



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

THE VIKING RAID ON LINDISFARNE, 793AD

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The Viking Raid on Lindisfarne

Introduction

The monastery at Lindisfarne was the pre-eminent religious centre in Northumbria and was acknowledged as such throughout the Kingdom's of Anglo-Saxon England.

Lindisfarne

In an age when religion was an important and daily factor in the lives of all Christians, there was no doubting in the hearts of the believers that it was God who directed the daily events of their lives and that if unpleasant or tragic events unfolded, then it was a punishment from the Almighty for the indiscretion of the sinner.



Painting by Tom Lovell (1909-1997).

The attack on Lindisfarne Monastery 793.

God was paramount, the ultimate power, but the God of the early Christians was the God of the old - testament, a God that demanded devotion and obedience and a God that was vengeful if his laws were transgressed.

So, the church encouraged and instigated this mantra and the vast majority of the people of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms believed it.

It is very likely that the raiders who would become known as the Vikings had raided the coasts of the British Isles for many years but they were likely just seen as pirates and slavers and that they had not been identified as being a specific group of people.

Raiding had always been an issue and was an accepted hazard of life in the early Middle Ages but the fact was, it had taken place since time immemorial. It was just another factor in the harsh reality of life that existed in those times.

The first recording in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle dates to 787 when it recorded that three ships of Northmen, landed on the coast of Wessex, where they killed the King's reeve, one Beaduheard. This unfortunate individual is the first recorded Anglo-Saxon to be killed by Vikings.

Given that this event took place near to modern day Dorchester, at Portland, one can imagine that these raiders must have crossed the North Sea and that they 'raided' their way down the east coast of Britain. There must have been many more victims.



Lindisfarne or Holy- island today. Image by Chris Coombe of York. Creative commons License.

Defenceless villages and unguarded religious centres must have been such a temptation to these raiders from the sea, who could strike with impunity, knowing that there would be little resistance. They would seize loot, women or slaves and be back on their ships before any local military force could be sent against them. Easy pickings with minimal chances of being caught. At least this was the case in the early days of these raids.

792

By 792, it appears that there was growing concern about these raiders, which suggest that the raids were becoming increasingly frequent and that the perpetrators were pagan savages from lands that lay to the far North-East of the British Isles. A Kentish charter states that the Kingdom of Mercia was beginning to take steps to instigate defensive measures against these Barbarians.

It was the attack on Lindisfarne, now believed to have taken place on the 8th of June 793, that records as to who the raiders were. The Anglo-Saxon chronicle records that the attack had occurred in January but this was a scribal error and any raid at that time of the year was unlikely as any journey across the North-Sea would have been highly precarious. The attack, which can also be deemed to have been the first to have occurred in Western Europe sent a seismic shockwave through Christendom.



Modern statue of St. Aidan – Lindisfarne Abbey. Author Kim Traynor
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Monkwearmouth -Jarrow. Another Northumbrian Abbey looted by the Vikings.
Attribution: Xaphire. Creative commons License.

Outrage and disgust were the response from all the Christian people of Europe's western seaboard, but of course, the general belief, or at least the one pedalled by the church, was that it was a punishment ordained by God for the laxness of the Western nations in their obedience to his laws.

It would appear that in the year 793, that a famine was occurring throughout the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms and that other strange portents had been seen in

The chronicles state that during the attack on the Monastery, that only the church was destroyed and that goods were looted and that blood was spilt.

Other medieval sources go into more detail. The 12th century 'Historia Regum' (The history of the Kings) states that everything was laid waste and that all the alters were dug up and destroyed and that all the treasures of the Monastery were pillaged. The monks were dragged to the raider's ships in fetters, whilst those who were unfit to be of any use were drowned in the sea.

Alcuin

The Northumbrian scholar, Alcuin, who was serving as a tutor to the children of Charlamagne, wrote that the alters were splattered with the blood of the priests and that the holy sanctuary was defiled by pagans and that the bodies of the saints buried on the island were trampled upon like 'dung in the street'.

If these accounts are true, and they likely are, then it is clear that these Northmen indulged in an orgy of violence and pillaging. They had attacked an undefended and isolated island community and they were safe from any immediate Northumbrian military intervention. Their attack could be carried out with leisure. Probably intoxicated, scathing of the Christian religion, seeing it as weak and unwarlike compared to their own gods, seeing it as weak and unwarlike compared to their own gods, these raiders were free to do what they wanted to. Young inexperienced men develop a pack mentality and if not controlled by strong leaders, they run amok. It is not unconceivable that many of the monks were mistreated in the cruellest of manners as they were seen as passive and cowardly, an anathema to the followers of the Norse gods

The Monastery at Lindisfarne.

The Monastery at Lindisfarne had been established by the Irish monk, Aidan in the mid seventh century on the invitation of King Oswald. (Saint Oswald). It was a base from which the Christian faith would spread across the Anglo-Saxon mainland. Saint Cuthbert would be buried within the Monastery which ensured that it became a place of pilgrimage and a centre for learning. It received Royal patronages which made the place extremely wealthy. The raiders obtained items of great value and importance with very little effort and their individual share of the treasures and the ease with which they were gained would only encourage further raiding, especially on these isolated holy places.



The Lindisfarne causeway today.

By Walter Baxter and licensed for reuse under the creative commons License.

Alcuin placed the blame on the sins of the Anglo-Saxon peoples though he didn't specifically state what those sins were. A Northumbrian King, Aelfwald had been murdered by a nobleman called Sicga a few years before the raid and then, Sicga had committed suicide in the February before the raid. Regicide and suicide

were both considered cardinal sins so maybe Alcuin was referring to these incidents as being offensive to God, thus provoking divine retribution.



**Iona Abbey from the sea. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike.
Author Karl Gruber.**

Other holy places would soon be plundered too. Iona and Jarrow being two of them. Iona would be attacked on two other occasions as well, namely in 802 and 806. On the last occasion, all 68 people living at the Monastery were slaughtered. This last attack caused the abandonment of Iona and the church and Monastery was re-established at Kells in Ireland.

Releig Ohdraín - Graveyard of the Kings

Below are named some of the Pictish and Scottish Kings who are buried on Iona in the 'Graveyard of the Kings' also known in Gallic as 'Releig Ohdraín'

Some 60 ancient and medieval kings are buried here.

Cináed mac Ailpín, king of the Picts (also known today as "Kenneth I of Scotland")

Domnall mac Causantín, alternatively "king of the Picts" or "king of Scotland" ("Donald II")

Causantín mac Áeda, Constantine II. Defeated at Brunanburh

Máel Coluim mac Domnaill, king of Scotland ("Malcolm I")

Donnchad mac Crínáin, king of Scotland ("Duncan I")

Mac Bethad mac Findlaích, king of Scotland ("Macbeth")

Domnall mac Donnchada, king of Scotland ("Donald III")

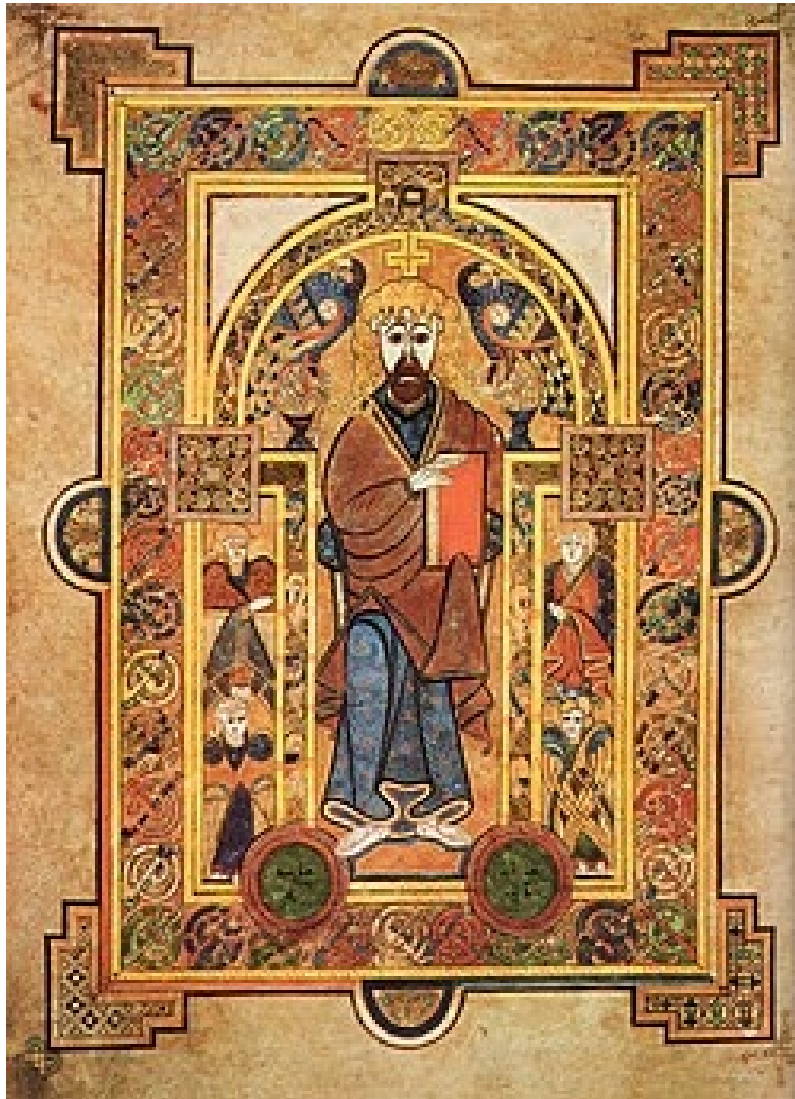


The round tower in the grounds of Kells Abbey. Built as a place of refuge to protect the monks from Viking raids. This file is licensed under the Creative commons license. Photo by Stephan Keaveny.

Kells

Kells had been founded as a Christian Abbey by Saint Columba in around 554 AD. The monks from Iona consecrated the new church there in 814 AD.

It will come as no surprise that this new centre attracted the attention of the Vikings, who attacked and raided the centre on several occasions. The famous book of Kells (Actually written on Iona) was somehow protected from the Vikings and never fell into their possession. It remained at Kells until the 1650's when it was sent to the Bishop, Henry Jones, the vice chancellor of Trinity college for protection Cromwell invaded Ireland. Considered to be the greatest treasure of the early medieval period, it can still be seen at trinity college today.



The book of Kells – Trinity Collage – Dublin.

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Many religious centres in both Britain, Ireland and western Europe were attacked and looted by the Vikings. These raids shocked these societies, but soon, the raiders would become invaders. The Viking wars were coming.



Book of Kells. Gospel of Saint John.
(this image is in the public domain).