

The Milesian Migration

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The history of the Celts has been written about throughout the centuries and encoded into the histories and genealogies of the people. Today when we look at the myths, legends, languages and traditions of the Irish, Welsh, Scottish, and English people we can begin to detect the remains of a once unified Celtic society. The stone circles found throughout Ireland and the United Kingdom clearly record a tradition once practiced by a powerful civilization. Across the British Isles, the languages spoken today and recorded in the past can be traced to a common Goidelic language once spoken by the ancient ancestors of the Manx, Irish, and Scottish people, and also a common Brythonic language which once would have united the people in Britain. These antiquitous languages themselves then seem to stem from an even older language which would have belonged to the ancestors of the Celts who first settled in the British Isles. But from where did those ancestors come?

During the Christianization of the Celtic people, their Pagan origin stories seem to have been preserved. The 10th century work, *Life of St. Cathroe of Metz*, records stories about the settlers of Scotland having battled their way across Ireland after arriving there from Asia Minor. Similarly the pedigrees of all the Irish kings and clans stem from the famed Milesius, the great warrior king who settled the Irish people coming from the Iberian Peninsula, who was himself the descendant of the kings of Scythia — a kingdom historically situated adjacent to Asia Minor, right across the Black Sea. Hence we have at least two closely related cultures each claiming origins in the Near East. Then in Wales we of course have King Arthur. Although speculative, it has been proposed that Arthur could have been a Sarmatian equestrian,^{1,2} again a story connecting the people to the Near East (Sarmatia being the neighboring kingdom to Scythia, see Figure 2). So between these origin stories, we are left with a tantalizing thought indeed: the ancient ancestors of the people in the British Isles migrating from the Near East and in particular, the Pontic – Caspian Steppe. If this is true and our British Isles Celts descend from the ancient people of the Near East, then surely we should be able to find evidence of it in our genetics.

Although there is clear evidence showing linguistic and genetic relationships between all the native peoples of the British Isles, a thorough discussion of that analysis is far outside the scope of this article, but is certainly a subject worthy of further investigation. That said, this article will be focusing on the Irish origin story of the ancient mythological figure called Milesius. It is for the migration story associated to him which I use the term, *Milesian migration*.

Let's begin with the traditional Irish pedigrees of the Gaelic Chieftains and we see a history preserved in the Christianized lines of descent leading up to the progenitor of the Irish royal clans, Milesius. The name Milesius has been argued to really be a fictional name coming

¹ Higham, Nicholas J. (2018). *King Arthur: The Making of the Legend*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press. pp. 262–63.

² Snyder, Christopher A. (2006). "Arthurian Origins". In Lacy, Norris J. (ed.). *A history of Arthurian scholarship*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer. pp. 1–18.

from the Latin phrase *Miles Hispaniae*,³ which translates as “a soldier of Spain.” Being in Latin, it was coined after the 5th century when Latin was brought to Ireland and the Christianized genealogies were first produced. However, Milesius is also mentioned in the 8th century text, *The*

Book of Invasions, as a Spanish king who invaded Ireland. As an invader who brought Iberian blood to the Island and established the families who would come to ruler over the conquered people, it was Milesius and his sons who established the new royal clans. Was this a medieval myth, or was it actually based on some truth?

Although we may never know how the medieval monastics came to know what they knew, it does appear that this Milesian conquest story could be rooted

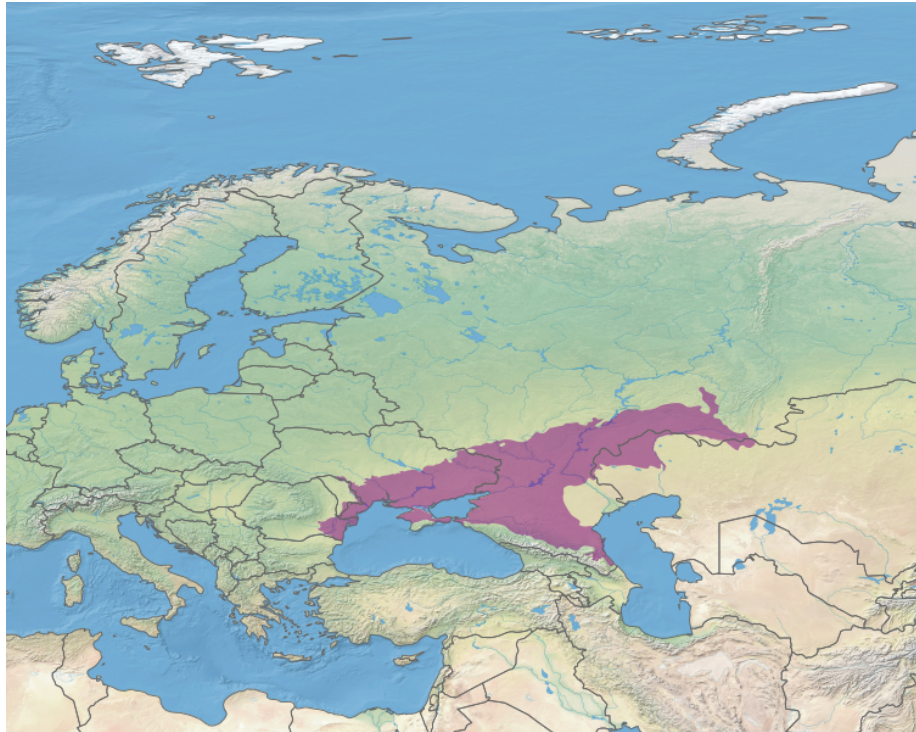


Fig. 1: Terpsichores. “Ecoregion PA0814: Pontic Steppe.” *Pontic–Caspian Steppe*, Wikipedia, 24 Oct. 2012, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ecoregion_PA0814.svg.

in truth. Although Milesius is almost certainly a fictional character, it could be that “he” embodies a larger migration event; whether it be a peaceful transition, or a conquest. Trinity College Dublin’s Smurfit Institute of Genetics has been able to demonstrate the Y-DNA evidence which actually supports such a Milesian migration. The research done by his team definitively demonstrated that the patrilineal Y-DNA of the modern Irish people is most closely related to the populations native to the northern Iberian peninsula, particularly the Basque Country. Furthermore, he’s also studied certain Irish animal populations and concluded that “the Irish badgers are Spanish, but the British badgers are not. ... It seems to me that most animals in Ireland came by boat. There seems to have been some communication with southern Europe.”⁴ Import of people and animals from Spain surely supports the idea that there was a Spanish migration into Ireland in the past.

³ Williams, Mark (2018). *Ireland's Immortals: A History of the Gods of Irish Myth*. Princeton University Press. p. 139.

⁴ Ahlstrom, Dick. “Genetic Studies Show Our Closest Relatives Are Found in Galicia and the Basque Region.” *The Irish Times*, 16 Feb. 2009.



Fig. 2: Dbachmann. “Scythia-Parthia 100BC” *Scythia*, Wikipedia, 2006, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Scythia-Parthia_100_BC.png.

So far the medieval Irish pedigrees seem to have preserved an ancient cultural memory of some influx of people from Spain. But the monastics, needing to legitimize the royals in their newly Christianized genealogies, went one step further and continued these pedigrees through the kings of Gothia, also known as Septimania (southern France), Cimmeria (approximately the Ukraine), and Scythia (the Pontic – Caspian steppe), back to the biblical Tower of Babel and ultimately Japhet, son of Noah.

However, we can delve deeper into this history and start to uncover the genetic and geographical origins of the Milesian migration. I worked with the McCarthy Surname Study a few years ago and we discovered something new my Y-DNA contained a SNP (single nucleotide polymorphism) not yet seen before and marked a very particular branch of the McCarthy Reagh sept. Knowing that is a princely family, we can then use my own results to analyze the line of genetic mutations going back thousands of years.

There are only three known iterations today of this new McCarthy Reagh SNP, called R-BY7779. Known to have emerged most likely in the 14th century, the R-BY7779 haplogroup stems from R-L51 (R1b1a1a2a1) which itself seems to have most likely emerged sometime around 4100 BCE. Then R-L51 descended from R-L23 (R1b1a1a2a) which had emerged about 300 years earlier. This haplogroup was the most recently known mutation to occur to its parent haplogroup, called R-M269, which emerged about 13,300 years ago. So while there are about 13 millennia between the emergence of R-M269 and R-L23, we don't need to look very far into the genetic past for our answers. A human male, known as 'I0124 (Samara)' was a hunter-gatherer

from Samara and lived between the years 5640-5555 cal BCE, just before the emergence of the R-L51 haplogroup. Sure enough, after sequencing the DNA of I0124 researchers determined he was a Neolithic male who “belonged to haplogroup R1b1” and “was ancestral for both the downstream haplogroup R1b1a1 (M478:23444054T→C) and R1b1a2 (M269:22739367T→C).”⁵ In other words, I0124 was an ancestor of the people belonging to the R-L23 haplogroup — the Irish!

So I0124 was a Samaran and the neolithic ancestor of most of the Irish. So does this match the Milesian migration story? Simply stated: yes. Samara is a region which genetic genealogists define as being centered on the Samara Bend of the Volga River — right in the middle of the ancient kingdom of Scythia! But if the Milesian story is to hold true, then the Samaran I0124 would also need to be the ancestor of a group of people concentrated in Spain.

We now move along the prehistoric timeline only about half a millennium, and we find another Neolithic male, identified as ‘I0410 (Spain).’ This man was alive sometime between 5178-5066 cal BCE and was again ancestral for R1b1a1 and R1b1a2, along with two more new haplogroups R1b1c2 and R1b1c3.⁶ Similarly he is an ancestor of the R-L23 haplogroup, but importantly, given the presence of two new mutations in the form of R1b1c2 and R1b1c3, he is also a descendant of the Samaran man. And now we have proof of patrilineal descent from a Scythian, which half a millennium later is located in Spain! Now, to be fair, the researchers point out that it’s possible that either this “Early Neolithic Spanish individual was a descendant of a Neolithic migrant from the Near East that introduced this lineage to western Europe, or (ii) there was a very sparse distribution of haplogroup R1b in European hunter-gatherers and early farmers, so the lack of its detection in the published literature may reflect its occurrence at very low frequency.”⁷

Considering R-L51 is concentrated today in southern France and Northern Italy (i.e. Gothia), R-L23 is descended from R-M269 which is shown in Spain and ultimately descending from people in Samara (i.e. Scythia) right in the middle of the Pontic–Caspian steppe, the genetic evidence clearly supports the medieval pedigrees listing the Irish royals as descendants of a Spanish migrant who descended from people in southern France (Gothia), who in turn descended from people in Scythia. Furthermore, using the calibrated dates of the Spanish and Samaran individuals we can estimate when the Milesian migration could have occurred. The Milesian ancestors would necessarily be in Samara sometime around 5598 BC,⁸ so the Milesian migration would have been no sooner than the 6th millennium BC.

Interestingly, we know that people were thriving in Ireland as early as 10,500 BC.⁹ So is there evidence to support the idea that Spanish migrant moved into Ireland five and half millennia later? The Irish Neolithic Ballynahatty woman (3343–3020 cal BC) and the Irish

⁵ Haak, W., Lazaridis, I., Patterson, N. *et al.* Massive migration from the steppe was a source for Indo-European languages in Europe. *Nature* **522**, 207–211 (2015), <https://www.biorxiv.org/content/10.1101/013433v1.full>

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Haplogroup YTree v9.01.00. *R1b YTree*, 18 Feb. 2021, www.yfull.com/tree/R1b/

⁹ “Earliest Evidence of Humans in Ireland.” *BBC News*, BBC, 21 Mar. 2016, www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-35863186.

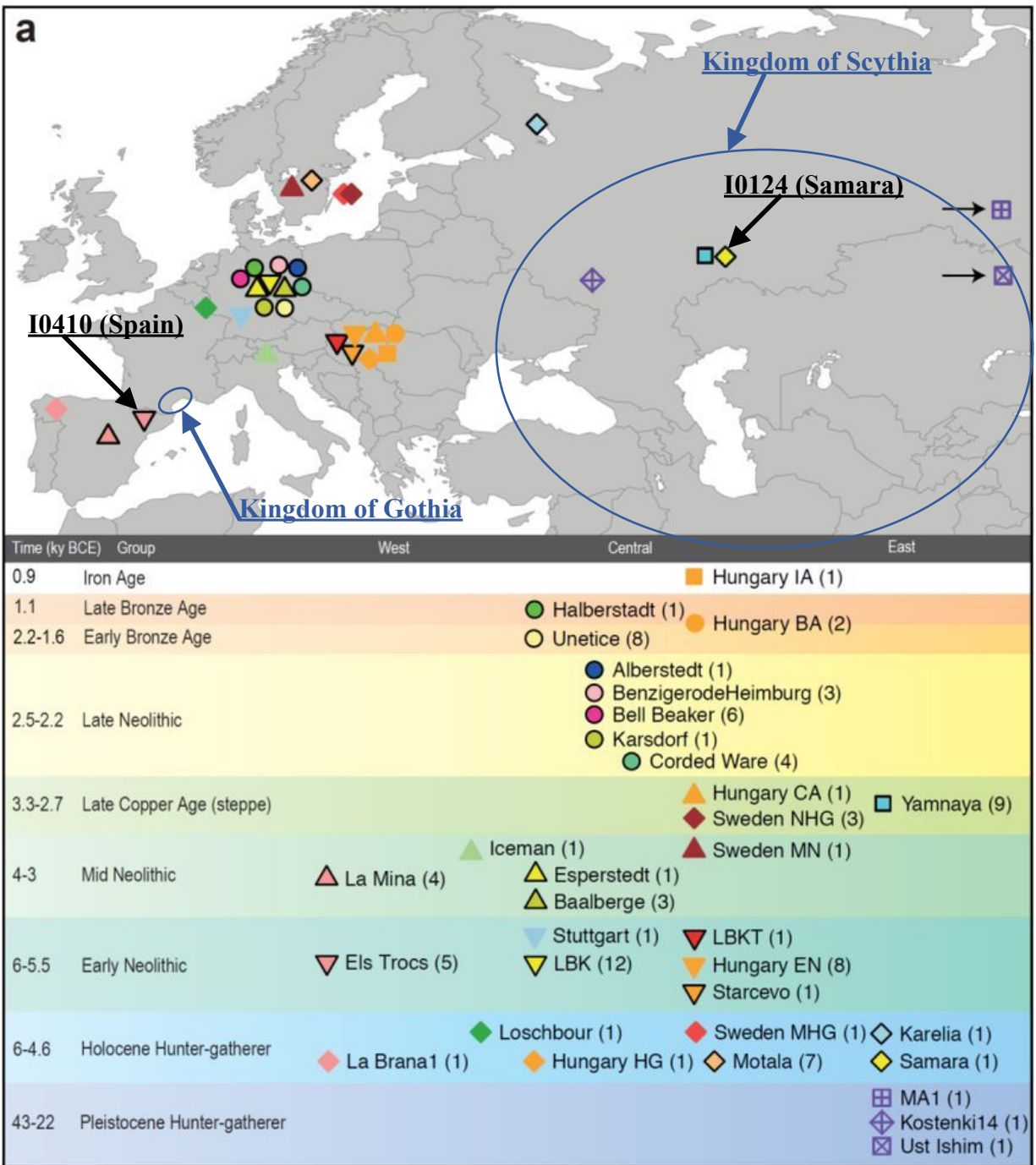


Fig. 3: Adapted from Figure 1 of Haak, W., Lazaridis, I., Patterson, N. *et al.* Massive migration from the steppe was a source for Indo-European languages in Europe. *Nature* **522**, 207–211 (2015) <https://www.biorxiv.org/content/10.1101/013433v1.full>

Bronze Age Rathlin man (2026–1534 cal BC) shed light on this.¹⁰ They provide direct evidence to suggest a change in the Irish population sometime before the 4th millennium BC.

¹⁰ Gilbert, E., O'Reilly, S., Merrigan, M. *et al.* The Irish DNA Atlas: Revealing Fine-Scale Population Structure and History within Ireland. *Sci Rep* **7**, 17199 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-017-17124-4>

“DNA analysis of the Neolithic woman from Ballynahatty, near Belfast, reveals that she was most similar to modern people from Spain and Sardinia. But her ancestors ultimately came to Europe from the Middle East, where agriculture was invented. The males from Rathlin Island, who lived not long after metallurgy was introduced, showed a different pattern to the Neolithic woman. A third of their ancestry came from ancient sources in the Pontic Steppe.”¹¹ Furthermore, the Ballynahatty woman’s “DNA is almost entirely absent from the population of modern Ireland.”¹² The Ballynahatty woman’s DNA would suggest that the older, native, population was probably from the Iberian Peninsula earlier in history, but she was a cousin of Ötzi! Then one to two millennia later, there was in fact an influx of migrants bearing the DNA of the modern Irish - the DNA descending from the Spanish migrants who themselves stemmed from the Pontic-Caspian steppe.

Furthermore, there is another study published in *Nature* in March 2000 which looked at the prevalence of the aforementioned R1b haplogroup (present in our Samaran man, and throughout Europe. The haplogroup R1b, is also referred to in older literature as ‘hg 1,’ and is strongly associated to the smaller and more exclusive ‘haplotype 15’ known as the Atlantic Modal Haplotype. This is an important piece of the puzzle to understand because by using these more precise groupings of genetic material (i.e. haplotypes) we very clearly see a cline emerge across Europe — perfectly consistent with the Milesian migration story. According to researchers at the Trinity College Department of Genetics, in Dublin, 80% of Y-Chromosomes in European males which belong to the greater haplogroup hg1 (R1b) also belong to the smaller haplotype 15. This relationship between hg 1 and haplotype 15 allowed them to estimate “that hg 1 frequencies follow a cline within Europe, extending from the Near East (1.8% in Turkey) to a peak in the Spanish Basque country (89%) in the west. This cline mirrors other genetic gradients in Europe and is best explained by the migration of Neolithic farmers from the Near East. When the surname-divided Irish data are appended to this cline, it continues to the western edge of Europe, with hg 1 — the putative pre-Neolithic western European variant — reaching its highest frequency in Connaught (98.3%).”¹³

In this, the Irish and Scottish migration stories actually seem to come together. The Scottish story found in the *Life of St. Cathroe of Metz*, has the Scots (or at least some of them) originating from a landing in the West of Ireland at *Cruachan Feli* (the Mountain of Ireland). Although it’s not known for sure where this would have been referring to, but it has been associated with Croagh Patrick, Co. Mayo, since at least the late 17th century. The *Britannicarum Ecclesiarum Antiquitates*, published in 1687, writes:

“... *Cruachan-eli*. Editissimum & notissimum Connaciae id promontorium est, in Maionensi Comitatu Occidentali imminenza Oceano: quod olim *Cruachan Aegli*,

¹¹ Rincon, Paul. “Ancient DNA Sheds Light on Irish Origins.” *BBC News*, BBC, 28 Dec. 2015, www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-35179269.

¹² Woolf, Christopher. “DNA Solves Mysteries of Ancient Ireland.” *The World*, 30 Dec. 2015, www.pri.org/stories/2015-12-30/dna-solves-mysteries-ancient-ireland.

¹³ Hill, E., Jobling, M. & Bradley, D. Y-chromosome variation and Irish origins. *Nature* **404**, 351–352 (2000). <https://doi.org/10.1038/35006158>

(ut in Hibernico Testamento B. Patricio attributo) sive *Aigle* aut *Oegbli* (ut alibi scriptum reperio) hodie *Cruach-Phadraig*, hoc est, *Cumulus Patricii* appellatur.”¹⁴

In English this says: “... *Cruachan-eli*. Which is the highest and widely known peak of Connaught, in the west of County Mayo near the Ocean: which was known in that time *Cruachan Aegli*, (as in the Testament for the Irish attributed to Saint Patrick) or also *Aigle* or *Oeghli* (as I find written elsewhere) today called *Cruach-Phadraig*, this is called *Cumulus Patricii*.”

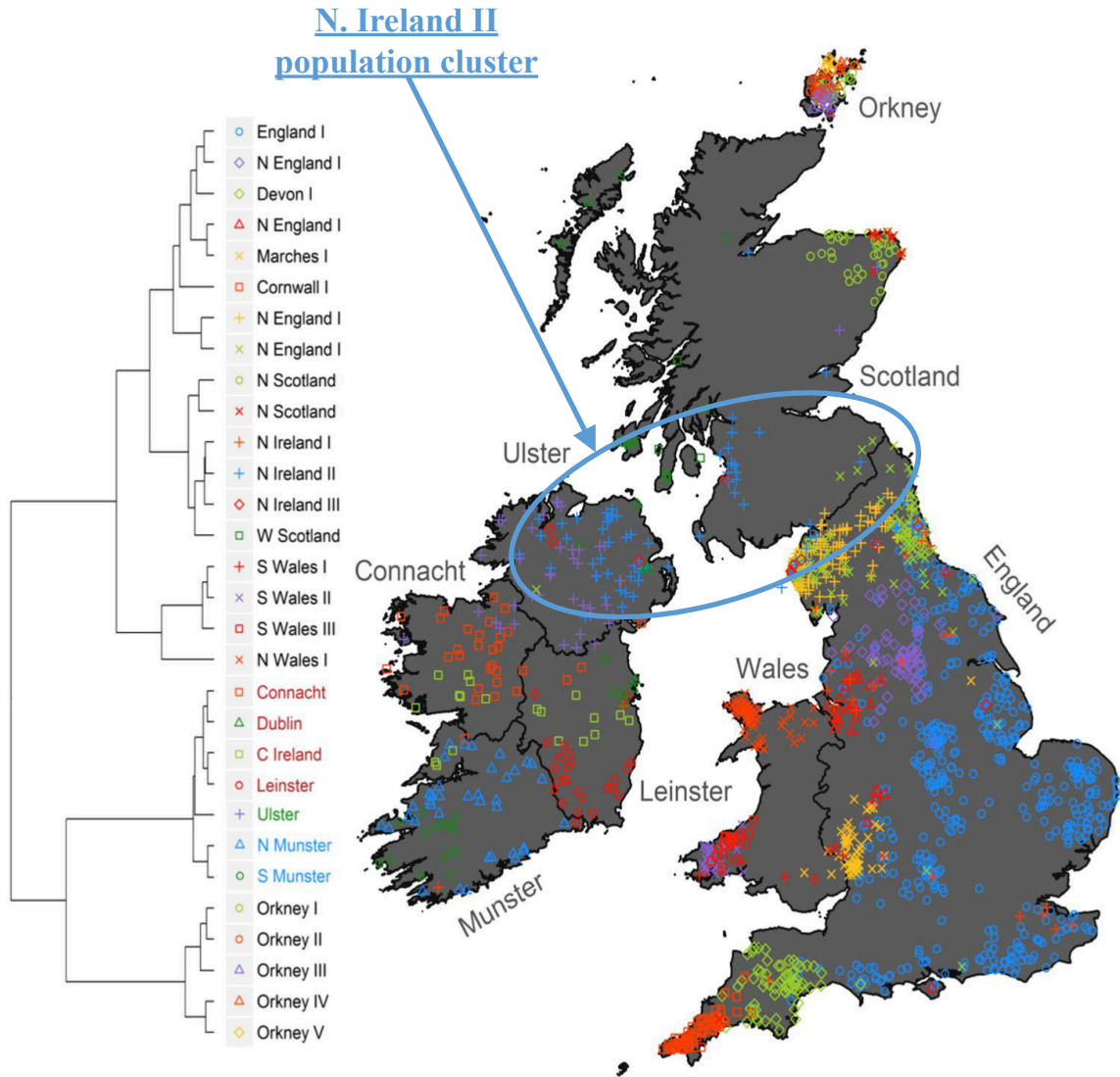


Fig. 4: Adapted from Figure 1 of Gilbert, E., O’Reilly, S., Merrigan, M. *et al.* The Irish DNA Atlas: Revealing Fine-Scale Population Structure and History within Ireland. *Sci Rep* 7, 17199 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-017-17124-4>

¹⁴ Ussher, James. “Charta S. Patricii.” *Britannicarum Ecclesiarum Antiquitates: Quibus Inserta Est Pestiferae Adversus Dei Gratiam a Pelagio Britanno in Ecclesiam Inductae Haereoseos Historia*, Second ed., Benjamin Tooke, 1687, p. 460.

This is an interesting piece of history (or lore) because it aligns the people in Scotland who are genetically descended from the Northern Irish (see Figure 4), and thereby aligning that Scottish origin story with the Irish story. Although the Scottish story doesn't have a "Milesius" character per se, it does share the spirit of the Milesian migration; namely, the people from the Near East ultimately landing in the west of Ireland. In fact, as we see the historical presence of haplogroup hg1 in Turkey, it would appear that the genetic genealogy even goes a some way to support the Scottish origin stories. In both the Irish and Scottish stories the migration to Ireland occurred in one generation by a daring sea voyage, however it seems the Irish oral histories may have somehow also preserved the greater migration from the Near East through Europe.

So it would appear that indeed the Milesian migration story very well may have been routed in real history, preserved by the Celts throughout the millennia in their oral traditions. As they preserved the memory, and countries came and went, maps were made and changed, they were able to assign names to the places they remember hearing about from older generations. Slowly the story of "we came from the east" became "we came from Gothia, but they came from Scythia," which in turn could have been preserved and put in the royal lineages as "your ancestors were the Kings of Gothia and the Kings of Scythia," etc. Once adopted as historical fact, these names and places were preserved by the bards and genealogists right up until today.

Although we can probably rest assured that Milesius was not the real name of a real person, the idea of Milesius embodies the story of a great migration which started thousands of years ago, preserved through the oral histories of Europe. As the Irish migrated into Scotland, I have no doubt they took the spirit and of that origin story with them and the Irish Milesius became the kings of Dál Riata, and thence those clans of Scotland have their 'Milesian migration' via the clans in the north of Ireland. Whoever 'Milesius' may or may not have been we can say that the 'Milesians' would have been those 3rd millennium settlers arriving on the western shores of Ireland from Spain 4,300 years ago,¹⁵ eventually replacing the native bloodlines, and subsequently — intentionally or otherwise — establishing the clans we have today throughout Ireland and parts of Scotland.

¹⁵ Woolf, Christopher. "DNA Solves Mysteries of Ancient Ireland." *The World*, 30 Dec. 2015, www.pri.org/stories/2015-12-30/dna-solves-mysteries-ancient-ireland.