

# The O'Hagan Family's Historical Role as Brehons in Irish Society

## Origins and Lineage

The O'Hagan family's role as brehons is deeply rooted in their ancestral lineage. They descended from the Cenél Feargusa branch of the Cenél nEógain, tracing their ancestry to Fergus, son of Eógan mac Néill (who was himself a son of Niall of the Nine Hostages). The family name O'Hagan (Ó hÁgáin or Ó hÓgáin) derives from Ogan/Ogain, who lived around 900 AD. The name means "Little Flamboyant Fire from the Sun," with "Aodh" referring to the pagan sun god and "Og" meaning young.

The earliest recorded O'Hagan in historical annals was Magrath O'Hagan, Lord of Cinel Fergus, whose death in 1081 was documented in the Annals of the Four Masters. Another early reference appears in July 1122 AD, when "Donnsleibhe Ua hOgain, chief of Cinel-Fearghusa, and lawgiver of Tealach-Og, died."

## Territorial Holdings and Seat of Power

The O'Hagans established their primary seat at Tullyhogue (Tulach Óg, meaning "Hill of Youth" in Irish) in County Tyrone, in the Barony of Dungannon (Upper), parish of Desertcreat. Archaeological evidence confirms that Tullyhogue was the settlement of the O'Hagans from the 11th century onward. The site is a double-banked circular ráth located on a commanding height, built as an ancient ceremonial site without true defensive features.

Before the 13th century, branches of the sept were also established in Counties Monaghan and Armagh, with later expansion to neighboring counties including Antrim, Londonderry, and Down.

## Legal Functions as Brehons

As brehons, the O'Hagans fulfilled several crucial legal functions in Gaelic Irish society:

- 1. Interpretation and Application of Brehon Law:** The O'Hagans were responsible for mediating, arbitrating, and interpreting the unwritten, verbal Brehon Laws in disputes for any lawbreaking event. This knowledge was taught by elders and passed down through generations within the family.
- 2. Judicial Authority:** They served as Chief Brehons to the Cinel Eoghain (Cenél nEógain) clan, making them the primary legal authorities for this powerful clan in Ulster. Their judgments carried significant weight and were respected throughout the region.
- 3. Legal Scholarship:** The O'Hagans maintained and transmitted the complex corpus of Brehon law, which covered areas including property rights, contracts, marriage, inheritance, and criminal offenses. This required extensive memorization and deep understanding of legal precedents and principles.
- 4. Dispute Resolution:** They presided over legal proceedings to resolve conflicts between individuals, families, and clans, ensuring that justice was administered according to traditional Gaelic principles rather than through violence or blood feuds.

## Ceremonial Role as Inaugurators

Beyond their strictly legal functions, the O'Hagans held the prestigious hereditary right of inaugurating the O'Neill as king or

overlord of Ulster. This ceremonial role was of immense political and cultural significance:

1. **Hereditary Seneschal:** With the rise of the medieval O'Neill dynasty, the O'Hagan chief became hereditary seneschal (reachtaire) and the senior of O'Neill's household families, the so-called "loughtee," or lucht tighé.
2. **Custodian of the Inauguration Site:** As custodians of Tullyhogue, the O'Hagans were responsible for maintaining the sacred site where O'Neill kings were inaugurated, including the Leac na Rí (Stone of the Kings).
3. **Ceremonial Procedures:** During the inauguration ceremony, the O'Hagan chief presided while O'Cahan—chief sub-king or uirrí to O'Neill—threw a single shoe over the new chief's head, echoing the ancient Indo-European concept of monosandalism.
4. **Presentation of the Law:** As a crucial part of the ceremony, the O'Hagan presented and read the law at O'Neill's inauguration, symbolically binding the new king to uphold Brehon law and traditional justice.
5. **Presentation of the Rod of Kingship:** The O'Hagan presented the white hazel 'rod of kingship' (slat na ríge), which by Tudor times was termed 'rod of lordship' (slat tigiornais).

## Archaeological Evidence of the O'Hagan Brehon Tradition

Archaeological investigations at Tullyhogue Fort have revealed significant evidence of the O'Hagan brehons' presence and role:

1. **The Grand Hall:** Excavations in 2015 uncovered the foundations of a Grand Hall dating to the late 15th-early 16th century. This structure, measuring approximately 12x6m with a central fire hearth, would have been where the chief O'Hagan conducted official business, including legal proceedings.

2. **The Leac na Rí:** The stone of kingship or Leac na Rí was located near the base of the hill. This inauguration stone had been turned into a rough outdoor throne by the Tudor era with the addition of three flat stone slabs for a back and two arm rests. The original was broken by Lord Mountjoy in 1602 to symbolize the destruction of the O'Neill dynasty's sovereignty.
3. **Contemporary Maps:** Richard Barthelet's map (c. 1602) provides valuable visual documentation of Tullyhogue as it appeared at the end of the Gaelic order. The map shows the layout of the fort, including two houses within the ringfort - one small building with a rounded hip-roof and a larger two-storied house with a thatched hip-roof.

## Social and Political Significance

The O'Hagans' role as brehons and inaugurators gave them exceptional status in Gaelic society:

1. **Elite Status:** As hereditary brehons and inaugurators, the O'Hagans were among the most powerful and influential families in Ulster, second only to the O'Neills themselves.
2. **Cultural Guardians:** They served as custodians of Gaelic legal traditions and ceremonial practices, helping to preserve Irish cultural identity in the face of increasing English influence.
3. **Political Advisors:** Their legal expertise and ceremonial authority made them natural political advisors to the O'Neill kings, with significant influence on governance and diplomacy.
4. **Mediators Between Worlds:** As Ireland increasingly came under English influence, the O'Hagans often found themselves mediating between Gaelic and English legal and political systems.

# The Decline of the O'Hagan Brehon Tradition

The O'Hagans' role as brehons continued until the destruction of the Gaelic order in the 17th century:

- 1. Hugh O'Neill's Inauguration:** The last Gaelic inauguration of a chief in Ireland was Hugh O'Neill's in 1595, performed by an O'Hagan at Tullyhogue.
- 2. Symbolic Destruction:** In 1602, Lord Mountjoy (sent by Elizabeth I) smashed the inauguration stone at Tullyhogue and destroyed the surrounding area, marking the end of the O'Hagans' role as inaugurators.
- 3. Flight of the Earls:** After the Battle of Kinsale, many O'Hagans suffered great losses with the dispossessions that followed. Several O'Hagans were among the 98 who fled northern Ireland with Hugh O'Neill in the "Flight of the Earls" in 1607.
- 4. Replacement by English Law:** Brehon law was gradually replaced by English common law, with the process largely complete by the end of the 17th century, ending the O'Hagans' traditional legal authority.

## Legacy and Historical Significance

The O'Hagans' role as brehons represents an important chapter in Irish legal history:

- 1. Preservation of Gaelic Tradition:** Through their role as brehons and inaugurators, the O'Hagans helped preserve Gaelic legal and ceremonial traditions for centuries.
- 2. Legal Innovation:** Brehon law, as practiced and interpreted by families like the O'Hagans, was considered advanced for its time in Europe, particularly in areas such as women's rights and environmental protection.

3. **Cultural Memory:** The association between the O'Hagans and Tullyhogue remains a significant element of Irish cultural memory and identity.
4. **Modern Recognition:** In 1870, Thomas O'Hagan became the first Catholic Lord Chancellor of Ireland since the Reformation, a symbolic reconnection with the family's ancient legal tradition.

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