

Chapter 2

From Scandinavia to the Wirral

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The Viking Age

The Wirral Vikings may have reached the area by a variety of routes, but ultimately their origins lay in the Scandinavian homeland, predominantly in the present-day countries of Norway and Denmark. The period known as the 'Viking Age' (c.AD 800–1100) is defined by the exodus of large numbers of people, whom we nowadays call 'Vikings', from Scandinavia. While geography dictated that Swedes normally headed east, Danes and Norwegians went south and west, to the continent of Europe, to Britain and Ireland, and across the North Atlantic to the Faroes, Iceland, Greenland and even North America. The earliest Vikings specialised in raiding activities, looting and burning towns and monasteries, killing and kidnapping monks and women. Later, their raiding and looting became more organised. In the course of the Viking Age, Scandinavian warriors seriously disrupted and even conquered several countries, while Scandinavian merchants traded across Europe and even further afield.

Both conquests and trading were easier if some Vikings settled permanently in the countries where they practised these activities, and there is evidence of both large- and small-scale settlement by Scandinavians in all of the areas just listed. Of the regions settled by Vikings, the Faroes and Iceland had been uninhabited before their arrival, and they could settle in and establish their society as they saw fit. Everywhere else, Vikings had to establish themselves alongside the existing population. Sometimes they could take possession of sparsely-populated districts spurned by the indigenous population, sometimes they may have had to displace the natives to establish their own farms and estates. The Vikings' expertise as merchants meant that some of their settlements abroad were urban. They revitalised old Roman towns like York and Lincoln, and established new towns like Dublin, but they also contributed to commercial activities at smaller ports and trading centres everywhere.

The end of the Viking Age was marked by a number of historical developments. Both Viking colonists abroad and their Scandinavian cousins back home gave up their old heathen religion and adopted Christianity. The 'new' colonies (such as Iceland) acquired national identities distinct from their homeland, while Scandinavians who had settled in inhabited areas (such as England) gradually lost their distinctive identities and became assimilated to the populations of their adopted countries. Along with Christianity, the countries of the Scandinavian homeland acquired European-style monarchs and forms of government, and joined the European family of nations. Christianity also brought cultural changes in its wake. One of the most important was the practice

of writing books, by hand with pen and ink on vellum and using the roman alphabet. In the Viking Age, Scandinavians had known only the runic alphabet, which they used to carve or scratch short inscriptions into wood, metal, bone and stone.

These runic inscriptions are our only contemporary Scandinavian sources for events in the Viking Age. As the surviving ones are heavily concentrated in the late Viking Age (the eleventh century), they can tell us relatively little about the raiding, trading and settlement activities of the ninth and tenth centuries. Thus our written sources for these activities come either from outside Scandinavia (written by the 'victims' of the Vikings, as it were), or are retrospective accounts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which may have some facts at their core, but are often heavily fictionalised and unreliable. Sometimes our sources are both later than the Viking Age, and written by non-Scandinavians, and such documents must always be used with caution. Luckily, written texts are not our only source of information about the Viking Age. Any account of the period will also rely on the interpretation of artefacts that have survived from the Viking Age, whether found above ground (such as sculpture), or retrieved by archaeologists from below the surface of the earth. Another important source for the study of the Scandinavian impact is that of the landscape itself and, in particular, the names people have given to both landscape features and settlements. All of these play an important part in the study of Scandinavian settlement in England, and on the Wirral.

The reasons for this great Scandinavian expansion cannot be pinpointed for certain, but probably included factors such as climate change and overpopulation in the Scandinavian homeland, but also a general thirst for adventure and, not least, a desire for wealth and land. The saga-writers of thirteenth-century Iceland, looking back on their Viking origins, gave political reasons for the Viking expansion: the colonies in the west came about as a result of opposition to the centralisation of power in the hands of Harald Finehair, the first Norwegian king of whom we have some historical records, and who lived in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. Thus, the historian Snorri Sturluson gives the following account:

In was in that time of strife, when King Harald gained the country of Norway, that the colonies of the Faroes and Iceland were discovered and settled. There was also a great exodus to Shetland, and many powerful men fled Norway, exiled by King Harald, and went on Viking expeditions in the west. They spent the winters in Orkney and the Hebrides, but in the summers they harried Norway and did great damage to the country.

The author of *Egils saga* gives a fuller list of the areas settled by these Norwegian political exiles, and specifically notes that they tended to occupy unpopulated areas:

And because of this oppression, many people fled the country and then many uninhabited regions far and wide were settled, both in the east in Jämtland and Hälsingland, and the lands in the west, the Hebrides, the

Dublin area, Ireland, Normandy in France, Caithness in Scotland, Orkney and Shetland, and the Faroes. And Iceland was discovered in that time.

These explanations are coloured by the political situation in the thirteenth century when they were written (and when Iceland was taken over by Norway), but the basic outline of events given is almost certainly correct.

Throughout the tenth century, Scandinavian kings continued to spend their youth raiding in the west. Snorri tells us that Eirik Bloodaxe (who later ruled briefly in York)

would regularly go on raiding expeditions in the summer, harrying Scotland and the Hebrides, Ireland and Wales, and amassing wealth for himself in this way.

Olaf Tryggvason apparently spent four years in the west:

He sailed all the way north to Northumbria and harried there. From there he went north to Scotland and harried widely there. From there he sailed to the Hebrides and had some battles there. Then he went south to Man and fought there. He also harried widely in Ireland. Then he went to Wales and harried widely in that country, and also the place called Cumberland.

This Viking activity in the Irish Sea region in the ninth and tenth centuries is the background against which we can understand Viking settlement in Wirral.

Vikings in the Irish Sea Region

The key to much Viking success was their expertise in shipbuilding and in sailing. For them, waterways and the sea were a link between different areas rather than a barrier. One important Viking route was to sail due west from Norway to Shetland. From Shetland, the route then went south along the coast to Orkney and to the Hebrides, and into the Irish Sea. All the regions bordering on, or in, the Irish Sea (Ireland, Wales, the Isle of Man, north-west England and south-west Scotland) suffered Viking raids, and all saw at least some Viking settlement.¹ Up until about the 830s, the Viking raids in this region appear to have been seasonal sorties direct from Norway, but later Vikings moved around within the region, establishing themselves first in one place, but capable of moving on to others when things got too hot for them. The evidence for the different Viking

¹ James Graham-Campbell and Colleen E. Batey, *Vikings in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1998), point out that the 'story of Scandinavian settlement around the Irish Sea needs a book of its own', but they do provide a very brief survey themselves (pp. 110–11). See also Graham-Campbell, 'The early Viking Age in the Irish Sea area', in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age*, pp. 104–30, based in part on his 'The Irish Sea vikings: raiders and settlers', in *The Middle Ages in the North-West*, pp. 59–83.

colonies of the Irish Sea region varies, and to some extent each had its own characteristics, but it is also clear that there were strong links between them.²

In some of our earliest surviving evidence, contemporary Irish sources record extensive Scandinavian raids from the end of the eighth century and growing in frequency throughout the ninth century. There is little evidence of Viking settlement except in and around urban centres such as Dublin, which developed from one of the first Viking winter bases recorded from the 840s.³ However, these bases provided a launching point for raiding and trading ventures across the Irish Sea and to the south.⁴

Scotland is much poorer than Ireland in written records, so we do not know how extensive the raids were there, although churches and monasteries must have suffered as they did in Ireland. Archaeology and place-names indicate extensive Scandinavian settlement in Shetland, Orkney and Caithness, and considerable settlement in the Hebrides.⁵ All these settlements appear to have started during the first decades after AD 800. Links between the Dublin Vikings and their cousins in western Scotland are demonstrated by finds such as the rich Viking burial at Kiloran Bay on the Hebridean island of Colonsay.⁶

South-west Scotland has some Scandinavian place-names which suggest an influx from the Danelaw in eastern England, while archaeological finds from Whithorn indicate trading connections with the rest of the Viking-influenced Irish Sea region.⁷

The Isle of Man has abundant evidence of Viking settlement in the form of archaeology, place-names and a remarkable collection of some thirty stone crosses and cross-slabs with Scandinavian runic inscriptions and Scandinavian-influenced art commemorating the dead of what was clearly a mixed Norse-Celtic population.⁸ The pagan burials of the Isle of Man suggest an early tenth-century context linked to the expulsion of the Vikings from Dublin and the Scandinavian settlement of north-west England.⁹

² David M. Wilson, 'Scandinavian ornamental influence in the Irish Sea region in the Viking Age', in *The Middle Ages in the North-West*, pp. 37–57.

³ Fellows-Jensen, 'Scandinavian place-names of the Irish Sea province', in *Viking Treasure from the North West*, pp. 32–4. See also *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age*, especially the contributions by Ragnall Ó Floinn, 'The archaeology of the early Viking Age in Ireland', pp. 131–65, and Elizabeth O'Brien, 'The location and context of Viking burials at Kilmainham and Islandbridge, Dublin', pp. 203–21.

⁴ Graham-Campbell, 'The early Viking Age in the Irish Sea area', in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age*, pp. 104–30.

⁵ Graham-Campbell and Batey, *Vikings in Scotland*; Fellows-Jensen, 'Scandinavian place-names of the Irish Sea province', in *Viking Treasure from the North West*, p. 34.

⁶ Graham-Campbell and Batey, *Vikings in Scotland*, pp. 118–22.

⁷ Peter H. Hill, 'Whithorn: the missing years', in Richard D. Oram and Geoffrey P. Stell, eds, *Galloway: Land and Lordship* (Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 27–44; Peter Hill, *Whithorn and St Ninian: The Excavation of a Monastic Town, 1984–91* (Stroud, 1997), pp. 48–60; Fellows-Jensen, 'Scandinavians in Dumfriesshire and Galloway: the place-name evidence', in *Galloway: Land and Lordship*, pp. 77–95; Graham-Campbell and Batey, *Vikings in Scotland*, pp. 202–5.

⁸ See the articles in Christine Fell *et al.*, eds, *The Viking Age in the Isle of Man*.

⁹ Graham-Campbell, 'The Irish Sea vikings: raiders and settlers', in *The Middle Ages in the North-West*, pp. 76–7.

Wales has a selection of Scandinavian place-names, and clearly participated in the trading activities of the Irish Sea region.¹⁰ Evidence for Scandinavian influence is not great, although the find of 'five superb Hiberno-viking rings' on Anglesey might well be linked with Ingimund's arrival there on his way to the Wirral.¹¹ Current archaeological excavations at Llanbedrgoch on Anglesey suggest that its tenth-century inhabitants practised farming, manufacturing and trading in a Hiberno-Norse context.¹²

Within this context, the north-west of England had links both west and east. Place-names in Cumberland, Westmorland and north Lancashire suggest a large-scale influx of Norse farmers, many though not necessarily all from the Irish Sea region, with some evidence of emigration from the Danelaw.¹³ The presence of Vikings in this region is demonstrated by archaeological evidence in the form of burials, chance finds of weapons, jewellery and loot, and coin hoards, while sculpture links this area both with the rest of the Irish Sea region, and with Anglo-Scandinavian areas in eastern England.¹⁴ Indeed, we can perhaps see in the burials the first generation of pagan Vikings who took land in this region, while their heirs who had converted to Christianity are commemorated by the hogbacks and crosses.¹⁵ Later Scandinavian contacts with the north-west of England can be traced in the few but fascinating runic inscriptions of the region.¹⁶

Some of the Vikings expelled from Dublin in 902 found their way to eastern England, with some Dublin kings ruling for a time in York. Of the various routes between Dublin and York that passed through north-west England, one of the most important appears to have been that along the Ribble valley, and the great treasure found at Cuerdale could explain much of what was happening in the north-west in the tenth century, if only we knew how to interpret it.¹⁷

The Viking story in eastern England is too well-known to need rehearsing here, from the attack on Lindisfarne in 793 to the reign of Cnut in the eleventh century and the last gasp of the Viking Age with the death of King Harald of

¹⁰ Fellows-Jensen, 'Scandinavian place-names of the Irish Sea province', in *Viking Treasure from the North West*, p. 34.

¹¹ Graham-Campbell, 'The early Viking Age in the Irish Sea area', in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age*, p. 108. See also Wendy Davies, *Patterns of Power in Early Wales* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 48–60.

¹² See Mark Redknapp, *Vikings in Wales: An Archaeological Quest* (Cardiff, 1999). There is also a brief summary in Graham-Campbell, 'The early Viking Age in the Irish Sea area', *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age*, pp. 104–30 (pp. 122–5).

¹³ Fellows-Jensen, *Scandinavian Settlement Names in the North-West*; John R. Baldwin and Ian D. Whyte, eds, *The Scandinavians in Cumbria* (Edinburgh, 1985).

¹⁴ B. J. N. Edwards, 'The Vikings in north-west England: the archaeological evidence', in *Viking Treasure from the North West*, pp. 43–62; B. J. N. Edwards, *Vikings in North West England: The Artifacts* (Lancaster, 1998). See also Bailey, *Viking Age Sculpture in Northern England*.

¹⁵ Graham-Campbell, 'The early Viking Age in the Irish Sea area', *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age*, p. 115.

¹⁶ Katherine Holman, *Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions in the British Isles: Their Historical Context* (Trondheim, 1996), pp. 56–85.

¹⁷ Graham-Campbell, 'The Cuerdale hoard: comparisons and context', in *Viking Treasure from the North West*, pp. 107–15, N. J. Higham, 'Northumbria, Mercia and the Irish Sea Norse', in *Viking Treasure from the North West*, pp. 21–30.

Norway at the battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066.¹⁸ Contemporary documents for this period are comparatively plentiful, and can be fleshed out with the testimony of place-names, language, archaeology, art history and poetry. Although both the raiding and the settlement in eastern England were undertaken primarily by Vikings of Danish origin, these activities cannot be entirely separated from those in the Irish Sea region, as we have seen. The temporary incursion into Chester by a Danish army in 893–4 demonstrates the vulnerability of this area to Viking attack, the tenth-century traffic across the Irish Sea from Dublin extended as far east as York, and York and Yorkshire were subject to Norwegian influence as well as Danish.

The Norse settlement of the Wirral is thus just one small aspect of the colourful and richly-documented Viking Age in Britain and Ireland.

¹⁸ Simon Keynes, 'The Vikings in England, c. 790–1016', in Peter Sawyer, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 48–82; Niels Lund, 'The Danish empire and the end of the Viking Age', in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, pp. 156–81.

Appendix

Silver Ingot from Ness, Wirral

SIMON C. BEAN

The ingot was found by a metal detector user in 1995 whilst searching on farm land at Ness, Wirral. The landowner allowed the finder to keep the ingot and it was brought to Liverpool Museum which subsequently acquired it. The find spot (which remains confidential) has yielded no further material from the Viking period and is not associated with any known archaeological site or earlier finds.

The ingot is 46 mm in length, 8 mm wide and 9 mm deep, with a roughly triangular profile, and weighs 24.55 g; its metallurgical composition has not been determined.¹ The surface is worn and shows possible evidence of pecking and there are three clear transverse nicks on one edge (see fig. 2.1),² although some of the marks, in particular the long scratch on the upper side, may be the result of post-depositional damage, possibly from the plough. Such ingots would have been cast in sand or in simple open moulds of clay or stone. The rough lower surface of the Ness ingot indicates the use of a stone mould. Locally, two stone ingot moulds have been found in Chester, at Lower Bridge Street³ and at Cuppin Street.⁴ The Ness ingot, however, does not appear to originate from either mould, although it compares closely to the Lower Bridge Street example.

Similar ingots are commonly found in Viking silver hoards which typically contain a mixture of coins, cut up silver artefacts ('hack-silver') and ingots. Whilst the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had adopted and used a native coinage, silver as bullion remained the medium of exchange in north west England, Ireland and Scotland, particularly in the first three quarters of the tenth century.⁵ Ingots formed a particularly convenient way of storing quantities of silver and could easily be halved or divided when necessary. The weight of the Ness ingot compares to a number of Viking Age weight standards in the British Isles and Scandinavia and also to that proposed for similar ingots found in the Castle Esplanade hoard, Chester.⁶

¹ S. E. Kruse, and J. Tate, 'XRF analysis of Viking Age silver ingots', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 122 (1992), 295–328.

² James Graham-Campbell, *The Viking-Age Gold and Silver of Scotland (AD 850–1100)*, (Edinburgh, 1995), p. 22.

³ J. A. Rutter, 'The finds', in D. J. P. Mason, ed., *Excavations at Chester. 26–42 Lower Bridge Street 1974–6: The Dark Age and Saxon Periods* (Chester, 1985), pp. 64–5.

⁴ T. J. Strickland, Autumn 1986 Interim Report (Grosvenor Museum), Chester.

⁵ S. E. Kruse, 'Silver storage and circulation in Viking-Age Scotland: the evidence of silver ingots', in C. E. Bately *et al.*, eds, *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic* (Edinburgh, 1993), pp. 187–203.

⁶ S. E. Kruse, 'Ingots and weight units in Viking Age silver hoards', *World Archaeology* 20:2 (1988), 285–301.

The largest surviving group of ingots, numbering over 350, comes from the great Cuerdale hoard found in 1840 in central Lancashire.⁷ It contained an assemblage of over 8,500 silver coins, ingots and hack-silver which can be dated on numismatic grounds to c.AD 905. A number of the Cuerdale ingots are directly comparable to this example, but none of those which reached Liverpool Museum originate from the same mould. Another hoard, deposited 10 miles from the present find at the Castle Esplanade, Chester, containing over 520 coins and at least 98 fragmentary or whole ingots, can be dated to c.AD 965.⁸ At present it is not possible to date the manufacture and loss of the Ness ingot with any more precision than to the late ninth or tenth century.

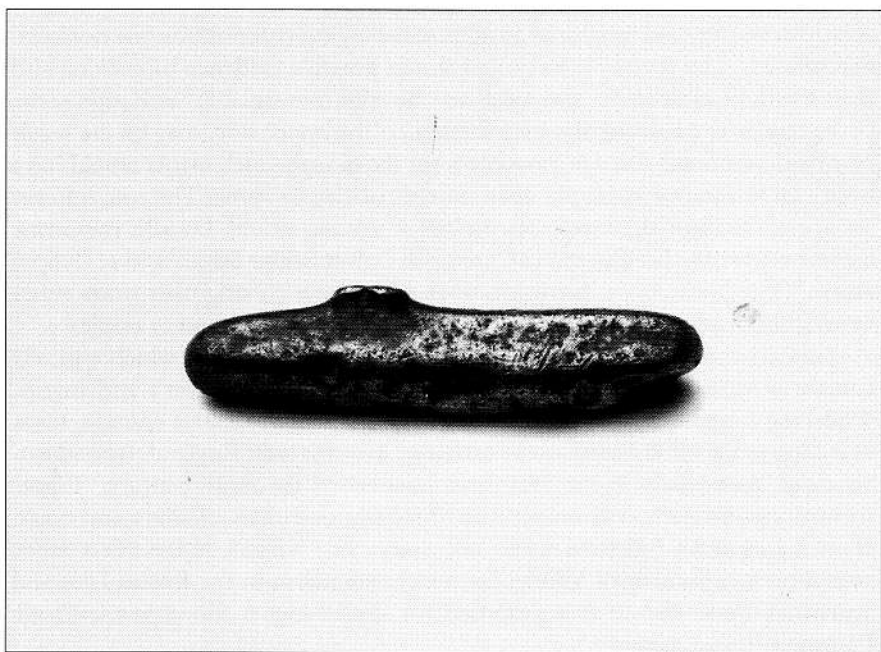


Fig. 2.1: The Ness silver ingot.

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⁷ Graham-Campbell, *Viking Treasure from the North West*, *passim*.

⁸ M. Blackburn and H. Pagan, 'A revised checklist of coins from the British Isles c.500–1100', in M. A. S. Blackburn, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Monetary History: Essays in Memory of R. H. M. Dolley* (Leicester, 1986), pp. 291–313, no. 144; B. J. N. Edwards, 'The Vikings in north-west England: the archaeological evidence', in *Viking Treasure from the North West*, p. 57.