

Early Gaelic Ulster

In the 12th century, Ulster's myriad of competing aristocratic lineages were resolving into vast kingdoms. The Cinéal Eoghain – a fusion of the O'Neill and MacLochlainn lineages- achieved dominion over what are today the counties of Armagh, Tyrone and Londonderry. The first stronghold of the Cinéal Eoghain was the spectacular Grianan fort in north Donegal, the ruins of which are still visible from Topped Mountain in north Fermanagh. Later, in the 11th century, the seat of this kingship was moved to conquered lands in Tullahogue, Co. Tyrone. The Cinéal Connail held sway over Donegal and competed with Cinéal Eoghain for the prize of the high kingship of Ireland. In the east the Ulaid – sometimes described as the original Ulstermen – were in power with the tribe of Dál Fiatach in control.

Fermanagh was squeezed uncomfortably between the Cinéal Connail to the west and Cinéal Eoghain to the north, and the Breifne to the south and was, therefore, perpetually disputed territory. The Annals of Ulster record the Oriel or Airghialla tuaths – a collection of minor tribes – displaced by the Uí Neill in Tyrone, establishing a new foothold in Fermanagh. The Airghialla ejected the indigenous tribes, Fir Manach and the Cinéal Eanna, who sank into oblivion. The Airghialla leaders declared themselves Kings of Fermanagh in 1009AD, though they never established an outright title to Fermanagh. Instead they forged and governed a loose federation of minor lineages, which survived on its diplomatic footwork around the far more powerful Cinéal Connail or Cinéal Eoghain. Throughout the 11th and 12th centuries the Kings of Fermanagh – O'hEignigh, O'Maolruanaidh and O'Dubhdara – were drawn from the Airghialla – its Clann Lugainn branch.

By the time Muircheartach MacLochlainn of the Uí Neill – descendants of Cinéal Eoghain – had secured for Uí Neill the coveted high throne of Ireland, the Airghialla were in thrall to them. Yet, thirty years later, the Airghialla territories had been ceded to the O'Donnells, descendants of Cinéal Connail, who were mortal enemies of the Uí Neill. The O'Neills and MacLochlainns the two aristocratic lineages in the Uí Neill – had quarrelled and Hugh O'Neill made an unholy alliance with the O'Donnells to defeat his cousins, the MacLochlainns. The price of O'Donnell support was Fermanagh. Yet in 1208AD O'hEignigh, the Airghialla King of Fermanagh squared up to the O'Donnells and defeated them in battle. This was the beginning of the rise of the Fermanagh kings.

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