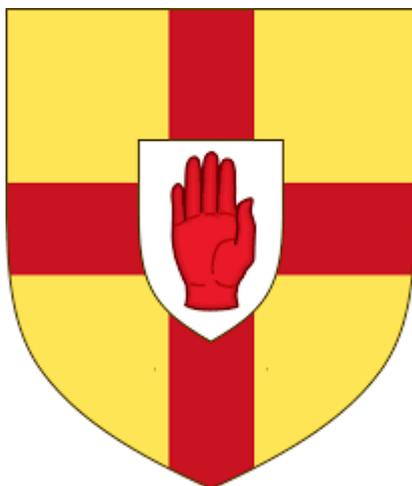


2. The Realm of the High King Niall



Historical Background

Around 450 AD, some of the ancestors of the O'Dochartaighs were settled and living in Inishowen. Since about 200 BC they were influenced by the spread of everything Celtic. In becoming an Irish Clan the O'Dochartaighs had survived many changes brought by centuries of pre-Christian challenges. These challenges included invasions, the rise and fall of empires, kingdoms, battles, and alliances. Several of these ancient changes have remained permanent and one of them is the Province of Ulster. Ulster, symbolised by its blood-stained red hand, is the northern province of Ireland and is surrounded by sea except for its southern border which connects it to the rest of Ireland.

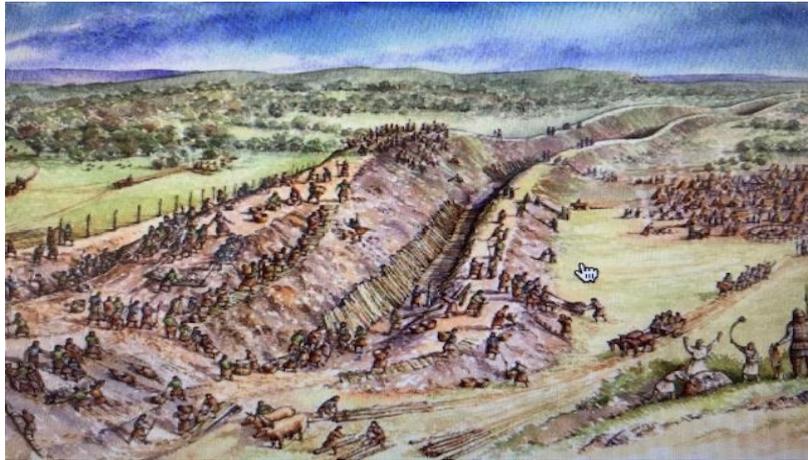


The Red Hand of Ulster



Province of Ulster (in green)

This southern border, with its loughs and land, once formed an almost impenetrable man-made barrier called Black Pig's Dyke. Folklore says it was torn into the landscape by an angry black boar. However, I think it was built by an ancient human force, controlling the comings and goings into southern Ulster. This early 'border control' monitored raids on humans and animals, especially cattle.



Black Pig's Dyke

An ancient, epic Ulster saga is the Cattle Raid of Cooley. Raiding and hostage taking was to become synonymous with one of my early Irish ancestors, Niall.



The Cattle Raid of Cooley

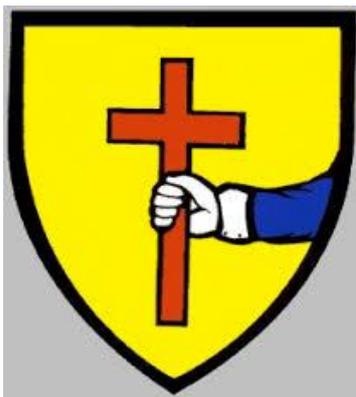
Niall of the Nine Hostages

Niall of the Nine Hostages, as he is known, is the ancestor of the Northern and Southern Uí Néill dynasties that dominated much of Ireland from about 400 to 1000 AD.



Niall the 114th King of Tara

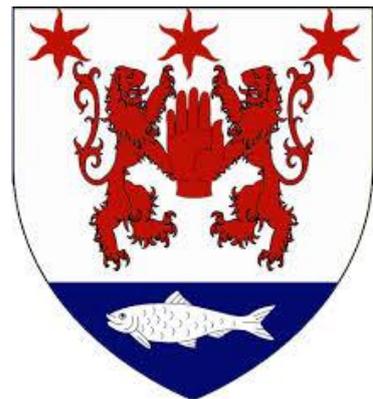
Descending from the Northern Uí Néill dynasties are the Clans of Ulster. The Western Ulster Clans include the O'Donnells, the O'Dohertys and the O'Neills.



O'Donnell



O'Doherty

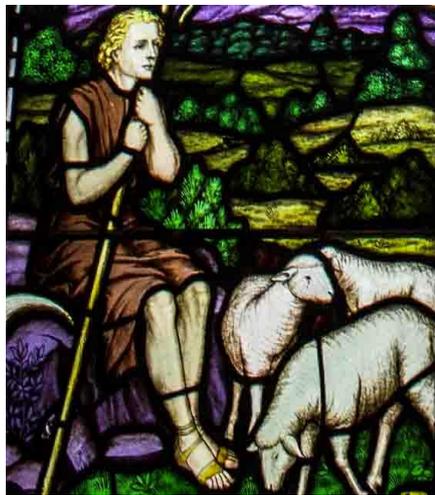


O'Neill

Hostage Taking

Around 400 AD the Roman army was leaving Britain, returning to Rome to save the collapsing empire. After four centuries of destruction of ancient Celtic ways, the Romans were leaving a cultural vacuum in Britannia. Ireland's High King Niall seized this opportunity to extend his kingdoms. His 'hostage kingdoms' already included Scotland and may have eventually included some of Europe. The term 'hostages' referred to both kingdoms and individuals. Human hostages could become valued members or slaves of a Kingdom.

One such hostage, brought back to Ireland at this time, was an educated teenager named Maewyn Succat. Maewyn, a Latin-speaking Welsh boy, was captured by King Niall's Irish raiders. Young Maewyn became a shepherd boy hostage on the hill side of an Ulster mountain, Mt Slemish, in Co Antrim. He grew up to become Ireland's famous patron saint, Saint Patrick.



Maewyn



Patrick

The Royal Palace

The realm of King Niall was centred on the ancient Royal Hill of Tara, the palace of the High Kings of Ireland. While living at Tara, King Niall fathered children from a number of royal wives and mistresses. Some of his male children became the Princes of Counties within the Provinces of Ireland.



Above the Hill of Tara

Two of King Niall's sons, Conaill and Eoghain, became the Princes of Tír Conaill and Tír Eoghain in Western Ulster. Their descendants, Cenél Conaill (the tribe of Conaill) and Cenél Eoghain (the tribe of Eoghain) lived in what are now the counties of Donegal, Derry and Tyrone.



Western Ulster (in yellow)