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# RELIGION, CULTS & RITUALS

## IN THE MEDIEVAL RURAL ENVIRONMENT

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*Religion, Kulte und Rituale in der mittelalterlichen bäuerlichen Umgebung*  
*Réligion, cultes et rituels au milieu rural médiéval*

edited by CHRISTIANE BIS-WORCH & CLAUDIA THEUNE

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# Struell: bathing at midsummer and the origins of holy wells

*Finbar McCormick* \*

## ABSTRACT

Holy wells are common across much of Europe and are particularly common in Britain and Ireland. They are generally associated with local saints but can also be dedicated to members of the holy family or St John. They are commonly believed to have curative powers and they are especially frequented on the anniversary of the saint to whom they are dedicated. Devotional activity focused on holy wells was especially important in Ireland as pre-Reformation churches passed into Protestant ownership and thus became unavailable for worship for the Roman Catholic majority of the population. There has been a general assumption that at least some holy wells had their origin in pre-Christian times. This theory can be supported by a late 7th-century Life of St Patrick which states that the druids regarded wells as sacred and made offerings to them. Struell Wells, County Down, is an early well associated with St Patrick. An 8th-century text describes the saint immersed in the well at night, singing psalms and resting on a nearby stone slab during the day. The main devotional activity at the well however, took place on Midsummer Eve rather than on the anniversary of the saint (17th March). Description from between the 17th and 19th centuries record that large numbers of pilgrims bathed in a naked state in the wells at midsummer. It can be suggested that these activities are a continuation of pre-Christian midsummer rituals associated with the promotion of good health, not only for humans but also for animals. There are records from Ireland and elsewhere of livestock being bathed at midsummer in order to protect them from illness. Additionally, there are records of early church condemnation of midsummer bathing as such activities were regarded as pagan.

**Keywords:** *Struell Wells, holy wells, midsummer, continuation of pre-Christian rituals.*

## RÉSUMÉ

*Struell : se baigner à la Saint-Jean et les origines des sources sacrées*

Les sources sacrées sont très connues dans toute l'Europe, mais surtout en Angleterre et en Irlande. Elles sont en général associées avec des saints locaux, mais peuvent également être dédiées à un membre de la sainte famille ou à St Jean. On leur attribue des pouvoirs de guérison et on les fréquente surtout pour l'anniversaire du saint auquel elles sont dédiées. Les pratiques de dévotion liées à des sources sacrées sont particulièrement importantes lorsque les Protestants reprennent possession des églises durant la préRéforme, à un

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moment où la vénération y est devenue impossible pour la majorité de la population de confession catholique. La théorie que certaines des sources sacrées remontent à une époque préchrétienne est étayée par le livre « la vie de saint Patrick » du VII<sup>e</sup> siècle dans lequel on parle des druides qui font des offrandes aux sources. Le site de « Struell » (County Down) est une vieille source dédiée à Saint Patrick. Un texte du VIII<sup>e</sup> siècle parle du saint qui s'y baignait la nuit, en chantant des psaumes et qui restait assis sur une pierre durant la journée. Les pratiques de vénération se concentraient surtout à la Saint Jean (au moment du solstice) et moins à l'anniversaire du saint (le 17 mars). Des descriptions, datant du XVII<sup>e</sup> au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, évoquent un grand nombre de pèlerins se baignant nu dans la source lors des solstices. On suppose que ces pratiques se développent dans la continuité des rites préchrétiens liés au solstice visant à assurer une bonne santé aux pèlerins et aux animaux. Certaines sources écrites, entre autres originaires d'Irlande, décrivent le bain rituel de bovins durant la Saint Jean afin de les protéger des maladies. S'y ajoutent des sources écrites de l'église primitive condamnant le bain dans les sources à la Saint Jean en tant que pratique païenne.

**Mots-clés :** *Struell wells, sources sacrées, solstice, continuité des rituels préchrétiens.*

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

*Struell: Baden zu Mitsommer und die Ursprünge der heiligen Quellen*

Heilige Quellen sind in vielen Teilen Europas bekannt, besonders aber in England und Irland. Sie sind in der Regel mit lokalen Heiligen verbunden, manchmal aber auch mit Mitgliedern der Heiligen Familie oder St.

Johannes. Allgemein heilende Kräfte zugesprochen, werden sie besonders an den Geburtstagen der Heiligen besucht, denen sie geweiht sind. Zeremonielle Aktivitäten an Heiligen Quellen waren in Irland besonders zu dem Zeitpunkt wichtig als Vorreformatoren Kirchen in protestantischen Besitz übergaben und entsprechend unerreichbar für die römisch-katholische Mehrheit der Bevölkerung wurden. Es herrscht allgemeine Übereinstimmung in der Annahme, dass einige der Heiligen Quellen in vorchristliche Zeiten zurückreichen. Unterstützt wird diese Theorie durch das Buch „Das Leben des Heiligen Patrick“ aus dem 7. Jh., in welchem davon berichtet wird, dass Druiden die Quellen als heilig ansahen und Opfergaben machten. Struell (County Down) ist eine frühe Quelle, die dem heiligen Patrick geweiht ist. Ein Text aus dem 8. Jh. beschreibt wie der Heilige, Psalmen singend, mittenächtig in der Quelle badet und sich am Tag auf einem nahegelegenen Stein niederlässt. Die religiösen Feiern an der Quelle konzentrieren sich jedoch eher auf Mitsommer und weniger auf den Geburtstag des Heiligen am 17. März. Schriftliche Urkunden aus dem 17. bis 19. Jh. berichten von zahlreichen Pilgern, die zu Mitsommer nackt in der Quelle badeten. Es wird angenommen, dass diese Aktivitäten in direkter Kontinuität zu vorchristlichen Mitsommer-Ritualen stehen und eine gute Gesundheit versprochen, nicht nur für die Menschen, sondern auch für die Tiere. Erzählungen aus Irland und anderswo berichten, dass das Vieh an Mitsommer gebadet wurde, um es vor Krankheiten zu schützen. Es kommt hinzu, dass die frühe Kirche das Baden zu Mitsommer als pagane Handlung zu unterbinden suchte.

**Schlagwörter:** *Struell wells, heilige Quellen, Mitsommer, Kontinuität vorchristlicher Riten.*

## Introduction

The concept of sacred waters is a world-wide phenomenon in ancient and modern religions (Ray 2014, 1). The role that water plays varies greatly. For instance, the river Ganges is considered sacred to those of the Hindu faith because it is the personification of the god Ganga, and bathing in its waters purifies body and soul and washes away sin (Bhardwaj 1973, 4; Dublois – Beauchamp 1897, 200), while at the Japanese Shinto shrine of Zeniarai Benzaiten Ugafuku it is believed that the washing of money in the sacred spring waters will increase one's prosperity in business (Mutsu 1918, 208-09). The word 'sacred' can cover a multitude of roles and meanings and it is often not possible to ascertain why a particular body of water was regarded as sacred. The deposition of large quantities of material in 'watery' places across prehistoric

Europe (Bradley 1990) might imply that such places were considered the dwelling places of gods, but in the absence of documentary sources this is at best informed speculation. The documentary evidence certainly indicates that the Romans worshipped rivers and springs, and the late 4th – early 5th century *Marus Servius Honoratus* noted that, 'there is no spring that is not sacred' (Campbell 2012, 128). Camp (1988, 172) may have been exaggerating that 'all water in antiquity was sacred' but there was clearly a range of ways in which water and wet places were regarded as sacred. This article considers the case of holy wells in Ireland and seeks to identify their source in the pre-Christian world with specific reference to Struell Wells, a particular site in County Down, in Ireland's northeast.

Holy wells occur over much of Europe but are particularly numerous in Britain and Ireland (Board –



Fig. 1. Pattern day at St Ronogue's Well, County Cork (© Barrow 1836, 350).

Board 1985; Logan 1980) where they are still often a focus of modern religious devotion. The most recent survey (Ray 2014, 4) indicates there are about 3000 in Ireland, 2000 in England, at least 1719 in Wales and over 1000 in Scotland. Holy wells are generally spring wells but can also be ponds lakes, inter-tidal pools or occasionally hollows in rocks. In Ireland they are generally associated with a saint, and less commonly Jesus and Mary (Carroll 1999, 26). The vast majority of the saints associated with wells are Irish, the most popular being Patrick and Brigid (Carroll 1999, 27). The devotions associated with specific holy wells usually occurred on the saint's day, i.e. the anniversary of the death of the saint. The devotion days were generally referred to as 'pattern' days, derived from the word 'patron' as in 'patron saint' (Fig. 1). The patterns that occurred at the wells usually comprise of a series of rituals comprising of 'rounds' of the stations associated with a well. Stations usually took the form of piles of stones, but could occasionally include earlier prehistoric cairns or megaliths, standing stones or cross-inscribed slabs. Flat stones were often referred to as 'saint's beds'. The 'rounds' generally comprised of walking in a right-hand direction round the 'station' reciting a designated number of prayers, usually Our Father's and Hail Mary's. Such rituals rarely occur in Britain, and Rattue (1995, 91) argues that the such rituals, if they existed, would have been suppressed after the Reformation.

As well as being a focus of pilgrimage, holy wells are also generally regarded as having curative powers and are visited at all times of the year in order to seek relief from pain and sickness. Persons attending the wells for this purpose usually take away holy water from the well and leave behind devotional objects such as holy pictures, statues rosary beads, candles, etc. In some cases, pieces of clothing belonging to the sick person are tied to nearby bushes or trees.

### Pre-Christian origins?

Archaeologists have tended to avoid the study of holy wells for the reason that the structures associated with holy wells tend to be relatively modern and almost invariably post-Reformation in date. Ray (2014, 44) describes Irish holy wells and being 'archeologically-resistant sites' because of the paucity of early material found during excavation (Ray 2014, 128-29). Additionally, historical references to pilgrimage to holy wells almost invariably date from the 16th century onwards, with the majority dating to the 18th and 19th centuries. There is a general assumption that holy wells are of a pre-Christian origin but there is usually little evidence to substantiate this in the case of individual wells. Furthermore, there is relatively little solid documentary evidence of their use as places of pilgrimage and devotion prior to early modern times.



This widespread assumption of pre-Christian origin for holy wells has led Rattue (1995, 2) to conclude that, 'holy wells has been and continue to be appallingly served by scholarship'. He is particularly critical of folklorists in this respect as they have tended to monopolise holy well studies. He notes that they have a tendency to regard the recently recorded devotional rituals practiced as survivals, 'of ancient custom and untainted relics of pure antiquity', and that they extend the 'motifs they found still in existence backwards to a prehistoric past' (Rattue 1995, 2-3). There is, however, a least some historical and archaeological evidence that could be used to argue for a pre-Christian origin but this evidence is in many cases equivocal. There is clear evidence for ritual practice Iron Age and Roman wells, ponds, lakes and rivers (Rattue 1995, 21-32; Ray 2014, 11-20; Ross 1967), and it could be argued that rituals associated with holy wells are derived in some way from these practices. But if, as Servius noted, there was 'no spring that is not sacred' virtually any post-Christian rituals associated with wells or water, could have its origins in pagan practice. Could not the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan, for instance, not be related to the ritual of washing away sin in the Ganges? The difficulty is in demonstrating a clear connection between pre- and post-Christian associated ritual at holy wells.

One could argue that the Church deliberately set out to Christianise pagan sacred sites, thus formally establishing continuity in use. It is often argued that the rationale for this approach is set out in Pope Gregory's letter to the St Mettius and fellow missionary St Augustine in 601, as recorded in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English people* (I. 30), which states that:

I have decided after long deliberation about the English people, that the idol temples of that race should be by no means destroyed, but only the idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars and place relics in them. For if the shrines are well built, it is essential that they should be changed from the worship of devils to the service of the true God. When this people see that their shrines are not destroyed they will be able to banish error from their hearts and be more ready to come to the places they are familiar with, but now recognising and worshipping the true God. And because they are in the habit of slaughtering much cattle to devils, some solemnity ought to be given to them in exchange for this. So on the day of dedication or the festivals of the holy martyrs, whose relics are deposited there, let them make themselves huts from the branches of trees around the churches which have been converted out of the shrines, and let them celebrate the solemnity with religious feasts (Colgrave – Mynors 1969, 107-09).

The above would suggest that it was Papal policy to convert pagan shrines to churches and by extension it could be argued that pagan wells could be converted to

Christian use. There are problems with this, however. There is little evidence for well-built pagan 'temples' that could be converted to churches in Britain or Ireland at this time. The archaeological evidence for the early church in Ireland indicates they were built on green-field sites and, if anything, deliberately avoided previously occupied sites either ritual or secular (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2014, 143-45). Fuglesang is of the opinion that Gregory's advice is not offered in the context of 'Germanic timbered temples, but rather in the context of contemporary discussions in Rome on the transformation of Roman stone temples in Italy and Gaul' (Fuglesang 2015, 26). The Pantheon in Rome, for instance, was consecrated as a church in 608. Fuglesang concludes, 'as far as I can see there is no further suggestion on the transformation of Germanic temples by either Pope Gregory or his successors and, on balance, I suggest that we regard Pope Gregory's words to St Augustine in 601 as a topical notion reflecting ongoing ecclesiastical deliberations in Italy'. Indeed, Bede elsewhere makes it clear that the retention of pagan shrines under new Christian management was not the policy practised when he records that the Northumbrian pagan priest Coifi, having undergone conversion, 'ordered his companions to destroy and set fire to the shrine and all the enclosures' (Colgrave – Mynors 1969, 187).

### Irish holy wells

Most of the studies on Irish holy wells have dealt with recording contemporary ritual and folklore associated with a particular well or wells in a particular area. The first critical overview of Irish holy wells was Patrick Logan's *Holy Wells of Ireland*, which took a thematic approach to the subject and has yet to be surpassed. The work does not deal with the origins in depth but it assumes that their genesis lies in the pre-Christian past (Logan 1980, 13).

The pre-Christian origins of holy wells and their associated rituals however were categorically rejected by M. P. Carroll (1999), an American sociologist who specialises in the sociological and psychological aspects of Catholic religious practice. Carroll, while accepting there are references to sacred and miraculous wells in medieval sources, argues that there are no references to pilgrimage and especially the 'rounding' and penitential aspect of the ritual devotion recorded in later sources. These core aspects of holy well use he sees as the product of the unique situation in Ireland after the Reformation where the majority of the population practised a religion that was different from that of the ruling elite. The Reformation in Ireland was essentially a failure in that the great majority of the population did not accept the new reformed faith, as they had done in Britain. While the practice of Catholic worship was never banned as such, all church buildings and lands were confiscated

and hierarchical administrative functions of the Catholic Church were curtailed severely. Carroll argues that new alternative forms of Catholic devotion and rituals were developed in which holy wells played a primary role. Carroll argued that the rounding rituals which are a central part of holy well devotion worship in Ireland, but absent at holy wells elsewhere, were a post-Reformation invention that went into decline after the Catholic Church was fully re-established in the 19th century.

Celeste Ray (2014) in her monograph, *The Origins of Ireland's Holy Wells*, rejects Carroll's thesis and sets out to defend the pre-Christian origins theory of wells. She provides extensive evidence for pre-Christian sacred wells in Europe but there is difficulty in demonstrating direct continuity across the introduction of Christianity. She also seeks to identify pre-Reformation evidence of 'rounding' and 'stations' as a component of pilgrimage. Ray (2014, 100) suggests that Gerald of Wales, writing in about 1186, provides evidence for the presence of 'stations' on the pilgrimage island of Lough Derg, Co. Donegal, but the evidence is problematic. Gerald refers to nine 'pits' on the island which might be interpreted as stations. He states that anyone who spends a night in one of these pits would be 'seized immediately by malignant spirits, and is crucified all night with such severe torments, and so continuously afflicted with many unspeakable punishments of fire and water and other things, that, when morning comes, there is found in his poor body scarcely even the smallest trace of life surviving' (O'Meara 1982, 61). It is more likely that these were the caves that allowed pilgrims to have the visions of purgatory for which the island was famed in medieval times. Perhaps better evidence for stations at the same site can, however, be found in later medieval sources. In 1515, Francesco Chiericati, the Italian bishop and Papal Nuncio to the English Court, made a visit to Lough Derg. He noted that bell-shaped cells (*campanas*), were a focus of the pilgrim's devotion. He stated that 'the ordinary penance is a fast on bread and water for nine consecutive days; they must also visit the cells of the three saints where they recite a certain number of prayers. Besides this they must stand in the lake, some knee-high, some waist-high and some to the neck; less penance for some, more for others' (Purcell 1987, 8). A mid-17th century map indicates that the 'stations' consisted of the foundation of several cells, each named after a saint (Harden – de Pontfarcy 1988, 186). The Italian pilgrim, Antonio Mammini visiting Lough Derg in 1411, records that he walked around the chapel on the island three times (Harden – de Pontfarcy 1988, 184). While Lough Derg is not technically a holy well site, the whole lake can be regarded as the sacred waters. The holy well at Gougane Barra, Cork, which will be discussed below, comprises of a walled-off area of a lake. The 16th century bardic poet Tagh Dhall Ó Huiginn (d. 1591)

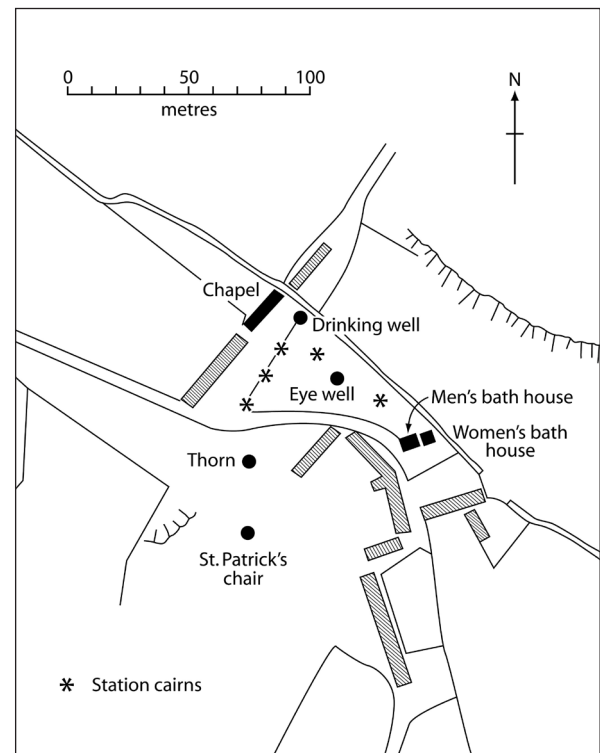


Fig. 2. Struell Wells. Shaded buildings are those shown on 1836 Ordnance Survey map. The location of station cairns are based on O'Laverty 1878 (© Finbar McCormick).

refers to the waters of Lough Derg as, 'a lake-spring to bathe all from their wounds'. The same poet also refers to pilgrims 'leaving their garments of sickness' at Lough Derg (Harden – de Pontfarcy 1988, 207). The lake clearly functioned in the same way as a holy well as far as pilgrims were concerned.

None of the pre-Reformation evidence for rounding, however, is completely convincing and it may well be that Carroll is correct and that the practice is a product of the Reformation. It could be that the origins for rounding are to be found in the rituals and liturgy of pre-Reformation and pre-Tridentine masses (pre-1570). Yates (2008, 6) notes that it was much like the Eastern Orthodox Church today with, 'the liturgy of the clergy on the one side of the screen and the private devotion on the other'. These two liturgies coincided only at the time of the Consecration with the bell being rung to draw the attention of the laity to its occurrence. The private liturgy involved devotion to relics and saints, and the offering of prayer to the departed (Duffy 1992, 118). Orthodox masses often involved constant movement between altars, icons and other sacred objects and it is likely that in pre-Reformation Ireland the laity moved around the church, offering prayers and private devotion at various altars and statues. With the Reformation and the confiscation of the churches, it may

well be that these rituals was transferred to the holy wells with the station cairns representing the altars and shrines that were previously present in the churches.

### Struell Wells

All the basic physical and ritual components associated with holy wells were present at the site of Struell Wells in County Down: pattern day, rounding, curative powers, and penitential practices, which would absolve pilgrims of their sins. In addition to this, Struell can be documented in the Early Medieval period and had documented bathing practices that were almost unique in Ireland when recorded during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. It will be argued that these bathing practices can provide an explanation for the origins of the holy well phenomenon.

Struell Wells is located close to both Saul, the site identified in early sources as the place where St Patrick began his mission in Ireland, and Downpatrick, where the saint was buried (Bieler 1979). The earliest reference to Patrick's presence at the site is preserved in the *Liber Hymnorum*, an 11th- to 12th-century compilation that contains an earlier hymn to St Patrick which dates, 'at the latest not later than 800' and which was attributed to the 5th-/6th-century St Fiacc (Stokes – Strachan 1903, ii, xxxvii, 307-21). The verses describe Patrick spending the nights in pools singing psalms and resting during the day on a flagstone having a pillar as a 'bolster'.

The cold of the weather used not to keep him from spending the night in pools: he strove after his kingdom in heaven; he preached by day on heights. In Slane north of the Benna Bairrche – neither drought nor flood used to seize it he sang a hundred psalms every night, he was a servant to the king of angels. He slept on a bare flagstone

then, and a wet quilt about him: his bolster was a pillar-stone; he left not his body in warmth (Stokes – Strachan 1903, ii, 315).

The well is called 'Slán' in the text, which in early and middle Irish means 'whole, sound, unimpaired, healthy' (Quinn 1983, 547). The well is stated to have been north of the Mourne Mountains (*Benna Bairrche*) and a gloss in the *Liber Hymnorum* identifies 'Slán' as being near Saul, which is about two miles from Struell, 'because every person over whom the water passed used to become whole (slán), and it is by Saul' (Stokes – Strachan 1903, 315). Thus, the earliest source implies that the waters were associated with the maintenance of health and curative powers. Furthermore, a gloss on the manuscript records that the site had become a place of pilgrimage, and disturbance, during the early medieval period. It records that the *Ulaid*, the local ruling dynasty, 'filled it [the well] in because of the troublesome crowds going out to it' (Stokes – Strachan 1903, ii, 315). The belief in the curative powers of other holy wells at this time is demonstrated in the Life of St Finnian of Clonard, written about 1200 (Ó Riain 2011, 319-20). When referring to a well at Ardcrnry in Co. Sligo, the Life states that, 'whatsoever sick man shall go into the well, he will come from it whole. Whatever troublesome party shall come to the *erenagh*, his honour (viz. the *erenagh's*) will not be taken away provided he repeat his *pater* at that flagstone (Hughes 1954, 262). Ray (2014, 99) regards the saying of a *pater* at a flagstone at the well as early evidence for rounding.

In terms of its physical appearance, Struell contains the most extensive range of buildings associated with a holy well anywhere in Ireland, comprising both wells and bathing houses dating to the medieval and post-medieval periods (Figs 2, 3) (McCormick 2009). The



Fig. 3. Struell. Eye well in foreground with men's (right) and women's (left) bath houses in background (© Finbar McCormick).



site also contained a church which is documented in 1306. The present church remains, however, are of 18th-century date.

Three separate rituals occurred at Struell: the rounding of the stations; penitential ritual associated with the chair where St Patrick rested after his nights in the pool; and curative activities associated with the wells and bath-houses. The rounding was associated with the stone cairn stations (now gone) and the extant buildings on the site, and followed the usual formula noted on other sites with pilgrims walking round the stations reciting prayers (*O'Lavery 1878*, 251; *Viator 1825*, 108). The penitential aspect ascending to St Patrick's seat, 'few, whose sins are of a milder cast may run up the path barefoot; but those who have been guilty of black and grievous offences, besides crawling upon their knees, must carry a large rough stone, with their hands placed upon the back of their necks' (*Viator 1825*, 108). This aspect of the rituals was completed when 'each penitent takes a seat in this chair, and is turned in it trice' (*Viator 1825*, 108).

The final part of the pattern comprised of bathing in the wells. A mid-17th-century observer had noted that St Patrick had been 'stark naked' when in the wells (*Reeves 1854*, 53) and pilgrims felt obliged to imitate this. From the 17th century, there are records of large numbers of people, sometimes several hundred, attending Struell and bathing naked in its waters, a practice that led to its suppression in the 19th century (*McCormick 2009*; *2011*). While the waters at Struell had curative powers for particular ailments and could be visited at any time of the year, the mass bathing on the pattern day for most had a different purpose. The great majority of the pilgrims were in good health and as one 19th-century observer noted, 'the physically strong and healthy bathed themselves as a shield against future affliction' (*The Downshire Protestant (newspaper) 28/6/1861*). The waters at Struell therefore had preventative as well as curative powers.

Another unusual feature of Struell Wells is that the time of pilgrimage did not coincide with the saint's day. The wells are exclusively associated with St Patrick, but yet the pilgrimage occurred at Midsummer on St John's Day. St Fiacc's hymn appears to describe Patrick bathing in the well reciting psalms, in an act of Christianising a site that was of significant pagan importance associated with Midsummer. Tírechán's late 7th-century *Life of St Patrick* also describes several instances where Patrick 'converts' wells to Christianity, usually by using their waters for baptism. He baptised the daughters of Loíguire at a well called *Clébach*, near Tusk, Co. Roscommon (*Bieler 1979*, 143-5), while he baptised St Erc at a well near Tara (*Bieler 1979*, 135). At the well of Sine, Co. Mayo, he is said to have baptised 'many thousands of people' (*Bieler 1979*, 152-153). Tírechán's *Life* describes a particular incident at a well also called

'Slán', which seems to have been located in the same area in Co. Mayo, in which the pagan nature of the well is explicitly expressed. He states that, 'the druids honoured the well and offered gifts to it as to a god' (*Bieler 1979*, 153-5). Patrick 'converted' the well and demonstrated its new status by baptising someone with its waters.

Description of Struell indicates that crowds gathered for several days around Midsummer, and that the midnight on St John's Eve was regarded as the moment when the powers of the waters were considered to be at their greatest, and a 'miraculous' surge in the waters was supposed to occur at this precise time. *Viator (1825*, 110) records that '[a]t the midnight hour, precisely at the point of time which separates midsummer eve from midsummer day, when all is silence, and all expectation, the channel that forms the communication between the wells, becomes insufficient to contain the increasing stream; and its waters burst forth, overflowing the entire plain'. He continues, '[a]ll modesty is here thrown aside. As they approach the well they throw off even their undergarments; and with Lacedemonian [Spartan] indifference they go forward in a state of absolute nudity, plunge in, and bathe promiscuously'. The Downshire Protestant (28/6/1861) further elaborates on the approach to midnight, '[a]s the time approached, the excitement increased. The bath-house was full. The eye-well was crowded. Bottles, jars and portable pitchers were brought into requisition to carry away the 'first shot' of the doubly distilled holy water! As the hour of twelve approached a considerable number of men and women, perfectly nude, and closely crammed together, waited in that Bath-house and struggled against each other, to get first serves with the water. We cannot go further into this description of this abominable scene – so disgraceful to our county.'

## Conclusions

The condemnatory nature of these reports echoes the criticism of midsummer activities by some early Church fathers. St Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), in modern Algeria, condemned Christians who continued to observe the pagan practice of bathing in the sea at midsummer, '[o]n the Birthday of St John the Baptist ... in celebration of a pagan superstition, Christians come to the sea and there they baptized themselves' (*Muldowney 1959*, 47). The custom was also practised, and likewise, condemned in Europe. A sermon of St Caesarius of Arles (d. 542) stated, '[l]et no one on the feast of St John dare to bathe in the fountains or marshes or rivers either at night or early in the morning; that wretched custom still remains from pagan observances' (*Mueller 1956*, 167-8).

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the midsummer bathing at Struell demonstrates continuity from these pre-Christian midsummer bathing practices.

Bathing rituals are also traditionally associated with midsummers elsewhere which again seem to be related to the activities condemned by St Augustine and St Caesarius. Westermarck (1905, 32; 1926) noted that midsummer ceremonial bathing in the sea, springs or rivers was practised in Morocco as it was believed that those who partook in the custom would 'suffer from no disease during the whole year'. Bathing in the sea or ponds sometimes accompanied the St John's Eve fires in parts of southern France in order to ward off sickness for the coming year (Frazer 1914, 194).

Animals were also bathed at midsummer for curative purposes. Neville (1713, 264) noted that at Lough Neagh, Ireland's largest lake, 'crowds come here on Midsummer eve and all sorts of sick, and sick cattle, are brought there likewise and driven into the water for their cure'. At Gougane Barra, Co Cork, the pattern, like Struell, is held at midsummer rather than on the saint's day. The 'well', as noted above, is in fact a walled-off section of the lake. Logan (1980, 128) states that 'at the time of the pilgrimage, people drove their cattle through part of the lake as a method of preventing the murrain'. Bathing animals at midsummer for their health had a wide distribution. Westermarck (1905, 31) noted that the people of the Andja, in Morocco, bathed their livestock, 'horses, mules and donkeys, cattle, sheep and goats', in the sea and rivers at midsummer. The contemporary festival of goat-washing in the sea on midsummer at Puerto de la Cruz, Tenerife, is a likely survival of the same tradition.

The evidence outlined above, though circumstantial, strongly suggests the existence of a pre-Christian midsummer pagan bathing festival associated with the promotion of health in both humans and livestock. St John's association with baptism would therefore have made him a fitting choice by the early Church for patronage of midsummer. It might further be suggested that all 'holy wells' were originally associated with midsummer but later moved to the feast days of saints, thus removing their pagan midsummer associations. In some instances, however, the mid-summer tradition was so powerful that it proved resistant to change. Thus while Struell is associated with St Patrick (17th March) and Gougane Barra with St Finbarr (25th September), the patron's day remained midsummer down to the present. It could also be argued that bathing, rather than rounding of stations, comprised the original rituals performed at holy wells. St Patrick was essentially bathing in the waters of Struell while St. Monenna of Killeevy, Co. Armagh, is described in her 12th-century hagiography as 'sitting up to her breasts in water' in her holy well (*Ulster Society for Medieval Latin Studies* 1979, 269). Pilgrims immersed in the waters of Lough Derg have already been referred to, while a 17th-century account describes 'a great multitude of persons, men women and children, assembled to bathe in a well

near Galway' (Lynch 1662, 57). Although no detail of the bathing is given it may have comprised of naked bathing as noted at Struell. An early 19th-century description of activities at an inter-tidal holy well at Malin Head, Co. Donegal, indicates that the bathing activities described at Struell were not unique. McParlan (1802, 17) noted 'a general ablution in the sea, male and female all frisking and playing in the water stark naked and washing off each other's sins'. Church intolerance for such activity probably explains the disappearance of bathing rituals at most sites.

The hypothesis forwarded here is, however, based on the evidence from a few sites providing evidence for curative bathing at midsummer. Investigations need to be made of traditions associated with wells across Europe in order to ascertain if similar midsummer practices existed elsewhere.

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# RELIGION, CULTS & RITUALS IN THE MEDIEVAL RURAL ENVIRONMENT

The study of belief, faith and religious practices can provide a deep insight into historical societies, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish or pagan. They form a constant of human behaviour. Through religion, cult and rituals, multi-layered and complex cultural norms are expressed, demonstrating group affiliation. However, popular devotion and belief in a rural environment can include practices that are out with those of the official religion.

Some of these practices discussed in this book can be investigated through archaeology. Important religious sites like churches, monasteries, mosques and synagogues as well as caves, holy wells and hermitages are discussed. Furthermore burials of children, revenants and the condemned are analysed, as they often deviate from normal practice and shed light on particular communities and their beliefs. Rituals concerning the protection of buildings and persons which focus on objects attributed with religious qualities are another area explored. Through archaeological research it is possible to gain an understanding of popular religion of medieval and early modern times and also to draw conclusions about religious ideas that are not written in documents. By bringing together these topics this book is of particular interest to scholars working in the field of archaeology, history and cultural anthropology.

*The addressed subjects were the theme of an international conference of the RURALIA association held in Clervaux, Luxemburg, in September 2015. Ruralia promotes the archaeology of medieval settlement and rural life. Current research questions in rural archaeology are discussed in an European wide context. The aim is to strengthen the exchange of knowledge in, and the development of, archaeologically comparable studies, and to make archaeological results available to other disciplines.*

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