

Lindisfarne Priory
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The raid on Lindisfarne priory on the 8th of June A.D. 793 set new boundaries and instilled new fear in the eyes of many in Western Europe. This attack on Lindisfarne was a result of dominating maritime advances, key strategies, and ruthless endeavors. The surprise with which the Norsemen arrived on the tiny coastal island can be best described in Alcuin's letter to the Northumbrian King:

“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 prey to pagan people”
(Loyn 39).

Alcuin put to words the horror spawned by the actual atrocities that the priests of Lindisfarne encountered. He also wrote of how this attack appeared out of nowhere, and how never in the 350 years of inhabitation have the people of Britain witnessed such acts of violence and plunder.

One of the instances Alcuin points out was the unexplained inroad from the sea. The natives of Lindisfarne, England, and its surrounding isles were nearly unaware of any existence of peoples to the far north and west. However, the Scandinavian culture had been on the rise for a few centuries and it was in the latter part of the 8th century that the need for expansion and wealth struck the isles of Atlantic Europe.

The developing nations of the Danes and Norse were originally seafaring peoples with much of their economies and lifestyles based around nautical necessities. This lifestyle allowed for far more superior technological advances in seafaring equipment. The ships the Norse used to raid Lindisfarne were the first of their kind. Years of trial and error allowed for the Vikings to ultimately dominate the waterways, oceans, and seas of Western Europe in the 7th and 8th centuries.

Little is known about the actual voyages the Vikings endured on their way to places such as Lindisfarne. However, we do know that most of these early raids were during the summer months when warmer weather was more likely and conditions were favorable (Pearson 339). During the journey to England, the North Sea was rarely kind even in the summer months. If the winds were not prevailing and the sea was calm the Vikings would lay down their oars into the sea, most ships of the time averaging 13 pairs of oars (Pearson 339). The oars allowed the Vikings to continue their journey to and from destinations without the need of wind. This was an essential element to the Viking ship because wind was not always steady and could be very unpredictable. Additionally, the Viking ship was equipped with a new generation of sail. Throughout the 7th century, the sail on a Viking ship was mediocre in size and was only sufficient for navigating shorter distances. But, in the 8th century, after nearly 100 years of trial and error, the Vikings successfully mastered a sail that was much larger than its early predecessors. This was

made possible by the invention of the *kjerringa*, a very large block of oak wood some 12 feet in length mounted on the hull that connected with the mast (Sawyer 71). The final advance, that was the most relevant for beaching on islands such as Lindisfarne was the rudder. The rudder was a single piece of wood approximately 11 feet in length that was mounted to the side of the hull via the “wart” (Sawyer 70). The new advance in the rudder allowed for something unheard of and terrifying to the people of Western Europe, that is, the beaching of an ocean-going vessel. When such a ship was beached, a part of the rudder along the gunwale allowed the entire rudder to be easily raised from the side of the hull so not to crush or break the rudder in shallow water or land. These new advances were completely utilized in the attack on Lindisfarne and considering these seafaring machines, we can begin to understand the confidence and poise the Vikings had enacting these long-range attacks.

The tiny coastal island of Lindisfarne is also referred to as the Holy Island. Its geographical location proved to play a vital role in the famous sack in A.D. 793. Its coastal location off the North East coast of Northumbria in England almost invited an eventual raid by Viking forces. The island has a unique characteristic in that twice a day, during low tide, it connects with the mainland through a narrow sandy causeway (Holy Island). This allowed the monks and other inhabitants to keep in constant contact with the English mainland, gathering food and other necessary resources to survive that could not be produced on the island. The monastery on the island once sat atop the island’s highpoint overlooking the North Sea (Holy Island). The tranquility and peaceful atmosphere surrounding the priory and the island itself was very misleading. As a result of its isolated location and vulnerability, Lindisfarne was a prime target for Viking raids. The Lindisfarne Priory was a center of concentrated wealth in eighth-century Anglo-Saxon England, housing fortunes in safe-deposits as well as valuable religious treasures such as golden crucifixes and crosiers, silver pyxes and ciboria, and ivory reliquaries (Lindisfarne). Once the Vikings learned of this defenseless, isolated treasure chest, the Lindisfarne Priory and its inhabitants were fated for demise.

Accounts of the sack of Lindisfarne in A.D. 793 do not offer key specifics in regards to the barbaric intruders involved. However, since it was one of the early raids in the Viking Age, this much is sure to be true: the raid was accomplished by either an individual ship or very small fleet of ships. The number of ships would have been a maximum of three with no more than 25-40 Vikings per ship (Pearson 339). Once the ships were beached on the shores of the Holy Island, a maximum of 120 raiders would have been the culprits in the devastation of the priory and its inhabitants.

But before the discussion of the actual attack, how did the raiders know that this tiny island with all its riches even existed? Many believe that prior trade routes and word of mouth were where Norse gained knowledge of the existence of valuable hot spots such as the monastery at Lindisfarne. Others believe that it was simply by chance that early, prerecorded raiding parties learned of the spots for future plundering and in return to their homeland spread knowledge in such a way (Pearson 348). However it was that the Vikings came to hear about the location of the monastery and its plentiful wealth at Lindisfarne, they still managed to set the stage for a new era in world history; one that dominated some of the most powerful entities in the world with surprise and success.

The strategies and tactics to be used for the Lindisfarne Priory raid were well-devised and had to be thoroughly implemented. Without organization and conformity the sack would be unsuccessful. Once beached, the Vikings had a short distance to traverse to get to the monastery. Details are unclear as to the exact circumstances once the Vikings breached the walls of the priory, but one thing is for certain: there was no detection of the raid until the last moments. Once the island was in sight, the sails were lowered and oars were dropped. The fact that only three feet of the ship was above water level provided a natural camouflage when approaching the target (Sawyer 71). Even if the monks at Lindisfarne could see the ship in the distance, it would be only a questionable figure in the distance until it was within striking distance. And since the monastery was isolated to coincide with the tradition of the monks, this camouflage allowed for no chance of escape.

Simeon of Durham paints a dismal picture of that horrific day on the 8th of June A.D. 793:

“And they came to the church of Lindisfarne, laid everything to 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...” (Lindisfarne).

The description of the sack at Lindisfarne by Simeon of Durham is one of gruesome disgust. From this passage one can clearly picture the horror and brutality the monks and other inhabitants encountered. What seems as only a trivial fragment in the description, however, the phrase, “they took some away”, is actually a highly important point in the Viking Age. Before the sack at Lindisfarne, there was no recorded documentation of human trafficking by the Vikings during raids (Downham). Prior to the raids, there were other means of acquiring slaves such as prisoners of war and a means to pay off debts, but this raid at Lindisfarne was the first in which the men were captured and used for the purpose of trading in the form of slavery.

The importance of this fact is not only because this slave-raiding was the first of its kind, but it proved to be one of the most lucrative activities for the raiders (Pearson 341). Clearly, precious gems, stones, gold and especially silver were prized possessions on a Viking raid, but the selling of men, women, and children proved to be the most valuable. One instance at Lindisfarne proves that during the attack the abduction of the monks was more valuable than monastery treasures (Pearson 341). The value of human captives were worth more in monetary value than the religious artifacts. The religious artifacts, other than those made of gold and silver, were generally taken to use as ransom rather than monetary value.

The sack of Lindisfarne went as quickly as it had come. This was a technique mastered by the Vikings especially of the earlier raids. The barbaric bands lacked the military strength and size to linger any longer than they did. The Vikings had a strict code that they lived by when going on their raids, seeking portable wealth only (Pearson 344). This term had many connotations. Essentially it proved that the strategy called for quick strikes, only taking what they could safely harbor on the boat for their journey home. This is why gold and silver coins were two of the most sought after commodities. Raiders could

obtain hundreds if not thousands at a time and at the same time not overcrowd the little available space left on the ship. Additionally, portable wealth and its many connotations can be exemplified by those who were enslaved like the monks at Lindisfarne. Human prisoners would have been the largest by-product of the raid in terms of size, and the most profitable as well.

This tactic of a quick, surprise approach and swift retreat was completely necessary to ensure successful future attacks and to protect the raiders as well as their homeland. The fact that the Vikings at Lindisfarne came in to the island unnoticed and left the same way, allowed for all of Europe to conjure up the worst of all fears in reference to the Vikings. The Vikings at Lindisfarne in A.D. 793 massacred many inhabitants and enslaved the rest, while plundering and raiding the entire priory. Little was left once the Vikings set fire to the monastery and sailed off back their Norse homeland. This is exactly the type of reputation the Vikings wanted.

The Vikings who sacked Lindisfarne Priory in the late 8th century traveled nearly 2,000 miles there and just as far on the way back. Before they left for the raid the ships were packed with food and water. However, there is only so much room on a Viking ship, and 2,000 miles in a ship is a long way. Food and water supplies would be almost entirely finished in the first part of the voyage. This is another reason why scholars believe isolated monasteries were a prime target for Viking raiders; they were well stocked with agricultural products (Pearson 341). The farms of the monastery consisted of fertile lands that grew various types of crops and had multiple animals such as cows and pigs for butchering. The monasteries also stored these products once harvested or butchered. The Vikings would not let this go to waste and used such victuals to their advantage for their long voyage back home.

Once the Vikings left Lindisfarne Priory, there were very few survivors at the scene of the raid. The monastery, its surrounding buildings and housing complexes were burned to the ground. There was little remaining once the Norsemen sailed off into the horizon. However, the monastery lived on. It was rebuilt in the following years only to be raided numerous times throughout the 9th century. After each successful attack by the Vikings, however the remaining monks, succeeded in keeping safe the remains of St. Cuthbert, as well as the Lindisfarne gospels.

St. Cuthbert was one of the founding bishops of the Lindisfarne Priory in A.D. 685. His body was entombed in a coffin behind the altar at Lindisfarne in A.D. 687. However after the first attack of the Vikings the monks repeatedly had to transfer the body back and forth to safe places to keep the Vikings from digging up and desecrating the remains. St. Cuthbert played a vital role to the origin of Lindisfarne and was an important figure to the monks at the time of the raids (Cavendish).

In addition to the body of St. Cuthbert, the Lindisfarne gospels were another prized possession the monks at Lindisfarne were successful in keeping away from the marauding Vikings. The gospels were a beautifully illuminated copy of the original Latin manuscripts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As a result of multiple attacks on the Holy Island throughout the 8th and 9th centuries, in A.D. 875 the monks fled the monastery for good with the relics of St. Cuthbert and the gospels. For nearly seven years they traveled in search of a permanent location for them and their prized possessions. They ended up at

Chester-Le-Street and remained there for over 100 years later. This is when the monks traveled to Durham Cathedral where they put St. Cuthbert to rest in a coffin located behind the altar (Cavendish). The gospels are still in existence to this day safely guarded from future Viking raids in the British Library.

The sack at Lindisfarne Priory on the 8th of June A.D. 793 marked the dawn of a new age and was a stepping stone in British and Scandinavian history. Not much is left from the raids on Lindisfarne that day but the memories and horrors will last forever. The Vikings at Lindisfarne showed their overwhelming technological advances in their seafaring mobilizations and therefore were a global superpower from A.D. 793 until the mid 11th century. Physical evidence of their domination is hard to come by, but what still remains has unlocked new ideas and possibilities about these seafaring barbarians. However, no other site in Viking Age history created the origins of fear and terror in Western Europe as the site at Lindisfarne Priory did.