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This dissertation studies the career of Brian "Bórumha" mac Cennétig from its beginning with his election to the kingship of his ancestral kingdom of Dál Cais in 976 until his death as the high-king of Ireland at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014. He was arguably the most successful Irish king of the Middle Ages, and his sobriquet “bórumha” ("cattle tribute"), usually Anglicized as “Boru,” refers to his right to the reign over the island. Special emphasis is placed on the development of his military strategy as he progressed from regional prince to lordship over the entire island.

Brian’s career has not received the scholarly attention given to his contemporaries elsewhere. His reign is either dealt with superficially in brief essays or treated more fully by writers interested in sensationalism. A careful study of Brian’s strategy and operational method reveals that they continuously evolved during the course of his reign. This is contradictory to conventional wisdom that believes Irish military development to be static after the ninth century. Brian was a careful student of his enemies and neighbors. He increasingly relied on fleets, similar to the Vikings, to provide transportation and used a series of fortifications, in imitation of the Anglo-Saxons and Franks, both for defensive, as well as offensive operations.

An argument to be made here is that the evolution of Brian’s strategies can best be understood by examining his career in stages. The initial decade of his rule was spent gaining and consolidating authority within the southern province of Munster. From 985 to 1002, Brian overcame rebellion within Munster and then expanded his rule to include the southern half of Ireland as well as gaining the submission of the previous high-king and the Viking center of Dublin. The next decade reflected the mature campaigns of Brian as he moved into the northern kingdoms bringing them under his nominal control by the year 1012. The final years of his life saw Brian responding to revolts and fighting his final battle at the field of Clontarf, just outside of Dublin.

Another theme of this work is that Brian must be placed within the context of his European contemporaries. Whatever the typical Irish kingship might have been, Brian was using tactics and methods usually believed to have been limited to Anglo-Saxon or continental monarchs. He consciously attempted to expand and define his authority in terms similar to those used by the Holy Roman Emperors, the Capetian kings of Francia, and the Anglo-Saxon kings of the family of Alfred the Great. Brian’s use of fleets, fortifications, and mercenaries combined with his efforts to secure the support of the church; all reflect an awareness of historical precedent and inspiration from outside Ireland. Contrary to the popular perception of Brian as the liberator of Ireland from foreign dominance, he purposely used outsiders to expand his authority. Brian “Boru” combined Irish tradition with innovation to become the most successful Irish king of his time.
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Introduction

In the 10th century, continental European rulers such as Otto I looked to Charlemagne as a model for legitimacy. Their supporters described them with the term “emperor” in articulating their right to rule. These ideas had a wide distribution. Otto’s son Otto II is called “emperor” by a contemporary in the list of kings inserted in the Irish poem Saltair na Rann. The term invoked religious sanction of rule, the approval of God, and evoked memories of the great lords of classical antiquity. Such authority exceeded that coming from the people and collective laws justifying, and limiting, the roles and responsibilities of medieval kings who were the descendants of the war leader of the barbarians. Imperial claims encompassed far greater sovereignty than the territorial extent of a kingship of a particular people.  

In the year 1005 A.D., an Irish king named Brian “Bórumha” mac Cennétig (Brian Boru) from the southern kingdom of the Dál Cais asserted his right to the title of Imperatoris Scotorum, “the emperor of the Irish.” Never before had the term been used for an Irish prince; after Brian’s death in 1014 it would not be used again. This reliance on a non-insular archetype distinctively marks Brian’s rise and rule. He demonstrated an unmatched ability to assert his authority in Ireland.

The outline of his life is easily divided

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1 Similar changes were taking place in the 9th and 10th century Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, see D.P. Kirby, The Earliest English Kings (London: Routledge, 1991) pages 164-170.
chronologically into quarters and provides the framework for this narrative. Each of these periods will receive detailed examination in the following chapters, but a brief overview is useful. Brian mac Cennétig became king of Dál Cais in the year 976, following the murder of his brother Mathgamáín. The death of Mathgamáín marked a turning point in Brian's life and he slowly began to deviate from normal Irish princely practice. The first activities that the annals record for him involve the exacting of revenge against all who were involved in the murder. His success continued as he attempted to assert himself as the king of Munster, a lordship claimed by his brother. His initial forays are typical of other Irish kings, what seemed like an endless series of raids and reprisals. The year 984 marked the consolidation of his rule over Munster and the close of the first quarter of his rule.

Brian began a campaign to have his lordship recognized throughout southern Ireland, which was complete in 997 when he and Máel Sechnaill II, the Uí Néill high king, divided the political domination of the island between themselves. Máel Sechnaill’s submission to Brian in 1002 ends this chapter of his life. Towards the end of the initial consolidation of his domain Brian cultivated his relationship with the Church. He used his influence to gather important ecclesiastical positions for his brother Marcan in 990 AD. The positive relationship between Church and Dál Cassian king would play an ever more important role as Brian began to look at the possibility of greater
conquest. Brian gained control of Dublin after the battle of Glenn Máma in 999 AD, and with that prize increased his economic and military advantage over his northern rival Máel Sechnaill. During this period Brian attacked multiple enemies almost simultaneously, overwhelming them as much by the constant and unceasing pressure as by his capacity to support such forces in the field.

Brian then embarked on a decade long effort to exert his control to the northernmost kingdoms. No other Irish king could match him at that point and he quickly worked to expand his control. His efforts at legitimating himself took numerous forms; the traditional Irish circuit of the island; a financial contribution to the most powerful northern church that secured their support; even rearticulating the relationship of political leader to the ruled. In 1005 A.D. he was able to claim control over the entire island, in theory if not in practice. No longer was he a king, now he assumed the title of emperor, and had the backing of the Church. At least the outward appearance of rule had changed. The years until 1012 saw him enforcing his claims.

The final years of his life were filled with revolt and rebellion, reflecting the personal nature of his rule and attempting to make the reality match the propaganda. Brian was never fully capable of subduing the northernmost kingdoms of Ireland and in his final years the kings of the North and the kings of Leinster chose to openly revolt - with the support of the Vikings of Dublin and allies from outside of Ireland. In
1014 A.D. he fought his greatest battle to keep his empire together. He won the fight but lost his life on that fateful day. This final chapter in his life demonstrates the changes that had come about within Ireland, as well as what had not changed despite his best efforts. The reliable core of his army came from his original kingdom and his Viking allies and the battle was a set piece fought in the fashion of Maldon and Hastings, not the raids so frequently cited in the annals. By this point it is obvious that Brian is conducting himself in a manner akin to other medieval rulers trying to establish themselves throughout Europe.

Each of these periods allows for the appreciation of factors that shaped his outlook and strategy at that point in time. Increasingly, however, the records indicate a complexity to the operations undertaken by the Dál Cais. For example, there are the first references to Brian’s building of fortifications, and the possibility of those specific complexes coming under attack. This shows a remarkable growth of military capability on the part of Brian, as he developed reliable bases for future operations. By the time of his death, Brian was behaving as an innovator in the political and military spheres of Irish life.

**The Sources**

The source materials for a study of Brian mac Cennétig are many and varied. An obvious lacuna is administrative documents: charters, treaties, decrees even court records. If they ever did exist, they do not anymore. The basic sources are the Irish
annals. Kathleen Hughes and Gearoid Mac Niocaill conducted
detailed examination of the relationships of these records to
each other in Early Christian Ireland and The Medieval Irish
Annals respectively. The Annals of Ulster are considered the
most reliable timeline for Irish history and serve as the base
for many of the other annalistic accounts. No later than the 9th
century, the Annals of Ulster reflect the interests of the Uí
Néill and the church of Armagh, focused on events in the north
and east. Alongside The Annals of Ulster comes the Annals of
Inisfallen which after 991 AD are considered to be an independent
source. These annals, focusing more heavily on the south of
Ireland provide details of Brian’s rise to power not found in the
more northerly focused Annals of Ulster. Accordingly, they can
be considered an Uí Briain record similar to the Annals of Ulster
for the Uí Néill. The Annals of Inisfallen record 24 distinctly
military events during Brian’s kingship. They also reveal a
changing strategic focus while demonstrating tactical consistency
by the Dál Cassian king. The Annals of Loch Cé provide a detailed
account of the battle of Clontarf not available in other records
and the Annals of Tigernach, Annals of Clonmacnoise and the
Chronicon Scotorum all provide additional and variant details to
the basic storyline. Each of these records comes from the
midlands and has a base in the now lost Chronicle of Ireland from

\(^2\) AI 977x2, 978, 982, 983x2, 984, 985, 987, 988, 991, 993, 999, 1000,
1002x2, 1005, 1006, 1007, 1010, 1011x2, 1013, 1014. These only include
hostings and battles not the full range of entries dealing with Brian’s
actions.
which they share many entries. The 17th century compilation of records by the Four Masters furnishes even more detail that is useful if viewed with caution. The Annals of the Four Masters are a later work of the Church and do have moments where they gloss over details or cast them in a different light from the Annals of Ulster or Annals of Inisfallen. These annalists, however, did have access to sources that are no longer extant and so can afford details that are not found in other materials.

More difficult to use are the narrative histories. Geoffrey Keating’s History of Ireland is a 17th century document that provides evidence not available in the Annals but also not always trustworthy. His sloppy timekeeping and pro-Irish bias are important details to keep in mind when approaching his work.

A crucial work for Brian’s career—equally tantalizing, and biased—is the propaganda tract Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, “War of the Irish against the Vikings,” written for either Brian’s grandson, Toirdelbach Ua Briain or his great-grandson Muirchertach. This work is by far the most detailed of records dealing with Brian’s life, but also the most pointedly biased. The level of detail in this work has resulted in many scholars using it almost to the exclusion of other materials. Certainly it includes factual material regarding Brian and one would expect it to be more accurate in those parts that were verifiable by other sources, primarily the latter life of Brian when he had reached renown throughout the island. There can also be little

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doubt that the author embellished portions to put the appropriate
spin on the message. Taken with Keating and the Four Masters,
the Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh does corroborate some useful
information as parts of it are found in all three sources.

Two other sources commonly ignored are the praise poem to
Brian by his court poet Mac Liag, Bóraimhe baile na ríogh, and
the Prophecy of Berchan, a work giving short descriptions of each
of the Irish kings. Both provide small bits of detail that add to
the overall wealth of material available.

**Modern Scholarship**

It is thus surprising that no critical study of his kingship
exists. The dearth of work regarding Brian Boru has led
historians to create a false paradigm of him as either a
destroyer of the traditional political system or a defender of
the island from external dominance. Neither model places him
within the context of his medieval peers. Scholarly estimations
of his career have ranged from the fulsome to the ineffectual.
In the early twentieth century, Edmund Curtis argued that the
development of Irish patronymics was due to the fame of the Dál
Cassian ruler, as his descendants made clear their link with
Brian.⁴ The traditional view of many scholars, such as Mike
Cronin, credit him with saving Ireland from the Vikings.⁵ More
critical historians, such as Séan Duffy and Michael Richter, hold
him responsible for destroying a stable political succession and

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⁴ Edmund Curtis, A History of Ireland (Methuen: University Paperbacks, 1936), 31.
⁵ Mike Cronin, A History of Ireland (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2001), 7-8.
ushering in an era of chaos often called the "period of kings with opposition." Certainly the object of such grandiose claims deserves a focused study, and one would expect to find a great wealth of scholarly investigation. Instead, what little has been written about Brian is either fragmentary in nature, outdated, or simply of low quality.

Part of the problem has been the place of Brian within the historiographical traditions of Irish nationalism. Such motivations are embodied in the 19th and 20th century issues of nationalism and identity. Daniel O’Connell’s efforts in 1843 to stage a meeting at Clontarf to discuss the repeal of the Act of Union invoked the spirit of “Brian Boru” as the embodiment of Irish resistance to outsiders. Irish nationalists sought and found strength in the distant past, creating a national character that would be furthered by the Gaelic League which sought to revitalize Irish culture and language. The beginning of the 20th century saw Ireland in need of a hero who could represent its continuing struggle against external oppression. New national ‘heroes’ were created during the years leading to the failed 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin. For example, T.J. Westropp made the first attempt to tell Brian's story in 1914, but his *Brian Boru, the Hero of Clontarf* is shorter than many articles and left much of the heroic and nationalist façade intact. Eventually, discussion of Brian took a more scholarly bend after the

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establishment of the Free-State shifted nationalist discourse. In his *Phases of Irish History*, Eoin MacNeill examined Brian’s career and suggested that the *Lebor na Cert* “The Book of Rights” (a catalogue of ritual gift exchange between lord and subordinate) was an expression of Brian’s idea of central authority, which was new and different from that of his peers. MacNeill also commented on the adoption of the epithet, the “king of the world,” i.e. the emperor, and how if there could be two in Europe, why not three with one in Ireland? A half century later, Donncha Ó Corráin returned to those themes in his 1972 *Ireland Before the Normans*, suggesting that Brian was the exemplar used by poets and scholars of the 11th century for the concept of the high-king over all of Ireland. They, in turn, projected that idea into the past. Also important are the brief expositions of Father John Ryan and Ó Corráin on the Battle of Clontarf: Ryan in 1938 and Ó Corráin in 1986. Ó Corráin's version was designed as a radio address for the *Milestones in Irish History* program and as such, does little beyond attempting to dispel the popular notion of Brian ending the Viking Invasions and saving Ireland at Clontarf (not a minor task). In his 1938 account, Ryan recounts

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10 Ó Corráin, 35-36.
the varied sources and includes what even he admits are the fantastic and supernatural omens that portend the outcome of the fight. While an entertaining account, it does little to develop understanding of the military aspects of the conflict and the action surrounding the battle.

In 1983, Roger Chatterton-Newman published his biography, Brian Boru King of Ireland which offers much more in the way of scholarship.\(^{11}\) His book, however, suffers from his desire to follow the accepted scholarly views regarding Brian. He portrays Brian as a hero and follows the path set out by Westropp, that is, when he was not taking a tangent to recount information regarding the saints or the Vikings. His book is a narrative written to bring information to a wider audience, not an exhaustive investigation or questioning of the sources.

Specifically focused are more recent studies. Aubrey Gwynn explored Brian's actions in Armagh in 1005 AD and Aibhe MacShamhráin looked at the battle of Glenn Máma.\(^{12}\) Both are scholarly works that provide important analysis of two of the key events in Brian’s life. Barry O’Brien styled Brian as a great military leader but did no real independent analysis to support such a claim.\(^{13}\) Ben Hudson recently advanced the argument that

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Brian marks a turning point in Irish conceptions of heroism, and by inference kingship. In "The Practical Hero" he argues that the Munster king conducted himself in a manner significantly different from his contemporaries. He does not seem to seek glory but rather the calculated extension of his authority. His actions indicate the use of an exemplar and if it is not another Irish king then external models should be sought.

**Brian: The Man and the Problem**

All of these works provide some insight, but not a comprehensive understanding of Brian or his success as a leader; that is the task undertaken in this work. Brian did not operate in a military vacuum and his political achievement most assuredly was tied to his military success. Ireland, as in much of Europe, was beginning to experience economic growth in the tenth century as well as a trend towards the consolidation of power from the local to regional level. A relatively limited pool of families emerged, effectively excluding smaller dynasties from power. The Eóganachta in the south and the various sects of the Uí Néill in the north and midlands formed power blocs that Brian Boru would have to deal with in turn. Trade, often conducted by the Vikings who connected previously limited local markets, brought economic growth and connections with the outside world. The Irish were not excluded from this prosperity. Such growth also meant an increase in resources for those individuals who could control a

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portion of the market. Wealth meant access to new weapons and manpower meaning potential new bases of military strength. After killing Ivar, the Viking leader of Limerick and subjugating the town, Limerick supported Brian’s efforts for the remainder of his career. At times, it appears that he had more difficult relations with his Irish subordinates that he had with this Viking town. Brian’s relationship with the Church served to enhance both his military and political successes. The church provided not only religious justification for his rule but also wealth and institutions of organization (and dissemination) not in the households of most kings.

When brought together, these threads weave a complicated tapestry showing the complexity of Brian’s empire building. His career was not about saving Ireland or asserting a right to a theoretical kingship, it was about taking advantage of his circumstances and if other issues could help justify his actions, so be it. The popular view of Brian as the man who drove the Vikings from Ireland, still being presented in Mike Cronin's general history written in 2001, is simply naive. To claim him as liberator will also require his demonization. He did not end the threat of a Viking takeover of Ireland, but he did incorporate the Viking settlements into his kingdom and used them as a very important part of his army. His objectives changed over time, and that simply adds to his impressive grasp and analysis of his situation. Initially his goal seems to have been to secure his position in the south, but later he realized the potential for
even greater success. He simultaneously pursued policies in a variety of arenas with what appears to be a vision of his desired goal that increased with each success: regional, provincial, and, finally, national supremacy.

While scholarly studies have concentrated on Brian's historical significance for Ireland, they do not address the question of his connection to the larger medieval world. This is one of the themes of this dissertation. Brian's career needs to be placed within the context of other medieval kings in Europe. The Irish were not isolated from the rest of Europe. Irish scholars were found throughout Europe at continental courts as well as religious houses; Marianus Scottus and Sedulius Scottus are the two best known Irish scholars in continental circles. Records of visiting Irish scholars are also found at locations through England. Viking ports at Dublin, Waterford, Limerick, Wexford and Cork connected the Island to a vibrant and growing trade network stretching from Galicia to the Baltic. This period was certainly not static. Understanding the changing nature of Irish politics during his life and the changes caused by his actions provide an even greater appreciation of Brian as a medieval ruler, rather than an icon for modern nationalist issues or as a scapegoat for Irish disunity. Extensive re-evaluation opens a window not only on what he accomplished, but how he accomplished it. In that awareness can be found the significance

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Brian carved his place in the Irish world in a manner similar to other rulers such as Charlemagne among the Franks and Alfred the Great among the Anglo-Saxons. The use of the term *Imperator* by his scribe suggests a conscious attempt to cast his rule in terms similar to those used by other powerful rulers, most notably the precursors to the Holy Roman Emperor. The parallels between Brian’s career and those of his contemporaries, or near contemporaries, are striking. Using Charlemagne as a model, the 'new emperors' of the tenth century sought a variety of means to assert the legitimacy of their claims to power which included sponsorship of the Church, building roads, providing security and the encouragement of learning. In particular, the similarity to the East Francian /Saxon kings is striking. The popular perception of the Emperor Henry I was shaped by the clergyman Widukind who depicted Henry as a champion defeating the invading Magyars, and whose military success earned him the Roman title of imperator. Henry’s son Otto I was similarly awarded the title after his victory at the Lechfeld in 955. Seven years later, he traveled to Rome for his coronation as *Imperator*

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18 Arnold, 84.
Romanorum, emperor of the Romans. The Pope gave him honors in the same manner that they had been conferred on Charlemagne. The ceremony integrated both the military and religious claims of Otto I and signified the renewal of a western empire. There were other signs of lordship. In Britain, the Anglo-Saxon king Alfred had surveyed and documented the properties and obligations of his kingdom in the Burghal Hideage. A similar survey by William the Conqueror is the Domesday Book. Both documents provided an understanding of what assets were available to the ruler, enabling them to collect taxes and tribute more effectively. Charles the Bald and Ethelred both employed Viking bands as mercenaries to enhance their military capability. These are all acts credited to Brian as well.

Brian asserted his authority by superior military prowess, similar to the strategy employed by Henry I and Otto I. After he had taken control of the southern Irish churches he traveled to Armagh in 1005 AD, the de facto religious center of Ireland and the main religious house of his greatest rival,. At Armagh he claimed the title of imperator, while the Annals of Ulster, maintained by the supporters of his northern rivals, call him augustus “revered” upon his death. That the visit is recorded at Armagh and in the northern annals shows its acceptance outside of the areas controlled by Brian, further legitimating the claim.

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20 Arnold, 85.
21 *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, edited by James Henthorn Todd (London: Rolls Series, 1866), 138-141 where his achievements are summarized.
As an emperor, a claim legitimized by the Church, he was able to articulate a version of authority more compelling than that of his potential opponents. Such a policy, if allowed to develop, could have changed the entire political system of the Irish world, reshaping it into yet another vast feudal kingdom.

At a minimum, that simple event suggests Brian’s awareness of continental expressions of authority and his attempt to match them. The Irish had a number of monastic settlements in the German lands, increasing the likelihood of transmission. That the Irish scholar Israel Scottus taught Otto I's brother Bruno only adds to the possible connections and suggests a venue for their transmission.\(^\text{22}\) As a reflection of the development of the early Christian Irish world and its connection to the larger world of medieval Europe, Brian’s rule provides an intriguing context for re-evaluating this period of history.

Especially intriguing is that Brian's actions suggest not just imitation, but also possibly innovation inspired by classical models. The Irish had access to the ancient Latin and Greek texts, as is well attested.\(^\text{23}\) Irish monks copied a wide variety of works that ranged from the religious texts of Augustine, Jerome and Origen to classical poets like Virgil and


Cicero.\textsuperscript{24} The 9th century Irish Scholar Sedulius Scottus quoted from the military treatises of Frontinus and Vegetius, showing an awareness of their content.\textsuperscript{25} Gifts of manuals were not uncommon in this period. The Bishop of Lisieux gave a copy of Vegetius to Charles the Bald. The court of Charles attracted many Irish scholars and was connected to that of Alfred the Great through the daughter of Charles who was Alfred’s step-mother.\textsuperscript{26} Sedulius Scottus provides evidence of an Irish scholar who transmitted these works from an ecclesiastical to secular audience in his poem describing the gift of a treatise on warfare from Bishop Hartgar of Liège to Count Eberhard of Friuli. The description of a ballista and an elephant clearly show this to come from a Mediterranean milieu. The volume presented by Bishop Hartgar possibly was the \textit{De Re Militari} of Vegetius. A copy of this work is preserved in an Irish manuscript of the 15th century (Trinity College, Dublin, MS E.5.20 ff.110-176), indicating that such works were also known in Ireland, although the surviving manuscripts are of a much later date.\textsuperscript{27} The \textit{Strategematica} of Frontinus also might have been known to Brian. To give one example, chapter 1.3.5 of the \textit{Strategematica} gives a vignette of the Carthaginian general Hasdrubal spreading his army among many fortified locations in such a manner that his Roman adversary

\textsuperscript{24} Ó Cróinín, 187, 213.
\textsuperscript{26} M.L. Laistner, \textit{Thought and Letters in Western Europe A.D. 500–900} (Ithaca: Methuen and Co., Ltd. 1971), 251–252 and 266.
Scipio would have had to besiege them each individually in order to attack Hasdrubal's center in Spain.\textsuperscript{28} This has a similarity in design and purpose to the fortifications placed by Brian in the South of Ireland in the first half of his career. Such possible inspirations are not rare in his career and many of Brian's actions suggest an awareness of classical precedents. Brian's efforts against his northern rival, the Uí Néill dynast and his predecessor as high king, Máel Sechnaill II, mirror suggestions found in Vegetius yet not in other Irish sources and historical precedents. To return to Hasdrubal, there is a similarity (see further the discussion in chapter three) with Brian's efforts to split the Uí Néill. Without a battle he was able to break the alliance between the Northern and the Southern Uí Néill and extend the campaign season long enough to bring them to the negotiating table on his terms.\textsuperscript{29}

His preference for raiding, while definitely Irish, includes a willingness to withdraw if faced by opposition. When the situation called for battle he would engage, but seemingly only when the price of not doing so had a greater cost. In this regard he followed the rules of war proposed by Vegetius in chapter 26 of the \textit{De Re Militari}.\textsuperscript{30} While similarities between Brian's conduct and passages within the ancient military treatises could be simple coincidence, they could also mean


\textsuperscript{29} Vegetius: \textit{Epitome of Military Science}, trans. by N.P. Milner (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1996), 884 and 88 compared to CGG 119-133.

\textsuperscript{30} Vegetius, 116-118.
familiarity and help to explain how he came to be so different from his peers. As of yet, no historian has even attempted to explore this relationship.

One as of yet untapped archive (regarding Brian that is), is the Irish landscape. The annalists concerned themselves with recording events of importance: raids, great battles and the deaths of learned men. They also comment on events that were out of the ordinary, such as plagues, abundant harvests, comets and meteors. This serves as the basis for my belief that the annals have not yet been fully exploited in the study of Brian Boru.

For instance, the annals record only two kings before the Normans who are credited with specific building projects - Turlough O'Connor and Brian. In doing so, the annalists have indicated that these are out of the ordinary and exceptional events. Other kings built forts or residences because they lived somewhere and the sources record activities at these locations. However these two have building programs and as such are out of the ordinary, whether because they were a different kind of construction or the scope was different. Turlough O'Connor has received recent attention from Mary Valante. It is interesting what she came up with regarding the programmatic nature of Turlough's actions, even suggesting Brian as his exemplar. In her study she suggests that they were probably defensive and meant to control territory but does not examine how those fortifications allowed him to exercise the desired degree of control. The reasons behind his activity remain obscured. Even with Valante's work, however, the
questions regarding Brian remain unanswered. Of the 15 enclosures credited to the Dál Cassian king, only three have been precisely identified.

One might then ask how these forts can possibly provide any useful information for historians. The answer lies in their physical setting. Their locations can be approximated within a mile or two using place name data. Analyzing the geographic locations of the buildings credited to Brian adds credence to the likelihood that he actually did place them with a specific purpose. When put together, the forts of Brian give the impression of a defense in depth with expansive views between the locations. The annals provide a very basic clue, where the forts were. Going to those areas provides a wealth of additional information — a countryside archive. Brian’s use of strategic fortifications to deny geographic access to his foes, as well as to enhance his ability to approach along the same routes bears a striking resemblance to the fortified bridges of Charles the Bald and the bridges and burghs of Alfred the Great. Such similarities suggest a flow of information into Ireland often disregarded by scholars. The itinerant nature of Brian's kingship demonstrates conclusively that Brian practiced a form of

32 The South of Ireland has remained relatively untouched until the past decade. Construction is now taking place at an increasingly frenzied pace but has resulted in only minor adjustments to the surface topography. The rivers of the South have yet to be diverted and the rugged terrain remains, well rugged. The topography of Dublin is problematic. The diversion of the Poodle into a tunnel as well as dredging and reclamation efforts has significantly altered the Dublin Bay area (see Chapter Five).
kingship common at that time elsewhere in Europe, not something unique unto Ireland. The greatest of Irish kings, the defender of Ireland, might well have been the product not of an isolated culture but rather an example of Irish awareness of continental affairs. Clearly, if he was in communication with other parts of Europe, the importance of that relationship cannot be overstressed.

The extant sources, as obscure as their material can be at times, offer an intriguing look at a man who combined traditional Irish practices with those of successful medieval kings. This work will provide an in-depth understanding of Brian as a military and political figure not only within Ireland, but within the greater context of medieval Europe. Political affairs, ecclesiastical interest and military events were closely related. Often studied separately, their mutual influence can be overlooked. Brian embodied the confluence of these three currents and yet his career was dominated by conflict.

Throughout his reign, Brian appears to have had acted according to a conscious plan. He did not just respond to opportunities, unless they presented him with strategic advantages. He appears to have sought battle and then conducted pursuits to magnify his battlefield success. It would have been easy to stop on the field of battle to revel in the glory of victory instead of forcing his troops to put their immediate gain (plunder) on hold for potentially greater gains. This runs counter to the much more limited aims of military actions commonly attributed to
Irish leaders of the 9th - 11th centuries. Over time, Brian developed a system of military fortifications as well as a logistical structure and process for the collection of tribute. This also served in the provisioning of armies in the field. He used mercenaries and garrisons as a small but permanent full time army. He coupled that with an ever increasing reliance on fleets for logistics and mobility. Combined, these elements resulted in a continuous pressure that became the implementation of his strategic goals by force. Supplemented by his use of other, non-military, tools such as diplomacy, ceremony, marriage and the Church, the Dál Cassian king effectively implemented and legitimized his rule.
Chapter 1

Brian Bórumha mac Cennétig is often cited as an example of a phenomenon, the great man who arose from nowhere to prominence. Modern historians follow medieval writers in presenting Brian in terms of the literary hero, who suddenly appears to save his people. John Ryan’s claim that “Brian Boru...was...a self-made man”\textsuperscript{33} while in many senses absolutely true, requires some degree of clarification. To say that Brian came from nowhere and that his father and brother really did not give him much of a start goes too far. His life is not a rags to riches story. Rather, the achievements of his Dál Cais predecessors set the stage for the most famous member of the family. Equally significant, their deaths provided the motivations for his initial actions and his political decisions early in his career. As such, the ascent of this family provides much needed background for a proper evaluation of the life and adventures of Brian Boru.

\textsuperscript{33} John Ryan, 355. My argument here is not with the primary thrust of Ryan’s thesis. Rather the degree to which he takes it. No one can divorce themselves from the situation into which they are born and Brian proved no exception. The turbulence and dynastic rivalries of this period are well documented by Byrne and Ó Corráin and are the stage onto which he would step. His family may not have included dominant players in this game but they were in the game at precisely the time when all over Europe dynasties were attempting to consolidate power. Smaller lines were continuously finding themselves relegated to lesser status and habitual relations of dependency - the Dál Cais managed to avoid this irrelevance precisely because of the work of Cennétig and Mathgamain.
A look at the history of Dál Cais reveals that the rise of Brian Boru to prominence was neither sudden nor inexplicable. While not as well-documented as the better known families of Uí Néill in the North or Eóganachta in the South, Dál Cais had some prominence in Munster by the 10th century. Brian’s father Cennétig mac Lorcáin was called “rígdamna Cassil” (“Royal material of Cashel”) by the Annals of Inisfallen on his death in 951 AD, indicating that he was considered a potential claimant to that throne; the Annals of Ulster call him “rí Tuathmuman” – king of North of Munster. The Annals of Inisfallen call Cennétig’s son Mathgamain, “ríg Cassil” (“king of Cashel”) as well as “rí Muman” – king of Munster. He is thus credited with the kingship of almost a quarter of Ireland! 

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34 AI 951. Mac Airt translates the term as “royal heir of Caisel” on page 155; AU 951, Mac Airt noted that this entry was a marginal insertion.
35 AI 976, AI 974.
such, Mathgamain must be considered one of the more powerful figures of his day, certainly within the province over which he held the kingship, and arguably in all of the island.\textsuperscript{36}

This study must begin, then, with a brief survey of Brian’s ancestors. Prior to the 10th century, the name of Dál Cais does not find mention in its own right. What would become the Dál Cassian dynasty came from the Uí Toirdelbach branch of the Southeast Munster people called the Deisi. One branch of the Deisi relocated to county Clare sometime between the 5th and 8th centuries and established a small kingdom there.\textsuperscript{37} Prior to the 10th century, the kingdom of In Déis Tuaiscirt (The Northern Déisi) played little role outside of their own borders. The annals have little information about them, and they were one of many obscure tuaths rarely making the “headlines” of the day. One 10\textsuperscript{th} century family from this kingdom would become known as the Dál Cais. Brian Boru is of this line. Their lands lay on the borders of two provinces, Connacht and Munster. The powerful dynasties of Connacht--Uí Briúin and Uí Fiachrach--were in the north of the province where they competed as well as clashing with their northern and eastern neighbors, the Uí Néill. The third largest kinship group was the Uí Maine who occupied much of

\textsuperscript{36} I make this argument based on the fact that both men are mentioned not only in annalistic sources recorded in the southwest but also those kept by northern scribes. Cennétig like so many hundreds of other Irish kings has the honor of his death receiving notice. His son gets two mentions, both times as the king of Munster; AU 967, AU 976, suggesting the rising fortunes of the dynasty.

\textsuperscript{37} Donncha Ó Corráin, Ireland Before the Normans (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1972), 114. Here he states the 8th century. Byrne, Irish Kings and High Kings, 180-183 suggests the 5th century. In either case, they settled long before the period of this story and did little of note for a long, or longer, time.
southern Connacht but were not claimants to the provincial title. While the struggles in Connacht kept these dynasties occupied, the kingdom of Uí Fiachrach Aidne, a sub-branch of the Uí Fiachrach, clashed occasionally with the Uí Fidgeinti of Western Munster. This peripheral action marked the southernmost extent of Connacht, certainly not areas that they held with a tight grip. Coincidentally, the lands in question would later be controlled by the Dál Cais.

The dynasty that controlled Munster, the Eóganachta, was separated into several branches located throughout Munster. Branches included Eóganacht Caisel, Eóganacht Raithlind, Eóganacht Loch Léin, Eóganacht Glendamnach, Eóganacht Áine, as well as the Uí Fidgeinte. Similarly to the Uí Néill families in the north, the various branches of the Eóganachta shared the kingship of Munster. While the Uí Néill were increasingly dominated by two families, the Eóganachta shared power among

38 Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings*. 243.
several branches, indicating an inability on the part of any one or two families to effectively consolidate power and achieve dominance.\textsuperscript{39} The dominating dynasties were located primarily in the southern and eastern regions of the province, with the families of the western regions and on the border with Connacht normally on the periphery of Munster’s power struggles. The Eóganachta tended to alternate succession to the kingship of Munster since none of the branches could monopolize power. The primary providers of kings were the Eóganacht Caisil and the Eóganacht Glennamnach, both from the eastern regions of Munster. The Eóganacht Locha Lein, the dynasty in the west of the province, rarely achieved power.

In this situation, the young Deisi kingdom fell into an area not normally in the spotlight of either Connacht’s or Munster’s political heartland. This was a mixed blessing. In a negative sense, the lands had no strong defender to thwart the attacks or travels of the increasingly powerful Norse raiders up the river Shannon, beginning in the ninth century. The Shannon served as a highway for these opportunists and little stood in their way in that regard until the mid-10th century. With no strong resistance at the mouth of the Shannon, the Norse were able to establish a settlement at Limerick, with importance for Dál Cais. Equally important is the fact that this region had

\textsuperscript{39} Byrne, pages 165-203 for the challenges facing efforts to consolidate authority. Ó Corráin opined that this diffusion was precisely the reason that no seat of power developed for the Eóganacta thus limiting their ability to resist the efforts of other powerful figures and groups such as the Uí Néill in the early 10\textsuperscript{th} century, pages 111-113.
little to offer in the traditional game of power politics played by the larger dynasties. The lands around the Shannon were rarely the objective of others’ designs, although many traveled through them. In Deís Tuascaírt held little to keep most conquerors there, which provided an opportunity for Dál Cais. Little about In Deís Tuascírt called others to venture into its business, and the concerns of Dál Cais were thus of little consequence outside of its borders. In a period where the powerful spent their precious resources trying to weaken each other, this region was ideally situated to take advantage of a potential power vacuum. One dynasty would have to stumble and fall, and around the year 900, one did.

Until the 10th century, the story of Munster was the story of its strongest family. Branches of the Eóganacht family controlled the important churches at Emly, Cork and Cashel as well as the provincial kingship. Their lands were at the heart of the province and they traditionally controlled selection of provincial rulers. Internal struggles to create alliances and control Munster weakened these families. The incursions of the Vikings also affected their ability to assert dominance and authority. Even weakened, however, the grasp of the Eóganachta on power in Munster was firm. Their hold on power required an even more significant shake for another dynasty to rise to prominence.

A dynasty takes shape

The first member of what would become known as Dál Cais to
become king of In Deis Tuaiscirt was Lorcán mac Lachtna of Uí Toirdelbaig, the grandfather of Brian. Prior to Lorcán, the kings had come from the line of Clann Óengussa. His rise to kingship was obviously a contentious moment. After what seems to have been an uneventful career, he was replaced upon his death by a non Uí Toirdelbaig member of the Deisi named Rebachán mac Mothla from the Clann Óengussa. Rebachán was an ecclesiastic, the abbot of Tuaim Greni, and thus represented his dynasty’s continued, albeit waning, influence. Munster had a history of monk-kings, some proving very successful. Felim mac Crimthainn, a Céli Dei from Clonfert, was elected as king of Munster in 820 and his 23 year career is full of raids on the Uí Néill and efforts to influence Armagh. With no heir apparent, his death in 843 left a series of weak rulers who were unable to maintain his success.\textsuperscript{40} This was a continuing problem that encouraged political instability. Like Felim a century before, Abbot Rebachán of Tuaim Greni had no heir upon his death.\textsuperscript{41}

Elections were not always the most civil of affairs. Caithreim Ceallachain Caisil records that both Cennétig (Brian’s father) and Cellachán (of Eóganacht Caisel) brought their hosts with them to an election; all of whom came fully armed and armored to the discussions. When the discussion did not go Cennétig’s way, he left the assembly in anger. While not selected as the king of Munster, after the death of Rebachán in 934 AD, Lorcán’s son and Brian’s father Cennétig, was elected

\textsuperscript{40} Ó Corráin, pages 97-99. \\
\textsuperscript{41} Ryan, 357; Byrne, Kings 214.
king of In Deis Tuaiscirt and Clann Óengussa faded from the political scene.\(^{42}\) Cennétig’s reign marks the changing fortunes of the Uí Toirdelbaig, later Dál Cais. The kingdom went from obscurity to being the subject of multiple records noting the activities of its ruling dynasty, noting an increase in its importance. Cennétig, was the first member of the dynasty known to have conducted a military foray outside of his territory.\(^{43}\) He is later mentioned among the events of the years 942, 944, and 950; the annals are not limited to his victories, more often than not these list his defeats. Both the *Annals of Ulster* and the *Annals of the Four Masters* recount the victory of Cellachán of Cashel (a dynast of Eóganacht Chaisil) over Cennétig in a battle that also cost Cennétig two of his sons.\(^{44}\) While most people do not want to go into the history books as losers, the entry provides some insight into a changing situation. Cennétig, for whatever unmentioned reason, was enough of a concern for the king of Munster to mount a military expedition against him and Dál Cais, which suggests a rise in influence.\(^{45}\) Cennétig’s son Mathgamain, who succeeded him in the kingship of Dál Cais, continued to build on the foundation built by his father.\(^{46}\) All


\(^{43}\) Ryan, 357.

\(^{44}\) AU 944, FM 944.

\(^{45}\) The patronage of the Eóganachta would still have been important in the monastic houses recording the events of these years. A rising threat to their patrons would not have incurred the kindest of commentary on their part. The increased notice, however, pays due.

\(^{46}\) Cennétig’s son Lachtna actually became king after his father’s death in 951 AD. Lachtna’s short reign of three years held nothing of note for the annalists and he was succeeded upon his death by his brother Mathgamain.
indications lead to the premise that Cennétig and Mathgamain succeeded militarily. Cennétig took his warriors outside of his kingdom; in 967, his son Mathgamain won victory in battle against the forces of the Norse of Limerick. Mathgamain’s victory over the Norse of Limerick, and the situation leading to that victory, deserve note.

In 963, the *Annals of Inisfallen* note, “A slaughter of the *Tuad Mumu* ("North Munster) on the Sinann, and they abandoned their vessels and were drowned.” Dál Cais did not control the river. The Shannon split the lands of the Dál Cais seriously challenging efforts to consolidate. Control of Limerick would block access up the river and improve security for Dál Cais. In 967, Mathgamain mustered his army and proceeded towards Limerick. The Vikings met him in open battle outside the town at Sulcoit. According to *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*, Dál Cais slaughtered the Vikings and devastated Limerick. After this battle, Mathgamain had additional successes in expanding his authority into the south. 967 marked a turning point for the king of Dál Cais, a moment where he demonstrated his martial capability and his potential as a threat to the Eóganachta. While the account of the battle of Sulcoit in the *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* includes many more details than the annals, it does follow the outline of their accounts. Of interest is a poem praising the prowess of Brian in this battle that is inserted into the youngest (B)

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47 AI 967; AU 967. Both record the plundering of Limerick, AI notes the battle.
48 AI 963.
manuscript of the seventeenth century. That none of the older versions includes this account gives reason to pause and question its purpose, because the annals all credit the victory to Mathgamain. Only in this recent version of an obvious propaganda tract designed to exalt Brian as a military and political leader, does this claim appear, and its veracity must be questioned. Such an attempt to establish Brian’s reputation and give him credit for a victory that two other, more credible sources, give to his brother suggests revisionism. The poem is inserted precisely in a period where it drew little notice suggesting that his partisans felt a need to enhance, if not create, a personal heroic nature for the future king.

In any event, the turnaround in Dál Cassian military fortune - going from an obscure force to one capable of defeating multiple opponents - has to have a cause. What enabled the Dál Cais to rise so quickly? The incursions of the Vikings, internal Eóganachta squabbles, and threats from the North all played a role in the fragmentation of Eóganachta power. Yet, Dál Cais emerged from this changed world, not any other dynasty. The opportunity was there for more than just Brian’s ancestors. Geographically, the Dál Cais held land on both sides of the river Shannon. The physical division of the kingdom by the river Shannon seems more of a hindrance than a help in consolidating power because the Vikings were able to sail up the river and raid. Consolidation requires unity and the Shannon provided

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49 Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib, 72.
50 Sean Duffy, *Ireland in the Middle Ages*, 30; O’Corrain, 111-114.
relatively unimpeded access to the heartlands of the Dál Cais for their enemies. The question needs be asked again, what happened so that they could challenge the hegemony of even a weakened Eóganachta confederation?

**Patronage**

To find the answer to the rise of the Dál Cais one must turn to the larger political scene in Ireland. The kings of Munster competed with their northern rivals the Uí Néill, for dominance. While a great deal has been written about the high kingship of Ireland - when the concept came into being, how old it was, the legal tracts relating to the proper selection of a high king, etc. - the conflict between north and south can be boiled down to one of power and control.\(^{51}\) If not able to defeat decisively the opposing dynasty, limiting their influence would suffice as a consolation prize. The traditional means of accumulating power in rural Ireland was the submission of other kings and the tributes that they would then provide. Wealth, traditionally measured in cattle, depended on receiving from those who submitted in order to give that wealth to redistribute it to favored individuals. Smaller kingdoms between the two larger powers were constantly being conquered by the rivals. Increasingly, new forms of power, wealth and prestige began to play on the Irish stage. As in secular society, among the churches in Ireland there was the consolidation of wealth by the powerful. They, in turn, attempted to spread their influence and

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\(^{51}\) Byrne, 254-274; Simms, 41-59; Duffy, *Ireland in the Middle Ages*, 32-33.
authority by various means, such as the use of church armies to attack other monasteries. One oft-quoted example is the victory of Clonmacnoise over the community of Durrow in 764 when hundreds died.\textsuperscript{52} The ties between the secular rulers and the rulers of the Churches have received much attention elsewhere, most notably in Kathleen Hughes’ work on the early church. Members from the lesser branches of powerful families increasingly found themselves as the abbot in charge of the local monastery. On occasion, the local king might even be the abbot. Control of church assets meant power. Not only the church, but small kingdoms were political assets as well. Alliances and aid could shift the balance of power within a region, potentially to the advantage of an external rival. The great dynasties played the game with a vengeance.

By the 10th century, the Uí Néill began to try and influence politics within Munster by providing aid and encouragement against the Eóganachta. Quite possibly one of their puppets even held the throne for a brief time. \textsuperscript{53} Kelleher suggested that Cormac mac Cuilennain might have been more pro-Uí Néill than pro-Eóganachta. His successor appears to be another of those compromise candidates, the abbot of Inis Cathaig named Flaithbertach mac Inmainén.\textsuperscript{53}

Cormac might not have been the only Uí Néill attempt to find a puppet to disturb the peace in Munster. The explanation for

\textsuperscript{52} AU 764; Michael Richter, \textit{Medieval Ireland the Enduring Tradition}, 99-100.
\textsuperscript{53} Kelleher, 236.
the rise of the Dál Cais might be found in the support of Uí Néill.\textsuperscript{54} The clues are scattered, but when pieced together they make a strong case for that relationship and serve to explain events surrounding the death of Mathgamain mac Cennétig, Brian’s brother, more satisfactorily than the “provincial rivals” theory.\textsuperscript{55} The specific evidence begins with the death of Orlaith, daughter of Cennétig, who is killed for infidelity in 941 AD. Orlaith had married Donnchad Uí Néill, the king of Midhe, a political marriage in which Dál Cais were definitely the weaker party. Her execution indicates a casual attitude by the Uí Néill to the reaction by her family.\textsuperscript{56} A lady from a more powerful family would have been sent away, as happened to the thrice married Gormflaith, sister of the king of Leinster. Immediately after Orlaith’s death, Uí Néill entered a period of weakness in which three kings died in four years. Conveniently, this is precisely when Cellachan of Cashel attacked and decisively defeated Cennétig in battle, killing two of his sons.\textsuperscript{57} With his Southern Uí Néill patrons occupied by internal issues, Cennétig was vulnerable to the attacks of the powerful Munster families. Much of this has been recounted previously and it is suggestive of a relationship, but more must be added for a conclusive result.

\textsuperscript{54} Kelleher 236-237, I elaborate on this in the following paragraphs.

\textsuperscript{55} The usual explanation for Mathgamain’s death is his rivalry with Máel Muad of the Eóganachta. The details are far more lurid, and, more importantly, provide a great deal more justification for the vindictive nature of the actions of the various members in the drama.

\textsuperscript{56} Kelleher, 236-237.

\textsuperscript{57} FM 944; AU 944; Kelleher 237.
Ecclesiastical events need to be added to the equation. The largest church in Munster during the tenth century was Emly. As expected, the leadership was drawn from the Eóganacht dynasties, as well as in the churches of Cork and Cashel. Their paruchia, or subordinate institutions, blanketed the south and competition among these institutions was fierce. Ecclesiastical competition in Munster resembled that happening throughout all of Ireland. Consolidation brought more and more of the smaller churches and monasteries into the fold of the largest three: Kildare, Emly and Armagh. Yet these larger institutions did not limit themselves geographically. They actively sought to expand into the territory of other churches. For example, the Church of Saint Patrick, Armagh, fell squarely in the Northern Uí Néill camp with the kings of Cenél nEógain having a residence there from the mid-9th century. So why do we find annalistic entries concerning Patrician stewards and officials in Munster? Interestingly, the first entries regarding a Patrician official in the south come in the year 928 AD when both the Annals of Ulster and Annals of Inisfallen record his visit. The next recorded visit comes 20 years later in 948. Both visits, however, occurred during the reign of Cennétig mac Lorcáin. They

58 O’Cróinín, Early Medieval Ireland, 162; O’Corrain, 84-89; Richter, 97-100; Hughes, The Church in Early Irish Society. Hughes, Sources, 219 reminds us that there is a spiritual dimension to this as well.
60 AU 928; AI 929.
61 FM 948. Gwynn noted four visits in 100 years, 928, 929, 948 and 1006 – all within the period of the rise of the Dál Cais, page 48-49.
suggest that the presence of Armagh in Munster was a part of Cennétig’s repayment for Uí Néill political and military support.

According to the *Annals of Inisfallen*, in the year 973, there was a quarrel between Dub dá Leithe of Armagh and the abbot of Emly during the former’s visit to Munster. The exact nature of the dispute was not recorded. In all probability, Armagh came to the south laying claim, as the true successors of Patrick, to be the primary church of all the Irish. As such, Emly would owe at a minimum deference if not a small tithe. The two men could not agree and had to turn to the provincial king, the Dál Cais dynast Mathgamain mac Cennétig, to settle the dispute; he decided in favor of Armagh. In his ruling “they agreed upon the perpetual right of Patrick.” The *Annals of Ulster* record a slightly greater victory indicating that Dub dá Lethe visited Munster and received his demand. One account of this visit even casts it in the same light as that of a political victory. According to the *Annals of the Four Masters*, “Dubh dá lethe, successor of Patrick, made a circuit of Munster, and obtained his demand.” Such a circuit was most commonly practiced by kings who wanted to validate their dominance over those who had submitted hostages. In some cases, this expedition would result in the taking of those hostages. In this light, one can see the momentous potential of Mathgamain’s pronouncement.

Why would the Dál Cais dynast and king of Munster have made

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62 AI 973.
63 AU 973.
64 FM, 973.
such a ruling except to weaken his political rival within Munster? Certainly this can be read as Mathgamain paying his political dues to Uí Néill. By ruling against Emly, he weakened their authority, making them subordinate to the Church of Armagh in the North. In so doing, Mathgamain increased his power when he opened the potential for other churches to rise in importance if they were better established within the parochia of Armagh; the discomfiture of Emly had the added attraction of reducing a bastion of support for the Eóganachta. His actions in 973 strongly suggest a friendly relationship with the northern powers. His decision caused the Eóganachta dynast Máel Muad mac Bráin to lead an armed uprising against Mathgamain. The reaction of the Eóganachta champion Máel Muad together with the other clues suggests an answer as to how Dál Cais rose to power instead of any other dynasty, and it "sets up" the events of the next five years.

A fateful decision

The record of Mathgamain’s ecclesiastical decision of 973 begins the series of events that ends in 976 with his death by treachery at Máel Muad’s hands. The reign of Mathgamain and the rise of the Dál Cais were accompanied by the hostility of the displaced families within Munster. The forces arrayed against

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65 The Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaíb is an acknowledged piece of O’Brien propaganda. Written for Brian’s grandson and to an audience looking for a hero to resist invaders (this time the Anglo-Normans [no, that was much later]) the work represents Brian as the great defender of Ireland. A king who routed the invader. Yet the work had to have some basis in truth. The O’Brien spin masters did great work but history is hidden and available to a careful and skeptical reader.
Mathgamain found in Máel Muad a leader and a focus for their efforts. Máel Muad came from the Uí Echach branch of the Eóganachta, a family whose power was centered in the Bandon River valley in what is now county Cork. Like Mathgamain, the rise of Máel Muad’s family to prominence was due, in large part, to the increasing division and weakness among the Eóganachta dynasties of central Munster.

Mathgamain entered Eóganachta territory in 964 and gathered support from several petty kingdoms. *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* indicates that this occurred only because the lands were controlled by the Vikings, but there must be more to the matter than that. Mathgamain was a legitimate contender for the provincial kingship and made every effort towards achieving that goal. In doing so he is credited with ravaging the lands of the Vikings and their people. Conducting raids, or ravaging in the colorful terms of the *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*, was standard practice among the Irish. Raids indicated military power and usually would lead to the submission of a less powerful territory. The text is careful to note that Mathgamain only attacked the foreigners, which was good propaganda. This could be extended to a somewhat different interpretation; that they attacked the people of the foreigners could quite easily be read as everyone who was not allied with Dál Cais were with the foreigners. Máel Muad, styled “the king of Desmumu (“south Munster”),” is specifically mentioned as one of those allied

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66 *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* 71.
against the Dál Cais.⁶⁷ We thus have insight into a power struggle between the established order and the upstarts. The point of view provided by the victors is one of necessity - for the good of Ireland - and follows a common practice of justification used time and again by medieval rulers. One must only look to Pepin’s exchange with the Pope when he usurped authority from the Merovingians and established a new dynasty for precedent.⁶⁸ Ignoring the conscience salve, Mathgamain challenged the established powers for control of Munster and succeeded in imposing his rule.⁶⁹ By 968 his raids had paid off with the submission of Munster and the taking of the hostages of Máel Muad and Ui Fidgeinte.⁷⁰

In 967, Mathgamain had defeated the Vikings of Limerick in battle at Sulcoit, outside of Limerick and then entered the city. In 969 he returned and according to one account, drove the foreigners from King’s Island.⁷¹ When they returned before the end of the year, they at least nominally submitted to Mathgamain’s authority. The Dál Cais had increased their control from Tuad Mumu to most of Munster.⁷²

Against this background, Mathgamain’s ruling in 973 took on

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⁶⁷ Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib, 75.
⁶⁹ Ryan has previously suggested that, “Mathgamain, Brian’s brother, should have shown ambition to secure the kingship of Munster, must have seemed to contemporaries amazing presumption.” page 373. I must argue that he may not have had a long history of familial power, but that rarely stood in the way during these years.
⁷⁰ Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib, 83.
⁷¹ FM, 969, page 695.
⁷² Ó’Corráin, 116-117.
an increased significance. Mathgamain elevated the claims of Armagh over those of the Church of Emly. In so doing he challenged the southern primacy of the abbot of Emly. Conveniently, this church had been controlled by the Eóganachta family for a long time. While Mathgamain’s ruling was a slap in the face for the head of the church of Emly, another ecclesiastic who would find this troublesome was the abbot of Cork, the coarb of Saint Bairre. This church had a large paruchia in the south of Munster. The direct challenge to Emly would ensure that the coarb of Bairre carefully watched the Dál Cais ruler, if not join in opposition to him.

Mathgamain’s decision had set in motion a potential restructuring - one devastating to waning powers like the Eóganachta. Already losing political relevance, they faced relegation to irrelevance in the religious sphere as well. Responding to what he can only have perceived as a threat to his family, Máel Muad, son of Bran, took the hostages of the territories south of Limerick and then marched against Mathgamain. This marked the beginning of a revolt against the authority of the Dál Cassian and quite possibly it resulted from his slighting of the Church of Emly in favor of Patrick. Recent studies have shown that this period is marked by substantial efforts on the part of the larger houses to dominate others and

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73 Kenney, 401.
74 AI 974.
If allowed to stand, the ruling would subordinate Emly to Armagh, effectively placing it’s assets under Uí Neill control. Mathgamain’s decision would weaken the southern church which did not support the sons of Cennétig. Such an affront would demand a response by the family of the abbot of Emly, unless they wanted to lose access to revenues and protections they had previously manipulated to their advantage. When the outright revolt against Dál Cassian rule did not succeed, Máel Muad and his allies, still smarting from the multiple affronts and defeats, turned to different means for obtaining their desires.

**Treachery**

After the failed revolt in 974, Máel Muad turned to less direct methods for restoring the dignity and power of the Eóganachta in both church and state. The obvious starting point was the removal of Mathgamain. The story, as normally recounted, runs quite quickly. Mathgamain was seized while traveling under the protection of the church by Donnabán of the Uí Fhidgeinte who turned him over to Máel Muad; he, in turn, had Mathgamain murdered. Yet the details of the story are far more lurid, and significant, than this account reveals.\(^7^6\)

Two years after the failed revolt of the Uí Echach king, Mathgamain traveled to Uí Fhidgeinte, a kingdom subordinate to him and located on his southern border. While on this short

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\(^7^5\) The Lives of the Saints show some of the revision that took place to reflect changes in affiliations. Here I refer to the unpublished work of Jessica Banks on the gamesmanship of Armagh and Kildare.  
\(^7^6\) Ó’Coraín, 117.
journey, he enjoyed the protection of Colum mac Ciaragan, Coarb of Bairre at Bruree. While there, Donnabán seized Mathgamain and took him prisoner. Subsequently, Donnabán handed his prisoner over to Máel Muad’s agents who then executed him. The details of this event vary depending on the perspective of the author. The northern annalists simply note that Máel Muad killed Mathgamain. Tigernach regards it as an act of treachery on the part of Donnabán of Ui Fidgeinte. Mathgamain had come to Brurée in order to work out a peace agreement between himself and Máel Muad, making his murder that much more sordid. Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib provides the fullest account, in which the betrayers take Mathgamain to Máel Muad, who was staying somewhere between Cnoc-an-Rebhraid and Raithin Mor in Fir Muighi, and there he died in appropriately dramatic fashion with flashing swords before the guarantor of his safety can arrive.

Of interest is the role of the Coarb of Barri. The Four Masters go out of their way to note that the murder took place against the protection of holy men. And yet one must wonder how Mathgamain came to be so far away from his ‘protector’ and how an Eóganachta priest could not control his own family – knowing that the violation would be a stain on the very church supporting Máel

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77 FM, 976 see the footnotes. Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaíb records much of the same information, page 89.
78 AI 976; AT 975; FM 976.
79 AU 976. This entry uses the standard x killed y format found in nearly every year for which there is a record.
80 AT 975.
81 FM footnotes, information provided by O’Donovan at 976.
82 Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib 89.
83 FM 974 [976]. See also Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib.
Muad. Some insight is given from similar events. An entry in the *Annals of Tigernach* adds potential clarity when in the year 973 they note that, "Donnchad the Fair, son of Aed, son of Fland, was treacherously killed by Agda, son of Dubchenn, while he was under the safeguard of Saints Brennan and Ciaran." Scarcely three years previously a similar offer of protection from Cork had been violated to the benefit of the Ui Echach clan of the Eóganachta. This was the same clan that provided the coarb of that very same church. The evidence is strongly suggestive the Eóganachta churchmen were promising protection, fully aware that their secular kinsmen would violate that vow. The complicity of the churches led by Eóganachta in these murders, eliminates the protection from retribution normally given to anyone in a church under Irish law. Viewed in this light, the reaction of Mathgamain’s brother Brian, marking the initial years of his rule makes a great deal of sense. The violation of protection meant that the violator could not seek sanctuary. If Máel Muad’s agents took sanctuary in a church, they could be seized and punished - exactly what happened in 977 on Inis Cathaig. Máel Muad’s Viking attempted to take refuge at Inis Cathaig but Brian’s men killed him there. One final note regarding the church is telling: after Brian took control of the lands of Munster, he took the hostages of the churches so that they would not give sanctuary to bad people. Here one could easily read

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84 AT 973.
85 Kelly, *Irish Laws*.
86 *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*, 107.
that his actions reflect a concern that at least some of the churches did not support him and he wanted to ensure their loyalty.\footnote{87} While the very act of violating protection had connotations, the location of the murder held symbolic significance as well.

**The Scene of the Crime**

Mathgamain was abducted at Bruree, handed over, and then murdered at a place called Belach Lechtna. There is disagreement as to the exact location of this site, but Belach Lechtna was the location of the murder. Additional conflict between the Dál Cais and the Eóganachta occurred at Belach Lechtna; it had also been the scene of border conflicts all the way back to the mid-8th century.\footnote{88} Belach Lechtna appears to have marked the boundary between the territory of the Dál Cais, and that of the Eóganachta. The argument over the location of Belach Lechtna boils down to two locations - Macroom in County Cork and the pass near Kilfinane on the border of modern County Limerick and County Cork. Support for the Macroom identification comes primarily from interpretations starting in the 18th century. Embodied in the dubious *Dublin Annals of Innisfallen*, composed in France in 1765, this source relied on a range of materials and

\footnote{87} One could take this a step further and argue that such temporal actions on the part of clerics angered a new king who held his faith dearly. Brian’s actions towards the Church throughout his reign suggest that he was closer than many; I would suggest that he might even have been raised with an ecclesiastic future like his older brother Marcan. The deaths of his brothers brought him into the political world. This is rather speculative however, as little but tertiary evidence exists as to Brian’s upbringing in the Church or his inner religiosity.

\footnote{88} AU 757.
interpretations to include local historians. One such 18th century historian, Charles Smith, linked pre-historic ruins with the 978 battle between Brian and Máel Muad. Little more than conjecture, his book was one of the sources used in interpreting the *Dublin Annals of Innisfallen* that are used by local Cork County historians to bolster their claim to the site. The argument hinges on the difference between Belach Legtha, claimed as Macroom and Belach Lechtna, which is accepted as near Kilfinane.\(^8^9\) The location of Kilfinane on the main route between Limerick and Cork weakens the Macroom argument. That Macroom is a good two days march from the location of the initial treachery further weakens that argument. Belach Lechtna appears to have marked the border between Thomond and the lands claimed by the Eóganachta. Killing Mathgamain at that location effectively and symbolically marked the extent of his authority. Máel Muad had a reason for the murder. His men executed that deed almost as soon

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89 Diarmuid Ó Murchadha, “Cenn Ebrat, Sliab Caín, Belach Ebrat, Belach Legtha/Lechta,” *Éigse* 24 (1996), pages 164-171. This is also reflected on the Macroom tourism website.
as Mathgamain was handed over by Donnabán. This was done in the lands controlled by their lord. There can be no other purpose in capturing, transferring and then moving a hostage before executing the very same hostage. If Macroom were the site, the extended travel and then execution simply does not make sense. There was no ceremonial site or purpose for choosing Macroom. Bringing the king in chains into a kingdom and then killing him in cold blood violates all the Irish laws on protection and the role and authority of kings.

**A Postscript on the Reigns of Cennétig and Mathgamain**

Murder cut short a promising career. Mathgamain’s father had been a contender, Mathgamain was a champion. Cennétig had successfully challenged the supremacy of the Eóganachta in Munster. He did so in a manner easily recognizable to students of Irish kingship. He sought marriage alliances with more powerful families giving him access to support that he would not have been able to otherwise garner. Using this support, he challenged the local powerhouses, establishing him as a force to be reckoned with outside of his small kingdom. His son built on that foundation. Extending the boundaries of Dál Cassian control, he defeated multiple foes and challenged the status quo of Munster. He intentionally attacked the Viking town of Limerick in 967, quite possibly seeing it as a lucrative source of funds. He courted the support of an ecclesiastical institution from outside of his province – directly challenging the church supporting the traditional power base. In short, he
threatened the previous balance of power between the branches of the Eóganachta. These became the basis for Dál Cassian power. In his advance he stepped on toes, leading to such enmity that his enemies would eventually turn to a conscious violation of Church protection in order to do him in. Through wile and deceit Máel Muad succeeded in putting a sudden end to this rising star. Unfortunately for him, he left a loose end - Mathgamain’s little brother...Brian.90
“Then Brian, son of Cennedigh, undertook the redress of the Dál Cais forthwith, after the murder of Mathgamhain; and he was not a stone in the place of an egg; and he was not a wisp in the place of a club; but he was a hero in place of a hero.”

In 976, Brian, youngest son of Cennétig, became king of the Dál Cais. In less than half a century, he rose to an incredible level of dominance in Ireland. One must ask, how did he manage this feat? One explanation blames the decline of the Eóganachta and the increasing breakup of central authority in Munster. In this scenario, the weakness and fragmentation of the Eóganachta proved most influential in the rise of Brian. Obviously, Brian could not have risen to a position of dominance without great difficulty, if a strong, established rival were present. But, then, this is not a wholly satisfactory explanation either. Why not another dynasty within the Eoghanacht or another kingdom? Dál Cais prospers, and not any other that had an historic claim or had held the kingship at some point in the past. The weakness and fragmentation of their rivals can explain only a part of the success of the Dál Cais. For they were one among several competing kingdoms attempting to fill a void left by the retreat of Eóganachta power.

Who was this young king? What do we know about Brian mac Cennétig before his sudden rise to power as the leader of the Dál Cais? His past holds the key to understanding him, his successes, and his failures in the early years of his princely

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91 Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, 101.
92 Donncha O Corrain, Ireland Before the Normans, pages 114-117 and Sean Duffy, Ireland in the Middle Ages, page 31.
career. His family came from the Ui Toirdelbach clan and had come into authority with his grandfather Lorcan. Brian was the fifth son of Cennétig mac Lorcan (reigned 934 to 951) born in either 926 or 941.93 He had at least four older brothers; the two eldest died in battle fighting for their father in the year 944.94 Cennétig’s third son, Mathgamain, became king in 954 and ruled until his murder in 976, when Brian would have been about thirty-five years old. His remaining older brother Marcan had a religious career and took orders as a priest.

This was a typical distribution for aristocratic Irish families, since the ability to draw on assets in both the secular and ecclesiastical arenas gave an advantage to them in the form of finances, resources, and manpower in order to expand and consolidate power. Many families often sent younger sons into the priesthood in order to rule the local church and support the political ambitions of the family with the resources of the local ecclesiastical institutions. These ties were very important for the dynasty and the church as well. Cennétig, ruler of a recently risen dynasty that leaned heavily on outside support, needed assets that he could call his own. He had at least three sons who were brought up as warriors and leaders which should have been enough to ensure a successor. That Dál Cais found them qualified was proven by the selection of one, possibly two of

93 AFM 1014 gives his age at death as 88 years old. AU gives his birth date at 941.
94 not listed by name in AI or in AU. AU notes the Battle of Gort Rotachain in which Tuadmumu is defeated by Cellachan of Caisel. The entry also comments on the large number of casualties.
those sons, Mathgamain and Lachtna as kings. His fourth son
could prove equally useful if he had as much success in the
ecclesiastical world as his brothers did in the world of real
politic. Supporting more warrior sons than that would have been
costly, a point of which Cennétig seemed well aware. On his
death, Marcán held the headship of three major churches and was,
arguably, the most powerful ecclesiastic in southern Ireland.
Kinship ensured that church wealth would be available for the
dynasty. The local kings would also have an even greater
incentive to protect the church. As lands were donated to the
church, the wealth and resources of that institution continued to
grow - even if the political fortunes of a dynasty declined.
Often younger sons in the Church gained control of vast
resources. Men competed in the religious arena in a manner
similar to the secular world. Those who would hope to rise in
the church had to begin early to develop the ties, affiliations
and contacts needed to wield authority in the spiritual realms.95

Brian’s close relationship with the church throughout his
reign is suggestive of an understanding of ecclesiastical
politics not always grasped by his peers. His gift of gold to
the See of Patrick in 1005 cemented a relationship with the
primates of northern Ireland who had connections to the northern
Úi Neill. Pretentious or pre-meditated, this act shows an
understanding of the inner workings, and needs, of the church.
Armagh benefited from the patronage of Brian. Certainly all of

95 Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources*
the principal churches in Ireland sought to expand their influence by developing relationships and establishing subordinate houses, increasing their paruchia. From the early 9th century the annals indicate that Armagh had sought to expand its influence in Munster.

Two other points worthy of note also have bearing regarding Brian and the Church. O’Curry suggested that Brian might have been educated in the Church. Learning to read, and exposure to the Greek and Roman classics both would have been part of such an education. Focus would have been on the early Church fathers and the Bible, but libraries included works by other Latin authors, a point that has intriguing possibilities and will be discussed later. One important individual in the Church was the spiritual guide, or amchara. This relationship assigns a heavy responsibility for the development of a new initiate to an older more experienced member of the monastery. Such a relationship is not used in general Irish society and thus explicitly ties those with such a bond to the Church. Sean Mac Airt has outlined a relationship between Brian and Máel Suthain that suggests that Máel Suthain filled this role with Brian. Brian’s concern with Inisfallen would lend some credence to this speculation.

97 AU 823 has the Bishop of Armagh imposing the Rule of Patrick on Munster and we see a similar entry in AI under the rule of Brian’s brother Mathgamain in 973, AI 973.
98 O’Curry, Manuscript materials of ancient Irish history, page 76.
99 AI, Introduction, page ix. See also The Rule of Ailbe of Emly, ed. by Joseph O’Neill, stanza 37 (page 105). Also the Rule of Tallaght.
The young man, pulled from the calling that he had been given by his family, due to the death of so many of his brothers, continued to worry himself with those who had cared for him. Highly speculative, such a theory would stand in stark contrast to the standard interpretation of Brian’s youth as a guerilla struggle against the local Vikings.

One must of course question the victories attributed to him that occurred during his brother’s reign. *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gaillaibh* takes pains to paint him as a great warrior in his youth, a defender of Ireland even when all others had succumbed to the might of the foreigners. Yet, so many recent studies have shown that the influence of the Vikings has been overstated. Donnchadh Ó Corráin noted that, “if you met a fully armed Viking intent on mayhem once in your life, as an Irishman of the tenth century, you were probably a bit unlucky.” Obviously the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gaillaibh* is a piece of propaganda, targeted to a specific audience with a carefully crafted message - that Brian’s family had defended Ireland against invaders before and would drive them out again. To attribute victories such as the battle of Sulcoit in 967 to Mathgamain, would weaken any argument that only Brian, for which read the descendants of Brian, could achieve stunning success against the foreigners. Those are

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critical themes that cannot be dismissed when looking at the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gaillaibh* for material in constructing a history of Brian. To credit such important victories to another line of the Dál Cais opens up the possibility of them claiming legitimacy by military prowess. A propaganda piece works best if it supports your cause, not someone else’s. The descendants of Mathgamain were serious claimants and the usurping of their victories by the author of the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gaillaibh*, was carefully crafted and manipulated in the text. The text claims that Mathgamain settled down to an honorable peace with his Irish neighbors as their king – he was not despised, nor denigrated. He was not however, elevated to the same level militarily as his younger brother who never gave up. Mathgamain settled for a peace that, in the eyes of his contemporaries, was not a bad deal. After a profound and extensive discussion, Mathgamain even comes around to understanding his brother Brian’s point of view that the only way for the Irish kings truly to rule would be to drive the foreigners from the country. Such a message would resonate in the 11th/12th century when the text was composed. Even then, the level-headed brothers turned to the nobles, the leaders in the community, to gather their support before declaring war. In this version of history, Mathgamain was king yet he plays a supporting role for Brian. Brian provided the impetus for action. He supplied the driving force behind the glorious efforts and rise of his dynasty. Who could argue with the selection of such an obviously brilliant and capable leader?
The Eóganachta foolishly did so out of concern for their failing dynastic ambitions, not for the good of the province. That they would be overcome by the righteous ruler of the Dál Cais was unquestionable. *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gàillaibh* depicts this. Yet one must approach these claims about Brian’s youth with some degree of caution.

Besides *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gàillaibh*, little documentary evidence exists to support this version of Brian’s pre-ascension past. Little about Brian can be found in more reliable sources such as the Annals. Indeed, much of the early section of the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gàillaibh* bears a striking similarity to the early years of another renowned warrior-king, Alfred of Wessex.\(^{101}\)

While Brian might have found much in the life of Alfred to admire, and he found inspiration for many of his later construction efforts, his early years are unlikely to have mirrored those of Alfred as closely as the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gàillaibh* would have us believe. Leadership, if he exercised it prior to his ascension, would have been in a supporting role to his brother, and the annalistic entries that describe Mathgamain’s reign, reinforce this idea. For example, the Battle of Sulcoit, depicted by the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gàillaibh* as a

\(^{101}\) There is no doubt that the Irish were well aware of the career and activities of Alfred of Wessex. Equally important is that there was a community of Irish scholars at Glastonbury who were active into the late tenth century and the potential for transmission of the Life of Alfred via that means both in writing and by word of mouth from those who had studied at Glastonbury. See Kathleen Hughes, “Evidence for contacts between the churches of the Irish and English from the Synod of Whitby to the Viking Age,” in *England before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitlock* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); 49–68, specifically her comments on Dunstan’s biographer, page 57.
joint venture by Brian and Mathgamain, is entered in the *Annals of Inisfallen* as solely the action of Mathgamain.  

As king, Mathgamain received credit with leading the expedition; however, Brian receives no mention as a leader in the annals, nor even as a participant. The annals also depict difficult decisions made by Mathgamain during his reign — with no reference to his brother’s role in those actions.  

Mathgamain led his people and made decisions, decisions that would ultimately cost him his life. He did this as the king of the Dál Cais, not as the front man for his younger brother. The careful insertion of Brian into those events by the authors of the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gaillaibh* seem designed to obscure the early years of Brian’s life — creating a tried battle-tested warrior to succeed his brother and continue leading his people to their destiny.

Brian first finds notice in the annals in 976 after the violent death of his brother Mathgamain. Immediately after becoming king, Brian launched an attack on Limerick that served to secure his southern flank and establish himself as an effective king.  

As with many aspects of his reign, this initial action has been interpreted in varied lights. For his partisans it continued his struggle to drive the foreigners from

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102 AI 967. *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* page 77-79 specifically attributes success in this battle to Brian. A poetic discourse between Brian and his brother refers to Brian as “the victorious” and ascribes to him a “mighty rout” of the enemy.

103 AI 969 credits Mathgamain with a hosting against Bran; AI 972 shows him enacting ordinances; AI 973 refers to his intervention in ecclesiastical issues that led to a chain of events that would end in Mathgamain’s death in 976.

Ireland. The other extreme condemns him for what they perceived as the callous disregard for the sanctity of church ground. Considered in light of the myriad circumstances that affected the attack, perhaps it is a little of them all - and even more. Viewing Brian’s raid on Scattery Island as part of a greater whole provides context. Connecting the threads, versus rendering judgment on individual acts, leads to a much fuller, and arguably better, understanding of not only what he accomplished, but also how he accomplished it.

Brian came to power as many other kings had - the violent death of his predecessor led to a sudden job opportunity. He had many concerns similar to those of other new kings, garnering support, solidifying control of his own territories, avenging the wrong done to his family and regaining control of the larger kingdom that his brother had held, even if the degree of that control had been challenged by others throughout his turbulent reign. Irish kings had used a raid on a neighboring territory to inaugurate the reign of a new king and establish his ability to execute his duties as a war leader. These raids also acted as a form of pay for the new king’s troops. Brian seemed to have had a longer range plan, even at the inauguration of his reign. Brian started off smart. He seems to have possessed several characteristics that political and military leaders need to have if they are going to be successful.

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105 Pádraig Ó Ríain, “The ‘Crech Ríg’ or ‘Regal Prey’, Eígse XV 1973, pages 24-30. Ó Ríain argues that initiating a reign with a foray was an institution in Irish society that confirmed the reputation of the king as a leader and gave him the ability to pay his troops.
First off, Brian understood his situation. He could have moved immediately against Máel Muad, the murderer of his brother, but that would have been impetuous and very bad for him. The Eóganachta in Cork were a very long distance away for Brian and for him to have come to power, massed his forces, and attempted an attack through several potentially hostile kingdoms would have stretched his lines of communication and extended himself and his flanks to the point where he would be ripe for multiple attacks against his flanks and rear with little possibility of support. His actions would also give a good deal of lead time as his movements indicated his direction of travel. This would have given Máel Muad and his allies time to discover and defend against that attack. He would also be exposed during his return trip, opening his forces to attack while they were slowed with booty and possibly wounds.\footnote{This is exactly what happened to Brian’s son Donnchadh in 1014 as depicted in the Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, pages 213-217.}

He chose against that option. Instead, he secured his flanks and purposefully executed attacks that culminated in the total defeat of his primary rival. His first attack, at Scattery Island, began the process of isolating Máel Muad and demonstrated to his followers that he could perform his leadership duties as king. Using a quick raid as the basis for his opening campaign, he set the conditions for exploitation of a successful strike. His warriors would be able to visit Limerick with the death of the Vikings’ leadership and if the attack was not successful, he would be able to withdraw quickly without having committed all of
his forces. Having secured his immediate position, Brian then struck to his south, eliminating the threat of an attack from the Uí Fidgeinte. Only with his rear and flank secured, did he attack Maél Muad deep in the southern reaches of Munster. From the beginning of his reign he demonstrated a maturity and awareness that suggest a calculating intelligence not found in many leaders of the time.

**Brian’s First Year**

Brian appears to have had three initial objectives upon his brother’s death; first he had to establish himself as in control of Dál Cais and Thomond, he then had to establish himself as king of Cashel and the entirety of Munster; he also needed to exact revenge for the murder of his brother. In the year 977 the Annals of *Inisfallen* note that, “Imar, king of the foreigners, and his two sons, were killed on Inis Cathaig by Brian, son of Cennétig.” So began Brian’s efforts. This record has been the basis for many negative comments regarding Brian’s lack of respect for the church. Inis Cathaig, modern Scattery Island near the mouth of the Shannon River, was an ecclesiastic compound. Taken at surface value, this certainly would be the most obvious interpretation of the event. Entering into the church premises, an area where violence was prohibited, Brian’s men took three lives. The sanctuary was violated and the egregious sin of murder committed. Such an act by a newly minted king was either incredibly audacious or incredibly stupid; or

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107 AI, 977.
could it have been something else? Brian’s lifelong relation with the Church indicates that he had respect for the institutions of the church. One way of looking at his actions on Scattery Island would have him directly challenging the church there. If he could just go in and kill people, what good would their protection be? An offer of sanctuary implied an ability to prevent its violation. This would be problematic if the king wanted to use the Church to help legitimize his rule. However, reasons did exist that would alleviate such a concern. The law tracts specifically state that anyone who violated sanctuary cannot claim it.¹⁰⁸ No sources specifically mention Ivar as a conspirator in the death of Mathgamain. That the king of Uí Fidgeinte did participate, and that the foreigners of Limerick had a positive enough relationship with Uí Fidgeinte to find mention of their slaughter by Brian in Uí Fidgeinte lands in 977 suggest at least a possible tie, but no firm proof.¹⁰⁹ If Brian was able to link Ivar to the actions of Máel Muad, then they would not be able to claim sanctuary. While the cleanup would have been a mess, Brian would not have desecrated the abbey. In fact, that this church tried to offer sanctuary to a criminal would cast them in a poor light. This interpretation reconciles his lifetime of respect for the church with his actions in 977.

The terse annalistic entry almost minimizes the action

¹⁰⁸ Fergus Kelly, A Guide to Early Irish Law (Dublin, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies: 1988), page 141. This reference specifically notes the prohibition against a clergyman providing protection to fugitive killers and others who have violated the law.
¹⁰⁹ AI 977.
that led to Imar’s death. Brian’s inaugural raid successfully demonstrated his military leadership and thus his legitimacy as a ruler. As has been previously mentioned, Irish kings often inaugurated their reign with a hosting to prove their martial prowess. In addition, a successful raid would provide a king with spoils which could then be used to reward those who had supported the aspirant in his quest for the crown. The raid also provided plunder to pay his supporters.\textsuperscript{110} Far greater detail comes from \textit{Cogadh Gaedhel re Gaillaibh} that recounts, besides the killing of these important individuals, Brian and his allies raided all of the islands in the mouth of the Shannon with Viking settlements. His followers of Dál Cais found great wealth and plunder in attacking their neighbors, a situation of which Brian most assuredly took advantage.\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Cogadh Gaedhel re Gaillaibh} does not hide the fact that Brian’s forces targeted more than just the Viking leaders; rather it emphasizes the initial success enjoyed by the new king.

Why did Brian choose Limerick as his target? Certainly his family had a history of conflict with the Norsemen. The memory of the battle of Sulcoit was less than a decade old in the minds of the Vikings. Their humbling at the hands of Brian’s brother Mathgamain when he allowed them to return would have left a bitter note. The potential for a new king of Munster to live further away, decreasing the likelihood of direct and active

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaiabh} 977, 103.
meddling in Limerick affairs, would have appealed to the Viking leaders of the town. A powerful, neighboring king offered a reduced chance of autonomy, or a greater chance of violence. Playing one side against the other in the Dál Cais – Eoganacht conflict kept both weak. In addition, it distracted both dynasties, reducing the time, effort and resources directed towards controlling Viking activities. In such an environment, the Vikings thrived. For almost four decades, beginning in the 940s, internal struggles between the various Uí Neill sects, such as Congalach mac Máele Mithig of Brega and Domnall Ua Néill of Clann Cholmáin, forced the Irish kings to focus their efforts on each other and not the Norse. In fact, the Vikings of Dublin are found as the allies of the kings of Brega at key battles. By shifting alliances, a crafty Viking leader could support a weaker king as an ally, enabling that king to defeat his rival. Supporting one against the other kept all the Irish kings weak, a game that was also being played out by the larger Irish families in each others’ back yards. If the Irish kings focused their efforts on the towns, more often than not, the Vikings suffered. When a powerful king turned his forces towards Limerick, Dublin or any other Viking settlement, the Vikings would be hard pressed to not capitulate. For example, Brian’s brother Mathgamain

112 See the overview provided by Donncha Ó Corráin in Ireland Before the Normans, pages 117-120. For the primary sources see AU 945 947 and 980. Not until 980 with the efforts of Máel Sechnaill mac Domnall, were the Vikings of Dublin again treated to the undiluted attentions of the king of Tara and brought to heel.
defeated the Vikings of Limerick in 967 and plundered the town.\textsuperscript{114} A crushing defeat of the town of Limerick would bring it under Brian’s control on his terms, not theirs. At Glenn Máma in 999, Brian defeated a Leinster army that was reinforced by the Vikings of Dublin. After the battle, Brian’s forces entered and plundered the city of Dublin. The Viking King of Dublin was expelled and shortly thereafter he returned and submitted to Brian.\textsuperscript{115} The cost of failure could be significant.

Brian’s inaugural attack would have required good intelligence pinpointing the whereabouts of Ivar and his family. In order to direct an attack against Ivar, Brian had to find the Viking leader first. One would expect the first place to find the leader of Limerick would be the town itself. Brian did not attack the town first. He seems to have determined where Ivar was hiding and then proceeded to that location. Once Ivar and his sons were located on Scattery Island, Brian would need vessels to cross the river. \textit{Cogadh Gaedhel re Gaillaibh} claims that Brian and the Ui Domhnaill of Corco Baiscinn killed Ivar and his sons and then plundered the islands in the Shannon Estuary finding great wealth.\textsuperscript{116} Corcu Baiscinn might have provided the boats to transport troops from the shoreline in the evening hours out to the island to set up for the attack. Domnall mac Diarmait, the son of the king of Corcu Baiscinn, died supporting Brian at Clontarf and such support would be expected for the king

\textsuperscript{114} AI 967.
\textsuperscript{115} AU 999, AI 1000. See also Donnchadh Ó Corráin, \textit{Ireland Before the Normans}, Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaihb-124.
\textsuperscript{116} Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaihb 103.
of Tuadmumu ("north Munster") early in his reign.\textsuperscript{117}

If \textit{Cogadh Gaedhel re Gaillaibh} is accurate, then Brian’s attacks were so successful that the remaining son of Ivar relocated south into the lands of the Ui Fidhgenti (see figure 2-1), a situation that would not last for long.\textsuperscript{118} This attack secured the southwest and southern flanks of Brian’s territories around the Shannon River. As long as the Vikings of Limerick had unhindered access up the Shannon, Brian had limited options regarding the use of his warriors. His lands of Dál Cais lands were not even a day’s journey by river from Limerick and, thus, would require enough forces remain to protect from raids. By devastating the Vikings and inflicting pillage and destruction,

\textsuperscript{117} AU 1014.
\textsuperscript{118} GG 103.
Brian significantly reduced Limerick’s threat. This then opened up avenues of advance against his next enemy and freed up his forces. At this point, he had to leave fewer warriors behind to guard avenues into his lands and could concentrate on offensive operations. With a solid ally in the Uí Dhomnaill kings of Corcu Baiscinn protecting his western flank, Brian could move south or east as needed. The Uí Dhomnaill gained significantly from these attacks. Known as a seafarers, this Irish kingdom relied on sailing and fishing for their livelihood. The weakening of the Vikings and their fleets would improve the economic position of this kingdom. Having profited from their allegiance to Brian, the Corcu Baiscinn provided his security force and Brian quickly took advantage of his position.

Brian’s second attack was against Uí Fidgeinte. Donnubhan, the Uí Fidgeinte king, had been instrumental in the treachery perpetrated against Mathgamain mac Cennétig. Bruree, one of Donnubhan’s royal forts, was where the initial treachery had taken place. Also in this attack, Brian caught the Vikings out of Limerick; the Annals of Inisfallen recorded the event as, “A raid by Brian, son of Cennétig, on Uí Fhidgeinte, and he made a great slaughter of foreigners therein.” The death of foreigners, read Vikings, was significant enough for mention. For some reason, a goodly number of them were out of their town several days journey or there may have been a Viking settlement among Uí Fidgeinte. Quite possibly they were running away after

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119 AI 977. Italics are mine.
his first attack, seeking protection from Donnubhan and his forces. Such flight is found elsewhere in the Annals, most notably the departure, and subsequent return, of Sitric from Dublin in 999. The first strike against Scattery Island must have been devastating enough to cause some concern for the Viking populace of Limerick. The following plundering of the town would have further enhanced this effect. After 978, we do not hear of the Vikings of Limerick revolting against Brian or opposing his efforts. They become reliable subordinates for the Dál Cassian king. Brian conducted multiple attacks against the Limerick Vikings inside of a year. He commanded a force that executed three excursions in a time period that would normally see only one such action by an Irish king. He raided, plundered and then raided again in quick succession. The Norse of Limerick had little time to regroup. Probably that at this point they surrendered hostages and accepted Brian’s overlordship – if not in recognition of his superiority then in recognition of their need for respite from his seemingly constant assault. Psychologically, he would have created the conditions of despair that facilitated their capitulation.\textsuperscript{120} Their submission is almost ironic, Vikings savaged by the Irish. More important, Brian showcased his ability to muster and successfully field forces more often than his peers.

The result of these attacks was that one year after his

\textsuperscript{120} AI 977. The effect of successive attacks in a short timeframe is best witnessed by the virtual abandonment of the monastery of Iona in the early 9\textsuperscript{th} century where repeated attacks caused the community to move the relics and most of the members to Kells.
succession, Brian was firmly in control of the Dál Cais and Thomond. He had executed a successful inaugural raid that resulted in the plundering of gold and silver, slaves and cattle that would reward those who supported him. He demonstrated his ability to lead warriors in battle not once but twice. He conducted multiple raids against several targets within a year and he managed to achieve partial revenge for the death of his brother. He had shown that he was a successful war leader. He marshaled his forces carefully, building each move on the one before. The implications of this first campaign, and the word campaign is used here intentionally, were enormous. The success of the raid on Uí Fidgheinti was dependent upon the success of the operation against Ivar. Moving from the attack against Scattery Island, Brian pursued his foes throughout the Shannon estuary. Other Irish kings conducted similar attacks, an inaugural raid was expected of a new king. He easily could have stopped after the initial onslaught but instead he continued in what could easily be called a pursuit. Brian begins to demonstrate a different approach to campaigning when quickly moved to again seek battle, this time against primarily an Irish enemy. After the attack, he again exploited his battlefield victory, pursuing not just the defeated Irish, but also the Vikings who had sought sanctuary after surviving his first attack. The establishment of reliable allies / subordinate kings on his flanks and the control of the lower Shannon left him firmly ensconced as king of Tuadmumu and well positioned to
assert his claim on the entirety of Munster. The manner in which he established himself as a king became a stepping stone on the path to his next objective – the kingship of all of Munster.

**Early Campaigns**

Two years later, Brian had two objectives remaining. He had to establish himself as the king of Cashel and he had not fully exacted revenge for the murder of his brother. Again there is evidence of compound actions by Brian. The first is the Battle of Belach Lechtna in which he defeated Máel Muad, the murderer of his elder brother Mathgamain and the primary rival contender for the crown of Cashel. Belach Lechtna was the location where Brian’s brother had been murdered and it was also the border between the northern and southern halves of Munster. This battle was, in effect, the defeat of the strongest arm of the Eoganchta family. In the previous year, Brian had started the process of securing his flanks by eliminating at least two of the allies who could have potentially thrown their support behind the Eóganachta. Both the Vikings of Limerick and Uí Fidgheinti had supported Máel Muad and the losses of their forces would have left the Eoganachta with a far smaller and less well equipped army.\(^\text{121}\)

According to Colm O’Lochlain’s study of roadways, the most likely path from Killaloe to Belach Lechtna passed both Limerick and to the east of Bruree. Attack from Limerick was unlikely since Brian had subdued the Norse of Limerick, while the defeat

\(^\text{121}\) No extant evidence indicates whether these two kingdoms supported Brian in 978 or even if they mustered forces.
of Uí Fidgeinte meant that their center at Bruree was no longer a threat. Beyond Bruree, Brian would have had to turn south-southeast through Kilmallock towards Ard Patrick and the Ballyhoura Mountains.\footnote{122} The pass through this area is called Belach Lechtna. Brian moved a sizable force directly towards the middle of Desmumu in a manner so that Máel Muad would have had early warning. Máel Muad mustered his forces and met Brian at Belach Lechtna.

Reliable accounts of the battle treat it succinctly. The \textit{Annals of Inisfallen} noted, “The battle of Belach Lechta, in which Máel Muad son of Bran, king of Cashel, and many others fell. Brian, son of Cennétig, was victor.”\footnote{123} The \textit{Annals of Ulster} simply record, “A battle between Brian son of Cennétig and Máel Muad, king of Desmumu, in which Máel Muad fell.”\footnote{124} It is interesting that both entries refer to Brian as the son of Cennétig yet differ on the appropriate title for Máel Muad. By titling Máel Muad as king of Cashel, the \textit{Annals of Inisfallen} claim the provincial kingship for Brian by his victory. The \textit{Annals of Ulster}, more conservatively and probably more correctly, note simply that he extended his control. The death of the leading Eoganachta candidate strengthened Brian’s claim to the throne as well as almost cementing his place as king of Munster.

Once again Brian did not stop at a battlefield victory.

\footnote{122} Colm O’Lochlain, map. \hfill \footnote{123} AI 978. \hfill \footnote{124} AU 978.
Both sets of annals record that Cork was sacked by fire.\textsuperscript{125} 

*Cogadh Gaedhel re Gaillaibh* states that, “Brian took the hostages of Munster even unto the sea,”\textsuperscript{126} strongly suggesting that he was responsible for the woes of Cork. Such exploitation is in keeping with Brian’s earlier operations and followed a pattern common throughout his reign. Nearly each major set-piece battle fought and won by the Dál Cais leader was followed by pursuit and exploitation. Battlefield plunder would have provided a good deal of financial reward for the troops with no additional cost, but payment of troops can only partially explain this conduct.

Exploitation of a battlefield success suggests, however, forethought in its conduct, as well as the intent fully to take

\textsuperscript{125} AI 978, AU 978.

\textsuperscript{126} *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, 10.
advantage of the weakness and disarray of the enemy. By plundering Cork after the battle, Brian was able to capitalize on his battlefield victory and warn the general population not to be on the wrong side against the Dál Cais. Such a capability dramatically expanded the options open to such a leader. Success was not just one or two victories but compounded exponentially as his opponents simply could not match the pace. A driving campaign and a complete battlefield victory led to an exploitation that devastated the political center of Brian’s rival.

Of interest, also dying at Cork that year is Finnechta the Bishop; the same bishop under whose protection, Mathgamain Mac Cennétig had been traveling when he was captured and murdered by Máel Muad. Only three years before his death another such violation of ecclesiastic protection had happened to Donnchad the Fair, son of Aed, son of Fland, who was murdered by Agda, son of Dubchenn.¹²⁷ Such protection seems much more like a mark than a charm, and casts Finnechta in a dubious light. There is no concrete evidence linking the violation of this protection with the death of the guarantor but there certainly is a strong possibility that Finnechta’s death occurred in conjunction with Brian’s plundering of Cork. The entry in the *Annals of Inisfallen* links the death of the bishop with the plundering of the town. In most instances in which the deaths of important ecclesiastics were recorded in the Irish annals, the entry stands

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¹²⁷ Annals of Tigernach 973.
alone. Here, the plundering occurs and the death is listed in 
the same line, thus linking the two together. This would send a 
message consistent with that coming out of the defeat of Máel 
Muad at Belach Lechtna. The bishop’s days of slight of hand were 
ended by a man who perceived himself as twice wronged – once in 
the murder of his brother and once in the abuse and violation of 
a sacred trust.

The message for those who considered opposing the Brian was 
simple, the Eoganachta would not be able to provide protection 
against the might of the Dál Cais. Capitulation was the only 
real alternative to defeat. This is reinforced by annalistic 
evidence that Brian took the hostages of Munster to the sea in 
this year. Such hostage taking would also be consistent with 
Irish practices of using hostages to recognize the submission of 
one territory to another. There is no evidence of an exchange of 
hostages which would indicate a deal between equal parties. The 
taking of hostages means that the Dál Cais were dominant and the 
Eoganachta fully recognized their inferior position. By the end 
of the year 978, two years after Brian Mac Cennétig became king 
of the Dál Cais, he had exacted full revenge for the death of his 
brother, killing the man who was overall responsible for the 
death of Mathgamain; quite possibly, he had eliminated the bishop 
whose protection had been violated (by that bishop’s kindred) in 
the death of his brother; he subjugated three major enemies and 
he eliminated the primary rival claimant to the throne of Cashel

\footnote{AI 978.}
and ruler of Munster. In all likelihood this led to the submission of the southwest of Ireland in its entirety. This situation is reflected in figure three.

As the year 979 began, Máel Muad had been defeated and the southwest of Ireland had fallen into the sphere of influence of the Dál Cais. Evidence suggests that Brian continued his expansion moving to the east. Reminiscent of his recent campaigns, Brian combined a battlefield victory with exploitation. The Dál Cais defeated the Vikings of Waterford at the Battle of Finn Conrach. They then plundered the Deisi, the local Irish, all the way to Waterford. Brian also received credit for the taking of the hostages of Munster and all the principal churches of Munster in order that they not take rebels and thieves into their sanctuary. This does follow along with the events listed in the Annals of *Inisfallen*, noting the taking of the hostages of Munster listed in 979 where the Annals of *Inisfallen* date it at 978. It is not uncommon for different records to record events in consecutive years depending on the information traveling from one record-keeper to another. *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* has the events in an order that suggests that taking of hostages late in 978 or early in 979. Using either date, by the end of 979 southwest Ireland was firmly under the control of the Dál Cais. Brian followed his victory at Finn Conrach with the banishment of the king of the Deisi.¹²⁹ There seems to be a deliberate attempt by Brian to bring his enemies to

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¹²⁹ *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, page 107.
battle, to fight and then to continue on after the battle. He has also avenged himself and had taken his full retribution on his enemies. Brian continued to increase his control of Munster and also continue his expansion. The year 979 was the second year in a row that he used a very risky tactic of engaging in open battle and then exploiting his success with a pursuit into the heart of his enemy’s lands. While this is not a campaign on the same scale as that of 978, the tactics were similar. Having secured the western and southern flanks, Brian focused his efforts towards the east. He did not “rush headlong into a wall,” instead he removed one brick at a time in such a way as to weaken the whole structure before knocking it down with his strike against the Deisi. The map of his activities in 979 (Fig.
2-3) shows how his actions built off of previous successes.

**Initial Consolidation 980-981**

The years 980 and 981 show no evidence of attacks or activities, offensive or defensive on the part of the Dál Cais. This gave Brian a two year period of relative calm to spend consolidating his authority and reaching agreements with his subjects and neighbors. Such a consolidation would involve efforts to ensure the submission of newly subordinated kingdoms as well as the imposition of tributes. Brian seems to have had constructed at this time a series of royal *duns* in this region for a purpose far different from use as personal residences. One interesting idea is the relationship between the list of fortifications and the extent of the territory controlled at this point.\(^\text{130}\) The list of residences culled from the *Book of Rights* shows Brian’s itinerant core. The locations of his royal forts (depicted in Fig. 3-4) provides evidence that Brian did reuse, or build from scratch, several *duns* with a specific military function. Brian built, expanded, or put to different use, at least fifteen *duns* over the course of his career. Ten of these have been identified within the bounds of Munster. These forts are located along key routes and terrain separated by a day’s march, about twenty miles. The forts form two rough lines and constitute a defensive line in which any location could receive reinforcements within a short period (see figure 3-4). Their effectiveness is suggested by the lack of hostile activity

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against Brian from the interior of Munster; revolts and conflict occurred on the periphery. In addition to their military purpose, Brian would have required locations for the collection of tribute and those sites to which people were already accustomed to delivering supplies.

While his building projects may have begun later, it is only to be expected that he expropriated royal sites from his defeated enemies. One example is the royal residence of Ui Fidgeinte at Bruree, which is one of the locations listed as a fort used by the Dál Cais king. A later entry in the Annals of Inisfallen in 985 reinforces this suggestion when Brian is given credit for fortifying, “cumtach” his residences. The verb *cumtach* has very specific meaning of “to add to,” (particularly in the sense of making it more defensible,) or “fortifying.” As such, by the year 985, the residences were already in existence and that they were then built up in 985. This meant that Brian was already using these locations before the year 985. 980 would thus offer a potential starting point that Brian began garrisoning his newly won kingdom and establishing positions from which he could improve his control.

Brian’s use of forts marked a shift in the use of some *duns*. The Irish primarily used single walled ringforts as homes with multiple buildings found inside the enclosures. Some high status, multi-vallate forts or *duns* are located in more strategic

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131 For the next 20 years, the only military activity that takes place within the borders of Munster is Brian’s circuit of Desmumu in 987, see AI. For more detail on Brian’s fortifications, see the appendix - once I have it done.
terrain, usually associated with clusters of smaller homesteads. The physical siting of such multi-vallate forts suggests a mixed role for those forts. They would have been the residence of the local high status personage and also, potentially, a refuge in case of attack.\textsuperscript{132} Except for Brian’s forts, there is no indication of a major change in the use of these sites until the early 12\textsuperscript{th} century with the creation of a series of fortified caistels by Turlough O’Connor.\textsuperscript{133}

The year 981 marked the end of Brian’s consolidation of control in Munster (Figure 2-4). This shows the approximate extent of Brian’s control at the close of the year 981, especially important in light of the events that would follow and take him outside of his kingdom of Cashel in the years that followed. He began conducting operations that included not just the southwest of Ireland but the entirety of Leth Mug (the southern Half of Ireland up to the midlands controlled by the Uí Neill Kings).

The year 976 was the first time that Brian is mentioned (with the exception of the interpolation of his birth) in the Annals of Ulster, marking a point at which his activities were noted outside of southwest Ireland. This denotes activity of importance outside of his small world. The annals are full of

\textsuperscript{132} Matthew Stout, The Irish Ringfort (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), specifically pages 33, 85, 90, and 96-97.
\textsuperscript{133} Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, Early Medieval Ireland, page 282.
one time wonders, kings and notables whose activities were worthy of note but most of those individuals never reappear. They make the news once and then disappear into obscurity. The year 982 arguably marks the entry of the Dál Cassian king onto a larger stage. The Annals of Inisfallen record two activities this year. Brian made a foray into Osraige and took a great prey, but many of his men were slain. This indicates that he had some success but also suffered at least a partial setback. They either alerted very quickly and caught the Dál Cais rear guard, or they had some advance warning and were gathering as Brian’s raiders entered Osraige. That they were not fully prepared before he arrived is suggested by the fact that the raiders took a great prey before they were engaged. However, his warriors do not
successfully complete the assigned task. Having taken the prey, the Dál Cassian force suffered heavy casualties and possibly lost the prey. Dál Cais suffered what should only be considered a defeat. There was no palpable, immediate success in this endeavor as the people of Osraige can claim to have driven the invaders out.⁴

The second note was that Leth Cuinn, broke the Tree of Mag Adair. This was a hugely symbolic event. The kings of Dál Cais were inaugurated at the Tree of Mag Adair. Writers from Gerald of Wales to Katherine Simms, have written expositions on the importance of ceremony and the criticality of ritual in inaugurating a reign. As such, this was not just an attack

⁴ AI 982.
against Brian, but a threat to the fundamental nature of Dál Cassian fitness to rule. Previously, the fortunes of the Dál Cais had been closely linked to support from Clan Cholmain of the Southern Uí Neill (discussed in Chapter One). Brian’s sister had married into Clann Cholmáin and when they withdrew their support, Brian’s father Cennétig had suffered significant setbacks. Brian’s brother had then courted support from the Northern Uí Neill and the visitation of Armagh to Munster during Mathgamain’s reign, suggests a relationship as well. Since the Uí Neill had supported the Dál Cassians and assisted their rise to local power through clientage; they could just as easily take that support away. The annals claimed Leth Cuinn, the northern half of Ireland, as the perpetrators of this deed. This suggests that Maél Sechnaill, as the king of Tara, the overlord of the north, had a role in the attack. The Annals of the Four Masters credit him, by name, with a similar attack on the Connacht center of Mag Ai two years later.\footnote{AFM 984.} If he did lead both attacks, this appears to represent an effort on his part to eliminate rival inaugural centers. Doing so would reduce the ceremonial and traditional basis for inaugurating the kings of Connacht and Dál Cais, weakening the foundation of their legitimacy. For the Uí Neill to chop that tree down was to so much as declare that they could make or break Dál Cassian kings, but they made such a statement symbolically. Quite possibly, Uí Néill feared Dál Cais by this point. Whether or not the men of Connacht supported him in the
982 attack against Dál Cais is suppositional at best. At a minimum, the annals record no resistance to his movement. With or without the active support of Connacht, the king of Ireland sent forces into Dál Cais lands to disrupt Brian Boru’s efforts at expansion. Even so, the respect for Brian was obvious. The Uí Neill after years of support, read decades of support, for this minor dynasty had significant concern over the rising power of the Dál Cais. After Brian led a foray, albeit an unsuccessful one, outside the bounds normally controlled by the kings of Munster his family’s previous patrons in Meath lashed out. Quite likely, they were concerned about competition over control of Leinster. Brian’s response to the potential setback incurred by the Uí Neill raid would prove crucial to the very survivability of his rule. Such action necessitated a response.

**Brian’s Response to Máel Sechnaill’s Aggression**

The son of Cennétig’s reaction was characteristically swift, thought-out and forceful. On one front, Brian launched a two pronged assault into Connacht. The first assault was a fleet that moved up the Shannon River, was engaged, and suffered heavy losses. Brian’s choice of forces for this attack is interesting. He used a fleet, moving forces from his port of Cork. One of those killed was Lochlainn, a *rigdomna* from Cork.\(^{136}\) Cork was a Viking stronghold and Lochlann is Middle Irish for “Norway” with the transferred meaning of “Viking.” This indicates that the men of Cork were participating as members of Brian’s forces. Five

\(^{136}\) AI 982 *Rigdomna* is commonly translated as royal heir, but it means literally “royal material.”
years previously these men had arrayed themselves against the Dál Cassians in battle, now they fought for the king of Dál Cais. Brian could not be assured of their loyalty nor zeal for fighting under his banner. So how he employed those warriors on whose loyalty he could not yet depend is interesting. He brought the warriors from Cork to attack into a region with which they normally would not have contact. While raiding so far from their territories, the Cork warriors would have no base of support and thus were nearly totally reliant on Brian for their support. In this way, he would have tested their loyalty to him by calling them to serve and yet would not have placed them in a position from which they could betray him or turn at an inopportune moment. To have done so would have left them isolated and far
from home, not a promising position to be in after their recent turn of fortune at his hands. They would have had little alternative but to try their best to accomplish the task set before them. In doing so, the Dál Cassian ruler put his least reliable force against his most immediate threat, weakening both while substantially strengthening his own situation regarding both. Brian’s move was quite clever and served to reinforce his kingship almost immediately after having the basis of that kingship threatened by the Uí Neill in the previous year. Brian showed his authority by forcing a muster, only kings could do that, and then he put the Cork warriors in a situation of dependency while increasing the forces available to him and forcing the Uí Briuin to take arms. Such astute gamesmanship shows a deep understanding of his political situation as well as the ability to make advantage where others might have halted to regroup. Skill, not luck, enabled him to reset his position.

The Eastern pincer of Brian’s attack into Connacht shows his first use of a large fleet. While his attack on Scattery Island would have needed ships to move from the shore to the island, the small size of his raiding force would have required little more than curraghs supplied by the locals. The fleet for his attack into Connacht possibly came from Cork with the forces that Brian mustered. Such a course of action, however, is unlikely as granting access to a fleet of less than trustworthy folks expressly defeats the logic argued in the previous paragraph. The Norse from that area were not the closest allies of the
Eóganachta and the personal name of at least one of the deceased in the raid suggests a Viking background. Most certainly it could have included ships from Limerick which had been subordinate to him for five years at that point. All records point to this fleet being a sizable one. Again Brian demonstrated the resources at his command.

The second expedition into Connacht went by land into the territory of the dynasty of Uí Briuin. This is significant, because the attack from Leth Cuinn of the previous year had in all probability come through the lands of the Uí Briuin; Brian’s attack suggests that they had supported the action. There is also the possibility that the attack was more personal. Brian’s mother Bébhinn was a royal princess from Uí Bríúin Seóla, the southwestern-most of the Uí Bríúin septs. The dominant branch, Uí Bríúin Ai, had lost control of the kingship of Connacht in 956 to Uí Bríúin Breifne. Uí Bríúin Seóla attempted to seize the kingship in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. Brian had a personal interest in the internal politics of Connacht, while his increasing dominance of Munster would be of concern to the various contenders. The attack of Dál Cais suggests that, at a minimum, Uí Bríúin had tacitly supported Máel Sechnaill, if he had led the incursion to Mag Adair. Brian immediately and

137 The Chronicon Scotorum recorded the raid by Congalach mac Máel Mithig from Connacht, in which two of Brian’s older brothers had been killed. It should also be noted that the men of Munster raided Clonmacnoise twice in the 950s and such activities show an active and somewhat unfriendly interaction between the two regions. See CS 950, 953 and 959 at http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100016/index.html accessed on 26 Sept 2005.
directly confronted a problem border kingdom that had acted, even indirectly, against him, punishing his northern neighbor. At the least his flank had not been secured, so this second attack would let Uí Briuin know that the Uí Néill were not the only people that they should be concerned about having as allies.

Significant is the terminology used to describe this force as Brian’s officials or suatrich in the Annals of Inisfallen. Mac Airt’s translation of the term as “officials” is misleading in this instance. The phrase Suatrich derives from the Norse word svartleggja which has the connotation of a hired soldier. Not only does it mean hired soldier, but has the additional meaning of a billeted soldier, one imposed on the local populace.138 As such, the Dál Cassian is employing what appears to be a mercenary band to execute a punitive attack straight at the heart of a neighboring kingdom. The phrase ‘sending his officials’ gives the suggestion of possible peaceful resolution or negotiation. Officials are administrative or diplomatic; these warriors had no such objectives. The action does not result in the subjugation of the Uí Briuin but the annals indicate that a mutual slaughter was inflicted upon both sides.139 It must be pointed out that enough evidence does not exist to determine whether the band was hired long term or made arrangements for a one time joint venture. Limited operations between Vikings and local rulers occurred throughout Ireland.140

138 DIL s.v. Suatrich.
139 AI 983.
140 AU 933, 947, 953, 956, 968, 970.
At this point Brian was “boxing” on his northern flank. He executed two attacks, both with forces that he could not count on as completely reliable. The failure of either attack, or even both, would matter little because he was not using his Dál Cais forces. While this two pronged attack would have provided an appropriate response to the challenge to the Dál Cassians, it appears to have disguised Brian’s true intentions.

The third relevant event that year was on a different front, in the east. For the second year in a row Brian harried Osraige. He continued to maintain pressure on Osraige, in the hope that, eventually, they would succumb. Repeated battering by Brian took its toll, and this time, he captured the son of the king of Osraige. Exhausted from the constant readiness required for dealing with repeated raids and with the capture of the king’s next of kin, Osraige succumbed. Exploiting his momentum, Brian then took the hostages of Leinster as well. After multiple attacks with mixed tactical success, Brian scored a strategic victory when he used continuous pressure to bring Osraige and Leinster to heel. By the end of the year, both are nominally under his control.¹⁴¹

Few Munster kings had managed to exhibit such a degree of influence. The legendary Bórumha, the cattle tribute due from Leinster to Munster moved from the realms of myth to reality. This year marks a turning point in Brian’s career. This is the second year that he suffered military setbacks at the tactical

¹⁴¹ AI 983.
level and yet continued to succeed at the strategic level of war. Brian desired control of Leinster. Continuous pressure was the strategy to enable that objective. Each attack that he mounted added to that pressure. Tactical defeats, meaning raids that failed to produce great preys or attacks that his opponents stopped, still contributed to the pressure that he applied. Attacking on multiple fronts, he pushed forward to where resistance proved weak, while maintaining pressure in other areas. He responded quickly to setbacks and demonstrated the ability to field three armies nearly simultaneously, at a time when most kings could muster at best one army in a year. Not only did he “get hostings on the road,” but at least two of those forces met battle. They are not insignificant numbers or missions. Here we see the realization of an effective strategy. Unlike his contemporaries who raided for cattle or attacked trees, Brian appears to have sought battle. Each time an engagement did not go his way, he quickly regrouped and returned. Brian did not give his enemies time to capitalize on their successes. For example, the destruction of the Tree of Mag Adair was intended to slight the legitimacy of Brian’s rule. He

142 In the 19th Century, the South African Zulu Chief Shaka revolutionized warfare in a similar manner. Prior to his reign, warfare had been a series of cattle raids with occasional battles that consisted mainly of missile exchanges. Shaka Zulu shortened the assegai spear, making it a close-quarters weapon and improved the shield that his warriors used. He then sought battle, greatly increasing the cost of warfare for himself and other kingdoms. Those who were not organized to face him in this new manner either capitulated or were destroyed. The constant war footing did have a high cost and that eventually proved Shaka’s undoing. http://husky1.stmarys.ca/~wmills/course316/9Zulu_Shaka.html from Wallace Mills’ class website.
countered quickly and authoritatively with a powerful attack. Such action would have invariably had an effect on the psychology of his enemies. Brian was relentless with his foes. Opposing the constant grinding attacks would offer little advantage and potentially devastating consequences; far better to ally with the Dál Cais than to oppose them.

The year 984 provides a convenient mark for the end of the first phase of Brian’s expansion. In that year, in the recently subjugated town of Waterford, Brian and a Viking troop led by men described as the Sons of Harald exchange hostages as a sign of goodwill. They then pledge to attack Dublin, the largest and most powerful Viking enclave in Ireland. In making such a deal one must wonder at Brian’s motives as well as those of his newest Viking allies. One commonly accepted justification for this endeavor is that these were the Viking leaders of the Norse of Limerick.\(^{143}\) This, however, is the first mention of the sons of Harald in Limerick. The only Harald from Limerick is Harald son of Ivar, killed by Brian in 977 and no positive identifications of any children of his have been made. They could have been the new leaders of that town subsequent to the deaths of Ivar and his sons but that is quite a supposition. In addition, why would they travel all the way to Waterford to exchange hostages rather than traveling the hour by river to Killaloe from Limerick? Since Limerick had submitted to Dál Cassian rule in 978, a further exchange of hostages at a distant site holds little credibility.

\(^{143}\) AI 984. Sean Mac Airt made this suggestion in his footnotes to the entry for the meeting in 984 between Brian and the sons of Harald.
This makes the idea of such a hostage exchange of less than an ideal identification. Brian controlled the Vikings of Limerick after 978 and their leader prior to this point had been Imar, not Harald. For them to go to Waterford to exchange hostages makes little sense as Brian would already have their hostages and Limerick and Kincora are far more likely sites for such an exchange. The sons of Harald could have been the leaders of the Norse community at Waterford. However, running counter to that identification is the annal entry itself. The annalist noted that, “Muirfolud mór na macc nArailt”\(^{144}\) While the exact meaning of the compounded term *Muirfolud* is uncertain, the intended meaning can be gleaned from the sub-components *muir* and *folud* meaning the sea and substance or material. *Folud* carries a sense of contract and obligation in the legal treatises and can also set out relations between lords and clients.\(^ {145}\) As such, a great coming from the sea for a contractual purpose by the sons of Harald is the long version of the entry. Most importantly, the Vikings had come from the sea, not the town. They were foreigners to the lands around Waterford. They also made a significant enough impression on their arrival to coin an entirely new term, *muirfolud*. The choice of location makes sense if one side of the alliance were to come from outside of Ireland. Waterford was located along the southern route across the Irish Sea. That route had carried trade and traffic for the Welsh Coast in addition to traffic from the Welsh Coast and traffic

\(^{144}\) AI 984. Mac Airt translated the term as “A great naval expedition.”

\(^{145}\) Dictionary of the Irish Language for *muir* and *folud* respectively.
from the Isles and the shores all along the Irish Sea and further afield. It is from outside of Ireland that we must look for clues to the Haraldsons' motives and identity. Waterford was far more of an international location for people looking to make a deal with Brian; people who had a choice in the matter. It was far enough away from his center of power that the exchange would not look like surrender and it would still be prestigious enough for him as he controlled that area.

The 10th century saw many Viking bands traveling the waters around Ireland and England. The earls of Orkney were actively involved in the politics of Scandinavia at the time and the sagas are filled with tales of a constant movement of nobles and families. The vagaries of chance and the harsh realities of failed political ambitions led many to seek their fortunes outside of Norway and Denmark. Some were not destined to longevity. The family of Eirik Bloodaxe serves to illustrate this point. Driven from the kingdom of Norway, Eirik sought support first in the Orkneys and eventually received control of Northumbria from King Edmund. He never fully established himself, being driven out of York twice and finally killed in an ambush in 954 at Stainmore.\textsuperscript{146} His sons continued to seek out support in efforts to regain their patrimony. Only Harald Graycloak succeeded, but like his father, he was unable to control the kingdom. The remainder of the family slowly passed

There were other families that were quite successful, the Norse followers of Rollo who settled in what became Nordmanland, or Normandy, serve as a useful example. Raiding throughout the Seine Valley, Rollo agreed to serve the king Charles the Simple in return for land. His descendants would expand this initial grant and cement their place in history as the Dukes of Normandy.\(^{148}\)

The Haraldsons appear to have been seeking a similar situation. If their motivation had only been raiding and plundering, it is unlikely that they would have sought an agreement with an Irish king as they had with Brian. While there are many examples of temporary alliances between local rulers and Viking bands, these one-time affairs lacked any arrangement that would indicate more than a short-term affair of convenience. The exchange of hostages between the Haraldsons and Dál Cais was part of a tradition that suggests the relationship was intended to last. If one accepts Hudson’s argument that the Haraldsons were the sons of Harald of Bayeux, then their motivation becomes quite clear – they were seeking to establish a new homeland. The sons of Harald came from Normandy after their family’s fortunes took a turn for the worse. Harald, a one time ally of the Duke of Normandy, seems to have run afoul of the Frankish Duke Hugh the Great who allied with Richard of Normandy in 954 and drove Harald

\(^{147}\) See *Heimskringla* for the full version of the story. For an excellent read on the topic try Poul Anderson’s *Mother of Kings* (Tor Books, 2003) written from the perspective of Eirik’s wife Gunnhild.  
from his home in Bayeux. Quite possibly, Harald and his sons had already started looking for new lands before this assault.\textsuperscript{149} These dispossessed nobles and their followers needed a grubstake.\textsuperscript{150} For Brian, the potential benefit was enormous. Authorizing the settlement of these foreign allies in the recently subjugated lands of the Deisi was a stroke of strategic genius. Such a garrison made revolting against Dál Cais authority difficult for the southeastern Irish kings as there would be little delay in a response to any uprising. Brian would not have to muster his forces in the west and then move to the disturbance. Rather, a heavily armed band loyal to him was within a short journey of any potential trouble spots. The Vikings were outsiders with no legitimate claim on authority in the area. Only their martial skills and Brian’s backing could legitimize their presence in the long term. As such, Brian created a situation of dependency while simultaneously using these allies to control a troublesome region.\textsuperscript{151} The success of


\textsuperscript{150} A fuller examination of the potential origins of the Haraldsons is contained in Appendix B. Having looked at several possible variants, Hudson’s analysis is by far the most conclusive and convincing possibility. It is important to note that this group of Vikings did go on to much greater success establishing a kingdom in the Northern Irish Sea that at various times controlled a sizable portion of the Irish Sea region and put them in direct competition with the Vikings of Dublin.

\textsuperscript{151} Such a strategy was found throughout Europe starting with the Roman location of auxiliary units from Britain in Germany, and using units from the Mediterranean to man Hadrian’s Wall. The Abassid Caliphs created an army in Baghdad composed of slaves pulled from their imperial borders to create a situation of dependency as well. The Imperial Guard in Constantinople, the Varangians, were pulled almost exclusively from Scandinavian stock and they were quite effective when applied by the Eastern Roman Emperors against rebellion and threats.
this policy became evident in the next year when the Deisi tried to drive Brian’s allies out, only to have his warriors sweep in and quash the revolt. The Deisi attacked Brian’s mercenaries, expending their time and energy on that garrison. This gave Brian the time to focus his response and then overwhelm the rebels. Here is the strategic decision by the king of Munster to include, not exclude, Norse warriors in his forces. Through careful crafting of alliances, the Dál Cais king had established a strong garrison without any crippling cost in money or troops. He expanded the forces that he could rely upon, both in quantity and quality, and positioned them in a manner that gave him strategic advantage over his adversaries.

Brian had used a similar strategy, albeit on a more modest scale, in 982 using forces from Cork in Connaught.
Yet the year was not over for Brian. After his meeting with the Haraldsons, Brian assembled his forces and proceeded to devastate Osraige. After taking their hostages, he took the hostages of Leinster as well. Brian went even further by tearing down the fortified places of Leinster, to include some of its churches. After this massive display of force, he set his hostage Gilla Patrick of Osraige free to rule as a subordinate king. 984 was Brian’s three part triumph in Leinster – his attack succeeded in destroying the safe havens in the region and demonstrated his military effectiveness. He arranged for the emplacement of allies to keep the province more firmly under his control and then he installed a puppet king who was of the legitimate line to rule. Combined, these three factors would have enabled Brian to do more than just claim tribute, he could now exact it. The reality of the Borumha was at hand.\footnote{The Cattle-tribute of Leinster purportedly began in the 1st century when the king of Leinster at the time, Eochu, submitted to the high-king of Tara. After going back on his word, the province was devastated and an annual fine, the Bóruma, imposed. The fine included 15,000 cows, 15,000 pigs, 15,000 sheep and a mass of wealth in jewelry and clothing. The full story can be found in \textit{Irish Kings and High-Kings} by Francis Byrne, 144-146.} For Leinster and the weakened Eoganachta families, as well as some of Brian’s own relatives, the strength of Brian’s position posed significant danger. If he continued to consolidate his hold on power, they could easily be marginalized to the point of exclusion, a situation that they would have found unacceptable. This new degree of realized authority would have consequences for Brian of the Tributes as he would spend the next years dealing...
with internal revolts against his power.
Chapter 3

From 984 to 1002, Brian mac Cennétig faced a series of challenges to his kingship of Munster. Internal dissension threatened to reverse the gains made during his initial seven years. The Úi Néill overlord Máel Sechnaill and the provincial king of Connacht, Cathal mac Conchobor, employed all their efforts at stopping the Dál Cais advance. Brian matured as a field commander in his encounters with these trials. His armies’ extended area of engagement, combat on multiple fronts nearly simultaneously, and an increased contact with more powerful kingdoms all combined to challenge his focus and limit his gains. The Dál Cais king emerged from these trials as the most powerful king in Ireland.

984 marked the submission of Leinster to Brian. After 984 the extent of Brian’s military operations meant that his enemies were no longer clustered in one area to his south-southeast. Brian now had to contend with threats from outside the southern kingdoms. Increasingly he divided his campaigning into two theaters of operation: northern and eastern. His activities in Connacht and western Meath constituted a western theater while his pressure and raids towards Leinster were the eastern front in his expansion. While the two areas were very much interrelated, they must be studied separately to truly appreciate the complexity and planning involved in the Dál Cais expansion. These regions effectively fell outside of any historic dominance by kings of Munster, although the kings of Munster had some
claim. Leinster had a history of acting independently but owing at least nominal allegiance to the king of Tara. Certainly the kings of Munster had wanted to control Leinster. For a brief time in the ninth century, Felim mac Crimthain had managed to subjugate the province and early in the tenth century Cormac mac Cuilenainn had died in his efforts to gain control of it. Since the early ninth century it had been, with the exception of Felim’s reign, an Uí Néill dependency. The great Bórumha tribute recounts the tribute that was supposed to be given by the kings of Leinster to the king of Tara. ¹⁵³ Connacht, while bordering the lands of the Dál Cais (Brian’s mother was from Connacht), were mythologically related to the Uí Néill kings. All of the origin myths of Ireland have Connacht as the original homeland from which the future kings of Tara emigrated. ¹⁵⁴ Neither region had been subordinate to the kings of Munster for any significant length of time. Both could, would, and did influence the affairs of Munster, but not in a significant and lasting manner. Such a balance soon changed.

Before any venture beyond a cattle raid could seriously be considered, Brian had to adjust to new conditions. In his efforts to gain recognition of his kingship in Munster, as well as his efforts to subdue the Eóganachta, Brian had conducted large scale operations annually, sometimes putting multiple armies in the field in the same year. Campaigns against Connacht

¹⁵³ Francis J. Byrne, Irish Kings and High-Kings (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1973), 144-145.
¹⁵⁴ Byrne, 230-231.
and Leinster presented a new challenge because the distance between those distinct regions made their simultaneous submission very difficult to achieve, let alone enforce. Brian’s actions were carefully planned and followed a pattern of continuous pressure elaborated in the previous chapter. When attacking the Ógannachta, he had had little need for an extended logistical train or apparatus in his initial expansion. Campaigns could be supplied in an ad hoc manner if required. Extending his efforts beyond that core zone, required Brian to develop a supply apparatus. Coordination of resources with supply required more planning in order to ensure that logistical support did not fall apart during longer moves. The movement of forces from assembly points took on an even more complex nature. The problem was not new and literature provides some guide to the problem. Táin Bó Cuailnge depicted those difficulties in the leisurely assembly of Mebh and Aill’s armies.155

Surprisingly for an event that must have been commonplace, the actual manner of a muster in Ireland at this time is not entirely clear. Each individual force camped separately while waiting for the whole host to assemble. Living off the land would be one solution for sustaining these forces in waiting, but a sedentary army quickly runs out of forage. Requisitioning local crops and animals to feed those hosts meant that as time progressed, the forces waiting grew larger while the local

155 The Tain translated by Thomas Kinsella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pages 58–65, also ix. The extant versions of this story come from the 12th century with portions of the text being possibly as old as the 8th century.
resources diminished. In addition it became a significant burden for the local population. Movement was critical to living off of the land. Even then, foraging within one’s own land was not the preferred method for provisioning a force. Musters from other kingdoms temporarily swelled the population at the muster site. A long waiting period consumed an increasingly greater amount of local product. Subordinates could be instructed to bring their own food; however, each warrior would only be able to carry a small store.\textsuperscript{156} They would require replenishment daily or every other day at a minimum. Rules of hospitality required that he provide adequately for his men.

In all practicality, larger forces would have required pre-positioned supplies. Careful placement of supplies along a route reduces overall travel time as foraging requires time and slows an army. Pre-positioning also reduced the effect on the local populace thus helping to maintain happiness within the realm. Farmers expected to pay tax or tribute, but foragers took well above that. While requisitioning supplies from farmers was a legally recognized practice, it could cause great hardship for those along the route of march. These considerations led to two important adjustments to Brian’s \textit{modus operandi}. First, he increased the establishment and use of supply points. Secondly, his armies took the field less frequently; bi-annual operations

\textsuperscript{156} Charlemagne had done so in his summons to Abbott Fulrad directing him to bring three months supplies with him to assembly. Brian Tierney, \textit{The Middle Ages Volume I: Sources of Medieval History}, 6\textsuperscript{th} edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, inc., 1999), page 89.
became the norm as opposed to annual moves. While he continued to conduct repeated operations, he did not sustain the same pace as his first eight years.

His hosting into Osraige marks the end of his annual campaigns and the beginning of operations further afield.

**Rebellion and asserting control in Munster**

After his Ossory campaign in 984, there was a three year hiatus due to internal conflicts. The first challenges appeared in 985 when, “The Déisi raided Brian’s mercenaries [amsu] and took 300 cows and Brian harried the Déisi to avenge that, and chased Domnall, son of Faelán, as far as Port Láirge, [previously Waterford] and the whole of the Déisi was devastated.” This revolt against his authority occurred on the Southeastern border of his territory by a recently subjugated sub-kingdom. The mercenary garrison bore the brunt of the Déisi’s efforts, and the Irish penetrated no further according to the annals. Brian’s response was to sweep in and inflict a serious blow to the Deisi with a force large enough to ravage the lands of the Deisi,

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probably a general muster of at least Thomond. The raiders were driven back by Brian’s force and Brian then devastated their kingdom. Suffering only a minor setback to one of his mercenary garrisons, Brian’s defense in depth strategy paid off as the garrison bought him time to muster his warriors and respond effectively. The strategic role of the fort and garrison cannot be overlooked. The fort required that the Deisi attack it before they could conduct a more extensive raid. To leave a manned position meant leaving their rear open for a retaliation by the garrison troops. This initial point thus slowed their advance and changed the focus from raiding into the lands of Munster to raiding a single dun. Adding a second layer to this defense effectively negated the use of raids for the purpose of stealing
cattle by Brian’s enemies, thus denying them the primary means of waging war in pastoral Ireland. The forts and garrisons effectively “de-clawed” smaller kingdoms’ ability to resist in traditional manners. After this defeat, the Déisi do not appear again in the records opposing the Dal Cais until after Brian’s death at Clontarf in 1014.

In 985 Brian also arrested his nephew, Aed, son of Mathgamhain. One can only surmise the reason for Aed’s incarceration, but only the stirring of trouble would result in such treatment of a family member. The timing suggests that Aed was attempting to position himself to assert his claim to the Dál Cais kingship. Whether coordinated with the Déisi or not, Brian saw Aed as a threat, even though his success up to that point reduced his cousins’ chances of succeeding to the throne. Brian and his immediate family had an advantage in any dynastic struggle with the descendants of Mathgamhain.

The attack of the Déisi and the imprisonment of Aed suggest a connection between the two events. When examined as a composite the two entries make even more sense. The Deisi were obviously concerned over Brian’s ability to exert his influence. Aed would also have seen his chance at coming into power quickly slipping away as Brian consolidated his hold and his sons came of age. While in theory, Aed was a member of the *derbfhine* and thus

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159 Francis J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (Dublin: Four courts Press, 1973), see pages 35-39 for an examination of those who were eligible to rise to kingship as well as considerations involved in the election process.
rigdamna, or kingly material, Brian’s son Murchad was most certainly seen as the tánaise, or expected successor. Aéd had few options if he wanted to own the stage versus being a supporting character. In the years following Brian’s death, a similar situation developed between his descendants. Brian’s grandson Turlough son of Tadc, used the military support of the king of Leinster to challenge Donnchad, Brian’s son, who held the throne. In both cases, the nephew lacked access to the military means controlled by the current king. Members of the rigdomnae commanded few resources to back their claims compared with those available to the prince’s family. Traditional enemies had much to gain by encouraging and materially supporting such infighting. The efforts by the Déisi did not succeed and Brian took the opportunity to reinforce his authority over the entirety of Southern Ireland in retaliation for their efforts.

After Brian dealt with the Déisi revolt and family rebellion, he proceeded on a “circuit” (timchell) of the South of Munster. Brian’s circuit of the south resembles the epic circuit conducted by Muircheartach of the Leather Cloaks in 941.¹⁶⁰ According to the Annals of Inisfallen, “A hosting by Brian, son of Cennétig, across Desmumu, and he took the hostages of Les Mór, Corcach and Imlech Ibuir.” Les Mór, anglicized as Lismore, and Imlech Ibuir or Emly were important churches, while Corcach was the thriving port of Cork. The route followed by the king is not

mentioned, but one possibility is that the king began his circuit at Emly and then traveled to Cork. No direct route existed from Cork to Lismore, but a detailed examination of routes and itineraries by Colm O’Lochlain shows only one established route – retracing his steps back to Belach Lechtna and then traveling East. A reason for suggesting this route, even though the Dál Cais king could have traveled cross country, is that the direct route included several water crossings and very rough terrain. An indirect journey would have given him the opportunity to rest his forces near Killeagh where the Book of Rights locates an Úi Briain royal residence. Such a location is a waypoint along the

southern land route. From Cork the journey would be a long day’s travel along what is today the N25. The route beyond this point still required several days travel, as well as a crossing of the Blackwater. As such, it would be a challenge. Another possibility is that Brian traveled along the coast by ship to his royal residence near Dun Garven.

In either case, the Dál Cais force would arrive right at the seat of the Deisi insurrection. This provided a show of force, reinforcing Brian’s ability to conduct a hosting into the lands of the Déisi. Their recent revolt provided justification for this action. The army would then have traveled north on the Slighe Chualann and then west through Tipperary to Cashel on the return to Thomond. A more probable circuit would have started near Lismore, proceeding through Southern Munster to Cork and ending in the vicinity of Emly.

Once again, an analysis of the annalistic record offers evidence about Brian’s fortifications. The distribution of the Uí Briaín royal fortresses across the South form a route in which most were separated by a day’s journey. For example, Brian’s residence near Clonmel is roughly 22 kilometers distant from the royal fortress at Dun Garven. Turning southwest toward Killeagh, it is a short distance to Brian’s two residences in vicinity of the Viking encampment at Cork. Leaving Cork, the king’s circuit would have taken him north to Glanworth and into the shadow of his fortification at Belach Lechtna. Turning east, he would have been able to travel through the Glen of Aherlow to Knockgraffon
and then to Emly. From Emly, his route back to his main fortress at Kincora was through lands dense with royal sites claimed by the Dal Cais.

This annalistic entry of 985, often cited by historians in connection with Brian’s taking of hostages, shows far more. During the course of the maneuver, Brian physically surveyed a large portion of his kingdom. He also conducted a hosting through those lands that might need a demonstration of his military might and a reminder of his authority. After the completion of this circuit, there are no further entries noting problems or military actions within Desmond during Brian’s remaining lifetime.

**The Itinerant Kingship of Brian Boru**

The preceding paragraphs assume a familiarity with the concept of itinerant kingship. The practice was common throughout Medieval Europe, but not frequently mentioned in regards to Ireland. The records of his actions imply that Brian practiced a form of itinerant kingship. His main seat was at Kincora, an important center from which he ruled the lands under his control. Even though it was the political and symbolic center of the Dal Cais, it was not the only royal residence. As noted above, using the *Book of Rights*’ list of other Uí Briain royal residences, their locations often some suggestions about Brian’s rule (see figure 3-4).

Of the 59 residences listed as belonging to the king, over forty locations can be identified with some degree of confidence.
In addition, Keating gives the names of thirteen fortifications built by Brian. The lists from the Book of Rights and Keating elaborate on the terse annalistic note that Brian fortified many places. Appendix 1 lists these forts, as well as their probable modern locations. Several of these locations have played roles far beyond Brian’s lifetime. Examples include both Beal Boru and Kilfinane which were converted into mottes by the Anglo-Normans in the early 13th century. The Uí Briain stronghold at Dun Iascaigh is the location of the important fifteenth-century Cahir Castle of the Butler family, which remains a stone castle of impressive dimensions. When viewed graphically, these locations appear to indicate a core zone of royal residences with a defensive belt of fortifications on the periphery. Having noted their importance in the sources, their physical appearance proved less remarkable.

Brian’s forts would have resembled so many other duns of the time. At most they would have been multi-vallate raths: homesteads capable of sheltering the king and his entourage for a short period of time. Most of their locations are found in modern Limerick and Clare counties. As mentioned above, they are located within a short distance of each other, less than a day’s journey. One can see the king traveling site to site and eating the rents due to him. He would then entertain the local notables and ensure their obedience as well as officiate in disputes and

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execute his legal duties. This core zone is similar to the itinerant core zone described by John Bernhardt in his study of German kingship.\textsuperscript{164} Distribution of these sites diminishes rapidly south of the line of fortifications built by Brian as military fortifications, a line on the map roughly corresponding with the Galtee Mountains. Those forts seem to represent a border, the practical extent of Brian’s itinerant circuit.

Fig. 3-4

\begin{center}
\textbf{Brian’s Residences}
\end{center}

There are several sites listed as royal residences outside of the core zone. These locales present raise an interesting question: what purpose would they have served if not a part of Brian’s

\textsuperscript{164} John Bernhardt, \textit{Itinerant Kingship and Royal Monasteries in Early Medieval Germany}, c. 936-1075 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pages 61-62. Bernhardt expounds on the core zone as the area in which the ruler had strong political and economic support and the magnate would spend the majority of their time in this region.
core? They were isolated from the other royal residences, far removed from Brian’s core zone. Several are located near important centers such as Cork and Waterford. One explanation is that they were forts of a defensive nature, but their locations along the coastline suggest otherwise. If intended as part of a defensive system, such locations would be difficult to man, defend or reinforce when needed. Their proximity to population areas suggests another purpose: they were collection centers for tributes. This fits in neatly with Bernhardt’s description of the peripheral zones of itinerant kings. In Germany, lords would normally establish a steward in outlying areas who would collect the tributes and rents on an annual or semi-annual basis. This was done at a collection center, not directly done by the ruler himself.\textsuperscript{165} Brian would not have traveled to the various subordinate kingdoms on any regular basis unless his presence was needed to reinforce his rule. In 987 he did conduct a hosting through his conquered lands and probably stopped at his residence outside of Cork as well as Dun Garven. Carefully positioned forts would have provided a venue for the collection of tribute by Brian’s agents. A royal dun located at the mouth of the bay in Cork would be perfectly placed for the collection, and subsequent movement, of tribute and taxes from that urban center. Located on the coastline, Brian’s fleets had easy access to, and provided transportation, wherever he desired. Traders could easily have moved those goods into the Irish Sea trade routes and

\textsuperscript{165} Bernhardt, pages 82-83.
would provide an explanation for the obvious wealth enjoyed by the Dál Cais under Brian. The location of royal residences along the coast of Kerry and up into Connacht reinforce this conjecture.

The sites of the central core, the outlying royal collection centers and Brian’s circuit would have combined in the late 980s to give Brian a greater degree of control than that of his brothers or father. The collection of tribute is emphasized in a praise poem titled, Bóraímhe baile na riogh (Cattle-Tribute Fort of the King). The poem suggests the royal residences played an important role in the ceremonial collection of taxes, noting, “A thousand pigs at those houses were in the tax from Connacht.”

The ability to enforce the demand for tribute and ensure the exacting thereof, was a powerful articulation of royal strength and authority. Brian’s residences and forts provided the foundation for the system. Those kingdoms in which he placed collection centers were reminded by the presence of that structure of his rule. The small garrisons at the defensive forts were a continuous military presence along the border demonstrating that Brian could keep forces on call year round, where no other king could do the same.

**Pushing North**

After ensuring his control of Munster, Brian turned his attention towards the northwest. Probably the greatest external threat to his kingship had come through Connacht in 982, when

166 Kuno Meyer, *Ériu IV*, page 72. Translation by Ben Hudson is personal correspondence by e-mail dated 11 February, 2006. Italics are mine.
“Leth Cuinn,” probably meaning the Uí Néill king Máel Sechnaill, had conducted a hosting on which he cut down the tree of Mag Adair, an important symbol of Dál Cais. Brian had responded to the incursion at that time and in 988 he prepared two fleets again. According to the Chronicon Scotorum, at least a portion of this force was composed of Brian’s Viking allies from Waterford. The annals credit these forces with 300 vessels and even if this number is an exaggeration, it shows a massive concentration of naval forces.\footnote{CS 988; AI 988.} For relative scale, 300 ships with a crew of around 30 would mean an army in the vicinity of 9,000 sailors. This is a useful event in which to show how military ambitions depended on logistical support, even in
medieval Ireland. To provision such a force would have required 4.5 tons of grain per day.\textsuperscript{168} Since Ireland at this time was primarily a pastoral economy, the countryside would have had to provide an equivalent in dairy products. A comparable standard would take 150-200 cows per day.\textsuperscript{169} A force even one-tenth the size recorded in the annals would have required the equivalent of 20 cows per day to provision. This was the annual food rent due to the king from 20 bóaire, "cow lords" the wealthiest stratum among the commoners.\textsuperscript{170} The Dál Cais king would have had to have built some stores prior to the arrival of such a force. A force half that size would have required over 1,000 cows for a month’s campaigning.\textsuperscript{171} Beal Boru, one of Brian’s ‘fortifications’ would have provided the ideal location for such a buildup. Located at the southernmost point of Loch Rí, this fort is located in a natural cattle pen. The hills slope up from the ford when Beal Boru is located and abound in grass (see Fig. 3-1). The shores would have made beaching boats fairly simple and the location is only a short journey from Kincora. A praise poem by Brian’s poet Mac Liag, Bóramhe baile na ríogh, recounts just such a use. The poem, honoring the king recounted the driving of massive numbers of cattle across the ford to Beal Boru. The poem, as translated by Ben Hudson remarks, “Success from that cattle tribute, at the

\textsuperscript{169} See that wonderful work by Beougher entitled “Celtic Warfare in Ireland, A Logistical Perspective.”
\textsuperscript{170} Fergus Kelly, Early Irish Law (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), page 30.
\textsuperscript{171} See Beougher, “Celtic Warfare in Ireland” for a detailed explanation of provisioning.
horn house beyond the house of the kingdom. The cattle tribute goes to the farmstead.”172 Mac Liag specified that the tribute was delivered to Beal Boru, not to Kincora. As such we see the rath as a temporary holding area, a collection point.

After mustering and provisioning, the two fleets set sail up the Shannon. 25 boats formed the smaller wing of the attack and they proceeded to Connacht. This force was engaged by the Connachta and suffered heavy losses.173 Their actions fixed the forces of Connacht however. In doing so, the main body of the raid continued unimpeded up the river and proceeded to harry Mide all the way to Uísnech, an Uí Néill ceremonial site. It seems that Brian was returning Máel Sechnaill’s raid in kind. Using the smaller force as a temporary shield, Brian was able to focus his main effort on doing the maximum amount of damage. Such an attack indicates that Brian’s target had shifted. His main attack was directed against the Uí Néill lands, not the Uí Briuin of Connacht. In so doing, it appears that he was trying to cut off Connacht from the Uí Néill and block Máel Sechnaill. In 985 Máel Sechnaill had conducted a large raid in Connacht and took away a great spoil.174 To prevent Máel Sechnaill from gaining control over Brian’s vulnerable northern Border, the Dál Cais king attacked Máel Sechnaill in an attempt to weaken the Uí Néill while continuing his own efforts to bring the Connachta to heel.

This became the opening play in a struggle between two of the

172 Kuno Meyer, Ériu IV, page 72. Translation by Ben Hudson is personal correspondence by e-mail dated 11 February, 2006.
173 AI 988.
174 AU 985.
most talented kings in Ireland. Connacht would be the backdrop for a back and forth contest that would eventually decide which of the two men would become the undisputed high king of the Irish.

The contest between Máel Sechnaill and Brian

The next series of moves in the West came in 990 and gave Máel Sechnaill the upper hand in their struggle for control of Connacht. Máel Sechnaill defeated the men of Tuadmumu (North Munster) at the Battle of Carn Fordroma, located in the vicinity of Nenagh. Here fell Domnall son of Lorcán, king of Múscraige Tíre and Uí Forgo.\textsuperscript{175} Domnall, Brian’s vassal, was king in the area of County Tipperary. His forces would have been some of the first available to respond to Máel Sechnaill’s incursion. The victory would have opened a new route into Munster for Máel Sechnaill. The attack came down the eastern side of the Shannon River and ended less than 20 miles from Kincora. The battle is noticeably absent from the \textit{Annals of Inisfallen} but is recounted in both the \textit{Annals of Ulster} and \textit{Chronicon Scotorum}.

It is highly doubtful that Brian participated in this battle although he would have most assuredly been aware of Máel Sechnaill’s movements at that time and afterwards. Two years later the Uí Néill king attacked through Connacht proper and took away a great tribute in cattle.\textsuperscript{176} Máel Sechnaill focused his efforts in this period on his western border, bringing pressure on the Dál Cais. Brian’s response came in the same year. The

\textsuperscript{175} AU 990, CS 990.  
\textsuperscript{176} AU 992.
Dáil Cais king mounted a raid of his own, moving north and then east as far as Loch Aininde in Mide. Brian’s host retired from the field without engaging in battle and without plundering anything of note. This show of force can be seen as something of a warning by the Dáil Cais. While it is likely that Brian ended the raid because it was not going well, he had responded to Máel Sechnaill’s raid with a hosting of his own. Brian demonstrated that he was not cowed and remained capable of responding. His response would have been an important signal as his recent efforts had been focused in the East.

In late 992 or early 993, the bishop of Armagh “conferred the degree of king” on Máel Sechnaill, providing additional

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177 CS 992.
legitimacy to his rule. In 993, Brian went on the offensive in the West. The *Annals of Inisfallen* record, "A naval raid by Brian, and he reached Breifne from Loch Rí by way of Áth Lia northwards." Brian’s fleet had moved well North and struck the Northwest flank of Máel Sechnaill’s kingdom. Quite possibly, this attack was a response to the royal coronation of Máel Sechnaill. Immediately following the inauguration, Máel Sechnaill attacked Brian directly. The Uí Néill king simply had to respond to the Dál Cais challenge. Religious legitimacy meant nothing if he could not perform the historical duty of a king of protecting his people. The religious significance of such an event cannot be overlooked. It is important to note that Máel Sechnaill was crowned king, or anointed as king, by the bishop of Armagh, the leading church in Ireland at the time. Armagh was the *de facto* arbiter with regard to royal and all national status, meaning that the support of that See was now a requirement for those who desired the high-kingship. Brian’s brother Mathgamhain had acknowledged the supremacy of Armagh decades before and the conferral of legitimacy for Máel Sechnaill was another tool in the articulation of his legitimacy. Brian’s offensive thus takes on a new light beyond simply another attempt at expansion. His attack was a bold military move to make a point. Máel Sechnaill received his authority from Patrick but he would have to prove his ability in traditional Celtic terms.

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178 AFM 993  
179 AI 993.  
180 AFM 992.
Máel Sechnaill retaliated by driving his forces straight at Brian, moving towards Nenagh where the Óenach Tete (Fair of Tete) was being held. After burning the grounds of the fair, Máel Sechnaill defeated Brian in battle. The Óenach Tete was the assembly festival of the men of eastern Munster, roughly modern Tipperary. The assembly had entertainment and goods for sale, it was also a time for the king to hear legal disputes and consult the people of the túath. Máel Sechnaill’s burning of that fair posed a serious question of the legitimacy of the king, Brian, to execute his legal duties as king regarding eastern Munster. The Chronicon Scotorum noted that the Uí Néill king inflicted a defeat but lists no battle. The Annals of Inisfallen remain mysteriously silent on this defeat, and Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibhh studiously avoids any mention of the back and forth of these years. Even the pro-Uí Néill Annals of Ulster fail to mention this encounter. The Annals of the Four Masters give the greatest detail specifically noting that Máel Sechnaill drove Brian and the men of Munster before him, plundering the fields and hills of Munster. At this point, Brian had suffered two consecutive defeats at the hands of Uí Néill and his subordinates had been defeated in a third. The pressure by Máel Sechnaill in the West was significant and included both a direct threat through Nenagh towards Brian’s primary residence as well as a less direct threat from Connacht. Most kings in Brian’s place would in probability have submitted. Brian, the master of offensive operations, simply changed directions.
Initial Fortifications

The Annals of Inisfallen for 995 recount, “The fortifying(?) of Caisel, Inis Locha Gair, and Inis Locha Sainglenn, and many structures besides, by Brian.” Instead of capitulating, Brian quickly made new fortifications to provide a defensive face to the north and northeast similar to that along his border with south Munster or Desmumu. In so doing, he created a barrier against the depredations of the Uí Néill. Reminiscent of his southern lines, these forts were a mutually supporting defense in depth each within a day’s march of other forts. To penetrate such a defense required a significant investment of forces and supplies, and Máel Sechnaill does not appear to have been able to muster such capability in 995. Brian was certainly not hurt by the actions of Máel Sechnaill’s other opponents. The king of Dublin, named Sitric Silkenbeard, on Máel Sechnaill’s southeastern border, had been exiled briefly in 994, but he returned from exile the following year, and the activities of the Dublin Vikings drew much of the Uí Néill king’s attention. Quiet since their defeat in 989 by Máel Sechnaill, the Dubliners plundered Downpatrick, forcing Máel Sechnaill to respond. This bit of fortune gave Brian time to develop his defenses. By 996, Brian’s northern border was secure enough that he was able to turn his attentions back to Leinster.

Brian Turns to the East

After the revolt by the Deisi in 985 and his circuit of the

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181 AI 995.
South in 987, the Munster king concentrated on Connacht and preventing the incursions of Máel Sechnaill from Meath. The situation changed in 990 with the installation of his older brother Marcan in the church of Emly. Previously a bastion of support for the Eóganachta, Brian’s family now controlled an important power base within Munster. With his brother now in charge of that institution, and the resources of its parochia, Brian had potential sources of supply located near his southern forts. The following year, Brian launched a raid into Leinster that succeeded in killing Tadc mac Donnchad, heir to the kingship of Osraige.\footnote{AI 990, 991.} This paved the way for Brian to return several years later when he took the hostages of the powerful southern
Leinster kingdom of Uí Chennselaig in 996. The entry notes that he took the hostages west of the Liffey so Osraige and not Leinster submitted to his rule at that point. It is interesting that the annals record no major raids or engagements by Brian before Uí Chennselaig submit to him. With the independent spirit normally displayed by Uí Chennselaig such a submission seems peculiar. Indeed, Brian seems to have taken advantage of a situation that he did not create. The actions of Brian’s rival Máel Sechnaill might have influenced the actions of Uí Chennselaig in this year. From 991–997, the annals are full of the actions of Máel Sechnaill, and those actions must have made an impression. Uí Néill depredations were extensive. The annals record that Máel Sechnaill killed Donnchad ua Congalaigh by treachery and he killed Éicnech ua Leoháin, king of Luigne in a religious house. In 994 he burned Swords. He finished this run by blinding Domnall, son of Donnchad Finn.\textsuperscript{183} Between murders, treachery and the burning of monasteries, the Uí Néill king displayed a will to dominate, no matter the cost to the receiver.\textsuperscript{183}

Caught between Máel Sechnaill’s brutal methods and the continuous raids of the Dál Cais, Uí Chennselaig had few options and compromise seemed unavoidable. Attempting to remain wholly independent meant standing between two behemoths, both of whom had demonstrated the ability to ravage. Responding to raids from two sides would be difficult at best. Joining Máel Sechnaill’s camp would have challenges as well. The Uí Néill king was

\textsuperscript{183} AU 991, 993, 994, and 997.
ruthless in consolidating his position. Lesser kings and potential rivals died regularly in his area of control. Simple proximity would also increase his opportunity to meddle in the affairs of Osraige. Brian on the other hand, exacted tribute regularly. Except when faced with revolt, however, he seemed to use violence less often as a tool to reinforce his authority. Allying with Brian would at least put some distance between the lord and his new subject kingdom.

**The Division of Ireland**

997 found the two rival kings, Brian and Máel Sechnaill, meeting at a peace conference at Port dá Chaineóc. The result of that conference was the division of Ireland into halves of

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184 AI 997.
political influence. The traditional line of demarcation—from the mouth of the river Liffey past Dublin westwards to an earthen work known as the “Black Pig’s Dyke”—seems to have been employed. Máel Sechnaill gave Brian the hostages of both Dublin and Leinster as a sign of his good will. The next year Brian made an expedition into Connacht to collect hostages of that region and turned them over to Máel Sechnaill. This agreement is of significance regarding Leinster. Prior to 997, the Uí Néill had claimed sovereignty over Leinster. Their efforts demonstrate the importance placed on gaining control of this region.¹⁸⁵ Leinster was the bridge to Wales and the southern trade routes around England to the continent. That the region had two major Viking settlements, Dublin and Wexford, only suggest the potential wealth to be found in this area. The Dubliners were a constant source of frustration and resistance requiring attention and resources better committed elsewhere. Máel Sechnaill’s calculations at this point are obvious. That Máel Sechnaill conceded his right to seek control of Leinster, by willingly giving hostages that he had taken by force, suggests that he saw Brian as a serious contender by this point. Giving Brian ‘control’ of Leinster allowed Máel Sechnaill to focus on Connacht. Brian had firm control over half of Leinster. Máel Sechnaill had claim to the remainder but enforcement had proven continuously difficult. Connacht appeared uncommitted and giving Brian ‘title’ to the double hornets’ nests of Leinster and Dublin

¹⁸⁵ Francis J. Byrne, Irish Kings and High-Kings (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1973), pages 144-150.
should have bogged him down and seriously extended his lines of communication. Máel Sechnaill thus freed himself to focus on Connacht while attempting to use Leinster and Dublin to occupy Brian.

Brian set out to assert his control of Leinster. He began with a raid into that province in 998. Already holding the hostages of the ruling dynasty, the Uí Donnchada, Brian’s raid seems aimed at other elements within the province not yet fully under his control. It has been suggested by Ryan that around this time, Brian divorced his second wife, Gormflaith. Brian then married Echrad, daughter of the king of Gailenga Becca, a small kingdom within Fingal, on the north of Dublin. Brian applied both military and political (through marriage) pressure, thus making inroads in his bid to control both Dublin and Leinster. Gormflaith’s animosity is evident in the Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaib and she has been seen as a force in inspiring her brother, and her son, in the events leading up to Clontarf in 1014. Quite possibly she did the same in 998. In any event, Sitric most assuredly saw Brian’s efforts as encroachment, as did his uncle Máelmórdá, the king of Leinster and Gormflaith’s brother. Their response was to destroy their immediate rivals Uí Donchada, led in the late 990s by Donnchad mac Domnall. Uí Donchada dwelt immediately south of the Viking settlement at

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186 AU 998.
187 Ryan, 365-366.
188 Ryan, 365-366.
Dublin, and they were also the primary rivals of the Uí Fáeláin, the dynasty of Máel Mórdha, for the kingship of Leinster.\textsuperscript{190} Donnchad came from a Leinster túath located in proximity to Dublin. The Vikings had an interest in Uí Donnchada affairs because of that geographic closeness. Brian’s claims to overlordship of this túath drove a physical wedge between Dublin and Leinster and provided a pro-Dál Cais candidate for ruling Leinster. Donnchad thus represented a threat not only to Máel Mórdha, but Sitric as well. In 999, Sitric of Dublin and Máel Mórdha of Leinster teamed up to capture Donnchad and hold him hostage. Máel Mórdha, with the support of his nephew and the Dublin Vikings, was crowned king of Leinster. It appears that Sitric was attempting to play kingmaker in a territory claimed by Brian. Sitric replaced Brian’s subordinate with Máel Mórdha, a man far more friendly to Dublin interests. Brian would have no choice but to respond. The result was a major clash of forces – the Battle of Glen Mama.

Brian was not responding to the aggressions of the Leinstermen under Máel Mórdha, rather his efforts should be seen as they affected Dublin. By 999 Brian had control of three of the four major Viking towns of Ireland. In 997, Máel Sechnaill had given Brian the hostages of Dublin, meaning that Brian was the recognized overlord of the town. His allies included the Kings of the Isles: the sons of Harold, who were the primary rivals in the Irish Sea to the Dublin Vikings. Looking at the

situation from this perspective, the events of 998 – 999 take on a different perspective from that normally espoused by historians.

The Battle of Glen Mama

The Battle of Glenn Máma was a major encounter. The *Annals of Inisfallen* record, “A slaughter of the foreigners of Áth Cliath by Brian, son of Cennétig.”¹⁹¹ The *Annals of Ulster* provide a similar picture only adding that, “the foreigners of Áth Cliath, accompanied by the Laigin, came to attack him”¹⁹² thus confirming that the Leinstermen participated. All of the records are in accord that the death toll was high on both sides. The dead included Sitric’s brother Harald, Cuilén son of Eitigén (who Mac Shamrain has associated with the Gailenga) as well as many other Viking nobles. If the colorful version of events from *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibhh* is to be believed, Máel Mórda was found hiding in a tree and brought forth by none other than Brian’s son Murchad.¹⁹³ The casualty list, combined with the story of Máel Mórda’s capture suggests that the battle turned into a rout and that would have been the point at which the largest number of casualties would have been inflicted. Hiding in a tree is suggestive of flight and Brian’s forces followed the initial victory by plundering Dublin the following day. The ravaging was intense, “The men of Munster invaded Áth Cliath, set fire to it, and burned it, and they invested it on the Kalends of

¹⁹¹ AI 999.
¹⁹² AU 999.
¹⁹³ *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibhh*, page 119.
January (January 1, 1000); and they burned Caill Tomair ("The Wood of Thor") as firewood."\textsuperscript{194} Even \textit{Chronicon Scotorum} notes the quantities of gold, silver and slaves taken by the Dál Cais.\textsuperscript{195} Brian fully exploited his battlefield victory and drove home his success while sparing enough of the town to ensure it provided resources.

The Battle of Glen Mama, fought in the last days of the first millennium, is normally portrayed as a victory by Brian over Máel Mórdha of Leinster. Yet Brian does not act in his normal manner after a battle, at least as regards Leinster. Time and again the Dál Cais king followed battlefield success with a pursuit and exploitation of his rival. Two examples illustrate this point. He had followed his initial raid against the leadership of Limerick by plundering the town as well. After defeating the Eóganachta at Belach Lechtna he continued on to burn Cork. In contrast, after winning the field at Glen Mama, he did not proceed into Leinster, rather he directed his attention at Dublin. According to the \textit{Chronicon Scotorum}, Brian, "went thereafter to Áth Cliath and was a week there and carried off its gold and silver and captives."\textsuperscript{196} \textit{Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh}, as can be imagined, gave even greater details of the sack, citing the number of foreign slaves taken by the Irish in addition to the portable valuables described in the annals.\textsuperscript{197}

The route of march taken by Brian before this battle

\textsuperscript{194} AI 999.
\textsuperscript{195} CS 999.
\textsuperscript{196} CS 999.
\textsuperscript{197} \textit{Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh}, pages 111-115.
deserves a moment of discussion. Traditionally the host of Munster traveled along the Slighe Dhála to Leinster. The March Roll of Leinster reinforces this in regards to an attack by Munster. The poem says, “If it be Munster that comes upon them...it behooves the descendants of Cennselach of the hundreds of cows [i.e. Úi Chennselaich] to confront them fiercely.” Such a route was quite possibly the way that he came for his raid into Leinster in 997. In any case, Brian also had the option of traveling on the Slighe Mor which would have brought him to Dublin in a manner that would have given the Vikings ample early warning to prepare their local forces. The movement would not have enabled them to call for reinforcements from overseas.

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198 The March Roll of the Men of Leinster, Ériu 6 (1912), page 123. Translated by Kuno Meyer.
however. The move would have taken ten to fifteen days, not long enough to prepare a ship for sail, garner support and bring these allies back in time. By traveling on the Slighe Mor, Brian enabled his target to concentrate forces. Sitric, however, had to look locally for reinforcements.

Obviously, Brian’s target was not Leinster but Dublin. The conquest of Dublin, rather than the simple cowing of the town, was the objective. To do so, Brian Boru did not stop with just a battlefield victory. He did not stop with plundering the riches of the town.

After defeating the military forces of the only Viking town that he did not control, Brian exiled the leader Sitric. For three months Sitric sought allies and support to no avail. He finally returned to Dublin in 1001 after swearing loyalty to Brian.199 No longer was the kingdom of Dublin an independent power that could play the various Irish kings against each other, now it was a subordinate in the truest sense of the term. Dublin forces are found in Brian’s armies over the next decade.

There was of course, more to the story than just Brian’s desire to quell the Dublin Vikings. Brian’s actions must be viewed in light of his relations with the Uí Néill high king. He did not have unlimited freedom in how he moved or in what he did. Each action might engender a counter reaction from other Irish kings, most especially from Máel Sechnaill. Kings competed for a finite pool of resources. One’s loss was another’s gain. Goals

199 AU 1001.
and objectives often overlapped and Dublin had been a target for the Úi Néill almost since its establishment. Its conquest by Brian denied those precious resources to Máel Sechnaill. Closing off Dublin to the Úi Néill kings meant limiting them to an ever constricted pool. The contest was a back and forth affair taking many paths and portrayals. Similar to modern news coverage, the events were not uniformly represented. As has been well documented, the various annals each show bias in how they portray events and even in what events were selected for inclusion. The annals provide a variety of lenses through which to see Brian, Dublin and the Úi Néill king Máel Sechnaill. The tension between Brian and Máel Sechnaill is often overlooked by historians who paint with broad brushstrokes the time between the agreement at Port dá Chanoic and the confrontation at Athlone in 1002.

**Focusing on Dublin**

Both Brian and Máel Sechnaill had coveted Dublin and made efforts to subjugate the town. Máel Sechnaill had expended a great deal of effort throughout his career towards Dublin. Raiding Dublin, besieging it and receiving its hostages gave Máel Sechnaill claim to the city. The division of Ireland in half by the Úi Néill and Dál Cais kings resulted in those hostages being given to Brian. Brian now had control of both Dublin and Leinster. Yet in 999 Máel Sechnaill raided Leinster.²⁰⁰ He did so as that province was in the midst of a struggle between two provincial dynasties. The Úi Néill were still a powerful force

²⁰⁰ AU 999.
and Brian had to be careful if he responded to Máel Sechnaill’s raid. Attacking Máel Sechnaill gained Brian nothing. Cognizant of the situation, Brian walked a thin line. He appears to have ignored Máel Sechnaill’s raid, focusing instead on his primary objective of Dublin, not Leinster.

Sitric called for assistance from his uncle in Leinster who responded with a muster of his forces. By following the Slighe Mor, the approach of the Munstermen would have come along the southern border of Uí Néill lands. This was within Brian’s right as the king of Leth Mug but certainly served as a subtle warning to Máel Sechnaill. Easily justified as a hosting against a rebellious subordinate, this was still a hosting right to the border of Máel Sechnaill’s lands. By traveling the Slighe Mor, Brian’s right flank was protected by his subordinate kingdom of Osraige. This allowed him to focus on enemy action from north or east. If Máel Sechnaill mustered a force to Brian’s north, the Dál Cais king could easily turn and face the threat. If Máel Sechnaill did not muster, then Brian continued on to Dublin.

Brian’s selection could not have been random. The critical point for Brian was when he potentially faced Meath, Dublin and Leinster. By following the Slighe Mór, he had the opportunity to determine how the king of Meath would respond before Brian had to deal with Dublin and Leinster. Now facing two enemies, his choice of routes limited the options of the Leinstermen. The Wicklow Mountains blocked the Southeast. The only pass through, the Gap of Wicklow, would come at the men of Munster from the
South. If Máel Mórda chose that route, Brian could have turned and faced him before the men of Dublin could become a factor in the fight. It also meant a potential supporting attack by the men of Osraige, Brian Boru’s forces in northeast Munster. If the Leinstermen chose to defend in the vicinity of the Gap they would be more than a day’s forced march from their Viking allies. Indeed, the Slighe Mór provided likely connections for Brian’s foes close to Dublin, if not at the city itself. Brian’s route meant that Máel Mórda of Leinster had to send his forces north to join up with those of Dublin instead of enabling an attack from the southeast. If Dublin and Leinster desired a coordinated attack there would be no room for maneuvering a host from Leinster into a flanking position while the men of Dublin faced Brian. The terrain hindered such a move and allowed Brian to face each host singly, greatly reducing their odds of success. To face him, they had to stand together. While scholarly opinion varies on the exact location of the battle, most sites are within a five mile radius. Whether the Glenn of Saggart or along the route of the modern N7 East of Kill, these sites all lie within fifteen miles of Dublin.\footnote{See Ailbe MacShamhráín, “The Battle of Glenn Máma, Dublin” in Medieval Dublin II, Seán Duffy ed. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), page 61 for a fuller discussion of the location.}

The Munster exploitation of their victory resulted in firm control over Viking Dublin. Suffering exile, Sitric was unable to find support and returned less than a year later, submitting to the overlordship of Brian Boru. The following years would see
Sitric fulfilling his duties as a subordinate, providing forces for several raids into the North of Ireland. For Brian this victory was extremely significant. He now controlled all four of the Viking port towns and the wealth from their tributes was immense. Dublin was a major port in the Irish Sea and English Channel trade and as such would have brought great wealth. No other Irish king had access to external sources of income to match those of the Dál Cais king. No other Irish king could recruit mercenaries as readily or easily as well.

**Subduing Máel Sechnaill**

The year 1001 saw the Dál Cais king testing the loyalty of his newest Viking allies. Advancing into the plain of Brega, a mixed cavalry force of Dublin Vikings and Leinstermen served as the vanguard. This hosting was intercepted by Máel Sechnaill who routed the raiders with heavy losses. At this point, Brian did not press his advance and the annals record that he, “retreated without giving battle or making incursion - by the Lord’s insistence.” The Chronicon Scotorum noted that Brian came with a large host that consisted of the men of Munster, South Connacht, Osraige, and Leinster, with the Vikings of Dublin alone being the cavalry force that led the move. Forcing a muster of the Uí Néill, Brian found no advantage and withdrew with little contact beyond the skirmish. His main body did not engage. Brian followed this demonstration of force the next year with yet another probing attack against Máel Sechnaill. His raiders were

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202 AU 1001.

203 CS 1000.
stopped in southern Mide by Aengus mac Carrach and the losses recorded in the annals suggest another defeat. Some unknown trigger caused Máel Sechnaill to look to the west for Brian’s next attack. To prevent a successful offensive by Brian in the west, Máel Sechnaill and his Connachta ally Cathal mac Conchobor decided to obstruct the Shannon River. Building a causeway across the river at Ath Luain, they attempted to block Brian’s fleet and limit his movement. All of the annals are in accord on the event. In 1001 the two kings began their causeway and in the next year, Brian brought his army north. No battle took place. In one version of events the meeting at Athlone was preceded by Brian’s visit to Tara. While this event finds no corroboration in any of the annals it is worth noting as a possible explanation for Máel Sechnaill’s actions in 1002. Brian had twice come up the Shannon River and across. Blocking the Shannon at that location was a necessity for Máel Sechnaill. If Brian’s forces could be stopped before they had the opportunity to spread out, the Uí Neill lands would be safer. According to Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh Brian traveled with all of Leth Mug to Tara and offered to face the Uí Néill in battle. Máel Sechnaill did not have a large enough force to do battle and the Dál Cais king offered him a month’s time to gather what support he could. What followed was the turning of the subordinate kings of Leth Conn, including the Cenel Conaill, against Máel Sechnaill. The tale goes on to have the Uí Néill king acknowledging his inability to face Brian alone but no one came to his aid. Possibly, the harsh
methods he had used to remain in power came back to haunt him.

In any case, Brian left to take arms against Máel Sechnaill the next year. An understated part of this record is the note that, “A great expedition of all Leth Mogha, both Gaill and Gaedhil.”

Brian led an army composed not only of Irishmen, but Viking mercenaries as well. Together, these forces were formidable. In the next year, the same army moved up the Shannon River to the causeway at Athlone. Both Cathal and Máel Sechnaill gave themselves up to Brian at that point. Both acknowledged his rule and gave hostages.

The Chronicon Scotorum for 1002 stated simply that, “Brian

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204 Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, pages 119-133. Quote is from page 119.
begins to rule."\textsuperscript{205} The submission of Máel Sechnaill and Cathal mac Conchobor theoretically placed four of the five major provincial kingdoms under Brian mac Cennetig’s rule. He ruled two of them with quite effective control as evidenced by the lack of violence in Munster subsequent to the failed revolts in 985. Leinster participated in raids and musters called by Brian for the next ten years. The \emph{Bóraimhe baile na ríogh} reflects the quantity of tribute exacted by the Dál Cais king and the sobriquet Borumha (cattle tribute) comes from Brian’s ability to enforce those payments. His methodical encirclement and isolation of Máel Sechnaill shows a strategic understanding executed far beyond that of his peers. Even in the face of multiple tactical setbacks, the Dál Cais king maintained pressure on his opponents that eventually proved overwhelming. Cutting them off from aid and then relentlessly pressing and probing for weaknesses, he simply wore them down while conserving his own ability to mass and maneuver when and where he so desired. Brian’s continued harassment must have taken its toll on the high king Máel Sechnaill. Year after year he had to maintain constant vigilance along his border to prevent the incursions of his southern neighbor. Calling his warriors to arms he successfully held the line but such musters left him little ability to conduct offensive operations. Brian had solid control of the South and as such could afford to turn the entirety of his attention, and increased wealth, against the Úi Néill. Máel Sechnaill had to

\textsuperscript{205} CS 1002.
contend with continued disputes among and with his subordinate kings. Conflict between Uí Néill and Ulaid and internal strife among the Northern Uí Néill in 1000, as well as a clash between the Northern Uí Néill and Ua Ruairc in Breifne the following year yielded little unity and even less stability and trust. The final dozen years of his rule would see the extension of his strategic vision to encompass the entire island of Ireland. His rule would also usher in a brief period of stability in which violence on a large scale nearly disappeared, a period in which prosperity must have flowered.

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206 AU 1000, 1001.
Chapter 4

“The first year of Brian, son of Ceinneidigh, son of Lorcan, in sovereignty over Ireland” so say the Annals of the Four Masters for the year 1002. For 24 years Brian had increased his control within Ireland and the year 1002 marked the passage of the high kingship from an Úi Néill to a non-Úi Néill king. Even more impressive is the submission of the previous king. The high kingship did not pass often from one living man to another. This achievement however, did not halt Brian’s ambitions. The next decade found him expanding his rule to every corner of Ireland. As high king, he used the recognition as a tool in making the high kingship a real office. For a brief moment, all of Ireland accepted the overlordship of one man. Bending all the forces available to him brought military and naval power to bear against his foes as well as continuing to exert pressure through the Church. These threads came together in an articulation of authority imitative of imperial power in continental Europe. The result of this program was the unification of the island under one rule.

Pushing North

In 1002 Brian mustered his forces and led them to Dundalk to confront Aedh mac Domnaill, the king of Ailech, and Eochaidh mac Ardgal, king of the Ulaid. Accounts of the results are ambiguous. The Annals of Ulster record a truce between them while the Annals of Inisfallen are silent as to the results of

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207 AFM 1002.
the expedition. Since most scholars rely on the account from the Annals of Ulster, they commonly portray this venture as a defeat for Brian as he did not come away with hostages signifying the submission of the Ulster kings.\textsuperscript{208} Such judgments denigrate the actual accomplishment of Brian in this endeavor. Both Máel Sechnaill and Connobar of Connacht had just submitted to Brian in 1002 after opposing him for an extended period. Máel Sechnaill had given up the title of high king and most certainly Brian Boru could not have trusted him completely. As he had done previously with the Eoganachta, Brian needed to demonstrate his ability to compel both kings to do his bidding, while not endangering his

\textsuperscript{208} AU 1002; AI 1002; Donncha Ó Corráin, \textit{Ireland before the Normans} (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1972), page 124. Ó Corráin called it a withdrawal in the face of united opposition.
gains to that point. Less than a year after the forces of Connacht and Midhe had gathered against him at Athlone, Brian called a muster. The fuller account of the Annals of Innisfallen is instructive: "A muster of the men of Mumu, the Connachta, the men of Mide, the Laigin, and of the foreigners of Áth Cliath and Port Láirge by Brian, son of Cennétig, against the Ulaid to take their hostages." This entry shows that the expedition was far more than a solo trip by Brian, included in his hosting were the troops that had just been arrayed against him less than a year before. One must ask how and where did this muster take place.

Sean Duffy attempted graphically to represent the annalistic information in his Atlas of Irish History. Duffy’s routing takes Brian almost directly to Dundalk without following any known routes used at the time. He assumed, probably rightfully so, that Brian began at Kincora. Duffy then depicted a movement across the midlands to arrive in Dundalk with a route reminiscent of the brevity and efficiency of the entry in the Annals of Ulster (See Fig. 4-1). Such depictions can be deceptive however. Without taking into consideration geography, known routes and the political concerns of that particular moment, one might find that the simplification of information obscures the complexity and importance of an event, leaving the answer unsatisfying.

One must ask again, where did this muster and subsequent march take place? The muster location had to be carefully

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209 AI 1002.
chosen. Brian would have had to provide the foodstuffs for the armies as they gathered.\footnote{See Beougher, particularly the chapters on manning the force and feeding the force.} He would also have to continue to provide security for his own lands, so effectively inviting Máel Sechnaill and Connobar into Munster by leaving it undefended makes little sense. That would place too many potential enemies in a position where they could do significant harm. A muster of his trusted contingents, minus his newest allies, within Munster would have minimized the rations that he would have to mass prior to the beginning of the hosting. Designating one or two additional points along his intended route of march would give him two additional advantages; initiative and control. As he moved his army along, The men of Connacht and then the men of Meath would have to wait in place for his arrival. Brian could choose to adjust his arrival as required to create an entrance or simply cause them to wait. They could only react. He also controlled who he met with and when. He thus met one potential foe at a time and had the flexibility to deal with the situation without fear of the complexity of all three forces coming to a single point at an appointed time. Much better for Brian was a final muster field in the vicinity of Dublin. One can thus safely assume that the muster with the men of Meath happened along the route to Dundalk. Brian’s army moved up to Connacht to collect those contingents while supported from the Shannon River and secure in his rear. If he had taken the Slighe Dhála through Leinster, he could not have guaranteed that the forces of
Connacht would not raid his unprotected rear in his absence. He would then have two options, the Slighe Assail or the Slighe Mhór, both routes crossing across the lands of Mide to the east coast. In choosing between the two crossing routes, the Slighe Assail would have put Máel Sechnaill between Brian’s forces and Munster. Such a position would expose him to possible attack from the Northern Uí Néill as well as from the south. Brian could not yet be confident in his newest enemy turned ally. These routes receive further support from the Annalistic accounts of Brian’s movements in 1004 discussed subsequently. In all likelihood Brian took the Slighe Mhór across to Dublin, either meeting Máel Sechnaill there or prior to arriving. Such a move would also serve as a threat to the Dubliners, as their overlord would arrive on their doorstep with a very sizable force. Brian’s allies from Waterford could either have traveled up the Slighe Chualann or sailed around the southeastern coast. As they had a naval force, it is probable that they came by sea. The combined force then advanced to Dundalk to meet the forces of the north. These movements stand in stark contrast to the routes suggested by Sean Duffy as well as suggesting a complexity previously hidden and unexplored.

In 1002, Brian Boru mustered the forces of all of the south, the west and the midlands. More than Leth Mogh, well over half of the island, participated in his hosting. If the sole measure of success is based on the annalist’s assertion that he went to take hostages, then Brian’s campaign must indeed be marked as a
failure. Counter to accusations of failure however, this hosting must be referred to as a success for him. Within a year of deposing the previous high-king, Brian had established himself in Irish style. Both Connobar and Máel Sechnaill came when summoned by their overlord. Legally speaking, an overlord had the right to summon subordinate kings on hostings. Brian did so and both provincial kings came; by their service they confirmed their submission.\textsuperscript{212} He conducted a processional to show he could compel other powerful kings to campaign in his army. He did not succeed in the supposed objective of gaining hostages from the Ulaid. Perhaps the annalist wanted to lessen the significance of the hosting. Perhaps, an Ulster pride in standing in the face of such a high-king shone through in that entry. However, Brian well might not have sought confrontation in this hosting. The hosting itself was of significance. Not having to risk his forces in battle would be a powerful influence on how he conducted the campaign. He tested his authority - and the response of his newest allies. He solidified his power in the south and executed an operational move involving forces from four of the six largest provinces in Ireland as well as incorporating outside allies. This was no small feat for a high king at any period in Irish history.

The following year began with dynastic intrigue in Leinster.

\textsuperscript{212} Kelly, \textit{Law}, pages 17-18. Kelly also noted that the legal tracts only deal with relationship between kings of tuaths up to rí cóicid (provincial king) as there is no legal reference for the high-king and his relations with the provincial kings since no effective high-king had managed to apply his authority.
The *Annals of Inisfallen* record that, “Brian, son of Cennétig, deposed the king of Laigin, i.e. Donnchadh, son of Domnall, and the hostages of Laigin were given by Brian to Máel Mórda, son of Murchad.”\(^{213}\) No reason is given. Adding to the intrigue is the fact that in 999 Máel Mórda had sided with the Dublin Vikings against Brian. There has been the suggestion that the Brian had been supporting Donnchadh, while the actions of Máel Mórda and Sitric of Dublin had been the excuse used by Brian for his expedition against them.\(^{214}\) For four years after that battle the Leinstermen had been the allies of the Dál Cais. Yet Brian deposed the Leinster king. One must ask why?

The Irish law tracts did account for instances where a king could be deposed. A king who lost in battle could technically lose his honor price although no examples of this theory in practice are found. A king who could not impose his will on his kingdom, collect tribute or take hostages could also be deposed. A king could even be deposed for an imperfect body after suffering from disease or wounds.\(^{215}\) In each case it is suggested that the deposition would be *internal* within the tuath, not externally imposed. Such laws were the laws of the people, not of overlords.

The removal of a subordinate king by Brian is far more in line with continental standards and suggests significant

\(^{213}\) AI 1003.
\(^{214}\) Ailbe MacShamhráin, “The Battle of Glenn Máma,” *Dublin in Medieval Dublin II*, Seán Duffy ed. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), page 60. See previous chapter for more detail on this affair.
authority. The annals give no justification suggesting a loss of physical standing or even losing a battle. R a seemingly loyal retainer with a man who had previously opposed him broke with Irish tradition. Perhaps Donnchadh’s poor performance in Brian’s northern campaigns influenced the decision. Equally possible is the influence of Brian’s wife, Gormflaith. Through his marriage to the Leinster princess, Brian was Máel Morda’s brother-in-law. Placing the brother over the troublesome kingdom would make the tie a blood relationship as well as restore a level of prestige to his wife’s family. Such bonds were powerful and in keeping with the execution of Irish politics.²¹⁶

Brian appears to some degree to be following the model established by a ninth century Uí Neill king, Áed “Ordnide”. Áed had defeated the Leinster army in 804 and received the submission of its king, Fínnechta.²¹⁷ Within a year he returned on another hosting to depose Fínnechta, replacing him with a dual kingship drawn from two other families. Áed’ efforts to weaken Leinster were in keeping with a similar division of authority in Midhe and show a policy of removing a subordinate king in order to weaken that kingdom and potentially make it more pliable. The removal of the established king placed a weaker leader/faction in charge – a faction beholden to the high-king that supported them.²¹⁸ For Leinster, at a time when Brian needed to be able to focus his

²¹⁶ Look at adding in a short section on the history of Máel Morda’s family to show their influence in Leinster.
²¹⁷ AU 804.
²¹⁸ Byrne, 160-162. Similar patterns can be found throughout the medieval world. The Mamluks and the Turks of the Abbasid State are the most obvious parallel.
attentions elsewhere, this would have been a significant consideration. By supporting Máel Morda, Brian reduced the potential for instability in the Southeast, freeing himself from the need to expend energy in securing that flank. He then began his northern campaigning in earnest.

**Probing the North**

Brian’s campaign in the year 1004 was in the west. Brian summoned his subordinate Máel Sechnaill and led their forces into the north of Connacht. This appears to indicate an attempt by Brian to conduct a circuit of Ireland.\(^{219}\) Conducting a circuit exemplified the authority of a king and laid his claim to lordship over the princes whose territory he traversed. Few kings attempted a circuit, and to do so showed the perambulator’s ability to force distant rulers to submit and provide hostages. Those hostages were critical symbols in a delicate political environment. The most celebrated circuit is that of Muirchertach Uí Néill, also known as Muirchertach of the Leather Cloaks. He conducted his circuit circa 942 in the winter using surprise instead of force to achieve his objective.\(^{220}\)

Brian seems to have followed a more direct and forceful approach in his first attempt. His march north was stopped at Traigh-Eothaile (identified as modern Ballysadare near Sligo) by the Northern Uí Néill, and this is important in determining how the Dal Cais advanced. What route did Brian take? Colm

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\(^{219}\) AFM 1003; AU 1004.

\(^{220}\) For the full account of Muirchertach’s adventures see *The Circuit of Ireland*, translated by John O’Donovan (Dublin: For the Irish Archaeological Society, 1841).
O’Lochlainn’s map of routes and itineraries shows a crisscross of trails weaving back and forth from Killaloe to the north; no direct route existed. Again, Sean Duffy draws a broad brushstroke across the rough terrain of Connacht seemingly without concern for the realities of travel. One suggestion is that Brian traveled to Sligo by sea. His fleets traveled the waters off Connacht year after year as they sailed north to harass the Uí Néill lands. The Annals of Ulster only mention Brian and so this suggests a potentially valid route to travel. Without the forces of other provinces, Brian could move from Kincora on the Shannon to the coast and then north, all via boat. No troops would have to travel overland. Brian’s royal residences in the Aran Islands would
have been a stopping point along the way for the king. Yet that route does not make sense for three reasons. The Uí Néill would have had enough advance notice to muster their warriors and meet Brian at the border to their lands. Secondly, a naval expedition would easily have been able to bypass the Uí Néill blocking position at Ballysadare. Third, the Annals of Inisfallen, contradicting the Annals of Ulster, specifically indicate that Brian’s force included Máel Sechnaill.

Brian’s meeting with Máel Sechnaill makes a route along the Shannon River the most likely. In 1011, the Annals of Ulster record a naval encampment of the two kings in the vicinity of Athlone. If Brian took the land route along the Shannon he would have proceeded roughly parallel to the river on the western side to Roscommon. After Máel Sechnaill joined him, the two could have proceeded towards Sligo, following roughly the route of the modern N61. While no evidence exists this early in his career for a naval encampment or semi-permanent base along the river, there are several later references to a base (probably on a lake), as well as Brian’s continued use of ships, making the most likely route up the Shannon past the Carrick to Loch Cé. From there his force could have proceeded northwest to the coast where he encountered the Uí Néill. The region around Loch Cé gave Brian’s fleets a protected bay with soft shores for beaching and a natural cattle pen. Interestingly, Keating places one of

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[221] Lebor na Cert, pages 42-43 list Na Trí hAirne ar mur máir ["the three Arans on the great sea"] as strongholds of the Kings of Cashel.
[222] AU 1011.
[223] ibid., AI 1011.
Brian’s royal fortifications precisely at Loch Cé. Similar in topography to Brian’s base at Beal Boru, Loch Cé would have been a very useful staging area for assaults to the North.

The political situation in the North changed in 1004, for reasons other than Brian’s attempt at a circuit. The *Annals of Innisfallen* also record, “A battle at Cráeb Tulcha between the Ulaid and Cenél Eógain and Cenél Conaill, and Áed son of Domnall Ua Néill, king of Ailech, was slain therein; and Eochaid son of Ardgal, king of Ulaid, together with his princes fell in the same battle.” The nobility of the northeast fell in battle. Two kings who had resisted Brian were dead. The Cenél Conaill appear to have been worn out at this point. They failed to follow up on this victory by taking the hostages of Ailech and Ulaid. The void was filled in the following year by a cunning move from the south.

**A New kind of King**

In 1005, Brian again came north with his host. Traveling up the Shannon River he turned east along the Slighe Assail and stopped at Teltown. Teltown had significance for the Úi Néill as it was their ancient ceremonial site. The king who held the site could call the Óenach Tailtu (“Fair of Teltown”) an event for the promulgation of laws reserved for the high-king. Brian’s stop at this particular point was important, because it represents Brian’s claim to be the overlord of all the Úi Néill, not just of

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224 AI 1004.
225 Byrne, pages 31 and 91. The Óenach was also a gathering for sports, trade, and legislation in addition to any legal pronouncements.
Máel Sechnaill. Brian did not stop at Tara the traditional seat of power in Ireland. Tara is less than a day’s journey from Teltown and to not stop after making a claim at Teltown had to have been a deliberate act. The snub suggests that Brian was attempting to shift the ceremonial centre of Ireland from Tara to Cashel. The Book of Rights claims that Cashel was the capital of Ireland and that the overlord of the island reigned from there. Combined with his subsequent movements to Armagh, this trip was undoubtedly a statement of Brian’s claim to authority, and his ability to enact that claim.

At this point he could have turned north moving around Upper Loch Erne and into Northern Úi Néill territory along a route he had not used before. His fleet, which he most likely used to move both troops and supplies up the Shannon River, would no
longer have been able to accompany him. His route lay overland, nearly due east from the river. By moving first to Teltown he split the Uí Néill in the north from their southern cousins, isolating the north. Brian took the Slighe Assail (Teltown is on this road). After making that move, Brian proceeded to the coast and then north. His week at Armagh was symbolic and his unimpeded movement through the heart of the previous high-king’s lands with no resistance was a designed display of his might. This military show became the background for even more momentous events that would occur during his next stop, at Armagh.

The year 1005 marked a symbolic turn of events. The imperial claims made by his secretary Máel Suthain in the Book of Armagh receive mention in nearly every account of Brian’s career. Brian visited Armagh after the death of the bishop, Áed, and "Brian left twenty ounces of gold [as an offering] upon the altar of Ard-Macha." Máel Suthain noted the visit and his entry as "in conspectu Briani imperatoris Scotorum" (in the presence of Brian, emperor of the Irish). Imperial claims are not limited to Ireland however. The tenth century in Europe saw rulers throughout Europe attempting, with various degrees of success, to consolidate and expand their authority. Scandinavia saw the

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226 Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters, Vol. 2, trans. and ed. by John O’Donovan, (Dublin: Hodges, Smith, and Co.,, 1856), page 753. Date given is out of T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin, and F.J. Byrne, ed., A New History of Ireland, vol. 8, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), page 47 since the AFM incorrectly place the gift in 1004. It is interesting to note the addition of the phrase [as an offering] by the Four Masters, almost as if they wanted to make sure that no reader ‘mistakenly’ assumed the gold might have been a bribe to induce cooperation.

227 TCD MS 52, folio 16.
Danish Harald Bluetooth, who announced his claims in the famous Jelling Stone inscription. Al Andalus had the kings of Galicia and León as well as the Umayyad dynasty in Cordoba under Abd al-Rahman III. Otto I faced had consolidated his hold over much of what is modern Germany by 955 and Widikund of Corvey began referring to Otto as emperor years before his official coronation in Rome. Benjamin Arnold’s poignant observation about Otto is useful at this point: “the politics which actually brought Otto I to Rome...did look remarkably like one of the motives for Charlemagne’s coronation in 800: a manoeuver by the Papacy for restoring its own authority under a new protector.” The crowning of an Emperor gave the church the appearance of bestowal of power and legitimacy upon a ruler who was its military protector. As the Church’s crowned secular representative, the emperor had an obligation to care for the church, as well as ensure that it thrived. If the church did not, it could easily be interpreted in Biblical terms of corruption and failure.

Brian’s grant of “the full demand” of the Successor of Patrick unmistakably designated Armagh as the leading ecclesiastical institute in Ireland, although the 20 ounces of gold that he gave the church as an offering must have also been welcome.

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228 León was formerly the kingdom of Asturia until 924 when it was subdivided and until 1230 when it became part of the kingdom of Castile. Galicia derived from Asturia as well and existed from 930 to 1157 when it became part of León.

229 Benjamin Arnold, Medieval Germany, 500-1300: A Political Interpretation (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 84-85.

230 Simple mention of Saul and David, Solomon and the Biblical justifications of the destruction of Israel and the Babylonian Captivity seem explicative.

231 AU 1006 for the granting of the demands and AU 1005 for the gift.
Financial support and the backing of the secular authority would have solidified Armagh’s position relative to its leading competitors and guaranteed the intertwining of its interests with Brian’s success.

Interestingly, the annals record that Brian took with him the pledges of the men of Ireland. This ceremony was not a hastily devised affair executed in dark back rooms. Important men from across the island came and one can imagine a very elaborate affair in the church; the procession of the king who would become emperor, the gift of gold, and the crowd. More assuredly the event would have been impressive and left a lasting memory for those in attendance, while messengers and travelers would have spread the word. In 851, more than a century and a half earlier, a similar gathering called a Ríghdál, a royal meeting or conference was held at Armagh by the Uí Neill king Máel Sechnaill I (died 862). The term used, dál, has the connotation of a legal meeting as well as the common translation as conference or assembly. The annals record the attendance of the military “nobles of Leth Cuinn” and the nobles of the west as well as the clergy of Armagh. It appears that this is the point in time in which Ulster accepted the rule of Máel Sechnaill

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232 For later descriptions of inaugurations and ceremonies in Ireland see Simms, From Kings to Warlords, pages 21-40. While the sources for her descriptions are over primarily 12th and 13th century, they show the elaborate nature of these affairs.
233 DIL: Dal.
234 AU 851. Interestingly, this did not get recorded in the Annals of Innisfallen.
as the high king. Thus there was a precedent within Ireland for a ceremonial gathering of the nobility at Armagh where the overlordship of one provincial king over others was acknowledged. Only in extremely rare cases did this occur. Significant is that the Men of Ireland came to Armagh for this event, an event in which Brian was given the title of Emperor of the Irish.

At Armagh in 1005, Brian saw the culmination of his efforts to project himself as more than just the most capable military commanders among the Irish. With religious sanction came the legitimacy for national lordship that only one man could rightfully claim. The support of Armagh, the most important religious institution in the North removed one key prop from the Uí Néill claims to supremacy as well as reducing their ability to receive financial support from the Church. An additional concern for the Uí Néill was that the tithes they paid to the Patrick’s church would go in part to supporting Brian. The Church and all of its resources were now squarely behind Brian and his success. To undermine that by supporting his secular enemies would also undermine Armagh now that Brian was its designated protector.

This was yet another wedge driven between the northern kings and their church. Brian conducted a hosting into the North with no overt reaction by the Cenél nEógain nor by Cenél Conaill. Moving to Armagh could not be seen as a direct attack on Cenél nEógain and Brian likely sent word of his intention to pay homage at the church ahead of time. In the preceding year, a conflict

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235 Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, page 263.
between Cenél Conaill and Ulaid had culminated that had absorbed their attention and efforts. Unable even to force the men of Ulster to give hostages, physically stopping Brian Boru was beyond their ability at that particular point in time. Their weakness, or at least its suggestion, would have been readily apparent. The entry in the Annals of Ulster recorded the attendance of the Men of Ireland, reinforcing the fact that the word had gone out in advance. By the time the messengers brought word of his travel plan and request for an assembly at Armagh, Cenél Conaill were worn out from their struggle for regional control and in a very difficult position. Brian Boru took advantage of northern Uí Neill weakness. A counter hosting that failed to stop him would have raised serious questions about their ability to enforce their claims to overlordship in the northeast. By not responding, they allowed Brian unchallenged access to Armagh. This facilitated a public relations coup. The largest church in the North became a supporter of the Dal Cassian king and he became their protector. This happened without battle, without an uproar and without even a recorded protest on the part of the northern Uí Néill. They simply did not show up. Instead of risking defeat in battle, they lost a crucial support of which Brian would make good use in the following years. To capitalize on his success in weakening political support for the northern Uí Néill, Brian resumed his military campaign the next year.
Fragmenting the North

Brian’s circuit in 1006 initially entered Tir Conaill. Coming from Connacht, Dál Cais had only two options – to attempt to pass through the wetlands between Lower and Upper Lough Erne in the vicinity of modern Enniskillen or to stay close to the coast. While travel through the region was possible, O’Lochlainn’s study has no recorded itineraries passing through this region. One can expect that small parties moved in and out but that larger groups would have had to skirt around the area. Since Dál Cais came through Connacht, moving east and then north would have meant a long detour and given Cenél Conaill warning of their approach. It also meant moving almost to modern Derry before having turning west. At that point, Brian would have faced almost all of the north simultaneously as well as having an extended supply line and an unprotected rear. His fleets would not have been able to move along his flank and as such would have separated him from a portion of his forces. While it would have been an unexpected move, it would also have been foolhardy. This is precisely the threatened move that he had made the previous year. The Uí Néill almost certainly would have reacted by posting additional border guards and patrols in anticipation of another attempt by the high king. The western land route into Tir Conaill made far more sense. Tir Conaill is normally translated as territory and yet here it seems important to understand another meaning. Land, earth or ground is a common usage of the term tir and when viewed in regard to Brian’s
movement north, this is a logical translation. Brian had previously moved north and met the Úi Néill at Ballysadare. The land route would again take him to this point and then further north. Such a move also fits with the annalistic description of him going through Connacht. This shows a mastery of operations by the high king. His circuit took him to his opponents one at a time, indicating that he intended to deal with each kingdom of the north separately. If he had sought battle against a combined enemy he would have chosen a different route that would have dictated where they should muster to meet him. As he had demonstrated at Dublin in 999, Brian understood positioning. So, his “great army” faced each kingdom independently; first Cenél Conaill, then Cenél nEógain. Even then he failed to take their hostages.
Tactically this made sense. By not taking hostages he did not have to care for them.\textsuperscript{236} In one previous instance, Brian was in a situation where M\'ael Sechnaill would have given hostages but he chose not to take them at the time, giving his peer a year respite.\textsuperscript{237} Since they had not submitted to him, Brian could claim that he was still on a hosting, a legally ‘binding’ situation in which his allies would have had to continue their service obligation. To have taken hostages would have made it far more difficult for Brian to maintain support for the continuation, and completion of his circuit.

Brian crossed into Ulster near the border of Tyrone, Derry and Donegal at Feartas Nim. From there, he had to choose whether to continue to hug the coast or to cut southeast. While Slighe Mhídluachra was the direct route, it is not the most likely way to go. Following Slighe Mhídluachra would bring him to the border of Dál Riata and Dal nAraidne at roughly the same time. Again, he would be away from his supporting fleet. This would be incredibly dangerous. In light of his previous tactics of attempting to face only one enemy at a time, keeping along the coast put him in the position to face them singly with his fleet on his flank. That he “kept his left hand” to the sea only solidifies this reasoning.\textsuperscript{238} He continued past Dál Riata, Dal Araidne and Ulidia until he finally reached Dundalk. He took hostages of all of the Northeastern kingdoms and effectively

\textsuperscript{236} Kelly, \textit{Law}, pages 164-176. Specific legal rights and roles for hostages are found from pages 173-176.
\textsuperscript{237} CGG page 131.
\textsuperscript{238} CGG page 133-139.
isolated the Northern Uí Néill. From that point he felt confident enough in his strength to disband his hosting.

Question: how did his Viking allies’ fleets know where and when to meet him in order to take their portion of the army home?
Answer - The fleets had shadowed the land move.

Brian’s campaigns reveal several interesting aspects of strategy and limitations. Early in his career the son of Cennétig campaigned annually. His forces moved against enemies who were close by and the regular mustering of his host shows the limited nature of his operations. Certainly this was an impressive show of force and required careful management of resources. As the range of his operations broadened however, he took the field less frequently. Together with the complications of arranging musters of larger and larger armies coming from a greater distance, the demands placed on his resources would have increased. These musters required the stockpiling of food and supplies as well as the transmission of schedules through messengers. The campaigns in the North seem to show some of these limitations. Brian conducted hostings in 1002 and 1003 followed by a two year hiatus. He then campaigned three years in a row: 1005, 1006, and 1007. After 1007 he did not move against the North again until 1010 and then a culminating attack in 1012. These campaigns are impressive and indicate an ability to put forces in the field that the North could not match over a sustained period. However, they show periods of reset as well. The maps of these attacks also show a very interesting pattern of
movements by Brian’s forces (see Fig. 4-7).

Brian’s hostings in 1002 and 1003 were his initial incursions into the north. He began on the east coast sustaining his efforts and capitalizing on his successes in Dublin. Pushing out from strength he probed his opportunities. In 1003 he completely changed his approach route, switching to the West coast. The Uí Néill quickly responded to his incursion and stopped him at Ballysadare. The next year saw no action by Brian. When faced with determination and strength, he adjusted. Shifting from a purely military tack, he arranged for his coronation at Armagh in 1005. He thus shifted his routing yet again. How would the Uí Néill respond? Should they patrol their border with Connacht? Preparing for Brian’s next onslaught, surely that was the appropriate response. After what must have been a mystifying delay, Brian then reappeared in the east and then withdrew. As all of Ireland would be focused on Armagh and the events of 1005, Brian shifted yet again making the Connacht border the point of entry for his second attempt at a circuit. Successfully disorienting the opposition, he was able to complete the circuit as previously described. Determined to stop him, the Northern Uí Néill would have re-focused their border patrols to the south and Brian then shifted his attack to a route previously unused by him. The forces of the south penetrated the midlands and met the Uí Néill in battle. Brian then delayed for over two years and the Uí Néill must have wondered and worried. In 1010 the attack came all the way on the east coast again where half of
the north submitted. To wait and wait and then have him appear in an unexpected region must have been maddening. Any sane king would look to respond to that threat as soon as possible. Here we see the beauty of Brian’s strategic mastery for in 1012, he struck a decisive blow. Having drawn the attention of the North further and further to the East, Brian made a two pronged assault up the Western Coast into the heart of the resistance.

**The end of Dal Cais Expansion**

The final capitulation of the north came with two years of campaigning by the forces of the South. In 1010, Brian moved his approach route back to the familiar territory of the eastern seaboard. Moving from Kincora, his forces arrived at Armagh. The most detailed annalistic account noted. “A great hosting of
the men of Mumu by Brian against Ua Néill, and it came to Ard Macha. And Ua Néill gave to Brian his demand in full, and Brian brought Ua Néill's hostages to Cenn Corad."239 There are no accounts extant that indicate that the Uí Néill gave battle at this point. Their submission was obviously not complete as Brian had to mount another expedition the following year. This campaign involved a direct strike by the forces of the high king in which they took hundreds of hostages and cattle.240 This attack came overland and the annals indicate that the forces of Leinster and Meath joined up with

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239 AI 1010. AU 1010 credits Brian with taking the pledges of the North.  
240 AU 1011.
Brian at a location used previously called Enach Dub.\textsuperscript{241}

Supported from their logistical encampment along the Shannon, the combined hosting pushed into the heartlands of the North and achieved huge success. The second prong of the attack came from the sea. The land half of the army was led by Brian’s sons. The attack was so successful that Brian brought not only hostages, but the king of Cenél Conaill, Mael Ruanaid ua Maíl Doraid, with him back to Kincora.\textsuperscript{242} Such a definitive statement of authority cannot be overlooked. Clearly, Brian was asserting his authority. The only hostage that he would accept was the king of Conaill.

**Mobility and Threat – a new aspect of Irish warfare**

An oft mentioned but under explored facet of Brian’s expansion was the use of fleets. Controlling all of the major Viking settlements in Ireland, and having made an agreement with the kings of the Isles, Brian’s access to naval power in all likelihood has been underestimated. The use of these assets has been mentioned previously in chapter three. From 985, Brian’s strategy increasingly incorporated reliance on naval power. The mobility gained by using warships added an element of speed that gave great advantage to the user. Average rates of travel in ship ran close to ten times those of men on foot.\textsuperscript{243} This advantage was obvious to the other kings when Máel Sechnaill and Cathal attempted to block the Shannon in 1002. Their failure led

\textsuperscript{241} AU 1011.
\textsuperscript{242} AFM 1011, AU 1011.
\textsuperscript{243} Paddy Griffith, *The Viking Art of War*, page 103. He lists 15 miles a day for movement by foot compared with 120 miles for a ship.
directly to their submission. Yet even the riparian threat was
not Brian’s greatest use of his fleets. In the years following
his acclamation as high king, he sent his fleets along the
northern coasts in supporting attacks and reinforcement of his
land campaigns. The only Irish king with access to the resources
to accomplish this, added a significant threat to his already
impressive ground campaign. The fear and terror writ large in
the annals and records about Viking raids were now in the control
of an Irishman. Foreigners, i.e. Vikings, based in Ireland were
subordinate and responsible to him for their actions. If they
raided in Ireland he was aware and probably involved in
targeting. If raiding outside of Ireland, they would give a
portion to their overlord. His alliance with the Haroldsons of
the Isles would influence their choice of targets as well. Other
raiders could travel a sizable distance through hostile waters to
reach Brian’s kingdom. His fleets controlled the southern
coastline. Viking fleets did not carry much in the way of
foodstuffs. They relied on established base camps or immediate
raids for food once arriving on land. As such, Brian’s fleets
and local defenses denied access to this critical resource.  

244 See the Bayeux Tapestry at the point where the narrative states “UT
CIBUM RAPERENTUR” which translates roughly to they went to requisition
which was accessed on 2 November 2006. For more on Viking logistics
in England, Richard Abels noted that, “Logistical considerations
determined the strategy of the Great Heathen Army’s invasion of Wessex
in 870/1” further detailing the taking and the use of the estate of
Reading as a supply base. The article “English Logistics and military
administration, 871-1066: The Impact of the Viking Wars” can be found
at www.eremilitari.org/resources/articles/abels.htm accessed on 2
November 2006. The article was originally published in Military
Aspects of Scandinavian Society in a European Perspective, AD 1-1300:
Few options were thus available to outside forces and the annals, not surprisingly, do not relate large numbers of Viking raids during this portion of Brian's reign.

Two events early in his high kingship illustrate the continued development of Brian's naval strategy. In 1002, Brian made an expedition to Dundalk to "demand hostages from Áed and Eochaid, and they parted on terms of truce." These kings were from Ailech and Ulster. The choice of location is peculiar. A land army would be better served by a more direct route to the Northern kingdoms. In 1005 and 1010 Brian followed just such a route through Armagh to reach these lands. Yet in 1002 they met at the coastal border between Meath and Ulster. This incident is usually overlooked. Some even misinterpret it. Ó Corráin referred to the event as if it was a defeat - calling the truce a withdrawal. Late the next year or early in 1004 Brian moved north through Connacht and was stopped by the Cenél Conaill at Traigh-Eothaile (Ballysadare). His force traveled along the waterway of the Shannon River and then moved cross country to the coast. From there he began moving along the coastline. Traigh-Eothaile, the border between Connacht and Uí Néill gave a coastal venue to the meeting between Dál Cais and Uí Néill. Pressing the Cenél Conaill, he pulled back without giving battle. Doing
this amidst a major clash between Cenél Eogain and Ulster forced the Uí Néill to face two enemies and allowed Brian to work his multi-component strategy. Internal strife in the northern kingdoms created weakness. Cenél Conaill fought with Ailech and Ulster and the animosity rose to the level where the Cenél Conaill claimed to have killed Áed mac Néill of Ailech when the annals credit old age.\textsuperscript{248} Pressing, but not fully committing, Brian challenged the ability of the Cenél Conaill to respond on multiple fronts. This excursion, taken alone, is normally interpreted as Brian Boru backing down in the face of a determined opponent.\textsuperscript{249} Stepping aside from the obvious lack of advantage that he would gain from battle at that point, the operation shows the continued development of Brian Boru’s naval strategy. As in the previous year, he deliberately chose an uncommon route for his operation. The coast was not a common line of communication for northern attacks. In fact, it was a significant deviation from his previous, successful, operations up the Shannon. As at Dundalk, he moved to and then along the coast. Combined, the events strongly suggest the coast was playing an increasingly important role in the initial campaigns against his northern opponents. Certainly it was not because the shoreline was easier marching. The ability to supply by sea would have been a factor. Having reinforcements close to hand would be another. The option to move naval forces around an enemy army if they committed decisively would be a third. In

\textsuperscript{248} AU 1004.
\textsuperscript{249} O’ Corráin, page 124.
this light, the events of 1002 and 1004 take on new meaning. Brian’s naval forces now take on the role of a supporting arm, providing supplies and reinforcements. The main arm of the force, a ground army, would drive forward and fix the enemy. Any decisive commitment of forces against him would leave the enemy’s lands open to exploitation by the naval wing. Such operational complexity would require a concerted and sophisticated defense to overcome – and in the midst of conflict between the northern kingdoms, neither would be able to rise fully to the occasion.

Brian’s assault on Cenél Conaill resembled the modern prize fighter’s careful dance in the ring. Like his early campaigns against the Eóganachta, constant motion forced his opponent to react continuously. Gauging each reaction, Brian struck at potential weak points and danced away when the timing was not fortuitous. Defensive action always saps a fighter, wearing him down more quickly than offensive action. He who holds the initiative can make half-hearted efforts that must be countered yet cost little in strength, only time. The defender must react to each move or feint as if it were the real effort. Failure to do so would open the kingdom up for a punishing raid. As the Cenél Conaill called their warriors together time and again on Brian’s timeline, they had little opportunity to plan and prepare raids or hostings. Their war host was called to defend and then no longer had an obligation for other activity in that year. Initiative remained with Brian.

The naval threat increased the dynamic of warfare. In
previous campaigns Brian primarily used land based forces to exploit success. He also used dual pronged assaults to fix his enemy while maneuvering the second pincer against his primary target. The Viking fleets gave him a similar threat with ever greater employment options. The Northern Uí Néill not only had to muster against Brian’s land assaults but also would have to maintain patrols and vigilance along the coast. As with boxing, the body blows weakened the Uí Néill, wearing them down and slowly weakening their reactions. Bit by bit, Brian could attack with greater impunity. The knockout would only be a matter of time.

**Basing**

The map depicting the consolidated routes suggests far more than just the trackways and pathways used by Brian in his northern campaigns. Analysis shows a density of movements important in understanding his operations. Brian’s army used the river Shannon extensively for transport. Several hosts turned east in the vicinity of Carrick on Shannon and began a ground movement in addition to several movements to the north extending at least as far as the Carrick and probably further upstream. These attacks then shifted to ground movements with one going towards Enniskillen but at least two others directed at Traigh-Eothaile or the modern territory around Sligo. Brian thus had at least one, and probably two points of debarkation for his fleets along the Upper Shannon.

At least one of Brian’s heralded building projects had
little to do with the physical defense of Munster but a great deal to do as a base of supply from which he launched many of his later campaigns. His fortification at Loch Cé gave Brian control of the upper reaches of the Shannon River. Loch Cé meant the denial of the Shannon to any force coming from the north and thus did have a limited defensive role.

Far more importantly, Loch Cé meant that Brian had a base of operations at the edge of the Northern Uí Neill lands, a secure point from which to attack into Argialla, Cenél Conaill and beyond. According to the Annals of Inisfallen, in 1006, Brian mustered the men of Leth Mug and "[came] to Ath Lúain, went to Es Ruáid, proceeded across it northwards, and made a circuit of the north of Ireland including Cenél Conaill, Cenél Eógain, Ulaid,
and Airgialla.” While this passage does not refer specifically to Loch Cé, the route between Athlone (midway up the Shannon) and Es Rúaid (Assaroe on the River Erne in Donegal), runs right through the upper reaches of the Shannon River and Loch Cé. The circuit that began with the Cenél Conaille just north of the stronghold proceeds around in Uí Neill territory to return to Loch Cé from the East out of Airgialla. Another reference in the same annals that reinforces the claim of Loch Cé as Brian’s jumping off point for his campaigns against the Northern Uí Neill comes in the year 1011: “A great muster of the men of Ireland by Brian, son of Cennetig, into Cénel Conaill...and carried off much booty to Mumu; and Brian came after that to the lake.” Seán mac Airt in his notes states that “probably the Shannon near Limerick is meant.” There was nothing near Limerick that was a lake. More likely is that the ‘lake’ was Loch Cé, where Brian had placed his fortifications. His troops could return to this supply point from which he then could arrange for their dismissal and ship plunder down the river to Munster. The second location was located between Athlone and Assaroe and referred to as Enach Dub. The Annals of Ulster note that Brian and Máel Sechnaill were there “again” suggesting a location of some permanence. This location fits with the multiple campaigns that travelled up the Shannon and then turned east across the land routes.

Along the east coast, Brian had another pair of bases from

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250 AI, page 179.
251 Ibid., page 181. Italics are mine.
252 Ibid., page 181.
253 AU 1011.
which he launched operations into the north. Dublin appears as an early base for Brian and when the Annals indicate that he was accompanied by the men of Dublin and of Leinster this area most certainly was the point of muster. Conveniently, his Norse allies would be able to beach their vessels temporarily while the army assembled and then either leave them under guard or shadow the force along the coast.

After his visit to Armagh in 1005, Brian regularly began his campaigns into the north of Ireland with musters at Armagh, instead of in Munster. In the year 1007 A.D., “A great muster of the men of Ireland, both foreigners and Gaedil, by Brian to Ard Macha, and they took the hostages of Ulaid...by force.” 254 Again in 1010, “A great hosting of the men of Mumu by Brian against Ua Neíll, and it came to Ard Macha.” 255 After 1004, the king of Munster used the Church of Armagh as a staging area in a manner quite similar to the way in which he used the border forts he had built in order to subjugate the south. By actively promoting the interests of the See of Patrick, both by proclaiming it the preeminent church of Ireland and by his healthy cash contribution, Brian gained an ally in the central region of Ireland, giving him a staging area to muster and resupply prior to launching campaigns into the northern territories to which the Shannon did not give him access.

When tied in with his logistical center at Beal Boru (the Pass of the Cow Tax), the inner workings of a very elaborate, and

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254 AI, page 179.
255 AI, page 181.
sophisticated logistical system become evident. Brian Boru, “Brian of the Cattle Tributes,” in other lands or times Brian the Tax Collector, brought those taxes to one centralized point. From that point on the lower Shannon, he could disperse them as he needed. When preparing for a military campaign, he could easily ship the cattle upriver to one of two locations that served as temporary cattle pens. From there, his forces would strike out overland with a full set of supplies, literally on the hoof. Dublin would serve as a similar collection point and Armagh had access to great wealth as well. Each location was a store setting the expedition up for success. These launching points would enable a far greater range of opportunities and shifts.
The period of peace following the submission of Cenél Conaill is a part of Brian’s reign that has found note in almost every history of his accomplishments. The Pax Irlandia reflects the significant achievement of Brian. From 1002 to 1012, the annals hold no record of Viking depredations against lands under Brian’s dominion. Internal conflicts were also limited. The kingdoms that had submitted to Brian appear rather peaceful and even prosperous. Yet successful conquest does not always mean successful and lasting rule. The unity of Ireland would be fleeting even as it was achieved. Cenél Conaill succumbed to Brian because he beat them down, wearing out their ability to resist until they had no option but to submit. With peace would come the cessation of these attacks. Cenél Conaill immediately began to rebuild capability during this lull. Leinster had an even lengthier time out of the limelight. Both kingdoms harbored ill-will and resentment towards Brian. Neither province had a history of accepting submission. After regaining their strength, they sought to re-establish their independence and challenge Brian’s control. Two revolts, nearly simultaneously in two distant sub-kingdoms would fully challenge the Dal Cassian ability to respond.

A Momentary Peace

The Annals of Ulster record part of a praise poem often quoted in regards to Brian’s rule:

It is remarkable that Sliab Cua has no troop,
That foreigners do not row around Eidnech,
That a lone woman crosses Luachair,  
That cows are without a herdsman, lowing. —That is in  
Brian's time.

At the year 1012, the whole of Ireland was under the lordship of  
one man, the high king and emperor from the kingdom of Dál Cais.  
Whether fact or fiction this poem indicates that his rule was  
remarkable at least for the relative peace and stability it  
afforded. This situation was far from the norm. From pre-  
history into the earliest records, Ireland had never totally  
fallen under even the nominal rule of one man. Since the arrival  
of the Vikings in the late eighth century, strife and disharmony  
seem better representations. Violence and warfare were endemic,  
constants in daily life. For a brief moment, that reality  
appears to have been suppressed. Like the Pax Romana, there was  
violence underneath. However, rarely was the island as united as  
it became under Brian Bórumha. For less than a year, Ireland was  
united and relative peace prevailed. Disharmony and discord  
would begin in locations with traditions that were not conducive  
to being ruled. From Leinster, the well known troublesome  
region, and the homelands of the Uí Néill, previous holders of  
the high kingship, would rise challenges that would tear the  
brief moment of unity apart.
Chapter 5

On Good Friday, 23 April 1014, Brian fought the final battle of his career on the field of Clontarf. The Battle of Clontarf took place just outside Dublin and has become a historical marker in Irish history. The story leading up to Clontarf as commonly portrayed begins with a revolt by Leinster, often considered the result of a conflict between Brian’s son Murchad and Máel Mórdha, king of Leinster. In the stock version of the story, Leinster led the revolt, enlisting the northern rulers of Cenél Eógain to throw off the chains of Dál Cais overlordship. More detailed accounts reflect the attacks against Brian’s ally Máel Sechnaill and his corresponding problems with Dublin in a series of five events. First, Brian fortifies his kingdom in anticipation of attack. Second, Brian and Máel Sechnaill then respond to these forays and challenges by attacking Dublin. Third, they lay siege for nearly four months and have to lift it around Christmas. Fourth, Máel Mórdha then builds a “confederation to meet the threat” of Brian’s certain return. The messengers go out and come back with pledges of assistance by Palm Sunday. Finally, the allies of Leinster arrive at Dublin just before the forces of Munster and the battle takes place on Good Friday. Medieval historians recount the bloodshed and list the fallen, which include Máel Mórdha and Earl Sigurd on the Leinster side as well as Brian and his son Murchad. The postscript to the account of the battle is when Brian’s remaining son Donnchad returns from

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256 Donncha Ó Corráin, Ireland Before the Normans (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1972), page 129.
his raid and leads the depleted army of Munster back home, facing opposition from his subordinate kingdom of Osraige on the way.\textsuperscript{257}

This relatively standard, and accepted, rendition of the battle is based on the account written by John Ryan.\textsuperscript{258} Ryan included many of the mythical elements contained in the primary sources, such as Cath Cluana Tarbh, which included otherworldly explanations for what happened. According to this work, for example, Brian’s death was divine retribution for his profaning of the church at Scattery Island in 976. These stories have no basis in historical fact but they provided convenient explanations for what happened, eliminating the need to research in depth what happened and why. Even modern accounts ignore the details of battle to focus on the significance of Clontarf.

Those who still claim that Brian drove the Vikings from Ireland might prefer not to have to deal with Brian’s use of them, and their survival in Ireland after Clontarf.

Two of the sources that have provided much of the information regarding the battle of Clontarf are \textit{Njal’s Saga} and \textit{Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh}. Divested of literary trappings, they have the potential to contribute significant and reliable details. The actual conduct of battle was a topic about which the audience would have known a great deal. This could not be manufactured and still be accepted. \textit{Njal’s Saga} follows the outline of events similar to \textit{Orneyinga Saga}. It also appears to include

\textsuperscript{257} \textit{Ó Corráin}, 128-130.
materials from a source contemporary to the source for the _Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh_. Quite possibly, both used a version of the now lost _Brian’s Saga_. Both are valid and important sources for understanding the Battle of Clontarf.\(^{259}\)

Historians invariably discuss the importance of the Battle of Clontarf with reference to one of two themes: the battle driving the Vikings from Ireland or the refutation of that claim with the counter-argument that the Vikings had not been a power for some time. Ó Corráin stated that the battle is important in that it so weakened the rule of the Dál Cais that it left a power vacuum. The High-Kingship became a crown worth fighting for and everyone was a potential claimant.\(^{260}\) Ó’Cróinín argued that the battle was really of little political importance owing its place in history to “its literary prestige.”\(^{261}\) Historians have tended to follow the lead of the _Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh_ in assigning blame for the events of 1012-1014 on Leinster. Donncha Ó Corráin

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\(^{260}\) Edmund Curtis, _A History of Ireland_ (New York: Methuen and Co., 1936), page 25-31; O’Corrain, page 130. This fits in with themes argued by other historians in regards to Brian’s reign overall, not just the battle of Clontarf. Sean Duffy noted that Brian succeeded in breaking the Leinster Alliance and halting their grab for power while Michael Richter remarked on how Brian broke the Uí Néill stranglehold on the high Kingship. See Sean Duffy, _Ireland in the Middle Ages_, pages 34-36 and Michael Richter, _Medieval Ireland_, page 115.

\(^{261}\) Dáibhí Ó Cróinín’s version of events found in _Early Medieval Ireland 400-1200_ (London: Longman Group, 1995), page 266.
called it “the revolt of Leinster and the Battle of Clontarf.” While he questioned the sources used, he credited Leinster with leadership of the conspiracy.\textsuperscript{262} John Ryan lays far more credit for the revolt on the Norse of Dublin. He saw events in England as inspiring the Dubliners to seek to throw off Brian’s yoke. After this promising start he then shifted to the story of Brian’s former wife as the instigation behind the events.\textsuperscript{263} Even at the gates of Dublin, Ryan credited the Leinstermen with leadership and the Dubliners are placed, as allies, to the side in the dispute.\textsuperscript{264} Dáibhí Ó Cróinín called much of previous historical understanding into question regarding the battle. After dispensing with the propaganda and literary inheritance of the battle he placed Brian against the Norse with the men of Leinster taking the side of the Dubliners, not the other way around.\textsuperscript{265} This brief synopsis of historical interpretations of Clontarf suggests that it has not been clearly defined, nor clearly explained.

What was Clontarf? In the minds of the first to write about it, it was a noteworthy event where many important men died. The \textit{Annals of Inisfallen} name eight of the dead while the \textit{Annals of Ulster} lists 27 of the dead by name. The \textit{Annals of Loch Cé} provide the most extensive list, naming 29 of the dead.\textsuperscript{266} As time progressed, it became a historical ‘memory’ that fit the

\textsuperscript{262} Donncha Ó Corráin, pages 127-128  
\textsuperscript{263} Ryan 363.  
\textsuperscript{264} Ryan 364.  
\textsuperscript{265} O Croinin, 266-267  
\textsuperscript{266} AU 1014; AI 1014; ALC 1014.
purposes of Brian Boru’s descendents. Re-cast in stark terms of
good and evil, indigenous defender against evil invaders, it
served to justify a position and claim. As that claim was
recognized and accepted, more and more families sought to use it
to their advantage, some even fabricated participation. The most
notable of these efforts were the claims of the royal family of
Briefne in the 12\textsuperscript{th} century that their ancestor Fergal Ua Ruairc
had fought for Brian. Never mind that he had died 48 years
before the battle.\textsuperscript{267} After the invasions of Ireland from Britain
from 1169, the role of Leinster in the battle of Clontarf took on
greater importance – their betrayal of Ireland to outsiders. The
actual battle itself was replaced by a mythical ‘Battle of
Clontarf’ that gained even greater import for its symbolism.
Resistance, strength, and even nationalism all find justification
in 23 April 1014. The battle has had many meanings, yet one must
wonder what really happened that day. All portents and saga
embellishments aside, why did Brian Boru go to battle?

To answer questions about the battle, one must first
understand events that preceded Clontarf. Where did the revolt
truly start and how did Brian and his allies react? The list
begins with Máel Sechnaill, whom Brian replaced as high king.
After losing the high kingship to Brian, he had been further
reduced militarily to the point where he could not even defeat
the Northern Uí Néill using just his resources. How that must
have weighed on his mind. Without Dublin, or many of the other

\textsuperscript{267} Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, “Bréifne Bias in Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib,” Éiriú
XLIII (1992), page 142.
kingdoms that had previously financed his campaigns, he was much weakened. Aware that Máel Sechnaill, Brian’s ally in the north, was challenged and unable to control his nominal subordinates, the Leinster king Máel Mórdá sensed an opportunity and began contesting Brian’s supremacy, as anecdotally revealed in Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh. One oft-noted incident recounts Máel Mórdá’s personal delivery of tribute to Kincora when Gormflaith aggravated her brother by asking why he was bringing tribute to Brian, calling it an affront to the honor of Leinster. The essential point is that he brought the tribute to Kincora, he did not send it. Máel Mórdá, in a bad temper, then gave advice in a board game that led to Murchad’s defeat, which created another source of tension. When Máel Mórdá left Kincora, he killed a messenger who had been sent to call him back to see the high-king. All of this took place in the year 1013.

So, while the King of Leinster might have chafed at paying tribute, and looked for opportunity to change his situation, he did not begin the revolt. The Northern Uí Néill, far from Brian’s center of gravity, were the initial impetus. Leinster and Dublin quickly opened a second front, challenging Brian’s ability to focus his energy and stomp out the revolt as he had done in 985 with Munster. Revolts in the southeast would have been far more concerning to the High-King. Brian could not deal with the north at the same time that his eastern flank was

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268 Ó’Corráin, page 128; Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, pages 143-147.
He had to deal with the east first, since he depended on the economic resources of the trading ports. This explains his initial surge against Leinster. In a parallel move, Brian re-fortified his southern line, according to the annals. This reveals obvious concern about a possible rising by his rivals of Eóganachta and so he dealt first with his own province then made what progress he could to quell nearby revolts and re-establish order. When he finally marched on Dublin, the uprising was almost two years old.

In hindsight it is clear that the year 1011, not 1014 and the battle of Clontarf, marked the end of Dál Cais expansion. When Máel Ruanaid, king of Cenél Conaill, came with Brian to Kincora as a hostage, Brian officially controlled all of Ireland. Problems began almost immediately. The events of 1012–1014 are commonly called a rebellion but historians have taken different approaches in defining “revolt;” one school focused on the leadership while the other looked at events. Donncha Ó Corráin is a representative of the leadership group. He credits Máel Mórdá and his sister, Gormflaith, with instigating this uprising. Gormflaith’s involvement is certainly believable. Her third marriage was to Brian Boru and she had born him a son, Donnchad. It is equally likely that by this time she was estranged or divorced from him and not present at Kincora as related by the Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh. She also seems to have harbored a grudge.

See previous chapters, specifically the development of Brian’s campaigns from 999 to 1011.
After his departure from Kincora, Máel Mórdá supposedly sent emissaries to the north to enlist the aid of the Uí Néill in resistance against the Dál Cais. The annals make this chronology questionable. The Annals of Ulster recorded that Flaithbertach Ua Néill of Cenél nEógain, the most powerful prince in the north, had begun attacking his neighbors in late 1012, which was followed by an attack into Meath, the homeland of Máel Sechnaill. Brian Boru’s response came before Leinster had even taken the field. Both Brian and Máel Muire, the head of the church of Armagh, petitioned Máel Sechnaill to counter the advances of Flaithbertach starting in 1013.²⁷⁰ Leinster and the Men of Dublin attacked Meath after Flaithbertach. To say that Máel Mórdá was the instigator is suppositional at best. Exact details will never be known. If the Kings of Leinster and Ailech had corresponded in order to coordinate their attacks, no hard evidence exists to corroborate the allegations from Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh. The simple lack of action from Flaithbertach in 1014, either by participating in the battle of Clontarf or by executing a raid to take advantage of Brian’s commitment in the east, infers the opposite. This suggests that Leinster and the Uí Néill did not conspire together and that Máel Mórdá was more of a supporting player than a leader in the revolt.

In addition, by late 1013, Dublin had become a focal point for Brian. Dublin was a critical economic base and its control was crucial for Brian’s financial situation as well as for

²⁷⁰ AU 1012; 1013.
denying those resources to other kings. The participation in the
revolt of Sitric Silkenbeard, the king of Dublin, brought the
full force of Brian’s attentions. Sitric became a de facto leader
in the revolt whether he intended to do so or not. He sent messengers
and emissaries out to recruit support from the Viking diaspora.
The list of foreigners at Clontarf attests to his success.

The first evidence of unrest comes from the Annals of Ulster
in the year 1012. Flaithbertach, King of Ailech, having
successfully raided twice into Cenél Conaill, turned and raided
the territory of Ard Ulad, taking away a great deal of plunder. Both Brian and Máel Muire of Armagh, asked Máel Sechnaill to respond. This was important for Brian because both his church,
and one of his newly subordinated kings had been attacked; he was compelled to defend them. His ability to provide protection was a critical aspect of his legitimacy as a ruler. Máel Sechnaill attacked Flaithbertach and lost several nobles in the initial contact. Flaithbertach, in turn, attacked in 1013 Máel

\[271\] AU 1012.
Sechnaill, who had to abandon the field. This defeat appears to have emboldened both the men of Dublin and Leinster who mounted an attack on Máel Sechnaill and defeated him at In Draigénén (now Drinan, co. Dublin) where Máel Sechnaill’s son, Flann was slain. Máel Sechnaill was unable to provide protection for his followers or to maintain the peace in the north for Brian. A general rising began in the northeast and quickly spread down the eastern seaboard. The foreigners of Dublin were so encouraged that they sailed to Cork and raided within Brian’s territories, a clear challenge of his authority.\textsuperscript{272} When Máel Sechnaill’s response proved inadequate, the Dál Cais king launched his own counterattack in the fall of 1013. Brian sent his field commander, his son Murchad, to raid Leinster. Brian took another force and rendezvoused with Murchad outside of Dublin where they settled in to besiege the town.\textsuperscript{273} When Brian joined Murchad at Kilmainham, they were only a short three kilometers to the town of Dublin.

Why was Brian so obsessed with Dublin? Continued archaeological investigations and recent intensive academic study of Dublin reveal that Dublin was a thriving market town. Importing raw materials from the surrounding territories and manufacture within the town combined with overseas trade coming into the port to make for a prosperous economy.\textsuperscript{274} The quays of the city allowed for temporary docking for the loading and

\textsuperscript{272} AI 1013.
\textsuperscript{273} AU 1013; AI 1013.
\textsuperscript{274} Mary Valante in \textit{Medieval Dublin Vol 1}, page 69.
unloading of ships. Similar to modern ports, the docks near the warehouses and commercial zones were not parking areas but very short term berths. For those vessels staying longer, berths were available farther west along the Liffey with a well known area being Clontarf, just under two kilometers from the town.

Besides the hustle and bustle of trade, the father and son would also have seen the fortifications. Dublin was not an easy, undefended target. The few successes of Irish kings at sacking the town attest to this. While the stone walls still remaining in modern Dublin were constructed in the 12th century, the town was enclosed by a wall at this time. Excavation has shown that the Vikings had two ditches that surrounded the town.\footnote{Hayden in Medieval Dublin Vol I, pages 85-93.} In addition, a raised bank and palisade carbon dated to 900–990 AD also hindered entry.\footnote{Walsh in Medieval Dublin Vol II, pages 106-116.} Ditches, raised banks, and wooden walls defended by well-armed men were not easy to take. While it is likely that the walls were not as massive as those of the Danish Trelleborgs (see figure 5-2), they
were probably more substantial than those recreated at Fotevikin in Sweden (see figure 5-3). Storming even a defense not supported by two ditches, would have proven very costly in men. Such was the obstacle facing Brian when he arrived on that September day in 1013.

Previously, Dublin had been taken only after the Viking forces had been defeated in battle and the victor had pursued them into the city. In 975, Dublin had successfully resisted a siege by Máel Sechnaill. In 980, however, the town was plundered by him after the Viking army had been defeated by Máel Sechnaill in open battle at Tara, in Uí Néill. This battle was renowned in its time and Máel Sechnaill took advantage of his victory pursuing the fleeing Viking forces all the way to Dublin. After a short encirclement of the unprepared town, he forced his way into the city. The Hiberno-Norse of Dublin then submitted to Máel Sechnaill.

A second successful penetration of Dublin had been on the first day of the second millennium, in the aftermath of the battle of Glenmama. Again the military might of the town was
lured from its walls. Joining the forces of Leinster against the
king of Munster, the combined army met a traumatic defeat at Glen
Mama. Again, the Irish forces exploited their battlefield
success by pursuing the vanquished into the city. The annals
record the ravages inflicted by Brian’s men and the expulsion of
the Viking king Sitric. As previously noted, his return came
with the price of submission to Dál Cais overlordship.

The lessons of those events were not lost on Sitric. Twice
the army of Dublin had left the town to face the High King’s
mustered forces in open battle. Twice they had lost. With each
defeat, the lord of Dublin had been unable to rally his forces to
defend the unprepared town and Dublin was sacked. On two other
occasions when Irish kings had besieged the city without the
advantage of a battlefield victory they were forced to lift the
siege and return to their kingdoms. On those latter sieges, the
men of Dublin had been prepared before the arrival of the Irish,
and remained within the town walls until the besiegers ran out of
supplies. The lesson was clear. When the men of Dublin avoided a
pitched battle and assumed a defensive posture, the result of, a
protracted siege was victory for the Viking town. This strategy
required Sitric to keep his warriors within the walls in order to
fend off the possibility of an assault; undermanned
fortifications could, and had, been taken by storm. Significant
prodding would be needed to get Sitric to leave his walls a third
time when facing the might of the Irish High King with his army.
The High-King was equally aware of the challenges of besieging
the town and would have to plan carefully to succeed in 1014. Sitric refused to move out of Dublin in the fall of 1013 and by Christmas Brian was forced to lift the siege and return home. He would be back.

**Brian’s Operational Plan**

Operationally, Brian read his situation perfectly. He knew that his forces were not as strong as they could have been. He did not have a significant superiority, and one might even claim that his forces were less well armed that their opponents on that day. The bulk of the Brian’s army was made of Irish men armed and equipped with the spear and shields common to those forces. Many would have had axes while the high status warriors might even have had swords and armor. As the *Book of Rights* reveals, the traditional gift exchange or stipends from the King of Cashel, i.e. Brian, to the lesser kings included swords and a much smaller number of sets of armor. Since those kings provided troops and service to the King of Cashel, this suggests that some of his household troops had equipment similar to that of the Norse warriors.\(^\text{277}\) *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* recorded that the rank and file had spears and shields but, “well-set Lochlann (i.e. Viking) axes, in the hands of chiefs, and leaders, and heroes, and brave knights” as well as “well-tempered, quick, sharp swords, in the beautiful white hands of chiefs and royal

\(^{277}\) *Lebor Na Cert*, pages 5-17. It is interesting that the King of Cashel had to give arms and armor yet all he received as tribute was livestock and clothing. This suggests that he was engaged in international trade using his raw materials to trade for processed high value items.
knights.”\textsuperscript{278} The Dublin forces and their allies would have had Viking swords and axes as well as armor. A portion of their force was composed of Irish fighting men but by and large, the Dublin-Leinster alliance was composed of mercenaries and traveling warriors. These were heroes and fighters who had been summoned because of their capability - they came armed and armored as professional fighters.

Brian chose a different route for his second attempt to quell the Dublin resistance in March of 1014. The previous year he had advanced along the \textit{Slighe Dhála}, the same route he had followed in 999 to reach Glen Mama. Perhaps he did so to give the Dubliners the opportunity to meet him in battle as they had at Glen Mama or he might have taken the direct route for reasons of expediency. The compressed nature of this campaign suggests the latter, that he took the direct route through Leinster to Dublin. The display of his army would have been an useful reminder to disaffected elements in Leinster in addition to giving Brian the opportunity to collect a few cows on the way, a manner of re-establishing himself. That he besieged the town reinforces the idea of the direct route. The Dubliners had warning of his approach and obviously prepared themselves. No matter the reason, Sitric remained in the city forcing a siege which failed. Their successful resistance would have fueled the necessity for Brian to deal with them as soon as possible. Successful resistance only fuels rebellion and the Emperor of

\textsuperscript{278} \textit{Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh}, pages 161-163.
Ireland needed to squash it quickly before he lost initiative and control. Sitric of Dublin knew that and summoned as much assistance as possible.

A month later, late in April 1014, the high king returned, this time along the *Slighe Mhór*. He had used this route on many occasions when subjugating the north (see Figure 4-8). This road took him along terrain that he knew and positioned his approach to the city from the northwest. This placed the River Liffey between him and Dublin, which indicates he had no intention of immediately assaulting or investing the walls. From the northwest, both of these courses of action would have necessitated forcing a crossing at the bridge or traveling back upriver to Kilmanhaim, neither of which makes sense. Brian was after some other effect. Why would he want to place himself in such a way that targeting Dublin would be even more difficult? How did this approach create a positive situation for him? Could Dublin possibly not have been the target? The answer is suggested by the composition of the Dublin-Leinster alliance. Their success in recruiting foreign warriors (see Figure 5-1) increased the temporary population of Dublin as well as exceeding the capacity of the docks to hold all the ships of their allies. The previous sieges had failed when Dublin had not been reinforced. With the addition of so many fighting men, the town walls would have been almost unbreachable for a force of equal strength. Brian had to come up with a way to improve his odds.

His new route to Dublin took his adversaries by surprise.
Probably they had posted extra security along Slighe Dhála to give them warning. Instead, Brian swung around to the north, taking him through Meath in a calculated maneuver. If Máel Sechnaill was having second thoughts, Brian guaranteed that Clan Cholmáin would muster with him by going through their lands, or they would face him alone. After previous signs of weakness, Máel Sechnaill could not afford a direct showdown with Brian and so he traveled with them to the vicinity of Dublin. When Brian arrived, the inhabitants of Dublin had not expected him and therefore had not had time to prepare stores for a siege. To place added pressure on Dublin, Brian launched a diversionary attack into Leinster, under the command of his youngest son Donnchad, Sitric’s half-brother. That raid would have cut off supplies that had not yet been delivered to the town, and it was a key component of Brian’s strategy. He had failed in a previous siege, but the simplest way to win a siege was to starve the besieged. With the town holding the large musters of its allies who had traveled by ship to support them, food would already be scarce. The raiding party sent by Brian to the south served to remind them as well of their limited food stocks. Brian’s new strategy had a far greater chance of success.

Another benefit to his approach from the north was that Brian threatened the one thing the allies of Dublin could not afford to leave unprotected - their ships, which were berthed just outside of the town on the northern shore of the River Liffey. The same force could not defend both the ships and the
city simultaneously if they remained behind the walls. In this manner, at least a portion of the force had to come out from the walls onto the open field to stop their enemies from destroying the boats. Not all of the force could come out however. They were aware of Brian’s raiding party, led by his son Donnchad, and so would have to leave at least some men in the fort to defend it. In addition, if the entire force had come out, Brian could quite easily have attacked Dublin by storm, thus negating the advantage of all of the allies who had come.

These two conditions changed the situation for Sitric and his allies. If they chose to wait for a siege, they would see their valuable ships fall into the hands of the Dál Cais. The armies of Sitric and Máel Mórdra would have to face Brian on the open plains. By coming in from the northwest, Brian had potentially split the Vikings’ forces. Those who had camped on the plains of Clontarf could be separated from those defending the town. For the townsmen to sally out across the single bridge after Brian’s army had settled in would have been folly. Yet, they could not leave the town unguarded since they could see Donnchad’s raiding force to the south. A garrison would have to remain in the city. Brian thus faced a slightly reduced force and they would meet in open battle, nullifying the advantage of the town’s walls. The tactics were brilliant.

**Determining the Line Up**

There is a great deal of disagreement on the sources on the topic of the disposition of forces. Reconciliation of conflicting
accounts however, is nothing new for medieval historians. In this particular instance, some methodologies used in military planning are helpful. Analyzing the historical narrative geographically as well as the application of templates offer new insights. Templating is a modern military intelligence tool. Normal dispositions of forces are overlaid on a map and then adjusted to fit the prevailing terrain. This gives a commander the likely course of action that his enemy will follow. A similar methodology can be used in dealing with Clontarf. Tactical trends establish a norm which can then be overlaid over the dispositions described by sources. This illuminates potential irregularities which can then be assessed to see if other factors can account for the difference. Reasons exist, both for digressions from norms, as well as for source inaccuracies.

One example serves to prove the value of templating in resolving conflict. According to Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, Sitric, King of Dublin, did not participate in the battle. According to Njal’s Saga, he commanded one wing of the Viking army. Ben Hudson noted that the Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh had to place Sitric on the walls of Dublin in order to account for his survival. The Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh claims that all Vikings who fought against Brian died, but Sitric’s death in 1042 made this claim an obvious discrepancy and was accounted for by taking him out of the battalion on the field. Cogadh Gaedhel re

\(^{279}\) Hudson, page 101.
Gallaibh did this by placing him in the city watching the battle instead of fighting. In templating the Viking force, “normal” required the king who put out a call for help to lead the forces. At a minimum, he would be expected to hold a prominent position. Sitric fought in open battle at Glenmama in 999 AD. No evidence or reason exists that would justify his remaining within the fortress while his army took the field. It is doubtful that he would have remained in charge for long if he did so. This template thus supports the account of Njal’s Saga which puts Sitric on the field of strife that day. His participation is thus presented in the following account.

The arrangement of forces at the start of the battle has received surprisingly little attention. This is surprising because the starting formations drive the flow of the conflict. John Ryan’s account, by far the most detailed examination of the battle, disappoints in this regard. He remarked, “As to the disposition of the rival forces, all that can be said with certainty is that each army was in sections.”\footnote{Ryan, page 37. He continues on to describe the work, and flaws, of J.H. Lloyd who reconstructed the battle using sources and assumptions not supported by credible source documents. After re-iterating Lloyd’s arrangement, Ryan then dissects this account calling it “entirely untrustworthy.” on page 39.} Certainty is a very difficult standard for medieval historians. Degrees of probability are far more achievable. Probable alignments of forces are those that would enable the events as told to occur. Without certainty, Ryan chose not even to attempt to determine what the day probably started as. Without this initial
understanding, Ryan then had to switch to a simple narrative which divorced his work from the mechanics of battle and their effects on events. While this might enable broad understanding of ‘what’ happened, this obscures the formations and hides ‘how’ the battle progressed. This hampers getting at the reasons behind ‘why’ the battle went as it did and gets at the results. Historians note the bloodiness of the fighting but never seem to explain why.

The template for Irish warfare in this period involved a more ritualistic form of warfare than occurred at Clontarf. Cattle-raiding was the normal aggressive behavior. If forces joined for battle they were arrayed in roughly two opposing shield walls and heroes would come out and fight individual combats. When one side broke and ran, the pursuit was limited and casualties were normally fairly low.

Warfare in the Viking world followed a different pattern. They also began with two opposing shield walls and occasional individual combats. However, Viking tactics included general engagement of all forces and also the use of formations designed to penetrate the enemy lines. Penetration would enable the exploitation of newly created and exposed flanks. The objective was to get warriors behind the enemy and attacking their flanks and rear. These areas were the least protected and most vulnerable; attacking these areas led to higher casualty rates. At the battle of Clontarf, the tactics followed by Brian and

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Murchad suggest a form of warfare far different from Irish norms, more akin to Viking tactics. Herein is at least a partial explanation for Brian’s success.

The battle of Clontarf took place in seven phases. While each phase receives detailed analysis in this chapter, the overall battle deserves attention. The conflict began with individual skirmishing, which then led to the initial general engagement. Pivotal moments occurred with the collapse of the Dublin Viking force and the subsequent penetration of the Viking line by Murchad. Both marked new phases in the fighting. These then led to the pursuit and final stands. The last phase of “mopping up” was highlighted by the incidental killing of King Brian.

**Composition of Brian’s Forces**

According to *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, Máel Sechnaill withdrew prior to the battle. One must of course ask why. Except for John Ryan, previous analyses of the battle have avoided this particular issue. At most they discuss whether or not he did participate. The forces of Meath would have been a significant addition to Brian’s battle array if they had fought. So why did they not? The justification boils down to a simple matter of self-interest. Máel Sechnaill had worked with and for Brian in the past years for a variety of reasons. Yet even if they had somehow become good friends, the loss was undiminished. Brian had supplanted Máel Sechnaill as high-king, had taken Máel

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Sechnaill’s former wife Gormflaith as his own wife (for a limited time), and had taken the revenues of Dublin from Máel Sechnaill for his own. None of these factors would have made support likely. In addition, the forces of Cenél Eógain had ravaged Máel Sechnaill’s lands in 1013 while the men of Dublin and Leinster had killed his son in a raid from the southeast, but Brian had not responded. Even though the high king was busy dealing with the rebellion in Leinster, that did not help Máel Sechnaill who had to defend his territory to maintain his kingship. While he would come to Brian’s summons, when Máel Sechnaill faced the prospects of a pitched battle there was little to entice him to participate. If he did, many of his warriors faced injury or death, further weakening his ability to resist the incursions of the Northern Uí Néill. If Brian had traveled through his lands, Máel Sechnaill would have been forced to muster and support the movement. One can see Máel Sechnaill arriving in front of Dublin half-heartedly in support of the High King. So why on the eve of battle, or even the morning thereof, did he turn? Only one clue exists to even suggest the enticement that it took to finalize his betrayal. Njal’s Saga records a visit from a horseman to Dublin. Whether Sitric offered his allegiance to Máel Sechnaill in return for the betrayal, or even simply offered a bribe, either would be incentive to abandon the field. Loyalty was to oneself. 283 To abstain from battle would have meant potentially a

283 Njal’s Saga, page 347. Mel Gibson created a similar situation for his movie Braveheart. While William Wallace was not betrayed on the field of battle as depicted in the film, this theatrical moment
financial incentive, would have kept his forces intact to face other more pressing challenges for the leader of the midlands and would have seriously weakened the high-king who had taken that title from Máel Sechnaill - thus allowing for a re-attempt on the title.

We must now return to Brian and his mercenarys. An interesting poem translated by Kuno Meyer sheds additional light on the subject. The poem, A Mor Maigne Moigi Siuil, has three parts and it interested Meyer in its use of the term fiana. The majority of the poem deals with the deaths of great Irish warriors. Far more relevant are the introduction and conclusion. The introduction discusses the value of warriors’ lives. While most of the poem laments the death of heroes, the first stanza introduces the idea that it is far better to lose the life of a goose than a home borne warrior. This appears to be a thinly veiled reference to foreign warriors - the geese. This theme has found popular play in the idea of wild geese, warriors who travel from location to location finding an area to settle only for short seasons and then taking flight again. The aristocracy that fled Ireland in the aftermath of the Cromwellian invasion were known as the “wild Geese.” This suggests that the poet believed that shedding the blood of foreigners in pursuit of objectives is far less disagreeable than losing the lives of Irish heroes. The final stanza brings the theme of geese directly in contact with Brian Boru. It seems that the poet is performing two functions provides a feel for what Brian would have been going through with Máel Sechnaill’s rather abrupt withdrawal.
with his poem. The first is justifying Brian’s use of foreign fighters as a way of preserving the flower of Irish manhood. Secondly it notes that he consciously made that effort giving them a safe haven to land. 284 This sets him up as unique and also seems to be a response to criticism. As the only king who relied so heavily on the Gael oglach (foreign warriors) or his amus (mercenaries), this set Brian in contrast to others who favored the traditional fíana. It casts that reliance on fíana as a reason for the destruction of so much. It is an interesting turn and a very important buttress to the argument that Brian Boru was innovative in his relations with the Vikings. More than just allies, the Vikings took on the role of Brian’s commitatus, his war band.

A note on Brian’s forces is appropriate at this point. The Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh provides information that at least one of his stewards is Scottish. If so, how did he get there? Brian had only one East coast port, and that was Dublin. It is clear that the allies of Sitric occupied the berths at Clontarf and it is doubtful that the Dubliners let Brian’s men dock at the town’s quays. If that is the case, then they either sailed around the island linking up with Brian and marching to Clontarf, or, they were already in Ireland. That Brian is only credited with bringing the men of the South of Ireland indicates that these mercenaries, these stewards, like the rest of his force, started there. This would fit if one accepts that Brian maintained

garrisons of mercenaries in the South. This would mean the adjustment of the earliest dates of Scottish mercenaries to the left, about one hundred years earlier than most historians currently accept.\(^{285}\) Any other explanation as to how they came to be on the battlefield however, falls short.

In comparison, the Annals of Inisfallen first list the term *amus* at 968 with, “Cathal m. Fogartaich, rí-amus h-Erend.” The term is again found at 985, “Crech Lasna Désse co amsu Briain co rucsat .ccc. bó.” After the reign of Brian, which is peculiar as the only use of this term, we do not find the *amus* mentioned again until 1230, used in reference to mac William and foreign forces. The term *fiana* is not mentioned at all in the Annals of Inisfallen. The Annals of Tigernach use *amus* in 1030, and again in 1134. Interestingly, the reference is to three mercenary ports. The line is “Ár mor la Deasmumain for Dál Cais im Donncadh mac Maic Murchada h-Úi Briain, & im a mac, et alíí multí, tria amus longpuirt.” Again the term comes up with remarkable frequency in conjunction with the Dál Cais. There is no reference to the *fiana*.

The use of the term has as much to do with individual author preference and socialization as it does an actual difference in

\(^{285}\) John Marsden, *Galloglas*, page 7 is the first use of the term *Galloglas* referring to Scottish mercenaries in Ireland. He also concedes that these warriors might have been in Ireland long before this hard evidence; Katherine Simms noted the use of Norse mercenaries in the 11th and 12th centuries, initially by the Viking kings and later copied by the Irish kings as well, *From Kings to Warlords*, page 117; Andrew McKerral, “West Highland Mercenaries in Ireland,” *The Scottish Historical Review* 30 (1951), page 2-3. McKerral notes that Hebridean mercenaries were in Ireland in the 13th Century but that the start of the Scots Mercenaries is somewhat obscured.
meaning. In the north, we find references to the fiana in the annals. References also include fiana rig. In the south, we find references to the amsu and the amus-rig. This is actually in keeping with the social geography of Ireland in the tenth century. The amus appears to indicate a foreigner. The fiana are homegrown Irish mercenary bands. The north of Ireland had successfully repulsed permanent settlements by the Norse. The south’s fortunes fared differently. Several areas became permanent homes to Vikings. These areas see the resurgence of the term amus and include references in Waterford as well as the vicinity of Dál Cais. References to the fiana occur in the Annals of Ulster and in the Book of Leinster. The Book of Leinster also includes a reference to the amus standing guard at the king’s hall. Amus is far more prevalent in the southern sources. It is found in the Annals of Inisfallen and only in those annals before the 11th century. It is in Cormac’s Glossary as well. This suggests that the terms are related to geographical conceptions and the amus is the generally preferred southern term and fiana found greater acceptance in the north. Both also reflect the ethnic construct of those bands.

It is interesting that the only use of the term amus that we find is in reference to the guards at a king’s house. These guards protect the king and his guests. A striking similarity can be drawn with the role played by other Vikings in other cultures. The Varangian guard protected the person of the emperor in Constantinople and then became an elite mercenary
field force. This is simply the most glaring example of the use of foreigners to protect a ruler. The use of a small group of external recruits created a situation where the position and survival of those guards depended on the survival of the very ruler they protected. Professional and reliable, these troops were important to Brian’s success throughout his reign.

A Final Piece in Place

Historians agree that Brian sent his younger son, Donnchad to raid and ravage the lands south of Dublin. *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* records that the raids were close enough to see plumes of smoke. However, if the raids were close enough for the damage to be seen, then it is unlikely that they were conducted in Leinster as some historians have suggested. Even though smoke from large scale fires is visible in clear weather and on flat terrain, the hills and forests of Ireland would have reduced this by a significant degree. Donnchadh left on Wednesday and returned on Sunday meaning a two day trip out and two days back. As such he would have travelled maybe 40 miles at most. This equates roughly with the southern border of the Fine Gall. This puts Donnchad within the economic hinterland of the kingdom of Dublin. The effect on morale has probably been understated by historians. The Dubliners were facing some very

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286 Ryan suggested that the purpose of this mission was to keep the Southern Leinster kingdoms from participating and that it accomplished this objective. See “The Battle of Clontarf,” page 21.

287 Mary Valante, “Dublin’s economic relations with hinterland and periphery in the later Viking age,” in *Medieval Dublin I*, ed. Seán Duffy (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), page 17. Valante marked two potential boundaries for the Fine Gall and I follow her more conservative delineation here.
serious economic conditions. The mercenaries were literally watching the food to feed them and the raw materials for the trade which would produce the money to pay them, going up in smoke. Provisions are important in resisting a siege. Without a substantial food supply, the Dublin Alliance would not last.

The Location of the Battle

That the battle took place at a location called Clontarf seems silly to even bother re-iterating. Ryan also goes to extensive length to determine that the modern district known as Clontarf was and is roughly equal to the Clontarf of 1014. The precise location of the battlefield may never be known as an amusement park now fills this area and makes investigation unlikely. However, some note on the general terrain and manmade features is appropriate as this affects both the array for battle as well as the conduct thereof. Brian arrived in the vicinity of Dublin coming from the North. His forces established camp at what Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh calls ‘the Plain of Ath Cliath.’ This is the same location where the army of Munster encamped to await the return of Donnchad from his raid and was within line of sight from the walls of Dublin. This location was separate from the field of battle as Brian’s troops did not camp where the dead were lying. Dubgall’s Bridge, the only dry crossing point from Dublin to the northern shore, was probably located on the northwestern corner of the town. The quays used

288 For the full argument see Ryan, “The Battle of Clontarf,” pages 32-37.
289 Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, 155.
290 Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, 211.
for loading and unloading of cargo were obviously riverside. They extended at least as far as Fishamble Street based on archaeological research. From a practical standpoint, this makes sense. The bridge did not impede cargo craft entering from the bay yet provided access to the northern shore. Another feature of the battle is Tomar’s Wood. Events during the battle suggest that Tomar’s Wood was located to the north/northeast of the field of battle. When the Viking chieftain Brodar, the slayer of Brian, fled from the battle, he got to Tomar Wood; Brian had taken up a position such that he was between the wood and the field of battle. It is unlikely that Brodar went back through all of Brian Boru’s army past the bridge to get to the wood. Nowhere is it discussed as a feature that took up part of the field and thus it was on an edge. With the River Liffey to the south, and Dublin Bay to the east, this leaves only the north as a realistic option. The battlefield was a large, open area on the north bank of the Liffey. The northern border of the plain was wooded and a bridge marked the southwest corner. The bank on the side of Clontarf with its jetties occupied by ships and the beach holding those that did not fit, marked the east and southeast of the field.

**Battle Lines are Drawn**

On the morning of 23 April 1014, Good Friday, the scene was set. According to Njal’s Saga, “both sides drew up in battle array” when Brian’s army came out of their camp.\(^{291}\) The situation

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\(^{291}\) *Njal’s Saga*, 347.
was such that the Dublin Alliance would meet the high-king in open battle to resolve the conflict. The allies who had gathered in camp near Clontarf were joined by the men of Dublin and they established their ranks in a rough line that covered from the bridge to the east towards the piers at Clontarf. The first question that must be asked is how were the two armies aligned that day? Taken individually, the sources present significant differences. Tempered, they can provide enough information to create a coherent, logical flow to the battle. Boiled down, the two variations are in the alignment of the units on each side. One common interpretation of medieval tactics, supported by the description in the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, has three battalions in each army lined up one behind the other. This is called battalions in column. A second interpretation has three battalions lined up side by side. This comes from *Njal’s Saga*.
and represents a common formation from antiquity through the middle ages. With some adjustment, *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* also supports this arrangement. In the three successive lines formation, the challenges in reconciling formations and movement with actions become significant. Depending on how deep the lines were, command and control were next to impossible. In the simplest terms, an army of only 1,000 men placed in three rows would cover an area nearly 350 meters long.\footnote{Shouting the length of three football fields, or even seeing flag and banner signals, is not a reasonable expectation. Even with only three rows, no one commander could control the men spread along this line. There would need to be subordinate commanders along the line relaying commands and signals. Grouping men makes more sense. Following banners and a more compact, defined grouping, they would be more likely to follow commands and perform the actions expected by leaders. Warriors would cluster around or...}

\footnote{If the death toll of 6,000 from the Annals of Loch Cé represents only half the participants in the battle, then the formations would have stretched over two kilometers.}
near their lord and it was the array of these groups that was paramount to success. These groups were organized in three roughly equal contingents under the command of one common lord. Placed on line, as depicted in figure 5-5, command and control would be far easier. The following account is based on the side by side formational template.

The Forces of the Dublin Alliance

_Njal’s Saga_ positions Earl Sigurd in the center of the Dublin-Leinster battle line with Brodir and Sitric in command of the flanks. While not specified, it is most likely that Sitric commanded the left flank and Brodir was on the right end of the line, formed with the Men of Leinster. The heavily armed and armored mercenaries under Brodir would defend their boats and protect the less well armored Leinstermen.

In accordance with fairly standard medieval practices, the Dublin Alliance was divided into three ‘battles.’ Earl Sigurd took the position of authority, commanding the center battle. Guarding the left flank, and the approach to Dublin, were the men of Dublin under the direction of King Sitric. The conflict within the _Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh_ concerning where the men of Dublin were positioned, can be rectified with an examination of the phrase translated by Todd as ‘after.’ The _Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh_ states that the men of Dublin were arrayed “_i n’diad_” which Todd translated as ‘after.’ This is the accepted translation of the phrase according to Antony Green. However,

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293 _Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh_, 164, 165.
Thurneyson lists *diad* as end, and in the sense of arranging military forces, this should be the preferred translation. Combining *i*, in or into, with *diad*, end, would then mean into/on the end.\(^{294}\)

The phrase thus translated meant the Dubliners were placed on one end of the formation, it does not indicate which end. One of the members of the Dublin battalion was Sitric’s uncle, Dubgall. Dubgall died at Clontarf and it has been suggested that Dubgall’s Bridge commemorates his death near that point.\(^ {295}\) If the Dubliners established the rightmost battalion, the flow of battle would have to move from east to west and then back east. That the Dubliners were driven back to the bridge on the southwest corner of the battlefield during the early fighting makes their location on the left flank most probable.

\(^{294}\) S.V. *diad* in Antony Green, Old Irish Verbs and Vocabulary (Somerville; Cascadilla, 1995), page 111; Rudolf Thurneyson, A Grammar of Old Irish, trans by D.A. Binchy and Osborne Bergin (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1946), pages 68, 125, 504.

\(^{295}\) Benjamin T. Hudson, page 102.
Located on the right flank were other mercenary bands recruited throughout the Viking littoral as well as the men of Leinster under Máel Mórdha. According to Njal’s Saga they were commanded by Brodir. While his two ships’ crews were a part of this flank, it is rather unlikely that a minor Viking war band leader would command such a post. Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh notes this group as consisting of Máel Mórdha and four other Leinster kings. The jumbled nature of the description given in the Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh makes any attempt at clarity a challenge. However, in the account of forces blending the Men of Dublin, their allies and the hosts of Leinster together, there is a very obvious break. The passage reads:

“A line of one very great strong battalion was formed of all the foreigners of Ath Cliath, and it was placed...after the Danmarkians [Earl Sigurd]. At their head were Dubhgall, son of Amlaf, and Gilla Ciaran son of Glun-iaraind, son of Amlaf, and Donchad, grandson of Erulf, and Amlaf Lagmund, son of Goffraudh, the four crown princes of the foreigners. At their head also, were Ottir the Black, and Grisin, and Lummin, and Snadgair, four petty kings of the foreigners, and four chieftains of ships [one of which was Brodir] and the nobles of the foreigners of Erinn along with them. A battalion was also formed of the Laighin and of the Ui Cennselaigh, and it was placed behind the above.”

This passage could very well be completely accurate and the Men of Leinster (i.e. Laighin) stood with no Viking support. The flow of events in the battle do not support this however. Njal’s Saga has the Viking chief Ulf Hreda, a member of Brian’s army, facing Brodir on the opposite flank from Sitric’s Dubliners. This suggests a separation and the punctuated break in the above passage matches that separation. When the author wrote, “At

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296 Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, page 165.
their head also...” this should be read as the head of the Leinster battalion, i.e. the right flank of the army. In light of competing evidence and the historic revisionism found within the Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh at points, as well as the internal evidence that will come out throughout the battle, the right flank was most likely a composite force. This wing included Viking mercenaries who were located in the fore, and the less well armored forces of Leinster immediately behind them. The Dublin-Leinster Alliance was thus arrayed in a classic formation of three battalions on line with the front ranks consisting primarily of armored forces. Earl Sigurd appears to have had overall command for the tactical battle, commanding the center with King Sitric controlling the left flank and Máel Mórdha and Brodir the right side of the line.

Dál Cais Forces

On the opposite side, the High-King Brian Boru did not take the field himself. Njal’s Saga claims that he stayed out of the
fight because he did not want to take up arms on a holy day but his advanced age, he was 73, might also have been a contributing factor. His bodyguards set up a wall of shields around him indicating that he was heavily protected by an elite group of fighters. The remainder of his forces was set up in front of the king. These were disposed in an array similar to the Dublin-Leinster Alliance.

His center was commanded by his son, Murchad. This force included the elite household warriors of the Dál Cais, as well as a Viking contingent. The Norsemen in Brian’s host were well known to their Scandinavian opponents. One, called Kerthjaldfad, was even credited with leading the center. Quite likely he led a portion of the host and served as one of Murchad’s advisors. This battalion also included the forces of the Dál Cais and also the musters of the kingdoms of Corca Bhascinn, the Deisi and the Ui Liathain.

A second battalion was formed with the men of Connacht with Tadg Ua Cellagh as the leader. These men were probably arranged on the right flank of Brian’s forces opposing the Men of Dublin instead of being behind Murchad’s host as the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* claims. If they were arranged behind Murchad then the claim that Ua Cellagh’s men defeated the Men of Dublin (a pivotal moment of the battle) becomes much more unlikely. These challenges become more obvious when comparing dispositions using figure 5-6 and figure 5-7. If Ua Cellagh’s and Sitric’s forces

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297 *Njal’s Saga*, 347.
298 *Njal’s Saga*, 347.
were not in the front, and according to the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* neither the Dubliners nor the Men of Connacht were, then it would be very difficult to find a way to engage each other.

The third battalion, on the left, was composed of “the ten great stewards of Brian.” One of these, Domhnall son of Eimin, is called a Scottish great steward. Other than Domhnall, the obscurity of the nobles in this formation is peculiar, especially in light of the precision accorded to the Dublin mercenaries. Scandinavian sources support the theory of the Norse composition of this force, and we see here what appears to be an entirely mercenary force being used by Brian. His stewards commanded his garrisons, which were manned by hired troops. So his flank was

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299 *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, 169.
made up of professionals, serving him for pay. In all likelihood, these men were better armored than their Irish counterparts and were a good choice to secure a vulnerable area. This force was placed as a pivot and they did not have to advance, but simply hold their ground. Later actions would show that they performed well, but left the heroics to the aristocratic Irish warriors in the other battalions. Brian’s arrangement of his forces shows an understanding of the forces available to him and maximized their strengths to missions.

**Initial Conflict**

The actual combat of the battle of Clontarf began on the Eastern flank. Plat, a Scandinavian warrior in the Dublin-Leinster force, stepped forward and issued a challenge to individual combat to Brian’s Scottish steward, Domnall mac Emin. Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh claims that the two men had had words the night before, but that is unlikely unless the two armies dined together before the battle. More probable is that they had crossed paths previously and Clontarf provided the venue for them to resolve any hostilities. Stepping out into the space between the two armies, Plat called out in Old Norse, “where is Domnall?” Domnall’s response in Old Irish of “Here you serpent” preceded their individual combat. Hudson rightly called attention to their dialogue, remarking on the bi-lingualism of these two combatants.\(^{300}\) Equally noteworthy is their familiarity; a

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\(^{300}\) Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, pages 175-177; Hudson, page 101. I followed Hudson’s translation versus those of Todd in the Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh. This facility with language is reminiscent of
Scottish steward of the Irish High-King who knew a Norse mercenary soldier by face, name and reputation. This suggests a degree of connectivity, possibly even of participation, of at least one of Brian’s administrators with the affairs of Vikings for hire. In any event, the two men died at each others’ hand thus resolving whatever issues they had with each other. After this duel, the main clash of arms began.

The initial surge of battle brought both lines together in bloody fighting. *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* goes to great lengths to describe the carnage. The devastation is likened to Judgement Day and the greatest of storms, falling showers of international corporations in the modern world where executives can switch between two, three or even four languages with ease and fluidity.
stars and even the four winds ripping apart.\textsuperscript{301} Neither side had cavalry, nor did they have archers. The only missile weapons were javelins and as such, all of the fighting that day would be hand to hand. Spears were thrust overhand into the enemy and the prevalence of axes on both sides would have resulted in grievous wounds. No wonder the combatants were so covered with blood and gore that, “it became a work of great difficulty to the battalions on both sides to defend their clear sparkling eyes and their flushed bright cheeks from the heavy showers of fiery sparks which were sent forth.”\textsuperscript{302} Swords and axes rained blows on chain mail armor indicating a very intense, close quarter fight.

During this phase of the battle, Conaing mac Doncuan, identified as the king of Desmond, faced Máel Mórdha, the King of Leinster. At first, this would seem to indicate that the Dál Cais center overlapped the Eastern flank of the Dublin-Leinstermen. Conaing was one of the three most trusted men of Brian Boru and was also his nephew. Identified as the king of Desmond, or of the south of Munster, which Brian had garrisoned with mercenary troops, he appears to have been a very important official of Brian’s administration and quite possibly was positioned with the stewards on the leftmost flank. This might explain how he was able to face the king of Leinster. Equally possible, the \textit{Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh} noted that the Men of Desmond (“south Munster”) were placed side by side with the Men of Tuadmumu (“north Munster”). This would put Conaing and the

\textsuperscript{301} \textit{Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh}, page 179.

\textsuperscript{302} \textit{Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh}, page 179.
southerners in with the mercenaries, giving them credit as an independent force. This also suggests a degree of prestige that went along with being a named command. The household troops of the two kings fought a desperate fight. 16 men died before Máel Mórdha and Conaing came face to face. The two died on the field, at each other’s hand, early in the fighting. While intense, this combat did not affect the outcome of the battle.

The other side of the line saw the first decisive moment of the day. Brian’s right flank advanced on the men of Dublin. As with most of the fighting that day, the casualties were extremely high. The men of the king of Connacht, Tadg Ua Cellaigh, were said to have numbered only 100 at the end of the day and the men of Dublin were reduced to fewer than a score. Ua Cellaigh’s
troops overcame the Dubliners who broke ranks and began fleeing for the bridge back to the town. As they fled, casualties mounted and few survived. Reinforcing the multi-national character of the conflict is the death notice of the final Dubliner killed on this flank. By his name, Arnaill Scot was an Irishman, but he was serving in the Dublin Battalion. Often referred to as the Hiberno-Norse, the Dubliners were more than just Scandinavian stock. Their ranks included the native Irishmen who lived in the Fine Gall. Arnaill’s death near the bridge signified the effective end of the Dublin force. This also meant that the left flank of the Dublin-Leinster Alliance had broken. As the men of Connacht drove the Dubliners back to the river, the remainder of the Alliance was cut off from retreat to the town. Backed up against a river, this was a very serious turn of events. *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* regards this as the decisive defeat of the day and that is a justifiable position. However, the center, under Earl Sigurd of the Orkneys, held their ground.

The troops of Earl Sigurd receive much attention in the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*. Described at length in the most sinister of terms, useful information does come out. These warriors were well equipped with spears and heavy broadswords. They are also noted as having bows, yet none of the accounts of the battle remark on their employment. The Viking Age weapons collected at the National Museum in Dublin give a good indication that the descriptions were accurate. The spear points in the
collections are heavy, tapering over a long blade to a point. Such spearheads were mounted on thick shafts 5-6 feet long and were optimized for overhand use while in a shield wall. Half of the Irish spearheads are similar in design. The swords of the Irish were no match at all for the Viking broadswords. The length and weight of the Scandinavian weapons were nearly twice that of the Irish swords. Employed in an overhand slash, these blades would have been devastating to an unarmored man and quite dangerous for an armored one. Their defensive gear was equally impressive. *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* describes chain mail armor similar to that shown on the Bayeaux Tapestry. Mail shirts and an iron helmet behind a wooden shield combined to make for a formidable target. While aligned shoulder to shoulder and facing the enemy, these men would have been difficult to injure and break.

The troops aligned against Earl Sigurd were led by Brian’s son Murchad. Murchad had been leading the tactical fight for Brian for well over a decade. His demonstrated prowess at the battle of Glen Mama in 999 suggests a leadership role for at least 15 years of nearly annual campaigning. He was an experienced commander with a veteran force. The early fighting

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saw Murchad’s center repulsed by Sigurd’s troops. In response, Murchad adopted a tactic reminiscent of the Scandinavian style of fighting when he led a charge to penetrate Sigurd’s line. Such a maneuver required disciplined troops and nearly perfect timing. The time came when Sigurd had to dress his line to deal with his newly exposed left flank. When the Dublin battalion gave way before the men of Connacht, Earl Sigurd had to prevent envelopment. At that moment, Murchad charged. Compared to Hector and Hercules, *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* records that, “he made an active, brave, sudden rush at the battalion of the Danmarkians (i.e. Sigurd’s troops), like a violent, impetuous, furious ox...and he made a hero’s breach, and a soldier’s field, through the battalion of the Danmarkians.”  

Followed by his household troops and the choice men of Munster, he cut through the Earl’s force and then turned back into the rear of that formation, supposedly making three passes through the formation. The description of his troops is telling; they “followed him sharply, quickly, and lightly, so that they touched each other foot to foot, and head to head, and body to body, behind him in every place that they came to.”  

This is a wedge. Packed tightly together, the men begin with one person at the point almost pushing back into the formation. The next two push him forward as does the expanding mass behind. The lead warrior becomes the cutting edge that parts the line into which he is driven. This technique is used today by re-enactors and opens

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304 *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, 189.
305 *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, 191.
the unprotected rear to attack. Even this tactical success did not yield instant results. Earl Sigurd’s men continued to fight and the battle was a hard contest. However, with the left flank turned and the center penetrated, as well as retreat to the town cut off, the situation looked grim for the allies of Dublin.

Realizing that they were in a desperate situation, they began to flee for the safety of their ships. This rout began the next phase of the battle – a series of individual encounters with substantial and bloody results.

Murchad’s breach of the Sigurd’s center set off a chain reaction. The armored warriors of Earl Sigurd began to break ranks and flee, which in turn, caused the nearly simultaneous flight of the Leinster battalion. The route to Dublin remained
cut off by the men of Connacht. The only remaining option for retreat was back through the Viking camp to the boats moored at Clontarf. Both battalions moved that direction. As they turned, the men of the Dál Cais and of Desmond pursued them. Combat became intensely personal as the Vikings were overcome and cut down one by one. One, obviously literary, encounter between Kerthjalfad and the Viking Thorstein Hallson, recorded in *Njal’s Saga*, suggests the intensity. Thorstein broke with the rest of the Dublin-Leinster Alliance but stopped to tie his shoe-thong. Kerthjalfad came up behind him and asked why he had stopped to which Thorstein replied, “I cannot reach home tonight, for my home is in Iceland.”306 He appears resigned to his fate and his calm in the face of adversity shows his understanding of the gravity of the situation. The men of Brian’s left flank continued to hold, shutting off the route to Tomar’s Wood and this funneled even more men into the ever shrinking beachhead. As the forces of the Earl of the Orkneys and the men of Leinster retreated to the safety of their boats, they faced yet another obstacle. The tide had carried many of the vessels into the bay.307 Fighting had raged long enough that boats that had been beached, but not tethered, had floated out into the river’s channel. In all practicality, escape was now cut off. Brian’s previous victories at Cork and Glen Mama had capitalized on the pursuit of his routed foes. In each case, an escape route had been available. With a perceived haven to run to, no individual

306 *Njal’s Saga*, page 348.
307 *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, page 191.
incentive had remained to make his opponents stand and fight. Facing a fleeing enemy, the lightly armed troops of the Irish kings had had devastating effects. Initially, the same had seemed likely at Clontarf. However, faced with no escape route, the surviving members of the Dublin Alliance turned to face their pursuers.

When he reached the beach and saw that there would be no escape, Earl Sigurd organized the remaining troops and turned to face his pursuers. In the thick of battle, he gained control of his men and cut back into the rapidly advancing Dál Cassians. No shield wall met Earl Sigurd, only an unorganized mass of Irish warriors. The Dál Cais had broken formation for the pursuit. Armored and unarmored pursuers suddenly came upon an organized resistance. The fighting intensified and casualties on both sides increased. Earl Sigurd’s banner served as the marker for the place of the rally of the Alliance forces. Evidence for this appears in the legend surrounding Earl Sigurd’s Raven banner. According to the legend, this banner was cursed and any man carrying the banner for Sigurd would be killed in the battle. In this final stand on the banks of the Liffey, Sigurd was forced to carry his own banner and he fell victim to its curse. While a wonderful bit of prose, there is a hint of useful information. Sigurd quite obviously was in the thick of fighting marked by his banner. Banners can rally your troops to you, but can also tell the enemy where you are. Seeing the routed forces organizing a defense, the Dál Cais attacked towards the banner in order to
break the leadership of the final resisters. The members of Earl Sigurd’s household troops died with him. They “defended his banner” so to speak and dying around his banner easily, in literature, became dying because of his banner. Earl Sigurd himself is supposed to have picked up the banner but such an act would have left him far less capable of fighting; a sword was a better object to have to hand at that time. After his household troops died in his defense, the earl came face to face with Murchad who supposedly killed him with a sword’s blow. The fierce fighting continued with Elbric (Erik) the son of the king of Lochlain (Norway) leading the foreigners. Here Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh indicates that the remaining warriors are all armored foreigners. This is quite likely to be an accurate statement. After a day of fighting, the weary combatants had been whittled down. Armor adds to life expectancy. These armored warriors continued to cut into the Dál Cais and deal heavy losses thereof. Murchad sought out Elbric. Again, the Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh becomes eloquent and claims that Murchad’s sword had melted. While melting ornamentation is a bit much to be plausible, a sword used for a day’s fighting was probably too dented and blunt to serve as much more than a club. Against armor and helmets, that would be of little use. Murchad is said to have thrown his sword aside and grappled with Elbric. Grabbing Elbric’s sword, Murchad thrust it through the Viking, who in turn drew a knife and stabbed Brian’s son, disemboweling him. The description is of close-quarters fighting. Incredibly brutal, and certainly to
the death, the contestants understood that they had no other options. Few on the losing side would survive and the cost to the victors would be high as well.

None of the sources describes the end of the major fighting, yet the end can be surmised. The initial clash of forces lasted well through the morning. As the Dublin-Leinster alliance fled to the piers, the high tide had come in. With a rough high tide of 1200, the waters would have been rising since early that morning, and the high tide on this date actually floated many of the ships that had been beached. As the sunset would not come for another eight plus hours, a long day faced the fleeing men as
they had nowhere to escape to until nightfall.\textsuperscript{308} Eight hours for the most desperate fighting of the day. As darkness fell the fighting would gradually cease as the survivors used darkness to escape as well as to re-group and tend to casualties. The majority of the fighting was finished long before darkness fell.

The final critical event in the battle was played out by one of the groups of Vikings fleeing the battle. The Viking war band leader, Brodir, along with two others, was making his way along the edge of Tomar’s Wood. They saw a small group around a man who seemed to be a praying priest, and Brodir prepared to move past him. One of his companions, who had previously served Brian as a mercenary, corrected him, noting that the praying man was the high-king of Ireland, Brian Boru.\textsuperscript{309} How did the high king come to be attended only by a few men? The answer is that his bodyguards, the household troops who had begun the battle by making a shield wall around him, had joined the conflict at Clontarf. \textit{Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh} indicates that they rushed off to seek battle, but a far more likely explanation is that Brian committed them as a reserve. He tracked the battle noting where the standards of his son and other commanders were. When those standards advanced or fell he would have known the consequences. To keep the pressure on at the weirs, sending in fresh, high-quality troops could make the difference between

\textsuperscript{308} In 2006, sunset on the 23\textsuperscript{rd} of April was at 8:40 PM as per the website: [http://www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/astronomy.html?n=78&month=4&year=2006&obj=sun&afl=-11&day=1](http://www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/astronomy.html?n=78&month=4&year=2006&obj=sun&afl=-11&day=1) accessed on 2 January 2007.

\textsuperscript{309} \textit{Njal’s Saga}, page 348; \textit{Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh}, page 203.
success and failure. Without the men of Meath, Brian’s options for a reserve were extremely limited. Donnchad had not yet returned with his raiding party, leaving the king with only his personal guards uncommitted. Sending them into the fray meant leaving himself unprotected. Nearing what was potentially the end of the battle, he decided that this was acceptable, with the result being that only his personal attendants remained. It was the kind of call that Brian would have made. His troops did not abandon him; they were not that disloyal, nor rash. Those that remained with him were his servants, not fighting men. John Ryan believes that some of Brian’s guards did remain, basing that assertion on the text from Njal’s Saga where Brodir rushed through the shield wall to deliver the killing blow. While showing Brodir’s prowess, it is highly unlikely that, accompanied only by two other weary fighters, he could single-handedly cut through even a small group of trained and armored bodyguards. In either case, Brodir rushed the 73 year old king. The servants tried to stop his attack, but had neither the equipment nor the experience to do so. Brodir quickly put an end to their efforts and then beheaded the High-King of Ireland before attempting to flee. He was later caught and tortured to death by Brian’s forces.

The Cost of the Battle

Scholars often remark on the bloody nature of the fighting at Clontarf. Well they should. Casualties on both sides were

high as evidenced by the extensive death lists recorded in the Annals. The Annals of Loch Cé record fourteen nobles of the Dublin-Leinster Alliance by name along with 6,000 additional fighters. The same annals note the death of fifteen men from the High-King’s force by name, to include Brian and his son Murchad.\textsuperscript{311} While the long duration of the fight accounts for a portion of this, there were other factors that added to the toll. The pursuit by Murchad would have provided ample opportunity to inflict damage on the retreating Dubliners and their allies. The majority of casualties occur in the later stages of battles once one side has been turned.\textsuperscript{312} The desperation with which the Viking allies fought when once cornered would have contributed to the carnage as well. Armored Vikings with swords against unarmored Irishmen who were not deployed in a shield wall with their fellows to protect them would have given the individual edge to the foreigners.

Also to be noted is the weaponry used by the Irishmen. The archaeological record does not support the Irish having a tradition of bringing swords to battle. Swords served a dual purpose: a fighter could attack, but could also defend with the blade. The last efforts of Irish smiths to build useful iron blades were in the 6th–8th centuries. After that, they simply copied swords, imported them or turned to different weapons. They used axes, later to be famed as Lochlain Axes. These single

\textsuperscript{311} Annals of Loch Cé 1014.
bladed weapons mounted on a long haft had only one purpose in battle - to kill. The injuries inflicted were severe.

The strategy that Brian had to adopt in order to win the battle is precisely the reason why the battle proved so costly. Brian’s forces attacked the ships of the allies of Dublin. When the Dál Cais broke the lines and turned the defenders, the defenders had nowhere to go. They were backed against the sea and their only avenue of escape was out of reach. The Vikings had no choice but to turn and fight to the death. In all of Brian’s previous pitched battles, he had allowed his foes to break ranks and retreat. When they did so, they streamed towards a place of safety in the hopes that reaching that objective would provide refuge. The Vikings had no such hope. Instead of the forces of Dál Cais pursuing and killing their enemies in an exploitation of a tactical battlefield victory, the battlefield simply extended to the coast at Clontarf. There, the weary pursuers came up against desperate opponents; opponents who were literally fighting for their lives. The cost to the attackers was staggering. In the type of fighting that would have taken place, neither side would have had a significant advantage. Whereas Murchad began the battle with a tactical movement that broke his enemy’s line, the pursuit to the beach stretched the combat along a front of well over two kilometers. No large formation would have held together. Small groups of men, sometimes individuals met in hand to hand combat. No shield wall protected the unarmored. No line to the left provided defense.
against the enemy. The combat was brutal, intense and bloody.

Here the Norse poem *Darradarljod* provides an apt end for describing the Battle of Clontarf:

The web is now woven  
And the battlefield reddened;  
The news of disaster  
Will spread through lands.  
It is horrible no[?]  
To look around,  
As a blood-red cloud  
Darkens the sky.  
The heavens are stained  
With the blood of men,  
As the Valkyries  
Sing their song.\textsuperscript{313}

\textsuperscript{313} *Njal’s Saga*, page 350.
Conclusion

Máel Sechnaill, King of Meath, succeeded Brian Boru as High King of Ireland and ruled as such until his death in 1022. The Annals of the Four Masters claim that he participated in the pursuit after the Battle of Clontarf. This is highly unlikely as no Uí Neill deaths are recorded in any of the sources. The Prophecy of Berchan had this to say about his second iteration as high king, “The usurper takes sovereignty again for nine years after great weariness; he will die in a house of Ciaran, those afterwards will be tales of satire.”314 This suggests that the King of Meath’s withdrawal prior to the Battle of Clontarf was seen at the time as an underhanded act. This lends credence to the idea that Máel Sechnaill withdrew his support for personal advantage. The following years found him campaigning in Dublin and Leinster, conveniently weakened by the now dead Brian. His efforts quickly eliminated Dublin and Leinster as sources of income for Brian’s son Donnchadh, making them prizes sought by most kings with designs on the High-Kingship. The death lists from the battle of Clontarf reveal a serious blow to the ranks of princes in Munster, effectively eliminating an entire generation of the nobility as well as leaving Máel Sechnaill as the only remaining realistic claimant to the Kingship of Ireland. The severity is seen at the end of the battle after Máel Sechnaill’s early departure and the primary leaders of the Dál Cais killed: Brian’s army had to wait two days for his young son, Donnchadh to

314 Benjamin T. Hudson, ed., The Prophecy of Berchan, page 79; see also pages 171-177.
arrive and assume the leadership.

**The Dal Cais**

Donchadh returned to the news of the deaths of his father the high-king, and his brother, the heir designate. The survivors of Brian’s army returned to their pre-battle encampment to await his arrival – the default leader of the Dál Cais. This force was still formidable enough that Sitric remained within the walls of Dublin, but the town did not capitulate in the wake of the battle of Clontarf.

When Donchadh arrived with the spoils of his raid, he immediately held council. While he had provisions, the men cooked several cows within sight of the hungry Dubliners, but taking Dublin by siege did not appear likely. While still strong enough to keep Sitric inside the town, fighting off a relieving force was not a promising prospect. Donnchadh would also have to worry about securing his lands and title in Munster. He chose to lift the siege and return home by the most expeditious route possible, the direct route through Leinster, the Slighe Dhála.

Traveling the Slighe Dhála had its own perils. The Men of Osraige had not come to the summons for war. They contested the passage of Donnchadh’s army on its homeward journey, not a promising sign for his control of that territory. Why did Donnchadh return through Osraige instead of back through the midlands? The simplest answer suggests that he did not trust Máel Sechnaill nor his ability to defeat him in battle. Donnchadh’s men were battered and bruised from Clontarf. Máel
Sechnaill had withdrawn his men and his host was neither battle weary nor full of wounded warriors. For a young king suddenly thrust into leadership, facing an experienced former high-king could have been career ending and to be avoided if at all possible.

Donnchad struggled to rule as the King of Munster for the next fifty years. While he remained a regional power within Munster, Dáibhí Ó Cróinín aptly summarized his reign noting that, “Brian’s son Donnchad, managed little more than to hang on to the remnants of his father’s claims in Munster in the face of serious internal rivalries.”\(^\text{315}\) Within a year, the foreigners of the Isles attacked his fortresses in the Aran Isles.\(^\text{316}\) These fortresses had served Brian’s fleets and their targeting by former allies alludes to their importance in controlling the western seaboard. His southern defensive line was also assaulted. In 1031 Gilla Patraic of Osraige attacked Dún na Sciath (near Lough Ennell in Westmeath), killing the steward and in 1054, Leinster and Osraige combined to burn Dún Trí Liag (modern Duntryleague).\(^\text{317}\) Systematically, the physical garrisons used so adeptly by Donnchad’s father, were eliminated by the very people they had been used to control.

Donnchad also faced significant internal dissension. He resorted to treachery to kill his half brother Tadc in 1023.\(^\text{318}\)


\(^{316}\) AI 1015.

\(^{317}\) AI 1031; AFM 1054.

\(^{318}\) AI 1023.
This gave him a respite, but his nephew Turlough, Tadc’s son, would ally with Diarmait of Leinster and after a see-saw of plundering, ravaging, burning and fighting, Turlough would replace Donnchad as king of the Dál Cais and Donnchad would travel to Rome on a pilgrimage. While Donnchad did make efforts as a claimant to the high kingship after Máel Sechnaill’s death in 1022, he was unable to effectively assert his authority. He did take the hostages of Meath in 1025 but then lost them the next year. That was the pinnacle of his achievement. He became one of many aspirants to greater authority who did not have the ability or resources to effectively impose their rule on others. This period has been called the time of the rí con fressaba, “kings with opposition.” No leader was strong enough to hold the undisputed title as high-king of Ireland.

**The O’Briens after Donnchad**

Brian’s grandson Turlough and his great-grandson, Muirchertach, both held aspirations to the High-Kingship. Turlough began his rule in 1063 as little more than the puppet of Diarmait mac Maíl na mBó of Leinster. At times allied with Connacht and eventually with Leinster, Turlough’s base of power was the support he received from outside of Munster. He was for all intents and purposes, a Leinster puppet. When Diarmait died in battle in 1072, Turlough quickly turned on Leinster allowing rival claimants to fight and weaken each other while Turlough placed his son, Muirchertach, as King of Dublin. Rivalries in

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319 AI 1058-1064 for the list of burnings and submissions.
Connacht fragmented that province as well. With Leinster and Connacht fractured by internal quarrels Turlough became the most powerful ruler in the south. His rule, however, was far from uncontested. Rival O’Brien contenders, most notably Cennétig O’Brien, the grandson of Donnchad, backed by the Ua Ruairc’s of Connacht, challenged Turlough. He held his seat but the constant skirmishing meant that he would not mount a single attack into the north. His reign was still far from inconsequential. Disputing claimants to the throne of Ulster turned to him for support, an interesting situation that Dáibhí Ó Cróinín saw as, “striking witness to his power and influence.” At a minimum, this shows that he was able to provide sufficient resources for others to court his favor in the game of politics that dominated eleventh century Ireland. At his death in 1086, the Annals of Ulster called him ri Erenn or King of Ireland.

Turlough’s three sons initially divided his kingdom. However, one died within a month and a second was banished leaving Muirchertach as the King of the Dál Cais and of Munster. Muirchertach was able to subdue Leinster and Connacht after years of fighting but was never able to extend his control as had his father and great-grandfather. Muirchertach’s greatest rival for the High-Kingship was Ardgar Ua Lochlainn of Cenél nEógain. Muirchertach attacked no fewer than ten times, and failed to receive the submission of the northern king on any

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321 AU 1086.
322 AI 1086.
occasion.\textsuperscript{323} Interestingly, the abbot of Armagh intervened in many of these excursions imposing a year’s cessation of hostilities. He was never able to build momentum. The church in the south was more supportive of Muirchertach, probably due to his granting of the perpetual right to Cashel to the Church in 1101. This took the traditional seat of his Eóganaichta enemies out of their hands forever, making it an economic base for the bishop of Cashel.\textsuperscript{324}

Muirchertach O’Brien had aspirations to glory and, in addition to his failed military efforts, had tried to shape his image using the accomplishments of his father and grandfather. It was Muirchertach who commissioned the work that would become known as the \textit{Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh}, transforming his grandfather’s life into a struggle to free Ireland from the clutches of invaders. While he proved ultimately unsuccessful in his own bid, the legend that he created has molded understanding of Brian Boru even to this day. The Brian Boru Center located in Killaloe, just down the hill from where Brian’s palace of Kincora once stood, is a living testament to the power of the O’Brien propaganda tract.

Muirchertach’s efforts to win the title of high-king effectively ended in 1114 when he was seriously ill. Internal rivalries brought his brother Diarmait back to power for two years followed by Muirchertach’s retaking of the Munster throne.

\textsuperscript{323} AU 1097, 1099, 1100, 1101, 1102, 1103, 1104, 1107, 1109, and 1113.  
\textsuperscript{324} Donncha Ó Corráin, \textit{Ireland Before the Normans} (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1972), page 149.
A new power in Connacht, Turlough O’Connor, began hammering the border and by his death in 1118, power had shifted to Connacht. Brian’s family was reduced to a supporting role in Irish history.

**Final Assessment**

Previous assessments of Brian’s rule and his accomplishments have been inadequate in their scope. As outlined in the introduction, his career has received much attention but little detailed analysis. Nearly all note his success to some degree but they fail to explain what he did in sufficient detail to determine how he was able to achieve as much as he did. The ‘how’ of his success is important; it gives insight into his methods and herein lays the true significance of his reign.

Brian’s methods bear more similarity to other European rulers in the tenth century than to his Irish peers. This suggests that the king of the Dál Cais can appropriately be placed in a European setting, not just an insular Irish one. Brian Boru was a tenth century example of central authority, of consolidation. His is also an example of the difficulty in establishing institutions that endure. Like Charlemagne before him, and his Germanic (in the geographic sense) contemporaries, his efforts were valiant but fleeting. Historians have created great legacies for the king of Dál Cais; it appears that these miss the mark to a significant degree, lessening the value of his accomplishments.

Past reviews of Brian’s accomplishments have been mixed. His story has been told before and has taken many shapes - the
classic hero bringing Ireland out of the domination of the evil foreign Vikings; the leader finding his destiny; the ruin of the old school. All of these bear some resemblance to the facts. All are historical versions of his life. History is interpretation and often, interpretation through a colored lens. His story has always been cast in the light of an isolated, insulated Ireland; considering him only within an Irish context. His history has been an Irish history, while his potential for understanding a far wider context has been routinely ignored. Take for example the common belief that Ireland was never ‘Romanized’ since the Romans never conquered the island. Yet this denies the Roman influences coming to light with a possible trade station on the east coast, a Roman style bridge crossing the Shannon River and a host of Roman styled weapons stored at the National Museum in Dublin. Christianity spread to Ireland from the continent. While the Irish may not have saved civilization by single-handedly preserving Christian learning, they were active participants in Christian discourse. There is also the popular idea that Brian saved Ireland from outside dominance, in this instance from the Vikings. There seems to have been a need at the turn of the last century, still lingering today in the works of Ó Croinín and Llewelyn Morgan, to preserve a history that makes Ireland unique, as if the introduction of foreign influences would somehow taint the accomplishments of the native Irish. The myth of a uniquely Irish preservation of knowledge and learning denies the initial introduction of that
learning from outside. Christianity in the Middle Ages had a significant number of variations in practice and understanding. Irish scholars were so well renowned precisely because of their extensive involvement in continental studies.

I would argue that these influences, and more so the manner that they were incorporated by the Irish, are what make Ireland unique, not their absence. If Brian had driven the foreigners from Ireland, he would have eliminated the nascent towns, international trade, technology and genetic contributions provided by the Scandinavians. The use of money seems to have been a significant contribution of the Vikings as well. While the good and bad of these issues can be argued, what cannot be reasonably disputed is that they became a part of Ireland, and the Irish past. Foreign influences and foreigners could be found in Ireland before Brian’s reign as well as afterwards. His reliance on the foreigners demonstrates their importance to Irish history. Performing as an economic base, military assets, and as transportation, the Vikings were driven into Irish society by Brian as opposed to driven out.

Historians such as Séan Duffy and Michael Richter have also credited Brian with the legacy of opening the eligibility for high-king to a new range of competitors. Control was no longer limited to a small circle of families and a limited number of claimants. Brian established the high-kingship as more than a titular office and that it had great value. Historians have cast this change in a negative light, suggesting that it ushered in a
period of increased violence and instability. Perhaps, the increase in record keeping beginning in the tenth century heightens such a perception. There can be no doubt that an increasing number of contenders from different families made efforts at the high-kingship. The kings of Connacht and the kings of Leinster had never been contenders before the eleventh century. They were, however, very involved in both intra and inter-regional disputes and power struggles. From the 7th century on, efforts to exert inter-regional control proved temporary as few kings, and even fewer dynasties, could maintain their short term successes. The raids, battles and murders that fill the annals for centuries attest to this simple fact. Such violence is not just representative of Ireland; rather it is reflective of eleventh century Europe.

The tenth century in Europe was a time of conflict and consolidation. The successor states, if they can be called states, to the Carolingian Empire prove instructive. In the west, Hugh Capet became the founder of a dynasty that would eventually become known as the kings of France. He came from a minor, but well connected family. His father was never a king but Hugh, with the support of the Ottonians, assumed that title. In 987, with the support of the archbishop of Reims, he was elected as Rex Francorum in place of a weak Carolingian candidate. The newly crowned king of the Franks then placed his candidates in powerful ecclesiastic positions at the same time that he began to increase his territorial control. In the east
of the former Carolingian empire, a similar process was taking shape. The Saxon dynasty, more commonly known as the Ottonians, worked to unify what became the Holy Roman Empire. In 962, Otto the First was crowned as Holy Roman Empire and his court made conscious attempts to reinforce his right to rule by casting it in terms of a divinely sanctioned rule dating back to the unification of church and state in Rome. Both of these contemporaries of Brian extended their influence through law, the church and their control of land and wealth. Yet, they were not the only contenders for the positions they sought. Hugh Capet supplanted the West Carolingian line.

In a similar vein, how many ‘legitimate’ contenders for the English throne existed upon the death of Edward the Confessor? Tostig and Harold Godwinsson of the Anglo-Saxons, Harald Hadradi from Norway and even William of Normandy all articulated their right to rule. In England, one fighter, William of Normandy, managed to apply greater military ability at the right moment to overcome and eliminate his rivals. It is interesting to note that William also had access to significant trade income and an army of mercenaries and hirelings. The situational similarities with the Holy Roman Empire illustrate that the challenges of decentralization were not wholly unique to Ireland. What became the Holy Roman Empire was not a harmonious joining of like-minded, like-goaled territories. The process of centralization required military and diplomatic success, Church support, administration and a strong economic base. Brian came into power
while infighting plagued each of the regional kingdoms, leaving the theoretical high-kingship an achievement that was really beyond the competitors fighting their local opponents. Brian’s significance is not in the legacy of kings with opposition; rather it is in his ability to access so many different sources of power to effectively overcome his enemies. For a brief period of time, he managed to suspend the continuous warfare plaguing Ireland. His reign is an example of success in a medieval period that had few such successes. To hold him accountable for the relapse into internecine violence that had existed prior to his rule is simply unfair: new contenders, new names, and new bases of power, certainly. That might even be worth considering in a positive light. The Uí Néill had not brought peace for over a hundred years, were they also responsible for the period of kings with opposition?

Brian initiated the process of institutionalizing his authority. References to his stewards and the apparent attempt to document property that remains extant as the Book of Rights attest to these nascent efforts. Many of his actions resembled those of other Irish kings such as when he placed family members in positions of power within the churches he controlled in order to ensure their support. He received tribute and gave gifts to his subordinates in a ritual of giving that cemented their ties. He also had members of his court in positions that are not represented in the courts of other kings. Brian had an armchara, or spiritual guide with ties to Inisfallen. Sometimes called
Brian’s scribe, Máel Suthain was responsible for recording
Brian’s claim as emperor in the Book of Armagh in 1005. Brian’s
son is noted as the lord of the mercenaries and Brian had ‘great
stewards’ (mórmaer) as well as stewards, suggesting a hierarchy
within his garrisons. Brian also established tribute collection
centers that seem to have been successful enough that he earned
the sobriquet “Boru” or “of the tributes.” Brian established
fortresses for the maintenance of his control. He also built
duns that served as logistical bases from which he could
provision his armies and his fleets. The success of this program
was revealed by the attacks launched against them by his enemies
immediately upon his death.

Under-evaluated in Brian’s success has been his military
program. The use of the term military throughout this work has
been conscious and deliberate, just as Brian’s use of force was
conscious and deliberate. Fleets, mercenaries, and battle have
been used by other Irish kings before and during his reign. Yet
no other ruler had combined them to the extent executed by the
king of the Dál Cais. Brought together with a deliberate focus,
Brian displayed a strategy of violence designed to produce a
lasting effect. Informed, possibly by the use of Latin
treatises, Brian’s activities bear a striking resemblance to the
programs and methodologies employed by other European rulers.
Brian fortified the south with a double line of garrisoned
earthworks that prevented significant penetration of his lands.
Such forts were also used by Alfred the Great of Wessex and in
Germany as well. He placed forts near religious houses and bridges to facilitate supply of the garrisons and to prevent access along important waterways. These points then became the staging areas for his offensive operations.

Brian’s strategic vision was multi-faceted. From the very beginning of his reign, the king seems to have considered his moves carefully before taking action. His targets were neither random nor impulsive. He quite easily could have gone after Máel Muad for the murder of Mathgamain. Instead, Brian conducted his inaugural raid against the leaders of Limerick, allies of Máel Muad. This attack provided plunder for his followers as well as legitimating his rule. It also removed the threat of attack to his rear. Swiftly following this, the Dál Cais then subjugated the Uí Fidgeinte so that within a year, Máel Muad had no reliable allies in Thomond. Brian then turned his attention to the Eóganacht king in a direct attack into the heart of his territory, forcing him into a face to face confrontation, defeating him in open battle and then pursuing the defeated enemy forces all the way to Cork. He then burned and plundered the town. Raiding into Eóganacht territory in retaliation for the murder might have been a more rapid response, but it would not have had nearly the lasting effect. Only by thinking and planning could Brian have developed, and linked, these operations in a manner that would achieve such success.

From the very beginning, Brian seems to have understood the value of waterborne transportation. For his first raid, he
coordinated, most likely with the Corcu Baiscind, for boats to move his force to Scattery Island. His relationship with them lasted his lifetime; they fought and died with him at Clontarf. Brian used fleets to attack up the Shannon River and then to move supplies along that highway. The value of waterways to his operations is proven by the efforts of his opponents to deny access. The failed building of a causeway in 1002 by Máel Sechnaill and the attack on Brian’s Aran Island duns by Vikings immediately upon his death are strongly suggestive that water was less of a barrier to the king of the Dál Cais than a resource. He fully exploited his advantage in mobility as evidenced by his operations in the 990s to conquer the west and his use of fleets to support his efforts to subjugate the north in the early eleventh century.

Brian was not the first Irish king to use hired help. Brian’s brother Mathgamhain had amus in his employ. The extent to which Brian relied on hirelings and the uses to which he put them, makes him notable. Hiring foreign fighters implies the economic means to pay them. This alone is significant. No other Irish king hired forces as Brian did. Certainly they would have if they had the ability to do so. Steve Morillo’s upcoming work on mercenaries addresses the variety of ways that the relationships were expressed as well as payment rendered. While no contracts exist, the records support several suppositions. In 985, Brian recruited temporary help when he made arrangements with the Sons of Harold for an attack on Dublin. The following
year saw the Deisi attacking Brian’s mercenaries at a site identified as one of Brian’s garrisons. Quite possibly, the meeting set the conditions for mercenary service to include land for service. This is comparable to England and Normandy regarding terms. Interestingly, the Viking band Brian dealt with in 985 had come from Normandy where a similar deal had been struck to found the settlement that would become Nordmanland or Normandy. Also, Brian recruited from more than one source. At least one of the great stewards in his force at Clontarf came from the area that would become Scotland. Maybe he was of Scandinavian descent but he did not come from Normandy. His sobriquet specifically places his origin in Northern Britain. Brian’s mercenaries thus came from more than one location. Brian was able to tap into the Scandinavian world of seafaring adventurers. Eventually controlling all of the major towns and ports in Ireland, he had access to supply that others did not. He also had finances that enabled him to hire those warriors and this small group of professional fighters became the permanent core of his army. In addition to his household troops, this gave him far greater forces available at any time than his opponents could muster from within their kingdoms. To hire mercenaries without steady financing would simply have been beyond their ability.

The annals also support the idea that Brian was innovative in his use of hired forces. The term amus is found primarily during his reign. There are few uses of the term outside of his
lifetime. As such, this indicates that the relationship was noteworthy enough to make the contemporary records. There is also the use of a new term regarding the sons of Harold where the annalist appears to be making an attempt to qualify a significant event. This was no small band of fighters trickling in to find a warm hearth upon which to rest.

Brian’s son Murchad was titled the lord of mercenaries. This suggests that a significant portion of his household troops were foreign fighters. While stretching the sources, Viking warriors were found in the household troops of the Byzantine rulers as the Varangian Guard. It is at least worthy of consideration that these fighters gave a measure of security to a ruler. Not only professional, well equipped fighters, they also had few local ties and loyalty to their employer was thus highly probable. That these warriors were included in the household troops is also evidenced by one of the men who killed Brian. Fleeing the field of Clontarf, this unnamed Viking recognized Brian. The reason given was that he had served the king previously. Bodyguards are the type of mercenary fighters who had been close enough to the king of the Dál Cais to know the king by sight. The acquaintance was more than passing.

Brian’s use of hired help stands out in Irish history. He leveraged their capabilities to meet his objectives. This gave him a significant advantage over his peers who used few, if any, external mercenaries. They could not afford them. This also places him squarely within a broader European context. Tenth
century leaders in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms used temporary help to augment their forces in their bids to consolidate power.

Brian stands as the most successful Irish king in imposing his authority. He exacted tribute from subordinate kingdoms that others could only claim, as suggested by his nickname of bórumha. He was the king of the great tributes. Brian wrote the textbook on the successful implementation of a political strategy. He combined a relentless military pressure with ceremony and political maneuver to articulate his ability to impose his rule as well as his right to do so. He courted, cajoled and demanded the support of the Church and then turned and provided support right back, a mastery of politics. By controlling the Viking towns, and by enforcing his right to tribute, Brian created an economic system from which he appears to have reaped financial reward. This income then allowed him to purchase the services of forces that became a full time army enabling a cycle of escalation to which only he had access. The obligation to provide service for a hosting, or to perform labor, characteristic of Irish legal obligations, meant temporary access to that capability. These are the forces to which his opponents had access. They are limited. Thus the power of those kings was limited as well. Brian was not constrained in the same manner. He called hostings when they were needed. He also could call on his full time forces to execute his requirements in between large scale call ups. The more he could afford to work outside of the limited Irish system, the greater his ability to shape his
Brian Boru was the archetype of the successful medieval ruler. He transformed from a Celtic war leader to a centralized authority. The greatest failure of his reign was that the nascent institutions used to articulate his authority still relied heavily on the individual. His son, Murchad, was the designated successor and by all appearances had taken on many of the day to day roles required for this new form of rule. He commanded the armies in the field, controlled the mercenaries, and played a critical role at the court. He was groomed to take over upon Brian’s demise. The death of Brian, at the age of 72, was to be expected. The death of his heir was not. The institutions of rule had not yet moved from personal rule to true institutions. The battle of Clontarf was as important in the death of the son, as it was in the death of the father. The elimination of the cream of the Dál Cais military, as well as the virtual decapitation of the nobility, meant that Brian’s young son Donnchad would have his hands full just asserting his rule in Thomond. The institutions quickly collapsed. Brian’s life and death thus bear more than a passing similarity to another medieval king - Charlemagne. Charlemagne rose on the back of his military genius, conquered vast territories, and used the title of emperor to his advantage in legitimating his rule. He also was unable to establish institutions of administration that lasted beyond his death. The lands he had controlled broke into territorial powers struggling amongst themselves for control.
Does this lessen the achievements of Charlemagne? Or do events after his death only heighten the magnitude of his accomplishments? The history of Brian Bórumha mac Cennétig should receive similar treatment.
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