



(940-1014)



Brian Boru

Born in 940 AD, Brian Boru was one of Ireland's greatest leaders who is credited with directing Ireland's future - for both good and bad.

Brian Boru (Brian mac Cennetig or Brian Boraimhe in Gaelic) was born in Munster, Ireland. A member of the Dal Cais (Delcassians) tribe, he was the brother of Mahon, who became King of Munster following the death of their father, Cenn-tig.

At this point in Ireland's history, Viking invaders (or Norsemen) had a stranglehold on the island, while the native Irish either sided with the Norse out of fear or belonged to small kingdoms that fought among themselves.

Mahon desired peace with the Vikings and attempted to attain it, but his younger brother Brian shared no such desire. In fact, after having witnessed the death of his mother and much of the Dal Cais tribe in a Norse raid while he was a child, Brian was a proponent of warfare with Vikings.

When he was old enough, Boru broke away from his brother to wage guerrilla warfare on the Norse. A skilled tactician, he won many decisive victories that instilled fear in the enemy as well as their Irish allies.

His attacks also helped to fuel rumours that there was a large, secret Dalcassian army. Boru's campaign gained much popular support and many Irishmen joined his cause, including his Brother Mahon, who renounced his truce with the Vikings. The combined forces were able to drive most of the Norse from Southern Ireland, including their leader Ivar (also known as Imar).

Eager for revenge, Ivar returned ten years later, capturing and killing Mahon. Brian succeeded his brother to the throne of Munster, bringing with him a re-fueled hatred of the enemy Norsemen. Soon after, his forces met with those of Ivar and Brian challenged him to personal combat. Ivar was killed and the Viking influence in Southern Ireland was struck another blow.

Boru's influence continued to grow throughout Southern Ireland and he became known for rebuilding many of the churches and other monuments that had been destroyed by the Norse.

In North Ireland, Malachy the Second followed Boru's lead when his forces defeated a Norse army to take Dublin in 980 and Malachy became King of Meath. The two kings met in 998 and agreed to divide Ireland between them, with Boru receiving the South and Malachy the North. Boru, however, had too much support - even in Northern Ireland - and Malachy eventually ended up allowing Boru to peacefully take over his lands.

Boru was granted the title "Ard Ri", meaning "High King". This made him one of the first - and last - kings to effectively unite Ireland under one monarch.

The rivals to Brian Boru's rule were numerous, however, both among the native Irish and the remaining Norse. In 1013, Maelmordha, King of Leinster, revolted and allied with the Vikings.



They summoned reinforcements from Boru's other Irish rivals and the Viking nations, as far away as Normandy and Iceland.

The two forces met on Good Friday, 1014 at Clontarf. Nearly 4,000 Irishmen were killed at the Battle of Clontarf, including Brian's son Murrrough, but the Viking/Leinster forces suffered even heavier losses.



At the end of the battle, what little remained of the Norse forces retreated to their ships. But before all the invaders fled, a small group of Norse troops came upon Brian's tent and decided that if they couldn't have Ireland, they would at least kill its King. Then in late seventies or early eighties, Brian was able to kill several men but King Brodar of Man struck Boru the mortal wound. Before he died, Brian was able to avenge himself by beheading Brodar.

Unfortunately, with Boru gone and his strong influence absent, Ireland soon fell into chaos and anarchy. There would never be another king powerful enough to rule all of Ireland.

Today, Boru is also known as the progenitor of the Clan O'Brien, through his four wives and thirty reputed concubines. Additionally, one of the symbols most commonly associated with Ireland - and the symbol used as Guinness's logo - is called the "Brian Boru Harp".

Stephen Butters, August 2000

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