

The enigma of the Viking longphort: a landscape archaeological perspective

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Introduction

Longphuirt (singular *longphort*) are reputedly the archaeological remains of raiding bases established and used in Ireland by Scandinavian raiding parties between the mid- to late-ninth century AD. The principal aim of this project was to tackle the controversial topic of the identification of the Viking raiding bases of ninth century Ireland. The project sought to question if a landscape archaeological method was useful for this task, and if such a methodology could provide a better understanding of *longphuirt*, as well as whether this methodology can help us build a model of how we might identify *longphuirt*.

Background and methodology

There has been considerable debate about longphuirt over the past fifteen years. Several potential *longphuirt* sites have been identified by various authors (e.g. Sheehan 2008; Valante 2008, 38–40; Simpson 2005; Simms 2001; Bhreathnach 1998; Clarke 1998; Doherty 1998, 324–6; Kelly and Maas 1998; Duffy 1996; Kelly and Maas 1995), but there is little agreement on what these sites might have looked like; how they functioned; or indeed how they might be properly investigated in the landscape. In contrast to much of the current literature, this project attempted to employ a landscape methodology that steps back from current debates, bringing with it a measured and composed consideration of the evidence at hand.

Eight potential *longphort* sites in Ireland were particularly focussed on in order to place them within their contemporary maritime environments and to assess their siting, form and potential role in warfare, settlement and trade. The sites particularly concentrated on for the study were Dunrally Fort in Co. Laois, Athlunkard in Co. Clare (SMR CL063-025002), Annagassan in Co. Louth (SMR LH015-015001-), Ballaghkeeran Little in Co. Westmeath (SMR WM022-041—), Rathmore in Co. Kerry (SMR KE047-115—), Rossnaree in Co. Meath (SMR ME026-004—), South Great George's Street/Ship Street Great, and Woodstown in Co. Waterford (SMR WA009-019—). These sites were given the most in-depth analysis, though evidence from other potential *longphuirt* sites in Ireland and northwest Europe were also used for comparison and reference.

This project was largely a desktop study. Existing literature on Viking activity in Ireland, Europe and Scandinavia was examined in order to build up a picture of current thinking and methodologies on longphuirt. Irish documentary sources (above all the Annals of Ulster and the Annals of the Four Masters) were also relied upon, as well as modern and historic cartographic evidence, in order to determine the relationships between

longphuirt and other settlement types and landscape features, as well as placename and artefactual evidence. The Sites and Monuments Records (SMR) for both the Republic and Northern Ireland were useful tools for the cartographic data and satellite images available in these databases. The Excavations Bulletin (www.excavations.ie), a database containing summary accounts of all the excavations carried out in Ireland from 1970–2005, was referred to for those sites that have undergone archaeological testing or excavation.

Longphuirt in the landscape, AD 830–AD 902

A major achievement of the project was the compilation of a catalogue of potential *longphort* sites, as well as catalogues of Viking activity referred to in the Annals of Ulster and the Annals of the Four Masters during the period AD 830–902. These catalogues have the potential to be developed into a database that would be a valuable tool for further research on these sites.

Using the information compiled in these catalogues, a number of common characteristics amongst *longphuirt* in Ireland were identified, and many of these characteristics can also be found in raiding bases in northwest Europe. However, a key finding of the project was to highlight that there is not necessarily a distinctive “type” of *longphort*. Generally, we can say that *longphuirt* were located close to water, sometimes between a major river and its tributary, with the landward side often protected by low-lying wet and marshy ground. Additionally, these sites are often located close to a ford or crossing point of the river. There are however many exceptions in site selection, with many clearly demonstrating opportunistic selection, as well as a preference towards the exploitation of locations along political boundaries. A *longphort* “type” was thus just as dependent on the existing landscape as on a pre-set model.

The various locations, morphologies, associated finds and documentary sources testify to the role played by *longphuirt* in raiding in the mid to late ninth century AD. Locations were often strategically placed to take advantage of navigable waterways. Ballaghkeeran Little's location on Lough Ree, for example, would have allowed its inhabitants access to the economic resources along the River Shannon, including the monasteries of Clonmacnoise and Clonfert. Defensive morphologies also testify to the role played in raiding by *longphuirt*. The Woodstown site has an excellent view of the surrounding area, and the marshy area in front of the site would have slowed down an approaching army. The Irish annals suggest that the capturing of slaves was a primary goal for Scandinavian raiders, though it is difficult to distinguish this evidence in the archaeological record. However, Swift (2001) suggests that the wealth of the finds at Woodstown may represent the profits of slave-raiding. Grave goods of a military nature and “warrior”

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burials such as those found at Woodstown, South Great George's Street and Ship Street Great may also testify to the role played in raiding by *longphuirt*.

The study also revealed the complex range of social and economic activities that *longphuirt* were involved in that included, not only raiding, but also metal production, trade and contemporary Irish politics. This is particularly revealed by the evidence uncovered by the excavations at Woodstown in Co. Waterford. Finds include numerous pieces of slag, clay tuyeres and items associated with metalworking (Russell 2003, 61–5). The site thus seems to have served as a production centre, most notably for iron artefacts, perhaps associated with shipbuilding and repair. If the inhabitants of *longphuirt* were engaging in commercial activities, such as trade, one would expect to evidence for hack silver (especially with peck-marks as a result of testing the silver during economic transactions), coins and coin hoards and weights. Such evidence has been found associated with Woodstown and Annagassan. The engagement in economic activities, in turn, seems to have played a part in the establishment of some *longphuirt*, such as the Dublin base, into more enduring settlements that became involved in contemporary Irish politics.

The Viking impact on the economy due to their presence in Ireland in *longphuirt* and other settlement types also had an impact on the state of contemporary politics. Many of the *longphuirt* proposed in the project were located on early medieval political boundaries. Annalistic evidence supports the argument that these locations were strategic and allowed the Vikings to take advantage of the political situation in early medieval Ireland. Dunrally Fort, for example, was located at the point of convergence of three early medieval kingdoms: Loíis, Uí Failge and Uí Muiredaig. It was also a short distance from the royal fortress of Dunamase, and short striking distance from Mide, the lands ruled by the Uí Néill. Its location also took advantage of an important route-way along the river valley, control of which was of great military importance to competing Irish kings (Kelly and Maas 1999, 135). Records of Viking involvement in

native feuds demonstrate the political nature that much of the Viking raids took on, particularly in the AD 860s and AD 870s, and this seems to coincide with a substantial decrease in recorded Viking church raids, signifying a change in tactics. Etchingam (1996, 54–6) has further demonstrated that two-thirds of Viking raids on churches in the second half of the ninth century can be linked with some degree of certainty to Viking relations with Irish dynasts. Access to a permanent trade centre such as Dublin and potential protection from Viking incursions would also have had benefits for the native Irish too, though it was also these ties with Irish groups that ultimately led to the attack and demise of the Dublin *longphort* in AD 902.

The project also attempted to find a *longphort ab initio*, using a model based upon common characteristics found amongst the eight sites examined for the study. The hypothetical search for the *longphort* began with an examination of the historical sources, which revealed five entries relating to an encampment on Lough Neagh or to raids from said encampment. It was thus decided to concentrate the search to a site on Lough Neagh. It was then decided to supplement the documentary evidence with an examination of place name evidence preserving either Scandinavian elements or reference to *longphort* or *dún* in the counties bordering Lough Neagh. This examination revealed a number of place names that preserving these features though most of these places were between 10 km and 70 km from the shores of Lough Neagh. However, at Dunore Point, 4 km southwest of Antrim, placename evidence may preserve a corruption of “dún-an-óir” (fort of gold), and this, coupled with the presence of four raths here, made the area a far more suitable place to focus the search upon. Ordnance survey mapping, satellite images from Google Maps and the Northern Ireland Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) were then considered. There is a record in the Northern Ireland SMR for one of the raths at Dunore Point (ANT055:022). Following examination of the description of the rath, the search was further narrowed down to one of the raths (marked ‘B’ in Fig. 1). The location and



Figure 1 Aerial photograph highlighting the four raths at Dunore Point, Co. Antrim

<<http://maps.google.com/maps?ll=54.684883,-6.2476795&z=18&t=h&hl=en>> [Accessed 28/07/09. © 2010 Google-Imagery © 2010 DigitalGlobe, GeoEye, TerraMetrics. Map data © Tele Atlas]

environment of the area was considered suitable for the landing of boats, as well as being naturally defensive, with good views of a relatively flat surrounding countryside and across Lough Neagh. The location would also have been a suitable one for taking advantage of the resources provided around Lough Neagh. Associated finds were unfortunately not forthcoming. Despite the frequent reference in the historical sources to a *longphort* on Lough Neagh, or raids from said *longphort*, very little direct evidence has to date been revealed in the archaeological record. The methodology thus came to a tenuous conclusion that the rath at Donore Point has the potential to be a *longphort*. Although this methodology was not entirely successful, in that it did not come to a concrete conclusion, it was at least methodological in its endeavours, showed that it is possible to use a systematic approach to the *longphort* question and has the potential to be developed to some success in other areas. It also demonstrated the ease with which the catalogues compiled for the project may be used as a starting point for gathering information.

The project also highlighted the need for more non-invasive survey methods on potential *longphuirt* in order to create a better understanding of their relationships with the landscape and surrounding contemporary monuments, as well as to reveal which *longphuirt* would be best suited to more investigation through archaeological excavation. The use of Aerial Photogrammetry (AP) or Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) to produce Digital Elevation Models (DEM) of *longphuirt* and their landscapes, a method used very successfully by the Discovery Programme in their Tara/Skreen AP Survey (2008) can help us to create three-dimensional models of *longphuirt* and of their surrounding landscapes, in order to create a better understanding of their relationships with the landscape and surrounding contemporary monuments. These non-invasive survey methods will also reveal which *longphuirt* would be best suited to more investigation through archaeological excavation.

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