

The Early Monastic Landscape of South Munster in Ireland. How did it begin?

- From the desert monasticism of Sketis in Egypt to the port of Alexandria, with John Cassian to the western Mediterranean's north shore, of the Western Empire, by the Lerins Islands to lands east of the port of Marseilles, to where Cassian founded his Egyptian style monastery with the blessing of Rome's Pope.
- From thence across Gaul to the coastline of Biscay Bay where the 'Gascon', of the **Corcú Laoidhe** [of **Deas Mumhan**] mariners/traders, learned viticulture. From a port there to the lands of **Deas Mumhan** (Desmond, South Munster). Entering the River Lee from the coastline, onto **Inis Luinge** of Saint Senan by Inniscarra where 'from abroad' fifty 'scholars' arrive at **Cró na hOidhe** (Cronody, the sheltering place of the scholars). From there forty of them fan out into the surrounding landscapes, some going northwards to found their cells and **cluains** i.e. spiritual meadows (e.g. Kilshannig (old cells/old cell place)) as far as the banks of the **Abha Mór** (the Blackwater River). Within this landscape space some spread to Barrahairin following tributaries and interconnecting streams as far as the foothills of the Boggeragh Mountains. Below Kilshannig (southwards of it) Saint **Laichtín's** Donoughmore (great **Domhnach** (Kyrakon in the Greek tradition?) church and large demesne) comes to be, as he and Olan of Aghabullogue, knee-walking, agree the boundaries of their hermitage lands neighbouring each other. **Eolang** (Olan) was he, by origin, an Egyptian of Sketis and its monasteries/hermitages, of the tradition of monasticism founded by St. Anthony the Great?
- If there is truth in all of this? If Olan was indeed of Egyptian origin, and training, did he pass through John Cassian's monastery and did he take ship once from Biscay Bay to **Deas Mumhan** (South Munster)? Did he found a 'paruchia' of Cell and **Cluain** at Aghabullogue? Did he die there leaving many of his flock to work the land and did he also train many in the spiritual ways of the Egyptian monastic tradition?

If so, then how does Olan, as an Egyptian, fit into:

- Irish monks being described to Emperor Charlemagne as '**pueri Aegyptae**' i.e. sons of Egypt,
- The Antiphony of Bangor Abbey (County Down) '**the true vine of Egypt**' in the 7th century AD,
- The discovery in a County Tipperary bog of the Faddan Mór breviary, its binding having Egyptian papyrus used in its manufacture,

- Those antiquarian references which speak of an Aghabullogue ogham stone inscription saying that Olan was an Egyptian.[See further information etc below].

In a publication which appeared in 1902 (entitled: ***Life of St. FinnBarr. Founder and Patron of the City and Diocese of Cork by Rev. C.M. O'Brien, Cork***), there is a reference to Olan of Aghabullogue as teacher of a young Saint **Finn Barr** founder of the great monastery of the **Corcach Mór** (the Great Marsh of the River Lee, Cork City), his cave by a holy island beneath the abbey rock of Gill Abbey. This reference states:

‘By divine illumination the advent of **Finn Barr** was made known to Olan and he having acquainted his household, our saint was received with all honour.

During the remaining years of Oeling’s life [***Eolaing, Oeling, Olan***], he and Finn Barr lived on the most intimate terms of friendship and confidence...’

This happened after Finn Barr had spend several years with **MacCorp** and had visited Rome in the company of Bishop **MacCorp**, his spiritual advisor, who was once a friend of Pope Gregory the Great [he of the process of syncretism?]. Finn Barr chose Olan as his spiritual advisor after **MacCorp’s** death.

The ‘Olan the Egyptian’ inscription:

- This is in Coolineagh graveyard, situated in a townland in Aghabullogue medieval parish, and close to Olan’s Well where another ogham inscribed stone is to be found, one from Mount Rivers townland nearby. The ‘Olan’ stone is a ‘pillar stone’ which has another stone, a small stone, on top of it known as St. Olan’s Cap to which folk legends are attached. Some have thought that the grave of Olan is marked by the pillar stone. Is this stone in its original position given the turbulent history of Aghabullogue [see the Rampiers of Aghabullogue elsewhere on this website] or did it come from a souterrain unearthed by antiquarians; not unusual in Cork and South Munster i.e. the ‘Ogham Stone Hunting’ tradition of Cork antiquarians John Windele, R.R. Brash, R. Caulfield et alia. Ogham stones ‘crop up’ often in places where early monasteries, hermitages and ‘chapels’ were founded e.g. Knockboy/Seskinane in North West Waterford or Dromlohan/Drunloman elsewhere in Waterford. The Cork antiquarian Richard Rolt Brash found that **Cillíní** (Kileens) were a good place to check for ogham stones and souterrains connected with them. While some early hermitages/church sites were abandoned due to changes in Christian traditions from the 7th century onwards, others continued in use to become later medieval churches and graveyards. Many of the abandoned ones seem to have ended up as **Cillíní** i.e. burial places for the unbaptised and strangers in a locality i.e. they remained in the local folk mind as sacred spaces, but note that the word **Cillíní** actually means the cells i.e. monastic cells.

- The ‘Olan’ ogham inscription has received a lot of scholarly attention since its discovery in the early 19th century. At this point in time antiquarian interests were developing in Cork city among the Middle Classes and an early antiquarians club was formed known as the South Munster Antiquarian (Society/Field Club) which included persons such as Abraham Abell, John Windele, R.R. Brash, Rev. Father Matt Horgan (translator of ogham) and others. Over time this club and its field activities led to the Cork Cuvierian Society (Richard Caulfield et alia) and then the founding of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society with connections to the Cork Literary and Scientific Society.
- In the mid 19th century Sir Samuel Ferguson’s reading of the ‘Olan’ ogham inscription interpreted it as referring to someone called **Corpmac** who was of Egypt. [For full information on this and other readings of this inscription see the website of Jost Gippert at titus.uni-frankfurt.de for ogham inscription #104]
- Does the inscription say:
 - Anm** = Resting place of / remember the Soul of ,
 - Corpi Mac** (a form of the personal name **Cormac** or does it mean **Coirp** (body as in Latin corpus) and **Mac** (as in Gaelic meaning the ‘son of’) who was of ‘Egypt’?
- Does it say **Cormac** was of Egypt? what would that mean? Cormac is a common Gaelic and South Munster personal name e.g. the legendary **Cormac Mac Cárthaigh** of later times. If so, was it someone named Cormac who sent ‘to Rome with Finn Barr, into Byzantine southern Italy as well as John Cassian’s foundation in South East France (east of Marseilles) and thus in the city of Rome when the influence of Syria and Syrian popes was once strong? If so, did they [ass by the islands of Lerins en-route to Rome?
- Or does **Mac Coirp** refer to the words ‘body’ and ‘son’? If so, what type of ‘son’? A son of the flesh or a spiritual one i.e. a disciple, a novice? In such a case does it mean the equivalent of the person who was ‘born of’ Egypt; that is if Egypt is a correct reading of the last word in the ogham inscription which may or may not be the case [see **Oeling, Eolang** in its Gaelic variants) was a ‘nickname’ given to the person **Cormac** or **Mac Coirp** what might the name mean? In its Gaelic form one could suggest that there is a ‘root’ word from which the name derives. This ‘root word’ is **Eol** which survives in Modern Irish in for example, the work **Eolas**, meaning knowledge or information. But what might it have meant in earlier times? Rev. Father Patrick S. Dinneen’s Dictionary of Irish to English words has some interesting entries [[Dinneen’s Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla](#)]

Dinneen gives a range of entries which stretch from **EOL** to **EOLMHAR**. This word range translates in English to words like ‘knowledge, guidance, judicious, learned, wise...’.

Do these words and their meanings not fit with the idea of Olan as the teacher of **Finn Barr** particularly when **Finn Barr's** older teacher **MacCoirp** (as in his hagiography) had the same, or a similar, name to that on the ogham inscription. If the **MacCoirp** of the ogham inscription was also the **MacCoirp** who originally tutored **Finn Barr** then was Olan a 'nickname' for **MacCoirp** (or **Cormac**)? [Remember how Saint **Mochuda** of the great monastery of Lismore, County Waterford, adopted the name of his teacher a monk named **Carthach** (meaning kindness, loving), a name also once used by an early bishop at 'Cashel of the Kings', the administrative centre of the South Munster kingdom, in County Tipperary, where young **Mochuda** was a bard prior to his religious life. As a result, according to some stories, **Mochuda** became Bishop **Carthach** which was anglicised to the word Carthage making him Saint Carthage founder of Lismore].

If so, then is the legend which came to be within a subsequent 1,500 years or so, that **Finn Barr** learned from 'Olan' or was tutored by 'Olan' after the death of **MacCoirp/Cormac(?)** slightly confused in its transmission over time? If so, then what was the relationship between **MacCoirp**, and Egypt; If any existed?

Was he Irish in origin and did he receive his 'training' / 'new teaching' at Lerins or at John Cassian's Egyptian style monastery as introduced there to the Western Empire? [Remember the druidic trained Saint **Ibar** of Wexford who sought the 'new teaching' and his nephew Saint **Abbán** founder of early Munster monasteries: **Abbán** to Ballyvourney by a branch of the River Lee at the end of his days].

Or, like those 'Britons' who stood and observed Simon Stylites on his pillar did he once tour the Holy Places of the Holy Lands and visit with the monks of Egypt at Sketis? Some centuries or more later would Saint **Adomnán** of Iona write of such places when Rome had fallen and access from Byzantine Italy (Otranto?), and elsewhere along the north Mediterranean, was no longer easy?

On his return journey home did he visit with Martin of Tours, founder of Gaul's monasticism, whose monks lived in 'caves' according to Martin's biographer (Sulpicius Severus)? Souterrain 'caves' are a common feature of what was once Gaul. Did he then take ship from Biscay Bay somewhere, somewhere perhaps where the **Gascon** (of Gascony?... see the Genealogies of the **Corcù Laoidhe** at [website celt.ie](http://www.celt.ie)) took ship homeward to the South Munster lands of the **Corcú Laoidhe** of West Cork and South Kerry, or did he travel from Gaul to where the River Lee meets the sea and go inland along it to **Inis Luinge** (ships 'island' or river headland of the ships) to Saint Senan of Inniscara (a name-sake of Saint Patrick's brother, Patrick a Breton or a Briton - see Losack) at **Cró na hOidhe** (Cronody i.e. shelter or rock shelter of the scholars) arriving there among fifty scholars many of whom fanned out across the lands of the **Muscraighe** (Muskerry and its people, a tribe once neighbouring allies of the **Corcú Laoidhe**) to found early monasteries

and hermitages and their communities in Christ (the people of God, God's people, **céile dé**) including that of 'Olan' at Aghabullogue, abutting Donoughmore (the place of Lachteen's silver arm shrine, a very great and large monastery in its heyday) where north to south river systems - which include a small river named Martin, flow, some to the Blackwater, some to the Lee?

What are some place-names the remnants of? Of what early medieval hermits and monks did both socially, economically and religiously? How do words like **Cill** (Kil), **Cluain** (Clon), **Cúile** (Cool), Desert or **Díseart**, **Drishane** and **Dar/Dair** (eastern hermitage/monastery) resonate as elements in our place-names in Munster?

Terminus Post Quem.

When it came to imposing the outcome of the Whitby Synod of 664 AD, by means of Anglo-Saxon intrusions or by other means, how far west across the island of Ireland did the Romanisation of Hibernian Christianity progress; presuming it began in the north east (e.g. Tara / Meath of the High Kingship?) and spread westwards and southwards? Was it total, or, if not then where did the western limits of its boundary lands lie north to south across the Irish landscape? Where were the blurred lines of uneasy compromise? Where were the firm lines of completed acceptance of change? What were the behavioural outcomes at small monasteries and hermitages - and at already very ancient sacred and holy places within local communities - as a result of being subsumed by such change? What archaeology, what changes in historical geography and in local history, place-naming, land-area configurations as well as uses and natural resources exploitations, folklore and community memory came to be?

Did the Hibernian Christianity remain dominant and largely intact and unaffected in the more remote western lands, in their largely unknown coves and creeks, unknown local geographies, mountain peaks, ravines and valleys, in the ways of river tributaries, in the trackways of small streams and rivulets in highlands and headwater lands, in their bogs, islands and peninsulas? By preserving a distinction from the Roman form of the religion did the vernacular monuments of its lifestyle and originating cultural influences survive more easily making it a place of austerity, of penance, of higher sanctity, of annual pilgrimage from many both from the other parts of the social landscape of Ireland as well as for visitors from abroad (e. g. the Purgatory Cave on Station Island at Lough Derg, County Donegal) in those centuries which followed after Whitby?

The Vanishing of Cill and Cluain Geographies. A Legacy of Disaggregation Processes?

What happened to abandoned cells and **cluains**? Subsequent making of land-divisions due to conquests, new settlement processes (be they Viking, Norman or later), changes in religious practices resulting from varying types of reform, reforms in agricultural practices etc., may, either as a single event or a layering of events, obscure what was once an integrity of place and place-naming; an integrity associating both man-made structures, man-made landscape configurations and the community agricultural practices and ergonomics of a locality into a single occupational entity. The piece of land on which a cell was located may have become subsumed beneath a

town-land name and as time progressed the name of the cell and its **cluain** - and any other usage named features man-made or natural ones of the site, may have become lost to local memory as field names and sub-denomination names became forgotten and not officially recorded or mapped.

In such a way a cell and its **cluain**, its **drishane** or desert, its **gort, garraí and garrane** as well as other features of its religious and agricultural landscape identity becomes lost, leaving at most a souterrain to be discovered centuries later, or a lonely ogham stone exposed in a ploughed field, a once 'holy' well overgrown and abandoned beneath the slope of a field fence amid echos of a forgotten pattern day. In a complexity of reasons why, the integrity of the man-made landscape features which constituted the cell and its **cluain** (its meadow for practical, aesthetic and spiritual purposes) may have been split across different civil parish units lying beside each other or became disaggregated due to new town-land entities coming into being or changes in the sub-divisioning of an old town-land area.

Also, in some cases the town-land, sub-denomination unit or field which gave its name to the medieval parish (civil parish) may be lost due to its boundaries having been ploughed or buried beneath construction or agricultural activities taking place across subsequent centuries; with all surface evidence of its existence thereby vanishing. This is a topic which deserves more study in an attempt to re-discover the geography, lay-out and land area configurations, of those religious and farming settlement entities based around cells, **cluains**, secular **dúns**, around **cahers**, **raths** and **lios**es - be they places once secular or religious in use, and great Laura monasteries and their hermitage out-farms etc...one might also include the association of mills, bridges, ferry crossings at **farsids**, the remnants of old **bothars** (lane-way) and **bothareens** (little lane-way), and the patterns and linear shapes of old field fences, water meadows and 'long acre' meadows: the meadow being a much prized aspect of medieval community life, hermitages and monasteries arising within them or alternatively the meadows being derived from the siting of monasteries and hermitages and thus as a reflection of the Godly labours of religious life. How much of it all survives in what is still the un-noticed, the unchanged 'common-place-ness', of some rural locations across the South Munster landscape; in place-names, material remains and to an extent in folklore memories?

How much of it can be recovered and mapped as the basis for strategic archaeological investigation and for the contextualisation of surviving surface monuments within local folk customs and traditions: notionally, to re-walk the lands of these earlier times, to fit the patterned walks of old pilgrimages on Saint's Days to field monuments, and see rags upon a hawthorn bush by a holy well where once the harvest **aoinach** of a pagan tribal people or clan family took place before a monk 'out of Egypt', perhaps, came preaching ...?

Each tribe to its own?

How does the origins narrative above fit with those of :

1. **Ciaráin** of Saighir whose mother was of the **Corcú Laoidhe** at Cape Clear (West Cork) and among whom the claim existed that the first Christian 'church' (a hermitage? a 'house church'?) in Ireland was founded there?
2. A claim that the first Christian king in Ireland was of a king of the **Corcú Laoidhe** people?
3. The stories of Saint **Abbán**, Saint **Gibnait** (Ballyvourney) and Saint **Ibar** (Wexford) and the relationships between them and **Abbán's** progress across South Munster and his foundations such as at Kilcrumper among the **Fir Maighe** people (Fermoy beside the Blackwater River) and finally among the **Muscraighe** people at Ballyvourney (Muskerry)?
4. Saint **Fachtna** at Rosscarbery in **Corcú Laoidhe** lands (West Cork, South Kerry)?
5. Saint Declan at Ardmore as a pre-Patrician saint among the **Déise** people of West Waterford and a noble of their blood?
6. Saint **Molagga** at Timoleague also once in **Corcú Laoidhe** lands?
7. Saint **Mocomogue** at Kinneigh in West Cork and north of Bantry Bay.
8. Saint **Maol an Faidh** (Maol the Prophet) at Dar Inis island on the Blackwater River by Youghal Harbour beside **Déise** lands.

Of the above, three sites are coastal foundations (Rosscarbery, Timoleague, Ardmore) while Kilcrumper and Dar Inis are on the great Blackwater River which enters the sea at Youghal, Dar Inis is an island as is Cape Clear, Kinneigh is close to the Bandpn River which enters the sea at Kinsale. How many more early hermitage / monastic sites across South Munster could be added to the above list, and what would a distribution map of such early sites - and their relationships to the sea, to travel and trade, to accessing those inland tribal landscapes connected to the sea via great rivers and their tributaries - say?

Are these sites, as independent narratives composed from archaeology, hagiography and place-names, the surviving fragments of the beginnings of Christianity in each tribe land? Are these the independent tribal narratives of how each of the above tribes, and their clans, received early Christianity ; just as the **Muscarighe** of the Donoughmore region received theirs as suggested in the above narrative sketch?