

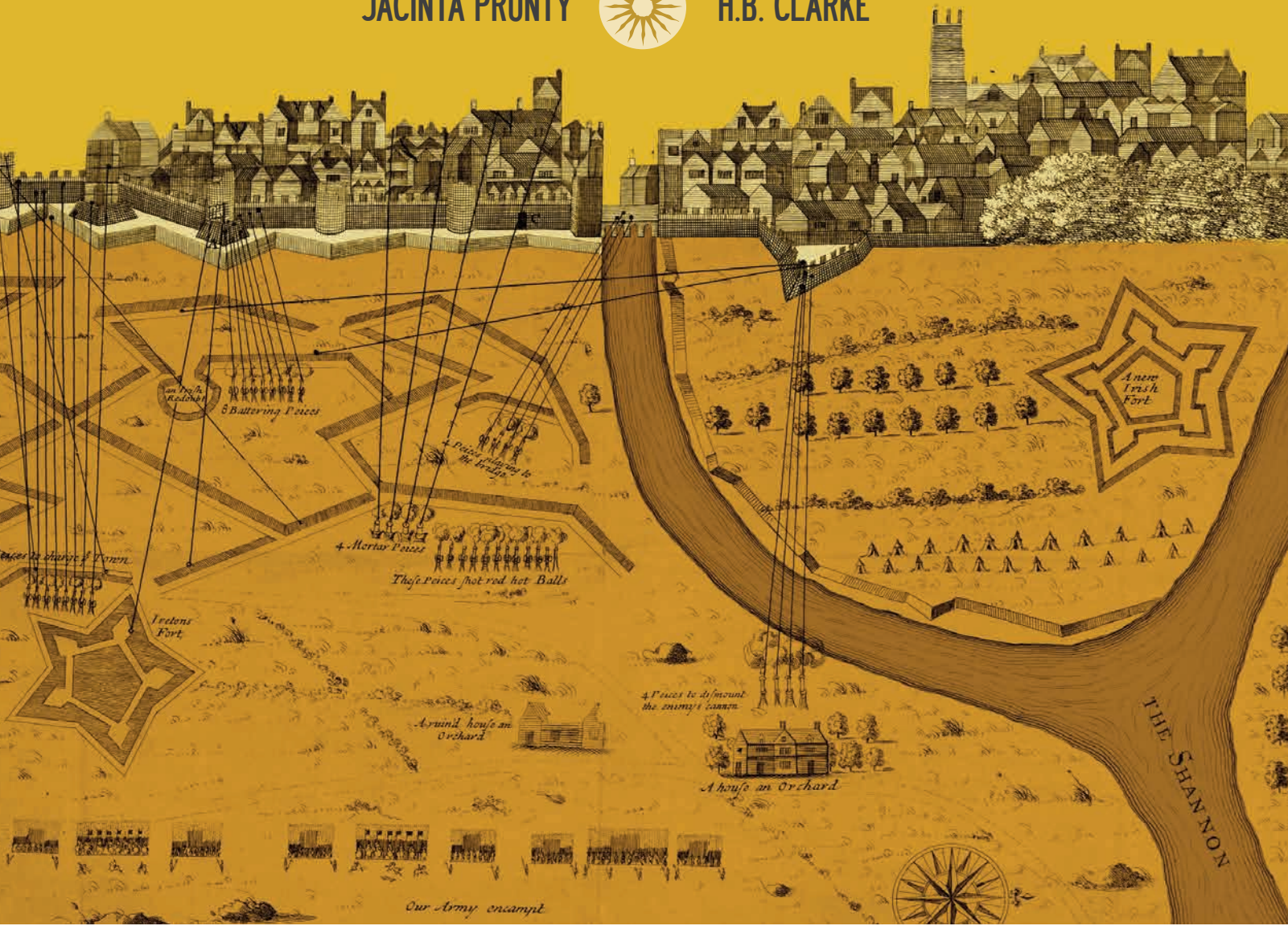
MAPS

READING THE MAPS: A GUIDE TO THE IRISH HISTORIC TOWNS ATLAS

JACINTA PRUNTY



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FOREWORD

The main title of this guidebook is an intentional echo of the phrase ‘reading the runes’. Runes have a dictionary definition of characters or marks that have mysterious or magical properties attributed to them. Maps have some of the same characteristics. To many people they have an air of mystery about them; they make extensive use of symbols and of conventions that need to be explained. They convey messages about spatial arrangements in a three-dimensional present and early maps do this in a four-dimensional past. Such maps may themselves date from the past or they may be reconstructions of that past. The word ‘reading’ should be understood in its widest sense: not only to take meaning from textual matter on a map, wherever that applies, but also to interpret the conventions, signs and symbols that map-makers employ.

Now that a critical mass of Irish Historic Towns Atlas (IHTA) fascicles has been published, together with ancillary works, the richness of the resource can be exploited. It can be done in a number of ways, using this guidebook to assist the process. To start with, the four main sections can be read as a series of conventional book chapters, divided by headings and generously illustrated. Then a stop-go approach can be adopted by re-reading individual units and answering the questions in the ‘test yourself’ boxes. This method would suit teaching environments on all levels. Finally research programmes could be devised on specific topics, using the material in this book as a starting point. To that end, the book includes suggestions for further reading in addition to the IHTA publications themselves.

As editors of the IHTA it is our belief that the geography and the history of towns and of town life in Ireland need to be better understood. It is also our belief that, made accessible to the widest possible readership, maps are a fundamental tool in that endeavour. In addition, many early maps are beautifully executed works of art. They deserve to be ‘read’ correctly for what they reveal about the past, as well as to be enjoyed as remarkable products of human creativity. Readers will discover that every Irish town in the sample has an interesting story to tell; the IHTA tells those stories through a balanced combination of maps and texts. Hitherto the stories were told individually; now they can be told collectively as well. In this guidebook every town, no matter how small in size or short its history, is the subject of at least one case study featuring part of, or an aspect of, its particular geographical and/or historical story. Reading the maps is a universal exercise.

Annghret Simms, H.B. Clarke, Raymond Gillespie, Jacinta Prunty
April 2011

UNIT D.2

The Viking town

The Vikings have often been credited with the foundation of Ireland's first towns, especially the 'famous five' – Cork, Dublin, Limerick, Waterford and Wexford. There is a great deal of truth in this idea, but the actual story of foundation and growth is not in the least bit straightforward. For one thing, only the last two names in this list are of Scandinavian origin, both indicating the presence of a fjord or inlet from the sea as a key element. The three other names are Irish, which should mean that there was already some sort of Gaelic settlement in the vicinity when the foreigners came along in their ships. In the IHTA series to date, only Dublin and Limerick have been published and there are some important differences between the two stories. This is partly because we know so much more about Dublin than about Limerick, both because of far more extensive archaeological investigations and because of the amount of surviving documentation.

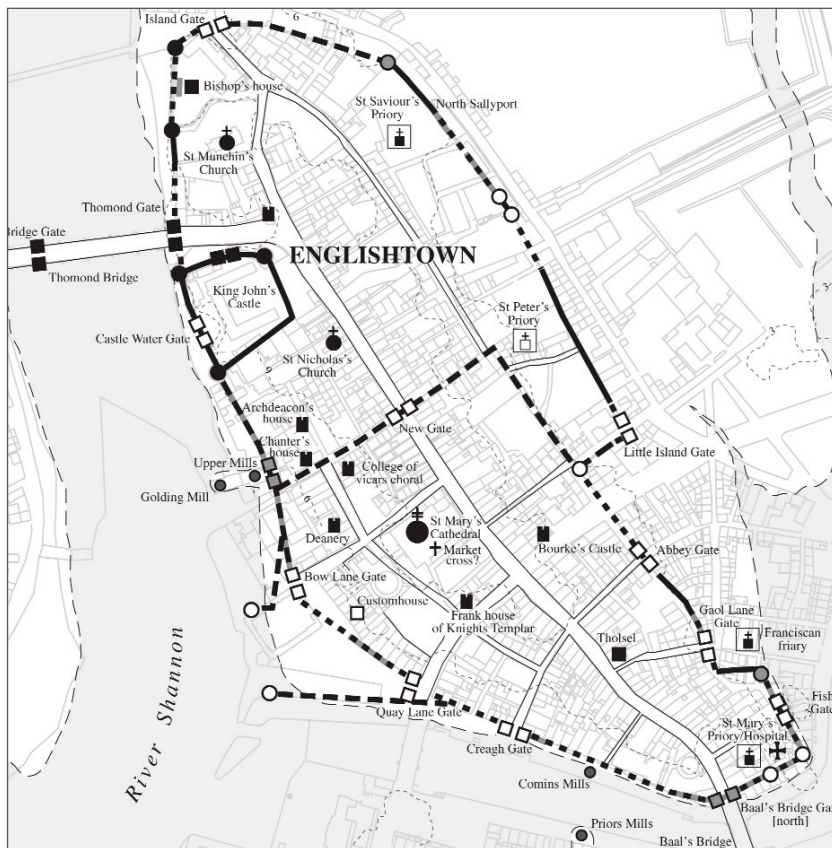
When considering the question of town foundation in Ireland, it must be understood from the start that the Vikings themselves came from a region that had no towns. They were country people accustomed to farming, fishing and hunting. They also engaged in craft-working and of course had become expert ship builders. Most of the Vikings who raided and eventually settled in Ireland are thought to have originated in Norway, where only one place – Kaupang south-west of Oslo – was functioning as a major trading settlement in the ninth century. Whether or not it can be described as a town is a debatable point, but in any case it was abandoned altogether *c.* 970. Thus Vikings did not come to Ireland with any fixed ideas about towns and they were coming to a country that, as we have just seen, had no towns either. Town life, then, was something that evolved in Ireland in the Viking period only on a small scale and only in the southern half of the island.

This natural hesitancy is illustrated by a circumstance common to both Dublin and Limerick: the Vikings changed their minds about where to place themselves. The present understanding is that the ninth-century *longphort* or ship encampment at Limerick was situated on the great bend of the River Shannon well to the north of the later town (Fig. 49). There is no justification for thinking of this as an essentially urban settlement and the encampment was destroyed by the Irish of Connacht in 887. At an unknown date in the

early tenth century Viking Limerick was refounded at the southern end of King's Island. In the course of time a very simple street layout emerged between the later Nicholas Street to Mary Street alignment and the Shannon (Fig. 50). Although we lack archaeological confirmation, there are historical grounds for supposing that this initiative began Limerick's first phase of urban growth, based on trade with Norway to the north and with the Iberian peninsula (Spain and Portugal) to the south.

A big political change occurred in 967 when the town was taken over by the Dál gCais of Thomond. Thereafter, until the coming of the Anglo-Normans in the late twelfth century, Limerick was essentially Irish and Christian, the main church located presumably on the site of St Mary's Cathedral (Fig. 131). This is how Brian Bóruma came to have 'Vikings' fighting on his side at the famous battle of Clontarf in 1014. It has been suggested tentatively that the inhabitants (at least the menfolk) had a meeting place outside the settlement where the castle was built later on and possibly a market place as well. Three sunken-floored buildings are all that we have from excavations to date. St Nicholas's Church stood in the same general area and this saint is often associated with the presence of merchant communities in European towns.

Fig. 131: *Limerick*, fig. 3, medieval sites in Englishtown, extract.



TEST YOURSELF

1. What does the Norwegian background to most of Ireland's Vikings tell us about town foundation?
2. Why were Ireland's Viking towns established only in the southern half of the island?
3. What does the transfer from one site to another imply about the Viking attitude to towns?
4. What natural advantages did the King's Island site at Limerick have over the earlier *longphort* site?
5. What do you understand by the term 'Hiberno-Norse'?

Accordingly the capture of Limerick by a powerful Irish dynasty heralded a long period of mixed cultural influences extending over the following two centuries. Historians and some archaeologists use a special term for this phase – Hiberno-Norse – implying amongst other things that both Irish and Norse were being spoken in the town. Most of the womenfolk were presumably from a Gaelic and Christian background, contributing to life in this small urban community on the Atlantic fringe of Europe. Other archaeologists, however, treat the whole period from the arrival of the first raiders in Ireland in 795 to the capture of Dublin and Waterford by the Anglo-Normans in 1170 as the Viking age; it is therefore important to be aware of variations in the terminology used by scholars representing different disciplines and traditions.

Viking Dublin: from ship encampment to town

For the reasons already stated, Dublin offers the best prospects at present for understanding the nature and the chronology of town foundation and early growth in Ireland. Nevertheless, when the other principal sites are better researched, it may turn out to be the case that Dublin is not altogether typical of the processes involved. A cautionary note needs to be struck at this point. Even so, the known parallels, such as the change of site at Waterford as well as at Limerick, are encouraging. So, too, is the division of time between a more purely Viking phase of development and a subsequent Hiberno-Norse one. In the case of Dublin the most convincing symbolic event is the crushing defeat of a Dublin army by that of the men of Mide under the leadership of the new high-king, Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill, at the battle of Tara in the year 980 (thirteen years after the Dál gCais capture of Limerick).

Just as at Limerick, there was a *longphort*, 'ship encampment' phase followed by a gap (902–17) and then an urban development phase at Dublin. The parallel is striking, especially when coupled with the change of site. The precise location of the first Viking settlement, or settlements, at Dublin in the ninth

century remains uncertain. All of the annalists who refer to the initial *longphort* in 841 say that the settlement took place at Duiblinn (modern Dubhlinn), that is to say, at a pre-existing monastic site dating back at least as far as the first half of the seventh century (Fig. 132). Four fragmentary Viking burials between the pool in the River Poddle and the ecclesiastical enclosure appear to confirm this possibility. After 842, however, most of the references are to the Vikings of Áth Cliath, implying that a second *longphort* had been established. One possibility, as yet unconfirmed archaeologically, is that they occupied Usher's Island in order to control the strategic river crossing of the Liffey and the network of highways associated with it, for much Viking raiding was conducted on horseback.

Fig. 132: *Dublin, part I, fig. 1, c. 840.*



After the period of enforced exile from 902 to 917 a new nucleus of defended settlement emerged, this time towards the eastern end of the low ridge where the Liffey and the Poddle offered natural protection on three sides. The somewhat unpredictable behaviour of the former may explain the presence of flood banks at Wood Quay and at Essex Street West. The first defensive embankment in a military sense has been dated to approximately 950, that is, around the time when a different descriptive noun starts to be used in the annals – *dún*, ‘stronghold’. The change in terminology is consistent thereafter and is probably significant: in Irish eyes, Dublin was becoming a different kind of settlement – a defended town. Throughout the Viking world, Dublin became famous as a trading place, and a waterfront district at Wood Quay and Essex Street West is likely to have been the primary focus of urban growth. The evolution of a genuine town seems to have coincided with the long reign of King Amlaíb (Norse Óláfr) Cúarán (945–80), whose defeat in battle at Tara brought the Viking age at Dublin to an end.

Before and after the period of exile there were subsidiary areas of settlement activity as well. The biggest Viking burial grounds ever found in Ireland were located upriver to the west at Kilmainham and Islandbridge (Fig. 133). Here between eighty and ninety pagan burials, about 10% of them of women, were uncovered unprofessionally by railway navvies in the nineteenth century. The grave-goods have usually been assigned a ninth-century date, coinciding with the *longphort* phase of development. At an unknown date a megalith later known as the Long Stone was erected on the edge of the bay as a marker commemorating the taking, or retaking, of Dublin (Fig. 134). As at Limerick the assembly site was outside the main settlement, towards the east in this case, where a number of burial mounds were apparently located as well. These gave rise to the medieval name of College Green – Hoggen Green, from the Norse *haugr*, ‘burial mound’.

The earthen embankments at Wood Quay, topped by timber palisades, hint at a squarish or possibly ovoid defended enclosure occupying the eastern end of the natural ridge. This was the core of the Viking town. The street pattern inside the enclosure is largely unknown and the probability is that most of Dublin’s early streets underlie present ones (Fig. 135). The east–west alignment represented by Castle Street and the curving north–south alignment represented by Fishamble Street are likely to be original. It is possible that another critical alignment represented by Essex Street West was reserved for quayside and related activities, though six house-plots have been found towards the west. The finds at Fishamble Street suggest a streetscape with post-and-wattle houses built at right-angles to the roadway (Fig. 68). In many cases, access to the rear of the plot appears to have been through the house rather than by means of a pathway alongside. Post-and-wattle boundary fences commonly separated house-plots from one another, creating a remarkable degree of spatial continuity.

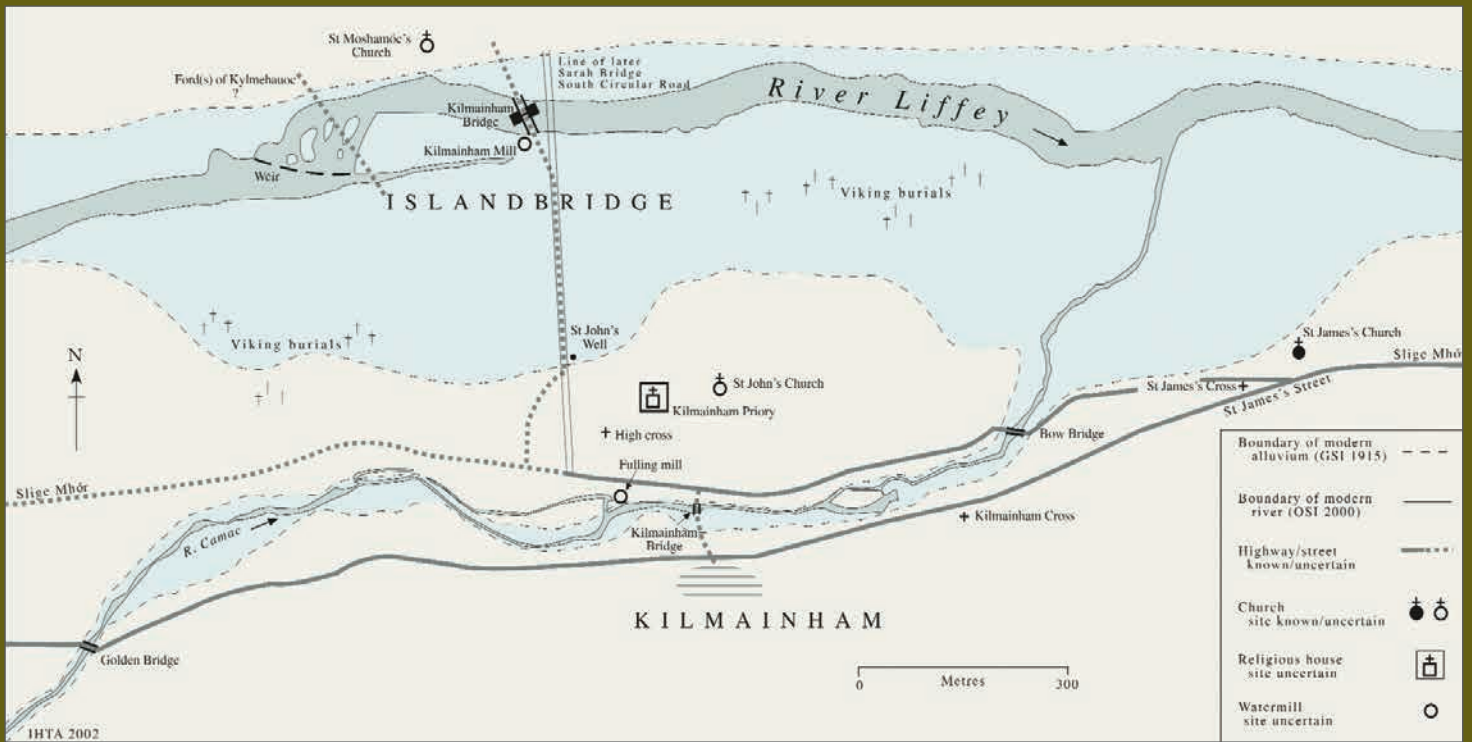


Fig. 133: *Dublin, part I*, fig. 3, medieval sites at Kilmainham.

Fig. 134: *Dublin, part I*, fig. 2, c. 1000.





Fig. 135: *Dublin, part I*, plate 1, artist's impression, c. 1000, by Simon Dick. Content supplied by P.F. Wallace, extract.

TEST YOURSELF

1. What was life in a Viking *longphort* in Ireland like?
2. In what ways has archaeology transformed our knowledge of Viking Dublin?
3. How well do dates derived from documents fit in with indications coming from archaeological excavations?
4. What was the nature of the subsidiary Viking sites around the core settlement?
5. From what point in time do you think that Dublin should be regarded as a genuine town?

Hiberno-Norse Dublin: from paganism to Christianity

Culturally the Vikings stood out from the native Irish in two main ways: their language was what we call Old Norse and their religion was what we call paganism. The former carries with it no particular historical baggage whereas the latter does. Pagans tend to be assumed to have been backward, barbaric and brutal. No doubt some of them were, but so were many so-called Christians throughout the middle ages and beyond. The Norse god of natural forces was Thor and a ceremonial ring dedicated to him was confiscated by Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill in 995, suggesting that paganism was still a living force among Dublin's male elite. But, as at Limerick, most of their womenfolk are likely to have been Irish from a Christian background and it is possible that, outside the *dún* itself, small churches already existed to serve the spiritual needs of female inhabitants and male converts. The most promising sites were all on the south bank of the Poddle, including churches with the specifically Irish dedications to St Bridget and St Patrick (Fig. 136). It is possible, too, that King Amlaíb Cúarán had taken an interest in promoting the cult of St Columba, hence the dedication of another church that in his day stood outside the *dún* to the west (Fig. 134).

Fig. 136: *Dublin, part I*,
fig. 4, c. 1170.



After several decades in which paganism and Christianity coexisted at Dublin, a decisive move was made to favour the latter as the official religion. This was the foundation of a cathedral dedicated to the Holy Trinity, which we know in a familiar way as Christ Church. The decision was made by Amlaíb's son, Sitriuc Silkbeard, towards the end of his long reign *c.* 1030 and it would have important topographical implications. The chosen site lay just outside the fortifications and needed to be protected. This may have been one of the factors that led to a doubling of the defended area to about 12 hectares. Thereafter the enclosed space was colonised by a number of churches with a mixture of dedications. Some are biblical, such as those dedicated to St John the Baptist, St Mary and St Michael; others may reflect Dublin's trading partners: St Martin's (northern France), St Olave's (Scandinavia) and St Werburgh's (England, especially Chester). And, as at Limerick, Dublin's merchant community gave a central place to a church dedicated to St Nicholas.

Thanks to the abundance and quality of the archaeological excavations, we know a good deal about the nature and the chronology of the fortifications. The second defensive embankment at Wood Quay was substantial and has been dated to *c.* 1000. On the riverward side, thick planks were driven into the ground and then earth, gravel and stones, reinforced by discarded screens and by brushwood, were dumped in layers behind them. Later on, this bank was crowned by a post-and-wattle palisade and, having been raised in height, by a more robust stave-built fence. Use of combustible materials is confirmed by documentary references to major destructions by fire in 1000 (by Brian Bóruma) and again in 1015 (by Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill). Roughly a century later the entire circuit was enclosed by a stone wall, parts of which can still be seen today inside and outside the Wood Quay Venue (Fig. 85). The cost of so doing would have been enormous and a sign of the continuing trading wealth of the town. By 1170 there were three gateways in this circuit of defensive walls, the ancestors of Dam Gate to the east, Newgate to the west and St Nicholas's Gate to the south.

Another major development in Dublin's Hiberno-Norse phase was the replacement of the ancient ford at Áth Cliath by a bridge. The bridge itself is reliably documented in the year 1112; it was probably made of timber and accessed by means of causeways built across the mud-flats on either side. There is a strong documentary hint that the first bridge dates from more than a century earlier, for in 1001 Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill, while still high-king of Ireland, is said to have built a causeway (Middle Irish *tochor*) from the northern bank of the Liffey to the middle of the river. Towards the end of the eleventh century yet another church was founded; this was St Michan's, carrying with it the implication that there was a suburban population already

in existence. Moreover the pronounced projection north-westwards of the enlarged enclosure on the opposite bank has the appearance of having been designed to control the approach to the bridge from the south.

We have seen in the case of Tuam that royal patronage could exert powerful influences on the ways in which a settlement developed and the same is true of Dublin. A key figure there was none other than Diarmait Mac Murchada, the king of Leinster from 1126 to 1171, who had a distinctly uneasy relationship with the town's inhabitants. Nevertheless he left his mark on Dublin with two suburban monastic foundations of continental reformed orders. Asserting his authority over the townspeople in 1146 following the death in battle of their king, he established a community of Arroasian nuns next to the former Viking assembly place and the burial ground of pagan rulers. This abbey came to be known as St Mary de Hogges, named after the *haugar* still standing outside the nuns' boundary wall. Then, soon after Diarmait's resumption of overlordship of Dublin in 1162, the Augustinian priory of All Saints was founded on an expanse of raised beach not far from the Viking Long Stone.

Meanwhile the suburban community on the northern bank of the Liffey may have disposed of a certain degree of wealth, for an unknown patron (or patrons) supported the foundation of the earliest reformed monastery at Dublin, St Mary's Abbey, in 1139. All in all, therefore, Dublin's transition from a partially pagan to a uniformly Christian religious identity brought with it great changes both inside the original defended enclosure of the tenth century and in every direction outside it. Yet culturally it remained distinctive, as the archaeological record reveals with finds of decorated wood, graffiti, ringed pins, runic inscriptions, and models and timbers of ships. This is why, when a new set of foreigners took over Dublin in and after 1170, the existing inhabitants and their descendants for several generations were referred to by an expressive term – Ostmen, 'men from the east'. This does not imply that they were thought of as having come from Denmark; rather it was another cultural borrowing reflecting the Icelanders' way of indicating their own ancestors who came from Norway. For Iceland, too, had been part of Dublin's trading orbit, which is why the town referred to as Dyflinn (from the Irish Duiblinn) features in a number of sagas.

TEST YOURSELF

1. What significance would you attach to the appearance of small churches outside the *dún* at Dublin?
2. What do the dedications of Dublin's Hiberno-Norse churches suggest about the cultural contacts and identities of the inhabitants?
3. Did Irish kings create more than they destroyed at Dublin in its Hiberno-Norse phase?
4. In what ways has archaeology transformed our knowledge of Hiberno-Norse Dublin?
5. How extensive were Dublin's suburbs by 1170?