

Evidence for Viking Settlement in County Limerick? An interpretation of place-names and folklore

The extent of Scandinavian settlement in Ireland has 'been frequently underestimated.'¹ Finds of silver hoards and coins can be interpreted as being within Viking controlled areas, and as Bradley has observed, this may indicate rural settlement.² In County Limerick such sites were close by navigable rivers, at Mungret with its early ecclesiastical centre close to the river Shannon, and at Adare and Askeaton on the tidal Maigue and Deel rivers. At Askeaton, a Viking gold transverse-hammered ingot was discovered in the early-twentieth century and lodged in the National Museum of Ireland.³ At Mungret, a mixed hoard of coin and silver ingots were uncovered that have been dated to c.953, while at Adare a hoard of Hiberno-Norse coins was found that has been dated to the mid-eleventh century.⁴

Scandinavian towns in Ireland were likely part of a wider settlement pattern: as Bradley has outlined, 'put simply, a town cannot exist without the produce of its rural hinterland'. The settled hinterland of the Scandinavian town of Dublin was considerable, and the town was dependent on the surrounding district for ninety per cent of its meat diet.⁵ It is known that Limerick had colonies in Co Limerick and dependent markets at

¹ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans* (Dublin, 1972) p. 105

² John Bradley, 'The interpretation of Scandinavian Settlement in Ireland', in John Bradley (ed.), *Settlement and Society in Medieval Ireland*, (Kilkenny, 1988), p. 68.

³ Mark Blackburn, 'Gold in England During the 'Age of Silver' (Eighth-Eleventh Centuries)', in James Graham-Campbell and Gareth Williams (eds), *Silver economy in the Viking Age*, (London, 2007), p. 89.

⁴ Michael A. Monk and John Sheehan (eds), *Early Medieval Munster: archaeology, history and society*, (Cork, 1998), p. 157.

⁵ Bradley, 'Scandinavian Settlement', pp 51, 52, 69, 70.

Thurles and Cashel.⁶ In the district surrounding present-day Limerick City there is place-name evidence to support more widespread Scandinavian settlement, such as Rathurd, 'Sigurd's rath', while in 1185 a charter from John, Lord of Ireland, named a Godric as holding land in the Singland area.⁷ There was a belief in the nineteenth century that in the eleventh century Vikings erected a strong fortress at Castletown, Kilcornan and that their leader on becoming a Christian had built a church near 'the fort of Moig'.⁸ One and a half kilometres south of Moig is Feereagh Lough and close by the west shore of the lake is the townland of Crokerspark. The old name for the townland recorded in the Civil Survey of 1655 was Ballyhitricke, *Baile Shitric*, 'the place of Sitric', a name of Scandinavian origin that may suggest a Viking settlement in the vicinity.

In south Limerick place-name evidence also suggests Viking activity there. Between Athlacca, Bruree and Granagh are the townlands of Howardstown North and Howardstown South. Howardstown is first recorded in 1242 in the Black Book of Limerick as Culbalysuward, the place-name translates as *Baile Shuird*, 'the place of Siurd' which is derived from Old Swedish, the short form of the name Sighurdh.⁹ Howardstown is on the Mague River downstream of Bruree, *Brú Rí*, 'the palace of the Kings' the ancient seat of the kings of the Uí Fídhgeinte, who ruled most of County Limerick up to the tenth century. The position of Howardstown was an important one and a settlement there likely controlled river access to Bruree, and there was also a medieval church there first recorded in the thirteenth century.¹⁰

In and around the prominent Knockfeerina Hill in mid County Limerick evidence from place-names suggest a Scandinavian settlement there. A short distance west of the village of Ballingarry is the townland of Doonbeirne, *Dún Beirn*, 'the fort of Bearn'. On Knockfeerina hill in part of Common townland is Lissaberne ring-fort, *Lios Beirn*, 'the enclosure of Bearn' (O.S. Map No. 38 County Limerick, SMR 12). The name Bearn or Bjorn according to a recent Limerick place-name study is of Norse origin; perhaps suggesting Ballingarry had a Viking community settled over a wide area as the distance from Doonbeirne to Lissaberne is almost two kilometres.¹¹

In 968, Mahon, king of the increasingly powerful Dál Cais, made 'a slaughter of the Danes' at Shanagolden.¹² This could be interpreted to mean that there was a Viking settlement there. The king of the Uí Conaill was killed by the Vikings in 916 and as that tribe had their power base at Knockourha south of Shanagolden the power vacuum that likely resulted may have allowed the Vikings to settle there. Other local evidence may lend support to this. The street running south from Shanagolden village to the Catholic Church is known locally as Dane Street. Local folklore is in disagreement as to how this street got its name. There is some suggestion as outlined by Breathnach that it was named after a Norse settlement, while other information would suggest that Dane is derived

⁶ Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans*, pp 104-5.

⁷ Gearóid MacSpealain, 'Notes of place names in the City and Liberties of Limerick', *NMAJ*, iii, no. 2 (1942) p. 113; James McCaffrey (ed.), *The Black Book of Limerick*, (Dublin, 1907) p. 103; Brian Hodkinson, 'The medieval city of Limerick', in Liam Irwin, Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, Matthew Potter, (eds), *Limerick History and Society, Interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish County*, (Dublin, 2009) p. 20.

⁸ Samuel Lewis, *A History and Topography of Limerick City and County*, (Dublin and Cork, 1980) p. 80.

⁹ Art Ó Maolfabhail (eag.), *Logainneacha na hÉireann Imleabhar I, Contae Luimnigh* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1990) p. 53; For information on Siurd surname see the Wikipedia encyclopaedia online at www.en.wikipedia.org.

¹⁰ Thomas Johnson Westropp, 'A Survey of the Ancient Churches in the County of Limerick', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, vol. xxx, no. 8 (1905) p. 432; Mainchin Seoighe, *Portrait of Limerick*, (London, 1982) pp 114-15.

¹¹ Ó Maolfabhail, *Logainneacha na hÉireann Imleabhar I, Contae Luimnigh*, p. 167.

¹² Thomas Johnson Westropp, 'The Ancient Castles of the County of Limerick' *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, vol. xxvi, no. 10, (1906-07) p. 243.

from Dean, named after Dean Patrick McNamara, who was the catholic parish priest in the parish in the 1820s and had resided at Elmville House on this street.¹³

At the foot of the west Limerick hill country the Hernik River flows through the village of Strand. Hernik is a Nordic surname and has no Irish origins, and according to local folklore Strand is the name of a Viking chieftain who lived there in the eleventh century. This should not be dismissed as Strand is in fact a Norwegian surname, and there are also a number of place-names in northern Europe such as in Norway and the Netherlands called Strand.¹⁴ Southwest of Strand village is the minor place-name *Leabaigh*, 'the bed of the giant' which suggests a strong man, perhaps a leader of importance was buried there.¹⁵ Strand had an Early Christian church surrounded by what the Ordnance Surveyors of 1840 described as 'a strong mound and ditch' called Templeineenboy, *Teampull na hInghine Baoith*, 'Saint Inneenboy's Church'. A possible reason for a Norse settlement at Strand might be the deposits of iron, fire-clay and coal in the area.¹⁶

It is, of course, possible that these place-names may not be of Scandinavian origin at all as there is some evidence from eleventh to thirteenth century Irish sources of the borrowing of personal Scandinavian names by the native Irish.¹⁷ However, the Scandinavian names that survive in County Limerick at Athlacca, Ballingarry, Kilcornan, Rathurd and Strand are in districts containing important mineral resources and some of the finest agricultural land in the county. This distribution is so widespread and in such prime locations that this likely indicates Viking exploitation of the economic resources of these districts. As Wallace has stated, cognisance should be taken that any town is an integral functioning part of the rural economy, and 'a relatively large area 'was needed 'to back up the town'.¹⁸ Tribute collected from neighbouring Irish tribes would not have worked, as this could dry up and would not have been able to support a town all year around. If these areas were under direct Viking control then a major market was available in the nearby town of Limerick for the agricultural and mineral resources of these districts. In conclusion, the locations of Viking treasure hoards, place-name evidence and folklore suggest not only was there Scandinavian settlement in coastal areas in County Limerick, but there may also have been a number of settlements further inland.

Gerard Curtin

¹³ Máire Breathnach Ní Ghormáin, 'The Impact of Man and the Environment on the 'Cultural Landscape' of West County Limerick. Three Case Studies: Shanid, Askeaton and Glin Castles, 1199 A.D. to the present', (unpublished B.A. thesis, University of Limerick, 2008) p. 25; See the plaque in the porch of Shanagolden Catholic Church for detail regarding Dean McNamara.

¹⁴ Folklore collected from Tim Mulcahy, Rathcahill East, Monagay, Co. Limerick. Ó Maolfabhail states that there was no clear origin of the name Strand. See Ó Maolfabhail, *Logainneacha na hÉireann Imleabhar: I, Contae Luimnigh*, p. 256. Hernik is a Nordic name and the Low German form of Heinrich. For Hernik and Strand surnames and place-names see the Wikipedia encyclopaedia online at www.en.wikipedia.org.

¹⁵ Folklore collected from Tim Mulcahy, Rathcahill East. My thanks to Tadgh Mulcahy, Templeglantine West, Co. Limerick for the identification and translation of this minor place-name.

¹⁶ Lewis, *History and Topography*, p. 150.

¹⁷ Brian Ó Cuív, 'Personal names as an indicator of relations between native Irish and settlers in the Viking period', in Bradley (ed.) *Settlement and Society in Medieval Ireland*, pp 79-88.

¹⁸ P. F. Wallace, 'The economy and commerce of Viking Age Dublin', in K. Jankun, H. Siems, and D. Timpe, (eds), *Untersuchungen zu Handel und Verkehr*, (Gottingen, 1987), p. 204.