

**THE LOCATION AND CONTEXT  
OF VIKING BURIALS  
AT KILMAINHAM AND ISLANDBRIDGE.**

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**Introduction**

One of the features that the site at Woodstown and the site of Kilmainham / Islandbridge have in common is the presence of a railway line, and the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the amount of information that can be obtained by examination of the nineteenth century Railway Company Minute Books. These records were meticulously kept, and can often, with close examination, yield fascinating detail about all aspects of the construction of the railway.

My interest in these Minute books came about as part of research I undertook some years ago in relation to the burials at Kilmainham/Islandbridge in Dublin. This research came about because since they were first referred to in 1841, a certain mythology had grown up around the Viking burials at Kilmainham/Islandbridge, Dublin, so much so that they were often referred to as being part of one 'vast Viking cemetery'. It became possible, thanks to the good offices of Córas Iompar Éireann in making the Minute books of the Great Southern and Western Railway available for study, and of the Office of Public Works and the National Museum of Ireland in allowing access to their files, to locate the find-spots of much of the archaeological material recovered over the past century and a half. (Thanks are due to the Director and staff of the Antiquities Division NMI, Mr Con Manning of the then OPW, and Mr Michael Foley of CIE, for their help in accessing material in their care). When plotted, this material clearly showed that there were two separate cemeteries: one located in the vicinity of the early monastic foundation of *Cell Maignenn* (modern Kilmainham), and another about 800 metres further west at Islandbridge. The evidence also suggests that the Viking burials may have been inserted into existing cemeteries belonging to the indigenous population whose burial rite was that of extended supine inhumation, oriented west-east (head to the west), either in unprotected dug graves or slab-lined

graves, with no grave goods.

## **Topography**

Kilmainham and Islandbridge are situated on a gravel ridge which measures approx. 2.0km long and 0.6km at its widest point, extending from the confluence of the River Liffey and the River Camac at Heuston Bridge, to beyond the western end of the War Memorial Park (Fig. 1). Before it was eroded by extensive gravel quarrying, the construction of the railway line and station and the insertion of the War Memorial Park, this ridge formed a triangular shaped 'promontory' rising to a height of approx. 23m. (75 feet) O.D.(Fig. 2). The northern part of the ridge slopes towards the river Liffey, and along the southern side there is a steep drop to the river Camac.. The western half of the ridge (Islandbridge) is now occupied by the 'village' of Islandbridge, blocks of apartment buildings, a school, a playing field and the War Memorial Park; the eastern half (Kilmainham) is now occupied by Heuston (formerly Kingsbridge) railway station, blocks of apartment buildings, Clancy Army Barracks and the Royal Hospital. The latter, which was constructed between 1680 and 1684, is located on the site of the Kilmainham Priory of the Knights' Hospitaller established in the twelfth century, which in turn had been built in the locality of the early Christian monastery of *Cell Maignenn*. Although Magniu or Maignenn, the founder of *Cell Maignenn*, is remembered in the ninth-century martyrologies; in *Féilire Óengusso* at December 18th, and in a note added at October 19<sup>th</sup>; and in the Martyrology of Tallaght at October 19th and December 18th, the foundation date of the monastery is unknown. However evidence that the monastery was established before the second half of the eighth century is provided by the *obit.* in the Annals of Ulster for the year 787 of the 'learned Lergus, grandson of Fidcháin, of Cell Maignenn'.

## **Context and location of Viking material**

Deficient records and the almost total destruction of skeletal material recovered from the ridge meant that an estimate of the location and numbers of burials involved could only be arrived at by examination of the various 'finds' recorded.

The earliest finds made in 1836 did not occur because of railway work; these were

described by Mr Huband-Smith in a paper read in 1840 to the Royal Irish Academy which included the following information;

...In some fields between the immediate grounds of the Royal Hospital and the brink of the River Liffey, about four years ago, some labourers employed in raising gravel, discovered a skeleton, around which were dispersed a variety of weapons and ornaments; they are now in the possession of the Commander of the forces...

The only gravel pit recorded on the 1837 edition of O.S. sheet 18 (Dublin) which fits the above description is marked 'A' on Figure 3. The burial was accompanied by a sword, spear, pin, axe, and what appears to have been the remains of a shield boss.

However between 1842 and 1848 various artefacts were recovered during trench cutting for the railway line, which was completed to the goods station in the autumn of 1847 and to the passenger terminal at Kingsbridge in November 1848 (Fig. 3).

In April 1842 six spearheads were purchased by the Royal Irish Academy from a Mr W. Thomson, and one sword, which was almost certainly found at the same time, was eventually purchased from Mr William Thompson (sic) in May 1847.

Artefacts recovered in 1845 from cuttings for the railway line, including five swords, four spearheads, two axeheads, eleven shield bosses, twenty-one knife-blades or tools, shears, tongs or pincers, a sickle, and miscellaneous iron objects, were donated to the Royal Irish Academy by the Governors of the Royal Hospital and the Directors of the Railway company. These donations were made both separately and jointly by both bodies. For instance, the minutes of the Board of the Gt. Southern and Western Railway, dated Nov. 12<sup>th</sup>, 1845, includes '...resolved that a letter be written to the Secretary of the Royal Irish Academy sending him on the part of this Company, a sword, and a head of a spear found in the excavations at the Hospital Grounds..' In PRIA (1845-47) the Directors of the Railway Company are recorded as having presented on Nov. 29<sup>th</sup>, 1845, two ancient iron swords and a spear-head found near Kilmainham, and on Dec. 8<sup>th</sup> 1845, several iron swords and other weapons found near Kilmainham. Also recorded on the same date is the presentation on behalf of the Royal Hospital by Colonel Napier, Deputy Adjutant-General, of a collection of iron

swords, bosses of shields, spears and other weapons, all found in the cuttings of the railway near Kilmainham. In the NMI records for material received around this time there are at least ten finds recorded as being donated by the Directors of the Railway Company, four finds donated jointly by the Governors of the Royal Hospital and the Railway Company Directors, and over thirty finds are simply recorded as having been found in the railway cuttings. Further finds were described in a letter written c.1846/7 by a Mr Underwood to J.J.A. Worsaae which depicted a skeleton 'lying to the east', with a necklace of beads about the neck, and a further skeleton nearby, which was lying north-south and was apparently accompanied by a sword (perhaps two) with a decorated pommel and a spear-head. In November 1848 Mr Richard Young of Islandbridge donated to the Royal Irish Academy ancient 'Danish' weapons discovered by workmen in excavating near the terminus of the Railway. These included a sword, a spearhead, and other iron objects. It is further recorded in December, 1860 that 'Mr Wilde, on the part of Wm. Young Esq. of Islandbridge, presented some ancient iron weapons etc. and a beautifully finished pair of bronze scales, found in an excavation near Kilmainham'. With hindsight we can only presume that these items were also part of the material recovered by Mr Richard Young in 1848.

*Locations.*

Items recovered in 1845 were the joint property of the Governors of the Royal Hospital and the Directors of the Railway Company and were donated as such to the Royal Irish Academy; they were recovered from land which at that time was still in the ownership of the Hospital but was being used by the railway company. The line through the Hospital grounds is recorded in the Gt. South. and Western Railway Board Minute Book 3, as being approved in June 1845 and the parcel of land involved is that which was finally purchased from the Royal Hospital by the railway company in 1853; it is described in an Indenture in the CIE archives as being;

...bounded on the north by the River Anna Liffey, on the south, partly by the road leading from Steevens Lane to the Royal Hospital, and partly...by the stone wall erected by the said Company...on the east by lands and building in the possession of the Railway company, and on the west partly by the Islandbridge Artillery Barracks, and Lunatic Asylum etc...

This parcel of land also contained the gravel quarry at Kilmainham referred to earlier in connection with the finds for 1836; as the goods terminus was completed in 1847 it is reasonable to assume that in 1845 the line was being constructed in or about the area of that quarry (Fig. 3 `B'). The burials described in the letter from Underwood to Worsaae appear also to have been recovered in this general area. The finds retrieved by Mr Young in 1848 appear to be from the section of line between the goods terminus and the passenger terminus which was completed in that year.

The items purchased from W. Thomson were recovered in 1842, three years before the line through the grounds of the Royal Hospital was approved, consequently they were recovered outside that area. The material must therefore have come not from Kilmainham but from Islandbridge when deep cuttings for the railway line were being dug in that area (Fig. 3 `C').

#### *Context of finds recorded for 1860*

On January 28th 1861 a letter was read to the Royal Irish Academy from George M. Miller, Esq., announcing a donation of some `osseous' remains and antiquities found in the works of the railway company near the Kingsbridge terminus. George Miller was an engineer to the Gt. South. and Western Railway. He was appointed in March 1847 and died Jan. 1864 (minute books 4 Aug. 1846-May 1848) and book 9 (1859-64). The antiquities mentioned included an iron shield boss, two swords, a spearhead, a stylus, an animal-shaped mount, and metallic remains.

#### *Location*

The location of these finds can be narrowed down by information from the Railway traffic minutes for 1860, which state that until that year the line curved from the passenger platform to the north towards the goods sidings, before curving south to Islandbridge. In 1860 this `great curve' was eliminated and the tracks then ran straight from the platforms until they commenced the descent to Islandbridge. The same minutes record that `osseous remains' also discovered at the time were given to the Royal Irish Academy. The `osseous remains' and antiquities were therefore recovered somewhere in the region of the new section of track (Fig. 3.`D') which places them in

the same general area of Kilmainham as the artifacts recovered in 1836 and 1845-48.

*Context of finds recorded for 1866:* These finds were not related to the railway, but are included here as they are important:

On December 10th, 1866 Sir William Wilde read a paper to the Royal Irish Academy in which he referred to material of Scandinavian origin found during gravel extraction from a 'great pit' in the '...fields sloping down from the ridge of Inchicore to the Liffey...to the south-west of the village of Islandbridge...'. The items recovered included seven swords, one sword hilt, six spears, four shield bosses, an insular zoomorphic mount, one belt buckle, several knife blades, hammers, tongs/pincers, sharpening stones, two weighing scales and ten decorated lead weights, two pairs oval brooches, several glass beads, spindle whorls, small metal tubes (needle cases?), a miniature axe (stick-pin?), and a 'large quantity of human bones'.

#### *Location*

The description provided by Wilde indicates that a new gravel pit had been opened by 1866 in order to provide road metalling for the city of Dublin. This effectively rules out the 'old gravel pit' at Islandbridge recorded on the 1837 and 1849 editions of O.S. sheet 18 (Dublin) (Fig. 3.). Gravel pits opened after 1849 (marked '2' on Fig. 3) situated on the slopes of the ridge to the west and south-west of the village of Islandbridge, recorded on the 1907 edition of the O.S. map, suggest that it was in this general area that the 1866 finds were made (Fig. 3. 'E').

This assumption is supported in a response written by Count Plunkett on behalf of the National Museum to a query received in 1912 regarding the 'extensive Norwegian burial ground' near Islandbridge. In this he states that no further material had been found in a gravel pit opened in June 1909 (Fig. 3. '1'), nor within the earlier gravel pits when these were backfilled with refuse by the Corporation of Dublin prior to 1912 (Fig. 3. '2').

#### *Context of finds recorded for 1933-34*

Like the finds mentioned above, these finds had nothing to do with the Railway

cuttings, but are included because they are relevant to the overall scheme of things.

Further burials and artefacts were recovered during the large scale removal of earth for the laying-out of the amphitheatre for the War Memorial Park at Islandbridge in 1933-34 (Fig. 3).

On February 11th, 1933, workmen unearthed a grave (or graves) containing two swords (one complete and one damaged), a spearhead, an axehead, some iron nails and two bent metal rods; the finds were removed to the N.M.I. A second grave was uncovered on April 13th, 1934 and was excavated by Dr. A. Mahr and Professor S.P. Ó Ríordáin; this was an adult burial in an extended position with no grave goods but there were indications of remains of a wooden coffin. A further human skeleton in an extended position, with no grave goods and with traces of a wooden coffin was excavated by S.P. Ó'Ríordáin on May 1st, 1934; and on October 9th, 1934 another unaccompanied skeleton was unearthed. The skull of a further burial was found nearby.

On October 12th, 1934, a further Viking burial with its head to the south was uncovered and was excavated by Mr Gógan of the National Museum. The grave contents, comprising one sword, one spearhead and one knife, were acquired by the National Museum on October 20th, 1934. A memorandum dated Oct. 1934 in the files of the O.P.W. from Capt. D. Campbell, Resident Engineer at the War Memorial Park, indicates that the burials with Viking grave goods were 'lying north and south', and the burials without grave goods were 'lying east and west'.

### *Location*

A map, setting out the exact findspots of all the burials was made by Capt. Campbell in October 1934 and these are as indicated by small crosses at 'F' on Fig. 3.

### **Numbers of burials**

#### *Kilmainham*

1836: One burial with full warrior apparel was indicated.

1845-48: Weapons recovered from the railway cuttings on Royal Hospital land, a total of seven swords, four spear-heads, twelve shield bosses, tongs, a sickle, scales and weights, indicate a minimum number of twelve burials. The tongs could have accompanied warrior burials, as was the case with the Viking boat burial at Knock-y-Doonee, on the Isle of Man, so also could the sickle and scales. Vikings functioned as warriors, merchants, farmers or smiths, depending on the circumstances in which they found themselves. The beads indicate at least one female burial and the two pairs of shears may also be attributable to female burials, for instance a pair of shears was present in a richly furnished female Viking burial at Peel, IOM. A reasonable estimate therefore, of the minimum number of Viking burials represented at this location would be fourteen (twelve male and possibly two female).

1860: The material presented to the Royal Irish Academy which contained two swords suggests a minimum of two male Viking burials. However, some of the 'osseous' remains presented may have been buried without grave goods, and this could signify the presence of native Irish burials.

The minimum number of Viking burials represented at Kilmainham is therefore seventeen (fifteen male and possibly two females).

### *Islandbridge*

1842: The recovery of one sword and six spearheads indicates a probable minimum of six male burials.

1866: Examination of the N.M.I. files and comparing these with Wilde's descriptions of the 'antiquities' recovered, and with the descriptions contained in an article by Coffey and Armstrong, the following list of donations emerges: seven complete swords and one sword hilt, six spears, four shield bosses, an insular zoomorphic mount, one belt buckle, several knife blades, hammers, tongs/pincers, sharpening stones, two weighing scales and ten decorated lead weights, two pairs oval brooches, several glass beads, several spindle whorls, small metal tubes (needle cases?), a miniature axe (more probably a stick-pin?), and 'a large quantity of human bones'. These artefacts indicate a minimum of eight male Viking burials. While it is conceded

that the presence of scales and weights, hammers, tongs, shears, knives etc. could indicate additional burials, these items could equally have been included with the warrior burials. A minimum number of two female Viking burials is indicated by the two pairs of oval brooches, glass beads, spindle whorls, small metal tubes etc., thus producing a total minimum number of nine furnished Viking burials. However, here again, it must be borne in mind that while part of the quantity of human bone recovered at this time undoubtedly represented Viking burials with grave goods, some of the bone could equally represent burials without grave goods, which may be native Irish.

1933-34: Two (possibly three) Viking burials aligned south-north with grave goods, together with a series of burials aligned west-east without grave goods, were recovered in this period.

The total minimum number of Viking burials represented at Islandbridge is nineteen (seventeen male and two female).

**Finds for which the date of recovery and location is unknown.**

These consist mainly of swords, some of which are of doubtful provenance, but for all of which I have examined the documentation. I did not include these swords in my calculations because it was not possible to place them in exact locations, however as one sword usually equals one burial, there are possibly a further 16 unaccounted-for male Viking burials. There are also several oval brooches with no definite provenance other than their being from Islandbridge or Kilmainham, which would suggest a possible minimum of a further 4 female Viking burials in the general area.

1989.

In January 1989, while keeping a watching brief on road widening operations near the War Memorial Park in the Islandbridge area, the late Mr Paddy Healy excavated a shallow pit which had been revealed during top-soil stripping. The pit contained animal bones, shells, etc. and a decorated gilt bronze strap-end of eighth century type, which had been converted into a brooch by the addition of an iron pin and catch. This discovery prompted Dr. Wallace, the Director of the N.M.I., to request that I undertake

an exploratory excavation in the area (Fig. 3. `X'). No further Viking material was recovered, but the stratigraphical evidence uncovered pointed to the conclusion that the area had been quarried in the past and backfilled with re-deposited boulder clay, which probably represents some of the backfilling carried out by Dublin Corporation around 1912. The pit in which the brooch was recovered had been dug, together with two other nearby pits, into this redeposited material, leading to the conclusion that the brooch had been gathered up with other debris and deposited into a small pit probably dug when this land had been in use as allotment plots between about 1930-50.

### **Discussion:**

It was determined from this analysis of the records that we were dealing, not with one vast cemetery, but with two separate cemeteries, one of which is at Kilmainham where a minimum number of seventeen Viking burials (fifteen male, two female) can be established. There is some evidence also for an unknown number of unaccompanied burials, i.e. probably native Irish, in the area. The origins of this cemetery probably lie in its association with the early Christian monastery at *Cell Maignenn* established before the ninth century. The second cemetery is at Islandbridge, where a minimum number of nineteen (seventeen male, two female) Viking burials can be confirmed. There is also positive evidence for the presence of several unaccompanied burials in the cemetery, and possible evidence for others. This cemetery is representative of the type of native secular cemetery familiar in Ireland in the early Christian period.

Unprovenanced finds indicate a possible further minimum of twenty Viking burials (sixteen male, four female) on the ridge, but the location of these cannot be accurately pinpointed.

The artefacts recovered have been dated to the latter half of the ninth century which makes them contemporary with the Viking *longphort* recorded in *AU* as having been established at *Duiblinn* in the year 841.

The promontory-ridge at the confluence of the Liffey and the Camac presented an ideal location for a *longphort*. It was a level-topped ridge, surrounded on the north, east, and south by water, and contained a ready-made infrastructure based on the

monastic foundation, which undoubtedly also included a secondary defence in the form of an enclosure.

The site also controlled a major crossing point on the river Liffey at Islandbridge; and there is a body of evidence which suggests that this ford, which later became known as Cell MoSamóc's Ford, was situated at a shallow part of the river with rising ground on both banks, just beyond the head of the tide thereby enabling the crossing to be used at all times except occasionally during particularly strong spring or flood tides or during periods of heavy rain in the mountains when the river would probably have been subject to flash floods.

In AD 833 Vikings are recorded in *AU* as having plundered Cluain Dolcáin (Clondalkin, Co. Dublin) situated beside the river Camac, suggesting that the raiders were familiar with the confluence of the Camac and the Liffey for some time before the establishment of a *longphort* on the Liffey in AD 841

Unfortunately little is known of the saint named *MoSamóc* except that the name is included in the list of saints preserved in the pre-twelfth century compilation Rawlinson B502 as *Mosamoc Dublinne*, *Mosamoc Gall* (a foreigner?), and *Mosamoc Bothaire*; and *Mogobboc i Cill Magnend* is probably a derivation of *Mosamoc*. It seems reasonable therefore to conclude that a church dedicated to MoSamóc existed somewhere near the fording point on the Liffey which later acquired that name.

The use of land at or near monastic sites for *longphort* is known elsewhere. When Vikings overwintered for the first time at Thanet in Kent in 851, they forced the nuns from the Minster to flee to Lyminge for safety. In the year 855 Vikings overwintered at the Isle of Sheppey, Kent, where there was also a Minster, and in 873-4 they took control of the monastery and overwintered at Repton in Derbyshire. It is worth noting that this site at Repton was located on a prominent bluff, well defined to the north by the River Trent, and to the east by Repton Brook. The Vikings took the extra precaution of constructing a D-shaped enclosure of bank and ditch around the site, the ditch then becoming filled with water from the river.

Similarly there are many parallels for the re-use of Christian cemeteries for burial by

pagan Vikings. At Donnybrook, Dublin, a Viking warrior burial, lying north-south, and possibly accompanied by two females who had no grave goods, was inserted into an already existing native secular cemetery of the early Christian period. Examples from the Isle of Man include the cemetery excavated at St. Patrick's Isle, Peel, where a rich female burial was inserted along with several other adult Viking burials and a child, all with grave goods, into a native Christian lintel grave cemetery of west-east graves. The female and child were aligned west-east, while the other adult Vikings were north-south, all of which disturbed earlier native burials. It has been suggested that this female at Peel might be a native Christian married to a Viking, and it is possible that the female burial found at Kilmainham, with necklace, lying west-east, associated with a north-south aligned Viking warrior burial, might also fit into this category, especially as her necklace contained some beads of native type. At Chapel Hill, Balladoole, Arbory, I.O.M. a ship burial containing a male and female was superimposed on a cemetery of west-east oriented Christian lintel-graves, the human remains in some of the graves still being articulated at the time of disturbance.

At Repton, Derbyshire, Viking burials were recovered not only in the immediate vicinity of the church, but also from a burial place approx. 30 metres outside the Viking enclosure. At Wensley Churchyard, North Yorkshire, a Viking warrior was buried with his weapons and a sickle, and at Kildale in North Yorkshire, eight or nine Viking burials were found underneath the church.

That records were not kept for unaccompanied (i.e. possible native Christian) burials in the Kilmainham/Islandbridge area in the nineteenth century is not surprising, given the overwhelming antiquarian interest in artefacts at that time. Whenever bones were found, they were referred to simply as 'osseous remains' and no details were kept. However, the unaccompanied, extended inhumations, laid with their heads to the west, recovered and recorded at Islandbridge in the 1930's provide evidence for the existence of a probable native cemetery at that place.

### **Conclusions**

The evidence points to the fact that there were two native Irish cemeteries at Kilmainham and Islandbridge, one monastic, and one apparently secular, into which

pagan Vikings inserted their dead during the ninth century. The weapons recovered with the burials indicate the presence of warriors, but these men also acted in other capacities, e.g. shears and sickles were needed for farming activities, tongs and pincers etc. were smithing tools, and weighing scales and weights were needed for trading purposes. The presence of female objects such as spindle whorls and small metal tubes or needle cases, indicate cloth/garment making. All of these point to a reasonably settled community. I would suggest that it is likely that the burials at Kilmainham and Islandbridge represent a group of Vikings who were living in a defensible *longphort* or settlement near the river-ford in that area in the ninth century.

To finish; I hope I have convinced you that before any further excavation takes place at Woodstown it is essential that permission should be sought to examine the original company and traffic minutes that were kept by the Railway Company during the construction phase of the railway in order to see if any material was discovered at that time, and to map the find-spots of such material. I admit that this is a time consuming task, but it could be turn out to be a very rewarding exercise.

Also, as I have already stated, Vikings almost always buried their dead in existing indigenous cemeteries, so, the fact that at least one Viking burial has been uncovered at Woodstown raises the possibility that there is a native Irish cemetery somewhere nearby.

### **Footnote**

(For more detailed and fully annotated versions of this paper see: Elizabeth O'Brien 'A Reconsideration of the Location and Context of Viking Burials at Kilmainham/Islandbridge, Dublin' in (ed) Conleth Manning *DUBLIN AND BEYOND THE PALE Studies in honour of Patrick Healy* (Dublin 1998) pp.35-44. and; Elizabeth O'Brien, 'The Location and Context of Viking Burials at Kilmainham and Islandbridge, Dublin' in (eds) H.B. Clarke, M. Ní Mhaonaigh & R. Ó Floinn *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age* (Dublin 1998) pp.203-221).

### ***Dr Elizabeth O'Brien***

Dr O'Brien has worked extensively on the records of nineteenth-century Irish railway builders in the context of her research on early Viking cemeteries in Dublin and she will be talking about the potential information on Woodstown which could be gained through examination of the early records of the Suir Valley Railway.

Dr Elizabeth O'Brien is the foremost archaeological expert on early Irish burial customs. She is a graduate of University College Dublin where she completed an M.A. degree on early Irish church archaeology and a M.Phil. on archaeological and documentary evidence for early burial customs in Ireland. She subsequently did her doctorate at Oxford University and this has been published as *Post-Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England: burial practices reviewed* (Oxford 1999). She is also well known as the Director of Excavations for the Rathmichael Historical Society from 1984 to 1992, a voluntary society which introduced many Irish archaeologists to their first experience of excavation.