CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Iveragh's mountain pilgrimages
Authors	Ó Carragáin, Tomás
Publication date	2009-07-01
Original Citation	Ó Carragáin, T. (2009) 'Iveragh's mountain pilgrimages' In: Crowley, J. and Sheehan, J. (eds)., The Iveragh Peninsula. A Cultural Atlas of the Ring of Kerry, Cork: Cork University Press, pp. 65-68.
Type of publication	Book chapter
Link to publisher's version	http://corkuniversitypress.com/The_Iveragh_Peninsula:_A_Cultural_Atlas_of_the_Ring_of_Kerry/254/
Rights	© 2009, The authors and contributors.
Download date	2026-11-02 23:34:02
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/443

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Iveragh's Mountain Pilgrimages

Tomás Ó Carragáin

Iveragh is famous for its mountains. In particular people come from around the world to climb Macgillycuddy's Reeks, Ireland's highest and most challenging peaks. In the past, however, it was two lesser mountains that attracted the majority of climbers on the peninsula: Drung Hill, near Kells, and Knocknadobar, near Cahersiveen. The high valleys of Macgillycuddy's Reeks, with their relatively poor soils, are not ideal for settlement and the massif formed such a formidable barrier that no important routeways pass through this part of the Iveragh peninsula. Consequently, for all its popularity among modern-day tourists, this was something of a cultural desert in the pre-modern period. By contrast, the dense distribution of archaeological monuments, such as megalithic tombs, rock art and ring-forts, around Knocknadobar and, to a lesser extent, Drung, indicate that substantial communities were clustered around these mountains for many centuries. Furthermore, the most important routeway to the west of the peninsula ran across the spur of Drung which, therefore, acted as a gateway to the territory beyond. These mountains loomed large in the

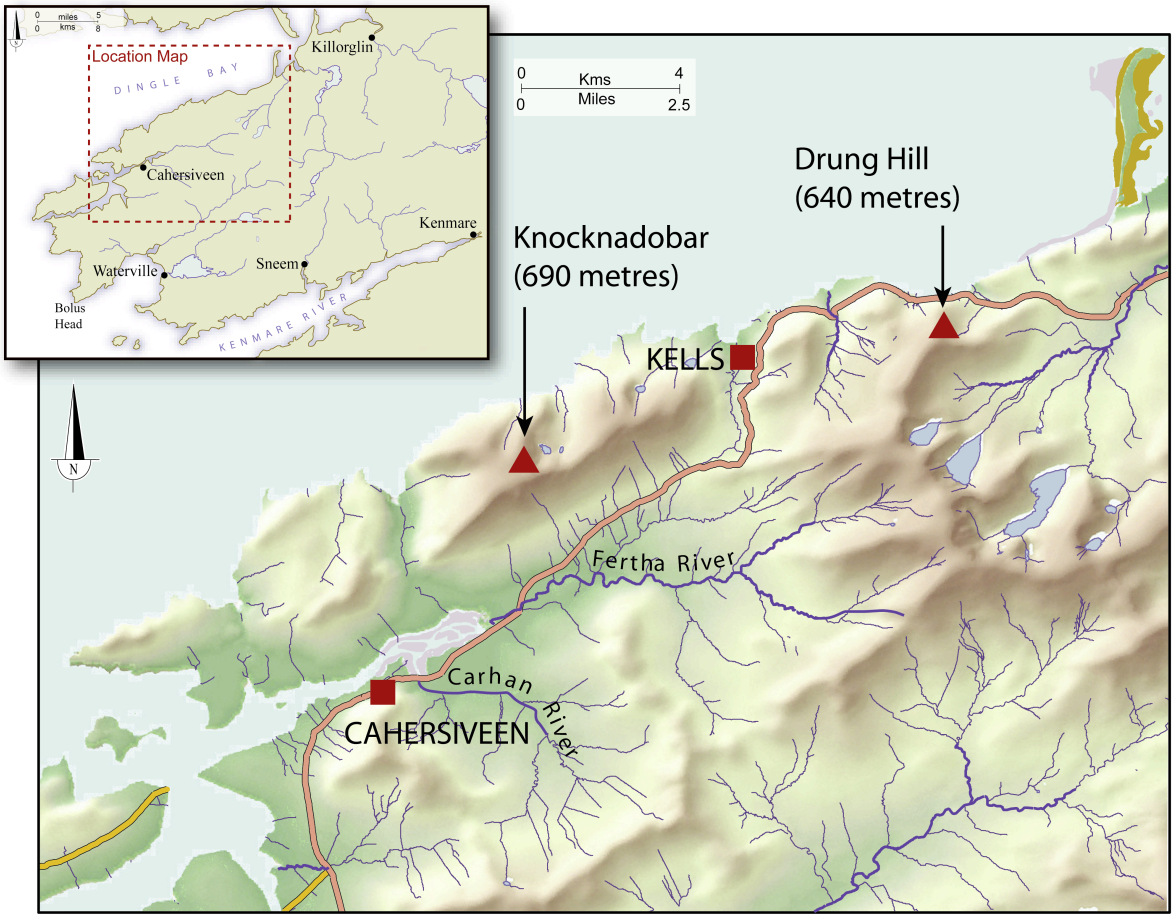


Fig. 1 Mountain pilgrimage sites in Iveragh.

imaginations of the early Iveragh communities and at some point they came to be identified as sacred.

Holy Mountains

The phenomenon of Holy Mountains is found in societies of various periods throughout the world. In many traditions they are believed to be points at which heaven and earth meet and are therefore places of revelation and, most notably in the Christian tradition, places where pilgrims could expiate their sins.[1] The possibility that Drung and Knocknadobar were foci for pilgrimage activity in prehistoric and Medieval times is supported by the presence of ritual monuments of various periods on their slopes and summits, more than on any other mountains on the peninsula.[2] But this is not to imply that the modern pilgrimages are pristine survivals from ancient times. They are not, as some have suggested, pagan rituals disguised with a thin veneer of Christianity. Rituals such as these are subject to change according to changing social circumstances. And yet, as we shall see, there is evidence to suggest some degree of continuity from the Medieval period at least.

Drung Hill

Drung is a steep 641 m high hill in the north of Iveragh, four kilometres east of Kells. The principal prehistoric monuments on it are two cairns. On top of its north-west spur, in Gleensk townland, is a large irregular cairn, over 2.5 m high. Some distance west-north-west of this is a much larger cairn, about thirty metres in diameter, known as Laghtfinnan. This commands panoramic views in all directions with Dingle Bay to the north and the valleys of the Fertha and Carhan rivers to the west.[3] Few mountain-top cairns of this sort have been excavated to modern standards, but what little comparative evidence there is suggests that Laghtfinnan could be a burial cairn of Bronze Age or even Neolithic origin. In this case the cairn remained a focus of ritual and possibly burial until at least the beginning of the Early Medieval period, for on top of it is a rectangular platform, or *leacht*, surmounted by an ogham stone. We are unlucky in that the least helpful part of the inscription is all that now survives: […] MAQI R[…]. All this tells us is that the name of the father of the person commemorated begins with 'R'. A small cross-in-circle motif hints that he may have been Christian, but equally this could be an addition to the monument.

Burial Monument and Boundary Marker

Like many ogham stones, and indeed like the cairn that underlies it, this may well have doubled as a burial monument and boundary marker. Drung marked the boundary between two early kingdoms and references in the early sources to Rí Druing (The King of Drung) indicate that it gave its name to one of them: probably the kingdom west of the hill. Boundary burials were an important way of staking claim to a territory and according to one early law tract 'the ogham on the stone is like a witness of ownership'. Burial grounds on boundaries



Fig. 2 The sacred mountain of Knocknadobar, near Cahersiveen. (Photo: John Crowley)



Fig. 3 The larger of the two cairns on Drung Hill, known as Laghtfinnan, may well be of prehistoric origin. However, it remained a focus of ritual until at least the beginning of the Early Medieval period, for on top of it is a rectangular platform, or *leacht*, surmounted by an ogham stone. (Photo: Paddy Bushe)

were often a focus for fairs or assemblies (*oenacha*) and in this regard it is interesting that the name 'Drung' comes from *drong*, meaning a gathering of people for a particular purpose. They were also commonly chosen as places of inauguration and it has been argued that the smaller of the two Drung cairns was where the Mac Carthaigh Mór was inaugurated by the Ó Súilleabháin Mór in 1600.[4]

Festival of Lughnasa

Beyond this tentative identification, we can say little for certain about the activities that took place at Drung in the Medieval period but it seems likely that, as in modern times, people gathered there at the end of July for the harvest festival of Lughnasa. The modern pilgrimage had died by about 1880 and we know of it only from accounts given to Pádraig Ó Fiannachta in 1942 by two elderly local farmers who had never taken part in it themselves. The activities they described are similar to those at other Lughnasa sites around the country. A cattle fair was held on the hillside, and on the summit there were games, singing and dancing contests. A specially prepared cake was cut by an engaged couple, or else by the best pair of dancers, a tradition unique to the Iveragh Lughnasa festivals. A meal was cooked and people stayed on the summit until midnight before continuing the festivities in houses and shebeens at the foot of the hill.[5]

The surviving accounts have a distinctly secular air to them. There is a holy well on the summit – Tobar Fhíonáin – and it is likely that it was a focus for devotions, but no details of the religious aspects of the pilgrimage survive. The tradition that St Fionán, Iveragh's most important saint, was buried in Laghtfinnan along with his dog may not be of great antiquity, for saints were invariably buried at their principal church and a *leacht* on Inis Uasal, in Lough Currane, near Waterville, is also identified as his grave. Nonetheless, the saint may have become associated with the mountain in the same way that St Brendan was associated with Mount Brandon by around 800. More evidence survives for the involvement of the church in the pilgrimage of Knocknadobar.

Knocknadobar

While Drung is the northernmost peak in a range of hills, Knocknadobar (673 m) rises independently between the sea to the north and the Fertha River to the south and is therefore a particularly prominent landmark. One cairn of uncertain date is situated on its western slopes and another, measuring over six metres in diameter and one metre high, occurs on its flat western summit.[6] This may be prehistoric in origin and has been carefully positioned to optimise the view of the Fertha valley below.

Two monuments of interest also occur closer to the foot



Fig. 4. The Early Medieval eucharistic motif on the cross-inscribed boulder at Ballydarrig, at the foot of Knocknadobar Mountain. (Photo: Tomás Ó Carragáin)

of the hill at the south-west. St Fursey's Well, sometimes known as Glaise Chumhra (Fragrant Stream), comprises a large pool lined by a low wall and fed by a natural stream. A slate slab inscribed with a simple cross lies at the bottom of the pool, while a modern cement cross stands nearby. Fursey was born in south Munster but there is no evidence to suggest he visited Iveragh before beginning his exile from Ireland in East Anglia and later in Gaul. However, his cult became established there at some stage and local tradition holds that water from Glaise Chumhra cured him of blindness.[7]

Outdoor Altar

Some distance east, in Ballydarrig townland, is a massive flat-topped boulder. Its upper surface is inscribed with an Early Medieval cross-in-circle motif. It is similar to that on the Drung ogham stone except for its triangular base and the fact that its lower left-hand quadrant is divided into two segments by a diagonal line. These details suggest that this was an outdoor altar at which masses were sometimes celebrated, possibly coinciding with the pilgrimage. The eighth-century Irish Stowe Missal specifies that when breaking the host a priest must first remove a segment from its lower left-hand quadrant in order to recall the wounding of Christ's side with a lance on Calvary. On an early cross at Nigg, in Scotland, the host is shown above a chalice with a triangular base and with this segment removed. The Ballydarrig design is a rare parallel for this Insular eucharistic motif.[8] It is surrounded by four little crosslets of a sort one normally finds at the corners of altar tops. This altar may mark the beginning of an alternative or earlier route to the summit. On the other hand it may have been an initial stopping point for medieval pilgrims who had crossed the Fertha River south of Ballydarrig, for an old roadway ran westwards from Ballydarrig in the direction of St Fursey's Well.

Like the Drung pilgrimage, that to Knocknadobar took place on the last Sunday of July and involved games, singing and dancing and the choice of a young couple to cut a specially-prepared cake.[9] But while the Drung pilgrimage had died out by the late nineteenth century, this one was revived in 1885 by Canon Brosnan, parish priest of Cahersiveen, who erected the Stations of the Cross on the route from Fursey's Well to the summit. These were refurbished by An Fórsa Cosanta Áitiúil in the 1950s and they still mark what remains the most popular route to the summit.