

The Story of Brian Boru and the Battle of Clontarf

One of the most famous of all the kings that ever ruled in Ireland was a man called Brian Boru. He came from Killaloe, just up the River Shannon from Limerick.

When Brian became king of Thomond or north Munster, he found himself in a tough spot straightaway. His brother had just been murdered, and it was Brian's job to go after the people who had done it. He did just that, and in the process he made himself king of all Munster. He also subdued the Vikings of Limerick and Waterford, and the Limerick and Waterford Vikings became a regular part of his armies as he campaigned further and further into Connacht, Leinster, and Meath.

Do you remember the story of how Mael Sechnaill I got angry at Cearbhall of Ossory, and the big meeting he called? Mael Sechnaill humbled Cearbhall there, and Cearbhall never threatened him again. Brian met with Mael Sechnaill II, the great-great-grandson of Mael Sechnaill I. Now Mael Sechnaill II was a very powerful king who had beaten the Vikings of Dublin and made them pay tribute. But when a meeting was held between Mael Sechnaill II and Brian Boru, it was Brian Boru who came out the better, and he became High King of Ireland. The kings from up in the north, from what is now Donegal and Northern Ireland didn't like it much, and in the end Brian had to bring one in chains all the way back down to his own place in Killaloe to submit there. So Brian made himself the strongest king that Ireland had ever seen.

But not everyone was happy with that. In particular the kings of northern Leinster and the Vikings of Dublin wanted to be free and independent. So they got together, and they hired in Viking fleets from Orkney and the Hebrides and Man and maybe even northern England as

well. The battle that they fought to gain their freedom was called in Irish *Cath Cluana Tairbh*, or the Battle of Clontarf, because of where it was fought. The Vikings had a simpler name for it: they just called it ‘Brian’s Battle.’

The battle took place in April of the year 1014. Some stories say that Brian fought with the best of them, but most say that he stayed out of the way, either because he was too old or because it was Good Friday and a holy day.

The Viking ships were beached somewhere between Howth and Dublin; the troops of North Leinster and Dublin faced Brian’s army somewhere in the area of Clontarf today. The battle raged most of the morning. Brian’s right-hand man, his eldest son Murchad, was killed. But the king of Leinster was killed, too, and so was Sigurd the Stout of Orkney with his raven banner. Near the bridge over the Liffey into Dublin Mael Sechnaill II, who was fighting for Brian, finally seems to have turned the tide of battle. The hired troops ran for their ships, only to find that the tide had come up, and that their ships were now floating far off in the water. Many were drowned, so the story goes, trying to reach their ships, and many were cut down on the beach as they wavered in despair.

Brodir was the man who killed Brian. Brodir had fled the battle, too, but in a slightly different direction. When he came upon the tent where Brian was lodged, he cut him down, though some say that Brian defended himself well. Who was Brodir? No one quite knows. A Viking chieftain, surely, from York, perhaps, or the Isle of Man, depending on who is telling the story. But Brian was killed, and his sons were not able to hold together the kingdom he had tried to build.