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Title	Changing attitudes to Viking art in medieval Ireland
Authors	Murray, Griffin
Publication date	2020-09-01
Original Citation	Murray, G. (2020) 'Changing attitudes to Viking art in medieval Ireland', in Pedersen, A. and Sindbæk, S. M. (eds)., Viking Encounters: Proceedings of the 18th Viking Congress, Aarhus University Press, National Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark, 06 - 12 August 2017, pp. 426-434. isbn: 9788771842654
Type of publication	Book chapter;Conference item
Link to publisher's version	https://unipress.dk/udgivelser/v/viking-encounters/, https://www.oxbowbooks.com/oxbow/viking-encounters.html
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Download date	2026-11-14 16:25:26
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/11074



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Viking Encounters



Delegates of the 18th Viking Congress assembled at the Trelleborg ring fortress. Photo: The National Museum of Denmark.

Viking Encounters

Proceedings of the Eighteenth Viking Congress, Denmark, August 6-12, 2017



Anne Pedersen & Søren M. Sindbæk

EDITORS

AARHUS UNIVERSITY PRESS

Viking Encounters
© The authors and Aarhus University Press 2020
Cover: Jørgen Sparre
Layout and typesetting: Ryevad Grafisk
This book is typeset in Minion Pro and printed on Arctic Volume 115 g
Printed by Narayana Press, Denmark

Printed in Denmark 2020

ISBN 978 87 7184 265 4
Aarhus University Press
Finlandsgade 29
DK-8200 Aarhus N
Denmark
www.unipress.dk

The congress and this book were sponsored by: Farumgaardfonden, Krogagerfonden, Carlsbergfondet, Dronning Margrethe II's arkæologiske fond, Aage & Johanne Louis-Hansens fond, Letterstedtska Föreningen, Destination Viking, Bikubenfonden (via the National Museum Jelling Project).

International distributors:
Oxbow Books Ltd.
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The logo of the Viking Congress was adopted at the fifth congress in the Faroes. Known in the Faroes as a held (Icelandic: *högld*), it is a ring made of a locked loop of ram's horn. It was, and still is, used for a number of purposes, but chiefly as a loop attached to a rope and used when carrying hay.

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Changing Attitudes to Viking Art in Medieval Ireland

Griffin Murray

> The evidence of artistic work in stone, metal, and manuscripts offers … a useful balance in any assessment of the Viking impact in Ireland. It is one of the most remarkable – even if long unremarked – witnesses to the positive and enduring contributions which the Scandinavians made to our cultural history. (Ó Cróinín 1995, 265)

Scholarship on Viking-Age Ireland has flourished over the last decade (e.g. Ní Mhaonaigh 2007; Sheehan & Ó Corráin 2010; Downham 2013; Duffy 2013; Harrison & Ó Floinn 2014; Clarke & Johnson 2015; Purcell et al. 2015). The main advances have been made in archaeology and history, largely as a result of development-led archaeological excavation and an overall expansion in university-based research. Despite this, and considering the remarks of Dáibhí Ó Cróinín in 1995 quoted above, surprisingly few scholars have engaged with the subject of Viking art in Ireland during this time. Exceptions are the monograph on the Cross of Cong by the present author (Murray 2014), and some chapters published in *The Vikings in Ireland and Beyond* (Clarke & Johnson 2015). Notably, this also contrasts with the large number of scholars who are actively researching and publishing in the area of Insular art in Early Medieval Ireland (see Moss 2007; 2014; Hawkes 2013; Newman et al. 2017). The current situation is regrettable, as the study of Viking art in Ireland has the potential to reveal many important aspects of Irish society, including the relationship between the native Irish and the Hiberno-Scandinavians, while also helping to elucidate the connections between Ireland and Scandinavia at the time.

The influence of Viking art in Ireland was first noted by both George Coffey (1909) and Haakon Shetelig (1909) in their respective discussions of Irish objects, such as the Clonmacnoise crosier, the shrine of St Patrick's bell, and the Cross of Cong. Later work by Shetelig (1948, reprinted 1954), T.D. Kendrick (1949) and Ole Henrik Moe (1955) were particularly influential in firmly establishing the use of Scandinavian stylistic terms, such as "Ringerike" and "Urnes", in relation to Irish material. The most significant period of research in the area stretched from the 1960s to the 1980s (e.g. Henry & Marsh-Micheli 1962; Henry 1962; 1967; 1970; Wilson & Klindt-Jensen 1966; Farnes 1975; O'Meadhra 1979; 1987; Fuglesang 1980; Stalley 1981; Ryan 1987; Lang 1988). However, little research has taken place in the three decades since then, with the exception of the recent work noted already and a chapter by Raghnall Ó Floinn (2001) in the publication *The Vikings in Ireland*, which accompanied the exhibition at The Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, Denmark.

One of the principal reasons for the relative lack of research in the area may be the fact that, remarkably, Viking art appears not to have had a significant impact in Ireland until the 11th century, nearly two and a half centuries after the first recorded Viking contacts. While Ruth Johnson (e.g. 1998; 2000; 2015) has done much to correct the notion of a hiatus in Irish



Figure 1. *Bearnán Conaill* from Inishkeel, Co. Donegal, applied decorative copper-alloy plate featuring ring-chain. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

art, the question of why there was such a late adoption of Viking art across Ireland is only beginning to be asked (Graham-Campbell 2013, 77). I have previously argued that secular and ecclesiastical politics, and related issues of identity, have had a significant influence in this regard (Murray 2015). In this paper, I wish to advance that argument further, using the evidence of Irish Christian metalwork, by looking in particular at the influence that politics may have played in changing Irish attitudes towards Viking art.

Early Viking art in Ireland

Significantly, the earlier Viking art styles – including the Oseberg, Borre, Jellinge and Mammen styles – appear to have had no impact generally on Irish art. Of the few objects featuring early Viking art or motifs that have been recovered in what may be classed as indigenous Irish contexts, most were either imports or were probably made in Hiberno-Scandinavian Dublin. One finds the ring-chain motif of the Borre style on a small number of objects found outside of the Hiberno-Scandinavian town. Apart from the Ballinderry gaming board, which is generally considered to be of Dublin manufacture (see Graham-Campbell 1987, 150; Lang 1988, 10-17; Ó Floinn 2001, 90-91), ring-chain also occurs on some ecclesiastical objects of Ulster provenance, which includes a hand-bell known as the *Bearnán Conaill* from Inishkeel, Co. Donegal (Speakman 2011; **Fig. 1**), a detached crosier ferrule from the River Bann (Anon. 1934, 55, fig. 2; Henry 1967, 194), and the *Soiscéal Molaise*, a book-shrine from Devenish, Co. Fermanagh (Mullarkey 2004).

The *Soiscéal Molaise* is dated by inscription to the first quarter of the 11th century (Murray 2013, 166-167), demonstrating the continuing use of the motif at a much later date than in Scandinavia. This is something that is also characteristic of the Ringerike and Urnes styles, which continued in use in Ireland after they had been supplanted in Scandinavia. Paul Mullarkey (2004; Wallace 2016, 352) has argued that the *Soiscéal Molaise* was the product of a Dublin workshop, and a Dublin workshop may also be proposed for the other two objects. The ring-chains on the *Bearnán Conaill* and on the River Bann crosier ferrule differ from that on the *Soiscéal Molaise*, but are identical to the pattern on a strap end from a mid- to late 10th-century context at Christchurch Place, Dublin (Lang 1988, 14, fig. 118). Indeed, the form of ring-chain on the crosier is closer to that on the mounts from Borre itself, suggesting an earlier date, perhaps coeval with the Dublin strap end.

As noted by Pat Wallace (2016, 333), Dublin need not have been officially Christian to have received commissions for ecclesiastical metalwork. Indeed, it was a significant centre for fine metalworking in the 10th and 11th centuries (Wallace 2016, 331-335), and I have previously argued that the 10th-century crosier found near Prosperous, Co. Kildare, was made there (Murray & Ó Riain 2017). This would suggest that there was ecclesiastical metalwork being produced in Dublin in the 10th and early 11th centuries predominantly in the Insular style, but occasionally betraying influence from Scandinavian styles, either directly or indirectly, in the use of motifs such as ring-chain. The discovery of crucibles of Insular type (Wallace 2016, 333) and of a large number of trial-pieces demonstrates that there was strong continuity from the Irish craft tradition within the town. Significantly, the goldsmith responsible for the *Soiscéal Molaise* is named in its inscription as Giolla Baithín (Ó Floinn 1983, 161), suggesting that he was of both Christian and native Irish background, and may even have been a cleric (Murray 2013, 168-169).

Ring-chain also occurs on the Isle of Man, where it appears prominently on some of the cross slabs (see Graham-Campbell 1987, 150). Indeed, there were strong political and economic connections between the Isle of Man and Ireland, particularly Dublin, during the 10th and 11th centuries (Wallace 2016, 375-376). One situation that may well have facilitated the production of Ulster church metalwork in the Hiberno-Scandinavian town in the late 10th and early 11th centuries was the political dominance of Dublin by Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill, King of Mide and High King of Ireland (980-1002, 1014-1022). Following the Battle of Tara in 980, Máel Sechnaill brought Dublin under Gaelic control for the first time, opening it up, both politically and economically, to his area of influence. Notably, following this defeat, the King of Dublin, Amlaíb Cuarán, retired to Iona 'on his pilgrimage', suggesting that the Dubliners were Christian by this time (Stout 2017, 179).

Hiberno-Ringerike style

The situation in Ireland changed in the 11th century, when Scandinavian art styles appear to have had a major impact not only on Dublin, as the surviving trial-pieces and decorated wood demonstrate (O'Meadhra 1979; Lang 1988; Wallace 2016), but on the whole of the country (Wilson & Klindt-Jensen 1966; Fuglesang 1980; Graham-Campbell 2013). The surviving evidence to date suggests that it was the Ringerike style that was the first Viking art style to have a major influence. The influence in Dublin may particularly be seen on a number of wooden objects excavated from levels dating from the 11th century (Lang 1988, 46). Signe Horn Fuglesang (1980, 78) postulated that the popularity of the Ringerike style in Ireland perhaps came following the displacement of Anglo-Scandinavians from Southern England to towns in Ireland in the aftermath of the Norman conquest. However, while James Lang (1988, 18, 46-74) does acknowledge the influence from Southern England in some of the Dublin decorated wood, he also demonstrated that it occurs in Dublin from the early 11th century.

It seems that it was in Dublin that an Irish version of the Ringerike style developed, which was also used to decorate a number of pieces of church metalwork. This may be seen in the case of a trial-piece from High Street in Dublin, which is closely comparable to the side panels



Figure 2. Crosier from Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly. Photo: National Museum of Ireland.



Figure 3. St Mura's bell from Fahan, Co. Donegal. Courtesy of the Trustees of the Wallace Collection, London.

of the Shrine of the Cathach, a book-shrine associated with St Columba from Co. Donegal (Ó Floinn 2001, 92-93). The shrine carries an inscription which enables us to date it sometime between 1062 and 1094, and to identify its place of manufacture as the monastery of Kells, Co. Meath. The name of the craftsman, Sitric Mac Meic Áeda, which is of partial Scandinavian origin, demonstrates, in combination with the art style he was practising, how Scandinavian cultural elements were mixed with Irish ones with ease at this time (Murray 2013, 167). Although Sitric was apparently from a Kells based family of goldsmiths, the closeness of his work to the trial-piece from High Street suggests that he was trained and/or worked in Dublin. This accords with the evidence of early Irish law, which indicates that apprentices were sent away to be trained by masters (Kelly 1988, 91).

The Clonmacnoise crosier is another example of a major religious object that is decorated in the Hiberno-Ringerike style (Ó Floinn 1983, 165-166; **Fig. 2**). While the early history of this object is unknown, we know it was in the collection of Henry Charles Sirr (1764-1841), Town Major of Dublin, from at least 1830 and was recorded as an 'Ancient ornamental crozier, which belonged to the Old Abbots of Clonmacnoise' (O'Callaghan Newenham 1830, 25). Raghnall Ó Floinn (2001, 93) considers that the decoration on this crosier 'probably owes its inspiration to the Dublin school of woodcarving', while Uainin O'Meadhra (2015, 393) suggests that 'Clonmacnoise employed Dublin-trained artisans'. Notably, the Clonmacnoise crosier features similar enamel plaques to those on the 10th-century crosier found near Prosperous, Co. Kildare, which I have argued was of Dublin manufacture (Murray & Ó Riain 2017). This

suggests that elements of the Clonmacnoise crosier may have been based on, or copied from, an older crosier of 10th-century Dublin manufacture. A goldsmith's hoard from Clonmacnoise, dating from the end of the 11th century and containing thirty Hiberno-Scandinavian coins (Ó Floinn & King 1998), indicates the connections between Clonmacnoise and Dublin around the time that the crosier was made.

Notably, the Shrine of the Cathach and the Clonmacnoise crosier demonstrate how Scandinavian influence was readily accepted for decoration of some of the most important religious objects in Ireland. Indeed, there are a number of other examples of Christian art, both metalwork and manuscript illumination, which display Hiberno-Ringerike ornament (Fuglesang 1980, 51-54, 75-76). Some of the other objects include the *Miosach*, a book-shrine from Clonmany (Fuglesang 1980, 52-53, 172-173, pl. 32:b-c), and St Mura's bell from Fahan (Ó Floinn 1995, 109-111, pls 4.10-12; **Fig. 3**), both from modern-day Co. Donegal, like the Shrine of the Cathach to which they are comparable. If we take the historical dating of the Shrine of the Cathach (1062-1094) as a chronological guide, the spread of the Ringerike style outside of Dublin coincides with significant political changes. It was in this period that Irish high kings first directly ruled Dublin. For instance, in 1052 Diarmait Mac Máel na mBó captured Dublin and took the kingship there, while Turlough O'Brien ruled the town from 1072, later installing his son Muirchertach as king (Ó Corráin 1972, 133-142).

Hiberno-Urnes style

A similar pattern may be seen in the case of the Hiberno-Urnes style in the early 12th century. However, we have more direct evidence in this period of the political connections between the Hiberno-Scandinavian towns and Irish Church metalwork. The most telling example is that of Turlough O'Connor, the Connacht king, who took effective control over Dublin from 1118 (Murray 2014, 38). A few years later he commissioned works in the West of Ireland, far from any Hiberno-Scandinavian town, which are predominantly decorated in the Hiberno-Urnes style. This included the Cross of Cong, which was made in Roscommon in 1123 by the goldsmith Máel Ísu mac Bratáin Uí Echach to enshrine a relic of the True Cross. The same goldsmith was clearly also responsible for St Manchan's shrine from Lemanaghan, Co. Offaly, and both are exquisite examples of the Hiberno-Urnes style (Murray 2014; 2015). O'Connor also patronized the erection of stone sculpted high crosses in Tuam, Co. Galway, in 1127, which were also decorated in the Hiberno-Urnes style (Murray 2014, 51-61).

There is no doubt that the artistic influence came from Dublin, even though there is little archaeological evidence for the Urnes style in the town due to fact that the relevant archaeological levels do not survive. Nevertheless, the discovery of some trial-pieces and decorated wooden objects in the style demonstrates that it was present in the town (O'Meadhra 1979, cat. 35, 39, 55; Lang 1988, 27; Wallace 2016, 402, pl. 11.16). It has been suggested that the influence of the Urnes style in Ireland also came through England (Farnes 1975, 137; Graham-Campbell 1987, 151), with Ó Floinn (2001, 97) proposing that Dublin's religious association with Canterbury was the connection. However, the Urnes style is largely found on secular objects in England and has been shown to have little relationship with Hiberno-Urnes (Owen 2001, 206),



Figure 4. St Laichtín's arm, Donoughmore, Co. Cork. Photo: National Museum of Ireland.

suggesting that its adoption in Ireland was as a result of more direct contact with Scandinavia. This is also supported by the decorated wooden handle recovered from a late 11th-century house on Fishamble Street, Dublin, which has been compared directly with objects in Sweden and Norway by Lang (1988, 27, 47) and in Gotland by Uaininn O'Meadhra (2015, 395).

The other Hiberno-Scandinavian towns must have also had a wider artistic influence, such as Cork in the case of St Laichtín's arm from Donoughmore, Co. Cork (Murray 2004; **Fig. 4**). This is another important Irish Christian object that was decorated in the Hiberno-Urnes style. It carries an inscription that records its patronage by Tadhg and Cormac Mac Carthy, Kings of Desmond, and allows it to be dated reasonably precisely to sometime around the years 1118 and 1121. Notably, Maelsechnaill O'Callaghan, king of Uí Echach, who is also mentioned in the inscription, died in Cork in 1121, and Cormac Mac Carthy was later to establish his capital there.

Conclusion

While the influence of later Viking art in Ireland has long been recognized, no one has examined why there was a fundamental change in attitude towards Scandinavian art in Ireland. It is argued here that the catalyst was a change in the political landscape, which saw the Hiberno-Scandinavian towns, particularly Dublin, increasingly come under the control of Irish high kings. The occurrence of ring-chain as a motif on Irish church metalwork corresponds with the dominance of Dublin by Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill from 980. This was followed from the

mid-11th century by direct rule of Dublin by Irish high kings, which aligns chronologically with the more prominent use of Viking art across Ireland. The Ringerike and Urnes styles may therefore be linked to the new political identity that emerged in Ireland from the middle of the 11th century.

One might also suggest that Viking art in Ireland up to then may have been aligned with a political, ethnic and cultural identity that was considered separate and perhaps alien by the indigenous population. The implication that the Hiberno-Scandinavians of Dublin were Christian from the late 10th century may have helped to ease any potential cultural hostilities. The establishment of Christchurch Cathedral in 1028 would have led to a demand for religious objects within Dublin that one can assume were decorated in the late Hiberno-Scandinavian styles. The fact that Dublin was a major centre of metalworking in the late 10th and 11th centuries that seems to have produced religious objects for other locations must also have been a critical factor in the popularity of the styles in Irish religious art. Nevertheless, I would argue that it was the political changes of the 11th and 12th centuries that were most significant in bringing Scandinavian artistic influence outside of Dublin and the other Hiberno-Scandinavian towns. Importantly, the evidence also indicates that strong cultural links were maintained between Ireland and Scandinavia as late as the 12th century, centuries after the first historically recorded contact.

Acknowledgements

Much of the research undertaken for this paper was carried out in the Department of Archaeology, University College Cork, with funding through an Irish Research Council doctoral scholarship and post-doctoral fellowship. I am particularly in debt to the guidance of John Sheehan at UCC. My thanks to Maeve Sikora, Keeper of Irish Antiquities, for access to material in the National Museum of Ireland, and to Greer Ramsey for access to material in the Ulster Museum. Finally, my thanks to Anne Pedersen for all of her advice, help and encouragement, when I first studied Late Viking art as a student while on a Socrates exchange to the University of Copenhagen.

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