Amlaib Cuarán and the Gael, 941–81

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Nobody interested in the history of Ireland or, indeed, of Dark Age Britain could fail to be aware of the existence of ‘Viking Dublin’. There is a danger, however, that this modern label, ‘Viking Dublin’, has come to obscure the complexities of the actual historical situation in the central Middle Ages. Modern ideas about Ireland and Britain cannot but influence our reading of the past and we must maintain constant vigilance that they do not lead us too far astray. Dublin can emerge from the historiography as an alien place, founded by foreign pirates and later taken over first by the English and then by the British colonial administrations as a centre of oppression and exploitation, the history of which is not truly Irish history. Recent scholarship has, however, made it increasingly clear that by the tenth and eleventh centuries the Gaill who dominated the Irish Sea world, whilst for the most part, sure enough, the descendants of Scandinavian warriors who arrived in these islands in the mid-ninth century, had become to a greater or lesser extent integrated into native society. Indeed it is noteworthy that whilst the far north of Scotland (Caithness, the northern Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland) became entirely Scandinavian in language and character following the Viking invasions, the Irish Sea zone to the south, dominated by the dynasty that usually controlled Dublin and the other Hiberno-Norse towns, emerged from the Viking Age speaking Gaelic.\(^1\) The imperium of the dynasty which claimed descent from the grandsons of Iar (who collectively flourished between 914 and 934)\(^2\) included not only the hinterlands of the longhous of Ireland but also the Isle of Man, Galloway (including most of modern Ayrshire), the southern Hebrides and Kintyre, and at times parts of the north of England.

The process by which the Gaill became Gael is not well understood and has been subjected to surprisingly little investigation. By the middle of the eleventh century Gaelic chroniclers had begun to experiment with new or resurrected terms such as Lochlann\(^4\) (and its derivatives) and Gall-Gaidel\(^5\) (vel sim.) in order to distinguish the more fully Scandinavian peoples from the more Gaelicized. Within a generation the Normans had arrived in these islands and the term Gaill became increasingly restricted to those of Frankish extraction. In what follows I wish to argue that these processes of ‘Gaelization’ had begun in the tenth century and that a detailed study of the career of one member of the Ul Ímar dynasty, Amlaib Cuarán (Ólaf Kvaran in the Norse sources and Anlaf Cwich in the English), whose active career lasted for forty years from 941 to 981, can shed some light on how the Ul Ímar dynasty became fully integrated into the Irish political landscape.

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3. Ragnall grandson of Iar is first noted in The annals of Ulster, ed. S. Mac Art and G. Mac Níocaill (Dublin, 1983), hereafter AUL, at 914-4 and the death of Gofraid grandson of Iar at AUL 914.4. The dealings of these two and a kinsman Sihtric are recounted in Irish and English chronicles throughout the intervening period.
5. First at AUL 1054.10 after a couple of ninth-century notices at AUL 856.3, 856.5 and 857.1.
Amlaib was the son of Siathric grandson of Ímar, who, at his death had been ruler of Northumbria as well as Dublin and presumably much of the rest of the Irish Sea zone. The kingship of the Gaill passed from Siathric to Gofraid grandson of Ímar and thence to Gofraid’s son Amlaib (Ólaf Guthfrithsson), who was frequently confused with his cousin Amlaib Cuarán by the English chroniclers and probably by the seventeenth-century Irish Annals of the Four Masters who describe Amlaib Cuarán going to York in 940 when all other sources claim that in 939/40 York was captured by Amlaib mac Gofraid. In fact our Amlaib first appears in Northumbria in 941 after his cousin, mac Gofraid, was slain following the sacking of the church of St Balthere at Tyningham in East Lothian. The northern English chronicle that records these events states, simply, ‘Siathric’s son, named Anlaf, ruled over the Northumbrians’. In common with most English sources the kingdoms ruled by dynasties of Viking origin are given the same name as the pre-Viking Age predecessors. To what extent this suggests a continuity of administration is unclear. Amlaib mac Gofraid’s death is noted by one Irish chronicle, but there is no mention of Amlaib Cuarán at this point. In fact unlike his cousin who is described by the Chronicum Scotorum as ‘king of the White Gaill and the Black Gaill’ (obscure terms meaning something like ‘Hiberno-Norse’ and ‘Anglo-Danish’ respectively), Cuarán seems to have ruled only the Northumbrians (Dabgallia?) at this stage. In Ireland two kings of the Uí Ímair dynasty were active in the following year, 942. One, an unnamed son of Ragnall, sacked Downpatrick but was pursued by Mัดdán mac Aedha king of the Ulaid to his island stronghold (presumably on Strangford Lough but perhaps further afield), driven from there and killed ‘by the Gaill’ on the mainland. The other was Blacaire mac Gofraid who used Dublin as a base to plunder Clonmacnoise and Kildare.

Professor Smyth claimed that the Uí Ímair imperium, the kingdom of the Gaill, remained unified in this period and that Amlaib Cuarán in York remained ‘senior king’, Blacaire and Mac Ragnall being merely lieutenants. The evidence for this is not good, however, and I hope to show in what follows that Blacaire and Amlaib were rivals who aligned themselves with different native factions in their struggle for power. Certainly Amlaib seems to have had a rival for power in Northumbria in Blacaire’s brother Ragnall (English


Ragnald). The northern chronicler tells us that ‘The Northumbrians drove their king, Anlaf, out of his kingdom’ in 943. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us that, in the same year, Edmund, the English king, stood sponsor to Anlaf at his baptism and, ‘after a good long period’, did the same for Ragnald at his confirmation. We might take this to suggest that Amlaib was baptised and then expelled, perhaps because he kow-towed to Edmund, and that his successor was then forced into like submission. Against this interpretation is the notice in the following year that when Edmund annexed Northumbria he drove out both Anlaf Siathric’s son and Ragnald Guthfrith’s son. There are various possible explanations for the appearance of both kings at this point. Perhaps Ragnald did expel Amlaib and the latter was attempting a come back, Edmund taking advantage of civil strife to move on them. Alternatively there may have been room for more than one kingdom inside ancient Northumbria, one centred on York perhaps and the other on the Irish Sea coastline. For what it is worth, the Anglo-Latin chronicler Æthelweard, writing some thirty years after the event, says that both the Uí Ímair kings were captured by the English forces and brought before Edmund. The Annals of Clonmacnoise, which survive only in an early modern translation into English, note a ‘king of the Danes’ killed at York in 943.

Whatever the truth about the details, it seems unlikely that Ragnald and Amlaib were on consistently good terms in Northumbria and it may be that Amlaib’s expulsion in 943 represents an expedition by Ragnald mounted from his brother’s base in Dublin. What, in all these chronicle accounts, English and Irish alike, remains obscure is the position in the Isle of Man which may well, even at this stage, have been the real Heart of Darkness in the Uí Ímair imperium. Secure from land attack by native powers and equidistant from Northumbria, Ireland and Galloway Man has yielded some of the richest evidence of Scandinavian settlement in the insular world. Evidence for control of the Isle of Man is what we would really need in order to determine whether Amlaib or Blacaire had the upper hand in this period.

Back in Ireland Blacaire mac Gofraid had not been idle. Whilst his brother and cousin were being worsted by the English Edmund, he had confronted and slain the ‘Hector of the Western World’, Muirchertach mac Néill, king of Ailech, heir apparent to the kingship of Tara and the most effective warleader on the island. The following day Blacaire sacked Armagh and later that year the Gaill, presumably his men, killed Lorcan mac Fáeláin, king of the Laigin. Lorcan’s successor Bréan mac Maile Mórdair retaliated against
Blacaire the following year in alliance with the king of Brega Congalach mac Maíl Mithig and sacked Dublin. That same year, 944, Donnchad Donn, the aged king of Tara (919–44), son of the great Flann Sinna (879–916) died and Congalach of Brega, his sister's son, flushed with the sack of Dublin, succeeded him as premier king amongst the Uí Néill.21

Congalach mac Maíl Mithig was the first king of Brega to hold the kingship of Tara since Cináed mac Írgalaig (724–28) over two hundred years previously. Almost certainly the burden of his claim was borne by his paternal links to the kings of Mide who had dominated the kingship of Tara for sixty-two out of the previous sixty-five years and his ability to capitalise on the recent death of Muirchertach who's kinsmen in the North were too busy struggling over the succession to the kingship of Ailech to put forward a serious claimant.22 In 945 he asserted his claims to be ri Errenn by taking hostages from the Connachta and in the same year Amlaíb Cuaráin reappears.

Where Amlaíb had been since his expulsion, and perhaps capture, in 943 is not known. In 945 Edmund ravaged all 'Cumberland', that is to say the kingdom of Strathclyde, and this rare expedition of an English army into the north-western frontier zone was almost certainly linked to anxieties about Uí Ímair activity on the Irish Sea littoral. If Æthelweard was correct in describing Amlaíb's capture in 943 then he may perhaps have spent the subsequent period in Edmund's household and his re-appearance may be a token of English Westpolitik. Alternatively he may have been building a power base for himself on the fringes of Strathclyde and have come to Ireland in flight from the English king. In either case the Irish chroniclers make it clear that Blacaire left Dublin and Amlaíb took over and within a year Amlaíb was fighting alongside his new neighbour Congalach mac Maíl Mithig an alliance that was to sustain them so long as both lived.23 Although the Dubliners plundered Clonmacnoise and the churches of Mide in 946 this was almost certainly with Congalach's connivance.24 It is unlikely that his taking of the kingship of Tara had been accepted by the whole of Clann Cholmáin and Amlaíb may have been providing booty for his own followers whilst undermining the position of his ally's rivals. The following year Amlaíb and Congalach were once again brothers in arms, with a noted lack of success, in combat with Ruaídrí Úa Canannáin, king of Cenél Conaill at Slane.25

This battle of Slane is the last certain appearance of Amlaíb Cuaráin in the Irish sources until the 960s. In 948 Blacaire was back on the scene but the fact that he appears only to be slain by Congalach suggests that he had ousted Amlaíb, Congalach's ally.26 It may be that the Dubliners had blamed Amlaíb for their defeat at the hands of the Cenél Conaill at Slane and had ousted him.

21 CS 943 (recte 944). 22 D. Ó Corráin, Ireland before the Normans (Dublin, 1972), 118–19; Ísakí, 'Vikings and Tara', 335. 23 AU 945.6 & 7. 24 AU 946.1. 25 AU 947.1. 26 AU 948.1.

Alternatively he reappears in Northumbria at about this point and it may be that he left Ireland voluntarily to take advantage of the death of Edmund (946) and that Blacaire had simply slipped in to fill the vacuum. Amlaíb's second period as king of Northumbria is, unfortunately, hard to secure chronologically as the English chronicle record is fairly corrupt at this point. Traditionally this part of his career has been dated 950–952 but Professor Sawyer has convincingly argued that 947 to 950 might be more appropriate.27 This period of Northumbrian rule ended when the Northumbrians drove Amlaíb out and took Æthelred's son as king. Æthelred is usually identified with Eiríkr Blöðsókr, the son of the Norwegian dynastic founder Harald Hárfagri but there are certain problems with this identification. The Scandinavian tradition universally makes Eiríkr's tenure in Northumbria comital rather than regal and places it in the later years of Æthel斯坦 (939–39). His rule there ends when Edmund accedes and places a king called Olaf (i.e. Amlaíb mac Gosfrid) over Northumbria who drives Eiríkr out and kills him. The tenth century Vita of Saint Cætroe also supports the presence of an Eric in Northumbria in 939/40.28 Modern scholars have, unaware of the Vita Cætre, tended to 'amend' the Scandinavian tradition or, aware of the Vita, to posit two periods of rule in Northumbria for Eiríkr as well as for Amlaíb but it is not impossible that Amlaíb Cuaráin's rival is someone different altogether. Perhaps another Uí Ímair dynast.

There now follows a period of at least ten years when we cannot trace Amlaíb's movements at all. This absence has tended to be over-looked by historians for two reasons. Firstly an unwillingness to recognise factionalism amongst the Uí Ímair informed by a rather monolithic view of 'the Vikings' inherited, ultimately, from eleventh- and twelfth-century works of historical fiction.29 Secondly rather too much reliance has been placed on the one Irish chronicle that does mention Amlaíb during these wilderness years, the Annals of the Four Masters. This chronicle was compiled in the early seventeenth century from a variety of sources. At its core lie a number of original medieval chronicles, including the Annals of Ulster, which survive independently elsewhere but there is a great deal of information in the Four Masters the provenance of which is unknown. Some of this material would appear to be drawn from legendary rather than annalistic material and it seems likely that much of the information relating to the Gaill belongs to this category. To take one example, the raid on Kells attributed to Amlaíb Cuaráin by the medieval chronicles30 (of which more anon), is, in the Four Masters, attributed to his...
son Sihtric. This cannot possibly be true. Sihtric's mother Gormflaithe, daughter of Murchadh mac Finn, was married three times, firstly to Amlaib, then to Mael Sechnaill king of Tara (980–1022) and, on divorcing the latter (c. 1002), to Brian Bóruma. Since she bore a son, Domnchad, to Brian she cannot have mothered a man capable of performing military actions, however precociously, in 970. Indeed she herself lived until 1030 and her second son Sihtric until 1042, some seventy-two years after the Four Masters have him raiding Kells. In other places the Four Masters give far more detail than is normal in tenth-century chronicles and it seems more than likely that the compilers have attempted to incorporate material drawn from later sagas, like those preserved in the so-called Fragmentary Annals, into the body of their chronicle. While some of the unique information in the Four Masters may well be genuine a good deal more work has to be done to improve our understanding of the processes that went into its compilation. Until then the complete absence of Amlaib from the other chronicles in this period and the appearance in them of alternative kings ruling the Gaill suggests that we should be very sceptical indeed of the witness borne on this count by the Four Masters.

After the killing of Blacaire mac Gorfoird by Congalach mac Maile Mithig in 948 the position of the Gaill in Ireland becomes slightly hazy. This is principally because the two dynasties who dominate Dublin prior to the return of Amlaib Cuarán are both called Gorfoird, one, mac Amlaib, is presumably Blacaire's nephew, a son of Amlaib mac Gorfoird, the other, mac Sitriuc, may have been a brother of Cuarán. Blacaire's successor is not given a patronymic at his first appearance, at the battle of Muine Brictail in 950. Ruaidhri Ua Canannain, the Cenél Conaill king for the kingship of Tara, had been ravaging the southern Ui Neill territories of Mide and Brega for six months when he was slain in this battle. The identity of the combatants is not so clear, however: although the Annals of Ulster state that he was slain by the Gaill, *Chronicon Scotorum*, while claiming that the battle was fought between the Gaill and the Gael, states that Congalach was the victor and that Gorfoird fled. One plausible explanation is that there were Gaill and Gael on both sides and that Ruaidhri and Congalach were supporting different factions within the Ui Ímair. This Gorfoird, presumably Ruaidhri's ally, would seem to be Gorfoird mac Amlaib for in 951 Gorfoird mac Sitriuc took possession of Dublin. That the previous regime was hostile to Congalach would seem to be confirmed by the killing of Colman mac Maile Pátraig, *princeps of Slane*, the premier bishop of northern Brega, in 948. This act was perhaps a reprisal for the killing of Blacaire.


Too little is known of Gorfoird mac Sitriuc to be certain that he was aligned with Congalach as his brother had been. He seems to have ruled for less than a year dying, perhaps, in the outbreak of 'leprous' and dysentery that hit Dublin in 951. His one military action was a great plundering of the churches of the Blackwater valley, including Kells and Donaghmore, on the Brega/Mide border. Whether this was done in concert with Congalach it is impossible to tell. For about a decade after this no ruler of the Dublin Gaill is named although they were active from time to time, and indeed, in 956 killed Congalach mac Maile Mithig. Outside of the Four Masters, Amlaib Cuarán is not named again until 964 when he sacked Kildare. Since after this date Amlaib was allied to Domnall mac Congalach of Brega, to whom he gave in marriage his daughter Ragnalla, it seems unlikely that he was responsible for the killing of Congalach in 956. The year before Amlaib's return, 953, Gorfoird mac Amlaib's death is noted. The implication is that Gorfoird had been leading the Gaill of Dublin up to this point. Indeed a brief notice in the Four Masters does seem to confirm this, attributing a raid on Anglesey in 961, noted in *Annales Cambriae*, to 'mac Amlaib'.

Congalach mac Maile Mithig had been succeeded as king of Tara by the northern Uí Neill candidate Domnall ua Neill, the son of that Muircertach who had been slain by Blacaire in 943. For much of his reign (956–980) Domnall seems to have been attempting a thorough subjugation of the midlands, excluding the men of Mide and Brega from the over-kingship. From the 960s onwards Amlaib seems to have been one of his main opponents, often in alliance with Domnall mac Congalach. Amlaib's first recorded act on his return to the political scene, as we have seen, was an attack on Kildare but this was a curiously civilised 'viking raid' with one of Amlaib's followers, Niell ua Erulb, ransoming most of the clergy. Indeed, plunder may not have been the main motive for this attack. *Chronicon Scotorum* tells us that the abbess of Kildare, Muireann ingen meic Colmain, a member of the Fothairt dynasty who seemed to have monopolised the post up to this date, died in this year. Her successor was not of the Fothairt or even a Leinster woman but Muireann the daughter of Congalach of Brega. To see a woman of this dynasty being intruded into the abbacy in the same year that Amlaib paid his respects to the shrine of Brigit seems more than coincidence.

Amlaib's connections with Irish dynasties were not limited to the family of Congalach alone. At some point he had actually married the sister of Domnall ua Neill himself. This woman, Dúnlaith, had previously been married to...
Domnall king of Mide (†952) and bore him a son Mael Sechnaill. The date of her marriage to Amlaib is not known nor whether it was brokered on behalf of her brother's kindred or her son's. It certainly preceded his marriage to Gormflaith daughter of Mael Morda, which probably took place during her father's reign as king of the Laigin (966–972). Both these marriages bore sons, Glan Iain and Sitriuc respectively. There were other sons, however, whose maternal descent is not known. Obituary notices in the chronicles allow us to identify Ragnall, Altair, Imar and Dubgall. One curious note found in both *Chronicon Scotorum* and the Annals of Tighernach may even suggest that Amlaib's stepson Mael Sechnaill mac Domnall found refuge in Dublin prior to asserting his kingship of Mide. Amongst the Laigin Amlaib seems to have favoured the Ui Faelain dynasty over the Ui Dunchada. The latter, whose home territory abutted directly upon Dublin's hinterland, around Lydon Hill, were, presumably, a little too close for comfort.

Domnall ua Neill's campaigns against Amlaib also targeted ecclesiastical sites. In 970, after being defeated by Amlaib and Domnall mac Congalaig at the battle of Ceil Mona, the northern king and his son Murchad sacked Louth, Droimein, Manasterboice and Dunleer. Some, at least, of these ecclesiastical sites would seem to have been under Amlaib's protection. In 976 Skreen was also destroyed by Domnall ua Neill. This church, the nearest member of the Columban *familia* to Tara, would seem at first glance to be beyond the ambit of Dublin but a poem of the period attributed to *Cinlaed ua hArtacain*, who had died the previous year, includes a panegyric stanza to Amlaib in what is essentially a *dindsenchas* on Skreen and the adjacent hill of Achall. The implication is that even if Amlaib was not exercising lordship in the region he was patronising religious establishments at Skreen. Skreen also draws attention to Amlaib's relationship with Colum Cille to whose monastery on Iona he was eventually to retire. It will be recalled that in 970 Amlaib had sacked Kells, which had been the home of the successor of Colum Cille, the *comarba Colum Cille*, since the middle of the ninth century. While the sacking of monasteries was a normal part of Irish warfare in this period it is interesting to note that the abbot of Iona, Mugron, who died in the year Amlaib's retirement, is given the title *comarba Colum Cille* by the annals of Ulster. Is it possible that Amlaib took the opportunity of his raid on Kells to retrieve some at least of the relics of Colum Cille and return them to Iona?

In 976 Amlaib's son-in-law Domnall mac Congalaig died. Up to this point the war against Domnall ua Neill had been prosecuted jointly by the