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# the viking issue

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# Vikings on the Barrow

## *Dunrally Fort, a possible Viking longphort in County Laois*

IN HIS Ordnance Survey letters of the 1830s John O'Donovan identified a site on the river Barrow at Vicarstown, Co. Laois, as that of a longphort associated with a Viking leader named Rodolf. Working on annalistic and placename evidence, O'Donovan identified the site as a large enclosure sited on marshy ground near the west bank of the River Barrow between Monasterevin and Athy. Now known as Dunrally Fort, the name is specific to the site and is not a townland name. According to O'Donovan, Dunrally is an anglicization of *Dún Rothlaibh*, the Fort of Rodolf. This in turn he identified as *Longphort-Rothlaibh* whose destruction on the 9 September, AD 862 is recorded in the Annals of the Four Masters in the following terms:

**Eamonn P. Kelly, Acting Keeper of Irish Antiquities in the National Museum of Ireland and John Maas, a journalist with a particular interest in archaeology, outline the evidence for a Viking longphort or defended harbour and settlement on the River Barrow and its links with the activities of a Viking called Rodolf.**

'The destruction of *Longphort-Rothlaibh* by Cinnedidh, son of Gaithin, lord of Laighis, on the fifth of the Ides of September; and the killing of Conall Ultach and Luirgnen, with many others along with them.'

The event is recorded in slightly different terms in the Fragmentary Annals:

'A dreadful slaughter was made of the fleet of Rodlaibh by Cearbhall, son of Dunlang, and by Cineide, son of Gaeithin, i.e. the son of Cearbhall's sister; and they (the crews of the fleet) had arrived from Lochlann a short time before; and Conall Ultach and Lairgnen were slain there with many others.'

### **The site and its wider context**

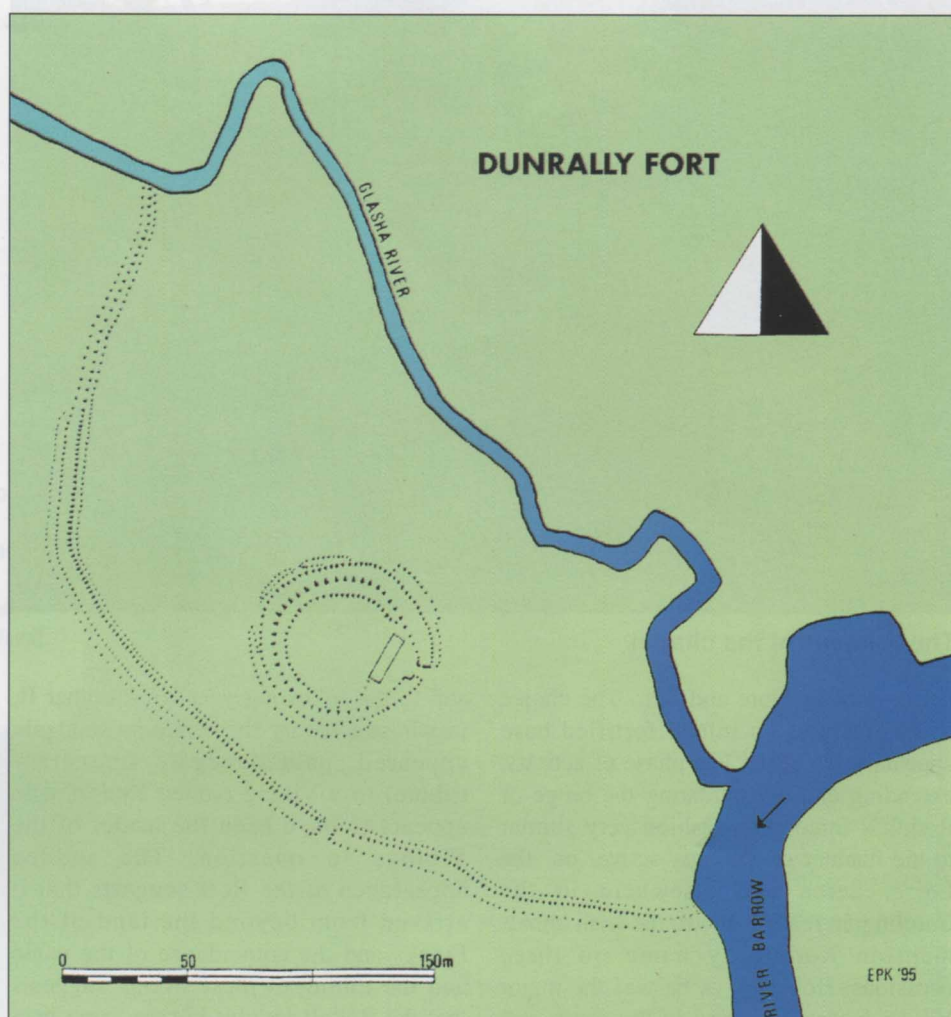
Dunrally fort is an oval earthwork which



has a slightly raised interior which measures 52 metres by 41 metres. This is enclosed by a high earthen rampart built inside a wide water-filled ditch and a counterscarp bank. The *Dún* element in the placename refers to a fortification and is not normally applied to Irish ringforts - which are more often designated by the elements *Rath* or *Lios*. Despite this, the earthwork does not correspond with what one would expect of a Viking longphort and it is recorded by the Sites and Monuments Record for County Laois as a bivallate ringfort, presumably of native construction.

A recent re-examination of the site by the authors, however, indicates that the oval earthwork is but the central citadel of a more massively defended structure. This is located at a bend in the river Barrow where it is joined by its tributary, the Glasha river. A huge D-shaped area is enclosed by a ditched rampart which joins the two rivers and contains the oval earthwork. The area enclosed measures 360 metres in length, northwest to southeast, and 150 metres in maximum width. The ditch, which is up to 5.3 metres wide and 1.8 metres deep, is usually water-filled. There is a continuous bank inside it which averages 3.8 metres in width. A counterscarp bank flanks the ditch for about one third its length. On the southeast side of the rampart there is an entrance by means of a stone bridge built in the late eighteenth century to facilitate access to a summer house built within the citadel by the parliamentarian Henry Grattan. The outer enclosure was sufficiently large to ensure that the biggest of Viking fleets could have been protected on-shore and, prior to modern dredging, there was a pool on the river Barrow, immediately adjacent, where ships could have been anchored.

The Glasha river once formed the boundary between the Lóigis and the Uí Failge while the river Barrow formed the border with the Uí Muiredaig. The choice of site may have aimed at taking advantage of rivalries between these kingdoms — a common Viking strategy. To the north of the site would have extended a large forest while west of it were extensive tracts of marsh and bog. In common with Viking towns in Ireland, the site is in proximity to a major crossing



Above — Plan of Dunrally Fort, Co. Laois.

Left — The ditch of the outer enclosure

point. A number of stone axes found in the Barrow at Dunrally Bridge, nearby, identifies the location as a crossing place since prehistoric times.

The construction of a longphort at Dunrally would have been consistent with the known practices of the Vikings elsewhere. The destruction of one such fortification on the river Dyle at Louvain, Belgium, is recorded in the Annals of Fulda for AD 891. This fort is described as having been surrounded by a ditch with a marsh on one side and the bank of the river on the other. Like *Longphort-Rothlaibh* it was destroyed in the autumn when the surrounding marshy ground would have been at its driest. Dunrally fort would have given the Vikings the option of raiding wealthy monasteries in the Barrow valley from either end of the river, thus increasing the element of

surprise. However, the threat posed by its close proximity to his stronghold at Dunamase led to its destruction by Ceneide, King of Lóigis assisted by Cerball, King of Osraige. A Viking silver hoard from Ballyadams, Co. Laois, is further evidence of a strong Viking presence in the area around this time. So also is the large gold armlet found at Rathedan, near the river Barrow at Leighlin Bridge, Co. Carlow - the largest extant find of Viking gold from Ireland.

#### Rodolf's travels

The sack of the longphort is the final mention in the Irish annals of Rodolf who appears to have been active in the region for about a decade. He focused his plundering activities on East Munster and the kingdom of Osraige, making use of a base in Waterford Harbour to raid up the





**The rampart of the citadel**

rivers Barrow, Nore and Suir. The choice of Dunrally as an inland fortified base appears to date to a late phase of activity, extending and consolidating the range of Rodolf's forces in a fashion very similar to the manner of Vikings active on the Loire, Seine and elsewhere in the Carolingian realms. In all, the Irish annals mention Rodolf by name on three occasions. However, as he was the major Viking leader operating in the south-east in the mid-ninth century, it may be reasonable to associate him with a number of unattributed raids against Osraige and elsewhere which appear to have involved the Waterford Harbour fleet and other Vikings who may have been allied to him. One of the entries in which Rodolf is named refers to a raid by his forces against Osraige, in the mid-850s, using either the Barrow or the Nore. A battle was fought at a ford named 'Ath Muiceada' and although Cerball defeated Rodolf he became separated from his followers and was captured by the Vikings. Luckily, however, he was able to escape. A later raid by Rodolf's followers against monasteries along the Barrow was initially successful but ended in disaster. The final mention of Rodolf in the Irish annals is the destruction of his longphort. Rodolf is not mentioned among the casualties and he may either have escaped or been elsewhere at the time.

Four months later, in January 863 a Viking fleet attacked down the river Rhine

and in the following year King Lothar II, in whose territory these raiders suddenly appeared, paid danegeld (monetary tribute) to a Viking named Rodolf who appears to have been the leader of the Vikings in question. The sudden appearance of the fleet suggests that it arrived from beyond the land of the Franks and the coincidence of the name and the timing of these events suggests that the Rodolf involved is the same man named in the Irish annals. If this is so then the Frankish annals enable us to identify Rodolf as the son of Harold, a former king

of Denmark who had settled in Frisia after being expelled from Denmark in 827. Harold was murdered by the Franks in 852 around the time that Rodolf's career in Ireland began. After his return, Rodolf continued to be active in the area of Frisia until his death in 873.

### **Longphorts in Ireland**

Careful scrutiny of the annals suggests that a significant number of longphorts were constructed in Ireland around the middle of the ninth century. A Viking base founded on Lough Neagh in 838 was referred to as a fortress in the following year. Longphorts were constructed at Dublin and Annagassan in 841 and many new Viking bases were established during the next two decades. Locations such as Narrowater, Co. Down, and Lough Swilly, Co. Donegal, were coastal but others, such as a site at Rosnaree, Co. Meath, were inland. Like *Longphort-Rothlaibh*, bases constructed on Lough Ree and the river Brosna were located deep in the interior of the island. A site at Ballaghkeeran Little, Co. Westmeath, which was the subject of an inconclusive excavation by the late Tom Fanning, may yet prove to be the Lough Ree longphort. The research strategy of the authors is to now seek to locate other sites referred to in the annals in order to establish inland longphorts as an important category of monument that we can directly associate with the Vikings.



**Interior of the citadel showing the summer house built by Henry Grattan in the 1780s**