

THE ORIGIN OF THE THREE COLLAS AND THE FALL OF EMAIN

by
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In the misty days before Christianity and the art of writing were brought to Ireland by St. Patrick and other missionaries and refugees, there lived three mighty warriors called *na tri Colla*, the three Collas. From them many of the families of the diocese of Clogher and elsewhere claim descent. The story of the three Collas survived in oral tradition and was written down centuries after their own time. Several twentieth-century writers have glanced at their story as a side-issue to other topics and have expressed doubt as to their very existence. It is the intention here to take a partisan viewpoint of their story and, in the process, offer a new suggestion for their origin and a comment on the dating of the Fall of Emain.

The Three Collas are mythical in the proper sense of the term, that is, their story explains why things are as they are. This does not mean that the trio did not exist. The Irish myths originally were handed down in rhythmical syllabic verse, whose lines were linked by alliteration. For some years it has been said that, when the language of the Irish underwent drastic changes between the fourth and seventh centuries, the existing, traditional myths had to be re-worded and re-interpreted to keep up with the language. The updating was "not necessarily in the direction of more accurate transmission of the contents."¹ Recently, however, it has been suggested (as the most likely explanation of such a rapid transition of the language) that during that era Ireland possessed a language with two markedly different "registers," each associated with a specific functional domain within the one society. The more basic register was the living, colloquial, purely oral language, a normally evolving form of Celtic speech from which Old Irish as written in the seventh century would arise. The second register, dubbed "Primitive Irish," was the language of the learned, a far more conservative language, which from the point of linguistic evolution was closer to the Old Celtic of Iron Age and Roman mainland Europe and Britain than it was to Old Irish. The learned, of course, understood both registers. At some point in the fifth century (or earlier) this older language came to be used for inscriptions. During the sixth century, Christianity overwhelmed the native religions and Latin learning replaced the Primitive Irish tradition among the learned class. Records written in the seventh century were not in Primitive Irish but instead were in the Old Irish that had been the evolving, common language of the people for centuries.² Memory of the "obsolete language of the scholars" survived and it was mentioned in a legend of Conor macNessa.³

Thus, the degree to which a particular myth was changed when the language changed must have varied in proportion to its dependence on the knowledge of the learned class for its preservation and transmission. Older myths or accounts that had survived only in the oral tradition of Primitive Irish are likely to have undergone

1. MacNiocaill, Gearúid, *Ireland before the Vikings*; Gill and MacMillan, 1972, 1-2
2. Koch, John T., "The Conversion and the Transition from Primitive to Old Irish c.367 - c.637"; *Emania*, No. 13 (1995), 39-50
3. MacManus, Seumas, *The Story of the Irish Race*; New York: Devin-Adair, 1944; 24

greater modification in the sixth century, while the core of more recent accounts, which may have survived in the common spoken predecessor of Old Irish and were well understood, are more likely to have survived with little modification.

The core of the events in the myth of the Collas probably occurred in the late fourth to early fifth century. The knowledge of these events, preserved among the Collas' descendants for two or three generations, along with the bilingual abilities of the learned class, would have proved an effective check against any wholesale modification of the account during the early stages of the shift in language.

However, as the centuries progressed, the myth was purposely changed, for the Irish historians of the middle ages continually updated and overhauled their corpus of histories, in order to bring all into a unified, synchronized whole.

The Traditional Account as of the Seventeenth Century

Perhaps the latest such version of the story of the three Collas, and the one most often quoted today, is contained in *Foras Feasa ar Eirinn* by Rev. Goeffrey Keating, D.D., translated as *The History of Ireland from the Earliest Period to the English Invasion* by John O'Mahony.⁴ Dr. Keating was born about the year 1570 in the province of Munster, was educated abroad, and returned to Ireland in 1610 to become curate of a Munster parish. He wrote the history from ancient sources (many of them copied or abstracted into the *Book of Leinster*, *Book of Ballymote*, and *Book of Lecan*) while the strictures of the law against Catholics were applied to him for personal reasons and he had been forced to leave his parish.

The story of the Collas begins during the reign of Fiacaídh Sraibtní as *ard-ri* or High-King of Ireland, which was supposed to have begun in the Year of our Lord 282. According to the accounts, the nominal kingship of all Ireland, with its seat at Tara, had been established by Fiacaídh's ancestors in the previous century.

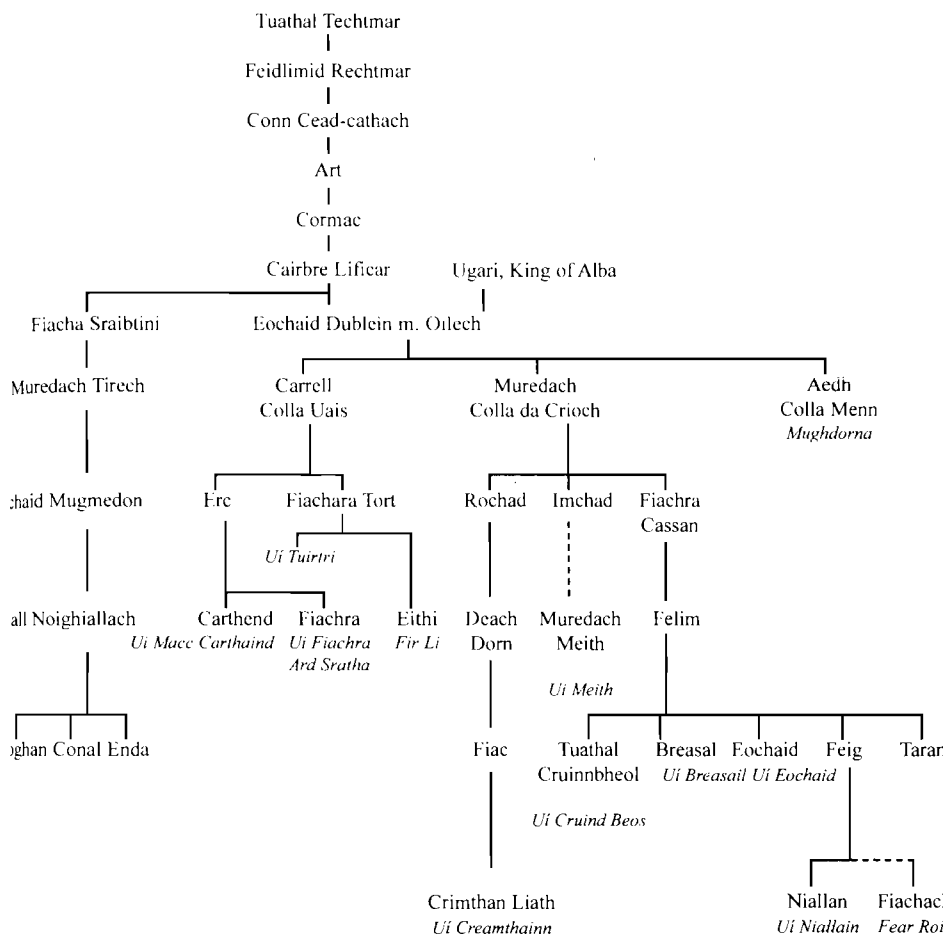
"Fiacaídh Sraibtní, son of Carbri Lificar, son of Cormac Ul-fada, of the line of Erimhon, held the sovereignty of Ireland for thirty-three years, when he fell by the three Collas, in the battle of Dubh-Comar. ...

"In order that the meaning of the following events may be the better understood, we shall set down here, from the Psalter of Cashel, both the cause of the battle of Dubh-Comar and a narration of the relationship that existed between the Collas and Fiacaídh Sraibtní. It is, then, at Carbri Lificar that the Oirghiallaigh, that is, the Clans of the Collas, separate from the clans of Niall, and from the Connachtaigh or Erimonians of Connaught. Now, Fiacaídh Sraibtní, son of Carbri Lificar, was the grandfather of Eocaidh Muigh-medon, son of Muredach Tirech, son of Fiacaídh Sraibtní. From the Muredach here mentioned, have sprung the clans of Niall and the men of Connaught. Eocaidh Dubleín was also son of Carbri Lificar, and brother of Fiacaídh Sraibtní. This Eocaidh had three sons, namely: the three Collas, and from these are descended the Ui Mhic Uais, the Ui Mhic Crimhainn, and the Moghdorna. The real names of the three Collas were, Carrell, Muredach, and Aedh. Here follows a quotation from an ancient bard in testimony thereof:

Of the three Collas have you heard,
Eocaidh's sons of highest fame,
Colla Menn, Colla Da-crioch,
And Colla Uais, the Ard-righ?

4. Keating, Geoffrey. *The History of Ireland from the Earliest Period to the English Invasion*, John O'Mahony, transl.; New York: James B. Kirker, 1866: 362-367

The Traditional Genealogy



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Their names, all three, I know full well -
Carrell and Muredach and Aedh;
By these was slain a mighty king,
On yonder fair, well cultured plain.

Carrell was Colla Uais, the king;
Muredach, Colla Da-crioch;
And glorious Aedh was Colla Menn.
Mighty were they beyond all braves!

"Oilech, daughter of the king of Alba, and wife of Eocaidh Dublein, was the mother of the three Collas. It was these three Collas that perpetrated the parricide upon Fiacaídh Sraibtní, whereby the sovereignty of Ireland was lost forever to them and their posterity. The following was the occasion of that parricide: whilst Fiacaídh Sraibtní was sovereign of Ireland, he had a distinguished son, who was called Muredach Tirech; and this Muredach was the commander-in-chief of his father's armies, for the king himself was not allowed to enter the battle-field. Upon a certain occasion, Muredach had marched into Munster, attended by an army, whence he brought off hostages and spoils. At the same time the king, his father, chanced to be at Dubh-Comar, near Talti, attended by another host; and there he was accompanied by the three Collas, the three sons of his brother, who had led their forces to his aid to that place. Then, when the multitude heard of the successes that Muredach had obtained in Munster, they said in common that he was the presumptive king of Ireland. 'What shall become of us,' said the Collas, 'if Muredach become sovereign after Fiacaídh? What we had better do,' said they, 'is to give battle to the old king, and when we have slain him, with his host, we shall easily overcome his son, whenever he may arrive.' In the meantime, Fiacaídh was engaged in conference with a certain druid, named Dubcomar, and this druid addressed him in the following words: 'O king,' said he 'if thou vanquish the Collas now, and slay them, no king of thy posterity shall ever reign over Ireland after thee.' 'Then,' said the monarch, 'I prefer rather to fall by the Collas myself, and to have the sovereignty of Ireland descend to my posterity, than to have them slain by me, and have the sovereignty of Ireland descend to their children.' After this, the hosts were drawn up in battle array, and they charged one another from each side. But the army of Fiacaídh Sraibtní was routed in that engagement, and he was slain himself therein, just as the druid Dubcomar had prophesied to him.

"A.D. 315. Colla Uais, son of Eocaidh Dublein, son of Carbri Lificar, of the line of Erimhon, held the sovereignty of Ireland for four years; at the end of which, both himself and his brothers were driven by Muredach Tirech into banishment to Alba, where they received a military maintenance from the Alban king. For Oileach, daughter of Ugari, king of Alba, was the mother of the three Collas. The reason why Carrell was styled Colla Uais, that is, Colla the Noble, was because of the distinction which he had obtained beyond the other Collas, for he had held the sovereignty of Ireland, and the others had not.

"A.D. 319. Muredach Tirech, son of Fiacaídh Sraibtní, of the line of Erimhon, held Ireland for thirty three years, and then he fell by Caelbadh, son of Crunn Badraei.

"As to the Collas, they were banished into Alba by Muredach Tirech, as we have related above. Three hundred warriors was the number of their host. The king of Alba received them with great respect, and gave them military maintenance, by reason of their great valour and hardihood. They remained with him for three years; after which they returned to Ireland, in hopes that Muredach would perpetrate a parricide upon

them, and that the sovereignty might fall to their posterity in consequence thereof. In coming from Alba, they brought over no stronger escort than a band of nine warriors with each of them. After landing, they made no delay until they arrived in the king's presence at Temhair. 'Have you brought me any news, my cousins?' said the king. 'We have no sadder news to tell,' said they, 'than the deed which we have ourselves done, namely the killing of thy father by our hands.' 'That is news we have already known,' said the king; 'but it is of no consequence to you now, except that the misfortune, which has already pursued you, shall not leave you.' 'This is the reply of a coward,' said the Collas. 'Be not sorry for it,' replied the king. 'You are welcome.' After this they spent a long time in great friendship with Muredach, so that they became the commanders of that king's armies in war.

"At last the king told them (the Collas), that it was time for them to conquer some territory, as an inheritance for their posterity. 'Of what territory dost thou wish that we should make sword-land?' said they. (There were not, in their own time, any warriors more intrepid than they.) 'March into Ulster,' said he, 'for you have good cause of enmity with its people; for an attendant upon the king of Uladh once burnt the beard and hair of Cormac, son of Art, with a torch, in Northern Magh Breagh. When Cormac had become king of Ireland, an overwhelming force of the Ulstermen came against him, and having extorted hostages from him, they banished him into Connaught. After that a peace was made between Cormac and them, and they prepared a feast for him at Northern Magh Breagh, and it was on that occasion that a servant of the king of Ulster burned the hair of Cormac. Now, that deed is still unavenged.'

"After this, king Muredach furnished them with a numerous army, with which the Collas marched into Connaught. There the men of Connaught joined their standard, with a force consisting of seven *catha* [of three thousand men each]. Thence they marched to the Carn of Achadh Leth-derg, in Fernmagh. From that hill, they fought seven battles against the Ulstermen, that is, a battle on each day during a whole week. Six of these battles were fought by the Connaughtmen, and the seventh by the Collas. In it Fergus Fogha, king of Emhain, was slain, and the Ulstermen were finally routed. They were then pursued, with great slaughter, from the Carn of Eocaidh to Glen Righe. From the latter place, the Collas marched back upon Emhain, which they plundered, and then burned, so that Emhain has remained since then without a king to inhabit it.

"The Collas next took the following territories from the Ulstermen, namely, Moghdurna, Ui Mic Crimthainn, and Ui Mic Uais. Colla Menn took possession of Moghdurna, Colla Da Crioch of Ui Mic Crimthainn, and Colla Uais seized upon Ui Mic Uais."

The battle of Carn Achadh Leth Derg took place in Fernmagh. The latter name today is applied to the barony of Farney in southeast County Monaghan, but in earlier times applied to the west of the county, the name having moved southeast with its people before the baronies were named. Pilip Ó Mórdha has pointed with some probability to Carnroe in Currin parish as the site of the battle.⁵ Glen Righe, across which the Ulaid fled after the battle, is the valley of the Newry River, on the eastern edge of County Armagh. Emhain or *an Emhain* is Anglicized Navan and is the famous site of that name, just west of Armagh.

Other Traditional Materials

Other versions of the myth appear in Laud MS 610, Rawlinson B502, the *Book of*

5. *Clogher Record*, 1973, 13-18

Leinster, and the *Book of Ballymote*, all of which are similar, and in the *Book of Lecan*, a slightly modified version. All are accompanied by genealogies of the descendants of the Collas. The version in Laud 610 was published in *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* volume viii (pp 317-319) and that in Rawlinson B502 was translated by M. A. O'Brien and published in the 1939 *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*. A short version in English was written about 1719 by John Dolan."

Three poems about the Collas and their descendants are preserved in Egerton MS 90 in the British Museum:

- *Oirgiallaig ardmora uaish*, ascribed to Flann Mainstreach (died 1056), concerns the Collas themselves. It names their mother Oileach, daughter of the King of Alba, and mentions their own personal names. It credits Colla da Crich with the death of Fergus Foga. It does not mention Carn Achad Leth Derg, but places a battle at Drum Direagra or Croib derga (or direagra), probably referring to Emain, where Creabh Derg was one of the legendary three houses.

- *Oirgialla a Emain Macha*, ascribed to Gilla na naomh O Duinn (died 1160), says that Colla Menn was killed by Fergus Foga in the battle of achadh buind leith deairg.

- *Tri meic Cuind* presents the genealogy from Conn Cead Cathach down to the Collas and mentions the personal names of the Collas.

Of the three territories mentioned at the end of Keating's account, the name Uí Macc Uais was applied to tuatha in the present counties of Tyrone and Londonderry, namely the barony of Tirkeeran and the lands of the Uí Fiachra Ardsratha, the Uí Thuirtri, and the Fir Lí. The lands were identified by their populations, for the descendants of Colla Uais were the Uí Mac Carthend of Loch Foyle (in Tirkeeran) from whom descended the MacDonalds of Scotland; the Uí Fiachra Ardsratha (in the vicinity of Ardstraw, County Tyrone); the Uí Thuirtri; and the Fir Lí (among whose descendants were Donnellan, lord of Massareen, and O'Flynn of Antrim).

Uí Mic Crimthann was the name given to the lands of that sept, encompassing large portions of the present counties Fermanagh and Monaghan and part of Tyrone. The descendants of Colla da Crioch were the Uí Creamhainn (including in later times the Maguires, McMahons, MacDonnell of Clankelly, Ó Kelly, Ó Donnellan, Ó Keran, and many others); and the Airthir of the present County Armagh (the Uí Niallan, Ó Hanlon, the Uí Eochaid including Uí Sinach who provided several primates, the Uí Breasail including Ó Célechán); and Ó Cooney, Ó Conor of Ulster, Ó Mooney, and others. The Uí Maine and Fir Rois also were counted among the descendants of Colla da Crioch.

Creoch Moghdurna, now represented by the barony of Cremorne in County Monaghan, originally was a larger territory. The descendants of Colla Menn were few in number, according to the genealogies descending from his two sons, Breasal and Deadhach Dorn. Ó Hanratty is of this family, as are Ó Lagnain or Lannan, Ó hAonain or O'Heenan, the Clan Cathail of Ulster and the eighth century MacAllen kings of Mughdorna-Maighe. Others count among his descendants the entire collection of peoples called the Mughdorna, named for Colla Menn's son Mughdorn.

These tribes were collectively known as the Airghialla. The "compact" between them and the *ard-rí* stood thus when the ancient *Book of Rights* was recorded in the

6. CR, 1956, 119-125

7. Keating/O'Mahony, op cit, 271

8. *Leubhar na g-ceart*, or the *Book of Rights*, John O'Donovan, transl.; Dublin: The Celtic Society, 1847; 134-155 list in their entirety the relationships between the high king and the various tribal kings of the Airghialla.

eleventh or twelfth century:

- The Airghialla owed a hosting for three fortnights every three years, but not in spring nor at the beginning of autumn; a rising-out of 700, in return for 700 cows.
- For any hosting they were to be given seven bondswomen (valued at three cows each) for each man slain.
- Whatever cattle they killed or injured, they had to pay only one-seventh of the normal restitution.
- If charged upon oath with any deed deserving of fetters, they had only to produce the oath of the accused. (For them, the oath apparently replaced the fetters.)
- The hostages given by the Airghialla were "bound" only by their oaths, not by chains; but any hostage who broke his oath and left was "not fit for earth nor for holy heaven."
- The King of Airghialla was entitled to one-third of every casual revenue, i.e. the King of Ulaid's share.
- The King of Airghialla's seat at all the mansions of the *ard-ri* was at his right hand, so far that the King of Airghialla's sword should reach the cup-bearer of the *ard-ri* or the hand of the *ard-ri*.
- The King of Airghialla has the privilege of presenting every third drinking horn that is brought to the King of Tara (i.e. the *ard-ri*).
- The same portion that the King of Airghialla receives from the King of Tara, his queen is entitled to receive from the queen of the *ard-ri*.

This list of articles traces the history of the collective tribe. The first three represent the original agreement for military service, as the Collas provided to Muredach Tirech. The next two, having to do with fetters and hostages, are related to their tribal name of Airghialla and will be discussed below. The last four, having to do with relationships between their king and the *ard-ri*, seem to be later additions, from the period after the complete defeat of the Ulaid and when the Airghialla had their own king, who was chosen from various branches of the extended family, from time to time.

Lastly, of the traditional accounts, the work titled *Cóir Anmann* or "Fitness of Names" lists the meanings of the epithets of the three Collas. Most of these are 'absurd' but are given as representative of the work of the middle ages.

The Three Collas, whence are they? Easy to say. They are the *colaig* (the sinful ones), for it was a great sin (*col*) for them to kill their father's brother, Fiacha Sreftine. In ancient books *Coll-ní* is said; it is not right but corrupt to say *Coll-ní* with *fada* (long-mark), but it is right to say the name shortly, that is, *na Collai*.

Colla *Uais*, i.e. Cairill, i.e. for his *uaise* (nobility), for he, rather than the other Collas, obtained the kingship of Ireland. Or, Colla *Oss*, i.e. he was an *oss* (stag) for his swiftness. Or, it was a doe that reared him. Or, *oss-sédguine* (deer-slayer) was he; wild deer he would have slain, for *séd* means 'deer'.

Colla *Menn*, i.e. Mennait Cruitnech (the Pict) fostered him. Or, he suffered from dumbness, for *menn* means stammering. Hence he was named Colla *Menn*.

Colla *Fó chri*, i.e. under (*fó*) Crinenn the wright (i.e. while Crinenn was her husband) he was begotten by Eochaid Domlén on the king of Alba's daughter Ailech. Or, *fó chri*, i.e. *fó chriaidh*, i.e. *cré* (clay) wherewith the wright's wife covered him to disguise him. Or Colla *Oichre*, i.e. *Oichre* the name of the place in which he was reared. Or Connla *Fovraidh* (excess), for he is accused (of lying with) the wife of Crinrad the wright of Slane that is in Rathann.'

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The name of the last brother is given as Colla da Crioch in many of the historical texts and normally is taken to mean "of two territories."

T. F. O Rahilly on the Invasions of Ireland

In his 1946 book, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, Thomas F. O Rahilly peeled back the layers of myth and legend to reveal four major prehistoric invasions of Ireland:

1) the Cruthen or Priteni, for whom the Britannic Isles were named, who survived in the historical epoch as the Picts in Scotland and scattered tribes in Ireland.

2) the Builg or Fir Bolg, also called the Erainn or Iverni, who arrived from about 600 to 300 BC. Identified with the Belgae of the continent and Britain, "their own invasion-legend tells how their ancestor Lugaid came from Britain and conquered Ireland." To this group belonged the Ulaid.

3) the Lagin and other tribes who came from Armorica about 300 to 200 BC and conquered mid- and south-Leinster and parts of Connaught.

4) the Goidels, who came from Gaul, and whose arrival "cannot have been much anterior to the extinction of Gaulish independence (50 BC)." They won their kingdom in the eastern midlands by the sword and lived for centuries at enmity with the Ulaid and the Lagin. Another group of Goidels peacefully penetrated the south of Ireland, ultimately to establish a capital at Cashel.¹⁰

In his extensive study of the sources, O Rahilly came to the conclusion that the compilers of *Leabhar Gabhala*, the story of the invasions of Ireland as synchronized and revised from the eighth to the twelfth century, were animated by the desire to unify the country, and that to accomplish this end they purposely attempted to obliterate the memory of the different ethnic origins of the people of Ireland. They had to endow all of the important septs of their day with a Goidelic origin in a common ancestor. Popular traditions concerning invaders had to be modified so that they would harmonize with the ideal that the Goidels had come to Ireland at a very remote period under the leadership of the Sons of Mil.¹¹

O Rahilly's prime example of this process was Tuathal Techtmar, leader of the Goidelic invasion not long before 50 BC. "Originally Tuathal was a foreigner whose connection with Ireland began when he invaded it. When he was turned into an Irishman and some account had to be given of his childhood, the motif of the youthful hero brought up by his mother in a foreign land in order to guard him from his enemies was ready to hand in the myth of the Birth of the Hero." Tuathal's pedigree was projected back and his "alleged ancestors, one and all, appear as kings of Ireland in the regnal lists." Similarly, the pedigrees of other important families were grafted onto the royal line. O Rahilly's conclusions in these areas are important in considering the origin of the three Collas.

O Rahilly on the Uí Néill and the Three Collas

In his chapter¹² on Tuathal Techtmar's fifth-century descendant, the *ard-ri* Néill Noighiallach, O Rahilly makes several direct or indirect comments on the Airghialla

10. O Rahilly, Thomas F., *Early Irish History and Mythology*; Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1946

11. *ibid*, 162, 194

12. *ibid*, 223-232

which have been accepted without comment by many later scholars. These may be summarized as six points:

1) Traditions and legends suggest very plainly that during an "extended period" an aggressive warfare was waged by the men of Tara, with the help of the vassals whom they employed as fighting men, against the Ulaid. The settlement of the sons of Néill (Eoghan, Conal, and Enda) in the northwest of Ulster marks the end of the struggle.

2) In central and southern Ulster, vassal states were set up for the various branches of the Airghialla. The *Uí Macc Uais* were notable in that there were branches of them in Brega and Mide (Westmeath and Meath); it is probable that they originally belonged to the Midlands and some participated in the conquest of Ulster and were rewarded with grants of the conquered territories, just as some of the *Cianachta* of the Midlands were settled in Glen Given.

3) The tribal name was *na hAirghialla*, connected with *giall*, 'hostage', and apparently meaning something like 'the submitted' or 'the hostage-givers'. Eoin MacNeill (*Ériu* xi, 28n.) was mistaken in treating the word as a compound of *giall*. Compare *argiallam do*, 'I submit to, I give hostages to' (in *Leabhar na hUidhre*, 10709).

4) Various dates are given for the three Collas. The more common version of the account, as given by Keating, makes them contemporaries of Muiredach Tirech, Néill's supposed grandfather. Another version makes them contemporaries of Néill. In 'Baile in Scáil' Eochu Mugmedón, Néill's father, is killed by the Collas. Other texts also provide an alternate end for Fiachu Sraibtime, having him slain in the battle of Cnámross. In a lengthy analysis, O Rahilly dates the end of Néill's reign to AD 427 and, if 27 years be the correct regnal length, his father's death to about the year 400.

5) The three Collas were in fact the three sons of Néill who took the northwest, i.e. Eoghan, Conall, and Enda. "As the achievements attributed to the Collas represent a fact of history, so the name collectively applied to them, *na trí Colla*, has all the appearance of having been handed down by genuine popular tradition. At the same time it is obvious that Colla cannot have been the real name of each of the three brothers, and that it must therefore be a kind of nickname equally applicable to all of them." He goes on to derive Colla from Conlae, in turn derived from Concla, in turn derived from Gaulish Condollios, in turn derived from Condollos, or "great head". This name, he says, we might "suppose" was applied to Néill Noighiallach.

6) He concludes, "The Airghialla owed their political existence to the military successes of the three sons of Néill; and the genealogists, whose task was to provide them with a noble pedigree, found a convenient way of doing so by making them descend from 'the three Collas.' ... At first, apparently, they made them contemporaries of Néill; but later, perhaps in order the better to distinguish them from Néill's sons, they pushed back their flourit a couple of generations." Néill Noighiallach's epithet, "of the nine hostages" he takes to refer not to the hostages of other kingdoms, as tradition held, but to the hostages of the Airghialla or hostage-givers.

From the point of view of a study of Néill Noighiallach, O Rahilly's conclusions seem quite reasonable. However, they leave much to be desired from the point of view of the Airghialla. Several areas left unexplored and unexplained by his suggestions are:

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- the personal names of the Collas were not Eoghan, Conal, and Enda but were Carrell, Muredach, and Aedh ;
- the learned men of Ireland's own interpretation of Airghialla, on the basis of the *Book of Rights* and later writings, was that it was a compound word;
- the alternative timing for the three Collas does not fit O Rahilly's suggestion. The alternative cited by O Rahilly makes them contemporary with Néill's father, not with his sons. Also, the effort by the men of the midlands to overthrow the Ulaid was "long-sustained"; how then can the entire conquest have taken place "during the reign of Néill and [have] been instigated by him"?
- the northwestern lands were named after their conquerors. Eoghan took Inis-Eoghain, Conal took Tir-Conaill, and Enda took Magh-Enna, lying north, west, and south of their new capital at Ailech. To the east, across the Foyle, was Tir-Cairthend, now Tirkeeran barony. The names of the tuatha imply that Cairthend, grandson of Colla Uais, was the contemporary of Néill's sons and assisted in the conquest of the northwest.
- the military prowess of the Collas. O Rahilly's conclusion that the Airghialla owed their political existence to the military successes of the sons of Néill ignores the traditional account that the Uí Néill owed the conquest of Ulster to the military success of the Collas.
- the origin of the Airghialla. Even were O Rahilly's theory accepted, it does not explain the origin of this tribe and its genealogies. To which of his four invading groups did they belong?

If the traditional "myth" of the Airghialla is not accepted, their origin is very obscure. Byrne wrote, "The genealogies are obscure and contradictory, but they reveal that the Airghialla were not a coherent ethnic or dynastic group, and sometimes they hint at plebeian origins." He proposed that they were indigenous to Ulster and, when the sons of Néill Noighiallach successfully attacked the northwest from Connaught, the Airghialla threw off their Ulaid overlords.¹³ MacNiocaill, on the other hand, saw two possibilities, namely (1) "that the Uí Néill defeated the Ulaid, but left the land to its pre-existing inhabitants, who were to crystallise into the Airghialla"; or (2) "that the Ulaid were in fact defeated by the ancestors of the historic Airghialla, who were (at least in part) intruders from outside the territory ruled by the Ulaid."¹⁴ It must be kept in mind that the accounts handed down to us are concerned only with the aristocracy. Except for the Mughdornai, we are not told what people made up the bulk of the population in the tuatha of the Airghialla, either when they first were established or for many centuries thereafter, any more than we know what peoples formed the bulk of the population under the sons of Néill in the northwest.

The grafting by the genealogists of indigenous lines onto the original stem of the Collas may explain some of the contradictions in the genealogies of their families, as noted by Byrne. This is especially true of the bulk of the Mughdorna, who are named (in Lecan) the Dubraige of Imlech Corco Duib, Pabraige la Creamtandu, Caeraige la Criarraige, Sordraide la Cremthandu, Corco Inmaind la Laiginu, and Snobraide la Mudornu. These were archaic tribes, who probably preceded the Airghialla on the land. As pointed out by MacNiocaill¹⁵, the suffix *-raige* means "the people of" and

13. Byrne, Francis John, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973; 74

14. MacNiocaill, op cit, 14

15. *ibid*, 3

Corco- may mean "seed". The Dubraide were the black-people; the Cearraige another black-people; the Sordraige the boar-people. Genealogies of these tribes were not even attempted by the *ollaimh*; they were only given eponymous ancestors, who were said to have been sons of Mughdorn.¹⁶

An Alternative Suggestion for the Collas' Origin

An alternative origin for the three Collas can be suggested that answers the above objections to O Rahilly's conclusions, while making use of other general conclusions that he reached.

The starting point for this suggestion can be O Rahilly's statement that the name Colla "cannot have been the real name of each of the three brothers, and that it must therefore be a kind of nickname equally applicable to all of them." Colla was not used as a personal name until about the year 1400, when the MacDonnell *gallóglai*gh of Connaught, aware of their descent from Colla Uais, began the practice, which soon was picked up by the MacMahons, MacDonnells of Clan Kelly, and MacDonalds of the southern Hebrides. Instances of pairs of brothers having the same name and different epithets are not uncommon in historical records. Instances of three brothers with the same name and different epithets are not uncommon in Irish mythology (the three Cairbres, the three Ferguses in Ulster, the three Cuans, Felim Reichtmar's three sons named Conla). However, an application of such a practice to three brothers is not what we have in the Collas. We are told the personal name of each of the brothers, so Colla is not to be considered a personal name. Nor was Colla necessarily a "nickname." One problem with O Rahilly's idea is that, if the "great head" were Néill Noighiallach and the Collas were his sons, then the three brothers would have been not *na tri Colla*, but *na tri meic an Colla*. O Rahilly's derivation of Colla from Condollos is possible, but it is not necessary.

The Collas are perhaps the only instance in prehistoric or early historic Ireland of three brothers having each a personal name, a name in common, and an epithet. The implication is that such a naming convention must have been imported, and the obvious source is the Roman Empire. The elements of the Roman naming convention were the *praenomen* (personal), *nomen* (family), and *cognomen* (descriptive or epithet), still familiar today in the name of Gaius Julius Caesar. The more familiar form, of course, is simply Julius Caesar, just as Carrell Colla Uais was more commonly called simply Colla Uais.

This brings us back to the story of the exile and return of the Collas. Professor O Rahilly demonstrated that Tuathal Teachtmair (along with the leaders of other invasions of Ireland) was grafted onto the royal Irish family by the *ollaimh* of later times; but in order to explain the surviving stories of his arrival in Ireland, the story of his previous exile from Ireland had to be invented. If this device were applied by the *ollaimh* to the three Collas, then their "return" from exile in Alba was their original advent. "Alba" in their time, the fourth century, included not only Scotland but also Roman Britain and thus the story corresponds with the Roman form of their names.

In Alba, the myth says, the three brothers commanded three hundred warriors for their grandfather, the king Ugari. The name "Ugari" could have been an invention of the middle ages, based on Uí Goffraidh or O'Gorry, the name of the family that descended from Colla Uais, went to the Scottish isles, and from which descended the MacDonalds. However, it differs by only one stroke of the pen from *uigari* or *uicari*,

16. *Book of Lecan*, folio 79v.

the form the Latin word *vicarius* would have taken in Ireland. In the Roman Empire, many officials and military commanders had *vicarii* or vicars. The most numerous of these in the fourth century were the vicars of absentee tribunes. (Each legion had six tribunes who served immediately beneath the commanding legate, commanding variously sized subdivisions of the legion.) The *vicarii* or "lieutenant commanders" were the highest-ranking non-commissioned officers in the army, usually having risen through the ranks.¹⁷ This agrees with the Collas having command of three hundred warriors in Alba. If they had been centurions, they would have been commanded by a *vicarius* and it would not be unlikely that they were related to him, for in the later empire many occupations were hereditary. This professional military service would explain their prowess as warriors, which brought about the overthrow of the Ulaid.

It is commonly accepted that there was movement in both directions between Ireland and the Roman Empire. Kuno Meyer pointed out that several Munster septs claim descent from migrants from Gaul of the first two centuries AD and that many of the intelligentsia of Roman Gaul, in flight from the advance of the barbarians, went to Ireland in the early years of the fifth century.¹⁸ No explicit instances have been found in the literature of Roman soldiers taking such a route, but it is known that the soldiers in fourth century Britain were not satisfied with their lot. In the year 367 General Theodosius went to Britain to set things right after much of the regular army stationed there had deserted.¹⁹ In a recent article, R. B. Warner summarizes some of the archaeological evidence for Roman military expeditions to Ireland in the first four centuries AD, concentrating on the sites traditionally connected with Tuathal Techtmar.²⁰

The Name 'Colla'

An origin in fourth century Roman Britain of three men using a Roman naming convention does not necessarily imply Roman blood (and it seems unlikely, though not impossible, that a true Roman would leave the Empire for Ireland). Roman citizenship was conferred on all free subjects of the Empire, including free Britons, in 214 AD. The *nomen* of such subjects of course was not an old Roman family name, but had any of several origins, such as the parentage of the person adopting the name, the person's geographical origin, or an indication of the time one gained citizenship.

Despite having an overlay of Romanitas, continuity persisted in Britain throughout the Roman period "between the earlier Celtic tribal life and that which emerged when the last Roman military convoy left the Island. On the whole the country had not drastically changed ..."²¹ It is unfortunate that almost no sources of any historical knowledge of this underlying British society exist today. The only attempts made to record or preserve any "history" of the native people were those of Gildas, Nennius, and Geoffrey of Monmouth, who unfortunately had few materials to work with. Geoffrey in his twelfth-century *History of the Kings of Britain* reports many details not

17. Jones, A.H.M., *The Later Roman Empire*, 284-602; Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1964; 643, 655, 675, 1279 n 158
18. Byrne, op cit, 9. Meyer, Kuno, *Learning in Ireland in the Fifth Century and the Transmission of Letters*; Dublin: School of Irish Learning; Hodges, Figgis & Co., 1913; 6-7, 11-12, 13-15. *Ériu*, iv (1900), 208
19. Johnson, Stephen, *Later Roman Britain*; N.Y.: Scribner, 1980, 95
20. Warner, R. B., "Tuathal Techtmar: A Myth or Ancient Literary Evidence for a Roman Invasion?", *Emania*, No. 13 (1995), 23-32
21. Myles Dillon and Nora Chadwick, *The Celtic Realms*; New York: New American Library, 1967; 44

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now preserved in other works. Much of this seems to be the stuff of fables, but where investigation is possible, there are sources, however incorrectly applied, for many of the names that he mentions.

Geoffrey twice mentions a name similar to that of the Collas. The first of these is a man named "Coill", whom he places in southeastern Britain about the early second century, a grandson of the generation that opposed the Roman invasion under Claudius in 43 AD. Geoffrey makes him a great-grandson of Cunobelin, whose royal residence was at Camulodunum, the hill fortress or dun of the god Camulos. The later Roman *civitas* on that site was Colonia Camulodunum. This name persisted into the fourth century. The Saxons re-named the town Colne-eeaster and Nennius in the ninth century called the city Cair Colun, both clearly tying its name to that of its river, the Coln or Colun. (But whence came the name of the river?) Today it is Colchester. Geoffrey says, "Coill from childhood had been brought up at Rome, and [had] been taught Roman ways" This could simply mean that he was of the first generation born and raised under the Empire.²²

The second of the men mentioned by Geoffrey is "Coel, Duke of Kaercolun" or Colchester, who supposedly lived early in the time of Emperor Constantius or about the year 300. Though nothing reliable is reported of Coel by Geoffrey, the name did persist. After the Norman conquest of 1066, the Domesday Book listed 276 burgesses of the town of Colchester. The majority of the names on the list are Saxon and a few are Norman, but the first name given is the Celtic 'Colman,' who held one house and five acres. As late as the middle ages, the western gate of the town was pointed out as the site of King Coel's castle.²³

It appears possible that a leading British family of the vicinity of Camulodunum might have taken some form of the name of the god or the river as its nomen. (A relationship between *Coll-ni*, as *Cóir Anmann* reports the Collas were called in then-ancient books, and the River Colne could be possible.) The name survived in Geoffrey of Monmouth as Coill and Coel, survived in the local population in Colman and King Coel's castle, and could have survived as the *nomen* of the three Collas.

Some versions of the myth of the Collas explain that they were so called because of the *col* or sin that they committed in killing their uncle. The true process may have been the reverse, namely that the story of the killing, as explanation of their "exile", was suggested by their *nomen*.

The 'Three Nines'

Another portion of the story of the Collas seems to point to this same area in southeastern Britain as their place of origin. In coming from Alba, Keating wrote, they brought only "a band of nine warriors with each of them," that is, three nines. (This statement does not appear in the *Book of Leinster* or the other versions available today, which say only that the three Collas came to Muredach Tirech at Tara, "without hound, without servant." Keating obviously had at least one source other than these when he wrote.)

The three nines also appear in *Imram Brain*, the Irish legend of The Voyage of Bran. The beginning of paragraph 32 of the legend has been translated, "Then on the morrow Bran went upon the sea. The number of his men was three companies of nine.

22. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, Book IV, Chapter 18

23. Cutts, Edward L., *Colchester*; London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1888, 35 and 64

One of his foster-brothers and mates was set over each of the three companies of nine."²⁴ In Irish, however, the second sentence is, *Tri nonbuir a lin*, literally, "Three nine-persons his line." Taken in isolation, without the explanation given in the following sentence, the simplest meaning of the sentence would be, "Three nine-persons [was] his lineage." Bran was called son of Febal, for whom Lough Foyle supposedly was named; and on the southeast of the Foyle lived descendants of Colla Uais.

It is striking that the description "three nines" appears in both of these stories where it could have originated in a statement as to the ancestry or tribe of the persons involved; and the persons are at least loosely tied together via the Foyle; while the vicinity of Camulodunum, where the name Coel appears so prominently, was the home of the British tribe named the Trinovantes. This name could be seen, very roughly, as a form of Latin *tri-novenus*, "three-nine-each" or perhaps *tri-nov-antes*, "three-nine-ranks."²⁵ Today this tribal name is thought to have been made up of *tri* or "across" or perhaps "over" and *novantes*, meaning prevailing, very strong, or quick or eager.²⁶ The literati of Roman and post-Roman Britain took the name to mean Troii-novantes, "new Trojans," so it is clear both that they did not know the original meaning of the name and that they tried to interpret it in Latin.²⁷

The "three nines" may represent a late survival of the original tribal name, interpreted literally. This interpretation may have been suggested by the fact that *coll* in Gaelic, the word for hazel, also was the name of the letter c, and in the old Irish alphabet c was the ninth letter.²⁸ Thus "the three Collas" would immediately suggest "three nines" to the reader and writer of Old Irish.

The Name 'Airghialla'

An intentional interpretation of the name 'Trinovantes' may have resulted in the tribal name of the descendants of the Collas, namely Oirghialla or Airghialla. O Rahilly took Airghialla to be not a compound but a form similar to *argiallam do*, 'I submit to' or 'I give hostages to,' and thus the name would mean "hostage givers." This would have been somewhat unsatisfactory as a descriptive tribal name, for many tribes must have given hostages to their overlords. Eoin MacNeill, unlike O Rahilly, heard²⁹ in the word a "peculiarity" in that "the second syllable preserves a long vowel. If the name is as old as the first half of the fifth century -- and that it is so there is no reason to doubt -- we should expect to find this vowel shortened... The long vowel indicates a continued conscious aversion to the sense of the component parts of the name..." He took *air* to mean eastern and *gialla*, literally "hostages," in the sense of "subjects," making the name "eastern-subjects," but then he had to explain this by saying that the tribe lived east of the royal family's home in Connaught.

The Irish of the middle ages heard the same "peculiarity" as MacNeill. *Cóir*

24. Kuno Meyer and Alfred Nutt, eds, *The Voyage of Bran*; London, 1895; 16-17

25. In many Celtic words *en* and *an* were interchangeable; see MacNeill, Eoin, *Phases of Irish History*; Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, Ltd., 1937, 57 note.

26. Holder, Alfred, *Alt-Celtischer Sprachschatz*; Graz: Akademische Druck - U. Verlagsanstalt; II/1955

27. See, e.g., Marsh, Henry, *Dark Age Britain, Some Sources of History*; Hamden [Connecticut]: Archon Books, 1970; 71

28. MacGeoghegan, the Abbé, *The History of Ireland Ancient & Modern*, Patrick O'Kelly, transl.; Dublin: James Duffy, 1844; 32

29. *Ériu*, xi (1932), 28-29 note

Anmann interprets the name as any of three compounds, namely *daer-gialla* (base hostages) or *saer-gialla* (noble hostages) or *ar gialla* (for hostages).³⁰

Michael O'Brien saw a parallel between Airghialla and district names wherein prefixes of the form *er-*, *air-*, *ar-*, etc. in Irish, Gaulish, and Welsh mean "in front of" and so Airghialla might mean "those in front of (having precedence of) the hostages."³¹

If the three Collas came to Ireland from Britain still retaining the knowledge of their old tribal name and repeated it to the Irish *ollaimh*, the latter may have heard in Trinovantes two roots. The first would be *tri-* as a prefix, meaning "three-fold" or "arch" or "over" or "super" (similar to *tres* in French and in fact the correct meaning of the British prefix as now understood). Translation into Irish would produce the prefix *air-*. The second root is *vantes*. In words taken from later British-pronounced Latin into Irish, internal "m" was lenited, that is, turned into a strongly nasal "b", that is approximately "v" as we pronounce it today and represented as mh in Gaelic. Also, in some Latin words internal "t" was pronounced as internal "d."³² Beginning with the spoken word and working back to a spelling, "vantes" could have been seen to have come from the Latin root *mando* meaning "I commit to the charge of, I entrust, I deliver." That which is human and is committed, entrusted, or delivered ordinarily must have been a slave. However, applied to free men, the term could only refer to a hostage, represented in Gaelic by the word *giall*. *Giall* also has the meaning "deposit," a meaning very close to that represented by Latin *mando*. Thus, the Trinovantes could have become, via Latin, the "Arch-hostages" or the Air-ghialla. This clearly is the meaning implied by the *Book of Rights*: the hostages given by the tribe of "Arch-hostages" were bound only by their oaths, not by fetters like ordinary hostages. Like the 'three-nines' and the Troii-novantes, Airghialla would not have been a correct translation of Trinovantes, but we can see how it might have come about.

Kuno Meyer pointed out³³ an instance of a fourth century Irish Bishop of Toul, whose name was not simply carried into a Latin form but was translated into Latin, and mis-translated at that, exactly the process proposed here for the name Airghialla, but in the opposite direction.

St. Patrick, Emain, and the Collas

Saint Patrick is important to the story of the Collas, because one of the few deductions that seems reasonable to most scholars today is that he chose Armagh as the seat of his episcopacy because it was near Emain Macha while that celebrated site was still in the hands of the Ulaid, i.e., it had not as yet fallen to the Collas. (As more than one has remarked, the story of Daire of the Airghialla and his gift of Armagh to St. Patrick clearly is fictional; even his genealogy is inconsistent with the story, being three or four generations too long.) Emain's fall during Patrick's lifetime and his retreat beyond the Newry River with the Ulaid would "account for the mystery of his death on Ulidian soil rather than in Armagh, a problem which has embarrassed all his biographers from

30. *Irische Texte*, op cit, 351-353

31. O'Brian, M. A., "The Old Irish Life of St. Brigit", in *Irish Historical Studies*, I (1938-39), 348 n.12

32. Jackson, Kenneth. *Language and History in Early Britain*; Edinburgh: The University Press, 1953; 35, 88, 128, 126

33. Meyer, Kuno, *Learning in Ireland in the Fifth Century and the Transmission of Letters*; Dublin: School of Irish Learning; Hodges, Figgis, & Co., 1913; 23 n 17

Muirchú to MacNeill.³⁴

Realization among scholars that the fifth century annals were not contemporary documents but were reconstructions has left that century a "dark age" of sorts and has left uncertain the dating of St. Patrick and other important persons and events. Despite the current "orthodox" dating of the death of St. Patrick to about the year 461, some Irish scholars and others espouse or at least admit the possibility of the traditional date of Wednesday, March 17, 493.³⁵ From a wider perspective, Professor Warren Carroll, writing in his *History of Christendom*, sees no problem with Patrick having had "a sixty-year apostolate following his consecration as bishop of Ireland in his early thirties, somewhat older than St. Athanasius when he was consecrated Bishop of Alexandria, and his death coming in his early nineties, somewhat younger than St. John the Evangelist, Bishop St. Simeon of Jerusalem, St. Anthony of the desert, Bishop Ossius of Cordoba, and Bishop Acacius of Beroea when they died, to mention only some particularly well-known and well-attested instances of longevity in this period."³⁶

Since the middle ages, the "fall of Emain" has been variously dated from 327 to 331 AD. Byrne points out, however, that "as late as the eleventh century an alternative tradition survived which placed the fall of Emain in AD 450."³⁷ If Patrick's traditional dating from the 430s to the 490s be correct, and it does agree with the alternative dating of the fall of Emain roughly in the mid-fifth century; and if Emain fell to the three Collas: then O Rahilly's identification of the three Collas as the sons of Néill Noighiallach would seem to be correct, for that is the era in which Néill's sons lived. However, an examination of the nature of Emain, the kingship, the Airghialla, and especially the older versions of the story of the three Collas provides a different conclusion.

Recent excavations at an Emhain or "the Navan Fort" have found no evidence of structural activity since the first century BC. Nor do the earthworks indicate that the site was defensive in character. It is clear, then, that calling Emain the "residence" of Fergus Foga would not be correct and in fact the older accounts do not call it that. In the first centuries AD Emain must have had symbolic importance to the Ulaid and perhaps was the site of their *óenach* or annual assembly of the people, just as Tara, though not a royal residence, was the site of the *óenach* in Meath, where temporary structures were erected for feasts as late as the twelfth century.³⁸ The king in pagan Ireland was the priest of his people. His remaining functions in early Christian times were to lead in war and to preside over the *óenach*.³⁹ This clearly is implied in the account of the

34. Binchy, D. A., "Patrick and His Biographers Ancient and Modern": *Studia Hibernica*, II (1962), 154. With him agrees Byrne, op cit, 50.

35. Byrne, op cit, 79-80. MacNiocaill, op cit, 22. Binchy, op cit. Tarlach Ó Raifeartaigh, "The Enigma of St. Patrick". *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* XIII No. 2 (1989) 1-60. Charles Thomas in *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (London: Batsford Academic and Educational Ltd, 1981), page 342, briefly gives three reasons favouring activity by Patrick c.470 rather than before 460.

36. Carroll, Warren H., *The Building of Christendom*: Front Royal [Virginia]: Christendom College Press, 1987; 124

37. Byrne, op cit, 73.

38. Byrne, op cit, pp 56-57. Aitchison, Nicholas B., *Armagh and the Royal Centres in Early Medieval Ireland*; Woodbridge, Suffolk [England]: Boydell & Brewer for Cruithne Press, 1994; 133 and 171-179

39. Byrne, op cit, 23

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Collas given in the *Book of Lecan*, where Fergus Foga, defeated by them, is called *tiuglaith Emana macha go ulltaib* and *tiuglaith ulad a heamain*.⁴⁰ Thus, the "fall of Emain" was not the taking, plundering, and burning of a fortress and residence, as portrayed by Keating, but was the loss of the symbolic centre and gathering place of the Ulaid as a people and a kingdom. Depending on the status of the old pagan religion, it may also have retained religious significance until it fell.

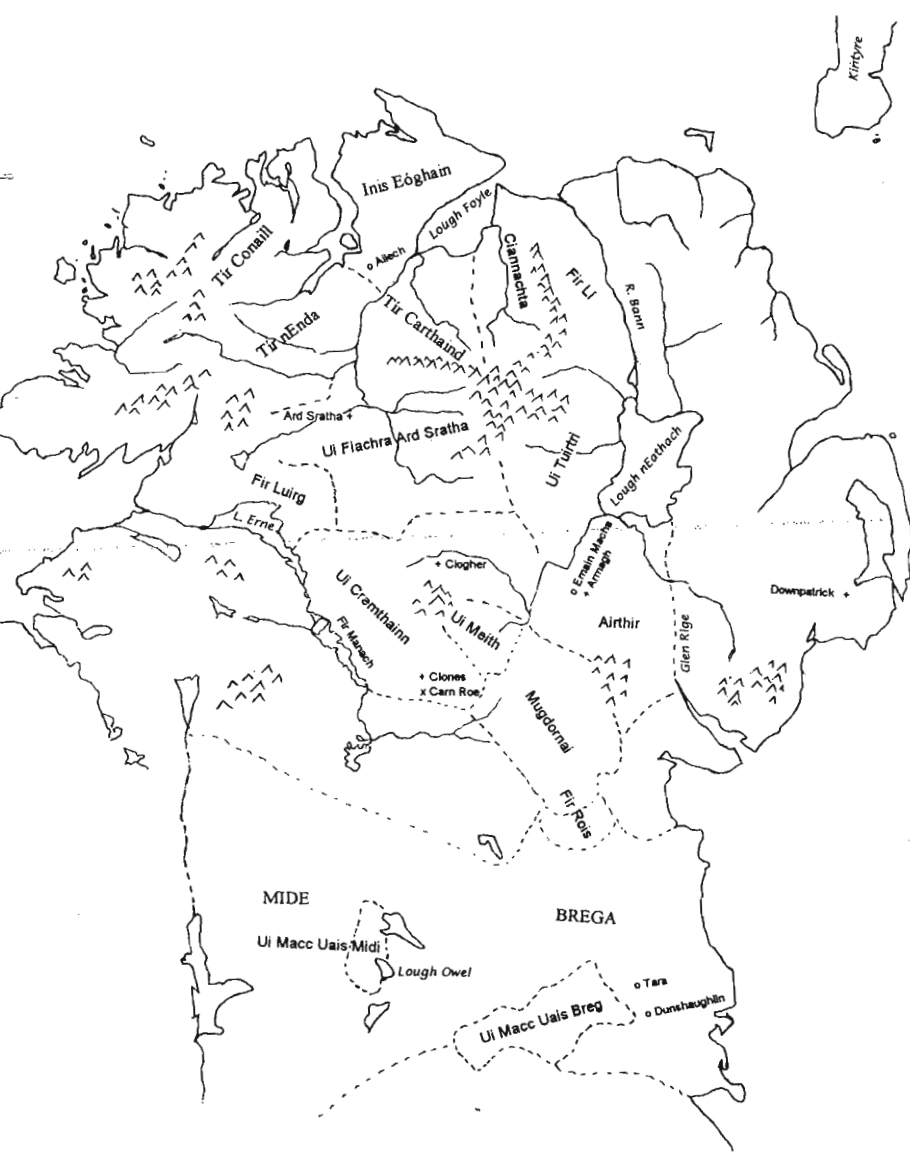
Keating's account of Emain's fall represents the end-point of a long process of development in the story of the three Collas. The full course of this development is not known, but the differences between the versions in the *Book of Leinster* and the *Book of Ballymote*, on the one hand, and the *Book of Lecan*, on the other, give us a glimpse of the later portion of this process. (The *Ballymote* version, though written down some two centuries later, is substantially the same as that in *Leinster*.) Both versions are similar to Keating's account down to the battle of Dubhcomar. At that point *Ballymote*, the older version, does not say that Colla Uais became king.⁴¹ Muiredach Tirech became king at once and the three Collas went immediately to Alba, where the king gave them a great fortress (or great affection -- *Leinster*). After their return to Ireland and making peace with Muredach Tireach at Tara, and after some further time had passed, Muredach sent them against the Ulaid. A great host was then with the Collas. They went after that to the men of Olnecmacht (or Connaught) and contracted fosterage with them. After that six *cutha* or battalions of the men of Olnecmacht went with them. They fought against the Ulaid at Carn Achad Leth Derg in Fermaigh; seven battles from that cairn against the Ulaid, a battle each day until the end of seven days; six battles by the men of Olnecmacht and the seventh battle by the Collas. The battle lasted a summer day and a summer night, reaching *fer na full*. They are in proximity of the cairn *coll na nothur*. They defeated the Ulaid at the beginning of the next day. The defeated fled to Glen Rige. They were a week after that plundering the Ulaid. According to *Leinster*, the sword-lands taken by the Airghialla were Mugdornai, O Crimthainn, na hAirtheraib, and O Mac Cuais. To this list *Ballymote* adds Fir Rois and an Emain. No apparent mention is made in this account of Fergus Foga or the taking and plundering of Emain, except the latter's inclusion in the list of sword-lands in *Ballymote*.

The version of the myth in the *Book of Lecan* has undergone some modification and development. It is similar to Keating's account down to the battle of Dubhcomar. At that point, Colla Uais took the kingship of Ireland for four years. He then died, Muredach Tireach took the kingship, and Colla da Crioch and Colla Menn went to Alba, where the king gave them great affection in regard for their valor. After three years they returned to Ireland and conversed with Muredach Tireach at Tara. The story then continues along the familiar line. The sword-lands taken by the Collas were Mudurnai, O Creamthaind, na hAirtheraib, and O Mac Cuais. As an afterthought, the editor of *Lecan* then added that it was in the battle of Carn Achad Leth Derg that Fergus Foga mac Frachair Foirthreaiain died, king of Ulaid and Emain Macha. Again, there is no apparent reference to the taking, plundering, or burning of Emain in the account.

At the end of the account of the last battle in the myth, there is a difficult point and it will be helpful to lay out exactly what the different versions say.

40. *Book of Lecan*, folio 77 recto, b 40-44.

41. *Book of Ballymote*, 109



Tribes and Territories of the Airghialla.

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Leinster: The battle lasted a summer day and a summer night, reaching *fearnu fuil*. They are in proximity of the cairn *coll* [gap in the story at the end of a column].

Ballymote: The battle lasted a summer day and a summer night, reaching *fuil forni fer*. They are near the cairn *coll na nothor*.

Lecan: The battle lasted a summer day and a summer night, reaching *fer na fuil* in proximity of the cairn. *Colla na nothur* its name.

Rawlinson: The battle lasted a summer day and a summer night, reaching *fuil fernu*. They are in proximity of the cairn *caill na n-othur*.

Laud: The battle lasted a summer day and a summer night, reaching *fer nu fuil*. They are in proximity of the cairn *coll na nothur*.

Clearly, the scribes had trouble at this point, and it is difficult for us to know what was intended in the original. O'Brien, working from Rawlinson, which is the clearest text for orthography and grammar, translates these sentences, "The battle was maintained a whole summer day and summer night until the blood [*fuil*] reached the girdles of men [*fer*]. Beside the cairn is the wood [*caill*] of the wounded [*othar*]." Another possible translation can be based on *fuil* meaning blood in the sense of "race" or "nation." It might be that *fer na fuil*, as given in both *Leinster* and *Lecan*, is correct. The meaning in this case would be that the battle raged until it reached the men of the race, *fer* or men being a euphemism for gods or idols. This would be in the same sense as *fear an airgid*, "the owner of the money", or even an *fear mór*, "the devil." If *coll* (*colla*, *caill*) at this point should be taken as *gol*, "wailing," then the place in proximity to the idols is Cairn Wailing-of-the-Wounded. This is reminiscent, and may be an alternate translation from Primitive Irish, of *bróin bheag*, the Warrior's Sorrow. This was one of the three legendary houses at Emain, it being "so named from the sorrow that sick warriors experienced there from the anguish of their wounds and diseases." Although Emain is not mentioned in the accounts, the proximity of the idols, the house at Emain, and the place of retreat of the Ulaid in Glen Rige would indicate that this last battle was fought near Emain. This agrees with the poem *Oirgiallaig ardmora uaish*, which places a battle at Creabh Derg, another of the three houses of the ancient Ulster capital.

The distance from old Farney to Emain could be easily traversed in less than a week. However, to fight every day for seven days across that distance, and for twenty-four hours on the seventh day, would be beyond human endurance. It seems clear, as O Rahilly concluded, that the myth collapses into one week a conquest that required an "extended period" to complete, involving at least the sons and grandsons of the Collas.

Stages of the Conquest

The patterns of genealogies and areas of settlement of the Airghialla suggest three stages in the conquest of Ulster. First, presumably as a result of the battle of Carn Achad Leth Derg by the Collas, were taken the Uí Crimthain areas in present Fermanagh, Tyrone, and Monaghan, though they would not have been given that name until some generations later. The leading family in this first-conquered territory was that of Colla da Crioch (which indicates the possibility that Colla Uais may have been his younger kinsman rather than his older brother). The Mugdorna, Uí Meith, and Fir Rois lands to the east and southeast may have been taken at this same time. The existence of this first phase of conquest is supported by archaeological excavation at Clogher, in Uí Crimthain, where an earlier fort was re-occupied in the fourth century. "The site has produced a small Romano-British bracelet and fragments of what may be

late Romano-British (4th century) pottery."⁴²

Second to fall would have been the *Uí Macc Uais* and *Uí Néill* lands in the north, taken in the time of the sons of Néill and the son and grandsons of Colla Uais. One of the genealogies calls Erc son of Colla Uais 'king of the northern mountain' and the *tuatha* were named for this Erc's sons and brother and the sons of Néill. The *Airghialla* (and the *Ciannachta* in Glen Given) formed a collection of buffer *tuatha* between the new *Uí Néill* settlements and the *Ulaid*.

Lastly, the *Airthir*, who were cognate to the *Uí Crimthainn*, in the second or third generation after the *Collas*, still no doubt under the leadership of the *Uí Néill*, took and settled what until then had been the heartland of the *Ulaid*, in present County Armagh. They were the "eastern" offshoot of the *Uí Crimthainn*.

In the sixth and early seventh centuries the *Airghialla* were still tributary to whoever was the *Uí Néill*, that is, the high king of that family or confederation, be he from its northern or its southern branch. It was not until about the year 650 that the *Airghialla* began to fall under the "sole dominion" of the Northern *Uí Néill*, the *Cenél nEógain* of *Ailech* and *Tír Eógain*.⁴³ Meanwhile, by a process now very obscure, the kingdoms of the Southern *Uí Néill* (*Mide* and *Brega*) were consolidated by the conquest of the loose tribal federations that previously had existed there. The *Airghialla* who settled in that area, i.e. the *Uí Macc Uais Mide*, the *Uí Macc Uais Breg*, and the *Mugdorna Breg*, became subject to the Southern *Uí Néill*.

The final stage of the conquest of Ulster, as mentioned above, would have occurred during the life of St. Patrick, after the foundation of his see at Armagh, and may have culminated in a battle at Creave Derg. Returning once again to the myth, if the interpretation of *fer na fuil* proposed above be correct, then the conquest of Émain by the *Airghialla* may have assisted St. Patrick's work of conversion of the *Ulaid* to Christianity by destroying their idols, or at least by denying access to them and demonstrating their powerlessness.

During this campaign, the *Airghialla* could have been under the leadership of the Southern *Uí Néill*. The much-maligned first portion of the list of the "Coarbs of Patrick" (in four manuscripts, with some variations) lists *Pátraic*, *Sechnall* (xiii years), *Sen-Pátraic* (x or ii), *Benén* (x), *Iarlaithe* (xiii), *Cormac* (xv), etc. *Sechnall*, the first coarb listed after St. Patrick, was the missionary bishop of the Southern *Uí Néill* in Meath.⁴⁵ If the Southern *Uí Néill* and the *Airghialla* drove the *Ulaid* from Émain, and Patrick from Armagh, the bishop then taking control of Armagh for the Christians among the conquerors would have been their bishop, namely *Sechnall*, as stated in the list. It is possible that, thirteen years after the taking of Armagh and Émain by the *Airthir*, perhaps when *Sechnall* died, an accommodation was reached among the churchmen that allowed Patrick in his old age once again to take control, the coarbship, of his own church at Armagh (even though he continued to reside among his converts in Down). Thus he, himself, could have appeared in the list of coarbs a second time as *Sen-Pátraic*, beginning the confusion about "two Patricks". The interjection of

42. Keating/O'Mahony, op cit, 271

43. Warner, op cit, 30

44. Byrne, op cit, 107, 114-115. Francis John Byrne, *The Rise of the Uí Néill and the high-kingship of Ireland*, O'Donnell Lecture delivered at University College, Dublin, 1969, 20. The basis is "A Poem on the Airghialla" translated by Máirín O Daly in *Ériu*, xvi (1952), 179-188.

45. Binchy, op cit, 162.

Sechnall of Meath between two periods of rule of Armagh by St. Patrick would reconcile the list of coarbs with the tradition, preserved in the annals, that Benén was the second and Iarlaithe the third Bishop of Armagh.

If St. Patrick died in 493*; and if Sechnall appears in the list of coarbs between two representations of St. Patrick; and if the numbers of years in the list are correct; then Emain fell about the year 470. This is not far from the "alternative" dating of the fall of Emain. It also coincides with the migration of the kings of Dal Riada from Antrim to Argyle about the year 470; this migration could have been an indirect result of the defeat and humiliation suffered by the Ulaid at the loss of Emain. Working back up the genealogies from later kings of the Airghialla whose obits are dated, the 460s represent about the third generation after the Collas.

Hence, we can see that the three Collas lived long before, were not contemporary with, and certainly are not to be identified with, the sons of Néill Noighiallach.

It can be noted that the difference between the myth in *Lecan* and the other versions indicates the cause of a point of confusion that appears in later versions of the genealogies, namely the insertion of one or two men named Eochaid immediately after (i.e. as son and grandson of) Colla Uais. This may have been an attempt to reconcile the myth, as it was developed over time, with the genealogies of the Airghialla. Colla Uais, because of his epithet seemingly indicating nobility, in later times was said to have been *ard-ri* and so it was necessary to make him the eldest of three brothers. Yet, the genealogies of his descendants were a generation or so short in comparison with those of the descendants of Colla da Crioch. He never was high-king, of course, and the discrepancy in generations would be readily explained if Colla Uais were a younger kinsman rather than an older brother of Colla da Crioch. The latter's epithet, in its earlier version of *fóchrí*, probably originated in some form of Old Irish *focrach*, which is glossed *mercennarius*.⁴⁶ This is an additional indication that he, and not Colla Uais, was the leader when the Collas entered the service of the king and began the conquest of Ulster.

Summary

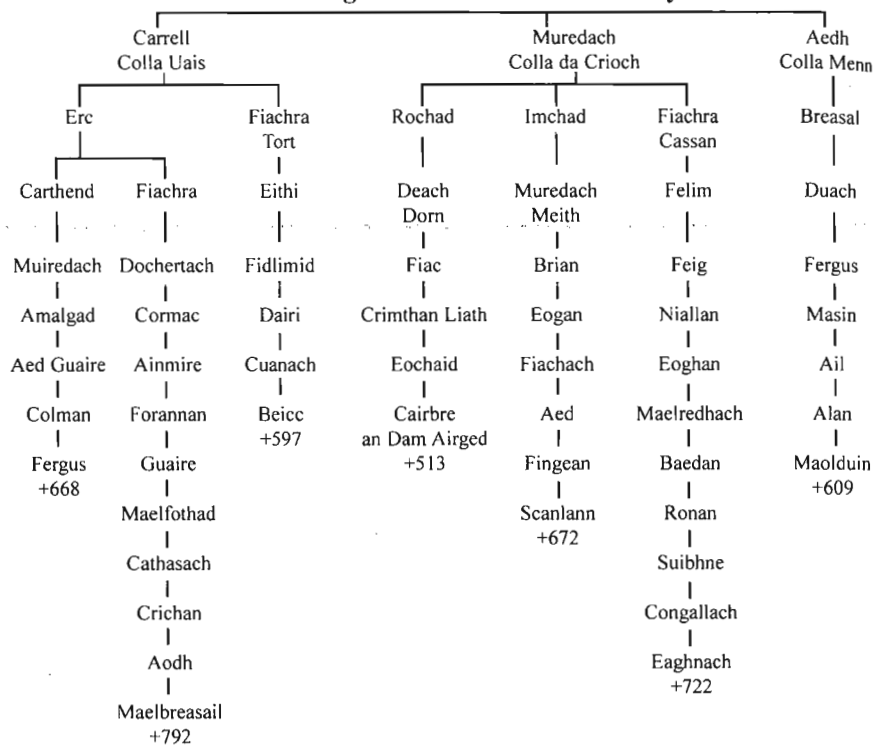
The first point to be made in summary is that there is no strong reason to reject the story of the three Collas, who under the sponsorship of the king of the Connachta conquered southern and north-central Ulster and were the ancestors of the Airghialla.

There are hints and clues that suggest that the three Collas were Romanized Britons, originating in the tribe named Trinovantes; used Colla as their nomen in the

* The year 493 can be approximated from the lists of coarbs, working back from the seventh century. David, who died in 551 according to what seems to be an independent entry in A.U., appears to be the same as the second Dubhthach. The first Dubhthach and the first Ailill appear to be duplicate names, because they alone, besides the second and third Patricks, have no tribal or other identity associated with them in the lists. Elimination of the first Ailill and the first Dubhthach (and the third Patrick, who was inserted in one list only) brings the transition from Sen-Patraic to Benén to about the year 490. It is remarkable that the lists include several coarbs (six of eleven to the end of the sixth century) that lasted exactly ten or twenty years, as if the office were held for a fixed term of years during that period.

46. Thurneysen, Rudolf, *A Grammar of Old Irish*; D.A. Binchy and Osborn Bergin, transl., Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1946; 222. The gloss is in St. Gall Glosses, 32^a 2.

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Roman naming system; and had experience in the military forces of the Empire, perhaps as centurions under a kinsman who was a *vicarius* of their tribune. They came to Ireland perhaps in the second half of the fourth century, in the time of the generation preceding Néill Noighiallach, and became military leaders for the kings of his family, the Connachta. From a mistranslation of their tribal name, which perhaps coincided with the king's granting that his new military commanders (accustomed to the rights of citizens and soldiers of the Empire) not have their hostages fettered, they were named the Airghialla, the "arch-hostages." They were sent against the Ulaid, with whom the Connachta had been warring without progress for generations, and achieved a signal victory at Carn Achadh Leth Derg, perhaps at Carn Roe in Currin Parish. This resulted in their taking sword-lands in Fermanagh, Tyrone, and Monaghan and the overlordship of the peoples already in that area, including those later identified as the Mugdorna. The lordship of this first conquest was in the family of Colla da Crioch, while the family of Colla Menn became overlords of the Mugdorna.

Over an extended period of perhaps eighty years, the Collas and their descendants fought several other battles against the Ulaid and took other lands from them. The son and grandsons of Colla Uais and the sons of Néill Noighiallach took north-central and northwest Ulster from the Ulaid, with the Airghialla and the Ciannachta settled to the east as buffers between the Uí Néill and the Ulaid. The lordship of these lands was taken by the families descending from Colla Uais. Other branches of the descendants of Colla Uais assisted the Uí Néill of Meath in the consolidation of their kingdoms of Mide and Brega and received lands there. About 470 the Airghialla, under the leadership of the Uí Néills of Meath, again defeated the Ulaid (possibly at Creave Derg) and drove them across the Newry River, taking from them their symbolic centre at Emain Macha and destroying whatever had remained there of their pagan religion. St. Patrick left Armagh to go into Down with the Ulaid, leaving Armagh for some years in the hands of Sechnall, Bishop of Meath. These "eastern" lands were taken by descendants of Colla da Crioch. St. Patrick later regained control of the church at Armagh and appears a second time as Sen-Pádraic in the list of coarbs.

The story of the three Collas was handed down in poetic form, first orally and then in writing, as the foundation myth of the Airghialla, with the long period of conquest collapsed into one week. It was not until the eighth century or later that the Collas were grafted onto the genealogy of the royal family of the Connachta, the story of their exile was invented, and Colla Uais was called *ard-ri*, as part of the successful campaign of the literati to unify Ireland.

Such are the tentative conclusions that can be reached by an examination of the myth of the three Collas in conjunction with the work of great Irish scholars of this century. It is greatly to be hoped that today's professional historians and philologists will bring their expertise to bear on the possibilities raised here.

Acknowledgement

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