


Vikings' settlements in Ireland before 1014

 Clare Downham

 4,440 Views  PaperRank: 5.0  17 Pages  1 File

 Medieval History, Medieval urban history, Irish History, Viking Studies

Perhaps the most enduring contribution which vikings made to Ireland was through their foundation of major ...read more

 Download



Full PDF Package



Original PDF



Summary

Related

Vikings' settlements in Ireland before 1014¹

Clare Downham, University of Aberdeen

Perhaps the most enduring contribution which vikings made to Ireland was through their foundation of major coastal towns, most notably those at Dublin, Limerick, and Waterford. However, vikings also established many smaller settlements which have generally received less attention. In this paper I comment on a range of viking-influenced settlement, including raiding bases, towns, coastal stations, and rural sites. A broad definition of the word 'viking' has been used to refer to people with Scandinavian cultural affiliations active outside Scandinavia.² This avoids the semantic difficulties posed by ethnic labels: for example, at what point should a Scandinavian settler in Ireland be called Hiberno-Scandinavian? What of Irish people who came to dwell in Scandinavian colonies, whose children may have borne Norse names and adopted Scandinavian cultural traits? The difficulties of being over-specific with ethnic terminology has been emphasised in recent studies, where the argument has been made that ethnic identities are subjectively, rather than objectively, created or assigned.³ Such ambiguities carry over into the interpretation of material culture in Ireland.

The first records of viking-attacks on Ireland relate to the 790s. Pádraig Ó Riain has suggested that the earliest form of viking-settlement consisted of ships remaining at

The earliest non-violent contact recorded between vikings and Gaels was of an economic nature. This seems to have included the payment of tribute as ‘protection money’ and the ransoming of captives.⁶ During the 830s a few high-profile Irishmen were captured and then killed ‘at the ships’ of the vikings, presumably because ransoms had not been agreed.⁷ Irish chroniclers seem shy of recording successful negotiations; nevertheless, these can be inferred. Political figures, including Mael Dúin, king of Calatruim (Galtrim, Co. Meath), and Forannán, bishop of Armagh, were seized by vikings in the 840s but re-appear later in the chronicle-record.⁸

‘The Life of St Findán of Rheinau’ provides an insight into early contacts between vikings and Gaels. Findán grew up in Leinster before travelling overseas and his Life seems to have been composed by an Irishman in Switzerland shortly after his death in the late ninth century.⁹ According to this ‘Life’, Findán’s sister was captured by vikings and he went with an interpreter to negotiate for her release. He was promptly seized by her captors, but some of the raiders argued that it was improper to enslave someone who was offering to pay a ransom. In consequence, Findán was set free (although he was later captured in a separate incident, at the behest of his Irish enemies).¹⁰ This event suggests that, in the 830s and 840s, viking-attacks were not always covert operations. A fleet might set itself up in a particular area for a sustained amount of time, not only as a campaign-base but also to ransom or trade goods with locals or to be engaged as hit-

From the 840s political alliances are attested between vikings and Irish and this may have further encouraged the establishment of vikings' bases in friendly territories.¹³

If ships at anchor provided the first stage of settlement, a logical development was the creation of embankments on land to protect them. This stage is frequently identified by the term *longphort*, 'ship-camp'. This word is mentioned in Irish records from the 840s.¹⁴ Annalists may have felt that a new label was necessary to describe the bases which vikings established in Ireland from the end of the 830s.¹⁵ These camps seem to have been established to enable vikings to campaign over a longer distance. A viking-camp may be broadly defined as any site where vikings remained for more than a day and the lifespan of individual bases varied radically. The *longphort* at Emly (Co. Tipperary) in 968 lasted for two days. However the *longphort* founded at Dublin in 841 has endured as a settlement until the present day.

The term *longphort* (plural *longphuirt*) has been adopted as the main term for temporary viking-bases by archaeologists and historians. However, its precise meaning is unclear. The term is infrequently and inconsistently used in contemporary records.¹⁶ Therefore it is uncertain whether *longphort* could refer to any kind of viking-camp or whether it represented a specific type. As Ragnall Ó Floinn has pointed out, viking-bases might assume a number of different forms responding to the needs of a particular campaign and the environment in which the warriors found themselves.¹⁷ In England a

[About](#) [Press](#) [Blog](#) [People](#) [Papers](#) [Job Board](#) [Advertise](#)  [We're Hiring!](#)  [Help Center](#)

[Terms](#) [Privacy](#) [Copyright](#) Academia ©2021