

The Viking Age in the Overkingdom of Ulaid

Russell Ó Ríagáin, University of Cambridge; russell.oriagain@gmail.com

This paper will outline the evidence for Ulaid's relationship with raiders and settlers from Scandinavia and from among the Scandinavian diaspora(s). The paper will place that evidence within the wider processes at work in the Viking Age. Despite being strategically located on the western shore of the North Channel linking the Irish Sea to the Atlantic, the overkingdom of Ulaid has not figured strongly in accounts of the Insular Viking Age compared to several other regions on the shores of the Irish Sea. This paper aims to rectify that by presenting the results of a decade's research into the relationship between settlement and colonialism on both sides of the North Channel in the Iron Age and medieval period using multiple categories of evidence.

Despite strong evidence for political continuity in the overkingdom of Ulaid there were winners and losers in this period, with the Dál Fiatach dynasty continuing to flourish in the south and the Cruithin of Mag nÉilne in the north vanishing from the documentary record in the second half of the ninth century. This disappearance might have more to do with the processes of political centralisation underway in Ireland and Britain from as early as the seventh century, but it may be that viking raids and the formation of Scandinavian diasporic settler communities acted as a catalyst for these socio-political changes in the north of Ireland. The documentary record hints at the presence of settlements in the form of camps and bases, but also in several instances also hints at something more continuous and substantial, especially when multiple categories of evidence are taken together. It would be difficult for any such settlements to survive without local alliances and documentary evidence survives for several enduring alliances between dynastic factions in the north of Ireland and factions of the diasporic settler communities from the mid ninth century onwards, as will be outlined and discussed.

This documentary material sheds important light on other categories of evidence (Figure 1). There seems to have been little disruption to the overall pattern of settlement in northeast Ireland in the Viking Age, even if the period does correspond to the construction of a large number of underground chambers in association with both enclosed and unenclosed settlement. However, within the island of Ireland, the northeast has the largest number of Viking Age furnished burials outside of the Dublin area. The northeast also has one of the highest number of toponyms derived from Old Norse (this paper will add several 'new' names to the list), even if that number is tiny compared to that found across the North Channel in Argyll.

Understanding the nature and extent of the relationship between Ulaid and the Scandinavian diaspora sheds new light on the politics of the Irish Sea in the later Viking Age—not least the role of the Dál Fiatach as a naval power in the eleventh century and the death of Magnús *berfættr* in their territory in AD1103.

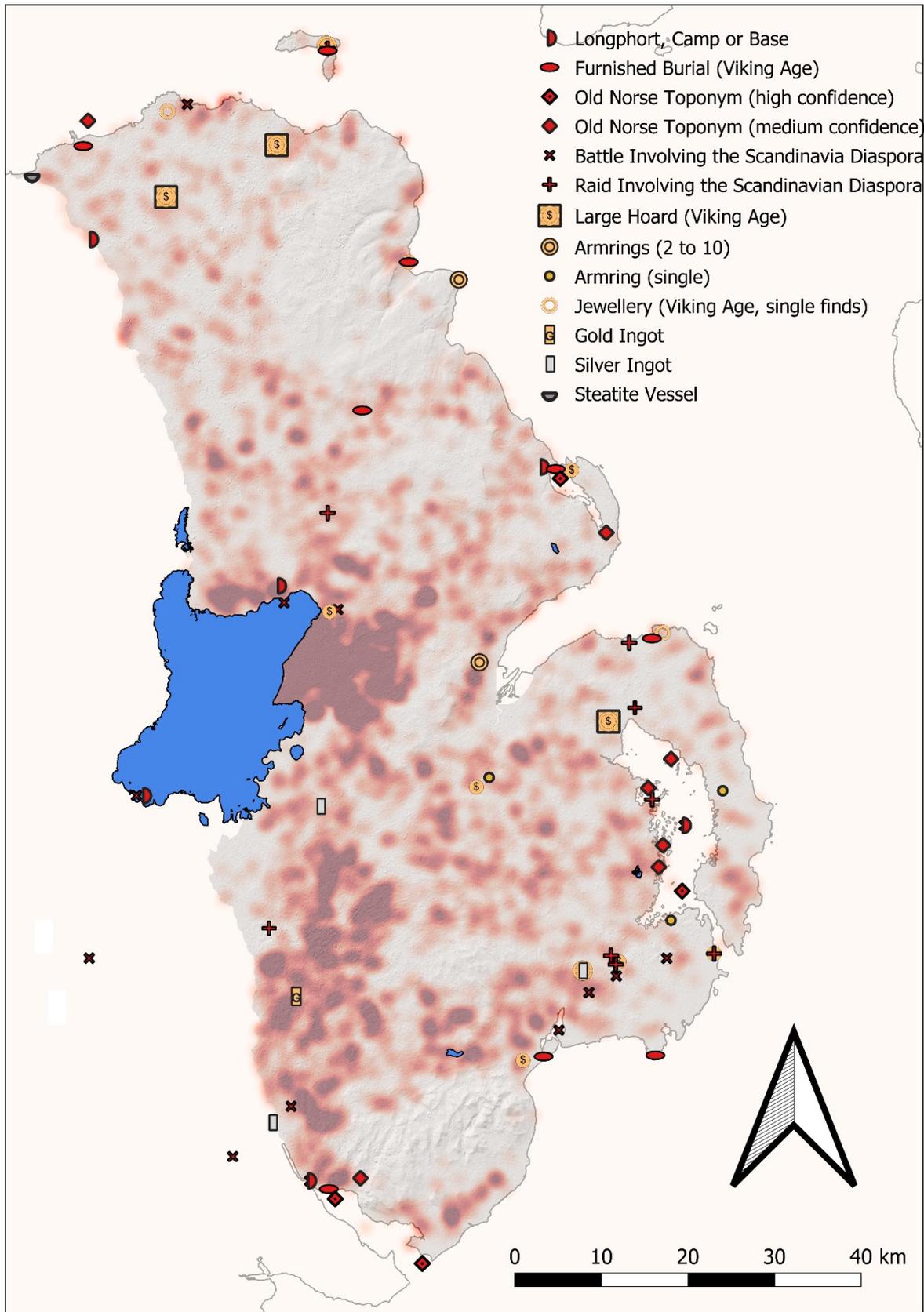


Figure 1. Sum of evidence for activity in the early medieval overkingdom of Ulaid in northeast Ireland associated with raiders and settlers from Scandinavia or from among Insular Scandinavian diasporic communities set over a heatmap of early medieval settlement; Heatmap radius set at 3km with maximum value of five (i.e., darkest patches contain five sites or more within a 3km radius of one another).