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Course title: M.A. (history and local studies)

Module code and title: HI 5101 scope, sources and
methods in local history

Course lecturer: Dr. Bernadette Whelan

Date submitted : 20 November 2002

Title: A study of the prehistoric settlement at Lough
Gur: two primary sources

Introduction

This essay will introduce a thesis concerned with Lough Gur in County Limerick. The preliminary title of the thesis is: *Lough Gur: An holistic study*. The thesis will examine the site at Lough Gur under a range of different themes.

The landscape would have had a profound influence in determining the nature of human settlement and interaction with the site. There may well have been Mesolithic settlement at the site (to be discussed below). The possibility of earlier settlement and the uniqueness of the landscape led to the development of the importance of the site for ritual activity in the Neolithic. In order to explore the nature and purpose of human interaction with the site, pollen diagram reports and archaeological excavation reports will be examined. These will be used to recreate the landscape and the early settlement / ritual sites.

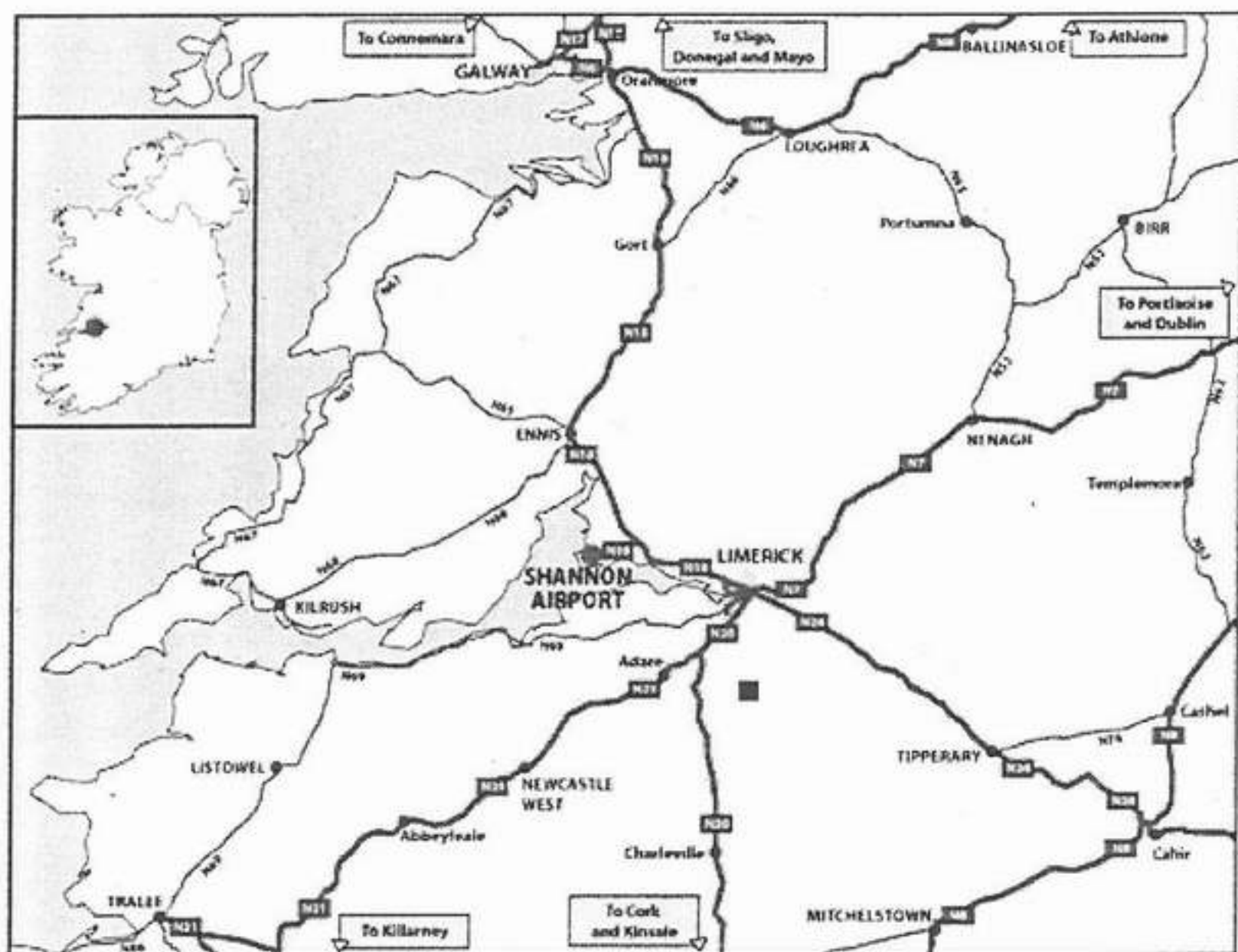
Mythology and folklore at Lough Gur will help to cast some light on the daily, monthly and annual preoccupations of the peoples at the settlement. Topics such as religious activity, the farming year and annual festivals will be explored.

With all the above in mind, other sites in Ireland with a similar settlement and ritual activity type will be analysed and compared in order to explore trade and exchange of ideas. A further extension of this theme will explore the influences of the wider world in more recent and modern times on the community at Lough Gur. The changing role of the church in its attempts to change and supersede the old beliefs and its role today will be examined. In addition, the views the local people had towards the interest shown by antiquarians and archaeologists in "the ruins", the modern interpretive centre and revivals of the "old faith" will also be examined.

To conclude the thesis will briefly reiterate all these themes, draw them together into a whole and complete picture of the community at Lough Gur as it evolved within the framework of European and latterly World events into modern times.

Two Primary Sources for the Early Settlement

The prime source for Lough Gur in its earliest phases of human activity is the archaeological record. There were extensive excavations carried out under the directorship of Sean P. O’Riordáin in the late 1930s and 1940s, and again by R.M. Cleary between 1985 and 1988. (Cleary. 2000). The excavation’s seem biased in favour of excavating the visible remains on Knockadoon Hill and the stone circles, of which the beginnings are in the Neolithic, but the landscape around Lough Gur is a classic Mesolithic landscape. Hunter-gatherers could exploit the resources of the lake itself, the lake is bounded by two rivers, the River Camoge to the north and River Morningstar to the south. Within walking distance is the Shannon estuary and coast with an abundance of bird and marine life. (Fig.1.).



■ Lough Gur

Figure 1: Geographical location of Lough Gur.

At the time of O’Riordáin’s excavations it was thought that peoples had not penetrated into the middle and south of the country in the Mesolithic, this has since been revised. (Woodman.1985). Also Mesolithic sites have been found at lakeside sites in Ireland in recent years, such as Lough Boora, Co. Offaly. (Waddall.1998,14).

G.F. Mitchell, working alongside O’Riordáin in the 1940s, undertook a sample of the pollen count in the prehistoric period. In his report published in 1954 Mitchell gives an account of the draining of the lake by the landowner a Count de Salis in the 1840s, in which the level of the lake dropped considerably. Mitchell also describes an experiment he undertook for a pollen diagram on Garrett Island, in the middle of Lough Gur, in which he reports finding worked flint. “ If the flints are in primary position, they must be older than the opening of the Neolithic period in Ireland. ” (Mitchell.1954,486).

No further investigations seem to have been carried out at the time into earlier settlement at Lough Gur, an investigation around the old shoreline of the lake should be undertaken in the future, in a search for shoreline Mesolithic activity.

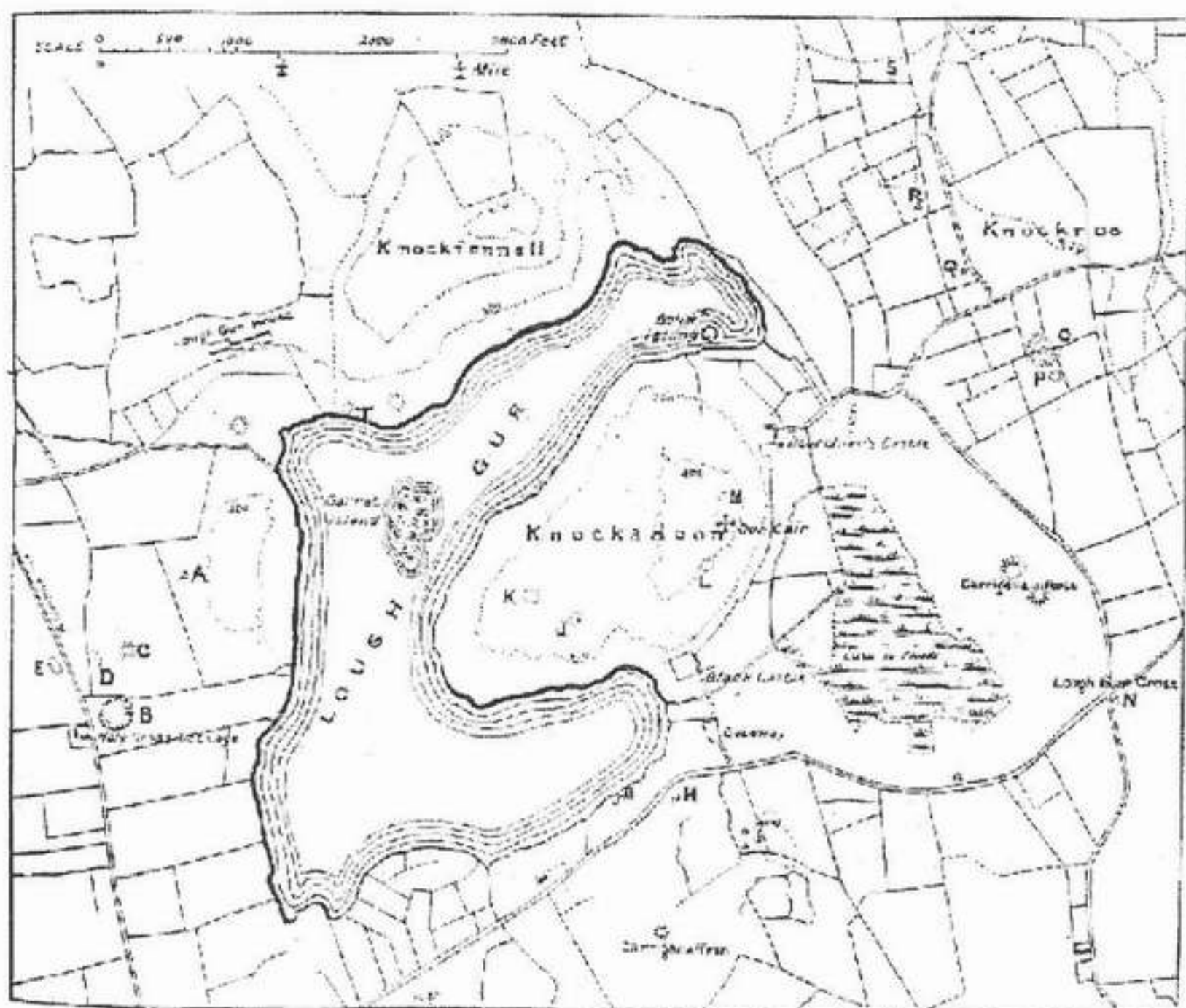


Figure 2: Sketch map of the Lough Gur site. (from Windle, 1912).

O’Riordáin excavated the stone circle at Grange and house sites on Knockadoon hill, (Fig. 2), the very high “island” that rises at the east of the modern lake, central to the larger lake before the 1840s. O’Riordáin did not have the luxury of radiocarbon dating to give a precise date to the pottery

fragments he found, but more recent work at Tankardstown Co. Limerick has found a similar pottery type to that found at the hut sites on Knockadoon Hill. O’Riordáin classified four pottery types at Lough Gur, class 1, class 1a, class 2, Beaker and Food Vessel, (Figs 3 and 4).

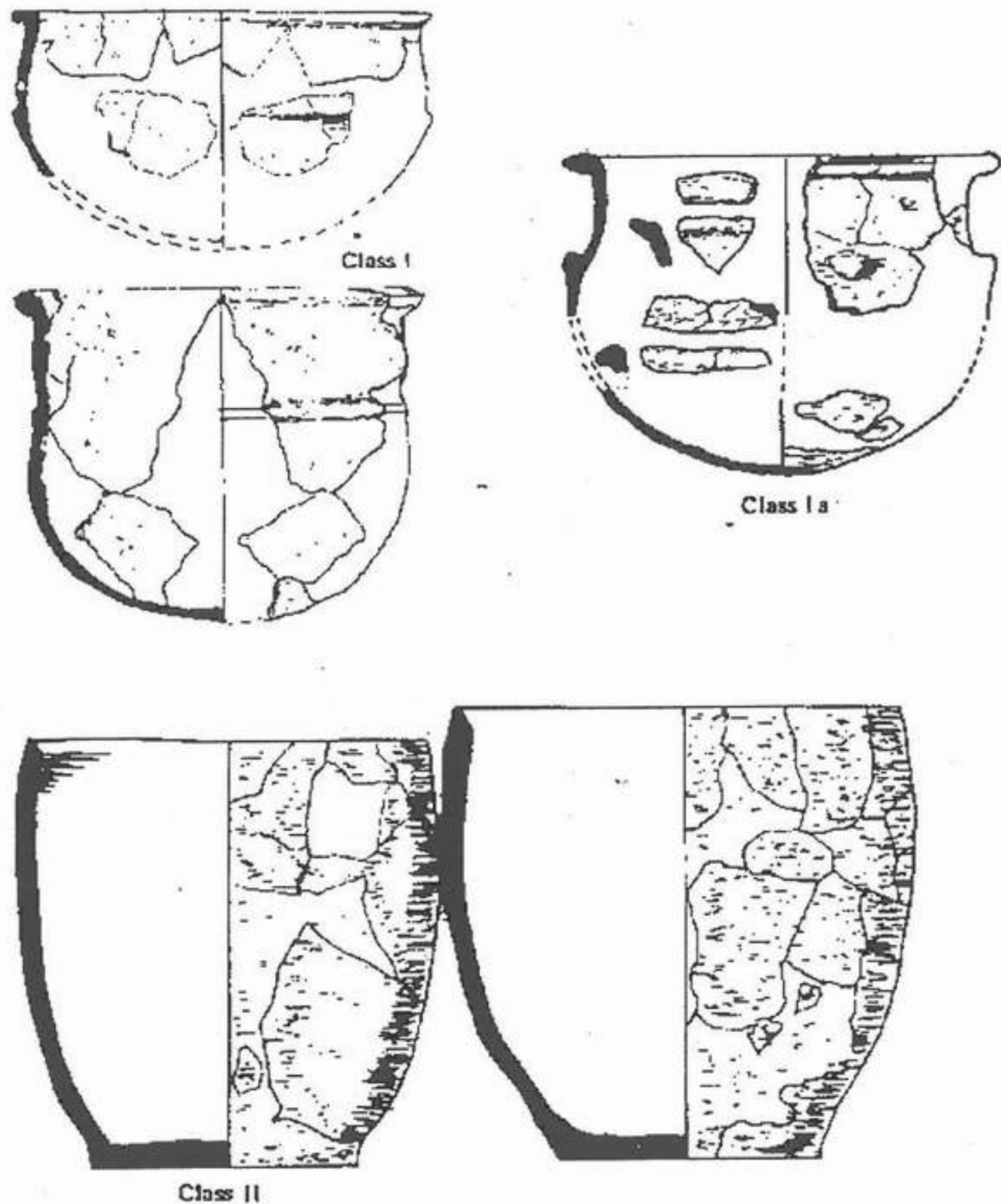


Figure 3: Pottery types at Lough Gur. (from O’Riordáin, 1951).

The pottery type at Tankardstown similar to that of Class 1 at hut sites at Lough Gur, was carbon dated to 4030-3786 cal. B.C. Also at the hut sites was class 1a, a carinated pot which has a distinctive modified style unique to Lough Gur. These pots have been dated to more recent finds in the county to 3650-3100 cal. B.C. (Cleary. 2000, 121). Class 1, class 2 pottery and some Beaker was found in the stone circle at Grange. Class 2 pottery is very similar to Grooved Ware associated with Neolithic ritual sites in

There are many surveys and accounts written of Lough Gur before O'Riordáin's excavations began in 1936. He lists seventeen previous accounts dating from 1775 to 1916 and one of these, Professor Windle, makes reference to an account of the lake from 1600. (1912,284).

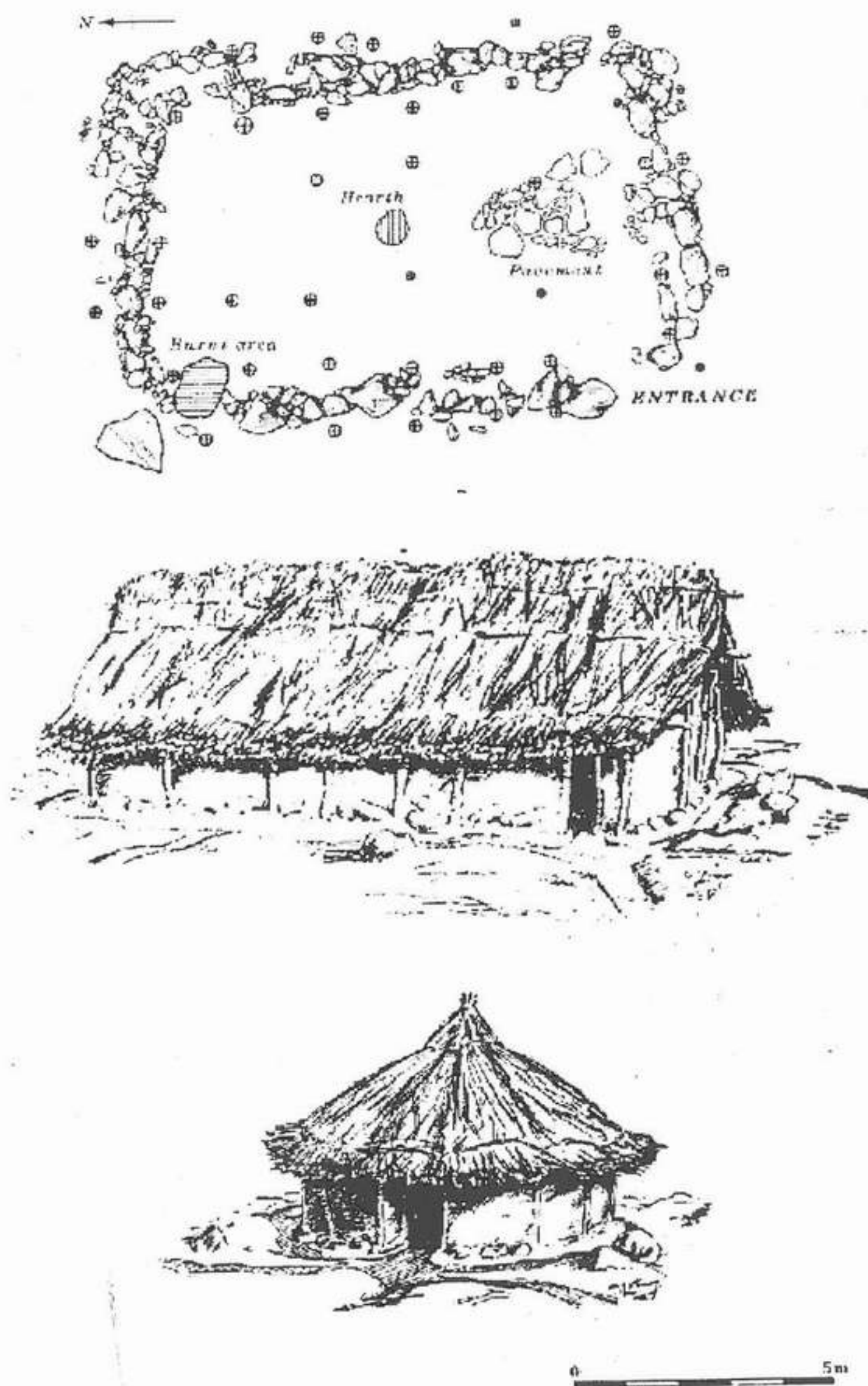


Figure 5: Reconstruction of hut types at Lough Gur. (from Waddell, 1998).

Professor Harkness is the first to attempt a methodical and scientific record of the megalithic remains around the lake in 1869. He is also the first to carry out an archaeological excavation at Lough Gur. It is clear from Harkness's account that there was once a larger stone circle, near Grange circle, that no longer exists.

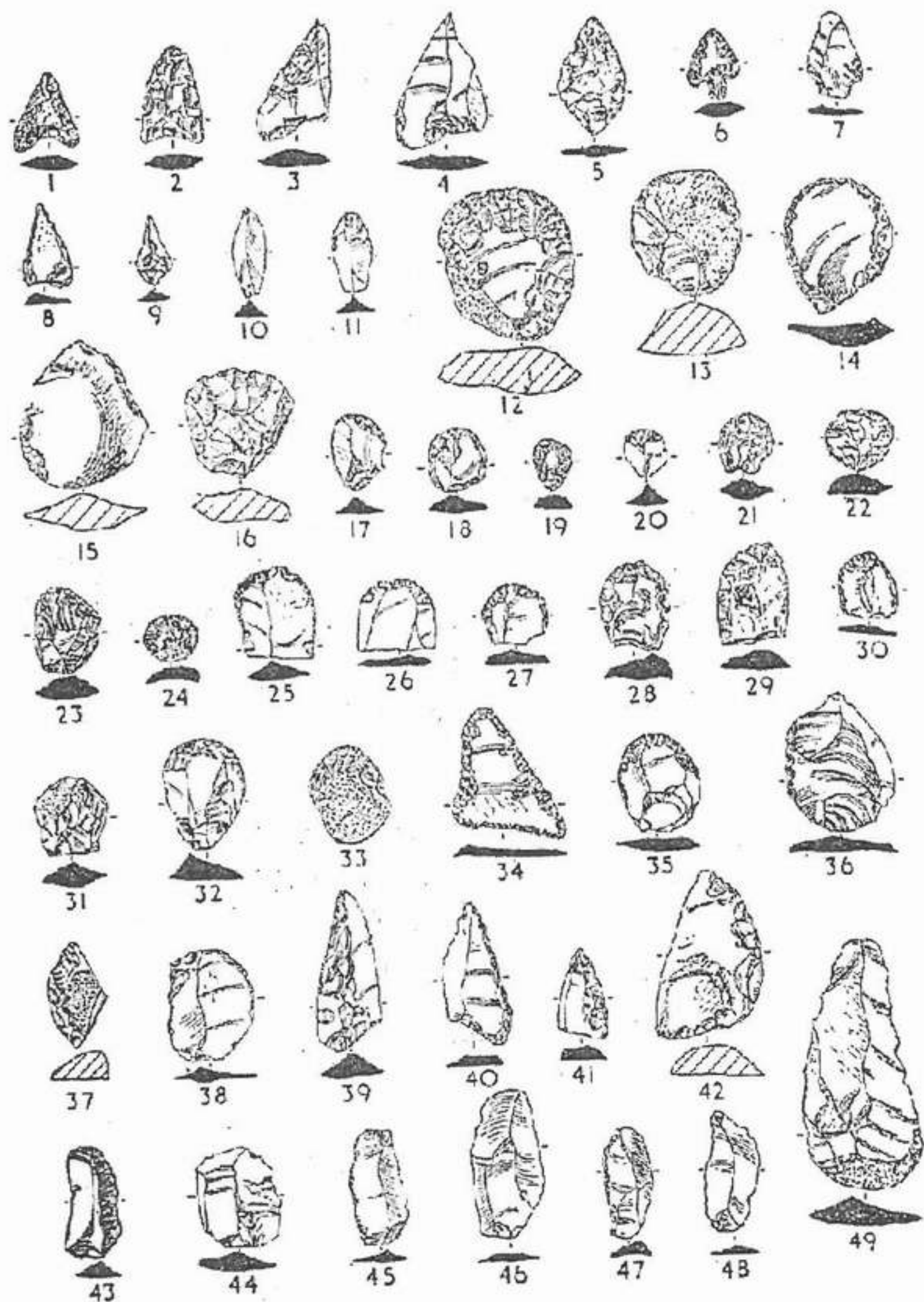


Figure 6: Flint artefacts from Lough Gur. (from O'Riordáin, 1951).

Windle in 1912 plots the remains on his map (Fig 2.), at D, Grange circle being B. E in Fig 2 was thought to be some displaced stones from the no longer existent circle, D, by Harkness in 1869. Windle believed them to be

the remains of an avenue, (1912,294). O'Riordáin, probably correctly, believes them to be the remains of a long barrow, he also remarks that another two long barrows have disappeared. (1951,38-9).¹

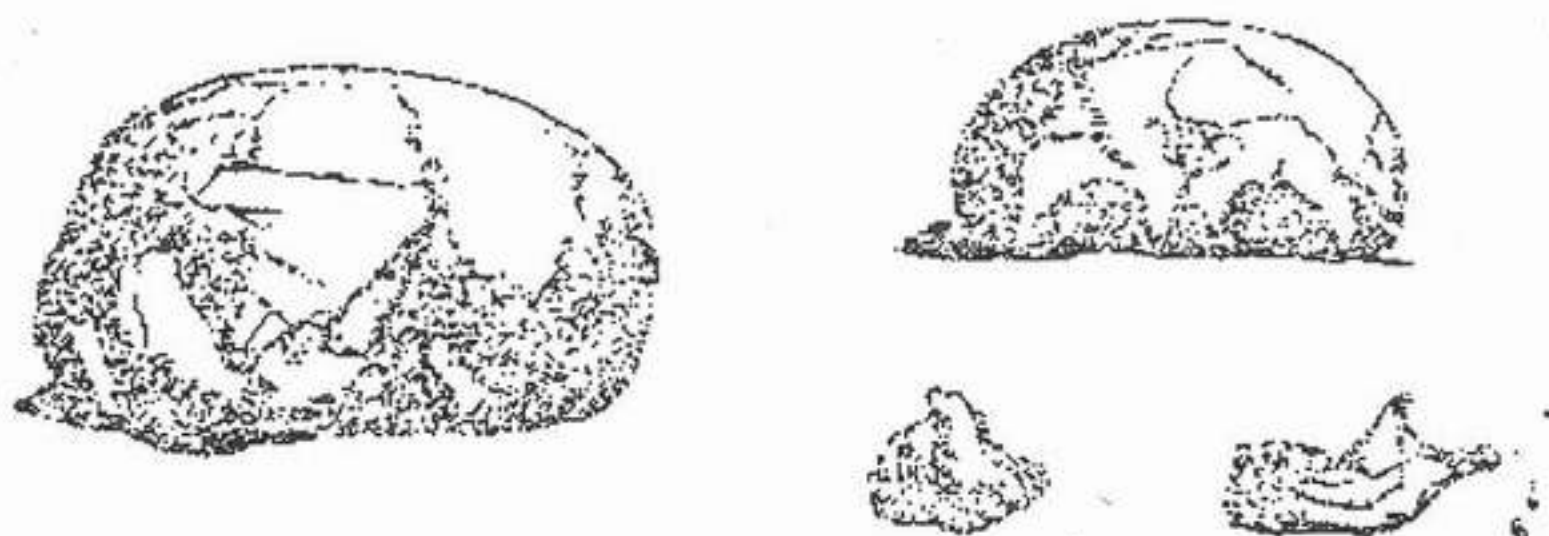


Figure 7: Bone fragments from circle J at Lough Gur. (from Harkness, 1869).

Harkness, while surveying the monuments, became interested in an arrangement of stones within a double stone circle at the south west of Knockadoon Hill, J in Fig 2. Within this circle Harkness describes a single standing stone, “....near the N.E. side, is a flaggy mass placed on its end in the ground, and being about 3ft high forms a small monolith....Surrounding the monolith....was a rude circle of small stones, about 8 feet in diameter.” (1869,390). Windle later described the standing stone as being in the south- west quadrant. (1912,298). Nearby, to the west of the standing stone was a slightly raised area, also with a ring of small stones around it. Harkness excavated both of these marked areas and found disarticulated human remains within them. At the base of the standing stone he found fragments of arm and rib bones, a lower jawbone, part of the upper jaw and the portion of a skull, (Fig 7). Placed with these bones was a small piece of deer antler. Harkness ages the individual to being around six to eight years old. “ The bones of the head exhibited features of an interesting nature, and the lower jaw had also peculiar characteristics.”. (1869,390). The brow ridges of the skull are very prominent with a low forehead. The lower jaw was very robust.²

¹ It is probable that the stone from these monuments was used for building cottages and farm buildings in the area before the 19th century.

² Was the child buried near the standing stone malformed or disabled? Archaeology has shown that disabled persons were given special burials in the Neolithic. The prominent brow ridges and low forehead point to a hominid from the Palaeolithic. How did the

In excavating the area to the west Harkness found what he calls a stone cist made up of limestone flags with a cover of the same. Within he found fragments of ribs, femurs, and a lower jawbone. These bones he records as belonging to two individuals. The jawbone to a child of six to eight years old, one of the femurs and leg bone belonging to a small adult. With these was placed the bones of a pig (possibly wild pig or boar), a tooth found in a part of the jawbone of the pig showed it was an adult. (1869,392).

Lastly Harkness gives a description of artefacts found on Garrett Island in the centre of Lough Gur. "Around Garrets island....particularly towards its southern side, are to be seen many upright piles.... At the time when the level of the lake lowered....the land laid bare was found to be covered with an enormous accumulation of bones....this spot continued to be a very prolific source of bones, for during the potato famine, the poor of Bruff....obtained a scanty livelihood by collecting and selling bones from this locality." (1869,395).³

remains of ancient individuals find their way into a Neolithic stone circle? If possible, the bone should be carbon dated.

³ The bone found on Garrett Island included a large number of ox skulls, sheep or goat skulls, a few dog skulls and a few deer skulls amongst other body parts. All the skulls had central bone fractures, in the forehead area. (Harkness. 1869,395). Was this a part of the ritual activity at Neolithic Lough Gur? Harkness adds that human bone was also found at this site.

Methods

The methods used to build the thesis will be explored through the modules of the course. Archaeological excavation reports alongside pollen analysis reports will help to recreate the landscape and settlement in prehistory and the early medieval period. Medieval records, later estate maps and records and Ordnance Survey maps will provide a picture of the landscape to the modern day.

Mythology and folklore will be researched with documents such as Lynch. J.F. 1897. *The myths and monuments of Lough Gair*. Books and journals, of recent publication concerning folklore at Lough Gur will provide material, such as Carbary. M. 1938. *The farm by Lough Gur.*, and *The Lough Gur and district historical society journal*.

The above journal and newspapers such as *The Limerick Post* and *The Limerick Leader*, from the 19th and 20th centuries will provide material for recent history. Church records will be researched and local people and local historians will be interviewed.

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