

If Irish Claim Nobility, Science May Approve

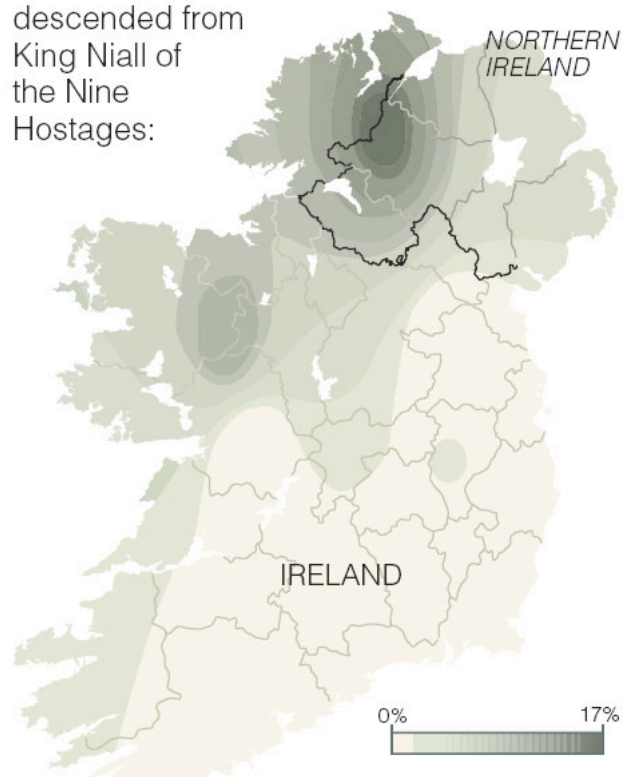
By [NICHOLAS WADE](#)

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Listen more kindly to the New York Irishmen who assure you that the blood of early Irish kings flows in their veins. At least 2 percent of the time, they are telling the truth, according to a new genetic survey.

The survey not only bolsters the bragging rights of some Irishmen claiming a proud heritage but also provides evidence of the existence of Niall of the Nine Hostages, an Irish high king of the fifth century A.D. regarded by some historians as more legend than real.

Percentage of men in Ireland who are believed to be descended from King Niall of the Nine Hostages:



The survey shows that 20 percent of men in northwestern [Ireland](#) carry a distinctive genetic signature on their Y chromosomes, possibly inherited from Niall, who was said to have had numerous sons, or some other leader in a position to have had many descendants.

About one in 50 New Yorkers of European origin - including men with names like O'Connor, Flynn, Egan, Hynes, O'Reilly and Quinn - carry the genetic signature linked with Niall and northwestern Ireland, writes Daniel Bradley, the geneticist who conducted the survey with colleagues at Trinity College in Dublin. He arrived at that estimate after surveying the Y chromosomes in a genetic database that included New Yorkers.

About 400,000 city residents say they are of Irish ancestry, according to a 2004 Census Bureau survey.

"I hope this means that I inherit a castle in Ireland," the novelist Peter Quinn said by phone from the Peter McManus cafe in Chelsea. Some McManuses also have the genetic signature. ("I hang out with kings," Mr. Quinn said.)

He said his father used to tell him that all the Quinn men were bald from wearing a crown. But he added, "We spent 150 years in the Bronx, and I think we wiped out all the royal genes in the process."

The report appears in the January issue of *The American Journal of Human Genetics*.

Dr. Bradley said he was as surprised at finding evidence that Niall existed as he would have been to learn that King Arthur had been real. Niall of the Nine Hostages

was so named because in his early reign he consolidated his power by taking hostages from opposing royal families.

He estimated that two million to three million men worldwide carry the distinctive Y chromosome signature, which he named the I.M.H., for Irish modal haplotype. A haplotype is a set of genetic mutations.

If he was indeed the patriarch, Niall of the Nine Hostages would rank among the most prolific males in history, behind Genghis Khan, ancestor of 16 million men in Asia, but ahead of Giocangga, founder of China's Manchu dynasty and forefather of some 1.6 million. This calculation, and the estimate of the I.M.H. signature's frequency in New York, were derived from a database of Y chromosome mutations.

The writer and actor Malachy McCourt said he was not surprised, since every Irish person is related to a king.

"They didn't mind who they slept with, and they had first dibs," he said. "It's so boring. It's not like the house of Windsor; every tribe had its own king."

He said Niall was "a highwayman. He was a slave trader, nothing noble about him. He was a pirate."

The link between the Niall Y chromosome and social power, which would have enabled the king to leave many descendants, "stretches back to the fifth century, which is a long time in Western European terms," Dr. Bradley said.

Asked if he himself carried the Niall signature, Dr. Bradley said he did and was "quite pleased," even though tradition holds that Niall captured and enslaved St. Patrick, who brought Christianity to Ireland.

Niall is said to have obtained hostages from each of the five provinces that then constituted Ireland, as well as from Scotland, the Saxons, the Britons and the Franks. He is thought to be the patriarch of the Ui Neill, meaning "the descendants of Niall," a group of dynasties that claimed the high kingship and ruled the northwest and other parts of Ireland from about A.D. 600 to 900.

The men with Ui Neill surnames tested by Dr. Bradley included those with the names, in anglicized form, O'Gallagher, O'Boyle, O'Doherty, O'Donnell, O'Connor, Cannon, Bradley, O'Reilly, Flynn, McKee, Campbell, Devlin, Donnelly, Egan, Gormley, Hynes, McCaul, McGovern, McLoughlin, McManus, McMenamin, Molloy, O'Kane, O'Rourke and Quinn. (The prefix "O" is sometimes dropped.)

Dr. Katherine Simms, a Celtic historian at Trinity College who advised the geneticists and was a co-author of their report, said some historians had assumed that the common ancestor of the Ui Neill was "merely a mythical divine ancestor figure, imagined in order to explain the political links that existed between the dynasties themselves in the later period."

But Dr. Bradley's findings, she said, "appear to confirm that the Ui Neill really did come from a common ancestor," and perhaps that the mythical narrative of Niall's birth and ascent to kingship "had a genetic basis."

The earliest Irish genealogies, if true, must have been recorded in oral form for several generations, since writing did not become common in Ireland until 600. Dr. Daibhi O'Croinin of the National University of Ireland in Galway said he was confident that "extensive genealogical material" could have been memorized and put into writing later, but "whether Niall of the Nine Hostages ever existed is itself a moot point."

Another Celtic expert, Dr. Catherine McKenna of Harvard University, said in an e-mail message that "historians will be skeptical about the notion that all of the Ui Neill descend from the ancestor who seems to be implied by the genetic evidence, or that this ancestor was Niall Noigiallach (Niall of the Nine Hostages) himself."

She said the number of Niall's supposed sons grew from 4 to 14 as new dynasties achieved power and claimed descent from Niall. "The evidence for the Ui Neill as a political construct is strong enough that historians wouldn't readily believe in the historical reality of Niall himself," she said.

Still, the new genetic evidence may convince historians that there was a common ancestor for at least one of the major branches of the Ui Neill, such as the Cenel nEogain, which lived in an area of northwest Ireland where the I.M.H. is most common.

"In fact," Dr. McKenna said, "I find the evidence, from that point of view, really fascinating."

But historians have tended to view the Ui Neill as a political construct, doubting their genealogical claims of descent from Niall and even whether Niall existed at all.

When the Irish took surnames, however, around A.D. 1000, some chose names associated with the Ui Neill dynasties. Dr. Bradley tested Irishmen with Ui Neill surnames and found the I.M.H. signature was much more common among them than among Irishmen as a whole.

