

The Viking Slave Trade
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The popularity of the 'Sea Stallion of Glendalough' as a media item and visitor attraction indicates a fairly popular perception of vikings in Ireland's past. They can be perceived as swashbuckling adventurers, craftsmen and traders who launched a medieval version of the 'Celtic Tiger' economy. These views flourish alongside an older view of vikings as bloodthirsty heathens, hell bent on plunder and destruction. The practise of slavery by vikings in Ireland can similarly be interpreted in two ways; it was a trade already well established in medieval Ireland and Britain in which Scandinavian entrepreneurs played no worse a role, or it can be argued that there was something strikingly abhorrent about the scale and nature of the vikings' acquisition and sale of human cargo. We have a rich body of evidence for viking slavery in Ireland which can be brought into this debate.

ACQUISITION

Slavery was a feature of European society long before the vikings arrived. St Patrick was first brought to Ireland as a captive, and slave raiding across the Irish Sea is attested (in both directions) at the time when Roman power collapsed in Britain. However there no evidence of large-scale slave raiding in Ireland in the century prior to the vikings' first recorded raids. Slaves were, nevertheless, obtained by other means; as prisoners of war, or in lieu of debts that could not be paid. In addition parents occasionally sold their children or gave themselves into slavery as a desperate measure during times of famine.

When vikings came to attack the coasts of Ireland, people, along with ecclesiastical metalwork and cattle, were portable goods which might be transported off in ships. 'The Annals of Ulster' record under the year 821 that Howth (Co. Dublin) was raided and 'a great booty of women was carried away'. Viking-leaders also came to appreciate that they could obtain a quick and sizeable profit by ransoming high status captives back to their communities or families. From the 830s a number of high profile figures were seized (usually kings or bishops) who were later released (presumably for a fee) or who were 'killed at the ships' of the vikings – maybe because hostage negotiations failed or because the captives chose to put up a fight.

A remarkable account of one individual's travail at the hands of the vikings can be found in the 'Life of Saint Findan'. This account was written survives from the late ninth century. It tells how Findan (a man of noble stock from Leinster) was sent to ransom his sister who had been taken by vikings. Things went badly and Findan was himself captured although some of the vikings argued that it was wrong to seize negotiators and he was soon freed. Findan nevertheless was taken by vikings on another occasion and taken to the Orkney Islands where he eventually escaped and made his way to the Continent. A curious feature of the account is that Findan's second capture was aided by an Irish conspirator. Political alliances between vikings and Irish are recorded in annals from the 840s. In the tenth and eleventh centuries we hear of Irish kings gathering captives as the booty of war, presumably, so that they too could profit from the burgeoning slave markets established in Ireland's major ports.

FATE

What was the fate of those captured by vikings? ‘The Life of Findan’ suggests that some were sold on to viking colonies in Britain, while recent DNA studies suggest that many went to Iceland. A sensational story is also found in a thirteenth-century Icelandic saga concerning an Irish princess called Melkorka who was brought to Iceland as a slave. Melkorka pretended to be dumb, and it was only after she had borne a child to her owner that her Irish pedigree was discovered. Laxdaela saga presents one of several medieval stories which circulated about Irish princesses in Iceland. These probably reflect later fantasises about exotic noble beauties rather than historical reality. Another destination for slaves exported from Ireland was to the east. The comparatively sophisticated Islamic and Byzantine empires produced many luxury goods which were sought after by viking traders and there is archaeological evidence for imports from these regions, including Byzantine silk and Arabic coins in Ireland. These high-status goods were exchanged for ‘unmanufactured’ items from North Europe including slaves and furs.

The destination of slaves was only one aspect of their fate, their treatment was another. The Arabic geographer Ibn Fadlan, gives a very dark account of the way that vikings treated their female slaves, which included human sacrifice. There is some evidence for this in an Insular context. At Ballateare on the Isle of Man a wealthy viking was buried with many possessions including a young female¹ who had been killed with a savage blow across the top of her skull. Her remains lay toward the top of the warrior’s burial mound, mixed in with the cremated remains of his animals. An eleventh century poem ‘Moriuht’ purports to tell the tale of an Irish poet and his family who were captured by vikings. The poem is an outrageous attack by a rival who delights in claims that that Moriuht was urinated upon and gang raped by his captors.

There is no doubt that people living in eastern coastal districts of Ireland feared seizure by vikings. Probably very few slaves were sacrificed to heathen gods. Most would have ended up living alongside their new owners, in Ireland or abroad, required to do the dirtier and more laborious work of the household. Whether owners were relatively kind (eventually freeing their dependents and endowing them with land), or whether they treated their slaves worse than their livestock, that must have varied from owner to owner.

OPPOSITION

Not all slaves accepted their condition. A few escaped, one (an Irish bishop held on Dalkey Island in 940) died in the attempt. The Icelandic ‘Book of Settlements’ gives a story of a revolt by Irish slaves in the early days of the Scandinavian colony, but in this tale the escapees were all killed.

It is possible that some of the wars fought between Irish and vikings were fuelled by accusations that the enemy had made slaves of their own people. In 980 the Southern Uí Néill king Maelsechlainn stormed Dublin. He was accredited with releasing all the Irish slaves in the port from captivity. This may have been a wise political move as well as an act of charity; it served as a rallying point for a king who

¹ The proof reader incorrectly changed this to read ‘many slaves, including a young female’. There is only evidence for one human sacrifice at Ballateare.

sought supremacy across Ireland, and it imposed an economic disadvantage on his defeated enemies.

In the late tenth century the fortunes of viking rulers in Ireland were in decline. They suffered a series of defeats at the hands of powerful Irish kings. In these situations the tables were turned. Irish kings now seized human booty from the defeated viking armies or towns. Their justification seems to have been that the inhabitants of viking towns were foreigners bearing the sins of their forebears.

CONTINUATION

Notwithstanding the significant defeats suffered by the viking towns they remained economically powerful in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and commerce in slaves continued. There is greater evidence for the involvement of Irish kings in this lucrative business in the eleventh century. There are also reports of slaves being paid as tribute, or in return for military service. In 1098 ships from Dublin supported the Welsh of Anglesey against the Normans, but they were bought over by a Norman earl with promises of 'captives ... of young men and maidens'. A near contemporary Welsh source reports with relish that the earl 'assembled from afar all the hags – toothless, humped, lame, one-eyed, troublesome, feeble' to give as payment to the 'traitors', the sight of whom caused the Dubliners to lift their anchors and sail away.

A significant blow was dealt to the slave market of Dublin in 1102 when trafficking human cargo was banned in England. This led to the breakdown of exchange networks in this particular commodity, although some illicit trading may have continued from the port of Bristol where Irish merchants were accused of carrying unwitting visitors off in their ships.

THE END OF THE SLAVE TRADE

For the Anglo-Norman invaders of Ireland, the persistence of the slave trade was used as a justification for conquest. Any English slaves in Ireland were to be freed according to a decree of the Council of Armagh in 1171. It is not clear if there were many English slaves in Ireland at this time, but it certainly suited the invaders to seize the moral high-ground. Trading in slaves had been abolished in areas under Norman rule, partly on religious grounds as a movement for spiritual reform spread through Christendom, but also due to economic reasons. Across large areas of Europe population growth meant that lower classes of freemen were forced to accept worse conditions of employment and this meant that slavery was not so necessary. In effect, one could argue that Normans opposed slavery but supported a system which saw people of the lowest ranks now partially enslaved as serfs.

CONCLUSION

The slave-raids which vikings embarked upon in Ireland seemed fearful and abhorrent to contemporaries. This is despite that fact that slavery was already an integral part of Irish society. Perhaps this fear was fuelled by the alien ways and heathenism of the first viking raiders, and their method of slave acquisition which operated outside the normal rules of Irish society. Despite this, over time, non-viking groups became

willing to participate in similar slaving activities in Ireland and elsewhere. How important slavery was to the economy of the Viking Age ports in Ireland is unclear. Contemporary sources perhaps tell us more about the emotions that were provoked by the capture and sale of individuals rather than the commercial significance of these transactions.

Medieval slave-traders sought to depersonalise their victims (perhaps to soothe their own consciences) by identifying them as low born, criminals, foreigners, or members of an opposing political group. In passing judgement on medieval crimes against humanity, it is worth remembering that such labels have also been used in modern times when denying people basic human rights.

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