

Markers of heroic deaths

On the crest of a low hill outside Ballyhaunis, in a townland called Island, is an ogham stone lying in the centre of a small barrow some 10 metres in diameter and approximately half a metre high. The inscription on the stone reads 'CUNALEGI A[VI] QUNACANOS' which has been translated as 'belonging to Wolf-?, descendant of Wolf-Singer'. The barrow is typical of the small mounds overlying Iron Age cremation burials. These are normally not marked by stone pillars but the skeleton of a forty-five year old male, lying on his back with a plain standing stone to the right of his head, has been found at Kiltullagh on the Roscommon/Mayo border and this has been radiocarbon-dated to between AD 406 and 532. It is surrounded by other standing stones, evidence of other inhumations and traces of barrows and it may provide a guide to the approximate period of the Island stone, some 10 km north-west of Kiltullagh.

There is a reasonable amount of evidence showing that ogham inscriptions could be carved on pre-existing monuments. Approximately ten percent of Irish ogham stones are considerably larger than the average and many archaeologists have argued that these larger examples are prehistoric standing stones of Bronze Age date which were re-visited in the dying days of the Roman empire by men who carved them with the names of individuals written in ogham alphabet. One of the clearest examples of these potentially re-used stones is the very large, heart-shaped stone from Knickeen in Wicklow which is marked by a central carved V shaped notch on its upper edge and carries the inscription MAQI NILI or son of *Nilos*. Comparative notches on other stones, such as that found on Long Meg at the Bronze Age megalithic complex outside Penrith in Cumbria, have been interpreted as design features, designed to help focus light beams at certain times of the year. Unfortunately, Knickeen's current situation, in the middle of a wood, does not allow for potential experiments to explore such possibilities further.

A feature of our earliest Christian texts are the high number of stories recorded about ancestral graves in the landscape which are described as being characterised by mounds and occasionally by standing stones. Some of the ogham carvers may have been working within this same *Dindshenchas* tradition. It is certain that later generations understood this to have been the case; many of the warriors fought and were killed by Cú Chulainn and other heroes are said to have been buried under mounds, with their name inscribed on ogham pillars erected above the mound and the story of their deaths incorporated into the place-names of their locality.

There is something over three hundred and thirty ogham stones known from Ireland, the majority of them in the south-west of the country. Roughly two-thirds have inscriptions showing features of the language of the fifth century and earlier with the majority of the later stones (from the sixth and early seventh centuries) being found in the areas of greatest concentration in the south-west. All the Irish examples commemorate men.

The personal names of these men and their progenitors tell us something about their culture. There are names made up of single nouns such as 'Raven' (*Branos*), 'Badger' (*Brocos*), 'Flame' (*Degos*) and 'Strong' (*Trenos*) as well as diminutive forms such as 'Little

Badger' (*Brocnagnas*) or 'Little Dark One' (*Ceragnas*). More commonly, we find compound forms such as 'Black raven' (*Branaddov*), 'Grey Wolf' (*Glasiconas*), 'Wolf-head' (*Cunacennos*) or 'Black-Fire' (*Dovaidona*).

A particularly interesting group of names refers to non-human birth: 'Raven-born' (*Branogenos*), 'Yew-tree born' (*Ivagenos* - which evolves to modern Eoghan), 'Wolf-born' (*Cunagenos*) and 'Mead-born' (*Meddugenos*). This last name is also found on a collection of Roman spoons from Thetford in East Anglia where it is paired with the mischievous Roman god of the woods, Faunus. One of the most common in this group is 'Son of Cow' or possibly 'Son of Heaven' (*Maqos Ercias*) which Eoin MacNeill argued must have referred to a prehistoric cow-goddess for it is one of the relatively few nouns with feminine endings recorded in the ogham corpus. Still others incorporate the ability to procreate: 'Virility' (*Vergusos* - evolving to Fergus); 'Wolf-potency' (*Cunagussos*) or simple joy in a successful outcome as in 'Good-Born' (*Sogini*).

Some names show contact with Iron Age gods worshipped in Britain and on the continent as in the "Champion of Segamo" (*Neta Segamonas*) names from Waterford; Segamo is a name attached to provincial Roman statues of the god Mars and includes the element *Sego*-meaning victory. Lug, famous as the Iron Age god who gave his name to Lyons, Leiden and Carlisle, is also found in the ogham corpus in the form of names such as 'Respecter of Lug' (*Lugudeccas*) and 'Lug-fighter' (*Luguvicas*).

Many other names have explicit military connotations: 'Battle-strong' (*Trenacatos*), 'Around battle' (*Ambicatos*), 'Battle-Yew' (*Ivacatos*), 'Battle-Man' (*Cattuvirros*) or 'Battle-head' (*Catabarros*). Still more are associated with leadership - 'Hound-lord' (*Maglicunas*), 'Battle-lord' (*Catomaglos*), 'Famed king' (*Clutorigas*) and 'Over-lord' (*Vortigurn/Vortigern* as in the Romano-British despot famed in English tradition for inviting the Saxon invaders). A minority of names seem to denote more peaceful interests such as 'Wise pure one' (*Gatteglan*) or farming ability as in 'Calf-possessor' (*Gamatos*).

Some linguists have argued that personal names, as such, are mere markers of identity and tell us little about the cultural attributes of those who bore them. Nobody, however, has argued that the meanings of these names were unknown to the men carving them into perpetual memorials on the stones of Ireland's landscape. Our school-children are still taught that Cú Chulainn or 'Culann's hound/wolf' was pre-eminent amongst the early warriors of Ireland. The medieval manuscripts tell us that the animal he killed with his sliotar and/or a standing stone was an *archú* or 'Slaughter-hound' but it is the names of the heroes recorded in the ogham alphabet which provide us with our clearest insights into the mentality of the later Iron Age society which gave birth to his story.