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Authors	Sheehan, John
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Reflections on Kingship, the Church, and Viking Age Silver in Ireland

John Sheehan

This chapter considers the wealth of some of Ireland's kings, as represented by Viking Age silver hoards, and relates it to investment in the ecclesiastical sphere during the ninth and tenth centuries. While the rich Irish annals do not contain references to hoards or hoarding, there are some mentions of the phenomenon in early literary sources, and these relate to the church. In what follows, I argue that Viking Age silver hoards were deposited on church land with higher frequency than has hitherto been appreciated, and can therefore be seen to represent ecclesiastical, rather than secular, wealth. I consider a case study of Clann Cholmáin of Mide, the most powerful polity in tenth-century Ireland, and how its connections with the development of the monastery of Clonmacnoise may be related to its silver wealth, as evidenced by the Lough Ennell and Hare Island hoards. Finally, I briefly consider the status of the cross-marked ingot, which is suggested to be a product manufactured for use in Irish ecclesiastical contexts.

The Introduction of Viking Age Silver

Given the nature and duration of Scandinavian settlement and activity in Ireland it is no surprise that a large number of Viking Age silver hoards have been found there. In fact, over 130 hoards of ninth- and tenth-century date are now on record, representing a concentration of finds that is, in numerical terms, unequalled in the Viking world outside Scandinavia during this period. Just over half of these are 'coinless' hoards (comprising non-numismatic material, such as ingots and ornaments, only), while the remainder comprise either 'mixed' hoards (combining coin and non-numismatic material) or coin hoards (composed exclusively of coins) (Sheehan 2007). Given that just under half of Ireland's hoards contain coins, it may seem that there are good prospects for dating hoards as well as the various types of non-numismatic material that occur

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in them. Unfortunately, however, the matter is not so straightforward. It is complicated, for instance, by the fact that most of the mixed hoards were deposited during the mid to late tenth century while the coinless hoards have a wider date range, from the second half of the ninth century onwards. In addition, the wide range of the bullion values of the hoards, which vary significantly, contribute towards the complexity of the issue; many of the coin hoards are rather small finds, with the coinless examples tending to be significantly heavier. Consequently, it is the coinless hoards that account for the great bulk of the considerable amount of silver wealth that was present in Ireland during the ninth and tenth centuries, and many of these cannot be closely dated. As a result of these and other issues it is difficult to relate the hoards to historically attested events, or even to broad historical horizons of activities. It is more straightforward, however, to relate these finds to the Irish kingdoms in which they are found. This is because a large proportion of the finds are provenanced to a locality, combined with the fact that the broad extent and limits of the 185 or so kingdoms that existed around AD 900 are now identifiable as a result of recent work on Ireland's early medieval territorial, political, and economic divisions by Paul MacCotter (2008).

While it is not always possible to identify particular cultural contexts for Viking Age silver hoards from Ireland, it is nonetheless evident that there are sometimes discernible correlations between groupings of specific types of hoards and certain locations that are associated with the dominant dynasties of the Irish kingdoms (Purcell & Sheehan 2013, 37–41; Sheehan 2015). It is clear from both general patterns of distribution and from the tendency for many of these Scandinavian-type hoards to derive from Irish settlement sites, such as royal centres, ecclesiastical foundations, ringforts, and crannógs, that a great many of these finds represent Irish wealth. Reflection on how this was acquired usually focuses on the economic relationships that must have existed between the Irish and the Scandinavians (Graham-Campbell 1998, 106). While this view has merit, it does not take account of the importance of other potential mechanisms for silver exchange, such as the formation of political alliances, the practice of gift-exchange, the conventions of ransoming, and, perhaps most importantly in the Irish context, the exercise of tribute.

Silver of Scandinavian character begins to appear in Ireland during the mid ninth century, the same time as the *longphuirt* settlements, defined as 'fortifications . . . to protect fleets and to facilitate raiding and trading' (Kelly 2015, 55), begin to develop. However, the military capabilities of these sites were kept in check by the force of the Irish kings. As a result, unlike the Scandinavians in England, the Scandinavians in Ireland remained landless for the most part; they were therefore not normally in a position to use cattle, the main marker of wealth and medium of exchange in Ireland (Kelly 1997, 57–8; McCormick 2008, 209–11), to develop economically. Instead, in order to become relevant in Ireland, and to make it possible for them to become part of local political and

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economic systems, it seems the Scandinavians had to innovate and introduce an economic support system that was new to the country. Archaeologically, the evidence for this is the silver. It is now appreciated that a significant proportion of the coinless hoards from Ireland may belong to the second half of the ninth century, the main era of the *longphuirt* (Sheehan 2014, 210–11). This connects with the results of recent archaeological investigations at the *longphort* of Woodstown, Co. Waterford, which has demonstrated that silver and ingot-production were important facets of the economy at this site (Young 2014, 111–12; Sheehan 2014, 195–6). Woodstown has produced a metal-working furnace within which silver, as well as copper-alloy, was worked, and, in addition, it has produced crucibles, silver-assaying cupels, and many lead weights (Wallace 2014). What these finds seem to suggest is that a major innovation of the Scandinavians in Ireland at this time was the introduction of a silver-based system of exchange.

The majority of the silver hoards from Ireland have been found in Irish, as opposed to Scandinavian, contexts. In both societies gift-giving appears to have been part of elite culture (Sheehan 2013, 811–21), so perhaps the gifting of silver was perceived as one of the ways for the incoming Scandinavian leaders to try and establish themselves within the Irish elite. Indeed, it seems that establishing themselves within this grouping appears to have been an important aim from the outset. The historical sources reference both intermarriage and the formation of military alliances between the Scandinavians and the Irish from the mid ninth century onwards; in fact, the first recorded military pact of this type was in 842, within a year of the first recorded *longphuirt* (Purcell & Sheehan 2013, 41). Therefore, it may be argued that *longphuirt*, rather than being primarily regarded as assault bases, should be viewed as a result of cooperation between the Scandinavian leaders and some Irish kings. Indeed, it has been suggested that the foundation of the early *longphort* at Linn Ross (Rossnaree), a short distance from the royal centre of Knowth/Cnóbha, may have been established with the consent of the Brega kingship (Downham 2004, 238). It is evident from the literary and historical sources that the Scandinavian incomers were not perceived as being of inferior rank, and from an early stage the annalists recognize their status by frequently referring to them as 'sons of the King of Lochlann'; for instance, Amlaíb (ON Óláfr) is referred to in this manner in the Annals of Ulster *sub anno* 853. It seems on this basis, as well as on the basis of the archaeological evidence, which shows that silver was beginning to occur in Irish contexts, that the appearance of the *longphuirt* is correlated with the arrival of the Scandinavians as part of the Irish political scene, and not simply as alien pagan raiders. Far from being mere raiding bases, the *longphuirt* were developing trading and other economic functions using silver and other media. It appears that these sites were being invested in as mid-ninth-century power bases, as much to develop power in the future as in the present. It is not surprising,

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therefore, that during the following century Ireland's first towns developed in the same locations of some of the *longphuirt* (Kelly 2015, 91–2).

Cattle formed the basic unit of wealth in early medieval Ireland, resulting in livestock becoming the foundation of its wealth system (Kelly 1997, 57–8; McCormick 2008, 209–11). This appears to have begun to change from the ninth century onwards, during a period of significant political, social, and economic adjustment during which there was a notable shift from devolved to centralized power (Ó Corráin 1972, 28–32). These changes were not due to the Scandinavians, but the incomers had arrived on the scene at an opportune time, during a period of transformation. There are hints in the written sources that within native Irish society there is a move away from the cattle-based structure of wealth to one which also included silver as a means of exchange (Kelly 1997, 57–8). Clearly, the use of silver in this way must have resulted from the influence of the Scandinavians.

The Church

This mid-ninth-century period of transformation also involved the church, given its close relationship with kingship. While Christianity was introduced into Ireland in the late fourth/early fifth century, the eighth and ninth centuries marked the main period of the consolidation of the church. This was a time of expanding ecclesiastical power, evidenced by an increase in church building and the production of sculpture, metalwork, etc. This power was founded on the earlier growth of ecclesiastical estates, large agricultural demesnes that surrounded significant church establishments. These estates were granted to the church by local dynasties, often the same kin-groups that had founded the church sites, a connection which led to what has been described as 'an incestuous dynamic of ecclesiastical and secular politics' in which the church sites were 'the essential props of ambitious dynasties' (Ryan 1988, 33). In recent years UCC's *Making Christian Landscapes* project has been researching these ecclesiastical estates, using both historical and landscape approaches (Ó Carragáin 2014). It has shown that in some parts of the country, where the historical or archaeological evidence survives, these ecclesiastical estates could grow to occupy up to a third of the land mass. If we measure the importance of the church in this way, it should not be surprising to learn that a significant number of Viking Age silver hoards were deposited on church-owned land. Hoards, often coin hoards, occasionally turn up in early church sites, but the recognition that the distinction between 'secular' and 'ecclesiastical' settlement forms is a modern construct now indicates that the silver wealth of the church cannot be measured by these finds alone. Given that a significant proportion of ringforts, crannógs, and other settlement sites occur on church land, it has become evident that church-owned silver is not necessarily always going to be found solely on the ecclesiastical sites themselves and that the church probably owned more silver than has been previously supposed.

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In what follows, I use the silver hoards of the ninth and tenth centuries to consider the relationship between the church, with its estates, the Irish kings, with whom the church had very close and often familial affiliations with, and the Hiberno-Scandinavians, who were responsible for introducing silver to Ireland and whose ambitions resulted in their interaction with these kings.

Historical and Literary Sources

References to Viking Age silver and silver hoarding do not occur in the Irish annals. This may appear surprising, given that the annals are such rich historical sources for a period when silver was so prevalent, but these sources normally focus on political and ecclesiastical events. Nevertheless, references to silver do occur in several literary texts, including in the Ulster Cycle, where the term is normally used in descriptions of the regalia of the mythical heroes of these tales (Mallory 1986). It is interesting to note, however, that some literary sources do relate to silver hoards and hoarding, sometimes involving the Scandinavians, and to an association between this silver and the church.

The first of these is particularly thought-provoking because it occurs specifically in connection with the discovery of a silver hoard and how this was subsequently used towards funding the building of a church, described as 'a great oratory, built of stone and extremely beautiful'. This narrative is in St Bernard's *Life of Malachy*, written in Clairvaux between 1148 and 1153, and it involves St Malachy's discovery of a hoard of silver and his use of it to fund the building of the church at Bangor, Co. Down (Meyer 1978, 79–80): 'Hence it was that when many pieces of silver were found Malachy did not put them back in their place, but took them out of their place; for he bade the whole gift of God to be spent on the work of God.' The hoard, which is very likely to have been of Viking Age date, is not interpreted as merely representing a chance find of old treasure but, rather, as a divine gift: 'For who else caused a treasure to be stored in that place, and being stored, not to be found till the time and work of Malachy?' While this source is of twelfth-century date, it may reflect an understanding and an appreciation in the Irish church that wealth from 'outside', and specifically silver, had been used to its direct benefit in earlier times.

Another literary source, of a different type, is *Ard na Scela, a mhic na ccuach*, a eulogy to Écnechán Mac Dálaig, king of Cénel Conaill, a kingdom in modern county Donegal, north-west Ireland, who died in 906 (Dobbs 1955). It is a long poem and is attributed to Flann mac Lonáin, who died in 918. Even though Ó Corráin dates it later, to the eleventh or twelfth century (1978, 32), and Downham assigns it to the twelfth or thirteenth century (2007, 39), it is nonetheless regarded as a source that provides important information on the Scandinavians' activities in this part of Ireland and on their interactions with the local rulers, particularly in relation to early tenth-century historical events that took

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place on the Fanad and Inishowen peninsulas (Graham-Campbell 1988, 109–10; Ó Floinn 1995, 101–3). These events are recorded in the Annals of Ulster, *sub anno* 921, and the Annals of the Four Masters, *sub anno* 919, and relate to the defeats of two Viking land-based fleets. The poem recounts details of these Viking coastal bases, forced marriage alliances between Viking leaders and Irish princesses in lieu of tribute demands, a runaway bride, and Viking treasures of gold and silver. Following their defeat by Écnechán, the wealth of the Vikings, which includes 'gold and pure white silver', is divided among the 'long-speared' Cénel Conaill dynasty, with 'ten ounces to every strong district' and 'five ounces to every great church', this division probably reflecting the early medieval concept of *tertia Deo*/'third to God' (Etchingham 1999, 271–88). It is worth noting that recorded hoards from, on, or close to the Inishowen peninsula represent one of the more noteworthy concentrations of Viking Age silver from within a geographically restricted area anywhere in Ireland (Purcell & Sheehan 2013, 50). Furthermore, these finds possess a number of features in common, each containing complete ornaments, few ingots, little or no hack-silver, and no coins, suggesting that they may represent a shared hoarding horizon dating to the same broad period. This apparent correlation between an archaeological distribution pattern and the location of incidents noted in early Irish literature is interesting, though in the present context what is of special significance is that the local church received no less than a third of Cénel Conaill's newly acquired silver wealth.

Scél Choirpri Chruim agus Móelsechlaind meic Móelrúanaid survives as a fifteenth-century religious saga tale (Wiley 2013), though it has been convincingly argued that it was first composed in the early tenth century (Kehnel 1997, 112–13). This is a story about the tormented spirit of Máel Sechnaill, the mid-ninth-century Clann Cholmáin king, which comes back from purgatory and visits the monastery of Clonmacnoise, one of the greatest ecclesiastical foundations in early medieval Ireland, which lies in his former kingdom. The spirit seeks help from Bishop Cairpre Cam, who prays and fasts for the post-mortem redemption of the king's soul and is eventually successful. When it is redeemed from torment, Máel Sechnaill's spirit revisits Clonmacnoise and, as a reward, shows the churchmen the spot where he had once buried a treasure of gold and silver which he had gained in a raid against the Dublin Vikings. Again, as in *Ard na Scela, a mhic na ccuach*, Scandinavian wealth has ultimately been acquired by the Irish church through the intervention of local kingships. As will be explored below, there is no doubt that Clonmacnoise benefited greatly from the patronage of Máel Sechnaill and subsequent Clann Cholmáin kings, particularly his son, Flann Sinna, who were extraordinarily silver-rich in the ninth and tenth centuries.

The main point about these literary sources is that they each relate connections between Viking silver and the church. While this association is not evident from the historical sources, it is already apparent from the recorded

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archaeological discoveries of gold and silver hoards on ecclesiastical sites, such as Monasterboice, Scattery Island, Rahan, Mungret, Dysart, Hare Island, Tynan, Dysert Glebe, Vesnoy, etc. One of the literary sources specifically relates to the discovery of a lost silver hoard, while the two others explain how silver was acquired by Irish kings as plunder from the Scandinavians. In one instance this wealth was then hoarded by the king, while in the other it was divided and redistributed. In both cases the church ultimately benefits, which is unsurprising given the close links, already noted, that existed between ecclesiastical and secular politics.

Southern Uí Néill and Clann Cholmáin

Some general trends emerge from the distribution patterns of recorded ninth- and tenth-century silver hoards within the context of Ireland's kingdoms and over-kingdoms. There are identifiable geographic concentrations in some areas that are clearly focused on the locations of important royal and ecclesiastical centres, and these sorts of concentrations seem to correlate with the place of deposition of much of the silver (Purcell & Sheehan 2013, 37–41; Sheehan 2015). However, the over-kingdom with the highest number of individual hoard find-spots, numbering almost fifty, and with by far the greatest total bullion value, is Southern Uí Néill (Fig. 6.1). The great silver wealth of this kingdom is unquestionable, and it is clear that the majority of these hoards represent Irish- rather than Scandinavian-owned wealth, albeit originally obtained from Dublin on its border zone (Kenny 1987, 512). Southern Uí Néill was an over-kingdom with sustained connections with the Viking town, whether through trade, alliance, tribute, ransom, loot, or other means. Some finds within the kingdom appear to be socially motivated, such as ornament hoards, others may have been more economically inspired and represent the use of silver as currency, such as hack-silver hoards, while others, such as large ingot hoards, appear more likely to signify tribute.

Southern Uí Néill was the most powerful polity in tenth-century Ireland, and the most significant of its three main septs was the Clann Cholmáin of Mide (Downham 2004). Over 60 per cent of the Southern Uí Néill's hoards are from the kingdom of Mide, forming the greatest number, by far, from a single kingdom in Viking Age Ireland. In bullion terms, however, most of it derives from a number of finds from around Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath. This lake was the location of the Clann Cholmáin's royal centre from the eighth to the eleventh centuries, with its kings residing in a compact landscape comprising a platform ringfort, Dún na Scíath, a crannóg, Cró Inis, and an adjacent church site, Dysart.

Two of the Clann Cholmáin kings—Máel Sechnaill, who has already been noted above in relation to *Scél Choirpri Chruim agus Móelsechlaind meic Móelrúanaid*, and Flann Sinna, his son—made the somewhat conceptual high-kingship of

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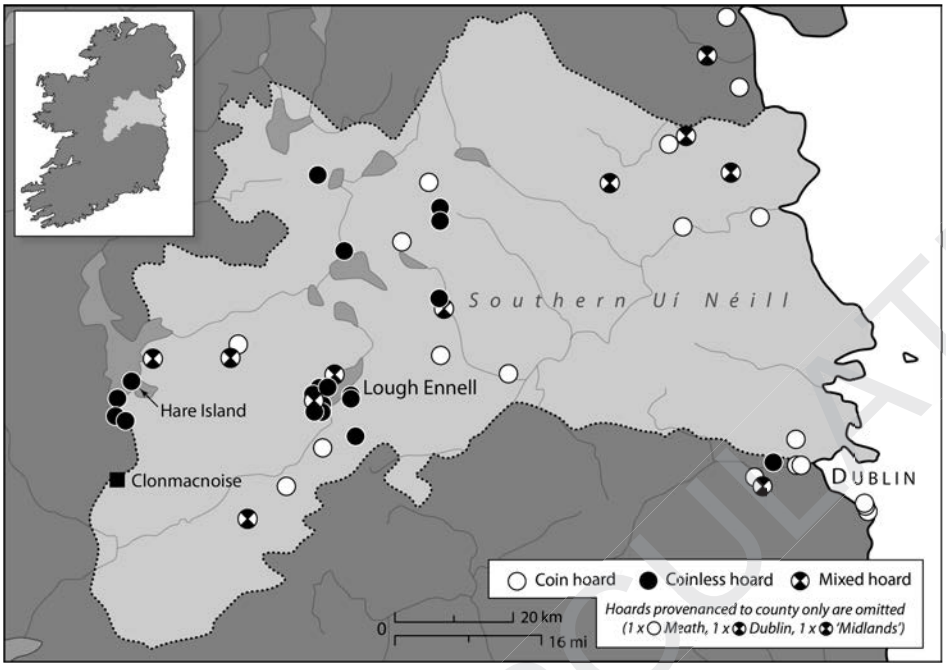


Fig. 6.1. The distribution of ninth- and tenth-century silver hoards in Southern Uí Néill, with Lough Ennell, Clonmacnoise, and Hare Island indicated.

Ireland, which they both held, into something more tangible (Byrne 1973, 264–5). The seventy-year period between the beginning and end of their periods of kingship (846–916) is also the formative period when *longphuirt* and noteworthy quantities of silver first appear in Viking Age Ireland. From the historical sources it is evident that these kings allied with the Dublin Vikings on occasion, sometimes through intermarriage, even if their relationship was usually one of enmity (Purcell & Sheehan 2013, *passim*). One way the importance of this connection can be quantified is by looking at the size and nature of the hoards deposited within the Clann Cholmáin territory.

Lough Ennell, the centre of Clann Cholmáin power, has produced a very impressive amount of Viking Age silver: eight hoards in all (Ryan et al. 1984; Maas 2015). Some are from islands and crannógs on the lake, some from its shoreline, one is from the Dysart ecclesiastical site, and another is from a crannóg, which may have been associated with Lynn, another important ecclesiastical site. Two of the finds are mixed hoards, dating to the tenth century, but the great bulk of the silver in the eight hoards is of non-numismatic form. Most of the finds are from the south and east side of the lake, where the hub of the royal landscape is located. The hoards are largely characterized by ingots and hack-silver, rather than ornaments, but they compensate for this apparent plainness in terms of their size and quantity. Some of the ingots are very large and, in terms of their

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form and weight, are not of Scandinavian character (Graham-Campbell & Sheehan 2009, 83), indicating that Clann Cholmáin were adept at making their own manner of ingots, even if the silver itself reached their hands as a result of Scandinavian activity. There is so much silver from the lake and its immediate environs, in fact, that the amount of wealth represented by it is paralleled in only a few other locations in the Viking world, such as Cuerdale, Lancashire (Graham-Campbell 2011), and Spillings, Gotland (Pettersson 2009). Together the hoards total a little over 50 kg of silver, amounting to over half of the total weight of Ireland's Viking Age hoards.

All of this wealth appears to have been accumulated by Clann Cholmáin during the later ninth and tenth centuries. It may be plausibly assumed that the massive amount of silver that has been recovered from around Lough Ennell is merely illustrative of what was actually hoarded there and, for whatever reasons, was left buried. It may also be reasonably presumed that Clann Cholmáin is unlikely to have left all of its silver hoarded in this way. Surely the dynasty also *used* its silver wealth, even if the evidence for how it may have done so is not inherent in the hoards themselves. Can we speculate on what this royal family was doing with its wealth? In order to do so the focus must be moved from the hoards towards the broader background of the Clann Cholmáin dynasty and its activities during the later ninth and tenth centuries.

Clann Cholmáin, and other Irish kingships, must have had multiple uses for their silver. These probably included paying mercenary allies, using it to strengthen social and political ties, as well as in trading, tribute, and gift-exchange. Silver was also used to facilitate the development of a series of experimental Irish ornament forms during the late ninth century, both secular and ecclesiastical, including the impressive penannular brooches of bossed and ball-types which were subsequently adopted and elaborated by the Hiberno-Scandinavians (Graham-Campbell 1983; Ó Floinn 1989, 89–90). In the case of Clann Cholmáin the acquisition of silver may even have been instrumental in furnishing the kingship with the ability to develop a fleet, for in *Chronicum Scotorum*, *sub anno* 910, it is recorded as having a fleet (*coblach*) on the Shannon lakes. Indeed, it is noted as gaining victory in this affair, the first recorded combat between Irish fleets (Etchingham 2015, 88), and this may have paved the way for the first maritime engagements between the Irish kingships and the Vikings. Some of the silver wealth was undoubtedly simply set aside and hoarded, perhaps in case it would be needed for future tribute or ransom payments. All of these types of silver uses—recycling, redistribution, and hoarding—are important, and deserve further consideration, but in the present context another use, connected to the relationship between Clann Cholmáin and the church is, perhaps, the most compelling. This is because there is historical, literary, art-historical, and archaeological evidence to show that this kingship developed into one of Ireland's foremost church patrons during its period of immense silver wealth.

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Clann Cholmáin and the Church

In the past attention has been drawn towards the strong relationship that existed between Clann Cholmáin and the church, particularly in terms of the dynasty's patronage, even if it has not yet been considered in the context of its silver wealth. Ó Carragáin, for instance, noted that there is a remarkable concentration of pre-Romanesque stone churches in Southern Uí Néill, and he suggested that this relates to the commissioning of churches by Clann Cholmáin (2010, 121, fig. 131). There is one highly prestigious ecclesiastical site, however, with which Clann Cholmáin maintained a particularly intimate relationship from the mid ninth to the early eleventh century. This site, Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly, belongs to a small group of high-ranking foundations that developed into centres of ecclesiastical and political power during the early medieval period, and study of its development during the Clann Cholmáin period shows that the dynasty went well beyond the limits of simply patronizing it by occasional church-building. The power and authority of a strong patron provided protection for an ecclesiastical site, and in this regard it is very interesting that not a single burning or plundering of Clonmacnoise, by either the Scandinavians or the Irish, is recorded during the reigns of either Máel Sechnaill (845–62) or Flann Sinna (879–916) (Ó Floinn 1998, 97). The burials here of both these kings were recorded in the annals, as well as of other members of their families, demonstrating that patronage of the site had already been taken over by Clann Cholmáin by 862, the year of Máel Sechnaill's death. The earliest piece of archaeological evidence for this patronage at Clonmacnoise is the high cross known as the South Cross, as this has an inscription which almost certainly bears the name of Máel Sechnaill (Ó Murchadha & Ó Murchú 1988, 61–3). This forms the earliest inscriptional evidence for what is clearly royal involvement in the setting up of high crosses, not just in Southern Uí Néill, but also elsewhere in Ireland, and it brings a new political dimension to understanding the background of these monuments. The South Cross must have been erected sometime during Máel Sechnaill's reign, probably during the 840s or 850s, the first decades of the *longphuirt*.

The best documented example of Clann Cholmáin's involvement in the patronage of church construction, however, is the building known as Clonmacnoise cathedral (Fig. 6.2). This is the largest surviving pre-Romanesque church in Ireland, was probably the first stone building at Clonmacnoise, and, in architectural terms, is an extraordinary building (Manning 1998; Ó Carragáin 2010, *passim*). It was consecrated in 909, and an entry in the Annals of the Four Masters, *sub anno* 904, attributes its building to Flann Sinna and abbot Colmán. It may be regarded as marking, in a monumental manner, the climax of a successful partnership between Clonmacnoise and the Clann Cholmáin dynasty, as well as an expression of the power and resources of both. However, there was more to this Clann Cholmáin investment in Clonmacnoise than just the

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Fig. 6.2. Clonmacnoise cathedral, with the Cross of the Scriptures directly west of it (National Monuments Service, Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht).

cathedral. A new high cross was also commissioned, the West Cross, also known as the Cross of the Scriptures, which bears the names of both Flann Sinna and Colmán on its inscription and was thus probably erected at the same time as the cathedral (Ó Murchadha 1980, 48–50). Ó Carragáin has demonstrated that this monument became one of three high crosses that were carefully arranged, or rearranged, to the north, south, and west of the cathedral, so that the axis of the overall scheme inscribes the Sign of the Cross over the building (2010, 44). Clearly, in the early tenth century Flann Sinna was closely associated with this large-scale, innovative, and sophisticated programme of architectural and sculptural development at Clonmacnoise. A similar cruciform arrangement of church and high crosses may have existed at Kells, Co. Meath, a site which also lies within Southern Uí Néill territory, and the patron of this scheme was most likely either Máel Sechnaill or Flann Sinna. Another link between Kells and Clonmacnoise is provided by their high crosses, as it seems the same master-sculptor was responsible for the early tenth-century examples at both sites (Stalley 2007, 159).

In addition to the development of the cathedral and high crosses, it is interesting to note that the first record of relics and shrines associated with Clonmacnoise date to the late ninth century, during the period of Clann Cholmáin's

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patronage, when the shrine of its founder, the *scrín Ciaráin*, receives mention in the Annals of the Four Masters, *sub anno* 894. It is not known who its patron was, but the likelihood that it may have been Clann Cholmáin is supported by records of similar donations to Clonmacnoise over the following century by subsequent kings of this dynasty, including that of a golden altar-frontal (Ó Floinn 1998, 93–7). Clann Cholmáin patronage also extended to the enshrinement of illuminated manuscripts, as Flann is recorded as having commissioned a *cumdach* or shrine for one of Ireland's most extraordinary manuscripts, the Book of Durrow, in the early tenth century (Meehan 1996, 13). Finally, a very large series of finely decorated cross-slabs was created at Clonmacnoise during the period of Clann Cholmáin patronage (Ó Floinn 1998, 92–3). Examples of this type are also found on other ecclesiastical sites within a radius of about 25 km of Clonmacnoise, which is an indication of the size of its ecclesiastical estate and influence. Interestingly, some of these slabs are ornamented with fret- and spiral-patterns of a type also found on the pinheads and terminals of the contemporary silver 'thistle brooches' of ball-type (cf. Johnson 2001, figs 17–22), raising the possibility that such Viking Age brooches may have been developed in artistic ecclesiastical settings which had access to silver, such as Clonmacnoise.

How might the patronage of Clonmacnoise, and of other important ecclesiastical foundations in Southern Uí Néill, be related to the wealth represented by Clann Cholmáin's Lough Ennell silver? Given the scale of investment in Clonmacnoise, and elsewhere, it seems likely that one of its uses of silver was to enhance and develop its status as church patrons. Did this mean they paid the *saer*, the master mason, and his builders, and other craftspeople, in silver bullion, or did they give silver wealth to Clonmacnoise and other establishments who could convert it to brooches or other forms of currency? The written sources indicate that church builders were paid in cattle (Ní Ghrádaigh 2007, 114), but is this just an outmoded euphemism by the tenth century? There is some evidence in the historical sources that silver bullion had already begun to displace cattle as a system of exchange and for reckoning values by the ninth century (Kelly 1997, 57–8; McCormick 2008, 209–11). Perhaps the arrival of silver, through the Scandinavians, gave rise to the emergence of independent professional craftspeople in Ireland, as in the Hiberno-Scandinavian towns, and that these included church builders, high-cross sculptors, and shipwrights.

Hare Island/Inis Aingin

It is perhaps noteworthy within the context of this chapter that the greatest recorded find of Viking Age wealth from Ireland, apart from the Clann Cholmáin group of hoards at Lough Ennell, comes from Hare Island, an ecclesiastical site. This large island, on the eastern side of Lough Ree, upriver from Clonmacnoise, is also located within Clann Cholmáin territory. Known in the annalistic

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sources as *Inis Aingin*, it has been identified as belonging to Clonmacnoise's ecclesiastical estate (Kehnel 1997, 71; Swift 2003, 117). It clearly was a site of considerable importance, for the Annals of the Four Masters, *sub anno* 894, record the holding of a synod there; in attendance were the senior ecclesiastics and bishop of Clonmacnoise, accompanied by the *scrín Ciaráin*. Kehnel suggests that the island may also have functioned as a trade harbour for Clonmacnoise (1997, 71). In this context, it is interesting to note that Scattery Island, in the Shannon estuary, another potential trade harbour, shares a hagiographical link with Clonmacnoise and that it too has produced a Viking Age silver hoard (Sheehan 2010). In 1802 two Viking Age hoards were discovered on Hare Island, one of gold and one of silver (Vallancey 1804; Graham-Campbell 1974; Graham-Campbell & Sheehan forthcoming). Both, unfortunately, were subsequently melted down, but drawings had been made of several of the hoards' components (Fig. 6.3). The weights of the ten arm-rings that comprised the gold hoard were recorded as amounting to 5 kg, making it the biggest gold hoard known from anywhere in the Viking world.

Hare Island is located close to the entrance of an inlet of the lake, known as Killinure, within which a number of other finds of Viking Age silver have been recorded. A large enclosure at Ballaghkeeran, at Killinure, has been interpreted as a *longphort* associated with the historically attested Scandinavian presence on Lough Ree during the first half of the tenth century (Fanning 1983; Kelly 2015, 61–3). This *longphort*, if it existed before these dates, which occur during the 920–30s, may have been established with the consent of the

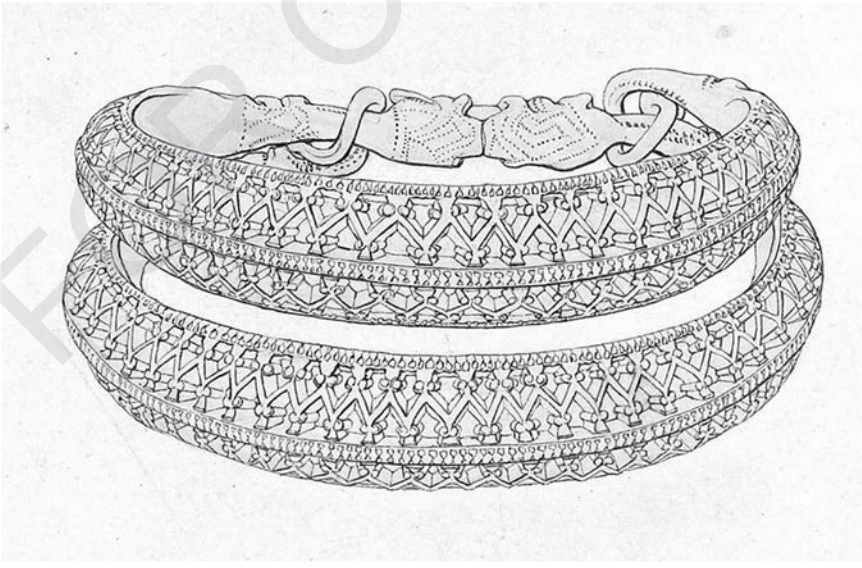


Fig. 6.3. One of the arm-rings from the gold hoard from Hare Island (The Society of Antiquaries, London).

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Clann Cholmáin kingship and, in all likelihood, for its advantage. The Hare Island hoards represent a massive Viking Age treasure, found in Clann Cholmáin territory but on the Clonmacnoise estate, the deposition of which possibly dates to the same decade or so as the main Clonmacnoise developments outlined above. Was Clonmacnoise monastery hoarding its wealth on this island estate?

The Cross-marked Ingot

It appears that the Irish church was familiar with Viking Age silver, and with ownership of it. This raises the question, was church-owned silver, or silver destined for the church, ever distinguished in any way? The Hare Island silver hoard comprised ingots and arm-rings, samples of which were illustrated in scaled drawings prior to their loss (Vallancey 1804, fig. 1). These included a large ingot, *c.*8.9 cm in length and *c.*3.8 cm in width, with, on its upper face, a raised cruciform motif with expanded terminals. This ingot is broadly similar to the large cross-marked examples in the Cuerdale hoard (Kruse & Graham-Campbell 2011, 83, fig. 4.6), which average *c.*8.6 cm in length and *c.*2.7 cm in width (though it should be noted that there are also two other, much smaller, cross-marked ingots in this find). It is interesting to note that the larger Cuerdale ingots were cast in the same mould, even if some are cross-marked and some plain. We may draw parallels between these plain and cross-marked ingots and the process of wealth division between kings and the church that is described in *Ard na Scela, a mhic na ccuach*, and suggest that the Cuerdale cross-marked ingots may have been intended for the ecclesiastical sphere.

While in Britain ingots of this type are only represented in the Cuerdale hoard, it should be noted that among the substantial ingot component of the recently discovered Bedale find, from Yorkshire, are three examples with incised crosses (Ager 2012, nos. 6, 10, 19). These ingots, though they differ in size and weight from each other, seem to form a discrete subgroup as the crosses are of the same Latin type, have the same proportions, and are located in the same position on the ingots. Work in progress on the mixed hoard from Silverdale, Lancashire (PAS: LANCUM-65C1B4), deposited *c.*900–10, has revealed crosses on two of the ingots (Barry Ager, pers. comm.). In Ireland, apart from the Hare Island find, examples of ingots with raised crosses are on record from hoards at Newry, Co. Down (Fig. 6.4) (Bøe 1940, 107, fig. 73d), and an unpublished find from near Tyrrellspass, Co. Westmeath. The ingots from the latter find, which, incidentally, lies in the territory of Clann Cholmáin, are now missing, but were apparently very large, bigger than those from the Cuerdale find, and two of them featured crosses. The Newry example, at *c.*8.9 cm in length by *c.*1.6 cm in width, is not as broad as the Cuerdale examples, but it is of approximately the same length and its cross is of similar form. Given that cross-marked ingots are on record from three locations in Ireland, it is perhaps not surprising that

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Fig. 6.4. Cross-marked ingot from Newry, Co. Down.

there are also two moulds for producing such ingots on record from there. One of these, in sandstone, is from Knowth/Cnóbha (Barton-Murray & Bayley 2012, 531, fig. 7.4:8), a royal site of Brega, in Southern Uí Néill, with strong Hiberno-Scandinavian connections (Wallace 2012). It would produce a large, broad ingot, of the same general form as the Cuerdale examples and, like the Cuerdale and Newry ingots, with a centrally positioned raised cross. The other occurrence is a soapstone mould from the excavations at Christchurch Place, Dublin (Fig. 6.5) (National Museum of Ireland registration number E122:16967), unfortunately broken, which would have produced a short, but thick and broad, cross-marked ingot.

There are locational contexts for three of the five occurrences of cross-marked ingots and ingot-moulds from Ireland. Apart from the Newry and Tyrrellspass hoards, about which little is on record, one of the others is from an ecclesiastical estate with royal connections, Hare Island, one is from an Irish royal centre, Knowth, and one is from Viking Dublin, which is essentially another type of royal centre. This apparent trend seems to imply that the background and contexts of cross-marked ingots are different to those of the more standard forms. They certainly appear to be a Hiberno-Scandinavian product, and it seems possible that some, at least, were specifically produced for use in Irish ecclesiastical circles.

Conclusion

This chapter considered how some of the wealth represented by Ireland's Viking Age silver, much of which was in the ownership of local and provincial kings, may have been put to use. Obviously, some of it was deposited in the ground as hoards, forming the body of evidence that is most easily recognizable archaeologically. On the other hand, some of the silver was recycled and used to facilitate the development of novel Irish ornament forms, including an impressive

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Fig. 6.5. Soapstone mould for a cross-marked ingot from Christchurch Place, Dublin.

series of penannular brooches which were subsequently adopted and elaborated by the Scandinavians, while other quantities were presumably used in royal trading, tribute and gift-exchange. In this chapter, however, the evidence of literary sources is used as a platform for exploring the investment of silver wealth by kings in the patronage of the ecclesiastical sphere, with which they often had intense familial connections. Even though hoards are sometimes found on ecclesiastical sites, and thus represent this phenomenon archaeologically (as may the cross-marked ingots), it may be assumed, given the recent recognition of the magnitude of ecclesiastical estates in Ireland during the Viking Age, that some of the hoards associated with ringfort-type settlements actually represent ecclesiastical, rather than secular, wealth. Indeed, given the strong bond that existed between secular and ecclesiastical powers in early medieval Ireland, it may be challenging to distinguish between the wealth of the two. This bond, within the context of Viking Age silver, is illustrated by the powerful Clann Cholmáin of Mide. It is unlikely to be coincidence that this dynasty, on the evidence of the hoards the wealthiest in Ireland, was also the one that invested so heavily in church patronage.

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