

A BIT ON THE GALLOWGLASS...



A "Sparth" unit: Squire, Gallowglass, and Kern



Albrecht Durer-Early 1500s Lithograph of Gallowglass

- Both Chess and Hnefatafl are considered games of strategy. These games were likely played by both Viking chiefs, Irish/Highland clan chiefs, and Gallowglass warriors as a means of learning tactics and strategy
- **Background:** Historical sources and archeology show that Vikings raided and then settled in parts of Ireland, England, and western Scotland from the 8th to the 11/12th centuries. Over generations they assimilated and intermarried into the local populations, especially in Ireland and Scotland. The combination of western Gaelic (Pict/Scoti) and Viking bloodlines produced hardy, strong young men who from the mid-1200s to early 1600s became the mainstay of the Gallowglass mercenary soldier in Ireland and later in Europe
- The term Gallowglass come from Anglicization of 'galloglaigh', which in Gaelic meant 'young foreign warriors' or 'young foreign soldiers'. (Today, the terms soldiers and warriors can carry different connotations)
- In reality, for much of history, becoming a mercenary was considered an honorable profession for younger sons who did not inherit family fortunes, or men in families with little means to support themselves
- The MacDougall and MacDowall clans supplied young men for generations to the service of different Irish chieftains: "history records the most notable Gallowglass were from the Clans of McCabe, MacDonald/McDonnell, **MacDougall/MacDowell**, MacRory, MacSheehy, MacSweeney, and McCoy. But this trade continued for over 400 years and many Scots Clans got in on the act, so how does one identify other Clans and surnames associated with Gallowglass? Clues as to the origins of the Gallowglass can be found in the surname of the first to arrive; the **MacDoughall's**, who's surname translates as 'son of the dark foreigner.'" From: <https://www.irishorigenes.com/content/gallowglass-do-you-belong-warrior-clan>
- The use of Gallowglass arose for 2 reasons: First, their reputation was they never quit the field of battle, and fought to the death. Second, the Scots had learned tactics for dealing with Norman cavalry, using their 5-6 foot long axes, the Sparth axe. The Normans invaded Ireland in the 1160s with an army of infantry and only 100 armored horsemen, but the Norman cavalry inflicted terrible casualties on lightly armed Irish soldiers. Irish chieftains paid Gallowglass with both cash and cattle. <https://macdougall.org/gallowglass/>
- The use of Gallowglass expanded throughout Europe in the 14th to 16 centuries. In Ireland, some Scottish clans, like the MacSweeneys and MacDonnells, left Scotland completely and resettled in Ireland.
- Queen Elizabeth I hired gallowglass in the 1500s to fight in Ireland and act as part of her palace guard
- By the early 1600s, with the **age of gunpowder**, the use of Gallowglass gradually faded away
- The Scottish Gallowglass were all Catholic, there were no Protestant based Gallowglass, although generations later, during the Ulster Plantation period, descendants with clan names of former Gallowglass that became Protestant settled in Ireland from Scotland, and many later relocated to the American colonies in the late 1600s to mid-1700s.
- Links to their Gallowglass histories can be found in their clan mottos: "*Victory or Death*" of the MacDougalls, and "*To Conquer or Die*" of the MacDowalls.

WEAPONS AND TRAINING OF GALLOWGLASS

- Gallowglass in their day were considered 'elite' heavy infantry; they could be compared to Greek/Spartan hoplites, the Roman legionnaire, or later Grenadier units in infantry regiments; many were recruited due to being large in stature as well as their fighting ability
- Individual Gallowglass were organized in 'units' of 3, called a **Sparth**. The Sparth consisted of the **Gallowglass** warrior and 2 assistants, one a **Kern**, a lightly armed Irish soldier/assistant, and a **Squire**, who carried food and supplies. Many Squires were also musicians, playing the bagpipes, flute, and/or drums.
- They wore similar armor to the Normans; long, ring-mail shirts and sometimes plate armor over their torsos, or sometimes wearing plate armor on just one of their arms, usually on the shield arm, instead of carrying a shield. Helmets shapes differed on the individual wearer
- The Gallowglass were known mainly known for 2 weapons: First, for the 5-6 foot axes they carried, called the **Sparth Axe**, after the unit. Based on earlier 2-handed Viking axes, the Sparth Axe was a devastating weapon against both cavalry and foot soldiers. The Sparth axe also came as 1-hander, but it is mainly known as a 2-handed axe
- The second weapon was a large, 4-5 foot long 2-handed sword or a 1-handed arming sword, called Ring Swords or the Irish sword. It had a unique, ring shaped pommel with the tang of the sword running through the center of the ring. The 2-handed Irish sword is the forerunner and earlier contemporary of the 2-handed Scottish claymore (claidheamh-mor), or Great sword; the 1-handed Irish sword have similar characteristics of the later Highland broadsword (claidheamh-beg), or small sword. Claidheamh (Gaelic) is pronounced clá-dif or Clay-he-mīth'...
- There were Gallowglass 'schools' formed in both Scotland and Ireland for over 300 hundred years to teach combat with a variety of weapons to young men & boys
- By the 1500s, many lesser trained and ill-equipped equipped Scots were sent to Ireland due to higher demand for soldiers, because of increased fighting between Irish clans and fighting the English. Many did not wear shoes, and many fought only in long cloths (later great kilts?) and short tunics they wore, with little armor. Their legs were exposed, and because of this, they were nicknamed by the Irish "**redshanks**"
- By the late 1400s to 1500s, many Gallowglass were recruited as well from the native Irish population



Gallowglass



Sparth Axe & Irish Sword



Redshanks



Irish 2-Hand Sword



Gallowglass on Pony



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