



EARLY FARMING IN KERRY

Mícheál Ó Coileáin examines the prehistoric settlements in the Loch a'Dúin valley on the Dingle Peninsula in Kerry

The backbone of the Dingle Peninsula (Irish: Corca Dhuibhne) is a jagged and impressive 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. **Loch a'Dúin valley** is located on the north-facing side of the mountain ridge, between the peaks of **Sliabh na Leice** (Slievenalecka) to the west and **Sliabh na nGabhar** (Slievenagower) to the east - in the Cloghane and Brandon area of the peninsula.

When walking on upland blanket bogs, such as at Loch a'Dúin (Loughadoon), there is always the possibility that under your feet there are archaeological wonders, perfectly preserved in the dark peat. Organic material such as **timber, butter,**

Above:
Aerial view of
Loch a'Dúin valley
on the Dingle
Peninsula

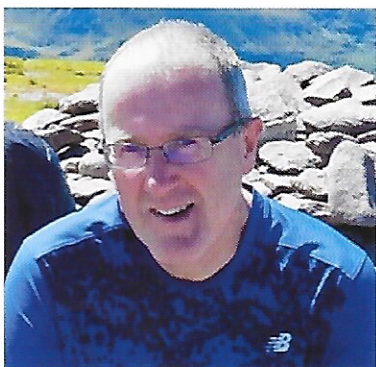
woven cloth, bodies and manuscripts have been found by people working in the bogs. There have also been numerous **metal finds**, which are now on view in the **National Museum of Ireland**.

Loch a'Dúin is an archaeological landscape of ninety sites, which are scattered throughout the valley, linked in places by up to twelve kilometres of **pre-bog stone walls**, which for the most part remain covered by peat. It is a remarkable landscape of over 650 hectares, which gives us an insight into early farming in Ireland, from the Bronze Age to present times.

The relatively straightforward walk around Loch a'Dúin is popular with families, visitors and hillwalking groups. The soils are predominantly blanket bog peats along the valley floor and shallow, peaty gleys among the boulder-strewn fan deposits around the corrie walls of the lake. The main vegetation throughout the valley is heath and rough pasture. It is grazed by sheep throughout the year, with cattle grazing there occasionally during the summer months.

Archaeological surveys

The location of a prehistoric **wedge tomb** within the pre-bog field system has been noted for many years by local farmers. It was visited by the **Kerry Field Club** in 1945 and a brief description of the tomb was noted. The wedge tomb was described in much more detail by the **Megalithic Survey of Ireland** in 1982.



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Photograph: Noel O'Neill



In 1986, other monuments, including partially visible **stone walls**, were surveyed and published in the *Archaeological Survey of the Dingle Peninsula*. As part of a further study in the 1990s, other walls and sites were uncovered.

Two **pollen studies** have also been produced, giving us extensive details of what grew in the area over the past 4,000 years.

Bronze Age structures

There are four distinct areas of archaeological interest within the valley. In one of these areas, the walls are probably as late as the 18th and 19th centuries, as they appear to be associated with structures linked to sheep farming. The remaining three areas appear to date to the prehistoric period, indicating activity in the Bronze Age, particularly between 4500-2500 BP (Before Present).

The most substantial area where walls are located is the **central complex**. This is located on the shoulder of blanket bog in the north-western part of the valley, at an altitude of between 80-150 metres, and covers an area of up to 80 hectares. At least thirty fields can be identified, with a total wall length of 7.34 kilometres. There are twenty-seven archaeological sites scattered amongst the remains of these walls, which include **enclosures, pre-bog hut sites, cup-and-circle rock art, fulachta fiadh** and a **cist grave**.

Along the eastern side of the lakeshore, up to a height of 250 metres, we find another complex of walls with a total length of 2.35 kilometres. Unlike the central complex, there are only three fields identifiable here. Because of the sloping nature of the ground there is little peat, the deepest being up to 50cm in places. As a result, most of the walls are identifiable above the surface of the hillside and interspersed amongst these walls are thirty-eight archaeological sites, also with **fulachta fiadh, rock art, enclosures** and **hut sites**, plus a **fortified island**.

Many sites have a mixture of **clocháns** (stone huts),

Above:
Fortified island at Loch a'Dúin

Below:
An example of cup-and-circle rock art from the western shore of Loch a'Dúin. There are 13 examples of this prehistoric rock art in the valley

which seem to have been used and reused over a long period of time for both habitation and sheep farming purposes. It is likely that this part of the valley was used mostly for habitation.

The final part of the valley where pre-bog walls are found is approximately halfway in along the valley floor, on a natural, oval-shaped hillock to the east of the Scorid River. The hillock has been enclosed by a wall of boulders and follows the natural contours of the landscape.

A short distance further north are two **standing stones**, one of which appears to have been deliberately shaped to resemble the summit of **Mount Brandon**, on which it may be orientated. Other monuments nearby include **fulachta fiadh** and **hut sites**. ➤





Above left:
Section of an excavated trench of stone wall which was built during the mid to late Bronze Age (3200-2500 BP)

Above right:
Sunlight flooding the chamber of the wedge tomb at Loch a'Dúin

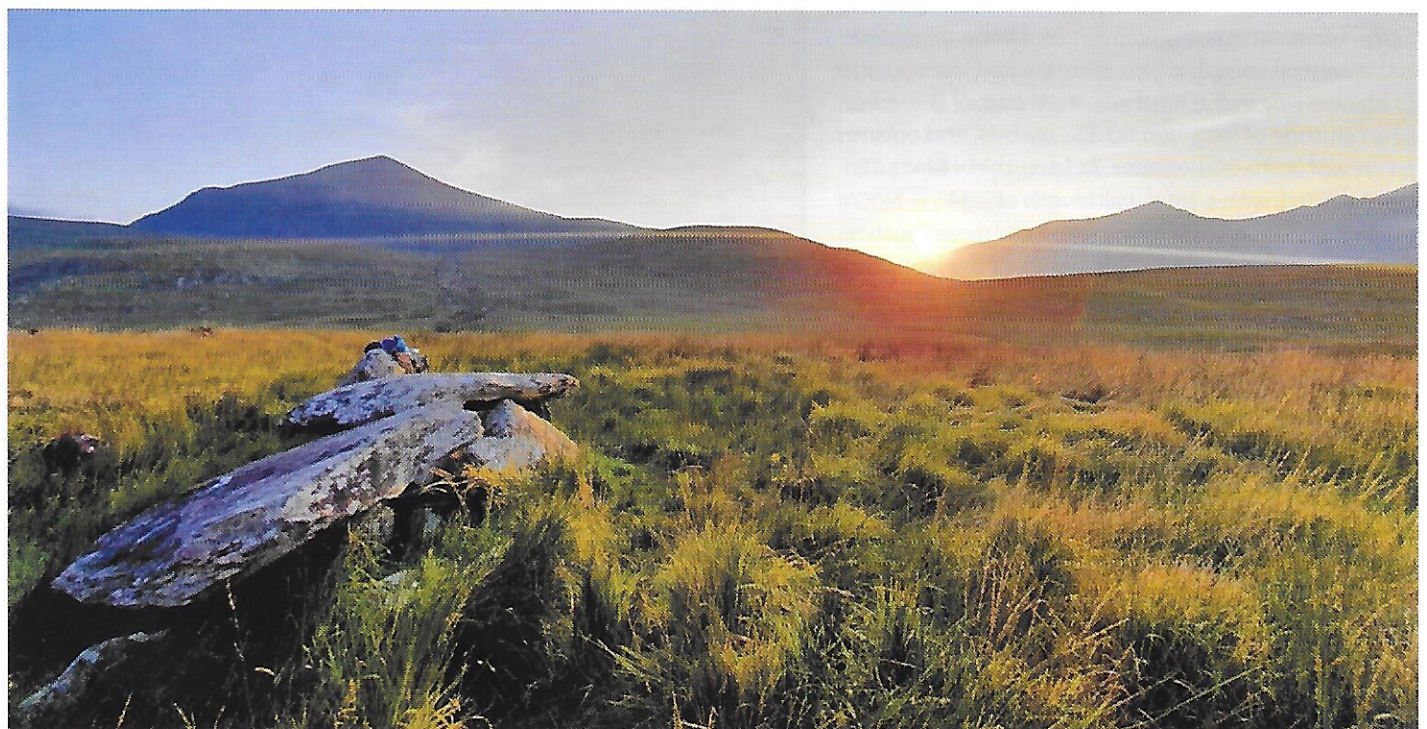
Below:
The wedge tomb

The earliest farmers

The introduction of agriculture to the Dingle Peninsula has been examined, principally by **Peter Woodman**, at **Ferriter's Cove**, near Ballyferriter. This work has provided a series of radiocarbon dates, which span the period from 6300-4000 BP. The evidence from Ferriter's Cove suggests that intermittent prehistoric settlement took place throughout a period of a thousand years, but the site may have been in use for several thousand years from the Mesolithic period through to the beginning of the Bronze Age.

The site has provided some early Neolithic dates for the peninsula. Samples taken from **cattle bone** have been dated to almost 6,000 years ago. These dates could be taken to represent the beginnings of agriculture on the Dingle Peninsula and provide a context for the later occupation and development of agriculture in the Loch a'Dúin valley.

None of the walls in this area appear to have been used for agricultural purposes, and it is possible, due to the nature of the sites located here, that this area was designated as a place of ritual, away from the main centre of farming or habitation. **Daithí Ó Conaill**, a hillwalker with **Tralee Mountaineering Club**, has noticed that on the spring and autumn equinox dates the setting sun floods the chamber of the **wedge tomb**, illuminating the cup-and-circle rock art on the southern wall of the tomb.



Photographs: Noel O'Neill (stone wall), Micheál Ó Coileáin (wedge tomb)



The cattle bone from Ferriter's Cove remains the earliest evidence of cattle in Ireland, and DNA evidence suggests the cattle originated in France.

There are two **pollen studies** published from the Loch a'Dúin valley. The first is by **John Dodson** (1990) and, although not directly linked to the archaeological sites in the valley, it does provide interesting results. The second study was undertaken by **Steffen Wolters** (1994). It was during this latter study that pollen cores were taken close to one of the field walls to establish a date for their construction.

Taken together, these studies give us a remarkable picture of the Loch a'Dúin valley. They suggest that farming activity was first introduced to the valley in around 4000 BP, but not on an intensive scale.

The pollen evidence shows that the early post-glacial period in the valley was associated with open woodland of birch and willow, and grasslands containing dock. This was later replaced by woodland made up of oak, hazel, elm and pine, which Wolters dates to 9500 BP.

Woodland began to decline from 4400 BP, while heathland, bog and pasture began to develop, and has been to the fore up to the present.

The forest decline that Wolters notes from 4400 BP is likely to be linked to the **beginning of farming** in the valley. During this period (3000-2500 BP), there was 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 pollen study there are several peaks in herb species such as silverweed and bracken. The presence of cereal pollen, in addition to these species, would seem to suggest **cereal agriculture** as well as **livestock farming**. In summary, it is in the early Bronze Age that we find major clearances taking place, leading to probable soil impoverishment and bog formation.

In the period of intensive agriculture in the middle of the Bronze Age (3200-2500 BP), the woodland is cleared, through cutting rather than burning, and

Above:
Another view
of Loch a'Dúin
valley

Below:
Hillwalkers by
the waterfall in
the Loch a'Dúin
valley

there is a presence of cereal-type pollen, suggesting intensive farming involving both livestock and arable agriculture.

It is during this period that the **stone walls** were built in Loch a'Dúin, along with many of the archaeological sites. Although monuments such as the **wedge tomb**, **rock art** and **standing stones** would all have been earlier, it is a possibility that the valley was initially used for ritual purposes, and farming developed at a later period in the valley.

At roughly 3200 BP, a more vigorous agricultural period begins, which continued for the following 700 years. There follows a lull in farming activity for almost 1,000 years, and then the final phase of farming begins at 1430 BP, 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. It is likely that the peat formation in the valley from this period on prevented arable and livestock farming.

A walk through Loch a'Dúin valley is a worthy reason to visit the Cloghane and Brandon area, and provides a fascinating inclusion on a hillwalking trip to the Dingle Peninsula. Keep your eyes peeled for the archaeological wonders there. ■

