

THE GRAVE OF MAGNUS BARELEGS

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Magnus Barelegs, king of Norway, was killed by the Ulaí in 1103 as he began his journey home after a military campaign in Ireland. Documentary sources indicate that this happened somewhere near Downpatrick and a mound near the former shore of Horse Island is traditionally identified as his grave. The evidence for the identification is reviewed.

INTRODUCTION

The first Ordnance Survey 6" map of Downpatrick, Co Down (1834), shows a large area of marshland lying to the south of the cathedral, the site of the early monastery of Downpatrick and traditional burial place of St Patrick. To the south-west of this a large peninsula juts out into the marsh (Fig 1). A map of the area of 1755 (Fig 2) shows that this was formerly an island, latterly known as Horse Island, at the edge of a tidal inlet of Strangford Lough. In 1755 the island was located next to the land and would have been accessible on foot at low tide. A small sub-rectangular enclosure is shown on the western side of Horse Island on the 1838 map but is not

marked as an antiquity. By the time the map had been revised in 1859 a railway track had been built through the area and the enclosure was now labelled an 'Intrenchment' and a nearby mound was named as Magnus' Grave (Fig 3).

MAGNUS BARELEGS IN IRELAND

The mound is now regarded as being the burial place of Magnus Barelegs (Óláfsson), king of Norway, whom the annals record as having been killed by the Ulaí in 1103. Magnus III became king of Norway when his father died in 1090 and set about trying to regain lands around the Irish Sea and Scotland that had formerly been under the sway of Norway. His adventures were recorded by the Icelandic chronicler Snorri Sturlason (1179–1241) in the *Heimskringla* and several other sources. His campaigns in the West and death in Ireland have been discussed by Power (1986; 1993; 1994). In 1098 Magnus captured Orkney, the Hebrides and the Isle of Man before returning to Norway. In 1102 he set out for Ireland at a time when Muirchertach Ua Briain, having consolidated his power in much of the south of Ireland, was in the process of trying to subdue Domnall Mac Lochlainn and the Cenél nEógain of mid-Ulster. Muirchertach had for several years been trying to subdue the Cenél nEógain but these endeavours were generally foiled by 'the well-intentioned intervention of the church' (Ó Corráin 1972, 146), which managed to continually broker truces before Ua Briain could gain military supremacy.

In 1102 Magnus arrived in Ireland and took Dublin. This must have been a

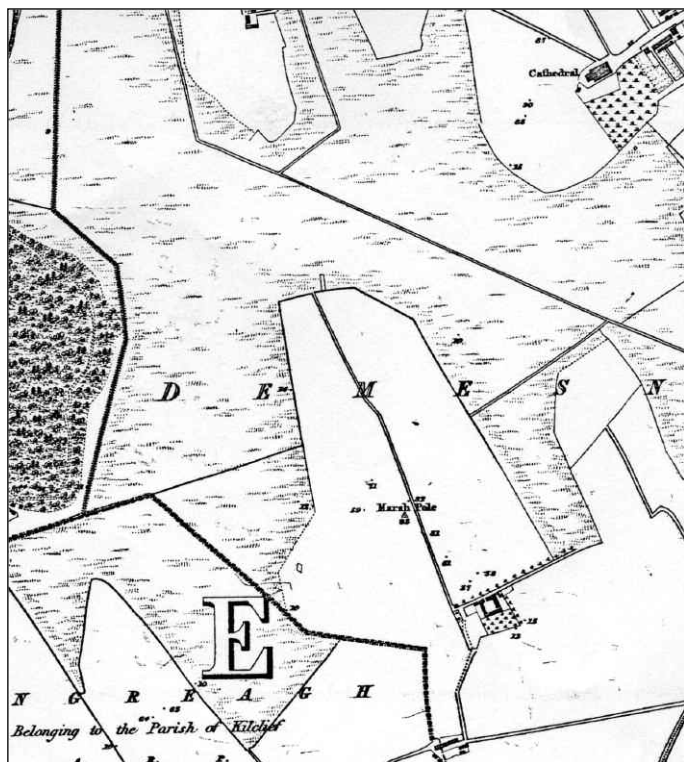


Fig 1 1834 Ordnance Survey map showing enclosure.

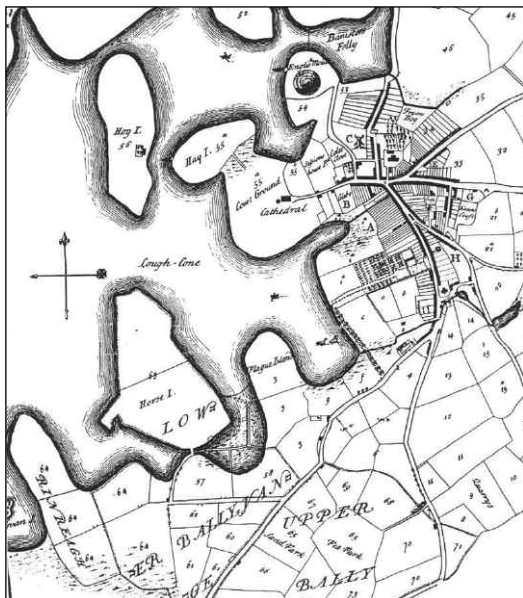
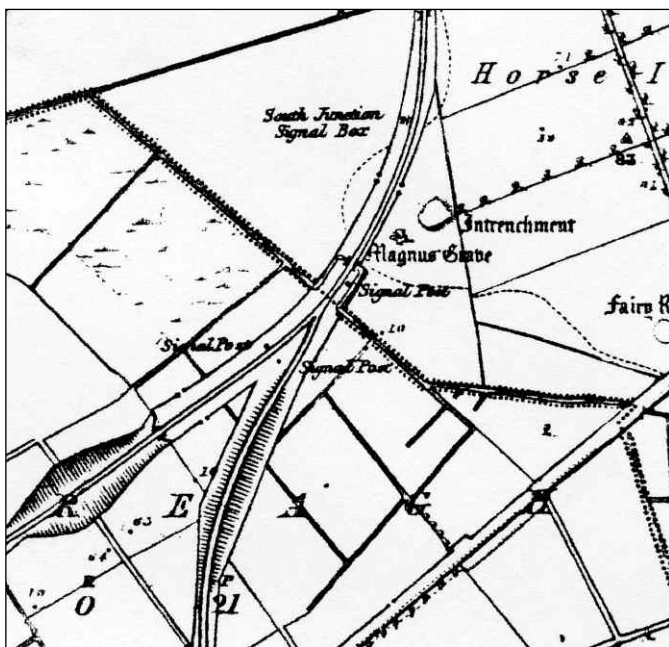


Fig 2 1729 map of the Downpatrick area (after Rankin 1997); the enclosure and mound are located on the 'spur' on the west side of Horse Island.

distracting new ingredient to Muirchertach's complicated, and constantly changing, assemblage of allies and enemies. He quickly made a truce and alliance with Magnus, sealing the deed with the marriage of his daughter, called Biadmunio in the Norse texts, to Sigurd, son of Magnus. Hostages also seem to have been exchanged (Power 1986, 125–6). Ó Corráin (1998, 450) refers to this truce as a 'holding operation' on the part of the Irish king. There are several descriptions of the relationship

between Muirchertach, called Mýrjartak in the Norse texts, and Magnus but they are often contradictory or fanciful (Power 1986, 122–7). It seems likely that Magnus was allied to Muirchertach in his campaign against Domnal Mac Lochlainn and the Cenél nEógain in 1103, who at that stage were warring against the Ulaid (Ó Corráin 1972, 147). The Norse *Heimskringla* notes that both kings 'had many battles, subdued the country, and had conquered the greatest part of Ulster when Mýrjartak returned home to Connaught' (Laing 1961, 273). The Irish sources note that Muirchertach had travelled north along with assembled forces of Munster, Leinster, Connacht, Meath and Dublin (Ó Corráin 1972, 14), the latter presumably being the troops of Magnus. Contrary to the Norse sources, the campaign was not a success (AU, AFM). Muirchertach first led his troops to Mag Coba, near Newry, 'to relieve the Ulidians' (AFM), and from there travelled to Armagh where he tried to win over the Church with offerings of gold and the promise of 'eight score cows', but without success. He then returned to Mag Coba, where he left 'the people of the province of Leinster and numbers of the men of Munster' (AFM). Magnus and his troops may have formed part of the Leinster group as the Annals of Ulster mention 'foreigners' as being present. Muirchertach meanwhile went raiding the Dál nAraide (in Co



Antrim) with troops from Connacht and Meath. The forces at Mag Coba were attacked by Domnal Mac Lochlainn on 5 August and heavily defeated, the Annals of Ulster noting that the defeat included 'a slaughter of the foreigners of Dublin'. Magnus, if indeed he was even present, was not killed at Mag Coba, because the Annals of Ulster note in the same year (1103) that 'Magnus, king of Lochlann (Norway), was killed on a raid on Ulaid'. The Annals of the Four Masters record that 'Maghnus, King of Lochlann and the Islands, and a man who had contemplated the invasion of all Ireland, was slain by the Ulidians, with a slaughter of his people about him, on a predatory excursion'.

Fig 3 1859 Ordnance Survey revised map.



Pl 1 Magnus' Grave.

The Irish sources provide no further information of the incident but various Norse sources discuss the death of Magnus in more detail. In general, they state that Magnus was on the way home to Norway in 1103 and was killed while trying to acquire cattle provisions for his journey (Power 1994, 216). The greatest detail is in Snorri Sturlason's *Heimskringla*, which provides the further information that his ally Muirchertach had agreed to supply provisions. The source begins by recording that

He lay at Ulster ready for sea with his whole fleet. As they thought they needed cattle for sea-provision, King Magnus sent a message to King Mýrjartak, telling him to send some cattle for slaughter, and appointed the day before Bartholomew's day [23 August] as the day they should arrive, if the messengers reached him in safety; but the cattle had not made their appearance the evening before St Bartholomew's mass. On the mass day itself, when the sun rose in the sky, King Magnus went on shore himself with the greater part of his men, to look after his people, and to carry off cattle from the coast (Laing 1961, 273).

A long, and often confusing, description follows. The *Heimskringla* describes the terrain of the area as follows: 'the pathway lay over bog and fen, and flat stones were laid over it. There were copses and

brushwood on either side. As they advanced they met a very high ridge. From there they saw a long way' (Power 1994, 219). From this height the Norwegians spotted 'a great cloud of dust kicked up by horses inland and discussed among themselves whether it might be the army of the Irish, but some said that it would be their men with the cattle' (ibid). Magnus and the troops were taking no chances so they drew up battle lines. It must have been with some relief that they discovered that 'when the cloud of dust came near they recognised their own men, who were bringing a lot of cattle which the Irish king had sent them'.

They set out from their ships 'but when they got out into the bogs, they found it slow going across the fens'. Affairs, however, took a turn for the worse when 'the army of the Irish burst out from the edges of every copse and began to attack' (ibid, 220). The Norwegians were forced to retreat, making a 'shieldwall', but suffered heavy casualties. Magnus was first wounded by a spear that went through his thighs and then was struck in the neck with an Irish axe which killed him. The remainder fled to their ships leaving the bodies of the slain behind but managed to retrieve the king's standard and his sword. They then sailed to Orkney. Sigurd, on hearing of his father's death, abandoned his new wife and joined the troops in Scotland before all

returned to Norway.

The Norse saga material does not state the location of the death of Magnus and the Irish annals state simply that it was in Ulaid, which would roughly comprise Co Down and part of Co Antrim. According to the 13th-century *Chronicle of the Kings of Man and Sudreys*, Magnus was 'buried near the Church of St Patrick, in Down' (Goss 1894). Although the *Chronicle* was not published until the middle of the 19th century (Goss 1874, 60–1), the manuscript was well known before this since Harris (1744, 29) refers to Magnus being buried near Down cathedral and attributed this information to the *Chronicle of the Isle of Man*. This might suggest that he is buried in the cathedral graveyard, but the mound called Magnus' Grave is also nearby and lies about 1200m south of the cathedral (Fig 2). The identification of the mound on the 1859 map as the burial place can probably be attributed to fieldwork by Jens Jacob Asmussen Worsaae, the Danish archaeologist, rather than to any long-standing local oral tradition associating Magnus with the mound. Worsaae spent several months in Ireland, based in Dublin, in late 1846 and early 1847 recording Viking age antiquities on behalf of King Christain VIII of Denmark. He is known to have made several excursions from Dublin during that period, although Downpatrick is not listed in the memoir of his Irish

visit (Henry 1995). However, in July 1852 the *Downpatrick Recorder*, the local weekly newspaper, reported that

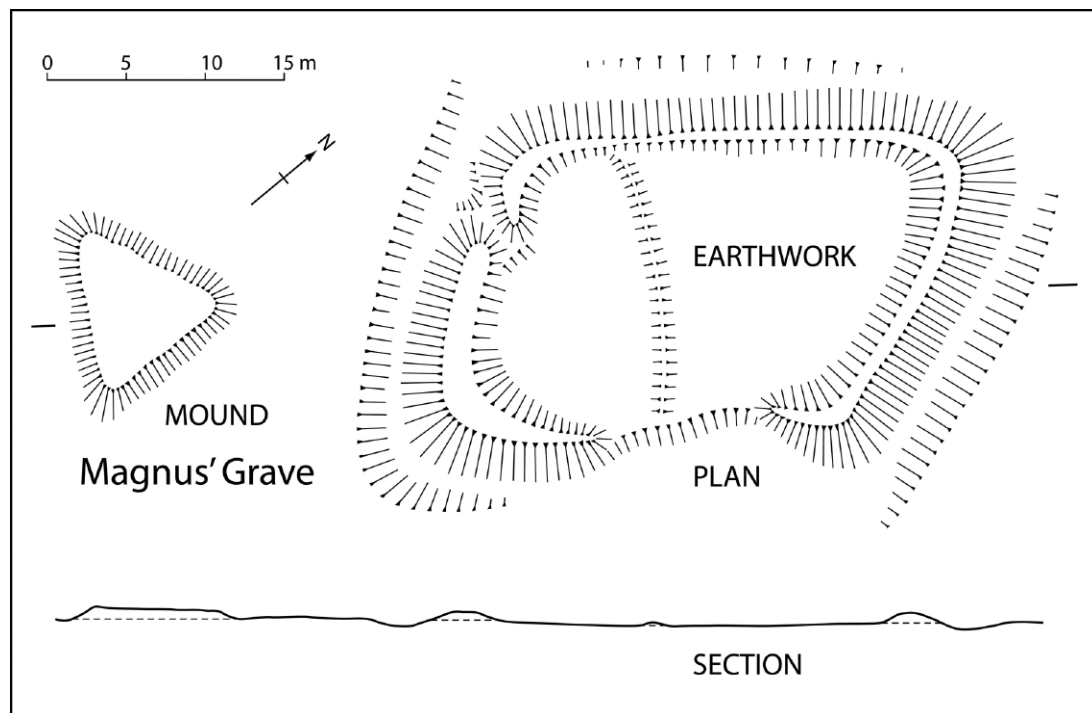
Mr Worsaae, the Norwegian historian, some time ago visited this town for the purpose of fixing upon the exact spot where Magnus was buried, and, after the most diligent search, taken in connection with information afforded by manuscripts in the library of Copenhagen, he came to the conclusion that the grave is a little mound [Pl 1], adjoining a clump of trees on the extremity of a place formerly known as 'Island Maister' and now known by the name of 'Horse Island'.

This information was doubtless passed on to the surveyors who were revising the Ordnance Survey maps a decade later.

THE ENCLOSURE (Fig 4; Pl 2)

On the 1859 map the earthwork near the mound is described as an entrenchment. It is a small rectangular enclosure, too small to be a medieval moated grange, but unlike any other prehistoric or early medieval monument type. One is tempted to identify the site as a Viking *longphort*, although other presumed examples are larger. Annagassan (Linns), Co Louth, had a maximum diameter of 73m (Buckley & Sweetman 1991, 97), Athlunkard, Co Clare, is 75m (Kelly & O'Donovan 1998, 14), while

Fig 4 Magnus' Grave (after Jope 1966).





Pl 2 Enclosure, viewed from Magnus' Grave.

Woodstown, Co Waterford, is about 460m in length (O'Brien & Russell 2005, 111). The suggested *longphort* at Dunrally, Co Laois, has a maximum length of 360m, but the interior enclosure measures 52 x 41m (Kelly & Maas 1995, 31), which is not much larger than the Horse Island example that has a maximum diameter of about 43m. It should be noted, however, that there is much controversy and speculation concerning the form of the *longphort* in Ireland, and the term has been applied to a range of different settlement types (Gibbons & Gibbons 2008; Maas 2008; Valante 2008, 38–45). Indeed, the only site among the above that has produced Viking material is Woodstown, Co Waterford. It seems, however, that here the Vikings used a pre-existing settlement because the bottom of the enclosing ditch produced a 5th- to 6th-century date (O'Sullivan & Stanley 2005, 152), although the validity of this date is strongly contested by Maas (2008, 221–2). Given our lack of information on the subject it would be unwise to exclude the possibility the Horse Island enclosure is a *longphort* on account of its relatively small size. There is also extensive evidence for the presence of Vikings on Strangford Lough (Loch Cuan) in the 9th and 10th centuries, which was often their base for raiding further afield (Valante 2009, 45, 104). There is therefore at least a possibility that the Horse Island enclosure is a *longphort*.

THE DEATH OF MAGNUS — DOUBLE-CROSS OR MISTAKEN IDENTITY?

Is it likely that the Horse Island mound is the burial place of Magnus? We need first to establish if the general area is a likely candidate for the site discussed in the *Heimskringla*. We must return to that text and the Irish annalistic record to try to establish what occurred. We know that Magnus and his troops had campaigned with Muirchertach Ua Briain in the summer of 1103. The *Heimskringla* states this while the Irish sources, without specifically mentioning Magnus, record the presence of 'foreigners' from Dublin, which is a likely reference to such forces. It is likely that some of these forces were naval and that they may have sailed to Ulster. The annals also inform us that foreign troops were present when Muirchertach's allies suffered defeat at Mag Coba, as some Scandinavian names are recorded amongst the slain in the Annals of the Four Masters. Soon after this battle the forces dispersed. The *Heimskringla* states that Muirchertach returned to Connacht, while Magnus decided to return to Norway. If, as is likely, the forces of Magnus were present at Mag Coba, his fleet would have been moored in inner Carlingford Lough. Before the dispersal it seems that Muirchertach agreed to procure cattle for the provisioning of the fleet for its return to Norway.

The annals indicate that the rendezvous for the supply of these cattle was to be in the land of the Ulaid, and the Chronicles of the Kings of Isle of Man imply that this was in the vicinity of Downpatrick, as it was near there that Magnus was buried. The Ulaid were allies of Muirchertach and the Annals of the Four Masters indicate that the main purpose of the campaign was to help the Ulaid who had been attacked by the Cenél nEógain. The cattle were therefore to be delivered on what should have been the lands of allies of both Muirchertach and Magnus, ie a safe location. The boggy fens and mires interspaced with drumlin hills in the vicinity of Horse Island correspond very closely to the landscape described in the *Heimskringla*. This is the only area of such terrain in or around Downpatrick and one of the very few areas where bog abuts the shoreline on the Co Down coast. Both the documentary and topographical evidence suggests that the chosen location for the delivery of cattle was to the south-west of Downpatrick.

One could hardly choose a more unsuitable place for the delivery of cattle to a naval fleet. Even today it is extremely difficult to reach Horse Island from the south or east and all access is via a modern road built through the mires. Since there is no evidence that Magnus or his forces had been in this area before, it seems likely that the site would have been chosen by Muirchertach and his Ulaid allies; perhaps they suggested that the site of an abandoned *longphort* would have been a suitable rendezvous. Although unsuitable for driving cattle, it was a perfect location for an ambush. The *Heimskringla* essentially describes how Magnus and his forces were lured inland into the mires to meet up with the cattle and then ambushed as they returned to their ships. Muirchertach certainly would have wanted permanently to be rid of Magnus. For several years he had been trying to gain full control of Ireland, and the last thing he would have wanted was the arrival of a Norwegian king with the same ambition, 'a man who attempted to conquer Ireland' as the *Chronicon Scotorum* described him. The truce with Magnus had indeed been a 'holding operation' and the request for provisions provided Muirchertach with a welcome opportunity to bring the situation to a close. The Ulaid depended on Muirchertach for protection from the Cenél nEógain and would therefore have been willing participants in such a plot. Power (1986,

127–8) takes a more benign view of the incident. She notes that the *Heimskringla* is the only source that records the arrangement for Muirchertach to supply cattle. The much less detailed *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sögum* simply records that Magnus and his men had gone ashore to help themselves to cattle when they came to grief. Power prefers to believe that Magnus raided on his own initiative and was mistaken for an unknown group of marauders as 'the Ulaid would scarcely deliberately slay an ally of Muirchertach's and a potential supporter of their own' (ibid 128). There is, however, a basic problem with this interpretation. If Magnus wanted to raid cattle he could have done so somewhere along the east coast of Down or Antrim and not gone significantly out of his way up the Narrows of Strangford Lough to the Quoile estuary to an area that was particularly unsuitable for the procurement of cattle. The acceptance of this scenario would necessitate the complete rejection of the *Heimskringla* narrative. That the chronicler Ordericus Vitalis simply records that Magnus was treacherously enticed inland by the Irish and slain (Chibnall 1958, 49) would tend to support the *Heimskringla* version.

CONCLUSIONS

It would be wonderful if the identification of the resting place of Magnus Barelegs on Horse Island could be attributed to the oral transmission of information down through the centuries. Alas, this is not the case and the designation of the mound as Magnus' Grave is instead due to a visit to the area of Jens Jacob Asmussen Worsaae in the middle of the 19th century. Despite this, however, the texts on which Worsaae based his conclusion do indeed seem to support him. The sagas indicate that Magnus died in marshy terrain very similar to the vicinity of the mound. The location also agrees with the statement that Magnus was 'buried near the church of St Patrick, in Down', as stated in the Chronicle of Man. It may well be that the victors of the ambush did not choose to accord a Christian burial to the vanquished but instead buried them near where they had fallen. The proximity of the mound to an enclosure that is a strong candidate for inclusion in the small corpus of identified Irish *longphuirt* could strengthen this hypothesis.

APPENDIX DESCRIPTION OF THE DEATH OF MAGNUS

FROM THE *HEIMSKRINGLA* AS
TRANSLATED BY LAING (1961,

273–4)

He lay at Ulster ready for sea with his full fleet. As they thought they needed cattle for ship-provision, King Magnus sent a message to King Moriartak, telling him to send some cattle for slaughter; and appointed the day before St Bartholomew's day [23 August] as the day they should arrive; if the messengers reached him in safety; but the cattle had not made their appearance the evening before Bartholomew's mass. On the mass day itself, when the sun rose in the sky, King Magnus went on shore himself with the greater part of his men, to look after his people, and to carry off cattle from the coast. The weather was calm, the sun shone, and the road lay through mire and mosses, but there was brushwood on both sides of the road. When they came somewhat farther, they reached a height from which they had a wide view. They saw from it a great dust rising up the country, as of horsemen, and they said to each other, "That must be the Irish Army," but others said, "It was their own men coming with cattle." They halted there and Eyvind Olboge said, "Now, sire, do you intend to direct the march? The men think we are advancing imprudently. You know the Irish are treacherous; think, therefore, of a good council for your men." Then the King said, "Let us draw up our men and be ready, if there be treachery." This was done, and the king and Eyvind went before the line. King Magnus had a helmet on his head; a red shield, in which was inlaid a gilded lion; and was girth with his sword Legbiter, of which the hilt was of tooth [ivory], and the hand grip wound round with gold thread and the sword was extremely sharp. In his hand he had a short spear, and a red short cloak over his coat, on which, both before and behind, was embroidered a lion in yellow silk; and all the men acknowledged that they had never seen a briske, statelier man. Eyvind had also a red cloak like the king's; and he also was a stout, handsome, warlike man.

When the dust-cloud approached nearer they knew their own men, who were driving the cattle. The Irish king had been faithful to the promises he had given the king, and had sent them. Thereupon, they all turned towards the ship, and it was mid-day. When they came to the mires they went but slowly over the boggy places; and then the Irish started up on every side against them from every bushy point

of land, and the battle began instantly. The Northmen were being divided in various heaps, so that many of them fell. Then said Eyvind to the King. "Unfortunate is this march to our people, and we must instantly hit upon some good plan."

The king answered "Call all the men together with the war-horns under the banner, and the men who are here shall make a rampart with their shields, and thus we will retreat backwards out of the mires; and will clear ourselves fast enough when we get upon firm ground."

The Irish shot boldly; and though they fell in crowds, there came always others to fill the gaps. Now when the king had come to the last of the ditches there was a difficult crossing, and few places were passable; so that many Northmen fell there. When the king called to his lenderman Torgrim Skindhue, who was an Upland man, and ordered him to go over the ditch with his division. "We shall defend you, he said," said he, "in the mean time, so that no harm can come of you. Go out then to those holms and shoot at them from thence; for ye are good bowmen."

When Torgrim and his men came over the ditch they cast their shields behind their backs, and set off to the ships.

When the king saw this, he said, "Thou art deserting your king in an unmanly way. I was foolish in making thee a lenderman, and driving Sigurd Hund out of the country; for never would he have behaved so."

King Magnus received a wound being pierced by a spear through both thighs above the knees. The king laid hold of the shaft between his legs, broke the spear in two, and said "Thus we break shaft spears, my lads; let us go briskly on. Nothing hurts me." A little after King Magnus was struck in the neck with an Irish axe, and this was his death-wound. Then those who were behind fled. Vidkunn-Jonsson instantly killed the man who had given the king his death wound, and fled, after having received three wounds; but brought the king's banner and the sword of Legbiter to the ships. Vidkunn was the last man who fled; there were two there who stayed to the last Sigurd Ranesson and Dag Eilivsson. There fell with King Magnus Eyvind Olboge, Ulv Ranesson, and many other great people. Many of the Northmen fell, but many more of the Irish. The Northmen who escaped sailed away immediately in autumn. Erling, Earl Erland's [Earl of Orkney] son, fell with King Magnus in Ireland; but the men who fled from Ireland came to the Orkney Islands. Now when King Sigurd heard that his father had fallen, he set off immediately, leaving the Irish king's daughter behind, and proceeded in autumn with the whole fleet directly to Norway.

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