



# Caldragh Stone Figure

By Richard Warner



— LOUGH ERNE —  
**PILGRIM WAY**



**Summary.**

Stone statue bearing a pair of almost identical back-to-back figures. Carboniferous limestone.

Date: Probably Early Medieval, 9th to 11th century AD.

Present Location: Caldragh graveyard, Dreenan townland, Boa Island, Lower Lough Erne, Co. Fermanagh.

Find-place: probably the present location.

Main reference: Lanigan Wood 2004.

Best published illustrations: Warner 2003 (showing it almost complete); Ryan 1991 (a partial view).

Also known as: the 'Boa Island figure', 'Boa Island statue' and 'the Boa Island Janus'.

Dimensions: height 140 cm; width 46 cm; thickness 30.5 cm.





## Description

This description is based on the almost complete statue, as it can now be reconstructed on paper since part of its additional lower portion was discovered in 2001 (Warner 2003). Unfortunately, the two parts have not yet been physically joined together. Descriptions and discussions published before 2001 are likely to contain understandable misinterpretations of the then incomplete stone. The surface is extremely abraded in some places and there is no doubt that some features have been removed by destructive weathering – which continues at an increasing rate.

The roughly square-section pillar-stone is deeply carved with two almost identical, almost full-size, figures, placed back-to-back. Each figure is surmounted by a triangular face with a long rectangular nose, an open mouth, a long-pointed chin, and almond-shaped eyes each with a raised border. One face also has a protruding tongue and clearly marked pupils; the other has neither but does have a clear groove outlining the face (I shall refer to the figures as the ‘tongue-figure’ and the ‘non-tongue-figure’). The tops of each face are not quite the same size, that of tongue-figure being thicker than the other. Between these heads is a fairly deep rectangular socket. On one side (right-hand side of tongue-figure), filling the space between the two faces and possibly extending onto and below the non-tongue shoulder is a pattern of opposing diagonal grooves – creating a feathering effect. This is not present, or more likely has not survived, on the other side. On the left-hand side of non-tongue-figure, behind the surrounding facial groove, are triangles containing short diagonal grooves.

Each figure has a pair of spindly arms, running diagonally from knobby shoulders, and ending with long five-digit hands, which bend around the corners of the stone. Because half of the lower portion is still missing only one hand of each figure is present, but the symmetry is clear. Running around the whole, continuous and embracing both figures, is a broad band that appears to be a belt, and which runs under the arms. Adjacent to the belt a series of short lines appears to indicate decoration or fabric-edging of some sort. Six diagonal grooves on the lower part of the right arm of the tongue-figure are noted, but are unexplained. Marking the vertical centre-line of each figure is a narrow, very raised band, which begins not at the chin but under the belt, and appears to run down the lower length of the pillar.

## Find circumstances

When it was drawn by Du Noyer, in 1841, this statue was in Caldragh graveyard, where it stands today. A hitherto unknown piece of the statue was discovered in 2001, lying only a couple of metres away amongst rubble. It therefore seems likely that the statue has always been at or near this spot.

## Discussion

From 1933, when Lady Lowry-Corry published the first paper on the 'Boa Island statue', as it became known, there was an overwhelming scholarly opinion that it was a pagan Celtic statue of pre-Christian (Iron Age). This was the opinion, for instance, of Henry (1965), Ross (1967), Rynne (1972), Hickey (1975) and Raftery (1984), who all stressed the close similarities between this statue (which they usually called, incorrectly, a 'Janus' figure) with Celtic Iron Age statues in Germany, France and Roman Britain. Yet most of them allowed the possibility that the Dreenan statue might be of Early Medieval date. With time, and more study, the 'Celtic pagan' explanation became less certain, and Ireland's leading Iron Age scholar, Raftery, was led to modify an early opinion (1984, 309) that 'There can, of course, be no doubt that .... the Boa Island carving .... belong[ed] to the pagan Iron Age', with a later one that it 'could belong to the pre-Christian period' (1994, 186; *my italics*). In 1991, however, Ryan had firmly placed the figure, 'often erroneously described as ... pagan Iron Age', into the later part of the Early Medieval period – 9th or 10th century (191, 213). Since the discovery of the extra portion in 2001 the general weight of scholarly opinion has firmly moved to favour an Early Medieval / Early Christian date (in particular Lanigan Wood 2004), but stressing a continuation from a pagan tradition – although it is not clear to me what that actually means. The change of emphasis has arisen partly because some of the unclear, but pagan-looking features (such as the 'phallus' and possible crossed legs (neither of which was a previously unreasonable supposition) have now been disproved by the new portion.

Does this mean that we shall never be able to date the statue with any degree of certainty? If we hope to use the facial characteristics, as is so often done (such phrases as 'a typical Celtic head' abound in the literature), we shall fail. Not just because, when all is said and done, a head is just a head, but more seriously because so many of the comparative carvings, and not just in Ireland, are themselves undated and circular arguments are the rule in this field. The comparison exercise has often been to search amongst the foreign pieces to discover a single similar trait irrespective of how different the whole is. The problem is that there are few convincing British or Continental parallels for Dreenan, either in the whole or in the detail, and indeed even the details can be found much closer to home. The socket in the top, whose purpose is admittedly obscure, can be found (after a fashion) on Romano-British stone heads, but also on Early Medieval stone figures in Fermanagh (White Island). Again, the 'belt' can be found on Celtic Continental statues, but also on local statues whose Early Medieval date is certain (for instance White Island again). The crossed arms can be found (vaguely) on Celtic statues on the Continent but more persuasively on a certainly Early Medieval, clerical, stone figure in Donegal (Carndonagh).



The vertical band, which seems to indicate the front seam of a garment, but goes downwards from the belt, leaving the upper part devoid of a seam, is also paralleled at White Island. It goes without saying that where local parallels can be found they should carry far more weight than any distant comparanda, and contrary to the difficulty in dating many British and Continental figures and heads the statues at White Island and Carndonagh are, without any shadow of doubt, Early Medieval / Early Christian – indeed probably not earlier than the 9th century AD.

We are now faced with the question of what the statue represents, and it must be stressed that my conclusion that it is Christian in date does not mean that I believe it to be Christian in nature. On the contrary it gives every appearance of being decidedly un-Christian, as Helen Lanigan Wood noted (2004, 42) - ‘two such grim-faced figures, staring menacingly in opposite directions’ might not be expected in a Christian community. I would not be willing to go so far as to suggest that the stone is ithyphallic (representing a phallus) but it is not an unreasonable suggestion – especially as a plain phallic pillar is to be seen in nearby Killadeas churchyard. The shrieking mouths, the spindly arms and hands, the abrupt shoulders, the pointed faces sunk between those shoulders, the back-to-back duplication of the Dreenan figures appear to be very earthy – the general impression is that this statue represents a personage to be feared and avoided. Indeed the image that the figures conjure up for me is of an all-seeing malignant bird perched on a pillar-stone. I would especially draw attention to the diagonal hatching between the heads and on the upper part of one head. In my opinion this is deliberate feathering to make the neck appear crow-like. This implication that the statue is intended to represent a malicious bird-like being has the support of the name of the island – Boa Island. Early spellings strongly suggest that this place-name is from the Irish Inis Badhbha – ‘the island of the hooded-crow’, or more specifically the ‘island of the (war-goddess) Badhbh’. The destructive, powerful goddess Badhbh, and a couple of similar magical and unpleasant females figure prominently in the Irish legends of the Medieval period. We cannot doubt that the personalities go back to pagan times, as do some of the stories in which they appear, but their representation as statues carries no chronological information, nor an implication that they represent a continuing tradition of statuary.

The present graveyard, apparently the reason for the name Caldragh, Irish Cealtrach – ‘a graveyard’, contains a large number of what must be assumed to be either unbaptised infants’ graves or paupers’ graves. There appears to be a stone-and-earth banked enclosure, of roughly oval shape, surrounding the graveyard (Foley & McHugh 2014, 736-7, site 1146). If this enclosure is ancient it might give us an archaeological context for the statue, but we have no reason to think that it should have been ecclesiastical. It is very clear that as late as 16th century, to the Christian Irish the mythical otherworld was very real. For what it is worth my opinion would be that here at Dreenan we have a local cult-centre to Badhbh, within a defining enclosure.

The Dreenan statue (and the graveyard and another less important statue within it), although the property of the landowner, are ostensibly ‘protected’ (scheduled: SMR FER 153:008).

Nonetheless, the statue cannot be considered to be safe – either from weathering (which is severely affecting it) or from theft.



## Persons

Helen Lanigan Wood (formerly Helen Hickey) has written extensively on the Dreenan figure, and the other Fermanagh statues, and is Ireland's leading expert on the subject. She was for many years curator of Fermanagh County Museum.

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