The Viking Age

Ireland and the West

Proceedings of the Fifteenth Viking Congress

John Sheehan & Donnchadh Ó Corráin *editors*

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Weapons and warfare in Viking-Age Ireland

ANDREW HALPIN

INTRODUCTION

The common view of the Viking impact on warfare and weaponry in Irel stresses the utterly inferior military technology and organization of an Ir society that had not faced any significant external threat in centuries. T contrast between the two cultures, in military terms, is typified by comparis such as that between a typical 'Viking' sword and an Irish 'crannog' type sw (e.g. Mallory 1981, 108, fig. 2). This view, best argued over forty years ago Etienne Rynne (1966), undoubtedly retains a great deal of truth, but it is in n of reassessment. Such a reassessment will probably require more archaeolog evidence than is currently available and certainly more sustained research t has to date been carried out, but I hope here to offer some observations various aspects of warfare and weaponry in the four centuries after the arriva the Vikings, which may at least highlight issues to be addressed.

PRE-VIKING IRELAND

Fairly plentiful historical sources – which will be considered below – elucid many aspects of the Viking impact on Irish warfare. Assessing the impact weaponry, however, can be more difficult because it is largely a matter archaeological, rather than historical inquiry, and is beset with various proble of source material and the progress of research. We must begin with a consid ation of the state of Irish military technology on the eve of the Viking peri Historical sources clearly indicate that the armoury of Irish warriors of eighth century, as in previous centuries, consisted of swords, spears and shie for defence (for a full discussion of this evidence see Halpin 1999, 19–31). Th are also the items represented in the archaeological record but, primarily beca of the lack of furnished burials, this record is rather meagre and is particula lacking in examples from well-dated contexts. Thus, while we have so spearheads and shield bosses datable to the seventh and eighth centuries, su as those from Lagore (Hencken 1950–1, 94–9, figs 29–33), one can at this po do little more than mention them, as little serious analysis has been carried (Rynne's 1956 thesis contains some discussion, but remains unpublished).

Rynne (1981) has produced a classification of pre-Viking swords, of which latest type – his so-called 'crannog' swords – is thought to have been curren

e time of the earliest Viking raids, leading to the unflattering comparisons ted earlier. There is, however, no firm basis for dating these swords any later an the seventh century, and it is purely an assumption that they were still in e when the Viking attacks began. In the absence of any evidence for swords of other types being used in Ireland at the end of the eighth century, it might t be considered an unreasonable assumption that 'crannog' swords were still e current form. But could there have been other types of swords in use by the ne of the Viking raids? Peirce (2002, 28–9) recently suggested that a very fine ord from near Askeaton, Co. Limerick (NMI, registration no. Wk25), usually nsidered as of 'Viking' form, should be classified as a variant of Petersen's 919) Type A and be dated to the eighth century. If this is correct, it raises the ssibility that the sword could have reached Ireland before the Viking raids gan – and, indeed, there is no reason why some Irish warriors could not have tained state-of-the-art weapons from England or continental Europe during e eighth century. The technological quality of Irish weapons of the pre-Viking riod has also been questioned, but such metallographic studies as have been rried out are not entirely damning. While some of these weapons are undoubtly technologically inferior, others were found to be of reasonable quality, with ite effective carburized and heat-treated cutting edges (Scott 1990, 108–46, 6–7). Moreover, the idea of overwhelming Viking military superiority is hardly rne out in the historical record. As Clarke (1990–2, 97, 105–8) put it, 'the most iking feature of the recorded battles [between the Vikings and the Irish] is that e Vikings lost most of them'. I would not seek to deny initial Viking military periority, but one must be careful not to overstate this and to bear in mind that ch superiority could have been compensated for relatively quickly by the more werful Irish kings. Military technology is always an area in which rapid sponses to new influences can be expected.

THE VIKING IMPACT

evertheless, the appearance in ninth-century Ireland of very fine weapons, ch as those found in the Viking graves at Kilmainham and Islandbridge, ıblin (see, for example, Boe 1940, 12–38, 61–4, 82–91; Walsh 1998; Pierce 02, 39, 42–3, 56–9, 66–7), almost certainly represents a significant new develment in military technology, at least in quantitative terms if not qualitative. e still await the publication of a long-promised study of Irish Viking swords, d discussing the impact of these weapons on the Irish is difficult because they ıd to occur either in graves, which are automatically (albeit no doubt correctly) umed to be Viking, or in culturally-neutral settings such as rivers. Were these ords widely adopted or imitated by Irish warriors? It is surely likely that they re to some extent, but the extent of this borrowing remains unknown. Indeed, here is some uncertainty about the form of swords used by Irish warriors in

the eighth century, there is if anything even less certainty about the forms of swords used in the ninth century. Potentially, the best example of adoption of Viking swords by Irish warriors is the famous sword from Ballinderry crannog Co. Westmeath (NMI, registration number 1928:382; Boe 1940, 77–9, Pierce 2002, 63–5), a ninth-century sword found in a probable tenth-century context on a classic Irish site. As I will argue later, however, there are grounds for thinking that Ballinderry is exceptional, rather than typical, in its weaponry assemblage.

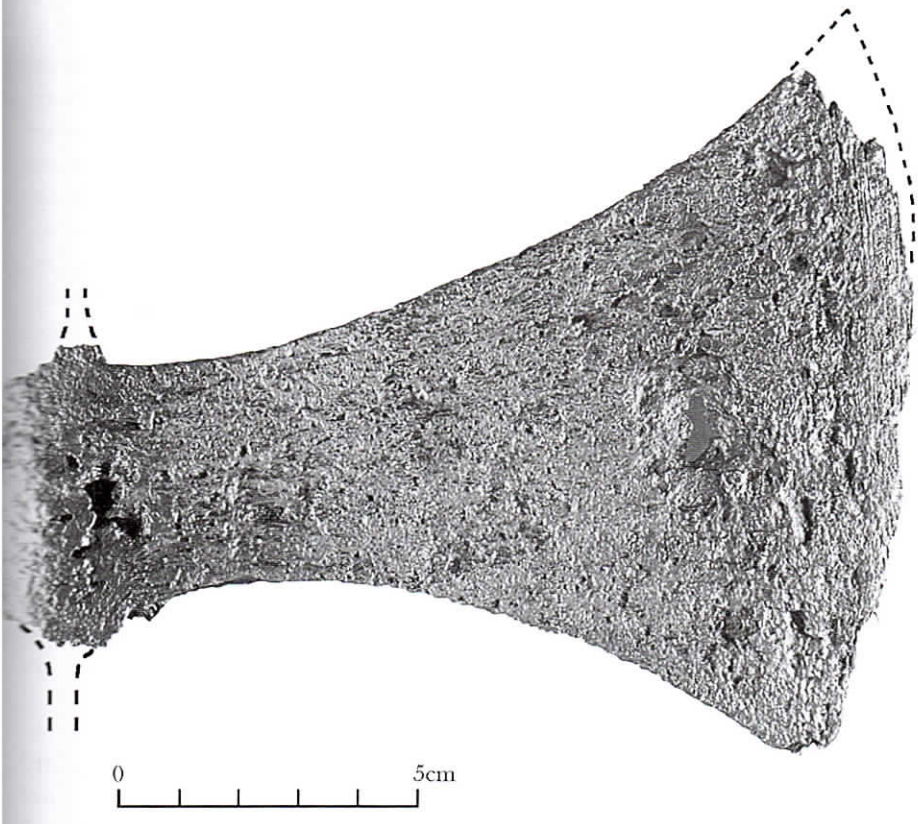
There is one clear example of the adoption of Viking weaponry by the Irish. The axe was unknown as a weapon in pre-Viking Ireland and was clearly introduced by the Vikings, probably in the ninth century (Halpin 1999, 47). Thereafter, it was widely adopted by the Irish as a cheaper substitute for the sword, and axes are referred to with great frequency in sources of the eleventh and twelfth centuries as used both by Scandinavians and Irish. By the late twelfth century, Giraldus Cambrensis, the chronicler of the English conquest, depicts it as a veritable national weapon of the Irish. He stated that the Irish used:

> *three types of weapons – short spears, two darts [...] and big axes well and carefully forged, which they have taken over from the Norwegians and the Ostmen [...]. They are quicker and more expert than any other people in throwing, when everything else fails, stones as missiles, and such stones do great damage to the enemy in an engagement.* (O'Meara 1982, 101)

I will return later to the 'short spears and darts', but for now it should be noted that Giraldus was surprisingly well-informed in knowing that the Irish had adopted the axe from the Norse – a point confirmed by archaeology, since all known battle axes of this period are derived from Scandinavian forms, particularly Petersen's (1919) Type M. Such axes are relatively common in Ireland and generally dated to about the eleventh century (Halpin 2005, 362–3, pl. 3), but there is evidence for a development from the classic Scandinavian forms, characterized by a broadening of the neck of the axehead and a progressively more upward-splaying blade. This process finds its fullest expression in late medieval axeheads dating probably to the thirteenth century, or perhaps later (e.g. Halpin 2005, pls 1, 2, 5), but it can already be seen in two probable twelfth-century examples, one from the River Corrib near Galway (Halpin 2005, pl. 4), and the other from Winetavern Street in Dublin (Fig. 12.1).

EXCAVATED HIBERNO-NORSE WEAPONRY

My research to date has focused primarily on the weaponry found on excavated sites of this period, particularly the National Museum of Ireland's excavations



12.1 Twelfth-century iron axehead from Winetavern Street, Dublin (NMI: E81:2428) (© National Museum of Ireland).

in Dublin (shortly to appear in the *Medieval Dublin Excavations, 1962–81* series), but including other sites such as Waterford (Halpin 1997). These sites have produced a substantial assemblage of weaponry, but it is of a quite distinctive character, since it effectively represents material lost or discarded within the Hiberno-Norse towns. This is seen by comparing the weaponry assemblage from the National Museum's excavations in the Hiberno-Norse settlement of Dublin with that from the nearby and only slightly earlier cemeteries at Kilmainham and Islandbridge (see table, Fig. 12.2). The latter is characterized by an abundance of the larger, more prestigious weapons, especially swords, but these are rare on the settlement sites, where the assemblage is dominated by the humble arrowhead. The very different profiles of these two weapon assemblages are the result of different biases operating in the processes both of deposition and (at least in the case of the cemeteries) of recovery.

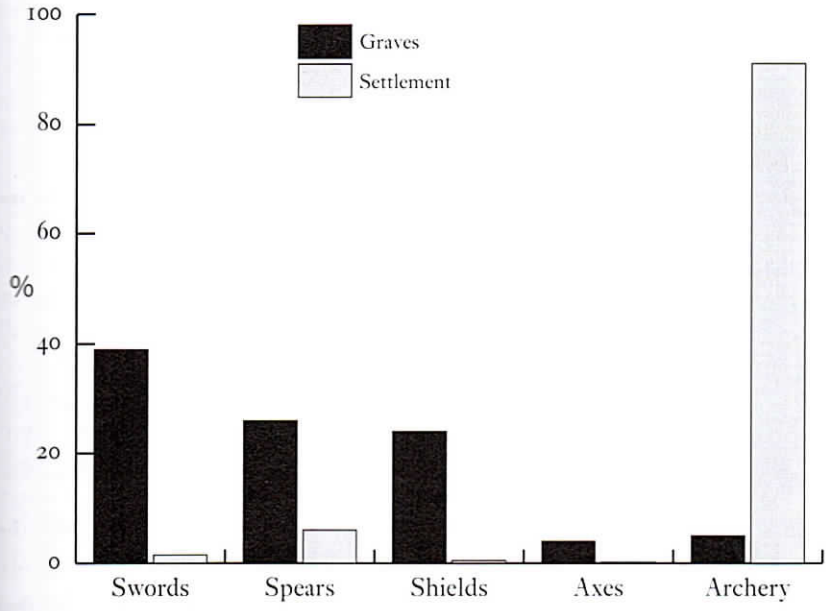
Spearheads

Before turning to archery material, I want firstly to look at the next most common weapon type in the settlement site assemblage – spearheads, of which there are over twenty examples from Hiberno-Norse contexts in Dublin. It can be argued that the spear was the most important weapon in medieval warfare, in the sense that it was the most widely used, at all periods and by all social grades. In Ireland, this is surely reflected in the fact that at least twelve different Irish terms for spears occur in early medieval sources (Halpin 1999, 43–5). Attempts to define the differences between these terms, much less reconcile them with an archaeological typology, tend to prove futile, but the terminological diversity clearly points to a corresponding range of forms and functions, especially relating to distinctions between spears intended for throwing, and those intended for use in hand-to-hand fighting. The most striking feature of the spearheads from the excavations in Dublin is their size (Fig. 12.3). Only two of them could even be described as of moderate dimensions, yet they dwarf the other, more typical Dublin spearheads. The longest (NMI, E43:1958), is 35.6cm in length and of Petersen's Type K or Solberg's (1985, 86–87) Type VII.2B. The other large spearhead (NMI, E172:14661) is 29.2cm in length and is a good example of Petersen's Type H, or Solberg's (1985, 122–3) Type IX.3, with a relatively sophisticated pattern-welded blade. When the blade lengths of all the Dublin spearheads are plotted on a histogram (see table, Fig. 12.4), we see that 90 per cent of them are less than 15cm in length and 50 per cent are under 10cm.

Clearly, there are depositional biases at work here – larger spearheads are less likely to be lost or discarded – but I am not aware of any other sites in the Viking world which have produced such a preponderance of small spearheads. This suggests that cultural factors may also be in operation, and at this point we must return to Giraldus's statement about the Irish using small spears and darts – a statement fully confirmed by other documentary sources of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. An emphasis on small, light spears, presumably intended for throwing rather than for hand-to-hand combat, is perfectly understandable in the context of medieval Irish warfare which, for reasons best explained by Simms (1975–6), was characterized by mobility rather than solidity, and by fast-moving skirmishes rather than pitched battles. There is good historical evidence that the Hiberno-Norse adapted to these patterns of warfare, at least on occasion (Halpin 1999, 30–1, 48–53). Are we seeing, in the Dublin spearheads, evidence that they also adapted to Irish weapon standards?

Archery material

It is archery, however, which provides the vast bulk of the weapon assemblage from excavated sites of this period, in Dublin and elsewhere. At the beginning of the Viking period, the bow and arrow had been effectively unknown in Ireland for at least a thousand years, and the Vikings must be credited with the

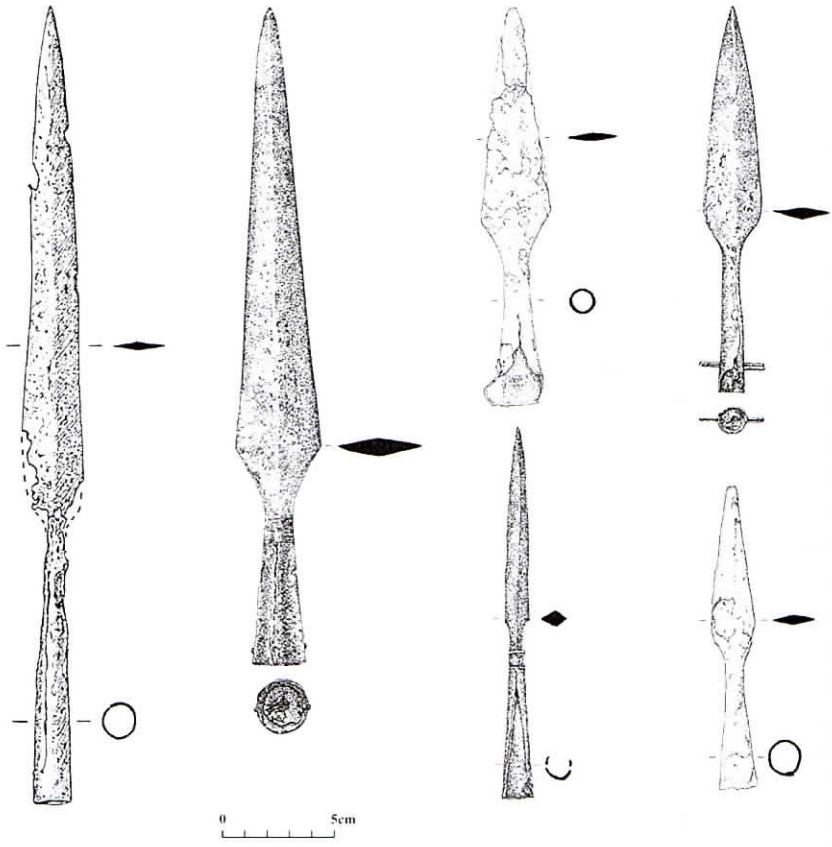


12.2 Table showing proportions of weapon types recovered from Kilmainham/Islandbridge cemeteries ('Graves') and excavated sites in Dublin ('Settlement').

reintroduction of archery. Hiberno-Norse urban sites, particularly in Dublin, have produced many hundreds of iron arrowheads and, while the size of this assemblage may give a misleading picture of the importance of archery in Viking warfare, it does allow us to address statistical and chronological issues in a way that is not possible for other weapon types.

The typology of these arrowheads (Fig. 12.5) breaks down into two main groups: firstly, broad-bladed arrowheads, which can be either leaf-shaped, shouldered or triangular, and secondly, bodkin-bladed arrowheads, with narrow, spike-like blades designed for only one purpose, to penetrate mail armour. These armour-piercing arrowheads make up a substantial majority of the assemblage as a whole – almost 70 per cent – and this underlines the most important feature of this material, its essentially military nature. At least 80 per cent of the Hiberno-Norse arrowhead assemblage can fairly confidently be identified as being military in function, while no more than 5 per cent was definitely intended for hunting. The remainder cannot be categorized with certainty, but I would argue that most of these were likely to have been for military use also.

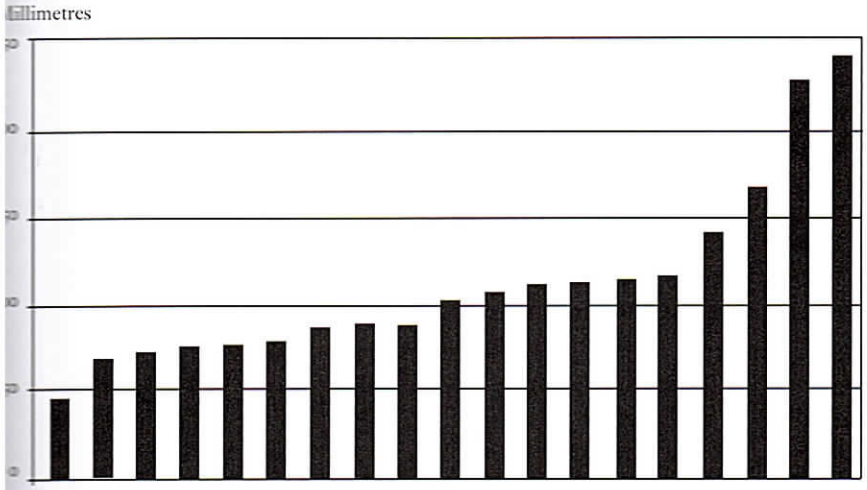
Both broad blades and bodkin blades occur in tanged and socketed forms. The tanged types are typically Scandinavian and are precisely what one might expect to find in the Hiberno-Norse towns. But the assemblage also includes a range of socketed types which, to my knowledge, are not common in Scandinavia at this



12.3 Spearheads from Hiberno-Norse Dublin.

date. In fact, from the mid-tenth century onwards the popularity of tanged types in Dublin declines rapidly. Could it be that this trend (see table, Fig. 12.6) is in some sense a mirror of the declining Scandinavian character of Dublin and the other Hiberno-Norse towns?

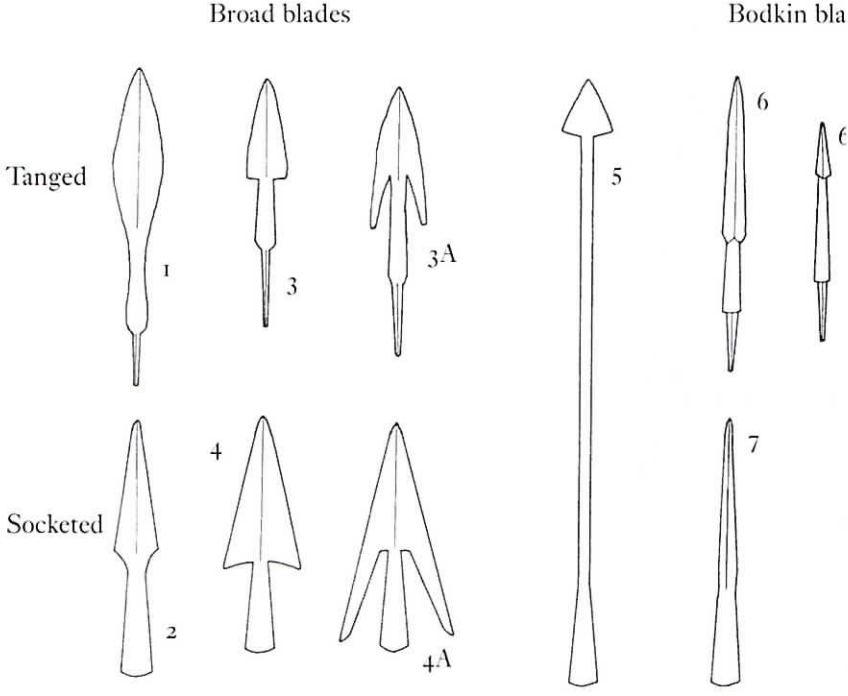
The socketed types are clearly in the majority from the mid-tenth century onward, but their origins represent something of a conundrum if, as currently seems to be the case, these cannot be sought in Scandinavia at this date. It is clear that they are not borrowed from the Irish, because despite the continuous tradition of Viking archery from the early ninth century, there is no evidence for any serious use of the bow by the Irish, at least for military purposes, before the thirteenth century. The entire corpus of arrowheads known from native Irish sites prior to the thirteenth century consists of a total of four arrowheads: two from the Dunbell raths, Co. Kilkenny; and one each from Cahercommaun, Co. Clare and Lagore crannog, Co. Meath (Halpin 1999, 96–7). All are of



12.4 Table showing blade-lengths of spearheads from Hiberno-Norse contexts in Dublin.

Scandinavian tanged form (Type 1 in Fig. 12.3) and it is extremely doubtful if they can be interpreted as reflecting the activities of the actual inhabitants of these sites. There is, however, one exceptional discovery relevant to this discussion. One of Europe's finest medieval bows was found in a probable tenth-century context at Ballinderry crannog, Co. Westmeath (Hencken 1935–7, 139, 224, 225–6, fig. 8:D). This was no isolated find, for Ballinderry produced a veritable arsenal of 'classic' Viking weaponry: apart from the sword mentioned earlier, a battleaxe, two spearheads and a socketed knife were also found (Hencken 1935–7, 127, 138–9, 143, 156, figs 5:A, C, D, 25:A). Is Ballinderry the outstanding example of the extent to which Viking weaponry was being adopted by the Irish in the tenth century? This may be so, but in view of the lack of any other evidence for Irish archery, the presence of the bow suggests that something atypical was happening at Ballinderry, whatever that may have been.

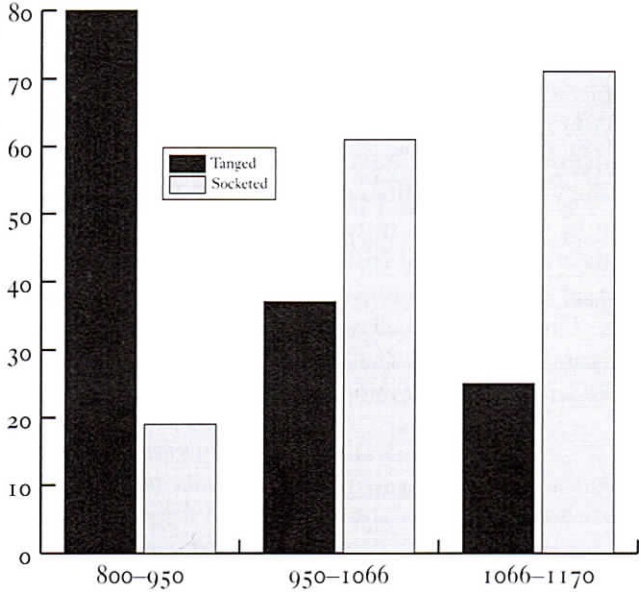
Finally, I wish to turn my attention the largest group of Hiberno-Norse arrowheads, the armour-piercing types. These first appear in quantity around the middle of the tenth century, in both tanged and socketed forms, and they quickly become dominant in the arrowhead assemblage, accounting for 60 per cent of the total by the eleventh century and rising to over 70 per cent of the total by the early twelfth century. The presence in such large numbers of arrowheads which are designed purely for use against armoured opponents (and which are actually less effective against unarmoured opponents than traditional broad-bladed arrowheads) clearly says something about the prevalence of armour at this period. This seems to make perfect sense in the context of Irish historical sources of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which consistently indicate the widespread



12.5 Typology of Hiberno-Norse arrowheads.

use of armour by Viking and Hiberno-Norse warriors (Halpin 1999, 37-
However, these same sources are equally adamant that the Irish did not
armour – indeed, on occasion Irish defeats are explicitly explained in tern
the ineffectiveness of Irish weapons against Viking armour (see, for exan
Todd 1867, 53, 67–9; Bugge 1905, 65–6, 101–2). This is at best an overstaten
if not a deliberate distortion of the facts, but there is certainly no evidenc
the widespread use of armour by Irish forces and this raises questions about
to interpret the predominance of armour-piercing arrowheads in the Hibe
Norse towns. Could it be, for instance, that the warriors of Dublin (at least)
mainly concerned to equip themselves for theatres of war outside of Irelan

Similar patterns have been noted elsewhere. The predominance of arm
piercing arrowheads at the Slavic fortress of Starigard/Oldenburg, on the E
coast, was interpreted by Kempke (1988, 301–2) as a response to the emerg
of armoured, mounted aristocratic warriors in the Baltic area during the t
century. In the wider European context, this can be seen as a manifestatic
the rise of the *miles*, the armoured, mounted warrior who was such an impor



12.6 Table showing relative proportions of tanged and socketed arrowheads in Dublin, by period.

art of the feudal package developing in the tenth century. Kempke also seems o suggest that there was an eastward progression in the shift to armour-piercing rrowheads. Thus, whereas armour-piercing forms are already in the majority in he arrowhead assemblage at Trelleborg in the late tenth century (Norlund 1948, 37–9), they do not predominate at Starigard until the eleventh century, while urther east, at Opole in Poland and Novgorod in Russia, armour-piercing forms re not in the majority until the twelfth century (Kempke 1988, 301–2; table 1). There is no comparable archaeological evidence in Britain, but Brooks (1978, 7–93) has argued from historical sources that it is precisely in the later tenth entury that most Anglo-Saxon warriors begin to wear mail armour, apparently t the deliberate encouragement of Aethelred II.

Dublin is apparently in the vanguard of these developments, as 60 per cent of ll arrowheads dating to the second half of the tenth century are armour-iercing. Can this be interpreted in the way it has been interpreted further east? raditionally, Irish historians have tended to argue that feudalism did not reach eland until after the English conquest in the late twelfth century, but more ecently historians such as Byrne (1987, 10–12) have spoken about the eudalization' of Irish society in the two centuries prior to this, the effects of hich were particularly noticeable in warfare. Kings now commanded significant

numbers of well-equipped full-time and mercenary troops, and had the resources to undertake prolonged campaigns, on water as well as on land, and to fortify their kingdoms with castles. Byrne sees implicit evidence for the existence of a quasi-feudal military class of noble warriors, who increasingly operated on horseback (Byrne 1987, 11). Regardless of whether this should be interpreted in terms of feudalism, it clearly amounts to a radical transformation of Irish warfare, and the Vikings and Hiberno-Norse must be seen as prime agents in this. This can be viewed both in terms of their direct military impact and indirectly, in their opening up of Irish societies to developments elsewhere, and their creation of the wealth necessary for Irish kings to partake of these developments. Thus, despite their very mixed military record in Ireland, the Vikings and their descendants had a profound effect, not just on weaponry, but on Irish military and political development.

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