

The geographical position of standing stones in northwest County Limerick

Ten prehistoric standing stones are situated in a region along the southern shore of the Shannon estuary from the Kerry bounds to the river Maigue in northwest County Limerick. When these standing stones were erected is not known as no archaeological work has taken place at any of them, however, evidence from other parts of the country where dating evidence has been found give a Bronze Age date of the late second or early first millennia BC for the erection of this type of monument.¹ Varying interpretations on the purpose of these stones have been suggested ranging from marking prehistoric track ways to having some ritualistic purpose or being the grave stones of long-dead chieftains. In the late-nineteenth century, Wakeman first argued that many such stones marked boundaries, highlighting the stones at either side of the river Erne in County Donegal² and this is now a popular explanation.

An examination of the standing stones in northwest Limerick also suggests that many were situated on land marking significant boundaries, in particular those of later civil parishes. When the parish system was introduced into the Irish church in the twelfth century there is evidence that the boundaries in Gaelic areas followed those of existing túatha, the territorial divisions of Gaelic Ireland.³ While there must have been fluctuations in the power of different Gaelic families and their influence in the locality and the size of the land units held by them no doubt increased and decreased correspondingly over time, nevertheless the correlation between the boundaries of the new parishes and standing stones in west Limerick suggests that some of these early divisions were fairly stable, probably going back to the Bronze Age. One has to allow of course for the possibility that such standing stones were used as convenient markers when the parish boundaries (later termed the civil parishes) were decided upon and might not have anything to do with the lands held by Gaelic family groups.

The following examination of the geographical position of these stones is based on a study of the Ordnance Surveys Maps of 1841 and 1923, the Discovery Series Maps no. 64 and 65 (1996) and from field work. The analysis follows a west to east direction from Glin to Kildimo. At Ballycullane, southwest of Glin, in Kilfergus civil parish a standing stone is situated on land that is adjoining Kilnaughten parish in County Kerry to the west.⁴ In the east of Kilfergus parish standing stones are to be found at Killacolla, adjoining the parish of Loghill and two stones at Tooraree, contiguous to the parish of Kilmoylan.⁵ The ancient tribe here were the Corbraigh and the boundary of their lands here in the valley of the Glencorbry River seems to have been marked by standing stones at the west, east and south east corners. All four standing stones are situated on high ground. The neighbouring townland to Tooraree is Tinnakilla in Kilmoylan parish,

¹ Peter Harbison, *Pre-Christian Ireland, From the first settlers to the early Celts* (London, 1994) pp 96-8; Seán Ó Nualláin, 'Stone Circles, stone rows, boulder burials and standing stones' in Michael Ryan (ed.), *Irish Archaeology Illustrated* (Dublin, 1994) pp 89-92.

² William F. Wakeman, *Handbook of Irish Antiquities* (London, 1995 edition) p. 8.

³ Neal Garnham, 'Parish' in S.J. Connolly (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford, 1998) pp 426-7.

⁴ *Discovery Series Map* no. 64, 1996; Caroline Toal (ed.), *North Kerry Archaeological Survey* (Tralee, 1995) p. 27. The stone here is in Ballycullane Upper, while Ballycullane Lower adjoins County Kerry. However, the divisions of lower and upper were only brought in by the Ordnance Surveyors in the early nineteenth century.

⁵ Gerard Curtin, *Recollections of Our Native Valley, A History of the parish of Loughill-Ballyhahill and the Owvaun Valley* (Ballyhahill, 1996) pp 6-8.

where a standing stone is also to be found. Place-name evidence also points to the existence of standing stones long since gone. A division of the townland of Knocknagornagh in Kilmoylan parish is called Knockadullane, (*Cnoc an Gallán*), the hill of the standing stone).⁶ This townland is situated contiguous to Rathronan parish.

Moving to the vicinity of Shanagolden, there are standing stones at Cloonty, Cloonyclohassy and Shanid Lower, townlands that are on high ground and on the boundary between Kilmoylan, Loghill and Shanagolden parishes. These stones are not marked on any of the Ordnance Survey maps, and at less than 1.5 metres in height, the possibility that these are not of prehistoric origin has also to be considered.⁷ All three stones are in close proximity to Knockourha Hill, the power base for the Uí Conaill Gabhra tribe in the early Christian period. O'Connor has highlighted that many chief forts of the period 'served as territorial delimitation points'.⁸ As the hill at Knockourha occupies a very commanding position, it might very well have been used for defence further back into the prehistoric period and strengthens the view that these standing stones could well be of prehistoric origin.

Moving further east to the Limerick plain, the boundary of the lands held by the Caonraí tribe may well have been marked at the south and east. These stones seem to mark the later boundaries of the barony of Kenry. A standing stone is situated at Currahchase, in Adare parish and in close proximity to Kilcornan parish.⁹ On the banks of the Maigue, a standing stone is found at Court in Kildimo parish. This townland is on the west bank of the river which is the boundary with Kilkeedy parish. The Maigue also forms the boundary between the baronies of Kenry and Pubblebrien. There seems little doubt that the river here has marked a boundary since prehistoric times. All the standing stones mentioned are situated in close proximity to a civil parish boundary and in many instances within two hundred metres of such divisions.

Many areas in the country have no standing stones, in some places they may have long since been destroyed or perhaps were never erected and in many cases such stones may have had some other purpose than marking boundaries. Take for example the work done by Toal in the neighbouring region of north Kerry. Only one of the four standing stones found along the Shannon coast from Ballybunion to Tarbert is in a townland contiguous to the next civil parish.¹⁰ Such evidence suggests that in the north Kerry region the purpose of these stones was varied and in later times were not used to mark out parish boundaries.

Nevertheless the findings from this survey of northwest Limerick are certainly intriguing, suggesting a link between standing stones and boundaries and that these boundaries were known and relatively stable from 2000BC to 1100AD, with little change taking place in the areas the different tribes controlled for over two thousand years.

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⁶ Dan Keane, *Around Athea* (Moyvane, 2005) p. 18; Curtin, *Recollections*, pp 5-6.

⁷ Gerard Curtin, 'Two unrecorded Standing Stones near Shanagolden', *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, vol. 42 (2002) pp 177-8.

⁸ Patrick J. O'Connor, *Exploring Limerick's Past, An Historical Geography of Urban Development in County and City* (Newcastle West, 1987) p. 6.

⁹ *Discovery Series Map* no. 65, 1996.

¹⁰ Toal (ed.), *North Kerry Survey*, pp 27-48.

