

St Aidan's Homeschool



BRIAN mac Cennétig
Aka
BRIAN BÓRUMÁ

The Last King of Ireland

A Biography

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Brian mac Cennétig (c. 941; 23 April 1014), called **Brian Bóruma** (), was an Irish king who overthrew the centuries-long domination of the Kingship of Ireland by the Uí Néill. Building on the achievements of his father, Cennétig mac Lorcaín, and brother, Mathgamain, Brian first made himself King of Munster, then subjugated Leinster, making himself ruler of the south of Ireland.

The Uí Néill king Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill, abandoned by his northern kinsmen of the Cenél nEógain and Cenél Conaill, acknowledged Brian as High King at Athlone in 1002. In the decade that followed, Brian campaigned against the northern Uí Néill, who refused to accept his claims, against Leinster, where resistance was frequent, and against Dublin. Brian's hard-won authority was seriously challenged in 1013 when his ally Máel Sechnaill was attacked by the Cenél nEógain king Flaithbertach Ua Néill, with the Ulstermen as his allies. This was followed by further attacks on Máel Sechnaill by the Norse Gaels of Dublin under their king Sihtric and the Leinstermen led by Máel Mórda mac Murchada. Brian campaigned against these enemies in 1013. In 1014, Brian's armies confronted the armies of Leinster and Dublin at Clontarf near Dublin on Good Friday. The resulting Battle of Clontarf was a bloody affair, with Brian, his son Murchad, and Máel Mórda among those killed. The list of the noble dead in the *Annals of Ulster* includes Irish kings, Norse Gaels, Scotsmen, and Scandinavians. The immediate beneficiary of the slaughter was Máel Sechnaill who resumed his interrupted reign as the last Uí Néill High King.

In death, Brian proved to be a greater figure than in life. The court of his great-grandson Muirchertach Ua Briain produced the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, a work of near hagiography. The Norse Gaels and Scandinavians too produced works magnifying Brian, among these Njal's Saga, the Orkneyinga Saga, and the now-lost Brian's Saga. Brian's war against Máel Mórda and Sihtric was to be inextricably connected with his complicated marital relations, in particular his marriage to Gormlaith, Máel Mórda's sister and Sihtric's mother, who had been in turn the wife of Amlaíb Cuarán, king of Dublin and York, then of Máel Sechnaill, and finally of Brian.

Biography

Early life

Brian was likely born in 941 although some sources place his birth as early as 926. He was born near Killaloe, a town in the region of Thomond where his father, Cennétig mac Lorcaín, was king. When their father died, the kingship of Thomond passed to Brian's older brother, Mathgamain, and, when Mathgamain was killed in 976, Brian replaced him. Subsequently he became the King of the entire kingdom of Munster. His mother Bé Binn was also killed by Vikings when he was a child.

The origin of his cognomen Boru or Borúma (Tributes) is believed to relate to a crossing point on the river Shannon where a cattle-tribute was driven from his sept, the Dál gCais to the larger sept to which they owed allegiance, the Eóganachta. However, it seems more likely that he'd have been given this name

for being the man to reverse the tide of this tribute, and receive it back from those who his family formerly paid it to. Later legends originated to suggest that it was because he collected monies from the minor rulers of Ireland and used these to rebuild monasteries and libraries that had been destroyed during Norsemen (Viking) invasions.

The Dál Cais

Brian belonged to the Dál gCais (or Dalcassians) who occupied a territory straddling the largest river in Ireland, the River Shannon, a territory that would later be known as the Kingdom of Thomond and today incorporates portions of County Clare and County Limerick. The Shannon served as an easy route by which raids could be made against the province of Connacht (to the river's west) and Meath (to its east). Both Brian's father, Cennétig mac Lor cáin and his older brother Mathgamain conducted river-borne raids, in which the young Brian would undoubtedly have participated. This was probably the root of his appreciation for naval forces in his later career.

An important influence upon the Dalcassians was the presence of the Hiberno-Norse city of Limerick on an isthmus around which the Shannon River winds (known today as King's Island or the Island Field). Undoubtedly the Hiberno-Norse of Limerick and the Dalcassians frequently came to blows, but it's unlikely that the relationship was always one of hostility; there was probably peaceful contact as well, such as trade. The Dalcassians may have benefited from these interactions, from which they'd have been exposed to Norse innovations such as superior weapons and ship design, all factors that may have contributed to their growing power.

Mathgamain

In 964, Brian's older brother, Mathgamain, claimed control over the entire province of Munster by capturing the Rock of Cashel, capital of the rival Eóganacht dynasty. The Eóganacht King, Máel Muad mac Brain, organised an anti-Dalcassian alliance that included at least one other Irish ruler in Munster, and Ivar, the ruler of Limerick. At the Battle of Sulchoid, a Dalcassian army led by Mathgamain and Brian decisively defeated the Hiberno-Norse army of Limerick and, following up their victory, looted and burned the city. The Dalcassian victory at Sulchoid may have led Máel Muad to decide that deception might succeed where an open contest of strength on the battlefield had failed. In 976 Mathgamain attended what was supposed to be a peaceful meeting for reconciliation, where he was seized and murdered. It was under these unpromising circumstances that Brian, at age thirty-five, became the new leader of the Dalcassians.

Brian immediately set about avenging his brother's death and reinstating the control of the Dalcassians over the province of Munster. In quick succession, he attacked and defeated the Hiberno-Norse of Limerick, Máel Muad's Irish allies, and finally, Máel Muad himself. Brian's approach to establishing his control over the Munster demonstrated features that would become characteristic of all of his

wars: he seized the initiative, defeating his enemies before they could join forces to overwhelm him, and although he was ruthless and horribly brutal by modern standards, he sought reconciliation in the aftermath of victory rather than continuing hostility. After he'd killed both the ruler of Limerick, Ivar, and Ivar's successor, he allowed the Hiberno-Norse in Limerick to remain in their settlement. After he'd killed Máel Muad, he treated his son and successor, Cian, with great respect, giving Cian the hand of his daughter, Sadb in marriage. Cian remained a faithful ally for the rest of his life.

Extending authority

Having established unchallenged rule over his home Province of Munster, Brian turned to extending his authority over the neighbouring provinces of Leinster to the east and Connacht to the north. By doing so, he came into conflict with High King Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill whose power base was the Province of Meath. For the next fifteen years, from 982 to 997, High King Máel Sechnaill repeatedly led armies into Leinster and Munster, while Boru, like his father and brother before him, led his naval forces up the Shannon to attack Connacht and Meath on either side of the river. He suffered quite a few reverses in this struggle, but appears to have learned from his setbacks.

He developed a military strategy that would serve him well throughout his career: the coordinated use of forces on both land and water, including on rivers and along Ireland's coast. Brian's naval forces, which included contingents supplied by the Hiberno-Norse cities that he brought under his control, provided both indirect and direct support for his forces on land. Indirect support involved a fleet making a diversionary attack on an enemy in a location far away from where Brian planned to strike with his army. Direct support involved naval forces acting as one arm in a strategic pincer, the army forming the other arm.

In 996 Brian finally managed to control the Province of Leinster, which may have been what led Máel Sechnaill to reach a compromise with him in the following year. By recognising Brian's authority over *Leth Moga*, that is, the Southern Half, which included the Provinces of Munster and Leinster (and the Hiberno-Norse cities within them), Máel Sechnaill was simply accepting the reality that confronted him and retained control over *Leth Cuinn*, that is, the Northern Half, which consisted of the Provinces of Meath, Connacht, and Ulster.

Precisely because he'd submitted to Brian's authority, the King of Leinster was overthrown in 998 and replaced by Máel Morda mac Murchada. Given the circumstances under which Máel Morda had been appointed, it isn't surprising that he launched an open rebellion against Brian's authority. In response, Boru assembled the forces of the Province of Munster with the intention of laying siege to the Hiberno-Norse city of Dublin, which was ruled by Máel Morda's ally and cousin, Sigtrygg Silkbeard. Together Máel Morda and Sigtrygg determined to meet Boru's army in battle rather than risk a siege. Thus, in 999, the opposing armies fought the Battle of Glen Mama.

The Irish annals all agree that this was a particularly fierce and bloody engagement, although claims that it lasted from morning until midnight, or that the combined Leinster-Dublin force lost 4,000 killed are open to question. In any case, Brian followed up his victory, as he and his brother had in the aftermath of the Battle of Sulchoid thirty-two years before, by capturing and sacking the enemy's city. Once again, however, Brian opted for reconciliation; he requested Sigtrygg to return and resume his position as ruler of Dublin, giving Sigtrygg the hand of one of his daughters in marriage, just as he'd with the Eoganacht King, Cain. It may have been on this occasion that Brian married Sigtrygg's mother and Máel Morda's sister Gormflaith, the former wife of Máel Sechnaill.

The struggle for Ireland

Brian made it clear that his ambitions hadn't been satisfied by the compromise of 997 when, in the year 1000, he led a combined Munster-Leinster-Dublin army in an attack on High King Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill's home Province of Meath. The struggle over who would control all of Ireland was renewed. Máel Sechnaill's most important ally was the King of Connacht, Cathal mac Conchobar mac Taidg (O'Connor), but this presented a number of problems. The Provinces of Meath and Connacht were separated by the Shannon River, which served as both a route by which Brian's naval forces could attack the shores of either province and as a barrier to the two rulers providing mutual support for each other. Máel Sechnaill came up with an ingenious solution; two bridges would be erected across the Shannon. These bridges would serve as both obstacles preventing Brian's fleet from traveling up the Shannon and as a means by which the armies of the Provinces of Meath and Connacht could cross over into each others kingdoms.

The Annals state that, in the year 1002, Máel Sechnaill surrendered his title to Brian, although they don't say anything about how or why this came about. The *Cogadh Gaedhil re Gallaibh* provides a story in which Brian challenges High King Máel Sechnaill to a battle at the Hill of Tara in the Province of Meath, but the High King requests a month long truce so that he can mobilise his forces, which Brian grants him. But Máel Sechnaill fails to rally the regional rulers who are nominally his subordinates by the time the deadline arrives, and he's forced to surrender his title to Brian. This explanation is hardly credible, given Brian's style of engaging in war; if he'd found his opponent at a disadvantage he'd certainly have taken full advantage of it rather than allowing his enemy the time to even the odds. Conversely, it's hard to believe, given the length and intensity of the struggle between Máel Sechnaill and Brian, that the High King would surrender his title without a fight.

Where that fight may have occurred and what the particular circumstances were surrounding it we may never know. What is certain is that in 1002 Brian became the new High King of Ireland.

Unlike some who had previously held the title, Brian intended to be High King in more than name only. To accomplish this he needed to impose his will upon the regional rulers of the only Province that didn't already recognise his authority,

Ulster. Ulster's geography presented a formidable challenge; there were three main routes by which an invading army could enter the Province, and all three favoured the defenders. Brian first had to find a means of getting through or around these defensive 'choke points', and then he'd to subdue the fiercely independent regional Kings of Ulster. It took Brian ten years of campaigning to achieve his goal which, considering he could and did call on all of the military forces of the rest of Ireland, indicates how formidable the Kings of Ulster were. Once again, it was his coordinated use of forces on land and at sea that allowed him to triumph; while the rulers of Ulster could bring the advance of Brian's army to a halt, they couldn't prevent his fleet from attacking the shores of their kingdoms. But gaining entry to the Province of Ulster brought him only halfway to his goal. Brian systematically defeated each of the regional rulers who defied him, forcing them to recognise him as their overlord.

Emperor of the Irish

It was during this process that Brian also pursued an alternate means of consolidating his control, not merely over the Province of Ulster, but over Ireland as a whole. In contrast to its structure elsewhere, the Christian Church in Ireland was centred, not around the bishops of diocese and archbishops of archdiocese, but rather around monasteries headed by powerful abbots who were members of the royal dynasties of the lands in which their monasteries resided. Among the most important monasteries was Armagh, located in the Province of Ulster. It is recorded in the 'Book of Armagh' that, in the year 1005, Brian donated twenty-two ounces of gold to the monastery and declared that Armagh was the religious capital of Ireland to which all other monasteries should send the funds they collected. This was a clever move, for the supremacy of the monastery of Armagh would last only so long as Brian remained the High King. Therefore, it was in the interest of Armagh to support Boru with all their wealth and power. It is also interesting that Boru isn't referred to in the passage from the 'Book of Armagh' as the 'Ard Ri' – that is, High-King – but rather he's declared "*Emperatus Scottorum*," or "Emperor of the Irish."

Though it's only speculation, it has been suggested that Brian and the Church in Ireland were together seeking to establish a new form of kingship in Ireland, one that was modelled after the kingships of England and France, in which there were no lesser ranks of regional Kings – simply one King who had (or sought to have) power over all. In any case, whether as High King or Emperor, by 1011 all of the regional rulers in Ireland acknowledged Brian's authority. Unfortunately, no sooner had this been achieved than it was lost again. Máel Mórda mac Murchada of Leinster had only accepted Brian's authority grudgingly and in 1012 rose in rebellion. The *Cogadh Gaedhil re Gallaibh* relates a story in which one of Brian's sons insults Máel Morda, which leads him to declare his independence from Brian's authority. Whatever the actual reason was, Máel Morda sought allies with which to defy the High-King. He found one in a regional ruler in Ulster who had only recently submitted to Brian. Together they attacked the Province of Meath, where the former High King Máel Sechnaill sought Brian's help to defend his Kingdom. In 1013 Boru led a force from his own Province of Munster and from southern Connacht into Leinster; a detachment under his son, Murchad, ravaged

the southern half of the Province of Leinster for three months. The forces under Murchad and Brian were reunited on 9 September outside the walls of Dublin. The city was blockaded, but it was the High King's army that ran out of supplies first, so that Brian was forced to abandon the siege and return to Munster around the time of Christmas.

Máel Morda may have hoped that by defying Brian, he could enlist the aid of all the other regional rulers Brian had forced to submit to him. If so, he must have been sorely disappointed; while the entire Province of Ulster and most of the Province of Connacht failed to provide the High King with troops, they did not, with the exception of a single ruler in Ulster, provide support for Máel Morda either. His inability to obtain troops from any rulers in Ireland, along with his awareness that he'd need them when the High King returned in 1014, may explain why Máel Morda sought to obtain troops from rulers outside of Ireland. He instructed his subordinate and cousin, Sigtrygg, the ruler of Dublin, to travel overseas to enlist aid.

Sigtrygg sailed to Orkney, and on his return stopped at the Isle of Man. These islands had been seized by the Vikings long before and the Hiberno-Norse had close ties with Orkney and the Isle of Man. There was even a precedent for employing Norsemen from the isles; they'd been used by Sigtrygg's father, Olaf Cuaran, in 980, and by Sigtrygg himself in 990. Their incentive was loot, not land. Contrary to the assertions made in the *Cogadh Gaedhil re Gallaibh*, this wasn't an attempt by the Vikings to reconquer Ireland. All of the Norsemen, both the Norse-Gaels of Dublin and the Norsemen from the Isles, were in the service of Máel Morda. It should also be remembered that the High King had 'Vikings' in his army as well; mainly the Hiberno-Norse of Limerick (and probably those of Waterford, Wexford, and Cork as well), but also, according to some sources, a rival gang of Norse mercenaries from the Isle of Man.

Essentially this could be characterised as an Irish civil war in which foreigners participated as minor players.

Along with whatever troops he obtained from abroad, the forces that Brian mustered included the troops of his home Province of Munster, those of Southern Connacht, and the men of the Province of Meath, the latter commanded by his old rival Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill. He may have outnumbered Máel Morda's army, since Brian felt secure enough to dispatch a mounted detachment under the command of his youngest son, Donnchad, to raid southern Leinster, presumably hoping to force Máel Morda to release his contingents from there to return to defend their homes. Unfortunately for the High King, if he'd had a superiority in numbers it was soon lost. A disagreement with the King of Meath resulted in Máel Sechnaill withdrawing his support (Brian sent a messenger to find Donnchad and ask him to return with his detachment, but the call for help came too late). To compound his problems, the Norse contingents, led by Sigurd Hlodvirsson, Earl of Orkney and Brodir of the Isle of Man, arrived on Palm Sunday, the 18 April. The battle would occur five days later, on Good Friday.

The fighting took place just north of the city of Dublin, at Clontarf (now a

prosperous suburb). It may well be that the two sides were evenly matched, as all of the accounts state that the Battle of Clontarf lasted all day. Although this may be an exaggeration, it does suggest that it was a long, drawn-out fight.

There are many legends concerning how Brian was killed, from dying in a heroic man-to-man combat to being killed by the fleeing Viking mercenary Brodir while praying in his tent. He is said to be buried in the grounds of St. Patrick's Cathedral in the city of Armagh. Legend dictates he's buried at the north end of the church.

Historical view

The popular image of Brian—the ruler who managed to unify the regional leaders of Ireland so as to free the land from a 'Danish' (Viking) occupation—originates from the powerful influence of a work of 12th century propaganda, *Cogadh Gaedhil re Gallaibh* (*The War of the Irish with the Foreigners*) in which Brian takes the leading role. This work is thought to have been commissioned by Boru's great-grandson, Muirchertach Ua Briain as a means of justifying the Ua Briain (O'Brien) claim to the High-Kingship, a title upon which the Ui Neill had had a monopoly.

The influence of this work, on both scholarly and popular authors, can't be exaggerated. Until the 1970s most scholarly writing concerning the Vikings' activities in Ireland, as well as the career of Brian Boru, accepted the claims of *Cogadh Gaedhil re Gallaibh* at face value.

Brian didn't free Ireland from a Norse (Viking) occupation simply because it was never conquered by the Vikings. In the last decade of the 8th century, Norse raiders began attacking targets in Ireland and, beginning in the mid-9th century, these raiders established the fortified camps that later grew into Ireland's first cities: Dublin, Limerick, Waterford, Wexford, and Cork. Within only a few generations, the Norse citizens of these cities had converted to Christianity, inter-married with the Irish, and often adopted the Irish language, dress and customs; thus becoming what historians refer to as the 'Hiberno-Norse'. Such Hiberno-Norse cities were fully integrated into the political scene in Ireland, long before the birth of Brian Boru. They often suffered attacks from Irish rulers, and made alliances with others, though ultimately came under the control of the kings of the Provinces of Meath, Leinster, or Munster, who chose those among Hiberno-Norse who would rule the cities, subservient to their loyal subordinates. Rather than conquering Ireland, the Vikings, who initially attacked and subsequently settled in Ireland were, in fact, assimilated by the Irish.

Marriages

Brian married four women:

1. Mór, mother of Murchad, who was slain with Boru at Clontarf.
2. Echrád, mother of his successor Tadc.
3. Gormflaith, the best known of his wives and said to be the most beautiful. She was the daughter of Murchad mac Finn, King of Leinster, sister of Máel Morda and also widow of Olaf Cuarán, the Viking king of Dublin and York.

She was the mother of Donnchad, who succeeded Boru as King of Munster. She was said to be his true love, having mistakenly challenged his authority one too many times, they divorced. Though she's said to be the cause of his death, she was also said to be the one to mourn him the most.

4. Dub Choblaig, was daughter of the King of Connacht.

According to *Njal's Saga*, he also had a foster-son named Kerthialfad.

Cultural heritage

□ The family descended from him (the O'Briens) subsequently ranked as one of the chief dynastic families of the country (see Chiefs of the Name).

In popular culture

Celtic metal band Mael Mórdha derived their name from the king of Leinster who fought against Brian. This was also the theme of their 2005 debut album *Cluain Tarbh*. Another Celtic metal band Cruachan has used the story of Brian Boru for a song "Ard Ri Na Heireann" (translated as "The High King of Ireland") on their 2004 album *Pagan*. Morgan Llywelyn has written a novelization of Brian's life called simply *Lion of Ireland*. The sequel, *Pride of Lions*, tells the story of his sons, Donough and Teigue, as they vie for his crown.

His name is remembered in the title of one of the oldest tunes in Ireland's traditional repertoire : Brian Boru's March.

In "Strapping Young Lads" by Brian Dunning, Brunnhilde claimed to have killed Boru in single combat, and "torn his still-beating heart from his breast."

Limerick band Lucky Numbers released their hit single *Brian Boru* in 1979.

French Brittanian singer Alan Stivell released in 1995 an album called Brian Boru. Most notable for a pop song reprise of the March (though the tune is normally an instrumental piece)

In Star Trek Deep Space Nine, Chief Miles O'Brien has traced his ancestry back to the 11th century Irish king Brian Boru.

Trivia

□ The descendants of Brian were known as the Ua Brian (O'Brien) clan, hence the surnames Ó Briain, O'Brien, O'Brian etc. "O" was originally Ó which in turn came from Ua, which means "grandson", or "descendant" (of a named person). The prefix is often anglicised to O', using an apostrophe instead of the Irish síneadh fada: "".

□ The term **the Brian Boru** is also used to refer to the Brian Boru harp, the national symbol of the Republic of Ireland which appears on the back of Irish euro currency. made between the 14th and 15th centuries, the harp also appears on the Leinster flag. A similar harp features in the trade mark of Guinness.

□ The Spire of Dublin was very nearly named the Brian Boru Spire.

- The Royal Irish Regiment's mascot, an Irish Wolfhound, is always called Brian Boru. The current dog is Brian Boru VII.
- The website for Irish vodka brand Boru says it's "Inspired by Ireland's Visionary High King Brian Boru."
- A major motion picture film surrounding the life of Brian Boru is scheduled to be filmed in 2008 and released in 2009. The film will be entirely shot in Ireland and directed by Cork native Mark Mahon, from an award-winning script he wrote called, "Freedom Within the Heart". American actor, Leonardo DiCaprio is attached to play Brian Boru.

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<http://www.wikipedia.org>

http://brian_boru.totallyexplained.com/

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