



Millennium Dawn Mass at Grange Stone Circle.



Patricia, Tim and Tom Casey, Holycross.

GRANGE STONE CIRCLE (LÍOS NA GRAINSI)

By Tim Casey (and Family)

It is, indeed, a most welcome opportunity and honour for me to compile this article for the *Grange Book*. Some of what follows have been taken from *Voices from The Dawn – The Folklore of Ireland’s Ancient Monuments* (www.voices-fromthedawn.com) and *Lough Gur & District Historical Society Journals*. Several other sources are acknowledged throughout the article. Grange Stone Circle and other monuments have always been part of the lives of the Casey family going back for generations. Proximity to Grange Stone Circle and other monuments has guaranteed this. In reality, it would be difficult to live in this wider locality – steeped in history, folklore and archaeology, not to mention the magnificent Lough Gur – without being deeply touched by the wonder of it all. It is a privilege to live and farm in such a prestigious and colourful environment. I have always been interested in the history and archaeology of the wider Lough Gur area, which includes a number of parishes, and I am pleased that my family members share this interest, particularly my daughter, Annie, who involves herself in many facets, including the [Lough Gur Heritage Centre](#).

Being aware of the national and international importance of Grange Stone Circle, surrounded by my farm land, I took steps some years ago to protect the site, in so far as I could, by fencing off the monument so that it would not become damaged by farm animals. It gives me great pleasure to see the thousands of people from near and wide, many from overseas, who come to visit the monument increasingly and to gaze upon its splendour in jaw-dropping awe. I meet many of these visitors. I extend welcome, provide information and answer many of their questions, and I also refer some of them on to much more knowledgeable local sources, as appropriate, including, of course, the magnificent [Lough Gur Heritage Centre](#) and local archaeologist, [Michael Quinlan](#).

Stone Circle

Grange Stone Circle, 300 metres west of Lough Gur in County Limerick, Ireland, is [situated](#) beside the Limerick-Kilmallock road, four kilometres north of Bruff, within the parish of Grange. The site is now in the guardianship of the State.

An extensive pattern of ancient field boundaries occurs to the north-west of the Circle, at Ardaghlooda.

Composed of 113 standing stones, Grange Stone Circle, also known as Líos na Grainsi (*Note 1*), is the largest and finest in Ireland. It was thought to have been built circa 2200 BC, after the arrival of the Bronze Age people in Lough Gur. It was a ritual site akin to our churches of the present day and also served as an astronomical calendar. We can only speculate on the rituals that took place here, but know that they were of great importance to people from surrounding settlements. The Circle is aligned on the sunrise of the summer solstice when the sun shines directly in the centre of the Circle.

The Circle comprises a ring of continuous and contiguous (*Note 2*) uprights up to 2.8 metres high, with a diameter of 45 metres and backed by an earthen bank, 9 metres wide and about 1-2 metres tall, making it more like a henge (*Note 3*) monument than conventional stone circle. Twelve large orthostats (*Note 4*) have been placed at intervals around the stone ring, each standing directly opposite one of the other ‘axial’ stones. This embankment and the precise arrangement of orthostats suggest that this site had a ritual purpose. Some of the stones are very large and include both limestone and volcanic breccia. (*Note 5*)

“Crom Dubh”, the largest stone of the Líos – the 40 tonnes, 2.5 metre (8 feet) tall squared behemoth to the north of the entryway – has acquired the name *Rannach Crom Dubh* (the Staff of Black Crom). This stone, which extends a further five feet underground, is thought to have been dragged to the Líos from its source around 1.5 kilometres [a mile] away, demonstrating its importance in the construction. (*Note 6*) The entrance on the eastern side is paved and flanked by uprights. The entrance stones are matched by a pair of equally impressive slabs on the southwest side, whose tops slope down towards each other to form a V-shape. Clay has been packed down to a depth of 60 centimetres across the whole area of the enclosure.

At the exact centre of the Circle, the excavations discovered a post-hole 12.7 centimetres [5 inches] in diameter. According to archaeologist, Professor Ó Ríordáin – “Two suggestions have been made regarding the purpose of this posthole - that it carried a central wooden post, a sort of totem pole, connected with the ritual of the site and [alternatively] that it held the pole from which the builders marked out the Circle. The latter practical alternative appears to be the more likely.” (*Note 7*). The almost perfect shape of the Circle would suggest that it was measured from a reference point, such as a central stake.

Seán P Ó Ríordáin, UCC Archaeologist, excavated Grange Stone Circle in 1939. During the excavations, he found more than 4,000 sherds (*term used in archaeology*) of pottery, dating from the Early Neolithic to the Late Bronze Age, spanning a period of some 2,600 years. One beaker vessel was reassembled from its sherds. According to Professor Ó Ríordáin, the reconstructed vessel was the only one for which the completed profile is certain. The fragments were found

near Stone 12 (the northern entrance portal). The vessel is 21.2 centimetres [8.3 inches] in height and the diameter at the rim is 14.5 centimetres [5.7 inches]. Professor Ó Ríordáin had no doubts that the Grange Circle was “sacred and ritual in purpose”. He suggested that all the sherds of broken beakers might have been the result of a ritual involving the drinking of beer, followed by the deliberate breaking of the vessels on the stones of the Líos. In his novel, *The Sun Temple*, local author, historian and archaeologist, [Michael Quinlan](#), created a dramatic scene that culminated in just such a ritual.

Professor Ó Ríordáin deduced that the circle was ceremonial due to “negative evidence” – the absence of signs of habitation or burial. He suggests that the wide bank around the stones might have been “a stand where an audience could observe what was going on within”. (Note 8)

Professor Ó Ríordáin postulated that the Circle dated from the Late Neolithic Age. In the *Illustrated Guide to Lough Gur* by [MJ & C O’Kelly](#) – revised in 1981 (Note 9), referring to the excavations in 1939, it is stated that “Finds came in the main from the old ground surface in the area immediately inside the orthostats and from the boulder packing around the orthostats. Fragments of human bones were found in three places, but in no case was there evidence that they formed part of a formal burial. Neither was there any evidence of habitation. There were many flints – arrowheads, scrapers, blades, etc. Pottery included sherds of round-bottomed Neolithic bowls, sherds of coarse flat-bottomed bucket-shaped Neolithic pots, sherds of beaker ware and of food vessels, all sealed down by the layer of soil put in to level the interior and, therefore, all in contemporary use on the site.”

In general, the pottery suggests the Late Neolithic period as the likely time of building. Since the finds also included a bronze awl-fragment and a dagger sheath-mount in bronze, the excavator put forward the 18th century BC as the actual time of construction. Nowadays, so as to bring it into line with more recent developments due to the techniques of radiocarbon dating, a date centring on 2000 BC is regarded as more likely. Professor Ó Ríordáin pointed out, however, that “Stone circles are notoriously difficult to date accurately, due to the scarcity of datable finds.”

However, Archaeologist, Helen Roche, UCD, with the benefit of radiocarbon dating and a modern understanding of pottery timelines and excavation stratigraphy, explains – “The most recent pottery-type, found at a position which would have predated the monument – in this case beneath the bank on the old ground surface – was ‘Class II’ ware. This type, in the light of extensive comparative studies with securely dated material over the years, is now judged to be a Late Bronze Age coarse ware. Therefore the Circle, officially designated to have been constructed in the Neolithic Age, is actually a Late Bronze Age site.” (Note 10) (Note 11)

“The presence of earlier types of pottery on the site...[indicates that] the construc-

tion of the impressive Late Bronze Age enclosure was the result of an enduring tradition of a particular sacredness at this specific place... Grange was a site of great importance, most likely of a ritual nature, from possibly as far back as the Early Neolithic period”.

At the time of publication of this book, further analysis is awaited from Rose Cleary, Archaeologist, UCC, following excavations conducted by her in more recent times. In the meantime, Michael Quinlan, local archaeologist, holds the view that the Circle dates to 2500 BC.

The Summer Solstice Sunrise

On June 27th, 1998, the front page of the *Limerick Leader* described the extraordinary scene the previous Sunday morning, as landowner, Tim Casey [*me*], joined the crowd of about forty celebrants awaiting the summer solstice sunrise.

“Tim saw the famed beam of sunlight shining directly through an opening in the great stone circle of Lough Gur. It was a fairly rare occurrence for the sunrise to be unobstructed by clouds; those who had camped out all night in the Líos were richly rewarded. When we arrived for the solstice event the next summer, the skies were not quite so accommodating, as the beam of light had to contend with some clouds on the horizon. But, it was still a remarkable experience. Fire barrels were blazing to help ward off the biting cold. Some people danced to the constant drumming, their motion also a way of dealing with the cold. Fire-spinners and other modern necromancers helped to usher in the first light of dawn.”

“It was clear to this observer that each of the celebrants came to the Líos that cold night for their own reasons. Some decreed their devotion to the Celtic god of the harvest, burning candles on the altar set up before the looming Crom Dubh orthostat. Others were ever mindful of the celestial alignments of the stones, in particular, the imminent arrival of the solar rays onto the V-shaped axial stones opposite the entrance. One person was making circuits around the bank of the Líos, chanting softly while banging on a small drum. One group of women, mindful of the connection between Lough Gur and the enchantress Áine, greeted the sun goddess at the stone circle and then drove to Knock Áine, some 5 kilometres (3 miles) to the south-east, to dance to her spirit. What was shared by everyone that night was an amorphous but deeply felt connection to the spirits of the people who built the Líos and did their own dancing in this stone circle on a summer solstice, thousands of years ago.”
(Note 12).

Crom Dubh

Crom Dubh is thought to be the “stooped black man” who, in legend, first brought wheat into Ireland, bending under its weight. He was associated with harvest celebrations well into the nineteenth century. Crom Dubh remains a focus of the modern celebrants of the summer solstice sunrise to this day.



Paddy and Katherine Casey.

Crom was bent because he carried seed. He bore on his shoulder whatever had to be endured to ensure the continuance of life, and in this way he served the goddess Ériu (*Ireland*). He was dark because he had been under the earth to find the grain. (*Note 13*)

It was customary into the middle of the twentieth century to leave garlands of flowers on the pillar during the harvest festival (*Lughnasa*). (*Note 14*) Next to the

massive stone is a smaller stack of stones, said to represent Eithne, the Corn Child. She was the fairy mistress of the dark Crom Dubh, the god of the harvest.

The excavator of the Líos, Professor Ó Ríordáin, had his doubts regarding the authenticity of the Crom Dubh legends. He suspected that the name may have originated with a “hedge schoolmaster of the eighteenth century”, who knew of the legendary tales of St Patrick overcoming the pagan deity of Crom Cruach, and then applied the story to the stones of Lough Gur’s Líos. (Note 15) Maire MacNeill, however, points to *Rannach*, a word not found in modern Irish, as evidence that the name is unlikely to have been a late invention. (Note 16)

According to Tom McNamara (*deceased*), local historian and folklorist, there were other local stories regarding the stones of the Líos. There was a Mrs Webb, who claimed she was a person who could see back in the past. (Note 17) She said that the Circle was a place of sacrifice. She saw a young girl being dragged to the centre of that Circle, and there these priests, or whatever they were, with robes and all the rest of it. And she saw her being sacrificed, and dead... and she pointed the spot out to Professor Ó Ríordáin, who excavated the place. There were no revelations to support the story.

Other Grange Stone Circles

In the field just to the north of the Líos sits another circle, smaller in size and with some of its stones removed for road building many years ago. Archaeologists refer to this monument as Circle C (the Líos is Circle B). This circle (actually an oval), has a diameter of 17.4 metres (57 feet) and has a 1.5 metre (5 feet) orthostat for its tallest stone. The largest stone circle in the area, even larger than the Líos, no longer exists. It was designated as Circle D, and it stood in the same field as Circle C. Travellers in the eighteenth century, when writing about the great stone circle by Lough Gur, may have been referring to this lost circle, which was so large that there were cottages inside it. (Note 18) A local legend held that this circle was stolen by Merlin and brought over to England to create Stonehenge. (Note 19)

Conclusion

I hope that you have enjoyed this very brief account of history, archaeology, and folklore pertaining to Grange Stone Circle, as well as related activities of more recent times. If you have not already visited and pondered at Grange Stone Circle and the many more monuments and archaeological sites in the wider Grange/Lough Gur area, I hope that you will do so soon. Perhaps you will even encounter the enchantress, Áine!

The Dawning of the Third Millennium (By Joan O’Brien, Lower Grange)

As the sun broke over the eastern horizon on a cool, crisp winter’s morning, it was Saturday, 1st January 2000 AD, and history was made at Grange Stone Circle.

Here where for thousands of years, in the pre-Christian era, worship of a different nature took place, Mass was celebrated for the first time in living memory. This historic Mass to herald the dawning of the *Third Millennium* was concelebrated by James Canon Costello, PP and Fr Joseph Foley, CC, Bruff. To add to the aura and mystique of both location and occasion, one couldn't but marvel at the wonder of the sunrise, while a melodic "Dawn Chorus" echoed throughout the Circle. As if to salute the solemnity of the event, a lone swan circled in flight overhead. A large gathering of parishioners from Grange, Lough Gur, Bruff and Meanus was present, as well as many others from farther afield, all joining in the unique celebration.

After the ceremony, neighbours and strangers alike mingled and gathered in groups, discussing the wondrous occasion and event. When, eventually, the gathering dispersed, each person departed with solemn thoughts, most likely of a remarkable and unique experience, having been present at a location steeped in history, folklore and mythology when the sun rose and cast its rays on the Circle on the first morning of the new millennium, while also attending Mass there. In a short time, Grange Stone Circle was left in silence with its secrets.

Perhaps, on that historic morning, somebody present wondered if people had congregated at the Circle on the morning of the arrival of the second millennium. And if so, what did they say, do and hope for? And if when the fourth millennium dawns, will those who may attend at the Circle then be struck by the same awe and wonder at antiquity and Mother Nature, and will they disperse with their hopes for the future prominent in their minds, as did many on 1st January, 2000?

References and Notes:

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(1) *Líos* is Irish for an enclosure or fort.

(2) *Contiguous* – touching or placed edge to edge, rather than free-standing.

(3) The modern definition of a 'henge' is that of a circular or oval space surrounded by a bank with an internal ditch. It is a type of late Neolithic monument typically found in the south of England.

https://h2g2.com/edited_entry/A18188977

(4) An orthostat is a large stone set upright. The term is only used by archaeologists to describe individual prehistoric stones that constitute a part of larger structures. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Megalithic_architectural_elements

(5) *Breccia* is a rock composed of broken fragments of minerals or rock cemented together by a fine-grained matrix, which can be either similar to or different from the composition of the fragments.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breccia>

(6) Citation by *Voices from the Dawn* – <http://www.voicesfromthedawn.com/lough-gur/> – McNally, Kenneth. *Ireland's Ancient Stones: A Megalithic Heritage*. Belfast: Appletree, 2006. 65-66.

(7) Citation by *Voices from the Dawn* – <http://www.voicesfromthedawn.com/lough-gur/> – Ó Ríordáin, Seán P "Lough Gur Excavations: The Great Stone Circle (B) in Grange Townland." *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature* 54 (1951/1952): 42-44.

(8) Citation by *Voices from the Dawn* – <http://www.voicesfromthedawn.com/lough-gur/> – Ó Ríordáin, Seán P "Lough Gur Excavations: The Great Stone Circle (B) in Grange Townland." *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature* 54 (1951/1952): 73-74.

(9) *O'Kelly, M.J. & O'Kelly, C.* (1978). *Illustrated Guide to Lough Gur Co Limerick*. Blackrock (Ardnalee, Blackrock, Cork): Revised in 1981.

- (10) Late Bronze Age – circa 1000 BC - <http://irisharchaeology.ie/work/>
- (11) Citation by Voices from the Dawn – <http://www.voicesfromthedawn.com/lough-gur/>– Roche, Helen, “The Dating of the Embanked Stone Circle at Grange, Co Limerick.” *From Megaliths to Metal: Essays in Honour of George Eogan*, Ed John Bradley, Barry Raftery, John Coles, and Eoin Grogan. Oxford: Oxbow, 2004. 109-16.
- (12) Citation by Voices from the Dawn – <http://www.voicesfromthedawn.com/lough-gur/>– Feehily, Patricia. “Summer Solstice Wonder at Lough Gur Farm.” *The Limerick Leader* 27 June 1998: 1.
- (13) Citation by Voices from the Dawn – <http://www.voicesfromthedawn.com/lough-gur/>– Ó Ríordáin, Seán P “Lough Gur Excavations: The Great Stone Circle (B) in Grange Townland.” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature* 54 (1951/1952): 42. In another article Ó Ríordáin again warned about accepted JF Lynch’s folklore accounts at face value: “It is...difficult to differentiate between genuine local traditions and beliefs based on the writings of the late Rev JF Lynch.” (Ó Ríordáin, Seán P. “Medieval Dwellings at Caherguillamore, Co Limerick.” *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* Seventh 12.2 (1942): 37)
- (14) Citation by Voices from the Dawn - <http://www.voicesfromthedawn.com/lough-gur/>– Zucchelli, Christine. *Stones of Adoration Sacred Stones and Mystic Megaliths of Ireland*. Doughcloyne, Wilton, Cork: Collins, 2007. 76.
- (15) Citation by Voices from the Dawn – <http://www.voicesfromthedawn.com/lough-gur/>– Damery, Patricia. “The Horned God: A Personal Discovery of Cultural Myth.” *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal* 23.3 (2004): 18-19.
- (16) Citation by Voices from the Dawn – <http://www.voicesfromthedawn.com/lough-gur/>– MacNeill, Maire. *The Festival of Lughnasa*. London: Oxford University Press, 1962. 346+.
The author, along with Ó Ríordáin, warns “...we are forcibly reminded of the resemblance to the anecdote about a specific stone circle which... was the source of the medieval literary legends of Cenn Croich.”
- (17) Citation by Voices from the Dawn – <http://www.voicesfromthedawn.com/lough-gur/>– McNamara, Tom. “Grange Stone Circle.” Personal interview - 25 June 1979.
- (18) Citation by Voices from the Dawn - <http://www.voicesfromthedawn.com/lough-gur/> - Windle, Bertram C.A. “On Certain Megalithic Remains Immediately Surrounding Lough Gur, County Limerick.” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature* 30 (1912/1913): 293-94. The excavator of the Lough Gur monuments, Professor Ó Ríordáin, believes that early visitors had “Circle B” in mind “as the object of their admiration since it is likely that the cottages which stood in D in the early nineteenth century and the road which cut it in the west, already existed in the previous century to the detriment of the monument.” (Ó Ríordáin, Seán P. “Lough Gur Excavations: The Great Stone Circle (B) in Grange Townland.” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature* 54 (1951/1952): 37.)
- (19) Citation by Voices from the Dawn – <http://www.voicesfromthedawn.com/lough-gur/>– The destroyed circle was meant to be 52 m (171 ft.) in diameter with 72 stones, larger than the Líos without its wide bank. The most frequently noted legend about Stonehenge and Merlin has him relocating the stone circle from the Curragh of Kildare.