

The Norse Invasion

Some twelve hundred years had passed after the first coming of the Celtic-speaking peoples to Ireland before a new storm of invasion broke on the island—the beginning of a succession of wars of conquest and foreign rule which lasted for eleven hundred years to come. In the past centuries the only strangers in direct contact with the Irish had been the Galli or Gauls of the Empire, so that the name “Gall” became synonymous with “foreigner” [1]: the word which in centuries of Christian intercourse had lost all harmful character, took on a new meaning when it was transferred to the fierce pagan raiders from the northern seas whose pirate fleets practically surrounded the island for two hundred years. The invading hosts called themselves Norsemen, or Northmen, as the northern branch in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, of a larger Teutonic people. At their first appearance the Irish only knew them as “the Heathen”—*Genti*. Later they called them Lochlannaigh, which Professor Marstrander explains as the men of Rogaland, an old division of Scandinavia. But their permanent title remained as the Foreigners or *Gaill*—Fingaill if they were the fair-haired Norwegians, Dubhgaill if they were the black-haired Danes. They marked the earliest threat of external forces gathering to break the free development of Irish civilization and government.

According to the Norwegian scholar Marstrander, in the seventh century Norse fishers and sea-farers had already landed on Irish coasts in their voyages among the islands of the northern seas. A chance mention in Bede [2] of a captive in war sold as a slave to a certain Frisian shows that the slave-trade was active as early as 679, and no doubt the Irish coasts were as frequently visited as the English by shrewd merchants, whether from the southern or the northern shores of the North Sea. So profitable indeed was this traffic in slaves that they maintained it till the thirteenth century.

The Scandinavians had their training in a hard school. Hemmed in between the ocean and the black forests and frozen lakes and highlands at their back, they were driven to the sea as fishers or as traders, with a thousand miles of coast to practise seamanship, sailing without compass against Arctic tempests. In a Norse saga we read of mariners from Iceland driven before the north wind in a heavy mist. One leader asked another if he could tell at all to what land they were likely to be near. “Many lands there are,” said he, “which we might hit with the weather we have had—the Orkneys, or Scotland, or Ireland” [3]. Need forced them to build better ships than other peoples and to use them with greater skill. Their pinewoods supplied them with timber for stout vessels, and from the mines of Upsala they had iron and copper for the chains and anchors of their ships, for their heavy swords, their spear and arrow points and head-pieces and shields, and all the armour which was later the wonder and admiration of the Irish. Legend and poems preserved the memory of their stature and strength; “tall men urge the ships”: one word served alike for “giant” or “robber” [4]. Mighty eaters and drinkers when they had the chance, defying hardships and danger, they were as pitiless to themselves as they were merciless to others. Their historian, Snorro Stiorleson, writing soon after 1200, describes the customary way to get rid of a foreign enemy or home rival—to surround his house by treachery, and burn every one in it—which “was a feat much admired.” If in danger of defeat at home they would inflict the same horror on their kindred as on enemies. Where each little district had its king, and each king was privileged to choose any number of wives, families of rulers multiplied. Crowded into their narrow realms, chiefs who found their territory cut down too small for their ancient honour “drove about in piratical expeditions” to seek some new dominion; a high-spirited “king” even at twelve years old might start as leader of roving adventurers. “There were,” said the Norse historian, “many sea-kings who ruled over many people, but had no lands, and he might well be called a sea-king who never slept beneath sooty roof-timbers” [5]. “Great scourers of the seas, a nation desperate in attempting the conquest of other realms,” their dominion on the whole

circuit of the European waters was unchallenged. Their proud individual freedom, their desperate battle with the hard world they knew and their brave mastery of it, were expressed in a defiant paganism which would have no traffic with Christianity—a religion opposed to every instinct of their fierce independence. The ruthless cruelty with which after long centuries it was finally forced on them in the eleventh century by their Saint Olaf, is probably as ferocious a conversion as any known to European history.

The most exact account of the Norse wars in Ireland is in the contemporary meagre record of the Ulster Annals. Caution is needed in the reading of later sagas and histories, which, however, add all that lacks in the Annals of warmth and vivid emotion. The story of Ireland lies not in the detailed study of attacks and wars, but rather in the way that the Irish under their old constitution met the violence of the impact, what force of recovery was in them, and what were the permanent results.

In 795 the burning of Rechra, now Lambay island, by “Genti” driven off from the opposite coast was the first warning of danger. Coasting round the north shores they entered the wide expanse of the Atlantic, and landed in 807 at Inishmurray off the coast of Sligo. Shifting and multiplying fleets of marauders presently swarmed round the coasts—emigrants who had flung themselves on the ocean to escape the rough hand of conquering kings, buccaneers seeking “the spoils of the sea” from Pictland to Gaul, stray companies out of work or putting in for a winter’s shelter in Ireland, boats of whale-fishers and walrus-killers. Voyagers guided their way by the flights of birds from her shores ; the harbours of “the great island” gave them winter shelter from the Atlantic tempests ; her fields of corn, her cattle driven to the shore for the “strand-hewing,” provisioned their crews ; her woods had timber for repairs ; her men and women were of price valuable for the slave-trade. The light vessels were drawn up to the shore with a gangway by which the crew could pass over and sleep on land, ready for the foray. In 811 and 812 we read of battle and slaughter in east Ulster, Mayo, Connemara, and west Munster about Loch Lein : in 821 of plunder and “a great prey of women” in Etair or Howth, and the whole southern coast invaded from Wexford to Cork. From Skellig-Michael, the island cliff amid Atlantic waves, the pirates carried off in 824 the solitary hermit Etgall to die of hunger and thirst. The same year the oratory of Bangor the Great in the north was spoiled, and the relics of Comgall shaken out of their shrine. Downpatrick and Moville were plundered, but the invaders were beaten back from Mag Inis, now Lecale. There was fighting in Ossory, and off the Wexford coast. In 827 the “Genti” were in Louth and Brega, burning Lusk. Falling on the Leinstermen they destroyed their camp with innumerable slain : they plundered Tech Munnu, now Taghmon in Wexford—Tech Moling, now S. Mullins on the Barrow—Inis Teoc, now Inistioge on the Nore—and the whole of Ossory, where however they lost in battle a hundred and seventy men. They carried their devastations to Glendalough, Wicklow, and Kildare ; in the south to Lismore and Kinsale ; on the Shannon to what is now Limerick, and over the rich lands under the fort of Shanid ; raiding as far as Cork, they occupied west Munster “with a slaughter that has not been reckoned.” “One of the hardest men to talk to,” said a triad of the ninth century, “is a viking in his hauberk.” Good roads led from every port to the farms and granaries of monastic settlements, and the tilled lands and houses of the rich agriculturists, with everywhere rich preys. In these years the Foreigners plundered Armagh for the first time in 832, and in 833 fell on the monastery of Clondalkin near Dublin, the “black pool.”

In some fifty years (790-840) the rovers had learned the geography of Ireland. They began to occupy islands and forelands whence to carry their raids inland. From inlets of the sea and rivers they now dragged their light boats across shallow rapids and threw them into lakes, where they found shelter and provisions while they sent inland new marauding parties. The Norse leader Turgeis, who seized Armagh after three attacks in a month (832), brought with

him “ a great royal fleet into the north of Ireland,” and holding Loch Neagh and the main waterways opened systematic destruction as far as Derry. Forannan the chief *comarb* or lay successor of S. Patrick fled with the shrine of the saint to Munster “ whilst Turgeis was in Armagh and in the sovereignty of the north of Ireland” ; taken captive by the Foreigners of Limerick who broke the shrine and carried him to their ships, he yet lived to return to Armagh on the fall of Turgeis. In Monaghan the raiders seized the shrine of Adamnan, and burned Clones, leading captive bishops and presbyters and wise men, and putting others to death. The fleet in Loch Ree, where Turgeis seems to have taken command about 837, plundered Clonmacnois, Clonfert, Lorrha, Tir da glas, Iniscaltra, and the churches of Loch Derg. His wife Ota is said to have given her oracles from the chief altar of Clonmacnois. On the eastern side the inlets of Loch Ciian and Carlingford opened the way to some of the most fruitful lands in Ireland. From Snaim Aigneich at the head of Carlingford Loch the foreigners took captive great numbers of the *familia* of Patrick. The tillage farmers round Loch Cuan, and pious settlements such as the island Mahee, must have been left desolate, and all the rich surrounding country-side, with Merville and what was left of Bangor the Great.

Scandinavian raids were now in fact taking on the character of organized commercial enterprise, following on one of the great revolutions in world-history—the ruin of the Imperial trade of Europe by the conquests of Islam [6]. Since 476 the power of the Roman Emperors had passed to the eastern Emperors at Constantinople. But the Roman Empire had left to the western world a definite system of common life—various peoples gathered under a supreme Emperor—“ cities” where kings and bishops and courts resided, and great ceremonies and political functions were concentrated. A large and wealthy body of professional merchants, gathered in the cities and occupied in commerce on the grand scale, did business far and wide. The imperial system was based on the freedom of the sea. Mediterranean commerce bound together in a common interest Syria, Africa, Italy, Spain, and Gaul, with the outlying lands beyond. Marseilles with its colonies of foreign merchants, Jews and Syrians, was for the west the capital of all trades of luxury—oil, spices, fabrics, Egyptian papyrus, the wines of Gaza. Its immense business brought to it the leading representatives of international traffic in western Europe, based on the credit and currency of the Imperial coinage.

The whole of this complicated order of trade was shattered by the triumphant wars of Islam. Half a century after Muhammad’s first attack on the Eastern Empire in Palestine (629) his followers had conquered Syria, seized Alexandria, the second city in the Mediterranean world, spread over the north of Africa, destroyed Carthage, and reached the Atlantic (675). In the next half century Asia Minor was overrun, Constantinople besieged for a year, Cyprus the important centre of Mediterranean trade occupied, and south France invaded. In 785 the conquerors celebrated their triumph in Spain by the great mosque at Cordova. Islam stood as the great rival of Christendom and its civilization.

By the closing of the Mediterranean highway of exchange, the emperor at Constantinople was practically cut off from western Europe. The elaborate system of organized trade on an international scale perished from the roots. The leading port of Marseilles lay empty and desolate, the streets of the city bare, and the dependent merchants of Gaul in irretrievable calamity. Civilization and commerce, broken off from the old Roman Empire, were adrift in a world where intercourse of the various regions had ceased.

It was in this crisis of economic disaster that a new Empire arose resting on other trades, other seas, other peoples, and other money. Charles the Great, sole ruler of the Frankish kingdom, had since 771 fought the heathen Saxons between the Elbe and the Rhine, the Lombards of Italy in defence of the Pope, and the Spanish Islam ; in 796 he made his famous

court-town at Aachen (Aix la Chapelle), “ the Rome of the North,” centre of the new civilization. In 797 the Church of Rome repudiated allegiance to the infamous Empress-Mother Eirene who ruled at Byzantium, and in 800 the victorious warrior of the Faith, Charles the Great, was crowned at Rome Emperor of the West. He had the genius and originality to see that Europe had ceased to live by the Mediterranean, and that the old merchants of the great commerce had become negligible. He was strong enough to accept the new conditions for northern Europe, where a rising industry was already moving along the borders of the English Channel and the North Sea, by Rouen, Quentoric, Duurstede, with a traffic between the Carolingian dominions and the shores of England, northern Germany, and the Scandinavian countries. Its main wealth lay in the cloths of Flanders carried by Frisian mariners across the narrow seas from the Scheldt, the Meuse, and the Rhine. Traffic was local, worked by small traders. Furs and slaves from the north were brought by sharp adventurers to the petty dealers of the coasts. Agriculturists carried their supplies to neighbouring village markets. When in this small commerce gold disappeared from circulation the new Emperor, with a genius ready for every emergency, struck his money in silver, with lesser common coins suited to the popular needs. But amid the general disorganization his plan of reserving to the monarch at least the profit of mintage failed ; and from the middle of the tenth century the right of coinage became by concessions a local affair. For example, Sitric, lord of Dublin and the Liffey harbour, could presently strike coins that carried value in Scandinavia [7].

For many decades the Scandinavian mariners had been searching out all the openings to piracy and traffic in the northern seas, and they were ready for the new occasion. Traders as well as pirates, they bartered their furs, skins, and slaves for the cloths and skilled manufactures of the mainland. When the traffic of Eastern luxuries was checked in the Mediterranean, Swedish and Danish adventurers opened a new trade from Byzantium through Russia and dispersed their rich Eastern wares along the northern coasts. The North no longer looked to Marseilles and Gaul as the source of their supplies, but to Gothland and the Baltic.

The Imperial Mediterranean commerce fell before the hosts of the infidel. The first beginnings of a new Imperial trade at Aachen were broken by the Scandinavian masters of the northern seas. If Marseilles had been left desolate, Duurstede on the North Sea lay a heap of ruins after successive destructions by Danish pirates in 800, 813 and 820 A.D. [8]. The terror of the Scandinavian raiders was on every shore—rovers sheltering in creeks and islands for the winter to plunder the mainland in summer, and in the open ocean sailing to ever wider voyages of adventure. From Aachen between the Meuse and the Rhine Charles kept watch on the northern coast. In a riddling puzzle (probably between 782 and 786) he asked a learned man of his court, Paul the Deacon, whether he would prefer to be crushed under a huge mass of iron, or doomed for ever to a gloomy dungeon cave, or sent to convert and baptize Sigfrid the king who “ wields the impious sceptre of pestilential Denmark,” The Emperor’s desperate effort in 810 to form a fleet for the protection of the Frisian coast was vain.

With the larger ventures of the Scandinavians the war in Ireland took on a new character. The Norse were already before 840 permanently settled in the Orkneys, Shetlands, Hebrides, Caithness, Argyle, and the Isle of Man ; whence they could send to Ireland more numerous fleets, and warriors better organized for plunder [9]. Powerful fleets took possession of the rivers that traversed the rich plains of Brega and Meath, sixty ships on the Boyne in 837, and as many on the Liffey. The first prey was taken from south Brega in 836 after fierce resistance, with many killed and captives. In 841 the Gaill raised the earliest fortified stations on harbours ; known in the Annals by the term *long-phort* [10]—a word at first applied to ships drawn up and protected on the land-side, but which in the course of the next seventy years

came to mean an entrenched or stockaded position for an army. There was one at Linn-Duachaid or Casan Linn, the “paths of the pool,” later known as Ath-na-gCasan or Anagassan, the “ford of the paths”—a port of note in ancient times, where the old northern highway from Tara, the *Sligha Midluachra*, touched the harbour at the opening of the rivers Clyde and Dee as they fell together into the sea. Another was at *Dubh-linn*, where the Liffey dark from the bog underlying its waters met the tide of the Irish Sea. From fixed harbour-forts roving expeditions were not limited to a day’s march from the coast: raiders of Anagassan crossed the country to Tethba and to Clonmacnois; those of Dublin reached out to the Slieve Bloom mountains and to Birr and Saighir in Ely O’Carroll. Under these cross-country raids of plunderers the old houses of hospitality along the great lines of traffic vanished from the social system of Ireland. The invaders proceeded with method, choosing their rallying points, their winter quarters, the times of their striking so as not to return too quickly to places already visited; ordering their devastations with all the foresight of skilled commercial agents, and providing for convenient depots where plunder could be stored and exchanged. Warriors who sailed to gather booty one month, in the next crossed the sea as merchants in the world-trade—ready-armed to overwhelm rival traders on the way, whose stores might enrich their own cargo.

From this time “most cruel devastation” swept over the whole midland country—the fleets of the eastern plains and of the Shannon alike gathering the wealth of that fertile territory, Meath, easy of access and sure of profit. According to a “triad” of the ninth century, Bangor the Great and Lynally were counted as two of three famous unlucky places in Ireland, no doubt because of their repeated plunderings and destruction. The bones of the powerful S. Colmán were hastily buried in their shrine for centuries to come [11]. Famous smiths’ work of Lynally, bridles of silver and gold, sacred vessels, disappeared. The whole middle district from Clonmacnois to Kells must have been especially rich in embroideries, ornaments, rich vessels, decorated cloaks and tunics and woollen mantles, which went the same road to foreign markets. To Scandinavians, who for centuries to come had no written literature, the scribes had left evil spells of witchcraft; illuminated manuscripts and relics were flung into rivers and bog-holes, and whole libraries utterly destroyed. A manuscript of Irish writing in the ninth century which is still preserved at Laon was probably written at Armagh, by the bishop, anchorite, and eminent scribe Mochta (+ 893), and carried for safety to the Continent from one of the half-dozen raids by which Armagh was devastated in the forty-five years after 898 A.D. [12].

The new character of the war was demonstrated when in 849 the “king of the Foreigners” sent a fleet of seven score ships to establish his power over all the Norse settlers in Ireland; and Dubhlinn, with its bridge of hurdles, was marked out by the strategic genius of the Scandinavians as the critical centre of the Irish settlement. In 851 a fleet of Black Gaill or Danes from south Sweden and Jutland fell on the White Gaill of the Liffey harbour, broke their fleet at sea, and in battle on shore slew vast numbers, beheading every one of the slain, and carried off a great prey of women with the gold and property stored in the fort. “And thus,” says an Irish tale, “the Lord took from them all the wealth which they had taken from the churches and sanctuaries and shrines of the saints of Erin” [13]. The Fingail in their turn surprised the Dubhgaill at Snaim Aigneach at the head of Carlingford Loch, and drove them from their ships. On which the Danish commander advised his men to put themselves under the protection of S. Patrick by promising “honourable alms for the gaining of victory and triumph” over those who had robbed his churches and outraged the saints of Ireland. By “the tutelage of S. Patrick” victory turned to the Danes with treasures of gold and silver and women and ships captured in the Norse camp. In 853 the Norse again triumphed under Amlaib or Olaf, “son of the king of Lochlann,” who arrived with a prodigious fleet, when the Foreigners of Ireland submitted to him as king of Dublin, and a tribute was given him by the

Gaidhel. The defences of the post were strengthened by his new fort Dún Amlaib at Clondalkin. He became joint king with Imhar or Hingmar,

The Liffey swamp itself was not a site which tempted the old Irish to form a settlement, but to the Scandinavians it had a special value not only for trade by sea and land, but as a border post whence troops could be thrown into the lands of the Uí Neill, or of the Leinster kings, or across the middle country to the Shannon. The river line here bounded kingdoms whose hostility was bitter ever since the Uí Neill had wrested from the men of Leinster “the plain of Meath,” imposing on them a hated tribute. From the little hill where the Castle now stands, once overgrown with hazels and willows, the Foreigners commanded that most critical position in Irish history, where the river was crossed by the bridge of hurdles at Ath Cliath, leading to the main road from Leinster to Tara and the north—a passage well known in Irish history. The story was not forgotten of the “massacre of Ath Cliath” in 769 when the men of Brega, on their way home from a fight with the men of Wicklow, met the full sea-tide as they tried to cross the frontier at the bridge of hurdles, and fell in “the great slaughter.” The district was populous and wealthy. The Uí Briuin Chualainn had settled in the region round Sliab Cualann (now vulgarly called the Sugar Loaf). No monastery was more famous than that of Tallaght in the wide plain into which half a dozen passes dropped from the Wicklow hills—rival of Armagh as a centre of learning, national and ecclesiastical—a curious fore-shadowing of later conflict between the Primate of Armagh and the Archbishop of Dublin. The abbot of Clondalkin held an important place in the events of the time. Close by on the Escir ridge the ruins of a church still remain on the site of an ancient rath, overlooking reaches of fertile land. The abbey of Finglas was not far from the hurdle bridge. Kilmainham recalls the “church of Maignend” on a height overlooking the Liffey, founded about 600 and still standing in the time of Brían Boru. The church of Cell-mo-Shámhóg near Islandbridge became famous as the site of the “battle of Dublin” (919) between the high-king and the Norsemen. It was a land good to plunder, the pleasant plain of the Dodder and the Liffey between the mountains and the sea, with its circle of prosperous monasteries.

To the Scandinavians, lords not of the land but of the ocean, the value of Dublin was not as a capital of Irish sovereignty but as commanding the Irish Sea. In York kings of Dublin or of the same family had their other capital, carrying on business through the North Sea and the Baltic. Dublin harbour was to the foreign adventurers a trading and military centre, a port in which the warrior might any day change from raider to armed chapman, sailing under the rules of either profession in turn. The defending fort Dún Amlaib at Clondalkin showed the importance Olaf attached to the new site, and the attack and burning of the Dún in 867 was the answer of the Irish Cennétig king of Leix. Beneath the fort the “hurdle bridge” made a passage half lost in marsh between the tidal waters to seaward and on the other side the “Black Pool.” From a later poem we learn that the Ford of Fences was a passage within a row of piles, a palisade compared to some monster’s ribs [14]. On the level ground by the river off “Dam” Street, near the site of the House of Parliament in the eighteenth century, was the common Assembly of the Scandinavians—a circular Moat bearing on its summit the King’s seat, and below it in ordered concentric tiers or steps the seats of his kingly sons, his earls, and men of substance according to their degrees. The “folksmot” was always in the open air, while the “husting,” where the king called his guardsmen or the leaders of his army, was gathered in a house. The “twelve judges” who presided in their tribunals, and the “twelve best men” who took part in the election of a new king formed a number strange to the Irish, who even to the seventeenth century called the Norwegians “the Twelve Judges Clan” [15].

Dublin itself remained a pagan city with its temple to Thor (probably where S. Andrew’s church now stands) close to the Thing, and to the mounds where the kings were buried, above the rush of the tide checked at Dam Street. In the boggy marsh by the Liffey timber houses

seem then and later to have been raised on wooden piles or hurdles. The only Irish inhabitants were apparently the captives used as slaves, or sold (in 980 two thousand of them) to traders. The first “city” founded in Ireland, it carried from first to last its non-national character—alien in religion, tradition, and culture—based on the right of a strong hand and a stiff trade. Foreign raids and pillage, however rude their destruction, were evils that passed away—but a permanent foreign city commanding the approach to the rich central lands of Ireland, itself fed and defended from the sea, held at all times by strangers, and by its position unconquerable from the land, remained to Irishmen for centuries to come a perpetual menace to national life. In 1650 Duaid MacFirbis tells that the greater part of the merchants of Dublin are descended from Amlaib Cuaran, the viking who fought the battle of Brunanburh and was king of York and later of Dublin ; and he adds the moral—“ Thus the race of this Amlaib Cuaran in the town of Ath Cliath is opposing the Gaidhels of Erin” [16]

The encampment at Ath Cliath intensified, and at the same time made more perilous, the conflict between north and south. Kings of Cashel had mostly remained in a sort of passive resistance to the north, secure behind the fighting-men of Leinster. It was not till the Norse raiders were ravaging the whole territories of the Uí Neill that the ambition of the southern kings, themselves still beyond reach of attack, became again active.

Ireland has been charged with slackness or timidity in not sending fleets from her shores either to destroy the pirates or to share their profitable trade. The reasons are not far to seek. The Irish were daring sailors since the days when Columcille waited for news of his friend Cormac, who in a boat of skin voyaged to the Orkneys, “ beyond the limits of human endeavour.” They were in the Faroe islands about 725 A.D. ; it is said in Norway that the sheep left there by Irish adventurers attracted the first Norwegian settlers. They reached Iceland in 795, and left behind them “ Irish books, bells, and croziers.” The first Norse settlers there in 814 carried with them ten Irish captives by whose long sea experience their own lives were saved, the Irish teaching their captors, when fresh water in the ship was exhausted, to avert death by a mixture of meal and butter kneaded into “ mynntak.” Old laws of the seventh or eighth centuries describe three ships used by the Irish—*na longa fada*, called after the Latin *naves longae* ; “ barks” “ which are not rowed” ; and “ hide-covered boats.” But for war at sea Ireland was not better prepared than England, or than the Emperor Charles the Great. With a population not increasing, but growing in wealth and industry, there was no reason for hopeless crusades against the sea forces of Scandinavia. Nor could the Irish in the fervour of their Christian faith have made common cause with heathen slave-dealers as rigid in their paganism as merciless in their traffic. No organized defence was possible against raids striking unforeseen from the unknown, and vanishing as suddenly as they came. During centuries of general internal peace permanent military organization was not required, and fighting men called out from their ordinary peaceful occupations could not lawfully be held to military service for more than a few weeks in any year. As for monastic settlements where tenant farmers were freed from “ hosting,” they were practically defenceless. Mercenary forces, long abandoned among the Irish, may now have appeared occasionally here and there, when from 856 chance bands of the “ Gall-gaedhel” made their appearance, people of the generation following the Norse conquest of the Isle of Man and the Hebrides, men of mixed race, speaking broken Irish and probably broken Norse, half or wholly pagan, ready to fight as occasion served on any and every side, but it would seem in most cases for the Irish [17]. As battle swung backwards and forwards, we catch in a few stray fragments of verse preserved by chance glimpses both of the terror of that time and of the Irish temper [18]. One fragment rejoices in the harsh protection allowed by winter tempests : “ Bitter is the wind to-night. It tosses the ocean’s white hair; I do not fear the fierce warriors of Norway coursing on the Irish sea to-night.” Another gives the spirit of the defenders : “ Conaire of the race of Cean loved nothing better than to hide in his garment Viking loot, as if in the overflow of the full harvest in a high wood a handful of grey apples had been shaken down

by the King of kings.” Such another warrior must have been Maelciarain, “hero-plunderer of the Foreigners, champion of the east of Ireland,” slain in 869. Like the men of the Netherlands the Irish must have realized that there was no security other than the fortress against the Northmen, unskilled in the arts of siege : hence the jibe against the man of Down who failed to stand like a strongly-barred castle against the storming of the pirate host : “Son of Flannain, thou lazy mare, thou one-legged goose, thou crooked lock when the battle-cry of the Vikings rings out.”

Sites and dates and leaders of battles often remain unknown in a conflict where neither victory nor defeat counted beyond the day of fighting. But forty years of raiding expeditions did not pass without Irish resistance, growing more resolute as the violence of attack increased. The first “slaughters of the Genti” were in Mayo, and in Munster at Loch Lein (811) ; in Mag Inis (825) ; in Brega (827) ; a victory by the high-king Niall in the first year of his reign (833) ; by the Uí Fidgente in west Munster (834) ; by the men of Brega (837). The year after the destruction of Connacht and Meath and the monasteries of the Shannon, Mael Seachlinn king of Meath took Turgeis prisoner, and executed him after Irish law by drowning in Loch Owel (845) ; and the high-king Niall in that year, the last of his life, fought a victorious battle. In 846 the first act of the new high-king Mael Seachlinn was to demolish the stronghold of Irish robber-bands plundering the country “after the manner of the Genti.” In 848 he slew seven hundred of the Foreigners in a fight at Forach near Skreen. Tigernach king of Lagore gained a yet greater victory. Already in 847 Cearbhall king of Ossory had attacked and defeated the foreign settlers in Dublin. The next year Olcobhar king of Munster with Lorcan king of Leinster slew twelve hundred of the enemy in battle, among them the heir of the king of Lochlann ; and there was another victory over the “Genti” by the Eoganacht of Cashel. Perhaps the return of Diarmait to Armagh from his exile by Turgeis showed some relaxation of the terror in the north. A contemporary chronicler, Prudentius of Troyes, has an entry under the year 848 : “The Irish are victorious over the invading Northmen with the help of Christ and drive them from their borders. For which cause the king of the Irish sends an embassy to Charles (the Bald) in token of peace and friendship, bringing gifts and requesting a passage for the king to Rome” [19].

The reign of Feidlimid (820-847), second of the recorded ecclesiastical kings of Munster—“optimus Scottorum” according to the northern chronicler, “a scribe and anchorite,” but in an earlier account described as carrying a crozier—covered the first period of the Norse invasion. One of his first acts was to meet Artri bishop of Armagh (823) and establish with him the “Law of Patrick” in Munster, thus enforcing again the claim of Armagh to the primacy. A relentless man of war, his career, to quote Dr. MacNeill, “reads like that of a heathen king of Norsemen.” In 823 he burned the monastery of Gallen, a foundation of the Britons in the west of Meath, with its dwelling places and oratory. In 826 he led the army of Munster over the Connacht border, burning the same district : and again in 830 he wasted Fore and south Connacht. The next year (831), at the head of troops of Munster and Leinster, he plundered Brega ; and in 833 attacked Clonmacnois and Durrow in turn, slaughtering in each the *familia*, and burning the termon-lands to the church door. In 836 he attacked the ecclesiastical settlement of Kildare, carrying off captive from the monastery Forinnan abbot of Armagh, and dignitaries of “Patrick’s congregation” there assembled—fugitives apparently from Armagh under Turgeis. When the expelled abbot Díarmait fled, carrying the “law and ensigns” of Patrick, he had been replaced in 835 by Forinnan, a man of Monaghan, who in his turn also fled, taking refuge in Kildare, so that Feidlimid as new champion of Armagh possibly looked on him as a usurper ; three years later (839) Diarmait was restored to Armagh.

The sinister part of the story is that Feidlimid's campaigns in Hy Many, Roscommon, Meath, Brega, and the borderlands, were made while the "Genti" were over-running all the middle districts of the Uí Neill with their utmost ferocity. In the midst of his wars Feidlimid had held two royal assemblies with the northern kings—one convention with the high-king Conchobor at Birr in 831 ; and another with Niall at Cloncurry in 838. But his fixed purpose remains clear, through the calamities of north and middle Ireland to secure for himself the high-kingship. His attack on the men of Hy Many-ended in disaster according to their own account : " In Magh-I they were not feeble ; let any one enquire of Feidlimid whence Lough-na-Calla was called "— the " lake of shouting" — as the Connacht men named it after their victory. Later he had his revenge, when in 840 he carried away their hostages and struck east to ravage Brega [20].

" Feidlimid is the King
To whom it was but one day's work
(To obtain) the pledges of Connacht without battle,
And to devastate Meath."

He felt no obligation to aid the Uí Neill against heathen raiders. Their danger was his opportunity to raise the power of Cashel to its highest point. Amid ruins of Norse raids he marched to Tara itself, and " rested there" after the example of Cathal a hundred years before—an occupation of the royal hill which he could use to assert his claim to be " king of Ireland." In 841, while the " Genti" were raising their first fortress at Dubh-linn he led his host to Carman near Mullaghmast, the assembly-place of the Leinster kings, no doubt to preside there and assert his sovereignty over Leinster as well as over Connacht and Meath. There the final conflict was waged. The high-king Niall marched to meet him. The flight of Feidlimid was recorded by the triumphant pæan of some Uí Neill court-poet, very scornful of a southern ecclesiastic as against a northern battle-hero [21] :

" The crozier of vigil-keeping Feidlimid,
Which was left on the thorn-trees,
Niall bore off, with usual power,
By right of the battle of swords."

Six years later the contest ended, when Niall Caille " died by drowning" in 846, and in 847 Feidhmid " rested." Possibly it was some Munster patriot who during this time composed under the name of S. Patrick the famous " Blessing on Munster" [22].

The new high-king Mael Seachlinn was a man of great power. He had already (846) taken prisoner Turgeis and executed him by drowning, and carried war against lawless men and foreign pirates. By solemn counsel of the good men of Ireland and the abbot of Armagh in a state assembly he put to death the son of the king of Connacht for joining in the pirates' raids (851). That same year he held a royal meeting in Armagh with the nobles of all Leth Cuinn and the king of east Ulster, and the congregation of Patrick and clerics of Meath. In 855 he crossed the border of the men of Munster, and took hostages of their submission ; and three years later again marched through the south to the sea, stopping ten nights at the Blackwater, and carrying away hostages as far as the Old Head of Kinsale and the Aran islands. Yet another royal assembly of kings and abbots was held by Mael Seachlinn at Rahugh in 859, with the abbots of Armagh and of Clonard, which established peace and concord between the men of Ireland ; and in that assembly the king of Ossory and the king of Munster entered into allegiance with Leth Cuinn. The next year (860) Mael Seachlinn led the hostings of the three provinces, Munster, Leinster, and Connacht, to Armagh in token of the sovereignty of all Ireland. He was challenged in a furious night attack and slaughter by the king of Ailech, Aed

Finnliath or “ fair-gray,” son of a former high-king and heir to Tara, but held his post. It was his last triumph. In 862 he died, and Aed reigned at Tara.

Aed had been entangled with one of the wild and restless princes of Brega in raids on Meath. But as high-king he took up the war against the invaders. From their new fort at Dubh-linn Olaf and his associate Ivar raided with increased violence the middle territory where the great tumuli of the Boyne were broken open in 863—“ the cave of Achadh-Aldai, and the cave of Cnoghba, and the cave of Fert-Boadan over Dubadh, and the cave of the smith’s wife, were searched by the Foreigners, which had not been done before . . . and Lorcan son of Cathal, king of Meath, was with them thereat,” for which crime he was taken and blinded in the next year. In a later expedition from Leinster to Kerry, about 865, the son of Olaf and another chieftain “ left not a cave underground that they did not explore ; and they left nothing from Limerick to Cork that they did not ravage.” Gold by this time must have been getting scarce in the monasteries. In 866 Aed plundered the Norse strongholds on the coast, carried off spoils, brought away twelve score heads from his victory at Loch Foyle ; and three years later defeated armies of Brega and Leinster who had joined a great host of Foreigners. From that time none of the Gaill made military settlements north of Dublin and Limerick, and the fact that in 879 Aed “ fell asleep” in the monastery of Dromiskin in Co. Louth testifies to his success in checking the menace of the “ Genti” in northern Ireland. To some extent they repaired in the south their losses in the north. Above all they had secured the harbour of the Liffey.

In no case, however, did wars or alliances secure for the “ Genti” a permanent hold on the inland country ; while the frequent conferences of kings of Cashel and kings of Tara never ceased to show an underlying common policy for the interests of Ireland as a whole. In thirty years we have seen recorded four important assemblies : A royal meeting at Birr between the king of Cashel and the high-king in 836, and “ a great royal meeting” in 837 at Cloncurry on the Leinster border between the kings of Cashel and Tara. The third royal meeting, in Armagh, was between the high-king and the northern nobles, with the congregation of Patrick and the clerics of Meath (851). But the fourth assembly at Rahugh in Meath (859) again concerned the south ; when the king of Tara, and abbots of the north made peace and concord between the men of Ireland, and Cearbhall king of Ossory gave the award of the congregation. There Ossory entered into allegiance with the north, and the king of Munster tendered his allegiance.

Olaf himself meanwhile was warring in Pictland (865), whence he returned to plunder and burn Armagh (868), and again sailed to join Ivar in Scotland, where the northern Britons still held the fortress of Alcluit (Dumbarton) long after they had been dispossessed of their other territories in Scotland. After the capture of Alcluit (870) Olaf returned with a fleet of two hundred ships, and a great spoil of men. Angles and Britons and Picts, in captivity ; and pursued his ravages in Munster and Connacht till in 871 he was slain in battle. Ivar followed him as “ King of Dublin” and of “ the Norsemen of all Ireland and Britain” till he “ ended life” in 873.

The capture of Alcluit after four months of siege by Ivar and Olaf (870) ends the history of the Britons .who outside the bounds of the Roman Empire had remained unsubdued till the Norse attack. The hosts of the Norsemen and Danes were now established over all the coast districts which before had been held by the Scots, as well as Caithness and Sutherland in the extreme north, and Galloway (Gallovidia, GallGaedhil, in Norse Gall-geddlar) : and the Hebrides, henceforth the islands of the foreigners, Inse Gall.

On every side the Scandinavians were triumphant. They had overrun England so that the greatest king and statesman of the English, Alfred (871-901), was only able by treaty to secure one-third of his country, which he held during his life ; the terror of the time has its echoes in prophecies preserved for centuries, such as : “ When the Black Fleet of Norway was come and gone, after in England there should be war never.” Invasions in mass, with a systematic ordering of war and pillage, fell on the lands where Charles the Great had set up his new civilization on the old Imperial inheritance of laws and beliefs. Lords of conquered territories on the Meuse and the Rhine, they entered Paris by the Seine, overran Normandy in 876, and presently voyaged down the coasts of Spain, by the Mediterranean to Sicily and Italy, and so opened their long-sea route to Constantinople. Meanwhile colonies of Swedes had passed by the Baltic and the gulf of Finland to settle on the opposite coast about Novgorod and along the Dnieper—the Eastway, as they called it—leaving their traces in Scandinavian names along the rapids of the river, till in 839 they came in contact with the Greeks, and Swedish traders were introduced by the Emperor of the East to the Western Emperor, Louis the Pious. In 865 two hundred of their vessels appeared before Constantinople ; in 880 they had reached the Sea of Azof, the Don and the Volga; in 913 they had five hundred ships, each carrying a hundred men, in the Caspian. In Gothland, a general centre of exchange for the Eastway trade in luxuries, Russian furs, Greek and Arabian silks, and Indian spices, there have been found about thirty thousand coins, most of them from central Asia, of the tenth century. Already in the middle of the ninth century the Scandinavians threatened to become masters of Europe from the Volga to the Shannon. They had on the ocean no opposition to fear : their monopoly of sea-power was assured for centuries to come.

- [1] “ There is a curious implication, not noticed in any writing known to me, in the fact that Galli, Gaill, became synonymous with ‘ foreigner.’ Before the Norman invasion of England, none of the inhabitants of Britain, whether Picts, Britons, Anglo-Saxons, or Scots, are ever called Gaill in Irish. ‘ Baile Bricceni’ (a curious piece of Irish Church History cast in the form of a prophecy, probably between 900 and 950) speaks of ‘ these two islands,’ as being a kind of world apart.” (Note by Eoin MacNeill.)
- [2] “ The Church Historians of England,” Vol. I, Part II (“ Beda”), p. 472.
- [3] “ The Saga of Burnt Njal” (ed. Dasent), II, 7.
- [4] Alex Bugge : “ Entstehung der Islandischen Saga” (*Zeitschrift für Deutsches Altertum*, Band LI).
- [5] Laing : “ Sea-kings of Norway,” pp. 246, 260.
- [6] H. Pirenne : “ Un Contraste Economique,” *Revue Beige de Philologie et d’Histoire*, n. 2, avril 1923, See also Bugge, “ Seafaring and Shipping during the Viking Ages.” (Saga Book of the Viking Club, Jan. 1909.)
- [7] The Stavanger Museum in Norway has coins of this period minted in twenty-nine different places. Some hundred coins were discovered in the Bukn islands in 1923, supposed to have been buried there in 1020. Among them are very many from London, York, and other cities. The German coins are of very inferior quality, those identified being of the time of Otto I, II, and III, and a few of Henry II.
- [8] An admirable description of the pirate raids on the northern coasts of Europe is given by the eminent historian Henri Pirenne in his “ *Histoire de Belgique*” (Vol. I).
- [9] “ The Isle of Man, from its secure position and proximity to fairly prosperous regions, must have been a great support of the Norse power in these parts. Orosius says that in his time Man was held by the Irish (about 350-400)—these could have been either ancient settlers or more probably (since Orosius calls them Scotti) part of the Irish overflow of that age. Several oghams attest continued Irish occupation, probably in the sixth century. One of them contains the name of Conaille, gens then ruling in the district of Dundalk. Later, the Britons occupied Man. The ‘ *Annales Cambrae*’ probably give some particulars. These Britons are likely to have been of the element squeezed out of southern Scotland between

the Scots and the Bernician Angles, as I think were also the Britons who, under Cunedda and his sons, displaced the Irish power in Wales. The Norsemen displaced the Britons in Man but Irish seems to have remained the language of the island throughout. Manx is a dialect of Irish having features common to most of the dialects that came under Norse influence. In Manx, a husbandman is called *éireannach* (I give the Irish spelling, as I am not sure of the Manx spelling), which means ‘Irishman,’ a proof that the native population, as distinguished from the seafaring, were known to tradition to be Irish. Under the later Norwegian power, the kings of Man were subject to Norway but superior to the kings of the Hebrides. Hence the bishopric of Sodor and Man—Sodor = Sudreyar =: the Hebrides.

“I can find no history of the Norsemen in Galloway until the twelfth century, but in Gaelic, Galloway is Gallaibh = the Norsemen. Cunningham in Ayrshire seems also to be the name of a Norse settlement.” (Eoin MacNeill.)

[10] Eoin MacNeill in *Scottish Review*, XXXIX, pp. 254-276.

[11] Kuno Meyer: “Life of Colman” (R.I.J. Todd Lecture Series, XVII). For the wanderings of Columcille’s relics see Gougau: “Les Chretientés Celtiques,” p. 351.

[12] Kuno Meyer: “Über eine Handschrift von Laon” (*Sitzungsberichte der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 1914, Klasse von 30 April).

[13] “War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill,” p. lxiv. ,

[14] R.I.A. Todd Lecture Series, X, pp. 315, 101.

[15] For Dublin see Haliday’s *Scandinavian History of Dublin*; and his first address, reprinted in *Sinn Fein*, May 27, 1911.

[16] Duaid MacFirbis: “On the Fomorians and Norsemen.” (Trans. Alexander Bugge, Christiania 1905.)

[17] Walsh: “Scandinavian Relations with Ireland,” p. 10. The “gicgog of a Gall-Gaedhel” was generally understood to mean halting or broken Gaelic. The fleet of the Gall-Gaedhel is mentioned. There was a mixed Norse and Gaelic population in Galloway (the word is a corruption of Gall-Gaedhel) as well as in the Hebrides.

[18] Kuno Meyer: “Bruchstücke,” 56, 61; “Ancient Irish Poetry,” p. 101; “Ulster Annals,” I, p. 381.

[19] The following passage is from Traube’s essay on Sedulius Scottus in his “O Roma Nobilis” in the *Proceedings of the Bavarian Academy*, xix, 1892, p. 342: “Die Vermutung ist gestattet, dass Sedulius mit der irischen Gesandtschaft aufs Festland gekommen ist, von der Prudentius zum Jahr 848 berichtet: ‘Scotti super Nordmannos iruentes auxiliHo domini nostri Jesu Christi victores eos a suis finibus propeUunt. Unde et rex Scottorum ad Karolum pacis et amicitiae gratia legates cum muneribus mittit viam sibi petenti Romam concedi deprecens.’”

[20] “Ulster Annals.”

[21] *lb.*

[22] Kuno Meyer: “Ancient Irish Poetry,” p. 29.

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