

## 2. STANDING STONES IN IRISH TRADITION

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the role of standing stones in Ireland with the aim of providing a context for the development of ogam stones. Erect boulders, known archaeologically as orthostats or monoliths, are a common feature in the Irish countryside where they can occur as isolated monuments, in pairs, in rows of three to six stones or in circles. Only a small minority are inscribed with the form of writing which we know today as ogam. This poses a question: if, as the most recent writers have affirmed, ogam stones first developed in Ireland (McManus 1991, 19-20; Thomas 1994, 34), are they merely the latest phase in a long tradition? Did they fulfill a different function from the uninscribed stones simply because they incorporate written texts? In some recent archaeological inventories, ogam stones are listed as a separate category but examples of the genre also occur in the categories of standing stones and early ecclesiastical sites (Cuppage 1986, 256; O'Sullivan & Sheehan 1996, 245). This appropriately reflects current uncertainty about possible distinctions between ogam stones and other types of freestanding orthostats.

In volume 10 of *Archaeology Ireland*, Gabriel Cooney puts forward a suggestion that Irish standing stones should not necessarily be seen as originating in the Bronze Age and he points out that there are a number of examples of single monoliths which are found in conjunction with Neolithic burial mounds, both passage tombs and court tombs (Cooney 1996). With specific reference to passage tombs he cites four examples: a pyramid-shaped pillar 1.5m high said by an eighteenth-century commentator to have stood inside Newgrange (Herity 1974, 28), a large isolated pillar inside cairn L at Lough Crew, another in cairn F at Carrowkeel and two examples outside the eastern and western passage tombs of the main mound at Knowth.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Newgrange and Knowth are both passage tombs which were modified during the Iron Age. In the case of Knowth, two penannular ditches transformed the large central mound into a protected settlement: one just inside the kerb at the base and the other surrounding the outer edge at the top (Eogan 1991, 118). A piece of Roman *terra sigillata* pottery was found on the old ground surface surrounding the large mound (Eogan 1968, 375) which, together with the proximity of the lower ditch to the original perimeter, suggests that the

Neolithic passages may have been visible at that date. Claire O'Kelly believes that the tomb at Newgrange was a grass-covered mound with no visible passage by the time the ritual deposits of Romano-British material were made (Carson & O'Kelly 1977, 45), although the apparent concentration of the Romano-British deposits in the area around the entrance of the tomb might suggest otherwise (see *ibid.*, map at end of article). Cairn L is the focal tomb of the Carnbane West nucleus in the Lough Crew cemetery and is immediately adjacent to cairn H in which the bulk of the Lough Crew flakes were apparently found. Moreover, Raftery states that a box in the National Museum, labelled in what is thought to be the excavator's hand, contains 21 flakes which are said to have come from Cairn L (Raftery 1984, 251; see also Herity 1974, 237-8).

Perhaps what we are seeing in these specific instances, then, is not a Neolithic ritual involving standing stones as Cooney suggests but rather further evidence for Iron Age ceremonial activity at these sites. Peter Woodman has drawn attention to the fact that there are now numerous Iron Age radiocarbon dates from Irish megalithic tombs and he suggests that this Iron Age activity may have contributed to the later Old Irish and Middle Irish legends about the inhabitants of the *síde* or fairy mounds (Woodman 1992, 308). In the previous chapter the evidence for Iron Age burial, bone plaques and Romano-British coins and jewellery at Knowth, Lough Crew and Newgrange was outlined; it may be that free-standing orthostats were also added at some point after the initial erection of the Neolithic mounds. It is important to remember that prehistoric monuments which survive to the present day have been the subject of curiosity and awe to many generations besides our own (Woodman 1992, 302-8; Aitchison 1994, 106-130; Swift 1996, 7-8) and an Iron Age origin for at least some of the free-standing orthostats found on Neolithic passage tombs would accord with the evidence for the erection of similar orthostats at ceremonial centres.<sup>12</sup>

If the postulated Neolithic origin for Irish standing stones appears somewhat fragile, there is good evidence for assuming their existence in the Bronze Age. An association between stone pillars and burials is typified by the early excavation of Furness by R.A.S. Macalister *et al.* (1913) where a cist with grave goods of the Beaker period and at least two cremated bodies were marked by a free-standing pillar within a circular enclosure. A small cist of Bronze Age date was found to be

<sup>12</sup> See discussion below, pages 32-3.

associated with the seven-foot high monolith at Punchestown, Co. Kildare and similar finds have been made at Drumnahare, Carrownacaw and Ballycroghan, all in Co. Down and at Site C, Newgrange, Co. Meath (Ó Ríordáin 1979, 143; Herity & Eogan 1977, 128). A study of standing stones by Maria Medlycott in 1989 indicates that of the 65 stones then excavated or disturbed, 41 could be dated through finds either in direct or indirect association. Of these, 2 belonged to the Beaker period and a further 31 were Early Bronze Age; there was no excavated stone with Iron Age dates (Medlycott 1989, 59, 61). J.P. Mallory and T.E. McNeill have suggested that a number of burials associated with the stones were later in date than the stones themselves and were deposited at such sites because of the perceived sacred nature of the location and they cite the modern burial of a dog at the foot of one such stone as an illustration of this phenomenon (Mallory and MacNeill 1991, 103). The statistics provided by Medlycott make this appear unlikely as a generalised explanation for if the burials were attracted in such a random fashion one might expect greater variety in the age of the associated burials.

The use of standing stones to mark burials may be merely part of a widespread practice of erecting such monuments in Bronze Age times. On the south-eastern side of the great mound at Newgrange, there are traces of Bronze Age dwellings, together with two large circles. One of these is marked by posts and pits whilst the other is composed of large, rough-hewn standing stones. Excavation has suggested that this phase in Newgrange's history belongs to c. 2500 B.C. (Sweetman 1985). Stone circles are frequently found elsewhere, mainly in south-western Ireland and in mid Ulster (Herity and Eogan 1977, 123-8; Ó Ríordáin 1979, 150-60; Harbison 1988, 94-99; O'Kelly 1989, 137-42). Excavated sites include some such as Cuilbane, Co. Londonderry or Ballynoe, Co. Down (Mallory & McNeill 1991, 71-4) which probably belong to the late Neolithic but the majority are thought to be Bronze Age in date. Apart from the all-embracing "ritual activity", the exact function of these stone circles remains unclear but excavation has produced evidence for deposition of small portions of human bone at a number of sites, often in the centre of the ring (Burl & Piper 1979, 55-77).

In a study of stone rows in the south of Ireland, Séan Ó Nualláin identified 73 rows of between three and six stones in counties Cork and Kerry and 103 pairs of standing stones and several more sites have come to light since his article was published (Ó Nualláin 1988; Ruggles 1994,

S17). The stone rows of mid Ulster are rather different from the south-western examples, consisting of large numbers of closely spaced, low, standing stones (O'Sullivan and Sheehan 1996, 45). There are also small stone rings, often with cairns inside them and with short rows of tall pillars standing at a tangent to the circles (Burl & Piper 1979, 53). In the absence of detailed study they are not considered further here.

In south-western stone rows, the orthostats were often graded in height with the tallest stone at one end (Ó Nualláin 1988, 181). By 1988, excavation had taken place at two stone rows. Maughnasilly, Co. Cork, a row of five stones, produced a thumb-shaped flint scraper and a (uncalibrated) radiocarbon date of 1315 B.C. +/- 55 while a charcoal spread five metres to the west of the three-stone row at Dromatouk, Co. Kerry produced a dating of 1380 B.C. +/- 50. At Cashelkeelty, uncalibrated radiocarbon dates from the associated stone circle suggested an erection date of 970-715 B.C. while stragraphic evidence indicated that the four-stone row pre-dated this by some centuries (Ó Nualláin 1988, 194, 234-5, 239-240). In addition, three rows are found in close conjunction with five-stone circles and a further two with Bronze Age boulder burials. Ruins of cairns are found close to two rows and single monoliths are found in association with three rows (*ibid.*, 181-184). Overall, this evidence can be summed up as indicating a late Neolithic to late Bronze Age date (Lynch 1981a, 65-74; Ó Nualláin 1988, 194). The function of the rows remains unclear but there is increasing evidence for burial at stone circles and cairns with which some rows are associated and this may imply some funerary or commemorative role for the rows (Ó Nualláin 1988, 194-5).

In examining alignments of three or more stones which are inter-visible in the south-west, Ann Lynch has argued that their orientation is astronomically significant and aligned to mid and turning points of solar and lunar cycles (Lynch 1981b). Using slightly different methods of measurement, Clive Ruggles later produced a modified version of Lynch's argument in which he suggested that most of these south-western monuments were aligned with lunar cycles and appeared to be orientated on prominent hill-tops (Ruggles 1994). On the other hand, photographs taken by Gerry Bracken at the Boheh stone, Co. Mayo in mid April and again in mid August showed the sun apparently tumbling down the steep slopes of Croagh Patrick and would appear to provide strong evidence for a solar cult at this site (Bracken & Wayman 1992). Bracken linked this

phenomenon with the cultivation of sown crops, suggesting that it signalled first the beginning of the planting and then the start of harvest. The Boheh stone is covered with cup-and-ring markings, such as are commonly found in association with stone circles in both Ireland and Britain (Burl & Piper 1979, *passim*.)

Of the stone pairs, the majority of cases consist of a taller and shorter stone, normally set with their long axes roughly in line. The gap between them can range between 0.55m to 9.40m although the most common is a gap under 2m. Four sites have Bronze Age boulder burials in the vicinity of the pairs while five are associated with five-stone circles. Three of these five are complexes which also include radial-stone cairns. Alignment is roughly similar to the pattern for stone rows, being focussed in the north-east and south-west quadrants. As to their function, R.A.S. Macalister (1949a, 105-6) suggested that some pairs may have represented deities, either male and female (signified respectively by pointy-topped and blunt-topped stones) or heavenly twins on the analogy of Castor and Pollux. Oliver Davies (1939, 170) considered certain pairs to be anthropomorphic with male and female connotations. In contrast, Ó Nualláin argued that stone pairs were a subset of the stone rows and should be seen as fulfilling the same role (Ó Nualláin 1988, 184-189).

It would appear, therefore, that standing stones were used in the Irish Bronze Age in a variety of ways. A number of the free-standing monoliths were used to mark cremation burials in cists. Those which occurred as multiple-stone monuments, be they circles, stone rows or pairs have been assumed to be of ritual significance, possibly connected with burial ceremonies and there appears to be a concern with astronomical alignment and prominent hill-tops.

At a later stage Ireland witnessed an Iron Age cult of decorated standing stones of which the most famous is the Turoe stone in Co. Galway (Duignan 1976). Four others are known, concentrated in the northern half of the country: Castlestrange, Co. Roscommon, Derrykeighan, Co. Derry, Killycluggin, Co. Cavan and Mullaghmast, Co. Kildare. None, unfortunately, is in its original position. They are of two basic types, the large up-standing monolith of Turoe or the squat, rather rounded style represented by Castlestrange in Co. Roscommon. On the basis of the art styles used, they have been dated from the first century A.D. to perhaps as late as the middle of the first millennium A.D. (Raftery 1984, 291-303). Of these the latest is apparently the Mullaghmast stone,

where Raftery argues the incised decoration shows parallels with the art found on early medieval metalwork such as the lachets (*ibid.*, 297-8). Conor Newman has tentatively linked the art on Mullaghmast to the first stage in the later development of his Ultimate La Tène style of fifth to seventh-century date. He associates it with fine line ornament without enamel on Irish three-link horse bits, Y-shaped pendants, B-1 brooches and silver disc-headed pins (1995, 23-4).

Raftery has also suggested that the undecorated round-topped monolith at the royal ceremonial centre of Tara, now known as the *Lia Fáil*, is to be connected with the cult represented by these decorated stones (1984, 301; 1994, 181). As noted above, (page 14), an eighth-century text identifies this monument as phallic and associates it with the rituals of royal inauguration. Notwithstanding the doubts of Tomas Ó Broin (1990), this would seem to corroborate the normal identification, for the extant monument is distinctly phallic in appearance and was known to nineteenth-century locals as *Bod Fhearghais* (Fergus' penis).<sup>13</sup> It was allegedly moved from the side of the Neolithic passage tomb at Tara, known today as *Dumha na nGiall*, at the end of the eighteenth century (Ó Broin 1990, 400). Such a location links this stone with the postulated Iron Age custom of erecting stone pillars by prehistoric grave-mounds, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

Etienne Rynne amongst others has suggested that the monuments *Blocc* and *Bluigne*, named in the same early text as the *Lia Fáil*, are to be linked to two stones, the one squat and rounded and the other upright and rectangular, in the Church of Ireland graveyard at Tara (Rynne 1987, 192-4). (The latter is carved with an indistinct figure, identified by Rynne as a sheela-na-gig type figure).<sup>14</sup> A prominent pillar stone on the site known today as "Dathi's mound", forms part of the complex of monuments focussed on Cruachu, the royal ceremonial centre of the early medieval

<sup>13</sup> The texts cited by Ó Broin which imply that the *Lia Fáil* was a flat stone are Middle Irish or later in date. They post-date the Old Irish account in *De Shil Chonairi Móir* which, as already mentioned, glosses the name of the *Lia Fáil* as *ferp cluche* or the stone penis.

<sup>14</sup> Leo Swan has pointed to a similar pairing at Donaghpatrick in Co. Meath (unpublished lecture at the Irish conference of Medievalists, Maynooth 1996) but the *Shell Guide to Ireland* by Lord Killanin and Michael Duignan indicates that these stones were only grouped together in the recent past (Killanin & Duignan 1967, 199). Similarly, Eamonn Kelly has suggested that the sheela-na-gig stone at Tara may have been taken from a nearby medieval church and did not originate as one of a pair of standing stones (Kelly 1996, 28).

over-kingdom of the Connachta (Swift 1993, 55-85). This was excavated by Waddell in 1981 and produced evidence that the circular mound on which the stone stood was carved out of a natural gravel ridge and had apparently not been used for burial. Radiocarbon dates from charcoal found at the base of the mound suggested an erection date of between 200BC and the early centuries A.D. (Waddell 1988, 10-12). Mullaghmast was identified by Edmund Hogan with the ceremonial centre of the seventh-century Uí Dúnlainge kings, entitled 'Maistiú' in a seventh-century text (Hogan 1910, 535, Bieler 1979, 132-3) and this identification has not been questioned by more recent scholars. A standing stone at Findermore, Co. Tyrone has been associated with the site of Clogher, probably a royal centre of the Uí Chremthainn, and Ann Hamlin has suggested that the cross currently carved in false relief on the pillar is a later addition (Hamlin 1982, 293; Warner 1981-2).

To date, then, there are standing stones, both monoliths and possible pairs, on the royal ceremonial centres of Tara, Cruachu and possibly at Maistiú and Clogher while the radiocarbon date from Cruachu and the decorated stone at Mullaghmast may indicate that such stones originated in the Iron Age if not earlier. The monolith at Cruachu was apparently erected on a mound specifically erected for that purpose while that at Tara is said to have been located on the side of a Neolithic passage tomb incorporated into the complex. The putative pair of orthostats at Tara, consisting of one tall pillar and one small squat stone, may, if original, be connected with the Bronze Age pairs identified by Ó Nualláin in Kerry and by Medlycott in Wicklow. Alternatively, if one accepts Kelly's suggestion about the late origins of the sheela-na-gig (see above, p.30, fn.2), the pairing of the two stones may be of no archaeological significance.

That some of these Iron Age stones may originally have been associated with some form of contemporary burial ceremony is suggested by the recent discoveries at Raffin in Co. Meath, where a squat and undecorated boulder overlay the burial of the front part of a human skull, apparently buried after having been ritually exposed. The skull was buried 40 cm below the surface, on a bed of charcoal and in association with an animal's pelvis and rib-bone. Sufficient material survived to produce a calibrated radiocarbon date of 100 B.C. - A.D. 130 (Newman 1993a). Raffin is a multi-period site but this burial is linked by the excavator to a hut-circle, with a C<sub>14</sub> date of 30 B.C.-A.D. 670 which was apparently surrounded by circles of free-standing posts (Newman 1993b). At an

earlier stage in the Bronze Age, however, the site was apparently a ceremonial centre similar to those identified at Emain Macha and Rathgall, Co. Wicklow and, as a consequence, the excavator sees both Bronze Age and Iron Age material in conjunction, indicating a role for Raffin as a local version of the larger ceremonial centres (Newman 1993a; Swift 1997, 14-18). Thus, there is some reason for seeing some Iron Age standing stones, particularly the undecorated type, as being associated with ceremonial centres and possibly having royal connotations. Of the decorated type, that at Mullaghmast was also found close to a site which was royal in the seventh century A.D. while the Turoe stone, prior to the 1850s, apparently stood about 100m west of a settlement site on the summit of the low hill of Feerwore, Co. Galway (Raftery 1944).

There is, of course, the possibility that Bronze Age type burial markers occasionally continued into the Iron Age in some areas. Given the proportionately small number of standing stones excavated to date (Medlycott 1989, 55-65) and the current assumptions about cultural continuity in many areas from the late Bronze Age into the Iron Age (Cooney & Grogan 1994, 173-84), an unknown number of unexcavated sites may represent Iron Age burials similar to those identified in the Bronze Age. Without further excavation, however, this remains idle speculation and the fact remains that, of the forty-one stones which have produced dating evidence, none have produced diagnostic Iron Age finds (Medlycott 1989, 61). Furthermore, such evidence as we have for Iron Age burial appears to suggest that burial under mounds, occasionally within embanked earthen enclosures, may be the more common ritual at this date (Raftery 1994, 189).

One of the problems with this type of investigation is that the erection of unworked orthostats appears too common a practice to be clearly diagnostic of any specific era or culture. Cooney has pointed to the role of standing stones in socialising the landscape of Australia and the Canadian Arctic (Cooney 1996) while Thomas has recently sought to illuminate insular traditions through the theories of Mircea Eliade; he sees standing stones as having significance for all humans and interprets them as "permanent modalities of existence which transcend individual life-spans and symbolize ascension to another sphere of existence" (as paraphrased in Thomas 1994, 11-14). A search for specific European parallels for Irish standing stones is, therefore, unlikely to be productive but given the traditional association of the Irish Iron Age with La Tène



cultures on the Continent (see above, pages 11-12), it is worth noting that Iron Age stone monoliths are also known elsewhere in Europe.

Since the days of Déchelette at the beginning of this century, various writers have postulated the existence of Breton parallels for the Turoe stone. The parallel most often cited is the decorated stone from Kemaria which is thought to date to the fourth century B.C., but there are over six hundred stones attributed to this period from Brittany and it may be significant that the two major groupings are low squat examples on the one hand and tall pillars on the other (Waddell 1982, 21). A dressed pillar on Cape Clear, Co. Cork, with crosses inscribed on three sides, has recently been identified as a possible Christianised version of these Breton stones (O'Leary & Shee-Twohig 1993). At the present time, however, the cult of paired stones, such as is well represented in Ireland, has not been found in either Brittany or, apparently, Great Britain (Ó Nualláin 1988, 198-200).

In the region east of the Rhine, in Baden-Württemberg, are sites such as Rottemburg am Neckar, where there are Iron Age anthropomorphic stones, carved with crude representations of the human figure and associated with circular grave mounds (Reim 1988, 28-31). These can occur, as at Rottemburg, in a necropolis which continued in use from the Hallstatt into the middle La Tène periods (approximately 800-700 B.C. to 300-200 B.C.). The mounds with which they are associated are cremation burials (although inhumations occur in the same cemetery) and in one instance, on mound 7, the pillar was found in secondary position.

In the area around the mouth of the Rhône, there are a number of pillars inscribed in Greek letters with the name of the deceased and that of his father (the patronymic). These individuals appear from their names to have been Gaulish Celts (Lejeune 1985). A number of these have been found in association with cremation burials (*ibid.*, 85-97, 118). In the Narbonnaise, they are dated from the second century B.C. to the first century A.D. while further north they appear to begin slightly later, dating from the first century B.C. to the first century A.D. (*ibid.*, 3). There are also similar pillars, which seem from their inscriptions to have been votive offerings to gods (*ibid.*, 52-6). At some point during the first century A.D., a switch to the use of the Latin alphabet for inscriptions occurred; these stones are located further north again, in the centre and west of France for the most part (Lejeune 1988, 57-181). Like their counterparts in Greek, these inscriptions are both epitaphs and dedications; the last in the series, from Plumergat in the Morbihan (Brittany), may date to the fifth

century A.D. and appears to be dedicated to the fathers of the boundary (*ibid.*, 179-81).

This last monument shows possible Roman influence. In his book, *Understanding Roman inscriptions*, Laurence Keppie drew attention to the inscribed pillars which could mark the boundaries between one town and the next as well as the terminal stones known as *cippi* or *termini* which were used to mark the internal grid system of a town's *territorium* or district (Keppie 1991, 59). In the first century A.D., the poet Ovid tells of the festivities dedicated to the god Terminus, (whose name means "Boundary"), which took place on the twenty-third of February. Siculus Flaccus tells of a ritual in which the blood and ashes of a sacrificial animal, together with offerings from the fruits of the earth were placed in a pit at the corner of adjoining fields and a stone or stump was placed above it (cited in Scullard 1981, 79-80). Flaccus also mentions the possible confusion which could arise if a grave stone was erected too close to the edges of the town grid (cited in Keppie 1991, 100). Henig has pointed to a possible British example of such a *terminus* monument (Henig 1982, 214). The stone in question is now lost but it is said to have stood beside the road to Caerleon with an inscription, recorded in the eighteenth century, which read simply: "Termin" (Collingwood and Wright 1965, 325).<sup>15</sup>

Thomas has long argued that one of the factors which probably led to the development of the ogam memorial stone tradition was the existence in Britain of Roman memorial stones (Thomas 1971, 96-7). These were vertical stones, two or four-sided, erected above burials and taller than their width with flat, rounded or gabled tops. They were occasionally inscribed, most often with the name, parentage, voting group (if a Roman citizen), career and distinctions of the commemorand and the name(s) of the individuals erecting the stone. The name of the deceased could be in the nominative case, so that deceased was the subject of the sentence; in the dative case, indicating a dedication to the deceased or in the genitive, implying the grave or monument of the deceased. Often the monuments are ornamented; occasionally with ornate sculptured representations of the deceased, other times with simple incised motifs. Such stones occur throughout the Roman world but most often in the Rhineland and Danubian provinces and cross-fertilisation with the Gaulish stones already mentioned can be detected in the surviving corpus (Keppie 1991, 98-109;

<sup>15</sup> The only comparable stone which I have found to date is from Sardinia and reads "Terminus quintus Uddalhaddar Numisiarum" (Sotgiu 1961, 152-3).

Salway 1981, 699; Toynbee 1971, 246-252; Lejeune 1985 and 1988, *passim*.)

What distinguishes the Gaulish and Roman stones from their putative Irish counterparts is the fact that they bear written inscriptions and/or they have been described by contemporary authors in written texts. It is this and this alone which allows the investigator to move beyond the very broad categories of burial-marker or ritual monument to specify functions such as boundary stone or invocation of a deity. For the stones without such inscriptions, only the original archaeological context provides any guidance and in the vast majority of cases this is unknown, either because the site was never excavated or because the stone was moved at some point in the past. Moreover, of those monuments with inscriptions, the similarities in form indicate that it is only the texts themselves which will help to distinguish the various functions of the stones; in terms of the basic monument it is impossible to distinguish a Gaulish dedicatory stone from one used as a burial marker. Roman stones are more distinctive but since the current examination is devoted to possible Irish reflexes of Roman practice and there is no evidence that Roman sculptural fashions were absorbed by the Irish, this does not advance the enquiry.

When evaluating Thomas' suggestion that Roman memorial stones may have provided an impetus to the development of ogam stones, one should note the fact that, of the three clear examples of Roman burial in Ireland, at Stoneyford, Co. Kilkenny, Bray, Co. Wicklow and Lambay Island, Co. Dublin (Bateson 1973, 45, 68-70, 71-2; O'Brien 1990, 37-40), none appear to have been marked with any form of upstanding pillar. Consistent with the proposal, on the other hand, is the fact that burials marked by standing stones can be shown to have been a form of burial ritual around the middle of the first millenium A.D. in Ireland.

Chris Corlett has built on the work of Elizabeth O'Brien (1990, 1992) in his interpretation of the transition between pagan and Christian burial practices (1996). Like her, he stresses the folly of seeing the introduction of Christianity as marking an immediate and decisive break with the rituals of the past. Instead, he suggests that, as with every other transition period, change was probably slow and allowed time for native adaption of an intrusive theme. Among the various types of burial ritual known from this period, a recent excavation by Finbar McCormick at Kiltullagh (on the Mayo/Roscommon border) has produced a radiocarbon dated inhumation burial beneath a standing stone. The skeleton has been

dated at one standard deviation to between A.D. 418 to 442 and at two standard deviations, where there is a 95% probability, to between A.D. 406 and 532 (McCormick *et al.* 1995). Nearby inhumation burials, possibly marked with standing stones (Cribbin *et al.* 1994, 62) produced dates at two standard deviations between A.D. 70-420 and A.D. 262-600.

At Reask in Co. Kerry, the earliest phase of the site was a lintel cemetery, marked on its north-eastern corner by a pillar stone which Tom Fanning believed was in its original position. A radiocarbon date from a hearth believed to be contemporary with this cemetery was dated to A.D. 385 +/- 90. Finds from the cemetery, which included a sherd of Bii ware would seem to corroborate a foundation date prior to the mid sixth century while a blue bead, found directly above the cemetery may be as early as the first half of the first millennium A.D. (Fanning 1981, 79-86, 113-115, 121). An earlier excavation, by Ó Riordáin at Lough Gur in the 1940s, has produced a medieval cemetery of the "Early Christian period" within a Late Neolithic settlement site. Contemporary with this cemetery, as argued by Ó Riordáin's editors, Eoin Grogan and George Eogan (1987, 312, 323), was a standing stone. A site at Great Connell, Co. Kildare produced a stone with a possible cross carved upon it and associated with an unenclosed cemetery of early medieval date (Medlycott 1989, 61) while Kilgowan, Co. Kildare, produced a granite standing stone, again carved with a cross of unknown date, and associated with a number of extended inhumations without grave-goods (Keeley 1987-91). 31 sherds of medieval and post-medieval pottery was found on this site and the excavator took the burials to be either Iron Age or early medieval in date. In Dooney, Co. Donegal, a mound which had previously been used for settlement became a cemetery in its latest phase and a standing stone erected on the site was thought to belong to this period (Ó Riordáin & Rynne 1961). Finally, the famous pillar of Kilnasaggart in Co. Armagh, which records in Roman lettering the donation of land to St Peter, is said by its excavator to be linked to an enclosure of stone-built and dug graves (Hamlin 1982, 291). The inscription on this stone is thought to refer to a man whose death is recorded in the *Annals of the Four Masters* under the year 714.

A documentary reference to the use of pillars to mark burials is found in Tirechán's seventh-century account of the coming of Christianity to Ireland which identifies a stone as the grave marker of a druid who defied Patrick (Bieler 1979, 130-133). This is taken by Ludwig Bieler, editor of the text, to have been a monument erected at Tara but in fact both

Tírechán and Muirchú, who records another version of the same incident in his *Vita Patricii*, locate the event at *Fertae Fer Féic* (Bieler 1979, 86-91, 130-33)<sup>16</sup>. The word *fertae* apparently refers to a site of communal interment, used for people of high status and the scene of important legal and supernatural events (Swift 1996, 13-16). This incident, therefore, tells us of the use of at least one pillar in close association with such collective burial sites but has nothing to add (*pace* Bhreathnach 1995, 60) to our understanding of the appearance of Tara in the early middle ages.

In short, in addition to the Iron Age cult of both decorated and undecorated stones which appears to be focussed on ceremonial centres, there may have been a practice of erecting standing stones over inhumation burials in the middle of the first millenium A.D. As evidenced at Kiltullagh, this practice was represented by a monolith over each individual burial with a number of graves being grouped together. This development may have been influenced by the existence of stone burial markers in the cemeteries of Roman Britain. If so, this might explain why inhumation burials marked by stone pillars have only been identified in the immediate pre-Christian period in Ireland and not from the Iron Age as a whole. On the evidence to date, there is a gap between those Irish standing stones clearly associated with cremation burials in the Bronze Age and the mid-first millenium burials discussed here.

There is also a probable distinction to be drawn between monoliths associated with the stone rows and circles of roughly Bronze Age date and those decorated with Iron Age art or found on sites which were of royal significance in our earliest documentary sources. Our understanding of this distinction is obscured to some degree by the fact that such ceremonial centres were apparently the scene of earlier activity in the Bronze Age (Raftery 1994, 64-79; Cooney & Grogan 1994, 149-58, 185-193, 218-20) and there may also have been an Iron Age custom of erecting orthostats on Neolithic passage tombs. The pair of stones at Tara, for example - if accepted as an early pairing - look similar to Bronze Age examples elsewhere. It is suggested here that, despite this possible evidence for continuity at Tara, the decorated monoliths and the change in type of location-site, probably does indicate some distinction which should be

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<sup>16</sup> The suggestion that this event took place at Tara is based on an assumption to that effect by J.H. Todd (1864, 423 fn.3), which was subsequently followed without comment by Whitley Stokes (1887, II 307). There is no evidence to support the idea in the manuscript of the *Book of Armagh*.

drawn between Iron Age and Bronze Age cults involving free-standing monoliths.

A separate category of stone pillar is indicated in the evidence from Reask, Lough Gur and Kilnasaggart, which implies the use of a single monolith marking a whole cemetery of inhumation graves in Ireland. If one accepts the fourth-century radiocarbon date for Reask, this practice may have begun at a period preceding the accepted date for the arrival of Christianity in Ireland. The excavator identified the primary phase of occupation to a "broad fourth to seventh-century A.D. bracket" but, presumably because of the orthodox dating, concluded that "from the outset we are dealing with a Christian community of, say, the fifth to the seventh century A.D." (Fanning 1981, 155, 158). The pillar itself, being ornamented with an ornate cross, is definitely Christian (*ibid.*, 139-41) as is that at Kilnasaggart which also has a number of small crosses inscribed within circles and a long Latin cross (Hamlin 1982, 291). Ann Hamlin has suggested that a number of ogam stones which are found on Christian sites and which bear Christian symbolism may reflect the same practice as that found at Kilnasaggart or Reask (1982, 283-5).

There is at least one very good reason why a putatively pre-Christian cult of orthostats marking burials might have been modified in some areas after the introduction of Christianity. In the Old Testament, the use of stone boulders and pillars as burial and estate markers is recorded as having been a practice of the early Hebrews. In Genesis 35:19-20, for example, it is written:

and Rachel died and was buried in the way to Ephrath which is Bethlehem. And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave: that is the pillar of Rachel's grave unto this day.

In Genesis 28:18-22, another pillar is said to mark an estate:

Jacob rose early in the morning and he took the stone which he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called the name of that place Bethel but the name of the city was Luz at the first. Then Jacob made a vow saying "..... this stone, which I have set

up for a pillar will be God's house and of all that thou givest me I will give the tenth to thee".<sup>17</sup>

Finally, there is yet another episode in which such pillars are used as boundary markers (Gen 31: 42-52):

Jacob took a stone and set it up for a pillar. And Jacob said to his brethern: "Gather stones and they took stones and made a heap and they did eat there upon the heap. And Laban called it Jegar-saha-dutha but Jacob called it Galeed. And Laban said. "... behold this heap and behold this pillar, which I have cast betwixt me and thee. This pillar be witness that I will not pass over this heap to thee and that thou shalt not pass over this heap and pillar unto me for harm."

Thus Christian literature could be seen by the Irish as providing good though not exact parallels for an already existing native custom of erecting stone monoliths. The inscription on the Kilnasaggart stone makes specific reference to its role as an estate marker:

IN LOC SO TANIMMAIRNI TERNOHC MAC CERAN BIC ER  
CUL PETER APSTAL - "This place, Ternoc son of Ciaran the  
Little has bequeathed it under the protection of Peter the Apostle"  
(Macalister 1949b, 115)

Both Kilnasaggart and Reask are cemeteries and the decorated stone at Reask is thought by its excavator to have been originally located at the edge of the graves in a boundary position (Fanning 1981, 86,152). Both are also ornamented with crosses. A third stone, from Kilfountain, Co. Kerry, is inscribed with the eponym of the site, **FINTEN**, in Roman letters. This may indicate a dedicatory function (Macalister 1945, 180). In these three instances, it seems reasonable to argue that biblical prototypes did, in fact, modify Irish custom and it is possible, taking the Reask evidence at face value, that this modification took place at a very early date. Contemporaneously, however, the pillar stone(s) from Kiltullagh would indicate the existence of another practice, involving the erection of

<sup>17</sup> See also Genesis 31:13, 35:14.

one stone per inhumation grave which were apparently grouped together in cemeteries.

Interestingly, medieval Irish writers saw three roles for ogam stones, fulfilling the same three purposes that are indicated for stone pillars in the Bible: that is, as memorials for the dead, as boundary markers and as proclaiming the ownership of estates. In the documentary sources such memorial stones are linked to specific graves rather than to cemeteries; Damian McManus for example, cites among other evidence, the death-tale of Etarcomol mac Eda in Recension I of *Táin Bó Cúailgne* which concludes:

Then Etarcomol's grave was dug and his headstone (*lia*) was planted in the ground; his name was written in ogam and he was mourned (O'Rahilly 1976, 43, 163).

The grave, in this instance, is clearly associated with a pillar of its own. Another incident of similar import in the *Táin* is the fight with Gaile Dáne his twenty-seven sons and his nephew. They were killed by the ford of Áth Fir Diad and *rolátha a naí coirthi fichit and sin* - "their twenty-nine headstones were erected there" (*ibid.*, 78, 195). The text does not indicate whether the headstones were inscribed with ogam but it does suggest a cemetery, with each grave being individually marked.

In other words, saga texts depict ogam inscriptions on stone as referring on occasion to ancestral figures, buried beneath stone pillars. The archaeological evidence outlined here would appear to imply a connection between such descriptions and burials of approximately the fifth century A.D., as witnessed at Kiltullagh. Sites such as Drumlohan in Co. Waterford, Knockshanawee, Co. Cork or Coolmagort, Co. Kerry which have produced a number of ogam stones in close association, though not in their original position (Macalister 1945, 112-116 191-3, 267-277), also suggest that the parallel of Kiltullagh with one monolith per grave is of greater relevance than those of Reask or Kilnasaggart. This would also be indicated by the finds at Ballinrannig, Co. Kerry where a storm in the eighteenth century blew away an accumulation of sand and exposed seven ogam stones, a number of graves and fragments of bone (Cuppage 1986, 250-52). In the absence of a detailed discussion of the locations and historiography of much of the Irish ogam stone corpus, however, such suggestions remain mere speculation. The work of Fionnbarr Moore, who



is producing a detailed study of the archaeological context of Irish ogam stones, will provide a much-needed corrective to the current linguistically-orientated debate on ogam and is eagerly awaited.

In a collection of passages dealing with prescriptive rights in *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, the second of the methods by which lawful possession of land is secured is glossed as:

*.i. a forgell don tuaith conid lais; vel a forgell isinní bis isin thir, int oghum isin gollan* “i.e. that the community should testify that it is his, or the testimony in that which is in the land, the ogam in the pillar-stone” (Binchy 1978, 754.39-40; trans. in McManus 1991, 164).

Glosses to the law-tract *Gúbretha Caratniad* appear to imply that one of the inanimate things which overswear living witnesses is a boundary marked by a stone and this statement, in turn, is glossed with the phrase *int ogom isinn gollann* “the ogam in the stone” (Binchy 1978, 2199:8-10, 2143:21-2). Another glossator uses *int ogam isin gollan* to gloss the phrase *comcuimne da crich* “the mutual memory of two (adjoining) lands” (*ibid.*, 748.18-19). In the law-tract *Berrad Airechta* the answer to the question: “how is truth with regard to land ownership found in Irish law?” is answered *Inbat la comorbu cuimne, cen ogom i n-aílchib, cen accrus n-aithgnith, cen macu, cen ratha:... it e tiubaithsir fiadain*. (When heirs have memories, without ogam in stones, without recognised lot-casting, without *mac* and *ráth* sureties, it is witnesses who fix truth.)<sup>18</sup> (All of the above are cited in McManus 1991, 163-4).

Based on legal references to *tellach* (or the procedure for claiming disputed land), Thomas Charles-Edwards has argued that, in late pagan Ireland, graves were placed upon the boundaries of land units and marked with stones on which the name of the owner and his kindred was inscribed in ogam (Binchy 1978, 205.22 - 206.22, 210.12-35). In cases where inheritance of a particular piece of land was disputed, claimants would draw attention to their relationship to the deceased in a ceremony involving the symbolic crossing of the boundary over the grave-mound

<sup>18</sup> Robin Stacey suggests interpreting *Inbat* as the interrogative particle + *biat* and translates this passage as “Do heirs have memories without ogam on stones?” The sense in both cases appears the same: that the unsupported memories of heirs are legally worthless because of their vested interest and witnesses in the shape of ogam stones, lot-casting or sureties are required to establish the truth.

(1976; 1993b, 259-265). This model envisages cemeteries of graves, each with an ogam pillar, on the borders of estates but the difficulty for archaeologists, is the identification of possible pre-Christian boundaries. For what it is worth, one should note that the Kiltullagh graves are located on a present county boundary, between Roscommon and Mayo (Cribbin *et al.* 1994, 61). Fionnbarr Moore has also argued that the cairn and accompanying ogam stone at Gleensk, Co. Kerry, which lies across a modern parish boundary, may represent an early land division (in O'Sullivan and Sheehan 1996, 114, 238).

In the law texts, the emphasis appears to have been on the role of ogam stones as estate markers. This has coloured interpretations of prehistoric standing stones (see for example, Buckley 1991; Cuppage 1986, 37; Power *et al.*, 1992, 45, 124) but if the arguments put forward here are accepted, there is little reason to assume a connection between such descriptions and Bronze Age monoliths connected with stone rows or even Iron Age stones on ceremonial centres.<sup>19</sup> The description of ogam stones as markers of boundaries may refer to the location of cemeteries such as Kiltullagh, as argued by Charles-Edwards, or alternatively, it may represent the role which single ogam pillars were felt to fill after the widespread adoption of Christianity and consequent modification of the role of pillar stones, following biblical analogies. In any event, I would understand the legal references as being relevant to early medieval or, at the very most, late Iron Age contexts - I would be very dubious about the admissibility of this evidence in relation to early prehistoric orthostats.

The upshot of this enquiry has been to underline the extremely limited nature of the evidence currently at our disposal for the interpretation of Irish standing stones. At the same time, and paradoxically, such information as is available implies that standing stones were erected for a variety of purposes and that these purposes could change over time. It is important to reiterate that functions such as boundary marker or invocation to a deity can only be deduced at present through the written word, either inscribed on the stone itself or in texts which describe such monuments. It is possible, of course, that more detailed study of the actual form of standing stones may produce more specific archaeological categorisations but given that the majority of standing stones are unworked

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<sup>19</sup> One should note here Medlycott's observation that standing stones in pre-bog field systems of unknown date on the Dingle peninsula appear to be located within fields rather than on the boundaries (Medlycott 1989, 54; Cuppage 1986, 20-29).

boulders, this seems unlikely. At the same time, the potential exists that functions, which we can logically only ascribe to inscribed stones, to have also been filled by an unknown percentage of uninscribed stones. Any attempt to put forward a chronological model of change and development must, therefore, be treated solely as a theoretical model.

In recent years, theoretical archaeologists in Britain have grown accustomed to bandying about terms such as “processualist” and “post-processualist”. Put briefly, processual archaeology argues that a true picture of the past can be obtained provided we are rigorous enough in our methodology. Post-processualism is the opposite; proponents argue that our inherent biases are such that all truth can only be relative and that every archaeologist picks the interpretation best suited to his own cultural background. As has recently been pointed out, this particular debate has been treated with some scepticism in Ireland, where collection of data, rather than theoretical speculation, has been seen as the greater priority (Cooney 1993; Johnston 1994).

In view of the tiny amount of data at their disposal, it is not surprising that historians of the early centuries A.D. in these islands have long been sceptical about the possibilities of achieving a full picture of the past. In 1968 John Morris quoted J.B.S. Haldane’s dictum: “ a fact is a theory in which no one has made a large hole for a long time” and concurred with Ludwig Bieler’s remark:

According to a widely accepted view it is the historian’s task to find out what actually happened. This I believe is impossible. The historian cannot do more than collect, assess and interpret evidence (Morris 1968, 73, quoting Bieler 1967, 2).

The same theoretical problem - the difficulties involved in establishing a methodology which might allow us insight into past societies - can be seen in the active debate currently taking place amongst students of early Irish literature on the subject of nativism versus anti-nativism. The most detailed exposition of the anti-nativist view has been that of Kim McCone who suggests that the majority of scholars in this field (whom he, following James Carney, dubs nativist) have stressed the conservatism of Irish tradition and its fundamentally oral transmission at the expense of Christian and literate elements visible in the texts. This is seen as the

almost inevitable outcome of the Indo-European background to the development of research into early Irish literature. McCone criticises this approach on a number of grounds. He cites ethnographic studies which imply that, where material is passed down by word of mouth, changes are gradually introduced in order to make the information intelligible to the audience of the day. He suggests that the evidence of the texts themselves indicate that early Irish clerics, whom all recognise as the men responsible for the form in which vernacular manuscript material exists today, were antipathetic to pagan beliefs. He criticizes the notion that Irish society was archaic and conservative until the arrival of the Norsemen and that political manoeuvrings were highly ritualised and largely bloodless. He points to the activities of Irish missionary saints during this period, arguing that the vigour and energy displayed by these men is difficult to reconcile with the notions of static conservation of a pre-Christian past and he concludes by making a plea for more attention to be devoted to the structure, content and context of extant texts rather than to their putative origins and sources (McCone 1990, 2-28; for last point see Wormald 1986).

From a personal standpoint, the twin notions that texts are primarily important for the period in which they are written and that society is rarely if ever static are both attractive. On the other hand, as Tomás Ó Cathasaigh has recently emphasised (1996, 62-3), the stress which some anti-nativists place on the Christian context of the surviving texts has tended to minimise the discussion of possible pre-Christian elements in their writings (for an extreme example of this tendency, see Ó Corráin 1985). The potential for examining these does, however, exist; if not through comparative study of texts, than certainly in the material culture of the age preceding the advent of documentation.

This thumb-nail sketch of current debates about theoretical approaches to early Ireland is my pretext for the launching of a processualist and post-nativist theory on ogam stones. I would argue that the development of ogam memorial stones should not be seen as part of a seamless development from the standing stones of the Bronze Age, a cult which appears to have largely died out by the Iron Age. Instead, the practice of raising ogam pillar-stones may have had its roots in the use of monoliths at pre-Christian Iron Age ceremonial centres and possibly in an Iron Age custom of erecting single orthostats on the sites of Neolithic passage tombs. At some time towards the middle of the first millennium A.D., single standing stones became associated more specifically with

inhumation burials, possibly because of an awareness of Romano-British memorial stones. Alternatively, this development may have come about through contacts with the Continent, where apparently native Iron Age traditions from both Germanic and Celtic cultures had merged with those of the Roman empire.

With the introduction of Christianity to Ireland, the proponents of the new religion were able to incorporate the tradition of marking burials with stones into their belief-system because of the biblical parallels which they found in Genesis. The use of stones as boundary markers may have previously existed in indigenous tradition but our lack of contemporary textual evidence and the difficulties involved in identifying prehistoric boundaries have made this an impossible problem to resolve. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that cemeteries, with individual graves being marked by ogam stones, may have been located on the edges of estates and, in this sense, the stones with their associated graves would have formed a recognisable boundary. It is suggested here that, probably as a result of Christian influences, the tradition of erecting stones as burial markers was subsequently modified and a new practice arose of using single standing stones to mark cemeteries as a whole or as dedicatory stones for estates. On *a priori* grounds, it seems likely that these changes occurred at different stages in different parts of the country, probably with an unknown degree of overlap. On the basis of the, admittedly limited, archaeological evidence currently available, however, there seems little reason to see standing stones as markers for inhumation burials (rather than for cremations as in the Bronze Age) being used in Irish contexts long before the fifth century A.D.

This has obvious consequences for the theory put forward at the beginning of this century that the ogam stones represent the work of a learned class, determinedly pagan, openly antagonistic to Christianity and the Latin world and deliberately attempting to use an archaic mode of language in order to emphasise the antiquity of the memorials (MacNeill 1909, 1931; Macalister 1945, 1937, Ó Cróinín 1995, 33-6; see discussion in McManus 1991, 55-61). It is undoubtedly true that some ogam inscriptions were probably added to already existing standing stones - amongst other examples one might cite the enormous monoliths at Ballintermon or Dromlusk, both in Co. Kerry or the three-metre high pillar at Bridell in Pembrokeshire (Cuppge 1986, 44; O'Sullivan and Sheehan, 1996, 55; Nash-Williams 1950, 180). All three of these examples are so

much larger than the average ogam stone that a prehistoric origin seems likely. On the other hand, more recent research by linguists has pointed out that various language developments can be traced through the inscriptions - that instead of being static and archaic, the language used is remarkably fluid, mirroring changes which we find elsewhere and on the latest stones show increasing similarities with the type of Irish found in the earliest manuscript texts (McManus 1991, *passim* and further discussion below, in chapter 3). This has undermined a crucial plank in the "archaic" interpretation. The other major plank has traditionally been the descriptions of ogam in the Old Irish sagas. If, however, one accepts, as I have argued here, that the descriptions of ogam in medieval vernacular literature do not necessarily represent a pre-Christian reality, this second plank goes as well. The final point for the enthusiasts of the "archaic" school is that crosses are invariably added later to the stones but as both Macalister (1945, 143) and McManus (1991, 54) have pointed out, there are a small number of stones where the cross in fact predates the inscription. On the whole, it seems to me, the archaeological and historical evidence supports McManus's dictum on the language of the inscriptions, that "the cult of ogams did not survive into the Christian period, it began in it" (McManus 1991, 60). The linguistic evidence for this dictum is discussed in the next chapter.