



Ancient Order of Hibernians
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Celtic military leader Brian Boru (c. 940-1014) was the first king of a united Ireland.

Through shrewd military acumen Brian Boru became the first king of a united Ireland, in an era when the isle was little more than a verdant home to Celtic peoples whose society still reflected much of the traditions of the late Iron Age. During his reign, domestic political stability invigorated Ireland, and religious and cultural life was able to flourish. "Brian Boru was remarkable in the Ireland of his time," wrote Máire and Liam de Paor in *Early Christian Ireland*, "because he seems to have thought in terms of the feudal organization which had already developed in Europe rather than in terms of the primitive and unstable kingship-system of Ireland." His achievement has earned him comparisons with another great uniter of warring lands, the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne.

Ireland Before Brian

The Irish were a Celtic people, a population that dominated central Europe after the fifth century B.C.E. Known as fierce warriors, they migrated to the British Isles and retained many aspects of their past there for centuries after Celtic culture in Europe was supplanted by Roman and other civilizations. In Ireland, they organized into groups of related families called *tuaths*, fought other *tuaths* viciously on horseback, and possessed a social hierarchy that was dominated by Druid priests and chief-like kings called *ri*. Christianity was introduced in the fifth century C.E. by Ireland's legendary St. Patrick, but it was a religion imposed on an unsettled, agrarian land with few urban centers. Instead, Ireland's repositories of culture were its monasteries, which dotted the countryside. There, monks lived austere, simple lives but wrote treatises on religious topics and transcribed Celtic mythology in Latin.

Sea-faring Vikings from various parts of Scandinavia started to plunder Ireland beginning in 795. Like other settlements near coastal waters in northern Europe, the Irish feared the sudden onslaught of Viking ships and the ruthlessness of their men, who quickly sacked towns and loaded livestock and anything else of value onto their ships. In their own lands, some of these Scandinavians had been subdued by Frankish conquerors in the

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name of Charlemagne and Christianity, and it made them determined foes of any Christian people. The Scandinavians found much of Ireland's artistic treasures—ceremonial metalwork and a wealth of other precious-metal handicrafts in a unique, curvilinear style—in its monasteries and plundered them as well; many of these ornamental swords or belts were later excavated from graves in Norway. Over the next few decades, these Vikings also began to winter over in Ireland instead of returning home; they built walled towns such as DubhLinnhe (Dublin), whose origins date to 840. Both Dublin and other coastal towns became hubs of commercial activity as the Vikings set up lucrative trade monopolies. Organized Irish military resistance to Viking rule was successful only in the north. In the south, warring *tuaths* and provinces could not muster the same unity of forces to do battle.

By 940 C.E., roughly the time of Brian's birth, Ireland was segregated into five provinces of connected *tuaths* known as the Five Fifths. These were Ulster, Connacht, Meath, Munster, and Leinster. Since the fifth century C.E., varying kings of the first three provinces dominated the northern lands, and sometimes claimed all of Ireland in name; in reality, however, the *ard ri*, or high king, held true power only in the north, leaving Munster and Leinster quite sovereign. The north's royal seat was at Tara. In the south, a *ri* of the Eogannacht *tuath* reigned at Cashel in Munster, near present-day Tipperary.

Brian Boru and the Dal Chais

Brian Boru was, with his brother Mahon, prince of a tribe in Munster called the Dal Chais. Their home ground was an area known as Thomond at the mouth of the River Shannon, in what is now County Clare. The tribe and the brothers gained a reputation as astute, fierce mercenaries, and in 964 Mahon decided to battle the Eogannacht family for the throne of Cashel. This center of power in the south of Ireland was located between Viking settlements at Limerick and the seaside city of Waterford. Mahon emerged victorious and took the Eogannacht crown for himself, but a Viking settlement at Limerick effectively sundered him at Cashel from the Dal Chais lands at Thomond.

At Brian's urging, plans were made to oust the Vikings from Limerick, beginning with raids on the outer settlements. The first serious battle came at Sulcoit and the settlement was sacked. Brian, at the age of 26, then stormed Limerick on his brother's behalf. Typical of the skirmishes of the time and place, men on each side were clad in mail and did battle on horseback with swords, spears, and axes. The Irish were known to behead their enemies, and they also rounded up Scandinavians and immediately slaughtered anyone who was fit to fight.

The beginning of Brian's eventual vanquish of Viking power came with this victory at Limerick in 968. When Mahon was murdered, Brian became king of Munster, and over

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the next few years consolidated his power in the rest of the south. He constructed a fleet of ships and kept them anchored on the River Shannon, and sent out plundering raids to the north. He overwhelmed the Vikings in Waterford and rid them from the surrounding islands as well. He then set his sights on attacking the Viking king in Dublin. To do so he allied with Meath's ruler, his onetime rival Malachy, to do battle with the King of Leinster, who was allied with Dublin. After a decisive and bloody fight, Brian entered Dublin victorious in 1000 C.E. The Vikings were allowed to stay, but hefty tribute was levied from them.

Now Brian firmly controlled Munster and Leinster, and set his sights farther north. He assembled an army of Irish and Danes and rode to Tara, where the high king of Ireland, the *Ui Neill ri*, sat. By this point Brian's reputation was so widespread that the north capitulated with almost no resistance. Brian further consolidated power by marrying Gormflaith, the sister of the King of Leinster. However, Gormflaith was also mother of Sitric, the former Viking leader in Dublin; to complicate matters, Sitric then married Brian's sister.

"Imperator Scottorum"

In 1002 Brian deposed Malachy and thus became true *ard ri* of all Ireland. Historical corroboration of this comes from his signature, written for him by his scribe in 1004, in the *Book of Armagh*. The manuscript, which also contained the *Confessio*, or autobiographical writing of St. Patrick, was the treasure of Armagh, the seat of the Christian Church in Ireland at the time. Brian paid 20 ounces of gold to the church fathers there in exchange for being allowed to sign, "Brian, Imperator Scottorum" (meaning "king of the Scots," from the Latin writings of the day that named the Celts of the British Isles *Scoti*), in the sacred manuscript.

Brian's reign as king of Ireland lasted twelve years, and the country prospered during his rule. Monasteries and schools that had previously been sacked and closed as a result of continuous warfare were reopened, or rebuilt. He decreed the construction of roads and bridges, and built many churches along the Shannon, a symbolic statement since the river had once been the main highway for the Vikings and their plundering inland raids. Bronze artistry, which had fallen into decline, also experienced a revival. Trade increased, and emissaries were even sent across the sea to Scotland and Wales to extract tribute.

The Battle of Clontarf

The end of Brian's rule and his own demise had its origins in a quarrel between the King of Leinster and Brian's son Murrough over a chess game in 1013. When the King stormed

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out of Brian's Kincora castle, his sister Gormflaith went with him. She then rallied her son Sitric along with some Vikings from the Isle of Man and Hebrides, and assembled a fleet at mouth of the Liffey. The Vikings also sent out word back home for reinforcements, and Scandinavian mercenaries arrived in huge numbers. The actual battle took place at Clontarf, near Dublin, on Good Friday, 1014. It lasted from dawn to sunset. Brian was now 74, and since it was a holy day he remained in a tent near the rear of the battle site and prayed. The Irish were victorious: Brian's army slew 7,000 Vikings, while only 4,000 Irish lost their lives. Both Brian's son and grandson died on the field, however. As the Vikings fled to the sea, the flanks guarding Brian's encampment scattered, and he was surprised by a Viking king, Brodar of the Isle of Man. Brodar was able to ride into the tent, and Brian reacted by cutting Brodar's leg off below the knee; Brodar then split Brian's skull, killing him with the blow.

Brian's body was carried to Armagh in a solemn cortege. Yet his 1014 victory at Clontarf remains a momentous date in Irish history, the year that marked the end of Viking aggression in Ireland. Though Ireland lapsed back into disunion for some time afterward, it would not be invaded for another 150 years until Anglo-Saxons from England set their sights on its green hills. Most of the Vikings that remained in Ireland converted to Christianity and inter-married; they would never dominate the Irish again. Brian's descendants are the O'Brien clan. One of them later married a Norman noble, and an offspring of this union was Elizabeth de Burgh. She later married the Duke of Clarence, who was the son of English king Edward III, and from their union came the York kings and the mother of Henry VIII.

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