



VOTIVE OFFERINGS DEPOSITION AT ST COLMAN MAC DUAGH'S HERMITAGE, EAGLE'S ROCK, KEELHILLA.

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1. Introduction

An ancient oratory site associated with St Colman MacDuagh is located within the Burren National Park at Slieve Carran Nature Reserve in the townland of Keelhilla. St. Colman MacDuagh is reputed to have lived as a hermit in a cave at the site during the 7th century.

Today, there are a number of recorded archaeological monuments within the immediate monastic site (which may be surrounded by a circular enclosure) including a stone church, graveyard, the hermitage (i.e., the cave), a holy well, a bullaun stone and two penitential stations. The wider surrounding landscape includes two fulacht fiadh, the saint's grave and a number of possible penitential stations. The site is one of the attractions on a designated 2.5km looped walking trail within the Nature Reserve.

Archaeologist Carleton Jones (Jones, 2004) states that the archaeological features at Keelhilla "*suggest the site was an early hermitage site, possibly dating to the 7th century, when Mac Duagh is supposed to live*".

This report is concerned with the recent increase in the deposition of so-called 'votive offerings' on the trees surrounding the holy well. Such depositions are generally associated with a tradition of pilgrimage to 'holy' sites in Ireland and would generally be left by the 'pilgrim' while undertaking a 'pattern' at the site perhaps once a year, on the Saints Day or an annual festival day. However, in recent years, such 'offerings' as rags, toys and personal items are being tied to the trees at the site throughout the year. Due to the increase in numbers and the nature of these 'offerings', they are causing a litter issue. Whether these items are genuine votive offerings or a new spiritual tourism phenomenon is what needs to be determined. If they are being deposited by 'tourists' to the site, the issue needs to be tackled in terms of awareness raising and the Burren & Cliffs of Moher GeoparkLIFE's 'Leave No Trace' policy and code of conduct.

To obtain baseline data with regard to the amount of 'offerings' deposited at this site and their nature, this report was commissioned by the Burren & Cliffs of Moher GeoparkLIFE project. The evidence for Colman MacDuagh's oratory being a site of pilgrimage in the past was examined and a photographic and descriptive inventory of the offerings on the site on the 17th December 2015 was undertaken. The results of this work are detailed in this report.

3. Evidence of a 'pattern' at Keelhilla

Most usually at sites associated with pilgrimage, on the Saint's Feast Day, people would visit 'Stations' along a specified route. The stations could consist of crosses, slabs, cairns of stones, wells, pillar stones etc. Prayers would be recited at each station in the practice referred to as doing the 'pattern' or 'round' of the 'stations'.

In the Ordnance Survey Letters of 1839 Eugene O'Curry stated "...at Kinalia, Tobermacduagh at which Stations are performed and a "Pattern" held on St Mac Duagh's Day, said to be the last day of summer, but this must be an error, as St Colman Mac Duagh's Day is the 3rd of February".

In her encyclopaedic study, *The Festival of Lughnasa*, the folklorist Máire Mac Neill (Mac Neill, 2008) stated that the major pre-Christian agricultural festival in Ireland was celebrated at the end of July/start of August (the last day of summer) at mountain tops, lake/river shores and holy wells. In the case of Tobermacduagh, she contests O'Curry's statement and writes – "We may be sure that the people were not in error about the day on which the patron was held and that here as at so many other similar sites it was on the last Sunday of July".

Thomas J. Westropp in his "Folklore Survey of County Clare" also writes "...on the last day of summer rounds are performed at the two altars of the oratory of St Colman Mac Duagh at Kinallia"

Within the local region, there is no living memory of the Lughnasa pattern/pilgrimage day at Keelhilla.

More recently, Pádraig O'Riain (O'Riain 2011) points out that 29th October "... is the official day of commemoration in the diocese" of the feast of Mac Duagh. On 29th October 2015, the author of this paper observed direction signs on the road side leading towards Keelhilla marked "Colman Mass". Also observed were several large wooden crosses on the trail between the Slieve Carran Nature Reserve entrance and the hermitage. This would suggest that the official day is still being celebrated locally.

4. The question of a 'rag tree' tradition at Keelhilla?

A.T. Lucas in his book "The Sacred Trees of Ireland" (Lucas 1963), suggests that typical holy wells would have had a rag tree (a.k.a. a blessed tree) on the site. "The typical holy well has a bush or tree growing alongside which partakes of the sanctity of the well".

The rag tree is so called because in the past a piece of the pilgrim's clothing or "rag" was tied to the tree. The rag was the symbol of the ailment of the pilgrim. The folk belief was that the tree would spirit away the illness of the person. Francis Jones documents the earliest written reference to a rag tree as 1618 in his book *The Holy Wells of Wales*.

Where rag trees are present in Ireland, the tradition has evolved over time and pieces of clothing/rags are now much less in evidence than in the past. In 1974 John Logan recorded some of the offerings attached to the rag tree of Saighir Ciaran in County Offaly - "rags, a clothes peg, a metal corkscrew wine-opener, a bay's soother and the usual pious bits and pieces, small crosses, scapulars, fragments of rosary beads etc".

In 2006 Janet Bord wrote "these days handkerchiefs, tissues, scarves and ribbons are seen – clearly the modern pilgrim uses any scrap of material to hand, and the ritual probably does not relate to an ailment".

The author of this report has identified, through oral and documentary evidence, several instances of holy well sites in the North Clare region, which have “lost” their rag tree due to cutting or storm damage. These sites include:

Bullán Phádraig, Poulnalour, Kilnaboy : *“blessed tree (ash) growing beside it”* (the well) mentioned by George Pilkington, collector, Kilnaboy National School, National Schools’ Folklore Collection 1937/38. Tree no longer extant.

Tobar Inion Baoith, Anneville, Kilnaboy : Blessed (ash) tree felled by Clare County Council for road widening circa 1970s. Local oral source.

Tobar Inion Baoith, Commons South, Kilnaboy : felled by storm. Local oral source.

Tobar Colmchille, Glencolmcille, Carran : rag (haw thorn tree) felled by fuel merchant circa 1950s. Local oral source.

Tobar Moon, Kilmoon, Lisdoonvarna: Blessed tree collapsed into holy well. Tree and well no longer extant. Tom Munnely National Folklore Collection 2231 : pages 147-157.

Tobar Mogua, Noughaval: Blessed tree (ash) felled by storm. Local oral source.

Thomas L. Cooke writing in 1842/43 describes a thorn tree that overhung the well at Keelhilla which was also torn down by a storm, but he does not refer to it as a rag tree or mention any evidence of this practice at the site: *“the spring (Mac Duagh’s well) was overhung by one of the very few thorn bushes which decorate the place; but even that shelter was torn from the fountain by the storm on the night of the 6th January 1839”*.

At a seminar “Pilgrimage in the Burren” organised by the Burren & Cliffs of Moher GeoparkLIFE project in October 2014, a field trip was undertaken to MacDuagh’s oratory at Keelhilla to view and discuss the issues around the conservation of this site and potential impacts of the growing ‘spiritual tourism’ sector. One of the seminar participants, who is a local resident, remarked on this day, that in her life memory, there were no ‘offerings’ deposited on the trees at Keelhilla and no tradition of this activity.

5. Visitor activity at the site today

The NPWS Conservation Ranger for the area and local residents in the neighbouring townland of Coskeam have noted an increase in visitor numbers in recent years to Colman MacDuagh’s oratory. The rise in visitor numbers may partly explain the rise in the number of ‘offerings’ being left at the site.

The site was surveyed on 17th December 2015 and a total of 345 ribbons and 51 “non-ribbon” offerings were recorded. (Appendix I: Inventory of findings). Approximately five years ago (2000) the National Parks and Wildlife Service, who manage the Nature Reserve within which St MacDuagh’s oratory is located, removed all offerings from the site. The existing offerings recorded in December 2015 therefore have accumulated over this 5 year period.

In general, there were mainly two locations for the deposition of offerings at holy well sites – the rag tree and the holy well. In the latter case coins were deposited in the water whilst the well house area had some alcove/altar area which housed offerings.

However, at Keelhilla, during the December 2015 survey, 22 locations at which offerings were deposited were recorded. These locations consisted of 17 trees, 1 outdoor altar, 2 alcoves in the walls of the oratory and the holy well (in the water and within the walls of the well house). The Keelhilla site therefore exhibits a very dispersed/scattergun model of deposition, at a site where there is very little oral or documentary evidence of a tradition of this type of activity.

The tree which is in closest proximity to the holy well (ref: Tree number 1: Appendix I) has the highest concentration of offerings on site i.e. 178 of the 345 ribbons and 20 of the 51 non-ribbon offerings recorded are hung from this tree (Photo 1).

A further 17 trees in the area surrounding the well and along a track to the Cave, had offerings attached in December 2015. This marks a significant break with tradition as in the historical evidence from other sites, it is generally accepted that only one tree was considered to be blessed and thus *exclusively* the focus of ritual.



Photo 1: Most decorated tree at Keelhilla. Well to the right of tree.

Another modern development is the widespread use of the ribbon as an offering. Whilst 345 ribbons were recorded on site, not even one rag was recorded. Janet Bord (Bord, 2006) defines the rag as the symbol of the physical ailment of the pilgrim in the past at a time when the tree and well were associated with cures and folk medicine.

A total of 5 religion – associated offerings (figure 8), out of total of 345 ribbons and 51 no-ribbon offerings were noted at the hermitage suggesting that this practice is heavily secularised at present.



Photo 2: Rosary beads at Keelhilla. One of only 5 religion-associated offerings recorded on site (Dec. 2015).

Two alcoves in the fabric of the well house (Photo 3) although not easily accessed, may have had a function for the housing of votive offerings in the past. During the December 2015 survey, there were no offerings present in these alcoves.



Photo 3: Possible receptacles for offerings within the well house.

Whereas there are no offerings at the potential traditional site of the well alcove, it is ironic that tree number one (which has no proven historic tradition of offerings) contained 50% of the offerings on site during the survey. 178 ribbon and 20 non-ribbon offerings i.e. 198 of the site total of 396 offerings (345 ribbons and 51 non-ribbon offerings).

6. A regional spread in activity

In addition to the survey at Keelhilla, three other sites in the north Burren region which are exhibiting 'rag tree' activity were examined for comparative reasons— a tree at St Coman's holy well, Ballyclery, Kinvara (figure 2), a roadside bush at Murroughtoohy, Fanore (figure 3) and a tree on Abbey Hill close to St Patricks Well.



Photo 4: "Rag" tree at St Coman's holy well, Ballyclery, Kinvara.



Photo 5: "Rag" bush, Murroughtoohy, Fanore

Well over 90% of the offerings attached to these trees were ribbons. There were no rags or offerings of a religious character in evidence on the trees. This offerings profile is largely mirrored at the hermitage although in the latter case the offerings are attached to *several trees* rather than just one.

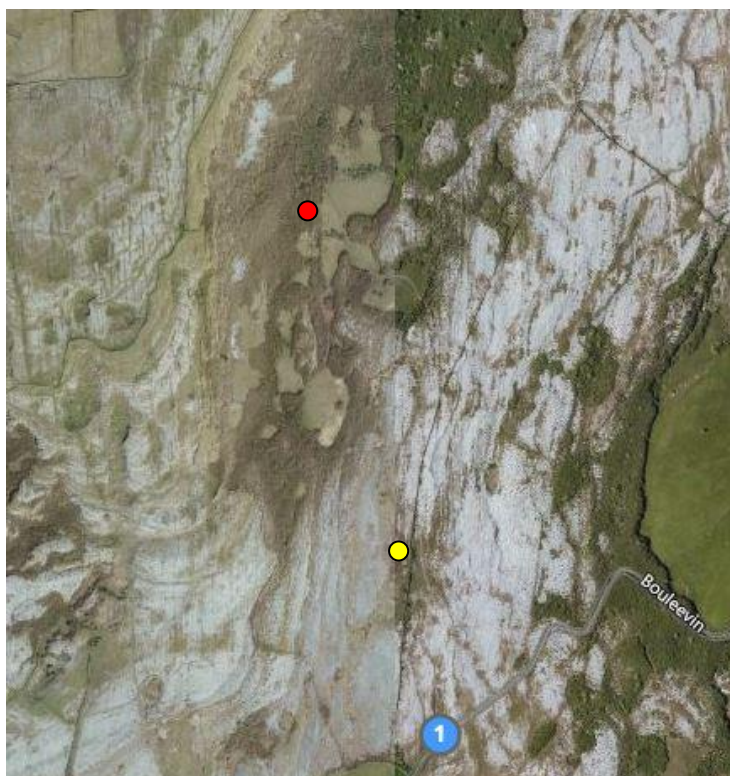
Two of these trees (Kinvara and Murroohgtoohy) are at roadside locations, while the third is along a popular walking trail (the green road at Abbey Hill). The 'offerings' phenomenon was unknown on the bush at Murroughtoohy previous to the summer of 2015 and a co-ordinated pink and blue ribbon 'offerings' appeared on the tree at Kinvara during the summer of 2014. The activity at Abbey Hill appears to date to approximately 2014 and includes strips of plastic silage wrapping be



Photos 6 (a-d): 'Rag' Tree and offerings at Abbey Hill (photos taken: 13-10-2014)

7. Additional visitor impact at Keelhilla

It is locally believed that visitor numbers to Colman MacDuagh's Hermitage have risen sharply in the recent past. In 2014, the Burren & Cliffs of Moher GeoparkLIFE project installed footfall counters along the designated looped walking trail at Keelhilla Nature Reserve (Map 1) in order to obtain baseline data and to continue monitoring the numbers on a daily, monthly and annual basis. The numbers recorded between September 2014 and September 2015 indicated 5,163 people using the trail between the entrance to the Nature Reserve at Slieve Carran and St MacDuagh's Oratory. (Doyle, 2015)



Map 2: Location of footfall counter at Slieve Carran Nature Reserve. Red dot signifies the location of MacDuagh's Oratory. Blue dot indicates location of footfall counter on walking trail. The number one indicates the location of the roadside car parking area.

The hermitage is approximately one kilometre from the nature reserve parking area on the Carran-Kinvara road. The high-grade surfacing of the road in recent years (estimated 10-15 years ago approximately) has facilitated traffic coming from both directions.

As the hermitage is situated in the Burren National Park (Slieve Carran Nature Reserve) there is free public access which is unsupervised. The majority of visitors do not abuse the privilege of access. However, there has been a small amount of damage caused at the site, including graffiti on a "cyclopean" stone in the fabric of the church (photo 7); initials carved on a tree (photo 8); a partial collapse of the well house (dry stone construction) caused by visitors walking along top of structure (photo 9).



Photo 7. Graffiti on hermitage oratory.



Photo 8. Initials carved on tree at site.



Photo 9. Partial collapse of well house. Left of lintel/slab.

8. Conclusions

Pilgrims frequented ecclesiastical sites in the past in order to gain forgiveness for sins (the main point of any pilgrimage) and to obtain cures for ailments through prayer and the deposition of offerings. The tradition of pilgrimage gathered strength in 12th century Ireland and by the nineteenth century there was also the added attraction of the “carnival” (the post-pilgrimage festivities) particularly at Lughnasa sites on the feast day celebration of the saint.

There is no hard evidence that St Colman Mac Duaghs oratory at Keelhilla was a Lughnasa site. However a number of historical documentary references and some of the remaining archaeological features of the site suggest that there may have been a pattern at the site connected to the penitential stations. Local memory recounts a pilgrimage route between the site and Kilmacduagh. A religious ceremony was held at the site on the 29th October 2015, although the Saints feast day is recorded historically as occurring on February 3rd. It was uncertain whether this is an annually held event.

The oratory is a popular visitor destination sited along a designated walking trail within the Burren National Park. In recent years, the number of ‘votive offerings’ at the site has increased along with a perceived increase in visitor numbers.

Given the secular, “non-rag” character of the offerings deposited at Keelhilla between 2000 and 2015 and the lack of evidence of a tradition of a ‘rag tree’ at this site, it can be concluded that the majority of visitors are not motivated to visit the site today for the same religious, medical and social reasons of past generations.

To establish the motives of the modern pilgrim at Keelhilla further survey work and visitor interviews are required.

However, here are just *some* possible explanations for the modern offering phenomenon at the hermitage....

- 1) *Neo-paganism*. Modern pagans individually or in groups visiting the site and interpreting it from a resolutely pre-Christian perspective. This may explain in part the secular character of the vast majority of offerings.
- 2) *Tour guides*. Guides encouraging tour participants to leave offerings. The author is aware of at least two sites in the Burren where tour guides have been actively encouraging visitors to leave offerings even though *no such tradition* of offerings exists at either location. One of these locations is the earthen fort at *An Ráth*, Ballyalban just south of Ballyvaughan on the R480 (photo 10). The Offerings phenomenon has now ceased at An Rath as the site was closed to visitors on health and safety grounds in autumn 2014.



Photo 10. Tree stump with earthen fort An Ráth, Ballyalban – the focus of modern deposition of offerings.

- 3) *Copycat*. Visitors impressed by the spectacle and aura of offerings decide to imitate.
- 4) *Heartfelt deposition*. Some visitors still leaving offerings on site for spiritual reasons e.g. rosary beads to commune with God; baby's cap for supplication on behalf of child; photo of deceased person in act of remembrance; small number of petitions; wooden car – object of little material value but perhaps of high symbolic value.....

9. Questions Raised

The 'offerings' phenomenon which is occurring at a small number of sites in the Burren has been highlighted by the work of the Geopark LIFE project and this awareness raising has encouraged lively debate amongst conservationists/heritage enthusiasts.

There are widely divergent views on the subject. Some conservationists regard the offerings as having nothing to do with tradition and a contravention of the Leave No Trace code of conduct. They argue for the removal of all offerings.

Others contest that the offerings in the hermitage are tradition and think that all offerings on site should be left in situ.

The author of this report suspects that some of the offerings at the hermitage have been left there for non-spiritual, egocentric motives. However, if we remove all offerings, are we not also destroying some heartfelt, spiritual depositions which are part of a rich tradition on site?

Patrick Logan states that "The custom of leaving a votive offering is an essential part of pilgrimage to a holy well". The alcoves in the well house on site were almost certainly repositories for offerings. Thus there may be some validity in the argument that the offerings on site today are part of a tradition in a state of transition.

Conversely it is felt that it may be hard to defend offerings at sites where there is no such tradition e.g. tree stump and trees at An Ráth (photo 10); thorn tree at Murroughtoohy (photo 3) and thorn tree at holy well, Ballyclery, Kinvara (photo 2).

If visitors are to continue to leave offerings at Keelhilla, would there be a case for directing them to a focused area of the site e.g. one specific tree and the holy well instead of the messy, modern scattergun depositions at the moment? Even if this move were desirable, how would one practically implement it?

Mac Duagh's oratory site is of national significance in historical/cultural/archaeological terms. It is one of a handful of Ireland's surviving Early Medieval hermitages. Unsupervised public access is thus a real privilege. A small minority of visitors abuse this privilege and for that reason the site will continue to be prone to damage.

It is strongly recommended that a proper logging/recording system is undertaken for better understanding and management of the site. Logging of damage to the site, remedial action, and damage trends upwards or downwards. Trends in offerings. Even the logging of the movement of the cross as below would help us understand better the people and landscape story at Keelhilla.

POSTSCRIPT – THE CROSS



Photo 11 (a-d). The metal cross movement on site.

Arguably the biggest “offering” on the site at Keelhilla is a large metal cross. It is a metal facsimile of a Celtic cross. It seems black in colour in origin and is now painted white. The cross is about 3.5 metres in height.

There is a photo of the cross in Averil Swinfen’s book *Forgotten Stones* (The Lilliput Press 1992). In this photo the cross is embedded in the outdoor altar in the oratory ruin. *Image top left.*

The author of this report began visiting the hermitage in 2002 and logging the movement of the Cross.

In 2002, the cross was not present on the site.

Approximately 5 years ago (2010) the cross “re-appeared” within the oratory ruin. *Image top right.*

Approximately 2 years ago (2013) the cross was moved to its current position – in seclusion behind the oratory. *Image bottom left.*

The cross remains behind the oratory (2015) but has been leant on its side. *Image bottom right.*

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