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NORMANS IN IRELAND



▲ The main kingdoms of Ireland

After the Battle of Clontarf in **1014** the Vikings, or Norsemen as they are also known, settled down to live in Ireland. They controlled a number of port towns (Dublin, Wexford, Waterford, Cork and Limerick). They became important traders who intermarried with the Irish and often supported various chieftains who were fighting for power. Ireland was ruled at the time by a number of powerful families.

Three family chieftains were seeking to be high king of Ireland: Turlough O'Connor from Connaught, Muircertach Mac Lochlainn of Aileach

in Ulster and Diarmaid Mac Murrough of Ferns in Leinster.

In **1152** these three chieftains crushed the army of another chieftain called Tiernan O'Rourke. His territory of Breifne was taken, his wealth of cattle stolen and as a final insult Mac Murrough kidnapped O'Rourke's wife Dervorgilla. Fourteen years later O'Rourke took his revenge in battle, and Mac Lochlainn was killed.

Ruairí O'Connor (Turlough's son) then made peace with Tiernan O'Rourke and they marched on Dublin. Ruairí was made high-king of Ireland. O'Rourke and his other allies who now included the Vikings of Dublin marched against Mac

Despite Irish feuding in the 11th and early 12th centuries the country produced beautiful art and architecture during that time. Two fine examples of this are Cormac's Chapel on the rock of Cashel and the Cross of Cong (now in the National Museum).

Murrough. Diarmaid fled to Wales. With a small band of loyal allies and his daughter Aoife, he sought the help of the Normans to regain his kingdom.

The Normans

Vikings or Norsemen had also settled in France in the 10th century. The place where they settled became known as Normandy and they were known as Normans. This powerful group, with William the Conqueror as their leader, defeated the English in 1066 at the Battle of Hastings. They took over England and eventually conquered the Celtic people of Wales. By 1155 the Norman King, Henry II, was considering invading Ireland with permission from Pope Adrian IV.

The Grianán of Aileach at Carrowreagh on the Inishowen peninsula in Donegal was extensively reconstructed in the last century. It is a fine example of an Irish hill fort.



▲ A map of Europe from *The Typography of Ireland*

Much of the information we have about this time in Irish history comes from two main sources. Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald the Welshman) wrote *The Topography of Ireland* and *The Conquest of Ireland* around 1180. He collected first-hand accounts of the invasion from the Normans, many of whom were relatives of his own. The second source is a long poem in French called *Le Chanson de Dermot e li Quens* (*The Song of Dermot and the Earls*). The author of this work was probably a Norman monk who lived in Ireland for a while.

Diarmaid Mac Murrough went from Wales to France in his search for help. Henry II was in France when Diarmaid met him in the spring of 1167. Henry did not promise help but cleverly agreed that Diarmaid could

find help among the Normans in Wales. These Welsh Normans worried Henry because they were becoming a powerful threat to his own reign in England. Diarmaid went back to Wales but even with Henry's letter of approval he found it difficult to get help. Eventually, Earl Richard Fitzgilbert de Clare, better known as Strongbow, agreed to help.

Strongbow was from a famous Norman family but Henry had confiscated their lands. Strongbow and many of his allies were delighted by Diarmaid's promises of land. To secure the agreement, Diarmaid pledged his daughter Aoife in marriage to Strongbow and declared that he would become king of Leinster after Diarmaid's own death.

In **1169** the first Normans landed at Bannow Bay in Wexford under Robert Fitzstephen. Other landings followed with Maurice Fitzgerald. In **1170** Raymond le Gros Fitzgerald defeated the Irish at Baginbun in a decisive battle. Strongbow arrived in August **1170**.

According to the old rhyme 'At the creeke of Baginbunne Ireland was lost and wonne'.

Henry, king of England, duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, and count of Anjou, to all his liegemen, English, Normans, Welsh and Scots, and to all nations subject to his sway, greeting: Whensoever these letters shall come unto you, know that we have received Dermot, prince of Leinster, into our grace and favour; wherefore whosoever within the bounds of our territories shall be willing to give him aid, as our vassal and liegeman, in recovering his dominion, let him be assured of our favour and licence in that behalf.

▲ Henry's letter to Mac Murrough

King Dermot, then you must know
Goes everywhere seeking aid.
And everywhere he seeks
In Wales and in England.
So far did he ask for aid
Up and down in this kingdom
That he had an interview,
So says the geste, with Earl Richard.

▲ Lines from *The Song of Dermot and the Earls*

Waterford was captured and Aoife and Strongbow were married. Mac Murrough and the Normans now marched on Dublin and despite the efforts of Ruairí O'Connor and his allies (20,000 Irish against 5,500 Normans), Dublin was captured. Ruairí was high-king now in name only. Diarmaid himself died in **1171** and Strongbow became king of Leinster.

For inviting the Normans to Ireland Diarmaid Mac Murrough became despised in Irish history and was known as Diarmaid na nGall or Diarmaid of the Foreigners.

Henry II began to worry that Strongbow was becoming too powerful. He arrived in Ireland in **1172** with a huge army and many Gaelic chieftains submitted to him and he regranted their lands to them. They hoped that he would protect them from the Norman lords who were taking their land. Henry was proclaimed Lord of Ireland but before returning to England in **1172** he

granted Meath to **Hugh de Lacy**. He also gave land to other Norman lords and drew up a charter for Dublin, granting the city to the men of Bristol. When Henry returned to England the Normans continued capturing land.

To the Norman lords Ireland was a rich and bountiful place.

This is how Giraldus describes it:

'The tillage land is exuberantly rich, the fields yielding large crops of corn, herds of cattle graze on the mountains, the woods abound with wild animals.' Irish people at the time had a rich and varied diet and besides bread they ate meat, fish, cheese, fruit, nuts, butter, vegetables, milk and mead. Giraldus tells us that young people grew tall, with handsome figures and fresh complexions. Cattle and animals were the chief form of currency. Giraldus found the men's beards barbarous but he admired the high artistic and musical achievements of the native Irish.



▲ Digging and sowing

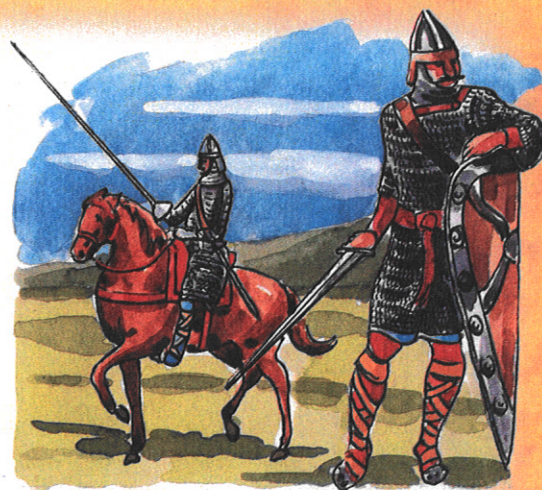


▲ An Irish harpist

It was no wonder then that the Normans wished to extend their control over more of Ireland. They were able to do this for a number of reasons. They were experienced soldiers who fought to a well organised plan. Irish soldiers on the other hand charged bravely but in disarray. Norman weapons like the long sword and lance were superior to the Irish axe and short sword. The Normans wore iron helmets and suits of chain mail or hauberks as protection while the Irish wore linen tunics. Norman knights on horseback must have been a terrifying sight to the Irish footsoldiers. On top of all this, Irish spears, javelins and sling-stones were no match for the Welsh archers with their deadly cross-bows that could kill or seriously injure at 200 metres.

However, one of the main reasons for the Norman supremacy was that the Irish were constantly fighting among themselves and failed to unite to defeat the invaders.

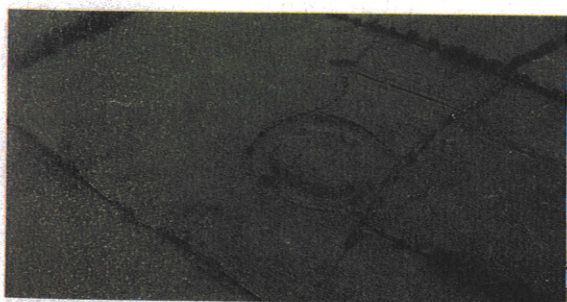
The Normans were excellent colonisers and administrators. Once an area was conquered they erected defences at strategic points. These motte-and-bailey castles were much more secure than the Irish-style rath.



▲ Norman arms and armour

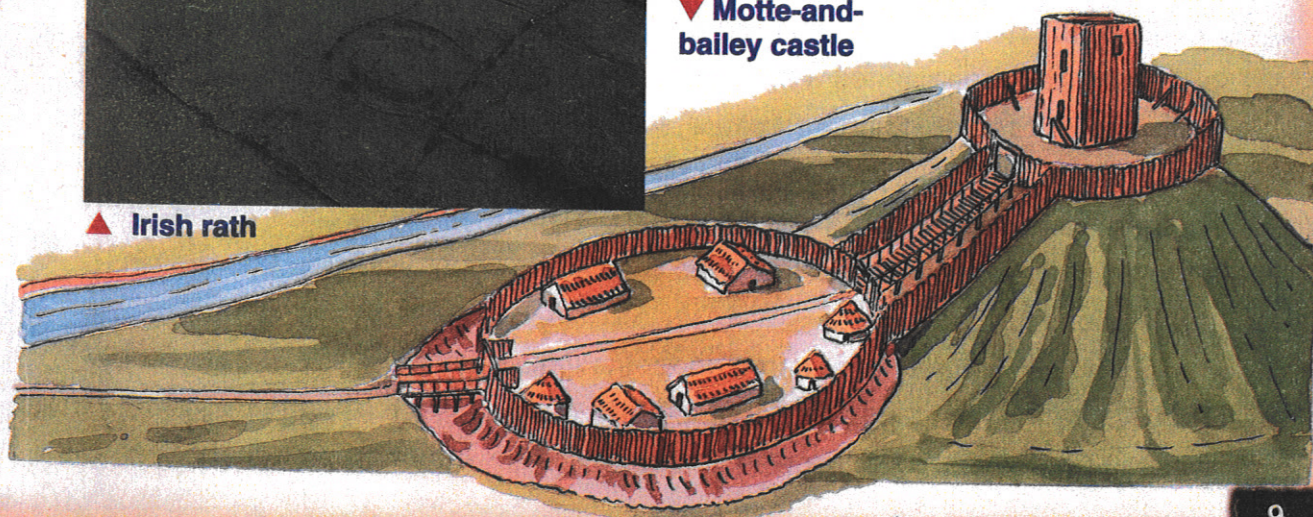


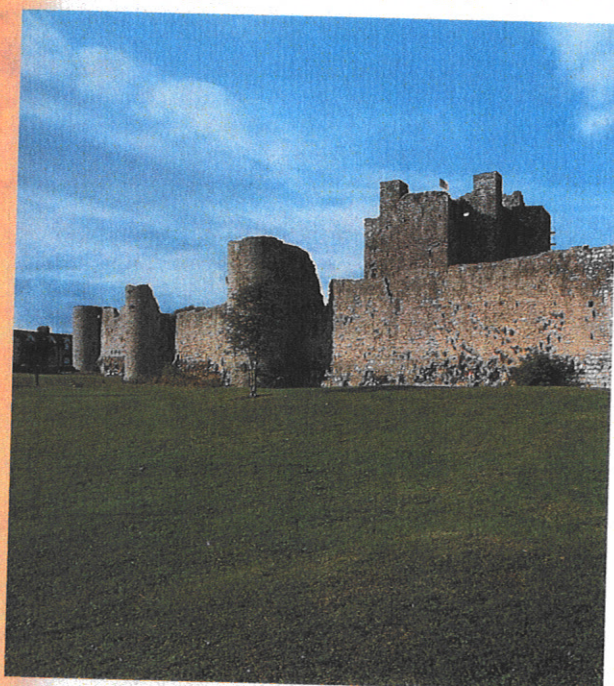
▲ Irish fighters



▲ Irish rath

▼ Motte-and-bailey castle





▲ Trim castle

Later, fine stone castles were built. The Irish countryside is now dotted with these castles or their ruins. Towns and abbeys were often established by the Normans around these castles – for example, Trim, Nenagh, Athlone, Carlingford and Roscommon.

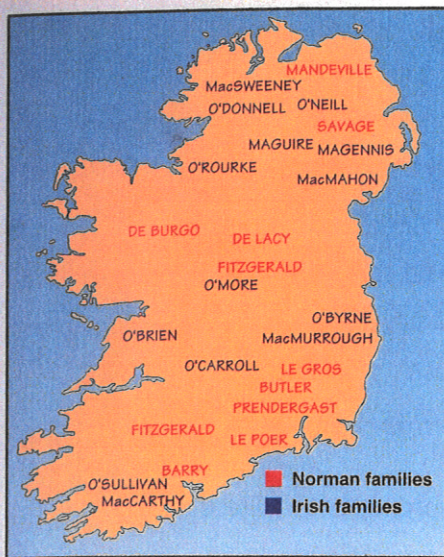
A feudal system was put in place by these new colonisers to replace the Irish Brehon system. Under the feudal system Henry II owned all the land and granted sections to various Norman lords. They subdivided it among their noblemen, knights and followers. In many cases the ordinary Irish people of an area remained on their land under the new masters.

Peasants were also brought from England to farm the land. These peasants paid a rent for the land and had to fight for the Norman lord when this was required.

Strongbow died in **1176** and was buried in Christ Church, Dublin. John de Courcy emerged as the Norman strongman and ruthlessly conquered Ulster. The Book of Leinster records the death of Ruairi O'Connor in the abbey at Cong in **1198**. He was buried in Clonmacnoise. It was the end of an era in Irish history.

By **1250** the Normans had control of three-quarters of Ireland. Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries were established from the grants of wealthy Normans. For the next hundred years, however, the Irish fought back. The Black Death or plague reached Ireland in **1348**, killing more people than died in all the wars. The Normans, living closely in their towns and villages, suffered much more than the Irish who lived in the countryside; 14,000 died in Dublin alone.

Gradually Norman lords came under the influence of the Gaelic way of life. They spoke the Irish language, adopted Irish customs such as fostering, dressed like the Irish and followed Brehon law. They intermarried with the Irish



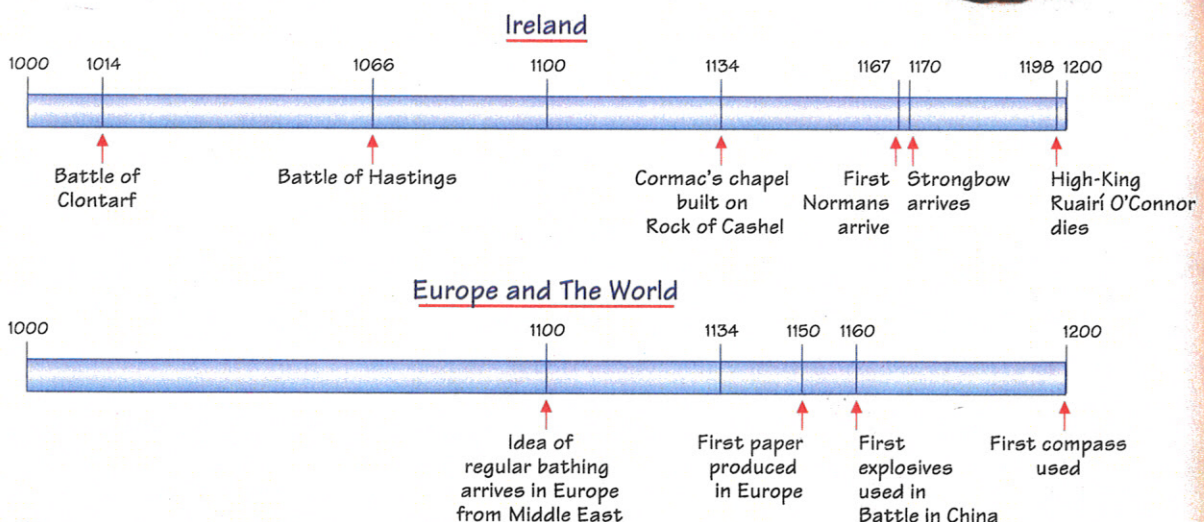
▲ Norman and Irish family names

native poets or musicians, follow Irish customs or traditions, wear Irish clothes, or trade with the Irish. However these laws were mostly ignored. Ties between the Norman lords and the Irish continued to grow.

and paid little attention to the English king or his viceroys in Ireland. By the **1360s** only an area around Dublin called the Pale was controlled by the English colonists. The English kings feared that the Normans were becoming more Irish than the Irish themselves. In **1366** a parliament was held in Kilkenny, stronghold of the Butler family. Laws called the Statutes of Kilkenny were passed. According to these laws a Norman who married an Irish native had his or her lands confiscated by the king. Normans were forbidden to speak Irish, keep

The children's rhyme Ring-a-ring-a-rosie recalls the Black Death. 'Rosies' refer to the red blotches on the skin, 'posies' were perfumed cloths which people carried to cover their noses and 'we all fall down' refers to death.

Time-Charts



Local History

The tomb of Strongbow can be seen in Christ Church in Dublin today.

ACTIVITIES

1. Answer these questions.

- A. What was the name of Ruairí O'Connor's father?
- B. Where did the Irish high-king live?
- C. In the 12th century what Irish family ruled most of Sligo and Leitrim?
- D. How did the Normans get their name?
- E. In what year was the Battle of Hastings?
- F. What was Strongbow's full name?
- G. Where did the Normans first land in Ireland?
- H. Name five Norman lords who were part of the Norman invasion.
- I. Describe a Norman soldier.
- J. Name four things Norman lords could not do, according to the Statutes of Kilkenny.

2. Think about it.

- A. Why was *The Song of Dermot and the Earls* written in French?
- B. Think of two reasons why the Normans selected Wexford as their first landing place.
- C. Why was it possible for 5,500 Normans to defeat the 20,000-strong army of Ruairí O'Connor?
- D. Describe how land was divided under the Norman feudal system.
- E. How did the Normans begin to become 'more Irish than the Irish themselves'?

3. Explain these words, using your own sentences.

Intermarried; confiscated; disarray; archers; hauberks; colonisers; the Pale

4. To do.

- A. Dramatise the conversation between Henry 11 and Diarmuid Mac Murrough when Diarmuid came looking for help.
- B. Make a model of a motte-and-bailey using lollipop sticks and márla.
- C. Design the front page of a newspaper and write the article for the day that Aoife and Strongbow got married.
- D. Compose other short poems (like the Baginbunne rhyme) about the various incidents surrounding the Norman Invasion.
- E. Imagine that all your class were children in Waterford when the Normans captured it. Describe your experiences.
- F. Collect information about the Black Death and present it as a book.