

Scandinavian England: not just the Northwest

This next Viking Congress provides the exciting opportunity of exploring and experiencing the impact on Wales and northwest England of the Scandinavians who settled and left such a mark on – among other things – local language, place-names, burials, and stone sculpture. But, as vikings and other incomers imposed themselves on the landscapes and social organisation of the region, exploited its resources, and integrated themselves into power structures, was what happened there typical? How does the rest of England compare? It has often been said that East Anglia, on the other side of the country, was not heavily settled by Scandinavians and missed out on the influx of culture seen elsewhere in the English ‘Danelaw’. This conclusion is based in part on the apparent low density of place-names and the absence of the sculpture influenced by Scandinavian art styles and imagery that is so striking in the North and Northwest. Neither of these circumstances necessarily signify an absence of settlers: the place-names are there, but in subtler patterns, and sculpture was limited by the poor quality of local stone. Jane Kershaw’s work on metalwork finds has encouraged a reassessment of the Scandinavian impact on this sometimes neglected but highly significant region. For the Congress I would therefore like to re-examine East Anglia’s Scandinavian history: the potential of its coastal position, starting with ninth-century viking activity; its crucial role in the logistics of the Great Army from 865; the assumption of political power there by Guthrum – who ruled as King Alfred’s equal – and a succession of other kings; its booming economy; the thriving of local hybrid aristocracies after conquest by the West Saxons in the early tenth century; and the later impact of Scandinavian aggression in the eleventh century (before and after the Norman Conquest). Although the sources are notoriously few and fragmentary, I will use what written evidence there is in combination with place-names and the very rich material evidence of immigrant culture. I will also take advantage of the resumption of the regional study undertaken for the Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture. Combining these various sources for an overview of East Anglia that epitomises its Scandinavian history will offer a strong contrast to the Irish Sea zone, a featured theme of the conference as well as its location. A focus on East Anglia will act as a reminder that the Scandinavian experience – even in England – was characterised by diversity and the adaptation to regional circumstances.