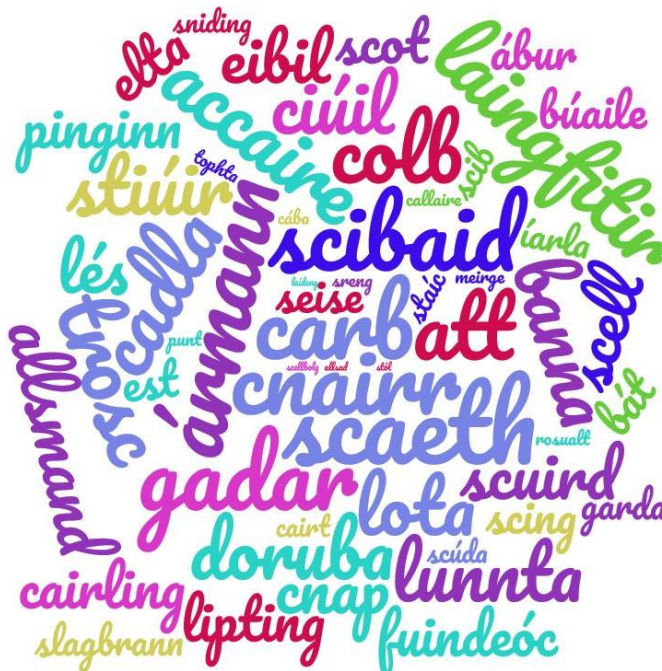


How did the Vikings influence the Irish language?

2. Loan-words



The Vikings began raiding Ireland at the end of the eighth century – but their activity in Ireland quickly began to diversify in the following centuries. They began to settle there, to found towns such as Dublin and Cork, to establish trading networks, and even to fight alongside Irish kings.

This would have resulted in all sorts of interactions between the Vikings and the medieval Irish – and looking at how these interactions are reflected in the language can be a really useful way of tracking how relationships between these two peoples developed. This worksheet will look at what evidence **loan-words** can give us about these interactions.

▪ What is a loan-word?

A loan-word is a word that has been borrowed from another language. As such, it can give valuable evidence about contact between two different cultures. For example, a lot of twentieth- and twenty-first-century loan-words into Modern English relate to food, such as ‘pizza’ (from Italian), ‘baguette’ (from French) or ‘taco’ (from Mexican Spanish). This tells us that one way in which modern cultures interact is by borrowing one another’s culinary ideas!

In the same way, we can identify interactions between the medieval Irish and the Vikings by looking at words which were borrowed into Medieval Irish from Old Norse, the language of the Vikings.

We’ve already seen from other worksheets that the Irish borrowed the Old Norse word *vikingr* into their language, giving it the more Irish-looking form *ucing*, to supply them with a word that meant ‘Viking’. But what other words did they borrow from the Viking settlers?

Activity

You will be given a selection of loan-words that were borrowed into Medieval Irish from Old Norse.

Look for patterns in the types of words that have been borrowed. Can you sort them into different categories? (NB. there is no single right answer)

What can you work out about the interactions between the medieval Irish and the Vikings from the types of words that have been borrowed?

Which are your biggest groups of words? Why do you think the medieval Irish particularly borrowed words belonging to that category?

Extension Exercise

The Vikings didn't only raid and settle in Ireland – they were also active across northern Europe, from North America to western Russia. And so their presence can be felt in many other languages as well, English not the least of them. Do you know any Old Norse loan-words which have survived into Modern English?

You can look these up using the Advanced Search tool of the Oxford English Dictionary online (<http://www.oed.com/advancedsearch>), by entering 'Old Norse' in the 'Language of Origin' field and clicking 'Search'. How many results do you get?

Are there any Old Norse words from your handout which might have been borrowed into English as well? Use the Oxford English Dictionary to check if you were right!

Bibliography

Sharon Arbuthnot, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Gregory Toner, *A History of Ireland in 100 Words* (October, 2019)

Diarmaid Ó Muirithe, *From the Viking Word-Hoard: A Dictionary of Scandinavian Words in the Languages of Britain and Ireland* (Dublin, 2010)

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>)

Website: Oxford English Dictionary (www.oed.com)



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

Answer Sheet

The tables of words are designed to be cut out into separate cards, one for each loan-word. Each card contains the Medieval Irish word, a Modern English translation, and the Old Norse (ON) word from which it was derived. For an activity which doesn't involve cutting-out, see 'Alternative Activity' below.

NB. The fact that a word was borrowed doesn't mean that the medieval Irish didn't have their own word for it already, e.g. we can't assume that they didn't have horses before the Vikings came. But certain trends are still apparent.

Categories might include: boat-related, weapon-related, clothing-related, words belonging to home and farm (e.g. window, loft, cart, fetter for cattle), words describing people (officer, companion, hag), words describing social structures (officer, herald, earl, bond), words linked to trade and/or urban life. Some words may seem to belong in several categories or belong in a category of their own (e.g. light).

Points for discussion:

- The largest group of words relates to boats and seafaring. This could be sub-categorised into words for boat, words for parts of a boat, and words relating to seafaring more generally (e.g. island, codfish, sea-monster). It is not surprising that this is the largest group given the Vikings' reputation for their seafaring abilities and boatbuilding technologies, which was apparently superior to that of other neighbouring peoples at this time. The Vikings must have had a huge influence on Irish nautical activity and terminology.
- Another big group is words relating to weapons. We would expect this since much of the interaction between the Irish and the Vikings (especially in the early period) would have been of a military nature. The borrowing of the word for 'shield-wall' possibly suggests that this was a Viking military tactic that was new to the Irish.
- But this could be contrasted with words that seem to be about social structure and even keeping the peace (e.g. official, bond, companion). There are also more domestic words, relating to houses and farming, reflecting the change from raiders to settlers.
- 'Pound-weight' and 'penny-weight' are clear evidence of the increase in trade which accompanied the Viking settlements. Although it is uncertain whether these words actually come from Old Norse or from the almost-identical Old English equivalents, the first coins were struck in Ireland by the Vikings (in the late tenth century), reproducing English prototypes. These Irish words *punt* and *pinginn* originally designated units of weight of metal, but later came to be applied to coins.
- Many words could be linked to trading activity (e.g. necklet, cloak, horse, hunting-dog, hat, helmet, shirt, codfish). This could include weaponry (e.g. sword-hilt), since markets would have included craftsmen producing intricate metalwork.
- Given the Vikings' role in founding major urban settlements in Ireland, many of these words could also be grouped under 'urban life', especially those relating to social structure and domestic life. This might include 'yard, enclosure', since Norse markets were made up of plots with makeshift booths. And curses like *sniding* and *cairling* might have been frequently heard in the hustle and bustle of a marketplace!



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Alternative Activity

For a less challenging activity (or one that involves less cutting-out!), you could leave the words in table-format and give the categories to the students to start with, rather than letting them work out their own. Your activity would then be:

These loan-words can be divided into several different categories: words relating to boats and seafaring, words relating to weapons, words relating to clothing, words relating to home and farm, words relating to trade, and words relating to social structures. Using a different colour for each category, sort the loan-words into their separate groups. Some words may not fit into any category, while some may belong to more than one.

What can you work out about the interactions between the medieval Irish and the Vikings from the types of words that have been borrowed?

Which are your biggest groups of words? Why do you think the medieval Irish particularly borrowed words belonging to that category?

Extension Exercise

NB. Some Modern English words will be red herrings, since even if they look like the Old Norse words on the handout, they may actually be derived from Old English (the closely-related Germanic language spoken by the Anglo-Saxons), or they may even simply share a common Indo-European root. You can find this information under the full entry for each word in the Oxford English Dictionary, under 'Etymology'.

Red herrings, i.e. words that come from Old English (or Common Germanic) but are closely related to Old Norse, include:

- boat < OE *bat*, but related to ON *bátr*
- ship < OE *scip*, but related to ON *skip*
- steer < OE *stíeran*, but related to ON *styri*
- hat < OE *hæt*, but related to ON *hatr*
- hilt < OE *hilt*, but related to ON *hjalt*
- shield < OE *sceld*, but related to ON *skjöldr*
- string < OE *streng*, but related to ON *strengr*
- stool < OE *stól*, but related to ON *stóll*
- earl < OE *eorl*, but related to ON *jarl*
- yard < OE *geard* – but English 'garth' does come from ON *garðr* (while 'garden' comes from Anglo-Norman *gardein*)

Modern English words that do seem to have been derived from Old Norse include:

- keel < ON *kjóll*
- cart < ON *kartr*
- window < ON *vindauga*
- loft < ON *loft*
- skin < ON *skinn*
- skirt < ON *skyrta*
- garth < ON *garðr*
- steak < ON *steik*
- Viking < ON *víkingr*



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

Other points for discussion:

- The Modern English word ‘window’ was originally ‘wind-eye’, which is a literal translation the Old Norse word *vindauga* (*vindr* + *auga*), transferred into Medieval Irish as *fuindeóc*. What does this tell us about how windows were being made at this time?
> They didn’t have any glass in them. This word probably referred originally to a hole in the roof to let out the smoke from the fire.
- The Old Norse word *skyrta* meant ‘shirt’ (and gave Medieval Irish *scuirde* ‘shirt’) – but its Modern English derivative is ‘skirt’. How might the meaning of this word evolved?
> Presumably because this word originally meant some kind of long tunic, and then later in English became applied only to the bottom half of it.
- Why do you think the Old Norse word *skinn* ‘skin’, which gives us Modern English ‘skin’, came to mean ‘clothes’ in Medieval Irish?
> Probably because it originally referred to clothes that were made out of animal skins.

Bibliography

Sharon Arbuthnot, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Gregory Toner, *A History of Ireland in 100 Words* (October, 2019)

Diarmaid Ó Muirthe, *From the Viking Word-Hoard: A Dictionary of Scandinavian Words in the Languages of Britain and Ireland* (Dublin, 2010)

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Dr Rebecca Shercliff, Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge



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<i>cnairr</i> ‘ship’ (ON <i>knörr</i>)	<i>cadla</i> ‘rope, cord’ (ON <i>kaðall</i>)	<i>ciúil</i> ‘ship’ (ON <i>kjóll</i>)	<i>laingfitir</i> ‘fetter between legs of cattle’ (ON <i>langfjætur</i>)
<i>allsmand</i> ‘necklet’ (ON <i>halsmen</i>)	<i>cairling</i> ‘hag’ (ON <i>kerling</i>)	<i>ábur</i> ‘oar-hole’ (ON <i>háborá</i>)	<i>lota</i> ‘loft, upper storey, platform’ (ON <i>lopt</i>)
<i>íarla</i> ‘earl’ (ON <i>jarl</i>)	<i>rosualt</i> ‘sea-monster’ (ON <i>hrosshvalr</i>)	<i>sreng</i> ‘string, cord’ (ON <i>strengr</i>)	<i>eibil</i> ‘rope for hoisting a sail’ (ON <i>hefill</i>)
<i>laídeng</i> ‘boat, ship, fleet’ (ON <i>leiðangr</i>)	<i>scaeth</i> ‘ship, fleet’ (ON <i>skeið</i>)	<i>accaire</i> ‘anchor’ (ON <i>akkeri</i>)	<i>elta</i> ‘cross-guard of a sword’ (ON <i>hjalt</i>)
<i>lunnta</i> ‘oar-handle’ (ON <i>hlunnr</i>)	<i>scell</i> ‘shield’ (ON <i>skjöldr</i>)	<i>fuindeóc</i> ‘window’ (ON <i>vindauga</i>)	<i>scing</i> ‘covering, clothes, cloak’ (ON <i>skinn</i>)
<i>bát</i> ‘boat’ (ON <i>bátr</i>)	<i>scib</i> ‘ship’ (ON <i>skip</i>)	<i>scúda</i> ‘small boat’ (ON <i>skúta</i>)	<i>slagbrann</i> ‘bar used to propel missiles’ (ON <i>slagbrandr</i>)
<i>cába</i> ‘cape, cloak’ (ON <i>kápa</i>)	<i>stól</i> ‘stool’ (ON <i>stóll</i>)	<i>gadar</i> ‘hunting-dog’ (ON <i>gagarr</i>)	<i>sniding</i> ‘worthless fellow, wretch’ (ON <i>níðingr</i>)

<i>punt</i> ‘pound-weight’ (ON <i>pund</i>)	<i>búaile</i> ‘part of a shield’ (ON <i>bola</i>)	<i>doruba</i> ‘measuring-line’ (ON <i>dorg</i>)	<i>í</i> ‘island’ (ON <i>ey</i>)
<i>scellbolg</i> ‘shield-wall’ (ON <i>skjaldborg</i>)	<i>cairt</i> ‘vehicle, cart’ (ON <i>kartr</i>)	<i>scuird</i> ‘shirt, tunic, cloak’ (ON <i>skyrta</i>)	<i>carb</i> ‘ship’ (ON <i>karfi</i>)
<i>ármann</i> ‘officer, official’ (ON <i>ármaðr</i>)	<i>callaire</i> ‘herald, crier’ (ON <i>kallari</i>)	<i>pinginn</i> ‘penny-weight’ (ON <i>penningr</i>)	<i>trosc</i> ‘codfish’ (ON <i>þorskr</i>)
<i>att</i> ‘hat, hood, helmet’ (ON <i>hattr</i>)	<i>meirge</i> ‘battle-standard’ (ON <i>merki</i>)	<i>seise</i> ‘comrade, companion’ (ON <i>sessi</i>)	<i>stiúir</i> ‘rudder, helm’ (ON <i>styri</i>)
<i>banna</i> ‘bond, guarantee’ (ON <i>band</i>)	<i>allsad</i> ‘slackening a sail’ (ON <i>halsa</i>)	<i>garda</i> ‘yard, enclosure’ (ON <i>garðr</i>)	<i>cnap</i> ‘button’ (ON <i>knappr</i>)
<i>lés</i> ‘light, radiance’ (ON <i>ljós</i>)	<i>scibaid</i> ‘equips a ship’ (ON <i>skipa</i>)	<i>staíc</i> ‘steak, piece of meat’ (ON <i>steik</i>)	<i>scot</i> ‘sheet, sail’ (ON <i>skaut</i>)
<i>lipting</i> ‘stern of a ship’ (ON <i>lypting</i>)	<i>colb</i> ‘shaft of a weapon’ (ON <i>kolfr</i>)	<i>tophta</i> ‘thwart, row-bench’ (ON <i>topt</i>)	<i>est</i> ‘horse’ (ON <i>hestr</i>)