

What is a Viking?



The Old Norse term *vikingr* referred to a raider from the Scandinavian countries. So it originally referred to piratical activity, but it also came to be more generally applied to Scandinavian seafarers engaged not only in raiding, but also settlement and trading.

Moreover, from the first half of the ninth century onwards, it is likely that most of those who partook in ‘Viking’ activity in the British Isles and Ireland were actually permanent residents of those islands.

Those who settled permanently in Ireland developed a distinct culture which is often referred to for convenience as **Hiberno-Norse**. The Hiberno-Norse resided in trading towns and on farms scattered around the coasts of the Irish Sea, from coastal Ireland to the Western Isles and western coastline of Scotland.

But what did the medieval Irish call the Vikings who raided and settled in their country?

▪ Heathens

One term which we find in Irish annals referring to Viking raiders is *genti* ‘heathens’ (from Latin *gentes*, cf. Mod. Eng. ‘Gentiles’). This term remained in use until the conversion of the Scandinavian settlers in the tenth century.

Here is an example from the Annals of Ulster:

795

The burning of Rechrann by *gennti* and its reliquary was broken open and despoiled.

The Chronicle of Ireland, transl. Charles-Edwards, p. 258

▪ Foreigners

Other terms were more neutral – for example, they were identified as ‘foreigners’ (*gall*, pl. *gaill*). The *gaill* ‘foreigners’ were divided by chroniclers into *dubgaill* ‘dark foreigners’ and *findgaill* ‘fair foreigners’. We are not sure what this distinction refers to, but it does indicate that the raiders were perceived as belonging to several separate, disunited groups. A similar distinction seems to be suggested by the related terms *dubgennti* ‘dark heathens’ and *findgennti* ‘fair heathens’.

Interestingly, you also find the term *glas-ghall*, from the words *gall* + *glas* ‘grey’ – eDIL tells us that the Vikings were called this because of their steel armour.

Here is an example from the Annals of Clonmacnoise:

845

Thorgestr and the *Gaill* made a fortified camp on Lough Ree, and they plundered Connacht and Mide, and they burnt Clonmacnoise with its oratories, and Clonfert and Terryglass and Lorrha and other enclosed settlements

The Chronicle of Ireland, transl. Charles-Edwards, p. 302

▪ **People from the North / People from *Lochlann***

Other more neutral terms comment on where the raiders came from. For example, they were called *Nordmanni* ‘Northmen’.

Here is an example from the Annals of Ulster:

837

A fleet of three score ships of the *Nordmanni* on the River Boyne; another fleet of three score ships on the River Liffey. These two fleets then plundered Mag Lifi and Mag mBreg, including churches and forts and farms

The Chronicle of Ireland, transl. Charles-Edwards, p. 294

The Vikings were also said to come from *Lothlainn*, although different medieval Irish authors seem to mean different places by this name – sometimes it seems to refer to Norway, and sometimes to Viking settlements in the Hebrides or the Isle of Man.

This name *Lothlainn* is used in a ninth-century poem which was written in the margins of a medieval manuscript. It must have been written at a time when Viking raids were a real danger.

Bitter is the wind tonight,
it stirs up the white-waved sea.
I do not fear the coursing of the Irish Sea
by the fierce warriors of *Lothlind*.

Translation taken from ‘ASNC Spoken Word’ (www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/spokenword/i_isacher.php?d=tt)

In later texts, dating to the eleventh century onwards, a similar name *Lochlann* is also used, leading to the term *Lochlannach* ‘someone from *Lochlann*’. In late medieval Irish literature, *Lochlann* even becomes a mysterious Otherworldly place.

▪ **Vikings**

The medieval Irish did actually have a word ‘Viking’, *ucing*, which was a loan-word from the Old Norse word *vikingr*.

Who are the *Gall-Goídil*?

Annals from ninth-century Ireland start to mention people who are called the *Gall-Goídil*. But what sort of person did this refer to?

The word is made up of *gall* ‘foreigner’ + *goídel* ‘Irishman’, so it seems to mean ‘Norse-Irish’ or ‘Gaelic-Scandinavians’ – possibly ‘foreign Irish speakers’.

It clearly refers to some kind of mixing between the Irish inhabitants of Ireland and the Scandinavian raiders and settlers, but what form did this take?

Perhaps it refers to intermarriage, or to the children resulting from intermarriage – or perhaps to children from one background who were fostered and brought up by families from the other background.

The existence of the *Gall-Goídil*, with their hybrid identity, shows that distinctions between the Irish and the ‘foreigners’ were not always as clear-cut as some chroniclers would like to make out, and they became less so over time.

Here is an example from the Annals of Ulster:

856

A great war between the *gennti* and Máel Sechnaill together with the *Gall-Goídil*

The Chronicle of Ireland, transl. Charles-Edwards, p. 311

This is the first time that the *Gall-Goídil* are mentioned in the annals. Here we can see that they are fighting alongside the Irish king Máel Sechnaill against the ‘*gennti*’.

In eleventh- and twelfth-century Scotland, the term *Gall-Goídil* was used to refer to Scandinavian areas such as **Galloway**.

Activities

1. Can you match up these Irish words (and one Norse word!) with their English translations?
Hint: there may be more than one right answer.

<i>genti</i>	Viking
<i>dubgaill</i>	fair foreigners
<i>Lochlannach</i>	dark heathens
<i>vikingr</i>	heathens
<i>gaill</i>	Northmen
<i>findgennti</i>	inhabitant of <i>Lochlann</i>
<i>Nordmanni</i>	dark foreigners
<i>findgaill</i>	foreigners
<i>dubgennti</i>	fair heathens
<i>ucing</i>	

2. Can you work out what the words *dub* and *find* mean?

So what does the place-name Dublin mean? (*linn* is the medieval Irish word for ‘pool’ or ‘lake’)
Can you think of an English town with the same name?

3. Looking at the various terms that the medieval Irish used for the Viking raiders and settlers, what can we work out about how they viewed them? What sort of differences did they see between the Vikings and themselves?
4. Listen to the recording of the poem ‘Bitter is the wind tonight’ – listen out for the word *Lothlind!*
Imagine what life would have been like for a monk living in Ireland at the time of the Viking raids.
What do you think he was thinking and feeling when he wrote down this poem?

Bibliography

T. M. Charles-Edwards, transl., *The Chronicle of Ireland* (Liverpool, 2006) – available online through Liverpool University Press Online (subscription required)
Website: *The Viking Age c. 790–1066*, developed by the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge (<https://asnevikingage.wixsite.com/pilot>)



* you can look up all of these Irish words and their English translations in eDIL
(Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language): www.dil.ie

Answer Sheet

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|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. <i>vikingr</i> | Viking |
| <i>genti</i> | heathens |
| <i>gaill</i> | foreigners |
| <i>dubgaill</i> | dark foreigners |
| <i>findgaill</i> | fair foreigners |
| <i>dubgennti</i> | dark heathens |
| <i>findgennti</i> | fair heathens |
| <i>Nordmanni</i> | Northmen |
| <i>Lochlannach</i> | inhabitant of <i>Lochlann</i> |
| <i>ucing</i> | Viking |
2. *Dub* means ‘dark’ or ‘black’; *find* means ‘fair’ or ‘white’. The place-name Dublin means ‘black pool’, and refers to the tidal pool located where the River Poddle enters the River Liffey in the centre of Dublin. The Irish name for the town was *Áth Cliath* ‘ford of hurdles’: the Modern Irish name for Dublin is still *Baile Áth Cliath* ‘town of the hurdled ford’. The English town Blackpool contains the same elements of Dublin. This name may come from a drainage channel near the town which ran over a peat bog, discharging discoloured water into the sea and forming a black pool.
3. Essentially, the medieval Irish defined the Vikings with respect to the ways in which they were different from themselves.
They viewed the Vikings in terms of their religion, which was different to their own: the medieval Irish were Christians from the fifth century onwards, whereas the Vikings had a different belief system, leading the Irish to term them ‘heathens’.
They viewed the Vikings in terms of where they came from. Partly the Vikings’ origins were just identified as ‘different’ or ‘other’, leading to the term ‘foreigner’. But the medieval Irish were also more specific, identifying the Vikings as coming from the North, or from *Lochlann*, wherever this was thought to be.
We don’t know what the terms *dubgaill* ‘dark foreigners’ and *findgaill* ‘fair foreigners’ refer to. They might have related to what the Vikings looked like – perhaps to hair colour, or skin tone?
They seem to have found Viking battle equipment distinctive, seeing as they coined the term *glasghall* ‘grey foreigner’, referring to their armour.
The poem ‘Bitter is the wind’ also shows that the Irish associated the Vikings with the sea. Their means of transport was by longship, making them a formidable naval power, especially terrifying because they could suddenly appear anywhere on the coast of Ireland.
4. You can find the recording of ‘Bitter is the wind’ on the ASNC Spoken Word website:
https://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/spokenword/i_isacher.php?d=tt
The scribe is feeling relieved that the stormy weather is preventing Viking raiders from attacking his home that night, which suggests that this must have been a constant threat.

Bibliography

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Website: *The Viking Age c. 790–1066*, developed by the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge (<https://asncvikingage.wixsite.com/pilot>)

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