Mass Viking grave identified in southern England

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In June 2009 a relief road was being constructed that cut through Ridgeway hill in Weymouth, in the south coast of England. Archaeologists working ahead of the construction discovered what was at first believed to be an Iron Age ritual site.

However, the site was in fact a mass grave containing 54 decapitated young men. Their bodies were neatly stacked together and their heads had been piled to one side of the grave.

Dr Jane Evans and Carolyn Chenery at the NERC Geosciences Laboratory in Nottingham carried out isotope tests of the teeth and found that the grave's occupants were of Scandinavian origin. Further dating placed the massacre to between AD 910 and 1034, taking it past the Iron and Roman ages and placing it towards the end of Britain's Viking/late Anglo-Saxon age. The men were all well-built and were mainly in their late teens and early twenties.

There is strong evidence to suggest that this was a Viking raiding party that was unable to make it back to the ship before being caught by the locals.

The first Viking raid to be recorded in Britain is the attack on the monastery at Lindisfarne, Northumbria, in AD 793. The monastery was not destroyed in this raid, but further attacks in the coming decades did lead to its destruction and the destruction of a number of monasteries along the north coast. This raid conventionally marks the starting point of the Viking age in Britain.

Up until the ninth century, England was split roughly into four main kingdoms: Northumbria, the northern kingdom; East Anglia, the eastern kingdom; Mercia, the western kingdom; and Wessex, the southern kingdom. The Vikings (after raiding the coasts for several decades) started settling in Northumbria and East Anglia, much to the disgust of the Church.

Monks, who were the first to be schooled in reading and writing, were the writers of historical accounts such as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, therefore written accounts from this time demonise Vikings and exaggerate the number and impact of the Viking raids. The monk Ermentarius, for example, wrote that "the number of ships grows and the endless stream of Vikings never ceases; everywhere Christians are the victims of massacre, burning and plundering as the Vikings conquer all in their path and no-one resists them…"

However the Vikings did not plunder and destroy monasteries because of religious differences. During this time the population would have been paying tithes (tax) to the church for land rental, weddings, funerals, blessings, etc. This payment did not always take the form of money, but all of it was stored in the monasteries. The Vikings acquired a lot of booty from these raids, but they also acquired a lot of money through being paid by kings to leave their towns alone.

Of the raids that took place during the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries only a small percentage were actually carried out by Vikings, the name applied to the Scandinavian freebooters active in that period. Many more raids were carried out by Englishmen upon other Englishmen, whether they belonged to different kingdoms or the same kingdom. England was divided into four kingdoms, and neighbouring Scotland, Wales and Ireland were also each divided into several kingdoms. All these kingdoms were constantly raiding each other, and the raids were not only led by kings but also monks from rival monasteries.

The Vikings filtered down into Mercia and Wessex during the late 800s, but their stay in Wessex was brief. In AD 878 King Alfred of Wessex raised an army that was able to push the Viking settlers back past London in the east and Birmingham in the north. The defeat of the rival kingdoms provided the West Saxon royal house the opportunity to extend its power over large parts of what was to become England. It led to the establishment of two kingdoms in place of the previous four: the kingdom of England and The Danelaw. It would not be until AD 1016 that the kingdoms would be united under one king, the Viking Cnut.

Alfred's success can be attributed to his introduction of the Burghal system, which was a network of fortified towns that were spread out at twenty-mile intervals, placed in

strategic positions such as river crossings. These *burhs* could be defended by a small militia, the *fryd*. All the able-bodied men of the kingdom would serve in the militias and they took monthly shifts so that they could still continue with their farming and metal production.

At first the Viking raiders seemed to use their loot to acquire status among their fellow warriors, rather than settling permanently in England, but as time went on they began to buy land and establish themselves in their new homeland. At this time in Britain, kings had the final say in land distribution, awarding estates to loyal followers and monastic communities. When the Vikings decided to settle, a more rapid land division took place as estates were either seized or bought by the Viking jarls (earls), who then redistributed land among themselves and their followers.

The Viking settlement in Britain was only a small part of the trading, raiding and settlement that can be attributed to Scandinavians in the early medieval period. They were legendary seafarers and this enabled them to travel great distances which meant that not only did they visit the immediate European countries, but went much further afield.

Archaeological finds, such as the Vale of York Hoard, shows that the Vikings visited Italy, Greece, Afghanistan and penetrated deep into Russia setting up trading links as they went. The hoard was found near Harrogate in North Yorkshire in 2007. It consisted of a gilt silver vessel, probably made in France or Germany, which had been buried in a lead-lined chest. It contained silver and gold arm and neck rings, brooches and 617 coins that came from all over Europe and the Islamic world.

Evidence that they visited and traded with Asia Minor (today's Turkey) comes from the Gokstad ship that was unearthed in 1880 in Stockholm, Sweden. The vessel contained the bones of a peacock, a bird native to south Asia. They also set their sights on the Atlantic Ocean and discovered Iceland, Greenland and mainland North America, settling in the first two.

The barbarity of the Vikings is what the writers of that period focused on, as it served their own purposes to demonise them, but the interesting thing about the Ridgeway mass graves is it shows how brutal the other side could be. The captured raiders were stripped of any clothing before their execution, thus humiliating them, and then it appears that the captors just went at them with their swords and axes, hacking them as they stood unarmed until they decapitated them. A blow by an axe or sword to each arm would have prevented the victim from being able to raise them again to defend their head and chest and marks left on the arm bones of the victims show that such blows were dealt.

The initial reports of the mass grave said that it contained 51 victims, due to only the heads being counted. After the bones were organised into individual skeletons, it was discovered that the burial contained 54 victims. It is believed that the heads were either kept as trophies or displayed as a warning to others of what the locals would do to future raiders. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle describes the f*ryd* patrolling the coastline to ward off potential raiders.

The captives must have been deliberately placed on Ridgeway hill as it overlooks an ancient roadway, which meant that anyone travelling to or from the coast would see where the Viking raiders were buried. Burials such as these are referred to as heathen burials in descriptions of estate boundaries. They were reserved for those who were regarded as unfit for Christian burial in the churchyard of the parish church. To bury someone on unconsecrated ground and on the very outermost boundary of the parish or estate was seen as a punishment to the eternal soul of the dead person.

For the Viking raiders who met their end on Ridgeway Hill this form of burial was a two-pronged insult, since there were many Vikings who held both pagan and Christian beliefs. It would have been an ignominious end for the pagans and the Christians alike. To die in battle was regarded as a glorious end. The final insult was to be buried without their weapons, since this meant that they would not be able to identify themselves to the gods in the afterlife, or fight alongside them.

It was a brutal death in an age when raiding and piracy were common practices. But within less than a century there would be a Danish king on the throne of England and the Scandinavian languages had become an integral part of the dialects of English. The excavation of the Ridgeway burial site and the subsequent scientific work offers a valuable insight into a period that is still far from fully understood and long subject to misconception because of the slanted accounts of the monks.