

The Killing of the “Lord of the Foreigners of Luimneach” in Ardrahan in AD 940

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If the small parish of Ardrahan in South Galway is known for any historical event it is the battle of 1225 which was immortalised by Thomas Davis in *The West's Awake* with the lines,

For often, in O'Connor's van,/ To triumph dashed each Connaught clan—/ And fleet as deer the Normans ran/ Through Corlieu's Pass and Ardrahan¹

a song later made iconic by Joe MacDonagh's rendition from the Hogan Stand upon Galway's 1980 All-Ireland victory.² Davis's ballad was an act of nationalistic mythmaking, overlooking the record in the Annals where the *Galls* (foreigners) were merely allied to Aed mac Chthail Chrobdeirg in his effort to suppress the rebellion of the O'Connors, and transforming it into an Irish triumph over the Normans.³ A similar treatment has been given to another of Ardrahan's entries in the annals, the killing of Aralt, king of the Vikings in Limerick in AD 940. Aralt was not just a grandson of Ívarr – the famed dynasty supposedly descending from the mythical Ragnarr loðbrók which came to entirely dominate Viking Ireland as well as play an active role in England, mainland Scotland, the Hebrides, and Wales – but, as a member of the final generation of Ívarr's *derbfhine* (certain kindred), he was one of the last to be explicitly identified in Annals belonging to his lineage.⁴ However the only work of history to discuss his death, Jerome Fahey's *The History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Kilmacduagh* (1893), again reduced the history of Ardrahan to nationalistic simplifications, reflecting on it that “we must admire the persevering fearlessness with which [The Irish Chieftains] continued to resist [the Northern hordes] for over two centuries... The heroism of our people at that period had perhaps few parallels in history”.⁵ A contribution to the historiography which analyses the historical record more dispassionately and places the killing in the context of the overall decline of Viking Limerick is therefore necessary.

Evidence from the Annals

The Annals of the Four Master's thirteenth entry for AD 938 tells us “Aralt, grandson of Imhar, i.e. the son of Sitric, lord of the foreigners of Luimneach, was killed in Connaught by the Caenraighi of Aidhne”.⁶ In the first full translation of the Annals, John O'Donovan's classic 1848 *Annals of the kingdom of Ireland From the Four Masters*, O'Donovan claims “Caenraighi of Aidhne” to be “a Sept seated at Ard-Aidhne, near Ardrahan, in the barony of Kiltartan, and county of Galway”.⁷ Evidence of this can be seen in *The Genealogies, Tribes, and Customs of Hy-Fiachrach, Commonly Called O'Dowda's Country* which includes the passage, “there were three tribes in Aidhne before the Hy-Fiachrach, namely, the Ciarraighe, Oga Beathra, the Tradraighe, of Dubh-ros, and the Caonraighe, of

¹ Thomas Davis, *The Poems of Thomas Davis*, (James Duffy, 1846), pp. 9-10. Paddy Downey, *DAY OF GLORY*

² Duggan, Barry, *Hurling champ Joe's dreaming of Galway win -- and new song*, *The Irish Independent*, September 29th 2012,

³ *Annála Connacht*, CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts: a project of University College, Cork, AC1225.24-1225.26.

⁴ “[A *derbfhine*] was a family-unit comprising the descendants in a male line from a common great-grandfather. The significance of the *derbfhine* was that any male belonging to the *derbfhine* of a previous king was eligible to inherit part of his property. It was also more likely that a new king would arise from within this immediate kin-group”, see Clare Downham *The Viking Kings of Britain and Ireland: The Dynasty of Ívarr to A.D. 1014*, (Dunedin Academic Press, 2007), pp. 1, 4-5, 29.

⁵ Fahey, Jerome, *The History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Kilmacduagh*, (M. H. Gill and Son, 1893), pp. 117-119.

⁶ *The Annals of the Four Masters*, CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts: a project of University College, Cork, FM938.13.

⁷ John O'Donovan ed. and trans., *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by The Four Masters*, (Dublin, 1849), p. 640. For details on this translation see Bernadette Cunningham. *John O'Donovan's Edition of the Annals of the Four Masters: an Irish Classic?* *EUROPEAN STUDIES* 26 (2008), pp. 129-149.

Ard Aidhne”.⁸ This text is translated from the genealogical manuscript of Duaid mac Fírbis in the library of Lord Roden, and the Book of Lecan in the library of the Royal Irish Academy, which has long been regarded as “one of the earliest most authoritative compilations of Irish genealogical material extant”.⁹ However the exact location of Ard Aidhne or the potential battle itself is still unclear from this account. Some additional help in locating the event can be found in *The Annals of Clonmacnoise* or *Mageoghagan's Book* which tells us “Harald (Aralt) O’Hymer (Imhar) king of the Danes of Lymbrick (Luimneach) was killed in Connaught at Ratheyne”.¹⁰ The location of Ratheyne is, again, not certain; however, considering *The Four Masters* place the event in “Aidhne” and the above mentioned evidence of the Caenraighi being at “Ard Aidhne”, the suggestion made by Jerome Fahey in *The History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Kilmacduagh* that the battle took place in the townland of Raheen in Ardrahan seems overwhelmingly likely.¹¹

However, *Mageoghagan's Book* also introduces a problem of chronology. It dates its entry as AD 933, five years earlier than the Annals of the Four Masters places it (Fahey overestimates the discrepancy incorrectly stating the Annals of Clonmacnoise place it in 833).¹² This can largely be resolved by looking at *The Chronicum Scotorum* entry, “Aralt son of Ímar's grandson, i.e. son of Sitric king of the foreigners of Luimnech, was killed by the Connachta”, dated as AD 940 (*The Annals of Inisfallen* also record the “Death of Aralt, grandson of Ímar, at the hands of the Connachta” the same year).¹³ Analysis by D.P. McCarthy of the kalend and ferial chronological apparatus employed in the Annals and comparisons made to independently verifiable events has concluded the Annals of the so-called Clonmacnoise group, which includes the *Chronicum Scotorum*, though not *The Annals of Clonmacnoise*, present a reliable and consistent chronology from AD 1 to 1178, with the exception of 425-31, 616-63, and 767-803.¹⁴ Therefore we can conclude AD 940 to be the most accurate date for the killing of Aralt.

Archaeology

It is worth examining briefly the existing archaeological evidence, or lack thereof, for Viking Activity in Ardrahan. The M18 motorway was built through the townland identified as the most likely for the battle against the Danes, Raheen, opening in 2017.¹⁵ In advance of this, an archaeological excavation was undertaken in the vicinity of the townland at a Cashel and Cemetery in Owenbristly as one of twenty-three sites studied between June 2008 and March 2010.¹⁶ The drystone enclosure was likely used from the 5th to the 10th centuries and the 97 burials identified in the cemetery were similarly radiocarbon dated to an aggregate range from AD 550 to 970.¹⁷ The rate of violent death, at 31% of adult males, is much higher than comparative sites such as Raystown, Co. Meath (8%), Mount Gamble (11%), and Augherskea, Co. Meath (10%).¹⁸ The indication of a high level of violence cannot be taken as any

⁸ Duaid Mac Fírbis, *The Genealogies, Tribes, and Customs of Hy-Fiachrach, commonly called O’Dowda’s County*, ed. and trans. by John O’Donovan (Printed at the University Press for the Irish Archaeological Society, 1844), p. 59.

⁹ Quote from W. D. H Sellar, *The Origins and Ancestry of Somerled*, *The Scottish Historical Review*, 45, No. 140, Part 2 (1966), p. 126.

¹⁰ Dennis Murphy ed., *The Annals of Clonmacnoise from the Creation to AD 1408*, trans. Mageoghagan, Conell, (University Press for The Royal Society of Antiquaries Ireland, 1896), p. 151. Connection is noted by O’Donovan but fails to note chronological discrepancy, see O’Donovan, *AFM*, p. 641.

¹¹ Jerome Fahey, *The History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Kilmacduagh*, (M. H. Gill and Son, 1893), p. 117.

¹² *Ibid.* and Murphy, *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, p. 151.

¹³ *Chronicum Scotorum*, CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts: A Project of University College, Cork, CS940 and *The Annals of Inisfallen*, CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts: a project of University College, Cork, AI940.1.

¹⁴ Daniel P. McCarthy, *The Irish Annals: Their Genesis, Evolution, and History*, (Four Courts Press, 2008), pp. 342-348.

¹⁵ *New motorway in Galway Set to Cut Journey Times*, *RTE News*, 27th of September 2017,

¹⁶ Finn Delaney and John Tierney, *In the Lowlands of South Galway: Archaeological Excavations On the N18 Oranmore to Gort National Road Scheme*, (National Roads Authority, 2011), p. 18-19.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 103, 107.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

evidence of a significant battle around AD 940 however as all but one lay within the range AD 554 to 776 (the exception being between AD 780 and 972).¹⁹ There is no supporting evidence to connect the site to the Caenraighi of Aidhne and unfortunately the excavation offers no support in understanding the entries in the Annals.

However there is one possible piece of material evidence for Viking activity in the area, 'The Ardrahan Brooch', a rare piece of Viking silver currently held in The British Museum.²⁰ Bossed penannular brooches with a thistle and ball, like the 'The Ardrahan Brooch' are a late sub-type of penannular brooches developed in the 9th century and associated with areas of Viking influence of which fourteen out of forty-three finds have been in Ireland.²¹ However the provenance of the piece is questionable. We can identify the brooch in question as being that held by the British Museum based on correspondence from James V. Browne MD, professor of surgery at Queen's College, Galway, to MP William Gregory, who held significant estates in Galway, primarily at Coole, where some of his lands extended into Ardrahan.²² The correspondence shows an advanced stage of discussion on acquiring it for the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) from a Miss Burdge (whom the British Museum lists as having purchased the artefact from), reporting that it is as "a Danish brooch, 5 inches in diameter, silver with a pin 14 inches in length", approximately matching the museum cataloguing details.²³ The only reference to it being "The Ardrahan Brooch" comes from further correspondence on a possible acquisition between William Wilde, member of the RIA's Antiquities committee, to Gregory saying, "The Ardrahan Brooch was never directly or indirectly offered for sale to the R.I.A".²⁴ It has been suggested that referring to it as such was an in-joke between Wilde and Gregory.²⁵ However based on the tone of the letter, which appears exercised that "the British Museum had the command of thousands with which to buy up every thing of interest found in this Country", that "Miss Burdge sold [The brooch] to a Jew dealer who will no doubt turn a penny upon it", and that "[The RIA] cannot be expected to hunt up the Jew dealer to whom Miss Burdge sold the article if she will not give his address", there is no evidence of any joke being present.²⁶ There is also an intuitive explanation to how the brooch would have been found in Ardrahan, should this be its actual provenance, as the railway reached Ardrahan during 1867-1868 and the discovery of an artefact during a civil engineering project by a labourer who would quickly sell it on (in this case to Louisa Burdge who ran a Galway jewellers) would not be uncommon.²⁷ However without any corroboration of Wilde's claim or proper recording of the finding – The British Museum merely records it as being "found/acquired" in Co. Galway²⁸ – and the fact the invention of names for such finds did not reflect their actual provenance, such as the 'Tara' Brooch or 'Dál Riada' brooch, were common in the period, means tying the 'Ardrahan' brooch to Ardrahan with any certainty is impossible.²⁹ The absence of firm archaeological evidence indicates Viking activity in Ardrahan was limited, perhaps exclusively to the sole event in AD 940 for which we have evidence in the Annals.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-94.

²⁰ *Bossed Penannular Brooch*, The British Museum,.

²¹ Philip McEvansoneya, 'The 'Ardrahan' Brooch', *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society* 62 (2010), p. 19

²² *Landed Estates Database*, Gregory, University of Galway 2025,

²³ Quoted in McEvansoneya, 'The 'Ardrahan' Brooch', p. 20. For cataloguing details see The British Museum, *Bossed Penannular Brooch*.

²⁴ Quoted in McEvansoneya, 'The 'Ardrahan' Brooch', pp. 20-22.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

²⁸ The British Museum, *Bossed Penannular Brooch*.

²⁹ McEvansoneya, 'The 'Ardrahan' Brooch', pp. 23-24.

The Killing of Aralt in Context

The killing of Aralt must be considered in the context of the overall decline of Viking Limerick in the period. Some degree of Viking settlement can be seen around Limerick as early as 845.³⁰ However, it wasn't until the 920s they began to rival the power of Dublin and Waterford, capturing the overking of Munster in 921 and then, in 922 plundering "Cluain Moccu Nóis [Clonmacnoise], and all the islands on Loch Rí".³¹ They remained active in the area until at least 924 when their presence on Lough Ree was noted in the *Chronicum Scotorum*.³² This entry shows Limerick under a King Colla, possibly the son of Bárðr son of Ívarr who died in 881, making Limerick a rival dynasty of Ívarr to Dublin (though it is also possible he was son of a Bárðr Óttarsson).³³ As a result of this activity, the Limerick Vikings appear to have been considered a threat to Dublin and Waterford, a rival military, naval power and centre of commercial transactions which through the widespread economic influence Viking-bases projected, could establish a web of relations with Irish kings menacing the vital interests of rival Viking settlements. Notably, in regards to access to the Shannon, essential because of its navigability, size, and proximity to sites of wealth such as Clonmacnoise.³⁴ Consequently in AD 924, "Gothfrith, grandson of Ímar, made an expedition from Áth Cliath to Luimnech, and a very large company of his followers were left behind *dead* with Ailche's son".³⁵ Limerick was also further embattled by the presence of Waterford Vikings who settled at Lough Gur, in response they allied with "the men of Munster" (demonstrating their growing influence) to "inflict a slaughter of the foreigners of Waterford".³⁶ The height of the power of Limerick was reached in 928 with the entry in *Annals of Ulster* noting that "Ailche's son went on Loch nEchach [Lough Neagh] with a fleet of the foreigners, and he ravaged the islands of the lake and the territories bordering it", the furthest North they would reach.³⁷ From this point the power of Limerick generally trends downwards. In 930 after plundering Lough Corrib they were forced off by men from Connaught moving to settle for a period at Ossory, where they were in turn expelled by Godfrey.³⁸ A war broke out between Dublin and Limerick continuing until C. AD 935 when "Amhlaeibh, son of Godfrey, lord of the foreigners, came at Lammas from Ath-cliaith, and carried off *as prisoners* Amhlaeibh Ceanncairech from Loch Ribh, and the foreigners who were with him (i.e. with Cairech), after breaking their ships".³⁹ The victory appears to have given Dublin a dominant position – they raided Clonmacnoise in 936, 942 and 946 without any attempt by Limerick to assert its own rights to pillage in the area.⁴⁰

It is in this light the death of Aralt must be seen, it is one point along a general downward trend of the strength of Limerick. Fahey's claim,

Our Irish chiefs, though too often engaged in petty warfare amongst themselves, seldom failed to meet those pagan plunderers with a determined spirit of resistance; and frequently their resistance was crowned with success, as in the case of the victory... which the chiefs of Aidhne gained over the Northmen at Raheen

paints a picture of an underdog victory of the Irish who defeated pagans only by their "spirited opposition".⁴¹ However by AD 940 Limerick was far from the power it had been in the 920s. Limerick

³⁰ *The Annals of Ulster*, trans. Mac Airt, Seán and Mac Niocaill, Gearóid, *CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts: a project of University College, Cork*, 2025, AU845.1.

³¹ AFM, 921.16 and AU922.3.

³² CS924,

³³ Downham, *The Viking Kings of Britain and Ireland*, p. 36.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37 and Valante, Mary A., *The Vikings in Ireland: Settlement, Trade, and Urbanization*, (Four Courts Press, 2008), pp. 103-104.

³⁵ AU924.3.

³⁶ AI926.2 and AI927.2

³⁷ AU928.5 and Valante, *The Vikings in Ireland*, p. 105.

³⁸ CS 929, FM 928.10, FM 929.11 and Valante, *The Vikings in Ireland*, p. 105.

³⁹ AFM 935.16 and Downham, *The Viking Kings of Britain and Ireland*, pp. 40-1.

⁴⁰ AU936.2, AU942.7, AU946.1 and Valante, *Vikings in Ireland*, p. 109.

⁴¹ Fahey, *The History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Kilmacduagh*, pp. 117-119.

would go on to be taken under Dál Cais control, it's King Imar and his two sons killed by Brian Boru in 977, ending Viking control of Limerick.⁴² The establishment of any direct causality between Aralt's death and the ultimate end of Viking Limerick is impossible; however a more complete picture of Aralt's death as provided by a comparative analysis of the annals contributes not only to the local history of Ardrahan – it being based on the archaeological record likely one of the only incidents of Viking activity in the area – but also more significantly to a fuller understanding of the process by which Limerick declined in the mid 10th century.

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⁴² CS977 and Downham, *The Viking Kings of Britain and Ireland*, p. 53-55.