

## **Section: Family, Land, and the Home**

### **Lesson: The Tribe and The Family** *an Tuath agus an Fine*

**By: Kevin Flanagan | The Brehon Academy**

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To begin painting a picture of what early Irish society looked like, I'd like to start with a quote from one of the foremost scholars on the Brehon Laws, D. A. Binchy.

He described Irish society as tribal, rural, hierarchical, and familiar. He said it was tribal because the basic territorial unit was called the tuath, which is usually translated as a tribe.

He said it was rural because there seemed to be few areas of dense settlement. It was hierarchical because society was strictly divided into ranks, and each of these had their own honor price. And it was familiar because society was ultimately kin-based.

So when we talk about the system as being tribal, it might conjure up inaccurate ideas. These political units were self-governing and independent, and they were called tuath. The plural would be tuatha.

This word can mean a tribe, a people, a state, a nation, or a political unit.

But because this is such an important feature of the early Irish system, I'd like to give you another quote.

Now, it's a little bit long, but I think it gives a really good idea of what we should have in mind when we're thinking about this kin-based or tribal system of early Ireland.

*"The tribe system is the development of the family. The first wanderer from the original seat of the people strays forth into foreign lands at the head of his family. The father is at once the priest, the judge, and the king. He rules his children as the ablest and the wisest. Around the original family gather their slaves and dependents. All the members of the original family and their followers form a single unit. No individual has an existence except as a member of this body. Their flocks and herds form a common property. They possess no clear idea of individual ownership. The tribe exists upon the assumption of common descent. Suppose a tribe of this nature to abandon its wandering life and conquer for itself a district*

*in some foreign land. The principles upon which the land would be occupied flow from the ideas on which the tribe is constituted. The tribe is an undivided whole. The land would be conquered by all for the benefit of all and will belong to all in common. For the convenience of cultivation, separate lots might be appropriated to individuals but none would gain an absolute ownership in his allotted portion. His occupancy would be subject to resumption by the tribe, and the arable land might be from time to time divided as would suit the convenience of all. The pastoral lands would remain open for the cattle of the tribe subject to such rules as from time to time might be taught necessary."*

And that's by Hodder M. Westropp in his article 'On the Tribal System and Land Tenure in Ireland under the Brehon Laws'.

So from this we can see that the tribal system is very much a natural progression of the family unit and that's important to bear in mind.

These families joined together by mutual consent and by virtue of living in geographic proximity to one another, and formed allegiances amongst themselves.

From these families, they would pick their chieftains, they would pick their leaders. We see an example of this word "*tuatha*" in the mythologies in reference to the great Tuatha Dé Danann, the mythical race of beings that were said to have come here, defeated a Firbolg race and took the sovereignty of Ireland until they were later defeated by the Milesians and then driven into the hills of Ireland.

This Tuatha Dé Danann would become the '*sidhe*'; the fairy people who lived in the hills. And the word *tuatha* here is taken to mean the "tribes" or the "peoples" of the goddess Danu or Danann.

So people had strong relationships to the other members of their tribe. They were related to each other through real ties of blood, claiming ancestry from some common ancestor. And it might be distant relatives, but they still had that notion of coming from the same blood, the same family, but they were also related to each other, to the land, to the fact that they shared a certain area of land with one another and it ought to be managed for the benefit of the whole tribe.

Now, we can even see this connection of lord and land in the names of many places in Ireland. If we take County Tyrone in the north of Ireland, for example, which in Irish is *Tír Eoghain*, meaning Eoin's Country or the country or the land of Eoin's Descendants. We also see it in the original name for Donegal, which was *Tír Chonaill*, which would be the land of Conall's descendants.

We also see this importance of descending from a common ancestor in the surnames of Ireland. So whenever you see an "O"; O'Neill, Ó'Raghallaigh, O'Higgins, this literally translates to mean a grandson of, or can be taken to mean a descendant of.

So all the people who share their surname are acknowledging that they descend from a single common ancestor. We also see it with the "Macs"; McCarthy, McDonald, McShane, here Mac (Mc) means son of, again paying homage to the idea of descent from a common ancestor.

All free members of the tribe had a say in tribal affairs. In this sense, it was very much like the old Athenian democracy.

If you were a member of the tribe, you had standing among your peers, if you had something to say in a matter, you could stand up and have your voice heard. So even though they had their elected chieftains, it wasn't so much seen as a form of subjugation to that chieftain.

This chieftain was more like the elected figurehead. And that's a key thing to point out with the early Irish system. Kings were elected, not inherited.

A king or a chieftain, what they would have called a "*rí*", could be elected from any eligible member of the whole family unit, the whole king group, the whole tribe.

The rules of eligibility were carefully defined in the Brehon laws, but it was not based on primogeniture, which is what we have in the English system, where the firstborn male, regardless of his capacity to lead or his ability as a ruler, would become the king by right of his birth.

In Ireland, the *rí*, the chieftain was selected among the best of all the eligible men of the tribe.

And it could be argued that the fact that he was voted to lead gave him an extra legitimacy, the sort of legitimacy that doesn't come from primogeniture and the rights of the first-born male. Smaller tuatha could merge with bigger, more powerful tuath. Now, this could happen through conquest, as was too often the case, but it might also have occurred voluntarily for some mutual benefits like a stronger economic base or greater protection in military affairs.

But smaller *tuath* retained control of their own domestic affairs. They appointed their own chieftains and governed their own territory. The chief of this small tuath kept up his public duties but would also have to respond to his over-chief, a chief of a big confederacy of tuatha, which was called a '*rí-tuath-mór*', a 'chief of a big tuath'.