

Sitric the Survivor: Making Sense of Viking-Age Dublin's Dynastic Family Feuds and the Battle of Clontarf

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For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. (James 3:16)

If a Viking ruled over Ireland's busy port of Dublin, for more than 40 years, one might expect that Viking had good connections – political networks and family dynasty links. True enough, but those royal connections also came with a lot of family conflict baggage! This mix of family politics, applied to Viking-style conflict resolution processes, is repeatedly illustrated in the family life and political career of Dublin's Viking ruler **Sitric "Silkbeard"** (a/k/a "Silkenbeard") **Olafsson**.¹



Of course, Vikings in Ireland are known by both their Irish and their Norse names, and variants abound when spelling those names --- so Sitric's name appears in variants including Sigtrygg, Sigtryg, Sigtryggr, Sihtric, and Sitrick. Sitric was not an uncommon Viking name, but history only knows one Viking nicknamed "**Silkbeard**" (or "Silkenbeard"), so that is how he will often be identified here.

¹ As surprising as it may be to some, **Christ Church Cathedral**, in Dublin (Ireland), was originally established by King Silkbeard around AD1028 --- it now belongs to the (Anglican Protestant) Church of Ireland. Silkbeard died in AD1042.

Silkbeard had political connections, as well as family ties, directly, both by his birth and by his marriages, as well as indirectly, because his blood kin and in-laws themselves were very interconnected with the geopolitical networks of Ireland Viking Age, both inside and outside of Ireland.

This short study will show that Silkbeard's family ties, which overlap with his political networks, help to explain just how interconnected personal relationships were in Viking Ireland, especially during Silkbeard's unusually long career, as well as during the times immediately before and after that illustrious career.



FAMILY FEUDS: DIVORCE COURT BATTLES, WRIT LARGE?

To specifically illustrate Silkbeard's interconnectedness with notable players in his world, consider how his career was traumatically challenged when his own mother (**Gormlaith ingen Murchada**, whose name in Old Norse is **Kormloð** –

since the Old Norse use **K** for both “G” and “K” consonants) urged him to war against her ex-husband (Brian Boru), who was Silkbeard’s former stepfather.

Besides her son Silkbeard, Gormlaith incited others, especially her brother **Máel Mórda**, plus 3 other warriors whom she appeared willing to marry (if Brian was defeated), to go to war against her ex, Brian Boru. How did ex-queen Gormlaith become so heavily involved in plotting a military coup against her royal ex?

But Silkbeard’s mother, **Gormlaith**, was ***not new** to politics in Viking Age Ireland*.

Firstly, Gormlaith’s father was **Murchad mac Finn**, king of Leinster (in southern Ireland); her brother **Máel Mórda** (a/k/a Máel Mordha) mac Murchada, became the successor king when their father (Murchad) died.

Secondly, it is important to notice that Gormlaith’s brother Máel Mórda fought against Brian Boru (Gormlaith’s ex-husband, so Máel’s ex-brother-in-law) at the **Battle of Clontarf in AD1014**, where many brave warriors breathed their last.²

Thirdly, as wife of Dublin-York’s king **Olaf Cuaran** (a/k/a Kváran³) **Sitricsson**, she mothered **Silkbeard** (who later became king).

² Both **Máel Mórda** (Gormlaith’s brother, as king of Leinster) and **Brian Boru** (Gormlaith’s 2nd husband, who divorced her) died during the Battle of Clontarf on Good Friday of AD1014, along with thousands of other Norse and Irish warriors.

³ **Olaf Cuaran** was king of Northumbria/Jórvík (York) 2 or 3 times, plus king of Dublin twice. Olaf was known as **Óláfr Sigtryggsson** in Old Norse, and in old Irish Gaelic as **Amlaíb mac Sitric** or as **Amlaíb Cuarán** (meaning Olaf “Sandal”). Olaf was a direct descendant of “Ivar the Boneless”, one of the Great Heathen Army heads. Regarding the Great Heathen Army’s contribution to creation apologetics, see James J. S. Johnson, “Something Fishy about Radiocarbon-Dating Viking Bones”, ***Creation Research Society Quarterly***, 54(3):213-216 (winter 2018). Olaf’s sister (some say “daughter”; Brian Tompsett says “sister”; maybe ½-sister?), **Gytha** (a/k/a Gyda), after becoming widowed, married Christian Viking **Olaf Trygvason**, himself then a widower; for a few years Olaf Trygvason lived in both England and Dublin, likely helping Olaf Cuaran, his royal brother-in-law in Dublin.

Fourthly, as wife of Munster's king **Brian Boru**, she mothered **Donnchad** (who later became king of Munster).

And, *fifthly*, it seems that her third and last marriage was to Meath's king **Máel Sechlainn mac Domnall**⁴ (who once defeated **Olaf Cuaran** in AD980), --- and who once fought on December 30th of AD999 with **Brian Boru**, and later against him in AD1002, and against him again in AD1014), for whom Gormlaith mothered **Conchobar** (who appears to have died during AD1030). This part of Gormlaith's life is less documented (i.e., the evidence for this third marriage is not as sound and thorough as the historical evidence of Gormlaith's first and second marriages), yet that is to be expected (or at least it is not unforeseeable) because her political relevance apparently faded soon after the Battle of Clontarf.

BRIAN BORU FLIPS THE FAMILY DYNASTY SEESAW

Silkbeard's mother, years after becoming a widow (when Silkbeard's father died in AD981) married **Brian Boru**, who had previously fathered children.

One of Brian Boru's preëxisting children, in AD1000, was a daughter named **Sláine ingen Briain** (i.e., Brian's-dottir), whom Silkbeard (Gormlaith's son) then married.

In other words, Gormlaith's marriage to Brian Boru (who was already the father of Sláine), when combined with Silkbeard marrying Sláine (both occurred shortly

⁴ It also seems that **Máel Sechlainn II mac Domnall** (a/k/a "Malachy") previously married Dublin/York's king **Olaf Cuaran**'s daughter named **Máel Muire ingen Amlaíb** (the latter 2 words meaning "Olafsdottir", i.e., "daughter of Olaf"). This **Máel Muire** was half-sister to Dublin's king **Sitric "Silkbeard" Olafsson**, as well as sister (or half-sister) to **Gytha Olafsdottir** (who married **Olaf Tryggvason**, who later became Christian Viking king of Norway and its possessions). *Assuming that Gormlaith eventually married Máel Sechlainn II, who previously had married Olaf Cuaran's daughter Máel Muire (who once was Gormlaith's stepdaughter), that would mean Gormlaith was marrying the ex-husband of her own stepdaughter!*

after the Battle of Glenmama, though Gormlaith's marriage to Brian preceded Silkbeard's marriage to Brian's daughter), meant that ***Silkbeard was then married to his own mother's stepdaughter*** --- in order to *doubly tie* the dynastic family of Brian Boru to that of Gormlaith and her son (by Olaf Cuaran) Sitric "Silkbeard".

As a result, **Olaf Sitricsson**, the son of **Silkbeard** (and thus part of the Olafsson family dynasty, which apparently descends from the original Norse-Danish Viking dynasty – called by the Irish **Uí Ímair** ("descendants of Ivar") --- that established **Dublin**, led by Ivar, Halfdan, and others) and **Sláine** (and thus part of Brian Boru's family dynasty) --- could claim *Gormlaith* as both his paternal grandmother and as his maternal step-grandmother.⁵

This double marriage alliance was no romantic accident or lucky coincidence. Rather, this double marriage alliance was a *strategic reaction* to the outcome of the **Battle of Glenmama**, ***where all 4 belligerent parties had a tie to Gormlaith***.

BATTLE OF GLENMAMA, December 30th A.D. 999

Before considering who fought against whom at the **Battle of Clontarf** (in April of AD1014), it is helpful to notice who fought whom during the *earlier* **Battle of Glenmama** (on Little Christmas Eve, AD999). The Glenmama (Irish: *Ghleann Máma*) battle climaxed a rebellion in Leinster (southern Ireland).

Four Irish kingdoms were involved at Glenmama's showdown:

- (1) Kingdom of Leinster, headed by King **Máel Mórda** (*Gormlaith's brother*);
- (2) Kingdom of Munster, headed by King **Brian Boru** (who became *Gormlaith's 2nd husband*);

⁵ Would Olaf Sitricsson call Gormlaith "**Farmor**" (meaning "Father's mother"), or "**Mormor**" (meaning "Mother's [step]-mother"), or just "**Bestemor**" (meaning "grandmother")? [AUTHOR'S PERSONAL NOTE: my son's sons (i.e., my biogenetic grandchildren) call me "**Farfar**", Norwegian for "Father's father". ><> JJSJ]

(3) Kingdom of Meath, headed by “High King” **Máel Sechnaill II mac Domnall** (a/k/a “**King Malachy**”, who appears to have been, at some point, *Gormlaith’s husband*, -- most likely her 3rd husband, soon after the Battle of Clontarf, although some say they were a pair before Gormlaith married Brian -- perhaps both suggestions are true); and

(4) Kingdom of Dublin, headed by Norse-Viking King **Sitric “Silkbeard”** (*Gormlaith’s son by Olaf Cuaran, Gormlaith’s 1st husband*).

Mael Morda mac Murchada of north Leinster is taken prisoner and Dublin is subsequently attacked. Brian stays in Dublin from January to beginning of February; he plunders the city, burns the fortress and expels the Viking leader, Sitric mac Amlaíb (known in Norse as Sigtryggr Silkiskegg or Sitric “Silkbeard”) for a short while before he is allowed back to rule Dublin as Brian’s client king.

Brian Boru has thus defeated Gormlaith’s brother (**Máel Mórda**), and Gormlaith’s son (**Sitric “Silkbeard”**), at Glenmama. Two politically coerced marriage alliances soon follow: **(1)** Gormlaith marries Brian Boru; and **(2)** Gormlaith’s son Silkbeard marries Sláine, one of Brian’s daughters.

Now to consider the later controversy -- about 14 years later -- when Gormlaith has been prodding her son (Silkbeard) to help lead a war against her ex-husband (Brian Boru), Silkbeard’s former stepfather.

Unsurprisingly, the rejected ex-queen/now-divorcée, *Gormlaith sought revenge against Brian Boru*. This hostile alienation led, in short time, to what history calls the **Battle of Clontarf**, a major event in Irish history, on Good Friday of **AD1014**. Clontarf is a coastland on **Dublin Bay’s** north side (*see map below, on page 8*).

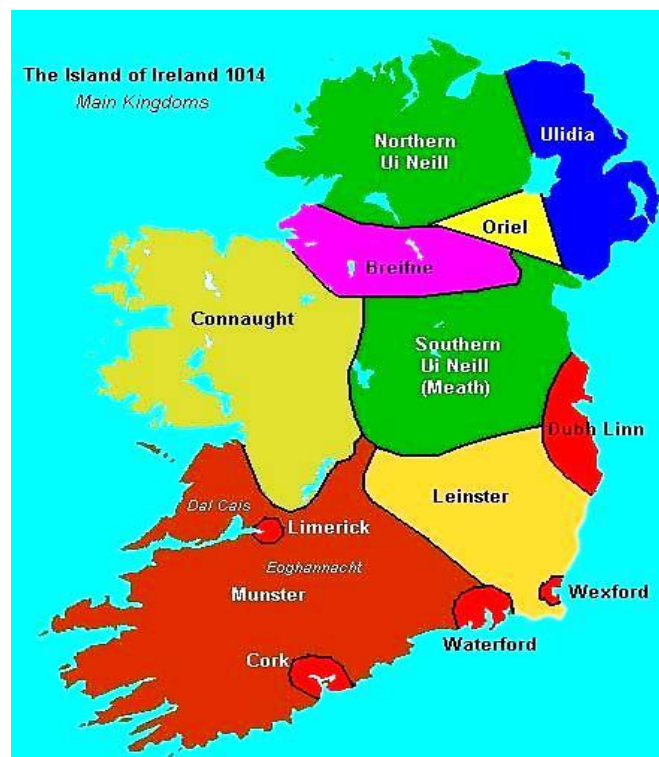
Gormlaith was determined to support a worthy challenger who could (and would) defeat her ex-husband, Brian Boru. But who would that be?

Actually the “who” was not just one warrior! The Viking Age histories (especially the Icelandic sagas) indicate that Gormlaith “diversified” the risks involved, i.e., she chose not to put all of her matrimonial “eggs” in one basket.

Gormlaith instructed her son *Silkbeard* to tell **Sigurd “the Stout” Hlodvirsson** (earl of Orkney, grandson of Thorfinn Skull-splitter Einarsson) that she would marry Sigurd Hlodvirsson *if* Brian Boru (her ex) was defeated, plus Gormlaith would use her political power/influence to establish Sigurd as High King in Ireland.

However, Gormlaith likewise instructed her son *Silkbeard* to similarly tell **Bróðir** (a/k/a Bróðir of Man, i.e., a warrior from the Isle of Man) that she would marry Bróðir *if* Brian Boru (her ex) was defeated, plus Gormlaith would use her political power/influence to establish Bróðir as High King in Ireland. (Ironically, **Óspak**, the brother of **Bróðir**, refused to fight Brian, choosing rather to fight for him – and thus **Óspak**’s men fought for Brian Boru while **Bróðir**’s men fought against Brian.)

Unsurprisingly, Gormlaith instructed her son Silkbeard to avoid telling the Orcadian earl Sigurd what she was promising Bróðir; likewise, she told Silkbeard to keep secret from the Manx warrior Bróðir what she was promising Sigurd!



BATTLE OF CLONTARF, April 23rd A.D. 1014

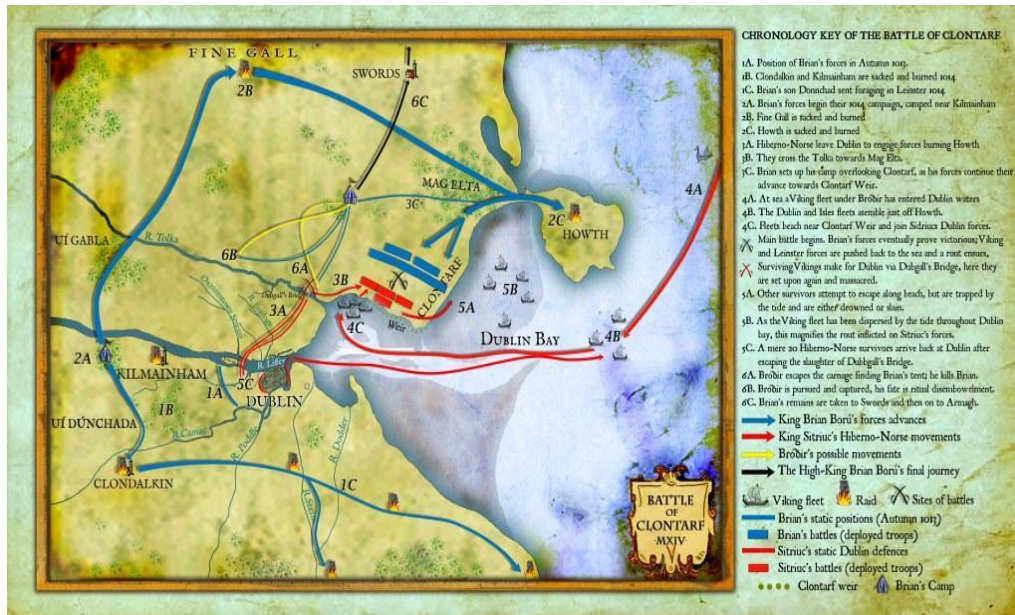
Several Irish kingdoms, plus many mercenary “neighbors”, clashed at Clontarf:

- (1) Kingdom of Leinster, headed by King **Máel Mórda** (*Gormlaith's brother*);
- (2) Kingdom of Munster, headed by King **Brian Boru** (who was *Gormlaith's 2nd husband, but now divorced from her*) and militarily led by his son **Murchad** (born of Brian's 1st wife Mór, daughter of a king of Connacht), with help from Brian's **son Tadc** (born of Brian's 2nd wife Echrad), and from Brian's **grandson Turlough** (only 15) and **grandson Tadc** (son of Murchad);
- (3) Kingdom of Meath, headed by “High King” **Máel Sechnaill II** (of the Irish **Uí Néill** family dynasty, who apparently became *Gormlaith's 3rd husband*, after the battle --- it appears that his forces “showed up”, but did not seriously engage in the early fighting, until it was clear that the defenders were winning; only then did the Meath men join the fight, chase down and slaughter the fleeing Manxmen and Orcadian attackers, and soon afterwards claim victory);
- (4) Kingdom of Dublin, headed by Norse-Viking King **Sitric “Silkbeard”** (*Gormlaith's son by her 1st husband*; Silkbeard was aided by his brother Dubgall Olafsson);
- (5) Earldom of Orkney, headed by **Sigurd “the Stout” Hlodvirsson** (*whom Gormlaith promised to marry, and to help establish as Irish high king, if Brian was defeated*);
- (6) Isle of Man mercenaries (linked to Sigurd the Stout), represented by **Bróðir** (*whom Gormlaith also promised to marry, and to help establish as Irish high king, if Brian was defeated*); and others, of course.

But what happened to those who fought at Clontarf, on Good Friday of AD1014?

Estimates of casualties suggest many thousands fought: maybe 13,000 to 14,000 men total, with Brian's coalition forces comprising perhaps 7000 or 8000 of that number. Of those myriads of warriors, most died in battle. Most died on the

battlefield, or drowned in tidewaters while trying to flee to their Viking ships, or died from their battle wounds. Records suggest that the attacking allies lost 80% to 90% of their numbers, the defenders lost ¼ to ½ of their numbers --- its bloodiness is comparable to the bloodshed at Antietam in America's Civil War, although that Western Maryland battle exceeded 23,000 casualties in one day, whereas the Battle of Clontarf suffered somewhat close to half that number.



During the Battle of Clontarf the Manx Viking Bróðir killed Brian Boru, bragging about it immediately: "Now, let man tell man, that Bróðir felled Brian!"



Fame flees fastly, though: **Bróðir** himself died later that day, captured then disemboweled, with his intestinal tract literally wrapped around a tree by Wolf the Quarrelsome (no more details are needed!).

Also, Orkney's earl **Sigurd Hlodvirsson** was killed by Brian's son **Murchad**; soon afterwards **Murchad** himself (the main leader of Brian's forces) also died.

Leinster's king **Máel Mórda** (Gormlaith's brother) was also killed that day.

Obviously Gormlaith never had a problem explaining her simultaneous proposals of marriage to **Sigurd** and to **Bróðir** --- because both men died then at Clontarf.

In the end, the Dublin Bay defenders (Brian's army and its coalition forces, including Silkbeard's army) "won" the battle – even though **Brian Boru** himself, and his son **Murchad**, died in the defense, as did Murchad's son **Tadc** (i.e., Brian's grandson). However, the House of Brian (**Uí Briain**, a/k/a O'Brien) itself was not a dynastic "winner", as political power shifted back to the **Uí Neill** (O'Neill) high-kinship, which then was represented by **Máel Sechlainn II**.

Accordingly, **Máel Sechlainn II**, king of Meath, who usually had opposed Brian Boru more than he had helped him, **survived the Battle of Clontarf** – and so it was **Máel Sechlainn II** who would take much of what Brian and others had lost.

Donnchad mac Briain (son of Brian Boru and Gormlaith) also survived the Battle of Clontarf. Donnchad returned to Munster, soon ruling there, in lieu of his deceased father. After eliminating a competitor (his half-brother *Tadc mac Briain*, whose father was Brian and mother was Echrad) in AD1023, Donnchad established his rule as Munster's king for 40 years afterwards, a feat comparable to the resilience of his half-brother Sitric Silkenbeard.

The other notable survivor (besides **Gormlaith** herself⁶) was **Sitric Silkbeard**, who some say fought valiantly, but others say he stayed close to the Dublin fortress

⁶ Some sources suggest that Gormlaith married king Máel Sechlainn II ("Malachy") after her 1st husband Olaf Cuaran died, yet before she married Brian Boru. Other sources strongly disagree, suggesting that Gormlaith was married only to Olaf, then Brian, then a third time to Máel Sechlainn II, king of Meath.

walls, as its military defender (to prevent looting, etc.). Likely, Silkbeard did some of both. Politically, the strongest survivor of the battle was **Máel Sechlainn II**, so he “mopped up” much of Brian’s realm, reimposing the **Uí Neill** (O’Neill) high-kingship dynasty in central Ireland. Under **Máel Sechlainn II**’s overlordship, therefore, Silkbeard continued to rule Dublin. In AD1036, after more than 40 years of ruling Dublin, Silkbeard finally retired – abdicating his throne to his nephew **Echmarcach**. Silkbeard traveled widely for 6 years, dying in AD1042.



[photo credit: Irish Times]

So what was the key to Sitric Silkbeard’s longevity as Dublin’s ruler, amidst all the family fireworks and turf-grabbing turmoil in Viking Age Ireland?

One wise habit **Silkbeard** practiced was the pragmatic virtue of *not trying to be “top dog” in rank or power*. If it was tolerable, Silkbeard submitted to an overlord, what the Irish called a “high king” (i.e., a king who also overruled other kings, what continental Europe called an “emperor”). The result, for **Silkbeard**, was *survival* with less-than-complete autonomy for his Viking port-based kingdom of Dublin, an international commerce giant. Meanwhile, others, who stretched for greater lots, often *died trying to overreach*. *Contentedness* (i.e., appreciating what you have, when it is enough) has its rewards (see **1st Timothy 6:6**). *Covetousness* is a cruel slavemaster, and greed for glory (and/or for other kinds of gain) has ruined many ambitious men and women. ><> JJSJ profjjsj@aol.com

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