

The Rocks of the Fianna



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Na Clocha Fianna is the name given to a pair of stone rows at Askillaun, near Louisburgh in south-west County Mayo. Whether attributed to Medb, Dhiarmuid agus Gráinne, Fionn mac Cumhaill or Cúchulainn, many of our prehistoric monuments have become associated with the heroic legends of pre-Christian Ireland. Admittedly the legends, in the form with which we are now familiar, were written down for the first time only about 1000 years ago, and some scholars have warned against their use as a window onto the people and society of pre-Christian Ireland.

Whatever the truth behind these dramatic stories, they have influenced the way in which people over the last few hundred years have explained the prehistoric monuments in their surrounding landscape. There was quite clearly a recognition, without any archaeological expertise, that these monuments could not be Christian, and an alternative explanation had to be found.

However, it would be a mistake to simply dismiss the association of a row of standing stones with 'the fingers of Fionn mac Cumhaill' as children's fireside stories. Recent

archaeological thinking has argued that the building of monuments by late prehistoric people in close proximity to the pre-existing monuments of their early prehistoric ancestors was one way in which later communities, whether justified or not, made claims to their ancestral roots. Could it be possible that many of the legends associated with these prehistoric monuments represent attempts by more recent communities to forge links with their pre-Christian ancestral roots? □

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