

Brian was here

by Cormac Burke

Ireland's most famous king, Brian Boru, was buried in Armagh in 1014. But he had made an earlier visit. In 1004 Brian toured the north in triumph, collected hostages and left twenty ounces of gold on Patrick's altar. It was then that the following entry was made in Latin in a blank space in the Book of Armagh: (see illustration)

Saint Patrick, when going to Heaven, ordered that the whole fruit of his labour ... should be paid to the apostolic city which in Irish is named Ard Mhacha. So have I found in the books of the Irish. I, namely Máel Suthain, have written [this] in the sight of Brian, emperor of the Irish, and what I have written he has confirmed for all the kings of Cashel.

The scribe was Brian's secretary, and it may be that the king himself was unable to write. Brian was remembered, nevertheless, as a patron of learning, having sent overseas for books to replace those lost in the Viking wars. That Brian styled himself 'emperor of the Irish' illustrates his grand designs, and he probably had the great Charlemagne in mind as role-model, if not indeed Constantine, the Roman emperor who had embraced the Christian faith. Nor was it an accident that Brian's visit was recorded in a famous manuscript. The Book of Armagh was regarded as a relic of Patrick, even though (as we now know) it was

written in 807, centuries after Patrick had died. But such was its association with the patron saint that the book was counted as a symbol of office by the abbots of Armagh. Two other symbols were the famous bell and staff which Patrick was believed to have used.

No doubt the symbols of the Armagh abbots were carried in procession on the day of Brian's funeral in 1014. His body had been brought from Clontarf, via Swords, Duleek and Louth and must have been formally received and waked at these and other places along the way. Armagh had previously seen royal burials, and a tomb (or cemetery) was reserved for kings of the northern Uí Néill. But Brian was treated differently - perhaps with greater reverence - and was buried within the church to which he had brought gold in 1004. He was laid to rest (as a later source records) in the north-western quarter, perhaps in a recess or aisle. It is a sad reflection of the discontinuity of our history that the original church no longer stands and that the exact location of Brian's grave is today unknown.

