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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE LOCH A'DUÍN VALLEY

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The backbone of the Dingle Peninsula is formed by an impressive and jagged mountain range formed by irrepressible glaciers. It stretches from Ballysitteragh, north of Dingle town, towards the Conor Pass and eastwards from there towards Stradbally Mountain. The Loch a'Dúin valley is located in the north facing side of this mountain ridge between the peaks of Sliabh Na Leice to the west and Sliabh Na Gower to the east. The lake is one of 35 lakes in the region of the Owenmore Valley and Brandon Range. It is fed by three lakes from an area known as Com an ár and the river Scorrid drains Loch a'Dúin to the sea at Fermoyle and Brandon Bay.

The study area stretches from the water fall at the southern end of the Lake to Kilmore Bridge on the Conor-Pass Road that links Dingle to the northern side of the peninsula. The area is almost 1500 acres in total. To the west, the valley is defined by a gentle sloping ridge, which forms the lower slopes of Sliabh Na Leice. To the east, the defining features are the lower slopes of Sliabh Na Gower which slope down to the farming settlements at Ballyhoneen.

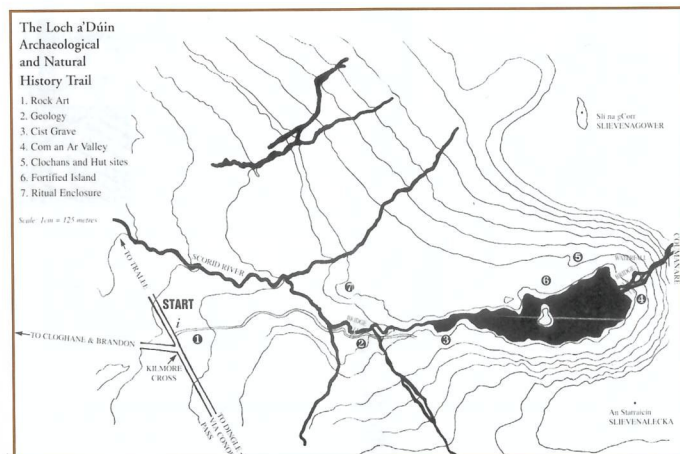
The soils are predominantly blanket-bog peats along the area of the valley floor or shallow peaty gleys among the boulder strewn fan deposits around the steep corrie walls of the lake. The main vegetation throughout the valley is heath and rough pasture and is grazed by sheep throughout the year, with cattle grazed occasionally during the summer months.

The location of a wedge tomb within a pre-bog field system in the Loch a'Dúin Valley has been noted for many years by the local farmers. It was also visited by the Kerry Field Club in 1945 and a brief description of the tomb was given. The wedge tomb was also described in much more detail by the Megalithic Survey of Ireland (de Valera and O Nualláin, 1982). However it was not until 1986 that a number of other monuments (24 in total) including some visible walls were officially recorded (Cuppage et. al., 1986). The brief description included in this publication deals with a subsequent survey which was undertaken as part of a post-graduate study, which was submitted in 2003 to The National University of Ireland. Within the confines of the study area, a total of 11.6km of stone walls have been mapped, both above and below the surface of the bog. The number of monuments identified has now increased to 89. Furthermore, since the completion of the Dingle Peninsula Survey, two pollen studies have been undertaken in the area (Dodson 1990 and Wolters 1994); the latter was designed to tie in with some of the walls to establish a date of construction.

There are four distinct areas of the valley in which pre-bog walls have been located. In one of these areas, the walls are probably as late as the 18th or 19th century as they appear to be associated with structures linked to sheep farming. The remaining three would appear



Island (Photographer Tom Fox).



Map of Area.

to date to the pre-historic period with a certain concentration of adjacent monuments linked to the walls indicating activity in the Bronze Age. The most substantial area where walls are located is known as the Central Complex. It is located on the shoulder of blanket bog in the north western part of the valley at an altitude of between 80m - 150m. and covers an area up to 80ha. At least 30 enclosed fields can be identified, with a total wall length of 7.35km. There are 27 archaeological sites scattered amongst the remains of the dry-stone walls, these include three enclosures, seven pre-bog hut-sites, three other hut-sites not pre-bog in nature, six examples of cup and circle rock art, two fulachta fiadh and one cist grave.

Along the eastern side of the lake shore up to a height of 250m we find the second complex of walls in the valley. This complex covers an area roughly 170 acres in size and consists of 23 lengths of wall with a total length of 2.35km. Unlike the Central Complex there are only three fields identifiable here; however one of these enclosed areas is 4.5ha. with the two smaller enclosed fields 0.25ha. and 0.48ha. respectively. Because of the sloping nature of the ground, there is little peat cover, the deepest being up to 50cm in places. As a result most of the walls are identifiable above the surface of the hillside. Interspersed throughout the walls here are 38 archaeological monuments, including two fulachta fiadh, one example of rock art, two enclosures, a fortified island and five hut-sites of a pre-bog nature. The remaining 27 sites are a mixture of clochans which seem to have been re-used over a long period of time; in some cases they have been rebuilt. Because of the concentration of hut-sites and the shelter it afforded, it is possible that it was used mostly for habitation. The final area of the valley where pre-bog walls are to be found is approximately mid-way on the valley floor, on a natural oval shaped hillock to the east of the Scorrid River. The hillock has been enclosed with a wall which follows the natural contours of the hillock. There is one gap in the enclosing feature on the south east side. The oval shaped enclosure is sub-divided by two cross walls creating three distinct enclosed spaces on the hillock. These measure 0.73ha., 0.55ha. and 0.65ha. respectively. The wedge tomb is located on the summit of the hillock. Further to the south are two standing stones, one of which has been damaged. The second appears to have been deliberately shaped to resemble Mount Brandon and may be aligned with its summit. There are a series of other walls close by, but they do not form any clear pattern such as those found in the other areas within the valley. Other monuments located in this hillock area include four fulachta fiadh and three hut-sites. None of the walls seem to have been used for agricultural purposes and it possible that this area was designated as a place of ritual, away from the main center of farming or habitation.



Standing Stone (Photographer Tom Fox).

The introduction of agriculture to the Dingle Peninsula has been examined principally by Woodman at Ferriter's Cove, near Ballyferriter. This work has provided a series of radiocarbon dates which span the period from 6300 \pm 140BP to 4820 \pm 67BP. There are indications from both stratigraphic observations and radiocarbon dates that intermittent prehistoric settlement took place at Ferriter's Cove throughout a period of several hundred years. The site has provided some early Neolithic dates for the peninsula. Samples taken from cattle bone have been dated to 5825 \pm 50BP and to 5510 \pm 70BP. These dates could be taken to represent the beginnings of agriculture on the peninsula and provide a context for the later occupation and development of agriculture in the Loch a'Dúin Valley. Indeed there may have been an overlap. The evidence from Ferriter's Cove, suggests that it was used on a seasonal basis, most likely late-summer and autumn. The charcoal evidence from the hearth sites are mostly of oak suggesting that there was a cover of mixed deciduous trees in the local environs. The radiocarbon dates from the site would suggest a main period of occupation between 4600BC and 4300BC, with another date closer to 4000BC. There was one later date which points to a phase of occupation after 3600BC, which would place it within a few hundred years of agricultural activity at Loch a'Dúin.

Unusually for a valley of this size, there have been two pollen studies undertaken here in the past few decades. The first was by Dodson (1990), although not directly linked to any of the archaeological features it provides interesting results. The second study was undertaken by Wolters (1994). The pollen cores were taken close to one of the field walls to establish a date for their construction. Furthermore, as part of the study a section of wall was excavated to provide possible dates for its construction.

Dodson produced three pollen cores from the general area of the valley. His findings show that the early post-glacial period in the valley was associated with open woodland of Birch and Willow and also with grasslands containing dock. This was later replaced with woodland, made up mostly of Oak, Hazel, Elm and Pine which he dates to 9500BP. By 7500BP Oak and Elm along with Birch and Hazel dominate. Woodland began to decline from 4400BP, while heath-land, bog and pasture began to develop and came to the fore up to the present. The forest decline phase began around 4400BP and Dodson associates this with the first evidence of farming. During this period (3000 - 2500BP), there is an increase in grasses and sedges and a decrease in Alder and Birch, although Oak pollen remains high, which could mean selective woodland clearance. In this zone there are also several peaks in agricultural indicator herb species such as *Plantago-lanceolata*, silver weed and bracken. The presence of cereal pollen in addition to these species would seem to suggest cereal agricultural as well as pastoralism. In summation, it is during the early part of the Bronze Age that we get major clearance taking place in the pollen catchment areas of the Loch a'Dúin sites, leading to probable soil impoverishment and bog formation. Dodson links the decline in woodland taxa with the expansion of heathland and bog as

well as with human interference and despite occasional reversals this was taking place over a period of centuries. Dodson argues that the prehistoric sites in Loch a'Dúin would tie in with these occurrence from 4400 - 2800BP.

The more recent pollen study was undertaken by Stefan Wolters, to link in with the present study of the valley. These palaeo-ecological studies were carried out to provide an environmental context for the archaeological study. The pollen profiles by Wolters record the various changes in vegetation over the greater part of 4000 years. The earliest traces date to the mid-Bronze Age, where woodland of Alder and Birch seems to have covered the area. The woody vegetation survived until 3250BP. He also dates the growth of blanket-bog to this period and the increase in human activity occurs at a similar time-frame. This is evidenced through the presence of *Pteridium* and *Plantago-lanceolata*. These species indicate a woodland clearance where the trees were felled rather than burned. The presence of other herbaceous taxa, grasses and cereal-type pollen suggest intensive farming involving both pastoral and arable agriculture.

Taken together both studies suggest that farming activity is first introduced into the Locha'Dúin valley around 4000BP, but not as an intensive period of agriculture. At approximately 3200BP a more vigorous agricultural phase began, which continued for the following 700 years. There follows a lull in farming activity, followed by a shorter intensive period of farming around 1430BP, which is associated with the early Christian period. This phase of farming is accompanied by evidence of cereal type pollen, although it did not last for more than 150 years.

Wolters suggests that the main phase of wall construction dates to the principle period of agricultural activity in the valley from 3200BP - 2500BP. His investigations showed that some peat had begun to form in the depressions beside the walls at 3600BP, while the formation of more extensive blanket-bog dated to roughly 3200BP. This would seem to date the first beginning of the intensive phase to 3250BP when the walls were built on mineral soil. This is also true in the areas where the peat has been cutaway and the surviving remains of the ancient walls are built on mineral soil. Hence we can conclude that the date of the construction of the walls was prior to, or at the time peat began to accumulate in the valley.

As it is implausible that wall construction took place when peat accumulation was well underway, it is likely that the walls were built on mineral soil around the 3200BP date when the pollen record suggests that substantial farming, which included an important arable component, was developing. However the pattern of field walls in this complex would suggest that the main type of farming was pastoral.



Clochan (Photographer Tom Fox).