

LITHICS WITH AN IDENTITY CRISIS

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LITHICS WITH AN IDENTITY CRISIS

Marion Dowd finds more than weeds in her garden.

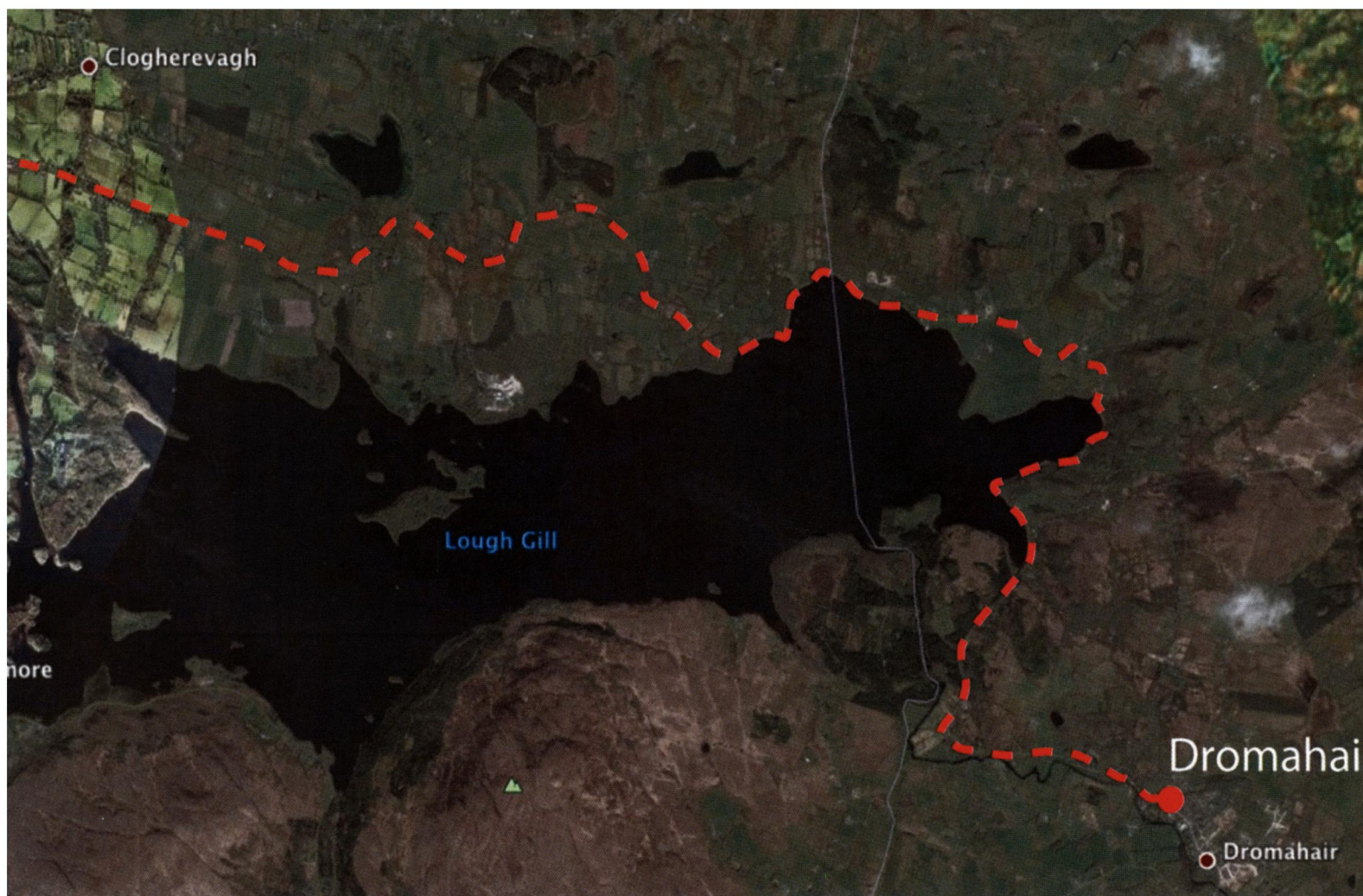
It is not always possible to get away from the day job. Taking a break from work one summer evening in 2008, I started weeding my back garden in Dromahair, Co. Leitrim. Within minutes I had picked up a piece of chert and, on closer inspection, realised that it was struck. Since that initial discovery a small assemblage of lithics have been recovered from the garden topsoil, along with seashells and pieces of charcoal. I was curious as to where the material might have come from, and my neighbour Nicola Fallon was able to provide one possible answer. When our housing estate in Dromahair (Carrickacroghery td) was first built in 2004–5, the developer brought in truckloads of topsoil for the gardens from a green-field site at Strandhill (Larass/Strandhill td), Co. Sligo, which was subsequently developed to become a second housing estate (Fig. 1). It is not possible to establish with certainty whether or not the lithics and seashells from my garden originated from the Strandhill site, but at present it seems the most likely option. Though there was no recorded archaeological site at that location, the finds suggest that some form of prehistoric activity once took place there. The archaeological site, or at least part of it, then seems to have been inadvertently transported across the Sligo–Leitrim border to Dromahair, some 28km to the east!

Above: Fig. 1—Possible route of the archaeological material from Strandhill to Dromahair.

The archaeological material

The assemblage collected from the topsoil in Dromahair suggests that limited episodes of knapping, domestic activities and shellfish consumption took place at the original archaeological site. Dr Farina Sternke has examined the lithics and has identified the presence of a possible core and core fragments, a flake and a possible flake, débitage and a retouched artefact that was probably used as a scraper (Fig. 2). Based on size and technology, Sternke suggests a late Neolithic or early Bronze Age date for the assemblage. The seashells include edible periwinkles, common limpet, oyster and common cockle (Fig. 3). The Strandhill site lies in close proximity to





the coast, where these species of shellfish are in plentiful supply and continue to be gathered to the present day. This is not the only option, of course—the seashells may have arrived at their present location via other routes, and cannot be associated with the lithics with certainty; this is simply one scenario.

The moral of the tale

It is worth questioning whether archaeological material such as that described here is of any scholarly value, deriving as it does from heavily disturbed *ex situ* contexts. Nevertheless, this small prehistoric assemblage from Strandhill/Dromahaire raises an interesting issue of provenancing in relation to the large number of artefacts in our national collections that have been found in topsoil in the course of activities such as ploughing, land reclamation or gardening. Most of these finds are probably disturbed from *in situ* archaeological sites located at deeper levels or in the immediate environs. It is likely, however, that some artefacts may have travelled a considerable distance when topsoil was transported from one location to another. Such distances may not have been significant prior to the advent of mechanised farming. Nevertheless, even eighteenth- and nineteenth-century landscaping of demesnes would have involved the movement of large quantities of soil, possibly over several kilometres and potentially between different townlands. Thus when dealing with artefacts found in topsoil more caution may need to be exercised about where dots are placed on distribution maps, particularly with regard to micro-landscape settings.

Left: Fig. 2—Retouched chert artefact.

Right: Fig. 3—Seashells recovered.

Though clearly limited in the inferences that can be drawn, finds like those described here *can* contribute to the broader understanding of a locality, particularly if it is possible to retrace the likely origin of the material. In this instance it seems that a previously unrecorded late Neolithic or early Bronze Age site may once have existed just north of Knocknarea Mountain. Though a modest collection, the finds contribute towards what is known of prehistoric life in the rich Cúil Írra peninsula of County Sligo. A collection licence number (2011C8) has been issued for the finds and they will be deposited in the National Museum in due course. ■

