

Clontarf "The Great Turning Point"

by **Thorfinn Olafsson**

The conflict at Clontarf has its roots in the power struggle between the Norse culture and the Celtic heritage and the problems of assimilation by Norsemen with the Irish. Much of Ireland had been the slave and trading grounds for the Vikings of Norway, Jutland, Iceland, England, Orkney, Shetland, Isle of Man, Hebrides, Cornwall, Leinster, and Flanders and there was considerable interest by all of the Scandinavian countries in maintaining Norse influence over Irish holdings.

The Norwegian and Danish Vikings had established large trading forts (longphorts) all throughout what we now know as the British Isles. Although the Vikings who maintained these outposts were indeed Norse, they began to integrate with the Celts and slowly they became embroiled in the quibbling between local Celtic rulers. Soon alliances and secret pacts were being established between the Norse regents and the local Irish rulers. With the Norse king of Dublin, Sigtrygg (pronounced Sitric) Silkybeard supporting the rebellion by Móelmórdha of Leinster against the High King Brian Boru (who was now 73 years old), the stage was set for one of the most definitive Viking and Celtic battles ever.

The battle of Clontarf was fought on April 23rd, "Good Friday," in the year 1014 a.d. The site of the battle itself was not at Clontarf specifically, but Clonliffe, which lies between Liffey and the Tolka. Maelmordha and Sigtrygg Silkybeard had amassed support from two powerful allies: Earl Sigurd Hlodvisson of Orkney and Brodir (or Brodar depending on your source) of Man. With their forces encamped approximately 2 miles inland from Dublin Bay, the lines were drawn up against Brian Boru's 20,000 men. Maelmordha's men were in the center (no one is quite sure; however, Maelmordha must have had a sizeable force for use in the center of the line), Earl Sigurd Hlodvisson's men and Brodir's men formed the left of the line, and Sigtrygg Silkybeard's Dubliners made up the right. King Sigtrygg Silkybeard also had some of his Dubliners guard the longships, which were moored in the bay.

The first clash between the two armies occurred when Mdelmórdha's men rushed from the high ground into the tightly packed phalanx of Boru's army. The fighting was arduous, with Boru's son Murchadh taking the full fury of the initial assault. The first clash, in fact, drove Murchadh's "Munster Men" deep within his father's lines. Although the Vikings enjoyed the very first success, Murchadh's troops, who outnumbered Móeimórdha's Vikings, began to inflict large casualties on the Viking center. With the Viking center quickly falling into chaos, the Dublin right flank began to break ranks for the moored longships. As the Dublin Vikings charged for the fortress of Dublin, part of Boru's army pursued the fleeing Vikings leaving the command tent of Boru open. As all was looking dark for the Vikings, Earl Sigurd Hlodvisson and Brodir were able to rally their men for another attack to Murchadh's Munster Men; however, by the time the troops were rallied, Murchadh had surrounded the left flank. Through all the chaos, Brodir (who was hiding in the woods) was able to break through the line when King Brian's line thinned in pursuit of King Sigtrygg's troops and penetrate the command tent of Boru. Boru and his Murchadh were slain with Brodir's sword (or a Great Axe by the Irish source.) The scene of Boru's death was quite horrific, as Njal's Sagas reveals:

"The boy Tadhg threw up an arm to protect Brian, but the sword cut off the arm and the king's head. The king's blood spilled over the stump of the boy's arm, and the wound healed at once."

Roughly 20 men made it back to the longfort. Those Vikings who tried to get to their longships drowned in the high tide with their heavy mail shirts acting as anchors. The battle of Clontarf was an utter defeat for the Vikings, and in some respect for the Irish, for the Vikings lost all claims to their Irish holdings and the loss of Boru spelled the end of a unified Celtic leadership.

Till nasta gang - jag sager "ADJO"

Bibliography and Suggested Reading

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