

Excavations at High Street and Winetavern Street, Dublin

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IT is generally accepted that there were no towns in Ireland before Viking times and the construction of a harbour fortress at Dublin by Norse Vikings in the mid 9th century¹ is considered to have constituted part, at least, of the settlement out of which the medieval town later developed. The town fortifications of the 12th and later centuries encompassed an area approximately 600 m. from east to west and 300 m. from north to south, much of which was sited on relatively high ground overlooking the southern bank of the River Liffey. High Street, which runs parallel to the river and extends from the Cornmarket to the church of the Holy Trinity (Christ Church), was the principal street in the medieval period. In 1962 and 1963 archaeological excavation was carried out by the National Museum of Ireland on a plot of ground bordered by High Street, Nicholas Street and Back Lane (FIG. 20). Proposed street-widening schemes in this area of the old town occasioned the removal of a number of houses adjoining these streets and, in advance of further development-work, the Corporation of Dublin, who owned the properties, afforded the Museum an opportunity of archaeological investigation.

In the initial stages of this work it was found that the foundations dug for the construction of 18th-century house-cellars abutting on High Street and Nicholas Street had disturbed the ground to an average depth of 2·50 m. below the modern street level. Investigation revealed that there still remained an additional 2-m. stratum of relatively undisturbed occupation-debris below the bases of the cellars. Excavation of this material in the course of two six-month campaigns in 1962 and 1963 yielded a large number of objects and structures ranging in date from the 9th to the early 14th centuries. It was established, also, that the earliest settlement in that particular area had occurred in Viking times and finds from the earlier phases of occupation included a bone trial-piece with ring-chain motif of Borre style (FIG. 21, *a*), a bronze needle-case of Viking type (FIG. 21, *b*), a gilt bronze disc-brooch decorated in the Borre-Jellinge style (FIG. 21, *c*),² and an ingot-mould of soapstone which had, on one wide face, a matrix for casting Thor's hammer-symbols (FIG. 21, *d*). Evidence of comb-making, leather-working and weaving (FIG. 22) was also recovered. Structural features of the Viking and later periods included remains of houses constructed in post-and-wattle technique; in some

¹ The Rev. John Ryan, 'Pre-Norman Dublin', *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, LXXIX (1949), 68.

² A close parallel is that from grave 831 at Birka, Sweden: H. Arbmán, *Birka I, Die Gräber* (Stockholm, 1943), pl. 70, no. 18. The long pin on the High Street example is a later addition. For other examples, from Norway, see J. Petersen, *Vikingetidens Smykker* (Stavanger, 1928), pp. 117-18.

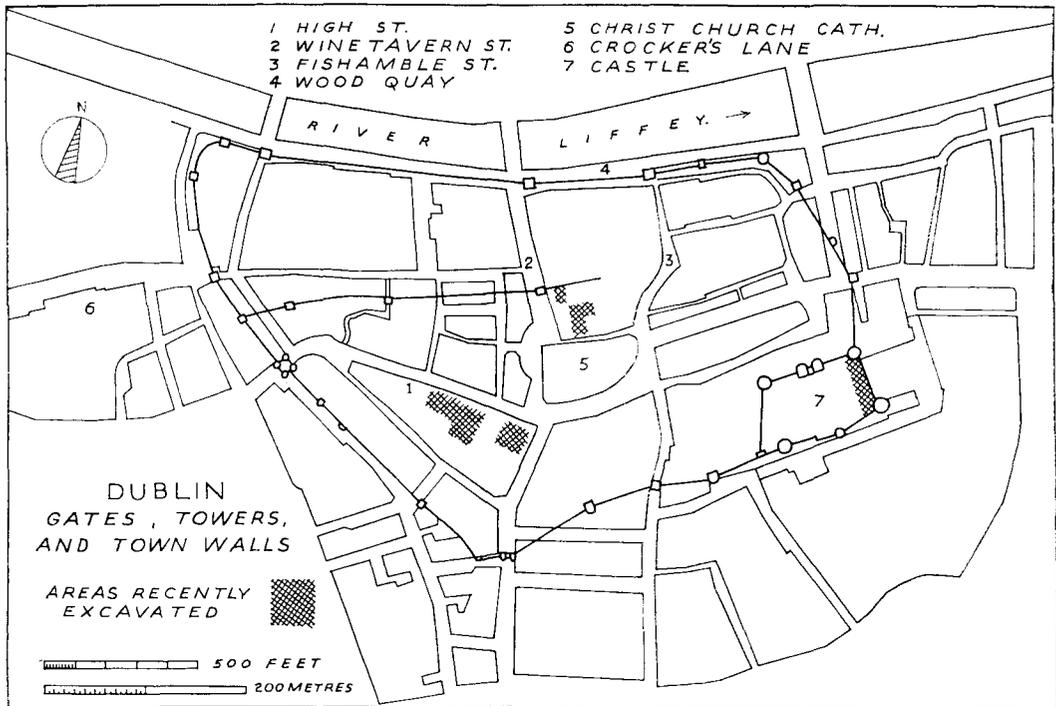


FIG. 20

MAP OF THE OLD CITY OF DUBLIN (pp. 73, 76)

showing the line of the fortifications and the sites of recent excavations at High Street (1) and Winetavern Street (2)

instances portions of the house walls remained to an average height of 61 cm. and consisted, usually, of two spaced rows of undressed upright posts in the round with a horizontal weft of rods or wattles, generally of hazel, ash or elm, between them. Fairly complete ground-plans of two houses were recovered and they suggest that the buildings were single-story sub-rectangular structures measuring, on average, 8 m. long and 6 m. wide.

In 1967 a more extensive area bordered by High Street and Back Lane (PL. v, A) was made available for investigation and the excavation which began in that year is currently in progress. After initial clearance of the site down to the level of the bases of 18th-century cellars, stratified deposits of the 13th century were revealed. Objects recovered from these levels included a pilgrim-badge made of pewter (PL. vi, A) which is of a type known to have been made in Rome, a lead seal-matrix bearing the name Adam Burestone and the figure of a centaur in bas-relief (PL. vi, B), and a small bronze pilgrim's flask or *ampulla* inscribed in relief with dedications to St. Wulfstan (of Worcester) and the Virgin Mary (PL. vi, C).³

³ Thanks are due to Mr. Brian Spencer, Assistant Keeper, The London Museum, and Mr. Michael Dolley, Department of Modern History, The Queen's University, Belfast, for assistance in identifying these objects.

A feature of part of the site was an abundance of worked leather ascribable by means of coins and other artifacts to the late 12th and early 13th centuries. The leather-work included numerous examples of shoes and knife-sheaths, some of the latter bearing incised decoration (PL. VI, D). Examination of the mass of leather⁴ has shown that much of it consists of a large number of soles, worn, damaged or holed, which would seem to indicate that at this period it was not the practice to repair worn soles. It would appear, however, that the uppers when cut away from the worn soles were reused to make new articles of footwear, usually of a smaller size than the originals. Cattle-hides were the source of most of the leather, but a number of examples of shoes made from goat-skin are also present. The finding of such a large quantity of leather in one area suggests that the concentration resulted not from the labours of a single cobbler but of a community working in the same sector of the town over a long period of time.

A significant amount of pottery of the 12th and 13th centuries has also been recovered and a preliminary examination has shown that Bristol pottery of Ham Green type, other west of England and midland wares and pottery from NW. and SW. France, as well as material of local manufacture, are present.⁵ An adjoining area of the High Street site has produced evidence of intensive working of bone and antler from the 11th to the 13th centuries. Much of the material consists of comb-makers' waste and rejects (PL. VII, B). Over 180 examples of single-sided combs, many of them fragmentary and some in various stages of manufacture, have been found (PL. VII, A) and it is noteworthy that only a few double-sided combs occur in these levels.⁶ The principal raw material used was red-deer antler. Although a large quantity of worked and unworked antler was found, very few deer bones were present among the animal food-bones which occurred in quantity⁷ on the site and it is evident, also, from the presence of natural ruptures on the majority of the burrs recovered that shed antlers were the main source of supply. Other objects made of bone and antler include game-pieces, dice and objects decorated with dot-and-circle ornament, which were, apparently, intended for use as handles (PL. VIII, C).

A number of carved bone trial-pieces—animal ribs and long bones bearing panels of animal interlacements and geometric motifs—have been found in 11th- and 12th-century levels.⁸ One of the more interesting examples had motifs in the Ringerike style (PL. VIII, A, B). The main composition, which is formed of two semi-interlaced animals, is best paralleled on one of the early panels on the shrine of the Cathach of Columcille (Columba). The shrine bears an inscription dating it

⁴ Leather-work on the site has been examined by Mr. John Waterer, Honorary Secretary, The Museum of Leathercraft, London.

⁵ Examination and identification of the pottery are being carried out by Mr. K. J. Barton, Director, Portsmouth City Museum.

⁶ Combs from the excavations have been studied by Miss Mairead Dunlevy, Art and Industrial Division, National Museum of Ireland.

⁷ General identification of the animal bones has been made by Miss Geraldine Roche.

⁸ The writer wishes to express his thanks to Dr. A. T. Lucas, Director, National Museum of Ireland; Dr. Françoise Henry, Director of Art Studies, University College, Dublin; Prof. David M. Wilson, Department of Scandinavian Studies, University College, London; and Mrs. Charlotte Blindheim, Universitetets Oldsaksamling, Oslo, for helpful comments on this and other material from the excavations.

between 1062 and 1098.⁹ The discovery of baked clay crucible-fragments, slag and vitreous matter in association with a workshop-hearth in the area where some of the trial-pieces were found suggests the presence of a 'school' of artists and metal-workers in this part of Dublin at that period.

Over 130 bronze pins have been found; a large proportion of them are of gilt bronze while others show traces of silvering or tinning. The specimens include stick-pins and ring-headed pins and among the latter were many examples of the crutch-headed type which are decorated with dot-and-circle ornament (FIG. 23, *b*).¹⁰ Also worthy of note is a decorated pewter disc-brooch of the 11th century (FIG. 23, *a*).

Iron objects found in the various levels include barrel-padlocks and their keys, belt-buckles, tanged knives, socketed arrow-heads, horseshoes, fish-hooks and a variety of iron nails, some of which are of the kind used in boat- and ship-building (FIG. 24).

Remains of structures built in the post-and-wattle technique have been encountered at all levels. Although no complete house-plan has been recovered in the current work, examples of two wooden doorways, each provided with a wooden threshold, probably originally formed part of dwelling-houses. On either side of the entrance in one example there was a stout oak jamb, 22 cm. wide and 7 cm. thick. A slot or groove cut in the outer face of each jamb was used to house the horizontal layers of wattle-work which formed the side walls. This method of stabilizing the ends of the wattles at their junction with the door-jamb was also observed in examples discovered in the excavations at Winetavern Street (see below) in 1969-71 (FIGS. 25, 28).¹¹

In 13th-century levels a number of timber-framed structures were found. In one example closely-set timber boards were nailed to the framework and in another small, framed structure the wall consisted of boards set horizontally edge to edge with their ends fitted into a vertical slot in the squared-oak corner-posts. Another timber feature of interest, found at High Street in late 11th-century levels, is a well-preserved plank pathway, about 1 m. wide (PL. V, B).

Since 1969 excavations have been conducted, also, at Winetavern Street immediately north of Christ Church Cathedral (FIG. 20). As at High Street, the later medieval and post-medieval strata had been considerably disturbed or removed as a result of later building, but stratified material, ranging in date from the 9th and 10th centuries to the 13th century, has been recovered. A number of pits of 13th-century date contained a wide range of objects, including fragments of cloth, leather shoes and decorated leather knife-sheaths, fragments of glass including parts of the rim and body of an enamelled glass vessel,¹² an iron gimlet

⁹ David M. Wilson and Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art* (London, 1966), p. 144, pl. lxvi, *b*.

¹⁰ The ring-headed pins have been examined by Mr. Thomas Fanning, Assistant Inspector, National Parks and Monuments Branch, Office of Public Works, Dublin.

¹¹ I am much indebted to Mr. Patrick Healy, Newgrove Avenue, Sandymount, Dublin, for surveying these features and for assistance in recording other structures and material from the excavations. I also wish to thank Mr. Bernard Grimes, School of Architecture, University College, Dublin, for FIGS. 25 and 26.

¹² Dr. D. B. Harden has identified this enamelled glass as part of a beaker of the Syro-Frankish group of the late 13th century.

with a lathe-turned wooden handle (PL. X, B), and glazed and unglazed pottery, all of which had, apparently, been discarded as refuse. From among the sherds found, it was possible to reconstruct a number of jugs from the Bordeaux region (PL. IX, A). One of the pits was found to have been made to accommodate a prefabricated wooden framework, consisting of stout corner-posts supporting a lining of horizontal boards on the sides of the pit (FIG. 26). The boards, 20 cm. wide and 1 cm. thick, overlapped each other like weather-boards and had been inserted between the frame and the sides of the pit cut to receive the structure. The wooden frame, which measured approximately 1.90 m. by 1.90 m. and which survived to a height of 1.50 m., had been carefully constructed. Mortises and tenons and wooden pins and dowels were employed to secure the joints and no iron nails were used in its construction. The boards which lined the pit were held in place against the framework by earth which had been rammed down in the narrow space between them and the sides of the pit.

In 11th- to 13th-century levels the discovery of many wooden bowls, platters and barrel staves, some in an unfinished state, suggests that wood-turners and coopers were settled in this part of the town. In a late 11th-century context two planks were found in juxtaposition, each bearing an incised sketch of a ship (FIG. 27, a, b), while two small wooden models of ships were discovered in later levels (PL. X, A). A quantity of decorated pottery, mainly rim- and body-sherds, some of which have a light sprinkle of glaze, occurred in 11th-century levels. The ware, predominantly grey in colour, is thought to be of French origin. Finds of the 10th century and earlier include an inlaid bronze dress-pin topped by a human head (PL. X, c), a number of ring-headed bronze pins, a small openwork quadrangular bronze brooch similar to examples from Birka¹³ and Hedeby,¹⁴ animal-headed bone pins, amber beads, and fragments of lignite bracelets, a stone ingot-mould and a few examples of Viking spear-heads.

Although over 230 examples of bone combs were found in the course of the Winetavern Street excavation, the site produced no evidence that comb-making was carried on there. Numerous structural remnants in the post-and-wattle technique PL. IX, B, including remains of houses (FIG. 28) and boundary-fences, occurred at all levels.

Examination of seeds and fragments of plants from different levels¹⁵ shows that the townspeople ate strawberries, apples, cherries, plums, sloes, blackberries, rowan berries and hazel nuts. Fig seeds were found in 13th-century levels. It also appears that the seeds of goosefoot (*Chenopodium*) and three species of *Polygonum* (knotgrass, black bindweed and pale persicaria) were, apparently, extensively occurred used as food.

¹³ H. Arbman, *op. cit.* in note 2, pl. 85, no. 5.

¹⁴ Torsten Capelle, *Der Metallschmuck von Haithabu* (Neumünster, 1968), pp. 47, 107, pl. 9, nos. 2-3. Another close parallel is that from a ship-burial at Fjortoft, Sunnmøre, Norway (Bergen Museum inventory no. B11769^c), which was associated with two oval brooches, a trefoil brooch and a number of glass beads. I wish to thank Dr. Birgit Arrhenius, Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm, for drawing attention to this parallel and to Dr. Egil Bakka and Mrs. Signe Nordhagen, Historisk Museum, Bergen, for additional details regarding the associated material. This find is mentioned briefly by Capelle, *op. cit.*, p. 47, note 327.

¹⁵ This material has been identified by Professor G. F. Mitchell, Department of Quaternary Studies, Trinity College, Dublin, and by Miss M. J. P. Scannell, Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, Dublin.

During the excavations at High Street and Winetavern Street 38 coins and two French jettons or reckoning counters were discovered.¹⁶ The coins include a few English, 7 Anglo-Irish, 19 Irish bracteates from the 3rd quarter of the 12th century and a number of Hiberno-Norse coins varying in date from c. 1040 to the 2nd quarter of the 12th century.

These excavations adjoining High Street and Winetavern Street, some of the more interesting results of which are recorded in this preliminary report, have already been of considerable importance in helping to elucidate aspects of the early history of Dublin; and further progress may be expected, since work on both sites is continuing.

Until 1962 no excavation of the Viking and medieval strata in the city had been carried out, apart from a small area¹⁷ within the precincts of Dublin Castle (FIG. 20), and, with the exception of the material from Viking graves recovered in the Islandbridge–Kilmainham district to the west of the city,¹⁸ no significant body of archaeological material existed to illustrate either the density or extent of the settlement.¹⁹ Although the international character of the town in its early period was apparent from a study of the literary references,²⁰ the material from the recent excavations—much of it in an excellent state of preservation owing to the preservative qualities of the deposit—demonstrates contacts not only with Scandinavia but also with some of the main trading centres of western Europe in medieval times.

NOTE

The Society is much indebted to the British Academy for a grant towards the cost of publishing this paper.

¹⁶ Coins from both sites have been examined by Mr. Michael Dolley, Department of Modern History, The Queen's University, Belfast.

¹⁷ Investigated by Mr. M. Ó hEochaidhe of the National Monuments Branch, Office of Public Works, in 1961–2.

¹⁸ W. R. Wilde, *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, x (1866–9), 13–22; G. Coffey and E. C. R. Armstrong, *ibid.*, 28c (1910), 107–22; Johs. Bøe, 'Norse antiquities in Ireland', *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. H. Shetelig, pt. III (Oslo, 1940), 11–65; Haakon Shetelig, 'The Viking graves in Great Britain and Ireland', *Acta Archaeologica*, xvi (1945), 1.

¹⁹ The Rev. John Ryan, *op. cit.* in note 1, p. 66.

²⁰ C. Haliday, *The Scandinavian Kingdom of Dublin* (Dublin, 1884); A. Walsh, *Scandinavian Relations with Ireland* (Dublin, 1922); Peter Foote and David M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement, the Society and Culture of Early Medieval Scandinavia* (London, 1970), p. 217.

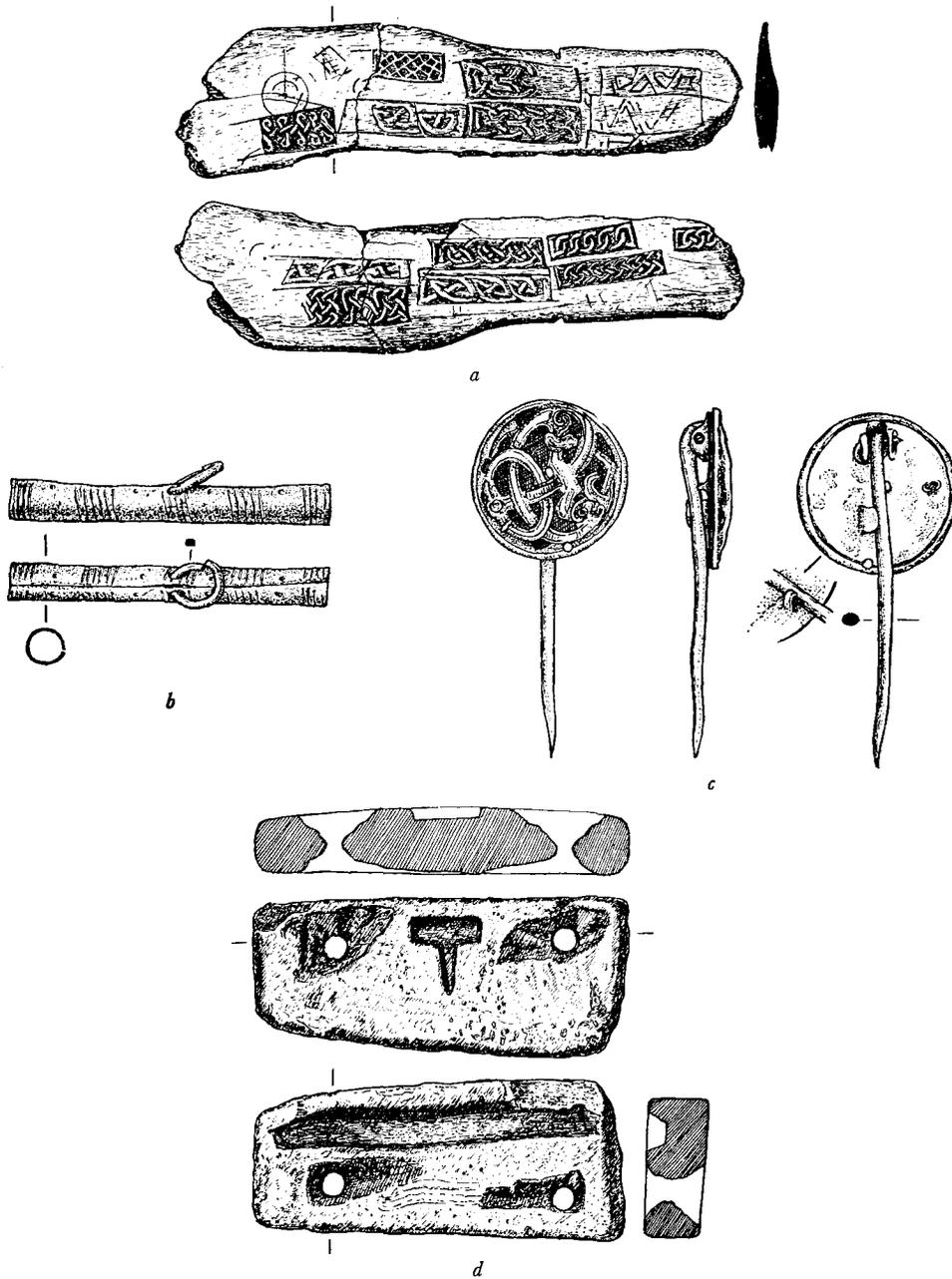


FIG. 21

FINDS OF VIKING DATE FROM HIGH STREET, DUBLIN, 1962-3 (p. 73)

a. Bone trial-piece with ornament in Borre style. Sc. $\frac{1}{2}$

b. Bronze needle-case from the earliest phase of occupation. Sc. $\frac{2}{3}$

c. Gilt bronze brooch with ornament in Borre-Jellinge style. Sc. $\frac{2}{3}$

d. Soapstone ingot-mould bearing a matrix for casting Thor's hammer-symbols. Sc. $\frac{1}{2}$

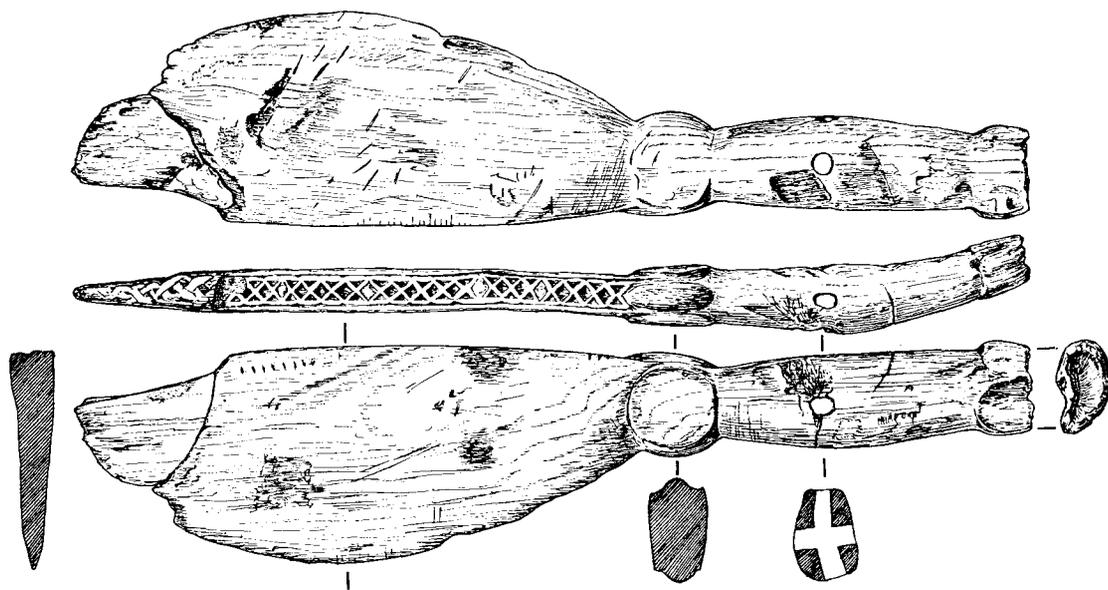


FIG. 22

HIGH STREET, DUBLIN, 1962

Weaver's sword of yew (*Taxus*) of Viking date with carved decoration (p. 73). Sc. $\frac{1}{2}$

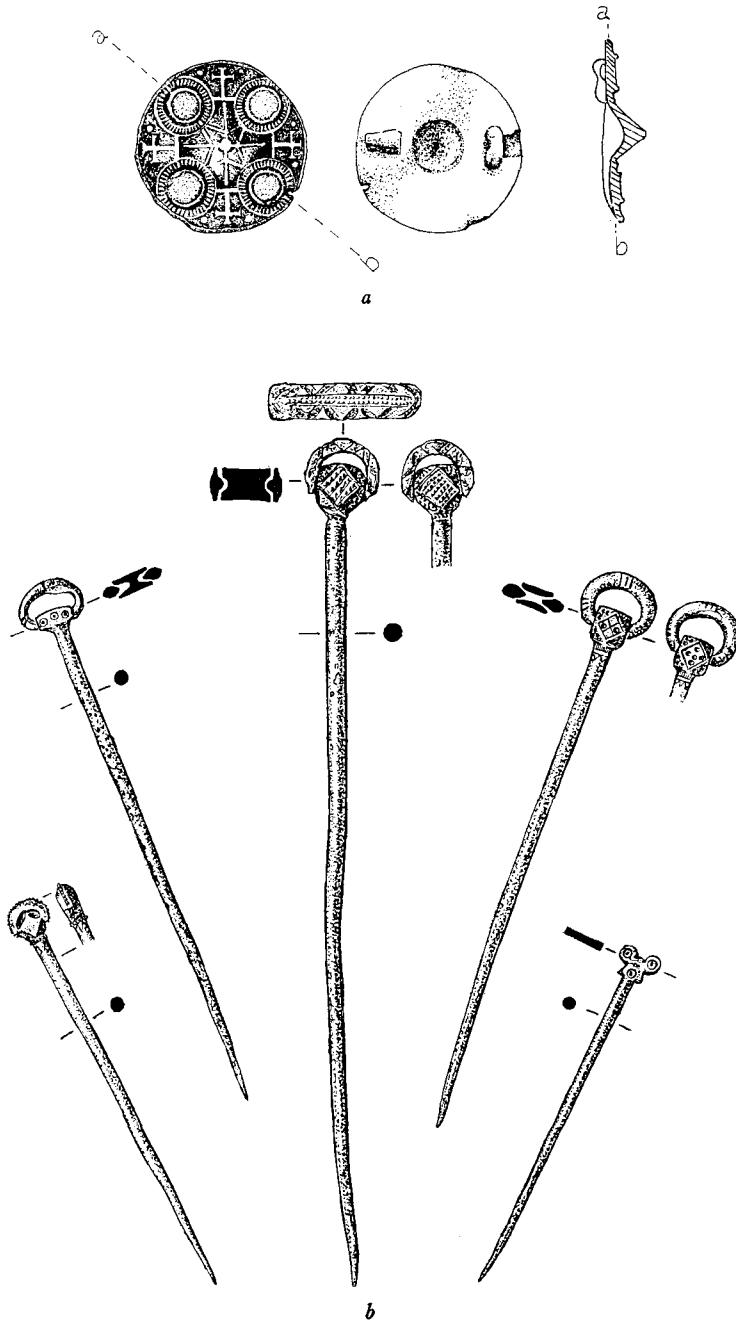


FIG. 23

FINDS OF VIKING DATE FROM HIGH STREET, DUBLIN (p. 76). Sc. $\frac{3}{8}$

a. Disc-brooch of pewter with a cross-pattern in relief

b. Some typical stick-pins and ring-headed pins with dot-in-circle and other decoration

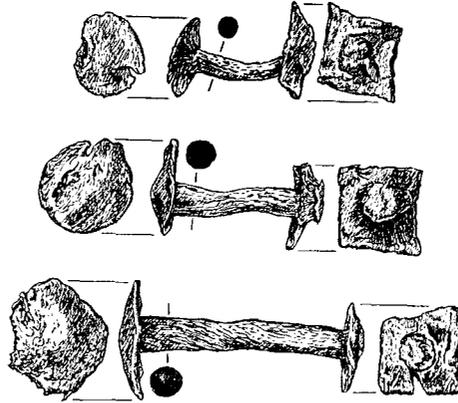


FIG. 24

HIGH STREET, DUBLIN, 1962-3 (p. 76). Sc. $\frac{1}{2}$
 Iron nails of the type used in ship- and boat-building

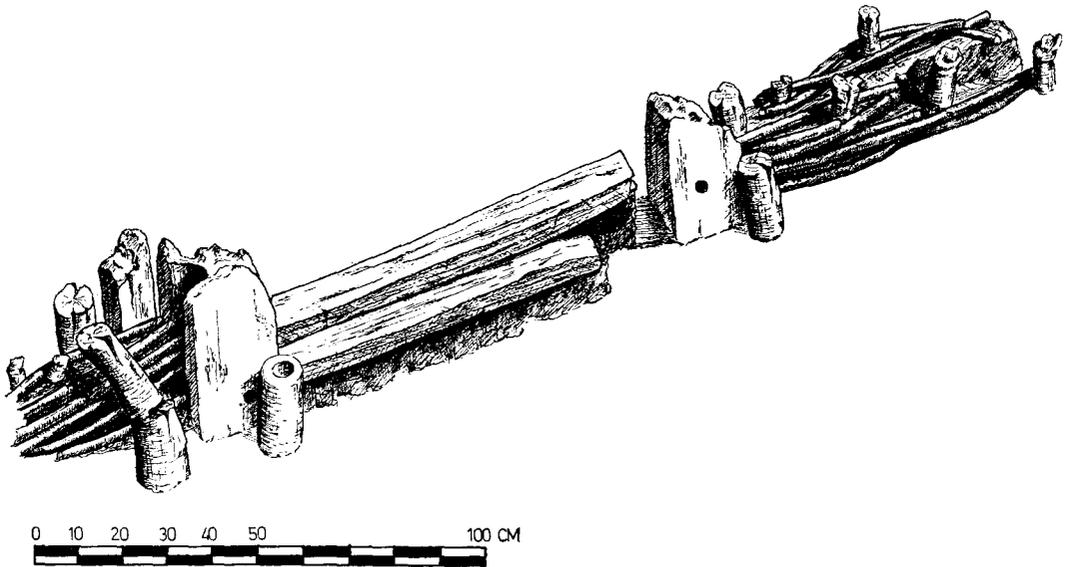


FIG. 25

WINETAVERN STREET, DUBLIN, 1970 (p. 76)

Threshold of house 21/2, showing the slots in the door-jambs which held the wattle-work of the side walls
 (see FIG. 28, at top)

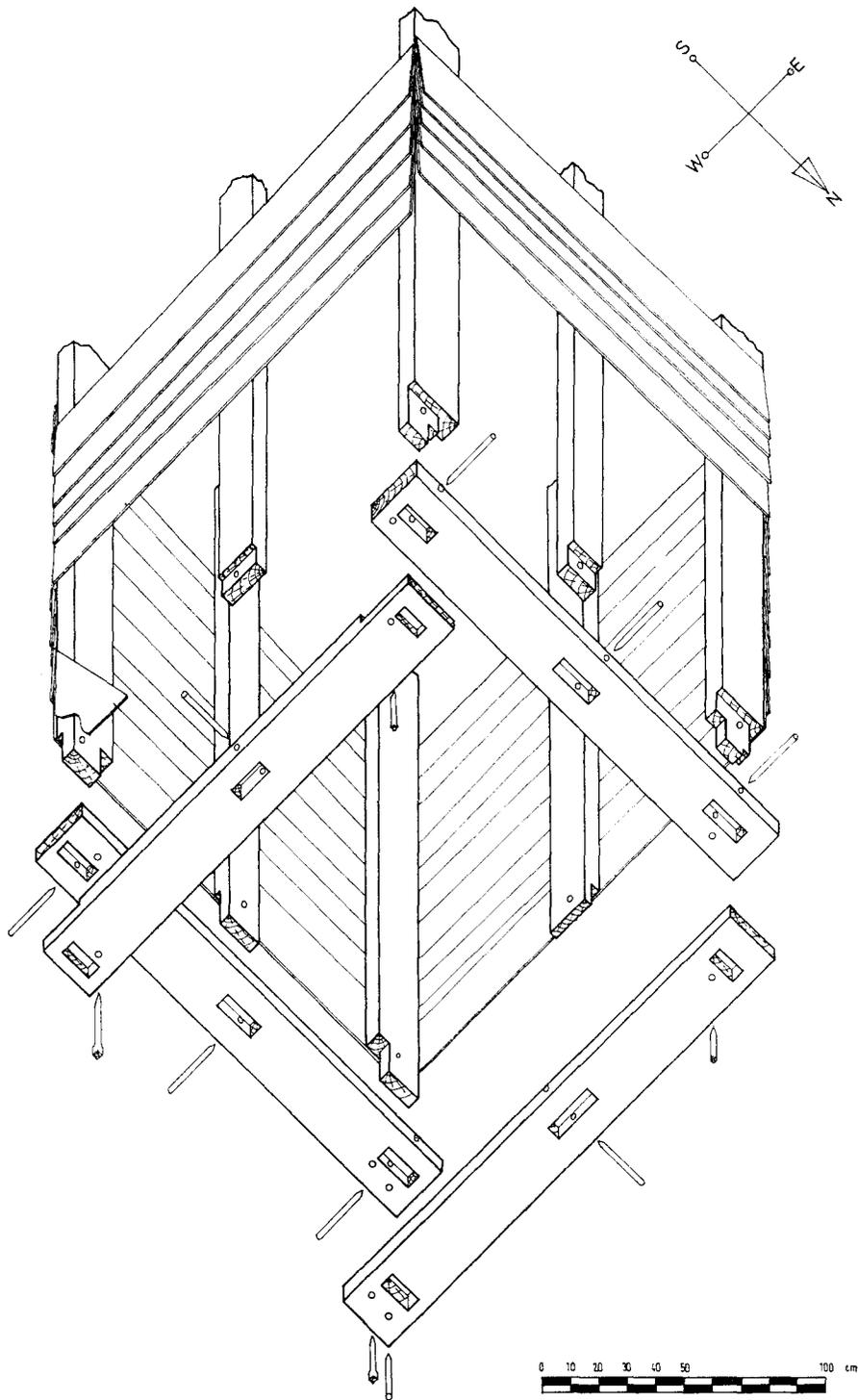


FIG. 26

WINETAVERN STREET, DUBLIN, 1970 (p. 77)

Axonometric drawing of the prefabricated square wooden framework found in pit 13/2 (see FIG. 28)

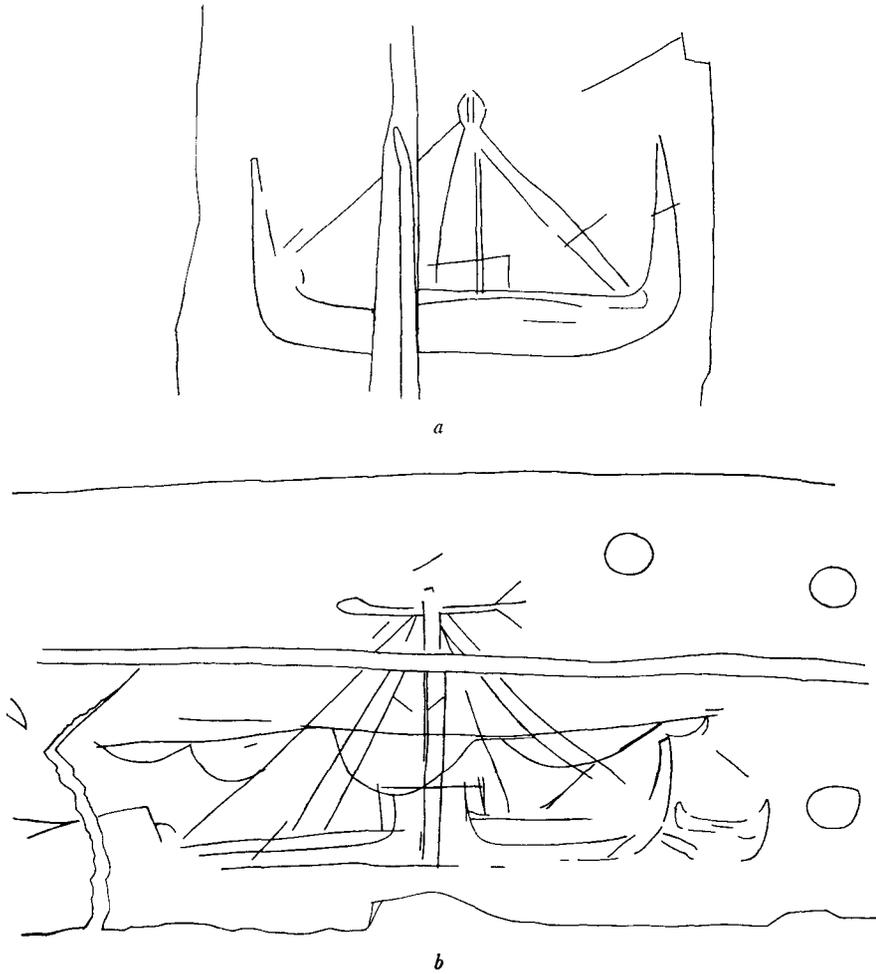


FIG. 27

WINETAVERN STREET, DUBLIN

Sketches of ships incised on two planks juxtaposed in a late 11th-century context (p. 77). Sc. $\frac{1}{4}$

WINETAVERN STREET DUBLIN 1970

HOUSE SITE NO. 21/2

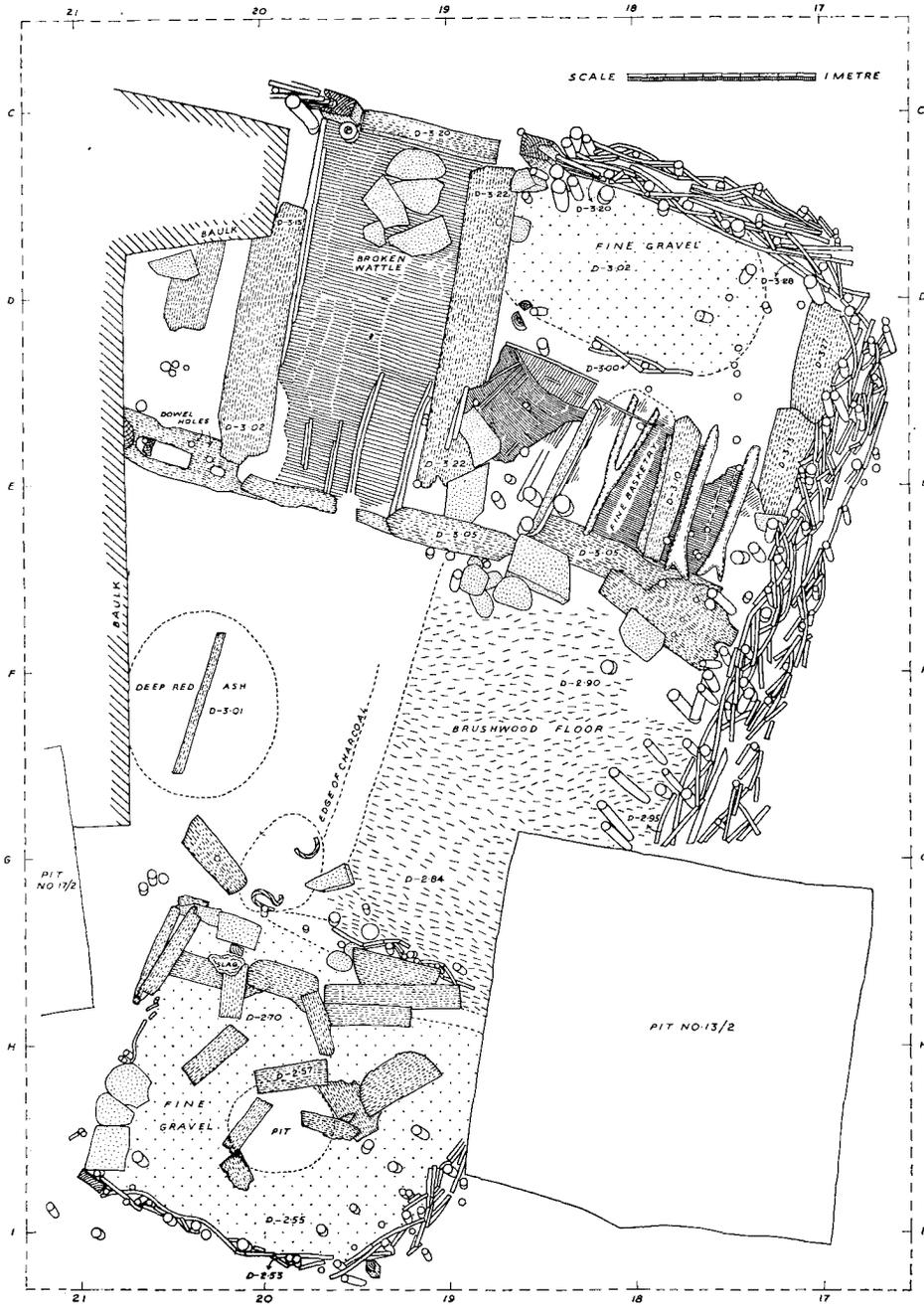


FIG. 28

WINETAVERN STREET, DUBLIN

Plan of house-site 21/2 (p. 76f.), showing (at top) position of the threshold (FIG. 25) and (at bottom) the wood-framed pit, no. 13/2 (FIG. 26)