

# **Cillín “Dumhach na Leanbh”, An Teach Mór, Lochán Beag, Cill Ainnín, Maigh Chuilinn. (GA091-014)**

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## Background: The Death of Infants in the Ancient World

Extremely high infant mortality has been a factor in human life across the entire world until extremely recently and in many places right up to the present day. Modern estimates range from 20% to as high as 50% for the death rate of children younger than one year old in the Roman world. As a result, very young children were often treated as a separate category of human beings – not yet fully integrated into the community in either a social or ritual sense. In Europe, the earliest written accounts we have that deal with the issue are drawn from ancient Greek and Roman texts. Classical medicine did not believe that infants were born fully alive, one text describes the newborn as being closer to vegetable than animal until the fallopian tube fell off after several days and it was widely believed that the child was not fully awake or conscious for the first 40 days after birth.

Neither Greek nor Roman infants were treated as individuals until they received their name from the head of the household (usually the father) at a special ceremony about a week to 10 days after birth. In Sparta, new born boys were first inspected by their tribe's *Gerousia* (council elders) and those considered too sickly or weak were exposed for several years at the base of Mount Taygetus and only retrieved if they proved tough enough to survive. Similarly, in Athens, new born infants could be abandoned and exposed if their parents chose not to rear them. Greek babies were often buried separately from the wider community; their remains are frequently found interred in rubbish dumps or beneath the floors of dwelling houses rather than in cemeteries. In the 1930's the skeletons of around 450 babies were discovered interred inside a well in the Agora in Athens along with what appear to be the remains of sacrificed dogs. In Rome, the process of mourning and formal burial was tightly regulated. Adults and older children were usually cremated and their ashes interred in the family plot. It was ritually and legally forbidden to inter their remains within the walls of a city or settlement. Infants of less than 1 year old were not formally mourned although their loss was clearly often bitterly regretted in private. Babies who died before they reached 40 days were not cremated and their remains were not interred with those of the rest of the family but they were clearly not forgotten. Their unburnt remains could be buried within the walls of settlements and frequently found their last home under the family house; not quite members of the community but not abandoned either.

## Christianity and the Unbaptized

With the gradual adoption of Christianity across Europe, baptism took the place of older pagan religious or legal ceremonies and served to welcome infants into the Christian community. The Christian child received a name and was welcomed as both a child of God and a member of his earthly family. However, as in the older pagan world, infants who died before they received the sacrament remained outside the community of Christian believers, in the afterlife as in life.

In the late fourth and early fifth century St Augustine argued that the souls of the unbaptized were damned but by the twelfth century debates about their fate had resulted in a widespread belief that they went to a separate destination – limbo – where they did not suffer directly like the damned but did not rejoice in the light of God like the saved. In areas of France it was believed that unbaptized infants were vulnerable to being replaced by fairy changelings and across Europe the souls of unbaptized children were believed to appear in the form of moths, floating lights or “willow-the-wisps” – often seeking their souls or their names. In Italy, as late as 1681, it was reported by the Inquisition that the bodies of unbaptized infants were being brought, for a fee, to a particular statue of the Madonna in the Village of Trava, where, after many prayers, it would be claimed that the child had very briefly miraculously come back to life in time to be baptized so that they could avoid this fate. Until 1983 Canon Law forbade parents from burying their unbaptized children in consecrated ground.

## Children’s Burial Grounds in Ireland

In the Irish folk tradition, unbaptized children (*leanaí gan baisteadh*) are sent to *Dorchadas gan Phían* but may be redeemed on the day of judgement. The tradition is clearly a long established one in Ireland. The tenth century (c.950s-960s) *Betha Adamnáin* records that; “Once as Adamnán was going around a burial ground in Tory, he scrutinized and blessed the ground, saying: ‘The corpse of a pregnant woman is in the graveyard, a thing which is offensive to the saints. This place here is her grave. Open it and take her with you to the sea-shore.’” The children of women who died while pregnant were unbaptized and thus could not remain with the bones of the saints. The removal of the body to the shore matches the location of many children’s burial grounds including *Dumhach na Leanbh*.

When a baby died before baptism, it was usually wrapped in a white cloth or laid in a white box and then, usually after sunset or before sunrise, brought to be buried by its father or nearest male relative in an unconsecrated grave. The child was not waked, nor was there a formal funeral. No priest would be present but prayers were said, Robin Flower, witnessing such a burial in the 1940s, described the community following the coffin to the place of burial as they would have to a normal funeral. While it was forbidden to bury unbaptized children in conventional cemeteries, they were not buried in random locations. Unbaptized children were not yet full members of the Christian Community of the Saints but nor were they forgotten. As in ancient Rome, the local community found a place for its smallest members whom it could not bury in the usual way.

Abandoned churchyards or monastic sites which remained sacred but were no longer under the control of the official Church were often chosen and the northwest corner was favoured. This is reflected in the

place names *cill*, *cillín*, Killeen, *seanchill* and *Reiligi* (graveyards) as well as *teampaillín* (little church/temple, found in the south and west). In cases where older churches were not used, places associated with the fairies or the “good people” were popular; many children’s burial grounds are found within *liosanna* or *ráthanna*; perhaps in search of an older form of sacred space. Children might also be buried in “in-between” spaces such as under a boundary wall, in a ditch, on the shore, on a cliff face.

The bodies of strangers as well as victims of famine or plague were also often buried in these abandoned or border spaces. There are also isolated cases of burials beneath or alongside a lone bush or a holy well. In the folklore tradition, it was widely believed that disturbing these burials could bring supernatural harm, walking across the burial place of an unbaptised body could result in sudden hunger (*an féar gortach*) or becoming disoriented and lost “the stray sod” and accounts survive of the spirits of unbaptized children appearing as ghosts or bright lights; sometimes receiving the gift of resurrection and baptism from a priest or local Saint.

## Children’s Burial Grounds in Connemara

In Connemara, Children’s burial grounds follow most of the same patterns as those found elsewhere. The most westerly example is to be found on Cnoc Mór, Westquarter, Inishbofin within a long abandoned Early Church site associated with St. Scáithin.

*Droim Snámha* burial ground overlooking lough Corrib is associated with a holy well and local tradition claims that children were buried around the well during penal times; the last of whom was a young Protestant girl in the early 20th century. *Gabhán na Lí*, Mám, is c.250m NW of a ringfort. It is known locally as *Cillín* and the foundations of a rectangular stone structure can be seen within the burial ground.

The *Doire Bhéal an Mháma* burial ground is close to the pilgrimage route to *Mám Éan* and St Patrick’s Well and sits within a probable prehistoric enclosure. A burial ground in *An Chloch Bhreac Íochtair* north of Corr na Móna near Loch Measc sits within a ringfort. Many others such as those in *An Aill Bhreac* (‘*Guaire na bPaistide*’/‘*Reilig na bPaistide*’), *Camas Íochtair* – (*Aill na bPáistí*), *Ceannúir*, *An Ros Rua*, *Fínis* (‘Burial Ground for Children and Strangers’ - *Reilig Fhínse*), *Inis Treabhair* (*Reilig na bPáistí Marbha*) and *Leitir Geis Thoir* (‘Infant’s Burial Gd. – ‘*Ciabh Cillín*’) are either on or overlooking the coast.

Burial grounds are also found on or close to boundaries as at *Ceathrú an Lisín* (*Creig na Leanbh*) Inis Meain, *Doire Iorrais* (*An Chill Bheag/Reilig na bPáistí*) and a site known as Lisheen is to found close to a stream and the boundary between *na Doiriú Theas* and *An Chloch Mhór Thuaidh* in rough mountain land.

## Site Description

The Burial Ground known as *Dumhach na Leanbh* is located on a sliver of eroding machair dune on the seaward side of the enclosed land on the very edge of Galway Bay in the SW corner of Loughaun Beg townland and SE of the nearby settlement of Ballard, Ballintemore and Ballynew.

A coastal path edges the site on its northern side and reef of bedrock just into the sea on its southern side. Its location in this liminal zone sandwiched between land and sea is typical of the location of many such monuments throughout Connemara.

The site is crescentic in plan, measuring 31m east/west and is 10.75m at the widest point. It narrows to 1.70m at the western end. It is enclosed by a low kerb of cut granite stone about twenty cms high by thirty deep. There are no written accounts of the site and much of the site's history appears to have been lost or though it is probable that there is much about the sites history that could still be recovered from the older residents of the area.

It first appears in official records with the publication of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition OS maps in 1898 where it is simply marked as burial ground. Its outline is shown on the 25inch OS map of the area. It does not appear on earlier editions of the map though this does not mean that it was not in existence sixty years earlier.

The Burial Ground contains one very fine a concrete cross, 2.20m in height and set on a rectangular base 0.9m high its western face contains the inscription *Dumhach na Leanbh*. The cross is an important and highly visible local landmark and was erected here as part of an earlier effort at highlighting and conserving the site and its immediate surroundings. Winter storms have eroded away a small fragment of dunes on the south and south west side of the monument and covered many of the burials to a depth of twenty centimetres in sand.

The burials are indicated by as many as a dozen single headstones and these are concentrated at the eastern end of the burial ground in addition there are a small number of displaced recumbent grave slabs. The tallest of the single headstones stand 44cms high, 32cms wide and 10cms deep. A number of these at the eastern end of the site are arranged in a line and are in the usual fashion orientated East-West, with the taller headstone to the West.

Close to the path on the NE edge are the two obvious stone markers probably edging a child's grave. The stones are 67cms apart, the western stone 74cms in length, 20cms wide and 36cms high. The eastern stone is 63cms wide, 45cms high and 14cms wide. The small number of recumbent slabs on site, which were probably the covering slab of graves. They may have shifted somewhat from their original position; they measure 94cms long, 50cms wide and protrude 10cms above the ground.

The area of burial markers has been badly disturbed over the years and it is likely that many more burials were placed here without any formal grave markers. The centre and western end of the site has few obvious clear cut burial markers however; the few protruding stones in this area may indicate a presence of graves in this area also.

Despite earlier efforts to protect the site powerful storm surges in recent years have continued to cause damage to the site and its surroundings and this has necessitated the addition of another outer layer of rock armour on its seaward side. This was carried out in order to provide some medium term relief from the pounding seas. This rock armour is up to 3.40m wide and 1.40m high and is composed of local granite boulders. It is thickest on the south and south-west sides where the pressure from storm surges is at its worst.

## **Recommendations for Future Management**

We know little about the individuals who were buried in this Graveyard, as their history has not been recorded. An oral history project in the area might yet recover some details of their short lives and anyone else who might have ended up here.

The surface of the site is now very bare and exposed and it should be re-seeded with dune grasses or re-sodded. This would assist in the protection of any undisturbed burials on site and at the same time adding to its already considerable aesthetic appeal. The rock armour will ensure the protection from the immediate future but it's given its location long term future is in some doubt from rising sea levels. The recent winter storms have already damaged a newly surfaced track to the site on its eastern side.

The drone photography that we carried will provide an invaluable baseline for future monitoring of the site and the adjacent coastline.

No intrusive work should take place within the confines of the burial ground.

**A selection of the many recorded Killeens in Connemara and Aran from the Archaeological Inventory of County Galway.**

- 844 Aillebrack, west of Ballyconneely (*An Aill Bhreac*) – not marked – Close to seashore c.50m S of td Boundary. Known in 19<sup>th</sup> Century as '*Guaire na bPaistide*' or '*Reilig na bPaistide*'.
- 846 Ballynew, east of Cleggan (*An Baile Nua*) – Indicated 'Children's Burial Ground' – On N side of road close to foot of a hillslope. Known locally as *Poll na bPéist*. It is said that Famine Victims are buried here as well as children.
- 847 (*Béal an Daingin* – not marked – On a small hillock on seashore, to NW of the new graveyard. Known locally as *Cnocán na Leanbh*).
- 849 *Camas Íochtair* – not marked – On a small coastal promontory on inner reaches of *Cuan Chamais*. Known locally as *Aill na bPáistí*.
- 851 *Ceannúir*, Rosroe (*An Ros Rua*) – not marked – By seashore at head of *Cuan na Beirtrí Buí*.
- 853 *Ceathrú an Lisín*, Inis Meáin – not marked - In area of rock outcrop and scrub close to the boundary between subdivisions of *Baile an Lisín* and *Móinín na Ruaige, Inis Meáin*. Known locally as *Creig na Leanbh*.
- 857 *An Chloch Bhreac Láir* overlooking Lough Mask – indicated 'Children's Burial Ground' (*Cnocán na bPáiste*).
- 867 *Doirín na gCos Fuar*, possible enclosure to the east of Maam Cross (*Doire na gCos Fuar*) – Indicated 'Crukaunnapostha' (infant's burial ground) (*Cnocán na bPáiste*). – On an oval hillock in bogland NW of *Loch an Iarainn*. – There is a large limestone erratic at NW end of the hillock.
- 869 *Doire Iorraís* – not marked – On N – facing hillslope under alders, c.50m S of a stream which forms the townland boundary. Known locally as *An Chill Bheag* or *Reilig na bPáistí*.....One small wooden cross was also present.
- 870 *Doire Bhéal an Mháma* – not marked – On W facing hillslope c.150m NNW of td boundary and c.300m E of the junction of the *Bun na gCnoc* road and the trackway leading to Maumeen and St Patrick's Well. Close to the pilgrimage route and within a probable prehistoric enclosure.
- 873 *Droim Snámha*, near the Hill of Doon, Lough Corrib– not marked – Associated with a holy well (Tobar Fechín). According to local tradition, children were buried in the vicinity of the well during penal times. The last burial is reputed to have been that of a young Protestant girl in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- 876 *Foirnis* – not marked – On W side of road c.400m N of the bridge to *Leitir Mealláin*. Known locally as *Cloch na bPáistí*, it has been damaged by roadworks and is difficult to make out.

- 879 *Gabhlán na Lí, Mám.* Known locally as *Cillín*, foundations or a rectangular stone structure are set within an earlier sub-circular enclosure.
- 880 *Fínis* – indicated ‘Burial Ground for Children and Strangers’ – Just above HWM on W side of the island and immediately S of the old school. Known locally as *Reilig Fhínse*, records the tradition ‘that one of the first settlers here, a woman of the Mac Donnchas’, is buried there.
- 882 *Inis Treabhair* – not marked – In W part of the island c.90m from shore. Known locally as *Reilig na bPáistí Marbha*.....Not used for 35 years or more (1991).
- 886 *Cnoc an tSeanbhaile*, north of Moycullen – indicated ‘Lisheennalannov’ – On N side of a laneway in gently undulating farmland...Lisín na Leannaí
- 888 Lettergesh East (*Leitir Geis Thoir*) – indicated ‘Infant’s Burial Gd. – On a N-facing hillslope overlooking coast. Known locally as ‘*Ciabh Cillín*’, it consists.....including a roughly rectangular setting of stone just inside the bank at N.