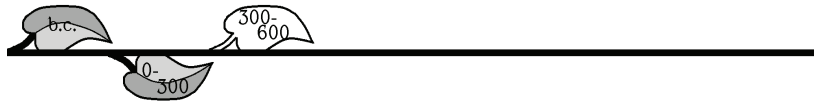


## The Ui Cinnsealaigh Clan



abraid Loingsech and his soldiers landed in Wexford and seized the throne of Leinster at Dinn Rig. However, the descendants of this army settled in many areas outside of Leinster, including Connacht and Munster. At one time they controlled parts of Meath that included Tara, and Leinster tradition states that their rights once ruled over that royal residence: “The king of Ui Cinnsealaigh [anglicized as Hy Kinsella] of the spoils has control of the house of Tara; this is the truth for all time, for it is the house of the king of Leinster.”<sup>1</sup>

Around the 4<sup>th</sup> century, after the death of Cormac mac Art, the two groups that would come to dominate Leinster, the Hy Kinsella and the Hy Dunlaing, migrated from the west through the Gowran pass into Leinster. In a series of battles, they defeated the Hy Bairche, who had controlled South Leinster since the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The two new groups then peacefully agreed to divide Leinster, the Hy Dunlaing taking the northern half and the Hy Kinsella taking the southern half. The dividing line between the two territories was the present border of County Kildare and County Carlow. The Hy Dunlaing stronghold was at Naas, in north-central Kildare; the Hy Kinsella’s was at Rathvilly, situated on the northern border of County Carlow. These two groups occupied the richest farmland in

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<sup>1</sup> From the ancient Irish *Book of Rights*.

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Leinster while the groups they subdued were removed to bog land and mountainous areas.

At this time another group was also expanding, the Hy Neill of Ulster. In a series of battles they took control of Ulster from the Ulaid, the people of Cuchulainn, and then expanded south into Meath. They became the most powerful clan in Ireland, eventually extending their control to include the royal site of Tara, previously ruled by Leinster. This set the stage for the bloody encounters between the Leinstermen and the Hy Neill, encounters that involved the illustrious family of Enna Kinsella.

In 365 the battle of Croghan Hill was fought between the Leinster righ, Enna, and Ireland's Ard Righ, Eochaidh Muighmheadhoin of the Hy Neill, a very successful campaigner. The annalists recorded only the broad outlines of this encounter, but based on other documented battles we can fill in the details.

In the spring of 365 a tuath righ under the control of Enna in the Leinster territory of Offaly refused to pay tribute to Enna. The Ard Righ Eochaidh, aware that several other tuatha in Leinster would refuse to pay the next installment of their tribute to Enna if the rebellious Offaly righ was supported by the Hy Neill, called a war council to do just that. Eochaidh needed little excuse to attack Enna, because he held Enna responsible for the death of one of his relatives years before.<sup>2</sup> All the tuath righs of Meath who paid tribute to Eochaidh

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<sup>2</sup> An early Leinster dynast, Cuilenn of the Ui Labrada, slew a Hy Neill man Ciar Culdub, who was apparently under royal protection. Cuilenn was dispossessed of his lands as a result, and these were forfeit to the ard righ. Cuilenn, however, was granted land in recompense by Enna Kinsella, who later came to dominate south Leinster, which strongly suggests that Enna put Cuilenn up to the murder in the first place.

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arrived at his fort and agreed to support the rebellious Offaly righ in Leinster. A battle between Eochaidh and Enna seemed inevitable. The discussion then turned to the number of warriors each Meath tuath could supply, where and when the force should come together, and how the army should proceed into Leinster. Meanwhile, Enna, unaware of the danger about to surface, began assembling a war party of his own to raid the lands of his rebellious Offaly under-righ.

The Meath tuath righs, upon returning home from Eochaidh's war council, sent out messengers to their nobles and assembled their allotment of fighting men and women.<sup>3</sup> Within a week they were marching to the agreed upon meeting point, a cairn in southern Meath. Eochaidh had not asked for all the fighters the province could muster because by Meath law he was able only to command each fighter for six weeks every three years.<sup>4</sup> He had to leave some of the warriors at home for use in the following years, so the number to call out was always a gamble. The attacking righ had no idea how many his opponent would muster. Eochaidh had decided that 100 horse riders (all nobility) and 500 foot soldiers (mainly from the free class) would be enough.

A week later Eochaidh, now in southern Meath by the border of Leinster, scanned with satisfaction the army waiting at the cairn. Almost 2,000 people were gathered; along with the 600 warriors were numerous servants escorting packhorses carrying tents, bedding and rations of bread, meal, dried meat and milk. Eochaidh gave marching orders and the force left the

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<sup>3</sup> Not until 697 were women exempted from battle through the influence of St. Adarnan at the synod of Tara (before 697 women were chosen only if a family had no sons). While this synod granted them protection from battle, it also stripped women of the right to inherit land (except in special situations) because they no longer defended it.

<sup>4</sup> This agreement varied from province to province and from righ to righ depending on how powerful the leader was.

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cairn, snaking its way over the border into Leinster towards the tuath of the rebellious Offaly righ. It was late June, with harvest still seven or eight weeks away, which worked well for Meath because the foot soldiers could not be kept in service during harvest time.

Long before the Meath army entered Leinster, Enna had learned of its intentions. He had already sent word that the province was under attack and that warriors should meet in the territory of Offaly. Constrained by time, he could count on collecting only 80 horse riders and 400 foot soldiers. While these forces were being assembled, Enna dispatched a messenger envoy to Eochaidh. The envoy, wearing traditional dress and carrying a white staff in one hand and a sword in the other (symbolic of the options, peace or war), leapt onto his bare-backed horse and galloped off. He rode alone without fear of being harmed. (The code of chivalry romanticized by French writers in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries comes from the Celts.) Days later, after meeting with the Meath righ at the rebellious Offaly righ's fort, he packed away his white staff and carried his sword aloft through the fortified Meath camp. The messenger, upon returning to Enna, related that Eochaidh was not about to forgo battle unless Enna submitted to him and paid tribute.

After a long march north from Hy Kinsella, the Leinster army encountered Eochaidh's army. Since it was late in the day both forces set up camp less than a mile apart, Enna on Croghan Hill and Eochaidh surrounding the Offaly righ's fort. In the following exchange of messengers, Eochaidh demanded that Enna submit to him while Enna demanded that Eochaidh vacate Leinster. Neither side was willing to capitulate, so both set up night pickets around their perimeter. Night battles were a last resort, however, since the confusion they engendered was too risky.

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**Croghan Hill where Enna's men camped**

The next morning, before dawn, trumpets and horns blared from both encampments to signal wake-up, troop displacement, emblem bearers to the front, and numerous other orders. Nervously the men and women fell in behind their nobles, some drinking voraciously, all having packed enough food for that day in a satchel hung at their side. Through the dim early morning light, across an open field with a gentle upgrade in favor of the Leinster army, the nobles from the two provinces faced each other. Many pulled clothing tight around them to ward off the chill.

Each tuath's druid stood at the front of the battle line, next to the tuath righ, wearing a large cloak in the color of his clan. Before them stood their warriors armed with spears mounted on white hazel. The soldiers wore their long white shirts with splendid cloaks colored according to clans. In one hand most held their polished blue-green swords while the other was protected by the red bronze bosses in the center of the many-colored shields.

Since the Gaels believed that courage flowed down the generations, the druids' voices filled the air with heroic deeds

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done in the past by ancestors of the clan. They praised the warriors of today for their courage and prowess, and they lamented those who had been slain in the past. The clansmen remembered why they had come to fight: for their families, their history, and the land from which neither was divisible. They listened quietly with only their shields, weapons, and courage. Finally, they prayed with their druids for victory.

As the first rays of the sun streaked across the soft Irish grass, Enna's champion stepped into the path between the two forces and shouted, "Ho, I am Donagh, descended from Labraid Loingsech, renowned warrior of Leinster, and a match for any 100 Meath men. At the age of 16, having lost my shield, I stopped a sword thrust with my left arm and then took the said sword to kill my opponent." A cheer erupted from many of the Leinstermen, aware of their champion's history, as they pounded their shields with their spear shafts or swords. Standing in family groups, fathers with their sons (or perhaps daughters) behind them, uncles with their nephews at their shoulder, cousins side by side, they quieted quickly, knowing what was to come.

Running out a few steps from Meath's side, a huge man with a great sword hanging from his side, Meath's champion, returned, "I am Murtagh, descendant of Conn of the Hundred Battles, the most renowned warrior of all Ireland. When I was the age of 18, a noble of Munster cast a spear at me in battle. I caught it and threw it back, impaling both him and the Munster Champion." Meath, to encourage its champion, now raised its own fury of sound.

"In Leinster, we've heard of you and your assorted skills," shouted the Leinster champion again. "We hear you prefer to perfect your skills not on the battle field but in the cattle barn instead." (Milking the cattle was a woman's job.) Again a