

*The Earliest Viking Activity in England?**

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle has been generally regarded as the most reliable guide we possess to the first viking attacks on England.¹ However, recent comment on the hiatus in the Chronicle in records of seaborne attacks from AD 794 until 835 points to the need for further enquiry regarding the first raids in England.² The purpose of this article is to explore various written sources which might provide an alternative narrative to that of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. These include letters, foreign chronicles and charters which emphasise that some of the earliest viking activity in England focused on Kent. As Kent has long been an entry-point for refugees, migrants and invaders, it is not surprising that seaborne raiders were attracted to this region.

The core text or ‘common stock’ which underlies extant versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was probably compiled and completed in Wessex in 892.³ It could be argued that this text is biased towards events in Wessex and towards King Alfred and his associates (871–99) to the exclusion of other concerns.⁴ The Chronicle identifies the first fleet of ‘deniscra monna’, or Northmen, as having arrived in England during the reign of King Beorhtric of Wessex (786–802).⁵ Versions ‘D’, ‘E’ and ‘F’ of the Chronicle subsequently added that the ships came from Hordaland (Norway). Three ships are reported to have arrived at the coast near a royal residence. The king’s reeve rode out to the raiders, unaware of their hostile intentions, and they slew him. Later sources locate the altercation at Portland in Dorset.⁶ It may have been important to the compilers of the common stock of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, who were concerned with contemporary viking wars in Alfred’s reign,

* I should like to thank Ben Raffield for discussion, History Canada for enabling me to examine charters in the British Library, Marios Costambeys for assistance with Monumenta Germaniae Historica references, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful and thoughtful comments. The term ‘viking’ here is used to describe raiders (as per Old Norse *vikingr*). It is not used as an ethnic label.

1. K. Holman, *The Northern Conquest* (Oxford, 2007), p. 23; S. Coupland, ‘The Vikings in Francia and Anglo-Saxon England to 911’, in R. McKitterick, ed., *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, II: *c.700–900* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 190–201, at 192.

2. C. Downham, ‘Vikings in England’, in S. Brink and N. Price, eds., *The Viking World* (London, 2008), pp. 341–9, at 342; N.J. Higham and M.J. Ryan, *The Anglo-Saxon World* (2nd edn, New Haven, CT, 2015), p. 258.

3. P.H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings* (London, 1962), pp. 13–21.

4. B. Yorke, ‘The Representation of Early West Saxon History in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’, in A. Jorgensen, ed., *Reading the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: Language, Literature, History* (Turnhout, 2010), pp. 141–66, at 154.

5. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, III: *MS A*, ed. J. Bately (Cambridge, 1986) [hereafter *ASC A*], s.a. 787 (for 789).

6. *Chronicon Æthelweardi: The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. and tr. A. Campbell (London, 1962), p. 27; *The Annals of St Neots with Vita Prima Sancti Neoti*, ed. D.N. Dumville and M. Lapidge (Cambridge, 1985), p. 35.

to show (retrospectively) that the beginning of the English Viking Age had taken place in Wessex. Recently, Alban Gautier has raised the question of how the raiders got to Portland from Scandinavia.⁷ Did they travel via the Channel or via the Irish Sea? Did they have stopping-places en route? Did they have prior intelligence of the seaways and the destination? The evidence of viking activity in Kent may shed light on these questions.

The conflict at Portland may or may not have preceded other recorded attacks. The most famous of these is the raid on Lindisfarne in 793 which was followed by the sack of a monastery at *Donemuthan* ('the mouth of the River Don') in Northumbria in 794.⁸ Both raids are recorded in the northern recension (versions D and E) of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and were not part of the original compilation. The gap in the records of piratical activity in the common stock of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle until 835 may therefore reflect the lack of interest of the authors in recording anything but the first raid in Wessex before the reign of Alfred's grandfather Ecgberht (because prior to Ecgberht's reign, other dynasties had held the kingship).⁹ In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the depredations of 'the heathen men' were recorded with increasing frequency during the late 830s, 840s and 850s. From 865 to 896 the narrative of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is focused on viking campaigns during the career of Alfred the Great. Alfred's family are portrayed as victims of vikings and defenders of southern England. It may be that events which did not support this depiction were consciously excluded from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

Two letters written by Alcuin, a scholar at the court of Charlemagne, in response to the attack on Lindisfarne in 793 are well known.¹⁰ One of these chastised Aethelred, king of Northumbria, for (among other things) his luxurious habits and trimming his beard in imitation of pagans. In Alcuin's second letter, to Higbald, bishop of Lindisfarne, he says that he will go to Charlemagne and seek help in recovering the youths who had been taken captive by vikings. Both letters indicate that the 'pagans' responsible for the attack on Lindisfarne were not entirely alien; the letter to Higbald even hints that Charlemagne had diplomatic contacts who could help negotiate the release of hostages.¹¹ This raises the question whether viking attacks were always bolts from

7. A. Gautier, 'La piraterie dans les mers du Nord au haut Moyen Âge', in G. Buti and P. Hrodej, eds., *Histoire des pirates et des corsaires, de l'Antiquité à nos jours* (Paris, 2016), pp. 77–90.

8. *English Historical Documents*, I: c.500–1042, ed. D. Whitelock (London, 1955), p. 167 n. 7 and p. 764 n. 3; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, VI: *MS D*, ed. G.P. Cubbin (Cambridge, 1996), s.aa. 793, 794; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, VII: *MS E*, ed. S. Irvine (Cambridge, 2004), s.aa. 793, 794.

9. Yorke, 'Representation of Early West Saxon History', pp. 150, 154–5, and cf. 147.

10. *Two Alcuin Letter Books*, ed. C. Chase (Toronto, 1975), p. 55 (tr. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 776).

11. J. Nelson, 'Britain, Ireland and Europe, c.750–c.900', in P. Stafford, ed., *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland, c.500–c.1100* (Chichester, 2009), pp. 231–48, at 233–6.

the blue, or whether vikings were becoming increasingly familiar from the 790s onwards.

Another letter of Alcuin, addressed to the clergy and nobles of Kent in 797, provides further evidence of raids outside Wessex. The letter calls for the restoration of Archbishop Aethelheard to the see of Canterbury (after he was deposed by King Eadberht Praen of Kent) and political unity in the face of attacks: 'Imminet uero maximum insulae huic et populo habitanti in ea periculum. Ecce quod nunquam antea auditum fuit, populus paganus solet uastare piratico latrocinio littora nostra' ('A very great danger threatens this island and the people dwelling in it. Behold a thing never before heard of, a pagan people is becoming accustomed to laying waste our shores with piratical robbery').¹² This dire image would have had little currency if it had not been recognised as a contemporary reality. The letter goes on to make a comparison with the warnings of the sixth-century British author Gildas to his fellow countrymen to amend their ways or be punished, and the subsequent loss of British territory. The implication is that the people of Kent, and indeed all the English-speaking peoples, will be overwhelmed by pagan attackers if they do not reform. The very fact that Alcuin expected the threat to be credible to his audience may demonstrate a degree of fear that had developed among the Kentish elite in response to a sequence of seaborne attacks.

It may be relevant to compare events in England with records of attacks elsewhere in north-west Europe. In 794, the 'devastation of all the islands of Britain by heathens' was also recorded in the Annals of Ulster,¹³ suggesting extensive piratical activity. Irish chronicles also reported attacks on the Gaelic churches of Iona, Inishmurray (Co. Sligo), Inisbofin (Co. Galway) and Lambay (Co. Dublin, or Rathlin, Co. Antrim) in 795. Holmpatrick in Dublin Bay was raided in 798.¹⁴ In the same year, the Annals of Ulster recorded 'great invasions of both Britain and Ireland' by the 'heathens'.¹⁵ Iona was subject to further attacks in 802 and 806, and Inishmurray was raided again in 807 along with Roscam (Co. Galway). In Francia, Alcuin reported that vikings were marauding the coasts of Aquitaine in 799.¹⁶ It may have been in response to these attacks that Charlemagne travelled to the Frankish coast in 800 to build a fleet and set up guards in

12. *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. A. Haddan and W. Stubbs (3 vols., Oxford, 1869–71), iii. 510 (tr. E.P. Cheyney, *Readings in English History* [Boston, MA, 1922], pp. 56–7).

13. *The Annals of Ulster (to AD 1131)*, ed. and tr. S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill (Dublin, 1983) [hereafter *AU*], s.a. 794.

14. *AU*, s.a. 795, 798; *The Annals of Inisfallen, MS Rawlinson B503*, ed. and tr. S. Mac Airt (Dublin, 1944), s.a. 795.

15. *AU*, s.a. 798.

16. *Monumenta Alcuiniana*, ed. P. Jaffé, Bibliotheca Rerum Germanicarum, vi (Berlin, 1873), ep. 127, p. 512; *Alvini sive Albini epistolae*, no. 184, ed. E. Dümmler, *Epistolae Karolini Aevi II*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica [hereafter *MGH*], Epistolae [hereafter *Epp.*], IV (Berlin, 1895), no. 184, pp. 308–10.

various places.¹⁷ The Royal Frankish Annals reported that in 810 Charlemagne gathered an army near Bremen to defend against a fleet of two hundred Danish ships which had ravaged Frisia and imposed a tribute there after winning victory in three battles. Einhard's 'Life of Charlemagne' also refers to the continuous depredations of Northmen on the coasts of Gaul and Germany.¹⁸ These Continental and Irish records make the evidence of sustained early viking activity in Britain more intelligible.

The Royal Frankish Annals also mention piratical activity around English coasts. In 808 King Eardwulf of Northumbria was driven from his kingdom and visited Charlemagne before travelling to see the pope in Rome.¹⁹ On returning from Rome, Eardwulf was escorted back to his kingdom by envoys of Pope Leo III and Charlemagne. The Royal Frankish Annals reported, under the year 809, that all the envoys returned without mishap, except for one Aldwulf, an English deacon, who was captured by pirates and taken back to Britain. There he was ransomed by one of the men of King Coenwulf of Mercia and returned to Rome.²⁰ The episode is also mentioned in papal correspondence. Leo III wrote to Charlemagne referring to an earlier letter from the emperor describing 'the capture and redemption of the deacon Aldwulf, our legate'.²¹ This event would therefore seem to reveal both piratical activity and communication between the kidnappers and the agents of King Coenwulf of Mercia. This may have been the consequence of the diplomatic connections of the Mercians, or might suggest that vikings had established temporary camps in Britain where stolen goods and people could be ransomed.²² The evidence is certainly suggestive of more sustained interaction than hit-and-raid attacks, and may also reflect the circumstances that prevailed in Ireland during the 830s and

17. É. Ridel, 'From Scotland to Normandy: The Celtic Sea Route of the Vikings', in B. Ballin Smith et al., eds., *West over Sea: Studies in Scandinavian Sea-Borne Expansion and Settlement Before 1300* (Leiden, 2007), pp. 81–94, at 84; *Annales regni Francorum inde ab a. 741 usque ad a. 829, qui dicuntur Annales Laurissenses maiores et Einhardi*, s.a. 800, ed. G.H. Pertz and F. Kurze, MGH *Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi* [hereafter SS rer. Germ.], VI (Hanover, 1895) [hereafter *RFA*] (tr. W. Scholz and B. Rogers, *Carolingian Chronicles: Royal Frankish Annals and Nithard's Histories* [Ann Arbor, MI, 1970], s.a. 800).

18. *RFA*, s.a. 810; Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni*, ch. 17, ed. G.H. Pertz and G. Waitz, MGH SS rer. Germ., XXV (Hanover, 1911), p. 21 (tr. P.E. Dutton, *Charlemagne's Courtier: The Complete Einhard* [Toronto, ON, 1998], p. 27).

19. *RFA*, s.a. 808.

20. *RFA*, s.a. 809; J. Story, *Carolingian Connections: Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia, c.750–870* (Aldershot, 2003), p. 203.

21. *Regesta pontificum romanorum, ab condita ecclesia ad annum post Christum natum MCXCVIII*, ed. P. Jaffé (Berlin, 1851), ep. 1924, p. 219; *Einhardi epistolae*, no. 4, ed. K. Hampe, *Epistolae Karolini Aevi III*, MGH Epp., V (Berlin, 1899), pp. 93–4. See D. Forsman, 'An Appeal to Rome: Anglo-Saxon Dispute Settlement, 800–810', *Heroic Age*, vi (2003), available at <http://www.heroicage.org/issues/6/forsman.html>.

22. For the Irish evidence, see E. Purcell, 'The First Generation in Ireland, 795–812: Viking Raids and Viking Bases', in H.B. Clarke and R. Johnson, eds., *The Vikings in Ireland and Beyond: Before and After the Battle of Clontarf* (Dublin, 2015), pp. 41–54; C. Downham, 'The Historical Importance of Viking-Age Waterford', *Journal of Celtic Studies*, iv (2004), pp. 71–96, at 74–6.

840s, when Irish chronicles and records of events in the ‘Life of Saint Findán’ allude to the capture and subsequent release of high-status secular and ecclesiastical figures.²³

Important evidence for piratical activity in England is also provided by the charters of St Augustine’s abbey in Canterbury and Christ Church Canterbury. These include contemporary records from 792 to 822, a time when Kent was under the control of Mercian kings. Mercia is disproportionately well represented in surviving charter evidence from these decades. Forty-eight charters from Mercia and nine from Wessex represent the totality of Anglo-Saxon charters attributed to the period 790 to 825, according to the ‘Electronic Sawyer’ database.²⁴ A significant number of the Mercian charters hail from Kent. Though the evidence provided by the diplomas is thus geographically skewed, it does provide an insight into early raids along England’s southern coasts beyond the borders of Wessex. The best known of these charters—which has survived as an antiquarian copy—is one issued by King Coenwulf of Mercia in 804. This granted the abess of the double monastery of Lyminge a small piece of land in the city of Canterbury as ‘a refuge in necessity’.²⁵ The church of Lyminge was accessible from the sea, and it has been generally assumed that the need for a refuge may therefore relate to viking activities.

The evidence relating to Lyminge is pre-dated by a privilege granted by Offa to Kentish churches and monasteries at *Clofesho* in 792. Copies of this text only survive in two thirteenth-century cartularies, but there is nothing implausible in its wording or internal dating, and it has been deemed to be authentic in the most recent study by Susan Kelly.²⁶ In it, Offa confirms the liberties of the churches and grants them exemption from various dues and services owed to the royal household. However, it is perhaps significant that he excludes from this immunity the obligation of military service in Kent ‘contra paganos marinos cum classis migrantibus’ (‘against seaborne pagans with migrating fleets’)—and against the people of Essex if necessary, as well as building bridges and fortifications ‘against the pagans’. As noted by Kelly, this clause contains the earliest evidence for the presence of vikings in Kent.²⁷

23. W.P.L. Thomson and C.J. Omand, tr., ‘St Findan and the Pictish-Norse Transition’, in R.J. Berry and H.N. Firth, eds., *The People of Orkney* (Kirkwall, 1986), pp. 279–87; C. Downham, ‘Viking Settlements in Ireland before 1014’, in J.V. Sigurðsson and T. Bolton, eds. *Celtic–Norse Relationships in the Irish Sea in the Middle Ages, 800–1200* (Leiden, 2014), pp. 1–21, at 2–3.

24. *The Electronic Sawyer: Online Catalogue of Anglo-Saxon Charters*, available at <http://www.esawyer.org.uk/>.

25. *English Historical Documents*, ed. Whitelock, pp. 473–4; *Charters of Christ Church Canterbury*, ed. N.P. Brooks and S.E. Kelly (Anglo-Saxon Charters 17–18; Oxford, 2013), no. 34, i. 463–6; *Electronic Sawyer*, no. 160. The original charter does not survive but it is preserved in antiquarian copies, and abbreviated versions date from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

26. *Charters of St Augustine’s Abbey, Canterbury and Minster-in-Thamet*, ed. S.E. Kelly (Anglo-Saxon Charters, 4; Oxford, 1995), no. 15, pp. 60–61; *Electronic Sawyer*, no. 134.

27. *Charters of St Augustine’s*, ed. Kelly, no. 15, p. 63; N. Brooks, ‘The Pre-Conquest Charters of Christ Church, Canterbury’ (Univ. of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1969), p. 160; S. Brookes and S. Harrington, *The Kingdom and People of Kent, A.D. 400–1066: Their History and Archaeology* (Stroud, 2010), p. 120.

Indeed, it suggests a response to seaborne depredations which preceded the attack on Lindisfarne in 793 and may have pre-dated the attack on Dorset.

Offa's privilege of 792 may present an innovation in mentioning the obligations of raising an army, bridge-building and the construction of fortresses in a Kentish context.²⁸ But these three burdens had been mentioned in earlier Mercian charters from the mid-eighth century, albeit without mention of pagans. As Nicholas Brooks noted, similar obligations appear in Frankish capitularies from the eighth and ninth centuries. The requirement of bridge-building, fortress work and army service appeared in later Wessex charters with some regularity from the mid-ninth century onwards, and became codified in English law of the tenth and eleventh centuries.²⁹ Viking depredations may therefore have allowed Offa to introduce common burdens, which were already extant in Mercia, in Kent under the guise of emergency measures. All three burdens could be linked with defence.³⁰ This may have been an opportunistic extension of royal power which played on people's fears as well as a practical response to a difficult situation.

Four charters from Christ Church Canterbury issued from 811 to 822 make further reference to defence against 'pagans'.³¹ Their wording echoes Offa's privilege of 792 in that the allusions to 'pagans' appear in clauses listing the obligations of army service, bridge work and fortress-building.³² Two of the charters in question were issued in 811, only a year after the islands of Frisia had been laid waste by a large viking fleet. In the same year Charlemagne visited Boulogne to inspect a defensive fleet he had ordered to be prepared, and he had the lighthouse at Boulogne restored.³³ The evidence suggests a pattern of viking activity and defensive reaction along the southern margins of the North Sea leading into the English channel. A charter issued on 21 April 811 concerns a land exchange between Wulfred, archbishop of Canterbury,

28. *Charters of St Augustine's*, ed. Kelly, no. 15, p. 63.

29. N.P. Brooks, 'The Development of Military Obligations in Eighth and Ninth Century England', in P. Clemoes and K. Hughes, eds., *England before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitelock* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 69–84, at 69; D. Gore, 'A Review of Viking Attacks in Western England to the Early Tenth Century, their Motives and Responses', in R. Lavelle and S. Roffey, eds., *Danes in Wessex: The Scandinavian Impact on Southern England, c.800–1100* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 56–69, at 60.

30. Brooks, 'Development of Military Obligations', p. 69; cf. A. Cooper, *Bridges, Law and Power in Medieval England, 700–1400* (Woodbridge, 2006), pp. 40–44. Cooper qualifies Brooks's analysis by emphasising the utility of bridges for non-military purposes.

31. *Electronic Sawyer*, nos. 168, 177, 186, 1264; *Charters of Christ Church*, ed. Brooks and Kelly, nos. 43, 44, 48, 53, i. 506–09, 512–15, 536–8, 558–60. These are remarkable survivals as single-sheet charters from the early ninth century.

32. Not all early ninth-century Christ Church charters mention these three obligations with reference to 'pagans': *Charters of Christ Church*, ed. Brooks and Kelly, no. 51; *Electronic Sawyer*, no. 178. Another appears to be a forgery: *Charters of Christ Church*, eds. Brooks and Kelly, no. 49 and i. 544; *Electronic Sawyer*, no. 175. S. Keynes, 'The Control of Kent in the Ninth Century', *Early Medieval Europe*, ii (1993), pp. 111–31, at 114 n. 23.

33. *RFA*, s.a. 811.

and the community of Christ Church, under the terms of which the archbishop exchanged five sulungs in the district of Eastry for four sulungs at Bishopsbourne.³⁴ The wording of the charter suggests there may have been some initial reluctance on the part of the community at Christ Church Canterbury to accept this deal. Wulfred states that he has expended great efforts on uniting the five sulungs of property which he is ceding, and that he is giving away one sulung more than he is getting back, in return for the community's 'humility and obedience'; by implication, then, this is a good deal for his loyal adherents. A passage at the end of the charter threatens to annul the exchange if either party does not honour the full terms of the agreement, which may hint at mistrust. Brooks and Kelly have noted that this is an unusual passage to include in a land exchange between an archbishop and a church.³⁵ But another unusual feature is, of course, the reference to 'pagans'. The community of Christ Church is granted the land with all liberty except the three burdens of armed service, construction of fortresses and the building of bridges *contra paganos*.³⁶ The stipulation is evocative of the subsequent activities of Charles the Bald in France in defending his kingdom against vikings in the 860s.³⁷

It may be relevant to compare the position of the lands that Wulfred was giving away with those he was receiving. Eastry sits less than three miles south-west of the important port of Sandwich, and is strategically located on the old Roman road which linked Dover to Richborough Castle. It is tempting to surmise that the concern to spell out the military obligations of landholders against pagans related to the fear of viking attacks in this region. In contrast, the lands which Wulfred received at Bishopsbourne lay four miles south-east of Canterbury. This was a less exposed location and presumably easier to manage, as Wulfred was based in Canterbury. Reading between the lines, the emphasis on honouring the agreement and the reference to defensive obligations against pagans therefore suggests that Wulfred's grant of an extra sulung was more pragmatic than altruistic.

The next Christ Church charter, dated to 1 August 811, also refers to 'pagans'.³⁸ Under its terms, Coenwulf of Mercia grants two sulungs of land near Rainham, two sulungs at Graveney, two-and-a-half tenements in Canterbury and meadows by the River Stour to Archbishop Wulfred. These lands in Kent are given in exchange for 126 mancuses.³⁹ The

34. *Electronic Sawyer*, no. 1264; *Charters of Christ Church*, ed. Brooks and Kelly, no. 43, i. 506–09; P. Vinogradoff, 'Sulung and Hide', *English Historical Review*, xix (1904), pp. 282–6. A sulung is a land unit of varied size often equated with two hides, or around two hundred acres.

35. *Charters of Christ Church*, ed. Brooks and Kelly, no. 43, i. 512.

36. Brooks, 'Development of Military Obligations', p. 72.

37. Coupland, 'Vikings in Francia', p. 198.

38. *Electronic Sawyer*, no. 168; *Charters of Christ Church*, ed. Brooks and Kelly, no. 44, i. 512–15.

39. A mancus is a unit of gold, often regarded as equivalent to thirty silver pennies; see M. Blackburn, 'Gold in England during the "Age of Silver" (Eighth to Eleventh Centuries)', in J. Graham-Campbell and G. Williams, eds., *Silver Economy in the Viking Age* (Walnut Creek, CA, 2007), pp. 55–98, at 57–8.

land is free from public tribute but not exempted from the obligations of ‘pontis instructionem et contra paganos expeditionem atque arcis munitionem distructionemue’ (‘bridge-building, military expeditions against the pagans, and the construction and destruction of fortresses’). The reference to the eradication of forts is intriguing, and Frank Stenton and Nicholas Brooks used this charter as evidence for the establishment of viking camps.⁴⁰ This interpretation challenges the impression, given in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, that vikings founded temporary settlements from 851 when they over-wintered on Thanet. It is possible, from comparison with viking activities elsewhere—for example, in Ireland—that their bases could be very transient.⁴¹ Therefore a phase of establishing short-term bases prior to more prolonged episodes of over-wintering in Kent would seem possible. However the charter may also refer to an obligation to decommission fortresses that had been built by local people, because they were no longer useful and the materials could be recycled, or to prevent defended sites from falling into enemy hands. Whatever the reality, the wording of this charter shows distinctive features which go beyond the repetition of stock formulae, and which may provide some insight into the reality of local circumstances.

The lands at Rainham and Graveney were vulnerable to seaborne raids as they are located on the north coast of Kent. Both were also close to the strategically important overland route of Watling Street, which linked Canterbury to Rochester, London and points further north. Rainham was situated on the Medway estuary and Graveney lay further east along the south Swale marshes. The importance of Graveney as a place to land ships has been highlighted by the discovery of a Viking Age cargo vessel in the local mudflats. This boat was 14 metres in length, suited for crossing the English Channel, and had been built at the end of the ninth century or during the early tenth century.⁴² Despite Graveney’s vulnerability to seaborne attack, Wulfred acquired lands here through a string of purchases dating from 811 to 815. The archbishop obtained five adjoining properties ranging in size from twenty acres to the two sulungs specified in the charter of 811. Mention is also made of a residence (*mansio*) at Graveney. Wulfred’s policy consolidated landholdings, presumably in order to enable more

40. F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd edn., Oxford, 1971), p. 292; Brooks, ‘Development of Military Obligations’, p. 80; *Charters of Christ Church Canterbury*, ed. Brooks and Kelly, no. 44, i. 518.

41. C. Downham, ‘Viking Camps in Ninth-Century Ireland: Sources, Locations and Interactions’, in S. Duffy, ed., *Medieval Dublin X* (Dublin, 2010), pp. 93–125, at 93–4; *AU*, s.a. 936; *Annals of Inisfallen*, ed. Mac Airt, s.a. 968.

42. A.C. Evans and V.H. Fenwick, ‘The Graveney Boat’, *Antiquity*, xlv (1971), pp. 89–96; S. McGrail, ‘Early Boatbuilding Techniques in Britain and Ireland—Dating Technological Change’, *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, xvi (1987), pp. 343–6; B. Booth, ‘A Handlist of Maritime Radiocarbon Dates’, *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, xiii (1984), pp. 189–204, at 192. For a recent summary, see S. McGrail, *Boats of the World from the Stone Age to Medieval Times* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 218–20. For this last reference I am grateful to David Petts.

efficient exploitation and management, and as part of a wider strategy of adding land to estates which he already held.⁴³ Whether piratical activity affected land prices or encouraged land to change hands is a topic which merits further exploration; but clearly Wulfred did not consider the viking threat to be so great that it would significantly damage the value of his new properties.

In a subsequent charter of 814, a sulung at *Cyningces cua land* near Graveney was granted to Wulfred by King Coenwulf in return for seven pounds of silver.⁴⁴ The land was given free of secular burdens and services, apart from 'expeditionem et arcis munitionem contra paganos et pontis instructionem communiter sicut tota gens illa de suis propriis hereditariis consuete faciunt' ('armed service, the construction of fortresses against pagans and the building of bridges just as the whole people is accustomed to perform from their hereditary possessions'). In the following year Coenwulf granted one hide at *Seleberhting lond* near Graveney to Wulfred in return for a ring or armband worth 23 mancuses.⁴⁵ The charter makes no reference to pagans but does refer to obligations of military service, bridge- and fortress-building. The diploma also refers to *angylde*, which was a burden relating to the administration of justice that appears in other Mercian charters.

The years after 814 were overshadowed by disputes between the Mercian king Coenwulf and Archbishop Wulfred over control of the important minsters of Minster-in-Thanet and Reculver. As a result there is a gap in the series of diplomas at Christ Church from 815 to 821, when Wulfred may have been suspended from office.⁴⁶ The rift between king and archbishop over the exercise of power may not have been healed before Coenwulf's death in 821. Nevertheless there is an abbreviated copy of a charter of 821 in which the king grants the land of Copstone in Otford, West Kent, to Wulfred.⁴⁷ A year after the old king died, Wulfred consecrated his successor, Ceolwulf. The charter that was issued on 17 September 822 marked the reconciliation between king and archbishop, and also continued an earlier pattern of the king granting land to his archbishop to help him build up existing estates in exchange for gold. Wulfred gave 75 mancuses in exchange for an estate of five sulungs at Milton, Otford.⁴⁸ These lands lie at a strategic crossing-point in the Darent valley. Ceolwulf granted the land free from all services and burdens, except for four clauses, 'expeditione contra paganos ostes, et pontes constructione seu arcis munitione uel destructione in eodem gente et singularam pretium foras reddat' ('military service against

43. *Charters of Christ Church*, ed. Brooks and Kelly, i. 154.

44. *Ibid.*, no. 48, i. 536–8; *Electronic Sawyer*, no. 177.

45. *Charters of Christ Church*, ed. Brooks and Kelly, no. 51, i. 553–4 and i. 555; *Electronic Sawyer*, no. 178.

46. N. Brooks, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury: Christ Church from 597 to 1066* (Leicester, 1984), pp. 133–6.

47. *Charters of Christ Church*, ed. Brooks and Kelly, no. 52, i. 557; *Electronic Sawyer*, no. 1619.

48. *Charters of Christ Church*, ed. Brooks and Kelly, no. 53, i. 558–60; *Electronic Sawyer*, no. 186.

pagan enemies, and the construction of bridges and the fortification or destruction of fortresses among the same people, and it is to render single payment outside [i.e. for stolen goods]). The text is noteworthy for its reference to the destruction of fortresses and the need to specify 'paganos ostes' rather than pagans in general. It implies that not all pagans were enemies—or that not all enemies were pagans. This could hint at non-military interaction between seaborne raiders and English people.⁴⁹

Comparisons may be drawn with Frankish and Irish chronicle records in the years from 812 to 822. The Royal Frankish Annals reported that a Scandinavian fleet landed in Ireland in 812, but it was driven away by the Irish.⁵⁰ The Annals of Ulster made reference to a string of military successes against vikings in the years 811 and 812, first by the people of Ulster, and then by Fir Umhaill in the west of Ireland, and by the people of Munster. In 812, in contrast, vikings won a battle against the Conmaicne in Connaught.⁵¹ In 813 the Fir Umhaill of Connaught were defeated. In the same year the Royal Frankish Annals recorded the expansion of the power of Danish kings in Vestfold, across from 'the northern tip of Britain'.⁵² The year 820 witnessed a flurry of viking activity around the coasts of Francia. According to the Royal Frankish Annals, thirteen pirate ships raided Flanders but were repelled after they had captured some cattle and set fire to dwellings. A viking attempt to invade the Seine estuary was also deflected. In that year vikings also raided Bouin in Aquitaine and took a large amount of booty away with them.⁵³ In the following year, Irish chronicles recorded raids against Howth in the north of Dublin Bay, and Wexford Harbour on the south coast.⁵⁴ In this context, the exposed coasts and wealthy churches of Kent may have been seen as ripe for attack.

From 835 the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records the vikings as a regular threat to southern England. In 851 this culminated in vikings overwintering in Thanet, the storming of Canterbury, and an attack on Sandwich.⁵⁵ The fear of vikings in the early ninth century was expressed in different ways. In 839, King Aethelwulf of Wessex and Kent planned

49. The fourth obligation relating to compensation to theft is very rare in Anglo-Saxon Charters: Cooper, *Bridges, Law and Power*, p. 42. Later evidence of integration (as well as the significance of cross-channel links) is discussed by J. Nelson, 'England and the Continent in the Ninth Century, II: The Vikings and the Others', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., xiii (2003), pp. 1–28. Apart from the Kentish diplomas, the only surviving Anglo-Saxon charter to mention 'pagans' dated to 844 is widely regarded as spurious. It purports to record viking attacks on Wessex: *Electronic Sawyer*, no. 294; S. Keynes, 'The West Saxon Charters of King Aethelwulf and his sons', *English Historical Review*, cix (1994), pp. 1109–49, at 1114 n. 3, 1115–16.

50. *RFA*, s.a. 812.

51. *AU*, s.a.a. 811, 812.

52. *RFA*, s.a. 813. Scholtz and Rogers's translation also suggests that vikings conquered the northern tip of Britain but this seems to be a misinterpretation of the Latin.

53. *RFA*, s.a. 820.

54. *AU*, s.a. 821.

55. *ASC A*, s.a.a. 835, 836, 838, 840, 841, 842, 843, 848, 851 (tr. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, pp. 172–3).

a pilgrimage to Rome, spurred on by the dream of an English priest. The dream envisaged his people being destroyed by the fire and sword of pagan men if penitence was not undertaken.⁵⁶ Around 850, Ealburh granted food rents from her estate in Brabourne, Kent, which lay roughly eight miles from the coast, to the community of St Augustine's, Canterbury.⁵⁷ In return the community was expected to sing Psalm 20 every day on her behalf. The charter makes provision for non-payment of rents for up to three years because of heathen attacks or other reasons, after which the lands would be given to St Augustine's. The stipulation suggests that vikings were regarded as one of the most likely reasons for agricultural production to be disrupted in this part of Kent.

Interactions between vikings and natives also appear to have developed. The mention of an alliance between the people of Cornwall and vikings in 838 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle implies good communication and trust between armies of different peoples.⁵⁸ Similar contacts may have developed in Kent. The lavish gospel book *Codex Aureus*, which was granted to Christ Church Canterbury by Ealdorman Alfred and Waerburg his wife, contains a fascinating inscription added to the first page of St Matthew's gospel.⁵⁹ It records how this couple ransomed the book from a heathen army as an act of piety. Alfred and Waerburg flourished during the late ninth century, and it is possible that the *Codex* was stolen from Canterbury during the raid recorded in 851.⁶⁰ This would suggest negotiations taking place which required interlocutors, a modicum of trust and a cross-cultural code of conduct to enable agreements to be concluded. Such contacts could not be built up quickly and they may hint at sustained viking activity in southern England during the first half of the ninth century.

It is also possible that the viking attacks on Kent in the closing years of the eighth century and opening years of the ninth century helped to destabilise Mercian control in the region. Simon Keynes has persuasively argued that several factors led King Ecgberht of Wessex to wrest control of Kent from Mercia in 826.⁶¹ Kent had been subjected to Mercian rule in the face of some resistance in the late eighth century.⁶²

56. P.E. Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire* (London, 1994), pp. 107–9; *Annales Bertiniani*, s.a. 839, ed. F. Grat, J. Vielliard and S. Clémencet (Paris, 1964) (tr. J.L. Nelson, *The Annals of St Bertin* [Manchester, 1991], s.a. 839).

57. *Charters of St Augustine's*, ed. Kelly, no. 24, p. 81; *Electronic Sawyer*, no. 1198.

58. By comparison we have records of viking attacks on Ireland from AD 795 but the first political alliances are documented nearly half a century later: *AU*, s.a. 842. Derek Gore ('Review of Viking Attacks', p. 59) suggests that the vikings who allied with the Cornish in 838 may have been those who were active at Carhampton in 836.

59. *The Codex Aureus: An Eighth-Century Gospel Book*, Stockholm Kunngliga Bibliotek, A. 135: Part 1, ed. R. Gameson (Copenhagen, 2001), pp. 75–7.

60. *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England*, s.vv. 'Alfred 18', 'Waerburg 3'; available online at <http://www.pase.ac.uk>; *Charters of Christ Church*, ed. Brooks and Kelly, no. 97, ii. 818–21 *Electronic Sawyer*, no. 1508.

61. Keynes, 'Control of Kent', pp. 113–19.

62. Story, *Carolingian Connections*, pp. 192–4.

In particular, King Coenwulf appears to have failed to secure the long-term loyalty of the Kentish nobility to Mercia. Keynes has made the case that Coenwulf did not visit Kent regularly or delegate control effectively after 807, and Kentish noblemen do not appear to have held high positions at the Mercian court. Coenwulf also alienated ecclesiastical supporters through his disputes with Archbishop Wulfred of Canterbury.⁶³ Political turmoil followed Coenwulf's death in 821.⁶⁴ His successor Ceolwulf was unable to resolve matters and was expelled from power in 823. Two years later King Ecgberht of Wessex won a military victory over King Beornwulf of Mercia at Ellendon and an armed force was dispatched from Wessex to bring Kent under West Saxon control.⁶⁵ It is tempting to surmise that viking attacks added to the political pressures which culminated in regime change in Kent. King Ecgberht may have been able to capitalise on political unrest and local disaffection with Mercia, in which vikings may also have played a part. From the 830s the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle presents King Alfred's family as defenders of the people of Kent (as well as Wessex) against seaborne raiders.

Although the evidence of early viking incursions in southern England in letters, chronicles and charters cited above is available in published editions, it has not been gathered in such a way as to invite reconsideration of the account given in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. The common stock of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records only one raid prior to 835; this is retrospectively identified as the first viking attack on the English, and it took place in Wessex. However, the evidence presented in this article suggests that the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle plays down the impact of vikings in England prior to the reign of King Alfred's grandfather Ecgberht. The authors of the common stock were concerned to show Alfred and his immediate family as the main victims and enemies of pagan raiders. Other accounts of viking raids which could diminish the impact of this account were either unknown to them, or suppressed. In fact, early viking activity in England was more extensive than the common stock of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle allows. In particular, the experience of Kent seems to be comparable with that of the north-western fringes of the Carolingian empire or the coasts of Ireland during the years from 790 to 825. This material points to an alternative to the dominant narrative of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the beginning of the Viking Age in England.

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63. *Ibid.*, pp. 208–9.

64. *Electronic Sawyer*, no. 1435.

65. *ASCA*, s.aa. 825, 826; Keynes, 'Control of Kent', p. 120.