



Dolmens at Ballycroum, near Feakle, County Clare

Author(s): T. J. Westropp

Source: *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy (1889-1901)*, Vol. 6 (1900 - 1902), pp. 85-92

Published by: [Royal Irish Academy](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20488771>

Accessed: 07/08/2013 21:45

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Royal Irish Academy is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy (1889-1901)*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

VIII.

DOLMENS AT BALLYCROUM, NEAR FEAKLE, COUNTY CLARE. By T. J. WESTROPP, M.A.

[Read APRIL 23RD, 1900.]

NORTH of the village of Feakle, in the ancient district of Tuath Aughty, forming the southern region of the hilly district of Slieve Aughty, between the counties of Galway and Clare, lie three dolmens, the subject of this Paper.¹

They are reached by a road winding up the green slopes of the hills, to the north of the parish church of Feakle, and commanding a fine open view across the plains of Clare to Slieve Bernagh and the Shannon. The parish of Feakle (Fechill, 1302) is not rich in antiquities, and probably the facts of its unusual size, and the absence of any ancient church in the beautiful and extensive valley south of Lough Graney, implies its wild and scantily peopled condition in early Christian times. This evidently continued to later days as is shown by the unusual scarcity of the peel towers, so common in other districts, only one site remaining in the parish which is in extent about 8 miles square. The numerous names compounded of Derry and Durra, lying along the flanks of the hills, tell of numerous and probably nearly unbroken oak forests. Indeed, the district must have been thickly-wooded from the days when huge elks were engulfed in its bogs down to the last century.

Early legend connects the name Aughty with "Echtge the awful," a lady of the Tuatha de Danann, daughter of Nuad Silver Hand,² who was a lover of the cup bearer of Sengann and Gann, the tribal ancestors of the Siol Gangain—the Ganganoi of Ptolemy's Atlas.

Our annalists state that the lake of Lough Graney burst out with numerous other lakes in other places, about 700 years before our era. In the historic period no events of much importance occurred in its borders, and in its few records its loneliness and wildness are usually

¹ Ordnance Survey Map, County Clare, No. 19.

² "Silva Gadelica," vol. ii., p. 126. Caeilte also mentions a place, Cuaille Chepain, south of Lough Graney, where Chepan Mac Morna fell.

mentioned in emphatic language. The "Colloquy of the Ancients" tells of the severe winter when "the stag of frigid Echtge's summit catches the chorus of the wolves."¹ The "Wars of Turlough" again and again relate how the Macnamaras and O'Briens fled to the old woods, when the Clan of Brien Roe and its English allies, the De Clares of Bunratty, proved too strong for them. In 1277, the Macnamaras flee into "Echtge's dense forest and leafy foliage"; it afforded them safety in 1280, and again in the severe winter of 1315, "by Echtge's shortest tracks, in the fast woods they made their close set camp; in this stress and jeopardy, they passed the cold-winded, dark-visaged winter." At last fortune changed, and their enemies in their turn sought the friendly shelter in their wild and harassed retreat under Brian Bawn from Burren to the fords of Killaloe in 1316, "until in Echtge's blue ridges, wind-tormented, cold, and with buttressed sides they found a resting place."

To Echtge's forests Prince Murchad O'Brien and his adherents carried the cattle spoil of the Normans, and from them they made their forced march a few days later in May, 1318, to complete the destruction of the army of Sir Richard De Clare, at Dysert O'Dea.

The rental of the Macnamaras, about 1380, mentions only ten out of the ninety townlands of the parish, and even these lie chiefly round Feakle and Fahy, where traces of ancient occupation occur. Indeed, till the latter half of the last century, no English or Irish families of note seem to have fixed their residence in the lonely valleys; nevertheless, the dolmens and rock-markings of Dromandoora already described in these *Proceedings*, the cists at Corracloon and the townland noted in this Paper, together with a few forts, show that, in very early days, a few adventurous mortals dwelt in the recesses of the forests.

Driving up the pass we get a beautiful glimpse of the distant Lough Graney, the ancient Lough Bo Girre² embosomed in the wooded hills of Caher, and note the blocks of the defaced dolmen of Corracloon rising above the thick furze bushes on the rounded hill to our right. We cross the little mountain stream and winding valley of Glan-bonnive, and then ascend the fields to the summit of the ridge, finding a rude track used by turf-cutters which brings us to the boggy basin where these dolmens lie, in the townland of Ballycroum.

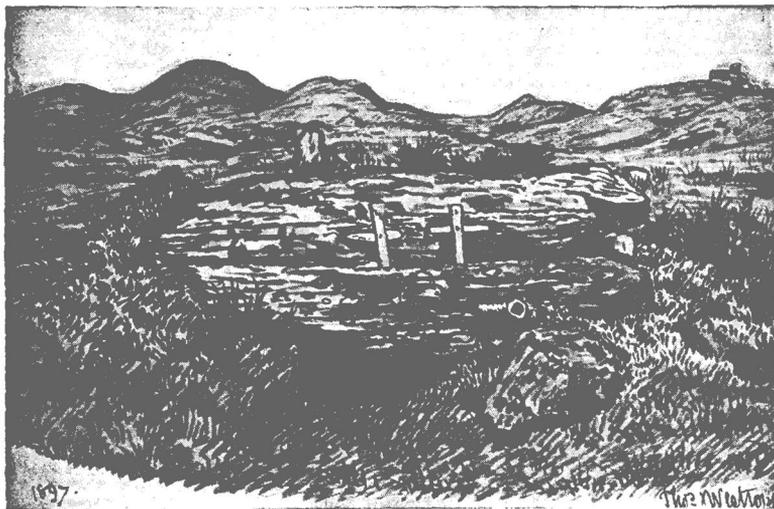
This Paper is mainly intended to correct a vague and misleading description, and a fanciful theory set forth in the Ordnance Survey

¹ "Silva Gadelica." "Colloquy of the Ancients," vol. ii., p. 192.

² Silva Gadelica, vol. ii., p. 126.

Letters;¹ this has unfortunately been published by Mr. Borlase² without a personal visit, and owing to its wide dissemination has been quoted, and in one instance has already been used as the basis of a further theory.³ It therefore seems necessary, despite the proverbial difficulty of stopping an error once it gets into print, to supply careful plans and information, and point out the deficiencies of O'Donovan's description and the consequent untenable nature of his theory.

He writes—"Tobar Ghraine, *i.e.* Grania's well, which is, perhaps, the most curious in Ireland as resembling almost in every particular instance the well called the '*the King of the Waters*'⁴ in the Book of



TOBERGRANIA. FROM THE EAST.

(Altoir Ultach on the mound.)

Armagh. It is situated in the centre of a bog about three miles from the village of Feakle. It is a square well measuring 5 feet every way, and constructed of stones placed on their edges, and covered at the top with a large flag laid horizontally, and measuring 8 feet from the north to the south, and 7 feet 6 inches from east to west, and

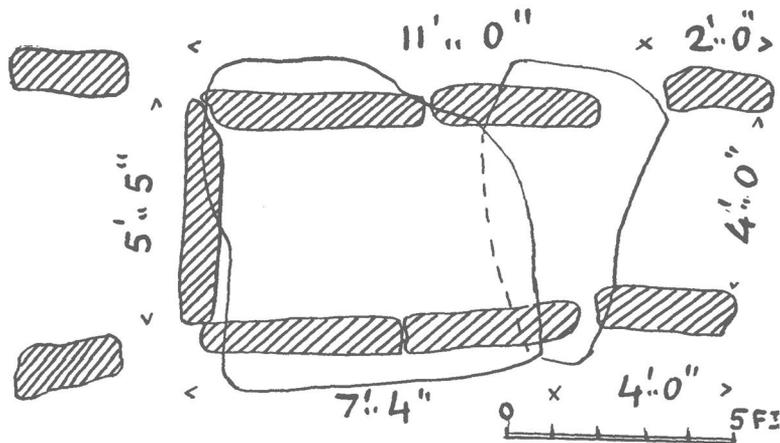
¹ MSS. R. I. A., 14 B 24, p. 156.

² "Dolmens of Ireland," p. 95.

³ *R. S. A. I. Journal*, 1899, pp. 63, 123.

⁴ "Tripartite Life of St. Patrick" (Ed. Whitley Stokes), pp. 122 and 123. The "Rex Aquarum" was four-cornered, and had a square slab on top with a slit.

18 inches in thickness. This flag is of grit, and covers the whole well except a *small hole at the west end*, in which particular it perfectly agrees with the 'King of the Waters,' which was completely covered overhead with a large square slab, excepting in one place where there was a split through which people were wont to drop into the well offerings of gold and silver. Tober grania, though not named after any saint, is much resorted (*sic*) for the cure of sore eyes. There can be little doubt that this was a pagan well worshipped by the Hydro-lators of ancient Ireland. It is strange to find it so near Loch Greine, which seems to have derived its name from heliolatry."¹ He then gives a much more careful and accurate description of Altoir Olltach, "the Ultonian Altar."



Plan of Dolmen of Tobergrania.

O'Donovan must have written from "forgotten memory," judging from his statement that the well is 5 feet square. It is actually a tapering cist of the most ordinary type of the dolmens in this district, with antæ to the west end; it is 8 feet long internally, tapering from 4 feet 2 inches to 3 feet 6 inches eastward; each side is formed of two blocks, and there is a single block at the west end with a semi-circular "scoop" out of the end not unparalleled in other cromlechs in the same county.² These opes may have been "ghost-doors," and may

¹ This view he contradicts a few lines lower down, stating that the lake is named after the district of Grian Echtghe.

² Deerpark and Creevagh, *e.g.*

conceivably have been used for inserting offerings, but their analogy to the hole in the cover of the well of Slan is too doubtful for statement. The holes so common in the sides of Indian dolmens are not of frequent occurrence in our island, and also the fact that at least several of the dolmens with "scoops" were embedded in cairns and mounds renders their use for offerings to the dead dweller in the cist still more uncertain.

There are two top slabs, the western overlapping the eastern, as is sometimes the case in other dolmens; the larger is irregular, its extreme measurements are 7 feet 7 inches north and south by 7 feet 10 inches east and west, and about 18 inches thick. On the lower slab rest a number of offerings of the poorest description—buttons, bottles, broken glass and crockery, and two very rude wooden crosses, left by those who resorted to the "well" for the cure of their eyes.

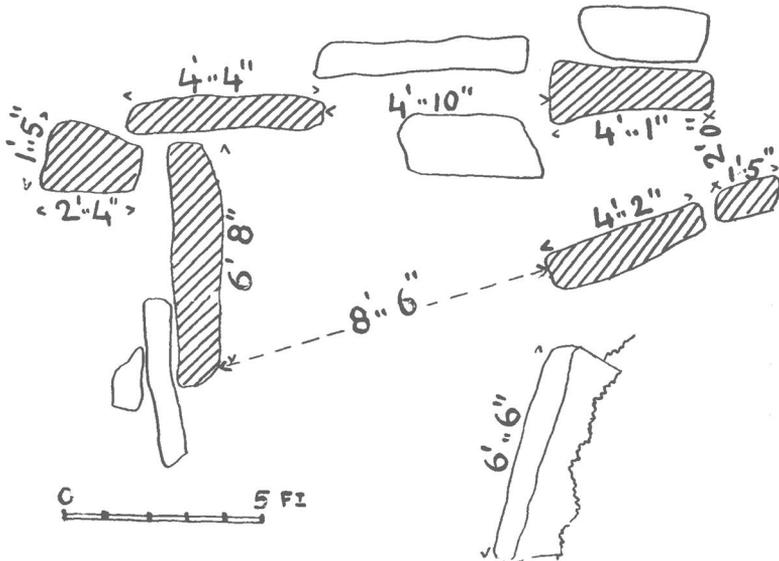
O'Donovan found it in good repute in his day, but its reputation has waned during the intervening sixty years, so fruitful of change in weightier matters in this country, and so destructive of folk-lore and traditional observance. As far as I could learn, a few old and poor people come now and then; but a neighbouring farmer's wife, living less than a mile from the well, though she "had heard people talk about the cures of Tubbergranny," and her own eyes were weak, had never taken the trouble to visit it.

Finally, the "well" has no spring in it. I have visited in a wet summer and in the autumn, and could only detect surface water or mud inside. It used, I hear, to have water at all times, but as the peat gets more and more cut away it is now practically dry at most seasons of the year. No doubt when it was made on its little knoll a few feet above the present surface of the bog the peat was not so high as in later days, and now the older state of dryness is being restored.

ALTOIR ULTACH is still understood by the peasantry to have derived its name from a priest who fled from Ulster to a spot where the penal laws were less powerful, and used to celebrate the Mass on this dolmen, as a fellow-priest used to do on the dolmen of Knockshanvo, on the hill of Knockaphunta beyond Broadford. The "altar" stands on a "saddle" (half way up the slope of one of the curious low rounded knolls which surround the bog) and lies to the west of Tobergrania. It commands a noble view through the gaps between the knolls over the Lakeland of Central Clare,¹ with its bright blue streaks of the Lakes of Cullaun, Kilgorey, Rosslara, and many others lying among

¹ I have counted thirty lakes visible from another hill at Lough Ea.

the woods, while far away lies the lake-like estuary of the Fergus, with its islands and long reaches of the Shannon. On the hummock to the north we get an equally fine view of Lough Graney and its glens and of the distant Lough Derg. Altoir Ultach has, at the north-west corner, a pillar 2 feet 1 inches by 1 foot 5 inches, and 5 feet high. The north side of the structure consists of three slabs (4 feet 4 inches, 4 feet 10 inches, and 4 feet 1 inch long, the middle one displaced). The two eastern blocks of the south side are *in situ*; a gap 8 feet 6 inches long lies between them, and the large western slab, which is 6 feet 8 inches



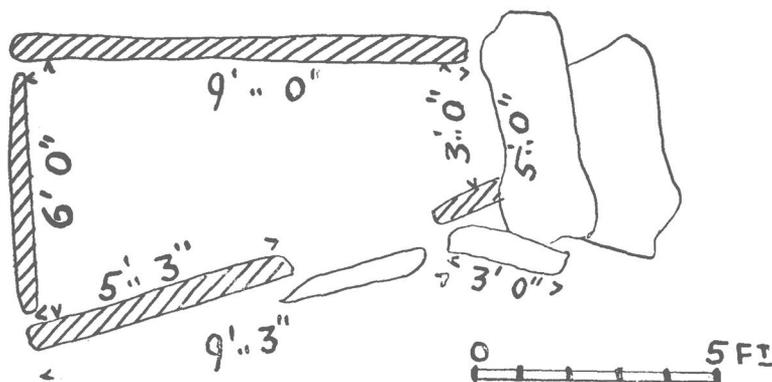
Plan of Dolmen of Altoir Ultach.

long and about 4 feet high. One of the side slabs 6 feet 6 inches long has been dragged out till it lies nearly at right angles to its former position. The slabs vary from 10 to 14 and 16 inches in thickness. The structure is of the usual plan, 14 feet long and tapering eastward from 6 feet 8 inches to 2 feet. The sides, as usual, get lower towards the east, till they scarcely rise a foot over the grassy sward. The roof slabs had been removed before 1839.

“DERMOT AND GRANIA’S BED.”—The third dolmen lies almost buried in heather and bilberries not far eastward from Altoir Ultach. It is not noted on the maps or in the Letters of the Survey. It is of

the usual plan, one slab 9 feet long to the north, three to the south, and one to the west, tapering eastward from 5 feet to 3 feet, and about 10 feet long. The covers are gone, and it has been dug up.

Dermot and Grania are locally supposed to be saints. One man thought they had built Feakle church in the old times. Evidently the Ulster priest and the old repute of the well, though it had no Christian dedication, rehabilitated the character of the dolmens and their traditional builders, for their Paganism is forgotten, which is far from being the case elsewhere in the county, and the older people connect them rather with the faith of St. Mochonna of Feakle than with that of the ancient chieftain's daughter, Lady Graney—"who was drowned in Lough Graney, washed down the River Graney, and buried in Tom-graney."¹



Plan of Dermot and Grania's Bed.

A very old herdsman also told me that Grania was one of the *saints* who had built the other "Labbas," and that the "scoop" in the end slab was made by *his* head when *he* drank out of the well.

The name Cahergrania on the key map has no local existence. The nearest trace of a stone fort is found some miles to the north-east on the hill above the trees and rhododendrons of Caher, on the shore of the lonely "Lake of the Sun," in the heart of Echtghe.²

¹ "The Colloquy of the Ancients" mentions this lady as daughter of Finn.

² See Mr. H. Knox's interesting notes on the "dolmen well" of Tobernaholthora in Mayo. *Journal, Roy. Soc. Ant. Ireland*, 1899, pp. 63 and 127.

NOTE ADDED IN THE PRESS.

THE interest shown in the statement as to the occurrence of forest names round Echtghe encourages me to copy from my notes the following list of place names round the southern slopes of those hills:—

Inchicronan Parish.—Derrynagleera, Derrynacrogg, Durra, Derryvet, Derryvinnaun, Derrygoul, Derryhamma, Derryskeagh, Derrybeg, Derryfadda, Derrynarahny, Derrymore (2).

Tulla Parish.—Derryulk (3), Kyleduff, Kylemore, Roslara, Derrymore (2), Derrybeg, Derrynabrone, Derrykeadran, Derrinterriff.

Feakle Parish.—Derrynaveagh, Derryfadda, Derrycarran, Dereendooagh, Derricnaw, Killanena, Gortaderry, Crossderry, Derrynaneal, Derrynagittagh (3), Derryabbert, Derryvinna, Derryeaghra, Derrybehagh, Derrygravaun, Derrynaheila, Derryulk Derrywillin, Augha-derreen, Knockbehagh, and Corbehagh.

The names stop abruptly at Feakle Parish, there being none in Moynoe Parish, though it runs for several miles up the hills. One name, Derrycon, is found in Iniscaltra Parish.

Mr. G. Kinahan, on the reading of the present Paper, stated that he considered these dolmens to be slab huts for deer stalkers, and that he found pits near them for the capture of deer. As the cists are identical with those found in cairns, and with others containing buried human skeletons, I see no reason for separating the dolmens from the class which they resemble. We would of course require some definite proof that the "pits" had not been made by turf diggers.