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THE IDEAL KING: BRIAN BORU AND THE MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN CONCEPT OF
KINGSHIP

by

KODY E.B. WHITTINGTON
B.A. UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA, 2019

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ABSTRACT

When one thinks of great kings, and more specifically of great kings of the early medieval period, there are a few names that almost immediately come to mind. Charlemagne is perhaps the first great medieval ruler one may mention. Alfred the Great would likely not be far behind. Both these men represented, for their respective peoples, what a great king should be. The early medieval period was a time of development in thought and in practice for the office of kingship, and the writings and actions of the men of this period would have a profound influence in the following centuries. Most nations can look back at the early medieval period and pick out at least one ruler that symbolized the ideal of kingship, and Ireland is no different. For early medieval Ireland, the king that stood as the ideal was Brian Boru. This thesis will be examining Brian as a model of early medieval kingship. My argument is that Brian's kingship not only represented the ideal of kingship in a comparable manner to Charlemagne and Alfred, but also blended traditional Irish kingship with models of kingship from the rest of Europe that altered the concept of the High King of Ireland. To do this, this thesis will be examining Brian within three regions of Europe, each receiving its own chapter, and how he fits into the respective ideals of kingship for each region. The three regions utilized by this thesis are Ireland, Frankia and England, and Scandinavia. Through this, this thesis will argue of the similarities between the kings of these regions regarding what caused them to be seen as great kings and models of kingship, and how Brian's own kingship fits into the criteria. This research will serve as an analysis of the concept of early medieval kingship outside of the traditional areas of study, comparing them and examining how each influenced the other, using Brian as the lens of focus.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the study of early medieval kingship, and specifically in discussions relating to the concept of the ideal king, the kings that are most prominently discussed are Charlemagne (r. 768-814) and Alfred the Great (r. 886-899). Both of these men represented, for their respective peoples, what a great king should be. Both represented, or were at least remembered as, the ideal that a king should aspire to and thus served as sources of emulation for future rulers, even rulers outside of their respective kingdoms. The early medieval period was a time of development in thought and in practice for the office of kingship, and the writings and actions of the men of this period would have a profound influence in the following centuries. The influence of these kings was great enough that they are immortalized as nationalistic symbols even today. It is for these reasons that Charlemagne and Alfred feature so prominently in discussions of early medieval ideal kingship in Europe, but in this period of developing ideas and ideals of kingship, certain sections of Europe and their kings are often ignored or mentioned merely in passing in discussions of said development. Ireland in particular is often relegated to the sidelines in the discussion of wider European development of the office of kingship, despite having its own Charlemagne or Alfred in the form of Brian Boru (r. 978-1014).

This thesis will be examining Brian as a model of early medieval kingship, specifically the developing ideas of the ideal king. How did he reflect the Irish model of the ideal king? How did he go against the Irish model? How did his kingship compare to the model of kingship in other areas of Europe? This analysis is not so much concerned with the “facts” of Brian’s rule so much as it is concerned with the perceptions and idealizations of kings and kingship that were forming during this time. For example, it is highly improbable that Brian, in his seventies or

eighties at the time of his death at the Battle of Clontarf, was able to slay two Viking warriors before succumbing to his wounds. However, this does give evidence of a society that viewed the ideal king as a strong and valiant warrior who died with sword in hand. Tracing the spread and development of this ideal, and how this came together in the representation of Brian, is the central theme of this research. My argument is that Brian's kingship not only represented the ideal of kingship in a comparable manner to Charlemagne and Alfred, but also blended traditional Irish kingship with models of kingship from the rest of Europe that altered the concept of the High King of Ireland. This will in turn show that the developing ideas of kingship at this time was built upon mutual influence between various parts of Europe. To do this, this thesis will be examining Brian within three regions of Europe and how he fits into the respective ideals of kingship for each region, as well as how each of these regions influenced one another in their concepts of the ideal king. The three regions utilized by this thesis are Ireland, Frankia and Anglo-Saxon England, and Scandinavia. Through this, this thesis will argue of the similarities between the kings of these regions regarding what caused them to be seen as great kings and models of kingship, how Brian's own kingship fits into the criteria, and how mutual influence may be seen. This research will serve as an analysis of the concept of early medieval kingship outside of the traditional areas of study, comparing them and examining how each influenced the other, using Brian as the lens of focus.

The Life of Brian

Born in Munster in the south of Ireland around 941 AD, Brian belonged to the clan known as the Dal Cais, which ruled the kingdom of Thomond, a sub-kingdom of Munster. Brian

lived near the end of the Viking Age, a time when Vikings had established cities and kingdoms throughout Ireland, assimilated into the culture and politics of the region, and allied with and fought against various Irish kings. All records of the life of Brian begin with him waging a guerilla campaign against the Vikings of Munster alongside his elder brother Mathgamhain, portraying it as a noble effort to free Munster from the “foreigners” that had ruthlessly ruled over it and depicting Brian as a tireless warrior from the very beginning. This campaign culminated in the Battle of Sulcoit in 968, a great victory over Ivar of Limerick, the most powerful Viking ruler in Munster and ally, or perhaps overlord, of the Irish king of Munster, Mael Muad. Soon after, Mathgamhain seized the kingship of Munster from Mael Muad, apparently ushering in a period of prosperity. However, a conspiracy led by Mael Muad, Ivar, and Donnabhan of Ui Fidhgenti resulted in the dishonorable killing of Mathgamhain in 976.

Now the king of the Dal Cais, Brian swore bloody revenge on his brother’s killers, and proved himself every bit as capable as his elder brother, especially in his capacity as a military commander. In quick succession, Brian battled and killed the conspirators. In 977, he defeated the Viking forces at Inis Cathaig, killing Ivar and two of his sons. In 978, Brian faced Donnabhan and Aralt, eldest son and heir of Ivar, at Cathair Cuan and killed them both. Finally, in that same year, Brian battled Mael Muad, once more king of Munster, at Belach Lechta and slew him. With this, Brian secured the hostages and the tribute of Munster, and became king of Munster through right of conquest just as his brother had before him.

After solidifying his position as king of Munster, Brian then set about aggressively expanding his power. Invading Ossory and Leinster, Brian secured the hostages and the submissions of the kings of those regions, making him king of Leth Mogha, or the southern half

of Ireland, by 984. Brian's power over Leth Mogha was officially recognized in 998 when he entered into a treaty with Mael Sechnaill of the Ui Neill, the High King of Ireland. This treaty recognized Brian as the sole sovereign of Leth Mogha, and Mael Sechnaill as the sole sovereign of Leth Cuin, the northern half, with neither one holding hostages of the other and thus neither was the overlord of the other.

Brian's authority over Leth Mogha faced its first major challenge with the revolt of Leinster and the Norse kingdom of Dublin in 999. The revolt ended with the Battle of Glenmama that same year, in which Brian was victorious and was once more able to establish his authority over Leinster and the Viking settlements within his territory. Perhaps emboldened by this victory and once more having taken time to strengthen his power base, Brian went to war against Mael Sechnaill in 1001. By 1002, Brian and his forces had reached Tara and demanded that Mael Sechnaill either submit to his authority and offer hostages or face him in battle. After Mael Sechnaill failed to gather support from the Northern Ui Neill kings, he submitted to Brian and gave him hostages, effectively surrendering the position of High King of Ireland to Brian.

But Leth Cuin had not been completely subdued. Though Connacht quickly submitted and gave hostages to Brian, he faced a united opposition of the kings of Ulster and decided to withdraw and bide his time. Conflict between the northern kings gave Brian the opportunity he had been waiting for, allowing him to march back into the north in 1005, during which he made his famous visit to the ecclesiastical city of Armagh and donated 20 ounces of gold in a gesture of piety and support. By the end of 1005 Brian had conquered Ulaid and most of the north, leaving only the kingdoms of Cenel Conaill and Cenel Eogain independent of his rule. Brian once more withdrew and cautiously waited while tightening his hold on what he had already

gained, returning in 1007 and 1011 with more favorable conditions to conquer and receive the submission of Cenel Eogain and Cenel Conaill respectively. By 1011, Brian was king of Ireland, ending the centuries-long hegemony of the Ui Neill dynasty and advancing new ideas of Irish kingship, in some way recreating the concept of the high king and turning it into a prize worth fighting for, in which the end result was a united Ireland under a single powerful monarch.

Following this, Ireland supposedly entered an era of profound peace and prosperity. Having conquered the whole of Ireland, Brian now became an upholder of law and justice, supposedly creating a kingdom so safe that a woman could walk from one end of Ireland to the other carrying a golden ring and not be harassed. He gave generously to his soldiers, his vassal-kings, and to all his supporters. He is recorded to have sponsored the spread of knowledge, the purchasing of books, and the building of churches and infrastructure. In short, Brian is depicted as having served to uphold the law and the traditions of Ireland, supported the Church and the cause of education, and through generosity and the building of infrastructure bettered the lives of the people of Ireland. But this peace was apparently short-lived.

By 1013, Leinster and Dublin had once more risen in revolt against Brian's rule. Both the revolt and Brian's reign as king of Ireland ended at the Battle of Clontarf. Taking place on Good Friday of 1014, the Battle of Clontarf is as fixed in the minds of the Irish people as the Battle of Hastings or Brunanburh is for the English. This battle saw Brian praying to God in his tent while his eldest son Murchad led his father's forces into battle outside of Dublin. Though Murchad fell in battle, the forces of Brian routed the Leinster-Dublin rebels. However, Brian himself was also killed during the retreat when two Viking warriors managed to sneak into his tent and struck the aged High King down. Thus was Brian victorious and yet tragically slain, along with his heir, in

his final battle that has been famously, though somewhat erroneously, portrayed as preventing foreign domination of Ireland.

Brian and his son were buried in Armagh with great honors, and Brian's passing is recorded with great mourning. His death is recorded as not only the loss of a great king or a hero, but a loss of the valor, the integrity, and the prosperity of Ireland itself. In his panegyric, he is likened to Augustus, Alexander the Great, Solomon, David, and Moses. He is praised and immortalized for his abilities as a valiant warrior, for his faithfulness and devotion to God, and for his efforts to rule justly and prosperously. He is remembered as "one of the three best that were ever born in Erin; and one of the three men who most caused Erin to prosper."¹ In short, Brian is remembered as Ireland's ideal king in much the same manner as Charlemagne and Alfred are remembered as the ideal kings for their respective regions.

Chapter Organization

Chapter one will be dedicated to an analysis of Ireland and Irish kingship. This chapter will examine the Irish concept of kingship and what made an ideal king. It will look at the mythology of Ireland, as Irish scholars rarely made a distinction between mythology and history, and how this mythology impacted and influenced the ideal of Irish kingship. It will also examine the specifics and differences of Irish kings and Irish high kings, with special focus given to the office of high king itself, its power, and whether such a title was actually utilized. Brian himself will then be examined to determine how he represents the Irish ideal of kingship and why medieval Irish scholars record him as great king. But how was Irish kingship, and Ireland in

¹ *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, or, The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*, James Henthorn Todd, ed. and trans. (London: Longmans, Greed, Reader, and Dyer, 1867), 203.

general, similar or different to the rest of Europe? Was it, in fact, any different at all? Scholars such as Arnold Toynbee and Peter Sawyer have noted that Ireland is somewhat unique in medieval European history due to it being outside the realm and heritage of the Roman Empire, and thus its culture and institutions have remained relatively untouched compared to the rest of Europe.² To what extent did this uniqueness from the rest of Europe affect kingship and Brian's kingship in particular? How might have Irish concepts of kingship influenced the concepts of kingship for the rest of Europe? How did Brian fit into the specifically Irish ideal of kingship? How did Brian deviate from traditional forms of Irish kingship? This will lead into the second chapter in which wider European concepts of kingship and their influences will be discussed.

As stated in the beginning of this proposal, the two early medieval kings ingrained in the popular mind are Charlemagne and Alfred the Great. As such, the second chapter examines their respective kingdoms of Frankia and Anglo-Saxon England, while also briefly examining kingship in other parts of continental Europe. As stated above, there is a uniqueness to Ireland compared to the rest of Europe due to being outside of the direct territory and heritage of the Roman Empire. So how did those territories that were once part of the Roman Empire have their own form of kingship? How did the legacy and memory of Rome affect the development and concept of kingship? To what extent did Germanic or barbarian influence play in the development of ideal kingship? How did European concepts of kingship influence Irish concepts? The chapter will begin with an examination of Charlemagne and how he not only represented the ideal of European kingship, but also how he helped to develop the ideal perhaps more than any king before him. Though Charlemagne receives most of this section, a brief

² P.H. Sawyer and Ian Wood, ed. *Early Medieval Kingship* (Leeds: University of Leeds Press, 1977), 142.

discussion of previous and successive rulers of the Frankish kingdom and their place within the development and concept of kingship is included, beginning with Clovis and ending with Charles the Fat in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. Alfred receives similar treatment, especially regarding his own writings on kingship that relate him to Charlemagne as one who both represented and developed the ideal of kingship, though Alfred and to a lesser extent his grandson Athelstan are the only kings that will be mentioned in detail in this section. The culmination of this chapter is an examination of Brian Boru and how he did or did not reflect, not only the Irish concept of kingship, but the European concept of kingship. It will analyze how Brian was actively influenced by outside concepts of kingship and incorporated them into his own style of kingship.

The inclusion of an examination of Scandinavian kingship may seem strange, but scholars such as Toynbee and Sawyer have placed Scandinavia alongside Ireland as being outside of the European culture of “heirs” of Rome. Furthermore, the era that will be examined in this research largely coincides with what has been recognized as the Viking Age. The spread of the Viking raiders and settlers across Europe doubtlessly allowed for a spread of mutual influence in regard to the ideas and ideals of kingship. Additionally, historians have cited Viking influence in the development of kingship in Ireland, England, and Frankia, not only through war but also through cultural assimilation and economic development. Brian, along with Alfred and to a lesser extent Charlemagne and his successors, both warred and allied with Scandinavian invaders. The popular myth is that Brian, again much like Alfred, is the king who drove the Vikings from Ireland and saved it from domination. Historians have since refuted this statement, as the Vikings were not expelled so much as assimilated, though some have argued that it may

have prevented a larger invasion force comparable to Cnut's invasion of England. Regardless, Brian's fame and depiction as one who warred successfully against the Vikings is integral to his position in the ideal of kingship and will be examined throughout the thesis. Given the relatively recent conversion of Scandinavian rulers to Christianity, aspects of pagan mythology and the influence this had on Scandinavian concepts of kingship will be analyzed in a similar manner as Irish mythology will be analyzed in chapter one. Olaf II of Norway (r. 1015-1028), known as St. Olaf, will serve as the representation of Scandinavia's ideal king and will receive the bulk of analysis in this section. This is due to his prominence within the 13th century text *Heimskringla* and his status as the "Eternal King of Norway," which suggests his status as an ideal king. Primarily, this chapter will detail the Scandinavian concept of kingship, how it may have affected Irish concepts, how Brian adopted certain Scandinavian ideas and traits to support his own kingship, and how Brian was both viewed by his Scandinavian adversaries and how he fit within their ideal of kingship.

Within each of these three chapters, and in addition to discussions of any unique natures or features of kingship within each region, there will be three sub-sections that will look at the specific aspects of a king that seem to overlap across each region and form a sort of checklist for an ideal ruler. These will be the king as warrior, the king as pious, and the king as statesman.

One of the central themes of medieval kingship, both early and later, is the king's place as a leader in war, and in some cases, as a warrior himself. Defending the kingdom and waging war against enemies was a responsibility of the king, but to what extent was the king himself to be involved in the fighting or the development of strategy, and how did this vary from kingdom to kingdom? Additionally, the king as a warrior for peace, along with the developments of the

justification for a king waging a war, will be analyzed. Brian himself was a renowned warrior, and as noted, had won his authority primarily through conquest. All the Annals discussed in this thesis depict Brian as a warrior, with nearly every entry pertaining to Brian mentioning some raid, conquest, or military victory. *The War of the Irish with the Foreigners* does this on an even larger scale, as the very beginning of the account details Brian's early years as a guerilla fighter and only continues to depict him as a successful warrior and commander. However, Brian's wars were also depicted as just and waged with the goal of a peaceful Ireland.

The Church was a powerful institution throughout the Middle Ages, and the early medieval period is no exception. The extent of ecclesiastical influence on kings and kingship is a matter of debate, but historians generally accept that to the medieval mind, a good king was a pious king, one that respects God and the Church. Was the king seen as sacred or divinely appointed? How did the king connect himself, or allowed himself to be connected with, aspects of the Church and divinity?? However, this section will also be dedicated to an analysis of the king's connection to religious matters that were non-Christian, and how this aspect of the king may have survived after the introduction of Christianity. Brian had a good relationship with the diocese of Armagh, leaving twenty ounces of gold on the altar of the cathedral and declaring it the religious capital of Ireland, thus ensuring its support for him, as noted in the *Book of Armagh*.³ Additionally, Brian has been depicted as sacred, or at least incredibly pious and devout. *The War of the Irish with the Foreigners* records how Norse soldiers at first mistook Brian for a wise priest, before recognizing him as the king. Additionally, and in keeping with

³ Denis Casey and Bernard Meehan, "Manuscripts: Brian Boru and the Book of Armagh," *History Ireland* 22, no. 2 (2014): 28.

pre-Christian Irish concepts of kingship, this same source also seems to tie Brian directly with the land itself and its prosperity, transforming him into an almost divine figure.

When examining the king as a statesman, it is important to offer some clarification. I specifically intend to analyze the king and his connection to law and justice, and his domestic policies and contributions. This will include the king as a maker or enforcer of law, the king as a builder, the king as a patron of the spread of knowledge, and the traditions and evolution of the king's title. Sources depict Brian as a supporter of knowledge and the building of infrastructure. In addition, medieval Irish historians and even the Norse *Njals Saga* remember him as having kept to the ancient traditions of Ireland, to have upheld the laws, and to have judged justly. Historians have traced this to the early medieval belief that a good ruler is one who rules himself, who stays within the law and obeys it. Does this mean that a good king is a limited king? Does the law determine the king, or does the king determine the law? What shared traditions and duties existed across the three regions discussed? What traditions and kingly duties are unique to each region? Not all of these ideals are shared across the three regions that will be discussed, and thus some chapters may omit one or more of these concepts in order to maintain focus. For example, depictions of Brian as a patron of building infrastructure and of knowledge do not seem to have a parallel in depictions of other Irish kings, but rather with English and European kings. Thus, this aspect of his depiction will be reserved for chapter two.

Primary Sources

Most of the primary source information for Brian comes from *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, or *The War of the Irish with the Foreigners*, which is the source of most historical

information on Brian in general. There is debate over the dating and authorship of the text, though most modern scholars agree that it dates to the reign of Brian's great-grandson Muirchertach (d. 1119), almost one hundred years after Brian's death, citing evidence of apparent parallels and references to Muirchertach's reign and arguing that it was commissioned in an attempt to relate Muirchertach to his venerated ancestor and strengthen his claims to the high-kingship.⁴ In addition, the work is itself a piece of incredible propaganda, but I would argue that this is not necessarily a problem in terms of my thesis. While it is entirely probable that the account exaggerates, perhaps even fabricates in some cases, it is still an account that demonstrates what the medieval Irish mind thought of when considering what a great king was or should be. In this way, it is little different from the chronicles and biographies of other early medieval kings. *The Annals of Innisfallen*, *The Annals of Ulster*, and *The Annals of the Four Masters* will supplement *Cogadh*, as will a brief inscription in the *Book of Armagh* that was written by one of Brian's advisors, Mael Suthain, during his visit to Armagh in 1005. The various *Annals* themselves must be noted for their differing biases. While *Innisfallen* was very supportive of Brian, given its southern roots, *Ulster* and especially *Four Masters* are more critical of Brian due to their northern origins. However, these latter two *Annals* still offer an overall depiction of Brian as a good and powerful king by the time he came to rule Ireland. Discussion of Brian will also make use of the brief mention of Brian in the 13th century Viking saga *Njals Saga*, which depicts him as a temperate and good-natured king who upheld law and justice, as well as one that seemingly possessed sacred qualities. This also serves to reveal

⁴ Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, "The Date of Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib," *Peritia* 9 (1995): 376-77.

Scandinavian concepts of kingship through an analysis of the aspects of Brian that they respected. Additionally, *Lebor Gabala Erenn*, or *The Book of the Taking of Ireland*, will also be used in the analysis of Irish kingship as a whole. *The Book of the Taking of Ireland* is a pseudo-historical text dated to around the eleventh century that tells the history of Ireland from the creation of the world until the time of its writing, and details the conquest of Ireland by six races, including the Tuatha de Danann who comprise the Irish pagan pantheon. This source will be used in its capacity as a record of Irish mythology and how this mythology influenced Irish ideas of kingship.

Primary source information for Charlemagne will come from Einhard's *Vita Caroli Magni*, or *Life of Charles the Great*, written between 818 and 833, and Notker's *Gesta Caroli Magni*, or *The Deeds of Charles the Great*, written between 884 and 887. Both accounts are biographies meant to extol Charlemagne and serve to depict as him as a warrior, as pious, and as a statesman. Similarly, the primary sources used for Alfred will be Asser's *Vita Alfredi regis Angul Saxonum*, or *Life of Alfred*, written around 895. Also included will be selections from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and from Alfred's own writings, specifically in his translations of the works of Pope Gregory, Boethius, and Augustine of Hippo. These sources serve a similar function as the sources relating to Charlemagne and to *The War of the Irish with the Foreigners*, in that they were meant to idealize the ruler and portray him as a model king.

In addition to *Njals Saga*, primary source information for Scandinavian kingship will come from *Heimskringla*, the most well-known of the Norse kings' sagas. The saga is itself a collection of sagas detailing Norwegian kings from their mythological roots as the dynasty of Odin to the reign of Magnus V in the late twelfth century. As Olaf II is the primary focus of

Scandinavian ideal kingship, his saga will be used extensively, especially considering that it alone takes up roughly a third of *Heimskringla*. Additionally, the *Yngling Saga* within *Heimskringla* will also be used to demonstrate overall Scandinavian ideals of kingship, as will other sagas such as *Hrolfs saga kraka*, *Egils saga*, and *Orkneyinga saga*.

Historiography

Fortunately, the historiography of early medieval kingship is expansive enough to make the task of determining what the early medieval concept of kingship and good kingship was a relatively easy one, though there has been the challenge of relatively little being written in the way of theoretical thought on the office of kingship prior to the ninth century. Since World War II, the historiography has integrated the disciplines and utilized more varied sources such as literary sources, numismatics, hagiographic material, and archaeology. This historiography has been largely defined by its focus on the various influences that developed early medieval kingship, specifically the influences of Rome, the Church, and the Germanic barbarians. The extent of the influence of Rome in the development of kingship has especially been one of debate over the true extent of said influence. John Wallace-Hadrill has argued that the writings of Cicero and Tacitus on the ideal ruler directly influenced the writings and arguments of early medieval thinkers such as Cassiodorus and Gregory the Great, and that Orosius directly influenced Alfred the Great.⁵ There have also been studies as to how Charlemagne consciously attempted to associate himself with the imperial power of Rome.⁶

⁵ J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent: The Ford Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford in Hilary Term 1970* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 32.

⁶ Rosamund McKitterick, "Charles the Bald & the Image of Kingship," *History Today* 38 (June 1988): 30.

There has also been debate on the presence of Germanic, or otherwise pagan or Celtic, influence within early medieval kingship. There is the issue, as Wallace-Hadrill points out, of knowing exactly what Germanic kingship was prior to Rome's fall, as most sources that present the "facts" of Germanic kingship were written by the Romans.⁷ Joel Rosenthal also points out that historians such as W. A. Chaney who argue for the survival of pagan kingship after conversion are at risk of providing a "Frazer-like list of example, rather than an exposition of a working institution."⁸ That said, there has been evidence of pagan, non-Roman influences being present in early medieval kingship, largely shown through mythical pedigrees, such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* tracing the ancestry of Ceolwulf to Woden.⁹ This is perhaps most especially present in Irish kingship, such as the use of the title of "sons of Mil" for many royal lines of Ireland, Mil being the mythical ancestor of the modern Irish whose sons were the last race to invade and conquer Ireland.¹⁰

The influence of the Church, and its transformation of kingship into a fully-fledged office, has also widely been discussed by scholars within the historiography. Wallace-Hadrill credits Pope Gregory the Great as being the first to call kingship an office, a *ministerium*, and that his writings and interpretation of Augustine of Hippo were instrumental in the development of the early medieval concept of kingship.¹¹ Indeed, he cites how Alfred the Great even translated Gregory's *Cura Pastoralis* and was greatly influenced by its arguments.¹² Richard

⁷ Wallace-Hadrill, 1.

⁸ Joel Rosenthal, "A Historiographical Survey: Anglo-Saxon Kings and Kingship since World War II," *Journal of British Studies* 24 (1985): 83.

⁹ Rosenthal, 80.

¹⁰ Francis Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), 11.

¹¹ Wallace-Hadrill, 31.

¹² *Ibid.*, 143.

Abels's biography on Alfred the Great is in complete agreement with this argument, and even suggests that Alfred only further blurred the distinction between secular and ecclesiastic power.¹³ Wallace-Hadrill continues by arguing that the major developments of kingship in the seventh and ninth centuries were largely due to the increased involvement of churchmen in influencing kingship and theorizing about kingship.¹⁴

Francis Byrne believes the case is somewhat different in Ireland however. Byrne stated that Christianity, at least initially, caused a decline in royal power due to the loss of the king's "priestly functions," and due to the Church fitting so well into Irish society that it felt no obligation to the kings in terms of supporting an increase in their authority.¹⁵ According to Byrne, this did eventually shift in the seventh century, likely due to the development of Armagh as the prime seat of church power in Ireland and its desire for a national monarchy that would support its position.¹⁶ This was soon after echoed in Donncha Ó Corráin's analysis of pre-Norman Irish kingship, in which he states that, "they [the Church] did much to enhance kingship by their introduction of wider political ideas concerning the royal office and by acting as servitors of the great dynasties. Already, the tract *De duodecim abusivis saeculi*, written most probably between 630 and 650, has much to say about kingship," including how a Christian king is supposed to act.¹⁷ This argument has persisted into more recent years, as shown when Gleeson

¹³ Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship, and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), 250.

¹⁴ Wallace-Hadrill, 47, 98.

¹⁵ Byrne, 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁷ Ó Corráin's, "Nationality and Kingship in Pre-Norman Ireland."

stated in 2012 that, “from at least the 7th century Irish clerics successfully propagated a Christian ideology of divine rulership by God’s grace.”¹⁸

The historiography of Frankish and Anglo-Saxon kingship, along with studies specifically pertaining to Charlemagne and Alfred, is perhaps the most expansive of the topics discussed in this thesis. The themes and study of early medieval kingship discussed previously tend to focus primarily on these two rulers and these two regions, and a plethora of scholarship related to these rulers has been produced. Most of the secondary material utilized in this thesis that focuses on medieval European kingship as a whole indeed fall into this trend of primarily discussing Alfred and Charlemagne or at least discussing the concepts of kingship in their respective regions. Among the works utilized in this thesis that focus purely on one of these two rulers include Richard Abels’s 1998 biography of Alfred the Great and Robert Morrissey’s 2003 *Charlemagne and France*, in which Morrissey analyzes the evolution of the depictions, perceptions, and usage of Charlemagne.

Secondary research material for Scandinavian kingship, and the historiography of Scandinavian kingship, is quite limited. In this thesis, only Philip Line’s 2007 *Kingship and State Formation in Sweden* is a work that specifically focuses on Scandinavian kingship. Aside from this, P. H. Sawyer’s 1982 *Kings and Vikings* and Forte, Oram, and Pederson’s 2005 *Viking Empires* do dedicate some sections to analyzing Scandinavian concepts of kingship, but it is not their primary focus. A fair amount of writing has been done focusing on the Vikings in England, such as D. M. Hadley’s 2006 *The Vikings in England: Settlement, Society and Culture*. As far as

¹⁸ Patrick Gleeson, "Constructing Kingship in Early Medieval Ireland: Power, Place and Ideology," *Medieval Archaeology*, (2012): 3.

looking at individual rulers as models of the ideal Scandinavian king, Cnut the Great seems to be given the lion's share of analysis, as he is frequently mentioned in the above sources and has recently received his own biography in Timothy Bolton's 2017 *Cnut the Great*. As mentioned previously, Olaf II of Norway will feature as Scandinavia's ideal king given his prominence in *Heimskringla*, but it is interesting and frustrating that there seems to be very little scholarship on him and he tends to only be mentioned briefly in these academic works.

In relation to Irish kingship, and to Brian Boru himself, there are issues and debates within the historiography that must be addressed. Perhaps the most prominent issue in the historiography of Irish kingship that will be discussed in this thesis are the grades or titles of the kings of Ireland. While the popular mind has a vision of various kings of Ireland swearing loyalty to one High King, the reality is much more complicated. Indeed, historians debate whether there ever was a High King, as the title does not appear in any law tracts. There have been mentions of a "sovereign of Ireland" or a "king of Ireland" in both Irish and non-Irish accounts, but the actual title and powers, or even the existence of, an overking of the whole of Ireland are still a matter of debate. This debate is perhaps only made more complex by Brian himself, with his usage of the unprecedented title of *Imperator Scottorum* and with some scholars arguing that Brian may have created or redefined the concept of a high king of Ireland, which was then projected into the past by contemporary and future poets and historians. For Brian himself, the historiography is similarly full of debates. Scholars such as Francis Byrne have argued that Brian was no different from his predecessors, differing only in that he showed that anyone with a strong enough army could claim to be king of Ireland. Others however, such as Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, have attempted to determine why Brian is remembered and have

concluded that, while it was in part due to the propagandistic efforts of Brian and his successors, it was also because he was a “king of real ability who succeeded, over the course of a long reign, in becoming Ireland’s most powerful ruler,” achieving unprecedented power for someone of his particular origins.¹⁹ Somewhat related to this, Brian’s popular depiction as ending Viking power in Ireland has also been a matter of debate. Most historians agree that the Vikings in Ireland had largely assimilated into Irish political and cultural society by the time of Brian’s rise to power, and more often than not were the vassals of Irish kings rather than their overlords. Brian himself utilized Viking soldiers and ships in his various campaigns. These uses and the possible Viking influence on Brian will be discussed in chapter three. However, Sean Duffy’s 2013 *Brian Boru and the Battle of Clontarf*, in addition to discussing Brian’s use of the Viking presence to assist in his rise to power, has also made the argument that Brian’s victory at the Battle of Clontarf may have prevented a larger Viking invasion of Ireland. Though opinions and analysis of Brian and his actions differ, it cannot be denied that Brian had immortalized himself, and continued to be remembered as a national symbol of Ireland and the model of an ideal king.

There have been brief comparisons and passing mentions in terms of Brian Boru and Irish kingship as compared to kings and kingship in the rest of Europe during this period. However, there has yet to be a substantial study of Brian and his kingship within the frame of not only the medieval Irish view of ideal kingship, but the overall medieval concept of kingship and their respective influences on one another. I will thus contribute to the historiography of both the study of Brian Boru and to the study of early medieval kingship through this collective analysis

¹⁹ Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, *Brian Boru: Ireland’s Greatest King?*, (Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 2007), 14.

of Brian and how he reflected the ideals of kingship that were developing within Ireland, Europe, and Scandinavia. I will demonstrate how Brian may have utilized aspects of all three regions discussed in order to develop a new or at the very least evolved concept of kingship within Ireland.

CHAPTER 2: BRIAN AND IRELAND

It is within the context of Ireland that we begin analysis of Brian's depiction as the ideal king. However, it is important to first establish what the specifically Irish ideal of kingship was. As such, information and analysis of Irish concepts or practices relating to each of the three categories discussed in the introductory chapter will be provided before Brian himself is discussed and analyzed within this context of ideal kingship. Thus, this section will begin with an analysis of any unique features of Ireland and its concept of kingship, as well as how Irish thought contributed to the wider development of early medieval European kingship.

As stated in the previous chapter, Ireland is often considered to be outside of mainstream European thought during the medieval period. Compared to the rest of Europe, Ireland's form of kingship has been viewed as "archaic," and closer in appearance to pre-Christian Scandinavia than to England or the Continent.²⁰ This "archaic" aspect of Irish kingship is largely due to the relatively unique experience that Ireland had with the coming of Christianity and the somewhat minimal impact it had on its pagan traditions. While Christianity often found ways to assimilate pagan traditions into its theology, Ireland seems to have experienced an assimilation that favored its pagan roots to a much greater degree than in other areas of Europe, with some scholars seeing the blending of Christian and pagan Irish theology into a "virtually new mythology."²¹ Even if some may see this claim as extreme, there is evidence that pagan traditions still remained firmly in place with the coming of Christianity, with sacred trees and wells being found on church sites

²⁰ Francis J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), 12.

²¹ Charles Doherty, "Kingship in Early Ireland", in *Tara: A Study of an Exceptional Kingship and Landscape*, ed. Edel Bhreathnach, (Maynooth: An Sagart 2005), 6.

and traditional agricultural rituals simply adding a saint such as Brigit.²² Scholars analyzing kingship in relation to this blending of pagan and Christian have concluded that, while Old Testament expressions of kingship were part of the Irish view of kings in a similar manner as they were elsewhere in Europe, the Irish concept was more firmly rooted in its pre-Christian Celtic past.²³ This can be seen in the continued depiction of the Irish king as possessing qualities of the pagan sacral king in contrast to the other kings of Europe who had begun to follow a more Isidorean concept of kingship in which God rather than the king possessed a supernatural quality.²⁴ This particular aspect of Irish kingship will be discussed throughout this chapter. Somewhat related to this is how the practice of the clergy anointing kings in oil in a similar manner to Biblical kings never truly caught on in Ireland as it did in the rest of Europe, with the only exception being perhaps the late eighth century king Aed the Ordained, and even then it is not known if he was ordained with oil or even by a member of the clergy.²⁵

Another aspect of Irish kingship that differed from the rest of Europe was its policy of succession, as Ireland did not engage in the practice of primogeniture, nor did it partition land amongst numerous male heirs.²⁶ While seniority was a factor for inheritance, it was but one factor of many, especially when it came to succession to the kingship. When it came to who would succeed as head of the family, it was the eldest, but the decision as to who would succeed as king more often depended on who was “nobler,” which translated to who was seen as more

²² Ibid, 7.

²³ Bart Jaski, "Early Medieval Irish kingship and the Old Testament," *Early Medieval Europe* 7, (November 1998): 343.

²⁴ Ralph O'Connor, *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel: Kingship and Narrative Artistry in a Medieval Irish Saga*, (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2013), 274.

²⁵ Ibid, 275.

²⁶ Bart Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship and Succession*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000, pp. 13.

capable and possessed the greatest number of clients among the potential heirs which included not only direct family members such as sons, but brothers, cousins, and uncles as well.²⁷ Irish saga-literature and political propaganda commonly reflects this tradition, as it will depict the elder brother being subverted by his more worthy younger sibling, who goes on to attain the kingship and become the founder of a ruling lineage.²⁸ This relates to the system of tanistry that some scholars have argued was practiced by Irish kings. In this system, a member of the king's family that was a *rigdamnai*, translated as "king-material," was chosen as tanist, or heir apparent, by the king and therefore chosen to succeed him.²⁹ As stated above, any close member of the family was considered *rigdamnai*, and thus could be made tanist. It was therefore the "noblest," or most powerful among them that was chosen as the tanist and successor. Other scholars have argued that, similar to the Franks and Anglo-Saxons, there was a process of election of kings by the nobility and clergy, but most of these claims come from sixteenth century sources and thus there is little evidence to support a defined procedure of election.³⁰

Additionally, the succession of the kingship of a *tuath*, a single kingdom, or any of the overkingdoms often followed the rule of alternation between clans or the branches of clans. An example of this can be found in the kingship of Ui Dunlainge and Leinster alternating for several generations between the three branches of Ui Dunchada, Ui Faelainand, and Ui Muiredaig, and this practice was articulated in the law tract *Corus Besgnai*.³¹ The Merovingian and Carolingian practice of evenly dividing the land between heirs was virtually non-existent, though this was

²⁷ Byrne, 35.

²⁸ Jaski, "Old Testament," 334-5.

²⁹ Byrne, 35-8.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 36.

³¹ Jaski, "Old Testament," 338.

more than likely out of practicality due to the small size of each *tuath*.³² The result of these rules of succession meant that Irish dynasties rarely lacked for heirs and were particularly long-lived when compared to their counterparts on the Continent.³³ While in these respects Ireland seems relatively untouched by European influence at the time, Ireland played a significant role in the development of kingship on the Continent.

The earliest example of what has been termed the “mirror for princes” genre of medieval literature is the seventh century Irish work *Audacht Moraind*, which contained advice and philosophy on what made a good king and what made a poor king, and which possibly served as the basis for future works focused on determining what a good king should be.³⁴ Additionally, a seventh century chapter on the *rex iniquus* within the Irish religious treatises *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* was quoted within a collection of canons compiled in the following century, as well as in a 775 letter to Charlemagne, and was cited at various Frankish synods and church councils during the ninth century.³⁵ Finally, Anton Scharer has argued that Asser during his writing of Alfred’s biography drew upon the ninth century text, *Liber de rectoribus Christianis*, which was authored by the Irishman Sedulius Scottus.³⁶ Ironically, the author of *Cogadh* would in turn look to Asser’s work when constructing Brian’s biography, though it can be argued that it was merely continuing a tradition that perhaps traces its origins back to Ireland. In this manner, Ireland served as a source of influence when it came to the European writing and thought on the subject of kingship.

³² Byrne, 36.

³³ Michael Richter, *Medieval Ireland: the Enduring Tradition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 33.

³⁴ Byrne, 24-25.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 25-26.

³⁶ Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, *Brian Boru: Ireland’s Greatest King?* (Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 2007), 132.

The King as Warrior

Ireland

Quite prominent in the Irish concept of kingship is the king's role and skills as a warrior. Sean Duffy has even stated that "Ireland's was a warrior society. Arguably, the Irish prided their kings more for their martial endeavor than for any other quality, believing that fortune favored the brave, perhaps even the reckless."³⁷ This can perhaps be traced back to the Celtic settlement of Ireland being done by a "military caste," which largely helped to shape the laws and traditions of Ireland.³⁸ Warfare was endemic between the kings of the various petty kingdoms, though this often only amounted to small raids with the purpose of securing hostages or cattle, which would in turn often signify suzerainty. The duties of kingship itself largely revolved around war. The tribal king, or the king of a single *tuath*, had few governmental duties aside from serving as a leader in war.³⁹ Even kings of several *tuath* or the overkings of provinces served primarily as war leaders rather than legislators. Warfare was perhaps even somewhat ceremonial, especially for overkings. It has been speculated that at least certain kingdoms within Ireland considered it a point of honor and a test of mettle for the king or overking to demonstrate his ability to collect tribute or hostages in person with an army at his back.⁴⁰ Similarly, there is evidence of the institution known as the *crech rig*, or royal foray, in which the king demonstrated his suitability for the office by engaging in a raid on enemy territory.⁴¹ Even the origin myth of the Irish people

³⁷ Sean Duffy, *Brian Boru and the Battle of Clontarf* (Dublin: Gill Books, 2013), 124.

³⁸ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, "Nationality and Kingship in Pre-Norman Ireland," *Historical Studies XI: Nationality and the Pursuit of National Independence, Papers Read Before the Conference Held at Trinity College, Dublin, 26–31 May 1975*, (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1978).

³⁹ Byrne, 23.

⁴⁰ Byrne, 45.

⁴¹ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *Ireland Before the Normans* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan LTD, 1972), 37.

reflects a martial tradition. The *Lebor Gabala Erenn* recounts how Ireland was invaded and settled by six successive races, each one battling and conquering the last for the right to rule Ireland. The Milesians, the last race to invade Ireland and the ancestors of the Irish, even fought the Irish pagan pantheon, the Tuatha De Danann, and drove them into the *sidhe*, or mounds which connect to the mythical Otherworld.⁴² The respect that the Irish had for warrior kings was such that it may have affected how their deaths were recorded, especially in the annals. The annals record noteworthy events, and death in battle was seen as much more remarkable and proper for a king than to die peacefully in his bed.⁴³

Those claiming to be King of Tara or High King of Ireland faced even greater pressure to prove themselves as capable warriors. As will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter, the title of high king did not appear in any law tracts, and thus was not subject to respect and adherence purely on the basis of law. Those claiming to be high king therefore were judged by their individual power and “measured by his fist.”⁴⁴ Interestingly, the process of conquest and subjugation of other kingdoms that defined the path of those who attempted to become high king had a term, not in the law tracts, but in the poems and stories that described this rising political reality: *ferann claidib*, sword land.⁴⁵

The eighth century legal text *Bretha Nemed Toisech* lists that among the requirements for a *Feis Temro*, or a Feast of Tara which acted as a sort of inauguration ceremony for certain high kings, were that the claimant gain the submission of a sufficient number of kings, either

⁴² David Willis McCullough, *Wars of the Irish Kings: A Thousand Years of Struggle from the Age of Myth to the Reign of Queen Elizabeth I* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002), 3.

⁴³ Edel Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World, A.D. 400-1000: Landscape, Kingship, and Religion* (Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2014), 232.

⁴⁴ Doherty, 12.

⁴⁵ Richter, 36.

through taking hostages or conquering their lands, and that he be skillful in military tactics.⁴⁶ Similarly, the ninth century text *Tecosca Cormaic*, or *Instructions of Cormac*, the legendary pseudo-historical king Cormac mac Airt lists “strength in waging war” as one of the requirements for becoming king, or perhaps specifically high king.⁴⁷ Another account of a legendary king, that of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* and its depiction of Conaire Mor, also contributes to the Irish association with the great king as the great warrior. Though the story is ultimately a warning and an example of what befalls a poor king, Conaire begins as the model of a good king, and among his positive qualities are that he “combines beauty with a warrior's frenzied ardour... His destructive power recalls and surpasses that of Mac Cécht, with a body-count of twelve hundred dead.”⁴⁸

Of course, it was not just traditional Irish belief or the remnants of pagan mythology that encouraged the praising of the king as warrior. As has been stated, the office of kingship in Ireland was firmly rooted in its pagan past, but this did not mean that it was immune to or ignored Christian concepts of kingship as they were introduced. There was the popular example of Biblical King David, who can be described as the premier warrior-king within Christian thought. The example of David, the warrior for God and defender of His Church, was present within the minds of medieval Irish kings, and his image was used more often as the Viking Age began.

It is perhaps during the Viking Age that Ireland's concept of the warrior king reached a new height. The Vikings offered a foreign, almost ever-present menace for the Irish to battle.

⁴⁶ Bhreathnach, 117-118.

⁴⁷ Jaski, “Old Testament,” 337-338.

⁴⁸ Ralph O'Connor, *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel: Kingship and Narrative Artistry in a Medieval Irish Saga* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2013), 197.

They offered a clear enemy and a justification for war that allowed Irish kings to demonstrate their prowess and to be renowned as defenders of the Irish. In some medieval Irish minds, this may have even been another race attempting to conquer Ireland in the same manner the Milesians conquered the Tuatha De Danann. Indeed, the Irish annals paint many of the conflicts over the course of two centuries in national or ethnic terms, with the “men of Ireland” or “the Irish” warring against “the Foreigners.” It was in this world that Brian was born, and he would exploit it to its full extent to depict himself as a warrior, a slayer of Foreigners, and a defender of the Irish.

Brian

Brian’s status as a warrior is best shown within the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, which is the only source that provides information on Brian prior to his appearance in the annals, which only begin to record his actions after he had succeeded his brother Mathgamhain. From the very beginning, Brian is depicted as a warrior from a line of warriors. His clan, the Dal Cais, are described thus: “To them belonged the lead in entering an enemy’s country, and the rere on returning.”⁴⁹ After first introducing Brian, the account describes how he and Mathgamhain took to the forests of Munster to wage a guerilla campaign against the Norse in their lands, writing “they dispersed themselves among the forests and woods of the three tribes that were there. They began to plunder and kill the foreigners immediately after that.”⁵⁰ The account continues that after Mathgamhain had agreed to a truce with the Vikings, Brian would not accept it and continued to attack from the forests, depicting him as a relentless warrior and a rugged soldier

⁴⁹ *Cogadh*, 53.

⁵⁰ *Cogadh*, 59.

who rested in “rude huts instead of encampments, in the woods and solitudes and deserts and caves of Ui Blait,” and how Brian killed the Vikings of Munster “in twos, and in threes, and in fives, and in scores, and in hundreds.”⁵¹ This guerilla campaign culminates in Brian’s followers dwindling to a handful, but even then, Brian is depicted as the superior to Mathgamhain, as Brian and the rest of the Dal Cais cry out for war against the Vikings, death being more honorable than submitting the land and inheritance their ancestors had fought for to foreigners. Mathgamhain consents, and the account moves to his victory over Ivar of Limerick at the Battle of Sulcoit. Interestingly, Mathgamhain asks Brian for a report of the battle, indicating that he was not present, or at the very least was commanding away from the front while Brian led the army.⁵² While *Cogadh* never insults Mathgamhain and does indeed praise him as a good king and as a hero, it is clear that Brian is meant to be the focus and his more active role in Sulcoit than his brother’s is meant to further heighten his reputation as a warrior as well as a commander. This is further exemplified in the poetic exchange between Mathgamhain and Brian following the battle, in which Mathgamhain exclaims “O Brian! Thou chief in the combat!”⁵³ Following this battle is Mathgamhain’s ascension as King of Munster, his murder, and Brian’s subsequent campaigns of revenge against the murderers. From here, Brian’s power is built on his ability to make war, culminating in a rule that can be characterized as a “military rather than an institutional hegemony.”⁵⁴

Much as Mathgamhain became King of Munster through his conquest of Cashel, so too did Brian become King of Munster through right of conquest, primarily through his defeat of

⁵¹ Ibid, 61.

⁵² Ibid, 77.

⁵³ Ibid, 81

⁵⁴ Duffy, *Battle of Clontarf*, 168.

Ivar of Limerick at the Battle of Inis Cathaig in 977 and later his defeat of Mael Muad at Belach Lechta in 978. It is through marching at the head of an army that he was able to take the hostages and the submissions of the kings of Leinster and Ossory and thus become king of Leth Mogha.⁵⁵ The Battle of Glenmama in 999 is Brian's next chief victory, and the description of the battle in *Cogadh* once more reflects the warrior society of Ireland. The battle is described as "furious, red, valiant, heroic, manly," depicting it as something great and honorable.⁵⁶ Following this, Brian continued to use his increased military strength to secure power. As will be discussed in greater detail later, the high kingship was attained by strength of arms rather than any tradition in law.

Brian demonstrated this when he came to Tara at the head of an army and demanded that Mael Sechnaill surrender hostages to him or to "give him battle" if he refused.⁵⁷ Mael Sechnaill could not answer Brian's challenge, and thus submitted to his authority. It was thus that Brian became High King through the strength of his army, though the disunity and disloyalty of his northern opponents did make his bid for power that much easier. Brian would take advantage of this disunity in his conquest of Leth Cuinn, invading the north over a period of ten years and engaging in combat only when the odds were in his favor. This campaign ended in 1011 when "A great hosting by Brian to Cenél Conaill both by land and sea, and Ua Maíl Doraid, king of Cenél Conaill, came with Brian to Cenn Corad, accepted a large stipend from him, and made complete submission to him."⁵⁸ Cenel Conaill was the last of the independent kingdoms to submit to Brian's authority and thus, through force of arms, Brian was now the king of all

⁵⁵ *Cogadh*, 107-109.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 111.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 117.

⁵⁸ *Annals of Inisfallen*, Sean Mac Airt, trans. (Cork: University College Cork CELT [Corpus of Electronic Texts] project, 2008), entry year 1011.

Ireland. Interestingly, this account also sheds light on a military tactic that Brian often employed to great effect, that being the deploying of land and naval forces in a pincer maneuver. Where Brian got the naval power for such a tactic will be discussed later in this section.

Though, at least according to *Cogadh*, Brian did not actively participate in the Battle of Clontarf, the account still depicts him as a capable warrior in his final battle. Upon being discovered by Brodar and another Viking who, in the chaos of the rout, had come upon Brian with the intention of slaying him, Brian did not fall without a fight. *Cogadh* states:

When Brian saw [Brodar] he gazed at him, and gave him a stroke with his sword, and cut off his left leg at the knee and his right leg at the foot. The foreigner dealt Brian a stroke which cleft his head utterly; and Brian killed the second man that was with Brodar, and they fell mutually by each other.⁵⁹

A fitting end for a warrior king who, despite his advanced age and being outnumbered, was able to kill his opponents before ultimately dying himself. Brian had lived as a great warrior, and now had died as a great warrior.

Another way in which Brian is depicted as the ideal warrior is in his comparison or association with certain individuals that represent war or the ideal warrior. Mathgamhain once refers to Brian as “Brian of Banba,” Banba being an Irish war goddess.⁶⁰ Of course, Banba is also one of the poetic names of Ireland, and thus he could have been referring to Brian as simply “Brian of Ireland,” though the presence of that particular name is still worthy of note. The Dal Cais, and by extension Brian, are also compared favorably in their martial prowess to Mil Espaine, the mythical progenitor of the Milesians who were the last race to conquer Ireland.⁶¹

⁵⁹ *Cogadh*, 203.

⁶⁰ *Cogadh*, 63.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 161.

Brian's favored son and chosen heir Murchad should also be included in this analysis, given his close association with his father. Murchad is portrayed as a superhuman warrior, and placed in the tradition of warriors such as Hector of Troy, Hercules, Samson, and Lugh Lamfada.⁶² The association with Lugh is especially interesting given his status as a member of the Tuatha De Danann, the Irish gods, as well as his role in liberating the Tuatha De Dannan for the domination of the foreign and monstrous Fomorians. This could be an attempt to associate Murchad, and Brian who is himself later compared to Lugh, with a warrior that led Ireland to victory in order to expel a foreign power that had seemingly dominated the land. Some historians have also suggested that he was more subtly compared to the Irish demi-god and the premier Irish warrior-hero Cu Chulainn.⁶³ The *Cattle Raid of Cooley*, which has its earliest versions in the seventh and eighth centuries, describes Cu Chulainn as entering battle rage in which "Malignant mists and spurts of fire... flickered red in the vaporous clouds that rose boiling above his head."⁶⁴ The description of Murchad as possessing "a boiling, terrible anger," and the later description of his final duel stating, "the sword of Murchadh at that time was inlaid with ornaments, and the inlaying that was in it melted with the excessive heat of the striking, and the burning sword cleft his hand," certainly seems to correlate.⁶⁵

Returning to Brian specifically, there are other comparisons that offer more insight into how Brian was depicted as the ideal warrior-king. Brian is noted in *Cogadh* as "one of the three best that was ever born in Erin," with the other two being Lugh Lamfada and Fionn mac

⁶² Ibid, 187.

⁶³ Ní Mhaonaigh, *Ireland's Greatest King?*, 71-72.

⁶⁴ Translation found in McCullough, *Wars of the Irish Kings*, 26.

⁶⁵ *Cogadh*, 189, 197.

Cumhaill.⁶⁶ The significance of the comparison to Lugh has already been discussed above, but the association with Fionn is fascinating. While not a god like Lugh or a demi-god like Cu Chulainn, Fionn was the leader of the Fianna, which was charged with repelling foreign invaders. Thus, Brian is associated with another protector of Ireland. Aside from these Irish comparisons, there is also the comparison to the great conquerors Octavian and Alexander the Great.⁶⁷ The reference to Octavian is especially interesting, possibly implying that Brian's war to become High King was similar to Octavian's war to become emperor, and resulted in an Irish equivalent to the *Pax Romana*. In the medieval Irish mind, his capacity as a warrior allowed him to conquer Ireland and by doing so cause it to prosper. In addition to being compared favorably to Octavian and Alexander, Brian is also compared to the Biblical King David. Brian's entire campaign against the Vikings can be interpreted as the campaign of a Davidic warrior-king. Ó Corráin's notes that *Cogadh* depicts the Vikings as "ferocious tyrants, plunderers of the church and enslavers of the Irish."⁶⁸ Brian can thus be seen as a Christian warrior akin to David simply through his wars against them. Aside from the specific mention and comparison to David, *Cogadh* gives a description of the Dal Cais, and by extension Brian, as "ever-victorious sons of Israel of Erin."⁶⁹ It serves to compare the struggle of Brian with the struggle of David, as both sought to overcome the enemies of God.

It is important to note that all of Brian's wars are depicted as being justified, that Brian was not a conqueror for the sake of conquest, but was a man with a cause that had to be fought for. Brian's campaign against Ivar, Donnubhan, and Mael Muad were wars of vengeance for the

⁶⁶ Ibid, 203.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 205.

⁶⁸ Ó Corráin, "Nationality and Kingship in Pre-Norman Ireland."

⁶⁹ Ibid, 161.

death of his brother Mathgamhain. His brother was King of Munster, and he had been treacherously slain, and thus those that committed the deed had to be brought to justice through war. Similarly, just as Mathgamhain supposedly deposed Mael Muad because he had become a vassal for the Vikings and was therefore unfit to rule, so too did Brian take the mantle of king of Munster from Mael Muad after he had not only proved himself a vassal to Foreigners, but also a cowardly murderer. Additionally, there have been interpretations that Brian's subsequent conquests after becoming King of Munster were not without do cause. Alice Stopford Green argued that "Munster could not stand long with a hostile Leinster in so threatening a position, and for mere security the king of Cashel was forced to become the king of Leth Moga," and later argued that a similar threat from Dublin forced him to pursue the high kingship for the sake of security.⁷⁰ While Green's analysis must be taken with caution due to the heavily nationalistic themes of her research, the concept of justifying a pre-emptive strike for the sake of security is not uncommon in medieval sources, being especially utilized in the biographies of Charlemagne. Thus, while this supposed threat and pre-emptive strike is not present within Irish sources, it is not improbable that the situation was viewed in such a manner. Another justification that could and likely was utilized for Brian's conquest of Leinster and Ossory was the ancient division of the north and south of Ireland, Leth Cuinn and Leth Mogha. As, supposedly, a descendent of Mug Nuadat and as King of Cashel, i.e. Munster, Brian may have felt that he was owed the submission of Leinster and Ossory by rights. His wars were thus simply claiming what was already his. His war against Mael Sechnaill and his conquest of Leth Cuinn are harder to justify, though it may be that, as the high kingship was tied to tradition more than legality, Brian felt that

⁷⁰ Alice Stopford Green, *History of the Irish State to 1014* (London: Macmillan, 1925), 368, 383.

he had as much a right as any to claim to be king of the whole of Ireland. He was also not the first king of Leth Mogha to do so. The eighth century king Cathal mac Finguine and the ninth century king Fedelmid mac Crimthainn both warred against Leth Cuinn and attempted to assert their sovereignty over all of Ireland.⁷¹ Brian, however, was the first to succeed. It could also have been justified that Brian must be the one to rule Ireland because he was the one who supposedly had struck the greatest blows against what the annals often record as the unrepentant enemy of Ireland: the Vikings.

Now it is specifically in the context of his war with the Vikings that we must examine Brian as the warrior. For it is the Vikings that serve as the primary antagonist in *Cogadh* and his war with them has immortalized him more than any other aspect of his reign. Regardless of whether Brian's campaigns, or especially the Battle of Clontarf, were truly wars of Irish against Viking or were wars between Irish kings with Viking auxiliaries, the fact remains that the medieval depictions of Brian vilify the Vikings and are used to both justify Brian's wars and extol his triumph as a warrior. As stated above, Ó Corráin pointed out how *Cogadh* portrays the Vikings as plunderers and vicious pagans, making them a foil to Brian. It is the Vikings who are presented as Brian's first enemies when he fights as a guerilla, and it is because a Viking is the lord of the King of Cashel that Brian helps Mathgamhain overthrow Mael Muad. Indeed, when Brian succeeds in becoming King of Munster, *Cogadh* claims that "the whole of Mumhain had been wrested by Brian from the foreigners."⁷² The account continues by offering Brian the praise of "Five and twenty battles...did Brian gain over [the Vikings], including the battle in which he

⁷¹ Duffy, *Battle of Clontarf*, 39-41.

⁷² *Cogadh*, 213.

himself was killed, besides sundry skirmishes.”⁷³ This is of course not counting the various campaigns against other Irish kings, which may have been to subtly increase his reputation as a warrior, or may have been to further portray him primarily as the enemy of the Vikings, who themselves are portrayed as enemies of the Irish, and thus make Brian look all the more the warrior-hero. Other accounts also seem to paint this as a struggle of Brian against the Vikings of Ireland. The *Annals of Ulster* state “A hosting by Maelsechlainn and Brian, when they took the pledges of the Foreigners for their submission to the Irish,” indicating that Brian, and Mael Sechnaill in this case, were fighting the Vikings on behalf of the Irish.⁷⁴ Notice also that the *Annals of Inisfallen* describe the Battle of Clontarf as “Great warfare between Brian and the foreigners of Áth Cliath, and Brian then brought a great muster of the men of Ireland to Áth Cliath. After that the foreigners of Áth Cliath gave battle to Brian,” indicating that this was primarily a battle of Irish against Vikings, despite the Irish king of Leinster also being among the rebels that battled Brian.⁷⁵ Interestingly, recent research has suggested that this depiction may have been more factual than has previously been accepted. Sean Duffy has suggested that, given the political climate of the time just before the Battle of Clontarf that included the Danish invasion of England that saw King Aethelred deposed, there was indeed significant fear of a large-scale Viking invasion to conquer Ireland.⁷⁶ The presence of powerful Vikings that included warriors from the Isle of Man and Jarl Sigurd of Orkney at Clontarf on the side of Sitric Silkenbeard of Dublin offer more credence to this fear of an attempt to conquer Ireland. In this

⁷³ Ibid, 117.

⁷⁴ *Annals of Ulster: A Chronicle of Irish Affairs from A.D. 431 to A.D. 1540*, Bartholomew MacCarthy, ed. (Dublin: A. Thom & co., 1887), 505.

⁷⁵ *Annals of Inisfallen*, entry year 1014.

⁷⁶ Duffy, *Battle of Clontarf*, 242-248.

sense, Brian could thus have been seen and later, perhaps accurately, depicted as standing victorious against a Viking host that attempted to do in Ireland what they had done in England. Regardless of the scale of a potential Viking threat, it remains that Brian has been depicted as a warrior who protected Ireland from foreign invaders. It is through Brian's struggle with the Vikings that he is portrayed as a warrior and a hero, not just to Munster or to Leth Mogha, but to all of Ireland.

Ironically, while the Vikings were perhaps Brian's enemy, they were also perhaps one of his greatest sources of military strength. Sean Duffy has pointed out that Brian's power and unprecedented success may have largely come from his exploitation of the Viking presence that was more common in Leth Mogha than in Leth Cuinn. He notes that the Viking towns of Limerick, Waterford, and later Dublin provided him with the naval capacity necessary to ferry his troops and employ pincer tactics as described above.⁷⁷ Brian could thus be credited as a king who most effectively exploited the Viking presence, cleverly using them both as a source of military manpower and as an enemy to be conquered. If nothing else, it once again speaks to his ability as a warrior to recognize the benefit of Viking military resources and to be able to use them to his benefit.

⁷⁷ Duffy, *Battle of Clontarf*, 110.

The King as Pious

Ireland

Christian

As was stated in the beginning of the chapter, Irish kingship was still very much in touch with its pagan past and aspects of its sacral kingship continued to linger. However, before that is discussed in greater detail, let attention be turned to more Christian acts of piety that were reflected in Irish kingship. It is possible that certain sagas or stories relating to ideal kingship had Christian influence. The warning tale of Conaire in *Togail* could have been partially inspired by the story of the Biblical king Saul, as both represent good kings that fell from grace through hubris and the breaking of sacred covenants, though the story itself is replete with pre-Christian themes.⁷⁸ Similarly, the Middle Irish *Tesmolad Cormaic*, *The Panegyric of Cormac*, compares the legendary king Cormac mac Airt with the biblical king Solomon and also states that in his reign Ireland became *tír tairrngiri*, “a Land of Promise’,” a phrase often used in medieval Ireland to translate the Biblical *terra repromissionis*, “Promised Land.”⁷⁹ Solomon, along with David, had of course become part of the concept of ideal kingship with the coming of Christianity, and the two were often used as models for kingship in Ireland.

⁷⁸ O'Connor, 266.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 286.

Pagan

As discussed previously, the coming of Christianity allowed for a blending of pagan and Christian traditions, and may have allowed for a blending on a much larger scale in Ireland than in other regions that allowed for pagan elements to remain. In addition to above mentions of sacred trees and wells remaining on Church grounds, there was also belief that tribal or dynastic ancestors that had long been dead could be saved, with there even being stories of Saint Patrick waking the dead in order to baptize them.⁸⁰ The depiction within *Lebor Gabala Erenn* of the Tuatha De Danann, the Irish gods, being driven to another world by the Milesians could also be seen as a method of preserving Irish supernatural beliefs while still upholding Christian doctrine. Even if these supernatural figures were not worshipped, they were still venerated and figured into many Irish accounts, as can be seen in the above mentions of figures such as Lugh and Cu Chulainn.

Analysis thus turns to the more pagan aspects of Irish kingship and its association with the divine. Analysis of early Irish kingship generally focuses on the sacral aspects of said kingship, with reference to the “ruler’s truth” that brings prosperity both in nature and society, the “taboos” that a king must not engage in, and the sacred marriage between the king and the goddess.⁸¹ The “ruler’s truth” and the prosperity that that brings is best seen in the tenth century saga *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. The *Togaill* reflects this concept in that “the king is presented as the central figure around whom the land finds order and meaning. When he goes astray, ‘Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.’”⁸² Conaire initially upholds the “ruler’s truth,” and Ireland

⁸⁰ Doherty, 9.

⁸¹ Jaski, “Old Testament,” 330.

⁸² O’Connor, 193.

was blessed with peace and plenty. However, when Conaire fails in his duties as king and dies as a result, Ireland is left in a state of interregnum, chaos and turmoil permeating the land. This concept of the “ruler’s truth” continued to thrive in Christian Irish writings on kingship. Returning to *Audacht Morainn*, it has been argued that the author, rather than attributing the prosperity of the territory at least partially to God, instead attributes it solely to the king, the “ruler’s truth.” Additionally, other texts such as the extract from *De duodecim abusivis* incorporated into the *Hibernensis* likewise does not mention God and presents the “king’s truth,” or “justice” as a power in its own right: “The king's justice is the people's peace, [...] the joy of men, the temperance of weather, the serenity of the sea, the fertility of the land, [...] abundance of crops, fecundity of trees.”⁸³ In short, Irish kings were seen to be the embodiment of the luck and prosperity of their people rather than the holder of a Christian office.⁸⁴ The king continued to function as a sacral mediator between the natural and the supernatural, and it was the king’s actions that prevented or facilitated natural disasters rather than God.

Somewhat related to the “ruler’s truth” were the “taboos” that the king must not break. The “taboos” of the king are subject to change depending on the source, and the coming of Christianity slightly altered these taboos, often relegating them to certain acts only being permissible on certain days.⁸⁵ These included very basic but still important requirements such as not judging falsely and treating guests with hospitality. However, more specific taboos have been placed on individual kings. For instance, Conaire Mor, in addition to breaking the taboo of judging falsely in order to spare his foster brother, was also given, and subsequently broke, the

⁸³ Ibid, 282.

⁸⁴ J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent: The Ford Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford in Hilary Term 1970* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 57.

⁸⁵ Bhreathnach, 129.

taboo of not allowing a single man or a single woman into his home.⁸⁶ The breaking of these taboos was a serious matter, and the fate of Conair at the end of *Togail* demonstrates this. Not only did Conaire meet a violent end, but Ireland itself was thrown into turmoil, supposedly undergoing several years of anarchy with no High King.⁸⁷ It was thus vital for Irish kings to not break these taboos, not only for his sake but for the sake of the land itself so that the cosmic order was maintained and disaster did not befall the land.

The sacred marriage is perhaps the most debated and least well-known of these three sacral aspects. In short, the king would marry a woman who is seen as the personification of the land or of the goddess of that land, whether it be an individual *tuath* or Ireland as a whole. The earliest Irish king-list, the *Baile Chuinn Cétchathaigh* from the early eighth century, has entries such as Cormac mac Airt shall be “a glorious man upon her,” and Flan Asail shall “betroth her by force of fists to hostages.”⁸⁸ The “her” that these entries refer to is Ireland itself, personified as the goddess, who is in turn often personified by a woman. A later example is recorded in the *Annals of Connacht*, in which the inauguration of Feidhlimidh son of Aodh O Conchobair is described to have included the symbolic marriage of the king with the territory at a *banfheis rigi*, a “wife-feast of kingship.”⁸⁹ This inauguration supposedly took place in 1310, and thus would indicate quite an endurance of the pre-Christian custom. However, it has also been noted that this description seems to indicate that they were consciously reviving an ancient custom, which may mean that it had died out for some time. At the very least, the Ui Neill tradition of the Feast of

⁸⁶ O’ Connor, 47.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 2.

⁸⁸ Bhreathnach, 111-112.

⁸⁹ Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship*, 64.

Tara, in which the Ui Neill kings claiming the high kingship wedded the goddess of Tara who also represented Ireland, survived well into the early Christian times.⁹⁰

Another aspect of pre-Christian Irish kingship is the role of the *fili*, or poet, and their almost magical association with the king. Scholars have argued that the *fili* were, in a sense, king-makers that were largely responsible for proclaiming who is king due to the power they were believed to have held. It was believed that a formula spoken aloud by a true poet during ceremonial occasions was, by its very nature, considered a “truth,” due to the perceived “quasi-magical virtue of the chanted formulaic utterance.” Indeed, *Do Gairm rí*g, “proclaiming of the king,” is a phrase often associated with inauguration, and a similar sanction allowed poetic satire to raise blisters upon one’s face. Someone justifiably satirized forfeited their esteem, and kings were not exempt.⁹¹ An example of this can be found in the Irish saga *Cath Maige Tuired*, in which the lack of hospitality shown by King Bres causes the *fili* Cairpre to proclaim that “Bres’ prosperity no longer exists,” which is proclaimed true and causes only blight for Bres and his territory.⁹² Not only is this an example of the sacral power of kingship and the mystical powers of the poets, it is also noteworthy to point out that Bres is a Fomorian, a mythical race that perhaps has its closest parallel in the *jotunns* of Scandinavian mythology, and which are often depicted as monstrous creatures that embody forces of destruction.

⁹⁰ Ó Corráin, *Ireland Before the Normans*, 32.

⁹¹ Patrick Gleeson, "Constructing Kingship in Early Medieval Ireland: Power, Place and Ideology," *Medieval Archaeology*, (2012): 18.

⁹² Bhreathnach, 224-225.

Brian

Christian

While Brian is perhaps most famous in his military endeavors, Brian's association with piety and the supernatural may be the most fascinating aspect of him.⁹³ Perhaps the first true depiction of piety comes indirectly through Brian's brother Mathgamhain. Mathgamhain is murdered, despite being under the protection of the Church, and "when Mathgamhain saw the naked sword about to strike him, having the Gospel of Barri on his breast to protect him, he threw it towards the people of Columb, son of Ciaragan, with the intent that the blood should not touch it," thus showing the king as one who reveres the Gospel, the word of God.⁹⁴ By extension, those that perpetrated the murder are seen as blasphemers, and Brian's vengeance is depicted as all the more necessary in order to bring them to justice. Another indirect example comes in the form of Brian's son Murchad, specifically his death. Despite being disemboweled in his final duel, *Cogadh* makes it clear that Murchad did not die until he had made confession and taken communion, indicating a significant reverence of piety in the form of Christian last rites.⁹⁵

Perhaps Brian's most famous act of piety was during his visit to Armagh in 1005, during which he left an offering of twenty ounces of gold on the altar. It was also during this visit that Brian proclaimed Armagh as the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland. Mael Suthain, advisor and confessor of Brian, wrote in the *Book of Armagh*, "Saint Patrick, while going to heaven, ordered

⁹³ There are references throughout *Cogadh* of Brian's building of churches, which indicate piety and dedication to the Church. However, as there seems to be little in the way of traditional Irish concepts of kingship relating to the king as the builder of churches, this particular analysis will not be discussed in this chapter. See Chapter Two for this discussion.

⁹⁴ *Cogadh*, 91.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 197.

that the entire fruit of his labour, so of baptism, so of legal suits as of alms, to be conveyed to the apostolic city which in Scottic is called Ardd Macha.”⁹⁶ Armagh had been claiming this position for some time before the birth of Brian, and the importance of Armagh can perhaps be seen in a tenth century map of the world where Armagh is the only named location in Ireland.⁹⁷ As such, it is possible that Brian did this out of pure piety and simply affirmed the rights of Armagh as he believed it to be the seat of the heirs of Saint Patrick. However, it is just as likely that he did this for political advantage, gaining the support of Armagh, and the Church as a whole, in his bid for kingship. Armagh was located in the north, the area of Ireland where Brian’s rule was most contested, and Brian’s support would mean that Armagh would be less likely to act as a haven for his enemies. It also was symbolic of Brian’s power in that he, a king from Munster in the South, was the benefactor of a northern church. The annals also note Brian’s other acts of veneration for the Church. For instance, the *Annals of Ulster* note that in 1011 there was “A hosting by Brian into Magh-Muirtheimne; and he gave full freedom to Patrick’s churches on that hosting.”⁹⁸

The Battle of Clontarf is one of the few military engagements that Brian is not recorded to have actively participated in. It could have well been due to his advanced age, Brian being in his late eighties at the time. However, it has also been suggested that Brian refused to fight because it was a holy day, Good Friday, and even only sent troops because an engagement was forced upon him.⁹⁹ Alternatively, though possibly related, it could also have been that Brian

⁹⁶ Translated in Denis Casey and Bernard Meehan, "Manuscripts: Brian Boru and the Book of Armagh," *History Ireland* 22 (2014): 28.

⁹⁷ Green, 388.

⁹⁸ *Annals of Ulster*, 527.

⁹⁹ Green, 407.

obeyed the taboo that a king should not fight on Friday, Friday being a dedicated day of fast for the king.¹⁰⁰ Regardless of his reasons, during the Battle of Clontarf Brian is depicted as constantly praying and singing psalms, and after every fifty prayers and fifty psalms, he would inquire as to the progress of the battle.¹⁰¹ This not only shows Brian as a pious man, but one that believes that prayer would lead to victory. It may even suggest a priestly function of the king, a belief that the king is a direct line to God in much the same way as a priest or bishop. This is perhaps made more evident when the Vikings who come upon him at first do not believe that he is the king, but that he is “‘a noble priest.’”¹⁰² As Brian believed that his death grew near, he set about making preparations that included his will and what he would bequeath to the Church in a show of piety. Among Brian’s will was “twelve score cows to be given to the Comharba of Patrick, and the Society of Ard-Macha; and its own proper dues to Cill da Lua, and the churches of Mumhain.”¹⁰³ The giving of these gifts was meant to show Brian’s generosity and support towards the Church, and to portray him as a pious king dedicated to the service of God. Following his death, his requests were honored and the Church, especially Armagh, paid him great respect. The *Annals of the Four Masters* notes “Maelmuire and his clergy waked the bodies with great honour and veneration; and they were interred at Ard-Macha in a new tomb.”¹⁰⁴ The fact that Brian was entombed in Armagh is particularly impressive given his Munster origins, and his burial there could have been an attempt at a show of veneration for what he claimed as the seat of the heirs of Patrick.

¹⁰⁰ Bhreathnach, 129.

¹⁰¹ *Cogadh*, 197-199.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 203.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 201.

¹⁰⁴ *Annals of the Four Masters*, Myriam Priour and Stephen Beechinor, ed. (Cork: University College Cork CELT [Corpus of Electronic Texts] project, 2008), entry year 1013.

Pagan

Brian is not only depicted as representing elements of Christian piety, but also aspects of Ireland's pagan roots. The presence of supernatural spirits is highlighted several times within *Cogadh*, primarily just prior to the Battle of Clontarf. There is an exchange within *Cogadh* between Murchad and a warrior named Dunlang O'Hartugan, in which both reveal that they were offered a heavenly life and worldly gifts "in hills and in fairy mansions," likely referencing the *sidhe* and the blissful Otherworld of the Tuatha De Dannan.¹⁰⁵ However, both refuse these gifts, as it would mean abandoning their king, their oaths, and their country. This could also be seen as a refusal to fall back into true paganism, where God is abandoned for earthly pleasures and worship of the old Irish gods is resumed. Brian himself also claims to have had his own encounter with a mythical Irish spirit. *Cogadh* writes: "For, Aibhell, of Craig Liath, came to me last night,' said [Brian], 'and she told me that I should be killed this day; and she said to me that the first of my sons I should see this day would be he who should succeed me in the sovereignty; and that is Donnchadh.'"¹⁰⁶ Aibhell is the guardian banshee, or family spirit, of the royal house of Munster. Thus, Brian is still shown to have connected himself with the supernatural aspects of kingship that were distinctly Irish and pre-Christian in character.

The pre-Christian concept of the "ruler's truth" is also quite present in depictions of Brian. Brian's reign is very much depicted as a time of peace and prosperity for Ireland, where the land and its people flourished as a result of Brian's just rule. Following Brian's death at Clontarf, the author of *Cogadh* writes: "Erinn fell by the death of Brian... Two-thirds of the

¹⁰⁵ *Cogadh*, 171-173.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 201.

dignity and valour of the champions of Erin fled on hearing this news. Two-thirds of the purity and devotion of the clerics of Erin vanished at that news. Their modesty and chastity departed from the women of Erin at the same news... Two-thirds of their milk also departed from quadrupeds at that news.”¹⁰⁷ Thus Brian is presented as representing the prosperity and fortune of his land and people. Brian still possess the traits of sacral kingship that tie the person of the king to the supernatural, and whose wrongful death can lead to disaster both natural and spiritual.

Examination of the individuals that Brian is likened to further demonstrate how he was depicted as a pious king in both a Christian and pagan manner. His association with the god Lugh and the mythical hero Fionn has already been discussed sufficiently to demonstrate an association with the divine or the magical, but his association with Banba may require ruther elaboration. As stated previously, Brian was called “Brian of Banba” by Mathgamhain, which could have referred to the Irish war goddess, though it could have simply been a poetic name for Ireland itself. However, as was shown in the section discussing the Irish kingship practice of marriage to the goddess, this could have possibly been meant to illustrate Brian’s marriage to the divine manifestation of Ireland. In his panegyric near the end of *Cogadh*, among those he is compared favorably to are the Biblical figures of Solomon, David, and Moses.¹⁰⁸ Solomon and David, as has been said, were looked to as the ideal Biblical kings and were often used as models for good kingship. The relation with David in particular was meant to denote piety and faithfulness to God, especially in the context of warring against perceived heathens and enemies of God. The comparison to Moses is also quite significant, given that Moses is most known for

¹⁰⁷ *Cogadh*, 205-207.

¹⁰⁸ *Cogadh*, 205.

leading his people out of slavery. Brian is thus depicted as a chosen leader who was tasked by God to end the slavery of his people. Later, in the thirteenth century, the poet Muiredach Albanach O Dalaigh composed the work “To you alone, Brian of Ireland,” in which he placed Brian in the same category as St. Patrick when it came to serving Ireland and its churches in its time of need.¹⁰⁹ That Brian would be placed side by side with one of Ireland’s three most venerated saints speaks volumes of his perceived piety and service to God and His churches. But there is one other individual that Brian has been compared with that I believe has not received significant analysis and which may be unique among Irish kings: Jesus Christ.

The connection is first made blatantly clear in the O Dalaigh poem mentioned above:

On Good Friday Brian was killed
Defending the hostaged Irish
As Christ without sin was killed
Defending the children of Adam.¹¹⁰

While, as I said, this is the first blatant comparison, it may not be the first depiction of Brian associating him with Christ. The image of a king who died on Good Friday to save his people must surely have sounded familiar, even if the source was subtle enough to not outright say Christ’s name. All of the sources on Brian say that the day of the Battle of Clontarf and of his death was Good Friday, and thus there is no reason to doubt that it indeed occurred on that day. However, whether this was truly the date of the battle and Brian’s death is not important at this point. What is important is that Good Friday is the day Brian is written to have died, a noble

¹⁰⁹ Duffy, *Battle of Clontarf*, 266-267.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 268.

king who died for the sake of his kingdom. I believe that this was a conscious effort to depict Brian as a Christ-like figure, an effort that I believe has no parallel in Irish history.

The King as Stateman

Ireland

Analysis now turns to the role of Irish kings in the formation and enforcement of the law, as patrons of building and of the spread of knowledge, the traditions and expectations of their office, and the titles that they held or even created. In short, I will now analyze the king as statesman, or how the king is depicted and idealized in terms of internal affairs. Examination of these aspects and comparison of Brian's rule in this context will be the final examination of this chapter.¹¹¹

The King as Lawmaker or Keeper

This section will analyze the role of Irish kings in the formation and enforcement of law. The problem is that there are relatively few sources, and these are often not very detailed. There are no texts, for example, that tell us in detail the legal powers of the king, the order of the royal household, or the legal functions of the king's officers.¹¹² The king did not make the law or enforce public or private justice, and he was not the landowner of the tribal territories over which he ruled. However, a king could act as a judge or arbitrator if matters could not be settled

¹¹¹ The aspects of the ideal king as a patron of construction projects and the spread of knowledge and learning is surprisingly absent in medieval Irish writing, especially when compared to writings of kingship in the rest of Europe. Brian, however, is depicted quite prominently as possessing both of these aspects. This particular view of the ideal king will be looked at in more detail in Chapter Two.

¹¹² Ó Corráin, "Nationality and Kingship in Pre-Norman Ireland"

otherwise, but this mainly concerned individual or temporary cases which did not “directly lead to the establishment of legal precedence or new legislation.”¹¹³ Regardless, this is an example of the ideal that a king must be a just and wise judge. There is an almost supernatural association with the king’s ability as a judge and the prosperity of Ireland, which is related to the concept of the “ruler’s truth” and the presence of “taboos” that were discussed above. The story of Conaire Mor highlights this, as the requirement to be a just judge is important enough that to judge falsely would be breaking a sacred taboo of kingship. Conaire judged falsely when he placed his foster-brothers above his duties as king and arbiter, becoming the first in a series of sacred duties and oaths that Conaire fails. Conaire’s breaking of this taboo is ultimately what sets him, and the whole of Ireland, on the path to destruction and tragedy. His story thus further highlights the importance placed on a king to be a wise and just arbiter of the law. The king was also responsible for presiding over the *oenach*, or popular assembly, though again this did not mean that he took a leading role in creating legislation.¹¹⁴ It was in external affairs that the king had the most power, especially in his role as a leader in war but also as a maker of peace, as a negotiator between tribes, and as a coordinator of relationships of submission or superiority to other kings.¹¹⁵

The King as Generous

There were also certain traditional expectations of a king, such as that he must be a generous lord. The act of paying a stipend to the king that submitted to another king’s authority,

¹¹³ Jaski, “Old Testament,” 331.

¹¹⁴ Byrne, 23.

¹¹⁵ Ó Corráin, *Ireland Before the Normans*, 28.

as well as the inauguration practice of the “royal foray” that included gifting the booty that was taken exemplify this.¹¹⁶ This relates to the ideal of the king as a great warrior, as a king that is successful in war is better able to gain spoils and booty to distribute generously among his followers. The *Tecosca Cormaic* also has the legendary High King Cormac mac Airt list “generosity” as a necessary trait for rulers.¹¹⁷ This ideal of the generous king can also be seen in the story of *Togaill*, Conaire's generosity being the quality which initially won him the kingship as *rí óc eslobar*, “a young, generous king.”¹¹⁸

The King's Title

Perhaps the most debated aspect of Irish kingship is the nature of kingship of the whole of Ireland itself. As stated in the previous chapter, any title of high king of Ireland or king of Ireland is absent from any law tracts, and the term itself is relatively young and often added later when annals are compiled or to give a certain venerated ancestor more prominence. An example of proclaiming a past ruler to have been king of Ireland was Admonan, who called the sixth century king Diarmait mac Cerbaill as *totius Scotiae regnatorem a deo ordinatum* “the ruler of all Ireland, ordained by God.”¹¹⁹ The high kingship did not truly begin to appear until the Ui Neill began to grow in power in the seventh century, concentrating the line of succession and making efforts to associate their rule of Tara with the rule of Ireland as a whole. This culminated in the ninth century during the reign of Mael Sechnaill I, the first person to turn the concept of the high kingship of Ireland into a reality, largely due to his military might that included the first

¹¹⁶ Ó Corráin, *Ireland Before the Normans*, 37.

¹¹⁷ Jaski, “Old Testament,” 337-8.

¹¹⁸ O' Connor, 198.

¹¹⁹ Ó Corráin, “Nationality and Kingship in Pre-Norman Ireland.”

recorded submission of a king of Munster to the King of Tara.¹²⁰ From that time until the time of Brian Boru, the kingship of Tara had become monopolized by the Ui Neill and associated with a claim of rulership over all Ireland.¹²¹ The King of Tara and the High King of Ireland became mutually interchangeable terms. Despite this, the high kingship was never stable, and any man that was successful in asserting himself as High King was only successful in that he had established a personal rather than an institutional rule.¹²² After his death, his successors had to face the difficult task of attempting to rebuild that hegemony, the high kingship never being secure or stable. Francis Byrne perhaps put it best when he described the High Kings as having “reigned but did not rule.”¹²³

Brian

The King as Lawmaker or Keeper

While it has been pointed out that kings did not have a role in the formation of laws, Ó Corráin points out that Donnchad mac Brian and his successor Tairdelbach Ua Brian constructed legislation for issues such as theft and “feats of arms,” with the annals concerning Donnchad writing in reference to *cáin mór oc mc Briain* “a great law by the son of Brian.”¹²⁴ This could potentially mean that Brian played a leading role in paving the way for an increased power for the Irish kings, allowing them to in at least some sense create laws. It may even be possible that Brian accomplished this during his own reign, as Alice Stopford Green had pointed to the Book

¹²⁰ Ó Corráin, *Ireland Before the Normans*, 21.

¹²¹ Duffy, *Battle of Clontarf*, 15.

¹²² *Ibid*, 44.

¹²³ Byrne, 270.

¹²⁴ Ó Corráin, “Nationality and Kingship in Pre-Norman Ireland.”

of Rights detailing new policies supposedly enacted by Brian, including the establishment of tribute from three kingdoms, including Limerick and the kingdom Donnabhan had ruled, and the increase of tribute from those kingdoms that had traditionally been compelled.¹²⁵ However, this could have simply been part of or a slight extension of the external power of negotiating the details of submission that were discussed above.

Even if Brian did not take an active role in the formation of laws, he did display the requirement that a king should enforce the law and judge wisely. Brian's description as a just judge is related to the Irish concept of the "king's truth," where Ireland's prosperity directly depended on the king's ability to be a wise and just arbiter of the law. As shown by the story of Conaire, Ireland and its king can suffer dire consequences if the king does not judge justly. But Brian, according to the various sources and descriptions of him, did not make Conaire's mistake. *Cogadh* describes how Brian "fined and imprisoned the perpetrators of murders, trespass, robbery and war. He hanged, and killed, and destroyed the robber and thieves, and plunderer of Erin."¹²⁶ Through his ability as a just judge, Ireland supposedly prospered. It is described how his reign, "at length became bright, placid, happy, peaceful, prosperous, wealthy, rich, festive, giving of banquets, laying of foundation," and it is later stated that "the peace of Erin was proclaimed by [Brian], both of churches and people; so that peace throughout all Erin was made in his time."¹²⁷ *Cogadh* further states that Brian, "continued in this way prosperously, peaceful, giving banquets, hospitable, just-judging," and creating a society so safe that a woman could travel from one end of Ireland to the other carry a gold ring and not be accosted.¹²⁸ It was only

¹²⁵ Green, 369.

¹²⁶ *Cogadh*, 137-9.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 101, 137.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 141.

his death that caused a seemingly supernatural catastrophe in Ireland, once again linking him the concept of the “ruler’s truth” and the direct link of the king to the kingdom’s prosperity. While Conaire served as an example of a poor king, as one who was not a just judge, Brian served as an example of an ideal king, a wise arbiter of the law. Brian thus represented the concept of the ideal king as one who was a keeper of law and arbiter of justice, in addition to representing the Irish concept of the “ruler’s truth,” in which Ireland prospered because its king judged justly.

The King as Generous

Brian is also depicted as having very much adhered to the ideal of the king as a generous lord, giving gifts freely to his supporters and even supposedly to the common people. His success in war certainly aided him in his efforts to reward his soldiers with booty. *Cogadh* states: “Men of learning and historians say that there was not a yeoman among the men of Mumhain on that expedition who had not received enough to furnish his house with gold and silver, and cloth of colour, and all kinds of property in like manner.”¹²⁹ *Cogadh* also writes that as Brian traveled and provisioned himself at various towns, “Brian bestowed twelve hundred horses upon them, besides gold, and silver, and clothing. For no purveyor of any of their towns departed from Brian without receiving a horse or some other gift that deserved his thanks.”¹³⁰ Brian is thus presented as a generous lord, one that rewards his followers and subjects and thus proves himself worthy of ruling.

¹²⁹ *Cogadh*, 117.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 137.

The King's Title

Brian's rise from second son of a relatively small tribal kingdom to the King of Munster, then of Leth Mogha, and finally High King represents an astounding rise to power. Indeed, few if any other Irish king can be described as having risen so far and so quickly. However, this did in some ways put Brian at odds with the traditions of the titles he held, and he even went as far as to create new titles of his own. The fact that Brian, a member of the Dal Cais, seized the kingship of Munster from the Eoganachta can certainly be seen as breaking tradition, seizing the kingship from the ruling dynasty. However, Brian and his supporters made it *seem* as though he respected the tradition by providing the Dal Cais with a falsified pedigree that connected them to the ruling Munster dynasty through the creation of Cormac Cas, the supposed younger brother of the Eoganachta's founding ancestor Eogan Mor. This gave the Dal Cais a hereditary right to the kingship of Munster, a right that they would at last claim under Mathgamhain and later Brian.

This claim to dynastic right also served to aid him in subjugating the rest of Leth Mogha, as his supposed relation to the Eoganachta gave him the right to rule as king of Ireland's southern half. This itself can also be related to Brian's first "rebellion" against Mael Sechnaill. Brian's agreement with Mael Sechnaill in 998, which ended the fighting between the two rulers and established each as the sovereign ruler of half of Ireland, could be seen as Brian's attempt to restore an ancient tradition of kingship that had faltered, that being the equal division of Ireland between two equal rulers as it had been during the time of Conn of the Hundred Battles and Mug Nuadat.

In terms of the high kingship, Brian did break with the tradition of the title for the simple fact that he was a king of Munster, not an Ui Neill. The Ui Neill had seized the monopoly of the

high kingship since the seventh century, but had done so in a manner that was no different from Brian. The only difference was that they had done it first and had held it until Brian arrived. However, the mere fact that Brian severed the centuries-long link between the title of King of Tara and King of Ireland is a noteworthy example of going against what was considered tradition.¹³¹ In spite of this, the mere fact that he is recognized as king of Ireland, even by northern-based annals and chronicles that tended to extol his rivals name him as king of Ireland, even while those same chronicles fail to mention powerful Minster kings of the past that could not gain the same recognition as Brian.¹³² Despite Brian arguably breaking tradition to become High King, it seems that Brian did not do anything that could be considered breaking the traditional powers or authority of the high kingship itself. Green argued that “there is no hint that Brian ever transgressed in any event whatever the traditional limits of the High King’s rights.”¹³³ However, what those traditional rights were is still a matter of debate, especially since, again, the high kingship did not have any basis in law and therefore there is little to go on when it come to arguments on what the traditional powers of the High Kings were. However, Green does provide an example in the form of Mael Sechnaill and the kingship of Tara.¹³⁴ As noted above, Brian’s reign saw for the very first time the titles of King of Tara and King of Ireland being separate and belonging to two different people. However, Green argued that the fact that Brian allowed Mael Sechnaill to continue to rule as King of Tara, and that Brian himself did not claim to be King of Tara or to rule from Tara represented a respect for the tradition of the Ui Neill ruling Tara and a respect for the ruling families in general. It is possible that Brian had a greater impact on the title

¹³¹ Duffy, 135.

¹³² Ní Mhaonaigh, *Ireland’s Greatest King?*, 48.

¹³³ Green, 391.

¹³⁴ Green, 396.

of High King itself than any king before him, as he turned it into a prize worthy of struggle, and he contributed greatly to “advancing the idea of a kingship of the whole island,” an idea which contemporary poets and scholars elaborated and projected into the immemorial past.¹³⁵ It was because of Brian’s achievement and reign as High King that the theory of the High King was largely created, which in turn influenced the concept of kingship and the struggles of future Irish kings.

Perhaps Brian’s greatest break with tradition in terms of the position and power of the High King was the new title he introduced during his reign, that of *Imperator Scotorum*. The title appears in the *Book of Armagh*, which states “I have written, Calvus Perennis [Mael Suthain], in the sight of Brian, *imperator scotorum*.”¹³⁶ This title is unique in Irish history, and while some scholars have argued that it was simply the closest Latin translation of *Ard ri Erenn*, High King of Ireland, others have pointed out that this is simply not true and that the title was almost entirely different and signified a development in Irish kingship.¹³⁷ Close examination of the title itself does reveal some potential effort to increase the power of the Irish ruler. *Scoti* is the Latin translation of the Irish *Goidil*, or Gaels. *Goidil* denoted the entire Gaelic-speaking world, including Scotland, the Western Isles, and the Isle of Man. Had Brian been attempting to depict himself as ruler of specifically Ireland and its people, he could have used *Hibernici* instead of *Scoti*.¹³⁸ This could indicate imperial ambitions for Brian that were far beyond his predecessors. However, even if this is not the case, the choice of wording still denotes an imperial power over

¹³⁵ Ó Corráin, *Ireland Before the Normans*, 125.

¹³⁶ Translated in Denis Casey and Bernard Meehan, “Manuscripts: Brian Boru and the Book of Armagh,” 28.

¹³⁷ Aubrey Gwynn, “Brian in Armagh (1005),” *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society* 9 (1978), 44.

¹³⁸ Duffy, 144.

a race of people, and the title is still unique to Brian. The annals seem to be in at least partial compliance with the title, as the *Annals of Ulster* name Brian “arch-king of the Gaedhil of Ireland, and of the Foreigners and Britons, the Augustus of all the north-west of Europe.”¹³⁹ In addition to the claiming of kingship over, not just the peoples of Ireland, but of the inhabitants of certain Welsh and Scottish territories, the inclusion of Augustus is a distinctly imperial title. Even the *Annals of the Four Masters*, which are the most biased against Brian, refer to him as “monarch of Ireland, who was the Augustus of all the West of Europe.”¹⁴⁰ This demonstrates that the title had at least some acceptance among the people of Ireland. The roots and potential influences of this title will be more fully explained in the following chapter.

¹³⁹ *Annals of Ulster*, 533.

¹⁴⁰ *Annals of the Four Masters*, entry year 1013.

CHAPTER 3: BRIAN AND EUROPE

Now that Brian had been examined within the context of ideal kingship in Ireland, analysis now turns to concepts of ideal kingship within Western Europe and how Brian fit the mold. As stated in the introduction, the two kings that will receive the majority of analysis in comparison to Brian will be Charlemagne and Alfred the Great, as they are the most prominent within the historiography of early medieval kingship and arguably contributed the most to its development and evolution. As such, other kings within Frankia and Anglo-Saxon England will be discussed and examined within this chapter. This will include the Merovingian predecessors of Charlemagne and his successors such as Charles the Bald and Charles the Fat. A few of Alfred's Anglo-Saxon predecessors will be also briefly mentioned, along with his grandson Aethelstan and his descendent Aethelred the Unready. However, a few other kings from a few other regions will be discussed to give a wider view of the development of ideals of kingship within continental Europe, most notably Visigothic Spain.

Much like the previous chapter, this chapter will examine the king in his role as a warrior or leader in war, his piety and possibly his sacrality, and his role as a statesman and place in internal affairs. Analysis within each of these sections will begin with the "miscellaneous" regions of Europe and their kings before moving on to Frankia and then Anglo-Saxon England. From there, the predecessors of the two kings will be analyzed before Charlemagne and Alfred themselves are discussed, followed by a few of their more relevant successors. Brian himself will then be analyzed at the end of each of these sections, demonstrating how he did or did not fit within the concept of the ideal king as expressed through these European rulers. This will also

show how Brian was influenced by certain aspects of European kingship and incorporated them into his own kingship, demonstrating an evolving concept of kingship during this period.

King as Warrior

Europe

Thus, I begin with an analysis of the aspect of kingship that seems both the most common and the most vital during this period: the king as warrior. The ideal of the king as a warrior is a concept that is arguably older than any other perceived requirement of a good ruler, and transcends period, region, and religion. As stated in the previous chapter, Ireland was an especially war-like society. Similarly, the kingdoms of Europe placed a high emphasis on the king's prowess in war. This is largely due to the combined influence of the Roman and Germanic barbarian origins of these kingdoms. John Wallace-Hadrill pointed this out when he stated that the early barbarian kingdoms of the fourth and fifth centuries were a result of the Roman desire for Germanic settlements of soldiers ruled by warrior-kings who possessed *potestas*, or temporal power that could be used to command on behalf of or negotiate with Roman officials.¹⁴¹ Indeed, scholars of early medieval kingship such as Ian Wood have stated that leadership in war was the royal activity that barbarian kings were most occupied with.¹⁴²

Christian thought also promoted the ideal of a king who is a successful warrior, often from the simple substitute of fighting in the name of Christ rather than Woden. St. Augustine and the archbishop of Reims Hincmar, for example, both preached a belief that it was a king's duty

¹⁴¹ Wallace-Hadrill, 20.

¹⁴² P. H. Sawyer and Ian Wood, *Early Medieval Kingship* (Leeds: University of Leeds Press, 1977), 4.

to protect through force both society and the Church from external attack, as this was a duty given to the king by God Himself.¹⁴³ Isidore of Seville was another Church writer who contributed greatly to advancing ideas of kingship, specifically with his development of the kingship of Visigothic Spain. It was Isidore and other members of the clergy that guided the kingship from that of a simple leader of a war band to a more Davidic kingship that fought for the Christian cause. While no king ever met his particular expectations, he did credit the Visigothic kings Sisebut and Suinthila with at least attempting or coming close, and he listed being a great warrior among their accomplishments.¹⁴⁴

There was also a combination of these three influences, Roman, Germanic, and Christian, in the concept of the place of war and its association with peace and prosperity. In the Roman view, peace was born of victory in war. For the Germanic barbarian culture, war was a manifestation of vitality and thus central to the continued prosperity of the kingdom. And in Christian thought, peace was God's gift that was won through battling His enemies.¹⁴⁵ All three of these influences melded together in the developing thought of ideal kingship in Europe to form the ideal that war was a means to peace and prosperity, and thus it was the king's duty to be a great warrior and to successfully lead his kingdom in war.

¹⁴³ Janet L. Nelson, "The Church's Military Service in the Ninth Century: A Contemporary Comparative View?," *Studies In Church History* 20 (January 1, 1983): 27-8.

¹⁴⁴ Jace T. Crouch, "Isidore of Seville and the Evolution of Kingship in Visigothic Spain," *Mediterranean Studies* 4 (1994): 19.

¹⁴⁵ Wallace-Hadrill, 31.

Frankia

Of the Merovingian predecessors of Charlemagne, only Clovis will be given analysis, and even then very brief analysis. Clovis himself represents the two chief influences of European kings, Roman and Germanic origins. He was a provincial governor in the late Roman tradition with imperial recognition from the Emperor Anastasius, but he was also a barbarian king. It is largely through Clovis's wars of conquest that the kingdom of the Franks emerged, his systematic elimination of any and all rival kings in the region leading to the creation of a polity and a kingly authority that was both Roman and Germanic.¹⁴⁶ Clovis is thus significant largely due to his skills as a leader in war.

Charlemagne could be argued as representing the medieval European ideal of kingship as a whole, his name and deeds being so often evoked and emulated. It is thus fitting that depictions of him represent his chief quality as a successful leader in war. Granted, this could be due the first thirty years of Charlemagne's reign being an almost constant series of wars and military campaigns. However, the constant presence of war also allowed for greater opportunities for Charlemagne to prove that he met this chief quality of kingship, and gave his biographies plenty of opportunities to depict him as the warrior-king.

In his *Life of Charlemagne*, Einhard makes two interesting decisions when beginning to tell the story of Charlemagne. First, he begins by detailing how Charlemagne's father Pippin attained the kingship, while also mentioning Charlemagne's grandfather Charles Martel and his great victories over the invading "Saracens."¹⁴⁷ This may have been done to demonstrate

¹⁴⁶ Sawyer and Wood, 25.

¹⁴⁷ Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, trans. David Ganz, in *Two Lives of Charlemagne* (London; New York: Penguin, 2008), 19.

Charlemagne's pedigree and show him as being from a line of great warriors who defended Frankia and Christianity. Second, Einhard blatantly states that he intends to skip Charlemagne's childhood and early life and begins with the wars that he waged, specifically starting with the war in Aquitaine.¹⁴⁸ It speaks to the importance of the king being a warrior that Charlemagne, arguably the culmination of the ideal king, is presented in his biography as a warrior first and foremost.

After discussing Charlemagne's victory in Aquitaine, Einhard then moves on to discuss his war with the Lombards, in which he restored the lands taken by the Lombards to the Church, and then the war in Saxony against the supposedly violent and barbarous pagans.¹⁴⁹ The biography then goes on to mention the invasion of Spain, the conquest of the Bretons, the Bavarian war, the war with the Slavs, and the war with the Avars. With the exception of the invasion of Spain and the subsequent tragedy at Roncevaux Pass, each of these wars serves to praise Charlemagne and depict him as successfully leading the kingdom to victory in war. Interestingly, Einhard makes it a point to mention that Charlemagne himself was rarely on the battlefield. During his discussion of the Saxon war he writes: "In this war...Charles met the enemy in battle no more than twice, once at a mountain called Osning in the place called Detmold, and again at the River Hase...His enemies were destroyed and conquered in these two battles, so much so that they no longer dared to anger the king or resist his coming..."¹⁵⁰ Similarly, Einhard writes that during the war with the Avars, "[Charlemagne] himself led one expedition into Pannonia..."¹⁵¹ This is echoed in Notker the Stammerer's later biography, *The*

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 21.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 22-3.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 24.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 27.

Deeds of Charlemagne, in which he writes “In the Saxon war, in which [Charlemagne] was engaged in person for some considerable time,” and later notes how Charlemagne “was often angry because he was urged to go out and fight against foreign nations, when one of his nobles might have accomplished this task.”¹⁵² It seems that Frankish ideals of kingship were more concerned with the king’s ability to command and delegate successfully in war, rather than lead or fight personally. Though the king was still praised highly when he did fight, what ultimately mattered was success in war rather than personal martial prowess. Thus, Charlemagne is not often depicted as one who leads on the battlefield or participates in the fighting himself. When he does appear on the field, the author of course makes it a point to praise his prowess, but it is a rare occurrence. It seems that, at least in Einhard’s and Notker’s depiction of him, Charlemagne was more of a commander, at least in the sense of a moral and wise leader, than a warrior.¹⁵³

It is also interesting to note the reasons depictions of Charlemagne provide for the wars that he waged. The war with the Lombards was waged because they had attacked and taken land from the Church. The Saxon war was waged because the Saxons were barbarous pagans that threatened Christianity. Charlemagne conquered the Bretons because they had broken their oaths and did not obey his commands. The Bavarian war began because of the “pride and weakness of Duke Tassilo,” who disobeyed and provoked Charlemagne.¹⁵⁴ The war against the Slavs began because the Slavs attacked the Abrodites, who were allies of the Franks.¹⁵⁵ Each of these wars is presented as necessary, and Charlemagne himself is never seen as the aggressor. It is always a

¹⁵² Notker the Stammerer, *The Deeds of Charlemagne*, trans. David Granz, in *Two Lives of Charlemagne* (London; New York: Penguin, 2008), 87, 103.

¹⁵³ Robert Morrissey, *Charlemagne & France: a Thousand Years of Mythology* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 25.

¹⁵⁴ Einhard, 27.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 27.

hostile enemy, or a betrayal, or a duty to protect that causes Charlemagne to go to war. His wars are justified and he is seen as a protector and a just ruler through the wars he wages.

Such was Charlemagne's legacy as a warrior that his successors were expected to continue that legacy and emulate their venerated predecessor. Charles the Bald attempted to live up to this legacy during his reign, warring against rebellious nobles and his own siblings in addition to the ever-increasing Viking raids. He did not always achieve victory, but he was active and victorious enough to at least be considered a good king and not reviled by any contemporary or future writers. The same could not be said for Charles the Fat. According to Simon MacLean, participation in warfare had been central to the Carolingian Dynasty, and that warfare in the king's name was often a unifying factor within the Carolingian Empire.¹⁵⁶ Unfortunately, Charles the Fat was either too incompetent or too unlucky to maintain this unity that depended on victory, not just warfare itself. Charles's repeated failures against the Viking attacks, especially at Asselt in 882 and Paris in 886, largely led to a loss of confidence among his contemporaries and to his deposition not long after, thus ending the Carolingian Dynasty.¹⁵⁷ Future authors, scholars, and historians were no more kind to him, and Charles the Fat was often seen as a failure whose incompetence and laziness led to the downfall of the dynasty from which such a great ruler as Charlemagne had come. Charles the Fat thus represents the figure of the bad king, largely because of his failures as a leader in war.

¹⁵⁶ Simon Maclean, *Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century: Charles the Fat and the End of the Carolingian Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 18.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

Anglo-Saxon

Before looking at Alfred, other notable Anglo-Saxon kings should be examined in order to give a more complete views of kingship in this region and how the king as warrior ideal was reflected. Egbert, the King of Wessex from 802 to 839, was able to conquer Mercia and everything south of the Humber, and thereby gain the submission of the people of Kent, Surrey, Sussex, Essex, and East Anglia. For this accomplishment, the chroniclers declared Egbert as the eighth king who was “Bretwalda.”¹⁵⁸ While the term “Bretwalda” and how that relates to ideal kingship will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter, what is most important in this episode is that Egbert was recognized and praised because of his conquests, his skills as a leader in war.

Alfred the Great can in many ways be seen as the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of Charlemagne, and this includes his depiction as a great warrior who led his kingdom successfully during times of conflict. There is perhaps even greater emphasis on Alfred’s qualities as a warrior given the precarious situation that Wessex and England as a whole was in during the Viking invasions, during which the Danelaw ruled over the majority of the island. Alfred’s reign was thus often one of defense and reconquest, and often against a singular enemy in the form of the Vikings. Unlike Charlemagne, Alfred’s biography, *Life of King Alfred* by Asser, does begin with his birth and early years. The first mention of Alfred’s military capabilities comes some pages later when his older brother Aethelred was still king. It mentions an engagements between the forces of Aethelred and Alfred and the forces of the Vikings at a location called Ashdown,

¹⁵⁸ Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser’s Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England; New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Penguin Books, 1988), 11.

where “Alfred and his men reached the battlefield sooner and in better order” than Aethelred, after which he “deployed the Christian forces against the hostile armies...acting courageously, like a wild boar,” despite the fact that his brother had not yet arrived due to his insistence on completing Mass.¹⁵⁹ Alfred is thus seen as the architect of this victory, more so than his brother who did not show up to the battlefield. Indeed, Asser notes that Alfred could have overthrown his brother with the consent of the kingdom, largely because he was a “great warrior and victorious in virtually all battles.”¹⁶⁰ Not only does this praise Alfred as one who possess more kingly qualities than his brother, it reveals the seemingly most important quality that a good king must possess is that he be a great and victorious warrior. Granted, Asser still credits Aethelred’s piety and appeal to God with greatly aiding in the victory, but Alfred is still shown as the military commander. It is also important to note that, according to Richard Abels, the battle at Ashdown is the only instance in which it is explicitly stated that Alfred personally led troops into battle.¹⁶¹ The rest of Asser’s account does not explicitly mention Alfred engaging directly in battle, but neither does it say he did not. Unlike Einhard who clearly pointed out that Charlemagne only personally campaigned three times, or Notker who stated that Charlemagne would prefer to send one of his nobles to command rather than go himself, Asser does not make mention of how often or how inclined Alfred was to go on campaign himself.

After succeeding his brother as king, Alfred continued to war against the Vikings. This led to perhaps the most famous episode of Alfred’s campaign, that being his flight from

¹⁵⁹ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, in *Alfred the Great: Asser’s Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, 79.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 81.

¹⁶¹ Richard Philip Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship, and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), 136.

Chippenham in 878 and his guerilla war against the Viking occupiers. Asser writes how Alfred led “a restless life in great distress amid the woody and marshy places of Somerset. He had nothing to live on except what he could forage by frequent raids...from the Vikings...”¹⁶² Asser continues to detail how Alfred continued to move his forces, attacking the Vikings when he could before gaining a significant victory at Edington that saw the unconditional surrender and expulsion of the Vikings in Wessex.¹⁶³ This victory is especially important to Alfred’s depiction as the ideal warrior-king, as it shows him overcoming being at a disadvantage to achieve a victory that not only freed Wessex from Viking rule, but also resulted in a victory that supposedly had no precedent and left the Vikings in shock and dismay to the point of surrendering as many hostages as Alfred requested while getting none in return. This is perhaps the pinnacle of Alfred’s depiction of a great warrior, and aside from a few other raids and victories, there is little else by Asser that depicts him as a warrior.

In addition to depicting Alfred as a successful war leader, there are sources that also portray him as an innovator in terms of military organization and tactics. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, for instance, details how Alfred divided his army in two, so that “always half its men were at home, half out on service, except for those men that were to garrison the burhs.”¹⁶⁴ Later, the *Chronicle* mentions how Alfred ordered “longships” to be built in order to counter the Vikings, and that these ships “were built neither on the Frisian nor on the Danish pattern, but as it seemed to Alfred that they would be most useful,” indicating that these ships were entirely

¹⁶² Asser, 83.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, 84-5.

¹⁶⁴ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in *Alfred the Great: Asser’s Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, 115.

Alfred's design.¹⁶⁵ These innovations were made alongside the general construction of new fortifications across Alfred's domain.

Returning again to the justification of wars the kings wage, we see in Asser's *Life* that Alfred's conflict with the Vikings was just and necessary. The presence of the Vikings and the Danelaw was seen as a foreign invasion and the wars of Alfred were meant to take back what rightfully belonged to the Anglo-Saxons. But not only were they foreign invaders and conquerors, Asser also makes a point to label them as "pagans," while he labels the Anglo-Saxon forces as "Christians." Asser thus makes this a holy war to defend Christianity from marauding pagans.

Let analysis now be turned to a few of Alfred's successors, Aethelstan and Aethelred the Unready. Though less well known and less celebrated than his grandfather, Aethelstan nevertheless reflects the aspects of the ideal king, including the king as warrior, and is celebrated as one of the great Anglo-Saxon kings because of this. From the time when he was old enough to take up arms, he assisted his uncle and later his aunt in the conquest of Mercia from the Danes, and overall assisted his father Edward in the campaigns against the Danelaw and driving out the Viking rulers and settlers from England.¹⁶⁶ This early experience would greatly aid in his ascension to the throne, especially in Mercia where he was most active militarily in the defense and expansion of Anglo-Saxon territory. His military success would only continue into his reign as king. For instance, he led a successful combined land and sea expedition to Scotland in 934, returning to Wessex with the son of the Scottish king as his hostage.¹⁶⁷ This successful use of a

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 118-9

¹⁶⁶ Sarah Foot, *Aethelstan: the First King of England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 12.

¹⁶⁷ Foot, 23.

combined land and sea campaign will be discussed further in the section discussing Brian. But perhaps Aethelstan's greatest victory, and the one for which he is most well-known, is his victory at the Battle of Brunanburh in 937. Brunanburh was where Aethelstan faced a Scots-Norse alliance, and most information on the battle itself comes from a praise-poem within the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The poem depicts this not only as the greatest victory achieved in England since the Angles and Saxons first conquered the Britons, but also as a battle in which England was saved from the conquest of the Norse and Scots.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, this victory was depicted as a victory for all Anglo-Saxons, not just a West Saxon one. Aethelstan is thus seen as the pinnacle of the ideal king, being likened to the ancient Bretwalda kings that earned praise from their conquest of the Britons, and shown as a savior that defended the English people through his skills as a warrior.

Aethelred the Unready is another story. Whereas Alfred and Aethelstan are shown as the ideal kings of Anglo-Saxon England, Aethelred is depicted as the model of a poor king, largely due to his failings in war. Aethelred's epithet of "unready" refers to his inability to resist the efforts of the Danish king Cnut to conquer England, and his unpopularity and poor reputation has endured into the modern era.¹⁶⁹ Granted, this epithet could also indicate him as one who was "poorly advised," and thus cannot have been entirely to blame. Regardless, his reputation and memory have still suffered and his is associated with a failed, if not a poor, king. Aethelred can thus be compared with Charles the Fat as a king who has been depicted as having caused the

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 170-1

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 228.

downfall of his kingdom through his military weakness. Ironically, both also found themselves in this situation due to Viking attacks.

The final aspect of European thought on the ideal warrior-king deals with a very specific Christian concept of ideal kingship. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Christian thoughts on kingship and the developing ideals of kingship often include allusions and comparisons to King David, the premier warrior-king within Christian thought. This is part of the larger influence of the Church in the office of kingship in the early medieval period.¹⁷⁰ Church thinkers largely used examples of kings from the Bible, primarily David, in their views concerning the ideal king and what it should be. And when it comes to war, the medieval mind did not shirk from representing David as the brutal warrior. This can be seen in the illustrations of the Stuttgart Psalter, most likely composed in the ninth century at St. Denis. The Psalter depicts an armed King David in scenes of bloodshed, war, and hand-to-hand combat. Even Christ himself, when he is depicted, is illustrated as a warrior-king.¹⁷¹ However, the king is not a warrior simply for the sake of war. Specifically, it is the king that defends the Church and furthers the Christian faith. For instance, the *Annales Regni Francorum* note how Charlemagne destroyed the pagan idol of the Saxons after he had defeated them, and how he defended Rome and the Church from the Lombards.¹⁷² Similarly, Asser's depiction of Alfred has him personally baptizing the pagan Viking king Guthrum after Alfred had defeated him in battle.¹⁷³ According to Richard Abels, Alfred was more directly related to David in depictions that describe him as being akin to the "fugitive David" during his flight and guerilla campaign in 877 and 878, emerging from the wilderness to

¹⁷⁰ Wallace-Hadrill, 47.

¹⁷¹ Wallace-Hadrill, 130.

¹⁷² Morrissey, 15-6.

¹⁷³ Asser, 84-5.

defeat the enemies of God just as David did for the Israelites.¹⁷⁴ Alfred himself also relates himself to David in his translation of the Psalter, or “David’s Psalm” noting in his introduction of the translation that the Psalm is a lament to the king’s enemies both internal and external.¹⁷⁵

Brian

I now turn to analyzing Brian in his capacity as the ideal warrior-king of European thought. The previous chapter was full of evidence of Brian being depicted as a great warrior and successful conqueror. Thus, I will try not to repeat too much of what was said previously. I will attempt to limit any evidence and analysis to only those that directly relate to the depictions of Charlemagne, Alfred, and other European kings.

Much like Einhard’s *Life of Charlemagne*, the author of *Cogadh* begins discussing Brian indirectly by discussing his lineage. The author first discusses the clan of the Dal Cais itself, noting that “To them belonged the lead in entering an enemy’s country, and the rere on returning.”¹⁷⁶ Later, the account lists Mug Nuadat as one of Brian’s ancestors, Mug being the one who divided Ireland in half with Conn of the Hundred Battles due to his prowess as a warrior. Again, like with Einhard’s biography of Charlemagne, this is meant to show Brian’s lineage as one filled with great warriors and that he continues that tradition. Also, like Einhard’s biography, the story of Brian does not begin with his birth, childhood, or early years, instead diving straight into his early military campaigns. It is in this section of *Cogadh* that Brian can now be related to and compared to the story of Alfred. The beginning of Brian’s story depicts him as waging a

¹⁷⁴ Abels, 219.

¹⁷⁵ Alfred’s translation of the Psalter, in in *Alfred the Great: Asser’s Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, 153.

¹⁷⁶ *Cogadh*, 55.

guerilla war against the Vikings that occupy his native Munster. *Cogadh* reads: “Brian...and with him the young champions of the Dal Cais, went back again into the forests and woods and deserts of north Mumhain. He began then immediately to plunder and kill, and retaliate on the foreigners.”¹⁷⁷ Brian thus shares a similarity with Alfred in that both underwent a period of engaging in guerilla warfare with an occupying enemy, which was utilized to depict them as tireless warriors that refused to surrender and continued to fight despite overwhelming odds. Another similarity to Alfred comes in the description of the Battle of Sulcoit. *Cogadh* depicts Brian’s brother Mathgamhain, who was king, inquiring about the progress of the battle to Brian, implying that it was Brian that was leading the army in battle rather than Mathgamhain. This can be seen as relating to Asser’s description of the battle at Ashdown, where it is Alfred rather than his brother the king that leads his army to victory. Also, like Asser’s description of Ashdown, *Cogadh* does not necessarily use this to shame Mathgamhain, but does still highlight the more kingly aspects of his brother who acted as a leader in war. A final similarity to Alfred can be seen in Brian’s attempt to counter, or acquire, the naval superiority of his Viking enemies. The previous section discussed how Alfred ordered the construction of his own types of longships to counter the Vikings, which had mixed results. Brian, and many other Irish kings, also constructed their own ships on the Viking model. Brian, however, went further and acquired the ships, and the ship-makers, themselves.¹⁷⁸ There seems to be no evidence that Alfred utilized the Viking presence to his advantage, at least not in the biographies and chronicles. Conversely, Brian was able to gain the submission of the Viking settlements of Leth Mogha, which made up

¹⁷⁷ *Cogadh*, 61.

¹⁷⁸ Sean Duffy, *Brian Boru and the Battle of Clontarf* (Dublin: Gill Books, 2013), 128.

the majority of Viking settlements in Ireland as a whole, and was able to control the warriors and the fleets of those settlements, thereby adding to his already impressive military might and demonstrating his abilities as a shrewd tactician.¹⁷⁹

Unlike Charlemagne and even Alfred, Brian seems to be depicted as having taken a more active role in the commanding and fighting of battles, seemingly leading in person more often than the two European kings. *Cogadh* writes how “Five and twenty battles... did Brian gain over [the Vikings], including the battle in which he himself was killed, besides sundry skirmishes.”¹⁸⁰ This seems to indicate a more active and personal role by Brian in terms of combat and war leadership. This could be due to the high emphasis on personal prowess that was more prevalent in Ireland than other areas of Europe. Indeed, Sean Duffy has pointed out that the first instance contemporary sources explicitly stated that Brian did *not* actively lead troops was at Cenel Conaill in 1011, and even then they note that he traveled north and gave command of the troops to his sons.¹⁸¹ This greater emphasis on Brian as one possessing personal martial prowess can also be seen in the death of Brian, as *Cogadh* depicts him dying a warrior’s death.¹⁸² Brian is thus depicted as dying in battle, slaying his enemies as he dies, rather than dying peacefully like Charlemagne or Alfred. Brian is depicted as a more active warrior, one concerned with his own personal prowess and abilities as a commander than as one who delegates command to others and leads purely by wisdom or morality alone.

¹⁷⁹ Brian’s utilization of the Viking presence in Ireland to strengthen himself will be more fully explored in Chapter 3.

¹⁸⁰ *Cogadh*, 117.

¹⁸¹ Duffy, *Battle of Clontarf*, 163.

¹⁸² See “Chapter 1: Brian and Ireland,” Section 1: The King as Warrior

Ironically, it is not Charlemagne or Alfred in which Brian finds his closest European parallel of the king as warrior, but with Aethelstan. Much like Aethelstan, Brian effectively utilized the strategy of a pincer movement that combined a land army and a navy. The *Annals of Inisfallen* write: “A great hosting by Brian to Cenél Conaill both by land and sea...”¹⁸³ But most significant in its similarity to Aethelstan is the depiction of the Battle of Clontarf, specifically its similarity to the Battle of Brunanburh. Both of these battles were depicted as struggles in which the fate of a nation were at stake, and both serve to promote a national narrative, be it English or Irish. Both are battles in which defeat would likely mean domination by Scandinavian invaders, and both are won by kings that are depicted as saviors of their people because of their heroic victory. The only difference seems to be that Brian died despite his victory. This can also be seen as a contrast to Aethelred the Unready, as Brian succeeded where Aethelred failed. Both seemingly faced the threat of Viking conquest, but Brian did not falter and upheld his obligation as a king to be a great warrior, unlike Aethelred. Regardless, Clontarf holds a similar significance to Brunanburh in that both praise a king that won a vital battle for the future of the kingdom because of their skills as a warrior.

An important similarity, perhaps even theme, relating to the ideal king as warrior is the enemy they fought and their role in the depiction of the ideal warrior-king. The enemy, whether internal or external, was seen as an imminent and dangerous threat to the king and his kingdom. The ideal warrior-king is thus portrayed, not as an aggressor, but as a defender that must fight to preserve his kingdom and people. The enemies of the king give him justification to wage war. If by consequence he should receive more territory and power, then that was a beneficial side-

¹⁸³*Annals of Inisfallen*, entry year 1011.

effect.¹⁸⁴ This can clearly be seen in the depictions of both Charlemagne and Alfred. Very similar to Alfred, the Vikings were Brian's antagonist, his foil, something for him to stand against. Ó Corráin explains that, "In *Cogad* the Vikings are brutal and ferocious tyrants, plunderers of the church and enslavers of the Irish—in all they are the foils to the glory of Dál Cais and the triumph of Brian."¹⁸⁵ In other words, the Vikings were cast as the villain that the brave warrior, Brian, must defeat. In a similar manner as Charlemagne, Brian is not portrayed as the aggressor, but as the man who believes that either he, his kin, or his kingdom are threatened or attacked, and thus he must wage war for the sake of himself and his people. This is reflected within *Cogadh* itself when Brian refuses a truce with the Vikings because "it was not natural or hereditary to them to submit to insults or contempt...it was no honor to their courage to abandon, without battle or conflicts, to dark foreigners, and black grim Gentiles, the inheritance which their fathers and grandfathers had defended in battles and conflicts against the chiefs of the Gaedhil."¹⁸⁶ This not only depicts Brian as a brave warrior who would never accept defeat, but also one who fights for a reason, that being that he sees a threat to the honor and land of his people and must fight to protect it.

This concept of the enemy giving justification can later be seen in Brian's subsequent invasions of Limerick and Munster, as Ivar of Limerick and King Mael Muad of Munster had been involved in the dishonorable murder of Brian's brother Mathgamhain. *Cogadh* states this clearly: "He then made an invading, defying, rapid, subjugating, ruthless, untiring war, in which he fully avenged his brother."¹⁸⁷ This slight against his honor and family, not to mention the

¹⁸⁴ Morrissey, 18.

¹⁸⁵ Donnchadh Ó Corráin. "Nationality and Kingship in Pre-Norman Ireland."

¹⁸⁶ *Cogadh*, 69.

¹⁸⁷ *Cogadh*, 101.

blatant murder and betrayal of oaths, was used as justification for his wars that culminated with the conquest of the entirety of Munster by 978. Alice Stopford Green concurs with the theme of the king having justification for his wars, stating that his later conquest of Leinster was done out of concern for the close proximity of the hostile kingdom to Munster, and that his pursuit of the high-kingship was primarily motivated by the threat of Dublin that could only, to Brian's mind, be checked by a united Ireland.¹⁸⁸ The Battle of Glenmama in 999 and later the Battle of Clontarf in 1014 have also been depicted as justified, both times being the result of the Leinster and Dublin kings breaking their oaths and rebelling against Brian, thus forcing him to fight in order to punish them and restore order. The Battle of Clontarf had the additional justification of a threat of foreign invasion or dominance, giving Brian even more cause and subsequently more praise for fighting.

An interesting perception of the use of war to bring about peace and stability can also be seen within *Cogadh* and its depiction of Brian. For instance, the account states how "His reign, at the beginning of his reign, was one full of battles, wars, combats, plundering, ravaging, unquiet. But at its conclusion, this reign at length became bright, placid, happy, peaceful, prosperous, wealthy, rich, festive, giving of banquets, laying of foundation."¹⁸⁹ This shows that Brian's efforts and success in war ultimately led to peace and prosperity for Ireland. This can also be seen in the account's description of how Brian became High King. The account describes how, in 1002, "A great expedition of all Leth Mogha, both Gaill and Gaedhil, was afterwards made by Brian, until they reached Temhair [Tara] of the kings; and messengers were sent from them to

¹⁸⁸ Alice Stopford Green, *History of the Irish State to 1014* (London: Macmillan, 1925), 368, 383.

¹⁸⁹ *Cogadh*, 101.

Maelsechlainn...king of Temhair, and they demanded hostages from him, or battle should he refuse hostages.”¹⁹⁰ This ultimately resulted in Maelsechlainn’s submission to Brian without battle, in which the granting of gifts and hostages officially recognized Brian as High King of Ireland. Brian’s ascension, his breaking of the Ui Neill monopoly on the kingship of Ireland and his subsequent pacification of the north, was entirely facilitated by military force and coercion. As Brian is remembered as “one of the three best that was ever born in Erin, and one of the three men who most caused Erin to prosper,” and is compared to the great conquerors Octavian and Alexander the Great, this suggests that his rise to power through military force was not seen as a negative aspect and was indeed a trait that allowed him to represent and be remembered as an ideal king.¹⁹¹ The reference to Octavian is especially interesting, possibly implying that Brian’s war to become High King was similar to Octavian’s war to become emperor, and resulted in an Irish equivalent to the *Pax Romana*. In the medieval Irish mind, his capacity as a warrior allowed him to conquer Ireland and by doing so cause it to prosper. It also represents a similar influence of the Roman past and institutions that shaped kingship across Europe.

Brian also shares with Charlemagne and Alfred the distinction of being specifically a Christian warrior-king, likened to David as a defender of the Church and Christianity. As stated in the previous chapter, Brian’s entire campaign against the Vikings can be interpreted as the campaign of a Davidic warrior-king. The Vikings of *Cogadh* are described as pagans and enemies of the Church, and thus Brian can be seen as a Christian warrior akin to David simply through his wars against them. Brian’s time as a guerilla fighter can be especially likened to

¹⁹⁰ *Cogadh*, 119.

¹⁹¹ *Cogadh*, 205.

Alfred's "fugitive David" mentioned above. Aside from the specific mention and comparison to David, *Cogadh* gives a description of the Dal Cais, and by extension Brian, as "ever-victorious sons of Israel of Erinn."¹⁹² This depiction is, of course, Biblical in its influence, and serves to depict Brian and his clan in the vein of David and the Israelites. It also serves to compare the struggle of Brian with the struggle of David, as both sought to overcome the enemies of God and expel them from their home. This comparison to Israel will be elaborated further in the following section.

The King as Pious

Europe

Before discussing Charlemagne and Alfred in their role as meeting the ideal of the pious king, one other area of Europe should be pointed out and discussed briefly for its role in the formation of this ideal. The kings of Visigothic Spain were largely reliant on the Church for support of their power, such that the cooperation of bishops with the king "had no parallel in western Europe."¹⁹³ As stated above, the Church used this reliance and cooperation to transform the Visigothic kings into rulers more akin to Biblical figures such as David. Isidore of Seville was especially prevalent in this formation, and events such as the Fourth Council of Toledo in 633 attempted to strengthen the monarchy by establishing an official ideology that fit with Church beliefs.¹⁹⁴ This, coupled with Isidore's own thoughts that a king ruled by divine right and were subject only to God, culminated in canon law protecting the monarchy and promoting the

¹⁹² *Cogadh*, pp. 161.

¹⁹³ Crouch, 9

¹⁹⁴ Crouch, 10.

sanctity of kingship.¹⁹⁵ This is a clear instance of establishing Old Testament, Davidic form of kingship in which the ideal king supports the Church and obeys God.

Frankia

Christian

Charlemagne himself is of course famous for being crowned Emperor by the Pope on Christmas in the year 800, and this in part could suggest his piety due to acknowledging the Pope's right to give him power. More concrete examples of Charlemagne being depicted as pious can be seen in accounts such as the poem "Karolus Magnus et Leo papa," in which he is once more described in the vein of David, though in this instance David's piety rather than his skills as a warrior are being invoked to compare favorably with Charlemagne.¹⁹⁶ Additionally, Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* depicts Charlemagne as a man whose every action is seemingly affected by his piety and reverence to God. The Saxon war, for instance, ended with Charlemagne victorious and demanding that the Saxons adopt the Christian faith.¹⁹⁷ This could once more be seen as an aspect of Davidic kingship, where the king defends and spreads the faith of God. Einhard even directly states that Charlemagne's piety was the reason he constructed the basilica at Aachen. It is also the reason why he "supplied the church with such an abundance of sacred vessels made of gold and silver," and even gave the treasury of the church of St. Peter in Rome "a vast wealth of gold, silver and precious stones."¹⁹⁸ His generosity to the Church

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 22.

¹⁹⁶ Morrissey, pp. 9.

¹⁹⁷ Einhard, 24.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 36-7.

extended to his own will, in which he provided that one-third of his wealth would be given to the Church.¹⁹⁹

Perhaps the most important aspect of Charlemagne and his depictions of piety is his association with Israel and his attempting to portray the Frankish people as the new chosen people of God. Russell Chamberlain fully voices Charlemagne's ambition when he states that "The deeply religious Charlemagne, through his relationship with a succession of six popes, strove to advance the ideal of a theocratic state governed by a priest and a king in harmony," thus pointing out that Charlemagne was ultimately constructing a "New Israel."²⁰⁰ This could in some ways relate to the role of the pious king being closer to God and more likely to have his prayers answered, and thus he is at the top of a theocratic society. The twelfth century *Book of Emperors* claims that the prayers of a pious king are considered of higher quality and more likely to be answered directly than the prayers of just anyone. The *Book* portrays Charlemagne's prayer to heal Pope Leo's eyes as almost demanding, even threatening, but it is answered because he is a pious king.²⁰¹ Charlemagne's close association with religious office, and thus his desire for a "New Israel," can also be seen in Notker's biography, in which he refers to Charlemagne as "bishop of bishops," directly giving him an association of religious authority.²⁰²

Charlemagne's descendants continued to emulate Charlemagne and depict themselves as pious rulers. Charles the Bald, for example, went to great lengths to show himself as the pious kings in various visual mediums. In the Vivian Bible of the mid-ninth century, Charles is shown

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 42.

²⁰⁰ Russell Chamberlain, "The Ideal of Unity," *History Today* 53, no. 11 (November 2003): 60.

²⁰¹ Henry A. Myers, "The Concept of Kingship in the 'Book of Emperors' ('Kaiserchronik')," *Traditio* 27 (1971): 223-4.

²⁰² Notker, 75.

with the hand of God above him, indicating divine intervention and appointment, and depictions of David within the Vivian Bible have him bear a strong similarity to Charles and wear a Carolingian crown.²⁰³ Aside from this, Charles continued to emulate Charlemagne's piety by donating to monasteries and ordering the construction of new churches.

Pagan

While instances of ideal Christian kingship are plentiful, aspects of kingship that recall the pagan past of sacral kingship are much rarer. Wallace-Hadrill notes that the early Merovingian kings were believed to be able to heal the sick through physical contact and help ensure a bountiful harvest but that the concept of the sacral king had been significantly diminished by the time of the Carolingians.²⁰⁴ Indeed, there was less "sacral" kingship and more "sacred" kingship defined once again by the Church and by Biblical figures. Ralph O'Connor argued that Carolingian "sacred kingship" regularly invoked Samuel, Saul, David, and Solomon to promote the idea that the king was overseen and judged by God, meaning that God was at the center of the supernatural rather than the king himself. Kingship itself did not depend on a supernatural quality of the king, but on the king keeping his contract with God and following the "Isidorian imperatives" of wisdom, justice, and piety.²⁰⁵ Even when a king seemingly possessed supernatural abilities, it is depicted as an act of God rather than the king. When Pope Gregory

²⁰³ Rosamund McKitterick, "Charles the Bald & the Image of Kingship," *History Today* 38 (June 1988): 31-2.

²⁰⁴ Wallace-Hadrill, 19.

²⁰⁵ Ralph O'Connor, *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel: Kingship and Narrative Artistry in a Medieval Irish Saga* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2013), 274.

described King Gunthram's thaumaturgical powers, he describes it as a Christian power bestowed *upon* him by God, not a power that he as king possess.²⁰⁶

Anglo-Saxon

Christian

Alfred also followed the trend of the ideal king as pious. Asser's biography of him mentions that among the first teachings in his life was that of the psalms and prayers, and mentions that Alfred collected these psalms and prayers in a book that he kept by his side throughout his life, thus showing a very deep and personal devotion to piety.²⁰⁷ Asser also depicts Alfred's closeness to God through prayer in a similar manner that the *Book of Emperors* would depict Charlemagne. Asser writes that Alfred prayed for an end to sickness he had been suffering since childhood and that soon after his prayer Alfred "felt himself divinely cured from that malady," showing that Alfred's piety was such that he received miraculous, if not divine aid simply through his prayer.²⁰⁸

Alfred is also depicted expressing his piety through the building of churches and the monetary support of churches. Asser notes that he ordered the building of a monastery suitable for nuns near Shaftesbury, as well as another near Athelney, and that he "abundantly endowed these monasteries with estates of land and wealth of every kind."²⁰⁹ Asser also notes that nearly one quarter of the revenue of taxation every year was given to monasteries across Anglo-Saxon

²⁰⁶ Wallace-Hadrill, 51.

²⁰⁷ Asser, 75.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 89.

²⁰⁹ Asser, 105.

land.²¹⁰ The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* also mentions that Alfred's generosity to the Church, much like Charlemagne's, was not limited to his own kingdom. Several entries record how the alms of King Alfred were brought to Rome.²¹¹

There are also famous tales, most of which take place during Alfred's time in the wilderness as a guerilla fighter, that depict Alfred as a pious and Christian king. The most popular of these include the tale of how Alfred displayed the Christian qualities of patience and humility by bearing the verbal assault of a peasant woman after he had burned the cakes that were baking, and the tale that displayed his Christian charity when he shared his meager rations with a stranger that revealed himself to be Saint Cuthbert, who then told Alfred that he had been ordained by God to rule all of England.²¹² The latter story can be taken as an association of the king with the divine in the form of the intervention of saints.

But perhaps the most interesting depiction of Alfred as pious comes from the king's own writings, specifically his translations of the work of Pope Gregory. Alfred's piety, or at the very least his association of the king with God, comes from his own translation of Gregory's *Cura Pastoralis*. Alfred's translation seemed to suggest that he associated the office of kingship with the office of bishop even more closely than Gregory did, meaning that he considered the king to possess a Church, or at the very least a sacred, office.²¹³ This very much relates to Charlemagne's attempt to establish a "New Israel" in which the king hold both a secular and religious office.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 107.

²¹¹ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 113.

²¹² Abels, 158.

²¹³ Wallace-Hadrill, 143.

Alfred's successors, specifically Aethelstan, also continued this aspect of the pious, Christian king. Aethelstan was described by contemporaries as a notably pious king, even by his eras standards, with some even comparing him to Charlemagne.²¹⁴ Aethelstan was also compared directly to Biblical kings, once again demonstrating a desire for Old Testament kingship, in a new prayer for the anointing of the king. The prayer included endowing the king with qualities of Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon.²¹⁵ Aethelstan also followed in his predecessors' foot steps by his patronage to the Church, which Aethelstan himself saw as a central element to his role as a king.²¹⁶

Pagan

Much like Charlemagne, depictions of Alfred demonstrating a link to the pagan past of sacral kingship are rare. The rarity of this association with the pagan past does not mean it is not there, however. The royal house of Kent utilized the pagan mythological figures of Hengest, Horsa, and Oisc in order to give the noble house a heroic standing.²¹⁷ Asser notes that among Alfred's ancestors are Woden and Geat, the latter Asser explicitly mentions was worshipped as a pagan god.²¹⁸ Despite this mention being so brief, and Asser making no further allusion to the pagan past, it is still interesting that he mentioned it at all, and may have been used to further praise Alfred's lineage.

²¹⁴ Foot, 5.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 76.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 117.

²¹⁷ Wallace-Hadrill, 22-3.

²¹⁸ Asser, 67.

Brian

Christian

For his part, Brian more than matches Charlemagne and Alfred in terms of depictions of his piety and dedication to the service and support of the Church. *Cogadh*, even with its general focus on Brian as a warrior, is quick to depict him as a pious king by claiming that “By him were erected also noble churches in Erin and their sanctuaries,” depicting him as a builder of churches in a manner similar to Solomon.²¹⁹ Additionally, Brian is portrayed as also giving generously to the Church in term of monetary donations. Brian’s will supposedly provided “twelve score cows to be given to the Comharba of Patrick, and the Society of Ard-Macha; and its own proper dues to Cill da Lua, and the churches of Mumhain.”²²⁰ Much in the same vein as the previously mentioned depictions of Alfred and Charlemagne, this was meant to demonstrate the generosity and support of Brian to the Church in the form of monetary support. However, unlike Alfred and Charlemagne, there is no evidence to suggest that Brian donated to the Church in Rome itself. Perhaps Brian’s most well-known show of piety occurred during his visit to Armagh in 1004. During his visit, Brian performed two significant actions of piety. The first is recorded in *Cogadh* and in various Annals as, “he went from that to Ard Macha [Armagh], and he laid twenty ounces of gold on the altar in Ard Macha.”²²¹ Much as Charlemagne and Alfred had donated to monasteries to show their piety, Brian had done the same in Armagh. More importantly, Brian recognized the primacy of Armagh as the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland. An entry penned by his advisor Mael Suthain in the *Book of Armagh* states, “Saint Patrick, while

²¹⁹ *Cogadh*, 139.

²²⁰ *Cogadh*, 201.

²²¹ *Cogadh*, pp. 135.

going to heaven, ordered that the entire fruit of his labour, so of baptism, so of legal suits as of alms, to be conveyed to the apostolic city which in Scottic is called Ardd Macha.”²²² Brian thus not only supported the Church monetarily, but specifically supported Armagh as the religious capital of Ireland and the developing hierarchy and centralization of the Church within Ireland.

In regards to personal actions that speak to piety, specifically prayer and the attending of Mass, *Cogadh* details how Brian did not lead troops in the Battle of Clontarf, but instead remained in his tent, saying fifty prayers and singing fifty psalms before inquiring as to the progress of the battle, and then repeating the process.²²³ Green argued that Brian did not fight and instead chose to pray because it was a holy day, which would of course show the king as pious.²²⁴ In such an important moment as a battle like Clontarf, the king would likely be seen as having a responsibility to appeal to God and look to Him for victory. This is similar to how Alfred’s brother prayed feverishly at Ashdown, contributing to the Anglo-Saxon victory. It is also a reflection of the concept of the prayers of a pious king being more likely to be answered, and thus all the more important that the good king be a pious king that can pray for the benefit of his people.

Brian’s association with Biblical figures such as David and Solomon has been discussed in the previous chapter. Additionally, while also being favorably likened to David and Solomon, he is also likened to Moses, likely due to his perceived efforts to free the Irish people from Viking domination. This could reflect greater influence of Continental Christian thought on kingship, an increased acceptance of Isidorian ideals of kingship, or the conscious effort to

²²² Denis Casey and Bernard Meehan. "Manuscripts: Brian Boru and the Book of Armagh," *History Ireland* 22 (2014): 28

²²³ *Cogadh*, pp. 197-99.

²²⁴ Green, pp. 407.

imitate Charlemagne's "New Israel." This last possibility is especially possible given certain wording within *Cogadh*. Specifically, *Cogadh* refers to the Dal Cais as the "ever-victorious sons of Israel of Erin." ²²⁵ This could indicate a belief of the Irish, or at least the Dal Cais, are the new chosen people of God, just as Charlemagne indicated that the Franks were the new Israelites. This could in turn indicate an effort to establish a more theocratic kingdom similar to Charlemagne's. That Brian recognized the primacy of Armagh, thus gaining a powerful Church ally in his quest for domination and possible centralization, seems to lend credence to this. Another possible piece of evidence for this is Brian's policy of placing members of his family or clan in positions of clerical authority, such as his brother Marcin mac Cennitig, who was made abbot of Inis Celtra and Terryglass, thus indicating an effort to bring monastic foundations under the control of the ruling dynasty. ²²⁶ As a final note on depictions of Brian likening him to Biblical figures, Brian's depiction as Christ-like, a king that sacrificed his life on Good Friday, has no parallel in European or Anglo-Saxon kingship, just as it has no parallel in Irish kingship.

Finally, Brian's piety even seemed to manifest itself in his own physical appearance, as on the day of his death at the Battle of Clontarf, his attacker Brodar supposedly did not recognize Brian and stated, "'it is not the king...but a noble priest.'" ²²⁷ It can be argued that this association, or confusion, of the king with a member of the clergy is similar to Alfred's translation of Gregory and his belief that the king was in fact a divinely appointed office similar to a priest or bishop. It may also have been an attempt to invoke the priestly functions of pre-Christian kings. ²²⁸ This brings up the distinct difference between Irish and English or Frankish

²²⁵ *Cogadh*, 161.

²²⁶ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, "Dál Cais—Church and Dynasty," *Ériu* (2017): 52.

²²⁷ *Cogadh*, 203.

²²⁸ Byrne, 33.

kingship in terms of depictions of piety, that being the increased presence of pre-Christian or pagan aspects of the king.

Pagan

Irish kingship as a whole, as mentioned in the previous chapter, was more connected to its pagan past than other areas of Europe, and Brian's kingship was no different. Without repeating too much of the previous chapter, Brian was associated with, and in some cases directly descended from, mythical figures of Ireland's pagan past. He claims to be a descendent of Mug Nuadat, one of the two mythical kings responsible for the division of Ireland, in addition to claiming descent from Mil, the mythological figure and founder of the Irish race whose sons supposedly conquered Ireland from the Tuatha De Dannan.²²⁹ As stated in the previous chapter, his son Murchadh is compared to the Irish god Lugh and the demi-god Cu Chulainn, and *Cogadh* claimed he had encounters with fairy creatures that tempted him with worldly pleasures. Brian himself in *Cogadh* claims that Aibhell, the banshee spirit of the Dal Cais, had spoken to him and warned him of his coming death.²³⁰ All of this ties in to the concept that Brian possessed attributes of a sacral kingship, in which the king was the embodiment of the social and cosmic order that allowed for his people to prosper, and whose death caused that prosperity to end and chaos to ensue. In this way, Brian is distinct from his European counterparts due to his comparatively greater association with pre-Christian pagan elements of his region indicative of medieval Ireland.

²²⁹ *Cogadh*, 161.

²³⁰ *Ibid*, 201.

The King as Statesman

As with the previous chapter, this section will be divided into several subsections that each deal with an aspect of the kings as statesman, or the king in his role in the internal affairs and functions of his kingdom. This will include the king's role in the formations and enforcement of law, the king's status as a sponsor of building projects, the king's status as a patron of knowledge, and the title that the king held or in some cases created.

Frankia

The King as Lawmaker or Keeper

So far as judgement and the law is concerned, Charlemagne was seen as an administrator, as both a keeper and maker of laws. Writings from Hincmar detail how Charlemagne held assemblies twice a year, during which he himself made proposals for the assemblies to discuss and either agree upon or refute, whereupon Charlemagne carried out their decision.²³¹ The image presented in this depiction is of a king as arbiter, and as one who respects and upholds the laws of his kingdom. He has a role in the creation of said laws, but he accepts the limits of his power and respects the power of his assemblies to refuse him. Einhard gives an example of Charlemagne's role in the creation of law, but limits it to where he "did nothing more than add a few chapters to the law," and ensured that the law was translated and written down so that they may be better understood and preserved.²³² This minimal interference in the law and the desire to preserve it is a common theme, and may represent how a good king respects the laws laid down

²³¹ Morrissey, 40.

²³² Einhard, 38.

by his predecessors. More often than not, the good king is seen as a judge or arbiter rather than a law-maker. Notker presents Charlemagne in this vein by describing him as “the most rigorous seeker after justice,” and “after God the greatest of judges,” who punished wickedness within his realm.²³³

The King as Builder

In addition to his work constructing the basilica at Aachen, Einhard notes that Charlemagne “undertook very many works calculated to adorn and benefit his kingdom,” including two palaces and a general program of repair and renovation for any “sacred edifices.”²³⁴ Charlemagne’s depiction as a great builder of infrastructure is best seen in the work of Notker, who describes numerous projects undertaken by Charlemagne for the building of bridges, ships, passages, and paths. Notker describes how these buildings were done following the example of the “all-wise Solomon,” associating Charlemagne with the famed Biblical builder of the Temple of Jerusalem.²³⁵ To Morrissey, the specific account of the construction of the bridge over the Rhine in Mainz best illustrates the theme behind the aspect of the king as the builder. Morrissey states that Notker gives a symbolic purpose to the building of the bridge, presenting Charlemagne as both a literal and figurative architect, the latter reflecting his capacity as an architect of an orderly and harmonious community.²³⁶

²³³ Notker, 75, 82.

²³⁴ Einhard, 30.

²³⁵ Notker, 78.

²³⁶ Morrissey, 33.

The King as Patron of Knowledge

Many depictions of Charlemagne have shown him as a lover of knowledge. Morrissey states how he was famed for fostering a renewal in the study of arts and sciences, hosting scholars from all over Europe in his Palace School, where grammar, rhetoric, geometry, astronomy, and arithmetic flourished.²³⁷ Einhard writes of Charlemagne's personal love of knowledge and desire to spread it, writing that "[Charlemagne] believed that his children should be brought up so that both sons and daughters were first educated in the liberal arts, which he himself had studied."²³⁸ That he required his own children, even his daughters, to receive an education speaks to how highly Charlemagne supposedly held knowledge. Charlemagne continued to support the spread of knowledge, with Einhard describing how he "cultivated the liberal arts most studiously and, greatly respecting those who taught them, he granted them great honours," in addition to supporting the learning of math and astronomy for himself, his household, and his realm.²³⁹ Another example of this depiction comes from Notker, who states that Charlemagne was "ever filled with an insatiable lust for knowledge," and who personally taught and questioned schoolboys, even those from the "middle and lower classes."²⁴⁰

The King's Title

Analysis of the title of the king is important due to the developing powers, and in some cases the developing centralization, of rulers during this period. As kings gained more territory,

²³⁷ Morrissey, 9-10.

²³⁸ Einhard, 32.

²³⁹ Ibid, 36.

²⁴⁰ Notker, 56-7.

more authority, the titles they wore began to change to reflect that growing power. The importance of these title, and how they influenced one another, will be the focus of this section.

Charlemagne was, of course, King of the Franks and later King of the Lombards, but it was his coronation as the first Holy Roman Emperor that solidified his imperial ambitions and brought back the title of emperor to western Europe. This is reflected in Notker's biography, in which he refers to Charlemagne as "Emperor, Augustus, and Caesar."²⁴¹ However, this was an amalgamation of titles (King of the Franks, King of the Lombards, Holy Roman Emperor) rather than the development of a single title.

Anglo-Saxon

The King as Lawmaker or Keeper

Alfred issued new law codes that were meant to depict Alfred in the vein of Solomon as a "divinely-inspired law giver." Alfred's association of the divinity of law and of obeying the commands of the king can be seen in his translation and interpretation of the work of Gregory, as they reflect his belief in the divine mandate to obey God, and by extension the kings that are His chosen rulers of the people of the Earth.²⁴² It is interesting to note that, according to Abels, Alfred depicted himself as a law-finder rather than a law-maker, finding the best laws from previous English kings and combining them.²⁴³ This could reflect the ideal of a king that keeps to tradition, that obeys the old laws of his ancestors and predecessors. It is also a similar manner in which Einhard describes Charlemagne, merely adding on to already existing laws. This can be

²⁴¹ Notker, 78.

²⁴² Wallace-Hadrill, 144-45.

²⁴³ Abels, 247.

seen in the extracts of Alfred's law codes, in which Alfred himself states that he did not dare to presume writing his own laws, but instead kept or rejected old laws and then compiled them with the assistance and acceptance of his councilors.²⁴⁴ Alfred's grandson Aethelstan could perhaps be argued as a king who expanded his role in the formation of laws, as certain scholars have noted that the law codes and legal pronouncements made during his reign seem to have been more personally directed by him.²⁴⁵ Once again however, the king is often seen as the arbiter of law rather than the giver of law itself. Asser notes, for instance, that Alfred "used also to sit at judicial hearings for the benefit of both of his nobles and the common people," as it was usually only he that could settle disputes wisely without the parties turning to violence.²⁴⁶

The King as Builder

In a similar manner as Notker's depiction of Charlemagne, Asser's depiction of Alfred draws attention to the cities and towns he either restored or built, and to the "royal halls and chambers marvelously constructed of stone and wood," once more presenting the picture of a Solomon-like builder of public works and infrastructure.²⁴⁷ Again, like Charlemagne, this aspect of the king as builder is used to highlight his control over society and his establishment of order which he directs, Asser likening it to a pilot guiding his ship in the proper direction and ensuring each person has a place and a responsibility to fulfil under his direction.

²⁴⁴ Extracts from the laws of King Alfred, in *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, 164.

²⁴⁵ Foot, 144.

²⁴⁶ Asser, 109.

²⁴⁷ Asser, 101.

The King as Patron of Knowledge

Depictions of Alfred are very similar to Charlemagne in terms of his love of learning. Asser especially goes out of his way to show Alfred's love of wisdom, writing near the beginning of his biography that "From the cradle onwards, in spite of all the demands of the present life, it has been the desire for wisdom...which has characterized the nature of his noble mind."²⁴⁸ Asser also points out that, much like Charlemagne, Alfred saw to the education of his own children, and to his realm as a whole. Asser specifically mentions his daughter Aethelweard was "given over to training in reading and writing under the attentive care of teachers, in company of all the nobly born children of virtually the entire area, and a good many of lesser birth as well."²⁴⁹ Asser relates Alfred directly to Solomon, stating how both men "having come to despise all renown and wealth of this world, sought wisdom from God and thereby achieved both (namely, wisdom and renown in this world.)"²⁵⁰ Alfred's own opinions on the value and need for the spread of knowledge can be seen in his translation of *Pastoralis*, in which he writes in the preface: "Learning has declined so thoroughly in England that there were very few men on this side of the Humber who could understand their divine services in English, or even translate a single letter from Latin into English...Thanks be to God Almighty that we now have any supply of teachers at all!"²⁵¹ Finally, Asser notes that Alfred's will included that one-eighth of his riches would go to the school that he had established.²⁵² Interestingly, a century after Alfred's death, the historian Aethelweard in his *Chronicon Aethelwardi* described Alfred as, "above all, instructed

²⁴⁸ Asser, 74-5.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 90.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 92.

²⁵¹ Alfred's translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care*, in *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, 125.

²⁵² Asser, 107.

in divine learning.”²⁵³ This is especially fascinating given that he also describes Alfred as “active in war,” but still chose to put his status as a learned man and a seeker of knowledge above all other venerable traits.

The King’s Title

Alfred is a bit different from Charlemagne, as his titles evolved rather than grew in number. Alfred began as the King of Wessex, but according to Asser was recognized by all Angles and Saxons not under the rule of the Danelaw as the King of the Anglo-Saxons, a new title for the region.²⁵⁴ Of course, in the past, there had been the Bretwalda, an overking that in many ways was not dissimilar to the High King of Ireland. However, Alfred’s title of King of the Anglo-Saxons represents an authority over all Anglo-Saxons, regardless of where they reside, and denotes a singular ruler with no sub-kings. Alfred’s grandson Aethelstan would push this title, and its imperial implications, further when he adopted the title of King of the English. Not only was Aethelstan the first king to rule over all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms as a single realm, but he also came to be an over-king of Britain, with Welsh and Scottish rulers accepting him as their overlord.²⁵⁵ Aethelstan thus combined the old title of Bretwalda with the new title of *rex Anglorum*, creating a kingship that was imperial in character, in which he was the sole ruler of the English in addition to being the suzerain of the Welsh, Scottish, and Britons.

²⁵³ Abels, 308.

²⁵⁴ Asser, 98.

²⁵⁵ Foot, 20.

Brian

The King as Lawmaker or Keeper

Brian's place within the enforcement of the law is made quite clear, especially given that to the medieval Irish mind, to be a just judge was one of the most important duties of the kings, and one in which to judge unjustly is to invite disaster. Accounts depict Brian as a just judge and as a king who upheld the law. *Cogadh* details how his reign as High King was marked by how "He continued in this way prosperously, peaceful, giving banquets, hospitable, just-judging."²⁵⁶ Other accounts have agreed with this, such as the Viking *Njals Saga*. The saga describes Brian as "the best-natured of all kings," and tells of how "King Brian thrice forgave all his outlaws the same faults, but if they misbehaved themselves oftener, then he let them be judged by the law."²⁵⁷ The *Annals of Inisfallen* give an account of "A hosting by Brian, son of Cennétig, across Desmumu, and he took the hostages of Les Mór, Corcach and Imlech Ibuir as a guarantee of the banishment of robbers and lawless people therefrom."²⁵⁸ Indeed, such was the peace and enforcement of law that *Cogadh* described how a woman could walk from the north of Ireland to the south, "carrying a ring of gold on a horse-rod and she was neither robbed nor insulted."²⁵⁹ This clearly depicts Brian as a model king who, through the judgement and enforcement of the law, was able to bring prosperity and peace to his people. However, it is his place within the formation of the law that is difficult to determine.

²⁵⁶ *Cogadh*, 141.

²⁵⁷ George Webbe Dasent, *The Story of Burnt Njal, from the Icelandic of the Njals Saga*, 2nd edition (London: G. Richards, 1900), 319.

²⁵⁸ *Annals of Inisfallen*, entry 987.

²⁵⁹ *Cogadh*, 139.

There is some evidence to suggest that Brian instituted law reform, at least within his own province of Munster. Green points out that, after he became King of Munster, Brian had amended the *Book of Rights* to institute new tributes on three kingdoms that had traditionally been exempt, these three kingdoms including the former territories of Ivar and Donnabhan, two men who conspired with Mael Muad to murder Brian's brother Mathgamhain.²⁶⁰ Perhaps even more significant was his amendment to the *Book of Rights* after he became High King, which moved the seat of the King of Ireland from Tara to Cashel, which had been the seat of the kings of Munster and thus Brian's seat.²⁶¹ This could again be an attempt by Brian to solidify a national Irish kingship into law, which would thus depict him as a visionary who laid the foundations for a dynasty and a nation under one ruler, not unlike Alfred and his grandson Aethelstan. Considering Brian's great lament at the death of his favored son Murchad, whom Brian had groomed to succeed him, this is not improbable. It is also possible that he laid the foundation for future kings to have a more active role in the formation of laws. O'Corrain discusses the reign of Brian's son and grandson and points out that "on three separate occasions the annals record legislation by Donnchad mac Briain, king of Munster, and by his successor, Tairdelbach Ua Briain. In 1040 we find the king of Munster legislating against theft, against 'feats of arms', and manual labour on Sunday, and promulgating a law that cattle should not be brought indoors."²⁶²

²⁶⁰ Green, 369.

²⁶¹ Ibid, 394.

²⁶² Donnchadh Ó Corráin, "Nationality and Kingship in Pre-Norman Ireland."

The King as Builder

Brian, unlike many Irish kings, is also depicted as the great builder. Following his wars to become King of Munster, *Cogadh* states how, “[Brian’s] reign at length became bright, placid, happy, peaceful, prosperous, wealthy, rich, festive, giving of banquets, laying of foundation.”²⁶³ Similarly, after he had become High King the account states that “Many works, also, and repairs were made by him. By him were erected... the bell tower of Tuam Greine...By him were made bridges and causeways, and high roads. By him were strengthened, also, the duns, and fastnesses, and islands, and celebrated royal forts of Mumhain.”²⁶⁴ Notice how building comes with an era described as peaceful and prosperous. This is thus similar to Notker’s depiction of Charlemagne as an architect, not only of physical buildings, but of communal harmony. It is also similar to Alfred in that it can be seen as rebuilding after a time of war, as these events are described after Brian had pacified his enemies, be they Vikings or rival Irish kings. Brian thus displays the same Solomon-like, king as builder quality as Charlemagne and Alfred.

The King as Patron of Knowledge

Brian also finds greater commonality in European kings than Irish kings in his depiction as a patron of the spread of knowledge. While there is no reference to Brian’s personal love of knowledge or of his own education, there is reference to his promotion of knowledge for the benefit of Ireland. When Brian had sent his navies to collect tribute from the Britons and Saxons, and from the peoples of Scotland and Argyll, *Cogadh* claims that he gave a third of the tribute

²⁶³ *Cogadh*, 101.

²⁶⁴ *Cogadh*, 139-41.

collected “to the professors of sciences and arts,” thus showing himself as a generous patron.²⁶⁵ This is further shown by Brian’s seemingly organized method to the spread of education in a similar manner as Alfred, displayed in *Cogadh* when it states, “He sent professors and masters to teach wisdom and knowledge, and to buy books from beyond the sea...and Brian, himself, gave the price of learning and the price of books to every one separately who went on this service.”²⁶⁶ There have been claims that Brian’s patronage was such that he facilitated a sort of renaissance in terms of knowledge that outlived his reign. Green stated that “The remarkable works of the scribes in the eleventh century was doubtless due to the intellectual impulse given by Brian at this time.”²⁶⁷ Once again, Brian stands with Charlemagne and Alfred as representing the medieval concept of the ideal king, this time through his patronage of the pursuit and spread of knowledge.

The King’s Title

As stated in the previous chapter, the title of *ard ri*, or high king, is a difficult subject to discuss. The title does not appear in Irish law tracts and the powers of the High King are often restricted to at least his home kingdom and at most to his own personal ability to enforce his authority in the other kingdoms. In the case of Brian, what is important is that he is recognized as possessing the title of high king, and that he was able to enforce his authority and gain the submission of every kingdom in Ireland. This is shown through the rare instance in which a southern king is recognized by northern annals, such as the *Annals of Ulster*, as being king of

²⁶⁵ *Cogadh*, 137.

²⁶⁶ *Cogadh*, 139.

²⁶⁷ Green, 374.

Ireland who gained the submission of the kings of the north. The annals themselves are a good indication of Brian's growth in authority as reflected by his titles. The *Annals of Ulster* list him first as "King of Caisel," or King of Munster or of Leth Mogha, and later referring him to "King of Ireland" and "arch-king of the Gaedhil of Ireland, and of the Foreigners and Britons."²⁶⁸ It is possible that Brian had a greater impact on the title of High King itself than any king before him, as he was able to break the Ui Neill monopoly on the title and was able to give the title real authority through his conquests. He turned it into a prize worthy of struggle, and he contributed greatly to "advancing the idea of a kingship of the whole island," an idea which contemporary poets and scholars elaborated and projected into the immemorial past.²⁶⁹ It was because of Brian's achievement and reign as High King that the theory of the High King was largely created, which in turn influenced the concept of kingship and the struggles of future Irish kings. In his titles of king of Ireland, descriptions of him also include the title of "Augustus of all the West of Europe."²⁷⁰ This indicates the imperial ambitions that, similar to Alfred and Charlemagne, Brian would pursue during his reign.

Aside from the title of High King, there was a more imperial title that Brian developed that is perhaps of even greater significance. An entry authored by Mael Suthain in the *Book of Armagh* reads, "I write this is the sight of Brian, *imperator scotorum*," translated alternatively to "emperor of the Gaels," or "emperor of the Scots."²⁷¹ His taking of the title *Imperator Scotorum*, a unique title in Irish history, could reflect a conscious decision to create a title that reflected a more centralized authority and that could have been officially recognized by law, putting Ireland

²⁶⁸ *Annals of Ulster*, 531.

²⁶⁹ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *Ireland Before the Normans* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan LTD, 1972), 125.

²⁷⁰ *Annals of the Four Masters*, entry year 1013.

²⁷¹ Casey and Meehan, 28.

on a path of centralization under a single king. It can also be seen as extending his authority to include all those of the Irish, or Gaelic, race, which was not confined within the borders of Ireland. This would suggest a truly imperial ambition. Parallels of this can be seen in Aethelstan taking the title of King of the English, and Otto III taking the title of *Imperator Romanorum* rather than *Imperator Romanus*.²⁷² This theory is supported by Sean Duffy, who not only repeats that the title bears similarity to Otto III's title, but expands in this by stating that Otto III was a contemporary of Brian, who more than likely would have been aware of Otto's efforts and of the Frankish empire in general, and thus it is not improbable that Brian consciously attempted to imitate the practice of taking an imperial title that denoted rule of a people not constrained by a region.²⁷³ There is also evidence that Brian's imperial ambitions were realized. *Cogadh* states that "[the navies of Brian] levied royal tribute from the Saxons and the Britons, and the Lemhnaigh of Alba, and Airer-Gaedhil, and their pledges and hostages along with the chief tribute," indicating an acknowledgment of Brian as suzerain outside of Ireland.²⁷⁴ Duffy also points out that among the nobles that fought on behalf of Brian at Clontarf was a man named Domnall mac Eimin mic Cainnich Moir, a Scottish earl from Aberdeenshire.²⁷⁵ This could further indicate Brian's status as a suzerain of territories outside of Ireland, and the legitimacy of his imperial stylings. Regardless, Brian is depicted as a ruler who created a new title to reflect an increase of royal authority and a new imperial ambition in a similar manner as European kings.

²⁷² Aubrey Gwynn, "Brian in Armagh (1005)," *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society* 9 (1978): 44-45.

²⁷³ Duffy, *Battle of Clontarf*, 143.

²⁷⁴ *Cogadh*, 137.

²⁷⁵ Duffy, *Battle of Clontarf*, 150.

CHAPTER 4: BRIAN AND SCANDINAVIA

This chapter presents the most difficulty for analysis. Among the reasons for this is the general lack of scholarship on the medieval Scandinavian idea and ideal of kingship. When there is discussion, it is often in relation to post-Christianized Scandinavia, state formation in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, or how Scandinavian kingship was influenced by and became essentially identical to European kingship. This is at least in part due to the other issue that this thesis faces, that being the relative lack of sources. Christianity, and literacy by extension, was introduced to the region later than most of Europe. There had previously been runic inscriptions, and the possibility of the earliest composition of the Edda in the ninth century, however said text survives only in a thirteenth century manuscript. Therefore, written sources before the twelfth century are few and far between, and the sources we do have are in many cases not contemporary to the events described. For instance, *The Saga of St. Olaf* contained within Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* is a thirteenth century text detailing the life of a venerated early eleventh century king. The sources themselves also indicate that they received their information from non-written sources, such as skaldic poetry and oral tradition. Using *Heimskringla* again as an example, Snorri's forward to the work credits several skalds as a source when compiling these sagas, and at the end of the forward he writes, "As to the poems, I consider they will yield the best information if they are correctly composed and judiciously interpreted."²⁷⁶ However, it is still possible to glimpse specifically Scandinavian ideals of kingship within these sources and to

²⁷⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, Lee M. Hollander, trans. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 7th Edition, 2009), 5.

analyze them in terms of the mutual influence and evolution of the concept of kingship in the early medieval period.

This also means that most sources that discuss Scandinavia, or its people, before the twelfth century come from other European kingdoms. These European sources are often laced with animosity and a labeling of “other” toward Scandinavians, likely due to the experience of Viking raids and wars. The Scandinavians, and by extension their kings, are thus viewed as enemies, foreigners, and pagan barbarians. Not much attention is given to their kings or thoughts of kingship, and when these sources do discuss kings it is usually to describe them as murderous scourges of God. This is especially true in the sources that this thesis has utilized in its analysis of Brian, as the Vikings are consistently depicted as enemies and heathens that are a threat to Ireland and its people.

On the other hand, analysis of Brian within the context of Scandinavian kingship will in some ways be easier than analysis within the context of European kingship. Due to the heavy presence of Vikings in Ireland in Brian’s time, and to his interaction with them in both warfare and alliance, there are several Viking sagas that discuss Brian, or at least the famed Battle of Clontarf. Brian’s recognition of the value of Viking cities, wealth, and military strength, and the Viking recognition of Brian as a worthy king offers an insight into both the Scandinavian view of what makes an ideal king and how Brian may have consciously adopted certain aspects of Scandinavian kingship in order to strengthen his power and perhaps develop a new concept of kingship.

The Scandinavian king that will be discussed in this chapter will be Olaf II Haraldsson of Norway, known as St. Olaf. Despite other kings such as Cnut the Great of Denmark represent

ideals of kingship, Olaf will be the focus of this analysis due to his prominent presence within *Heimskringla*, his posthumous status as a warrior-king that died fighting for the sake of his kingdom, his canonization as a saint, and his unique title of *Rex Perpetuus Norvegiae*. Olaf should thus be a sufficient example of ideal Scandinavian kingship, though broad analysis of Scandinavian kingship will be discussed before Olaf himself becomes the focus, and other kings will be discussed in those sections as necessary. As before, Brian will then be analyzed at the end of each section to determine how he reflected Scandinavian ideals of kingship and how this demonstrates an evolving concept of kingship.

The King as Warrior

Scandinavia

In the popular mind, it does not seem surprising that the ideal Scandinavian king was supposed to be a great warrior. Popular images of the Vikings paint them as a society in which success in war meant everything, and that the strongest are the ones that rule. While this is not necessarily untrue, there is more to this ideal than simply one who could pillage the best. It was part of a warlike culture that was not dissimilar to Europe or Ireland in which military might was able to maintain peace and control in a divided region, it was tied to religion and divine blessing both pagan and Christian, it was linked to expectations of generosity and the giving of wealth, and it was often justified as a necessity for the protection of the kingdom. This is best put by Angelo Forte, Richard Oram, and Frederick Pederson when they wrote, “The personal power of a king during the Viking Age was to a large extent determined by his personal esteem, his ability to gather a *hird* of warriors around him that could add to his prestige by plunder and military

exploits.”²⁷⁷ After the introduction of Christianity, Scandinavia became more similar to Europe in its attitude towards war, specifically in regard to the king’s duty to ensure the peace of both society and the Church through force and battling the enemies of God. Indeed, much like the various barbarian kings before them, the kings of Scandinavia were willing to accept Christianity as it still depicted a god that would reward obedience through success and glory in battle.²⁷⁸ War was a way that a king could prove that he was indeed worthy to rule, that the gods or God favored him, and that he had the strength necessary to defend his people, or in some cases be immortalized as a hero.

The importance of the king’s role in war can be viewed in the stories of the earliest kings of Scandinavia, specifically in the *Saga of the Ynglings*, the first saga presented in Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*. Though Snorri attempts to give a more historical rather than mythical spin to the tale, the *Yngling Saga* still tells the story of the Scandinavian gods and how they were the first royal dynasty of the region. Snorri writes that Othin, or Odin, was the first king of this dynasty and that he was “a great warrior and fared widely, conquering many countries. He was so victorious that he won the upper hand in every battle.”²⁷⁹ Thus, the first king of the first dynasty is presented as a great warrior and, according to Sturluson, the kings of Norway were descended from this first dynasty. This implies that the king’s prowess in war was seen as the foremost quality that was necessary for a good king, as Norway’s rulers are supposedly descended from that first great warrior-king.

²⁷⁷ Angelo Forte, Richard D. Oram, and Frederik Pedersen, *Viking Empires* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 49.

²⁷⁸ P. H. Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings: Scandinavia and Europe AD 700–1100* (London; New York: Methuen, 1982), 9.

²⁷⁹ Sturluson, 7.

This saga also presents a king who is not a warrior, a king named Huggleik, who is described as “not a warrior but remained quietly in his kingdom.”²⁸⁰ Due to not being a warrior, Huggleik is depicted as weak, lazy, and greedy. Because of this, he loses his kingdom when the “sea-king” Haki kills him in battle while Huggleik is hiding in his “shield castle,” a retinue of warriors surrounding the king in battle. The description of “sea-king” could imply that Haki was a king who was frequently raiding or conquering. Regardless, it is Haki the great warrior that is given a new kingdom, and Huggleik the non-warrior who is slain along with his sons, losing his kingdom and his bloodline. This shows the importance placed upon a ruler that he be a proficient in war.

Later in *Heimskringla*, during the *Saint Olaf's Saga*, there is an anecdote in which the venerated King Olaf II of Norway tests his younger half-brothers, the youngest of them being three years old. The first test involves him frowning and attempting to look angry at his three younger brothers. While the oldest two whimpered, the youngest, Harald, faced him fearlessly and twisted his mustache when Olaf pulled his hair. The second test was when he watched the three children play near a pond. While the eldest two built small barns with livestock, Harald played with chips of wood as if they were warships. The final test was when he asked the three brothers what they would most like to have. The eldest two wanted fields and cattle, but Harald wanted housecarls, enough to take his brothers' fields and cattle. On hearing this, Olaf turned to his mother and said, “In him you are likely to bring up a king.”²⁸¹ This story plainly states what

²⁸⁰ Ibid, 25.

²⁸¹ Sturluson, 314-5.

the makings of a king are. Bravery and the command of men and ships are the makings of a king, as the king is a warrior and not a farmer.²⁸²

Another example of this can be seen in *Egils Saga*. The saga suggests that there are certain individuals who are seen as a threat to a king because they possess kingly qualities and can therefore replace him. Chief among these kingly qualities is their skill as a warrior. These threatening individuals are compared to kings due to their “prowess.” They are like kings because of their martial prowess and are therefore suitable candidates for kingship if the current king should die, or may even be readily supported if they actively attempt to depose the current king due to their famed prowess.²⁸³ This once again demonstrates how the ideal Scandinavian king was a great warrior, and a view that if the king was weak, then it is a great warrior who is most qualified to replace him.

A final example of this can be found in *Hrolfs saga kraka*, which tells the story of the sixth century king Hrolfr Kraki. Armann Jakobsson in his analysis of the saga in terms of royal ideology notes that, “The cardinal virtue of King Helgi...is being a great soldier. He dies in battle defending himself with great valor, as befits a chivalrous king.”²⁸⁴ Helgi’s son Hrolfr is similarly skilled and similarly praised as a good king because of it, including his glorious death in battle. Hrolfr himself is described in the saga thus: “He strikes alike with both hands, and in battle he is unlike other kings. To me he seems to have the strength of twelve men so many brave men he has killed.”²⁸⁵ Finally, when discussing the section of the saga when Hrolfr’s father

²⁸² The Harald referred to in this story is Harald Hadrada, who would indeed become King of Norway after the death of Olaf’s son Magnus the Good.

²⁸³ Nahir I. Otaño Gracia, "Vikings of the Round Table: Kingship in the *Islendingasögur* and the *Riddarasögur*," *Comitatus: A Journal Of Medieval And Renaissance Studies* 47 (2016):86-8.

²⁸⁴ Armann Jakobsson, "The Royal Ideology and Genre of *Hrolfs saga kraka*," *Scandinavian Studies* (1999):158.

²⁸⁵ Jakobsson, 145-6.

Helgi cripples the evil king Hrokr instead of killing him, Jakobsson states that “a lame king is no use to his kingdom.”²⁸⁶ This indicates that a crippled king is a king that cannot fight, and thus is worthless as a king. This all once more points toward an ideal among medieval Scandinavia that a good king is a warrior king.

Olaf II

The frequent depiction of Olaf II, one of if not the most celebrated Norwegian king, as a great warrior is not surprising. As stated above, medieval Scandinavian sources clearly promote the ideal king as one who is successful in war. However, Olaf’s reign in particular was ripe with references of his prowess and military skill. This is due to Olaf conquering Norway by 1015, albeit briefly, after it had been dominated by the King of Denmark since the reign of Harald Bluetooth around 970. His conquests would include fighting against rival kings and lords in Norway, reclaim old territory from Sweden, and facing rebellions that would ultimately result in his deposition and subsequent death at the Battle of Stiklestad in 1030. Olaf was thus a king almost always at war, and his skill in war is praised by sources that extol him as an ideal king.

Within the first paragraphs of his saga within *Heimskringla*, Olaf’s physical prowess is praised. The source describes him as “a good shot, an excellent swimmer, and second to none in hurtling spears.”²⁸⁷ These physical activities were seen as training for combat, and skill in these was taken to equate to skill in combat. The saga goes on to tell how he led his first Viking expedition at the age of twelve, and that he was given the title of king as it was “the custom that warrior-kings on a viking expedition, if of royal birth, were forthwith called kings, even though

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 154.

²⁸⁷ Sturluson, 245.

they had no land to govern.”²⁸⁸ This itself is another example of the importance placed on war and the king’s martial ability, as the title of king is given to those of royal lineage who engaged in sea raiding and warfare, regardless of land possessed. And, according to *Heimskringla* at least, Olaf was already recognized as a warrior at this point. The saga records a praise-poem for Olaf that stated, “Young still, yet you, Olaf, used early to warlike deeds,” and this is seemingly confirmed when the saga describes Olaf being victorious in his first battle against another group of Vikings despite being outnumbered.²⁸⁹ Several more encounters during this expedition are mentioned, including raids in Ösel and Finland. Interestingly, this expedition in Finland ended in Olaf’s retreat and the loss of many of his men. However, the account does not dwell on this and Olaf is quickly praised once more for a victory over other Vikings in Denmark and against the Frisians.²⁹⁰

After many years of raiding and warring across Western Europe, including some time in which he fought for King Aethelred of England against the Danes and seemingly proved instrumental in several victories in London and Canterbury, Olaf supposedly received a vision declaring that he shall be king of Norway. Upon his return and reunion with his family, Olaf describes what this time raiding has gained him, stating, “all that time my men and I have had nothing for our support but what we gained in warfare,” clearly proclaiming that he survived by his skill in war alone and thus presenting himself as the warrior that a king must be. He then details his plan to become king of Norway, again utilizing language that speaks to his status as a warrior. Olaf states that, “I intend to seek my patrimony at the point of a sword,” and that he will

²⁸⁸ Ibid, 246.

²⁸⁹ Ibid, 246-7.

²⁹⁰ Ibid, 249-50

not beg for aid or for vassalage from the king of Denmark or the king of Sweden.²⁹¹ Olaf is thus presented as having survived for years purely as a warrior, gaining what he needed at the point of a sword, and that he will continue to do so as he attempts to claim the sole kingship of Norway.

Olaf's campaign for the kingship of Norway offers a specific depiction of Olaf as the ideal warrior. As noted above, Norway had been under the rule of Danish kings since around 970. Thus when King Sigurth, Olaf's stepfather, convened with several "district kings" of Norway to ask that they support Olaf, he tells them that they need to "throw off the yoke which the Danes and Swedes had lain upon them," and that Olaf is the man to do it due to his "prowess."²⁹² Hearing of the deeds that Olaf had performed, his acts as a warrior, the majority of the kings that are assembled swear their loyalty to him. While Olaf is noted as the descendent of Harald Fairhair, the supposed first King of Norway, it is his personal martial prowess that is highlighted as his chief quality for the kingship and ultimately what wins him support of the local kings. This is seemingly in line with Scandinavian, or perhaps specifically Norwegian, standards of kingship. Philip Line has noted that in Norway in particular, the "ultimate arbiter in gaining the kingship was military strength."²⁹³ With the Danish vassal pre-occupied with assisting Cnut the Great in his campaign to conquer England, Olaf was swiftly able to take power from them within Norway, and the Battle of Nesjar in 1016 saw him remove the Swedish vassal from power. Norway was thus free of foreign rulers, and Olaf eventually managed to subdue the last five independent kings in a single stroke, leaving him as the sole king of Norway. Olaf is

²⁹¹ Ibid, 269.

²⁹² Ibid, 271

²⁹³ Philip Line, *Kingship and State Formation in Sweden, 1130-1290* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007), 76.

thus depicted as a savior or liberator, freeing his kingdom from foreign oppression through strength of arms and uniting it under a single king through strength of arms.

Once Olaf becomes the sole king of Norway, Olaf is still presented as an active warrior. Several rebellions and challenges to his rule erupted during his reign, many of them short-lived and consisting of farmers supposedly resistant to Olaf's spreading of Christianity. Sturluson notes that during one of these rebellions, "the king put his men in battle formation, himself riding at their head," thus depicting him as a frontline commander.²⁹⁴ This can also be seen as an example of the ideal king being a warrior for God, enforcing His will and spreading or protecting the Christian faith through force. Another of these rebellions came in the form of one Erling Skjalgsson, though this too was brought to an end through Olaf's skill as a warrior. In the battle that ended Skjalgsson's rebellion, Sturluson notes that, "The king himself strode forward, dealing hard blows," and that a praise poem composed by a skald named Sigvat states, "Eager for War, Olaf endlong the ship went fighting...Gushed warm gore from deep wounds, grimly fought the sea-king."²⁹⁵ This presents Olaf as the ideal warrior king, active in battle and fighting in the front.

However, one of these rebellions would deprive Olaf of his kingdom. Discontent among the Norwegian nobility stemming from Olaf's greater centralization of power led them to support Cnut the Great of Denmark's invasion of Norway. Olaf was thus in exile between 1028 and 1029, finding refuge in Sweden and Russia. During this exile, *Saint Olaf's Saga* claims that Olaf received a dream in which Olaf Tryggvason, the previous Norwegian king, encouraged Olaf to

²⁹⁴ Sturluson, 370.

²⁹⁵ Ibid, 466.

take back his kingdom. The most relevant aspect of this described event is that the aspect of Tryggvason claims that “It is the mark of a king to conquer his enemies or else honorably to suffer death in battle, together with his men.”²⁹⁶ The ideal king is therefore presented as a conquering king. However, to die honorably in battle is still seen as an aspect of an ideal king. Even if the king fails to conquer his enemies, he still fought and thus died with honor and respect. This is precisely what happens to Olaf. At his final battle at Stiklestad, Olaf once more proves himself the ideal warrior king. The source describes that he, “issued from the shield castle and went into the front ranks,” and that he, “himself advanced in hand to hand combat...King Olaf fought then most valiantly.”²⁹⁷ Olaf would still fall however, the battle lost and Norway once more a vassal kingdom of Denmark. However, Olaf is not mocked or deemed to have been dishonored. He fought valiantly and in the thick of battle, and thus died as a warrior. Compare this Hagleik, the king mentioned above. He also died in battle and his kingdom was conquered, but he is declared a bad king because he himself did not fight, but hid in his shield castle. Olaf left the safety of his shield castle and fought with his own hands to take back his kingdom, and is thus depicted as a true warrior and king who died with honor as a hero who tried to save his land from foreign tyranny.

Brian

Analysis now turns once again to Brian and his depiction of the ideal warrior king. As with the previous chapter, I will attempt to limit examples and analysis of this aspect of Brian’s kingship to what is most relevant in regard to Scandinavian concepts of the ideal warrior king.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 483.

²⁹⁷ Ibid, 512-513.

Specifically, I will be focusing on Brian's personal prowess in battle, how he used that prowess and his skill in military command to become the High King, and how he represented the ideal of dying honorably in battle.

Much like *Saint Olaf's Saga* and how it began its tale of Olaf with how he was a great warrior, *Cogadh* begins its description of Brian by describing him and his elder brother Mathgamhain as, "two stout, able, valiant pillars, two fierce, lacerating, magnificent heroes, two gates of battle, two poles of combat...two spears of victory and readiness," before going into detail about how Brian waged guerilla campaigns against the Vikings of Ireland, striking them wherever he could and living in harsh conditions as a warrior.²⁹⁸ This is thus an example of Brian's personal physical prowess and skill as a warrior, something that would have been respected among Scandinavian sources and expected of an ideal king. This is further shown in Mathgamhain's praise of Brian following their victory at Sulcoit, in which Mathgamhain exclaims, "O Brian! Thou chief in the combat!"²⁹⁹ Once Mathgamhain was murdered and Brian became king of Munster, his status as a warrior only increased. *Cogadh* details how he waged near-constant war to avenge his brother and to expel the Vikings from Leth Mogha. He is shown as a capable commander winning battle after battle and slaying those that conspired against his brother. The account states, "Five and twenty battles...did Brian gain over [the Vikings], including the battle in which he himself was killed, besides sundry skirmishes."³⁰⁰ Subsequently, Brian would continue to personally go on campaigns in pursuit of becoming the dominant king of Ireland. This is shown clearly in the Annals with entries such as, "A muster by Brian, son of

²⁹⁸ James Henthorn Todd, ed. and trans. *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, or, The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*, London: Longmans, Greed, Reader, and Dyer, 1867, pg. 57-63.

²⁹⁹ *Cogadh*, 81.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 117.

Cennétig, of the men of Ireland, both foreigners and Gaedil south of Sliab Fuait, to Ard Macha and to Ráith Mór of Mag Line in Ulaid to obtain the hostages of Cenél Conaill and Cenél Eógain.”³⁰¹ Brian is thus both a capable warrior and commander, and seemingly unstoppable in his conquests. Such a king would surely have resonated well in Scandinavia, as a king that conquers without major loss is seen as blessed and worthy to rule.

Interestingly, the Viking presence in Ireland, and in Leth Mogha in particular, itself allowed Brian to strengthen his military might. The Viking warriors with their higher quality weapons and armor, and especially their fleets of ships, served as a boon to Brian and instrumental in his campaigns of conquest. By the year 1000, Brian had the Viking cities of Limerick, Waterford, and Dublin as his vassals and was able to call upon their supply of armies and navies. In effect, Brian had command over all the Norse armies and fleets in Ireland, allowing him to exert immense military power against his rival kings in the north.³⁰² Brian was thus able to recognize and utilize the strength of his Scandinavia rivals-turned-vassals to his advantage, combining their military strength with his own to produce a truly formidable power within Ireland.

In addition to Brian’s personal abilities as a warrior and commander, his status as a liberator of his kingdom from foreign dominion and his method of obtaining kingship through conquest is also similar to Scandinavian aspects of kingship. Olaf is in part famous because he was able to break, albeit temporarily, Danish domination of Norway and take back lands that had been held by Sweden. Similarly, Brian is depicted as having liberated Ireland from Viking

³⁰¹*Annals of Inisfallen*, entry year 1005.

³⁰² Duffy, *Battle of Clontarf*, 124

domination. Of course, that there was any Viking domination of Ireland is a matter of debate, with most scholars concluding that the Vikings were a relatively small player in Irish politics that were often under the control of Irish kings and used in inter-Irish struggles. However, there is evidence that Brian did prevent a much larger wave of Viking incursions that may have made attempts to establish Scandinavian dominion. As stated in previous chapters, Sean Duffy has pointed out that the rebellion of Leinster and Dublin, along with the Battle of Clontarf, happened almost concurrently with the Danish invasion of England. This may indicate that there was a sense that Scandinavian conquest across the Irish Sea was imminent, and indeed there did seem to be a surplus of suddenly “unemployed” warriors following Sven Forkbeard’s death and the period before Cnut’s return and conquest of England. Ireland may therefore have been seen as a consolation prize for these warriors, and indeed it seems many of them fought on behalf of Dublin’s Sitric Silkenbeard.³⁰³ Thus Brian is presented as a savior of Ireland who prevented foreign domination through his victory at Clontarf. It is also possible to see Brian’s breaking of the Eoganachta domination of the kingship of Munster and the Ui Neill domination of the high kingship as another example of Brian as a liberator. This is indeed how sources such as *Cogadh* and the Annals portray it, depicting the invasion of the territory of and the deposition of the Eoganachta as done in the name of liberating the region from the tyranny of the Norse and replacing a dynasty that had allowed that tyranny to take root.³⁰⁴ Related to this, Brian’s method of becoming the chief king of Ireland through conquest is similar to Olaf’s achievement of the sole kingship of Norway “at the point of a sword.” Brian achieved the kingship of Munster by

³⁰³ Ibid, 242-8.

³⁰⁴ Ibid, 86.

killing Mael Muad at Belach Lechta, and went on to conquer Leinster and Ossory to become king of Leth Mogha. Following this, he began his campaign to conquer the rest of Ireland, raiding and subduing most of Connacht before meeting Mael Sechnaill at Tara to challenge him for the title of High King. *Cogadh* writes, “A great expedition of all Leth Mogha, both Gaill and Gaedhil, was afterwards made by Brian, until they reached Temhair [Tara] of the kings; and messengers were sent from them to Maelsechlainn...king of Temhair, and they demanded hostages from him, or battle should he refuse hostages.”³⁰⁵ Mael Sechnaill could not gather the forces to battle Brian, and so he submitted to Brian’s authority and Brian became High King. From here, Brian began his decade-long campaign to conquer Ulster. One by one, the kingdoms of the north would submit to his authority in the face of Brian’s military might, ending with “A hosting by Brian to Magh-Corrain, when he brought with him the King of Cinel-Conaill...in submission, to Cenn-Coradh.”³⁰⁶ Through conquering this last king, Brian had become the overlord of Ireland, the chief king and greatest power. This was accomplished largely through military conquest. As Brian conquered, his forces increased, and he used this superior military might to force every king in Ireland to submit to his authority and thereby truly hold the title of High King of Ireland. There is little difference between Brian and Olaf in how they achieved power in their respective kingdoms.

Brian also reflects the Scandinavian aspect of the ideal king that death in battle is honorable, and even if the battle or the cause they are fighting for is lost, dying while fighting is

³⁰⁵ *Cogadh*, 119.

³⁰⁶ *Annals of Ulster*, 525.

still considered the mark of a good king. This is depicted early in *Cogadh*, before Brian even became king, when he told his brother Mathgamhain:

it was hereditary for him to die, and hereditary for all the Dal Cais...but it was not hereditary to them to submit to insults or contempt...it was no honor to their courage to abandon, without battle or conflicts, to dark foreigners, and black grim Gentiles, the inheritance which their fathers and grandfathers had defended in battles and conflicts against the chiefs of the Gaedhil.³⁰⁷

Of course, this is most clearly demonstrated in Brian's final battle, the battle in which he is killed. After his son Murchad died in battle, and in the confusion of the rout where Vikings were likely to be coming toward his tent, Brian's attendant asks that Brian pull back to camp and wait there in safety. Brian's reply is, "retreat becomes us not."³⁰⁸ This demonstrates bravery in the face of death, and an unwillingness to flee from battle that surely would have registered with any Scandinavian readers of the work. Subsequently, when Brian is attacked by Brodar and another Viking, he manages to kill both of them before he himself dies, thus dying while fighting as a true warrior.³⁰⁹

Most interestingly, Brian himself, and especially the Battle of Clontarf, is named and sometimes discussed in detail in several Scandinavian sagas. Brian, or his Norse name Brjann, had become a mighty and legendary king within Scandinavian literature, a worthy opponent for one to have fought against so that their descendants would have stories of glory and honor to tell.³¹⁰ Brian is mentioned in *Heimskringla* during *Saint Olaf's Saga*, when Earl Sigurth of Orkney is described as having fallen at the Battle of Clontarf.³¹¹ In the original Old Norse

³⁰⁷ *Cogadh*, 69.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 201.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 203.

³¹⁰ Duffy, *Battle of Clontarf*, 97.

³¹¹ Sturluson, 352.

language of the text, Clontarf is referred to as *Brjansorrosta*, or “Brian’s battle.” This itself shows how linked Brian was to the conflict and how his name was recognized by Scandinavian scholars, and may indicate a sense of honor and respect for the Irish king among the Scandinavians. This respect can especially be seen in the *Saga of Burnt Njall*. In this saga, Clontarf is once again referred to as “Brian’s battle,” and Brian’s killer, Brodir/Brodar, is not described with honor and respect but is instead treated as a villain and is punished with a painful death for his slaying of Brian.³¹² While this version does not have Brian die while fighting and killing his enemies, it does end its tale of him by stating, “Brian fell but kept his kingdom ere he lost one drop of blood.”³¹³ Brian is thus still depicted as victorious in war, winning the battle before he was slain. This statement is repeated in the 13th century *Orkneyinga saga*, in which it is stated that, “King Brian fell with victory and glory.”³¹⁴ Brian thus fell in battle, both dying honorably and achieving victory. This is similar yet also somewhat different to how Olaf’s death is described. Olaf died honorably in battle, yet his kingdom is ultimately lost to foreign conquerors. Brian, however, falls honorably in battle while also being victorious in his conflict, supposedly preserving and protecting his kingdom from would-be conquerors. This is perhaps why he is so honored and respected in Scandinavian accounts, as he fits with Scandinavian ideals of kingship, including how an ideal king should die. All of this is made even more interesting by the fact that Scandinavian literature often features an attitude of disdain towards the Irish.³¹⁵ Thus, Brian must have represented a king that was worthy of respect in the mind of medieval Scandinavian scholars. Brian fit the mold of the ideal Scandinavian warrior king. He himself

³¹² *Njall*, 326-7.

³¹³ *Njall*, 330.

³¹⁴ Found in Sean Duffy, *Brian Boru and the Battle of Clontarf*, 229.

³¹⁵ Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, *Greatest King*, 81-2.

possessed great prowess as a warrior and an architect of victory as military commander. He served as a liberator of his kingdom and won his authority at the point of a sword. Brian died gloriously and victoriously, protecting his kingdom and overcoming his opponents. It is likely that many kings of Scandinavia would have hoped to live and die in such a manner.

The King as Pious

Scandinavia

As stated previously, Christianity arrived relatively late to the region of Scandinavia. But much like with the rest of Europe, Christianity spread rapidly with the support of the kings who saw an opportunity to increase their power and thus embraced the new religion and facilitated its spread. Early sources, the majority of which are non-Scandinavian, often paint them as pagans and heathens, active enemies of Christ and His Church. However, one must of course recognize that these sources are from the perspective of outsiders, and more often than not the perspective of those that experienced or heard tell of the raids carried out by the Scandinavians. That said, Scandinavian sources have indicated a lasting presence of pagan mythology and tradition, more so than in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon territories, but perhaps less so than in Ireland. Specifically, there are many references to the pagan past, and the king's relation to said past, but it is often portrayed in a negative light. Meaning, the pagan mythology and pantheon of the past is often maligned as evil, and those that cling to it are often depicted as antagonists or as cowards in Scandinavian literature. There are exceptions to this, of course, often when the king is described as a great warrior akin to the old gods. For the most part, however, mentions of paganism in these sources tend to cast those that practice it as evil. Some of the earlier skaldic verses of the

tenth and eleventh centuries may be different, still being accepting of the pagan pantheon and praising it accordingly, but those sources are rare.

Some examples of the maligning of the pagan past can be seen in the various sagas. *Njalls Saga*, for instance, describes Brodir as an apostate and a heathen sorcerer.³¹⁶ Brodir is depicted as a villain for the entirety of his appearance within the saga, and is ultimately punished with a painful death for his killing of the Christian King Brian. He is compared unfavorably to his brother Ospak, who is described as a noble heathen and who eventually accepts baptism at Brian's hands. This suggests a rejection of the pagan past and religion as evil and worthy of death, while those that embrace the Christian faith gain life. Another example appears in *Hrolfs saga kraka*, in which Hrolf is depicted as a "noble heathen," who does not worship the pagan gods and relies on his own strength. This is shown when Odin appears before Hrolf and offers him weapons, but is rejected by Hrolf as an evil spirit.³¹⁷ A final example can be found in Sturluson's *Saga of the Ynglings*, in which he describes the many magical power of Odin, including the power shapeshift, to weaken or frighten his enemies, and to see the future. Sturluson points out however that, "this sorcery is attended by such wickedness that manly men consider it shameful to practice it, and so it was taught to priestesses."³¹⁸ Pagan magic, and perhaps the pagan gods themselves, is shown as wicked, unmanly, and weak. The use of this magic and the worship of these gods would therefore only come from the wicked and weak, not the ideal king. This is, of course, after the introduction of Christianity and therefore it is likely that the ideal king had previously been associated with these pagan gods and magics. This is also

³¹⁶ *Njall*, 323.

³¹⁷ Jakobsson, 150.

³¹⁸ Sturluson, 10-11.

in some way contradictory due to instances where a king with great prowess in battle is compared to Odin, which will be shown later in this chapter.

Of course, as stated previously, there are instances where the pagan mythology plays a large role in the concept of the ideal king, even in post-Christian Scandinavia. An obvious example of the persistence of paganism and its influence on kingship is that fact that many pagan myths are preserved in literature. The Poetic and Prose Edda detail the stories of the pagan gods and goddesses, even if authors like Snorri Sturluson try to make it somewhat more realistic and human by making the Aesir as inhabitants of Asia. The *Yngling Saga* discussed above also contains some events of pagan mythology and the old Norse gods. Another example of persistent paganism in the concept of the ideal king is genealogy. Much like the rest of Europe, kings were described as the descendants of gods, giving them a greater foundation for their power and authority over others.³¹⁹ This is further shown by the belief that some scholars have that the king of Sweden acted as the representative of Freyr and held cultic festivals every nine years in the region of Uppsala.³²⁰ These festivals supposedly included a sacred wedding to the fertility goddess and the bestowal of royal blessings, known as the “king’s luck,” that came in the form of peace, prosperity, and plentiful harvest.³²¹ This concept of the “king’s luck” persisted into Christian times, as will be shown in this chapter.

³¹⁹ Line, 45.

³²⁰ Line, 339.

³²¹ Ibid, 357.

Olaf II

Christian

The first aspect of the ideal pious Scandinavian king that shall be discussed is related to the ideal of the king as warrior. Specifically, the ideal Scandinavian king shows his piety and devotion to God through fighting in His name. Some scholars have argued that the Scandinavian image of Christ was the victorious warrior king.³²² Thus, to be an ideally pious king is to fight in His name and thereby spread the faith. Olaf very much conforms to this model. He, along with his predecessor Olaf Tryggvason, is largely credited with the conversion of Norway to Christianity. This conversion often came forcefully and was ruthlessly enforced. This can be seen throughout *Saint Olaf's Saga*, the rebellion of farmers who rejected Christianity having been mentioned above. Another example of this can be found in Sturluson's account of Olaf's enforcement of Christianity in the Uppland districts. Sturluson states that Olaf vowed to drive out all that clung to the pagan religion. His punishments would include having the offenders, "maimed, having their hands or feet lopped off or their eyes gouged out, others he had hanged or beheaded, but left no one unchastised who refused to serve God."³²³ Olaf was thus quite violent in his piety, depicting a king who is ideal because he does not tolerate the heathen and ruthlessly enforces the will of God. In fact, Olaf is presented as such a staunch warrior of God that, even in his most desperate time when he needs troops to regain his throne, he refuses the services of warrior and even dismisses some of his own troops because they were not Christian.³²⁴ The

³²² Line, 385-6.

³²³ Sturluson, 309.

³²⁴ Ibid, 490-1.

depiction of Olaf represents the ideal pious king as one that is a tireless warrior and defender of the faith, one that does not consort with or tolerate “heathens.”

Olaf displayed other acts of piety that were not violent in their expression. Something as simple as taking the time to paint the image of the cross on the shields and helmets of his army and having mass before the Battle of Nesjar is an example of this.³²⁵ Another simple act of piety came when Olaf paid penance by burning his hand after breaking the Sabbath, vowing to strictly observe the laws and commandments of Christianity.³²⁶ Other examples of this include Olaf having a “habit” of going to church and observing mass every morning, and dedicating himself to enforcing the “Christian code of laws...laying great stress on abolishing heathendom and ancient practices such as seemed to him contrary to the spirit of Christianity.”³²⁷ This enforcement would include personally traveling across his realm to each district, having meetings with the farmers to read aloud the Christian laws and commandments, and ensuring that the local earls had enforced these laws and stamped out pagan practices.

But perhaps Olaf’s greatest depiction of piety comes in the various instances in which he supposedly performed miracles. The first of these miracles is recorded in *Saint Olaf’s Saga* when he healed a sick man named Egil by placing his hand on Egil’s side.³²⁸ Another miracle of healing came from when he healed a boil on a boy’s throat that prevented him from eating, breaking bread and placing it “on his palm in crosswise,” before giving the bread to the boy and having him swallow it.³²⁹ Aside from these miracles, Olaf himself seemed to radiate holiness,

³²⁵ Sturluson, 281.

³²⁶ Ibid, 485.

³²⁷ Ibid, 289.

³²⁸ Sturluson, 446-7.

³²⁹ Ibid, 485.

enough to where he was supposedly banished an evil spirit that inhabited a chalet for years simply by his act of prayer.³³⁰ His final miracle actually came after his death, as when a man named Thorir the Hound found Olaf's body and the king's blood came in contact with a wound on Thorir's hand, the wound healed instantly.³³¹ Thorir is thus the first to believe in the sanctity of Olaf, and to declare it to the other nobles and clergy of Norway. This same blood would later be used to return the vision of a blind man, furthering the claims that Olaf was holy and worthy of sainthood.³³² All of this together depicts a king who is not only pious, but holy. He is a sacral king that can perform miracles of healing and expel demons because of his devotion to God. His supposed performance of miracles, and the view of his death at Stiklestad as that of a martyr, caused Olaf to be declared a saint not long after his death.

Olaf's status as a saint endured, especially within Norway, where he became its patron saint. This is reflected in the twelfth century "Letter of Privilege," in which the Norwegian king Magnus V describes Olaf as second to God Himself, how he had "sanctified" the kingdom with his blood, and how Magnus shall rule Norway under Olaf's divine protection.³³³ Olaf is thus presented as the ideal pious king within Scandinavia. He is a warrior of God that did not tolerate the presence of paganism within his realm, and spread the faith at the point of a sword. He enforced the laws and commandments of God, and himself observed these laws with devotion. Most importantly, Olaf is shown to possess a sanctity and holiness that allowed him to perform miracles, even after his death. He is both saint and king, a ruler devoted to God.

³³⁰ Sturluson, 472.

³³¹ Ibid, 516.

³³² Ibid, 522.

³³³ Magnus Erlingsson's *Privilegiebrev*, found in Inger Ekrem, Lars Boje Mortensen, ed., and Peter Fisher, trans. *Historia Norwegie*. (Museum Tusulanum Press, 2003), 209.

Pagan

Though Olaf is presented as an ideal Christian king, to the point that he is seen as holy and canonized as a saint, there are instances in his saga where he is likened to or possessed elements of the pagan past. One of these occurs after his victory at London Bridge, where Sturluson states that a skald named Ottar the Black praised Olaf as “Othin’s storm-of-steels keen urger,” thereby likening Olaf to the pagan god Odin in terms of his skill and ferocity in battle.³³⁴ However, the greatest example of Olaf retaining some of the pagan aspects of pre-Christian Scandinavian kingship comes in his possession of the “king’s luck.” Olaf’s luck and its potency is mentioned several times throughout *Saint Olaf’s Saga*, the first instance being on Olaf’s return to Norway after his years as a raider. He and his crew experienced a violent storm, but because they had, “a good crew and the luck of the king with them, everything turned out well.”³³⁵ Luck is brought up again when Olaf sends one of his vassals, Bjorn, on the dangerous mission to negotiate with the Swedish king. When Bjorn’s friend Hjalti sees that he is worried, Hjalti assures him that “the king’s good luck may do wonders.” Later, when Bjorn is about to depart, he asks Olaf that he “give us your luck along this journey.”³³⁶ The “king’s luck,” thus still has a place in Olaf’s character, and seems to be a powerful, almost supernatural force. It could be argued that this good fortune comes from being blessed by God due to Olaf’s devotion, but it is telling that the luck is specifically referred to as the king’s, and that it is a blessing he can give to others.

³³⁴ Sturluson, 253.

³³⁵ Ibid, 264.

³³⁶ Ibid, 300-301.

Brian

Christian

Depictions of Brian's Christian piety are quite similar to the depictions of Olaf's piety. However, it can be argued that depictions of Brian do not have him enforcing Christianity quite so violently, nor does he seem to care much for the conversion of the pagan or for the enforcement of Christian commandments. This could be due to Ireland having been Christianized for centuries, far longer than Scandinavia, and thus there was little need to enforce Christian law or expel those that still clung to pagan worship. That said, Brian is certainly not lacking in these aspects, but they are perhaps not as focused on or not seen as important in the sources extolling Brian. Brian did indeed battle pagans as a warrior of God, these pagans just happened to be Scandinavians and "Foreigners" to his land. In speaking of what the Vikings did to the churches of Ireland, *Cogadh* writes, "and they ravaged...her privileged churches, and her sanctuaries; and they rent her shrines, and her reliquaries, and her books."³³⁷ It is possible that the Vikings that Brian warred against and who were residing in Ireland were indeed pagan, with Christianity not having been completely accepted by the majority of the Scandinavian population even into the twelfth century. However, it is just as likely the major rulers of Viking settlements in Ireland, having become assimilated into Irish politics and even Irish culture by the time of Brian's reign, were Christian. Regardless, *Cogadh's* depiction of the Vikings, and the depiction of the Viking from various other Irish sources, paint them as marauding pagans that Brian ultimately overcame, thereby bringing safety to the Christian churches of Ireland. Both Brian and

³³⁷ *Cogadh*, 41.

Olaf were pious in that they were warriors fighting the enemies of God. *Njalls Saga* and the baptism of Ospak is the only instance in which sources state that Brian ever converted a pagan, and there are no Irish sources that mention him converting any to Christianity.

Brian also did, in a way, support the commandments of Christianity. Specifically, he gave the Church within Ireland authority and his support. This can be seen in entries such as the *Annals of Ulster* when it states, “A hosting round Ireland by Brian...when he granted the full demand of Patrick’s congregation, and of his successor.”³³⁸ This can also be seen in Brian’s donations to the Church, specifically to Armagh, and to Brian’s recognition of Armagh as the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland, thereby centralizing and strengthening the authority of the Church. Aside from this, Brian’s piety often came in the form of building churches. *Cogadh* states that, “By him were erected also noble churches in Erinn and their sanctuaries.”³³⁹ Brian’s personal displays of piety are also shown in a manner quite similar to Olaf’s. Even at Clontarf, Brian observed church services and mass, and all throughout the battle he prayed and sang psalms. This can be seen as similar to Olaf’s observation of mass just before the Battle of Nesjar.

Brian is also very similar to Olaf in that he is depicted as being a martyr and close to God. *Cogadh* again offers a description of Brian’s piety that praises him in a similar manner that Scandinavian sources praise Olaf. Brian may not have been canonized as a saint, but he was depicted as possessing such piety that his Viking killers at first mistook him for a priest.³⁴⁰ Though the 13th century poem mentioned in previous chapters, “To you alone, Brian of Ireland,”

³³⁸ *Annals of Ulster*, 517.

³³⁹ *Cogadh*, 139.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 203.

offers the most compelling example of Brian's piety and closeness to God, directly likening him to Jesus Christ in that both sacrificed themselves defending their people.

Much like Olaf, Brian is depicted as a martyr that died for the sake of his people and his kingdom. However, the comparison to Christ is uniquely Brian's. Again, Brian may not have been declared a saint, but here he is compared directly to Christ, which may be even greater praise in Christian society, and indeed had been listed earlier in the poem alongside St. Patrick as one of the four men who had come to the aid of Ireland, further making him similar to Olaf in terms of depictions of piety. The only difference between these two depictions of these two kings is that accounts of Brian frequently liken or compare him to Biblical figures such as Moses, David, and Solomon. Olaf, however, is never compared to those figures.

Once again, analysis turns to Brian's depiction in Scandinavian sources to determine how Brian was viewed by Scandinavian scholars as an ideal king through their own standards. *Njalls Saga* specifically will be examined. As noted previously, Ospak was the brother of Brodir, and Ospak was a noble pagan. However, when Brodir told Ospak that he was going to war against Brian, Ospak said that he would not fight against the good king. Ospak sailed to Ireland and told Brian what he knew, and Ospak accepted baptism at Brian's hands.³⁴¹ Brian is thus immediately depicted as a good Christian king, baptizing pagans and bringing them into the Christian faith. This is further shown on the day of the Battle of Clontarf, when the saga writes that, "Now it must be told of King Brian that he would not fight on the fast-day," meaning that he would not fight on Good Friday, or perhaps on Friday in general due to its association with a day of

³⁴¹ *Njalls Saga*, 324.

fasting.³⁴² This again shows a king that is pious and devoted to observing the commandments of the faith, even during times of war. Finally, and most significantly, *Njalls Saga* gives Brian a sanctity that is not seen in Irish sources. When Brian is attacked by Brodir, his young servant named Takt attempts to protect him. The account states, “The lad Takt threw his arm in the way, and the stroke took it off and the king’s head too, but the king’s blood came on the lad’s stump, and the stump was healed by it on the spot.” Later, after Brian’s body has been recovered, the account states that, “After that they took King Brian’s body and laid it out. The king’s head had grown fast to the trunk.”³⁴³ Brian is thus shown to have sacred blood that can perform miracles of healing, and his body can heal itself to be whole and seemingly undamaged, just like St. Olaf. Brian’s piety is such that he can be seen as a holy and blessed figure in this Scandinavian source. Thus, to Scandinavians, Brian was the ideal king in terms piety just like Olaf was, both possessing healing powers and performing great miracles.

Pagan

Instances of pagan concepts or beliefs in relation to Brian’s status as the ideal king are more or less the same as with Olaf. There is a genealogy that links him to mythical beings, he is often likened to gods in terms of his traits and abilities, and he possess a variation of the “king’s luck.” The difference is perhaps that the pagan past is seemingly not so maligned within Brian’s sources, or Irish sources in general.

The genealogical aspects of Brian’s association with the pagan past have already been mentioned. But as a reminder, Brian is supposedly descended from Mug Nuadat, a mythical king

³⁴² Ibid, 325.

³⁴³ Ibid, 326-7.

who supposedly split the rule of Ireland in half during his constant wars with his rival Conn of the Hundred Battles.³⁴⁴ Similarly, Brian is counted among the “Sons of Mil,” Mil Espaine being the mythical progenitor of the Irish race, whose sons invaded Ireland and conquered it from the Tuatha De Danann, the pagan gods of Ireland. While Brian is not descended from the Tuatha De Danann themselves, he is still a descendant of mythical, pre-Christian kings, some of whom fought against these gods.

Despite not being a descendant of the gods, he is often likened to them. Mathgamhain’s description of Brian as “Brian of Banba,” which was discussed in chapter one, could imply that Brian is being compared to an Irish war goddess, both for his skill in combat and for his dedication to the defense of his land.³⁴⁵ Brian is also compared to the god Lugh Lamfada as “one of the three best that was ever born in Erin,” Lugh having been discussed previously as a god amongst the Tuatha De Dannan.³⁴⁶ Brian is thus likened to a pagan god, a god that is still revered even in post-Christian Ireland. While Olaf is occasionally compared favorably to Odin, Odin is not given as much reverence and in fact he and many of the pagan gods of Scandinavia are treated with disdain throughout *Heimskringla* and other post-Christian Scandinavian sources.

Other aspects of the pagan past include the guardian banshee of the King of Munster visiting Brian before Clontarf to tell him of his impending death. According to *Cogadh*, Brian states, “For, Aibhell, of Craig Liath, came to me last night,” not referring to her as an evil spirit or a devil, but keeping her in her traditional function of a family spirit that comes in times of trouble.³⁴⁷ He thus keeps with pre-Christian tradition in honoring and listening to the advice of

³⁴⁴ *Cogadh*, 59.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 63.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 203.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 201.

family spirits. But the most significant pagan aspect of Brian as the ideal king in comparison to Olaf comes from his possession of the “king’s luck.” The “king’s luck,” or the “king’s truth,” was a recognized concept in pre-Christian Ireland, where the king represented an embodiment of the social and cosmic order, himself being responsible for the peace and prosperity of Ireland.³⁴⁸ Brian’s death reflects that he possessed this “king’s truth,” when *Cogadh* states, “Erinn fell by the death of Brian...,” its people losing their valor, their virtue, and their prosperity due to his death.³⁴⁹ Brian’s “truth” seems to be somewhat more potent than Olaf’s “luck,” but the two concepts clearly imbue both rulers with an almost supernatural power that allows them to prevent disaster and to facilitate prosperity, and thus they are seen as good and ideal kings.

The King as Statesman

The final section of this chapter will analyze the aspects of the king as the ideal statesman, or alternatively the king and his role in the internal affairs and expectations of his kingdom that are not concerned with his military prowess or piety, though these aspects may be related to those two ideals in some way. This will include the king in his capacity as a maker or enforcer of law, the king as a generous lord, and an analysis of the king’s title and the power or traditions of said title. These will be the focus of this section due to their similarity to the ideals of Irish kingship, and Brian’s kingship in particular, thus allowing for comparison and analysis.

³⁴⁸ Ní Mhaonaigh, *Greatest King*, 42.

³⁴⁹ *Cogadh*, 205-7.

Scandinavia

The ideal king seems to be very much tied to the law and his ability to uphold it. In Sweden, there are accounts that the election of the king includes a condition where he swears to uphold the law, and after his election he rode through several regions throughout Sweden, swearing in each location to uphold the local law and keep the peace.³⁵⁰ The Icelandic chieftains, known as *godar*, were responsible for attending and playing leading roles in the assemblies, especially the national assembly known as the *Althing*.³⁵¹ The king was thus required to observe and maintain the law.

In some cases, the king was a lawgiver, meaning that the king had a say in what the law was. This can be seen in the thirteenth century Swedish legal document, *Upplandslagen*, where the king is equated to God as the giver of laws.³⁵² It further elaborates that only the king is allowed to change the law, with the help of the wise men of the kingdom. The full extent of the king's right to change or add laws is unclear, but such instances where the king does alter the law is not taken lightly, and as stated above, only happens with the advice and counsel of wise men. That the king must also be wise likely means that the ideal king would be aware of what laws should be added or removed. Jakobsson pointed this out in his analysis of *Hrolfs saga kraka*, where he points out that wisdom is necessary for a king, and without it he is not fit to be king.³⁵³

However, in terms of his relationship with the law, the king was more often seen as a arbiter of justice, a wise judge, rather than a creator of laws. The Icelandic *godar* mentioned previously may have been responsible for being the heads of these law assemblies, but it was the

³⁵⁰ Line, 202-3.

³⁵¹ Sawyer, 59.

³⁵² Line, 378.

³⁵³ Jakobsson, 158.

“lawspeaker” whose function it was to declare the law, a law that was accepted by and united all the chieftains.³⁵⁴ The requirement that a king must be wise is central to this, as a king must be wise to be a good judge and to keep the laws accordingly. In post-Christian Sweden, while the Church had “a considerable say in justice,” the king was in control of most of the judicial processes, especially those that required the most serious penalties.³⁵⁵ This is also most likely the case in Norway and Denmark, with kings having jurisdiction over the most severe cases, though there is evidence that kings arbitrated more mundane disputes and crimes as well.

A king was also expected to be generous and to give freely to his followers. This requirement of ideal kings is partially related to the king’s function as a warrior. The plunder he received from his conquests was expected to be rewarded to his followers, and the king’s power was largely based on his ability to reward his followers.³⁵⁶ Thus, constant conquest was necessary in order to continually reward his followers, to be seen as a generous lord and maintain his power. However, to be generous is also simply a noble quality that a good king is supposed to possess. The descriptions of King Hrolf in *Hrolfs saga krak* note him as, “openhanded and generous...He withholds neither gold nor treasure from nearly everyone that wants or needs them.”³⁵⁷ This great generosity causes lords and warriors to seek him out so that they might serve him. Hrolf is thus respected as a good king and is able to grow in authority because of his generous nature. Kings that give generously, such as Hrolf, are praised within the sagas, while those kings that are miserly are derided and often lose respect, authority, or even their throne. Hugleik for example, who was mentioned above, is looked down upon in the *Saga of the*

³⁵⁴ Sawyer, 59.

³⁵⁵ Line, 163.

³⁵⁶ Sawyer, 144.

³⁵⁷ Jakobsson, 156.

Ynglings because, despite possessing vast wealth, he was, “miserly of his goods.”³⁵⁸ This greed would contribute to his death and the loss of his kingdom at the hands of Haki. Thus, it was important that a good king be generous.

The title of the kings of Scandinavia, along with the powers and traditions that come with said title, are more difficult to analyze than the titles of previous chapters. The runic inscriptions of pre-literate Scandinavia offer little insight into royal titles, and there are no written lawcodes of this period. Thus, the sources that detail the various titles of kings, or of the development of the titles of King of Norway, or Denmark, or Sweden are very few. There is, for example, reference to Harald Fairhair as the first King of Norway, but little else that has been found in the course of this research in regard to how exactly this came about and what titles and powers of petty rulers existed before them. It does seem to fit with the belief mentioned above that, in Norway, military power was what determined who was king. Thus, there may not be many law tracts detailing the powers and traditions of the title, as it was a title that came about through the exertion of pure military power from individual claimants to kingship. There are also the Jelling Stones of Harald Bluetooth, which proclaim that Harald had “won” Denmark and Norway, unifying it under one monarchy through conquest. But again, there is little information in the development of the title and of the king’s powers. There is mention of a *Rex Danorum* in Alcuin’s *Vita Willibrordi*, but little else in regard to what this title meant or how it came about.³⁵⁹ It has been suggested that developments in the centralization of kingship in Scandinavia may have been one of the causes of the Viking Age raids, as single kingship in Norway and Denmark

³⁵⁸ Sturluson, 25.

³⁵⁹ Forte, 45.

seemed to have been in existence possibly as early as 800 and had been cemented between 900 and 1000.³⁶⁰ By the tenth and eleventh centuries, there were more kings that set out on Viking expeditions than in previous centuries, so this could indeed indicate a more stable power base within their home kingdom that allowed them to lead these raiding or conquering expeditions.

There is however some evidence of the power, and limitations thereof, of the king. In Sweden at least, the nobility seemed to have had the right to choose the king in an election, as noted above. According to most law codes, the nobility was able to confirm or reject those who claimed the kingship.³⁶¹ This also seems to be the case in Denmark, at least in its early years. *Gesta Danorum* emphasized multiple times the importance of the Danish tradition of electing kings, and were thus opposed to a hereditary monarchy.³⁶² According to *Saint Olaf's Saga*, the power these assemblies of Sweden had over the king seem to be quite substantial. According to the saga, King Olaf of Sweden was threatened with deposition and death “if you will not do as we say.” This is also related to the king’s responsibility to the law, as this same assembly threatened this fate for Olaf of Sweden because, “it would not tolerate from [Olaf] lawlessness,” clearly showing that the king was subject to the law and not above it.³⁶³ It is unclear of the case is true in Denmark or Norway, if the king had to submit to the will of an assembly or else face the risk of being lawfully deposed and killed.

³⁶⁰ Line, 48.

³⁶¹ Line, 86.

³⁶² Sawyer, 16.

³⁶³ Sturluson, 321.

Olaf

The King as Lawmaker or Keeper

There is evidence to suggest that Olaf had some hand in the making of laws. *Saint Olaf's Saga* states that, "He changed laws with the advice of the wisest men, taking away or adding as seemed best to him."³⁶⁴ Here we see an example of what was described above, the king as a lawmaker, but only with the advice of wise men to counsel him in his decisions. However, this passage still seems to suggest that Olaf was the final arbiter of what was or was not changed. Another example comes from when the saga details how Olaf summoned a large assembly and, "entered it into the laws that all men from the Uppland districts were to attend this assembly and that the laws enacted there were to apply to all the Uppland districts."³⁶⁵ This shows the ideal king being a giver of laws, but this example in particular shows Olaf as a creator of new assemblies that would create new laws that had authority over other assemblies and laws in the area. This could indicate an attempt at increased centralization of power and an effort of the king to have greater authority over the creation of the law.

Olaf is also depicted as the wise arbiter of justice, the judge that enforces the law and declares the punishment. Even before he began his quest to become king of Norway, Olaf is referred to as "thieves' subduer," a poetic term indicating that he is a warder of the laws.³⁶⁶ This can be interpreted as Olaf possessing the qualities of a king as a keeper of the laws even while he was still a raiding warrior. *Saint Olaf's Saga* gives a clear example of Olaf acting as an arbiter of the law when he judges the punishment for the murder of an Earl. The account states, "King Olaf

³⁶⁴ Sturluson, 289.

³⁶⁵ Ibid, 375.

³⁶⁶ Sturluson, 251.

adjudged the compensation for the slaying of Earl Einar to be the same as for three landed-men; but because of the offence committed [by Einar], one third of the payment was to be forgiven.”³⁶⁷ Another example comes from Olaf’s judgement of a man that had murdered a vassal of Olaf in the king’s lodging during Easter, three severe crimes in one. When the son of the criminal asked the king to allow him to pay a fine allow his father to live, Olaf replied, “Although I set great value on you Skjalg, I shall not for your sake break the law and debase my royal dignity.”³⁶⁸ Olaf is thus presented as the wise judge that does not let personal feelings define his sense of justice. He maintains the law and enforces it above all, as that is the duty of a good king.

The King as Generous

Olaf also is depicted as possessing a generous nature as befits a good king. A composition made by the skald Sigvat after Olaf’s death asks, “What greater giver-of-rings hath governed northern folk lands?”³⁶⁹ Another skald named Bersi, himself a servant of Olaf’s Danish enemy Svein Hakonsson, also makes mention of Olaf’s great generosity. He describes Olaf as “Fafnir’s-treasure’s-foe.”³⁷⁰ Fafnir is a character that appears in the *Volsunga Saga*, in which he is a dwarven prince who is transformed into a dragon due to his immense greed. He jealously guards his hoard of treasure before he is slain by the hero Sigurd. Fafnir himself can be interpreted as the archetype of a bad ruler, one who is greedy and miserly, and eventually pays for this sin with his life. Referring to Olaf as “Fafnir’s-treasure’s-foe,” is a way to describe Olaf

³⁶⁷ Ibid, 360

³⁶⁸ Ibid, 382.

³⁶⁹ Sturluson, 533.

³⁷⁰ Sturluson, 284.

as a great dispenser of wealth, a giver of treasure rather than a hoarder. Another example shows Olaf not only being generous to his loyal followers, but to his enemies. His saga states that, before the Battle of Stiklestad, he gave a farmer a large purse of silver with instructions to donate it to churches, priests, and the poor for the sake of those that will die in the upcoming battle. When the farmer asks if this money was to be given for the salvation of the king and his men, Olaf replied, “This money is to be given for the souls of those men who stand on the side of the farmers and will fall by the weapons of our men.”³⁷¹ Olaf is thus a generous lord in that he rewards his followers and thus maintains his power, but is also generous simply because he is a good man. Olaf is shown to possess a noble and honorable trait in his generosity, a generosity that extends even to his enemies.

The King’s Title

As stated above, there is little information in terms of the title or evolution of the title of the kings of Scandinavia. In Olaf’s case, he is recognized as King of Norway as he is descended from the line of Harald Fairhair, the first King of Norway. Olaf declares that he will claim the title with military force, but there is evidence within his saga that he held a respect for the traditional limitations of the title and how it is bestowed upon a claimant. *Saint Olaf’s Saga* writes that the petty kings of Norway summoned an assembly in which Olaf voiced his claim to the kingship. He asks the kings, and nobles, and farmers to accept his claim and support him, and in return would keep the law and defend the land. The assembly accepts him, and it is through their acceptance that he is given the title of King of Norway.³⁷²

³⁷¹ Ibid, 498.

³⁷² Sturluson, 273.

However, there is an aspect of Olaf's title as ruler of Norway that sets him apart from other Scandinavian rulers. The first hint of this comes from when *Saint Olaf's Saga* details the dream Olaf had telling him to return to Norway and rule as king. The saga states that the man that appeared in Olaf's dream told him that "[Olaf] shall be king of Norway forever," and that Olaf took this dream to mean that he would be king and that his descendants would be king long after he died.³⁷³ However, the only one of Olaf's descendants that ruled Norway was his illegitimate son Magnus. After Magnus's death, it was Olaf's half-brother Harald Hardrada that would be king, and his descendants king after him. I believe this claim of Olaf being king of Norway forever relates to a title that is unique to Olaf. The 12th century text, *Historia Norwegiae*, refers to Olaf as *Rex Perpetuus Norvegiae*, or Everlasting King of Norway.³⁷⁴ Mentioning again the "Letter of Privilege," from Magnus V in 1163, there is a recognition of Olaf as the ruler of Norway long after his death. The letter contains Magnus stating that, "I shall manage this kingdom as the noble martyr's [Olaf's] inheritance, under his feudal majesty and as his deputy and vassal," and it refers to Norway as "St. Olaf's property."³⁷⁵ 1163 is not the earliest instance of this recognition of Olaf as ruling or guiding Norway after his death, however, as there is evidence in the form of poems that refer to him as continuing to rule beyond death dated as early as 1032.³⁷⁶ Olaf thus rules Norway forever through this title, through a recognition of him as the ideal that all kings should aspire to, and perhaps through his status as a symbol of a national identity. This status will be analyzed in the concluding chapter.

³⁷³ Ibid, 258.

³⁷⁴ *Historia Norwegie*, Inger Ekrem, Lars Boje Mortensen, ed., and Peter Fisher, trans. (Museum Tusulanum Press, 2003), 87.

³⁷⁵ Ekrem, 209.

³⁷⁶ Ibid, 210.

Brian

The King as Lawmaker or Keeper

As was noted in the first chapter, there is little evidence presented that suggests that Brian took an active role in the formation of laws, or that this was something that Irish kings engaged in in general. There is evidence that his heirs engaged in the altering or adding of laws, thus suggesting that he may have during his reign taken measures to increase the authority of the king in regard to the creation of laws. And Green has argued that the Book of Rights detailed new policies supposedly enacted by Brian, including the establishment of tribute from three kingdoms and the increase of tribute from those kingdoms that had traditionally been compelled.³⁷⁷ In this way, Brian could be compared to Olaf in his role as a maker of laws.

There is much more evidence to suggest that Brian possessed the ideal trait of being the keeper of the law, of being a wise and just judge. *Cogadh* notes Brian as a fervent and uncompromising enforcer of the law, writing, “He fined and imprisoned the perpetrators of murders, trespass, robbery and war. He hanged, and killed, and destroyed the robber and thieves, and plunderer of Erin.”³⁷⁸ This description is almost ruthless in its wording, and shows a king dedicated to maintaining the rule of law and the punishment of those that violate it. *Cogadh* encapsulates the entirety of Brian’s reign as one in which peace and the rule of law was returned and maintained, stating, “He continued in this way prosperously, peaceful, giving banquets, hospitable, just-judging; wealthily, venerated; chastely, and with devotion, and with law and with rules among the clergy,” seemingly restoring Ireland to a state of stability in which justice

³⁷⁷ Green, 369.

³⁷⁸ *Cogadh*, 137-9.

prevailed and was enforced, enough so to where a woman could supposedly travel alone and laden with gold from one end of Ireland to the other and not be accosted.³⁷⁹ Other Irish sources also describe Brian as one who enforced the law. The *Annals of Inisfallen*, for example, write in the year 987, “A hosting by Brian, son of Cennétig, across Desmumu, and he took the hostages of Les Mór, Corcach and Imlech Ibuir as a guarantee of the banishment of robbers and lawless people therefrom.”³⁸⁰ To the Irish, Brian was a king that enforced the law and served as a wide judge.

But it is not just Irish sources that praise his status as an arbiter and keeper of the law. *Njalls Saga* once again offers a Scandinavian perspective of Brian as the ideal king. The saga describes Brian as, “the best-natured of all kings,” and describes how, “King Brian thrice forgave all his outlaws the same faults, but if they misbehaved themselves oftener, then he let them be judged by the law; and from this one may mark what a king he must have been.”³⁸¹ Brian is thus shown as a just king and a merciful king, one that enforces the law but is tempered by compassion. There is great respect in this depiction, and this shows that Brian was viewed as the ideal king who enforces the law in the view of medieval Scandinavian authors.

The King as Generous

Accounts of Brian also note his great sense of generosity. He is portrayed as generous to his followers and to his warriors. *Cogadh* shows this when it states, “Men of learning and historians say that there was not a yeoman among the men of Mumhain on that expedition who

³⁷⁹ *Cogadh*, 141.

³⁸⁰ *Annals of Inisfallen*, entry year 987.

³⁸¹ *Njall*, 319.

had not received enough to furnish his house with gold and silver, and cloth of colour, and all kinds of property in like manner.”³⁸² Brian is thus generous with the plunder of his conquests, handing it out to the men of his army much as Olaf or any other Scandinavian ideal king would have. It was not just his warriors that Brian was supposedly quite generous towards, as *Cogadh* also notes that during Brian’s circuit of Ireland “no purveyor of any of their towns departed from Brian without receiving a horse or some other gift that deserved his thanks,” and that a third of the tribute collected by his fleets went to, “the professors of sciences and arts, and to every one who was most in need of it.”³⁸³ Thus, much like Olaf, Brian supposedly possessed a sense of generosity that went beyond merely ensuring that his soldiers and vassals stayed happy and loyal, giving to the common people and to the scholars of his kingdom as well. This noble trait is seen in both of these ideal kings.

The King’s Title

While there is still debate about certain aspects of the titles and powers of rulers within Ireland, especially the title of High King, there is relatively more evidence and material than Scandinavian rulers. Brian himself represents an example of almost every level of kingship in Ireland, starting as the tribal king of the Dal Cais, then King of Munster, then King of Leth Mogha, before finally becoming High King of Ireland. He also represents a shift in the traditions of the title of High King, or King of Ireland. It has already been mentioned in previous chapters that Brian had broken Ui Neill hegemony on the title of High King, and it was during his reign that the titles of King of Tara and King of Ireland were held by two different people for the first

³⁸² *Cogadh*, 117.

³⁸³ *Ibid*, 137.

time. Brian, perhaps more than any ruler before him, was able to exert his authority across the whole of Ireland and truly make himself an overking that every other king submitted to, even if it was only temporary and did not survive his death.

However, where Brian and Olaf share the most similarity in their status as the ideal king is their unique titles. Olaf was *Rex Perpetuus Norvegiae*, and Brian was *Imperator Scotorum*. Much like Olaf, no king before or since has held this title and there are significant implications to it. There are also some differences. Brian's title was given to him, and most likely crafted by him, during his lifetime, while Olaf's was given to him posthumously. Also, Olaf's title is in some ways connected to his status as a saint, eternally watching over and guiding Norway as patron in Heaven, while Brian's is more temporal and seems to indicate a power, or an attempt at power, beyond the borders of Ireland itself. Regardless, both titles represent a shift from the titles of previous rulers and speak to the power and respect that these two kings had in their respective kingdoms.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The early medieval period was a time of development in thought and in practice for the office of kingship, and the writings and actions of the men of this period would have a profound influence in the following centuries. The kings of this era would serve as ideals, figures that future kings would aspire to emulate. These kings would include Charlemagne, Alfred the Great, Saint Olaf, and others. Ireland's ideal king was Brian Boru, and this thesis has presented evidence that Brian represented elements of the ideal king from each of the three regions discussed. This not only indicates at least some overarching ideals that went beyond borders and boundaries, but may also suggest that Brian represented, or was at least written of as, a king that was able to blend concepts of kingship from all of these regions.

Ireland itself was a prime location for this kind of blending to occur, with its own unique culture and concepts distinct from the rest of Europe while still being close enough to be influenced, while also playing host to a substantial Scandinavian presence with more or less permanent settlements in cities such as Dublin. Additionally, it has been shown that Brian had made several advances or changes in the kingship of Ireland, deposing both the ruling dynasty of Leth Mogha and of Ireland as a whole, and turning the title of High King from a title that was often meaningless beyond the borders of Meath into one that was worth warring over and could potentially unite Ireland under a single monarch. Not only this, but Brian created an entirely new title, *Imperator Scotorum*, which may have been influenced by the titles of the English kings and Holy Roman Emperors that preceded or were contemporary to Brian.

Within his home of Ireland, Brian fit perfectly into the concept of the ideal king. Ireland was described as a warrior society, one in which a king was expected to be successful in war,

especially if he hoped to bring the numerous rival kings and overkings under his rule. Brian, with depictions of him beginning and ending with his victory and prowess in battle, has been presented as more than meeting those requirements for the ideal warrior king. Additionally, Irish kings were expected to show a reverence to God not unlike the Biblical David and Solomon. The sources directly link Brian to these figures, in addition to others such as Moses, and therefore seem to portray him as the ruler of a new Israel, with his clan even being directly called the “Sons of Israel of Erin.” But Brian also fit into the mold of Irish kings that still were very much connected to the pagan past. Depictions of Brian liken him to the pagan gods such as Lugh, to mythical heroes such as Fionn Mac Cumhaill, and note that he displayed the concept of the “ruler’s truth,” in which he embodied the cosmic order and prosperity of Ireland. Furthermore, Brian stands unique among Irish kings, and most kings in general, as being likened to directly to Christ through his death, or perceived sacrifice for the sake of his kingdom, on Good Friday. Related to the concept of the “ruler’s truth,” Brian displayed the necessary qualities of an Irish king to be a just judge and arbiter of the law, with sources claiming that he punished criminals and enforced law and order throughout Ireland. Some evidence suggests that he may also have laid the groundwork for increasing the king’s authority in the making of law. He is written as a generous and giving lord, providing plunder for his soldiers and gifts of thanks for his people, enriching Ireland as a whole. It can be argued that Brian also did much to advance the concept of kingship in Ireland. He increased his authority as High King arguably more than any of his predecessors, and advanced the idea of a kingship of the whole of Ireland, one that would be taken up by those after him who claimed to be High King. His development of the title of

Imperator Scotorum may also suggest aspirations of a more centralized and imperial form of rule.

Brian also fit quite well in the ideals of kingship for the rest of Europe. The king's status as a warrior was slightly different in Carolingian Frankia, as the king himself was not expected to be a great warrior, or even a great commander. While Charlemagne is indeed praised for his skill as a tactician, this praise is relatively rare, and Charlemagne even complains that he must go to battle himself rather than one of his chosen generals. Brian is thus more similar to the Anglo-Saxon kings Alfred and Aethelstan, being an active warrior and military commander for most of his life, only leaving front-line command to his sons when he is old or it is a holy day. Brian also finds similarity to these two kings, and especially to Aethelstan, in being portrayed as a hero that fought in a climatic battle that saved his respective kingdom from foreign invaders, those invaders also both ironically being Vikings. Depictions of Brian's piety are also quite similar, as Brian would donate to the Church and sponsor the construction of Churches in a similar manner as Charlemagne and Alfred. Brian has also been presented as a Davidic warrior for God in much the same way as Charlemagne and Alfred. However, depictions of Brian have him much more in tune with the pagan past than these European kings. Brian was also praised as a builder and a patron of knowledge, a trait that is not often seen in Irish accounts of kings but is used often when praising European rulers. This may have been done in an attempt to associate him with these revered rulers and place him as a wise ruler who facilitated the improvement of his kingdom both structurally and intellectually. In addition, as noted above, Brian and those that wrote of him may have been influenced by the development of kingship, including the titles that

these kings used, when he took the title of *Imperator Scotorum*. This may show an attempt by Brian to exercise a direct, singular rule over Ireland in a similar manner as other European kings.

The ideals of Scandinavian kingship and Irish kingship seem to be quite similar, and it is no great surprise that Brian was able to meet those requirements, being in such close proximity to this culture. He was a great and active warrior not content to simply sit and let others do the fighting. He won his authority at the point of a sword, much as the venerated St. Olaf had. He also once again shared the status of being a hero, as well as a martyr, who died in a great battle attempting to save his kingdom from foreign conquest. Both kings represented great Christian piety, to the point where both were in one way or another considered sacred or holy by those that wrote of them, with even Scandinavian accounts noting that Brian's blood performed miracles. Though, again, Brian is more in tune with his pagan past than Olaf and other Scandinavian kings. Both Irish and Scandinavian ideas of kingship required that the ideal king be a just judge, and Brian is noted as judging justly in much the same manner as Olaf or any other ideal Scandinavian king. The requirement that a king be generous was also shared between the two cultures, and both Brian and his Scandinavian counterparts are shown as being openhanded and giving not only to their troops but to commoners. Such generosity inspires loyalty and the generous lord is simultaneously seen as the honorable and worthy lord. Perhaps most significantly, Brian appears in Scandinavian literature and is judged a good king despite being an enemy. The Scandinavians themselves declare that Brian fits their criteria of the ideal king.

However, there is another trait that each of these kings share with one another. Each of them has become a symbol of national identity that can still be seen to this day, and some can even be described as founding father-like figures. Charlemagne, despite also being linked to

Germans and Italians, in undeniably linked to the French identity, with some even claiming that he is a symbol of the French people and their ideals.³⁸⁴ Alfred the Great is considered the “founder of the Royal Navy,” and the “Father of England.”³⁸⁵ For St. Olaf, he is the patron saint of Norway, its Eternal King who holds the earthly kings of Norway as his vassals, who defend Norway in his name. Even the coat of arms of Norway, still in use today, includes Olaf’s silver axe.

Brian is no different. Like Olaf, he too is part of his nation’s symbolism. The harp that is so prominent in Ireland’s coat of arms is a depiction of an actual harp that is known as Brian Boru’s harp, though there is no evidence that he actually owned it.³⁸⁶ But more than this, Brian is seen as a hero and inspiration to the Irish and to the ideal of an Irish nation. No matter how true the statement may be that Brian freed Ireland from foreign domination, that is how he is viewed in the popular mind, especially among the Irish people. From the Norman invasion of 1169 until the Easter Uprising of 1916, Brian’s name is invoked in calls for Irish nationalism. The poem that has been mentioned several times in this thesis, “To you alone, Brian of Ireland,” includes a section that reads, “the Foreigners did not inhabit Ireland from then onward until today, until the Earl came today,” the Earl referring to Strongbow.³⁸⁷ The poem later poses this question:

When will there come the like of Brian
South or north, east or west,
Who will protect the Irish against evil
As he alone protected?³⁸⁸

³⁸⁴ Morrissey, xviii.

³⁸⁵ Abels, 4.

³⁸⁶ Duffy, “Imperator Scotorum,” 11.

³⁸⁷ Duffy, *Battle of Clontarf*, 268.

³⁸⁸ Duffy, *Battle of Clontarf*, 269.

The people of Ireland believed that Brian was a hero, a liberator and savior of the Irish people. And this belief did not stop in the medieval period. Daniel O’Connell’s campaign to repeal the Act of Union in the 1840s included a massive gathering at Clontarf, choosing it because it was where one group of foreigners was expelled from Ireland, so it was fitting that it be the place where another was expelled.³⁸⁹ A final example can be found in the feelings of the 1916 Easter Uprising, when the execution of the leaders was likened to Brian’s martyrdom at Clontarf.³⁹⁰ Brian is thus a symbol of nationalism to the Irish people, an icon of resistance and independence, perhaps even a founder of their nation. In my own personal experience, I asked my host family in Ireland if they had ever heard the name of Brian Boru. They immediately answered yes, that he was taught in primary schools to children, and that he was a national symbol no different than George Washington might be for Americans. Brian has remained fixed in the minds and identity of the Irish. He is a symbol of ideal kingship, of a changing concept of kingship in the early medieval period, and of Ireland itself. While there are still questions and ongoing debate about Brian, and while I hold no delusion that my research will bring about any definitive new view, I believe that Brian is a fascinating figure of study. I believe that this thesis has demonstrated the possibility that Brian advanced the idea of kingship within Ireland, drawing influence not only from his native land, but from the revered rulers of Europe and the concepts held by the “Foreigners” that inhabited his kingdom. I believe that Brian represents a form of kingship that demonstrates an evolution in early medieval kingship, a transitional and perhaps unfinished phase that was brought about through mutual influence within the European world.

³⁸⁹ Ibid, 277.

³⁹⁰ Ibid, xiv.

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