Chapter 7
Settlers in England

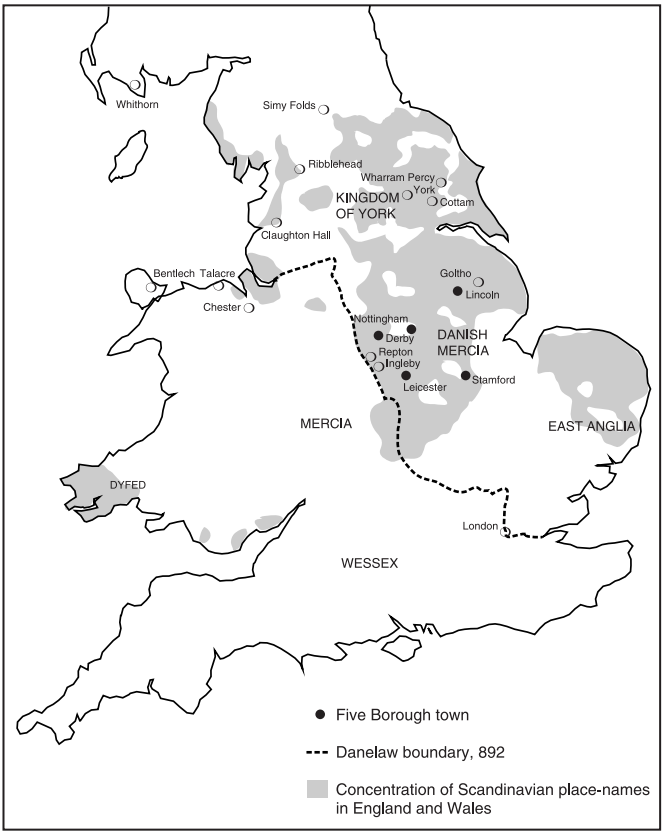
For the present-day inhabitants of England, it is the Anglo-Saxons who have generally been regarded as the ancestral English, whereas the Vikings are definitely *them*, not *us*. The English may have a sneaking admiration for their amoral and carefree existence, but apart from a few hotheads who claim they carry Viking blood, they are not really our ancestors. The English language, English laws, customs, and system of government, even the English countryside and villages, are somehow Anglo-Saxon and not North European or Scandinavian, despite the irony that the Angles and Saxons arrived from much the same area as the Danes, some 400 years earlier. It is still Ælfred who was the first king of England, and it was he who united the warring Anglo-Saxon kingdoms against the Viking invader. In 793 there were four Anglo-Saxon kingdoms: East Anglia, Mercia, Wessex, and Northumbria; by 900 there was just one: Wessex.

However, it was Ælfred's own scribes who recorded events in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and since the Vikings did not write history it is little wonder that we have been sold a one-sided story. Historians are now less inclined to accept Wessex propaganda at face value. Although the scale of Scandinavian settlement is still debated, its positive impact is widely acknowledged. Archaeologists have emphasized the Scandinavian contribution to urbanism, to the development of industry, and to the changes taking place in rural

settlement patterns; and from new artefact types and artistic styles they are able to talk about a hybrid Anglo-Scandinavian culture. Present-day school children are taught to appreciate ethnic diversity, and in history lessons they learn about multiple waves of raiders and settlers, each contributing to the national character. With England and Denmark once again joined together in a political union for the first time since Cnut, the Vikings have a more positive image.

Academics discussing the scale of Scandinavian settlement in England have danced to the rhythms of the ongoing debate between those who see the history of England as one of successive waves of invaders, and those who emphasize internal evolution and change. According to whom you believe, immigration was confined to a small group of elite land-takers, or it was a secondary mass migration in the wake of the raiding parties. Part of the problem is that the different categories of evidence do not describe a coherent story, and so each discipline has taken a different perspective. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records three partitions of land between the Danes and the English in the 870s – in Northumbria, Mercia, and East Anglia. Following the Treaty of Wedmore in 886 a boundary was established between Ælfred and the Danes, running: 'Up the Thames, and then up the Lea, and along the Lea to its source, then in a straight line to Bedford, then up the Ouse to Watling Street'. The area to the north and east of this line later became known as the Danelaw, to distinguish that part of the country where Danish custom prevailed.

Place-name scholars have found that there is some correspondence between their maps of Scandinavian-influenced names and the boundaries of the Danelaw. In Yorkshire, for example, there are 210 place names that end in *-by* (the Old Norse name for village); in Lincolnshire there are 220, the majority combined with Old Norse personal names. However, it is important to emphasize that the distribution maps show the influence of the Scandinavian language, not the location of Scandinavian settlements. Initially, at least, there



9. Scandinavian activity in England

must have been two distinct Old English and Old Norse language-using communities in the Danelaw, although the languages were so similar that there would have been sufficient mutual intelligibility for most transactions, without the need for widespread bilingualism or for specialist interpreters. During the 10th and 11th centuries, however, there was extensive hybridization and language borrowing between the two cultures. The place-name evidence is late, most

names being first recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086, by which time the Anglo-Saxons had been undergoing 200 years of cultural mixing with speakers of Old Norse.

Archaeologically, Scandinavian settlements have been difficult to detect. In the upland areas of northern England, isolated farmsteads such as that at Ribblehead have often been assumed to be the homes of colonists, and further south, the appearance of bow-sided halls at sites like Goltho might indicate the residences of new Scandinavian lords – although of course there is nothing ethnically Scandinavian about the shape or form of a building. At Wharram Percy, Borre-style belt fittings, probably manufactured in Norway, have been found on the site of what became one of the medieval manors, and it seems likely that the village was first laid out with regularly divided plots in the 10th century. This process of village nucleation is repeated throughout lowland England during the 10th century, and may represent part of an ongoing process of land privatization. Former great estates, previously owned by the king or the church, were divided up into smaller units held by individual lords. This process was happening both in the Danelaw and in Wessex and was not a direct result of Viking raids, although the disruption of the monasteries and the subsequent dislocation of landholdings clearly accelerated the process.

The recording of finds recovered by metal-detectorists has also transformed knowledge of settlement patterns. The population of Viking Age England acquired a taste for costume jewellery mass-produced in copper alloy. Although some retain Anglo-Saxon forms, such as the disc brooch, they are frequently decorated with Scandinavian-style motifs, and therefore represent a hybrid culture which it is appropriate to call Anglo-Scandinavian. There are also completely new types, such as tiny copper alloy bells, which may have been amulets or costume fittings. Although they are not known from Scandinavia itself, they have been found in settlements as far apart as Iceland, Scotland, and Yorkshire, and may represent

the spread of a fashion developed in the Irish Sea region. Metal objects produced according to Anglo-Scandinavian taste have been found in large numbers in eastern England. Whereas we cannot choose our genes and we can only modify our language to a limited extent, we can choose our jewellery, and these finds indicate widespread acceptance of an Anglo-Scandinavian cultural identity in 10th-century England.

At Cottam, in East Yorkshire, I excavated a settlement first discovered by metal-detectorists. In the 8th and 9th centuries there had been an Anglo-Saxon farmstead, possibly an outlying dependency of a royal estate at Driffield. The residents had been part of a trading network and there were large numbers of low-denomination Northumbrian copper alloy coins, or *stycas*. In the late 9th or early 10th century the Anglo-Saxon farm was abandoned and replaced by a new planned farm set within rectangular paddocks and with a rather grand gated entrance. The new occupants, who from their dress may well have been Scandinavian colonists, were no longer able to buy and sell with coins as the Northumbrian mints had ceased production, but this did not prevent them trading west with York and south of the Humber to Lincolnshire, weighing out bullion to conduct their transactions. They lived in their new farm for only a couple of generations before relocating to the site of what became the planned medieval village.

The Scandinavian settlement also brought major changes to towns and provided a stimulus for the largest urban regeneration since Britain under the Romans. In Mercia and Wessex, systems of fortified towns, or *burhs*, were established by royal decrees in response to the Viking threat. They also functioned as civil and ecclesiastical administrative centres, and mints were established in them. In some cases, such as Chester, Gloucester, Exeter, and Winchester, Roman sites were refortified; in other cases they used natural defences. Elsewhere, such as at Cricklade, Wallingford, and Oxford, new defences were constructed based upon Roman models.

Many became important markets; at Chester a community of Hiberno-Norse traders settled between the Roman fort and the River Dee.

Although Viking raids initially disrupted trade organized through the urban markets or *wics*, at places such as Hamwic (Southampton), Lundenwic (London), and Eoforwic (York), these towns flourished in the 10th century. In most cases the trading sites were brought within, or adjacent to, the walls of the old Roman forts, and were then subject to rapid development. York is the best known, with the street at Coppergate established in the early 10th century, and four tenements used by a variety of merchants, manufacturers, and craftsmen. Within 50 years the pressure on urban space – in common with many other English towns – led to the development of planked two-storey buildings, with cellars for storing raw materials and finished products, and upstairs for living, working, and trading. The city was an important commercial and manufacturing centre and by 900 York's new Viking rulers were minting their own coins. These were partly for propaganda purposes, demonstrating that the Viking kingdom was as respectable as other Western Christian states, but the volume of coinage indicates high levels of transactions. By 1000 York may have had a population of 15,000, dependent upon food supplied from the hinterland, and with access to cereal crops, animals, and marine resources. The Life of St Oswald records that the city was 'enriched with the treasures of merchants, who come from all parts, but above all from the Danish people'.

In the East Midlands the Danes themselves established a series of urban strongholds, described as the Five Boroughs, comprising Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Nottingham, and Stamford. Excavations have failed to reveal anything specifically Scandinavian about these towns and they may have been based upon English models. Some of the new industries which grew up within their shadow, such as the production of glazed Stamford-ware pottery, may have resulted from immigrants moving in with the Scandinavian traders, but

10. Excavations in progress at Coppergate, York

throughout England rural 'cottage' industry was being replaced by town-based industrialized mass production in response to the new urban markets.

Erik Bloodaxe (d. 954)

Erik Bloodaxe, Viking leader and King of Northumbria, was the son of Haraldr Finehair, King of Vestfold (872?–*c.*930). Few facts about his life are reliably attested, other than that he was expelled from York in 954, and may have been killed on the Roman road to Cumbria at Stainmore (the modern A66). His fame is due to his prominence in the saga literature, unique for a 10th-century Scandinavian king in the British Isles. Erik is said to have begun his Viking career at the age of 12, meeting his wife Gunnhild on an expedition to the White Sea. Erik became king of Norway on the death of his father, killing several of his brothers and rivals, before being ousted by his younger brother Hákon. Erik next made his way to Orkney, and then to Northumbria, eventually residing in York until his expulsion. Erik also appears in *Egils Saga*, as the enemy of the psychopath and poet Egil Skallagrímsson. Despite pardoning Egil's life in return for a praise poem, Erik was generally given a bad press, with a remarkable career of plunder and homicide. He embodies the modern perception of the Viking world.

Nonetheless, although Viking Age England was thriving, the Vikings themselves have been hard to find. The relative scarcity of identifiable burials of a Scandinavian character in England must lead to the conclusion that – unlike those on the Atlantic margins – most settlers were not buried in their traditional dress. The exceptions are mostly clustered in the North-West and Cumbria, areas where a Scandinavian identity seems to have been maintained for longer, and where most settlers lived in scattered farmsteads and were buried on their farms. A number of individual mound burials, frequently containing weaponry, were generally excavated in the

19th century, at sites such as Aspatria, Hesket in the Forest, and Claughton Hall. They follow similar burial practices to those observed on the Isle of Man (p. 85). The only cemetery was discovered in 2004 by a metal-detectorist, on a low hill overlooking the village of Cumwhitton, near Carlisle. It comprised just six burials – four males and two females – buried with weaponry and jewellery. A mound had been raised over one of the males.

In lowland and eastern England such burials are extremely scarce and it appears that Scandinavian cultural identity was rarely reflected in the burial rite. Newcomers in these areas may have often joined established settlements and may have been accommodated within existing Anglo-Saxon graveyards. Another recent discovery, at Adwick-le-Street, near Doncaster, provides a clear exception. A woman had been buried with a non-matching pair of oval brooches, of late 9th-century date, and fragments of an iron knife and key or latch-lifter. A small copper-alloy bowl, probably manufactured in the Celtic West, had been placed at her feet. Isotope analysis of her teeth shows she originated from the Trondheim area of Norway, or possibly north-east Scotland. There is no evidence for settlement or other burials in the locality and she must represent an isolated death.

The other exceptions are provided by two remarkable cemeteries which have been associated with the over-wintering of the Great Army at Repton, in 873–4. Having taken over the Mercian royal shrine at Repton, the Viking army constructed a massive D-shaped encampment, using the River Trent to protect the flat side of the D, and the tower of the Anglo-Saxon church as a gatehouse. In Anglo-Saxon England power could be acquired through association with sanctity and several accompanied burials were placed immediately adjacent to the shrine of the martyred St Wigstan, including the grave of a warrior who had met a particularly grisly death. The man in grave 511 had been killed by a slashing sword blow to his inner thigh, as well as having a sharp object thrust through the socket of an eye; given the damage to the inside of his rib cage there is also a

suggestion that he had been disembowelled. He was buried with a sword which had been broken and replaced in its fleece-lined scabbard, a knife and a key. He wore a silver Thor's hammer amulet at his neck, and a jackdaw leg bone and a boar's tuck had been placed between his legs, possibly symbols of Oðinn and Freyr respectively. Outside and to the west of the encampment the Viking army had also desecrated a second mausoleum, levelling a two-roomed structure, and burying an important warrior in the centre of one of the rooms, arranging the reinterred remains of at least 250 individuals around him. A group of four young males, buried adjacent to this mound, may have been sacrificial victims. It has been argued that the charnel deposit, comprising 80 per cent males, may represent warriors of the Viking army, although it has also been suggested that they may have been the Anglo-Saxon monks, either killed in the attack, or disturbed from their graves.

I excavated an alternative candidate for the war cemetery of the Great Army at Heath Wood, on a promontory overlooking Repton and the flood plain of the Trent, 4 kilometres to the south-east. Some 59 mounds can now be identified, in a number of clusters. Some of the mounds were constructed over the cremation pyres of the deceased. The charcoal hearths had been raked over but they include fragments of burnt swords and shields, as well as the cremated bones of sacrificed horses and dogs, and joints of meat. Other mounds appeared to be empty at first but, in one, some small token offerings of a few fragments of burnt bone and a ringed pin were discovered. Perhaps these were cenotaph-style memorials to warriors who had died and been cremated elsewhere, and were represented by small parcels of bone and personal items which had been brought back to Heath Wood. The cremation cemetery at Heath Wood is unique in the British Isles and appears to evoke pre-Christian burial rites in Scandinavia, as if some sections of the campaigning army felt it important to emphasize their Vikingness, while others preferred to be buried adjacent to the Mercian shrine. Whereas Heath Wood was short-lived, the cemetery at Repton continued in use for burials in Scandinavian character into the 10th

Ivarr the Boneless (d. *c.*873)

Ivarr was one of the leaders of the Viking Great Army that invaded England in 865 and is said to have been the son of Ragnar Lodbrok ('Leather Breeches'), who led the sack of Paris in 845. In the later saga literature he is described as lacking bones, the result of a curse placed on Ragnar by his second wife, who warned him not to consummate their marriage until three nights had passed. Ragnar refused to wait, and as a result Ivarr was born. Some have argued that 'boneless' is a mistranslation of 'childless' but the sagas recount how Ivarr was unable to walk and had to be carried on a shield. It has been suggested that he suffered from brittle bone disease.

When Ivarr defeated the Northumbrians at York in 867 their leader Osbert was killed in the battle, and his rival Ælla was put to death by a form of ritual murder known as the 'blood-eagle'. One graphic description says that 'They caused the bloody eagle to be carved on the back of Ælla, and they cut away all of the ribs from the spine, and then they ripped out his lungs', although this account has often been dismissed as later folklore or mistranslation.

Ivarr died in Dublin in 873. According to legend his body was brought back to England. Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle have suggested that Ivarr was the warrior buried in the centre of the mausoleum at Repton, although many doubt this.

century, including the erection of a hogback tombstone (see below).

It is significant that, while 9th-century graves are rare, in the 10th century subsequent generations of Scandinavian settlers may also have abandoned grave-goods but developed distinctive stone monuments to mark their graves. In northern and eastern England in particular they borrowed the Anglo-Saxon and Irish custom of erecting stone crosses at monastic sites, and turned them into individual memorials for the founder burials of rural graveyards. At Middleton in North Yorkshire, for example, there is a small group of warrior crosses, including one which depicts an armed warrior on the front, and a dragon-like beast on the reverse, and another which shows a hunting scene.

The so-called hogback tombstones reflect another newly invented type of monument. These low grave memorials have arched backs, like bow-sided halls; some are grasped at each end by pairs of beasts, sometimes identified as muzzled bears. Their inspiration may have come from recumbent stone grave slabs of the early Scandinavian rulers of England, such as those found under York Minster, combined with elements of Irish house shrines. Although examples have been found as far afield as northern Scotland and south-western England, the distribution is focused in North Yorkshire, within the territory of the Viking kings of York and Dublin. Both the crosses and the hogback stones date from the first part of the 10th century and may reflect the arrival of later generations of Hiberno-Norse settlers from Ireland, following their expulsion from Dublin, for whom it was important to preserve a Viking identity.

The new Anglo-Scandinavian lords were Christianized, and much of the sculpture incorporates Christian and pre-Christian themes, such as the cross from Gosforth in Cumbria, which shows a Crucifixion scene populated with figures in Scandinavian costume on one side, and a scene from Ragnarok, the end of the world, on

11. Middleton warrior, North Yorkshire

the reverse. They were also responsible for the great boom in church building in the 10th and 11th centuries. In Anglo-Saxon England there was a system of minster churches under which small

communities of monks served the large estates. These had collapsed during the Scandinavian settlement and the new landowners now constructed private chapels on their estates, many of which developed into parish churches serving the local community. At Wharram Percy there is 8th- and 9th-century sculpture relating to an earlier, possibly minster church, but a small timber church was established on a new site in the 10th century. This was enlarged in the 11th century into a stone church with a separate nave and chancel. The church became the focus for burials of the early lords of the manor, including some marked by recumbent stone slabs, and many of the early burials around the church have been radiocarbon dated to the 10th century. An Old English inscription on the sundial at the site of the Anglo-Saxon minster at Kirkdale provides a graphic illustration for this process of Anglo-Scandinavian privatization. It relates how Orm, son of Gamal – both Old Norse names – bought the minster when it was tumbled down and ruined, and erected a new church on the site in 1055–65, the decade before the Battle of Stamford Bridge.

In England, therefore, there is evidence for a complex sequence of assimilation between peoples of different language, culture, and religion, and the creation of hybrid identities, over at least 200 years. The following chapters will look at the situation in other parts of the British Isles, where the native societies may not have been so economically or politically advanced.