

THE VIKINGS COME TO THANET

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A RECENT text-book says that " The first Danish raiders who are known to have visited England reached Sheppey in 835 " and the subsequent discussion of the Viking Age is based upon this unfortunate inaccuracy. Other writers, some concerned solely with the Vikings and others dealing with our general history, have derived from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* different evidence of the first arrival of the Vikings. In Wessex it was believed that they came in the time of King Beorhtric, who reigned from 786 to 802, and the *Chronicle* summarizes the tale as follows :

789 . . . and in his day came first three ships, and the reeve rode to meet them, and would have taken them up to the king's town because he knew not what manner of men they were. But they slew him. These were the first ships of the Danes that found their way to England.

It is believed that the king's town referred to was probably Dorchester. In Northumberland they had a different and more dramatic tale which appears under the year 793. The *Chronicle* tells us that in this year dreadful prodigies appeared over Northumbria and miserably terrified the people ; that is, whirlwinds beyond measure and lightnings ; and fiery dragons were seen flying in the heavens. The *Chronicle* then continues :

Upon these tokens there followed a great famine and after that, in the same year, on the sixth of the Ides of January, the harrying of heathen men miserably destroyed God's Church in Lindisfarne, with robbery and with slaughter.

Although it is not here claimed that this was the first descent upon the coast of England, it was evidently considered to be so by the men of those days. Here is the evidence of Alcuin, the Yorkshire school-master who had settled at the court of Charlemagne. He was writing to those who remained of the monks of Holy Isle :

Lo, it is almost 350 years that we and our forefathers have dwelt in this fair land, and never has such a horror before appeared in Britain . . . it was not thought possible that they could have made such a voyage . . . let this be a lesson to the novices to praise diligently the King of Heaven and not to be digging out

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foxes and chasing hares. How impious it is to follow foxes instead of Christ !

We have thus conflicting evidence from what is usually a very good source, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and from learned historians, about the date of the first coming of the Vikings. It is easy to see how some of this conflict came about. Those who wrote the Northumbrian annals knew nothing about Wessex, and Wessex in turn knew little of Northumbria, which it must have regarded as a far-off foreign country. By a mere chance the earliest surviving records of Viking attacks on Kent did not find their way into the *Chronicle*. They have been transmitted to us only in the history of Thomas of Elmham but it seems beyond question that the first recorded attacks upon this country were those of the Danes who came to Thanet in the year 753 and who continued to attack these islands from that time onward, and who had actually destroyed the nunnery of Minster in Thanet long before the descent upon Sheppey which is mentioned above.

THE WORK OF THOMAS OF ELMHAM

Thomas was a learned man, a monk and an official of the Abbey of St. Augustine soon after the year 1400. He wrote his history of the abbey (which is largely unfinished) to correct the careless writing of a predecessor named William Thorne (see Edition Davis). His idea of the scope of his history (published in the Rolls series) was very wide and he set out the various headings under which it was to be arranged although he did not even commence many of his chapters. He criticizes Thorne's copies of charters as differing unpardonably from the originals still in the possession of the monastery, and he is very careful to give accurate dates for the events with which he deals. This accuracy he seeks to reinforce by stating the time which has elapsed between known events and those whose date is less certain. He is undoubtedly a trustworthy writer but, like all other historians, he had to depend on the statements of earlier writers when he had no means of checking them. It seems likely that his knowledge of the earliest Danish invasions, which is entirely concerned with Thanet, was derived from some record of the nunnery of St. Mildred in that island. This was destroyed by the Danes in the year 826 but many years later the lands of the nunnery were given to the monastery of St. Augustine. It is quite possible that the remaining muniments of the nunnery were handed over at the same time.

The History of Thomas of Elmham is prefaced by a chronological list which was apparently based upon it but perhaps not compiled by Thomas himself. In this list we read :

“ A.D. 753. Prima Danorum rabies in Thaneto. 156 years since the coming of Augustine.”

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There are also in the history itself further clues as to the exact date, for example, the following notes :

“ To whom succeeded the virgin Sigeburga . . . in her time was the first raid of the Danes upon Thanet.”

and

“ Note that this first coming of the Danes was 117 years before the Martyrdom of Saint Edmund, King of East Anglia.”

At this point in his story Thomas forgets all about his own monastery and embarks upon the epic of the death of St. Edmund. He emphasizes the wickedness of the Danish leaders, Hyngwar and Hubba, but seems to find some sort of excuse or explanation of it in the fact that Saint Edmund had inadvertently married the daughter of the King of the Danes and “ a certain bear ” which was much against nature and has, I think, escaped the attention of Danish historians. Thomas then reverts to his passion for dates with the remark :

This second coming of the Danes was 260 years before the martyrdom of St. Elphege.

Saint Elphege, Archbishop of Canterbury died at Greenwich in the year 1012. If we deduct 260 years from this we arrive at 752. This was certainly the first coming of the Vikings and we are bound to suppose that Thomas called it the second coming of the Danes because he realized that invaders from Denmark, under the leadership of Hengest, represented the first invasion.

We now have the following dates for the first coming of the Vikings to Thanet :

- (1) 753 in the chronological list.
- (2) 156 years since the coming of Augustine. He came in 597 so that the resulting date is again 753.
- (3) In the time of Abbess Sigeburga—751 to 797.
- (4) 117 years before the death of Saint Edmund, i.e. A.D. 870 less 177 years. The result is 753.
- (5) 260 years before the martyrdom of Saint Elphege in 1012. This brings the date to 752.

As a result of these many calculations we can safely say that according to the information available to Thomas of Elmham the Vikings did undoubtedly visit Thanet in the year 753. This is the earliest record of such a raid, in this or any other country, which we possess and it is difficult to see how its validity can possibly be disputed although general historians have hitherto felt obliged to date this first raid some forty years later.

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THE UNRECORDED RAIDS

What was happening in these forty years? Did raids continue or was there, in fact, a period of peace?

There is no actual record of raids during this time, that is, during the years 754 to 797. In fact, there is no evidence at all until towards the end of that period but this evidence looks backwards and argues strongly against any prolonged period of peace.

In the first place there is the fact that Kent was seething with disquiet during most of this time owing to its own attempts to become independent once more and the ferocity which these attempts aroused in King Offa of Mercia. It is often said that the Vikings kept themselves well informed about the internal affairs of other countries and habitually attacked those who were already weakened by internal troubles. If this is true they had good reason to attack Kent during the reign of King Offa. That they actually did so is evidenced by a charter of that king dated in the year 792 (BCS 848/9). By this charter Offa restored to Christchurch (with which he had made some sort of truce) the privileges which they had enjoyed under the Kentish kings. These privileges were what we might now call exemption from rates and taxes but they included also exemption from other duties of which we now know nothing, e.g. the entertainment of King's Messengers, pasturing his horses, etc. In all charters by which such wide privileges were given we expect to find certain exceptions. In this charter of 792 the exceptions are set out as follows. These were the services which the men of the Archbishop's estates were still obliged to render :

“ Army service within Kent against the heathen of the seas with their roving fleets or, if need be, in Sussex, and the building of bridges, and the defence of forts against the heathen within the confines of Kent.”

Such words as these could hardly have been justified by a single raid on Thanet forty years earlier. We are bound to conclude that the sight of “ roving fleets ” was nothing new to the men of Kent, nor to those of Sussex, and it exceeds the bounds of what is reasonable to suppose that these fleets sailed past our coasts without ever making any landings.

We may also quote as evidence that there was no period of peace a letter of the Yorkshire schoolmaster. This is what Alcuin wrote to the men of Kent in the year 797 :

The greatest danger is hanging over this island and the people who live in it. You see now a thing which has never been heard of : a pagan people is making a habit of plundering our shores like pirates.

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These are only a few words from a very lengthy jeremiad but they certainly suggest that Viking raids were no new thing in 797.

This evidence of unrecorded raids is not as strong as one would wish, even if we add to it the statement of William Thorne that the Danes came "every year," but it is strong enough to make it reasonably certain that after the first raid in 753 there was no long period of peace. The final conclusion is that the first recorded Viking raid was in the year 753 and that after that year the kingdom of Kent experienced other raids, probably of minor severity, until, in 826, Minster in Thanet was burnt to the ground and most of its inmates slaughtered.

THE SACK OF MINSTER

Minster seems to have been the first of the Kentish religious houses to be sacked and burnt by the Vikings. Thomas of Elmham gives a somewhat complicated method of reckoning the date of this tragedy and William Thorne gives various conflicting dates. There seems no doubt that it was in the year 825 or 826 that the end came. At this time the Abbess Seledritha presided over the convent and according to Thorne "she increased as far as she could the number of the nuns which had been diminished by the coming of the Danes." Thomas of Elmham adds that she was largely successful in raising the nunnery once more to its original rank and that she recovered many estates which had been taken away in the time of King Offa. He then continues with the words :

Nevertheless, as so often happened, the army of the Danish people arrived with a huge fleet, not at that time so much for loot as to subjugate the whole realm of England, swarming over the entire island of Thanet and destroying from its very foundations the nunnery of Mildred. And the blessed virgin Seledritha, with other virgins living in the hallowed building, together with priests and levites and other ministers of God, were consumed in the flames. Nor from that time was it afterwards possible to restore that monastery to its former dignity but, because the army had destroyed 60 or more of the nuns, their place was taken by a lay parish with two or three clerks.

Thus began the process of social and religious disintegration which was one of the most serious effects of the Danish raids. St. Mildred's nunnery was much more than a closed house in which resided a certain number of nuns. It was the cultural, religious and agricultural head of the whole island, of which it owned the greater part. Since women could not easily—especially if professed nuns—manage such an extensive organization there were many priests and lay servants of various degrees upon whom fell most of the administrative work. In 826

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nearly all of these were slain. A few of them may have escaped, bearing some of the treasures and title deeds of the nunnery, but for all practical purposes the Island of Thanet was deprived of the whole of its administrative machinery. In the religious sphere this meant that the many churches which had been served by priests attached to the Minster were now, such of them as remained, served only by poor parish priests. For these the cloistered monks of those days had very little respect but it was much to their credit that they braved the dangers of Viking raids and carried on when the inhabitants might otherwise have been deprived of all the rites of the church.

After the destruction of the nunnery the Vikings came back again to Thanet on more than one occasion and it seems that they used it as a base for their attacks on other parts of Kent. Of conditions within the island in those later days we know nothing at all and there is here a break in its history which is never likely to be filled.

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