

Section: Family, Land, and the Home

Lesson: The Three Primary Family Units In Early Irish Society

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The concept of the family in early Ireland was large.

The family itself was like an internal, self-governing unit; a closed society that was based on merit, earned respect, and an inherent respect for the elders of the clan, the "fine".

So, let's look at the concept of the family to the early Irish in a little bit more detail.

First of all, our idea of our family is likely to extend from grandparents to grandchildren, but to the early Irish, it extended as far as a great, and even great-great-grandfather.

To give you an idea of what that might have looked like, the early Irish family could be broken up into three distinct layers.

The first layer was your *gelfine*, your 'bright kin'. This included your father, all of his siblings and children, and his father.

So, it basically is like our modern nuclear family, extending from grandparents to grandchildren.

The next level was your *derbfine*, arguably the most important layer of the family unit, meaning 'true kin'. This is really what the early Irish would have considered their close family.

The next level after that was your *iarfine*, extending to your great-great-grandfather, all of his children, their children, their children, and so on. This *iarfine* was known as your 'after-kin', and it wasn't as important as your kin in your *derbfine* or your *gelfine*.

Families were primarily viewed patrilineally through the father's line, but the maternal line was also very important and played a very prominent role in social and familial life.

Families themselves were led by their family pillar, or the family head, in Irish would be the *agae fine* (family pillar), or the *cenn fine* (family head).

Families were the main social-legal unit. If one member of the family was harmed, the whole family was seen to be the victim of that harm.

But they were also liable for the debts and the wrongdoings of their kinsmen and they had to protect and avenge the members of their kin.

So, take a moment to consider this seanfhocal, this old saying from Ireland:

Is Mairg Ailtir Cen Ríagail, "Woe to him who was raised without rules."

This old saying reminds us of the responsibility of the wider kin to educate their family in the customs of the people and the standards of expected behaviour in society.

And we'll be exploring these customs in more detail as we continue in this course. So, to recap, society was enshrined around the idea of the extended family unit.

Every family had limited degrees of sovereignty, governed family affairs internally, and was considered as a whole in legal affairs.

There was an equality of freedom and respect given to all members of the tuath.

Table: Three Layers of Family Unit (*an fine*) in Early Ireland

TYPE	DESCRIPTION OF THE <i>FINE</i>	SIGNIFICANCE
<i>Gelfine</i> (‘bright kin’)	This layer consists of your father, his siblings, their children, and your paternal grandfather. Comparable to the modern nuclear family, the <i>Gelfine</i> represents the closest relatives who typically share a household or live in close proximity. Members of this layer engage in daily life activities, provide emotional support, and contribute to the upbringing and welfare of children.	<p>Similar to the modern nuclear family.</p> <p>Represents the closest relatives.</p> <p>Plays a role in supporting and caring for each other.</p> <p>Legally not as important as the <i>derbfine</i>.</p>
<i>Derbfine</i> (‘true kin’)	This layer encompasses your father’s father’s father, all of his children, their children, and their children, creating a broader family network. As the most significant layer in early Irish society, the <i>Derbfine</i> formed the core of the family structure. It was essential for maintaining lineage, property rights, and social standing. Members of the <i>Derbfine</i> were closely connected and held collective responsibilities, making it the foundation for family support and decision-making in early Ireland.	<p>Primary ‘legal unit’ under the Brehon Law.</p> <p>Responsible for settling disputes and maintaining order within the family.</p> <p>Collective responsibility for debts and wrongdoings of its members.</p>
<i>Iarfine</i> (‘after kin’)	This layer extends to your great-great-grandfather, all of his children, their children, and their subsequent offspring. The <i>Iarfine</i> represents a more distant network of relatives, providing a broader connection for support, alliances, and social interactions. While not as crucial as the <i>Gelfine</i> or <i>Derbfine</i> in terms of daily involvement and decision-making, the <i>Iarfine</i> contributes to the family’s overall reputation and can be called upon for assistance during challenging times.	<p>Not as important as <i>Derbfine</i> or <i>Gelfine</i>.</p> <p>Provided a wider familial network of support.</p> <p>Could be called upon for assistance in times of need.</p>