

Aghabullogue and Saint Eolang (Saint Olan) the Anchorite

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'The anchoritic movement [Culdee, *Céile Dé*] of the early 9th century which was centred on the ecclesiastical foundations of Finglas and Tallaght...The text which ensued now known as the Martyrology of Tallaght was compiled sometime after 826 and before 833...the list of saints for 5 September reads as follows:

Elacho (uel) Achaid Bó
Eolang anchorita
Et Duib Scuili
Faithlenn dechoin.

'[The feasts of] *Eolach* (or *Eolang*) of *Achad Bó*, of *Eolach* the anchorite, of *Dub Scuile* and of *Faithliu* the deacon'.

'In other words, *Eolach*, patron of the church named *Achad Bó*, and *Eolach* the anchorite, alleged holder of a then very highly regarded office, were almost certainly one and the same.'

Eolang was anglicised as Olan. In considering St. Olan's settlement / community at Aghabullogue (*Achad Bó*), and its landscape area e.g. was it an enclosed *cluain* and *cill* and if so where did he live as an anchorite? Did he construct and / or occupy a souterrain either within an 'enclosing' of the *cluain* or outside? Did he originally come to this locality to live as an anchorite in the 'wilderness' and occupy a space either above or below ground beside what came to be known as his holy well?

Was he one of Saint Senan's fifty scholars from abroad landing initially at *Cró na hOidhe* by Inniscarra on the River Lee; from a ship which had navigated the inland marshlands (where Cork City would come centuries later), marshlands where another hermitage of *Fionnbarra*, on a marshland island below a steep cliff at Gill Abbey would come to be, a land area of farmed river weirs beside which the spread of a great monastic community would come to be, with a round tower from where to call the faithful to daily prayer, and extensive monastic manor lands spreading westward?

For *Eolang* as with *Fionnbarra*, did a religious community of monachi - and *monaig* servants / tenants / artisans, grow up around him seeking guidance and good example from his way of life? After his death did these followers form a community which subsequently became a *cluain* (meadow but in a religious sense) hermitage with its out-farms (*farrans*)?

Cró na hOidhe (*Cró* meaning a *Gougane* - like that hermitage, perhaps 'skete'- like, place of Saint (*Naomh*) *Fionnbarra* of Cork i.e. a rock shelter in his case overlooking a lake, one perhaps not too unlike that of Saint Kevin of Glendalough in Wicklow.

Cró na hOidhe the rock shelter of the professors or scholars reflected in the townland name Cronody at *Inis Luinge* (inlet / island of the ships) by Inniscarra by the River Lee.

Within the area of a *cluain* at Aghabullogue was a medieval church, close distant to Olan's well, erected as time progressed? Did it replace an earlier structure? Was the church erected in close proximity to where his grave was situated and if so is the ogham stone which is said in local

folklore to mark his grave the actual site of his burial? Also why does this ogham have a small stone known as the 'cap' sitting on it? What tradition if any might this represent if Olan came from, say, the Eastern Mediterranean during the 9th century AD? Did the ogham inscription mention that he was an Egyptian or did this enter the scholarly literature solely as a result of 19th century antiquarian speculation?

Given the reference in the Bangor antiphony describing Irish Christianity as the 'true vine of Egypt' how likely might it be that he was from Egypt...Scetis? How likely given John Cassian's Egyptian style monastery in South East France - with Lerins Island not very far away in a bay, as a training centre? It is interesting to note that Saint *Abbán* of Ballyvourney had a *cluain* beside the river there - with a collection of cells located on the opposite side of the river and a wheel cross inscribed monolith. His reputed burial place where a number of ogham stones are situated, beside his holy well, lies within the precincts of the *cluain*. What might this say? That some of his followers or successors wished to have their ogham inscribed grave-slabs placed beside his grave? Was this his actual burial site, or is it a type of cenotaph for people of later generations to have a specific spot at which to pray to him?

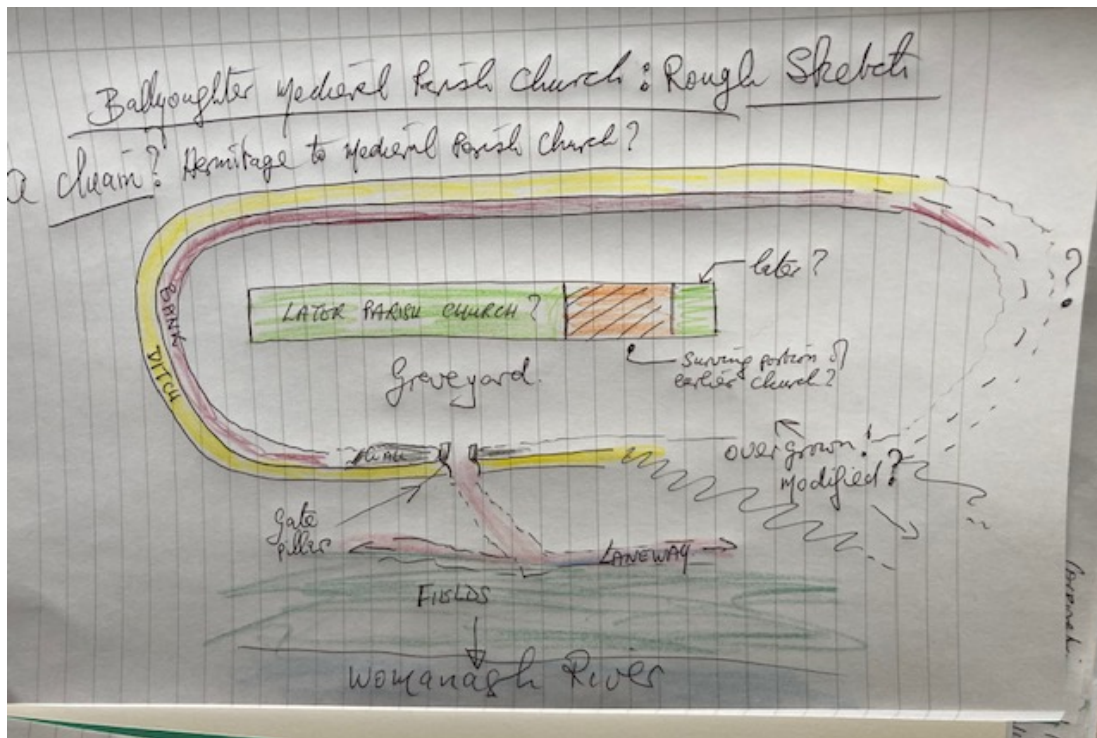
What was the function of the anchorite? To 'anchor' the locality of the living (or dead) 'saint' (our saint, our of our locality, the prefix **mo** as a term of endearment being added to his name e.g. *mo comoge* as Saint **Mocomoge**) to heaven as a ship is anchored to dry-land though tossed about in angry seas and stormy weather? Anchorite, a suitable metaphor for a gathering community of early followers of a 'saint' and local religious leader? An anchorite, not to be approached but watched and imitated, an example of a spiritual and ascetic way of life through austerity, seclusion, awaiting its crossing to a heavenly world, a contemplative whose prayers interceded on behalf of the community in the hope of alleviate their personal trials and tribulations, the saint at his 'holy well', its baptisms, its votive rags of hope and its pattern day festivals at his annual feast day, 'once gone to God' he became, the continuing veneration in the centuries to come and the requests for local miracles / cures ...

As to what the topographic layout of a *cluain* might have been, one wonders. It is interesting to note the ruined medieval church site at Ballyoughtera (actually **BallyVoughtera**....home place of the burnt land, a place of furnaces and metal works) beside Castlemartyr estate beside the town of that name in East County Cork. A ditch, outside of an earthen bank part rebuilt (?) as a boundary wall, still survive, surrounding an area of land which contains a medieval parish church and graveyard. The structure of the church building appears to have had several phases of modification and expansion, at both East and West sides.

One wonders if a portion of the walls of an earlier stone built chapel were incorporated into the structure at a time when the medieval parish church was constructed and if some of the original cut-stone features were included? Such does not appear to have been uncommon e.g. as at Seskinane in North West County Waterford where ogham stones - graveslabs of monachi, perhaps, possibly from an earlier occupation of the site - were incorporated in places such as window sills of the medieval parish church. If the bank and ditch represent the preservation, and incorporation, of the original site enclosure as the boundary of the medieval parish church and graveyard, then is it possible to get a sense of what the shape and area of internal space within such *cluain* hermitages i.e. small early monastic sites, might have been? If so, then should one see *Abbán's cluain* at Ballyvourney beside the river and *Eolang's cluain* at Aghabullogue as being similar in layout, if not larger. Was Seskinane (Knockboy as in North West Waterford)) with its ogham stones - if this was their original provenance - also a hermitage originally, one of similar extent and shape? And also, Seskinane is not too far distant east of *LabbaMolagga* i.e. *Saint Molagga's bed in the parish of Kildorrery, County Cork.*!

Rough sketch of enclosure at Ballyoughtera (Ballyvoughtera):

How might this 9th century anchorite movement, as mentioned above, have approached the existence of ogham inscribed grave-slabs in its locality if such slabs were commonplace; though no longer made after the mid 7th century? Were some removed from their original locations and



placed beside holy wells (capped wells? and with a hawthorn tree?) associated with the local, founder, saint? Is this what happened at Olan's well and at that of *Abbán*, thereby creating a specific place in the landscape at which to commemorate them on their feast days?

If some ogham stones were left on the surface, perhaps according to the degree of influence of local clan or chieftain, were other taken and used in the construction of souterrains, souterrains intended for use either as penitential cells or as night lodgings for certain members of a monastic community, or as places, in other times, to continue older Christian worship practices underground; where long dead local founders no longer were recognised or in fashion, where they could no longer be venerated because of changed religious norms on the surface, where they could still be locally worshipped as 'shrine' places at hermitages and as places of pilgrimage?

Were they used for souterrains which were specifically intended and constructed for use by anchorites; being incorporated in the structure of the souterrain as a method of sanctifying it and giving it the protection of the saint commemorated in the inscriptions i.e they were regarded as holy relics? Does the number of ogham stones found in a particular souterrain say something about the population size and timespan of a hermitage in that place? If there is any truth to be revealed by these questions then was the practice of using ogham stone in the construction of souterrain i.e. either in the masonry work of dry-stone built sites or in the construction of entrance passages to clay-cut ones, a spiritual one? Does the presence of such stones indicate whether or not there was a monastic presence in the immediate locality prior to the 9th century? Does it indicate that those souterrains which have ogham stones built into them were constructed during the 9th century anchorite movement?

Also does the fact that the vast majority of ogham inscribed stones have been found in South Munster say something about the nature of early Christianity, its depth of penetration in South Munster prior to the mid 7th century after which, on linguistic grounds, the practice stopped, or did the 9th century, and the Culdee (*Céile Dé* i.e meaning The People of God) movement, cause a plethora of ogham stones lying or still upright on the surface, and scattered across the landscape according to where earlier foundations had been, compared with other parts of Ireland? Does it say something about South Munster's geographical location, sea routes, and its maritime contacts and connections during the Iron Age and Roman times? Does it say something about the travels of early Byzantine Christianity and changing relationships with Rome as time progressed? Does it say something about Byzantine Christianity and a tradition of 'saints' in 'caves' ? Does it say anything about North African Christianity prior to the rise of Islam? Does it

say anything about the rise of Islam in the 7th century and about the Gaelic use of the word *Íosa* phonetically the same perhaps as used in Islam perhaps? Does it say anything about Christianity in South Munster prior to Saint Patrick's arrival in 432 AD and about why, according to some local traditions, Patrick was not successful in bringing earlier foundations, those created by the children of local aristocratic / tribal families and clans into the fold; as a Rome appointed bishop, they refusing to hand over their churches (communities and structures) to him and so he moved north...having begun his mission at a promontory Roman trading post at the Old Head of Kinsale at a ringfort enclosure named *Lios* Patrick there, at *Dún Céarmna* there, at *Dún Mac Phadraig* there?

Does this mean that in the timeframe prior to the Whitby Synod in 664 AD i.e. say 432 to 664 AD, there was a gradual penetration of Roman Christianity across the South Munster landscape with some hermitages deciding to side with Rome others remaining loyal to the Byzantine tradition? Did such, if so, result in open conflict in some localities with destruction and abandonment of hermitages loyal to the Byzantine tradition and did some followers leave the South Munster landscape for remote islands, or seek out remote peninsulas, or seek white martyrdom upon the sea? Subterranean spaces of penance and prayer being abandoned on surface landscapes, and ogham stones being left standing or fallen in some places, with a sense of dereliction, where the literacy to create them had been lost or prohibited and a new tradition was supported by the local ruler? As a result did Whitby bring the pressure of several decades of tension to a head? Did a revival take place in subsequent decades leading to an anchorite movement in the 9th century - and alternative religious houses, or was it just a renewal of old strifes again coming to a head as the Roman tradition had never fully succeeded, particularly in the remote parts of South West Munster? Did the last energies of such rising waves of tension deflate as Culdees became canons within Rome's church infrastructure in Ireland? What might the inhabitants of Kilnaruane (Cell of the Roman faction?) by Bantry Bay, and other early church / hermitage sites nothing now known of them except through place-names and how they are interpreted i.e. *Cill* or *Cillíní* sites which may suggest in there place names, or local folk traditions, a Roman factional loyalty, have had to say in answer to these questions were they to somehow speak to us through landscape archaeology today...might Caherlehillan in County Kerry have something to say?