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It is easy today to find out about the history of a city like York — all you have to do is go to the right history books and encyclopaedias and look it up. But where do the writers of such books get **their** information from? How do they know what actually happened in York in Viking times?

The Vikings did not write down very much about themselves until years later, when they had become Christian and learned to read and write in the Roman alphabet (which we use today): then, in Norway and Iceland, people wrote many fine stories or sagas about their brave Viking ancestors.

The saga of the Icelander Egil Skallagrimsson tells how he came to Jorvik in the year 948 and met his enemy Eirik Bloodaxe, king of York. But there are several hundred years between the events which Egil's saga describes and the date when it was actually written down, so it is not very likely that it is a completely reliable account. We can accept that the main outline of events is correct, but the words that are said to have been spoken by Egil and Eirik were probably added much later to make it a better story.

So, if the Vikings at the time did not write down very much, and the sagas written by Christian Scandinavians centuries later are not entirely reliable, are there any other writings that tell us about Viking York? In the countries which the Vikings attacked, such as France, Ireland and England, letters and chronicles survive which were mostly written by monks and nuns who hated the Vikings as enemies, invaders and heathen. Would you be quite fair in what you wrote about your enemies?

A priest of York called Alcuin wrote a number of letters when he heard of the first Viking invaders. In 793, after the Viking attack on Holy Island, he wrote to the King of Northumbria: "What does the bloody rain signify which in the time of Lent in the church of St. Peter in the city of York, which is the head of the whole kingdom, we saw fall menacingly on the north side from the roof, though the sky was clear? Can it be expected that from the north there will come the vengeance of blood?" Clearly to Alcuin the Vikings were a threat to peaceful Anglo-Saxon Christianity, so you could hardly expect him to take note of their good points!

But after the Vikings had settled in York and elsewhere, they were no longer seen by English and Irish chroniclers just as wicked

invaders. Alliances and trading agreements were made with them, and their codes of law discussed. In the year 918, Aethelflaed, Queen of Mercia and daughter of King Alfred, so impressed the Eoforwicingas that they promised with oaths and pledges to accept her rule. Unfortunately however she died almost at once. This is the only example of the newly coined word **Eoforwicingas** (it is found in a Mercian section of the **Anglo-Saxon Chronicle**), and probably means 'the people of York', or just possibly 'the York Vikings'. Eoforwic was the Anglo-Saxon (Old English) word for York, which the Vikings later changed into the form Jorvik.

But the **Anglo-Saxon Chronicle**, important as it is, was mostly written down in Wessex and is mainly concerned therefore with the south. It does however give us some important facts about the north, for example that in 944 "King Edward brought all Northumbria under his sway, and drove out two kings Anlaf Sihtricson and Raegnald Guthfrithson." These are kings with Norse names, and by piecing together what English and Irish chroniclers tell us, it is possible to sort out to some extent the confused history of the Viking kingdom of Jorvik.

There are, however, other odd sources which more interestingly give us glimpses of what life in Jorvik was like. An account of the life of St. Oswald, who was Archbishop of York in the tenth century, and himself of Danish ancestry, records that the city was "full and wealthy beyond words with the riches of merchants". Sometimes we learn of the building of churches; the **Anglo-Saxon Chronicle** tells us that in 1055 — when the Vikings had long been Christian — "Earl Siward died at York, and he was buried in the church which he himself had built and consecrated in the name of God and St. Olaf."

From what was being written down, either in Latin or English, in different parts of the country, we can pick out here and there sentences about what was happening in York. But do we have any records from York itself? The answer is not very many. Coins with the names of kings on them can only give us a small amount of information. Carved stones put up by people with Norse names sometimes have quite long inscriptions. Two Yorkshire sundials, one at St. Gregory's Minster, Kirkdale and one at Aldbrough are particularly interesting. Another one at Great Edstone was clearly meant to hold a long inscription but was never completed.

Sundial at Aldbrough

**VLF (HE)T AROERAN CYRICE FOR
H(A)NVM 7 FOR GVN(WARA) SAVLA**

*Ulf ordered the church to be put up for himself and
for Gunwaru's soul*

The language is basically Old English with possible Old Norse influence. The names are Old Norse, the date tenth or eleventh century

Sundial at Great Edstone, North Yorkshire

LODAN ME WROHTE A

Lothan made me . . .

The name is Norse, the language English, tenth or eleventh century.

Sundial at St Gregory's Minster, Kirkdale (3 texts)

¹
**ORM GAMAL SVNA BOHTE SCS
GREGORIVS MINSTER DONNE HIT
WES AEL TOBROCAN 7 TOFALAN 7
HE HIT LET MACAN NEWAN FROM
GRVND E XPE 7 SCS GREGORIVS IN
EADWARD DAGVM CNG 7 N TOSTI
DAGVM EORL**

*Orm, son of Gamal, bought St Gregory's minster
when it was all broken and fallen down, and had it
newly built up from the ground to Christ and St
Gregory in the days of King Edward and in the days
of Earl Tosti.*

²
**ÞIS IS DAEGES SOLMERCA AET
ILCVM TIDE**

This is the day's sun-marker at every hour

³
**7 HAWARD ME WROHTE 7 BRAND
PRS**

and Haward made me and Brand, priest.

All the texts are in Old English showing influence from Old Norse. The date is mid eleventh century. The names, apart from that of King Edward are Norse. Tosti was the Earl of Northumbria, and Orm was probably the man who is said in Domesday to have held twelve estates in Yorkshire, including Kirkdale.

Although Domesday Book (1086) belongs to the period after the Norman Conquest, it tells us about men and women in Yorkshire with Norse names, holding and farming land in the middle of the eleventh century. Not all of it is interesting, but there is one short story which gives us a splendid glimpse of two very independent people, managing their lives and estates:

"Concerning all the land of Asa, they testify that . . . she had her land separate and free from the control of Björnulfr her husband, even when they were together, so that he could neither make a gift nor sale of it nor forfeit it; but after their separation she retired with all her land and possessed it as its lady."

Both Asa and Björnulfr are Norse names.

From Alcuin writing his shocked letters in 793 to the Domesday Survey of 1086 is a long period of history. We do not have nearly enough written accounts to reconstruct everything that happened in Jorvik or York from the arrival of the Vikings to the arrival of the Normans, and some of what we do have is not very helpful.

All we can do is to use our written sources as sensibly as possible, making allowance for their limitations and seeing how much we can learn from putting them together. It is a jigsaw that will never be finished because we shall never have all the bits. But we can get an idea from time to time of what the finished picture might look like.