

A Place of Contact and Contradiction: The Socially Constructed Space(s) of Viking Encampment

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Throughout the ninth and early tenth centuries, itinerant viking hosts managed to establish numerous encampment sites as part of their ongoing expeditions across Atlantic Europe. Much more than a mere means to wait out the winter, camps like these are increasingly recognised to have played host to a broad range of activity, serving as venues of production, commerce, ritual, leisure, and domestic life. In order to facilitate these assorted interactions, viking encampments would have harboured complex and layered sociopolitical systems, wherein goods and services were rendered, information was disseminated, and interpersonal bonds were formed and strengthened. Nevertheless, as incongruous, heterotopian sites within their enveloping host environment, these localised, self-organised camps represented paradoxical spaces: straddling the line between transience and permanence, they were neither open nor fully sealed off, neither public nor fully private, and neither peaceful nor fully militant.

Having thus far been extensively investigated as physical, practical spaces, viking encampments have only rarely been highlighted in their roles as social and mental constructs, embedded within such tangible settings. As such, it remains largely unclear as to how their (inter)regional emergence and development would have contributed to an individual and collective 'sense of place' for those occupying them, and – by extension – how these spaces served to inform wider in(ter)group viking identities. Building on a wide-ranging, interdisciplinary body of evidence from across Ireland, England, and the Frankish realm, this paper will cast viking encampments in a novel light, considering them not merely as material sites, but as socially fundamental spaces, where people built up their strength and strategy, where they lived, played, ate, drank, and slept, where bonds of fellowship and family were fostered, where people were ill, where they were cared for, where they died, were buried, and where they were grieved. In doing so, it will argue that these encampments represented far more than utilitarian, anticipatory spaces, and were integral to the viability and sustainability of an ongoing viking way of life.