

Megalithic altars



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MANY PORTAL TOMBS and wedge tombs of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age were romanticised by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiquarians as druid's altars. However, the idea that some megalithic tombs were used as altars is perhaps not as far-fetched as it might seem. Several tombs have the name 'altar' associated with them, and a wedge tomb recently excavated by Billy O'Brien has given its name, Altar, to an entire townland in Cork.

A similar example is a wedge tomb at Srahwee near Killadoon in south-west Mayo, locally called *Altóir*, 'altar', which has given its name to the nearby lake, Lough Nahaltora. Nearby is a dried-up holy well called Tobernahaltora. A small cross has been incised on the surface of the roof stone of the tomb.

This is the discrete landscape of an altar used for open-air religious services during the time of the Penal Laws of the eighteenth and

early nineteenth centuries. It has been suggested by some archaeologists that megalithic tombs functioned as ceremonial centres in the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age in a similar fashion to a parish church today. Here at Srahwee a wedge tomb served as a focus for parochial religious ceremonies, not during the Early Bronze Age but during the eighteenth century.

But why was this particular place chosen as a Penal altar? The most obvious explanation, apart from the necessary seclusion of the site, is that this Early Bronze Age tomb, denuded of its original cairn, actually resembles a church altar. The nearby spring well may also have been a useful asset. Or could it be that the notion that this was an altar from a previous era was ingrained in the minds of the people who chose this site, thereby making it the most obvious candidate? ■

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