

CHAPTER 2

The History of Croagh Patrick

What's in a Name?

Long before St Patrick's visit in 441, the Reek was known by its ancient name of Cruachán Aigli. The area around the mountain was known in Irish as 'Aigli'. The village of Murrisk was referred to as 'Muiresc Aigli' with 'Muiresc' meaning 'Sea Swamp'. 'Cruach' in English is a variant of 'rick' or reek, or stacked-up hill and refers to the cone-shaped mountain.

Some translators took 'Aigli' to mean 'Eagle'. On foot of this interpretation, the coat of arms for Westport town incorporates an eagle and, in the nineteenth century, part of the ridge extending eastwards from the peak or Reek was still called Mount Eagle.

The name Cruach Phádraig started to gain prominence over Cruachán Aigli from the tenth to the thirteenth century. In the sixteenth century when many Irish placenames were given an Anglicised version, Cruach Phádraig became widely known as Croagh Patrick.

*'And Patrick proceeded to Mons Aigli (Croagh Patrick),
intending to fast there for forty days and forty nights,
following the example of Moses, Elias, and Christ.'*

Book of Armagh

Ancient Rituals

For thousands of years this pyramidal mountain has been a sacred place. When Saint Patrick visited Ireland he would have found a highly organised Celtic tradition of four festival holidays in the year: Samhain (November 1), Imbolg (February 1), Beltaine (May 1) and Lughnasa (August 1).

Pagans celebrated the harvest with the festival of Lughnasa, held in honour of the god Lugh who was an ancient pagan god of the Tuatha Dé Danann, a divine Irish race, and whose name is now encompassed in the Irish for August (Lughnasa). (*Nasa* means games or an assembly). This festival took place throughout the country, often in high

places, such as Mount Brandon in County Kerry and Slieve Donard in County Down. Its tradition became absorbed into the new Christian beliefs. Locally the festival became known as Domhnach Chrom Dubh (Black Crom Sunday. Crom Dubh features in legend as a pagan god.), Garland Sunday, Garlic Sunday, the last Sunday of Summer, Domhnach na Cruaiche (Reek Sunday).

The ancient lore also recounts many stories about the defeat of paganism. St Patrick is credited with conquering many prominent pagan sites for Christianity and Croagh Patrick is one of the most important.

Cosmological Alignment

Croagh Patrick is also the centre of a number of cosmological alignments, which no doubt further enhanced the mountain's mythical and spiritual status in ancient times. The setting sun at certain important dates in

the year aligns with the mountain. Thousands of years later St Patrick converted the Irish people to worshipping the Son of God rather than the deity of the Sun.

Sacred Equinox Journey

In recent years Anthony Murphy and Richard Moore wrote a book titled, *Island of the Setting Sun: In Search of Ireland's Ancient Astronomers*. Their theory is that Croagh Patrick is part of an ancient cosmological alignment, stretching 135m (217km) from the Hill of Slane, in the east, to Croagh Patrick in the west, linking some of the most sacred sites associated with St Patrick. The

authors explore the idea that St Patrick followed a 'sacred equinox journey'. Using Google Earth, they found that the equinox line extends from Millmount, Drogheda, County Louth, to Slane and aligns west with Croagh Patrick. It includes the Cruachan Aí complex in Roscommon (home of legendary Queen Medb and inauguration and burial site of the ancient kings of



The winter solstice aligns with the standing stone row at Annagh every year on 21 December at 1.40pm.

Connacht) and follows the ancient pilgrim road of Tóchar Phádraig, which passes by the Rock of Boheh, mentioned below. They stated that ‘evidence is emerging that significant archaeological sites dating from

deep in prehistory are linked – not just through mythology, archaeology and cosmology – but through an arrangement of complex, and, in some cases, astonishing alignments.’



Rolling Sun

In 1987 Gerry Bracken discovered that while standing at the Rock of Boheh (St Patrick's Chair, National Monument), which is about 7km (just over 4m) from Croagh Patrick, that the setting sun, rather than disappear behind Croagh Patrick, actually rolls down the north slope of the mountain. This phenomenon lasts about twenty minutes and occurs on the 18 April and 24 August each year. These two dates, with 21 December, split the year into three equal parts and it is thought that they

were used to celebrate sowing and harvesting seasons. The spectacle of the rolling sun in prehistoric times probably merited the inscription on the Boheh rock outcrop, depicting many cup-and-ring marks, making it one of the finest examples of Neolithic rock art in Ireland and Britain. The Boheh Rock is on the pilgrim route Tóchar Phádraig and is also one of the sites on the Clew Bay Archaeological Trail, www.clewbaytrail.com.



The archaeological complex at Annagh, near Murrisk, includes a standing stone row within an enclosure.

Winter Solstice

Less than a kilometre from Croagh Patrick is the ancient ritual site of Annagh, Killadangan, which has a standing stone row at its centre. This stone row aligns with the setting sun at 1.40pm on 21 December each year. The sun sets into a notch on the east-ridge of Croagh Patrick. The Murrisk Development

Association organises a heritage and archaeology tour each year, which concludes with a visit to Annagh, to view the phenomenon of the sun alignment. On the same day as the rising sun is celebrated at Newgrange, the setting sun retires to its sacred celestial home at Croagh Patrick.

View of the summit from the west, showing the enclosure and the path leading to Lecanvey.



Inset: The archaeological excavation in 1995 exposed the enclosing wall, which is no longer visible.



Archaeology

All the archaeological evidence indicates that Croagh Patrick has been part of a huge ritual landscape for many years before St Patrick's sojourn on the mountain and the mountain's subsequent history and legends have further embellished its reputation as an ancient pilgrimage site.

As early as 1839 it was noted that on the northern slopes of Croagh Patrick one could see:

'a low wall, built of large, un-cemented stones evidently of the most ancient construction – a Cyclopean monument raised ages before the Roman Patrick ascended ... built by that ancient people that have erected their solemn monuments in every land ... the low wall which, I believe, has never been before noticed, a wall that has borne the Atlantic tempest of thousands of years.'

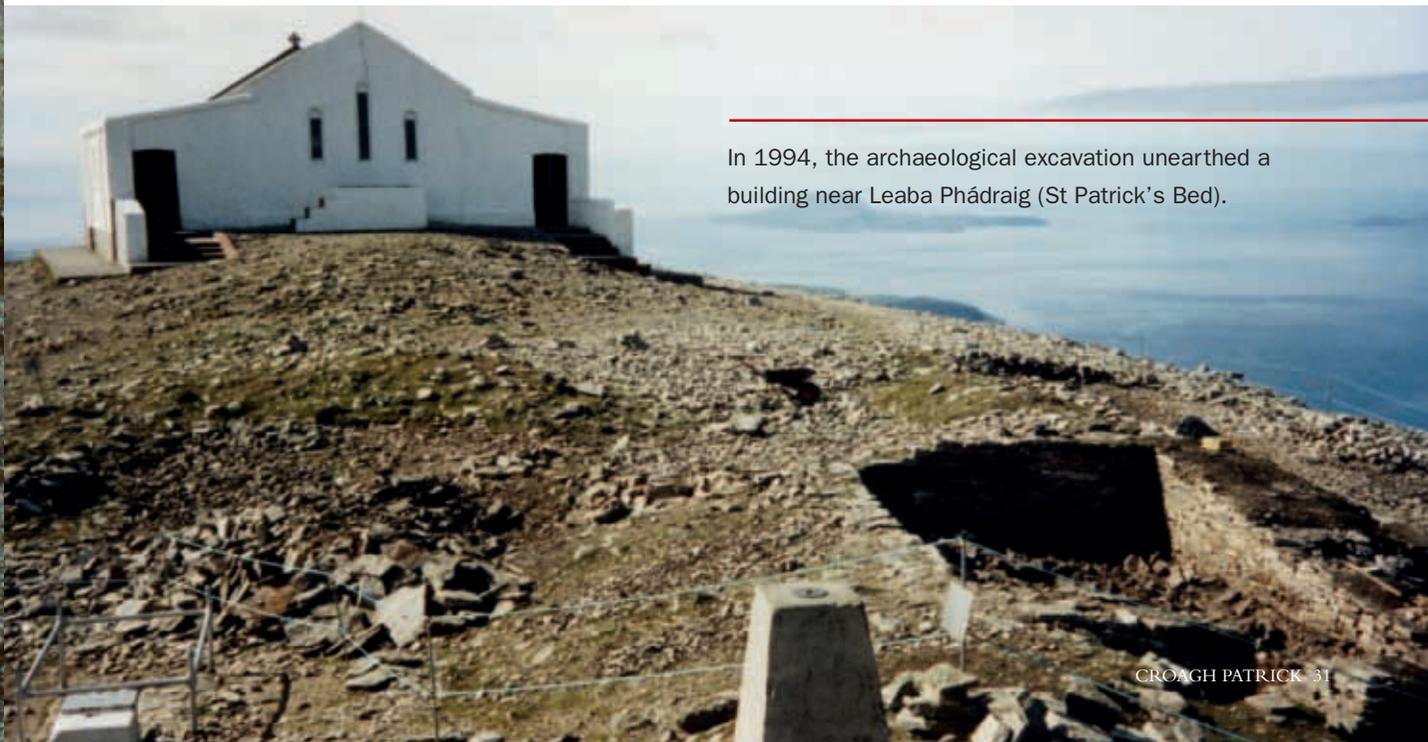
Caesar Otway, *A Tour in Connaught*.

The Croagh Patrick Archaeological Committee, founded in 1994, undertook to record any early human or building activity before and after St Patrick's visit to the mountain. A team of eight people, led by archaeologists Gerry Walsh and Michael Gibbons, climbed to the summit each day for eight weeks during July and August in 1994 and 1995.

A hill-top rampart enclosing the whole summit was discovered. A number of coloured glass beads were found. A glass specialist dated the dark blue and amber glass beads from the third century BC to the fourth century AD. This structure was on the summit before St Patrick's mission and probably indicates an enclosed ritual site.

The excavations also revealed a rectangular building measuring 7.76m by 5.52m (30ft by 18ft), probably an early Christian oratory

In 1994, the archaeological excavation unearthed a building near Leaba Phádraig (St Patrick's Bed).





An early photograph of the archaeological excavation shows the remains of the roof collapse, which filled the interior of an ancient building.

similar to the Gallarus Oratory in County Kerry. A sample of charcoal from the excavation was radiocarbon-dated from AD430 to AD890. These are significant dates, as we know St Patrick was on Croagh Patrick in the fifth century. This site has now been back-filled for protection and can no longer be viewed.



Door-post holes at the entrance to the building, similar to the Gallarus Oratory.

A second archaeological programme was undertaken from 1996 to 1998 under the direction of Louisburgh archaeologist, Leo Morahan. After three years of surveys many new archaeological sites and monuments were discovered and recorded in the orbit of Croagh Patrick.



The building discovered during the excavation is the same size as the Gallarus Oratory in Dingle, County Kerry.