

Richard Cole

II: 64 British Perspectives

1 Introduction

The memory of the Viking Age in Britain has chiefly been conditioned by two conflicting impulses. From the eighth until the eleventh centuries, large numbers of Scandinavians arrived in the British Isles. Sometimes they came as raiders, sometimes as settlers, sometimes as merchants, sometimes as would-be kings. In the years and centuries following this period, the first impulse of those who reflected upon it was to emphasise the conflict between the invaders and the invaded. From the Victorian period onwards, a second impulse emerged: to emphasise the legacy of cultural enrichment (and in the troubling parlance of the Victorians, particularly *racial* enrichment) afforded by the arrival of the Vikings in Britain.

2 Case Study: Memory of the Viking Age in Britain – from trauma to empire

In the context of memory studies, Britain's experience of remembering the Viking Age differs somewhat from that of other nations. For the Scandinavian countries, the process has essentially focussed on remembering "what we did". For countries such as the United States, the process is one of memory appropriation: "perhaps *they* were here, perhaps *we* are them". Both of these dynamics are at work in the British situation, but in the case of England, and to a degree Ireland, a third factor must be taken into account: the substantial body of Viking Age and Early Medieval literature detailing "what was done to *us*". There is a traumatic sense of violation conveyed by these early sources. Indeed, the graphic accounts of Viking violence they provide are entirely consonant with the way that modern film and television often revels in the supposed barbarity of medieval Scandinavians: paganism, drunkenness, and sexual violence are recurrent themes (McDougall 1993). To take just a few examples, nearly at random, images of pagan raiders mocking Christian ceremony can be found in the twelfth-century *Cogadh gáedhel re Gallaibh. The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill* (13, cf. 226, on the Vikings in Ireland, often minimised by a focus on England, see Jones 1973, 204–208). The trope of Vikings raping defenceless English women can be found in Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* [The Sermon of the Wolf to the English] (1010–1016): "[...] oft tyne oððe twelfe, ælc æfter oþrum, scendað to bysmore þæs þegenes cwenan

hwilum his dohtor oððe nydmagan þær he on locað (*The Homilies of Wulfstan, Sermo*, 271) [often ten or twelve [Vikings], each after the other, shamefully disgrace a given man's wife and even his daughter or kinswoman, while he looks on (author's translation)]. As Ian Dougall has observed, the characterisation of the Vikings as particularly boozy recurred in medieval English letters (McDougall 1993, 210), and survived into Renaissance literature too (Seaton 1935, 5).

On these lurid themes, the resemblance between Early Medieval British sources and trashy Anglo-American television is obviously not because of, say, a seamless oral tradition, passed down from generation to generation and told to the director while he/she was still child, dandled on his/her grandmother's knee. Rather, it is the end result of a complex process of remembering, with antiquarians producing editions of medieval texts, popularisers representing them in other media, some folklore, a fair amount of freewheeling imagination, etc. This is demonstrative of what Pierre Nora called the "milieu de mémoire" (Nora 1989, 9), the thicket of agendas and media by which the past is remembered, uncoordinated and often unconcerned with authenticity.

It is symptomatic of the hegemony of the English-speaking world that the Viking Age has generally been defined according to the first and last recorded Viking attacks on English soil. The Viking Age is accordingly often reckoned to have begun with the attack on Lindisfarne monastery in 793, and to have ended with the death of the ultimate Viking, King Haraldr Harðráði, at Stamford Bridge in 1066. Although the aforementioned periodisation is somewhat problematic, not least because Vikings had been raiding elsewhere in Europe before 793, it does have the advantage that the year 1066 also saw a dramatic change in England's cultural and linguistic climate. With the Norman conquest, England began to shift away from the Germanic continuum which had connected the island to Scandinavia, towards a new focus on the Francophone inheritance brought by the *nouveau régime*.

Authors in the Norman period continued to treat the trauma of the Viking Age, albeit in a less urgent manner than one finds in pre-Conquest poetry such as the Old English *Battle of Maldon*. Florence of Worcester (d. 1118), Symeon of Durham (d. 1130s), and William of Malmesbury (fl. 1120s) are all examples of Anglo-Norman Latin chroniclers who recalled the Danish and Norwegian attacks on England. Multiple factors might explain this continuity. Firstly, there is the reality that in the years following the Conquest it was by no means clear that Scandinavians would not trouble the House of Normandy just as they had the House of Wessex. The Danish King Sveinn Ástríðarson (r. 1047–1076) felt that he had inherited Haraldr's claim on the English throne. Supposedly he sent men to support the Anglo-Saxon rebel and folk hero Hereward the Wake. One miracle tale by the second Norman Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm (d. 1109), concerns

a monk sent to arbitrate a non-aggression pact between William the Conqueror and Sveinn's son, King Knútr (r. 1080–1086) (Anselm 319–324; cf. *Mariú saga*, 1030–1032). Anselm's tale, which depicts the Danes actively making preparations to invade, indicates that the possibility of ongoing attacks from Scandinavia concerned the Norman elite. The fact that it was a miracle tale embedded in a sermon also indicates that there was some attempt to communicate these fears to the general public. Indeed, it has been suggested that some close to the Danish crown were still vainly nurturing their claim to England as late as the thirteenth century (Heebøll-Holm 2015, 262–264; cf. Larson 1912).

As the threat from Denmark waned, Anglo-Norman authors apparently felt at liberty to interpret the memory of the Viking Age less in the image of past traumas, and more in the image of contemporary concerns. Thus in medieval English romance and art the Vikings from the North became conflated with the Saracens from the East (Cawsey 2009) (see fig. 1). Although this development might seem far-fetched to a modern observer, it is quite straightforward when one considers the medieval propensity to think in terms of typology: what essential qualities or narrative roles are shared by two analogous characters? Both the Dane and the Muslim were understood as implacable, martially gifted, non-Christian 'Others', posing a direct threat to Christendom. The Anglo-Norman poet Wace described the Vikings who attacked his native Channel Islands as "la gent sarrazine" [the Saracen people] in the *Roman de Rou* (c. 1160s):

<p>Em plusors liex pert la ruine qui firent la gent sarrazine en Auremen et en Gernesii, en Serc, en Erin, en Guernerui [...] (Wace 2002, 348)</p>	<p>In several places one can see the ruins which the Saracen people made in Alderney, and in Jersey, in Sark, in Herm, in Guernsey</p>
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The hybridised 'Scandinavian Saracen' notwithstanding, the high and late Middle Ages saw a widespread decline in literary interest in Britain's Viking Age past, which would not be reversed until the Victorian era. One might have expected interest in Scandinavian matters to thrive during this period: The Normans were themselves of Scandinavian heritage, and during the early days following the founding of their dynasty by Rollo (d. c. 930) there are some indications that they wished to preserve and emphasise this aspect of their history. Dudo of St. Quentin, writing in the early eleventh century, depicts a scene where William Longsword (d. 942) of Normandy has his son, Duke Richard I, sent to Bayeux to study Old Norse, "ut queat sermocinari profusius olim contra Dacigenas" (Dudo 1865, 222) [so that in the future he should be able to express himself more fluently to the Dacian-born (translation Christiansen 1998, 97)]. As seen, the increasing harmlessness of Scandinavia to England probably contributed to this disinterest.



Fig. 1: BL Harley MS 2278, fol. 61 (England, 1430s) – Martyrdom of St Edmund in 869, with Vikings depicted as Saracens

However, arguably the crucial factor in the decline of Viking memories amongst Norman authors was the discovery of a competing source of inspiration: the Arthurian tradition. With their Celtic settings, Arthurian romances provided a sense of connection to Britain that recollections of ‘Dacian’ ancestry never could. The adoption of Arthurian material by the Normans was most likely therefore inevitable, and the role that Scandinavica might have played in global culture had Arthuriana not outstripped it can only be a matter of idle speculation.

As shall be seen, there are compelling arguments to suggest that the traumatic memory of the Viking Age survived in England during the Tudor, Stuart, and Georgian periods (on the comparatively little Anglo-Scandinavian interest during these eras, see O’Donoghue 2014, 28–54). But the next ‘sea change’ in popular historiography would not arrive until the Victorian era. As Andrew Wawn has comprehensively surveyed (e.g. Wawn 2000), the Victorians saw themselves in the Vikings: manly adventurers who had carved a maritime empire. The Old Norse cultural inheritance was singularly well placed for appropriation. Britain (and particularly England) struggled to locate an appropriate empire in its own past on which to model itself, in the way that, say, Italy might look to Rome or France to Charlemagne. The Roman presence in Britain inspired some, but there were issues there that offended Victorian prejudices: 1) Rome was liable to being perceived as Mediterranean and effeminate, 2) it was an empire that had very obviously fallen, while Britain’s holdings were famously those on which ‘the sun

would never set'. Thus the Scandinavian diaspora in Britain was imaginatively reconceived as a precursor to British imperialism. William and Mary Howitt's *The Literature and Romance of Northern Europe* (1852) is so transparent on its ideological commitments that it merits quoting at length:

Turn now from these old Scandinavians to the English. Though they have lived now for eight centuries under the influence of a religious faith totally opposed to that of Odin – under the religion of peace and love – it has not been able to quench the old Norse fire in their veins. The same love of martial daring and fame ; the same indomitable sea-faring spirit, the same passion for discovery of new seas and new lands, the same irresistible longing, when discovered, to seize and colonize them, the same victorious strength in subduing the vastest, the most populous or the most savage nations to their yoke [...] America, Australia, the Indies East and West, South Africa, Gibraltar, Malta, the Ionia Isles, and the isles of many a distant sea bear testimony to the survival of the spirit of the Vikings in the bosoms of the British [...]. (Howitt 1852, 12–13)

The Victorian experience might be considered as an intermediary between contemporary processes in Scandinavia and America: like Scandinavians, there was some degree of truth to the genealogical claim that Britons were the descendants of the Vikings, but like many American enthusiasts much of what was claimed as cultural inheritance was spurious and nakedly ideological. As in German *völkisch* thought, there was a racial component in the Victorian memory of the Vikings, although for the Howitts the Vikings were the element in English blood which had mercifully saved us from ending up like our Teutonic cousins:

But while we are compounded of British, Roman, Saxon and Scandinavian blood, had that of Germany predominated we should have been now as Germany is, a country without colonies, without conquests, without a fleet, and without political liberty. We might have displayed a good share of German intellectuality, but had we not possessed the crowning advantages of Scandinavian prowess, enterprise, and invincible fortitude and independence, we should indeed have been a *Deutsche Insel*, but not a Great Britain. (Howitt 1852, 13)

The Victorian reassessment of the Viking Age as a positive contribution to British history is easily characterised as conservative, and being closely bound up with the Empire. The feverish jingoism of the Empire has declined a great deal in the past century, though the oddly racial way the Vikings are discussed in Britain has survived. DNA testing kits, which fulfil fantasies of proving to a percentage how Scandinavian one supposedly is, are fairly popular items. A widely watched series of television programmes from 2001, entitled *The Blood of the Vikings* and accompanied by a popular book, rested its claims on this DNA technology. However, it ought to be noted that the same fundamental dynamic – of Viking blood compensating for undesirable elements in one's own identity – has also been adopted by

counter-hegemonic currents in British society. While the Howitts believed that slavish Saxon stock had been fortified by vital Viking vigour, the socialist and Icelandic enthusiast William Morris believed that Scandinavian heritage had given Britons a taste for consensus and liberty, opposite to the oppressive and bureaucratic ‘Norman Yoke’ (e.g. 1995 [1890], 90). Indeed, the occasional socialist interest in Viking heritage is also attested by the evening that Morris apparently once spent with Friedrich Engels discussing the *Poetic Edda* (Engels 1959, 245–246). The use of heritage as a ‘counterbalance’ in identity construction is also found in some modern regionalist movements. Those who favour greater autonomy for Yorkshire, North-Eastern England, or Orkney and Shetland may well emphasise their Scandinavian roots, which they feel differentiate them from solidly Saxon or Norman South East England.

The Victorian celebration of the Viking incursions was so energetic that one would be forgiven for thinking that it had erased the medieval tendency to reflect on the Viking Age with horror. However, there are some hints that the same sense of trauma felt by authors such as Wulfstan survived in vernacular memory. When one consults the volumes of orally collected British folklore, much of it published in the 1970s on a county-by-county basis, tales of Danish violence recur in certain regions. One finds motifs such as referring to red-headed children as “Danes’ bastards” or “Daners” (Palmer 1973, 58; Whitlock 1976, 118). A mother may threaten her child that “I’ll set the Danes on to yer if yer doänt do as I tells yer!” (Simpson 2009 [1973], 28). There are ghost stories about spectral Danish invaders (Palmer 1973, 133–134; Simpson 2009 [1973], 45–46; Tongue 1965, 100) who continue to haunt England even in death. There are also etiological legends explaining that certain fruits or stones are red because of “Danes’ blood” (Boase 1976, 101–102, 114–115; Jones-Baker 1977, 133).

As Simpson remarks in the case of Sussex (2009 [1973], 12) it is notable that a county which was largely spared from the Viking invasions should have such a wealth of folklore about them. Indeed, one finds this trend to extend further: counties which were once inside the Danelaw often have little or even no preserved folklore about Viking raids – perhaps there was no impetus to fear Scandinavian raiders when they were in fact ones own grandparents. In Northumbria, Yorkshire, and the Scottish Isles, where one might expect to find the most folktales about Viking attacks, none are recorded in the canonical collections. It is the counties on the borders of the Danish controlled zone, or alternatively those deepest in the heartlands of Wessex, where the folkloric sources are the most vivid. In the case of those who lived at the border of the Danelaw, one can imagine that many tales were first generated out of actual conflict with their Scandinavian neighbours. In the case of places such as Sussex, these stories are arguably indicative that the absence of a hated ‘Other’ gives the imagination a

peculiar degree of freedom to speculate over just how terrible they would be in reality.

Of course, it would be an oversimplification to conclude this survey with the implication that folkloric sources are automatically more ‘authentic’ memories than the ideological fabrications of the Victorians. A folk tradition recorded in 1870 or 1970 may well not have existed at all in 1070 or 1570 – or it may have done, but the tradition’s bogeyman may not have become the Danes until the Victorian obsession took hold (indeed, particularly amongst spectral warriors there is often a great degree of flexibility: the same ghoul may variously be a knight, a Roman soldier, a Roundhead, or a Viking). Thus we return to the most useful message of memory studies: that authenticity is not always the arbiter of value. Where Nora (1989) spoke of *les lieux de mémoire*, we might think of a colourful *famille de mémoire* – one that embraces Wulfstan’s plunderers, Wace’s Saracen Scandinavians, the Howitt’s ‘Viking Redcoats’, and the moaning ghosts of Southern English folklore.

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