

CRANNOGS

DWELLINGS ON
ARTIFICIAL OR
MODIFIED NATURAL
ISLANDS IN LOCHS



By James Macnaughton

The Irish word “crann” means a tree (or a wooden pin, a pulpit, a churn, a driver’s box on a coach) and “-og” is a diminutive, so “Crannog” is literally a young tree. Most of them were built on young greenwood piles, because they resisted rotting in the water for longer. In Ireland they were very widespread, with over 1,200 known examples, and in Scotland there are around 600, but not many of them have been excavated as yet. They are also found in Scandinavia and throughout Europe. The earliest Crannogs are 5,000 years old, and many of them continued in use until the 17th Century. Where our Clan is concerned the Crannogs on Loch Tay are the most interesting, because our Pictish forebears were settled on Loch Tay side many centuries before Christ.

The Crannog at Acharn on Loch Tay is very much in Macnaughton country. It has been totally re-constructed, starting in 1994, and a visit to it is a must for anyone touring Scotland from the U.K. or overseas. A 15 metre circular platform is connected to the shore by a 20 metre long timber causeway and it is supported on 168 timber piles. Driving these piles into the loch bed required great strength and skill and it took 12 days of very hard work to drive in all of the alder wood piles. They were sunk 2 metres into the bed of the loch by lashing a cross pole to the pile and twisting it to and fro to drill it into the loch bed. Then the deck was pegged and lashed onto the piles. The walls of the round house were made from hazel stems woven together and the roof was thatched with reeds from the loch. A stone hearth was made in the centre of the dwelling and the smoke simply found its way out through the thatch. So everything was constructed as exactly as possible as the Picts would have done it, and visitors can join in four week courses on interpreting archaeological evidence, learning ancient skills, eating food made from ancient recipes etc. etc.

Their most recent project was to make a log boat based on the Bronze Age Carpow log boat found in the Tay near Abernethy (another Macnaughton stronghold)! They used replica Bronze Age axes, adzes and chisels. The boat was launched in September 2011 and 6 people paddled it across Loch Tay to the Crannog Centre. In those distant days waterways were the main channels for travel and communication, so boats were very

much in evidence on rivers and lochs as well as on the open seas. Events are held at the Acharn Crannog Centre at the Midsummer, Lughnasah and Samhain festivals.

The Crannogs were used as refuges in time of trouble, as fishing stations and even as holiday residences! They were a symbol of local wealth and power. They were the centres of prosperous Iron Age farms, where people lived in an easily defended place to protect themselves and their stock from raiders. Cattle and crops were tended on nearby fields, sheep on hill pastures. Local woods provided fruit, hazelnuts, mushrooms, medicines and wild boar, deer and hares. Some Crannogs were used by Monastic Hermits and Metal Smiths, as places where they could work in peace and isolation.

At Oakbank Crannog, in the waters off Fearnan on the North bank of Loch Tay, the archaeologists found, preserved in the cold, peaty waters of the loch, structural timbers, food, utensils and bits of clothing 2,600 years old. There was even a butter dish with some butter still on it!

There are high concentrations in Argyll (including the one on Loch Dubh, which is very much a Macnaughton site) and in Dumfries and Galloway. In the far North West of Scotland and on the Hebrides Islands, where wood was in very short supply, the Crannogs were built of stone, were reached by stone causeways, and are known as “Island Duns” (Dun being the Gaelic for a Fort) or Atlantic Roundhouses. There is one on Loch Olabhat on North Uist called Eilean Domnuill, which dates back to Neolithic times.

In Ireland, the Crannogs date back to Neolithic times in many instances and are found in central and N.W areas of the country. County Cavan has a particularly large number. At Loughbrickland, South of Banbridge in County Down, there is one, which was occupied since 4,000 BC, and the Maginneses of Iveagh lived there until they built a castle on the shore. At Craiganowen Castle (16th Century) 10K East of Quinn, near Ennis in County Clare, a Crannog has been re-constructed. Castle Espie Wetlands Bird Sanctuary in County Down is planning to have a Crannog built.

Research for this article was based on: info@crannog.co.uk and two books by Dr. Nicholas Dixon – “The Crannogs of Perthshire” (Price £3) and “The Crannogs of Scotland” (Price £17.99). Also on: oracleireland.com/ireland/history/crannog.php. There is plenty of information on the Internet, including some good illustrations, but the best thing to do is to go and visit some of the Crannogs and find yourself looking at some of the deepest of your roots. The picture of the Acharn Crannog Centre is from CMAW files and was donated to the clan by member Barry McNaughton.

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