

**Transcription of a talk given by
Mac Aodhagáin Michael JS Egan
at the Egan Clan Rally
Hobart, Tasmania
3 July 2010**

“Some time ago David and Kerry Edwards asked me to prepare a few words on any topic I would like to speak on so here I am. I was allotted twenty minutes and the paper is therefore brief but I will cover what I can in that time.

Since our last Rally in Ireland we have made one very significant find and I'd like to tell you all about it. In 1861 a historian/antiquarian by the name of George Petrie found two very old headstones in Fuerty, Co. Roscommon – near Roscommon Town. The ancient monastery at Fuerty was founded by St Patrick in the mid fifth century and contains some very old ruins. The two stones were laid aside and in time were again covered over with soil. During graveyard cleanup operations in 1984 a team of workers located the stones about 600 mm under the topsoil. Both of the headstones were dated to the ninth century. At that time it was decided that they would be best preserved by embedding them in the vertical wall of the nearby 18th century church bell-tower.

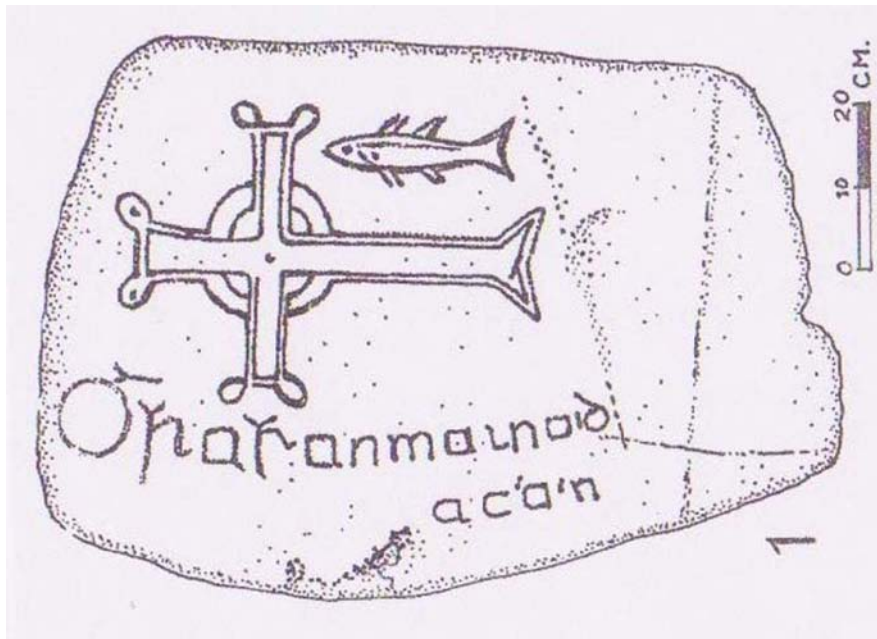
One of the stones was dedicated to a person by the name of Mor, which means ‘big’ or ‘very many’. The other stone I will now show you.



Fuerty Churchyard



Aidacain (Egan/Aodhagáin) Stone



Reproduced from "Some Early Christian Slabs from Fuerty and Clontuskert", Albert Siggins, Roscommon Historical Journal, Vol, 2 1988.

The inscription in old Irish script reads as follows:

*Or ar anmain Aid
acain*

In English this translates as "Pray for the soul of Aidacain" (Egan).

The Stone

A few more words about the stone: It is about 950mm long by 680mm wide and is red sandstone. The centre of the stone has a two-lined ring cross with looped terminals. To the right of the cross and facing upwards is a fish which still clearly displays an eye, fins, gills and lateral line. (This is one of only two stones which have been found in Ireland with this early Christian symbol). The inscription is in the vertical on the left hand side of the cross. The Irish and the presentation of the stone is typical of the Clonmacnoise style for the time period concerned and shows what would have been carved for a very important lay person or ecclesiastic.

Who Was Aidacain?

From the Annals of The Four Masters we know that this man died in 865AD.

From the ancient Irish Annals we know quite a lot about him - where he received his education, where he spent most of his active life, his position as an anchorite in the monastery at Clonmacnoise and several generations of his family who were active in that place up to around the year 1200AD. I don't have time to get into the details on all of these people but will add that one of the most famous was a man called Conn na mBocht - Conn of the Poor. Amongst other things he looked after the poor at Clonmacnoise.

At the time of Aidacain there were no Universities or many places of higher learning in Ireland. Foremost in the country on the educational front would have been Clonmacnoise and it is without any shadow of doubt that it was at Clonmacnoise that the Egans learned to be scribes, brehons and wise men. With such education they would have been ideally equipped to help large clans to organise the running of their clan armies, lands and taxes. Initially they put their talents to use in the service of the O'Kellys in east Galway who were great supporters of Clonmacnoise. By the early medieval period they were the chief accountants, brehons and marshals of the O'Kelly forces... all very important posts.

From these positions they acquired much land and wealth in East Galway. Their next step was to set up schools of learning and this they did at Parke and Duniry (both also in Co Galway in O'Kelly territory). It is likely that Parke came first but this has not been established definitively as yet. Both were thriving in the 1400s.

We know that Ballymacegan, Co Tipperary was a school for the education of judges/brehons in the 1500s and was flourishing into the mid 1600s. These Egans almost certainly came south from Parke. Why settle at Ballymacegan? It was ideally located in the centre of the country and near the Shannon River. This was in the territory of the Duke of Ormond and it was a Palatinate and not subject to Dublin Castle. The area was free of the strife for long periods because Ormond had his own very large army to protect his territory. The Egans were clever, as usual, to set up in such a place. They got on well with Ormond as no doubt he welcomed a peaceful, well educated family who could advise him on all things associated with lands and the Brehon Laws which were still in force in his area.

So why was Aidacain buried in Fuerty and not Clonmacnoise? The answer can be found in the ancient annals which tell us that the O'Kellys were at war with the authorities in Clonmacnoise in the 840 -880 AD period and most likely Aidacain was not allowed to be buried there. Instead he was buried in the most sacred place readily available to the O'Kellys in their own territory ie Fuerty , which had been founded by St Patrick.



O'Kelly Lands – East Galway

(Fuerty is near the “3” under Roscommon and Clonmacnoise is near the letter “S” in Shannon)

Acknowledgments

In conclusion I must acknowledge that without the PhD Thesis work of Ms Annette Kehnel in 1995 on the Church and Lands of St Ciaran at Clonmacnoise it would have been virtually impossible to tie together all the facts presented above about the early Egans. Her work is available as ISBN 3-8258-3442-5.

Thank you all for listening – I’ll try to answer any questions you may have now or later.”

*Michael J.S. Egan
Mac Aodhagáin
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