

**ON THE
FOMORIANS AND
THE NORSEMEN**

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BY

DUALD MAC FIRBIS

THE ORIGINAL IRISH TEXT,

EDITED, WITH

TRANSLATION AND NOTES

BY

ALEXANDER BUGGE

PROFESSOR IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CHRISTIANIA

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The tract on the Fomorians and the Lochlannachs (i. e. Norsemen) forms part of the »Book of Pedigrees« (*Leabhar Genealach*), a work compiled by the Irish historian and antiquary Duaid Mac Firbis (*Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhísigh*), »the last of a long line of historians and chroniclers of Lecan *Mic Fhirbhísigh*, in the barony of *Tir-Fhiachradh*, or Tíreragh, in the county of Sligo.«¹⁾ Duaid Mac Firbis who is one of the foremost names of the Irish Renaissance, belonged to an ancient family, of which many members have been distinguished by literary achievements. The Great Book of Lecan, now in the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, was compiled in the year 1416 by Gilla Isa Mór, the direct ancestor of Duaid Mac Firbis, and the Yellow Book of Lecan, now in the library of Trinity College, Dublin, was written in the year 1391 by Donogh Mac Firbis.²⁾ Duaid Mac Firbis was born in the latter part of the 16th century. He was a young man about the year 1595, and he was unfortunately murdered at Dunfin, in the county of Sligo, in 1670. His most important work is »The Book of Pedigrees«. This large and comprehensive volume of the pedigrees of nearly all the most important ancient Irish and Anglo-Norman families was compiled in the year 1650. Mac Firbis himself says in the preface to his work: »The branches of relationship and genealogical ramifications of every colony that took possession of Erin, traced from this time up to Adam (excepting only those of the Fomorians, Lochlannachs, and Saxon-Galls, of whom we however treat as they have settled in our country), together with a sanctilogium and a catalogue of the kings of Erin; and finally, an index, which comprises, in alphabetical order, the surnames, and the remarkable places

¹⁾ E. O'Curry, MS. materials of Irish History, p. 120. ²⁾ MS. Materials, p. 125.

mentioned in this book, which was compiled by Duaid Mac Firbis of Lecan, 1650.*¹⁾

The original manuscript of the »Book of Pedigrees« is in the possession of the Earl of Roden. But the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, possesses an excellent fac-simile copy, made in the year 1836 by the late E. O'Curry whose services to Irish history and literature cannot be too highly appreciated. I have not seen the original manuscript, but during my stay in Dublin, the autumn and winter 1901—1902, I was able to make use of used O'Curry's copy. I am much indebted to the officials of the Academy for kind assistance given me while studying the manuscripts under their charge.

The tract on the Fomorians and Lochlannachs forms the 9th book of Mac Firbis's work, and its pages are numbered p. 768—777, these figures, no doubt, referring to the numbering of the pages of the original MS., for in O'Curry's own copy the whole tract only occupies little more than five pages. Mac Firbis's tract consists of two distinct parts. In the first part he gives a short review of the history of the Norsemen in Ireland; in the second he deals with the so called Fomorians and with the Irish families who are descended from the Norsemen, and lastly he gives the pedigrees of the Mac Leods and of the Mac Cabes. Most of what Mac Firbis tells us in the first part of his treatise is also found in the annals, and especially it bears a strong resemblance to the beginning of »The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill« (*Cogadh Gaedhil re Gal-laibh*), edited by the late Dr. Todd.²⁾ In fact, at first sight one would think that Mac Firbis had only given a short summary of this famous work. But a closer inspection of the facts will show that Mac Firbis gives some references, which are not to be found elsewhere. I refer to the two lists of Viking chieftains. »The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill« contains two similar lists, one in chapter XXXVI (about the year 930), and the other in ch. CXVII (an enumeration of chieftains killed in the battle of Clontarf in 1014). But the names which Mac Firbis gives, are not exactly the same as those found in »The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill«; they have more resemblance to the list given in the »Annals of Clonmacnois« (a^o 830, p. 133). And neither of these works mention

¹⁾ MS. Materials, pp. 121 and 541. ²⁾ *Rerum Britannicarum mediæ ævi scriptores*, London 1809.

in what parts of Ireland the above mentioned Vikings plundered and settled down. Mac Firbis is the only author who gives information about this. In the second part of his work he also gives some details which are not found elsewhere, e. g. the fact that Amhlaibh of PortLairge (i. e. Waterford) was present in the battle of Clontarf, and the epithets »Magnus of the swift ship«, and »Ivar of the judgments«. This shows that Mac Firbis has made use of some Manuscripts now lost. He himself quotes the »Great Book of Lecan of Mac Firbis«, compiled in the year 1416 by Gilla Isa Mór Mac Firbis of Lecan Mic Fhirbisigh. The original MS. of this work still exists, in the Library of the Royal Irish Academy, in Dublin, but it contains nothing relating to the history of the Norsemen in Ireland. O'Curry, who has drawn attention to this curious fact, in his Academy Catalogue (p. 832), preserved in the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin, says that Mac Firbis in his »Book of Pedigrees« tells us »that the pedigrees and wars and battles of the Danes in Ireland are to be found in the Great Book of Lecan Mac Firbis, but of these tracts not a vestige remains in this book«. This shows that some parts of the Great Book of Lecan are now lost. The lost portion has no doubt contained a tract corresponding to the beginning of the »War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill«, but in a somewhat different and, I think, more original form than does O'Clerys copy, corresponding to the defective copy in the Book of Leinster.¹⁾ This I conclude from the fact that Mac Firbis gives some names in a better form. He writes f. i. *Toirberd dubh*, while »The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill« has the corrupt *Toirberdach* (ch. XXXVI). Besides, Mac Firbis has probably used some other now lost sources. The »War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill« takes us down to the battle of Clontarf; but Mac Firbis must also have known something of the later history of the Norsemen in Ireland. He tells us that »Magnus of the swift ship, son of the king of Lochlann« (*Maghnus na loinge luaithe mac righ Lochlann*), and his descendants in Ireland are mentioned in the Great Book of Lecan. O'Donovan thinks that this Magnus is the same as Magnus, son of Harold, king of Man, who is mentioned by the Four Masters A. D. 972. »The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill« men-

¹⁾ Printed at the end of the »War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill«.

tions (ch. LIII and LIII) another Magnus, of Limerick (*Mannus Lumnig*, also called *Maghnas Berna*), who was killed in the year 968. Both these chieftains were, however, comparatively obscure persons, and neither of them could be called »son of the king of Norway (Lochlann)«. But there was another, more famous, Magnus, viz. the Norwegian king Magnus Bareleg, who was killed in Ulster in the year 1103. This Magnus enjoyed a great fame, especially in Ireland. On his expeditions to the British Islands, he conquered the Hebrides and Anglesey, and was acknowledged by the men of Dublin as their king. It once looked as if he was going to conquer all Ireland. The Manx Chronicle¹⁾ tells us that Magnus sent his shoes to the high-king of Erin, Muichertach, ordering him to wear them on his shoulders on Christmas Day in the presence of his ambassadors, as a token of submission, and that Muichertach obeyed this command. Ordericus Vitalis even says that king Magnus was married to a daughter of king Muichertach, but that afterwards he sent her back (Ordericus Vitalis, ed. Duchesne, p. 767). With the death of Magnus, however, the Norwegian danger passed away. King Magnus very early became celebrated in Irish poetry and tales. In the ancient vellum MS. »Leabhar Breac« there is a stanza where he is called »Magnus of the fearful battles« (*Magnus ná timu troit*).²⁾ About 1500 he already has become a hero of the Ossianic cycle. One of the tales of a MS. from about 1600 describes an expedition of Finn and his men to Lochlann or Norway, where they destroyed the kingdom of »Magnus the great«.³⁾ Poems from the 17th and 18th centuries sing about Magnus »king of Norway« or »king of Bergen«, as he is also called, his expeditions to Ireland, and his battles with Finn and the Fianna.⁴⁾

On the other hand, Magnus has himself made a still existing love-poem on an Irish girl, and one of his sons, the later king Harald Gille, was born in Ireland or in the Hebrides by an Irish mother. This seems to prove that Magnus of the swift ship is identical with the Norwegian king Mag-

¹⁾ A. D. 1098. The Norwegian historian, P. A. Munch, has proved that the actual date was 1101. ²⁾ Leabhar Breac: photolith. ed., p. 256, in the margin. ³⁾ A. Bugge, *Vikingerne*, p. 166. ⁴⁾ Miss Brook, *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (Dublin 1789); A. Bugge, *Contributions to the History of the Norsemen in Ireland II* (Christiania Videnskabselskabs Skrifter, 1900).

nus Bareleg. This king is also mentioned in the Annals of the Four Masters, the Annals of Ulster etc.; but none of them calls him »Magnus of the swift ship«. This epithet must, however, be ancient, because it is also found in a pedigree of the Mac Leods in a MS. in the Advocates Library in Edinburgh, from ca. 1550.¹⁾ The Ossianic poem, printed by Miss Brooke gives him similar epithets, f. i. *Maghnus righ Lochlainn na long m-breac* (»Magnus, king of Norway, of the spotted ships«), and »the Great Magnus of the successfull ships«. The expression »Magnus of the swift ship« seems to belong to a poem or to a heroic tale. The Annals and Sagas such as »The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill« do not use similar expressions. I therefore conclude that Mac Firbis has known a now lost poem or a tale on Magnus Bareleg, king of Norway. The Ossianic poems about him must certainly be based on a more ancient historic poem. But Mac Firbis must have used other sources than the Great Book of Lecan. At the end of his tract on the Fomorians and Lochlannachs, he quotes »Another account«, and »A tract of an old book«. These tracts seem to have contained pedigrees of Irish and Scotch families, e. g. of the Mac Leods. Mac Firbis's treatise thus contains a great deal of historical interest, giving us details which we should not else have known. But he is not quite to be relied upon. He confounds the mythical Fomorians and the historical Lochlannachs or Norsemen, and seems to think that the Fomorians were Scandinavian searobbers. Professor Zimmer has proved²⁾ that *fomor* originally signifies »a giant«. But during the Viking-Ages the conception of a »Fomor« was greatly altered and influenced by tales of the Scandinavian searobbers, and especially of the wild *berserker*. This explains that there are many Norwegian and Danish elements in the Fomorian tales. Thus the story in »The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill« about the tyranny of the Norsemen in Ireland (ch. XL) has passed into a tale about the Fomorians at the time of king Nuada of the Silver Hand, where it is said, that the Fomorians came from Lochlann. This explains, why Mac Firbis confounds the Fomorians and the Norsemen. The pedigree of the Mac

¹⁾ See the notes at the end of this paper. ²⁾ Ueber die frühesten Berührungen der Iren mit den Nordgermanen, p. 34. ³⁾ A. Bugge, Contributions, II p. 15 f.