

# The Fair of Carman: A Further Reflection of Ancient Ireland's Affinity to Sport

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Irish history is rich with accounts of fairs and assemblies and the role that these gatherings have played in shaping Irish culture. The countryside is generously populated with well-known landmarks that indicate the ancient site of a gathering of people. Honoring these traditional assemblies has long been a custom recorded meticulously in the ancient manuscripts. "There were assemblies at wells, at cemeteries, on mountain heights and beside rivers and waterways. A number of them had their inception as funeral games honoring famous persons."

The Fair of Carman was just such an assembly: a gathering to honor the dead. Carman was neither a queen nor heroine, but rather a noxious woman. The celebration of funeral games was likely in honor of her death rather than in honor of her good deeds or her good life. The ancient fair of Carman that developed at her grave site became an assembly of repute and can be likened to its larger and more famous counterpart, the Fair of Tailtiu, or more popularly known as the Tailteann Games. Sport and athletic contests were a significant and lasting component of the Fair of Carman.

Earlier research has acknowledged the prominence of Aenoch Tailteann (The Tailteann Fair) as the most significant, well known and continuous of fairs of the ancient Irish. As the Pythian Games and the Nemean Games were the lesser of the Pan-Hellenic contests and secondary to the Olympic Games, so was the Fair of Carman secondary to the more famous Tailteann assembly. Irish historians and manuscript translators consistently mention these two ancient fairs in that order.

Both Carman and Tailteann assemblies exhibited some commonalities that should be noted. They were both sanctioned by the Ard Ri (high king). They were celebrated with regularity, they contained a well-kept moral code, and they both attached significance to games and athletic contests.

Aeonach Carman (The Fair of Carman), however, has been accorded a particular place in Irish history. Most of what is known of the Fair of Carman has been described in a lengthy 11th Century poem. This 81-quatrain epic poem describes the fair in such detail that historians have referred to the contents of the poem as a kind of bench mark description of life in pre-Christian Ireland. Historians as well as archaeologists, however are reluctant to define an exact location of this ancient sport festival. The most authoritative conclusions are that it was along the middle portion of the Barrow Riber in south Kildare. Most historians, however, have been content with not pinpointing a conclusive site.

The Fair of Carman attests to the love of sport and athletic contests of the Irish people. The assembly was staged in an open area with a special area for horse racing. On each day of the fair the games were dedicated to or participated in by designated people. The games and races were given special recognition in the descriptive poem. Seven horse races, military shows and athletic contests, mainly with warriors' implements, were a part of the celebration. The sport of hurling likely occupied a prominent place in the earliest fairs of Carman.

Much of what historians infer about life in ancient Ireland has been gleaned from poetry recorded in ancient manuscripts. The poet's description of the Fair of Carman has given insight into the culture of Irish Antiquity. Bards were important personages in village and tribal life. They were indeed, the journalists, newscasters, and sportswriters of their time. Although their tales undoubtedly contained embellishment and exaggeration, and because they were recorded by monks or scribes of the Church, contained some Christian bias, nonetheless, they were essentially the embodiment of the history of ancient Ireland. So the Fair of Carman, as described in the poem gives an acceptable account of Irish culture and reiterates ancient Ireland's affinity to sport.