

The Sack of Viking Limerick

I Introduction

The origins of Limerick are obscure: an initial Viking settlement seems to have been located at Athlunkard.¹ The more permanent settlement on King's Island probably dates from 922,² and is still visible in the street pattern of the old city today.³ The Vikings also controlled considerable tracts outside the city proper, possibly as much as from Cratloe and Bunratty in the west to Plassey in the east, and from Slieve Barnagh to the north to Ballyneety south of Limerick.⁴

This city flourished mightily for a time, feeding off the rich midland monasteries, establishing bases in Ossory and

by Lenore Fischer

Connaught, even raiding up into Lough Erne and Lough Neagh, while at the same time engaging in a vigorous East Atlantic trade.⁵ But the Vikings ultimately failed to establish lasting kingdoms in Ireland. Far from crushing the local dynasties, their base at Limerick actually proved the key to power for the nearby Dalcassian clan.⁶ The Dalcassians made great propaganda out of how they wrested success from the Vikings. Their account, the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, may be no more reliable than a Hollywood film,⁷ but it contains a sketch of Limerick city that is well worth studying.

II The Battle of Solohead

The *Cogadh Gaedhil re Gaillibh*⁸ describes the Battle of Solohead in 967 as lasting from sunrise until midday, at which time the Vikings broke and ran, pursued by Brian Boru and his Dalcassian troops. Mopping-up operations took the rest of the day and most of the night, but the following day the Dalcassians arrived at the city: they entered and ransacked it.

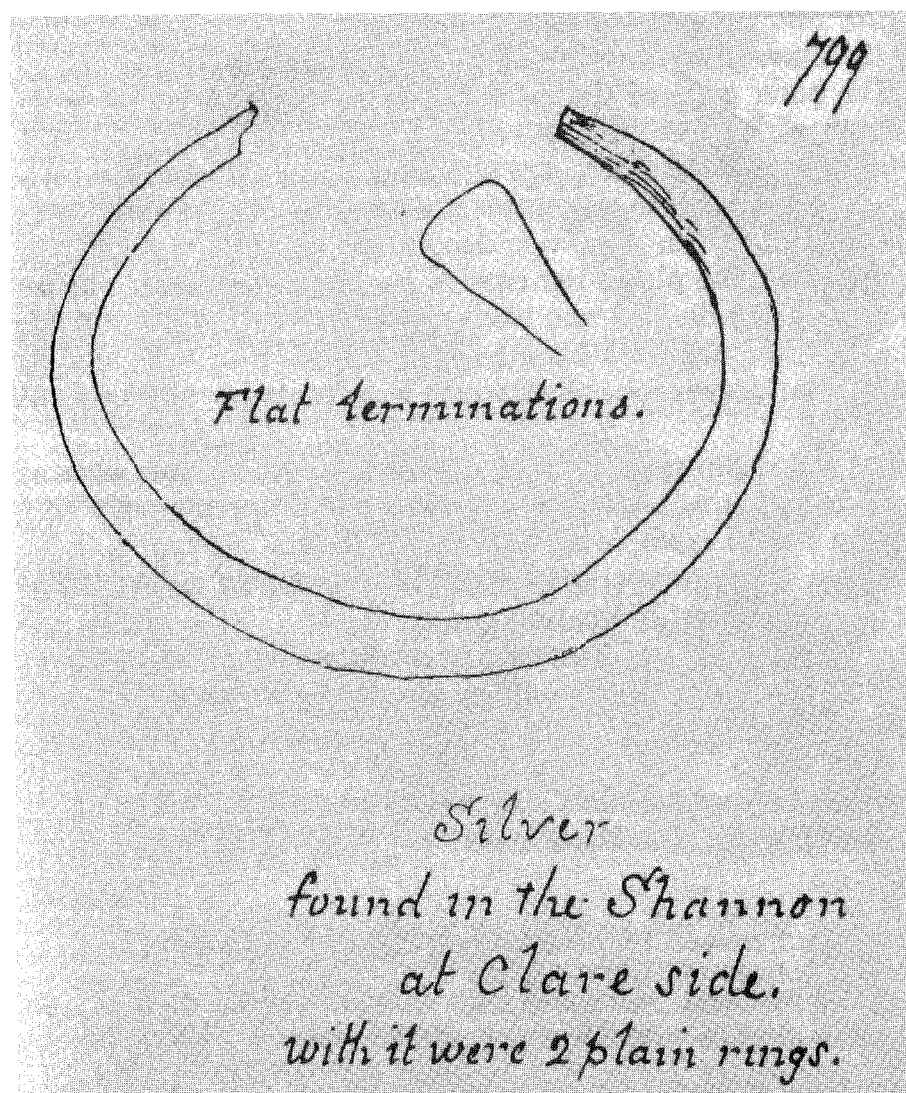
What did this Viking city look like? We do not precisely know, but we can be sure that its houses were built of wood or wattle and had thatched roofs.⁹ Its main street probably ran along the present Crosbie Row and Courthouse Lane in front of where St. Mary's Cathedral stands today,¹⁰ and the whole was probably surrounded by an earthen wall and palisade.¹¹

Into this thatched and walled city the Vikings fled. Their defences were of no avail: the Irish overran them and poured into the city. The *Cogadh* gloatingly describes what happened next among the Aladdin's treasures contained within:

*They carried off their jewels and their best property, and their saddles beautiful and foreign; their gold and their silver; their beautifully woven cloth of all colours and of all kinds; their satins and silken cloth, pleasing and variegated, both scarlet and green, and all sorts of cloth in like manner. They carried away their soft, youthful, bright, matchless, girls; their blooming silk-clad young women; and their active, large, and well-formed boys.*¹²

Limerick in the 960s was no longer the driving power that it had been in the 920s and '30s, when it had sent fleets into Loughs Ree, Corrib, Erne and Neagh, established an Ossory base, and smashed the army of King Gothfrith of Dublin.¹³ Gothfrith had struggled to keep his balance on these and other fronts, but it was his son and successor, Olaf, who quashed Limerick's ambitions when he destroyed their fleet on Lough Ree in 935, took their king prisoner and installed a new ruling dynasty in the city.¹⁴

The subsequent thirty years saw Limerick become a political football, subordinate to Dublin, but used increasingly by the Irish septs as a key to power. Cellachan, the most significant figure among the tenth-century Eoganacht Kings of Cashel seems to have sacked the city and certainly called on Limerick's troops as allies in subsequent campaigns.¹⁵ Cellachan's death in 954 opened the way for Brian Boru's brother, Mathgamhain, to



19th century drawing of a Viking-age silver armring / ring-money "found in the Shannon at the Clare side. with it were two plain rings." The objects themselves are lost.



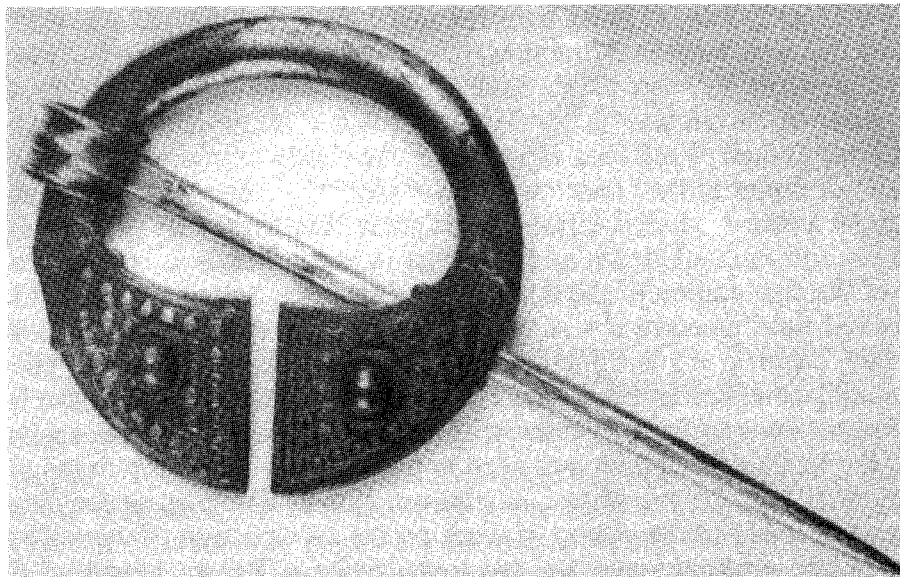
Viking silver neckring originally thought to be from Limerick, now re-provenanced to Miltown Malbay, Co. Clare

(National Museum of Ireland)

claim the kingship of Cashel.¹⁶ Precarious enough at first, this claim gained enormously in credibility the day he sacked Limerick in 967 as described above.

The *Cogadh* was probably written between 1103 and 1113, at a time when Brian's descendant, Murtough Mor O'Brien, was giving new meaning to the concept of High Kingship, implementing a drastic reorganisation of the church, codifying the law in the *Lebor na Cert* and removing the court of the King of Munster from Cashel to the City of Limerick.¹⁷ The *Cogadh* itself is meant as a justification of his claims to power and as a warning to rivals in his own time. Written some 150 years after the Battle of Solohead, it delights in painting the Vikings as the embodiment of all evil, the better to highlight the triumphs of Murtough Mor O'Brien's ancestor, Brian Boru, against them. Nevertheless, the *Cogadh's* description of the spoils found in Limerick is written from a perspective far closer in time to the event than ours, and is worth taking seriously. It may seem little enough to go on, but when compared and amplified with what we know of the Viking

world, it yields a remarkably vivid picture of the life and commerce of a Viking trading town. So let us look at the *Cogadh's* description clause by clause.



Viking silver pennanular brooch found at Kildimo in the early 19th century

(National Museum of Ireland)

III "They carried off their jewels and their best property"

It is important to remember that while wealthy persons nowadays sport credit cards, bank accounts and fat wallets, the Viking businessman had no such facilities. Apart from stashed hacksilver, coins, ingots and merchandise, affluent Vikings literally wore much of their wealth upon their bodies. The coloured photographs that abound in National Geographic Magazine of Third World women a-drip with earrings and arms silver with bangles from wrist to elbow are photographs of people from just such an economic level, whose entire surplus wealth must be stockpiled in material goods. Personal ornaments represent a particularly safe way of carrying wealth, as wearing them on one's body makes them more difficult to rob. So when the *Cogadh* speaks of jewels, we may picture them plundering wealthy families, stripping women and men of their treasures and ornaments and rifling the merchants' and craftsmens' shops for their stock of jewellery and fine gear.

These jewels were certainly not the African diamonds, Asian sapphires and rubies or South American emeralds we see in jeweller's shops today. Gemstones that have turned up in the Viking context in Ireland include garnet, rock crystal and carnelian, while other substances used for ornaments include amber, ivory, jet and intricately designed glass beads.¹⁸

The prime way of storing wealth was as arm-rings. Arm-rings, in fact, were really a form of currency or ring-money made to standardized units of weight,¹⁹ hammered out crudely and stamped with simple, repetitive designs. Usually they were in silver, but a plain gold armring was found hidden under a stone in the caves at Edenvale, not far from Ennis, Co. Clare.²⁰ The Scottish Vikings turned out unadorned armrings: three of these may have turned up on the Clare side of the Shannon, judging from the drawing that is all that remains of them.²¹ Given that they

were essentially a form of currency, the overall wealth of the Irish Vikings can be deduced from the enormous numbers of armrings produced in Ireland: they are the commonest products of the Hiberno-Viking tradition.²² There is a clear Dublin focus to most of the arm ring styles, but some distinctive armring types were produced in the Cork city area.²³ Cork city, as reflected in the historical sources, was not a significant Viking settlement.²⁴ Given that our knowledge of their material goods is based almost solely on random finds, it may well be that Limerick had its own thriving silver-working tradition which we have not yet stumbled across.

Neck-rings were another way of storing wealth: a heavy plaited Viking neck-ring was found near Miltown Malbay.²⁵

Besides these, the Vikings wore a great variety of brooches as clothing fasteners, having no cunning zips or buttons as we do today. The very prominent paired tortoise brooches for women's pinafores were on their way out by the 960s²⁶; many of these consisted in any case of cheap imitations. Brooches for shawls or cloaks ranged from simple ringed pins to more costly kite brooches, penannular brooches and thistle brooches.

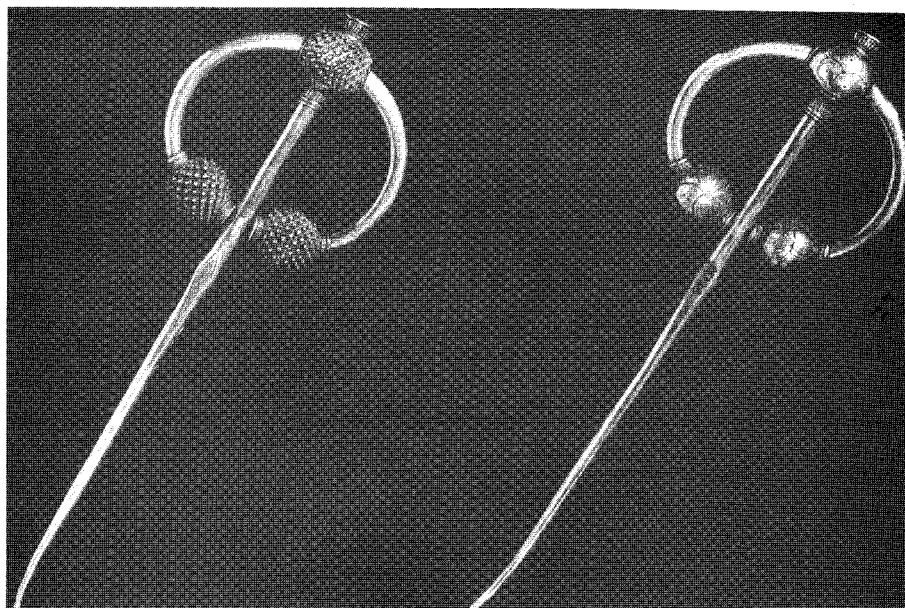
Ringed pins were an Irish fashion that the Vikings took to in a big way, elaborated on, and exported throughout the Viking world.²⁷ A silver ringed pin of tenth century date was found in Adare. Its shaft is now in pieces, but it is considered to be the finest and longest ringed pin on record.²⁸ Seven other ringed pins were formerly on display in the Limerick Museum as part of the Dunraven Collection, but we cannot be sure that they were all from Munster.²⁹

A silver bossed penannular brooch found at Kildimo is in the National Museum now.³⁰ No less than six thistle brooches, a variant developed by the Irish Vikings on the penannular theme, have turned up in the North Munster area: at Newmarket-on-Fergus, Cashel, and two other places in Tipperary (exact find-spot unknown), one in the Ardagh hoard and one under a large boulder in Ballynolan, Co. Limerick.³¹

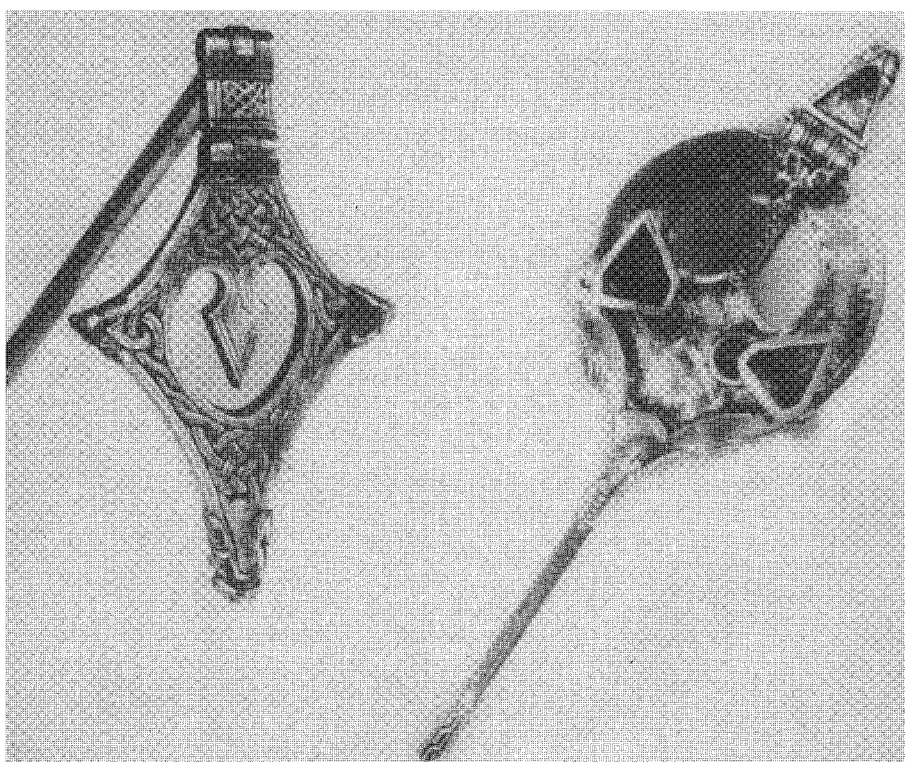
Perhaps the most elaborate of men's brooches were the kite brooches, a type unique to the Vikings of Ireland. These could be set with glass or gems and featured a special double hinge between the pin shaft and its kite-shaped head so as better to accommodate thick layers of heavy outer clothing.³² Two of the finest examples ever found came from Limerick City. Precisely how or where they came to light was not recorded, but works on the railway had just begun at that time, so they may have come from the Roxborough Road area.³³

Belts, vital for slinging swords, were tipped with beautifully ornamented metal strap ends, some of which can be seen in Limerick Museum's "History through Artefacts" exhibition.

Spears may have been the commonest weapons, but swords were the most prized. A sword was an implement for a



Viking silver thistle brooch found at Ballynolan, near Pallaskenry, front and back views
(Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge University)



Two Viking kite brooches found in 1845 near Limerick during the construction of the railway line to Limerick Junction, possibly in the Roxborough area
(National Museum of Ireland)

lifetime, highly cherished, and its hilt could be decorated with precious metals or carved from ivory. Two tenth century Viking swords have turned up to date in the Limerick area. One was found in the Shannon muds at Cooperhill; the second, an Anglo Saxon type with decorated pommel, was found at Askeaton³⁴ and can be seen in the National Museum.

Finally, the fine porcelains, crystal and table silver of today have their medieval equivalents in such items as bronze buckets, ladles, bowls, glasses and drinking horns. Social life centred on the banquet hall, and a lavish host took pains to display his wealth here. Sets of small glass or silver cups could impress a drink-

ing party, and bronze bowls of water would be handed round before and after meals for the diners to wash their hands in.³⁵

Such, then, are the kinds of jewels and property to which the *Cogadh* must have been referring in its eulogy of the sack of Limerick that day. The number and quality of the silver brooches that have turned up in the area of Limerick are good evidence that the Limerick Vikings had wealth aplenty to be plundered.

IV "Their Saddles beautiful and foreign"

The Vikings may have come by ship, but they were proud of their horses and

carried them overseas long distances, even to Iceland. Though Limerick controlled much of the Shannon system with a fleet of ships in the 920s and 930s, the Irish Vikings relied increasingly on cavalry for their inland exploits.³⁶ Horses were sometimes included in prestigious Viking burials: one such found in 1848 at Navan, Co. Meath, was probably from the early Viking raids. This had a double-reined snaffle-bit and a variety of bronze and silvered bridle ornaments, most of which had probably started life as Irish ecclesiastical ornaments but had been pillaged and put to a new use.³⁷

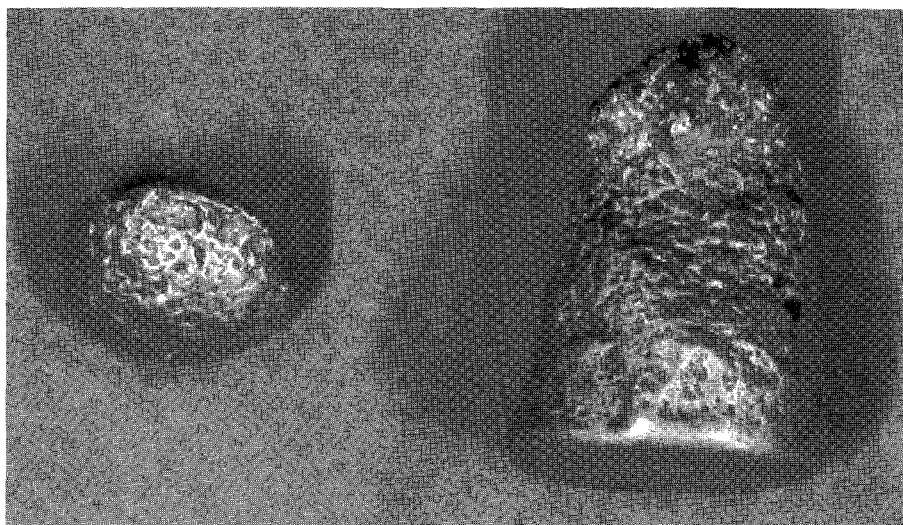
The kind of car we drive today is a prime indicator of status. The horse and its trappings were equally so for the Vikings. While a poor man used a simple blanket of coarse wool or a cushion of straw strapped to the animal's back, wealthier people preferred leather saddles, sometimes with embroidered cloth trim, or even brightly painted wooden saddles trimmed with silver or other metals. Such wooden-frame saddles were used by the Spaniards at the time and still survive today where the Spaniards introduced them into Mexico and the American West.³⁸

"When they are riding" says Giraldus Cambrensis of the Irish, "they do not use saddles or leggings or spurs."³⁹ (Giraldus was very partial to scurrilous gossip, and reported even wild absurdities.) Even in the fourteenth century, a high-ranking Irish nobleman is recorded as riding to an important political engagement using only a light blanket for a saddle. It has therefore been suggested that the Irish at the time the *Cogadh* was written were not familiar with saddles and hence regarded them with awe.⁴⁰ Yet the *Lebor na Cert*, written at the same period and in the same court as the *Cogadh*, lists saddles as one of the gifts given by an Irish king to his underlings,⁴¹ so the Irish must have used saddles, though what they looked like we do not at this stage know. That they were quite different from the Viking saddles is clear from the text.

V "Their Gold and their Silver"

We have already described the kind of ornaments in which gold and silver could be stored and how the exceptional number of Viking silver brooches found in the Limerick area reflects a very wealthy Viking community.

Silver and gold were also traded in the form of ingots, often cast from re-melted, chopped-up ornaments. A gold ingot was found in Askeaton.⁴² Gold sources had dried up in Northern Europe by this time, though some Irish gold mines may have been worked in Leinster and elsewhere.⁴³ A hoard discovered close to the ruined churches of Mungret contained a number of silver ingots, six of which still survived in 1960 in the Limerick Museum.⁴⁴ Two silver ingots and part of a third were also contained in a hoard from Carraig Aille II at Lough Gur.⁴⁵



Viking silver weights / ingots: left, weighing $\frac{1}{4}$ Dublin ounce, found at Corbally opposite St. Thomas' Island, right, weighing $\frac{1}{4}$ Dublin ounces, found at Summerhill, Co. Clare, near the Shannon opposite Castleconnell

(Limerick Museum)



Decorated iron slave collar, mid-7th century AD, from the Irish royal site at Lagore, Co. Westmeath

(National Museum of Ireland)

Much as a special style of arming was developed in Cork, so a special style of ingot may have come from Munster as well. These come in the form of thick bands of silver, curved into linkable horse-shoe shapes; they are too bulky for finger-rings, yet too small for arm rings.⁴⁶

The Vikings had enriched Europe with a splendid supply of silver brought via their Russian trade routes from Constantinople and Persia. By the 960s, though, this was petering out and being replaced by a new source in the Harz Mountains of Germany.⁴⁷ Much of this silver made its way to England in exchange for wool and was converted there into English coins. No hoards of Arabic dirhems have ever been reported in Munster, but the Mungret hoard, probably deposited around 953, contained quantities of English coins. Nine coins survived long enough to be described: two were minted in London, one in East Anglia, one in Wessex, three in Chester and two in York.⁴⁸ Only the Wessex mint of these was purely Anglo-Saxon. East Anglia was firmly in the Danelaw, and London had its

own Scandinavian group of moneyers.⁴⁹ The York coins were issued in the Vikings' curious double star kingdom of York and Dublin, while Chester, though nominally West Saxon, played piggy-in-the-middle as the Viking kings strove to hold York and Dublin together across the Irish Sea.

The gold and silver ingots of the Limerick region, then, reinforce our impression of an extremely wealthy community here, while the few coins left of the Mungret hoard more specifically reflect the internal trading of the Western Viking world.

VI "Their beautifully woven cloth"

The *Cogadh* waxes lyrical on the subject of fabrics: woven cloths, satins and silks, scarlet and green and variegated.

Ordinary fabrics in Brian Boru's day were made of wool and linen, derived from local sheep and flax. A good housewife prided herself on her abilities to spin and weave fine cloth. Viking women wove all

their own main clothing, sheets and blankets, tapestries and banners, and when they were finished weaving they employed glass linen smoothers and whalebone plaques, much as we would iron on an ironing board today.⁵⁰

But the Vikings, especially the men, were fond of dressing well and appreciated the softness of smooth fabrics and furs. Excavations in Dublin found silk tabby weaves from Byzantium and the Arab world, patterned compound silks of Persia and Byzantium, and bands of edging made of gold wire threaded onto silk that may have come from Central Asia.⁵¹ The many silk caps and scarves found protected the skin from rougher woollens.⁵²

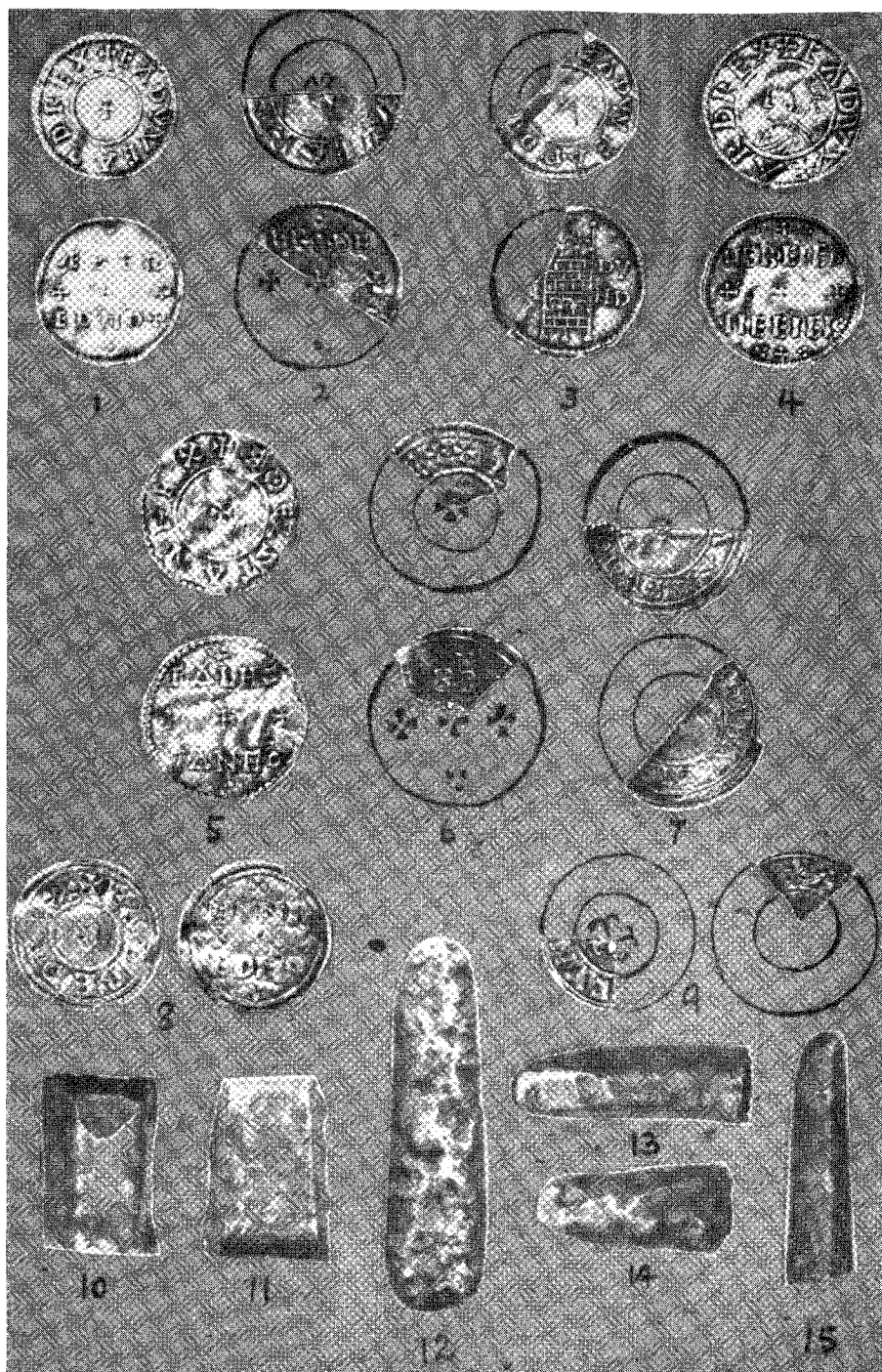
It is not just the kinds of cloth in which the *Cogadh* exults, however, but also the colours. The sumptuary laws in the early Irish legal tracts make it clear that colour was an important indicator of status.⁵³ Introduced madder and woad were highly-prized by the Irish for producing reds, pinks and blues,⁵⁴ while a wide range of native plants produced yellows, oranges, greens and greys. Saffron may have started being imported along with silks,⁵⁵ but its distinctively intense yellow is not mentioned in the *Cogadh*. Nevertheless, foreign fabrics will surely have had shades unavailable here, which would be reckoned all the more desirable in a world where colour was such an essential part of display.

VII "They carried away ... their girls, ...young women ...and boys"

What have girls, young women and well-formed boys to do with plunder? Everything, for the Vikings were great slavers and the Irish were no newcomers to the game either, as the story of St. Patrick bears out.

The first major recorded Viking slave raid took place in 869 in Armagh, when Olaf, King of Dublin, killed or took prisoner some 1,000 people.⁵⁶ Two years later the same Olaf was able to bring back 200 ships laden with slaves from his wars in Scotland. From then on the slave market in Dublin was regularly replenished both by prisoners of war and by deliberate raids on monasteries. Those enslaved who could not buy their way free went to labour in Ireland or abroad. The recently abdicated King of Cashel himself, hauled to Limerick in 923, had to buy his freedom.⁵⁷ But by the 960s it was no longer the Vikings who were slavers so much as the Irish.⁵⁸

Women were the most desirable slaves. The daily work of grinding corn, baking, weaving, washing, and cleaning are all carried out by machines now, but before milled flour, bakeries, ready-made clothes, washing machines and hoovers existed, households required a vast amount of female labour in order to function. Right up into Victorian days female servants were the drudges; in Early Christian and Viking Ireland, it was female slaves.



Part of the Mungret Hoard, consisting of nine Anglo-Saxons struck between 910 and 950 and six silver ingots

(Photo - North Munster Antiquarian Journal)

Men were less valuable. Strong grown men could be dangerous: the Icelandic sagas tell of Irish slaves who killed their masters and ran free.⁵⁹ A man with special skills to recommend him, however, might be taken.⁶⁰ The *Cogadh* puts it very simply: "every one of them that was fit for war was killed, and every one that was fit for a slave was enslaved."⁶¹

VIII Summary and Conclusions

In describing the plundering of Limerick, the *Cogadh* shows us a picture of a wealthy trading city, with jewels and gold, silks and fine saddles. This reflects Limerick's position as one of the Viking ports controlling the luxury goods trade in Ireland.⁶² Precious stones and metals, currency,

silks and slaves were exchanged in the markets of cities such as Limerick for Irish produce, especially beef and hides.⁶³

While Dublin, Waterford and Cork all counted as home bases, it is clear that Limerick's main overseas trading partners were in the North Atlantic. An Icelandic merchant described in the *Landnamabok* had spent many years in Limerick and therefore earned the name Rafin Hlimrecksfari.⁶⁴ English coinage in the Mungret hoard suggests trading contacts with Chester, York, the Danelaw and London. After this the picture fades. It is impossible at this stage to gauge how much trade was occurring with France and the Rhineland. Norway had no major trading ports in the 960s, and its commerce seems to have been a movable

feast. Armring styles, however, suggest that Ireland had trade links with Denmark and the Baltic,⁶⁵ and we may assume that Limerick merchants benefited from the Eastern trade routes of the Volga and the Dnieper, even if they seldom ventured that far in person.

Though written a century and a half after the event, the *Cogadh* provides us with a window onto a vanished world. The glimpse afforded us may be fleeting, yet if we take the trouble, as it were, to turn up the magnification, we can in our imaginations bring back to life the city of the far-travelling Vikings, with their fine clothing and armrings, their horses and their slaves.

IX Endnotes

- 1 Kelly & O'Donovan 1998, p. 16.
- 2 Clarke 1998, p. 366.
- 3 Hodgkinson, 2003.
- 4 Bradley 1988, p. 64.
- 5 Smyth 1979, pp. 20-21.
- 6 Ó Corrain 1972, p. 107.
- 7 See Ní Mhaonaigh 1995 for an analysis of the *Cogadh*.
- 8 Todd 1967, p. 79.
- 9 See Geraghty 1986 for a description of Dublin at this time.
- 10 See Hodgkinson 2003, p.3 for this and for a valuable discussion of Viking Limerick's town layout.
- 11 Wallace 2001, p. 42.
- 12 Todd 1867, pp. 79-81.
- 13 Jaski 1995, p. 330.
- 14 *Annals of the Four Masters*.
- 15 *Chronicon Scotorum*, entries for years 943 & 952; *Annals of Ulster* years 944 & 953; *Annals of Clonmacnoise* 933, 937 & 948.
- 16 Jaski 1995, pp. 341-2.
- 17 Ní Mhaonaigh 1995, p. 377.
- 18 Wallace 1988, p. 22-23.
- 19 Sheehan 1995, p. 21.
- 20 Westropp, M.A. 1906, pp. 68-9.
- 21 Sheehan 1982, p. 102.
- 22 Sheehan 1998a, p. 178.
- 23 Sheehan 1998b, p. 155.
- 24 Ó Corrain 1974, p.55.
- 25 Sheehan 1982, p. 102.
- 26 Roesdahl 1982, pp. 103 & 126.
- 27 Fanning 1983, p. 330.
- 28 Cahill and Ó Floinn, 1995 p. 80.
- 29 Fanning 1969, p. 6.
- 30 Cahill and Ó Floinn 1995, pp. 76-77.
- 31 Graham-Campbell 1983, p. 321.
- 32 Somerville 1993, p. 77.
- 33 Cahill & Ó Floinn 1995, pp. 73-76.
- 34 Walsh 1998, p. 234.
- 35 Wamers 1998, pp. 39-41.
- 36 Clarke 1990, p. 102.
- 37 Kavanagh 1988, pp. 100-101.
- 38 Kavanagh 1988, p. 93.
- 39 See O'Meara's translation, 1951.
- 40 Kavanagh 1988, p. 93.
- 41 Doherty 1980, p. 74.
- 42 Cahill & Ó Floinn 1995, p. 80.
- 43 Whitfield 1993, p. 23.
- 44 Dolley 1960, p. 121.
- 45 Sheehan 1998b, p. 151, illustration p. 152.
- 46 Sheehan 1998b, p. 155.
- 47 Sawyer 1978, p. 33.
- 48 Dolley 1960, p. 126.
- 49 Loyn 1994, p. 100.
- 50 Graham-Campbell & Kidd 1980, p. 82; see examples on display in the National Museum in Dublin.
- 51 Dunlevy 1989, p. 22.
- 52 Wallace 1988a, p. 13.
- 53 Kelly 1997, p. 263; see also Dunlevy 1998,

pp. 19 & 20.

- 54 Kelly 1997, pp. 264-9.
- 55 Dunlevy 1998, p. 54.
- 56 Holm 1986, p. 320.
- 57 Holm 1986, p. 326.
- 58 Holm 1986, p. 330.
- 59 Kristjansson 1998, p. 269.
- 60 Holm 1968, p. 325.
- 61 Todd 1867, p. 81.
- 62 Doherty 1980, p. 71-2.
- 63 Holm 1986, p. 335.
- 64 Lee 1889, p. 230.
- 65 Sheehan 1998a, pp. 194-6.

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