

12. Woodstown 6: the finds

Siobhán McNamara



Illus. 1—A selection of stone, glass, bone, metal and glass artefacts recovered from Woodstown 6 (Richard O’Brien)

Archaeological investigations on the route of the new N25 Waterford City Bypass discovered a large Viking settlement of ninth to eleventh century date on the banks of the River Suir in the townland of Woodstown in County Waterford.¹ This may have supplanted an earlier Irish settlement on the same site and also re-used the earlier Irish enclosing ditch on the south bank of the river. The discovery and investigation of the site are described in a paper by Richard O’Brien and Ian Russell (this volume). This paper briefly describes the range and date of artefacts recovered from the site.

Approximately 4,595 finds were recovered by archaeological investigation of the site between March and June 2004 (Russell 2004). A further 713 were found during the wet

¹ NGR 255022, 111276; Height 7.97 m OD; Excavation Licence No. 02E0441.

sieving of the topsoil from the site between June and October 2004 (Illus. 1). This brings the total number of finds from Woodstown 6 to 5,308. At least 12% of these are recognisably modern, such as chinaware and railway bolts. However, with specialist analysis of some classes of finds, especially the corroded iron objects, e.g. X-ray, this percentage could increase the total assemblage. Eighty-nine percent of the finds were from the topsoil, i.e. only 11% of the finds were found from archaeological contexts and some of these were post-medieval in date.

The largest proportion of finds were of metal. There are a few possible reasons for this, as follows.

- The finds retrieval strategy included repeated metal-detection of the topsoil from 29 test-trenches excavated in 2003, before they were individually backfilled.
- No bone survived in the acidic soils with the exception of burnt bone pieces, which could have more resilience against acidity.
- The soil conditions did not favour the widespread preservation of wood. Only one piece of wood was found during the excavations, this came from the waterlogged basal layer of the enclosure ditch. One possible wooden handle was recovered from the edge of a wetland area adjacent to the site during the more recent archaeological testing there. This level dated to the Late Bronze Age period.
- Very few sherds of non-modern pottery were found which would suggest that the inhabitants used wooden instead of ceramic bowls for domestic use. There were several sherds of post-medieval pottery and some Irish ware, as yet undated, that prove that pottery, especially unglazed, could survive but classic medieval wares were noticeable by their absence.

Metal

The metal from Woodstown 6 consisted of over 1,473 nails. These included 275 clench nails that would have been used in shipbuilding or window and door construction. Some iron wedges were also found that could have been used to split tree trunks, which in turn could have been associated with upstanding wooden structures or the building and maintenance of ships. A number of woodworking axes and iron hammers were found; one woodworking axe was recovered from the enclosure ditch. Large amounts of iron smelting debris were recovered, as were lesser quantities of copper-alloy, silver and lead debris.

Domestic material

The evidence for domestic activity came from 10 spindle whorls that were used in hand-spinning, and two possible iron shears. Hinge pivots found on site may have been used to hang doors and windows in domestic buildings. General everyday grooming objects consisted of copper-alloy tweezers and fragments of burnt bone, some of which were combs. Four thatch-weights were also recovered which would have been used for weighing down thatch.



Illus. 2—Viking-type five-lobed sword pommel, which measures 67 mm by 27 mm by 42 mm (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

Stone

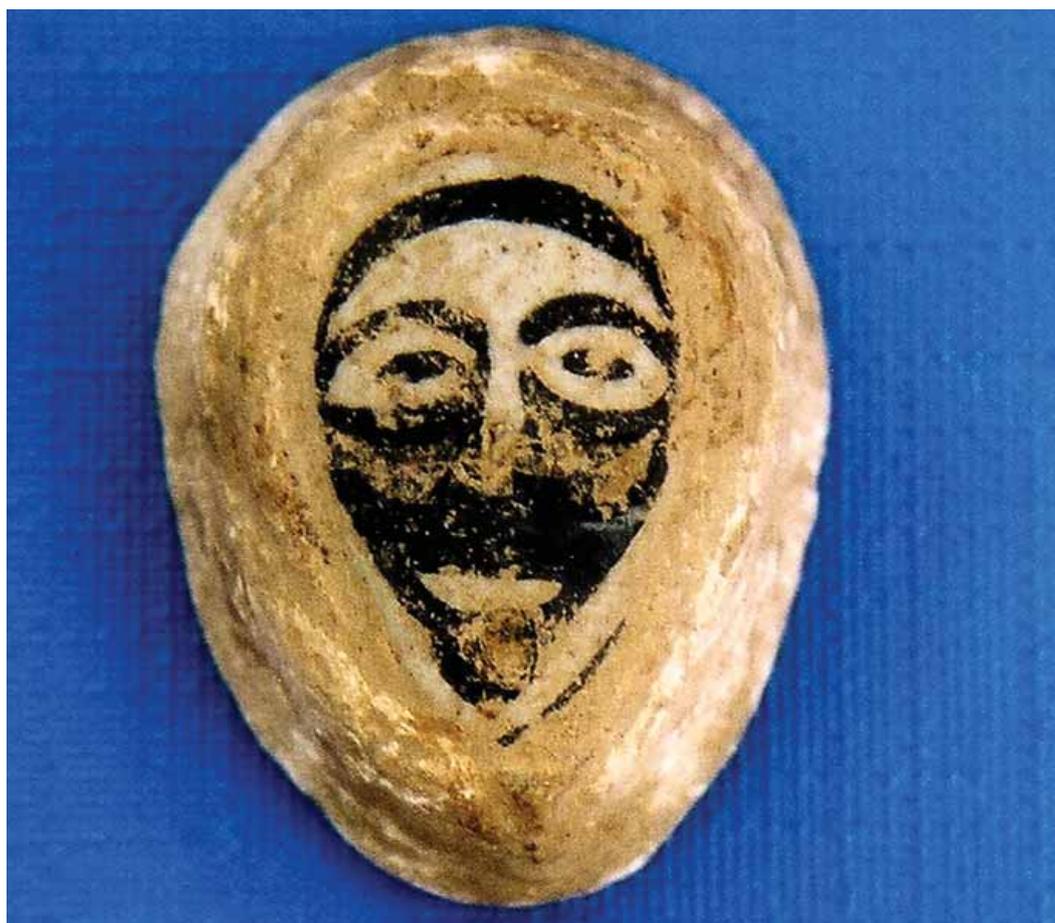
There was a wide variety of stone finds. Some were referred to above, but in addition there were a number of sharpening stones (for knives or pins). Some of these are made of ragstone schist that might have come from Norway or Scotland. There were some very fine examples of rotary burnishing stones used to polish metal. A horizontal piece of wood, attached to a handle, was inserted through the central perforation and thus the stone could be rotated efficiently. The rotary burnishing stones can be looked at in a new light as these were previously thought to have been found exclusively on Viking sites in Ireland (Sheehan *et al.* 2001), but all the rotary stones from datable contexts at Woodstown pre-dated the Viking occupation of the site.

Weaponry

Grave goods from a single burial found outside the enclosure consisted of a sword, shield boss, shield mount, battle-axe, spearhead, perforated honestone and ring pin. Apart from the example recovered from the grave, three Viking-type sword pommels (Illus 2), two iron spearheads, a possible dagger pommel of unknown date and a probable Iron Age spear butt were found in the topsoil.

Trade

A total of 208 lead pan weights (Illus. 3), c. 30 pieces of hack silver (made up of hacked ingots and other pieces) with some complete copper-alloy ingots, and one complete silver ingot weighing 22 grams were found, predominantly in the topsoil. The lead weights peaked at 11 grams and 22 grams respectively. This suggested the weights were used in



Illus. 3—Decorated lead pan weight or gaming counter. It is 23 mm by 17 mm by 12 mm and weighs 19 grams (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

weighing silver, as were indicated also by similar evidence from late Viking Dublin. The recovery of a number of stamped and unstamped silver arm-rings suggests that these were manufactured on site. In addition, there were solidified molten silver nodules and two lead weights that had obviously spilled out of broken moulds. These finds further suggest the manufacture of silver ingots and lead weights on site. A fragment of a *Kufic* coin (Illus. 4) from Arabia represented the first such discovery in Munster (Sheehan 1998) and challenges preconceived notions concerning the distribution of these coins in Ireland.

Some glass and amber beads and an ivory bead—possibly walrus from the north Atlantic—were indicative of further trade influences. They were found in the earlier phases of the enclosure ditch, securely dated from radiocarbon samples to the period AD 400–560 (see Appendix 1).

Ecclesiastical objects

There was a possible book clasp, perhaps used at one time to bind a vellum manuscript. An escutcheon or clasp was also found, possibly from a house shrine (i.e. a decorative metal box to hold the relics of a saint). Lastly, a beautifully ornate circular mount with gold foil (Illus.



Illus. 4.—Fragment of a silver Kufic coin, which measures 9 mm by 7 mm by 1 mm (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)



Illus. 5—Copper-alloy stud mount (30 mm in diameter) with gold foil (Studio Lab)

5) may also have come originally from a house shrine. All of these objects are interpreted as fragments of sacred books or objects of early medieval date. Either the pre-Viking site at Woodstown was an Irish monastery or these fragments represent objects brought from elsewhere to the Viking settlement, either as loot or tribute.

Conclusion

It is unclear how many of the finds can be designated as purely Viking or Irish from the total artefactual assemblage, as 89% were recovered from the topsoil. But a number were securely dated to the pre-Viking levels of the enclosure ditch. A lot of finds can and do overlap into both Viking and pre-Viking categories. This illustrates the difficulty of trying

to draw conclusions from a topsoil assemblage and underscores the importance of finds that are securely stratified.

There is a possibility that the pre-Viking enclosure was a monastery and objects like the escutcheon and mounts could have been made on site in that phase by monks, and not looted from elsewhere by the Vikings. This theory is purely speculative until further work is carried out. In either case, this site offers a unique opportunity to view a period of overlap between native Irish rural settlement and early Viking settlers in the early medieval period.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Dr Patrick Quinney for the statistical information, the Director and staff of the National Museum of Ireland, and John Sheehan of University College Cork for examination of the silver artefacts.