Rite Springs Eternal:
Religious Confluence in the Origins of Irish Holy Wells

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For Marty, Olivia, Liam and Clare, with my everlasting love

Abstract

In this dissertation I explore the origins of contemporary Irish holy well veneration. There are three main theories that have been suggested to account for this religious practice. The first is the long held belief that these sacred springs represent a survival from pre-Christian, "Celtic" religious practice. This view was held fairly universally by scholars well into the twentieth century, and is today still promoted by non-academic, largely New-Age works treating holy wells. The second theory I consider is that the cult of the holy well was indeed pre-Christian, but was introduced through contact with peoples of the Roman Empire, thus representing some degree of culture change through contact with foreign practices and ideas. The third theory holds that the phenomenon is Christian in origin, although whether it is a product of ancient Christianity or a post-Reformation development is another matter.

To discern which theory, or indeed combination of theories is the most accurate, I looked to documentary evidence from Classical sources, from Saints' vitae, and from mythological narratives. I also consider the archaeological evidence for ritual deposition in watery sites across Europe, and crucially from the limited number of archaeologically excavated holy wells, as well as aerial photography and satellite imagery. To aid in interpretation of this body of evidence I use the case of sacred springs in Catholic Latin America as an ethnographic analogy of how such sites have been used to facilitate conversion of a pagan populace to Christianity.

Considering all of this, I found that the holy well complex is an amalgam of different cultural strains, with much of the ritual performed deriving from Christianity,

but with the healing shrine aspect having been introduced from Roman Britain. However, I demonstrate that the holy wells that evidence deposition in the Romano-British period are all near the "royal sites" of Iron Age and Early Medieval importance, and illustrate the many springs and ponds that exist at these sites, and that I believe will prove to have been an Iron Age precursor to the holy well.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements---*i*
Abstract---*iii*
List of Figures---*vi*
Preface --*vii*

Chapter 1 On the Origin of Holy Wells -- 1

Chapter 2 When Traditions Merge: Changing Paradigms of Culture Change ------------- 7

Chapter 3 Holy Wells and Christian Pilgrimage -- 39

Chapter 4 Water in Myth and Ritual: Water Worship in the *longue durée* ----------------71

Chapter 5 Water in the Pagan "Celtic" Ritual Landscape ----------------------------------- 91

Chapter 6 Spring Veneration in the Roman World --119

Chapter 7 Water Under the Bridge: The Evolution of Wet Site Veneration in the Leinster Blackwater Valley, Co. Meath, a Case Study -----------------------------------136

Chapter 8 Conversion and Continuity: an Ethnographic Analogy ------------------------151
Chapter 9 Conclusion ---169

Bibliography ---172

List of Figures

Figure		page
1:1	St. John's Well, Millstreet, Co. Cork	2
3:1	Rag tree at St. Feichin's Well	40
3:2	St. Brigit's Well, Killare	43
3:3	Map of St. Brigit's Well, Killare	44
3:4	Statue of St. Brigit and *ex-votos*	45
3:5	St. Brigit's Well, Killare, with Hill of *Uisneach*	46
3:6	Toothwell, the Burren	47
3:7	Ogulla's Well and Chapel	49
3:8	Ogulla's Well, plan view	49
3:9	Statue of St. Mary with votive offerings	50
3:10	Statue of St. Patrick with votives	51
3:11	Cross with rosaries and other votives	52
3:12	Cathedral at Santiago de Compostela	57
3:13	Basilica and Grotto at Lourdes, plan	58
3:14	Basilica and Grotto at Lourdes	59
3:15	Grotto of Massabielle at Lourdes	60
3:16	Turbrid's Well, Millstreet	60
4:1	Camp Coldwater Spring, Minneapolis	73
5:1	Hill of Tara, plan	97
5:2	St. Patrick's Well, Tara	99
5:3	Artificial pond near Tara	100
5:4	Emain Macha and Haughey's Fort, plan	102
5:5	Cruachain, plan	105
5:6	Rory's Well, Toberrory	106
5:7	Dún Ailinne, plan	107
5:8	St. John's Well, Dún Ailline	108
5:9	Rock of Cashel	109
5:10	Cathedral well, Cashel	111
5:11	Hill of *Uisneach*, plan	113
5:12	Pond on summit of *Uisneach*	113
5:13	St. Patrick's Well, *Uisneach*	114
5:14	Teltown, plan	115
5:15	Lag an Aonaigh, the "Marriage Well", Teltown	116
7:1	Leinster Blackwater River Valley, plan	137
7:2	Crannog on Mullagh Lough	138
7:3	Kells, Co. Meath	141
7:4	Housing Development sign	142
7:5	Extruded peat on Fletcherstown Bog, Co. Meath	143
7:6	Newgrange	144
7:7	Rosaries and votives at St. Gobnet's Well, Ballyvourney, Co. Cork	148
7:8	St. Patrick's Well, Tara, 2002	149
7:9	St. Patrick's Well, Tara, 2008	149
7:10	Neo-pagan petitions on St. Patrick's Well, Tara, 2008	150
9:1	Neo-pagan petitions at St. Neot's Well, Cornwall	169
9:2	Votive Fountain, Heathrow International Airport	170

Preface

The road that led me to this dissertation has been long. As an Anthropology undergraduate at the University of Vermont I took some religion courses, and soon declared a second major. I was particularly smitten by comparative religion, really enjoying courses from Bill Paden, Richard Sugarman, and Bob Gussner. I was introduced to Ireland's holy wells in Walter Brenneman's course, *Celtic Myth and Ritual.* Brenneman had been a student of Mircea Eliade's, and was heavily influenced by him. I ended up taking enough Religion classes to declare Religion a second major, and Brenneman became my Religion advisor. He was in the final stages of writing his book on Irish holy wells, *Crossing the Circle at the Holy Wells of Ireland*, with his wife Mary. They had been using Earthwatch expeditions to gather information on wells across Ireland and were continuing to do so, planning a gazetteer of the wells. I had the opportunity to accompany them on their last such expedition in 1994. We stayed in a group of Rent-an-Irish-Cottages for several days, taking a crash version of the Celtic myth class by the turf fire. Then we partnered up, each team of two heading to a different county with a list of known wells to check on, and orders to record any others we learned of, as well as any pertinent folklore. My partner and I headed, in our rental car, to Macroom, Co. Cork. From that base we ranged over much of County Cork with our OS maps, investigating holy wells. These places impressed me deeply. Littered with Catholic offerings, they appeared to me to be primordial cult sites, often hidden in groves, or within hedged enclosures, with rag trees and ancient stones standing at their sides. At some of them the very air was different, cooled by the shade of the trees, and by the

humidity of the burbling spring. I decided then that I would like to do more of this 'welling' in my career. What tremendous fun it was, and has continued to be!

The Brennemans' approach, based in phenomenology, took the pagan origin of the holy well cult for granted. They generally seemed to distrust archaeologists, who they referred to as 'rock people.' Back in Vermont, I was hired on the University's contract archaeology unit, and that experience inspired me to explore the topic of holy wells archaeologically, to see if this really was 'Celtic myth and ritual' that people were engaging in, in the superimposed context of Christianity. I had considered my emphasis to be more socio-cultural up until then.

I then enrolled in the University of York, in England as a Master's student in the Archaeology Department. I wrote my thesis on the Holy Wells of Cornwall, comparing the distribution of the holy wells with Early Christian features in the landscape to come up with a list of 'reasonably certain' Early Christian holy wells. After completing that degree, and after two more years of CRM work for the University of Vermont, I moved to Minneapolis to study the holy wells of Ireland under Peter Wells. Now, after a few changes of plan and a few children, I see the end of that long road, and I stand ready to step off.

Chapter 1

On the Origin of Holy Wells

The figure stooped under the tree limbs as she entered the shady precinct of the spring. It was cooler in there, and quiet, save for the babbling of the water in a small pool under a mossy wall of stones. What sunlight made it to the water caught small metal items in the pool, glinting points of light back into the shadows of the trees. A small thorn tree stood by the spring, adorned with small rags in varying states of decay. A carven image sat atop the stones amid a drift of other offerings. She knelt by the water and drank, uttering private and important words, then left a few items on the stones. Would the water help her this time? She prayed it would.

Scenes like this take place at countless holy wells today, and indeed at similar sacred sites in many parts of the ancient world, reflecting an almost universal human response to the uncanny emergence of fresh water from the ground. Not just a door to the otherworld, but a threshold from which the very essence of our survival flows. This water from the Underworld, as such, has widely been held to have powers to heal, to foresee the future, and to curse. Such sacred springs are a widespread feature of the European landscape, and in Britain and Ireland are called holy wells.

The term 'well' is misleading in English, as it has come to primarily suggest a deep shaft or pit, usually dug to access the water table. It is however an apt term, as a primary definition of "well" is "an issue of water from the earth: a pool fed by a spring" (Mish 1995: 1342). This sense of the word is evoked in the expression 'to well up,' as in tears, or blood, or water rising to fill a depression. The Irish term for a holy well or spring is *tobar,* and implies one that is held to be of some religious significance. They range from complex Catholic shrines, to simple, natural places in the landscape (fig. 1:1).

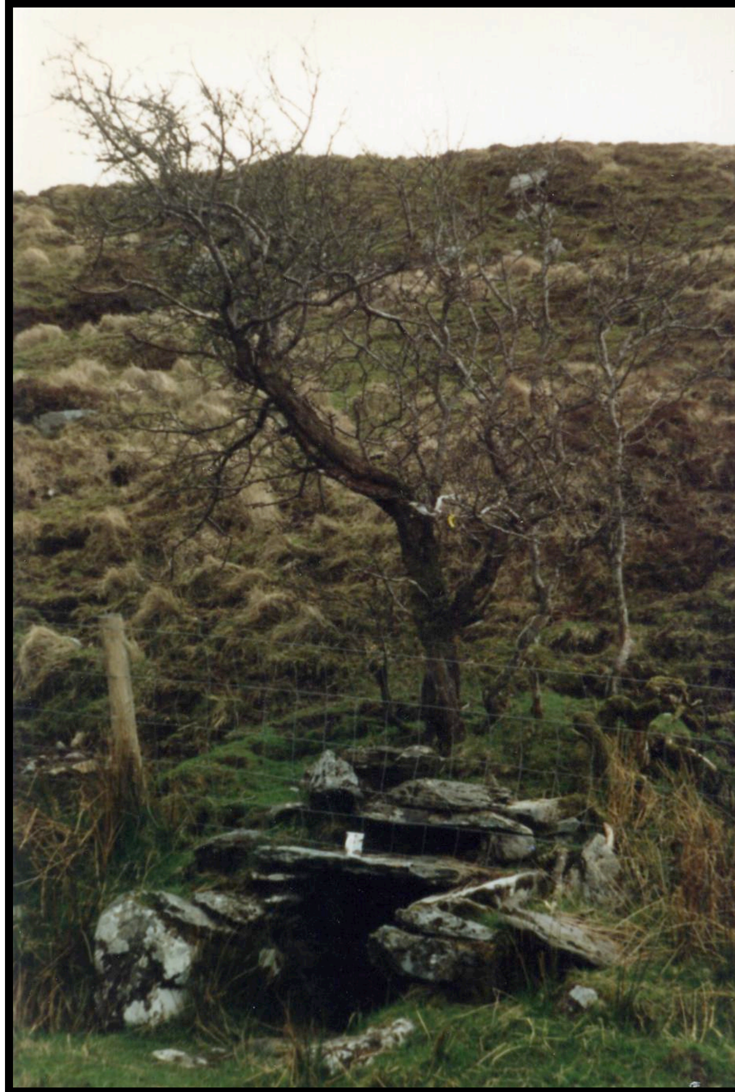

Figure 1:1 St. John's Well, Millstreet, Co. Cork

Holy wells are the focal points of countless shrines across Europe and beyond, offering people places of private prayer, and of congregation particularly on the festival day of the local patron saint. The cult behavior surrounding these holy wells has long attracted the attention of folklorists and historians of religion, generally interpreted as a clear case of pagan ritual surviving under a cosmetic veneer of Christianity. The distribution of these

shrines has also suggested that the holy wells are regional expressions of a pan-European tradition of religious veneration and pilgrimage. Claims to this effect have contributed to the aura of mysticism and superstition about holy wells, and even many devout Christians who frequent the wells in Ireland suggest that these rites are survivals from a deep pagan past. Scholars uniformly stated as much in the early 20th century, with statements such as: "Some of the well customs that have descended to our own day seem to be undoubted vestiges of this pagan adoration" (White 1905: 94). This assumption was made even into recent decades. Mary Nolan claims, "old holy places, often in remote areas, were 'baptized' in the new religion or given new meaning through their historical, or more often legendary, association with Celtic saints" (1983: 422). Barry Raftery states, "the many holy wells which are today dispersed across the Irish countryside are *doubtless* Christianized descendents of pagan places of pilgrimage" (1994: 183, my emphasis). And, perhaps most eloquently, Peter Harbison says their origins "go back so far that they disappear into the mists of time" (1990: 229). Belaboring this position are the numerous New Age works that continue to claim such a deep pagan 'Celtic' origin for the holy well traditions (Straffon 1993; Metzner 1994). Despite all of this, it has not been definitively demonstrated that the holy well cult is in fact of pagan origin.

On the other extreme, there are scholars who believe the holy well cult to be a recent Christian development, such as James Carroll who argues that the holy well cult is a "post-Reformation phenomenon" (2000: 101). He suggests that, "holy well cults, patterns, rounding rituals, and so forth . . . only became widely popular in the period following the Reformation" (102). This is a serious suggestion. If Carroll is right, then

holy wells are not pagan survivals at all, but were invented by Catholic Irish in a devotional revolution after the Reformation.

A third suggestion has been made by Éamonn Kelly, who believes that the holy well indeed predates Christianity in Ireland, but that it derived in the first centuries AD from the Romano-British cult of healing springs. This would bring the origin to the Empire, making it cognate with the provincial spring-centered shrines and temples that have produced such rich votive materials in Britain and Gaul.

I seek here to assess these claims and determine which of them is true, or if perhaps more than one point of origin can be demonstrated, thus casting holy wells as a cultural amalgam, a cult of mixed heritage. The specific questions I ask are the following:

1) Is the Irish holy well cult Christian in origin?

    a. If yes, is it ancient, or from the post-Reformation period?

2) Is it of pagan origin?

    a. If yes, does it derive from native Irish cult, or from the Roman Empire?

3) Is the Irish holy well cult of mixed origin?

    a. If yes, can I pinpoint which aspects of the cult are native, foreign, Christian and pagan?

This topic hinges on the subject of culture change, so in Chapter 2 I will discuss theoretical paradigms that scholars have used for the discussion of that topic over the last century. With that conceptual and terminological material considered, I will then delve in Chapter 3 into holy wells' roles within Christianity and pilgrimage, which entails a consideration of Ireland's relationship to and history with Britain and the Continent. In Chapter 4 I will address water's broad role in mythology, with particular attention to be

paid to European material, and then explore the archaeology of watery deposition to outline in what ways and for how long water has been involved in the religious rituals of Europe. I will then focus in Chapter 5 on Ireland, outlining what we know about pagan "Celtic" cult, and looking for evidence of native forms of water worship, before turning to the use of water in the religious rituals of the Roman Empire in Chapter 6. I will put all of these ideas all together in Chapter 7 with a case study of the changing roles and meaning of water in one Irish landscape over the vast expanse of time I am considering here. In Chapter 8 I will explore the issue of conversion, and the question of continuity of cult, using an ethnographic analogy of sacred springs being used to facilitate conversion to Christianity in another context of culture change, and discuss what that suggests about the possibility of the same process having occurred in Europe, particularly in Ireland.

As with all religion, all culture for that matter, I expect to find some degree of mixed pedigree, for how far must one go to find a 'pure' culture, as it began *ab origine*? My task is the same as that of scholars looking at cases of cultural blending anywhere. In my case it involves culture change in a frontier zone, with the possible spread of religious traditions from the Roman Empire to peoples beyond its borders. Such cultural intermingling outside the Empire needs to be considered as seriously as cases within the Empire's bounds have been, such as the Romano-British, the Gallo-Romans, or the Romans themselves who rose from Etruscan, Greek, as well as Italic forebears. If I find that the holy well tradition is of similar mixed pedigree, I hope to tease out the cultural strands to best understand the behavior's origins. For now, before I address my questions, I will turn to the topic of culture change, and consider how to discuss this process without suggesting that religions apparently mixing were somehow unblended to begin with.

Chapter 2

When Traditions Merge: Changing Paradigms of Culture Change

Seeking the origin of Irish holy well veneration requires an appreciation of just how much Irish culture owes to contact with other peoples. Aspects of Irish culture have been borrowed from, if not outright brought in turn by Neolithic farmers, metal smiths, whoever introduced La Tène style decoration, Early Christians, Vikings, Normans, and Protestants. Of course, the strongest link is that between Ireland and Britain. This myriad of cultural veins have grown together into what is today's Irish culture, and it can be difficult to say when and from whence any given aspect of the culture, such as the holy well cult, originated. Generations of scholars have considered holy well veneration to be a 'syncretic' blend of pagan-Celtic and Christian practices, and thus to represent a survival of pre-Christian Irish Religion (Logan 1980: 11; Bord and Bord 1985: 7, 9, 11; Brenneman and Brenneman 1995: 13; Ross 1967: 59). In this chapter I begin with a consideration of this term and idea of *syncretism* that has dominated the study of religious change through contact for so long. I then step back to consider the broader *acculturation* paradigm that informed the use of syncretism, and the colonial mindset in which it was formulated and exercised throughout the early and mid-20th century. I then briefly discuss the alternative term and notion of *entanglement*, before focusing on the subset of acculturation long used in discussing the effects engendered by the spread of Roman rule, *Romanization*. I then discuss a few further alternative terms that are currently being used in place of Romanization, and the state of culture change theory today. Finally, I discuss the methodology of ethnographic analogy that I will employ in Chapter 8.

Syncretism

The term of choice for referring to religious mixing has for over a century been *syncretism*. In the middle of the 20th century, syncretism was used as a quite neutral term for cultural amalgams. Charles Winnick's *Dictionary of Anthropology* (1956) provided this definition:

> **Syncretism. 1** In religion, a merger of two analogous elements in two different cultures. Each of the elements retains its being, e.g. the identification of African deities and Catholic saints among some African cult devotees in Haiti. **2** In language, the use of a particular grammatical form to perform the functions of another form or other forms in addition to its own (Winnick 1956: 520).

Here the term specifies cases of religious merger where each element "retains its being". This suggestion that cultural elements had a "being" to retain, that they represented an ancient cultural isolate, unspoilt by foreign influence, has in the last decade been heavily criticized. This problem of conceiving the component cultural strands themselves as pure was pointed out by Kilbride, who attacked the very concept of syncretism, saying that it denies the fluidity of each religion, treating them as static and pristine (Pluskowski and Patrick 2003: 30; Kilbride 2000: 8). Pluskowski and Patrick hold that the term 'can be used effectively to refer to any mingling of the two contrasting paradigms' (2003: 30). They are careful to explicitly state exactly how they are using the term: "Thus our use of 'syncretism' will not assume any religious stasis, and the recognition of dynamic fluidity in both Christian and pagan paradigms remains a central issue" (ibid. 30-31).

Jane Webster was acknowledging the problems with the term syncretism years before Kilbride's argument against the concept and term (Webster 1997). She, however, did not suggest eliminating the word (yet), but rather adjusting our concept of what the

phenomenon it connotes really is. She adjusted the term to fit her understanding of what this religious melding represents. She basically came to the same decision as Pluskowski and Patrick, that the term is still useful, while the way it has been understood most often is uncritical of the dialogue that such phenomena represents between the voices of the previous and introduced religions.

Webster's discussion of syncretism was focused largely on the results of interaction between Roman and Celtic religions, and she has drawn parallels between that and the situation in Latin America (Webster 1997a; 1997b). Webster described syncretism as, ' . . . the interaction of two systems of belief and practice in the development of "Romano-Celtic" religion' (Webster 1997a: 165.). She sees the mixed iconography of Gallo-Roman sculptural depictions pairing Celtic and Roman deities as multi-faceted, at once expressing domination, and 'resistant adaptation' (Webster 1997a: 180-181). The worship of goddesses in Central and Eastern Gaul that such sculptures encouraged ' . . . empowered small-scale acts of everyday resistance in the home and facilitated the continued transmission of indigenous popular belief' (ibid. 181). Webster suggests that in instances of apparent syncretism, that the dominated culture is expressing its voice. This 'indigenous' voice is often obscured enough by the presence of the dominant symbolism to pass, as it were, under the radar, and be allowed to persist largely in traditional form. Webster's use hearkens back to the 1956 definition of syncretism, where "each of the elements retains its being," adding the acknowledgement and accommodation of our long held, colonial assumptions about the nature and process of culture contact.

David Petts, in discussing votive deposition of a type of lead tank that sometimes bear Christian ornamentation in Late Roman Britain, suggested that this should not be seen as pagan treatment of Christian items, and so syncretic, but rather illustrative of the wide variation of expression and archaeological signaling that early Christianity represents (Petts 2003 116). He states:

> It is wrong to suggest that the deposition of Christian objects in such a manner is an example of syncretism, or that those who carried out (sic) were consciously behaving in a pagan manner . . . After all, just because pre-Christian religious believers prayed means not that the act of prayer in Christianity is syncretic, but merely an established mode of religious practice . . . [B]asic modes of religious practice may show continuity over the period of conversion without indicating syncretism or a hybrid or mongrel religion (ibid).

I particularly enjoy the use of 'mongrel' here, which seems to emphasize the low regard in which Petts holds the idea that such practices retain anything pagan about them. Petts warns against overuse of the concept of syncretism in pointing out how varied religion was, and indeed remains today. This issue of continuity of practice versus complete religious about-face upon conversion is central to this work, and will be discussed in some depth in Chapter 8. Petts' concern closely follows Kilbride's warning, however, even in the same synthetic volume, the term syncretism used freely.

It is clear then that the term and very concept of syncretism underwent sound rethinking in the last decade of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st. It must be pointed out that there is, on the other hand, an extensive and growing body of literature on syncretism (Das 2003; Alvarsson & Segato 2003; Sered 2007; Suzawa 2008). Much of this work is engaged in exploring the swiftly changing religious complexion of the world due to globalization. According to N. K. Das, who studies religious traditions in India:

‘Syncretism . . . signifies a belief in multiple religious assumptions, dogmas and doctrinal systems as also unification of different religious denominations, schools of thought and religious practices’ (2003: 9).

Alvarsson and Segato have also published on the topic (2003). They codify the phenomenon into ‘ . . .two general types of religious configurations produced by encounters between religious practices and beliefs . . .’ (ibid: 11). The first possible configuration is when a new amalgam, or “religious option” crystallizes out of the two traditions (ibid.). This new option is a perfectly integrated, unique, systematic religious universe, where none of the component traditions clearly dominates.

The second modality or configuration that can result from religions meeting is one where a nonsystematic cluster of beliefs is adhered to, often made up of ‘recognizable units – divinities, cult objects, liturgical practices, and theological ideas – not necessarily consistent or compatible among themselves’ (ibid. 12). This kind of formation requires ‘shifts of mind’ to alternate between ‘creeds of reference’ that varied situationally (ibid: 12, 13). This second type of syncretism once again echoes Winnick’s syncretism of 1956, with the intermingling elements each retaining their being.

Based on her study of various traditional healing practices in the Boston area, Susan Sered recently offered a “taxonomy of ritual mixing” (2007). Her model uses the concept of *ritual menus*, or “clusters of rituals associated with particular streams, modalities, traditions, or subgroups”, which all together make up *ritual reservoirs*, or “the total collection of rituals that exist within a large cultural context” (2007: 238).

Sered distinguished between three main varieties of mixing. The first is “individual/idiosyncratic mixing” where individuals build their own *ritual packages* from

available *ritual menus* (ibid: 238). I imagine a buffet of cultural offerings from which you can choose freely, or a *tapas* menu from which one builds a dinner from a variety of small components. Sered's second type of ritual mixing is "professional practitioner mixing", where it is the religious specialist practitioners who choose from the *ritual menus* to build "an eclectic ritual repertoire . . . in order to enhance the professional's ritual efficacy, status, or power" (ibid). The practitioners' clients or followers may not know there has been any mixing. Presumably there is no change to the component religious strands being brought together. It is more the case of a new hybrid tradition being created, or invented by the professional.

Third is "institutional-level mixing", which Sered points out can involve "antisyncretism", active distancing from, or even outright rejection of other religions, or varying degrees of mixing. Of the varieties of mixing, Sered distinguishes *syncretism*, from *synergy*, making essentially the same distinction as Alvarsson and Segato, with syncretism referring to new unified amalgams, and synergy being the juxtaposition of separate elements that are still considered separate traditions. To this Sered also adds a third variety of mixing, *appropriation*, where "one group helps itself to the rituals, symbols, resources, or power of another group", for their own benefit (ibid). This is often done without permission or even despite clear opposition.

The relevance of Sered's work to my own is clear, considering the role of holy wells as sites of ritual healing, and I will return to consider them through the lens of her taxonomy later. Suffice it to say in this survey of "syncretism use", that the term has not gone away as some scholars had hoped it would. Even Irish holy well veneration itself has recently been called syncretic, echoing the views of numerous earlier scholars. In her

2010 commentary on Irish holy wells, Celeste Ray referred to the ritual traditions surrounding them as having "entered Christian practice from a previous, and long-lived, existence and is a legacy of the syncretism that shaped indigenous visions of Christianity" (Ray 2010: 8). Indeed the term lives on, even in direct reference to holy wells, despite so much effort to avoid it.

This chapter would be incomplete without commenting on Yukako Suzawa's notable contributions to the discussion of syncretism, bringing a fresh perspective fostered in the Japanese scholarly tradition (Suzawa 2008). In Japan, the native Shinto religion existed in juxtaposition with Buddhism since its introduction from Korea in the sixth century AD, and Suzawa points out that in Japanese Studies this juxtaposition is called, simply, syncretism (3). They do not have any issues with the term such as has been the case in the West.

Acculturation

Syncretism lost popularity among many scholars due in part to its association with acculturation theory. The acculturation paradigm of culture change built off of the unilinear model of culture change that prevailed in the late 19th and most of the 20th century. This model reflects colonial attitudes and assumptions about the superiority of the dominant culture in situations of cultural exchange, and the inevitability of colonized peoples being assimilated. As Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection pervaded thinking about society, European scholars began thinking about the evolution of culture. The basic scheme, as set out by Lewis Henry Morgan, held that all societies had or would evolve through the same stages, "from Savagery, through Barbarism, to Civilization, the

latter achieved often only with the aid of Westerners" (1878). Compounding this ethnocentric bias was the denial by American race scientists such as Morton and Nott that Africans even had the "civilizing capacity," a stance that follows Thomas Jefferson's early suspicions about African inferiority (Jefferson 1781-1785: 42). Jefferson interestingly held Native Americans in higher esteem, suggesting that they could be civilized, that they were of similar stock (ibid). Those ideals devolved by the time of Andrew Jackson, when the Cherokee were forced out of their lands, despite having embraced the civilizing policy, adopting Western dress, architecture, religion, and political structure. This is a process precedented by the Roman spread of 'humanitas' or civilization to its newly conquered provinces to maintain their empire. Of course, it turned out that our need for land to offer the poor white men was too great, and the Cherokee were told they had to not only stay Indian, but would be doing so far away. In a culture where forcing your ways on others is a way of life, the perception of what culture change entails becomes skewed. Acculturation came for many to refer to this biased and forced variety of culture change.

Nevertheless, some scholars saw the fuller reality of culture change even in the early 20th century (See Cusick 1988: 128-1290. Margaret Mead distinguished between contact that was peaceful, and that which was intrusive (1932:3-4). Similarly, Alexander Lesser distinguished egalitarian culture contact from that which involved oppression. For him, acculturation was limited to the former, where "the ways in which some cultural aspect is taken into a culture and adjusted and fitted to it. This implies some relative cultural equality between the giving and receiving cultures" (Lesser 1933: ix; Cusick 1998: 128). Where there was oppression or where contact was enforced, he expected the

resultant culture change to reflect resistance, assimilation, or "creative readaptation" (ibid). In 1936, acculturation was defined by a committee of the American Anthropological Association, taking this variability of culture change into account:

> Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups (Redfield et al 1936).

Kroeber reworded this, emphasizing the distinction more clearly: "Acculturation comprises those changes produced in a culture by the influence of another culture which result in an increased similarity of the two. *The influencing may be reciprocal or overwhelmingly one-way*. The resultant assimilation may proceed so far as the extinction of one culture by absorption in the other; or other factors may intervene to counterbalance the assimilation and keep the cultures separate" (1948: 425, my emphasis). He then further distills the definition of acculturation as, simply: "the effect on cultures of contact with other cultures" (ibid: 426), and again as: "any modification of one culture by another culture" (ibid). Kroeber also points out how eternal and ubiquitous this process is: "It has no doubt been operative since there have been separate human cultures. Ninety-nine per cent of all acculturation must lie in the past; and it involves the nature, the processes, and the patterns of culture as well as its changes" (ibid: 426).

However, many studies pursuing this aspect of culture change in the early 20th century focused either on the "Americanization" of Native Americans and immigrant populations in the United States, or of the "civilization" of the native populace of various European colonies (ibid). As such, these studies emphasized the 'overwhelmingly one-way" manifestation of acculturation. As a member of the committee that defined

acculturation for the AAA, Linton pointed out that these studies all focused on situations where change was being forced on groups by a dominant culture, intended "to result in ultimate disappearance of the minority – in its cultural and social fusion " (Kroeber 1948: 428). These early studies were carried out with the full expectation, or even hope, that these minority cultures would be fully assimilated into the expanding, dominant, colonial societies.

In his influential work *Culture and Conquest*, George Foster treated culture change of the directed variety. He described the Spanish Culture that transferred to the New World as having been screened at several stages (Foster 1960: 11; Cusick 1998: 132-133). The initial Spanish culture that was introduced was really only a sample, deriving by default from the invaders' home regions of Spain. Further limiting what was introduced were the policies of the Church and the Crown on what institutions to promote in the New World, leading to religion, language, town planning and government all being imported (ibid). The imported culture went through another screen, the next mesh size down, as it were, when the local peoples either rejected or accepted aspects of it (ibid). The result was what Foster called a "conquest culture", which was not a full replica of Spanish culture (ibid). He also used the term "founder effect", invoking the analogy of genetic drift from the lexicon of biological evolution. I find his usage of that model here interesting, and will discuss it more below.

The focus on forced culture change clearly does not reflect the full scope of acculturation as the term had been defined. Some scholars echoed the balanced understanding of Kroeber and Lesser, like Milton Gordon who distinguished between acculturation and assimilation (1964; Cusick 1998: 129).

Charles Ewen has noted how recent textbooks have avoided the term, with the exception of Ferraro et al, who offered this adjusted definition that reflects the long-standing, biased use of the term: "acculturation - a subordinate culture adopting many of the culture traits of the subordinating culture. Usually associated with conquest" (Ferraro et al. 1994: 484-485). That is a significant shift in the common understanding of the term. The trend has been for scholars eventually to avoid the term acculturation entirely, and to seek alternatives that do encompass the full variability of culture change resulting from culture contact. That such an imbalance of power is true in many cases of contact is clear enough, but scholars of colonial situations have in recent years stressed that change flows both ways even in these situations.

Entanglement

One alternative term that does connote the mutual, multidirectional relationship and swapping of cultural attributes is *entanglement*. Nicholas Thomas offered the term "entangled objects" in 1991 (205-206), and Michael Dietler extended the concept with his "cultural entanglement" (1997; 1998). Of this entanglement Dietler writes:

> [I]ntercultural adoption of objects or practices . . . is an active process of creative appropriation, manipulation, and transformation played out by individuals and social groups with a variety of competing interests and strategies of action embedded in local political relations, cultural perceptions, and cosmologies. People use alien contacts for their own political agendas, and they give new meanings to borrowed cultural elements according to their own cosmologies and schemes of value. Foreign objects must be understood not for what they represent in the society of origin, but for their culturally specific meaning and perceived utility in the context of consumption (Dietler 2005: 62-3).

Dietler helps us see the power of the local individual in adopting any aspects of a foreign culture. He calls this process "intercultural", but emphasizes how "foreign" elements or objects, or "alien contacts" are used. The overall impression one gets is of how intrusive cultural elements are either incorporated or not, and how this is done, rather than any discussion of how the foreign culture exporting those elements might be transformed through the process and contact.

Entanglement avoids the mistake of ignoring the motives and negotiations of people who experience cultural change via a foreign, dominant culture. However, while entanglement clearly suggests strands of two or more cultures intermingling, the word to me suggests that this intermingling is impermanent. Tangled fibers can be untangled. When they are hopelessly tangled, we cut out the knotted strands. If we want to consider the agency of those on the front lines of cultural exchange, than what strands of each culture infiltrate the other might rather be the result of calculated choice, of intention, than of unpleasant accident. If one is combining strands of fiber intentionally, we call this weaving, knitting or braiding. Entanglement suggests what happens to our fishing lines, or to our hair when we are sleeping, the result of which is a mess that we need to painstakingly and painfully deal with. This is not the case with culture, despite efforts such as eugenics, which feared and actively attempted to prevent the spread of populations of mixed race that could pass for white. Our terminology ought to refer to such interweavings, racial or cultural, not as problems, but neutrally, as the new cultural amalgams, hybrids, or creoles from whose fused traditions the parent strands arguably, to varying degrees, can no longer be extricated. Despite my own issues with the word, entanglement is a very important interpretive model that has brought us a considerable

way from old-school biased acculturation theory. The term is being used in a variety of contexts, such as Tronchetti and van Dommelen's 2005 article on "entangled objects and hybrid practices" in Sardinia, where indigenous Nuragic cultures came in contact with the colonizing Phoenicians. Their use is quite neutral, emphasizing the new meanings that the new social spaces created through the contact engendered, rather than either colonial bullying or resistance on the part of the colonized peoples.

The study of the effect of Roman society on its subject peoples has its own variety of acculturation bias, to which I turn now. I will then return to discuss further alternative explanatory models and terminology that have been offered in reaction to it.

Romanization

How to understand culture change stemming from contact with Roman peoples deserves particular attention here, since one possibility I am considering is that the Irish holy well tradition might have been adopted from the Romano-British, who in turn had inherited it from their Roman conquerors. A provincial manifestation of acculturation known as *Romanization* has dominated the study of Temperate Europe's late prehistoric and early historic past.

Webster provided a great synopsis of the evolution of the term over the last century, which I lean on here (2001: 209-217). Haverfield explained Romanization in the early decades of the 20th century as a civilizing process carried out in the conquered regions (Haverfield 1923: 10-11). The civilization brought to the provinces consisted of the language, urbanism, religion, art, material culture, and politics of Rome. For Haverfield, it was through the development of this "internal civilization," alongside

defending the frontier, that Rome maintained its empire (ibid). This foreshadowed the parallel and disturbing sense of a "civilizing mission", or "white man's burden" that European and American powers fostered to rationalize their own conquering, converting, and acculturating (in the pejorative sense), of foreign "primitive" peoples in the age of colonialism. In both cases, basic institutions of the conquering culture were intentionally introduced and, to varying extents, forced on the people, including language, religion, architecture, education, and material culture. Haverfield noted that this process was more thorough among the elite and in urban contexts than it was in rural areas where pre-Roman "tribal and national sentiments or fashions" persisted (Haverfield 1923: 18; Webster 2001: 211). So according to Haverfield, Romanization "extinguished the distinction between Roman and provincial," except "not everywhere and at once" (ibid.). This is contradictory, and not terribly helpful.

Haverfield's student Collingwood developed the concept of Romanization further in the 1930s, suggesting that the encounter between Rome and Britain resulted in a new blend that was "neither Roman nor British, but *Romano-British*, a fusion of the two things into a single thing different from either" (Collingwood 1932: 92; Webster 2001: 211; my emphasis). As Webster points out, Collingwood's idea of fusion or hybridity is very similar to recent writing on the subject, although he did not stress the effect of power relations on the process (2001: 213).

By the 1960s and '70s, stress came to fall on the idea of resistance to Rome, indeed to any colonial power, and the survival of local culture relatively intact beneath a gloss or veneer of Romanization (ibid: 212). Webster called this "the nativist

counterattack," pointing out that this model failed to explain the cases of hybridity that were emerging (2001: 212-113).

In the 1990's, Millett built on Haverfield's Romanization, attempting to reconcile that model's emphasis on Roman-spread culture with the Nativists' emphasis on indigenous acceptance or rejection of that culture (Webster 2001: 213). Millet saw the driving force behind the adoption of Roman culture to be the native elites, who, being largely allowed to maintain their rule, took it upon themselves to adopt Roman material culture as a means of reinforcing their status (ibid; Millett 1990).

Simon Keay has suggested that the term, "suggestive and value-laden" though it may be, is still useful if qualified (Keay 2001: 123). He argues that the term is too "firmly rooted" in European lexicons to avoid using now. His definition of Romanization, however, is very similar to recent models that avoid the term, such as creolization, to which I turn my attention now.

Creolization

In 2001, the same year Keay defended the qualified use of the term Romanization, Jane Webster suggested that it was time to replace it with *creolization*. The linguistic term had already been adopted by historians and anthropologists in the New World to describe new cultural amalgams forming in culture contact situations (Ferguson 1992; Joyner 1974). Webster has taken this usage of creolization from its application in colonial New World contexts and applied it to the discussion of the cultural blending apparent in the northwest Roman Provinces of Britain and Gaul. The linguistic term creolization has offered the same benefit as hybridity, as both suggesting that when local cultures maintain links to

their past while adopting aspects of colonial culture, that it should be seen as “a process of resistant adaptation” (Webster 2003: 42). This perspective stresses “the negotiation of post-conquest identities from the “bottom up” rather than – as is often the case in studies of Romanization – from the perspective of provincial elites” (Webster 2001: 209).

Creolization, and indeed, entanglement, both entail a consideration of individual *agency*. This term has been defined in many, and sometimes, contradictory ways (Dobres and Robb 2000), but generally involves individuals’ decision making in choosing what action to take throughout their lives. Perhaps the most useful definition for me here is: “the strategic carrying out of an intentional plan in accordance with a specific culturally constructed idea of personhood” (ibid: 9). Joyce adds the element of a specific culturally constructed idea of *cosmos*, which is certainly apt for a discussion of religious acts (ibid). The consideration of agency as affecting people’s adoption, appropriation, or rejection of a foreign cultural element is an important amendment to the acculturation paradigm that tended to ignore this aspect of reality, largely viewing culture as being either forced wholesale on a people, or eagerly adopted as a superior way of life.

Creolization also suggests a degree of fluidity, as that is how language changes and mixes (although entanglement is interestingly more applicable to the amalgamation of language to my mind, with etymology being a means of untangling). The religious iconography described by Webster, and by Greg Woolf, demonstrates a culture being changed by, and intentionally appropriating aspects of, a foreign, imperial culture. While creolization works very well for this discussion, it ironically does not reflect the directionality that is unavoidable in this situation. Gaul and Britain were conquered and administered by Rome, the culture of which was brought by Romans, and via many non-

Romans serving in the Roman army. Their culture(s) flowed, as it were, into Gaul and Britain, I will return to consider the trope of flowing further below.

Hybridity

The term "hybridity," was borrowed from biology and applied to the topic of culture by Homi Bhabha in 1985. However, although the usage seemed new, it was presaged by Kroeber decades earlier, when he characterized Latin American instances of cultural mixing as "a hybridization" (1948: 431). Nonetheless, Bhabha's use of the term reinvigorated it, with other scholars following suit. Julian Thomas used the term in 1994, referring to "the introduction of new media into old practices" as "*cultural hybridization"* (1994: 129). After Bhabha, Thomas views this *hybridity* as ". . . the outcome of a deliberate construction of the foreign out of the familiar, which "brings newness into the world"' (Thomas 1994: 126, Bhabha 1985; 1994). This term, and its careful use, foreshadows more recent discussion and use of the term syncretism itself. Along with entanglement and creolization, hybridity reflects an awareness of listening to the voice of the 'non-foreign' component of any cultural amalgam. Bhabha's cultural hybridity, however, could be seen as based on the same biased model of culture for which syncretism has been criticized. Cultural hybridity, as used by some scholars, presumes that the parent cultures were once pure (van Dommelen 2005: 117; Friedman 1995: 80-85). Add to this the fact that the term hybrid itself is borrowed from the literature of Western Race scientists of the early 20th century (van Dommelen 2005: 117), and that for some the term seems to come with considerable baggage. I do not think that hybrid is commonly understood to imply racist ideas, however, and I do like how the biological

concept of hybrid reflects the fluid, breeding aspect of culture contact and amalgams. Like creolization, hybridity offers neutral language to discuss the offspring of mingling cultures.

Cultural Transmission

There is a large body of research that explores culture change in terms of transmission (Cavalli-Sforza et al 1982; Shennan 2002; see Clark and Barton 1997; Boyd and Richerson). These generally view culture change from an evolutionary perspective. Barbara J. Mills offers a useful synopsis of the main ideas (2008: 245-252). Some scholars recognize "two parallel systems of intergenerational transmission: genetic and cultural", each with its own selective pressures (Boyd and Richerson: 1992), while others (Lyman and O'Brien: 1997) consider culture as an extension of the physical phenotype, and so feel that the evolution of culture can be understood fully in discussion of biological evolution of humans (Mills 2008: 246-247).

Cavalli-Sforza et al (1982) presented terminology to differentiate models of cultural transmission, which has been used in much current work on the topic (Mills 2008: 247). This model considered "the ratio of number of transmitters to the number of receivers" as well as how the transmitters are related socially to the receivers (ibid). They discussed vertical, oblique, and horizontal transmission. *Vertical* consists of parents transmitting culture to their offspring. *Oblique* transmission is from the whole parental generation to that of their children, and *horizontal* transmission occurs between "age peers" (ibid). As to the ratio of cultural exporters to importers, there are the extremes of one transmitting culture to many, or many concerting their transmission to one person

(ibid). This model seems useful, although the terminology does evoke a certain sense of contagion, as if culture were something that one catches against one's will, as a virus is transmitted.

Evolutionary archaeologists have made use of Boyd and Richerson's distinction between *guided* and *biased* transmission (see Mills 2008: 248 for a list of publications), especially in discussion of colonial contexts. *Guided* variation is essentially trial and error, culture change that stems from people tinkering with their practices to improve them. In *biased* transmission, the bias can be *direct*, where one way of doing things is deemed better than another and so is adopted; *indirect*, where the way of doing things that is perceived as more prestigious is chosen, and *prestige-biased* or *conformist* transmission where a "particular cultural variant" is chosen due simply to its frequent occurrence in the population (ibid). To these we can also add impediments such as cultural proscriptions that discourage practices, or what has been called "*negative* prestige-biased transmission" (Mills 2008: 249). It is interesting to consider which variety of transmission brought holy well rituals to Ireland, if they were indeed imported. Whether it was from "Romanized" neighbors and kin across the Irish sea, or from Christian traditions, it could have been prestige-biased, or even direct transmission that brought the cult to Ireland

This framework seems thorough, and excellent for an evolutionary approach to culture change, yet strikes me, ironically given the sense of transmitting disease I mentioned, as a bit sterile.

Cultural Mobility

Another model, or choice of terminology, used to discuss culture change is *cultural mobility*, as Greenblatt et al have quite recently written about (2010). This model of understanding culture contact and change stresses the reality that cultures have always intermingled. Greenblatt stresses that "[t]here is no going back to the fantasy that once upon a time there were settled, coherent, and perfectly integrated national or ethnic communities" (Greenblatt 2010: 2). Cultures always change, on their own and in reaction to contact with other cultures:

> The apparent fixity and stability of cultures is, in Montaigne's words, 'nothing but a more languid motion' (1948: 610). Even in places that at first glance are characterized more by homogeneity and stasis than by pluralism and change, cultural circuits facilitating motion are at work (ibid).

This school draws heavily from Goethe's concept of "*Weltliteratur*, world literature, which he conceived of as a ceaseless process of exchange across the borders of nations and cultures" (Greenblatt 2010: 4). Cultural Mobility, like Goethe's model, was:

> . . . based upon a canny insight into the restless process through which texts, images, artifacts, and ideas are moved, disguised, translated, transformed, adapted, and reimagined in the ceaseless, resourceful work of culture (Greenblatt 2010: 4).

This is a useful umbrella term to refer to the inexorable phenomenon of culture changing and being transferred to new peoples and places. It does not emphasize invasive, forced change of colonialism, nor the active negotiations of subjugated peoples in adopting aspects of imposed culture. It simply holds that culture is not tied to one people or place, or even to one assemblage of traits or practices, rather it moves about with or without people to new peoples in new places, its components being chosen or rejected and

recombined endlessly and in countless ways. Greenblatt emphasizes discussion of actual movement of peoples, and thus the routes of travel, the *contact zones* where culture moves from one group of people to another, and specialized *mobilizers*, or "agents, go-betweens, translators or intermediaries" through whom culture is moved.

One example of this mobility that Greenblatt cites relates closely to my work on the origins of spring veneration:

> As Walter Burkert observed in his study of near Eastern influence on Greek culture in the Early Archaic Age, adaptation to Greek phonetics, some time around the eighth century BCE, sparked an unprecedented intellectual, religious, and literary mobility (Burkert 1992). This cultural mobility, facilitated by traders, craftsmen, and troops of mercenaries, is obviously uneven and at certain times and places has been sharply restricted. But once launched, it has proved unstoppable (Greenblatt 2010).

One possibility I am considering here is that these same "traders, craftsmen, and troops" helped to disseminate at least part of what was to become the Irish cult of springs, which was "set into motion" along with other cultural components of the Mediterranean world, finally arriving in Ireland via these same categories of mobilizers, through the *contact zone* of the Irish Sea.

Inculturation

It is one thing to acknowledge that an intrusive, dominant, or colonial culture is changed by contact with the peoples it is dominating (as in the *entanglement* model), but there is not a great deal of literature directly discussing this phenomenon. One very interesting case discussed by Suzawa (2008) involves the institutionalized manner in which the Catholic Church officially allows changes to its doctrine and symbol system in some

cases of spreading to new populations. The Vatican uses the term “inculturation” for such adaptation of Christianity to aspects of indigenous culture (ibid). In discussing this phenomenon, Suzawa contrasts the broad success with which Buddhism spread in Japan after its introduction in the mid-sixth century AD (ibid: 5-6), to the much more limited success that Christianity managed after it was introduced a millennium later (ibid: 2-3). What success Christianity did achieve was due largely to the Jesuit missionaries’ decision to adopt Japanese Buddhist religious terms to refer to Christian doctrines, specifically terms for the Buddha to refer to God (ibid: 2; Kitagawa: 1966: 139). That is a serious concession. Can you imagine missionaries in Mexico allowing God to be called Tlaloc, or in Scandinavia, Thor? The Jesuits also got permission from Rome to reorganize their mission to resemble Zen Buddhist schools, which made the whole thing seem less alien to possible recruits. Still, Roman Catholicism represented European-ness in general, and members of the growing group were persecuted. Rising up against this persecution, some 40,000 Japanese Christians rebelled against the Shogun in the mid 17th century, becoming a factor considered in Japan’s decision to close its self to the outside world (Suzawa 2008: 2-3). That way of spreading one’s religion did not work well in Japan.

Buddhism came to Japan via China and then Korea, a long journey during which the religion had been embraced, translated, re-illustrated, and influenced by the many generations of individuals who passed it along (ibid; 5-6). The religion arrived in Japan already attuned to the Eastern patterns of the sacred, and identified with the local pantheons it had met along the way. After a brief period of conflict with Shinto, Buddhism became established alongside Japan’s native religion for a thousand years,

separate, yet with a certain degree of fusion, as with the Shinto *Kami* deities being identified with the (already cosmopolitan) gods of Buddhism (ibid: 5).

One fundamental difference between these two cases of foreign religious expansion into Japan was that Christianity was being intentionally introduced and promulgated, while Buddhism spread largely through willing, interested and innovative play with the new concepts and imagery, by a relay of related cultures. The Catholic principle of "inculturation" does not allow the subject peoples this kind of freedom to play with the religion (Suzawa 2008: 4). This issue was brought up in at the Vatican 1998, at the Synod for Asia, where the Asian Bishops suggested allowing more Asian symbols and spiritual understanding to be used in Asian Christianity, including discussion of a feminine aspect of the divine (ibid: 3-7). This idea did not pass committee.

Buddhism, on the other hand, did embrace the religions it came to coexist with. One gets the sense of this embrace from the words of Prince Shotoku Taishi (AD 574-622) :

Shinto is the root and stem of a big robust tree replete with an inexhaustible amount of energy, and Confucianism is its branches and leaves, while Buddhism is its flowers and fruit (Suzawa 2008: 5; Herbert 1967: 47).

Linguists have long discussed the phenomenon of *nativization*, whereby loan words being altered according to local rules of pronunciation (phonological nativization), outright adoption (lexical nativization), and loan shifts (where the concept is adopted, but a local word is semantically altered to encompass the new concept) (Hock 1986: 390-400). Catholicism's *inculturation*, seen from the point of view of those being converted,

involves very parallel processes. The invasive terms and concepts often need to be altered somewhat in order to make sense locally. The allowance of the local names of God to be used in Medieval Japan to refer to Jahweh is a clear case of loan shifting. This is what the Asian Bishops were suggesting ought to be accomplished more thoroughly to promote adoption of Catholicism in Asia, a process of nativization of Christianity to render it more sensible to Asian religious understandings. However, Christianity does not embrace imagery of religions melding, such as the great tree of Shinto/Confucianism/Buddhism. It shuns any imagery or concept of the new faith in any way deriving from or coexisting with the former, local religion, as Petts comments quoted above suggest. Christianity has relied, rather, on the belief that at conversion, an individual's intention is wholly changed, precluding any continuity (Lane-Fox 1986: 35; Daniélou 1950: 432; Suzawa 2008: 7). This issue of how to consider continuity in situations of religious conversion is crucial in understanding the history of holy wells, and I will devote some words to it further in Chapter 8.

Culture Flow

I have mentioned how creolization and hybridity both suggest a degree of fluidity that I believe is essential to the study of culture change, with creolization tapping linguistic evolutionary vocabulary, and hybridity that of biology. The more I consider the matter, the more I feel that this idea of fluidity, of flowing and mixing the way air or water do, is very useful for the discussion of how cultures change over space and through time. Not only does such an approach avoid the fallacy of seeing cultures as ever having been static and pristine, but it also allows for various degrees of cultural mixing to be discussed, with

the directionality of the flow of ideas or things taken into account. Following the term *Gene Flow* used in population genetics to describe novel genes entering a gene pool through mating, I call this *Culture Flow*, where culture from one or more groups enters a distinct cultural group through interaction or trade. This is similar to the cultural transmission and cultural mobility paradigms discussed above, but adds some useful nuances, and a variety of terminological options.

Such terminology recalls the theory of memetic evolution as set out by Dawkins (1974). That body of theory holds that culture is transmitted in units of information, *memes*, which are subject to selective pressures as genes are in biological evolution. Advantageous cultural traits spread, those that prove over-costly falter and do not reproduce as well. There is much to be said for this way of thinking about culture changing, as discussed under *cultural transmission* above.

I conceive of culture as *flowing* down to us as individuals, and as societies. This is how we understand and discuss inheritance genealogically, and genetically. Each family and culture is the result of ancestral lineages all contributing to a new composite person or society. This model also works very well for culture. Thus we can speak of tributary cultures, and of cultural confluence. To indicate foreign elements flowing into a culture there is the term *influence*, fallen out of fashion of late, that at once conveys directionality and the fluid nature of cultural intermingling.

The term influence is commonly used to refer to the effect of one individual and their practices on another individual and their practices. We discuss the mutual and varying influence people exert and experience in any social relationship. We also use influence to discuss how our ancestors have contributed to us as individuals. Cultures

have the same relationships. Contemporary American culture is influenced by the cultures that lead to it, whether long ago in the case of the Normans, or somewhat more recently by Irish or African people. Even if we aren't descended from all of the inflowing groups, our common culture has been influenced to varying extents by these cultures. American music, jazz, blues, and rock, would not be if there had not been an in-flowing, or influence, of African musical traditions to those of the Euro-Americans. The term influence suggests the fluid nature of cultures; it suggests the effect of the people and cultures with whom we have relationships, and it suggests the parent-descendent nature of cultural transmission.

It must be pointed out for the sake of clarity, that unlike genes, culture can be acquired and then passed on. We cannot pass acquired traits on to our offspring, unless they are *cultural* traits: a new language, a summer cabin, stock portfolio, or good manners. We cannot pass on a good tan or a haircut, or a fit body. That would be what has become known as Lamarckian evolution, after Jean-Baptiste Lamarck who theorized that species changed through individual's efforts to better themselves, resulting in new traits that were then passed on to offspring (Haviland et al 2011: 31). Genes must be inherited. Although there is interesting research being done on *epigenetics*, the study of how environmental conditions during an individual's lifetime can in some situations change the traits that an individual passes on to their children (Pembrey et al 2006). This idea is important in the consideration of cultural traits being transmitted to or borrowed by another cultural group. To what extent does the new context or milieu of a cultural practice, trait, symbol, etc., in its new group's usage overpower or alter the effect of the cultural trait itself? Symbolic referents can change in the new context of use or practice,

indeed, the original meaning of the act or image might be heavily skewed or lost entirely. One might call this phenomenon *epimemetics*. Such considerations are of particularly acute importance when one is considering symbols, or ritual acts that refer to or reenact previous, often hierophanous events. This is the issue at the heart of the debate over whether places like holy wells, should they be demonstrated to have been pagan cult sites, really demonstrate continuity of practice, of cult, or whether the new context of the practice, the *epimemetics*, render any commonality of place or behavior insignificant, attached to a wholly new religious sentiment and meaning.

I am not here adopting the meme theory model wholesale, but rather am adapting the terminology and analogy used in genetics to reflect what I see as a similarity in the dynamics of culture change to that of hydrology. When I started to think of culture as an entity that flows, I was struck by the notion that we take similar measures to protect ourselves from this culture flow as we do to protect ourselves from the elements, from water and air. We have cultural practices that function to prevent change. We construct cultural shelter, weatherized, but not without leakage. One example is prescriptive linguistics, where rules are codified and enforced, as in *l'Académie Française* that polices French largely against Anglicization, to prevent perceived degradation of the language. Yet dictionary makers have to monitor current terms and usage in order to remain up to date. Another example of cultural practice aimed at preventing culture change is a Minneapolis suburb's recent vote to make English the only language of official record in the town. No documents had ever been translated into other languages, but there apparently was a perceived need to prevent that from ever even being considered.

Our cultural "weather-stripping" may fail when culture is flowing with a strong current. Cultural turbulence can send waves of culture out of its banks, and our defenses can be breached. Or perhaps culture is best conceptualized as having high and low pressure systems, leading to tidal, pressurized flow. Sometimes we send emissaries of our culture to strategically impose or inject aspects of our own culture into another culture. Foster's "Conquest Culture" that Spain sent into Mexico was an intentional injection. High pressure in Spain drove the flow, but what grew in the New World had been filtered through the screening processes, like screens in our faucets, of Elite choice, local response, and conditions on the ground. Missionary activity is also a culturally pressurized injection, entailing intentionally planting seeds, or more aptly, cuttings of culture, with the hopes that they will grow robustly and spread. These missionaries represent jets of culture, forced across cultural frontiers by this pressure. The mission is a sort of emission, if you will. Situations of imperial conquest and forced acculturation, be it Europeans taking the New World by force, or the Romans conquering the provinces, could be imagined as cases where the conquering culture was pressurized and blown, as it were, into the new societies over which it held sway.

Other times, one culture will siphon aspects of a foreign culture into itself. Frontier zones, rather than being semi-permeable barriers, experience *cultural capillary action*, with culture being siphoned (in one or more directions) across the border. Some of this culture flow is instigated by individual agency, people deciding to adopt elements of a foreign culture, or to obtain spouses from other groups. Some of the flow is random, circumstantial contact between people. Some of it is imposed by force. All of these can result in a cultural evolutionary event, a hybrid or amalgam culture, whether you call it

syncretic, a creole, or a crossbreed. This is the birth of a culture, *ethnogenesis*. In this model, *ethnogenesis* would have to be considered either a constant, or an oxymoron. Culture must be seen either as *constantly being born* (through *cultural drift* or *culture flow)*, or as having derived from common ape culture some 7 million years ago and morphed constantly since then, and so has *no moment of birth at all*.

This question is pertinent with respect to holy wells. Do they represent cultural capillary action, where local turgor pressure, individual people's situations, decisions, or whims, or societal climate, drew foreign cultural elements in? Or do they represent a cultural emission, and if so, from whence?

What might work against this culture flow model that I propose is the fact that, for reasons akin to those that rendered *acculturation* unpopular, some scholars have chosen to avoid the term *influence* that naturally fits in a model of change involving the capacity of flowing. Alternative terms have been used in such contexts since the mid 1990's (Dietler 1998; Wells 2001). This avoidance seems to stem at least in part from the widespread reaction against *World-System*, or *core-periphery* theory, as put forth by Wallerstein (1974). He suggested that systems of interregional exchange are the best way to understand European economic growth in the last 500 years. Innate in these relations was the fact that power became centralized in European States, called the *core*, who grew ever more wealthy and dominant over the areas they had grown to exploit, called the *periphery* (Stein 1998: 223). This model has also been applied to ancient situations of colonialism and culture change.

In contexts of a complex society expanding and effecting less complex neighboring societies, the term *influence*, like *acculturation*, implies that the *core*, the

developed and politically powerful cultures, unilaterally determine and direct how the peripheral groups adopt the culture of the core. This denies any *agency* to those in the periphery. Agency, as discussed above, is active, purposeful, intentional manipulation of rules and situations. Without it these subordinate cultures are mere passive recipients of 'superior' cultural traits from the core. This colonial mindset is also evident in the concept of Romanization that has filled the literature on my culture area for generations. An unqualified use of the term influence might imply such asymmetrical relations. However, I do not think the term influence suggests the World Systems model to most people. Nor do I think it need suggest one-way cultural flow. So, I hold that the terms influence, confluence, and tributary are useful for the discussion of this marrying and blending of cultures, offering usage that can be nuanced enough to suggest intentional or dominant flow, forced change, as in to "exert influence" or convey a sense of completely neutral and pain-free cultural blending.

Culture Change Theory Today

This consideration of a swath of literature dealing with culture change serves to illustrate the variety of approaches used in the past, and those used today. Syncretism is still alive as a paradigm. Romanization is still being used, although increasingly well qualified. Creolization, hybridity, and entanglement are all currently employed as options enabling scholars to avoid the Colonial bias of acculturation. Evolutionary discussions of culture change are innumerable, in terms of memes or of simple transmission, and cultural mobility offers yet another, quite generalized paradigm within which one can discuss culture contact and change in a variety of ways, from the concrete, materialistic point of

departure considering actual peoples and places and times, to the more heady theoretical ideas such as "metaphorical movements: between center and periphery; faith and skepticism; order and chaos; exteriority and interiority" (Greenblatt 2010: 250). I look forward to seeing what we as a body of scholars come up with in the future to discuss these rich moments of culture contact and change.

Ethnographic Analogy

In closing this chapter, I want to discuss ethnographic analogy, an important interpretive tool that I will be using. Patty Jo Watson outlined the central points of this process in 1999, and I take the following points here from her. Ethnographic analogy is a technique whereby we infer things about the past, using physical evidence as recovered by archaeology, using "knowledge of relevant contemporary cultural and noncultural materials" (Watson 1999: 49). Materials deemed "relevant" are "those contemporary forms, functions, and processes that seem to show significant resemblance to, i.e. are analogous to or analogs for, past forms and their hypothesized functions and processes" (ibid). The archaeologist compares the cultural remains of the past to the observations made on contemporary cultural practices, either from published accounts, images, or from specific ethnographic or experimental research. Alison Wylie highlighted two main types of analogy (1982). Formal analogies are where there is a simple similarity of form between the past cultural evidence and the ethnographic material. Relational analogies are when the past culture and the contemporary culture are either very similar, that is, adapted to similar environments and operating with similar technologies, or that they are actually related, with the contemporary culture being descended from the past one (Wylie

1982; Thomas and Kelly 2006: 238-9). I will be using ethnographic analogy in my consideration of holy wells being used as instruments of conversion to Christianity in Chapter 8.

Chapter 3

Holy Wells and Christian Pilgrimage

Turning now to my research questions I ask, is the holy well cult Christian in origin? If so, does it trace back to ancient Christianity, or is it a development of post-Reformation Catholic revival? To approach an answer, I will first consider holy wells as they exist today in Christian culture, and follow that up with a discussion about the history of Christian pilgrimage, and how the Irish practices relate to this broader pattern.

Holy Wells

There is a significant amount of Catholic veneration of holy wells today. Many parishes maintain their local well and hold mass there annually on the patron saint's Holy Day, occasions that from the 17th into the 19th centuries anchored important annual fairs, which I will turn to below. But holy wells also serve as a medium for more private interaction with the Divine. They receive offerings throughout the rest of the year by individuals who visit the sites to pray and petition God or the patron saint to hear their prayers. Much of the ritual activity is carried out casually, and often quite privately, particularly if one is seeking a cure. Some of the most common reasons that people visited holy wells are eye ailments, warts, arthritis, sick children, mental illness, and fertility issues (Logan 1980: Ch 6). The visitors to the wells generally pray, drink the water, and leave a votive deposit of some kind. Frequent deposits include coins, hair accoutrements, and Catholic iconographic items such as statuettes, rosaries and prayer cards. Items are left on an altar above the well, and in the case of the coins, also in the water itself. Traditionally, to seek

a cure one leaves items to represent or embody one's ailment. The little bits of cloth tied to special trees at many wells traditionally serve as such, a physical manifestation of the illness or complaint (fig. 3:1). In many areas the tradition was to wash an afflicted body

Figure 3:1 Rag tree at St. Feichin's Well, Fore Abbey, Co. Westmeath.

part in the stream that flowed from the well, and then tie the cloth used to wipe the affliction in the tree (Logan 1980: 116). When the rag decays and disappears, so will your affliction or troubles. This type of behavior is classic *contagious magic*, as conceived in 20th Century scholarship, whereby "whatever [one] does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact" (Frazer 1922: 12; for a

discussion of recent critiques of this idea see Janowitz 2001). This is deemed possible when it is believed that "things which have once been in contact with each other are always in contact" (ibid: 13). This is the assumption that underlies much folk medicine, which quite consistently concerns "the magical divestment of disease, whereby the malady is passed off wholly, or in a part which still represents the whole" (Hand 1969, from Lehman et al 1989: 194). At some Irish holy wells, these strips of cloth, or 'clooties', whether representing petitioners' ailments, or having been tied on as a reminder of prayers made, are the only sign that the site is any more than just another spring. In my experience, if one sees clooties, then coins have likely been left in the spring as well. Often, coins and other small metal items are also left in the tree, driven into the trunk or another wooden feature such as a gate-post, uncannily similar to some Native American groups' techniques of transferring disease by "plugging," "nailing," and "wedging" items into a trunk (Hand 1969).

The holy well ritual complex typically comprises spring, tree, and often one or more stones, all of which may be paid special attention in ceremonial acts performed at the sites. There is a great deal of lore concerning these 'pin wells' and their 'rag trees' in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, and the supernatural powers attributed to their waters (Hartland 1893; Jones 1954; Gribben 1992). Furthermore, wells are also used in rituals of penance, whereby an individual will be prescribed a certain number of *Paters*, *Aves*, and so forth to recite at the well, in some cases in conjunction with stops at stations of the cross set up around or nearby the well, in payment for sins committed.

A description of a well shrine I visited in 2008 and the offerings left at it will serve nicely to illustrate the types of offerings commonly made at holy wells across Ireland.

I paid a visit to St. Brigit's Well, which lies just west of the Hill of Uisneach in Co. Meath (fig. 3:2 and fig. 3:3). In a field north of the road, the precinct is delimited by a roughly 16 x 44 meter rectangular enclosure, partly fence and partly wall. In the western end of the enclosure there are the ruins of a small church or oratory. The land slopes to the east, and a path leads to a large stone niche that shelters a statue of Brigit that is the focus of most of the offerings (figs. 3:2, 3:3, and 3:4). The stairs continue down to the spring itself, immediately below the niche, which is collected in a round stone-walled catchment pool that drains towards the "royal" Hill of *Uisneach*, which looms prominently on the eastern horizon (fig. 3:5).

Figure 3:2 St. Brigit's Well, Killare, Co. Westmeath.

The votive offerings are placed primarily on the large dedicatory stone that serves as the floor of the niche, the base of the statue, and as the altar. Upon it were left a variety of items that reflect the main themes of votive offerings. These included: statuettes, prayer plates, rosaries, crucifixes, St. Brigit's crosses of woven rushes, candles, coins, seashells, small vessels, anthropomorphic perfume bottles, real and plastic flowers, small saints' medallions, a thimble, and a key.

The tree had some 'clooties' tied to it, though fewer than many such trees receive. A large candle had been placed inside the large hollow trunk of the tree, and a small plush toy pig hung from a branch. There is a bench facing the well and statue, and the

entire site is bounded by fences, trees and shrubs, giving it the feel of a secluded sanctuary.

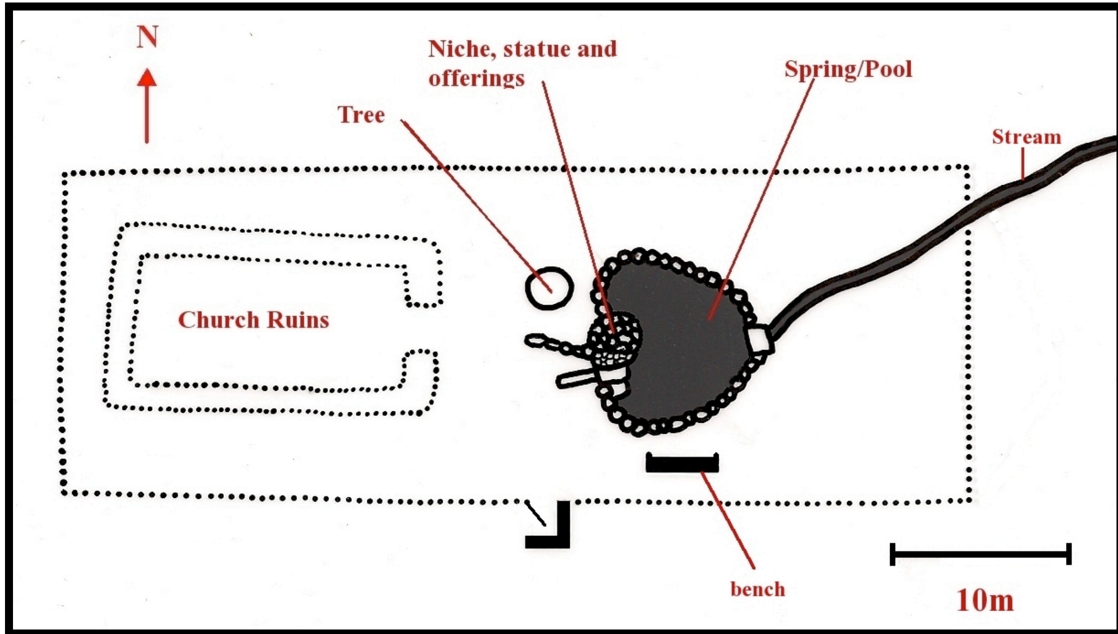

Figure 3:3 St. Brigit's Well, Killare, Co. Westmeath, plan view.

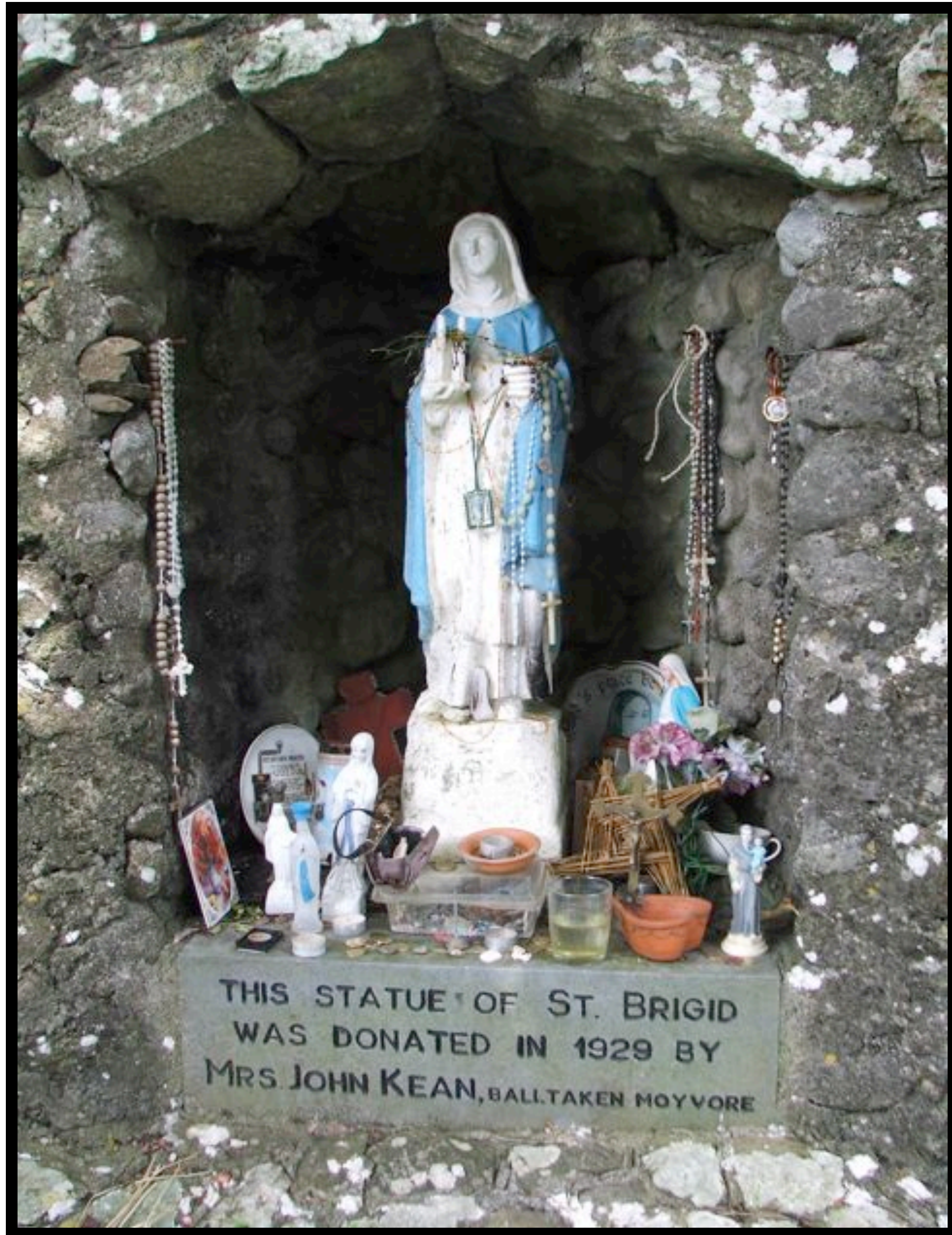

Figure 3:4 Statue of St. Brigit (Brigid) and associated *ex-votos*.

Figure 3:5 St. Brigit's Well with the Hill of *Uisneach* beyond.

St. Brigit's Well is fairly heavily venerated, but overall the level and nature of votive behavior at the shrine captures the essence of holy wells across Ireland. Most other holy wells I have visited evidence a similar range of items, although many had received more coins, and some notably included more children's items, socks, and hair accessories. Hair accoutrements were also prevalent offerings in a very similar inventory of votive objects recorded by Rahtz and Watts from a holy well and cave in Co. Donegal, Ireland (1979) that Ann Woodward later likened to the votive materials of a Romano-British temple (Woodward 1992: 123). We will see that this type of healing shrine was common at springs in the Classical World, and healing rituals akin to the one these

petitions represent are known in various forms broadly throughout Europe. One endemic attribute of Irish holy well worship that has attracted attention is the practice of saying the rosary at the sites as payment of penance as doled out by church authorities (Carroll 2000).

There are also many Irish sites that receive considerably less votive behavior, such as the Toothwell on the Burren in County Clare (fig 3:6). This spring is a small (15cm) round hole in the exposed limestone bedrock that comprises the landscape of the Burren. A very small dry-stone wall of pieces of the same limestone surrounds most of the well, and supports a thin slab that shelters the hole and also provides a shelf.

Figure 3:6 Toothwell, on the Burren, Co. Clare.

This shelf is used as an altar receiving pilgrims' offerings, which here interestingly were all items of metal, shell, bone. The metal items were mostly coins with a few bits of iron and a horseshoe. Startling to find among the offerings were several human teeth, although the name Toothwell might have tipped me off. There is no Christian dedication here, nor any overt Christian offerings or symbols marking the site, such as statuettes, prayer cards, rosaries, or other typical votives. The well attracts at least some Christian attention, as the Brennemans' photograph of the well captured a handmade wooden cross on the altar in the early 1990's (1995: 8).

Other holy well sites have become large, complex pilgrimage shrines on the Continental model, with multiple sacred *foci* to visit and petition, facilities for large numbers of pilgrims, and even a model grotto with a statue of Mary in it in imitation of Lourdes. A good example of a holy well that has been developed to a considerable extent is Ogulla's Well just south of Tulsk, Co. Roscommon (figures 3:7-3:11). Nestled right against the roadside bank, Ogulla's spring rises in an area of small, rocky pools, then flows into a channel, past a statue of Patrick, under two footbridges, to a walled basin and stone cross, and away in a broad stream. A modern glass-walled, hexagonal roofed chapel has been erected next to the spring, and one can find votive offerings and written petitions on the altar inside. Informational signs tell how this structure was created for by Pope John Paul II to use in 1979 when he visited the internationally famous pilgrimage site at Knock, marking the centennial of Marian apparitions there. The walled access point at the cross where some of the water is channeled resembles a holy well, but it is not clear if this is one of the sources. There is also a statue of Mary several meters from the stream.

Figure 3:7 Ogulla's Well and Chapel, near Tulsk, Co. Roscommon, facing NNE.

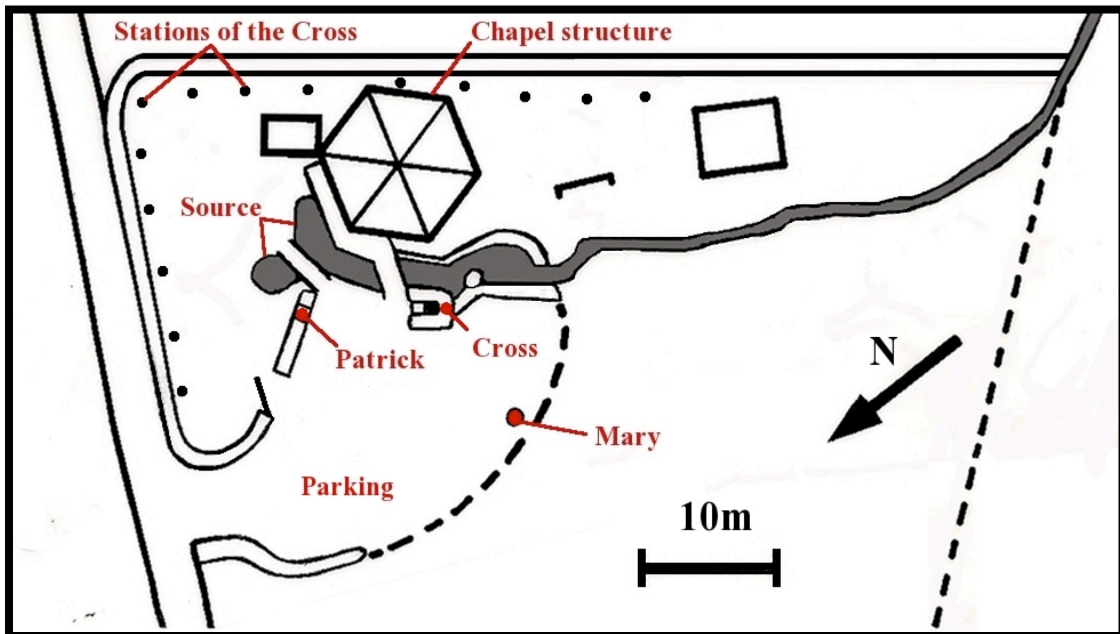

Figure 3:8 Ogulla's Well, plan view.

This spring is said to be the site where St. Patrick met and baptized two daughters of the king of Tara, both of whom died upon taking communion and seeing the glory of God (Doherty 2005: 7-8; Bieler 144-145).

Figure 3:9 Statue of St. Mary with votive offerings, and industrial conduit, behind barbed wire on the edge of the shrine area in May of 2007.

Lying below the road level and bounded by stone walls and high hedges, the site has the feeling of an enclosed sanctuary, with simple Stations of the Cross staked out behind the spring and the chapel, a bench placed facing the stream where it burbles over a small fall. The area delimited by the road and the field boundaries that extends to the west has a separate entrance, and does not form part of the shrine. Some industrial materials have been stored right behind the statue of St. Mary since at least 2007 (fig. 3:9)

Figure 3:10 Statue of St. Patrick with votives.

There is an altar in the glass building, so outdoor offerings are left in a variety of places: on the statues of the Virgin Mary (fig. 3:9), St. Patrick (fig. 3:10) on the cross (fig. 3:11), and in the spring itself. I observed what appear to be years' worth of accumulated votive items lying on the ground behind Patrick, near to the source that are being quickly enveloped by the flora.

It is important to note also that this site is quite close to the 'royal' cult landscape of Rathcroghan (*Cruachain*), which I will discuss along with the other royal sites in detail in Chapter 5. It is at springs such as these that many Irish Catholics pray, seek healing, penance, and hear mass at annual gatherings. Now let us turn towards the Continent, to see how this behavior relates to pilgrimage traditions there.

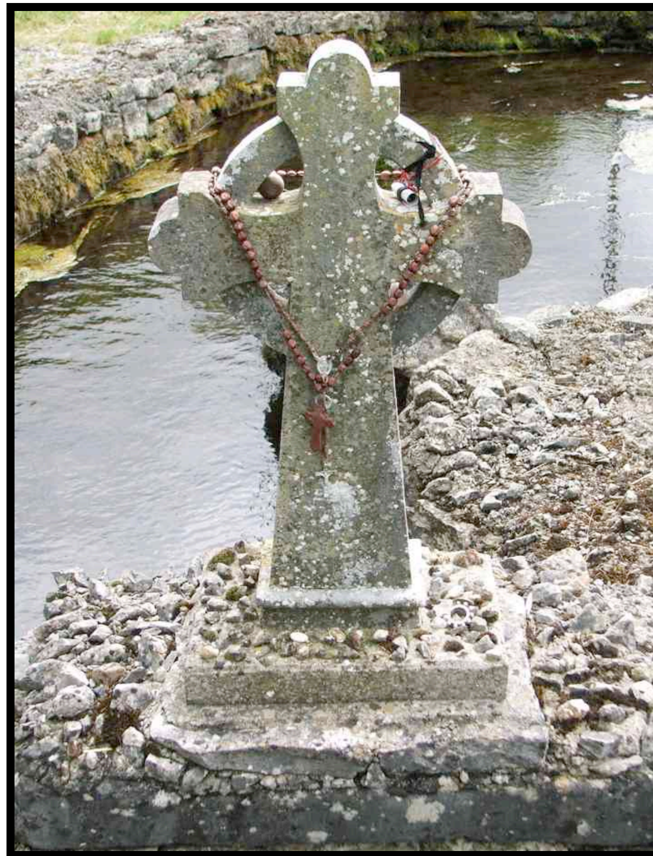

Figure 3:11 Cross with rosaries and other votives, with the stream beyond.

Christian Pilgrimage

How does this behavior relate to the European cult of Saints? In approaching that question, I widen my scope a bit to show that pilgrimage is common not only to the three Hebraic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but indeed is also practiced in Hinduism and Buddhism, and in traditions all around the world. Christian pilgrimage began with travel to ~~h~~ Jerusalem, following in the footsteps of St. Paul, who traveled there "to stand on the same ground the Saviour had trodden" (Harbison 1992: 23). So Christ's tomb, where he ascended to heaven, was by the 2nd century augmented by Bethlehem, Nazareth, and the Mount of the Sermon as places to which early Christians came to be closer to God (ibid: 24). This initial pilgrimage to holy places was soon extended to include visiting "exceptional human beings" who were believed to have to power to cure (ibid). Simeon the Stylite (AD390-459) exemplified such Christian stars. He had gained such a reputation for his decades upon a column that multitudes, including some non-Christians, made the long journey to see him. By the 3rd century, it was broadly believed that such holy individuals could help even after death, resulting in their burial places becoming pilgrimage destinations. Also, objects with which they had been in contact could convey these individual's power, so people began taking bits of Simeon's column (now reduced to a mere stub) (Maraval 1985: 237), and even dirt from graves that contained no remains at all, as was the case in the early 4th century at Christ's own tomb, which had to be refilled with dirt by attendants of the shrine each day (Frank 2006: 193). Such souvenirs in places included water from springs that was taken away in small flasks. This early phase of Christian pilgrimage appears in hindsight to have been marked by

tolerance, compared to the ethnic cleansing that began once Christians had the Roman army behind them.

By the 4th and 5th centuries, the "network of holy space" had been broadened by the inclusion of a whole "gallery of holy men", which came to include individuals living both in monastic contexts, and in isolated eremitic cells (Brown 1981; Bitton-Ashkelony 2005: 187). It was during the 4th century that Constantine made Christianity the state religion, and immediately these same holy men began attacking the pagan places of worship. Such aggression towards pagan sites had begun in earnest after the Roman Empire became Christian in the 4th century. The code published by Theodosius II in 438 compiled laws by Constantine and the subsequent Christian emperors that rendered not only sacrifice, but even merely being around temples, crimes punishable (at least on paper) by death (*Codex Theodosius*, 16.10.2: trans. Pharr). So Emperor Constantius Augustus declares, "Superstition shall cease, the madness of sacrifices shall be abolished" (ibid). And, here with Constans, he writes:

> It is Our pleasure that the temples shall be immediately closed in all places and in all cities, and access to them forbidden, so as to deny to all abandoned men the opportunity to commit sin. It is also Our will that all men shall abstain from sacrifices. But if perchance any man should perpetrate any such criminality, he shall be struck down with the avenging sword (ibid: 16.10.4).

This declaration, of course, generally prohibited all things pagan, foremost the myriad cults that had burgeoned in the Empire. This ban included Roman rites, certainly, but it also outlawed those cults that had been introduced from the East and taken root in the farthest reaches of the Empire, as well as "romanized" versions of local cults in the provinces. The onslaught against non-Christian cult sites advanced with Christianity, the

cultural destruction crossing the landscape of Europe like a line of wild fire, inexorably advancing and destroying the religious cultural landscape of Europe, finally reaching the Baltic countries in the late Medieval period (and of course, eventually, burning on through huge expanses of the world beyond Europe). St. Martin of Tours' path of destruction in the late 4th century is perhaps the most famous episode of these brutal attacks, and set an example for subsequent conversion techniques. A series of church edicts on the Continent instructed clergy to prevent pagan worship specifically at springs, trees, and stones. The Council of Arles in AD 452 declares that any Bishop that lets "infidels light torches or venerate trees, fountains or stones" is himself guilty of sacrilege (Rattue 1995: 78). Similar declarations were repeatedly made through the 8th century (ibid). There is some evidence for another strategy emerging by the beginning of the 7th century. when the instructions of Pope Gregory the Great to his missionaries in England included this quite specific advice:

> [T]he temples of the idols among that people should on no account be destroyed. The idols are to be destroyed, but the temples themselves are to be aspersed with holy water, altars set up in them, and relics deposited there. For if these temples are well-built, they must be purified from the worship of demons and dedicated to the service of the true God. In this way, we hope that the people, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may abandon their error and, flocking more readily to their accustomed resorts, may come to know and adore the true God" (Bede I. 30).

Oliver Nicholson points out that this is very atypical, suggesting that such restraint does not represent the normal way pagan sites were treated by Christians (pers. comm.). This sentiment is echoed in a 19th century account of what is possibly an 8th century well-blessing rite recorded on a manuscript from Bobbio, Italy, that asks God to "drive hence the occult ghosts and demons lying in wait so that purified and faultless this well will

remain" (Rattue 1995: 78). Nolan points out how that the Christianizing of landscape features in this period was done largely by Irish missionaries (1983: 422), which might explain such a blessing coming from Bobbio, an establishment of the Irishman, Columbanus, who founded numerous other monasteries, including the aptly named Fontaines (D'Arcy 1974: 118-123). Whether it was due solely to Irish missionary activities or not, people continued to visit these rural landscape-based shrines, much as the vegetation sprouts anew after the wildfire has passed.

Eighth century Lombard law prohibited the worship of sacred trees and springs, and Charlemagne established fines to be paid "if anyone makes a vow at springs or trees or groves or makes any offering in the manner of the pagans and eats in honour of the demons" (Dowden 2000: 43). The fate of sacred springs in this period depended on their location, on the whims of the kings and church leaders there. By the monastic revival of the 10th century, in England, the recycling of cult site suggested by Gregory was no longer allowed. In the decree put forth in the Canons of Edgar in 1005-08, clergy were required to "entirely extinguish every heathen practice; and forbid worship of wells, and necromancy and worship of trees and worship of stones" (ibid: 79). Similar decrees went out in England through the 11th century. But, the strategy of accommodation promulgated by Gregory five hundred years earlier was then brought back by the 1102 Council of Westminster, whereby "all new cults of wells or small-scale shrines were made subject to the authority of the local bishop" (ibid). By this time on the Continent, saints *vitae* were being written, attributing miraculous springs to the saints, often via their staff, hammer, or kiss (Caulier 1990: 35-39). Thus they were being morphed into wholly and exclusively Christian sites *ab origine*. History is written by the victors, indeed.

While veneration of the pagan sacred landscape experienced its ups and downs, pilgrimage to the places where these exceptional Christian people lived or had been interred blossomed. Most of all it was the final resting place of their relics, usually consisting of their bones, even a fragment, but also including their personal items, that drew pilgrimage. Thus began the cult of relics that came to dominate continental pilgrimage throughout the Middle Ages, and indeed remains today a major factor in determining where pilgrims go in Europe.

Among such sites harboring the relics of a saint, the one that attracted most medieval and later pilgrimage in Europe is Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Spain (fig. 3:12) the road to which (*El Camino*) is in reality a network of routes criss-crossing Europe.

Figure 3:12 The Cathedral at Santiago de Compostela (*Courtesy of Carolyn Serrano*).

This ancient, widespread veneration of and pilgrimage to sites associated with the saints was nearly wiped out in many areas by the Reformation (Turner and Turner 1978: 37), but was reinvigorated by a series of post-medieval Marian apparitions that led to the establishment of new and widely popular pilgrimage traditions associated with miraculous healing and conversionary experiences. Most famous among such recently established pilgrimage sites is Lourdes in France (fig. 3:13). Lourdes is particularly important here, as it has become a model for the subsequent remodeling of holy wells across Europe, and of shrines across the world. In 1858, a young woman named Bernadette Soubirous had eleven visions of the Virgin Mary. Mary spoke to her on all of these occasions, once telling her to drink at the spring, which Bernadette had to dig to find, thus causing the spring to flow (Turner and Turner 1978: 226). Since that time, the spot has become an incredibly built-up and elaborate center of Catholic devotion (figures 3:13 and 3:14).

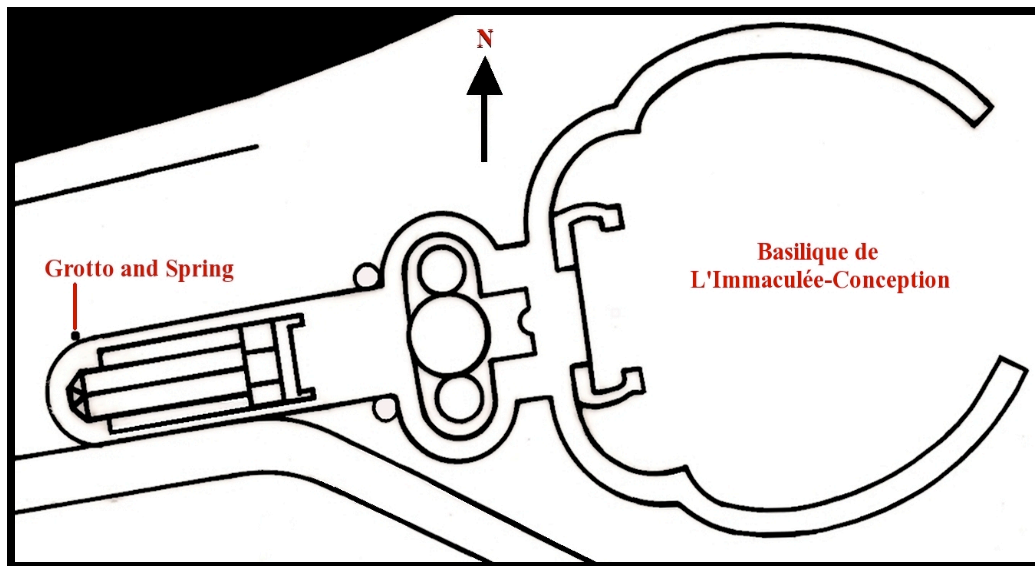

Figure. 3:13 Plan of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception at Lourdes, with the Grotto and Spring of Massabielle.

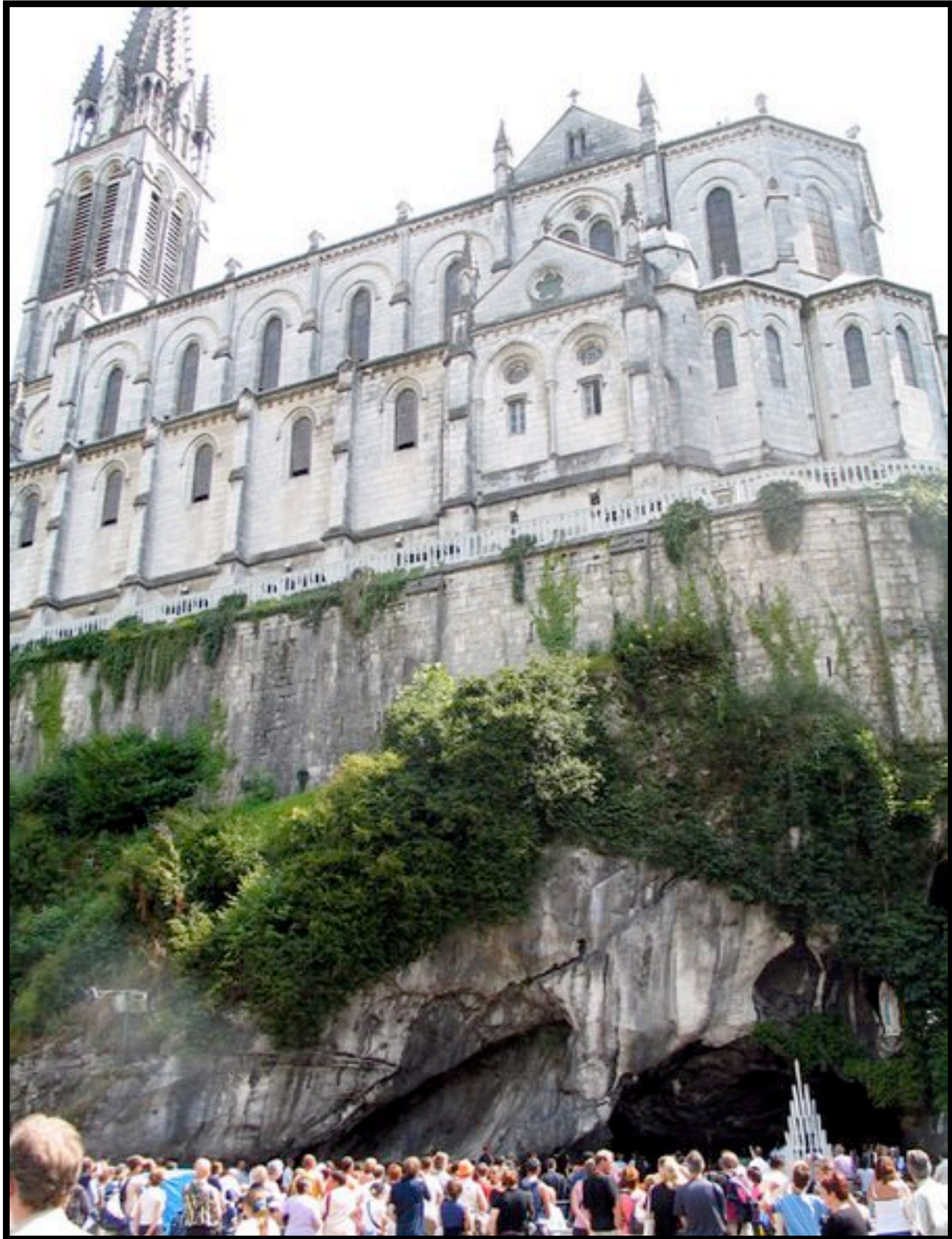

Figure 3:14 Basilica of the Immaculate Conception and Grotto of Massabielle.
Courtesy of Jean-Noël Lafargue.

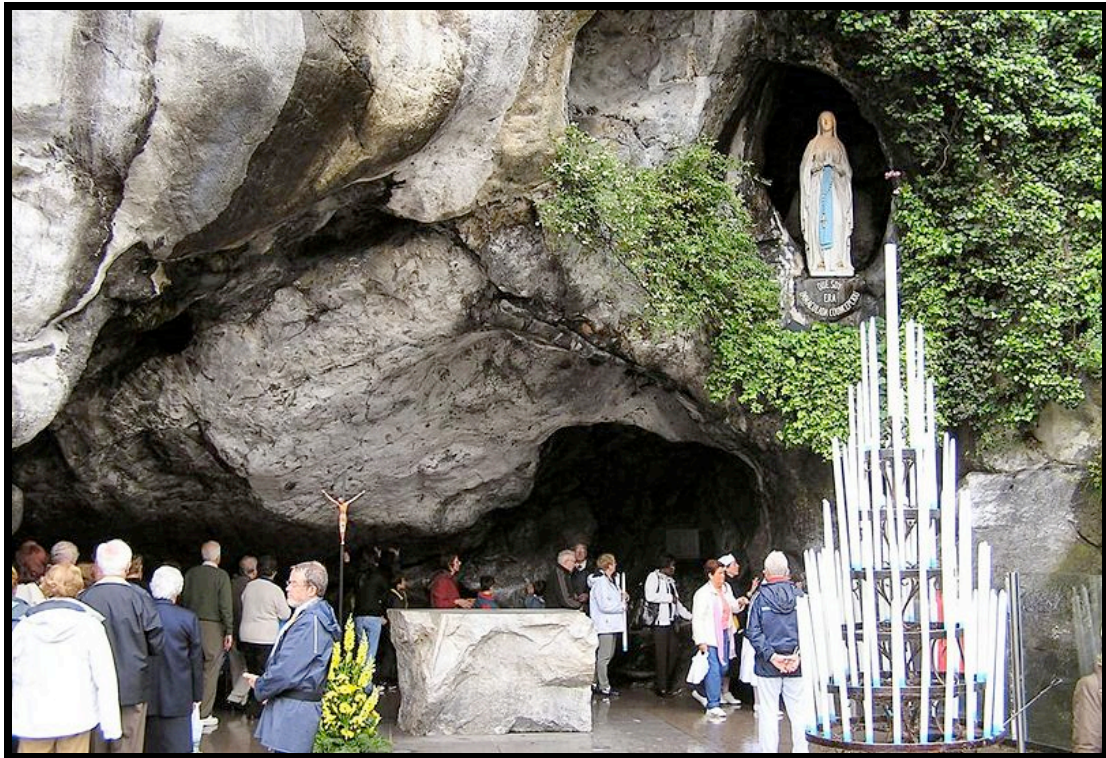

Figure 3:15 Grotto of Massabielle at Lourdes (*Courtesy of Emmanual Brunner*).

Figure 3:16 Turbrid's Well, Millstreet, Co. Cork, with its Lourdes grotto.

The Basilica of the Immaculate Conception was constructed actually above the spring, which still flows out of the cave in the rock outcropping where Bernadette found it (figs. 3:13-3:15). Bernadette reported seeing Mary in a second, smaller cave just above and to the right of the spring, which today houses a statue of Mary, providing the template for the countless Lourdes grottos found internationally. The niche at St. Brigit's well discussed above certainly hearkens back to Lourdes, as do many more direct facsimiles at other shrines, such as Turbrid's well in Millstreet, Co. Cork (fig.3:16). Note the smaller statue of Bernadette kneeling in front of the grotto, which is the position of the spring at Lourdes (fig. 3:15).

In northern New England where I grew up, there is the French Canadian tradition of erecting a "bathtub Mary" in one's yard, with a tub buried half-way on end, leaving just enough projecting above ground to act as an *aedicule* for a statue of Mary, leaving me to wonder if Lourdes also provided the model for those, or whether that is just a thrifty way of recreating a niche as one would find in a church. In imitating the Lourdes grotto, Continental shrines did eventually manage to incorporate the symbolism of "height, grove, water, stone, and grotto" wherever the relics ended up (Nolan 1983: 422). The growing ubiquity of such universal grotto shrines further diminished the importance of specific places to the Continental pilgrimage tradition.

In short, pilgrimage in Europe today still focuses on ancient sites such as Santiago de Compostela, and Rome, but increasingly sites of modern origin such as Lourdes have become major centers as well. While recent embellishments have made pilgrimage sites in Ireland and those on the Continent resemble each other a great deal, and Lourdes is focused on a miraculous spring, the general distinction of landscape-based pilgrimage in

Ireland and relic-based pilgrimage on the Continent remains. Further aspects of Continental pilgrimage will be discussed in exploring the relationship of Ireland's pilgrimage tradition to this wider pattern.

The History of Irish Pilgrimage

Irish holy well veneration doubtlessly owes much to this wider Christian background of pilgrimage. From its beginnings in the fifth century AD, Irish pilgrimage has differed from Continental traditions. Nolan states what many people take for granted, that:

> the early Celtic church was . . . more open to syncretism of old and new religious traditions. Old holy places, often in remote areas, were 'baptized ' in the new religion or given new meaning through their historical, or more often legendary, association with Celtic saints" (422).

As pointed out above, many Early Christian shrines on the continent developed at the tombs of martyrs in cemeteries on the edges of Roman cities, and devotions there focused on physical remains of the saints, as discussed above, rather than on any particular feature of the landscape, which had been attacked and forbidden as places of pagan and thus demonic worship. The process of trashing local religious sites largely missed Ireland, where, according to the hagiographers, springs were made Christian right away, skipping the steps of destroying the sites and forbidding the pagans to go there (Doherty 2005: 6). So, whereas saint's relics drew pilgrims on the Continent, Ireland's pilgrimage focused on the very type of landscape feature that the Church had savaged and forbidden on the Continent. Thus in the 7th century Tírechán tells us of Patrick coming upon pagans worshipping their votive Well of *Slán*, which he does not destroy (although he does

unsuccessfully attempt to look under a rock to disprove that anyone's bones lay there), rather he tells them their *beliefs* are wrong. He sanctifies wells either by digging them directly, establishing chapels by them, and in the case of *Clébach* (Ogulla's well discussed above), by founding a church nearby the burial place of the two princesses that had died there. The ubiquity of such accounts in the *vitae* make it clear at least that 7th century Christians had a real concern with the Christianization of wells (Doherty 2005: 8).

The Continental tradition gradually shifted from a tomb and relic oriented practice to image veneration and Marian devotion from the 9th to 11th centuries, a process that also largely missed Ireland (Nolan 1983: 423). In the late 12th century, however, the Norman invasion of Ireland, the spread of the Cistercian monastic order, and Rome's domination of the Celtic church all began to rejoin Irish pilgrimage to the evolving mainstream traditions of Europe, an integration that continued for centuries, ending only as Protestant Britain's political and economic subjugation of Ireland strengthened in the Late Medieval period (ibid: 424). The British attempted sporadically to curb Roman Catholic ritual expressions, especially any pilgrimage-related veneration of images, relics, or devotion to Mary.

The British also attempted to block developments in the Counter-Reformation, which was flourishing on the continent, from reaching Ireland. Nolan states that the British largely succeeded, eliminating "nearly every aspect of pilgrimage that had been introduced into Ireland between the late eleventh and the early sixteenth centuries" (ibid). David Miller points out, though, that the Counter Reformation did meet with some success in Ireland, aided by the growing importance of the town centers focused on the

church and marketplace (Miller 2005). Miller distinguished three distinct but interconnected ways of practicing Catholicism, modes based in the *landscape*, *household*, and *chapel*, respectively, and suggested that these must be born in mind in order to best understand Irish pilgrimage (2005: 102). The chapel-based mode of worship was the ideal fostered by the Tridentine Reforms, wherein believers in each territorial parish were to worship at a central parish church, where clergy would preside over the weekly sacraments of mass, and a minimum of once a year each adherent was to undertake penance for sins committed before taking communion (ibid: 97). These policies were established at the Council of Trent in the late 16th century in response to criticisms made during the Reformation (Hardiman 2007), and by the late 18th century were allowed to penetrate Ireland when the Penal Laws were relaxed. This form of practicing Catholicism did not necessarily work for the agrarian population base away from the towns. These were a transhumant folk, migrating from winter to summer pastures and homes, taking them regularly too far away from the parish church to comply with the strictures placed on worship. Besides, during the years of the Penal Laws, remote holy wells had become places of congregation, of mass, pilgrimage to which was emblematic of resistance to their colonial rulers (ibid: 425). Nolan describes what remained of Irish pilgrimage at this point as having been "pushed back 1,000 years toward a folk reinterpretation of the ancient Celtic tradition" (ibid.) (or what she also called "ancient semi-Christianized traditions"), resulting by the nineteenth century in Irish pilgrimage representing "the most fully archaic example of Christian pilgrimage in Western Europe" (ibid: 426). The transhumant agrarian class used the opportunities for worship offered by the terrain they had long inhabited and traversed. This landscape-based worship realized two forms: the

"pattern" or patron saint's day festival, and pilgrimage proper (Miller 2005: 97-100). By then, though, all three had been linked by an emphasis on mass, on penance, and on the rosary (ibid: 102).

"**Patterns**"

In many Irish communities the Parish church holds a mass service at the local holy well annually on the patron saint's day. Such events today are staid and pious events, essentially a parish church service held at the well. I attended one such mass at a holy well in County Cork in 1994 and was struck by the juxtaposition of the Church officials in their garb and electric keyboard standing somewhat awkwardly by the well, with the twin breast-shaped mountains called *the Paps* (*Dhá Chích Anann*, the breasts of the goddess Danu) in the background!

For centuries, however, such fairs commemorating the patron saint of the parish, known as 'patrons' or 'patterns,' had been highly charged events of wide regional importance, where games, horse racing, general merrymaking, and often faction fighting accompanied and augmented the religious obligations carried out at the saint's holy well (Logan 1980: 35). These great festivals are first described in the mid 17th century. The church component of the event involved mass at the holy well, with traditional stations for pilgrims to perform. These rituals involve 'rounding,' or circumambulating the well and any number of other sacred features of the landscape. These pilgrims' stations often include a cluster of features near a church or chapel comprising some combination of a tree, stone, cemetery, saint's grave, and occasional non-ecclesiastical features. Patterns became infamous for their hedonistic party aspect, with drinking, cavorting, and fighting

being staple activities at them. The Church condemned them in the 19th century, and most of the traditions either ceased entirely, or were stripped of their secular, unsavory traditions, becoming the upstanding outdoor church services carried out entirely under the watchful eye of the clergy, such as I experienced. Nolan states that even after the relaxation of the Penal Laws, prior to 1800, the Church remained unsupportive, or worse, towards pilgrimage for over a hundred years (1983: 426).

Wider Irish Pilgrimage

Beyond the small-scale personal holy well rituals, and the regional patterns on saints' days, pilgrimage in Ireland is best known for the two grandest traditions associated with Saint Patrick, pilgrimage to *Lough Derg* in Co. Donegal (the site of St. Patrick's Purgatory), and that to the mountain, *Croagh Patrick* (Harbison 1992: 55). The Lough Derg tradition was recorded in the 12th century, when the purported experiences of a Welsh knight named Owein were immortalized in Latin and several vernacular languages and read across Europe. The site consists of two islands out in the Lough, one of which had a cave that induced visions of hell, descriptions of which are suspected to have influenced Dante and medieval painters, thus to have contributed to popular imagery of the nether world and the demons and tortured souls therein. The pilgrims completed "rounds" at the site, circling and kissing the church and various saints' "beds" and certain other features, while reciting requisite numbers of decades of the rosary (ibid: 62).

Pilgrimage to *Croagh Patrick*, while less well known internationally, entailed a gruelling crawl to and up the mountain, and the performance of similar rounds at the summit, although including far fewer features. Two other mountains on the Western

fringe of Ireland also attracted pilgrims: *Slieve League*, of which little is known save the physical remains of the pilgrimage route including clear stations, and Mount Brandon in Dingle, pilgrimage to which survived into modern times (Harbison 1992). Monastic establishments on the western isles also attracted pilgrims early on, with *Skellig Michael* as the most famous and indeed physically striking example. To these must be added what has become the major pilgrimage site in Ireland, Knock, where several people reported seeing apparitions in the late 19th century.

All of these examples, of which there are many more localized versions, focus on physical features of the landscape, albeit ones that at some point received Christian dedications and construction, a fundamental trait that they share with the cult of the holy well. Indeed, the two are not really separate phenomena, as the great pilgrimages all generally include one or more holy well, and often, as in the case of Mount Brandon, conclude with a traditional *pattern* fair, complete with worship at a well.

Another point that I must make here is that holy wells are not an exclusively Irish phenomenon. France alone has thousands (Caulier 1990: 15-21), and while major pilgrimages tend to be to places where saint's relics are kept, or to where apparitions have been seen, there is ample veneration of springs associated with the saints there as well (ibid: her whole book). Further confounding the comparisons is the fact that the most popular pilgrimage shrine in Ireland today is Knock, Co. Mayo (from which the glass chapel at Ogulla's well above was removed) where as mentioned above a group of people saw visions in 1879. Notably, these were not only of Mary, but of a variety of personages (Carroll 1986: 202-211), putting it in the same class of site as Lourdes, and Fátima in Portugal, all places where pilgrimage is to the site of visions, rather than to either

physical relics or ancient landscape features.

Ancient well rites?

If Nolan is right, and Irish pilgrimage came to draw on ancient traditions, what I want to know is what exactly were these ancient Celtic traditions that the Irish Catholics were pushed back towards to reinterpret? Even Carroll allows that there were likely some sacred springs in the Early Christian Period (2000: 74), and Gerald of Wales recounts some fantastical magical wells in Ireland in the time of the Norman Conquest. The most direct and vivid account of ritual behavior at a spring that might represent this ancient tradition towards which Irish Catholics had been pushed back is that mentioned above from the seventh century hagiographer Tírechán, who was seeking to document the churches that St. Patrick was reputed to have founded (Aitchison 1996: 68).

Tírechán wrote of Patrick:

> And he came to the well of Findmag which is called Slán, because he had been told that the druids honoured the well and offered gifts to it as a god. The well was of square shape and the mouth of the well was covered with a square stone (and water flew over the stone, that is through ducts closed with cement) like a regal trail[?], and the infidels said that some wise man had made for himself a shrine in the water under the stone to bleach his bones perpetually because he feared the burning by fire; and they worshipped the well as a god. . . And the druids and the pagans of that region and a very large crowd gathered together at the well and Patrick said to them: 'Lift the stone; let us see what is under it, whether bones or not, for I am telling you: under it there are not the bones of a man, but - so I believe - some gold and silver from your wicked sacrifices leaks through the cementing of the stones'; and they were unable to lift the stone (ibid).

As one of the only descriptions of a sacred well in this 'contact' period, this brief reference has perhaps been overused. There are also countless holy wells in the later *vitae*, bursting forth due to various acts by virtually every saint (Orme 1992: 63, 81 89).

Such accounts are by their nature suspect, as so much of the content of the saints' Lives are clearly drawn from the template of the 4th century *Life of Anthony*, in which Anthony miraculously causes a spring to burst forth in a time of need, and indeed this motif might go all the way back to Moses (Athanasius 1980: 71). Nicholas Aitchison argues quite convincingly that Tírechán's account of the well is an incidental aside in his work, and through various lines of evidence, deems it to be quite reliable. Assuming there is some truth in the account, we must ask, what sort of ritual site does the story describe? It is a spring with a flowing stream, it has some stonework, it is worshiped as a god, and it was reputed to contain human remains and offerings of precious metal. It seems pagan enough. In fact it fits with the stereotype of Celtic human sacrifice and the deposition of metalwork in watery places, deemed to be doorways to the otherworld or residences of supernatural beings. Is this the "ancient Celtic tradition" that Nolan sees Irish Catholics being pushed back toward to reinterpret? If so, this seems inconsistent with Carroll. This passage supports Carroll's main claim though, that the rounding rituals were new, as there is no mention of such behavior in Tírechán's account.

I am interested in the origin of more than just rounding, but in the religious veneration of springs, and Tírechán's account demonstrates that either holy wells of some kind existed in pagan Irish tradition, or that the Christian authors writing in the Early Medieval Period about the pagan past thought they had been important, which itself suggests an earlier origin than Carroll allows. However, it remains possible that the well cult is Christian in origin, and that the missionaries bringing the new faith to Ireland could have brought the baptismal shrines with them. I will further address the possibility of holy wells being artifacts of the conversion process in Ireland below. Next, however, I

turn to consider the roles water plays in religion broadly, and more pointedly in the mythology and ritual practices of pre-Christian Europe.

Chapter 4

Water in Myth and Ritual: Water Worship in the *Longue Durée*

People have held watery sites to be divine, or to be especially appropriate and efficacious places to contact the gods for millennia. Water is essential to human life, and to all the living things upon which we depend. Yet in the greatest paradox, water is also deadly. A bit of it down the wrong tube can take an individual life. A deluge might take thousands, or, we are told, nearly all of us. Perhaps it is this dual and conflicting nature that has led people to attribute some degree of supernatural power to water. Kamash recently wrote about this 'ontological paradox of water' (2008), illustrating how while water has been associated with purification in the Western World, it also has a darker side in many traditions. I will be discussing how in Europe the watery deposition of votive offerings involved both of these motives.

Information about this widespread habit of water worship can be found in the society's mythology, as well as in the archaeology of their rituals. Before I discuss the ancient practice of actually putting things in water, I will take a moment to highlight water's broad importance in religious narratives.

Water in Mythology

Water is commonly attributed an early and major role in stories of creation (Eliade 1958: 188). In many of the world's cosmogonies, life begins in the divine primeval water (Eliade 1958: 188). Thus in Genesis, God moves on the face of the waters, while Vedic creation happened on the backdrop of an impenetrable, dark abyss of water (Radhakrishnan 1953: 35). Similarly, in the Mesopotamian creation story, the *Enuma*

Elish, creation is preceded by a primeval ocean, the origin of which is never explained (Hooke 1978: 24). Among their chief gods is *Enki,* the god of wisdom, of the "subterranean freshwater ocean", and of fertility-dispensing springs (Anderson 1986: 177). He is believed to have been worshipped at the intriguing mid-3rd century BC Barbar temple in Bahrain that had both a spring flowing from its side and a well that remained focal points of the site for centuries, and is believed to be one of Enki's abodes and places of worship. The return of the primordial watery state of things looms as a danger in some traditions, as the Great Flood motif found in many cultures' myths reminds us. So Noah and his Sumerian and Babylonian counterparts *Ziusudra*, and *Utnapishtim*, are each instructed to save what they can before the world is submerged (Hooke 1978: 46-9). Across the world, in the Lakota creation story, a lone girl is spared the deluge, snatched up by an eagle with whom she repopulates the earth once the waters eventually subside (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984: 93-95).

In Shinto, the *kami* spirits or gods enthuse many natural features. The god *Mii-no-Kami* specifically embodies and oversees springs and wells (Bruhl 1959: 416). Shinto shrines are generally set up by a spring or a stream, in which pilgrims wash before entering the shrine; or a basin is provided if there is no such natural source (Swan 1991).

Water also figures prominently in the mythology of Native American peoples. *Tlaloc* the rain god was among the most important deities of Central America, where the Cenote pools of the Maya were seen as doors to the otherworld and received an array of offerings, including humans (Sauer 2005: 96; Ashmore and Knapp 1999; Turner and Turner 1978: ch. 2). Many springs in Latin America today are the foci of modern pilgrimage, under varying degrees of Christian appropriation, such as the spring visited

on pilgrimage to the Lord of Chalma in Huizquilan, Mexico (Harvey 1991). I will describe that further in Chapter 8. There is a spring sacred to the Dakota (Sioux) in Minneapolis (fig. 4:1).

Figure 4:1. Camp Coldwater Spring, Minneapolis, MN. The spring rises within the well-house and flows into the large pool.

This spring is considered to be where the god of the waters, *Unktehi* lives, and figures in the Dakota creation story as the god's portal between worlds (Rudner 2001: 111), although there is some debate as to whether this is an old tradition or a new one related to protesting development of the area in the 1990's. The Zuñi story involves the Earth-mother "sinking deep into the embrace of the waters below, thus separating from the Sky-father in the embrace of the waters above" (Cushing 1868: 379; Eliade 1977: 131). George Caitlin recorded ceremonies commemorating the receding of such primordial

floodwaters among the Mandan (Caitlin 1841, in Matthiessen 1989: 154). These rituals of the Mandan people bear a striking resemblance to ancient votive practices in Europe, to which I will be turning in a moment.

At the ultimate Muslim pilgrimage site of Mecca, legend has it that the Zamzam spring is the spot where Abraham's wife Hagar was supplied water that she desperately needed by the touch of an angel's wing to the ground (Peters 1994: 17-18). The spring's water is still used to purify pilgrims of their sin, and pilgrims fill small bottles to take away (Barnes 2006: 24). In Zoroastrian tradition, the divine figure *Anahita*, a goddess of water, fertility, wisdom, and war, is associated with springs (Nabarz 2005; Masson-Ourcel 1976; Eliade 1958: 195; Beeman 2007: pers. com.). Robert Graves (1948: 371) suggested that Anahita represented the same figure as the Anna who appears in many European traditions, such as Anna Perenna of Rome, and Danu/Anu of Ireland (whose Paps we discussed above). Shrines devoted to her veneration are common at springs in Iran, where they attract visitors from various religions (Beeman: pers. com.).

The sea, so vast and beautiful, terrible yet providing, is itself widely deified. Oceanus, Poseidon, Neptune, Mannanon, and many others each embody the sea. The rivers that feed the oceans are commonly considered divine beings as well, such as the powerful *Styx* and *Scamander* in Greek myth, and the *Tiber* of Rome. This divine status often extends to the lakes and pools that form along them, and to the springs from which the rivers and their tributaries originate. It is clear that one can find examples of water as divine across the globe.

Of more immediate pertinence to my work on Irish holy wells are the tales of water in the religions of Europe. Supernatural wells figure prominently in Irish,

Scandinavian, and Classical myth and legend. In Irish mythology there are numerous accounts of sacred springs and river goddesses. The Shannon, the Boyne, and the other major rivers of Ireland are all said to (but do not) originate in an otherworldly well at the Royal center on the Hill of *Uisneach* (Rees and Rees 1961: 161). This Well of *Segais*, or Connla's Well, existed in the Otherworld, with nine hazel trees growing over it (ibid; Rolleston 1990, 1917). The hazelnuts would drop into the well, creating *na bolcca imaiss*, bubbles of inspiration, and be eaten by sacred salmon. Anyone who came in contact with these salmon thereafter would gain divine knowledge. The hero Finn McCumhail, for one, touched such a salmon and ever after needed only to suck his thumb to know the future (ibid). Many folktales concerning wells in the British Isles involve decapitated heads (Ross 1996: 155-161). This has helped fuel the theory of the Celtic cult of the head. There are also numerous legends involving people drowning in wells, murdered either by other humans, or by the animated water itself for some transgression.

In Scandinavian myth, the World Tree *Yggdrasil* has three roots each originating in a spring (Crossley-Holland 1980). One of these springs is the otherworldly Well of *Urd* (cognate with the weird/*wyrd* sisters of English literature), which was presided over by the Norns, three divine sisters, a maid, a matron and a crone, who control fate as did the Greek *Moirai*, or Roman *Parcae*. Another of these springs was presided over by the head of the god *Mimir*, and it was at this well that Odin gave his eye to gain divine knowledge, including of runic magic. The third well is in Hel. These three wells may all be versions of what was originally a single well. Be that as it may, the similarities between the Germanic tales and those from the Irish and Welsh traditions have long been

noted (Davidson 1988: 25-26). Common to the traditions are otherworldly wells associated with divine inspiration and prophetic knowledge.

In Greek mythology, the minor divinities associated with springs were a variety of nymph called *Crenae* or *Pegae* (Guirand 1976, 1959: 149). Their functions included prophecy, healing, and guarding "flowers, fields and flocks" (ibid.). These nymphs lived either deep in the water, or in grottoes near their springs. Interestingly, they are characterized as being busy spinning and weaving. They were by nature benign, but when they became enamored with a man, they turned deadly, drawing the man into the water to their death.

In his *Metamorphoses*, written around AD 10, Ovid describes the springs of multiple Roman divinities. The hero Cadmus finds such a site, one that was home to a sacred snake:

> An ancient forest stood there, undespoiled by any axe, and in its midst a cave thick set with bushes. Tightly-fitted stones made a low archway, under which the water poured from abundant springs, and there a serpent, sacred to Mars, was dwelling (Ovid 1955).

The serpent killed Cadmus' servants whom he had sent to find water. The low stonework archway sure sounds like a holy well. There are numerous similar descriptions of the goddess Diana, or Artemis frequenting such spring sanctuaries:

> There was a valley there, all dark and shaded with pine and cypress, sacred to Diana, Gargaphie, its name was, and it held deep in its inner shade a secret grotto made by no art, unless you think of Nature as being an artist. Out of rock and tufa she had formed an archway, where the shining water made slender watery sound, and soon subsided into a pool, and grassy banks around it. The goddess of the woods, when tired from hunting, came here to bathe her limbs in the cool crystal (ibid).

That could easily be a description of the Lourdes grotto, prior to the basilica and vast paved precinct being added. Many tales of nymphs drawing some youth to their death in a spring could be quoted here, as could Pliny's description of rural spring shrines (Pliny, in MacMullen and Lane 1992: 42-43), but I will let this handful of examples suffice to illustrate how prominently water figures in the mythology of European peoples.

Water in European Cult

Having looked to mythology for evidence of water veneration, let us now consider what evidence there is for actual rituals that focused on sacred waters. Watery sites have been deemed appropriate places to deposit a suite of items in Europe, in various ways, for thousands of years. Much of the famous metalwork from the Bronze and Iron Ages was recovered from such contexts, and the Roman Period saw a flourishing of healing shrines, as well as historical accounts of barbarian sacrifices of metalwork to watery sites. At a glance it appears that the Irish and other European holy well traditions must descend from this ancient watery deposition of metalwork.

Discussing this early water veneration, Eberhard Sauer has cautioned us not to treat all offerings to watery places as necessarily the same phenomenon, suggesting that the different bodies of water and types of offerings could represent quite different beliefs and practices (2005: 95). Bradley had emphasized the same point years earlier (2000: 53), and Fontijn has recently clearly demonstrated that certain materials were selectively deposited in different watery contexts (2008). Further, we cannot assume that deposition in the same type of watery site meant the same thing at different times; some areas saw

repeated use of the same sites for over a thousand years. Symbolic meanings are fickle. They can change in a generation, let alone over centuries or millennia.

This offering of items to wet sites begins in the Mesolithic (Bradley 2005: 142-3), and ground-stone axes were first put into rivers and bogs in the Neolithic. Similar practices began widely across Neolithic Temperate Europe, including Britain and Southern Scandinavia (Bradley 1988: 58; 2005: 130; Stjernquist 1997), the Low Countries (Fontijn 2008; Wentink 2008), and Ireland (Raftery 1994: Bourke 2001: 5). A number of Scandinavian springs began receiving offerings in this early period, including horse and dog remains (Stjernquist 1997). Bogs received stone axes, often alongside ceramic pots and amber beads at this time as well (Randsborg 1995: 104).

In many places this behavior continued into the Bronze Age and, after a lull in the early Iron Age, picked up again in the Late Iron Age (Raftery 1994; Bradley 1990). A few Temperate European springs have evidenced some veneration in the Early Iron Age (Sauer 2005; Barral et al 2005), and I discuss these a bit further in Chapter 6. There was certainly a resurgence of this behavior in the Late Iron Age; much of the La Tène style metalwork on the Continent and the British Isles is known from watery deposits. Some of the finest examples of metalwork ever found have been weapons and armor recovered from European rivers (Torbrugge 1970-1). The Battersea Shield, the Waterloo Helmet, cauldrons, swords, axes, spears and other arms and tools have all been recovered from the Thames, as have a number of human skulls (Bradley 1990). Similar items have been recovered from other rivers in England, particularly the Witham in Lincolnshire, and in Ireland from the Shannon and the Bann. On the Continent, people offered these sorts of things to many rivers, including the Meuse (Fontijn 2008) the Rhine, the Saône, and the

Oise (Wirth 2005), the Doubs (Daubigney et al. 2005), the Loire (Bouvet et al 2003: 93) and to the Ulla in the Iberian Peninsula (Rey 2003).

Bogs continued to be places of offering. In this category are the numerous finds from Sweden, Denmark, northern Germany, and Ireland. The Gundestrup Cauldron has attracted much attention, as it appears to be of Southeast European manufacture, was deposited in a pool or bog in Denmark, and seems to portray numerous themes and figures from Celtic myth (although recent analysis suggests that it sat in the open air for some time). Numerous other cauldrons have been recovered from wet sites across Temperate Europe. Other spectacular metal finds from bogs are the dramatically horned helmets from Viksø, Denmark (Cunliffe 1994: 330). Perhaps most intriguing are the bronze horns, the *lurer*, found in bogs. These are especially important because they shed light not only on votive practices, but also on one aspect of music that these people played and heard, likely at ceremonial occasions such as these depositional events. Another special category of offering are a number of miniature bronze wagons, some carrying "solar" discs and gesticulating humans, many pulled by or ornamented with water birds. These tend to have metal bits hanging on loops so that they would jingle when moved, and, when highly polished, they must have cast light about very effectively, particularly when lit by firelight. We must not forget the individuals whose lives ended in these bogs, many in the Iron Age, such as at Tollund and Lindow. Whether these individuals represent sacrifices to the gods, victims of capital punishment, or both we cannot know for sure.

Watery deposition was not exclusive to male items; stereotypically female items made it into many such deposits as well, including fibulae, arm and neck rings, and

hanging vessel parts. It should be remembered that at the time of deposition, such "bog" offerings were likely placed in open pools of water that have since grown over with peat, so I will consider them together with offerings found in pools and small lakes.

The site of La Tène itself, after which the Late Iron Age is named, is now generally interpreted to have been such an offering place. A pier had been built out into a bay of Lake Neuchâtel, from which a plethora of metalwork was given up to the water in the 5th century BC. Swords, spears, axes, shields, various tools, vehicle parts, vessels of wood, metal and ceramic, jewelry, coins, and human remains were recovered (Brunaux 1987: 42; Cunliffe 1997: 31). Similar offering complexes have been found elsewhere (Cunliffe 1997: 194), including Flag Fen which received offerings between 1200-200 BC (Pryor 2001) and the Witham in Lincolnshire, England where items were deposited in the river from the Bronze Age through the Medieval Period (Parker Pearson et al.: 2007). Both of these sites have evidenced wooden platforms projecting out above waters that received offerings, including metalwork.

Parker Pearson has pointed out that the dendrochronological dates for these and numerous other timber platforms over watery offering places suggest that they were built in anticipation of lunar eclipses (ibid), conjuring images of widespread and regular ceremonial associated with these celestial events, carried out at watery sites. I can imagine the view of the eclipse in the pool's still surface would be fantastic on a calm night. Also akin to these sites is the famous Welsh druidical cult site of *Llyn Cerrig Bach*, where the depositors of items dating from the 2nd century BC and the 1st century AD used a natural rock outcrop rather than a timber platform (Fox 1946). This site dates appropriately to represent the Romans' final drive through the area to rout out the druids

in AD 61. The offerings included weaponry, ornaments, slave chains and chariot parts (ibid).

Such sites have precursors in Scandinavia, such as the Middle Neolithic site of Skogsmossen, where there was a house with an adjacent "sacrificial fen" or pool that received whole pottery vessels, some lightly used but heavily burned stone axes, and a variety of special flint and slate tools, all probably deposited from a wooden dock of some kind (Bradley 2005: 129; Apel et al. 1997). While it consists primarily of a spring, the Röekillorna site in Sweden might also be considered in this category, as the spring water collected in a large pool that received offerings (Stjernquist 1997). Sternquist's excavation of the spring and pool produced materials spanning the Neolithic to the Roman Iron Age. This material includes stone tools, a few metal items, and the bones of primarily horses and dogs, but also of humans, all presumably sacrifices. She interpreted this as a fertility cult, based largely on a piece of wood that she saw as a crude phallic symbol. This is the first recent excavation of a spring that clearly demonstrates ritual deposition so early, and continuity (or reuse) right into the Roman Period. The human remains suggest a connection with the famous deposition of people into bogs, although the flow of freshwater here allowed decomposition of soft tissues.

Ireland's wet sites experienced the same basic pattern of change. The Neolithic axes thrown in rivers give way to bronze axes, which are then joined in their watery grave by an array of other Bronze Age weaponry and ornament (Bourke 2001: 5). Irish bogs have produced fantastic metalwork, among the most famous finds being the Late Bronze Age Dowris hoard, important enough to have given its name to the entire archaeological horizon in Ireland (Raftery 1994: 25). This hoard consisted of at least 218

items of bronze: weaponry, tools, cauldrons, buckets, an estimated 26 horns/trumpets (like the Danish *lurer*), and numerous items known as "crotals" (ibid), which are somewhat enigmatic items that resemble a bull's testes ("scrotals") that would have hung from something and swung about, potentially making quite a racket.

Late Bronze Age Ireland also had votive pools. This is the period that saw the construction and veneration of the King's Stables, the artificial pond next to Haughey's Fort near *Emain Macha* (Lynn 2003: 74).

Offerings of metal items in rivers drop off dramatically in the Early Iron Age, but do continue, and for the first time considerable numbers of ornaments are deposited alongside of them (Raftery 1994). It is in this Late Bronze Age shift to depositing ornaments in rivers and bogs, and building catchment pools for springs that I suggest we must look for our Irish antecedent to the holy well cult. The importance of deposition into pools apparently lasted a while, as The King's Stable received votives into the Iron Age (Lynn 2003: 74), and its status as a votive pool is emulated in the treatment of *Loughnashade* which sits in a similar position beside *Emain*, and received La Tène style sheet bronze horns, and human skulls in the Late Iron Age (Raftery 1994: 184). These two ponds suggest that similar pools at the other royal sites may have also received offerings in the Bronze and Iron Ages. I will explore water at the royal sites in some detail in the next chapter.

My focus on votive deposition in wet sites makes it sound as though all offerings were made to water, which is misleading. This behavior is intimately tied to the deposition of items in hoards on dry land, in pits and sanctuary ditches, as well as in graves. To deal with all of this material adequately is beyond this project. For a broad

discussion of changing patterns of deposition including all these site types, see Bradley 1990.

What my swift discussion of these watery deposits serves is to illustrate is that there is a very long history of (apparently) votive deposition into bodies of water in Temperate Europe, and that holy well veneration in these same areas must be considered to descend from, or have been influenced by, this tradition unless the contrary can be demonstrated. Let us listen now to the wells themselves, so to speak, and consider what their archaeology can tell us.

The Holy Well as Pagan Survival? The Archaeology of Holy Wells

Wells and Ecclesiastical Establishments

As discussed in Chapter 3, holy wells are commonly found near churches in Ireland, including many early ecclesiastical foundations. It has been suggested that holy wells may have determined the location of these early Christian foundations (Aalen 1997: 52; Harbison 1992: 229). In this model, first an enclosed cemetery would be established nearby, followed by a monk's cell, and eventually a church. At sites that became major centers and towns, a second and larger enclosure would be established. These former enclosures are often preserved in the lay of the streets, as at Armagh and Kells. The famous early ecclesiastical sites in the South West are good examples of establishments that did not develop further. Skelig Michael was supplied by two wells. Kilnabuonia and Reask each had its holy well (Leask 1955-60). Of course, springs on islands were especially important to preserve on simple functional grounds. If they did not start out

sacred springs, they soon became such under the monks. At the monastic settlement on Rathlin O'Birne Island, the monks made the sacred status of their well clear enough, embellishing it with two cross-inscribed slabs (Walsh 1983: 61). But holy wells were also common features of ecclesiastical sites on the mainland, where fresh water was arguably less of a limiting resource. There are two holy wells in the vicinity of Clonmacnoise, which interestingly is itself the earliest recorded pilgrimage site in Ireland. Whether the springs played any role in this early Christian ritual is not known. We only know of the pilgrimage that early from accounts of individuals dying there on pilgrimage. Excavation of St. Cíaran's Well there produced no artifacts predating the 19th century (Heather King, pers. comm.). There is today an early-medieval cross slab at the well, but how long it has stood there is not known.

Again, it is always good to have a trusty spring, even on the mainland, so the possibility that the springs helped determine the site of an ecclesiastical foundation for utilitarian reasons alone must be entertained. In any case, in the model we are considering, the holy well is viewed as having been the focal point of pre-Christian ritual activity, onto which the Christians accreted the rites of the new religion. This model is certainly possible, but without sound dating one cannot know for sure if a given spring was venerated prior to the arrival of Christianity, or if it was merely a good source of water and only by association with the Christian foundation considered sacred. Mould (1955) suggested that some such domestic wells that formerly served these abandoned early ecclesiastical centers likely became holy wells only during the time of the penal laws, when Catholics were establishing clandestine meeting places. Then there are those wells that likely began their ritual roles only with the establishment of the Tridentine

Reforms that channeled people to worship at town-based parish churches as discussed above. It would have been a good move to provide a familiar, landscape-based cult focus near the churches and chapels, to ease any difficulties the congregation may have had in shifting to this new paradigm of practice from their long-standing transhumant rural traditions. If the holy wells attracted Christian pioneers because they were places of worship that involved offerings, then we ought to be able to find evidence of that earlier use somewhere.

The Excavated Few

The problem is that not many Irish holy wells have been excavated, so there is regrettably little data to shed light on the phenomenon's antiquity in Ireland. I assume that all of the roadwork carried out in Ireland over the last 15 years has resulted in the excavation of at least a few additional holy wells, which remain un-published beyond the grey literature. To date, Éamonn Kelly of the National Museum of Ireland has excavated the lion's share at several. He has demonstrated what one would suspect of a holy well with any medieval stonework, that the construction had disturbed the stratigraphy immediately around the spring, which had itself subsequently been cleaned out. This is consistent with the excavation of St. Ciaran's Well at Clonmacnoise that produced only modern items. But, Kelly also demonstrated the value of excavating the adjacent area, as he recovered Iron Age materials a few meters away from one spring that otherwise appeared post-medieval, and 9th century materials 20 meters away from another well that otherwise lacked early finds (Kelly 2000), suggesting that cuttings a similar distance from other holy wells might well prove fruitful too.

The most significant results of Kelly's excavations are artifacts from three holy wells in County Meath (2002). A 9th century ring pin was recovered near Tober Doney, about 5km north of the legendary cult site the Hill of Tara, alongside some late 17th century artifacts. Situated 8km north of there and a mere 3 km southwest of the royal cult site of Teltown was St. Anne's Well in Randalstown (the site now sits under a large tailings pond). Among the more numerous post-medieval artifacts recovered in the spring's vicinity were found a first century Roman brooch and a small rim sherd from what is likely a first or second century AD Samian ware bowl from southern Gaul (Kelly 2002: 27). At Phoenixtown an armlet was recovered, originally coiled and likely from the second century. It resembles another coiled bracelet dredged from the confluence of the rivers Deel and Boyne in the same county, whose style suggests a north British connection (ibid.). Kelly shared photos of some of the finds with me, but to date I have not seen any plans of the sites, so unfortunately cannot provide them here. Most important for me in any case is the *terminus post quem* that Kelly's finds establish, as well as the connections to the Roman Empire.

Kelly has suggested that these items from the Roman world found at holy wells demonstrate the practice of a Romano-British curative well cult in the vicinity, and that the deposition of similar material at other sites, especially Freestone Hill, Co. Kilkenny, Corleck Hill, Co. Cavan, and Golden, Co. Tipperary, suggests that similar Roman style shrines were being adopted more widely (Kelly 2002: 24-28). Roman coins and votive objects have also been found left at numerous Irish Megalithic sites, famously at the Neolithic passage tomb Newgrange (Freeman 2001).

While the Roman and British finds are few in number to date, and do not approach the scope of ex-votos found at such healing shrines as those of Sequana in Gaul and of Sulis Minerva at Bath (Green 1996; Cunliffe 1988), their presence so close to the holy wells is significant. Is this evidence for what Rahtz and Watts suspected, and that Kelly suggested, a local expression of a Romano-British healing cult?

The Empire next door

When the island of Great Britain was invaded by Roman forces in AD 43, it had already been relating with the Roman world for centuries, including Julius Caesar's expeditions nearly a century earlier. So by the time the Romano-British items were deposited in the vicinity of springs in Ireland in the first two centuries AD, Ireland's neighbors and kin in Britain were already becoming familiar with, and in places adopting, some Roman ways. Edel Bhreathnach has pointed out how related Ireland and Roman Britain were "linguistically, materially and ideologically" (Bhreathnach 2005: xii). She also specifically discussed the likelihood that the coastal region of Brega was home to an ethnically diverse community of bilingual British and Irish speakers, and that these relationships facilitated the spread of Christianity from Western Britain (ibid: 411-412). Smyth has also discussed trans-Irish Sea relationships, rehearsing the evidence for a British origin of several peoples of Leinster (Smyth 1982: 19). Reflecting such overseas relations are a number of burials that demonstrate the practice of Roman funerary ritual in Ireland. Among them are the cremation in a glass urn found in Stoneyford, Co. Kilkenny, and a group of Roman style burials on Lambay Island. It has been suggested that the people buried in the latter had either been in trade relations with

the Brigantes of Britain, or were themselves a group of Brigantian refugees, fleeing the Romans who defeated them in A.D. 74 (Freeman 2001: 2-3). The nearby promontory fort of Drumanagh near Loughshinny has also produced a sherd of 1st century Samian ware, and has likewise been suggested as a possible Roman or Romano-British settlement (Raftery 1994: 207-208).

Further evidencing the arrival of Roman ideas in the area is the concentration of *ogham* stones in the Blackwater Valley (Newman 2007: 409). Ogham writing, found most abundantly in the Southwest, was developed in Ireland under the influence of Latin, and the concentration in this area suggests a community participating in some degree of cultural exchange with the Empire.

As I explored in Chapter 2, there are many ways such cultural exchange takes place; one certainly need not be conquered to learn about or adopt the practices of neighboring peoples. Newman has pointed out the impact that the influx of slaves obtained by raids on British shores would have had on Irish communities (Newman 1998: 133). Warner discussed the influence that Irish mercenaries returning from service in the Roman army would have had on their communities upon returning home (Warner 1991: 50). Bhreathnach noted that women from Britain were reputed in many cases to have been married into Irish families as a means of forging alliances (Bhreathnach 2006: xi). This is the capillary action at the edge of a culture, the turgor pressure, the drawing in and emitting of culture in both directions across the frontier through the lives of many sorts of people.

I can imagine these brides, slaves, and soldiers seeking the same healthcare options that they enjoyed back home in Britain, where petitioning the otherworldly forces

at healing springs was an established practice (as discussed in Chapter 5). We should consider the healing shrine here as just one aspect of broader Roman culture, in particular a component of Roman medicine that was on the whole likely attractive enough to be sought out and actively imported into Ireland, independent of immigration. The assemblage of pottery and jewelry from the springs would certainly fit in nicely among votive offerings at a Romano-British shrine, yet none of the types of ex-votos diagnostic of a Continental or British style healing sanctuary, such as coins, model body parts, carved figurines, or curse tablets have been found at an Irish holy well to date with one exception. The one find that does strongly suggest a healing shrine is the occulist's stamp found at the site of a now in-filled holy well in Golden, in a field called 'Spital lands' (Daffy 2002: 8-9). These stamps, used by physicians in the Roman west to stamp information onto blocks of a salve used to cure eye ailments, were common at healing spring sanctuaries in Gaul and Britain, and suggest the presence here (in the *hospital* lands) of a Roman-trained physician (ibid: 8). So, while we do not know for certain if or how people brought the Romano-British healing cult to Ireland, there was clearly ample opportunity for them to have done so.

Significant here is Kelly's point that the holy wells that produced the Iron Age materials are situated within a few kilometers of the ceremonial complex at Teltown (*Tailtiu*), which was important both as a post-medieval fairground, and as a site for the important regional Lughnasa assembly (*óenach*) held by the king of Tara in the Early Medieval Period. The well at which the 9th century ring-pin was found is a bit farther from Teltown, but closer to Tara, the quintessential Irish Royal cult landscape.

Some answers

Although this archaeological data is scant, it suggests three things:

First, it suggests that there was some type of votive deposition at springs in the early centuries AD, *before* Christianity was brought to Ireland, suggesting that holy wells owe at least some heritage to pre-Christian, pagan rite.

Second, the Romano-British artifacts recovered from holy wells suggest that this pagan heritage of the Christian practice included a non-local pattern drawing from Roman Britain, which I will argue is largely derived from religions of the Mediterranean Basin. The healing spring shrine does not have to be a pure import from the Empire, as the deposition of material from Britain in springs could have been a mere embellishment to a local Irish version of a pan-European phenomenon. It could have been visitors, trade partners or kinfolk from overseas making offerings of what they had on them. Locals might have been offering items they acquired abroad, or that came to them through trade. But we do know that some such interreligious contact and change was going on with peoples of the Roman world, and that opens the door to the possibility that the Irish holy well cult could indeed be a cultural heir of Mediterranean spring worship. To consider this heritage further, I will be exploring spring veneration in the Mediterranean Basin in Chapter 6.

Third, the proximity of Kelly's proposed Iron Age holy wells to the so-called "royal sites" is highly significant, as these sites have produced great evidence for spectacular Iron Age ritual, as well as Romano-British votives akin to those recovered by Kelly. It is to these landscapes that I turn to now, to assess whether the Irish veneration of springs might have some ancestry in the cultic behavior carried out there in the Iron Age.

Chapter 5

Water in the Pagan 'Celtic' Ritual Landscape

As we have seen, there is a cluster of holy wells demonstrating Iron Age and Early Medieval activity in the landscape between the cult centers of Tara and Teltown, both of which are 'royal sites' with complex and sprawling ceremonial landscapes. The major royal sites are famous as the venues of many mythological escapades, and for the extraordinary archaeological evidence for Iron Age ritual practice. Significant to my task is the fact that there are also springs at all of these centers, which suggests that springs might have been used in rituals performed at these native Irish religious sites. So, before looking to foreign influences for the roots of holy well veneration, I will look to Ireland itself. I will first explore the documentary evidence that holy well veneration is a survival of pre-Christian Irish religious practice, and then turn to discuss the cult landscapes of the Royal sites, to see where and in what ways water sources may have played a role in cult there. I begin with a Classical account of a Celtic sacred spring that comes to us from the 1st century AD, contemporary with the deposition of the Romano-British items in or near Irish springs.

Lucan

It was the 1st century AD rhetorician and author Lucan who wrote the account. He was describing a Gallic cult site just prior to its destruction a century before his own time, in 49 BC:

A grove there was, untouched by men's hands from ancient times, whose interlacing boughs enclosed a space of darkness and cold shade, and banished the sunlight far above. No rural Pan dwelt there, no Silvanus, ruler of the woods, no Nymphs; but gods were worshipped there with savage rites, the altars were heaped with hideous offerings, and every tree was sprinkled with human gore. Water, also, fell there in abundance from dark springs. The images of the gods, grim and rude, were uncouth blocks formed of felled tree-trunks. Their mere antiquity and the ghastly hue of their rotten timber struck terror. Legend told that often the subterranean hollows quaked and bellowed, that yew trees fell down and rose again, that the glare of conflagration came from trees that were not on fire, and that serpents twined and glided around the stems. The people never resorted thither to worship at close quarter, but left the place to the gods . . . The grove was sentenced by Caesar to fall before the stroke of the axe (Lucan 3, 399-426).

Lucan's prejudice is not veiled, and he writes of a site destroyed a century earlier, but stripped of the propagandistic embellishments, his description is still useful. He describes a sacred grove of trees, with multiple springs, altars heaped with offerings, carved wooden images of the gods worshiped there, and evidence of human sacrifice. Lucan suggests the site is ancient, but that area of southern Gaul had been influenced by the Greek colony of Massalia for centuries, and as referred to in the next chapter, its culture was already arguably Gallo-Greek, or a hybrid of Gallic and Greek traditions (Haeussler 2007; King 1990). The culture of *Gallia Narbonensis* that Rome found was not a cultural isolate. Even this early account, if it has any credibility, might not be describing an unadulterated 'pre-Classical' ritual site. It is interesting how similar his description is to Ovid's descriptions of spring sites discussed in the previous chapter, and one wonders if Lucan, who would have grown up on Ovid's work, may have been plagiarizing a bit. Or perhaps this was not an uncommon sort of place to run across.

The Well of *Segais*

As discussed in chapter 4, there are numerous sacred and magical wells in Irish mythology. Above I discussed the Mythic Well of *Segais*, and it is important enough to revisit here. This was the otherworldly well from which the major rivers of Ireland were said to flow, and over which grew nine hazel trees whose hazelnuts would drop into the well, creating *na bolcca imaiss*, bubbles of inspiration, and be eaten by the magical or divine salmon (Rees and Rees 1991, 1961; Rolleston 1990, 1917). Eating or even touching the salmon would give the gift of prophetic knowledge. This well also claimed the life of *Sinend*, the goddess-like figure of the river Shannon, when it's waters rose and overwhelmed her (ibid).

Magical wells also figure in the tales of the cosmological wars between generations, or waves of deities. The *Tuatha de Danaan* had a supernatural well that foreshadows the traditional healing capacity of today's wells. In the 2nd Battle of Moytura, fighting against the dreaded Fomorians, the slain *Tuatha De Dannan* are brought back to life by the Well of Slane and 4 leeches that lived around it.

The Well of *Slán*

Perhaps the most important account of a ritual spring in Ireland is that by the seventh century hagiographer Tírechán, who was seeking to document the churches which St. Patrick was reputed to have founded. Tírechán wrote of Patrick:

> And he came to the well of Findmag which is called Slán, because he had been told that the druids honoured the well and offered gifts to it as a god. The well was of square shape

and the mouth of the well was covered with a square stone (and water flew over the stone, that is through ducts closed with cement) like a regal trail[?], and the infidels said that some wise man had made for himself a shrine in the water under the stone to bleach his bones perpetually because he feared the burning by fire; and they worshipped the well as a god. . . And the druids and the pagans of that region and a very large crowd gathered together at the well and Patrick said to them: 'Lift the stone; let us see what is under it, whether bones or not, for I am telling you: under it there are not the bones of a man, but - so I believe - some gold and silver from your wicked sacrifices leaks through the cementing of the stones'; and they were unable to lift the stone (Aitchison 1996: 68).

Aitchison claims that the account is likely reliable, based on Tírechán's apparent familiarity with the site evidenced in his clumsy but detailed description of it, and the fact that the passage is a learned digression, not pertaining directly to the text's central purpose. He suggests that this account may well reflect fifth century AD votive practices, and possibly even Iron Age Irish ritual practices. It is far more common to read of springs' miraculous origins at the hands of Saints, a motif that is traceable back to the Life of Anthony, and perhaps to Moses himself.

Ireland's Provincial Royal Sites

The royal cult sites were used as ritual theaters for a number of ceremonial occasions by regional kings. There was a hierarchy of such sites, with smaller scale centers serving the needs of local rulers, and the major sites holding at least some symbolic sway over much larger areas. I will discuss the main Provincial cult centers here generally as a group, and then describe each one in detail, with an eye to how water may have been used in the symbolically charged ritual activities performed there.

Early historical documents in Ireland record that the island was traditionally organized into five main regional kingdoms, Ulster, Connacht, Leinster, and Munster,

with Meath in the center (Lynn 2003: 122). There were many local kings, but some lineages temporarily achieved overlord status over the entire province, and retained strong associations with this status for many generations. Some families achieved at least a nominal high kingship over all of Ireland, although this was arguably only a political reality in the Medieval Period (Doherty 2005). These key families retained a legendary association with this high kingship as well as with the main ceremonial centers of their respective provinces. It was traditionally at these ceremonial centers that the kings would be inaugurated, and at which provincial *óenachs* (assemblies) would be held. In legend these sites were also the royal residences, and there is some evidence for habitation at most of them. Scholars are fairly unanimous now that *Emain Macha* (Navan Fort) is the royal site of Ulster, *Teamair* (Tara) the center in Meath, *Cruachan* (Rathcroghan) the site in Connaught, and *Dún Ailinne* (Knockaulin) in Leinster. Cashel was the royal site in the Medieval Period in Munster, but it is said to have originally been located elsewhere (Hull 1941: 949-950).

All of these sites also have at least one source of water at them. Given the ritual role springs have played at Medieval and modern assemblies at wells, I believe an understanding of these wet sites could shed light on what role, if any, springs played in Irish Pagan cult, and thus possibly how the holy well might be of Irish descent.

Barry Raftery has provided clear and succinct descriptions of the Royal sites, with the exception of Cashel, understandable since we know nothing of the Iron Age site there or wherever it may be. The information I convey on these sites is largely from him (1997), with details added from original and more recent sources as needed. To best imagine the religious practices of Iron Age Ireland, one really has to get a sense of the

grand scope of these landscapes. To give a sense of the extent and variety of features that comprise these ritual theaters, I will only briefly describe the main component monuments of each site, reserving the detailed discussion for the features that most directly relate to the possible ritual use of water at these royal centers.

Tara

The most famous Royal site in Ireland is the Hill of Tara, with over thirty monuments discernable in the landscape (Newman 1997: 1)(Fig. 5:1). These include earthen enclosures, linear earthworks, and burial mounds. For decades Tara was the only royal site that was well known. This is due to the fact that Tara is the subject of a large portion of the eleventh century *dindsenchas* (Lore of places), a work that offers quasi-historical mythological tales and fortuitous etymologies to explain the names of places and features in the landscape. Also contributing to the wealth of research on Tara is its association with the High-kingship of Ireland. Any man aspiring to be High King in the Medieval period needed to claim lordship of Tara. Likely the most widely known historical and archaeological site in Ireland, Tara has come to symbolize much about the Irish spirit and independent, native identity. This symbolic power has been illustrated through the outcry heard in the early years of the twenty-first century over the proposal and construction of a new motorway through the greater landscape of Tara.

The names of the monuments of Tara are taken from the eleventh century *dindsenchas*, and were applied to specific extant features by Petrie in 1839. The largest visible monument in the landscape of Tara is *Rath na Ríogh* (the Fort of the Kings). This

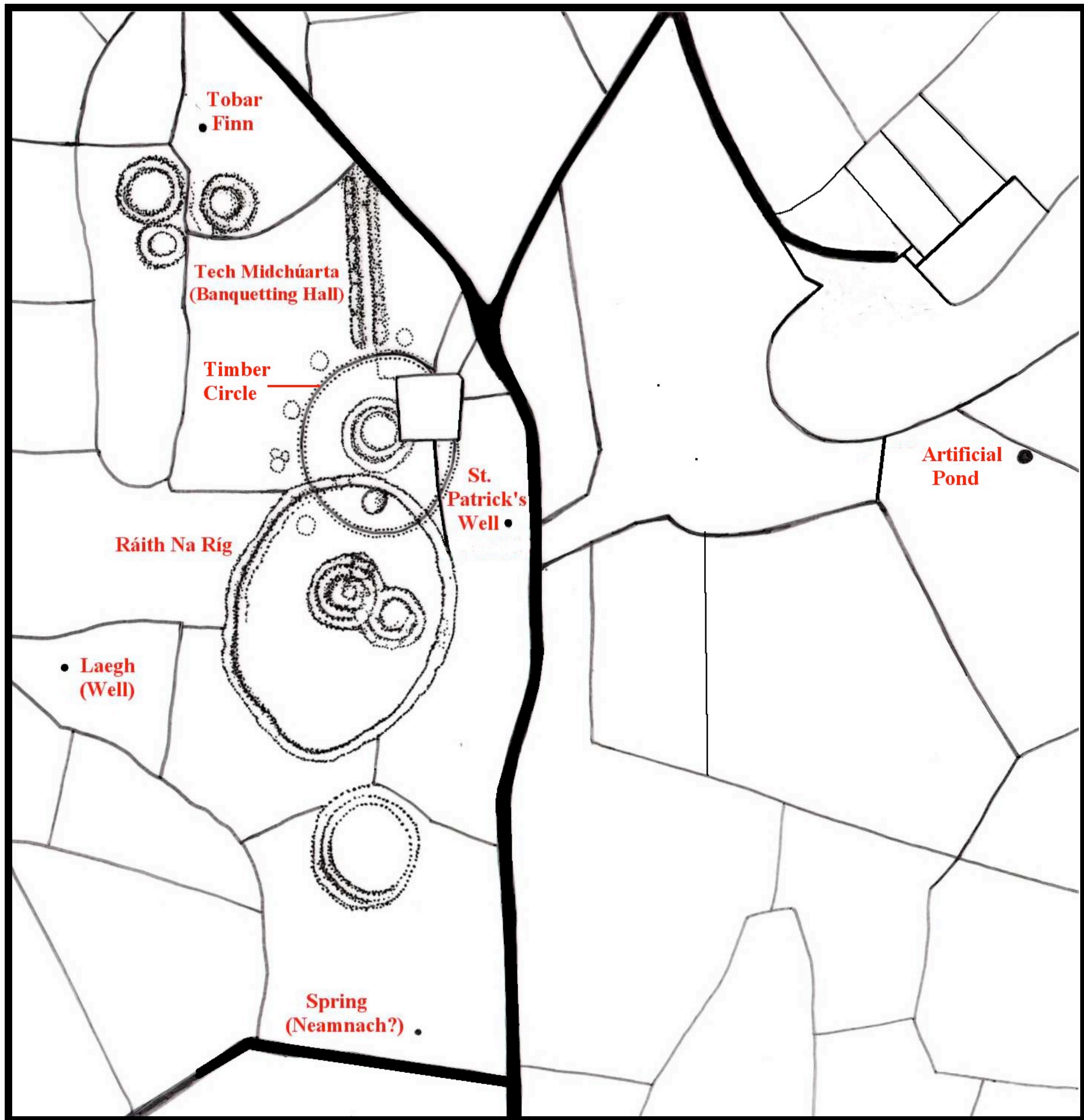

Figure 5:1 The Hill of Tara**,** showing major monuments and sources of water (after Newman 1997, 2007; Raftery 1994; Slavin 1996; Petrie 1839). The Neolithic timber circle and some of the barrows around it are known from remote sensing (Newman 2007).

is a large oval earthen bank enclosure with a diameter of 318m north to south, and 264m east to west (Newman 1997), with an internal ditch or fosse. Enclosures with internal fosses have come to be called *hengiform*, as they conform to the non-defensive

arrangement known from Neolithic ritual enclosures in Britain known as henges. This feature is common to the other royal centers as discussed below. Within the ditch at *Ráth na Ríogh* are two smaller earthen enclosures, *Teach Cormaic* (Cormac's House) and the *Forradh* (the Royal Seat). These are both bivallate enclosures, each being comprised of two earthen banks with the fosse in between. Also within *Rath na Riogh* is *Duma na mBó* (the Mound of the Hostages), a Neolithic passage tomb reused in the Bronze Age and upon which *Lia Fáil* (the Stone of Destiny) stood until 1824. *Lia Fáil* now stands on the northern portion of the mound within the banks of the *Forradh*. Just north of *Rath na Riogh* is a trivallate enclosure known as the Rath of the synods, and further north still is the Banqueting Hall, two parallel, slightly curvilinear earthen banks approximately 200m in length (Newman 1997: 104). To the west of the Banqueting Hall are three enclosures, Rath Gráinne and the Sloping Trenches (Clóenfherta).

There are at least four springs flanking the hill of Tara (fig. 5:1). The closest spring to the core of the monuments is St. Patrick's Well, just downhill to the east of the Mound of the Hostages, and the only spring with a Christian dedication today (fig 5:2). This well was identified in the 19th century as the ancient *Neamnach*. It has been restored and is the object of some votive behavior today.

Newman discussed a strong spring on the southern extent of the hill as *Neamnach*, at odds with Petrie's claim, but consistent with MacAlister (Newman 1997: 4, 29, 39). This southern spring lies only 200 meters or so south of *Ráith Lóegaire*. On the northwestern edge of the hill is *Tobar Finn*, a damp depression that used to feed the now drained Marsh of Tara. To the west is a small spring that was known as *Laegh*, and is the

site of another baptism by St. Patrick. It is wet today but no visual evidence remains of the well or souterrain structure recorded in MacAlister's time (ibid: 28).

Figure 5:2 St. Patrick's Well, Hill of Tara.

A fifth water source at Tara is a small pool, not usually included in maps of the Tara landscape, on the facing hillside some 700m to the east (fig. 5:1, 5:3). Newman has suggested that this might be an artificial pond akin to the King's Stables (ibid: 29; 1998: 139). The alignment of this pond to the center of Tara is similar to that of the King's Stables to Haughey's Fort, and Loughnashade to Navan. All three pools lie east-northeast of their respective hills, although the two ponds at *Emain Macha* are closer each at about 350m away.

Figure 5:3 The small, apparently artificial pond to the east-northeast of Tara, looking back at the Hill.

Conor Newman has recently conjectured a royal procession that a King of Tara might have made from the royal residence on the crannog at Dunshaughlin, via the Gabhra river to Tara. This suggested procession would have stopped at an itinerary of high status sites, as well as at the artificial pond and the holy well *Nemneach*, and then on

to the Hill which figures in Medieval legends of the site (Newman, forthcoming). I would add to this itinerary the Tara marsh fed by Tobar Finn, which was close enough to the downhill end of the *Tech Midchuarta* to be considered as having possibly played a role in the circuit. Elsewhere, Newman has also suggested and described a detailed royal processional approach through the *Tech Midcharta* and the summit monuments to the entrance of the main earthen enclosure, *Rath na Riogh* (2007).

Related to Tara is another, lower hilltop landscape at Teltown, some 19 km to the north, where the kings of Tara held their Royal *Lughnasa* assembly (*óenach*), which I will address separately below.

Emain Macha

In Ulster it was the site of *Emain Macha* that was the Royal Seat (fig. 5:4). Navan Fort with the Iron Age votive-rich lake Loughnashade dominate the landscape here, with the twin hilltop site, Haughey's Fort, with the Late Bronze Age artificial votive pond known as the Kings' Stables nearby to the west. Emain Macha was the home of the Ulstermen in the eighth-century Táin Bó Cuailgne (The Cattle Raid of Cooley). The greater landscape includes linear earthworks lying between the two hilltop enclosures, running north-south, and Lynn has proposed that even the much discussed Dorsey earthwork 28km to the south, be it defensive or ritual in purpose, is related to the same complex.

The main ritual complex was centered on the two hills and this immediate landscape. Navan Fort itself was the site of intriguing Iron Age activity. On the hilltop are two sites that are easily discerned and have been excavated. Site A produced evidence of a sequence of circular wooden structures, at times forming a figure-of-eight of two

contemporary buildings. At Site B habitation evidence from the Neolithic and again from a long period spanning the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age were found. In the final phase, a huge timber construction stood, known as the 40 meter structure.

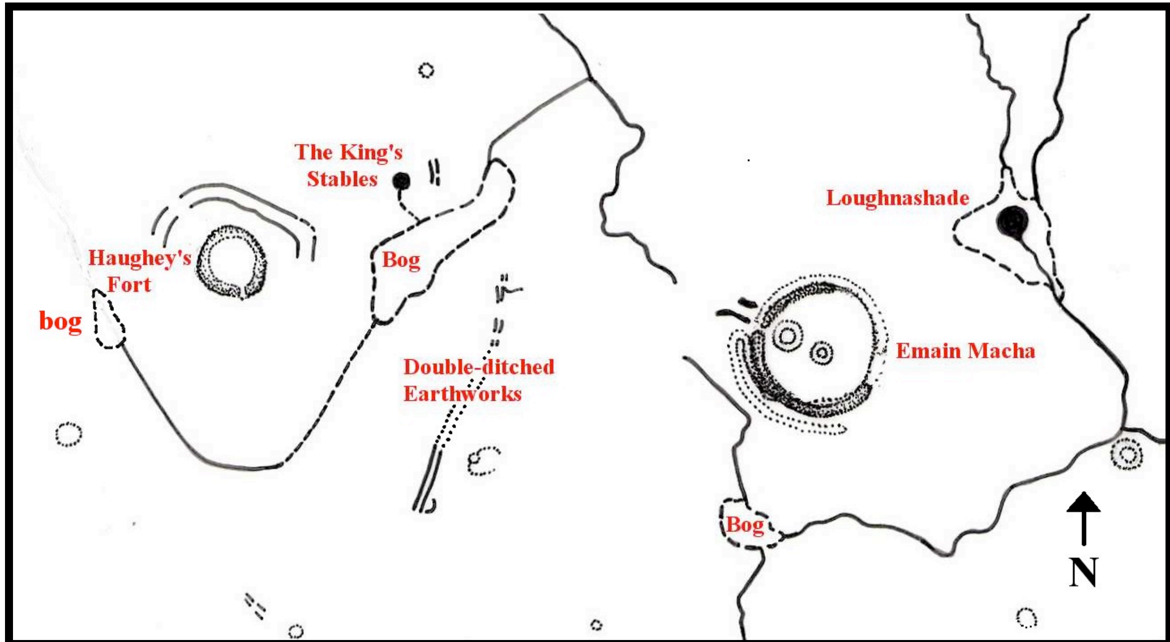

Figure 5:4 Emain Macha, Haughey's Fort and associated water features (after Aitchison 1994; Aalen, Whelan and Stout 1997; Lynn 2003; Warner 2006).

This structure was built with concentric rings of timber posts around a huge central oak post. The layout would have allowed it to be roofed. The structure was then filled with a huge cairn and burned (Lynn 2003: chapter 2). This structure was dated to 94/95 BC by dendrochronological analysis of the preserved base of the central post. This is contemporary with the dates obtained from the Dorsey Earthwork to the south, pointing to large scale Iron Age elaboration of the landscape in the region, presumably directed by the king who ruled from *Emain Macha*.

The landscape of *Emain Macha* has numerous water sources (Fig. 5:4). There is Loughnashade near Navan, which itself received Iron Age votives, and the twin hill to the west Haughey's Fort had the artificial pool called The King's Stables nearby for it's Bronze Age votive needs, and due south of that pond lies Tray Bog that would have been a sizeable lake originally. Just to the west of Navan Fort are the sources of two streams, although I do not know if they were ever considered special. The southernmost of these streams feeds into a small bog just southwest of Navan Fort that could have been significant. A small hoard of Late Bronze Age date was recovered from a bog in Tamlaght .8km to the southwest of Haughey's Fort, consisting of a sword, two vessels and a ring-headed pin, all of copper alloy (Warner et al 2004). There is another small suggestively boggy spot between there and the hill that connects to the stream flowing around the southern flank of Haughey's Fort and into Tray Bog. There is also a holy well less than 2km westward along the ancient road from Navan to Armagh at Legarhill. Given the demonstrated votive deposition in watery sites at the complex in the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age, all of these springs and bogs should also be considered archaeologically sensitive.

Cruachain

The capital of Connaught was *Cruachain*, identified as the mound Rathcroghan in County Roscommon and the landscape of monuments around it (fig. 5:5). *Cruachain* is the Royal center of the O'Connors of Roscommon, who were traditionally inaugurated at a hill called Carnfree (*Carn Friách*), just to the south. The complex of the Cruachain landscape consists of numerous raths, barrows and linear earthworks spread out over a

sprawling plateau. The Rathcroghan monument itself is a circular mound 88m in diameter at the base, with a 32m wide nearly flat top with an eroded mound, small at 4m by 5m, rising from it (Waddell 1983: 27). Geophysical work has identified evidence of a series of circular structures atop the mound, as well as a trench likely for a large circular wooden structure adjacent to the mound to the northeast, reminiscent of the structures known to have stood at *Emain Macha*, Tara, and *Dún Ailinne* (Waddell et al forthcoming). For decades it was noted that this royal center lacked the characteristic large hengiform enclosure that is so prominent at these same sibling sites. However, recent geophysical work by researchers from NUI Galway has also identified just such a huge enclosure beneath the ground's surface (Barton and Fenwick 2005). They found evidence of a very large bank and ditch that encloses the Rathcroghan mound itself, the presumed wooden structure, along with a number of other monuments. These discoveries certainly strengthen the identification of this landscape with the *Cruachain* of the literary sources, and make further comparison to the other royal sites even more solid.

Water sources surround the main monument group at *Cruachain*, much as they do at Tara (fig. 5.5). There are at least seven springs and ponds all roughly equidistant from the Rathcroghan enclosure at the center of the complex. On a ridge some 1200m to the northwest of Rathcroghan is the heavily disturbed *Oweyaniska*, or cave of the waters, which includes a feature that Herity described as a well-spring and Waddell as a souterrain (Herity 1991:24; Waddell 1983: 37). Waddell also identified a small pond 150m to the east adjacent to a ring-barrow known as Little Rathbeg (Herity 1991: 34). A bit further east is what I perceive as yet another pond, possibly artificial, that is bounded by earthen banks just south of an arcuate linear embankment that appears to be the

southwestern portion of an outer enclosure around Rathbeg (visible in Herity 1991: p.18, Plate 4b). Approximately 1200m to the northeast of Rathcroghan is Rory's well, *Tobar Ruaidhri* for which the townland (Toberrory) and neighboring ringfort are named (fig. 5:6). The well today is a trough in the soggy bottom of a field on the south side of the road, and it bears no signs of veneration beyond a small parking area. This spring may

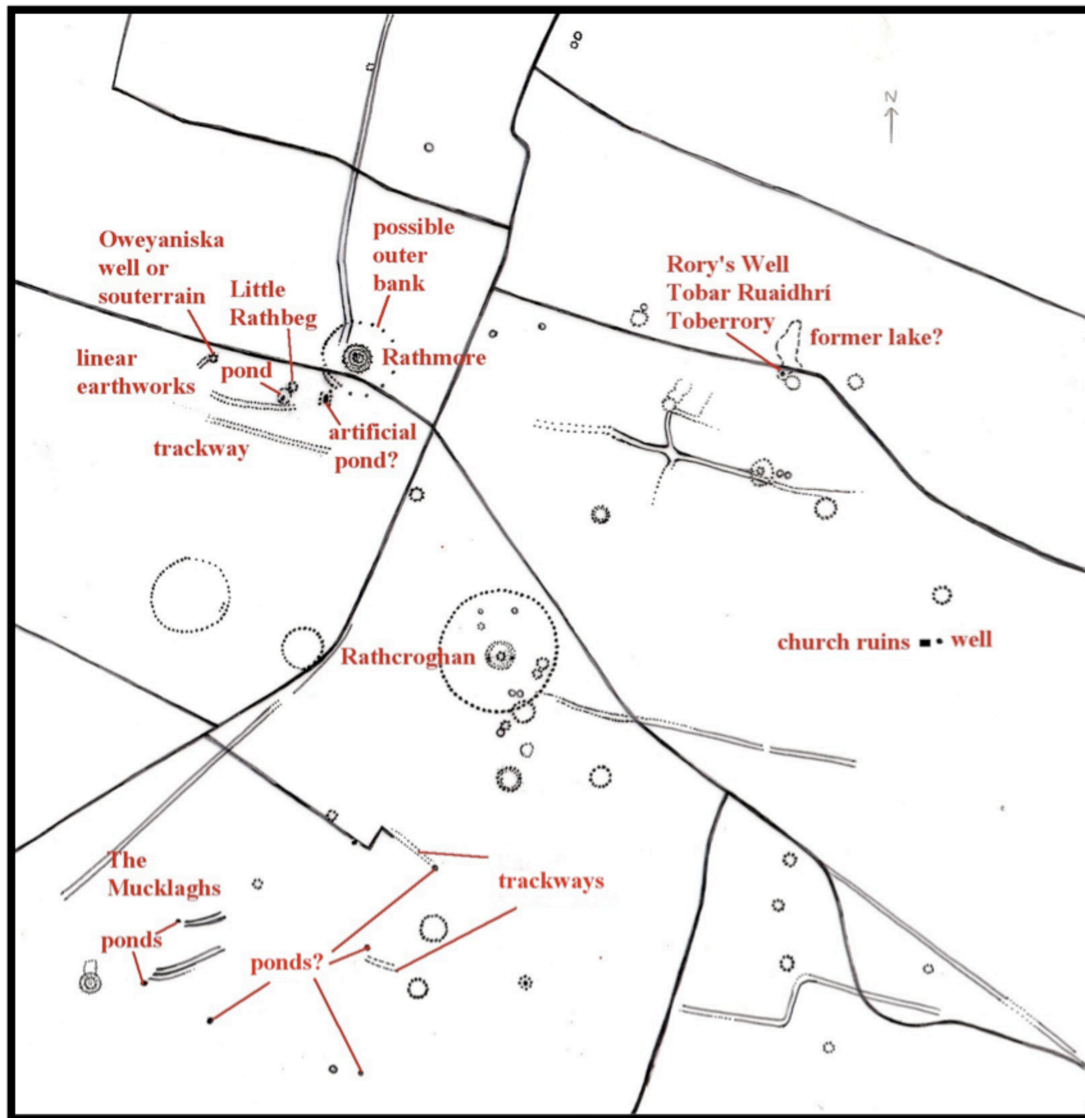

Figure 5:5 The Main Monument complex of Cruachain, showing the location of water sources and double-banked linear earthworks (after Waddell 1983; Herity 1991; Ordnance Survey of Ireland Discovery Series 33).

have fed what appears on satellite imagery to have been a lake that included the immediate area and the boggy ground across the road to the north. Around 1200m to Rathcroghan's east is a well by the ruins of a church, and finally About 1500m to the southwest of Rathcroghan are a pair of small ponds at which the Mucklaghs earthworks terminate, with another about one kilometer to the east (Waddell 1983: 22), and several more suspicious wet spots in the vicinity.

Figure 5:6 Rory's well, *Tobar Ruaidhri*, northeast of Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon.

Dún Ailinne

The site of *Dún Ailinne* was the provincial capital of Leinster (Fig. 5:7). It has been identified as the hilltop site of Knockaulin in County Kildare, which was excavated by Bernard Wailes from 1968 to 1975 (Johnston and Wailes 2007). It has a huge hengiform bank and ditch enclosing the entire hilltop, about 500m at the widest.

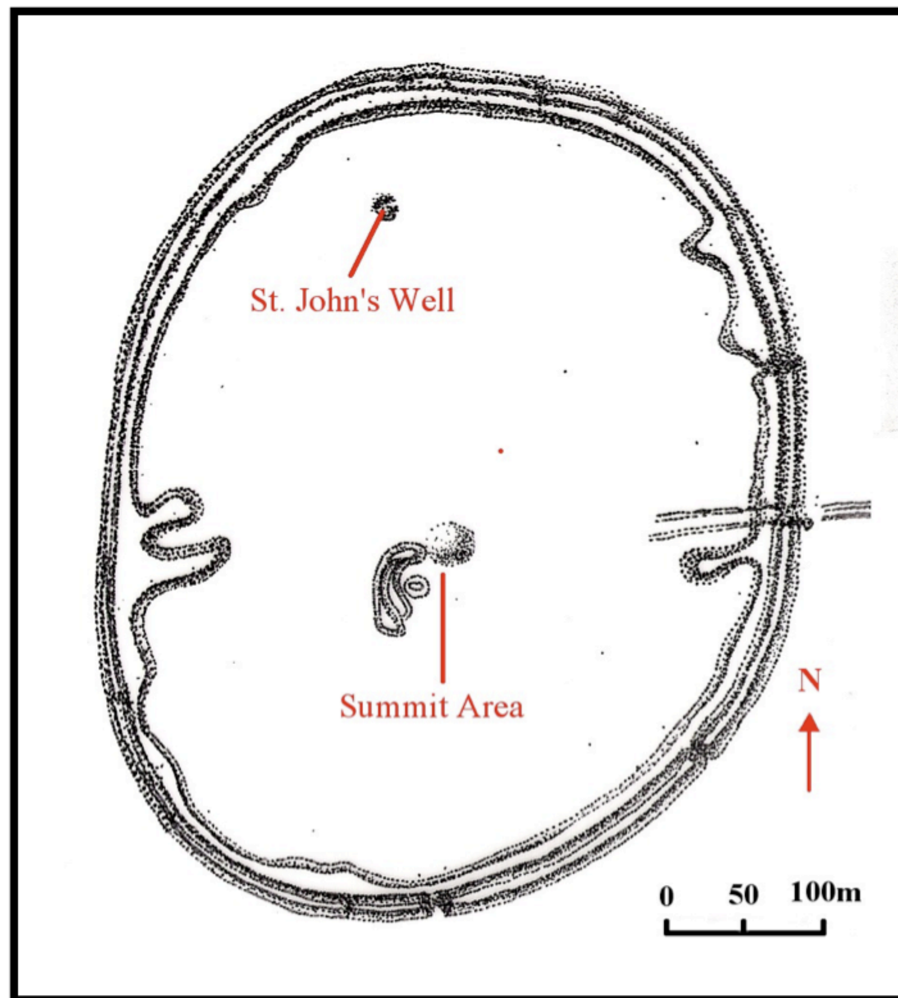

Figure 5:7 Dún Ailinne, showing double-banked enclosure and location of St. John's Well. (after Wailes 2007).

Excavations focused on a raised area with a low mound on it near the center of the hilltop. Neolithic habitation evidence was found, but it was the Iron Age material that proved really impressive. A series of circular structures were built there, with their main entrance to the Northeast, for a time with a funnel shaped fence of some kind leading to it. In the central area of these structures at various times there was a small round enclosure, about 6m in diameter, around which at one point stood a 25m-diameter circle of standing posts. This inner structure seems to have had no entry at ground level, and may have been a tower of some kind with steps or a ramp leading up (Wailes 2007: 18). The main activity at the site was dated largely to the first centuries AD and BC, although it includes dates from 390BC to AD 320. The area of 'St. John's Well,' a small, slightly greener depression reputed to be an intermittent spring in the Northwest area of the enclosure is of particular interest to the present work (fig. 5:8).

Figure 5:8 St. John's Well, *Dún Ailinne*, Co. Kildare.

This well was not included in the excavation, nor in the discussion of the site, save in Hick's chapter on possible astronomical alignments (ibid: 183, 193), but it's name suggests that it was deemed sacred at some point, and so should be considered an important feature of the ritual complex. Recent topographical and geophysical work on the site has located a roadway on the east leading to the summit, and indeed has focused on St. John's Well, where a strong magnetic anomaly registered in the center of the feature (Johnston et al 2009). Excavation of the well is planned for summer 2011 (Crabtree, pers. comm.).

Cashel

Figure 5:9 Medieval ecclesiastical buildings on the "Rock of Cashel".

In Munster the Provincial Capitol is Cashel, Co. Tipperary, although it is supposed to have moved from another site at some point. It is possible that the ancient Capitol lies beneath the Medieval Church at Cashel (fig. 5:9). The site itself occupies a prominent rocky outcrop projecting off of an adjacent hill. It would be hard to find a site with a better view of the surrounding landscape, a consideration that does seem to have been important in choosing these centers. In the medieval story, drawn from a number of manuscripts (Hull 1941: 937-938), it is said that a swineherd of *Aed*, the King of Munster, saw a wonder ". . . on these ridges in the north", which set the stage for the royal capitol to be moved there. This suggests that the original capitol was south of Cashel. While a quest for the original site is beyond the present task, it is worth mentioning a few contending sites. There are two large enclosures not far from Cashel. 3km to the south is a bivallate rath known as *Rath na Drinne*. It encloses an area estimated to be 300 to 400m in diameter (themodernantiquarian.com). *Carron Henge* is 5km to the SSE, and enclosure of 300m diameter with a central mound. I cannot find any proper literature on either monument, unfortunately. I can imagine a swineherd finding Cashel from either of these, though, and given their scale, they could be contenders for the original capitol site. Further afield, there is a trivallate enclosure in Kilfinane, Co. Limerick that seems like a possibility, and the Cush earthworks complex is not far to the northeast (Evans 1966: 143-145). A more intriguing association with this is an expanse of poorly documented earthworks 1km to the southeast of the Kilfinane trivallate enclosure where two wells, one holy and one a submerged souterrain, coexist in a field (themodernantiquarian.com). I normally endeavor to avoid website citations, but I have

not found reference to these earthworks or wells in any other sources. Given what we know about the other Provincial royal sites, one would expect Munster's version to occupy a prominent hill with commanding views, to have a large hengiform enclosure, at least discernable through geophysics if not extant, and evidence of large, circular wooden structures dating to the centuries around the birth of Christ.

Figure 5:10 Well in Cathedral wall at Cashel, Co. Tipperary.

However, if Cashel itself was indeed the Provincial Capital in the Iron Age and Early Medieval Period, it is notable that, as with many Medieval churches, there is a well in the wall of the 13th century Cathedral (fig. 5:10). Whether there was a spring or not prior to it being dug is unknown, but if it was a spring and Cashel was the assembly site, then the well presumably would have played some role in the assembly. A Roman fibula of the 1st to 2nd century AD was also recovered in excavations at the cathedral, similar to

the type found at Randalstown. It is notable also that the occulists stamp mentioned above was found 6km to the west in Golden, suggesting that there was a Roman-style healing cult in the area. It is possible that the fibula found on Cashel was deposited in the environs of the spring there in a similar cult practice. A serious effort to find the previous Munster capital would be a worthy endeavor, although the site likely was never capital of a unified Munster, which apparently only came to be quite late (Aitchison 1994: 127).

Uisneach

Uisneach is the legendary umbilical center of Ireland where the provinces all meet (fig. 5:11). It has its own royal associations (Aitchison 1994: 118), and, fitting the bill, the ritual complex includes multiple water sources. The hill is strewn with archaeological features, dominated by a stone figure of eight structure to which an old road leads up the hill from the south. Numerous enclosures, tumuli and stones dot the hill. There is a pond near the summit of the hill (fig 5:12), and St. Patrick's Well down the south slope from there (fig 5:13). Another, recently formed pond is yet further down this south slope. At the foot of the hill almost two kilometers to the west is St. Brigit's Well described in Chapter 3. Uisneach was host to the great *óenach* of *Bealtine*, on May 1st (Halpin and Newman 2006: 355). It is also the place where the otherworldly Well of *Segais* is reputed to have flown beneath the sacred hazel trees, home to the supernatural salmon and source of the five major rivers in Ireland (Rees and Rees 1961: 161). I think that given these associations, the site's sources of water likely played roles in the ceremonial history of the place.

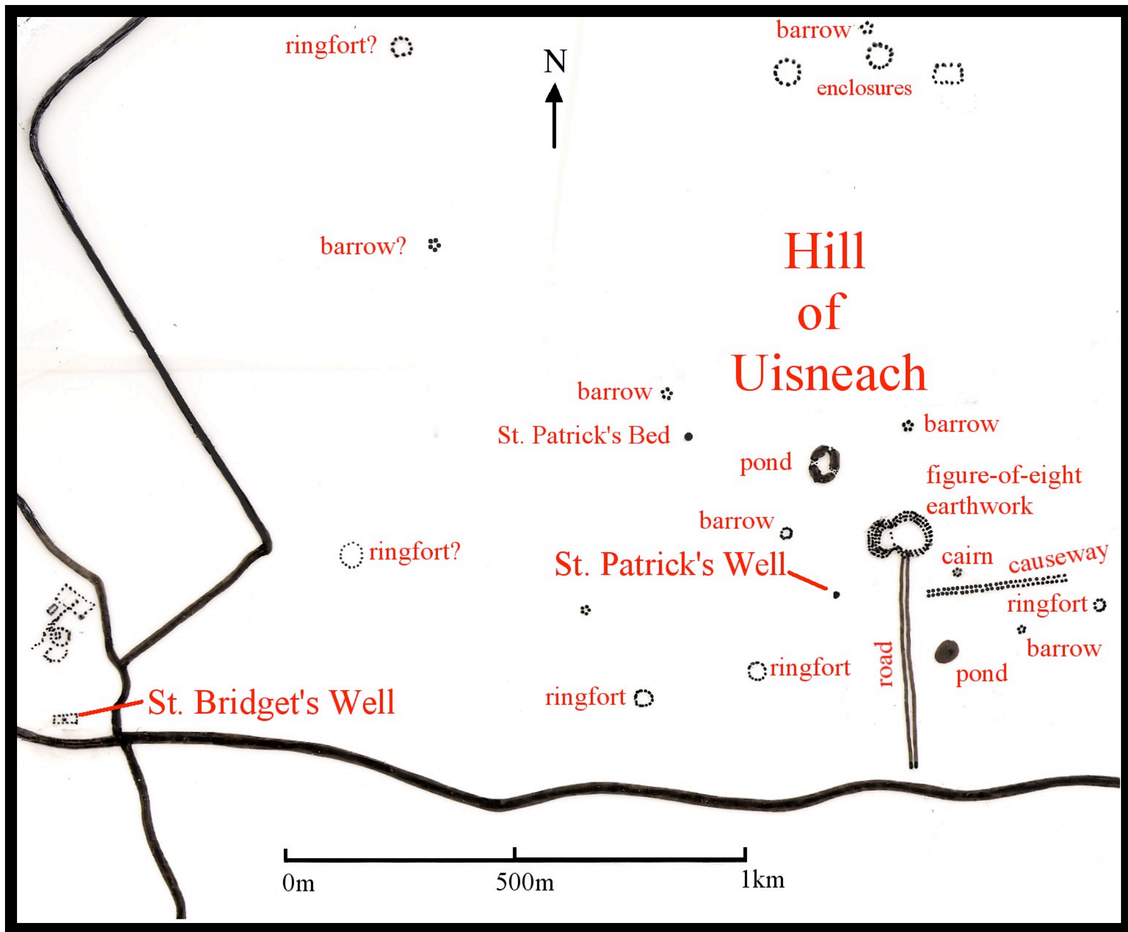

Figure 5:11 The Hill of *Uisneach*, Co. Westmeath, showing major monuments, including St. Brigit's Well discussed in Chapter 3.

Figure 5:12 The pond on the summit of *Uisneach*.

Figure 5:13 St. Patrick's Well, *Uisneach*.

Teltown

Another royal cult site to consider here is Teltown (*Tailtiu*) (Fig. 5:14), particularly because of what it suggests about how the springs at the major royal sites may have been used. It was at Teltown that the kings of Tara held their annual Lughnasa assembly (*óenach*). The site occupies a low rise on the North Bank of the Leinster Blackwater River in Co. Meath. Like the other royal sites described above, the area is dotted with enclosures, earthworks, artificial ponds, and springs. One of these springs, *Lag an Aonaigh* ("the hollow of the fair", locally pronounced "laganeany") is held in local tradition to have been the scene of an unusual nuptial rite in pagan antiquity (MacNeill

1962: 315-318). The site is also known as the 'Marriage Well,' and the 'Vale of Marriage.' Today the site of *Lag an Aonaigh* comprises a wide bowl or hollow in the

Figure 5:14 The site of Teltown, showing major monuments and watery sites (after MacNeill 1962; OSI *Discovery Series* 42; GoogleEarth).

hillside directly east of and below the road leading northeastward to St. Catherine's Church (fig. 5:15). It is incorporated into the intersection of the roadside wall and a field boundary wall that runs roughly east-west. Down in this hollow there is still a spring, although it appears, if one catches a glimpse of it at all through the dense hedge, to be frequented only by cattle.

It is the nature of the marriages once solemnized here that contributed to Teltown's fame, as these were temporary bonds that could be undone after a year and a day. Contributing to the fame of this practice was the fact that the bride and groom were selected randomly. The marriage ritual was supposedly carried out in the following way. In a wall along the hollow was a door with a hole in it. During the fair, marriageable young men would gather on one side of this hole, and single young women on the other,

Figure 5:15 *Lag an Aonaigh*, the "Marriage Well", Teltown, Co. Meath.

then one woman would reach through the door and a man would clasp her hand, thus randomly determining with whom they were then wed, contracted to cohabitate for a year and a day. Should they want to end the contract after that time, they would need merely

to climb atop a nearby earthwork, turn their backs to each other, and walk away and off of the monument. O'Donovan records the place visited for this un-marrying as the "Rath at Telton" (MacNeill 1962 316). Presumably this is *Rath Dubh,* the central enclosure of Teltown, but Eugene Conwell recorded the tradition that it was the closer *Knockans* linear earthworks just uphill to the northwest that were climbed for this process (ibid: 317). Any untying of the knot would conveniently take place during the next year's assembly, so they could try their luck again right away back down at the *Lag* if they so wished. It has also been suggested that the *Knockans* are the feature referred to as *tulach na coibhche*, "the hill of the buying," which Gwynn suggested specifically connotes paying the bride-price (Gwynn 1903-35: 433-434). It seems that the *Knockans* linear earthworks played some sort of role in the ritual, and if they are homologous to the *Tech Midchuarta* of Tara, then I suggest they may have been used in a similar ritual procession at Teltown as Newman has conceived at Tara.

This odd tradition also suggests that the springs at the other royal sites may likewise have played a role of matchmaker, or of somehow sanctioning marriages. This is unexpected, and the Teltown case certainly could be anomalous, however that the temporary marriage ritual might have been practiced at other *óenaige* is suggested by a prohibition against changing spouses in the 11th century poem about the *óenach* at Carman (Gwynn 1903-35: 2-25; MacNeill 1962: 342). Also, as it is the only documented ritual use of a spring at a royal site, and there are springs in all of those cult landscapes, it is worth consideration. As I have written elsewhere, this association of royal sites, watery sites, and marriage rites may stem from inaugural rituals that involved the symbolic marriage of the king to the land, the sovereignty goddess herself (Mallery: forthcoming).

It may be that *fulacht fiadh,* the supposed cooking sites that are increasingly being seen as places of ritual purification described in Chapter 4, represent places where ritual baths took place, perhaps including the variety described by Giraldus Cambrensis, and recently discussed, quite seriously, by Doherty (2005). I predict that some of these watery sites in the royal cult landscapes will prove to have been involved in ritual activities there.

Chapter 6

The Veneration of Springs in the Roman World

If it is true that the holy well cult is traceable to Ireland's Romano-British neighbors, as the archaeological evidence suggests, then it is to that Romano-British cult that we must now turn our attention, for with Romano-British and Gallo-Roman shrines we enter the world of Classical spring veneration, with its roots in the Mediterranean Basin. I will discuss ritual use of springs in the Roman Provinces closest to Ireland first, and then consider such practices further afield in the Empire to best understand this probable strain of Irish holy wells' heritage.

Great Britain

While it is open-ocean that divides Ireland from Great Britain, this border is in no way a closed one. Quite to the contrary, the peoples of both sides of the Irish Sea were seafarers, and there was ample travel, trade and migration between them, as I outlined in Chapter 4. A bit longer of a sail from Ireland brings one to the Continent. Certain famous sites venerated in the Roman Period in Britain and in Gaul have contributed to the popular idea that springs were sacred to the pre-Roman 'Celtic' peoples. Bath is the quintessential British sacred spring site, devoted to Sulis Minerva. The hot spring was developed into a monumental bath complex and temple. The spring received votives largely in the form of coins and *defixiones*, leaden curse tablets, offered to Minerva and to the native goddess Sulis who came to be equated with her. While offerings of British items were also found in the spring, only 18 date from the pre-Roman Iron Age, and

could easily have been deposited in the Roman period (Green 1996: 33; Cunliffe 1988: 1).

This type of spring sanctuary was developed in several other places in Britain, such as the baths of Arnemetia at Buxton, and those at Lydney (Henig 1984: 56) and Nettleton. The latter two had facilities for pilgrims to incubate, or receive visions in a sacred sleep in the precinct (Woodward 1992). Coventina's Well on Hadrian's Wall, which saw considerable deposition of votives including sculpted and inscribed altars, seems to be entirely attributable to the Roman military, who were largely drawn from the peoples of other conquered provinces of the Empire (Allason-Jones and McCay 1985). The nymph or goddess Coventina herself may be an import, as the few other inscriptions of her name come from either Northwest Spain or Southern France (Allason-Jones 1996: 111). Springhead provides one glimpse of a clearly Late Iron Age cult site that was near springs that in turn provided a focal point of a Roman-style temple (Andrews 2007). No pre-Roman materials were found in the area of the spring, however, while some 100 were found elsewhere on the site. Evidence for pre-Roman spring veneration in Britain is, in fact, very scant (Webster 1995: 449-450).

Gaul

As mentioned in Chapter 3, holy wells are very common in France. A considerable number of Gallo-Roman spring-shrines have been excavated, especially at the sources of rivers, as at the famous Sequana shrine at the source of the Seine. That site had a pool to catch water, and the waterlogged conditions preserved a series of carved wooden figurines (Roland 1965). Similar finds were made at Chamalières, Bourbonne-les-Bains

and numerous other sites (Sauer 2005; Webster 1995). These rich sites have fueled the notion that this sort of healing shrine focused on a spring was a pre-Roman, "Celtic" phenomenon. They are conceived as representing the category of site described in Lucan's colorful account cited in Chapter 4. None of the votives at these sites, however, are older than the first century AD. To explain this lack of earlier finds, some scholars have suggested that offerings to pits and springs may have often left no traces, and that since it seems to be a mixture of Gallic and Roman, that the Romans must have just translated the gods via *interpretatio* (Webster 1995). This implies that the veneration of springs was a native, Gallic, 'Celtic,' tradition. Yet, as Webster pointed out, the archaeological evidence suggests that these healing spring shrines were a "veritable post-conquest phenomenon" (Webster 1995: 450). Woolf has also pointed out the lack of evidence for any pre-Augustan ritual activity at the Source of the Seine and at Chamalières as well (1998), and Sauer suggested that the offering of coins in springs in Gaul was "indeed a result of southern influences on indigenous religion" (2005). Like Webster, Sauer notes that the lack of archaeological evidence of spring veneration in Temperate Europe could mean two things. Either such sites were venerated as natural sanctuaries unspoiled by any construction or by the offering of durable man-made artifacts, or "springs played virtually no role in the native religious systems north of the Alps" (Sauer 2005: 108).

While most spring sanctuaries do appear to have been established only in the period of heavy contact with the Roman Empire, there are a number of springs that received offerings earlier, as mentioned in Chapter 4. A much earlier ritual use of springs is known from Southern France in the 4th millennium BC (Blake 2005: 115;

Sherrat 1994: 183). So far, there is little evidence linking the Gallo-Roman ritual use to the Neolithic and Bronze Age cult evidenced in springs, although continuity cannot be ruled out entirely, as many forms of veneration leave no permanent traces (Sauer 2005: 108; Brunaux 1988: 41). In the South, long interacting with the wider Mediterranean peoples, the religious behavior at springs and at the *Celto-ligurian* sanctuaries more broadly resembles that elsewhere in the Classical world especially those in Iberia and the Greek East (*ibid*. 37), and indeed on Sardinia and neighboring islands (Webster 1996: 183-7). Representing this regional affinity is the monumental spring temple at *Glanum* (Rolland 1960). As mentioned earlier, the area in contact with the Greek colony of Massalia was clearly affected by the Greek colonists and their culture. Anthony King called this mixed culture "Gallo-Greek", as expressed at Glanum by retaining the focus on a local deity, *Glanis,* but with a temple type derived from traditions of the Mediterranean Basin (King 1990:134).

In the north, the spring sanctuaries do not seem to have been as important or popular (Brunaux 1988). Some sites with Early Iron Age finds that could bridge the early and later periods of spring veneration in Gaul include the source of the Douix at Châtillon-sur-Seine, which received Halstatt-period brooches (8th to 6th centuries BC), and La Tène era pottery (Sauer 2005: 104-105). Two catchment installations were constructed at another spring at Trier-Feyen in the Halstatt Period, over 300 years prior to the arrival of the Romans (Sauer 2005: 105). While the site later received hundreds of Roman coins into additional catchment basins, no pre-Roman offerings of any kind were recovered in these earliest basins. Also, the spring at the site of Duchcov in the Czech Republic received a spectacular deposit dating from around the end of the 4th century

BC (Kruta 1991). A large bronze cauldron was recovered five meters deep in the strata of the natural well, along with a hoard of smaller offerings including over 2,000 fibulae, bracelets, and rings of bronze (ibid.). Important here is the fact that a bronze spear had been deposited in the spring a thousand years earlier, recovered a few meters below the Early Iron Age hoard. The deposition of bronze jewelry in the spring foreshadows the similar assemblages offered to springs in the Classical period shrines. It is curious, though, that the other spring sites showing activity in the Early Iron Age contained no such durable offerings at all, raising the question of whether this was anomalous, or if similar finds from this period await discovery deep in Continental springs. The Duchov treasure was recovered because a new shaft was being dug, and five meters is perhaps deeper than most archaeological excavations of springs would have gone, which might suggest that perhaps future investigations should delve to similar depths.

So from Ireland we have followed the trail of the holy well cult across the sea to the neighboring Roman Province of Britain, and to the Continent and Gaul, yet it seems we must go a bit farther south to find what appears to be the deepest roots of the holy well cult, and from where the Romans spread it clean across the Empire.

The Mediterranean Basin

The Greek World

Early Greek sanctuaries were open-air spaces marked by a natural feature in the landscape and a small altar, delimited by a number of stones or a low wall (Pedley 2005: 29). This enclosure of the site forms the *temenos*, marking out the sacred internal space from the profane world outside, a practice perpetuated in the Christian ecclesiastical

enclosures. The natural *foci* of these sacred spaces in the Eastern Mediterranean could be trees, rocks, hilltops, caves or springs (ibid). As early as the seventh century BC, many Greek sanctuaries that did not have a natural source of water on site provided basins to hold water, known as *perirrhanteria,* "sprinklers," or *hagisteria,* "sacrilizers," for use in purification rites (ibid, 162). It was deemed necessary to cleanse oneself of various impurities of the profane world before entering the enclosed sacred precinct (Cole 2004: 35-37). To the ancient Greeks, fresh water emerging from the ground was generally held to be holy, and in fact sacred springs were widespread throughout the wider Eastern Mediterranean world, and attracted pilgrims. Many fifth century inscriptions list behaviors prohibited at these springs that were intended to keep the sacred sources of water pure. These prohibited acts include washing, swimming, soaking hides, and throwing either sacrificial cakes or dung into the sacred water (Cole 1988: 161). Similar taboos exist in lore concerning holy wells in Ireland (Logan 1980: 67-68).

In Greek cult such springs are often associated with the healing god Apollo. At his sanctuaries, water from springs was often a source of prophetic inspiration. Perhaps the most famous example was that at Delphi, where the oracular abilities of the young lady, or ladies, known as *pythia* were legendary (Burkert 1985: 115-116). The pythia would bathe in the waters of the Castalian spring that flows from the bedrock outside the *temenos*, and then proceed to the main temple. Waters from a second source, the *Kassotis* spring just to the east of the temple was channeled to run into the temple, where the pythia would drink of it, and prophesy (ibid.) (Cole 1988: 162). A spring was also central at the Apollo sanctuary at Didyma on Iona. This spring was the focal point of the original open-air sanctuary, around which a series of walls and enclosures were eventually built

(ibid: 163). This prophetic function of springs resembles the Scandinavian and Irish motifs explored above, and I will come back to it below.

Corinth was replete with springs; there was *the* Sacred Spring, as well as the Spring of Pereine in the Agora, the Euryides springs and the Spring of Glauke just outside, and the Spring of Nema to the north (Robinson 2005). The main Temple at Corinth was Apollo's, but springs were also features at many other Apollo sites of less universal importance than these famous temples.

This oracular power of springs was also manifested in practices aimed at *altering* the future. Along with burial sites, springs and fountains were believed to be effective access points to the spirit world, where objects were offered supplicating nymphs or deities, or with formulae inscribed to manipulate the supernatural forces directly. This magico-religious act often involved depositing curse tablets. Known by the Romans as *defixiones*, these inscriptions were frequently concerned with such matters as fixing sporting events, the fate of thieves, or affairs of the heart. The curses involved an element of binding, and many figurines were offered with limbs bound, and even pierced with skewers like pins in a voodoo doll (Faraone 2003). The inscriptions inform us that the figurines represent individuals in whom the practitioner is attempting to affect either misfortune or passion. Some indeed have disproportionately large sexual parts.

The other power that spring water was believed to wield in ancient Greece was the power to heal. This was true at many of these same Apollo sanctuaries, where he was sought out as both a healer and as a conduit of prophecy. Water also functioned this way at sanctuaries of the divinized healer *Asklepios*, or *Asculapeus*, where it was used to purify and to heal (Cole 1988: 163). Interestingly, the role the springs played in the

healing process was not distinct from the oracular function, as the knowledge of how to heal the infliction was in many cases conveyed through dreams and visions. Patrons would be purified initially by being sprinkled with the water, after which the inflicted parts might be washed inside the sanctuary. After this it was traditional to incubate, that is to lie down to sleep in a special chamber, the *abaton*. Dreams during this sleep conveyed the appropriate actions to take as prescribed by the deity. Sometimes these cures included bathing in the baths that often constitute part of the sanctuary complex (ibid.). Sometimes the cure entailed drinking the water itself, or was attributed to the power of resident snakes as at Epidauros (Pedley 2005: 32). The waters thus had a direct healing effect when appropriate, but also functioned to inspire the knowledge of what would cure the ailment, which is again essentially prophecy. Incubation in the sanctuary was also practiced at oracles such as Delphi by pilgrims who could not afford the cost of official pythian interpretation (Pedley 2005: 89).

Springs were also common foci at sanctuaries of Apollo's twin sister, Artemis, and of a handful of other goddesses such as Peirene (Ana Perenna), as at Corinth and Rome (Robinson 2005; Piranomonte 2002). Major temples aside, every spring in the Greek world was held to at least be the abode of one of the minor supernatural figures, the nymphs. Young and beautiful, the nymphs were believed to have had the ability to cause an individual to lapse into a prophetic state known as *nympholepsy*, "a heightening of awareness and elevated verbal skills" (Larson 2001: 13). In this way nymphs inspired people with the power to know the future through the water of their sacred springs. They were dangerous though, as they are also known to lure young men to their doom in the spring.

The Italic Peninsula

Such attention to springs began early elsewhere in the Mediterranean as well. Starting n the Middle Bronze Age, a spring at Banditella, Italy received deposits of pottery and discs of worked bone, offerings that by the 6th century had shifted to consist of small metal items including bronze and silver rings, and a small bronze horse (Blake 2005: 116). A similar site in Latium near Campoverde is the Laghetto del Monsignore, a spring that received anthropomorphic sheet bronze figures and both full-size and miniature ceramics from the 10th to the 7th century BC (ibid). On a neighboring hilltop a small seasonally water-filled depression was surrounded by pit-huts that received offerings in the 12th century BC, later to include personal jewelry and perfume vessels in the 10th century (ibid), an inventory of votives similar to the modern ones that I recorded at St. Brigit's holy well near *Uisneach*, in Ireland.

Magna Graecia

The Greek colonists that settled in the Southern Italic Peninsula in the 8th and 7th centuries BC brought with them their own tradition of spring veneration, and a number of their spring sanctuaries have been excavated. Edlund (1987) has collected details of the sites in this area, and it is from her that I draw here. At Pizzica a spring on a hillside was offered votives from the 7th c. into the Roman period, including pottery, both full-sized and miniature, and statuettes. The water was channeled into two runs, but no other development marked the spot. At S. Biagio was a more monumental spring sanctuary "of a distinctly character" (ibid: 98).

Etruria

Springs, wells, pools and cisterns were central features at many Etruscan sanctuaries. The large Portonaccio Sanctuary complex at Veii was comprised of a triangular enclosure, and large Tuscan temple and altar, a sacrificial pit, with both a large basin and a well (Jannot 2005: 85). Similar water features form part of numerous other temple complexes (ibid: 83). The sanctuary at Monteguragazza (Edlund 1987: 83) sounds very much like an Irish holy well; votives offered to the well consisted of an inscribed stone *cippus*, pottery, and a group of bronze *kouroi* statuettes. A worked molded stone base next to the well was likely used as an altar. The well and altar were both inside a small, unroofed stone enclosure. All it lacks is a rag tree! Thermal springs, as in most places, attracted sanctuaries as well, such as at the 6th century BC temple near the Sillene spring in the Chianciano Terme park, which was later Christianized, and at the 2nd century BC great temple at Fucoli (ibid).

It has been suggested that healing cults were brought into Etruria by the Romans between 400 and 100 BC (Edlund-Berry: p. 162-163), when the healing function of springs became widespread throughout the peninsula. Jannot projects that curative function back into the Archaic (8th-6th centuries BC), referring to the sanctuary of the waters at Marzabotto and the probability that the water-centered sanctuary at Chianciano had an Archaic predecessor (Jannot 2005: 83; Edlund 1987: 82). The spring sanctuary of Marzabotto, had not only the spring itself, but also a square well and a fountain complex with retaining walls, pavement, and at least partial roof (Edlund 1987: 68-69). Offerings here included local pottery and bronze votive statuettes that together place the votive

behavior in the 8th to 5th centuries BC (ibid.). Since springs were venerated elsewhere on the peninsula even earlier, it is possible that some of these Etruscan sites were sacred earlier as well.

Rome

Nullus enim fons non sacer (Servius: 7 .84.)

Springs certainly remained special under Rome. There are numerous sacred springs in the landscape of Rome itself. There is the spring of Juturna at the Forum, one on the Caelian Hill, and two near Porta Capena, that of Egeria and one dedicated to the Camenae (Edlund-Berry : 168-9). The Camenae were honored on Aug 13 in the Roman festival calendar (ibid). Similar to the Norns of Scandinavian mythology, the Camenae are associated with fate. These figures, while among a variety of supernatural beings linked to springs, may be quite important in understanding the associations of holy wells in Ireland. There were other occasions to venerate springs in the Roman calendar as well. Horace gives us a peek into how springs were honored during the annual Fontanalia festival around the end of the thirties BC:

> O Fountain of Bandusia, clearer than crystal,
> worthy of sweet wine and not without flowers,
> tomorrow you shall have in sacrifice
> a kid whose brow buds with new horns.
>
> Portending battles of love, Venusian wars.
> In vain: for this son of the lascivious flock
> shall tinge your gelid waters
> with crimson blood.
>
> Even in the atrocious season
> of the blazing Dog-star, even then

you offer refreshing coolness
to the oxen wearied of the plough

And to the vagrant flock. And you also
shall become a famous fountain
So long as I sing of the ilex overhanging the hollow rock
From which leap your loquacious waters (Odes III.xiii).

The *fontanalia* is the festival of springs (*fons)*. Numerous similar sacrifices made at springs are described elsewhere, so Horace's description of what would be done at the spring is probably fairly reliable for the late 1st century B.C. The *fons* in the poem may in fact be the spring on the property that Augustus had given to Horace that he so lovingly describes (Alexander 1999: 334). Horace's mention of the spring's 'portending battles of love' is worth pausing to consider. This is again the divinatory power of the spring as was so important in the Greek east, and in *Magna Graecia*. This quote also suggests an association with affairs of romance akin to that mentioned in discussion of the Irish cult site of Teltown above, a relationship I will consider below. The power of springs to effect the future was also sought in ancient Italy, often through a professional intermediary not unlike the Greek pythia, but who used verbal formulae and sympathetic figurines to cast curses. Fountains (*fons*) were deemed as efficacious for such purposes as the original sources of the water. One such fountain was discovered beneath the Piazza Euclid in Rome where the goddess Anna Perenna was venerated (Piranomonte 2002; Faraone 2003). Incredibly well preserved beneath the modern piazza, the shrine consisted of three inscribed altars and numerous magico-religious offerings (Piranomonte 2002). These consisted of *defixiones*, requests inscribed on lead tablets to curse or cause feelings or behavior in other people. Also recovered were wax figurines similarly meant to bind or

otherwise affect individuals magically. Faraone has treated such 'voodoo' dolls at length elsewhere, including many found in springs and tombs in Greece (2003). This association of springs and fountains with knowledge of or control over the future will also be important below in the discussion of the Irish well cult.

Pliny the Younger gives us a useful description of a remote spring shrine from the 1st century AD, contemporary once again with the earliest holy well finds from Ireland:

> The banks are thickly clothed with ash trees and poplars, whose green reflections can be counted in the clear stream as if they were planted there. The water is as cold and as sparkling as snow. Close by is a holy temple of great antiquity in which is a standing image of the [river] god Clitumnus himself clad in a magistrate's bordered robe; the written oracles lying there prove the presence and prophetic powers of his divinity. All round are a umber of small shrines, each containing its god and having its own name and cult, and some of them also their own springs, for as well as the parent stream there are smaller ones which have separate sources but afterwards join the river (Pliny: *Letters* 8.5f, in MacMullen and Lane 1992: 42-43).

It is clear here that all the sources of the river were sacred and divine, which was generally the case in the Mediterranean Basin.

The Roman world also saw continuation of the ancient spring sanctuaries, including the cults of *Asklepeus* (*Asculapius*) and the nymphs. The prophesying power of the Greek sibyl figure was perpetuated in Rome as well. The Sibylline Oracles, containing the fate of Rome, were written by an Apollo-enthused intermediary from *Magna Graecia* in the old tradition known from Delphi and elsewhere (Beard, North and Price 1998: 62-3). In much of official Roman religion, however, water use was not required of the priests. Rather, sacred water could be used by anyone, any time, for healing and ritual cleansing (Edlund-Berry 2006: 180). As in Greece, it was largely for

purification, healing, and both divining and affecting the future that the people of Ancient Italy addressed springs and fountains.

Spain

Spring sanctuaries akin to those honored elsewhere in the Roman world were also frequented by the people of the Iberian Peninsula. Latin inscriptions on altars at many of these shrines tell us the names of a number of deities associated with these springs. It is upon several of these that various forms of the name *Coventina* were inscribed, important here for having shed light on the nymph Coventina venerated at a spring on Hadrians's Wall mentioned above (Allason-Jones 1985). José Blazquez discussed six Iberian spring sanctuaries, claiming that they were indigenous (2001: 5), even traceable to the Neolithic (Blazquez 1977: 228). Blazquez noted that while northern Iberian spring worship showed kinship with that of Celtic peoples to the north, that southern regions were affiliated rather with North African Berber healing springs, both having merged with the Greek and Roman versions spread through colonization and empire (Blasquez 1977: 330-331). With the very existence of pre-Roman-style spring veneration in Gaul and the British Isles yet undemonstrated, the comparison of the Iberian 'Indigenous' examples to their Celtic neighbors deserves caution. The Berber holy well tradition I referred to earlier, where today Muslim Saints are honored at springs North Africa (Goodman 1998), is likely traceable in some form at least back to the Roman Empire.

Iberia's remaining neighbors are the islands to the east, where there was clearly an ancient tradition of venerating sacred wells, to which we turn now.

Sardinia, Corsica, and the Balaeric Islands

The islands in the Western Mediterranean have a spring worshipping tradition that clearly begins prior to the arrival of Classical cults. Sardinia, Sicily, Corsica and the Balaeric Islands all boast holy wells, as any browse through tourist websites demonstrates. In Sardinia, large complex astronomically aligned wells were constructed by the Nuragic culture around 1100 BC, where people offered bronze statuettes, activity that reached its peak between 900 and 500 BC (Blake 2001: 149). At *Su Tempiesu* a fine drystone well house covers a spring on a steep mountainside. The 'temple-complex' consists of this rectangular steep-pitched gabled structure with a catchment pool for the spring, which drains through a chute cut in the paved floor outside and into a second basin built into a wall that shields the temple's entrance (Webster 1996: 182). Votives were offered to both basins, and date to this same Late Bronze Age - Early Iron Age transition period.

The Sardinian sacred wells were surrounded by large stone enclosures within which Webster has suggested "ritual celebration, involving feasting, singing, games and entertainment" took place (ibid: 187), a claim bolstered by the "large-scale, public celebrations (*launeddas*)" conducted today "within similar festival enclosures associated now with Christian saints" (ibid). Webster points out that many churches were built near such enclosures, whose calendrical festivals provided an effective context for proselytizing the pagans" (ibid. 187; Lilliu 1988: 570). This is a striking parallel to the inclusion of holy well veneration in the celebration of Patron Saints' Days, or "patterns," in Ireland and their supposed origin in pre-Christian calendrical festive assemblies that I mentioned above and explore further below.

So it is clear that if the Irish holy well cult does owe its origin to the Romano-British, than it represents the spread of a type of veneration of springs that had already made its way northward from the Mediterranean, where springs had enjoyed this exalted status for millenia. Further, if the Romano-British and Gallo-Roman items from the early centuries AD represent the first episode of votive deposition at springs in Ireland, and Jane Webster is right in allowing that the British and Gallic spring sanctuaries are a 'veritable post-conquest phenomenon' (1995: 450), then it only took a century or two for this healing shrine tradition to spread from the Mediterranean Basin to Ireland, which was then at the end of the known world.

While the pagan people of the Mediterranean Basin attributed the powers of the springs to various gods and nymphs, once Christianity started spreading under Imperial sanction in the fourth century AD, the wells were officially considered powered by demons, so to venerate them was considered devil worship, along with the veneration of trees, stones and other landscape features (Dowden 2000: 41-43; Stopford 1994: 61).

There was, however another development in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin that impacted the cult of springs, possibly ensuring springs a future in the ritual lives of Europeans for many centuries to come. Athanasius, in his *Life of Anthony*, tells us how St. Anthony caused a spring to burst forth from the dry ground when all seemed lost:

> Having gone around to several places and finding no water, they were unable to travel any farther, but lay instead on the ground, and released the camel, despairing for their lives. But the old man, seeing everyone in peril, being greatly distressed and sighing deeply, departed from them a short distance. And bending his knees and stretching out his hands, he offered a prayer. Immediately the Lord made water gush forth from where he was praying. And after everyone drank his fill, they were revived (Greg 1980: 71).

This miraculous drawing forth of the divine waters from the dry ground by Anthony became a formula for later *vita* authors, a template followed quite frequently in the *vitae* of saints throughout North West Europe. Using staves, their feet, even dismembered heads, countless Saints created springs:

Finding himself verie dry, [he] <prayed and> raysed vp a well, which at this daye is called after his name <and also a church builded by it, & it is written that he [said?] that> such as came to that well should by drincking of it finde help fro there infirmities and especially for expelling veanomouse diseases & wormes out of there Bellies [sic] (Orme 1992: 63).

This was Saint Cadoc in Cornwall, but similar events are relayed in many *vitae*. As we will see below in discussing Christianity further, this literature allowed springs to be considered Christian *ab origine*, and so spared their veneration from being considered pagan and satanic. Pagan holy wells could be converted to Christianity, the manifestation of their sacred power attributed to the power of God wielded through the Saints. This officially removes the taint of heathendom, but local memory can be strong and people are smart, so a sense of the pre-Christian origin has remained strong in many areas.

Chapter 7
Water Under the Bridge: The evolution of Wet Site Veneration in the Leinster Blackwater Valley, Co. Meath, a Case Study

The evidence I have surveyed here for the veneration of watery sites has spanned a vast stretch of time, from the Mesolithic to the present, and most of Europe. To get a better idea of how this tendency of ours to offer items to the waters has evolved through this time period in Ireland, I will focus in on one discrete landscape and follow, as best one can, the changing roles that watery sites have taken in the ritual practices of the inhabitants there.

I turn to the valley of the Leinster Blackwater River (*An Abhainn Dubh*) (fig. 7:1), at the center of which sits the royal cult site of Teltown (*Tealtiu*) discussed above. Connor Newman suggested that this valley was a discreet culture area several years ago. I am focusing particularly on the valley's *waterscape*, a term Veronica Strang has used to refer to all of the types of watery sites, rivers, lakes, bogs, streams, pools, and springs (2008; Bradley and Yates 2010). First I will describe the valley itself. The entrance to the valley upstream to the west is a narrow pass between Mullagh Hill and Mullagh Lough (fig. 7:2), guarded by a promontory fort in the lake flanked by two crannogs. Crannogs are artificial islands, largely built and used after 500 AD for elite residences (O'Sullivan 2000: 8). Someone important was keeping an eye on this pass. Following the Moynalty River (*An Abhainn Rua, the Redwater*) downstream and to the southeast, with land sloping up on either side, one reaches the Hill of Lloyd that overlooks the town of Kells and the wider valley beyond. To the north and east across the valley rise a bank of hills, clearly delimiting the area. To the south the rise is subtler, but Faughan Hill is visible,

and downstream to the southeast more hills are visible. Further downstream the Moynalty joins the Blackwater River and flows around the royal cult site of Teltown, and on down to Navan where it joins the northward flowing Boyne just as that river makes a sharp eastwardly turn to head towards the famous Neolithic passage tombs of Knowth, Newgrange, and Dowth, and on to the Irish sea. The valley area is marked on the map by a dashed line.

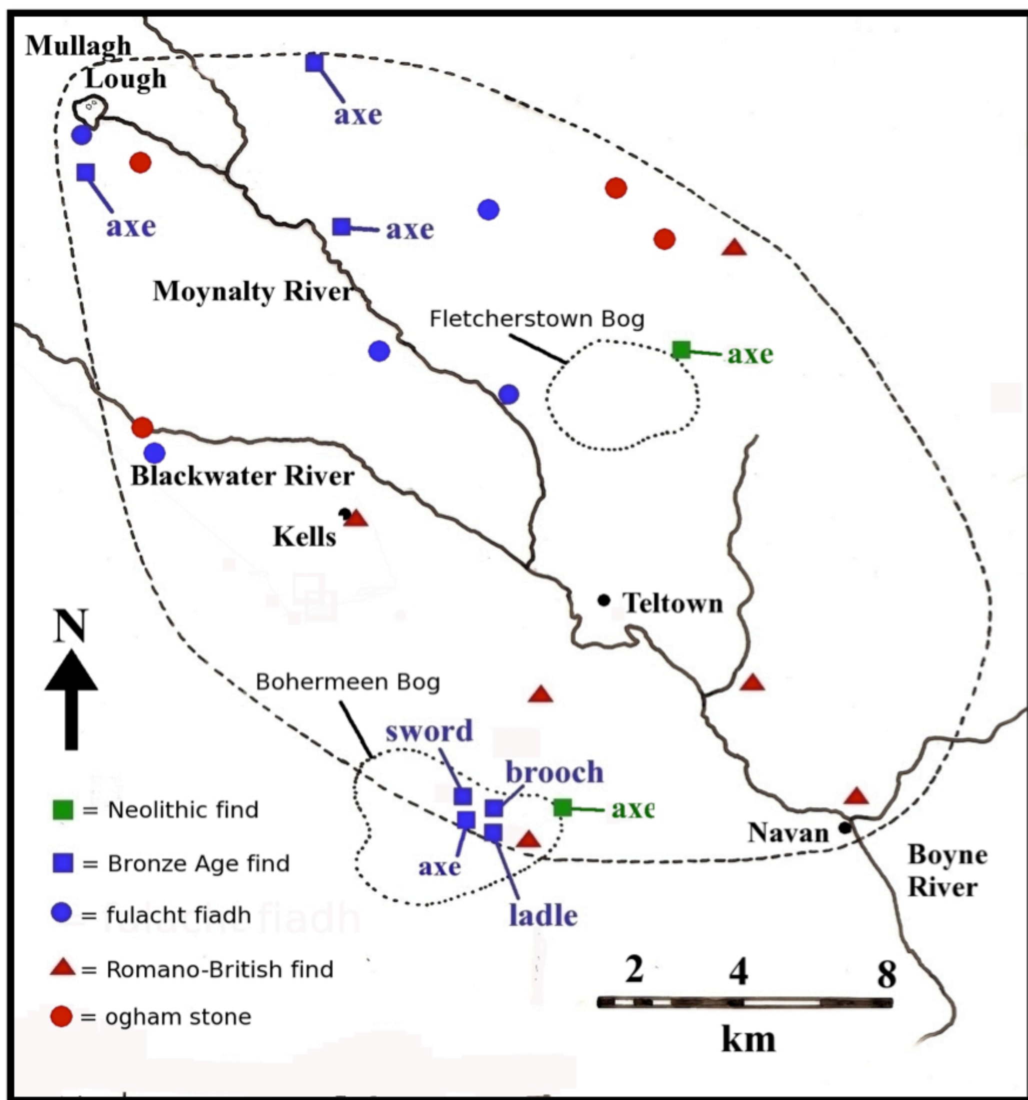

Figure 7:1 The Leinster Blackwater River Valley, showing finds from wet sites, as well as all Romano-British items found in the area (after Newman 2004; and the National Museum of Irelands' bog finds database).

Figure 7:2 Crannog on Mullagh Lough guarding the pass between the Lake and the hill rising to the right.

The earliest evidence of watery deposition in this area yet discovered are two polished stone axe heads recovered from the valley's two largest bogs. There are at least 9 other such axe heads known from the valley, but not from wet sites. Whether these bog finds are of a votive nature is not certain. In the Neolithic, these bogs would have been largely open bodies of water, and so perceived and utilized differently than in later times. They would have been used for travel and transport, and fishing. Importantly, bogs were liminal places, politically and spiritually. They often divided territories, and they seem to have been perceived as interfaces between this surface world and the supernatural

otherworld. The discovery of this type of artifact from Irish and other European rivers in great numbers likewise suggests that putting axe heads into watery places had special, likely religious, meaning to those who carried out the act.

By the Middle Bronze Age, the bogs would have been beginning to become impassable with the encroaching peat, leaving only small lakes fringed with fenlands (Aalen et al 1997: 114). Local inhabitants would have been using and perceiving these places in new ways. People continued to deposit items into bogs in this period, with Bohermeen bog in the southern extent of the area receiving a number of bronze items: a sword, an axe head, a ladle, and a brooch. The provenience of most of these items is approximate, and I was not able to learn to what part of the Bronze Age they belong. It is unlikely that they were deposited as a hoard, as they are all recorded as individual finds, often from the edge or "near" the bog, suggesting they were deposited into the open fen waters surrounding the growing bog. The bronze axe marked near Mullagh Lough on figure 7:1 was found "in a bog near Mullagh", but precisely where was not recorded (NMI bog find database). I also included the *fulacht fiadh* or cooking places, curved mounds of burnt debris and fire-cracked rock surrounding a hearth and trough. These have long been interpreted as having been used for cooking, but there is growing consensus that they were more likely used as sweat houses, an idea supported by the fact that there tends to be no faunal remains at them at all (Harbison 1988: 110-112), even where the soil would have preserved them (Barfield 1987). There is always a source of water, be it a stream or a spring nearby with which to fill the trough. If they were used as saunas, then I would suspect they had a magico-religious function as well. I have experienced Native American sweat lodges, and they are a profound form of prayer in

that context, and to a certain extent this is likely to have been true throughout their circumpolar distribution, at least in the sense of purification (Barfield and Hodder 1987; Bradley and Yates 2010). Bradley and Yates have recently noted a pattern of deposition of metalwork with such burnt mounds in the English Fenlands that should further contribute to a ritual interpretation of these features (2010).

The only evidence of Iron Age watery deposition in the area found to date is the Romano-British material (with the caveat that the *fulacht fiadh* could date to this period as well). These include the armring from the holy well in Phoenixtown, the brooch and Samian ware sherd from St. Anne's Well in Randalstown, and the Roman statuette of a household god (*lar*) recovered from the confluence of the Blackwater and Boyne at Navan. The bogs were growing fast after 500 BC (Aalen et al 1997: 115), and there would have been fewer open pools into which one might make offerings.

Though they are not part of the waterscape, it is in the early centuries (4th to 7th) of the Early Medieval or Early Christian period that the *ogham* stones were erected, or at least inscribed (Edwards 1989: 103). While there seems to have been a lull in watery deposition in this period, there was a surge in ritual activity reflected in landscaping projects, such as the construction of the *Knockans* double-banked linear earthwork at Teltown, dated to two episodes in the 7th to 10th centuries. It is also in this period that the monastery of Kells was established (figure 7:3), by the monks fleeing Iona, which had been repeatedly attacked by Vikings. A holy well is marked on the OS map at Kells, but I could not find it on the ground, and suspect that it may have fallen victim to development (fig. 7:4). That holy wells were still receiving offerings in the general area in this period

is demonstrated by the 9th century ring pin recovered from Tober Doney, a bit south of the Blackwater Valley, but closer to Tara.

Figure 7:3 Kells, Co. Meath, Ireland.

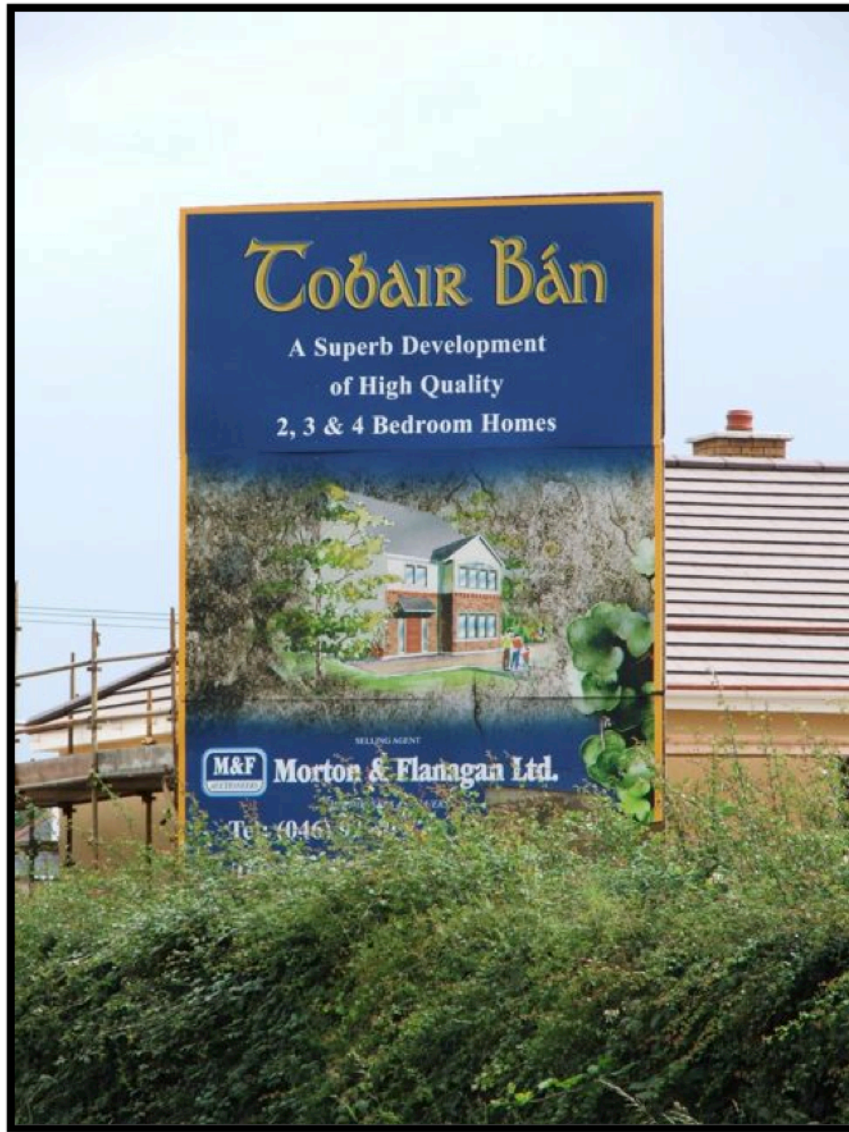

Figure 7:4 Housing development at Kells being constructed in 2005 near supposed location of a holy well. The name means "woman's well".

The addition of the *Knockans* to the Teltown cult landscape occurred when the site was being used as the staging grounds for the Lughnasa *óenach* of the kings of Tara. This event is believed to have survived, in rural fair form, into the 1700's (MacNeill 1962). Water played a role in that event in several ways: horses were made to swim across the river for fertility and purification purposes, mass was held at a holy well (St.

Brigit's in Martry after the event moved across the river), and according to oral tradition recorded in the 19th century, there was the peculiar wedding ritual described in chapter 5 that took place annually at *Lag an Aonaigh* on the Hill of Teltown itself. A fourth role of water may be preserved by the dreaded spring *Leary's Hole*, reputed to be the place where an evil being was imprisoned (ibid). What role or roles, if any, the numerous other springs and artificial ponds on the hill played in the rituals carried out at the site we do not know. None of the holy wells in the area have received much attention in the last 100 years or more, since the traditional pattern days died out. The bogs see much activity, but it is now industrial rather than ritual (fig. 7:5).

Figure 7:5. Extruded peat from industrial harvesters, Fletcherstown bog, Co. Meath.

This brief survey of watery deposition in the Blackwater valley is a nice microcosm for the changes we see in such behavior in Ireland as a whole, and indeed in Europe more broadly. The Neolithic (and in places, the Mesolithic) saw the beginning of the tradition of depositing valuable things in water. We must remember how valuable a polished stone axe was in terms of investment of time and effort. These are not quick, flaked tools, but rather took a great deal of time to create. It seems that rivers and bogs were among the places deemed appropriate for the final resting places of these items, as destined in their cultural biographies (Fontijn 2008: 89). Many such items (speaking broadly) deposited in wet sites had seen a long period of use, they had lived their lives, so to speak, and now carried special meanings and were appropriate to offer to the water (ibid). It is important to note that the Neolithic religious behavior in the Blackwater valley did not happen in isolation. The area is in between to areas of monumental Neolithic burial and ritual activity: the Bend in the Boyne with its massive passage tombs a mere 6km to the east (fig 7:6),

Figure 7:6. Newgrange passage tomb, with entrance just visible on the right.

and the sprawling Lough Crew complex about 10 km to the west. In fact, if one follows the Blackwater upstream out of this valley a bit, it flows within about 5km of that hill. Rather than being isolates, the few finds in this small area are part of a blanket of activity that covers the land in varying concentrations.

This all remains true in the Bronze Age, when the material was of great value, and unlike the stone axes, could actually be recycled were it not being consumed by these rituals. The weapons and tools from the Bronze Age (which may include more brooches and axes listed in the National Museum of Ireland's database, the age of which I could not ascertain) represent the type of deposition that took grander form in deposits such as the Dowris hoard, and, closer to the Blackwater, the hoard of golden trumpet-headed dress fasteners recovered just south of the Bohermeen bog at Dressogue (Eogan 1957). I suspect that were the Blackwater ever dredged, that more offerings would be discovered from the Neolithic and Bronze Age, such as have been found in the Shannon, the Bann, the Ulster Blackwater (there are several Blackwater rivers in Ireland), the Erne, and the Barrow (Bourke 2001).

I suspect that there is more evidence of native Irish Iron Age watery deposition in the Blackwater Valley as well, as it was fairly widespread elsewhere. The Kings' Stables near *Emain Macha* bridged the Bronze Age to Iron Age transition as a watery place of offering, receiving dog bones, deer antlers, and a human skull (Lynn 1977), and nearby Loughnashade received the impressive Iron Age sheet bronze trumpets. I have illustrated how ubiquitous springs and pools are at the royal cult sites, Teltown included, and I predict that once these are investigated, some will prove to have received votives of

similar types, as St. John's Well at Dun Ailinne recently has (Crabtree et al, forthcoming). Other contenders are: the four springs and the artificial pond at Tara; the numerous springs at *Cruachain*, such as Rory's Well; and the numerous springs and small bogs around *Emain Macha* and Haughey's Fort (as identified in Chapter 5). After all, much of the finest La Tène decorated material has come from wet sites, such as the Broighter hoard from the floodplain of the river Roe near the coast (Raftery 1994: 183), and the huge hoard recovered in association with wooden pilings from bogland in Lisnacrogher, Co. Antrim (ibid: 184), that could have been a crannog, or perhaps an offering platform as at La Tène and similar sites discussed in Chapter 4.

In the early centuries AD, there seems to have been a shift. The bogs were becoming impassable and less watery. River deposits drop off. The evidence for votive deposition in water is, for the first time, found in springs rather than lakes, rivers, and bogs, and the items are either from Britain or show a close relationship across the Irish Sea with peoples living in the Roman Empire. This seems to be the beginning of what we now call the holy well. It is not the beginning of the veneration of water, but as the evidence stands right now, it seems to have been a significant shift in the focus of this behavior. Also, the weaponry, so long a major component in this practice across Temperate Europe, is no longer offered. It is small, personal items that are offered. Is this due to the simple fact that most such springs are small, and cannot easily receive large offerings? Or is this a shift in the symbolic meaning, a shift from a martial emphasis towards acts of healing, of personal, small-scale petition. Is this the same shift Hedeager (1992) suggested for Iron Age society in general, from communal to individual rituals? I think this is likely the case. Springs were not normal venues for great State rituals in the

Mediterranean, but rather occult places where individuals could interface with the supernatural themselves, or via religious specialists. Large-scale military offerings were made at the great "Celtic" temples on the Continent, such as Gournay-sur-Aronde (Brunaux 1988), but no such temples have been found in Ireland.

From the 7th century on, the story of holy wells is told by Christians. As rehearsed above, the *vitae* of Patrick and other saints either have the Saint defeating local religious specialists, sanctifying pre-existing sacred springs, or causing the springs to burst forth through their own powers. It seems that turning these places to Christianity was an important concern for these hagiographers, at least. It seems that the personal contact with God continued to be sought at these intimate shrines, for healing, and for making requests. To what extent holy wells played a role in the rituals of the transhumant agrarian populace's annual movements is not clear, but I believe that mass came to be held at holy wells only under duress, when the Protestant authorities forbade Catholic worship, driving it "underground". Much of the trappings of today's well cult must derive from this time, when practitioners recreated, as best one could, indoor places of worship out of doors. Further aspects of today's well cult came to be only with the emphasis on the rosary and on penance called for by the Tridentine Reforms. The ubiquitous rosaries and frequent Stations of the Cross found at holy wells reflect this focus (fig. 7:7).

The most recent change in ritual practices that Irish, and indeed international, holy wells are experiencing derives from the increasing secularity of many Christian people's lives, combined with a surge in Neopagan interest in and adoption of these sites. I have seen a progressive change over the years I have been paying attention. When I first visited Tara in 2002, St. Patrick's Well was overgrown and neglected (fig. 7:8).

Figure 7:7 Rosaries, votive offerings and cups at St. Gobnet's Well, Ballyvourney, Co. Cork.

The next time I saw the well, it had been tidied up, made easier to access, and some of the surrounding bank had been scarfed back and fenced (fig. 7:8). Then in 2008, I found the well draped with votive petitions for individuals' health, for compassion and tolerance, and for the Great Goddess (fig. 7:9 and 7:10).

This was after Tara had become the center of the maelstrom over the motorway being cut through the landscape, with neopagan protesters camped out at the gate around the clock. It seems, based on the archaeological evidence, that if these New Agers really want to worship the ancient access points to the "Celtic" deities, they ought to do so at the rivers, bogs, and lakes. The holy well seems to be an import from the Mediterranean Basin, not that the ancients would mind sharing!

Figure 7:8 St. Patrick's Well, Tara, 2002.

Figure 7:9 St. Patrick's Well in 2008, tidied up and adorned with pagan petitions.

Figure 7:10. Neo-pagan petitions on St. Patrick's Well, Tara, 2008.

Chapter 8:

Conversion and Continuity: An Ethnographic Analogy

It seems safe to say that aspects of holy well ritual originated in pagan nature worship. However, there came a time when the Church came to Christen these sites and use them in rituals of their own. A central question that arises is this: when sacred sites are co-opted by a new religion, and people venerate the site continuously through the conversion, do they change the intentionality of their acts? Do they perceive, or feel, the symbolism of their acts change? Do people have the same concept of the supernatural referent, or recipient of their acts? Do these acts mean the same thing? In cases where converts leave the rituals and ritual sites of their former religions behind them and embrace those of the new, it is easier to argue that there is no continuity from one practice to the other, but this is another matter. Whether holy wells in Ireland, and the rest of Temperate Europe for that matter, predate the spread of the healing shrine from the Mediterranean Basin or not, they were in most places venerated prior to Christianity. They were subsequently Christianized, becoming personal-scale places, with built-in portals to God. They became typical enough eventually that new manifestations of the sacred, generally in the form visions of Mary, engendered once mundane springs to become sacred and to be venerated.

As early as the 11th century in Lagny, France a spring was sanctified (Hubert 1977). At Lourdes, it was at the Virgin Mary's bidding to "Go drink at the spring and wash yourself in it" that Bernadette sought the spring in the grotto, and in fact she had to dig, in essence causing the water to burst forth, just as so many Saints are supposed to

have done in their *vitae* (Turner and Turner 1978: 226). Thus the spring became sacred, and as the Turners point out, “Bernadette’s washing and drinking provided the model for subsequent pilgrim behavior” (ibid: 227). There is also a sacred well where the children saw one of their apparitions at Fátima in Portugal in the early 20th century. A new Marian shrine with a miraculous spring was dedicated in Brittany as late as 1949 (Badone 2007). That these new Christian ritual sites were established in the mold of the Christianized, landscape-based ritual sites speaks to how thoroughly such intimate encounters with the divine had been adopted by Christians. One way to explore how these pagan sites changed, or more aptly how their visitor’s *intentionality* changed, in this conversion to Christianity is through ethnographic analogy. I turn now to a consideration of Latin American spring veneration. This is a formal analogy in that it is a polytheistic society that venerated springs, and continued to do so after having been converted to Christianity, as was the case in Europe. It is a relational analogy in that the religious overlay is from the same Christian source in both cases.

In Latin America the numerous creolized cults that arose through the mingling of Catholic, African, and Native American religions provide numerous analogies of what can happen when the Christian Church converts a population of polytheistic, animistic pagans, as it did in Europe. That watery sites were offered votive items in pre-contact Mesoamerica has been extensively commented on (Sauer 2005: 96; Ashmore and Knapp 1999; Turner and Turner 1978: ch. 2). The cenote of *Chichen Itza* and its offerings are particularly famous. One example, out of many, of a sacred spring that has been Christianized in the Latin American context will serve to illustrate how parallel the two cases of Christian-pagan hybridity are.

There is an interesting pilgrimage route in Huizquilan, Mexico, leading to the site of Chalma (Harvey 1991). It began after a Marian apparition in a cave in the 16th century. The native population of the region, the Otomi believed in a multitude of gods. Most important for us to consider here are *Makatá*, Old Father, and *Makamé*, Old Mother. *Makatá* was worshiped on mountaintops, and with springtime ceremonies. *Makamé* was an earth mother, or 'spirit of the grainfield', associated with flowers, fecundity, the moon, and notably here with natural caves and springs. The cave of Chalma itself had been a site where *Cihuacoatl*, the goddess of carnal love, had been worshipped, and her image in the cave was replaced by one of Mary of Egypt (Turner and Turner 1978: 54). The pilgrimage route consists of a number of stations or stops on the way to the church at Chalma. Many of these consist of stone chapels, themselves strikingly similar to holy well-houses in Britain. At one station however a sacred *ahuehuete* tree is venerated, which grows out of a spring believed to be the origin of all water. Pilgrims leave umbilical cords on the tree, in little bags, to protect the children's health and boys' virility. If it is their first time, pilgrims reaching the tree should dance with crowns of flowers on their heads, and women should bathe in both the spring and in a nearby river to assure fecundity. Women may also leave a garment or a braid on the tree, as personal offerings to the Lord of Chalma (p. 101).

This example has many parallels with European holy wells. As I rehearsed above, there is a strong association in Europe between holy wells and sacred trees (Eliade 1958; Logan 1980; Brenneman & Brenneman 1997). These trees, especially in Catholic areas such as Ireland and France, receive petitions from pilgrims in the form of rags or strips of cloth, very similar to the offerings at Chalma. These are believed to leave behind

whatever ailment or other issue the supplicant wants to alleviate. A wide range of other items is left at springs, on the altar if one exists, and the water is drunk to affect various cures, or for fertility, as at Chalma. I must say that the dancing around the spring with flower crowns on even conjures imagery of British maypole ritual. Finally, at the heart of the site, we have the cosmic spring that feeds the world's rivers, just like the Otherworldly spring in Irish myth. On the surface, then, this example seems quite parallel to European examples, but how much of this is due to the common Christian culture that converted both peoples?

The early missionary strategy in Mexico included the conversion of certain elements of the indigenous sacred landscape, which was made up of natural features such as caves, mountains, and springs (Harvey 1991: 91). They purposefully sought these sites out to convert, knowing that the people would continue their rituals. Due to this incomplete conversion of the sacred landscape, however, many sites did not undergo this conversion, remaining active pagan ritual sites into the twentieth century (ibid.). Even where they did operate, it has been suggested that the missionaries in Mexico were conscious and explicit in their encouragement of "the equation of many elements of Catholicism with elements of the indigenous religion" (ibid. 59-60). The Chalma area was left largely unmolested until the later arrival of the Augustinians (Turner and Turner 1978: 55). So, whom are these offerings intended for? Are these people truly converted? Are they offering their umbilical cords to the Lord of Chalma, or to the black Jesus, or to God? Or are the offerings intended for the goddess of carnal love of Chalma, or to *Makamé* the Earth Mother, with her association with springs and fecundity? If the question is whether there is continuity of religious practice here or not, it would be hard

to argue against it. The intentionality seems decidedly earthward. Can the same be said for the offerings to Irish holy wells? Were the spring shrines left pagan enough that people's offerings there are in any cases offered to the spring, or the earth (New-agers aside)? Christianity spread to Ireland considerably earlier than it did to the New World, so can we really imagine Irish Christians intending their offerings to the *genius loci*, to the pre-Christian powers-that-be, be they Irish, British, or Roman? Was there a similarly incomplete Christianization of the landscape and populace in Ireland? Were missionaries in Ireland following the policy of Gregory the Great in his letter to Mellitus, mentioned in Chapter 3, that called for just this type of encouragement? His orders are relevant enough here to look at more closely. In 601AD, Pope Gregory advised missionaries in England to destroy only the idols of the pagans, and to Christianize the temples by depositing relics there, thus preserving the places to which "the people . . . flocking more readily to their accustomed resorts, may come to know and adore the true God" (Bede I. 30). By this point, the church had been destroying temples, groves, trees, and other pagan ritual sites for centuries, and was implementing a new strategy, one that allowed pagan traditions to continue, as long as they were done at least nominally in the name of the Christian God. Even blood sacrifice was allowed to continue:

> And since they have a custom of sacrificing many oxen to demons, let some other solemnity be substituted in its place, such as a day of Dedication of the Festivals of the holy martyrs whose relics are enshrined there. On such occasions they might well construct shelters of boughs for themselves around the churches that were once temples, and celebrate the solemnity with devout feasting. They are no longer to sacrifice beasts to the Devil, but they may kill them for food to the praise of God, and give thanks to the Giver of all gifts for the plenty they enjoy. If the people are allowed some worldly pleasures in this way, they will more readily come to desire the joys of the spirit (ibid).

Gregory himself suggests that even the intentionality will, at least at first, remain the same, hopefully changing with prolonged exposure to Christian ways: “For it is certainly impossible to eradicate all errors from obstinate minds at one stroke, and whoever wishes to climb to a mountain top climbs gradually step by step, and not in one leap.” Gregory also expresses an awareness of how hybrid the church already is with a reference to similar allowances made by God to the Israelites:

It was in this way that the Lord revealed Himself to the Israelite people in Egypt, permitting the sacrifices formerly offered to the Devil to be offered thenceforward to Himself instead. So He bade them sacrifice beasts to Him, so that, once they became enlightened, they might abandon one element of sacrifice and retain another. For, while they were to offer the same beasts as before, they were to offer them to God instead of to idols, so that they would no longer be offering the same sacrifices” (Bede I. 30).

The last bit needs repeating: “For while they were to offer the same beasts as before, they were to offer them to God instead of to idols, so that they will no longer be offering the same sacrifices.” The Israelites had abandoned one element of sacrifice and retained another. This is hybridity. To what extent did this go on in Late Antiquity? Gregory believed that by converting the place, and by telling the people to offer their sacrifices in a different name, that there was no continuity of religious practice, that paganism was ended in that place, replaced wholly by Christian rite and eventually belief, even when the people were admittedly still behaving the same, their ‘obstinate minds’ still making errors, still intending the offerings to the pagan gods.

Let us take what we have gained from this ethnographic analogy, turn our attention back to Ireland, and consider what the rites performed at springs there meant to the performers. The people of Iron Age Ireland were familiar with sacred springs and artificial pools. By the dawn of Christianity there, we can imagine ritual ponds and

springs at the major ceremonial centers, and at least a handful of healing well shrines in the tradition of Roman Britain and Gaul, if not a plethora of them. At the royal sites, the springs and pools likely had associations with the gods, with kings and their rites, and likely were seen as doors to the otherworld. At the Roman style shrines the springs likely were associated with healing, with the power to know and to manipulate the future. As Christian sites, these wells are also believed to have healing powers, and to bring good luck. Victor Turner likened this focus on illness and disease in Christian pilgrimage rites to what he called "rituals of affliction" (Turner and Turner 1978: 11). Such rituals "are performed to propitiate or exorcize supernatural beings of forces believed to be the cause of illness, ill luck, or death" (ibid.). But holy wells are also places of prayer, and of penance, of asking for a desired future, or paying the fine for sin. It seems safe to credit this much of the Irish holy well cult phenomenon to the Mediterranean cult of springs. But is the intentionality the same? Is it simple orthopraxy, whereby the diligent execution of the rite will magically bring the desired result, or is it prayer? This is where that distinction between magic and religion, if we make one, becomes central. Do the Christian petitioners believe it is the ritual, or the God that causes the supernatural intervention?

Returning to Susan Sered's taxonomy of ritual mixing, I can easily imagine individual patrons to wells combining religious rituals freely, if not always consciously. I can also imagine some type of Irish religious officiant making use of newly available rituals from abroad to increase their own status or efficacy, whether we call it appropriation or opportunism. Sered points out how, " . . . in terms of healing, the exotic is often perceived as more powerful" (Sered 2007: 227), and that " . . . healers utilize

ritual accumulation to enhance their healing capabilities" (228). The rites of the neighboring Empire must have been perceived as powerful and exotic, and been added to existing healing rituals in just this type of ritual accumulation. In highly localized cult, as was likely the case in Iron Age Ireland, I believe that once the religious *cognicenti* had adopted a practice, we might consider it *institutional* for people in the area. Approaching holy wells as an element of medicine allows that may have been imported from Roman Britain along with other aspects of Roman medicine, such as surgical tools. The presence of an occulist's stamp at the site of a well in Golden has already suggested this connection. They were commonly offered at Gaulish healing shrines.

Now it must be asked, what about the possible link with native Irish spring veneration? Is there anything in the Christian holy well cult that derives from the native Irish sacred pool tradition? One possible bit of symbolism that may have served to bridge the native pools and Romano-Christian springs is the association with a king, or Lord. Perhaps the tales of kings gaining *flaith* and sovereignty through ritual processions involving these springs, pools and earthworks provided a convenient segue to tales of the King of Kings being human, but through God's power becoming God himself. It is perhaps obvious, but must be rehearsed here, how Christians believe they partake in His grace. They do so through baptism, where it is the water (from the spring?) that conveys his power. This purificatory role that water has played must have been a powerful bridging symbol. Following Eliade's generalization, the Brennemans the perception of the source of the power, the hierophany or manifestation of the sacred, began to shift with the arrival of Christianity, from the Earth to the Sky (1994: 74, 106-107). Whereas pagans had deemed these springs as the embodiment, or at least the abode of nymphs or

gods, the sacred was manifest right there, in the water that flowed from the under/otherworld. Remember that the King gained *flaith* from the sovereignty goddess, who has been recently associated with these springs by Doherty and by Newman. The sacred power was seen as flowing from the spring to the King. I will return to this aspect of the pagan system of belief in a moment. For Christians, the power is derived from heaven, the spring is just a vehicle or tool that conveniently conveys or delivers God's power. The power flows from the King to the spring. This is a significant shift. I recently attended my cousin's baptism, and the words used in the ceremony illustrate this Christian perception of the hierophany, and are worth quoting here:

We thank you, almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.
We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into his fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

At the following words, the Presider touches the water

Now sanctify this water, we pray you, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue forever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior. To him, to you, and to the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen (*The Great Vigil of Easter* April 3, 2010, St. John's Episcopal Church, St. Cloud, Minnesota).

The water is sanctified, made powerful, by the power of the Holy Spirit. "*Over* it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation" (my emphasis). This suggests that the water preceded God's movement, that it preceded the creation. The water used in the rite is sanctified by God, through the touch and words of the officiant. The Brennemans generalized this as the shift from an Earth-centered religion to one focused on the Sky,

the same dichotomy that Eliade stresses, between Cosmic religions that are somatic, centripetal, cyclical, and intimate, and Historic religions that are linear, celestial, centrifugal, and expanding. This degree of generalization is perhaps a bit overwrought for the present discussion, but it does stress how fundamentally the supernatural referent of a symbol or ritual site can swing upon conversion. In this sense, providing that the individuals enacting the rites have honestly converted, one could argue that while the rituals may continue uninterrupted, that there is no religious continuity, as Gregory hoped would be the case. The sacred power comes to be believed as derived from a different source. There is a sort of gravitational inversion. But, how can we ever know if individuals have actually converted their inner belief of what their actions mean? If demonstrating continuity hinges on penetrating the ancient mind, than it is a tall order.

I have an old friend, Sam, with whom I grew up, and a bit of his story strikes at the heart of this matter. He was brought up Quaker, but was really an atheist. He brought me to my first Quaker meeting. In graduate school he met and fell in love with an Orthodox Jewish woman. When it became clear that she was the one, he began the process of conversion to Judaism so that he could marry her. All of the requisite rituals and tasks were performed, and he became an official Jew, and had a fantastic wedding. But, the next time we got together and went out to breakfast, as had been one of our greatest pleasures as friends, he ordered bacon as he always had done. When I raised my eyebrow and asked why he was breaking the taboo, he said simply, "It's not a problem, I'm just a bad Jew!" Just because one converts to a new religion, especially under duress (not that Sam was really under duress, rather he lucidly converted for purely non-religious reasons), does not mean that their inner idea of the sacred, or the divine, or what

rules are important has changed in the least. New and forcibly converted pagans visiting holy wells may very well have been doing as close to what they had always done as they could get away with. They may have perceived the power of the spring as emerging from the Earth, as manifesting then and there, not having become sacred only upon the grace of a higher (literally) power, even despite what words they may have uttered during the rite.

One factor to consider here is the fact that Christianity was unique in the ancient world in that it united religious ritual and religious sentiment. This was one reason that it was so incompatible with Roman paganism. In Roman rite, it was the behavior that mattered, not the attitude, it was a tradition of *orthopraxy*. If not carried out with carefully prescribed precision, rituals would have to be repeated until completed perfectly to be effective. One's belief or inner thoughts during this procedure were immaterial.

While this is true, it is notable also that one aspect of many ritual sites, of grand temples as well as intimate rural shrines, is that they tend to instill in visitors a certain degree of religious sentiment. This is especially true for visitors whose very presence is due to a belief that divine beings reside in, or are reachable at such sites. These places can arouse *numinous* feelings, comprised at once of fear and fascination, creature feeling, and so forth. A big question then, is whether the visitors to Christianized pagan sites associate such religious sentiment with these Christian symbols, or with the spring, tree, or other natural feature that they had venerated for so long? Are the Brennemans right? Does the supernatural referent of the spring, the perceived source of the divine power, shift from the earth to the sky with conversion to Christianity? Do the Christians see the power coming from God down to the water, via a Saint and his crosier, or the Priest and his

touch? Notably, the Brennemans see this shift being completed in Ireland only in recent decades, with the tidying up of holy well shrines representing "the celestial symbolism of order, emptiness, light, and fastness associated with pastoral nomadic and urban industrial cultures and with Protestantism" (p. 106). Of course, Ireland was Christianized well before the New World, arguably more than long enough for the original intent of the well veneration to have been inverted towards the lone Sky God, but when I have asked Irish Catholics about the springs, and these were individuals who visited holy wells, prayed at them, and believed in their healing powers, they often referred to the pagan origin of the wells, and to a certain ambivalence as to where the power was originating. The Brennemans see this traditional Irish Catholic intentionality as having retained the earthward orientation. Where one truly perceives the power as originating is a question that can indeed only be known in one's own mind, and indeed many practitioners likely never even consider it.

So the water itself provided bridging symbolism for the process of conversion. What other symbols served to bridge the transition? Such bridges are also possible windows into the previous religion. Arguably the sacred tree or *bile* of Irish tradition could be equated with the cross, and the sacred Salmon or eel in the mythical well could be equated with the fish as a symbol of Jesus. The Brennemans point to these commonalities as facilitating conversion.

But in spite of the differing emphases within the respective cultures, it was the common symbolic complexes that provided the conditions for the possibility of syncretism between Celt and Christian in Ireland. It is through this common ground . . . that the possibility of a genuine understanding of, and opening to, the other presents itself" (75).

This recalls Gregory the Great's hope that "the people, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may abandon their error and, flocking more readily to their accustomed resorts, may come to know and adore the true God" (Bede I. 30). If the Brennemans are right, and Celtic Christianity adopted the new religion without fully inverting their perceived hierophany until quite recently, it seems this means of converting people's innermost beliefs can take a very long time indeed. Perhaps the church was falling back on the orthopraxy of their Roman forbears, ignoring the intent, as long as the acts done appeared correct. What does this say about the issue of continuity? It is worth reviewing what Petts offered on the issue of continuity:

It is wrong to suggest that the deposition of Christian objects in such a manner is an example of syncretism, or that those who carried out (sic) were consciously behaving in a pagan manner . . . After all, just because pre-Christian religious believers prayed means not that the act of prayer in Christianity is syncretic, but merely an established mode of religious practice. . . [B]asic modes of religious practice may show continuity over the period of conversion without indicating syncretism or a hybrid or mongrel religion (Petts 2003 116).

Remember the disdain with which he typed 'mongrel'? In his view, there is no continuity in the deposition of lead tanks in the Christian context, even though it had been a pagan practice, and was continued by Christians. Apparently for him it is the intent that matters. Again, the Brennemans suggest that the pagan intentionality and symbol system survived in Ireland for centuries, but as Denis Feeney points out about Roman rite:

[I]gnorance and obscurity are part of the mystique and effectiveness of ritual. We are always trying to home in on what ritual is really saying; but ritual is not really *saying* anything (except perhaps to the gods). It can only be made to say things, and too many things at that. Furthermore, the form of a ritual may remain constant over very long periods of time while generating or accepting entirely novel interpretations (Feeney 1998: 120).

Should we consider this to be continuity, if the interpretations that the acts generate change over time? I must accept the general stance that we can never truly enter another person's mind, never truly know what another is thinking, perceiving, or believing. They can try to tell us, they might be our most close relation or confidant, but words remain symbols, their referents arbitrary and learned, and we are at their mercy when it comes to conveying the goings on in our minds and hearts.

Meaning Through Time

With this caveat declared, I will proceed with an attempt at a rudimentary outline of some meanings that the hybrid Irish holy well rituals may have had through time. This could be considered a sort of cultural de-tanglement (or, perhaps, de-tangler?). I begin with Iron Age Ireland, understood as being culturally hybrid already, however one imagines such Continental cultural traits as agriculture, metallurgy, the Celtic language, or La Tène style material culture having arrived there. If the pools and springs of the royal landscapes did contribute to the holy well cult, did that cult inherit any discernible meaning or intent from this strain of its inheritance? What did veneration of these springs mean in the context of the royal cult landscapes? Based on the traditions recorded by Christian monks, springs at these royal sites are associated with otherworldly power, with wisdom, divination, and with the sovereignty of the land. I believe that these springs at royal sites were likely used in ritual processions, of kings, and likely of common folk as suggested by the association of the spring, *Lag an Aonaigh* and the *Knockans* earthworks with wedding rituals at Teltown. In these circumstances, I believe the springs were perceived as offering a degree of divine authority, of sanction, for the rites in which they played a part. The Teltown case also suggests that these springs may have been believed

to have divinatory power, as it was at the spring that couples were randomly set up for their temporary marriages.

With the arrival of the Romano-British healing shrine came the aspect of healing, possibly foreshadowed by the legend of the spring that brought fallen warriors back to life in the Battle of Moytura. The healing well cult was likely a part of the wider Roman medical package that must have been attractive on its own. Sered has pointed out how "in terms of healing, the exotic is often perceived as more powerful" (2007: 227). She also noted how "healers utilize ritual accumulation to enhance their healing capabilities" (228). I can imagine that wielding the healing powers of the great and powerful Empire that had taken over the rest of the world would have been perceived as greatly enhancing such capabilities. With this healing shrine tradition likely came its association with divinatory power that we see in the springs at the great oracles in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin. Some rites arriving with the cult likely entailed the ability to convey otherworldly knowledge, as in how to be cured of a disease, such as people sought at the *Asklepeia* through drinking the water and incubating to receive visions during the divine sleep. Ritual acts in this context likely also involved the capacity of these springs to curse, either through the deity's cooperation, or through magical manipulation of the otherworldly forces residing there through precise protocol. It seems that the divinatory capacity of the wells, and their ability to dispense wisdom might have provided a sort of bridging mechanism, easing the import of the Mediterranean well cult, as they both recall supposedly ancient Irish, and Scandinavian, traditions of holy wells.

As I have explored above, the coming of Christianity brought a new level of meaning to these wells, an apparent shift of hierophany from the Earth to the Sky,

perhaps from the goddess/nymph/feminine principle to the God/masculine principle, although the many holy wells dedicated to Mary and Brigit and other female saints could represent a degree of survival of the pre-Christian traditions. The Christian missionaries had at their disposal an arsenal of symbols to utilize in the conversion process. Keep the wells holy, but make them Christian. Keep the tree standing at the well sacred, but use it as an analogue of the Cross and thus of Christ. Use the tales of the salmon, who transmits to those with whom it comes in contact divine inspiration, as metaphors for Jesus, who elsewhere was symbolized by the fish. And perhaps it was the variety of power I have suggested was perceived in pre-Roman Iron Age Ireland, the association with royal authority, and with the authority of the land itself, of sovereignty, that the Christian missionaries were hoping to co-opt by establishing springs as part of their own cult landscape. They could also claim the healing and the prophecy as being gifts of God, two powerful tools to adopt. If so, then arguably these concepts may have informed rituals enacted at the early Christian holy wells.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

In conclusion, I will recap the simple and interesting genealogy of Ireland's holy wells that my research has suggested. It appears that the Irish holy well cult is a hybrid. It is the result of at least three identifiable cultural strains intermingling in Ireland. First, I believe that the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age ritual use of springs and artificial pools in Ireland should be considered as related antecedent. Archaeologically, those springs and ponds associated with double banked or double-ditched linear earthworks at the major provincial royal cult sites should be considered very sensitive, and potentially very informative about the ritual practices of this period. The fact that the *Knockans* earthworks were constructed as late as the 7th to 10th century, and are associated with ritual behavior involving the spring or pool of *Lag an Aonaigh* at Teltown, when that landscape enters history as the theater of a Christianized royal *óenach* suggests that such ritual processions remained important into the Early Christian Period.

The archaeological assemblage from holy wells suggests that even before the royal sites' springs were repurposed by the Church, an expression of the healing shrine, long a part of the peoples of the Mediterranean's religious landscape, had spread through Gaul, then Britain, and out of the Empire to Ireland. This exotic, personal, and localized magico-religious medical facility must have been attractive to the Irish. For the populace, it was probably seen as a welcome addition to whatever healing traditions existed in Ireland already. If there existed some sort of shamanic figure in Irish society, as was likely true across northern Europe, as it is across northern Asia, and indeed in much of

the world, than such a healing shrine was likely embraced by them as a sensible and powerful addition to their accumulated ritual toolkit. If the Medieval texts recording earlier traditions hold any truth, than we can say that the idea of springs that heal, and that instill otherworldly knowledge, either of the future or of some sort of wisdom or inspiration, existed already in Ireland, and must have smoothed the infiltration of the Romano-British healing spring shrine.

Then came the Christians. By the time Patrick and his colleagues came to Ireland, the church had already been struggling with how to treat these pagan springs on the Continent and in Britain. It seems that in Ireland the missionaries presaged the tack that Pope Gregory the Great adopted two centuries later, of strategically allowing some structural aspects of the pagan religious practices to stand, to be fleshed out with the ideology of the new faith. These evangelists took advantage of symbolism that bridged paganism to Christianity. They translated, as it were, the tree, spring, and fish, with their associated practices to the ritual language of Christianity. The Celtic Church then was itself a unique hybrid, preserving select pagan rites and infrastructure in order to best propagate the worship of their new and lone God. But that was not the end of the evolution of the well cult, for Christianity in Ireland was to go through its own growing pains, first with the arrival of the Normans who brought their Continental form of Christianity that had succeeded in eliminating more of the pagan ways, and then with the Reformation that sought to further purge the Church of such papistry as statues and pilgrimage. This, in turn, brought on revitalization by the Irish Catholics, who in their isolation from the broader Christian world turned back towards their own ancient ritual landscape and traditions, resulting in a form of Christian pilgrimage that was uniquely

archaic. It is likely in this period that many of the trappings that today characterize the holy well cult were invented, or reinvented, as people sought to rekindle their native ways in the face of increasingly successful colonial oppression. In recent decades, as the often all but forgotten holy wells are remembered, tidied up, sterilized, and renovated to resemble little Lourdes snowglobes, the well cult has evolved yet more, with the changes begun by the first Christian emissaries to Ireland finally being realized. Pilgrims increasingly can sit on metal benches on paved grounds, with elaborate fake grottos and trappings of Continental shrines. The grace of the well, the hierophany, being more fully perceived as deriving from the Middle Eastern Sun God, rather than from the *genius* of the spring itself.

Figure 9:1 Neo-pagan votive offerings at St. Neot's Well, Cornwall, UK, including a candle, scented oil, garlic, onion, lime, and wild flowers

Also in recent decades, another big influence has been exerted on the wells. The New Age movement has adopted these sites as their own, as Earth Goddess worshipping

sites that have survived the onslaught of Christian Imperialism. The result, most marked in Britain where the Reformation was much more successful in rooting out the Christian use of the wells, yet increasingly in Ireland too, is a new tradition of votive deposition that aims to recreate the ancient 'Celtic' pagan veneration of the springs. So today one might find garlic and scented oils at the springs where once the Christian offerings of rosaries, statuettes, and prayer cards would have been placed (fig. 9:1). One cannot tell the intent of coins, candles, and babies socks, but it is likely that some portion of these are pagan offerings as well. It is interesting that while these Neo-pagans are right that some of these springs were pagan cult sites, it is likely that the majority of them were not 'Celtic' sites originally, but rather, Roman. I have not run across any pagan reuse of the artificial pools and processional ways that likely do represent a pagan 'Celtic' veneration of springs.

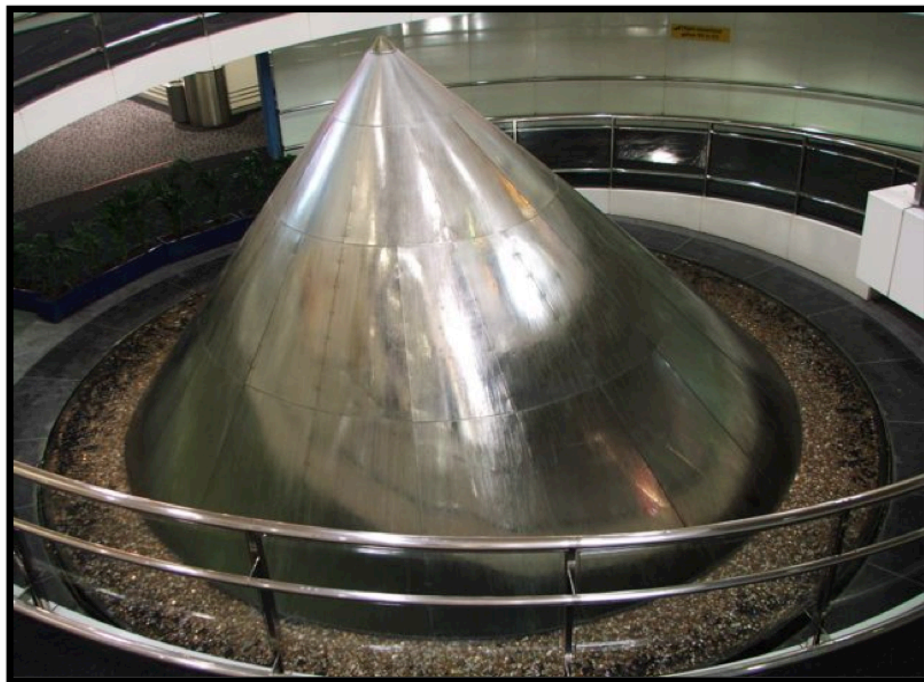

Figure 9:2 Votive fountain at Heathrow International Airport, UK.

And from the European holy well tradition derive the countless fountains and pools that receive coins today, the wishing wells, in shopping malls, public plazas, and airports (fig. 9:2). Offerings are made, but it seems in this descendent of the Mediterranean healing spring, the religious referent has been lost. People might make a wish, or simply hope the act brings luck, but who or what will bring this about is not really considered. I daresay those practitioners are not venerating the spirit of the spring, or God. What, then, is that? Is it the spirit of the mall? It seems that regardless of the religion holding sway over such sites now, that our predilection for putting little shiny things in water is so entrenched that it is likely to persist for many generations to come.

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