

VESTIGES OF CELTIC MYTHOLOGY
IN THE PLACENAMES OF LOUGH CORRIB
AND ITS HINTERLAND

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Following is an adaptation of several pieces written in his native Irish language by Professor Seán Ó Cinnéide, concerned in the main with the possible pagan origins of some of the placenames on and about Lough Corrib, with occasional references to diverse places along the western seaboard deemed to have similar associations. The articles here summarised have been published in their original form in various issues of Feasta during 2005 and 2006. In the majority of cases the Irish versions of the placenames have been retained, since it was felt that in their anglicised form many of the suggested mythological associations are somewhat obscured. For location purposes the reader is directed to the OSI Discovery Series maps, especially Sheets 38 and 45 relating to the Lough Corrib region.

The study of placenames has been of great interest to Seán Ó Cinnéide for more than three decades, during which time he has written and published many articles on the subject.¹ In so doing he has been actively engaged in an ancient pursuit that has fascinated Gaelic scholars since early medieval times at the latest.² Such is evident from the *Dindshenchas*, a collection of poems from the Middle Irish period on the topographical lore of Ireland,³ recounting the myths and legends associated with particular places scattered throughout the country in an effort to explain the origins of their names.

Similarly, evidence of Celtic mythology is almost everywhere to be detected in the toponymy of Lough Corrib and its hinterland, according to Ó Cinnéide. This should not surprise us in the least since tradition maintains it was here the legendary Tuatha Dé Danann arrived in their flying ships, hidden by a mystic cloud, and fought the Firbolg for possession of the country at the first battle of Magh Tuireadh, on the northern shores of the lake.⁴ Foremost amongst the placenames mentioned by our author is the island of Inchoigoill in the northeast of Lough Corrib, about four miles out from Cong. This island is encountered in the annals as early as 1128, where the name is written as 'Inis-in-ghaill' and 'Inis in Ghoill' in the *Annals of Ulster* and the *Annals of the Four Masters* respectively.⁵ In the second quarter of the seventeenth century it is mentioned by Fr John Colgan under the name 'Inis an Gaill Chrabhuigh' in a list of church foundations having Saxon connections,⁶ while later in the same century Roderic O'Flaherty interpreted the name as 'island of the foreigner', from *An Gall Cráibhtheach*, 'the devout foreigner'.⁷ The latter derivation was rejected by T.S. Ó Máille in the middle of the last century, who maintained that the island was originally called after the

celebrated inscribed pillar-stone located there, since the Irish word *gall* (genitive *goill*) also signifies 'stone'.⁸

While not discounting Ó Máille's interpretation outright, Ó Cinnéide maintains that a much better one appears to exist. He accordingly makes reference to T.F. O'Rahilly's well known work, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, in particular to the diversity of names there mentioned which the pagan Irish used to describe their sun-god, depending on the characteristics he was perceived to possess.⁹ Among the names listed by our author are *Goll*, 'the one-eyed', *Lug*, 'brightness', *Aed*, 'fire', *Dearc*, 'eye', *Deargdearc*, 'red-eye', *Eocha*, 'horse', and indeed *Grian*, 'heat'.¹⁰ Reference is also made to O'Rahilly's suggestion that the Irish word *súil*, signifying 'eye', is closely related to the Latin word *sol*, meaning 'sun', and that at one time the sun was thought of as the eye of the day.¹¹ Ó Cinnéide feels that it would not be going beyond the bounds of reason to think that it is Goll, the sun-god of the Irish, that is in question in Inis an Ghoill, and also in Ros Goill in County Donegal, since these places were perhaps sites of sun worship in the pagan period.¹²

He recounts a tradition that Ros Goill derives its name from Goll mac Mórna, said to have been drowned at Carraig Ghoill out in the sea to the north of the Rosses,¹³ and relates the various stories about Goll's death to the humanisation of the sun-god. Numerous places with names deemed to have mythical origins close to Ros Goill are listed, such as Loch Gréine in Fanad, Dún Méabha near Carraig Ghoill, and Cnoc an tSí, while he also notes that Dún Fionnachaidh and Abhainn na Finne, which likewise are believed to have been named after mythical figures, are not very far removed. He feels that it may be a stretch of the imagination to consider that Abhainn Súilí and Loch Súilí have some connection with the sun-god, this on account of the possibility that the name includes the element 'Súil' and that this refers to the sun; nevertheless, he remarks on the similarity of pronunciation and the fact that it was thought that the sun-god sojourned beneath lakes and seas at night. Accordingly it is suggested that it is on account of this that lakes such as Loch Gréine, Loch Deirgdheirc, Loch nEachach, Loch Luigheach and Loch an Scáil in Corca Dhuibhne have their names, and that in order to humanise the gods it was later fabricated that the lakes were named after people who were drowned in them.¹⁴

In support of the assertion that Inis an Ghoill is connected with the sun-god, Ó Cinnéide remarks on the presence of the terms 'Lug-' and '-Aed-' in the inscription on the afore-mentioned pillar-stone which reads: LIE LUGAEDON MACCI MENUEH, 'The stone of Lugaedon, son of Menb'.¹⁵ *Macci*, an old genitive of *mac*, meaning 'son', indicates that a single being is interred beneath the stone, and it is suggested that the one being that the pagan Irish would understand from Lug and Aed was the sun-god.¹⁶ (See front cover and frontispiece.)

Similarly, the author argues that further evidence of the monument's mythological associations can be inferred from an analysis of 'Menueh', the final name inscribed on the stone. 'Menueh' is a genitive, and the suffix '-ueh' is a later form of '-uicas', meaning 'warrior', examples of which occur in ogham inscriptions. Since '-uicas' is usually associated with the name of some god such

as Lugouicas, Branouicas, etc., Ó Cinnéide conjectures that the element 'Men-' in 'Menueh' may also refer to a god. He adverts to the widely accepted belief among scholars that the term 'Men-' in Menavi or Oileán Mhanainn, 'Isle of Man', and in the name of the Menapii tribe mentioned by Classical writers, relates to the sea-god, Manannán mac Lir.¹⁷ Accordingly he suggests that it may be in order to hold the opinion that it is perhaps Manannán that is in question in the 'Menueh' part of the Inchaghoill inscription. Such an opinion is strengthened by the fact that an older name for Manannán was Oirbsiu, from which Lough Corrib derived its original name, Loch nOirbsen, now corrupted to Loch Coirib. Ó Cinnéide also recalls the tradition that the sun-god, Lugh, had a palace or fairy dwelling beneath the lake, and that he was a foster-son to Manannán, a relationship that may be reflected in the use of the term 'macci' in the inscription.¹⁸

Accompanying the inscription, on the upper portion of the stone, are seven engraved crosses, confirming that it was executed for Christians. Expert opinion holds that it is no later than the sixth century in date, and is probably the oldest extant example of an Irish inscription in Latin characters.¹⁹ Ó Cinnéide maintains that the early Christian writers of the history of Ireland portrayed the gods of the Irish as deceased human beings, in order to bring about the abandonment of paganism as quickly as possible. Accordingly he suggests that the inscription may also be the oldest example of the humanising of the gods of the Irish, in so far as one would think that the stone of Luguaedon marked the burial place of a dead person.²⁰ Since the inscription is no later than the sixth century, Christianity and paganism would still have been in conflict with one another, and it is felt that 'Lug', 'Aed' and 'Luguaedon', as referring to the sun-god, would not as yet have been completely forgotten.²¹

As regards the stone itself, the author suggests that the upper quarter was purposely cut off before it was inscribed, even though it would have been better suited as a headstone in its original state, and that it could have been inscribed horizontally to the right, as is customary, rather than perpendicularly towards the ground, as it is. Also, the Silurian sandstone from which it is composed is rather common in the area, and it would have been easy for the inscriber to come upon a superior stone for Luguaedon, if he so wished.²² R.A.S Macalister was of the opinion that the stone had originally been an ogham stone, but that it had been destroyed by someone who

had a spite against the pagan letters . . . So on the side of the stone he transcribed the old ogham inscription in the later 'Irish' letters, which Christianity had introduced, and then split off the ogham-inscribed angles. Thereafter, to drive out completely the evil influences which had entered in the stone, he surrounded it with crosses – two on each side except that to the north, where he put only one.²³

Ó Cinnéide completely rejects the ogham theory on grounds of space, and in relation to the abundance of the crosses he suggests that if their purpose was to banish evil, then it appears as if the stone had a mysterious function in pagan ceremonies before the early Christians made it into a headstone. He is reluctant to elaborate on what exactly the pillar-stone reminds him of,²⁴ yet in a circuitous

manner through comparison with the Turoe stone in east Galway and the Lia Fáil in Tara, both of which are thought to have been associated with fertility rites,²⁵ he conveys his thoughts clearly to us. Indeed in the nineteenth century the Lia Fáil was known to local Irish speakers as *Bod Fhearghusa*, 'the phallus of Fergus', with the name, Fergus, significantly, denoting 'virile vigour'.²⁶

Looking further afield from Inis an Ghoill, Ó Cinnéide notes with interest the great number of places on and around Lough Corrib that have names of mythical beings, such as Inis Bóinne, Loch na Bó Finne, Loch na mBan Fionn, Cnoc an tSí, Cnoc Meá of Sí Finnhearra, Seanadh Gréine, and indeed the site of the first legendary battle of Magh Tuireadh, near Cong.²⁷ Other places mentioned include Inis Dáith Bhuí, Inis Buaí, Oileán an Ghamhna, Oileán Dá Lára, Oileán-na Lára Báine, Suí Con, Loch an tSiáin, Ceapach na Lára Báine, Inis Mhic an Trír, and perhaps Inis Mhic Uí Choinn.²⁸

The islands of Inis Mhic an Trír and Inis Mhic Uí Choinn are located in the northern part of Lough Corrib, as are most of the islands whose names are deemed to have mythical origins.²⁹ In his endeavours to establish the mythological associations of these two islands, the author once again refers to O'Rahilly to support his theories. The latter explains that Conn was one of the names applied to the god of the Otherworld, from whom the Celts believed themselves to be descended, and that the legendary Conn Céthchathach was certainly not a historical character, but rather the ancestor god of the Connachta. The primary meaning of the word *conn* is given as 'sense, reason', and it is suggested that the name is likely to have been applied to the Celtic Otherworld deity, in his capacity as god of wisdom.³⁰ Ó Cinnéide admits that, on account of the prevalence of the surname Ó Coinn (Quinn) and Mac Coinn, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not it is a god or a person that is in question in the name Inis Mhic Uí Choinn; however, by analogy with Inis Mhic an Trír, he concludes that it is quite likely to be dedicated to the concept *conn*.³¹

Referring to O'Rahilly, our author informs us that Goibniu, Luchta and Credne were the gods of the intellect and the arts, that Bríd, the muse of poetry, was the mother of the three, and that Eagna (Wisdom) was the name of their son.³² He goes on to declare that if Eagna is the only case of a son being mentioned in association with three gods, then it is certain that it is he who is in question in the element 'Mhic' in Inis Mhic an Trír, and that it is because the island is dedicated to Eagna that it has its name. Since *eagna* and *conn* are closely related to each other in meaning, he suggests that perhaps Inis Mhic Uí Chuinn gets its name in a similar fashion. The two islands are close to each other in the northeast of the lake, and such dedications might be deemed to have come about as a result of druids, poets and craftspeople having bardic schools or universities on them. At any rate, he concludes, it is pleasant to ponder the possibility of an all-Irish university in Galway ages before English was spoken in England, much less in Ireland.³³

If his opinions on these islands have validity, then he believes that they are not isolated cases of worldly things being dedicated to abstract concepts such as reason and wisdom. Tobar na mBan Naoinh, 'The Well of the Holy Women', in Teelin in County Donegal is singled out for examination in this context, and here

Ciall (Sense), Tuigse (Understanding) and Náire (Modesty) are the names of the saintly women in question.³⁴ It is said that they were sisters of Saint Colmcille, but Ó Cinnéide maintains that the well was dedicated to these concepts much earlier during the pagan era, and suggests that, had it not been sanctified, the name might well have been Tobar na mBanna, from Tobar na mBandia, similar to 'Banna' in Abhainn na Banna, which is based on bandia, 'goddess'. He points out that the concepts of sense, understanding, reason and wisdom are not very far removed from each other in meaning, all being characteristics of the mind, and suggests that there may be other places dedicated to similar abstract concepts, such as Cnoc Meá, which is but a few miles to the northeast of Lough Corrib. The final element 'Meá' is usually taken to be derived from the alcoholic drink mead, or from the personal name Méabh which is based on the drink, but our author proposes that it could perhaps be connected with some form of *meáigh*, 'estimate, judge', or the related word *meas*, or even *mis* as in Sliabh Mis.³⁵

In addition to examining the names of the three largest islands on Lough Corrib, as described above, Ó Cinnéide submits for analysis some of the names of the lesser islands such as Earcán Mór, Earcán Beag and An Muclach. Undoubtedly, he states, the element Earcán refers to a pig, as in the case of Inis Earcáin or Sherkin Island off the southwest coast of County Cork, and in the Orkney Islands to the north of Scotland.³⁶ Another example of islands being dedicated to pigs is the archipelago known as The Seven Hogs, which lies to the north of Rough Point between Brandon Bay and Tralee Bay in County Kerry.³⁷ Significantly, two of the islands in this area are called An Muclach Beag and An Muclach Mór, with the word 'muclach' understood to refer to a place for holding pigs.³⁸ With regard to the islands of Earcán Mór, Earcán Beag and An Muclach in Lough Corrib, and given the mythological nature of the material here under discussion, it is difficult to ignore the tradition that Manannán mac Lir was reputed to have possessed a herd of magical pigs that could be eaten on one day but would be alive and ready for the same fate on the next.³⁹

A short distance to the west of Earcán Mór and Earcán Beag is a small island called Bróintín, the name referring to a small quern or millstone. On account of its shape Ó Cinnéide surmises that it may have been called after the saddle-quern in use during Neolithic and Bronze Age times, and that it may possibly be connected with the grinding of corn by the Lucht Sí on nearby Oileán an Arbhair. Such is a reflection of the author's opinion of the Lough Corrib area in general, and of the northern part of the lake in particular, which he considers to be one of the principal channels in Ireland for the Saol Sí. Indeed he concludes that there are few other places in the country that have the same density or abundance of sites with mythological associations as are found in Lough Corrib and the surrounding district, and he accordingly proclaims that it is no exaggeration to call it 'The Fairy Lake of West-Connacht'.⁴⁰

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SOURCE REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 Seán Ó Cinnéide, 'Logainmneacha' in *Feasta* (Iúil, 2005), lch. 13. This article, the first of those relating for the most part to the Lough Corrib area, contains references to places with no apparent mythological associations such as Luimneach, which the author surmises derived from an Old-Irish compound word *loim-enach*, signifying 'bare marsh'. (Also in *Dinnsheanchas*, Meitheamh, 1975.) Likewise he mentions places further afield such as Inis Oirr, the smallest of the Aran Islands, maintaining here, as elsewhere (*Feasta*, Nollaig, 1982), that 'Inis Saor' is the version of the name that best suits the pronunciation obtaining amongst the native Irish speakers of the Aran Islands and Connemara, and he suggests that it may be a relic of the reputed settlement of the islands by 'freemen' from Connacht and Munster in the sixth century.
- 2 Among the modern day scholars who have contributed greatly to our knowledge and understanding of placenames is Dr Nollaig Ó Muraíle, formerly of the Placenames Branch of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland. See, for example, his contribution 'Settlement and place-names' in Patrick J. Duffy, David Edwards and Elizabeth Fitzpatrick (eds), *Gaelic Ireland c.1250 – c.1650: land, lordship and settlement* (Dublin, 2001; paperback edition, 2004), pp 223-245.
- 3 See Francis J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high kings* (London, 1973; reprint, Dublin, 2004), p. 54, for dating and description of *Dindshenchas*.
- 4 Cary Meehan, *The traveller's guide to sacred Ireland* (Glastonbury, 2002), pp 19, 578.
- 5 *AU & AFM*, sub anno 1128.
- 6 Vera Orschel, *Maigh Eo na Sacsan: the early medieval history of an Anglo-Saxon community in Ireland c.AD 664 – c.AD 800* (unpublished thesis, NUI, Galway, 2000), p. 84, quoting Brev. John Colgan, *Acta sanctorum Hiberniae*, p. 605.
- 7 Roderic O'Flaherty, *A chorographical description of West or h-Iar Connaught*, edited by James Hardiman (Dublin, 1846), p. 24. See also pp 186-7 where the Saxon ecclesiastic Ecgbert is associated with the island.
- 8 T.S. Ó Máille, 'County Galway Place-Names' in *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, vol. 25 (1952-3), pp 82-3 (at 82); also 'Áitainmneacha na Gaillimhe' in Diarmuid Ó Cearbhaill (ed.), *Galway: town and gown 1484-1984* (Dublin, 1984), pp 50-62 (at 52).
- 9 Thomas F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology* (1946; reprint, Dublin, 1957); see especially pp 58-9, 278, 289-94, 320.
- 10 See O'Rahilly, *op. cit.*, pp 289-90, where he portrays Grian as a sun-goddess.
- 11 O'Rahilly, *op. cit.*, p. 58, has the following: 'From its shape and brightness the sun was regarded as the divine Eye of the heavens'.
- 12 Ó Cinnéide, 'Logainmneacha' in *Feasta* (Iúil, 2005), lch. 13; also *Galway Advertiser*, 7 April 2005. Worthy of note is the fact that these placenames differ in construction; therefore, with the inclusion of the definite article in Inis an Ghoill it would translate as 'island of the Goll', whereas Ros Goill would simply be rendered as 'wood of Goll'. The name is given as Inis an Ghail in OSI *Discovery Series* Sheet 45.
- 13 Ó Cinnéide, 'Logainmneacha' in *Feasta* (Iúil, 2005), lch. 14, where the author credits local schoolteachers Máire Ní Laifearthaí and Nóirín Goulding with this tale.
- 14 *Ibid.* Scáil, we are told, was another name for Lugh, thus accounting for the inclusion of Loch an Scáil in this list.
- 15 The translation is from Lord Killarín and Michael Duignan, *The Shell guide to Ireland* (London, 1967), p. 180; but see also Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early medieval Ireland 400 – 1200* (London and New York, 1995), p. 34, where the inscription and translation are given as follows: LIE LUGAEDON MACCI MENUEH ('The stone of Lugáed mac Menb').
- 16 Ó Cinnéide, 'Logainmneacha' in *Feasta* (Iúil, 2005), lch. 13.

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