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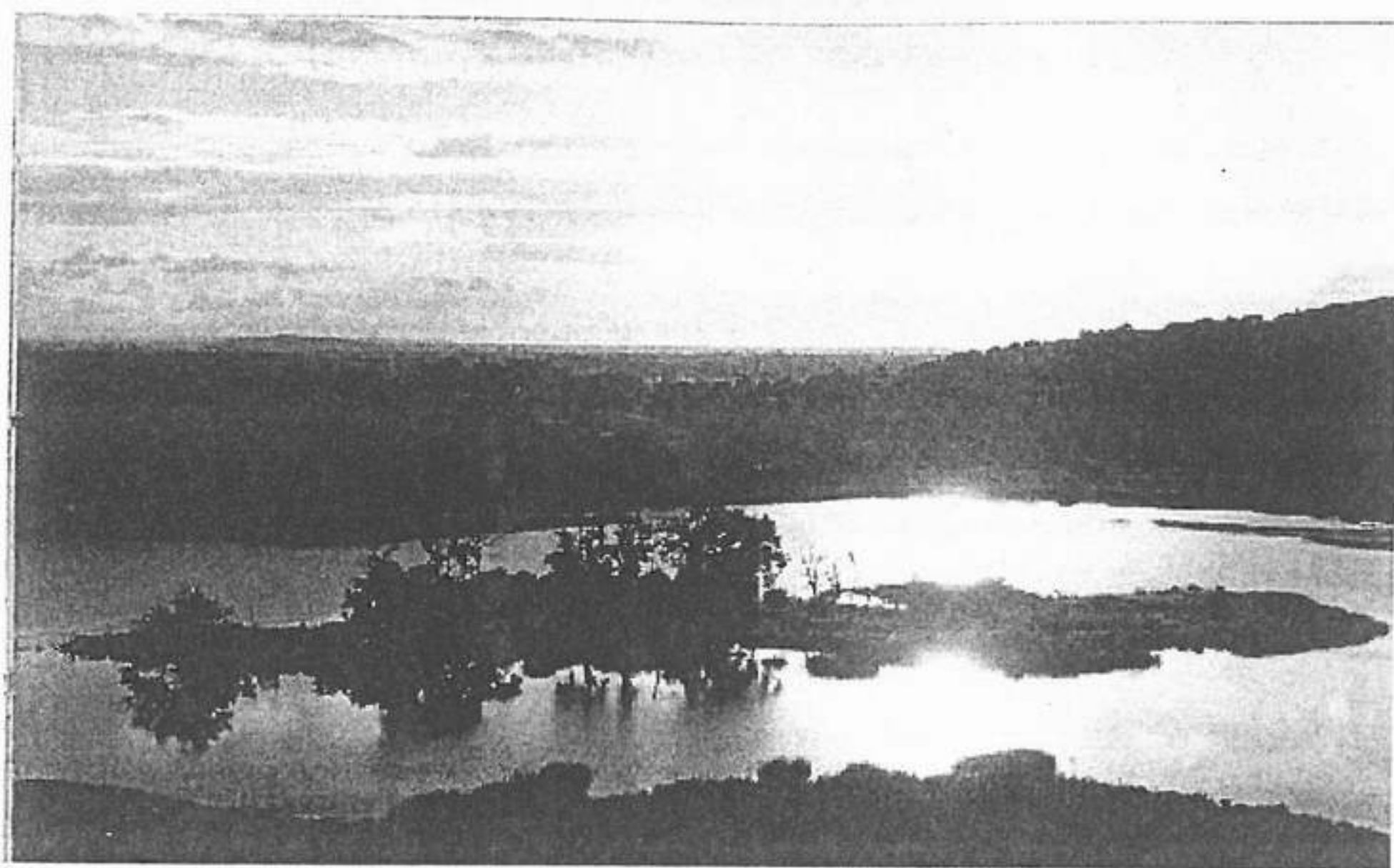
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Lough Gur. The enchanted lake. . From Dames.



Fig 1. Location of Lough Gur.

## Introduction: Methods for rediscovery of the past.

Lough Gur , the enchanted lake, is in Co. Limerick 20 kilometres south of Limerick. (Fig 1).

When one listens to or reads the more recent renditions of the mythology and folktales of the Lough Gur area, one can feel a sense of the ancient that is highlighted by certain words or phrases within these stories. A knowledge of archaeology and the names given to some of the monuments and surrounding landscape point to prehistoric beginnings. Motifs within the tales seem to bring to life elements of archaeological knowledge and give some meaning to the symbols the ancestors left within the landscape. We begin with the stories we have today, take the clues that they give us and proceed to rediscover human interaction with the world of the past through ritual and religion.

The Irish Folklore Commission created in 1935 is a prime source for the more recent record of tales linked with Lough Gur. This material was later stored in a larger archive and retitled The Department of Irish Folklore in 1971. These records are kept at University College Dublin. The people of Lough Gur provide us with another invaluable source within the pages of its own local journal, *The Lough Gur and District Historical Society Journal*. A special folklore edition was produced in 1991 (no.7), with references and notes provided by Dr. Daíthi Ó hOgain and edited by Mr. Michael Quinlan.

To the lay reader the folktales would appear to be interesting if bizarre old tales of no relevance today, (sadly there is some truth in that), to the reader with some knowledge of history, the tales are diluted records of older much more complex stories. These more complex stories can be found in The Irish Folklore Commission's records of mythology connected with the Irish Gods as in the pantheon of the Tuatha Dé Danann and in books written by such scholars as Dr. Ó hOgain.

The tales are of little relevance today, due to the advent of the welfare state, people are less reliant on ritual to placate the elements. The modern media of television has also created an environment where storytelling is in decline. We must be profoundly thankful that The Irish Folklore Commission was created to "Go out and gather up the fragments lest they perish."



## Unravelling the threads.

There are two main characters referred to in the folklore of Lough Gur many tales of the region are spin-offs from these central themes. The first is Áine who, as we shall see, is the origin figure and from her, most of the subsequent tales and more are derived. The second is Geároid Iarla or Earl Garrett in English, from which comes the modern name for the island in the centre of the lake, Garrett Island. Geároid Iarla is said to be Áine's son born of a union between her and the first Anglo Norman invader to the area, Maurice Fitzgerald, earl of Desmond. This tale will be explored below.

Áine's presence in the modern tales has a sense of a mysterious ethereal quality, she is not dangerous or aggressive towards humans who meet her, she is all powerful in the stories, in turn this is sometimes depicted as threatening. Today she appears in stories as a banshee, when she is supposed to have cried out from Knockadoon ("the hollow hill" that rises up from the edge of the lake), at the burial of Thomas O' Connellan, the bard, at New Church Lough Gur. (*The Lough Gur and District Historical Society Journal*.1991,80.henceforth TLG&DHSJ,1991). Áine was also heard keening and crying around the lake and out into the locality after the excavation of the Giants Graves, a Neolithic burial chamber, in 1938. ( Dames,1992,80.). She is seen travelling in the Coiste Bodhar or Deaf Coach which is seen at May Eve and at a death. (TLG&DHSJ,1991,77.). Other stories liken her to a beautiful lady in white, an enchantress, a fairy queen and lady of the lake. As lady of the lake her golden comb is stolen by a herdsboy while she is bathing. Ever afterwards he has very bad luck and dies after which the comb is returned to the lake to protect his family. (The Irish Folklore Commission, Ms. S516, henceforth IFC S516, TLG&DHSJ,1991,14,15.)

In another tale she appears to a talented herdsman, Sean O'Shea plays the pipes and Áine persuades him to accompany her in her coach to a palace where he will play at a private party. She promises to reward him well with a bag of gold. While Sean is playing he notices that there are fish swimming outside the windows of the palace, the palace is under the lake. After awaking on Knockadoon he finds his bag of gold given to him the night before has turned into a bag of yellow furze blossoms.(IFC S516,TLG&DHSJ,1991,33-35.).

Another story tells of Áine appearing "...in all the radiance of her majestic beauty" to James Cleary, a few evenings later he was drowned in the lake after his curragh capsized, "...thereby proving the summons of the lady of the lake is always imperative and irresistible." (IFC S516,5).

Lastly Áine is associated with a large flat topped rock at the lakeside on the northern shore of Knockadoon (Fig.3), named *Suideachan* or *Suichan Bean an Ti*, the English name being The Housekeepers Chair. Áine is in one tale to be seen sitting on this rock in the summer (IFC S516), in another it is here that she sits while combing her long golden hair with her golden comb (TLG&DHSJ,1991,15.).

There are some hints in these tales of a pre-Christian root to Áine, the Banshee, from *bean si* the woman of the *si* or sacred hollow hill (O'Duinn 2000, 55.). The golden comb being thrown into the lake. The palace under the lake, The drowning in the lake after a summons from her. If we go back further into the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries we begin to find accounts of her worship that portray her origins more clearly.

## Hilltop worship and origin myths.

Áine is worshiped at her sanctuary hill *Cnoc Áine* meaning Hill of Áine. It is anglicised into its present meaningless form Knockainy. The old form of worship was practiced until recently and is still remembered by Sean McNamara of Bruff in 1988. "She was both a corn-goddess and a giver of fertility and love. Her cult existed for many years after the advent of Christianity, especially among the old people around in the area here, who lit torches of hay and straw which they lighted and carried around the her hill at night. Afterwards they dispersed themselves among the fields and pastures, holding the torches over the crops and cattle to bring them good luck." Sean later goes on to call her "...Áine the Goddess of the old Celtic religion." (TLG&DHSJ,1991,10).

Cnoc Áine is a part of the complex surrounding Lough Gur, it lies four kilometres south east of the lake (Fig 2). The ritual in celebration of Áine took place on the hill at the summer solstice of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June. Áine is the primal God from which all others are sprung. She is also known in Ireland as An, Ana, Anu, Dana and Danu. The pantheon of nature gods are sprung from Áine-Danu, The Tuatha Dé Danann are said in Christian lore to have thrown out of heaven and fall to earth to live under the sacred hills and in sacred caves. The Tuatha Dé Danann become the fairies in more recent times (Dames, 1992, 67-69, O'Duinn 2000,55-61).

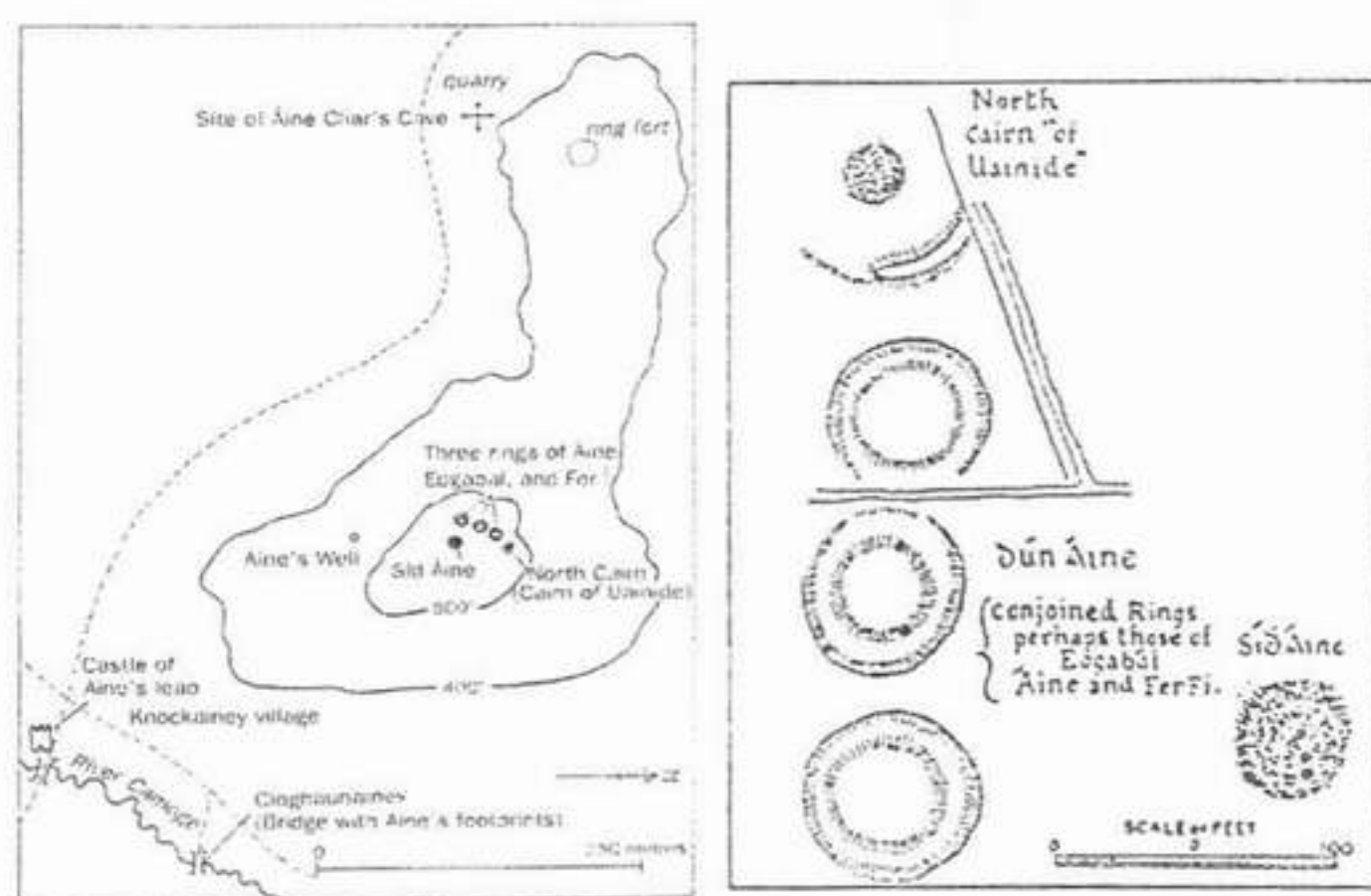


Fig 2. Cnoc Áine Hill. From Dames.



Áine is associated with the sun, the fiery driver (O'Duinn,2000,640.The word *aine* in Irish means brightness, glow, radiance, splendour, glory as well as delight, joy, pleasure (Dames1992, 62). In Ana-Áine we see the goddess of fertility epitomised in the two breast like hills Dhá Chioch Anann (the paps) Co. Kerry. Áine is also associated with birth at Lough Gur (explored below), so she is God from which all life springs.

The ritual in her honour and the request for her protection takes place on the eve of the summer solstice, space does not allow a full description of the ritual nor folktales associated with it, the brief summary above will suffice. As Sean McNamara's account suggests this pagan festival may have been celebrated into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sean O'Duinn in a fine book *Where Three Streams Meet*, gives an account of the ritual in a 19<sup>th</sup> century source. In other parts of Ireland this festival is given a Christian gloss and called St. Johns Eve, there is no mention of St. John in the account given for Lough Gur. O'Duinn goes on to write: "At the other side of Co. Limerick (west Limerick) the bonfire was known as *Teine Féil' Eoin*, and prayers were said for the crops and fine weather. In Athea parish, the parish priest...attended the bonfire and led the prayers...In Knockainy, however, Áine prevailed, with apparently no great fuss on the part of the church," (2000,61-66).

The tales of the conception and supernatural transformation of Geároid Iarla seem to hold clues to folk history, medieval romance and echoes of the prehistoric. Briefly the tale is this. The first earl of Desmond, Muiris (Maurice), was walking by the lake when he saw a beautiful woman sat combing her long hair after bathing in the lake. Behind her lay her cloak. Muiris snatched up her cloak, which gained him power over her and he lay with her (or raped her). Nine months later the beautiful woman, Áine, gives the earl his son, warning him never to show surprise at anything his son does. Later in the story an event occurs that causes the first earl to show surprise, so Geároid must leave his father. Geároid walks down to the River Comoge where when he touches the water he turns into a goose and flies away. Another tale is of Geároid Iarla rising up from the lake every seven years from his palace beneath the waters. (IFC S516, TLG&DHSJ,1991,5-7, Dames,1992,67,111). The line from a song of Co. Waterford hints at medieval romantic influence in this story. "Gentle Aine Fitzgerald close relative of a swan." (Dames,1992,111).

## The Beauty of the Goddess.

Archaeology coupled with mythology and folklore bring Áine's presence to us today. Through Archaeology we can trace her back to Neolithic times 6000-4000 years ago. Figure 3 shows us the path of the rising sun on the first of August at the festival of Lughnasa, the most joyful day of the year, the birth of the harvest child. The festival was also called *Domhnach Chrom Dubh*. Lugh leader of the Tuatha Dé Danann defeats and kills Balar of the evil eye, leader of the Fomorians at the Battle of Maigh Tuireadh. Lugh refrains from killing their king, Breas, because the Fomorians possess the secret of agriculture. "...but of course, the battle was really a supernatural one in which the bright, progressive, generous deities defeated the dark divinities who seek to enchain and prevent the evolutionary process." (O'Duinn, 2000, 302). Crom Dubh was the god of harvest and was dark and bent in appearance, a person has to bend or stoop in the harvesting process. He was the god who appears throughout Ireland on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, the day of harvest. Lughnasa was called Black Stoop Sunday in Co. Limerick. Áine and Crom Dubh were linked in another name for the festival *Domhnach Áine Chroim Duibh* (the Sunday of Áine and Crom Dubh). It is Crom who carried the first great sheaf of corn (Dames, 1992, 101).

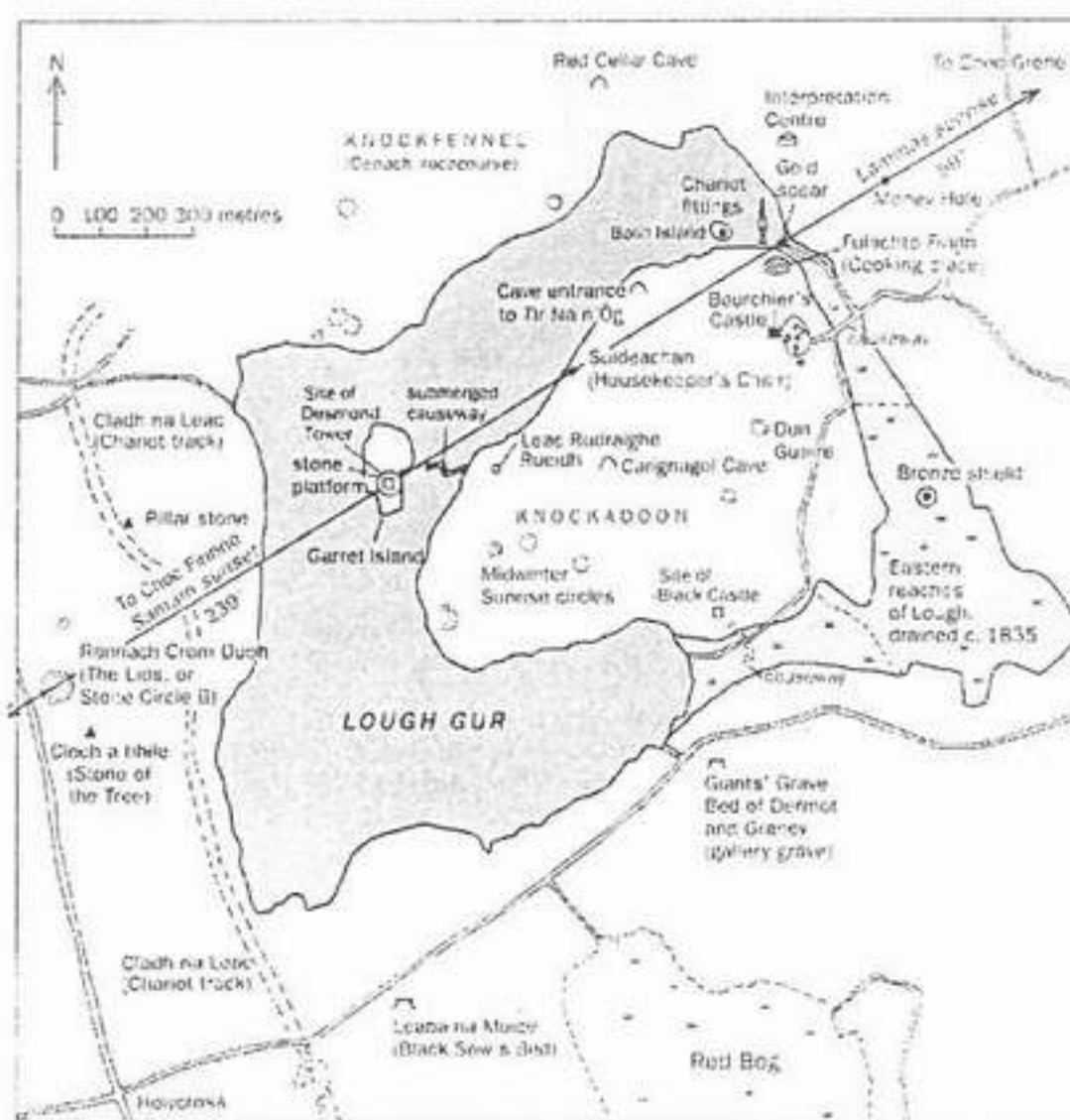


Fig 3 Lough Gur and the monuments in the landscape. From Dames.



Lugh is proclaimed King and married to the goddess of fertility. They are married at Samhain (from the 1<sup>st</sup> of November), a child is born nine months later at Lughnasa. The child is the corn harvest (Dames, 1992, 101, O'Duinn, 2000, 305).

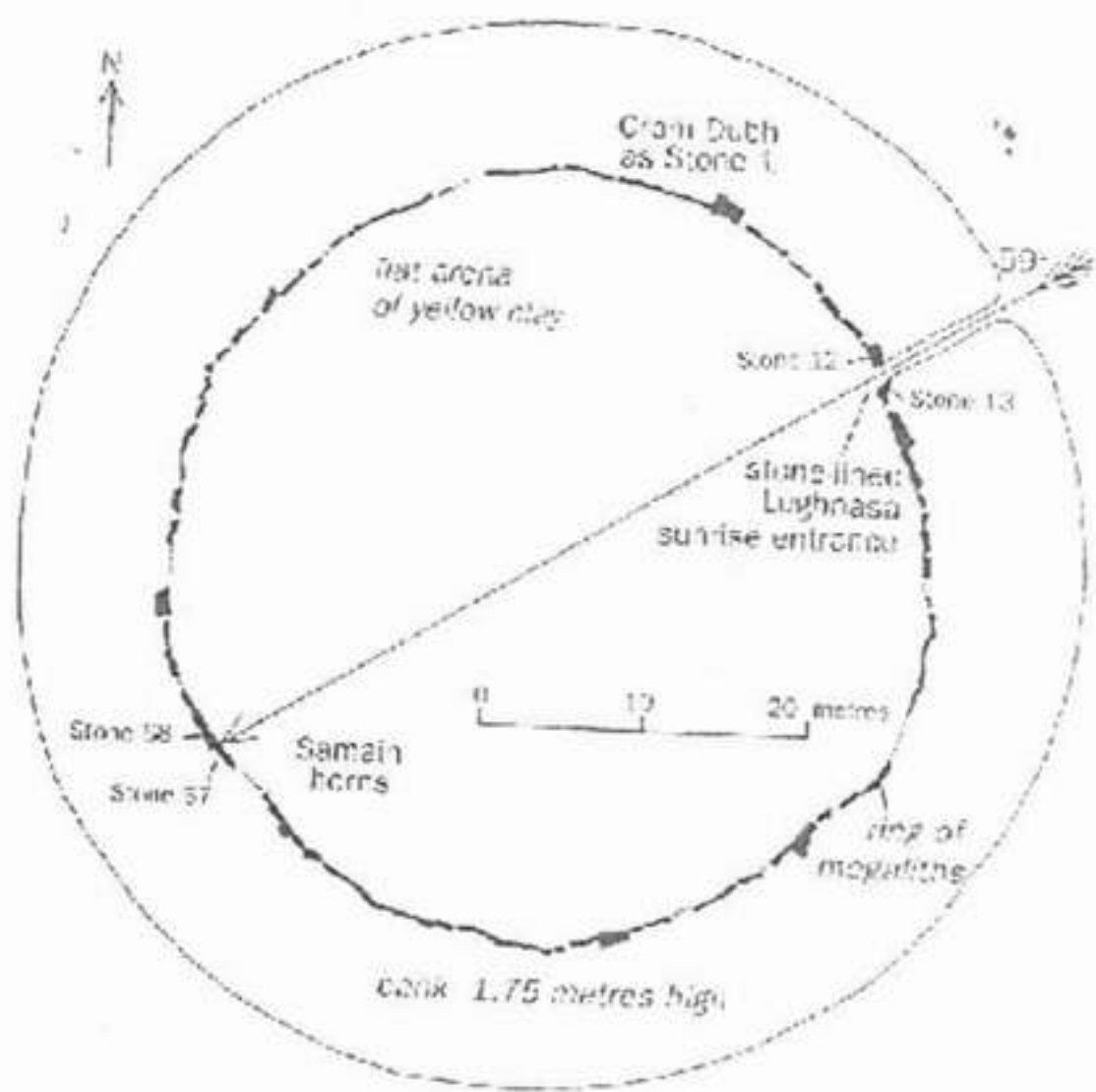


Fig 4. Rannach Crom Dubh or Circle B. Excavated by O' Riordain. From Dames.



Fig 5. The entranceway to circle B. At other side of the circle stones 67 and 68. From Dames.

Figure 4 is the great stone circle at Lough Gur excavated by Sean P.O'Riordain in the 1930's. The Lughnasa sunrise shines through the entrance and on to between the stones 67 and 68 (Fig 5). These stones are also aligned to the Samhain sunset. The line of the Lughnasa sunrise (59 degrees) is also the same as the Bealtaine sunrise and the Samhain sunset at 239 degrees is also that of the sunset of Imbolc. The four cycles of the year are glorified in the circle *Rannach Crom Dubh*, it may also be the embodiment of Áine. Rose Cleary has dated the construction of the circle to c.2700-2250 B.C. (Cleary, 2000).

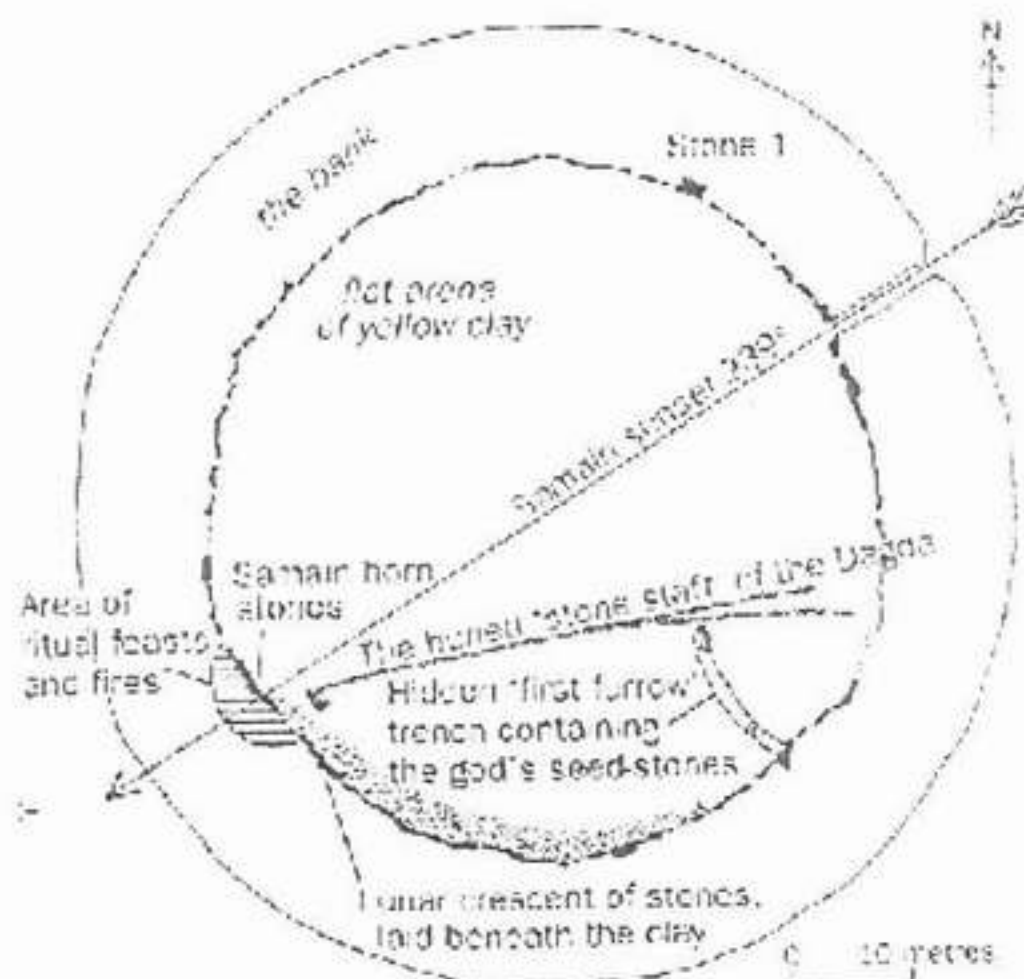


Fig 6. The hidden staff and crescent moon at Rannach Crom Dubh. From Dames.

Figure 6 portrays what O' Ríordain found under the surface of yellow clay in the stone circle. Hidden under the surface were the hidden machinations of the Dagda's staff, the Dagda being another form of Crom Dubh. "O; Riordain found (but did not recognize) the samain symbols of a Neolithic god and goddess. Made of stone on a gigantic and matching scale, these were the staff or walking stick of the god and the crescent new moon of the maiden-goddess."

(Dames, 1992,105). On Lughnasa Áine sits on the *suidechan* (or maternity chair) and awaits the dazzling birth of her son Lugh in the sunrise across the face of her twin sun goddess sister Grian at Cnoc Grene. The sun passes over the "Money Hole" a large flagstone, in its path a bronze spear head with gold inlay was deposited. It passes over Áine on the birth chair as she labours with the harvest

birth. It is here that she sits in the summer and combs her long golden hair, here where the first earl of Desmond surprises her. The sun passes over the place where the son of this union resides and flashes through the circle. The sun enters her body as the male penis enters a woman's body, as the sword does the sheath.



## Conclusion: Joyous beginning.

We have found her at last, the beautiful Áine. As with all the most profound of answers the solution is with us all the time, the answer is “staring us in the face.” For she is the all encompassing true God, the beauty of the earth, sun, moon and stars. *Aine* the Irish word tells us all these things, delight, joy, pleasure, agility, expedition, swiftness, play, sport, amusement, music, harmony, melody, experience, truth, veracity, brightness, glow, radiance, splendour, glory, brilliance, wit, and drinking up. (Dames,1992,62). She could be said to be an embodiment of *Neart*, the creative life force, the energy and cosmic life force within everything including ourselves.

In this modern age we have the ability to transcend the mundane daily chores involved in “keeping body and soul together.” The Tuath Dé Danann can rejoice in the knowledge that we are no longer in the yoke of the dark gods and the endless monotony of the agricultural cycle, we can truly be free of them and human evolution can know no bounds. The irony is of course is that in achieving a state where we can become free we have become divorced ourselves from nature on the whole. The naming of the elements and planets and the stories told of these elemental forces and the worshipping of them, has been largely lost and through this loss many of us have lost a sense of the *Neart* and Áine.

Ireland more than any other European country has preserved its Gaelic Indo-European culture through the recording of its *béaloidéas*. Through its study coupled with archaeology, we can regain the knowledge of the ancestors, or at least a part. The folk tales at Lough Gur speak to us in a whisper from the Neolithic.

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