

Why the O'Hagans Left Inishowen for Tullyhogue

Historical Context and Causes

The migration of the O'Hagan family (Cenél Feargusa) from Inishowen to Tullyhogue was part of a broader historical movement of the Cenél nEógain dynasty eastward across Ulster, driven by several interconnected factors:

1. Military Pressure from the Cenél Conaill

The primary catalyst for the O'Hagans' migration appears to have been military pressure from their rival kinsmen, the Cenél Conaill. Historical sources consistently describe the O'Hagans as having "battled their way" from Inishowen to Tullyhogue, suggesting this was not a peaceful relocation but a forced migration due to conflict.

The Annals record numerous battles between the Cenél Conaill and Cenél nEógain (of which the O'Hagans were a branch) throughout the 8th-11th centuries. By the 12th century, the Cenél Conaill had conquered Inishowen entirely, confirming the military pressure that had pushed the Cenél nEógain eastward.

2. Strategic Eastward Expansion of the Cenél nEógain

The migration was also part of a strategic eastward expansion of the entire Cenél nEógain dynasty:

"In the 8th century a series of victories were gained by the Cenél Eóghain over the Cenél Conaill in Magh Ithe (east Co. Donegal),

splitting their power between the territories of Fanad, in the north, and Tír Aeda, in the south. By the beginning of the 9th century the Cenél Eóghain were the dominant Northern dynasty, as they spread their influence east into modern county Derry and south into modern county Tyrone."

This eastward movement was not just a retreat from the Cenél Conaill but also an opportunity to expand into new territories by displacing the native Cruithin (Pictish) populations east of the River Bann.

3. Shift of the Cenél nEógain Power Base

The historical record clearly documents a deliberate shift of the Cenél nEógain power base:

"By the 11th century their power-base had moved from Ailech to that near Tullahogue in modern day county Tyrone (named from Tír Eóghain, or Tir Owen)."

This shift represented a strategic decision by the Cenél nEógain leadership to establish their center of power further east, away from the constant pressure of the Cenél Conaill. As a prominent family within the Cenél nEógain, the O'Hagans would have been part of this broader movement.

4. Opportunity at Tullyhogue

Tullyhogue itself offered significant advantages as a new seat of power:

1. **Strategic Location:** Tullyhogue is located on a commanding height, similar to their previous capital at Ailech, providing defensive advantages.
2. **Ancient Ceremonial Significance:** Archaeological evidence indicates that Tullyhogue was "built as an ancient ceremonial site without true defensive features," suggesting it already had

cultural or religious importance that the O'Hagans could leverage.

3. **Fertile Territory:** The lands around Tullyhogue in County Tyrone were more fertile and productive than the more mountainous terrain of Inishowen.

5. Rise to Prominence Through New Role

The migration to Tullyhogue ultimately benefited the O'Hagans by allowing them to establish a new and prestigious role:

"With the rise of the medieval O'Neill dynasty, O'Hagan became hereditary seneschal (reachtaire) and the senior of O'Neill's household families, the so-called 'loughtee,' or lucht tige. As custodian of the inauguration site, O'Hagan presented and read the law at O'Neill's inauguration."

This new position as custodians of the O'Neill inauguration site and hereditary brehons gave the O'Hagans significant status and influence within the new power structure of the Cenél nEógain in Tyrone.

Timeline of the Migration

While precise dates for the O'Hagan migration are not explicitly recorded, we can establish an approximate timeline:

- The Cenél Feargusa (O'Hagans) originally settled around Inishowen in the 5th-6th centuries as part of the initial Cenél nEógain expansion.
- The eastward pressure and battles likely occurred throughout the 8th-10th centuries.
- By the 11th century, historical records confirm that Tullyhogue was "the settlement of the O'Hagans."
- The 12th century saw the complete conquest of Inishowen by the Cenél Conaill, confirming that the migration was complete by this time.

Conclusion

The O'Hagans' migration from Inishowen to Tullyhogue was driven by a combination of military pressure from rival clans, strategic eastward expansion of their broader kinship group, and the opportunity to establish a new and prestigious role within the evolving power structure of medieval Ulster. This migration ultimately proved beneficial for the O'Hagans, as they established themselves as one of the most powerful and influential families in Ulster through their role as brehons and inaugurators of the O'Neill kings.

References

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