Piracy in Late Roman Britain: a Perspective from the Viking Age

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INTRODUCTION

One of the key issues concerning late Roman Britain is the nature of contacts with seafaring peoples from the continental North Sea coast. More often than not, these interactions have been seen as hostile, provoking a military response from the Romans that is most recognisable in the archaeological record by new and often massive coastal fortifications from the third century onwards.

Despite the many modern narratives on the subject, notions about the character of Germanic raiding are poorly defined. In large part this is due to the absence of any detailed accounts of piracy in the historical record, and indeed contemporary references are so sparse that episodes of coastal attacks are entirely open to doubt.[1] Archaeological traces of raiding are even more rare, and this lack of evidence makes possible alternative assessments of late Roman military strategy around the British coast.[2] The question has still wider implications, for it impacts upon our understanding of the character of the transition from Roman Britain to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

By contrast, there can be no doubt about the reality of Viking attacks on Britain, Ireland, and indeed on a wider continental stage. Historical records and archaeological evidence combine to give a picture (albeit one that is still incomplete) of how raiding developed during this period and the manner in which it was conducted. It is argued below that there is a basic similarity between the initial phase of Viking attacks and those of the barbarians on the coast of Roman Britain. Using this premise, the present paper seeks to shed light on the issue of North Sea piracy during the later centuries of Roman rule.

COMPARING THE ROMAN AND VIKING ERAS

All parallels between late Roman Britain and the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms are to an extent superficial and must be treated with caution. It is recognised from the outset that there are many important distinctions between the early German incursions and those of the later Scandinavians, from social milieu to maritime technology. There is, for example, considerable debate as to whether the Anglo-Saxons were capable of direct voyages over the North Sea, or if raiding was only achievable by 'coastal crawling' and a crossing at the Straits of Dover.[3] The scale of the polities under attack, and the military capacity and organisation of Roman Britain and the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, were also markedly different.

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[1] Bartholomew 1984; White 1961.
[2] Cotterill 1993; Pearson 2002; 2005.
[3] Contrast Crumlin-Pedersen 1990 with Carver 1990. On Roman and German sea-power see respectively Casey 1994, ch. 12 and Haywood 1991.

Another key issue relates to the motivation (or compulsion) that lay behind the raiding and colonisation of the two periods, which must surely have been a major factor in determining the character of piracy. Little is known about the German homelands, and there is a danger of conflating barbarian society during the Roman period with that of later Scandinavia.[4] In both cases it has been suggested that a combination of population pressure and land shortage may have contributed, and certainly it is known that Germanic settlements existed in the coastal zone during an era of rising sea-levels, climatic deterioration, and possible tribal migration from the east. As Sawyer points out,[5] however, such an explanation is not sufficient to explain the raiding of the Viking era, which seems to have partly arisen out of a more 'positive' desire for wealth, power, and political prestige. Until we know more about the early German peoples we should exercise considerable caution on this issue, and be prepared to entertain the possibility of more ideological motives.

In putting forward this analogy, it would also be misleading to suggest that our understanding of Viking attacks is anything approaching comprehensive. Just as there is a debate on the nature of raiding in the Roman world, so too there is one for the Viking period. Many of the uncertainties raised with regard to the barbarian *adventus* (e.g. the scale of population influx, the problems of ethnic identity in the archaeological record) find an echo in studies of the eighth to tenth centuries.

Ethnographic data from the Viking era cannot prove or disprove piracy during Roman times, but when approached with sufficient discretion, this comparative exercise retains considerable value. The objective of this paper is to present a possible, detailed, model of Germanic raiding, and in this respect the specific details of Scandinavian piracy are far less important than the wider trends. The intention is also to demonstrate the extent to which such activities would be manifested in the archaeological record, an issue that is of particular significance because it enables us to make a more informed judgement about the reality — or otherwise — of raiding during the third to fifth centuries.

THE CHARACTER OF VIKING PIRACY

In contrast to Romano-British studies, the scholar of the Viking Age is well served by detailed discussions of piracy, in large part driven by the considerable number of primary historical sources. Inevitably such records are uneven in their geographical and chronological scope, and reflect the various biases to be expected of medieval sources.[6]

The patchy coverage of the sources sets a trap for the historian considering the scale, intensity, and location of raiding. Frankia is quite well served by contemporary chronicles, for example the *Annals of Fulda* and *Annals of St Bertin*, and thus we can chart a detailed picture of attacks during the mid- and later ninth century.[7] Britain is less fortunate because the principal English source, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, was compiled in A.D. 892 and is very uneven in its coverage. We run the risk, therefore, of underestimating the extent of attacks on those areas where the commentaries are less detailed or altogether silent. Paradoxically, the most detailed sources tend to be written in areas which *survived* the Viking assaults rather than those which succumbed: the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, for example, was written in Wessex, the only one of the four Anglo-Saxon kingdoms existing in A.D. 800 to survive the century.[8] Much less is known of Northumbria

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[4] e.g. Faulkner 2000, 88–90.
[5] Sawyer 1997, 3–8.
[6] Dumville 2002.
[7] Coupland 1998.
[8] Brooks 1979.

and Mercia, and almost nothing of East Anglia, precisely because successful raiding seems to have hindered both the production, and the survival of, historical records.

Recent research in particular has been concerned with testing the primary sources against the archaeological record, and has gone some distance towards refining (and in part challenging) popular conceptions. However, little has been settled, and summarising the debate on Scandinavian raiding and settlement in England, Trafford comments that the discourse has reached a stalemate between those arguing for a large or a small number of Viking settlers.[9]

CHRONOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

The primary sources that inform us about Viking involvement in North-West Europe suggest that it followed an intensifying trend.[10] The first phase, during the late eighth and early ninth centuries, appears to have comprised opportunist raiding during the summer period on vulnerable coastal targets. These early raiders arrived in small numbers and relied on hit-and-run tactics, and there was unlikely to have been prolonged contact between attacker and native. However, from the 830s in Ireland and the 850s in England a new phase began, with overwintering Viking 'armies' becoming an increasing feature of warfare, and Scandinavian warlords playing a significant role in regional affairs. In certain cases the situation ultimately progressed to one of political conquest, for example the English Danelaw, the duchy of Normandy, and the kingdom of Dublin.

SCALE AND INTENSITY

It is difficult to estimate the size of Viking fleets and the numbers of warriors involved from contemporary historical sources. Such matters are reported with varying precision, and even where specified, the size of vessels (and thus their crew complement) remains unknown. The academic debate is presently polarised between those who contend that Viking armies were small and those who argue for the presence of much larger Scandinavian forces.[11]

This issue is perhaps less contentious with regard to the first raiding phase, if only because the scope for different estimates is fairly small. The sources suggest that raids were carried out by individual ships or small fleets, and were confined to the summer months when sailing conditions were most favourable; the first recorded contact with the Vikings in England, for example, involved a group of three ships which landed at Portland in A.D. 789. The pirates involved in the earliest raids against Ireland (A.D. 795–836) also arrived in single ships or very small 'fleets'. Crew sizes are uncertain, but limited evidence of ninth-century Viking ships suggests complements of between 25 and 70 persons,[12] so we might envisage forces of a few tens up to about 200.

From our foreshortened historical perspective, Viking raiding appears at first glance to be a continuous feature of the late eighth and early ninth centuries. This, however, is not the case. Between A.D. 795 and 807 there were only ten recorded attacks on Irish monasteries (including the island sites of Iona and Skye), and no more are known for the next 15 years. Between A.D. 822 and 829 a further 15 attacks are recorded, bringing the total to 25 over a period of 34 years. A broadly similar pattern can be observed in Britain during the same period. Sawyer comments

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[9]   Trafford 2000, 21.
[10] Sawyer 1997.
[11] Sawyer 1962; Brooks 1979.
[12] Haywood 1995, 48.

that whilst 'we must infer that many raids have gone unrecorded … we must not push this too far and make the Vikings out to be more effective than they were'.[13]

The same intermittent pattern of attacks continued throughout the ninth and tenth centuries, with violent periods interspersed with episodes of calm. To some extent this must be a false impression created by the sources: the literary silence from the Northumbrian, Mercian, and East Anglian kingdoms — at the very time when these polities were falling to the Vikings — is one example of this phenomenon. However, even taking into account the unevenness of the historical sources, it is possible to see changes in the emphasis of raiding. The Vikings were pragmatic, and saw no reason to raid areas with well-organised armies. Thus, for example, Alfred the Great's successful defence of Wessex turned Viking attention to Frankia during the later ninth century, whilst the establishment of the Norse duchy of Normandy in A.D. 911 changed the focus of attacks to Brittany and Ireland (in the case of the latter, ending the so-called '40 Years Rest'). Even within a single country or province the distribution of attacks was patchy. Some sites, particularly those in vulnerable locations, were repeatedly attacked within the space of only a few years (for example Lindisfarne and Iona), whilst others escaped attention for many decades, and some perhaps entirely.

TARGETS

Historical accounts emphasise the wealthy, vulnerable character of the targets chosen by the Vikings for their attacks. Although secular sites must also have been targets, historians of the time were at pains to point out the many attacks on religious institutions. Further selectivity is apparent, the literary evidence suggesting that the poorer churches and their communities with little to offer were left alone at the expense of richer establishments.[14] Whether this is an omission on the part of the raider, or just of the chronicler, is difficult to determine.

The very earliest targets in Britain, Ireland, and Frankia were all in vulnerable coastal locations, Lindisfarne, Iona, Skye, and Rathlin being prominent examples. Throughout the whole of the first phase of Viking raiding, attacks were confined to sites within 30km of the coast.[15] Only during the second phase, as forces became larger and more organised, did assaults extend further inland, utilising navigable waterways. However, rowing upriver, even with a favourable wind, was a slow and risky enterprise that negated much of the Vikings' advantage of mobility and surprise.

PLUNDER

The choice of religious targets on the part of the Vikings was pragmatic rather than ideologically motivated. Monasteries were centres of concentrated wealth, were used as safe-deposits, and their locations were often isolated. Evidence from hoards (both in the Scandinavian homeland and elsewhere) suggests that coins, plate, and other metalwork were sought-after booty. By contrast, religious artefacts often had little intrinsic value and were more valuable as ransom. Assemblages such as the Cuerdale Hoard, Lancashire,[16] attest to the wealth that could be collected through raiding, but it should be noted that the major hoards date to the later phases of attacks when extortion had become as effective a means of wealth-collection as actual violence.[17]

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13   Sawyer 1997, 94.
14   O'Corráin 1997, 93.
15   Haywood 1995, 72; O'Corráin 1997, 87.
16   Graham-Campbell 1992.
17   See Reuter 1985.

Importantly, other booty will not feature in the archaeological record. An additional attraction of the monasteries lay in the fact that their farms were well stocked with agricultural products. Whilst of comparatively low value for its volume, such goods were essential if a raiding group were to survive their journey home. Given the probable summer timing of the early phase of raids, it is unlikely that the Vikings destroyed many harvests.

Slave-taking was another major and lucrative activity from the outset.[18] The first attack on Lindisfarne in A.D. 793 involved the abduction of monks, and it is perhaps a comment on the value of human captives that they were taken whilst many of the monastery's treasures were left unscathed. Slaving was a regular feature of Viking warfare, and Irish annals record several instances where hundreds of captives of both sexes were taken at a single time; whilst a proportion may have been ransomed, a great many were destined for the slave markets. The *Life of St Fintan of Rheinau* indicates that captives were being sold in the Scandinavian homeland, whilst locations such as Dublin were also important centres of the slave trade.[19]

VIOLENCE

The historical record provides a strong image of Viking depredations, and despite recent research that modifies our understanding of their impact, there is no doubt of the reality of attacks, or the genuine shock expressed by contemporary chronicles.

The traditional image of Viking raiding is of an activity accompanied by violent destruction. Burning is a consistent feature in historical accounts, and Lucas assembles a large volume of textual evidence for the burning of Irish churches during the medieval period.[20] However, Lucas notes that the culprits were as often native forces as they were foreign pirates, and brings to our attention the fact that the era was not one of just Scandinavian violence. For example, prior to the onset of Viking raiding, civil war in Northumbria is alleged to have led to the robbing of church lands (see the *History of St Cuthbert*). Similarly, during the tenth-century wars against the Danelaw the West Saxons were responsible for direct assaults on the Church, most famously at Ripon in A.D. 948.[21] Authors such as Alcuin asserted that the sins of the people had brought down the heathen assault on England: attribution of blame is not, therefore, as simple as it might first seem.

EVIDENCE FOR VIKING RAIDING

DESTRUCTION

There is some archaeological evidence to support the documentary assertions of violence during the eighth to tenth centuries, but it is far less than might be thought. The site of the monastery at Tarbat, on the east coast of Scotland, is one prominent example. Here, a destruction layer in one part of the site attests to an episode of widespread burning, and contains charcoal, ash, nails (interpreted as the remains of structures), and fragments of religious sculpture that appear to have been deliberately smashed. The destruction of this sculpture surely suggests an ideological element to the violence. Excavations under the church have revealed 67 skeletons, 57 of whom were male and several of them having suffered blade injuries. Carbon dates are as

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[18]   Pelteret 1995.
[19]   Holm 1986.
[20]   Lucas 1967.
[21]   Hadley 2000, 284–6.

yet inconclusive, but the excavator suggests a date of *c.* A.D. 1000, and the bodies are perhaps connected with the Battle of Tarbat Ness recorded in A.D. 1035.[22] Tarbat monastery was abandoned between *c.* A.D. 800 and 1100, and it is tempting to suggest that its demise was caused by a catastrophic Viking assault. Evidence of probable Viking violence has also emerged in Wales. At Llanbedrgoch, Anglesey, a small ninth-century native defensive enclosure has yielded the bodies of five individuals who appear to have been murdered.[23]

The above examples are the exception rather than the rule, and despite the weight of historical evidence from the Viking period, physical traces of destruction are otherwise rather elusive. Whilst this situation might be attributed to a shortfall in the archaeological record, there are in fact data to suggest that in certain cases the level of damage was far less than the histories imply. Lindisfarne, for example, was notoriously attacked on several occasions during the late eighth and ninth centuries, to the extent that the monks and their famous gospel book embarked on a seven-year exile from the island after A.D. 875. However, recent excavations on the site have revealed a number of features that are likely to be early medieval and thus part of the monastic site. Although there was evidence for one building in this area having burnt down, this appears to be an isolated event and there are no indications of an all-consuming conflagration in this area of the village.[24] A similar situation prevails at Nendrum Abbey (Co. Down) — one of the few Irish monastic sites to be subject to large-scale excavation. The site was raided in A.D. 974 and has yielded some archaeological evidence for destruction of certain buildings by fire. However, whilst it is tempting to ascribe the fire to a violent assault, the burning appears localised and it could equally have been caused by domestic accident.

The widespread absence of destruction layers may in fact indicate that attacks were less physically damaging than is often assumed, and that the image portrayed in historical records is somewhat false. Richards points out that to destroy a site is to end its usefulness as a source of plunder, and that a more pragmatic approach is to leave it intact, so that it could be raided again once its wealth was replenished.[25] Destruction does often seem to have been minimal, as was the case with ecclesiastical buildings in north-western France, which rarely seem to have been damaged by Viking warfare. The monastery of St Germain-des-Prés, on the west bank of the Seine at Paris, for example, survived Viking occupation virtually unscathed during the siege of the city in A.D. 845.[26]

ABANDONMENT

Although outright destruction seems rare, an indirect consequence of Viking depredations was the abandonment of wealthy sites in areas under greatest threat. However, in discussing this issue we must bear in mind the violence of native armies at the time, and accept that sites could also have been deserted for reasons only indirectly related to warfare. Sources such as Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, for example, talk of a more general malaise affecting the quality of ninth-century monastic life that had little to do with the Scandinavians.

Nevertheless, in France abandonment does appear to have taken place on a regional scale. During the mid-ninth century, Charles the Bald's policy of defending the central part of his kingdom led to religious communities in the lower Seine and Loire seeking safety elsewhere. Similarly, the intensification of attacks on Britanny after A.D. 911 led to its nobility fleeing to

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[22] M. Carver pers. comm.
[23] Redknap 2000.
[24] G. Young pers. comm.; O' Sullivan and Young 1995.
[25] Richards 2001, 88.
[26] Nelson 1997, 46.

Frankia and England and to the abandonment of its coastal monasteries.[27] The contemporary chronicle of Nantes records that the poorer Bretons had no choice but to remain and take their chances.

Both the instances above relate to periods when defensive systems had entirely broken down, and where the Vikings were able to operate without hindrance. Where political authority remained, as it did in England and generally also in Ireland, the effects of attacks were less radical. Nevertheless, there remain examples of disruption on a local scale. Prominent among them is the relocation of a part of the monastic house at Iona to a new establishment built at Kells between A.D. 807 and 814, after a series of attacks in preceding years.[28] Some Northumbrian houses may have succumbed to the 'Great Army' of the 860s, and archaeological evidence does suggest an interruption in occupation during the later ninth century. The possibility that the less prestigious house at Tarbat failed to recover after a Viking assault has been noted above, and this instance should alert us to other potential abandonments about which the historical sources are silent.

There is other inferential evidence to suggest serious disruption to religious institutions. In A.D. 804 the nunnery of Lyminge (Kent) was granted land within the walls of Canterbury as a refuge, illustrating how even the earliest, uncoordinated phase of attacks could affect vulnerable communities:[29] the relocation of the bishopric of Leicester to Dorchester-on-Thames during the 870s suggests similar concerns. The succession of bishops of Lindsey, Elmham, and Dunwich breaks down during the late ninth century pointing to dislocation of the ecclesiastical infrastructure, though whether as a consequence of warfare or politics is not clear.[30]

Although disturbances are certainly evident, it is equally clear that monastic life persisted throughout the ninth and tenth centuries, even within vulnerable areas. As Keynes points out,[31] there is little reliable evidence for the fate of any individual monastery, and most sites attacked by the Vikings continued to function. The *Life of Blathmac* and other contemporary annals record the goings-on of the abbots of Iona between A.D. 818 and 878, demonstrating that even here monastic life was able to continue. Hadley also argues that ecclesiastical organisation in the Danelaw at the level of the mother church survived more or less intact during this period.[32]

Life in coastal towns also continued, despite serious attacks such as that on Canterbury in A.D. 851,[33] and the same is true of continental urban centres. Haywood observes that the only major coastal zone settlements abandoned during this period (Quentovic and Dorestad) were probably given up because river silting undermined their usefulness as ports, and not because of the Vikings;[34] however, one has to wonder if the persistent attacks on Dorestad after A.D. 834 did not hasten its demise. Nantes was left semi-derelict after a period of Viking tenure, but this appears to be due to neglect, rather than the result of violence.

Although most sites survived, there is evidence to suggest damage to the social infrastructure, which can be seen in declining literacy standards. We have already observed the dearth of ninth-century histories from northern and eastern England, and Brooks points out a drastic drop in the quality of charters written in Canterbury in the years following the sack of the city.[35] Physical damage to a site is, apparently, only a part of the story.

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[27]   Haywood 1995, 82–3.
[28]   O'Corráin 1997, 83.
[29]   Brooks 1984.
[30]   Barrow 2000, 157–8.
[31]   Keynes 1997.
[32]   Hadley 2000, 279.
[33]   Brooks 1984, 30.
[34]   Haywood 1995, 51.
[35]   Brooks 1979, 15–17.

WARFARE

The evidence from native British sites, discussed above, is heavily outweighed by other indications of the Viking presence.[36] It is notable, however, that virtually all remains date to the mid-ninth century onwards, when war bands were present in more significant numbers, staying over prolonged periods, and gaining wealth as much by extortion as by actual robbery. The earlier phase of more transient raiding has left few traces, a point to which we shall return when discussing the Roman era.

Extremely rarely, it is possible to find the remains of the Norse warriors themselves, although identification is hindered by the widely varying burial practices of the Scandinavians.[37] The prime example is that of the barrow cemetery at Ingleby, Derbyshire,[38] but this is an exceptional instance, and in fact the total number of graves in Britain definitely identified as Viking is limited to around 50.[39] The nearby site at Repton, once suggested to have been the burial place of members of the 'Great Army' of A.D. 873–4, now appears to have a more complex explanation.[40]

The passage of Viking armies is better marked by their treasure hoards; these occur across Britain, and vary in size from those containing just a few objects to spectacular metalwork assemblages such as that from Cuerdale.[41] Whilst most hoards comprise treasure, caches of weapons have also been discovered. As a counterpoint, there are also numerous contemporary hoards, for example those in Yorkshire dating to the 860s or later, believed to have been buried for safekeeping by the native Anglo-Saxon population.[42] Within the Scandinavian homelands, other treasure hoards and grave goods attest to a wealth of material from widely-gathered sources.[43]

THE PATTERN OF SCANDINAVIAN RAIDING

Although there are many aspects of Viking piracy that cannot be taken forward into a discussion of the Roman period, the preceding discussion brings out several important points. First is the contrast between the initial phase of raiding during the late eighth and early ninth century, and the more intensive warfare that followed. It is surely the case that the Romano-British authorities would not have tolerated the long-term presence of a hostile force within their borders, and thus any model for Germanic raiding should draw primarily from the earliest phase of attacks.

We have seen that these initial Viking raids were sporadic and confined to the summer months, and on a limited scale of individual ships or very small fleets. Whilst the immediate coastal zone was at risk, piracy did not extend any significant distance inland. The aim of warfare was portable wealth, and destruction of property was probably uncommon. The physical effects on England were limited and most sites that had been raided continued to function. However, vulnerable locations were prone to repeated assault and disruption to the social fabric, which could arise from the killing or abduction of even a few skilled individuals, could have long-term consequences.

[36]   Wilson 1976.
[37]   Halsall 2000.
[38]   Richards *et al*. 1995.
[39]   Graham-Campbell 1979.
[40]   Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1992; 2001.
[41]   Graham-Campbell 1992; 1995; Shetelig 1940–5.
[42]   Richards 2001, 145.
[43]   e.g. Wamers 1983.

Finally we must observe that only very rarely does archaeology conclusively reflect warfare on this scale, and even the passage of the larger armies of the later ninth and tenth centuries goes mostly undetected. Better evidence for attacks can be found in hoards of plundered material transported back to the Viking homelands, but human traffic will leave no indication at all. Transient pirates in the Roman period were unlikely to bury what they could not hope to collect, and thus they would pass through the British archaeological record without leaving so much as a trace.[44]

PIRACY IN ROMAN BRITAIN

Despite a widespread belief in early German piracy, archaeological evidence has proved elusive — an unsurprising fact in the light of the preceding discussion. Instead, attention is normally focused on interpretation of the slender historical evidence, whether in support or denial of piracy. Most discussions cite only what is deemed to be the response to attacks, in terms of new defences on the 'Saxon Shore' and more widely around the coast.[45] With the exception of Cotterill's examination of seafaring,[46] there has been little attempt to understand the practical details of raiding. Through analogy with the Vikings, the following discussion attempts to widen the scope of this debate, and to place the question of piracy within a wider context.

EVIDENCE FOR ATTACKS

Despite assertions about barbarian piracy that date back to Camden's *Britannia*, incontrovertible evidence for destruction is, in fact, extremely slight. It does seem that the Goldsborough and Huntcliffe signal-stations met with a violent end in the last years of Roman rule,[47] but whether either site was the victim of Saxon attack, rather than of northern British barbarians, is perhaps more questionable. Other sites with which the author is familiar have produced suspicious remains, for example the burial of three individuals in the former area of the earth fort at Richborough, and a skeleton found at the base of a well outside the neighbouring fort at Reculver.[48] Both might be suggested as indications of a violent attack, although there are no accompanying signs of damage to buildings.

It is true that evidence of this nature has not been collated across Roman Britain, and it is possible that similar remains exist at other locations: taken as a whole these might assume a greater significance, but at the moment they only appear as curious aspects of individual sites. However, it would not be unreasonable to state that there is less accepted evidence for piracy in present scholarship than there was twenty years ago. For example, the possibility that Irish raiders looted Wroxeter during the late fourth century is no longer accepted.[49]

Evidence for the abandonment of sites is also lacking, and indeed, the late third century witnessed a boom in private building across southern England.[50] Salway suggests that this

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[44] Within England the greatest indication of Scandinavian activity comes from place-names and relates to colonisation of the Danelaw — see Fellows-Jenson 2001; Styles 2001 — but Germanic settlement is highly unlikely to have influenced place-names on a detectable scale until post-Roman times.
[45] e.g. Johnson 1976.
[46] Cotterill 1993.
[47] Hornsby and Staunton 1912; Hornsby and Laverick 1932.
[48] Cunliffe 1968, 36; Philp 1958, 164.
[49] White and Barker 1998, 19.
[50] Rivet 1969.

signifies a migration of wealthy landowners and their capital from Gaul to the safer climes of Britain,[51] and if so it would find a parallel with the exodus of Brittany's nobility during the early tenth century. Admittedly it is inland locations such as Bath that can be singled out as particular areas of growth, but the general impression is not one of a province in crisis.

The preceding argument follows a trend in recent scholarship, which is generally sceptical of attributing archaeological remains to barbarian destruction. Whilst historical accounts of the Boudiccan Revolt are still borne out by the material evidence, other events are being reassessed. In the North, the so-called 'Brigantian Revolt' of the A.D. 150s, once thought to have caused the temporary withdrawal from the Antonine Wall, now seems entirely dubious,[52] as does an invasion across Hadrian's Wall in A.D. 197.[53] Doubt has also been cast on the scale and impact of the Barbarian Conspiracy, the evidence for supposed destruction failing to survive detailed scrutiny.[54]

In this light, barbarian raiders can no longer be used as the explanatory devices for archaeological remains that they once were. Robertson[55] and Casey[56] both argue that coin hoards from later Roman Britain, once assumed to indicate insecurity amongst the British population,[57] now seem better attributed to economic crises. Reece makes a more general point about the difficulty of determining the reason for the burial and non-recovery of any coin hoard.[58] Poulton and Scott, however, are able to make a convincing case for the deposition of pewter hoards having a ritual explanation.[59] The origin of town walls has also been questioned, since the argument that they were built as protection from barbarian incursions has become more difficult to sustain. It is now widely recognised that they could have arisen from more abstract reasons than defence,[60] whilst a concise episode of bastion construction during the 'Theodosian Restoration'[61] is now doubted.[62]

During the last decade scholars have also inclined towards a lesser degree of contact between Roman and barbarian in late Roman Britain than was once supposed. In particular, arguments for the presence of Germanic *laeti* and *foederati* within the province, based upon indicators of ethnicity such as 'Romano-Saxon' pottery and decorative metalwork in the form of jewellery and belt buckles,[63] have foundered in recent years.[64]

THE GERMANIC HOMELANDS

As is the case for the Viking era, better evidence of interaction between the Empire and *Barbaricum* can be found in the German homeland. Roman cultural material found beyond the imperial frontier has attracted considerable attention from scholars,[65] and here can be found possible corroboration of piracy. It has long been recognised that the agencies by which such

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[51]   Salway 1993, 191.
[52]   Hodgson 1995.
[53]   Salway 1991, 221–2.
[54]   Evans 1984; Morris 1973, 15–16.
[55]   Robertson 1988, 29–32.
[56]   Casey 1994, 29.
[57]   Johnson 1976, 7.
[58]   Reece 1988.
[59]   Poulton and Scott 1993.
[60]   e.g. Guest 2002.
[61]   Frere 1987, 248.
[62]   Millett 1990, 215.
[63]   e.g. Myres 1986, 83–114.
[64]   Jones 1993, 34.
[65]   Fulford 1985; Laser and Voss 1994; Swift 2000.

items travelled, whether as the result of trade, diplomacy, or raiding, are in most cases extremely difficult to determine.[66] Nevertheless, Wheeler felt able to identify deposits of Roman loot within 'Free Germany', dating from the early imperial period onwards and continuing a longer tradition of ritual deposition.[67] Most pertinent to the present discussion are the peat-bog deposits of the eastern side of the Jutland peninsula and the Danish islands, of which the Nydam hoard (found in association with several boat burials) is perhaps the most famous example.[68] The hoards, some very sizeable, are characterised by a preponderance of military metalwork, and in this respect they differ from many Viking hoards (for example those from Gotland) which were very much based on treasure. Dating is approximate, but the deposits appear to belong to the third, fourth, and fifth centuries A.D. Wheeler thought they were best attributed to the land-based attacks of the German confederations, particularly during the third century, although he did admit the possibility that some could have been collected through piracy in the Baltic or English Channel.[69] Given the sheer scale of some of the hoards, their military character, and the fact that each appears to represent a single deposit rather than a gradual accumulation, the former scenario does indeed seem most likely — perhaps the product of significant Roman defeats. However, such caches of metalwork are only a small percentage of the total volume of Roman material found beyond the frontiers. Their character is unusual, and they preserve material deliberately held back for social purposes. There is no telling how much other wealth (for example coinage) identified in Jutland and elsewhere represents redistributed plunder, as opposed to the profits of trade.

The character of any archaeologically invisible booty is difficult to determine, but it may be argued that it was limited in quantity. It is thought that the flow of such goods was from *Barbaricum* into the Empire, rather than vice-versa; Jutland, coastal Germany, and Holland, for example, are suggested to have been able to offer animal goods in trade or tribute.[70] Slaves were another valuable commodity, but, whilst their capture was a common feature of inter-barbarian warfare, Germanic society itself did not keep them in significant numbers.[71] The Empire offered a lucrative market for slaves, but one cannot expect it to have engaged in the traffic of Roman citizens captured via North Sea piracy. Thus, whilst the taking of slaves and hostages by Mediterranean pirates was well known during the Roman period,[72] it seems much less likely that Germanic raiders would have engaged in similar activities on a major scale. These factors argue for a situation in which most booty should be visible within the archaeological record, even if its subsequent distribution makes it difficult to identify as the product of warfare.

A MODEL FOR GERMANIC PIRACY

Much of the literature concerned with late Roman Britain conveys the sense of an island under siege in which Germanic incursions were frequent, severe in character, and occurring from the early third century. As we have seen, there is no conclusive evidence to support such a view, although it is probably reasonable to accept that a maritime threat existed to a certain degree.[73]

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[66]   Eggers 1951, 72–7; Hedeager 1977.
[67]   Wheeler 1954, 53–62.
[68]   Engelhardt 1865.
[69]   Wheeler 1954, 61–2. It is interesting to note that Roman material in Irish contexts is now considered to be the debris of a few individuals — perhaps former auxiliaries — rather than loot or traded goods, Bateson 1973.
[70]   Elton 1996; Todd 1975, 41.
[71]   Thompson 1960; 1965, 16–17.
[72]   Rauh 2003.
[73]   Pearson 2005.

However, barbarian military organisation is recognised to have been poor,[74] and there seems little reason to suppose that any individual warlord had the ability to assemble and maintain a large fleet of vessels for piracy. As such, the number of attackers in any given group was probably small, and its military capacity would have been limited. We have seen from the Viking period that incursions inland were a risk even to sizeable war bands, and the idea that German pirates could have penetrated far into Britain, or stayed long within its borders, seems improbable. Piracy was most likely to have been restricted to a narrow strip of the coastal zone, confined to the summer months, and not even necessarily an annual occurrence. Opportunist targets would have been exploited on a hit-and-run basis.

In terms of those targets, urban centres are unlikely to have been vulnerable, since most had been provided with walls (for whatever reason) by the end of the third century. Barbarian field armies were notoriously unable to overcome such defences, and for this reason the countryside would have offered better prospects to small war bands. Here the wealth would have been less concentrated (except for a relatively small number of very affluent sites), but there were areas such as the Medway where villas were closely clustered. It is notable, however, that few villas would have been as vulnerable as the later Saxon monasteries, since many of the latter were deliberately sited in remote, unpopulated locations. The nearest comparable targets in Roman Britain are the temples, which were beneficiaries of both public and private donations.[75] Since the barbarians lacked the military strength to linger in the province, detailed knowledge of Britain's geography must have been hard to come by. Identification of profitable areas could just have been a matter of chance, but those areas unlucky enough to be raided once might well expect further attacks.

As a related point, we have noted above how the focus of Viking attacks shifted according to circumstance, singling out areas of weakness whilst leaving strongly defended regions alone. There is no reason to assume that earlier piracy was not equally pragmatic, and thus different parts of the Roman Atlantic coast may have been more or less affected at any given time. For example, one of the panegyrics for Constantius (*Pan. Lat.* 8.5) comments on Carausius' usurpation of the fleet 'used to protect the Gauls', and there must surely have been other, less extreme, instances where political circumstance and troop deployments strengthened one area of the coast whilst weakening another. Indeed, if scholars such as Whittaker are correct in emphasising the effectiveness of the Saxon Shore defences of Britain,[76] we might well expect piracy to have been diverted to Gaul or elsewhere.

THE ROMAN RESPONSE?

The preceding discussion rather minimises the impact of piracy, and seen in these terms the supposed Roman countermeasures of new forts and defended towns appear disproportionate. Indeed, it seems highly unlikely that town walls were created out of fear of piracy, particularly in inland locations given that raiding beyond the coastal zone was impractical. In any case, all second-century earthen circuits are too early in date to have been prompted by piracy, and we would also have to explain why sites such as Canterbury were not provided with defences of any kind until the late third century.[77]

The construction of the Saxon Shore consumed appreciable state resources[78] and — if

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[74] e.g. Todd 1975, 179–80.
[75] See Salway 1993, 237–8.
[76] Whittaker 1994, 160.
[77] Wacher 1995, 198.
[78] Pearson 2003.

envisaged as a defence — required a permanent garrison of considerable size. Davies, for example, estimates the Shore Forts garrison to have been between 2,000 and 3,000,[79] a figure that does not take account of detachments around the coast of Wales and Northern England, nor of militia within maritime towns. In A.D. 300 the army of Britain is estimated to have numbered about 25,000 and this was reduced in stages during the fourth century.[80] Given these figures, the burden on military manpower seems out of step with the limited threat from raiding that is proposed by this study. We must therefore assume that our piracy model is incorrect, that garrisons did not comprise entire units, or that the forts were utilised for an entirely different purpose. Arguments are presented elsewhere for the Shore Forts being something other than a maritime defensive scheme: tactical considerations, their piecemeal creation, a sparse and sporadic occupation history, and the illogical and early closure of several sites from the mid-fourth century, all point to a different conclusion.[81] A primary logistical function has been proposed, although there is nothing to preclude a complementary (though perhaps secondary) role in coastal defence.

Even the latter possibility may be belied by the forts' location. Villas have been suggested as prime targets of raiding, but it is notable that the Shore Forts are situated in areas where villas are remarkably sparse.[82] It has been asserted that such 'blank' areas represent imperial estates,[83] although the absence of villas is not necessarily a good indicator of state administration of an agricultural district.[84] Nevertheless, as a defence the Shore Forts seem either to have been poorly located, or intended only to protect official sites at the expense of civilian zones.

CONCLUSIONS

The existing debate on Germanic piracy is often characterised by its polarisation, between those who argue for extensive piracy,[85] and those who wish to deny it entirely.[86] However, the question is perhaps rather more complex, and may hinge instead on a better appreciation of the scale of raiding. The preceding discussion presents Germanic piracy in a less dramatic fashion than has often been the case, in which attacks were sporadic, small-scale, and probably disruptive rather than destructive. The extent to which occasional violence could have eroded the fabric of Roman society is something of an open question, but if towns remained unscathed then the administration of the province would probably have been largely unaffected. A great many other uncertainties remain, but when the evidence from the Roman period is considered and analogies made with later piracy, this model seems as plausible as any that envisages extensive warfare.

There are avenues of research that could potentially move the debate forward. For instance, collation of data on sites where 'destruction deposits' are asserted might bring previously unseen patterns to light, and would certainly allow scrutiny of each claim. Since it is argued that raiding is more likely to cause the abandonment of a site, rather than its immediate destruction, this issue could also be investigated. For instance, do villas in the coastal zone generally decline at an earlier stage than those further inland? If so, we might look to raiding as a possible or contributory cause. The extent to which Roman material found in Free Germany constitutes the

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[79]   Davies 1984, 93.
[80]   Breeze 1984.
[81]   Cotterill 1993; Pearson 2005.
[82]   See Jones and Mattingly 1990, map 7:6.
[83]   Richmond 1955, 130–1.
[84]   Crawford 1976; Fincham 2002.
[85]   Johnson 1976.
[86]   Cotterill 1993; White 1961.

spoils of raiding might potentially be addressed through study of mint marks and metalwork styles. If the origins of such material can be traced, light could be shed on whether a hoard has been assembled from piracy, tribute, or trade, depending on how widely-sourced individual deposits were. It may also suggest which parts of the North-West Empire were under attack — in this respect any British material would have the advantage that it cannot be confused with booty from overland raids, as would be the case for continental assemblages.

As a closing point, the question of barbarian raiding during the late Roman period and settlement within the former imperial frontiers from the fifth century onwards cannot be disengaged. Many scholars now propose that the Germanic 'conquest' of England did not involve mass migrations, but was achieved by small numbers and an acquiescent native population.[87] The model outlined within this paper, of a limited threat and equally limited response, argues that late Roman piracy should be seen in a similar light, rather than as a large-scale, violent precursor to an inevitable and massive Germanic invasion.

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87   e.g. Esmonde Cleary 1989, 204; Higham 1992.

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