

Brian Boru Lecture Series

Gormlaith ingen Murchada ben Briain

Brian's evil nemesis - female trouble-maker

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Backdrop – the unhappy marriage of Brian's sister Orlaith to king of Tara (Donnchad mac Flaind)

Banshenchus: The three wives of Donnchad mac Flaind are:

- Orlaith daughter of Cennétig (died 940),
- Dúibileamna daughter of Tigernán king of Breifne (died 942) – in her fifties?
- Caindeach daughter of Canandan (died 927) (of Cenél Conaill?)

See also Annals of Ulster 931

Der bhFáil, daughter of Mael Finnia son of Flannacán (leader of Brega in Meath), queen of Tara, died. Is this woman Donnchad's fourth wife?

Chronicon Scotorum 941

Órlaith daughter of Cennétig son of Lorcán was slain by Donnchad son of Flann, king of Ireland, having been charged with illicit sexual relations with Óengus, his son (who died as king of Mide in 945)

John Kelleher suggests that Orlaith is teenage bride of old king at this stage?

Annals of Ulster 944

Donnchad son of Flann son of Mael Sechnaill son of Mael Ruanaid son of Donnchad, king of Tara, dies after spending 25 years as king.



Donnchad mac Flaind

- His family had been important as major players amongst kings of Tara since 840s; their family mausoleum kept at Clonmacnoise and their chief churches were Clonmacnoise and Clonard
- Traditional marriage partners of this family were found within over-kingdom of Ailech in the north-west
- In Donnchad's own day, a new power arising on his eastern border with a coastal kingdom of Knowth being created by the dynasty of Flannacán's

descendants – who took over all of Mide and kingship of Tara under Congalach mac Máel Mithig (944-956)

Modern diocese of Meath = rough approximation of Medieval Mide



General principles of early Irish “marriage” partnerships

- Marriage is organised by secular society and did not involve Church ceremonies but the Church has views as to what the best sort of marriages should be. 8th C Irish canon law says the best sort of marriages are with a virgin wife, are monogamous, are ratified by parents of both spouses and last for life.
- Marriage was a contract between members of the same social class. The suitor gives bride-price (*coibche*) to the man who controls the female (father/legal kinsmen responsible) in front of witnesses. There seems normally to have been a feast to mark the transfer of the woman to the new male responsible for her.
- In secular law, a man could be in more than one partnership at a time – including primary wife (*cétmuintir*) and secondary wife of lesser legal status (*adaltrach*).

Making money out of “partnerships”

- *Coibche* (=bride-price) was divided between bride and the male kinsman responsible for her.
- In the case of her first marriage, the bride got half the *coibche* – the percentage going to female increased in her subsequent marriages.
- If the partnership should be dissolved; *coibche* remained with the bride and her kinsman unless the break-up was her fault – in which case it was returned to the suitor.
- In addition to *coibche*, woman had a *tinchor* or “contribution” given by woman’s family to support her during partnership.

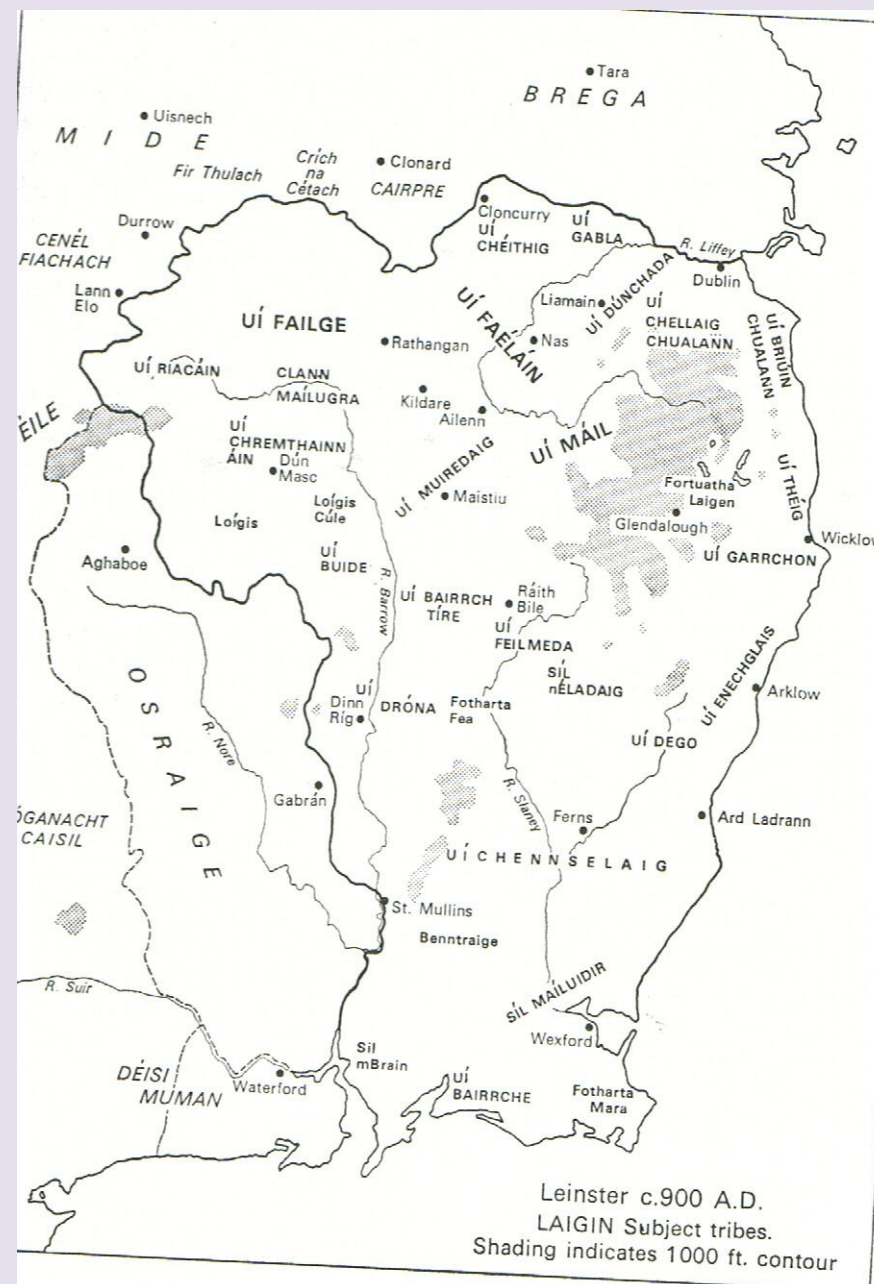
An example of bride price as paid to an earlier Gormlaith married to Cormac mac Cuillenáin, king of Munster (died 908)

(poem in late Middle Irish 11th/12th C)

- “Arise daughter of the king, let your mind not be perplexed; there is another woman in rivalry with you, o red-lipped womanly one.
- The woman who torments me is the church of God for whom poetry is made – and other thoughts for which there should be repentance.
- I married the daughter of Flann son of Mael Sechnaill son of Domnall; I gave three hundred horned cattle in covenant, as bride-price (*cétcheannach*) for her.
- I gave twenty ounces of gold and twenty drinking horns; I do not know the exact amount of all the possessions she took from me.

Our Gormlaith's parents

- Mother = daughter of king of Connacht (according to 12th C poem)
- Father = Murchad mac Finn of Uí Fáeláin dynasty of northern Leinster
- Uí Fáeláin, Uí Dunchada, Uí Muireadaig are the three northern branches of Laigin rulers. The Uí Failge had not dominated the kingship of Leinster for some time although they appear to get more powerful in post Brian Boru era. (It is possible that the lands associated with them in this map represent their later growth to power.)



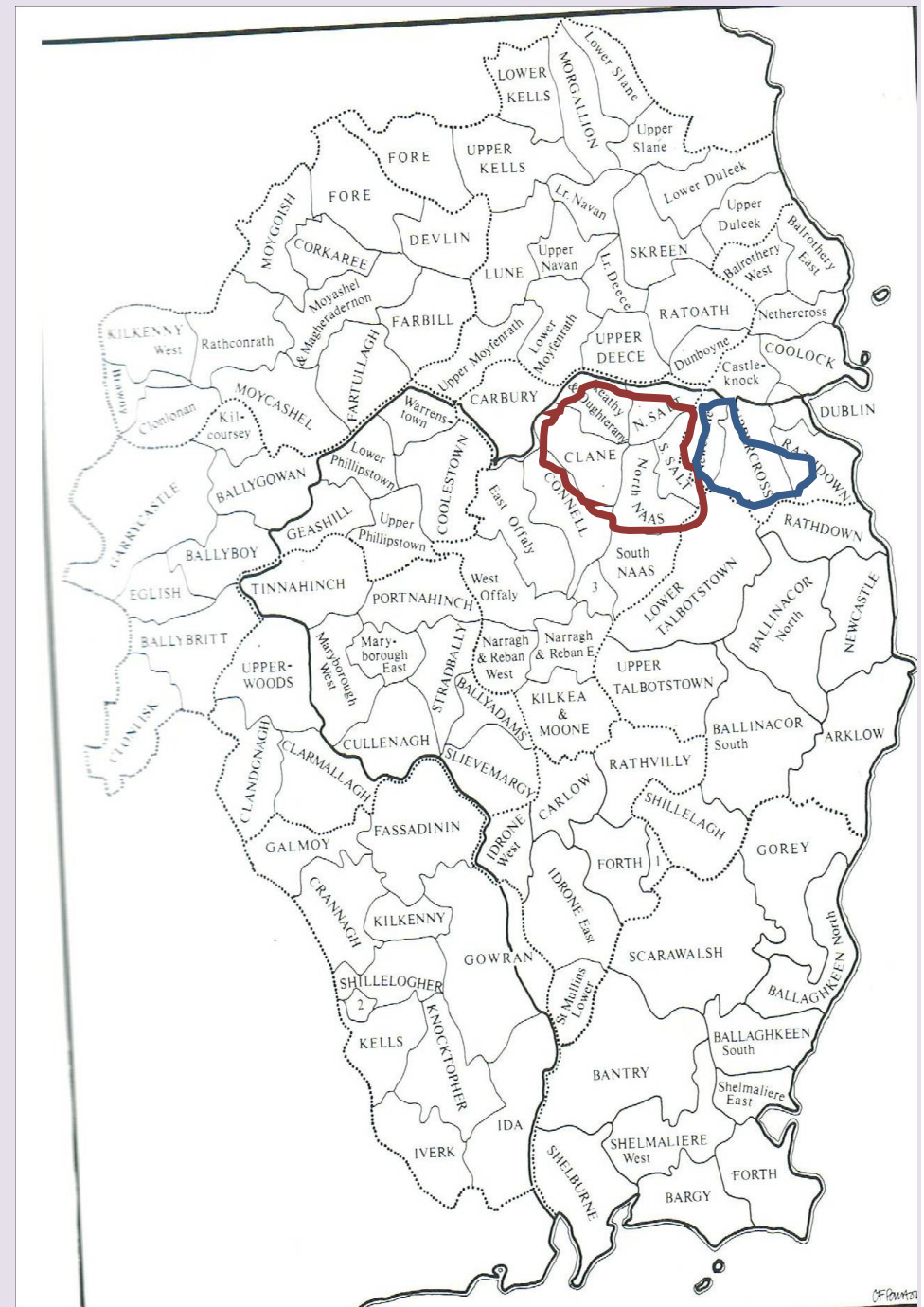
Map of (modern Leinster baronies)

“We can securely locate the Uí Faeláin in ‘Eastern Liffey (Airthir Life) about the fort of Naas in Co. Kildare; Hogan assigned to the Uí Faeláin the baronies of North and South Salt, Clane, Ikeathy and Outehteranyin addition to the barony of North Naas. This would seem to represent Uí Fáeláin lands at a period of maximum expansion.

A. Smyth, *Celtic Leinster* (1982), 42

See also M-T Flanagan, “Henry II and the kingdom of Uí Fáeláin” in J. Bradley et al. *Settlement and society in medieval Ireland* (1988), 229-39; C. Swift “Brigid, Patrick and the kings of Kildare, AD 640-850” in *Kildare: history and society* (2006)

Uí Faeláin kingdom in red
– Uí Dunchada in blue



East coast politics – in marrying Gormlaith, Brian is allying with strong Uí Faeláin king of 960s

Annals of Four Masters 956 (really 958?)

A victory was gained over the Ui-Dunchadha, the Ui-Failghe, and the Clann Ceallaig, at Fidh-Chuilinn (Feighcullen, Co. Kildare); namely, over Domhnall, son of Lorcan, and Domhnall, son of Maelmordha, by the Ui-Faelain; **namely, by Murchad, son of Finn**; in which were slain Cearnach, son of Lorcan, chief of Clann-Ceallaigh, and Naeideanan Ua Domhnaill, and many others of the nobility besides them.

Annals of the Four Masters 965

An army was led by **Murchad, son of Finn, King of Leinster, into Osraige**, where he remained four nights, after having plundered Magh-Raighne; but Mathghamhain and the men of Munster overtook him, as did the Deisi and the Osraige, from Ath-Buana to Commur; but Murchadh escaped from them in safety, without leaving horse or man behind.

Annals of the Four Masters 967

•An army was led by Murchad, son of Finn, into Leinster and Osraige, and they remained five nights there; but he was overtaken by Mathghamhain, son of Ceinneidigh, with the men of Munster, the two Eili, the Deisi, and Imar of Port-Lairge, with the foreigners and the Osraige. Murchad burned Dun-Ua-Tochmairc by force; but they escaped before his eyes, without leaving a man or a horse behind.

Kells was plundered by Sitric, son of Amhlaeibh, lord of the foreigners (of Dublin), and by Murchad, son of Finn, King of Leinster; but Domnall Ua Neill, King of Ireland, overtook and defeated them.

•Annals of Ulster Chronicon Scotorum 972

•Murchad son of Finn, overking of Laigin, was killed by Domnall Claen in treachery.

Gormlaith's first husband = Norse king of Dublin – whom she married when?

- Gormlaith's first husband was Norse king of Dublin, Amlaib (Ólafr) Cuaran. As Amlaib's father died in 927, he may have been considerably older than Gormlaith. Amlaib's own retirement to Iona in 980, a year before his death indicates that this marriage took place sometime in the 970s, when Gormlaith, who died in 1028/1030, was still very young.
- Their son Sigtrygg took kingship by 995 – again suggesting marriage took place earlier rather than later.
- Amlaib had also married Donnflaith, daughter of Cenél nÉógain king and ex-wife of king of Mide whose son, Glúniarn (Ironknee) died as ruler of Dublin in 982

Amlaib Cuarán powerful
RULER OF DUBLIN
married

1) daughter of Ailech
and queen of Mide – her
son Glúniarn rules
Dublin and died 982 –

2) Gormlaith as d. of
Leinster king – her son
Sitrygg rules Dublin after
988

NB! Amlaib's daughter by ??
one of them marries into
Knowth kingship.
Another daughter marries
[Olafr Tryggvason](#), king of
Norway, and a third marries
into kingship of Isles
(Hebrides).

SO
Ruler of Dublin in 980s= half
brother
of ruler of Mide (who =Mael
Sechnaill, the long standing
enemy of Brian in 980s and 990s)

**This is the woman
who later marries
Brian AND also
marries MaelSechnaill**

Court of Norse Dublin – where Gormlaith ruled as queen – the story of the merchant Gunnlaug

- Gunnlaug then sailed with some merchants northwards from England to Dublin. At that time, Ireland was ruled by King Sigtrygg Silkenbeard, son of Ólafr Kvaran (Cúaran) and Queen Kormlöd (Gormlaith); he had been ruling the kingdom only a short time.
- Gunnlaug went into the king's presence and gave him a courtly and respectful greeting and the king gave him a fitting welcome.

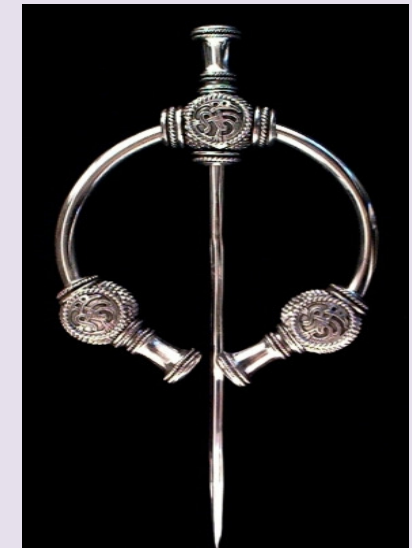
Gunnlaug gave him poem...

“How should it be rewarded?” asked the king “if I gave him a couple of merchant ships?”

“That’s too much my lord” said the treasurer “As rewards for poems, other kings give valuable treasures, fine swords or gold bracelets.”

The king gave him his own clothes made of new and precious cloth, an embroidered tunic, a cloak lined with precious furs and a gold bracelet weighing half a pound.

The Norse saga of Gunnlaug Serpent Tongue



Goods
available at
the court of
Amlaib and
Gormlaith



Outfits the young Gormlaith might have worn

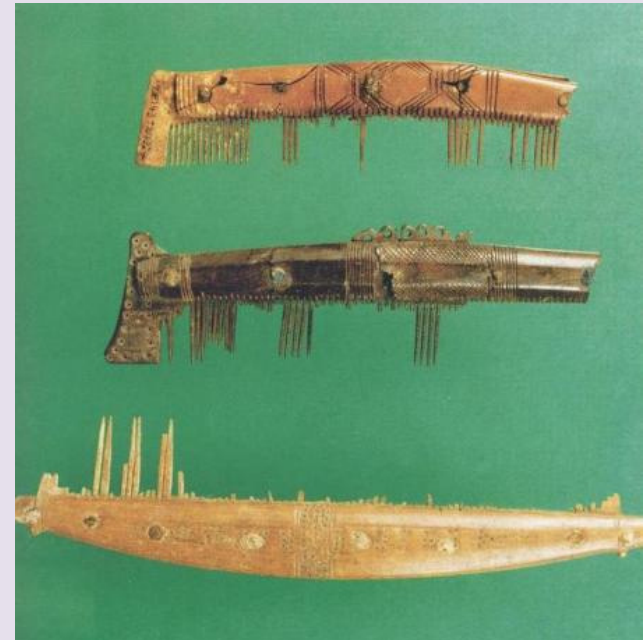


Gunnlaug's poem (thought to be an original eleventh-century composition)

- I know which scion of royal breed I wish to celebrate; he is Kváran's son. He schools himself to be openhanded; the prince will not begrudge me a gold ring – of this the poet is confident. Let the king tell me if he has heard more accomplished verse; it is in *drápa* – form.

Combs found in Dublin excavations

Norse warriors pride themselves on their hair – Florence of Worcester says that in this period women preferred them to Anglo-Saxon men because they combed their hair and washed every week.



Who was Gormlaith's second husband? Brian or Mael-Sechnaill?

*Gormlaith ingen Murchada ben Briain. Is si sede ra ling na tri lemmend da n-ebrad:
Tri lemmend ra ling Gormlaith / ni lingfea ben co brath / léim i nAth Cliath, léim i
Temraig / léim i Cassel, carnmaig os chach.
Amlaib Cuarain a cétmuntar 7 Mcel Sechlainn mac Domnaill iar tain 7 Brian. ‘*

Gormlaith, daughter of Murchad, wife of Brian. She it was who took the three leaps of which are said: "Three leaps did Gormlaith perform which no other woman shall do till Doomsday: a leap into Dublin, a leap into Tara, a leap into Cashel, the plain with the mound which surpasses all". Amlaib Cuaran was her (first) husband, and Mael Sechnaill mac Domnaill after that, and Brian.'

We know almost nothing about Gormlaith's marriage to Mael Sechnaill and it may, in fact, have happened after Brian's death in Clontarf. See, however, Alex Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba 789-1070* (Edinburgh 2007), 215 where he suggests Mael Sechnaill married Gormlaith immediately after he defeated her husband Amláib after battle of Tara in 980. This suggestion fits better with sequence of marriages in above verse than the more common assumption that she married Mael Sechnaill post 1014.

Context for marriage: Brian's expansion into Leinster?

**"Since the 980s and 990s saw Brian attempt to extend his sway in Leinster, one might speculate that his marriage to the daughter of an Uí Fáelain king is to be viewed in this context. Indeed, it might in fact be linked to his first incursion there in 984, were he to have combined a show of military might with marital diplomacy."
(Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, "The three Gormlaiths", p.19)**

The son of Brian and Gormlaith, Donnchad, fought in Clontarf in 1014 and survived till 1063 – so must have been born in 990s or at outside 980s

More precise Leinster context in mid/late 990s

- Since mid 980s, overlordship of Leinster was held by Donnchad mac Domnaill of the Uí Dunchada, the Irish kingdom beside the Norse settlement of Dublin.
- In 993 when Dublin Norse fought Waterford Norse, Uí Dunchada backed Waterford. The Uí Faeláin ruler, Máel Morda mac Murchaid (brother of Gormlaith) backed Dublin (under Sitric, Gormlaith's son) and together they killed Donnchad's cousins in 994 (Gilla-Céile) and 996 (Mathgamain)
- In 999, Máel Morda and Sitric take Donnchad prisoner.
- SO ..

Annals of Inisfallen 996

The hostages of Uí Cheinnselaig and of the west of Liphe were taken by Brian, son of Cennétig, in Mag Ailbe.

>>> i.e. Brian takes the hostages of south Leinster and of ??? Uí Faeláin?? – is this the most likely context for his marriage to Gormlaith ?

Submission of Máel Morda to Brian – in ? 996 as told in the *Coghadh* account

- Mael Morda son of Murchad king of Laigin [Leinster] set out to convey three masts of pine of the trees of Fid Gaible to Brian at Kincora viz a mast from the Uí Failghe (Offaly) and a mast from the Uí Faeláin and a mast from the Uí Muireadhaig [and from Laois and from the three Comnaib in ?south Laois/nth Kilkenny]. But a dispute took place between them when ascending a boggy mountain whereupon the king himself, viz Mael Morda put his hand to the mast of the Uí Faeláin, having a silken tunic which Brian had previously given him, which had a border of gold round it and silver buttons, the tunic was on him and one of its buttons broke with the exertion.

- Now when they had arrived at Kincora, the king took off his tunic and it was carried to his sister to put a silver button on it viz to Gormlaith, Brian's wife and she was mother to Donnchad, son of Brian. The queen took the tunic and cast it into the fire and she began to reproach and incite her brother because she thought it ill that he should yield service and vassalage and suffer oppression from any one or yield that which his father or grandfather never yielded and she said that his, Brian's son, would require the same thing from his son.
- Some peevish words followed between him and Murchad (Brian's eldest son) the next morning. arising out of a casual controversy at *fidchell*.. (Mael morda won and Murchad said.."It was you who gave advice to the foreigners when they were defeated". ..)
- ..This was told to Brian and he sent a messenger after him (Mael Morda) to detain him until Brian should have converse with him and until he should carry away with him cattle and pay. The messenger overtook him at the end of the plank-bridge of Killaloe on the east side and he was mounting his horse there. A dispute ensued between him and the messenger and he turned on the messenger and gave him a stroke of a yew-horse-switch on his head and broke all the bones of the head..."

According to *Cogadh*, Mael Mórda storms home and decides to rebel against Brian as a consequence

LXXXIV. Mael Mórda arrived that night at Sen Leas Abáinn, in Ui-Buidhi, viz., at the house of the son of Berdai, king of Ui-mBuidhi (barony of Ballyadams, Co. Laois). He arrived early the next morning at the Garbh Thamhnach, at the house of Dunlang, son of Tuathal, king of western Liffey ; and the nobles of Laigin [Leinster] assembled to meet him at that place, and in convention ; and he told them that he had received dishonour, and that reproachful words were applied to himself and to all the province. The decision that they came to thereupon was to turn against Brian ; and they sent messengers to Flaithbhertach, son of Muirchertach O'Neill, i.e., to' the king of Ailech, exhorting him to make war upon Mael Sechnaill and the kingdom of the Ulaid (NE Ulster); and other messengers were despatched to Ferghal Ua Ruairc, king of Breifne and to Ualgarg O'Ciardha, king of Cairbre; and these all consented to turn against Brian.

So was Gormlaith a proud Leinster princess worried about ambitions of western kings with regard to her own homeland or simply an anxious mum, worried that her own son would not inherit any of Brian's power – since Murchad was the son by an earlier (Connacht) wife?

Brennu-Njals saga (Norse Saga of Burnt Niall) depicts Gormlaith as the evil nemesis who inspired Clontarf

- Earl Sigurd of Orkney invited Earl Gilli of the Hebrides, his brother in law, to stay with him. Gilli was married to Sigurd's sister, Hvarflod. A king from Ireland called Sigtrygg was also there. He was the son of Olaf Kvaran [Amlaib Cúaran]. His mother was called Kormlod (Gormlaith); she was endowed with great beauty and all those attributes which were outside her own control but it is said that in all the characteristics for which she herself was responsible, she was utterly wicked. **She had been married to a king called Brian but now they were divorced.** He was the noblest of all kings and lived in Kincora in Ireland. His brother was Ulf Hreda, a great champion and warrior.
- (Ulf's name is Norse; he is not mentioned in Irish sources).

- King Brian had a foster-son called Kerjalfad - he was the son of King Kylfir, who had fought many battles against King Brian but eventually had fled the land and entered a monastery. When King Brian had gone south on a pilgrimage, he had met King Kylfir and there had been a reconciliation.: King Brian had adopted Kerthjalfad and loved him more than his own sons. At this point in the saga, Kerthjalfad was fully grown and was the bravest of men.
- King Brian had a son called Dungad, another called Margad (Murchad) and another called Tadm (Tadg) – he was the youngest and we call him Tann. King Brian's eldest sons were fully grown and very brave men.
- Kormlod was not the mother of King Brian's sons. She was so filled with hate against him after their divorce that she wished him dead. King Brian would always forgive men he had sentenced to outlawry; even when they committed the same offence thrice; but if they transgressed yet again, he let the law take its course. From this it can be judged what kind of a king he was.
- The (13th C) Norse saga writer is wrong here; Irish sources indicate that Gormlaith was the mother of Dungad/Donnchad.

Kormlod kept urging her son Sigtrygg to kill King Brian. For that purpose she sent him to Earl Sigurd to ask for support. King Sigtrygg arrived in Orkney before Christmas and Earl Gilli came there at the same time as was written earlier.

The hall was so arranged that King Sigtrygg sat on the centre high-seat with the earls on either side of him....

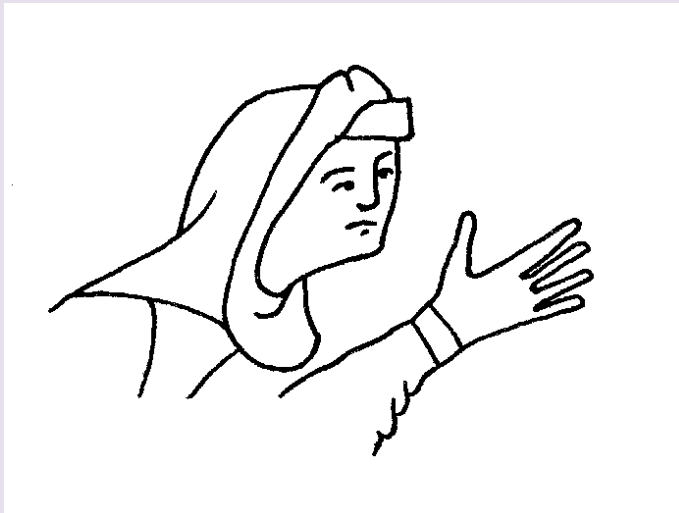
King Sigtrygg then raised the matter of his mission to Earl Sigurd and asked him to go to war with him against King Brian. The earl was stubborn for a long time. Finally he agreed but only on condition that he should marry Sigtrygg's mother, Kormlod and become king of Ireland if they defeated Brian. All his men urged him against the expedition but without success. When they parted, Earl Sigurd had promised to take part in the expedition and King Sigtrygg had promised him his mother and the kingdom. It was agreed that Earl Sigurd would come with all his army to Dublin on Palm Sunday.

Sigtrygg sailed south to Ireland and told his mother that the earl had joined forces with them and told her what he himself had committed them to. She was pleased at this but said that they would have to amass an even larger force. ...

Kormlod replied "There are two Vikings lying off the Isle of Man with thirty ships and they are so formidable that no one can withstand them. They are called Ospak and Brodir. Go and meet them and spare nothing to induce them to join you, whatever conditions they demand.

King Sigtrygg went...He stated the purpose of his visit at once but Brodir refused to have anything to do with the scheme until Sigtrygg promised him the kingdom and his mother. This was to be kept quite secret to prevent Earl Sigurd from hearing about it....

John Ryan speculates that the men of Leinster may not have risen against Brian 'were they not nagged into irresponsible fury by a woman's tongue'. Moreover, 'it was Ireland's misfortune that at such a moment this sharp, able and irreconcilable woman was in a position to do untold mischief' (J. Ryan "The battle of Clontarf", *Journal of the Royal Society*) LXVIII (1938), pp. 1ff



Modern historians and how they interpret Gormlaith's actions

Gormlaith in *Brennu-Njals* saga is deliberately portrayed as the antithesis of Brian. Her villainous deeds graphically oppose his heroic ones; she is the evil demon at odds with the saintly king. Her association with all things pagan is particularly underlined by her association, together with the apostate Bródir, with the supernatural horseman. By contrast, Brian's Christianity is emphasised throughout.

M. Ní Mhaonaigh, "The three Gormlaiths"

Gormlaith after Clontarf – did she marry Mael-Sechnaill?

Banshenchus

Cland Murchada mic Fhind Gormlaid gasta gein rí Laigen léir – the child of Murchad son of Find was Gormlaith, the **clever** offspring of the king of all Leinster

Death notice: no reference to Mael-Sechnaill

Annals of Tigernach and Chronicon Scotorum 1028/1030

*Gormlaith ingen Murchadha meic Floind, **mathair** Sitriuca meic Amlaim, rí Gall, 7 Donnchada meic Briain, rí Muman mortua est:*

Marriage to Mael Sechnaill as indicated in “leaping” poem?

Annals of Four Masters 1030

Gormlaith, daughter of Murchadh, son of Finn, **mother** of the king of the foreigners, i.e. of Sitric; Donnchadh, son of Brian, King of Munster; and Conchobhar, son of Mael Sechnaill, King of Tara, died.

Also *mistaken reference to Mael Sechnaill as Gormlaith's son in the twelfth- or thirteenth-century Welsh text *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*

If she did marry Mael Sechnaill... she was indeed clever

- Mael Sechnaill of Mide became strongest king in Ireland after Clontarf where Brian and his eldest son Murchad both died.
- Mael Sechnaill died in 1022
- Dál Cais in next generation was led by Donnchad, Gormlaith's son who claimed kingship of all Ireland and certainly was active king of Munster. He was deposed in 1063 and went on pilgrimage to Rome where he died en route. It seems likely, therefore, that he was the son of Brian's middle to late years.
- At one point, Donnchad's brother in law, Echmarcach mac Ragnaill was king of Dublin 1036-38. He went with Donnchad on pilgrimage and also died there.
- Donnchad gives important relic to Lorrha – a book shrine to keep safe an 8th C sacramentary

History remembers Donnchad as a failed king but in his own day he saw himself as “king of Ireland” and inheritor of Brian's power (he describes himself as *rí Érenn* on the Lorrha shrine for the Stowe Missal)

So in the end it is Gormlaith's son who inherited from Brian rather than those of her predecessors. He wasn't as powerful as his dad, partly because so many of the family died at Clontarf but he was still extremely well connected and he kept the Dál Cais sufficiently powerful that his nephew, Toirdelbach was able to emerge in later eleventh Century as a successor to the high-kingship of Ireland.



Bibliography

- Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, “Tales of three Gormlaiths in early Irish literature”, *Ériu* 52 (2002), 1-24 – available on JSTOR
- Ailbhe Mac Shamhráin, “The battle of Glenn Máma, Dublin and the high-kingship of Ireland”, *Medieval Dublin II* ed. S. Duffy (Dublin 2001), 53-64
- For previous Gormlaiths, see also Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, “Three weddings and a funeral: rewriting Irish political history in the tenth century” and Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, “On Gormfhlaith daughter of Flann Sinna and the lure of the sovereignty goddess”, both in *Seanchas: studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis John Byrne* (Dublin 2000), 212-224, 225-237
- For suggestion of early marriage between Gormlaith and Mael Sechnaill in context of Scandinavian/insular relations (especially in north Britain), see A. Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba: 789-1070* (Edinburgh 2007)