



Chieftains to High-Kings: Primary Grades of Kingship Lesson Transcript

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Now, let's take a look at the varying grades of king in a bit more detail. By far the most common type of chieftain was a leader of a simple tuath, simply referred to as a "rí" or a "rí-tuath".

While it was not always the case, more often than not these chieftains of petty kingdoms would in turn owe allegiances to other chieftains. Or he might owe tribute to another king of a higher grade, such as the "rí-tuath-mór", the king of a big tuath.

This was where a number of smaller tuatha came under the rule of one powerful chief, and he becomes the king of a confederacy, an over-king of the chieftains of the submitting tuatha.

And in turn, whether he is just a "rí" or a "rí-tuath-mór", they too would find themselves in tribute to a king of the next highest grade; which usually meant a king of one of the five Provinces of Ulster, Munster, Connacht, Leinster and Meath.

At the time when this was the case, the Five Provincial Kingdoms were known as the "Pentarchy".

A final over-king was usually selected by the courts of the provincial kings. This king-of-kings would traditionally rule from the province of Meath, and the high kingship of Ireland bears particular significance to the Hill of Tara, in modern day County Meath, otherwise known as "Teamhair na Rí", or Tara of the Kings.



Now, although we have just set out the four basic primary grades of chieftain, it's important to also point out that within these four grades there were many more grades of varying degrees that were determined by a chieftain's individual degree of sovereignty, their wealth and their personal power.

Those who were stronger in these features were stronger in fact. It wasn't a question of dispute if one king had visibly more wealth and power than the others. And the early Irish laws recognised this.

So to recap, the most basic type of king or chieftain was called a "rí", and they sat over a tuath. These tuatha could join together under one more powerful tuath and the chieftain of this would be called a "rí-tuath-mór". The next grade would be the kings of the Provinces, the Pentarchy. And finally, we would have the "ard rí na hÉireann", the high-king of all Ireland.

And as we progressed through this chain, each of the lower grades owed allegiances and tributes in the form of submission to the higher kings.