

VIKING-AGE YORK

The City 2. The Viking Capture of York

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What we know about the Vikings' capture of York comes mostly from written records of that time, in particular the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which gives an account of the most important happenings each year.

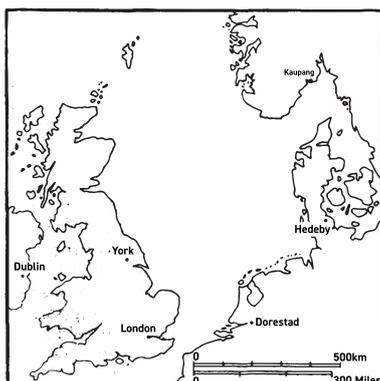
EARLY RAIDS

It tells how Viking raids on Britain began in AD 793 (1) with the attack on the monastery at Lindisfarne, and became more frequent until in 851 a Viking army stayed in England through the winter, instead of sailing home to Scandinavia in the autumn with their loot. Another group of Vikings stayed throughout 855-6, and then in 865 a "great army" of Vikings, as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle described them, landed in East Anglia. No-one knows how big this "great army" was - perhaps only a few hundred warriors, or possibly several thousand; one or two thousand may be the most reasonable number to suggest. This army was to stay in England for the next 14 years, strengthened from time to time by newcomers. Its aim was not just to seize loot but to take over the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and settle permanently in England.

In AD 866 they took horses from the East Anglians and set off for York, the capital of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria. York at this time was the only town north of the Humber; it may not have had a large population living among the ruined Roman buildings, but it had a cathedral, a monastery famous for its learning, and merchants from many countries.



A stone cross at Middleton Church, North Yorkshire; showing a warrior with helmet, spear, axe, sword and knife.



(1) Map to show the position of York in relation to Scandinavia.

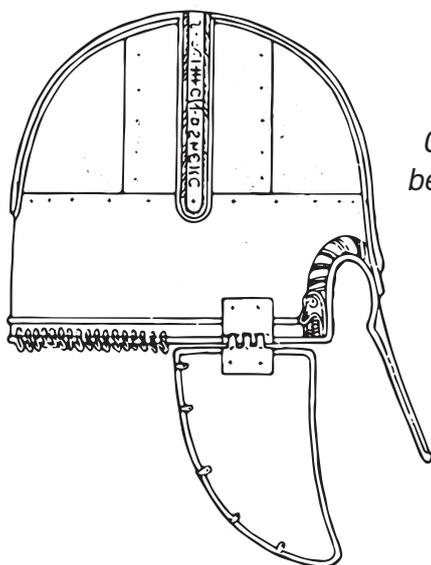
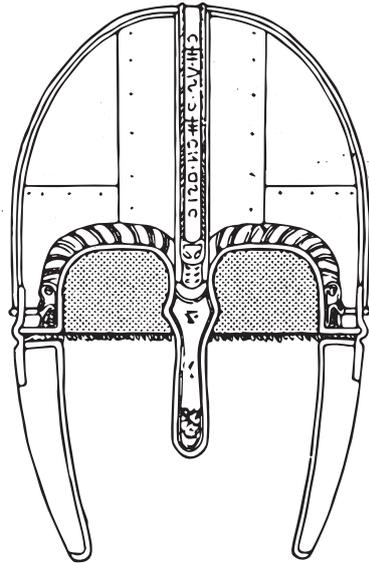
NORTHUMBRIAN WARS

The Vikings probably chose York as their first target because at that time there was civil war in Northumbria and they thought that this would make invasion easier. Aelle, the Northumbrian king in York, had driven out the previous king Osbert by force, but Osbert still hoped to get his throne back. The Vikings too were against Aelle, because he was believed to have captured the great Viking leader Ragnar Lothbrok on an earlier raid into Northumbria, and put him to death by placing him in a pit with poisonous snakes. According to later legend, the Viking army that attacked York in 866 was led by the sons of Ragnar Lothbrok, seeking revenge.

YORK ATTACKED

The Vikings attacked York on 1 November 866, (2) and seem to have taken it without difficulty. Aelle was not captured, however, and in March 867 he and Osbert joined forces to make a counter-attack on the Vikings in York. They managed to break through its defences, but were then defeated "with an immense slaughter", as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records, and both the Northumbrian kings were killed. It is possible that a group of human skeletons found during the excavations

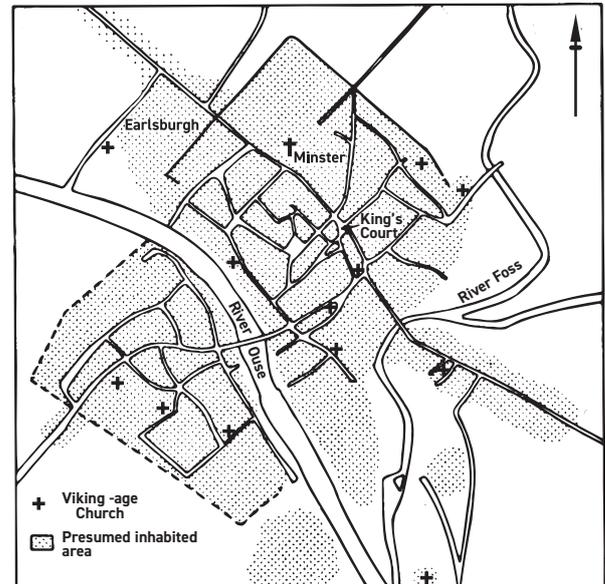
Front view of the Coppergate Helmet before conservation.



Side view of the Coppergate Helmet before conservation.

The Coppergate Helmet is of Anglo-Saxon period, dated 750-775. It is a mystery how it came to its final resting place in Coppergate; but archaeologists have suggested the possibility that it may have been used and lost during the struggle for York between the Anglo Saxons and the Vikings in AD 866.

in Coppergate may have been victims of this massacre, for they had been hastily buried in pits and not in a proper cemetery. Later stories give further details about the death of Aelle who, it was said, was tortured to death by having a 'blood-eagle' carved into his back by Ivarr, one of the sons of Ragnar Lothbrok. If true, it is just possible that Aelle was killed as a sacrifice to a heathen god.



(2) A plan of Jorvik in the 11th Century

REBELLION IN YORK

In 868 the Viking army left York, heading for the Midlands, but a garrison was probably left behind in the city, where an Anglo-Saxon, Egbert, was allowed to rule in their name. The Vikings returned in 869-70 before moving off again to East Anglia. In 873, however, they were forced to return yet again, because their puppet king Egbert and the Archbishop of York Wulfhere had been driven out by a rebellion. Wulfhere had clearly reached some agreement with the Vikings and was regarded as their ally. The rebellion was crushed and Wulfhere restored to his cathedral, but Egbert had died and was replaced by another puppet ruler Ricsige. The Vikings now felt that York could safely be left, and spent the winter of 873-4 in Lincolnshire. But in 875 they returned, and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that the following year the Viking leader Halfdan "shared out the land of the Northumbrians, and they proceeded to plough and to support themselves." York was now firmly held by Viking settlers, and their kings ruled the city and its kingdom for most of the next 80 years.