

## Tower Houses and Power: Social and Familial Hierarchies in East County Clare c.1350- c.1600

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Taking the case study of the western Irish sept of Mac Conmara this paper examines the geography and archaeology of tower houses in the context of their genealogical affiliations. The rich but under-used genealogical data on Gaelic Ireland's late medieval septs, carefully preserved in native manuscripts, allows us to reconstruct the complex networks of kinship in many Irish lordships. The surviving remains of tower houses similarly provide an important lens through which to quantify the relative material differences between lineages within the wider kin group.

While several studies of tower houses have sought to examine the formal characteristics and landscape setting of tower houses in late medieval Ireland, it remains uncertain how issues of kinship and social hierarchy impacted on their siting, form and size. The question of kinship is a key one in any study of late medieval Ireland but it is still unclear to what degree tower houses were built and occupied by those outside the immediate kin group of the ruling lord. To what extent did junior lineages and minor client septs participate in tower house building? What can tower houses tell us about the comparative economic and social status of differing kin groups within a shared landscape?<sup>1</sup>

The Mac Conmara lordship of Clann Chuiléin in eastern County Clare serves as a useful case study. Not only is there a rich collection of surviving buildings but a detailed genealogical record reveals the patrilineal relationships between each castle-holding lineage. What's more, surviving documentation attributes the construction of the towers to specific individuals, providing a chronological view of castle construction within these kin groups, which is much more difficult to retrieve elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> There are several lists of builders for the county but the most accurate seems to be the list which survives in an eighteenth-century manuscript (Royal Irish Academy MS 24 D 10) and which was

<sup>1</sup> Many such questions were raised by Rolf Loeber, 'An Architectural History of Gaelic Castles and Settlements, 1370-1600,' in Patrick Duffy, David Edwards and Elizabeth FitzPatrick (eds), *Gaelic Ireland c.1250-c.1650* (Dublin, 2001) pp 271-314.

<sup>2</sup> A number of important studies have already been conducted on both the geography and history of Clann Chuiléin, see Aoife Nic Ghiollamhaith, 'Kings and Vassals in Later Medieval Ireland: The Uí Bhriain and the MeicConmara in the Fourteenth Century,' in Terence Barry, Robin Frame and Katharine Simms (eds), *Colony and Frontier in Medieval Ireland* (London, 1995) pp 201-16; Patrick Nugent, 'The Dynamics of the Sept System in Fourteenth Century Clare,' in Ciarán Ó Murchadha (ed.), *County Clare Studies* (Ennis, 2000) pp 55-71; Patrick Nugent, 'A Historical Geography of the Transformation in the Territorial Organization of Gaelic Society in County Clare during the Early Modern Period,' (unpublished PhD thesis, University College Cork, 2002); Patrick Nugent, 'The interface between the Gaelic clan system of Co. Clare and the emerging centralising English nation-state in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century,' *Irish Geography*, 40, no.1 (2007) pp 79-98; Patrick Nugent, *The Gaelic Clans of Co. Clare and their territories* (Dublin, 2007). Luke McNerney, 'The West Clann Chuiléin Lordship in 1586: Evidence from a Forgotten Inquisition', *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, 48 (2008) pp 33-62; the tower houses of this area have been extensively examined in studies by Martin Breen and Risteárd Ua Cronin published in the *Other Clare*.



consulted by the antiquary R.W. Twigge in his research on Clann Chuiléin.<sup>3</sup> It seems likely that this is based on an earlier written source, and while there is evidence from other lordships in Ireland of a similar interest in retaining the memory of castle founders in poetry and prose, this is the most extensive and schematic such record.<sup>4</sup> Twigge attempted to identify a builder for every castle from this list (and others) but some of the identifications remain tentative. The conclusions that we draw from his work must therefore be similarly tentative and open to review and correction. Out of a total of about 80 tower houses<sup>5</sup> in the territory (see fig. 1), RIA MS 24 D 10 lists the names of the builders of 68 castles of various septs, 40 or so of which can be tentatively identified with the surviving genealogical sources.<sup>6</sup> Most of the names in the list date to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which equates well with the archaeological evidence and gives the list some credibility. As well as giving the names of builders in each Mac Conmara lineage, the list also includes the names of builders within several minor septs in the lordship. However, as the dominant sept, the Meic Conmara were by far the most prolific builders, to whom the construction of some 57 castles is attributed.<sup>7</sup>

Genealogies of the Meic Conmara survive in several different manuscript collections, many of which were collated by Twigge in the late nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> They recite the descent of some twenty-five separate lineages, several of whom built more than one tower house.<sup>9</sup> Microfilm copies of Twigge's manuscript notes from the British Library are retained at Clare County Library and form the basis of the genealogical sources used in this study.

Written genealogies identify the varying branches of the sept in a number of ways: lesser lineages, for example, are named after the ancestors that linked them to the main line, or prominent individuals within the lineage; alternatively they were known by the lands they occupied.<sup>10</sup> A number of these lineages were short sub-lineages of wider kin groups who might be, for convenience sake, treated as one. The more prominent lineages were identified by their chiefry titles: Mac Conmara Fionn and Mac Conmara Riabhach, ruling west and east Clann Chuiléin respectively (see fig. 3). The division in the lordship occurred following the rule of Maccon Mór (fl.1360), possibly as a means of satisfying sons by two separate marriages whom he no doubt feared would quarrel over the succession. Twigge's genealogical scheme shows that all the late-medieval Mac Conmara lineages descended from a common late-thirteenth-century ancestor, Cumheadha Mór (d.1306),<sup>11</sup> suggesting that earlier branches of the sept were expelled, extinguished or

<sup>3</sup> A fragment of this list in the Irish language survives in RIA MS 3.A.11, p. 1 and was published in Rev. Aubrey Gwynn and Dermot Gleeson, *A History of the Diocese of Killaloe* (Dublin, 1962) pp 523-4; a more garbled version by William O'Lionain was unearthed by John O'Donovan – see Maureen Comber (ed.), John O'Donovan and Eugene O'Curry, *The Antiquities of County Clare: Ordnance Survey Letters 1839* (Ennis, 2003) pp 261-3.

<sup>4</sup> See Andrew Tierney, 'Pedigrees in Stone? Castles, Colonialism and Gaelic-Irish Identity from the Middle Ages to the Celtic Revival', (unpublished PhD thesis, University College Dublin, 2005), vol. I, pp 53-86.

<sup>5</sup> See Thomas J. Westropp, 'Notes on the Lesser Castles or "Peel Towers" of the County of Clare', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, vol. 20 (1899) p. 349. In this article Westropp made some use of the various castle builder lists to sketch out a chronology of tower houses in County Clare, though he was well aware of their possible inaccuracies.

<sup>6</sup> Royal Irish Academy MS 24 D 10, pp 70-2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Robert W. Twigge, 'Materials for a History of Clann-Cuilein (the eastern division of county Clare), historical, topographical and genealogical collections relating to Clann Chuiléin, "Macnamara's Country," in East Clare', Vols. V-IX. Genealogical collections. Five volumes. Copy of Brit. Lib. MS 39263-39267 in Clare County Library: Twigge Collections. There are also Meic Conmara genealogies in Royal Irish Academy MSS 23 H 22; 23 M 17; 24.K.29; 24.D.9. and Trinity College Dublin MS H.5.19.

<sup>9</sup> See Twigge 'Materials'; also RIA MS 23 M 17, p. 139.

<sup>10</sup> See RIA MS 23 M 17, no. 153, for example.

<sup>11</sup> Twigge, *Pedigrees*, i-xix.



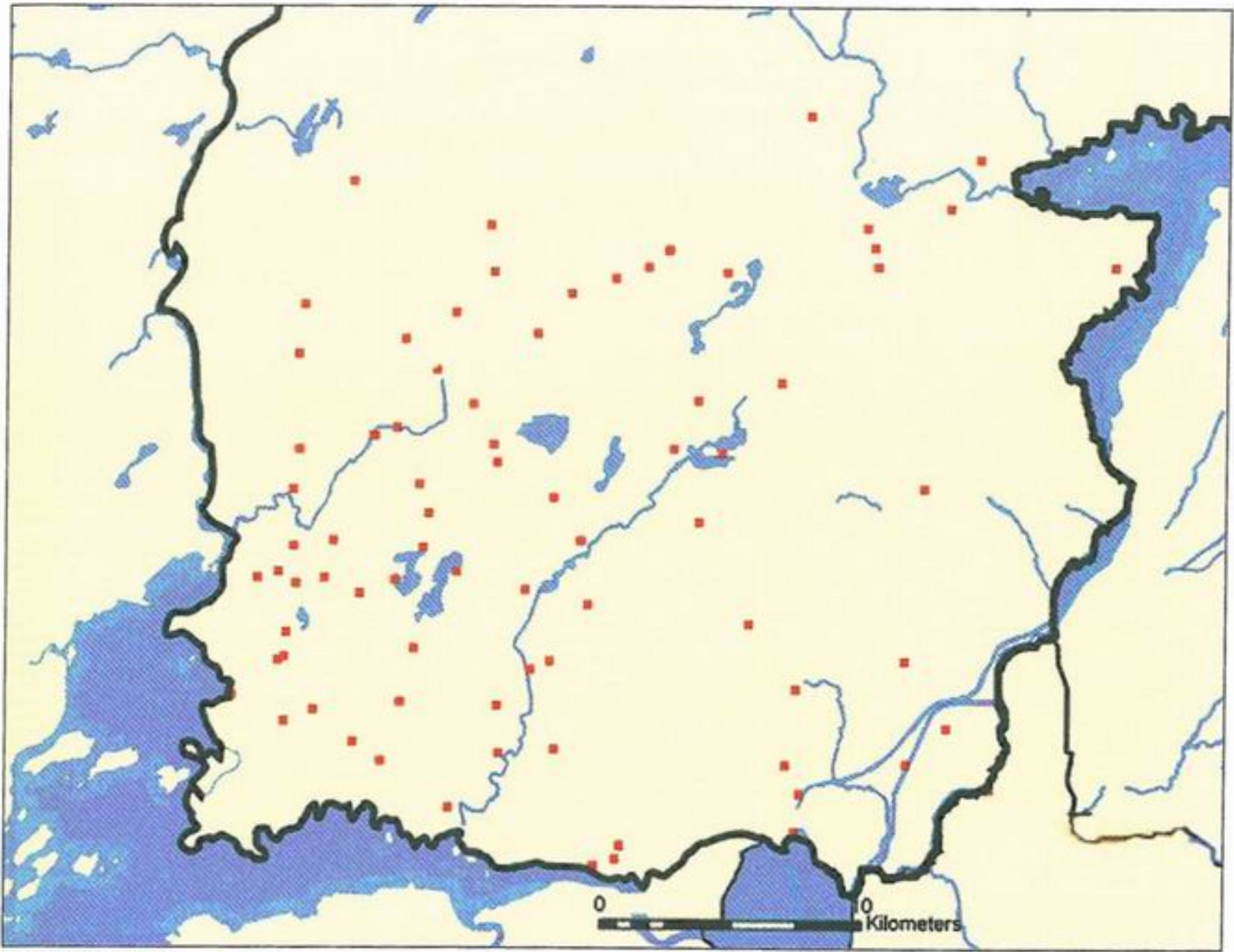


Fig. 1 Castle sites in Clann Chuilén, 1300-1600

reduced in the competition for land and resources. As Aoife Nic Ghiollamhaith has shown, the expansion of Mac Conmara Riabhach into new lands to the east was at the expense of numerous minor septs with whom they shared only a distant relationship; many of them were obliterated in the process.<sup>12</sup>

### Gaelic Genealogical Identity

Gaelic noble families had a multitude of nominal identities designed to express degrees of kinship with those above and below them in the social hierarchy. These manifested themselves through shared ancestors that represented points of common agnatic descent with other kin groups. The Meic Conmara took the name of an eleventh-century ancestor, Cú-mara ('Sea Hound'), but also referred to themselves as the *siol Aodh* (lineage of Aodh), a tenth-century ancestor, through whom they shared kinship with other septs not descended from Cú-mara. The Meic Conmara were the senior descendants of Aodh and by the later Middle Ages junior lines of this kin group had become obscure due to the power and expansion of the Meic Conmara who spread out across east Clare. Where such distant kin survived it was usually through the acquisition of some professional role; for example, the Mac Fhlannchadha, a minor sept who lived within the borders of the Mac Conmara territory, practised as Brehon lawyers. The Mac Conmara territory of Clann Chuilén was named after an ancestor reputed to have lived in the eighth century through whom they were more distantly connected to a further range of minor families who

<sup>12</sup> Nic Ghiollamhaith, 'Kings and Vassals', pp 214-15.



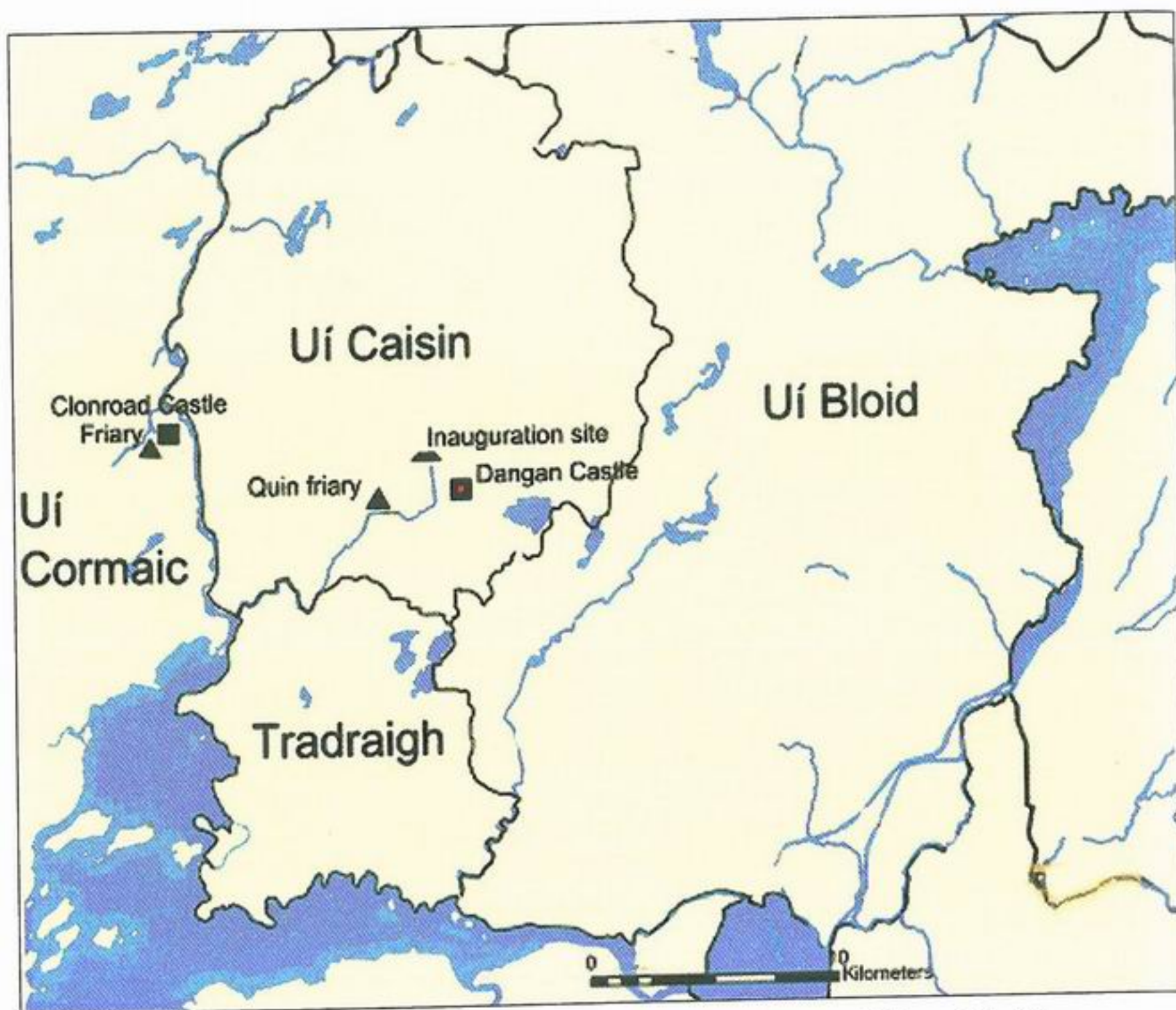


Fig. 2 Early territorial divisions within the territory of Clann Chuiléin and key sites of later date

occupied lands under them. One sept within this group was the lineage of Ó hIcēadh (O'Hickey), a name which signifies 'descendants of the healer', a family who maintained the hereditary role of physicians to the Meic Conmara and Uí Bhriain.<sup>13</sup>

The Meic Conmara, Mac Fhlannchadha and Uí hIcēadh also described themselves as the Uí Caisín, 'descendants of Caisín' – an ancestor assigned to the fifth century – through whom they shared a descent with their neighbours on their eastern border – the Uí Ghrádaigh, a lineage who had once occupied the territory of Clann Chuiléin but who were pushed eastwards in the fourteenth century. They survived as ecclesiastics around the church at Tuamgraney by the river Shannon.<sup>14</sup> The Meic Conmara were the senior descendants of Uí Caisín and had once been kings of a small *tuath* or country called Uí Caisín during the ninth and tenth centuries, which formed the north-west corner of their later lordship (see fig. 2).<sup>15</sup>

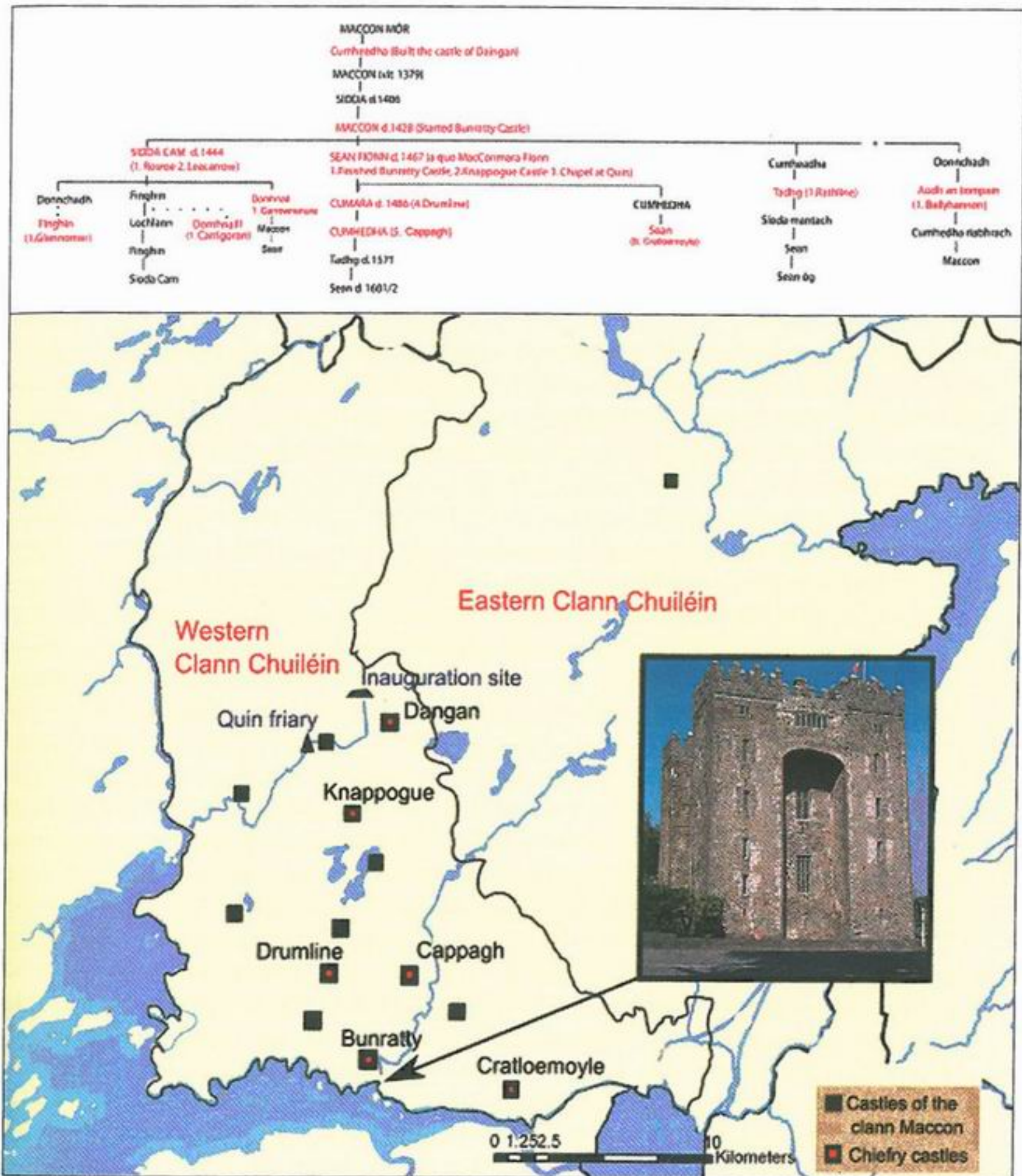
More important for the Meic Conmara was their membership of the kin group known as Dál Cais (from Cas, father of Caisín), who formed their genealogical link with their neighbours to the west, the Uí Bhriain, their overlords, descendants of the famous tenth-

<sup>13</sup> Twigge, Pedigrees, vol. xii, pedigree i.

<sup>14</sup> Nic Ghiollamhaith, 'Kings and Vassals', p. 202.

<sup>15</sup> The Meic Conmara were identified as kings and lords of Uí Caisín until the early fourteenth century after which they became lords of Clann Chuiléin – see Twigge, pedigree ii.





**Fig. 3** The distribution of castles of the senior Meic Conmara Fionn lineage, 1350-1600. Castle builders are highlighted in red

century Irish high king, Brian Boroimhe, who dominated the area of modern County Clare. This identity linked the Meic Conmara with a whole range of major Irish septs in the northern part of the province of Munster. Cas was said to be a descendant of the much remoter figure Eoghan, the founder of the Kingship of Munster, to whom the Dál gCais forged a link when they appropriated that kingship in the tenth century.<sup>16</sup> Although

<sup>16</sup> Francis Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings* (Dublin, 2001) p. 11. There was a further stratum of identity going back to their ancestor, *Mugh*, from whom most of the families in the Southern half of Ireland descended and which distinguished them from those living in the northern half. The relative superiority of these two ancient kin groups was the subject of a major contention between poets in the early seventeenth century – see Lambert McKenna (ed.), *Iomrabad na bFilead/The Contention of the Bards*, 2 vols (London, 1918).



archaic (and not necessarily historically accurate), this kin network retained a lively presence and meaning in late-medieval poetry and prose, and as such is an important factor in considering kinship and identity during the period of tower house construction.<sup>17</sup>

### Castles in the Senior Line

How did such constructs of genealogical identity (real or feigned) manifest themselves in the late-medieval landscape? The Royal Irish Academy manuscript list of castle-builders cites Dangan-i-viggen Castle, in the heart of Uí Caisín - the most ancient part of the Mac Conmara territory - as the earliest Mac Conmara castle, to which it attributes a fourteenth-century founder, Connheadha Mac Conmara (and his son, Donnchadh), the death of whose half-brother, Sean an Gabhaltais is recorded at 1373.<sup>18</sup> This is notable in the context of Gaelic-Irish castle building generally, for which few pre-1400 examples survive. Its architecture is distinctive from that of the typical tower house (if there is such a thing), the latter a structure built typically between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. Dangan-iviggen has long and high parallel vaults rising above its ground floor, suggesting a link with the Anglo-Norman hall houses of the thirteenth century, something that gives credence to the manuscript list of castle-builders as a reliable source.<sup>19</sup> Its upper sections are unfortunately much ruined and the whole structure obscured by dense growth.

The RIA list give no other Gaelic castle in the region so early a date suggesting that the practice of building in stone within Clann Chuiléin (and perhaps over a wider area in Thomond) was initiated by the senior lineage of the Mac Conmara sept in an area already resonant with political and social authority. The Mac Conmara Fionn, senior descendants of Connheadha Mór in western Clann Chuiléin, retained possession of the chiefry castle of Dangan-i-viggen (fig. 2) from the fourteenth century through to the late sixteenth, despite building large tower houses - such as Bunratty and Knappogue - further south in their territory.<sup>20</sup> The two baronies which comprised their territory (marked western Clann Chuiléin in fig. 3) were named after it and imbued with its ancestral authority. There are a number of possible reasons for its continued importance: firstly, it was located in the ancient territory of Uí Caisín, which the sept had once ruled as kings and effectively marked their ancestral homeland; secondly, it was in close proximity to the dynastic inauguration site at Magh Adhair, where representatives of every lineage would assemble to witness the election of both Uí Bhriain and Meic Conmara lords;<sup>21</sup> thirdly, it was close to the sept's burial place at the friary of Quin, which conferred upon it a social and political centrality (fig. 2). It was supported by Mac Conmara Fionn's mensal lands and a focal point for feasting right into the late sixteenth century.<sup>22</sup> As has been remarked elsewhere, the close geographical relationships between chiefry seats and friaries were a feature of medieval Gaelic-Irish lordship and attest to the role played by ecclesiastical

<sup>17</sup> For the enduring political relevance of these archaic kinship ties in early modern County Clare, see Joep Leerssen, *The Contention of the Bards (Iomarbhágh na bhFileadha) and its Place in Irish Political and Literary History* (Dublin, 1994) pp 20-22.

<sup>18</sup> Twigge, vol. xii, pedigree ii.

<sup>19</sup> The importance of Dangan-i-viggen has been noted for some time - see Terry Barry, 'The Last Frontier: Defence and Settlement in Late Medieval Ireland', in Terry Barry, Robin Frame & Katharine Simms (eds), *Colony and Frontier in Medieval Ireland: Essays Presented to J.F. Lydon* (London, 1995), p. 226; see also Risteard Ua Crónín and Martin Breen, 'Daingean Uí Bhigín Castle, Quin, Co. Clare', *The Other Clare*, vol. 10 (1986) pp 52-3.

<sup>20</sup> Twigge, Pedigree iv, part 1.

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed account of this inauguration site see Elizabeth FitzPatrick, *Royal Inauguration in Gaelic Ireland c.1100-1600: a Cultural Landscape Study* (Woodbridge, 2004) pp 52-9.

<sup>22</sup> See McInerney, 'The West Clann Chuiléin Lordship in 1586', p. 45.



sites in underpinning the power of their lay founders.<sup>23</sup> Friaries were places where hierarchical relationships might similarly be expressed in material and spatial terms.

The enduring importance of Dangan-i-viggen Castle to the Mac Conmara sept extended beyond the line of Mac Conmara Fionn. When the lordship of Clann Chuiléin split in two during the fourteenth century, the lands of Dangan were divided between the two main branches of the sept.<sup>24</sup> Although the junior line, taking the chiefry title *Mac Conmara Riabhach*, established a separate lordship and chiefry seat at Tulla, to the east, they continued to derive an income from their half of the demesne lands at Dangan, throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>25</sup> This continued connection with the oldest castle in the territory must have provided some sense of legitimacy to their rule as it recalled their ancestry from Maccon Mór, the father of the castle's builder.<sup>26</sup>

Although their occupancy of a castle at Dangan-i-viggen from the mid-fourteenth century may have cemented the supremacy of the Mac Conmara Fionn within the wider sept, it was not until four generations later, according to the castle list, that they began castle building in stone on a wider scale. This largely coincides with the period when castles of 'tower house' type became more common across Ireland as a whole. From Dangan they expanded southwards to the richer lands of Tradraighe,<sup>27</sup> building ten further castles of tower house type between 1400 and 1600, half of which are attributed to junior members of the main line (fig. 3), who established cadet houses. They were more prolific in this regard than any other branch of the sept, reflecting their success in maintaining the chiefry title within almost a single line of descent. Within this group, the tower houses associated with the chieftainship itself are the most impressive in scale, the largest constructed on the site of the Anglo-Norman castle at Bunratty in the southern region of their lordship.<sup>28</sup> This act of reconstruction was highly symbolic as the history and survival of the Mac Conmara sept was bound up with the defeat (in alliance with the Uí Bhriain) of the Anglo-Norman de Clare family who built the original castle here in the late thirteenth century.<sup>29</sup> The martial triumph of the Meic Conmara and Uí Bhriain against their enemies was celebrated in a lengthy fourteenth-century prose tract in which struggles over Bunratty feature prominently.<sup>30</sup>

Its size was remarkably ambitious for the standards of the time and out-scaled every other chiefry residence in Ireland during the fifteenth century – a scale perhaps determined by the decision to build on the remnants of the earlier Anglo-Norman structure.<sup>31</sup> Its Gaelic-Irish provenance became very much obscured in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries until highlighted by George McNamara in 1913, since when it has been well known. It evidently took several years to build, remaining unfinished at the time of its founder's death (Maccon Mac Conmara, d.1428), until its completion by his younger son, Sean (d.1467). His eldest son, Síoda Cam, built Ros Ruadh Castle some miles to the

<sup>23</sup> Loeber, 'An Architectural History of Gaelic Settlements', p. 298; Tierney, 'Pedigrees in Stone', vol. 2, p. 340 and 342.

<sup>24</sup> Twigge, 'Materials', vol. xii, pedigree ii.

<sup>25</sup> James Frost, *The history and topography of the county of Clare* (Dublin, 1893) p. 273; Nugent, 'The Dynamics of the Clan System', pp 56-7.

<sup>26</sup> For the genealogy of Dangan's builders see Twigge, 'Materials', Pedigree ii.

<sup>27</sup> For the varying quality of lands in Clann Chuiléin, see Nugent, 'A Historical Geography,' pp 412-13.

<sup>28</sup> Twigge, 'Materials', see pedigree iv, part 1 (as cross-referenced with RIA 24 D 10).

<sup>29</sup> For a detailed account of the various castles constructed at Bunratty, see George U. Mac Namara, 'Bunratty Castles', *North Munster Archaeological Society Journal*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1913 – 1915) pp 220 – 327.

<sup>30</sup> Standish Hayes O'Grady (ed.), *Caithreim Thoirdhealbhaigh* (London, 1929) p. 34.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the archaeological evidence, see Rory Sherlock, 'An Introduction to Bunratty Castle', in Roger Stalley (ed.), *Limerick and South-West Ireland: Medieval Art and Architecture* (Transactions of the British Archaeological Association XXXIV) pp 202-18:211.



north, which shares some architectural features in common with Bunratty (in particular, its first floor entrance) but is much smaller, lacking the four bedchamber towers that define his father's great edifice.<sup>32</sup> Síoda's most notable contribution as *taoiseach*, according to the RIA builders-list, was the transformation of the existing thirteenth-century castle at Quin into a large Franciscan friary close to the old chiefry seat at Dangan (see above). As at Bunratty this work involved the powerfully symbolic remodelling of a former Anglo-Norman castle. The surviving fabric clearly shows the lower parts of the great round towers of the castle still visible at the corners of the friary suggesting that the builders intended some message of rebirth and regeneration to be read here.<sup>33</sup> It's exactly the type of imagery that would have appealed to bardic poets of the period.

Síoda Cam died before the friary's completion and his death, some twenty years before that of his successor – his younger brother Sean Fionn – ensured that his sons (who were likely minors) would not succeed to the chieftainship.<sup>34</sup> One son, Domhnall, built a second castle at Carrownenure, which continued in possession of his lineage until it became subdivided between three separate branches post 1570.<sup>35</sup> In fact, if the attributions of the RIA castle-builders list are correct, the line of Síoda Cam, although the senior, was probably thrown into the shadows by Sean's successful completion of Bunratty, the friary at Quin (the church is attributed to him), and a second chiefry castle of larger-than-average size further north at Knappogue (see fig. 3). Sean Fionn ruled for twenty years during which time he assisted his own son, Cumara, in building a modestly-sized castle northwest of Bunratty at Dromline. The proximity of this castle to Bunratty may have helped establish Cumara's claim to the chieftainship, as he succeeded on Sean's death in 1467.

There is evidence of a further division of lands during this period. For example, though Síoda Cam must have constructed Rosroe Castle while either he or his father was *taoiseach*, the failure of his sons to succeed to the chieftainship did not see the castle revert to their more successful cousins. Rather, Síoda Cam's descendants retained independent possession of the tower house at Rosroe until the early seventeenth century.<sup>36</sup> Similarly the nephews of Sean Fionn (by his younger brothers) built castles and established new lineages at Ballyhannan and Rathline, lands evidently allotted to them in perpetuity (see fig. 3).<sup>37</sup> However, in the next generation we find that Sean's younger son, Cumheadha, fails to establish an independent lineage even though he held the chieftainship briefly on the death of his older brother.<sup>38</sup> It was probably during this period that Cumheadha's own son built a castle at Cratloemoye, south of Bunratty. However, the chieftainship reverted to his cousin in the next generation and the castle along with it.<sup>39</sup>

While this junior line might have died out, it seems unlikely given the absence of junior lineages off the main line in the generations that followed. Rather, from this point we notice a consolidation of castle-building and occupation within the senior line. In the next generation Cumara's eldest son, Connheadha, reputedly built a castle close to Bun-

<sup>32</sup> Twigge, 'Materials', vol. xii, pedigrees iii and iv; Royal Irish Academy MS 24. D. 10.

<sup>33</sup> See Brian Hodkinson, 'Was Quin Castle Completed?', *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, vol. 44 (2004) pp 53-8.

<sup>34</sup> Twigge, 'Materials', pedigree iv, part I.

<sup>35</sup> Twigge, 'Materials', pedigree iii.

<sup>36</sup> Twigge, 'Materials', pedigree iii.

<sup>37</sup> Twigge, 'Materials', pedigrees ii, iv and v.

<sup>38</sup> On Cumara's death in 1486 he was succeeded by his brother who ruled only for six years before being succeeded by his nephew from the main line.

<sup>39</sup> Cratloemoye is listed amongst the possessions of Sean Mac Conmara Fionn in 1574 – see Twigge Pedigree iv, part I.



ratty at Cappagh (almost equidistant to that at Dromline), which may have been a similar attempt to advertise his proximity to the centre of power prior to his father's death.<sup>40</sup> The construction of castles by three successive generations of the senior lineage in this southern part of the lordship suggests an attempt to provide residences for sons close to the sept's most emphatic material expression of lordly power at Bunratty. So whereas the construction of only a single castle is attributed to several minor Mac Conmara lineages during the period of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which might serve their senior kinsmen, the eldest sons and brothers of Mac Conmara *taoisigh* might expect to each reside in their own separate tower house - at least for the duration of their life.

This is paralleled elsewhere. Late-sixteenth-century genealogies of the Ó Cinnéide sept (who ruled the neighbouring territory of Ormond, to the east) show several closely positioned castles of the *slíocht* Brian mac Ruadhri Mór in a single parish occupied in just this way.<sup>41</sup> It is possible that the construction of new castles at Dromline and Cappagh, close to Bunratty, was similarly a way of accommodating sons and brothers of the *taoiseach*. This idea is borne out by the later occupation of these castles by younger brothers of the *taoiseach* in the following century; at least two of them were resident at Cappagh and Cratloemoyle, which demonstrates that these castles remained at the disposal of immediate relations while remaining nominally the property of the *taoiseach* himself.<sup>42</sup> The process of clan expansion, by which junior lineages of the main line established themselves separately and held castles independently to the *Taoiseach*, on what must have been originally demesne lands, is still unclear, but the passing of time probably played a role.<sup>43</sup> Investment in a tower house and the maintenance of a record of its builder may also have been an important factor in anchoring such junior kin groups on their lands. Conversely, where tower houses were built by the ruling lord, they may have been less likely to become alienated to a junior line over time.

It is notable that the genealogy of Mac Conmara Fionn does not produce any substantial junior lineages in the period after the second half of the fifteenth century, suggesting either that there were none, or, more probably, that younger sons were not in a position to establish independent landholding lineages in the same way as the younger sons of their ancestor, Maccon (d.1428).<sup>44</sup> This may suggest that a form of primogeniture (deliberate or otherwise) was operating in the line of Mac Conmara Fionn from the second half of the fifteenth century. Dromline and Cratloemoyle were smaller in scale than Bunratty and Knappogue, which seems appropriate given their role in accommodating the wider kin group of the *taoiseach*.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the success of the *slíocht* Mac Conmara Fionn, the descendants of Sioda Cam of Rosroe never forgot their familial seniority. According to one manuscript source, they attempted to reclaim their superiority by legal means in the sixteenth century.<sup>46</sup> This attempt may have been prompted by the re-establishment of English colonial rule in County Clare which would have supported succession strictly by primogeniture. Interest-

<sup>40</sup> Twigge, 'Materials', pedigree iv, part 1.

<sup>41</sup> Tierney, 'Pedigrees in Stone?' vol. I, pp 154-95.

<sup>42</sup> Twigge, 'Materials', pedigree iv, part 1.

<sup>43</sup> On this point see McNerney, 'The West Clann Chuiléin Lordship in 1586', p. 45.

<sup>44</sup> See Twigge, pedigree iv, part 1.

<sup>45</sup> For comparative plans of Dromline and Cratloemoyle see William G. Ryan, 'A Survey of Monuments of Archaeological and Historical Interest in the Barony of Bunratty Lower, Co. Clare' (unpublished MA thesis, University College Cork, 1979), [http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/archaeology/ryan/part4\\_index.html](http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/archaeology/ryan/part4_index.html), accessed 1 Oct. 2012.

<sup>46</sup> Royal Irish Academy MS 24 D 10, p. 69.



ingly, it is during the same period that this line possibly built two new castles much further west and east of their original caput at Rosroe suggesting they somehow appropriated additional lands.<sup>47</sup> They may have been in league with the Uí Bhriain, supporters of the Tudor enterprise, who began to usurp the power of the Mac Conmara Fionn during the second half of the sixteenth century.<sup>48</sup>

### The problem of Bunratty

The Uí Bhriain were senior kin of the Meic Conmara and as lords of Thomond (north Munster) ruled all of modern County Clare. In genealogical terms they claimed to be the main line of the Dál gCais, an ancient tribal grouping based on ancestry from Cas, the reputed fifth-century ancestor of most of the septs of north Munster. Given this hierarchical relationship it is notable that Bunratty Castle far out scaled the chief-seat of the Uí Bhriain at Clonroad.<sup>49</sup> Not only was it the largest castle of this date in Thomond but also the largest in Ireland. We have to account for the fact that the Meic Conmara, nominally a sept of the second rank, appear to be building above their station during the mid-fifteenth century. But just how powerful were they prior to constructing Bunratty and what does such a statement in stone tell us about their status within the wider kin group of the Dál gCais?

The reconstruction of Bunratty may have confirmed a rise in status of the Meic Conmara that began in the fourteenth century. Their role in the internal power struggles of the Uí Bhriain, and the wars against the territorial incursions of the Anglo-Norman colonisers had given them the opportunity to displace many of the other minor septs of east Clare and expand their lineage. In particular, they achieved a political and military status independent of their overlords, forging their own alliances with Anglo-Norman lords and serving as king makers within the Ó Briain dynasty – both in ceremonial terms and otherwise.<sup>50</sup> Their independence from the Uí Bhriain, was most cogently expressed in their construction of the Franciscan friary in the heart of their lordship at Quin. When founded in 1402 by Sioda Cam Mac Conmara, the annals declared that ‘it should be the burial place of himself and his tribe’.<sup>51</sup> Prior to this the family had been buried at the Franciscan friary next to Clonroad (see fig. 2), established much earlier by the Uí Bhriain, where they shared burial space with other junior septs of the Dál gCais.<sup>52</sup>

Although the Uí Bhriain may have retained a nominally ascendant rank within the Dál gCais due their former royal status, their position was weak. As Nic Ghiollamhaith points out, this weakness was acknowledged by a mid-fourteenth-century Anglo-Norman chronicle that refers to Mac Conmara, rather than Ó Briain, as ‘king of Thomond’.<sup>53</sup> A

<sup>47</sup> Twigge, ‘Materials’, Pedigree iii.

<sup>48</sup> RIA MS 24. D.10, p. 36.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Dineley’s seventeenth-century view of the Ó Briain caput at Clonroad shows a tower house of average size, albeit attached to a larger manor house of sixteenth-century date. For a full discussion of Clonroad see Brian Ó Dálaigh, ‘History of an O’Brien Stronghold: Clonroad c.1210-1626’, *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, vol. xxix (1987) pp 16-31.

<sup>50</sup> Nic Ghiollamhaith, ‘Kings and Vassals’, p. 202.

<sup>51</sup> John O’Donovan (ed.), *Annala Rioghachta Éireann: Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four masters from the earliest period to the year 1616*, vol. iv (Dublin, 1851) p. 775; RIA MS. 24.D 10 attributes the construction of the friary to his grandson, also Sioda Cam (d.1444), whose younger brother, Sean (d.1467) apparently built the church.

<sup>52</sup> O’Grady, *Caithreim Thoirdhealbhaigh*, p. 34; Interestingly, despite this shift towards independence, papal records show that the lay patrons of Quin were officially the Uí Bhriain rather than the Meic Conmara, which may have been a residual acknowledgment of their senior rank within the Dál Cais – see Luke McInerney, ‘Clerics and Clansmen: The Vicarages and Rectories of Tradraige in the Fifteenth Century’ *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, 48 (2008) pp 1-21:10-16 (Kilmaleery and Kilnasoolagh).

<sup>53</sup> Nic Ghiollamhaith, ‘Kings and Vassals’, p. 212.



century or so later, Sean Mac Conmara, builder of Bunratty and Knappogue, was lauded as *ardtaoiseach Dál gCais*, a step up from the *ardtaoiseach Chloinne Chuiléin*, which had described his ancestors.<sup>54</sup> The construction during the fifteenth century of impressively scaled chiefry seats at Bunratty and Knappogue suggests a vibrant economy in the lordship during this period, which may have supported their large-scale building projects. Luke McInerney has argued that rising tithes in the area during this period point to a growth in the Gaelic agricultural economy, which the Meic Conmara would have benefitted most from through the rents and tributes they exacted as lords.<sup>55</sup> He has also noted the sept's increasing engagement with the feudal economy and their ability to take advantage of their position between two mercantile cities on the west coast,<sup>56</sup> perhaps a contributing factor in the wealth and power so ostentatiously displayed at Bunratty.

Mac Conmara power declined in the face of the Tudor reconquest, allowing the earl of Thomond to take over Bunratty and reassert his power, as one eighteenth-century commentator noted:

Many lands, it is reported, came to this earl at easy terms, so that gradually he gained a very considerable interest in both the said Baronies, and caused the Barony of Dangen-I-Viggin [the area of Western Clann Chuiléin] to take its denomination (tho' it was the ancient mansion of Macnamara, Dangen-I-viggen being a good castle fortified with a good strong wall round about it, when the said Barony took its name) from Bunratty, and to be called the Barony of Bunratty, to abolish, as one would believe, the memory of those that were lawful inheritors thereof.<sup>57</sup>

In contrast, the chiefry lineage of Mac Conmara Riabhach in east Clann Chuiléin never established themselves so emphatically in material terms. Nor did they have as wide a geographical spread of tower houses as their neighbours in the western lordship. In fact, their castles were sited remarkably close together – four in a single row on the northern fringe of their lordship (fig. 4 – in green) at Tulla, Garruragh, Lismeehan and Fertanemore, in a single parish.<sup>58</sup> None of their surviving tower houses suggest they built anything as large as Bunratty or Knappogue (though admittedly their chief seat at Tulla has been destroyed so is not available for analysis).<sup>59</sup> Nor did they establish a separate religious foundation within their lordship, again suggesting they were of more limited economic means. The information we have shows that two successive generations, a father and son, built their seats at Fertane and Garruragh (fig. 4) in the mid-to-late fifteenth century. Unfortunately, the person listed in RIA MS 24 D 10 as builder of Tulla, the principal chiefry seat, does not feature in the genealogies. The builder of the relatively modest tower house at Garruragh married the daughter of Connheadha Mac Conmara of Bunratty demonstrating an attempt to forge links by marriage between these two chiefry lines.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>54</sup> B. Ó Cuiv, 'A fragment of Irish annals', *Celtica*, 14 (1981) pp 83-104; John O'Donovan, *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland* vol. III, sub anno 1373.7, p. 658.

<sup>55</sup> See 'Clerics and Clansmen', p. 18; for a wider survey of the economy of the Mac Conmara lordship see McInerney, 'The west Clann Chuiléin lordship in 1586', pp 34-8.

<sup>56</sup> McInerney, 'The west Clann Chuiléin lordship in 1586', p. 48.

<sup>57</sup> RIA MS 24 D 10, 34-36.

<sup>58</sup> This lineage built castles at Garruragh, Fertane and Lismeehan – see Twigge, 'Materials', pedigree XVI.

<sup>59</sup> There are substantial remains of Garruragh, which appear fifteenth century in date. Only one wall survives of Fertane and that is fragmentary, though it looks somewhat unusual in character. Lismeehan would appear to be of sixteenth century date.

<sup>60</sup> Twigge, 'Materials' pedigree xvi; for Ruadhri's castle at Teerovannan, compare with builders list in RIA 24 D 10.



Their failure to build extensively across their lordship in the way that the Mac Conmara Fionn had done may explain why the line of Mac Conmara Riabhach did not retain its supremacy. Their authority was challenged in the sixteenth century by a distantly related line, the *slíocht Sir Sean Mac Conmara*, who co-operated with the new English administration.<sup>61</sup> The emerging power of this rival kin group is represented by a second grouping of four tower houses further south, built almost equidistant from each other in a square formation over two generations (fig. 4 – in grey) around Doon Lough. The documentary sources attribute the earliest of these, Moanogeenagh, to Maccon, a third cousin of Mac Conmara Fionn of Bunratty, sometime in the second half of the fifteenth century. His son, Síoda, made a claim for the chieftainship of eastern Clann Chuiléin and, according to the RIA castle list, built three new castles (Doon, Trough and Mountallon), a considerable investment if it is to be believed. His brother, Ruadhri, is also credited with the castle at Teerovannan, which is part of this group. Síoda's son, Sean, inherited the title and features as the head of this line in the late-sixteenth-century genealogies.<sup>62</sup> There is plenty of evidence that the cost of chiefry castle construction in Gaelic Ireland was imposed upon other freeholders within the territory and Síoda's sudden construction of these castles may reflect a new coercive power over other freeholders in the lordship.<sup>63</sup> Future archaeological research may be able to verify whether these attributions are likely to be accurate in terms of date.

### Castle Building by Junior Lineages

The distribution of tower houses in east Clare also provides information about the status of more junior lines of the Meic Conmara. If we compare the position of the *slíocht Sir Sean* to kin similarly positioned within the overall Mac Conmara kin group, they seem fairly typical, prior to their attempt to claim the lordship of east Clann Chuiléin. Sir Sean's line was one of four lineages descended from the younger brothers of Síoda Mac Conmara (d.1406), the father of the builder of Bunratty (see fig. 4 – grey with boxed outline). Each of these lineages constructed a single castle three-to-five generations distant from their common ancestor – in the mid-to-late fifteenth century in dispersed locations, and, with the exception of the *slíocht Sir Sean*, made no further attempts at tower house construction.<sup>64</sup> The most easterly of the lineages is that of Sir Sean, the progeny of a second marriage.<sup>65</sup>

While the close grouping of the castles of the line of Sir Sean might be explained by their concentration in the hands of a single individual, elsewhere such proximity seems to reflect divisions of land within a lineage that has fragmented with the passing of time. For example, there is a cluster of four tower houses in the parish of Kilnoe, in the north-east of the eastern lordship (fig. 4 – orange); three built very close together (Coolreaghmore, Coolreaghbeg and Caherhurly) and a fourth further to the west (Ballyhinch). According to the documentary sources, they were all constructed in a single generation in the mid-fifteenth century by two sub-lineages – the *slíocht Maccon Fionn* and the *slíocht Pilib mac Cumara* – who shared a great grandfather.<sup>66</sup> Each sub-lineage erected two tower houses; in one instance, both were the work of a single member of the group – pre-

<sup>61</sup> P. White, *The History of Clare and the Dalcassian Clans of Tipperary, Limerick and Galway* (Dublin, 1893) p. 177.

<sup>62</sup> Twigge, 'Materials', vol. xii, pedigree x.

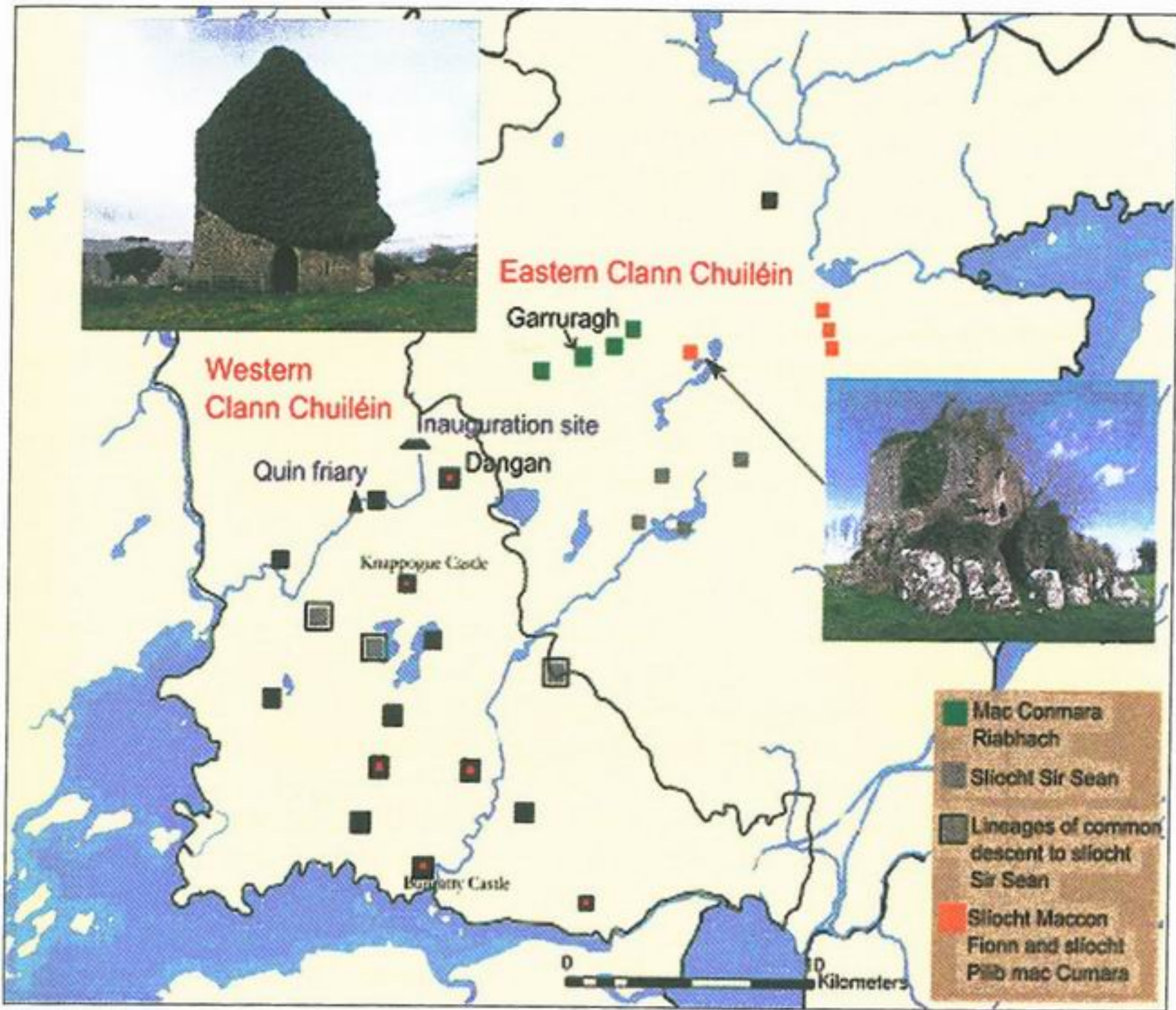
<sup>63</sup> This tradition of imposing the costs of chiefry residences on the territory as a whole is referred to in a number of different early sources – see Loeber 'An architectural history of Gaelic castles', p. 309; Tierney 'Pedigrees in Stone', p. 83.

<sup>64</sup> Twigge, 'Materials', vol. xii, pedigree ii.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Twigge, 'Materials', vol. xii, pedigrees xi and xii.





**Fig. 4** Castle distributions of selected kin groups in eastern Clann Chuiléin. Top Left: Garruragh Castle, a seat of the Mac Conmara Riabhach - now reduced to half its height. Right: Ballyhinch Castle – only the ground floor survives

sumably the eldest of that line –, and in the other, by two brothers. They had to go back four generations to find a common male ancestor with the senior line of the Mac Conmara Fionn, Connheada, builder of Dangan-i-viggen. Of these four tower houses only Ballyhinch partly survives and is of average dimensions, though now much reduced in height.<sup>67</sup>

The gavelling or equal division of lands was the traditional mode of inheritance in Gaelic Ireland and where only a single castle was built within a lineage several related kin groups may continue to claim an interest in it. The *slíocht* Aonach Uí Bhfoinn, were a minor Mac Conmara lineage, distantly related to other lines (their common ancestor was Lochlainn Mac Conmara, d.1312). The castle-builders list attributes the construction of their tower house at Enagh to two brothers living during the late fifteenth century. By the late sixteenth century the lands around it were occupied by two separate lineages some five generations apart.<sup>68</sup> The senior lineage at this time was not descended from the

<sup>67</sup> Only part of the ground floor of the castle of Ballyhinch survives.

<sup>68</sup> Twigge 'Materials', Pedigree xvii. Twigge's identification of the builders of Enagh is likely correct as too many names are given in RIA MS 24 D 10. His identification of the builder of *Daingean breac* as their younger uncle seems unlikely as the castle does not appear amongst the possessions of this lineage at a later date.



builders but rather the builder's uncle. In neighbouring North Tipperary, Kenneth Nicholls has outlined the case of a similarly minor lineage occupying land around a single castle over several generations until a legal dispute arose over how the land should be divided – the question being whether a split of the lands had actually been made in the past between the two sub-lineages. Both sub-lineages shared a great grandfather and so were second cousins by the late sixteenth century. It was decreed by the brehon that they should divide the land but that certain tributes should be paid annually to the senior descendant by his cousins. According to the ruling, the senior would also get to live in the castle but his cousins would have the right to maintain residences inside its bawn. It was also decreed that there would be legal penalties imposed on any who gave 'impudence, insult or scandal' to the senior or his wife.<sup>69</sup> It appears then that tower houses provide focal points for larger settlements of related kinship groups. In 1584 the freeholders on lands around Dysert O'Dea castle (in northern County Clare) were told that they would only hold their lands if they:

come and build their houses, and keep their respective residences in Dishert afforesd in the houseplots and garden plots to each of them severally appoynted ...to spend their respective livelihoods in their severall dwellings together, to the end and intention that they may be ready at all tymes and houres to aide and assiste one another against the assault and incursions of foreigners.<sup>70</sup>

We have evidence in Gaelic territories in parts of counties Tipperary and Clare of not just the partial inheritance of land but the partial sale or lease of tower-house-type castles.<sup>71</sup> But whether tower houses were actually built to accommodate a wide kinship network or not remains unclear. The buildings themselves, designed as four or five floors of accommodation with a hall at the top, suggest that several related, yet distinct, groups might occupy a tower house if the need arose – particularly before people became more concerned with privacy in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The Ballycapple evidence points to more exclusive use of such towers by the senior member of the sept and his immediate family, though whether this was a recent development at that point is uncertain.<sup>72</sup>

### **Tower Houses of Professional Lineages**

It was a commonly accepted occurrence that the descendants of the most powerful would eventually push out weaker lineages – and the landscapes of medieval Ireland were littered with place-names that recall the one time presence of obscure and vanquished

<sup>69</sup> Kenneth Nicholls, 'Gaelic landownership in Tipperary in the light of the surviving Irish deeds' in William Nolan (ed.), *Tipperary: History and Society* (Dublin, 1985) pp 92-103; Loeber, 'An Architectural History of Gaelic Castles', p. 276.

<sup>70</sup> John Ainsworth (ed.), *The Inchiquin Manuscripts* (Dublin, 1961) p. 275.

<sup>71</sup> See for example the conveyance by Mahown McRory O'Loughlen of the lower half of his castle to Donough O'Brien in 1607, Ainsworth, 'Inchiquin Manuscripts', p. 305. Also the leasing of a rooms in the castle of Tiredagh to two different tenants by Concobhar mac Sean Mac Conmara, see RIA MS 24. D. 10, p. 47; for a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon in County Clare and elsewhere, see Rory Sherlock, 'Cross-cultural occurrences of mutations in tower house architecture: evidence of cultural homogeneity in late medieval Ireland', *The Journal of Irish Archaeology*, 15 (2006) pp 73-91:85-7.

<sup>72</sup> On the changing nature of the tower house hall and the issue of privacy, see Rory Sherlock, 'The Later Medieval Fireplaces of County Cork', *JCHAS*, 105 (2000) pp 207-30:226; Tierney, 'Pedigrees in Stone', pp 135-6; Rory Sherlock, 'The evolution of the tower-house as a domestic space', in Elizabeth FitzPatrick and James Kelly (eds), *Domestic Life in Ireland* (Dublin, 2011) pp 115-140:132-5.



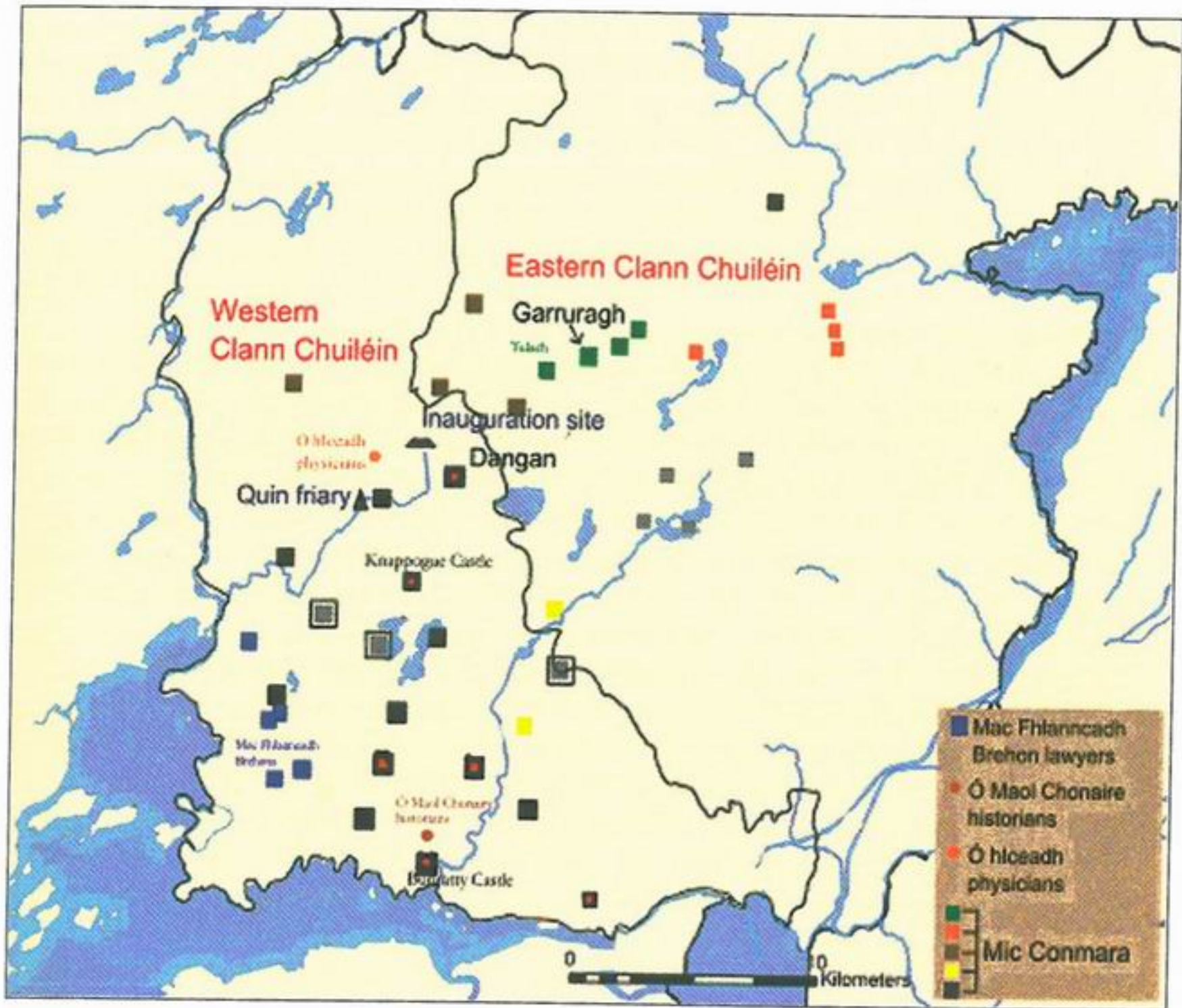


Fig. 5 Castles and settlements of professional septs with selected Meic Conmara septs in the territory of Clann Chuiléin

families, distant kin to the surviving occupiers.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, there is an exception to this rule. The lay learned septs within the Meic Conmara territories seem to have occupied land in the richer western lordship of Mac Conmara Fionn, although they were only distantly related to the ruling lord. Hereditary allegiances between powerful ruling lineages and minor septs, to whom they were distantly related, seem to have been a key part of the administrative infrastructure of Gaelic lordship.<sup>74</sup> The late-medieval Mac Fhlannchadha sept of brehon lawyers claimed kinship to the Meic Conmara through a tenth-century ancestor yet maintained a powerful status within the territory and built no less than five tower houses along the western lands of the lordship of west Clann Chuiléin in a single group (see fig. 5).<sup>75</sup>

The evidence of the castle-builder lists suggests that the Mac Fhlannchadha sept built their own castles, and operated on their own lands in much the same way as any other

<sup>73</sup> K.W. Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicized Ireland in the Middle Ages*, (2nd ed., Dublin, 2003) pp 18-19.

<sup>74</sup> For a detailed discussion of the lands held by such septs in the Mac Conmara lordship see Luke McNerney, 'The West Clann Chuiléin Lordship in 1586: Evidence from a Forgotten Inquisition', *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, 48 (2008) pp 33-62; Luke McNerney, 'A Mac Fhlannchadha Fosterage Document from c. 1580', *The Irish Genealogist*, vol. 13:2 (2011) pp 93-128.

<sup>75</sup> RIA MS 24. D. 10 pp 70-2; Tierney 'Pedigrees in Stone', pp 236-40.



freeholder in the territory, though their income must have been considerably increased by their professional activities.<sup>76</sup> The Mac Fhlannchadha pedigrees, when cross referenced with RIA MS 24 D 10, suggest the sept didn't begin building tower houses until after 1500.<sup>77</sup> If we believe this source, there was a very close familial relationship between the builders. 'Connor Mac Murtagh Mac Hugh Clanchy', a contemporary of Cumheada Mac Conmara, to whom the construction of Cappagh Castle is attributed, is credited with the construction of Urlanmore, the first Mac Fhlannchadha castle to be erected, according to the RIA castle-builders list.<sup>78</sup> Two castles to the south of Urlanmore, Ballynaclogh and Clonloghan were reputedly both built by Connor's son, Donogh, while the castle to the north, Ballysallagh, was built by his other son, also named Connor. However, Urlan Maol, a castle situated immediately to the east of Urlanmore is attributed to 'Teige mac Murtogh mac Teige Clanchy', a figure who does not appear in the pedigrees and whose name suggests no immediate kinship to the Urlanmore line – despite the spatial proximity of the two.<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, the close relationship between most of these builders suggests a sustained programme of castle building over two generations within a single dominant lineage of the sept. By the late sixteenth century, the sept were also in possession of the former Mac Conmara tower house of Mooghane, further to the north.<sup>80</sup>

According to the list of castle builders, Urlanmore was the earliest amongst the kin group and may have retained a senior status amongst the sept, in the same way that Dangan did for the Meic Conmara. In 1570 it was inhabited by 'Conoghor oig mac Clanchie brehon' and in 1585 it was the residence of Donnchadh MacFhlannchadha, chief of his name.<sup>81</sup> Their collective location northwest of the chiefry castles of Bunratty, Cappagh and Dromline is perhaps testimony to the extent to which they were protected by Meic Conmara patronage. It is noteworthy that the Mac Fhlannchadha lineage serving under the Meic Conmara built more intensively than that under the Uí Bhriain (the latter occupied two tower houses in the barony of Corcomroe and one in the barony of Inchiquin, west Clare), which is perhaps testament to the independent power of Mac Conmara Fionn.<sup>82</sup> Such patronage was no doubt important to secure long-term loyalty. When the Uí Bhriain acquired Bunratty in the later sixteenth century, at the expense of the Meic Conmara, they continued to patronise their own Mac Fhlannchadha brehons in west Clare, with whom they had a longstanding relationship.<sup>83</sup>

The destruction of many of the castles built by professional septs in Ireland is a great misfortune as we cannot at present tell if there was anything particularly distinctive about them.<sup>84</sup> Few such septs can have built as extensively as the MacFhlannchadha, though

<sup>76</sup> See Ryan, 'Survey of Monuments in the Barony of Bunratty Lower, Co. Clare'.

<sup>77</sup> Twigge, 'Materials', vol. viii. For a more detailed account of this sept, see Luke McNerney, 'A Mac Fhlannchadha Fosterage Document'.

<sup>78</sup> RIA MS. 24. D. 10; Twigge 'Materials', vol. viii and vol. xii; see also RIA MS 23 M 17.

<sup>79</sup> See Royal Irish Academy RIA MS 24 D 10.

<sup>80</sup> R.W. Twigge, 'Edward White's Description of Thomond in 1574,' *North Munster Archaeological Society Journal*, I, no.2 (1910), p. 79; McNerney 'A Mac Fhlannchadha Fosterage Document', p. 93.

<sup>81</sup> Martin Breen, 'A 1570 List of Castles in County Clare', *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, 36 (1995) p. 132; R.W. Twigge, 'Edward White's Description of Thomond in 1574,' p. 79; A Martin Freeman (ed.), *Compassion Booke of Conought* (Dublin, 1936) p. 11.

<sup>82</sup> Twigge, 'Edward White's Description of Thomond in 1574,' pp 81-4.

<sup>83</sup> In his will the 4th Earl of Thomond requested his sons look after Boetius Clancy – probably Boetius Clancy of Knockfinn. See Brian Ó Dálaigh, 'A Comparative Study of the Wills of the First and Fourth Earls of Thomond', *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, 34 (1992), p. 61.

<sup>84</sup> For a limited survey of the castles of learned septs, see Tierney 'Pedigrees in Stone?', pp 196-263.



none of their towers survive in good condition and the principal seat of the lineage, at Urlanmore, collapsed c.1990.<sup>85</sup> Surviving photographs show a hall-like structure with a tower at one end, which W.G. Ryan interpreted as a two phase structure of fifteenth and sixteenth century provenance respectively.<sup>86</sup> Urlan maol Castle, next to it, has the remains of a small vaulted ground floor chamber, but its original form is obscure. The septs' other three castles at Ballynaclogh, Clonloghan and Ballysallagh were also demolished making comparative analysis difficult without archaeological investigation. Even the recovery of ground plans would be very interesting.

Despite the absence of standing built remains, the documentary record of tower house sites, when considered in a social context, is quite revealing about the relative material status of different hereditary learned septs. A comparison of the Mac Fhlannchadha legal family and the Ó Maoil Chonaire chroniclers is instructive in this regard. The Ó Maoil Chonaire sept maintained a well-known school of history on the fringes of the Bunratty Castle deerpark at Ard Kyle (see fig. 5), but there is no evidence that the sept built a tower house at this site or anywhere else.<sup>87</sup> One member of the sept appears in possession of Rossmanagher in 1570, but the construction of the castle is attributed to the Meic Conmara, suggesting it was a late acquisition.<sup>88</sup> This suggests a distinction in material status between the legal and history professions within the Mac Conmara lordship. Looking wider afield in Clare, it is similarly notable that only a single castle is recorded in the hands of the Macraith sept, hereditary poets at Islandmagrath, in the neighbouring barony ruled by the Uí Bhriain.<sup>89</sup> The Mac Bruaideadh sept of poets of the 'Contention of the Bards' fame do not appear as castle holders in the various late-sixteenth-century lists, though they acquired a castle at Doonogan in the barony of Ibrickan in the early seventeenth century.<sup>90</sup> Another learned family living in the Meic Conmara lordship, the Ó hIcfeadh sept of physicians at Ballyhickey, may have occupied a tower house in the fifteenth century, though the evidence for this is unreliable.<sup>91</sup> The medical sept of Ó Nialláin possessed three tower houses in Clann Chuiléin in the late sixteenth century but these were acquired at the expense of the Meic Conmara (to whom at least two of them are attributed in the castle-builders list), under the influence of the earl of Thomond.<sup>92</sup> However, the ecclesiastical Mac an Oirchinnigh sept, a cadet branch of the Meic Conmara dating from the twelfth century, occupied two tower houses, which they are credited with building.<sup>93</sup> Similar evidence of tower house occupation by ecclesiastical and brehon

<sup>85</sup> R. Ua Cróinín, 'Recent collapse of Urlanmore tower house', *The Other Clare*, 23 (1999) p. 53.

<sup>86</sup> [http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/archaeology/ryan/part4\\_chapter41\\_urlanmore\\_castle.htm](http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/archaeology/ryan/part4_chapter41_urlanmore_castle.htm). Accessed December 2012.

<sup>87</sup> Edmund Curtis, 'The O'Maoilchonaire family: unpublished letters from Sir Edward Conry, Bart., to H.F. Hore Esq., 1864,' *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, 19 (1940-1), pp 118-46; Brian Ó Dálaigh, 'The Uí Mhaoilchonaire of Thomond', *Studia Hibernica*, vol. 35 (2009-2010), pp 45-68.

<sup>88</sup> Breen, 'A 1570 List of Castles in County Clare', p. 132; RIA 24 D 10.

<sup>89</sup> Twigge, 'Edward White's Description of Thomond', p. 84.

<sup>90</sup> Luke McNerney, 'Lettermoylan of Clann Bhruaideadha: A résumé of their landholding, topography & history' *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, 52 (2012) p. 108.

<sup>91</sup> One manuscript records a castle having been built in the C15 – though no record of it survives on the ground or indeed in the late C16 lists of castles in the territory – making its one time existence quite suspect. See J. Hickey, 'The O'Hickeys: hereditary physicians to the O'Briens of Thomond and some of their descendants', *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, 8 (1958) pp 38-41.

<sup>92</sup> Twigge, 'Edward White's Description of Thomond', p. 79; Tierney, 'Pedigrees in Stone', pp 245-6.

<sup>93</sup> Royal Irish Academy MS 24. D. 10. Twigge, Pedigree, II. For a full account of this sept see Luke McNerney 'Survey of the McNerney Sept of Thomond', *The Other Clare*, 31 (2007) & 32 (2008); [http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/genealogy/don\\_tran/fam\\_his/mcinerneys/mcinerneys.htm](http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/genealogy/don_tran/fam_his/mcinerneys/mcinerneys.htm)



septs exists in Ormond, but for the larger part it took place there very late and as a result of political upheaval that saw the decline of the Uí Chinnéidigh.<sup>94</sup>

Professional lineages such as the Meic Fhlannchadha, distantly related as they were to their overlords, must have provided the Mac Conmara *taoiseach* with an important administrative and social buffer to his closer relatives. It is likely that other minor septs found employment in and around chiefry castles for the same reason – as, for example, happened in the Mac Carthaigh castles in Muskerry in County Cork.<sup>95</sup> An early-fourteenth-century rental for the Meic Conmara tells us that their hereditary stewards were from the Ó Rodain sept, distant kin of the Clann Chuiléin, though they do not appear amongst castle-occupiers in the late-sixteenth-century records.<sup>96</sup> Recent research has argued that the prevalence of obscure Gaelic families in Quin parish provided labour on the mensal lands of the Mac Conmara Fionn, none of whom seemed to have had sufficient means or status to occupy tower houses themselves.<sup>97</sup>

### Conclusion

More detailed studies undertaken with an eye to kinship relations may allow us to comment more fully on how the built environment contributed to the social fabric of the late medieval lordship. As a comparison between fig. 1 and fig. 5 shows, it has not been possible to chart kin affiliations for every tower house in the territory due to the tentative nature of the sources. But even a crude assessment of tower-house siting and scale shows something of the comparative material condition of at least some of the Gaelic-Irish septs and their sub-lineages. Kinship relations amongst the higher echelon of Gaelic society were clearly distinct from those in lower social ranks by virtue of their material wealth. It would appear that the ruling lineage of Mac Conmara Fionn, for example, built castles in greater numbers, earlier in date, larger in size and at greater distances apart than any of the other lineages within the sept. Their spatial relationship with key sites of temporal and religious power is also significant, while their greater numbers allowed generous provision of accommodation for the lord's immediate kin group, giving a wide reach to his influence. Such arrangements in eastern Clann Chuiléin are less visible and the range of tower house construction by the ruling lineage appears more limited there.

The large scale of Bunratty remains something of a mystery, and it would be interesting to know more about its role in the power structure of Clann Chuiléin, as well as its relationship to other chiefry seats at Dangan-I-viggen and Knappogue. On the one hand it may attest to the power of the Mac Conmara during the period of its construction, but the presence of the Uí Bhriain there in the sixteenth century may suggest they had some long term interest in it too.

Tower house construction was, however, not solely the prerogative of the territories' lords. The expansion of the Mac Conmara sept in the fourteenth century saw the construction of tower houses by several junior branches. Though some built no more than a single tower, retained over generations within the one line, other junior lineages managed to construct several in groups, with closely related kin living in close proximity to each

<sup>94</sup> Tierney, 'Pedigrees in Stone', pp 253-62.

<sup>95</sup> See Herbert W. Gillman, 'Sir Cormac McTeige MacCarthy and the sept lands of Muskerry, county Cork, with a historical pedigree', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, 1 (1892) pp 193-200; see also Tierney, 'Pedigrees in Stone', vol. I, pp 101-08.

<sup>96</sup> Twigg, 'Materials', Pedigree I; see Nugent, *The Gaelic Clans of County Clare*, pp 87-92.

<sup>97</sup> Luke McInerney, 'The west Clann Chuiléin lordship in 1586', p. 36.



other on lands that were either shared or came to be divided. Whether these castles were constructed as protection from the depredations of their more distant kin, with an eye to attack from outside the lordship, or simply as material statements of their own wealth and status is uncertain; perhaps a combination of all these. As solid visible statements in the landscape, they must have consolidated a sept's claims to their lands, expressing a visual and material corollary to their genealogical identity. As minor lineages, their holdings were vulnerable to the incursions of more powerful kin and perhaps for this reason the names of castle builders were carefully nurtured in family memory. Violations of such claims may explain why, in a few cases, the castle builder's name does not equate at all with the pedigree of the occupying sept. It is equally possible, of course, that the lists of builders contain some wilful distortions on the part of later land grabbers.

The existence of tower houses built by professional learned septs is an important but little-acknowledged element of the late-medieval landscape.<sup>98</sup> In Clann Chuiléin, the legal dynasty of the Mac Fhlannchadha were distinguished by both the number of their castles and their clustered grouping in the southwest of the lordship. There are few parallels for castle-building in such numbers by a learned sept anywhere else in Ireland and future investigations might attempt to look at the building activities of such families in a wider context. While the poor survival rate of their tower houses in Clann Chuiléin and other lordships is unfortunate, such is their importance in understanding late-medieval Irish society that further comparative studies would be worthwhile.

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<sup>98</sup> For a fuller treatment of this issue see Tierney, 'Pedigrees in Stone', vol. ii, chap. 7.



