



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

# THE GREAT NORTHUMBRIAN RAID ON IRELAND 684AD.

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# The Great Northumbrian Raid on Ireland

## Introduction

Sub-Roman Britain saw the various peoples of Britain engaged in parochial warfare for centuries. The various Anglo-Saxon peoples, Picts, Scots of Dal Riata and Britons fought each other in an attempt to carve out their own Kingdoms. Alliances were made and broken with regularity as the powerful subdued the weak and an endless circle of violence and warfare followed.

## The Chronicles

The various sources available clearly demonstrate that Britain was in a chaotic state. The writings of Gildas, Nennius and Bede and the entries into the Anglo-Saxon chronicles, The Annals of Ireland, those of Cambriae, Clonmacnoise, Tigernach, Ulster, the four Masters and others mean that this cannot be denied.

## Irish Raiders

Irish raiders had been a problem during the last decades of Roman rule and this issue would have carried on in the sub-Roman period too. Booty and slaves were the goals and as you will likely know, Patrick, the future saint was a Romano-British individual who was captured and enslaved by the Irish. As the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms began to emerge it is inconceivable that they did not have contact and dealings with the Irish. Given that slaving was a profitable business enterprise, raids against mainland Britain's western seaboard continued and there must have been a response from the English. Unfortunately, little specific information about this has survived.

The Irish clashes with the Welsh, Picts and the Scots of Dal Riata are documented a little better than the English sources but most of the evidence pertains to the incessant wars between the various Irish Kingdoms and their relationship with Dal Riata. The Scots of Dal Riata still laid claim to their original homeland.

## The Scots

The Scots had started settling what is now Argyle from about 400 AD. The Romans were aware of them and by 495, there were sufficient numbers of them in the Argyle area that they moved the seat of Dal Riata to their new territory, which they named as Dal Riata, also. Their capital was at the hill fort of Dunadd.

The Kingdom of Dal Riata 495 – 850 AD including original Irish homeland.



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The original petty kingdom of Dal Riata had been in what is now the northern part of county Antrim. There were four tribal groups amongst the Scots, namely the Cenél nGabráin, the Cenél nÓengusa, the Cenél Loairn and the Cenél Comgaill.

The Scot's most dangerous and persistent enemy would prove to be the Picts and there would be warfare between them until their eventual unification under Cináed mac Ailpín in 842 AD. Cináed mac Ailpín was a Scot and had been their King since 840 AD., but his title was King of the Picts.

Causantín mac Áeda would be the first King of Alba (The original name for Scotland) in 900 AD. He would be known as Constantine to The Anglo-Saxons and he is best remembered as being the Scottish leader that was defeated at the battle of Brunanburh in 937 AD., along with his allies, the Hiberno-Norse of Dublin and the Britons of Strathclyde.

## 627AD

Edwin of Northumbria seized the Isle of Man and Anglesey in 627 AD.

Edwin's seizure of these two western islands invariably gave him two staging points for mounting raids into Ireland. He was the most powerful Anglo-Saxon King during this period and Northumbria was the strongest Kingdom with an effective military which also had the capability to carry out naval operations. Though not well documented it appears that raids on Ireland were conducted though they seem to have been punitive rather than any large-scale invasions. Northumbrian occupation of the two islands was relatively short-lived and it would appear that it would be another decade before Northumbrian warriors would take part in a large-scale battle in Ireland.

### **The loss of Irish Dal Riata. 629 AD.**

In 629 AD. the Dal Riata Scots were defeated by the Irish Kingdom of Daire nAraidi at the battle of battle of Fid Eoin, at an unidentified location in north eastern Ireland. A secondary Dal Riata force from Kintyre were also destroyed a short time later. This saw the loss of Scottish territory in Ireland.

The battle of Magh Rath or Moira. 637 AD.

A combined army of Dal Riata Scots, Britons and Northumbrian Saxons together with King Congal Caech of the Irish Ulaid dynasty were decisively defeated by the Irish High King, Domnall II. The battle took place in county Down. The defeat of Dal Riata and its allies resulted in the Scots finally accepting the loss of their territory in Ireland. On the same day that this battle took place, a fleet of the Irish High King, defeated a Dal Riata fleet at the battle of the Mull of Kintyre.

### **Ui Neill dynasty**

The Ui Neill dynasty now held all Irish Dal Riata lands and they would remain the most powerful dynasty in what is now Antrim for the next 1000 years. – The battle of Moira is considered to have been the largest battle ever fought in Ireland. Sources claim that each army numbered 50000 men though this is highly unlikely.

Many of the townlands in the area today have names derived from 'bloodshed'. The town of Aughnafosker means 'Field of Slaughter in old Irish, and the town of Carnalbanagh is old Irish for 'Scotsman's grave'. This account is the first known source which mentions Anglo-Saxons fighting as an army in Ireland.

### **The Northumbrian attack 684 AD.**

It is not known what provoked this attack but an Anglo-Saxon army from Northumbria ravaged the Irish Kingdom of Brega. County Meath roughly covers the area that was ancient Brega. The annals of the Four Masters tell of a devastating attack which resulted in the slaughter of many Irish and the desecration of churches and land. Hundreds of people were taken as slaves and the booty seized was said to have been enormous.

The commander of the Northumbrian army was Ealdorman Behrt, the right-hand man of the Northumbrian King Ecgrith.

Even Bede condemned the Northumbrian attack stating that the destruction of the churches and the treatment of a Christian people was appalling. The attack must have been savage, even for those times, because Bede lambasted Ecgrith for both the attack and its savagery.

Even the Anglo-Saxon chronicles lamented this event.

An Anglo-Saxon Bishop who was working in Ireland during the attack, namely one Ecgbert criticised the Northumbrian King and that warned that God would punish him for having committed such a brutal attack on innocent people.

### **686AD**

Two years later, in 686, The Bishop of Iona, Adomnan, went to Northumbria and negotiated the release of 60 of the Irish hostages. No further details are known other than the hostages were released and returned to Ireland.

Ecgrith had been King of Northumbria for 15 years when this event occurred. He had been at war with Mercia and Northumbrian supremacy was in decline. The Scots of Dal Riata along with the Picts and the Britons of Strathclyde, peoples who Ecgrith claimed he was overlord of, were in open rebellion and on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May 685, Ecgrith and most of his army were destroyed at the battle of Nectansmere by a Pictish army.

**NB.**

Slavery was deeply ingrained in the society of Anglo-Saxon England. Bristol, (Brycg stowe) had a thriving slave market. The constant wars of the early medieval period ensured that a steady stream of captives were available for export. Fighting men were not usually sold as slaves as they presented a potential danger to any prospective buyer but women and children captured in war were ideal for such enslavement. The main source of buyers were the Irish so it is clear that the Anglo-Saxons had developed contact with the Irish tribes, probably by the 6<sup>th</sup> century, if not even earlier.

There are a number of historians who now believe that the Romans raided Ireland and carried out punitive raids against tribes who supported the Britons. Though hotly disputed, the Roman general, Agricola, may well have conducted military actions in Ireland in the first century AD. There is evidence that the Romans supported an exiled Irish King called Túathal Techtmar and that they assisted him in reclaiming his realm. The 2nd-century Roman poet Juvenal, who may have served in Britain under Agricola, wrote that "arms had been taken beyond the shores of Iuverna". (Hibernia).