

Brian Boru Lecture Series



Viking Limerick

The wealth, the shipping and possibly the connections that helped bring Brian Boru to national power

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Early Viking activity in Limerick in annals

- 835: The burning of Mungret and other churches in western Munster
- 837: Inis Celtra was plundered by the heathens

AU 845 “Forannán, abbot of Ard Macha, was taken prisoner by the heathens in Cluain Comarda with his halidoms and following, and was brought to the ships of Luimnech”.

- Dún Masc was plundered by the heathens, and there were killed there Aed son of Dub dá Crích, abbot of Tír dá Glas (Terryglass), and Cluain Eidnig, Ceithernach son of Cú Dínaisc, prior of Cell Dara, and many others.
- There was an encampment of the foreigners i.e. under Tuircéis on Loch Rí, and they plundered Connacht and Mide, and burned Cluain Moccu Nóis with its oratories, and Cluain Ferta Brénainn, and Tír dá Glas and Lothra and other monasteries.

Terryglass is at north end of Lough Derg so that all three of these entries are linked by the Shannon. It seems likely that they represent the activities of one particular fleet or raiding party.

Information on early Viking activities in Limerick area drawn from *Cogadh* e.g. events of c.AD 845

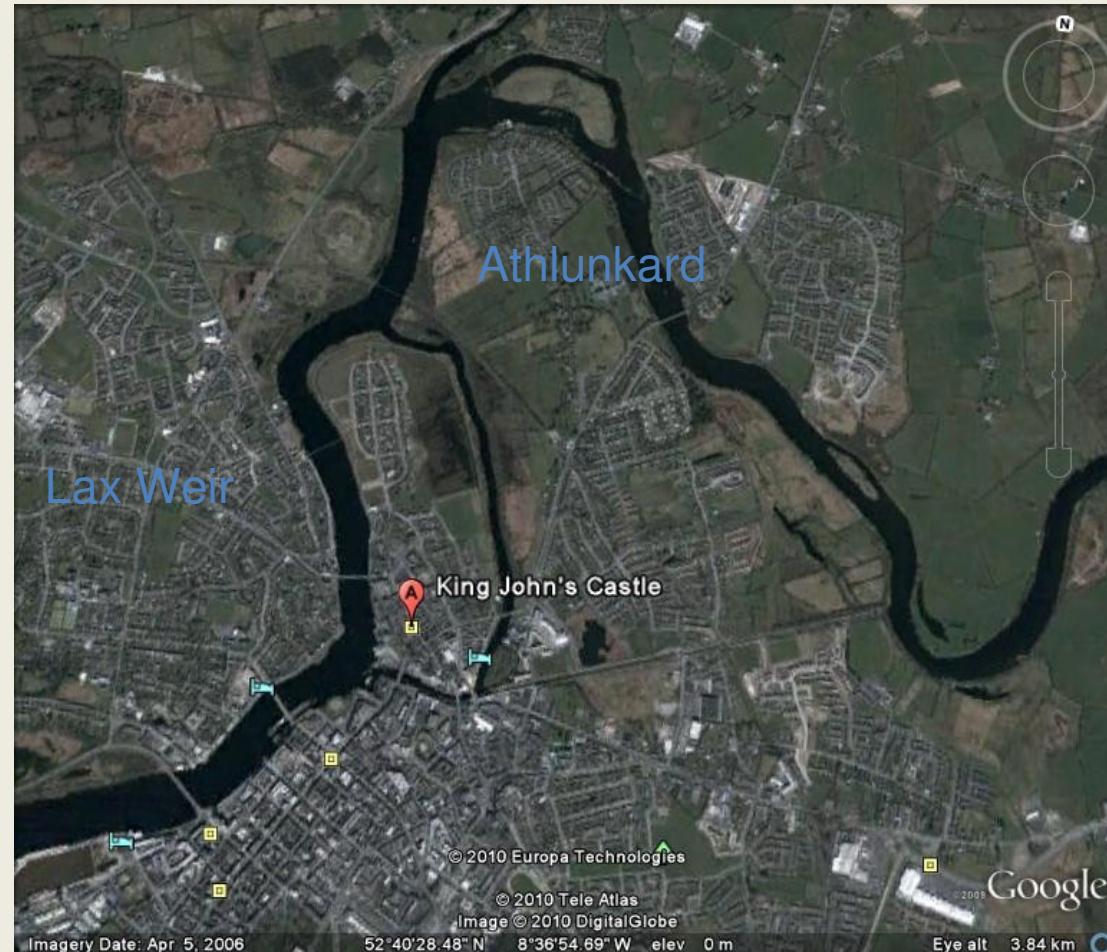
XIII. After this there came great sea-cast floods of foreigners into Ireland,- so that there was not a point thereof without a fleet/expedition (*loinges*). It was by these that Brí Gobhann was plundered, and Tressach, son of Mescill killed. A fleet came to Ciarrraighe Luachra, and all was plundered by them to Cill Ita (Killeedy) and Cuil Emhni ; and the Martini' of Mumhain were plundered **by the fleet of Luimnech**, who carried off Farannan, comharba of Ard Macha," from Cluain Comairdi to Luimneach, and they broke Patrick's shrine.

Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh was written to promote the Dál Cais and Brian Boru in the era of Brian's great grandson, Muirchertach. It has been argued, most recently by Etchingham, that entries within that text are likely to represent at some remove, contemporary annal entries which have not survived independently in the annalistic texts.

NB! Tressach son of Mescill is identified as a member of the Dál Cais in the 12th C genealogies but not a member of the ruling line of Uí Thairdelbaig (i.e. not a member of Brian Boru's immediate family.)

Limerick ? – *Longphort* type location of King's Island (*Inis Sibtonn*)

The placename *Athlunkard* includes the element *longphort* which originated as a term describing a defensible location for ships and which then evolved into a word used in Irish to describe fortifications.



Historical evidence for *longphort*

Longphort in Irish annals of 9th C:

Linn Duachaill (841),

Dublin (842, 902),

longphort Rothalaibh (862),

longphoirt Gall etir Cenél nÉogain , Dál nAraide (866),

Youghal (866),

longphort Tomrair iarla (866)

Etymology of *longphort*

- *Long* = ship and *port* = from Latin *portus* = place for disembarking, port.
- *Port* used in Irish as synonym for “place” in 10th C *Bethu Phádraig* – see also *Port Laoise*
- Compound nouns with qualifier as first element = Germanic-style construction which is relatively rare in Irish but see Gaulish *Cingeto-rix* (Hero-king). In the period preceding the Viking raids on Ireland we find *Delgg-inis* (Thorn-island) 733.
- During the Viking period, we find Germanic style compounds such as *muirchoblach* (940) (sea-fleet) which may have arisen in a bilingual context. *Longphort* may have a similar origin.

Working definition of 9th C *longphort*

- Ó Corráin: defended ship harbour
- Clarke: *emporium* or trading centre
- De Paor: shore fortress
- Swift: “Fortified protection for Viking ships which acted as base for raiding party and where goods gained (including herds) could be guarded.”

Longphort at Athlunkard: E.P Kelly & E. O'Donovan, *Archaeology Ireland* 12.4 (1998)

- Athlunkard is in Co. Clare on the River Shannon. The placename *Athlunkard* refers to a ford (*áth*) and a defended ship encampment (longphort). The encampment referred to in the placename is represented by earthworks opposite an island in the Shannon. Iron objects dating from the final century of the first millennium, a plough coulter, a spearhead, a spearbutt and a small ring, were found on the site. A Viking silver weight was found on the opposite riverbank.
- The site is D shaped, 75m long and 30m wide, enclosed by a curved rampart. It is located on low ground where a stream runs into the Shannon. Beyond the rampart is a marsh. Inside the enclosure is an oval raised area 20m by 12.5m protected by a bank and ditch.

Athlunkard – Áth *Longphoirt* (conclusions of Kelly & O'Donovan)

- It is believed likely that the earthworks are the remains of the Viking earthworks founded between AD 840 and 930.
- LAX weir, located below the island, which preserves the Norse word for salmon is evidence for Scandinavian presence in the area.
- The Vikings carried out a major two year campaign along the Shannon system in the mid ninth century.
- A Viking base was founded on Lough Ree in 845 and soon afterwards a major settlement was established at Limerick.
- The Athlunkard longphort may be related to this campaign.

Advantages of Limerick for Viking settlers

- Curragower falls requiring portage stop located by defensible island on major river surrounded by water



Release of abbot of Armagh from Limerick

– the *Cogadh* version

XIV It was in this year Turgeis was taken prisoner by Maelsechlainn ; and he was afterwards drowned in Loch Uair," viz., the year before the drowning of Niall Cailli, and the second year before the death of Fedh-limidh, son of Crimhthann ; and it was in the time of these two that all these events took place. Now, when Turgeis was killed, Farannan, abbot of Ard Macha, went out of Mumhain and the shrine of Patrick was repaired by him.

The attack by (Limerick?) Vikings on the *Óenach* assembly at Roscrea (according to *Cogadh*)

XV. Now the same year in which Farannan was taken prisoner, the shrine of Patrick broken, and the churches of Mumhain plundered, [the foreigners] came to Ros Creda (Roscrea) on the festival of Paul and Peter, when the fair had begun ; and they were given battle, and the foreigners were defeated through the grace of Paul and Peter, and countless numbers of them were killed there ; and Earl Onphile was struck there with a stone by which he was killed. Much, indeed, of evil and distress did they receive, and much was received from them in those years, which is not recorded at all.

Limerick Vikings attack the south coast: the *Cogadh* account

XVIII There came after that a fleet from Luimnech into the south of Ireland, and they plundered Skellig Micheal, and Inis Flainn (Inisfallen on Lakes of Killarney) and Disert Domhain and Cluain Mór (Cloyne), and they killed Rudgaile, son of Trebtade, and Cormac, son of Selbach, the anchorite/ and he it was whom the angel set loose three times, though he was bound again every time. Moreover, Cork was plundered by them, and they burned Ros Ailithri and Cenn Mara, and the greater part of Mumhan ; but [the Mumha Medhonach gave them battle and] their slaughter was completed at Ard Feradaigh. The south of Ireland also gave them battle under Donnchadh, son of Amhalgaidh, king of the Eoganacht Ua Neit and Clochna, king of Corca Laiodhe, was killed by them there.

Around the same time (according to the Cogadh):

XX There came after this Black-gentile Danars, and they spread themselves over Erinn, and they endeavoured to drive the Fair-gentiles out of Ireland; and they engaged in battle and they killed five thousand of the Fair-gentiles at Snamh Ergda. After that another fleet came and landed in Ciarraighe and all was plundered by them to Luimnech and Kileedy; and Imleach-Ibhair (Emly), and Caisel of the Kings, and the eastern Cethraighi; and Liath Mocoemhoc (nr Two-Mile Borris, east of Thurles). It was in the reign of Feidlimidh, son of Crimhthann, that all these ravages were perpetrated.

XXI The Dal Cais defeated them in another battle on Loch Deircdeircc

According to the annals, Feidlimid mac Crimthann died in 847.

9th C century Limerick Viking history

Assuming we can believe the synchronisms given in the *Cogadh*, in the mid 9thC we see in that text:

- ❖ A fleet under Turgeis (with his wife Otta) operating on the Shannon attacking major churches such as Clonmacnoise
- ❖ A fleet from Limerick (under Turgeis?) which attacks Cork and Kerry
- ❖ The suggestion that Turgeis was involved in kidnapping the leader of Armagh who was on circuit with important relics and keeping him prisoner
- ❖ An attack (possibly by Turgeis's forces) at a major assembly at Roscrea held in late June
- ❖ A second fleet under different and antagonistic leadership which attacks up the estuary but also lands and moves overland to attack Cashel and Emly. This force was said to have been defeated by the ancestors of the Dál Cais

This picture drawn from the *Cogadh* adds colour and a sense of political involvement to the descriptions of attacks on Shannon churches in the annals and suggests the presence of at least two major Viking fleets active in the mid West in the middle of the ninth century.

10th C Vikings nationally within Ireland

- For whatever reason we see cessation of Viking activity in our late ninth and early 10th century annalistic sources. Viking reappear in 914 at Waterford, 12 years after expulsion from Dublin.
- The Waterford leadership by 917 was identified with descendants of Ívarr (Ímar) who died as king of Dublin and invader of Scotland in 873. A major battle between Dublin leaders versus the king of Tara operating with Meath & Westmeath allies in 919 resulted in the deaths of the latter and Viking Dublin went on to flourish as a settlement, setting up important dynastic link with York (easily accessible from west coast of Britain down the broad valley of Swaledale).

Record in annals indicates that the new Vikings arrived in early 10th C as part of a **dynastic expansion linked to family of Ímar**

- A.D. 917 “Sitric, grandson of Ímar, landed with his fleet at *Cenn Fuait* on the coast of Leinster. Ragnall, grandson of Ímar, with his second fleet moved against the foreigners of Waterford. A slaughter of the foreigners at *Neimlid* in Munster. The Éoganacht and the Ciarraige made another slaughter”
- A.D. 919 “The heathens won a battle against the Irish at *Dublinn* in which fell Niall Glúndub, son of Aed, king of Ireland and here also fell.....

Cuerdale hoard, Nth Lancashire -

75,00 coins, 1,000 ingots, ornaments, hack silver etc.

Deposited c. 910-920



A hoard gathered together to pay an army to invade Ireland?
No direct evidence but much of the metalwork is of Hiberno-Viking origin and the size of the hoard far larger than the norm.

One of very first Viking JARLs ever recorded – Jarl Tomrair mac Ailchi of Limerick: *Pórir son of Helgi?*

AU 893: A great dissension among the foreigners of Áth Cliath, and they became dispersed, one section of them following Ímar's son, and the other Sichfrith n-lerll.

Annals of Ulster 921: *Longas Luimnigh .i. M. Ailche for Loch Ri coro ortatur Cluain M Nois , huile innsi ind Locha co rucas preid mair eter or , argat , innbusa ili.*
The fleet of Limerick, that is of Ailche's son went on Loch Rí, plundered Clonmacnoise and all the islands on Loch Rí and took great booty in gold, silver and much treasure.

Annals of Inisfallen 922: *iarla do Gallaib ... , dul do coro ort Inis Celtra , Muccinnis*

AU 923 *sloghadh la Gothbrith h. nlmair o Ath Cliath co Luimnech co fargbadh slog dimar dia muintir la m. nAilche*

Gothfrith grandson of Ímar made an expedition from Dublin to Limerick and a very large company of his followers were left behind with Ailche's son.

AU 928 *M. Ailche for Loch nEchach co muiriucht di Gallaibh coro inder innsi in Locha , confinia eius*

Ailche's son went on Loch Neagh with a fleet of Foreigners and he ravaged the islands of the lake and its neighbours.

Jarl Tomrair clearly had major impact on Irish story-tellers – other non-contemporary references exist to a major Jarl Tomrar in 9th C

AI 866: *Tomrar iarla do orcain Cluana Ferta Brrenaind conro marb Brenaind tres ló iar richtain a longphort.*

Frag. A. §337 *Isin bliadain si tainig Tomrar iarla ó Luimnioch go Cluin Fearta Breanainn (duine aindreannada, agarbh, aindgidh eisidhe do Lochlannaigh) andar leis fo ghebhadh brad mó ‘sin chill sin. Gidh eadh ní mur ra sháoil fuair, uair táinig seal beag fios reimhe , ro theiced go maith reimhe i n-eathraibh, dream eile i sescuibh, dream oilé ‘sin teampul. An dream imorro fora rug-sin ar an urlár , isin reilc, ro-marbh-som.... Marbh imorro do dhasacht an Tomrair ‘sin bliadain si ar n-imirt do Bhreanainn miorbhal fair.*

In this year Earl Tomrar came from Limerick to Clonfert (he was a very strong, very rough, merciless man of the Lochlannaigh, thinking to take great spoils in that church. However he did not get what he expected because a warning arrived a little while ahead of him and the people fled promptly before him in boats and some others into the marshes, others into the church. Those whom he found on the ground and in the graveyard he killed. That Tomrar moreover died of insanity within a year, Brenann having performed a miracle upon him.

Frag. A. §278 *go ro marbat amlaidh sin an dá thaoiseach .i. Hona Luimnigh , Tomrari Torra - ..*
And that was how they slew the two chieftains, Hona of Limerick and Tomrir Torra

The Fragmentary Annals have been identified as an eleventh-century collection of material put together in Kingdom of Ossory (Kilkenny and Laois.)

Limerick= chief Viking power in Ireland under Tomrair

- 924 Kolli son of Bárðr “lord of *Luimnech*” – under Tomrair? – raids Lough Ree
- C. the year 927, Tomrair succeeded in conquering Dublin. In an attempt to curb his power, the Dublin leadership encouraged the men of Waterford to attack Kilmallock but their attack was defeated.
- Tómrair’s achievements were striking and the area under his control was enormous – in 928, he was active on Lough Neagh (facing down Halfdán’s colony of Dublin Vikings?), in 929 on Lough Corrib and in the early 930s, Limerick men were once again contending with the Dublin leadership in Kilkenny

After Jarl Tomrair, Limerick Vikings continue to use Shannon to attack north and south

- *Cogadh* - Limerickmen attack on western Mide and on Connacht (Galway bay – Kilmacduagh area) ; this is confirmed by
- AI 923 They capture Flaithbertach mac Inmainén at ?Monaincha – king of Munster who was living in retirement as cleric.
- 933 AFM – Limerick under Ólafr /Amlaíb Cenncairech attack Lough Ree and Uí Maine.
- AFM 934, CS 935 – recte 936 Ships carried from Lough Erne over Breifne to Lough Ree and raids thoroughout Connacht
- AFM 937, raid on the church of Kilclief, Co. Down, mouth of Strangford Lough, by a Viking named mac Barith (**Bárðarson** or **Bárðsson** - a relative of Colla (**Kolli**) mac Bairid or ua Bairid, the late king of Limerick (†932).
- CS 937 – recte 938 “The foreigners of Loch Ree went to Áth Cliath”.
- MEANWHILE **Dubliners** (Gothfrith) establishing base at Waterford and raiding south coast. Jarl Tomrair forces him to leave the area and his main operations appears to have been in east coast – Clonenagh and Ferns in 921 and ?Saltee Islands 924; capturing Leinster kings in 925 and sacking Kildare in 926. Meanwhile his son Hálfdan operating in north-east of Ireland close to Galloway coast – including Annagassan fortress? Another son, 933 Oláfr Gothfrithsson (Amlaib) was leading an army in Strangford Lough in 933 – the same force once commanded by Hálfdan?
- In 937, Oláfr Gothfrithsson of Dublin attacks and subdues Limerick fleet on Shannon: AFM 935 (recte 937): “Amlaíb, son of Gofraid, lord of the foreigners, came at Lúgnasa from Ath-cliath, and carried off as prisoners **Amlaíb Cenncairech** [of Limerick] from Loch Ree , and the foreigners who were with him after breaking their ships.”
- Ólafr Gothfrithsson of Dublin then has short period in northern England fighting king Athelstan but returns in defeat and once again uses base in Dublin to attack Kildare and Dunmore cave outside Kilkenny. He dies in 941/2.
- In short, suggestion that there are at least two large and antagonistic confederations of Viking forces in early tenth-century Ireland – one based on east coast operating out of Dublin and one based at Limerick, using Shannon as major routeway into Irish interior.

New Viking forces active in Limerick and the Hebrides in 970s

- CS 940: Aralt son of Ímar's grandson, i.e. son of Sitric, king of the foreigners of Luimnech, was killed by the Connachta.
(NB! This Harold may have been a Dublin interloper put into Limerick after their defeat by Dublin Ólafr Gothfrithsson in 937).

DÁL CÁIS CONQUER LIMERICK

AI 967 – A defeat of the foreigners of Luimnech by Mathgamain, son of Cennétig, at Sulchuait, and Luimnech was burned by him before noon on the following day.

- 971 – Anglesey in North Wales is devastated by “son of Haraldr”. – Welsh sources identify 2 sons of Harald named Gothfrith and Maccus.
Maccus is called “*king of many islands*” when he submits to English king Edgar at Chester in 973.
This phrase is used of Vikings connected with Hebrides in 960.
- AI 974: “The son of Aralt made a circuit of Ireland with a great company, and plundered Inis Cathaig, and brought Ímar from it into captivity.”
- AFM 972 (recte 974): “The plundering of Inis-Cathaigh [Scattery Island] by Maccus, son of Aralt, with the Lagmainn of the islands along with him; and Ímar, lord of the foreigners of Luimnech, was carried off from the island, and the violation of [ST] Senan thereby.”
- AI 975: Ímar escaped over sea, and Inis Ubdan [=Inis Sibtonn – King’s Island] was captured again.

SO...after Jarl Tomrair

- After Jarl Tomrair who was active as king of Limerick in 920s,30s; we see Ólafr/Amlaíb Cenncairech in control of Limerick. He raids up into Lough Erne and said to have attacked Dublin but is defeated by Ólafr Gothfrithsson of Dublin in 937.
- A man with Dublin connections (Haraldr) is said to be lord of Limerick at his death in 940 – he may have been put in charge by Ólafr Gothfrithsson.
- From early 950s, area of operations for both Limerick and Waterford is essentially internal Munster politics and we don't see them in our sources acting on national stage. However, we do see Limerick men fighting with Cellachán Caisil, Eóganacht king of Munster in 953 to attack Clonmacnoise which was the intersection point of north/south and east/west communications network across the central belt of Ireland.
- According to the *Cogadh*, by the time of the Dál Cais raid Limerick in 937, the Limerick Vikings are controlled by Ímar
- According to annals, after the Dál Cais raid on Limerick, an alternative dynasty which had been associated with Limerick in preceding generation takes control of Shannon Estuary and carries off Ímar. It is not clear where this Ímar originated but *Cogadh* §XLIX identifies him as *Ímar ua Ímair, ardríg Gall Muman ocus Goedel* – “Ímar grandson of Ímar, high-king of the Foreigners of Munster and the Gael”. In *Cogadh*, therefore, this man seems to be being depicted as also part of wider family of Vikings ruling in Dublin and Waterford after the initial conquests by the “Uí Ímair” in the early years of the tenth century.

Analysis of Limerick evidence

If we can trust our sources, therefore, the Vikings operating in mid tenth-century Limerick appear to have been families who could operate widely in the seas between Ireland and Britain as well as across Ireland but at the same time, they appear to be dynasties claiming ancestry from those active in the same region in the ninth century. They thus appear to represent the ambitions of, as it were, Viking “provincials” based in the West (i.e. in Ireland, Britain and surrounding islands) rather than new settlers from Norway and Scandinavia.

By the 960s, Limerick Vikings appear in our sources as mercenaries available for hire by Munster kings. There seems to have been at least two Viking dynasties operating out of Limerick – one which allies itself with traditional Eóganacht kings of Cashel and a second which benefits from military operations of Dál Cais against Limerick. This latter may have originated in Dublin and may have been put into Limerick as henchmen of Dublin leaders. In period immediately after Dál Cais conquest of Limerick, this dynasty seems to have been active on east coast of Irish Sea, was identified as holding power in the Hebrides and was led by nephew of the then king of Dublin, Ólafr/Amlaíb Cúaran who continued to hold leadership of Dublin until 980. Thus the Dál Cais, at this early stage in their rise to power, appears to have been if not in alliance with Dublin, at least in position to allow offshoots of the Dublin dynasty who were based on King’s Island to prosper in Shannon estuary in aftermath of Dál Cais conquests.

Conclusions

- Shannon was the key waterway leading into interior of Ireland and was used extensively by Viking shipping. In our sources, warships carrying soldiers are most clearly depicted but we can imagine that trading ships were also present (see powerpoint on “Vikings on the Shannon”).
- Limerick was major political power amongst Viking lords and contended with Dublin and Waterford for leadership of Vikings in Ireland between 920s and 930s under Jarl Tomrair who was sufficiently important on national stage to give rise to stories of his military power after his death.
- They used Shannon as route to attack as far north as Lough Erne but they also appear to have attacked by land, especially in Connacht, Offaly and Westmeath.
- By 940, Limerick is controlled by a man (Harold) whose brother, Ólafr/Amlaíb Cúaran ruled in Dublin from c. 945 to 980.
- Dynasty of Ímar defeated by Dál Cais in 967 and Viking colony of Limerick sacked.
- Harold’s son, Maccus who up to this had been active in the Scottish Isles and Wales, appears in Shannon estuary in years after Dál Cais sacking of Limerick and captures Ímar.

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