A Re-examination of Four Sites in Grange Townland, Lough Gur, Co. Limerick

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Four monuments, two stone circles one of them very substantially destroyed, a megalithic structure which may be a ruined court-tomb and an eroded earthwork, all lying a short distance to the north and north-west of the embanked stone circle in Grange townland, Lough Gur, County Limerick, are illustrated and described.

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The well-known complex of prehistoric monuments to the west of Lough Gur and in Grange townland, County Limerick, has received frequent mention in the literature, the fullest general account being that by Bertram Windle (1912), Ó Riordáin (1951), in his report of the excavation of the best-known of the group, the embanked circle designated “B” by Windle, included brief descriptions of the other sites. More recently, O’Kelly (1975), in a guide-book to the area, has provided short accounts of most of the monuments.

The Conference organised by the Association of Young Irish Archaeologists held in Limerick in November 1986 on the topic, “The Prehistoric Archaeology of Lough Gur, County Limerick”, prompted a re-examination of four sites in that area the results of which, conveyed to the Conference by one of us (S. Ó N.), are made available here. These sites are the stone circles designated “C” and “D” by Windle, the megalithic structure to which he assigned the letter “E”, and a large sub-circular depression, apparently an eroded earthwork, 10 m to the west of the last, marked “Stone Circle (Site of)” on the Ordnance Survey (OS) six-inch map, Sheet 32. Plans of the four sites, made in 1986, are provided here. In addition, a late 18th century manuscript plan from the Austin Cooper collection showing circles “C” and “D” and the nearby since then excavated circle “B” is reproduced (Illus. 6). This drawing is entitled “Plans & Sections of Three Circles of Stones near Loch Gower 7 Miles from Limerick on the Road to Cork” (National Library of Ireland). On the manuscript drawing the largest circle is Site “D”, the smallest Site “C” and the third is the embanked circle “B”. An aerial photograph of the eroded earthwork, taken in 1986, is also presented (Illus. 8).

SITE DESCRIPTIONS

Site “E” (Illus. 1 and 2)

This monument (National Grid Reference (NGR) R631405) was first marked on the OS 1:2,500 map of 1900 where it was named “Stone Circle”. On the revised 1:2,500 map of 1925 it was named “Stone Avenue” and it appeared on the 1:2,500 sheet of 1980 as “Megalithic Structure”. It is on pasture that falls gently to the west and stands about 10 m east of the next to be described. A comparison of our plan with that of Windle (1912, Illus. 5) shows that there has been little or no change in its condition in the intervening years.

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Location map derived from OS 1:2,500 survey (Plants 5049 B.D) showing five sites, four lettered B, C, D, and E (Windle 1912) and the Earthwork named "Stone Circle (Site of)" on OS 1:2,500 plan (1925).

Illus. 1.

A row of three stones, 6.5 m long, to the N stands opposite the middle part of another line, 23 m long, now represented by 13 stones. There is a transversely-set stone midway between the rows which are 7.3 m to 8.3 m apart and diverge from each other towards the ESE. The three northern stones are 1 m to 1.7 m long, 40 cm to 65 cm wide, and 35 cm to 55 cm high. A displaced stone, 1 m in maximum dimension, rests against the westernmost example. All but two of the stones of the southern row are less than 70 cm in height. The two tall stones, the second and fourth from the E, are, respectively, 1 m and 1.15 m high. All are firmly set but the status of one (not hatched), which does not rise above ground level, is uncertain. The transversely-set stone between the two rows is a gable-shaped split boulder,
flat face to E, and measures 1 m long, 40 cm wide, 85 cm high. To the N and S of the monument there is in each case a single stone, the first 1 m and the second 1.2 m in maximum dimension, both partly embedded in the ground on their broad faces, and both, if they ever formed part of the monument, clearly displaced.

Ó Riordain (1951, 38-9) has suggested that this monument is the remains of a megalithic tomb of long cairn type, and O’ Kelly (1975, 5), though observing that too little survived
above ground to make a definite decision, suggested that it was a court tomb and it has been provisionally listed as such by one of us (Ó Nualláin 1989, 119). The two rows of stones would seem to represent the sides of a kerb, the stones set skew to the eastern end of the more southerly line being perhaps the remains of a façade. The divergence of the two lines of stones to the ESE is indicative both of the trapezoidal shape and the overwhelmingly preferred eastwards orientation of the court tomb class. The single stone between the two lines, is, in all respects, a suitable backstone.

Earthwork (Illus. 1, 3, 4 and 8)

This feature (NGR R631405) was first recorded on the OS 1:2,500 map of 1925 where it is named “Stone Circle (Site of)” but it is not shown on the OS 1:2,500 map of 1980. According to Lynch (1895, 300; 1913, 16) there was a stone circle here but Ó Rfordáin
(1951, 39) expressed considerable doubt about this and pointed out that there is no good
evidence to support the claim.

On the ground this feature, which seems to be an artificial construction, appears as a large
somewhat dish-shaped depression. A contour plan of the site, at intervals of 10 cm, is
presented here (Illus. 3). Windle’s Site “E” approaches closely at the E and is shown on the
plan. The dished appearance of the site is demonstrated in the isometric view (Illus. 4). It is
well-defined at the E where a lowering of the original level of rising ground has left a sharp
rise as a perimeter and at the N by a broad, low bank which at the NW narrows considerably.
The aerial photograph shows it to be of short oval outline (Illus. 8). The enclosure measures,
in overall extent, some 95 m N-S and 80 m E-W and is sited on sloping ground, the level of
which at the western side of the site is some 5 m below that at the eastern.

Site “C” (Illus. 1, 5 and 6)

This stone circle (NGR R632405), shown on the various editions of the OS large scale
maps, 15.5 m to 16.5 m across, has within a low mound and outside it, in places, traces of
what may have been an outer bank (Ó Ríordáin 1951, 38). It consists of 15 large stones,
evenly spaced; an additional stone at the E is considerably smaller than the others and
cannot with any certainty be regarded as an original feature. Two stones, cross-hatched on
plan, are set on edge in the ground unlike most, and perhaps all, of the remaining examples
which rest on the surface of the ground. There is no indication that the latter examples are
other than in their original positions. The southern of the two set stones is 2.8 m long, 1 m
wide and 1.3 m high and the other is 1.4 m long, 55 cm wide and 60 cm high. The remaining
stones, which vary in plan size from 1.2 m by 1.4 m to 3.2 m by 2.6 m and in height from 60
cm to 1.4 m, are, in the main, broad flattish sub-rectangular blocks. Nine of them, the seven
next to the cross-hatched pair at the N and the two closest to the same pair at the S, are
clearly set on rather than in the ground. The bases of the remaining four stones are below
ground but this seems to be due to an accumulation of earth. The southernmost of the four is
undercut on the outside, possibly an attempt at deliberate destruction. The small unhatched
stone is firmly-set. Splits in two stones of the circle are indicated by pecked lines on the plan.

There is a gap, 6 m wide, at the SW which, on the evidence of the Cooper collection manuscript, is to be accounted for by the loss of two stones since the late 18th century. Other than this the spaces between the hatched stones vary from 40 cm to 2.6 m in width. The stones now stand in a shallow channel, not more than 20 cm deep, apparently the result of
cattle movements alongside and around the stones. The channel does not extend across the gap in the circle at the SW.

The outer pecked lines mark a barely traceable fall in ground level, what might be the outer edge of the possible external bank mentioned above. The approximate limits of the
internal mound, which is about 30 cm high, are shown by a pecked line on the plan. It is grass-grown and apparently of earth. This mound is not shown on OS maps but seems to be represented by a lightly inked ring within the circle on the Fair Plan (the manuscript on which the original six-inch map of 1840 was based).

**Site “D”** (Illus. 1, 6 and 7)

This feature (NGR R632404) is identified as a stone circle on the original OS six-inch map (1840) where its western extremity is shown cut by a roadway, since abandoned. On the OS 1:2,500 map of the area of 1900, where four stones are depicted, it is also identified as a stone circle. It is named “Stone Circle (Site of)” on the OS 1:2,500 map of 1920 and that of 1980.
Four stones, perhaps the remnant of the circle, survive. Three of them appear to rest on the ground while the fourth (hatched on plan) seems firmly set. From N to S they measure, in turn, 1.3 m long, 1.1 m wide, 80 cm high; 1.9 m long, 80 cm wide, 85 cm high; 1.5 m long, 1.7 m wide, 45 cm high; and 1.4 m long, 90 cm wide, 70 cm high. About 5 m NW of the northernmost of the four there is another large stone. That the row of four stones, and the fifth some distance away, were all in their present positions some 75 years ago is clear from Windle’s plan of the site (1912, Fig. 4) which shows the row of four, there numbered 3, 4, 5 and 6, as part of a shallow arc of 11 stones, conceivably part of the western perimeter of a large circle.

Earlier commentators provide a reasonably coherent picture of the circle though there are inconsistencies as to detail between them. Various estimates of its diameter have been given but most favour one of 150 to 160 feet (45 m to 49 m). There is general agreement that the stones of the circle were low-sized, all about three feet high (c. 1 m). The maximum number of stones noted at the circle was 72 (Fitzgerald and McGregor 1826, Vol. 1, 298) and though it is not possible to make a precise count of the number of stones shown on the Cooper manuscript plan there would appear to be approximately 70 represented. Some slight gaps in the perimeter suggest stones had already been lost by that stage. Beaufort (1828, 138) has remarked of the 60 she noted that some stood close together and that between others there were considerable gaps. Crofton Croker (1833, 107) counted 69, though as he admitted, with some difficulty, as many were “much sunk in the ground” and overgrown, and was informed that 12 of the largest had been removed and broken for road repairs. John O’ Donovan
counted 40 stones (Ordnance Survey Letters, Co. Limerick, 1840, Vol. 1, 120-1) and Lenihan (1866, 724) 58 stones. It is clear that by the 1890s the circle had been largely demolished as Lynch (1895, 300) reported the survival of but six, and Dowd (1896, 76) eight, stones.

The nature of the portrayal of the site on the original OS six-inch map (1840) - a ring of hachures outside a circle of dots - would suggest that it was embanked but Ó Riordáin (1951, 38) has dismissed the map as an unreliable source on the basis that the bank around excavated circle "B" is not shown on it. On the Fair Plan (the manuscript on which the published map was based) shading, though somewhat faint, around circle "B" was probably intended to depict the bank and its omission from the published map may have been an oversight. Similar shading around circle "D" on the Fair Plan seems to have formed the basis for the ring of hachures shown on the published map. Previous accounts of the site contain no reference to the existence of a bank there. According to Beaufort (1828, 138) "the ground around and within the circle is perfectly level" which seems intended to mean that the circle was a simple ring of stones. The manuscript drawing in the Austin Cooper collection clearly, in a profile across the site, shows an unembanked ring of stones. It should though be noted that this drawing is not free of error as Site "B", though correctly shown as embanked both in plan and section, is portrayed as a circle with a diameter of 90 feet, considerably less than the true diameter of 150 feet (Ó Riordáin 1951, 42). The sources do not permit of a definite conclusion as to whether circle "D" was or was not embanked.

COMMENTS

Though only 30 km SW of the court-tomb at Shanballyedmond, County Tipperary, excavated by O' Kelly (1958, 37-72), the possible example at Grange is outside the main distribution of the type which is in the northern half of the country and brings to but four the number S of a line from Dublin to Athlone and E and S of the River Shannon. The suggested identification of the so-called "Stone Avenue" at Grange as a likely court tomb broadens the funerary picture that has emerged in the Lough Gur area from the excavations of Ó Riordáin (1954; Grogan and Eogan 1987), and Ó Riordáin and Ó h-Iceadha (1955), and from nearby Caherguillamore (Hunt 1967).

Surface examination of relatively featureless and considerably defaced earthen enclosures such as the eroded example at Grange does not permit of reliable classification, but its dimensions and dished appearance suggest it might be compared with a series of large embanked enclosures, the best known examples of which are in the vicinity of the River Boyne in County Meath (Stout 1991). Excavation at one of these, Monknewtown (Sweetman 1976), revealed similarities both in structure and finds between it and the embanked Circle "B" at Grange. Excavation has shown that the bank at both these sites was built without the requirement of a flanking ditch. At Monknewtown the material for the enclosing bank was obtained by scooping the interior and it would appear as if the enclosing bank of the defaced enclosure at Grange, at least at its eastern and uphill side where it appears to have been hollowed from the rising ground, may have been built in a like manner.

In regard to the stone circles, our survey has served to illustrate the internal mound noted by Ó Riordáin in circle "C" and the outer feature which he considered to be a bank. In the case of circle "D" it would seem that the short row of stones shown in our plan is the remains of what was a considerable stone circle. Their place, as part of the Lough Gur group, in the distribution pattern of Irish stone circles has been dealt with elsewhere by one of us (Ó Nualláin 1975, 113-4). The most striking feature of the Lough Gur group of circles is their morphological diversity: an embanked circle of contiguous stones ("B"), a circle of
contiguous stones enclosed within a large stone-faced bank, Circle “O” (Grogan and Eogan 1987, 496-7), and a relatively small, gapped, circle of stones with internal mound (“C”).

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