

The McNeills of Ireland, a Y-DNA Perspective

Alex Buchanan – June 2020

The surname McNeill, in various spellings, has existed in Ireland for a long time. It has been prominent in Co Antrim since the 1600s, when the settlement of Scots in the North began.

Many McNeills with Irish ancestry cling to a belief that their ancestors came from Barra, but Y-DNA testing has found that only a very small number of Irish McNeills came from Barra, the great majority came from the Kintyre region in Argyll.

1. McNeills from Argyll. The islands and shores of western Argyll have provided the largest number of McNeill settlers in Ireland.

(a) The most prominent of the Scottish McNeills in Ireland are the descendants of Lachlan McNeill (1611-1694) of Tirfergus (I1a-BY48593), in southern Kintyre. These families held estates in Co Antrim and Londonderry in the north and Co Louth in the south.

(b) A small McNeill family (R1b-BY159782) from Co Antrim with very close links to McNeills in Kilmodan, Argyll. Kilmodan is thought to be their home parish.

2. MacNeils from Barra. Only two cases of migration from Barra to Ireland are known but there could be others that have not yet come to light.

(a) Just recently, three men with known ancestry in Dublin or nearby parts of eastern Ireland were found to have Y-DNA (R1b-A11118) matching the Chiefly MacNeil family of Barra. One of these men has a family legend that tells of his MacNeil ancestor escaping from the threat of the British Army and quietly taking up residence in Dublin. This is almost certainly a reference to the period when the Chief of Barra was captured and imprisoned in London.

(b) Another MacNeil family, this one belonging to the lineage of the hereditary Pipers to the Chief of Barra (R1a-A10884), settled in Co Down about 1700.

3. McNeills who are R1b-M222. These families are difficult to place as they occur on both sides of the Irish Sea but almost certainly originated in Ireland. Many of them were probably originally O'Neills as M222 is accepted as the Y-genetic signature of the Irish King Niall of the Nine Hostages and his kin. There is evidence that the names O'Neill and McNeill were interchangeable depending on the social pressures of the locality. This group awaits further research.