

Living Outside the Viking World?: Identifying Scandinavian activity in central and southern Scotland

Dr Elizabeth Pierce
Affiliated Researcher, University of Glasgow
epierce78@gmail.com

In the final years of the eighth century AD, Scandinavian raiders arrived in Scotland from across the North Sea. At first their activities centred upon raiding, relieving monasteries such as Iona and Portmahomack of their treasures. Soon, though, the main focus turned toward settlement, including activities such as farming, fishing and trade. The most dominant Scandinavian settlement in what is now Scotland took place in the Northern Isles, the Western Isles and the northern Scottish mainland in Caithness and Sutherland. In some areas, especially Orkney and Shetland, the Scandinavian influence was so great that even today it is still reflected in the place-names and culture of those islands.

Unlike the cultural, social, political, and economic dominance of Scandinavians in the Highlands and Islands, their presence elsewhere in Scotland in the Viking and Norse periods is more ephemeral and often overlooked. A Norse presence in the southwest in Dumfries and Galloway is already known from the production site at Whithorn and the 2014 discovery of the Galloway hoard, but there are also hints of Norse activity in other areas: Numerous finds of diagnostic Viking artefacts have been recorded in the Clyde and Forth Valleys and Scottish Borders, perhaps signalling routeways used, and a handful of Viking burials have been found. However, actually identifying Scandinavians in the archaeological record in central and southern Scotland has proven challenging because they would have made up only a small part of the population.

The Norse presence in these areas appears to have been more than just movement through the landscape. Although no long houses have yet been identified in central Scotland, recent excavations of a cemetery at The Carrick along the western edge of Loch Lomond have suggested the settlement of families. There are also clues that the Norse may have been active in trade in early Scottish towns; excavations from Perth, for example, yielded a number of Norse artefacts. The situation in this part of Scotland, then, might have been more similar to areas of England, where Scandinavian language and culture never dominated, and instead Scandinavians soon became indistinguishable from their neighbours in the archaeological record. The effort to identify the ephemeral Norse presence in central Scotland is further confused by the shared roots of the Old Norse and Older Scots languages, which makes assigning place-names a Norse origin more difficult. Fewer written records, ranging from annals to port log books, exist in Scotland than in England, increasing the reliance upon the archaeological record.

This paper will assemble the archaeological, historical, and linguistic evidence for a Norse presence in central and southern Scotland from the Viking Age up to the 14th century. Additionally, it will discuss what influence these Scandinavians might have had in these areas, particularly the economic power they wielded as a minority group. What kind of wealth and resources were they able to control? Ultimately, we must ponder whether they still considered themselves part of the Norse world.