

GALLOGLASS 1250–1600

Gaelic Mercenary Warrior



FERGUS CANNAN

ILLUSTRATED BY SEÁN Ó'BRÓGÁIN

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother Joan Cannan, née Ross (1918–2002), whose ancestor was wounded at Dundalk serving with Edward Bruce in the 14th century. ‘*Cuiridh mi clach air do chàrn.*’

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GALLOGLASS

1250–1600

INTRODUCTION

The galloglass lived for war. As a mercenary in a land broken by conflict, his sole function was to fight and his only contribution to society was destruction. Ireland was the country in which he fought; Ireland's chiefs and warlords were his paymasters. Without the protection of galloglass, no Irish chief could hope to stay in power. In war, they formed his elite vanguard; in peace, they acted as his bodyguards and enforcers of his will. From a time when Edward I was still a young prince and Robert Bruce not yet born, until the age of Shakespeare and Raleigh, galloglass were Ireland's most fearsome fighting men.

Yet the galloglass did not originate in Ireland. His homelands were the islands and coastal regions of Scotland's rugged western seaboard, primarily Argyll and the Western Isles. The Western Isles were especially steeped in Viking heritage and had come to be known in Gaelic – the language of the Irish, Manx and most Scots – as the *Innse-Gall*, 'Isles of the Foreigners'. It is this *gall* that is present in 'galloglass', an Anglicization of the Gaelic *gallóglach*, or in its plural form *gallóglai*gh. Together with *óglach*, Gaelic for 'youth', 'servant' or 'warrior', 'galloglass' translates literally as 'foreign warrior', and by implication as 'warrior from the Norsemen's Isles'.

CHRONOLOGY

11th–12th century	Scots recruited by Irish provincial kings as crack infantry and bodyguards.
1171	Henry II of England lands in Ireland, claiming it as a subject land.
1259	MacRory <i>gallóglai</i> gh serving in Ireland.
1265–67	MacSweeney warriors mentioned in Ireland for the first time.
1266	Western Isles ceded to Scotland by Norway.
1290	MacDonnell galloglass mentioned for first time in earliest known use of term 'galloglass' in full.

1309	Exiled MacDougalls (later called MacDowell) in Ireland by early December.
1315	Edward Bruce invades Ireland and is crowned High King the following year.
1315	Autumn: famine spreads through Ireland.
1318	Battle of Faughart; Edward Bruce killed, ending Scottish invasion of Ireland.
1333	English lose control of Ulster and Connacht.
1358	First reference to MacCabe galloglass in Ireland.
1366	Statutes of Kilkenny: Anglo-Irish told they must not speak Irish, intermarry with the Irish, sell armour or horses to the Irish or play hurling; the statutes are largely ignored.
1367	First mention of MacSheehy galloglass in Ireland.
1468	Rebellion in Munster.
1494	Dublin Parliament made subject to decisions of English Privy Council.
1496	Pale limited to Dublin and small surrounding area stretching to Clongowes.
1504	Galloglass of Earl of Kildare and Ulick Burke clash at battle of Knockdoe.
1534–36	Ireland in revolt.
1536	'Reformation Parliament' in Dublin declares Henry VIII supreme head of the Church.
1556	Plantation of Offaly and Laois.
1579	Battle of Monasternenagh, Sir John of Desmond defeated by Sir Nicholas Malby; Earl of Desmond now also in rebellion.
1583	Earl of Desmond killed by government forces.
1585–87	Plantation of Munster and Leinster.
1595	Hugh O'Neill and Red Hugh O'Donnell now in rebellion in Ulster.
1598	Battle of the Yellow Ford, English beaten by O'Neill and O'Donnell.

- 1601 Battle of Kinsale: O'Neill and O'Donnell defeated.
- 1603 Death of Elizabeth I; James VI of Scotland becomes King James I of Scotland, England and Ireland.
- 1607 'Flight of the Earls'; O'Neill (Earl of Tyrone), Rory O'Donnell (Earl of Tyrconnell) and Cuconnachy Maguire (Lord of Fermanagh) leave Ulster for the European Continent, never to return.
- 1608 Plantation of Ulster begins.
- 1618 Thomas Gainsford comments in *The Glory of England*: 'The name of galloglass is in a manner extinct'.

RECRUITMENT

Highland and Island Scots were warriors to the bone. Their ancestors were a mix of warlike Celtic tribesmen and Viking soldier-seafarers, and the two cultures had fused together to create a violent society of tempestuous, ruddy-skinned men. Life in these parts was based around subsistence agriculture, fishing, hunting, fighting and feuding. This was a world in which conflict was a part of daily life. For a young Highlander who had not inherited land or position, prospects were few. Everyday life was so hazardous – whether as a fisherman riding the waves or a peasant famer driving his meagre flock across wind-lashed moors – that it was no great leap into the unknown to become a soldier. For those up to the challenge, it was worth taking a chance in Ireland.

Yet many of the first galloglass – including the MacSweeneys, MacDowells and many MacDonnells – were not men choosing to seek their fortunes in Ireland, but exiles who had been ejected or otherwise fallen foul of the King of Scots. Meanwhile, other MacDonnells (the MacSheehys were a MacDonnell offshoot) and the MacRorys were enthusiastic proponents of Robert and

Edward Bruce's vision of an Ireland 'free' of English rule, seeing rich pickings to be had if the Anglo-Irish barons could be driven from their estates. Ireland offered them both the prospect of power and land, and the opportunity to participate in a (to Scottish eyes) heroic war against the English – a deeply attractive proposition for any self-respecting Scot. The other great galloglass tribe, the MacCabs, are more mysterious, but as an alleged cadet branch of the great MacLeods of Harris they probably found little room for their own ambitions at home. They too would make their own way in the world as mercenaries in war-torn Ireland.

Castle Sween, Scotland. The Mac Suibhne (MacSweeney) family were originally powerful landholders in Knapdale in Argyll, where they built Castle Sween. However, in 1262 the MacSweens (as the name is spelt in Scotland) lost their lands, with royal backing, to the Stewarts of Menteith. Moving to Ireland, they sought revenge by siding with England during the war for Scottish independence. In 1310 Edward II of England bestowed Knapdale on three brothers – 'Swiene of Argyll' – if they could get it back. It was an impossible task but the MacSweens rose instead to become a great power in Ireland as mercenaries. (Crown Copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland)



The English occupation of Ireland began when Dermot MacMurrough, King of Leinster, was deposed by a neighbouring chief in 1166. Foolishly, but understandably, Dermot appealed to England for help. Soon, land-hungry English and Welsh knights were pouring into Ireland. A terrible war of conquest had begun. The native chiefs fought back but, lacking a single king to rally behind, suffered defeat after defeat. By the middle of the next century the English had succeeded in establishing a permanent enclave around Dublin known as the 'Pale', from the Latin for 'stake'. The Irish chiefs faced a stark choice: perish or bring yet more foreign fighters into their country. The foreigners they turned to were the galloglass.

'Home' to Ireland

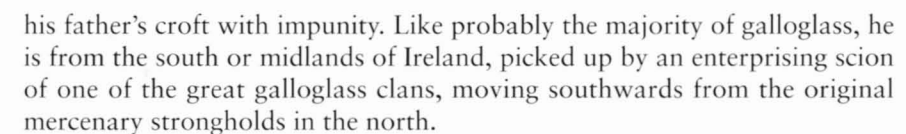
Arriving in their longships in the middle years of the 13th century, the galloglass settled first in the north of Ireland before spreading out across the land. Immediately the advance of the English was checked. Scots quickly acquired a reputation for being instigators of revolt in Ireland – or as the English general Sir Henry Bagenal put it much later in 1592, for being the 'firebrand and nurse of rebellion' in Ireland. Scottish galloglass, generally Highland noblemen of a rather minor, restlessly ambitious or disgraced sort, liked to be flattered by the Irish bards as 'exiled' heroes returning to rescue the Irish 'motherland'. The reality was that most of them simply saw Ireland as a playground for their ambition and a new land to exploit. Nor did they have much interest in the plight of the ordinary Irish people. The Irish people they were interested in were the chiefs and lords of the country – those with money and power to give them.



Inauguration of the chief of the O'Neills at Tullaghogue in an English map of c.1600. A two-handed axe, held aloft on the left, indicates the presence of O'Neill's MacDonnell constable of galloglass at the ceremony. Mac Domhnaill (MacDonnell) and Mac Sithigh (MacSheehy) galloglass were descended from the MacDonalds, a pre-eminent power in the Western Isles. Already deeply involved in Irish affairs by the time of the Bruce invasion, many joined with the Scots assault on Ireland. Other MacDonalds opposed the Bruce brothers but seem also to have been on bad terms with the anti-Bruce MacDougalls. These MacDonalds probably found themselves in reduced circumstances and became galloglass in Ireland. (National Maritime Museum, London)

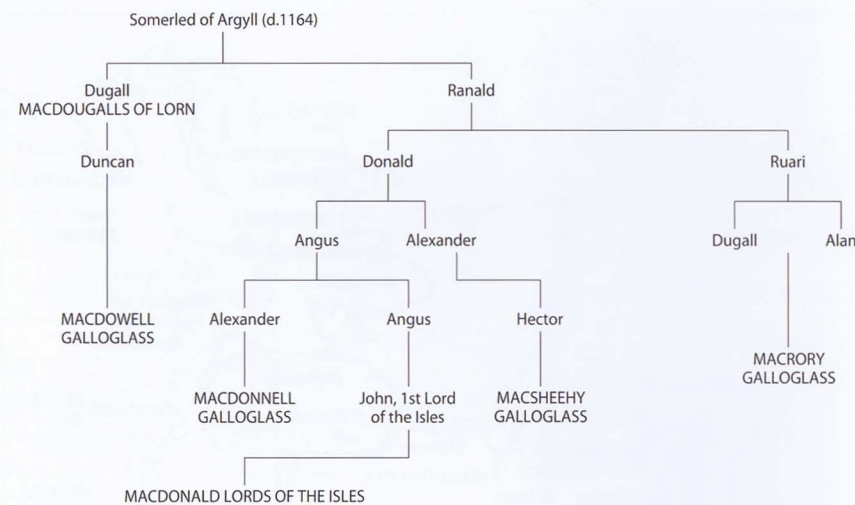


But the Scots galloglass were relatively few in number, and so to extend their influence they began recruiting local Irishmen to fill out the rank and file in their mercenary brigades. We can visualize one of their Irish recruits as a young peasant lad, hardy and brave, though more by necessity than choice, and from the lowliest of backgrounds. Still only a teenager, his whole life has been blighted by war, famine and crop failure. Many of his earliest memories are of gangs of Irish, Anglo-Irish, English and Scottish marauders plundering



The location of the galloglass kindreds in Ireland and principal associated lordships. (Author's image)

The descent from Somerled, vanquisher of the Norse, of the MacDonnell, MacDowell, MacSheehy and MacRory galloglass. The fortunes of the Mac Ruaidhri (MacRory) clan in Scotland were particularly mixed. They took a turn for the worse when Haakon IV of Norway invaded Scotland in 1263 over rights of sovereignty to the Western Isles. As Haakon's vassals on Bute, the MacRorys remained loyal to Norway and were soundly beaten by the King of Scots. The MacRorys then emerged as dogged supporters of Bruce, but in 1346 their last male chief in Scotland was slain by the Earl of Ross.



by Sir John Perrot, then governor of Munster. Perrot warned of 12 months' imprisonment and a fine for any 'son of a husbandman or ploughman' who 'will become a kern, galloglass, or horse-boy, or will take any other idle trade of life'. The implication is that these are the usual suspects who volunteered for galloglass service: Irish farm-boys who had had enough of poverty, back-breaking manual labour and English domination.

Robert Cowley, an Anglo-Irish government official, said of galloglass in 1537 that 'amongst 200 of them' there would be 'scant eight' who were 'gentlemen', with 'all the residue' akin to 'slaves' gathered out of different parts of Ireland. Those eight 'gentlemen' were likely to be Scotsmen of one family and name, and would be not only be the unit's officers, but effectively the board of management of what was, for them, a family enterprise. Galloglass were to the end thought of as 'Scots' and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* repeats the old assumption that 'from the Western Isles / Of kerns and galloglasses is supplied' – but the reality was that probably most galloglass were Irish farm-boys playing the part of Scotsmen.

A

SOMERLED'S DOWRY: DERRY, 1259

It is apparently as items in a dowry that galloglass make their first appearance in Irish history. The *Annals of Loch Cé* say that in 1259 Aodh O'Connor of Connacht (1) went to Derry to marry the daughter of Lord Dugall MacRory of Garmoran, Argyll. His bride (2), continue the same annals, brought 'eight score óglaigh' (young warriors) with her, together with one 'Alan MacSomhairle'. This Alan (3) was Dugall's younger brother and the commander of the 160 warriors, who were certainly galloglass – the missing prefix *gall* is found in the peculiar nickname of the groom, later called by the Loch Cé annals Aodh na-nGall – 'Hugh of the Foreigners'. Alan, depicted here as a heavily-armed nobleman with strong echoes of Scandinavian influence in his attire, eventually returned to Scotland on the death of his brother, succeeding as Lord of Garmoran.

Marriage was an important mechanism for the transfer of galloglass from Scotland to Ireland, and for their subsequent spread throughout Ireland. In fact, Scots had been serving in Irish armies for a long time before 1259. Another descendant of Somerled, one 'MacSomhairle, king of Argyll' was noted by the *Annals of Connacht* as killed alongside many O'Donnells by Anglo-Irish forces at Ballyshannon in 1247. Romance was, of course, incidental to the purpose of the O'Connor-MacRory marriage, and others like it: this was about building an alliance of power between two great Gaelic houses. With good reason, O'Connor looks with wonderment and awe at his wife and her warlike entourage.



Some Irish recruits were of gentle birth; all, however, look to have been penniless drifters, moving up and down the country, living by their wits and their swords. Poverty and misfortune attracted both sides of Ireland to the profession, and the Earl of Kildare's first constable of galloglass was an Anglo-Irish man named Barrett who 'being exiled out of Connaught' (wrote Sir Thomas Luttrell in 1537), became a galloglass officer in command of 24 axemen. Edmund Spenser (c.1552–99) quite wrongly considered the galloglass to be of 'ancient English' stock – nevertheless, among a list of 'kern' receiving the King's pardon in 1546 was the suspiciously English-sounding Robert, 'son of Thomas Browne, kern, or galloglass'.

Casualty rates among galloglass were always high, but Ireland was awash with just the right kind of 'loose young men', to borrow Spenser's phrase, that galloglass captains were looking for: brigands, younger or bastard sons of noblemen, runaway servants, stable-boys and labourers, kern from the retinues of broken lords, prizefighters, wild men, perhaps even the odd English adventurer or deserter turned renegade; a ragtag pack of violent and desperate men.

Once word gets out that galloglass are encamped in the area, our imaginary Irish farm-boy will come forward to humbly offer his services to the commander or 'constable' of the Scots. A galloglass constable was invariably a terrifying Highland autocrat demanding total obedience from his men; his word was absolute. On the other hand, he was likely to inspire respect and loyalty, for the simple reason that his competence as a field officer would be obvious. A constable always led his men from the front, in sharp contrast to the cautious Irish lords who, as the Earl of Essex observed in 1599, 'dare never put themselves to any hazard', getting their kern and 'hirelings' to do the fighting for them.

Mail-clad warrior armed with a two-handed axe from the tomb of Alexander MacLeod, 1528, St Clement's Church, Rodel, Harris, Scotland. (Crown Copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland)



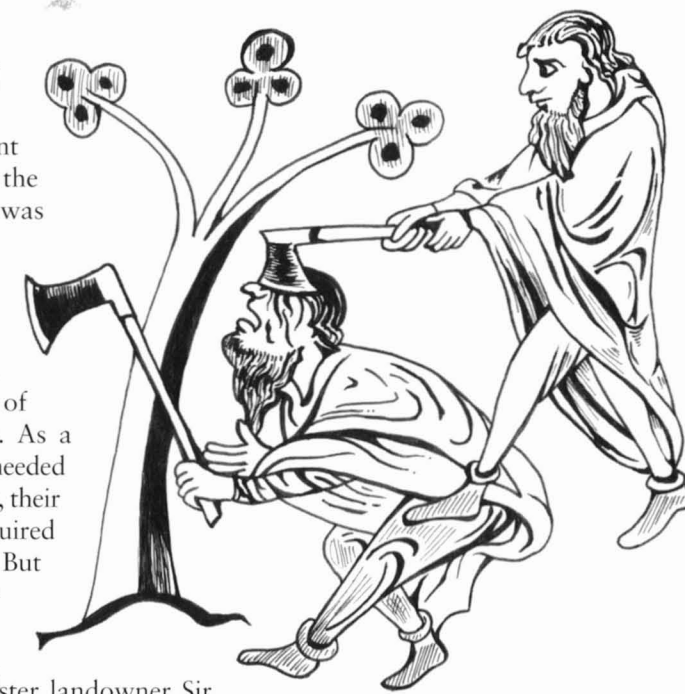
TRAINING AND SELECTION

No questions would be asked of our aspirant galloglass. His past is of no concern to the constable. What concerned the constable was strength and size. These, along with courage, were the essential qualifications for a galloglass. An Irish poem composed in honour of Donal MacSweeney (fl. 1570–1619), last inaugurated 'MacSweeney Fanad', states Donal chose only the strongest men of Fanad, County Donegal, to be his warriors. As a brigade of hand-picked bodyguards, galloglass needed to be men of great height and muscle. For a start, their main weapon, the mighty two-handed axe, required tremendous stamina to be wielded effectively. But above all else, the galloglass were chosen for their size and strength in order to form an impressive physical barricade to their lord, a notion echoed in the 14th century by the Ulster landowner Sir Robert Savage of the Ards who cautioned: 'Better a castle of bones than a castle of stones.'

Galloglass certainly struck the English as physically imposing men. John Dymmok, who served in Ireland with the Earl of Essex at the end of the 1500s, recalled galloglass as 'picked and selected men of great and mighty bodies'. Richard Stanishurst (1547–1618), an Anglo-Irish member of the Inns of Court, described galloglass ('*Galeglasios*' he called them in Latin) as 'tall of stature, big of limb, burly of body, well and strongly timbered' and 'of more than ordinary strength of limb'. Again, the constables were spoilt for choice since the medieval Irish were clearly a lofty and strongly made people, Dymmok finding them 'clear' and 'well-favoured' in complexion, with 'tall and corpulent bodies'. It was now up to the constable to turn these hulking brutes into a working unit of galloglass.

The hereditary tradition

Barnaby Rich (d.1617), an Englishman who had fought galloglass, observed: 'If the father hath been a galloglass, the son will be a galloglass.' In Gaelic Scotland and Ireland occupations were often hereditary, but Rich's statement only really holds true when it comes to the officers. They were likely to come from a family of galloglass and could consider themselves members of the wider Gaelic professional class of hereditary bards, historians, lawgivers, smiths, physicians and others, each of whom was settled on land by a chief in exchange for his particular skill. Thus, in 1607 Sir John Duncan listed for the government some of those 'lands given to certain septs privileged among the Irish, that is the lands of the chroniclers, rhymers and galloglass'.



13th-century Irishmen fighting with axes, from Gerald of Wales' account of Ireland. (Author's drawing)

'Scots in your smooth ship, to plunder on the high sea', rhapsodized one poem concerning the MacSweeneys. This galley (*birlinn*) on MacLeod's tomb at Rodel is the kind of vessel that transported warriors between Scotland to Ireland. (Crown Copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland)





Head of a battleaxe, probably from the 16th century, found in the river Bann. The Scandinavian origins of the galloglass axe are clearly visible in the design of this weapon. (Photograph reproduced courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Northern Ireland)

Head of a battleaxe of galloglass type, from Annaghbeg, County Tyrone, 16th century. A poem says the mere act of taking an axe into hand was enough to make ravens and crows gather over the head of Turlough MacSweeney (probably d.1544), 'grateful for what they get from the slaughter'. (Photograph reproduced courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Northern Ireland)

Our recruit, meanwhile, has no military background. Like most Irishmen, he can handle a sword or bow and is no mean bare-knuckle fighter, but his technique is patchy and he has no knowledge of tactics. The minimum age for a galloglass

was probably 16 or so, since an English document entitled *A description of the power of Irishmen* and compiled in the 1480s, stated of Irish soldiery in general: 'Their sons learn to be men of war from the age of 16 years and be continually practised in toils thereof.' Furthermore, arms-bearing age is stated to be '16 to 60' in grants received by the MacDonnells from the Crown for the manor of Tinnakill, which even in the reign of Charles I came with the condition that they must maintain continually 'twelve expert axe bearers, called Galloglass' for government service.

England's 'foul over-sight'

No strictly formal system of training existed. Instead, men tended to drift into galloglass or kern service as a consequence of some related trade, skill or way of life they already practised. Most Irishmen led rough, brutish lives and with a bit of guidance just about always made excellent soldiers – Essex warned Elizabeth I that only veteran soldiers should be used against the 'hard' common men of O'Neill's rebel army. Spenser said that 'kern' (*ceithearnach*, light native Irish infantryman) were often recruited from the ranks of 'horse-boys' or grooms employed by inns and gentlemen. Their employers were often Englishmen, which Spenser called a 'foul over-sight', since they learned from their masters how to shoot and other useful military skills, making them all the more adept at cutting English throats when they grew up to become kern.



B

TRAINING, c.1450

Mastering the heavy two-handed axe was the first priority of every new galloglass recruit. Here, under the eagle eye of a veteran weapons master, two aspirant galloglass train with wooden poles – a rare concession to safety. Veteran instructors must have drilled their new recruits ruthlessly; there are no accounts of poor weapons skills among galloglass. Stanihurst called them 'powerful swordsmen', meaning they were both skilled and strong in the use of arms. Galloglass stood out in Ireland for their discipline and doughty staying power too, and they must have learned some kind of drill, perhaps practising axe movements en masse, and learning to advance and fall back in formation.

Instructors were fathers, cousins and uncles. They were rarely strangers, making for a familiar, if conservative, training environment. Gainsford noted the Irish bards 'live in a kindred, the father instructing the son or brother, and he his cousin or friend' – the same was almost certainly true of galloglass who belonged to one of the established mercenary families. They learned their trade from childhood and formed the profession's officer class, growing up in self-sufficient 'kindreds' of galloglass, surrounded by other galloglass and their families. Those not born to the profession could be adopted into it, receiving their training in the same close-knit atmosphere of clan and kindred.





Dunollie Castle, near Oban in Scotland, was a seat of MacDougall of Lorn. Once one of the premier families in the Highlands, the Mac Dubhghaill clan were bitter enemies of Robert Bruce. After supporting John Comyn, Bruce's rival for the Scottish throne (who Bruce killed with his own hand), and then Edward II (who Bruce defeated), the MacDougalls were left broken and landless. They made a fresh start as galloglass in Ireland, their name becoming MacDowell. (Author's photograph)

Some galloglass were themselves probably ex-kern who had progressed to a more honourable (so it was considered to be a galloglass) grade of warriorhood. Men of their sort might spend only a season in a galloglass company before moving on, either to another company or a different line of work. At the same time, apprenticeship and fosterage were normal methods of education in Gaelic society and it is perfectly possible that our Irish recruit, in his early teens but already large and showing potential, will be taken on as an apprentice warrior.

Sir Anthony St Leger (c.1496–1559), Lord Deputy of Ireland, reported to Henry VIII that galloglass were always accompanied by 'boys', and Dymmok said each galloglass had 'a man for his harness bearer and a boy to carry his provisions'. These galloglass attendants are called 'knaves' by the *power of Irishmen* report, 'knaue' meaning (then as now) a lower-class rascal, but also a male servant or boy. It is likely that at least some of these 'boys' were trainee galloglass, analogous to squires. Two attendants (sometimes one – no rigid standards existed to be followed, only

traditions) and a galloglass together made a 'spar', the standard sub-unit within the company, and so-named because the galloglass' axe was itself nicknamed a 'spar' in the sense of a cross-beam.

And so begins a long period of apprenticeship as our recruit is taken on as a page and cook to a mature galloglass, as one-third of a spar within a working company of axemen. While training is largely a matter of learning on the job, specialist skills are required of our aspirant galloglass. In a galloglass camp, somewhere in the Irish countryside beyond the reach of English interference, he is taught the use of the two-handed axe, the broadsword and the spear, as well as the use and maintenance of armour. As an Irishman, his instincts are to ambush, harry and skirmish rather than engage – in the words of the *power of Irishmen* report the Irish made: 'Good watchers in the night, as good soldiers by night as others by day.' Now veteran galloglass would teach the young Irish lad how to stand and fight in the cold light of day.

Training is dangerous, bloody and hard, but our recruit is beginning to feel part of something more than a military unit. He is becoming, no less, a member of a family empire and a hereditary caste of warriors. The other trainees hail from disparate clans and regions of the country, and the constable irons out these differences by imparting a sense of loyalty to his family name. His name becomes their professional identity. We therefore find that galloglass serving in County Cork in 1584 were men with unmistakably Irish names like 'Mollaghlen O'Dowgan', 'Earywan m'Shane Y Conigane' and 'William m'Dermody Y Skannell' – but all served under the proud alias of 'M'Swine's galloglass'. It does not take the young farm lad long to realize that it would be better to die than bring dishonour to that name.

The constable is pleased with our recruit's progress and aged about 15 he is reassigned to serve as a 'harness-bearer' to a galloglass. This is a real test of our recruit's abilities because the harness-bearer is expected to go into action with the galloglass, acting as a javelin-thrower and skirmisher for his master. When not in action he must clean and carry the galloglass' armour and weapons or 'harness' – an honour not a chore in Gaelic society. Our young recruit is quickly developing into a hardened, self-reliant survivor, despite his age. He has also started to adopt the haughty mannerisms of the constable and his Scots, who he has heard heaping scorn and ridicule on civilians, the labouring classes, and the English and their jumped-up 'nobility' – mere social climbers only able, at best, to trace their families as far back as the piratical Normans.

APPEARANCE

At last the Irish farm-boy becomes a 'Scot' and is accepted into the galloglass ranks. The constable was right to spot his potential, as he has now grown into a tall and massively strong man. On completion of his training he is obliged to make what Stanihurst called a great devout oath (*magma religione jurat*) that he will never turn his back on the enemy, regardless of the circumstances. Already cultivating a steely disregard for death, everything about him speaks of strength and Gaelic male pride. He may well have grown a heavy moustache, perhaps with beard, and probably styles his long hair into the Irish thick fringe known as a 'glib', which so outraged the Tudors that they legislated against it.

William Camden left a vivid account of the consternation caused by the arrival of Shane O'Neill in London in 1562, having come with his galloglass to negotiate with Elizabeth I: 'And now Shane O'Neill came from Ireland, to keep the promise he had made a year before, with an escort of galloglass armed with battle-axes, bare-headed, with flowing curls, yellow shirts dyed with saffron, large sleeves, short tunics and rough cloaks, whom the English followed with as much wonderment as if they came from China or America.'

Clothing

Though the galloglass maintained a 'Scottish' ethos as a warrior, his clothes were essentially pan-Gaelic attire. A saffron-coloured shirt, as mentioned by Camden, will be the basic item of clothing for our novice galloglass. Known in Gaelic as the *lèine croich*, it was often nothing more than a golden-coloured smock with wide sleeves (useful for concealing weapons and plunder). The finest, however, were enormous, flowing garments, richly dyed and made from as much as 30m of material, which could be lengthened or shortened by the taking up or letting down of surplus cloth at the waist according to conditions of climate.

Most galloglass appear to have worn hose, but many, including their attendants, went 'redshank' or barelegged, like most Gaelic Scots and Irish. Their shoes were no better than those suffered by everyone else of the age, being pieces of hide usually reaching no higher than the ankle and tied with leather laces. The grip they offered was poor and it was often more practical to fight barefooted.

When out of armour, our galloglass wears over his 'saffroned' *lèine* a thickly embroidered jacket reaching the waist (hence Camden's reference to 'short tunics'). In the 16th century these jackets are shown to have slashed sleeves and being embroidered with scrolling floral designs. At night, he wraps



The effigy of Giolla Bhrighde MacFhionghain (Gilbride MacKinnon), c.1330–50, Iona Abbey Museum, Scotland. Dressed in a basinet with cowl of mail, gauntlets and long quilted coat, this fine figure offers a vivid snapshot of the appearance of a 14th-century galloglass. (Crown Copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland)

himself in a rough cloak or *brat* ('mantle' to English writers), which was thick, triangular-shaped and more like a hairy rug than a cloak. Waterford is said to have been a centre for the manufacture of the *brat*. Stanihurst recalled a friend who wore a Waterford rug on a frosty morning in London – its pile was so thick that mastiffs sprang at him, 'deeming he had been a bear'.

Armour

Heavily armed and physically overbearing, our farm-boy turned galloglass will seem to the English a fairy-tale giant made real. Spenser cast the evil giant Grantorto in the distinct mould of a galloglass in his *Faerie Queene* (Book V, published 1596). A colonial administrator in Ireland as well as a poet, Spenser had galloglass all around him to inspire the creation of a nightmare ogre, 'huge and hideous' with 'great skill in single fight':

All armed in a coat of iron plate,
Of great defence to ward the deadly fear,
And on his head a steel cap he did wear
Of colour rusty brown, but sure and strong;
And in his hand an huge pole-axe did bear,
With which he went to fight, to justify his wrong

Late 15th-century figures of galloglass adorn the base of Felim O'Connor's tomb at Roscommon abbey. (Photographic Unit, Department of Environmental Heritage and Local Government, Ireland)

Spenser described the real-life giants, those 'footmen they call galloglasses', in *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596) as a soldier 'armed in a long shirt of mail down to the calf of the leg, with a long broad axe in his hand'. Spenser was right, and a simple 'steel cap' (Irish: *clogad*, *cathbharr* or *cuinnbeirt*), a shirt of mail (*luireach*) and an axe (*tuagh*) remained the classic galloglass battle-gear for three centuries. Not all galloglass conformed to this



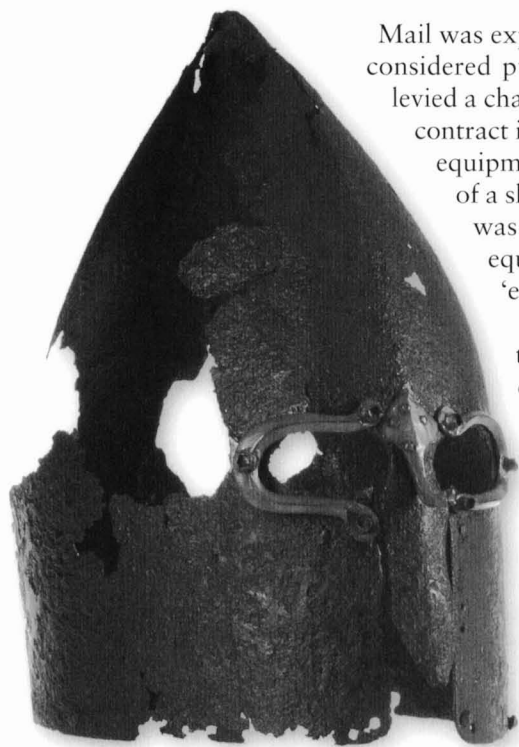
The warriors on the O'Connor tomb at Roscommon wear the characteristic galloglass 'harness' of basinet, mail and quilted coats. (Photographic Unit, Department of Environmental Heritage and Local Government, Ireland)

style of attire. A wider range of equipment is detailed in a highly significant bond made in about 1380 between Turlough *Caoch* ('the One-Eyed') MacSweeney and Turlough O'Donnell, chief of Tyrconnell. As part of the deal, recorded in the early 16th-century *Book of the MacSweeneys*, the 'Clan Sweeney' pledged to supply only properly equipped galloglass, the minimum standard being set at 'a coat of mail [*luireach*] and hood of mail [*scabal*]' or 'a jack [*seca*] and a helmet [*cuinnbeirt*]'.

Though jacks (Grantorto's 'coat of iron plate') were worn by some, the majority of galloglass in any unit were always clad in mail. In 1428 John Swayne, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of Ireland, noted the activities of 'eight battles of footmen arrayed in the guise of this country, that is, every man aketon, haubergeon, pisane, basinet'. The reason for the predominance of mail was simple. First, mail was traditionally the preferred armour of the Highland gentleman; second, galloglass constables appear to have often kept stockpiles of mail shirts to issue to their men on enlistment.

Portions of riveted mail were found on the same crannog as the Lough Henney helmet (see overleaf), together with the remains of an immensely tall Irish chieftain. (Photograph reproduced courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Northern Ireland)





This splendid iron helmet, with bronze nasal and brow decoration, was found on Wright's Island on Lough Henney, County Down, and probably dates from about 1400. (Photograph reproduced courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Northern Ireland)

Mail was expensive to make and the constable's stockpile was in no way considered public or shared property; some constables may have even levied a charge for the hire of a mail shirt. The MacSweeney–O'Donnell contract in fact stated that if any of MacSweeney's galloglass lost their equipment, the constable (written as *consabal*) would impose a fine of a shilling for a missing axe and a groat for a spear. MacSweeney was to pocket this fine himself, presumably in order to buy new equipment, though no fine was to be made for a missing helmet 'except the galloglass' brain'.

None of these items were ever made to a uniform type and there was considerable variation in the *erradh* (military equipment) from one galloglass to the next according to personal taste and wealth. When our recruit has enough wages saved he might purchase his own mail shirt or jack, but for now we can expect him, as a newly qualified galloglass, to be wearing a heavy *luireach* of riveted iron rings – reaching to the elbows or wrists, and to just above or below the knees – and drawn from the arsenal of the constable. Worn over a quilted tunic, his mail shirt provides a high degree of protection and – an important consideration for the mobile galloglass – is flexible enough to allow free movement of the limbs.

The quilted tunic or 'aketon' (*cotún* to Irishmen) was another mainstay of the galloglass (and indeed Scottish) armoury. This superb piece of kit took the form of a leather or fabric coat stuffed with wool and stitched into vertical quilts. Every galloglass wore one of these. On its own it could stop a sword blow or even, at a distance, an arrow. Its defensive strength was such that many galloglass wore only a *cotún* for bodily protection; it was also warm and, from waxing or pitching, waterproof. Some galloglass added a mantle or coif of mail to the ensemble, or protected their neck and shoulders with a 'pisane' of mail (*scabal*) attached to their helmet.

Much of this armour would have been made by native Irish smiths, often hereditary professionals, working to a high, though doubtless conservative standard. But the galloglass was never a quixotic anachronism, or a throwback to a 'Viking' way of war. For centuries, the galloglass represented the cutting-edge elite in Irish warfare. His armour was nearly always modern, keeping a rough pace with wider European developments in military design, even if the basic format of his battledress – helmet, mail shirt and axe – did not much change.



Basinet, late 14th or early 15th century, possibly German, now in Dean Castle, Kilmarnock, Scotland. Helmets of this type were much used by galloglass and west Scots noblemen. (East Ayrshire Arts and Museums, www.futuremuseum.co.uk)



The wide and open countryside of Knockdoe, County Galway, scene of the battle in 1504. (Seán Ó'Brógáin)

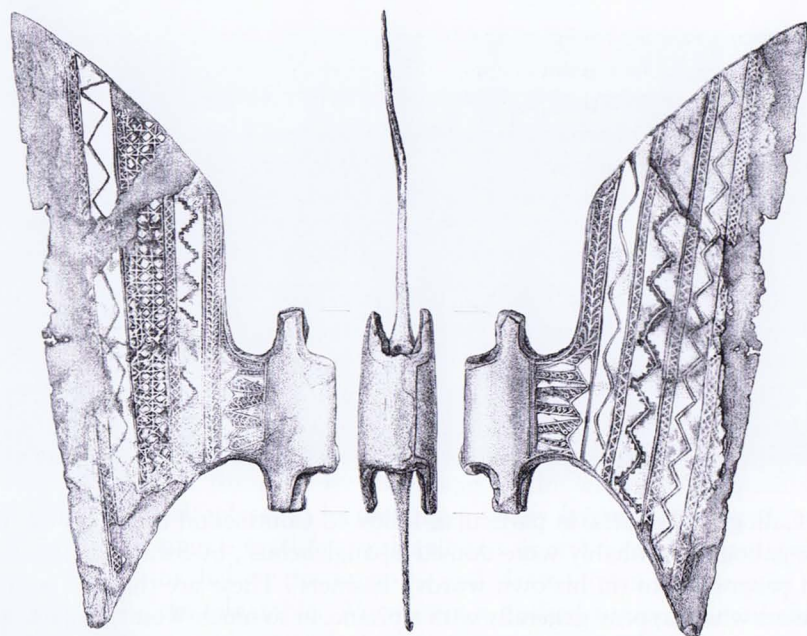
Galloglass helmets, in particular, followed Continental trends. While the first galloglass probably wore domed 'spanglehelms', by Swayne's time they had progressed to (in his own words) 'basinets'. These are the tall, pointed helmets which appear, generally with a pisane, in so much West Highland and Irish figure sculpture from the mid-14th to mid-16th century. They resemble so closely the basinets made in Germany and Italy that we must conclude that many, perhaps even most, were made there and exported to Ireland.

Basinets were still the most common galloglass helmet when St Leger summarized galloglass for Henry VIII in 1543 as 'footmen ... harnessed in mail and basinets'. After this date the basinet's long tenure came to a close, and at the start of the 17th century Rich and Dymmok defined the typical galloglass helmet of their day as a 'skull', meaning a simple metal cap rounded in the shape of the wearer's skull. Even so, from the mid-16th century many galloglass made use of secret shipments of morions, burgonets and cabassets from catholic Spain and Italy. Other 16th-century galloglass may have worn segmented or quilted headpieces, some probably constructed (almost certainly by Irish smiths) like jacks, as a series of iron plates riveted or threaded on to a backing of fabric or leather.

Galloglass constables were more than sufficiently wealthy and connected to make their own purchases from foreign (including English) arms merchants. Unfortunately, imports of equipment could be erratic and unreliable: in the reign of Richard II the English intercepted a 'certain barge' loaded by 'certain merchants' with 'wines, ale, armour, artillery and other goods and chattels' to 'aid and comfort' the King's 'Irish enemies'. Supplies of armour were replenished with plunder, and the *Annals of Connacht* recorded in 1416 a victory over the English of Meath, 'whereby many prisoners, horses, suits of armour and arms were acquired'. The O'Briens captured in 1499, the *Annals of Ulster* say, 'sixteen score' of '*luireacha*' from the Butlers of Ormond, a haul which would have pleased any constable worried about how to balance the supply and loss of mail.

Sometimes the galloglass found that he himself was used as a source of military equipment. In 1445 Turlough MacDowell and his galloglass suffered the indignity of being captured and stripped of their armour, weapons, money and clothes by MacGeoghagan men. In spite of such unreliable mechanisms of supply, the galloglass was as a rule extremely well equipped – more so than the average Irish soldier, and much more so than the often miserably supplied English soldier in Ireland.

16th-century axe-head from Clonteevy, County Tyrone (now in the National Museums Northern Ireland, Belfast). Formed from a single piece of folded iron and overlaid with decoration in silver foil, it matches exactly with contemporary depictions and descriptions of the axes used by galloglass. Drawing by Dierdre Crone. (After C. Bourke, 2001)



Weapons

More than any other piece of his equipment, it was the axe that symbolized the battlefield power of the galloglass. In Scotland the Norse legacy of fighting as heavy infantry with two-handed weapons was alive and strong, and the galloglass were, in this respect, direct heirs to the Norse tradition.

The galloglass axe was itself originally derived from the long-handled 'Dane' axes of the Vikings, though by the 16th century it had come to resemble a poleaxe or 'halberd' in Dymmok's opinion.

St Leger said of the galloglass that 'every one of them' had an axe, 'called a spar', which resembled 'the axe of the Tower', by which he probably meant the executioner's two-handed axe in the Tower of London. It is clear, however, that not every galloglass wielded a two-handed axe, and Dymmok actually said that the axe was the weapon galloglass 'most use'. A description, if a somewhat formulaic one, of galloglass weaponry is given by the *Annals of the Four Masters* in recounting a clash between MacSheehys and MacSweeneys in 1568, who 'made trial of the temper of their sharp spears, the strength of their battle-axes, the keenness of their swords, and the hardness of their helmets'.

The spear (*craoiseach*) was undoubtedly a major alternative to the axe. From the early 16th century, but to a lesser extent, the two-handed sword was another. The Ulster annals say nothing of the weapons of Alan and Ruaidhri MacLean, killed in 1486 while serving with MacCabe galloglass, but a MacLean in Ireland cannot have been very differently equipped to his kinsmen in Scotland. MacLeans in Scotland were described in the 1570s by Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie as armed for battle with 'bows and halflangs [hand-and-a-half swords] and haubergeons of mail'. Many 'redshank' mercenaries went to Ireland with 'halfhang' and two-handed swords. Sir Richard Bingham reported in 1586 that he had killed and drowned more than 1,000 New Scots in Connacht, taking '300 or 400 of their long swords, with many of their bows and skulls [iron caps] ... out of the water'.

15th-century carving of a warrior displaying the arms of Butler, Jerpoint Abbey, County Kilkenny. (Author's drawing)



On the whole, the two-handed sword is a weapon more accurately associated with the seasonal Highland soldier of fortune than the galloglass. Some galloglass used them: two-handed swords were made in Ireland and an example survives in private hands which matches closely that carried by one of the 'war men of Ireland' drawn by Albrecht Dürer. Nonetheless, it is clear that two-handed swords were never a common galloglass weapon, and galloglass were nearly always considered axemen by their contemporaries. The galloglass' axe had a ceremonial significance, being borne in parade as it was in 1460 when Henry MacCabe died of sickness and was, say the *Four Masters*: 'carried to Cavan to be interred there, attended by two hundred and eighty galloglass armed with axes.' On balance, it is probably the case that the two-handed axe was the galloglass' parade weapon on virtually all occasions, and his battle weapon on most, but not all, occasions.

It is likely, then, that our Irish galloglass will fight with a double-handed broadaxe. The galloglass axe came in no standard type: Dymmok described it to be 'somewhat like a shoemaker's knife' (probably straight like a scalpel blade), and Stanihurst called them 'double-bladed hatchets, almost sharper than razors, fixed on shafts of more than ordinary length'. It is Stanihurst's last observation – that galloglass axes had shafts 'of more than ordinary length' – which was the weapon's defining characteristic. True to its Nordic roots, the galloglass axe-head usually lacked a beak or spearhead, so that it was, as Dymmok put it, 'without a pike'.

Nevertheless, when wielded in great numbers the galloglass' axes appeared much the same: all were mounted on abnormally long hafts – some 'six feet' (1.8m) in length according to Dymmok – with a terrifyingly large axe-head. Rich was therefore able to simply call this weapon the 'galloglass axe'. They were doubtless generally of Irish manufacture, though little is known about their production. It was an awesome weapon to behold, Stanihurst writing that 'when they strike they inflict a dreadful wound', while Dymmok recounted that the galloglass' axe was always 'deadly where it lighteth'.



Effigy of a mail-clad warrior at Glinsk, County Galway, late 15th century. (Author's drawing)



Carrickfergus Castle, main residence of the Earls of Ulster. Moryson called the town 'a frontier town towards Scotland'. Its castle held out against Edward Bruce from the summer of 1315 to September 1316. (Bob Paisley)

As a side arm, the galloglass carried a dirk, an item Dymmok called ‘a skeine’, having ‘Englished’ the Irish word *scian*. A short hunting bow (*boga*) and a cruciform-hilted, single-handed broadsword (*cloidem*) in a wide, fringed scabbard were likewise common side arms. The galloglass’ sword was normally the work of an Irish blacksmith, who would fit an imported blade on a hilt of his own making. The galloglass’ other side arms were his personal attendants with their skirmishing tools: javelins, glaives, bows, dirks and spears. Thomas Hughes’ *Misfortunes of Arthur* (1587) provides a nice thumbnail sketch of a light Irish skirmisher: ‘a man bareheaded, with black, long, shagged hair down to his shoulders, apparelled with an Irish jacket and shirt, having an Irish dagger by his side, and a dart in his hand.’

CONDITIONS OF SERVICE

Armed with his axe and mail shirt, our Irish galloglass is ready for mercenary service. There existed two definite types of galloglass. One was a man retained on a perpetual basis as a household guardsman by one lord, and one lord only. Only the mightiest of lords could afford to keep a unit of galloglass for long. Galloglass of this settled variety cannot be classed as mercenaries in the true sense of the word – instead, they became over time subject clans, and their constables sub-chiefs of those subject clans.

Contracts and bonds of vassalage

The bond of service that Turlough ‘the One-Eyed’ MacSweeney entered into with the O’Donnells of Tyrconnell probably represents the ideal to which our galloglass would aspire. ‘And it was then’, says the *Book of the MacSweeneys*, ‘that a levy of galloglass was made on Clan Sweeney’. In exchange for land and privileges, the MacSweeneys pledged to supply galloglass at a rate of two for each quarter of land. If the constable was unable to supply the required number of galloglass, he was to pay a fine of ‘two cows for each galloglass deficient, that is, one cow for the man himself and one for his equipment’ – clear proof that the galloglass’ metal armour, for which he was so prized among the Irish, was considered at least as valuable as the man himself.

In the same contract, Turlough MacSweeney agreed to foster the son of O’Donnell, besides offers of fishing rights, a ‘champion hound’, tax benefits and the privilege of sitting at O’Donnell’s right-hand side at feasts. For the next two centuries the MacSweeneys were to be the most important sub-chiefs of the O’Donnell clan. The MacDonnells of Tyrone were similarly an accepted part of the O’Neill clan from the mid-13th century, just as the MacSheehys were a permanent fixture at the court of the Earls of Desmond from 1420 until the death of the ‘great rebel earl’ in 1583.

Freelance galloglass

Until their treaty with O’Donnell of Tyrconnell, the MacSweeneys had followed what the MacSweeney book called ‘the Scottish habit’, meaning they followed whoever would employ them. This was the other type of galloglass: an axe for hire, always available to the highest bidder. He might spend his entire life roving the country from one retinue to the next in search of war. The length of his contracts was normally a quarter of a year.

The career of a freelance galloglass was usually less lucrative than that of the galloglass who succeeded in attaching himself to a single lord. Stanihurst made the intriguing remark that galloglass were ‘commonly wayward rather by profession than by nature’, and it appears that the ‘wayward’ galloglass generally hoped at some stage to settle. Until then, the usual jobs that came his way were invading one lord’s territory on behalf of another lord, or defending a lord’s territory against attack from another lord. Often the galloglass’ opponents in these invasions and counter-invasions were other galloglass; it was not uncommon to find that the opposing galloglass commanders were relatives. If so, no quarter was given and a fight to the death would ensue.

Another source of work was the killing of important individuals. MacCabes were employed by the O’Reillys, deadly enemies of the O’Rourkes, and an entry for 1402 in the *Annals of Connacht* reads: ‘Fergal, son of Aed O’Rourke, son of the king of Breifne and a prince eligible for the kingship, was treacherously killed in his own house by Loughlin Calach MacCabe a fortnight before Easter. He was buried in the monastery of Sligo.’

The murky waters of Irish power play were such that in 1416 the MacCabes were noted by the *Annals of Ulster* as ‘retained galloglass’ to the O’Rourkes – but not Loughlin. He was killed in Meath by the English in 1413, where together with the O’Reillys and others of the ‘*Clann Caba*’, the Four Masters recorded, he ‘committed acts of conflagration and depredation’. It was perfectly normal for an Irish lord to approach the galloglass with a request to kill a member of his own family or clan. The *Annals of Connacht* say that in 1316, a ‘daughter of Manus O’Connor hired a band of galloglass and gave them a reward for killing Rory, son of Donal O’Connor, and so by them he was killed’.

Robert Cowley maintained that galloglass ‘serveth for their wages, and not for love, nor affection’. Yet the loyalties of even the freelance galloglass were rarely entirely decided by material considerations. The galloglass’ own strong sense of personal honour counted for more than gold or cattle. It is recorded by the Four Masters that in 1568 Thomas Fitzmaurice of Kerry came under attack when the period of contractual service of his MacSweeney galloglass – one quarter of the year – was due to expire. Fitzmaurice’s enemies knew this and attacked with their own MacSheehy galloglass. But Eamonn MacSweeney, constable of the galloglass, say the Four Masters, ‘did not think it honourable’ to desert Fitzmaurice. The same annals go on to say that it was not only their consciences which made the MacSweeneys stay but their ‘enmity and indignation’ for the MacSheehys, who Eamonn and his men butchered with enthusiasm.

Ranks and unit structure

The basic formation in which our young Irish galloglass will find himself is the *corrughadh*, or what English commentators called the ‘battle’ (i.e. battalion). A ‘battle’ generally consisted of 80 or so spars, and so when we hear from Swayne that a battle commonly had 400 men, only a third (at most half) of this number would have been galloglass. A unit of this size would be a particularly strong one, and about 160–180 men appears to have been a more normal total, of which 80–90 would be galloglass. A lower average is given in the *power of Irishmen* report, which commented: ‘a battle of galloglass be 60 or 80 men harnessed on foot with spars, each with 1 knave.’ Dymmok, meanwhile, settled on 80 spars to ‘make a battle of galloglass’, as did the Irish council in writing to Henry VIII that ‘18 banners of galloglass’ belonging to the Earl of Desmond had been slain, ‘which be commonly in every banner 80 men’.

Axe-heads found in Ireland, possibly galloglass weapons. Top: from County Donegal, now in National Museum of Ireland (NMI). Upper middle: from Coleraine, County Derry, now NMI. Lower middle: from Derryhollagh, County Antrim, now NMI. Bottom: probably from Ulster, now National Museums Northern Ireland, Belfast. (Author’s drawing)





An Irish sword from Lough Neagh, 16th century. Its blade is probably a German import, but the open ring-pommel is a distinctively Irish design innovation. (Photograph reproduced courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Northern Ireland)

The consabal

'Battles' were commanded by a constable or *consabal*, a term imported into the Irish language by Anglo-Norman settlement and meaning, as it does in English, a head officer or governor. Those lords fortunate enough to have multiple battles of galloglass appointed one man to act as marshal of all galloglass and other full-time, professional military forces (household kern, gunners, horsemen and the like). A lord usually awarded the position of constable on a hereditary basis if the galloglass settled down in the service of a single clan; among freelance galloglass, the position remained hereditary, passing from one generation to the next, without any authority beyond family tradition.

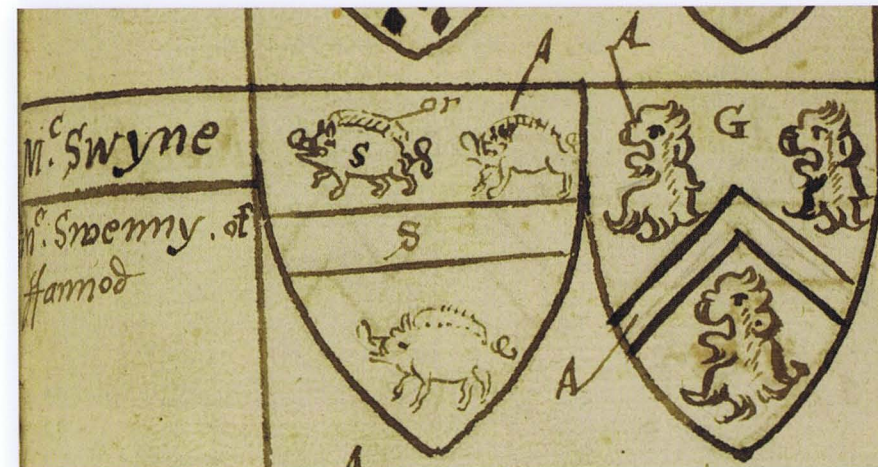
One poem dedicated to Donal MacSweeney of Fanad states he had 'an ogham inscription' on his axe 'whose bounty is victory', and it may be that the constable's rank was sometimes signified by special decoration or inscriptions on his axe. In the mid-16th century comes a reference to a galloglass guide with 'a silver spear or axe, and the hilt thereof hanging full of silk' – clearly this adornment on his weapon held some secret significance among his people. In a more general sense, a constable's office was certainly symbolized by his axe, MacSweeney bardic verse claiming 'Ireland is united by the slender axe'. In battle, the constable fought in the front ranks accompanied by a bagpiper. The *Image of Irelande* depicts a galloglass piper as an unarmoured man who brings his instrument along for raiding as well as for battles. The constable was also likely to have by his side a standard (*mergeda*) and a warrior to bear it. A poem concerning Donal MacSweeney tells of his 'satin banner' of 'golden birds', which had been embroidered by his wife, Gráinne.

Pay and rations

When our galloglass and his 'battle' enter into the service of a lord (either Irish or Anglo-Irish, there was little difference between the two), a period of negotiation over terms of pay and conditions would ensue. The constable would normally expect pay and victuals for 100–120 galloglass, even though he generally only actually supplied 80–90 galloglass. The remainder were allowed to him as 'deadpays' or non-existent men whose pay and victuals the constable took as his own salary. English state papers outlining the 'wages of Irish men of war' in 1575 record that in a company of 100 galloglass the constable was permitted 13 dead pays (compared with eight per 100 men allowed for a captain of kern), on top of six men's allowance of victuals. In other words, the constable's salary was routinely at least ten, and sometimes as much as twenty times that of the common galloglass.

We hear from the same English papers of 1575 that a galloglass constable was also to receive a warhorse and a horse for everyday transport for each quarter of service; a mail shirt might sometimes be given in place of the latter horse. By the date of this document the pre-eminence of the galloglass was being eroded by gunners and by 'New Scots' (seasonal Highland infantry), and in 1575 the captains of these rival troop types were permitted the same number of deadpays per 100-man company. Until then, the galloglass' wages, privileges and general standing within an army were virtually unmatched.

As for the wages (*tuarastal*) themselves, these generally came in the standard Irish currency: cattle. In 1553 a galloglass was to be paid 4d. a day; increased to 8d. in 1562. Though actual coinage did occasionally pass hands, galloglass were nearly always paid in goods to the value of his salary – in cattle, meal, butter and other victuals. The record of 'wages of Irish men of

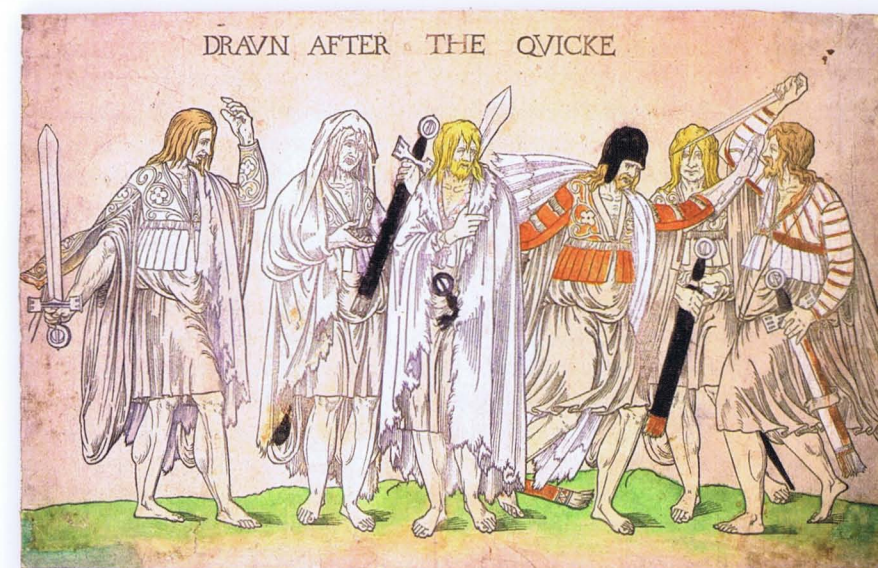


MacSweeney arms from an armorial of the 17th century. Outsiders to the spirit of European chivalry and courtly culture, Gaels came late to heraldry and rarely adhered fully to its rules or ideals. Though 'mercenary' and often opportunistic in outlook, galloglass were proud of their own culture and were only prepared to adopt English language, customs and mannerisms – such as heraldry – when it became clear that the old Gaelic way of life was gone for ever. (Office of the Chief Herald of Ireland)

war' states that each galloglass received 'one beef [i.e. a cow] for his wages and two beefs for his feeding and diet' for every quarter-year. Though the 'wages of a Scot is like' (meaning 'New Scots'), rank-and-file 'kern' were paid in 1575 only a single heifer to the value of eight shillings for each quarter-year in service.

Diet

It was up to each galloglass to do what he wished with this pay in kind, bearing in mind that his cattle had to cover payment and food for his attendants. The galloglass, a large man with a manly appetite, was supplied with food besides beef as part of his wages. The ordinary Irish diet of the time was based on oatmeal, roots, cresses, dairy produce, meats and whiskey – a simple and natural diet. Black pudding was a favourite treat. When times were bad animals were bled for sustenance, Fynes Moryson (1566–1630), secretary to Elizabeth I's Lord Deputy, noting that dying horses were eaten both for pleasure and for lack of meat. To keep him suitably huge and heavyweight, the galloglass enjoyed a marvellously rich diet, 'chiefly feeding',



Anonymous woodcut of Irish warriors, 'DRAVN AFTER THE QVICKE' (from life), dated to the reign of Henry VIII. (Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology)

Doe Castle, Donegal. The word Doe comes from the Irish *Tuath* meaning 'territory', and it was the Mac Suibhne d'Tuath – sometimes called the Tri Tuatha and Anglicized to MacSweeney Doe – who built this castle in the early 16th century. (Seán Ó'Brógáin)



wrote Stanihurst, 'on beef, pork and butter'. Traditionally, English soldiers were also fed on beef, without which they were thought unable to fight; it was the soldier's meat. The galloglass washed all this meat down with his free 'methers' of milk, and hearty quantities of ale and whiskey; Moryson said the latter was consumed by the Irish, both women and men, high born and low, 'til they be as drunk as beggars'.

Both the galloglass' wages and provisions were levied as a tax by the lord employing them from his feudal tenants, a system known as *buannacht* or 'bonaght' in its Anglicized form. It is, therefore, very carefully specified who will supply this 'bonaght' in a contract dated 22 July 1560 between the MacDonnells of Leinster and no less an employer than Elizabeth I's Lord Lieutenant of Ireland:

By the lord lieutenant:

Trusty and well-beloved we greet you well: And where for the service of the queen's highness we have thought good at this present to entertain three hundred spars of her majesty's galloglass under your conduct for one quarter of a year: we let you wit that we have directed our several mandates unto O'Byrne and unto O'Molloy and unto the captains of the Anally [the O'Farrells] to furnish you of your bonaght for the same accordingly, the which mandates you shall receive herewith to be delivered unto them, and therefore will and charge you and every of you to assemble and prepare your said number of spars of galloglass and with all expedition receive your said bonaght appointed and furthermore be with them in readiness to her majesty's service as you shall from us have commandment. Hereof see you fail not in any ways.

To Alexander, son of Turlough; Turlough MacDonnell; Colla, son of Turlough, and the rest of the captains of the queen's majesty's galloglass, and to every of them.

Billets and accommodation

The Irish lordships were largely subsistence economies, and so free food and lodging were a logical means of payment. Accommodation for the galloglass was supplied by the lord employing him, who would billet the 'battle' among the homes of his vassals. Mercenaries had traditionally been maintained in Ireland by *bonaght*, but the system became more oppressive once the Irish lords began to compete with each other as to who could maintain the largest number of galloglass. The worst offenders were the Anglo-Irish and 'Old English' lords. Like the Duke of York in Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, they found what 'a puissant and mighty power' was had from keeping 'galloglass and stout kerns'. While *bonaght* was a tax collected on behalf of the constable, the system now developed into 'coyne and livery', from the Irish *coimheadh* (to mean billeting) with the English 'livery' (meaning victualling). Coyne and livery cut out the middle man: the general populace was now expected to feed, house, pay and wait on the galloglass and his attendants themselves – literally from their own pockets and straight into the galloglass' rough and ungrateful hands.

Sir John Davies (1569–1626), Attorney General of Ireland, described 'coyne and livery' as 'the most wicked and mischievous custom'. He noted it was an Irish system in origin, 'for they used to lay *bonaght* upon their people and never gave their soldiers any other pay', but had to acknowledge that 'when the English had learned it they ... made it more intolerable'. With breathtaking thoughtlessness, Anglo-Irish magnates imposed whole armies of unmanageable galloglass and kern on their tenantry. And it got worse still: when James Butler (d.1452), 4th Earl of Ormond, quartered galloglass and 'kernty' throughout his lands in Tipperary and Kilkenny he granted each soldier permission to take a *cuid oidhche* ('cuddy') or the right to a night's food, drink and entertainment from the house of every freeholder.

If our Irish galloglass and his 'battle' had been hired on a long-term basis, they may well be settled away from the general populace on designated tax-free farms, complete with labourers. More usually, his billet would be a peasant's bothy, characteristically a circular or hive-shaped structure of wicker and wood plastered with mud and lime, and a roof of thatch. Its inhabitants would be peasants who spent their dismal and degraded days tending livestock and growing a little corn. Already poor, the arrival of our galloglass and his attendants along with all their gear would be an appalling imposition.

For our lowborn Irish galloglass this is a fantastically good life. He has servants who cook for him. He is feared and obeyed by all. When off duty, he spends his time feasting, lounging, singing and wrestling. He is a parasite who consumes everything in sight, and the hospitality of his hosts is unlikely to satisfy him. The cattle of neighbouring farms always posed a tempting target for the greedy galloglass; one William Clinch of Newcastle, County Dublin, complained in 1562 that 13 of his cows had been stolen by a single galloglass.



OPPOSITE:

Effigy of an unknown warrior at Kilninian, Mull, Scotland, early to mid-16th century. This powerful figure wears a helmet similar to that found at Lough Henney, besides a *cotún* (aketon) and mantle of mail. (Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland)



Figure from the early 16th-century tomb slab of one of the MacSweeney's of Banagh at Killybegs, Donegal. (Author's drawing)

Discipline in the ranks

No surprise, then, that desertion among galloglass never appears to have been a problem. The constables did little to restrain their men, leaving them to bully and steal as they wished. As early as 1297, O'Neill of Tyrone, MacMahon of Oriel and Maguire of Fermanagh promised the Archbishop of Armagh that in future they would prevent their 'Scots and satellites [i.e. galloglass, attendants and kern]' from trespassing on the archbishop's land and harassing his tenants. Henry VIII spoke against the practice in very strong terms in 1541, decreeing that 'No lord, captain or gentleman shall exact any impositions called coyne and livery from the tenants of others' unless authorized to do so by the Lord Deputy and government. No one was listening, and George Brown, Archbishop of Dublin, complained during the same period of the Earl of Ormond's 'continual coyne and livery, called extortion'. Ormond had previously quietened down criticism of his behaviour by paying a visit to the Irish council accompanied by a company of galloglass!

Misdeeds towards civilians generally counted for little – one Gorre Mackan the galloglass was let off with a pardon for the murder of Catherine Dale in 1545 – but it was a capital offence for a galloglass to disobey his constable or employer. Discipline within the unit was brutal and harsh: one galloglass serving the Earl of Desmond was nailed to a post in 1558 for drawing his weapon in camp when told not to; the next day another was hanged for the theft of a mail shirt.

Accommodation for the officers

Constables were often granted land by their employer on which, if they settled down, they could build castles (usually solemn towers built in the Scottish style) and lead the life of a clan chief in miniature. When land was granted to a constable it was as payment for his role as a supplier of galloglass, for which reason the English called Ballygawley, held by the MacDonnells in the service of the O'Neills, 'the galloglass country'. Land granted to a constable also provided a convenient source of manpower for the recruitment of new galloglass 'volunteers'.

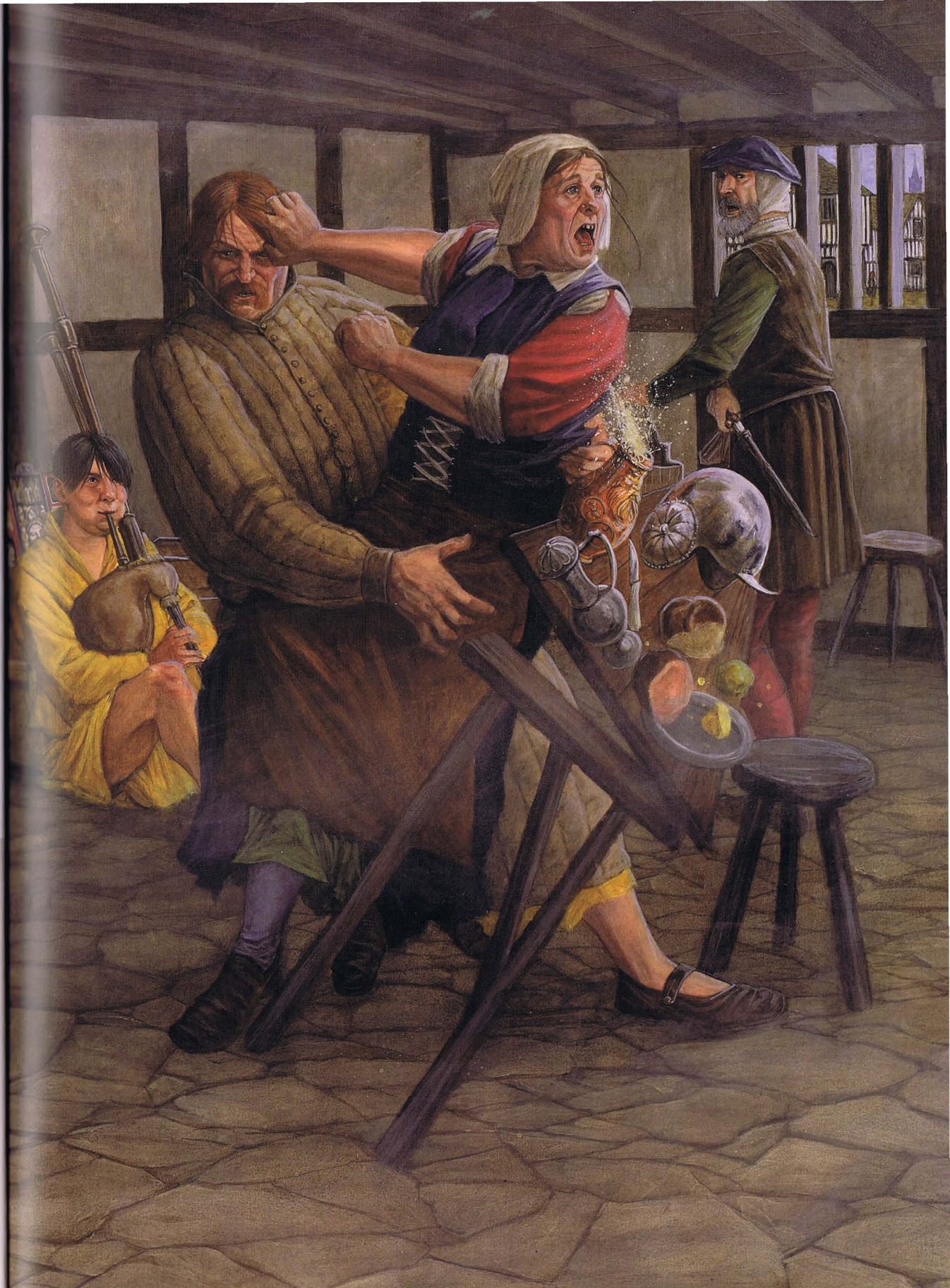
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'COYNE AND LIVERY', c.1560

A galloglass was rarely, if ever, a welcome addition to an Irish household. In a poor country, the galloglass thought nothing of eating everything in sight and taking whatever he took a fancy to. He was usually billeted on a different household for each quarter of the year that he was retained; he had to be, for by the end of his stay he had usually stripped the house of his host bare. The practice spread even to the Pale and by the mid-16th century, a galloglass might well find himself billeted on an English family. An English house was likely to be much the same as those of the native Irish, but with the odd English flourish – bed linen and more furniture. The galloglass was not interested in ethnic origins; he did not discriminate. Staying with an English family merely meant there was more to steal. In 1572, Sir Thomas Smith's project for the colonization of the Ards described the reality of having a galloglass as a lodger:

Coyne and livery is this. There will come a kern or a galloglass, which be the Irish soldiers, to lie in a churl's house; while he is there, he will be master of the house; he will not only have meat, but money also allowed him, and at his departure, the best thing he shall see in the churl's house, be it linen cloth, a shirt, mantle, or such like. Thus is the churl eaten up.

Here we see the house of an English family within the Pale in the process of being 'eaten up' by a 'royal' MacDonnell galloglass and his boy. The galloglass wears his *cotún* as ordinary clothing – Spenser was horrified to find that Irish soldiers wandered about in their quilted coats both at home and 'in towns and civil places'.





The ruins of Olderfleet Castle, guarding Larne harbour. Originally called Curran Castle, it was later seized by the Crown. The MacDonnells of Antrim made several determined but unsuccessful efforts to claim it. (Bob Paisley)

MacSweeney galloglass from John Goghe's 1567 map of Ireland, wearing mail and what look to be morions or cabassets, and (right) a crested 'skull'. (Author's drawing)



When the MacDonnells of Leinster entered government service they were retained in essentially the same way. Elizabeth I granted Colla (or Calvagh) MacDonnell 998 acres (404 hectares) in Laois as part of an appointment as 'Constable of Her Majesty's Galloglass'. It appears that the MacDonnells actually occupied 10,000 acres (4,047 hectares) of land – they were no doubt eager to exploit the Crown's ignorance of what it was actually granting! In return, Colla was to pay rent of £12. 9s. 6d., and 'keep 12 Scottish galloglass', with others maintained elsewhere on the estate such as the four to be supported on the 320 acres (130 hectares) granted to his son Hugh.

The galloglass constable was, therefore, usually technically landless, being a feudal landholder rather than landowner. Sir George Carew noted at the close of the 16th century that there were MacSweeneys resident in Carbery 'without inheritance, living on bonaght and other allowances, being kept by the MacCarthys as mercenary followers for their defence'. This hardly served to diminish their power and the galloglass captains, 'five brethren and the sons of two other brethren of one lineage, called McSwynes', who Lord Deputy Sir Henry Sidney met at Cork in 1576, were without land but 'of such credit they would make the greatest lords of the province both in fear of them and glad of their friendship'.

ON CAMPAIGN

Ireland was a country permanently at war – if not with the English then with itself, as rival chiefs engaged in vicious blood feuds for regional supremacy. Most of the time, the English were just another participant in the perpetual cycle of intertribal strife. For our Irish galloglass life on campaign will be a rude awakening after the feudal bliss of coyne and livery. He now has to prove he is worth all those privileges and all that beef. At the commencement of hostilities, the chief would order a 'rising out' (*gairmsluaigh*) or general muster of his people, as he gathered together his advisers and counsellors in a general assembly. Many of his vassals were likely to simply ignore the call to arms, despite the obligation owed by every able-bodied man (save learned professionals and clergy) to serve in the 'hosting'. But not the galloglass – they were always on hand, and always ready for action.

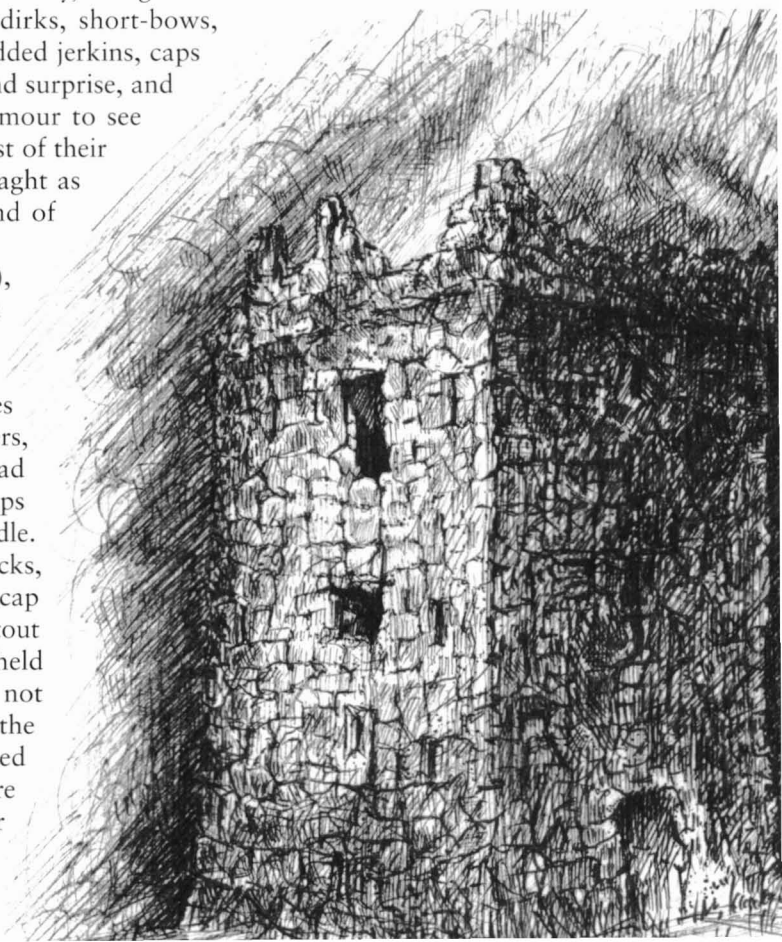
Irish armies

As Dymmok noted, Irish armies consisted of three basic troop types: 'Horsemen, Galloglass and Kern.' In status, the galloglass ranked between the horsemen and kern. The galloglass, however, was the only one of the three troop types whose training and arms were suited to fighting pitched battles. Kern and horsemen, though valiant and confrontational, were basically skirmishers and raiders, rather than solid battlefield troops, and usually only part-time soldiers.

The 'shag-haired crafty kern' (Shakespeare, *Henry VI Part 2*) was the ordinary able-bodied freeman turned warrior. Almost indestructibly tough, kern constituted the bulk of every Irish army, being armed with javelins, spears, glaives, swords, dirks, short-bows, and later firearms. Some had targes, padded jerkins, caps and helmets, but they opted for speed and surprise, and their legendary ferocity, rather than armour to see them through. A selection of the steadiest of their number were retained by chiefs on bonaght as 'household kern' (*ceithearn tigh*), a kind of police force of military thugs.

Next were the cavalry (*marcsbluag*), most prestigious of the three types of Irish soldier. They were all members of the nobility; some were also mercenaries. Ireland has always produced fine horses and Irishmen were considered superb riders, generally better than the English – they had to be given that they rode without stirrups and with only a stuffed cushion for a saddle. They were equipped with mail shirts, jacks, quilted jerkins, targes, and an iron skullcap or padded head guard. A sword with a stout chopping blade, dirk and light lance – held over the head during the charge and not couched under the arm because of the absence of stirrups – were their preferred arms. Each had with him a groom or squire to bring up a spare horse for his master during battle.

The ruins of Tighearna Coille ('Forest Manor', variously called Tinnakill, Tynekille, Tennekille in English) in the 'Queen's County' of Laois – seat of the MacDonnells of Leinster for 200 years. (Author's drawing)



These three service arms – kern, light horse and galloglass – and from the 15th century New Scots, formed the basis of all Irish armies, both Gaelic and Anglo-Irish, until the end of the Gaelic military establishment in the early 17th century. As the only available heavy infantry in Ireland, galloglass were a rare and expensive elite. At the top of the pile were men like the Earl of Desmond, whose wartime strength the *power of Irishmen* survey gave succinctly as: ‘400 horse, 8 bat of Gall, 1 bat of crosbowmen and gunners, 3000 kern.’ This level of military power was exceptional and a chief would count himself lucky if he could field a single battle of galloglass. Most could raise about 100–200 kern, 20–40 horse and no galloglass at all.

Raiding

Most warfare in medieval Ireland consisted of raids for cattle. Cattle rustling was something of a national obsession in Ireland, and the galloglass had a particular role to play in the *creach* or raid: to form a rearguard to allow the swift and safe removal of stolen livestock. For our Irish galloglass this will be his first taste of action. The numbers of men involved in such expeditions were usually fairly small: in 1455 the Ulster annals give the strength of a raiding party as 140 foot soldiers and 12 horsemen; two years later, we hear of a preying expedition of 60 infantry and six horsemen. This was war at its most small-scale, fast moving and personal. The target might be a local Gaelic rival or an Anglo-Irish or English settlement. It made no difference if there were cattle to be had.

The dynamics of the raid

Irish raiding parties hit fast and hard. Surprise was always of the utmost importance, and so at dawn or dusk, bare-footed kern, galloglass and horsemen would march briskly across a wilderness of bogs and mist-wrapped moorland until arriving at the target area: the farms of an enemy clan. The kern then quickly round up the cattle, and burn and pillage the homes of the local inhabitants. Any fighting that needs to be done is handled by the horsemen, who as dashing young noblemen are keen to show off their bravery and skill. The galloglass, meanwhile, wait in their ‘battle’, axes at the ready, lest a relief force should arrive to rescue the lifted cattle. If this happens, the galloglass immediately form into a defensive formation, screening the horsemen and kern who drive away the cattle, before the galloglass themselves make a slow fighting withdrawal.

Losses among galloglass were low during raiding operations. Nevertheless, raiding was certainly not risk free. Disaster overcame the MacCabes on one raid in 1433 after conflict erupted among the MacRannells, and one faction, say the Four Masters, ‘took the sons of Mahon MacCabe into their pay to assist them’. The MacCabes and their raiding party passed into Moy, which they burnt and looted. But as they prepared to withdraw, the Four Masters continue, ‘they were overtaken by a strong body of troops’. The ‘sons of Mahon’ formed a rearguard, and three of them, Ross, Donough, and Bryan, ‘were slain on the spot with many others’. Rory, the eldest brother, was taken prisoner ‘half dead’. Only Turlough, the fifth son, ‘whose mother was Una, daughter of Sean O’Reilly’, made it to safety.

Yet it was worth the risk, since a good raid meant plunder and a nice supplement to the galloglass’ cattle-based income. We hear from the Four Masters that in 1571 James Fitzmaurice took Kilmallock at dawn with a ‘furious attack made by the warlike troops of the Clann Sweeney and Clann Sheehy’ (this time fighting on the same side) who ‘proceeded to divide among

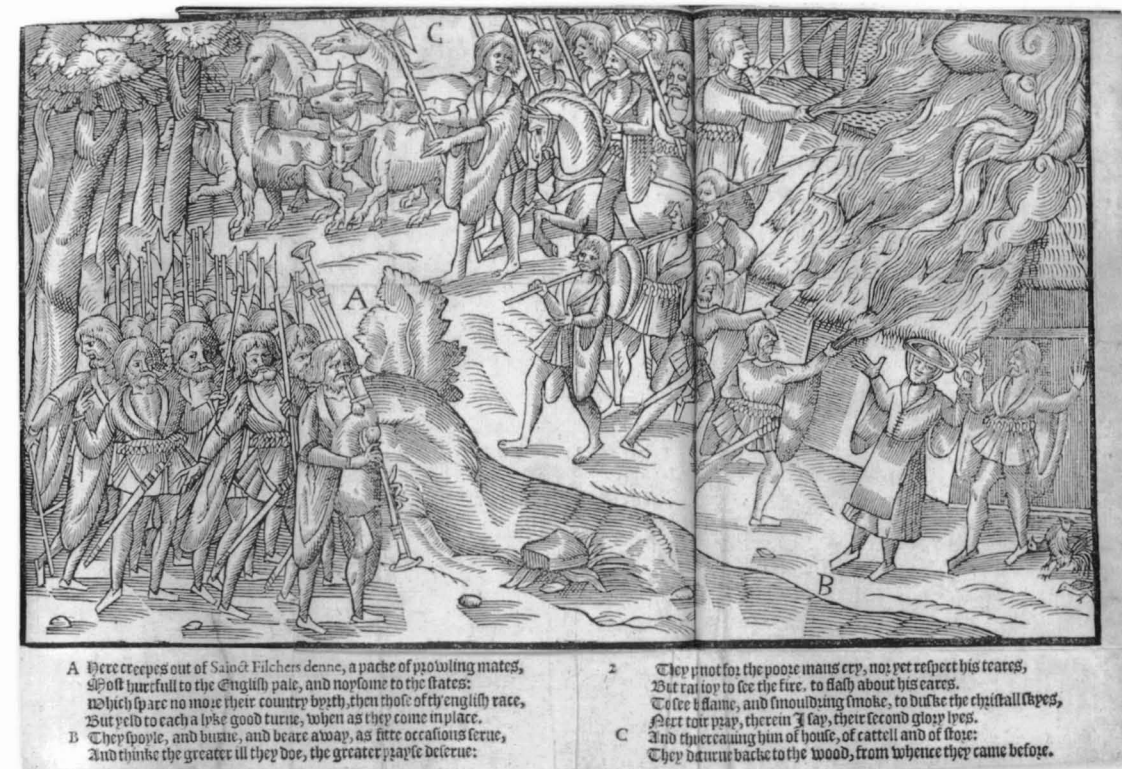
themselves the town’s gold, silver, various riches and valuable jewels, which the father would have acknowledged to his heir, or the mother to her daughter...’

Making camp

Galloglass liked to think of themselves as men who revelled in physical hardship. It was lucky they felt this way because there were few home comforts to be had while they were on campaign. Moryson wrote, rather amusingly, of the ‘wild Irish’: ‘I trust no man expects among these gallants any beds, much less featherbeds and sheets.’ The unit our recruit serves in is supported by a small baggage train pulled by packhorses or oxen; beyond that, he and his comrades will have to rough it and live off the land. We know, however, that Irish armies took tents with them. These, according to the 16th-century *Book of the MacSweeney of Fanad*, were constructed from spears used as tent-poles: ‘Every man withdraws his spear from what constituted his sleeping-quarters last night.’

Besides a tent, what the galloglass took with him on campaign was a carefully considered selection of items that, by and large he could wear, if not carry easily. Thus, his mantle doubled as a bedroll, an item which Sir William Herbert, a Munster colonial promoter, described in 1585 as ‘serving unto the Irish as to a hedgehog his skin or to a snail her shell for a garment by day and a house by night’. In the same way, the bows and javelins of his attendants provided a means of hunting for dinner as well as for fighting. He needed no cutlery, bowls or plates. A knife and a piece of cowhide taken from the beast he sat down to eat would suffice, Moryson observing how the Irish would ‘set their meat upon a bundle of grass, and use the same grass for napkins to wipe their hands’.

The *creach* or raid, as depicted in John Derrick’s *The Image of Irelande*, published 1581. The sequence begins (marked by Derrick’s ‘A’) with axemen, kern and a piper appearing from the woods. Next, this ‘packe of prowling mates’ loot and burn a farmstead and round up cattle (‘B’), and then (‘C’) ‘returme back to the wood’ (University of Edinburgh)



THE GALLOGLASS EXPERIENCE OF BATTLE

It was by fighting battles that the galloglass really earned his keep. Pitched battles were rare in Ireland and, by European standards, generally small affairs; a typical Irish battle might be several hundred men on either side clashing with lightning speed in a series of running battles. These encounters would be the main event of our galloglass' life and his main opportunity to carve out a name for himself as a great mercenary warrior.

Before the battle

The night before battle, wild boasts were made and much drink consumed to boost faltering confidence. A poem in the MacSweeney Book is full of scorn for the man who promises death but 'never travels to confront you'. 'Tongues', the poem continues, 'run after drinking, promising to repel you in the battlefield'. The *Book of Howth*, a chronicle of the St Lawrence family, speaks of Ulick Burke's soldiers passing the night before Knockdoe as 'wagering, drinking and playing at cards' and bragging 'who should have this prisoner and that prisoner'. Soon it would be seen what lay behind those boasts.

Surprise and night attacks

Veterans were more likely to remain silent and sober since attack often came at night. At Knockavoe (1522) the O'Neills marched into Tyrconnell with a large army including MacSheehy and MacDonnell galloglass. The O'Donnells, though outnumbered, had their own MacSweeneys and skirmished skilfully until making a surprise assault on the O'Neill camp in the dead of night. Fighting raged in the blackness, the Four Masters vividly recounting how soldiers came 'into collision with one another... Scarcely did any one of them on either side know with whom he should engage in combat'. The O'Neills were routed with the loss of upwards of 900 warriors.

Standing guard

To guard against night attacks, our galloglass and his fellow axemen take turns to maintain a watchful vigil through the night. Appropriately, the MacDonnell arms bear the motto *toujours prêts* – 'always ready'. This claim was put to the test in 1557, when, the Four Masters record, a party of MacSweeneys was sent to reconnoitre the camp of the MacDonnells. The MacDonnells stood guard around the tent of their leader, Shane, son of the chief of the O'Neills. Under cover of darkness the MacSweeneys advanced undetected by the MacDonnells:

D

CATTLE RAID, c.1480

Raiding was a way of life for the Gaelic nobility. An anonymous poem dedicated to Donal MacSweeney of Fanad is tinged with regret that Donal's freewheeling adolescence spent killing and looting must come to an end now that he is Lord of Fanad, to which he succeeded in 1570: 'A feature of his title is that he may not plunder'. Raiding and reiving was always a young man's game. In this plate stolen cattle are driven away by kern and a chieftain on horseback. Clad in the characteristic basinet and armour of the age, a party of galloglass wait impassively in their 'battle', weapons at the ready, lest a relief force should arrive to rescue the lifted livestock.



until they came to the great central fire at the entrance to the son of O'Neill's tent ... a huge torch, thicker than a man's body, was constantly flaming at a short distance ... and sixty grim and redoubtable galloglass with sharp, keen axes, terrible and ready for action ... were watching and guarding the son of O'Neill.

Vanguard and attack

The master poet Eochaidh Ó hEoghusa recalled how Ewen Óg MacSweeney of the Trí Tuatha (d.1596) was 'entrusted with a heavy responsibility by the O'Donnells'. This responsibility was 'to take the van and rearguard of the army'. Here was the galloglass' primary battlefield role: to lead the vanguard in the attack, and form the rearguard in retreat. Whatever the size of the force they served, their role remained the same. Consequently, when Fitzmaurice's MacSweeneys prepared to assail the MacSheehys in 1568 we are told by the Four Masters that Fitzmaurice 'placed in order and array the small friendly forces that he had with him, and the Clan Sweeney were placed in the van to make the onset'.

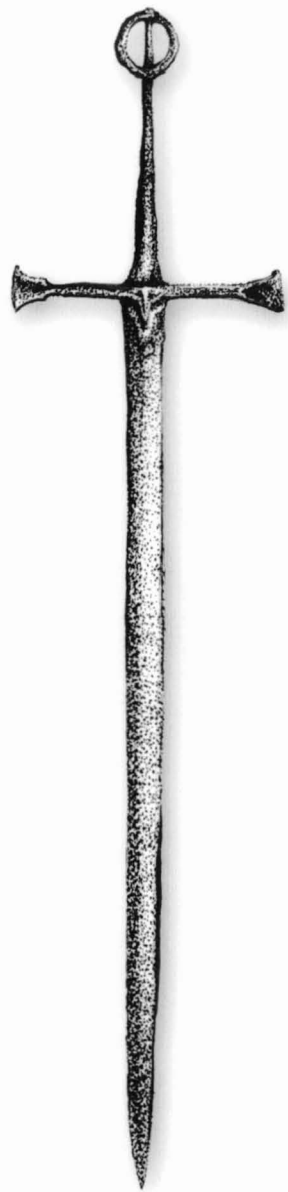
To hand blows

Before coming to hand blows with the enemy, galloglass liked to disorientate and harry the enemy with their harness-bearers, who would be sent out like beaters on a hunt, with their skirmishing weapons. After hurling their javelins (St Leger said they carried a set of three) the attendants would fall back behind the galloglass. At that point the galloglass closed in. Whenever galloglass were involved, battle was guaranteed to be furious, deadly and quick. First would come a short, aggressive charge with bellowing war cries and pipes blaring. The demonic momentum of the galloglass style of attack then becomes apparent, as the galloglass continue to press forward, smashing through the opposing lines and causing terrible slaughter with their axes, spears and swords.

The outcome was never long in the deciding; a blizzard of axe blows and the battle was over. As Stanihurst wrote: 'In every sharp and severe engagement, should they come to close fighting, they either soon kill, or are killed.' Dymmok agreed: 'The greatest force of the battle consisteth in them, choosing rather to die than to yield; so that when it cometh to hardy blows, they are quickly slain, or win the field.' If the galloglass became wounded in the fighting or got into difficulty his attendant would come enter into the fray, using any javelins or arrows he had left – if not, with dirk and spear. If all went well and the galloglass remained on his feet, the attendant's job was keep well back and make sure his master's flanks stayed clear, allowing his master a clear channel either side of him in which to go to work with his axe or other double-handed weapon.

The defensive screen

If the galloglass were on the receiving end of an attack, their attendants would again skirmish with the approaching enemy, throwing their darts until, as St Leger put it, 'they come to the hand stripe'. Then the galloglass would form a rock-solid wall of two-handed weaponry, holding firm at any cost – not an enviable position, but Ewen Óg MacSweeney of the Trí Tuatha was praised by O' hEoghusa for 'taking the gap of danger when all others refuse'. No one in Ireland could hold his ground in defence like a galloglass.



Irish two-handed sword (overall length: 124.5cm), 16th century, private collection. (Author's drawing)

One Irish tactic was to deploy a defensive wall of galloglass in conjunction with an attacking formation of cavalry. The *Annals of Connacht* tell of a valiant last stand made by 'two battalions of galloglass, namely the Clan Donnell under Turlough MacDonnell and the Clan Dowell under Alexander MacDowell', in a struggle with the Clanricard in 1419. The action began with an attack on the Clanricard by horsemen, but these 'were hurled back towards their galloglasses' who 'held their ground and fought on'. Suddenly, the galloglass and sheltering horsemen were attacked from the rear, as well as from the front by Clanricard's own MacSweeney galloglass. Eventually, their lines collapsed, but they fought to the last. Among the dead, the *Annals of Connacht* reported, were 'that doughty champion never before overcome in battle or combat or onset' Alexander MacDowell, his two sons and 'many others gentle and simple'.

Galloglass made occasional use of horses themselves. In 1556 the horse of Turlough MacCabe was injured as he and his comrades – a mix of 'English footmen' and 'galloglass and other Irishmen' – withdrew from an action against New Scots. Galloglass officers certainly used horses for transport, as did the 'lord's galloglass' (discussed below), but under normal circumstances the galloglass was an infantryman, and proud of it. He was, after all, a heavily armoured infantryman, or as Spenser put it, the *pedes gravis armature*.

Rearguard actions

Though bloodthirsty and proud, galloglass did not always fight to the death. Galloglass were pragmatic tacticians and adept at conducting an orderly fighting retreat – indeed, the rearguard was a galloglass speciality, since it did not break his oath to always face the enemy. If compelled to withdraw, galloglass would calmly form up into an orderly rearguard, screening the cavalry and other important units in order to allow their escape from the field.

The galloglass' record for self-sacrifice on the battlefield is unparalleled in medieval Irish history. Galloglass held their nerve in circumstances of almost unimaginable stress. In 1434 the remnants of an O'Donnell army, badly mauled by the English, were escorted to safety by Turlough Ruadh ('the Red'), son of Turlough 'the One-Eyed', and his MacSweeney galloglass. As St Leger said of galloglass: 'these sort of men be those that do not lightly abandon the field, but bide the brunt to the death.'

Ambushes

Galloglass were adaptable to most scenarios presented by irregular, low-level tribal warfare, as was endemic in Ireland, but they had to be used carefully. Although not as heavily armoured as the English or Anglo-Irish knight, their equipment was nonetheless too cumbersome to allow a speedy retreat. A rather confused account of what was probably a rather confused action survives in Lambeth Palace archives, telling how in 1563 Shane O'Neill ambushed the Earl of Sussex's men. After a brief fight O'Neill's men took to their heels. The chase was on and the Irish were pursued until they again fell into cover, setting another ambush (a standard Irish ploy) with 'certain hargobushe', wounding the English standard bearer. Then Shane's men 'fled to the bog', but in this one small skirmish from 15 to 21 'Scots galloglass' had



Late-medieval grave slab depicting a sword with a characteristic Highland hilt; Nereabolls, Islay, Scotland. (Crown Copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland)



Irish warriors by Albrecht Dürer, 1521. Dürer was in the Netherlands in 1520–21, where he may have encountered Irishmen serving the Hapsburgs as mercenaries. The extremely precise and accurate rendering of the arms and equipment of these warriors – almost certainly ex-galloglass and their attendants – strongly suggests that Dürer made this sketch from life. The only glaring inaccuracy is the exaggerated size of the two-handed sword. (Berlin / Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin / Image: Jörg P. Anders)

been killed or drowned, and one taken prisoner (his fate is not recorded). Their heavy equipment, and perhaps their size too, had probably counted against them, unlike the light kern and horsemen who had been able to flee from the English to the safety of their bogs.

Victory over the English: Meath 1423

Few men could best a galloglass in single combat. Unfortunately, the English were no mean fighters themselves. Galloglass had a profound sense of personal prestige and to be seen to overcome an enemy champion, especially an English one, greatly enhanced a warrior's standing within his unit. The English troop types who stood a good chance against the galloglass were knights (the galloglass' nearest equivalent in status) and doughty yeoman halberdiers and billmen (the galloglass' nearest equivalent in equipment).

A tough combat took place between galloglass and the English in Meath in 1423. There, Mulmurry MacSweeney of Banagh led his galloglass into action as part of an army of O'Donnells, O'Neills and those the Four Masters call simply 'the Irish of Ulster in general'. Somewhere probably in the north-east of Meath, they clashed with government forces sent out from the Pale. The Four Masters claim the Lord Deputy was 'the knight who was the chief commander of the English army', and that Mulmurry MacSweeney slew the Lord Deputy in mortal combat. In fact, we know that the Lord Deputy was not present in this action, but clearly an important English knight had been seen to fall in combat with Mulmurry and his unstoppable vanguard.

At this point the English lines broke under the weight of MacSweeney's assault, many dying as they were pursued by a mass of galloglass, kern, skirmishers and horsemen. The Four Masters conclude the story by telling us that the Irish 'obtained great spoils' on that occasion, and left Dundalk and 'all the English' in the vicinity under tribute. The fighting had been little more than a glorified skirmish – such was the nature of warfare in the medieval Irish lordship – but for Mulmurry it had been a defining moment, and his reputation was secured.

Galloglass against galloglass: Knockdoe 1504

Knockdoe (*Cnoc Tuagh*, 'little hill of the axes') was the largest battle ever fought between Irishmen, and most of the fighting was handled by the galloglass. Ferocious rivalries existed between galloglass clans, and at Knockdoe family and professional pride were at stake. The background to the battle was that Ulick Burke of Clanricard was at war with his neighbours, the O'Kellys, who were allies of the Burkes of Mayo. Parliament had prohibited the Irish lords from making war without the Lord Deputy's licence, so when Ulick razed three O'Kelly castles and seized Galway town, the O'Kellys appealed to the Lord Deputy.

The Lord Deputy was at this time Gearóid Mór – or to English speakers, Gerald Fitzgerald, 8th Earl of Kildare – and the most powerful man in Ireland. Kildare gathered together a substantial private army, including his own MacDonnell galloglass (at least 120 of them by c.1500), and assembled a confederation of clans, many of whom employed galloglass: O'Kellys, Mayo Burkes (with MacSweeneys), O'Donnells (with MacSweeneys), O'Neills (with MacDonnells), MacMahons (with MacCables), Magennises, O'Reillys (with MacCables), O'Connors (with MacDonnells), O'Dermots and other Gaelic, Anglo-Irish and English soldiers from the Pale – a total of about 6,000 men. Ulick's army was probably slightly smaller: perhaps 4,000 men. Besides his private MacSweeneys and Burke clansmen, he was joined by the O'Briens of Thomond (and their MacSweeneys), Macnamaras, O'Kennedys, O'Carrolls of Ely and others from Munster.

Some 13km from Galway town, on 19 August, the two armies collided. According to the *Book of Howth*, Kildare placed his archers on either side of a single huge division of Palesmen armed with bills and other infantry weapons. The galloglass and Gaelic Irish were apparently placed on the right hand of this central division, and the cavalry on the left. Summoning his 'Captain of Galloglass', Kildare ordered the galloglass to move to the front of the central division, in order to form the van of the army. 'I am glad,' replied the captain (in the words of the *Book of Howth*), 'you can do me no more honour by God's blood', at which point, he 'took the axe in his hand and began to flourish'.

In the following battle, neither the Palesmen nor Irish cavalry played any significant role – it is said that not a single Englishman was hurt at Knockdoe. Ulick had also put his galloglass in the front ranks of his army, and they now came on to the terrifying clamour of their war cries. Kildare's English archers let loose clouds of arrows. Many fell, hands were fixed by arrows to axe hafts, but they pressed on. Reaching Kildare's lines, the fight that followed was little more than a slogging-match between two equally determined forces of galloglass.

After hours of hand-to-hand fighting, sheer weight of numbers began to count against Ulick's galloglass. Falling back in small groups they regrouped



For if his balure once be moude, reuenge on them to take,
Which doe our foueraigne princes labors, like beaulty beastes forlake:
Tys not the cruell stoumy rage, nor gathered force of those
Nor yet the crooked crabbtree lookes, of greaie glibbed foes,
Can make him to reuoke the thing, his honor hath pretended
But that same Justice must procede, gainst those that haue offended.

For Mars till be the final end, of trapt'rous waged warres,
To plucke he hates of Rebels downe, that lately pearle the starres.
To yelde than gordon for desertes, by rigour of his blade,
And with the fainto gall their hartes, which such byrroies haue made.
Loe whe re it is upen fight, most perfect to be seene
Whely shew oeth that all end aright, of rebels to our Queene.

The forces of the Lord Deputy (shown on the left) clash with their 'glibbed foes' in *The Image of Irelande*. In the background, axe-wielding galloglass make a tactical retreat from English halberdiers and handgunners. Among the dead is the galloglass 'pyper'. (University of Edinburgh)

along the banks of the river Clare, where they were ruthlessly cut down by their pursuers. Ulick had lost. About half of his army – 2,000 or so men – lay dead. Perhaps 1,000 of Kildare's men perished; we have no way of knowing for sure. We know, however, that casualties among galloglass on both sides were extremely heavy, the Ulster annals writing that where there 'were nine battles of galloglass in compact array there escaped not alive of them but one thin battle alone'.

Loyalty to the end: Monasternenagh 1579

The image of galloglass as mercenaries who fought solely for money is difficult to square with their suicidal performance at Monasternenagh – a performance that flew completely in the face of all selfish instincts. In 1579, Sir John Fitzgerald, the Earl of Desmond's brother, was in rebellion against the Crown. On 3 October, near the ruined monastery of Monasternenagh in south-west Ireland, Sir John brought some 2,000 Desmond warriors into the field, including the family MacSheehy. Arrayed against them were 1,000 or so well-trained Englishmen commanded by the hard-bitten Sir Nicholas Malby: gunners, halberdiers, pikemen and a small reserve of cavalry.

The battle began with a determined charge by the MacSheehy galloglass. Rich was there and did not think much of the galloglass onslaught, later writing that 'the service of galloglass in the field was neither good against horsemen, nor able to endure an encounter with pikes'. It was against pikes, drawn up in orderly squares, that the MacSheehys now expended themselves. After the psychological impact of the first Irish charge had been shaken off, it became clear there was nothing the galloglass could do to break the English squares.



In desperation, the MacSheehys began rushing forward in a series of frenzied but fruitless sallies. The bodies of MacSheehys piled up across the field, alongside perhaps a quarter of the Irish army. Where the galloglass and Irish had managed to force their way through the English pikes, they doubtless usually triumphed; but their intense, adrenalin-fuelled valour and individual prowess was wasted against the disciplined fire and steel of the English. As Malby's cavalry began to bear down on their flanks, the MacSheehys joined the general exodus of Irishmen from the field.

Perhaps the author of a government report of 1515 had witnessed or heard talk of a similar poor performance by galloglass, since it made the accusation that galloglass had 'no more power, nor might, to stand in the field ... than have the wolf against lion, or the kite against the falcon'. It is difficult to know how anyone in full possession of their faculties could have reached such a conclusion. Galloglass were always tightly disciplined, brave and skilled at arms. They were not, of course, invincible, but bad generalship was to blame for their defeat at Monasternenagh. As a general lesson, they were vulnerable to missile fire, unless supported by their own. Attempts to remedy this weakness were made in the 16th century, and at the Erne Fords (1593) galloglass appear to have been deployed three or four men deep in front of gunners, archers and pikemen – much in the manner of the 'double pay' *Landsknecht* halberdiers and two-handed swordsmen found in Continental armies.

Rout of Maguire's axemen by the English at the Erne Fords, 10 October 1593, from John Thomas' picture-map. This crude but interesting image appears to show unarmoured galloglass – except for possibly some helmets. Their clothing looks modern and they wear swept-hilt rapiers, perhaps indicating the fairly Anglicized appearance of the last galloglass. (Author's drawing)

ETHOS AND MOTIVATION

Galloglass claimed to have no fear of death. Losses were always high: their role as masters of both vanguard and rearguard ensured that whole 'battles' were almost completely wiped out on a regular basis. Lord Richard de Clare reported 600 slain at a single action in Thormond in 1311. The wars between Gaelic Irish, Anglo-Irish and English were never-ending. An entry for 1339 in the *Annals of Connacht* conveys the general state of medieval Ireland: 'Great war all over Meath between foreigners and Gaels. The corn crops of Ireland were destroyed and there was famine in the land.'

The galloglass bore these trials with extraordinary courage, and their reputation as an elite never failed to attract fresh blood into their ranks. Less admirable was their indifference to brutality and suffering. It is an unavoidable fact that the historical record of the galloglass bears the deep stain of atrocity. They were, on balance, no worse than the English or native Irish in this respect, and their conduct remained the same whether they fought Englishmen or Irishmen. If surrender came quickly, the galloglass might be generous; if they were opposed or cornered they ran wild, looting and killing without compunction.

Odium humanitatis

The English poet Michael Drayton (1563–1631) rather optimistically suggested that if the Irish bards sang his verse they might 'mollify' the 'slaught'ring galloglass'. More realistic was Stanihurst's chilling remark that galloglass had an *odium humanitatis* – a hatred of humanity. Canny mercenaries they may have been, the galloglass' code was that of the anti-hero of pagan Gaelic and Norse saga. Revelling in the chaos of war and repulsed by peace, galloglass combined many of the worst aspects of medieval Scotland and Ireland – a chimera of Scottish excessive violence and Irish anarchic nihilism. Galloglass rarely bothered taking prisoners, Dymmok writing them off as 'cruel without compassion'. Stanihurst said the same, adding they were 'altogether sanguinary'. Spenser accused both galloglass and kern of 'bestly behaviour', inasmuch as they 'oppress all men, they spoil as well the subject, as the enemy; they steal, they are cruel and bloody, full of revenge and delighting in deadly execution, licentious, swearers, and blasphemers, common ravishers of women, and murderers of children'.

E

MACSWEENEY VERSUS MACSWEENEY: KNOCKDOE, 1504

Here a MacSweeney of the Earl of Kildare's army (1) is locked in deadly confrontation with a MacSweeney in the service of Ulick Burke (2). Both are noblemen of the MacSweeney tribe, both closely related to their respective constables, but bad blood exists between their two branches of the family. Their young harness-bearers (3 and 4) watch but do not interfere: this must be a private combat to the death between two gentlemen. Sir George Carew wrote of the 'mortal malice' existing between two MacSweeney septs in Carbery, so that whenever any of them met 'they did assuredly fight'. The cause of this rivalry was apparently nothing more than a dispute over which branch was descended from the nobler ancestor.

(1) represents the most modern form of galloglass of his day, in quilted coat, mail shirt, helmet with pike, all made to an extremely high standard. His shoes are fashionable by any standard. His opponent, (2), is an older, wilder warrior who rejects the comfort and style of modern military dress. A grizzled tribal fighter, he opts for primitive sandals and carries an old-fashioned axe. The feather crest (*cir*) on his iron 'skull' is inspired by a late medieval figure carving at Killybegs.



These comments cannot be accepted uncritically, but while the Irish were condemned by hysterical Elizabethans as ‘savages’ there was also a certain fondness for, in the words of Thomas Gainsford, veteran of Kinsale, the ‘proud hearts’ of the ‘amorous’ Irish, ‘liberal of life’ and ‘lovers of music and hospitality’. All we hear of the galloglass is that they were, as Stanihurst termed it, ‘grim of countenance’. The English admired galloglass as warriors and considered them gentlemen in status, never calling them ‘scum’ as they did the kern – even if ‘rude galloglass’ did (allegedly) turn the head of the governor of Carrickfergus into a football in 1597. Yet this respect was mingled with a dread for the galloglass’ peculiarly ‘Scottish’ manner of fighting. Put simply this meant – and this is an accusation levelled at Scots by both the English and Irish – that galloglass and New Scots were especially, often needlessly, destructive.

Famine and homicide

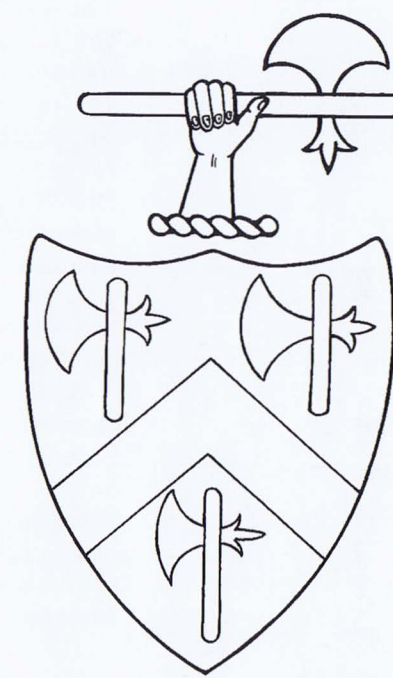
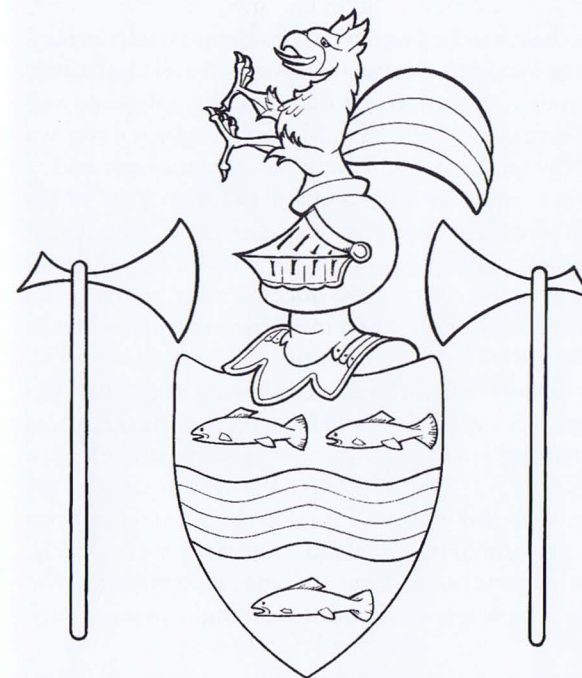
When Robert Bruce arrived in Ireland around Christmas 1316 at the head of ‘many galloglass’ he was welcomed by the *Annals of Connacht* as a liberator coming ‘to expel the foreigners from Ireland’. Two years later the very same annals cried out that ‘never was a better deed done for the Irish’ than the defeat of the Scots at Faughart, who had brought nothing to Ireland but ‘falsehood and famine and homicide’. Before reaching Faughart, his brother Edward Bruce and his army had taken Dundalk amid great slaughter. John Barbour (d.1395) did not shy away from recording the horror of the scene in *The Bruce*:

And in the town made such a slaughter,
Such a shambles, that like water
From lying bodies flowed the blood
Through streets and gutters in a flood.

The Scottish military presence provoked mixed feelings amongst the Irish, but the idea that the Bruce brothers had come to Ireland as Celtic liberators sent the Pale into fits of panic. For the native Irish, clan was always more important than nationality, and little coordinated anti-English feeling existed. In Scotland hatred of the English was ingrained, which, paradoxically, was one of the qualities that made Scots so eagerly sought after as fighting men in Ireland. Scots, and by association galloglass, fought to the death, without half measure or compromise.

Vassals and empire builders

After several years of service, our Irish galloglass would have taken part in battles, sieges, single combat, skirmishes, cattle raids, and, admittedly, razed defenceless towns and villages. Through all this time he will have remained alert and on guard; he is never truly off duty, and as an elite bodyguard and infantryman, he attends on his lord at every dinner, guarding against every surprise, accompanying his lord on every visit or journey. There is no divide between his family and professional life – as a galloglass fighting for a tribal lord these are one and the same.



It cannot have escaped our galloglass’ attention that the arrival of his unit in each new household that employs them brings about an immediate and fundamental shift in the local balance of power. Neighbouring chiefs scramble to hire their own galloglass, yet a question of loyalty sometimes hangs over their head. As soon as our galloglass sets his foot on an employer’s lands, he finds himself enmeshed in conspiracy. He must decide whether to remain loyal or to join the inevitable plots hatched by those close to the chief. Indeed, when the term ‘galloglass’ is used in full for the first time it is in the context of family power politics. In 1290 the *Annals of Connacht* described how Aodh O’Donnell was deposed by his half-brother Turloch ‘through the power of his mother’s kin, the Clan Donald, and of many other galloglass’.

The situation did not change with time and there remained the danger that the galloglass might turn on their master. But the chiefs had no choice; at any rate, galloglass were far more trustworthy than the wild kern or scheming tribal nobility. Nonetheless, the MacSweeneys trod a particularly dangerous path between empire-builders and loyal servants. First recorded in Tyrconnell in the 1280s, they spent the next hundred years wresting large parts of the region from its original owners, before entering the service of the O’Donnells of Tyrconnell and growing to become a clan within a clan.

As if to remind the MacSweeneys of their position of vassals, and to add glamour to that role, the bards represented them as the heirs to the memory of the Fianna, warrior companions of the legendary Fionn MacCumhaill – they were ‘Finn’s inheritance’. In the 16th century, Ó hEoghusa eulogized on the relative virtues of the Fianna and MacSweeneys: ‘It is no reproach to these heroes of yore that the Race of Sweeney do twice as much in defence of Ireland.’ Ewen Óg MacSweeney of the Trí Tuatha was portrayed by the same poet as an insomniac whose only relief came through fighting for the O’Donnells, a man who ‘neither can nor would sleep without a battle, often exchanging wounds in defence of the O’Donnells’.

MacCabe arms from 18th-century graves at Ballintemple, County Cavan. The axes suggest an enduring ‘galloglass’ identity among the MacCabes. In an Ireland of anti-Catholic Penal Laws, they must have clung tightly to family tales and folk memories of a time when the MacCabes were mighty *gallóglaigh*. (Drawings by Katy Lumsden)

Tomb slab dated 1544 at Doe Castle, probably carved for one of the MacSweeney Does. (Author’s drawing)

The lord's galloglass

Our galloglass may decide he has now had enough of the infantry service and try to get taken on by a lord in need of a personal bodyguard and champion. This was the 'lord's galloglass', a man of exceptional loyalty, diligence and close-quarter fighting skills. Writing in the 1690s, Martin Martin, a native of Skye, outlined the duties of this post, saying that in times past chiefs had 'a bold armour-bearer, whose business was always to attend the person of his master night and day to prevent any surprise, and this man was called galloglass'. These were the duties that had been performed by an ex-galloglass who appeared as a witness in a lawsuit of 1605, explaining he had been 'galloglass to Connor O'Brien [3rd Earl of Thomond] and waited on him in his chamber'.

In Scotland, the 'lord's galloglass' had an equivalent known as an 'armour-bearer', the term Martin used. This was the original and true galloglass who bequeathed to all later representatives of his order the identity of being first and foremost a personal bodyguard. The lowly harness-bearer carried his galloglass' armour, and so too did the lord's galloglass carry armour belonging to his master at ceremonial occasions. The custom was adopted by the Anglo-Irish and English – even Lord Deputy Charles Blount, 8th Baron Mountjoy (c.1562–1606), had a galloglass who rode at his side on horseback and carried his helmet for him.

A lord's galloglass received a larger salary than his ordinary infantry counterpart; the 'Lord's galloglass' serving O'Neill of Tyrone in 1601 was listed in an English document to enjoy one dead-pay for every 100-man company. Martin also said that the lord's galloglass or armour-bearer – this 'extraordinary man, whose strength and courage distinguished him from the common sort' – was granted a double portion of meat at every meal. This was to ensure he was well fed, but, like the bearing of armour, formed a symbolic and public statement of fealty between lord and champion.

To be a lord's galloglass was materially very rewarding, even luxurious, but it was also highly dangerous – perhaps even more so than serving as a galloglass axeman. The lord's galloglass routinely had to ward off assassins and take up challenges made against his employer. It was a 'lusty galloglass' who in 1586

F

BRUCE'S INVASION: ANTRIM COAST

On 26 May 1315, Edward Bruce (1), younger brother of King Robert, landed on the Antrim coast at the head of some 6,000 men with the intention of driving out the English. The army doubtless came ashore at multiple locations, and both Larne and Glendun are likely landing points. This plate shows Edward conversing on the beach with two senior commanders, as the army moves inland at the start of the campaign. One is a powerful MacDonald lord from the north of the country (2). With MacDonald is Sir Fergus of Ardrossan (3), a prominent supporter of the Bruce brothers and described by Barbour as 'a right courageous knight'. Like Edward, Sir Fergus hails from Scotland's Gaelic south-west, and is every bit as 'Celtic' in his arms, dress and demeanour as the bare-legged MacDonald.

Barbour recounts the initial success of the campaign: 'In less than three years Sir Edward won nineteen great victories, and in sundry of these battles he vanquished 20,000 men and more, with horses mailed to the feet.' Ultimately, the invasion was defeated by famine. Its legacy, however, was profound. Ireland was now full of battle-hardened Scottish warriors, and many would stay on as galloglass. The campaign had provided graphic proof (as if it were needed) of the incredible skill and fortitude of Scottish soldiery; the invasion made their name in Ireland.

Edward's adventure was a bloodthirsty affair; Sir Fergus apparently died at Skerries near Ardscoil on 26 January 1316, while the chiefs of both the MacDonalds and the MacRorays fell with the brave but reckless Edward at the disastrous battle of Faughart on 14 October 1318.



accepted the challenge made by Alexander MacSorley, commander of a troop of New Scots, against his English employer, Captain Nicholas Merriman. The galloglass champion (allegedly disguised as Merriman) stunned MacSorley at the first blow. But MacSorley recovered quickly and slew the galloglass, at which point Merriman stepped in, fighting for some time with sword and target. Merriman wounded the by now exhausted MacSorley in the leg, forcing him to give ground, which so discouraged the Scots that they fled.

Into government service

Many galloglass worked for the English not as personal bodyguards, but as members of regular companies of axemen. Galloglass, spurred by their quest for land and power, were usually prepared to work for the English, a paymaster who had more to offer than just cattle. Ireland was a split land, half native, half Anglicized, and its nobles, galloglass included, were used to living hybrid lives. For a long time, English monarchs treated the galloglass constables with a cautious respect, and the feeling was mutual. Richard II met with some of the galloglass captains in Ireland in 1395, speaking through an interpreter named Thomas Talbot. Among those paying homage to Richard was Thomas MacCabe of Clogher who came with his paymaster, Philip MacMahon of Oriel. Another was 'Schan MacDonyld', styling himself 'chief of his name and constable of the Irish of Ulster'. MacDonald had earlier written to Richard from Armagh expressing his wish to become Richard's 'liegeman, captain and constable throughout your whole land of Ireland with as many armed men as you wish me to have with your royal majesty'.

We see here the seeds of an interesting alliance between certain MacDonnells and the English Crown. The MacDonnells saw that the English administration in Dublin was short of soldiers and could benefit from their services. In 1542 the government received the 'submission' – really an offer of military assistance – of a MacDonnell 'capten of the galloglasses'. MacDonnell opened his pledge with statements of loyalty, renouncing the authority of the 'Bishop of Rome'

Maolmhuire Mac Suibhne (Mulmurry MacSweeney) was the last inaugurated chief of Doe. He was knighted in 1600 by Elizabeth I but is said to have died in poverty. (Seán Ó'Brógáin)



and saying he recognized only Henry VIII as his 'Sovereign Lord'. MacDonnell asked for the King 'to assign to me and my followers his majesty's lands called the Grene Castle and the Mourne, now lying waste and unoccupied', in return promising to 'bind myself and my said followers to serve his majesty at all times' with 120 or 80 (dependent on location) 'spars well harnessed'. Clearly anxious about competing offers the King might receive, MacDonnell added: 'I humbly desire his majesty, in case any such need shall be, that more galloglass shall be hired, that such galloglass as I shall bring above the said number may be hired afore other strangers.'

Dublin could ill afford to refuse such offers. But Dublin, and the fragile Pale around it, was always a reluctant employer of galloglass. Unlike the Gaelicized Anglo-Irish magnates, the inhabitants of these areas strove to uphold the English way of life and were strong with the pioneer spirit of the frontiersman. At the same time, they knew they lacked the money or resources to adequately defend – never mind extend – their borders. Dublin's problem was that English kings refused to spend much money on keeping the peace in Ireland, preferring to rely instead on semi-loyal Anglo-Irish warlords like the Earls of Kildare to run Ireland on their behalf.

It was, in fact, the 8th Earl of Kildare (d.1513), victor of Knockdoe, who was largely responsible for making the inclusion of galloglass in government armies a matter of normal routine. He showed that the best men to defend the Pale were those who most threatened it, persuading Dublin to employ not only galloglass but kern and horsemen too. The Lord Deputy was soon seen travelling the land with units of galloglass at his side, making treaties with chieftains for the use of their galloglass in time of war; in 1540 O'Donnell pledged 'to provide to go with the deputy when needed, for one month, 60 horse, 120 kern and 120 Scots alias galloglass'. Twenty years earlier a state memorandum had already conceded that 'without galloglass and kern, the deputy cannot well defend the Englishry'.

An Irish chief arming for battle in John Derrick's *The Image of Irelande*. He is waited on by a horse-boy and an axeman – probably his 'lord's galloglass' or a 'household kern' bodyguard. (University of Edinburgh)



A galloglass, presumably in Crown service, stands guard in Elizabeth I's charter to Dublin, 1581/82. (Reproduced by kind permission of Dublin City Archives)

Constables of the Pale

The 8th Earl of Kildare's power was so great that he was able to billet his galloglass within the Pale, exacting 'coyne and livery' from even the English. His galloglass, the MacDonnells, were at this time Kildare's own men rather than Crown employees. They had come into Kildare's service after Turlough MacDonnell (d.1435) arrived in Leinster. Clearly a man of great ambition and ability, Turlough had commanded a battle of galloglass for the O'Kellys in Galway before he and his family came into the orbit, probably at first on an occasional basis, of the English and the Earls of Kildare. It proved to be a shrewd move. Turlough and his son, Eoin Carragh (d.1466) made a name for themselves in government circles as dependable mercenaries who were prepared to take on the dangerous job of guarding the borders of the Pale. Eoin was called 'best captain of the English', and it was probably him that built or acquired Tinnakill Castle in County Laois on the Pale's wild frontier.

The MacDonnell-Kildare relationship came to an end when Gearóid Óg, 9th Earl of Kildare, fell out with Henry VIII and was imprisoned in the Tower, where he died in 1534. Having lost their employer, the MacDonnells were promptly taken on by the government on a formal basis as 'royal' galloglass. In 1549 they were described as the 'King's galloglasses of the Clandonnells'. Four years later, Alexander MacDonnell was hailed as 'captain of the King's *Scotici*, otherwise galloglass'.

G THE RESCUE OF THE EARL OF DESMOND, 1582

The MacSheehys were fiercely loyal retainers of the Earls of Desmond. In 1579, Gerald Fitzgerald, 14th Earl (1), revolted against Elizabeth I. In late April, 1582, he and a bodyguard of 80 MacSheehys were surprised near Kilfinnane by a party of English soldiers as they prepared for supper. An old pistol wound Fitzgerald suffered some years earlier had opened again in the damp chill of the evening, leaving him unable to walk. Fitzgerald was borne to safety in a blanket across a peat bog by his galloglass while others of their unit fought a delaying action with the English.

The right-hand figure (2) who carries the invalided Fitzgerald is none other than Maurice MacSheehy, constable of the Desmond galloglass. Attired in the usual mail, he wears a good-quality burgonet imported from Germany. With him are two galloglass, one wearing an Italian-made morion (3). The other (4), having lost both his helmet and axe, must defend himself with only his dirk. The last figure (5) is a chaplain to the MacSheehys – certainly no jolly friar, but a gaunt and hardened warrior of Rome. He believes he is waging a war against the 'heretic' Elizabeth and brandishes a sword, one of a shipment sent by the King of Spain to help his Irish allies.

Fitzgerald did escape; half of the 80 galloglass lost their lives to ensure that he did. The next year Fitzgerald was surprised and killed by government soldiers, and his head stuck on London Bridge.





Effigy of a man in armour (identity unknown); 14th or 15th century, Iona Abbey Museum, Scotland. (Crown Copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland)

In exchange for the Crown's protection of their rights to Tinnakill and other perks, the MacDonnells policed the borders of the Pale and were a prominent feature in the plantation of Laois and Offaly, promising to 'go upon' any Irish raiders who strayed into the 'Queen's county'. Secretly, the Crown hoped that by settling MacDonnells on land granted under English law they could wean them off coyne and livery and their 'uncivilized' Gaelic ways. It was a subtle means of dismantling the Gaelic order – perhaps too subtle for seasoned opportunists like the MacDonnells, who simply took what was on offer while remaining every bit as Gaelic, warlike and free-spirited. Even so, the MacDonnells proved (usually) to be loyal servants of the Crown and in 1570 their leader, Colla, died fighting the rebel Burkes of Mayo. The Burkes' galloglass, incidentally, were Colla's cousins, the MacDonnells of Connacht.

Government galloglass appear to have been a rowdy bunch. Lambeth Palace's manuscript account of Lord Sussex in Ireland in 1563 talks of MacDonnell galloglass squabbling with government kern, until 'one Kelly was slain, and McDonnell Gallo and others wounded,' at which point Sussex 'took up the matter, and made them friends in his tent'. If our galloglass enters English service, the chief differences he will notice are that he sleeps in a better tent and that there is more paperwork involved in getting him signed up. More welcome than the paperwork would be the ration packs that the English issued to their men: in 1563 'victuals for four whole days' were given to a party of Queen's galloglass, kern and Englishmen setting out on a mission against Shane O'Neill.

Galloglass could be tolerated by Dublin for only so long. Few in the government were happy to have men like the MacDonnells about the place. Late in her reign, Elizabeth I ordered the Dublin administration to 'clear our army of the Irish' and use only English soldiers. This proved impossible to implement but demonstrated the yawning gulf that had opened up between Gael and Pale. From the point of view of the galloglass, they had been happy to work in a nominal way for the English interest while the Lord Deputy operated like just another semi-independent Irish prince. Indeed, the 8th Earl of

Kildare – though Lord Deputy and a Knight of the Garter – openly participated in rebellion against Henry VII. Later Lord Deputies were different; they were outsiders to Irish ways and were direct instruments of English colonization. The battle lines were hardening and cooperation was fast becoming a thing of the past.

Retirement and reward

As the years pass, our Irish galloglass – assuming he is not yet in the grave – may well have risen to command his own 'battle'. If he has remained with his old unit, he will have become a respected veteran who has won the trust of his constable. Constables customarily bestowed gifts on their men, as they did amongst all their followers and guests, though one poem warns against exhausting the liberality of Donal MacSweeney of Fanad – telling us to be warned, for despite his 'miracles of hospitality', one greedy party who expected too much suddenly found their eyes fixed on his axe.

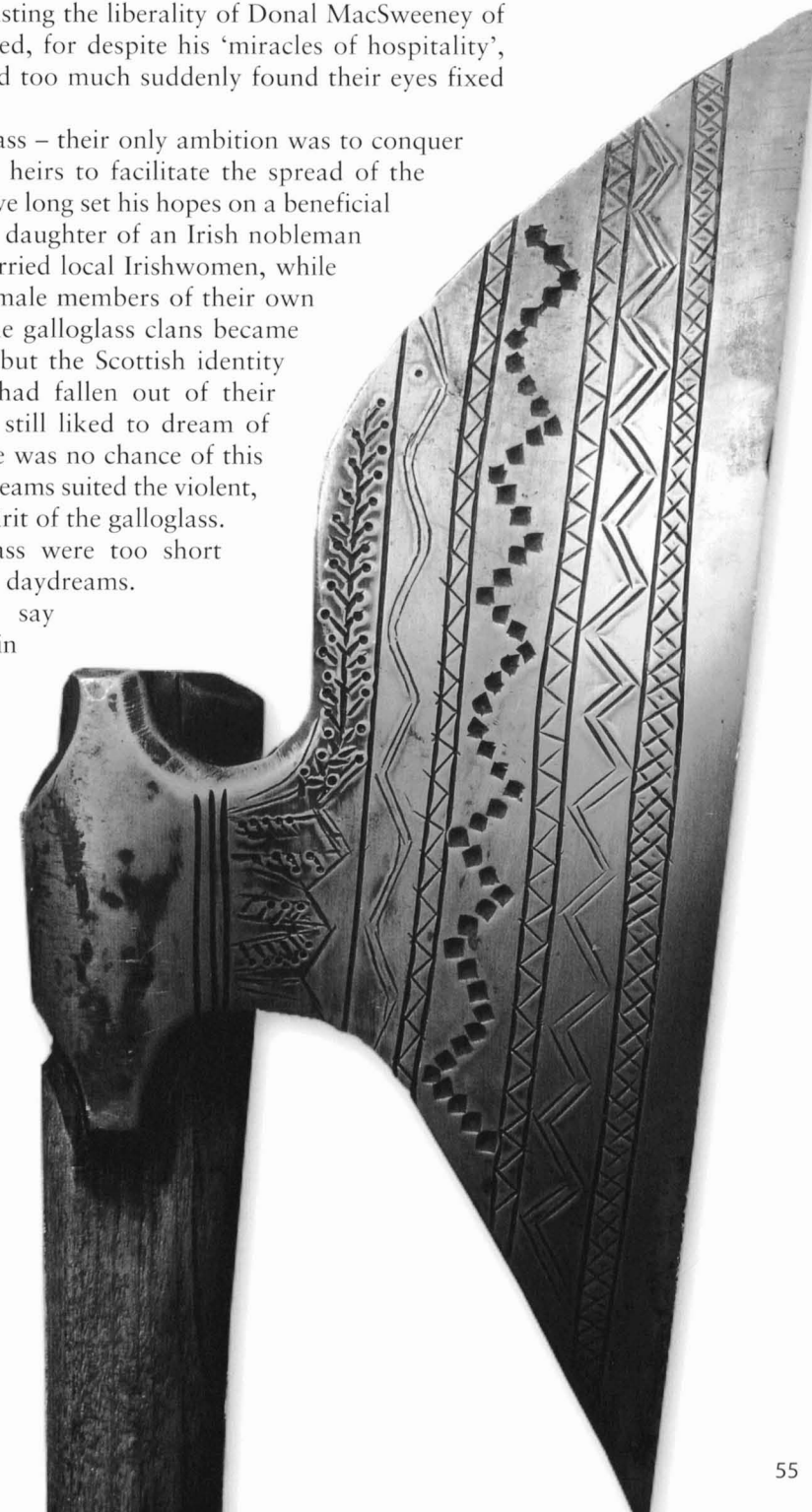
Galloglass spawned galloglass – their only ambition was to conquer new lands and beget multiple heirs to facilitate the spread of the kindred. Our galloglass will have long set his hopes on a beneficial (to him) marriage, ideally, the daughter of an Irish nobleman with land. Most galloglass married local Irishwomen, while others took wives from the female members of their own warrior kindred. Over time the galloglass clans became substantially Irish in 'blood', but the Scottish identity lived on. A century after it had fallen out of their possession, the MacSweeneys still liked to dream of reclaiming Castle Sween. There was no chance of this ever happening but such pipe dreams suited the violent, yet oddly sentimental 'exile' spirit of the galloglass.

The lives of most galloglass were too short to leave much time for idle daydreams.

The Annals of Connacht say William MacDowell was killed in

1471 on his way home from mercenary service in Leinster. Enemies were everywhere and galloglass made too many of them to expect a peaceful retirement. Others survived, but as mutilated cripples; Turlough MacSweeney (yet another with that name) lost a hand and a foot in a fight on the River Bandon after which he hobbled about on a wooden leg, only to be killed in 1579 at the gate of Cork by a relative. But the galloglass quest for land and power was insatiable. Even after our galloglass has laid aside his axe for the last time and married his heiress, he will probably find that he is too conditioned by years of war to ever be truly contented with life as a gentleman farmer.

A reconstructed galloglass axe, based on surviving examples. The cutting edge is almost exactly 1ft (30cm) long, which Stanihurst gives as the measurement for a galloglass axe-head. (Dave Swift)



'Like anatomies of death'

If, however, our Irish galloglass lived during the Elizabethan age he may well find that no cosy farmstead awaits him. Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558 and was at first content to leave Ireland to its own devices. Yet as she grew older she became impatient with the Irish lords. Enough of broken promises and rebellion – she would remodel Ireland as an obedient English colony, governed by English laws and customs.

Even while they were employed by the government, galloglass were synonymous with civil unrest, disorder and Scottish intrigue. It was a reasonable accusation. All across the country galloglass were playing a leading role in the resistance to English centralization. Perceiving England's mistrust of galloglass, some of the Irish lords tried to shift the blame onto their galloglass for their own treasonous misdeeds. MacWilliam Eighter (aka Richard Burke) apologized in 1580–81 to Queen Elizabeth for rebelling against her, explaining that his 'lewd disobedience' was caused by the 'persuasion and Counsel of the Clandonnells and other undutiful persons'.

The Crown's policy of dismantling the Gaelic military establishment by employing galloglass under English pay and rewards had given way to coercion and force of arms. Yet many needed little persuasion to abandon the mercenary profession and were already morphing into 'respectable' landowners. The Tinnakill MacDonnells had grown financially and socially secure and no longer needed to be galloglass. The Four Masters said of Alexander, son of Colla, at his death in 1577 that 'there were not many sons of galloglass in Ireland at that time who were more wealthy' than he. His brother, 'Yellow' Hugh (Aodh Buidhe) MacDonnell (c.1549–1619), was the last of the Tinnakill chiefs to wield the galloglass axe. Hugh's son, Fergus,

H

THE END OF THE OLD ORDER: BALLYHOURA HILLS, 1583

After the failure of the Desmond rising, ragged bands of MacSheehys struggled home to their farms in the Vale of Awbeg, County Cork, only to find Elizabeth I's surveyors already at work – clearing their farmsteads and surveying their land for incoming waves of English settlers. In this final plate we see a galloglass, his wife and his young son seeking refuge in the Ballyhoura hills above the river Awbeg. Armed with an Irish-made two-handed sword, the galloglass wears the armour of a typical late 16th-century galloglass: a mail shirt and imported Continental helmet – in the case of this figure, a single-piece Italian cabasset. Below in the valley English soldiers raze their farmland, on which the MacSheehys had been settled for three generations.

The story does not end there. After long months of waiting, watching and skirmishing, Desmond's galloglass were finally expelled from the south of the country by the overseers of the plantation of Munster, who ordered all galloglass and kern to leave, 'other than such as shall give themselves to manure the ground'. Banding together with New Scots and kern, some made their way north to Ulster, the only part of Ireland still offering co-ordinated resistance to English rule. In 1594, lords Hugh O'Neill and 'Red' Hugh O'Donnell, with their own MacSweeneys and MacDonnells, rose in revolt.

In 1603 the rebellion folded. Two years later, the Irish were informed by Lord Deputy Sir Arthur Chichester that they were no longer subjects of their chief or lord, but subjects of King James alone. The 'Flight of the Earls' in 1607 was the final act in the long and sorry story of the galloglass' decline. Among those leaving the country was Rory, chief of the O'Donnells. His constable, Donal MacSweeney of Fanad, stayed behind. Donal is noted in the early 17th century as a slightly pathetic figure who weathered the plantation of Ulster by publicly condemning O'Donnell as a traitor. Incredibly, his grovelling got him a grant of 2,000 acres (810 hectares) and the office of magistrate, though he received the solicitor-general's frowns for sitting as a justice of peace 'in an uncivil manner in his mantle'. Donal would surely have preferred the tribute paid to his ancestor of happier times, Turlough the One-Eyed, who died in 1399 and received from the *Book of the MacSweeneys* what must be the perfect epitaph for any successful galloglass: 'a man of great knowledge, very violent and very generous'.





Effigy of O'Cahan, late 15th century, St Mary's Abbey, Dungiven. (Author's drawing)

led a quiet life as Lord of the Manor of Tinnakill in possession of some 10,000 acres (4,050 hectares), including the right to hold a court, weekly market and a fair 'for two days annually – viz., 21st and 22nd September'. But pressurized to adopt English ways and language, their position was often precarious and difficult.

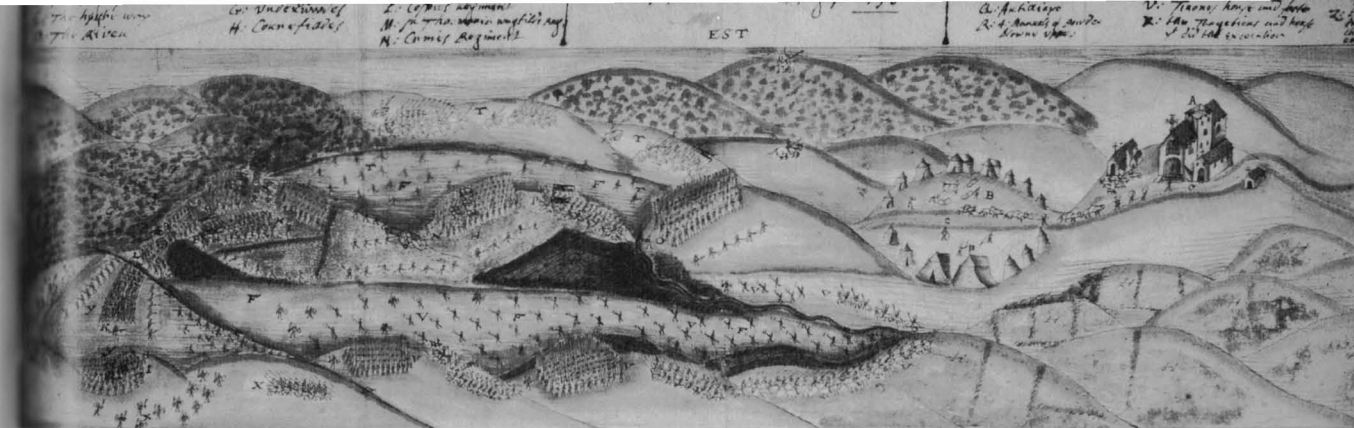
The reality was that the galloglass' time had passed. Chiefs wanting to hire mercenaries were increasingly now opting for New Scots over galloglass: the seasonal 'redshanks' did not require long-term bonaght and so could be hired in their thousands rather than tens or hundreds. The freelance galloglass was already a thing of the past. Galloglass were still found in private armies as household guardsmen; but those following chiefs who remained opposed to English rule were now doomed. In the last two decades of the 16th century, an appalling struggle arose between Elizabeth and the last of the great independent lords of Ireland. One by one they fell, and with them went their galloglass – first the Fitzgeralds and their MacSheehys and MacSweeneys in the south, then the O'Neills and O'Donnells and their MacSweeneys and MacDonnells (joined by some of the Leinster MacDonnells, supposed servants of the Crown) in the north. Surviving galloglass passed into the starving and destitute masses – the innocent victims of war who Spenser remembered looking 'like anatomies of death'.

The galloglass and the keys to heaven

In 1571, the English Jesuit Edmund Campion published a curious account of how an Irish priest, 'needy of money', organized a collection fund for St Patrick who had supposedly been hit over the head by St Peter during an attempt to get an 'Irish galloglass' into heaven. The galloglass' story is indeed one of unadulterated violence to the end. The last representatives of the livelihood fought bravely but against insurmountable odds. By a quirk of history, the English royal line had passed into history with them. It was a Scotsman, James Stuart, who took Elizabeth's place as sovereign ruler of England and Ireland.

The condition of the old galloglass officer class improved slightly under the Stuarts, but there was no escaping the fact that Elizabeth had changed Ireland forever. Gone was the world of petty kings, bards, bonaght and private wars which had supported and given life to the galloglass as a martial order. Nor were the Stuarts inclined to try and bring that world back. Some galloglass survived as landowners, though they were often rather down at heel. They met their final downfall as

insurgents in the 1641 revolt and as anti-Cromwell confederates and royalists. Among those stripped of his lands was 'Yellow' Hugh's grandson, James MacDonnell of Tinnakill, 'Hibernian Papist', who died in London in 1661.



Others had fled abroad seeking fresh fortunes, just as the first galloglass from Scotland had done. A great deal more simply sank without trace or led unrewarding, marginalized lives as labourers, stablemen, lowly mercenary security men and criminals. Thereafter they vanish from view, constables included. If our Irish galloglass is unfortunate enough to witness the eclipse of the old order, the likelihood is that he will be among them, joining the exodus into oblivion.

PLACES TO VISIT

Visiting the National Museum of Ireland (Dublin), especially the Collins Barracks branch of the museum, and the Ulster Museum (Belfast) is essential for anyone wanting to explore the subject of galloglass. The National Museum of Scotland (Edinburgh) furnishes the visitor with an understanding of the Scotland that the galloglass came from. Castles like Enniskillen Castle in Northern Ireland (open as a museum), Doe Castle near Creeslough in Ireland (open to the public) and Castle Sween in Kilmory in Scotland (open all year) survive as haunting monuments to a lost world.

The battle of the Yellow Ford, 14 August 1598. At the Yellow Ford, the army of Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, won a major victory over the English – the English dead included their commander, Sir Henry Bagenal. Galloglass were still stated by the English at this time to form a part of O'Neill's forces, but no obviously galloglass-type warriors appear in this panorama by the English soldier John Thomas. O'Neill made radical reforms of his forces and it is possible that his galloglass had been re-equipped as pikemen or 'targeteers'. (The Board of Trinity College Dublin)



A reconstructed scian, with tooled leather scabbard, based on those shown in Derrick's *Image of Ireland* and other contemporary illustrations. (Dave Swift)

GLOSSARY

Key:

IG: Irish Gaelic

SG: Scots Gaelic

SE: Scots English

E: English

Brat (IG/SG):

cloak, mantle.

Bog(h)a (IG/SG):

bow.

Buanna (IG/SG):

mercenary; hence *buannacht* (IG), literally ‘guesting’: the right of a lord to quarter soldiers on his subjects and extract wages and provisions in the form of a tax for the maintenance of those soldiers.

Ceithearnach (IG), *kern* (E):

‘trooper’, native Irish infantryman, from *ceithearn* for ‘troop’.

Clogad/t (IG/SG):

helmet, also *cuinnbeirt* and *cathbharr* (IG), none of these terms with any precise usage.

Claidheamh (SG), *cloidhem* (IG):

sword.

Coinmheadh (IG), ‘coyne’ (E):

‘give hospitality’, the billeting of soldiers on a lord’s subjects.

Consabal (IG):

military commander or governor, from Latin *comes stabuli*.

Corrughadh/córugud (IG):

unit of soldiers, from *córaigid* (IG/SG) ‘arranges, sets in order’.

Cotún (IG), *actoun* (SE), *aketon* (E):

long padded tunic worn for body defence.

Cráisech (IG), *craoiseach* (SG):

spear (see also *sleagh*).

Creach (IG/SG):

raid, often for cattle.

Eidid(h) (IG/SG):

general term for armour.

Ga/gaoi/ghai (IG), *gath* (SG):

javelin.

Lèine croich (IG/SG): ‘saffron shirt’,
yellow-coloured linen tunic.

Livery (E):

provision of food for a soldier, retainer or horse.

Luireach (IG/SG):

mail shirt.

Saiget (IG), *saighead* (SG):

arrow.

Scabal (IG/SG):

coif, pisane or mantle of mail.

Scian (IG), *sgian* (SG):

dagger.

Seca (IG):

jack or jerkin; *seacaid* (SG): jacket.

Sgiath (IG/SG):

general word for shield.

Sleagh (SG), *sleg* (IG):

spear or lance.

Sparre (IG), *spàrr* (SG), *spar* (E):

pole-axe of the galloglass, as in a joist or beam; also
the unit formed by a galloglass and his attendants.

Targadha (IG), *targaid* (SG), *targe* (SE), *target* (E):

small round shield.

Tuagh (IG/SG):

axe.

Running galloglass, by Seán
Ó Brógáin.



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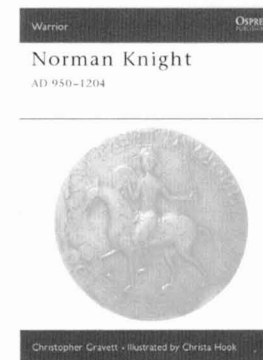
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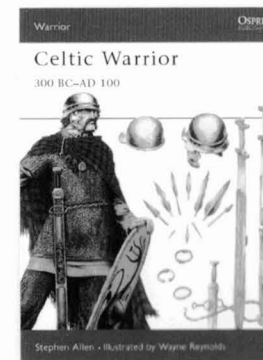
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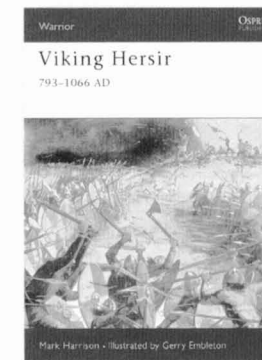
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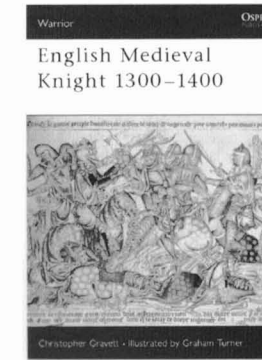
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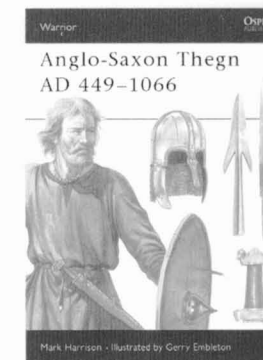
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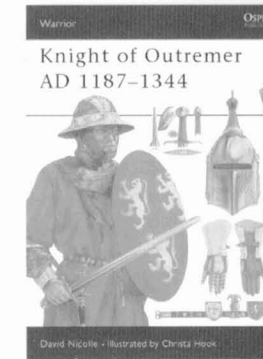
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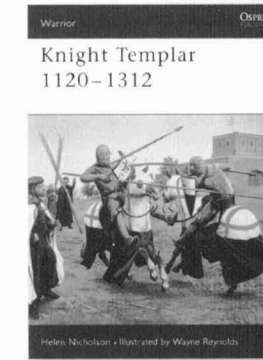
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