

Scandinavian Influence? I: Archaeological Background

Colleen Batey

Some thoughts from the Scandinavian Perspective: Aspects of the Vikings in Perthshire

Perthshire is not traditionally an area where we have expected to find evidence of Viking presence, disparate sources and isolated finds have led to the assumption that there is nothing much to be learnt about a Scandinavian influx to the area. However, these disparate sources and these isolated finds when combined with detailed field analysis undertaken by the Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust may perhaps indicate that there is more to this than perhaps we had been prepared to consider. Perhaps there was a Viking presence in Perthshire, at the heart of the Pictish Kingdom.

Viking raids were recorded on the area from 839AD onwards and it is recorded that "the Danes laid waste Pictland to Clunie and Dunkeld" and there is even a reference that "the Northmen spent a whole year in Pictland". Raiding took place into the 10th century and Dunkeld was plundered. For fuller details of the raids see Barbara Crawford's contribution to these conference abstracts (and also Crawford 1987, 39ff.), which also covers the important development of placename studies in Fife and Kinross. These all supply a background for us to use as a starting point when assessing the nature and extent of any Viking presence or incursion into the area.

The Archaeological Evidence

In Perthshire and its environs there have been some stunning archaeological discoveries. The two Pictish silver brooches from Clunie, for example, had been deposited together and it is suggested- somewhat as a last resort - that they were buried in the face of the Viking arrival. From Norrie's Law in Fife, a substantial Pictish silver hoard included a fragment of a Hiberno-Norse silver armring, and Graham-Campbell has cast doubt on whether this was in fact from the same find at all (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 103). There are a number of 11th century silver coin finds from the area, including a relatively recent (1989) find of a hoard of Hiberno-Norse pennies from Dull (Bateson 1993) which had been deposited circa AD 1025. Other disparate finds include a mutilated crest from an 11th century bell-shrine from Inchaffray Abbey which is decorated in Irish Ringerike style and, from north of the Tay, the Monifieth crescent which combines both Pictish symbols and a short runic inscription (see for example Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 103-4).

Despite these finds, there is as yet nothing to indicate the presence of pagan Viking burials in the area, although the Errol brooches have often been cited in this context. These oval brooches are typical of those found ubiquitously representing pagan female burial, but these, along with the Gotlandic brooch from the Bridge of Earn, are now considered more likely as collectors items rather than *bonafide* Perthshire Vikings burial evidence (discussed in Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 104; Graham-Campbell and Patterson forthcoming).

There are however Viking period weapons from Perth itself. Two spearheads from excavations on the Perth High Street originally identified as Petersen Viking Type K are suggested by David Caldwell (forthcoming) to be in use somewhat later. The elaborate sword hilt, also from the Perth High Street, of Petersen Type U is dated to the 10th century and has parallels at Kiloran Bay, Colonsay (ibid). A second sword hilt from Perth Watergate (accession number PMAG 147 and see Graham-Campbell and Patterson forthcoming) has a pattern-welded blade and could belong to the 9th

century. It is highly unusual for such weapons to be found on settlement sites, so a preferred context would be either a pagan grave(s) or an accidental loss at a water crossing - Watergate was the original frontage onto the river when Perth began to develop and it is also close to the early bridging point at the end of the High Street.

The remaining evidence is in the form of textiles and related equipment. There is a complete glass linen smoother from King Edward Street, Perth, from a 12th century context (Bowler, Cox and Smith 1995, 970) and an incomplete example from Meal Vennel, from a context dated to the 14-15th century (Cox 1996, 596). This type of object is certainly known from the Viking period and in Scandinavia their use continued down to modern times (Bowler et al, 1995, 970). Of more telling worth however is the textile evidence itself. From Perth High Street, Helen Bennett (forthcoming) has identified Wadmál and Sprang textiles, which are likely to have a Scandinavian origin. The question remains however, about the nature of such contact and exchange.

In 1987, L M Blanchard noted that 'As with other Scottish burghs, evidence for urban life in Perth prior to the late 12th century is limited [Duncan] using evidence from custom receipts...suggests that the Watergate area on the W bank of the Tay was the nucleus of the early burgh' (1987, 210). Extensive excavation work undertaken by SUAT has enabled a fuller picture of the environment and economy of the nearby High Street. Results of this work are eagerly awaited. However, if this locality was settled by the Vikings, presumably as a trading base, what form would we expect it to take? It would not presumably resemble Birsay in Orkney or Jarlshof in Shetland, where extensive stone built complexes span centuries of Scandinavian rule. Would it be more like Whithorn or York perhaps? Timber construction would be most likely, but not in the Irish style as seen at Whithorn or Dublin, more in line with the York scenario perhaps. The discovery of wattle buildings at the High Street sites associated with middens and evidence for the working of leather would seem to echo the York situation. Unfortunately so many artefacts are not immediately identified as Scandinavian in character - unlike the oval brooches or the sword hilts - many are ubiquitous in form, functional and updateable by typological means. Chronological assistance must therefore be supplied by scientific dating programmes, such as dendrochronology or perhaps C14.

A dispersed settlement may have been the model adopted, with a focus which migrated locally. This has been identified in Kirkwall through the work of Neil McGavin, Raymond Lamb (Lamb 1993, 44-49) and Olwyn Owen, where it would now seem that the crucial area for understanding the nature of the early settlement in Kirkwall lies beneath the BP gas holders... Indeed excavation at another early burgh has also yielded surprises. At Govan on the Clyde, the fine carved stone assemblage has been long known with its distinctive Scandinavian hog back stones, but the context had been something of an unknown quantity. Recent excavations by Steven Driscoll have revealed activity broadly contemporary with the sculpture and a possible "Moothill" or thing place at Doomster Hill only a few hundred metres from the present location of the stones (eg Ritchie ed 1994; Driscoll 1998). This settlement focus on the Clyde predates the development of Glasgow, whose initial focus may well have been on the necropolis adjacent to the Cathedral.

This has moved some distance from the stray finds of Viking age in Perthshire, but it is hoped that the image of wooden houses, clinkerbuilt boats and their Scandinavian traders scattered along the banks of the River Tay at Perth may be an image to conjure with. If this is completely wrong, no matter, it surely does not obviate the search.

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