

The Lios

Email from Diarmuid Ó'Giolláin 6th August, 2003

"The word is 'lios' (gen. 'leasa', pl. 'liosanna'). It is commonly used in English, particularly in the south, and appears in the anglicized versions of place-names as 'Lis(s)-'. It is one of several words for what archaeologists call 'ringforts'. They are also commonly called 'raths' (Ir. 'ráth') or '(fairy) forts'. Ringforts are dated between the 5th and 10th centuries AD and were enclosed farmsteads (the circular shape is from the earthen bank and the dyke). Nearly 50,000 have been identified. You'll find a brief and succinct overview in the Atlas of the Rural Irish Landscape (ed. Aalen, Whelan and Stout), pp. 44-47.

I don't know when ringforts came to be seen as sacred places, but it must have been after they ceased to be dwelling places. The medieval chronicle *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* ('The Book of Invasions') tells of the defeat of the Tuatha Dé Danann by the Gaels, the former retiring underground and their chiefs each being assigned a 'sídh' or fairy fort (the mod. Ir. word for fairy, 'síóg', is a derivative of the former). See Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*. In modern folk culture, the ringforts are the abode of the fairies and sacred places to be respected. Profaning them in any way brings dire consequences. This belief is one of the reasons so many still survive. People or animals might be abducted by the fairies and brought to the forts. There are accounts of people leaving offerings outside the forts. Don't confuse these beliefs with the twee fairies of the Victorians. You'll find representative 20th century texts in Séamus Ó Duilearga, *Seán Ó Conaill's Book*, where narratives no. 91 to 137 are fairy legends (from the Ballinskelligs region), and in Seán Ó hEochaidh et al., *Fairy legends from Donegal*. Lady Gregory's *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* is among best collections recorded in English. Angela Bourke has given the most interesting readings of such narratives (*The Burning of Brigit Cleary* and various articles).

You may find information on your local lios in the Irish Folklore Commission archive. It and its index are on microfilm in Q-1. Copyright is held by the Folklore Dept in UCD so if you publish anything from it make sure you get written permission: they are very strict about that. There are two collections. The main collection is largely in Irish. If you check the provenance index you will find what was recorded in your area (organized by province/county/barony/parish). Judging from your address, there were

Irish speakers in your district in the glory years of the Folklore Commission (the last Irish in East Cork seems to have been spoken around Knockadoon), and its collectors probably recorded from them. The other collection is the Schools' Collection and involved the senior pupils of most of the rural primary schools in the 26 counties in the late 1930s. They recorded local oral traditions, including traditions of local ringforts. There is a book with the names of the schools in Q-1 (province/county/barony/parish). The Ordnance Survey may have recorded information in the Name-Books or Memoirs from before the Famine. You may be able to find your lios on some of the detailed 19th century maps. I think they're in Q-1 as well."