

## **CAMAS Ó BHFATHAIDH TÍRE**

*A NOTE ON ITS LOCATION AND SIGNIFICANCE*

**BREANDÁN Ó CÍOBHÁIN**

The late 11<sup>th</sup> century text, ‘Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh’ (= CGG) begins with a factual account of the initial Viking attacks as a preamble to what develops into an exaggerated and unreliable account of the later prolonged resistance of Dál gCais to these attacks. This preamble offers precise dates and is precise in its enumeration of places, unrelated to Dál gCais. It is likely that such details derive from contemporary local annals, which no longer survive. A detailed analysis of various aspects of this and other evidence will not be gone into here, where the purpose is simply to outline the possibilities offered by the text in the case of one of the places mentioned.

It is stated (*LL V*, 1319; = J.H. Todd, *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* (1867), 4) that the Viking invasion of Ireland began with the arrival of a fleet of 120 ships “*a Cammus Hua Fathaid Tire*” (= *CHFT*) in the reigns of Aedh mac Néill, king of Ireland, and Artrí mac Cathail, king of Munster, whose reigns terminated in 819 and 820 respectively. There is an added precision in the statement that the ensuing plundering took place in the tenth year before Artrí’s death (821), implying 812. (The apparently conflicting statement that places it in the second year of Feidhlimidh mac Crimhthainn’s reign (821) will not be discussed here.)

Todd (*CGG* xxxvi, note 2), quoting corrupt versions of the placename, *CHFT*, “*Caoimh Inis ó bFothaidh*” and “*Caoimh Inis Uibh Rathaigh*” from “Keating” (*Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*), concludes that “this island would seem to have been off the coast of Iveragh, ... county of Kerry,” having just stated that “*Camas* signifies a bend in a river” and that it “was probably in the territory of Corca-Luighe, S.W. of the present county of Cork.” The fact is that *camas* does mean ‘a bend in a river’, not ‘an island’. As to its location, the text goes on to say that the invaders plundered “*Inis Labraind*” and “*Darinis*”, namely Inch at the eastern extremity of Dingle Bay, and the monastic island of *Dairinis*, up river

from Youghal, on the Blackwater. A Munster location is confirmed by the statement that Eoghanacht Locha Léin killed 416 of the plunderers in battle.

The text goes on to say immediately after that, that another fleet arrived which plundered six ecclesiastical sites between *Beagéire* in Wexford Harbour and *Sceilg Mhichíl* in Kerry. The juxtaposition of the arrival of the two fleets lends itself to the conclusion that the second fleet also made land in *CHFT*, as the arrival of the fleet is distinguished in both cases from the subsequent plundering raids. Given the precision in naming the sites plundered by both fleets, it would be surprising if the base of operations of the second fleet should be left unnamed if it were other than *CHFT*.

The only reference to the placename, *CHFT*, is in the text under discussion, and it has not survived orally. The present writer's attention was attracted to it by chance while considering the two placenames associated with it, recalling, in the context of the recent identification of a Viking site at Woodstown, that there were three pronounced features of the River Suir in the vicinity of Waterford, which might merit the designation, *camas*.

Clearly, the location of a sept named *Uí Fhathaidh Tíre*, is crucial for the location of *CHFT*. Unfortunately, a presumption of scholarship over the past century and a half has compounded Todd's mistake (following J.O'Donovan, *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann* (=ARÉ), passim) in that all occurrences of *Uí Fhathaidh* were taken to refer to the barony of Iffa and Offa East/West, in south Tipperary. The double name is taken to represent *Uí(bh) Fhathaidh* and *Uí(bh) Eoghain*, the latter, supposedly, lying east of the former. A Viking landfall is unlikely to have taken place in this territory, extending to the north of the Knockmealdown Mountains as far as N.E. Cork.

An unprejudiced reading of an entry in ARÉ, duplicated for the years 891 and 920 (= *Chronicum Scottorum* 896), indicates a location for *CHFT* further to the east, namely near the Waterford estuary. It reads, "*Flann, mac Lonáin, ... primh fhile Gaoidheal uile, ... do mharbhadh la macaibh Cuirbhuidhe, do Uibh Fothaith iatsen, hi nduinetaidhe hic Loch dácaoch i ndeisibh Mumhán.*",

recording the killing of *Flann mac Lonáin* by *Uí Fhothaith* (= *Fhathaidh*) at *Loch Dá Chaoch* in the *Déise* of Munster. *Loch Dá Chaoch* is the Waterford estuary, and considerable Viking activity is recorded here in the second decade of the 10<sup>th</sup> century in *ARÉ* (v. Todd, *CGG*, 26), the location being described as *Port Láirge* in other sources.

This clarifies a vague reference in J. Carney, *Topographical Poems*, 46, to “another *Uí Fhathaidh*”, situated at the eastern extremity of a sequence of ethnic entities, listed in the order, *Uí Fhathaidh* (incorporating *Uí Néill* and *Uí Eoghain*), *Uachtar Tíre*, and “*Uí Fhathaidh eile go tuinn// ... // ... // Uí Bhreisléin go sál soirdheas*”. This situates the second *Uí Fhathaidh* to the east even of *Uachtar Tíre*, the modern barony of Upperthird, Co. Waterford, “to the wave ...south eastwards to the heel.” ‘Heel’ is descriptive of the narrow extension of land at the eastern extremity of Co. Waterford, comprising the barony of Gaultiere and half that of Middlethird. The westernmost of the three features on the Suir, which might be described as *camas*, is where this heel begins, and it is separated by 8km from the barony of Iffa and Offa East.

The poem in question is of an archaising nature, composed about 1400, and depicting the preNorman, rather than the current, distribution of Irish septs. The danger of creative historiography cannot be excluded and, indeed, is indicated in other parts of the poem, though this is likely to be confined to a disjunction of chronology and geography. Nevertheless, corroboration of the location of *Uí Fhathaidh* is to be had not only from the evidence presented above but, unambiguously, from a series of state, family and ecclesiastical documents extending from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In these it (‘Offath’, etc.) is sometimes designated a ‘cantred’ or ‘hundred’, corresponding to the later barony of Gaultiere, the latter name emerging only at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century as an *alias*, prior to becoming the exclusive designation.

It will be noted that none of the above forms of the name of the territory in question contains the epithet, *Tíre*. It is common practice for septs sharing a common name (and, likely, ancestry) to be differentiated by *mara* and *tíre*, when appropriate, as in *Uí Mhéith Mara/Tíre*. One could argue that *Uí*

*Fhathaidh Mara* is the one documented above, given its coastal location, and that *Uí Fhathaidh Tíre* must, therefore, refer to the inland Iffa and Offa in Tipperary. This is discounted by the presence of the epithet, *Tíre*, in the entry in *AI* (896) for the killing of *Flann mac Lonáin* (quoted above from *ARÉ*): “*Guin Flaind meicc Lonáin, rí filed nErend, la Hú Fothaid Tíre.*” While the only other references in the annals to *Uí Fhathaidh Tíre* (*ARÉ* 813 and 849) do not add to our knowledge, they confirm the existence of the name. One may wonder whether the fact that the chief of *Uí Fhathaidh Tíre* died a natural rather than a violent death in the year following the arrival of Vikings in his territory in 812, might indicate a collaborative relationship between his sept and the invaders.

This brings us to the problem of deciding which characteristics of the three candidates for the designation, *CHFT*, up river from the Waterford estuary, make the strongest case for selection. A detailed evaluation of all three is not feasible here, other than to remark that the most easterly is so close to the sea that it may well not have been in *Uí Fhathaidh Tíre*. There is the further consideration that the secondary channel in the bend here, between Little Island and the land, does not offer the manoeuvrability required by a large fleet – if not two fleets.

The next pronounced bend, 1.5km up river from Waterford, has the advantage of a depth of 80 feet at one point in the channel opposite Granny Castle. On the negative side, it is exposed to the prevailing winds blowing over the low ground to the south, onto the concave outline of the body of water on the north shore. A strong tide runs here.

The next bend is 3km further up river again, with a hill rising 232 feet abruptly to the south in the townland of Mount Congreve. The concave outline of the body of water, resembling to some extent a harbour, is under the hill on the south shore, thus sheltered from winds in the arc from south to west. The fact that the approach from Granny Castle is the widest stretch of the Suir, provides an unexpected expanse of inland water as an approach.

The detailed description supplied here for the vicinity of this bend is derived entirely from the traditional fishermen on the river, to whom the writer is indebted. The most remarkable characteristic is that the depth of water immediately under the hill, where the steep slope finishes as a rocky precipice dropping into the water, is 70 feet – reaching 80 feet at high spring tides. Towards the eastern extremity of the curve this rock projects a short distance into the river, thereby interfering in the following remarkable manner with the flow of the tide up river.

As the tide passes this projection it divides in a manner that allows the main body of water to proceed up river, while a subsidiary stream is diverted straight across the curve. When it reaches a point on the opposite side of the curve – about .7km away - it turns back along the shore as far as the projection, where it rejoins the subsidiary tide-stream, creating an ongoing elliptical slow movement of water. This creates a body of slack water, where the salmon rest while the tide fills, and are easily netted by the fishermen. This phenomenon was clearly observed by the writer at high spring tide. (A similar phenomenon is apparent on a lesser scale in a curve about 2km up river on the Kilkenny side.) The incoming tide runs for 4 ½ hours, the outgoing for 7 ½, separated by up to 30 minutes.

None of this proves that the Viking fleet of 812 had to make this bend on the Suir their base, from which to plunder south Munster all the way to Dingle Bay. The early Viking marauders are described by specialists in this field as reaching Ireland in early summer, accumulating plunder during the summer, and returning to their homeland with it in the autumn. This implies that they needed a safe, sheltered haven, to which they could return with their booty (including slaves) at intervals during summer. Their ships needed to be moored rather than be brought ashore, as mobility and manoeuvrability were essential for their purpose.

Mooring at this point on the Suir made attack from the steep rocky slopes on the south unlikely, while the inland location facilitated access to sources of food on a 360 degree radius. It may not be a complete coincidence that quite a few of the

Viking bases of this period are adjacent to ecclesiastical sites, one of which, Killoteran, lies immediately east of the river-bend on the Waterford side. It may be that the more advanced farming practices of ecclesiastical centres were viewed as guaranteeing adequate provision of food, and buildings for the safe keeping of plunder.

It has already been stated that the name of the barony at the eastern extremity of Co. Waterford, Gaultiere, displaced 'Offath' (in its various forms) in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. One must, therefore, admit that it is somewhat disconcerting that not only the site considered most likely to represent *CHFT*, but the whole south bank of the Suir eastwards to the suburbs of Waterford city, does not lie within this barony, but in Middlethird. The boundary turns abruptly east at a point 1.5km south of the Suir, abreast of Woodstown, the latter being 1.5km east of the river-bend.

It must first be stated that barony boundaries are liable to alteration at all periods down to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Accordingly, we find that the strip of land excluded from Gaultiere, inclusive of Killoteran, was in the 17<sup>th</sup> century not in Middlethird but in the 'Liberties of the City of Waterford' (*The Civil Survey A.D. 1654-1656*, 171), placing it firmly within the ambit of the Viking territory of Waterford.

This still leaves Mountcongreve, adjacent to which the river-bend is located, in the barony of Middlethird, and arguably outside the boundary of *Uí Fhathaidh*. On the other hand, we may have here an indication of where the eastern boundary of *Uí Fhathaidh Tíre* lies. There can be no doubt that the boundary of the Viking diocese of Waterford, created in 1096, fifteen years before the native Irish system of territorial dioceses was established, reflected the extent of Viking influence. Prior to the amalgamation of the dioceses of Waterford and Lismore in 1363, this boundary ran roughly from where the Clodiagh River enters the Suir, 6.5km up river from Mountcongreve, south to the coast a short distance east of Dunabrattin Head. The latter is 16km west of the western boundary of Gaultiere in Tramore Bay. The diocesan boundary lies a short distance to the east of the present western boundary of Middlethird.

One might therefore propose a provisional hypothesis that the territory of *Uí Fhathaidh Tíre* occupied the northern half of the present barony of Middlethird – and, perhaps, portion of the N.W. of Gaultiere -, being absorbed by the Norse kingdom of Waterford, as the other branch of *Uí Fhathaigh* in Gaultiere was. There may be corroboration of this hypothesis in the fact that Viking activity in the vicinity of the northern end of the diocesan boundary is indicated by the presence of a tenement known as ‘Lang(e)port’ in the possession of the family of ‘de la Rokele’ from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the name becomes ‘Rockwells Castle’ (*The Civil Survey*, 106). It is now known as Rocketscastle or Mayfield, the first element being a corruption of ‘Rokele’.

The name appears once as ‘Adlangport’ in the year 1290, indicating the presence of a ford. While this might not coincide with a feature on the Suir just south of the mouth of the Clodiagh River, described by local fishermen as follows (paraphrased), the phenomenon is relevant to our considerations: ‘There is a sandbank where it was the custom to cross on horseback at low water. It was also possible for men to walk out in a place called ‘the Reach’ at low spring tide, and during the 20 or 30 minutes of slack tide at the ebb, swim the narrow channel and walk ashore on the far side.’ As sandbanks become more frequent from here on up river, a similar situation could prevail opposite Rocketscastle, where a substantial bank has existed in recent times.

The townland of Rocketscastle is separated from the junction of the Clodiagh and Suir rivers by the townland of Knockane, on which stands a ruin on the river-bank, called ‘Rocket’s Castle’. However, *The Civil Survey* makes clear that Knockane and Coolroe were subdenominations of Rocketscastle, so that its earlier alias ‘Lang(e)port’ need not have been separated from the confluence of the two rivers. Such a location is where one would expect a *longphort* of the Vikings, some 8km up river from the proposed location of *CHFT*, where ships could be hauled ashore for winter in a defensible position at the river-fork. This would belong to the period, later in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, when wintering in Ireland was the practice. Again it is suggestive, if not coincidental, that the townland immediately north of Rocketscastle bears the ecclesiastical name, *Cill Eoghain* (where ‘Kill-’, the first element in the anglicised forms, which alone are

available, is confirmed as *Cill* rather than *Coill* by the survival of the field-name *Páirc na Cille* in 20<sup>th</sup> century oral tradition), while an early christian church site is located directly across the Suir in the townland of Clonmore in Kilkenny.

There is some archaeological support for a Viking presence here, in that a decorated strap end of copper alloy was found in the context of a cist burial in the townland of Rocketscastle (Margaret Gowan, *Three Irish Gas Pipelines: New Archaeological Evidence in Munster*, 1988, 162-169). It is suggested that its associations are with 'the Scandinavian north of Britain.' The findings are summarised as follows, 'It is likely that the presence of the strap-end within the cist dates that structure to the ninth-tenth century. The grave appears to have held an inhumed burial, possibly of a child; the grave is too small to have held an adult inhumation. ... The possibility that this is a Viking grave cannot be ruled out. The strap-end is of such an unusual variety that it may indicate the presence of Vikings on the River Suir at this time.' Even granted the uncertainty acknowledged by the excavator in relation to the burial, the presence of the unusual find in question cannot be dismissed as unreliable as an indication of a Viking presence, which is the issue here. The excavator ventures the opinion that the group of pits in the environment of the cist are 'contemporary with the burial ... and may represent the vestiges of occupation on the site.'

In conclusion, it may be said that a clearer picture of the Viking associations with the River Suir, from the estuary to the *longphort* posited here, must await further excavations in Woodstown and, perhaps, in Rocketscastle. It is clear that these associations begin in the year 812, and it looks as if *CHFT*, in line with the Woodstown and Rocketscastle sites, is up river from Waterford, where apparently no evidence of settlement prior to the 11<sup>th</sup> century was encountered in recent excavations. One can venture a chronological sequence from *CHFT* to Rocketscastle, to Woodstown, to Waterford, representing respectively a short-term raiding base, a long-term raiding base, a civil settlement whose nature awaits clarification, and a trading centre, for which the previous settlement was abandoned.

This movement of a settlement down river in an estuary is evident in the case of Drogheda, the original *Droichead Átha* being located at what is now known as Old Bridge, in the vicinity of Mellifont Abbey, originally known as *Mainistir Dhroichead Átha*. (Just above this is *Linn Rois* where the presence of Viking fleets is reported in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century – at another *camas* feature). The present Drogheda was originally known as ‘Castelblathagh’. Something similar is found in the case of Dundalk, where the settlement shifted a short distance down river from *Dún Dealgan* to *Tráigh Bhaile(mhic Bhuain)*, taking the name with it, though Dundalk was still known to Irish speakers of Omeath into the mid-twentieth century by *An Sráidbhaile*, a corrupt form of the original name. One might muse whether a similar relationship obtained between the Islandbridge settlement and that at *Dubhlinn* on the Liffey!

There is the further consideration that it is known from geological and archaeological observation that a marine transgression has been in progress on the Irish coast for some three thousand years. If, as seems likely, sea level was considerably lower 1,200 years ago, the unusual depth of water at the proposed site of *CHFT* would have been a significant advantage. The up river *longphort* would have been better protected from sudden attack from the river by rival Vikings (frequently recorded) by more sandbanks than exist today. Some two hundred years later it may be presumed that trading vessels were of far greater draft than the original raiders’ ships and the early trading vessels, occasioning a movement of the then settlement down river to take advantage of deeper water – the progress of the marine transgression not keeping pace with the growth in draft over a century or so. The settlement to which the names *Port Láirge* and *Vedra(r)-fjodr* were originally applied may yet be unambiguously established by a combination of archaeological and onomastic research. There can be no doubt that the Viking associations with the Waterford estuary are some of the most intriguing to present themselves for our understanding of a pivotal period in Irish history, with relevance not only to the the Scandinavian world but to northern Europe in general. The unique opportunity offered by unencumbered greenfield sites demands thorough investigation.

It is worth mentioning here that at the present day the Suir is tidal as far as 1.2km above Carrick on Suir, and that it is known that barges plying between there and Clonmel, 9.5km up river, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were horse drawn from the bank. Sandbanks begin in the river about 10km south of Carrick, though this does not prevent periodical oil deliveries by river to storage tanks at Fiddown, 3.2km down river from Carrick, on an ongoing basis.

It remains for me to record my gratitude collectively to a number of people who helped in a variety of ways in the course of my research for this note. Full references to sources were dispensed with as this note is intended as a general preliminary statement.

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Dr Breandán Ó Cíobháin, the author of a paper on the place-name Camas ua Fothaid Tíre - associated with Woodstown or its environs, has kindly made his paper available to the Save Viking Waterford Action Group.

Dr Ó Cíobháin is a retired place-names expert with the Place-Names Office of the Ordnance Survey. He continues to research place-names as an independent scholar.