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Seanchas - Much More Than a Genealogy



CÉ hIAD NA GAEIL? WHO ARE THE GAEIL?

The definition of 'Gaeil' has changed over time. Today, the word Gaeil is primarily used in Irish to denote speakers of a Gaelic language (i.e., Irish Gaelic, Scottish Gaelic, Manx Gaelic). It can also be used in an ethnic sense. But the original meaning was very different.

A. The First Gaeil

Most experts agree that the Irish word 'Gaeil' is a borrowing from Brythonic of 'gwyddyl', meaning 'wild ones'. The Britons applied the word *gwyddyl* indiscriminately to all of the Irish, regardless of tribe, who were busy trying to plunder Roman Britain and its Celtic and Romano-Celtic citizens in the 3rd through 5th centuries A.D. Brythonic was the major Celtic language spoken by the Britons and it is the ancestor language of Welsh, Cornish, and Breton. (The other major Celtic or Celticized language of Britain at that time was Pretanic, which the Irish Gaeil call Cruithin, and which may have been Brythonic at least in part.) This exonym or name of foreign origin, *gwyddyl*, came into Old Irish as *Goideal* (singular) and *Goidil* (plural) and their variants. With the Irish spelling change of the 1960s, the Modern Irish spellings of *Gaedheal* (singular) and *Gaedhil* (plural) were changed to *Gael* and *Gaeil*.

B. Ancestor-Heroes and Ancestor-Gods of the 'Gaeil'

By about the 6th or 7th century A.D., the Uí Néill were using the name 'Gaeil' to create a fictional genealogy and kinship-group (the basis of political and military alliance in Irish society at that time) of which they were the leaders. Every kinship needs ancestors, so Uí Néill propagandists also provided a number of fictional ancestor-heroes, including:

Gaedheal Glas
 Gaedheal mac Eathoir
 Éibhear Scot
 Scotia, daughter of the Pharaoh Cincris and mother of Gaedheal Glas

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C. The 'Book of Invasions' and the Gaeil

The Uí Néill created the concept of the High Kingship of Ireland by the 5th century A.D. and put it into practical operation by the 8th century A.D. The genealogies included in *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (literally, the 'Book of Takings of Ireland,' but usually translated as the 'Book of Invasions of Ireland') were an important foundation for the formation of that government and are therefore often called the "official genealogies". Given that these genealogies use the apparently invented figure of Gaedheal Glas in order to claim the existence of a super-tribe called the Gaeil, they are also called the "Gaelic genealogies".

Lebor Gabála Éirenn is dedicated to the story of the 'Gaeil.' The principal elements of Ireland's "official" genealogies began to be entered into what became the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* as early as the 7th century A.D. Written and re-written in a Christian context, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* is part Bible, part authentic pre-Christian Irish myth, and part genealogical fiction. However, based on the work of T.F. O'Rahilly and other outstanding scholars of the 20th century, its actual nature has again been recognized. It is propaganda purposely created by the Uí Néill from about the 7th century A.D. to the end of the 12th century A.D. to demonstrate that all the tribes of Ireland should recognize the Uí Néill right to the High Kingship of Ireland.

Lebor Gabála Éirenn claims invasions of Ireland by Ceasair, Parthalón, Nemed, the Fir Bolg (who in *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* include the Fir Domnann and Fir Gáioin, i.e., two of the three major branches of the Laighin), the supernatural demons called Fomhóraigh, the supernatural Tuatha Dé Danann, and finally, the 'Gaeil.' It goes to great lengths to claim that all the earlier invasions of Ireland were killed off or exiled from Ireland by plagues, floods, the Fomhóraigh, etc.

Therefore, by its own logic, all the peoples of Ireland (except for a handful of insignificant subject tribes) must descend from the last claimed invasion, that of the 'Gaeil.' Therefore, by Féineachas or ancient Irish law (literally Féini-law), all the peoples of Ireland must owe allegiance to the Uí Néill, foremost of the Uí Míleadh ('Descendants of the Soldier'), a.k.a., the 'Cine Scuit' ('Race of Scotia') or 'Gaeil.' (1)

This is, of course, a convenient piece of myth making from a dynasty intent on establishing its hegemony over all Ireland. It's a great story, it gained ground until it eclipsed (but in most cases did not entirely eradicate) the earlier (and often actual) genealogical traditions of most tribes, and it became so popular by the end of the medieval period that until the 20th century, it was almost entirely believed by the Irish and their descendants overseas. Its hold became so firm on the Irish psyche that not even the great Irish scholar T.F. O'Rahilly could shake the concept of a 'Goidelic Invasion' of Ireland, despite its obvious problems noted by O'Rahilly himself.

D. The 'Gaelic Invasion'

Some modern scholars have accepted the invasion by the 'Gaeil' as an historic fact and have attempted to date it. For example, O'Rahilly believed that it occurred within a century or so of the time of Christ as the fourth and last Celtic invasion of Ireland, preceded by those of the Cruithin (sometime around the 8th to 5th centuries B.C.), Érainn (sometime around the 5th to 3rd centuries B.C.), and Laighin (sometime around the 3rd to 1st centuries B.C.). (2)

Others recognize that the Gaeil do exist, but as a linguistic group. For example, in the Gaelic languages, the word Gaeil is especially used to mean the speakers of those languages - Irish Gaelic, Scottish Gaelic, and Manx Gaelic. But nearly everything about the origin-story of the Gaeil as written in the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* is a problem, as we'll see below.

E. Problems with the Genealogies of the 'Gaeil'

In the earliest versions of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, the 'Gaeil,' 'Uí Míleadh,' ('Descendants of the Soldier'), or Cine Scuit ('Race of Scotia') include only the Féini (i.e., Connachta and Uí Néill) and the Eoghanachta. By the time of the last revisions of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* at the end of the 12th century A.D., the invasion group called the 'Gaeil,' 'Uí Míleadh, or Cine Scuit includes the Féini (i.e., Connachta and Uí Néill), Eoghanachta, Laighin, Érainn, Dál gCais, Ulaidh, branches of the Cruithin, and almost everybody else in Ireland except a relatively small minority of 'unfree' or tribute paying tribes. (3) Here we see an example of the Uí Néill Public Relations Department in over-drive.

The 17th century *Foras Feasa Ar Éirinn* ('Foundation of Knowledge on Ireland' but usually mis-translated as 'History of Ireland' in English) by Seathrún Céitinn (called 'Geoffrey Keating' in English) follows the official Uí Néill line. The genealogical section of this work begins by listing the twelve 'saorchlann' ('free clans') of 'Gaeil' in Ireland, six in Leth Cuinn ('Conn's Half') and six in Leth Mogha ('Mogh's Half'). The six in Leth Cuinn are Dál gCuinn (or Connachta), Dál gCéin (Cianachta), Dál nAraide, Dál Fiatach, Dál Riata, and Dál Niadh Corb (of the Laighin). The six in Leth Mogha are Dál nEoghain (or Eoghanachta), Dál bhFiachach, Dál gCéide, Dál Dáirine, Dál mBáirdine, and Dál gCais. (4)

The Dál Fiatach are the original Ulaid. The Dál Fiatach and the Dál Riata are originally of the Érainn. The Dál gCéide, Dál Dáirine, and Dál mBáirdine are Érainn. The Dál gCais, although eventually grafted to the main stem of the Eoghanachta genealogy, were originally part of the Déisi alliance and therefore classified as Érainn. The Dál gCéin may originally have been Laighin. The Dál nAraide are Cruithin in origin. The oldest genealogical texts about the Dál gCuinn or Connachta call them Féini. The Dál bhFiachach (i.e., the Dál bhFiachach Suidge) are the royal dynasty of the Déisi.

In other words, although these various Cruithin, Érainn, Laighin, and Féini peoples eventually accepted 'Gaelic' descent, this Uí Néill story goes against what we know of earlier traditions of each. Only the Eoghanachta wholeheartedly accepted a 'Gaelic' pedigree at such an early date that no alternative origin tale survives.

But even the Eoghanachta's 'Gaelic' origin tale confirms (even highlights) that they landed in Ireland separate from the rest of the supposed 'Gaeil.' Further, their key ancestor is Eóghan ('Yew Born' or 'Well Born'), their name means 'Descendants of Eóghan' and they do not claim descent from Conn ('Head'), the central ancestor-hero (and, apparently, original ancestor-god) of the Uí Néill of the Connachta, the foremost branch of the supposed 'Gaeil.'

From what we know of Celtic tribes of this period, this is an absurdity. Celtic tribes identified themselves according to 'the god my people swear by' and usually named themselves accordingly. For example, Luighne means 'Collective descendants of (the god) Lugh,' Delbhna means 'Collective descendants of (the god) Dealbh Aoidh,' Cianachta means 'The descendants of (the god) Cian,' who in Irish mythology was the father of the god Lugh. Therefore, without a common divine ancestry, or even a common mythological invasion, it's difficult to believe that the Eoghanachta and Connachta/Uí Néill are related except by a genealogical fiction.

F. Problems with the Names of the 'Gaeil'

The three names of this supposed Celtic tribe - Uí Míleadh, Gaeil, and Scoit (or Cine Scuit) - are borrowings from other languages:

Uí Míleadh

The name Uí Míleadh, 'Descendants of the Soldier', is based on the Latin word *Militas* ('Soldier') and is not a native Irish word. (5)

Gaedhil or Gaeil

The 'official genealogists' ask us to believe that the 'Gaeil' ('Gaedhil' in the older Irish spelling) are named after Gaedheal mac Eathor and Gaedheal Glas. Gaedheal son of Eathor, according to the tale, was instrumental in studying and regulating the languages of the world after the fall of the Tower of Babel. Gaedheal Glas was a friend and protector of Moses and the Israelites as they made their escape from Pharaoh. These are obviously Christian rather than pagan Celtic stories.

As we have already seen, however, the word 'Gaeil,' is originally an exonym given to the Irish by the Britons. It is actually the Brythonic word 'gwyddyl' meaning 'wild ones.'

Scuit or Cine Scuit

The 'official genealogists' ask us to believe that the Scuit or Cine Scuit are named after Scota the daughter of Pharaoh Cincris, or Éibhear Scot son of Sru. According to the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, Scota was the mother of Gaedheal Glas, and Éibhear Scot took command of the ancestors of the Gaeil at Crete after they were (according to this elaborate fiction) expelled from Egypt.

The word Scotti, however, is another exonym. It is the word the Romans used for the raiding Irish. (6)(7)(8) Although a number of theories have been put forward over the years as to the origin of this word, no one knows for sure why the Romans chose it. One suggestion is that it comes from the Greek word *skotos* meaning 'darkness.'

G. Why choose Gaeil, Scuit, and Uí Míleadh?

So, why did the 'official genealogists' choose to use three foreign names for their fictional super-tribe and the related genealogies they were creating?

More particularly, why would the Uí Neill, proud of their actual genealogy like all Celts, accept three foreign names for themselves including an insult applied to them by the Celts of Britain?

Here is a possible explanation.

In creating a new, pan-Irish super-tribe embracing almost all of Ireland's distinct peoples, there was a need to choose ancestors on a politic basis, i.e., without showing special preference for the ancestor gods or heroes of any one tribe. Just about the only way to do that was to go outside the tradition to new ancestor-heroes anointed with new or foreign names.

Given that the names Gaeil and Scotti were already being applied to all Irish raiders by the British Celts and their Roman patrons, these names already had a certain amount of traction as pan Irish names.

As for Uí Míleadh, I would think that this name was appealing on the basis of a) the prestige of Latin in the increasingly

Christianized Ireland of the 6th and 7th centuries A.D., and b) its compatibility with Ireland's own native martial tradition.

Accordingly, the "official" genealogists of the Uí Néill went forward with Gaeil, Scotti, and Uí Míleadh by which to build a new genealogical fiction.

These were apparently good choices. After all, the plan worked.

H. Conclusion

Armed with a foreign name and a clever manipulation of Ireland's Seanchas tradition, the Uí Néill created and put into operation the High-Kingship of a fractious but unified 'Gaelic' Ireland.

NOTES

1. *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, Volumes I-V, edited by R.A.S. Macalister. London: Irish Texts Society, 1938-1956.
2. O'Rahilly, T.F. , *Early Irish History and Mythology*. Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1946. Chapters IV, VI, X, XI, XIV, Appendix I
3. Byrne, Francis John. *Irish Kings and High-Kings*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1973. pps. 8, 9
4. Céitinn, Seathrún. *Foras Feasa Ar Éirinn – the History of Ireland*, edited by David Comyn and Patrick S. Dineen. London: Irish Texts Society, 1902-1914. Volume IV, p. 13
5. O'Rahilly, p. 195
6. Chadwick, Nora. *Celtic Britain*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1963. pps. 24 30)
7. Moody, T.W. & Martin, F.X., editors. *The Course of Irish History*. Cork: The Mercier Press, 1967. p. 44
8. Byrne, p. 8

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