

# Whence and Whither, Óláfr? A short conjecture about the location of 'Laithlind'<sup>1</sup>

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IN AD 848, the Irish annals tell of Jarl Þórir (Irish *Tomrair erell*), deputy of the king of Laithlind, being killed in battle against the Irish:

*Bellum re nOlconur, ri Muman, 7 re Lorggan m. Cellaig co Laighniu for gennti ecc Sciath Nachtai(n) in quo ceciderunt Tomrair erell, tanise righ Laithlinne, 7 da cet dec inbi.*

Ólchobor, king of Mumu, and Lorcán son of Cellach, with the Laigin, won a battle against the heathens at Sciath Nechtain, in which fell the jarl Tomrair, tanist of the king of Laithlind, and two hundred about him.<sup>2</sup>

Only a few years later, in 853, Óláfr (Irish *Amlaíb*), son of the king of Laithlind, comes to Ireland:

*Amhlaim m. righ Laithlinde do tuidhecht a nErinn coro giallsat Gaill Ereann dó, 7 cis o Goidhelaib.*

Amlaíb, son of the king of Laithlind, came to Ireland, and the foreigners of Ireland submitted to him, and he took tribute from the Irish.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 I am very grateful to Clare Downham (Liverpool), Stephen Harrison (Glasgow), Arne Kruse (Edinburgh), Sigmund Oehrl (Stockholm), and Alex Woolf (St Andrews) for their helpful comments on the manuscript and their encouragement as well as their reservations regarding the 'can of worms' that is the Laithlind controversy. Any errors and inconsistencies are of course my responsibility. Thanks are also due to Shane McLeod (Tasmania) for permission to use his photo.
  - 2 *Annals of Ulster* 848, 306–7 (I changed the editors' translation of 'Lochlann' back to the 'Laithlind' of the original); cf. *Annals of the Four Masters* s.a. 846, 474–7; *Chronicon Scotorum* 848, 148–9. For the earliest references to the term, see also Ó Corráin 1998, 300–4, Etchingham 2007, 12–7, and Etchingham 2010, 80–4.
  - 3 *Annals of Ulster* 853, 312–3 (I changed the editors' translation of 'Lochlann' back to the 'Laithlind' of the original); cf. *Annals of the Four Masters* 851, 486–7; *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, §239, 94–7.

The two men's titles – 'jarl' / 'deputy of the king' and 'son of the king', respectively – indicate men of high rank and authority in a realm that in both references is demonstrated to have been 'ruled by a king, the superior of a jarl.'<sup>4</sup>

The geographical location of Þórir and Óláf's homeland, the Viking realm Laithlind, has been the subject of lively scholarly debate for many years, with opinions generally divided between placing Laithlind either in Norway or in Scotland, with the majority of scholars favouring the former option.<sup>5</sup> It cannot be the purpose of this paper to summarise and evaluate all hypotheses and arguments put forward on this issue in any detail – this has been done by others elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> In the face of scanty and occasionally doubtful evidence on this point, it instead examines a hitherto neglected approach and presents the hypothesis that Laithlind might have been located in Scotland after all.

The name 'Laithlind' (in variations also as 'Laithlinn' or 'Lothlind/Lothlend', but always with *-th* at the end of the first element), is found only four times in the historical and literary record, all dating to the middle of the ninth century. In addition to the annalistic entries quoted above, there is an Old Irish poem, written on the margin of a page of Priscian's *Institutiones grammaticae* in the Stiftsbibliothek Sankt Gallen (MS 904):

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| <i>Is acher in gaith in-nocht</i>        | The wind is fierce to-night                      |
| <i>fu-fúasna fairggæ findfolt;</i>       | it tosses the sea's white mane                   |
| <i>ní ágor réimm mora minn</i>           | I do not fear the coursing of a quiet sea        |
| <i>dond láechraid lainn úa Lothlind.</i> | by the fierce warriors of Lothlend. <sup>7</sup> |

Another quatrain is appended to an entry on the battle of Cell Ua nDaigri in the *Annals of the Four Masters* s.a. 866:

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|---|--|
| <i>Dos-fail dar Findabhair find</i>         | There comes over fair Findabair            |
| <i>fialach grinn dond Laithlind luind –</i> | a keen host from fierce <i>Laithlind</i> – |

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4 Etchingham 2010, 81 (author's italics). The reference to Tomrair is the earliest recorded instance of the term 'jarl'. According to Alex Woolf, it 'seems to have been used for a king's man holding vice-regal authority over a territory with its own traditional ethnic or regnal identity' (2007, 304). Donnchadh Ó Corráin interprets 'tanist' as denoting the king's 'heir-designate' (1998, 301).

5 Alternative hypotheses, such as Heinrich Zimmer's suggestion of the Danish island Låland, or the one by Anders Ahlqvist, based on a linguistic analysis to localise 'Lothlinn' (as opposed to 'Lochlann') as a place in Viking Dublin, did not find widespread support (Zimmer 1891, 140; Ahlqvist 2005).

6 Etchingham 2007, as well as Greene 1976; Ó Corráin 1998; Ahlqvist 2005; Valante 2008, 64–6; Dumville 2008, 356; Etchingham 2010, 80–4; 2014.

7 Quoted after Ó Corrain 1998, 303; cf. Etchingham 2007, 13.

as ar chédaibh rimhter Goill –  
do cath fri righ nÉtar n-uill.

the Foreigners are counted in hundreds –  
to do battle against the king of great Étar.<sup>8</sup>

Neither instance offers any indication where ‘Laithlind’ might be located other than that it must be overseas. It only becomes clear that it must have been a Viking kingdom from which Norse raiders set out to plunder in Ireland.

Later sources provide a starting-point. By the eleventh century, ‘Laithlind’ seems to have been replaced in the chronicles by the similar (yet possibly etymologically unrelated) ‘Lochlann’ (or ‘Lochlainn,’ with *-ch*), which was clearly meant to denote the kingdom of Norway. The *Annals of Tigernach*, for example, refer to Magnus berfœttr (‘barelegs’; †1103), king of Norway, as ‘Maghnus, ri Lochland’.<sup>9</sup> Taking the word literally and translating it as ‘lochland/land of the (sea-)lochs’, this interpretation appears almost too obvious, considering the abundance of fjords in western Norway. Accordingly, the question whether this identification could also be applied to mid-ninth-century Laithlind was often answered in the affirmative at first. Editors of the Irish chronicles translated the term as ‘Norway’ almost as a matter of course (or in fact, as ‘Lochlann’, taking its meaning as ‘Norway’ for granted),<sup>10</sup> and some scholars presented supporting evidence. Egon Wamers considers the name of the Norwegian region of Hlaðir (modern Lade) in Trøndelag as being the origin of the first element of ‘Laithlind’ and points out the presence of Irish loot in western Norwegian Viking graves: ‘*Laithlind* must have been a small but important kingdom in Norway [...(.)] so important that the name *Laithlind* later became synonymous with “Norway” itself [...(:)] the motherland in the east for the colony in the west.’<sup>11</sup> Colmán Etchingham endorses his views with enthusiasm – as well as due caution: ‘It is a perfectly plausible hypothesis – but no more than that, on the evidence – that mid-ninth-century *Laithlinn* was, in fact, a polity in Norway.’<sup>12</sup> He supports this position by identifying the chronicles’ ‘finngenti/finngail’ (literally the ‘white/fair foreigners’ – as opposed to the ‘dubgenti/dubgail’, the ‘dark/black foreigners’, both terms denoting distinct groups of Vikings) as Norwegians from Laithlind.<sup>13</sup>

8 Quoted after Ó Corrain 1998, 304 (editor’s italics); cf. Etchingham 2007, 14; cf. O’Donovan 1848, 506–7.

9 *Annals of Tigernach* [1103], 24. Cf. Etchingham 2010, 80–4; Chadwick 1983, 20; Smyth 1977; Marstrander 1911, 250–1; cf. Downham 2009, 13–6; Dumville 2008, 356; Etchingham 2007. For ‘Lochlann’ as a mythical realm, cf. Ní Mhaonaigh 2006.

10 cf. e.g. Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill 1983 (ed. *Annals of Ulster*); Radner 1978 (ed. *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*); Hennessy 1887 (ed. *Annals of Ulster*); cf. notes 2, 3 and 37.

11 Wamers 1998, 65–8 (author’s italics).

12 Etchingham 2007, 27 (author’s italics); cf. e.g. Valante 2008, 68–9; Griffiths 2010, 36.

13 Etchingham 2010.

Recently, Arne Kruse has put forward the notion that the term Laithlind (or rather \*Laipland) means 'the land along the Leið', the important sheltered passage between the islands and the coast of south-western Norway (ON 'leið' meaning 'path, route, (water)way').<sup>14</sup> He suggests that Avaldsnes on the island of Karmøy in Rogaland, possible residence of several early kings and a site rich in Insular metal finds, was the centre of the kingdom of Laithlind. Located at the entrance to the Leið, it consequently was in a position to control traffic passing through it.<sup>15</sup>

Other scholars did not agree with the equation of Laithlind and Norway. It was deemed more probable that Laithlind was used to denote another territory characterised by fjords and sea-lochs: western Scotland.<sup>16</sup>

By interpreting 'Laithlind' as the precursor of the term 'Lochlann', Donnchadh Ó Corráin argues backwards chronologically from an entry in the *Annals of Ulster* s.a. 1014, an account of the famous battle of Clontarf.<sup>17</sup> In it, Broðir, a Viking leader, is called the commander of the 'loinges Lochlannach' – of the fleet of Lochlann –, and all the lieutenants of the 'gail Lochlainne' – of the foreigners of Lochlann – have Gaelic names or sobriquets, not Scandinavian ones.<sup>18</sup> The phrase 'Gail iarthair domain'<sup>19</sup> (the foreigners of the western world), which is how the *Annals of Inisfallen* refers to the losers of the battle, is supposed to militate in favour of an origin in northern Britain and to support the impression 'that, for the contemporary annalist, *Laithlinn/Lochlainn* meant no more than the Norwegian Viking settlements in the British Isles, and more particularly those in Scotland and Man.'<sup>20</sup> Two Irish literary texts – *Cath Maige Tuired*<sup>21</sup> and *Cath Ruis na Ríg*<sup>22</sup> – allow this thesis, again according to Ó Corráin, to be referred back to the ninth century.<sup>23</sup> Only in the middle/late eleventh century, he concludes, did 'Lochlann' adopt the new meaning, focussing explicitly on Norway. Etchingam rejects Ó Corráin's argument by identifying both logical and methodological errors, and he adds that the lack of archaeological, literary, and historical evidence in favour of a Scandinavian kingdom in Scotland made the existence of such an entity

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14 But cf. ON 'leið', the yearly autumn assembly of the Vikings in Iceland, and place-names like 'Leiðvöllr', 'Leiðhólmr', or 'Leiðarnes' (see Byock 2001, 171–4).

15 Kruse 2017; cf. Skre 2017.

16 See Dolley 1966, 18–9; Sawyer 1970, 89; Ó Corráin 1998; 2000, 97, 100.

17 Ó Corráin 1998, 10–4; cf. Greene 1976, 77.

18 Cf. *Annals of Ulster* 1014, 446.

19 *Annals of Inisfallen* 1014, 184–5.

20 Ó Corráin 1998, 310 (author's italics).

21 Stokes 1891, 38, 74.

22 *Book of Leinster* 22737–51, 764.

23 Ó Corráin 1998, 310–7.

fundamentally improbable.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the question remains unanswered.

However, the activities of Óláfr, son of the king of Laithlind, and his 'brothers'<sup>25</sup> Ívarr (Irish *Ímar*) and Auðgísl/Ásl (Irish *Auisle*), as recorded in the Irish chronicles, may provide some tentative information in favour of a Scottish location of Laithlind after all.

After their take-over of the Viking settlement at Dublin in 853, Óláfr and Ívarr spent the next ten years in Ireland, consolidating their position between powerful Irish neighbours/enemies, by both warfare and diplomacy. As far as can be ascertained, they never left the island for campaigns abroad. In the mid-860s, though, the 'brothers' seem to have felt free to do just that and turn their attention to other shores, across the sea.<sup>26</sup> Ívarr, it appears, travelled to East Anglia in 864 and joined the Great Army that eventually took York in 866 and founded Norse Northumbria.<sup>27</sup> Óláfr, together with his 'brother' Auðgísl, plundered in Pictland in 866, leading an army of Vikings from both Ireland and Scotland, as recorded in the *Annals of Ulster*:

*Amlaiph 7 Auisle do dul i Fortrenn co nGallaib Erenn 7 Alban cor innriset Cruithentuaithe n-uile 7 co tucsat a ngiallo.*

Amlaíb and Auisle went with the foreigners of Ireland and Scotland to Fortriu, plundered the entire Pictish country and took away hostages from them.<sup>28</sup>

Based on an ambiguous wording in the *Scottish Chronicle* (*Chronicle of the Kings of Alba*), Alfred Smyth suggested that on this occasion, Óláfr could have spent up to three years abroad,<sup>29</sup> but Ó Corrain pointed out that the *Annals*

24 Etchingham 2007; 2010, 80–4; cf. Wamers 1998, 66–8; Graham-Campbell and Batey 2002, esp. 113–42.

25 Whether they were indeed biological brothers (or half-brothers) or rather 'brothers-in-arms', as it were, is unclear, but the point does not affect the argument.

26 Downham 2009, 17–23, 139–42; Steinforth 2018.

27 Downham 2009, 21, 64–7.

28 *Annals of Ulster* 866, 320–1; cf. *Fragmentary Annals* §328, 118–9. The identification of 'Alba' is difficult here, as it did not, in the 9th century, necessarily denote the post-(mid-)9th-century kingdom of the Scots or a realm within the confines of modern-day Scotland. Dauvit Broun suggests the term to translate 'Alba' here would be 'Britain' (2007, 71–87; cf. Dumville 1996). This would considerably widen the area in which to look for the territories referred to by the chronicler for 866 as home of Óláfr's Vikings, but it does not preclude the possibility that he thought of 'Alba' being located in Scotland after all. In fact, the *Annals of Ulster* relate that in 871, Óláfr and Ívarr were returning home to Dublin 'a Albain' after the siege of Alt Clut, which is located in Dumbarton in Scotland. And another seven years later, in Ívarr's obituary, the same source uses the term 'Britannia', so it may be assumed that it was aware of a difference between 'Alba' and 'Britannia', even if its nomenclature may not precisely reflect the political situation in the third quarter of the 9th century.

29 Smyth 1977, 143–9; *Scottish Chronicle*, 154; cf. Miller 1999, 243; Woolf 2007, 108–9.



**Fig. 1. Dumbarton Rock (*Alt Clut*) on the river Clyde (looking east towards Glasgow): site of the siege in 870 by Óláf and Ívar. The main 9th-century fortress is likely to have been located on the eastern peak** (Photo by author; courtesy of Historic Environment Scotland, Edinburgh).

of *Inisfallen* put Óláf in Lismore in 867, committing ‘treachery’.<sup>30</sup> After he had had to return to Ireland to deal with some trouble there, Óláfr soon ventured on another expedition in Scotland, in 870. This time, he joined forces with Ívar to attack Alt Clut (Dumbarton Rock; fig. 1) and take it after a long siege:

*Obsesio Ailech Cluathae a Norddmannis, .i. Amlaiph 7 Imhar, duo reges Norddmannorum obsederunt arcem illum 7 distruxerunt in fine .iiii. mensium arcem 7 predauerunt.*

The siege of Ail Cluaithe by the Norsemen: Amlaíb and Ímar, two kings of the Norsemen, laid siege to the fortress and at the end of four months they destroyed and plundered it.<sup>31</sup>

Together, the ‘brothers’ returned home to Dublin in 871, ‘bringing away with them in captivity to Ireland a great prey of Angles and Britons and Picts’.<sup>32</sup> Unless these Angles had been captured in north-western Northumbria

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30 Ó Corráin 1979, 314; *Annals of Inisfallen* 867.

31 *Annals of Ulster* 870, 326–7 (editors’ italics); cf. *Fragmentary Annals* §388, 142–3; as well as (without mentioning names) *Annales Cambriae* 870, 48, 89; *Brut y Tywysogyon* 871, 8–9, and *Brenhinedd y Saesson* 870, 22–3; cf. Alcock 1975/76, esp. 106, 110.

32 *Annals of Ulster* 871, 327; cf. *Fragmentary Annals* §393, 144–5 and *Chronicon Scotorum* 871, 162–3.

(in modern south-western Scotland), their presence among the captives might indicate that either Óláfr and Ívarr also undertook raids all the way into the south-east of Scotland or that Ívarr had brought them along from his campaigning in northern England.<sup>33</sup> The conquest and settlement of the Isle of Man by the Dublin Vikings, which was not recorded in any written sources, must have taken place during this period as well, around the year 870.<sup>34</sup> Finally, Óláfr died, probably between 872 and 874,<sup>35</sup> either – according to the *Scottish Chronicle* – while fighting against and/or gathering tribute from the Picts,<sup>36</sup> on his third known campaign in Scotland, or – according to the *Fragmentary Annals* – back in Laithlind, after having been called home by his father, the king, to help him quell an (internecine) insurrection:

*Amhlaoihb do dhol a hEirinn i Lochlainn do chogadh ar Lochlandac(h)aib 7 do congnamh rá a athair, .i. Gofridh, uair ra bhatar na Lochlannaigh ag cogadh 'na cheann-said he, ar ttiachtain ó a athair ara cheann.*

Amlaib went from Ireland to *Lochlainn* to fight the *Lochlanders* and help his father, Gofraid, for the *Lochlanders* were warring against him, his father having sent for him.<sup>37</sup>

The name of Óláfr's father given here, 'Gofraid' (Norse *Guðrøðr*), has led to confusion as it contributed to the idea that Óláfr of Laithlind, king of Dublin, might be identical with both Óláf enn hvíti (the White, son of Ingjald!), king of Dublin, and *Ynglinga saga's* Óláf Geirstaðaálfr, son of Guðrøð, king of Vestfold, and thus also to locating Laithlind in the Norwegian region of Vestfold.<sup>38</sup> Chronological difficulties in reconciling the known data of these men's lives render these equations impossible.<sup>39</sup>

Sadly, the contemporary chronicles are silent about the end of Óláfr's life. There are no independent records to confirm the details about his final voyage

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33 Cf. Downham 2017, 108.

34 See Steinforth 2015a; 2015b; 2018.

35 The *Fragmentary Annals* (§409, 146–7) mention that 'the Norwegian [sic] king (*rígh Lochlann*), i.e. Gothfráid, died of a sudden hideous disease' about this time. Very probably, they are mistaken here, and it is possible that in fact Óláfr is referred to. Still, the exact date of his death remains unknown.

36 *Scottish Chronicle (Chronicle of the Kings of Alba)*, f. 28v.b (8), 154 (cf. Miller 1999).

37 *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, §400, 144–5 (The editor translates 'Lochlainn' and 'Lochlannaigh' as 'Norway' and 'Norwegians', respectively: I changed the translation in those three instances [in italics]); cf. Ó Corráin 1998, 332.

38 Smyth 1977, 110; Smyth 1984, 155–6; cf. Storm 1880, esp. 321–4; cf. Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla, Ynglinga saga*, ch. 53–4; *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, §400, 144–5; *Landnámabók*, ch. 7, 136.

39 Steffensen 1970–3; Sawyer 1989, 26.

to Laithlind mentioned in the *Fragmentary Annals*, which were written down a considerable period of time after the events under discussion here and hence are occasionally less than reliable (although they are in accord with other sources when mentioning Óláf's earlier ventures). Accepting the story of his expedition back home to 'Laithlind/Lochlann' as the basis for a hypothesis is therefore a bit of a leap of faith – but for the sake of the argument it shall be considered here.

The fact that Óláfr (and Ívarr) campaigned in Scotland (several Irish and occasionally Welsh sources attest to their activities there) is beyond question; the debate is about permanent mid-ninth-century settlement. For this, admittedly, direct evidence is lacking – let alone for an extensive and powerful Viking kingdom capable of sending out mighty fleets to plunder in Ireland and take over Viking Dublin. Yet two instances in the chronicles must be taken into account.

Firstly, the annals' claim that in 866 Óláfr led an army of 'the foreigners from Ireland and Scotland' against the Picts strongly suggests that there were Vikings settled in Scotland (or Britain, at any rate<sup>40</sup>) at that time. Moreover, the entry makes clear that Óláfr exercised some degree of authority over these resident 'foreigners from Scotland' and indicates that they were able to join him in his expedition (i.e. were free to leave their homes without danger of being attacked by local enemies).

Secondly, when Ívarr, king of Dublin, died in 873, the *Annals of Ulster* in his short obituary styled him 'rex Nordmannorum totius Hiberniae et Britanniae' – king of all the Northmen in Ireland and Britain.<sup>41</sup> We cannot be sure what exactly the chronicler meant by the term 'Britannia', but considering Ívarr's career, campaigning in northern England as well as south-western Scotland (and possibly the Isle of Man), it seems clear that he was considered to have been ruling over Viking territories to both the west and the east of the Irish Sea.

Ó Corráin draws a sweeping conclusion from these entries, claiming that 'the evidence suggests that [by 873] Dublin was the capital of a sea-kingdom: Man and all Scotland and it is probable that Galloway and Cumbria from the Solway Firth to the Mersey formed part of the same overkingdom'.<sup>42</sup> I very much hesitate to go as far (especially regarding the range and detail of the territories specified) and only agree in general terms – that indeed by 873/4 there existed a Viking sea-kingdom, with dominions in Scotland, England, and Man, ruled by Dublin.

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40 Cf. note 28 above.

41 *Annals of Ulster* 873, 328–9; my italics.

42 Ó Corráin 2008, 431; cf. Ó Corráin 2000, 100.



Both archaeological and historical research into ninth-century Viking settlement shows a marked dichotomy between the coastal domains around the Irish Sea. In Ireland, it is well documented by both disciplines by the middle of the ninth century, but similar evidence is relatively scarce and unreliable in Scotland, England, and Wales. The archaeology in these areas is often interpreted as indicating a date for initial settlement only in the late ninth or even early tenth century. This view was also taken to apply to the Isle of Man, but I recently argued that Man was conquered by Dublin Vikings earlier than that, about 870.<sup>43</sup> It was reasoned that Viking settlement cannot necessarily be expected to produce a strong reflex in the archaeological record and that therefore the absence of evidence for (early) Norse presence must not be accepted as proof of the absence of the Norse themselves – in the Isle of Man as in other areas of Viking settlement, such as south-western Scotland and north-western England.<sup>44</sup>

A look at the names of polities in Scotland mentioned in the contemporary Irish annals during the lifetimes of Óláf and Ívar might help us – even though the definition and extent (and annalistic usage) of political entities and their names at any precise moment of history, especially on evidence only from outside witnesses, is difficult.<sup>45</sup> Several different territories are specified, setting them apart from Laithlind: the realms of Alba, Fortriu, and Pictland ('Cruithenthúath') as well as 'the Picti', the British kingdom of Alt Clut in modern Strathclyde, the Gall-Gaedhil, and the Innsi Gall are referred to, some of them before, during, and after Óláf and Ívar's time, while Dál Riata is recorded only once, shortly before, in 836, but in a probably anachronistic entry.<sup>46</sup> According to the *Annals of Ulster*, Vikings won a decisive battle in 839 against the Picts of Fortriu, in which Áed mac Boanta, the last known king of Dál Riata, was killed, along with 'others almost innumerable'.<sup>47</sup> This appears to have been followed by a period of instability, not least because of further inroads by the Vikings, who might have found 'secure possession of the islands around Argyll [...] a strategic precondition' to support their

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43 Steinforth 2015a; 2015b.

44 The establishment of a Viking kingdom in York/Northumbria after 866 – at about the same time when the Isle of Man fell under the control of the Dublin Vikings – also suggests that communication lines and/or trade and travel routes were opened up between Dublin and York – via Man and some as yet undiscovered coastal bases in Cumbria and Lancashire. Archaeological evidence in favour of early contacts between the Vikings in Dublin and Northumbria is the eighth/ninth-century horse-harness mount of Irish origin (the so-called 'Ainsbrook mount'), found in North Yorkshire (Graham-Campbell 2017; cf. Steinforth 2020).

45 E.g. Woolf 2007, 57–67, 87–121.

46 *Annals of the Four Masters* 836, 453; cf. Woolf 2007, 299; Etchingham 2007, 29.

47 *Annals of Ulster* 838, 298–9; cf. Ó Corráin 2000, 97; Woolf 2007, 66.

increasing ambitions in Ireland at this time.<sup>48</sup> A Norse take-over of the islands of Dál Riata appears to be what the Frankish *Annales Bertiniani* record s.a. 847:

*Scotti a Nordomannis per annos plurimos impertiti, tributarii efficiuntur, insulis circumquaque positis nullo restistente potiti immorantes.*

The Scotti, after having been attacked by the Northmen for many years, were made tributary to them. After seizing all the islands in the vicinity without meeting resistance, they [= the Northmen] settled down on them permanently.<sup>49</sup>

It is not too fanciful to assume that 'this may mark the Viking conquest of the Inner Hebrides and the break-up of Dál Riata'<sup>50</sup> and that some settlement also took place on the Scottish Dál Riata mainland.<sup>51</sup> In 848, Jarl Þórir, deputy of the king of Laithlind, dies in Ireland, and the 'Gallgáedhil, the 'Foreigner-Gaels', are first mentioned in 856,<sup>52</sup> at almost the exact time Óláfr comes to Dublin from Laithlind.

A very young discipline might go some way to support this: oxygen isotope analysis suggests that two skeletons in early Viking Dublin belonged to young men who were not born in Norway, but probably in western Scotland.<sup>53</sup> More work, however, needs to be done here to draw sound conclusions on a much broader analysis of samples.

Taking all these references into consideration, it is very possible and even plausible that on the one hand, small Viking king-/jarldoms had been established in south-western Scotland as early as the 840s; on the other, that by the mid-/late 860s, Vikings had created a sea-kingdom spanning the Irish Sea, with settlements in south-western Scotland (and probably north-western England) that Norse Dublin had strong connections to and exercised authority over.

But was the kingdom of Laithlind one of these early settlements? One striking connection is Óláfr's noteworthy tendency to go campaigning in Scotland – despite the risk of things turning against him back in Dublin or his possessions in Ireland (such as his own fortress near Clondalkin, which was raided by the Irish in 867),<sup>54</sup> and even when a campaign required a months-

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48 Downham 2015, 91.

49 *Annales Bertiniani* 847, 70; my translation. Assuredly, the name 'Scotti' is supposed to refer to the inhabitants of Ireland (cf. Woolf 2006, 94–5).

50 Downham 2015, 191.

51 Cf. Smyth 1977, 149–53.

52 *Annals of Ulster* 855, 314. For details about the Gallgáedhil, see Downham 2015, 197–201.

53 Simpson 2005, 52.

54 *Annals of Ulster* 866, 322–3.

long siege. According to the annals, he never raided anyplace else outside of Ireland and did not accompany his 'brother' to join the Great Army, but chose Scotland every time, which appears to have held a special appeal for him.

This appeal, one might assume, could have been that Óláfr had made the Picts of a certain area tributary to him and repeatedly returned to Scotland to collect his dues. The annals claim that he 'plundered the *entire* Pictish country' and assumed the authority to levy tributes from *all* its territories,<sup>55</sup> but Óláfr's expeditions also included a long siege of one of the local British power-centres in the south-west (and possibly even a stay in Scotland of several years?). If we were to accept as a working-hypothesis both the probability of Viking king-/jarldoms in Scotland in the middle of the ninth century and the possibility of one of them being the annals' Laithlind, Óláfr's special interest in south-western Scotland could be explained: it was his homeland.

On this assumption, his engagement during at least three campaigns in Scotland would have been aimed at furthering his father's (the king's) policies and interests, waging war against the Picts as well as against hostile neighbours of his native Laithlind, defending his own home and possibly enlarging his inheritance. The 'Scottish Vikings' mentioned in the annals would have been 'residents' and 'subjects' of Laithlind, over which Óláfr, as 'prince' of the realm, held authority. The three years of campaigning Smyth suggested after Óláfr's voyage to Fortriu in 866 might just as well have been spent at home – in part, at least. And due to Óláfr's position in Ireland, Laithlind would have been closely linked with his new kingdom in Dublin.

Furthermore, Óláfr would have been rather busy in his final years between 871 and his presumed death by 874, if he had had to undertake the lengthy journey to Norway after the king's call for help, fulfil his task in quelling an insurgency in 'Laithlind', and return home to Ireland, before embarking on another expedition, collecting tribute in Scotland, where he was killed. While this by no means would have been impossible, the chronology would be lightened to a considerable degree if it had just been the short journey to Scotland Óláfr had to make once again before falling in battle there, fighting for his father, against Causantín of the Picts. This latter scenario reconciles most of the conflicting bits of information we have on Óláfr's end – his death (a) while fighting in/for his native Laithlind (as told by the *Fragmentary Annals*) and/or (b) collecting tributes from the Picts (as recorded in the *Scottish Chronicle*).

Thus, Laithlind would have begun its existence at an unknown date before 848 (when Jarl Þórir is reported to have died in Ireland), perhaps in the aftermath of the Viking triumph in battle over the Picts in 839 and possibly on

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55 Cf. Ó Corráin 1998, 329.

formerly Dál Riata territory.<sup>56</sup> With Óláf's accession to the throne of Dublin in 853 and his maritime expansion into and across the Irish Sea, it would indeed have been part of a Viking sea-kingdom.

Archaeologically, this supposition cannot be substantiated. It has been pointed out that Laithlind was a 'kingdom' and a power-centre and must have been rich and powerful (and presumably quite large) to be capable of sending out (large) fleets on raiding expeditions and would therefore inevitably have produced a considerable amount of archaeological remains – of settlement deposits as well as imported material. Unlike certain areas of western Norway, the south-west of Scotland unfortunately is not as rich in Insular metalwork that can be interpreted as a reflection of prolonged Viking raids in Ireland as would have to be expected to support the idea of a location of Laithlind in the west.<sup>57</sup> However, the concentration of richly furnished mid-ninth-century Viking graves in the islands of Argyll, especially on the islands of Colonsay, Oronsay, and Islay, might be considered as representing a lost power-centre of the Vikings in the southern Hebrides,<sup>58</sup> which possibly even included the Outer Isles.<sup>59</sup> No direct evidence for such an entity has been found as yet, though.

This prompts Egon Wamers to ask: 'Why should we invent a "maritime centre" on an island in the west for which there is neither historical, literary nor archaeological evidence',<sup>60</sup> when in Norway there are several plausible candidates? Arne Kruse's idea of Avaldsnes being the centre of a kingdom that lined the important 'leið' is quite persuasive, but lacks the final proof of the connection between the place in Norway and the name in the Irish annals. For all their impressive records of Irish loot, the question whether this or any other of the Norwegian kingdoms or territories can and must be regarded as the chronicles' 'Laithlind', remains unanswered.

On the other hand, Kruse's suggestion regarding the etymology of 'Leiðlind' as deriving from ON 'leið', waterway, which he applied to the route through the islands off south-western Norway, might in fact just as well apply to that kingdom's Scottish location suggested here. At the moment, it can be only speculation, but it may be worthwhile to investigate the question of whether the seaway in the lee of the Western Isles and along the coast of western

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56 For details and interpretations of early/mid-9th century history and archaeology in SW-Scotland, see e.g. Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 18–9, 84–92; Jennings and Kruse 2009; Downham 2015.

57 Cf. Wamers 1998; Graham-Campbell and Batey 2002; Etchingam 2007, 26–7.

58 Cf. Harrison 2015, 313.

59 Jennings and Kruse 2005, 292. For a discussion of economic activities linking the region, see e.g. Horne 2014.

60 Wamers 1998, 66.

Scotland could be considered as a Scottish 'leið', as it were. From (at least) the Isle of Skye southwards it would provide ships with a route sheltered from the west winds, all the way into the Irish Sea, especially when using the portage across the isthmus of Kintyre (fig. 2). Any realm centred in the southern islands of the Hebrides (such as Colonsay and Oronsay, Islay as well as Arran) and exercising control over the islands and the adjacent mainland would be in an ideal position to monitor and control traffic to and from the Irish Sea on both the protected route and the open sea (fig. 3). More research, however, is needed to decide this point.

While early/mid-ninth-century Norse activity in western Scotland must be beyond doubt, the extent of any political entity cannot be defined. But just as Dublin and other Viking bases in Ireland did not 'acquire extensive rural hinterlands',<sup>61</sup> it is perhaps not necessary to think of Laithlind as covering and operating a large territory, but simply as a compact coastal settlement

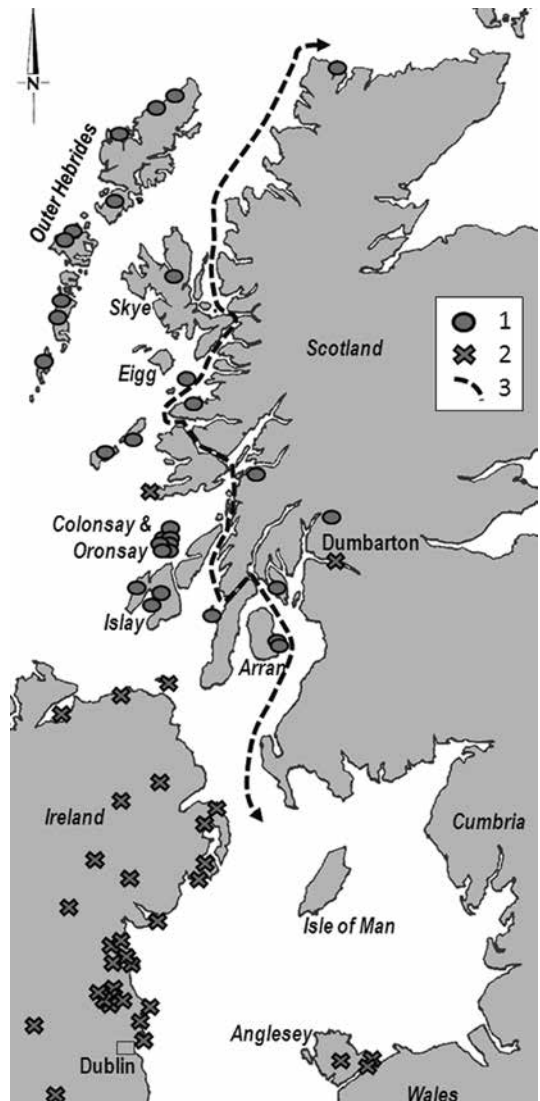


Fig. 2. Map of western Scotland and the Irish Sea area (Graphics by author).

1: Viking graves in western Scotland

2: Viking raids mentioned in the Irish chronicles, AD 795 to 875

3: Conjectural route of the 'Scottish leið'

61 Woolf 2007, 287.



fig. 3. Kildonnan, Eigg: View from the site of the Viking burial towards the mainland of Scotland across the presumptive 'Scottish leið' (Photo courtesy of Shane McLeod, Tasmania).

(perhaps little more than a substantial and well-fortified *longphort*?) with the ability to acquire resources, enough manpower to engage in warfare in Ireland, and enough fortitude to make its presence felt to the Irish chroniclers. Perhaps it is not necessary to 'invent a maritime centre' of Vikings in Scotland. Perhaps we just need to discover it.

Once again, we must acknowledge the silence of the evidence and the absence of positive proof either way. And even if this means risking the breach of due methodological procedure both by over-interpreting doubtful sources and a certain application of imagination, we must attempt to fill in the great gaps in our understanding of an important and intriguing piece of early Viking-Age Irish Sea history. Having done so, I submit the hypothesis that Óláf's homeland Laithlind was a Viking realm of unknown size in Scotland rather than Norway, which he fought for repeatedly and eventually died in, and which was part of a mid-ninth-century Viking sea-kingdom in the Irish Sea. Apart from Laithlind, this encompassed Dublin, the Isle of Man, and territories in north-western England, which might have had close links to Norse York/Northumbria.

It has been suggested that in a situation like this 'true confusion is better than false clarity.'<sup>62</sup> Obviously, I have not followed this advice. When there is not enough evidence to aim for clarity or for definite results, however,

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62 Constable 1995, 22.

considered speculation of what information there is and the proposition of a hypothesis is still better than to admit to true confusion. I do not dismiss the views of other scholars or reject their evidence, and I do not claim to have answered the question or to have provided definite proof, but to have mapped out an idea of a possible and plausible contribution to a solution of this challenging and controversial problem. Future research is called upon to provide ‘clarity’ – if that is at all possible to achieve – on Óláfr’s origin and destinations, his ‘whence and whither’.

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