

Brian Boru Lecture Series

Brian Boru and his descendants: some surnames from early medieval Clare

Dr. Catherine Swift
Mary Immaculate College





The postcard illustrated here was on sale in Nassau street in Dublin & claims Ireland was the first country in Europe to adopt hereditary surnames. (This claim is probably based on the work of the nineteenth-century scholar John O'Donovan in *The topographical poems of John O'Dubhagáin and Giolla na naomh O'Huidhrin* (1862).) The general European pattern is one where surnames are seen originating in the eleventh century

In "Aspects of Irish personal names" published in *Celtica* 1986, Brian Ó Cuív argued that many of the early instances of *Úa* (later *Ó*) names in Irish sources represented the literal meaning "grandson" of X rather than the emergence of surnames and that the whole question of the origins of Irish surnames needed to be studied in considerable more detail.

Mac Liag's Life of Brian Borumha – as quoted by George Petrie

- *Is é Brian tuc .uii. Mainistreacha eitir aidhme ⁊ eallach ⁊ fhearann amach; ⁊ dá chloicteach trichat; ⁊ is lais ro daingneadh an t-ord posda; ⁊ is si a linn tucad sloinnte ar tus ⁊ duthadha do no sloinnte ⁊ do rinne crichairecht cacha tuaithe ⁊ gacha trícha ced; ⁊ is si a linn ro h-oirneadh gradha flatha ⁊ filidh ⁊ eclaisi. Is e Brian umorro nach tard erafor ealadhain o oidche a geineamhlaigh co h-oidhche a bhais.*
- “It is Brian that gave out seven monasteries , both furniture and cattle and land; and thirty-two *cloictheachs* [round towers] ; and it is by him the marriage ceremony was confirmed; **and it is during his time surnames were first given, and territories (were allocated) to the surnames** and the boundaries of every lordship and cantred were fixed ; and it is in his time the degrees of chief and poet and ecclesiastic, were appointed. It is Brian also that never refused science from the night of his birth to the night of his death.

G. Petrie, *The Ecclesiastical architecture of Ireland; an essay on the origin and uses of Round Towers of Ireland* (1845, repr. Shannon 1970), 390 (my emphasis)

Mac Liag's life is not a contemporary source but the early nineteenth-century scholar Edward O'Reilly published a list of works said to be by Mac Liag the bard of Brian in the *Transactions of the Ibero-Celtic Society* 1820 p. lxx

**A study of Brian Boru's genetic ancestry is published in
"Genetic Investigation of the Patrilineal Kinship
Structure of Early Medieval Ireland"**

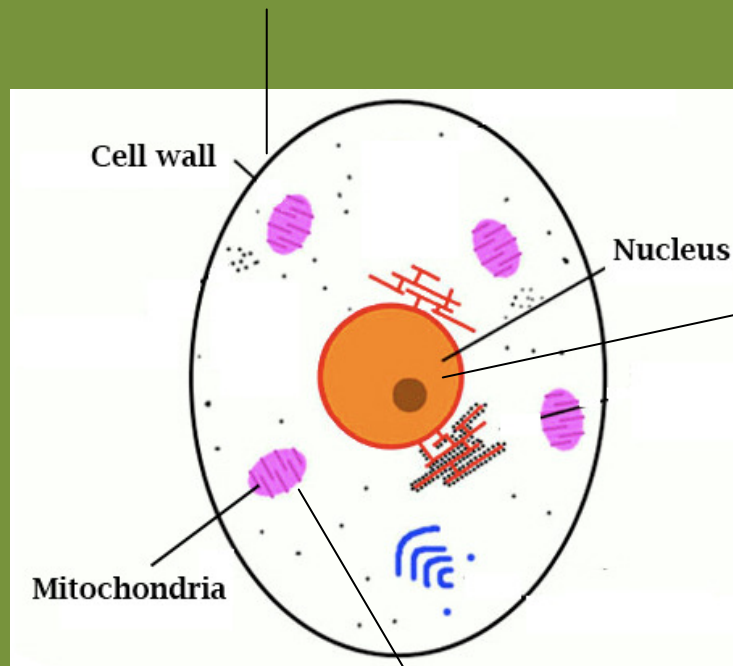
published in *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 2008
by Brian McEvoy, K. Simms & D.G. Bradley of TCD

Questions posed in this article include:

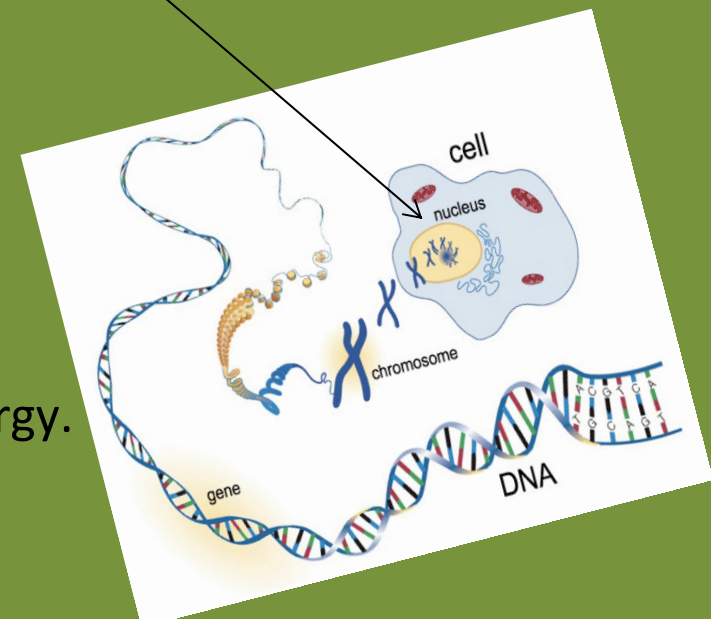
- Do kingdom names such as Uí Néill or Connachta reflect the ancestor of an élite dynasty or of the population of the kingdom as a whole?
- 2006 paper argues that strong IMH haplotype (section of DNA) within surnames identified as Uí Néill confirms that there is strong evidence that dynasty was indeed related by father to son descent.
- Intention to test this conclusion by looking at other dynasties (including Brian's dynasty, the Dál Cais.)

DNA - All cells share some of the same basic structures...

- All cells have a cell wall.
This holds them together and defines their shape.

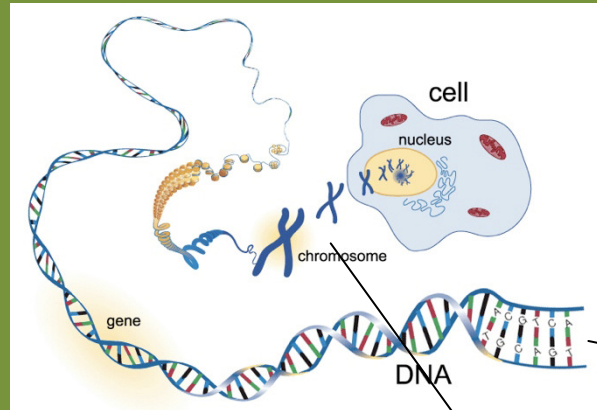


- All true cells have a nucleus, that holds the main information.



- Most cells have mitochondria, that provide energy.

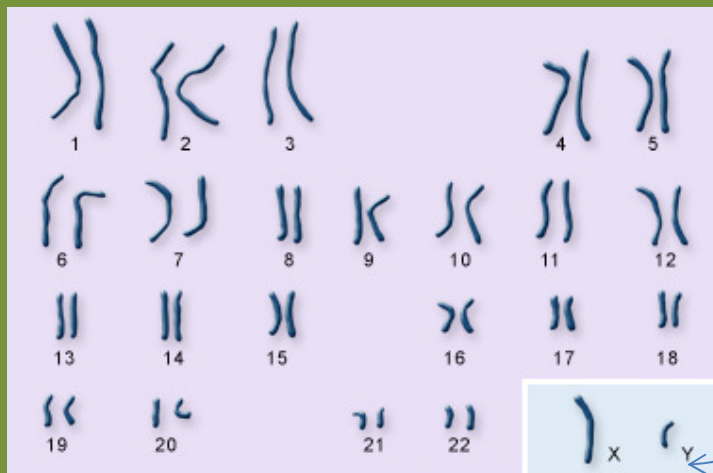
How does the nucleus store its information?



Inside the nucleus are structures called chromosomes.



Each chromosome consists of two strands of DNA wound around each other



Chromosomes come in pairs



22 pairs of chromosomes mutate randomly in the shared offspring when two people mate. The only chromosome which does not is the **Y chromosome** which is **handed down from father to son** and mutates very slowly over long periods of time.

Relationship between DNA and surnames

- In the mid 2000s, geneticists argued that Y chromosomes are like surnames; each gets handed down from father to son (although social conventions are now beginning to change in the case of surnames).
- A series of studies were undertaken in which the DNA of various surnames was examined in order to search for
 - a) DNA characteristics which might be considered as ethnic markers
 - b) the extent to which DNA is shared by holders of the same surname

In Ireland, such studies were undertaken by the School of Genetics in Trinity College Dublin; in England, much work has been done by the Department of Genetics at the University of Leicester.

The study of Brian Boru's ancestry was one of a series of studies by the Trinity group.

B. McEvoy & D. Bradley, "Y-chromosomes and the extent of patrilineal ancestry in Irish surnames" *Human Genetics* 119 (2006), 212–19.

"L. Moore et al., "A Y chromosome signature of hegemony in Gaelic Ireland" *American Journal of Human Genetics* 78 (2006), 334-8

B. McEvoy, C. Brady, L. T Moore and D. G Bradley, "The scale and nature of Viking settlement in Ireland from Y-chromosome admixture analysis", *European Journal of Human Genetics* (2006) 14, 1288–1294.

McEvoy, B., K. Simms, & D. G. Bradley "Genetic Investigation of the Patrilineal Kinship Structure of Early Medieval Ireland", *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 136 (2008), 415–22

**Work by TCD
Department of
Genetics on the
early surnames and
remote ancestors of
Irish families**

Argument of McEvoy *et al* 2008.

- Although their name derives from a pre-historic and **quasi-mythological** founder Eógan Mór, the group called Eóganacht claimed descent from his **apparently** 5th century AD descendant “Corc” (see Fig.2). The Eóganacht had several geographically distinct branches **reputedly** descended from Corc’s sons.
- The Dál Cais grouping, which came to dominate Munster from the Eóganacht in the 10th century AD, is widely believed to have **forged** a genealogical connection between its eponymous founder (Cas) and Eóghan Mór to legitimize the change in power.
- **From the 11th century on, individual named founders emerged from these units giving rise to modern surnames (derived from the founder’s personal name or nickname**
- **CS – No historian would stand over early stages of Cas’ pedigree as historically accurate. That is very different matter from surnames derived from Brian’s descendants which are well attested in contemporary documentation such as annals from the eleventh century.**

McEvoy *et al.* 2008: Investigation of 247 individuals with Munster surnames

- Stage I: group of 247 individuals was divided into 3
 - Eóganacht,
 - Dál Cais
 - random Munster surnames
- Stage II: Results were tested against 184 samples taken without incorporating surname data. This is called the Munster geographic group.

Dál Cais surnames tested in Stage I: total of 80 examples

Cahill – 10 examples

O'Brien - 14 examples

Clancy – 8

O'Dea -6

Heffernan – 7

O' Grady – 7

Hickey – 6

Kennedy – 7

McGrath – 6

McMahon – 5

McNamara – 4

Eóganacht surnames tested in Stage I:

total = 95

Cronin – 8 examples

Doran – 6

Kirby – 8

McCarthy – 7

McGillicuddy – 7

Moriarty – 8

O'Callaghan - 10

O'Donoghue – 8

O'Donovan – 2

O'Flynn – 6

O'Keefe – 6

O'Mahony – 3

O'Sullivan – 7

Quill - 8

Random Munster surnames tested in Stage I: total = 72 names

- Carroll – 5 samples
- Coffey – 9
- Healy - 6
- Maher – 12
- O'Connor – 11
- O'Driscoll – 8
- O'Leary – 6
- O'Loughlin – 5
- O'Shea - 6
- Whelan - 4

Results of McEvoy *et al.* 2008 study

“Amongst the Eóganacht nor the Dál Cais surname groupings (nor both together) **none showed significant differences at the tribal level when compared with the Munster surname control sample** (P 5 0.769, 0.952 and 0.808, respectively), indicating that neither designation is under-laid by extensive shared ancestry as a whole.”

- CS: As historian, I am unclear what the authors mean by “tribal level” but I’m assuming that this means there is nothing unifying the various surnames which are thought to descend from Eoganacht ancestry AND nothing unifying Dál Cais surnames either

Parenthesis: what is a tribe in early Ireland?

- 'I have been reproached with avoiding the word 'tribe' I have avoided it, and for two reasons; first, because some have used it in so loose a sense as to make it meaningless; and second, because others have used it with the deliberate intent to create the impression that the structure of society in Ireland down to the seventeenth century finds its modern parallel among the Australian or Central African aborigines.

Eoin Mac Neill, *Phases of Irish history* (Dublin 1919), 183f.

- When I was attracted to the study of Irish history it was natural that I should come to it imbued with the notions in vogue at the time, especially with the notions in vogue about the form of government and society that were supposed to have prevailed in ancient and medieval Ireland and among other peoples who were classed as Celtic. I soon discovered that these notions, so far as Ireland was concerned, were not based on anything that could be called study, on any kind of systematic investigation. I discovered also that the same notions were quite modern and had come into vogue among educated people in the course of the nineteenth century mainly. As they were not based on systematic study, so also they were not reduced to any form of intelligible description in detail... We were told on all hands that Irish social and political life took the form of the Clan System. As evolutionary theories regarding human society became more fashionable, writers who wished to appear learned sometimes preferred to say the Tribal System.

Eoin Mac Neill, *Early Irish laws and institutions* (1935), 1f.

- Professor Ioan Lewis gave the Gregynog conference two alternative definitions of the word 'tribe' which might find approval among some anthropologists. The first was its use to describe a community which forms a recognisable linguistic and cultural entity, but which need not necessarily be united politically. In this sense both Ireland and Wales in the early medieval period might properly be termed 'tribes'-which is hardly useful to anyone. Otherwise, 'tribe' might denote the largest political unit in a given community. This leaves 'community' undefined and seems to run counter to Binchy's equation of tribe and *tuath*, since the latter is surely the smallest of Irish political units; and if it be not permissible to identify *tuath* and tribe there is little point in calling Irish society tribal. Most modern anthropologists seem wary of adopting the classical view of Sir Henry Maine that the tribe was based essentially on blood relationship, whether real or fictional, although Lucy Mair seems to feel that this concept has a certain validity." It is significant, however, that Dr. Binchy has gone to pains to deny such as basis for the Irish *tuath*, or even for the primitive Indo-European *teutd. He therefore rejects the first definition of 'tribe'. in the Oxford English Dictionary, viz.' 'A group of persons forming a community and claiming descent from a common ancestor... (b) A particular race of recognized ancestry; a family.'

F.J. Byrne, "Tribes and tribalism", *Ériu* 22 (1971), 131-2

Stage 3: Munster geographic sample examined to see if one could find a dominant Y-chromosome signature like IMH in North-West

- The Munster central/ancestral Y-chromosome (marked C in Fig. 4) is considerably less frequent than the IMH in the Northwest (3.8% vs. 12.5%) but is surrounded by more extensive and frequent diversity.
- Conclusion is that there is a less homogeneous population in Munster than in NW Ireland
- “it is possible that greater migration to Munster relative to the Northwest over the past 1,000 years (associated with Norman and English conquest) may dilute such a signature in the Munster geographic sample.”

Geographically Munster data

“We next investigated the Munster surname data for evidence of important additional founding lineages (see Fig. 5). **Two potential founding male signatures** (frequent Y-chromosomes surrounded by subsidiary diversity) are apparent, centered or ancestral on haplotypes A and B.

These two clusters of leading Y chromosomes **are scattered between individuals of the three groups used e.g. Eóganacht, Dál Cais & random Munster surnames**”

BUT...

“It is none-the-less curious that haplotypes A and B, the joint second and third most common Y-chromosomes in the geographic Munster sample (at 2.2% and 1.6%, respectively), are enriched in the surname sample (Dal Cais, Eoganacht and Munster surnames) at 12.9% and 6.5%, respectively”

- i.e. Haplotype A was found in generic Munster surnames at 2.2 but in our two sets of Eóganacht and Dál Cais surnames much higher reading of 12.9 and 6.5% of Haplotype A was found.
- It appears that the chosen Munster surnames (which have some degree of longevity in Irish genealogy) show some degree of common ancestry even though there is little evidence that the Dál Cais and Eóganacht groups share strong common characteristics.
- Question? Does the geographic Munster group include those taken from surnames of non-Irish origin? This is not clear from article.

Ancient division between Thomond and Desmond

“These findings may reflect the presence of geographic sub-structure in Munster. In this regard, it is interesting to note that clusters A and B are significantly different in terms of the geographic origin of individuals when divided into Northern and Southern Munster geographic cohorts”

While there are subdivisions of Munster from the late tenth century corresponding to Thomond (meaning “north Munster” and “Desmond” (meaning “south Munster”). However these geographically defined kingdoms do not correspond to the earliest distribution of Eóganacht kingdoms which were concentrated in Tipperary, east Limerick and Kerry.

The Dál Cais dynasties, in contrast, are largely limited to Clare, West Tipperary and East Limerick from the time in which they are first recorded in any detail in the tenth century (and so do appear to be based largely in North Munster or Thomond).

Conclusions of McEvoy *et al.*, 2008

[While] “our analysis cannot exclude the possibility that some level of patrilineal kinship underlaid the Munster Eóganacht and Dál Cais entities, it does seem that if any existed it was not comparable in extent to the widespread kinship in the contemporaneous Uí Néill grouping from the North of the Island, presumably the descendants of the ancestral eponym “Niall of the Nine Hostages” and his clan.

“Although the Uí Néill and Eóganacht are often thought of as major contemporary rivals from the North and South of the island respectively, genetic evidence combined with surname information suggest they were founded, established and perhaps led by different means and this may reflect wider differences in organization of Irish tribal societies.”

The genetic inheritance of the Uí Néill from Niall of the Nine Hostages provides material for a debate in its own right but within the context of this study, it seems very strange that the Eóganacht and the Dál Cais are both given equal weighting given that the latter emerge into contemporary documentation only in the tenth century. Few historians would see the common ancestry of the Eóganacht and Dál Cais which is proposed in twelfth-century genealogical texts as being anything other than the propaganda of the “new kids on the block” claiming remote and ancestral connections with the traditional kingship of Munster as well as, through the female line, with the ultimate ancestor figure of the Uí Néill, Con Cétchathaig – Conn of the Hundred Battles.

Genealogical information from 12th C manuscript Rawlinson B 502

Thus begins the Psalter of Cashel: Here begins the genealogy of the *Síl Ébir*

An imprudent race of the *Scotti*, forgetful of their own affairs and deeds... from these Irish genealogies will identify first the genealogy of Éremon, then the genealogy of Ébir, thirdly the genealogy of Ír and fourthly, that of Lugdach mac Ítha.

There are two sons belonging to Mag Nuadat – that is Ailill Aulomm (Ailill of the Grazed Ear) and Lugaid Laga. **Ailill Áulomm had 19 sons as follows:**

Eogan Mór, Cormac Cass, Tidell, Mercón, Mac-Corb. Cian, Conall – these are the seven sons of Sadb daughter of Conn Cétchathaig (Conn of the Hundred Battles)

Uilenn, Errind (or Malleón), Tigernach. Mathrach, Mac-Coll, Mac-Malléon, Corrb, Chrocaini, Eochaid Fráech Irrind (the passionate chariot fighter?) Eochaid Órainech (Gold-Face),. Eochaid Baí (Sword-Feat (?)) or Dímóna (?), Eochaid Tóebfota (Long flanks).

They all perished in the battle of Mucrama and the family withered away except for three men, that is

- Eogan Mór – from whom are the Eoganachta
- Cian – from whom are the Cianachta
- Cormac – from whom are the Dál Cais (that is, the Déise)

M.A. O'Brien, *Corpus Genelogiae Hiberniae* (Dublin 1962), 192

!!Major Problem!!

- There is no discussion in this article (McEvoy *et al.* 2008) of how the authors chose the surnames which are being seen as typical of the various groupings: Dál Cais or Eóganacht.
- This is particularly problematic in that surnames are only evolving in period after Brian Boru and the history of this process is very poorly studied in Ireland.

Genealogies of the Uí Briain

- M.A. O'Brien published material entitled *De genelogia Dál Chais ut inuenitur in Psalterio Caissil* from the twelfth century manuscripts Rawlinson B 502 and the Book of Leinster in *Corpus Genealogiae Hiberniae* (Dublin 1962). 235-245. Surnames are not clearly identifiable in this text.
- Standish Hayes O'Grady published genealogies of the Uí Briain under the title *Senchas Síil Briain* in his edition of *Caithréim Thoirdelbhaigh* (Irish Texts Society 26, 27, London 1929). This has now been subject to a specific study by Nollaig Ó Muraíle (Irish Texts Society Subsidiary Texts 24, 2012,)pp. 47-50 who concludes that O'Grady's text is based on more than one manuscript source and is essentially that published in the eighteenth-century *An Leabhar Muimhneach*.
- The genealogies used below are therefore from *Leabhar Mór na nGenealach: The Great Book of Genealogies compiled (1645-66) by Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbishigh ed. N. Ó Muraíle* (Dublin 2003) which do provide evidence for surnames.

***Great Book of Genealogies* by Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbisigh compiled AD 1645-66**

Three sons of Brian Boru left descendants:

- Tadhg,
- Donnchadh from whom Uí Dhonnchadha, at present called Clann Bhriain
- Domnall

The great grandsons of Brian Boru in *Great Book of Genealogies*

- **Clann Mhathghamhna
(family of Mathgamain)**
– descended from Muirchertach son of Tadg son of Brian Boru
- **Clann Domnaill & Clann Toirdealbhaigh Dhuinn
(family of Domnall and family of Brown Toirdelbach)**
descended from Domnall son of Tadg son of Brian Boru

Great-great grandsons (5 generations down) of Brian Boru in *Great Book of Genealogies*

- Kings of Thomond (= Uí Bhriain) = descendants of Toirdhealbhach son of Diarmuid, son of Toirdealbhach son of Tadhg son of Brian Boru
- Clann Taidhg Ghlae descendants of Tadhg, son of Diarmuid son of Toirdhealbhach son of Tadhg son of Brian Boru
- Clann Diarmada Fhinn son of Diarmuid Finn son of Diarmuid son of Toirdealbhach son of Tadhg son of Brian Boru
- Clann an Easbuig son of Donnchadh son of Diarmuid son of Toirdealbhach son of Tadhg son of Brian Boru

6 generations down from Brian Boru

- Domnall Mór king of Thomond from whom are kings of Síol Briain son of Thoirdealbhach son of Diarmuid son of Toirdealbhach son of Tadhg son of Brian Boru
- Consaidín from whom are Clann Consaidín son of Thoirdelbhach son of Diarmuid son of Toirdealbhach son of Tadhg son of Brian Boru
- **Of the surnames used in the McEvoy *et al.* study, O'Brien (with 14 examples) are clearly descended from Brian Boru but others such as Considines, who appear equally clearly descended from Brian Boru, are not included in this study.**

Genealogy of Mac Craith – surname used in the study

- Diarmuid son of Giolla Íosa son of Maol Muire son of Tomás Mór son of Maol Muire son of Giolla Íosa son of Flann son of **Mac Raith *file*** son of Flann son of Eichthighearn son of Ceinnéidigh son of Lorcán son of Lachtna

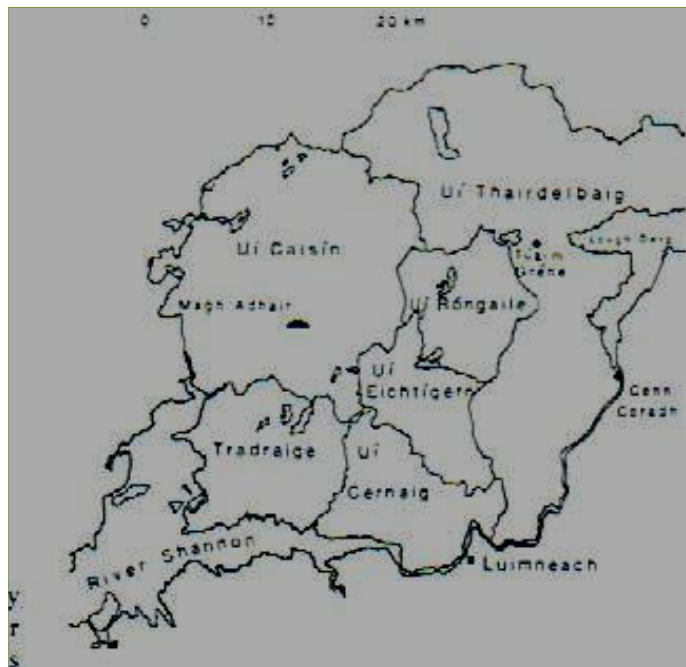
i.e. Mac Raith – the ancestor who gives his name to Mac Craith is descended from a brother of Brian Boru rather than in the direct line.

Genealogies of Mac Namara and O'Hickey

- Family of Mac Con son of Síoda son of Mac Con son of Cú Meadha son of Mac Con son of Lochlainn son of Cú Meadha Mór son of Niall son of Cú Mara son of Domnall son of Cú Mara from whom is the *fine* (kindred/sept) son of Domnall son of Meanma son of Aodh Aghar son of Éanna son of Aisíodh son of Síoda and Eich Bhuidhe son of Maol Cluiche son of **Cuiléan son of Urthaile...son of Caisín son of Cas** .
- It is written that Uí Icidhe, the doctors, belong to the family of Cuiléan son of Urthaile

LOGIC underlying choice of surnames in McEvoy *et al.* 2008 appears to be a wish to have the widest possible definition of Dál Cais

- **MacMahons** – descended from great great grandsons of Brian Boru
- **MacGraths** – descended from brother of Brian Boru
- **MacNamaras and O'Hickeys** – descended from a completely different descent from ultimate descendant of Cas



13.9 The composite chiefdom of the Déis Tuaiscirt/Dál

Clare in the 13th C after Ó hÓgáin as published by Michael Mac Mahon “Each lord in his own territory – Giolla na Naomh Ó hUidhrín’s profile of Thomond” *The Other Clare*_36 (2012), 68

Dál Cais in the time of Brian Boru according to D. Blair Gibson in *Celtic chieftdom, Celtic state: the evolution of complex social systems in prehistoric Europe* ed. B. Arnold & D. Blair Gibson (Cambridge 1995), 123



Thomond (13th Century) after Ó hÓgáin

Conclusions

- McEvoy *et al.* 2008 argue that the ultimate genetic history of the Dál Cais should be studied as part of the story of how 5th C kingships in Ireland (in particular those of the Uí Néill and Eóganacht) evolved. They are particularly interested in the roles of the eponymous 5th C and earlier ancestors in producing sons who ultimately gave rise (in the eleventh century and later) to modern Irish surnames.
- To this historian, this approach seems to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of prehistoric figures attached as ancestor figures to later royal dynasties. Of far greater interest, genealogically and historically, would be a genetic study of the descendants of Brian Boru who are well documented in contemporary sources from the tenth century and the modern surnames attached to these. We might not be able to tell much about their “tribal ancestry” from such eleventh-century and later figures but we would learn a great deal about the nature of Irish kingship in the period immediately before the Norman conquest and the genetic legacy of a remarkable high-king of Ireland who, building on the achievements of a mere three generations of predecessors, broke the six hundred year old dominance of the highest political office known in early Ireland.