

death for cremating the dead in accordance with heathen rites; death for rejecting baptism.

Several times, in the course of the campaign of resistance, Widukind sought refuge across the border with his brother-in-law Sigfrid, a Danish king. News of Charlemagne's depredations, and in particular the Verden massacre, must have travelled like a shock wave through Danish territory and beyond.

Converting the Danes

How should the heathen Scandinavians react to the threat? For, whether they knew it or not, they were on Alcuin's list of peoples to be converted. In 789 he wrote to a friend working among the Saxons: "Tell me, is there any hope of our converting the Danes?"

Should the Vikings simply wait for Charlemagne's armies to arrive and set about the task? Or should they fight to defend their culture?

A military campaign against the might of Frankish Christendom was out of the question. However, the Christian monasteries – like Lindisfarne – dotted around the rim of northern Europe were symbolically important and, in the parlance of modern terrorist warfare, 'soft targets'. So, with an indifference to the humanity of their victims as complete as that of Charlemagne's towards the Saxons, these first Viking raiders were able to set off on a punishing series of attacks in the grip of a no-holds-barred rage directed at Christian 'others'.

The Christian annalists who documented Viking violence insistently saw the conflict as a battle between religious cultures. A hundred years after Lindisfarne, Asser, in his biography of Alfred the Great, continued to refer to the much larger bands of Vikings who



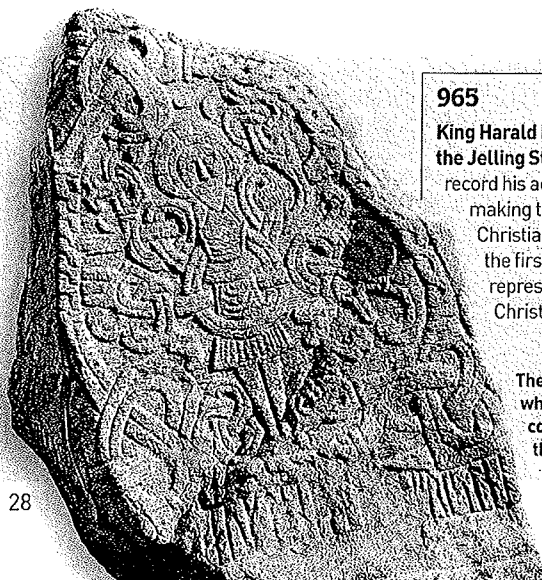
A tenth-century vellum shows Viking warriors disembarking in England during the second wave of migration

The Archbishop of Canterbury was murdered for the sport of a drunken group of men from Jutland

had by now established themselves along the eastern seaboard of England as "the pagans" (*pagani*), and to their victims as "Christians" (*christiani*).

Attacks such as those mounted by Vikings were almost impossible to

defend against, and long before Asser's time the raiders had discovered how easy it was to plunder what was probably the richest country in western Europe. In 851 a fleet of 350 ships sailed up the Thames to attack London and



965

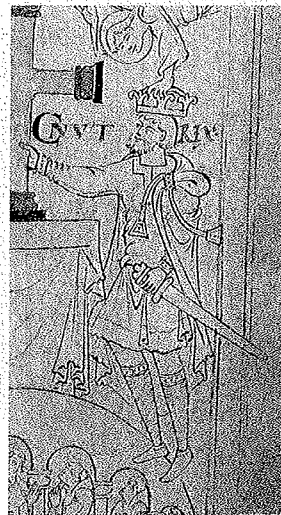
King Harald Bluetooth has the Jelling Stone carved to record his achievement in making the Danes Christian. The stone is the first significant representation of Christ in Scandinavia.

The Jelling Stone, which marks the conversion of the Danes

1012

The sack of Canterbury and murder of the Archbishop of Canterbury presages the fall of Anglo-Saxon England. Within four years Harald's grandson, Cnut, is king of England.

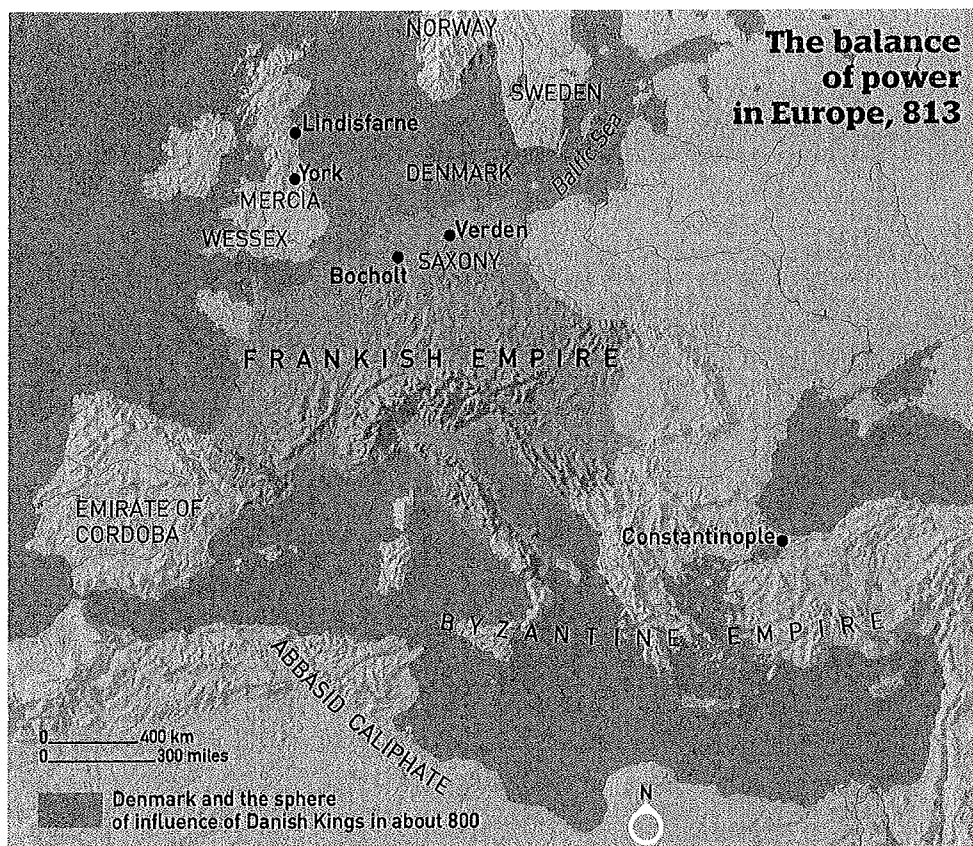
King Cnut donates a cross to Newminster in this 1031 illustration



1028

Cnut's North Sea empire reaches its greatest extent with the acquisition of Norway. It also includes England, Denmark and much of southern Sweden.

The balance of power in Europe, 813



Canterbury and, instead of sailing home, spent the winter encamped at Thanet. It was a prelude to the arrival in 865 of what *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* called the "Great Heathen Army", a force which after 15 years of warring against the demoralised kingdoms of Northumbria, Wessex, Mercia and East Anglia, had gained control of England from York down to East Anglia.

By 927 much of the lost territory had been regained by the Wessex king Alfred the Great and his son Edward and grandson Athelstan, but by that time the achievements of the Great Heathen Army had become part of the cultural history of young Viking males.

Large scale Viking violence returned to England during the reign of King Ethelred in the 990s under the Dane, Sven Forkbeard, and the Norwegian, Olaf Trygvasson. The policy of the 'danegeld' – protection money paid in return for being left alone – was practised with a punishing regularity. It was with wealth gained in this fashion that the Viking Olaf Trygvasson financed his successful bid for the crown of Norway in 995.

In 1012 the Archbishop of Canterbury was captured and, when the ransom demanded for him was not forthcoming, was murdered for the sport of a drunken group of men under

The etymology of the word 'Viking'

It is not even certain that 'Viking' is Scandinavian in origin. It occurs several times in the Old English poems *Widsid*, usually dated to the end of the seventh century, and in the eighth-century *Exodus*, where the tribe of Reuben are described as "sæwicingas", meaning 'sea-warriors', as they cross the Red Sea on their way out of Egypt.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle uses the term only four times before 1066, in the native English forms *wicenga* or *wicinga*, in 879, 885, 921 and 982. Some linguists believe it derives from the Latin *vīcus*, meaning 'camp' or 'dwelling-place'. Others suggest it comes from an Old Norse verb *vikja*, meaning 'to travel from place to place'.

A simple and persuasive theory is that it originally denoted people from the Vik, the name for the bay area of south-eastern Norway around the Oslo fjord that also denoted the inland coastal region, and included the coast of Bohuslän in present-day Sweden. There is support for the suggestion in the frequency with which the waters of the Vik appear in saga literature, suggesting it was the most heavily trafficked maritime area in the region at the time.

the Viking earl, Thorkell the Tall. They pelted him with bones, stones, blocks of wood and the skulls of cattle before finishing him off with the flat of an axe.

The loss of its spiritual head brought the faltering Anglo-Saxon monarchy to its knees and within two years a Danish king, Sven Forkbeard, was on the throne of England. By 1028 Sven's son, Cnut, was ruler of a North Sea empire that ➤

1034

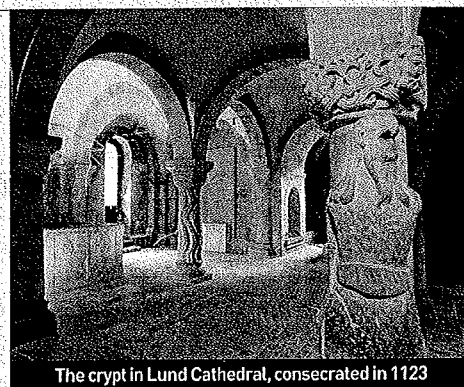
The canonisation of Olav Haraldsson, a former Viking, who was baptised and became king of Norway. During his reign, Christian culture is firmly institutionalised in Norway.

The death of Olav Haraldsson in the battle of Stiklestad, 29 July 1030



1104

The archbishopric of Lund in southern Sweden is created, the first in Scandinavia. This marks the end of heathendom as the prevailing religious and political culture in the region.



The crypt in Lund Cathedral, consecrated in 1123

The Viking attacks

included Denmark (with Skåne in Sweden), Norway, and all England.

In name at least, the heathens were now Christians; but their pride in themselves as conquering warriors remained strong. A poem in praise of Cnut – composed by his Icelandic court poet, Sigvat – invoked the memory of the Northumbrian king, Aella of York, defeated in battle by Ivar the Boneless during the first surge of the Great Heathen Army: "And Ivar, who dwelt in York, carved the eagle on Aella's back".

Remarkably, Cnut's triumphs were figured in Sigvat's literary imagination as the successful resolution of a conflict that had been going on for over 150 years, beginning as a series of gestures of cultural self-defence and soon after developing into dreams of conquest.

Alcuin had foreseen the ultimate consequences of the first Viking raid of 793 with visionary precision. "Who does not fear this?" he asked King Ethelred of Northumbria. "Who does not lament this as if his country were captured?" In his distress, he was overlooking the fact that the Vikings were only doing what his own Saxon



Sven Forkbeard lands in England, c1013, and establishes himself as king

forefathers had done to the Britons and Celts of the kingdoms of England some three and a half centuries earlier, conquering "this fair land" by the same means – violence – as the Vikings.

Cnut was unlucky with his sons, and Danish rule in England lasted less than 30 years. Fifteen years on and the memories of King Cnut and his North Sea empire were all but wiped out by the greater drama of Duke William of Normandy's conquest of 1066. **11**

Robert Ferguson has been a leading scholar and exponent of Scandinavian culture and history for over 25 years. He lives in Oslo and on the Isle of Cumbrae

JOURNEYS

Books

► **The Hammer and the Cross: A New History of the Vikings** by Robert Ferguson (Allen Lane, November 2009)

► To buy **The Hammer and the Cross** from BBC History Bookstore for £20 (RRP £30) turn to page 78

► **Chronicles of the Vikings: Records, Memorials, Myths** by RI Page (British Museum Press, 1995)

► **The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle** ed. Michael Swanton (Phoenix, 2000)

Conference

► **The 2010 Jorvik Viking Festival** in York will begin with a conference celebrating the highlights of the past 25 years' research into the Vikings. www.jorvik-viking-centre.co.uk

On the podcast

Robert Ferguson discusses the Vikings on December Pod 2 (online from 18 Dec)

► www.bbchistorymagazine.com/podcast-page

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In search of the



Norman soldiers
cross the English
Channel in a
scene from
*La Vie de Saint
Aubin d'Angers*,
c11th century

BBC History, August 2012

Normans



David Bates considers who the famously conquering Normans really were, 1,100 years on from the foundation of the duchy of Normandy

AS ANYONE WITH the most basic grasp of Britain's history is fully aware, the Norman invasion and subsequent conquest of England in the late 11th century had a major impact on the story of the British Isles. But who were the Normans, and where did they come from?

Now is a good time to consider this, as 2011 was probably the year of the 1,100th anniversary of the so-called Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte, the agreement by which the Carolingian king Charles the Simple (reigned 898–922) granted lands around Rouen and the river Seine to the Viking chieftain Rollo and his followers. This event is generally viewed as establishing Rollo as the founder of the dynasty of Norman dukes in northern France. The dating of the treaty to 911 is based on some rather vague chronology in the first of the great histories of the Norman rulers, written by Dudo of Saint-Quentin around 100 years after the event.

In Normandy, 2011 witnessed splendid exhibitions such as a display of artefacts from the principality of Novgorod at the Musée de Normandie in Caen, conferences, seminars and public lectures organised by French colleagues. Another highlight

was the '911–2011: Happy Birthday Normandie' celebrations, which involved a host of exhibitions and events across the towns and villages of the whole of the region (www.happybirthdaynormandie.com).

The anniversary has raised questions

spirit and set off to conquer Normandy". The publicity even went as far as to offer gifts to individuals named William and Matilda. All good fun, I'm sure, but – as a professional historian who spent much of 2010 and 2011 working at the Université de Caen

Basse-Normandie – I must jib at the reference to "your sleeping Viking spirit".

What exactly does this mean? It is certainly a reference to the great movement of Scandinavian peoples, conveniently known as Vikings, across the seas of northern Europe. These voyages took them to Iceland, Greenland and North America, as well as to much of the British Isles and what we now call France, and produced several major settlements across this vast region.

The term 'Viking spirit' is definitely relevant to the foundation of Normandy. Rollo and his followers were undoubtedly participants in this

great movement, as well as being the successors to earlier war-bands that had been active in northern France and the valley of the river Seine since the 840s.

But were the men and women behind 'Happy Birthday Normandie' right to make such an explicit link between the adventurous seafaring character of stereotypical Vikings and the birth of Normandy?

In some ways, the association seems strange. After all,



Rollo, first Duke of Normandy, is baptised at Rouen in a c1400 illustration

about how professional historians and the public understand the birth of Normandy – above all through the invitation in the official publicity of 'Happy Birthday Normandie' to "feel free to awaken your sleeping Viking

By the late 10th century, Normandy's frontiers were clearly defined

explaining historical change on the basis of supposed inherent characteristics of peoples has now been rejected by disciplines ranging from genetic science to literary studies. In its place has appeared a number of complex analyses that see identity as a literary and political construct.

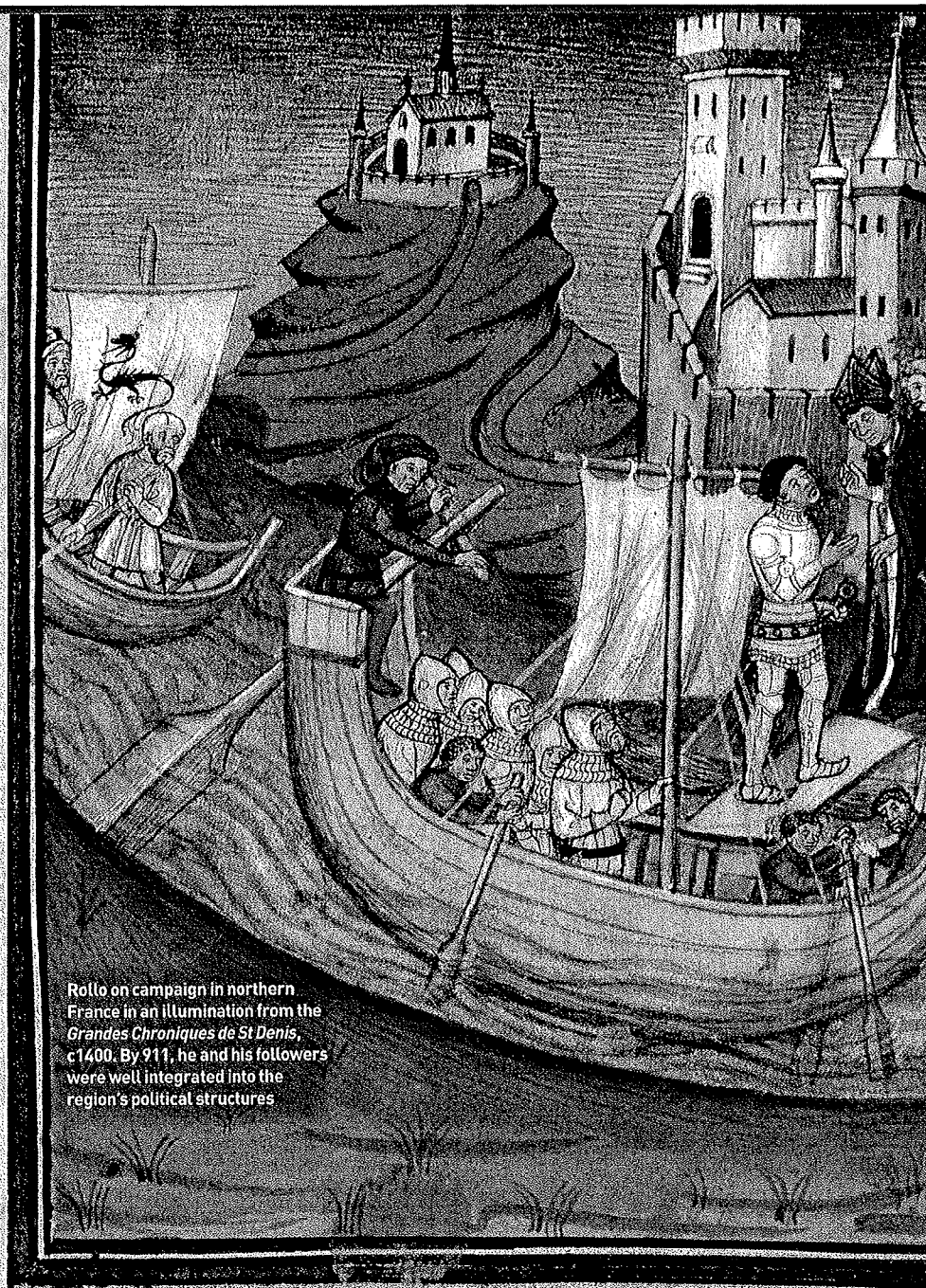
Yet, at the same time, the emphasis on the transition from Vikings to Normans does neatly set up the central historical issues. William and Matilda, the names of William the Conqueror and his wife, are not Scandinavian; through them therefore we are instantly confronted with cultural change. How did the 'Vikings' of 911 become the 'Normans' of the 11th century?

Social structures

Most historians of the period are agreed that, by 911, Rollo and his followers were already well integrated into northern France's political and social structures. Since many of them had already been based around the valley of the Seine for some years, political alliances and cultural and economic exchanges with the indigenous Franks had taken place long before 911.

Although they were typical early medieval warriors who regarded plunder as a central objective – a situation that had caused great damage to the monasteries and bishoprics of the region – Rollo and his followers were most certainly not a force from the outside set exclusively on disrupting and exploiting Christian society.

The Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte resembles other agreements made throughout the ninth century – such as the Alfred-Guthrum treaty in England in the 880s – in that its aim was to consolidate the existing integration through conversion to Christianity and the creation of alliances. What became Normandy was created out of negotiations and compromises that were the standard political currency of



Rollo on campaign in northern France in an illumination from the *Grandes Chroniques de St Denis*, c1400. By 911, he and his followers were well integrated into the region's political structures

the time, employed by people who understood one another well.

One crucial result of all this was that the new elite descended from Rollo and his companions, however much it might be reinforced by fresh

immigration from other 'Viking' settlements, would always be a small minority among the indigenous Frankish population.

All types of source material for Normandy's 10th-century history, including the archaeological and documentary, are exceedingly thin.

Timeline: The Normans

AD 911

The probable date of the so-called Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte by which King Charles the Simple (reigned 898–922) grants the territory that was to become the duchy of Normandy to Rollo and his followers.

928

The approximate date of Rollo's death. His son and successor, William Longsword, marries a Frankish wife and has a reputation for Christian piety.



942

William Longsword is assassinated on the orders of Arnulf, count of Flanders. William's involvement in wars between northern French territorial rulers is an indication of Norman integration into a Frankish environment.



TOP PHOTO

When we do emerge into the relative sunlight of the time of Duke Richard II, r996–1026, (Rollo's great-grandson and William the Conqueror's grandfather), the evidence indicates a duchy whose frontiers in relation to its neighbours were for the most part clearly defined, and whose people were apparently

substantially integrated socially and culturally into the post-Carolingian Frankish world. This took shape following the disintegration of Charlemagne's empire – the last emperor, Charles the Fat, had died in 888, leaving a legacy of political flux out of which the kingdoms of France and Germany were starting to emerge.

Among other things, Normandy's early 11th-century inhabitants spoke

Scandinavian settlement into Normandy continued for many decades after 911

French, the duchy's institutional church was in the process of a revival assisted by outside reformers such as William of Volpiano, and charters in the rulers' names were written in a style that perpetuated Carolingian forms.

A clear sign of the image that the dukes wished to present is made clear by Dudo's *Historia*, written for Richard II and his father Richard I (r942–96), with the purpose of portraying them and their predecessors Rollo and William Longsword (r923–42) as model Christian princes. It is also of crucial importance that Dudo set out to describe Normandy as a land in which many peoples had combined to produce the single identity that he called Norman.

No one nowadays would argue, as was once done, that the duchy was created ready-made out of three treaties with the Franks in 911, 924 and 933. Instead, its final territorial composition and size were the products of resilience and military skill. The 10th century in northern France was a period of notable fluidity, the great age of the formation of territorial principalities, such as Flanders, Blois–Chartres and Anjou. It witnessed steady progress by the aristocratic elite, based around

Birth of the Normans



Rouen, towards domination over a more extended area. It is, however, a notable indicator of the difficulties they encountered that it was not until three generations after 911 that we can see the full apparatus of ecclesiastical and secular rule taking shape across what had become the duchy.

Maritime culture

To say that the erstwhile predators had gone native and, over a period of a century, assimilated fully to their Frankish neighbours would be to make a serious mistake. Literary sources, combined with linguistic and place-name evidence, indicate that substantial Scandinavian settlement from the British Isles and elsewhere into Normandy was continuing for many decades after 911. In other words, the rulers and inhabitants of the emergent duchy were still participants in the maritime culture of the world of the northern seas.

That they remained so into the 11th century is demonstrated by the way in which Duke Richard II's alliance was sought by the English king Æthelred the Unready (r978–1016) and the Scandinavian warriors who raided, and eventually conquered, England.

It is probable too that conversion to Christianity was overall a protracted process. A remarkable process of state-building is arguably well illustrated by the 10th-century coinage of the Norman rulers, of which specimens exist from the time of William Longsword onwards. Impeccably Carolingian in design, but dating from earlier than most similar princely coins minted for the likes of the ➤

A brass plaque commemorating Æthelred the Unready in Wimborne Minster, Dorset. His marriage to Emma, sister of Robert II of Normandy, was to have grave consequences for Anglo-Saxon England



942–46

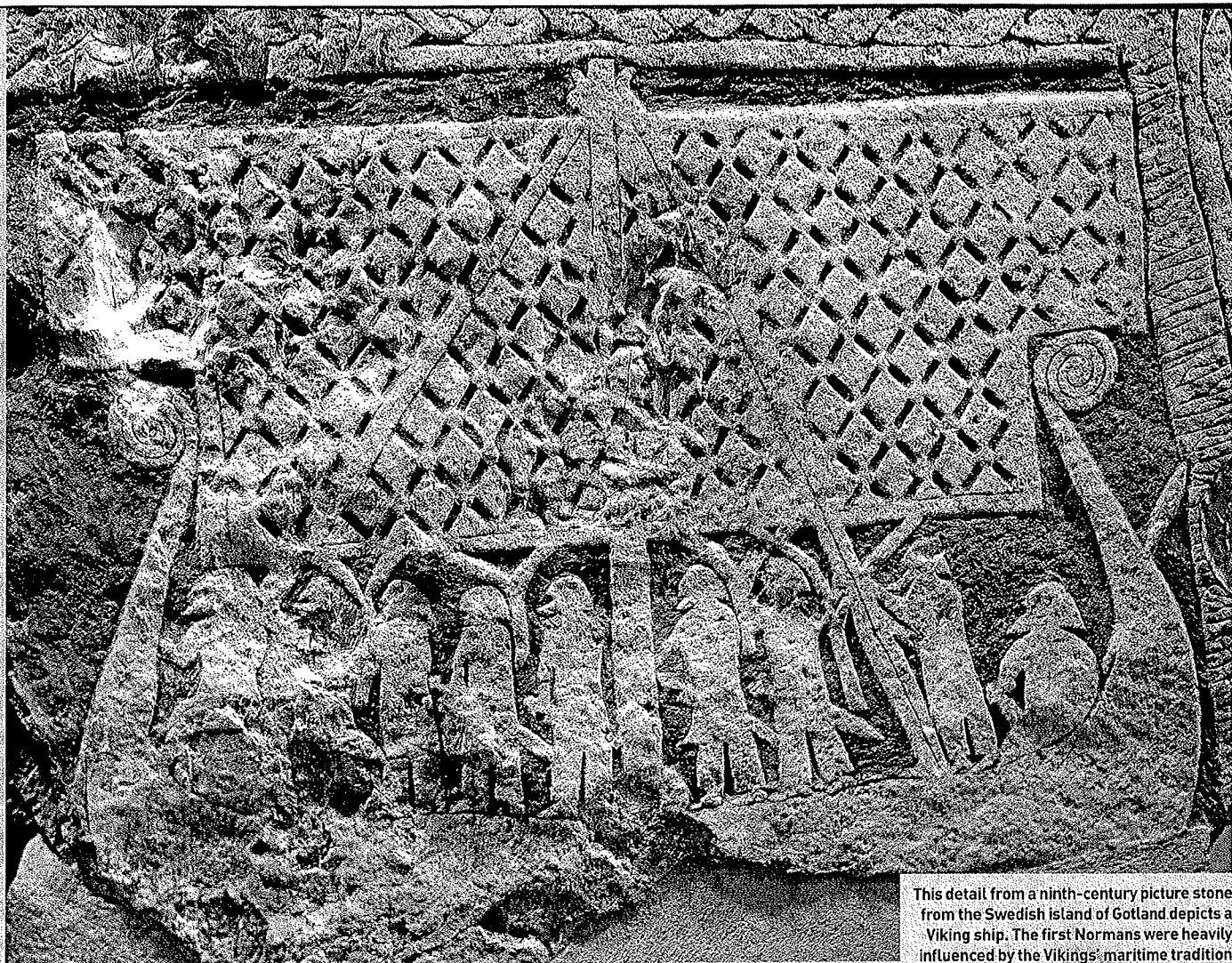
In the early years of his long reign, Richard I has to deal with the Carolingian king Louis IV's attempts to reconquer the territories granted to his grandfather, Rollo, and father, William Longsword.

990

A charter contains the names of the archbishop of Rouen and his six suffragan bishops of Avranches, Bayeux, Coutances, Evreux, Lisieux and Sées. This is the first convincing sign of the reconstitution of the full range of ecclesiastical governance within the duchy.

991

In a non-alignment pact with the English king Æthelred the Unready, Richard I agrees not to aid the attacks on England by King Sven Forkbeard of Denmark. That Richard continues to allow King Sven and others to use the harbours of Normandy indicates the continuing strength at this time of the duchy's political links to the Scandinavian north.



This detail from a ninth-century picture stone from the Swedish island of Gotland depicts a Viking ship. The first Normans were heavily influenced by the Vikings' maritime tradition

counts of Anjou and Blois, they show the newcomers both associating themselves with the highest elites of the world into which they were integrating and at the same time asserting their distinctiveness and superiority within it.

The territory that Richard II ruled, however, had come to be called *Normannia* or *terra Normannorum*, and the people that occupied it *Normanni*, by both its inhabitants and their neighbours. In other words, no matter how much inter-marriage and acculturation with indigenous Franks had taken place, the land and its people were identified as the home of the people of the north.

King Cnut, who ruled England, Denmark, Norway and parts of Sweden



That a non-Norman late 10th-century writer could call its ostentatiously Christian rulers *duces pyratum* ('dukes of the seafaring pirates') shows that the influence of the past remained culturally and socially positive.

Virtuous ruler

In terms of explaining the astonishing events of the 11th century, Richard II's reign has to be crucial. One of those medieval rulers who the written sources mostly portray as virtuous and pious, he must have been an extremely capable practitioner of the military culture of the times.

Richard's reign saw the earliest journeys to southern Italy. The sources

on these migrations are both difficult and contradictory, but they suggest that individuals from Normandy and neighbouring regions travelled south in the second decade of the 11th century, sometimes as pilgrims and often in search of fortune through service in war. In the midst of this, we are told, Duke Richard both provided military assistance to Pope Benedict VIII and secured a papal confirmation from him that he could use the title 'duke of the Normans'.

A seaward-looking maritime province had been transformed into a principality with networks and influence that stretched across the lands of western and southern Europe, all of which was subsequently to be exploited

996

Death of Richard I. His reign had witnessed the re-foundation of the monasteries of Saint-Ouen of Rouen, Mont Saint-Michel, Saint-Wandrille and Fécamp. This signalled the start of the great expansion of monasticism in Normandy in the 11th century.

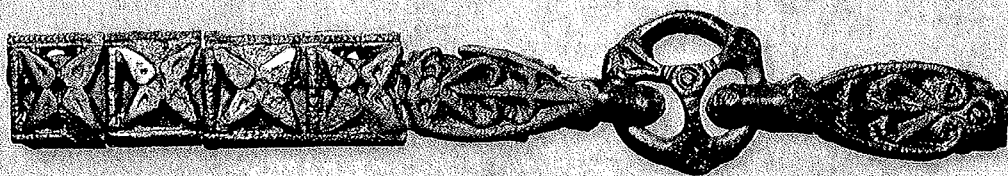
1013

Richard's son Richard II gives shelter to the family of King Æthelred as they flee from the continuing assault on the English kingdom by King Sven Forkbeard and his son Cnut. Among the refugees is Æthelred's son, the future King Edward the Confessor (r1042–66).

1000–20

Migration from Normandy and other parts of northern France to southern Italy was clearly well under way by this period.

RIGHT: A Viking sword belt, late 900s/early 1000s, found near Fleet Street in London
BELOW: Coins minted under England's first Norman king, William I, and his successors



Duke William (the Conqueror). Later, after assuming the English crown in 1042, Edward was to make an offer to William that was interpreted by the latter as a promise of succession to the English kingdom. This was to become the justification for the invasion of 1066.

Most aspects of the life and achievements of William the Conqueror and his associates lie beyond the scope of this article. His so-called 'minority' should cease to be viewed as a time of exceptional violence when 'the Normans' exhibited their worst disruptive characteristics, and rather as a short period in the early 1040s when a feud-based society typical of the entire medieval west was deprived of the refereeing role of an effective ruler.

That a formidable young man soon imposed himself was then of the greatest importance; that so many people from across northern France were ready to trust to his leadership and

cross the Channel on a risky venture in 1066 is surely the most powerful commentary there is on just how awe-inspiring he was. (Some indeed would say terrifying; others would think even that word polite.)

It is probable that William's capacity to assemble the fleet that crossed the Channel in 1066 did represent a continuation of the seafaring traditions of his ancestors. Yet his achievement was not something that can be called quintessentially 'Norman'. It was rather the accomplishment of a particularly capable early medieval war leader who ruled what had become the duchy of Normandy.

Tourist boards really don't need to hail Normandy's 'Viking spirit' to persuade people to spend some time there – it is a place of quite exceptional beauty and historical interest. And those who do visit should recognise that Norman identity was forged within the crucible of the regionalisation of power that was a feature of what we now call France in the century after the disintegration of the Carolingian empire.

Visitors should also remember that this was accomplished by an elite with diverse ethnic and social origins who retained and cultivated a continuing consciousness of a different past. 'Happy Birthday Normandie' reminds us that this consciousness continues still. ■

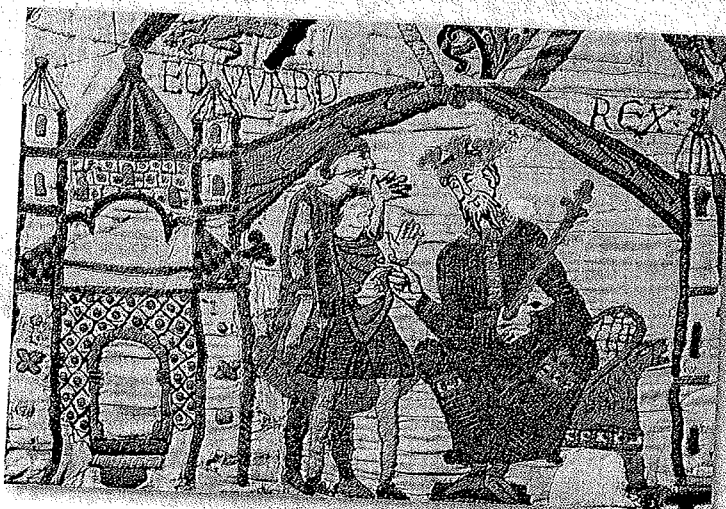
David Bates is professorial fellow at the University of East Anglia. He is the author of *William the Conqueror* (The History Press, 2004)

Normandy's influence and networks stretched across western and southern Europe

– not just by William the Conqueror, but also by the many individuals who travelled to the Mediterranean, of whom the brothers Robert Guiscard and Roger the Great Count are the most famous.

Yet, in the midst of everything, it was a simple gesture of support from Richard for a family member that was to have the most dramatic consequences of all. His sister Emma had earlier married King Æthelred as part of a package negotiated to sever Richard from the English kingdom's persecutors. A few years later, when the threat from the armies of Sven Forkbeard and his son, the future King Cnut, threatened to overwhelm England, Richard decided to shoulder the responsibility of sheltering the family.

In 1013, therefore, a young boy, the future King Edward the Confessor, arrived in Normandy to live under the protection of Richard II, his son Duke Robert (r1027–1035) and his grandson



King Edward the Confessor sends Earl Harold (later Harold II) to Normandy in a scene from the Bayeux Tapestry

1026

Death of Duke Richard II.

He is succeeded briefly by his son **Richard III** (r1026–27) and then another son, **Robert the Magnificent** (r1027–35).

1035

Duke Robert dies at Nicea in Asia Minor on the return journey from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He is succeeded by his illegitimate son **William**, then in all likelihood seven or eight years old.

JOURNEYS

Books

- **The Normans** by Marjorie Chibnall (Blackwell, 2000)
- **The Normans in Europe** by Elisabeth van Houts (Manchester University Press, 2000)

TV

- Neil Oliver presents **Vikings**, a series that looks beyond the stereotypical Norse warriors of popular perception, on BBC Two this summer



Look out for our feature on the Vikings in our September issue

1013

THE YEAR THE VIKINGS CONQUERED ENGLAND

It's 1,000 years since Swein Forkbeard employed superior military strength and tactical ability to supplant the descendants of Alfred the Great. **Sarah Foot** traces Swein's journey from foreign adventurer to first Viking king of England

ONE THOUSAND YEARS ago this summer, the king of Denmark (and lord also over Norway and Sweden) invaded England with a large fleet. After a brief campaign, he secured the submission of all the English people apart from the inhabitants of London. When, as a near-contemporary English chronicler reported, "all the nation regarded him as full king", the citizens of London finally capitulated and submitted, giving the Dane hostages, "for fear that he would destroy them"

That king was Swein Forkbeard. His swift conquest sent the Anglo-Saxons' native ruler, Æthelred (nicknamed 'the Unready') into exile in Normandy, leaving his English subjects to pay a large tribute and supply their conqueror

and his army with provisions.

How could a foreign adventurer have brought such an abrupt end to the rule of the descendants of Alfred the Great? How could he have reversed the victory Alfred had won over the ninth-century Vikings, and reduced England to a subject realm within a Scandinavian empire?

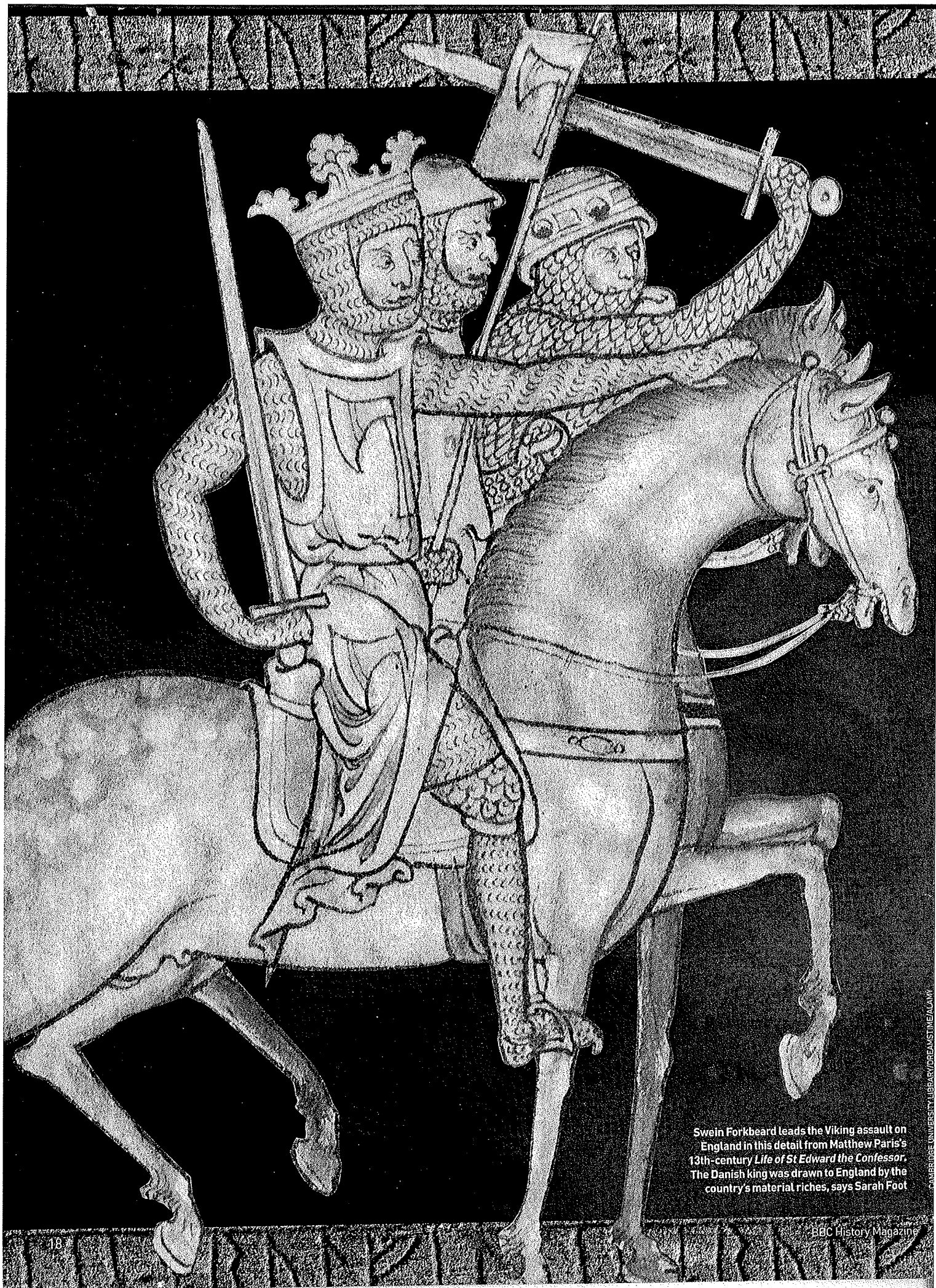
The story of Swein's conquest of England goes back to the AD 990s, to one of the most celebrated episodes in early English military history, reported laconically in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, but commemorated in a famous Old English poem: *The Battle of Maldon*. In the summer of 991, a fleet of more than 90 Viking ships landed in Kent, sailed to Ipswich and, after sacking that town, came into the estuary of the Blackwater river in Essex.

Facing them on the other shore stood the ranks of the English army led by the Ealdorman of Essex, Byrhtnoth. When a Danish messenger called across the water to urge the English to make

The citizens of London capitulated, giving Swein hostages, "for fear that he would destroy them"

peace and "buy off this onslaught of spears with tribute-money", so that they need not "join battle so grievously", Byrhtnoth stepped forward to speak in response:

"Sea raider, can you hear what this



Swein Forkbeard leads the Viking assault on England in this detail from Matthew Paris's 13th-century *Life of St Edward the Confessor*. The Danish king was drawn to England by the country's material riches, says Sarah Foot

Swein's progress

The key locations in the Dane's procession to the English crown

MAP ILLUSTRATION BY MARTIN SANDERS

1014 Bury St Edmunds

St Edmund exacts his legendary revenge

Bury's monks preserved a legend that the townspeople had resisted paying taxes to Swein, arguing that they paid taxes only to their saint. To prove their point, the martyred St Edmund appeared before Swein at Gainsborough and transfigured him with a lance, so that he died horribly.

1013–14 Gainsborough

Swein establishes a strategic base

Gainsborough in Lincolnshire is where Swein received the submission of Northumbria, the men of Lindsey and of the Five Boroughs. With good communications it made an ideal base for the Danish king. Swein died at Gainsborough after having supposedly fallen from his horse.

1013 Winchester

Alfred's former residence falls to the Vikings

This was one of the favoured residences of the kings of Wessex from the time of Alfred; its submission to Swein marked an important moment in his conquest of England. After he became king, Cnut made generous gifts to the New Minster in Winchester.

1013 Bath

The western shires submit to Swein

It was in Bath – where King Edgar (Æthelred's father) had been crowned in 973 – that Swein waited for Ealdorman Æthelmær to bring the thegns of the western shires to submit to him.

Gainsborough Lincoln

The 5 Boroughs Derby Nottingham

Leicester Stamford

991 Maldon

Swein outfoxes the English in Essex

It's in Maldon in Essex that Swein secured the key victory in his campaign to conquer England over an army led by the Ealdorman of Essex, Byrhtnoth. A narrow causeway at a tidal ford separates the town from Northey Island, where Swein's fleet landed in 991.

992–1013 London

The capital wins praise for putting up a fight

London plays a prominent role in the narrative of the campaigns of Æthelred's reign in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The author's account was coloured by his knowledge of the defeat of the English, of whom he was generally very critical, but he praised the city's resistance to Swein.

1002 Oxford

Where Danes felt the wrath of Æthelred

A document from St Frideswide's in Oxford reveals that the church was burned down in 1002, when Danes had taken refuge there to escape King Æthelred's instruction to destroy all Danes 'who had sprung up in England like cockle among the wheat'.

Bury St. Edmunds

Oxford Wallingford

London

Maldon

Canterbury

Winchester

1013 Wallingford

Swein crosses the Thames

At an important crossing point of the Thames, south of Oxford, Wallingford is where King Alfred had established one of his forts and a royal mint. On his way from the Midlands to Bath, Swein crossed the river here.

1013 Five Boroughs

Where the Danes secured the Midlands

The Five Boroughs were the principal towns of Danish Mercia: Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Nottingham and Stamford. Their submission in 1013 provided Swein with a base from which to move south.

1011 Canterbury

The Danes put an archbishop to death

Canterbury was besieged by the Danes in 1011 and fell because of the treachery of someone inside the town. The army captured the archbishop, Æltheah (Alphege), who refused to allow anyone to pay a ransom for him; so they killed him, pelling him with bones and ox-heads and striking his head with an axe.

army is saying?
 They intend to give all of you spears
 as tribute,
 deadly points and tried swords,
 payment in war-gear, which will be of no
 benefit to you in battle.
 Messenger of the seamen, report back!
 Tell your people a much less pleasing tale
 that here stands with his company an earl
 of unstained reputation,
 who intends to defend this homeland,
 the kingdom of Æthelred, my lord's
 people and his country. They shall fall
 the heathens in battle."
Battle of Maldon, lines 45–54

The Danes are cast as arrogant in their demands for tribute but their military prowess is never concealed

Determining that the "grim game of battle" would arbitrate between them before the English would pay tribute, Byrhtnoth ordered his men to pick up their shields and walk to stand on the edge of the river, where the flood tide flowed, separating the two forces. Only when the waters receded could the seaborne attackers try to take the causeway, which bold Englishmen defended resolutely, refusing to take flight from the ford.

The perfidious Vikings (as the poem portrayed them) tricked their way into getting Byrhtnoth to yield some ground; he then paid the ultimate price for that act of pride, as the poet saw it, of conceding the Danes too much land. Byrhtnoth fell in the battle, with his last breath commending his soul to the Lord of hosts and of angels.

Hateful visitors

The Maldon poet contrasted the heroism and dedication of Byrhtnoth and those who fell with him – loyal followers of a devout lord – with the disloyal and ungrateful cowards who fled the battlefield on their lord's death, instead of sacrificing their own lives to avenge him. Danes ("the hateful visitors") appear as arrogant in their demand for tribute before a blow has been struck; they use guile to gain ground on the English side of the causeway. English valour and moral courage lie at the heart of the poet's message, but the military prowess of the "fierce" Vikings is never concealed.

Although the poem did not name any of the hostile army, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* credited Olaf (Tryggvason) with leading the force that attacked England in 991, implying that he fought at Maldon. But an independent source mentions the involvement of an Essex nobleman in a "treacherous plan that Swein should be received in Essex when first he came there with a fleet". This suggests that Swein, not Olaf, took the command. Newly established as king in Denmark, with the substantial power and resources of that realm behind him, Swein made a more plausible leader of this invading force than did the Norwegian adventurer Olaf. He would prove a formidable foe.

After a period of relative peace, Vikings had begun again to attack English shores before Swein and Olaf arrived in 991. Swein's personal involvement represented a new threat: Denmark's ruler had his eye on the material resources of England, one of the richest kingdoms of its day. Scandinavian adventurers had sought new lands and opportunities in western



Both sides of a coin struck during the reign of English king Æthelred. One side shows the king himself, while the other portrays the hand of God

Europe since the ninth century, but never before had the Danish king himself led their raids. Swein's ability to spend so much time on overseas expeditions offers an insight into the security of his power at home. The plunder he gathered in England helped to bolster both his resources and his reputation, strengthening his position on both sides of the North Sea.

Spreading misery

Defeated at Maldon, the English paid tribute to the Danes. Further Danish victories followed in the next three years, with attacks on East Anglia, Lindsey, Northumbria, London, Essex, Kent, Sussex and Hampshire until the English again paid tribute.

At this point, in 994, the English king Æthelred succeeded in separating Swein and Olaf by sponsoring Olaf at his confirmation and giving him royal gifts. In return, Olaf promised never to come back to England in hostility, but took his new wealth to Norway and seized the throne. This forced Swein back to Scandinavia to counter the threat to his own realm. While the Danish king sought to reassert control at home (defeating and killing his Norwegian rival in 999), Viking armies continued to harry England, levying large tributes and causing significant misery.

Swein first reappears in the English chronicle record when leading the army in an attack on Exeter in 1003, but he may have returned to England as early as 1000. In 1004 he came with his fleet to Norwich, and burned the town down. Fierce fighting near Thetford brought Swein another victory and it



The hapless English king Æthelred, as depicted in the 13th-century *Abingdon Chronicle*

Who was Swein Forkbeard?

The rise of the Danish king who subjugated England

SWEIN WAS THE SON of Harold Bluetooth, the first Christian king of Denmark, who had substantially enlarged the Danish kingdom and been accepted as overlord in Norway. Eager to wield power himself, Swein rebelled against his father in AD 987, and drove him into exile.

Such was the stability of the realm that Harold had created that Swein was free to lead raids on England himself, without having to worry about his security at home. And his campaign enjoyed the support not only of his own retainers but also of other leading men from Denmark and elsewhere in Scandinavia, who hoped to profit from the treasures he would win.

Swein's nickname, Forkbeard, is first recorded in a chronicle from Roskilde, compiled about 1140. Most medieval accounts of his career followed the

lead given by a German chronicler, Adam of Bremen, who denigrated Swein for failing to recognise the authority of the German emperor and not acknowledging the ecclesiastical authority of the archbishop of

Hamburg-Bremen. A more positive picture is offered in a text in praise of Emma, widow of Æthelred the Unready, who went on to marry Cnut, Swein's son. There Swein is praised as a fortunate, generous and religious king.



Such was Swein's thirst for power that he deposed his own father, Harold Bluetooth, shown above

seemed no man could defeat him. Then in 1005 a famine struck England, one so bad that the chronicler wrote that "no man ever remembered one so cruel". Swein was forced to take his fleet back to Denmark.

The chronicler, writing from London some time after the events, during the reign of Swein's son Cnut, laid the blame for the recurrent English defeats firmly on the English leadership. To the chronicler's mind, the incompetence, indecision and cowardice of those in power weakened the morale and determination of the rank-and-file troops, who often crumbled on the battlefield without offering real resistance. So weak were England's defensive responses that the Danes went about as they pleased: "Nothing withstood them, and no naval force nor land force dared go against them, no matter how far inland they went" (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*).

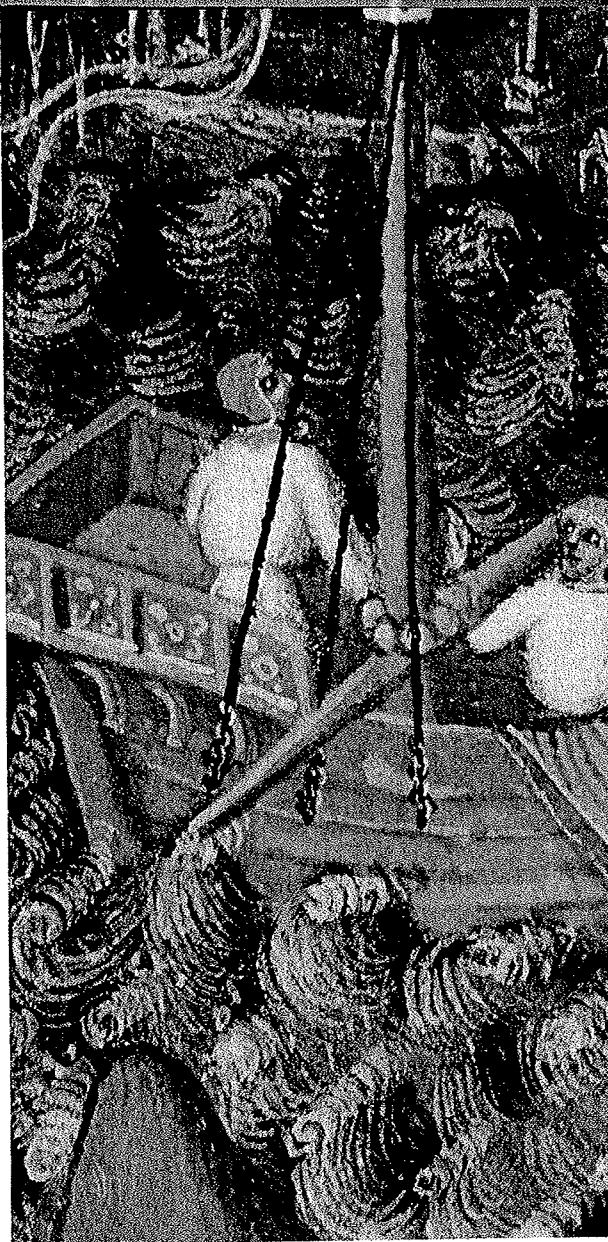
Even Æthelred's drastic strategy of ordering the massacre of all Danish men in England on St Brice's Day in 1002 did little to turn the tide of Danish victory, serving only to heighten the population's fears.

Although Swein stayed in Denmark after his return in the year of the great famine in England (1005), his absence brought no respite to the English. The arrival in 1009 of the "immense raiding army", led by Thorkell the Tall, represented a turning point in

Even Æthelred's strategy of ordering the massacre of all Danish men in England on St Brice's Day in 1002 did little to turn the tide

Æthelred's reign. Whether, as one source favourable to Swein maintained, Thorkell came as the agent of Swein or (as is more plausible) he led an independent band of warriors, drawn from across Scandinavia, Thorkell's tactics and military prowess proved more than a match for English defences. Between 1009 and 1012, his army devastated great swathes of England. As the chronicler wrote: "All these disasters befell us through bad policy, in that they were never offered tribute in time, nor fought against; but when they had done most to our injury, peace and truce were made with them. And for all this truce and tribute, they journeyed none the less in bands everywhere, and harried our wretched people and plundered and killed them."

From an English perspective, the nadir of Thorkell's campaign came in 1012 following the fall of the city of





Canterbury when, on 19 April, his army shamefully put to death Ælfheah, archbishop of Canterbury. In the aftermath of the archbishop's martyrdom, Thorkell and 45 ships from his army changed sides to ally with Æthelred, promising to defend England.

Northern power base

In 1013, King Swein arrived with his fleet at Sandwich in Kent. He might (as one source maintained) have wanted to punish Thorkell for changing sides. But a close connection between Swein and Thorkell cannot be proven, and other considerations motivated the Danish king, including the desire to now conquer England.

From Sandwich, Swein sailed quickly round East Anglia, into the mouth of the Humber and along the Trent until he reached Gainsborough. Without a fight, Earl Uhtred and all the

Northumbrians, the people of Lindsey and of the Five Boroughs and all the Danish settlers north of Watling Street submitted to him. This diplomatic victory gave Swein a power base from which to attack Thorkell and Æthelred in the south.

Having provisioned his army, and equipped it with horses, Swein left his son Cnut in charge in Northumbria and crossed Watling Street. Then he allowed his army to do whatever damage it would, intending to subdue the English by fear. His strategy worked. The citizens of Oxford submitted to him and gave him hostages; so did the men of Winchester.

Only London refused to yield, its citizens resisting because King Æthelred and Thorkell were inside its walls. So Swein turned away to Wallingford, crossed the Thames and went to Bath, where he stayed with his army. All the western 'thegns'

Swein arrives in England in an illustration from the *Lives of Saints Edmund and Fremund* (1434–44). The Dane set out to subdue the English through fear – and the strategy worked

(noblemen) came to submit to him and gave him hostages.

Now, as the chronicler wrote, "all the nation regarded him as full king". So it was that the men of London also submitted for fear of what he would do to them. And Swein demanded full payment and provisions for his army that winter. Yet, despite it all, the chronicler lamented, "his army ravaged as often as they pleased".

King Æthelred escaped to the Isle of Wight where he spent Christmas, and then went into exile with his wife's people in Normandy. For one short winter, Swein, the king of Denmark and overlord of much of Scandinavia, added England to his empire. But on 3 February 1014, Swein died, and the fleet elected Cnut as king. The English then thought better of their own king, their natural lord and begged him to return, "if he would govern them more justly than he did before".

It would take two more years of heavy fighting, the death of Æthelred (in April 1016) and of his son Edmund (Ironside) at the end of November that same year, before Cnut would succeed to the whole kingdom of the English and so initiate a period of Danish rule. Cnut's ultimate victory owed much to the persistence and military prowess of his father, Swein. From the perspective of 1013, it was clear that Byrhtnoth and his companions at Maldon had fallen to the superior military and tactical strength of the most successful king of the Viking age. **E**

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JOURNEYS

Books

► *Æthelred the Unready: the Ill-Counselled King* by Ann Williams (Hambleton and London, 2003)

► *Æthelred II: King of the English 978–1016* by Ryan Lavelle (The History Press, 2008)

► *Cnut: England's Viking King* by MK Lawson (The History Press, 2011)

► *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991* by Donald Scragg, ed (Basil Blackwell, 1991)

Museum

► For more on the Viking presence in England during the 10th and 11th centuries, visit the **Jorvik Viking Centre in York**. <http://jorvik-viking-centre.co.uk/>