

**The Living Tradition
of Saints
in the British Isles**

11 Ireland:

Shrines, Clochans and Hermits

Community of St Bega, St Mungo and St Herbert
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A Pilgrim

Anthony Weir

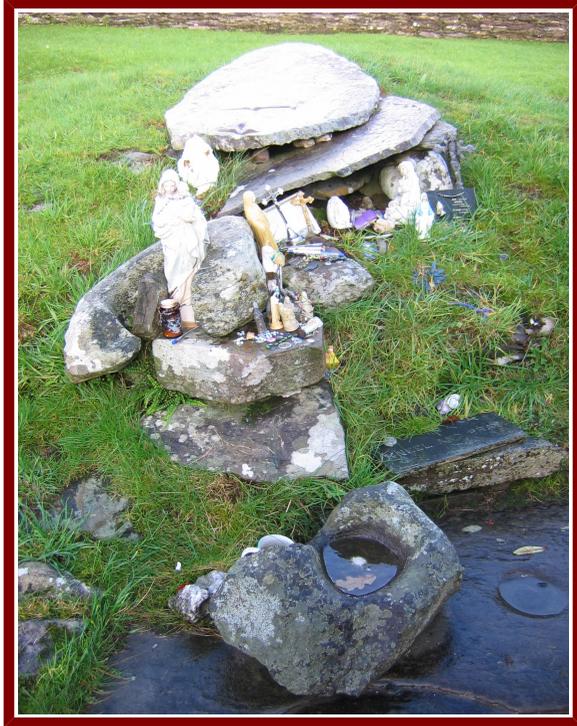
Here's an early pilgrim! Note his pose, his knowing eye, his cheerful grin, the spring in his step and requisite walking stick. He is off on a lifetime's journey to see the saints.

Of all the evidence of early Christian times, the most we have is from Ireland. Whatever we want to know, look first at what Ireland tells us.

The flowering of early Christian Ireland was due in the first place to the obedience of the first generations to the Gospel and the powerful attraction set up by who they were and what they did.

Several things followed: the Saints went to their reward, their disciples revered them; tombs or shrines appeared, pilgrims came; the monks extended their monasteries, high crosses appeared also, round towers and cathedrals. Lives of the Saints were written for pilgrims

Crowds of pilgrims were a familiar sight all over the Christian world without exception. At one level they were simply Christians taking time out for the sake of growing in the Kingdom of God. We have to remember that at this stage there was no universal system of parishes and churches conveniently at hand nearly everywhere. At another level there were the onlookers and the gullible. But pilgrimages were an astonishingly powerful and positive force in the life of the church.



The Grave of St Gonnait at Ballyvourney Co Cork was very popular with pilgrims, her cell and her holy Well also



So was the Grave of St Abban at Ballyvourney
and his holy well



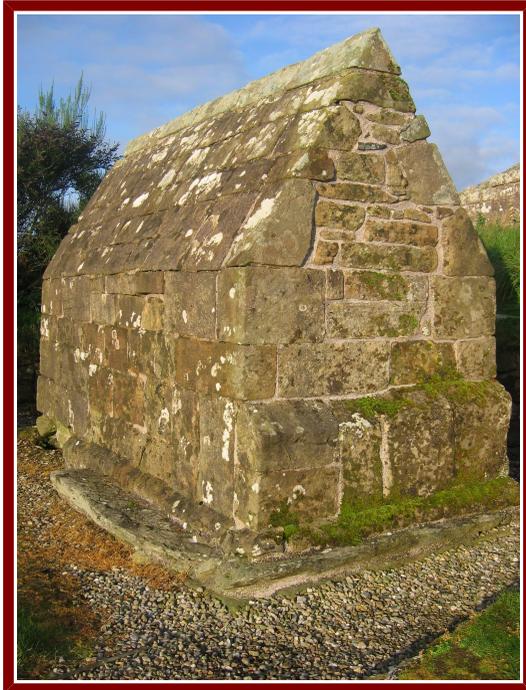
St Declan's 8C stone 'house' (burial chapel), Ardmore, Co Waterford was very popular too



'See the place where he lay'
The place of death is the place of Resurrection



St Dermot's 'House', Inchcleraun, Co Longford



St Muiridach's 12C tomb in the form of miniature church,
Banagher, Co Derry



Tomb of St Tighernach, Clones, Co Monaghan



The Grave of St Fintan at Kilfountain on the Dingle peninsula is simply a pillar stone with his name written on it



Tomb shrine at Killoluaig, Iveragh peninsula, Co Kerry

Such shrines as these existed in often out of the way places where disciples could pray and worship in the presence of their father(s).



Tombshrine of St Buonia, Killobuonia,
Iveragh Peninsula Co Kerry



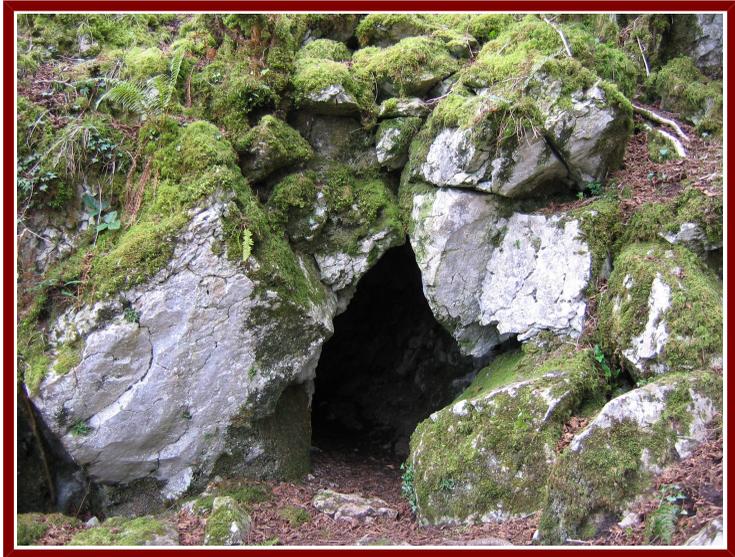
The magnificent restored tomb shrine Illaunloughan Island, Portmagee Co Kerry. Notice and white quartz and scallop shells symbols of purity and life eternal



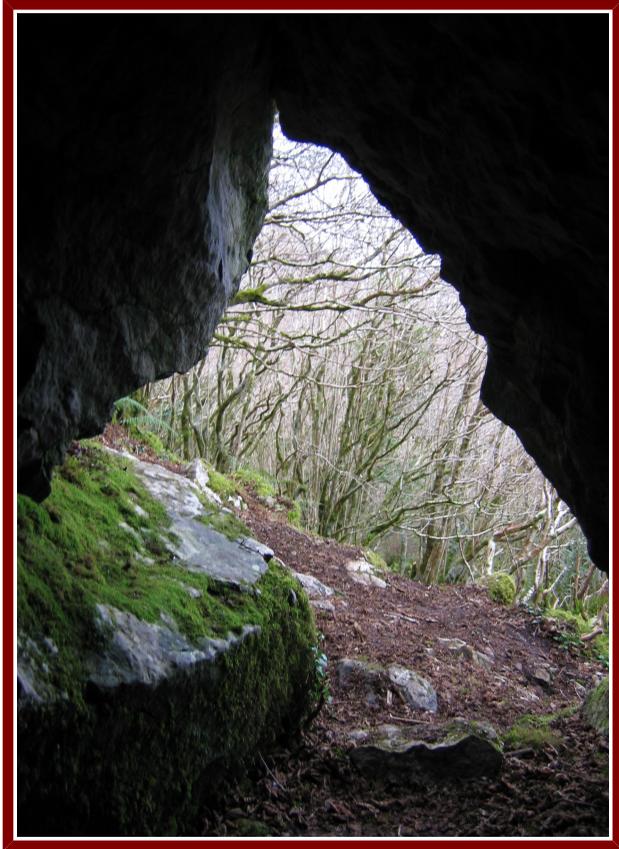
Tomb of St Cronan, the Burren, Co Clare.
The hole allowed the pilgrim to put an arm into the Tomb
and touch the ground where the Saint was buried



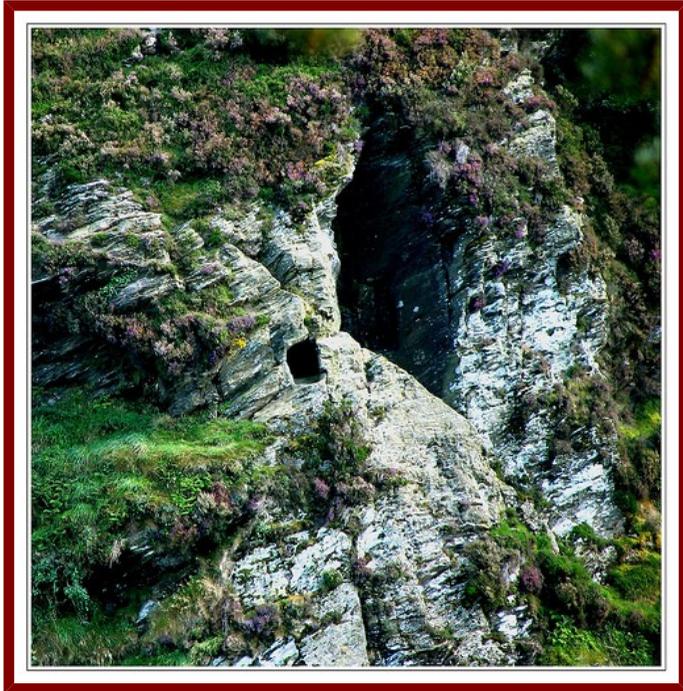
Grave, with part of his Cross Slab in the foreground,
St Breacan, Inishmore, Aran



But the hermits always sought out greater solitude - so there was always a measure of continuing renewal of the life of solitude and prayer. Some chose to live in caves:
St Colman Mac Duagh, Keehilla, Co Clare



The view



The little square left of centre is St Kevin's Cave,
Glendalough



St Finan's cell on Lough Currane, Waterville, Co Kerry

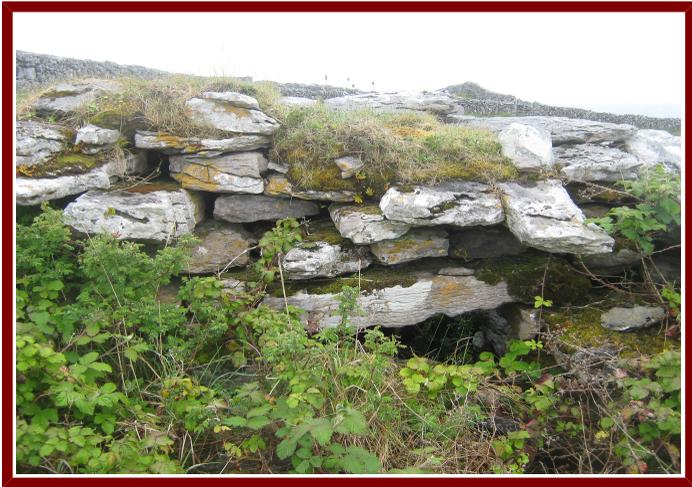
But the preferred dwelling place was the clochan, a dry stone hut with a corbelled roof. They are many in South West Ireland, reflecting a local tradition of building going back into pre-Christian times. They might be round or rectangular, and the thick walls made them water tight. From their shape they are often referred to as 'bee-hive' cells



This one on Illauntannig island off Dingle peninsula, Co Kerry, has lost its roof.



Complete Clochan at Fahan, Dingle Peninsula, Co Kerry

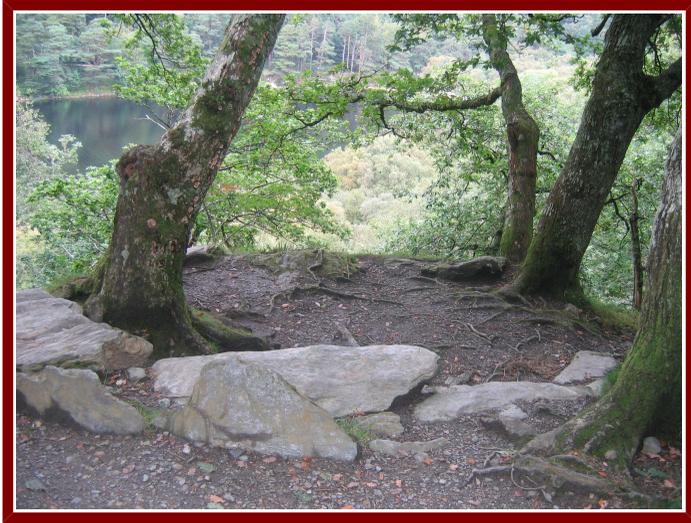


Remote Clochan, Inishmore, Aran



Another remote hermitage,
Kildreelig, Iveragh Peninsula, Co Kerry

Co Kerry, and in particular the Iveragh peninsula, has perhaps more hermitages than anywhere else in Ireland. Much fun can be had in finding them. My favourite hermit site is Kildreelig. Situated on a steep slope of Bolus head overlooking Kenmare Bay it must have one of the best views of all Ireland. But you have to find it! We abandoned all hope – till by an astounding act of revelation we found it. I have never got out of my mind that the saintly monk who lived there may have been the reason.



Site of St Kevin's Oratory, Glendalough, Co Wicklow
above the Upper lake



Double Clochans at the monastery at Reask,
Dingle peninsula, Co Kerry



Illauntannig: a larger Clochan can be used as an Oratory



Oratory Clochan on Skellig Michael

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St Brendan's 'boat-shaped' Oratory, Kilmalkedar, Dingle peninsula, Co Kerry. The shape is similar to that of an *upturned* boat



Another 'boat-shaped' Oratory at Ballymoreagh, Dingle peninsula, Co Kerry. Notice the finials once on the top of the gable have been found



Ballynabloun 'Boat-shaped' Oratory overlooking St Finan's bay, Iveragh peninsula, Co Kerry



The perfect Oratory at Gallarus, Dingle peninsula, Co Kerry. The date of it, and how far these oratories are a 'local' phenomenon in Irish church building, is much discussed.



The top of an oratory on a high sea stack Co Clare.
An engraving of 1839 shows a complete boat shaped
oratory.

Comparison with the use of sea stacks by hermits in the
Shetlands suggest there was a knowledge in early
Ireland of stylite hermits from Syria and that this use of
sea stacks was inspired by them

The first phase of the early church in Ireland produced some 250 saints - not including the ones unknown to us.

From 800 the church was an established force all over the country. The centuries that followed brought about huge advances in learning, literature, metallurgy and all craftwork, agriculture etc. Indeed Ireland still offers so much that we have no space to give to specifically Irish contributions such as High Crosses and Round Towers.

In spite of the destructive predations of the Vikings from 749 onwards, the Living Tradition was able to survive and renew itself.

But, as often happens, many churches and monasteries were subject to lay control by kings, tribal leaders, and abbots. In time this became abusive and robbed them of much of their witness. There was awareness of the need to counteract this with the work of Maelruan of Tallaght and Oengus 'the Culdee' ('Servant of God') in 8-9C. This was always true among hermits.

The hermitage on Skellig Michael may be of Culdee inspiration

We are fortunate that in Ireland, unlike Wales and Cornwall, we have some documents which give us insight into Irish monastic life. The first are the Irish Penitentials show deep awareness of the processes of conversion of the human heart which bring healing to the human being. This gives us confidence that the Living Tradition was being lived among their fathers (anamcharas or 'soul friends') and disciples. Indeed the Irish were the source of renewal of the whole sacrament of repentance throughout western Europe

We also have eight Irish 'Rules' of monastic life. These too give us confidence about Irish monastic life. They give very clear evidence of the call to holiness and how the Irish saw the Life of Perfection.

The hermit life finds little sympathy with the modern ethic of usefulness. But paradoxically the life of prayer is capable of doing great things.

When we look at Scotland we see the same hermit culture reaching not only to the farthest Western Isles i.e. the Outer Hebrides, but beyond.

The same culture, with St Columbanus and his disciples, went the other way preaching the Gospel and founding monasteries all over Europe as far as Italy.

The monk's keen sense of learning was also renowned. Their willingness to study everything the ancient world had to offer did in a sense 'save' Western civilisation

What stones cannot convey of human touch, perhaps two poems may.

The first stems from a small monastic milieu:

'I wish, O son of the living god, O ancient, eternal King,
For a hidden little hut in the wilderness that it may be my

dwelling.

An all-grey lithe little lark to be by its side,
A clear pool to wash away sins through the grace of the
Holy Spirit.

Quite near, a beautiful wood around it on every side,
To nurse many-voiced birds, hiding it with its shelter.
A southern aspect for warmth; a little brook across its
floor,

A choice land with many gracious gifts such as be good
for every plant.

A few men of sense - we will tell their number-

Humble and obedient, to pray to the King:-

Four times three, three times four, fit for every need,

Twice this in the church, both North and South:-

Six pairs besides myself,

Praying forever to the King who makes the sun shine.

A pleasant church and with the linen altar cloth a dwelling
for God from Heaven;

Then, shining candles above the pure white scriptures.

One house for all to go to for the care of the body,

Without ribaldry, without boasting, without thought of evil.

This is the husbandry I would take, I would choose, and
will not hide it:

Fragrant leek, hens, salmon, trout, bees:

Raiment and food for me from the King of fair fame,

And I to be sitting for a while praying God in every place'.

Tr Kuno Meyer

Or take this rather lighter more amusing one of a copyist
and his cat (*Tr Robin Flower*):

'I and Pangur Bán, my cat

'Tis a like task we are at;

Hunting mice is his delight
Hunting words I sit all night.

Better far than praise of men
'Tis to sit with book and pen;
Pangur bears me no ill will,
He too plies his simple skill.

'Tis a merry thing to see
At our tasks how glad are we,
When at home we sit and find
Entertainment to our mind.

Oftentimes a mouse will stray
In the hero Pangur's way:
Oftentimes my keen thought set
Takes a meaning in its net.

'Gainst the wall he sets his eye
Full and fierce and sharp and sly;
'Gainst the wall of knowledge I
All my little wisdom try.

When a mouse darts from its den,
O how glad is Pangur then!
O what gladness do I prove
When I solve the doubts I love!

So in peace our tasks we ply,
Pangur Bán, my cat, and I;
In our arts we find our bliss,
I have mine and he has his.

Practice every day has made
Pangur perfect in his trade;
I get wisdom day and night
Turning darkness into light.

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