

Viking Congress 2021 - A 12th century graffito from the Coombe, Dublin

By

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Abstract

Pre-development excavations by ACAS at nos.124-8 the Coombe over the winter of 2017-18 uncovered a row of five Dublin Type 1 Houses with rear yards set in long narrow plots. This level yielded numerous high status artefacts, including a stone or slate bearing enigmatic graffito comprising letters and pictures on both sides. The habitation level is dated by stratigraphy and associated pottery to the late twelfth century.

One side of the stone displays a composition comprising a quadruped presumably a horse, apparently mounted by a warrior figure brandishing a sword and carrying a triangular shield. There are two birds in the picture, one of which is seated on the man's head and the other is below the animal's hind feet. Above the picture, also centrally located at the top of the stone, are two inscribed letters, reading either as 'Bb' or 'Db'.

The other side of the stone displays a quadruped and several letters of the alphabet in lower case. Both surfaces of the stone are covered with multiple indeterminate cuts and scratch marks. The dating and context of the slate puts it on the cusp of the late Viking Age (Hiberno Norse) and early Norman (Hiberno-Norman) period in a suburb of Dublin, during a time of immense political and cultural upheaval and transformation from town to city and colonial capital.

This context presents a challenge for interpreting the graffiti in cultural terms – does one look to Insular, Viking or Norman comparanda? What tradition do the letters belong to? Who was the rider intended to be, and would he have been recognisable to the contemporary onlooker? This paper explores these questions, seeking artistic parallels for the artwork in Insular, Viking and medieval sources; it considers the form and function of the slate and reflects on the author of the graffiti.

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