

## Who was Gormlaith's mother? A detective story

*Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin*

Gormlaith daughter of Murchad son of Finn, mother of the king of the foreigners, Sitric, and of Donnchad son of Brian, king of Munster, and of Conchobar son of Mael Sechlainn king of Tara, died.

—Annals of the Four Masters, 1030

It was May 2004. I was on the Hill of Tara and thinking, not for the first time, about those kings and queens who had walked this very ground thousands of years before me, and pondering the goddesses, venerated by many generations, who have left their names on monuments such as Ráith Meidbe and Ráith Gráinne. But above all I was thinking about Gormlaith, the woman who allegedly married the last two men to call themselves kings of Tara: Brian Boru, killed in the Battle of Clontarf (1014) by a retreating Viking, and Mael Sechlainn, his sworn enemy (†1022). But Gormlaith's first marriage was to Olaf, the Viking king of Dublin, who also had a personal involvement with the area, fighting the Battle of Tara in 980 and remembered in the poem on Achall (the old name for the modern-day Skryne):

Amlaíb [Olaf] of Áth Cliath the hundred-strong,  
 Who gained the kingship of Benn Étair;  
 I bore from him as price of my song  
 A horse of the horses of Achall.

My attention had been drawn to her earlier that same year when a first-year student asked me to give a lecture on her (an unusual event at the best of times). When I asked him why, he replied, as if it were obvious to all, 'She must have been some babe'.



*Pl. 31—A view looking westwards over the gently undulating rural landscape of the Gabhra Valley towards the Hill of Tara, as seen from the base of Rath Lugh, one of Tara's outer defensive fortifications. The forest clearance in preparation for the construction of the M3 motorway can be seen in the foreground, with the River Gabhra meandering through the landscape in the middle distance (photo: J.F.).*

On the hill that day I was surrounded by people involved in the campaign to reroute the M3 motorway away from Tara's Gabhra Valley (Pl. 31), but as it was a particularly beautiful May evening I wandered off alone for a while to contemplate Gormlaith. For that brief moment, whilst treading in her footsteps, I put myself in her shoes and thought of her life and her times—this woman who had sons on both sides of the Battle of Clontarf in 1014 and who sided with her eldest son, Sitric Silkenbeard. For those few moments I felt strangely at one with her.

Some days later the realisation dawned that I did not know who her mother had been, despite the fact that I was working on an edition of a twelfth-century medieval text on famous women called the *Banshenchas* ('The Lore of Women') that listed the women along with their husbands and offspring. Her father was well known, Murchad son of Finn, king of Leinster. Checking the *Banshenchas*,

it became obvious why her mother's name would not come to mind: Murchad's wife was never mentioned.

For a number of days I talked of little else, and finally, during a phone conversation with another member of the Tara campaign, I mentioned her again and the fact that I could not find her mother. I was greeted with a curt 'Well, look again', and there the conversation terminated abruptly. That morning I was at home with only a few potentially relevant books, so, almost at random, I took the major collection of genealogies from the shelf and it opened at page 13. There it was, her family's genealogy, the Uí Fhaeláin of Leinster, and her father's name, Murchad son of Finn, along with her brother, Mael Mórda. A little further down the page was Gormlaith, along with the infamous piece of poetry that says of her:

It is she who made the three leaps of which is said:

Three leaps Gormlaith made

that a woman will not ever make again;

a leap to Dublin, a leap to Tara,

a leap to Cashel, the rock plain that surpasses all.

Amlaíb Cuarán her first husband and Mael Sechlainn son of Domnall after that and Brian.

Just above the poem, quoted by anyone who wrote about her, there was the prose section on her family genealogy. I had never paid much attention to it before, being more interested in her marriages and the little poem. It said of her father:

Four sons by him: Faelán Senior and Mael Mórda and Muiredach from whom the Uí Daimin son of Muiredach and Mael Carmain. *Scirrdech banamas* then his mother and Gormlaith the daughter of Murchad wife of Brian.

I had never noticed the two words *scirrdech banamas* before. *Banamas* did not cause a problem; it meant a female slave or servant. But the first word, on the right-hand side of the page, was strange—*scirrdech*. What was it? Where had it come from? I had never noticed it before; how had I missed it? It certainly was not an Irish word; even to my untutored eye it looked like Norse. I felt a slight shiver running down my spine. What had I found?

Of all the women in the early medieval period, Gormlaith is the one who jumps from the pages of the history books. Like her contemporaries, she is said to have had multiple marriages, three in her case: the first to Olaf, the Viking king of Dublin; the second to Brian Boru, king of Ireland; and a third, less

certain, to Mael Sechlainn of Meath, also king of Ireland. Therefore she had been married to the main participants in the Battle of Clontarf, and reputedly sat on the sidelines watching the battle. She definitely had offspring by the first two relationships, including Sitric son of Olaf and Donnchad son of Brian Boru, and they were both involved in this historic conflict. In the accounts, she appears to favour her Norse/Viking son Sitric above the others.

Gormlaith was probably born *c.* 955 and she almost certainly married Olaf in the 970s when she was very young. (This date was suggested to me by my colleague Ailbhe Mac Samhráin. If correct, she was born exactly 1,000 years before me.) In this period girls were married early, probably as soon as they were capable of having children. The average lifespan too was generally shorter than today, although there are some notable exceptions, with certain people living past 80—Brian Boru himself, for example. Her father was killed in 972, and he may have arranged her marriage to the much older Olaf, who died in retirement on the island of Iona in 980/1.

Brian was probably her second husband. This is borne out by the fact that her son by him, Donnchad, king of Munster, was a participant in the Battle of Clontarf and did not die until 1064 (on pilgrimage to Rome). The obit in the Annals of the Four Masters quoted above mentions a third son, Conchobhar son of Mael Sechlainn; this may be proof of her third and final marriage but it is not mentioned in the Lore of Women.

Gormlaith outlived all her husbands, dying in 1030. If born in 955, she would therefore have lived to about 75 years of age and would have been approximately 58 when the Battle of Clontarf took place. But after the battle she disappears from the sources and nothing is heard about her until the death notices in the annals. The entries are sparse: they do not contain any references to donations to the church, repentance or dying quietly, a feature of some notices of other famous women of her age. Sitric survived her by only twelve years, dying in the same year as his daughter, Caillech Finéin, in 1042, with one annalistic entry saying that they died within the same month. Her early marriage is further borne out by the fact that Sitric took over the kingship of Dublin as early as 995 (possibly at the age of 25) when his maternal uncle killed the reigning king. To add to the complexities, Sitric married a daughter of Brian Boru by another wife, not Gormlaith, so this is not incest although it seems slightly distasteful to our modern morality. His wife's name is not mentioned, but Brian had at least three daughters: Dub Esa (†1052) and Sadb (†1048), neither of whom has husbands mentioned in the sources, and Bé Binn (†1073 on pilgrimage to Armagh), who married Flaithbertach son of Muirchertach of Cenél nEogain, Ailech.

We know most about Gormlaith from later twelfth-century sources. There are two accounts of the period directly preceding the Battle of Clontarf: the first is

the Irish *Cogad Gaeil re Gallaib* ('The Battle of the Irish and the Foreigners') and the second is a Norse source called the *Brennu-Njál saga*. The Irish text describes the supposed events of 1013: while they are all at Kincora prior to the battle, she taunts her brother, Mael Mórda, for taking a silk tunic as a present from Brian Boru. Mael Mórda has brought pine trees to Kincora to be used for masts, and breaks one of the silver buttons on the tunic given to him by Brian. He asks Gormlaith to mend it, but she throws it in the fire, saying that 'she thought ill that he should yield service and vassalage, and suffer oppression from any one, or yield that which his father or grandfather never yielded', and that Brian's son would exact the same from Mael Mórda's son. It is difficult to explain what they were doing in Kincora at that time and, although explanations have been attempted, this episode is probably pure fiction.

Some modern historians malign Gormlaith as much as these twelfth-century accounts of her behaviour. John Ryan said that the men of Leinster might not have risen against Brian 'were they not nagged into irresponsible fury by a woman's tongue', and again that 'it was Ireland's misfortune that at such a moment this sharp, able and irreconcilable woman was in a position to do untold mischief'. Her place as an 'evil schemer' is repeated by later texts like Keating's seventeenth-century *History of Ireland* and the Early Modern Irish version of the *Battle of Clontarf*.

The Norse version of events, the *Brennu-Njál saga*, associates her closely with Sitric, and no mention is made of their presence in Kincora. In fact, it says that she was with Brodir, Brian Boru's murderer, the day before the battle, and that she had a very active role in the lead-up to the battle itself. The text contradicts the Irish sources in saying that she bore Brian no children. According to this account, she urged Sitric to kill Brian and to muster military aid in both the Orkneys and the Isle of Man, where, as part of the agreement, he promises his mother's hand in marriage to both groups. He is also said to have made a pact with Brodir and promised him Gormlaith as well. (Beautiful as she was, at about 58 she was hardly the catch she had been some 25 years earlier.) It continues saying that she wanted Brian dead because she was so angry after their divorce. The fact that Gormlaith is so vehemently set against Brian may indicate that he divorced her rather than she him, if this text is to be believed. The writer casts her in the role of the evil woman in contrast to her saintly husband, who is said to have forgiven a man even when he transgressed three times. He is the best of kings: adopting the son of the enemy as his own (perhaps the writer misunderstood the concept of fosterage), converting a Viking (Ospakr) to Christianity and saving his son Tadc with the blood of his wound when dying. The remarkably beautiful Gormlaith is painted as an evil, vengeful queen, the instigator of the *Battle of Clontarf* and a much darker personality than her Irish counterpart:

A king from Ireland, called Sigtrygg, was also there. He was the son of Olaf Kvaran. His mother was called Kormlod; she was endowed with great beauty and all those attributes which were outside her own control, but it is said that in all the characteristics for which she herself was responsible, she was utterly wicked. She had been married to a king called Brian, but now they were divorced. He was the noblest of all kings, and lived in Kincora in Ireland.

The historian Alfred Smyth says of her:

In Icelandic tradition she is portrayed as a grim and scheming lady who plays men off against each other in her ruthless quest for vengeance against Brian Boru, and like early Germanic heroines Gormlaith, too, was alleged to have been 'the fairest of all women', even by her Scandinavian enemies. Gormlaith may, or may not, have had good looks, but she did have the royal blood of countless generations of Leinster kings in her veins, and it was this which earned her a place in the beds and counsels of three of the most famous kings of medieval Irish and Scandinavian tradition—Maelsechlainn II, Olaf Cuaran and Brian Boru.

She certainly had Leinster 'royal blood . . . in her veins', but whose blood did it mix with, Gormlaith who excites so much interest in both medieval and modern literature (Table 2)? What about her maternal background? The prose version of the Lore of Women says:

Gormlaith daughter of Murchad son of Finn, mother of Sitric son of Olaf king of the Foreigners and Donnchad son of Brian (Boru) king of Munster.

The metrical version agrees:

Gormlaith offspring of Murchad son of Finn  
skilled child of the careful king of Leinster.  
Her children (were) wealthy Donnchad son of Brian  
and Sitric son of generous Amlaíb.

The genealogies do contain one odd incident about a supposed mother of both Gormlaith and Mael Mórda, but neither the woman nor her father are actually named and the story appears to have no further basis in fact.

It is the mother of Gormlaith daughter of Murchad who saw a vision: that she slept with the king of Leinster and bore a son to him and that he assumed the

kingship of Leinster and that she bore a daughter to the same king and that she took the kingship of Ireland. Those were Máel Mórda and Gormlaith. And it is because of that, the king of Leinster i.e. Murchad took her lawfully from the kings of the other provinces who were wooing her. The mother, moreover, was the daughter of the king of Connacht.

This is matched, however, by another unusual incident describing the birth of Bé Binn, mother of Brian Boru. His maternal grandmother is said to be Cianóc, the wife of a hospitaller called Crechán of Connacht, and they are unable to have children. They are helped by St Cairell, who tells her that she will have two daughters called Creise and Osnad. He prophesies that Osnad will become the wife of Erchad, son of Murchad of Connacht. Osnad then will bear him a daughter called Bé Binn, and she in turn will bear Brian Boru, son of Cenn Éitig. There seems to be an attempt here to mythologise Brian by giving his mother a heroic birth as is commonly found in the life cycles of kings and heroes. Both the prose and metrical versions of the Lore of Women agree that Brian's grandmother was Bé Binn, daughter of Erchad son of Murchad, and says:

Bé Binn daughter of Urchad son of Murchad, king of west Connacht, wife of Cenn Éitig son of Lorcán mother of Brian son of Cenn Éitig king of Ireland and of Flann and of Conchobar. [Prose version]

Bé Binn daughter of Erchad, a beautiful woman,  
mother of Brian of judgments.  
Steady Erchad son of Murchad  
king of southern Connacht of the forays. [Metrical version]

To return, then, to that strange word in the original genealogical piece, *scirrdech*: what did this mean? Even I could see that the ending of the word *-ech* was Irish, but with no knowledge of Old Norse where did I begin? The word appears in only one manuscript but a second uses the word *banamas*, agreeing that the woman was a slave or servant. Therefore the genealogies in two of the major manuscripts agree that Gormlaith's mother was a servant/slave.

I looked first at the *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, and the closest word there was *sciggire*, said to be from the Old Norse *skeggiar* 'islanders' used in the saga The Battle of Ros na Ríog on the Boyne, where the phrase 'from Bare of Sciggire' appears when the Ulster king Conchobar mac Nessa is advised by a warrior to send messengers to look for soldiers to various places, including 'Sciggire'. The editor of the text identifies it as the Faroe Islands. Perhaps it meant 'islander', used in the same way as the Modern Irish word *oiléanach* (islander)?

At this point I could no longer keep the news to myself. I rang Edel Bhreathnach, the well-known early Irish historian, and her reaction and support gave me further belief that I had made a major discovery. Eventually, after a number of days, I managed to speak on the phone to my colleague Donncha Ó Corráin, professor of early Irish history in Cork. He had his copy of the genealogies and I directed him to the word. He agreed that it was Norse but was not fully convinced by the Faroe Islands thesis or the general argument. Then I was put in touch with a colleague who is conversant with Old Icelandic and Faroese, and he came up with another alternative: it could derive from the Norse word *skilrrdb*, 'baptised'. So the word could mean 'the baptised one'.

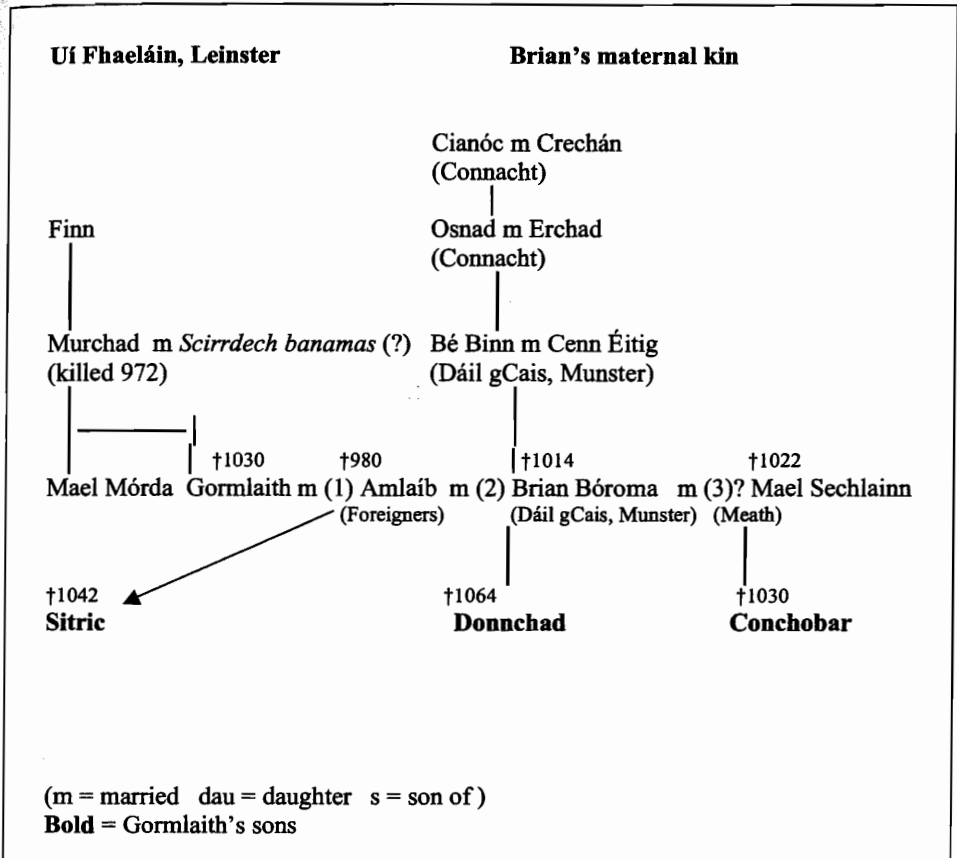
Armed with this information, I decided to offer a paper to the yearly two-day conference at the School of Celtic Studies in November 2004. In May it seemed like a good idea, but by the end of November it was a terrifying prospect. I was about to throw a bomb into early Irish history. That afternoon the room was full, there was not even standing room; the word was out that my paper would be controversial. My students had turned out in force; their supportive faces, as well as others, made the ordeal a little easier. I delivered the paper at breakneck speed, put the words on the blackboard and stood back, expecting disbelief and annihilation particularly from linguists. To my surprise, with the very odd exception, there was a general consensus that the word was Old Norse and probably came from *skira* 'to baptise'. This would give the word *skir* 'the baptised (woman)' along with the Old Irish ending *-ech*. I was lucky in the extreme to have present Mark Scowcroft, who was visiting from America and had studied Old Norse. He, along with Professors Kim McCone and Liam Breatnach, agreed that the Old Norse word *skird* corresponded exactly with the word *scirrd-* from the genealogy.

Apart from the cold historical facts, there is a quiet human drama here. If Gormlaith's mother was a Viking servant or slave, probably taken by an Irish raiding party and perhaps forcibly baptised, it would explain Gormlaith's marriage to Olaf despite the age gap. Both had a similar background and were probably bilingual. He might not see her Viking, albeit slave, pedigree as a disadvantage. On the other hand, perhaps her father felt that it would be difficult to arrange a marriage for a daughter with such parentage? Her mother's ancestry is probably lost forever; a *banamas* in Ireland, she could have been anyone, even of royal descent, at home. It also explains Gormlaith's support for and abiding allegiance to her first-born, half-Viking son, even to the point of sending him overseas for Viking help. I had assumed that she was sending him to his father's relatives for support, but perhaps they were her own maternal relations? We may not know where her mother came from originally, but she herself did and so must Gormlaith. And what of Murchad, Gormlaith's father? No other woman



appears in his life at a time when men, and indeed women, married and remarried up to seven or eight times. Did he keep his *scirrdech banamas* as his permanent wife? If this is Gormlaith's background, it goes a long way to explain the animosity towards her in Irish and Norse literature at a period in history when there was great conflict between the two, and within a hundred years the medieval revisionists were out in full force. It appears that her alliance was with the Norse and Sitric rather than with Leinster and her brother.

*Table 2—Gormlaith's mother: genealogy.*



But Gormlaith came closer to home. Looking out of the window of my house in Maynooth, I wondered where Gormlaith had been the night before the Battle of Clontarf. On asking Ailbhe Mac Samhráin the question, his reply sent the now-familiar shiver down my back: 'Right beside you', he said in Irish. Her family had taken over the very land on which I was sitting at the beginning of the eleventh century, and there was quite a battle in the area of the Rye River

around Maynooth in 999.

But even this was not the end of Gormlaith's possible connection with my home. A month later, in June 2004, I received a call from a local journalist.

'You must know all about it,' she said mysteriously.

'What are you talking about?' I replied, mystified.

'The bodies they found . . . five of them.'

My blood ran cold.

'What bodies? Where?'

'Right beside you, where they are building the new houses.'

'Have they found the missing women?' I asked, thinking of the large number of young women who had gone missing in the Kildare/Dublin region over the past decade.

'I don't think so,' she laughed. 'Apparently they're about a thousand years old.'

And yes, there was a building site about two fields away from me, outside the very window I had glanced through the month before as I was talking to Ailbhe. Gormlaith's family—outside my window?

We do not know who they are, and perhaps their true identity will forever remain unknown, but these people were certainly contemporaries of Gormlaith, living and buried here on her 'home turf'. With the huge number of archaeological finds in recent years, it may be some time before they are examined in detail. When the dig was completed, the total number of bodies found on the site was 55.

Finally, it was during this voyage of discovery that the enormity of another site at Woodstown, Co. Waterford, came to light: a Viking longfort or town from which thousands of finds have been recovered, including manacles—evidence of an active slave trade. Thoughts again turned to Gormlaith's mother. Somehow I suspect that this story and that of Gormlaith's mother is not yet over. An archaeologist colleague commented that the dead bodies had followed me to my back door. I couldn't help thinking that it was quite the opposite—I had followed Gormlaith to her back door . . .

### Further reading

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