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The Great Burial Mounds at Loughcrew, County Meath

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The Great Burial Mounds at Loughcrew, County Meath.

N April, 1907, it was my good fortune to visit the great Pagan necropolis on Sliabh-na-Calliaghe, two miles S.E. of Oldcastle. Before starting I read almost all that has been written on the subject. In the Royal Irish Academy, thanks to the courtesy of Dr. Joly, I was privileged to see Dr. Petrie's sketches and to read O'Donovan's letters from the district while he was engaged on the Ordnance Survey, and I next saw in the Dublin Museum all the "finds" which were dug out of the tombs.

Up to the year 1858 the monuments at Loughcrew seemed to have escaped the notice of antiquaries, but in that year a paper upon them was written by Wakeman and read for him at Oxford, and in May and Nov., 1864, Eugene A. Conwell brought them under the notice of the Royal Irish Academy and gave dimensions of thirty cairns. Conwell had for company during his investigations Mr. Du Noyer, who made great numbers of drawings and plans, these I believe are the property of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (though in this I am open to correction).

Here in Royal Meath we find one of the most remarkable groups of archaic monuments in Western Europe, and were these remains on that Continent archæologists by the score would annually visit them.

The chief tumuli are on the tops of the hills and some of them are visible from the train as it glides between Kells and Oldcastle. They are at an elevation of 904 feet above sea level. The principal tombs are open and easily entered. Ancient writers say there were fifty of them. In 1864 there were thirty, to-day the number is hard to ascertain, as some are mere heaps of *debris*, others grass-grown. Externally they appear hills of small, loose stones, the larger amounting to tens of thousands of tons. The largest cairn (now demolished) must have had no less a diameter than sixty yards. The interiors are formed of a passage leading to a rude circular chamber divided into irregular compartments by boulders and slabs, some of very considerable size. The most remarkable thing about them is that they are almost covered with sculptured devices. In the so-called Hag's Chair Cairn (from the stone sofa on the exterior) there are (*a*) a figure composed of 14 concentric circles, (*b*) single circles, (*c*) cups surrounded by circles, (*d*) groups of cups markings and cups within circles, (*e*) three concentric circles round a cup, (*f*)

waving lines, (*g*) quadrilateral figure with crossed lines, (*h*) concentric ovals, (*i*) elliptical arcs, (*j*) rayed circles, (*k*) spirals and (*l*) zig-zags. Conwell recorded the astonishing number of 1,393 separate devices; Wakeman says: a greater number than in Britain, Caledonia and Gaul combined. The scorings were quite sharp and clear when the tombs were first opened, and Conwell says they quickly became weathered. We may presume that they are in a much worse condition in our day and that as the years go on so will the hand of time gently obliterate the work of the far away men of old. The writer obtained a number of rubbings, some of which illustrate this article and which indicate even better than a photograph the actual condition of the stones in 1907.

CARVED DEVICES FROM STONES IN LOUGHCREW TUMULI.
RUBBINGS BY MRS. MARY HOBSON.

The cairns are oriented, one due E., one E. 10° N., four E. 10° S., one to W., now demolished, as are unfortunately many others—the place having been used as a quarry for the whole country side. These hills are covered with megalithic monuments, tumuli, an alignment, stone circles singly and two and three together, a cashel, standing stone, the district round abounds in raths, moats, and souterrains.

In the list of monuments of the Fair of Taillté in the Dindsenchas are raths, ferts (likely rectangular chambers formed of upright slabs), cnocs, foruds, which were places where the king assembled the people—the seat of the king being *a chair on a mound which was a memorial over the dead*, which possibly has reference to the stone sofa on the Hag's Chair Cairn.

This tomb had a circumference in Conwell's time (not likely to have been disturbed since) of $115\frac{1}{2}$ yards, base to summit 21 paces, and surrounded by 37 stones,

**TWO VIEWS OF
GREAT CAIRN (CARNBANE W.), LOUGHCREW.**
(Upper Photo lent by the Board of Works. and lower one taken by Mrs. Hobson.)

Photo]

[H. G. Tempest

THE "HAG'S CHAIR," LOUGHCREW.

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GREAT CAIRN (CARNBANE W.), LOUGHCREW.

Interior, showing one of the recesses.

Photo]

[H. G. Tempest

THE "HAG'S CHAIR," LOUGHCREW.

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GREAT CAIRN (CARNBANE W.), LOUGHCREW.

Interior, showing one of the recesses.

FROM HAG'S CHAIR CAIRN.

CARVED DEVICES ON STONES IN LOUGHCREW TUMULI.

RUBBINGS BY MRS. MARY HOBSON.

CARVED DEVICES ON STONES FROM HAG'S CHAIR CAIRN IN LOUGHCREW TUMULI.
RUBBINGS BY MRS. MARY HOBSON.

length of curve at entrance 17 yards. This curve is noticeable in almost all the cairns. The chamber is divided into three compartments about 4 feet square ; entire length of passage, 28 feet ; chamber about 16 feet in diameter ; 28 inscribed stones. The Great Cairn is divided into seven inches by immense boulders. I thought I had surely seen the best in the Hag's Chair Cairn, but this is larger, the boulders greater in number and size—a magnificent and impressive example of cyclopean masonry, stone after stone being nearly covered with inscriptions.

When the cairns were opened the most astonishing number and variety of objects were found ; in one alone 150 different pieces of bone, 50 portions of limb-bones, 30 other bones, shoulder blades, 48 portions of skulls, etc., 8 portions of jaws with teeth, end of bone bodkin, part of bone ferrule, 6 bits of bone pins, 14 pieces of very rude pottery (evidently urns blackened by fire), 10 pieces flints, 155 sea-shells almost perfect, 110 broken shells, 8 sorts of lustrous stones, 100 white pebbles, brown stone ball, with bone implements, glass, amber, bronze and iron. Other tombs yielded rude stone basins 3 feet 5 inches long, 2 feet 4 inches broad, and 5 inches thick, and one even larger, also 4,484 pieces of bone, some polished and ornamented by compass (like thin paper knives), a stone urn, etc., etc.

When primitive peoples forget the meaning of the monuments among them or when a new tribe arrives equally ignorant imagination steps in and accounts for the otherwise unaccountable. Here, at Loughcrew, the story goes that an old hag, one Calleadh Bhéartha, jumped from peak to peak of these hills with her apron full of stones and very naturally she let them fall—a heap here and a heap there—and what more clear than that the stone sofa on one of the heaps had been her resting place ? This elusive amazon has been identified by some writers with Evlin of Bengore and Slieve Gullion.

One naturally asks, who built these wonderful tombs, and when ? Two questions not so easy to answer. The *History of the Cemeteries*, one of the most ancient of the Irish MSS., compiled and transcribed from an early copy by a monk of Clonmacnoise about 1100 A.D., says :—" At Taillten the Kings of Ulster were used to bury—viz., Ollamh Fodhla with his descendants down to Conchobhar." (The *Four Masters* set down the death of the former as 1277 B.C., and tradition says the latter died in 33 A.D.), and again—

" The three cemeteries of the idolaters are
The cemetery of Taillten the Select,
The ever-clean cemetery of Cruachan
And the cemetery of Brugh.
The Host of Great Meath are buried
In the middle of the lordly Brugh.
The great Ultonians used to bury
At Taillten with great pomp."

Seven of the Tuatha De Dannan were buried at Taillten (O'Curry) and there can be little doubt that " Taillten," though some miles from the present village of Telltown, must be the great necropolis on Sliabh-na-Callaighe, and that in point of time this is older as well as being ruder, larger and more imposing, than the better known and easier reached tumuli of New Grange and Dowth. One is struck by the difference in the height of the doorways in the two groups. At Sliabh-na-Callaighe they are lofty, while those at New Grange and Dowth are low, with passages through which one has to partly creep. One wonders if there was some necessity for defence and for a doorway low and easily concealed, while in the earlier time at Sliabh-na-Callaighe things were so peaceable that the builders feared no disturbing element.

Joyce says :—" One of the De Dannan Kings, Lewry* of the Long Hand, established a gathering or fair, to be held yearly on August 1st, in honour of his foster-

* Lugh.

CARVED DEVICES FROM STONES IN LOUGHCREW TUMULI.
RUBBINGS BY MRS. MARY HOBSON.

ENTRANCE FROM OUTSIDE.

ENTRANCE FROM INSIDE.

INCISED STONE AT ENTRANCE.

THE GREAT CAIRN (CARNEBANE W.), LOUGHCREW.

Photos by Mrs. Hobson.

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**HAG'S CHAIR CAIRN (CARNBANE E.),
LOUGHCREW.**

Interior, showing one of the recesses.

mother Taillté . . . and he called the place Tailltenn." O'Curry tell us that Brugh and Loughcrew are not prehistoric, in that they come within the traditionary period and probably belong to the heoric cycle, and that Taillté is said to have been married to Eochad Mac Erc, a Firbolg King. The last fair of Taillté was held in Roderick O'Connor's reign in the twelfth century. We are told that Queen Taillte was buried here with Eochad Carbh and many others and that "upon the Mur of Eochad of chiselled stones were the Forads of the Kings of Teamor, upon the Mur of his wife were the twenty Forads of their Queens." If we cannot find these, let us at least approach in a spirit of reverence this great parthenon of a dim and heroic age.

MARY HOBSON.

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