DUBLIN

THE MAKING OF A CAPITAL CITY

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DUBLIN TOWN AND THE FIRST THOUSAND YEARS

If the Roman legions had arrived in Hibernia and conquered the Irish lowlands, their likely point of entry would have been somewhere along the sixty miles of friendly coast between the Wicklow Mountains and the hills of the Cooley peninsula. The rivers Boyne and Liffey offer natural pathways into the interior, even though neither river is navigable for more than a few miles from the coast. The more northerly river makes an unobtrusive connection with the Irish Sea, but the Liffey flows out into the great amphitheatre of Dublin Bay, which has always charmed sailors, only to trick them with its sand bars, hidden shallows and peculiar currents. But two millennia ago the masters of the many vessels that filled the seaways of Roman Britain would have had no particular difficulty manoeuvring into either the lower Boyne or across the estuary of the Liffey. And entering on a high tide across the mud shoals of Dublin's inner waters would have led the eye to an elevated gravel ridge overlooking the south bank which extends westwards for a mile and more. To a Roman centurion, the ridge would have been a tempting location for a fortress, but Roman soldiers never came closer than Holyhead, and there was to be no scaled-down version of *Londinium* on the Liffey – or the Boyne.

The ridge's early history was not as a fortress but as a meeting point for travellers, fishermen and farmers. The southern prospect from the ridge was across a landscape that had been settled and farmed since Neolithic times, a district particularly rich in prehistoric monuments, with the

wooded Dublin/Wicklow mountains filling the skyline. The northern prospect was across the Liffey and Tolka valleys, the borderland between two of the principal kingdoms of eastern Ireland, that of Laigin (Leinster), which lay to the south-west with its ceremonial centre the hill-fort of Dún Ailinne near Kilcullen, and that of Brega, associated with the southern Uí Néill, with centres at Knowth and Lagore in modern County Meath. Brega included the Hill of Tara, the prehistoric meeting-ground supposedly shared by all the Irish kingdoms, but by the sixth century it seems to have been abandoned. Embedded within these regional kingdoms were large numbers of dynastic territories or sub-kingdoms, one of which lay between the rivers Liffey and Camac to the west and the Dodder valley to the south, which was associated with the Uí Fergusa. It was a modest swathe of land that included all of the original urban settlement, but about the Uí Fergusa clan we know almost nothing.

The ridge was the final meeting point of several long-distance tracks that crossed the interior of Ireland and converged on the east coast, one from east Ulster, one from across the Irish Midlands and two from the south. They are of uncertain antiquity and their precise trajectory remains in dispute, but their convergence on the site of Dublin before the town even existed is suggestive. The ridge rises at most fifty feet above the river, which at that point is fully tidal, and two millennia ago the full tide transformed the Liffey into an expansive waterway more than 200 metres wide, shallow but treacherous. A spring tide could shrink the flow to a small channel, perhaps no wider than five metres. There were several points where it was regularly forded at low water, but the favoured crossing was some distance upstream near Usher's Island, where the challenge of wading across the muddy river-bed was made easier by the installation of sheets of hurdle under the water – by whom it is not recorded. This gave the nearby settlement on the ridge its first name, *Áth Cliath*, the ford of the hurdles. Yet, according to the Irish annals, despite the hurdles a small army was caught by the tide in 770 and many were drowned making their crossing, victors after battle.[1]

The muddy banks provided an embarkation point for the tiny vessels venturing out into the Irish Sea, some to fish, some to make the hazardous crossing to Wales. These and other landing places around Dublin Bay and along the coast northwards to the Boyne may well have been known to Roman traders, and Roman Christianity certainly penetrated the region very early. By the eighth century there were probably two small churches

on the hill, one the precursor of the surviving medieval church of St Audeon's. A short distance downstream is the modest river mouth of the Poddle as it enters the Liffey. Nowadays its north-eastward trajectory is an invisible feature of the city, safely hidden underground, but then it was a vital waterway, more manageable than the Liffey but still liable to flood. Near its mouth was the dark pool, *Linn Duib* or (as it was later called) *Dubh Linn*, which acted as an antechamber between tributary and river. It seems that close to the pool an early church, possibly the monastery of Dubh Linn mentioned in the annals, was established in the seventh century, but precisely where remains a matter of archaeological debate: the earliest attested Christian site in the neighbourhood is in the Great Ship Street/Chancery Lane area where some 272 burials have been located, laid to rest in the Early Christian Irish manner and dated between the eighth and the eleventh centuries. These burials have been linked to the nearby church-site of St Michael le Pole, which may indeed have been the original monastic site. This first chapter in Dublin's history is still very opaque, but what is clear is that there were several nodes of settlement, one on the ridge, one across the Poddle, and, as Howard Clarke has shown, such duality is not untypical of many embryonic towns in the Europe of the Dark Ages. But there was certainly no street plan, no marketplace. Indeed, without any suggestion of coinage there is little to suggest the existence of commerce beyond what would have been involved in supplying the material needs of ecclesiastics and travellers. The *Dubh Linn* monastery, wherever it was located, was certainly not as rich or as famous as the monastery at Kildare, which was closely associated with the kings of Leinster, or the monastery at Swords to the north, but taken together, this pre-urban cluster south of the Liffey was becoming a busy point of transit and, perhaps also, a place of relative safety.[2]

Norse state

The first horror stories about barbarian pirates appearing over the northern horizon are likely to have been spread in 797 after the sacking of a monastery on Church Island, some twenty miles north of the Liffey mouth and close to present-day Skerries. In the following decades there was a string of such incidents, including the capture of 'a great prey of women' on Howth in 821. But then in the late 830s much larger fleets of longboats began to

beach near the mouths of the Boyne and the Liffey. The *Dubh Linn* and Clondalkin monasteries, together with other local churches, seem to have provided the first pickings for the visitors, the Vikings. They erected seasonal camps along the rivers, which were larger and far more formidable than any previous type of settlement. And from 841, according to the Irish annals, these Norsemen began to over-winter on the Liffey, building huts and erecting a stockade, a *longphort,* to protect their boats. Just where they did this has been much debated and several possible locations have been championed. Linzi Simpson, one of the band of urban archaeologists who have transformed our knowledge of the Norse and Norman town, has suggested that the earliest Viking settlement may not have been beside the Liffey but to the south-east of the pool (to the west of modern South Great George's Street), to judge by some very early warrior burials discovered there, and that the original *longphort* may have been located there. But on balance it seems likely, as Andrew Halpin has argued, that the Vikings' fortified base from the 850s was on the eastern end of the ridge overlooking the Poddle/Liffey confluence (i.e. running from Dublin Castle north towards the river, east of the Werburgh Street/Fishamble Street line), where signs of late ninth-century Viking settlement show up strongly. But, wherever their first base, the impact of the newcomers was immediate. Within a generation of their initial settlement they controlled a small hinterland, perhaps from Donnybrook in the south to Clondalkin in the west and northwards to Finglas, and they may also have had settlements on the coast from Dalkey north to Lusk. The indigenous inhabitants within that zone, not least the churchmen, seem to have continued to live with some measure of Norse protection.[3]

Irish sources speak of huge numbers of Viking longboats, rich in booty, resting at Dublin in some years (no fewer than 200 in 871), and throughout the ninth century the settlement served primarily as a springboard for piratical raids conducted elsewhere around the Irish Sea, some of which penetrated deep inland, both in Ireland and lowland Britain, to a quite extraordinary degree: in the 860s and 870s an extended network of warriors closely related to Ívarr and Hálfdan of Dublin seized the military upper hand over a vast swathe of British territory (far more than the Vikings ever held in Ireland itself), capturing York in 867. In David Dumville's recent assessment, by 878 'the Dubliners exercised hegemony or direct rule over a solid block of territory from the Clyde to mid-Wales and had a significant stake in the conquest of all England'. But with the

appearance of Alfred of Wessex, their ambitions across the water were progressively contained. As in all predatory societies, the predators regularly fell out among themselves, which in time gave opportunities to their enemies. In Dublin itself this was the background to the attack in 902 by the king of Leinster, working for once in alliance with the men of Brega, when the settlement and all its appendages were comprehensively destroyed. Most of the inhabitants, it seems, were expelled, many to Anglesey and the Wirral, from where they attempted but failed to capture Saxon Chester.[4]

The Liffey and its attractions were not forgotten. Hiberno-Norse warriors returned from their English wars and their principal base in York a decade later. It was probably a more ethnically mixed army that came back, and the later characterisation of them as *Ostmen*, men from the east, is only part of the story. In a series of land and sea campaigns in the south-east in 914 they captured (or possibly recaptured) Waterford, and three years later repossessed Dublin. The shock effect of this return of the Scandinavians was evident in the Irish response it triggered: the formation of an unusually large fighting force led by Niall Glúndub, the Uí Néill high-king, drawing men from all the northern Irish kingdoms, which swept down on the Norsemen in September 919, only to suffer a terrible rebuff a mile or two outside the town at the battle of Islandbridge. Niall and a string of accompanying Ulster kings were killed. That bloody defeat marks the beginnings of a true Norse urban community at Dublin and confirmed them as a naval and territorial power. Indeed, they subsequently tried to dominate a much larger Irish hinterland and to operate within a huge maritime space encompassing the north Irish Sea, south-west Scotland, the Western Isles and the northern seas to Orkney; they also had links in the west with what was in effect a new Dublin colony, Viking Limerick. Over the next two decades there was a clear attempt by Dublin-based forces to carve out a Scandinavian kingdom in east Ulster along the lines of what had been achieved in the north of England centred on York. But the resistance of the Ulaid and the Uí Néill eventually scuppered that plan, and soon the Scandinavian control of York was lost too. Norse Dublin, however, remained strong in its own right, and its kings were endlessly involved in Irish dynastic conflicts that in the long run worked against it. After 951 it rarely engaged in offensive raiding within Ireland, and the town was itself attacked from land on at least seven occasions between 936 and 1015, on two of these with great losses. Despite this, the site was never again abandoned. In the later tenth century, between

times of war, it enjoyed a growing maritime trade and became an increasingly fortified place.[5]

Given the technology of the era, fortification meant strong earthen banks up to three metres high, crowned by post-and-wattle fences. In Halpin's model, the ninth-century site expanded westwards along the ridge, its limits following the future north/south line of Winetavern Street and Nicholas Street, with a bank surrounding the whole site, protected on three sides by the Liffey and the Poddle. The defensive strength of the compound, to judge by excavations on its north side, was enhanced around 950 and again *c.*1000, each rebuilding coming in the wake of military assault. The site, it seems, had a formal layout from the beginning, and within it lay the embryonic Castle Street, Fishamble Street, Werburgh Street and Skinner's Row – the area of the modern city that lies close to the east end of Christ Church Cathedral. Then, at some point in the eleventh century, the enclosure was extended westwards once again, along the future High Street and taking in part of the putative site of *Áth Cliath.* The street lines within the enclosure picked up fortification lines and older routeways, probably those of the long-distance paths of the prehistoric era. But the ecclesiastical buildings lying eastwards across the Poddle in *Dubh Linn* remained unfortified, while *Dyflinn,* as Norse/Ostman sources called their place, became a citadel of some thirty acres, the densest settlement occurring along Fishamble Street and on the north-facing slope above the river.[6]

For over eighty years, between 952 and 1036, one Norse family dominated that community: Olaf Cuarán and two of his sons. Olaf's ambitions had been to rule both Viking York and Dublin – and be a regional warlord extracting tribute from neighbouring kingdoms. But during their ascendancy, Dublin's power on the Irish political chessboard actually diminished while its economy strengthened. The battle of Tara (980) marks the end of Dublin's regional military ascendancy and of its control over what later became Kildare and Meath. Shortly afterwards, Olaf's reign ended abruptly when Máel Sechnaill, the king of Mide and occasional high-king, took the town after a three-day siege and released vast numbers of slaves and prisoners. Stories in the Irish annals about the extraordinary treasure carried out of the town gave a hint of its dazzling reputation. Máel Sechnaill besieged it on two further occasions, extracting a promise of permanent tribute in 989 and removing the 'ring of Thor' and other communal treasures in 995. But then in 997, as part of an island-wide share-out, he ceded overlordship of the town to Brian Bóruma, king of the Munstermen.

This was resisted in Dublin, but Brian defeated a mainly Norse army in 999 and thereupon sacked the town and extracted heavy reparations. The famous early twelfth-century tract, *Cogad Gaedel re Gallaib* ('The war of the Gael and the foreigner') spoke of the rape and mass enslavement of the civilian population after the Munster victory as just revenge for what the Vikings had inflicted – but this was a highly partisan account. Recovery again came quickly and in 1013 the Dubliners and the Leinstermen once more challenged Brian's ascendancy. Aided by Norse forces from the Isle of Man, the Hebrides and Orkney, the *Dyflinn*/Leinster forces met Brian's army at Clontarf in the following spring. They lost in the great Good Friday battle beside Dublin Bay and, despite what later generations thought, this was not so much a great Irish national victory over the Vikings as a bloody contest on an unprecedented scale between ever more powerful regional warlords, an unstable contest in which the Liffey townsmen had a major stake. Although they were on the losing side, the death of their nemesis Brian Bóruma on the battlefield temporarily restored Leinster's and Dublin's autonomy.[7]

As Howard Clarke has emphasised, perhaps the most remarkable survivor in *Dyflinn*'s history was Sitriuc Silkbeard. As one of Olaf's surviving sons, he had been installed by Máel Sechnaill as king in 989, but had moved out of the latter's orbit and managed to shift allegiances over the following forty years. Marrying at different times into the families of both Máel Sechnaill and Brian Bóruma, Sitriuc and his city-state survived repeated pillaging to become a pivot of trade in the Irish Sea, and his intimate links with Wales, Anglo-Saxon England and his Viking allies far to the north suggest a figure of rare energy and guile. He minted the first Irish coins in 997 ('SIHTRIC REX DYFLINN') and oversaw the strengthening of the town's fortifications after Brian's sacking of the place in 1000. The symbolic focus for his people was the Thingmót, a great mound to the east of the settlement and near the tidal limit (adjacent to modern College Green), 'where kings presided and law-makers pronounced', or possibly a building beside it on what became Hoggen Green. Indeed, here are the likely origins of corporate municipal government, even though we have no explicit documentary evidence how it might have operated, nor the area it controlled. The wider region dominated by the town was known as *Fine Gall*, the land of the foreigners in Irish sources, *Dyflinnarskíri* in Norse, the territory from Dublin northwards to Skerries and west to Leixlip. This district was both the bread-basket and the nursery of fishermen for a hungry town.

But despite its growing wealth and populousness, the city-state was now dominated by the regional dynasties jousting for the high-kingship. For about forty years at different times in the eleventh century the kingship of Dublin was assumed by the kings of Leinster, by the Ua Briain kings of Thomond or by one of their sons. Sharp divisions between the descendants of the original Dublin royal dynasty and the Hiberno-Norse mac Ragnaill dynasty in Waterford opened the door to such outside control; the longest such intrusion began in 1052 when Diarmait mac Mail na mBó, king of Leinster, drove out Echmarcach mac Ragnaill and left his own son in charge – not, it seems, an unpopular move and an arrangement which lasted for nearly twenty years. Just how much power resided in those who carried the kingly title is quite unclear, but it is striking that the descendants of the foundation dynasty of Ívarr of the 850s, labelled in the Irish sources as the *Dubgaill*, managed to return to recover the kingship on perhaps five occasions between the 990s and the 1140s. Yet the complete absence of internal documentation on this constantly evolving Hiberno-Norse state makes the identity even of some of its kings rather speculative.[8]

By contrast, modern archaeology since the 1960s has revealed an extraordinary volume of information about the material culture of this community. Indeed, much of what we now know about the insular Viking world comes from the Dublin excavations: nearly half of all Viking-age burials found in Britain and Ireland in modern times have been in the Dublin area, some of them pagan, some Christian burials. The town had a simple street system and single-storey post-and-wattle houses of a remarkably standardised design, with a typical floor area in the dominant house-type of about 40 square metres. Their roofs were of thatch, and they were usually set back from the street. The vast bric-a-brac of everyday urban life, from Anglo-Saxon coins, keepsakes of metal and bone and traces of textiles to their domestic detritus, have come to light in over fifty years of investigation by Breandán Ó Ríordáin, Patrick Wallace and their many successors. Botanical evidence has revealed much about the diet (wheaten and oaten bread, porridge, hazelnuts, berries and ale, some beef, shellfish and herring), in all likelihood a far more diverse fare than was then normal outside the town. It also points to the heavy demands by townspeople on nearby vegetation, both for heating their hearths and for building (evident in the ubiquitous traces of hazel woven into domestic walling and fencing, and of vast amount of ash timber turned into posts). Pre-Viking evidence

1. The wooden model of a Viking longboat, one of two found in excavations at Winetwaven Street, close to Wood Quay, which have been dated to the twelfth century. This was probably a child's toy. It would have had a single mast and the manoeuvrable square sail that was a standard feature in the hundreds of full-size longboats belonging to the Norse town.

of the town's material culture has been far less abundant, but that may reflect the sites that have been investigated to date. Numerous excavations in the Wood Quay and Fishamble Street neighbourhoods, and along the banks of the lower Poddle, have exposed the diverse material culture of a small but militarised trading community, expanding in size and commercial complexity over more than 300 years. Wallace has discerned some degree of occupational segregation from the archaeology: the merchants and well-to-do around the old site of Fishamble Street, 'Dublin's combmakers concentrated in High St., the metal-workers in Christchurch Place, the cobblers in High Street ...', with some like the blacksmiths and the boat-builders probably outside the defended area. Some of the exposed street alignments of late ninth- and tenth-century dates mark out property divisions that, quite remarkably, have persisted down to modern times.[9]

But one of the most striking revelations as riverside sections of Viking Dublin were being excavated in the 1970s – the Wood Quay site – was evidence of the exotic range of luxury goods present in the tenth- and eleventh-century town: traces of Asian silks and gold braid, amber jewellery (made in Dublin), walrus ivory, gold and silver ingots, coins from possibly as far as Samarkand. This was, it appeared, both an entrepôt and a place where there was a local demand for luxuries. An upswing in wholesale commerce is suggested by the growing output of silver coin minted in Dublin during the first half of the eleventh century but, judging by the

specie unearthed, Anglo-Saxon coins (of Chester, London and elsewhere) outnumbered the locally minted pieces. For much of the tenth and eleventh centuries Chester remained the key point of commercial contact, and there is some evidence of Dublin settlers resident in that town, and of Hiberno-Norse involvement in improving the safety of the North Wales coast with fortified quaysides and navigation aids. Judging by the regional distribution within Ireland of coin hoards dating from the era, it is striking that virtually all have been discovered in the northern half of modern Leinster – and nowhere else – hinting at a particular pattern of hinterland trading as well as very specific flows of tribute payment. The town's indigenous shipping fleet, small but highly mobile craft that routinely engaged in cross-channel movement, remained its strength, and access to high-quality Wicklow oak for building the boats may have been a strong comparative advantage over towns elsewhere in the Norse world. The key to understanding Dublin's commercial ascendancy was something that does not show up in the archaeology: the trade in slaves. This had been an element of Irish Sea commerce throughout the first millennium, but it reached a peak in the eleventh century: Dublin became an international slave market with prisoners of war being traded in both directions across the Irish Sea, captives from warfare within Ireland that were sold in Dublin by the victors, and slaves from Wales, England, Normandy and perhaps even outside western Europe (given the fleeting references to 'blackmen'). Poul Holm has suggested that the wholesale transmission of prisoners of war into slave markets may have begun as a Norse practice, but that from the late tenth century it was copied on a grand scale in the escalating conflicts between Irish kingdoms, particularly in eastern Ireland, with the slaves, young males and females, being disposed of in Dublin. The scale of the traffic is unknown, but it only subsided in the early twelfth century when the Norman ban on slavery and quieter times within England reduced both English demand and supply. The fate of the generations of slaves traded through Dublin is quite obscure, but presumably their owners were wealthy and their tasks were principally domestic.[10]

In his final years, Sitriuc copied King Cnut and went to Rome, travelling with the king of Brega (while their respective heirs went to war in their absence). Although Christian practices had been common in Dublin since the ninth century, Sitriuc was himself a convert. He went on to create a major endowment, the great church at the western end of the fortified compound near the highest point of the ridge, Holy Trinity Christ