

Woodstown: Viking Chiefs, Irish Kings & Exported Princesses

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to look at one possible impact of Woodstown on our understanding of Irish history. The limited excavation of the site to date has produced a great deal of evidence for trade; large quantities of hack silver and lead weights which appear to be of the type used by merchants to weigh up silver when negotiating with other traders. There is also a large number of ship nails, implying that the people who lived in the settlement were either building ships on site or at the very least, had enough ships at their disposal that they were able to cannibalise old ships to build their houses. On Frances Shanahan's RTE programme on Monday 18th Oct, we learnt that analysis of the finds by Dr John Sheahan of UCC suggest a dating range for this silverwork from the 840s to the 880s. If the site is as rich as it appears from the limited information available, it surely must have made an impact on the surrounding communities. The purpose of this paper is make a suggestion about that impact which, while it primarily affected the south-east, may also have had national consequences.

Tairred na nDésse or 'The Journeying of the Déisi'

One of the earliest records which we have of the Déisi, the native kingdom in which Viking Woodstown was constructed, is their origin legend; the story which they themselves told of how they came to settle in the south-east of the country. It has come down to us in a version which was written down in the late eighth century, immediately before the Vikings first attacked Ireland.

According to this story, entitled *Tairred na nDésse* or 'The journeying of the Déisi', the Déisi originally lived around Tara. One day, the son of the high king of Tara abducted a princess of the Déisi and made her his wife. Her uncle Óengus, furious that the family had not been consulted, suffered a *ríastrad catha* or battle fury – something Déisi men have been known to suffer on sports fields to the present day. Under this battle fury, Óengus ran a spear through the would-be husband, killing him outright and also taking out the eye of the high-king, Cormac mac Airt himself. As a result, the Déisi were exiled from Tara and forced to wander around Ireland, seeking a home for themselves. One branch journeyed over seas and set up a colony in Dyfed in southern Wales; others spent

time in Carlow and Wexford. Eventually however, a girl was born to a Déisi mother and the ancestor of the Uí Chennselaig kings of Ferns in Wexford and the druids prophesied that it was through this girl, Ethne Uathach, that the Déisi would find a permanent dwelling place.

When she grew up, the king of Cashel (in Tipperary) offered for Ethne's hand and promised that, in return, he would give the Déisi whatever land they wanted in perpetuity. The Déisi chose land belonging to the Ossorymen of Kilkenny but the Kilkennymen refused to give up their land and although many battles were fought between the Déisi and the Ossorymen, the Déisi were unable to get their way.

At this point, Ethne Uathach suggested that the Déisi should seek help from the judge and wise man attached to the court of Cashel, one Lugaid Laigde Cosc. He told them to bring their druids before him. The author continues: 'And they were called to him and they gave him two jars full of wine which had been brought to them from the lands of France, together with the food of France for he who would eat and drink it would be intoxicated and sober at the same time'. Lugaid told them to take the food and drink to their old professor, the druid of the Ossorymen and tell him that they were sorry for having fought against his people.

The old Ossory druid was blind and when the two Déisi men arrived with their gifts, he drank the wine and then his daughter asked him – 'O my venerable father, can there be rescue for the Déisi?'. 'Yes', replied the old professor, 'if they get ready for battle tomorrow but do not kill anybody for whichever people tomorrow first kills a man, shall lose this land until the day of Judgement'.

The druids of the Déisi had to think hard since, although they now knew the secret of what they had to do to win, so too did their enemies, the Ossorymen. Eventually, they persuaded an old serf to sacrifice himself, promising that his family would be free for ever. They turned him into a red cow and sent him to attack the Ossorymen at the Ford of the Red Cow, west of Mullaghindeona in the parish of Newchapel, near Clonmel. The Ossorymen, not realising the cow was in fact human, killed the cow and the Déisi inherited the land of Waterford and there they have lived ever since.

This is an origin legend rather than factual history but there are a number of interesting historical implications to the tale which, as noted, was written down at around the same period as the first Viking raids on Ireland. It is noteworthy, for example, that the Déisi were already thought to have had overseas contact at that stage – a group had settled in Wales and they were able to import wine and food from France. Secondly, the role of royal women and their marriages is stressed as a fundamental element in the making of political alliances. Thirdly, the story makes it clear that, in Déisi tradition, the men of modern county Waterford enjoyed close, if not always amicable relationships with the men of Kilkenny.

Uí Faeláin, Uí Rosa, Uí Oengusa agus Uí Fothaid

In terms of historical documentation for the early Déisi, there are relatively few references in the annals to either Déisi kings or to events taking place within their kingdom. What there are, suggest a people which did not have a single royal family but rather a number of different dynasties, each of which was capable of providing the Déisi king. On some occasions, no-one managed to exercise complete control and two kings would divide the land between them. Judging by the genealogies or family trees which survive for these dynasties, the pre-Viking kings of the Déisi included members of the Uí Faeláin, the Uí Rosa, the Uí Oengusa and possibly the Uí Fothaid. The genealogies say that the Uí Rosa, who attained the kingship in the 730s, were based in the area around Clonmel in Tipperary – for Déisi territory extended rather further north and west than the modern county of Waterford today. To locate the others, we are dependent on the evidence provided by the Anglo-Norman documentation of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This would locate the Uí Faeláin in and around modern Dungarvan, the Uí Oengusa around Stradbally and the Uí Fothaid, as discussed in Colmán Etchingham's lecture a fortnight ago, in east Waterford, corresponding roughly to the area of the modern barony of Gaultiere and the eastern part of Middlethird.

Surrounding the Déisi were two, if not three powerful kingdoms. Although there were a number of fairly small kingdoms, in early medieval Ireland, each ruled by an individual king or leader, that king didn't necessarily hold a lot of power. Your average local king, in order to get on in the world, had to declare his loyalty to one of the more powerful kings and he did this in a

number of ways. He would give the superior king a food render of cattle, sheep and pigs at certain key dates in the year such as Beltaine, Lughnasa or Samain – the major festivals of the Celtic year. In the summer, he would also offer bread and vegetables, as well as processed food like cheeses and in the winter, butchered meat. He would also give clothes and mantles, woven by the womenfolk of his community. In addition, the local king would offer his superior king hospitality if the king visited his territory and he and his men would join the superior king's army if the latter decided to fight a war. Thus, the more local kings a superior king could persuade to join him, the stronger he was.

If a local king decided he wasn't getting enough out of the deal, his superior could placate him; by giving him a role at court – chief warrior or chief judge for example. Alternatively, the superior might give the local man treasure – gold, silver, armour, foreign horses and hunting dogs are all mentioned. The local king could then use this treasure not only to provide luxuries for himself but also as donations to his own supporters. At the end of the day, if the local king could not be brought on side, it was open to the superior to quash him; he could take hostages from his subordinate to keep him in line; he could support a local candidate to supplant him as king or as a last resort, he could invade the local territory and kill the rebel.

In short, the situation was much like modern politics today. Imagine if you will, Bertie Ahern as a Celtic warrior king; his power is largely derived from the support of local lords, such as Martin Cullen, John McGuinness or M.J. Nolan. If Bertie was to visit the south-east, these men would offer him hospitality & if Bertie had a problem that he needed to solve elsewhere or a department that needed to be run, the local lord could be called upon to join him in Dublin. Apart from giving up on the hostage-taking and the killing, in fact, one could say that politics in Ireland hasn't changed very much at all.

As their name, the Déisi or 'clients' suggests, the Déisi never really rose to be one of the great superior kings of the south-east. This may be because there were a number of families contesting the kingship; the most successful kingdoms appear to have been those where the kingship descended, if not from father to son, than at least within members of a single dynasty. Instead, the Déisi were most commonly allied to the powerful overlords, the Eóganachta kings of Cashel. (This long-standing relationship is probably the reason why, in their

origin legend, Ethne Uathach is seen as having been the wife of the king of Cashel.) The Eóganachta kings dominated the provincial kingdom of Munster. To their east, however, there was also the powerful Uí Cennselaig kingdom of south Leinster, based at this point in their history around the area of Ferns. The Wexfordmen didn't manage to dominate the Leinster province in the way the Eóganachta dominated Munster but they fought it out with the kings of Kildare and Offaly, in particular, to hold the title of provincial king.

Ossory

Immediately to the north of the Déisi was the kingdom of Ossory. I classify this as a possible powerful kingdom rather than a definite one. This is because Kilkenny is not well covered in the Irish annals, our main source for detecting the ebb and flow of political power in the early middle ages. There are hints, however, that the Ossorymen, too, may have been considered powerful, particularly in the context of Leinster politics. A seventh-century life of Patrick, for example, tells how the saint not only visited the area of Kilkenny but also gave his church there precious relics of the early martyrs; we have a single verse of a praise poem for an mid eighth-century king who is also said to have conquered parts of Carlow and defeated the eastern Leinstermen at Gowran and so forth. These hints are, however, few and far between and really only allow us to speculate about the possible importance of Kilkenny prior to the Viking age.

Cerball mac Dúngaile

This picture changes radically, however, in the middle of the ninth century. Suddenly, out of the blue, as it were, there is a heavy concentration of annals dealing with one particular Kilkenny king, some fifteen entries for a single reign. These entries deal with the career of one Cerball mac Dúngaile, king of Ossory between about 848 and 888. Some people may know this man as Cearbhuill mac Dunlinge (the sources differ as to the exact spelling of his name.) I use Cerball here because this is how the Vikings heard his name – in old Norse sources, the man is referred to as Kjarval. I would draw your attention to the fact that Cerball's dates mirror almost exactly the period to which John Sheehan attributed the Woodstown metalwork. Moreover, the importance given to Cerball is not limited to the ordinary annals; he also figures in a heroic saga of his activities, in praise poetry, in old Norse sagas and in a comment attached to the list of Kilkenny kings incorporated into the Book of Leinster.

To begin with this last as it is the shortest: the list of Ossory kings is normally a simple recitation of names with occasionally, a note as to the number of years a king ruled. In the case of Cerball, somebody has added a comment: “*There was not in Ireland a single locality which did not give him*”. Most unfortunately, the final word is missing but the mere statement that every locality in Ireland gave him something is, in itself, an important fact. As already mentioned, Ireland was, in this period, divided into a host of small kingdoms and any attempt to build a strong power base, involved vast amounts of persuasion, not to mention bribery and bullying in equal measure. The claim that every community in Ireland felt the need to give Cerball something is an enormous claim for the ruler of an hitherto obscure kingdom of Ossory.

At the beginning of his career the annal entries for Cerball show him attacking the traditional enemies of the Ossorymen – his brother Dondchad attacks the Déisi while he himself attacks the southern Leinster Uí Cheinnselaig. In 847, however, he is said to have made an attack on the Vikings of Dublin at an unknown location & slays 1200 of them. By 858, in contrast, he is said to be in alliance with a Viking lord called Ímar in raiding the area of Aradh-tíre in north-west Tipperary and in 859, the pair were joined by another Viking leader called Amlaíb. We do not know who Ímar was but Amlaíb is identified in the annals as the son of the king of Lochlann, which most scholars would identify with Norway. Amlaíb had arrived in Ireland some five years before his alliance with Cerball and not only established control over all the Vikings then living in Ireland; he was also able to extract food renders from some of the Irish rulers as well. In 858, therefore, Cerball was in alliance with the strongest Viking leader in Ireland, a man whom the Irish annals say had a fort at Clondalkin, outside Dublin while the Norse sagas, which call him Ólaf, call him king of Dublin and the surrounding district. The alliance with Cerball is not, therefore, based on the fact that the two men are operating in the same geographical district. On the contrary; Amlaíb and Ímar, as Cerball’s allies, were simultaneously opposing another group of Vikings, who under a leader called Caitil Find were operating in Munster.

As a threesome, Ímar, Amlaíb and Cerball led a great army into Westmeath where the high-king of Tara, Máelsechnaill was currently residing. They plundered the area for over a month and at the end of that time a great meeting was held at Rahugh in order, as the annalist puts it, *‘to make peace and*

friendship between the men of Ireland'. As a result of that meeting, Cerball broke with his traditional bonds of loyalty to the king of Cashel and instead, offered to become an ally of the high-king. It seems likely that it was at the same time that Cerball's sister, Land, became the high-king's wife while Cerball married the high-king's daughter by another woman. The new alliance was thus cemented by Cerball becoming simultaneously the brother-in-law and the son-in-law of the high-king.

We do not know what happened to Amlaíb and Ímar under this cosy arrangement but two years later, Amlaíb turns up in alliance with the high-king's strongest enemy, Áed Finnliath of Co. Tyrone and we see this new alliance, in its turn, attacking Westmeath. Cerball brought an army into Westmeath to support the high-king against this attack and, according to one Munster annalist, chases the northerners back as far as the Few's Mountains of Armagh. The previous year, Cerball is reported as attacking and defeating the Viking fleet of Port Lairge. Within a few short years, therefore, Cerball changed from being an ally of Ireland's strongest Vikings to being at war with both Dublin and Waterford Vikings. The reason for this change of tack on Cerball's part, appears to be, because he had, in the interim, thrown in his lot with the Westmeath high-king of Tara, Máelsechnaill. It was during this anti-Viking period, as well, that Cerball's nephew, the king of Laois, and possibly Cerball himself, also attacked a third Viking force under a leader named Rodolb, who appears to have been operating in the Sliabh Mairge hills (in Counties Laois and Kilkenny) and along the Barrow.

Unfortunately, for Cerball, however, Máelsechnaill died in 862 and although his Ossory queen had given birth to a boy who later became an equally powerful high-king – one who was responsible for erecting the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise – he was only a youngster when his father died and thus of no use to his uncle Cerball as an ally. This was particularly necessary since Máelsechnaill's successor as high king was Aed Finnliath of Tyrone, the man whom Ímar and Amlaíb had joined up with after they were abandoned by the Ossory king. Cerball continued to fight both Vikings and others; he defeated a force at Fertagh in north Kilkenny in 863 and he fought with the eastern Leinstermen in 864 but he obviously felt the need of a strong ally. In 866, Ímar and Amlaíb took a huge force of Vikings to eastern Scotland and perhaps in the vacuum left by their new interests in other countries, Cerball was able to patch

up an alliance with the new high-king, Aed Finnliath. As before, he cemented the alliance by marrying his sister off to the new high-king; in fact, he married off the same sister, Land, the erstwhile widow of Máelsechnaill. He also helped his new brother-in-law in battle; when Áed Finnliath attacked Leinster in 870, for example, running a campaign from Dublin south-westwards to Gowran; Cerball and his nephew, the king of Laois, attacked Leinster from the west and ended up occupying Dun Bolg, outside Baltinglass in Co. Wicklow.

It seems likely that it was as part of this new alliance with Aed Finnliath that we see Cerball attacking Connacht in the same year, 870 and again in 871. As a king of Co. Tyrone, Áed had a traditional hatred of the northern Connachta kings in particular and according to one annalist, he had celebrated his inaugural year as high-king by mounting a campaign against them. There seems no other obvious reason why Cerball should waste his time attacking Connacht; it was far outside his normal field of operations and we never see him doing such a thing either before or after this period in his life. He did, however, continue to keep a warrior's overview on events in the south-east; attacking the Déisi in 870, raiding Munster in 871 and the Déisi again in 874, when he plundered them as far as the Viking base at Youghal. He also attacked his traditional enemies, the Uí Cennselaig of Ferns and around the same time, he is said to have totally devastated the territory of the Uí Oengusa, the Déisi people who lived in and around Stradbally. By the time of his last recorded battle, in 878, however, Cerball had managed to bully or persuade at least some members of the Déisi to join his army. At what was identified in the beginning of this paper as the stronghold of the Déisi dynasty known as the Uí Rosa, at Clonmel, Cerball and the Déisi combined to defeat a Munster force which included amongst its warriors, kings from as far afield as Co. Limerick.

This account of Cerball is drawn from the annals. Judging by these sources, apart from a brief flirtation with the Viking kings, Amlaíb and Ímar towards the beginning of his career, the Ossory king seems to spend most of his career in opposition to the Vikings. There are, however, unexplained gaps in the story; most notably, the very early attack on Dublin in 847 when he is said to have killed off 1200 Dublin Vikings. Why do we see him suddenly emerging on the national stage with status no Ossory king before him appears to have attained? Why, if he began his career in opposition to Dubliners, did he change tack and become the ally of Amlaíb and Ímar, if only for a brief period. Finally,

why did Máelsechnaill decide to ally himself with Cerball at Rahugh? Even if Cerball's attack on Westmeath for a month had caused the high-king some disquiet, was it really that successful that he had to be bought off with a double marriage alliance? To judge by the annals, high-kings could expect attacks on their home territories almost as a matter of course; such attacks did not, so far as we know, normally result in marriage links being made with the attackers. For some reason not described in the texts so far discussed, Cerball had attained great power prior to his being recorded in the annals.

Fragmentary Annals of Ireland

It is with this in mind that we turn to another source; the heroic chronicle of Cerball's deeds embedded in the *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*. This is a saga text, just as *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaib*, mentioned by Colman Etchingham, is a heroic account of Brian Boru. Like the *Cogadh*, the heroic biography of Cerball is based on annals but with a story element added in to make a dramatic account about a figure who was not only important in his own day, but also, as ancestor of the Brennans and the Fitzpatricks, was revered by later generations as one of the greatest of Kilkenny warriors. It is this saga, for example, which gives us the story of how, when two fleets of Vikings attacked the Ossory territories for plunder, messengers came to Cerball to tell him but he was drunk. *"And when daybreak came next morning, Cerball attacked all of them with his troops and he did not give up after they had been slaughtered until they had been routed and they had scattered in all directions. Cerball himself found it hard in this battle and the amount he had drunk the night before hampered him greatly but he vomited much and that gave him great strength; and he urged his people loudly and harshly against the Vikings and more than half of the army was killed there and those who escaped fled to their ships."* The latest work on Irish placenames, in University College Cork, would place this defeat at Killahy, about two and a half miles north-west of Mullinavat and the biographer finishes the account by saying *"Cerball turned back afterwards with triumph and great spoils."*

The point of the story is Cerball's ability to fight while nursing a major hangover but we can also detect that the storyteller sees nothing improbable about the fact that the Vikings would have ships on the local rivers or indeed, that fighting resulted in plunder not just for the Vikings but also for the Irish

kings who took them on. If we are right to place the defeat at Killahy, the rivers in this instance may have been the Blackwater or even the Suir itself. In other words, there are hints of possible real historical facts which lie behind the story of Cerball, the heroic fighter, and it behoves us to investigate these hints, just as we do the more sober annals. In this light, it is worth considering one particular episode in the saga which appears to belong to Cerball's early career:

“At this time, Horm and his people came to Cerball son of Dúngal and Cerball assisted them against the other Vikings since they were afraid that they would be overcome by the stratagems of the other Vikings. Therefore, Cerball took them to him honourably and they were together with him, often gaining victories over foreigners and Irish. In the same year (*this is thought to be around 852*), the men of Munster sent messengers to Cerball son of Dúngal asking him to come with Horm's men and the Ossory forces to relieve and reinforce them against the other Vikings who were plundering and destroying them at that time. Now Cerball responded to that and he commanded all Horm's men, together with the Ossorymen, to go to assist the men of Munster and he was obeyed. The Cerball proceeded against the other Vikings with a large mixed army of Vikings and Irish. When the other Vikings saw Cerball with his army or teinue, they were seized by terror and great fear. Cerball went to a high place and he was talking to his own people first. This is what he said, looking at the wasted lands around him:

‘Do you not see’ said he, ‘how the other Vikings have devastated this territory by taking its cattle and by killing its people? If they are stronger than we are today, they will do the same in our land. Since we are a large army today, let us fight hard against them. Moreover, there is another reason why we must do hard fighting; that Horm's men, who are along with us, may discover no cowardice or timidity in us. For it could happen, that though they are on our side today, they might be against us another day. A third reason is so that the men of Munster whom we have come to help may understand our bravery, for they are often our enemies.’

Afterwards, Cerball spoke to Horm's men and this is what he said to them: ‘Act valiantly today, for the other Vikings are your

hereditary enemies and have battled amongst you and made great massacres previously. You are fortunate that we are with you today against them. And one thing more, it will not be good for you if we see weakness or cowardice in you.'

After these two rousing pep talks, according to the saga writer, Cerball came back home, once again, with victory and spoils. Horm and his people were escorted to the king of Tara after that and the king of Tara welcomed him and gave him great honour. Then Horm went to sea and was killed later by Rodri, king of the Britons.

Now, as it happens, the more sober annalists confirm that Horm was a historical figure and that he was killed by Rhodri Mawr, king of Wales, in 856. They also identify him as chief of the Dubgennti or dark heathens. They also state that these Dubgennti fought with the Findgeinti or Findgall, the fair heathens, in Dublin in 851 and 852. So some parts of this heroic biography are undoubtedly historically correct. It may be, therefore, that the kernel of the story: that Cerball rose to power in the south-east through an alliance with a specific group of Vikings, is also correct. It is noteworthy that, according to the suggested dates put forward by the editor of the heroic biography, Cerball's alliance with Horm took place in the early 850s, when the Dubgennti were attacking Dublin. This might give us a context for Cerball's own attack on Dublin in 847 when he is said to have killed 1200 Vikings. References to the Dubgennti cease when Amlaíb arrived in Ireland and became leader of all the Vikings on the island; this may imply that Horm and his men ceased to be important players following that event and prompted them to sail away to seek better fortunes in Wales. As an erst-while ally of Horm, it makes sense that Cerball would have chosen to throw in his lot with the new Viking leadership; this is, after all, exactly what he subsequently did when he became Áed Finnliath's ally after Máelsechnaill died.

Old Norse Sagas.

Corroboration of Cerball's status as important Viking ally also occurs in an entirely separate source, the Old Norse sagas. Like the heroic biographies of Brian Boru and Cerball himself, these are tales about noble ancestors, written down in the thirteenth and later centuries by Icelandic and Norwegian writers. It is interesting that in these Scandinavian sources, King Kjarval rather than

Máelsechnaill, Áed Finnliath or any of the other Irish high-kings is by far and away the most prominent Irish figure. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, for example, the daughter of king Kjarval is said to have married a man known as Eyvind the Ostman. Together they produced a famous son called Helgi the Lean, who later married a woman from the Norse colony in the Hebrides. Helgi subsequently settled in Iceland where he took possession of a large tract of land which he named Kristness or Christ's promontory – he may have been exposed to Christianity through his mother, Cerball's daughter. On the other hand, the Christian influence on this half-Kilkenny man was only skin deep; another saga, the *Landnamabók*, tells us that Helgi normally believed in Christ but invoked Thor the pagan thunder god during sea-voyages and times of stress.

Cerball's ally, Amlaíb, lord of Clondalkin and the Dublin region, is also said in these Viking sagas to have been Helgi's brother in law for he married into the same Hebridean dynasty as did Helgi himself. To put it another way, just as Cerball cemented his alliances with the high-kings Máelsechnaill and Áed Findliath by marrying them in turn to his sister, his temporary alliance with Amlaíb may also have been strengthened by the fact that Amlaíb, was, indirectly, his son in law through two marriages. In the next generation, Amlaíb's son Thorstein, went onto become king of the north of Scotland; Thorstein, in his turn, married Helgi's sister or, if you prefer, Cerball's half-Viking granddaughter. The children of this marriage, Cerball's great grandchildren, included a son called Ólaf Faelán; Faelán being the Irish name meaning 'little wolf' and the name, coincidentally no doubt, of the ancestor of the Déisi dynasty, the Uí Faeláin of Dungarvan. Ólaf Faelán had six sisters and these are said to have been married off to Viking lords in Orkney, the Faeroes and Iceland.

Thus, the Scandinavian sources make it quite clear that King Kjarval of Ossory was remembered in Old Norse tradition as somebody who was quite keen to marry members of his family to the more powerful leaders of the Viking colonies in the North Atlantic. This puts in context the statement of Cerball's Irish biographer, that Cerball was prepared to make alliances with Viking leaders such as Horm of the Dubgennti, as well as the annalists's statement that over a period of years, in the early part of his career, he had an alliance with the Viking leaders Ímar and Amlaíb. It is clear from our knowledge of the later ninth century in Ireland, that there were numbers of competing Viking bands operating

in Ireland at this time and that they fell in and out of alliance with Irish kings according to the ebb and flow of local politics. Many of these bands appear only once; Colmán Etchingham pointed out, for example, that our limited record of the ninth-century Vikings in Waterford includes a single 892 reference to a subordinate base at St Mullins in Co. Carlow.

Conclusion

Where then, does the unexplored settlement at Woodstown fit into this picture? We are still awaiting publication of the preliminary explorations in 2004 so we are dependent, as yet, on radio journalists such as Frances Shanahan and the print media, to tell us what has been found. From what we can glean, however, there is great wealth on the site and that wealth appears, on John Sheehan's analysis, to be concentrated in the period 840s to 880s. There may be evidence for plunder on the site in the form of broken shrines; there is certainly evidence for trade in the form of hack silver and lead weights. The story of Cerball can be pieced together from the textual sources as I have suggested here but in all the references to battles, one key ingredient is missing; the means by which Cerball persuaded so many people to fight in his armies.

I have said that Irish kings became powerful by persuading other, less powerful kings to join them and in return, their subordinates would expect promotion at court or gifts of treasure, both for themselves personally and for them to disseminate amongst their followers. If Cerball began his rise to power by making himself an ally of Horm of the Dubgennti, both the Ossory king and the Viking chief must have seen the possibility of mutual benefits arising out of this arrangement. What could those benefits have of Meath. It is clear that raiding for such purposes was not limited to Ireland; in 871, Amlaíb and Ímar returned to Dublin from excursions into Scotland with 200 ships full of English, Pictish and British slaves.

It is clear, therefore, that at least some of Cerball's Viking allies were slave traders on a major scale. If the same was true of Horm of the Dubgennti, this would provide one rationale for the proposed alliance between the Viking chief and the Ossory king. Cerball could have made use of the Viking forces in fighting battles against his enemies and the stories of how the Eóganachta king asked specifically for him to bring a mixed force to fight for the Cashel ruler or how Cerball introduced Horm to the high-king of Tara shows how much the

Irish kings valued the military expertise of the foreigners. Horm, on the other hand, might well have profited from such battles by taking large numbers of captives which he could ship back to the Viking homelands.

I would suggest, therefore, that one explanation for the wealth which seems to have been found at Woodstown, may represent the profits made from slave-raiding. The most likely Irish king to have benefited from this sudden influx of wealth is Cerball mac Dúnlíne of Ossory, whose career appears inextricably linked to alliances with Viking chiefs. It was these alliances, as far as we can determine, which catapulted the hitherto relatively obscure kingdom of Kilkenny into an important role on the national stage and made Cerball himself the brother in law of not one but two successive high-kings of Tara. By trading Irish slaves acquired from his enemies with the Viking leaders of Woodstown Cerball would have been well placed to acquire treasures, weapons and indeed personnel with which to pay and equip his armies. It is noteworthy that the only annalistic reference to Cerball's reign which does not make reference to his battle-prowess carries an implicit reference to his wealth - in 862, Cerball is credited with holding the *óenach* of Mag Raighne. An *óenach*, or fair, was an occasion when a superior king gathered together the lords and local kings from all the peoples who made up his particular band of allies. It was the occasion for horse-racing and community games, of arranged marriages, competitions among poets and of major feasting. It was also a time where food renders were rendered up to one's superior and when alliances between strong kings and their subordinates were thrashed out. Once the Vikings arrived in Ireland, a new element was added to this mix, represented by the Norse loan-word *margad* or market. The texts describe foreigners appearing at the *óenach* who brought exotic goods for sale in exchange for gold and silver. They made their profit from the assembled lords and kings who had just received their annual renders from their subordinates as well as luxuries from the superiors who wanted to bribe them into giving their support. I suspect that the Vikings of Woodstown may have played a prominent part in the Kilkenny *óenach* of 862. been?

In his book "*Viking raids on Irish church settlements in the ninth century*", Colmán Etchingham pointed out that while plunder of ecclesiastical metalwork is only rarely mentioned by annalists describing Viking attacks, the capture of human beings is a feature of just under half

of those references which do more than mention the bare occurrence of a raid. Some of these appear to be the capture of high status individuals who were held for ransom; in 845, for example, Forannán, the abbot of Armagh was taken prisoner by the ‘heathens’ and brought to the ships of Limerick but in 846 the annalist notes his safe return from Munster. In other cases, the raiding appears to have been intended to produce slaves – an entry for 869, for example, tells how Amlaíb killed or captured 1000 people in Armagh while in 821, a ‘great prey’ of women were taken from Howth and in 836, the ‘heathens’ carried off many prisoners from the area.

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Dr Swift’s latest article (Cardiff 2004) is on Irish shipping in the Viking age.

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