

By Séamus Ó hUiltacháin

About three kilometres south of Blacklion and north-west of Cuilcagh Mountain lies a remarkable limestone plateau at an altitude of between seven hundred and nine hundred feet, which is now beginning to be recognized as one of the finest relict landscapes of its size in all of Ireland. A relict landscape is a landscape which has survived relatively intact from the past, whose features (whether natural or man-made) have been fossilized in time.

The limestone bedrock of this area was formed in a shallow tropical sea 335 to 350 million years ago during the Carboniferous Period.

The Gaelic word "Boireann" means a stony place. During the last Ice Age huge blocks of sandstone were deposited by glaciers on the limestone bedrock. These "Glacial Erratics" can now be seen sitting on pedestals of limestone which they have protected from erosion over the millennia. The Ice Age changed the landscape and drainage patterns, gouging out valleys but leaving the more resistant Burren area high and dry. Remnants of the pre-glacial landscape can still be seen in a now dry river bed and relict sinks.

Probably about 4,500 B.C. at the beginning of the Neolithic period (Late Stone Age) the first farmers began to clear the native woodland of the Cavan Burren, which would have been predominantly hazel (though also containing yew and juniper). The climate was then warmer and there would have been a greater soil covering than there is today. The habitation sites of these people, their field walls, as well as their funereal monuments (megalithic tombs) have survived over the millennia, forming an integrated prehistoric landscape. The sandstone of the glacial deposits was invariably the building material for home, field wall and the more rudimentary "boulder" graves. The stone for the more spectacular megalithic tombs (and Burren contains fine examples of three different types) would appear to have been quarried and transported a distance.

The Cavan Burren, like the Burren in County Clare is a karst (eroded limestone) landscape. Limestone pavement with clints and grykes appears on the surface, while water sinks forming caves and fissures. The plateau is a watershed between the Shannon and the Erne systems – water sinking to the north flows into Lough MacNea and the Erne – while that which sinks to

the south re-emerges at the Shannon Pot. A thin semi-impermeable igneous intrusion of dolerite runs through the limestone bedrock, acting as a barrier to the subterranean aquifers. Glacial hills and small areas of peat bog complement this karst landscape. The area is rich in ground flora while hazel, juniper and yew can still be found outside the coniferous forest.

The present Burren Forest was planted in the mid 1950s, when the last farmers left, bringing to an end a tradition and way of life that had survived for 6,500 years. At the time of planting little thought was given to the built heritage of the area. Sitka spruce and lodgepole pine were planted right up to the megalithic tombs while nobody realized that the area also contained habitation sites and field walls which were perhaps five thousand years old. However, this forest, although totally different to the forest encountered by the neolithic farmers, may have helped to protect and preserve this unique landscape for this and future generations by ensuring that no "land improvement" took place over the past fifty years.

The first written references to the antiquities of Burren and the surrounding townlands (now referred to by geologists and archaeologists as the Cavan Burren) are to be found in W.F. Wakeman's Guide to Lough Erne 1877. Wakeman said of the Burren graves that they were "one of the most remarkable groups of "Celtic" Antiquities remaining". Of the wedge tomb sited at the Giant's Leap he said that it "covers the largest area and is the most perfect example of any "dolmen" in Ireland". He believed, however, that in prehistoric times the chief monument of the group would have been the larger still but now much ruined wedge tomb on Tullygobban (Tulaigh an Ghobáin) – the highest hill in Burren. He describes the portal tomb in the south-west of the townland, with its perfectly preserved cairn, as "a perfect New Grange in miniature". In all Wakeman lists eight megalithic monuments in Burren.

W.C. Borlase in Dolmens of Ireland 1897 is equally gracious in his evaluation of the Burren monuments. Stating that the Giant's Leap wedge tomb monument is "fully forty seven feet and tapering between eighteen and twelve feet wide", he then draws attention to another of its remarkable features : "On the roofing stone at the west end are thirty cup-hollows, some of them with concentric ridge rings surrounding a hollow centre, like miniature forts in stone".

In their submission to the Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland 1937 on "Megalithic Monuments in the Parish of Killinagh, Co. Cavan," Dorothy Lowry-Corry and Phyllis Richardson spoke of a "very important group of sepulchral monuments which has its centre in the townland of Burren". Their more famous friend and contemporary E. Estyn Evans stated in his Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland: "A notable group of megaliths occupies the barren mountain-limestone country in and around the townland of Burren – at least a dozen sites". He continued: "The group is unusual in the variety of its tombs: Wedges, court graves, portal

graves and round cairns of various kinds ... There are two or three round cairns, which appear to have large unroofed chambers, oval or round in plan, reminiscent of Sess Kilgreen, in Co. Tyrone and of passage grave tradition ."

Its geographical location, plus the political situation in Northern Ireland probably contributed to a general lack of knowledge and appreciation of the Burren archaeological sites during the final third of the twentieth century. During this time also the maturing coniferous forest made access to the monuments extremely difficult, hiding from the general public this wonderful repository of human and natural history.

While the importance of the Burren area in terms of its funerary monuments has been recognized from the late nineteenth century, and the nearby cashels (stone forts) and sweathouses of Moneygashel and Legeelan were described by S.F. Milligan as far back as 1889 and 1891 , it is only in the last decade that the full significance of this landscape has begun to emerge. A fortuitous discovery of the remains of another megalithic tomb under a thin layer of peat followed by the discovery of a promontory fort, plus anecdotal evidence by a local farmer of a pre-bog field wall found while cutting turf some fifty years previously, convinced the author and Gaby Burns that the full story had not yet been told, and fearing what might happen in large-scale felling operations of trees they began a systematic and painstaking survey in what was then dense forest. Gradually a picture of a complete prehistoric world began to emerge – habitation sites, field walls, standing stones, a small stone circle and rock art complementing the megalithic tombs. Although no excavation has yet taken place to definitively date the hut sites and associated field walls they are most likely Neolithic / Bronze Age, while it is generally agreed that the cup and ring marks of rock art belong to the same period.

One of the first things that we noticed while carrying out this survey was that a great number of the sandstone glacial erratics had been split and incorporated into field walls. An examination of both sections of the split boulder invariably revealed a protected pedestal of limestone of different heights under both sections. By measuring the pedestal height under the tossed off section and considering it as a fraction of the adjacent pedestal we concluded that these boulders had been split thousands of years ago. That we were dealing with prehistoric field systems was confirmed by the discovery of rock art on a split boulder which was part of a relict field wall on a limestone outcrop in the adjacent Marlbank area of Fermanagh some time later.

The prehistoric field patterns bear little resemblance in terms of shape to modern nineteenth century fields. These latter day rectangular fields were shaped and laid out on the instructions and direction of landlords. The ancient fields grew organically and naturally from a central circular area (the original clearing in the virgin forest) gradually covering large areas of the surrounding landscape. Over thirty kilometres of previously unrecorded farm walls have now been recorded in the Cavan Burren area and across the Marlbanks. Unlike the Céide Fields in Mayo over ninety percent of the Burren – Marlbanks fields survive above ground level although their antiquity is again proven by the fact that some disappear into bog. A lot of them survive as what archaeologist Carlton Jones calls "tumble walls". Others can be traced as ridges across the karst landscape – ridges protected from erosion by a wall which has now gone, having been recycled into an adjacent nineteenth century wall. In Burren Forest there are two very interesting nineteenth century shelter walls. These were built to provide shelter for outlying cattle over the winter. The walls are built on the base of ancient sandstone walls while the upper courses are of limestone. The limestone only became available through erosion in relatively recent times while the sandstone (locally called "freestone") has been utilized since prehistoric times.

That such a variety of tombs exist in Burren and surrounding townlands would suggest settlement in this area over a prolonged period in prehistory. Portal tombs are now generally dated to the period 3500 B.C. – 4000 B.C; court tombs to circa 3000 B.C; while wedge tombs were built in the Final Neolithic / early Bronze Age. An unusual feature of one of the portal tombs in Burren is that it survives in an almost intact round cairn. (This is the tomb Wakeman called a "perfect Newgrange in miniature"). Another larger dolmen (the "Calf House") was converted into an animal shelter in the late nineteenth century but is still hugely impressive – not least for its beautifully sculpted transverse portal stones.

The wedge tomb at the Giant's Leap is perhaps the finest of its kind in Ireland. In addition to these recognized tombs there are a number of modified glacial erratics which may well be "prototype" graves. One of these, now classified as a tomb has a chamber carved from the limestone pedestal underneath. Recently discovered cup and ring marks under a thin layer of peat on the overlying glacial erratic plus two adjacent "framing" pillar stones and further evidence of rock art nearby has confirmed it as a grave. This whole complex faces north-east, into the rising sun on the summer solstice. The Giant's Leap wedge tomb and Tullygobban Hill wedge tomb both face south-west, into the setting sun on the winter solstice. Immediately outside the forest in the townland of Legolough and adjacent to each other are a court tomb, a wedge tomb and a round cairn. The Legolough tombs command magnificent views of surrounding lake and mountain, as did the Burren tombs prior to afforestation and when the forest was young. These views are commented on by Ruaidhri de Valera and SeanÓ Nualláin

in their Survey of the Megalithic Tombs of Ireland.

Thirty seven hut sites have been discovered in the Burren Forest while a total of approximately one hundred and fifty hut or house sites have been discovered during the course of our wider survey in the Burren – Marlbank area. The huts usually survive as single small circular or oval footings of stone. However there is one site consisting of five contiguous rings of stone. We named this the "Taj Mahal". It is located approximately fifty metres from a large circular enclosure, also containing hut sites, which may well be the original clearing in the prehistoric forest. Beside this multiple hut complex is a probable prototype tomb with a "causeway" running back from it to the circular enclosure. Many of the Burren huts would appear to have been built of stone up to roof level. A possible extant Neolithic hut survives to a height of over two metres immediately south of Burren in Manragh townland. There are other hut sites, relict field walls and a well nearby, with glacial erratics and dwarf juniper scattered across the karst landscape. Larger sub-rectangular hut sites survive in a probable Neolithic field system in nearby Duckfield townland. A porcellanite Neolithic axe head was discovered here in a relict field wall in 2003, about two hundred metres from a wedge tomb. It is now in the Cavan County Museum, on display in the axe head case in the boatroom. Some of the hut or house sites would appear to have hearth stones. A number of the house sites in the Marlbank area would appear to be mediaeval rather than prehistoric. These usually contain two rooms and apart from the stone footings may have been constructed of timber and daub. In some cases extensive areas of relict cultivation ridges are clearly visible nearby.

Burren is in every respect a "relict" landscape. Its funereal monuments, habitation sites and fields survive from prehistoric times. Its glacial erratics survive from the last ice age while its dry valley and associated doline bear testimony to a pre-glacial river and sink. The fossils embedded in its limestone are the coral of a tropical sea of 350 million years ago. The area is a unique educational resource, showing not only the history of human settlement from the tombs of the early Neolithic settlers to the limekilns and animal shelters of the nineteenth century farmers but in addition to this the evolution of a landscape from its formation in a tropical sea south of the Equator, through the various ice ages to the present. It is a palimpsest of history with layer upon layer of both human and natural history visible on its karstic features.

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