The term ‘Scandinavian Dublin’ applies to the years before 1171: That is, prior to the seizure of Dublin by the Henry II and the execution of its last viking king Ascall mac Torcaill. The purpose of this paper is to examine Dublin's status as a frontier polity. The port had a border position in Ireland. It was identified as a kingdom ruled and inhabited by foreigners (gaíll was the term most commonly employed in Irish chronicles). Dublin also bordered the sea, and as such its neighbours may be counted as the kingdoms closest to Ireland across the water, namely Man and the Isles, England, Wales and Scotland.

It can be argued that the history of Dublin during the twelfth century has been largely construed from the perspective of those neighbours who were most eager to possess it, namely the English and the Irish. From an English historiographic perspective, events there before 1170 tend to be judged as a prelude to the Angevin invasion (Downham 2003, 55). From an Irish perspective, the contest between leading overkings to control Dublin has sometimes been regarded as part of a wider struggle for national unity; a process which is deemed to have been cut short by Henry II's arrival (Ó Cróinin 1995, 290–92; Duffy 1997, 81). These hindsight approaches are by no means invalid. However there may be scope for closer examination of Dublin's quest for self-determination and power in relation to its neighbours before 1170.²

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² The approach in this paper is stimulated by work undertaken since the 1990s on the Irish Sea region by a range of scholars (for example Ian Beuermann, Seán Duffy, and Kari Maund) which has been significant in broadening debate over Dublin's history in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.
Three subjects will be briefly explored in this paper. The first is the identity of the Dubliners in the twelfth century, the second is the town’s political dealings with its Irish neighbours, and the last is Dublin’s connections across the Irish Sea.

**Identity**

The subject of identity is undoubtedly complex, but some generalisations may be made by dividing our evidence into the broad categories of assigned and self-expressed identity. Here it is relevant to mention R. R. Davies’s observation that ‘the medieval construction of the world,…was one which defined it as a collection of peoples; whatever modern historians care to believe, contemporaries were not in doubt about the reality and solidity of such communities’ (1994, 7). In other words the medieval world defined people by ethnicity no matter how fragile and arbitrary its labels might be.

To some degree we can evaluate the identity of twelfth-century Dubliners from the opinions of their neighbours. Dublin during the twelfth-century comprised of an urban settlement but also a rural hinterland which was defined in Irish sources as Fine Gall or crich Gall (kindred or territory of the foreigners) (Downham 2005, 170–71). The use of the term gaill in Irish sources to refer to the inhabitants of Dublin in the twelfth century suggests that they were regarded as non-Irish or foreign despite the presence of Viking communities in Ireland since the ninth century (Downham 2004b, 75). Further evidence that the Dubliners remained culturally distinct can be found in the writings of Gerald of Wales. He stated that the inhabitants of the Viking towns were different from the Irish and that they were called Ostmen (O’Meara 1982, 122; 1948–50, 175). This was a term derived from Norse meaning an ‘easterner’ (perhaps reflecting a self-perception among the people of Dublin that their ancestors came from the east) (Curtis 1908, 209, n. 1). The Norse customs and dress of those inhabiting Ireland’s major ports are also referred to by an Arab geographer Tarsi ‘al-Akhbar who wrote around 1080 (James 1978, 5–9). He assumed that the people he encountered reflected the character of Ireland as a whole and thus identified it as a Viking land. While these accounts provide strong evidence that the inhabitants of Dublin retained Scandinavian cultural traits, they were not uniformly regarded as a Scandinavian people.