

The Story of a King in Ireland

When the Vikings were telling Melkorka's story, they called her father Myrkjartan. No king in Ireland ever actually had such a name, but there was a famous Irish king called Cearbhall, and maybe he is the king they meant.

Cearbhall was king of Ossory, whose name is still remembered in 'Borris in Ossory' today. Ossory lay in the Nore Valley between Munster and Leinster, and was an important gateway from one to the other. When Cearbhall was growing up in the 830s, the kingdom he was to govern was subject to Munster, but Cearbhall changed all that.

The Vikings were very active in Ireland at that time. They built fortresses in Dublin and elsewhere, to protect their ships and shelter them between raids. Early in Cearbhall's reign his lands were plundered many times. The Vikings even captured the abbot of Armagh when he was travelling nearby, and took him to their ships at Limerick. One especially feared Viking leader named Turgeis built a fortress up the River Shannon on Lough Ree and plundered Connacht and Meath and south along the Shannon, but he was captured by the great king Mael Sechnaill. Mael Sechnaill didn't want Turgeis to die bravely by the sword, because he knew that according to Turgeis' pagan religion, anyone killed bravely would go to Valhalla and live feasting and drinking forever there. So Mael Sechnaill ordered that Turgeis be drowned so that his soul could never enter his pagan heaven. If you travel along the N4 from Longford to Mullingar you will see Lough Owel, the lake where Turgeis drowned.

When Cearbhall became king of Ossory, he didn't want to pay taxes to Munster any more, so he started raiding in Munster on the one side of him

and in Leinster on the other side. Cearbhall won some battles against the Vikings, too, but then he decided that Viking help might be useful. The Vikings were fighting a lot among themselves at the time, so he offered to help out one side, if they would help him later on. Ivar and a prince named Olaf were kings of Dublin at the time, and together with Cearbhall they made such a powerful alliance that they even started to attack the territories of Mael Sechnaill himself, who was the main king in Ireland. That made Mael Sechnaill angry.

So Mael Sechnaill came down and in 859 held a big meeting in which it was decided that Cearbhall's kingdom of Ossory would no longer be subject to Munster, but would pay taxes directly to Mael Sechnaill instead. The king of Munster agreed to this, but he was the sorry man after. When he went home the Vikings of Limerick went and got him and broke his back and beat him to death with stones.

But they didn't dare touch Cearbhall, and he was never friends with them again. Cearbhall held a great assembly on the plains of Ossory, with dancing and music, sports and drinking. Tributes were paid, law-cases heard, and everyone was at peace.

Cearbhall never became king of all Ireland, but he made his kingdom much more important than it had ever been before. The Vikings feared and respected him, and they were proud to tell stories about him and claim that they were related to him.

And Mael Sechnaill, the great king, did so well at establishing order in Ireland, that when he died his successor had much less work to do to keep the peace, and afterwards people said that there had been a 'Forty Year's Rest' to Viking violence in the land.

Exercises

Put the following events in the right order:

1. The king of Munster is stoned to death by the Vikings _____
2. Cearbhall holds an assembly with music and sports and feasting. _____
3. Cearbhall makes an alliance with Ivar and Olaf. _____
4. Mael Sechnaill has Turgeis drowned in Lough Owel. _____
5. Mael Sechnaill holds a meeting in which Ossory is made subject to him instead of to Munster. _____

Colour in the map of Ireland

Choose different colours for
Ossory, Munster, Leinster and
Mael Sechnaill's lands (Midhe)

