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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Book Review: The Boyne Currach: from Beneath the Shadows of Newgrange By Claidhbh Ó Gibne

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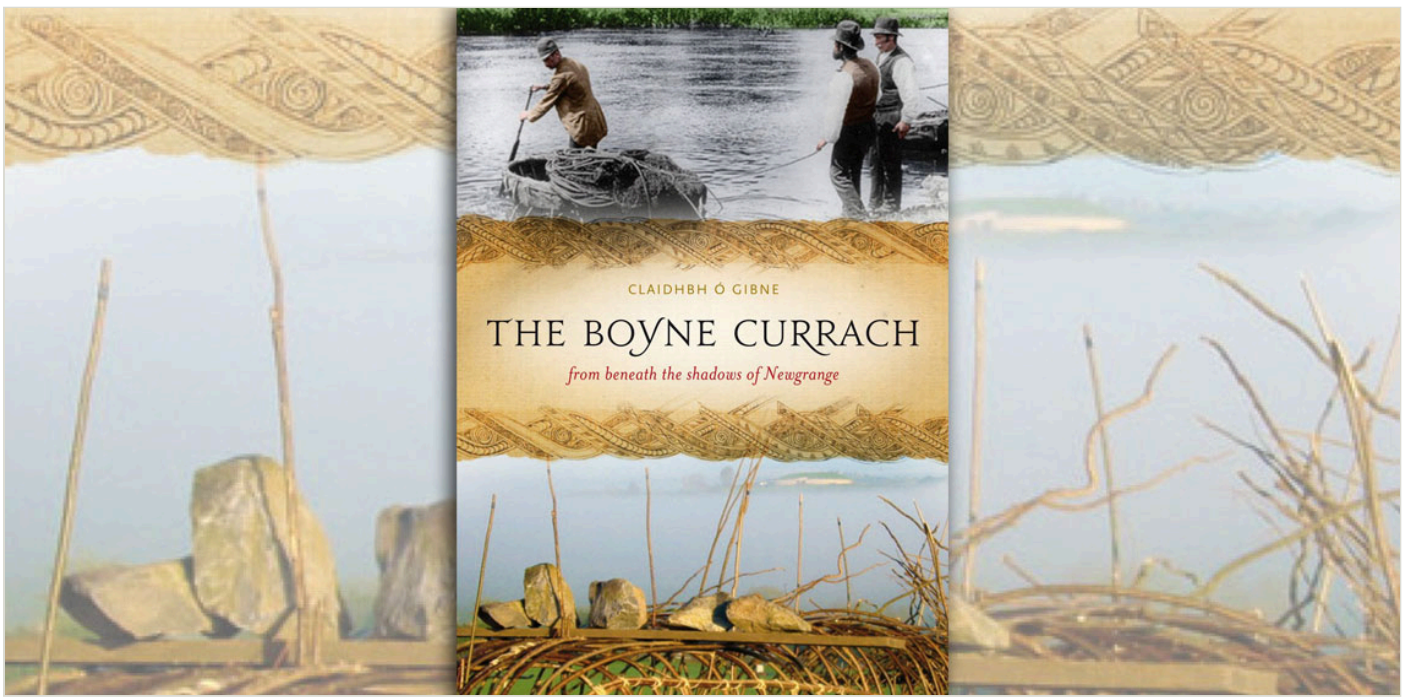

Claidhbh Ó Gibne has devoted himself to building traditional currachs and researching their history. His new volume, The Boyne Currach: From beneath the shadows of Newgrange, puts the currach in the context of the history of hide-covered boats, explains in detail how to build one, and describes the current experimental construction of a very large example.

> The book includes a fine recounting of written and archaeological evidence for hide-covered boats, from Herodotus's description of watercraft used on the Euphrates River to Roman accounts of them in Ireland and Galicia.

In the study of prehistory, the boat often seems comparable to the kind of particle that physicists have identified in theory but cannot yet find. Organic construction leaves no archaeological trace for such astonishing accomplishments as the peopling of Oceania, for example. Increasingly, however, evidence points to widespread patterns of sophisticated seafaring, and often associated colonization, very early in human history – even 130,000 years ago, in the case of a 2010 discovery on the island of Crete (The New York Times, 15 February 2010).

The early colonization of the British Isles is one such story, and this is why the humble currach of Ireland carries within its small frame such an important message. Even today, crossings by boat to the British Isles from the European mainland are not undertaken lightly by any mariner, yet megalithic constructions stand as undeniable proof that Stone Age people had to have made such passages. Like the bark canoes and skin-covered kayaks of North America, the currach is a direct descendent of a much earlier technology that proved so highly suited to its environment and use that it survived thousands of years, even into to modern times. Currachs deserve close examination—and they turn out to be neither so entirely humble nor so very simple.

As he describes in The Boyne Currach: From beneath the shadows of Newgrange, Claidhbh Ó Gibne's study began innocently with the Boyne River of his youth. An artist, he returned to the area as an adult and became fascinated by the organic construction of the area's currachs. He built one for himself and then paddled it the length of the river. On such a voyage a new vista opens with every meander of a river. Similiarly, Ó Gibne opened a new thread of research and fresh insights with each task of currach building he undertook. His book is a lyrical tribute but also a practical how-to manual. It is both enthusiastic speculation and academic treatise. It is informed by both the written record and oral tradition. The combinations are delightful.

Ó Gibne writes quite lovingly of the Boyne (page 25): "It does not rise in high mountains, and it is not required to hammer its way through rock-filled obstacles or over falls, preferring instead to slither and curl between hills and flat plains, lush and green. It smells of meadow, rich pastures intermingled with wooded glens, waltzing rhythmically in the wind that chooses to remain, for a brief moment at least, in slumbered shadows, cooling its gentle waves." History here is a constant presence. A tale of an unusually large salmon caught by a currach fisherman in the 1940s might pivot neatly into a record of an abbot taken to task in 1366 for erecting a fish weir that interrupted accustomed currach routes.

The book includes a fine recounting of written and archaeological evidence for hide-covered boats, from Herodotus's description of watercraft used on the Euphrates River to Roman accounts of them in Ireland and Galicia. This leads logically to the fascinating history of leather tanning, drawing in everything from descriptions in The Iliad to the tanning methods of native cultures, nicely augmented by the author's direct experience. Remarkably, in Ireland and Wales boats from the same tradition remained in use within living memory—though the memory has been growing dim.

Ó Gibne became so enraptured with the story that in 1997 he founded the Boyne Currach Center in his home to preserve and further the currach building arts. He teaches currach construction and use, and the study has plainly deepened and enriched his appreciation of his environment. He knows where the best hazel rods of the right size are to be found; where currachs were built most recently, by whom, and for what purpose – often for poaching salmon illegally. Interspersed with the written records are direct personal observations, plus the memories and tales of local people.

By closely studying component technologies – tanning, basketweaving, lashing and fishing – the author expanded his understanding of the boats. He describes in detail how to build one; in such a way that anyone could give it a try. His own cleverly rendered drawings are not only charming but make the techniques very clear, my favorite example being the depiction of the particularly important technique adapted from basketweaving, called 'mouthwaling.' Mastering these techniques is one skill; another, equally important, is setting them down in writing and illustrations that can readily convey knowledge to others.

The more he learned about currachs, the more Ó Gibne became convinced of the capability and practicality of large hide-covered boats, which are frequently, but scantly, mentioned in historical works. His subtitle, "beneath the shadows of Newgrange" refers to the famous Stone Age structure of about 3,200 BC, erected close to the Boyne and famously illuminated inside by sunlight only at the winter solstice. A recent hypothesis, the author writes (page 133), posits that stones for the edifice may have been brought by a water route up the Boyne. With the rising tide, a boat with enough displacement could lift even a large stone slung underneath its hull. Then, it would require comparatively little energy to move the stone a considerable distance. (In the age of sail, extremely heavy anchors were slung under ship's boats in the same way. I personally maneuvered a 90 kg iron mushroom mooring and a like weight of heavy chain in this same manner from a 54 kg, 4.6 m plywood dory.) To test the seaworthiness and utility of a large currach, Ó Gibne first built and sailed a 7.3 m boat. As of the book's publication, and as of this writing, he was amid the construction of an 11 m currach, a massive undertaking requiring a sheathing of 30 hides, lashed and stitched using only Stone Age technology, such as bone needles. The author hopes to "recreate the first tomb builders' journey to Ireland from the Continent and their transportation of stones to the royal site on the banks of the Boyne."

It is to be hoped that the volume will be updated with a new printing once this Newgrange currach has been tested at sea. (If a second edition comes, I might ask the author to include an index and a good map of the Boyne River area, since some of the place names are tricky to find even on computer maps. Also, some of the Irish historical references might do with brief elaboration for those of us not fortunate enough to be Irish. Photographs of the Newgrange stones, too, would help comprehend the scale of effort involved.)

Many people, whether landsmen or sailors, have encountered images of currachs at some point in life. The boat is an icon of Irish folklore. Thanks to Ó Gibne, we can learn in an engaging manner a great deal about what it is we've been seeing, and what it means.

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