

# MEDIEVAL ULSTER

## BEYOND WESTEROS AND THE GAME OF THRONES



McGUINNESS



THE ENGLISH



CLANDEBOYE O'NEILL



McSWEENEY



O'HANLON



MAGUIRE



O'DONNELL



McDONNELL



O'BOYLE



O'NEILL



O'CAHAN



McQUILLAN



O'DOHERTY

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## BEYOND WESTEROS AND THE GAME OF THRONES

Television audiences across the world have been thrilled by the exploits of the Starks, Lannisters, and Targaryens in HBO's hugely successful Game of Thrones TV series, and ancient monuments across Northern Ireland have been used as filming locations for places in the seven kingdoms of Westeros, the main setting for the series.

These monuments, however, have their own remarkable stories to tell, and this narrative has been produced for the first time through the Beyond Westeros project led by archaeologists from the School of Natural and Built Environment at Queen's University Belfast, working with the Strangford Lough and Lecale Partnership, and supported and funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, Tourism NI, and the Historic Environment Division of the Department for Communities. It was developed as part of their European Year of Cultural Heritage programme.

### ❖ OVERVIEW ❖

Powerful warlords ruled Medieval Ireland and they wielded political control in the absence of a central government. Each was supported by their own force of mercenary foot soldiers (Scottish Gallowglass from the Western Isles), light infantry (kern) and horsemen.

Wars and rivalries were played out, with alliances and marriages, betrayals, hostage taking and assassination. In Ulster, around the year 1500, thirteen Lordships fought for supremacy, not unlike the seven mythical Kingdoms of the Game of Thrones television series. Their stories unfolded in their castles, monasteries, churches, and defensive forts and across out timeless landscape.

County Down provided filming locations for the lands of the North in Game of Thrones but in the 1500s it saw a real power struggle between rival Gaelic chiefs, McGuinness and the Clandeboyne O' Neills, and the Norman English who had invaded with the White Knight, John de Courcy, in 1176, and who for a time dominated this landscape.

Many of the events of those times resonate with events and characters in the Game of Thrones.

### Hospitality and Treachery

One of the famous scenes in Game of Thrones is the Red Wedding, a bloody massacre of the Starks by their host, Lord Walder Frey, as revenge for the breaking of the marriage pact between the houses of Frey and Stark, during a banquet. This betrayal of trust during a feast was not uncommon in medieval Ireland.

In 1574 the great Brian McPhelim O' Neill, Lord of Clandeboyne, invited the Earl of Essex, Walter Devereaux, to dine with him and his wife and brother at their castle at Castlereagh. This hospitality, a mark of leadership in Gaelic society, was returned with a vicious attack from their guests, which would have shocked the Gaelic population. At that meal Essex treacherously repaid the honour by killing 125 of O' Neill's soldiers and attendants, seizing his host, Brian O' Neill and his two family members, and executing them.

Another famous O' Neill leader, Shane O' Neill, met a similar fate at the hands of the Scottish McDonalds who took over large swathes of the north. In that instance the O' Neills were releasing a McDonald hostage and expected more gratitude from their guests!

## **Carnage and the murder of innocents**

Within a year of murdering the O'Neill's of Clandeboye, during a feast thrown by them in his honour, the Earl of Essex went on to massacre more than 600 hundred men, women and children of the Scottish McDonald clan who were taking refuge on Rathlin Island. Such carnage is a recurrent theme in Game of Thrones.

## **Hostages, warding and tanistry.**

At the beginning of Game of Thrones Series 1 we are introduced to Theon Greyjoy who was a ward of Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell. He had initially been taken hostage by Eddard Stark to secure the loyalty of his father Balon Greyjoy to the King. Theon was raised with the Stark children and had a close friendship with Robb.

Taking hostages was a common practice in the middle ages. Family members or followers were taken as insurance to guarantee that the offender will adhere to a deal. In the spring of 1204, John de Courcy, in retreat, was defeated and captured by Hugh de Lacey. Both were English Norman knights but the King of England had instructed De Lacy to oust de Courcy for fear that he was becoming too powerful and could threaten the throne. De Courcy secured his release by swearing to submit to the King and to give over hostages. The second name on the list of hostages, after Milo, Fitz John de Courcy, was Robin (Robert) Savage, son and heir of William Savage. These two young men were to be given over along with seven others.

The giving and taking of hostages was common practice in medieval times. Hostages were not mistreated, they were usually afforded the status of noblemen and they lived in and among the noble household they were held but they acted as a guarantee of the keeping of a promise or agreement and could be killed or mistreated if required.

This practice is not to be confused with warding. Children of noblemen, were sent (not taken) as wards to the homes of another noble family for an express purpose. In the case of sons, to train as knights, and for young women to help improve their prospects of a favourable marriage.

In Gaelic culture there was another practice, tanistry, which was associated with the succession of kings and chiefs. Succession did not automatically fall to the oldest son. Instead the successor was selected from all the well-connected male members of the clan. They chose the candidate they thought best suited and the person chosen was then known as the tanist. This selection could cause jealousy and in order to guard against usurpers and guarantee the safety of the tanist he was often sent away to another clan or even to an 'English' noble family (when they were living in peace with their English neighbours) for safe keeping.

## **Religion**

The founding and support of religious sites and orders was an important part of Gaelic and Norman medieval life. Impressive monasteries such as Inch and Greyabbey were statements of the importance and wealth of their founders as well as being spiritual centres. In the early medieval period the Crusades were in full flow and Hugh de Lacy founded centres for the Knights Templar and the Knights Hospitaller in County Down. This theme also runs through Game of Thrones with religious beliefs becoming entwined with earthly affairs.

## **The warring Lordships and changing allegiances**

The Game of Thrones families are constantly forging and negotiating alliances and manoeuvring themselves into positions of power and attempted security. Real medieval life was no different and families rose and fell accordingly. Take the McGuinnesses for example.

The Gaelic McGuinnesses allied themselves to the English Earldom of Ulster but kept close ties with their Gaelic roots and later found themselves rebelling against their former allies.

Sir Hugh McGuinness was called “the civillist of all the Irishry” by the English Bagenal family and Sir Nicholas Bagnall was cited as having brought Sir Hugh over to the English Queen’s side from that of the Gaelic O’Neills. As a reward, in 1584 Sir Hugh was regranted ‘the entire country or territory of Iveagh’. However, his daughter married the Gaelic Lord, Hugh O Neill – a bond by marriage between the two families. Unsurprisingly, his son, Art Roe McGuinness, switched sides and joined O’ Neill’s in the Nine Years’ War against the English. During this war, Lord Mountjoy, the Lord Deputy of Ireland, ravaged Iveagh to the point where Art Roe McGuinness submitted to prevent the extermination of his people, and as such was promised he could keep his lands – once more swearing loyalty to the English crown.

## **Training for War and Life in a Great House**

Boys from noble families were trained as fighters from an early age and they could expect to be involved in battles and warfare for much of their lives providing a ready fighting force for themselves and their allies and leaders. Their swords were an extension of themselves. Like most young men of high birth, John de Courcy was trained from a child in the art of fighting and war. He was amongst the knights who followed de Burgh to Ireland in 1176 following the death of Strongbow in search of adventure and land. His impetuous nature was matched with his readiness and ability to enter into the thick of battle himself.

This lifestyle is portrayed in Series 1 of the Game of Thrones where we see the Stark boys being trained in archery and weaponry. Surprisingly, however, their sister Arya proves herself to be more than a match for the men in the family. She even has a sword made specially for her which she names “Needle”.

Norman ladies had little chance of such freedom. Arya’s sister, Sansa, has an upbringing typical of young Norman women, learning sewing, embroidery, singing, poetry and other pursuits suitable for the future wife of a great lord.

In Gaelic culture women also had limited powers but could own property and some noble women such as Grace O’Malley developed reputations as great warriors and leaders.

## **Women and Power**

Most women in the Game of Thrones have little power other than the influence they bring to bear on their sons and husbands. Caitlyn Stark and Cersie Lannister try to steer their sons Robb Stark and Joffrey Lannister on lordship affairs but ultimately they must accept their authority. Likewise Margaery Tyrell seeks to manipulate her husband King Joffrey. Some women, however, rose to personal power during the series – Daenerys Targaryen becomes a kind of mystical, messiah figure, while Yara Greyjoy is a tough, down to earth woman fighting her battles head on.

Real medieval women were also greatly disadvantaged and wielded power mainly through influencing the men in their lives.

The status of Norman women and their marriages came under English Common Law. Women did not own property but could influence their sons and husbands. If two sons died the daughter could inherit land. Marrying an heiress was hugely advantageous for an ambitious man and this gave her a certain bargaining power.



In Gaelic society women held a stronger position in that they were allowed to have a dowry and if they got divorced they kept this dowry for themselves and they could also collect rents from their husband's lands.

We know little of the lives of ordinary women from lesser families but there are references to women in the workplace in the 15th century, making and selling bread and beer, or taking part in the harvest. If a man who was a merchant died his wife could take over the business and she was allowed into the guilds. But generally only the lives of the noble families and their dynastic marriages were recorded.

Some noble women did rise to power and their stories are told here.

### *Gyle de Burgh*

A woman's revenge and an internal family feud was the motivation for the murder of the 3rd Earl of Ulster, William de Burgh, by his own barons in 1333, and the bloody civil war which followed.

Gyle de Burgh was Norman nobility, raised in Connaught, daughter of William "Liath" de Burgh who was a loyal follower and ally of the powerful Red Earl of Ulster and Connaught, Richard de Burgh. She grew up in the midst of battles as the de Burghs faced opposition from the Scots and the Gaelic Irish. Her father both fought against and formed alliances with the Irish clans. Eventually the Red Earl was defeated in battle by the Scots, who took her father prisoner and only released him after he agreed not to attack the Scots in Ireland and when Gyle's little brother, only one year old, was taken to Scotland as a hostage in return.

Gyle's marriage to Richard de Mandeville (whose ancestors had settled in County Down) was a political move to further strengthen the family's position as the de Mandevilles had been equally important followers and allies of the Red Earl. She moved to their stronghold in Ulster at a time of great instability as the family prepared to pass power from one generation to the next with the successive deaths of the powerful Red Earl and his stalwart, Gyle's father. The Red Earl was succeeded by his grandson, William the Brown Earl, who was young and headstrong, and felt threatened by his most powerful followers and sought to dominate them. He arrested Gyle's brother-in-law Henry de Mandeville on spurious charges, then clashed with Gyle's brother Walter de Burgh over his assassination of the king of the O'Connors. The Brown Earl arrested Walter and horrifically starved him to death in the dungeons of his castle at Northburgh near the Foyle, in 1333 – a move which raised tensions to boiling point. Some say that the coat of arms of the city of Derry, which strangely incorporates a skeleton, is a depiction of the poor, starved Walter de Burgh.

In retaliation Gyle urged her husband, Richard de Mandeville, to do the unthinkable, to break their allegiance to the Earl of Ulster, her cousin, to avenge this atrocity against her brother. She succeeded and the murder of the Brown Earl, William de Burgh, between Belfast and Carrickfergus, by his own barons in 1333, led to a terrible civil war. Gyle had instigated a war that tore apart families and long held allegiances, destroyed the farming and export infrastructure operated by these families, and ultimately helped to wreck the Norman's control of Ulster.

### *Queen Elizabeth*

Queen Elizabeth was a formidable woman and a powerful leader who brought about the end of the powerful Gaelic lordships in Ireland. At the end of 16th century there was increasing Elizabethan interference in Ireland and especially in Ulster. Generally, the further away from the Pale (around Dublin) the more Gaelic and independent the people and so Queen Elizabeth turned her attention on them the most.

Elizabeth set about introducing English law into Irish areas, establishing sheriffs in post and declaring that the oldest son should inherit land. This ran contrary to Gaelic culture where it was the extended family that decided who should inherit power from their forefathers and the land was held in common. This interference in Irish affairs led to open warfare with the Maguires and the O'Donnells and then Hugh O'Neill, Lord of Tyrone, the biggest Gaelic lordship in Ulster in the Nine Year's War 1593-1603.

The Gaelic Irish almost won but were defeated at the Battle of Kinsale. During this period Queen Elizabeth died but Hugh O'Neill was unaware and he surrendered under the Treaty of Mellifont. There was an uneasy peace for the next few years but the Gaelic lords did not feel safe in the hostile environment created by successful Elizabethan generals such as Arthur Chichester who wanted the spoils of war and territory. This resulted in the Flight of Earls, the departure from Ireland of the last Irish noble leaders, from Donegal in 1607.

### *Conn O'Neill's Wife*

Conn O'Neill of the Clandeboy O' Neills had tried to avoid taking sides in the Nine Year's War but was badgered into following Hugh O'Neill into battle. He was eventually arrested and held at Carrickfergus Castle. Probably in order to belittle Conn's status and to justify the later requisitioning of his lands, Conn has been portrayed as a drunkard whose imprisonment was due to his men killing some soldiers in a drunken brawl while they were delivering a shipment of wine to Carrickfergus. It is more likely that he was imprisoned for treason for his involvement in the Nine Year's War.

His wife sought to rescue him and she travelled to Scotland to meet an Ayrshire aristocrat and buccaneer, Sir Hugh Montgomery and between them they agreed a plan. The story goes that she smuggled a rope into the prison inside a round of cheese and that Conn used this to make good his escape. James Hamilton got in on the action and Montgomery and Hamilton negotiated with Conn to split his estate three ways between them in return for obtaining a royal pardon for him.

Conn went on to sell off his land piecemeal and eventually also Castlereagh Castle in 1616. Conn O'Neill died in 1619 and is buried in obscurity - possibly in the grounds of Moat House, a former graveyard, off the old Hollywood Road. His remaining lands were then taken over by Hugh Montgomery.

### *Rose O'Donnell*

There were some very notable, powerful Gaelic women. Rose O'Donnell, mother of Red Hugh, helped secure his Lordship of Tirconnell and was involved in negotiating over hostages. She also encouraged him to establish a famous abbey in Donegal.

### *Granuaile*

Grace O'Malley, Granuaile, is known as the Pirate Queen, who exacted tithes from ships passing her territory on the west coast of Ireland. She fought alongside her husband and the men under her command and was a great sea captain. She sailed her own ship to meet Queen Elizabeth in London to secure a pardon for her son who had been imprisoned. She was also powerful enough to not have to take sides in the Nine Year's war.

Beyond Westeros has developed “crests” to represent the Thirteen Lordships of Ulster around 1500.



**O'Donnell**

The herrings are a reminder of the important role played by fishing in the lordship by foreign seafarers who called the O'Donnell the “King of the Fish”



**O'Neill**

The Red Hand of Ulster, the traditional emblem of the O'Neills during the Medieval period



**O'Hanlon**

The harp reminds us of the strong bardic traditions within this region of Ulster



**McQuillan**

A late 16th century map of the north coast depicts a lurking wolf, a reminder that Mac Tire was a common animal in the Medieval landscape



**McGuinness**

The lion rampant was the emblem used by the McGuinness lordship during the Medieval period



### **O'Boyle**

The ravens of the western hills and mountains of Ulster



### **O'Doherty**

The swords and camán, as depicted on the Medieval graveslab in Clonca Church in Inishowen



### **O'Cahan**

The important role played by salmon on the River Bann in this lordship's economy



### **McDonnell**

The birlinn or galley, that provided transportation between the McDonnell lands in Islay and north Antrim



### **Maguire**

Inspired by the name of this lordship's inauguration site, Sgiath Gabhra, the Shield of the White Mare





### **Clandeboyne O'Neill**

A successful division from the main Tyrone lordship, the Clandeboyne O'Neills also used the Red Hand as their emblem



### **The English**

The Late Medieval tower house castle was a popular settlement form among the English of Lecale and the Ards



### **McSweeney**

The galloglass lineage, and hence two bloody galloglass axes, with the boar their traditional emblem

## Find out more

You can look up medieval sites and Game of Thrones Filming Locations in County Down on the Beyond Westeros Story Map

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/ee3f4883679d45df91fbb158c89e34>

## Find out more at

<http://www.strangfordlough.org/projects/medieval-down.html>

<https://archaeology-palaeoecology-qub.com>



Medieval Ulster - Beyond Westeros



QUB - Archaeology at Queen's

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