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**COMETS AND
CATASTROPHIES**

**Illuminated
monuments**

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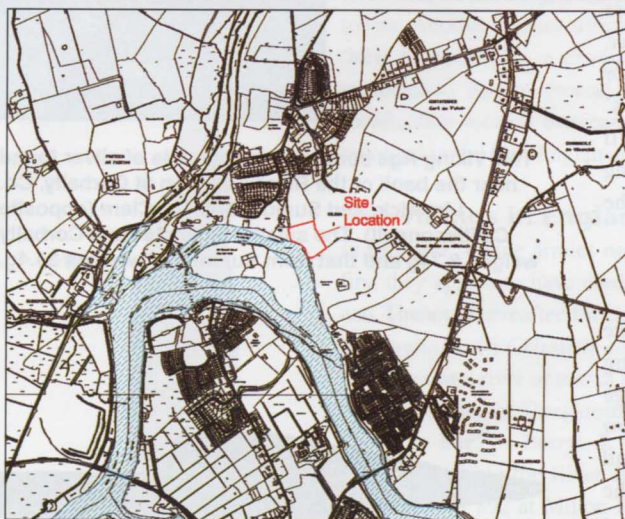
Eamonn P. Kelly; ekelly@museum.ie

Kerry ritual enclosures *Longphort* in County Clare
Medieval Magi Royal circuits and King's court

A Viking longphort near Athlunkard, Co. Clare

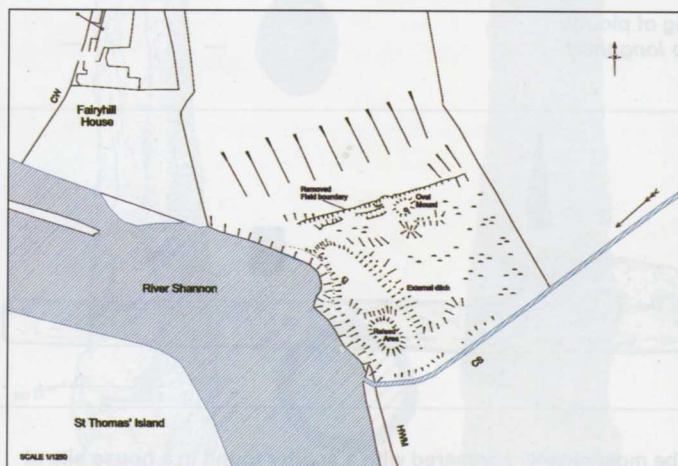
Eamonn P. Kelly, Keeper of Antiquities at the National Museum of Ireland, and Edmond O'Donovan of Margaret Gowen & Co. Ltd present important evidence of a newly identified Viking fortress at Athlunkard, Co. Clare.

THE PLACENAME *Athlunkard* preserves reference to a ford (*ath*) and a defended ship encampment (*longphort*). The term *longphort* was first introduced into the language of the annals in 840, when it was used to describe a Viking base on Lough Neagh. Into the first half of the tenth century *longphort* was used to describe Scandinavian bases, which were invariably associated with the activities of ships and fleets. Thereafter use of the term was extended to describe Irish fortifications.



Location

Athlunkard is a townland in County Clare, located on the bend of the Shannon above Limerick. Athlunkard Bridge, which spans the river, is the modern successor to an important ancient ford. The placename was apparently rendered *longford* in the seventeenth century. It is likely that the *longphort* referred to in the placename is represented by earthworks in the nearby townland of Fairyhill, opposite St Thomas' Island, on the County Clare bank of the River Shannon near Athlunkard Bridge.



Plan of longphort.



Digital terrain model of longphort.



View of *longphort* from the north.

Metal finds

The existence of the earthworks was first noticed some years ago following National Museum and Garda investigations into treasure-hunting activities in the Limerick area. Iron objects dating from the final centuries of the first millennium AD were found on the site. These were a plough coulter, a spearhead, a spearbutt and a small ring or hoop. Nearby, on the shore of St Thomas' Island, an iron axe was found which still contained part of a wooden handle. A Viking silver weight was found at Corbally on the riverbank opposite.

Site description

In recent months a reinvestigation of the site was necessitated by proposed pipe-laying associated with the Limerick Main Drainage Scheme. The earthworks, which are just below the tidal limit of the river, are silted and eroded, but a detailed survey revealed the presence of a D-shaped site, enclosed by a curved rampart. It is located where a stream runs into the River Shannon and is open to the stream and river. The option of locating on adjacent high ground was deliberately overlooked, and the site is in a narrow band of low-lying ground dividing two areas of higher ground. Beyond the rampart there is an intractable marsh which affords natural protection.

Within the enclosure, which is 75m long and 30m wide, there is an oval raised area measuring 20m by 12.5m, protected formerly by a ditch and counterscarp bank.

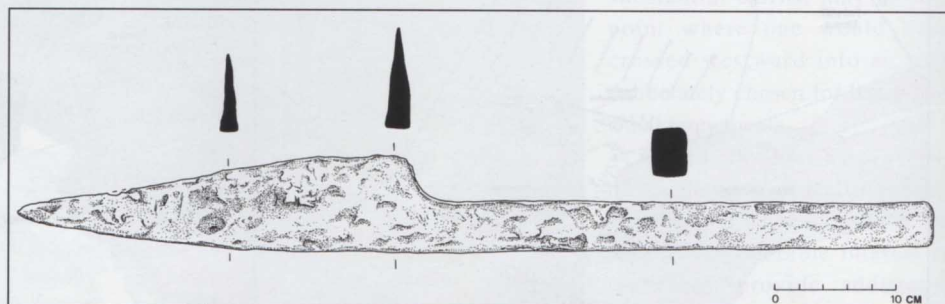
During the topographic survey, a small oval mound was identified in boggy ground 25m to the north-east of the enclosure. It measures 10m by 9m and rises 30cm above the surface



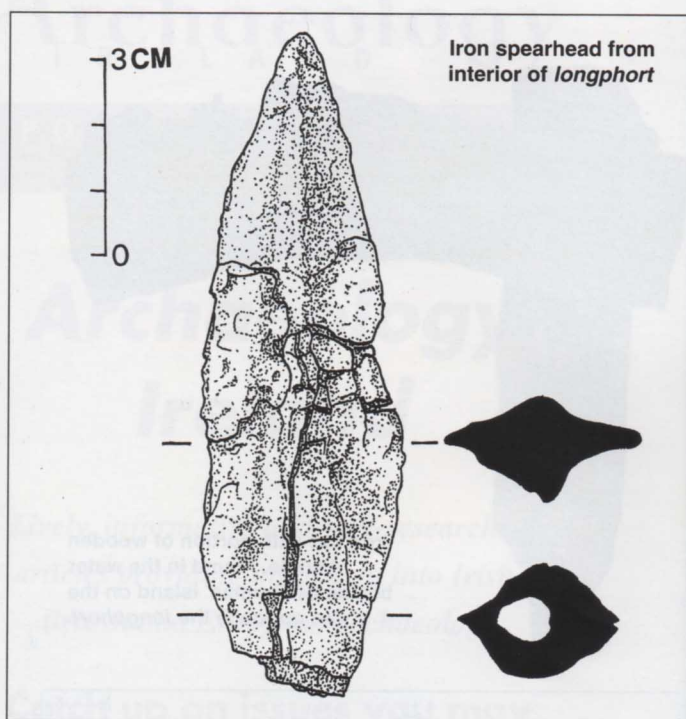
Two Viking Age conical weights made of silver found near the bank of the River Shannon at Corbally, Co. Limerick, and Summerhill, Co. Clare (opposite Castleconnell). The smaller example from Corbally weighs 6.74g and that from Summerhill weighs 34.4g.



Photograph and drawing of plough coulter found within the *longphort*.

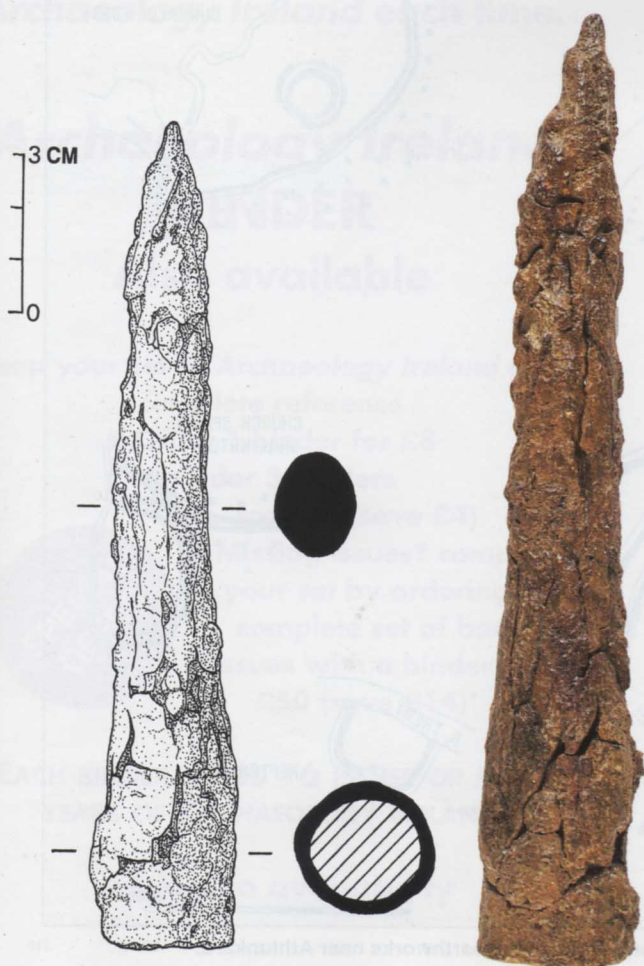


This plough coulter can be most closely compared with a coulter found in a house site at Whitefort, Co. Down, where finds of souterrain were indicated a date in the latter part of the first millennium AD.



Iron spearhead from interior of longphort

Iron spearbutt from interior of longphort.



of the marsh. To the south of it there is a suggestion of a parallel banked feature of uncertain function.

On the high ground to the east is Kilquain Church and graveyard, dedicated to St Cuanna, a sixth-century saint. No early remains are visible on the site but it may be an early medieval foundation.

It is believed likely that the earthworks opposite St Thomas' Island are the remains of a Viking *longphort* founded between AD 840 and 930. Lax Weir, located below the island, preserves the Norse word for salmon and is evidence of a Scandinavian presence in the immediate locality.

The longphort in Ireland

The *longphort* near Athlunkard is smaller than, although identical in its elements to, a site at Dunrally, Co. Laois, identified in recent years as *Longphort Rothlaibh*, the destruction of which in 862 is recorded in the annals. Comparison can also be drawn with a site at Annagassan, Co. Louth, where the annals report a *longphort* in 841. This may be an oval enclosure, known as Lisnarann, which immediately overlooks a D-shaped island in the River Glyde. The enclosure at Annagassan is around the same size as the Athlunkard site, and the islands at both Annagassan and Athlunkard probably formed an integral part of the Scandinavian defences. The greater scale of Dunrally (360m by 150m) may reflect the fact that there was no island available at that location.

The Athlunkard and Dunrally sites are each located at the junction of a river with its tributary, a feature shared with the tenth-century Irish Viking towns. Another feature which the sites have in common with the towns is their proximity to a crossing-point on the river. That the sites are protected by marshy ground is notable. The destruction in 891 of a Viking fortification located between a marsh and the River Dyle in Belgium is recorded in the Carolingian annals.

The Vikings in England

In England, Viking armies needed to camp in defensible positions, and at first they appear to have used natural islands, such as the Isle of Sheppey and Thanet. Thereafter fortifications were constructed, and references in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* suggest that the Vikings preferred to make use of the sea or a river or marsh to protect them on one side.

The fortress at Tempsford built in 917 may be a D-shaped earthwork known as Beeston Berrys. It is five to six acres in extent, with its straight side butting onto the River Ivel. Viking forts were constructed in 885 at Rochester; in 892 at Milton Regis and Appledore; in 893 at Benfleet and Shoebury; and in 894 on the River Lea above London and at Bridgenorth on the River Severn.

A D-shaped enclosure known as Church Spaul at Shillington, which abuts a navigable stream and has a wet ditch, may be of Viking construction. It measures approximately 165m x 100m and is surrounded by marshy ground. A more substantial D-shaped enclosure, measuring approximately 390m x 165m, is located on the south-western edge of Stonea Island, Wimblington, Cambs. It is constructed beside Latches Fen, which acts as the straight side of the enclosure.

A small D-shaped site abutting the River Ouse at The Hillings, Eaton Socon, Hunts, has been shown to date from pre-Norman times. At Shoebury, Essex, a rampart enclosing a semicircular area, approximately 460m across, adjacent to the sea, may be the Viking camp of 893.

The general resemblance of the English sites to the Viking towns of Birka and Hedeby is notable. Conclusive evidence supports the view that a D-shaped enclosure at Repton, England, was constructed as a winter camp for the Viking army of 873-4. It is similar in size to Athlunkard.



Iron ring from interior of longphort.



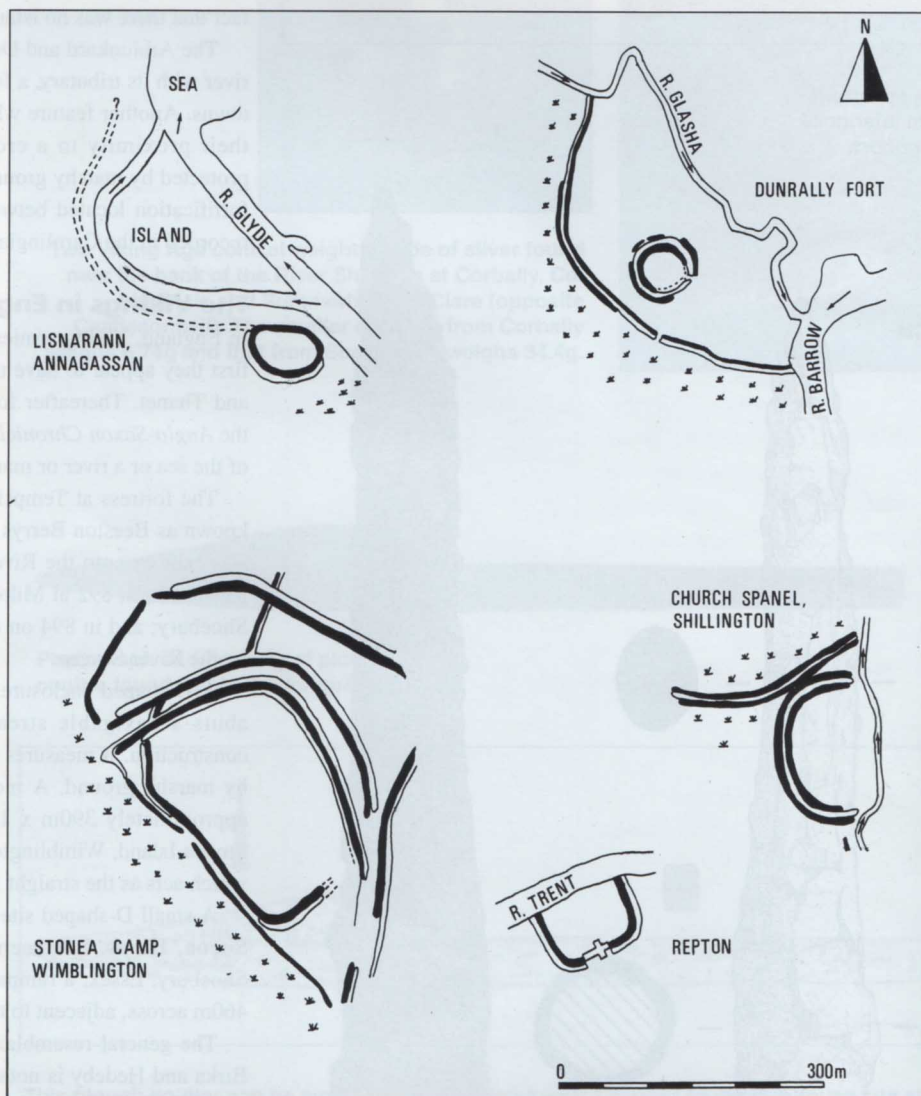
Iron axe with portion of wooden handle. Found in the water beside St Thomas' Island on the shore opposite the longphort.

The River Trent forms one side and the rest of the site is surrounded by a bank and ditch, into which the pre-existing monastic church is incorporated as a gatehouse. Excavations have discovered extensive Viking remains, including weapons and burials.

Conclusion

The construction of the *longphort* near Athlunkard may relate to a major two-year campaign by the Vikings along the Shannon system which spread into the Southern Uí Néill kingdom of Mide and also into Connacht and Munster. The Vikings raided inland across County Limerick to capture the abbot of Armagh, who was then making a circuit of the district, at *Cluain Comarda*, or Colmanswell, Co. Limerick.

During this campaign a Viking base was founded on Lough Ree in 845 and, in keeping with practice elsewhere, it seems likely that they also had a base or bases in or near the Shannon estuary to secure their rear. By about the middle of the ninth century the Vikings had established a permanent settlement at Limerick, where it is believed that they built a fortress on King's Island. If it was directly associated with the mid-ninth-century Viking activities on the River Shannon, then use of the Athlunkard *longphort* may have been of short duration. However, if it was an outlying fortification protecting the ford and related to the defence of the main settlement on King's Island, a longer period of use could be envisaged. □



Possible Viking sites which compare with the earthworks near Athlunkard.