

Ancient High Kings of Ireland:

What Can Be Known, What Supposed?

Many amateur (and some professional) genealogists, intent on working out their entire ancestry 'as far back as possible,' discover one or more descents from 'High Kings' of Ireland [Kelley], and try to follow these lines. This proves difficult; they're forced to have recourse to such dubious-looking works as O'Hart's Irish Pedigrees [] and Kimball's Your Family Tree [], where they encounter seemingly endless lists of the strangely spelled and unpronounceable names of Irish kings, supposedly stretching back millennia into deep antiquity (and ultimately to no lesser luminary than Adam himself!), as well as a great mass of biographical and historical traditions entailing a number of incomprehensible customs, and many quaint (and/or savage) fairy tales. Dissatisfied, more intellectual, determined, and fortunately situated [] genealogists seek out the 20th-century scholarly literature -- where, to their sorrow, they will find 'the experts' expressing sharply conflicting opinions [] as to the 'reliability' of such ancient Irish pedigrees, opinions typically expressed with much vehemence and, apparently, little factual evidence or analysis. How to evaluate?

Niall's is the line of the later High Kings of Ireland, and has the best chance of having been correctly preserved. (Wholly or in part.)

Few (but not 'no') historians would deny the historicity and genealogical validity of Niall's line in his own day and subsequently; few (or perhaps indeed 'none') would allow historicity, let alone genealogical validity, to his supposed line before the Iron-Age conquest of Ireland by the P-Celts (in the vicinity of 400 BC)

Somewhere during the eight centuries between the two points -- ca. 400 BC and ca. AD 400 -- pure confabulation must leave off, and history (and -- later? -- genealogy) probably begin.

Starts arbitrarily with Siorna Saoghalach, clearly before actual genealogy, let alone history, can begin.

O = *O'Hart's Irish Pedigrees*
A4M = *Annals of the Four Masters*
K = *Keating's History of Ireland*

Each generation is stated to be son of preceding.

Names are as in O, with versions from A4M & K in parens, ff. (Choice is arbitrary, as all are beyond both author's and reader's ability to utter without dislocation of the mandible.)

Numbers are assigned in backward order from Niall Noighiallach as 1.

Data presented in standard order: status (regnant or not); how obtained throne (if did); purportedly factual deeds; events of reign & personal tales, in epitome.

Chronology -- of reigns and lives -- is wholly artificial, constructed to accommodate the anachronistic 'High Kingship' swappage, and is ignored here.

[CONSIDER ALSO TO WHICH FAMILY ASSASSIN-SUCCESSOR BELONGED -- SOME ARE OF OTHER FAMILIES, SOME BROTHERS OR NEPHEWS OF OWN.]

[AND: IS NAME A RETROJECTION?]

Standard form should help make artificial or suspicious patterns plainer.

39. **Siorna Saoghalach**

fl. {say} 710 BC
regnant
killed by successor
lived 150 years

38. **Olioll Aolcheoin**

fl. {say} 680 BC
didn't rule

37. **Glalchadh**

fl. {say} 650 BC
regnant
killed by ?successor

36. **Nuadhas Flonnfall**

fl. {say} 620 BC
regnant
killed by successor

35. **Aedan Glas**

fl. {say} 590 BC
didn't rule
pirates; plague

34. **Simeon [??] Breac**

fl. {say} 560 BC
regnant
killed predecessor
killed by ?successor

33. **Muredach Bolgach**

fl. {say} 530 BC

regnant
killed by ?successor

32. Fiacha Tolgrach

fl. {say} 500 BC
regnant
killed by ?successor

31. Duach Ladrach

fl. {say} 470 BC
regnant
killed by successor

30. Eochaidh Buadhach

fl. {say} 440 BC
didn't rule
two plagues

Note pattern to this point. We start with a fabulous figure who lives 150 years; of the next nine generations, we are told almost nothing. Six reign as kings, invariably killing their predecessors and being killed by their successors. Three are excluded from the throne by their father's killer; two of the three are assigned 'calamities,' which are not reported for the regnant generations.

29. Ugainé Mor

fl. {say} 410 BC
regnant
killed, but assassin's attempt on throne fails
ruled "all the islands of western Europe"
married "Caesair dau. of the king of France"
had 25 kids; divided kingdom into 25 portions, one for each; "by means of this division the taxes were collected during the succeeding 300 years"

Note break in artificial pattern. Ugainé is first generation with a somewhat detailed biography; he is associated with "western Europe" and a kingdom of "France" (then, Celtic Gaul); the tale of his 25 kids and the division of Ireland suggests an administrative reorganization for purposes of taxation. (Nor does his murderer's attempt on the throne succeed.)

This break in pattern, the association with Celtic Gaul, his supposed hegemony over much of far-western Europe, and the new administration, all suggest that Ugainé was the iron-age P-Celtic conqueror, from Gaul, of the old Q-Celtic Cruithin. Judging by dead reckoning, he falls at around the (archeologically) correct time: 400 BC, +/- 100 years. Any real genealogy should start with him; it's unlikely that the conquerors collected and preserved any oral tradition as to the preceding royal succession of the subject peoples, unless they grafted him onto it, which would seem psychologically unnecessary in the case of an inferior predecessor culture. It seems only faintly possible that the earlier generations could have been, in reality, Ugainé's royal continental ancestors -- had he already been a king, with wide hegemony, he'd not have removed to Ireland, lock, stock, and barrel; if not already a king, he'd not have had a valid, bardically-preserved tradition of long

lineage.

28. **Colethach Caol-bhreach**

fl. {say} 380 BC
regnant
killed predecessor
killed by successor
long reign

27. **Melg Molbthach**

fl. {say} 350 BC
regnant
killed by ?successor

26. **Iaran Gleofathach**

fl. {say} 320 BC
regnant
killed by ?successor
just, wise, learned, accomplished

25. **Conla Caomh**

fl. {say} 290 BC
regnant
died a natural death

24. **Olloll Cas-fiachlach**

fl. {say} 260 BC
regnant
killed by successor

23. **Eochaidh Alt-Leathan**

fl. {say} 230 BC
regnant
killed by successor

22. **Aongus (Aeneas) Tuirmeach-Teamrach**

fl. {say} 200 BC
regnant
killed by ?successor "at Tara"

21. **Enna Aigneach**

fl. {say} 170 BC
regnant
killed by ?successor

generous

From Coletlach to Enna, all generations rule, an apparent violation of expectations qua 'tanistry.' However, our definite knowledge of the theory and practice of tanistry dates from, and applies to, a much later Ireland, after anno 500 or so. We should perhaps not follow the monks and retroject possible anachronisms into the past. Suspicious, but not disproof.

All generations but one are 'killed by successor,' in continuation of the artificial pre-Ugaine pattern (retrojection of a single High Kingship into the illimitable past, but reconciling this with the apparent incompatibility of having two or three 'royal families' at once by swapping the Ard-Ri-ship back and forth.

Virtually no biography, save a touch or two.

No apparent breaks within this segment. [PLAY UP 'SEGMENTS' ANGLE.]

20. Assaman Eamhna

fl. {say} 140 BC
didn't rule

19. Roighen Ruadh

fl. {say} 110 BC
didn't rule
cattle-plague

18. Fionnlogh

fl. {say} 80 BC
didn't rule

17. Fionn

fl. {say} 50 BC
didn't rule
married Benia, dau. of Criomthann
two sons
[GO BACK AND ADD WIVES, SONS]

A sharp and suspicious break in pattern. Before, the succession is never interrupted for more than one generation, which is at least consistent with tanistry; here, four generations in a row don't rule, which would render Fionn and his descendants tanistically ineligible for rule. (See, of course, above remarks re retrojection of tanistry.)

One account _____ even intercalates an additional two generations who don't rule.

No biography, except for the assignment, as earlier, of a 'calamity' to the non-regnant Roighen Ruadh.

This segment looks suspiciously like genealogical 'connective tissue,' designed to derive the next generation from the earlier -- and quite possibly historical -- line.

16. Eochaidh Feidlioch ("The Sad [?]")

fl. (say) 20 BC

regnant

died a natural death

ended division of Ireland into 25 parts; restored "ancient Firbolgian division into [five] provinces"

built royal palace in Connaught at Druin-na-n Druagh (now Craughan)

married Clothfionn, dau. of Eochaid Uchtleathan

triplet sons -- Breas, Nar, and Lothar, the *Fineamh(n)as*, all killed in battle, hence E's epithet

dau. (Maedhb -- becomes Queen of Connaught; heroine of long cycle of tales)

According to _____, each of the three sons had intercourse with their sister _____, and mutually fathered her son, Lughaidh Sriabh-n Dearg; she subsequently had intercourse with Lughaidh himself, and fathered his son, and her own grandson

Here we enter the period for which elaborate tales begin to be told of the High Kings and their families; although the tales are largely fable, they may reflect some distorted history, and in any case suggest, by the mere fact of their existence, that some -- though surely not all -- of their heroes were real figures, still well-remembered as the protagonists of a rich body of oral tradition. Compare with the aridity of the above accounts, save that for Ugainne Mor; although segments __ - __ may be 'real,' they would only have been recalled as bardic king-lists.

Eochaidh becomes king after four (or six) non-regnant generations of suspicious historicity, and completely reorganizes the provincial organization. (The account is distorted; likely Ireland had always been reckoned as five kingdoms.) This suggests at least a 'revolution,' of sorts, perhaps an actual invasion and subjugation. It seems doubtful that Eochaidh had any ancestral 'royal' claim.

There is much (scandalous) biography here; it seems clear to me that Eochaidh, at least, was a real person, and doubtless Queen Maedbh as well. The exact biological details as to who gave birth to Lughaidh and his son cannot be known, but it should be borne in mind that we are dealing with a primitive and savage society; although telegony is biologically impossible, one of the 'Fineamh(n)as' (though not all three) may conceivably have, in fact, fathered a child on his sister. Stranger things have been known to happen, including in 1990s America. This biological muddle, however, is another point of (relatively minor) suspicion.

Note, finally, that from this point, kings leave off being 'slain by their successor,' for some generations.

15. Breas-Nar-Lothar [sic]

fl. (say) AD 10

didn't rule -- all died in battle, v.p.

mutually impregnated sister, who bore Lughaidh (see next)

Irish stop using surface cairns for dead, start inhumation

See above remarks re the naughty siblings and the upshot of their conduct. Note also that here begin the 'explanatory fables,' in which customs, innovations, and inventions are assigned to a time and/or a king.

14. **Lughaidh Sriabh-n Dearg**

fl. {say} 40

regnant

suicide

married Dearborguill, dau. of 'the king of Denmark [SIGNIFICANCE?];' _____ {say}s
the mother of his son was _____, his own mother

13. **Crimthann Niadh-Nar** ('The Heroic')

fl. {say} 70

regnant

died in fall from horse

married Nar-Tath-Chaoch, dau. of Laoch, son of Daire, "who lived in the land of the Picts [WOULD THIS REALLY BE PICTAVIA IN NORTHERN SCOTLAND, OR DOES THIS MERELY MEAN SHE WAS OF THE CRUITHNE?]

long account in Ogygia [AMEND INTRO TO INCLUDE; ADD TO UGAINE'S NOTICE]

12. **Feredach Fionn-Feachtnach** ('True and Sincere')

fl. {say} 100

regnant

died a natural death, at Tara

tale of Moran son of Maoin, "Chief Justice" of the Kingdom, and his collar "Iodhain Morain," which forced him -- and witnesses -- to be just

11. **Fiacha Fionn Ola** ("Of the White Oxen")

fl. {say} 130

regnant

killed by successor

married Eithne, dau. of "the King of Alba;" she went to Alba to give birth to Tuathal

In the above segment, deaths are 'natural' until Fiacha; fabulous and explanatory tales continue; wives begin to be mentioned with some regularity (their parentage, however, is -- at least in some cases [Denmark!]) -- quite unlikely).

Tanistry questions continue -- indeed, throughout the remainder of this line -- and call for the same reservations (and strictures on possible anachronism) as earlier.

A possible break begins with the story that Eithne went to her father's kingdom, outside Ireland, to give birth to her son. Inherently grossly implausible -- mothers of royal heirs would have been jealously guarded and cared for at home -- it also raises the suspicion of having been invented to explain the foreign origin of an invader, and attach him artificially to a prior ruling family.

10. **Tuathal Teachtmar** ("The Legitimate")

fl. {say} 160

regnant -- but not until he grew up (in Alba), invaded Ireland at the head of an army, and took the throne by bloody force

killed by successor

married Baine, dau. of "Sgaile Balbh, king of England"
took land from four provinces to create his own royal domain
built palaces
elaborate tale of the annual tribute he (and all his successors) exacted in the form of
meat, clothing, and metals, precious and otherwise
tale associating him and a "Queen Tailte" with an annual mass-marriage rite

Metthinks his epithet may protest too much. As above, was he a 'legitimate' king, or an adventurer from abroad? However, note that Tacitus – a near-contemporary -- records the case of an Irish prince, exiled in Britain, who prevailed upon the Roman general Agricola for help in regaining his throne. (One of the very first notices in any outside source whatever on events within Ireland – to Rome, of course, a land of wild, ignorant, and savage cattle-drovers.)

It is equally possible, tho,' that Irish monks of 500 to 700 knew their Tacitus, and simply plagiarized his account for use vis-a-vis Tíuthal. Note the story of _____'s donkey-ears, which is lifted directly, and point for point, from ancient Greek mythology (Midas, King of Phrygia).

Is "Sgaile Balbh, King of 'England'" a "Caelius Balbus," provincial governor??

9. Fedhlimidh ('Felim') Rachtmar ("Righteous Legislator")

fl. {say} 190
regnant
died of "thirst"
married Ughna, dau. of "the king of Denmark"
established law of "retaliation" (*lex talionis?*)
"peace, quiet, plenty, security"

The manner of his death suggests the polydipsia of diabetes insipidus, a striking detail, and possibly historically valid – the death of a king from unquenchable thirst (apparently) would have been inexplicable and memorable.

Everything about the earlier stories suggests that 'retaliation' had been the law in Ireland -- as in all primitive societies -- from the beginning of time, and not just from that of Fedhlimidh. His epithet may still {say} something about him and his reign -- what, I can't {say}.

Again, "Denmark" – an odd choice. Or does it derive from the era in which the monkish compilers worked – the Danish raids?

8. Conn Ceadcathach ("Of the Hundred Battles")

fl. {say} 220
regnant
killed predecessor
killed by ?successor -- using gang of fifty ruffians disguised as women
king of Munster forced him to an equal division of Ireland
two sons, murdered by Conn's two brothers; third son survived
three daus

7. Art Eanfhear

fl. {say} 250

6. **Cormac MacAirt 'Ulfada'**

fl. {say} 280

5. **Cairbre Liffechar**

fl. {say} 310

4. **Fiacha Srabhteine**

fl. {say} 340

regnant -- "king of Conacht," "of Ireland"

killed by successor -- nephew

married Aoife, dau. of Gaothal, "king of Gall" [Gaul? Galway?]

3. **Muireadach Tireach**

fl. {say} 370

regnant

defeated and banished predecessor

died a natural death

married Muirion, dau. of Fiachadh, king of Ulster

2. **Eochaidh Muigh Meadhoín**

fl. {say} 400

regnant

died a natural death -- at Tara

married first Mong Fionn, dau. of Fiodhach, and sister of Crimthann, king of Munster; second Carthan Cais Dubh -- "Carinna" -- dau. of "the Celtic king of Britain"

four sons by (1); 1 son -- Niall -- by (2)

elaborate tale: Crimthann succeeds Eochaidh as Ard-Rí; Mong Fionn (why is she still living after E's death if E had a second wife after her?) poisons Crimthann, hoping to bring throne to her eldest son, poisons herself from same cup to allay suspicion. Throne comes, nevertheless, to Niall. Complex genealogy of sons of Niall's brothers.

1. **Niall Noíghíallach** ("Of the Nine Hostages") or **Mor** ("The Great")

fl. {say} 430

In summary, our analysis of Niall's traditional line shows potential 'breaks' at a

number of points, dividing it into a series of 'segments,' as follows:

.....