

GONE TO GROUND

I am going to talk about three focal points of devotion in Irish Christianity—the corporal, or ‘first class’ relic, ‘second class’ or associative relics and their shrines, and the holy well—and about some of the ways in which they relate to one another

Ireland is relatively poor in relics of the saints. Remains of holy bodies are in particularly short supply. Yet we know that pre-Norman and Norman Ireland venerated the remains of its own saints and of the martyred Apostles. Cogitosus’s mid-seventh century Latin life of Saint Brigit concludes with an unabashed advertisement for her foundation at Kildare, in which he depicts in glowing detail “the church in which the glorious bodies of both Archbishop Conleth and our most flourishing virgin Brigit are laid on the right and left of the ornate altar and rest in tombs adorned with a profusion of gold, silver, gems and precious stones, with gold and silver chandeliers hanging from above and different images presenting a variety of carvings and colours.”¹

Cogitosus is unusual, though. Adomnán, writing about Columba in the late seventh century, describes his death, funeral rites and burial in “the chosen grave” in the island monastery of Iona, but says nothing to suggest that this grave is a pilgrimage destination. Indeed, he seems rather to make a point of the fact that the *body* of Columba belongs exclusively to his monastic community. He reports that one of the monks had once remarked to Columba that when he died “all the population of these provinces will row here and fill the whole island of Iona to attend your funeral ceremonies,” but Columba replied that “the men and women of the lay population will not be able to come to my funeral at all. Only the monks of my own community will carry out my burial.” And indeed, says Adomnán, “there was a great storm of wind and rain which lasted

through the three days and three nights of the funeral. This prevented anyone from coming across the waters in a small boat from any direction.”²

There may be an important clue here to the relative lack of emphasis, in most early accounts of the founding saints of Irish Christianity, on their bodies as objects of devotion after their deaths. Not *all* ecclesiastical institutions necessarily wanted to attract pilgrims in large and lucrative numbers.

In the case of Patrick, the early lives appear to be a bit embarrassed about the question of the whereabouts of the body. Muirchú is a partisan of the church of Armagh, which he insists is “the place that [Patrick] loved best in the world,” and he is troubled that the saint is not buried there. So he provides an angel to instruct Patrick that he must go to Saul, in the eastern part of Down, to die. He further directs him to arrange to have his body placed in a wagon drawn by two oxen, “and wherever they pause to rest, there let a church be built to honour your body.”³ This episode, based on Samuel 1:6, serves to explain the tradition that Patrick is buried in Downpatrick, a bit to the west of Saul, where even today a stone marks what is said to be the site of the original grave [SLIDE]

Muirchú is simultaneously aware of and resistant to the cult of relics. He has the talkative and bossy angel give further orders to Patrick that he must “let a cubit’s depth of earth be placed on your body, so that relics will not be taken from it.” And when in the aftermath of Patrick’s death a violent conflict arises between the Uí Néill – a dynasty with interests in the church of Armagh – and the Ulaid of the eastern part of Ulster, over possession of the body of the saint, “the inlet of the sea called Muin Daim swelled up with a curving undulation . . . and prevented the peoples from fighting.” Muirchú wants no part of any exhumation and translation.

So in the seventh century the sacred bones of the saints were left to lie where they were first buried, and protected in one way or another from the hands of the people. These bones mattered, though. They created sacred space. To be buried in the same cemetery as a saint guaranteed his or her company at the Resurrection, and the advantage this would provide. A church might be built over the grave of a saint, but burial in the ground, rather than entombment within the church, would seem to have been the norm, with the shrines of Brigit and Conleth at Kildare a notable exception. From the eighth century, there are a few textual notes of exhumations and enshrinements, and we have an occasional above-ground shrine with an access hole [SLIDE Killabuonia tomb shrine]. But it seems to have remained the norm to keep the remains of the saints' bodies in contact with the ground, if not actually interred. It is mostly from Norman Ireland that we get stories of inventions and translations of the remains of Irish saints.

Brigit's tomb vanished from Kildare at some point. Not surprising, given that the annals record the plundering and burning of Kildare in 770, 836, 942, 964, 999, 1019, 1020, 1031, and so on.⁴ But, according to Giraldus Cambrensis, the bodies of Brigit, Patrick, and Columba were discovered in 1185 in a cave near Downpatrick by the Norman adventurer John de Courcy, who had conquered Ulster in 1177.⁵ De Courcy made himself an Ulsterman by patronage as well as by the sword; he became a great devotee of Saint Patrick. His great good fortune when "these three noble treasures were, through divine intervention, found and translated," as Gerald puts it, to the new abbey church that he had built in Downpatrick, was surely, in his own view, an indication of God's blessing on his enterprise.⁶

With the late twelfth-century translation of these three sets of relics, we find ourselves in a very different cultural milieu from that of the seventh-century lives of Patrick and Columba. The Normans have brought to Ireland the European rage for remains. Bodies are to be multiplied, collected, enshrined and advertised.

What happened to these bodies? As far as Brigit is concerned, we pick up the trail on the continent. Although we know nothing about the rest of her body, nor about Patrick's or Columba's, we have three heads of Brigit, two of them in Lisbon and one in Cologne. According to one tradition, Brigit's head was rescued from the profanation of Down Cathedral by Lord Grey in 1537. It was brought to the heart of Catholic Europe—the Habsburg court of Rudolf II in Vienna—where it eventually came into the possession of Don Juan de Borja, Philip II's ambassador to that court and an avid collector of relics. Don Juan's father, Francisco de Borja, served as General of the Society of Jesus, from 1565 until 1572. Don Juan himself had lived in Lisbon and was married to a Portuguese noblewoman. So he decided to donate his enormous collection of relics to the newly founded Jesuit church of Saõ Roque in Lisbon, where they were installed on January 25, 1588 at the conclusion of an elaborate procession through the city of Lisbon. A contemporary list of the relics in the collection numbers the skull of Saint Brigit of Ireland among them, and a contemporary account of the ceremonies informs us that Edmund McGauren, the exiled archbishop of Armagh, took part in the procession.⁷ Don Juan's relics are still on display at Saõ Roque, and the catalogue of the museum of Saõ Roque identifies a small casket [SLIDE] containing what appears to be the top of a small cranium, as the reliquary and relic of Brigit.

But if the Irish seem to have been somewhat careless of the remains of holy bodies, they had, in the words of Gerald of Wales, “a great reverence for bells that can be carried about, and staffs belonging to the saints,”⁸ and, we might add, for their books. The oldest extant Irish manuscript is a Latin Psalter written in the sixth or seventh century [SLIDE Cathach page] and according to longstanding tradition written by Saint Columba himself. What that attribution says about the reverence in Ireland for this particular kind of relic is significant. The cult of the *cathach*, or “battler”, as this Psalter is called, is linked to stories in the seventh-century *Life of Columba*, where the saint is in several places represented as writing -- in some cases quite explicitly copies of the Psalter. His books have miraculous properties. After Columba’s death, a young man carrying a satchel of books on a journey was thrown from his horse while fording the River Boyne and drowned. It was days later, according to Adomnán, that the body and the bag of books were found, and “the pages of all the books were found to be ruined and rotten except one page, which Saint Columba had written out with his own hand. This was found to be dry and in no way spoilt as though it had been all along in a book case”.⁹ No mere random object with which he had had physical contact, a book written in the saint’s hand was a doubly potent conduit of divine power, providing a point of contact with his physical being that made sacred the materiality of the already revelatory word of God.

In the cult of Patrick, it was especially his bell and his *bachall*, or staff, that were objects of devotion. According to the Annals of Ulster, Patrick’s bell was removed from his grave in 553 and entrusted to the church of Armagh. This hand bell has been preserved ever since and is now in the National Museum of Ireland [SLIDE Patrick’s

bell]. The bell, as much as the book, is an object associated with the saint in an especially significant way—the instrument by which he had summoned his monks to his own sacred presence or to the house of God. Patrick's *bachall* is provided with an origin story in a ninth-century life of the saint, where it is said to have been given to him by Jesus himself,¹⁰ and so was probably already known and venerated by that time. This important relic, the *bachall Iosa*, was kept track of for centuries, until it was publicly burned in Dublin in 1538.

The medieval Irish may have been careless with the bones of their saints, but they certainly looked after these objects—bells, books and *bachlae*. It was usual for a relic of this kind to be in the hereditary custody of a particular family. The *Cathach* of Saint Columba, for example, was held by the Mac Robhartaighs of Donegal. Like many other such objects, it was eventually enshrined in an elaborate reliquary. Most of the surviving Irish relic shrines date from the eleventh through fifteenth centuries, but where they can be associated with identifiable relics, these are generally much older. Here, for example, is the reliquary box that contained the *cathach*, commissioned by Cathbar Ó Domnaill, chief of the Uí Domnaill of Donegal in the late eleventh century [SLIDE cathach shrine]. And here, the shrine constructed for Patrick's bell ca. 1100. [SLIDE Patrick's bell shrine]

There is clear evidence of continuity in the veneration and use of these objects that is less apparent in the cult of corporal remains of the saints.¹¹ It was such secondary relics that most often served as emblems of authority in the process of collecting ecclesiastical taxes. The abbot of a monastic church was regarded as the *comarbae* or heir of the founder, and carrying the relics of the founder on circuit for the purpose of

collecting ecclesiastical dues rendered the saint present along with his *comarbae*; as it was the abbot who would normally carry the relics, the process actually performed the identity of saint and *comarbae*.

Relics were also carried into battle, in order to align their spiritual power of the saints with the martial power of the chieftains who resided within their *paruchiae*—this is how Columba’s Psalter came to be known as the *cathach*, or battler.

And they served very frequently as representatives of saints invoked to bear witness to oaths. In Ireland, relics were used in this way to avow innocence, to solemnize pacts and treaties, and for similar purposes. Sometimes, relics were simply taken ‘on circuit’ of a territory, and people could invoke their power for whatever purposes they saw fit.

Bells, books and *bachlae* were eminently portable and so served all of these purposes well. It was not only secondary relics that were used as talismans. Some portable reliquaries may have contained bones, such as this one, Saint Manchin’s Shrine, with its rings for carrying poles. [SLIDE: Manchin’s Shrine] By and large, though, it seems as though bodies were permitted to remain at rest in contact with the ground, while objects that saints had carried about with them were carried about by their *comarbae* and hereditary keepers.

The antithesis of these objects, as regards portability, was the well. It has been estimated that there are some three thousand sites in Ireland identified as holy wells. They are, in some cases, and used to be, in others, sites of collective ritual known as “patterns” performed annually on designated days; they are also sought out by individual supplicants, who may leave *ex voto* objects as ongoing witnesses to their petitions or their

gratitude, [SLIDE] and who may take some of the water of the well away with them for its physical and spiritual healing properties. It has been usual to regard the wells and the “patterns” as belonging more properly to a “pre-Christian” religious practice than to Christianity per se. And there is indeed good evidence, both archaeological and hagiographical, that some springs in Ireland were already sacred sites when Christianity arrived in the island. Muirchú tells a story about Patrick’s visit to a spring in Mayo “because he had been told that the druids honoured the well and made votive offerings to it as if to a god” believing that a prophet of the old religion lay buried in its water. Patrick demonstrates to the local people that there are in fact no bones in the well.¹² Like Martin of Tours, he christianizes the landscape by destroying monuments of the old religion or exposing them for the vanities that they are.

However, while there were sacred springs in pre-Christian Ireland, the cult of holy wells came to be closely associated with the saints of the Christian church, and especially with the native saints. With time, moreover, it grew *more*, rather than *less* important to Christian practice. To read the devotion associated with wells entirely as a quaint holdover from the prehistoric period in Ireland is to miss the important purpose that it served, especially in the period following the Reformation when not only had the bodies of the saints been lost, but many of their bells, books and crosiers had been destroyed, confiscated or secreted for fear of the Reformers, like, perhaps, the Lismore crozier [SLIDE Lismore crozier], a twelfth-century reliquary discovered in the wall of Lismore Cathedral in 1841

The Irish have a long tradition of associating specific topographical features with bodies. In the *dindsenchas*, for example, toponymic stories that were compiled from oral

tradition between the ninth century and the twelfth, places are often said to have received their names from those who died and were interred there. So the Hill of *Tara*—*Temair* in Irish--- is the rampart or *múr* of a queen named Tea; *Benn Etair*, the Hill of Howth, is the burial place of a woman named Etair, who died of grief for her husband there; Port Láirge, Waterford, is the “port of the thigh” of Roth, who was attacked and dismembered by mermaids; *Ard Macha*, Armagh, is the hill, or *ard*, on which is buried Macha, who cursed the Ulstermen before she died after being forced to race against the king’s horses at the end of her pregnancy. These stories draw on mythological traditions, but they were recorded within a monastic milieu, and reflect a habit of mind as much clerical as it was popular, of associating the landscape closely with the human body. The Christian Irish who composed the texts of the *dindsenchas* in their monasteries shared with their forebears an imaginative geography that associated the landscape not only with stories, but with bodies—bodies long gone, intangible and invisible, but nonetheless fully and physically present in specific places whose earth had absorbed them, whether literally, as when burials took place, or metonymically, when they passed through the landscape . This is manifest in a story that Patrick’s other seventh-century biographer, Tírechán, tells. Patrick is at a well [SLIDE Ogulla Well Tusk] when ‘suddenly there appeared the two daughters of King Loiguire, Ethne the Fair and Fedelm the Red.’¹³ Patrick’s preaching converts them, and soon after their baptism they die in rapturous longing to see the face of God. And, Tírechán reports, “when the days of keening the king’s daughters came to an end they buried them beside the well of Clébach and made a round ditch in the fashion of a *ferta*. That was the custom of the heathen Irish. But we call it *relic*, that is, the grave of the girls.”

We can see how readily the habit of mind that associated landscape and bodies lent itself to the cult of the Christian saints in the use that the Irish language came to make of *reliquiae*, the Latin word for the corporal remains of a deceased person. In Old Irish, *reliquiae* was borrowed as *reilic*, but *reilic* refers not to the remains of a saint as such, and not to objects associated with a saint, but to a cemetery and it still does (Mod.Ir. *reilig*). I would suggest that the Irish reinterpretation of the Latin term reflects the tradition of regarding specific pieces of terrain as identical with bodies, at least as fully charged with personal and bodily presence as the tombs that contain the bones of the deceased.¹⁴ Several Irish texts refer to the legal validity of oaths sworn in cemeteries, with an emphasis on a multiplicity of cemeteries as fortifying an oath. An oath cementing a contract could be sworn at one cemetery, but an oath concerning one's role in a matter of personal injury had to be sworn at three.¹⁵ Oaths were regularly sworn upon the portable reliquaries that we have discussed—what the Irish generally referred to as *mind*. In fact, this practice was so much the norm that *mind* developed the secondary meaning of “oath”. There were circumstances, however, in which the *reilic*, or cemetery, took the place of the *mind*. That the two were more or less functionally interchangeable is explicit in one law tract that states that “three separate relics (*tri minna saine*) have the force of three cemeteries (*reilgi*).¹⁶ If legendary bodies by their presence in the ground inscribed the Irish landscape with stories that gave it resonance, as the traditions of the *dindsenchas* attest; if actual bodies infused a burial ground with the power to enforce an oath; then it follows quite naturally that the site of a spring or “well” might come to be regarded as a place where the power of a saint resided in a very real and physical sense once he or she had traversed it..

The water that mediates the saint's virtue to the votary is of course the medium through which supernatural power is transmitted in baptism, and the water of springs, or wells—as opposed to rain water, river water, or sea water—is distinctive; it seems to be the very product of the earth; it is charged with the particularity of its place. Water, then, is the material medium through which the personal power that inheres in the landscape emerges from the earth and allows itself to be availed of on site or to be carried away, just as the power with which a saint's bell or *bachall* was charged could be taken anywhere.

Many of Ireland's holy wells are actually in or adjacent to cemeteries, and others, whether or not they are associated closely with *reilgi*, or burial grounds, are found in areas with which the lives of the saints who empower them are closely associated

Stories about saints and the origins of wells are good evidence that the cult of holy wells goes back to early Christian Ireland, but we have little record of how they were used in the Middle Ages. It is with the Establishment of the Church of Ireland and the Elizabethan and Cromwellian settlements, that the holy wells emerge clearly into the record. At the opening of the sixteenth century, power relationships in Ireland were more personal than institutional. Old English lords and Gaelic chieftains alike were 'big men', whose people provided them with payments and tributes in exchange for which they were allowed to occupy their lands and to rely on their lord to protect them from outside enemies. This kind of social and economic structure perpetuated the sense that those who served a single lord were in some sense a people. Within the framework of lordships like these, the cults of saints as protectors of particular peoples and territories flourished, and the role of certain families as the keepers of a saint's relics enhanced their status

throughout their territory. By the end of the seventeenth century, most people in Ireland were tenants. Their relationships with their landlords was economic, and their relationship with one another primarily that of neighbors. As for the land itself, what had been in many parts of the country an unfenced and uncultivated landscape had been largely cleared and made into demarcated fields for crops or pasture. This process decontextualized holy wells to some extent, and placed them within the unmistakably economic context implicit in the fact of being situated in someone's field.

Nevertheless, devotional and social practices associated with the wells flourished during the seventeenth century, as we know from the efforts to suppress them recorded, for example, in an ordinance of a synod at Armagh in 1618. The Roman Catholic clergy were perhaps even more agitated than the Anglicans about the large gathering at patterns and the party atmosphere that seems often to have prevailed there. This has suggested to more than one historian of popular religion in Ireland that there was a significant increase in the devotional activity at holy wells in this period, and even that some of the wells so venerated were only then receiving such attention. This was also a period in which patrons commissioned the construction of structures to protect some of the wells [SLIDE], and while some Protestant gentlemen were appalled by the superstition associated with the rituals of the pattern, others were intrigued by the question of whether the waters of at least some of the wells might have naturally salubrious properties.

Far from being a mere pre-Christian survival, the cult of the holy well came into its own during the early modern period. The wells became the sites at which people could reestablish their collective connection with a particular sacred landscape, in a newly individualized and monetized economy. They offered a way of making physical

contact with the sacred in a topsy-turvy world that had seen the bodies of the saints and their possessions as well dispersed or lost track of.

¹ Cogitosus, "Life of Saint Brigit," trans. S. Connolly and J.-M. Picard, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 117(1985), 11-27, 32.1, at 25.

² Adomnán of Iona, *Life of St Columba*, trans. Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin, 1995), III.23, p. 232.

³ Liam DePaor, trans., "Muirchú's Life of St Patrick," in *St. Patrick's World* (Dublin and South Bend, 1993), P. 196

⁴ Interestingly, the annals record that the relics of Conlaed (Conleth), the first bishop of Kildare, were enshrined in gold and silver in 800 (**Error! Main Document Only.** *Positio reliquiarum Conlaid h-i scrin oir & argait.* [AU]). According to Cogitosus, the relics of both Conlaed and Brigit were at Kildare when he wrote his *vita*, perhaps *ca.* 675. Where were the relics of Brigit in 800, when Conlaed's were, apparently, re-enshrined in the aftermath of the destruction, theft, or deterioration of the monument that Cogitosus had celebrated? We have no idea

⁵ Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. John O'Meara. rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 105.

⁶ The fact that it was worth his trouble to "find" the bodies of Brigit and Columba, as well as that of Patrick, is a sure sign that this trio of saints was already established in Irish Christian tradition as the three "national" patrons that they've been considered ever since. The "discovery" of Brigit's body also suggests that it had indeed long since vanished from the scene at Kildare, its whereabouts as unknown by 1183 as were the burial places of Patrick and Colmcille.

⁷ My account of the donation, the procession, and the installation of the de Borja relics at Saõ Roque is based on the research of Liam M. Brockey, "Jesuit Pastoral Theatre on an Urban Stage: Lisbon, 1588-1593."

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 116

⁹ II, 8, p.160.

¹⁰ in Capua, north of Naples, on the Tyrrhenian Sea, whither he has been brought by an angel

¹¹ From this point, my catalogue of the uses of relics in medieval Ireland depends heavily on A.T. Lucas, "The Social Role of Relics and Reliquaries in Ancient Ireland," *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 116 (1986), 5-37.

¹² DePaor, p. 169.

¹³ DePaor, "Bishop Tírechán's Account of St Patrick's Journey," pp. 154-74, at p. 163.

¹⁴ I do not mean to suggest that there was no Irish word referring to the corporal remains of a saint. As A.T. Lucas pointed out in "The Social Role of Relics and Reliquaries," p. 6, *taisí*, the plural of a word denoting a corpse, ghost, or ruin was used in this sense, while the most common term for an object associated with a saint was *mínd* or *mínn*.

¹⁵ Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), p. 199.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*