

## Dun Aengus

A stone fort on the very western edge of Europe; mute about its history when questioned by scholars; subject of romantic speculation on one of the most romantic spots in Ireland - the Aran Islands - Dun Aengus was created out of the stone and mystery of Ireland.

Dun Aengus (also Dun Angus and Dun Aonghusa) is located on Inish-more, the largest of the three Aran Islands. A visitor is not impressed by Dun Aengus when he views it from the low point of a long, rock strewn slope. Nor does the dun (**fort**) emerge slowly into view, for the visitor must concentrate on every step of the treacherous walk up the slope, every step a risk of ankle turned on a stone. But atop the slope, the visitor sees a semicircular stone wall of obvious antiquity enclosing a space that ends dramatically at a 300 foot cliff that falls off into the Atlantic Ocean.

The fort consists of three irregular semicircles, each a line of defense. Aside from the walls, one mode of defense is a band of stones set in the ground. Called a **chevaux-de-frise**, the stones are closely packed, set at an angle and intended to thwart an attack up the slope. Fortunately for the peaceful visitor to Dun Aengus, an intact chevaux-de-frise does not surround the fort, but the debris of such a defensive use of stone makes the walking trip to the fort slow and hazardous. The inner wall is awesome, thirteen feet thick and eighteen feet high in places, immortared with stone laid by hand upon stone. The enclosed space is 150 feet north and south and 140 feet east and west. The cliff at the western edge of the fort is as sheer as the Cliffs of Moher, but at 300 feet not as steep.

The view from atop the parapet is stunning. To the west is the expanse of the ocean to the horizon and 3000 miles beyond to North America. To the east is a moonscape, the rock strewn slope the walker must traverse and beyond, the openness of Inishmore and the stones of Aran everywhere.

What is this structure doing in this place? When was it built? Who built it? Archeologists, historians, antiquarians have no definitive answers to these and other questions about Dun Aengus. This is a fort with no water supply or evidence of dwellings, hardly suited for a long siege. Estimates on its time of construction range from a few centuries B.C. to the eighth or ninth century. Its builders - perhaps the legendary **Fir Bolgs**, perhaps the **Danes**.

The Fir Bolgs are thought to be a Celtic people from the continent who interact in Irish history-mythology with the Milesians, the Tuatha De Danann, and the Fomorians. The earliest description of West Connaught by Roderick O'Flaherty: "On the south side of Dun-Engus ... It is named of Engun PicHuathmore of the reliques of the Belqmen in Ireland, those living about the birth-time of Christ."

The Irish writer J. M. Synge accepts this history as true history when he writes about Dun Aengus, "I prop my book open with stones touched by the Fir-bolgs." Sir William Wilde, father of Oscar Wilde, hosted a reception in Dun Aengus in 1857 and in his remarks, he too accepted the Fir-Bolgs as builders: "I believe I now point to the stronghold prepared as the last standing place of the Firbolg Aborigines of Ireland, to fight their last battle if driven to the western surge ..."

Some Aran opinion, influenced by the 15th century Welsh historian Giraldus Cambrensis, accepts the Danes, Norse raiders of the ninth and tenth centuries, as the builders of Dun Aengus. Neither legend nor history helps an investigator to answer his questions about Dun Aengus. Even its name is a subject of argument.

Perhaps unknowable, Dun Aengus is nonetheless real, a place of awe and inspiration, the "Acropolis of Aran" it is "the most magnificent barbaric monument now extant in Europe."

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