

A HISTORY OF IRELAND IN 100 OBJECTS, A SELECTION
5TH & 6TH CLASS LESSON PLAN

Viking slave chain late-ninth or early-tenth century



The clink of this iron chain is a dark note that sounds through much of Irish history, from St Patrick to twentieth-century institutions of incarceration. It is the sound of slavery. It was found, along with a human skull, iron spearhead and bronze pin, near Ardakillen crannóg, Co. Roscommon. Its function was brutally plain: to turn people into moveable property. It is a remnant of a trade that sold Irish slaves to places as far apart as Iceland and the Arab world.

The Old Norse word for a slave, ‘thræll’, is still part of our language, as thrall; but slavery had a long and disreputable history in Ireland before the Vikings. St Patrick was captured as a slave, and one of the first written documents in Irish history is his Letter to Coroticus, denouncing a British chieftain who had enslaved some members of his Christian flock. Bondage remained a feature of later Irish society: there are records in the annals of families selling children in times of need.

In the ninth century, Viking Dublin had emerged as a major slaving centre, from which captives, not merely from the rest of Ireland but also from Britain, were traded. The slave trade retained a significant role in the city’s commerce until the twelfth century. (In a foretaste of nineteenth-century imperial rhetoric, the suppression of the slave trade was one excuse for the imposition of English overlordship in Ireland. The Anglo-Normans did in fact ban the use of

Christian slaves; a progressive move that took several hundred years to disseminate across the rest of the European continent.)

Most slaves are anonymous, but we have the names of a few Irish people enslaved by Vikings. The ‘Life’ of St Findan (or Fintan), a Leinster monk who died in Switzerland in 878, records the capture of his sister by Vikings. When Findan seeks to ransom her, he himself is captured. He is sold in succession to four different masters before he escapes. There is specific mention of the enslaved Findan being bound in chains. The Icelandic Laxdæla saga contains the story of Melkorka (probably Máel Curcaig), the daughter of an Irish king, who is captured in a raid when she is just fifteen and sold in a slave market in Norway to ‘Gilli the Russian’. She is then bought by a Viking called Höskuldr for ‘three silver pieces’. He takes her to Iceland, where she bears him a son, Oláfr, whom she teaches to speak Irish. She somehow retains a defiant personality: when Höskuldr’s wife contemptuously flings stockings at her head, Melkorka responds by giving her a bloody nose. Few Irish slaves were the children of kings, and few would have survived such defiance. In the saga, Melkorka pretends for years to be deaf and dumb. Slaves, indeed, seldom get to speak or to leave the records of their own voices. The only sound they leave behind is the dull clank of a chain.