

Topics: Sculpture and Viking Age London (St Paul's runestone)

Information for parents and teachers

Sculpture

While vikings are famous for raiding and trading, their settlement in England led to more peaceful co-existence, and this is reflected in stone sculptures influenced by Scandinavian art. In England, these works are nearly always found in association with churches and may commemorate the burials of important people in the community. Some of the vikings who arrived may have already been Christian or converted to christianity. One of the most famous sculptures in England is this runestone discovered in the churchyard of St Paul's cathedral in London in 1852. The runestone reads 'Ginna and Toki had this stone set up'. It shows a creature which maybe a lion or dragon with its front paws entangled with a snake. The Ringerike style is one of a series of Viking Art styles that were introduced to England from the ninth to eleventh centuries. Ringerike style is characterised by plant and animal motifs with extended tendrils and knots, the animals have small heads and slender sinuous bodies and almond shaped eyes. The style takes its name from a region north of Oslo and it was in fashion from c. 980-1070. The runestone at St Paul's Cathedral was probably erected in the early eleventh century, when the Danish king Cnut ruled England from 1016-1035.

Viking Age London

London had been the most important city in Roman Britain and at its height had a population of over 30,000. Much reduced occupation of the site continued into the fifth century. By the sixth century the area of the city was under Saxon control, later in the seventh century, it was incorporated into the growing kingdom of Mercia which would stretch as far north to the River Mersey. London grew in importance as a trading base during the seventh and eighth centuries, and also as a centre for craft. Materials found at the site during this period include pottery, glass, loom weights from cloth production, and metalwork. The settlement was a good source of tax and tolls for the Mercian kings that ruled it, and coins were minted in the settlement. From the early ninth century, London was subject to early viking raids, including major attacks in 842 and 851 when 350 ships are said to have entered the River Thames.

The focus of settlement at this date was the Strand area of around 50-60 hectares called *Lundenwic*, rather than inside the old Roman walls. In 871 vikings are thought to have established an over-wintering camp in the old Roman walls, which was where the cathedral of London was situated, and they may have drawn tribute from the neighbouring settlement. Alfred the Great seized control of London in 886, out of Viking control, and he then passed it into the care of his son-in-law Aethelred of Mercia (There is some suggestion that this may have represented a gift following the marriage of his daughter Aethelflaed). At this time the old Roman walls seem refortified and the ditches were re-dug making the old Roman area of London the focus of the growing settlement of *Lundenburh*. The core of what would later become the city of London, developed at the western side of the old Roman fortifications, close to the cathedral. After Aethelred's death, London was taken under the control of Edward the Elder and it was ruled by successive kings of Wessex, although it was not yet established

as their capital. Various law codes and charters were issued from the town which indicate its growing significance.

London grew rapidly in the tenth century, coins were minted here and the names of various moneyers can be identified. The settlement spread to the eastern half of the old Roman fortifications, and there were other associated settlements such as Southwark. There is evidence of dense settlement around Cheapside and Eastcheap (both were market areas) with an organised system of streets, plots and a waterfront. All sorts of goods were traded through the port, from slaves, to agricultural products and various manufactures. By the end of the tenth century London was clearly one of the most important settlements in Britain. At its peak London accounted for 40 percent of Anglo-Saxon coinage in circulation. The city would be a site of conflict during the Danish conquest of England, and it would be an important power centre for King Cnut.