

LOUGH CARRA, CO. MAYO : PART 1 (The Prehistoric Settlement)

“The Lake lay like a mirror that somebody had breathed upon, the brown islands showing through the mist faintly, with grey shadows falling into the water, blurred at the edge.”

From “The Lake” by George Moore

INTRODUCTION

Lough Carra is a picturesque lake set in the unique landscape of Co. Mayo. Over the centuries the lake has been associated with great writers, poets, artists and scientists. Carra’s intriguing place-names denote a rich and ancient past associated with local myth and legend. Today, the lake is an important tourist attraction and anglers haven. It also supports a significant habitat for a number of Mayo’s common and rare flora and faunas’ species.

The focus of this study is the immediate landscape around Lough Carra Co. Mayo in the Barony of Carra. This piece attempts to present a condensed introduction to the possible five millennia of human habitation within the region and to shed light on the significant heritage value of this hidden landscape. “The evidence of heritage is the essence of continuity” (O’Hara, 1991, 13) and Carra demonstrates that continuity with the rich archaeological evidence exhibited in the diverse categories of monument, which include promontory forts, cists, ringforts, crannogs, enclosures, field systems, ecclesiastical sites, causeways, and tower-houses.

Surveys were carried out on the archaeological features around Lough Carra, during the 1990s. This work was part of a wider survey of the county. The surveys were presented in two significant publications: ‘Ballinrobe and District, An Archaeological Study, (The Moyturra Project)’ and ‘The Archaeological Survey of Mayo’. From these publications detailed descriptions of surveys carried out on the relevant monuments proved to be invaluable. Today, ten years on, the monuments of heritage significance are revisited, photographed and a brief description of their condition is provided. An attempt to interpret the human imprint on this lake landscape is also offered.

THE PHYSICAL LANDSCAPE

Lough Carra is a member of what has become commonly known as ‘the Great Western Lakes’ group, which also includes: Lough Mask, Lough Cullen, Lough Conn and Lough Corrib. Under European law the lake has been designated as an S.A.C. (Special Area of Conservation). Carra lies just within the northern boundary of the limestone region which stretches from the Burren in Co. Clare. Because of its physical location, Carra is an example of a marl lake, which gives the water a unique green/turquoise colour. The term ‘marl’ indicates the presence of white or cream coloured deposits which consist largely of calcium carbonate. These deposits have also been identified in many turloughs in the Carra region and are also associated with fen and raised bogs. The land around Carra is well drained and fertile, traditionally making farming the main source of income in the region.

Lough Carra is moderately shallow, covering an area of approximately 4,500 acres. It is approximately 8 miles long, varying in width from a couple of hundred metres at its narrowest point, to nearly 2 miles at its widest point. The lake is situated 2 miles north of Ballinrobe and 8 miles (approx.) south of Castlebar. Carra is one of the lakes which expanded from the river Corrib, as is Lough Mask. Carra and Mask are connected by the Keel River. Lough Carra is enclosed in a dramatic landscape of mountains (the Partry Mountains to the west), bog, karst, natural woodland, forest plantation and pasture.

The land around the lake is very fertile. Pasture is the predominant land usage. Although a lot of natural woodland was cleared over the millennia, semi-natural woodland still exists at Castle Burke, Castle Carra and at the Partry estate. Some of the native tree species include oak, aspen and willow. Coniferous forests have been planted on the south basin of the lake at and around Moore Hall and Cloonee. An interesting point is the existence of unique orchid species within the Carra region. “ *Out of the 27 orchids known to occur in Ireland, I found no less than 19 about Lough Carra and its shores from the Northern limit of several of the rare limestone plants of Western Ireland, such as the Spring Gentian and Close Flower Orchids*” (Praeger, Robert Lloyd, 1906,). The landscape of Lough Carra not only supports abundance of floral habitats but also of faunal habitats.

It is not surprising that the lake and its surrounding landscape provided a secure base and livelihood to native inhabitants and colonists alike. Five millennia of habitation have left their impression on the landscape.

THE EARLIEST INHABITANTS

It is likely that the first humans settled in Ireland approximately 9000 years ago, after the great ice sheets had melted. These first settlers were hunter-gathers and nomadic, with no permanent settlement (as a result archaeological evidence is scarce). They consisted of small groups who foraged and gathered food when it was needed. These groups relied on flint (or chert) for their tools used in hunting and for fishing. Despite its advantageous location, no evidence for the Mesolithic is (as yet) evident from the Lough Carra region. The nearest Mesolithic site to County Mayo is at Lough Gara in County Sligo (O'Hara, 1982), although a distinctive stone tool called a Bann flake was discovered from Burrishoole (Corlett, 2001). Lough Carra could have provided these small communities with the resources that were needed to sustain them.

Evidence in the county indicates that the Neolithic communities were monumentalising the Mayo landscape and enclosing land for domestic farming purposes. The arrival of farming communities from Britain and or the Continent saw the introduction of new approaches to food production. The new methods, a combination of farming and foraging, would have involved a slow process of acculturation with the indigenous natives. Sedentary way of life prevailed, with the felling of trees and enclosure of land. New crafts and industries were adopted, as were new cultural innovations like the construction of great stone monuments. Similar to the Mesolithic period, no positive evidence has yet been uncovered for the Neolithic period from the Lough Carra region. However, approx. 8 miles away near the village of Cong, three court tombs (Killimor, Knocknageeha, and Killour) were discovered. These great stone monuments were as a result of the practise of collective inhumation and cremation. "The principal component of these tombs is a burial chamber constructed of large upright stones, roofed by lintels or corbelling and originally covered by a mound of earth or stones"(Ballinrobe Survey, 1994, p.1). Approx. 1,500 megalithic tombs have been discovered in this country and are divided into four classifications: court, portal, passage and wedge. 152 tombs have been identified in Mayo alone. (O'Hara,1991). The position of the tombs in south Mayo close to the Lough Mask, may allow us to speculate that the lake was used for fishing and collecting other vital resources. The connecting river Keel may have brought the tomb builders as far as Lough Carra to investigate its potential for food and land.

Bronze Age

The rich archaeological evidence representing the Neolithic period in Mayo leads us to speculate that the population prior to the arrival of metallurgy, was an efficient farming community, felling trees and enclosing their land. Inconsistent burial practices demonstrate the existence of different groups of immigrants with diverse cultural affinities, but with the skills to build impressive stone monuments on their landscape. They were likely to have been well organized oarsmen (as the first farmers would have demonstrated in their initial sea-crossing to Ireland in curragh-like boats) and very quickly navigated Mayo's coast and inland water routes. It is probable that through trade and communication, interaction occurred with a new population movement in Europe, known as the 'The Beaker People' (classified by the names of distinctive objects associated with their culture). These new communities did not invade Ireland, but integrated with the farming communities, and brought with them the experienced metal-seekers and the knowledge of metal production, which diffused around the country, as did novel burial rites and building trends.

These prospectors exploited the extensive mineral deposits in the south- west of the country (Cork and Kerry) and produced an extensive collection of copper, bronze and gold objects. Copper is not extensively found in Mayo, however, large amounts of gold exist in the Croagh Patrick region, in the Owenwee River (Corlett, 2001,p.16). Palstaves, lunulae, torcs have all been discovered in West Mayo. A flat bronze axe was discovered in Carrowlisdoonaun near Ballinrobe, close to the Lough Carra region (O'Hara, 1982, p.44). The artefacts found from this period demonstrate a highly skilled community becoming ever more aware of wealth, personal ornament and hegemony. The wealth of weapons discovered from this period demonstrates a period of conflict as well as prosperity.

The Bronze Age communities in Ireland did not practice collective or communal burial like their predecessors (except in a few instances), however, they did bury their dead singly in cists or pits. The burial rite could include the deceased being placed in a crouched position, in a stone-slab lined grave, with a ceramic pot known as a Food Vessel (occasionally other grave goods, like flint scrapers, bone pins and pendants, and daggers are also interred). In some instances cremated bone is deposited in a pit along with a vessel or urn. In the Later Bronze age cremation became the most popular burial process. The burnt bones were often placed in or under an urn, and pits or cists could occur in clusters or in isolation. Cist burials (some discovered in the 1990s others in the 1930s) were discovered at Carrownacon near Lough Carra's shores. Three were discovered in barrows (in this case ring-barrows, defined as prehistoric earthen burial mounds with a central level space surrounded by a fosse and external ditch), one was discovered in a tumulus (another type of earthen mound) and three discovered (as a result of ploughing) in isolation in well-drained areas (Ballinrobe Survey, 1994, p.4).

Another Bronze Age monument type represented in the Carra region is the standing stone. One simple extant example remains, Liskilleen. The stone is situated in a pasture overlooking Lough Carra to the west. It is 3.2m high, 0.4m in width and is roughly rectangular in shape. The stone is orientated NW-SE (Ballinrobe Survey, 1994,p.12) The purpose of this monument is unknown. They may have been used to mark a boundary or routeway, or it may simply have been erected as 'scratching posts' for cattle. The location of this stone, which is on top of a ridge overlooking the lake, suggests a boundary or routeway marker.

Approximately 7 miles from Lough Carra, between Balinrobe and Cross, lie another type of Bronze Age monument: fulachta fiadh. These monuments, believed to be ancient cooking sites (but also suggested to be early forms of sweat houses or used for bathing) indicate Bronze Age domesticity. Although situated a good distance away from Lough Carra, the monuments are usually situated near water, streams or marshy areas. They are recognised by their crescent –shape, and usually reveal fire-cracked stone and charcoal (Ballinrobe Survey, 1994, p.14)

Surely the most interesting prehistoric monuments in the Lough Carra region are its Bronze Age causeways. According to the Ballinrobe survey, these causeways were built where "stretches of water blocked a main thoroughfare. The causeways were built to limit a journey time or to reach a specific destination like 'Church Island'. There are five examples of these causeways: Ballycally 1 and 2, Carn 1 and 2 and Kilkeeran. Three of the examples consist of rows of timber posts, the other two are described as 'stone causeways'. One is described as a 'dump construction' and the last example is suspected to be of recent construction. These causeways are described as substantial in construction, with Ballycally 1 consisting of one hundred and nine timber posts set in the lake bed. Kilkeeran has eighty-four timber posts set in the lake bed. The causeways range in length with the largest at 124m in length and the smallest at 15m in length, and range in width from 9m to 1.5m. One is submerged while the rest are partly submerged. The timbers from the Kilkeeran causeway were dated, and gave an end date of 1101 BC with an estimated felling date of 1069+/-9BC or later. Another timber sample from Kilkeeran gave an end date of 1571 BC with an estimated felling date of 1539+/-9BC or later.

Iron Age

The last of our prehistoric sites from the Lough Carra region is classified as a lake promontory fort. These forts were naturally defended on all but one side, and artificial defences of earthen banks, fosses and stone walls were erected on the remaining side. Promontory forts are common along the western coast and are associated with the Iron Age. They are complex sites, with debatable uses. The period they date to is associated with the Celtic-speaking peoples from Europe, who like their Beaker ancestors did not invade Ireland as such, but influenced all aspects of society, through trade and communication. The fort at CastleCarra (locally known as Doon Wood) is situated on a 'narrow neck of land cutting off an extensive area of tree and scrub....' (Ballinrobe Survey, 1994, p.19). The fort is constructed of dry-stone masonry and is 114m in length, 15m in width and 2.2m in height. An identified gap of 3m in width was a likely later gateway. Two dry-stone wall enclosures exist at the west end of the enclosed area beside the lakeshore.

The quantity and range of archaeological material for the prehistoric period, demonstrates the long-term settlement significance of Lough Carra. The lake was not only an important domestic site providing an abundance of resources for our prehistoric ancestors, but it was also valued as an area of ritual connotation. This social, economic, and cultural significance will also be demonstrated in the early Christian, medieval and modern periods. (END OF PART ONE – PART TWO ON PAGE 8)

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LOUGH CARRA, CO. MAYO : PART 2 (The Medieval and Post-Medieval Settlement)

The early medieval period demonstrated a wealth of human habitation at Lough Carra in the form of ringforts, souterrains, crannogs and cashels. Clusters of ringforts are found in an area of drumlins between Castlebar and Lough Carra. The particularly high density of settlement in this area suggests that drumlins were a positive attribute in the minds of the ringfort builders (Stout, 1997).

Ringforts are the most common of archaeological field monuments in Ireland. They are roughly circular in plan with a central area of approximately 25-50m, enclosed by an earthen bank formed of material thrown up from an external bank (Lavelle 1994). The entrance gap was normally on the east side. Ringforts could be univallate (a single bank and ditch) or multivallate (two or more banks and ditches). The variations in ringfort size may reflect the local conditions, social structures, feature functions and or multi-period construction methods employed. Excavations have revealed that the majority of ringforts were built during the Early Christian Period. They were used as farmsteads but other purposes have been suggested (cattle pens). Souterrains and hut sites have been found in the interior of ringforts and evidence for corn grinding and other craft activities have been discovered.

There are approximately sixty ringforts within the immediate vicinity of Lough Carra. The majority of the ringforts are univallate, however there is an example of a trivallate ringfort at Burriscarra (although the middle and outer banks have been leveled). Entrances tend to face east and many have entrance causeways. Souterrains are a common feature associated with ringforts, although most are in-filled. The foundation of hut sites are recorded from a number of the Lough Carra ringforts as was a children's burial ground. One of the more interesting examples is of a conjoined ringfort at Togher, where two ringforts are joined on one side.

Cashels are circular like ringforts, but have a stone wall enclosing the open area instead of an earthen bank. They similarly served as homesteads and often have the common features of souterrains and hut sites. Although there are only half a dozen examples in the immediate Lough Carra region, cashels tend to be more common in the west of Ireland because of the large amount of rock available. The most impressive example is a site known as 'Annies' on the north shore of a sheltered bay in Lough Carra. This cashel has a sub-rectangular (45m N-S; 93m E-W) interior, enclosed by a stone wall. The interior contains a stone-built structure and its possible entrance is on the NE site. The site is however heavily overgrown. (Lavelle, 1994).

Another monument type in the region is the Crannog. Crannogs are artificially constructed islands in small lake areas where houses were erected. Sometimes natural islands were used as a base. Crannogs served the same functions as ringforts and cashels. They were constructed from materials like peat, brushwood and as the Lough Carra examples demonstrate, large amounts of stone. The majority of the monuments date to the Early Historic Period (O'Riordan, 1979) but continued in use well into the

Later Middle Ages. They were accessed from land by dug out canoes and submerged causeways.

Changing water levels and drainage continue to bring more examples to light (Lavelle, 1994). Five crannogs were recorded from the lake. Two of the five are entirely submerged. The crannog known as 'Lady's Lake' is circular and apparently artificially constructed of stone. Otter Island revealed an oval shaped artificially constructed island with some timber posts visible on the south beneath the water level. The submerged crannog SW of Lakeview Island appears to have been abandoned during construction. Local tradition tells us that a dug out canoe was removed from the site.

Many of the ringforts and cashel sites at Lough Carra had associated souterrains. Souterrains are underground man-made structures composed of various combinations of passages and chambers connected by creepways. They are entered from ground level by a narrow opening and are often marked on OS maps as caves. The Early Irish Annals refers to them as 'uam'. They were built from a combination of stone and earth with various construction methods employed. Some were of dry-stone covered with lintels built into an excavated trench and covered over with earth. Others were cut into the underlying clay and rock (Lavelle, 1994). Souterrains date from the 6th to the 13th centuries. Their function has been widely debated. They may have been built underground to avoid detection. Alternatively they may have stored foodstuffs and valuables. Unfortunately the majority of the souterrains recorded from the immediate Lough Carra region were collapsed or inaccessible at the time of survey.

Early ecclesiastical sites are peppered throughout the Lough Carra region, illustrating that the inhabitants were attracted to the tranquility and isolation offered by the lake. Churches, timber, dwellings, holy wells and rotary querns have been discovered. The occurrence of early ecclesiastical settlement on the islands in Lough Carra provides evidence of eremitical monasticism whereby hermits withdrew to places of solitude away from the temptations of the world. Church Island is one example. An early ecclesiastical settlement may have been situated near the church (which has been dated anytime after the mid 12th century). It is believed from local information that Marban a hermit poet, made his dwelling here. He was a brother of King Guaire of Gory who died in AD663.

The tradition of church building continued at Lough Carra throughout the medieval period. Many of these churches were parish churches and were in disuse by the 17th century. The extant examples are much-ruined and very few of their original features survive. The parish church at Burriscarra is worth mentioning. The church is difficult to interpret because of the numerous phases of building intervention and alterations. There is no clear division between the nave and chancel with no transepts, aisles or chapels. The east window is no longer in existence but there are two fine round arched doorways in the north wall. The most interesting feature of the church is its pronounced batter (slope) towards the base.

The Anglo-Normans had a clear impact on the Lough Carra region, as is evidenced by the fortifications they constructed. Fortification was not limited to the Anglo-Normans as there is evidence of a Gaelic-Irish occupied tower-house. Amongst the masonry castles in the area are Castlecarra, which was built between AD1238 and AD1300 by the de Stauntons, and Castleburke. The latter is associated with the Mac Evillys and was owned in the sixteenth century by Tibbot-na-long Bourke, son of Granuaile. Castlecarra is a three-storey tower standing in a later strongly fortified bawn (a fortified enclosure) with batter and with one rounded corner turret. Much of the building displays later additions of 15th century date, architecturally similar to tower-house features. Other features included a guardroom, vaulted room, mural stairs and a garderobe (latrine). Castleburke is a four-storey rectangular tower displaying gun loops. There are two castles situated on islands in Lough Carra, Castle Hag Island and Castle Island. Both examples are the fragmentary remains of tower-houses. The castle on Castle Hag Island belonged to MacTybbot Burke in 1574, and was known as Castlecally (Knox, 1908).

The Irish Church experienced a period of decay in the 10th and 11th centuries. A new surge of medieval monasticism was introduced to Ireland in the 12th and 13th centuries. The new abbeys and buildings were laid out in a more regular manner around a court yard or cloister. By the 15th century the west of Ireland witnessed a marked growth in this type of religious house. Some examples of religious houses from this period in the Lough Carra vicinity and wider area include Annies, Ballintobber, Castlecarra, Cong, Friarsquarter West, Inishmaine, Kill, and Kilmaine. Early in the fourteenth century, an Augustinian friary was established in Ballinrobe. This friary later became associated with the Abbey of Annies and Burriscarra Friary. The Augustinian Annies abbey, which is situated south of Burriscarra, was founded in 1440 by Walter de Burgo. This abbey was made subject to Kilcreevanty (a nunnery near Ballinasloe, Co. Galway) and became a house of nuns. The Franciscans were recorded here in 1587 and may have occupied the site after the suppression of Kilcreevanty (1543) and its associated houses, whose land was given to the Earl of Clanricarde in 1570 (Lavelle, 1994:91).

Burriscarra Abbey was at different times home to two different houses of the mendicant orders. There are four mendicant orders, the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and Carmelites. Members of these orders were expected to live a life of poverty, supported by begging. These orders first arrived in Ireland in the thirteenth century. Burriscarra friary was founded by Adam de Staunton as a Carmelite house in 1298 and continued in this capacity until the late fourteenth century. A community of Augustinians established themselves at the site in AD1413. This was part of the second phase in the expansion of the mendicant orders which occurred in late medieval Ireland. The friary church is predominantly of late medieval date. It consists of a long, undivided church with an additional aisle to the south. There is a well-preserved tracery window in the east wall of the side aisle, while parts of other tracery windows survive. The east window has been partially blocked up with a later window insertion.

A number of rooms of the domestic ranges survive at the site, while there is no surviving cloister arcade. A number of fireplaces survive in the conventual ranges in addition to a variety of window types, including some ogee-headed windows. The friary is constructed in the late Irish Gothic style. The construction of buildings in this style was indicative of the revival in the Gaelic and Gaelicised communities in late medieval Ireland.

Ballintubber Abbey is situated north of Burriscarra and was originally founded in 1216 by Cathal Croiderg O'Connor for the Augustinian Canons. Ballintubber Abbey was suppressed in 1542. Incidentally, both Burriscarra Friary and Ballintubber Abbey were held by John King in 1605. The Augustinian friars were granted possession of Ballintubber in the mid 17th century (Lavelle, 1994, p. 91).

By the 18th century, the land around Lough Carra came under the ownership of the Moore family, who were based at Moore Hall. The Moores were popular locally and George Henry Moore proved a humane landlord during the famine. His son, the noted writer George Augustus Moore, lived for a short period of his life at Moore Hall and the lake is mentioned in a number of his works. On February 1st 1923 Moore Hall was burnt by a local regiment of IRA men (Frazier, 2000). The house is now in ruins.

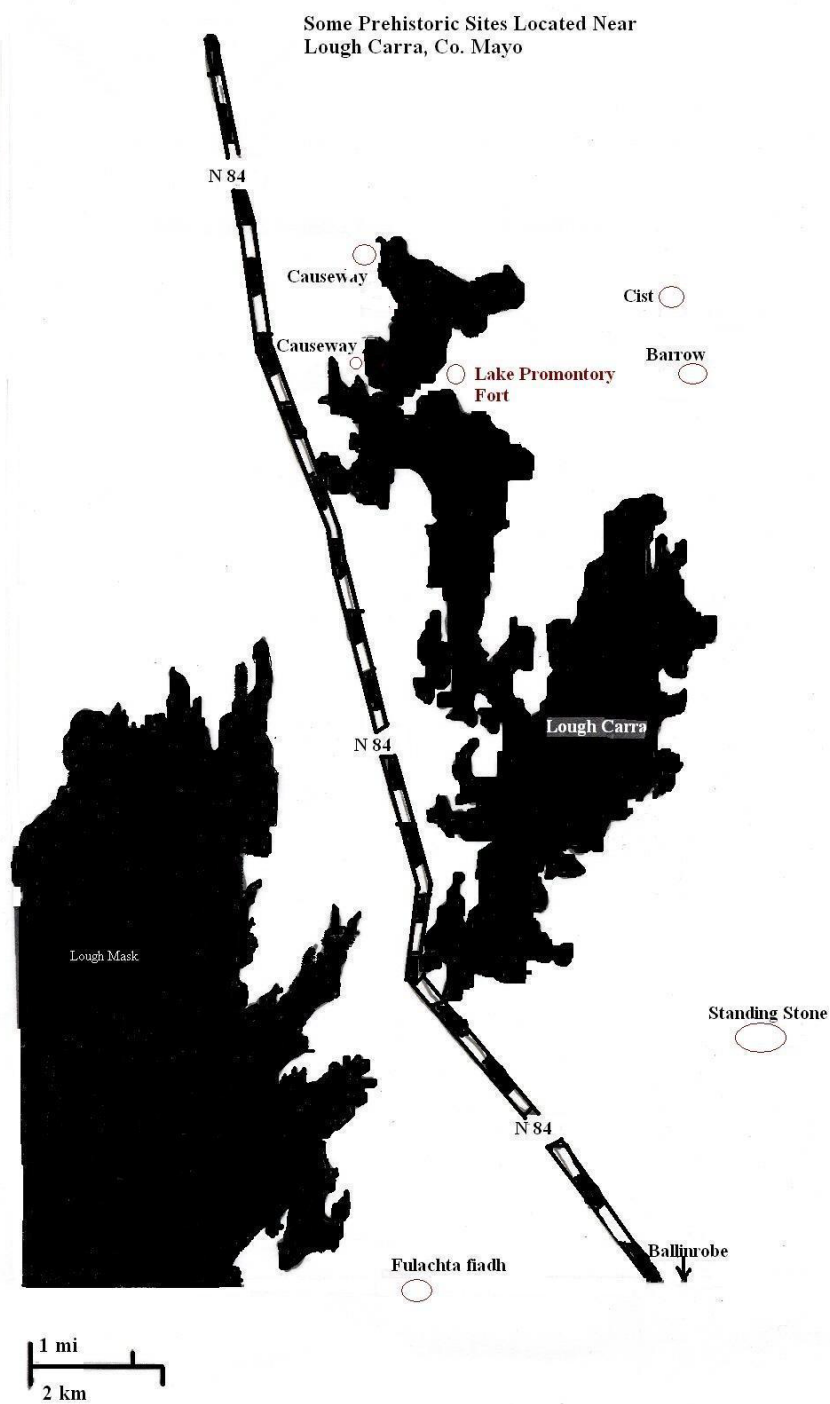
The naturalist Robert Lloyd Praeger also carried out surveys on Lough Carra's orchid species during the early 20th century. Today, the region of Lough Carra contains a vibrant farming community and is an important tourist attraction and angler's haven. From the archaeological evidence Lough Carra clearly demonstrates that it was a site of strategic importance, an advantageous habitation site, a ritual landscape, a spiritual sanctuary, not to mention one of the most beautiful and peaceful havens in county Mayo.

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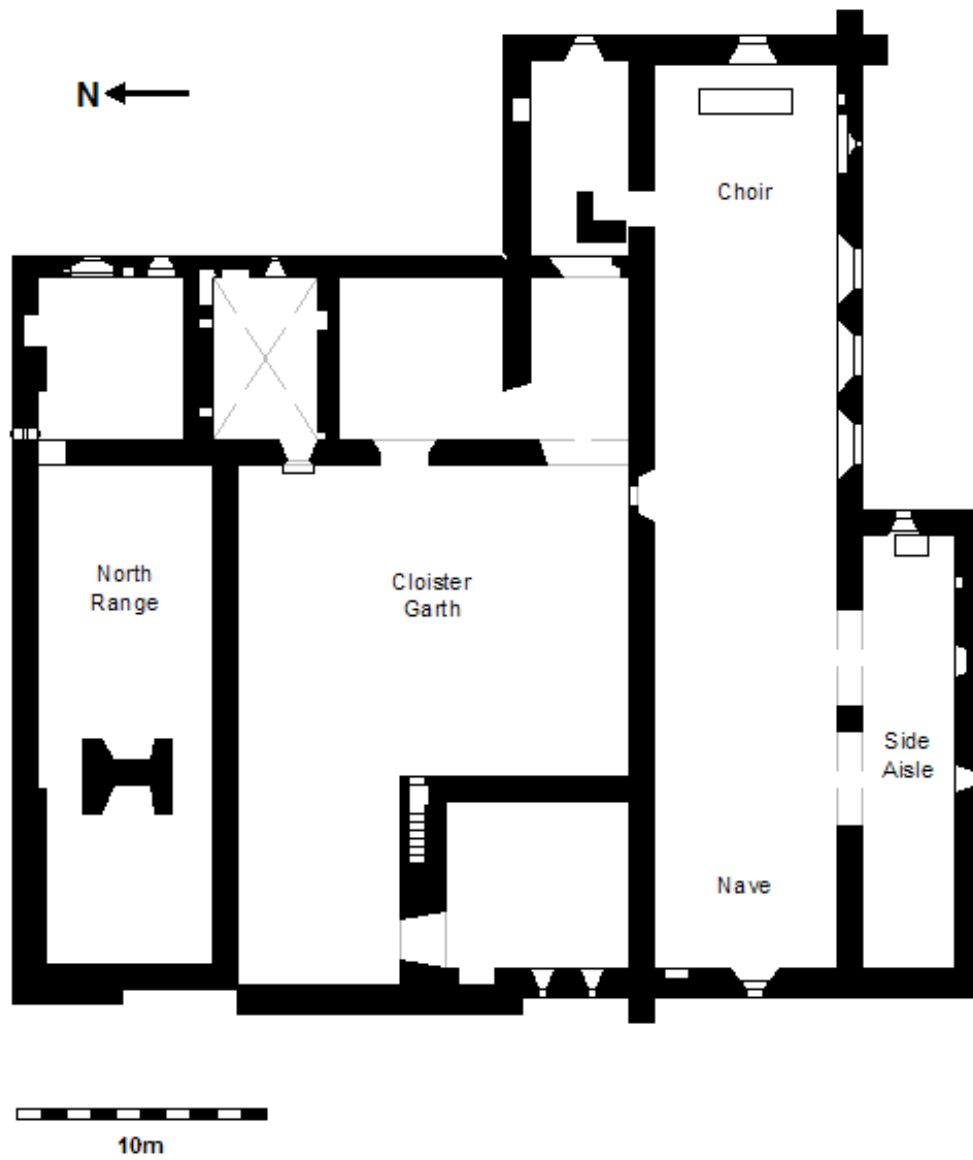
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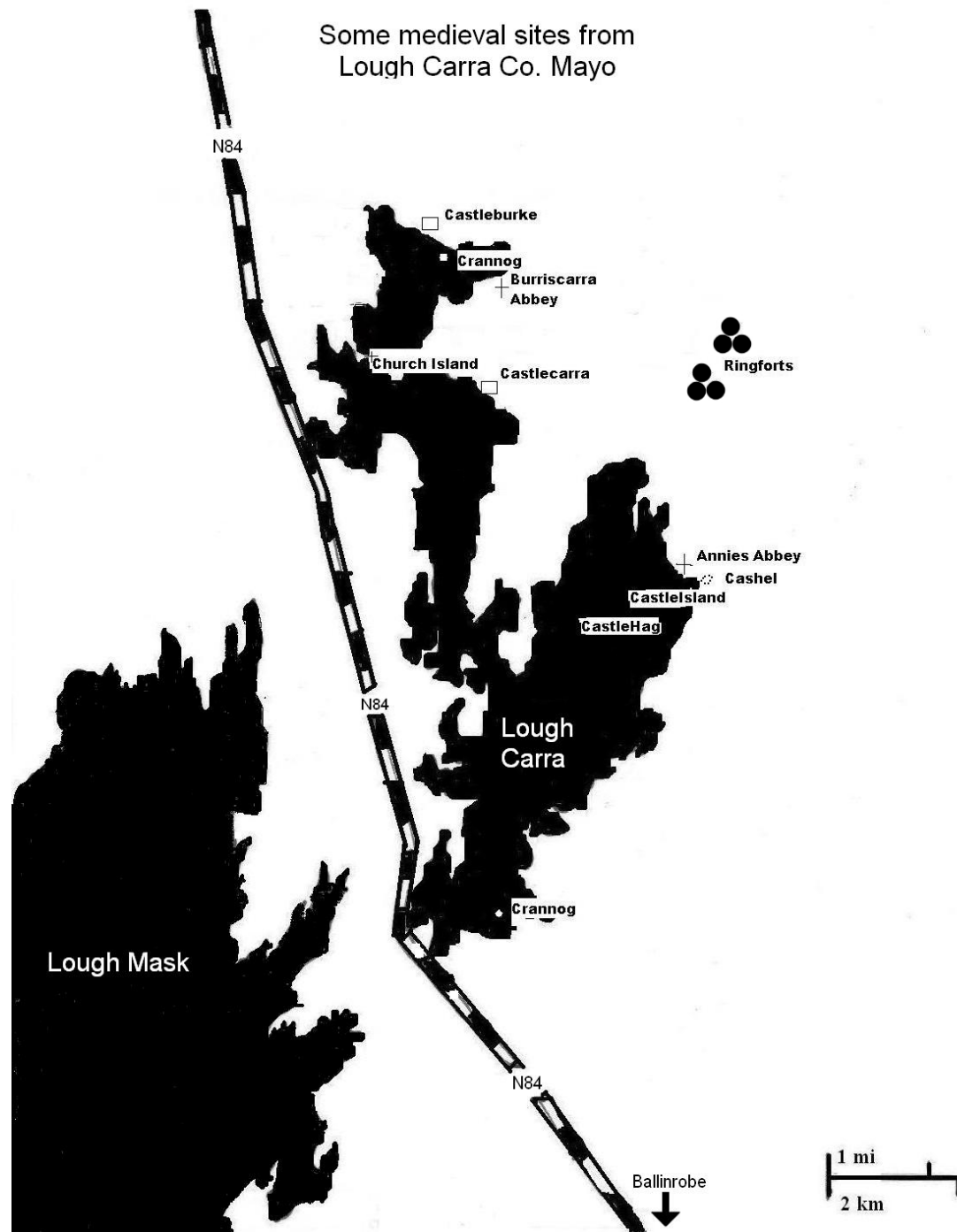
A Map of Lough Carra showing Prehistoric sites



Plan of Burriscarra Friary after Lavell, 1994



Medieval sites at Lough Carra



Burriscarra Friary seen from the North East.



Carved head from the East side of the Sedilia



Piscina in the choir of Burriscarra Friary



Three windows along the South wall of Burriscarra Friary



Tracery window at the Eastern end of the side aisle.



East face of Castleburke
Photograph by Lavelle 1994



West face of Castleburke

