

The Rathgeran Stone

BY E. W. HUGHES

*Rathgeran Hill, as the name suggests, is the Fort of Rowan trees and signifies a place of some importance. It is some importance. It is some six miles east of Graignamanagh beyond the village of Ballymurphy in the Vee between the old and new roads through the historic Scollogue Gap. Considerably lower than the more well known pinnacles it might properly be called a foothill to the Blackstairs Mountain Range. It is approximately 700 feet high with a gradual and easy approach from the main road. The owner of the land, Patrick Redmond, first spoke about the Rathgeran stone and an invitation to inspect it was fulfilled early last August. Fifteen minutes of easy uphill walking brought us to a spot on the hillside where an unbelievable sight met our eyes. There, lying almost covered with grass and fern, was a richly decorated slab of Newgrange vintage. Having carefully cleared away some of the surrounding grass and clay, five groups of concentric circles could be clearly traced, two of which appeared to be connected. The largest of these measure roughly 20 inches in diameter and contain seven circles each. The stone itself is coffin shape. Again, iceberg like, only a small portion of the stone was overground and possibly at one time it was completely covered, which may explain why it remained hidden

Returning to the site later, and having cleared away some of the surrounding soil, an additional three groups of small circles were exposed, bringing the total to eight.

The cover picture is a photograph by Miss Nell Prendergast of the Rathgeran Stone.

HOW DID IT GET THERE ? Experts distinguish between natural rocks and others, natural being those in their original habitat, and with some exceptions, these decorated stones are generally associated with Passage Grave art. As the late Dr. O'Riordan points out such engravings are really religious symbols having a sacred meaning, the origin and significance of which is long lost to us. In the immediate vicinity of the Rath-

geran Stone there is no evidence of a pre Christian burial site but on the hill top some 300 yards higher up are to be seen what might be some of the encircling stones of a Bronze Age Passage Grave. Undoubtedly the hill top area shows signs of interference as all the smaller stones were apparently used in the making of field fences and the earthen tumulus may originally have covered the Passage Grave has been scattered. Nevertheless, the following points indicate that there might be a Passage Grave site : (a) Situation on the Rathgeran Hill-top; (b) The circular plan as indicated by existing remains; (c) Proximity to other hill-top cairns at Brandon Hill and Cullentra. Could it be possible that in demolition of this historic monument an effort was made to remove downhill what might prove useful and that the effort was too much in the case of the Rathgeran Stone ? Could it be that here, as in Newgrange (Bru na Boinne) and Tara with prehistoric monuments existed the cemetery associated with Doninga, near Goresbridge of Din Riogh near Leighlinbridge ? Or again was the ancient site originally a Fort as the townland name suggests later, perhaps, to be used as a cemetery when it ceased to serve as a site for the living ? Perhaps even the reverse might be more accurate. What if the scribings are on a natural rock or boulder unconnected with any monument. This also is possible and there are many such examples scattered throughout Ireland known as the "Galician Group". All of which suggest that until the hill-top is surveyed and photographed, preferably from the air, followed perhaps by careful excavation, one can only guess to what exact period the Rathgeran Stone belongs.

Certain, however, is the fact that this Stone can be regarded as a valuable addition to our existing pre-Christian monuments : *RATH gCAORTHANN.

NOTE : To Miss N. Prendergast M.A. of the National Museum I am indebted for help and guidance also to Mr. Pat Nyham of the Ordnance Survey Office for the helpful research into and translation of the Townland name. At one stage I frankly decided against writing this believing as I still do that it is a field which belongs to the expert only.