



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

PRE BRUNANBURH

THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN IRELAND

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Contents

Pre Brunanburh – Irelands Political Situation	4
Introduction	4
The Mac Neil were making a statement	4
Gofraid was now in a perilous position	4
Anlaf now assumed his rule in Dublin	4
937.....	5
Anlaf after the defeat of Brunanburh.....	5
938.....	5
939.....	5
941.....	5
943.....	5

Pre Brunanburh – Irelands Political Situation

Introduction

We've referred to Anlaf's great enemy in Ireland in previous assessments, namely Muirchertach Mac Neill. As we know, Anlaf had defeated the Vikings of Limerick just weeks before he left for England in order to challenge Aethelstan, but going back to 925 AD the Dublin Vikings had suffered a major defeat at the hands on Muirchertach at the battle of Carlingford. This battle was not only a significant defeat for the Dublin Norse but resonated throughout Ireland because Muirchertach slaughtered several hundred Vikings who had surrendered to him. Anlaf's father Gofraid, had led the Dublin Norse into battle. He, somehow, had managed to escape.

The Mac Neill were making a statement

The Mac Neill were making a statement. In January, the following year, Anlaf's brother, Halvdan led an expedition against the Mac Neills but was ambushed by the Irish, led by Muirchertach himself. A significant part of the Dublin Norse were slaughtered and the survivors were pursued to northwards to the sea and were only saved because Gofraid managed to extract the survivors by sea.

Anlaf's father was now in a precarious position. His armies had suffered two major defeats by the Irish within the last eighteen months.

Gofraid was now in a perilous position

Prior to his two defeats to the Irish, he had launched an attack on the Limerick Vikings, a year before his encounters with Muirchertach and had suffered a major defeat.

Gofraid was now penniless and his military reputation had suffered severe damage. It is likely that he feared imminent attacks by either the Limerick Vikings or the Irish.

Gofraid was ruling Dublin on behalf of Sigtrygg the squint eyed. It's not certain if this character was either Gofraid's cousin or brother.

It was fortuitous for Gofraid, that at this moment, Sigtrygg the squint eyed died. Gofraid, seized his chance and travelled to York to claim the Kingship. His abandonment of Dublin resulted in the Limerick Vikings, under their leader, Tormod, attacking and sacking Dublin.

Gofraid's rule in York came to an end within 6 months as Athelstan, the English King drove him out. There is no reliable source as to how this occurred but it appears that Gofraid fled without resisting Athelstan militarily. Gofraid fled back to Ireland where he was able to retake Dublin back, but he was unable to eliminate the threat from Limerick and the Irish under Muirchertach were just biding their time.

We must assume that Anlaf witnessed these events as by 933AD, Gofraid attacked the Vikings of Limerick and was able to drive and then contain them within their own regions, though he could not inflict a decisive defeat upon them.

Gofraid then made a serious error of judgement and attacked Muirchertach in Armagh. The Irish inflicted several defeats on the Dublin Vikings. Gofraid retreated to Dublin where he died.

Anlaf now assumed his rule in Dublin

He was obviously highly concerned about the threat from Muirchertach so he approached several other Viking leaders and Irish Kings in order to build a coalition against Muirchertach. This seems to have created a 'status quo' and it appears that each fraction remained within their respective spheres awaiting an opportunity to finish each other off.

Anlaf's first priority, however, was to gain control over all the Viking factions in Ireland. He immediately attacked and looted towns in knowth and Brega and brought these regions under his control and by 935, he believed that he was powerful enough to take on the last remaining Norse led power in Ireland, the Vikings of Limerick.

Tormod had been replaced by Anlaf Cenncairech (scabby head) who himself, had subjugated other Norse settlements in the south west of Ireland.

937

In 937, Anlaf of Dublin attacked and plundered the monastic centre at Clonmacnoise, which was under the protection of Limerick. The two forces then met and fought a ship battle on Lough Ree in which, at last, the Dublin Vikings inflicted a devastating defeat on the Limerick Vikings.

Anlaf Gofraidson (Guffrithsson) now believed that he was the rightful ruler of York and prepared to invade England and to confront Athelstan.

Scabby head had been taken prisoner and would die a few months later at Brunanburh.

Anlaf after the defeat of Brunanburh

After Anlaf's defeat at Brunanburh, he disappeared for several months. We don't know where he went. He may have returned to Scotland with Constantine, the Scottish King, but we just do not know. Some sources suggest that Anlaf had married Constantine's daughter but this is disputed too.

938

We know that in 938 Muirchertach attacked and stormed Dublin but details are sparse.

Anlaf, where ever he had been, still possessed a large fleet and sometime after the fall of Dublin, Anlaf attacked Muirchertach's fortress at Ailech in Donegal and captured the King himself. Muirchertach was ransomed by Anlaf to the Irish and he raised so much money and booty that he was able to buy the loyalty of all the Norse factions in Ireland.

939

In 939, Athelstan died and Anlaf returned to York, supported by his cousin, Anlaf Cuaran. He left his brother, Blacaire, ruling in Dublin.

Anlaf came to an agreement with the English King, Edmund, which would let him rule York but within a couple of years Anlaf had taken the five Boroughs, namely Derby, Leicester, Stamford, Lincoln and Nottingham but this was short lived and the English King drove him out and recaptured the territory.

In Dublin, Blacaire, Anlaf's brother was attacked by the Irish under their old foe Muirchertach. The Norse prevented the Irish from capturing Dublin, but it is said that 1200 Vikings were killed during the battle.

941

In 941, Anlaf met his end when he was killed raiding an Anglian church at Tynningame in what is now Scotland but which was then part of Northumbria.

943

In 943, Blacaire counter attacked against the Irish and a battle was fought at Clonkeen. At this battle the Irish King, Muirchertach was killed and the Norse obtained a costly victory.

Blacaire was unable to follow up his victory and establish dominion over the Irish and within the next couple of years, Dublin was sacked twice by the new Irish warlord, Congalach.

In 945, Anlaf Cuaran , exiled from York removed Blacaire from power and became the new ruler of Dublin.

The wars continued but the continuing history is beyond the remit of the Brunanburh story so here we will stop.

We realise that this has been a bit of a read, but it is important that the political situation in Ireland is understood because it is critical to the Brunanburh story and to that of Anlaf Guthfrithson.