

The glory that was York

Northumbria and its capital, York, were thought to be in steep decline in the 8th century. But archaeology suggests a flourishing kingdom closely linked to Charlemagne's Europe. One of its chief figures was a great scholar and statesman named Alcuin. Dominic Tweddle reports

In AD 867 the Vikings took the city of York, the royal and ecclesiastical centre of the ancient Kingdom of Northumbria. Alarmed by the loss of their capital city, the two rivals to the Northumbrian throne, Osbert and Aelle, united to attack York. Both rival kings were killed and their army annihilated. The Kingdom of Northumbria was dead.

Modern historians have tended to regard these events as the inevitable ending to a miserable story of bloody civil war, intrigue, murder and economic crisis stretching back over more than a century since Eadberht, the last great King of Northumbria, abdicated to become a monk in AD 758. In a sense this is a rational interpretation of later Northumbrian history, since the only documents that are left from which to piece together the history of the kingdom are fragmentary chronicles. By their very nature these deal in the extremes of triumph and disaster.

There are no extended histories for the later 8th and earlier 9th centuries such as Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (which ends in 731), no charters or archives of the Northumbrian kings, no illuminated manuscripts such as the late 7th/early 8th century Lindisfarne Gospels and the *Codex Amiatinus* - the earliest extant complete Latin bible - and there are no great surviving buildings.

However, before accepting this bleak picture of political and moral decline in Northumbria, it is wise to pause. One great figure for this time and place does survive in the records - Alcuin - preserved for us in his own writings, those of his pupils and in the records of the Carolingian Empire.

Alcuin (c 730/40-804) is barely remembered today. Yet this great teacher from York's Minster school became one of the most influential men of his century, renowned throughout Europe for his learning. He was a principal advisor to the Frankish Emperor Charlemagne, and was later Abbot of Tours. If Northumbria in supposed decline could produce so great a figure, what else might be lost from view? That Alcuin's achievements were unique may be true, but that he was alone in the quality of his education, a single solitary flame in the darkness of a dying kingdom, seems on the face of it unlikely.

Alcuin himself provides us with a lyrical description of his own city of York. It was a city with 'high walls and towers' - an indication, backed up by recent excavations, that the walls of the Roman fortress still stood. York was adorned with the ancient Minster of St Peter with its fine new altar decked with 'gold, silver and jewels' placed on the site of the baptism in 627 of the first Christian king of Northumbria, Edwin (see BA April). There was also a great new church of the Alma Sophia, or Holy Wisdom, perhaps a centrally-planned building like Charlemagne's own palace building at Aachen, although all trace of it has vanished. It too was lavishly furnished, and the works had been supervised by Alcuin himself and his colleague Eanbald. York in Alcuin's time was clearly flourishing.

The library of York's Minster school, compiled mainly by Alcuin's mentor Archbishop Ælberht (767-78), was one of the most extensive in Europe, containing books by authors ranging from Jerome and Athanasius to Gregory the Great, and from John Chrysostom to Aristotle, Virgil, Cicero and Boethius. The curriculum at York was wide. Alongside Latin grammar, rhetoric and time-reckoning, students also learned logic, astronomy, geometry, arithmetic, maybe even history and natural history.

This curriculum was transferred by Alcuin to Charlemagne's court at Aachen and later to Tours, reintroducing books and subjects which had been neglected for centuries. As late as the 830s there were still requests to York from continental Europe for the loan of books.

Cosmopolitan city

Alcuin's elegant account of his own city as a cosmopolitan and urbane place is borne out by archaeology. Rich sculptures, possibly from St Peter's Church, have come from excavations under the Minster. At the confluence of York's two rivers, the Foss and the Ouse, the 7th and 8th century trading settlement has been located with evidence for long-distance trade and local crafts. Several York sites have produced evidence of material wealth in fine objects, some produced locally, some imported from the Continent.

There are also spectacular objects, particularly the late 8th century York Helmet with its perfect balance of form and decoration. The crown-like construction of the helmet is also interesting. One of the earliest services for consecrating Anglo-Saxon kings uses a helmet not a crown. Perhaps the York Helmet was itself royal. The pious inscription on the helmet gives the probable name of the owner, Oshere, the root of whose name - Os - is commonly encountered in the Northumbrian royal dynasty.

The York Helmet bears eloquent witness to the achievements of the metalsmiths of Alcuin's York, but it draws on existing Anglo-Saxon artistic traditions, particularly in the ferocious animals on the ends of the eyebrows and on the nasal. Yet in the years around 800 we also find something new in the material remains from York - innovatory classical motifs reflecting the influence of Carolingian Europe.

On the Continent, the Carolingian period witnessed a renewal of interest in classical art and learning. Charlemagne's great new palace at Aachen was built on classical Roman lines, embellished with sculptures and bronzes which would not have disgraced the Rome of the Caesars. The Aachen church incorporated columns brought from Ravenna. The manuscripts, ivories and metalworking of the new Empire also reinvented classical art, in particular the accurate depiction of the human figure and an interest in the vine scroll and plant ornament beloved of the Romans.

In Northumbria we can see, through archaeological finds, the introduction of these new artistic ideas. The sculptures from York and southern Northumbria employ classically-inspired human figures and naturalistic plant ornament. The very similar sculptures from York Minster, Otley, Croft and elsewhere in the region of York suggest that there was an active patronage of these new artistic ideas.

Classical art

Similar naturalism translated also into small-scale objects such as the Fishergate ring or Poppleton strap-ends. On the Ormside bowl, the plant scrolls sprout naturalistically and are filled with animals and birds which a Carolingian artist would recognise. The discovery of a blue glass stud from York, almost exactly matching the studs on the bowl, reminds us that the bowl could have been made in York.

In the hinterland of York, too, great progress has been made, from the discovery of rich metalwork from rural manors, to the excavation of the aristocratic manorial centre at Flixborough on the south bank of the River Humber (see BA October 1997). Towering over the remote monastery at Masham there was even a triumphal column celebrating not the victories of kings but of Christ and his saints.

Imperial ideas

It is possible to argue that York, like Aachen, was a city with imperial pretensions, with modern new buildings in the classical mode, and fine objects decorated in fashionable new styles. On a smaller scale, what Charlemagne aspired to achieve for the Frankish realm, perhaps the Northumbrian kings wished to achieve in the remote north.

And Alcuin's role? He clearly acted as a bridge between the Carolingian world and southern Northumbria, his letters alone tell us that. In his period York and the surrounding area were linked firmly to the Continent. But perhaps there is more. Behind these interesting parallels may be a controlling intellect with a clear vision of what kings and kingship should achieve for a Christian people. Were ideas conceived first on the small stage of Northumbria then transferred to the larger stage of the Carolingian Empire?

A new examination of Alcuin's writings and the archaeology of York and its hinterland thus forces a radical reinterpretation of the later history of Northumbria. It demonstrates that far from being the decadent descendant of a 'golden age' in the late 7th/early 8th century, later 8th/early 9th century Northumbria was vibrant, full of cultural promise, and wholly integrated into the re-emerging Europe.

Dominic Tweddle is the Chief Executive of Past Forward. An exhibition, 'Alcuin and Charlemagne', is being held at the Yorkshire Museum in York until 26 September.

A book on the exhibition is available from the Museum at £3.95 plus £1 p&p. For further information ring 01904 551800.