Review article

The Vikings in Ireland: *longphuirt* and legacy

Julian D. Richards*

STEPHEN H. HARRISON & RAGHNALL Ó FLOINN. *Viking graves and grave-goods in Ireland* (Medieval Dublin Excavations 1962–1981, series B, volume 11 (2014)). 2015. xxiii+783 pages, numerous colour and b&w illustrations, tables. Dublin: National Museum of Ireland; 978-0-901777-99-7 hardback £50.

HOWARD B. CLARKE & RUTH JOHNSON (ed.). *The Vikings in Ireland and beyond: before and after the Battle of Clontarf.* 2015. xxiii+526 pages, 31 colour and 70 b&w illustrations, 10 tables. Dublin: Four Courts; 978-1-84682-495-1 hardback £35.

Viking graves and grave-goods in Ireland is the long-awaited outcome of the Irish Viking Graves Project, which ran from 1999–2005. The project originated at a conference held in Dublin in 1995, at which the limited understanding of Viking burials was identified as a significant shortcoming of the Irish archaeological record. Stephen Harrison was appointed as Research Assistant, and began the major task of making sense of the antiquarian records of the Royal Irish Academy. The primary aim of this work was the creation of the first accurate and comprehensive catalogue of all Viking graves and grave-goods in Ireland. With this volume, that aim has been handsomely achieved.

Eighty per cent of known Irish Viking graves are from the vicinity of Dublin, the majority recovered during nineteenth-century excavations in the Kilmainham-Islandbridge area. There has been confusion over the provenance of many of the finds, and previous studies have failed to produce an authoritative catalogue. By going back to the primary records of original acquisitions, however, Harrison has demonstrated that the Irish burial assemblage, although still dominated by weapons, is larger and more varied than previously thought and includes many categories of small finds such as dress accessories. The study identified a total of 500 objects (previously the largest estimate was 280), derived from a minimum of 107 burials, of which 81 are from Dublin. This total (107) does not include those unfurnished burials found associated with furnished ones; moreover, as it is difficult to differentiate between unfurnished Viking and Irish graves, the true number of Viking graves may be much larger. Nonetheless, the authors conclude that the burials are concentrated in coastal Eastern Ireland; those found inland are located in river valleys with access to the sea. The focus on Dublin is confirmed as real, rather than as a product of recovery bias.

The Dublin assemblage comprises the largest collection of Viking grave goods from anywhere in Western Europe outside Scandinavia. On typological grounds, the majority are relatively early, from the late ninth century, with a few from the early tenth century, making them earlier than most of the dated Viking graves from the Isle of Man and north-west England. The authors note that most of the artefacts are consistent with the accepted historical dates for the establishment of Dublin in 840–841 and the expulsion of the Norse in 902, although in the absence of scientific dating, there is a danger of circular reasoning.

The Viking Graves Project and its publication has clearly been a massive undertaking. Chapter 1 introduces the project and reviews previous work; Chapter 2 provides an extensive discussion of sources and archives; Chapter 3 goes through each category of grave good by type; Chapter 4 discusses the significance of the corpus; and Chapter 5 comprises the exhaustive catalogue that forms the core of the publication. The volume is lavishly illustrated throughout, and will provide an invaluable resource for future study. The authors admit that there is still much analysis that should be undertaken, particularly on a scientific level. Some of the most exciting recent

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information about Viking burials has come from bioarchaeology, but, as with the scientific dating above, a lack of funds in this case has prevented applications such as isotope analysis.

Nonetheless, on the basis of the grave-goods it can be noted that 78 burials are male, 13 female and 16 are gender-neutral. The quantity of swords clearly points to the role of an elite male group in the first phase of Scandinavian settlement in Ireland, yet there were some high-status female settlers as well, represented by oval brooches, a whalebone plaque and an example of a so-called roasting spit or wand. One interesting feature is that while the swords were of clear Scandinavian type, and must have been brought into Ireland by their owners, the spears and shield bosses were of local manufacture. It is also noted as curious that, other than the swords, there are no continental objects, no belt fittings and no Anglo-Saxon coins or imported objects. Overall, the authors conclude that the corpus, and particularly the mix of Scandinavian and indigenous forms of weaponry, reflects the development of a local Viking identity in the Dublin area in the late ninth century.

In search of the wider Irish context and interpretation of this material, one might turn to the second of the books under review here, *The Vikings in Ireland and beyond*, edited by Howard Clarke and Ruth Johnson. This volume comprises 28 papers, originating from a symposium held in Dublin in 2011 on Viking Age Ireland and its wider connections. It suffers from many of the usual problems associated with conference proceedings, including a lack of focus or a coherent synthetic view, here compounded by a broad disciplinary spread of specialists who do not really engage with each other's material. The volume was ostensibly published to mark the millennial celebration of the Battle of Clontarf, but, as its subtitle suggests, its subject matter ranges widely in time.

There are undoubtedly some very useful papers, including the editors' own historiography of Viking Age Ireland. Clarke and Johnson remind us that Viking Age finds from the Dublin area were first presented to the Royal Irish Academy in 1845, but that it was Worsaae's visit in 1846–1847 that highlighted the Scandinavian contribution to Ireland, an issue which continues to resonate today. From 1922, an independent Ireland emphasised its Celtic links, and in 1938, A.J. Goedheer published the key book on the Battle of Clontarf, his conclusions meeting the requirements of the Catholic and nationalist agendas. In 1959, the first international Viking conference was held in Dublin, attributing the demise of the Irish saints and scholars to the Viking invasion, thereby giving academic expression to nationalist sentiment. Only the increased contribution of Viking archaeology and the more international climate of the 1970s onwards have reversed this trend.

The volume also includes a useful set of papers on the *longphort*, a term used in the annals as equivalent to the Anglo-Saxon *burh* and derived from two Latin loanwords—*longa* meaning ship, and *portus* meaning harbour. This category of site is associated with the early Viking raids on Ireland, and with the origins of Irish towns, including Dublin, and so has a key role in Irish Viking archaeology. Emer Purcell discusses the challenge of reconciling the annalistic and archaeological evidence, particularly scientific dates. She argues that there must have been a temporary base in Dublin before the traditional date of the establishment of the *longphort* in 840–841. She suggests that this can be argued from a close reading of the annals and does not have to be based on the controversial early dates for the South Great George Street burials in Dublin.

Eamonn Kelly reviews the archaeological evidence for the *longphort* at Annagassan, whose presence was confirmed in 2010 by geophysical survey and where excavation has revealed evidence for industrial activity and settlement. He shows how the search for *longphuirt* has been dominated by the hunt for D-shaped enclosures, but the citadel of Lis na Rann at Annagassan is now seen to be a very small part of a much larger area bounded by a rampart to the north, and by rivers to the south and west. This throws new light on the configuration of the *longphort* at Dublin—on a natural ridge protected by water on three sides but which would have needed fortifications on the landward (western) end. He concludes that *longphuirt* are often strategically located on the boundaries of kingdoms and that they were used as bases for trading and raiding. The new evidence from Woodstown suggests more emphasis should be placed on the economic role of such sites.

Kelly's paper is followed by a useful review by Gareth Williams of the English evidence for Viking camps from Repton, Torksey and the so-called ARNSY site, north of York. Williams discusses the nature of economic activity in the camps, including the major expansion in the use of cubo-octahedral weights and bullion economy in the 860s and 870s, in which the Viking camps played a key role. Williams asks

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who was exchanging what, and with whom? Was the market purely internal or, more probably, was there interaction with the surrounding population?

Rebecca Boyd provides an invaluable review of Ireland's Viking Age buildings. Over 450 houses are now known from Dublin, Cork, Waterford and Wexford. She notes that Wallace's standard typology still holds but is in need of refinement. It was a product of the Dublin excavations, and over half of the known examples fall within Wallace's Type 1; Types 6 and 7 have only one example each, and 25 per cent of houses do not fall into any category at all. Boyd also notes that while Viking buildings have previously been seen as an entirely urban phenomenon, it must now be accepted that there was also Scandinavian settlement in the countryside, even though its form and extent are still debated. She suggests, however, that as in England, the failure to identify Viking settlements has been caused by a focus on classic long houses, whereas there are hybrid Hiberno-Norse forms, such as the examples from Beginish and Cherrywood, south of Dublin, which are similar to Orcadian and Manx structures.

Some of the other papers provide a more mixed bag, offering interim statements on ongoing fieldwork, or notes on specific finds. Signe Horn Fuglesang provides a review of the written sources for pre-Christian sanctuaries in northern Europe, but her paper has nothing to do with Ireland. Similarly, Eileen Reilly's review of the evidence for the environment of Viking settlements extending from Ireland to Russia admits that no sensible conclusions can really be drawn from such widely varying contexts, as local factors are more important than any ubiquitous cultural package. Other contributions come across as token presences, maybe because it was felt that there had to be a paper on place names, or on women, for example.

On the other hand, there are important omissions. The most exciting recent Viking discovery in Ireland is the potential *longphort* at Woodstown (Russell & Hurley 2014). Beyond a few cross-references and a paper by John Sheehan on the Viking hack silver from the site, its contribution to our understanding of Viking Age Ireland is not considered. Similarly, the landmark excavations at Woodquay have finally been published (Wallace 2016), and a summary would have been useful. Indeed, beyond brief reports on specific sites, there is nothing on the contribution of the Viking Graves Project, although Linzi Simpson's documenting of the isotope analysis of the George Street burials reveals that two individuals were born in Scandinavia and that another two grew up on the Atlantic seaboard, possibly Scotland.

The volume concludes with retrospective papers by David Griffiths and Donnchadh Ó Corráin. Griffiths emphasises the long-term nature of contact between Britain and Ireland, and that Scandinavians were neither numerous enough nor culturally dominant enough to eclipse existing patterns of contact; he does, however, acknowledge the longevity of their cultural influence. Ó Corráin castigates previous historians for their failure to employ any serious source criticism. He notes that scholars from Brøndsted to Foote and Wilson have been content to use *Heimskringla* (dated *c.* 1230) as a source for the alleged kingship of Turgesius and the foundation of Dublin in the 840s, and that for political reasons they have placed a similar emphasis on the glorious career of Brian Boru and his victory at Clontarf. Consequently, the Vikings are seen as having had a uniquely destructive effect on Ireland—they ruined its high culture, debased its Church and destroyed its institutions; scholars such as Françoise Henry argued that the Vikings had a catastrophic impact on Irish art, while D.A. Binchy saw Ireland as a tribal society without trade or market places. Underlining Ruth Johnson's own contribution to the volume, Ó Corráin notes that the supposed hiatus in Irish art in the tenth century is not real, but rather a twentieth-century idea developed in line with historical thinking about the impact of the Vikings on Ireland. Hence, whereas Binchy argued that the failure of the Vikings to conquer Ireland was down to the hydra-headed nature of Irish tribal society, Ó Corráin suggests that this apparent failure is illusory, reinforced by a nationalist political agenda. In fact, the contributions in this volume all underline the degree to which Scandinavian culture was successful and has made a deep and lasting contribution to Ireland.

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