

Scandinavian Influence II: Historical Background

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Synopsis

The origins of Scottish Burghs must lie in the period when Scandinavian influence on commercial and urban activities in the North Sea zone is fully recognised. Historical evidence for Scandinavian influence on Scottish burghs is, however, sparse and difficult to date. Some legal, judicial and socio-economic terms from later documentary evidence, as well as personal names (and St. Clement dedications) will be discussed and set against a Scandinavian background. An attempt will be made to fit these social and cultural influences into a plausible historical framework that may help to advance our understanding of the origins of Scottish burghs.

Historical Questions and Problems

Over the years, I have murmured sometimes quietly, sometimes publicly, about expecting, and looking for, Scandinavian input into any early urban development in north Britain. As is well known there is a dearth of hard evidence for early trading centres in Scotland, despite the very great importance of the Viking impact on early urban development elsewhere—as raiders on the trading centres of Europe and then as developers of such centres in Anglo-Saxon England and Ireland. We really know absolutely nothing about any trading or exchange in Scotland in what we can call 'the Viking Age', that is from c.800 to the mid eleventh century. But urban archaeologists must be aware of the likelihood that traces of Scandinavian influence should be recognisable in the earliest levels of Scottish medieval towns: the wealth of evidence from tenth-century levels in Scandinavian York and Dublin provide a wonderful source of evidence for the richness of the culture engendered by the mobility of the Viking traders and the manufacturing centres where they operated. Should we expect this to be replicated in trading centres north of the Border?

The national identity of 'Scotland' was of course only in the making in this period. The component parts of the medieval kingdom were Pictland north of the Forth, Northumbria south of the Forth, Strathclyde south of the Clyde, Dál Riada in the west, and the Norse settlements around the northern and western coasts. So when we look for evidence of trading we have to be aware that there was no one political power in control of north Britain, and that each of these component ethnic and cultural groupings may have had their own trading centres which were founded, or which developed of their own accord, in response to the economic needs of the local population or the local dynasts[1].

Once the kingdom of 'Alba' developed in the tenth century, there was a more centralised dominant power group, based in the south-east, with centres at Scone and Dunfermline. We can be certain that traders must have been around to serve the royal dynasty's need for imported goods. We have only to note the comment in Turgot's *Life of Queen Margaret*, right at the end of this period, that she encouraged the importing of 'many and precious kinds of merchandise which in Scotland were before unknown, among which, at the instigation of the Queen, the people bought garments of various colours, and different kinds of personal ornaments so that from that time they went about clothed in new costumes of different fashions' (Metcalf, *Lives of the Scottish Saints*, p.53). This does however suggest that whatever trading in cloth and personal ornaments went on was closely controlled by the royal court, and would have been conducted at the court: whether there was any spin-off among the population at large is impossible to say. This was aristocratic trading which did not require urban mercantile centres.[2]

If archaeological evidence of early trading centres, and any Scandinavian influence in them, continues to elude us are we going to have to conclude that economically there was no need for trading centres in Scotland in the late Viking Age? Was the economy so backward that importing of luxury items by the royal court is the only means of exchange required, - or allowed? The lack of a national currency throughout the eleventh century would appear to be a relevant factor here. Does this suggest that there may not have been the need, or the resources, for the kings to mint their own coins? What about the silver hoards found scattered across southern Scotland and dating from this period? (Graham-Campbell, 1995). This evidence raises important issues about the economy and the medium in which trade was conducted, but this is not the issue which I am going to address here. I want to look at the situation during the period known as the Second Viking Age, that is the late tenth century to 1015 and then the period of Danish kingship in England, up to 1042, followed by the last years of Anglo-Saxon England, when the Scandinavian influence on England continued to be strong, and I want to ask: was the kingdom of Alba and the emerging medieval Scotland immune from the Scandinavian impact which can be perceived in other parts of the British Isles?

Trade in the Viking World

If we go back to the earlier Viking Age and look at a map of Viking trade routes in north Europe it is very plain that these routes, and the Viking traders, encircled the British Isles. The Danes and Norwegians came from societies where trade appears to have been a core activity. These raiders/traders were very mobile operators who had full command of the seas and waterways of north Europe. Their superb ships made them the conveyors of goods from one society to another and from one coast to another. And this activity led them to develop urban/trading communities where the goods could be exchanged and where goods could be manufactured. The remarkable discoveries in Danish urban archaeology in the past decade have shown that some of these early towns were in the making already before the Viking Age got under way in the late eighth century.

Danish settlement in eastern and northern England in the ninth century had an important urban focus, and many of the burghs of the eastern Midlands appear to have been Danish foundations, either for protection, or commercial reasons, or probably a mixture of both. Norse settlement in Ireland was almost entirely urban, as is well-known. The routes that are shown on maps of Viking trade suggest that north Britain was an integral part of this maritime world. Of course the northern and western coastal fringes were settled by Norse speakers and came under strong Scandinavian influence for a few centuries, so that they were essentially drawn into this maritime world. Southern Scotland remained independent of Scandinavian control, even though there were strong and sustained Viking attempts in the ninth century and the early tenth century to dominate the estuaries and access points into the heart of Fife, Forth and Strathclyde. But we have to expect that some influence would have resulted from exposure to and contact with the mobile Scandinavian operators who were transacting their business along the waterways of southern Scotland. However the archaeological evidence of any such contact is really non-existent, (but then any archaeological evidence of the ninth or tenth centuries in southern Scotland is very thin indeed). It is not until we come to the later tenth century and eleventh century that we have the sculptural evidence of the monumental hogback tombs at Govan on the river Clyde and other sacred church sites around the Forth estuary (see maps in Crawford, 1987, p. 93 and 1994, p.104) which indicate the presence of people with Scandinavian cultural origins who had settled and adopted Christianity in southern Scotland.

Second Viking Age

This brings us to the period when raiding from Denmark started up again, led by the royal Danish dynasty, Swein Forkbeard, and his son Cnut, with other powerful warriors like Thorkell the Tall and Olaf Triggvason of Norway. But these were specifically focussed against England and very few raids against Scotland are recorded from the Second Viking Age. Maybe there was enough to occupy the raiders in England. Maybe there was not enough wealth in the form of silver coin to attract them to Scotland! Maybe Swein had some convenient mutual arrangement with one of the kings in the north, for the German chronicler, Adam of Bremen, records in the later eleventh century that Swein had taken refuge with a 'king of Scots' after his father died in 986 (see my discussion 2001, p.76). Whatever the reason, Scotland/Alba appears to have been immune from the threat of Danish attack in the second Viking Age.

Things changed somewhat with the conquest of England by Swein's son Cnut in 1016. This period of Scandinavian rule (which continued until 1042) firmly tied England into Cnut's North Sea Empire. Was Scotland affected by this situation developing around the North Sea? It has been argued that Scotland was important for the security of Norway, which was brought under Cnut's dominion in 1028 (Hudson, 1992); and the submission of Malcolm II, Macbeth and a king of the Western Isles to Cnut in 1031 (recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle) certainly suggests that there was some political tie-up. But whether this political tie-up would have speeded up economic development in Scotland is difficult to say (see my comments on the economic situation in Crawford, 2001).

Political Links with Northumbria

Just at the time of Cnut's own death in 1034 there were big political changes within Alba following the violent death of the powerful king Malcolm II, which was followed by the equally violent death of his son Duncan, at the hands of Macbeth. This disastrous sequence of events for the ruling dynasty resulted in a situation which I think was of crucial importance for the future cultural development of Scotland. Duncan's young son Malcolm (called 'Canmore = 'big head') fled into exile at the court of Siward, the powerful Danish earl of Northumbria. For fourteen years he lived in northern England and probably for some of that time in the Earlsburgh at York, Siward's defensible residence north of the trading/mercantile urban centre around Coppergate. The Anglo-Scandinavian economic and commercial imprint on the city has been revealed by the Jorvik excavations, and the Norwegian and Danish imprint on land and society throughout Northumbria was undoubtedly strengthened by the rule of the Norwegian Erik of Lade, who was made earl of Northumbria by Cnut (1016-1033) and his successor the Danish Earl Siward from 1033 to 1055.

When he returned from exile in 1054- restored in fact by Earl Siward and King Edward, both of whom provided housecarls (trained household troops) for the campaign - Malcolm would have had his own following of Anglo-Scandinavian warriors who had gathered around him during his youth at Siward's court. Moreover he himself would have spoken a strongly Scandinavianised form of northern English in addition to his own native Gaelic (Crawford, 2001, p.83).

This situation seems to provide the right circumstances for the importation into Scotland of the Northumbrian or Anglo-Scandinavian social, cultural and economic terms and influences which appear in the historical sources of the next century. The new raft of nobility installed by Malcolm, many of whom probably returned with him from Northumbria, would have been given lands and privileges throughout south and

east Scotland - north and south of the Forth. They most likely would have brought in economic links -links with Northumbria, links across the North Sea- and could thus very easily have stimulated trading connections and perhaps proto-urban developments. It is noteworthy that several landowners around the Forth and Tay recorded in twelfth-century charters have Norse personal names such as Swein, Thorfinn and Thor, while there was a lady called Gunnilda at Nydie near Leuchars. There is also a Swain in Dunfermline and another at Perth (Mackenzie, 1949, p.36). If only we could trace them back into the eleventh century! [3] Here I suggest is a possible, perhaps likely, situation for encouragement of Anglo-Danish traders, with powerful protectors among the new landowning elite in Malcolm III's kingdom, and with the right trading contacts across the North Sea to establish suitable trading venues, or even beach markets along the coasts or estuaries of south-east Scotland.

Trading Places

Where would they have been? Geographical locations with the right beaching conditions would be chosen, or on rivers with suitable conditions for unloading goods and merchandise. Convenient access to land routes for transport might be necessary, and locations not far from the local power centres, of landowners or kings. [4]

One of the prime candidates for just such a trading location is Dundee, actually mentioned as the place Earl Siward made for when he led the campaign to restore Malcolm in 1054 (from a twelfth-century 'Life of Waltheof' by a monk of Crowland). This is fairly good evidence for the existence of Dundee as a power point in the mid-eleventh century, as a defensible landing-place for the Anglo-Scandinavian housecarls. It would also perhaps be a suitable provisioning place for the succeeding campaign which led up to the battle of Dunsinane (just a few miles to the north), and then the campaigns to the north-east for hunting down Macbeth and his stepson Lulach. So, if we are looking for a defensible trading place, following on from the restoration of Malcolm, Dundee would be a prime candidate.

I have discussed elsewhere the potential significance of the fact that the first parish church in Dundee was dedicated to St. Clement, a saint whose cult was strong in Denmark, and popular in the burghs of eastern England, suggested by the distribution of churches dedicated to him throughout that area (Crawford, 1999). My conclusions regarding the English examples are that the cult of St. Clement was greatly boosted by the Danish conquest of the early eleventh century, and that many of the urban churches were founded in the eleventh century, perhaps strategically located in places where the Danish regime needed to secure its control. We cannot claim that St. Clement's Dundee was founded for the same reasons by Earl Siward, but neither can we disclaim the significance of the existence of this church at the very heart of the original core of the port. As one of only four parish churches dedicated to Clement in Scotland it has some significance for our understanding of the east coast connections with a culture which had strong North Sea links.

Terminology

It is well-known that many administrative, social and agricultural terms like 'soke', 'shire', 'thane', 'drenc', 'carucate' and 'ploughgate' which one finds in medieval land charters in Scotland must have had their origin in the Anglo-Saxon culture of the southern kingdom (see discussion in Crawford, 2000, p.132, with refs. to G. W. S. Barrow's publications). The units such as 'soke' (an area of jurisdiction) and 'shire' (an administrative unit developed for governmental purposes of taxation and defence) were probably introduced by the kings of Scots in the late tenth or early eleventh century. The ranks of 'earl', 'thane' and 'drenc' were also imported, perhaps more specifically from the Anglo-Scandinavian culture of northern and eastern England. The

rural terms of 'bonder', 'gresmen' and 'hiredmen' which are found all over southern and central Scotland in the land grants of the 12th century must have been imported as a result of close connections between the Scots and Northumbria, and my guess would be that the return of Malcolm Canmore from his exile in northern England would have been the likely occasion of such a new linguistic influence, used by his followers and their men who moved north and took possession of estates which they were granted as reward for their loyalty and military support.

The rank of thane is of particular interest, as the districts controlled by thanes (thanages) became such an important element in the Scottish kingdom's administrative set-up. The term is derived from Anglo-Saxon *þegn* and Barrow believes it was borrowed and applied to an older class of Celtic official sometime between the 10th and the 12th centuries. Sandy Grant has argued (1993) that Malcolm II in the first half of the 11th century was responsible for establishing the system of thanages throughout the kingdom of Alba. The title of 'earl' (ON *jarl*) replaced the older Gaelic term *mormaer*, but exactly when is just as difficult to prove.

There are some very interesting judicial terms which appear in the medieval documents and which are not of Gaelic provenance: although one of them- *ranscauth* - has been Gaelicised. This was a term for the rights of police powers of investigation and scrutiny, but which must derive from ON *rannsaka*, the right to search a house. (SND, Barrow, 1992). But this is not a term which is known in Anglo-Saxon legal terminology, so it cannot have arrived with Northumbrian landowners. How and when did it enter into the legal terminology of the Scots?

Another term, found throughout Scotland, which is clearly linked to the Anglo-Scandinavian world of north and east England is 'Birlie/birlaw', with reference to local courts, and 'burlawmen/barleymen' with reference to those responsible for keeping good neighbourhood in their locality. This must be from Old Norse *byjar-lög* meaning the 'local custom or law of the township' and which enters into Middle English legal terminology as 'by-law'. In northern England it also became a transferred name for a district, and is believed to be the origin of the place-name Bierlaw (Fellows-Jensen 1965, 114). Although all recorded names are 13th century or later in date it is assumed that the term is borrowed from Danish and 'must represent a custom prevalent in the Danelaw' (ibid). When was it brought north to Scotland, and by whom? Although something of a 'popular' institution it probably had a landlord's initiative behind its appearance (Duncan, 1975, 349-50). Perhaps Northumbrian lords who came north in the 11th or 12th centuries brought the concept with them and instituted it in the estates they were granted by the king.

Kirset

This is however very much a rural term; if we are looking for urban influences from the Scandinavian world there is one extremely interesting term which is found in an urban context in Scotland-and only in Scotland, not in England. This is the term for an administrative arrangement whereby new settlers in a town were given immunity from financial dues for a period of years, and which is called 'kirset'. It is apparently derived from a Danish term *kyrr saet* = 'to sit quietly' or 'at peace'. The same term is used in Danish medieval land grants where it means immunity from having to make provision for the naval *leidang* or levy, which was often commuted to a money payment.

There are recorded examples of the use of this term in charters relating to Dumbarton and Dingwall in the 13th century (Mackenzie, 1949, 35-6), and in Aberdeen (Dickinson, 1949, p.xxxiv). It is included in the legal collection of Burgh laws, and so

must have been an arrangement in general use. Where did it come from and how was it introduced? If the origins of this term could be traced we would have a ray of light on possible direct Scandinavian influence on early Scottish urban history, for the term does not appear to have come via northern England, where it is not recorded, so far as I am aware.

There is certainly evidence that the earliest planted Scottish burghs of the 12th century had plenty of foreign incomers as their first settlers and burgesses, for English and Flemings are addressed in the royal charters. Danes are not mentioned, although there were burgesses with Danish names (see earlier mention of Swains in Dunfermline and Perth). Were Danish individuals such as these men responsible for the introduction of the term 'kirset'? The trouble is that its first recorded appearance is quite late, so that we have no idea whether it is connected with the early incoming burgesses, or whether it was introduced somewhat later. Our historical sources suffice to tell us that all these terms which are of Scandinavian origin were brought into general use in medieval Scotland, but they do not give us any hint as to when or by whom they were introduced.

Conclusions

All we can deduce at the present time is that connections with north-east England, or even Denmark were sufficiently close for such terms to be introduced by the Anglo-Scandinavian elite into rural and urban situations which presumably lacked any organisational structures of their own (urban ones anyway). It might have been that this elite brought in traders from Denmark to establish market places on their estates, or exchange places on the beaches near their residences. This is the pattern of 'beach markets' which are now being found around the coasts of Denmark, or in the sounds and fjords: 'landing places with a special link to the maritime world, places which served the rural hinterland and its local chieftains, but also had other functions - as anchorages, watch stations, harbours or production sites' (Owen, forthcoming)

If these incomers did come from Northumbria they came from a part of England which was hardly under the king's rule. It was the earl of Northumbria who ruled supreme and royal control was not so firmly established as it was going to be after the Norman Conquest. It took the Conqueror some years before he had brutally established full authority over York and the surrounding countryside. Before the mid-to late- 11th century it was an age when authority and commercial direction were in the hands of the local elites and the entrepreneur. So we should expect the traders of this age to be more independent and probably freer in their commercial enterprises. The 'hogback' tombs already referred to, which are found around the waterways of the Clyde, Forth and Tay estuaries are most satisfactorily explained as the memorials of just such traders, with Scandinavian cultural links and possibly ultimately of northern English origin, but naturalised into the Christian societies of Scots and Britons with whom they traded (Crawford, 1994,104-8). We should be looking for the trading bases from which *they* operated perhaps not too far away from their places of burial.

Once the kingdom of Alba was established and the Scots and Picts were unified in a single political entity, it was the kings who took direction of commercial affairs, and royal tariffs and tolls were imposed at established ports. Not until the 12th century do we have the historical evidence which shows us the kings in action implementing commercial policies, particularly King David who is well-known as the founder of burghs which were established and operated by Flemings and other incomers. But we can be sure that his brother and father before him were probably doing the same, if in a less structured and 'Normanised' way. I would make a claim for them being responsible for the inbringing of Scandinavian influence and personnel, which is only

recognisable in the Danish personal names of twelfth-century charters and legal terminology like 'kirset'. They were probably building on the trading pattern already established in the late Viking Age by those 'hogback-builders' who are evidence of the freer and more entrepreneurial spirit of the Scandinavian world. This hypothetical scenario is incapable of proof at the present stage of our knowledge, but we should be looking out for likely trading sites around the Forth and Tay, with archaeological evidence of Anglo-Scandinavian and cross-North Sea links. The origins of Perth may indeed lie in this period, but the archaeological evidence is as yet unrecognised.

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[1] For example Whithorn in the far south-west was tied into the particular geographical and maritime situation in that area. The Norse character of 10th and 11th century levels are being stressed by Olwyn Owen (see forthcoming paper in the Proceedings of the 15th Viking Congress)

[2] Olwyn Owen has also pointed out that the absence of known trading centres in Viking Scotland may be explained by chieftains controlling surpluses for the purpose of exchanging gifts and bestowing rewards on their own followers. No impetus therefore for trading centres to develop in the islands (1999, p.27)

[3] The son of one Thorfinn gave his name to an estate in Fife (*Bolgin filii Thorfini*), which Macbeth granted to the Céli De of St. Serf's Island in Loch Leven in the mid 11th century; this indisputably west Scand. name, which is closely associated with the earldom of Orkney in the same period may provide the clue as to how the Old Norse name 'Kirkness' came to be given to another estate -on the south-east shore of Loch Leven- which Macbeth similarly granted to the Céli De of St. Serf's Island (Taylor, 1995, 146-7)

[4] It would be worth studying the relationship of political centres with the nearest suitable maritime locations where shipping could safely unload goods. For Dunfermline for instance it would probably have been at Limekilns/Gellat or Inverkeithing.