Dublin's waterfront at Wood Quay: 900-1317

P F Wallace

Excavations have been conducted by the National Museum of Ireland in the old city of Dublin since 1962 (NM1 1973; Ó Ríordáin 1973). While the previous excavations have shed considerable light on the dwelling places and the industrial sectors into which the early medieval town may have been divided as well as revealing considerable information on contemporary crafts and art, the current waterfront excavations at the 1.6ha Wood Quay site (Fig 106) have provided new data on the development of the port, the earliest defences, and the date of the earliest stone wall, in addition to detailed topographical information. The excavations also uncovered evidence for early shipping, shipbuilding, and carpentry in addition to the quays. Unevenly documented details, such as the impact of Norman trade before the AD 1169 Anglo-Norman invasion, the differences between the material cultures of the Vikings and the Anglo-Normans, the Influence of native Celtic material culture on that of the Vikings, and the continuity of urban property boundaries from the 10th to the 13th centuries have all been assisted by the recent discoveries.

Nine stages (Fig 107) by which Dublin's medieval waterfront was advanced into the tidal estuary of the river Liffey between the 10th and 14th centuries have been uncovered since 1974. Earthen banks of the 10th and 11th centuries, a stone wall of about AD 1100, a series of wooden quay revetments of the 13th, and an early 14th century(?) stone quay wall have been unearthed (Wallace 1976; Wallace 1979; Wallace, forthcoming). The site is bisected roughly from east to west by a stone wall, built around AD 1100, which delimits the pre-Norman town. Since 1977 the excavation programme has concentrated on the pre-Norman (10th–12th centuries) area south of this wall, while the 1974–76 programme dealt with the area north of the wall which was reclaimed during the expansion of the port in the 13th century, when Ireland and especially Dublin shared in the great expansion of European trade and commerce.

The massive extent of the gradual encroachment on the Liffey in the Middle Ages becomes obvious if the hypothetical line of the original shore is compared with that of the late medieval quays. An indication of the line of the ancient shore is provided by the number of borings and observations made by the Geological Survey of Ireland between 1903 and 1915 (Camplugh *et al* 1903, 88–91; Haughton 1945, 55), when a wide spread of river alluvium was found to overlie a large area of the Boulder Clay on which Dublin is built. This indicated that the Liffey was originally much broader than it is now. Recent excavations have confirmed the position of the alluvium along Wood Quay and the importance of the medieval high-water line in relation to the siting of flood banks and the earliest defensive embankment.

Whilst the Liffey was wide and tidal, it was also fairly shallow; the shallowness seems to be the main reason for 13th century attempts to increase the draught of water for the increased size of contemporary ships. This problem was to continue even after the 17th century when the active port and docks area had moved eastwards in search of deeper water in the direction of the mouth of the river. The river was also fast-flowing and subject to flash floods

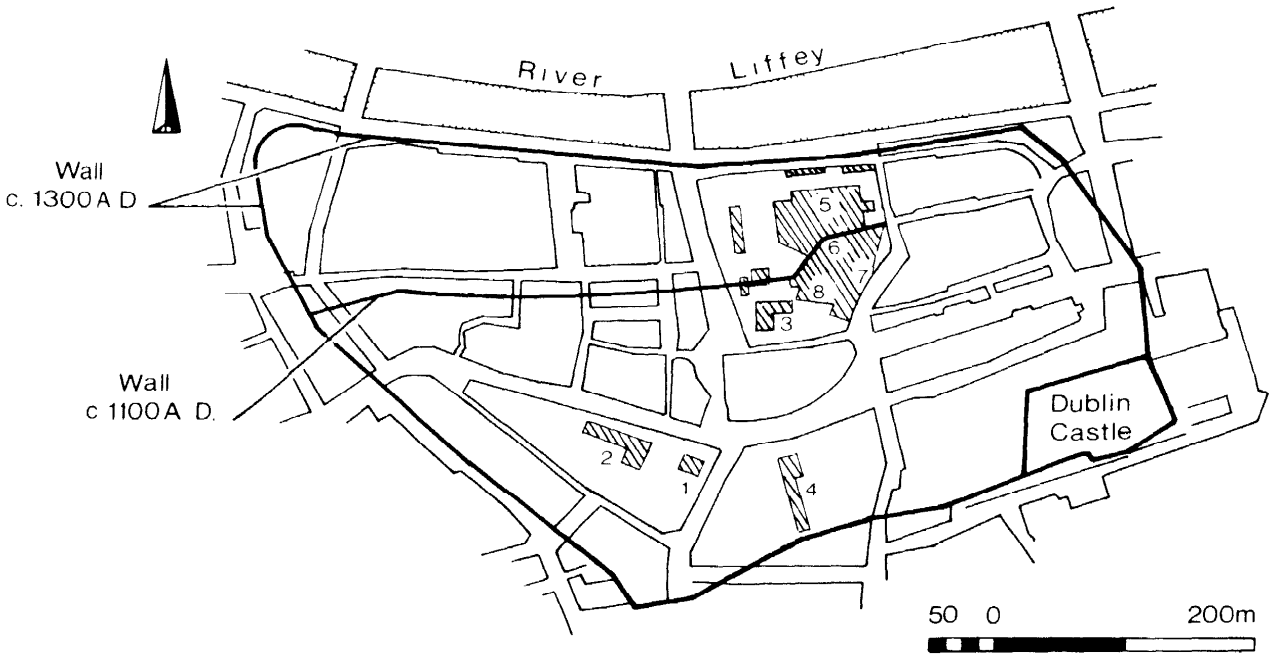

Fig 106 *Old City of Dublin showing line of stone walls, extent of original littoral, and sites of excavations.* 1 *High Street I, 1962-3;* 2 *High Street II, 1967-72;* 3 *Winetavern Street, 1969-73;* 4 *Christchurch Place, 1972-5;* 6 *Fishamble Street I, 1975-6 (all directed by B ò Riordan);* 5 *Wood Quay, 1974-6;* 7 *Fishamble Street II, 1975-;* 8 *St John's Lane, 1978-(all directed by P F Wallace)*

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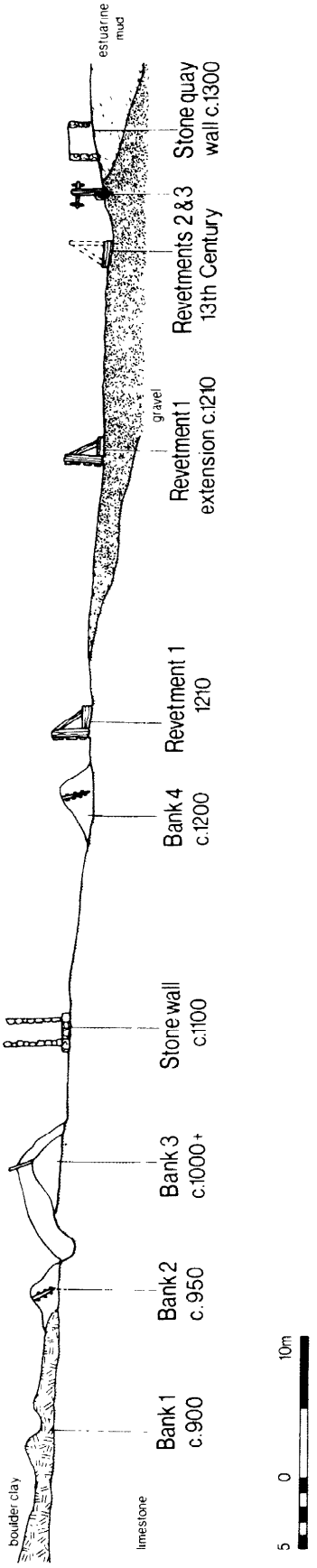

Fig 107 Dublin's medieval waterfront at Wood Quay: schematic cross-section to show positions of waterfronts from 10th to early 14th century

(Semple 1776), as is suggested by its original name in Irish, *Ruirteach* (Little 1952; Clarke H B 1977, 32) which means 'tempestuous', *Laoife* or Liffey (Byrne 1973, 150) then being applied to the plain west of Dublin through which the river flowed to the sea.

History records the earliest Viking foundation at Dublin as the AD 841 *longphort* or ship fortress, but no definite trace of this has come to light in the course of the excavations. It was built on the high spur of ground overlooking the river where the city was to develop and expand in the 10th and 11th centuries. The *longphort* was probably built at the confluence of the Liffey and its southern tributary, the Poddle, just east of the present Wood Quay site. While there is as yet no archaeological evidence for a pre-Viking township at Dublin, scholars have recently looked afresh at historical references (Little 1952) and topographical indications (Clarke HB 1977) which seem to suggest the existence of a monastic foundation of quasi-urban character. Even if such monastic establishments are accepted as proto-towns (Delaney 1977, 48-9), it is generally agreed that the Vikings were responsible for the establishment of the first real Irish towns (Butlin 1977, 11 -27) as Ireland was brought firmly into the mainstream of a north European commerce based largely on trade routes pioneered by the Scandinavians.

The earliest waterfront, AD 900- 1169

Bank 1

Recent work at Wood Quay has shown that low flood bank(s) were scarped out of boulder clay above the high-water line, probably in the early 10th century. These were not more than lm high and do not appear to have been topped with palisades. It is not clear yet if there is more than one of these banks or if they are concentric. It seems that they were primarily intended to keep the Viking properties on the slope above the foreshore dry. TWO skeletons, one male and one female and both orientated east-west, were found buried in the Boulder Clay at this level.

Bank 2

Sometime later, probably about AD 950, an extensive embankment was erected along the high-water line of the shore. Although conceived as a unit, it seems to have been built in a number of sections. This bank was partially built on top of dumped organic refuse including animal bones, discarded carcases, layers of sewage and moss, and was stabilized at its core by a post-and-wattle boundary fence against which was heaped the earth and gravel of which the bank was built. It appears to have been bonded in estuarine mud and was placed on the rising ground of the river bank, making its external aspect much higher than its internal. It would seem that the bank was started at the east of the site towards Fishamble Street and in the direction of the original *longphort*, where it was protected from the erosive action of the tidal river by a post-and-wattle breakwater secured in a channel cut into the rocky foreshore. A cobbled stone pathway may have existed just inside and parallel to the bank along this eastern section. A deep ditch *c* 1.60m in depth and *c* 2m in width was cut into the natural limestone bedrock immediately outside the central section of this bank. This can hardly have been defensive and may

Fig 108 Wood Quay, Dublin: mortised boards which originallyfronted the 10th century Bank 2 reused in the 11th century Bank 3

have been intended to retain water at low tides to facilitate docking ships. A boarded slipway(?) comprised of wide ashen boards set edge-to-edge on the outer slope of part of this bank, to which they were originally pegged through square mortises in their broad faces, may have facilitated the beaching or launching of boats (Fig 108). The most western part of this embankment was constructed on the higher-rising Boulder Clay well above the water line. The total extent of this structure is not known, as it extends beyond the confines of the excavation. The fact that the bank appears to follow higher ground at the west of the site where it appears to turn south-westwards suggests that this feature may not have been solely connected with the waterfront but may have encircled the early township, fulfilling an enclosing defensive function as well as the docking facility it seems to afford along part of the shore. The bank was built from east to west, encompassing exposed bedrock, natural sands and gravels, and Boulder Clay as it progressed westwards across the site.

Bank 3

Probably about AD 1000, a more substantial embankment built in at least four different stages was erected outside or farther out in the bed of the Liffey than that just described. The breakwater basketry of the early bank was partly used to retain the later bank, which was also protected by a post-and-wattle breakwater. Gravel, stones, and earth were used in the construction of this bank, which was reinforced by discarded post-and-wattle screens and by bundles of brushwood. Some of the boards which faced the outer slope of Bank 2 were turned over and used to stabilize the redeposited estuarine mud which forms part of Bank 3, showing the shortness of the time which elapsed between the final use of one bank and the erection of its replacement. This bank also had a series of long poles laid at right-angles to its long axis. These were either for reinforcing and bonding the loose ingredients of which it was comprised or, more likely, used to support palisades or fences. A post-and-

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