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Lindisfarne Priory Site Report Draft

Lindisfarne had once been regarded as the center of Christianity in northern England, occupied by monks, nuns and other religious inhabitants. On June 8th of 793, the Holy Island of Lindisfarne was victim to a Viking raid that would come to be known as the start of the Viking Age in Britain. Although the island's inhabitants were taken by surprise, the vulnerability of Lindisfarne Priory was apparent in its geographical location and the immense wealth of its monastery.

Lindisfarne Priory is located on the top of a tidal island on the eastern coast of Northumbria and sits directly west of central Jutland, making it dangerously susceptible to raid via an easily navigated route by sea. At high tide, the Lindisfarne is cut off from the mainland; however during low tide, a causeway connects the island to the mainland, enabling travel and access to the island.

In addition to its geographical disadvantages, the known wealth of monasteries at the time also made Lindisfarne an irresistible target. Similar to other monasteries, the Lindisfarne Priory served as a depository for much of the King's wealth, leaving it in the defenseless hands of isolated monks. Lindisfarne Priory was a center of immense wealth in eighth century Anglo-Saxon England, including riches such as valuable religious treasures made of silver, gold and ivory. It is no surprise that Lindisfarne was an appealing target for a Viking raid: "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). Once Vikings became aware of the accessibility of such riches, Lindisfarne Priory became an easily attainable and worthy conquest.

The Viking attack on Lindisfarne would not have been possible without both navigational and maritime advances. Since Britain is an island, its only possibility of being conquered was by maritime superiority. Early Viking raids were done in the spring and summer months when the weather was warmer and conditions were more favorable to sea voyages. However, even in the summer months the North Sea did not guarantee kind weather and Vikings had to strategically develop their shipbuilding techniques to accommodate successful travel and raids.

The development of the Viking long ship played an integral role in the Vikings' successful raid over Lindisfarne. The long ship allowed Vikings to arrive to the island with no detection until the last moments, a strategy that is described in various accounts of raids elsewhere in the British Isles (Jones, 183). One aspect of the Viking ship that was advantageous over their neighbors in Frisia, Saxony or Frankia was their ability to sail close to the wind. In comparison to the flat-

bottomed shape of their neighbors' ships, the T-shaped keels of the Viking ship enabled stability in heavy winds. However, it is important to recognize that the keel on Viking ships would be beneficial only in violent northern waters since sailing close to the wind for extended periods of time could exhaust both ship and crew (Haywood, 69).

The Viking sail was vastly improved in the 8th century. Prior to the advancement of the sail, the sail on Viking ships was average in size, only permitting shorter distances in travel. However, after years of developing maritime technology through trial and error, the Vikings established a new and much improved sail that was much larger and more efficient for travel by sea. The increased size of the sail would not have been a success had it not been for the invention of the *kjerringa*, which was mounted to the hull of the ship, connecting to the mast. The *kjerringa* was a large block of oak wood that provided extra support for the sail, ensuring stability and strength during Viking voyages (Foot & Wilson, 234).

The use of oars played a significant role in the success of early Viking raids. Oars acted as an auxiliary form of power when the ship was in some state of emergency, when the ship was maneuvering in shallow waters or when sufficient winds were lacking. Calm seas were not guaranteed during the warmer months and either were winds. The use of oars made it possible for Viking ships to continue their journey without the relying on inconsistent wind patterns (Jones 189).

The ship's removable rudder and three-foot draft made it possible for Vikings to land on beaches and sail up inlets. When the island was in sight, sails were lowered and oars were used in their place, which decreased its visibility and allowed the Vikings to remain unseen from the island's inhabitants. Because the attack on Lindisfarne was one of the earliest raids in Viking Age Britain, it can be surmised that the maximum number of ships would have been three, with somewhere between twenty-four and forty Vikings per ship (Pearson, 339).

In addition to the construction of the long ship, the navigational skills of the Vikings also made the raid of Lindisfarne possible. Navigation techniques such as latitude sailing, based on methods and instruments such as the Icelander Star-Oddi and the Norse bearing-dial, allowed for accuracy and efficiency at sea. Latitude sailing, along with the knowledge of landmark navigation, enabled Vikings to safely and efficiently travel the sea and successfully raid neighboring communities, such as Lindisfarne in the spring of A.D. 793 (Jones, 192).

The Vikings' strategic element of surprise is captured in this account from Simeon of Durham, a twelfth century historian who based his account on locally recorded sources:

"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 at sea..."

Simeon's depiction of the raid at Lindisfarne is based on local accounts, the majority of which were written by priests. For this reason, written accounts of the Viking sack at Lindisfarne were subject to the perspective of Christianity. At the time of the raid in A.D. 793, literate monks, familiar with the book of Revelation, inhabited the Holy Island of Lindisfarne. Prior knowledge of the book of Revelation undoubtedly influenced the way in which the raid of Lindisfarne reflected the story of the apocalypse and resulted in a religious undertone that portrayed Vikings as demon invaders. In the Revelation, several occurrences of the apocalypse involve disasters such as famine and earthquakes. There is also mention of nonbelievers ravaging God's church, not unlike the pagan Viking invaders of the Lindisfarne Priory. King Alfred, along with many priests and Lindisfarne inhabitants believed that the attack on the Holy Island was an omen and punishment for decreased piety in England. This religious interpretation of the raid spread across Europe, resulting in a devout Christian following.

Accounts of the Viking raid at Lindisfarne instilled a sense of fear in Europeans and unified Christians against the demonized pagan Vikings. The Northumbrian intellectual, Alcuin, demonstrates the demonization of pagans in his letter to the King of Northumbria:

"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).

According to Alcuin, who was at the court of Charlemagne at the time and a leader of the Carolingian Renaissance, the attack was unimaginable. The quick and mysterious manner in which Lindisfarne was raided invoked an immeasurable fear in Europeans and the demonization of pagan invaders drove people closer to secular and religious authority for protection. However, the duality and division of secular and religious power drove England into fragile state of disunited kingdoms. The Scandinavians recognized the vulnerable position of Northumbria and took advantage of its weakness for years to come, initiating Norse colonization and expansion toward English territories.

After the gruesome Viking attack on Lindisfarne and various other raids, it seemed inconceivable that the demonic pagan invaders described by Alcuin could coexist among the English. However, as history would have it, the two groups eventually

came to an agreement. Prior to Danish occupation, Northumbria was in a state of civil war, which left it vulnerable to invasion. Although there were various Viking raids on monasteries such as Lindisfarne Prior, the Danes had not attempted permanent colonization of England until their arrival in East Anglia in A.D. 865. Once the Danes acquired Northumbria, it seemed fitting that they would set their sights on Wessex.

In A.D. 870, Alfred the Great became King of Wessex and began resisting Danish advances. Alfred gained support of various non-Danish groups and began to reclaim land that had been overthrown by the Danes. When Alfred the Great came into the Battle of Edington in A.D. 878, his forces equally matched those of Guthrum. Alfred achieved a slight victory over Guthrum, however, he knew the victory would be for naught without further reconciliation between the English and the Danes. Thus, the Treaty of Wedmore was established (Battle of Edington). The treaty stated that the Danes would stop attempts to expand their territory and convert to Christianity. In return, the Danes received a large amount of land in England and protection under the Danelaw. Guthrum took the Christian name Athelstan and accepted Alfred as his godfather (Jones, 223).

One of the most significant aspects of the agreement between Alfred and Guthrum was the establishment of set boundaries for the Danelaw. Prior to the Danelaw, Norse and Christianity were opposing religions that refused to recognize one another as protected under the law. However, after the establishment of the Danelaw, England experienced a social and political organization that allowed the English and Danes to coexist, while still maintaining their respective identities. Alfred then assembled burghs in attempt to unify England and build a defense against future Dane advances.

The establishment of the Danelaw led to a blending of Scandinavian and English culture. While the Danes were allowed to conduct themselves in Danish societal fashion, they were also required by the Danelaw to follow Christianity. The Danes were able to develop laws and social customs separate from the English, creating a modified Scandinavian identity. Overtime, the coexistence between the English and Danes also influenced the English language, adopting Norse place names, nouns and pronouns (Jones, 224).

The invasion of Lindisfarne on June 8th A.D 793 marked the beginning of significant changes in Scandinavian, English and Western European culture. Drastic technological advancements in both shipbuilding and maritime navigation enabled the Vikings to fully exploit the vulnerability of Lindisfarne. Having been previously unconcerned with Scandinavian activity, England began to recognize Vikings as a threat to Northumbrian territories, and with good reason. For centuries to follow Viking raids and Scandinavian expansion challenged the English religion and law. It was not until the development of the Danelaw that the two groups were able to coexist. The shocking and brutal attack on the Holy Island continues to be regarded as the beginning of Viking Age Britain.

Purdy Lindisfarne Bibliography

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