PART II

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FROM VIKINGS TO KINGS

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The Viking expansion

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For 300 years, beginning at the end of the eighth century, Scandinavians, mostly from what are now Denmark, Norway and west Sweden, figure prominently in the history of western Europe, first as pirates and later as conquerors and colonists. In those centuries other Scandinavians, known as *Svear*, from east Sweden were active in similar ways in eastern Europe. The people these Scandinavians encountered described them in various ways. In western Europe they were often identified as Danes or Northmen, and were sometimes called heathens or gentiles. In the east the Slavs called the Scandinavian invaders *Rus*, a word derived from the Finnish name for the *Svear*. This word, variants of which were used in Arabic and Byzantine Greek, eventually gave Russia its name. In the ninth century it was only the English who called the invaders Vikings, originally a Scandinavian appellative – *víkingr*; a word that now has a wider meaning and is used to describe not only Viking warriors but also many aspects of Scandinavian society in what is commonly called the Viking Age.

The first recorded raids were on monasteries in the British Isles. In 793 Lindisfarne, an island monastery off the coast of Northumberland, was plundered. A year later raiders who attacked another Northumbrian monastery, probably Jarrow, were opposed and suffered losses. This resistance may have been the reason that in 795 Vikings attacked undefended island monasteries in the west: on Skye and Iona in the Hebrides, and Rathlin off the north-east coast of Ireland. The first recorded raid on the Continent, in 799, was also on an island monastery, St Philibert's on Noirmoutier, near the estuary of the Loire. One early incident that did not involve a church was in the reign of Brihtric, king of the West Saxons (786–802). The crews of three ships, later described as from Hordaland in Norway, landed in Portland on the south coast of England and killed a royal reeve who mistook them for merchants.

There must also have been raids on south-east England at this time, although none is reported until 835. As early as 792 the churches of Kent were obliged

to contribute to defences against pagan seamen, an obligation that is also mentioned in early ninth-century Kentish charters, one of which, dated 822, is extended to include the duty to destroy forts built by the pagans. Another indication that the Vikings threatened that part of England before 835 is a charter dated 804 granting land within the walls of Canterbury as a refuge for the nunnery of Lyminge, an exposed site near Romney Marsh.

Across the Channel, in 800 Charlemagne organised defences along the coast north of the Seine estuary against pirates who 'infest the Gallic sea'. As no attack on that coast is reported before 810 it is not possible to say when the raids began; Scandinavian pirates may have been a nuisance there for many years. It is, however, clear that by the last decade of the eighth century their raids had become so serious that rulers on both sides of the Channel took action against them. The Frankish defences were further strengthened in 811 after the Danes invaded Frisia in 810.

Causes

It has been argued that the pressure of increasing population in Scandinavia and the consequent shortage of land was the main cause of Viking activity. That may have been partly true of western Norway, where there were few reserves of land to be exploited: the earliest Scandinavian colonists were the Norwegians who began to settle in Orkney, Shetland and the Hebrides at the end of the eighth century, if not before. The later colonisation of Iceland was also largely the work of Norwegians. In other parts of Scandinavia, however, there is no hint of population pressure in or before the Viking period. Most of the first generations of Vikings were seeking wealth, not land. Indeed, throughout the whole period one of their main purposes was to acquire treasure in the form of gold, silver, gems, precious objects or coins, which they obtained either directly as plunder or tribute, or indirectly by ransoming captives of high rank or selling slaves. In eastern Europe their purpose was to obtain furs and slaves to sell. Successful Vikings could also hope to gain a reputation for courage and skill as warriors or seamen, and some of their leaders, especially those who were political exiles, also hoped to attract sufficiently large retinues of warriors to enable them to win power in Scandinavia, or abroad as conquerors.

Norwegians probably began to settle in Orkney and Shetland towards the end of the eighth century but until the middle of the ninth century most of the Vikings who survived returned home. Later some settled permanently in areas they had conquered in the British Isles or in northern Frankia, or in

Føroyar, Iceland, or, towards the end of the tenth century, in Greenland (see Chapter 8(d)). Some were exiles, unable to return to their homelands, others found it more convenient to settle on land distributed by their leaders in areas that had been conquered or newly discovered. Some, including many of those who settled in the British Isles, Iceland or in Russia, must have been tempted by the prospect of having more land than they could ever hope to own or rent in Scandinavia.

A key factor in the outburst of piracy was, in fact, the commercial expansion in north-west Europe that began towards the end of the seventh century when there was a significant increase in trade between the Continent and England.[1] This led to the development of several relatively large trading places: Dorestad on the Rhine, Quentovic, near Boulogne, and in England, Hamwic (the precursor of Southampton), Fordwich (the port of Canterbury), London, Ipswich and York. This trade grew even faster after about 700 when the Frisians obtained a very large supply of silver from an unidentified source, possibly in the Harz mountains, enabling them to produce a huge coinage that was quickly spread widely on the Continent and in England.

Scandinavia and the lands round the Baltic were soon affected by this development, for the produce of that region, particularly furs, was highly prized in western Europe. The best quality furs came from regions with the coldest winters, and for western Europe Scandinavia and the lands east of the Baltic were an ideal source. Merchants could sail into the Baltic in the summer and buy them and other produce, such as beaver and otter skins, amber, eiderdown and good-quality whetstones, in the trading places that were established there during the eighth century. Most of the furs offered for sale in such places as Ribe, Birka, Wollin, Truso and, in the ninth century, Hedeby, were gathered as tribute from the Sami, Finns and Balts who inhabited the best fur-producing areas. Northern Russia, which was the main source of high-quality furs in medieval Europe, was already being exploited in the eighth century by Finns, Slavs, Balts as well as *Svear*. By the middle of that century a base for this activity, with a mixed population of Finns, Slavs and some Scandinavians, had been established at Staraja (Old) Ladoga on the river Volkhov, some twelve kilometres from its estuary in Lake Ladoga.

The commercial links between northern and western Europe had consequences that in their turn prepared the way for the Viking raids. First, increased familiarity with western European sailing ships was an important factor in the adoption of sails in Scandinavia. Although Saxons and their neighbours in

1 I. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450–751* (London, 1994), pp. 293–303.

Jylland may have begun to use sails in the fifth century, Gotlandic picture-stones suggest that oars were the normal method of propulsion for another two centuries. Secondly, thanks to contacts with western merchants, Scandinavians began to learn about the wealth of Europe and the conflicts between, and within, European kingdoms from which they were later able to profit. Thirdly, shipping in the Baltic provided opportunities for pirates who were in time tempted to extend their activities into the North Sea. There were also political consequences. Rulers and chieftains who were best able to exact tribute gained wealth and power, as did those who controlled the trading places, or the routes leading to them. The Danish kings, whose central territory was in Jylland and the adjacent islands, benefited most, for they controlled the entrance to the Baltic and could provide security for ships passing through Store or Lille Bælt. They were consequently able to attract merchants to Hedeby, their trading place at the head of the inlet of Schlei, conveniently close to the land route between Jylland and Saxony. The alternative channel into the Baltic, Öresund, was less attractive, partly because of strong currents, but also because of the threat of piracy; it was not directly controlled by Danish kings until the end of the tenth century.

There are various indications that in the first half of the ninth century Danish kings were acknowledged as overlords by many of the local rulers and chieftains in the lands around Skagerrak and Kattegat. Any who were unable to resist Danish power, and were unwilling to submit, could choose exile, a prospect made more attractive by the opportunity to win fame and fortune by taking part in, or leading, Viking raids. The Danes were particularly eager to have hegemony over Viken, the land flanking Oslofjord. This district was of great value for it was there that the Danes could obtain iron that was produced in Norway. If, as seems likely, the word Viking originally referred to the inhabitants of Viken it could explain why the English, and only they, called Scandinavian pirates Vikings, for England was the natural goal for men from Viken who chose exile as raiders rather than submit to the Danes.

At first most of the Vikings who operated in the north and west of the British Isles were from Norway. There is no contemporary record of Scandinavian activity in Orkney, Shetland, or the Hebrides in the early ninth century, but archaeological evidence suggests that there were already contacts between Norway and Orkney in the seventh century.[2] By the mid-ninth century there were extensive Norwegian settlements in the Hebrides as well as in the

2 B. Myhre, 'The beginning of the Viking Age: Some current archaeological problems', in A. Faulkes and R. Perkins (eds.), *Viking Revaluations* (London, 1993), pp. 182–204 followed by 12 pp. of figures.

Northern Isles, a colonisation that was only possible after any resistance by the native inhabitants had been overcome. Although the Norwegian invaders were so dominant in these islands that virtually nothing of the native culture survived, it has been claimed that evidence found in the excavation of some graves in Orkney implies peaceful cooperation between the Norwegians and the original inhabitants.

It is, therefore, likely that the Scandinavian conquests in the Northern and Western Isles began with the establishment of bases by the leaders of the first raids. Initially, the Danes concentrated on the southern North Sea and the Channel coasts. Although the distinction between these zones was blurred in the middle of the ninth century when Danes challenged Norwegians in Ireland, archaeological and linguistic evidence show clearly that it was predominantly Danes who settled in eastern England and that most of those who occupied land in Ireland, the Hebrides and the Northern Isles were from Norway.

Vikings in west Europe

For several decades the Vikings mounted what were, in effect, hit and run raids, and rarely ventured far from the sea. The defences organised by English and Frankish rulers were apparently effective; most reported raids were in Ireland until the 830s when the scale and extent of Viking incursions increased dramatically. Dorestad, a major trading place about 80 km from the open sea, was raided in 834 and in each of the next three years. In 835 the Isle of Sheppey was ravaged and in 836 the West Saxon army was defeated by Vikings who landed on the north coast of Somerset. In the same year Vikings began to plunder monasteries in the interior of Ireland and the monks of St Philibert abandoned Noirmoutier to seek shelter in the Loire valley.

The breach of the Frankish defences in 834 was made possible by the political crisis in Frankia that began the previous year when the emperor Louis was deposed by his sons. He was soon restored, but the eldest son, Lothar, continued to oppose his father and welcomed the support of a Viking fleet that was led by Harald, an exiled Danish king. After Louis' death in 840, Lothar rewarded Harald and secured his support in the succession dispute by granting him Walcheren and the neighbouring region.[3]

Scandinavians took advantage of internal conflicts elsewhere in western Europe. In 838 Vikings supported the Britons of Cornwall against the West

3 I. Wood, 'Christians and pagans in ninth-century Scandinavia', in B. and P. Sawyer and I. Wood (eds.), *The Christianization of Scandinavia* (Alingsås, 1987), pp. 36–67, at p. 43.

Saxons, and in 844 a deposed Northumbrian king was restored to power after his usurper had been defeated and killed by Viking invaders. In Ireland too there were alliances between Vikings and Irish kings, certainly from 842, and probably earlier. It was, however, Frankia that offered Vikings the most rewarding opportunities. In 841, during the war between the sons of Louis, churches and towns in the Seine valley were raided and in 842 Quentovic was sacked by a fleet that then crossed the Channel to attack Hamwic.

When the civil war ended in 843 with the division of Frankia into three kingdoms, the Vikings had discovered that monasteries and towns on navigable rivers were vulnerable and that the Franks were sometimes prepared to pay large sums for the sake of peace. In 845 an attack on Paris was prevented by the payment of 7,000 pounds of silver; for the Vikings an unprecedented tribute. It is not surprising that before long many new bands of Vikings were attracted to Frankia. A Viking fleet wintered in the Seine in 852 and a year later another did so in the Loire. By the end of the decade all the main rivers of the west Frankish kingdom were being exploited by Viking fleets. The west Frankish kingdom suffered most. The other kingdoms were not so seriously disrupted by Vikings despite the existence of many promising targets in the valleys of the Rhine and Meuse. These rivers were, in effect, protected most of the time by other Vikings who were based near their estuaries as allies of the rulers of that part of Frankia.

The Iberian peninsula also offered rich targets, but only two Viking expeditions against it are recorded in the ninth century. In 844 a fleet of fifty-four ships was repulsed from Galicia and went on to attack Seville and Lisbon before returning to Aquitaine. Fifteen years later a larger fleet, sixty-two ships, sailed into the Mediterranean after plundering Seville and Algeciras, and raided North Africa before establishing a base in Camargue from which they plundered the Rhone valley. In response to this second attack the Caliph of Cordoba strengthened the defences by building a new fleet, and no further Viking raids on Muslim Spain are reported for a hundred years.[4]

Although the main arena of Viking activity in the middle years of the century was Frankia, the British Isles continued to suffer raids. In England one of the main objectives was the estuary of the river Thames. In 851 a fleet wintered on Thanet, near its mouth, and for several years Vikings were based there or further upstream on the Isle of Sheppey. Canterbury and London were sacked and Kent was extensively plundered despite having paid tribute to secure peace.

4 R. Collins, *Early Medieval Spain* (London, 1983), pp. 195–6.

Vikings began to winter in Ireland earlier than in England, first in 840 on Lough Neagh and a year later in Dublin, one of several defended ship-enclosures that were constructed in that year. Before long there were Viking bases at Wexford, Waterford, Cork, Limerick and elsewhere, from which the surrounding areas were plundered. The booty included ornaments and elaborate caskets, but Irish monasteries were not as rich in gold, silver and gems as those in Frankia and England. Captives, who could be sold to Muslims in Spain or North Africa, were far more valuable.

The Vikings in these bases were, of course, not confined to Ireland. The Dublin Vikings launched several expeditions across the Irish Sea and in 870, after a siege of four months, captured Dumbarton, the capital of the kingdom of Strathclyde. According to the Annals of Ulster, the victors returned to Dublin with 'a great multitude of men, English, Britons, and Picts in captivity', a reminder of the importance of human booty. The Vikings based in Ireland were far from united and rivalry between them was complicated by the arrival of Danes in 851 to challenge the Norwegians in Dublin and elsewhere. In subsequent years Irish annalists recorded with great pleasure many battles between these invaders.

By 870 there had been profound changes in Frankia and England. In 862 Charles, king of West Frankia began systematically to defend the heart of his kingdom. He had bridges built across the Seine and Loire to hinder the passage of enemy ships, and he fortified towns and abbeys.[5] The lower reaches of those rivers and other coastal areas were, in effect, left to the mercy of the raiders, some of whom remained in the Loire valley for many years. Most of the religious communities and many bishops in the exposed regions sought safety in other parts of Frankia.

These changes encouraged many Vikings to concentrate on England instead of Frankia. Several Viking leaders joined forces in the hope of winning status and independence by conquering the English kingdoms, of which there were then four. In 865 a fleet that landed in East Anglia was later joined by others to form what a contemporary chronicler described, with good reason, as 'a Great Army'. Five years later this army, by conquering two kingdoms, Northumbria and East Anglia, and dismembering a third, Mercia, controlled much of eastern England, from York to London. Only one kingdom, Wessex, remained intact and independent.

For several years after 870 the Viking army made determined, but unsuccessful, efforts to conquer Wessex, and between 876 and 880 its leaders began

5 S. Coupland, 'The fortified bridges of Charles the Bald', *Journal of Medieval History*, 17 (1991), pp. 1–12.

to grant estates to their principal followers who in turn distributed land to those of their followers who wished to settle. In the words of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 'they proceeded to plough and support themselves'. These colonists had a profound effect on dialects and place-names in the areas in which they settled; their influence on the farming vocabulary and field-names confirms that many were, indeed, farmers. The areas of densest Scandinavian settlement in the ninth century are indicated by concentrations of Scandinavian place-names, areas in which, significantly, most ornamental metalwork of the tenth and eleventh century decorated in Scandinavian styles have been found.[6]

At much the same time as members of the Great Army were settling in England, other Scandinavians, mainly Norwegians, began to colonise Iceland. The existence of this island had long been known, but it was uninhabited before the ninth century, with the possible exception that a few Irish priests or monks may have established religious communities there, as they did on other Atlantic islands. Icelanders later claimed that their ancestors emigrated in order to escape the tyranny of Harald *hárfagri* ('Finehair'), who was traditionally remembered as the first king of a united Norway. Emigration to Iceland began before Harald's time but it may have increased after Harald's victory in Hafrsfjord towards the end of the ninth century (see Chapter 8(c)).

Although a lack of reliable evidence makes it impossible to say what part earlier developments in Norway played in the movement to Iceland, Irish annals suggest that Scandinavians based in Ireland had reason to look for new homes in the second half of the ninth century. By establishing permanent bases in Ireland the Vikings lost the advantage of mobility, and disputes between different groups meant that they were unable to present a united front of the kind that proved so effective in England. They suffered many defeats. In 866 they were expelled from all their strongholds in the north and a Viking base at Youghal in the south was destroyed. Towards the end of the century the Vikings of Limerick, Waterford and Wexford all suffered defeats, and the Dublin Vikings, weakened by factional conflict, were overcome by the Irish in 902 and expelled. Some of the Dublin Vikings settled across the Irish Sea in the Wirral and possibly on the Isle of Man, but some Vikings who left Ireland at that time settled in Iceland.

Whether the colonisation was begun from the British Isles or from Norway, reports of the opportunities offered by that as yet unexploited land must have spread rapidly and tempted many to look for new homes there. After about sixty years most of the land suitable for settlement had been claimed. Later

6 Information generously given by Kevin Leahy of Scunthorpe Museum.

arrivals had to be content with less attractive sites, for example in the steep-sided fjords of north-west Iceland. For such people the discovery in the tenth century of apparently better sites in south-west Greenland was welcome, and towards the end of that century some began to move on, to found the most remote permanent Scandinavian settlement in which there were, eventually, some 300 farms.

According to later Icelandic sagas some of the early settlers in Greenland reached North America and discovered a fertile region they called *Vinland*, Meadow-land or Wine-land (see Chapter 8(d)). Several voyages to it are reported but the natives proved to be unfriendly and permanent settlement was not possible. Remains of buildings of this period with traces of temporary occupation by Scandinavians found at L'Anse aux Meadows near the northern tip of Newfoundland appear to have been a base camp for exploration. There is, however, no reliable evidence to show how much further south the Greenlanders went or whether they voyaged up the St Lawrence river.

The break-up of the Great Army after its failure to conquer Wessex coincided with renewed succession disputes in Frankia. Vikings were quick to take advantage of such dissension and from 879 to 891 several Viking armies were active on the Continent, occasionally combining forces. At first they concentrated on the area north of the Seine, including Flanders, where cities and monasteries had not been fortified, and in 882 there was a major incursion up the Rhine to Cologne and Trier. This led the Franks once again to protect that river by allowing a Viking army to control its estuary.

Another, more effective, response was to build fortifications. These measures had some success. In 885 the main army divided into two and each part returned to an area of earlier Viking activity, the Thames estuary and the Seine valley. After the former group had failed to take Rochester, some returned to the Continent, while others joined forces with Danes who had earlier settled in East Anglia. The Seine Vikings besieged Paris in the winter of that year. Although its defences held, the Franks were unable to prevent the invaders spending the next two winters further inland. During these campaigns huge quantities of plunder and tribute, and many captives, were taken, but the Vikings also suffered some defeats in pitched battles, in 881 at Saucourt, in 890 against the Bretons and in 891 near Louvain.

Following the defeat of 891 the army returned to England to renew the attempt to conquer the West Saxons. It failed. Alfred had learned the lesson of the campaigns in Frankia and had constructed a network of fortifications and built a fleet. In 896 the Vikings, having failed to gain even a foothold

in the areas of England not already under Scandinavian control, abandoned the attempt. In the words of the contemporary Chronicle: 'The Danish army divided, one force going into East Anglia and one into Northumbria; and those that were moneyless got themselves ships and went south across the sea to the Seine.'

Little is known about Viking activity on the Continent after that reversal. It is, however, clear that in 911 the west Frankish, or French, king granted Rouen and the surrounding territory in the lower Seine valley to a Viking leader called Rollo in the hope that he would deny other raiders the passage of the Seine, an arrangement similar to those made earlier to protect the Rhine. Another group of Vikings was allowed to settle in the neighbourhood of Nantes in 921 apparently to protect the Loire, but that only lasted sixteen years. The Viking occupation of Rouen proved permanent and was the basis of the later Duchy of Normandy, which at its full extent included the Cotentin in the west. Place- and personal names show that some of the Scandinavians who settled in the west of Normandy came from Celtic regions, probably Ireland. There are also indications that others had spent some time in England.

The other main development in the first half of the tenth century was the conquest of the Scandinavian areas in England by the descendants of Alfred who ruled Wessex and the English part of Mercia. The main resistance came from Northumbrians who tried to preserve their independence by recognising Scandinavians as kings of York. With the expulsion and death of the last of these kings, Erik Bloodaxe, an exiled Norwegian king, in 952 or 954, the English were at last permanently united in one kingdom. The earlier Scandinavian kings, none of whom ruled York for long, were all members of the dynasty that regained control of Dublin in 917. They claimed to be descendants of Ivar, the king of Dublin who, on his death in 873, was described by an Irish annalist as 'king of all the Scandinavians of Ireland and Britain'. Whatever justification there was for such a title, the fact that his descendants were so closely associated with York lends some support to the suggestion that he was one of the leaders of the Great Army that seized the city in 866.

The Scandinavians who ruled Dublin and those who retained control of other bases on the Irish coast were, during the tenth century, increasingly integrated in Irish politics, in which they played a minor role as allies of Irish kings in their struggles for supremacy. They could only hope to act independently overseas, and were probably responsible for the sporadic Viking activity that continued around the Irish Sea.

For most of the tenth century the opportunities for Vikings in west Europe were limited. The Scandinavians who had settled in the British Isles

and Normandy did not welcome newcomers, unless they had money. In Iceland the first settlers had taken the best land. The most promising targets for raids were well defended by fortifications or relatively well organised armies. Vikings could still hope to profit from hit and run raids, but few are reported until the last two decades of the century. Only large-scale invasions offered any hope of significant gains, and for most of the century no large armies operated in western Europe. One reason was probably that potential leaders were then engaged in internal conflicts in Scandinavia. In Norway there were disputes over the succession to the kingdom established by Harald Finehair, conflicts in which his son, Erik Bloodaxe, failed (Chapter 8(c)). In Denmark too there were apparently conflicts that were finally resolved by the success of Harald Bluetooth in restoring both royal power and the Danish hegemony over the lands around Skagerrak and Kattegat (see Chapter 8(b)).

The East

Reasons behind the decrease in Viking activity in western Europe may also lie in the better wealth-gathering opportunities that existed in the east where there had been great changes since the eighth century. Staraja Ladoga controlled the river Volkhov which was one of the most important routes between the Baltic and the interior of Russia. That control was made all the more effective by the rapids above the town that could only be safely navigated with the help of pilots supplied by Staraja Ladoga.

A hoard of Islamic coins deposited there in about 790 suggests that the resources of the region were by then being exported to the Caliphate. For over 200 years exports from Russia to the Muslim world, either directly across the Caspian Sea, or through markets on the rivers Don and Volga, were paid for mainly in silver coins, huge numbers of which have been found in eastern Europe. Contemporary Arab writers described the traders as *Rus*, which suggests that most of them were *Svear* from eastern Sweden. It is, therefore, not surprising that Islamic coins began to reach the Baltic region early in the ninth century.

By the middle of that century a new base had been established on an island in the Volkhov, where it flows out from Lake Ilmen, about 200 kilometres above Staraja Ladoga. This was the *Holmgarðr* of later Icelandic Sagas, but in Slavonic it came to be called Gorodisce (Old Town or Fort), in contrast to Novgorod (New Town or Fort) which was founded about a century later two kilometres downstream. Gorodisce, with both Slav and Scandinavian inhabitants, soon

became an important centre for the growing trade in Russian produce in both western and eastern markets.

The amount of Islamic silver reaching Russia increased dramatically in the tenth century thanks to the discovery of huge silver deposits in the Hindu Kush. This enabled the Samanid rulers of Transoxania to produce a vast quantity of coins, many of which were used to buy goods in Russia. This commerce, and the silver acquired by it, offered tempting opportunities to Vikings who found western Europe less rewarding after 900 than it had been earlier. Archaeological evidence for the presence of Scandinavians in Russia is much more abundant for the early tenth century than for the ninth, and significant numbers of Scandinavian graves have been found in the cemeteries of bases or trading places on the main rivers of the forest region, for example at Pskov, Cernigov on a tributary of the Dnepr, Bolsoe Timereven near Jaroslavl on the upper Volga, and Murom on its tributary, the Oka. The largest of these cemeteries was at Gnezdovo, on the upper Dnepr, near Smolensk, with 3,000 or more graves of the late ninth to the early eleventh century, some of which were certainly those of men and women of Scandinavian descent, including boat burials of people of high status.

However, this archaeological evidence appears to reflect a process of peaceful colonisation rather than violent tribute-taking or plundering. The burial rituals suggest that a significant number of Scandinavian men, women and children, mostly *Svear*, began to settle along with people from other cultures, Slavs, Finns and Balts, and that together they exploited this vast and sparsely populated region. As a result a distinct, blended culture evolved.[7]

The most significant extension of Scandinavian activity was to Kiev on the middle Dnepr, which was by the end of the ninth century ruled by a dynasty of Scandinavian descent. Initially they paid tribute to the Khazars, a Turkish people who occupied the valleys of the lower Don and Volga and from the seventh to the early tenth century had hegemony over a huge empire between the Caspian and Black Seas. Although the rulers of Kiev, and many of their leading followers, were of Scandinavian descent, by the end of the century they had been Slavicised. This change is clearly reflected in the rulers' names. The prince of Kiev from about 913 to 945 was Igor and his wife was Olga, names derived from the Scandinavian Ingvar and Helga, but his son, prince from 964 to 971, was named Svjatoslav. Nevertheless, they and their successors continued

7 I. Jansson, 'Warfare, trade or colonisation? Some general remarks on the eastern expansion of the Scandinavians in the Viking period', in P. Hansson (ed.), *The Rural Viking in Russia and Sweden* (Örebro, 1997), pp. 9–64.

to be considered *Rus*, a term that was by then no longer used specifically for Scandinavians.

Early in the tenth century coin hoards in Scandinavia show that many Samanid coins were by then reaching the Baltic region. It has been generally supposed that they reflect a favourable balance of trade, although it is not clear what was bought with them. The fact that for some twenty years after about 965 very few Islamic coins were imported into Scandinavia although they continued to reach Russia, if in smaller quantities than before, suggests that in the first half of the century much of the silver reaching Scandinavia was acquired in ways that were not possible later. The most satisfactory explanation is that much of it was gathered by trade or as tribute or plunder in eastern Europe by bands of Scandinavians operating independently, and that the decline in silver imports reflects the success of *Rus* princes in resisting such incursions. If so, that success was partly due to the Scandinavian warriors, called *varjagi* in Slavonic (ON *væringar*, Varangians in modern English) who were recruited by *Rus* princes in the tenth century.

According to later Kievan tradition, Svjatoslav's son, Vladimir, prince from 978 to 1015, early in his reign reduced his retinue of *varjagi* by sending many of them to the Byzantine Empire. This is confirmed by Byzantine evidence that a large force of warriors, later called *varaggoi*, was sent by Vladimir in 988 and enabled the emperor to crush a serious rebellion. Thereafter Varangians, Slavs as well as Scandinavians, played an important role in the Byzantine army, and later formed the imperial bodyguard, the Varangian Guard. One of the most famous members of this élite force was Harald *harðráði* ('Hard-ruler') before he became king of Norway in 1046.

The conquests of England

Increasingly effective opposition in the east may well have been a factor in the renewal of Viking raids in western Europe towards the end of the tenth century. A further incentive for Scandinavians to seek profitable exile as Vikings was the revival of Danish power under Harald Bluetooth and his son Sven Forkbeard. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that the two main periods of Viking activity in western Europe began, towards the end of the eighth and the tenth centuries, when Danish kings were extending their authority in neighbouring parts of Scandinavia.

Raids on England reported in the 980s may have been the work of Vikings from Ireland, but ten years later fleets from Scandinavia began once again to threaten western Europe. Many places along the coast of the continent, from

the Elbe to northern Spain, were attacked, but the main target was England, which was then a rich kingdom with large and expanding towns and a great quantity of silver in circulation in the form of coins of high quality. Vikings soon discovered that the English under their king Æthelred were able and willing to pay large sums for the sake of peace, however temporary.

There is little doubt that the first major raid on England, in 991, was led by Sven Forkbeard.[8] Whether or not he was aware that in the ninth century the power of Danish kings had been undermined by returning Vikings, he took good care to ensure that he as well as potential rivals profited from Viking expeditions. In 991 the English paid £10,000 and three years later a fleet that was certainly led by Sven extorted £16,000. He was also the leader of raids in 1003 and 1004, and although he is not named, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle implies that it was his army that returned in 1006 and forced the English to pay £36,000.

Other armies besides Sven's attacked England in Æthelred's reign. A runic inscription in Uppland commemorating Ulf of Borresta records that he took gelds in England from three leaders; Tostig, Thorkell and Knut. Tostig is not mentioned in English sources but Thorkell is named in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as the leader of an immense army that landed in Kent in August 1009. It stayed until 1012 when it was bought off by a tribute of £48,000. Some of the fleet then dispersed, but Thorkell, with 45 ships, remained to defend England. Thorkell was no friend of Sven Forkbeard and the king had reason to fear that, strengthened by this success and with English support, he might pose a serious threat to his power. Sven's decision to conquer England in the next year seems to have been partly intended to prevent such a challenge; he may even have suspected that Thorkell hoped to conquer England himself.

Sven's campaign of conquest began in the summer of 1013 and was finished at Christmas when he was acknowledged as king. His triumph was short-lived; he died six weeks later. The English recalled Æthelred from exile in Normandy but Sven's son Knut returned in 1015 to regain what his father had won. By the end of the following year he was recognised as king by the English, and later also by the Danes and Norwegians. The Danish conquest did not put an end to Viking attacks on England, but the fleet that Knut maintained proved to be an effective deterrent. No attacks are reported after 1018 when the crews of thirty pirate ships were killed by Knut's forces.

Knut died in 1035 and was succeeded in turn by two sons. After both were dead, in 1042 the English chose Æthelred's surviving son, Edward, as king.

8 P. Sawyer, 'The Scandinavian background', in J. Cooper (ed.), *The Battle of Maldon: Fiction and Fact*, pp. 33–42.

Nevertheless, several later kings of the Danes and of the Norwegians believed that they had a claim to England. Many Scandinavians were willing to encourage such ambitions and hoped at least to have the opportunity to gather some of England's wealth as plunder even if conquest was not possible.

When Edward died childless in January 1066, his successor, Harold Godwinson, was challenged by the Norwegian king, Harald Hard-ruler. He invaded England but was killed in a battle at Stamford Bridge, near York, on 25 September. Three weeks later Harold Godwinson was himself killed in a battle near Hastings against William, Duke of Normandy, who was crowned king of the English on Christmas Day. It was, however, several years before he had firm control of the whole kingdom, and English magnates who were unwilling to accept him were prepared to support the claim of the Danish king, Sven Estridsen. He arrived in the Humber in 1070 but William's vigorous defensive measures were effective and Sven withdrew in the summer, although he and his men were able to keep some of their booty.

Five years later a Danish fleet, led by one of Sven's sons, Knut, intended to support a rebellion against William but it had been crushed before they arrived. The Danes returned home after plundering York and its neighbourhood. In 1085, when Knut was king of the Danes, he planned to conquer England, a threat that William took very seriously, but the assembled fleet never sailed. There were a few later expeditions by Norwegian kings to the Northern and Western Isles but England never again suffered a large-scale attack by Scandinavians. The Viking Age was definitely over.

One of the most significant developments in these centuries was the huge extension of the Scandinavian world by Norwegian colonists. The descendants of Scandinavians who settled in England, Ireland, Normandy or Russia were quickly assimilated, but in the previously uninhabited Atlantic islands – Føroyar, Iceland and Greenland – Norwegian colonists and their descendants continued to speak their own language and maintained links with Norway. So too did those who settled in Orkney, Shetland, the Hebrides and the Isle of Man. The closeness of the links between Norway and these colonies was clearly demonstrated by their inclusion in the archiepiscopal province of Nidaros when it was established in the middle of the twelfth century.

In Scandinavia itself there were many changes in the Viking Age, the most fundamental being the conversion to Christianity, which will be discussed later. Missionaries, and later bishops in regular sees, not only preached a new religion, they also brought knowledge of more developed forms of government and opened new channels of communication with other parts of Europe. Links were also forged by traders. The increasing scale and range of commerce across

the North Sea and the Baltic to meet the demands of the expanding towns of western Europe for food and raw materials created many new opportunities for contacts and new influences. One result of this expanding commerce was the development of towns on new sites as well as in such well-established trading places as Ribe. This process was encouraged, and was indeed to a large extent made possible, by kings who could provide the protection that traders and craftsmen needed and who, in return, gained great benefits. Towns were not only centres of secular authority, supervised by royal agents, they were also places in which cathedrals or major churches, founded and endowed by kings, were imposing symbols of the new, Christian kingship.