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Anointed in the Blood of Dragons: Who were the Viking-Age Archers of
Ireland and Where are They?

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Abstract

The boxes and hundreds of arrowheads uncovered from the Dublin and Waterford excavations are testament
to a specific military function for archery in Viking warfare. However, unlike the many swords, axes and
spears uncovered from ‘warrior-burials’, there is interestingly no evidence for the deposition of archery
material or indeed the presence in graves of ‘Viking-archers’ at all. Using archaeological and historical
evidence, this paper will reassess the nature of Viking age archery in Ireland and will explore how a bow
of this kind may have been produced. Further discussion of key concepts include the various possible
reasons behind the deposition of weapons in graves. Viking religious attitudes towards archery as a mode
of combat, and the differences of materiality between bows and other weapon types that may explain the
lack of archery material in warrior-burials. This paper addresses the very nature of Viking Age warfare
and its relationship with archery, but ultimately questions the actual concept of the ‘the archer’ which for
the Vikings, in conclusion, may not have yet existed.

I. INTRODUCTION

There is arguably no age which better con-
jures imagery of weaponry and warfare
then that of the Vikings. Armed to the
teeth and clad in mail, the Norsemen who first
came to Ireland in the late eighth century were
no doubt a force to be reckoned with, and the
vision of wielded shields and swords left flick-
ering in our imagination is a crimsoned one.

Amid this picture stands the archer, who’s
figure, nocking his arrow, drawing back his
bow and releasing it to find its target, has
indelibly left its mark in both archaeology
and modern popular-culture. In 1958, the
one-handed Tony Curtis orders a volley of ar-
rows over the walls of Aella’s Castle, while in
the midst of a shield-wall scum in the His-
tory Channel’s ‘Vikings’, Ragnar calls upon his
bowman to shoot through the gap in defence,
sending his enemy to the sand, clenching his
chest. While this image of the Viking archer
is a captivating one, it has somewhat skewed
the academic perception of archery during this
time. Furthermore, as medieval archery in
Ireland has been given little or no attention
since Halpin (2008), there is currently a gen-
eral lack of understanding among non-archery
specialists of the structure and production of
Viking age bows in Ireland. This paper thus
aims to correct this image of the Viking archer
and how his bow was made. However, in do-
ing so we are presented with a rather curious
anomaly. While the archaeological and histori-
cal evidence discussed illustrates the cultural
significance and military importance of Viking
archery in Ireland, from the consistent absence
of archery material in warrior-burials, there ap-
ppears to be no evidence of dedicated archers
from this time at all. It certainly begs the ques-
tion: who were the real archers of Viking Age
Ireland and better yet, where are they?

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II. THE BOWS

Due to their organic nature, bows are generally quite rare in the archaeological record and the eight fragments from Dublin (Halpin 2008, 50), the six fragments (with one complete bow) from Waterford (Halpin 1997) along with the Ballinderry bow from Co. Westmeath (Henken 1935-7) are some of the only physical examples of medieval Irish bows to date.

The bow fragments from Dublin and Waterford are all known as ‘self bows’, meaning they are carved from the same piece of wood, unlike a ‘composite’ which is made from multiple materials such as glue, horn and sinew.

They have a relative tree ring date of thirty years and though ranging from 10th to 13th century in date and Viking/Hiberno-Norse and Anglo-Norman in type, they all clearly share a common Scandinavian origin in style.

Like most Scandinavian styles, the Dublin and Waterford bows are mostly made from Yew - Taxus Baccata (Johnson and More 2006, 22). The efficiency of a Yew bow comes from the unique way the tree grows, forming two organic layers: a creamy white sapwood and a vibrant amber heartwood which combined, creates a laminating effect. While the extremely hard and dense inner heartwood gives the bow strength (forming the belly), the highly flexible outer sapwood (facing the target) adds an elasticity that prevents the rigid heartwood from snapping. By using the two layers, one needs to only shoot a bow of yew to truly relish both its power and suppleness, adding a unique spring and fluidity to an arrow’s release.

Contrary to what may be assumed, a bow is far more than “simply a bent stick” (Hitchen 2000, 42). Whether fashioned from composite materials or made from a solid piece of wood, a bow is a sophisticated weapon that requires skill in production and use. The bows from Dublin and Waterford are the result of both embodied skill learned kinesthetically over time and the knowledge of one’s environment and materials within it; a knowledge not conceived of at a random point in time, but one that has been in development since the first arrow was cast c60,000 years ago (Backwell et al 2008, 1577).

III. MAKING THE BOW

How then was such a bow made? Through analysing the material evidence and reconstructing each production phase, we can imagine a craftsman, and the bow he is about to make. Deep in a particularly dense part of the forest, where the Yew trees are starved of water and light, forcing them to grow high and thick with little or no branches, the craftsman fells the tree he thinks is best for his bow. He observes how many bows he can attempt from one trunk, splits, and then quarters it using wedges. It is from one of these quarters that a single bow will be constructed. By examining the tree ring direction on the cross sections of the bows from Dublin and Waterford, we can see that each bow stave was shaped from either a halved or quartered cleft. Halving and quartering with wedges is common throughout the world. It is visible on the bow of Ötzi, the 5,000 year old Iceman from the Alps of Northern Italy (Fowler 2000, 209), and it was used to form the longbows at the battles of Agincourt and Crecy (Hitchen 2000, 43; Loades 2013, 15). Wooden wedges and heavy mallets are also known from excavated medieval sites in Dublin as well as many clefted timbers in Dublin as well as many clefted timbers for plank production (O’Sullivan 1993, 84).

Depending on how strong the maker wants the bow to be, he can leave the wood to season. This is simply letting the wood completely dry to prevent further warping after the craftsman has finished shaping the bow. Periodically turning the wood to his eye, he uses a carpenter’s axe to chop along the sides of the stave, creating a straight billet with which he can work from.

Unlike the English Longbow, a later medieval descendent, there seems to have been no consistency in bow length during the Viking age. Indeed this would have been difficult for Viking age craftsmen as they did not use numeric measurements, perhaps relying instead on scale lengths based on relative body mea-
surements, as seen with the old Icelandic word 'faðr' (fad-yr). This was a measurement denoting a length of two yards, meaning "outstretched arms" or "an embrace" (Zoëga 1910, 121), from which we get the modern word, 'fathom'. The length of a bow for example, could have been based either on the length of bow-maker's 'fathom' or that of the archer himself.

When the billet is made, the bow is then tapered from the centre out to each limb, using tools such as the drawknives, planes, knives and files on display in the Dublin Museum or similar to those from the Mästernyr tool chest, found in Gotland, Sweden (Ardwidson 1999, 37).

When the outline shape of the bow has been formed, the craftsman cuts out the ‘nocks’, where the string is attached and his bow is ready for tilling. Here the bend of each limb is slowly achieved by gradually scraping away small shavings towards each tip; repeatedly checking the bend. This is continued until the bow reaches its desired shape at full draw length. He takes the string, braces his bow and it’s ready to shoot.

IV. VIKING ARCHERY

While the number of bow finds from Ireland is small, the presence and wide use of archery during this time is evident from the hundreds of arrowheads also found in Waterford and Dublin (Halpin 1997, 51). The bow had been widely used in Ireland throughout the Neolithic and early Bronze-Age. However, there seems to have been a decline in archery between 1500BC and the early Christian period (ibid 1997, 51). The reintroduction of the bow is thus credited to the Vikings, whose application of it on the battlefield had a devastating effect on the Irish. Such devastation is clear from the types of arrowheads found in Dublin and Waterford such as the most common ‘bodkin tip’, forged to pierce through chainmail (Halpin 2008, 118); or the incendiary arrowhead, shaped with a long stem on which a flammable material could be wrapped, to shower the enemy in a rain of fire, or set alight the rigging of an enemy ship (Halpin 2008, 115).

Augmenting the archaeological evidence are the vivid historical sources in which the kinds of arrows and bows mentioned above come to life. The 12th century text Coighead Gaedhil re Gallaibh (Todd 1867, 159-61), vividly describes the ‘Bogada Blathl Blabuidi’ - the 'polished, yellow shining bows' at the Battle of Clontarf, 1014 ('yellow' being the typical colour of polished Yew); the arrows of which are forever immortalised as 'sharp, swift, bloody, crimsoned, bounding, barbed, wounding, piercing, murderous' and so poisoned', that they must have been 'anointed and browned in the blood of dragons'.

Such references are comparable to Scandinavian examples: one of which describes the bows of the 8th century Battle of Bravalla between the Danes and the Swedes (Davidson 1996, 242), the arrows from which were said to have split shields, penetrated helmets and burst breastplates. With bows of such force and arrows of such lethality and tactical efficiency, and of a society as fond of displaying military prowess as the Vikings, one would expect to find the wielder of this "wounding" weapon displayed as such in his grave. This however, is interestingly not the case.

V. IDENTIFYING THE ARCHERS

As with the longbow men of Henry VIII’s flagship the Mary Rose (Rule 1982, 181-3), in order to verify an individual as an archer, archery material must be identifiable within the same context as human remains. Added to this are the visible stresses on skeletal remains of repeatedly drawing a heavy bow, such as in the twisted spines of the Mary Rose archers (Strickland & Hardy 2005, 54) and indeed, perhaps on the male skeletons from Waterford, where osteoarthritis is concentrated in the right shoulders and left elbows of males (Power 1997, 783). What makes the Viking Archers of Ireland such an enigma is that within warrior-burials such as those from Ship-Street Gate and South-Great George's Street, Dublin for example, each grave
includes various daggers, knives, axes and spears (Simpson 2005, 11). However, unlike the sword, which accounts for almost half of the extant weaponry from sites around Dublin, archery equipment is almost completely excluded from deposition, accounting for less than 5% in all burials (Halpin 2008, 3). It's no surprise then that the Viking has become so synonymous with the sword, an intriguing characterisation considering that although archery material accounts for less than 5% in burials, it is the most frequently represented weapon in the overall record, accounting for 90% in settlement finds (Halpin 2008, 3). The question is thus, if archery was so widely used and effective in battle, why then is it so often excluded from warrior burials?

We cannot of course neglect the fact that due to the organic nature of the bow, there is a huge bias in recovery. For instance, while spearheads, axe-heads and arrowheads tend to survive, their respective handles and shafts do not. Hence, if a bow (made completely of wood) was also included in these assemblages, it too would not have survived. In most Viking graves however, the very presence of archery at all is often only inferred from a single arrowhead find. And although this seldom occurs, it can often be unclear as to whether an arrowhead was depositional or was in fact the cause of death, as was the case of the warrior from Orkney (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 118-19). Either way, based on the collective evidence from Ireland, England and Scandinavia as Hadley (2008 271-3) suggested, it is more likely that the inclusion of archery-material in graves was simply not common in Viking warrior burial practice. The question is, why?

VI. ATTITUDES TO ARCHERY

The evidence discussed suggests that archery was militarily popular among Scandinavians from long before the Vikings ever arrived in Ireland to well after the 13th century. We have also observed from the archaeological and historical evidence that the bow for the Vikings was an effective weapon; one made and handled with skill and great care. What is it then about the bow that would make a Viking warrior choose any other weapon over it in his own grave, or that of his fallen comrade?

Assuming that the ritual deposition of weapons in warrior-graves is connected to religious belief in an afterlife, a warrior’s wish to gain entry into Valhalla for example, the depositional choice of weaponry must therefore be a reflection of the respective society’s standards of acceptable and honourable methods of combat.

Such attitudes towards methods of killing an opponent are often contained in Viking sagas and religious texts. In the Icelandic Poetic Edda, the mischievous Loki in the midst of battle chooses not to attack Baldr (son of Odin) directly, as Baldr is a god and invulnerable to Loki. Instead, Loki tricks Baldr’s blind brother Höðr by directing Höðr’s bow towards his brother Baldr, killing him with an arrow made from mistletoe. This perhaps emphasises a Viking perspective of archery as an unchallenging, sinister and thusdishonourable way of killing an opponent; of a kind possibly unbecoming to those who dine with heroes in the afterlife and thus, one unlikely to be displayed in a burial.

VII. THE SWORD & THE BOW

If we consider some of the differences in materiality between bows and other weapons normally included in warrior-burials, we may begin to understand the implications behind the omission of a bow, over any other weapon.

The sword for example, is often recognised as a weapon of status, of ceremonial importance and power. Hadely (2008, 271-8) for example, talked about the sword as defining masculinity and interpreted Viking weapon-display as an assertion of the ruthlessness of their warlike religious beliefs. Taking with this Hodder’s ‘Dependence Theory’ (2012, 30) for example, we could assume that a warrior may build a living connection with his sword which triggers memories when he sees or uses
it. The warrior and the sword may become intertwined where, if he dies, so too may the sword; hence its inclusion in a warrior burial.

A common fact however, which modern archers learn quickly, is that after a while, a bow will inevitably break; it is part of its nature. If the wood on a sword, axe or spear breaks, it may be replaced. With a bow, its function relies solely on the entirety of its structure, if a part of it breaks or cracks, the whole bow is beyond repair and must be discarded. Therefore, unlike a sword which could potentially last years before breaking or dropping from the hands of its fallen owner, a soldier could go through many bows in his life-time and may not own one long enough to invest as much meaning in it, as he may a sword.

The sword also stays with the wielder during combat. It could conceivably carry a death count and a shared history with its handler. Arrows on the other hand, tend to break, and are often lost when loosed. Perhaps the disposable quality of the bow and the consumable nature of the arrows creates a sense of estrangement between warrior and weapon, making it difficult to define himself by it and thus display it as such in a grave.

VIII. The Viking Archer?

Neither can we neglect the data. If we return to the chart on weapon finds from Dublin, we are reminded that while archery material amounts to less than 5% of extant weaponry in graves, it accounts for a staggering 90% in settlement sites (Halpin 2008, 3). Of the large amount of arrowheads uncovered, many are multipurpose, non-military and even specifically for hunting (Halpin 1997, 54). Warriors simply may not have wanted to distinguish themselves in graves by a weapon that is so regularly used by ordinary people, choosing instead, weapons more synonymous with their profession, such as the sword, axe or spear.

The difficulty however in identifying the ‘Viking Age archer’ as separate from other warrior classes, is perhaps because the concept of the ‘archer’ had not yet been developed.

From the ninth century on, Norse laws required warriors to be armed with an axe, shield, sword and spear (Hardy 1992, 28), while also requiring them to bring a bow and arrows to the muster as part of their equipment. However, as Halpin (2008, 40) mentioned, from the existing historical sources there appears to be no evidence for Vikings ever deploying archers in actual ‘units.’ Rather, they would use the bow on the outset of battle, before engaging the enemy in melee combat. In fact, the word ‘archer’ originally has its roots in the old French word: Archer (Oxford Dictionary of English 2010), while the earliest visual representation of archers actually being deployed in units is from the Bayeux tapestry, depicting the Norman invasion of Britain, in 1066; perhaps bringing with them the concept of the archer as well as the word. Indeed, William the Conqueror himself remarked that his enemies had yet to appreciate the value of massed archery in units (Harrison and Embleton 1993, 14).

IX. Conclusion

“So who were the men that left so many arrowheads in Irish soil?”

Ultimately, it seems they were soldiers who were not tied to just one weapon type, but were seasoned artisans of war, capable of handling bows as well as other weapons for various forms of interpersonal combat.

They were craftsmen of the battlefield, who, just like our bow-maker, could choose from a variety of tools and skills to tackle the task at hand. There is no doubt that the Norsemen who settled in Ireland were skilled and seasoned in archery. For the Viking warrior however, the image and characterisation of one’s self specifically as an ‘archer’ was not a popular one and was perhaps a premature concept at the time. Their skill and innovation however, had nonetheless sown the seeds for this infamous and long lived class to come. Though used pragmatically at the beginning of a battle, it seems the natural place for the Viking warrior was not at a distance, picking off the enemy like later skirmishers did, but was right
in the sweat and blood of the fight, where he could look his opponent in the eye and test his worthiness of the mead of Valhalla.

REFERENCES


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Images

Left: Bow fragments found during the Dublin excavations, numbered according to (Halpin 2008, 49-50).

Right: Bow fragments found during the Waterford excavations, numbered according to (Halpin 2008, 54).
Above: Examining the Ballinderry Bow at the National Museum of Ireland.

Above: Close of the Ballinderry Bow at the National Museum of Ireland - Above Left: Original Sketch of Ballinderry Bow from (Hencken 1936).
Above: Examining Waterford Bow 2 (*National Museum of Ireland*)

Above: Waterford Bow 2, Detail of Nocks
Above: 1: Cross section of common Yew showing colour of sapwood and heartwood.

2: Some examples of bow cross sections from Dublin, Waterford and Ballinderry, where wood has been halved and quartered.

3: Diagram of crafted Yew billet, bow within the billet, and orientation of heartwood/sapwood on finished bow.
Above: Distribution chart of extant weapon types between settlements and graves, from the Kilmainham/Islandbridge cemeteries and from Hiberno-Norse contexts in Dublin. Table from (Halpin, 2008).

Above: Detail of Norman archery units from the Bayeux Tapestry, (Vitoria and Albert Museum) - Left, Right and Below: Examples of two socketed bodkin tipped arrowheads (left & Right) and incendiary arrowhead (below) found in Dublin (National Museum of Ireland).