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For Vikings, lure of the raid went beyond the booty

Posted by David Garner-York | July 28th, 2015

The Viking hit-and-run raids on monastic communities during the eighth century led to expansive military campaigns, settlement, and ultimately conquest of large swathes of the British Isles. But what was the social justification for such a spike in aggressive activity?

Previous research has considered environmental, demographic, technological, and political drivers, as well as the palpable lure of silver and slaves, to explain it.

“I wanted to try to discover what would make a young chieftain invest in the time and resources for such a risky venture,” says Steve Ashby of the archaeology department at the University of York. “And what were the motives of his crew?”

In a new study published in the journal *Archaeological Dialogues*, Ashby argues that focusing on the spoils of raiding is to ignore half the picture, as the rewards of such voyages consisted of much more than portable wealth.

“The lure of the exotic, of the world beyond the horizon, was an important factor. Classic anthropology has shown that the mystique of the exotic is a powerful force, and something that leaders and people of influence often use to prop up their power base. It is not difficult to see how this would have worked in the Viking Age.”

Peer admiration

The acquisition not just of silver but of distinctive forms of Anglo-Saxon, Frankish, and Celtic metalwork were tangible reminders of successful sorties, symbols of status and power, as well as calls-to-arms for future raids.

Many of the large quantity of Christian artifacts found in Scandinavian contexts (particularly Norwegian pagan burials) escaped melting and recycling, not because of one form of artistic appreciation, but because they were foundation stones for power, and touchstones in any argument for undertaking military activity.

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There was also a clear motive for why men joined raiding parties rather than blindly following their leaders. Raiding activity provided not only an opportunity for violence and the accumulation of wealth, but an

arena in which individuals could be noticed by their peers and superiors.

It was an opportunity to build reputations for skill, reliability, cunning, or courage. Just as leaders of raiding parties stood to gain more than portable wealth, so too their followers could seek intangible social capital from participation.


“The lure of the raid was thus more than booty; it was about winning and preserving power through the enchantment of travel and the doing of deeds,” Ashby says. “This provides an important correction to models that focus on the need for portable wealth; the act of acquiring silver was as important as the silver itself.”

Source: [University of York](#)

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