

Accounts of the Raid on Lindisfarne

In the year 793 CE, Viking ships attacked the monastery at Lindisfarne on the east coast of England. Below are excerpts from some accounts of the raid:

"Here Beorhtric [AD 786-802] took King Offa's daughter Eadburh. And in his days there came for the first time 3 ships; and then the reeve rode there and wanted to compel them to go to the king's town, because he did not know what they were; and they killed him. Those were the first ships of the Danish men which sought out the land of the English race."

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Winchester MS)

Such is the entry for AD 789, written by the chronicler a hundred years later. The king's reeve is said to have ridden to the harbor at Portland on the southwest coast of England, thinking the strangers to be traders whom he then would escort to the royal manor at Dorchester. (Even though the chronicler identifies the raiders as Danes, the term, like Northmen, was used generically to signify all Scandinavian invaders. The early Vikings tended to be Norwegian, although it was the Danes, who began their pillaging in AD 835, from whom the English suffered the most.)

A few years later, there is another entry, even more ominous, this time for AD 793.

"Here terrible portents came about over the land of Northumbria, and miserably frightened the people: these were immense flashes of lightening, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine immediately followed these signs; and a little after that in the same year on 8 June the raiding of heathen men miserably devastated God's church in Lindisfarne island by looting and slaughter."

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Petersborough MS)

The Vikings attack on the holy island of Lindisfarne off the northern coast of Northumbria is the earliest recorded and the best known of the Viking raids in the west. There was situated the monastery of St. Cuthbert, one of the most sacred places of pilgrimage in Britain, and it was there that the Lindisfarne gospels had been copied and illuminated. For more than one hundred and fifty years, Lindisfarne had been a sanctuary of learning and a repository for riches bequeathed by both the pious and the wicked for the repose of their souls. In its chapels and on its altars were golden crucifixes and crosiers, silver pyxes and ciboria, ivory reliquaries, tapestries, and illuminated manuscripts.

All were plundered.

The attack on Lindisfarne was unprecedented and horrified those who wrote of it. For Alcuin, who was at the court of Charlemagne and a leader of the Carolingian Renaissance, it was inconceivable that ships could suddenly appear from over the horizon.

"Lo, it is nearly 350 years that we and our fathers have inhabited this most lovely land, and never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race, nor was it thought that such an inroad from the sea could be made. Behold, the church of St. Cuthbert spattered with the blood of the priests of God, despoiled of all its ornaments; a place more venerable than all in Britain is given as a prey to pagan peoples."

Alcuin, Letter to Ethelred, King of Northumbria

So terrible was the attack on God's house that Alcuin sought to justify its occurrence (just as, over two hundred years later, Wulfstan, archbishop of York, would admonish his English brethren for their sins when renewed raids by the Danes had forced Æthelred to flee to Normandy the year before). How else to explain these depredations except that an omnipotent God was deservedly chastising an unworthy people.

"...the calamity of your tribulation saddens me greatly every day, though I am absent; when the pagans desecrated the sanctuaries of God, and poured out the blood of saints around the altar, laid waste the house of our hope, trampled on the bodies of saints in the temple of God, like dung in the street.... What assurance is there for the churches of Britain, if St Cuthbert, with so great a number of saints, defends not its own? Either this is the beginning of greater tribulation, or else the sins of the inhabitants have called it upon them. Truly it has not happened by chance, but is a sign that it was well merited by someone. But now, you who are left, stand manfully, fight bravely, defend the camp of God."

Alcuin, Letter to the Bishop of Lindisfarne

Another chronicler, working from a lost version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, writes of that fateful year.

"In the same year the pagans from the northern regions came with a naval force to Britain like stinging hornets and spread on all sides like fearful wolves, robbed, tore and slaughtered not only beasts of burden, sheep and oxen, but even priests and deacons, and companies of monks and nuns. And they came to the church of Lindisfarne, laid everything waste with grievous plundering, trampled the holy places with polluted steps, dug up the altars and seized all the treasures of the holy church. They killed some of the brothers, took some away with them in fetters, many they drove out, naked and loaded with insults, some they drowned in the sea..."

Simeon of Durham, *Historia Regum*

In AD 794, there was an attack on the Northumbrian monastery at Jarrow, where Bede once had resided, and the year after that, on St. Columba's monastery on the island of Iona. There also were attacks on the coast of Wales and Scotland. In AD 802 and 806, Iona again was devastated.

It was as a later entry recorded: the Vikings "burned and demolished, killed abbot and monks and all that they found there, brought it about so that what was earlier very rich was as it were nothing."

References: *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (1996) translated and edited by Michael Swanton; *English Historical Documents c.500-1042* (1979) edited by Dorothy Whitelock; *The Vikings* (1979) by Robert Wernick (Time-Life Books); *Vikings: Raiders from the North* (1993) by the Editors of Time-Life Books; *Early Britain: The Cambridge Cultural History* (1988) edited by Boris Ford; *The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval England* (1997) edited by Nigel Saul; *The Illustrated Bede* (1989) by John Marsden; *Early Britain: The Cambridge Cultural History* (1992) edited by Boris Ford; *The Making of England: Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture, AD 600-900* (1991) edited by Leslie Webster and Janet Backhouse; *The Fury of the Northmen: Saint, Shrines and Sea-Raiders in the Viking Age, AD 793-878* (1995) by John Marsden; *Lindisfarne Priory and Holy Island* (1988) by Eric Cambridge (English Heritage).