

II An Illustrated Map



Antiquities of the Sheen River Valley

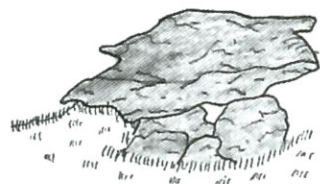
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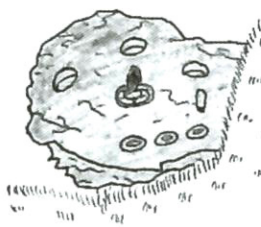
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Art/sketches by Karina & Linda O'Connor

This illustrated map of the antiquities of the Sheen River Valley of Bonane in South Kerry reveals for the first time a sophisticated astronomical calendar, encompassing both lunar and solar cycles, with its hub in the previously undocumented stone circle at Dromagorteen.

It encapsulates the relationship between some of the more important archaeological sites in the valley and may finally explain the origin of the unique Bullaun Stone (the Rolls of Butter) near Drom Fiachna cemetery, which has baffled antiquarians for centuries.



Overview



The wealth and diversity of the archaeological monuments of the Sheen Valley has surprisingly, until now, gone largely unnoticed, except to locals. In addition to documenting many of them for the first time, this map also shows that their positioning, relative to each other and to solar and lunar cycles, is quite precise and unlikely to have occurred by chance.

The map is the culmination of years of painstaking observation and study by the author, and does not purport to be a comprehensive guide to all the monuments in the Valley. Rather, in the interest of clarity, it concentrates on some of the principal and most accessible sites and their complex inter-relationship. It provides an invaluable reference to both the student and the casual visitor wishing to experience at first hand some of the best-preserved antiquities to be found anywhere in Western Europe.

The stone circle at Dromagorteen is the centrepiece of a complex astronomical calendar, which includes both solar and lunar cycles. Monuments on the horizon mark the rising and setting of the sun and moon at significant dates, such as winter and summer solstice. An imaginary axis drawn from these points to the stone circle reveals the astonishing fact that many of the monuments are sited on or close to these radial lines. The asymmetrical nature of these lines is accounted for by the mountainous topography of the Valley.

The unique Bullaun Stone, or Rolls of Butter as it is known locally, situated near Drom Fiachna cemetery in Garranes has attracted the interest of antiquarians for centuries, without any scientifically plausible explanation being offered for its origin.

It is now believed that it was an early astronomical observatory. The bullauns provide a mirror image of part of the constellation of Orion and its associated stars. The deeper and more defined bullauns or indentations represent the brighter stars.

The proximity of the bullaun stone to the present day St. Fiachna's cemetery is also significant. The cemetery, generally regarded as one of the oldest Christian burial places still in use in Ireland, almost certainly pre dates Christianity. The fence of the ancient cemetery, with its highly important "kink", together with the bullaun stone form a perfect alignment with the rising sun at the winter solstice.

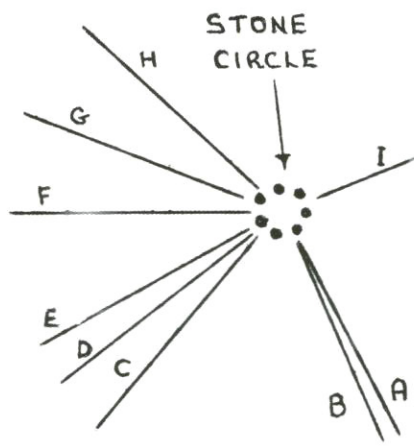
The early settlers placed great store in the sun and were in reality sun worshippers. In particular the rising sun of the winter solstice was closely associated with the cult of the dead. They held the belief that the mid-winter sunrise awoke the dead from their slumber and gave them re-birth into a new life. It is not a mere accident that an early astronomical observatory, the bullaun stone, is sited strategically close to this ancient burial place.

The monuments in the Sheen Valley combine to present a continuous multi-period record of habitation dating from the Neolithic period; an impressive fact in itself!

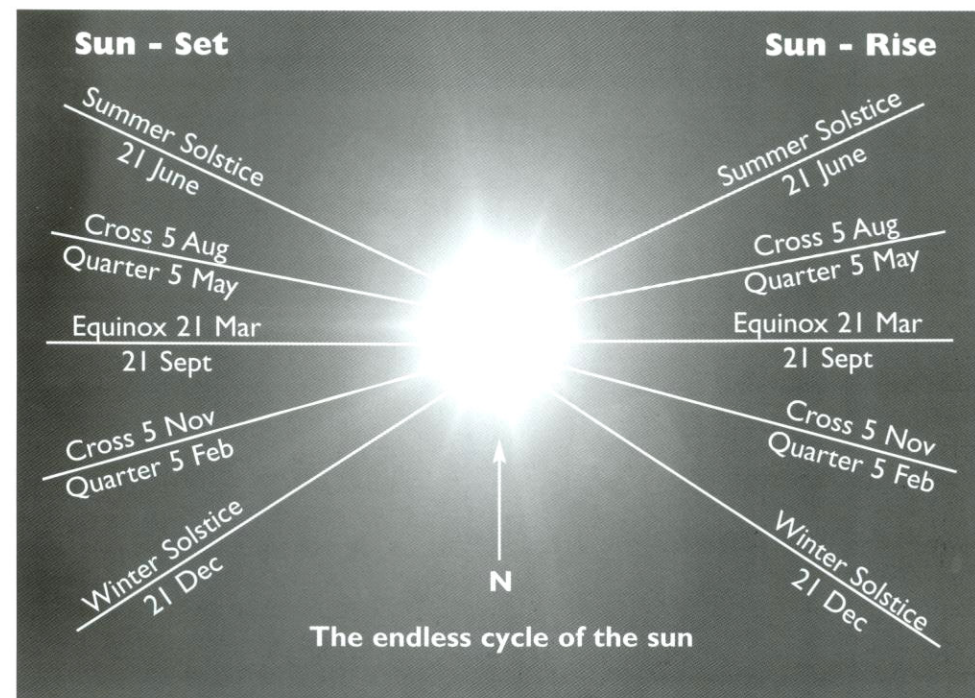


How To Read The Map:

- The map is best read starting at the stone circle in Dromagorteen, just right of the centre.
- Each line on the map, marked A to I, represents an imaginary axis drawn from the stone circle to a monument on the horizon.
- Every monument on the horizon marks the rising or setting of the sun or moon at that point on the horizon on a significant astronomical date. For example line F marks the setting sun, twice yearly, at the equinox.
- The diagram below shows sunrise and sunset positions for Southern Ireland as they would appear on a level plain. The asymmetrical nature of the lines on the map is accounted for by the mountainous nature of the Sheen Valley.



Sunrise and Sunset Positions



The Monuments

The early settlers believed in the continuity of the community after death and the collective burial of the dead in communal stone tombs was a characteristic of the Neolithic period. These communal tombs consisted of an accessible chamber protected by a mound of earth or stones, where the inhumed or cremated remains of the dead were placed, often accompanied by tools or personal objects to assist them in the afterlife. Many of the monuments of the Sheen Valley have a funerary significance.

Court Tombs

Court tombs are believed to be the oldest communal burials surviving in Ireland, dating from about 5,000 BC. This type of tomb is mostly found in the northern half of the country so the existence of one in the Sheen Valley, where wedge-tombs predominate, suggests very early habitation.

The typical court tomb has an elongated cairn of small stones leading to a court of roughly circular shape. A stone burial chamber opens from the inner end of the court and consists of a gallery of two or more chambers.

The court tomb at Milleens is set in a cluster of other monuments, including a bullaun stone, and is within easy walking distance of the N71.

Boulder-burials

Boulder-burials, dating from the Bronze Age, consist of a large cover-stone, or boulder, resting on three or more low stones, above a shallow pit containing cremated remains. They are found almost exclusively in the Southwest of Ireland, the majority occurring in west Cork. They may be found singly or in small groups, and in some instances they are associated with stone circles, as in the case of the stone circle at Dromagorteen.

Stone Circles

Stone circles consist of a ring of free-standing stones, usually an uneven number, symmetrically arranged so that one stone, the axial stone, is set directly opposite the two tallest stones, known as the portals, marking the entrance to the circle. In many instances this axis is aligned northeast-southwest, which may be of astronomical significance. Stone circles are generally regarded as ceremonial or ritual sites.

The stone circle at Dromagorteen, known as the Judge and Jury, consists of thirteen stones with a central boulder burial.

Ringforts

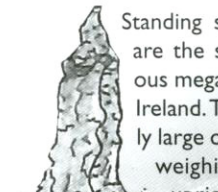
Ringforts, known in the Sheen Valley area as Liosanna or Rath, are by far the most numerous and well known of the archaeological remains. Dating from the first millennium AD they were built as fortified farmsteads to protect against intruders and predators. Typically, they consist of a circular enclosure protected by an earthen bank and external foss or ditch. One of the best examples of a lios or ringfort in the entire Sheen Valley lies within a few metres of the stone circle at Dromagorteen.

Wedge tombs



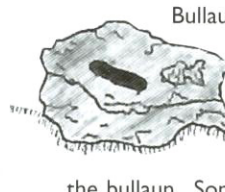
These megalithic tombs are characterised as having a gallery constructed with side stones, which decrease in height from the entrance, and are either parallel or give it a wedge shaped appearance. They are roofed with large stones, which sit directly on the walls of the gallery and are frequently oriented northeast-southwest and a single stone often closes the entrance. Generally they date from the late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age. There are many fine examples in the Sheen Valley.

Standing Stones



Standing stones, or gallan (gallan), are the simplest and most numerous megalithic monuments found in Ireland. These Monoliths are merely large oblong shaped stones, often weighing several tonnes, set upright in the ground. They could have been erected for a variety of purposes and may have marked boundaries or burial sites.

Bullaun Stones



Bullaun stones consist of a large flat-topped rock where a basin or bullaun has been carved out. Sometimes an oval or round shaped stone is found sitting in the bullaun. Some archaeologists believe that these were used as ancient corn mills. There are five examples of bullaun stones known in the Sheen Valley.

The bullaun stone near Drom Fiachna cemetery is unique in that it contains eight bullauns. This bullaun stone is closely associated in legend with St. Fiachna, the patron saint of the area. Legend has it that when St. Fiachna came upon a woman making butter with milk, which she had stolen from her neighbours on May morning, he petrified the dairy as a warning to sinners, hence the local name, the Rolls of Butter.

There are two instances where bullaun stones in the valley were adapted for ecclesiastical purposes. Near the medieval church at Drom Fiachna a small bullaun stone acted as a holy water font while during penal times, when Mass was celebrated in secret, a bullaun stone at Innisfoyle doubled as a baptismal and holy water font.

Rock Art

Rock art is a type of prehistoric carving that is usually found on boulders and outcrops of bedrock. Limited ranges of motifs occur, the simplest being the cupmark or circular design. The designs were executed by hammering sharp stone or metal points onto the rock surfaces to form depressions or pickmarks.

While the conventional wisdom is that rock art dates from the Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age; its purpose and meaning are still a mystery. In the context of the Sheen Valley it may well have had an astronomical significance!

Glossary

Megalithic

The term megalith is derived from the Greek Megas, meaning great or big and Lithos, meaning stone. It literally means large stones.

Monolithic

Single stone.

Neolithic

New stone period or new Stone Age.

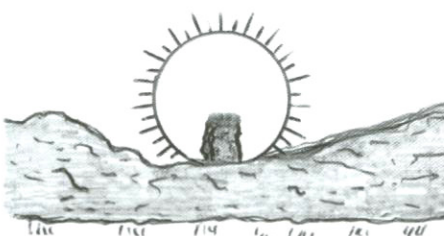
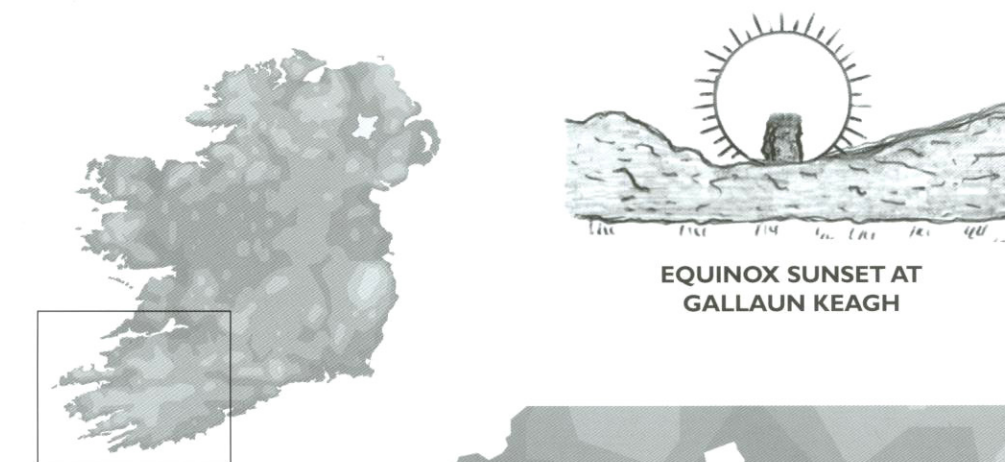
Time Scale

Neolithic Period	C. 4,000 BC - 2,000 BC
Bronze Age	C. 2,000 BC - 500 BC
Iron Age	C. 500 BC - 400 AD
Early Medieval Period	C. 400AD - 1200 AD

It should not be overlooked that 4,000 BC means 6,000 years ago!

Location

These maps show the location of the Sheen Valley which is transversed by the main N71 route and is easily accessed.



EQUINOX SUNSET AT GALLAUN KEAGH

