

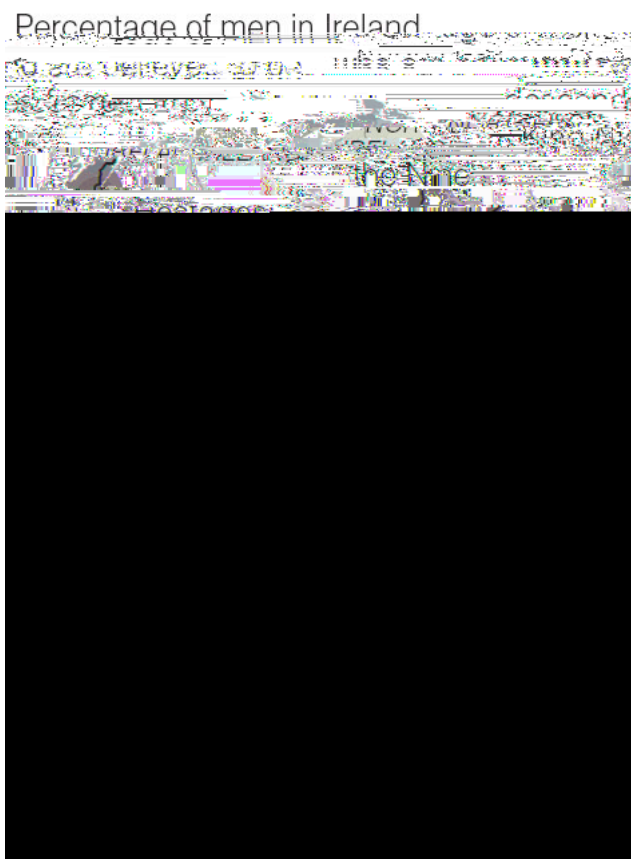
If Irish Claim Nobility, Science May Approve

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.



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

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.

