

Cath Bealaigh Mughna.

908 A.D.

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In the third week of August 908 AD, the Battle of Ballaghmoon was fought between High King, Flann Sinna, Máele Sechnaill (879–916 AD); the King of Leinster, Cerball mac Múirecáin, Uí Dúnlainge, Uí Faeláin and Cathal, son of Conchobhar, king of Connaught. Opposing these were Bishop Cormac mac Cuilennáin, Eóganacht Chaisil, King of Munster (902-908 AD); Flaithbertact, son of Inmainén, abbot of Inis Cathaig and Cellach mac Cerbail, King of Osraige (905-908 AD).

Ballaghmoon is a townland in the barony of Kilkea and Moone situated in south Kildare. All that remains of an important post reformation church and rectory are ruins standing in a walled graveyard containing ancient and extant graves. There is much written about and many sources available for the battle of Ballaghmoon or Cath Bealaigh-Mughna including the following:

Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters, ed., John O'Donovan, LL.D., M.R.I.A.; *Annals of Ulster*, ed., William M. Hennessy, M.R.A.I.; *The Annals of Inisfallen*, ed., Sean Mac Airt.; *The Annals of Clonmacnoise*, ed., D. Murphy, S.J.; *The Book of Ballymote*; *Keating's History of Ireland*; *Book of Leinster*; *An Leabhar Gabhála*; Colgan's *Trias Thaumaturga*; *Féilire Oingusso*; *Crede Mihi* (cir. 1270) ed. Gilbert; *Chronicon Scotorum*, ed., Hennessy; *Ecclesiastical History of Ireland*, Dr. Lanigan; and *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, ed., Joan Newton Radner.

John O'Donovan, who edited the Four Masters' *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland*, visited the area around Ballaghmoon during his work in Co. Kildare, for the nineteenth century, Ordnance Survey. He made a brief study of Cath Bealaigh Mughna at that time. In a footnote, on page 564 of the first volume of his edition, he states as follows:

Bealach-Mughna: i.e. Mughain's Road or Pass, Via Muganiae, now Ballaghmoon, in the south of the county of Kildare, and about two miles and a half north of the town of Carlow; not Ballymoon, in the county of Carlow, as Dr. Lanigan asserts in his *Ecclesiastical History of Ireland*, vol. iii, p. 351. See Circuit of Muircheartach Mac Neill, p. 38. The site of this battle is still pointed out at the place, and the stone on which King Cormac's head was cut off by a common soldier is shown.

Keating¹ gives a curious account of this battle in his history of Ireland, from a historical tract called Cath-Bealaigh-Mughna, or Battle of Ballaghmoon, not now accessible. However, the *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* tell the story of the battle of Bealach Mughna in almost the exact words that Keating used in his

comprehensive account of the battle in, *Foras feasa ar Éirinn*, his seventeenth-century history of Ireland. The Fragmentary Annals tell the story of Cath Bealaigh Mughna as follows:

A great army of the men of Munster was gathered by the same two men, that is, by Flaithbertach and Cormac to demand hostages of the Laigin and Osraige, and the men of Munster were all in the same camp. Flaithbertach happened to ride along a street of the camp on his horse; his horse fell into a deep ditch under him, and that was an evil omen for him. There were many of his own people and of the whole army, who did not wish to go on the expedition after that, for it seemed to all of them that this fall of the holy man was a calamitous omen.

Then noble messengers came from the Laigin, from Cerball son of Muirecán, to Cormac first and they delivered a message of peace on behalf of those of the Laigin who appeared to him (?); i.e., that there would be one peace in all of Ireland until Béltaine (May) – for it was a fortnight into autumn at that time – and hostages would be given into the keeping of Móenach,² the holy, wise and pious man and other pious people; many goods and treasures would be given to Flaithbertach and to Cormac.

The peace offered to him was most welcome to Cormac, and he came to tell Flaithbertach about it and he told him that it had come from the Laigin. When Flaithbertach heard that, he was greatly horrified and said, ‘This demonstrates your lack of spirit and the meanness of your descent, for you are the son of an outsider.’ He continued with many bitter and insulting words that it would be tedious to relate.

Cormac replied ‘I am certain of what will result from that – that is, from giving battle – holy man; Cormac will be cursed for it and it is likely that you will die.’ When Cormac had said that, he came to his own tent, tired and sorrowful, and when he had seated himself, he took a bucket of apples that was brought to him and he was distributing them to his followers and he said, ‘Beloved people, I shall never bestow apples upon you from this time forward.’ ‘Is it so, dear earthy Lord?’ asked his people. ‘Why have you made us sad and sorrowful? You have often made evil prophecies for us.’ Cormac said, ‘Indeed, beloved people, what sorrowful things have I said? For it is small wonder that I should not give you apples from my own hand, since there will be some one among you after me who will distribute apples to you.’

Afterwards he ordered a watch. There was summoned to him then the wise, pious man, exalted successor of Comgall and he made his confession and his will in his presence and received the Body of Christ from his hand. He renounced life in the presence of this Móenach, for he knew he would be killed in the battle, but did not wish many to know this about him. He asked that his body be brought to Cluain Uama, if possible, but if it was not, that it be brought to the burial ground of Diarmait grandson of Áed Rón, where he had studied for a long time. He greatly desired to be buried at Cluain Uama³ of the son of Léníne. Móenach, however, preferred to bury him at Dísert Diarmata (Castledermot), for Dísert Diarmata was one of Comgall’s places and Móenach was successor of Comgall. Móenach son of Siadal was the wisest man in his time and he worked hard then to make peace between the Laigin and the men of Munster, if possible. Many of the army of Munster deserted without leave.

Now there was a great clamour and commotion in the encampment of the men of Munster at that time, for they heard that Flann son of Máel Sechlainn was in the Laigin camp with a huge army of foot and horse. Then Móenach said, 'Nobles of Munster it would be right for you to give the well-born hostages that I have brought you into the keeping of pious men until Béltaine, i.e. the son of Ceball, king of the Laigin, and the son of the King of Osraige.' All the men of Munster were saying that it was Flaithbertach son of Inmainén alone who compelled them to go into Leinster. After the great complaint that they made, they came across Sliabh Mairge from the west to Droichet Lethglinne. However, Tipraite successor to Ailbe, and many clerics along with him stayed at Lethglenn and also the servants of the army and their pack horses.

Then the men of Munster sounded trumpets and battle-cries and proceeded to Mag Ailbe. They were waiting for their enemies with their backs to a dense wood. The men of Munster formed themselves into three equally large, equally extensive battalions; Flaithbertach son of Inmainén and Cellach son of Cerball, king of Osraige, leading the first battalion; Cormac son of Cuilennán, the king of Munster leading the middle Munster battalion; Cormac son of Mothla, king of the Déissi and the king of Ciarraige, and kings of many other tribes of West Munster in the third battalion. Then they proceeded like that over Mag Ailbe. They were complaining about the number of their enemies and the smallness of their own forces. This is what the wise men (i.e. the people who were among them) reported: that the Laigin with their allies were three or four times the number of the men of Munster, or more.

Now the men of Munster came to battle weak and in disorder. The noise in this battle was grievous, as the learned tell (i.e. the people who were in the battle), that is the noise of the one army being slain and the noise of the other army exulting in that slaughter. Now there were two causes that made the men of Munster suffer defeat: first, that Célechair, kinsmans of Cenn Gécáin, leaped suddenly onto his horse and as he leaped onto his horse, he said: 'Nobles of Munster, flee at once from this horrible battle and leave it to the clergy themselves, who have given no other counsel but to do battle.' He fled immediately after that and a great troop along with him. And then the other cause of defeat: Cellach son of Cerball, when he saw the troop that included the King of Ireland's noble followers slaughtering his own troop, leaped upon his horse and said to his own people, 'Get up on your horses and drive away the people who are before you!' And although he said that, it was not really for fighting that he said it, but rather in order to flee. What resulted from those causes, then, was the unanimous flight of the Munster battalions.

Alas, grievous and great was the slaughter throughout Mag Ailbe after that. Clergy were spared no more than laymen there; They were equally killed and beheaded. Whenever laymen or cleric was spared there, it was not done from mercy, but rather from desire to get ransom for them, or to keep them as servants.

Now Cormac the king escaped in the lead of the first troop. But his horse jumped into a ditch and he fell from the horse; when a group of his people saw that as they were fleeing, they came to the king and put him back on his horse. Then he saw one of his own foster sons, named Aed, of the noblemen of the Eóganachta, learned in wisdom and historical traditions and latin, and the king said to him 'Beloved son do not stay with me, but get away as best you can, I have told you already, that I will be killed in this battle.'

A few stayed with Cormac and he proceeded along the way on horse-back. There was much blood from men and horses along that road. Then the hind legs of his horse slipped on the slick road, in the path of that blood; the horse fell backwards and the king fell backwards and his back and his neck were broken in two. He said as he was falling, 'In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum.' And his spirit departed and the accursed impious sons went and stabbed spears into his body and hacked his head from his body.

Although many were the slain on Mag Ailbe east of the Berba, the cruelty of the Laigin was not satisfied with that, so they pursued the retreat westwards across Sliabh Mairge. They killed many noblemen in that pursuit.

At the very beginning of the battle Cellach son of Cerball, king of Osraige and his son had immediately been killed. Both laymen and clergy were killed severally from then on: many noble clergy were killed in this battle and many kings and chieftains. Fogartach son of Suibne, the sage in philosophy and theology, king of Ciarraige, was slain and Ailill son of Eógan, the distinguished master of jurisprudence in Ireland and many others, whom it would be a long task to write down.

The laymen, moreover, were Cormac, king of the Déssi; Dubucán king of Fir Mairge; Cenn Fáelad, king of Uí Conaill; Connadar and Aineslis of the Uí Thairdelbaig; and Éiden, king of Aidne, who was in exile in Munster; Máel Muad; Matudán; Dub dá Bairenn; Congal; Catharnach; Feradach; Áed, king of Uí Liathain; and Domnall, king of Dún Cermna.

These are the men who won the battle: Flann son of Máel Sechlainn, King of Ireland; Cerball son of Muirecán, king of Leinster; Tadc son of Fáelán, king of Uí Ceinnselaig; Temenán, king of Uí Dega; Cellach and Lorracán, two kings of Fir Cualann; Indeirge son of Dub Gilla, king of Uí Dróna; Follaman son of Ailill, king of Fotharta Fea; Tuathal son of Augaire, king of Uí Muiredaig; Auigrán son of Cennétig, king of Loíches; Máel Calland son of Fergal, king of Fortuatha; Cléirchen, king of Uí Bairrchi. A. Apart from Flann all the other kings named as victors are Leinster Kings even though Cathal king of Connaught, not only fought for the victors, but was said to have been killed in the battle. This would suggest that the report came from a Leinster source as the compiler seemed to have only a scant knowledge of the participating Munster Dignitaries. The Annals of the Four Masters⁴ report as follows:

The battle was gained over Cormac and he himself was slain, though his loss was mournful, for he was a king, a bishop, an anchorite, a scribe and profoundly learned in the Scotie tongue.⁵ These were the nobles who fell along with him, namely, Fogartach the Wise, son of Suibne, Lord of Carraighe-Cuirche; Ceallach, son of Cearbhal, lord of Osraige; Maelgorm, lord of Ciarraighe-Luach; Maelmorda. Lord of Raithlinn; Ailill, son of Eoghan, Abbot of Trian-Corcaighe; Colman, Abbot of Ceann-Eitigh; and the lord of Corca-Duibhne; and many nobles besides them and six thousand men along with them.⁶

Flann, king of Ireland, came with a large troop of royal horsemen and installed Diarmait son of Cerball in the kingship of Osraige. Diarmait had been

replaced by his brother Ceallach 'of the hard conflicts', who was killed in the battle, as king of Osraige in 900 AD. Then a group came before Flann and they had the head of Cormac the king; they said to Flann, 'Life and health, triumphant powerful king; we have the head of Cormac for you; as it is the custom with kings, raise your thigh and put this head under it and crush it with your thigh.'

'That is indeed evil,' said Flann to them and it was not thanks that he gave them. 'It was an evil deed,' he said, 'to cut off the holy bishop's head; I shall honour it, and not crush it.' Flann took the head in his hands and kissed it and he carried the consecrated head and the true martyr around him three times. After that the head was honourably brought from him to the body, in the place where Móenach son of Siadal, successor of Comgall was and he took Cormac's body to Díseart Diarmata and it was greatly honoured there, where it produces omens and miracles.

Why, then, should the heart not be moved and mourn this awful deed, that is, the killing and hacking up (with abominable weapons) of the holy person who was the most skilled that ever was or will be of the men of Ireland? A scholar in Irish and in Latin, the wholly pious and pure chief bishop, miraculous in chastity and in prayer, a sage in government, in all wisdom, knowledge and science, a sage of poetry and learning, chief of charity and every virtue; a wise man in teaching, high king of the two provinces of all Munster in his time.

Flann, the king of Ireland, returned then, after leaving Diarmait in the kingship of Osraige and making peace in partnership between him and his kinsmen. The Laigin returned also with triumph and spoils. Cerball son of Muirecán, king of the Laigin, proceeded to Cell Dara with great troops of captives and Flaithbertach son of Inmainén among those. The evil things that certain scholars of Leinster said about Flaithbertach are shameful to tell and improper to write.

Flaithbertach was brought to Cell Dara then and the clergy of Leinster reproached him severely, for they knew that it had been he alone who had urged the hosting and the battle and that Cormac had come against his will. However, after the death of Cerball, king of the Laigin, Flaithbertach was released, which was at the end of that year, according to some. Muirenn, successor to Brigit, along with a large group of clergy and many relics, escorted him to Mag nAirb⁷ and when he arrived in Munster he made peace there. Afterwards he went to his monastery on Inis Cathaig and spent a while there piously, until he came out again to take the kingship of Cashel and he was king of Munster for thirty-two years.

It is also said that the Munster King Cormac and the Leinster King Cerball, although fighting on opposite sides, were foster-brothers raised together and fellow students and that Gelsearc, daughter of Derell, King of France, raised them together.⁸

The story of how Cerball was killed is also told in the Fragmentary Annals. It appears that following the battle he went back to Naas via Kildare and as he was riding into Kildare at the head of a band of hostages with Gormfhlaith (the widow of king Cormac whom he had taken as his wife), riding beside him, his

young spear carrying servant was riding immediately behind with the spear. It was said ‘he was going into Cell Dara eastward along the street of the stone steps, with a proud horse under him, when he came opposite a comb-maker’s workshop; at that moment the comb-maker set out his antlers, when the horse was opposite him outside.’ The ‘proud horse shied backwards’ and Cerball was thrown upon his own spear and gravely wounded. He died from the wound one year and a day from that date and was buried among his forefathers in the graveyard of Nás. ‘Whence was said’:

There are nine kings – a warring line –
in the churchyard of Nás, under brilliant sky:
Muirecán of gifts, without mistake,
Cerball and wise Cellach,

Colmán, Bráen and vigorous Bran,
Finn, Fáelán, bold Dúnochad;
in Cell Corbbáil, I have heard,
their soldier-graves were dug.

Cerball mac Muirecán was the last King of Leinster to hold his residence in Naas.⁹ It was said of Gormfhlaith, who was a daughter of king Flann Sinna, that she survived three kings because when king Cearball died she married Niall Glúndubh¹⁰ who reigned as High King for three years before being killed in battle. Hence:

Gormfhlaith, daughter of Flann, sang:

Cerballl was always in control;
His manner was vigorous till death.
Those of his claims that were unpaid.
he carried off by his strength to Nás.

Evil for me was the the favour of two foreigners:
they killed Niall and Cerball:
Cerball by Ulb – famous deed –
And Niall Glúndub by Amlaide.

From the descriptions provided it can be concluded that the battle of Ballaghmoon was fought in an area along the eastern banks of the river barrow stretching from south Kildare to Leighlinbridge and that the remnants of fleeing Munster army was chased across the river Barrow there and back across the hills. It is debatable how much of the contact and chase, apart from the killing of Cormac Mac Cuilennáin, actually took place at Ballaghmoon or was indeed confined to Magh Ailbhe. It was always my belief that Magh Ailbhe consisted of a

Photo: Eamon Kane



Ballaghmoon

relatively small area of flat fertile land in the Barrow valley; that stretched from the River Griese, at its northern boundary, to somewhere just south of where Carlow town is presently situated; that Mullaghreelan hill, on the western boundary was from where Ailbhe, who gave her name to this plain, overlooked her territory from her áras or palace. Ailbhe, was daughter to High King, Ugáine Mór,¹¹ who allotted this territory to her when he divided the island of Ireland between his twenty two sons and three daughters.¹² The source doesn't say if he divided the island into twenty five equal divisions of usable land; what provision was made for mountains, bogs, lakes and rivers in reckoning the value of the divisions; or whether the sons got more or less than the daughters. Three of the sons and the three daughters, according to the source, moved to Maghs after the division, which might suggest that these six were given choice smaller divisions of fertile flat land or else a Magh was meant to be more than a flat fertile plain such as supported my first belief regarding Magh Ailbhe. On the other hand if the total landmass of the Island of Ireland was divided into twenty five equal parts each division would contain approximately 3,375 square kilometres which would mean that those sources which describe Magh Ailbhe as extending from the river Barrow and Sliabh Mairge to the Wicklow Mountains and containing the Barony of Kilkea and Moone in Co. Kildare and the northern part of the Barony of Idrone in Co. Carlow and of course contain An Bealac Mughna (the road to Munster),¹³ would be more correct.

Whatever about the exact location of the encounter, Ballaghmoon could better be described as a massacre than a battle since this confrontation between the armies devastated the Eoghanacht dynasty in Munster. If, as is stated, 6,000 were actually killed in the battle, this would be a mighty number in the context of that time and place. Whether those numbers stand up or not, the results of the contest had far reaching effects on for the Eoghanachts who had reigned supreme in Munster since the death in 601 of Aedh Caomh who had been a Dalcassian King there from 571.¹⁴ Much of the course of Irish History from 601 until the coming of the Vikings at the end of the eighth century was the pressure exerted on the O'Neill Kings at Tara by the attempts of Munster Eoghanachts to be High Kings and their failure to so do.¹⁵ Following their defeat at Ballaghmoon, Eoghanacht power waned considerably in Munster, creating space for their Dalcassian rivals to regain power. In 954 a Dalcassian, Cinneidigh (Kennedy) became king of Munster and was succeeded in 975 by his son Brian who reigned as king of Munster until 1002 when he became monarch of all Erin. Brian Ború, as he is better known, reigned as High King of Ireland until his death in the Battle of Clontarf in 1014 AD.

REFERENCES

1. Very Rev. Geoffrey Keating, parish priest of Tubrid, Co. Tipperary, compiled a History of Ireland from the earliest times until the Anglo Norman invasion in 1170 AD. He consulted the several ancient manuscripts then available and spent many years on his work, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, written about 1633, see Bernadette Cunningham, *The world of Geoffrey Keating* (Dublin, 2000), p. 59.

2. Móenach was at that time at the monastery of Díseart Diarmada (Castledermot). He subsequently became Abbot of Bangor, Co. Down cir. 920 AD.
3. Cloyne, Co. Cork, ref. Edmund Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum*, (Dublin, 1910).
4. See *Annála Rioghachta Éireann: Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the four Masters, from the earliest period to the year 1616*, ed., John O'Donovan, 7 vols, (Dublin, 1851) i, p. 569.
5. Cormac was the author of an ancient Irish Glossary called *Sanasan Chormaic* which was used as an authority on Irish grammar well into the seventeenth century. He is also credited with compiling the *Psalter of Cashel*.
6. Eugene O'Curry states that Dallan Mac More, Poet of Leinster attached to the Court of Cearbhall King of Leinster appears to have been present at the Battle: Eugene O'Curry, *On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish, A series of lectures by Eugene O'Curry*, M.R.I.A. Ed., W.K. Sullivan (3 vols, Dublin 1996), ii, p. 105.
7. Narbh was one of the sons of Ugáine Mór hence Magh Nairbh was the plain of Narbh. Ref. Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhisigh, *Leabhar Mór na nGenealach*, (1645-66), Ed., With translation and indexes by Nollaig Ó Muráile, (5 vols, Dublin, 2003), I, p.279.
8. See *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, ed., Joan Newton Radner, (Dublin, 1978), 908, 423 note .i.
9. See *Four Masters*, p. 572, footnote, o.
10. Niall Glúndubh succeeded Flann Sionna as Árd Rí in 915 AD. He was slain on 17 October 917 in the battle of Áth Cliath by the Vikings, Mac Fhibhisigh, *Leabhar Mór na nGenealach*, iii, p.39, 764.21.
11. Mac Fhirbhisigh, *Leabhar Mór na nGenealach*, i, p. 279, 104.3.
12. Mac Fhirbhisigh, *Leabhar Mór na nGenealach*, i, p. 279, 103.5.
13. Edmund Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum*, (Blackrock, 1910, reprint 1993), pp 511-512.
14. Eugene O'Curry, *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of ancient Irish history* (reprint, Dublin, 1878) pp 208-215.
15. Liam de Paor, Radio Éireann 1980s lecture.