

**Ryan Lavelle and Simon Roffey, eds., *Danes in Wessex: The Scandinavian Impact on Southern England c. 800–c. 1000* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016). Print, 272 pp., £45, ISBN: 9781782979319.**



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*Review*

The result of a conference also entitled *Danes in Wessex* at the University of Winchester in 2011, this collection of thirteen essays represents the first such volume to deal exclusively with Scandinavian engagement with the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex. Its 2016 release was well-timed to coincide with the millennial year of Cnut's English conquest, perhaps the most blatant intrusion of a Danish political elite into the royal estates of Wessex; and thus Æthelred II and Cnut occupy a prominent role across the contributions within volume. Yet Wessex had a long history of contact with Scandinavian aggressors before 1016, and the incursion of the Viking army of Guthrum into the lands of Alfred the Great in 878 is similarly ubiquitous to discussions of the Scandinavian impact upon Wessex. Unsurprisingly, Guthrum and Alfred join Cnut and Æthelred as critical historical touchstones for the contributors. The conflicts between these leaders have been well studied in earlier scholarship and by no means has the impact of Viking raiders and Scandinavian settlers upon Wessex been previously ignored. However, as Ryan Lavelle and Simon Roffey note in their introduction, scholars have often treated Wessex as a region which retained a fundamental and near-undisturbed Anglo-Saxon identity (p. 1).

This common narrative is a conceptual over-simplification that stems from the contrasting experiences of the West Saxons and the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of the midlands and the north. The well-documented Wessex resistance to hostile Scandinavian incursions and the subsequent rise of the Wessex dynasty seems to sit in sharp contrast to the success of Scandinavian raiders and settlers in the northern kingdoms. The inter-disciplinary contributions to this volume seek to expose the

true complexity of the Scandinavian — West Saxon relationship. Ranging from landscape archaeology to charter analyses, from legal examination to literary investigation, the chapters collected in *The Danes in Wessex* reveal a kingdom that, though never losing its independent Anglo-Saxon character, was nonetheless fundamentally altered by interaction with Scandinavian raiders, settlers, and conquerors.

The volume has no map that attempts to sketch the nebulous borders of the West-Saxon Kingdom over the three-century period covered. This is scarcely a surprise — individual contributions provide maps specific to the area under discussion; however, any attempt to portray Wessex as a specific geographical entity delineated by boundaries would necessarily be fictionalised. It is perhaps a little more surprising that, as they set the framework for the content that follows, Lavelle and Roffey similarly make no attempt to set any geographical parameters within the introduction. However, as they note, any single definition enforced upon their contributors would have been unable to account for variations over time (p. 1) — for context, we will understand Wessex as that territory of South-Western England primarily governed from the royal city of Winchester. Fortunately, the editors do not seek to avoid setting other terminological guidelines for the studies within the volume — and they make especial note of the semantic fluidity of the terms ‘Viking’, ‘Viking Age’, and even ‘Dane’. Of these it is the distinction between two Viking Ages that is most important to understanding Scandinavian — Wessex relations. While Lavelle and Roffey argue that, for Wessex, the two Viking Ages are intrinsically linked, they also make clear that the Viking aggression that brought Alfred and Guthrum into conflict in the ninth century must be held as distinct from that which culminated in Cnut’s conquest in the eleventh century. This delineation is maintained throughout the volume.

The inter-disciplinary nature of the volume allows for great variety in approach and case-study, but several were especially noteworthy representatives of their fields. In chapter five, John Baker and Stuart Brookes examine 'Anglo-Saxon strategic landscapes' through the lenses of 'infrastructure', 'intelligence', and 'mobilisation'. By 'infrastructure', the two authors refer to route-ways and the logistics of communication. Pre-existing Roman route-ways and rivers likely facilitated the movement of Viking raiders, and thus dictated both the arrangement permanent defensive structures in Wessex, and the reactionary campaign movements of the West Saxon army. On the topic of 'intelligence', the authors examine the use of lookouts and beacons in coordinating effective defensive activity, while 'mobilisation' considers the process of gathering troops, and how landscape facilitated or hindered muster. In taking this threefold approach, Baker and Brookes argue that it is possible to see the larger picture of a West Saxon shift toward militarisation. While the rapid militarisation of Wessex may have been a reaction to the Viking raids of the first Viking Age, the legacy of a militarised Wessex was a regional hegemony that evolved in a centralised state under a stable dynasty.

In chapter nine, Ann Williams (who has two chapters in the volume) looks at a pivotal figure of the second Viking Age, Thorkell the Tall. Thorkell was a Scandinavian war leader who was notably active in England, first as a confederate of Cnut's father, then of Æthelred, and finally of Cnut. Williams focuses on his career under Cnut and his role in Cnut's campaign of conquest. By tracing Thorkell's movements through the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, *Liðsmannaflokkur*, and the *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, amongst other sources, she established those few things that can be stated with confidence of the elusive figure, countering his often-embellished reputation.

In chapter eleven, C. P. Lewis provides an analysis of land-ownership of Wessex as recorded post-1066 and, parsing significant data and providing multiple tables, establishes the Danish origins of significant numbers of Wessex land-holders. As he states, 'even a cursory examination of Domesday reveals scores of Wessex landowners with Danish names' (p. 173). But this is far from a cursory examination, and Lewis identifies ninety-two landholders in Wessex in 1066 who had Danish origins, ranging from the huge estates of the magnate class, through to theigns, and rich farmers. Lewis establishes the presence of a significant Danish elite within a region often considered to have been a paradigm of Anglo-Saxon lordship. Here Lewis makes clear the point that ultimately thematically unites the varied contributions to the volume: the Scandinavian impact on Wessex from the time of the first Viking Age was significant and sustained.

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