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The Vikings in Munster

Edited by Tom Birkett
and Christina Lee



LANGUAGES, MYTHS AND FINDS

VOLUME 3

The Vikings in Munster

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CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF THE VIKING AGE
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CHAPTER 1

The Viking Age in Ireland – An Overview

Mark Kirwan

It is important to be aware that the term ‘Viking’ is a complicated one. The word comes from the Old Norse *víkingr*, usually meaning ‘pirate’, and is normally applied to medieval raiders from Scandinavia who attacked other countries by sea between the 9th and 11th centuries. Although the countries as we now know them did not exist at this time, we know that the Viking raiders who attacked Ireland primarily came from the regions which make up modern Norway and Denmark. The Irish sometimes referred to them as *Lochlannach*, meaning ‘men from the land of lakes’. This probably refers back to their native Scandinavia and its famous landscape, but it could equally refer to Scotland and northern England where the Vikings had also settled.

Not all medieval Scandinavians were Vikings, though, and not all Vikings were Scandinavian: they were often joined by warriors from other countries, and some Irish people even became Vikings. There are many theories as to why people chose a Viking lifestyle: some historians have suggested that they were driven outward by the shortage of good farmland back home, while others think that Viking bands were mostly composed of ‘second sons’, who could not inherit much from their fathers and therefore needed to build up their wealth in other ways. It is also possible that they were exiles, outlaws, and political outcasts, or maybe they simply saw an opportunity for adventure: after all, the Vikings were the most famous explorers of their age. Whatever their reasons, the Vikings’ actions shaped the course of much of medieval European history, but their influence is nowadays often overlooked because of their reputation as violent marauders.

Their longships were the most important part of their way of life. Vastly superior to other ships of the time, they enabled the Vikings to travel the world more widely than any of their contemporaries. They journeyed as far east as modern-day Russia and Istanbul (then called Constantinople), and as far west as the shores of North America, via Iceland and Greenland. They often settled in these places, and over time they established a vast network of trade routes that distributed goods and wealth in all directions. Far from being unruly savages, the Vikings were skilled navigators and their long voyages required them to operate as a well-drilled unit, which may have also given them an edge in combat. The speed of their longships meant the Vikings could strike coastal sites and escape before significant resistance could be mounted against them, but they preferred to fight on foot rather than at sea if they could help it – their ships were much too valuable to risk in battle.

These raiders favoured attacking isolated monastic communities, but not necessarily for religious reasons. True, the Vikings of the early raiding period were pagan, but many Christian Irish groups are also known to have attacked monasteries. The Vikings targeted these communities for many reasons – because they could be easily reached by sea, for one thing, and were also less well-defended than other local settlements – but especially because of the extremely valuable metalwork that was produced there. Medieval Irish monasteries were renowned for the gold and silver objects they produced, many of which take pride of place in modern museums, and striking examples of them have been found in other countries as a result of Viking raiding and trading. The Vikings are also known to have taken slaves from the places they attacked; important people, such as abbots or bishops, were sometimes ransomed back, but many others were forced into a life of servitude and sold abroad.

By the middle of the 9th century the Vikings began to stay longer in countries like Ireland, travelling further inland and even setting up camps for the winter. These camps are known as *longphorts*, from the Old Irish name for these encampments, and were made by pulling the ships up onto the shore of a river and building a fortified embankment and ditch around them. Over time, some of these *longphorts* grew to become the most important towns and cities of Ireland, including Cork, Dublin, Limerick and Waterford.

In order for these towns to survive the Vikings needed the support of their Irish neighbours. They could not rely on raiding for regular supplies of food, and settling more permanently in one location left them more vulnerable to attack, so they began to trade with the local Irish. They brought certain skills and crafts that made them valuable partners, and their vast trading networks allowed them to import exotic materials. They also introduced the use of coins to Ireland, replacing older trade systems like bartering, and established the first mint in the country. They began to intermarry with the Irish population and formed alliances with certain Irish kingdoms; gradually, this led them to convert to Christianity, and they built churches in their towns as a statement of

their newfound faith. Their skill in battle made them popular as mercenaries, and it was not uncommon to find Irish people and Vikings on both sides in a battle. In many places a unified 'Hiberno-Norse' identity began to emerge, including Ireland and the Scottish Isles, and the Vikings were well-established in Ireland by the time of the Anglo-Norman invasion in the late 12th century. Indeed, they never really left – many Irish people today are of Viking descent.

Achoimre as Gaeilge

Tagann an focal Béarla '*Viking*' on sean Ioruais '*vikingr*'. 'Sé is brí le seo ná 'foghlai mhara'. Mar an gcéanna tá sean fhocal Ghaelach againn i gcomhair an dream seo, sin é 'Lochlannach'. Níl sanasaíocht an fhocail seo iomlán cinnte ach dar le saineolaithe go mbaineann sé le tírdhreach an Ioruaidh agus na Danmhairge, nó b'fhéidir na réigiún in iarthar na hAlbaine a bhí lonnaithe ag na Lochlannaigh chomh maith.

Tá drochchlú ar na Lochlannaigh de bharr an tuairim go raibh formhór dóibh ina greachtóirí a d'ionsaigh áiteanna a bhí nocht ar an gcósta, na manaistreacha ach go hárailthe. Gan amhras tá frinne ag baint leis an dtuairim seo ach bhí i bhfad níos mó ag baint le teacht na Lochlannaigh go hÉireann agus go dtí áiteanna éagsúla ar fud na Breataine.

Bhí bunús eacnamaíochta taobh thiar de ghluaiseacht na Lochlannaigh. Is é tuairim saineolaithe gurbh é an easpa talamh curaíochta agus cúrsaí sóisialta sa bhaile a spreag an-chuid do's na Lochlannaigh dul ar imirce go hÉireann agus an Bhreatain.

Bhíodar in ann taisteal go hÉireann toisc go raibh loinge móra ildánacha ina seilbh acu agus bhí bua an loinseoireacht acu. Ós rud é go raibh na loinge seo acu, bhíodar in ann áiteanna iargulta ar an gcósta a ionsaí gan mórán stró. Bhí sé mar aidhm acu na manaistreacha a ionsaí mar thuig siad go raibh saibhreas le fáil iontu, miotail luachmhara ach go hárailthe. Ina theannta sin, bhí fonn orthu sclábhaithe a thógaint toisc go raibh praghas mór le fáil orthu.

In aineoin na gníomhachtaí seo, bhí tionchar mór ag na Lochlannaigh ar chúrsaí polaitiúla na hÉireann ón naoú go dtí an dara aois déag. De réir a chéile bhunaigh na Lochlannaigh bailte láidre ar chósta na hÉireann. Tá an dúchas Lochlannagh fós le feiscint sa lá atá inniu maidir le logainmneacha na bpríomh bailte, Baile Átha Cliath agus Port Láirge ach go hárailthe. Lena chois sin, lonnigh siad Corcaigh, Loch Garman agus Cathair Luimní. Don chuid is mó bhí na bailte seo suite ar an gcósta nó i mbéal inbheara. Is é an cúis le sin ná chun smacht a choimeád ar an dtimpeallacht agus ar chúrsaí trádála.

Bhí borradh eacnamaíochta sna bailte seo agus tá sé seo soiléir ón méid airgid atá faighte ag seandálaithe ó shin i leith. Thuig na Lochlannaigh go raibh géar ghá leis na bailte seo a chosaint agus mar leigheas ar seo ghlac siad níos mó páirte i gursaí polaitiúla na hÉireann. Dhein siad comhaontais le tiarnaí Éireannacha i gcoinne tiarnaí eile. Is féidir linn a rá go raibh tionchar mór ag na Lochlannaigh ar léarscáil na hÉireann roimh deireadh an dara aois déag.

CHAPTER 2

Life in Viking Age Ireland

Annemari Ferreira and Rachel Backa

The Viking Warrior

Most people think ‘warrior’ when they hear the word ‘Viking’, and the Vikings are perhaps most famous for their martial abilities and raiding activities. Not only did their first encounter with new places usually involve a degree of violence through raiding and plundering, but many Vikings also served as mercenaries throughout Europe. This was certainly the case in Ireland. Some Irish kings turned the same strength and skill with which Vikings could devastate treasure-rich monasteries to their advantage by employing Viking settlers as warriors in internal conflicts between vying Irish rulers. In this way warfare offered a seemingly contradictory opportunity for Norse foreigners to *coexist* and eventually integrate with various Irish groups and societies.

The weapons that the Norsemen took with them to the battlefield surely contributed to their fierce reputation. The war-tools primarily used by Vikings were the spear, the sword and the battle-axe. Weapons, and swords in particular, were highly valued both as symbols of status and as unique heirlooms with special traits and characteristics. In fact, swords with ‘personalities’ were sometimes given individual names by their owners, one example being the sword Sköfnung (*Scraper*) in the saga of Kormak the poet (*Kormáks saga*). Because of their cultural importance, many weapons were made as works of art, boasting pattern-welded blades and pommels inlaid with intricate designs. The 12th century Viking-style sword guard found at Smalls Reef off the coast of Wales in the Irish Sea – less than 100 km from the city of Waterford – is a beautiful example of this (*fig. 1*).



Fig. 1. Twelfth-century sword guard decorated with Urnes style figures, found at Smalls Reef, Wales. Drawing by Annemari Ferreira.

While swords, spears, and other weapons are given individual names and prestige in poems and prose tales, armour and a warrior's defensive tools should not be forgotten. While on campaign, Vikings would have wanted some means by which to protect themselves. Those who could afford them would have worn chain mail shirts, while others would have worn shirts of toughened leather.

Contrary to popular belief, helmets did not have horns. Rather, the horned helmet which today is so closely associated with Vikings is a 19th century invention. While a helmet would have been one of the most important pieces of armour a Viking could wear, full helmets are rarely found in the archaeological record. This is likely due to the fact that the majority of helmets would have been made not of metal, but of leather, which deteriorates quickly when buried.

Viking shields were made out of wood, and reinforced with metal strips, as well as a central metal boss covering the grip. They were large enough to offer significant protection, guarding the torso and most vital organs from injury. They were fairly heavy, and could have been used offensively, if the need arose. Shields would have also been painted a variety of different colours. For example, a runestone from Rønninge in Denmark (DR 202) mentions a man named 'Asgot of the red shield,' while the shields recovered from the Gokstad ship burial were painted yellow and black; law codes and sagas also mention white shields. Shields and swords were not the only decorated objects of war, and even the collars of the dogs who served their masters in battle were carefully designed, including this example from Waterford Museum of Treasures (*fig. 2*).



Fig. 2. Twelfth-century Dog Collar now in Reginald's Tower Museum, Waterford.

Photo by Annemari Ferreira.

The Viking Trader

Sailing Merchants

Ships and seafaring were essential elements of the Viking Age. Given the mountainous geography of much of Scandinavia, ships were a necessary means of transportation for goods or people over any distance. They were built out of flexible, overlapping radial-cut wooden beams called 'strakes', which were held together by iron rivets, creating a 'clinker-built' boat. The result was a sturdy, yet flexible craft that could efficiently navigate both coastal waters and open seas.

Viking ships can be split into two broad categories: ships used for trading, and ships used for raiding or warfare. Trading vessels were called *knarr*, while raiding vessels were called *langskip*, or 'longships' as we know them today. *Knarr* were built to be wider and deeper than *langskips*, the result being that although they were slower they were better suited to carrying cargo – be it cloth, livestock, or settlers. Warships were fast, but did not have room for much excess clutter: some were fitted with racks from which shields could be hung in order to maximise the *langskip's* usable space.

Viking ships had very shallow draughts, allowing them to negotiate most rivers and inlets. The *Sea Stallion from Glendalough* – a reconstruction of the Skuldelev 2 warship built near Dublin – measures almost 30 meters in length, but has a draught of just one meter (**fig. 3**). It was these sturdy, versatile ships which allowed the Norse to raid, trade, and settle throughout the North Atlantic.



Fig. 3. The reconstructed Viking Ship, Sea Stallion.

Photo by Anders Jensen.

Ships were so important to the Norse that they were included in their funerary rites, with high-status individuals being buried within them, or within stones arranged into the shape of a ship. In lower-status graves, a ship's rivet could be enough to symbolise the deceased's means of transportation to the underworld.

Buying with Bullion?

Like their Scandinavian counterparts, the Vikings in Ireland were kings of commerce. The wealth of hoards and trade-related artefacts found in Munster paint a picture of a thriving silver-economy. They include a rare penny of Eric Bloodaxe (York's last Viking king, c. AD 885-954), as well as a fragment of an 8th century Islamic dirham minted in the region of modern-day Iraq, illustrating the vast reach of Viking trade and exchange. And yet many of the hoards from Munster contain no coins at all, and coins such as the broken dirham from Woodstown would have had no worth as a coin with a determined and controlled economic value. What made Viking trade more fluid and expandable was, instead, the use of silver in any shape or form as valued by weight and quality. In this way one could buy or sell furs and wood by paying or



*Fig. 4. Viking woman with oval brooches – based on the Lilleberge burial.
Drawing by Annemari Ferreira.*

demanding a specific weight of silver, and it was therefore a versatile type of economy that could be used in any location in the vast Norse trading network.

Payment could, for example, take the form of coins, whole or broken; jewellery, fragmented or intact; and ingots that could be hammered into Hiberno-Scandinavian rings and arm-rings – convenient for transporting (and displaying) one's wealth. These 'hack-silver' objects are called bullion and could be weighed on scales using the type of lead weights excavated at the Woodstown Viking site near Waterford. Such weights often have individualising marks or patterns on them (see *cover image*), likely meant to let owners recognise their personal weights and avoid having these inadvertently (or not so inadvertently) taken by others during trading.

At Home with Vikings

Dressing for the Day

In many ways, the clothing of the Vikings was similar to that of their neighbours in Ireland, at least in terms of the materials used. Textiles would have been made of wool and linen, the quality and colours of which would have depended on the wealth of the individual. Due to the fact that the Norse worked trade routes which stretched between Greenland and Constantinople, the wealthy would have had access to rich silks.

Women's outfits would have consisted of a shift or underdress, possibly a tunic, and an 'apron'-style gown. Many women throughout the Norse world were buried wearing oval-shaped brooches. These were worn on the upper chest, often with multicoloured beads and metal ornaments strung between them (see *Fig. 4*). These brooches also served as convenient places from which to hang useful items such as keys, needle cases, or small sets of sheers.

Men's outfits consisted of at least one tunic and trousers, the size of which varied by region or personal taste. Both genders would have worn capes and both men and women would have worn jewellery – although much more jewellery has been found in female graves as opposed to male ones – and would have carried knives of varying sizes. Personal hygiene was also important, with both men and women carrying combs made of bone or antler with them.



Fig. 5. Viking Age beads, Gotlands Fornsal Museum.

Photo by Rachel Backa.

Beads were a common element of both male and female dress throughout the Norse world (**fig. 5**). One stunning example is a necklace of nearly seventy beads which was found hidden inside Glencurran Cave in the Burren, Co. Clare. It would have been a highly-valued piece of jewellery at the time, and a sign of a high-status individual.

Silver was often used in Norse jewellery, twisted, moulded and punched into intricate pins, and rings for the arm and neck, such as the neck ring and kite brooches found near Limerick. Trade with the Norse in the Viking Age also changed the composition of jewellery throughout the island. Though rare in Ireland in the Pre-Viking period, silver became used in great abundance due to the import of silver dirham coins from the Arabic world.

On a Full Stomach

A Viking Age diet would be appealing to many of us today. From looking at bones and pollen samples from settlement sites, we know that the Vikings ate many things which would be familiar to us, such as cod, pork, apples and beans. Dairy-based foods such as butter and cheese were also important foodstuffs. They also ate things which we would likely find odd, such as whale or horse.

The iconic drink of the Viking Age is mead, an alcoholic beverage made from fermented honey. Mead holds an important place in Norse mythology: in the *Gylfaginning* section of Snorri's thirteenth-century *Prose Edda*, mentions a goat named Heidrún who produces mead instead of milk from her udders. In another part of Snorri's *Edda*, known as *Skaldskaparmál*, Odin brings mead made from the blood of an individual named Kvasir to the gods, having stolen it from the giant Suttung. It is said that mead is the drink of inspiration, making anyone who drank it a great poet. While mead is mentioned frequently in Viking Age poetry and literature, it was more common to drink beer, or a drink made from soured milk, called *súrr*, which was also used to preserve meat.

Food would have been seasonal, and diets would have reflected regional differences. While staples such as dried fish and cereal crops could have been imported, the majority of what a person ate would need to have been grown, fished, or hunted locally.

Politics and Law

Food, clothing and other household tasks reflect one aspect of the daily concerns of Hiberno-Scandinavians trying to make ends meet in uncertain geographical and social surroundings. Law and politics concern another side of the daily life in a changing society of people who are trying to shape new communities – adapting to foreign cultures and adopting novel practises while also holding on to known and trusted ways of doing things. It is difficult to say exactly how Norse political and legal systems may have changed for Viking immigrants to Munster. But perhaps we may guess what would have stayed the same:

1) Things – A thing (*þing*) was a very important meeting or assembly of Viking people for legal and political purposes. Local, regional or even national things were held in central or accessible locations (thing-sites) in order to discuss important matters and settle legal disputes. It is likely that Norse settlers would have continued to hold such meetings in at least a local capacity after coming to Ireland since it was one way through which kings and *jarls* (important Viking rulers) could exercise some authority and through which communities could maintain order and strengthen cultural ties.

2) Lawspeakers – These were important figures who needed to know all Norse laws in order to recite them at gatherings. How long such lawspeakers would have held a place at legal proceedings in Ireland is an uncertain matter. It is possible that, like the early Irish rulers presiding over the writing of the *Senchas Már*, Hiberno-Vikings adopted the technology of the Latin alphabet with their conversion to Christianity and wrote their laws down, making the role of lawspeaker redundant. If there is truth to the account of the *Pseudo-historical Prologue to the Senchas Már*, this is exactly what happened to the poets and historians responsible for memory and judgement in early Irish law before the arrival of Christianity. In Scandinavia the position of lawspeaker eventually developed into an important legal office.

3) Compensation and negotiation – Although violence was often part of the legal proceedings at Things through duels and so-called ‘trials’, legal disputes were usually resolved through monetary settlements. This is an aspect of Viking law which resembles early Irish law and in both cases compensation, even for killing, was the preferred way of settling disputes. A person’s ‘value’, to be paid as compensation (*víti*) to the victim’s family, was determined by both station and gender. A sentence of outlawry – of being deemed beyond the protection of the law – was, essentially, either a death sentence or a form of banishment (depending on whether the convicted man was able to flee the country before being captured). Yet outlawry, like the death-sentence itself, was rarely bestowed.

Vikings and the World Unseen

Gods and Spirits: Viking Religion and Mythology

We know very little for certain about Old Norse religion. We have no surviving texts written about the religion by anyone who had practised it: the main written source we have is the *Prose Edda*, written in Iceland by Snorri Sturluson in the 13th century. Since the Norse throughout Scandinavia had converted to Christianity over a century previously, this means we cannot be certain that everything Snorri wrote is accurate.

What we do know for certain is that the old Norse religion was polytheistic, meaning that they had a number of gods, each fulfilling a different role. We also know that the religion was not uniform; certain gods were more popular in certain locations and they were worshipped differently over time. The gods we know the most about are Odin, Thor, Freyr and Loki. Odin is a god of wisdom, magic, and poetry. He is

constantly seeking knowledge, often in regards to his own death. Thor is a god of storms, physical strength, weather and crop production. Freyr is a god of fertility, whose marriage to the giantess Gerðr resulted in the ancestors of the kings of Sweden. Loki is a trickster god, who seems to simultaneously get the other gods into and then back out of trouble. It will supposedly be through his actions that Ragnarok, the climactic battle between the gods and giants, will be brought about. In the sagas, many people have favourite gods who they worship, and offer special devotion.

It was not only the gods which were included in pre-Christian worship. There was also a veneration of local spirits known as the *dísir*. These predominantly female spirits were connected to the land, and often served as guardian spirits for families. Also included in the Norse cosmology were elves, giants, and dwarves. We know little about the elves, but the giants seem to be the eternal enemies of the gods, although many of the gods marry or have children with giantesses. Dwarves are important inasmuch as they are master craftsmen, creating valuable tools and weapons for the gods. The dome of the sky is also said to be held up by four dwarves, named after the cardinal points of the compass.

Conversion to Christianity

The conversion of the Norse to Christianity was a slow process, which happened in different places at different times. The Scandinavians who settled in places such as Normandy and the English Danelaw converted within a few generations. Denmark officially converted during the reign of Harald Bluetooth around the year 965 AD. The first church in Sweden is said to have been built in the 9th century, but the country did not become fully Christian until the end of the 11th century. The first Christian king of Norway was Hakon Æthelstansfostri (r. 936-960 AD), but it would not be until the reign of Olaf Haraldson (r. 1015-1030 AD) that the entirety of Norway would accept Christianity. According to the sagas, the religion of Iceland changed during the Althing, or parliament, in the summer of 1000 AD. Iceland may have had a small Christian population during the early days of settlement, as many of the Norse who chose to move there had previously lived in Ireland and the British Isles, where many, such as Auð the Deep-minded, are said to have converted.

Missionaries from Germany or the British Isles worked to spread the Christian faith in the Viking homelands. For a period of time, there was a blending of the two religions, with crosses being found in graves alongside Thor's hammers or staffs associated with the practice of magic. There is even a mould found in Trend, Denmark, for casting metal jewellery which has spaces for both of the symbols. This shows that there was a demand for the two religious symbols at the same time.

In Scandinavia, the building of bridges, or causeways was closely associated with the Christian faith. Many runestones commemorate the soul of a deceased family member, stating that the person who commissioned the stone had built a bridge for

the sake of their soul. Others, such as U 896, found in Uppsala, Sweden, commemorate the dead, but also celebrate the deceased's Christianity.

For many Vikings, the decision to convert may have been as political as it was personal. By bringing their courts into the sphere of Western Christianity, the kings of Scandinavia could gain powerful ties and make alliances with other Christian kings in Europe. Conversion also opened doorways for many traders and mercenaries, as many could not do business with them while they remained pagan. A third option, occasionally undertaken by Vikings who wished to work as traders or mercenaries in Christian lands, was to receive *prima signatio*, and become a *catechumen*. This would mean that they would learn about the new religion and renounce their old beliefs, but not be baptised or fully participate in Christian worship. This allowed them to be part of both the Christian and pagan communities, allowing them to do business with both, without severing any social ties they had back home.

Death and Burial

Just as the Old Norse religion was not uniform, neither were Viking Age burial practices. Grave sites from throughout the Scandinavian and North Atlantic world have revealed numerous different styles of burial. Grave styles would differ based on the geographical area, time period, raw materials available to make the grave from, as well as the gender and social status of the individual. They could be single internments, or graves in which multiple people were interred.

While burial practices differ between regions and time periods, in the broadest of terms they can be split into two main categories: cremation and inhumation. In a cremation grave, the body and often some belongings of the deceased are burned, reducing the body and most non-metal goods to ash before burial. Inhumation burials are when the body is placed whole into the ground. Inhumation graves can vary between holes dug into the ground, cists, chamber graves, and could even contain boats. Many graves of either type are flat, but others – such as barrow mounds or stone ship settings – are easily visible within the landscape.

The writings of Ibn Fadlan, a tenth-century Arabic diplomat who travelled along the Volga river, gives an outsider's account of a Viking funeral, allegedly that of the King of the Rus. It is thought that the Rus were Norse traders who would later settle in what is now Russia. He describes a funeral rite which spans several days, involves both human and animal sacrifice, and culminates in the burning of a ship which is in turn covered earth to form a grave mound.

Whether Ibn Fadlan's descriptions are accurate or not, we do know that many individual elements of it are true; the Norse did include grave goods in many pre-Christian burials, as well as involving animal sacrifices, ships, and at times cremation. These would be tools, weapons, jewellery, food, furniture and even animals which the deceased may need or want to use in their afterlife. One of the most well-furnished

graves excavated to date is ship burial in Oseberg, Norway. The two women buried inside were supplied with a sled, cart, and horses to carry them on their journey through the afterlife, among other goods.

Horses were often included in high-status burials. However, there have been no horse-burials associated with any Hiberno-Norse populations in Ireland. There are, however, many pagan graves within Christian cemeteries from the period. It has been suggested that the sharing of space required the pagan Norse settlers to avoid any ostentatious displays of religion during their funerals, so as to better maintain trading contacts with their Christian neighbours.

What sort of afterlife a Viking could expect depended upon how they had died. Warriors who had fallen in battle were supposed to go to Valhalla. There they would spend the day fighting and the night feasting with other warriors in preparation to fight alongside the gods at Ragnarok. For the less-valiant, the afterlife would be spent in the abode of Hel, the daughter of Loki and the giantess Angrboda. According to Snorri, those who died of sickness or old age spent their afterlife in her domain.

Vikings Communicating

Runic Script

The Vikings used a runic alphabet to write commemorative inscriptions, messages, names or even curses on various wooden, bone or stone surfaces. The specific alphabet used in Ireland and Britain during the Viking Age is known as the Younger Futhark (*Fupark*) with these six letters representing the first six letters of the runic alphabet, written in full as *fupqrkhniastbmlr*. Even more specific is the type of Younger Futhark used by the Norwegian Vikings in Ireland, known as short-twig runes (*fig. 6*).

Due, perhaps, to an adoption of the Latin alphabet with the conversion to Christianity, few runic inscriptions have been found in Munster. One example of a Munster runestone (IR 3) was discovered in the remains of a Viking house on the island of Beginish, Co. Kerry, and now resides in the Cork Public Museum (*fig. 7*). The inscription on the stone is poorly preserved, but some of the runes are still clearly visible. The inscription follows a traditional runic formula and reads: [...] *reisti stei[n] [pe]nn[a]*. [...] *risti* [...] (...erected this stone. ...carved...).

Another very interesting runestone (IR2) which perfectly demonstrates the integration of Viking communities into existing Irish ones was found in 1916 at St Flannan's Cathedral in Killaloe – very close to the Viking centre of Limerick. These Viking Age runes, dated to around the year 1000, are inscribed on the fragment of a stone cross along with an Irish ogham inscription and reads: Þorgrí[*mr*] *reisti/risti kross þenna* (Thorgrimr erected/carved this cross). The ogham inscription in turn states: *beandac[h]t [ar] Toreaqr[im]* (A blessing on Thorgrimr). The fact that a man



Fig. 6. Short-twig runes.
Drawing by Annemari Ferreira.



Fig. 7. Detail from the Beginish runestone (IR3).
Photo reproduced with the kind permission of Cork Public Museum.

with a Norse name is the subject of both Irish and Old Norse runic inscriptions on a Christian monument is striking. Even more so is the borrowing of the Irish word for cross (that is, *kross*) in the Old Norse inscription rather than the usual *stein* (as seen in the Beginish runestone), demonstrating a mixing of language as well as identity in Viking Age Ireland.

Sagas and Poetry

Serving a dual role as entertainment and a repository for cultural memory, sagas are Old Norse stories about legendary and historical figures in Viking history. Originally transmitted orally, many of the sagas were written down between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries – particularly in Iceland. Some of these tales are

more fictitious than others, but all of them reveal some of the cultural concerns of the people who told them and passed them from one generation to the next. One of the Icelandic sagas in which Ireland features most prominently is *Laxdæla saga* (The Saga of the People of Laxárdalr). Revealing the darker side of Viking trade and commerce is Melkorka, an Irish princess who is captured on a Viking raid and subsequently sold as a slave to the Icelandic chieftan (*goði*) Hoskuld Dala-Kollsson. Melkorka, who pretends to be a mute thrall, becomes Hoskuld's concubine and subsequently gives birth to one of Iceland's most influential figures, Olaf the Peacock (so nick-named for his proud bearing and fine clothes). Melkorka secretly teaches Olaf to speak Irish Gaelic as a child and Olaf later journeys to Ireland as a young man in order to meet his grandfather, a certain King Muirchertach. It is noteworthy that although Melkorka is an Irish slave, she is described as being proud and intelligent. And though tensions between Scandinavia and Ireland can be seen in the attack of Irish men on Olaf and his retainers when they accidentally land on the Irish coast beyond the protection of the Norse *longphorts*, it is significant that the saga shows how Olaf's relationship with his aristocratic Irish grandfather contributes to his power and influence within Norse society. This view of Hiberno-Norse contact might well reflect a broader Scandinavian view of the complex social relationships between Vikings and local communities in Ireland.

Old Norse poetry is a very broad genre and can range from mythological, legendary and didactic (so-called eddic poetry), to political court poetry often composed in order to praise, criticise or eulogise kings (skaldic verse). Both forms of poetry were oral in nature and were passed down from poet to poet – as such they have strong rhythmic character with strict metrical structures. The mythological poetry is usually anonymous and describes many of the tales of Old Norse gods and heroes such as Sigurd's slaying of the dragon Fafnir. Skaldic poetry, on the other hand, is usually composed by named skalds – *skáld* is the Old Norse word for poet – and often deals with historical events related to war and military campaigns. Some religious and love poetry can however, also be seen as being 'skaldic' in nature. Skaldic verse is usually very complicated and mimics the dense, interlacing art seen in Viking Age metalwork and sculpture. This is surprisingly similar to the description of Irish poets in the *Pseudo-historical Prologue to the Senchas Már*, whose words are described as 'dark' and 'unclear'. Old Norse poetry is, in fact, sometimes purposefully ambiguous as Snorri Sturluson, the 13th century historian and lawspeaker tells us in his *Skáldskaparmál* (The Language of Poetry).

CHAPTER 3

The Vikings in Munster

Alex Wilson

Historical sources – how do we know what we know?

Linguistic sources

The language of the Vikings was Old Norse (ON), a Germanic language closely related to Old English. The Vikings who settled in Ireland continued to speak their language, and we can still see evidence of it in some of the anglicised place names of the cities in Munster:

- WATERFORD. From *Vethrafforthr* (ON *Veðrafförðr*), where *vethr* means ‘ram’ and *fforthr* means ‘fjord’ or river: Waterford therefore means ‘ram-river’.
- LIMERICK. From *Hlimrekr* (ON *Hlymrekr*). The name might come from the words *hlym* ‘noise’ and *rekr* ‘mighty’, and could refer to the sound of the river Shannon. Alternatively, it could be the Viking way of pronouncing the local Irish name for the area around the river, *Luimneach*, which means ‘a barren spot of land’.

That is not to say that the Vikings only settled in those places where Old Norse place names survive; after all, we have evidence for Vikings settling in Cork, but the city’s English name comes from the Irish *corcach* ‘marsh’. We also see Viking influence in some names that evolved from Old Irish, most notably in some modern-day Irish surnames. For example:

- COTTER. From *Mac Oitir* or *Mac Coitir*, meaning ‘son of Óttar’. Óttar or Ottir is a Norse personal name, and the fact that this surname is especially common in Munster might relate it to Ottir Iarla, a Viking who was one of the founders

of Waterford in 914. Other Gaelic names from Viking personal names include: MACAULIFFE (*Mac Olof*, 'son of Olaf') and MACMANUS (*Mac Magnus*, 'son of Magnús').

- DOYLE (also O'DOYLE, DOWELL or MCDOWELL). From *Dubhgaill*, meaning 'dark foreigner'. It used to be thought that 'dark' Vikings were Danes and 'fair' Vikings (*Finngaill*) were Norwegians, but now we think that *Dubhgaill* refers to the Vikings from later invasions who settled in the 10th century, and *Finngaill* to the earlier raiders.
- MCLOUGHLIN (also LOUGHLIN or O'LOUGHLIN). From *Mac Lochlainn*, meaning 'son of someone from *Lochlann*'. *Lochlann* means 'land of lakes', which probably refers to the Viking homelands.

It would be easy to assume that people with these surnames have Viking ancestors, but that might not necessarily be the case. For one thing, the original meanings of the names are less obvious nowadays, and they may have been adopted in later periods by Irish families without Viking ancestry for personal or political reasons. It's also important to remember that the Vikings themselves used patronymics instead of surnames (e.g. Olaf, son of Jon = Olaf Jonsson), although this way of naming may have changed for those settlers whose families had been well-established in Ireland for a long time. The meanings of the names do suggest, though, that the Viking settlers intermarried with the Irish, and their descendants probably adopted these surnames because they were proud of that aspect of their heritage, or because that was how other members of their community identified them.

Textual sources

Our most common textual sources for Viking Age Ireland are the Irish annals, historical writings of the monasteries that recorded the goings-on of their time. They normally focus on Viking raids in Ireland and can be quite hostile towards them, but it is important to remember that these texts were usually written by Irish monks who had good reason to be upset – after all, Vikings usually targeted their monasteries. The annals do also make reference to those places where the Vikings settled, but are mostly concerned with unusual events (much like the headlines of our own newspapers today) and do not give us a full picture of everyday life in these towns. For anybody interesting in reading the annals, many can be found online at www.celt.ucc.ie

We also have other medieval Irish chronicles, most famously *Cogadh Gáedhel re Gallaibh*, 'The War of the Irish with the Foreigners', and *Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil*, 'The Martial Career of Cellachán of Cashel'. The former describes the battles of the Irish leader Brian Boru from Sulcoit in 968 to Clontarf in 1014, while the latter is a biography of a King of Munster named Cellachán mac Buadacháin. The chronicles give us a great deal of detail about their encounters and the history of the Viking Age in Ireland, but they are also quite clearly pieces of propaganda. *Cogadh Gáedhel re*

Gallaibh was written to celebrate Brian's victory and is very aggressive towards all inhabitants of Dublin, Viking or not; *Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil* also depicts the Vikings as enemies and the Irish Dál Cais as allies, despite the historical Cellachán's close association with the Vikings of Waterford and his battles with the Dál Cais for control over Munster.

The Vikings themselves sometimes wrote in runes, but not usually at great length; their poetry and literature was generally transmitted orally. Their descendants in Iceland and Norway, however, wrote long prose narratives called sagas about their Viking ancestors. These sagas were written as entertaining histories, combining fact and fiction, and some of them record the interactions between the Vikings and the Irish. The famous Battle of Clontarf, which involved Vikings on either side (from Dublin, Munster, Orkney and the Isle of Man), is mentioned in two sagas: *The Saga of Njal* (ON: *Njáls saga*) and *The Saga of Thorstein Sithu-Hallsson* (ON: *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*). Some scholars think there might have been a saga called *The Saga of Brian* (ON: *Brjáns saga*) from which the Icelandic saga writers got their information about Clontarf, because a line in *The Saga of Thorstein* seems to suggest there was a saga written about Brian Boru. However, not all scholars agree that such a saga ever existed.

There is a clear Irish influence on some of the sagas. Two of the Icelandic sagas are named after heroes whose names clearly have Gaelic origins: *The Saga of Njal* and *The Saga of Kormak* (ON: *Kormáks saga*), whose names Njáll and Kormákr come from Niall and Cormac.

Archaeological sources

Archaeology deals with the physical objects we find in Munster that indicate the presence of Vikings in the region, whether that is evidence of buildings, such as the timbers of a town wall, or items of everyday use, such as combs or swords. There have been archaeological finds in all four major Viking port cities – Cork, Dublin, Limerick and Waterford – that support the written sources' claims of Viking settlement, although much in the Munster region is still to be excavated.

The evidence in Munster is typically dated from the early 11th century to the early 12th century, which is just after the Viking Age. Nevertheless, the absence of earlier material does not mean the Vikings were not in the area prior to these dates. The archaeological sources that survive are limited by the preservation conditions of each area (e.g. mid-12th to late- 13th century in Cork), which can vary widely; it is unlikely that evidence earlier than those dates will be so well-preserved. Alternatively, the dates might simply indicate that the development of smaller outposts into large urban towns took place later in Munster than it did in Dublin.

Whilst textual sources often focus on important or high-ranking figures, archaeological evidence helps to give us an idea of people's day-to-day lives. Physical objects – whether that means the foundations of a house or city wall, or the useful items

that Viking craftsmen made and traded with the Irish – help us understand why the Vikings settled in these areas, what crafts and cultural icons they valued, and the kinds of relationships that existed between these urban towns and their rural neighbours. Comparing these finds to their parallels elsewhere in the Viking world also gives us an idea of how Vikings in Ireland retained similarities with their past heritage, and how they differed by creating new artistic styles, trade goods and burial practices that reflect their new homes.

The Vikings Towns of Munster – Cork, Waterford and Limerick

Background

The first wave of Viking settlements in Munster began during the 9th century, with settlements mentioned at Cork, Limerick and Waterford by the Irish annals. The relationship between the Viking settlers and the local Irish was often hostile, and the early *longphorts* are usually only mentioned in contemporary Irish writings to indicate that they had been attacked by powerful inland Gaelic tribes, probably as retribution for the Vikings' own attacks. The archaeological record for this period is scantier than in Dublin, which has better conditions for the preservation of artefacts, and a lot of what we know about these earliest settlements relies on textual sources. Historians often differ in opinion on the size and permanency of these settlements, with Limerick seeming to be the most established of them.

Things had changed notably by the mid-10th century, after the large influx of Vikings into Waterford in 914. The future King of Munster – Cellachán mac Buadacháin – allied with the Waterford Vikings in 939 to attack the Southern Uí Néill kingdom just north of Dublin, raiding at the monasteries of Killeigh, Clonenagh and Clonard. The Vikings were much sought after as mercenaries because of their fighting prowess. Brian Boru, for example, conquered the Waterford Vikings from 967–77 and allied himself with them. This ensured that Vikings from Munster fought alongside him against the Vikings of Dublin and their allies at Clontarf in 1014, which suggests that by then regional differences had become more important than ethnic distinctions. After all, the permanent Viking towns could not possibly have existed without being able to trade with Irish farmers and to ally themselves with the powerful local kings.

Clontarf was not the only battle in which the Vikings fought each other; there was often competition between the Viking settlements for economic resources and political power, particularly between Waterford, Limerick and Dublin. An alliance of the Limerick Vikings and the men of Munster defeated the Waterford Vikings in 927 at Killmallock, and in 1013, a few months before Clontarf, an attack on Cork by Dublin Vikings led by King Sihtric's son Olaf was repelled to Cléire Island by the townsfolk and many of the assailants were slain. The frequency of these attacks reminds us that the Vikings were not a single faction united under one ruler, as the later Anglo-

Normans were, but were often distinct groups with their own communal identities; in this respect, they shared some similarities with the diverse Gaelic tribes of Ireland. More often than not attacks appear to have been undertaken to attain wealth and land or to take vengeance for earlier raids, and later on because of regional and political differences.

The landscape of Viking Age Munster

There are similarities between all the Viking settlements in Ireland, the most notable of which are to do with their geography. All three of the Munster port cities were built not just near to rivers, but virtually on top of them. Cork was built in the middle of the marsh from which it gets its name, and required land reclamation to keep its foundations above water; Limerick was built on an island surrounded by the channels of the Shannon. Today Waterford appears to only flank the River Suir, but this was not always the case. John's River, now further downstream, originally followed the same line as The Mall, one of Waterford's busiest streets, and the original settlement was established in the corner of land between these two rivers, meaning it was protected by not one but two fast-flowing borders. The original wooden Viking fort was in the location now occupied by Reginald's Tower, and the city's modern-day 'Viking Triangle', containing Waterford's heritage centres, preserves the original shape of the city. The maps in this booklet demonstrate how these landscapes have changed since the Viking Age, and give a sense of what the Vikings looked for in a settlement.

It would not have been easy to live in these areas, with their limited farming land and the often dangerous conditions of living in marshland and on floodplains. Why settle in such troublesome environments? There are a few possible answers. For one thing, the Vikings were a seafaring people, so it makes sense that they would settle in places with easy access to the ocean; they did not think of the sea as a barrier between lands, but as a way of reaching and exploring other countries. The early Viking raiders would have wanted a quick way to escape in case of danger, whilst the later settlers would have had equal need of a trading route for their ships. It is probably also likely that the Vikings wanted to avoid confrontation with the Irish clans that dominated the inland regions of the country, and the natural defences provided by these rivers and marshes would have been absolutely invaluable to strengthening their settlements.

It is also worth considering that the Vikings may have chosen to settle in these areas because nobody else wanted to live there. After all, the Vikings would have been outnumbered by the Irish if they had settled inland, and it would have made sense to choose safer, more remote locations. The location of St Finbarr's monastery (now the site of St Fin Barre's Cathedral), overlooking what is now the city of Cork, may well have been chosen for the isolation it afforded the monks.

Despite the challenges of the landscapes that they settled in, the Viking settlements endured and prospered. As they grew in size and influence, these ports

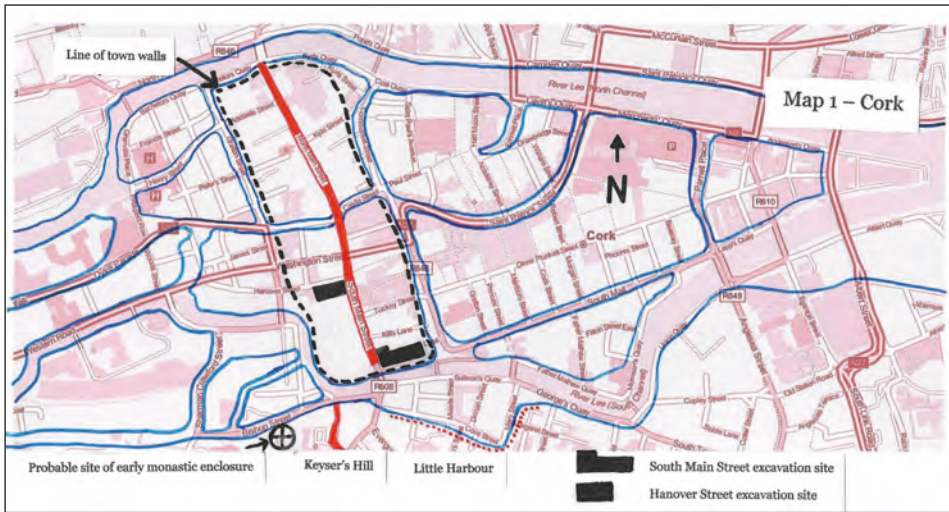
connected Ireland with a trading network and cultural contacts that covered much of northern Europe and even further afield, and introduced larger-scale urban development to what was a predominantly rural society. The later interest of Brian Boru and his dynasty in conquering the Viking port cities of Munster demonstrates not only their desire to bring all Munster and all Ireland under their control, but also the importance of the cities themselves. Through their sizeable military forces and established international trade routes, it made political and financial sense for Brian to ally with their Viking inhabitants rather than destroy them. When the Anglo-Normans subsequently invaded Ireland in the late 11th and 12th centuries, they too recognised the usefulness of the Viking settlements and expanded them further into great strongholds, reflected by the fact that today four of the five most populous cities in Ireland are of Viking origin – Dublin and the three port cities of Munster.

Cork

The earliest recorded presence of Vikings in the Cork area is 820, when the Irish annals describe a raid on the monastery overlooking the marsh. The Vikings plundered the monastery's most valuable treasures and, encouraged by this success, returned to attack the monastery around five more times in the next hundred years. Written sources make reference to a Viking *longphort* in the region called *Dún Corcaighe* (Fort of the Marshes), which was attacked in 848 by an Irish army from North Munster, and a settlement in the same area containing a leader of 'the foreigners' is mentioned in 867. Cork is not mentioned much more in the annals until the beginning of the 10th century around 914, when a much larger army of Vikings settled at Waterford and from there spread through much of Munster – *Cogad Gáedhel re Gallaibh* claims that after their raids, a third of these forces settled in Cork.

We know that the later Hiberno-Norse settlement was located on an island around what is now the South Main Street area, close to the site of the old Beamish Brewery, which probably suggests that the older fort was located in the same area. This area would have been one of the larger islands in the Lee during the Viking Age, and has been excavated several times since 1977. The Vikings also settled on the other side of the Lee in the area around what is now Barrack Street and Douglas Street, and there was probably a bridge joining the two settlements near where the modern South Gate Bridge now stands.

The geography of the area in the 9th century was very different from that of the modern city (see *Map 1*). It consisted of several small marshy islands within the Lee estuary, which were so low that they were completely submerged when the tide came in; the Vikings had to raise their buildings on timbers to keep them above water at high tide. There was also a noticeable cove in the river, which extended over the area that is now bounded by Cove Street, Meade's Street, Mary's Street and part of Sullivan's Quay.



Map 1. Outline of the Viking Age settlement at Cork.

Map by Shane Lordan.

Very little has survived from the earliest Viking settlements in the area, mostly because the preservation conditions in Cork are best-suited to the mid-12th to late 13th centuries; it might also be because such settlements were only used for temporary raiding bases or because the town was particularly small, but this is uncertain. In any case, the oldest Viking houses that have been found in Cork date from the beginning of the 12th century onwards, and were uncovered just off South Main Street, underneath the car park opposite the Beamish Brewery site, and continuing north away from South Gate Bridge. The remains showed that the houses were built on wooden supports, designed to keep them above the tide levels, and had mud and wattle walls. The earlier part of the site by the river was built up with clay to form a knoll, on which the houses were built. Timber beams resembling supports for a wooden town wall have also been excavated just south of the bridge, and at French's Quay on the southern bank of the river, near the former cove, where it is thought that they formed part of a jetty in the natural harbour.

Amongst the remnants of these buildings were found some items of everyday life, including pieces of decorated hair-combs, pottery shards, and the bow of a small boat. Perhaps the most impressive of these finds is a miniature wooden boat, clearly made as a toy (**fig. 8**). Similar toy boats have been found in the excavations at Dublin, and one of those has similarly detailed decoration as the Cork boat, which clearly shows the extent to which such toys were treasured. The find also demonstrates the cultural importance to the Vikings of boats, which were not just a means of transport but a crucial element of their lifestyle and ambitions.

On the southern side of the river stands one of the few place names in Cork that seems to come from Old Norse. Keysers Hill is one of the oldest streets in Cork and now leads up to Elizabeth Fort, a 17th century barracks. The name is not of Irish origins and is thought to be from a Viking word, though the exact meaning is uncertain. Most modern-day guides give the meaning as ‘the way to the quayside’, but the English word *quay* comes from Old French *kay*, rather than the equivalent Old Norse word *staithe*. Alternatively, the name might come from the word *keisari* – meaning ‘emperor’ – or from *keisa*, a verb meaning ‘to bend’ or ‘to jut out’, perhaps a reference to the steep slope of the hill or the curve of the river.

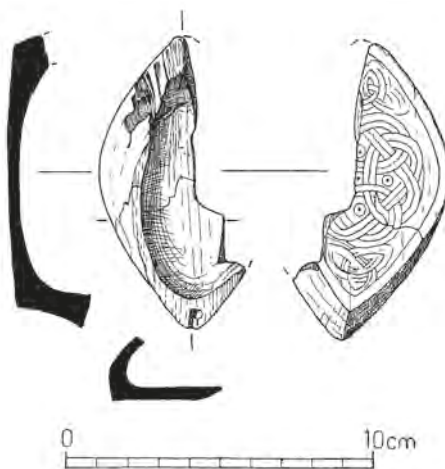


Fig. 8. Late-twelfth-century toy boat, from excavations at South Main Street, Cork.

Drawing reproduced from Maurice F. Hurley, ‘Children and Youth in Medieval and Post-medieval Cork’, JCHAS 118 (2013) 71–85, with kind permission of the author.

To get a clearer view of where the Vikings have left their mark, it is worth taking a boat trip out of the city and down to Cork Harbour. This is the route that Viking settlers and traders would have taken to get to Cork itself, and some of the islands still retain Viking-influenced place names. One such is Haulbowline, whose name may come from the Old Norse *áll-bæli* meaning an ‘eel dwelling’. Another is Foaty Island, though not everyone agrees on its etymology: some think it comes from the Irish *fód te*, meaning ‘warm soil’, whilst others argue that it comes from Old Norse *fót ey*, meaning ‘foot island’, maybe referring to its location near the end of the river.

Cork remained a Viking settlement until Ireland was invaded by the Anglo-Normans in the late 11th to 12th centuries. In 1177 their forces captured Cork and established their own stronger fortifications there, driving out many of the previous Viking and Irish inhabitants of the city. Rather than starting completely afresh and building further inland, the new arrivals proceeded to build the foundations of their own city on the mid-river site of the Viking town; the Anglo-Norman invaders, hardly popular themselves, were in no hurry to abandon this useful settlement.

Waterford and Woodstown

The Irish annals write that foreigners led by Sihtric of Norway arrived in the Waterford area around 853, and there are further references to a settlement in the area

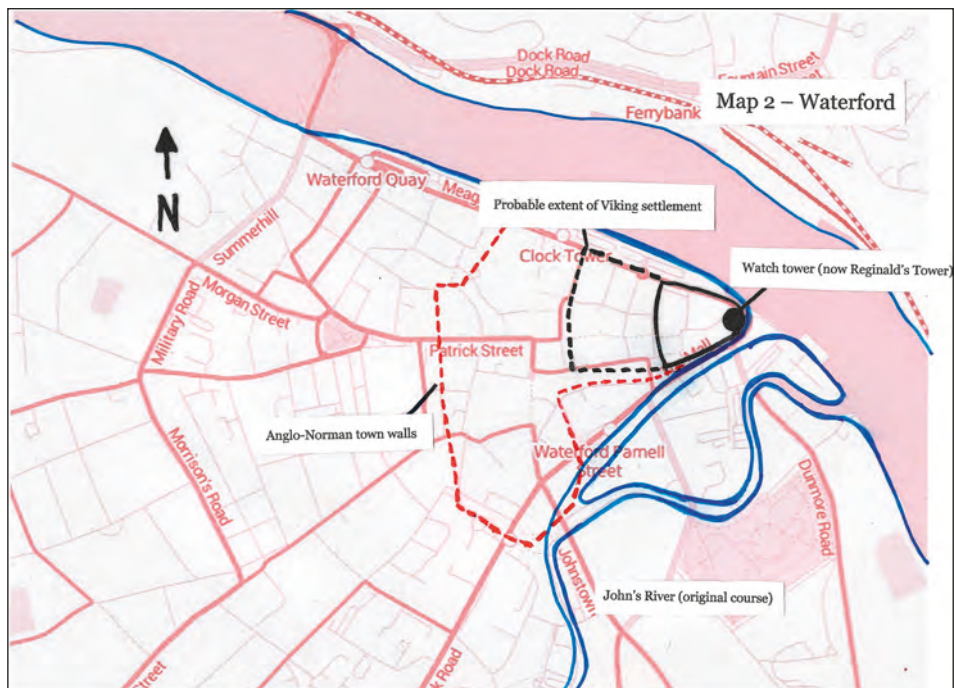
in 860 and 892. The settlement appears to have been rather small until 914, when the fleet of Vikings that had been forced to flee Dublin around 902 returned to Ireland. The town was said to have grown substantially larger by 915 under the rule of Ottir Iarla, and by 917 was attacked by the re-established Úi Ímair dynasty of Dublin, who ruled over the city at various times while it remained under Viking control.

Like Cork, the Viking-Age landscape of Waterford provided ideal natural defences for a small, vulnerable settlement (see *Map 2*). As mentioned above, the earlier location of John's River meant that it also bounded the settlement, with the Viking fort at the very tip of the headland, and the decision to establish the focal point of the settlement here must have resulted from the natural lie of the land. There was also a cove where the two rivers met, similar to the marsh in Cork in that it contained some small islands ideal for beaching ships. Having this cove was particularly important to the settlement at Waterford because of the fast-flowing nature of the Suir, which is one of the fastest-flowing rivers in Europe; without a natural harbour in which to anchor and protect their boats, the seafaring Vikings would not have been able to settle here.

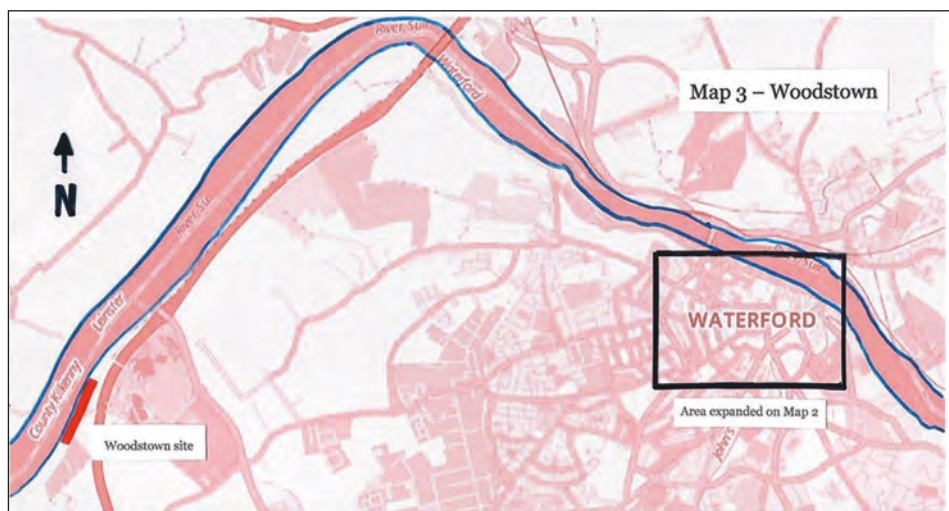
About three and a half miles west of modern-day Waterford lies one of the most important Viking Age sites to be discovered in recent times. The 9th century settlement at Woodstown (see *Map 3*) was discovered in 2003 after excavations took place on the route of a proposed road, which was later diverted after the people of Waterford campaigned to have the area preserved as a heritage site. In terms of Munster, the site provides us with the earliest evidence so far of Viking settlers in the region, dating from around 830–920; it seems to have been a small settlement, probably a *longphort*, which did not experience the urban development of places like Dublin. Only 5% of the site has been excavated so far, but the concentration of finds indicates that the settlement was densely populated and that this was an important site.

Some of the archaeological finds excavated from Woodstown are now displayed by the Waterford Museums Trust in Reginald's Tower. including the lead weight on the front cover of this booklet. While the weight adheres to Scandinavian traditions (which means it corresponds to a common system used across the Viking world), its decoration is distinctive, possibly representing an artistic tradition among settlers in the region. This was important as merchants might well use false weights to defraud unsuspecting traders, and it was important to be able to identify one's own weights to ensure a fair trade; there are several other weights on display in the Reginald's Tower that have also been personalised. There is also an intricately decorated piece of bone that is probably an example of an unfinished comb (*fig. 9*). Many combs made of bone were excavated at the Woodstown site, which suggests that the craftsman who made them was in great demand from the townspeople and local Irish traders.

The centrepiece of the hoard, though, is the sword taken from Woodstown's only excavated burial to date, accompanied by a broken spearhead. The sword is a particularly fine, well-preserved example of a 9th century weapon, but differs from



Map 2. Location of the Viking Age settlement in relation to the modern city of Waterford.
Map by Shane Lordan.



Map 3. Archaeological site of Woodstown.
Map by Shane Lordan.



*Fig. 9. Detail from bone trial piece found in Waterford city excavations, now in Reginald's Tower Museum, Co. Waterford.
Drawing by Annemari Ferreira.*

parallel examples elsewhere in that both it and the spearhead appear to have been purposefully damaged before being placed in the grave. It might be that the weapons were broken to stop any grave-robbers from stealing them, or alternatively, this damage might be an indication that the Vikings in this settlement were already developing new burial customs distinct from the Viking homelands, possibly influenced by their new location or the peoples with whom they interacted.

Reginald's Tower itself is one of the most remarkable landmarks in Waterford, standing at the very tip of the city's Viking Triangle and marking the site of the original Viking fort. The line of decorated stones running up to the tower from the west indicates the former location of the Viking town wall, which is also delineated on the basement wall of the city's Medieval Museum. The tower that survives today was built by the Anglo-Normans on top of that fort after they burned it down on conquering the city, and has been repaired and built upwards on many occasions since. The name Reginald hints at the Viking origins of the site. It is an anglicised form of Ragnall, which is itself a Gaelicised form of the Old Norse name Røgnvaldr. It probably refers to one of the many Ragnalls who ruled over the city, and may even refer back to the famous Ragnall ua Ímair. The Úi Ímair were a Hiberno-Norse dynasty who ruled several kingdoms around the Irish Sea. Ragnall's kinsman Sihtric was King of Dublin, and Ragnall was already King of Northumbria by the time he arrived in Waterford in 917 and took over from then-ruler Ottir Iarla, who became his deputy. Ragnall left Waterford in 918 and died soon afterward, but it is likely that some of the subsequent rulers of the city were also members of this dynasty.

It is thought that the wooden Viking Age fort on this site would have consisted of more than just the tower, which probably stood at the head of a military enclosure to which the town's inhabitants would have withdrawn in case of an attack. When the town was attacked by the superior military forces of the Anglo-Normans, this strategy and the weaker wooden defences failed, and the Vikings were forced to abandon the settlement.

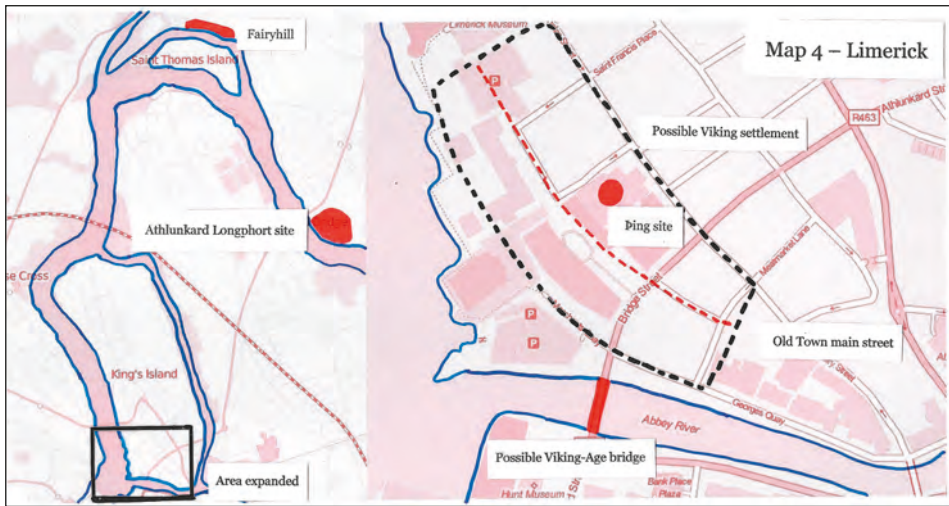
Limerick

Viking settlers are first recorded at Limerick by the Annals of Ulster in 845, in reference to a raid on Armagh. By 860 the settlement had attracted the attention of the Norwegian earl Tomar and his men, who stayed there until Tomar's death in an attack on Clonfert in 866. The Vikings were said to have been driven out of the area in 887 by men from Connacht, but more permanent settlement must have begun again at the site by 922, when it is written that another Tomar from Limerick encamped at nearby Lough Ree for two years.

The original Irish name for the area, *Luimneach*, 'a barren spot of land', suggests it was sparsely inhabited when the Vikings arrived, and the natural moat around King's Island – the centre of the later settlement – would have encouraged the raiders to store their valuable boats in this location (see **Map 4**). The Abbey River, the channel that borders the island on its eastern and southern sides, would have also provided a safe place to anchor ships compared to the much larger and faster Shannon. The city is located at the head of the Shannon estuary, right on the border between the freshwater of the river and the saltwater of the ocean, which may indicate that the Vikings who settled there were reluctant to venture further inland where the local Gaels would have outnumbered them.

The first *longphort* in the area appears to have been in the townland of Athlunkard, Co. Clare, the other side of the headland from King's Island. The place name refers to a ford (*ath*) across the river, and the *lunkard* element, which was spelled *longford* in the 17th century, clearly refers to the establishment of a *longphort* in the area. This *longphort* may have only been inhabited for a short while if it was used for raiding, but could have been in longer use if its function was to act as a defensive outpost for a larger settlement on King's Island. Geographical surveys along the Shannon have also revealed that there were defensive banks and ditches closer to King's Island at Fairyhill, at a ford adjacent to St Thomas' Island, which may suggest that there were several such outposts along the river leading to the main site.

The permanent settlement that had re-emerged on King's Island by 922 was centred on the site where St Mary's Cathedral now stands. The cathedral was built upon the former site of a Viking *þing*, which is an 'assembly' or 'meeting place', and formed the heart of the Viking settlement. The streets of the old town are based on the layout of the Viking city, with the main street probably running along the modern-day



Map 4. Outline of the Viking Age settlement(s) at Limerick.

Map by Shane Lordan.

streets Crosbie Row and Courthouse Lane, the part in between the two covered by the road running through the cathedral's grounds. There is also a Viking name element preserved in the old town in Athlunkard Street, named after the nearby townland and former *longphort* site.

Whereas the periods of Viking control in Cork and Waterford were both ended by the Anglo-Norman invasions, it was ended rather sooner in Limerick's case. Ivar of Limerick, the settlement's last Viking king, was heavily defeated by Brian Boru at the Battle of Sulcoit in 968. Brian later killed Ivar when he took control of the city in 977, and promptly annexed Limerick to be the new capital of his Munster kingdom and the Dál Cais tribe. Ivar himself was later described in *Cogad Gáedhel re Gallaibh* as one of Brian's most notable enemies who was killed because he claimed to be King of Munster, although most historians now doubt that he made such claims. The town's Viking inhabitants remained in the area and were involved in some power struggles over the city, but in reality their influence had been greatly reduced by the time the Normans arrived in the 1170s. Both the Irish and the Vikings were subsequently ejected from King's Island, which became the exclusive residence of the Normans, and were forced to live in the newly-established 'Irishtown', just across the southern bay from their former home.

CHAPTER 4

The Viking Legacy in Ireland

Mark Kirwan

The Vikings undoubtedly form a memorable part of Irish history, but how much can these memories be trusted? There are many elements which have shaped our perception of the past and it is important to be aware of these perceptions, so that we may have an accurate impression of Viking Age Ireland. This section considers how Vikings were remembered in Munster. As mentioned previously, we have virtually no written records by the Vikings themselves about their activities in Ireland, and the closest thing we do have – the Icelandic Sagas – were written down centuries later. The fact that the Vikings regularly attacked monasteries, the same places where most of our records about them were written, should also be taken into consideration.

It is of course true that the Vikings frequently engaged in violent acts. They undoubtedly took many lives and destroyed some monasteries and settlements, but they should not be assessed in terms of a modern sense of morality. It is important to realise that the Vikings were not unique in doing what they did; raiding and battles were a feature of Irish life before they arrived. Irish leaders often had to stake or defend their right to rule by asserting their military might, and raids in which cattle (the most common unit of wealth in pre-Viking Ireland) were stolen from rival settlements were a crucial and accepted part of these struggles (famously portrayed in the legend of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* or ‘The Cattle Raid of Cooley’). The popular image of Ireland as an idyllic and peaceful ‘land of saints and scholars’ before the Viking Age is a later fabrication. It is often overlooked that various Irish armies succeeded in defeating the Vikings in battle many times.

Another common idea about the Vikings in Ireland is that they came with the intention of conquering the whole country. While it is impossible to fully understand

their intentions from the scarce records available to us, there does not appear to be any intention to gain political overlordship of the whole island. The political structure of Ireland was not centralised, and relations between each Irish kingdom or *tuath* (numbering over 150 in total) relied on more complex personal relationships between leaders, rather than a single monarch retaining ultimate control over a large portion of land. The main example we have from the Irish sources refer to the actions of a Viking leader named Turgesius, whose exploits in attacking places like Clonmacnoise were exaggerated in the *Cogadh Gáedhel re Gallaibh* in order to appear as though he threatened the entire country. The writer seems to have exaggerated this attack, so that his subsequent defeat at the hands of King Máel Sechnaill mac Máele Ruanaid could be presented as a bigger accomplishment, and thus bring greater glory to Máel Sechnaill's dynasty. While we might still debate whether or not the Vikings ever intended to conquer the island, the fact is they never came close to achieving such an aim.

The concept of the 'Conquering Viking' also appears to owe something to a later conquest, that of the Anglo-Normans which took place in the 12th century. Possibly a result of the Normans themselves being of Scandinavian origin (they were descended from Vikings who established a settlement in Normandy, named after these 'Northmen', in modern France), for a long time the actions of Vikings in Ireland were not clearly distinguished from those of the Anglo-Normans, and some people even portrayed them as the vanguard of the later conquest. As a result of the many issues surrounding Ireland's subsequent relationship with Britain, particularly following the Act of Union in 1800, the role of the Vikings in Ireland was often treated unsympathetically. Due to growing nationalism and a desire to assert the achievements of the Irish people above all others, many refused to acknowledge the positive role the Vikings played in shaping the country. Some also felt that even if they did not play a direct role in the conquest, they had left the country weakened by their many raids and battles over the previous centuries.

The Vikings were never entirely ignored, however, and we do still owe much of our knowledge to previous generations of historians, archaeologists, linguists and antiquarians. To take one Munster example, John Windle (born in 1801) was an antiquarian from Cork who researched and wrote a great deal on medieval Irish history, and played an active part in many societies including the Cork Cuverian Society, the Cork Archaeological Society and the South Munster Antiquarian Society. Through his writings (now in the collection of the Royal Irish Academy) and others like him we can get a picture of what past generations thought about the Vikings. One particularly interesting insight comes from his correspondence with Zachariah Hawkes, another antiquarian from Bandon, Co. Cork, who was interested in uncovering the remains of Viking breweries in the area. They seem to have been under the impression that the Vikings were the first to bring brewing to Ireland, and that they were very careful to prevent the Irish from discovering their secrets.

Hawkes wrote to Windele to tell him about the remains of possible breweries that he had uncovered in places like Bantry and Ballymacowen, but noted that they appeared to have been destroyed to stop them from falling into Irish hands. An article in *The Dublin Penny Journal*, possibly by Albman, tells a story from an unknown source of the lengths that the Viking brewers would supposedly go to:

“The Irish practised all the means that was in their power to discover the art, but to no avail. They at length seized on two Danes, a father and son, [...] and threatened them with instant death if they did not divulge the secret. The father, at first, made a prompt denial; but at length desired them to kill his son, (which they did) and he would then reveal the secret. “Now,” said the Dane, “I knew myself had no chance of escape; and, perhaps, my son, owing to his tender age, might be tempted to shew you how to make beer, was he let to survive me.”

It is clear that Irish were brewing their own beer long before the Vikings arrived, but local histories such as these show us how they have always had a sense of fearlessness and innovation associated with them.



Fig 10. A romantic image of the Vikings.

Oscar Wergeland, 'Norsemen Arriving in Iceland' (1909). Image out of copyright.

Conclusion

Mark Kirwan

Over the past century the Vikings have become more and more accepted into the popular understanding of Irish history. Part of this has been a result of the establishment of the Irish Free State, allowing for the history of the country to be reassessed from a new perspective which is more open to outside influences. In addition, improvements in archaeological techniques have opened up new avenues of exploration, and revealed aspects of Viking lifestyle that were previously unknowable. The precedent set by the excavations at Wood Quay in Dublin, and the subsequent public protests to protect the site, brought home how much the Vikings are in fact a part of Irish heritage. Now Dublin is widely acknowledged as a Viking city, and it is

possible that other towns in Munster will follow in its footsteps.

In the past few years Waterford has made amazing leaps forward in embracing its Viking heritage. Spurred on by the discovery of the remains of a Viking camp at Woodstown, the city authorities and the people of Waterford have fully engaged with their past, and acted swiftly to protect and preserve the site for future examination. The development of the Viking Triangle, centred on the later settlement site and framed by three modern museums, has opened up its past to residents and visitors alike (see *fig. 11*). The potential for further discoveries at Woodstown is highly anticipated, and it is thought that a full excavation could revolutionise



Fig. 11. Waterford's Viking Triangle.
Photo by Mark Kirwan

our understanding of these *longphort* sites. The finds alone reaffirm our sense that these settlements were part of a global Viking network, bringing medieval Ireland into contact with a much larger world.

Studies undertaken by Dr Cathy Swift (Mary Immaculate College, Limerick) on the DNA composition of the Irish population (backed by surname research) have shown the extent to which the Vikings became part of the Irish population, including those who later emigrated from Ireland. This ongoing research is especially promising as it may reveal clusters of Viking settlement outside of the established urban zones, in areas that are not adequately represented by either the historical or archaeological evidence. Advancements such as these highlight how there are still new methods to be discovered that might allow us unexpected insights, and there is no telling what the future will bring to our understanding of the past. Indeed, Cork and Limerick are built on Viking foundations and future developments and excavations there may uncover further rich seams of evidence.

Munster played an essential role in Viking Age Ireland, and Ireland was in turn part of an extensive Viking world. Knowledge gained elsewhere continues to shine light on our understanding of Viking Munster, and similarly new discoveries in Munster add greater depth to our understanding of Viking life on a much larger scale. Munster's Viking past continues to connect it to the wider world in new and exciting ways. It is hoped that this booklet has presented a fairly comprehensive picture of the Vikings and their activities in Munster, and that the reader has come away with a new understanding of their role in Irish history, as well as having some preconceptions challenged. This is a complex and wide-ranging topic and the material we have presented here can only give a taste of the wealth of information available. For readers interested in exploring the topic further, the bibliography that follows will provide a useful starting point.

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Languages, Myths and Finds

Translating Norse and Viking Cultures for the Twenty-First Century

The *Languages, Myths and Finds* project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, ran in the years 2013-14, coinciding with the British Museum's international exhibition *Vikings: Life and Legend*. The aim of the project was to encourage conversations between specialist university academics and advanced research students in Old Norse and Viking Studies, and local communities around Britain and Ireland who were interested in knowing more about their Viking heritage. The communities chosen for the project were Cleveland, Dublin, Isle of Lewis, Isle of Man and Munster. Five small teams of academics and students were chosen to work with each community by developing and researching topics most suited to that locality, as identified in dialogue with the community. These booklets are the products of the research done by those teams together with the local partners, especially during field trips to the localities in the spring of 2014. The full set of five booklets can be viewed on the project website, <http://languagesmythsfinds.ac.uk>, where there is also further information about the project.

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