Students name: Alan John Dorymeade

ID number: 0269204

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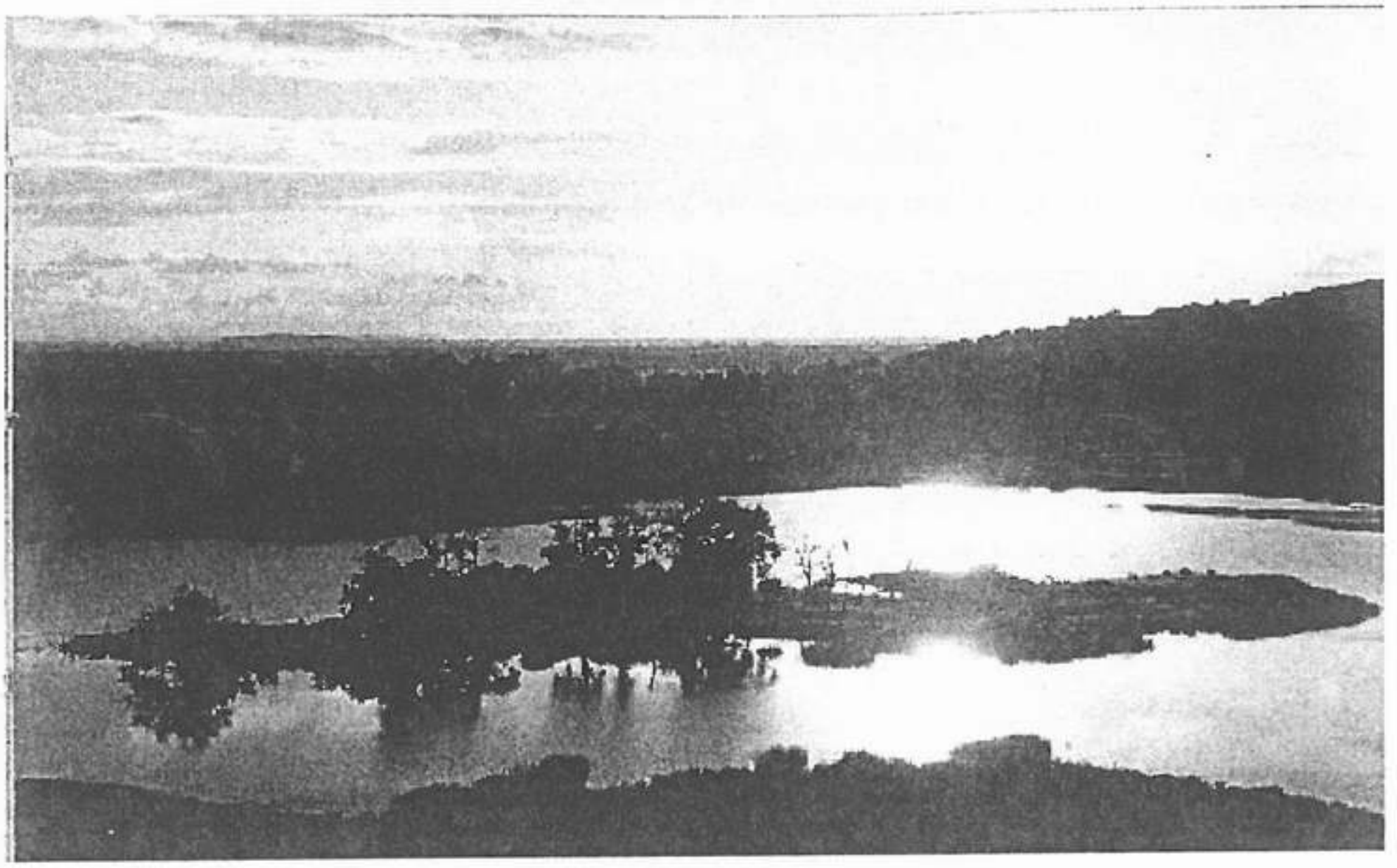


Lough Gur. The enchanted lake. . From Dames.

Fig 1. Location of Lough Gur.

Introduction

It is with the study of landscape that we can see the history of a people laid out before us. The visible traces such as field systems, boundaries, roads, monuments from prehistory, ruined churches and castles are all "signatures" left by a people in their landscape. The deciphering of these signatures, this three dimensional code, can cast light on the movements of peoples whether these movements be far ranging or restricted. The movement and actions of a people can illuminate the essence of a culture, the unique philosophy bound up within the landscape that create histories.

This paper will look the landscape at Lough Gur in Co. Limerick (Fig 1). The sacred lake with its profusion of associated ritual sites constructed in prehistory, the surrounding hills where gods dwelt and princes built their dwellings and castles, is a microcosm of a peoples history within this island. Today it is still the dwelling place of these people and some of the cultural events in human evolution and the history of this island have left their mark here.

With the aid of the archaeological record and a brief study of mythology and folktale this paper will explore the story of the landscape and its shaping by the people of Lough Gur in the prehistoric period.

Mesolithic beginnings.

Ireland with the rest of northern Europe would have had extensive tree cover develop when the last ice sheets melted and the present Littletonian Warm Stage we now live in began 10,000 years ago. This period corresponds with the Mesolithic in human history or the middle stone age. Mesolithic peoples were able to travel through modern Europe and on into Ireland by land. One of the earliest settlement sites for this period has been excavated by Peter Woodman at Mount Sandel, Co. Offaly and dates back to 9000 years ago (Mitchell, Ryan,113-116). The present English Channel and Irish Sea formed at about 7000 years ago (Ibid.,83-4). It is within an extensive cover of willow, birch, hazel and pine that Mesolithic peoples moved (Fig 2).

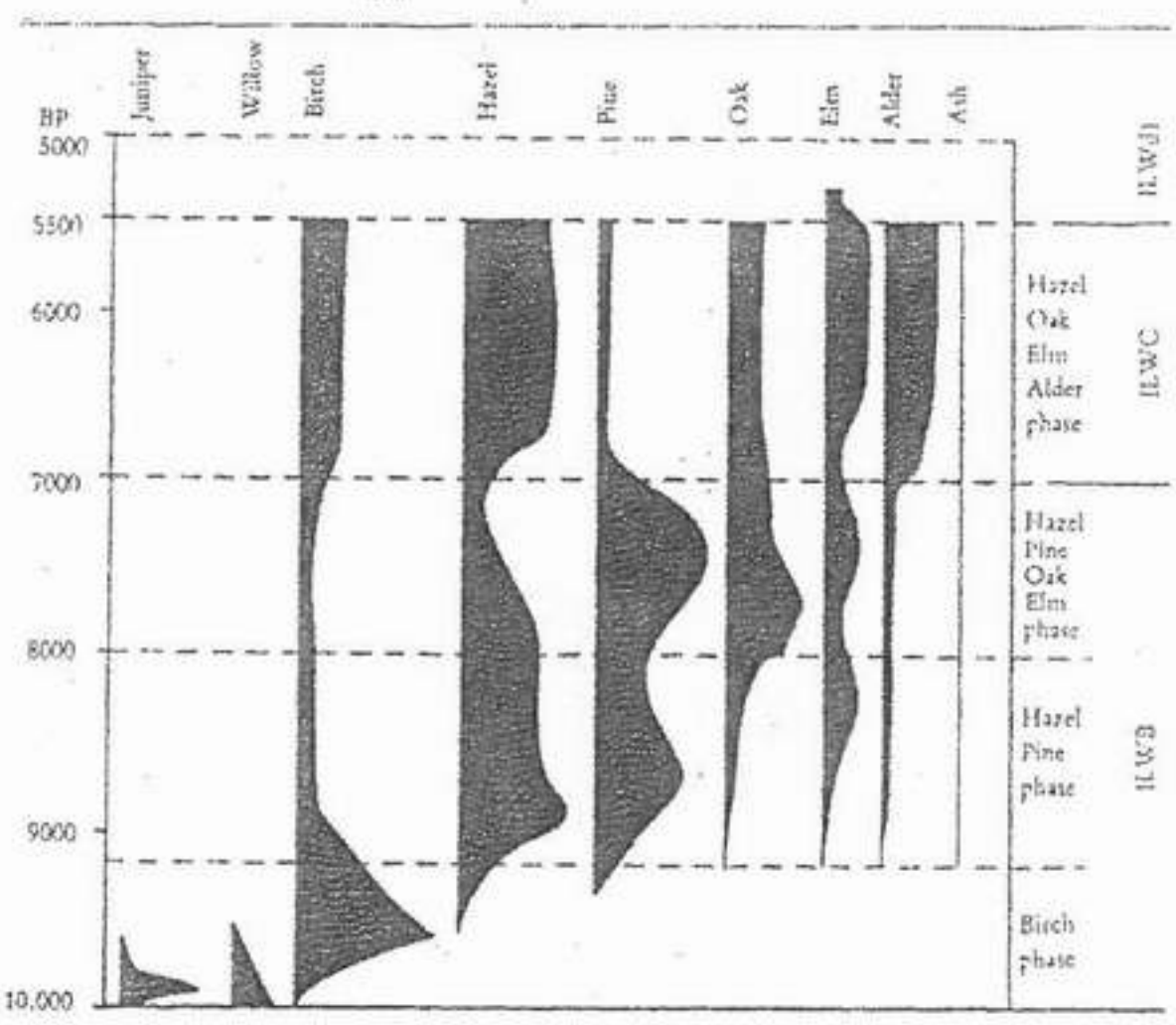


Fig 2. Pollen diagram illustrating woodland development. To the left are years BP (before present). For example, 9000 BP (9000 years ago), is 7000 B.C. From Mitchell and Ryan.

The Mesolithic economy consisted of hunting and gathering within a range of one days walk in all probability. Extended family groups used flint, bone and wooden tools to exploit coastal, river and lake resources alongside nuts, seeds and animals. Bones of fish, eels, shellfish, birds, deer and wild pig have been found at Mesolithic campsites (Mitchell,Ryan,115). A lakeside seasonal camp within walking distance of the coast (Lough Gur is 20 kms from the Shannon estuary), is

an ideal site for hunter-gatherer peoples. The summer and early autumn may have been spent on the coast fishing and preserving fish by smoking or salting. The winter and springtime could have been spent at Lough Gur amongst the sheltering hills and forests taking the game of the forest and some of its young in the spring. Comparisons can be made, through anthropological studies, to the lifestyles and cultures of tribal peoples such as Native Americans, Australian Aborigines and the tribes of Papau New Guinea.

The paths these people made would have firstly followed rivers, easily walked through the dense forest (Fig 3). The paths that were followed for centuries must have become imbued with meaning, special locations along the paths would have been named and have stories told about them (Tilley, 30). Large rocks, caves or changes in the contour of the land would have been given names and even personalities. Stories were told of the ancestors who had made the paths and their brave deeds, and some became gods for it is a courageous warrior that makes new paths, the world is bewildering, strange and frightening without paths.

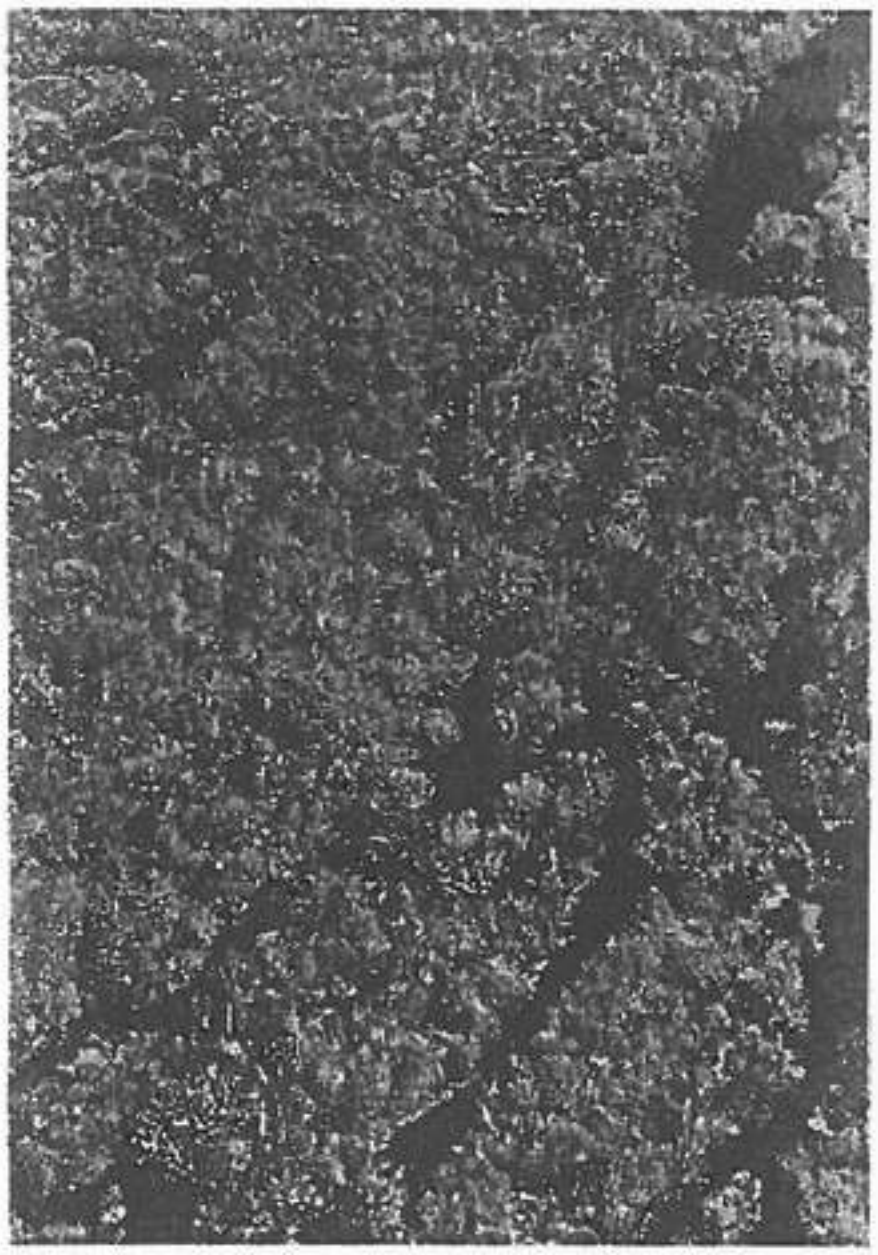


Fig 3. How the landscape would have looked before damage by pastoral peoples and their animals. The Geeragh near Macroom, Co.Cork, now drowned beneath a reservoir. From Mitchell and Ryan.

The first human landscapes were made up of paths, paths that lead from one campsite to another. The journey led through a world of the spirits and ancestors in a myriad of forms. The campsites had been formed over countless generations by

the ancestors. After each season special gifts were deposited in reverence at the campsite by the departing families. These deposited gifts over the centuries gave a power to the place and this place by the sea or lake became sacred. (Thomas, 1991).

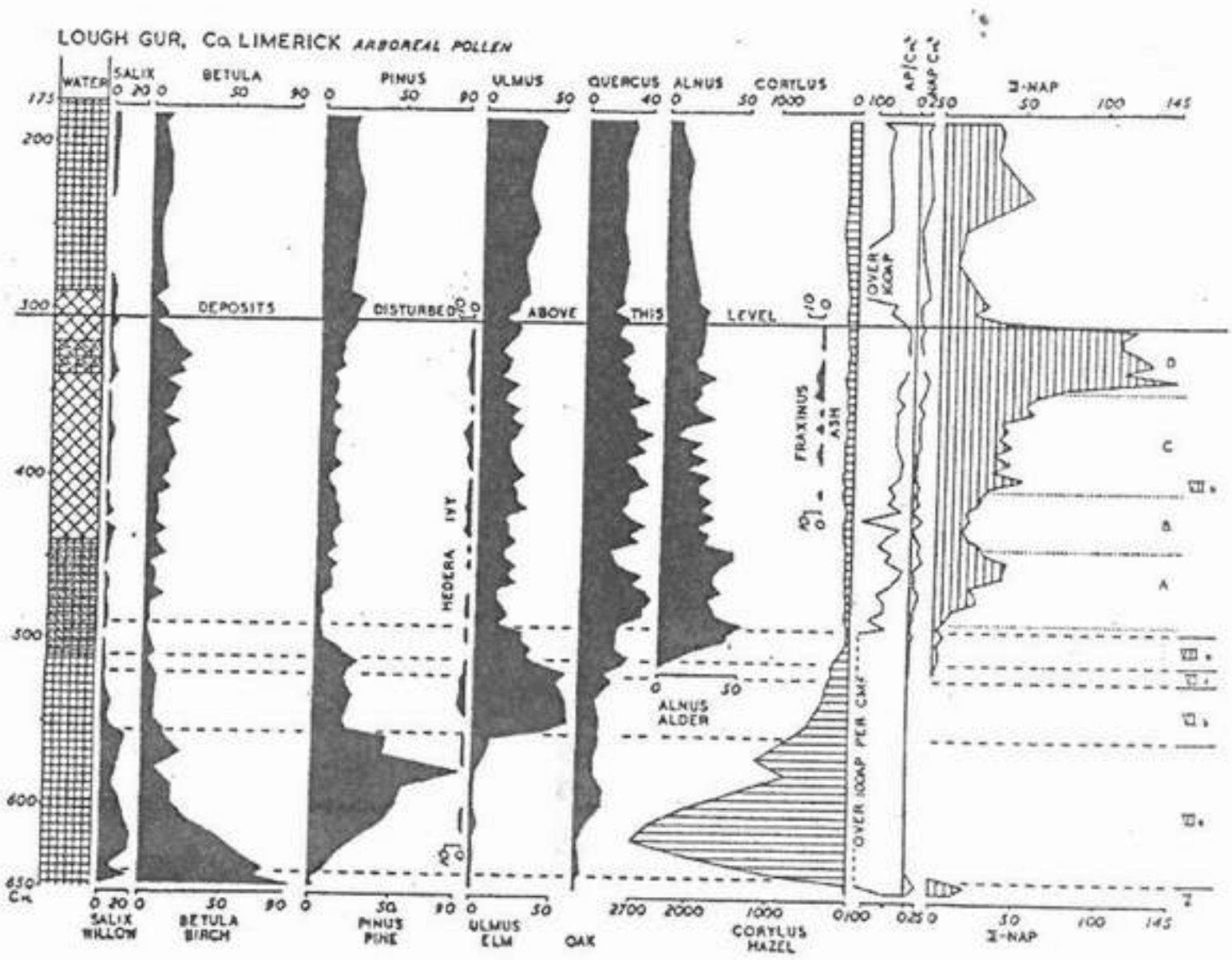
In 1948 G.F. Mitchell carried out a sample that would produce a pollen diagram for the immediate surrounding landscape at Lough Gur. Mitchell's diagram (Fig 4) shows the different layers of sediments on the left and the corresponding pollen counts. Hazel is to the right and far right are the levels of non-arboreal pollens, e.g. grasses and weeds of cultivation or clearance such as dock and nettle (highlighted in Fig 5). The level of the lake was lowered due to drainage in the 1830's this has caused some disturbance of the upper levels of pollen, (pointed out in the diagram), so this upper level must be discounted.

Comparison can be made with Figure 2 for a correspondence in human time, but tree growth at Lough Gur differs at times with the more general picture of Ireland in Figure 2. Mitchell also mentions an earlier sample taken from Garrett Island in the centre of the lake, the upper levels of the sample correspond to an early stage of zone V11a (to the right in Fig 4). Below this level to a depth of 17cms he found some roughly worked flint and shell "...If the flints are in primary position, they must be older than the opening of the Neolithic period in Ireland."(Mitchell, 486).

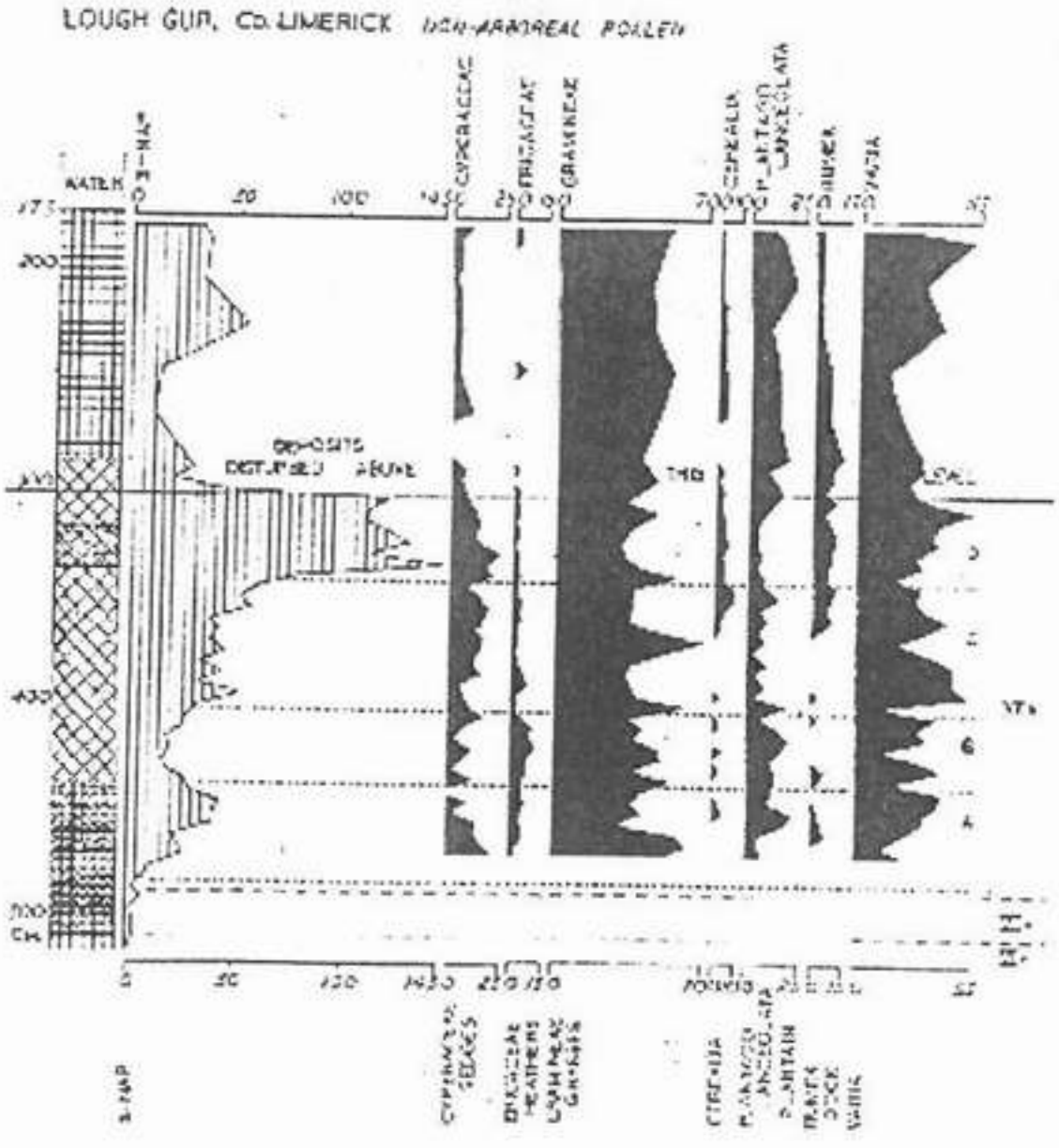
The tree cover begins to change at around 7000 years ago or 5000 B.C., the climate becomes warmer and wetter and alder forms fen woods in marshy areas around the lake. Pine and birch are reduced to less rich soils on higher ground and we find a dense forest of oak and elm. (Mitchell, Ryan, 141).

Mesolithic peoples probably created the first human impact on the landscape with the construction of lakeside campsites and working areas. The trunks of small trees and branches from larger trees may have been laid down at the lakeside to form a dry platform from which to embark out onto the lake and a dry place to work. Such a platform was found at a lakeside site in the north east of England, the Mesolithic encampment at Star Carr. These seasonal campsites would have consisted of quite small clearings at the edges of the immense dark forest. Clearings by the lakeside would attract deer which would feed on the new shoots sent up by tree stumps, thus making them easy prey. Artificial clearings may have been created for this purpose alone (Mitchell, Ryan, 116 & 139).

Over 2000-3000 years the lake had taken on a personality of her own, she gave life and sustenance to all creatures, some flying to her from afar for shelter while they mated and had their young at the same time every year. But she could easily take life if the rituals were not performed to honour her and her bright and beautiful sister who was born and died every day as she rose and fell over the wooded hills that embraced and sheltered her in her labour.



Figs 4 & 5. Pollen diagrams from Lough Gur. From Mitchell.



A clearer view: The development of space in the Neolithic.

The elm decline in prehistory is the most securely dated natural event in Britain and Ireland. It is now certain from archaeological research and pollen analysis that a bark-beetle carried the fungus causing elm disease similar to that we have seen in more recent times. The decline has been dated to 5900 years ago or 3900 B.C. (Mitchell, Ryan, 141-142). The psychological affect in the minds of the people in watching their huge and silent forests slowly dying can only be guessed at. The impact must have been profound and traumatic. The reasons they provided to themselves in answer to their questions can also only be guessed at. But whatever their conclusions a major change in culture took place at this time, this new culture creates a new or different sense of space and place.

At around 4000 B.C. peoples at Lough Gur began to produce pottery and more substantial and permanent dwellings. Archaeological excavation coupled with pollen analysis can create for us a picture of human interaction in a landscape. The pollen diagram from Lough Gur (Fig 4), shows the sharp decline of elm (zone A), a drop in alder around the lakeside, oak seems to rise at the beginning of the period then drops markedly, pine is also low then rises to a level average, birch and willow are low in number but constant. The elm decline must have created huge open areas in the forest, in these large open spaces oak spread but was obviously felled, and grasses, docks, nettles and blackberry grew. This natural clearance, catastrophic as it was, coincided with or gave an added impetus to a new economy, stock rearing.

Figure 5 shows at the beginnings of clearance a sharp rise in grasses while varia (nettles, blackberry) is low, then a fall in grasses corresponds with an increase in varia. Cereals hardly figure in the economy of Lough Gur in the Neolithic and Bronze Age (zones A, B and first half of C from the bottom), they rise in the Iron Age in the upper half of C, then drop and rise again in the early medieval period, D. Grasses and weeds within large open areas in the forest, created by the elm decline and a concerted clearance of oak, vie with each other for supremacy as pastoral patterns change.

Excavations at Lough Gur directed by S.P. Ó Ríordáin began in 1936 and continued until 1948. Five pottery types found show a continuous period of habitation on Knockadoon Hill (Fig 6), from *circa* 4000 B.C. to 1000 B.C. Knockadoon Hill rises up from the eastern side of the modern lake but before drainage probably formed an island within the lake. The types of pottery found are classified as Class 1, Class 1a, Class 2, Beaker and Food Vessel. The Class 1 wares can be dated to 4030-3786 cal.B.C., the Class 1a wares to 3650-3100 cal B.C., the Class 2 wares to 2900-2700 cal.B.C. (Cleary, 123-4), Beaker wares from 2345 B.C. (Mitchell, Ryan, 194) and Food Vessel (Bronze Age) to 1200-1000 B.C. (Cleary, 125).

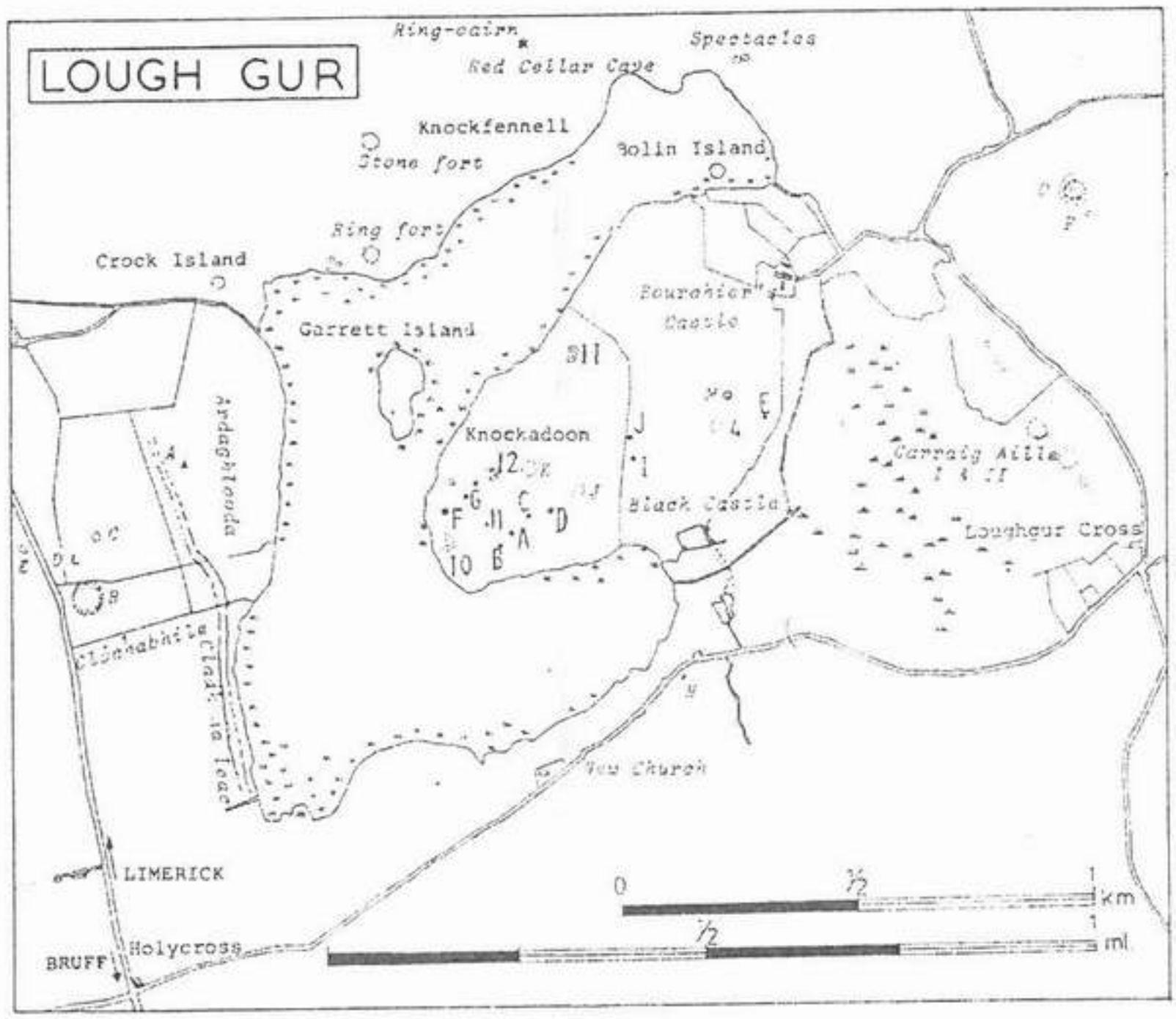


Fig 6. Map of Lough Gur showing excavated sites on Knockadoon, stone circles and tombs. Not all sites shown are mentioned in the text. The bold letters and numbers are from Ó Ríordáin the less bold letters are from Windle, 1912. From O' Kelly.

These dates show two probable variables for the earliest appearance of these types, Class 1 and Class 1a types continued to be produced and are found with later Class 2 and Beaker. The hut sites on Knockadoon Hill show early phases of construction alongside the first monuments to appear in the landscape. Hut sites A, B, C, D, E, (to the east of the hill), F, G, H, I, and J all contained early Neolithic pottery of

Class1 and 1a type (Fig 6). On the slope to the south of the lake site H is a wedge tomb of 8.8m by 3.6m, found within were fragments of human bone, pottery of Class1 and Class 2 and also Beaker and Food Vessel showing a long period of votive deposition. E to the west of the lake is thought to be a tomb of this type and there seems to have been three or possibly four other tombs around the lake that no longer exist. (Ó Ríordáin, 44-45).

Christopher Tilley in a thought provoking book *A phenomenology of landscape: Places paths and monuments,* investigates Neolithic tombs in south west Wales and remarks on their construction near earlier Mesolithic sites. Archaeologists have referred to these early tombs as territorial markers but Tilley's argument is more persuasive and more in keeping with the thrust of this paper, he writes: " The generally small size of the monument chambers indicates that these were very possibly places for the deposition of a few dedicatory ancestral remains, and were not used for successive interment. Their primary purpose, in fact seems to have been neither for burial nor deposition...They rather seem to have acted primarily as symbolic reference and ritually important ceremonial meeting points on paths of movement, drawing attention to the relationship between local groups and the landscape-itself already a constructed symbolic form of named places, pathways and significant locales from the Mesolithic onwards." (Tilley,109).

If we look at Figures 6 and 7 we can see tombs E and H as well as circle B (to be discussed below), are at the roadside. It may be that the modern narrow road is constructed over the sacred pathway of the Neolithic. If the early tombs were to be viewed from Knockadoon or the lakeside (along with the later stone circles), they could not be viewed if trees stood between the monuments and the lake. Monuments are constructed to be seen, the tombs were raised on slopes or hillsides, except circle B which was raised up from the level of the grassland it was constructed in.

Excavations on Knockadoon produced more than 1000 fragments of cattle bone (Waddell, 34). Professor Harkness writing in 1869 remarks on large quantities of bone found on Garrett Island after the level of the lake fell at draining. Many skulls of cattle were found, all had the centres of their skulls stove in at the forehead suggesting ritual killing. It must be added that some human bone was found also (Harkness, 395). Sacrifice may have developed in response to the

elm decline and the onset of a wetter climate. In 1958 evidence was found of the Neolithic on Garrett Island (O' Kelly, 39).

The stone circles were constructed later in the Neolithic, finds include pottery of Class 2 type and Grooved Ware in circle B to the west of the lake. At site O to the east, excavation produced no finds but at P beside it Class 2 type was found. Class 2 and Grooved Ware proved to be the same basic type, Grooved Ware being found in British Neolithic ritual sites. Some worked flint found in circle B were also similar to that of the Grooved Ware culture of Britain. Within the socket of one of the standing stones was found fragments of a Beaker pot, this pot is very similar in shape and decoration to one found at Wick Barrow in Somerset (Ó Ríordáin, 48-57). Rose Cleary dates the construction of circle B to 2700-2250 B.C. (2000, 124).

As above we would have seen a clearance of trees out to and beyond the monuments with grasslands around the lake. In the near distance we would see a thinner oak forest with less elm and open shrubby areas of some hazel, nettles and blackberry, pine and birch on the hills and willow in wet areas (Fig 4).

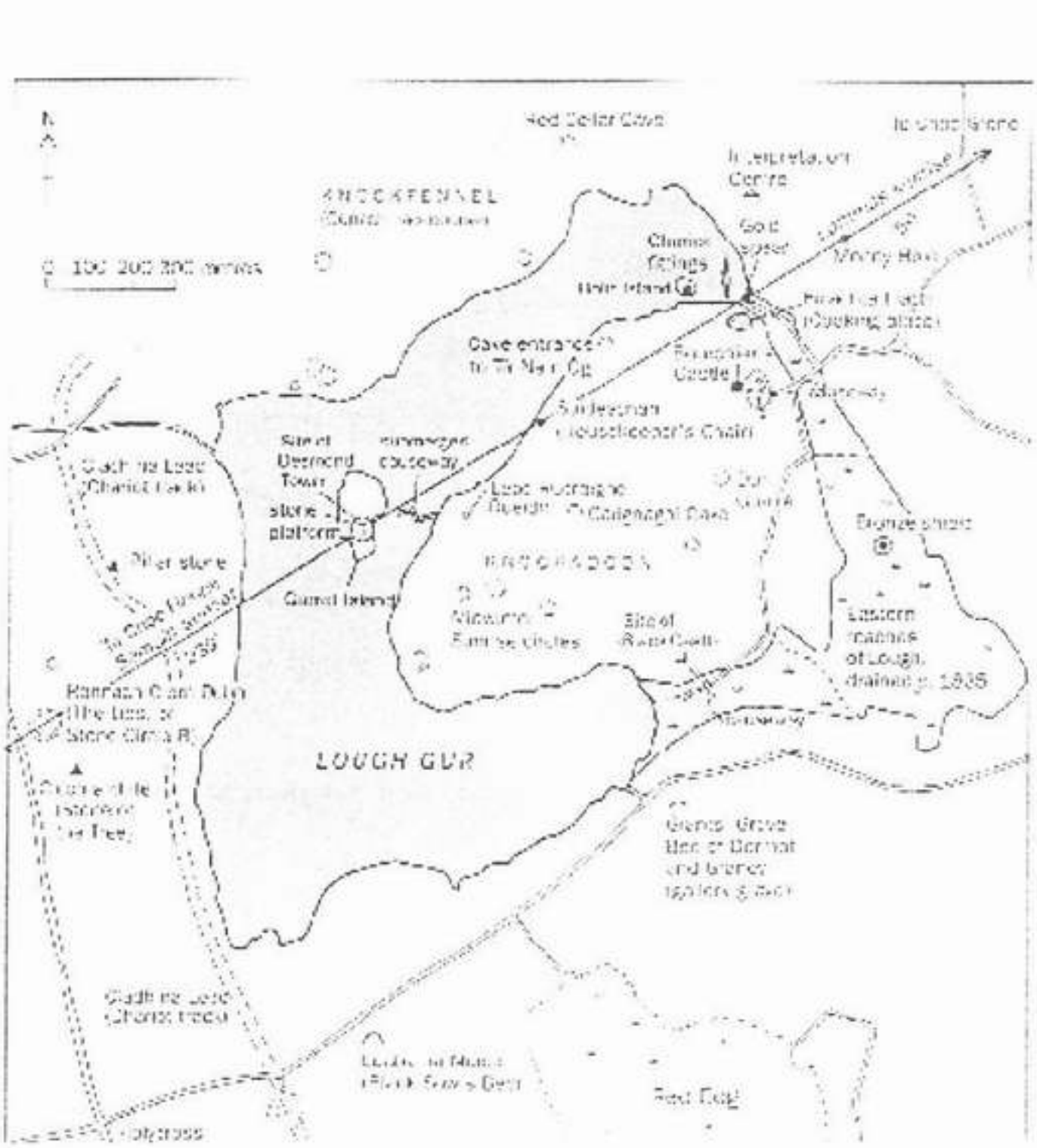


Fig 7. Lough Gur surrounded by its monuments, linked by the sun.

Conclusion: A glimpse of the Goddess.

Mythology and folktale can give us names of the gods and a glimpse of the rituals carried out to appease them. Folktales from Lough Gur today give us the name Áine whose sanctuary hill *Cnoc Áine* meaning Hill of Áine has been anglicised to Knockainy. It lies four kilometres south east of the lake. In folktales today she is known as an enchantress, a fairy queen and a banshee (IFC S516, TLG&DHSJ).[1] In some tales she is seen sitting on the *Suideachan* or *Suichan Bean an Ti* or "the little seat of the housekeeper" at the north west of Knockadoon (Fig 7). In Irish the word *ain* means "in my womb" and " the period of fasting prior to a feast day vigil." These words give associations of birth to the *Suideachan* and Áine may have sat to give birth on this chair as women were portrayed doing in art from prehistory and still do today in some tribal societies. Áine is the goddess of birth and fertility and she was worshiped on her hill on the sun's longest day, the 23rd of June until the 19th century. This may bring us to the threads, which unravelled, give us a clue to the function of the lake in ritual. Lough Gur is known locally as "the lake of hatching" or in reverse "the hatching lake" the Irish word *gur* means "keen and painful" as in *Mná re gúrlámnad,* "women in painful parturition" and *gure* is translated to "pangs." (Dames,85 & 97-100). Lough Gur is a lake of birth, the womb of the Goddess. In mythology *Gráinne* is the sun goddess, she gives her name to *Cnoc Grene* and she is Áine's sister.

In Figure 7 we can see the purpose of the later Neolithic arrangement of the landscape, from an early reverence for the ancestors to a "temple" for the goddess. The most joyful day of the year is celebrated here, Lughnasa and the birth of the harvest child. Also celebrated is the dark day at Samain (1st of November) summers end, along with the ritual killing and feasting of the bull.

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