

First Contact: the earliest Vikings in the Isle of Man

By Dirk H. Steinforth, manxvikings.jimdo.com (July 30, 2016)

The account of the Viking raid on Lindisfarne in AD 793 makes it so very clear: the arrival of the Vikings in the British Isles was sudden and violent. Year after year the Irish chronicles in the decades afterwards tell of ever new waves of Norse raiders murdering, plundering and despoiling monasteries.

The *Annals of Ulster* report under the year 798:

“Burning of Inis Phátraic by heathens, and cattle-tributes of the lands taken, and the shrine of Do-Chonna broken by them, and also great incursions by them, both in Ireland and Scotland” (Thanks again, Anna!).

‘Inis Phátraic’ – Patrick’s Island – was confidently identified as St Patrick’s Isle, a tiny island off the Manx town of Peel, where to this day the remains of St German’s Cathedral. Accordingly, it seemed evident that the Isle of Man itself fell victim to violent Viking attacks – at a very early date in the Viking Age. This, however, was the only entry in the chronicles mentioning a raid on the Island, and it was challenged later and eventually dismissed: ‘Inis Phátraic’, it was now thought, was more likely to have been ‘Holmpatrick’ (a.k.a. Church Island) off the town of Skerries, Co Dublin, in Ireland, also home of a monastery church ruin. By scholarly consensus, there was no written evidence of pre-tenth-century Viking presence in the Isle of Man any more.

Strangely enough, the archaeological evidence underwent a similar re-evaluation: a large number of grave-goods has been recovered from Viking graves, and originally not a few of these objects had been dated to the wide interval of ‘AD 850 to 950’, not excluding a Norse arrival in the Island in the middle of the ninth century, about the time of the Vikings’ settlement in neighbouring Ireland, at AD 940/41. Yet the interval was later shortened to the now widely accepted time range of ‘late ninth/early tenth century’. Some scholars even favoured a particularly late date for Vikings in the Isle of Man, around the year 900, and the expulsion of the Vikings out of Norse Dublin in AD 902 by the Irish appeared as a conceivable historical background. The famous Cuerdale hoard, found by the River Ribble near Preston (Lancs.) and dated to the very first years of the tenth century, might possibly be linked to this event.

The one thing the entry in the *Annals of Ulster* does prove, however, is the presence of Vikings in the Irish Sea by the year 800, and as the Isle of Man is easily visible from Northern Irish shores, its existence cannot have gone unnoticed by the Norse seafarers. Yet their absence in the historical, literary and archaeological records is regarded as pointing to them having ignored or spared the Island for more than 100 years since they first sailed into the Irish Sea, and more than 50 years after they settled in nearby Dublin. This is hard to credit.

It is debatable whether the absence of proof can be accepted as proof of absence on the one hand, on the other whether the history of events in one given area may be transferred to another. Situated in the middle of the Irish Sea, the Isle of Man might have suffered both Viking raids and Viking conquest just as its Irish neighbours did (transferring the tenor of the Irish chronicles on to Man) – or it might largely have

been spared and settled only late, like the coasts of Scotland and England (as there is no evidence of earlier presence there either)? The answer to this problem is difficult. Due to the lack of positive evidence in the Isle of Man we are forced to interpret the silence of the sources as best as we can.

Raiding

The chronicles report hundreds of Viking raids in Ireland after AD 795, both by seasonal raiders and, after 841, by resident ones. Unmentioned by them, there will also have been traders travelling to and from the Scandinavian homelands. There must have been some constant traffic of Viking boats during the ninth century, and it appears very unreasonable to suppose they never ventured into the eastern parts of the Irish Sea, raiding and/or trading where opportunity arose. The request for archaeological evidence for their presence there is unfair. We must ask what kind of archaeological record we can expect a Viking raid to produce that we today can find in the ground: the ashes of burnt down houses, the skeletons of murdered natives or fallen aggressors, or distinguishably local objects recovered elsewhere – if that. In fact, even in Ireland, where Viking raids are so well attested to by the chronicles, there are no finds or sites to support those, the earliest archaeological finds dating only from the 'settlement period' in the middle of the ninth century, leaving the 'raiding period' unproven archaeologically. The peaceful visit of a Norse merchant, trading not necessarily in Scandinavian-made goods only, but also of insular manufacture, many of which will have decayed long ago, surely leaves even less of an imprint in the archaeological record – and none at all in the written sources. Therefore, raids can well have taken place in the Isle of Man as well as in Cumbria or Dumfries, and probably have, despite the lack of positive evidence as to their activities there. And quite possibly this applies to a limited settlement of small groups of Norse farmers, artisans and traders as well.

Settlement

Permanent presence of the Vikings, however, is quite clearly attested to in Ireland, both in the chronicles and in the archaeological record, after the middle of the ninth century. Neither evidence exists regarding the Isle of Man and this is more serious, as at least some archaeological evidence could be expected to have been discovered in the Island by now. A simultaneous process seems unlikely.

As mentioned above, conventional dating puts the Manx Viking graves at the 'late ninth/early tenth centuries', leaving a chronological gap of some fifty years between the Norse settlements in Ireland and Man. The strategic location of the Isle of Man in the middle of the Irish Sea must have been very attractive, so it is tempting to assume that the Vikings in Ireland, especially in Dublin, did secure the Island for themselves at the earliest opportunity. And indeed this might have been the case, but with this opportunity arising only in later in the century, as the Irish chronicles suggest. After the initial settlement at Dublin the Norse started plundering the neighbouring monasteries, but also had to fight off Irish counterattacks as well as aggression by rivalling Viking groups. Thus the Scandinavians' military power appears to have been tied to consolidating their positions in Ireland. Only by AD 869 were they free to target other shores again, when the chronicles mention the siege of

Alt Clut (Dumbarton in Strathclyde, Scotland) by the Dublin Viking kings Óláfr and Ívarr. During this period there might finally have been the chance for the Vikings to take the Isle of Man to establish naval dominance in the Irish Sea. This would have allowed them to stage Viking raids from a strong strategic position and possibly to protect a trade-route to Viking York.

So it can be supposed that the Isle of Man was settled by Vikings, probably the Hiberno-Norse from Dublin, about AD 870, and due to the unequivocally violent tenor of the chronicles it seems unreasonable to think of this having happened in any other way than by military conquest. Given the possibility, however, of prior small-scale settlements of Scandinavians in Man and/or trade contacts between the Island and Dublin, it is conceivable that it took place with relatively little bloodshed.

This date for the Viking settlement in Man does not contradict the dating of the Manx Viking graves to the 'late ninth century' at the earliest and part explains, part avoids the chronological problems inherent to any later dating.

The Aftermath

There is no way to estimate the number of Viking incomers or their initial impact on the Manx native community. Surely a genocide against the indigenous population did not take place, we can rather assume that the Hiberno-Vikings established themselves in an unknown position of political – and partly cultural – dominance, possibly ruling the Isle of Man for the Norse kings of Dublin. Runic writing and the Norse language was introduced to the Island as well as the Scandinavian tradition of building rectangular houses (as opposed to the local roundhouses) and, for the time being, at least, pagan burial customs with barrows and lavish grave-goods. Still, local culture prevailed as well: the material found in the Vikings' furnished graves tended to be of predominantly insular manufacture, after less than a hundred years the Christian religion of the natives had outlasted the old faith of the Norse and by the end of the tenth century, it seems, the former Vikings had assimilated into the Manx, forming a new Island community.

Further reading

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