

# The Origin of Danish Settlement in England

## Introduction

To lay my cards on the table, I think the orthodox view about Viking influence on English life is wrong. Conventionally Anglo-Saxons brought the German language and culture to England, then, hundreds of years later Danish Vikings arrived and contributed their own language and culture. My view is that the early invaders were a mix of German and Danish and that the Danish Vikings had a relatively minor influence<sup>i</sup>. These thoughts were prompted by reading the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle<sup>1</sup> out of simple curiosity. I could not see a story of extensive Danish settlement within its pages. Rather, I saw a story of Danish Vikings who garrisoned troops in parts of England and who divided up land and wealth as the spoils of war. According to this alternative view, before the arrival of the Vikings, England was a melting pot of early Low Saxon and early Danish language and culture.

## The Post Roman Invasions

Orthodoxies are hard to pin down, but school history teaches that after the departure of the Romans, England was settled by three closely related tribes, the Angles, Saxons and possibly Jutes. Wikipedia<sup>2</sup> says the same,

*“During the fifth century, all Germanic tribes who invaded Britain were referred to as either Englisc, Ængle or Engle, who were all speakers of Old English”*

Like many people I was aware of the early sources of information, however, I thought it would be interesting to take another look. I found it surprising that the earliest reports did not mention the Angles. The Celtic cleric Gildas, who lived somewhere between 500 CE and 570 CE<sup>3</sup>, laments how the Saxons came to Britain, as mercenaries to defend the native Celts then stayed,

“those wild Saxons, of accursed name, hated by God and men, should be admitted into the island, like wolves into folds, in order to repel the northern nations.”

The Anglian presence in Britain (as opposed to Saxon) was first mentioned in the mid 6<sup>th</sup> century by the Eastern Roman historian Procopius<sup>4</sup>. He was writing some 200 years after the Romans left.

The Venerable Bede<sup>5</sup> writing around 731 CE (some 300 years after the events) uses Gildas but adds some ideas of his own. He is the earliest known source to refer to all three tribes.

*“They came from three very powerful Germanic peoples, the Saxons, Angles and Jutes. The people of Kent and the inhabitants of the Isle of Wight are of Jutish origin and also those opposite the Isle of Wight, that are part of the kingdom of Wessex which is still today called the nation of the Jutes.*

*From the Saxon country, that is, the district now known as Old Saxony, came the East Saxons, the South Saxons and the West Saxons.*

*Besides this, from the country of the Angles, that is, the land between the kingdoms of the Jutes and the Saxons, which is called Angulus, came the East Angles, the Middle Angles, the Mercians, and all of the Northumbrian people (that is those people who dwell north of the River Humber) as well as the other Anglian peoples. Angulus is said to have remained deserted from that day to this.”*

There is still debate about the origin of the Jutes, but Bede's account, which implies that they lived to the North of the Angles, sounds plausible.

The next authority to describe the post Roman invasions was the scholar who wrote the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle nearly 500 years after the departure of the Romans. The entry for 449 CE (but written hundreds of years later) follows Gildas and Bede in describing how the native Celts invited tribes from Germany to help protect them.

To summarise, the Saxons arrived soon after the departure of the Romans. The Angles had arrived some time before the mid seventh century (when they were described by Procopius). By the time of Bede, Angles, Saxons and Jutes were described as the invaders.

### **The Geographical Origin of the Angles**

Bede was correct in saying that the Angles came from the land between the Saxons and the Jutes. Broadly speaking he was correct in classifying them as Germanic, the term applying generically to both German and Scandinavian people. With an interval of 300 years between the events and his report he may not even have been aware of linguistic differences between the groups when they arrived, or may not have thought the distinction mattered. He was probably wrong in saying that they left a deserted land behind.

As Bede says the Angles came from Angelus (Angel) towards the South of the Jutland Peninsula<sup>ii</sup>. Although the area is now part of Germany, Angel was formerly Danish. It lay to the North of the Schlei (where the Jutland peninsula narrows towards the South as it nears Germany). The border extended westward from the Schlei along a defensive boundary known as the Danewerk (Danevirke Danish spelling), (Danavirki German equivalent). The second stage of the Danevirke dates back to around 500 CE according to carbon-14 dating reported in Wikipedia<sup>6</sup> hence the Angles came from within Danish territory. (Archaeological evidence from the Danewerk casts doubt on Bede's claim that Angulus was deserted after the departure of the Angles.) An article in Wikipedia<sup>7</sup> also tells us that from place name evidence, the linguistic border between German and Scandinavian languages followed the Danewerk.

### **Settlement and Place Names**

The orthodox view is that Danish place names are evidence of Viking Settlement. This can be examined by looking at variations in the prevalence of Danish place names on a county by county basis. Prevalence is estimated here, as the number of places having the Danish suffixes “by” and “thorpe” divided by the number of settlements having the German suffixes “ton” or “ham”. Higher values of this index imply greater density of Danish settlements. As we do not know the origin of many place names, we cannot construct an index of all Danish divided by all German place names. It follows that the index does not describe the precise density of the Danish place names; nevertheless it can be used to

imply their relative density. The raw information was downloaded from the Gazetteer of Place Names<sup>8</sup>. Only place names from England have been included. Places that cross county boundaries are excluded, as are places in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly (which have a different history).

The present day county level administrative boundaries have been used in the analysis. Obviously these differ from the Saxon boundaries, however, they are comprehensible to present day readers and may still contain “echoes” of the ancient counties and perhaps even the tribes from which they originated.

The counties (*ratios in parenthesis*) with the highest relative numbers of Danish place names are: Lincolnshire (1.4), Leicestershire (0.8), Westmorland (0.7), Yorkshire North Riding (0.7), Cumberland (0.7), Yorkshire East Riding (0.5), Yorkshire West Riding (0.5), Nottinghamshire (0.4), Northamptonshire (0.3), Derbyshire (0.2), Norfolk (0.2), Rutland (0.2) and Essex (0.1). All remaining counties have ratios of less than one in ten, while the following counties have no Danish place names at all: Berkshire, Cambridgeshire, Dorset, Herefordshire, Hertfordshire, Huntingdonshire, Middlesex, Northumberland<sup>iii</sup>, Shropshire, Somerset, Wiltshire, and Worcestershire.

The pattern of settlement from the place name evidence can be compared with that described in the written sources. The most authoritative contemporary source of the Viking incursions is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. It takes the form of a year by year record of English history. Writing began in the late 9<sup>th</sup> Century with retrospective entries for preceding years. A word search of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was undertaken to examine reports that might be associated with Viking settlement between 850 and 1066. The following search of word stems was used (number of “finds” in parenthesis): “settle” (3 for settling the land), “famil”(0 for family etc in relation to settling), “child”(1 for child etc in relation to settling), “sow”(0 for sow in relation to working the land), “plough”(1 for ploughing the land), “till”(1 for tilling the land). Places associated with possible settlement were (frequency in parenthesis): Mercia (1), East Anglia including Essex (3), North-humbria (1). There are 3 references to the army apportioning land, once in modern Northumberland where it was also spoken of in relation to ploughing and tilling, once in Mercia, and once in East Anglia in association with settling the land.

So, for the entire period of Danish Viking military activity, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records only 6 occasions on which settlement (either stated or implied) occurs. There is no mention of families arriving. The one mention of children seems to relate to army children. There is nothing to imply widespread immigration. There are no reports of towns, roads or bridges being built. On the other hand, there are reports of the Vikings building fortresses. The overall impression is one of an army at war with some incidental settlement, and not of a nascent settler economy.

The Viking activity recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle does not correlate well with Danish place names/settlement. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records little Viking activity in Lincolnshire, where there is the heaviest concentration of Danish place names. On the other hand North-humbria is mentioned frequently but, but has no Danish place names in modern Northumberland, and only a few in modern Durham. It is interesting that Danish

place names in North-humbria seem broadly to follow the pre-Viking division between the Kingdoms of Bernicia (what we might think of as “Geordie” areas) and Deira (what we might think of as Yorkshire). Since these areas had been united by the time of the Vikings, this suggests a pre-Viking origin for the distribution of place names (for why would invaders respect a boundary that was no longer there?).

East Anglia was one of the key areas of Viking activity. It was mentioned in thirteen of the years between 860 CE and 926 CE. In the later years native East Anglians joined forces with the Viking Armies. It provided men to support the Vikings in 894 CE,

*“...and of the Danish-men there was very great slaughter made; and that part which got away thence was saved by flight. When they had come into Essex to their fortress and to their ships, then the survivors again gathered a great army from among the East-Angles and the North-humbrians...”*

In spite of all this activity there were surprisingly few Danish settlement place names in East Anglia compared with Lincolnshire or Leicestershire.

More detailed information about East Anglia is provided in the Treaty between Alfred and Guthrum. Sometime between 878 CE and 890 CE King Alfred made a treaty with the Danish King Guthrum [ CITATION Var19 \l 2057 ], in which Alfred acknowledged the authority of Guthrum over East Anglia. The treaty says that the area under Guthrum’s control comprised the following:

*“up on the Thames, and then up on the Lea, and along the Lea unto its source, then straight to Bedford, then up on the Ouse to Watling Street.”*

Acknowledging that there are difficulties mapping the river courses against existing county boundaries, we can nevertheless make the reasonable approximation that the treaty area included all or significant parts of: Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Huntingdonshire and Cambridgeshire. Of these counties, only Norfolk, and, to a lesser extent Essex have even moderately high concentrations of Danish place names. Using the index, Norfolk has a ratio of 0.23 and Essex 0.11. Suffolk has relatively fewer with an index of 0.07. Hertfordshire has none, Bedfordshire has 0.02, Huntingdonshire has none and Cambridgeshire has none.

In summary, although there is a significant overlap, the contemporary written evidence of Viking activity fails to provide more than a superficial explanation of the distribution of Danish place names. Some areas that were reportedly conquered by the Vikings had significant numbers of Danish place names while others had relatively few or none at all.

## **Forms of Conquest**

There may only be a few reports of Viking settlement, but there is quite extensive information in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle about the military takeover. The general picture is of an army (often referred to as “the Heathen Army”) that quickly establishes bases and then widespread dominance in the kingdoms of East Anglia and North-humbria. The army obtains horses locally and uses them to wage campaigns further afield. It strikes out from

its garrisons in the East and returns to overwinter. After East Anglia and North-humbria fall, the next in line is Mercia. All three were Anglian kingdoms.

In 866 CE the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reports that,

*“...and the same year a great heathen army came to the land of the English nation, and took up their winter quarters among the East-Angles, and there they were horsed; and the East-Angles made peace with them.”*

The pacification of North-humbria was a little more difficult, but seems to have been over quite quickly. In 867 CE the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reports how the army moves on to garrison themselves in North-humbria,

*“This year the army went from East-Anglia over the mouth of the Humber to York in North-humbria. And there was much dissension among that people, and they had cast out their king Osbert, and had taken to themselves a king, Ælla, not of royal blood; but late in the year they resolved that they would fight against the army; and therefore they gathered a large force, and sought the army at the town of York, and stormed the town, and some of them got within, and there was an excessive slaughter made of the North-humbrians, some within, some without, and the kings were both slain: and the remainder made peace with the army.”*

The following year they were off to Mercia,

*“...the same army went into Mercia to Nottingham, and there took up their winter quarters. And Burhred king of the Mercians, and his 'witan,' begged of Ethelred king of the West-Saxons, and of Alfred his brother, that they would help them, that they might fight against the army. And then they went with the West-Saxon power into Mercia as far as Nottingham, and there met with the army within the fortress; and besieged them therein: but there was no great battle; and the Mercians made peace with the army.”*

Then in 869 CE the army was on the move again,

*“This year the army again went to York, and sat there one year.”*

In 875 CE the army split, part of it going into North-humbria. By this time the army is so secure within its client states that it is able to leave for extended periods to engage in continental adventures.

For example the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for 880 CE says,

*“And that same year the army, which previously had sat down at Fulham, went over sea to Ghent in France, and sat there one year.”*

Up until 911 CE almost every year's entry in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reported the army on the move either throughout England or on the continent. Then the Danes seemed to weaken with their strongholds being retaken. By 926 CE this stage of the Viking conquest was over and Wessex had re-established control over the whole country.

*“This year fiery lights appeared in the north part of the heavens. And Sihtric perished: and king Athelstan obtained the kingdom of the North-humbrians. And he ruled all the kings who were in this island.”*

Even after mention of the Vikings temporarily ends, the client states they had established in North-humbria and East Anglia, continue to be a thorn in the flesh of Wessex. With or without the Vikings, they retain their own identity.

While there is some mention of settlement, the overwhelming impression left by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle during the period up to 926 CE is of an army on the move, engaged in battle, or temporarily garrisoned. This is not an army giving support and protection to Viking settlers. Without Viking settlers we need to find an alternative explanation to the widespread Danish place names. Again this points to the Danish Angles rather than to Danish Vikings as the settlers. If the principle areas of Viking conquest were already heavily influenced by Danish Anglia, it begs the question of whether Danish Viking settlement was more acceptable in places that already had a Danish heritage. East Anglia, Mercia and North-humbria may have behaved like vassal states with Quisling rulers rather than as territorial extensions of the Danish homelands.

There was a pause in Danish activity for the remainder of the century until in 1001 CE the Danes were back. To begin with they came for treasure. For seven of the twelve years from 1002 CE to 1013 CE the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records demands for tribute. Then a period of imperial ambition began. Sweyn Forkbeard wanted more than tribute and in 1013 CE, he added England to his territories in Denmark and Norway. He was succeeded by his son, Cnut the Great, who held it until 1036. The Danes soon gave up direct control after the death of Cnut but reverted to demands for tribute again in 1040 CE and 1052 CE. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle does not record any settlement during the periods of tribute or dependency.

In summary, none of these phases of conquest were designed to support widespread settlement.

### **Artefacts**

The argument for pre-Viking Danish settlement is sustained by a rather large “elephant in the room”. It takes the form of a 27 metre longship buried in a mound of soil at Sutton Hoo[ CITATION Wik191 \l 2057 ]. Within the ship were royal regalia and traces of a buried body. Sutton Hoo is in modern Suffolk, close to its border with Norfolk. Similar ship burials are found in Scandinavia.

The most impressive finding at Sutton Hoo, apart from the ship itself, was a helmet covered in gold and jewels[ CITATION htt20 \l 2057 ]. The helmet was decoratively similar to Scandinavian helmets. Judging by the quality of the grave goods, it seems likely that this was a royal burial dating from somewhere around 600 CE. The body in the ship burial is believed to be that of Rædwald who died in 624 CE. There is speculation about the ancestors of Raedwald, but nothing is known with certainty. Unfortunately, because of the soil conditions, no DNA was recoverable.

Another helmet was recovered from York. It is known as the Coppergate Helmet [ CITATION Wik192 \l 2057 ]. It is similar in style to the Helmet at Sutton Hoo and is inscribed with the name Othera. There was a King called Othera who reigned in South West Mercia and who died sometime after 693 CE. The helmet is believed to date from the 8<sup>th</sup> century. It was found buried in what may have been a well, with an odd assortment of other artefacts including: a crucible, a rubbing stone, a fragment of hearth lining, fragments of slag, and fragments of iron. It seems possible that the hoard was buried for safekeeping by a metalworker and never recovered. If the helmet was destined for King Othera, it is possible that it was commissioned by him to be made by a Northumbrian craftsman. This might imply that Scandinavian metalworkers were working in York before the arrival of the Danish Vikings.

Another helmet, similar in style to the previous two was found in Northamptonshire. It is known as the Pioneer Helmet [ CITATION Wik193 \l 2057 ]. The helmet was apparently made for use rather than ornament. It is a typical Scandinavian helmet, carrying the figure of a boar's head on top of its crest. Such boar's head helmets were mentioned in the poem Beowulf which has Danish origins.

Fragments of a fourth helmet with similar Viking style decorations were found as part of a hoard from Staffordshire [ CITATION Wik24 \l 2057 ]. The helmet has been dated at around 600CE to 650CE. It was dismembered into hundreds of fragments, presumably for the value of the precious metals it contained.

With the exception of the dismembered Staffordshire helmet, these similarly styled helmets were all found in counties with Danish place names. The ship burial and the other artefacts suggest that the areas in which they were found were already culturally Danish before the arrival of the Vikings.

## **DNA**

There is recent evidence [ CITATION LES15 \l 2057 ] about the distribution of DNA throughout Britain. DNA samples from 2039 individuals having grandparents who lived nearby were used. The method used by the researchers grouped people having similar DNA. When these individuals were plotted on a map, it could be seen that people having similar mixtures of DNA generally lived close to one another. Their DNA was analysed to identify its European origins. A single group with both Danish and German DNA spanned most of lowland England. Additionally background levels of DNA from South West Germany and Belgium were seen across Britain.

Another aspect of their research examined whether "admixture events" could be identified. These population "pulses" mark the large scale arrival of new ethnic groups. They were able to identify two events. One was the arrival of Norwegians in Orkney. The other was the arrival of North West Germans in Lowland England. They attribute this to the post Roman arrival of the Saxons. It is significant that they did not,

*"find any clear genetic evidence of the Danish Viking occupation".*

Concerning the Danish component in English DNA, they noted that,

*“The increased contribution of this group to the ancestry profiles of all the English clusters further suggests that some part also came to the UK with the Saxons.”*

These findings were contested by researchers at London and Warwick [ CITATION Jan16 \l 2057 ] for two reasons,

*“First, GER3 (the German sample) may also represent Danish Vikings; and second, DEN18 (the Danish Sample) may not adequately represent Danish Vikings.”*

They argue that this might have happened because of the geographical proximity of Saxons and Danes. They also point to the late estimated date for the admixture (approximately 802 CE to 914 CE), about 400 years after the known arrival of the Saxons. The late date for this estimate seems wrong. Phillips et al attribute this to the fact that their estimates are “upper bounds”, resulting from delayed intermarriage between incomers and the established population, but 400 years does seem to be excessive. However, what seems reasonably certain is that the admixture, whenever it came, comprised both German and Danish people.

### **Conclusion**

Sometime between 430 CE when the Romans left, and about 550 CE when Procopius wrote, the Angles arrived in England. They came from Southern Denmark. They spoke Danish. They made Danish artefacts. They left Danish place names. They left their DNA in people throughout England. It is a coincidence that some 300 years later Danish Vikings arrived. We cannot know whether the Vikings added their own settlements, possibly they did. We cannot know whether they left their DNA, probably they did. But Viking place names and DNA, like white paint on a white canvas would be difficult to see against the remains of a pre-existing Danish population.

The obvious explanation for Danish culture in England is settlement by Danish Angles. The contrary belief that the Angles were Germans would need strong justification, yet there is none. Unfortunately the people themselves were illiterate, so we cannot hear their story directly. Bede says they came from the area we now know to have been Southern Denmark. There is pre-Viking evidence of Danish culture in the burial at Sutton Hoo and the artefacts that have been found in North and East England. The origin of the English Danes was the Anglian settlement by people who came from North of the Danework in Danish Anglia.

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Photograph 1 Caption "From Danish Anglia"

Photograph 2 Caption "To East Anglia – Home from Home"

- <sup>i</sup> The adjective Germanic is used generically to describe German and Scandinavian languages and culture
- <sup>ii</sup> A variety of “guesses” have been made about the origin of the name. Angel may be cognate with Danish “ankel”, English “ankle”, and proto-Germanic “ankulaz”, perhaps implying the narrowing or joining of the Jutland peninsula at its junction with the rest of continental Europe.
- <sup>iii</sup> For consistency with the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, we use the spelling “North-humbria” to describe the English lands to the North of the River Humber. It includes modern Northumberland, Durham and Yorkshire.