

Brian Boru's origins and the kingdom of North Munster

Cathy Swift examines the tradition that Cormac Cas was buried at Duntryleague Hill, near Galbally, Co. Limerick, and what it tells us about the rise of his descendent, Brian Boru.

In the early thirteenth-century *Accallam na Senórach* ['Tales of the Elders of Ireland'] the ultimate ancestor of Brian Boru is said to have met his death in the parish of Galbally in east Limerick:

'Cormac Cas [the Curly] son of Ailill *Áulomm* [Grazed Ear] attacked Eochaid *Abratrúad* [of the Red Eyelashes], the king of Ulster in the north. Eochaid died there and Cormac Cas was wounded and remained ill for 12 years. His brains were leaking but he held the kingship of Munster during this time. A stronghold and a fine residence were built for him at *Dún ar Sléib* [fortress on the mountain]. This mountain had a clear and pleasant natural well in its foundations and a great royal dwelling was built for him around it. Three stone pillars were erected around this well and the king's bed was placed within them, with its head to the east. A trusted household warrior kept bathing his wound with water from a cup or a basin. He died there afterwards and was buried in a vault under the fortress. For this reason it is also called *Dún Trí Liacc* [the fortress of the three stones, Duntryleague].'

Duntryleague Hill lies to the north of the Galtee mountains. There is a cairn marking the summit and some few hundred yards away, the remains of a Neolithic or Stone Age passage tomb known locally as Darby's bed. The views are spectacular and well worthy of a wounded king's gaze. Apart from the majestic peaks of the Galtees themselves, one can also see Seefin Mountain to the southwest. At the base of Seefin, Dr Diarmuid Ó Murchadha of UCC has placed the battle of Belach Lechta, on the road between Kilmallock and Kildorrey. It was here, according to a passage in *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, that Brian Boru's brother, Mathgamain was buried on the south slopes while the man who killed him, Máel Muad of Desmond, was buried on the north *ocus ní thaitnend grian fair co bráth* ['and the sun will never shine on him till Judgement.']

The drama of the location of Cormac's grave is not in doubt and its political relevance, on the mountainous fault-line between the two great power blocks of eleventh and twelfth-century Munster is unquestionable: the Galtees mark the division between Thomond (*Tuath-Mumu*, North Munster) and Desmond (*Deas-Mumu*, South Munster). Whether we should see Duntryleague as part of the original Dál Cais homeland, however, is far more dubious. It is noteworthy, for example, that in our text Cormac is said to be the son of Ailill *Áulomm*—who got his name [Grazed Ear] from an incident in which his ear was bitten by a woman from the *síd* mound at Knockainey, Co. Limerick, northwest of Duntryleague. Ailill's eldest and most famous son was Eógan Mór, the great-great grandfather of Conall Corc, founder of Cashel and ancestor of the Eóganacht dynasties who dominated the provincial kingship of Munster. These were based in homelands which included the lands around Cashel itself, Glanworth in north Cork and, to a rather lesser extent, the area around Knockainey. Eógan was also remembered by the medieval genealogists as the ancestor of the Uí Fidgente, whose royal fort was located at Bruree, on the banks of the Mague river, immediately to the east of Kilmallock. Thus it is Eógan's

descendants and not those of his putative brother, Cormac Cas, whose families ruled the flat lands of east Limerick and Tipperary.

Thomond and the Shannon

In contrast to the evidence for the descendants of Áilell Áulomm, our earliest references to the men of Thomond associate them firmly with the river Shannon. One such occurs in the vernacular life of Patrick, *Bethu Phátraic*, compiled from earlier materials in the tenth century just as the Dál Cais were coming into political prominence. Here we read:

‘The men of Tuath-mumu, to the north of *Luimnech*, went southwards in sea-fleets (*mur-coblaig*) to meet Patrick at *Domnach Mór Maige Aine*, that is to say, at what then and is now called Dún nÓacfhéne. He baptised them in Tír Glass to the south-east. Patrick afterwards went into Fininne, to the northwest of Domnach Mór, a hill from which is seen the country to the north of *Luimnech*. And he bestowed a blessing on the people of Tuath-mumu for the willingness with which they had come with abundance of their gifts to meet Patrick.’

The association between Thomond, the use of shipping and control of the river Shannon above modern Limerick could hardly be made clearer. It is reinforced yet again by the entry in the *Annals of Inisfallen* in 963: ‘A slaughter of the Tuad Mumu on the Shannon, and they abandoned their vessels and were drowned.’ This is also the area where we can trace Brian’s immediate antecedents. In the genealogies, for example, Brian is identified as a member of the Uí Thoirdelbaig, whose territory was located in the vicinity of Killaloe in the *Annals of the Four Masters* under the year 1192. St Flannan, whose church was also located at Killaloe is an ancestral member of the same dynasty. Brian Boru’s brother, Marcán, at the time of his death, was leader of church communities at Killaloe, Terryglass and Inis Cealtra—clearly positioned to dominate the southern, northern and western areas of Lough Derg. Brian’s own settlement at *Ceann Coradh* [‘head of the weir’] seems clearly to reflect its position at the point where the Shannon exits Lough Derg and where a bridge, first documented in 1071, seems to have already existed in Brian’s own day (if we are to believe the topographical details given in the early twelfth century *Cogadh*). The first king of the Dál Cais, a man whose death is noticed under the year 934, was also abbot of Tuamgraney, while Brian’s mother, like many of the Tuamgraney abbots, was a woman from the kingdom of Uí Fhiachrach Aidne, around Kilmacduagh in south Galway. Brian’s immediate antecedents, in short, are all closely associated with the western shores of Lough Derg in County Clare, lying far to the north of Duntryleague and the Galtees.

Luimnech

This location indicates that, as the Dál Cais grew in power in the first half of the tenth century, their most obvious enemies must always have been the Scandinavians of *Luimnech*. The exact significance of this word is debated and it appears, at this early date, to have been used of the estuary while the core of the area we now call Limerick city was known as *Inis Sibtonn* (modern King’s Island). Apart from the defensive qualities of the island, cut off from the mainland by the Abbey river, *Inis Sibtonn* marks an important transition point in the navigation of the Shannon for the stretch of water opposite the island contains the Curragower Falls and all shipping moving upriver must portage around this section. It is not surprising, therefore, that the island became the centre for a Viking base which, by the time

Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil was written in the first third of the twelfth century, could be termed a *baile* containing multiple houses and surrounded by a city wall marked by towers and gateways. A contemporary description in the *Metrical Dindshenchas* classifies it further as an assembly area for warriors and wealthy merchants.

We know of at least one Scandinavian fleet based in the estuary in the mid-ninth century when a candidate for leadership at Armagh, circuiting Ireland in what appears to have been a bid for resources, was captured in 845 and brought to ransom to the 'ships at *Luimnech*'. With the resumption of Norse attacks in the early tenth century, *Luimnech* became the stronghold of Jarl Þórir Helgason, who used the Shannon as his highway into the interior. In 922 for example, the *Annals of Inisfallen* record:

'Tomrair, son of Elgi, a Jarl of the foreigners on Luimnech and he proceeded and plundered Inis Cealtra and Muckinish and burned Clonmacnoise and he went on Lough Ree and plundered all its islands and he ravaged *Mide* [Westmeath and Meath].'

Luimnech was so important in this era it attracted the jealous attention of Dubliners for in 924 the *Annals of Ulster* note 'Gothfrith, grandson of Ímar, made an expedition from Áth Cliath to Luimnech and a very large company of his followers were left behind with Elgi's son'. Unfortunately we have no surviving accounts of the impact of such battles on the neighbouring Dál Cais of Killaloe but it is inconceivable that the militarisation of the area did not have an impact on the Claremen. At Cooperhill, west of Limerick city, a 'type D' sword of pre-tenth-century date was found in the Shannon mud while an Anglo-Saxon sword with a decorated pommel was found at Askeaton. At Cahercommaun in north Clare, 'type 1' arrowheads similar to those found at Dublin and York have been dated to the first half of the tenth century.

Conclusion

What then is the origin of the tradition that Cormac Cas was buried at Duntryleague? It is clear that Mathgamain and his younger brother Brian fought extensively in the lands to the south. In 964, Mathgamain conquered Cashel and in 967, he and his brother fought the battle of Sulchoit or Sulloghodomore (outside Limerick Junction) prior to their attack on the Viking base of Limerick. In 976, Mathgamain was seized by Donnubán son of Cathal, the Uí Fidgente king of Bruree and handed over to Mael Muad of Desmond to be killed. After this period, however, Brian and his descendants appear to have largely dominated Munster north of the Galtees. The genealogists, whether patronised by Dál Cais or Eóganacht kings, recognised the reality of this situation. By AD 1100, if not earlier, the doctrine of Cormac Cas as younger son of Ailill Áulomm appears in our records and the kingship of Munster is said to alternate between his descendants and those of his brother Eógan Mór. It is probably in this post tenth-century era, then, that Cormac Cas was first said to have been buried in Duntryleague.

Further reading:

- A. Ann Dooley and Harry Roe, *Tales of the Elders of Ireland* (Oxford World's Classics: OUP 2008)
- B. Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, *Brian Boru: Ireland's Greatest King* (Tempus: 2006)
- C. D. Sproule, 'Politics and pure narrative in the stories about Corc of Cashel', *Eriu* 36 (1985), 11-28
- D. B. Jaski, 'The genealogical section of the Psalter of Cashel', *Peritia* 17-18 (2003-4), 295-337