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Pagans and Christians at the frontier: Viking burial in the Danelaw

Julian D Richards

Introduction

The Vikings are the victims of cultural stereotyping (see e.g. Wawn 2000). In the popular imagination they provide the comic-book archetypal pagans: marauding shaggy war bands living and dying by the sword, with no respect for person or property, and least of all for the hallowed monasteries and clerics of Anglo-Saxon England. They worshipped violent and unforgiving Gods who inhabited the dark places of Northern Europe and they sacrificed animals and humans with complete disregard for Christian ethics. The Viking warrior aspired to the glorious death which would convey him on the journey to Valhalla where he would feast until Ragnarok.

On the other hand, the scholarly world, faced with an acute lack of archaeological evidence for Pagan hordes, has created an alternative stereotype of the peaceful immigrant and trader eager to take on all the trappings of the host society, including its religion. In Anglo-Saxon England, within the space of a single generation, pagan warriors had become Christian farmers. Christian burial was rapidly adopted (Wilson 1967), many choosing to be buried in churchyards (Graham-Campbell 1980). By the tenth century their ferocious leaders were commissioning stone crosses and establishing private chapels on their new estates.

[the] Evidence... all points to wide acceptance of the new faith already by the end of the 9th century. In the first decade of the 10th century the Danes can still be classed “pagans” by their enemies, but this is the last indication of any continuation of heathen religion (Whitelock 1941, xx).

Those Vikings who, after the late ninth-century partitions of land in East Anglia, Northumbria, and Mercia, settled in the area later known as the Danelaw, were amongst the first Scandinavians to adopt Christianity. They were Christian at least two or three generations before Harold Bluetooth’s claim to the conversion of Denmark (Roesdahl 1997) . The rapid conversion of Scandinavian settlers, so we are led to believe, demonstrates the weakness of their own pagan religions in the face of an all-embracing Christianity, and provides another example of their eagerness to become assimilated.

Both stereotypes, however, mask a variety of strategies and circumstances, and a number of recent contributions have highlighted this diversity. Abrams (2000, 2001) has suggested that the act of conversion should be distinguished from a longer process of Christianisation. Several authors (e.g. Sidebottom 2000, Stocker 2000, Stocker and Everson 2001) have shown how the adoption of Anglo-Scandinavian sculptural traditions may be linked to wider secular agendas. Hadley (2000; 2001) and Halsall (2000) have described the variety of burial practices in Late Saxon England which defies simple classification into pagan and Christian. Even within a relatively small Scandinavian colony different approaches might be adopted in different situations. At Balladoole, for example, on the south-east coast of the Isle of Man, a Christian cemetery was deliberately disturbed and desecrated when a Viking ship burial was inserted and the partially articulated remains of recent Christian burials were re-interred within the mound

(Richards 1991, 106; Tarlow 1997). At Peel Castle, by contrast, on the west coast of the island, the so-called “Pagan Lady” and other accompanied “Scandinavian-style” burials were actually interred in a Christian style stone-lined cist grave which respected existing graves (Richards 1991, 103). Elsewhere, such as in the case of the ship burial at Scar on Orkney, it has been suggested that the pagan burials might not be those of the first generation settlers, but might date instead to a later phase during which a small group sought to reassert paganism (Owen and Dalland 1999).

It is the purpose of this paper to further demonstrate that conversion might not be so much a matter of individual conscience as a question of social and political expediency. Religion may be used actively in the process of the creation and re-invention of group identities. Furthermore, it is performed within a social and political landscape of allegiances and obligations, but it also takes place within a physical landscape, and geographical space may be used to define distinct spheres of activity. For archaeologists, burial is one of the most observable physical manifestations of this.

I will discuss burials in the vicinity of Repton, Derbyshire, associated with a specific historically-attested event, that is, the over-wintering of the Viking Great Army in 873-4. This provides a case study of the adoption of paganism and Christianity according to political expediency and of the promotion of alternative burial rites as part of the creation and reinforcement of group identity within a landscape setting.

Repton is extremely unusual for the concentration of pagan burials within a small area. Around the church and shrine of St Wystan there are a number of individual accompanied burials, including an exceptional warrior grave, as well as a large burial mound apparently incorporating a central inhumation set within a substantial charnel deposit. This is in itself a unique phenomenon but only 4 km away, at Heath Wood, Ingleby, there are the remains of the only known Scandinavian cremation cemetery in the British Isles. Both sites have become better understood in recent years. Excavations at Repton in 1974-93 by Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle have revealed the remains of the Viking winter camp. Although full publication is awaited, the interim accounts (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 2001) provide sufficient detail to allow provisional interpretation. Antiquarian investigations and more recent topographic survey at Heath Wood have been summarised (Richards et al 1995) and whilst the full report is also in preparation the results of excavation in 1998-2000 have been outlined (Richards 2000, 148). Understanding the survival of pagan burial in this small part of South Derbyshire may help illuminate the nature of conversion elsewhere.

The first question must focus on why such a range of burial strategies is found concentrated in this location, when it is not found elsewhere in the Danelaw. To answer this we must consider the political and ideological significance of Repton. By the late ninth century Repton was one of the principal ecclesiastical centres of England, and was closely associated with the power of the Mercian royal family. A monastery had been established here in the seventh century. It appears to have been a double house for men and women ruled by an abbess of noble, possibly royal, rank (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 2001, 50). Several of the kings of the Mercian house were buried at Repton, including Aethelbald after his murder at Seckington in 757. In 849 Wigstan (Wystan) was brought to Repton after his murder in a struggle over the succession to the Mercian throne. Wigstan was buried in the mausoleum of his grandfather Wiglaf (827-40). This is almost certainly the crypt which survives beneath the chancel. Miracles took place at

the tomb and the entrances to the crypt were lengthened to deal with the flow of pilgrims (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 2001, 52). Before the end of the ninth century, Wigstan had come to be regarded as a saint. By this stage the church had a north and south porticus, and a chancel over the mausoleum, with burials to the south and east. Excavation has revealed evidence for multi-coloured window glass and exceptional stone sculpture. To the west, now within the area of the vicarage garden, there was also a two-roomed stone structure, probably a mortuary chapel.

From 865 England was subject to escalating Viking raids by a highly mobile force led by Ivar the Boneless and his brother Halfdan. It is difficult to get a clear understanding of the size of this army, beyond the fact that the Anglo-Saxon Chroniclers considered it to be “Great”, and the fact that it regularly over-wintered in England. After the conquest of Northumbria in 866, and East Anglia in 869, Alfred Smyth has suggested that the Great Army was reinforced by what the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle describes as the Summer Army, before it forced Wessex to make peace in 871 (1977, 240-3). The combined force was subsequently active in various parts of the extended kingdom of Mercia.

In the Autumn of 873 the Great Army arrived at Repton and took over the monastic complex, driving the Mercian king Burgred into exile in Rome, and placing one of his thegns, Ceolwulf, on the throne as their puppet king. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that the army took *wintersetl*, or winter quarters, there. Their choice had a symbolic as well as a tactical significance. The seizure of one of the holy places of Christendom could not have gone unnoticed; its continued occupation suggests a desire to gain whatever authority might rub off by association. But Repton also occupied a strategic location. The church of St Wystan was built on a prominent bluff on the south side of the flood plain of the River Trent. The river now flows on the far side of the valley, 1 km to the north, but originally flowed on the Repton side, at the foot of a low cliff. Repton therefore lay at an important junction of the main routes across the Trent and along the valley. In late ninth-century England this was an important frontier and a key point for the control of the Midlands.

The Great Army invested considerable effort in remodelling the site, and the monastic church, into a defensive enclosure. A large V-shaped ditch, 4 m deep x 8 m across at the top, was dug to create a D-shaped enclosure, enclosing an area of 1.46 ha (3.65 acres) with the church in the middle of its S side so that the doors in the north and south sides of the nave provided a defended entrance way, and the cliff of the Trent valley providing the long straight side of the D.

Several groups of burials have been associated with the over-wintering of 873-4 by the Biddles, including inhumations adjacent to the chancel, and the charnel deposit with its central burial in the former mortuary chapel. In their published interpretations of these graves the Biddles have cogently argued for the pagan Viking character of several aspects of their discoveries (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 2001). Although the evidence is persuasive, some qualification is necessary.

The most obvious “Viking” is the warrior aged at least 35-45 (Grave 511) buried immediately to the north of the chancel, within the defended enclosure. A second male, aged 17 to 20 (Grave 295), buried soon after and adjacent to the warrior, is interpreted by Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle as perhaps representing his weapon bearer. The man buried in Grave 511 had

met a very violent death, presumably in battle. It now appears that he had been killed by the thrust of a sharp implement through the eye which had penetrated the orbital socket and gone into the brain, presumably caused by a sword point finding a vulnerable spot on the head which was unprotected by the helmet (Blood of the Vikings 2001). However, before or after death he had also received several cuts to the arm, and a great slashing blow to the top of his left femur which would also have removed his genitals. Cuts to the lower vertebrae, inflicted from the stomach cavity also imply he was disembowelled. This detailed description is necessary in order to emphasise the grisly treatment that at least one of the Viking Great Army had received from the Christian defenders of a Mercian royal monastery. In most aspects his burial was that appropriate for a great pagan warrior, slain in battle. He was buried wearing a Thor's hammer amulet, and his sword was placed by his side. A boar's tusk was placed between his thighs, presumably to make up for what he had lost, in case it proved necessary in Valhalla. Further down a jackdaw, or raven, humerus was also placed between his legs, perhaps invoking Odin. On the other hand we should note that although not in the monastic cemetery he was buried on an east-west alignment immediately adjacent to a Christian shrine, and that the mausoleum to St Wystan was apparently retained intact during the Viking occupation. Given the powerful associations of burial next to saintly relics, at the very least this was someone for whom the options were being kept open.

Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle state that "there are several other burials of Scandinavian type" adjacent to the chancel (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 2001, 65). These are listed as Grave 529, a man aged 25-35 also buried north of the chancel, with a gold finger ring and five silver pennies datable to the mid-870s. They also note that burial continued south of the chancel, in the established monastic cemetery. Individually itemised graves from this area include Grave 83, a man aged c.50 with a copper alloy ring, and Grave 84, a younger man, aged c.20, adjacent. There is also Grave 203, a woman aged c.45 with an iron knife and a strike-a-light, although it is suggested that the latter could have been buried up to a generation later. Although these graves include a few personal objects there does not appear to be anything particularly Scandinavian or pagan about them, and the evidence for them being Scandinavian appears to rest upon their association with Grave 511. Grave 52 is also singled out as being the possible source of a bearded axe, but as this was found as a chance find in 1923 the association has to remain uncertain.

Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle also suggest that the charnel deposit from the western mortuary chapel and its central burial should be seen in the context of the 873-4 over-wintering. They present persuasive arguments that the central burial, disturbed c.1686, was probably that of Ivar the Boneless (2001, 81-4). I see no reason to argue with that, but would question their identification of the charnel deposit as comprising mainly the remains of the Viking Great Army. The dating, derived from a second packet of five coins, is consistent with 873-4, certainly associates the general assemblage with the over-wintering, even if the precise provenance of the coins is uncertain. The critical factor about the deposit, however, is that it is very clearly derived from disinterred and reburied skeletons. The total minimum number of individuals is 264, based on 253 left adult femurs and 11 juvenile right tibias. However, the percentage of the smaller bones recovered from these individuals is much lower, with only 32% of the vertebrae, for example, and less than 2% of the finger and toe bones. When decayed bodies are disturbed and re-buried it would be expected that the smaller bones would be lost. The other pertinent facts are that c.20% of the bodies were female, and that the 16 radiocarbon dates show at least two populations, the first dated to the late seventh or early

eight centuries, and the second group to the later ninth century. The Biddles (2001, 79) propose three possibilities for the origins of the earlier bones, including that they represent the primary burials in the mortuary chapel, that they are ancestral Viking remains brought with the Army from Scandinavia, and that all the bodies were brought from elsewhere. Although they conclude that the latter explanation is the most likely they still argue that the later bodies are those of the Great Army disinterred from their primary resting places and brought to Repton, having become contaminated with earlier burials. The principle evidence for a substantial Scandinavian component to the charnel deposit is the physical anthropological evidence, from which the Biddles conclude that “the male bones from the mass burial are massive and suggest a selected group, such as would be the case if the cemetery of a Guards regiment was studied and compared with the contemporary local population” (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 2001, 78).

However, a robust and predominantly male group need not necessarily equate with an incoming military elite, and the well-fed and aristocratic inhabitants of a Mercian monastery are also likely to have had a larger stature than the average Anglo-Saxon peasant or slave. Is there any reason to look further than the burials of the original monastic cemetery for the origins of the Repton charnel? In digging the great V-shaped ditch the Great Army cut through the established area of burial south of the chancel. It might have seemed a natural, if not particularly pagan, activity to collect the more obvious bones for reburial, and the existing mortuary chapel, outside the enclosure, would have provided a logical home. This explanation would fit the long date range of the charnel deposit and also, given Repton was a double house, the small proportion of female bones. It would also be in keeping with the general lack of weapon trauma on the charnel bones. The smaller proportions of older and younger individuals in the charnel deposit compared to the monastic cemetery might initially suggest it was drawn from a different population, but this can again be explained by differential survival and recovery of smaller and more fragile bones.

This is not to say that the Great Army was not responsible for the Repton charnel; or that they did not choose to bury one of their leaders as the central grave. The charnel bones might still include a few remains of re-interred warriors, but this was not its primary purpose. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to regard it simply as a rather convenient and prosaic collection point for bones disturbed in the course of earthwork construction. The symbolism of re-arranging the bones of Mercian monks and aristocrats around the psychopath Ivar would not have been lost on the conquering Army. They also truncated the Mercian royal mortuary chapel, levelled it with sand, gave it a stone kerb, and turned it into a mound. The Biddles further suggest that four teenagers, buried together next to the mound, were sacrificed as part of the burial ritual. This may be the case, although their skeletons bear no signs of violent injury.

I am certainly not suggesting that the Repton charnel deposit is not the work of pagans, but would argue that it was designed to reflect a degree of accommodation with the existing establishment. This includes a continuity of purpose, and a deliberate and clear association between Mercian and Viking remains, and between the Anglo-Saxon shrine and the Viking winter camp. This continuity is also reflected by the fact that the area of the charnel mound continued in use for aristocratic burial, with a later cemetery, including burials of those with fine jewellery and costume, drawn up around it. Similarly, in 1801-2 a hogback monument was found to the west of St Wystan’s church. This is too late to be associated with the Great Army, and should date to the period 920-70. We know little of the immediate history of St Wystan’s church after the Great Army departed, although by the first quarter of the tenth century it was

an important minster church, serving a large region of South Derbyshire (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 2001, 53). Apparently those continuing to require burial associated with the shrine also continued to include members of the local Danish aristocracy. Given that the Great Army gained control of Mercia not by its destruction but by putting their own candidate on the throne, none of this should be surprising. Those Vikings buried at Repton were seeking to legitimate their own succession by their association with the Mercian royal house, and whilst a few maintained some pagan trappings, the majority found it expedient to allow themselves to be converted to Christianity.

This strategy was not, however, shared by everyone who was in the Viking Army that arrived at Repton in 873. Repton is overlooked by a number of low hills that run parallel with the Trent Valley. Some 4 km to the south-east is a block of woodland known as Heath Wood. The plantation is relatively recent and in the ninth century this was open heath land commanding impressive views northwards across the Trent Plain. Further east lies the village of Ingleby, perhaps distinctive because it was a surviving enclave of the English in an area that was now under Danish control. It was on the brow of the hill now known as Heath Wood, however, that another group of Vikings chose to commemorate their dead with a more conventional pagan burial rite than that adopted by their compatriots in Repton. Excavations at Heath Wood, Ingleby, have revealed a Scandinavian cremation cemetery of some 60 mounds, of which about a third have now been excavated.

Excavations have revealed that many of the mounds contain *in situ* cremation hearths comprising charcoal, ash and burnt bone, of people as well as animal offerings, including remains of cow, horse, sheep, pig and dog. Despite the poor preservation conditions there are also traces of objects which had been deliberately placed on the pyres, as well as items of personal dress. The former include two mutilated swords (from Mounds 1 and 7), a large number of nails (also from Mound 7), possibly from the binding of a leather shield, and a number of nails from other objects. The latter include a number of iron buckles and copper alloy loops, a fragment of wire wool embroidery (from Mound 11), and a ring-headed pin (from Mound 56). Previous accounts have suggested that many of the mounds were empty, and may have represented a cenotaph style memorial for those given Christian burial elsewhere (Posnansky 1956, Richards et al 1995). However these conclusions were based on partial trenching of the burial mounds. Open area excavation of two mounds, Mounds 50 and 56, in 1998-2000, have revealed two forms of the cremation rite. Mound 50 contained an *in situ* cremation hearth with a mass of charcoal and cremated bone covering an area of c.2 x 3m within the centre of the mound. Mound 56, on the other hand, contained only a small patch of redeposited charcoal and bone, as well as the ring-headed pin, on the edge of the mound. This body must have been cremated elsewhere, and only a token deposit placed within the mound, which was otherwise completely empty. Incomplete excavation would have quite easily missed these ephemeral traces and so it seems likely that each of the Heath Wood mounds represented at least one cremation. Indeed, analysis of the remains from Mound 50 suggests the presence of at least two individuals (J.McKinley pers comm) and this could also have been the case for those bone assemblages examined in the 1940s and 1950s.

Although further analysis may provide more precise dating, at the moment there is nothing to definitely link the Ingleby burials to the over-wintering of 873-4. However, it is very difficult to see any other possible context. Given that St Wystan's church and the winter camp and Heath Wood would have been inter-visible and also that the presence of the Great Army in

873-4 is beyond doubt it would be perverse to try to associate the Heath Wood burials with some unidentified and unassociated event. Furthermore the excavated evidence appears to show that the Heath Wood mounds were erected within a relatively short space of time. Indeed, given the almost complete lack of cremation burial from elsewhere in the Danelaw, it is intrinsically unlikely that settled farmers in South Derbyshire, and they alone, would retain an alien burial rite. There is also one specific similarity with Repton. The mortuary chapel was prepared for the charnel deposit by levelling it with a layer of clean sand. The erection of Mounds 50 and 56 was undertaken by first removing the topsoil from across the area, and then digging into the bed rock to create a ring ditch, giving an approximate outline for the mound. The interior of each mound was then levelled with a 10cm thick layer of clean sand. In the case of Mound 50 the cremation pyre was then built directly on this surface, and the mound then thrown up over it. In each case the layer of clean sand can be interpreted as having some ritual cleansing function.

Otherwise, however, the burials at Repton and Heath Wood are very different. Cremation goes back to the pagan burial forms as practiced in ninth-century Sweden, Denmark and Norway. In Heimskringla, Snorri Sturluson notes that Odin's Law:

decreed that all the dead should be burned, and put on the funeral pyre with all their possessions. He also said that everyone should come to Valhalla with all the property that he had on the pyre, and he should also enjoy the use of what he had himself buried in the earth, and mounds should be raised in memory of men of rank.

A very definite commitment to paganism is demonstrated at Heath Wood by the performance of cremation rites and animal sacrifice in conjunction with mound burial. Rather than peaceful, permanent, stable settlement the barrow cemetery at Heath Wood seems to reflect instability and insecurity of some sort. In this way, the Heath Wood burials might represent a deliberate and physically imposing allusion to the pagan homeland of those who produced them; a statement of religious, political and military affiliation in unfamiliar and inhospitable surroundings.

The outstanding question is then why did those over-wintering at Repton react to the local circumstances in such different ways? To answer this I have suggested (Richards 2001) that we need to go back to the disparate composition of the Great Army:

The invaders cannot be treated as a large amorphous mass under the convenient label of the Great Army on the assumption that the *micel here* which arrived in 865 was the only significant body of invaders (Smyth 1977, 241)

On its departure from winter quarters in Repton the army split into two bands, perhaps reflecting the two forces which had been combined:

For nine years the miscellaneous Danish force had acted as a single military unit. In the autumn of 874 it fell apart into two armies which were never reunited (Stenton 1943, 250-1).

This was not simply spontaneous fragmentation because of numbers but the result of a specific agreement between Halfdan and Guthrum. Halfdan's army was tired of war and returned to

Northumbria where in 876 he and his men “shared out the land of the Northumbrians, and they proceeded to plough and support themselves.” Guthrum, Oscytel and Anund, on the other hand, left Repton to march on East Anglia and then to wage renewed war on Wessex.

One explanation for the different burial and conversion strategies represented at Repton and Heath Wood, therefore, might be that the two cemeteries represent a division in the Viking camp, the first group preferring legitimation through association with the Mercian site; the other preferring traditional pagan values. If the Biddles are correct that the central burial in the Repton charnel deposit is that of Ivar the Boneless then it is tempting also to speculate that it was Halfdan and his men, the original joint leader of the force that first arrived in 865, who were responsible for the appropriation of the mortuary chapel, whilst it was those reinforcements who had arrived in the summer of 871 under Guthrum who preferred cremation at Heath Wood.

In the environs of Repton we are therefore able to observe the playing out of a major ideological drama in the 870s. This war-torn frontier zone acted as a stage first for the demonstration of the power of the Great Army, but then for an unfolding drama of dissent within its ranks. With its tradition of royal Mercian patronage and its prestige as a focus of pilgrimage, Repton would have provided the perfect location for a demonstration of new spiritual convictions combined with political/military subjugation. The Mercian landscape and even the royal church and mausoleum were appropriated by one section of the Great Army in order to legitimate their political control. However, on a hill top to the south-east a traditional ritual of cremation, animal sacrifice and mound burial was being performed.

In this small area of South Derbyshire we can therefore see the creation of a ritual landscape, and the re-invention of a small piece of pagan Scandinavia in Heath Wood. Viking armies were not homogenous groups; they contained those of diverse beliefs and ideologies. Standard pagan and Christian stereotypes may be of little use if we wish to understand the nature of conversion in the Danelaw. In this single case study we are able to observe a number of alternate strategies and accommodations between pagans and Christians in a frontier society.

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