

Viking & Anglo-Saxon Science, Knowledge & Belief

A series of five explorations with Max Adams

In the fourth session the focus turns to engineering. The brilliance of Scandinavian boatbuilding is well-known, the high point of Early Medieval craft and skill in wood. Today we'll look at some less well-known aspects of construction in the Viking period.

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 920

Her on þysum gere foran to middum sumera for Eadweard cyning mid fierde to Snotingham, 7 het gewyrcaþ þa burg on suphealfe þære eas, ongean þa oþre, 7 þa brycge ofer Treontan betwix þam twam burgum

Annals of St Bertin 862

Their father Charles caused all the leading men of his realm to assemble about 1st of June, with many workmen and carts, at the place called Pîtres, where the Andelle from one side and the Eure from the other flow into the Seine. By constructing fortifications on the Seine he closed it off to ships sailing up or down the river. This was done because of the Northmen.

Royal Frankish Annals 808

But Godfrid before his return destroyed a trading place on the seashore, in Danish called Reric, which, because of the taxes it paid, was of great advantage to his kingdom. Transferring the merchants from Reric he weighed anchor and came with his whole army to the harbour of Schleswig. There he remained for a few days and decided to fortify the border of his kingdom against Saxony with a rampart, so that a protective bulwark would stretch from the eastern bay, called Ostarsalt, as far as the Western sea, along the entire north bank of the River Eider and broken by a single gate through which wagons and horsemen would be able to leave and enter. After dividing the work among the leaders of his troops he returned home.

Vita Colombae Book 2, Chapter 3

Of Corn sown after Midsummer and reaped in the beginning of the month of August, at the Saint's prayer, while he was residing in the Iouan island.

At another time the saint sent his monks to bring from the little farm of a peasant some bundles of twigs to build a dwelling. When they returned to the saint, with a freight-ship laden with the foresaid bundles of twigs, they told the saint that the poor man was very sorry on account of the loss. The saint immediately gave them these directions, saying, "Lest we do the man any wrong, take to him from us twice three measures of barley, and let him sow it now in his arable land." According to the saint's orders, the corn was sent

and delivered over to the poor man, who was called Findchan, with the above directions. He received them with thanks, but asked, "What good can any corn do, which is sown after midsummer, against the nature of this soil?" But his wife, on the contrary, said, "Do what thou hast been ordered by the saint, to whom the Lord will give whatever he asketh from Him." And the messengers likewise said further, "St. Clolumba, who sent us to thee with this gift, intrusted us also with this form of instruction regarding thy crop, saying, 'Let that man trust in the omnipotence of God; his corn, though sown now, when twelve days of the month of June are passed, shall be reaped in the beginning of the month of August.'" The peasant accordingly ploughed and sowed, and the crop which, against hope, he sowed at the above-mentioned time he gathered in ripe, to the admiration of all his neighbours, in the beginning of the month of August, in that place which is called Delcros.

From Abbo's Wars of Count Odo with the Northmen in the Reign of Charles the Fat

885. The Northmen came to Paris with 700 sailing ships, not counting those of smaller size which are commonly called barques. At one stretch the Seine was lined with the vessels for more than two leagues, so that one might ask in astonishment in what cavern the river had been swallowed up, since it was not to be seen.

In the morning the Northmen, boarding their ships, approached the tower and attacked it [the tower blocked access to the city by the so-called "Great Bridge," which connected the right bank of the Seine with the island on which the city was built. The tower stood on the present site of the Châtelet]. They shook it with their engines and stormed it with arrows. The city resounded with clamor, the people were aroused, the bridges trembled. All came together to defend the tower... There perished many Franks; after receiving wounds they were lavish of life. At last the enemy withdrew, carrying off their dead. The evening came. The tower had been sorely tried, but its foundations were still solid, as were also the narrow bays which surmounted them. The people spent the night repairing it with boards. By the next day, on the old citadel had been erected a new tower of wood, a half higher than the former one. At sunrise the Danes caught their first glimpse of it. Once more the latter engaged with the Christians in violent combat. On every side arrows sped and blood flowed. With the arrows mingled the stones hurled by slings and war-machines; the air was filled with them. The tower which had been built during the night groaned under the strokes of the darts, the city shook with the struggle, the people ran hither and thither, the bells jangled. The warriors rushed together to defend the tottering tower and to repel the fierce assault... the redoubtable Odo who never experienced defeat and who continually revived the spirits of the worn-out defenders [,] ran along the ramparts and hurled back the enemy. On those who were secreting themselves so as to undermine the tower he poured oil, wax, and pitch, which, being mixed and heated, burned the Danes and tore off their scalps. Some of them died; others threw themselves into the river to escape the awful substance. . . .