

# FOLLOWING THE OLD STONE ROAD: ÉIRE

by Tomas Lipps

The *Féile na gCloch* (Festival of Stone) is an annual dry stone walling festival/workshop that is held on Inis Oírr, the smallest of the Aran Islands.

This year I had the good fortune to be invited to come and participate and to give a presentation. It was a pleasure to associate with yet another gathering of stone-oriented folks in a place remarkable for the extent and character of its stonework. Following the event I took the opportunity of being in Ireland to schedule another two weeks there, rent a car and meander around the country photographing noteworthy stonework for STONEXUS.

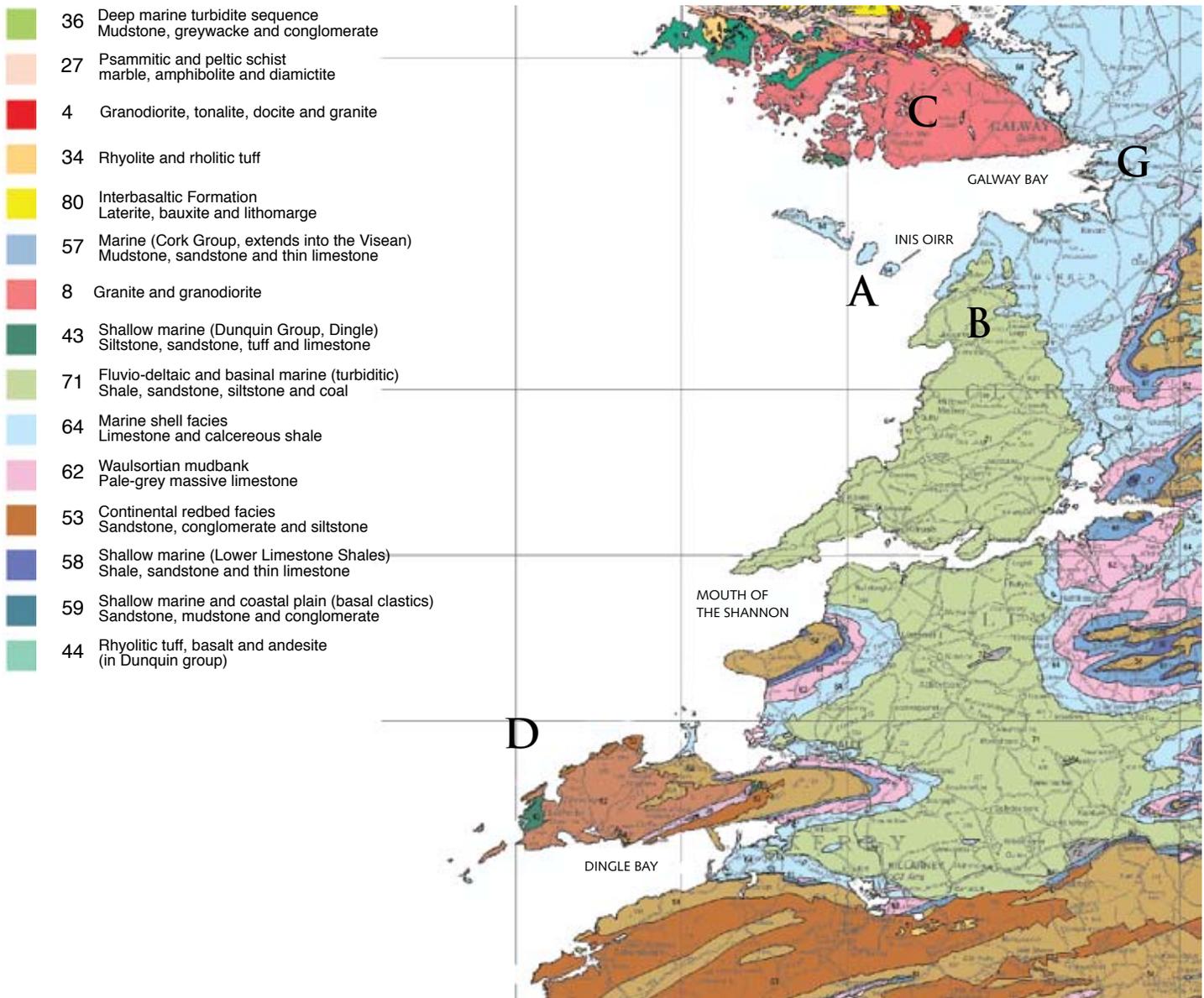
The invitation to Inis Oírr came when I was absorbed with organizing Stonework Symposium 2012 in Asheville, North Carolina

and the four workshops associated with that event. After the Symposium ended I had less than a week before flying out so research was scant, the result being an all-too-short and somewhat cursory exploration with an improvised and constantly changing itinerary. But it was both interesting and rewarding, more so because of the gracious character of the Irish folks I encountered along the way.

The places visited initially are all located along Ireland's rugged west central coast as shown below on the geological map section: the Aran Islands, the Burren, Connemara, Dingle and Galway. This account will commence with the Aran Islands.

*The first of two (or more) parts.*

*All photos by author unless otherwise labeled.  
Map courtesy of the Geological Survey of Ireland.*



# GALWAY

## Port of Entry.

From Shannon Airport to Galway city takes about an hour and a half by bus. Ten minutes into the drive and less than ten miles from the airport I saw, in a field a short distance from the highway, a *gallaun*, an ancient standing stone—a ‘preminder’ of the depth of the island’s history. Welcome to Ireland.

Once settled in, I went for a walk around the old town that is the heart of the city. Much has changed in the forty-three years since my last visit. The quiet port and county seat I knew has become one of Europe’s most popular tourist destinations and the music and arts festivals held here have earned it regard as Ireland’s cultural capital.

In 1124 the King of Connacht built a fort where the River Corrib met the bay. The settlement that gathered around the fort evolved into a port town that was visited by the mariner Cristoforo Colombo in 1477 (as commemorated by the sculpture of a dove, *un colombo*, shown at right). The city walls were extended in 1580 to protect the quays. In the 18th century the Spanish Arches (bottom of page) penetrated the walls to give access from the town to the newer quays outside.

The very first photograph I took in Galway (below) seemed to presage two sources of pleasure that I would experience in the days to come: stonework and Guinness.





### *stylistically speaking . . .*

The stonework of the Aran Islands is unique unto itself. Like the other islands, Inis Oírr is almost totally composed of limestone (except for the granitic immigrants mentioned earlier) but there is some variance in the way the stone is formed and when human peculiarities are factored in an amazing variety of walling styles results. Families tend to build in a particular way; if shown a photograph of a section of an island wall, an island man, at least one who builds walls, could identify 'who done it'.

There are horizontally coursed walls on Inis Oírr, some good ones (photo, facing page) and wall ends are stabilized with large horizontally oriented stones, but what Inis Oírr and the other islands are noted for are walls built with stones aligned vertically.

Equilibrium is the goal in building a wall. Horizontally coursed walls in which stones are placed in a stable position have *static* equilibrium.

Walls with stones standing or leaning against each other are (like polygonal walls in which the stones are placed so they are not at rest, but acting against each other) in a state of *dynamic* equilibrium. *Wedge-walling* is a good way to describe this system.

### *the mothers . . .*

On the Aran Islands, styles of walling have evolved which combine vertical and horizontal elements. The stones in wall ends framing an opening are horizontally bedded, but stones in the body of the wall and those used to close the opening may be placed vertically. Sometimes the lower section of a wall is horizontally coursed, but row upon row of vertical stones are placed on top. One style that is characteristically 'Aranesque' is the 'family' style wall, examples of which are shown below and at the top of the facing page. The large stones aligned vertically in the lower parts of the wall are called the *mothers*, the small stones they bracket are the *children*, the *fathers* go on top.



A properly built vertically coursed wall is similar to a horizontally coursed wall with respect to the primary rule of stonemasonry: "one over two, two over one"—*except* that in a vertically coursed wall it should be one *against* two, and two *against* one. The photo above is a section from the wall in the photo to its left. It has been rotated 90 degrees. Note how much this looks like a well-built horizontally coursed wall.



# THE BURREN



The Burren (Irish: *bhoireann* meaning stony place) is at the seaward edge of a vast limestone *massif*. It was subjected to the glacio-karstic weathering previously described with regard to Inis Oírr, a process that produced terrain with thin but well-drained soil (good for grazing) and an abundance of stone that is well suited for structural purposes.

For the last 9,000 years the Burren has been inhabited. An extensive Neolithic civilization left its mark on the landscape in the form of dolmens. Wedge tombs, so called due to the shape of the space enclosed by stone slabs, were common. A prime example is Poul-na-brone dolmen pictured on the cover and above. This early Bronze Age structure is not as large as it appears in photos (though the capstone does weigh about six tons).

Later in the Bronze Age, the Burren was occupied, as was the rest of the island, by the Celts who built the *caisels* (stone ringforts) the ruins of which dot the contemporary landscape.

The first stone castles in Ireland were built in the 12th century by the Anglo-Normans who controlled the north and east of the island. Gaelic chieftains were content with more modest accommodations within their *caisels* until they began to build structures like those of the Normans—the tower houses.

These were called castles but essentially they were fortified residences, often one room to a storey, three to five storeys tall with a machicolation projecting over the doorway from which to discomfit unwelcome visitors (and anyone intruding through the doorway was under threat from the 'murder hole' in the ceiling). The stout defensive character of the tower house (below) built in the Burren by the O'Brien clan was appropriate, boldly sited as it was at the junction of three rival territories rather than in the center of its own.

The southern face of the manor house that was added later proclaims a much different attitude toward light and life than the earlier tower. Both buildings were taller than they now appear.





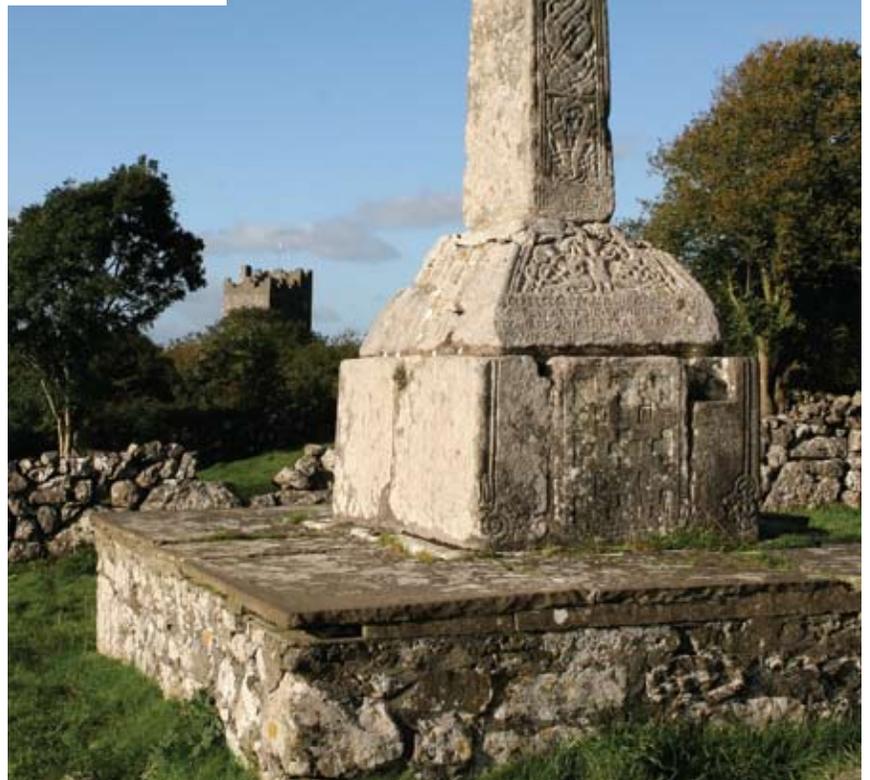
left: Ballinaboy Church. I was drawn to this site by a sketch I'd seen in a guidebook. It did not disappoint. Standing out in low relief is the form of a double-armed cross that is integrated within the matrix of fitted stonework.

below: Another cross, the high cross of Dysert O'Dea (dysert from the Latin word for hermitage) stands on the brow of a hill overlooking the monastery (not shown here). In the distance catching the last of the sun is O'Dea Castle, a fortified tower house standing 50 feet tall.

facing page, top: Poul nabrone dolmen, rear view.

facing page, bottom: Leamaneh Castle, a 15th century tower house onto which a 17th century manor house was grafted.

lower left: Entry into the manor house, Leamaneh Castle. This was not as much a fortification as the tower house, but care was taken to forestall any abrupt arrivals into the hall—the short staircase necessitated a turn to the side rendering visitors vulnerable. Note the chamfers of the door jambs—from a rectangular opening they flare to form the traditional Irish portal that narrows at the top.



# AUGHNANURE CASTLE



*“... the finest fortified dwelling  
upon any part of the shores of Lough Corrib . . .”*

Logistically and defensively, Aughnasure Castle is ideally situated upon a limestone bluff beside and under which the Drimneen River flows on its way to nearby Lough Corrib.

This was O’Flaherty country, a Gaelic clan noted for bravery in battle. An O’Flaherty fortification here would not have been a castle, but a traditional Gaelic *rath* or *caisel*, an earthen or stone ring fort. The first castle on this site was probably built by Walter de Burgh, son of Richard de Burgh, the Anglo-Norman knight who invaded, subdued and occupied the province of Connacht in 1256.

Whatever de Burgh built was undoubtedly Norman in character and of stone. Norman fortifications had evolved from a model consisting of the *motte*, a raised mound of soil, and the *bailey*, a lower area (which had provided the soil for the mound) surrounding the motte and protected by a timber wall. A wall would also be built atop the motte with, sometimes, a square wooden building in the center, a *keep* as it came to be known. By the 13th century when de Burgh built his castle stone was the material of choice, both for the central structure and the walls protecting the bailey or *bawn* as the Irish termed it. This became the fortified tower house/ castle that would be the model habitation of the landed gentry for several centuries. More than 3,000 were built in Ireland.

Galway town was lost to the Anglo-Norman occupiers but the O’Flahertys soon regained Aughnasure. For more than 300 years it was their main stronghold and from it they ruled the lands from the western shore of Lough Corrib to the Atlantic coast—*lar Connacht*—while paying nominal obeisance to the Crown. They were a constant threat to the citizens of Galway; the walls of the town were fortified *expressly* for protection against the ‘ferocious O’Flahertys’. In the 16th century Morogh na dTuadh, a minor figure in the clan, was pardoned by the Queen for his offenses (which included soundly defeating an English force sent against him). In return for ‘observing the Queen’s peace,’ he was appointed chief of the clan over the head of the legitimate chief in residence at Aughnasure. When an O’Flaherty uprising was quelled (with his help) and the castle taken by the English, it was granted to Morogh. He greatly improved Aughnasure and its defenses, bringing them to the standard seen today.

*above: Latter-day Aughnasure had a double bawn, an outlying area protected by a second perimeter wall. Here we are looking from the outer bawn toward the inner one and the six-storey tower house. The circular two-storey watchtower stood at a corner of the wall protecting the inner bawn and keep. There is a corbelled dome over the lower room and a corbelled conical roof over the upper.*

*above right: Detail of the bartizan, an outer-work supported on corbels with gunports to protect the tower’s doorway and the gate in the bawn wall (now gone).*

*right: No one has lived here since Peter O’Flaherty in the mid-20th century (after turning it over to the state and helping to restore it). This handsome fellow is now the sole inhabitant of Aughnasure. The Lord of the Manor, so to speak.*