

A Hand-Bell, an Anchorite, a Souterrain, and a Merovingian King.

It is interesting to note associations in the 6th to 8th centuries between Irish monastic houses, as centres of learning, and kingdoms in Wales, England and the Merovingian kingdom - a major kingdom which emerged after the fall of Rome's western empire, and those lands connected with this kingdom in what was once called Austrasia, as well as connections with Saxony and Bavaria.

The kingdom was centred on the landscape area now known as France, and France is a place of many souterrains and souterrain types. Bavaria and Saxony are also places of souterrains and there are similarities in architectural form evident as well as examples of associations with church sites. Austria is also a place of souterrains. Much has been said in the historical literature about associations between Irish monasticism and connections with the Merovingian Court, a recent addition being that by Picard, Jean-Michel called *De Gente Scottorum Monachi: The Irish in Merovingian Settlement Strategy IN The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World*, Chapter 18.

One also thinks about the degree of association between the Schottenklöster Celtic churches in Bavaria and those monks, as abbots, who were from the Irish kingdom of South Munster (Desmond, *Deas Mumhan*). How many Irish born missionaries - as well as scholars who had come from abroad, studied in the scholae of South Munster's monastic institutions, their civitates? How many brought the concept of the 'cave', natural or artificial, as habitation, as place of penance, as place of prayer, staff in hand with a handbell ringing and breviary in satchel, with them in to the urbes as well as the remote villages of the landscapes of the Merovingian world?

Between South Munster's shoreline and that of Biscay Bay lie the shorelines of England, with Cornwall at its most westerly side and above that Wales in the Irish Sea between Ireland and Britain. Perhaps from a mariner navigator's perspective Cornwall was a Waypoint between Biscay and South Munster, a place to shelter, to rest, to provision, during a sea journey between the two.

Cornwall, as a Gaelic speaking land at one time, one where the language survived for many centuries after Britannia and Saxon England came and went, has dry-stone built souterrains which are known as *Fogous* (was this the singular or plural form of the word i.e. *gou* or *gous*?). One wonders, if as a word in Cornish Gaelic (a P-Celtic subfamily of Celtic compared with a Q-Celtic one in Ireland), *Fogou* was a two part word originally comprised of what in early Irish would have been *Foth* (as *Fo* or *Fóg* in Cornish?) meaning under or beneath, and *Ous* or *Gous* as perhaps a word from Scots Gaelic or Saxon word *Hous* meaning house? Up to the 17th century and perhaps later some souterrains in the landscape of Scotland were referred to colloquially as 'earth houses' or 'erd hous'.

If the original words were *foth* and *hous* then the meaning is 'under house' which is what a souterrain either acting as a cellar, as a communal space or a place of solitary religious practice can be. It would not have been unusual for drystone built structures to be covered with sods to insulate them. One thinks of the early medieval monastic site at Reask, on the Dingle Peninsula in County Kerry (in South Munster), and also there is something resonant perhaps in the beehive chamber offset from a passage at Carn Euny in Cornwall, Saint Euny's well being close by.

Wales however does not have souterrains or anything like them and as far as I'm aware, neither does England. Why is this? There were Irish settlements in Wales after the collapse of Rome. Ogham stones are present in Wales and there were close, and well understood, ecclesiastical associations between Wales and Ireland in early medieval times. So, why no monastic souterrains, and consequently why no ogham stones from souterrains there; as best I understand it from the literature?

What circumstances led to this absence? Was this because early medieval Christianity in the minor kingdoms in Wales and Saxon England were not in favour of a Byzantine semi-cenobitic monasticism? Was this because of the mission of Augustine of Canterbury and his forty missionaries sent by Pope Gregory the Great (he of the policy of syncretisation?) in the 590s AD to convert the Saxons? In writing about this, one is reminded of the story of the arrival of fifty scholars 'from abroad' to Saint *Senán* at *Inis Luinge* (inlet / island of the ships at Cronody townland) by Inniscarra on the River Lee in Cork (South Munster).

Was it a spreading of this conversion by Rome which made its way across the sea and came into conflict with an earlier form of Christianity in South Munster; splitting loyalties at individual hermitages between those wishing to remain Byzantine and those wishing to side with Rome? If so, how did this erupt across the hermitages spaces of South Munster and with what consequences? Was it the Synod of Whitby in 664 AD which brought conflict to an end and brought harmony among the factions leading into Ireland's Golden Age of monasticism and scholarship?

Alternatively does it mean that Irish souterrains of the monastic architectural types were post-Whitby in Ireland and were a response to it and consequently a reason for using ogham stones in these (some of) structures e.g. the Culdees? In some individual circumstances how many of the Hiberno-Byzantine faction left for Europe as 'missionaries' and as a result bring their version of Christianity with them to remote places there, founding communities and establishing influence which may or may not have received approval from Roman bishops?

In reading about the scholars who came to Ireland in search of learning at these great institutions one notes the chapter on Early Irish Christianity by Eleanor Hull in her publication, [online at nli.ie], *A History of Ireland (1926 - 1931)* and the several examples given of scholars from abroad and who they were, who came seeking enlightenment and intellectual formation. Of the famous, it was Dagobert II later to become a Merovingian king who died circa 679 AD.

Another example of a scholar, one in search of learning in one of South Munster's great monastic houses was Cadoc of Wales i.e. Saint Cadoc. His legend speaks of him building a coracle to take him to Lismore on South Munster's great Blackwater River from the coastline by Youghal; or perhaps in his time where the Blackwater according to some folklore sources once entered the sea by Whiting Bay beside Saint Declan's great monastic house at Ardmore; its round tower and a frieze of figures on a ruined gable church wall still a source of wonder today.

In the 9th century AD a great tsunami is said to have hit the shores of South Munster resulting from an earth-quake in the sea off Lisbon in Portugal. It impacted the coastline of South Munster and, in passing, it is worth querying if and how the early monastery of Saint *Fionnbarra* (Finnbar or Finnbar or Finbar) with its community and round tower were affected? As the River Lee is tidal (once upon a time to Carrigrohane) beyond the marshlands (*Corcach Mór*, the Big Marsh) those upon which in later medieval times the city of Cork was built. One wonders what impact it had on the landscape which became those marshlands?

What was the area like before this and to what extent, if any, was it affected by a tsunami rushing inwards after a sea wall, spanning the mouth of today's Cork Harbour from Roche's Point, burst apart causing a great flood at the little marsh (*Corcach Beag*, Corkbeg, the Little Marsh) by Whitegate village and leading to the loss of 1,000 souls according to legend?

Cadoc's Handbell and the Souterrains of the Fir Maighe :

On returning to Wales and for the rest of his life he continued to wear 'the rough and hairy mantle such as the Irish wear out of doors' and 'one of his special treasures was a small bell of particular sweetness which he brought back from Lismore'. 'Lismore' meaning the great (*mór* meaning large or big and *lios* meaning the internal space of an encircling bank and ditch monastic community enclosure).

Lismore was the great monastic house of Saint *Mochuda*, (*Mochuda* i.e. our beloved *Chuda*?, anglicised as Saint Carthage) founded beside South Munster's Blackwater River with the monastic communities of the lands of the *Fir Maighe* people a short distance further along the river; a place of several souterrains and of the particular dry-stone built, corbelled, beehive cell and passage architectural type. Clustering around the river at this point were the palace of the tribal chieftain at Manning town-land beside the banks of the Funchion river close to its junction with the Blackwater, two souterrains of the beehive and passage type are known from this townland. Northwards further along the river is a cliff-top ringfort with another beehive and passage form of souterrain at Ballinacarriga (see excavation report online at Seanda Ezine, Issue 5, 2010, pp. 42-44) a site which has been excavated by archaeologists.

In his youth Mochuda was mentored by a hermit monk named *Carthach*. One wonders if this was the same *Carthach* (meaning loving, kind) who was a Bishop of Cashel in the 6th century; given the 'apple' story of Mochuda's travel there as a young bard before he joined the religious life?

Further along this river was the monastic estate of Saint *Fionn Chú* (White Hound) a warrior who became a monk and a saint and who was remembered locally for his extreme penitential practices. Near the Funchion's junction with the Blackwater, on the northern side of the Blackwater, was Kilcrumper (meaning the Cell of the Presbyter, said to have been founded by missionary Saint *Abbán*, later of Ballyvourney)

Opposite, on the south side of the river was the nunnery of Clondalane (*Cluain dá lann*, the spiritual meadow of two chapels) and though in later times it became designated as a separate town-land, the townland of Coole Abbey with its two early chapels and holy well and remembered as a *Civitas* (Latin for a settlement, a 'town', in Britannia and elsewhere within the Empire) appears to have been the specific land area after which Clondalane townland received its name; Coole Abbey being situated directly at the south side of Clondalane.

The word Coole is a common place name element in Ireland. It is an anglicised form of the Gaelic word *Cúile* meaning a corner patch or segment of land. Therefore was Coole Abbey, an area of ground with two chapels and a holy well in it, an area abutting the south west corner of Clondalane townland, in early medieval times a focal point within Clondalane; a 'corner' piece of land where the chapels and holy well of Saint *Flanaith's* hermitage / nunnery (mixed gender foundation?) / monastic settlement were situated? In later medieval times did it become the site of an 'abbey' foundation, because of that early monastic association, as was common elsewhere in South Munster and in Ireland in general.

It is interesting to note that in Sardinia the word *Cuile* referred to a shepherd's habitation associated with Byzantine monks at one time (see source reference elsewhere in this website). If *Cuile* is a word which was once associated with Hiberno-Byzantine monasticism, and with the landscapes of its settlements in Ireland, and if it is in some way reflective of Southern Italian kingdoms at a time when Byzantine Christianity was well established in such places, then did the word transfer from such places to Ireland via connections with early missionaries and others travelling to and fro, this topographical word thereby entering the vocabulary of the Gaelic language in Ireland?

Clondalane was founded by Saint *Flanaith* (or *Flanaid*) who was the daughter of the king of the *Fir Maighe* (meaning Men of the Plains Land, a river plain i.e. the Blackwater) tribe.

In his youth *Mochuda* was a bard and one day while travelling with his charioteer northwards to Cashel the seat of the High King of South Munster he began to cross the Blackwater at a ford perhaps somewhere close to Ballyhooley (*Baile na hÚlla*), a place of apple orchards, when he noticed an apple floating on the water and decided there was something special about it. So, he jumped down from the chariot and retrieved the apple. When he got to the home-place of the *Fir Maighe* king on the path of his journey he met *Flanaith* who had a 'withered hand' and so he gave her the special apple which healed her.

***Mochuda* decided some time later to become a monk and went northwards where in time he became an important monastic leader. But, as a result of conflict (of what nature?) he was driven away from that monastery and in his, short, remaining years he brought a great many monks i.e. monachi, (and *monaig* i.e. lay monks also?) southwards to found what would become the great monastery of Lismore in the years after his death in or circa 639 AD. *Flanaith* was inspired to join the religious life also and after a time away from Fermoy she returned to found her nunnery at Clondalane in her tribal landscape. But why do we not have any souterrain records for Clondalane whereas for *Abbán's* Kilcrumper there are several?**

In reading about the life of Saint Padarn in Wales who was said to have founded some church in the province of Leinster in Ireland it is interesting to note a Wikipedia entry which states 'at this time, as in any saints' lives of the era, there appears to be an aristocratic military function to Padarn's career' [quoted from Thomas Wakeman's Lives of the Cambro-British Saints, Chapter X]. If this is true then does it put the stories of Saint *Fionn Chú*, of Michelstown, County Cork beside the Funchion River, as a warrior who became a saint, into a context?

So also might this contextualise Saint Berihert an Anglo-Saxon nobleman who lead a great number of 'monks' to seek land and create a monastic settlement in what was once know as *Tuatha* Saxon (meaning petty kingdom land of the Saxons) in North Cork west of Fermoy by Tullylease, his 'brother' becoming the hermit John of Mushera and his three 'sisters' becoming nuns at Drishane / Cullen, though there are many other interpretations and contexts for these scrapes of legend? Berihert (Bericert) is also remembered at Berihert's Kyle in the Glen of Aherlow in South Tipperary where a significant number of carved stones remain.

In this locality, and westwards towards Mitchelstown and the Function River lies the richest farmland in Ireland known as the Golden Vale. It had the great monastery and round tower at Ardpatrik and loosely speaking stretched west from the Suir River in Waterford's *Déise* tribelands to the Mitchelstown locality. In this locality lies the barony of Iffa and Offa and one wonders if, once in the context of the above, it might be the case that Charles Smith's (circa 1746 AD?) claim that the name of the barony (Iffa (from Aoife?... who did she marry, if at all?, and what was her clan name?) and Offa, they being once separate baronies) was Saxon, was more accurate or indicative of a broader genealogical context encompassing that explanation given by Canon Patrick Power.

Rev. Canon Power was a doyen of Gaelic scholarship, an expert historical topographer of Waterford and East Cork, and also second Professor of Archaeology at University College Cork, who derived the names of the barony from those of local tribes, though more recent scholarship suggests it might have been associated with the family of *Eoghan Mór* the 2nd century founder of the *Eoghanacht* tribe, Lords of Cashel, and conquerer of the southern half of Ireland in his day?

Did Smith mean to reference Offa II of Mercia, he of westward conquests in Wales? If so what might one say of old genealogies which reference several princesses of *Mumhan* (i.e. Province of Munster in Ireland) marrying Anglo-Saxon lords? If so,

then did any of their children seek militarily, to claim their mother's, or earlier genealogically associated, clan lands in Munster, especially those in very rich farmland? Did any of such princesses refuse an arranged political marriage, becoming early nuns / hermits instead, taking example from another princess of the Fermoy locality named *Cranat* who blinded herself temporarily in order to remain in her religious community at Kilcranathan (meaning *Cranat's* cell / hermitage) mountain in North Cork when her brother arranged a marriage with a local Gaelic ruler?

So what was the scale and density of the clustering of monastic establishments across the *Fir Maighe* (Fermoy) tribe land, there by the Blackwater and Funchion Rivers, and also, further, what other monastic clusterings occurred along by the many other tributaries and junctions along its course, some also with a beehive souterrain or two (e.g. Castleblagh), the Blackwater being a great highway for travel from the sea to Lismore, to Fermoy to the northern tip of the great Donaghmore monastic landscape with the river Lee and Inniscarra on the south side of this landscape, to the monastic settlement of many souterrains at Drishane / Cullen in the shadow of the Paps of Anu where *Lassair*, *Ingen Bhuide* and *Latian*, three 'sisters' had their nunnery and the hermit John of Mushera roamed the mountain wilderness, and on to where the Blackwater has its source in the Mullaghareirk mountains?

Why is the drystone built corbelled, beehive and passage souterrain architectural form distinctive to the *Fir Maighe* tribeland, though not uncommon elsewhere in Ireland? Why does it appear to fade out westwards in favour of other souterrain forms; based on the slim data for souterrain interior details in this locality, as currently available in the Archaeological Record. Does this imply that interesting results might be revealed were a specific investigation of such to be done? For further information about the *Fir Maighe* / *Fir Maige* estates [see O Carrágain, Tomás (2015) Churches and social power in early medieval Ireland: a case study of *Fir Maige* IN: J.C. Sánches Pardo and M. Shapland (eds). Churches and Social Power in Early Medieval Europe. Brepols].

Adomnán's Bell and a 'stone cave' :

So, Cadoc's mementoes of his time and training in Lismore were a mantle and a little bell. When one thinks of a line from Saint *Adomnán's* Rule about his bell named *Doulgas* and its clapper ringing in a 'stone cave' by a *litir* (a piece of sloping land) as he prays his daily psalms, one wonders about the importance of the hand bell to such persons of the religious life. How precious a possession was it? And why no 'cave' ('stone cave' i.e. drystone built souterrain or a rock-cut or clay-cut souterrain, or a natural cave) when Cadoc returned home to Wales?

It is not unknown in County Cork for a souterrain to have been discovered in sloping ground, a souterrain masonry built or clay tunnelled, which may or may not have been within a ringfort ploughed out perhaps centuries ago.

The Oldcourt Bell and the Souterrain :

One is reminded of the handbell from Oldcourt town-land by Skibbereen in West Cork. Oldcourt was once a deepwater quay on the *Ilen (An Aighlinn)* river which rises to the north in the Mullaghareirk Mountains and flows to the sea a short distance south of Skibbereen. Skibbereen town developed beside a monastic foundation called *Abbeystrowry* which may, as was not unusual, have been founded on a much earlier monastic foundation, as was for example at *Timoleague* (meaning *Tí Molagga*, house of *Molagga*) and *Saint Molagga's* presence there in earlier times i.e. 7th century, long before the Abbey was constructed in the 13th century, a Cistercian abbey, a cell of the Abbey of *Sancta Maura* called locally *Mainistir na Srutha* (abbey of the 'strowry?' stream). Oldcourt is on the opposite side of the 'stream'. Was the land of Oldcourt part of an early monastic estate there, and if so how might the ringfort, the souterrain, its occupant and the bell have been contextualised by it?

The ringfort at Oldcourt which contained a clay-cut souterrain was excavated by *Conchubhar Ó Cuileanáin* [see report by *Ó Cuileanáin, Conchubhar, and T. F. Murphy*, 'A ring-fort at Oldcourt, Co. Cork', Ser. 2, Vol. 66, No. 204 (1961) pp. 79-92 via a search online at corkhist.ie]. The clay-cut souterrain had a circling passage leading down to a cell (chamber or cubicle) in the floor of which was a stone slab beneath which was discovered a handbell carefully wrapped in moss.

One wonders if the form of this clay-cut souterrain was an attempt to imitate a drystone built corbelled, beehive structure to some extent a loose, vernacular, interpretation of its architectural form? How does the discovery of a handbell here resonate with *Cadoc's* and *Adomnán's* handbells above? The Oldcourt bell is today in the collections of the National Museum of Ireland.

The Kilmichael Bell - though no specific souterrain :

Another mention of a handbell and the foundation of what would, generations later, become a medieval parish church site is a story which comes from Kilmichael civil parish situated in West Cork in the old tribal lands of the *Muscraige* people. Westward beyond Kilmichael is the lakeland locality area known as *Inchigeelagh*, for which the souterrain record for County Cork in South Munster notes many examples reported, though to a very large extent not scientifically explored.

Further west lies *Goughán Barra* the lakeland hermitage beside the source of the River Lee where *Saint Fionnbarra* resided in his younger years after a time at *Donaghmore's* great monastery beside the River Lee and before going to the marshland landscape of the *Corcach Mór* to found his great monastery there. *Goughán* meaning a rock shelter beside the large lake, in a glen and with a small island there, to which he journeyed again in his later years and died on his return at *Cill na Cluanna* (Cell of the *Cluains*) by the Lee near *Aglish*, attended by his hermit friend *Feama* who roamed the bogland wilderness of *Desertmore (Díseart Mór* meaning Big Desert, the word 'desert' referencing the Egyptian deserts of the Desert Fathers of the early church, but in an Irish context a bog, a 'green desert', as a 'desert' wilderness) situated to the south of the River Lee and south of the monastery of *Donaghmore* (a large monastery with a *kyrakon* i.e. Sunday

community church / chapel); perhaps somewhat resonant of Clonmacnoise. There are many Donaghmore place-names (and derivatives) across Ireland, some with remembered religious associations, some with architectural remains, and some have souterrains connections.

Rough sketch map to contextualise the territories mentioned :



Below is an account of Michael and the story of his bell, and its context, which I wrote for this website some years ago :

Kilmichael Parish, Stripping Away the Town-lands

[Since the Ordnance Survey at 6 inches to the mile was undertaken in the mid 19th century, a 'townland' in Ireland is the smallest administrative land division. Smaller divisions i.e. sub-denomination units and field-names within these townlands were not recorded officially, though such information does survive in local history and other literature for some places. The old Catholic medieval parishes, which came under the control of the Established Church after the Reformation became known as Civil Parishes and these form the next level of administrative division above the townland. The medieval parishes were created as an outcome of 12th century church reform and the introduction of dioceses, something which saw the end, and / or absorption, of older bishoprics and their estates, as well as their internal land unit entities, across the Irish landscape].

There is a folk story which speaks of the original church of Kilmichael being founded by a young priest (deacon or presbyter?) called Michael who was ordained in Rome by the Pope, and told by the Pope that on his return to Ireland he should seek a place for his church/cell where his handbell, of it self, would ring out; the bell having no dapper. This happened at a ringfort in Kilmichael and therefore Michael founded his church there. The townland in question is Moneycusker which O'Mahony suggests translates as the meadow of strife or slaughter. Moneycusker is overlooked by Mount Music. It still has its graveyard but no parish church now. There was a Reformation church present at one time and this was understood to be situated on the site of an earlier church. The name of the *lios* (ringfort) in which the church was built was *Lios*

Mongeen (monachi...monacháí ?)... There was also a holy well associated with the graveyard, at which ritual 'rounds' , as well as 'sports' events, were once performed on the Saint's day. Another version of this story occurs in the Irish National Folklore Archive (Schools Series, Roll 13286) which states that Michael identified the site for his cell when he saw two goats grazing.

Within the townland lies *Páirc na Cille* i.e. the field of the cell/hermitage. It has a souterrain. Was this the place where Michael's bell rang out according to tradition, where he made his cell, and was the *cill* to be replaced in later times by a parish church, a parish church situated in a ringfort in this townland; or more precisely one positioned at *Páirc na Cille* there?

Sister Evelyn Bolster in her history of the Diocese of Cork (1972, 270) gives the following information regarding a church of Michael at Kilmichael, In summary, she says that Mathew O Mahony, vicar at Macloneigh, erected at his own expense a church dedicated to Saint Michael the Archangel in the townland of Lackmalloe east of Moneycusker. Was Lackmalloe a sub-unit of Moneycusker townland and is that where *Páirc na Cille* originally was? Did a dedication to Michael the Archangel replace an earlier dedication to Michael of the handbell? One of the reasons for the building of this church was stated to be the 'enmity then existing between the people of Kilmichael and parishioners of Macloneigh and Inchigeela'.

It is of interest to note that at the north eastern boundary of Kilmichael there is Farranavarrigane townland. This appears to mean the *farran* or outfarm of the men? Diagonally opposite at the south western boundary of the parish lies Farranahineena townland which is the farm/outfarm of the daughters. Who were the daughters? Were they the same persons as at Ardnaneen (high place of the daughters)? Were they the three spiritual sisters of St. *Eiltín*, the three sisters mentioned in the Martyrology of Tallaght? Were they nuns who had an outfarm at the southwest of the parish while men (monks or *manaig*?) held an outfarm at the northeast; diagonally opposite them?

Some of those place names of the parish which contain ecclesiastical associations are places with the name element Cill i.e. Rosnakilla, Kilnarovenagh, Cill Seanaigh, Kilnadur, Cille Knockane - in its older name form. There is also a *Cluain* which implies a monastic area and it is one which was abandoned i.e. Clonmoyle (Cluain Maoille). There is a *Laragh* which implies either a gathering place or Laura semi-cenobitic monastery in the Greek style, or both, i.e. Shanlaragh meaning old laragh or laithreach. Why old? Was it remembered as an old place of Hibernian Christian worship when Kilnarovenagh came into being as a Roman /Saxon monastery? It is of note that to the north of Shanlaragh lies Shanacashel i.e. the old castle but meaning a *caiseal*, castellum i.e. a drystone built ringfort and perhaps a place of local status in Iron Age times. Was it because of this that a Laura monastery introducing Christianity was built close by?