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Feeding the *micel here* in England c865–878

Shane McLeod

**Abstract**

With the question of the probable size of ninth-century Viking armies remaining unresolved, this paper examines one of the primary impediments to fielding a large army: the availability of food. Perhaps the best documented Viking army of the century, the great army during its campaign in England, is the focus of this investigation. It is argued that historians have often ignored probable sources of food for the army, particularly the likelihood that food was regularly provided as part of peace treaties, and have consequently overstated the difficulty of maintaining a large army in hostile territory. Furthermore, the role that the kingdoms conquered by the great army and subsequently held on its behalf by puppet administrations may have played has also not been considered.

Despite some contemporary claims to the contrary, it has been argued that the Viking armies that operated in western Europe during the ninth century could not have numbered more than 1000 men.¹ The greatest obstacle to keeping an army numbering more than a few hundred men in the field was feeding it, and it is this logistical problem that forms the basis of the small army theory. Peter Sawyer first made this observation almost half a century ago, and the theory has since been most fully developed by Carroll Gillmor, examining Viking activities in Francia. With the question over the size of the *micel here* (great army) that landed in East Anglia in late 865 unresolved, this paper will examine the opportunities that the leaders of the great army had of provisioning their troops.²

Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman sources of the ninth to twelfth centuries provide few specific details about the size of the great army, except that it was large. The term ‘*micel sciphere*’ (great ship-army) was

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¹ This consideration often then impacts upon the estimates of likely Scandinavian settlers in conquered territory, as it may be argued that if the armies were small then a large subsequent migration of settlers was required to give rise to the number of Norse-influenced place names from an area like England’s Danelaw; see N Lund, ‘The settlers: where do we get them from - and do we need them?’ 147-171 in H Bekker-Nielsen, P Foote and O Olsen (ed), *Proceedings of the Eighth Viking Congress: Arhus 24-31 August 1977* (Odense, 1981).

² For example in three of the most recent biographies of King Alfred, D Sturdy, *Alfred the Great* (London, 1995) 111, argues that the great army would have numbered less than 1000 men; A P Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford, 1999) 21, supports a great army of over 1000 men; and R Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship, and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1998) 113, suggests that the great army may have initially numbered ‘in excess of 5000 combatants’.
used to describe the Viking army that destroyed Winchester in 860, while the fleet of 350 ships that sacked London and Canterbury in 851 is described as a ‘micelne here’ (large army), so presumably the great army was considered to be at least as large as these. Varying from implicit trust of these sources’ accounts of fleets numbering hundreds and thousands of men killed in battle, to complete scepticism of the sources, estimates by historians of the twentieth century and beyond have varied from a great army of a few hundred men to thousands. P H Sawyer has eventually settled on a great army of ‘not greater than 1000 men’, having initially claimed that Viking armies would not have been larger than a few hundred men. Following Sawyer’s lead, David Sturdy also favours a great army numbering less than 1000, while Carroll Gillmor believes that this was true of all Viking armies of the era. The large army argument was prevalent before Sawyer’s revision, and has more recently been supported by Niels Lund, Else Roesdahl, Alfred Smyth, Simon Keynes and Richard Abels. Whilst the great army should not be thought of as a homogenous group, with the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle providing examples of it both breaking up and being supplemented, the fact that coin hoard deposits peak between 865-875 indicates a great deal of uncertainty within England during the great army’s campaign, and suggests that this army was larger than those

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3 C Plummer, *Two of the Saxon Chronicles, Parallel: With Supplementary Extracts from the Others* I (Oxford, 1892) 68 (860). References to the Anglo Saxon Chronicle will be given as the year date listed in the chronicle, but in my text the actual calendar year will be used. For the dates of the Chronicle entries during the great army’s campaign see M L R Beaven, ‘The beginning of the year in the Alfredian Chronicle (866-7)’, *English Historical Review* XXXIII (1918) 328-342. The ‘A’ text of the Chronicle will be used unless indicated.

4 Plummer, 64 (851). A fleet of this size is likely to be an exaggeration.

5 For example, the Chronicle claims that there were ‘fela þusenda ofslægenra’ (many thousands killed) at the battle of Ashdown: Plummer, 70 (871); M Swanton (ed), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, (London, 2000) (hereafter ASC) 70. Swanton is useful in that he clearly indicates which parts of an entry belong to which actual year.


8 Sturdy, 111.


which came immediately before and after it.\textsuperscript{12} As such, for the sake of this paper it will be assumed that the great army was large, and it therefore needed access to large amounts of food.\textsuperscript{13}

Speaking of Francia, Gillmor states that even if an army only numbered in the hundreds it would have been unable to remain in one area for long, and that ‘prolonged expeditions would have been difficult’.\textsuperscript{14} Yet the great army managed to remain in the area of its winter camps for months at a time and remain in England for 12 years, suggesting that it was either very small, or that it utilised systematic methods of acquiring food. That the great army could conquer and control three of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and come close to conquering the fourth with only a few hundred men is virtually untenable, so it must have succeeded in regularly acquiring food.\textsuperscript{15} It has been estimated that an army of 1000 men would require two tons of unmilled flour per day, plus fodder for horses and fresh water,\textsuperscript{16} and such requirements in part dictated the great army’s tactic of moving its winter camp each year, as it is supposed that they would have exhausted the food supplies of the area they were in.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{ASC}, 72 (871); 72-74 (875); 74-76 (878); 76 (879); H R Loyn, \textit{The Vikings in Britain} (London, 1977) 57. Although the reasons behind the burial of any individual coin hoard is impossible to determine, such a large number of hoards at this time is surely significant. This is particularly true of hoards whose dates and locations correspond to the winter camps at Reading (870-871), Repton (873-874), Gloucester (877), Chippenham (878), and Cirencester, where the great army stayed in 878-879 before settling in East Anglia: see M Biddle and J Blair, ‘The Hook Norton hoard of 1848: a Viking burial from Oxfordshire?’, \textit{Oxoniensia} 52 (1987) 186-195. Furthermore, the comparative lack of activity on the continent during the great army’s campaign indicates that much of Viking activity was focussed on England during this period: N P Brooks, ‘England in the ninth century: the crucible of defeat’, \textit{Transactions of the Royal Historical Society} 29 (1979) 1-20, at p 8.

\textsuperscript{13} The suggestion at Roesdahl, 234, of 2000-3000 men seems reasonable, although it is possible that for major battles the Army may have been supplemented; and the suggestion at Abels, \textit{Alfred the Great}, 113, of over 5000 may have been possible, for example when the summer army joined the great army in 871.

\textsuperscript{14} Gillmor, 108: ‘These computations [dietary requirements] surely indicate that Sawyer is right in maintaining that Viking war bands numbered in the hundreds instead of the thousands’.

\textsuperscript{15} Of course many historians from Sawyer on have argued just that, but see Brooks, 1-20.

\textsuperscript{16} J Peddie, \textit{Alfred Warrior King} (Stroud, 1999) 58; Abels, \textit{Alfred the Great}, 259. These figures are, however, a little misleading as it is likely that the Vikings would have often done with less than the usual dietary requirements but then feasted when possible; see Gillmor, 108.

\textsuperscript{17} This correlation between moving winter camps and food supplies is noted by Beaven, 331; Roesdahl, 249; P Griffith, \textit{The Viking Art of War} (London, 1995) 116, amongst others. Æthelwærd also noted that the great army moved ‘after the
One way in which the great army was able to obtain some of its required food was to seize royal estates as its winter quarters. Royal estates contained large stores of food for the winter, collected as feorm (food rent) from the surrounding countryside, and the great army usually moved into its quarters in late autumn or early winter when the stores are likely to have been full. The feorm was the amount in kind owed by landowners for the support of the royal household, and this produce was delivered to the local royal estate. By moving after harvest, the great army may have been able to access grain supplies both immediately prior to departure and then again soon after arrival. During its campaign the great army seized the royal estates of Reading and Chippenham and attacked Wilton, while it is possible that York, Thetford, and Repton also acted as collection points for feorm. As it is difficult to establish how large the royal household was during the ninth century, it is also difficult to establish how much food would have been kept at royal estates. However, if the king were accompanied by the ten or so ealdormen of Wessex plus the two of Kent, and presumably some of their personal retainers, as well as scribes, messengers, priests, the queen and her attendants, then the amount of food would not have been insubstantial. The consistent targeting of royal estates by the great army suggests that the amount of food contained therein was worth its effort. A comparison may be made with Francia where armies, possibly at times consisting of 5000 or more men, were provisioned by stores held in royal estates and monasteries, and Charlemagne expected at least the monastery of St Quentin to be able to provide provisions for three

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20. Reading and Chippenham are named as royal estates by Asser, ‘Life of King Alfred’ ed and trans S Keynes and M Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser’s ‘Life of King Alfred’ and other contemporary sources* (Harmondsworth, 1983) 78, 83. For Wilton see P Sawyer, ‘The royal tun in pre-conquest England’ 273-299 in P Wormald (ed), *Ideal and reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon society* (Oxford, 1983) at p 283. It is not known whether York, Thetford or Repton were royal estates, but as the main towns of Northumbria and East Anglia, the former are likely to have had substantial food stores, while Repton had royal status as the burial place of at least three Mercian kings including St Wigstan. C Hart, *The Danelaw* (London, 1992) 251, suggests that Repton was part of a royal estate.

21. Loyn, 75.

months.\(^{23}\) Yet regardless of the amount of food, such stores are likely to have soon been exhausted by an army of over 1000 men, leading Abels to conclude that ‘a constant stream of foragers must have poured out of the Viking camp scouring the frozen countryside for provisions’.\(^{24}\)

An incident near the great army’s winter camp of 870-871 at Reading suggests that the foraging tactics of the Vikings were similar to those employed earlier by the Roman army. After establishing a new camp, Roman foraging parties would be sent out, while a Viking force left Reading even before its additional defences of earthen ramparts had been completed.\(^{25}\) Caesar’s experience in Gaul shows that the collection of provisions was a dangerous exercise, and for Roman armies foraging was often a major military exercise involving many troops.\(^{26}\) As Vercingetorix ambushed Caesar’s foraging parties,\(^{27}\) so a force commanded by ealdorman Æthelwulf ambushed two Viking jarls and their men after they had left Reading to plunder, leaving one of the jarls dead and the Vikings defeated.\(^{28}\) Indeed a Viking winter camp served the same purpose as the operational base that would be established by a Roman army to ravage the surrounding countryside.\(^{29}\)

Yet it has often been assumed that the great army’s survival was totally dependant on such foraging, virtually ignoring two important sources of food, and failing to note the implications of the fact that the great army was not always in hostile territory. It is well documented that during the reign of Æthelred (978-1016), Viking armies not only demanded large cash payments, but were also provided with food.\(^{30}\) In 994 a fleet said to consist of 94 ships had to be provisioned, and resources were obtained from all over England.\(^{31}\) Abels goes so far as to surmise that ‘[o]ne might suspect

\(^{23}\) *Ibid*, 149-150.

\(^{24}\) Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 132. A lease exists which states that the land ‘is now completely stocked, and when my lord first let it to me it was quite without stock, and stripped bare by heathen men’, showing how a Viking army could deplete an area of food. The chronology suggests that the reference is to a period during Alfred’s reign: D Whitelock (ed), *English Historical Documents* 500-1042 (London, 1955) 501.


\(^{27}\) Caesar, VII:16.3, 141.

\(^{28}\) ASC, 70 (871).

\(^{29}\) Roth, 150.

\(^{30}\) See, specifically, *ASC* E, 144 (1013); Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 263 for general discussion.

that even when we do not hear tell of demands for supplies, they were nonetheless made and met’, and I suggest that this applies equally to 865-878.\textsuperscript{32} If Viking armies of the later period demanded provisions as part of a peace deal, then there is no reason to think that the earlier great army would not also have demanded food, as in both cases feeding the army would have been an urgent necessity. Indeed there is evidence that food was provided as part of peace treaties in Francia from the early 860s, and as the same personnel are likely to have fought in both areas it would be unusual if they did not demand similar terms.\textsuperscript{33}

Every year in which the great army was active in hostile territory it succeeded in securing a peace treaty, and it is likely to have gained additional food as part of these treaties. Such payments of food would also help to explain why the army moved from one kingdom to another each year. Although foraging may have exhausted the local food supplies, the great army camped at Nottingham in Mercia in 867-868 was not going to affect food supplies at Shrewsbury on the Welsh border. But if food had to be provided as part of a peace settlement it may have been gathered from much of the kingdom as happened in 994, so if the army remained in the same kingdom for a second year it may have been difficult to obtain the necessary food as part of another treaty.\textsuperscript{34} Although he acknowledges that food could have been included in peace treaties, Smyth still has mass foraging expeditions being sent out by the great army at London in 871-872, despite the fact that a treaty was concluded with Wessex immediately

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{32} Also noted in Halsall, 155.
\footnote{33} The Annals of St Bertin record that Viking bands were provided with food in Francia in 861, 864, and 869. The Annals of St-Bertin trans J L Nelson, Ninth-Century Histories, Volume I (Manchester, 1991) 95, 112, 164. For possible numismatic evidence that members of the great army had campaigned in Francia in the early 860s see Smyth, King Alfred the Great, 19. It should also be noted that Viking activities in Francia lessened during the great army’s campaign in England, suggesting that most were engaged in that enterprise.
\footnote{34} The only year in which this did not hold true was 872 when the great army started the year in London in southern Mercia, then moved to suppress the Northumbrian rebellion before settling in Torksey in northern Mercia, and then went to Repton in central Mercia in 873. However, although in Mercia, Torksey is described in ASC, 72 (873), as being in Lindsey, an ancient kingdom probably absorbed by Mercia in the eighth century, and possibly administered separately and expected to fully fund any peace deal. The great army could also have brought food with them from Northumbria after suppressing the revolt: S Keynes, ‘Lindsey’ 289 in J Blair, M Lapidge, S Keynes, D Scragg (ed), The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England (Oxford, 1999).
\end{footnotes}
before the move to London, and another was secured from Mercia while the army was at London.\footnote{ASC, 72 (872); Smyth, \textit{King Alfred the Great}, 23. Although \textit{ASC} and Asser fail to mention a peace treaty between Wessex and the great army in 871, Æthelward says that one did take place: Æthelward, 40. Smyth suggests that food was part of the peace treaty at Nottingham but does not mention it in connection with the other treaties.} The events at Reading clearly show that foraging parties were sent out but in this, the only recorded instance, it was done immediately upon arrival. It is possible that after seizing a winter base and sending out a force to explore the area, seize food, and terrify the local population, local submission or at least acquiescence would soon have followed. However, there is also no reason to believe that a peace treaty with the army in its winter quarters consisted of a single one-off payment, and in the case of food it may have been provided in an ongoing manner.\footnote{ASC, 74 (878); \textit{‘depopulataque est ab eis pars maior provinciae illius’}: Æthelward, 41.} While the great army dominated the surrounding area and remained unopposed it could continue to demand food.

As a royal estate was a focal point within the immediate area, its capture would have helped the army to dominate that area and gain its submission. Such submission may have also resulted in food being provided even if the whole kingdom did not submit. This evidently happened around Chippenham in 878 when many of the West-Saxons submitted to the great army, and it may also be what Æthelweard describes as the great army ravaging the area around Wareham in 875-876.\footnote{Asser, 84-85.} How this food was delivered to the great army in residence may be indicated by the events of 878. After the battle of Edington, Asser states that Alfred killed all of the men, horses and cattle found outside of the great army’s camp, which helped to end the siege.\footnote{See, eg, Keynes and Lapidge, \textit{Alfred the Great}, 249 note 107; \textit{ASC}, 77 note 8; Plummer, II, 94.} It is assumed that this camp was Chippenham, which had been captured earlier that year.\footnote{Horses would also provide a high protein diet.} If submission to the great army included the provision of food, then it is likely that the great army had been given livestock that were then kept in pens outside the camp, providing a source of high protein food immediately at hand.\footnote{ASC, 77 (872); Smyth, \textit{King Alfred the Great}, 23. Although \textit{ASC} and Asser fail to mention a peace treaty between Wessex and the great army in 871, Æthelweard says that one did take place: Æthelward, 40. Smyth suggests that food was part of the peace treaty at Nottingham but does not mention it in connection with the other treaties.} Although this is the only reference to Alfred destroying his enemies’ food supplies during the great army’s campaign, it was a tactic that he was to use again when a new great army threatened Wessex and English Mercia from 892 to

\[\text{\footnotesize \textendash\textendash\textendash\textendash\textendash\textendash\textendash}\]
Indeed Alfred went as far as to burn the corn, kill the cattle, and eat up all of the available food in a scorched earth policy designed to prevent the Vikings from having access to provisions while they were under siege at Chester in 893.

An indication of the quantity of food available in Wessex may be inferred from the *Burghal Hidage*, a plan of the fortifications of Wessex and the men required to man them. Although in its current form the plan can be dated to c 914, on the basis some references in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Asser, along with an inscription at Shaftesbury mentioned by Malmesbury and then discovered in 1902, it is thought to be based on measures implemented by Alfred as early as 880. When speaking of the difficulties in provisioning a great army numbering over 1000 men, it must be remembered that according to the *Burghal Hidage* the people of the area around Wareham were responsible for supporting the 1600 men assigned to garrison the *burh*. If they were able to produce enough food to meet this need c 880, then it is difficult to argue that they would not have been able to

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41 ASC, 84-89. This new great army had originally arrived in Wessex after the original army had agreed to peace terms following the battle of Edington. It returned to Francia without engaging in battle, probably taking with it any of Guthrum’s men not happy to settle down in East Anglia: ASC, 76 (879-880).

42 ASC, 88 (894).

43 Existing in a number of versions in seven manuscripts, the *Burghal Hidage* lists 33 *burhs* (fortified places) and the number of *hides* (a unit of land assessment) allocated to their defence, with an explanation of how many men were required for a length of wall and how many men each hide was expected to contribute. A translation is provided in *Burghal Hidage* ed and trans S Keynes and M Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 193-194. For detailed commentary see D Hill, ‘The Burghal Hidage: the establishment of a text’, *Medieval Archaeology* 13 (1969) 84-92.

44 Hill, ‘The Burghal Hidage’, 91: based on the knowledge that Edward the Elder retook Buckingham from Scandinavian settlers in that year. For the view that the *Burghal Hidage* texts actually date from 886-890 and that Edward merely retook Buckingham in 914, see R H C Davis, ‘Alfred and Guthrum’s frontier’, *The English Historical Review* 97 (1982) 803-810 at p 807-809. For a view that the *Burghal Hidage* was compiled to be used for the shiring of Mercia, see D Hill, ‘The shiring of Mercia - again’ 144-159 in N J Higham and D H Hill (ed), *Edward the Elder 899-924* (London, 2001).

45 For example, one of the *Burghal Hidage* *burhs*, Chichester, was operational by 894: ASC, 88 (895); Asser, 102, speaks of Alfred commanding *burhs* to be built.

46 William of Malmesbury, *Chronicle of the Kings of England* ed and trans J A Giles and J Sharpe, *William of Malmesbury’s Chronicle of the Kings of England: from the earliest period to the reign of king Stephen* (London, 1847) 186. For the discovery of the Shaftesbury dedication and a likely reconstruction see Sturdy, 189. Interestingly the wording of the reconstruction is similar but not identical to that attested by Malmesbury. The inscription says that the *burh* was built in 880.


48 *Burghal Hidage*, 193.
do so in 875-876 during the great army’s occupation, and it has been shown that the population of urban centres in Wessex was well fed by the surrounding countryside specifically producing for the urban market.\textsuperscript{49} If the ravaging around Wareham mentioned by Æthelweard was not actually the systematic supply of provisions to the great army, then the Burghal Hidage suggests that the food would have been available to seize. Perhaps another indication of the relative abundance of food available in England at this time is that the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle does not record any famines during the time of the great army’s campaign.\textsuperscript{50}

Of course, the great army was not always operating in hostile territory and as such would not always have had to seize, forage or demand food. Once a kingdom was conquered, an Anglo-Saxon was appointed to rule on the great army’s behalf before they were ready to settle that kingdom, so Egbert and then Ricsig ruled on behalf of the great army in Northumbria from late 866 to 874,\textsuperscript{51} Oswald and Æthelræd may have ruled East Anglia from 869 to 879,\textsuperscript{52} and Ceolwulf II ruled Mercia from 874 to 877.\textsuperscript{53} In all of these instances, there is nothing to suggest that the governance of these kingdoms was radically changed, and in the matter of provisions the movement of the great army in 872 appears to be telling. Although the Chronicle merely informs us that the army went to Northumbria before wintering in Torksey in northern Mercia, two later sources explain that the Northumbrian client king Egbert and archbishop Wulfer had been expelled by the Northumbrians.\textsuperscript{54} This Northumbrian


\textsuperscript{50} Famines and pestilence are at other times recorded, eg in 896 when it is stated that pestilence amongst men and cattle caused more problems than the Vikings: ASC 87-88 (897).

\textsuperscript{51} ASC, 68 (867); 74 (874).

\textsuperscript{52} ASC, 70 (870); 76 (880). Oswald and Æthelræd are only know from coin issues: M Dolley, Viking Coins of the Danelaw and of Dublin (London, 1965) 16; M Blackburn, ‘Expansion and control: aspects of Anglo-Scandinavian minting south of the Humber’ 125-142 in J Graham-Campbell, R Hall, J Jesch, and D N Parsons (ed), Vikings and the Danelaw. Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Viking Congress (Oxford, 2001) at p 127. Blackburn suggests that Oswald and Æthelræd ruled East Anglia after Edmund but ‘before Scandinavian control was fully established’, but this is unlikely as it would present a very different scenario from what appears to have happened in Northumbria and Mercia.

\textsuperscript{53} ASC, 72 (874); 74 (877). The great army settled eastern Mercia in 877, leaving Ceolwulf with western Mercia.

\textsuperscript{54} ASC, 72 (873); Symeon of Durham, Historia Dunelmensis Ecclesiae Libri I-IV ed T Arnold, Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia 1 (Wiesbaden, 1965) 55-56; Roger of Wendover, Flores Historiarum ed and trans M Paris and J A Giles, Roger of Wendover’s Flowers of History: Comprising the History of England from the Descent of the Saxons to A.D. 1235 (London, 1849) 190.
revolt against its authority prompted the great army to make the long journey from London to York to suppress it, presumably delaying any plans to attempt the conquest of Wessex or Mercia. Having installed Ricsig as a new client king at York and recalling Wulfer, the great army then moved to Torksey, which was not only threatening to the Mercian heartland, but also close enough to York to keep a closer watch on developments and quickly respond to any further rebellion. Presumably York was considered to be secure before the army later moved to Repton.

The speed with which the great army responded to this crisis indicates the importance of Northumbria to it. Although the rebellion was no doubt vexing, it is also possible that many members of the army already had plans to eventually settle in Northumbria, and there is the possibility that there was already a Viking garrison there. However, captured kingdoms like Northumbria may have been crucial to the great army’s continuing campaign as a source of supplies. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that part of Ceolwulf’s agreement with the great army in 874 was that ‘he himself should be ready with all who would follow him, at the service of the raiding army’. While there is no indication of what this service may have entailed, there is no reason to assume that the collection of feorm stopped when the client king was installed, and this food is likely to have been collected on behalf of the great army as a form of tribute. Abbo says

55 Symeon, Historia Dunelmensis Ecclesiæ, 56; Roger of Wendover, 207. Egbert conveniently died at this time: Symeon of Durham, Historia Regum ed T Arnold, Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia II (Wiesbaden, 1965) 111. According to Roger of Wendover, 209, his death was caused by grief.

56 It also makes the notion that they were not interested in permanent conquest before the mid 870s nonsensical, as suggested by S Coupland, ‘The Vikings in Francia and Anglo-Saxon England to 911’ 190-201 in R McKitterick (ed), The New Cambridge Medieval History II, c.700-c.900. (Cambridge, 1995) at p 199.

57 Abbo of Fleury, Passio Sancti Eadmundi ed T Arnold, Memorialis of St. Edmund’s Abbey (Wiesbaden, 1965) 9, says that when the Viking leader Ivar left Northumbria for the conquest of East Anglia in 869, another leader, Ubba, remained behind. It is unlikely that a leader would have remained in a newly conquered kingdom without a sizeable force. Similarly, G Gaimar, Estorie des Engles ed and trans C T Martin and T D Hardy, Lestorie des Engles: Solum la Translacion Maistre Geoffrei Gaimar (Nendeln, 1966), 91 lines 2839-2840, says that when the great army left York for Nottingham in 867 a garrison was left behind.

58 ‘he geare ware mid him sylfum. 7 mid eallum pam be him ge læstan wolden to þæs heres þærfe’: Plummer, É, 73 (874); ASC, 73. Asser, Æthelweard and all ASC recensions except A name Ceolwulf as the new Mercian king.

59 It is unlikely that Anglo-Saxon troops would have been provided without comment by either ASC or Asser. However, it is a possibility as Gaimar, 92 lines 2861-2866, says that Northumbrians and Mercians joined the great army in its attack on East Anglia in 869. Although it is possible that the conquered Northumbrians were forced to supply some troops, it would be surprising if the supposedly unconquered Mercians did, unless it was part of the peace treaty reached at the end
that when the great army moved to East Anglia in 869, its leader Ivar demanded that Edmund become his under king and share the hereditary wealth of the kingdom with the army, and this would presumably include the king’s right to *feorm*. 60

In relation to client kings, Lesley Abrams asks ‘[w]as such a policy adopted in order to ensure continuity of government, or to harness existing arrangements to new purposes under new leadership?’ 61 I would argue that it was for both. The charters and coins issued by Ceolwulf II indicate that that the administration of Mercia continued in a seemingly normal way, 62 but the condition of his leadership mentioned by the Chronicle, like those demanded of Edmund according to Abbo, indicate that the wealth of the kingdom was now to be shared with the great army. Faced with food supply problems, it would be surprising if the Viking leaders were not extracting as much food from their client kingdoms as possible, and it is quite likely that the army would have increased the demands for food during the years that it resided in a puppet kingdom. The troop numbers of *Burghal Hidage* strongly suggest that food demands beyond the regular provision of *feorm* could have been met. It is quite possible that the great army rushed back to restore its rule in Northumbria in 872 because otherwise it might have starved.

Following this logic of easy food supplies being available in conquered kingdoms, it is likely that the great army moved to Cambridge on the East Anglian border in 874 as it was in a conquered kingdom with a puppet administration. This would have allowed the army to regroup and collect food in a non-hostile location after the apparent losses at Repton and the departure of Halfdan with a sizeable part of the army. 63 Although moving to Northumbria would have provided similar advantages, and indeed Halfdan did just that, for the rest of the army Northumbria was too

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60 ‘*atque idciro mandat ut cum eo antiques thesaurus et paternas divitias sug eo regnaturus dividias*’: Abbo of Fleury, 11.
62 For a charter see Whitelock, 491. For coins see Stenton, 252 note 1.
63 A mass grave has been excavated, containing the remains of at least 264 people, most of whom are believed to have been members of the great army: see M Biddle and B Kjølbye-Biddle, ‘Repton and the “great heathen army”’, 873-4’ 45-96 in Graham-Campbell et al, *Vikings and the Danelaw*, at p 68. The great army split after conquering Mercia in 874, with Halfdan taking part of the army into Northumbria, settling it in 876: *ASC*, 72-74. That such a large number of men died and yet the great army was still able to split, with one part settling Northumbria and the other eventually settling East Anglia, suggests that the great army was indeed large.
far from the final battle ground, Wessex. Remaining in the recently conquered kingdom of Mercia may have been untenable, as it is likely to have been short of food after the army had spent a winter there, and they may also have wanted to ensure a smooth transition to the rule of Ceolwulf. A similar logic of regrouping and easy food supplies can be applied to the move back to York after the siege at Nottingham in 867,\(^{64}\) and to Gloucester in Mercia in 877\(^{65}\) after the army had left Wessex following the loss of the fleet.\(^{66}\)

Not only would the conquered kingdoms provide a safe haven with ready supplies of food whenever the great army needed to pause and regroup, but food could then have been taken back into hostile territory. That the great army remained encamped at Nottingham during an unsuccessful siege by armies from both Mercia and Wessex, strongly suggests that they had enough food supplies within Nottingham to be able to remain inside. Although the sources do not state how long the siege lasted, it would be surprising if the king of Wessex went to the trouble of marching an army into Mercia at the Mercians’ request just to turn around and go home almost immediately after it had arrived.\(^{67}\) As such, the siege could be expected to have lasted for at least two weeks, and feeding any army larger than a few dozen men for two weeks or more, cut off from food supplies, is likely to have been extremely difficult.\(^{68}\) However if the Army brought food with them from Northumbria, that would have augmented whatever it had been able to seize or gain as tribute after arriving at Nottingham.\(^{69}\) Similarly, food could have been transported overland from conquered kingdoms to Reading in 870, Torksey in 872, and Chippenham in 878. Although the move to Wareham in 875 also originated in a conquered kingdom, the distance travelled by the great army would make it unlikely that food would have been transported as well, whereas the distances involved in the other journeys were relatively small.\(^{70}\)

\(^{64}\) ASC, 70 (869).

\(^{65}\) Æthelweard, 42, names Gloucester as the base.

\(^{66}\) ASC, 74 (877).

\(^{67}\) For possible archaeological evidence of the defences present at Nottingham at the time of the siege see R Hall, ‘Anglo-Scandinavian urban development in the east Midlands’ 143-155 in Graham-Campbell et al, Vikings and the Danelaw, at p 146.

\(^{68}\) The sources provide no information on the length of the sieges at Nottingham, Wareham, or Exeter, however the siege in 878 that effectively ended the great army’s campaign is said to have lasted 14 days: ASC, 76 (878).

\(^{69}\) Neither of the primary sources states how long the great army had been at Nottingham before the siege began.

\(^{70}\) A rider could travel approximately 50 km per day on the same horse, or 80 km if they changed horses: see Gillmor, 105. These figures will be used for all subsequent reckonings of journey duration. The journey from Cambridge to Wareham would be at least 210 km, or a four day ride.
Although Gillmor has convincingly demonstrated the difficulty of transporting food overland, particularly for journeys lasting more than two days, the use of ships would have been the most obvious way to transport food over long distances. If, as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle informs us, men could be brought in on ships to reinforce the army in 871, and to open a second front in 878, and doubtless on many other occasions missed by the Wessex-based sources, then why could food not be transported in the same way, or even at the same time? Such a supply of provisions, while highly practical and effective, was probably considered to be mundane and unlikely to interest a chronicler and would therefore go unrecorded. For a people who, as merchants, were familiar with transporting goods by ship, and who could travel by ship largely unopposed, how to feed the campaigning army would surely have been obvious. As such Northumbria and East Anglia provided another important element in the campaign, a safe harbour for Viking ships. Both Abbo of Fleury and Gaimar indicate that a Viking garrison was left in Northumbria, and troops left behind in conquered territory would not only have been able to ensure the continued compliance of the puppet administration and the collection of supplies, but could also protect the ships. The notion that at any time the great army would have been left in hostile territory without recourse to its ships is at odds with what we know from other Viking campaigns.

71 Gillmor, 106-107. However, on a journey of only one or two days the great army may have decided that it was worth taking food, if only to eat on the journey. Considering that it was able to travel the 210km from Cambridge to Wareham without being opposed, it would appear that the Anglo-Saxons had difficulty in mobilising an army quickly.

72 ASC, 72 (871); 74-76 (878). Although neither ASC nor Asser specifies that the 878 attack on Devon was coordinated with Guthrum’s move to Chippenham (although stating that the leader was a brother of Ivar and Halfdan is certainly suggestive), it would be an amazing coincidence if it was not: see Smyth, Scandinavian Kings, 248-249. Similarly, the arrival of another great army soon after Guthrum’s defeat at Chippenham suggests that it may have arrived either as reinforcements for another attempt at conquering Wessex, or to help Guthrum control Wessex if he had won the battle of Edington.

73 For the Scandinavians’ extensive trade networks and the importance of ships in commerce see J Graham-Campbell (ed), Cultural Atlas of the Viking World (New York, 1994) 78-88. The only mention in ASC of the ship army being opposed was in 875: ASC, 74. However, once again we have to be cautious of the fact that the sources originated in Wessex and are therefore more likely to record such instances involving that kingdom.

74 York may have had something akin to the Viking base (longphoirt) at Dublin: see D Ó Corráin, ‘Ireland, Wales, Man, and the Hebrides’ 83-109 in P Sawyer (ed), The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings (Oxford, 2001) at p 88. Suggested by Smyth, King Alfred the Great, 30.

75 For example Abbo of Fleury, 9-10, says that when Ivar arrived in East Anglia he left men to guard the ships and that this was customary for the ‘Danes’. Similarly,
Instead, it is more realistic to suppose that ships were based in the conquered kingdoms, and were used to move troops and supplies around England.\(^\text{76}\) When on campaign, the land army appears to have been in close contact with the ship army, allowing the co-ordinated attacks described by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Asser.\(^\text{77}\)

The use of the fleet in 876 is illuminating. The great army managed to march from Cambridge to Wareham unchallenged, presumably seizing food along the way but not being hindered by having to carry provisions. At Wareham it was joined by the ship army, which could have brought provisions from East Anglia. Later in the year, the Viking leader Guthrum honoured Alfred’s treaty at Exeter after his fleet had been lost, having ignored the previous treaty reached at Wareham. This may not only have been a case of not having enough troops to withstand a siege, but perhaps more likely of not having adequate food. The mounted component of the great army had undoubtedly had to get to Exeter as quickly as possible to avoid Alfred’s pursuit, and therefore is unlikely to have been carrying excess food supplies.\(^\text{78}\) But Æthelweard tells us that the great army ravaged the area around Wareham before it agreed to Alfred’s peace treaty, thereby gaining food.\(^\text{79}\) However, the fleet was unlikely to be hampered by pursuit and therefore it may be expected that it was carrying food supplies. With the fleet and these likely food supplies sunk, Guthrum had little choice but to agree to peace, as indicated by Gaimar: ‘Therefore, when they could hold out no longer, they held a parley to save themselves’.\(^\text{80}\) The most plausible reason for the army being able to ‘hold out no longer’ is that it had run out of food and had no way of getting more with Alfred and his troops in 894 Vikings were defeated by Alfred when carrying their plunder overland to meet their ships: *ASC* E, 85 (894).

The port of Harwich (*here wic*, army settlement) in East Anglia may have been such a base. Hart, *The Danelaw*, 37, suggests that its name originates with its use by the great army after settlement in 880, but it could equally have been established after East Anglia was conquered in 869-870 and subsequently used as an embarkation point for food and troops. *ASC*, 74, and Plummer, 74, in the entry for 876 refer to the *sciphere* (ship army), as distinct from the *here* or land army, indicating that they were regarded as two separate entities that worked together.

Namely the arrival of the summer army on the Thames in 871 to help the great army win the battle of Wilton: *ASC*, 72 (871). Also the arrival of a Viking force of 840 in 23 ships in Devon in 878 after the great army had captured Chippenham, effectively placing Alfred between two Viking forces. This force was defeated at Cynwit (Countisbury): *ASC*, 74-76 (878); Asser, 83-84.

Assuming that Alfred’s treaty included some food, it is likely that the mounted army feasted before leaving for Exeter, allowing them to make the two-day ride (105 km) to Exeter with little or no extra food required.

Æthelweard, 41. For a discussion of the great army’s entry to Wareham see Plummer II, 90.

Gaimar, 100 lines 3115-3116.
waiting outside Exeter’s walls. The Exeter peace treaty is likely to have included immediate food supplies provided by Alfred for the great army to leave Wessex, and then further supplies would have been forthcoming as feorman upon arrival in the conquered kingdom of Mercia.

When the great army returned to a conquered territory, as it did to York in 869 and 872, Cambridge in East Anglia in 874, and Gloucester in Mercia in 877, it would have had access to food. Furthermore, as no battles are recorded between the great army and Mercia, it appears that once the peace settlement was reached to end the siege at Nottingham in 867 future peace deals, and therefore food, were easy to secure when the great army wintered in London in 871-872 and Torksey in 872-873. Indeed, with Mercia seemingly offering no armed resistance and East Anglia appearing to capitulate easily in 865, it would appear that once Northumbria was conquered in 866-867 the only time that the great army would have had difficulty in obtaining food was during the Nottingham siege, the conquest of East Anglia in 869-870, its 871, 875-876, and 878 operations in Wessex, and perhaps its 873-874 conquest of Mercia. This means that for roughly half of the great army’s stay in England it would have had little difficulty in gaining adequate food supplies. But even in these other years both East Anglia and Mercia appear to have submitted quite quickly, Wessex made peace with the army quite soon after its arrival at Wareham at the end of 875 and at Exeter in 876, and parts of Wessex submitted to the great army in 878. So even here it did not take the great army long to gain either conquest or a peace treaty, both of which would have resulted in the supply of food, leaving the 867 siege at Nottingham and 871 in Wessex as the only two years during the great army’s 12-year campaign where it would have had great difficulty acquiring food.

A reconsideration of the problem shows that for many of its years in England the great army would have had little difficulty in acquiring food as it would have had provisions available when it stayed in its conquered kingdoms. In those years where it was in hostile territory and therefore may have had provisioning difficulties, it could have survived through a combination of stores seized from royal estates, foraging, peace treaties, and possibly supplies from conquered territories. Furthermore, the Burghal Hidage indicates that ninth-century England was capable of supporting a

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81 Plummer II, 92.
82 ASC, 70 (869); 72 (873); 74 (875); 74 (877).
83 ASC, 72 (872); 72 (873).
84 ASC, 70 (870) records one battle in East Anglia, so the great army would have had access to tribute food soon after its arrival. No battle is recorded in the capture of Mercia, however it is perhaps unlikely that none took place.
85 And in both instances it did eventually succeed in gaining a peace treaty.
large number of troops. Thus the problem of feeding the army is not the Achilles heel of the large army theory as is often thought.

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