

Tunnelled Souterrains in South Munster, Ireland.

**By
J.P. McCarthy**

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Part B

Summary

- 1.** The Use of **Ogham Stones** in souterrain construction in South Munster suggests, that in the second half of the 7th century AD and into the 8th century AD, some small monasteries and hermitages were either abandoned, destroyed or conceded to accepting Rome's authority; though in some places (islands and remote peninsular landscapes) the earlier **Hiberno-Christian** tradition continued unimpeded due to the **Culdee** (*Céile Dé* meaning 'People of God') **Revolt**. As a result, those early monastic sites which were either destroyed, or had conceded, hid ogham inscribed grave-slabs in crudely cut subterranean spaces or else incorporated them in to other types of structures such as oratories, churches and shrines. Before these events, it was not uncommon to place ogham inscribed slabs in the entrance ways to some souterrains as a form of spiritual protection, and also to venerate them as relics of founder 'saints'; even though the inscriptions themselves could not be read once used in the structures, something which might also have been the case when they were above ground, except by the learned few.
- 2.** **Anglo-Saxon Coins** deposited in a souterrain near the, once renowned, monastic school at **Rosscarbery Co. Cork** are of 10th century date i.e. two pennies of King **Aethelstan** (924-39), and one of King **Eadmund** (939-46). But do they date the souterrain? Several Anglo-Saxon lords married **Munster princesses**. Many **Anglo-Saxon princes**, as well as some European ones such as **Merovingian Dagobert II**, studied at Irish monasteries. **Charlemagne** recruited many Irish scholars to his court and referred to Irish monks as '**pueri Aegyptae**' while the 7th century antiphony of Bangor Abbey, Co. Down, referred to the early Irish Church as a '**true vine of Egypt**'. Irish monks from South Munster served as abbots at the **Schötenkloster** monastery in **Regensburg, Bavaria**.
- 3.** **Radio-Carbon** dating from a dry masonry beehive chamber souterrain (7th to 9th century), and from various ring-forts and early monastic sites - some with souterrains, give an activity date range of 4th (Reask, Co. Kerry) to 11th centuries AD.

4. There is an antiquarian report of a **wooden comb and box**, along with a large cluster of burnt human skeletal remains, found in a souterrain at a Viking settlement site beside a monastery in Cork. This settlement was destroyed by Irish King **Brian Ború** in the 10th century AD, because these Vikings, as allies of a local tribe, had murdered his brother.



Example of a wooden comb and box, Oslo Viking Ship Museum.

5. There are references to what appear to be souterrains in a body of **early Irish literature** created from the 8th to 12th centuries AD.
6. Early Christian history may provide a context for the likelihood that what was a **Hiberno-Christianity (Hiberno-Byzantine)**, one composed of one or more distinct traditions, may have arrived in Ireland through the travels and trading connections of Irish tribes along the coastline of **South Munster** with Roman **Britannia** and **Biscay Bay** if not the **Mediterranean**. This might have happened anytime from the 1st Century AD to the mid 5th century AD before **Roman Christianity** became re-enforced by **Anglo-Saxons** incursions (e.g. St. Berihert) and by **native reformers** in the wake of the **Whitby Synod of 664 AD**.
7. There is a possibility that the **Tig Faoi Talaimh**, multi-chambered, sites have a secular origin; one which represents a **BronzeAge/Iron Age / Early Medieval Continuum** within local / tribal vernacular architectural traditions.

A Question of Handbells, Dating and a bell deliberately deposited in the floor of a ring fort souterrain in West Cork. At what point in time was the handbell introduced by early Christianity to South Munster? Could such a date, if established, be used as a date 'post quem' for the development of Christian communities in a locality? Was the Coptic handbell used outside Egypt before the 6th century AD e.g. was it introduced to Western Europe by John Cassian (360-435)? What one might ask were the circumstances which gave rise to the context of the **Oldcourt**, Co. Cork handbell wrapped in moss [now in NMI] from an excavated univallate ring-fort souterrain just beyond the deep water area by Skibbereen with the old abbey ruins on the opposite side of the Ilen river? Did a missionary 'bishop' with his handbell as status (shepherd leading a flock) with the handbell in the ringfort single cell and passage souterrain (a clay cut imitation of the design used in dry masonry in Fermoy / Clangibbon territory or of that such as **Roovesmore** with ogham stones in its construction and in a univariate ringfort in Muskerry, a short distance beyond **Kilnaclunna** founded by **Fionnbarra** and subsumed in what is now **Ballineadig** townland) give rise to a subsequent **Cluain** monastery (just like **Fachtna's** one to the east along the coast and **Molaga's** one at Timoleague and **Fionnbarra's** one at the **Corcach Mór** and **Maol an Faidh's** one at **Dar Inish** which then became a later Norman or Medieval MacCarthy (?) foundation, and that of **Declán** at **Ardmore**? Did souterrain 'cells' or single chamber oratories (the core of monastic life and not the chapel) lead to the subsequent foundation of all of these coastal monasteries and thus are these lips univallate single chamber souterrains the coastal places where all of these great monastic foundations had their humble beginning and in memory of which the later great monasteries were built and named?

Of several instances across the early Irish hagiographical literature there is the following from the Life of Bairre of Cork from **Bethada Náem nÉrenn** which was translated by Charles Plummer. See celt.ucc.ie

'After this Bairre crossed the river⁴⁰ to Cell na Cluaine, and built a church there, and remained in it some time, till two pupils of Ruadan [of Lothra] came to him, Cormac and Buichin,⁴¹ who had asked of Ruadan a place for themselves. Ruadan said to them: 'Go with my blessing, and the place where its tongue shall strike your bell, and in which the strap of your book-wallet shall break, there will be your resurrection.'

[**note:** Is this Cell (Cill) na Cluaine the Kilnacluanna later (post mid 17th century Down Survey..see <http://downsurvey.tchpc.tcd.ie>) to be subsumed into Balineadig twonland in Aglish parish, Muskerry, where Finbarr opposite Cronody by Inis Luinge by Inniscarra... also a similar story from Kilmichael parish about a priest who was ordained in Rome and told that when his bell with no clapper mysteriously rang at a particular he would know that it was there he should found his cell (church). So if a handbell is central to identifying where a local early hermitage is founded, and this is what these stories are implying about the centrality of handbells in the mindset of these early Irish saints, then are these reasons as to why the handbell would be so special to them, a handbell to be wrapped in moss and placed beneath a stone slab in the floor of the chamber of a single chamber long souterrain passage in a univallate ringfort? As to its use within the chamber perhaps a quote from the a translation of the 7th century Rule of Saint Adomnán should be quoted ' by Dapper Doulgas [his bell] I will sing my psalms today in the stone cave'.

With an Eye to the Future.

Another future area of important research in regard to those souterrains which are of monastic Ireland is the study of the monastic demesnes of both post Norman and pre-Norman Ireland such as those of the early Bishoprics and their Deserts among other landscape designations. To what extent did one overlay the other? Or, was there a complete revamp and an abandonment of old territorial identities in favour of creating a new, reformed geography of the monastic landscape in post 12th century times?

If so how many abandonments of older, cell, hermitage, farran lands, desert (marshland wilderness or rough wasteland places in Ireland) etc and revised naming or marooning of old place naming took place to facilitate this etc...monastic landscape which either pre or post 12th century may have replicated the functional names of land zones within each demesne, demesnes sometimes continuous across large geographic areas with slight variations according to local circumstances such as land quality or proximity to the sea and islands. Did such a contiguity stretch from say from St. Colmán's monastery at Cloyne (*Cluain*) in East Cork to Finbarr's *Corcach Mór* to Timoleague and Ardmahon to Fachtna's Rosscarbery to whoever it was who first came to preach at Abbeystowry by Skibbereen beside the Ilen River, a river way to Roaring Water Bay and its islands, the first to preach at *An Chroabhach* i.e. *Creagh parish* (a branch of a tree...figurative for an outlying place or retreat?) at a univallate ringfort, beyond the deepwater quay at Oldcourt beside the isle of Inisbeg that island within the river a short distance down river from Abbeystowry.

But then does this pattern give way to rougher, more remote, isolated, more independent, hermitages on peninsular lands and islands by Mizen, by Sheep's Head by Beara by the coastlines of Iveragh and Dingle, and to something more rugged in terms of monastic settlement there being a dominance (perhaps of older origin as well as alternative tradition?) of such hermitages and cells in contrast to those hermitages and cells in the demesnes zoned according to designated functions within the corporate framework of such institutions e.g. a hermitage at a booley site, a hermitage of shepherds, a hermitage of lowland cattle husbanding...all under the centralised administrative control of the main precinct of the demesne with its *domhnach* church. Does such a geography underly the geography of post Elizabethan Ireland? Overlaid on that of the post 12th century parishes and later-town lands and their subdenominations? Within such geographies might an even older early/ nascent monastic / late Iron Age / early Medieval geography survive in fragments of land name memories in either the written or oral, or both, traditions of transmission?

How does one explain the presence of more than one souterrain either of the same architectural form or of varying architectural forms at certain sites? Might those at Barrahourin (7 plus and associated with ringforts) in the landscape area of Muskerry's great Donaghmore and its demesne derived from the foundation of Olan and Lachteen, reflect a boogying settlement under the supervision of the monastery its souterrain architectural forms being a reflection of the activities of the boles there? Or as at Manning townland in proximity to the Funcheon River's junction with the Blackwater where two 'beehive and passage' (B1) souterrain forms were discovered, this locality being contiguous with ecclesiastical sites at Kilcrumper (cell of the presbyter) and Clondalane i.e. *cluain dá lann* i.e. hermitage of two chapels, (incorporating Coole (*Cúile?*) Abbey), and also reputedly the place of the king of the *Fir Maighe* people at some point in time? Or the place of a hermitage at say Castleblagh further west along the Blackwater River where a souterrain architectural form (beehive and passage (B1) is in the same townland as an L- shaped galleries form (A2))? When it comes to defining a hermitage (*cluain*) monastic as well as broader ecclesiastical settlement space what are the functional elements of such a landscape area as a consequence of its coming into being? Depending on its designated function within the overall corporate activities of the demesne, were some hermitages solely aescetic and for certain categories of monk, others being for those of lesser religious status or secular with families? Did each hermitage have a ill space attached as well as farmland spaces named according to agricultural for industrial functions, others again being the spaces of persons of other talents? If places, either those which preserve a place name or local tradition memory, even though there is no physical evidence on the ground, or not, have more than one souterrain all being of either the same or differing souterrain architectural forms, then what might this say about the site and its lost history? Where there are differing forms what might this say about the functions of / need for, these distinct forms at this particular site?

For further reading re Handbells (do these first come to Ireland in the 5th or 6th century AD??) and the Early Coptic Church in Ireland see:

Robert K. Ritner (1979) EGYPTIANS IN IRELAND: A QUESTION OF COPTIC PEREGRINATIONS. *Rice University Studies*, **62** (2), William Marsh Rice University: 65–87. AT <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/4466223.pdf>

Early Medieval Irish Handbells. AT medieval.eu

Abba Seraphim (2019) ON THE TRAIL OF THE SEVEN COPTIC MONKS IN IRELAND). AT <https://britishorthodox.org/miscellaneous/on-the-trail-of-seven-coptic-monks-in-ireland/>

Saxby, Geoffrey (2020) The Celts and Copts and St Anthony - Notes on pre-Augustine Coptic and Celtic churches. AT [researchgate.net](https://www.researchgate.net)

Osman , Ahmed (2014)

The origins of the ancient Coptic Church of Egypt. AT <https://www.ancient-origins.net/history/origins-ancient-coptic-church-egypt-002462>

This presentation, plus longer and more detailed (though unfinished) versions are on my website at

www.pollfaoitalamh.ie

Go to the Word Desk Section and scroll down to the end to see these versions.

See also the Additional Notes attached to this presentation.

The End.

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