Vikings in Ireland

From raiders to traders

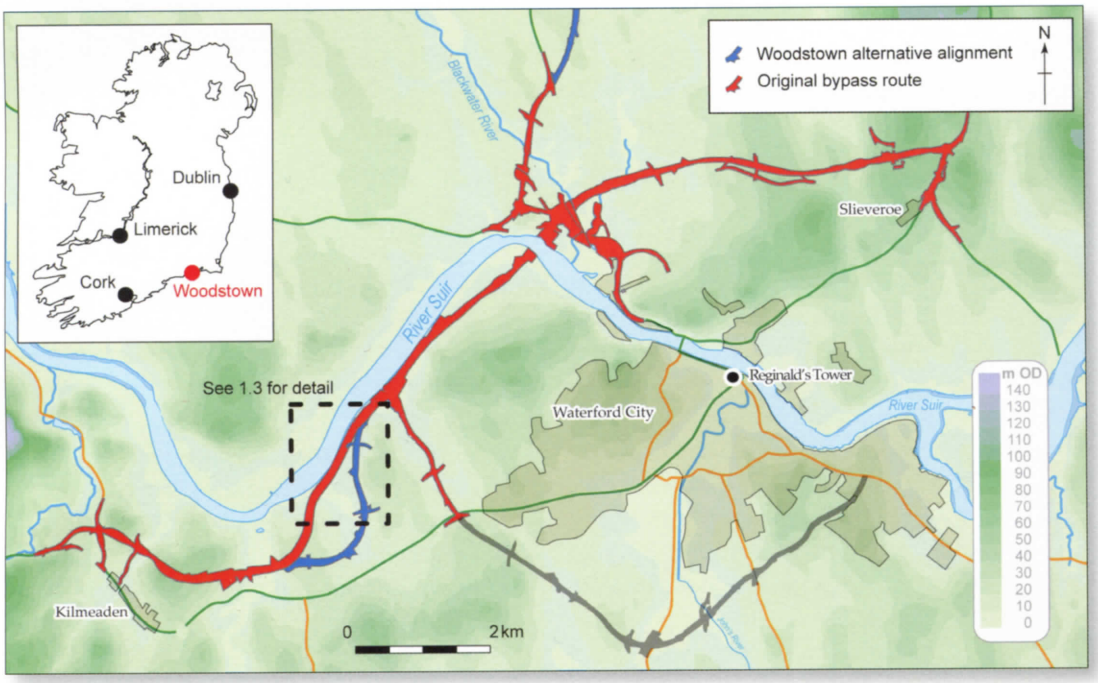
The discovery in 2003 of a major Viking-era settlement during the construction of the Waterford City Bypass attracted international attention. The definitive report on the resulting excavations has just been published, and it vindicates the decision by the National Roads Authority to re-route the road and preserve most of the site *in situ*. Chris Catling reports.

ALL IMAGES: Ian Russell, unless otherwise stated

It is not often that you hear the phrase 'we owe a great debt to the Vikings'; more often the Vikings are portrayed as unmitigated villains. But archaeologists in Waterford, south-east Ireland, have revealed a rather different side to the Vikings. Indeed, their work has led Councillor James Tobin of Waterford City and County Council to express pride in the city's Viking heritage, and stake a claim for Waterford as Ireland's 'oldest city', on the grounds that the settlement the Vikings established on the south bank of the River Suir around AD 914 'brought Ireland into close commercial contact with Europe and the wider world' and led to 'the establishment of Ireland's first permanent international trading centre that in time became our first city'.

ABOVE Overlooking Woodstown, a townland on the River Suir that is home to a major Viking settlement – and arguably Ireland's 'oldest city'.

Underpinning this proud proclamation was the accidental discovery of a second riverside settlement in flat fields flanking the south-eastern bank of the River Suir, some 9km (5.6 miles) upstream of the centre of Waterford. The site lies in the townland (an ancient Gaelic form of land division) of Woodstown. The name seems to be



LEFT The location of the Viking site in relation to modern Waterford.

BELOW Excavations ahead of the Waterford City Bypass uncovered a wealth of Viking finds, including the grave of an individual who had been laid to rest with typically 'male' artefacts including a sword.

of comparatively recent origin, and there are no annalistic references to the site; nothing showed up on aerial photographs either (though in hindsight, subsequent examination of the photographs indicated the very faintest outline of an enclosure). All seemed clear to route the path of the planned N25 Waterford City bypass through the fields bordering the river, and so construction work began, initially designed to redirect existing water courses into culverts that would eventually pass beneath the proposed bypass.

The Vikings emerge

Just in case, however, archaeologists used metal detectors to check the topsoil as it was removed from the site. Vast amounts of iron started to come up, but most of this was modern, scattered across the site by years of cultivation and deriving from farmyards, sheds, workshops, and the nearby railway line. However, among the modern scrap, older material began to emerge, and hints of the age and nature of this material were revealed when the sieving produced a considerable quantity of Viking-era grindstones and whetstones, once used to sharpen tools and weapons, along with ceramic finds consisting largely of metalworking crucibles.

Geophyiscal surveys were rapidly carried out. Among the more recent field boundaries and drainage ditches, evidence was picked up indicating the line of two enclosure ditches, with a gap that was interpreted as a possible entrance. These enclosed areas surrounded an unusually large number of pits and magnetic soil anomalies associated with the sort of intense burning that occurs around hearths and kilns. Test trenches then began to fill out the picture, not least when the trench that was used to examine a possible entrance to one of the enclosures found extensive evidence for metalworking and a Viking-era grave furnished with weapons indicating that the deceased was probably male.

The response to the finds was exemplary: the site was declared a national monument in February 2005 and the route of the bypass was replanned so as to preserve the remains of the Woodstown site *in situ*. A working group was set up to plan a limited programme of targeted excavation that would leave most of the site intact but would answer key questions about the site: in the event, less than 10 per cent of the area within

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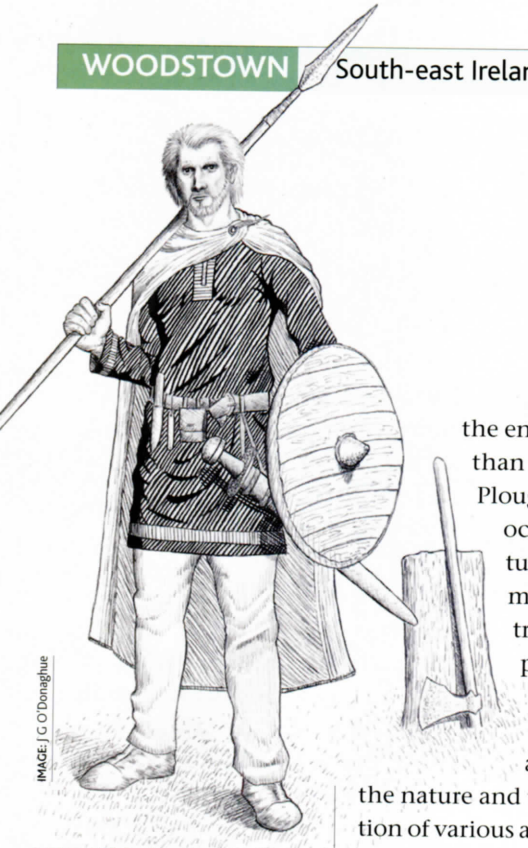


IMAGE: J G O'Donaghue

ABOVE This drawing by J G O'Donaghue, created in consultation with Stephen Harrison, re-imagines the man whose grave was uncovered at Woodstown, based on the excavated evidence.

> The *longphort* is a site of semi-permanent Viking encampment that might have started out as a pirate lair.

the enclosures was excavated, and less than half of this was fully excavated. Ploughing had already truncated the occupation levels so the 757 features that were recorded consisted mostly of features that had penetrated through to the subsoil: pits, post- and stake-holes, ditches, slot trenches, and hearths. Even so, this was sufficient to provide a great deal of information about the nature and use of the site, and the distribution of various activities within the enclosures.

Hiding out in Woodstown?

Carbon dates obtained from charcoal sealed within various pits, hearths, and ditches place the focus of activity at Woodstown in the hundred years between AD 850 and 950. There is a strong correlation between these dates and the artefactual assemblage, with most of the dateable material centred around the second half of the 9th century, and into the opening decades of the 10th century. The Viking-style furnished burial and the Scandinavian influence on the form of the dateable artefacts all go to reinforce the view that Woodstown was a Viking settlement, perhaps occupied intermittently during the late 9th and early 10th century.

It has been suggested that the site might be the type referred to in early medieval Irish annals as a *longphort*. This is usually translated as 'ship place' or 'ship fortress'. A generally accepted definition is that these were sites of semi-permanent Viking encampment that might have started out as pirate lairs or a base in which a Viking fleet might take shelter and from which it could carry out raids.

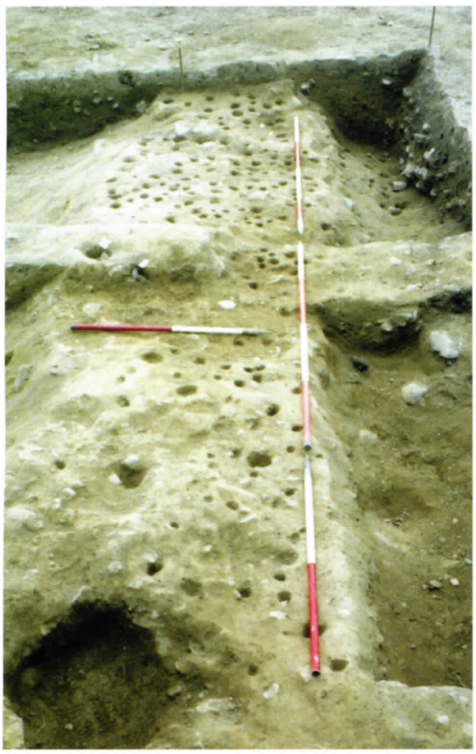
The annals do not name any identifiable *longphort* sites, so we are left guessing as to their form and function. The sort of site that has been labelled as a *longphort* in Ireland, the UK, and on the Continent typically consists of a D-shaped riverside enclosure, with the riverbank forming the straight side of the 'D' and a rampart on the landward side. The river frontage can vary in length from 100m to 500m, and the enclosure can measure from 50m to 200m at the widest point. Favoured locations include flat land surrounded by marshes, or small islands within fenland or wide rivers.

This exactly describes the Woodstown site, except that the Viking settlement here is defined by two D-shaped enclosures – in effect forming a shallow 'B' shape. The area where the two enclosure ditches appear to intersect was not investigated, so the physical connection between the two, and their stratigraphic relationship, remains unproven. The location of the grave and a possible entrance associated with the smaller of the

BELOW An aerial view of the site that shows the location of the (backfilled) excavation trenches, which were opened beside the River Suir.

BELOW RIGHT Like a number of other Viking-era camps known in Ireland, Britain, and Continental Europe, the Woodstown settlement was defined by D-shaped enclosures.

PHOTOS: StudioLab; BKS Surveys Ltd



PHOTOS: ACS

ABOVE A series of stake-holes provide evidence for the defensive bank protecting Enclosure 1, which may have been topped with a timber palisade. Within the fill of the corresponding ditch were traces of a smithing hearth, suggesting that the defences were no longer significant in the later stages of the enclosures' use.

two – Enclosure 1 – could be taken as indicating that it predates the larger Enclosure 2, located to the south of the first.

The limit of the southern enclosure was set by the swampy area to the south where the Killoteran stream joins the main River Suir. All told, the two ditches enclose an area that fits the general pattern: 460m in length and 150m in width, encompassing just under three hectares (7.5 acres). Little evidence survived at Woodstown to enable the scale of the enclosure bank to be determined: what remained of the ditch was between 2.4m and 4m wide and from 0.5m to 1.8m deep. Post-holes and stake-holes were found representing a palisade set at an oblique angle. The identification of an entrance rests on the presence of a metalled surface and of the grave, which suggests that the location was significant, but no evidence was found for a defensive gatehouse. Taken together, the ploughed-out remains hint at substantial defences, but large amounts of metallurgical waste were dumped into one of the enclosing ditches close to the entrance, which suggests that these defences eventually lost their initial significance.

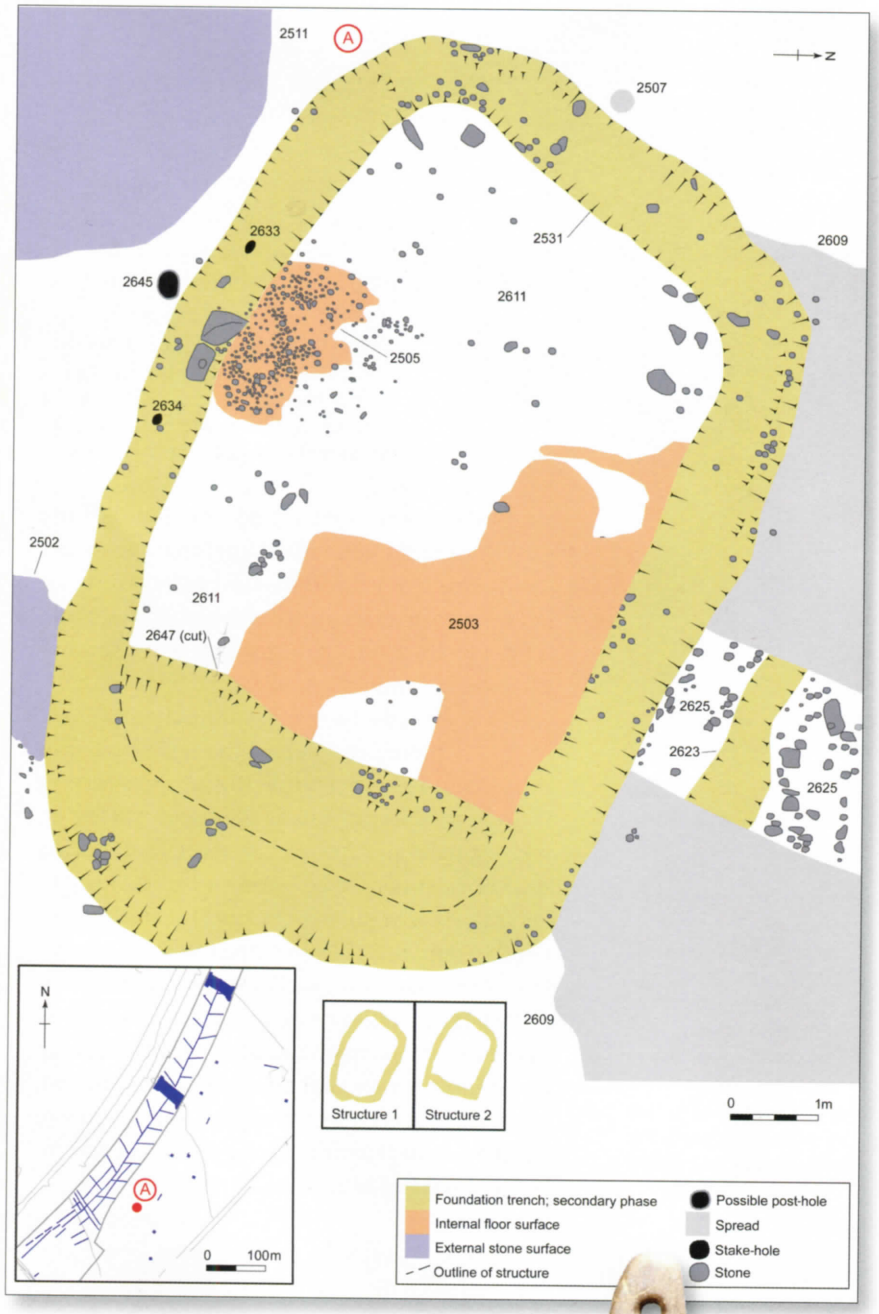
Homes for antiheroes

The limited width (2m) of the test trenches dug across the site made it difficult to identify house plans among the many post-holes and slot trenches found during excavation, but one complete ground plan was recorded during the excavation of a larger area, measuring 13m by 10m, in Enclosure 2. This was a sub-rectangular building with rounded corners, with an internal clay floor, surrounded by external surfaces made of stone cobbles set into clay. At least two phases of construction were found: one dated by charcoal to the period from AD 780 to 1014, and the later one to the period AD 885 to 1013. A 2m-wide doorway in the western wall was defined by two large stones set within the fill of the foundation trench, one of which had a shallow circular depression in the top, interpreted as the hinge pivot for a wooden door.

The foundation trenches for the first phase measured 8.4m by 5.4m; the later phase had the effect of reducing the length of the long walls by about 1.4m, to 7m, and the floor area from 45

PHOTOS: ACS

LEFT This sub-rectangular house, shown before excavation, had a pivot-stone at its entrance (BELOW), suggesting the presence of a door.



ABOVE A plan of the sub-rectangular house, showing its foundation trenches and clay and cobbled surfaces. Some of the finds from this house were fairly typical of a Viking-era settlement, including whetstones (RIGHT), while others, such as the fragment of a mount with partial Latin inscription (FAR RIGHT), were more unusual.

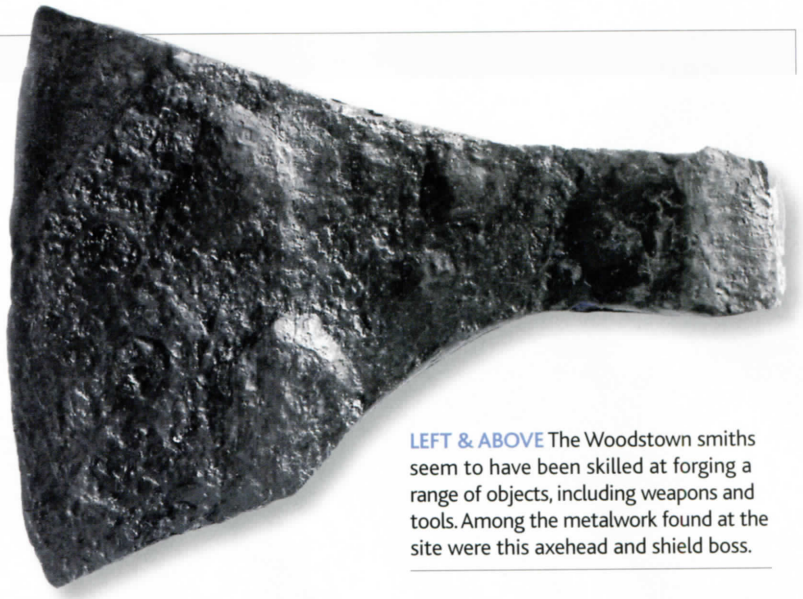
to 38 square metres. The finds recovered from the floor surfaces and foundation trenches included glass beads, amber fragments, and a mount bearing a Latin inscription, but also whetstones and crucible fragments, so it is difficult to say whether the structure was primarily industrial or had a shared industrial and domestic function.

In both cases, one would have expected a hearth or areas of burning; the absence of either is just one of several anomalies that make this structure unique in Ireland and difficult to parallel in Britain or Scandinavia: these include the lack of any internal divisions (houses of this period are typically divided into three areas) and the absence of internal roof supports. The evidence from the foundation trenches suggests that this was a lightweight timber structure of bowed walls, built either from vertical or horizontal planks that bore the whole weight of the roof. Though the size of the building fits well within the range for similar mid-size Viking-era houses excavated in Dublin and Waterford, this type of bow-ended long-house is more likely to derive from Scandinavian building traditions than local ones.

A hive of activity

Understanding the site, and the organisation and use of the space within the enclosure, is largely based on the finds, and these show that metal-working was the major activity. The authors of the report say guardedly that 'it cannot be stated with certainty that any one part of the site was favoured for industry or for habitation in preference to another'. No areas could be identified that were exclusively used for residential or industrial activities, and no evidence could be found for streets, roads, paths, ritual areas or private spaces. To someone seeking tidiness, order, and zoning, the Woodstown settlement looks very messy: the one building identified at the site could have been used for both industrial and residential purposes, and forges spilled out from the enclosure into the defensive ditch.

This was, to use a modern phrase, a 'hive of industry', engaged in smelting and smithing to make a great range of iron objects, and the people



IMAGES: Claudia Köhler

LEFT & ABOVE The Woodstown smiths seem to have been skilled at forging a range of objects, including weapons and tools. Among the metalwork found at the site were this axehead and shield boss.

of Viking Woodstown lived in, on, and among the substantial amounts of slag that resulted from metalworking. The iron ores smelted at Woodstown appear to be derived predominantly from bog-iron, as was true of most Viking-era ironworking all over northern Europe: ores, that is, that were harvested from peat bogs and springs where the iron contained in springs and ground water oxidises to form nodules that can vary in size from pea-grit to substantial boulders. The furnaces at Woodstown were used for smelting and refining this ore, and then forging weapons, knives, axes, and other tools.

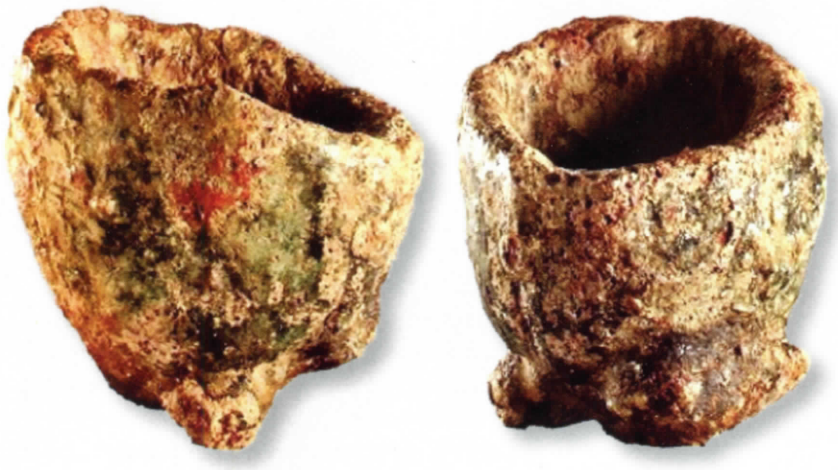
Some of the metal finds are indicative of other industrial processes, including the building and repair of sea-going vessels. Further evidence for boat-building comes from the large number of nails and roves – dish-shaped washers – that were key to the construction of the clinker-built vessels used by the Vikings, with their overlapping planks. The types of round-shanked nails found at the site are characteristic of Scandinavian-type boats of the period, and the lengths of the nails point to their use in large boats rather than ships, some of them more like rowing boats of only a few metres in length.

Re-reading the past

Such observations lead to the question of what the Vikings were doing here. The belief that Woodstown was engaged in trade, rather than simply maintaining their own ships and producing weapons and tools for the use of the settlement itself, is based on the sheer amount of activity and production going on here, and the amount of chopped-up silver found at the site. The Woodstown silver assemblage not only consists of a large number of comparatively small pieces of silver, it was also found in association with a large number of lead weights, providing the best evidence ever found in Ireland for the use of weights and silver together. In other words, this is not silver that has been cut up prior to casting into ingots or jewellery: it is silver that is used as a substitute for coinage, cut to a standard weight and value.

It has already been observed that there is nothing recorded in Irish annals that can be linked directly to the Viking presence at Woodstown: tempting as it is nevertheless to try to link the Woodstown settlement to the Viking fleet that was defeated by the king of Osraige in what is now Waterford Harbour in the 850s and 860s, it is not possible to prove that the Woodstown *longphort* served as the base for any specific Viking raids. Some fragments of decorated metalwork found among the cut-up silver might have had an ecclesiastical origin, but the most commonly represented source of decorated metalwork among the silver assemblage is the horse harness.

BELOW The large amount of hacksilver found at Woodstown suggests that its inhabitants were trading with other communities, using the cut-up metal by weight for its bullion value.



ABOVE A number of flat-bottomed crucibles highlight the large-scale metalworking that was taking place at this site.

Instead, the overwhelming evidence for industry and trade, including such smaller-scale craft activities as the working of glass, stone, amber, and lignite, leads to the conclusion that Woodstown represents a period of change in the nature of Scandinavian activity in Ireland. David Griffiths, author of *Vikings of the Irish Sea* (*CA* 245), makes the point that Viking Age raiders from Scandinavia began to prey on the Irish coast in increasing numbers from the last decade of the 8th century, but soon they began to point their prows inland, towards the agricultural and ecclesiastical riches of Ireland's interior. 'Feasting', he writes, 'on new resources, but now deprived of the freedom to strike unseen from a clear horizon, they became entangled in local bargaining, feuds and alliances, and the effects of these relationships changed the invaders' culture and outlook forever'.

Griffiths goes on to argue that, in contrast to the popular image, not all Vikings were predators, terrorising their victims into submission. Sometimes they encountered weak and helpless victims, but just as often they faced confident, powerful, and resourceful local leaders who could fight back and exact a high price from the would-be raiders, or negotiate with them and reach an agreement (as happened in Normandy, for example) whereby one group of Vikings was granted land in return for acting as mercenaries, fighting off other Viking raiders.

Nothing then was certain for the Vikings, and they needed places of retreat, secure moorings for their boats, defensible places for conserving and renewing their resources. We know of a number of such riverside fortresses, but most of them tend to be very short-lived – used for one winter, perhaps – and the lack of robust features combined with the unstable riverine environment means that we have very little evidence for what they looked like and how they were used. Two of the best known are at Repton, in Derbyshire (*CA* 100), and at Torksey, in Lincolnshire (*CA* 281), both on the River Trent. Metal-detecting at Torksey has produced a rich assemblage of cut-up silver, coins, and weights, but – as at Woodstown – the evidence for structures associated with these finds is proving elusive. A site on the River Ouse near York, discovered by metal-detecting and investigated by the late Richard Hall, presents a similar picture.

Some of these sites seem to have lasted longer than others, and to have developed a different character over time: they might have begun life as the sort of place that the Irish annals call a 'ship camp', or *longphort*, but the carbon dates for Woodstown indicate activity lasting for more than a century, though whether continuous or intermittent we do not yet know. The finds from Woodstown are not what we might expect of a warrior encampment or raiding base: nor are the people who lived and worked here parasitical, grabbing what they need from the hard work and production of vulnerable monks or farmers. Spindle whorls, loom weights, and a bangle fragment offer tantalising hints that women were present at the site, which again argues that this was something different from the base of a roving band of male raiders.

BELOW Fragmentary finds like this piece of brooch provide tantalising evidence that there were women living at Woodstown too, and that the site was more than simply a base for roving raiders.

> Sometimes the Vikings encountered weak and helpless victims, but just as often they faced confident, powerful, and resourceful local leaders.

LEFT Lead weights and a cast-glass human face highlight the combination of trading and skilled craftsmanship that was taking place at Woodstown during its Viking-era occupation.

Changing lifestyles

Ultimately it seems that Woodstown was abandoned in favour of the new Viking settlement at Waterford, about which, once again, we know very little, other than that it too was involved in smelting and metalworking in the area of the city where Reginald's Tower now stands, at a date between AD 898 and 1018. It is possible that Waterford was founded by settlers from Woodstown, moving *en masse* to the new and better site at a more accessible point on the river, closer to the sea. The Waterford site might have proved more suitable for building jetties than Woodstown, where the fast currents might have hampered the loading and unloading of bulky cargo, such as iron ore. It is equally possible that Waterford was founded by another Viking group: there is no reason to believe that Woodstown was a unique settlement along the banks of the Suir in the 9th and early 10th centuries; if there were multiple settlements, it is inevitable that sooner or later some would develop while others would be abandoned, depending on their suitability as settlement and industrial sites.

The significance of Woodstown derives from the fact that we have precious few examples of transitional sites representing the change of lifestyle from raiding to trade, settlement, and eventually to urbanisation in northern Europe, as represented by the Viking-founded towns of York, Dublin, and Waterford itself. What is more, the discovery of a site like Woodstown demonstrates that annals are useful as evidence, but partial: they tell dramatic tales of battles and raids, often in graphic detail. They seem less interested in the dull business of day-to-day industry and trade: that being the case, if a site of the size, importance, and longevity of Woodstown can escape notice by the chroniclers of early medieval Ireland, what other sites might be left to discover?

FURTHER READING

Ian Russell, Maurice F Hurley, and James Eogan (eds), *Woodstown: a Viking-Age settlement in Co. Waterford*, Four Courts Press, £35.00, ISBN 978-1846825361.