

Clontarf 1014 – a battle of the clans?

1. The contemporary record

In its account of the battle of Clontarf the northern *AU* report that Brian, son of Cennétig, king of Ireland, and Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill, king of Tara, led an army to Dublin (Áth Cliath)

- all of the Leinstermen (Laigin) were assembled to meet him (Brian), the foreigners of Áth Cliath, and a similar number of foreigners of Lochlainn (Scotland)
- a sterling battle was fought between them, the like of which had never been encountered before

Then the foreigners and the Leinstermen first broke in defeat and were completely wiped out

- there fell on the side of the foreign troop Máel Mórda, king of Leinster, and Domnall, king of the Forthuatha
- of the foreigners fell Dubgall, son of Amlaíb (= Óláfr), Sigurd, earl (jarl) of Orkney, and Gilla Ciaráin, heir designate of the foreigners, etc.
- Brodar who slew Brian, chief of the Scandinavian fleet, together with 6,000 others was also killed or drowned

Of the Irish who fell in the counter-shock were Brian, overking of the Irish of Ireland and of the foreigners [of Limerick and Waterford] and of the Britons [of Wales?], the Augustus of the whole of the north-west of Europe [= Ireland]

- his son Murchad and the latter's son Tairdelbach, Conaing, the heir designate of Mumu, Mothla, king of the Déisi Muman, etc.
- the list includes numerous kings of various parts of Munster, plus Domnall, the earl of Marr in Scotland
- this list carries conviction when analysed against known details

The southern *AI* report similarly, though more briefly and with three important differences of emphasis:

- a) *AU* give primacy on the side of the rebels to the Leinstermen, whereas *AI* give it to the Dublin army
- b) *AU* stress that the rebels were defeated decisively, whereas *AI* say only that the foreigners of the western world were slaughtered
- c) Only *AU* mention Máel Sechnaill's presence during the preliminary stages of the battle

The following points are common to both:

- a) Large numbers of kings and other nobles fell on both sides, Brian being given pride of place even though he did not fight
- b) There is no mention of Sigtryggr, the king of Dublin, who did not participate and survived to tell the tale
- c) There is no mention of Clontarf, which is not cited until it occurs in a king-list in the mid-12C Book of Leinster, i.e. that it was a battle fought at Dublin
- d) It was a great battle, rather like Hastings half a century later, since most medieval battles were over and done with in an hour or two

Thus these and other accounts of the battle of Clontarf vary considerably in detail

- other versions can be found in *CS*, *ALC*, *A Clon.* and *AFM* (the two latter 17C), though not in *AT* on account of a lacuna
- if it was difficult for contemporaries to summarize what happened, how much more difficult is it for us now?
- another factor is that some of these accounts were doctored later on, as Máire Ní Mhaonaigh explains in her book (2007)

2. Clan warfare

The OED definition of ‘clan’ is ‘a number of persons claiming descent from a common ancestor, and associated together’

- both armies fighting at Clontarf were composite ones and at least some of the participants would have thought of themselves as clansmen in this sense
- we have to assume that each body of men fought under the command and leadership of a particular king, earl or other nobleman

The principal military leaders on the two sides appear to have been Brian’s son Murchad and Máel Mórda, the king of Leinster

- the leader of the Dublin contingent was Dubgall, brother of King Sigtryggr
- how much control the principals had over their own composite contingents is unknown, but probably limited
- the duration of the battle and the enormous number of casualties implies a long series of skirmishes, in which all three leaders were killed
- only late in the day did the Munster force, occupying gently rising ground, succeed in pushing the opposition towards the water

Thus the Gaelic Irish components on both sides comprised bodies of clansmen fighting alongside one another, but in effect under individual leadership

- in that sense, the battle of Clontarf was a battle of the clans, Munster and Connacht ones on one side and Leinster ones on the other
- in addition to them, again on both sides, there were ‘Vikings’, or at least warriors of Scandinavian descent

3. Clan co-operation

Máel Mórda represented the Uí Fáeláin sept of the Uí Dúnlainge federation of clans, based at Naas (**Map**)

- Dúnlaing goes back genealogically to c. 500 A.D. and two of his sons were kings of Leinster in the early 6C

A remarkable development occurred after the death of Murchad (715–27), when his three surviving sons established ruling septs that monopolized the provincial kingship down to the year 1042 (over 300 years):

- a) Uí Dúnochada, based at Liamain (Lyons Hill, Newcastle, Co. Dublin)
 - their presence is still hinted at in the name of an inner suburb in the city, Dolphins Barn
 - if the origin of this outlandish name really is Carn Uí nDúnochada, ‘cairn of Uí Dúnochada’, the possibility is that it represents a cairn of stones serving as a territorial marker erected when Vikings established themselves at Dublin in 841
 - it may have survived for a very long time, hence the south-westerly projection in the boundary of the liberty of Dublin created during King Henry II’s overwintering in 1171–2
- b) Uí Fáeláin, based at Naas, whose castle may be a successor site
 - this was situated on the Slige Dála, ‘highway of the assemblies’; cf. Dáil Éireann
 - routeway led to the ancient political focus of north Leinster, Dún Ailinne, and the early church at Old Kilcullen
 - a branch led off to the chief church in the province at Kildare, over the Cuirrech Life
 - in other words, Naas was central to the command of north Leinster and potentially the whole province
- c) Uí Muiredaig, based at Mullaghmast (Maistiú), near Athy
 - their chief survival, apart from a prehistoric megalith, is the majestic and mysterious cross at Moone, representing royal patronage of the 9C or 10C
 - an undervalued site, with commanding vistas across Cos Carlow, Kildare and Wicklow

Throughout this long period of time, the provincial kingship of Leinster appears to have been shared on a roughly rotational basis (**Chart**)

- thus the 10C sequence is Cerball (Uí Fáeláin, 885–909), Augaire (Uí Muiredaig), Fáelán (Uí Dúnochada), Lorcán, also Uí Dúnochada, killed in an attack on Dublin), Bróen (Uí Fáeláin), Tuathal (Uí Muiredaig), Cellach (Uí Dúnochada), Murchad (Uí Fáeláin, father of Máel Mórda and Gormlaith), Augaire (Uí Muiredaig), Domnall Cláen (Uí Dúnochada) and Donnchad, his son (Uí Dúnochada, 984–1003)
- without clan consciousness, such a system could not have been in operation so relatively peacefully and for so long

But who broke this pattern initially – Brian Boru!

- as the new high-king by 1002, he deposed Donnchad in the following year and installed the Uí Fáeláin Máel Mórda as king of Leinster
- that is to say, the brother of his ex-wife Gormlaith and uncle of his son-in-law Sigtryggr, king of Dublin
- having broken the traditional Uí Néill monopoly of the high-kingship of Ireland by displacing Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill, now Brian Boru interfered in the royal succession in Leinster
- nevertheless he maintained the traditional Uí Dúnlainge monopoly

4. New clans

The Uí Dúnlainge ruling septs in Leinster were clans going back a long way under those names

- Brian Boru, on the other hand, was using a comparatively new name, Dál Cais, ‘the seed of Cas’
- the first king of Dál Cais died in 934 (*AI*), representing an ancient but minor dynasty called Uí Thairdelbaig
- Dál Cais were ambitious and engaged in rivalry with the traditional Éoganachta rulers of the kingdom of Munster
- the first Dál Cais leader to be termed king of Munster in the king-lists was Brian’s older brother, Mathgamain (963–76)

Inside the kingdom of Leinster there was another family of relative upstarts

- they are not known to have regarded themselves as a clan in the Gaelic sense, but we can call them the Ívarssons
- these were the descendants of Ívarr *inn beinlausi*, ‘the boneless’, king of Dublin from *c.* 856 to 873
- despite a 15-year break (902–17), when they were forced into exile in various parts of Britain, the Ívarssons made a dramatic comeback and ruled Dublin until 1036
- they made an impression on politics and society north and south of Dublin, in the lands of the Southern Uí Néill and of the Laigin
- eventually they made an impression much farther away, at Kincora by Lough Derg

The ruling king of Dublin, Sigtryggr Silkiskeggi (Sitriuc Silkbeard) was a great-great-grandson of the original Ívarr

- as the archaeology of Dublin has shown, and as documentary evidence indicates, Dublin had become a bustling and wealthy town (**View; map**)
- Brian Boru would have been aware of the potential wealth of genuine towns, for in his brother’s reign (967) Limerick had been taken over and its ruling (‘Viking’) dynasty eliminated
- a man ambitious to take over Ireland would have needed to find ways to take over Dublin

His initial solution was traditional in many parts of Europe – to use the marriage market

- in *c.* 990, who was the most promising and available woman?

- the answer was Gormlaith, the mother of King Sigtryggr and a Leinster princess of the Uí Fáeláin sept
- at an unknown date, in the late 980s or early 990s, she became Brian's second wife
- by then she was no spring chicken (but nor was Brian), but still young enough to bear him a son, Donnchad
- he became the unintended successor to his father as king of Munster (1014–64)

Gormlaith's relationship with Brian was probably fairly short-lived, for by 997 he had taken another woman as his third wife (**Chart**)

- Echrad was a daughter of Carlus mac Ailella, representing an obscure dynasty within the lands of the Southern Uí Néill
- this marriage was probably related to Brian's policy of pressurizing his great rival Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill
- it has been suggested that this would have given Brian and his troops a strategic resting place within striking distance of Dublin

At any rate in 997 Brian and Máel Sechnaill agreed to carve up the island of Ireland between them as two hegemonies

- Máel Sechnaill kept the northern half and Brian took the southern half, including crucially the kingdom and town of Dublin
- a Munster takeover of the whole of Leinster was not welcome and rebellion was in the air long before 1014
- it started in Dublin and was conceivably spurred on by a rejected Gormlaith

On the penultimate day of 999 the Dubliners fought and lost the battle of Glenn Máma with an expeditionary force led by Brian

- its location is highly uncertain, but perhaps near Newcastle Lyons
- Sigtryggr's brother Haraldr may have led the Dublin army for he was killed
- Sigtryggr himself was expelled and the town plundered and then burnt to the ground

As always on such occasions, a political settlement was reached, though with fairly extraordinary terms

- Sigtryggr was restored as king of Dublin and was provided with a new (?) wife, Sláine, a daughter of Brian by (probably) his first wife
- accordingly Gormlaith's son (Sigtryggr) by her first marriage (to Óláfr Kváran, gaelicized as Amlaíb Cuarán) was married to her step-daughter (Sláine) who was born to the first (?) wife of her third, though former, husband (Brian)

Family relationships became even more complicated when in 1003 Brian, now high-king himself in enforced succession to Máel Sechnaill, deposed the Uí Dúinchada king of Leinster, Donnchad

- Donnchad was replaced by none other than Gormlaith's (Uí Fáeláin) brother, Máel Mórda
- was this done at the request of, even out of respect for, Brian's own ex-wife, whose son, Sigtryggr, was his recently acquired son-in-law?

- conceivably so, for Donnchad's father was the man who had treacherously murdered the father of Gormlaith and Máel Mórda back in the year 972

However that may be, the person who brought together, for political reasons, the Dál Cais of Kincora and the Ivarssons of Dublin was Brian Boru

- his strategy was successful for 10 years, a commendable achievement in itself
- but relations soured again in 1013, for obscure reasons, and the dramatic outcome was the climactic battle fought at Clontarf in the following year

5. Precedents for Clontarf

The battle of Clontarf should not be assessed, as it so often is, in isolation from other battles

- it was special in some respects, but was far from being unprecedented
- it struck contemporaries as being remarkable for a number of reasons, especially the number of high-status casualties on both sides and the tragic death of the high-king

Yet Brian Boru was not the first high-king of Ireland to be killed by a Dublin-based army; in fact he was the third

- the return of Vikings to Dublin in 917 had presented a big challenge that could not be ignored
- accordingly the Northern Uí Néill high-king, Niall Glúndub, led a large force to Dublin two years later
- the upshot was a major battle fought outside Dublin (just like Clontarf), at Islandbridge near a ford across the River Liffey
- the northerners were defeated and Niall and many other high-status leaders were killed
- *AU* contain a moving lament comprising four quatrains

In the year 956 the Southern Uí Néill high-king, Congalath of Knowth (of Síil nÁedo Sláine of Brega) was ambushed on his return from a plundering expedition into Leinster

- his assailants were 'the foreigners of Áth Cliath' and the Laigin, then ruled over by the Uí Muiredaig Tuathal (947–58)
- Congalath became the second high-king to be killed by a Dublin-based army, here with the help of Leinster allies
- incidentally, during the 10C the Dubliners were sometimes allied with and sometimes opposed to the provincial kings of Leinster

Another great battle of the 10C set a different precedent for Clontarf in the year 980

- Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill (of Clann Cholmáin of Mide) had declared himself to be the high-king of Ireland
- on this occasion the most immediate challenge came from the aging king of Dublin, Óláfr Kváran (Sigtrygr's father)
- he had recruited, in advance, Vikings from the Northern and/or Western Isles of Scotland, just as his son would do in the winter of 1013–14
- *AU* record that 'a very great slaughter was inflicted on the foreigners therein and foreign power [was ejected] from Ireland [as a result]'

- in the view of that author, the Viking threat to Ireland had been eliminated, or at the very least contained, and one of Óláfr's sons (and potential successors) had been killed

And of course the battle of Glenn Máma in 999 foresaw Clontarf in yet another way

- it was an unsuccessful joint Dublin–Leinster encounter, fought outside the town, against an army assembled by Brian Boru
- in effect, not much that was genuinely new happened at Clontarf in the spring of 1014; only the scale was different

6. The Irish and the Viking wars

All of this suggests that we should give more consideration to the nature and scale of warfare between the Irish and Vikings

- standard accounts by modern scholars of Viking raids and of Viking warfare tend to build up a picture of inexorability and invincibility
- raid is piled on raid and victory is piled on victory – the terrorists are on a winning streak

Of course, we all recognize that Viking armies could be defeated, sometimes spectacularly so, but nevertheless an impression is created of Scandinavian supermen

- this in turn is reinforced by maps with large arrows indicating directions of attack, without any corresponding sign of whether such attacks were opposed, and, if so, who won

Dublin was clearly the most important Scandinavian settlement in Ireland and the one most capable of inflicting political damage on its neighbours

- if we look first at the naval encampment (*longphort*) phase, which lasted from 841 to 902, the adjoining provinces of Brega to the north and Leinster to the south bore the brunt of Dublin-based raids
- the number of recorded, successful plundering raids during the *longphort* phase is small
- even in this early phase of warfare, the Irish won most of their battles with Dublin Vikings
- for the latter the one major victory came in 888, when Flann Sinna led a large combination of native forces to defeat, the dead including the king of Connacht, the bishop of Kildare and the abbot of Kildalkey

After the return of the ruling dynasty in 917 the main target areas for periodic plundering were the same as before, though the intensity increased down to the middle of the 10C

- in the period 917–1014 at least 25 military engagements took place between Irish armies and Dublin ones, the latter sometimes containing native allies
- of these, the purely Irish forces won 15, most notably the battle of Tara in 980, after which King Óláfr Kváran retired, or was obliged to retire, to Iona in western Scotland

In addition, between 936 and 1013 there were at least 13 military assaults by Irish armies on Dublin itself, most of them successful

- ironically the siege by the Munster army in the autumn of 1013 was one of the failures and the besiegers insisted on going home for Christmas
- as on that occasion the leaders of these attacking forces were usually high-kings, sometimes assisted by allies
- here the trendsetter was Donnchad Donn mac Flainn of the Southern Uí Néill (a son of Flann Sinna), who captured and burnt Dublin in 936

Thus, by the end of the 10C Dublin – then a town of some size and importance – had been brought to heel, especially by Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill

- rarely thereafter did Dublin warriors take a military initiative overland in Ireland without native allies
- the Clontarf campaign was one of those occasions

The capacity of the Irish to defeat Viking armies more often than not may have a bearing on a quite different question – that of the extent and nature of Scandinavian rural settlement in Ireland

- there are very few purely Norse place-names in the Dublin area, or anywhere else in Ireland
- of these, some were given to small islands, such as Dalkey, Irelands Eye and Lambay, and one to a headland, Howth
- Leixlip upstream on the Liffey may have been no more than a natural feature where salmon negotiated a rise in the bed of the river in order to spawn
- a side-stream, the Steine(e), took its name from the Long Stone – a territorial marker erected by Vikings at an unknown date
- Bullock denoted a small harbour on the south side of Dublin Bay
- Windgate acquired its name from a gap in the hills leading towards the wilds of Wicklow

Down to the 1030s, despite periods of weakness, the traditional provincial rulers of Leinster, the Uí Dúnlainge federation of clans, remained as a relatively effective power

- as tribute-takers from the whole province, they were probably able to limit permanent territorial expansion by the Northmen, though not to prevent periodic raiding
- north of Dublin, rulers of Brega continued to be a force to be reckoned with
- in an expressive phrase, Gille Mo Chonna, who died after a drinking bout in Máel Sechnaill's house in 1013, is said in *AU* to have 'yoked the foreigners to the plough'
- as late as 1146 the men of southern Brega defeated and killed the king of Dublin, Ragnall mac Torcaill, and his Leinster allies

The Gunnhildr, Gunnar, Óláfr and Thorkell of the hybrid place-names could represent no more than the result of outward migration from the territorial core of the kingdom of Dublin at a relatively late stage in the 11C and 12C

- the essential Fine Gall appears to have lain between the Broad Meadow Water to the north and the Dargle river to the south

What all of this suggests, it seems to me, is that the rulers of Brega and of Leinster, despite the vicissitudes of the Viking Age, were successful in limiting by military

means the territorial expansion of the Dublin Vikings and their Hiberno-Norse descendants

- there are occasional hints of expansionism, such as Óláfr Kváran's interest in Skreen, near Tara, for a brief period in the 970s
- in his case, however, the crushing defeat in 980 would have put paid to such ambitions

7. Conclusions

This period of Irish history is enormously complicated, as well as enormously fascinating

- many conclusions could be drawn from what I have said, but I should like to suggest four:
 - a) The battle of Clontarf, in its lead-up and in its course, was special, but not unprecedented in most respects
 - b) During the late 10C and early 11C 'Viking' Dublin was undergoing important developments as a town (cf. *The Irish Times* supplement)
 - in broad terms it was ceasing to be a Viking emporium dominated by the slave trade and by periodic raids on monasteries
 - it was becoming a regular urban community engaged in craft-working and in local and overseas trade
 - its half-Norse king, Sigtryggr, initiated the first currency ever produced in Ireland in the mid-990s
 - that same king, having returned from a pilgrimage to Rome, cofounded the diocese of Dublin and the cathedral of the Holy Trinity (Christ Church)
 - a new culture was emerging, which archaeologists and historians call Hiberno-Norse
 - c) A simple oppositional interpretation of Brian Boru fighting against Vikings is unhistorical
 - Brian Boru was not completely detached from members of the Viking world
 - during the reign of his older brother Mathgamain, Viking Limerick had been taken over by the Dál Cais and its ruling dynasty eliminated
 - at Clontarf, Brian had Limerick- and Waterford-based 'Vikings' fighting on his side
 - one of his chosen sons-in-law, Sigtryggr of Dublin, was half Norse and Norse-speaking
 - during the period of peaceful co-operation Dublin 'Vikings' went on tour with Brian's Munstermen
 - after his death, the Hiberno-Norse kingdom of Dublin and the Gaelic kingdom of Munster were ruled for the next 22 years by half-brothers, Sigtryggr and Donnchad, both sons of Gormlaith
 - thus the idea that Brian, by his supposed victory at Clontarf, prevented a Viking conquest of Ireland is complete nonsense

- originally it was a figment of the imagination of the utterly and outlandishly biased author of *Cogadh Gáedhel re Gallaibh*
 - latterly it has been borrowed and propagated by nationalists of various hues and even by some historians
- d) Brian Boru did not prevent a Viking conquest of Ireland, because such a conquest had never been possible
- the numerous population groups in the country, including those that had a consciousness of being clans with ancient lineages, had always prevented such a development and continued to do so
 - even if the Dublin–Leinster coalition had won the battle of Clontarf, there would have been no prospect of the ‘Viking’ remnants somehow conquering the rest of Ireland
 - there were far too many kings and their armies, as there always had been
 - Ireland was all but unconquerable, as the Anglo-Normans and their English successors would discover in later times

Howard Clarke
12 April 2014.