Surnames were first introduced in Ireland in the early part of the 10th century and the earliest recorded surname is Ó Cléirigh (Ó Clery) from the year 916. The system of nomenclature adopted by the Irish was to prefix Mac (son) to the genitive case of the father’s personal name, or Ó / Ua (grandson) to that of the grandfather. The plural form Úi was often used to denote a tribal group as in Úi Néill, the extended O’Neill clan.

In the period prior to the Anglo-Norman invasion of the late 12th century the personal names in use in Ireland were almost exclusively of Celtic origin. Even though Christianity had taken hold from the first half of the 5th century the Irish were slow to adopt biblical names or the Latin and Greek names of the early Christian saints. The few Norse names that had been introduced by the Vikings and their followers had but little influence on the overwhelming Celtic character of Irish personal names. The practice of prefixing Mac and Ó / Ua to the patronymic necessitated the use of large numbers of names and Professor O’Brien in his research on Old Irish Personal Names collected more than 12,000 individual names.

**Co. Armagh Septs**

Most Irish surnames are still to be found in large numbers in the parts of the country where they originated. With this in mind I intend to take a brief look at the ‘Pedigrees of Co. Armagh Septs’ by J. B. Arthurs which lists the tribal divisions that populated the lands around Armagh between the 4th and 12th centuries as described in the Annals (viz. Book Of Leinster, Book of Lecan, Book of Ballymote, Annals of Ulster). While some of the information contained in the Annals may be pseudo-history and unreliable, the personal names recorded were those that were prevalent at the time, so it is not unreasonable to suppose that many of the surnames extant in Co. Armagh at the present time may be derived from Old Irish personal names recorded in genealogies of the septs that populated the area between the 5th and 12th centuries. As the same process was happening throughout Ireland, it is also true that similar surnames based on the same personal names, but unrelated, appeared in different parts of the country at different times.

**Haughey**

One of the most common personal names in the Armagh septs is Ó Eochaidh and its variants Eochu, Eochuadín and Eochaiden, from the Old Irish ech ‘horse’. If we prefix Ó to Eochaidh we have Ó hEochaidh which has been anglicized to Haughey, a surname still numerous in the vicinity of Armagh city where there is also a townland Ballogha (Baile Úi Eochaidh, ‘Haughey’s homestead’) close to the ancient site of Navan Fort. Another townland named after them is Cavanballagh mentioned in The Text of Inquisition of 1609 regarding the plantation of confiscated lands:

*And that the septime of Munteraghie (Moisne Uí Eochaidh — Haughey) and their ancestors, time out of mind, have been likewise seized of and in the town and lands of Cavanballagh (Cabhán Bháile Úi Eochaidh) with appurtenances, in the said territory of Clonacut (Gleann) …’*

This surname has been historically associated with the ancient territory of Oriel which includes the counties of Monaghan and much of Armagh and has a number of variant forms in Hoy, Hoey, Haffey and Hackett. When Mac is prefixed to the personal form it becomes Mac Eochaídh (Mac Caughey) and in some cases Mac becomes Mag on account of the initial vowel of Eochaídh/Eochaidh and gives us the anglicized form Mac Ghey.

Eochaídh, ‘horse-rider’, was used widely as a personal name throughout Ireland and, together with Eochu, was the second most popular male name in early Irish society. The surname Haughey is also found in S.W. Donegal where the same process of name formation took place.

**Cumascach** (‘the confuser’), is another personal name which occurs with regular frequency from the 8th to the 11th centuries. The Irish form Mac Cumascadh, now Comiskey and MacComiskey, is recorded first in the Clones area of North Monaghan but later moved to South Monaghan in the 11th century. From there it spread into South Armagh and North Louth and are still to be found in these areas today. The personal name Treíther ‘strong man’ is recorded for the year 1002. If we prefix Mac it gives us the modern Irish form Mac Treítríthair, better known without the prefix as Trainor and sometimes Traynor. In some cases the Mac has been retained and we find it anglicized as Mac Creanor; corrupt forms of the anglicized version without the Mac prefix, Reenor/Raynor also exist. The surname Trainor is still largely associated with Armagh as well as parts of Monaghan and Louth.

**Donnelly**

Dongnal, meaning ‘of princely valour’, is recorded for the year 791 in the Ui Bressail Airthir sept. Dongnal became one of the more popular personal names in medieval Ireland; it becomes the surname Ó Dongnhaile in modern Irish, better known today as Donnelly. Woulfe claims they were descended from one Donghal, fourth in descent from Donnchadh, King of Aileach and brother of Niall Glundubh, the ancestor of the O’Neills and that their original home was on the Donegal/Tyrone border near Lifford. Later, the Donnellys became a Genél Eoghan sept which covered much of North and West Armagh where they are still numerous today, particularly adjacent to the Blackwater where it separates the modern counties of Tyrone and Armagh. Their stronghold, Baile Úi Dhonnghaile (Castlecaulfield), was close to the seat of O’Neill power. Donnellys were...
a noted bardic family, but their chief was hereditary marshall of O’Neill’s forces and it is particularly as soldiers that they are remembered.15

A very interesting personal name is recorded twice Dub Êanua ‘the black-haired one from Eamhnáin (Navan)’. When Ó is prefixed it becomes Ó Duibheannaigh in the modern form and Mac Lysaght claims they were chiefs of Uí Bressail Iarthair, a territory west of Armagh. It is generally anglicized as Devney and is often confused with a Donegal family of the same name (Ó Duibheannaigh in Irish). There are a number of variations found throughout Ireland – O’Dwyany, O’Descany, O’Descany16 – but all are pronounced with the emphasis on the second syllable, except in Armagh where the stress falls on the first syllable [dív’ni].

McConville

Connacht, later Cunamaglos ‘wolf warrior’, was a fairly uncommon early name which occurs among the Airgialla (Oriel) people17. This name became Mac Conmaighil, the modern McConville, the name of an Oriel sept found largely in Cos. Armagh, Down and Louth at present18. Drumconwell (Druim Conmhaíth, ‘ridge of Conmáil’) is the name of a townland about two miles south of Armagh where an ogham stone was discovered bearing 5-6th century inscriptions which Warner posits includes the name Canamaglos (O.Ir. Conmáil)19. Another personal name which occurs frequently among the Armagh sept is Cernach (‘victorious, triumphant’) and the name Clann Chearnaigh (‘victorious, triumphant’) and the name is frequently among the Armagh septs is Cernach. Another personal name which occurs in the Armagh genealogies, but locally the surname usually takes the form Toal and is still common throughout the county. Yet another version of the same personal name is Tohill which is found frequently in Derry and Antrim. When Ó prefixes the personal name Anluan (‘great warrior’) it becomes Ó hAnluain in modern Irish which produces O’Hanlon in English. Prior to the Plantation of Ulster in the early 17th century O’Hanlons were kings of Aithrir (Oriel), territories situated on the eastern boundary of the modern county and the seat of their power was at Loughgilly20. The personal name Anluan first appears in the Uí Niallán sept towards the ends of the 8th century and is described as the ‘royal sept Uí Anluain’21. Another name among the descendants of the Uí Niallán is Ardgal (‘valourous as a bear’). The modern surname Mac Ardghail (Mac Ardle) is derived from this form and the name is widely found in Armagh and the neighbouring counties of Monaghan and Louth. Both Mac Lysaght and Bell maintain they are a branch of the Mac Mahon clan of Oriel, first noted as Siocht Ardghaidh Mhóir Mhic Mathúna (‘the race of Ardghal Mór Mac Mahon’)22.

MacCoey and (Mac) Carragher are two surnames which are peculiar to South Armagh. The Irish version of the former is Mac Cumhaigh26 and stems from the ancient personal name Cu Maige (‘hound of the plain’)27 and it occurs in the Uí Niallán sept and again in 745 among the Uí Cruinn28. Mac Earsháir is the Irish version of the Carragher, from the personal name Fearchar (‘friendly’) which also turns up among the Uí Cruinn. In English it appears with and without Mac and is sometimes confused with the Scottish name Forquhar.

Viking names

An interesting personal name in the Clann Shínaig sept is Sitríc29, which is a Gaelicized version of the Old Norse name Sigtýr (‘true victory’)?30. It wasn’t usual, of course, for Gaels to adopt foreign names, nevertheless a number of Scandinavian names did find their way into Irish society with the intermarriage of Gael and Viking. In Irish this became Mac Stíruit31 and in English, McKitterick. In Scotland this name is usually written McKetterick. Mac Lysaght claims it is not uncommon in the old territory of Oriel (Monaghan) and neighbouring counties and also that Hanson is a synonym for it in Co. Armagh32.

Another Viking personal name that was adopted by the Irish, Scots and Welsh is Ioar. In Old Irish this was Ímar (later, Íomhar) and a St. Ímar Úa hAedagáin was the teacher of St. Malachy in Armagh33. The Armagh genealogies record the death of an Ímar in 1161 of the Uí Meith Macha sept34.

With Mac prefixed this name became Mac Íomhaí, anglicized Mackeever, and is still common throughout the northern part of the county. Mac Lysaght suggests that some MacKeevers may be Mac Éiníir, from the forename Éiníir (Heber), a favourite with the Mac Mahon clan of Monaghan35.

Murphy is the most common surname in Ireland.

O’Toole and Toal

Tuathal (‘ruler of the people’) was the name of many Irish kings and heroes; a certain Tuathal Máelgarb was a 6th century king of the Uí Néill and Tuathal mac A��gaine who died in 938 was king of Leinster.29. This personal name became the surname O’Toal, anglicized O’Toole, and is very common in Co. Wicklow where they were clan chieftains for many centuries. The personal name also occurs regularly in the Arman genealogies, but locally the surname usually takes the form Toal and is still common throughout the county. Yet another version of the same personal name is Tohill which is found frequently in Derry and Antrim.
several parts of the country at different times. In Ulster it was prefixed with Mac to produce two forms Mac Murchadh and Mac Murchaidh; the clan originally owned the territory of Muintir Birn (Minterburn) in South Tyrone, but were dislodged by the O'Neills and subsequently settled in the mountainous region of South Armagh. The family names which appear in the above article are not necessarily descended from particular persons named in the genealogies of the Armagh septs. However, a considerable number of the personal names from which the surnames derive were common in the area during the period in question (4th C – 12thC) which suggests that the personal name was quite likely adopted as a surname during or after the period when surnames were being adopted. Furthermore, the fact that many of these surnames are still found in large numbers in the county adds to the speculation that many still inhabit their ancient patrimony.

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**Endnotes**

1. Woulfe, Patrick, 1923, Sloinnte Gaedheal is Gall, xv
2. Ó Murchadh, Diarmaid, 1999 The Formation of Gaelic Surnames in Ireland: Choosing the Eponyms, (Nomina, 22 29)
8. Ó Corráin, Donnchadh/Maguire, Fidelma, 1990, Irish Names, 86-7
10. Mac Lysaght, Edward, More Irish Families, 61

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2. Mac Lysaght, Edward – The Surnames of Ireland, Dublin, 1973
3. Arthurs, J. B – Early Septs & Territories of Co. Armagh (Bulletin of the Ulster Place-Name Society, Vol II, 3), Belfast, 1954
5. Ó Corráin, Donnchadh/Maguire Fidelma – Irish Names, Dublin, 1990
7. Ó Murchadh, Diarmuid – The Formation of Gaelic Surnames in Ireland: Choosing the Eponyms (Nomina 22, 1999)