

## Political structure of Medieval Ireland

Medieval Ireland was divided into a hierarchy of petty kingdoms grouped in larger units ruled over by provincial kings. The premier dynasty, Uí Néill [see \*Níall Noígíallach], had major over-kingdoms in the north (Northern Uí Néill) and the midlands (Southern Uí Néill). \*Tara was their symbolic site and ‘king of Tara’ meant over-king of the whole of Uí Néill and later ‘high-king of Ireland’. This personage was usually but not always the most powerful king in Ireland. The Southern Uí Néill were divided into Síl nAeda Sláine in Meath and Clann Cholmáin to the west. The Northern Uí Néill were divided into Cenél Conaill in Donegal and Cenél nEogain in Inishowen and later in mid-Ulster. The Ulaid, whom they had displaced, maintained a precarious independence east of the Bann. The Airgialla sub-kingdoms stretched from Armagh westwards to south Derry and were gradually brought under Uí Néill political control — and with them, the great monastery of Armagh. Cenél nEogain and Clann Cholmáin were to dominate the history of Uí Néill dynasty almost until the Norman invasion, and Cenél nEogain survived as the powerful O’Neills of Ulster until the Elizabethan re-conquest. Leinster was ruled by two dynasties: the Uí Dúnlainge (based in the plains of Kildare) from the eighth century to the eleventh, and the Uí Chennselaig (in Wexford and Carlow) from the eleventh to the twelfth. The plain of Meath was lost to Leinster in the early historical period and Ossory — a Munster sub-kingdom — was added to it in the eleventh century. Munster was ruled in the early historical period by the Dáirine, from the seventh to the tenth century by the \*Eoganacht dynasty (especially the Eoganacht of Cashel), and from the tenth to the twelfth century by Dál Cais (later Uí Briain, of whom \*Brian Bóroime was eponym and ancestor). Two dynasties — Uí Fiachrach and Uí Briain, both claiming to be kinsmen of the Uí Néill — vied for the \*kingship of Connacht. Uí Fiachrach, in the valley of the Moy and in south Connacht, dominated the province until the eighth century when they lost ground rapidly to Uí Briain. Thereafter, Uí Briain monopolised the kingship, gave Connacht a new and aggressive aristocracy and in the twelfth century their kings, Tairdelbach and Rory O’Connor were high kings of Ireland. See Donncha Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans* (1972); and Francis J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (1973).

**Oenach** [or aonach], a popular assembly held periodically at fixed locations associated with dynastic burial sites. The óenach involved games, races, contests, and artistic narrative performances that renewed the social and human order whilst honouring the otherworld [see \*sídh]. The \*festivals of the traditional calendar, such as \*Samhain, marked points of the year on

which an óenach took place; whilst the life cycle itself was marked by the wake, another from of óenach. These indicate that the óenach was related to a rite of passage marking changes in states of being. Oenach Tailtiu (Teltown, Co. Meath) held on Lúnasa, 1 August, survived into fairly recent times. Nenagh (Aonach Urmhumhan, lit. Fair of Ormond) derives its name from an óenach held there. See Máire MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa* (1962); and Michael Dames, *Mythic Ireland* (1992).