Niamh Wycherley

The Enduring Power of the Cult of Relics – an Irish Perspective

Abstract: As the cult of saints became increasingly important to the Christian religion during the latter stages of the Roman Empire, so too the veneration of relics became a central element of Christian piety. The urge to physically touch, kiss, or just be in the presence of saintly remains survives to this day. The estimated 250,000 British and Irish visitors to the relics of St Anthony of Padua in 2013, and the millions that attended the tours of St Thérèse's relics to Ireland, in 2001, 2009, and 2012, offers us an insight into the enduring power with which saintly remains have been invested in Ireland.[1] Indeed, the widespread media coverage of the discovery by Irish police in April 2018 of the heart of St Laurence O'Toole, stolen from Dublin's Christ Church Cathedral six years earlier, indicates an ongoing fascination with the cult of relics. This chapter explores how and why the cult of relics became a key element in the functioning of the Christian church in early medieval Ireland, as elsewhere, and in the Church's interaction with society. Furthermore, it will question whether it was the Church's control of the cult that ensures its longevity or whether the Church simply tapped into an essential part of human existence. Through an examination of the veneration of relics in Ireland, this study will shed light on the lasting appeal of the cult and what implications this has for our perceptions of religion in our modern, secular, global society.

Keywords: relics, cult of saints, Catholic Church, popular devotion, St Patrick, early Irish law, hagiography

The Nature of Relics

Relics are a manifestation of the cult of saints.[2] They are regarded as extensions of the saint's body and share its sacred quality. Proximity here is key. Saints had grown closer

1 Audrey HEALY / Eugene MCCAFFREY, St Thérèse in Ireland. Official Diary of the Irish Visit, April–July 2001, Dublin 2001, p. 10.

2 For what follows, and the cults of relics and saints in general, see Peter BROWN, The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, in: Journal of Roman Studies 61 (1971), pp. 80–101; Nicole HERRMANN-MASCARD, Les Reliques des Saints. Formation Coutumière d'un Droit, Paris 1975; Martin HEINZELMANN, Translationsberichte und andere Quellen des Reliquienkultes (Typologie des

Niamh Wycherley, NUI Postdoctoral Fellow in Irish/Celtic Studies, Moore Institute for Research in the Humanities and Social Studies, National University of Ireland, University Road, Galway, Ireland, niamh.wycherley@gmail.com

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110546316-012

to Christ through death and this intimacy could be shared with those on earth who nurtured relationships with the saints. The tangibility of relics ensured the appeal of the cult. Through the perceived intervention of the saint they belonged to, relics were used for many purposes, for example, to heal the sick, to effect favourable changes in weather, and to ensure victory in battle. In Late Antiquity relics were used as diplomatic gifts to facilitate the nurturing of relationships and alliances, creating a social as well as geographical network of solidarity, obligation, and reciprocity. The use of relics in church and secular politics became a key feature of the cult of relics throughout the medieval era, as well as into the early modern and modern periods. In the Middle Ages the circulation of relics bridged distances and differences between territories, expedited the creation of military networks, and smoothed relations between princes.[3] Part of the appeal of relics is their ability to transcend boundaries of time and place. The physical connection and interaction between pilgrim and relic could effectively collapse the temporal and spatial distance to the saint. The thaumaturgic power of relics was only one element in the cult. "Their ability to substitute for public authority, protect and secure the community, determine the relative status of individuals and churches, and provide for the community's economic prosperity",[4] ensured a lasting role for relics within the medieval Church and society.

The cult of relics is not just a medieval phenomenon. It is still a force in popular devotion, despite waning support for the church in increasingly secularized and multicultural societies such as Ireland. Space precludes an overview of the various forms of modern relic-related devotion here. Such behaviour persists, however, in most world religions,[5] and in 'secular' or celebrity cults,[6] and this suggests that, from an

Sources du Moyen Âge Occidental 33), Turnhout 1979; Peter BROWN, The Cult of the Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity, Chicago 1981; Patrick J. GEARY, Furta Sacra. Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages, rev. ed. Princeton 1990; Arnold ANGENENDT, Heilige und Reliquien. Die Geschichte ihres Kultes vom frühen Christentum bis zur Gegenwart, 2nd rev. ed. Munich 1997; James HOWARD-JOHNSTON / Paul Antony HAYWARD (eds.), The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown, Oxford 1999.

3 David ROLLASON, Relic-Cults as an Instrument of Royal Policy c. 900–c. 1050, in: Anglo-Saxon England 15 (1986), pp. 91–103, here pp. 93–96.

4 Patrick J. GEARY, Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages, Ithaca / NY 1994, pp. 205–206.

5 See Caroline Walker BYNUM, Christian Materiality. An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe, New York 2011, pp. 273–279; Brannon WHEELER, Mecca and Eden. Ritual, Relics and Territory in Islam, Chicago 2006; Josef W. MERI, The Cult of Saints Among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria (Oxford Oriental Monographs), Oxford 2002; Brian D. RUPPERT, Jewels in the Ashes. Buddha Relics and Power in Early Medieval Japan, London 2000; David OWNBY / Vincent GOOSSAERT / Ji ZHE (eds.), Making Saints in Modern China, Oxford 2017; Robert H. SCHARF, On the Allure of Buddhist Relics, in: Representations 66 (1999), pp. 75–99; John S. STRONG, Relics of the Buddha, Princeton 2004, pp. 2–5; Gregory SCHOPEN, Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks. Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India, Honolulu 1997.

6 For modern and secular cults see Peter Jan MARGRY (ed.), Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World. New Itineraries into the Sacred, Amsterdam 2008; James F. HOPGOOD (ed.), The Making of anthropological perspective, the tangibility of the cult of relics clearly satisfies some basic human need or desire. It is certainly intelligible in the context of Emile DURKHEIM'S theory of all forms of religion as "social cement".[7]

Despite the universality of the appeal of relics, it is only in the last fifty years that the cult of relics has become a distinct subject in studies of the cult of the saint.[8] In particular, there has been a recent upsurge in interest in the cult of relics stimulated by a plethora of dedicated museum exhibits.[9] The public and interactive nature of museums provides a valuable point of contact between the academic community and the general populace, and the success of these exhibitions reflects the interest of both groups in the cult of relics. Most notable was "Treasures of Heaven", displayed in 2011 in the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, and in the British Museum, London.[10] These recent major exhibitions of relics and reliquaries have called in to question the meaning of the cult in the modern age. Two key themes have emerged; one on the dichotomy between relics as talismanic objects and as objects of art and a second on whether there is a distinction between the secular and religious in relation to the cult.

These are both important issues. Today, the original religious importance of relics is sometimes thought to be unintelligible to modern sensibilities. The varying accounts and newspaper reviews of the "Treasures of Heaven" exhibit, however, indicate that to some it was a secular experience and to others a religious one.[11] The

---

Saints. Contesting Sacred Ground, Tuscaloosa 2005; Sarah M. MISEMER, Secular Saints. Performing Frida Kahlo, Carlos Gardel, Eva Perón, and Selena, Woodbridge 2008; Lyman L. JOHNSON (ed.), Death, Dismemberment, and Memory. Body Politics in Latin America, Albuquerque 2004; Nina TUMARKIN, Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia, Cambridge / MA 1997; Steve A. SMITH, Bones of Contention. Bolsheviks and the Struggle against Relics 1918–1930, in: Past and Present 204 (2009), pp. 155–194.

7 Emile DURKHEIM, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, ed. Joseph W. SWAIN, London 1968, p. 47.

8 In addition to notes above, especially note 2, see Edina BOZÓKY, La politique des reliques de Constantin à Saint Louis, Paris 2006; Julia M. H. SMITH, Portable Christianity. Relics in the Medieval West (c. 700–c. 1200), in: Proceedings of the British Academy 181 (2012), pp. 143–167; Robert BARTLETT, Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation, Princeton 2013; Marika RÄSÄNEN / Gritje HARTMANN / Earl J. RICHARDS (eds.), Relics, Identity, and Memory in Medieval Europe (Europa Sacra 21), Turnhout 2016.

9 For a review see Andrew BUTTERFIELD, What Remains, in: New Republic, August 18 (2011), pp. 26–31.

10 Martina BAGNOLI et al. (eds.), Treasures of Heaven. Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe, Baltimore 2010; James ROBINSON / Lloyd DE BEER / Anna HARNDEN (eds.), Matter of Faith: An Interdisciplinary Study of Relics and Relic Veneration in the Medieval Period (British Museum Research Publication 195), London 2014; Cynthia HAHN / Holger A. KLEIN (eds.), Saints and Sacred Matter. The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond (Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Symposia and Colloquia), Washington 2015.

11 For example, contrast Karen ARMSTRONG, Bones, Hairs and Blood, online: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jun/30/relics-pilgrims-medieval-cult-martyrs (last accessed 15/05/

enduring devotional significance of the items, for some, is proven by the fact that, as a result of repeated kissing and touching, the display cases required extra cleaning.[12] This underlines a key issue within the cult of relics: there is no inherent value in the actual items regarded as relics. As Patrick GEARY has argued, the worth of relics is a social construct based on a communal acceptance that these remains belonged to an individual intimately connected to a higher power, and that this individual's essence survives in the relics.[13] Those who argue that a particular relic cannot be authentic and deride those who 'are duped' by a greedy church, fundamentally misunderstand this crucial point about the cult of relics.[14] It is the people and their faith that imbue these objects with power and potency. There appears to be juxtaposition between the appeal of tangible items like relics – that can provide reassurance and facilitate intercession – and the deliberate use, and sometimes exploitation, of this belief by the authorities. Academic discourse needs to take these two different but linked modes of veneration into account.[15]

Throughout the Middle Ages there was no scholarly consensus or legal codification of types of relics, or on the theological meaning of the cult in itself. Julia SMITH has shown that, even when the cult was at its pre-Reformation height, there was a disjuncture between learned treatises and devotional practices.[16] Relic theory is still being worked out. Recently, Steven HOOPER has proposed a new tripartite theoretical framework which includes images as an integral component of the cult of relics and discards the previous dichotomy between the religious and the secular.[17] I agree with HOOPER that "classifying art and celebrity memorabilia as relics", allows us to better understand recent behaviour.[18] I am not convinced, however, that the relationship of people to celebrity memorabilia is the same as seeking divine intervention via holy relics. Relics are believed to hold power as a direct link to an

2019), who argues the exhibition can teach us about faith and belief in a modern world, with Waldermar JANUSZCZAK, The Hand of God, online: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-hand-of-god-mzmlxg0g2ck (last accessed 15/05/2019), who deemed the exhibition as only of art historical value.

12 Steven HOOPER, Bodies, Artefacts and Images. A Cross-Cultural Theory of Relics, in: ROBINSON / DE BEER / HARNDEN (note 10), pp. 188–199, here p. 194.

13 GEARY (note 4), p. 201.

14 John Calvin was one of the most famous proponents of this view. For discussion see Alexandra WALSHAM, Skeletons in the Cupboard. Relics after the English Reformation, in: Past and Present 206 (supplement 5) (2010), pp. 121–143.

15 Simon YARROW, Miracles, Belief and Christian Materiality: Relic'ing in Twelfth-Century Miracle Narratives, in: Matthew M. MESLEY / Louise E. WILSON (eds.), Contextualizing Miracles in the Christian West, 1100–1500, Oxford 2014, pp. 41–62, provides an instructive example of a sympathetic approach to understanding relic-oriented religion.

16 Julia M. H. SMITH, Relics. An Evolving Tradition in Latin Christianity, in: HAHN / KLEIN (note 10), pp. 41–60.

17 Steven HOOPER, A Cross-Cultural Theory of Relics, in: World Art 4 (2014), pp. 175–207.

18 HOOPER (note 12), p. 198.

intercessory saint who can act as representative at the resurrection. Can the same be said for modern celebrity heroes? Alexandra WALSHAM emphasizes, in her analysis of relics in post-Reformation Protestant England, that relics were treasured as keepsakes with spiritual and emotional significance rather than for material and miraculous properties. "The problem was that the potential for slippage between souvenir and sacramental, sign and receptacle of supernatural virtue was high."[19]

Investigations into efficacy and belief, such as Steven JUSTICE's examination of the purpose of incredible miracle stories in Medieval hagiography, presuppose that the Medieval mindset was one fundamentally distinct from our own.[20] Considering the continued popularity of some medieval relic sites, however, and the creation of new object-focussed cults, whether religious or otherwise, it may not be helpful to regard the cult of relics in the Middle Ages as different from the veneration of relics today.[21] An examination of the evidence for early Ireland indicates that the cult was anything but monolithic, and developed in response to the needs of particular communities and individuals.[22]

The Irish Case

The earliest written evidence for relics in Ireland is a statement in Cummian's letter on the paschal controversy, written c. 632. Cummian, possibly a bishop of Clonfert on the Shannon, contends that the relics of the holy martyrs brought back from Rome authenticated the Roman edict regarding the correct dating of Easter, which was of dispute at the time. In case of any doubters, Cummian verified his argument by actually testing the efficacy of the relics, and, of course, they duly produced miracles: "We saw with our own eyes a totally blind girl opening her eyes at these relics, and a paralytic walking and many demons cast out."[23] This evidence is significant. Not only does Cummian defend at length the superiority of Rome, he also indicates the

19 WALSHAM (note 14), p. 136.
20 Stephen JUSTICE, Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles? in: Representations 103 (2008), pp. 1–29.
21 See Rubén C. LOIS GONZÁLEZ, The Camino de Santiago and its Contemporary Renewal: Pilgrims, Tourists and Territorial Identities, in: Culture and Religion 14 (2013), pp. 8–22; Lisa BITEL, Our Lady of the Rock: Vision and Pilgrimage in the Mojave Desert, Ithaca / NY 2015.
22 For further details and references for all of the following content on the cult of relics in early Ireland, see Niamh WYCHERLEY, The Cult of Relics in Early Medieval Ireland (Studies in the Early Middle Ages 43), Turnhout 2015.
23 Cummian's Letter De Controversia Paschali and the De Ratione Computandi, ed. Maura WALSH / Dáibhí Ó CRÓINÍN, Toronto 1988, pp. 94–95, ll. 286–288: *Uidimus oculis nostris puellam caecam omnino ad has reliquias oculos aperientem, et paraliticum ambulantem, et multa demonia eiecta*.

respect afforded to Roman martyrial relics, a theme which was to continue in Irish documentary sources in the following centuries.

In his 'collection' of stories about Patrick, composed c. 690, Tírechán, reveals the extent to which the cult of relics had taken hold in Ireland by the late seventh century.[24] His account of the travels of Patrick is a veritable goldmine of evidence for the veneration of bodily remains. His numerous references to the location of the bones of holy men, such as Assicus and Mucneus, suggest that the Irish countryside was beginning to be defined by the cult of relics at this time.[25] He also makes an important claim that Patrick gave his disciple Sachellus, "a portion of the relics of Peter and Paul, Stephen, and Lawrence, which are in Armagh".[26] Regardless of how and when the Church of Armagh actually attained these relics, it was clearly using them to strengthen its political position, via Tírechán, in the late seventh century. In another episode, Tírechán recounts how Patrick ordained Olcán and granted him Roman relics in Dunseverick, Co. Antrim.[27] He was concerned with establishing which churches 'belonged' to Patrick. He creates an image of an Irish countryside interspersed with relics, bestowed by Patrick and his disciples on the churches they founded. This reflects the strategic function of saintly remains in authenticating claims and ascertaining the jurisdiction of churches. In general, relics are an important element in Tírechán's efforts to establish the primacy of Patrick as the founding saint in Ireland.

In the seventh century, Armagh, which claimed to have been established by Patrick in the fifth century, was vying to be recognized as the leading Irish church. Armagh focussed on establishing Patrick as the greatest saint in Ireland and the apostle of the Irish. The biggest threat to Armagh's primacy was from Kildare. The cult of relics, of corporeal remains in particular, played an essential role in this major political dispute in the early Irish Church. In his prologue to his 'Life of Brigit', written c. 675,[28] Cogitosus declared that Kildare was, "the head of almost all the Irish churches with supremacy over all the monasteries of the Irish and its *paruchia* extends over the whole land of Ireland, reaching from sea to sea".[29] He supported these claims by exalting the relics of his patrons, Brigit, founder of Kildare, and Conláed,

24 Tírechán, Collectanea, in: The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh, ed. and trans. Ludwig BIELER (Scriptores Latini Hiberniae 10), Dublin 1979, pp. 122–167.

25 Ibid., p. 134 (14.6), 140 (22.4), 156–157 (42.7).

26 Ibid., p. 122 (3.5): *partem de reliquís Petri et Pauli, Laurentii et Stefani quae sunt in Machi.*

27 Ibid., pp. 160–161 (48.3).

28 Thomas M. CHARLES-EDWARDS, *Early Christian Ireland*, Cambridge 2000, p. 438. Despite disagreement among scholars regarding a precise dating, the 'Life' can be confidently ascribed to the second half of the seventh century.

29 Cogitosus, Vita S. Brigitae, ed. Jean BOLLAND et al., Acta Sanctorum, 3rd ser., 1 February, Paris 1863, pp. 135–141, here p. 135 (2): *caput pene omnium Hibernensium Ecclesiarum, et culmen praecellens omnia monasteria Scottorum, cujus parochial per totam Hibernensem terram diffusa, a mari usque ad mare extensa est*. Cogitosus, Life of Saint Brigit, trans. Sean CONNOLLY / Jean-Michel PICARD, in: Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland 117 (1987), pp. 5–27, here p. 11 (Preface, 4).

her bishop. He describes them, "laid on the right and left of the ornate altar and resting in tombs adorned with a refined profusion of gold, silver, gems and precious stones".[30] The grandeur of the tombs, their prime positions on either side of the altar, and the sumptuousness of the adornments, leave us in no doubt that the veneration of the corporeal remains of Brigit and Conláed was crucial to the church of Kildare. This is explicitly stated by Cogitosus, who marvelled at the large crowds drawn into Kildare by the tombs of its patrons.[31] The presence of the corporeal remains of the founder drew many pilgrims and much revenue into the church, which was vitally important for the monastery's political position.

Cogitosus's grand description of these ornate tombs clearly embarrassed Armagh, given its lack of any bodily remains for Patrick. However, Armagh did boast other relics. In the mid seventh-century quasi-legal text the 'Liber Angeli' Armagh supported its claims for superiority by emphasizing that it, "ought to be venerated in honour of the relics of the principal martyrs Peter and Paul, Stephen, Lawrence, and the others".[32] For, although Armagh could not claim the bones of Patrick, it did possess the blood of Jesus Christ in a "sacred linen cloth".[33] This 'battle for supremacy' appears to have been decided by an Armagh-Kildare pact appended to the 'Liber Angeli' in which Armagh is evidently granted primacy.[34] Given the statements of Cogitosus, Tírechán and the 'Liber Angeli', it is clear that relics played a key role in the rivalry between the two churches.[35]

Churches promoted the cult of their saints by commissioning hagiography, taking relics on tours or circuits, and of course, by the creation of shrines and reliquaries. Indeed, a key legacy of the cult of relics in medieval Ireland is the material evidence, which has helped define Ireland's landscape and cultural heritage. The pilgrimage sites and routes dotted around the country and the opulent metalwork reliquaries on display in museums have contributed to Ireland's fame as the 'island of saints and scholars'.[36] The layout of many early Christian monasteries accommodated and enticed pilgrims seeking to venerate the tombs of the saints and to seek miraculous intervention by the saint on their behalf. Dating to perhaps as early as

30 Cogitosus (note 29), p. 141 (37): *a dextris et a sinistris altaris decorati, in monumentis posita, ornatis vario cultu auri et argenti et gemmarum pretiosi lapidis* [. . .] *requiescunt*.
31 Ibid., p. 141 (39).
32 Liber Angeli, in: Bieler (note 24), pp. 184–191, here p. 186 (19): *uenerari debet honore summorum martyrum Petri et Pauli, Stefani Laurendi et caeterorum.*
33 Ibid., p. 186 (19).
34 Ibid., pp. 190–191 (Appendix xi, 3.32).
35 For further discussion see Wycherley (note 22), esp. pp. 46–53, 69–72.
36 The literature on the archaeology of the cult of relics is extensive. In addition to the following notes, see, for example, Tomás Ó Carragáin, The Architectural Setting of the Cult of Relics in Early Medieval Ireland, in: Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland 133 (2003), pp. 130–176; Karen Overbey, Sacral Geographies: Saints, Shrines, and Territory in Medieval Ireland (Studies in the Visual Cultures of the Middle Ages 2), Turnhout 2012.

c. 600 CE, slab or 'A' shaped shrines are possibly earliest material evidence for the cult of relics in Ireland.[37] There is a clear similarity between these shrines and the *martyria* of the first few centuries of Christianity, and it could be argued that these were an Irish version of the Mediterranean *cella memoriae* – the cell or enclosure around the accessible tomb with its corporeal relic.[38] Holes in the slab shrines at Killabuonia, Killoluiag, and Kilpeacan (and the window in the later shrine at Bovevagh, Co. Derry) correspond to the *fenestella* or *cataracta* of more monumental continental tombs.[39] These openings provided access for the faithful to observe the holy relics and intensified the intimate relationship between saint and pilgrim. They also would have facilitated the insertion of items such as pieces of material termed *brandea* which pilgrims could 'dip' into the sacred space.

Early Christians could supplement veneration at the tombs of the saints during their lifetime by being buried next to the saints after death. The faithful desired to be buried near the saint to ensure proximity to his resurrection on the day of judgement, thus increasing their own chances of a similar fate. This custom of burial *ad sanctos* increased at such a rate in the early Christian Church that the most desired burial sites were a source of markedly unholy quarrelling.[40] The Irish evidence also indicates a developing concern about overcrowding because attempts were made to preserve the integrity of cemeteries and holy places.[41] The division of ecclesiastical sites into inner and outer enclosures became the norm in early Ireland, as revealed by aerial surveys.[42] Excavations reveal a pattern of an important shrine at the centre and the people buried outwards from this core.

Elizabeth O'BRIEN's analysis of the transition of Irish burial from pagan to Christian practices highlights that burial near the bones of the saint became a substitute for burial near the graves of the ancestors.[43] Burial *ad sanctos* reflects the assimilation of native and Christian ideas governing the manner in which bones could legitimate sites. This is corroborated by the eighth-century collection of Irish

37 Charles THOMAS, The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain, London 1971, pp. 143–144.
38 Françoise HENRY, Early Monasteries, Beehive Huts, and Dry-Stone Houses in the Neighbourhood of Caherciveen and Waterville, Co. Kerry, in: Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy 58 C (1957), pp. 45–166, here p. 155; THOMAS (note 37), pp. 140–141.
39 Nancy EDWARDS, The Archaeology of Early Medieval Ireland, London 1990, p. 131.
40 See Yvette DUVAL, Auprès des saints corps et âme. L'inhumation 'ad sanctos' dans la chrétienté d'Orient et d'Occident du III^{e} au VII^{e} siècle, Paris 1988.
41 Thomas FANNING, Excavation of an Early Christian Cemetery and Settlement at Reask, in: Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy 81 C (1981), pp. 67–172, here pp. 74–79.
42 Leo SWAN, Monastic Proto-towns in Early Medieval Ireland. The Evidence of Aerial Photography, Plan Analysis and Survey, in: Howard B. CLARKE / Anngret SIMMS, The Comparative History of Urban Origins in Non-Roman Europe (BAR International Series 255 [i]), Oxford 1985, pp. 77–102, here p. 99.
43 Elizabeth O'BRIEN, Pagan and Christian Burial in Ireland during the First Millennium AD. Continuity and Change, in: Nancy EDWARDS / Alan LANE (eds.), The Early Church in Wales and the West, Oxford 1992, pp. 130–137, here pp. 134–136.

church canons, the 'Collectio Canonum Hibernensis', which preserves the importance of ancestral cemeteries: "Man or woman should be buried in their paternal cemetery. For it is said: 'cursed is everyone who is not buried in the grave of his fathers'."[44] The Church effectively promoted the Christian saint as a replacement for the ancestor by fitting his burial into this ready-made cultural matrix.

The custom of burial *ad sanctos* in early Ireland also reveals important insights into the growing complicity between secular and ecclesiastical elites. Burial in the immediate vicinity of the saint was reserved for the most respected figures in the community – both religious and lay. The poem on the graves of the kings at Clonmacnoise glorifies the interment of important lay Christians, such as kings, within this inner *sanctum*.[45] In the 'Life of Munnu' of Taghmon burial in the vicinity of the saint was considered a rare privilege.[46] In this text the saint grants this honour to the donor of the land and stresses that all buried in the graveyard were assured of heaven.[47] Indeed, Máire HERBERT's analysis of burial *ad sanctos* in early Irish hagiography reveals the levels of political interference in the location of saintly burials. She shows that burial privileges were bestowed on secular powers in return for grants to churches.[48] Theories underpinning the veneration of relics fed into complex issues concerning jurisdiction over land and burial. Eighth-century legal texts such as the 'Collectio Canonum Hibernensis', 'Córus Bésgnai', and 'Ríagail Phátraic' reveal that the church was attempting to legislate and charge for burial at this time.

The Formal Use of Relics

The devotional activity surrounding the cult of relics led to the increasing employment of relics in the operations and framework of the Church. This is particularly well attested in the fundamental function of relics in church consecration, which

44 Die Irische Kanonensammlung, ed. Helmut WASSERSCHLEBEN, 2nd rev. ed. Leipzig 1885, p. 56 (18.2): *Vir sive mulier in suo paterno sepulcro sepeliatur. Dicitur enim: Maledictus omnis homo, qui non sepelitur in sepulcro patrum suorum.*
45 R. I. BEST, The Graves of the Kings at Clonmacnoise, in: Ériu 2 (1904), pp. 163–171 (perhaps composed by Conaing Buidhe O'Mulconry in the thirteenth century).
46 Vitae Fintani seu Munnu, in: Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae, ed. W. W. HEIST, Brussels 1965, pp. 198–209. Possibly dating to before the year 800, according to Richard SHARPE, Medieval Irish Saints' Lives, Oxford 1991, here p. 334.
47 Vitae Fintani seu Munnu (note 46), pp. 203–04 (20–21).
48 Máire HERBERT, Hagiography and Holy Bodies: Observations on Corporeal Relics in Pre-Viking Ireland, in: L'Irlanda e gli Irlandesi nell'alto Medioevo: Spoleto, 16–21 aprile 2009 (Settimane di studio della Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo 57), Spoleto 2010, pp. 239–57, here pp. 249–254.

was popularized by Ambrose, bishop of Milan, in the late fourth century.[49] In many cases the relics used were those disseminated from Rome, to bind churches to it and to solidify certain Roman agreements and edicts. Around the turn of the fifth century the letters of Avitus of Vienne testify to the use of Roman relics in the dedication and consecration of churches in Gaul.[50] By the eighth century relics were essential for the consecration of a church. In 787, the Seventh Ecumenical Council in Nicaea forbade the consecration of a church without a relic, under pain of "being deposed".[51] The cult of relics, thus, became rooted in the community's Eucharistic worship.

The Irish material indicates that relics were also an essential requirement in the foundation of churches in early Ireland. Evidence to support this can be found in a myriad of sources. The 'Collectio Canonum Hibernensis', for example, provides extensive sanctions to conserve the purity of places consecrated by saints' relics.[52] Furthermore, the 'Annals of Ulster' record that when Bishop Colmán and his Irish monks left Lindisfarne after their defeat at the Synod of Whitby, they brought with them relics and founded a church on Inishbofin.[53] The implication is clearly that the relics and the foundation of the church were intimately connected. According to the mid-ninth-century 'Virtutes Fursei', at his departure from Louth in 626 Fursa brought with him to Francia not only relics (*pignora*) of Patrick, but also those of local patron saints Beoán and Meldán, amongst others.[54] With these relics Fursa built a church in thirty days, in honour of the twelve apostles. Similarly, the eighth-century law text 'Bretha Nemed Toísech' states that the qualifications of a good church included *both* the tomb of a righteous man, presumably the founding saint,

49 See, for example, Saint Ambrose. Letters, trans. Mary M. BEYENKA (The Fathers of the Church 26), Washington 1954, p. 376 (Epistle 61); Alan THACKER, Loca Sanctorum. The Significance of Place in the Study of the Saints, in: ID. / Richard SHARPE (eds.), Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West, Oxford 2002, pp. 1–43, here pp. 5–11.

50 Ian WOOD, The Audience of Architecture in Post-Roman Gaul, in: Lawrence A. S. BUTLER / Richard K. MORRIS (eds.), The Anglo-Saxon Church. Papers on History, Architecture, and Archaeology in Honour of Dr H. M. Taylor (Council of British Archaeology Research Report 60), London 1986, pp. 74–79.

51 The Canons of the Holy and Ecumenical Seventh Council, in: The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church. Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees […], trans. Henry PERCIVAL (A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 2nd ser. 14), Oxford, New York 1971, pp. 555–570, here p. 560 (Canon 7).

52 Collectio Canonum Hibernensis (note 44), pp. 176–177 (44.6–9).

53 The Annals of Ulster (ad 1131). Part I. Text and Translation, ed. and trans. Seán MAC AIRT / Gearóid MAC NIOCAILL, Dublin 1983, *sub anno* 668: *Nauigatio Columbani episcopi cum reliquis sanctorum ad Insolam Uaccae Albae, in qua fundauit aeclesiam.*

54 Virtutes Fursei, ed. Bruno KRUSCH / Wilhelm LEVISON, in: Passiones Vitaeque Sanctorum Aevi Merowingici (MGH SRM 4), Hannover 1913, pp. 440–449, here p. 447 (19); Jean-Michel PICARD, Le culte des reliques en Irlande (VII^{e}–IX^{e} siècle), in: Edina BOZÓKY / Anne-Marie HELVÉTIUS (eds.), Les reliques. Objets, cultes, symbols (Hagiologia 1), Turnhout 1999, pp. 39–55, here p. 49.

and the relics of saints, which may have been placed inside the church as part of the consecration rite.[55]

Once relics were in place within the church, they became part of the official emblems or insignia, and as such were used to represent that church's position and status. Insignia, meaning symbols or badges of office, became a specific type of relic that represented a particular saint or church. The authority of insignia is preserved by 'Cáin Adamnáin',[56] which protects "the immunity of the church, her *familia*, her insignia and her sanctuaries".[57] Furthermore, the text stresses that the insignia or relics of churches merit particular protection and if they are damaged or violated in any manner, regardless of the location of the insignia at the time, a full fine is incurred.[58] The 'Liber Angeli' promoted the insignia of Patrick as superior to all others: "Whosoever insults or violates the consecrated insignia of Patrick, shall pay twofold."[59]

Relics effectively symbolized the saint and his church. If they were disrespected in any manner this was equivalent to slighting the actual saint, which would require proper retribution. In 809, the 'Annals of Ulster' record "the murder of Dúnchú, superior of the community of Tullylish beside the shrine of Patrick in the abbot's house".[60] We are informed later in the same year that the repercussion of this act was an attack by Áed son of Niall.[61] The reaction of the community was in response not just to the killing of Dúnchú but also to the perpetration of this act next to the shrine of Patrick. It was a gross violation to commit such a crime in a sacred space. It showed contempt not only for Patrick but also for his Church of Armagh. As political patron of Armagh it was a matter of honour for Áed to retaliate against such a base crime of disrespect, as it was a clear affront to his authority. This episode is part of the complex political wrangling that characterized Áed's kingship. An earlier incident of disrespect towards Armagh was the assault by the notorious Donnchad of Meath in 789 on the insignia of Armagh (the Staff of Jesus

55 The First Third of Bretha Nemed Toísech, ed. Liam Breatnach, in: Ériu 40 (1989), pp. 1–40, here pp. 8–9, 11 (3): *Cair: cis n-é dagfolad sóertho ecalso? Ní hansae: martarlaic fíréoin, reilgi nóeb, scriptuir déodae, airchinnech etail.*

56 The written text survives probably in ninth-century form and seeks to explain the law of Adomnán (Lex Innocentium) promulgated at the Synod of Birr in c. 697.

57 Cáin Adamnáin. An Old-Irish Treatise on the Law of Adamnan, ed. Kuno Meyer, Oxford 1905, p. 24 (34): *sóire ecalsi Dé cona muintir ⁊ a fethlaib ⁊ a termnaib.* The Law of Adomnán: A Translation, trans. Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, in: Thomas O'Loughlin (ed.), Adomnán at Birr, AD 697. Essays in commemoration of the Law of the Innocents, Dublin 2001, pp. 53–68, here p. 62.

58 Cáin Adamnáin (note 57), p. 26 (36): *Is óghdíri nach eclais fria sárughud a fethtaltae, cip port i ndéntur.*

59 Liber Angeli (note 32), pp. 188–189 (26): *Item quicumque contempserit aut uiolauerit insignia consecrata eiusdem agii, id est Patricii, duplicia soluet.*

60 Annals of Ulster (note 53), *sub anno* 809: *Occisio Dunchon principis Telcha Leiss hi fail scrine Patraicc i tigh abad Telcha Liss.*

61 Ibid., *sub anno* 809.

and relics of Patrick) at a gathering.[62] Like Áed, Donnchad was very astute at harnessing the power of relics and appreciating their various uses. These are just a couple of examples of the profanation of relics, and they provide an interesting insight into the alliances and maintenance of power within the Irish Church and society.

The political use of relics is well attested in the cult of relics in the church as a whole and became increasingly integral to the interactions between the Irish church and secular elites from the eighth and ninth centuries onwards. Relics would be present at the making of agreements and swearing of oaths and they were taken on tour to promote the cult of a particular saint, to seek intercession, and to exact tribute for his church. For example, the 'Annals of Ulster' states *sub anno* 734 that "the relics of Peter, Paul, and Patrick were taken on tour to execute the law".[63] Relic circuits provided an opportunity for the collection of revenue. The extent to which this was the primary objective of these circuits has been a matter of debate.[64] The timing of some relic circuits coincided with famines or the outbreak of disease and there may have been genuine concern for the well-being of the population at a time of undoubted difficulty and hardship.

Nevertheless, revenue collection was certainly an important facet of these tours. The early Irish law texts 'Cóic Conara Fugill' and 'Berrad Airechta' both make reference to the "earnings of a reliquary" (*tuillem menistrech*).[65] Another legal text, 'The Heptads' includes the "earnings of reliquaries" (*tuillem meinistri*),[66] among its list of the rights that cannot be recovered by distraint.[67] The phrase is glossed as "i. e. pay for protection by the relic, i. e. which is earned by the relics that are carried about, i. e. of tithes and first fruits and alms".[68] The circuit of relics combines two of the key elements intrinsic to the success of the cult of relics: faith and authority. For the relics of a particular saint to contain any real power and longevity lay Christians needed to believe in their

62 Ibid., *sub anno* 789.

63 Ibid.: *Commotatio martirum Petir ₇ Phoil ₇ Phatraicc ad legem perficiendam*. For a discussion of relic circuits and the use of relics for oath taking see WYCHERLEY (note 22), chs. 5, 6.

64 See, for example, Felim Ó BRIAIN, Hagiography of Leinster, in: John RYAN (ed.), Féilsgríbhinn Eóin Mhic Néill, Dublin 1940, pp. 454–464, here p. 457; Kathleen HUGHES, The Church in Early Irish Society, London 1966, pp. 168–169; Colmán ETCHINGHAM, Church Organisation in Ireland AD 650–1000, Maynooth 1999, ch. 5.3.

65 Cóic Conara Fugill, ed. and trans. Rudolf THURNEYSEN, Berlin 1926, pp. 21, 55 (16, 127); Corpus Iuris Hibernici, ed. Daniel A. BINCHY, 6 vols., Dublin 1978, vol. 2, p. 591, ll. 9–13; Berrad Airechta. An Old Irish Tract on Suretyship, ed. Robin Chapman STACEY, in: Thomas M. CHARLES-EDWARDS / Morfydd E. OWEN / Dafydd B. WALTERS (eds.), Lawyers and Laymen: Studies in the History of Law Presented to Professor Dafydd Jenkins on his Seventy-Fifth Birthday, Cardiff 1986, pp. 210–233, here p. 210.

66 Corpus Iuris Hibernici (note 65), vol. 1, p. 40, l. 10.

67 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 39, l. 30.

68 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 40, ll. 13–14: *.i. log ar comairce don minn .i. imtuillit na minna biit for aister .i. do .x. maduib ₇ primittib ₇ almsanaib.*

intercessory power. The relics also needed to be an effective resource for the church and secular elite to be adequately promoted.

The multiplicity, and various use, of terms for relics in early Ireland indicates that the cult of relics was complex and that there was no exclusive approach or definitive theory. At the very least, it is clear that Medieval Irish writers were continually interrogating the specificities of relics.[69] Despite this multiplicity, a close analysis of the uses of these terms often fails to reveal distinct meanings. It is difficult to disentangle, for example, terms such as *creatura, cretair, benedictio, meinistir*, and *chrismale*, all of which relate to the liturgical use of relics in Medieval Ireland. This difficulty in defining terms for relics is echoed in studies of the material manifestation of the cult, which suggest that medieval reliquaries created a distance between relic and pilgrim, rather than facilitating an intimate connection.[70] Access to relics was strictly regulated by the Church, which used these precious objects to consolidate its authority.[71] A similar obfuscation of relics is revealed by Christopher JONES's analysis of Old English terms for relics. He claims that terms such as *reliquias* and *haligdom* "occlude and elide, collectivize and largely depersonalize the 'holies' that they contain".[72] While the sheer variety of terms used for relics in Medieval Irish texts would suggest an attempt at illumination, a detailed analysis of the terms for relics in Medieval Ireland may reveal similar results to those put forward by JONES for Anglo-Saxon England.

Conclusions – Modern Relevance of The Cult of Relics?

From this very general and brief examination of the cult of relics in early medieval Ireland, we can observe a few important themes emerging. We can see that relics were more than just holy items to be revered by the faithful, they were administrative tools used in the day-to-day running of the Church. The evolution of relics into insignia and official emblems became a useful tool at the Church's disposal in its interaction with lay society. The sources also convey a clear sense of the political use of

69 There are over thirty terms relating to the cult of relics in Medieval Irish sources, in Hiberno-Latin (for example, *reliquiae, insignia, benedictio, martyr, creatura, scrinium, eulogia, capsella, basilica*), native vernacular Irish (for example, *mind, taise, cretair, fethal, fert, cumtach*) and Irish Latin loan-words (for example, *reilic, bennacht, martirum, lecht, meinistir, scrín, ruam*).

70 Cynthia HAHN, Metaphor and Meaning in Early Medieval Reliquaries, in: Giselle DE NIE /Karl F. MORRISON / Marco MOSTERT (eds.), Seeing the Invisible in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy 14), Turnhout 2005, pp. 239–263.

71 Robyn MALO, The Pardoner's Relics (and Why They Matter the Most), in: Chaucer Review 43 (2008), pp. 82–102.

72 Christopher A. JONES, Old English Words for Relics of the Saints, in: Florilegium 26 (2009), pp. 85–129, here p. 90.

relics to attain and maintain influence by clerical and secular elites and an understanding by these elites that relics were vehicles with which to 'control' the faithful in general. An important element here is that relics were symbols of authority and power. We must not, however, adopt an overly cynical view of the role of relics in early medieval Ireland, or indeed, in general. The enduring power of the cult, despite recent criticism of the hierarchy, power, and control of the Catholic Church, reflects the inherent appeal of relics to the lay community. Part of the success of the cult of relics in early Ireland was the fact that many aspects of the cult fitted well into pre-existing beliefs concerning the active role of the ancestor and his or her remains in society.

It is difficult to ascertain the exact details of the progression of relics from being objects of popular devotion to becoming political tools of the power brokers in medieval society. Indeed, given the discussion above, it would seem that a more useful approach is to view these two elements as simultaneous and inextricably linked. While many individuals do not engage in the veneration of relics, the cult is a fairly consistent feature of religion across varying time periods, faiths and geographical locations. An examination of the medieval cult of relics indicates that the Church facilitated and accommodated an existing need. The Church harnessed, rather than created, the cults of saints and relics. While some cults were 'invented' by ambitious church leaders, such as Ambrose of Milan, others evolved at a local level out of the commemoration of a respected religious community leader or an inspiring devout individual. But the relative 'success' or fame of a cult is often as a result of effective promotion by elites.

It is clear that the role of the saint as patron and mediator is at the very core of the appeal of the cult. The case of the heart of Laurence O'Toole provides an instructive example. In an era of declining church attendance, why did the return of this stolen relic attract so much media attention?[73] Given the discussion above, the answer could have its roots in the historical significance of Laurence O'Toole as defender of Dublin's interests in the twelfth century, one of the most difficult periods in the city's history. Assistant Garda Commissioner Pat Leahy spoke of his pleasure at returning the relic to its "rightful place among the people of Dublin".[74] The heart of Laurence O'Toole, therefore, represents the heart of Dublin itself, and the crime was perpetuated against the community as a whole. Indeed, Christ Church Cathedral, as a monument, represents Dublin, and is one the city's most famous landmarks and tourist attractions.

73 There are other such cases, such as the theft and retrieval of St Manchán's shrine in Boher, Co. Offaly, in 2012.

74 Ken Foy, 'Deadly Curse' Forces Thieves to Return Relic, in: Irish Independent Newspaper, April 27th, 2018.

In an increasingly secularized age, some argue that celebrities have replaced medieval saints as patrons.[75] Modern technology facilitates the fostering of perceived relationships with celebrities and social media provides a forum in which fans can communicate directly with the subjects of their devotion. The recent live broadcast of the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle on May 19th, 2018, promoted a virtual familiarity between the royal couple and the general public. A countless number of viewers dressed up as wedding guests for the event or hosted wedding viewing parties, replete with formal invitations and wedding cake. This indicates a desire by these viewers to be an active part of the intimate ceremony. Hours after the wedding some official guests auctioned their gift bags online.[76] This sort of intimacy can be attained on a permanent basis at the Hollywood Forever cemetery in Los Angeles, where burial plots are priced according to proximity to celebrity graves – a modern secular version of burial *ad sanctos*.[77]

Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from an examination of the medieval evidence, in particular in relation to early Ireland, is that there is dialectic at play between the veneration of relics as a popular act and one fashioned by elites. This dialectic transfers to the modern day, with the substitution of commercial considerations for those of the medieval abbot and aristocracy. Jan GEISBUSCH has shown how in recent years Catholic relics have been alienated from traditional institutional settings and traded through the internet, especially via auction sites like eBay, which appears as an arena on constructing and contesting religious significance through sacred objects.[78] Pilgrimage to holy sites must be supported by an institutional framework and infrastructure, which is inevitably created and maintained by governments and organisations that profit from the phenomenon. For example, one can only visit the grave of Elvis because his family at Graceland, supported by the local authority and community, motivated by varying degrees of commercialism, have accommodated visitors. Again, this is not to underplay the devotional significance of these items and sites to certain individuals or to exaggerate the mercenary aspects of the cult. In order to fully appreciate the relevance of the cult of relics today, we must acknowledge that popular devotion and commercial or institutional promotion are two sides of the one coin. If we frame our analysis of the veneration of relics within a singular model, in which the 'official' and 'popular' are co-dependant, we can better understand the enduring appeal of the cult.

75 See Fred INGLIS, A Short History of Celebrity, New Jersey 2010; see also note 6 above.

76 See also Cara BARRETT, In-Depth: The Sale of Paul Newman's Rolex Daytona. The Most Expensive Wristwatch Ever, online: https://www.hodinkee.com/articles/paul-newman-rolex-daytona-auction-most-expensive-watch-ever (last accessed 15/05/2019).

77 Chris ROJEK, Celebrity, London 2001, p. 60.

78 Jan GEISBUSCH, For Your Eyes Only? The Magic Touch of Relics, in: Sandra H. DUDLEY (ed.), Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things (Leicester Readers in Museum Studies), London, New York 2012, pp. 202–213.