The Vikings In Ireland

One of the greatest sources on Viking history comes from Ireland. There is a long history of interactions between the Irish and the Northmen which is recorded in many annals, poems and other texts written by monks as well as writers from the era. Ireland stood as a key region in the Viking-Age as it was a key staging post for trade and raids along Isles. The Vikings had an impact on Irish society and on towns that were constructed by Viking settlers became major settlements in years to come. This essay will cover major events that occurred during the Viking raids on Ireland, how settlements were formed and their uses by the Vikings as well the effect the Vikings had on place names and Irish society.

The first mentions of the Vikings by the Irish are in reference of the raids of Lambay Island and Iona, which were followed by a series of raids along the west coast, Connacht, Skellig and the areas surrounding Galway Bay, though the Annals of Ulster record only fourteen raids for the first two decades of the Viking's interactions with the Irish[footnoteRef:1]. The Vikings who attacked Ireland at this point were mainly from Norway and these raids were mainly done to scout out the new land. Not all of these early raids were successful however, in 811 an Irish victory over the 'fair-haired foreigners' is recorded by the Ulaid. In 821 a raid on Howth is recorded and it gives evidence of the starting of a slave-trade in Ireland as the Vikings are said to have taken a great number of women from the town[footnoteRef:2]. [1: Matthew Stout, Early Medieval Ireland 431-1169, p131, (Dublin, 2017)] [2: Matthew Stout, Early Medieval Ireland 431-1169, p131, (Dublin, 2017)]

The annals record a raid on Cill-Dara in 835 by the 'foreigners of Inbher-Deea'. This could suggest the existence of a Viking camp in the area, which was located somewhere in Wicklow, making it one of the earliest Viking settlements in Ireland[footnoteRef:3]. In 839 a fleet of Viking ships made camp on the lakeshore of Lough Neagh, showcasing a change in Viking activity in Ireland[footnoteRef:4]. This camp, or Longphort as they were called, was used to stage raids further inland. Other Longphoirts were built in Dublin, Loughree, Cork and Clondalkin[footnoteRef:5]. Archaeological evidence found at Linn Duachaill, which was built around 841 in north-eastern Ireland[footnoteRef:6], show that some of these settlements were planned to be permanent. Tools for ship repairs, trading equipment such as weights, domestic goods such as looms as well as goods gotten on raids were found on site. Similar good were found in Dublin. The presence of women at Viking burial grounds also prove that the Vikings planned to settle in Ireland[footnoteRef:7]. One of the reasons the Vikings may have wanted to settle in Ireland is that the land was very fertile for agriculture. This allowed for their settlements to provide for themselves and it also meant Irish settlements would have been richer. [3: Michael Gibbons, The Longphort Phenomenon: In Early Christian and Viking Ireland, History Ireland Vol 12 issue 3, pp 19-23, (Dublin, 2004)] [4: John Haywood, North Men: The Viking Saga 793-1241, p138, (London, 2016)] [5: Donncadh O Corraidh, Ireland, Wales, Man, and the Hebrides, The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings, ed by Peter Sawyer, p88, (Oxford, 2001)] [6: Erin Mulally, Ireland's Viking Fortress, Archaeology Vol 64, pp9-11, (Boston, 2011)] [7: Matthew Stout, Early Medieval Ireland 431-1169, pp143-144, (Dublin, 2017)]

The Viking settlement in Dublin was a key location in the Viking world. It was a staging post for raids in Scotland, Wales and western England, and it was a trade centre. Slaves and other

goods retrieved on raids would have been brought here and sold on to merchants. At least seventy-seven Viking burial sites have been found in the Dublin area since the 1700s[footnoteRef:8], with both pagan and Christian burials being present, showing that the Vikings in the region would have worshipped both religions during their settlement of the region. They also began marrying local women and began adopting some native customs[footnoteRef:9]. However in 902 Cearbhall of Leinster seized the town which led to twelve years of relative peace in Ireland from Viking raids[footnoteRef:10]. The loss of such an important settlement would have warded off most potential raiders for a while. This event marked the end of the first Viking-Age in Ireland. As a result of their forcible retreat from Ireland, Viking raids in England, Scotland and Wales increased. Another reason for the reduced rate of raids was that the losses the Vikings received did not make up for the loot received as the amount gained in Ireland was not as grand as that as there was in Frankia and Britain. Interest in settlements in Iceland also meant that there was less of a push for settlements in Ireland[footnoteRef:11] .The raids by the Vikings had effects on the locals who faced the brunt of these attacks. The kings who ruled the kingdoms of Ireland had mainly stopped outright fighting each other. Fewer battles were recorded between the Irish kings once the Viking raids had begun as lords began working together against the foreign threat. Political assassinations increased with twelve recorded in the ninth and tenth centuries and thirty eight recorded in the eleventh[footnoteRef:12]. Attacks on churches by the Irish also increased during this period, mainly as a show of dominance and power by nobles. The violence wrought by the Vikings had a serious impact on the people of Ireland. There are reports of monks and scholars leaving Ireland for Frankia, the scholar Sedulius being one such example. [8: Roger Atwood, The Vikings in Ireland, Archaeology Vol 68, pp46-49, (Boston, 2015)] [9: Howard B Clarke, The Vikings in Ireland: A Historian’s Perspective, Archaeology Ireland Vol 9, pp7-9, (Dublin, 1995)] [10: Gwyn Jones, A History of the Vikings,p208, (Oxford, 2001)] [11: Donncadh O Corraidh, Ireland, Wales, Man, and the Hebrides, The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings, ed by Peter Sawyer, pp92-93, (Oxford, 2001)] [12: Matthew Stout, Early Medieval Ireland 431-1169, p140, (Dublin, 2017)]

The second Viking-Age begins in 914, with a surprise attack on Waterford Harbour. Following this, attacks on the surrounding areas began and warriors from those removed from Dublin began to join in[footnoteRef:13]. Ireland failed to fight against this new onslaught, instead the local rulers fought amongst themselves. By the time they finally launched an assault against the invaders a new settlement had been created at St Mullins, forty kilometres away from Waterford and Dublin had been reclaimed by Sitric in 917[footnoteRef:14]. Multiple battles were fought between the Vikings and the Irish alliances however the Irish were unable to kick out the Northmen. The Vikings remained in Dublin and Waterford. The leader of the Waterford fleet then moved back to Britain where he captured York and Northumbria[footnoteRef:15]. [13: Donncadh O Corraidh, Ireland, Wales, Man, and the Hebrides, The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings, ed by Peter Sawyer, p96, (Oxford, 2001)] [14: Matthew Stout, Early Medieval Ireland 431-1169, p166, (Dublin, 2017)] [15: Donncadh O Corraidh, Ireland, Wales, Man, and the Hebrides, The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings, ed by Peter Sawyer, p98, (Oxford, 2001)]

In 921, Sitric’s kinsman, Godfrid, began a campaign on Armagh and the surrounding areas, beginning on the 11th of November, the feast of St Martin. However this campaign was defeated by the king of Northern Ui Neill, Muirchertach. Godfrid then attempted to capture York after the death of Sitric but was once again defeated. Athelstan took control of Northumbria at this time. Godfrid lost Dublin to the lord of Limerick, Tomar Mac Ailche, an independent Viking,

who had allied with some of Godfrids enemies. The forces of Limerick were finally defeated after Godfrids death by his son Amlaib in August 937[footnoteRef:16]. Muirchertach was also killed in 943 in a battle against a Viking group in Ardee, a town in Louth[footnoteRef:17]. Although this period shows multiple victories for the Vikings it's also the last time that there's an extended period of major violence by the Vikings in Ireland, though there continued to be raids. Almaib converted to Christianity and ruled Dublin up until 980. In 1956 the king of Cenel nEoghan, Domnall ua Neill reclaimed northern Ui Neill and restored the Irish High Kingship. In 1968 he began a campaign against the foreigners from the Barrow Valley to the sea over a two month period. He also plundered Lagin alongside this. In 977 the Viking king of Limerick was killed by Brian mac Cennetig, or Brian Boraime, who then secured control of Mumu, the area around Cork. After a failed battle of Tara weakened the Vikings of Dublin, Brian marched on the town and managed to capture it. After this the Vikings continued to weaken until they finally were driven out of Ireland in 1014 after they lost to Brian Boru at the battle of Clontarf, which marks the end of the Viking-Age in Ireland [16: Donncadh O Corraidh, Ireland, Wales, Man, and the Hebrides, The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings, ed by Peter Sawyer, p99, (Oxford, 2001)] [17: Matthew Stout, Early Medieval Ireland 431-1169, p169, (Dublin, 2017)]

The impact of the Vikings as a whole can be felt today by the place names of many towns throughout Ireland. Waterford, Dublin, Skerries, Wiclow and Arklow all show Norse influences in their names. Most of these Norse influenced names are found on the coast, with them becoming scarcer and scarcer the further inland you get and the further you get from those Viking settlements. Poems written by monks and scholars during times of raids show us the fear felt by those under direct threat of these invaders. There are also multiple texts written that show us what Viking-Irish society may have been like. One example is a Norse text called Brjanssaga ore Brian's saga, which gives an account of the battle of Clontarf, which was written in Dublin before 1118 by a cleric or monk. Archaeology also shows us what the Viking settlements were used for and also proves the some of the documents given in the annals. As mentioned before, the presence of home goods and blacksmith tools shows that some of the settlements such as Dublin were used for permanent settlement and the existence of mercantile goods show that trade was done in many of these towns. Goods from other parts of the Viking world, such as glass, whale bones and silks found in Dublin, show that some of these settlements were commercial hubs. Slaves were a major export for Dublin, as slaves taken from raids in Ireland, Scotland and Wales were brought back and sold from here. There is also a wide range of crafts found in Dublin, including comb makers, silver and goldsmiths, coopers, shipwrights and blacksmiths. This shows that Dublin would have been a large enough settlement as well as a trading hub in order to get the materials for these crafts to be possible. Like with the rest of the Viking world, the split between the pagan and Christian Vikings can be seen through the different burial mounds, though there seems to be less tension between these two groups than there were in Scandinavia.

Of course, even Ireland wasn't spared from tensions between the different Scandinavian countries. Norwegian Vikings fought against Danish invaders in 851and 852. These tensions carried over to Scotland when Vikings from Ireland were raiding. However the Vikings rarely got involved in tensions between the Irish kingdoms like they did in Frankia and England. This is most likely because, as was mentioned before, the Irish mainly stopped outright fighting each other during times of Viking raids. They would ally with each other briefly to deal with invaders and the only time that they fought amongst themselves during the Viking raids, the Vikings were busy reclaiming land they had lost and taking advantage of the fights between the Irish lords. However, the fact that these lords allied at all against the foreign threat allowed them to push

the Vikings back in a way that both the Frankish and the English failed to do, though it did lead to increased bloodshed between the two groups.

The Vikings managed to create a strong and important stronghold in Ireland that allowed them to connect trade routes as well as a resting and trading spot for raiders. They created a trade hub, and influenced towns, poetry, art, politics and architecture on the island. They managed assimilate with the locals and created a unique culture around the areas they settled. Although they never managed to control the entire island nor build any major settlements far inland, their successors, the Normans, would manage to do so shortly after the Viking-Age ended in Ireland. Because of this the Vikings will always be credited as having a major impact on the country as well as being a major player in Medieval Ireland.

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