

**Brian Boru Lecture Series**

**The Dál Cais version of the  
battle of Clontarf**

**And the death of Irish chivalry**

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# Following Mael Morda's Leinster rebellion

## According to Cogadh

the Leinster decision to rebel against Brian was followed by an invasion of Mide by **the king of Ailech** (under Leinster impetus)

+ invasion of north Mide by **king of Breifne** (also under Leinster impetus)

- Mide under Mael Sechnaill retaliates as far as Howth but is defeated.
- Leinster & Dublin then raid Mide again as far as Fore.

**“After which messengers went from Mael Sechnaill to Brian, to complain of this, namely, that his territory was plundered and his sons killed, and praying him not to permit the foreigners and the Laigin [Leinster] and the Brefne and the Cairbre, and the king of Ailech to come all together against him.**

## For 12<sup>th</sup> C Dál Cais writers

BATTLE OF CLONTARF = RESULT OF LEINSTER & DUBLIN REBELLING AGAINST BRIAN

Rebellion takes form of FIGHTING MAEL SECHNAILL OF MIDE

**In short – according to Dál Cais propaganda, MAEL-SECHNAILL ASKS BRIAN FOR HELP rather than Brian simply deciding to invade**

# Annals of Inisfallen (Munster chronicle)

1014

**Great warfare between Brian and the foreigners of Áth Cliath** and Brian brought a great muster of the men of Ireland to Áth Cliath. After that the foreigners of Áth Cliath gave battle to Brian, son of Cennétig and he was slain with his son Murchad, royal heir of Ireland and Murchad's son namely, Tairdelbach, as also the princes of Munster round Conaing, son of Donn Cuan and round Domnall son of Diarmait, king of Corcu Bascinn and round Mac Bethad son of Muiredach, king of Ciarraige Luachra, and also Tadc Ua Cellaig, king of Uí Maine and many others. There was also slain in that battle Mael Mórda son of Murchad, king of Laigin, together with the princes of the Laigin round him and the foreigners of the western world were slaughtered in that same battle.

# The dead according to the Annals of Inisfallen

(a pro-Dál Cais text in this period)

## Ciarriage LuachraDál Cais

Brian son of Cennétig, his son Murchad and his grandson, Tairdelbach son of Murchad.

Conaing son of Donn Cuan [son of Cennétig] (=?king of Arra in Tipperary?)

## Corcu Bascinn

Domnall son of Diarmait

Mac Bethad son of Muiredach

## Uí Maine

Tadc Ua Cellaig

## Leinster

Mael Mórda son of Murchad

# Compare with *Annals of Ulster account* where the dead are greater in number and more widespread, geographically:

## King of Leinster

Mael Mórda son of Murchad

## Forthuatha

Domnall son of Fergal

## Foreigners

Dubgall son of Amlaíb - + Siucraid son of  
Lodur – *jarl of Innsi Orc*

Gilla Ciaráin son of Glún Iarain – heir designate  
of the foreigners [king of Dublin]

Oittir Dub + Suartgair

Donnchad grandson of Erulb (=northern Viking  
relatives of Ailech and worthy of being  
king of Dublin)

Griséne & Luimne & Amlaíb son of Lagmann  
& Brodor *toisech* of the ships of the  
Lochlannaigh

## Dál Cais

Brian son of Cennétig, Murchad and  
Tairdelbach son of Murchad

Conaing son of of Donn Cuan son of Cennétig

## Déisi Muman

Mothla son of Domnall son of Faelán

Ciarraige Luachra

Corcu Baiscinn

Eoganacht Locha Léin

Uí Maine

Ua Cellaig

Uí Fhiachrach Aidne

Fernmag

Mormaer of Marr, Scotland

## *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh –* the story as told in the twelfth century

- LXXXVI: After this, the men of Munster and of Connacht, under Brian, made a great expedition against Ossory (Kilkenny) and against the Leinstermen. **Murchad son of Brian** made a great plunder of the Leinstermen and he devastated the whole country until he reached the community of Kevin of Glendalough and he ravaged and burnt the whole country and many captives were carried off by him and cattle innumerable and he came to Kilmainham to the *faithche* (open space) of Áth Cliath. Then Brian and the army came to join him. They made a siege and blockade around Áth Cliath and an encampment there. They were there from the festival of Ciaran in harvest (9<sup>th</sup> September) to Great Christmas and neither the foreigners nor the Leinstermen (Laigin) yielded him one hostage, nor one battle nor one subsidy during that time. So when their provisions were exhausted, Brian retired to his home about Christmas.

## *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* – the story as told in the twelfth century *cont.*

- LXXXVII: Another great expedition was made by Brian on the festival of Patrick in spring to attack Áth Cliath and the Laigin. [Leinster]. But when the foreigners heard of this muster coming against them, they sent messengers and ambassadors every where around them, to gather troops and armies unto them, to meet Brian in battle. They invited unto them **Brodor the earl and Amlaib, son of the king of Lochlann (Norway); the two earls of Cair and of all the north of Saxon-land. These two were the chiefs of ships and outlaws and Danes of all the west of Europe,** having no reverence, veneration, respect or mercy for God or for man, for church or for sanctuary, at the head of 2000 cruel, villainous, ferocious, plundering, hard-hearted, foreign, wonderful Danes, selling and hiring themselves for gold and silver and other treasure as well. And there was not one villain or robber of that 2000 who had not polished, strong, triple-plated, glittering armour of refined iron or of cool, uncorroding brass, encasing their sides and bodies from head to foot.

## ***Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*** – the story as told in the twelfth century *cont.*

- They invited to them also Sigurd, son of Lotar, **earl of the Orkneys** and of other islands also with an assembled army of ignorant, barbarous, thoughtless, irreclaimable, unsociable **foreigners of the Orkney islands and of the islands of Caithness; from Man and from Skye and from Lewis; from Kintyre and from Argyll and two barons of the Corr Britons (Cornwall?) and Corndabbliteoc of the Britons of St David's (Wales).**
- They invited also Carlus and Ebric, **two sons of the king of France and Plat, a strong knight of Lochlann and he hero Conmael.** This fleet then arrived from every quarter at Ath Cliath. There were also in Áth Cliath itself a very great force, namely three very strong battalions; for **Mael Morda, son of Murchad son of Finn, king of the Laigin and the muster of Laigin and of the Uí Cennselaigh** (Kinsellas – Sth Leinster) with him, come to Áth Cliath. These formed three great battalions.



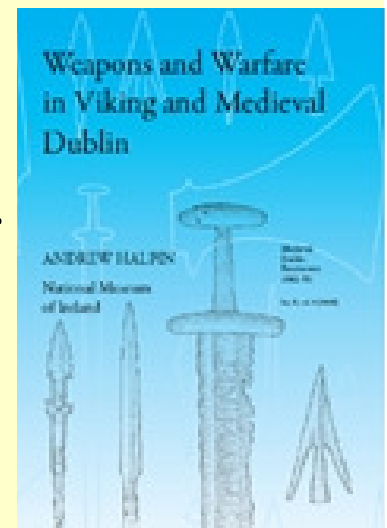
# Brian's Army

- LXXXVIII: To return now to Brian, son of Cennétig, king of Ireland. There assembled around him all that obeyed him of the men of Ireland, namely: the two provinces of **Munster and Connacht and the men of Mide** but the men of Mide were not faithful to him, for he knew himself that they would desert him at the approach of that battle, even though they came to the assembly.
- And they now reached Áth Cliath. And Uí Gabla and Uí Donnchadha (west county Dublin) and all Fine Gall (Fingal) were plundered by them. Kilmainham was burned by them. Then Donnchad son of Brian and the new levies of the Dál Cais and the third battalion of Munster were sent into the territories of the Leinstermen, in the absence of its people, to spoil and plunder the country. When the foreigners saw the conflagration in Fingal and the district of Edar (Howth), they came against them in Mag nElda (Plain of wings – no identification) and raised their standards of battle on high.

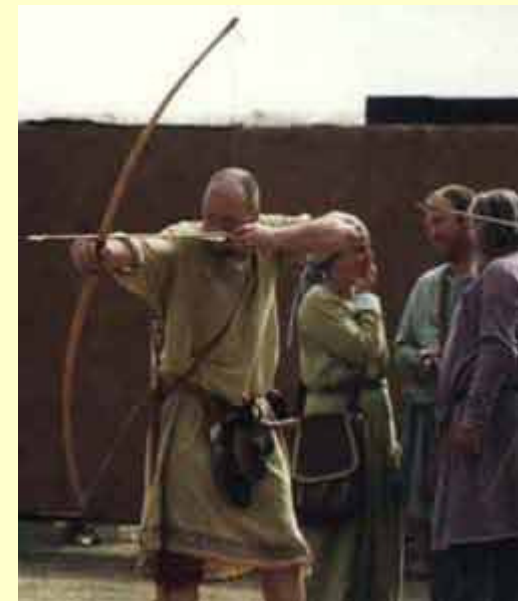
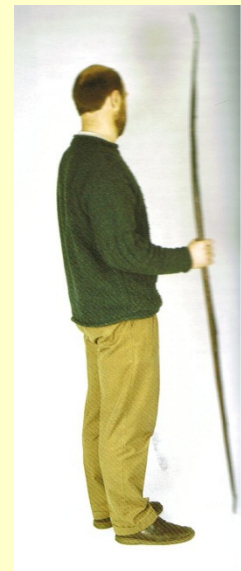
**In short, *Cogadh* describes skirmishes in Leinster by Brian's sons pre battle**

# The enemy (and their weapons)

Now on the one side of that battle were the shouting, hateful, ... **cruel, barbarous... huge... murderous, hostile Danes... surly piratical foreigners**... without reverence, without veneration, without honour, without mercy for God and for man. These had for the purposes of battle and combat and for their defence... sharp... poisoned **arrows**, which had been anointed and browned in the blood of dragons and toads and water-snakes of hell... they had with them hideous, barbarous **quivers** and polished yellow-shining **bows** and strong broad...**spears** in the stout, bold... hands of freebooters. They had also with them polished, pliable, triple-plated ...**corselets** of double refined iron and of cool uncorroding brass for the protection of their bodies and skin and skulls... They had also with them valorous, heroic... stout **swords**.



Archers – using Scandinavian type wooden long bows such as were found at Ballinderry



# The Dál Cais army use similar weapons to their enemies

- XCII. But on the other side of that battle were brave, valiant champions; soldierly, active, nimble..full of courage... bright, fresh, never-weary... valiant victorious heroes and chieftains and champions and brave soldiers, the men of high deeds and honour and fame of Ireland... that is to say the descendents of Lugaid son of Aengus Tirech who are called the Dál Cais and the stainless, intelligent heroes of the Gael along with them.
- **They were a tribe worthy of being compared with the sons of Míl for kingliness and great renown for energy and dignity and martial prowess. They were the Franks of ancient Ireland (Fodla) in intelligence and pure valour; the comely, beautiful, noble, ever-victorious sons of Israel of Ireland, the strong, tearing, brave lions of the Gael for valour and bold deeds, the terrible, nimble wolf-hounds of victorious Ireland... the graceful, symmetrical hawks of mild Europe ...**
- And these had for the purposes of battle and combat... above their heads, spears glittering, well riveted, empoisoned with well-shaped... handles of white hazel; terrible sharp darts with variegated silken strings; thick set with bright... nails. They had on them also long, glossy... graceful shirts. They had on them also beautiful, many-coloured... tunics over comfortable long vests. They had with them also great warlike, bright, beautiful, variegated shields with bosses of brass and elegant chains of bronze at the sides of their noble, accomplished... clansmen. They had on them also crested golden helmets, set with sparkling transparent, brilliant gems and precious stones on the heads of chiefs and royal knights. They had with them also shining, powerful... **bright, broad, well-set Lochlann (Viking) axes in the hands of chiefs and leaders and strong soldiers for cutting and maiming the close well-fastened coats of mail.** They had with them steel, strong.... quick, sharp swords in the beautiful white hands of chiefs and royal soldiers for hewing and for hacking, for maiming and mutilating skins and bodies and skulls...





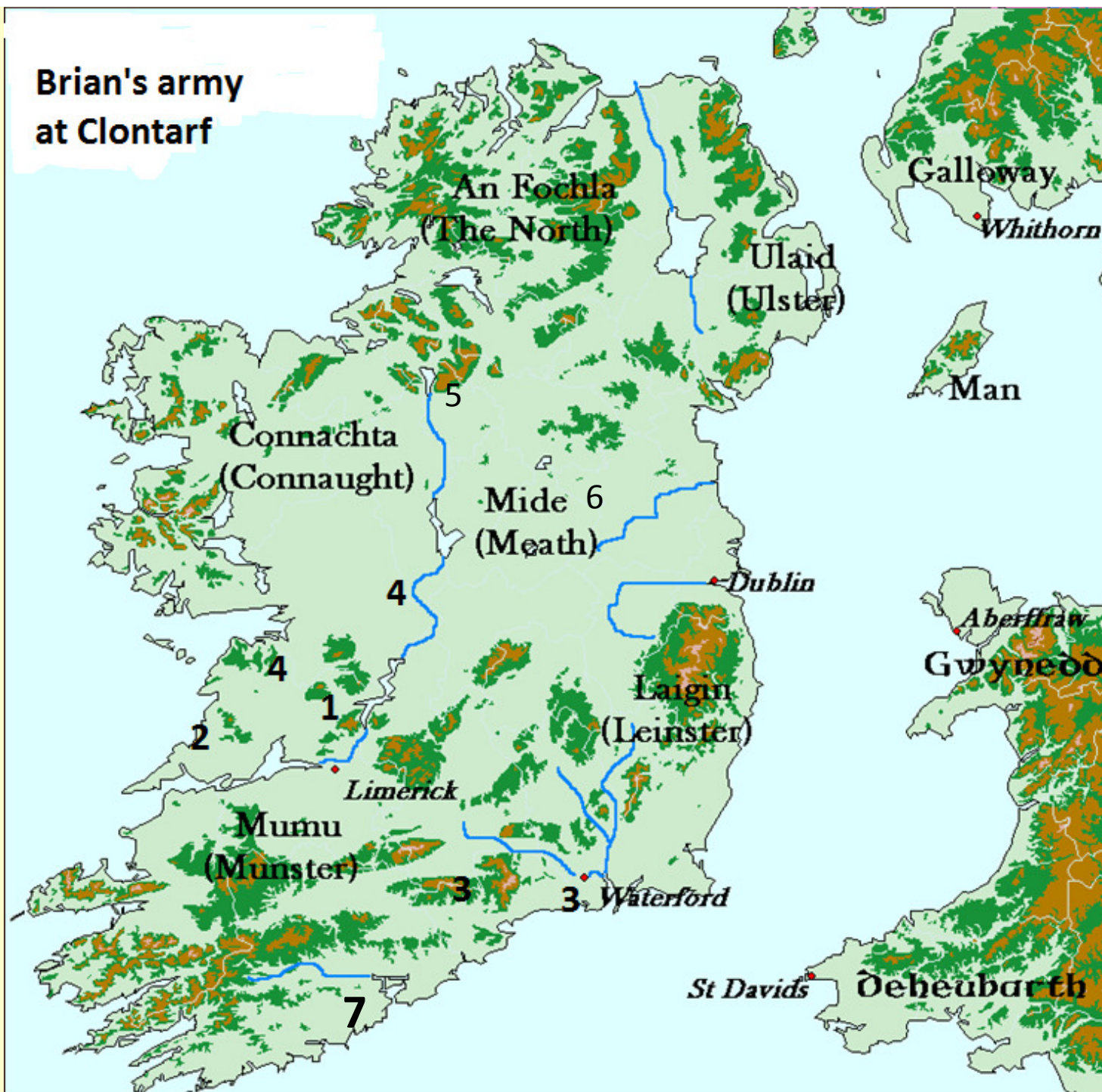
***Svartleggja***  
 (Cleasby/Vigfusson): black leg,  
 black stalk – borrowed into  
 Irish as *Súaitrech*, *suartlech* =  
 used in sources as term for  
 hired (Norse?) mercenaries



# The arrangement of the Dál Cais army

- XCV: The front of Brian's battalion and of the nobles of Ireland with him, was given to the aforesaid ... troops,.. lively heroes, viz to the heroic, victorious Dál Cais and to the Clann of Lugaid likewise. **At the head of these were the matchless, ever victorious Hector... Murchad son of Brian...** the head of valour and bravery and chivalry, generosity... and beauty of the men of the world in his time... Along with him were also Toirdelbach his son, the best crown prince of his time in Ireland and Conaing son of Donnucuan, one of the three men most valued by Brian that were then in Ireland; and Niall Ua Cuinn and Eochaid son of Dunadach and Cudulliagh, son of Cennétig, the three rear guards of Brian and Domnall son of **Diarmaid, king of Corcu Baiscinn** and the greater part of the men of bravery and valour of the Dál Cais along with them. One very strong and great battalion were also formed of the chosen hosts of all Munster and was **stationed in the rear of the former. At the head of these was Mothla, son of Domnall, son of Faelan, king of the Deisi and Magnus, son of Anmchad, king of Uí Liathain** and the brave and heroic of all Munster along with them.
- XCVI. **The battalion of Connacht also, was led by Mael Ruanaid Ua n-Eidin (king of Uí Fhiachrach Aidne)** and by Tadhg ua Cellaig, king of Uí Maine and by Mael Ruanaid son of Murghius, king of Muntir Maelruanaidh; and by Domnall, grandson of Cucennin, king of Uí nDiarmada and with Ualgarg son of Cerin and with the nobles of all Connacht along with them.

**Brian's army  
at Clontarf**



# Subordinates in the Dál Cais army

- The ten great stewards of Brian were drawn up with their foreign auxiliaries, on one side of the army. **Fergal Ua Ruairc and the Ui Briuin Breifni** and the Conmaicne were ordered to the left wing of the army.
- Mael Sechnaill also, son of Domnall, king of Tara and the battalion of the men of Mide with him, were next; but he consented not to be placed along with the rest; because the counsel of the foreigners on the preceding night was that he should put a ditch between him and the foreigners and that if he would not attack the foreigners, the foreigners would not attack him; and so it was done, for the evil understanding was between them.
- XCVII **Some of the historians (*senchaidi*) of Munster however, say that Murchad, son of Brian was placed, mixed with the battalion of Desmumhain (Desmond or south-Munster),** along with his company, namely 7 score (7 x 20) sons of kings that were in attendance upon him; for there was not a king of any one *túath* in Ireland who had not his son or his brother in Murchad's *teglach*; for he was the lord of the volunteers of Ireland and of her sons next to Aed Ua neill (of northern Uí Néill). They say that the two battalions were side by side, namely the battalion of Desmumhain (Desmond) and the battalion of Tuadmuman (Thomand) and it is clear that this is true for when they were arranging the battalion, Murchad went forward beyond the rest a hand's cast to attack the foreigners... and this is the reason why the nobles of all Desmumain were killed there because they endeavoured to follow Murchad to surround the foreigners and the Danes.



# The prophecy of Ua Hartagan – Murchad will die

- Then Murchad looked to one side and beheld approaching him on his right side, alone, the heroic courageous.... Young hero Dunlang O Hartagan and he recognised him and made three springs to meet him and he kissed him and welcomed him and “O lad, (*gille*) it is long since you came to us and great must be the love and attachment of some woman to you that induced you to abandon me and to abandon Brian and Conaing and Donnchadh and the nobles of Dál Cais in this manner and the delights of Ireland until today.
- “Alas O’king, said Dunlang, “the delight I have abandoned for you is greater, i.e. life without death, without cold, without thirst.... Until the judgement and heaven after the judgement and if I had not pledged my word to you I would not have come here and moreover, it has been foretold that I will die on the day that you will die. “Shall I receive death this day then? Said Murchad “You shall receive it indeed” said Dunlang and Brian and Conaing shall receive it and almost all the nobles of Ireland and Toirdelbhach your son... “This is not an encouragement to fight” said Murchad “and if we had such news, we wouldn’t have told you but however often I was offered in the *Síd* and in the *Brug* this world and these gifts, I never abandoned for one night my country nor my inheritance for them...”

# Scotland versus Norway

- First then were drawn up there Domnall, son of Eimin, ***mormaer* of Alban (Scotland) on Brian's side** and **Plait, son of the king of Lochlainn (Norway) brave champion of the foreigners...** Then Plait came forth from the battalion of the men in armour and said three times "Faras Domnall?" that is "where is Donnall?" Domnall answered and said, "here you reptile.". They fought then...and they fell by each other and the way that they fell was with the sword of each through the heart of the other with the hair of each in the clenched hand of the other. And the combat of that pair was the first of the battle.

Plait is thus reported as talking a garbled form of Old Norse at this point.

# Naas and Uí Chennselaig (southern Leinster) defeated by Breifne as Brian's allies

- CI The person who was on the flank of the Overseas battalion was Domnall, son of Tuathal, king of Liphe (Naas) with 10,00 men armed for battle. On Brian's side there met him their equal in numbers and in might, namely Fergal Ua Ruairc (Breifne) and Domnall son of Raghallach and Gilla-na-Naemb, son of Domnall O'Ferghail (Longford) and the nobles of the Ui Briuin and Conmaicni also.
- These..now detached themselves from the great body of the army until there was the distance of a bow shot between them to the north of the great body and they began to stab and hew each other.....They very nearly killed each other altogether and historians say that **there survived from the Ui Briuin and the Conmaicne only one hundred with Fergal Ua Ruairc** . The entire Uí Cennselaig were routed there and they were afterwards pursued to the battalion of the mail clad men.. and it was then that nine of the household troops of Fergal overtook Dunlang son of Tuathal and killed him. Mac an Trin who was *toiseach* of the house of Fergal beheaded him and he brought the head to Fergal to congratulate him on it. And they went then, **the few of the them that were left into Brian's battalion and behind Murchad's standard (*merge*)** and they had Fergal's standard floating there, after the fall of all their other standards and the killing of their chiefs namely 10 standards and 3 score.



# The degree of bloodshed

- CIII Another account of this is the description which Mael Sechnaill, son of Domnall, king of Tara gave of that crush when the Clann Cholmain asked him for an account of the battle. It was then he said “I never saw a battle like it nor have I heard of its equal and even if an angel of God attempted its description, I doubt if he could give it. ...not one person of the two hosts could recognise another though it might be his son or his brother that was nearest him unless he should know his voice and that he previously knew the spot in which he was for **we were so covered with the drops of gory blood, our heads as well as our faces and our clothes, carried by the force of the sharp cold wind which passed over them to us.** ...Our spears over our heads had become clogged and bound with long locks of hair ...

# Murchad son of Brian – the “Hector” of Ireland

- CVII To return to Murchad son of Brian the royal champion. He grasped his two valiant strong swords, viz a sword in his right hand and a sword in his left for he was the last man in Ireland who had equal skill in striking with his right and with his left hand. He was the last man who had true valour in Ireland. It was he that swore the word of a true champion, that he would not retreat one foot before the whole of the human race for any reason whatsoever but this alone that he might die of his wounds. He was the last man in Ireland who was a match for 100. He was the last man who killed 100 in one day. ..He was the metaphorical **Hector** of all-victorious Ireland in religion and in valour and in championship, in generosity and in munificence. He was the pleasant, affable, intelligent, accomplished **Samson** of the Hebrews for promoting the prosperity and freedom of his fatherland (*atharda*) and of his race (*cenél*). He was the second powerful Hercules... He was the **Lug Lama-fada** who, like him, sprang over every obstacle, laid bare every brave head and exterminated and expelled the foreigners and the Overseas men out of Ireland.

Murchad is thus compared to heroes of the Classical period, to the strong men of the Old Testament and to champions of the Irish mythological cycle.

## Gormlaith's son Sitrygg (Sitric) and Brian's daughter (Sitrygg's wife) watch Murchad, the brother (in law)

- CVIII When this very great, very valiant royal champion and brave powerful hero saw the crushing and the defeat which the men of Denmark and the Overseas Danish gave to the Dal Cais it operated on him like death or a permanent blemish to see the conflict of the foreigners with them and he was seized with a boiling terrible anger... It is testified by his enemies that is the historians of the foreigners and of the Laigin that **there fell 50 by his right hand and 50 by his left... and he never repeated a blow to any one but only the one blow and neither shield nor mail-coat (*luireach*) was proof to resist any of those blows...** He was followed by the great, impetuous... phalanx of the Clann Luigdech ..and the fine valiant... champions of his own *teglach* (household) namely 7 x 20 sons of kings that were in his household and the man of smallest patrimony amongst them was lord of a *triocha cé*t (3000 men – barony-sized unit?). And the son of Amlaib (ie. Sitric Silkenbeard) who was on the upper parts of his *grianán* (sunny place – watch tower?) watching them said “well do the foreigners reap the field.” “It will be at the end of the day that will be seen” said Brian's daughter, namely the wife of Amlaib's son.
- (*i.e.* Sitric was son of Amlaib (Ólafr) and Gormlaith; Gormlaith then married Brian. Brian's daughter by his Uí Fhiachrach wife (?) or by his wife from Meath was married to Sitric.)

# The defeat of the Leinstermen & the foreigners

- CIX They continued in battle array and fighting from sunrise to evening... For it was at the full tide the foreigners came out to fight the battle in the morning and the tide had come to the same place again at the close of the day when the foreigners were defeated and the tide had carried away their ships from them so that they had not at the last any place to fly to but into the sea after the mail-coated foreigners had been all killed by the Dál Cais. **An awful rout was made of the foreigners and of the Laigin** so that they fled simultaneously and they shouted their cries for mercy and made yells of defeat and retreat and running but they could only fly to the sea because they had no other place to retreat to seeing they were cut off between it and the head of Dubhgall's Bridge....and the foreigners were drowned in great numbers in the sea and they lay in heaps and in hundreds, confounded after parting with their bodily senses ...under the tremendous hard-hearted pressure with which the Dal Cais and the men of Connacht and as many as were also there of the nobles of Ireland pursued them.



## Brian's daughter watches her nephew being killed

- CX. It was then that **Toirdelbach, the son of Murchad son of Brian** went after the foreigners into the sea when the rushing tide wave struck him a blow against the weir of Clontarf and so he **was drowned** with a foreigner under him and a foreigner in his right hand and a foreigners in his left and a stake of the weir through him. There was not of his age a person of greater generosity or munificence than he in Ireland and there was not a more promising heir to the kingdom. For he inherited the munificence of his father and the royal dignity of his grandfather and he had not completed more than 15 years at that time. He was also one of the three men who had killed most on that day.
- Then it was Brian's daughter, namely the wife of Amlaib's son (Sitric) said "It appears to me that the foreigners have gained their inheritance (*dúchas*). "What do you mean woman" said Amlaib's son. The foreigners are going into the sea, their natural inheritance" said she, "I wonder if they are hot but if so they are not waiting to be milked". The son of Amlaib became angered and he gave her a blow (which knocked a tooth out of head).



# The death of Murchad son of Brian



- CXI To return to Murchad son of Brian. When he had passed through the battalions of the foreigners, accompanied by the champions of the Dal Cais... there was a party of soldiers of the foreigners still before him... it was then that Murchad perceived Siucraid son of Lotar, **Earl of the Orkneys** in the midst of the battalion of the Dál Cais, slaughtering and mutilating them... Then Murchad made a violent rush at him and dealt him a fierce blow... in the direction of his neck... and he cut his neck and felled that brave hero with two tremendous, well-aimed blows in that man.
- CXII Then came the heroic valiant... warrior, the son of Ebric, **son of the king of Lochlann (=Norway)** into the bosom and the centre of the Dál Cais ..[and he and Murchad] fought a stout furious bloody crimson combat... And the sword of Murchad at that time was inlaid with ornament and the inlaying that was in it melted with the excessive heat of the striking... He perceived that and cast the sword from him and he laid hold of the top of the foreigner's head and pulled his coat of mail over his head forward and they fought a wrestling combat. Then Murchad put the foreigner down under him by the force of wrestling and then he caught the foreigner's own sword and thrust it into the ribs of the foreigner's breast until it reached the ground through him three times. The foreigner then drew his knife and with it gave Murchad such a cut that the whole of his entrails were cut out and they fell to the ground before him. Then did shiverings and faintings descend on Murchad and he not the power to move so that they fell by each other there, the foreigner and Murchad. But at the same time Murchad cut off the foreigner's head. **And Murchad did not die that night nor until sunrise the next day until he had received absolution and communion and penance and until he had taken the Body of Christ and until he had made his confession and his will.**

**In Norse sources, the battle of Clontarf took place on Good Friday; the Cogadh does not give this detail but if such a date was part of the Irish tradition, it might explain why Murchad is said to have survived so long (for Holy Communion would not have been available until Easter Sunday.)**

# Brian hears of Murchad's death

- CXIII Let us speak now of the adventures of Brian, son of Cennétig during this time. When the forces met in combat, his cushion was spread under him and he opened his psalter and he began to clasp his hands and to pray after the battle had commenced and there was no one with him but his own *gilla*, whose name was Latean (from whom are the O'Lateans, still in Munster). Brian said to the attendant – “you watch the battles and the combats while I sing the psalms.” He sang 50 psalms and 50 prayers and 50 paternosters (Our Fathers) and he asked the attendant after that what the condition of the battalions was. The attendant answered and said “Mixed and closely confounded are the battalions... resounding blows upon heads and bones and skulls on both sides.” Then he asked **what was the condition of Murchad's standard and the *gilla* said “It is standing and many of the banners of the Dal Cais are around it and many heads are falling around it and a multitude of trophies and spoils with heads of the foreigners are along with it.” “That is good news indeed” said Brian.**
- His cushion was readjusted under him and he sang the psalms and prayer and the paternosters in the same manner as before. And he asked...what was the condition of Murchad's standard. The attendant said that it was far from him and that it passed through the battalions westwards and was still standing. Brian said “The men of Ireland shall be well while that standard remains standing because their courage and valour shall remain in them all as long as they can see that standard.”
- The cushion was readjusted under Brian and he sang 50 psalms and 50 prayers and 50 paters and the fighting continued all that time. He asked then of the attendant “in what state were the forces?” The attendant answered...”the greater part of them have fallen, leaving a few brave men and gallant heroes only still standing. Their condition is, furthermore, that they are wounded an pierced through and dismembered and they are disorganised all around like the grindings of a mill turning the wrong way and the foreigners are now defeated and **Murchad's standard has fallen.**

# Brian leaves Ireland to Donnchad and his body to Armagh

- “That is sad news” said Brian “the honour and valour of Ireland fell when that standard fell and Ireland has fallen now indeed and never shall there appear henceforth a champion comparable or like to that champion. And what worth is it to me to survive this or that I should obtain rulership of the world after the fall of Murchad and Conaing and the other nobles of the Dá1) Cais?...” Woe is me” said the attendant, “if you would take my advice you would mount your horse and we would go to the camp and remain there amongst the servants and every one who escapes this battle will come to us there and they will all rally around us. Besides, the battalions are now mixed together in confusion and a party of the foreigners have rejected the idea of retreating to the sea and we know not who may approach us where we now are. “Oh God boy” Said Brian, “retreat would not become us and I myself know that I will not leave this place alive and anyway, what would it profit me if I did? For Aibhell of Craig Liath came to me last night and she told me that I should be killed this day and she said to me that the first of my sons I should see this day would be he who should succeed me in the kingship and that is Donnchad; go now Ladean and take these horses with you and receive my blessing and carry out my will after me viz that my body and my soul to God and to St Patrick and that I am to be carried to Armagh and my blessing to Donnchad for discharging my last bequests after me – **viz 12 x 20 cows to be given to the heir of Patrick and the *muintir* of Armagh and its own proper dues to Killaloe and the churches of Munster** and he knows that I have not wealth of gold or silver but he is to pay them in return for my blessing and for his succeeding me. Go this night to Swords and desire them to come tomorrow early for my body and to carry it fromt here to Duleek of Cianan and then let them carry it to Louth and let Mael Muire Mac Eochada, the heir of Patrick and the *muintir* of Armagh come to meet me at Louth.

# The death of Brian

- CXIV. While they were engaged in this conversation, the attendant saw a party of the foreigners approaching them. The Earl Brodar was there and 2 warriors along with him. “There are people coming towards us here” said the attendant. “Woe is me, what manner of people are they?” said Brian. “A blue stark, naked people” said the attendant. “Alas!” said Brian, “they are the foreigners of the armour and it is not to do good to you that they have come.” While he was saying this, he arose and stepped off the cushion and unsheathed his sword. Brodar passed him by and noticed him not. One of the three who were there and who had been in Brian’s service, said “**CING, CING, this is the king.**” “**No, no, put priest, priest**” said Brodar – “it is not he but a noble priest”. “By no means” said the soldier “that is the great king Brian.” Brodar then turned around and appeared with a bright, gleaming, trusty, battle-axe in his hand with the handle set in the middle of it. When Brian saw him, he gazed at him and gave him a stroke with his sword and cut off his left leg at the knee and his right leg at the foot. The foreigner dealt Brian a stroke which cut open his head utterly and Brian killed the second man that was with Brodar and they fell both mutually by each other.

*This story probably indicates that the Dál Cais historians thought that Brian was dressed in a gown such as a clergyman might wear rather than in armour.*

## *Annals of Ulster*

Mael Muire successor of Patrick, with his venerable clerics and relics, came moreover to Swords (of Columcille) and brought away the body of Brian, king of Ireland and the body of his son Murchad and the head of Conaing and the head of Mothla (king of the Déise of Waterford) and buried them in Armagh in a new tomb. For twelve nights the community of Patrick waked the bodies in honour of the dead king.

## ‘Dál Cais’ V ‘Norse’ sources

The Dál Cais version of the battle of Clontarf differs in important aspects from that found in Norse sources.

Of these, the most detailed is that found in the *Saga of Burnt Njal*.

It has been suggested by some that this Norse saga had antecedents in an earlier text written in Norse Dublin although others disagree.

See Benjamin Hudson, “Brjáns Saga” in the journal *Medium Aevum* 71 (2002), 141-68 – reprinted in B. Hudson, *Irish Sea studies AD 900-1200* (Dublin 2006), 143-171

# The Norse version of Clontarf – the saga of Burnt Njal tells the story of the Manx hero Brodir

- **Chap 155:** ...Then Brodir conferred with Ospak. He told Ospak all about his talk with Sitrygg [Sitric of Dublin] and asked him to join him in the war against King Brian. He said that was of vital importance to him. Ospak said that he had no wish to fight against so good a king. They both became angry and made a division of their forces; Ospak got ten ships and Brodir twenty.
- Ospak was a heathen and a very shrewd man. He anchored his ships inside the Sound while Brodir lay just outside it.
- Brodir had been a Christian and had been consecrated a deacon but he had abandoned his faith and become an apostate. Now he sacrificed to heathen spirits and was deeply skilled in magic. He wore armour that no weapon could pierce. He was tall and powerful and his hair was so long that he tucked it under his belt; it was black.
- **Chap 156:** One night a terrible clamour broke out above Brodir and his men. They all awoke and jumped up and put on their clothes. At the same time, boiling blood rained down on them. They tried to protect themselves with their shields but several of them were scalded. This phenomenon lasted until dawn and one man on each ship was killed.
- Next night the clamour came again and they all jumped up once more. Their swords leapt from the sheaths and axes and spears flew into the air and fought of their own accord. The weapons attacked the men so fiercely that they were forced to protect themselves but several of them were wounded and one man on each ship was killed. This lasted until dawn. Then they slept again during the day.
- The third night the same clamour was heard. Ravens came flying at them with beaks and talons that seemed made of iron. The ravens attacked them violently but they defended themselves with swords and sheltered behind their shields. This lasted until dawn and once more one man on each ship lost his life. Then the others slept again for a while.



**It is true that Christianity was still spreading slowly through Norse-speaking world at time of Clontarf.**



Tenth-century soapstone mold, found at Trendgården, Jylland, Denmark, could be used to cast either heathen or Christian amulets.

Harold “Bluetooth” Gormsson (died 986) built exceptionally large church 30 x 14m at Jelling; commissioned large rune stone displaying crucified Christ and proclaimed he had made “the Danes Christian”. He dug up his father’s grave from mound north of this building and he placed them in tomb under church floor at entrance to choir. He also produced coins with Christian iconography.







## *Njal's saga:* Ospak turns to Brian



- When Brodir awoke he heaved a great sigh and ordered a boat to be lowered, saying that he wanted to see his sworn-brother Ospak. He stepped into the boat with some of his men. When he met Ospak, he told him of all the weird events that had occurred and asked him to explain what they could mean. Ospak refused to tell him until he was given a pledge of peace. Brodir gave his pledge but even so Ospak put off telling him until nightfall for Brodir would never kill at night.
- Then Ospak said “The blood raining down on you signifies that you shall shed much blood, your own as well as other people’s. The great clamour you heard signifies the rupture of the world ; you shall all die soon. The weapons attacking you signify battle and the **ravens which attacked you** signify the demons which you once believed in and which shall drag you down to the torments of Hell.
- Brodir was so outraged that he could not speak. He went straight back to his men and blocked the Sound with **ships**, fastening them to the shore with cables. He intended to kill Ospak and all his men next morning. Ospak saw their preparations and made a vow that he would accept Christianity and join King Brian and follow him for the rest of his life. Then he made his men cover all their ships and pole them along the shore; then they severed the cables of Brodir’s ships which drifted together while the men on board slept. Ospak and his men escaped from the Sound and set sail west for Ireland and did not pause until they had reached Kincora. Ospak told King Brian everything he had learnt, received baptism from him and committed himself to his protection. King Brian then gathered forces throughout his realm; they were all to assemble at Dublin the week before Palm Sunday.

# Gormlaith's other suitor – the Earl of

## Orkney

- **Chap 157 (Penguin edition):** Earl Sigurd Hlodvisson made ready to leave Orkney for Ireland. Flosi offered to accompany him but the earl refused since Flosi still had to carry out his pilgrimage to Rome. Flosi offered 15 of his own men for the expedition and this the earl accepted. Flosi himself went with Earl Gilli to the Hebrides.
- With Sigurd went Thorstein Hallsson, Hrafn the Red and Erling of Stroma. The earl did not want a man called Harek to come with them but promised that he would be the first to hear what happened.
- **Earl Sigurd arrived at Dublin with all his army on Palm Sunday.** Brodir and his forces were already there. **Brodir tried to learn by means of sorcery how the battle would go; the answer he got was this, that if the battle took place on Good Friday, King Brian would win the victory but lose his life and that if the battle took place earlier, all Brian's opponents would lose their lives. Then Brodir said that they should not join battle before Friday.**
- On the Thursday a man on a dapply grey horse came riding up carrying a javelin. He talked for a long time with Brodir and Kormlod (Gormlaith).
- King Brian had already reached Dublin with all his forces. **On Good Friday his army came marching out of the town and both sides drew up in battle array. Brodir was on one flank and King Sitrygg on the other with Earl Sigurd in the centre.**

*Note that the Norse describe Sitric of Dublin as fighting in the battle. This is very different from his role as passive and carping spectator in the Cogadh*

# Sigurd's raven banner

- King Brian did not wish to wield weapons on Good Friday; so a wall of shields was formed round him and his army was drawn up in front of it. Ulf Hreda was on the flank facing Brodir and on the other flank facing King Sitrygg were Ospak and King Brian's sons. In the centre was Kerthjalfad (identified as foster son of Brian) with the banners aloft before him.
- The armies clashed and there was bitter fighting. Brodir waded through the opposing ranks, felling all those in the forefront and no weapons could wound him. Ulf Hreda turned to face him and thrust at him thrice with such violence that Brodir was knocked down each time and could scarcely regain his feet. As soon as he scrambled to his feet the third time, he fled into the woods.
- Earl Sigurd had a fierce struggle with Kerthjalfad, who advanced with such vigor that he felled all those in the forefront. He burst through Earl Sigurd's ranks right up to the banner and killed the standard-bearer. The earl ordered someone else to carry the standard and the fighting flared up again. Kerthjalfad at once killed the new standard-bearer and all those who were near him. Earl Sigurd ordered Thorstein Hallsson to carry the standard and Thorstein was about to take it when Amundi the White said "Don't take the banner, Thorstein. All those who bear it get killed." "Hrafn the Red" said the earl "you take the standard." "Carry your own devil yourself" said Hrafn. "The earl said: "A beggar should carry his own bundle"; he ripped the flag from its staff and tucked it under his clothing. "A little later Amundi the White was killed and then the earl himself died with a spear through him."

# An earlier account of the origins of the raven banner

- One summer it happened that a Scottish earl called Finnleik challenged Sigurd to fight him on a particular day at Skitten. Sigurd's mother was a sorceress so he went to consult her, telling her that the odds against him were heavy, at least seven to one.
- "Had I thought you might live for ever," she said, "I'd have reared you in my wool-basket. But lifetimes are shaped by what will be, not by where you are. Now, take this banner. I've made it for you with all the skill I have, and my belief is this: that it will bring victory to the man it's carried before, but death to the one who carries it."
- It was a finely made banner, very cleverly embroidered with the figure of a raven, and when the banner fluttered in the breeze, the raven seemed to be flying ahead. Earl Sigurd lost his temper at his mother's words.
- He got the support of the Orkney farmers by giving them back their land-rights, then set out for Skitten to confront Earl Finnleik. The two sides formed up, but the moment they clashed Sigurd's standard-bearer was struck dead. The Earl told another man to pick up the banner but before long he'd been killed too. The Earl lost three standard bearers, but he won the battle and the farmers of Orkney got back their land-rights."

*Orkneyinga saga* – written at end of the twelfth century





# *Njal's saga*: the death of Brian and the revenge of his Norse half-brother

- Ospak advanced right through the opposing flank; he was severely wounded and both King Brian's sons were dead. But even so King Sigtrygg fled before him and at that his whole army broke into flight.
- Thorstein Hallsson stopped running while the others were fleeing and tied up his shoe-thong. Kerthjalfad asked him why he was not running.
- "Because" said Thorstein, "I cannot reach home tonight for my home is out in Iceland." Kerthjalfad spared his life.
- Hrafn the Red was chased into a river and there he seemed to see down into the depths of Hell itself with devils trying to drag him down. He said "Your dog has run twice to Rome already, Saint Peter, and would do it a third time if you allowed it." Then the devils released him and he managed to reach the other bank of the river.
- Brodir could see that King Brian's forces were pursuing the fugitives and there were only a few men left to man the wall of shields. He ran from the woods and burst through the wall of shields and hacked at the king. **The boy Tadk threw up an arm to protect Brian but the sword cut off the arm and the king's head. The king's blood spilled over the stump of the boy's arm and the wound healed at once.** Then Brodir shouted "Let the word go round that Brodir has felled King Brian".
- Messengers ran to tell the pursuing forces that King Brian had fallen. Ulf Hreda and Kerthjalfad turned back at once. They surrounded Brodir and his men and smothered their weapons with tree-branches.
- **Brodir was taken alive. Ulf Hreda slit open his belly and unwound his intestines from his stomach by leading him round and round an oak-tree and Brodir did not die before they had all been pulled out of him. Brodir's men were all put to death too.**
- King Brian's body was laid out. The head had miraculously grafted to the trunk again.

*Tadg was father and grandfather of the later Uí Briain kings Toirdelbach and Muirchertach. To be showered in blood was recognised as a form of baptism – similar to that undergone by martyrs. Tadg survived Clontarf and was killed in 1023*

# Prophecies of death in the Norse world

- On the morning of Good Friday, it happened that in Caithness that a man called Dorrud went outside and saw twelve riders approach a woman's bower and disappear inside. He walked over to the bower and peered through a window; inside he could see women with a loom set up before them. Men's heads were used in place of weights and men's intestines for the weft and warp; a sword served as the beater and the shuttle was an arrow. And these were the verses they were chanting:

*"Blood rains from the cloudy web on the broad loom of slaughter. The web of man, grey as armour is now being woven; the Valkyries will cross it with a crimson weft.*

*The warp is made of human entrails; human heads are used as weights; the heddle rods are blood-wet spears; the shafts are iron-bound and arrows are the shuttles. With swords we will weave this web of battle.*

*The Valkyries go weaving with drawn swords, Hild and Hjorthrimul, Sanngrid and Svipul. Spears will shatter, shields will splinter, swords will gnaw like wolves through armour.*

*Let us now wind the web of war which the young king once waged. Let us advance and wade through the ranks where friends of ours are exchanging blows.*

*Let us now wind the web of war and then follow the king to battle. Gunn and Gondul can see there the blood-spattered shields that guarded the king.*

*Let us now wind the web of war where the warrior banners are forging forward. Let his life not be taken; only the Valkyries can chose the slain.*

*Lands will be ruled by new peoples who once inhabited outlying headlands. We pronounce a great king destined to die. Now an earl is felled by spears.*

*The men of Ireland will suffer a grief that will never grow old in the minds of men. The web is now woven and the battlefield reddened; the news of disaster will spread through lands.*

*It is horrible now to look around as a blood-red cloud darkens the sky. ..*

**This poem has been identified as an original eleventh-century composition called *Darraðarljóð* which was later incorporated into the saga text of *Burnt Njall*.**



Viking age  
Valkyries  
who weave  
men's fate  
and bring  
heroes wine  
in the halls  
of Valhalla.





# The news of Clontarf spreads through Norse world

- A similar marvel was seen by Brand Gneistason in the Faroe Islands.
- **At Svinafell in Iceland, blood fell on to the priest's stole on Good Friday** and he had to take it off. At Thvattriver on Good Friday, the priest seemed to see an abyss of ocean beside the altar, full of terrible sights and for a long time he was unable to sing Mass.
- **In Orkney, Harek thought he saw Earl Sigurd and some of his men. Harek mounted his horse and rode to meet the earl. They were observed to meet and go riding behind a hill** but they were never seen again and not a trace of Harek was ever found.
- Earl Gilli in the Hebrides dreamed that a man came to him calling himself Herfid and said that he had just come from Ireland. The earl asked him for news and the man replied:
- “I was present where men fought; swords shrilled in Ireland. Weapons were shattered in the clash of shields. I heard that the battle was fierce; **Sigurd fell in the storm of spears. Wounds bled freely; Brian fell but conquered.**”
- A week later Hrafn the Red arrived and told them everything that had happened at the Battle of Clontarf, the death of King Brian and Earl Sigurd and Brodir and all the Vikings.
- “What can you tell me about my own men?” said Flosi.
- “They were all killed” replied Hrafn “except your brother-in-law Thorstein Hallsson. He was spared by Kerthjalfad and is with him now. Halldor Gudmundsson was also killed there.” Flosi told Earl Gilli that he was going away “**for we still have a pilgrimage to Rome to carry out.**” The earl told him to do as he wished; he gave Flosi a ship and anything else they needed as well as a load of silver. Then they sailed to Wales and stayed there a while.



# Bibliography

- Most of tonight's lecture is drawn from the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* which is available on the web:  
<http://archive.org/details/cogadhgaedhelreg00todd>
- All the major collections of Irish annals (including Annals of Inisfallen) are available online at <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/publishd.html>
- The Norse saga of Burnt Njall is available in various editions but perhaps most accessibly as *Njal's Saga* (Penguin Classics edition) trans. M. Magnusson & H. Palsson (1970) – used copies @ 1 penny on Amazon.
- For weaponry used at the battle of Clontarf, the most up to date discussion is A. Halpin, *Weapons and warfare in Viking and medieval Dublin* (Medieval Dublin Excavations Series B, vol 9 (2008) – see also discussion in forthcoming Viking volume by *Journal of Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* ed. R. Johnson & H. Clarke – not out yet.
- On the processes of Christianisation of the Norse in relation to Ireland – see L. Abrams, “The conversion of the Scandinavians of Dublin”, *Anglo-Norman Studies* 20 (1998), 1-29. See also **A. Smyth in Irish Sea Studies** A Ph.D thesis has recently been completed on the subject at the Centre of Medieval Studies in Toronto: Gwendolyn Sheldon, *The conversion of the Vikings in Ireland and the early history of the diocese of Dublin* (2010)