Chapter 8
Raiders and traders around the Irish Sea

The areas bordering the Irish Sea rarely featured in contemporary written sources but were of strategic importance to Scandinavian raiders and settlers. Cumbria has already been considered and this chapter will focus on the evidence for a Scandinavian presence in Ireland, Wales and the Isle of Man. The Hebrides, which formed the more northerly extent of this cultural zone, will be considered in the next chapter. There is also evidence for Scandinavian activity in south-west Scotland and along the Solway Firth. At Whithorn, a largely undocumented monastic site was destroyed by fire and abandoned in the 830s. It was reoccupied later in the 9th century, by a community with Scandinavian connections. By the 11th century it was a thriving trading post, with square timber houses which parallel examples from Dublin. From the Iron Age these areas had been united by their easy access to the sea, and they shared a hybrid Hiberno-Norse identity, born of interaction between an indigenous Celtic population and an incoming Scandinavian one.

Ireland

By the late 8th century Ireland was a centre for art, literature, and learning. Despite the lack of unified kingship the Irish elite had

developed the concept of an Irish identity, based on language, culture, and religion, and defined and justified through genealogy and origin myths. It was in contrast to this that incoming Vikings were seen as *gaill*, or foreigners. The Vikings have continued to be seen as outsiders – the Irish have looked back to their Celtic heritage for their roots, although the Vikings have been credited with the establishment of the major Irish towns. As is the case in England, there is actually considerable evidence for the development of a hybrid culture in Ireland. Although many of the settlers may have shared a common Norwegian ancestry they are unlikely to have arrived direct from Scandinavia, and they also adopted aspects of Celtic culture. It is therefore often appropriate to describe them as Hiberno-Norse.

It is not as if the Vikings were the only ones looting monasteries. Raiding was endemic in early Christian Ireland and there are at least 30 recorded attacks by Irish raiders prior to the first recorded Norwegian raid on Rechru (probably Rathlin Island, County Antrim) in 795. Up to the early 10th century there is always a clear distinction between Norse and Irish; thereafter the differences become blurred. The raids follow a similar pattern to those recorded in England. From the 830s isolated coastal attacks on monastic sites give way to systematic expeditions inland by larger fleets, and the construction of fortified camps, known as *longphorts*.

In 841 a stronghold was established as *Dubh-linn*, the 'black pool', at a crossing point over the River Liffey. Dublin, under Olaf the White, emerged as a small and powerful kingdom, until the Norse were ousted by an Irish coalition in 902, and 'abandoned a good number of their ships, and escaped half-dead after they had been wounded and broken', probably fleeing to north-west England. A short period of relative peace was followed by renewed raiding and in 917 the base at Dublin was re-established; by the mid-10th century it ruled over a substantial hinterland and written sources describe Dublin as the centre of the slave trade. With the Norman

conquest of Ireland in the 1160s the Norse towns became the property of the English crown. By the 12th century all Irish structures were attributed to the Norse, because it was believed that the Irish were incapable of building them. The Welsh writer and cleric Giraldus Cambrensis (1146–1223) wrote that 'the Irish attach no importance to castles, they make the woods their strongholds and the bogs their trenches'.

Viking Dublin was rediscovered in the 19th century. At least four separate cemeteries and a number of single graves were found in and around Dublin, totalling *c.*70–80 male burials and about ten female burials. All are assumed to date from the 60-year period between 841 and 902. The largest concentration was discovered in 1841 in railway cuttings near Kilmainham gaol; a second concentration was found 800 metres further west along the ridge, at Islandbridge. In both cases the burials were inserted amongst unaccompanied Christian cist graves. All appear to have been inhumations: there were *c.*40 swords, *c.*20 spears and shields, and a few oval brooches from female costume. Some of the grave-goods, including weights and scales, suggested trading activities; there were also shears, sickles, tongs and pincers, spindle whorls, and needle cases.

As a result of urban redevelopment, subsequent archaeological excavation has also focused upon Dublin, and has concentrated on the investigation of its origins. The town was enclosed by an earthen bank in the 10th century; a second larger bank was built outside this around the 11th-century town. There were extensive excavations from 1961–81 at High Street, Winetavern Street, and Woodquay. The material has been taken as evidence of predominant, or exclusively, Hiberno-Norse occupation from an early period. The post and wattle houses and workshops have no direct parallels and may have been an Irish type, or may have been influenced from England during the 10th-century re-establishment. They had internal roof-bearing posts, wattle and daub walls, with rounded corners, and a door in each gable wall. The interiors had

central hearths with narrow wall benches; there were sometimes small cubicles at each end.

At Fishamble Street extensive excavations have revealed a long sequence of occupation, with Anglo-Saxon-style buildings in the late 9th century, replaced by Hiberno-Norse buildings developed within 14 contiguous plots along the street from *c.*920 to the 11th century. No stables or byres have been found and the animal bones show that meat must have been brought from outside the town, although Finbar McCormick has suggested that the high proportion of pig bones suggest that pigs were kept in the backyards of the properties, maybe reflecting uncertainty over the food supply. The proportion of pigs is much lower in York where the Anglo-Scandinavian kingdom had command of a large area, but is similar to that from Hedeby, which may imply a similar insecurity with regards to its hinterland.

In 2004 another *longphort* settlement was discovered by the river at Woodstown, in south-east Ireland. An early medieval ditched enclosure was recut in the 9th century. It contained settlement traces, including timber houses, with much evidence of ships and perhaps ship construction, including large numbers of iron rivets. Over 170 lead weights have been recovered, as well as evidence for metal-working. Weaponry, including a grave outside the enclosure, containing a sword, spear, axe, shield, honestone and ringed pin, also indicates a date around the mid-9th century for the beginning of Hiberno-Norse activity. Occupation terminates *c.*1050, which is when excavation has revealed that 14 urban plots were established alongside Peter Street in Waterford, 2 kilometres away. There may be a similar site at Annagassan in County Louth. An irregular circular area surrounded by a bank and ditch may indicate the site of the *longphort* which annals record was established in 841.

Evidence for activity outside these semi-urban centres is sparse and it appears that there was little Hiberno-Norse settlement within rural Ireland: 80 per cent of known Scandinavian-style burials

come from within 5 kilometres of Dublin. Ring forts and crannogs produce Scandinavian-influenced objects, but none can be pointed to as Norse dwellings. The only clear Hiberno-Norse rural site is a coastal haven, occupied from the 10th to early 12th centuries. Beginish Island, off the west coast of County Kerry, is adjacent to the early monastery on Church Island. It was initially excavated in the 1950s and interpreted as an early medieval settlement with some Norse acculturation in a second phase. However, new work has questioned whether there really are two phases and has also confirmed the Hiberno-Norse character to the site, with a runic inscription and other Hiberno-Norse artefacts. The settlement includes eight houses and a number of animal shelters. One of the buildings incorporates a semi-sunken area which has been seen as a fusion of native Irish building traditions and architectural features, such as cellars, transmitted through Scandinavian towns.

Other evidence also suggests that Hiberno-Norse settlement was limited to southern and eastern Ireland, and to the semi-urban centres, but that alliances were formed with local kings who controlled the rural hinterlands. There are many Hiberno-Norse silver hoards in Ireland, comprising 53 coinless hoards of arm rings and ingots, 16 mixed hoards of coins and metalwork, and 41 coin hoards, predominantly made up of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Scandinavian coins from East Anglia and Northumbria, but also incorporating Arabic issues. John Sheehan has identified that whereas those hoards which include coins are found in the south and east, the coinless hoards are spread throughout Ireland, in areas not controlled by the Hiberno-Norse, and many come from ring forts, the bases of local chieftains. Few hoards contain fragmented hack-silver ingots and coins, representing ongoing exchange and classic economic activity. The majority of hoards apparently relate to tribute rather than trade. The Hiberno-Norse formed military alliances with local rulers and gift exchange may have been part of this process. The arm rings, in particular, may represent the payment of tribute from Dublin, designed to buy the allegiance of Irish kings.

Wales

The inhabitants of Wales have focused almost exclusively upon their Celtic past, and there has been little interest in Vikings. By the 9th century Wales consisted of a number of independent kingdoms, united in part by Christianity, and this native elite are generally seen as the ancestral Welsh. Old Norse had relatively little impact on Welsh and, apart from along the coast, there are relatively few Scandinavian-influenced place names. The archaeological evidence comprised a few isolated artefacts such as a glass bead from Hen Gastell (Swansea) and a ringed pin from Caerwent (Monmouthshire). There was little evidence for settlement, other than a handful of burials, including a skeleton buried with an iron spearhead in a slab-lined grave, discovered during the excavation of a cesspit for a new house at Talacre (Flintshire) in 1932, and a lone individual discovered in 1945 on the beach at Benllech in Anglesey, along with a number of iron coffin nails and an antler comb. A single hogback is known from Llanddewi Aber-arth (Ceredigion), and the crosses at Penmon (Anglesey) and Maen Achwyfan (Flintshire) show Scandinavian influence.

The accepted picture has therefore been that Vikings had little impact on Wales, apart perhaps from some isolated enclaves. Nonetheless, although written sources are scarce there are a few recorded raids, and it is likely that there was extensive contact and some settlement. The first recorded raid was in 852, when Cyngen of Powys was slain by 'gentiles', probably Vikings. There was also intensive raiding from *c.*950, following the death of Hywel Dda, king of Gwynedd and Deheubarth, and coinciding with the expulsion of Erik Bloodaxe from York in 954. Viking armies attacked coastal lowlands and religious centres such as Penmon, Caer Gybi (near Holyhead), Tywyn (Gwynedd), and St David's (raided 11 times between 967 and 1091). In 987 south Wales suffered attacks from an army which operated until 1002, when it was paid off with tribute in silver. There are 11 silver hoards from Wales, all from coastal areas. A hoard of five silver arm rings was

found at Red Wharf Bay, on Anglesey, in the late 19th century. Recent excavation by Mark Redknap at the nearby site at Llanbedrgoch has provided dramatic evidence for Viking activity.

Red Wharf Bay forms a large natural harbour, but the settlement at Llanbedrgoch was built on a natural routeway from the landing site, about one kilometre from the sea, but adjacent to a freshwater spring. It begins in the 7th–8th centuries as a native settlement comprising a ditched and banked enclosure encircling a number of wooden buildings constructed in the local tradition of mixed circular round houses and rectangular halls. In the 9th century the enclosure boundary was enhanced with a massive dry-stone wall, high and wide enough to carry a wall-walk, indicating the need to upgrade the defences. Inside there were at least six late 9th-/early 10th-century rectangular halls, including three resting upon sill beams, and two with traces of stone flagged floors. Both the form of the buildings and the evidence for wall benches suggests Scandinavian influence. The buildings were linked by a paved road, 3 metres wide, to an oval spring pool, accessed by stone steps.

Although the animal bone assemblage and presence of quern stones suggests the settlement had an agricultural basis, Llanbedrgoch also had wide trading contacts. There were English coins from Canterbury and Northumbria, Carolingian deniers, and a fragment of an Arabic dirham. There were also 19 lead weights and nine fragments of hack silver. Scandinavian influence is also indicated by the discovery of 11 10th-century ringed pins, four small ornamental bronze bells, and a Borre-style belt buckle; a large whetstone with a bronze ferrule in the shape of a helmet indicates warrior status. Iron forging took place on site, and there were 1,300 iron nails, including rivets from ship repair and over 50 knife blades. There was also casting of non-ferrous metals, in copper alloy, silver, and lead, and antler and leather working. Outside the enclosure five bodies had been unceremoniously

dumped in the ditch. One had been thrown on top of a child; his wrists had been tied behind him, and he had suffered a sharp blow to the left eye. Another adult had been placed face down with his arms tied in front of him. These must represent the victims of a raid. Llanbedrgoch was an early princely site or estate centre, and became an important focus for trade in the 9th and 10th centuries. It is very tempting to see the bodies as evidence that it was attacked by Vikings, and possibly occupied by them.

The Isle of Man

The Isle of Man first appears as a historic entity, along with the Western Isles, under its first Norwegian king, Godred Crovan (1079–95), and it had a series of Norse rulers until it was ceded by Norway to Alexander III of Scotland in 1266. The Scandinavian overlay on Man was considerable and the present-day Manx are proud of their Viking heritage. The Manx Parliament – the Tynwald – traces its origins to the meetings of the Norse open-air assembly, or Thing, and still assembles annually at Tynwald Hill, St John's, to promulgate those laws passed during the previous year. Many believe that the basic land unit, the *treen*, each with its chapel or *keeil*, is Norse, although others have suggested it may even be pre-Norse. It has also been argued that the number of surviving Scandinavian place names is only compatible with a substantial Norse settlement, and even that Man was for a while completely Norse-speaking, until Gaelic was reintroduced *c.*1300, although others have claimed that the Scandinavian element was confined to the ruling elite and chief landowners.

Archaeologically, it has been hard to find traces of Norse settlements, which may be under modern farms. There are few excavated sites, other than reoccupied coastal promontories such as Cronk ny Merriu and Close ny Chollagh, and upland shielings, such as Doarlish Cashen and the Braaid. Given the likely continuity of Norse building styles these sites are hard to date.

The burial record is more informative, and there is a relatively large number – over 25 – for such a small island. Many are under low mounds overlooking the sea and they appear to indicate competition for land ownership and the importance of using the landscape to lay claim to farms. During the Second World War, the German archaeologist, Gerhard Bersu, was interned on the Isle of Man as an enemy alien and was allowed to excavate a number of sites, including Balladoole. Here a boat grave had been superimposed upon a Christian cemetery, disturbing several recent burials. The ship was a small rowing boat in which a male was the main burial. He was buried with riding equipment and a number of costume items, including a Carolingian silver buckle and a Hiberno-Norse ringed pin. A substantial wooden pole had been erected at the edge of the mound, which was covered by a layer of cremated bones from sacrificial animals.

Bersu also excavated a chamber grave at Ballateare, on the north-west coast. A young male had been placed in a coffin at the foot of the chamber. He was buried with a sword – broken into three pieces and replaced in its scabbard – and wrapped in his cloak. A shield and two spears – also mutilated – had been put into the burial pit. A mound had been thrown up over the burial, in which cremated animal offerings had again been placed – along with the skeleton of a young woman who had been killed by a sword cut which had removed the top of her skull. A large pole had again been erected over the mound.

These burials, and other accompanied graves from the Isle of Man, have been dated to the late 9th or early 10th centuries. They are unlike the majority of Scandinavian graves, but they have come to stand for the Viking stereotypical warrior burial, with young men buried with all they need for Valhalla – their weapons, their horses and hounds, and even their slave girls. It is as if, in the competitive environment facing the first colonists, it was necessary to develop and exaggerate a Viking identity, as the defining part of who they were, and what they stood for.

By contrast, amongst over 300 cist burials in an early cemetery on St Patrick's Isle, Peel, only seven included any form of grave-goods, and most of these were costume items. Only the so-called 'Pagan Lady' stood out, with her necklace, comb, knives, shears, workbag, and cooking spit, or sorceress' staff. However, she was not wearing Scandinavian dress, which has led to the suggestion that she was a native Celt who had married a settler. The Peel cemetery appears to represent an alternative strategy of assimilation, and within a few generations the Hiberno-Manx elite were being buried in churchyards, under stone cross slabs. As in England, there was a flourishing school of stone sculpture when the Norse arrived, and following their conversion they produced a series of distinctive crosses from 930–1020, frequently combining Christian elements with Scandinavian mythology. At Kirk Andreas church, Sigurd is shown in a conical helmet, roasting three slices of dragon heart over flames. The thumb of his other hand is in his mouth, the tasting of the dragon's blood providing a crude metaphor for the Christian Eucharist. A second cross shows Oðinn, with spear and raven, his foot in the jaws of Fenrir, the wolf, counterbalanced on the other face by a Christian scene of a figure holding a book and cross.

Many of the crosses incorporate runic inscriptions. Most are commemorative and follow a common formula of 'N put this cross up in memory of M'. Of the 44 named individuals, 22 have Norse names, while 11 have Celtic ones. Some were erected in the memory of women, including another example from Kirk Andreas, where 'Sandulfr the Black raised this cross for his wife Arinbjörg'. The earliest surviving runes, from the 10th century, show a clear connection with Norway, but at the same time they show Norsemen accommodating to a Western tradition which has Celtic elements, and the development of a new hybrid cultural identity.

As in England, therefore, it is impossible to speak of a pure Viking cultural identity in the Irish Sea region, although we can observe different strategies of accommodation between raiders and settlers, sometimes emphasizing their cultural difference, and often creating

new cultural norms. As we travel northwards, in the next chapter, we will visit areas where it has been argued that the Norse achieved complete cultural dominance.