

Research history

Some comments

It is hardly possible to examine the history of research into the Vikings on the Continent without also keeping the Vikings of the insular West in view; these, at least to a certain extent, were clearly the same people who attacked Friesland and France in addition to the British coastline. However, more light seems to have been shed on the Vikings in the British Isles – possibly because, as early as the 17th century, there existed in England considerable interest in their history, literature and language (Wilson 1997: 18). On the other hand, knowledge about the Vikings on the Continent is substantially more limited; in overall terms, very little is known about the Scandinavians who made inroads into the Continental mainland from the end of the 8th to the beginning of the 11th century. Most contemporary accounts are lost and, moreover, some substantial aspects of this period may forever defy clarification. The available knowledge derives largely from written sources compiled by monks (and other literate people) in annals and other texts in Anglo-Saxon and Continental monasteries more than a thousand years ago. But with its historical background and embroidered coloured images, it is also possible to draw upon the Bayeux Tapestry – probably created shortly after the Battle of Hastings in 1066 – as comparative material for the elucidation of the presence of Vikings on the Continent.

Astonishingly, despite the relative abundance of written sources, the corresponding impact of the archaeological remains has only been accorded meagre attention. From an archaeological standpoint, research into Viking activities in the western European part of the Continent has proceeded in a negligent fashion south and west of the Elbe. There are, admittedly, comparatively sparse archaeological remains in this area. The finds consist almost exclusively of stray finds, since closed finds such as graves or hoards are rare.

Contemporary accounts (composed principally in Latin, though some exist in other languages) can only be used with considerable care (Sawyer 1971: 12), particularly since there is uncertainty as to how often a

text has been copied. The annals are in themselves a primary source text about the events as they actually happened, or, rather, as to how these were perceived at the time by the authors/scribes concerned. The actual writers of such texts were not historians; neither was it their intention to write history, but rather to leave behind a monument for posterity. Since then it has been the task of the historian to interpret these written sources. Thus it has also been the historians who, in the long course of time, have left their mark on the tradition of the chronicling of research. Meanwhile, however, the significant sources themselves are also available to anybody in easily accessible form (Rau 1955, 1958, 1969; also Albrechtsen in excerpts 1981).

The interest in Vikings, Normans and Danes ebbed and flowed in time with the alternation of cultural focal points within poetry, painting and sculpture (compare illustrations in Mjöberg 1980 and Wilson 1997) in which, respectively, the Romantic mood of the various periods and regions was emphasised – in the same way as the heroic and nationalistic attitudes.

In the catalogue about Vikings and Gods in European art (*Vikinger og Guder i Europæisk Kunst*) accompanying the 1997 exhibition at the Moesgård Museum in Århus, the “History of the Vikings” (Wilson 1997: 7) during the last 400 years was outlined, not only in their native Scandinavia, but also in the territories they conquered. However, it was not until the end of the 12th century or the start of the 13th century that the actual history of the Vikings in the exploits of the Danes (*Gesta Danorum*) was first written down by the Danish chronicler Saxo Grammaticus – taking as his point of departure the narratives and tales of the Norse Sagas. And it was the 19th century which saw the emergence of the first fully collated exegeses of the history of the Vikings, and the inroads they made into Europe, on the basis of the written accounts which were by then one thousand years old.

The current picture is familiar to everybody: heathen hordes from the North in their awe-inspiring – not to say terrifying – ships, pouring ashore along the coasts and rivers of Europe. Through pillage and arson, and by means of military surprise tactics, these quite obviously fearless pirates spread panic and terror among the defenceless Christians throughout almost the entire Occident. It is this very familiar notion which found expression in the literature and art of the 19th – and also in the greater part of the 20th – century, and is totally characteristic not only for England and France, but also for Scandinavia itself. It is only recently that a change in

this perception has come about; this scare-mongering picture of the Vikings, created by literature, began to be challenged and people started to examine the reasons for its emergence.

The four-volume work *Normannerne* (“The Normans”) by Johannes Steenstrup from the 19th century (1876–1882), in which he disproves the written sources and previously published literature, is today a classic in that it represents one of the first comprehensive descriptions of the Norsemen and their military ventures in the West. Steenstrup’s intention was, among other things, to demonstrate on the basis of the written sources that the “Norsemen [had not abandoned] their Norse customs in the new environment” (Steenstrup 1876, Vol. 1, v) as rapidly as had been suggested by other authors. Against the background of this pioneering work there emerged numerous studies, among which W. Vogel’s book *Die Normannen und das fränkische Reich* (“The Normans and the Frankish Realm”) must be given prominence. It was published in 1906 and described the period from 799 to 911. Just like Steenstrup, Vogel accepted the information given in the annals and, correspondingly, he narrowed his focus down to the exploits and events which are mentioned in the diverse source material. Subsequent works of history have drawn considerable benefit from the map drawn up by Vogel of the Frankish Kingdom, which incorporates a substantial proportion of the places, rivers, frontiers and Norse remains mentioned in contemporary accounts. Together with the map detailing Viking migrations in the book *The Vikings in Western Christendom* by C.F. Keary from 1891, it formed the basis for later maps of Viking ventures (e.g. Arbman 1961, fig. 15; Arbman 1974, 68; Graham-Campbell 1994, 145). Keary concentrated on the period between 789 and 888 and his momentous book (the exegeses of which are likewise based on the historical sources and the information in the Sagas) ends with the late attack on Paris (885–886) and the “turning point” for the heathen Vikings and their influence on Christian Europe (Keary 1891: 442).

Roughly contemporary with the appearance of these books, a number of archaeological finds came to light in France and Germany which seem to confirm both directly and indirectly the written information concerning the presence of the Vikings on the Continental mainland. Initially such finds were only mentioned in the journals of local museums. However, important attempts were already being made to link the archaeological finds with information about the events of the 9th and 10th centuries. Already in 1865 an

inhumation grave had been discovered in Pitres near Rouen with two oval brooches from the Viking period (Abbé Cochet 1871), though it was not until 1968 that these finds were acknowledged by a broader consensus of experts (Elmqvist 1969). In 1883 a “double” hoard of treasure was unearthed near Klein-Roscharden in Northwest Germany, which, judging from the coins it included, had been buried around 1005 to 1010. Among the individual finds was a so-called Terslev fibula (Johansen 1912) of Scandinavian origin. The treasure may have been concealed to protect it from a late Viking raid, although previously it was not considered as being part of the accepted picture of the Vikings on the Continent. It was not until 1951 that both these coins (Berghaus 1951) as well as other material (Gandert 1951) were presented to the public.

In 1906 a burial mound on the Île de Groix off the south coast of Brittany was excavated by P. du Chatellier and L. Le Pontois and found to contain the remains of a ship and two people (du Chatellier and Le Pontois 1908). The accompanying weapons were Scandinavian and this type of ship burial also had a Nordic affinity. However, not until 1978 was this ship burial published in modern source-critical terms (Müller-Wille 1978). The find was reported in the first edition of *Das Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* (1918–1919), though here it was given only a brief mention. The article dealing with the Vikings, which was written by the Norwegian historian A. Bugge, occupies 22 pages of the lexicon, and deals overwhelmingly with the information from the written sources, while the entire archaeological section (featuring coins, rune stones and individual finds, and information as to how the said items were treated) amounts to no more than two pages.

As early as the first decade of the 20th century, the mention in the literature of a number of isolated, unique works of art in Europe which could be attributed to the Viking period prompted some very interesting conclusions concerning the Scandinavian peoples on the Continent. However knowledge of many of these objects failed to reach a larger, specialist audience since only a few were published in recognised periodicals or publication series. This was the case with both the chests ornamented in the Mammen style from Bamberg and Cammin (Goldschmidt 1918 and 1926; compare also Muhl 1990) and also the magnificent Viking sword from Prague (Paulsen 1933). A further example is the upper part of what is

presumably a censer ornamented in the Jelling style (Paulsen 1932), and a horn from Maastricht, which has secondary ornamentation in the form of pressed fittings in the Mammen style (Hougen 1939; Roes 1940). These are only given sporadic mention, and they too were denied a place in the discussion of Viking influence on the Continent (e.g. Musset 1992).

An initial overview of the sparse material traces found on the western European Continent was finally presented in 1935 by H. Arbman (Arbman & Stenberger 1935: 137–189). Bjørn and Shetelig's great source-work *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland* (Bjørn & Shetelig 1940: 101–131) was somewhat more substantial in content. However, it is by no means exhaustive since it only includes a brief, regional supplementary listing of finds from the Continent complementing the British and Irish finds, and the historical background of these continental finds is not discussed either. Both works are based exclusively on a few chosen visits to museums where, obviously, the only objects cited were those in the public exhibition. The work of the spear head from Termonde in Belgium (*Der Spitze von Termonde*) was the subject of an exhaustive study as early as 1937 (Paulsen 1937).

In the successor to his overview from 1935, H. Arbman, together with his students in Lund, set about an intense study of the archaeological finds from the Seine Region; in this way, not only what was then known as “The Woman's Grave of Piîtres” (Elmqvist 1969) was dealt with, but also a number of weapons (Arbman & Nilsson, 1935). Furthermore this led, perhaps most significantly, to mention of such objects as swords in the specialist literature. This was also the case with a beautifully ornamented Viking-age sword which was discovered in 1929 on the Île de Bièce off the coast of Brittany (Durville 1929). In this context, the connection with the migration of the Vikings both south of Brittany and in the Loire Valley, together with the short-term settlement at Nantes, were discussed. At both Buxtehude and Hamburg (Jankuhn 1950–51; Müller-Wille 1970) swords were likewise unearthed which were associated with the conflicts in the North German territories between the Carolingians and the Vikings, including the 845 attack on the Hammaburg. Early medieval swords were also discovered in several locations in the Netherlands – principally in rivers – and published (Braat 1960; Ypey 1960–61, 1962–63), their presence having been interpreted as due to the periods of unrest between the Carolingians and the Vikings. Since 1978 all discoveries on the western European Continent of swords regarded as Viking have undergone critical examination, only about a dozen

examples have passed as original (Müller-Wille 1978: 70–74). Similarly sobering, a critical evaluation of what had previously been regarded as Viking finds from the Netherlands, had shown these discoveries to be actually severely limited in number (van Regteren Altena and Heidinga 1977). In any case, neither of the last two examples is based on a complete collation of data of the storerooms, and thus, in spite of everything, they can only be considered summary appraisals.

In the first half of the 20th century repeated examples of correspondence were seen between the archaeological material and the written historical sources. However, by the end of the 1960s the characteristic mode of presentation, depending almost solely on the written sources, began to change. Gradually the archaeological evidence was increasingly drawn upon in the representation of the Vikings on the Continent (Brøndsted 1960: 95 ff.; Arbman 1961: 82 f.); the English historian P. Sawyer argued in its favour that the archaeological testimony could support the historical sources (Sawyer 1971: 123) – though the reverse was apparently not possible.

In various Dutch publications, Friesland is often awarded great attention in a Viking context. According to the written sources, Friesland is one of those areas which was almost continually at the mercy of Viking attacks in the period 810–1010 (Besteman 1999: 253). However, there is little archaeological evidence for this, apart from sporadic individual finds (van Heeringen 1990a and 1990b), principally from Dorestad (Roes 1965; Verwers 1998) and also Domburg (Capelle 1976). Most recently discovered is the spectacular hoard of silver from Westerklijf (Besteman 1997 and 1999), which has decidedly broadened our knowledge of Vikings on the Continent. This information has been supplemented through the investigation of the marketplace at Dorestad (and its surroundings) in the Netherlands (Holwerde 1930; van Es & Verwers 1980; Verwers 1998), which was one of the most important Carolingian marketplaces and, according to the contemporary sources, was subject to repeated Viking attacks and pillage from 830.

Nevertheless, the attempt to see concordance between archaeological and historical (i.e. textual) testimony has also led to a situation in which a number of objects have reached museums over the course of time whose authenticity is not uncontested. The most famous of these is without doubt the so-called Winsum Treasure (Boeles 1951) which has been re-

garded unequivocally as a forgery since 1975 (Elzinga 1975). Not only in the Netherlands, but also in Belgium are there a number of “Viking finds” which have either been recognised as fakes, or had previously been incorrectly classified, or rather had shown themselves to be French at the earliest (van Regteren Altena & Heidinga 1977).

In regional terms it is, however, Normandy which has attracted the greatest attention from scholars. The Bayeux Tapestry, with its representation of the political relations between England and Normandy around 1066 which left their mark on various names in the area (Stenton 1957; Wilson 1985), has naturally promoted an increased awareness of Vikings in Normandy. Nevertheless, it is particularly the region’s “Norse-sounding” names – above all place names – which have attracted the attention of scholars. The linguistic heritage, such as –thorp, –dalle and hoguen, or a name such as Auberville (which means Asbjörndorf in German) (Musset 1992: 93), is indicative of Viking presence in that area. Research into place names was of crucial significance for the French historian and linguist, M. Lucien Musset, who as early as 1942 published his first major work concerning the Viking influence in Normandy, and has subsequently produced numerous publications on the Vikings (i.a. Musset 1992). Proceeding from his many years of research into names, he concluded that many Vikings in Normandy were of Anglo-Saxon extraction (Nissen Jaubert, forthcoming). The research into place names is one of those fields important for other scholars (Fellows-Jensen 1988; Gautier 1954; Marechal 1959). Through the incorporation of this research we have arrived at a more reliable image of the Vikings, both in England and on the Continental mainland, which has predominated since 1970 and has also already been reflected in *The Vikings in Francia* (Wallace-Hadrill 1975).

For the Belgian historian A. D’Haenens, who has written on both the Vikings in Belgium (1967) and in Normandy (1970), the point of departure is “That we know less than we thought we knew...” (cf. Wallace-Hadrill 1975: 4, note 12). In *Les invasions Normandes, une catastrophe?* (1970), D’Haenens, working from the data provided by the contemporary sources, takes a deliberate stand against the negative perception of the Viking campaigns, which, in the West, were essentially undertaken by the Danes. It is D’Haenens’ opinion that the Viking raids occasioned significantly less destruction than was usually supposed, and that a positive effect should instead be recognised, which in the course of time led to integration. A recent

historian of wider significance is H. Zettel, who, in *Das Bild der Normannen und Normanneneinfälle in westfränkischen, ostfränkischen und angelsächsischen Quellen des 8. bis 11. Jahrhunderts* (1977), offers an impressive and painstaking presentation and exegesis of the historical accounts. One of the areas he explores is the development of research with regard to the political and cultural understanding of the Vikings, but he also deals with the motivation behind their ventures, their fighting technique and the wide-spread concept of Danelaw.

However, in the last 30 years research has also been dominated by themes tackled in an interdisciplinary fashion. Now it is no longer solely the historians who are the exclusive contributors to the greater knowledge of the Vikings on the Continent. In this way, a multifaceted image emerges of the peoples from the North and their influence. In addition to name research, numismatics is also an important field from which much has been drawn in recent times (Dumas 1979). Then there are the ships which are mentioned hundreds of times in the written sources: much consideration has been given to them and the routes they sailed (Crumlin-Pedersen 1997; Ellmers 1972 and 1966). Supplementary to this are a number of contemporary depictions from the Continent of Viking ships (Capelle 1998): the Bayeux Tapestry, in fact, displays an entire fleet, including a royal vessel with a banner and bearing a cross blessed by the Pope.

The political and commercial aspects have been dealt with in a number of publications, e.g. in *Kings and Vikings* from 1984 written by P. Sawyer. This work also brings into the Viking context the Continental ring of forts along the mainland coast, some remains of which are still identifiable in rural areas bordering the shore. New excavations, of paramount importance being those undertaken at Middelbourg on Walcheren, hark back to the earliest traces of settlement at the beginning of the 9th century (van Heeringen et al. 1995). The data concerning the Viking hordes and their actual magnitude have been dealt with by a number of scholars. However *The Viking Art of War* by P. Griffith (1995) provides the first overview worth discussion of Viking military strategy seen from the perspective of modern military analysis. Taking as her points of departure coins and forts, the English scholar J. Nelson has produced a special exposition of the political history of the period (Nelson 1988). In one of her works (Nelson 1988) she arrives at the conclusion that, “the Continental evidence shows not the legen-

dary Viking faces of committed rapists and murderers...” (Nelson 1988: 19). Finally, mention must be made of several other works presenting surveys (Roesdahl 1987 and 1992; Graham-Campbell 1997; Nelson 1997); however, when seeking to illustrate their points these authors have done no more than fall back on previously known archaeological material.

Seen in international terms, there is a fundamental difference in research dealing with the Vikings. While in the North the Viking period belongs to prehistory, outside Scandinavia the period is reckoned to be part of the Middle Ages. Factors such as which individuals and disciplines have been concerned with the field have naturally also exerted an influence. In France, however, even when the opportunities for making outright statements or declarations are limited, it is regarded as necessary to continue undertaking increased archaeological investigations (Périn 1990 and Marin 1997). This also applies in the case of the Netherlands following the discovery of the Westerklijf Treasure (Besteman 1999).

What is still lacking, however, is a complete register of all the finds which can stand in context together with the presence, so well documented in writing, of the Vikings in western Europe. At this stage, only when this systematic inventory is put forward, will a well-balanced evaluation of events, supplemented also by the archaeological perspective, be possible.

Note

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