



## Paying the Rounds at Ireland's Holy Wells

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**Abstract.** – Anthropological analyses of pilgrimage and popular religiosity have given scant attention to transgenerational patterns in localized, unofficial liturgies. Broadening Gwen Neville's concept of "folk liturgy," this essay considers the sociospatial dialectic between liturgy, landscape and community at Ireland's holy wells. Often dedicated to unofficial and territorial "saints," wells preside over thaumaturgical landscapes that incorporate prehistoric sites, sacred trees and rocks as "stations" for prayer. Called "paying the rounds," the structured visitations of stations constitute liturgies unique to the physical attributes of each site. Localized "rounding" at holy wells contests many anthropological conventions about the process of pilgrimage. *[Ireland, holy well, folk liturgy, sacred landscapes, saint cults]*

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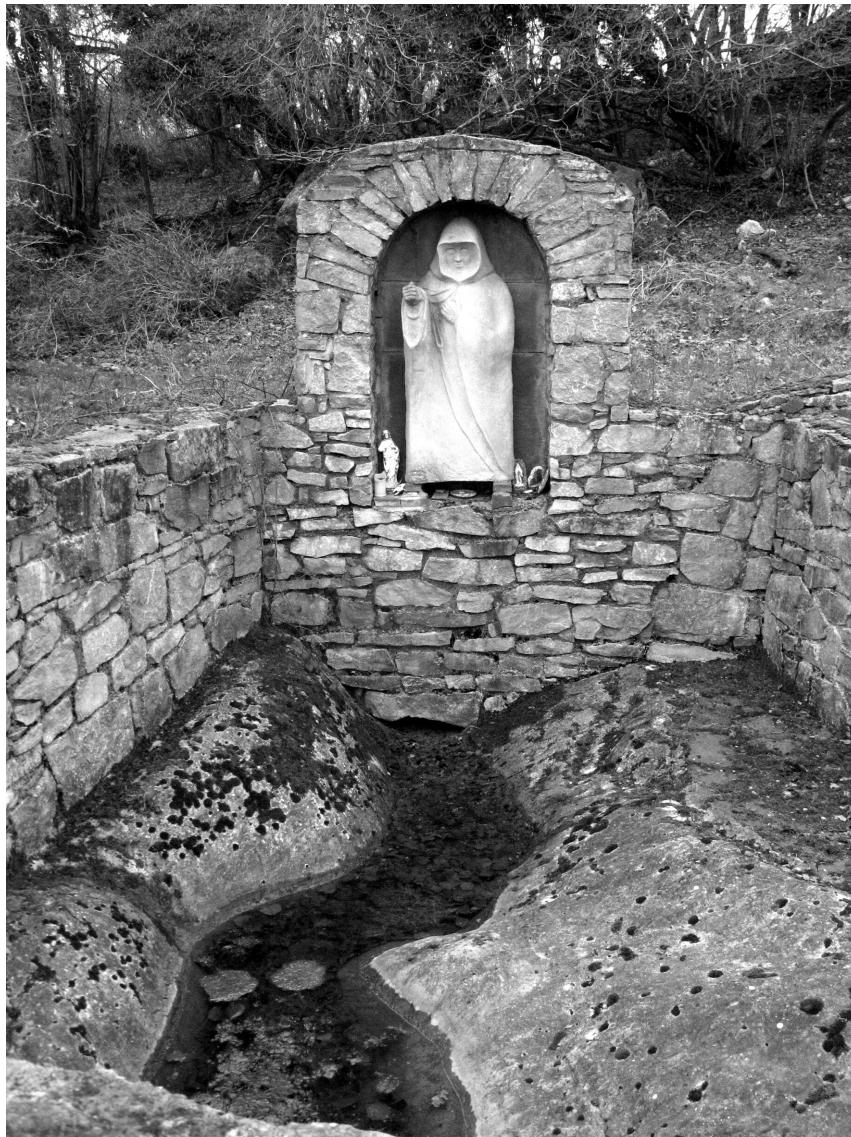
At Glenavoo, County Sligo, in the Mullarkeys' front yard is a place called "Lug na Péiste" (The Hollow of the Beast) where the fifth-century St. Attracta slew a dragon. A health-giving spring immediately gushed forth at the spot and became "Tobar Attracta" (St. Attracta's Holy Well). On the Sunday closest to her annual feast day, parishioners gather for a wellside mass and bless themselves with the water.<sup>1</sup> Situated within a horseshoe-shaped earthen mound, the well is almost seven feet below the surface in "the hollow," and is accessed by stone steps. It is one of over three thousand wells once venerated across Ireland.

A holy well is a water source, most often a spring (but sometimes a pond or an entire lake), which is a site of religious devotion. In Ireland, these sacred sites are commonly dedicated to a saint and their waters can be blessed with "a cure" for particular ailments. Formerly wells specialized in diseases such as tuberculosis, "sore eyes" and pertussis. Today they are resorted to for sore throats, head, back, stomach, and toothaches, warts and other skin complaints, eye problems, anxiety, and even cancer. Some wells are rich in specific chemicals such as potassium or magnesium and waters connected with skin complaints, for example, often contain sulphur. Chalybeate springs, containing iron salts, yield "strength-building" water. Those efficacious in improving mental health can have naturally-occurring lithium, as in County Kerry's "Valley of the Mad."<sup>2</sup>

Our daily physical need for water has fostered panhuman hydrolatry. Sacred wells and springs can be found around the globe: in Australia, Aboriginal ancestors are still greeted at water holes they created in Dreamtime; Mexico has its holy water *aguajes* and Mayan *cenotes*; Haiti has the healing pilgrimage waterfall at Sodo; Mami Wata has become the generalized name for healing spirits who inhabit a variety of water bodies in Niger and Nigeria; Shinto *kami* (spirits) dwell in Japanese springs, and Zamzam at Mecca is the holiest well in Islam, visited by millions annually on the hajj. As Eliade

1 Celebrations of Attracta's day have migrated from August 11th to August 12th in the last half-century.

2 In the U.S.A., lithium rich waters are commonly named "Lithia Springs."



**Fig. 1:** St. Manchán's holy well at Lemanaghan, County Offaly.

noted "... water symbolises the whole of potentiality; it is *fons et origo*, the source of all possible existence" (1958: 188). The first people to reach Ireland, during the Mesolithic, surely venerated water sources and Christina Fredengren argues that lithic materials and human remains deposited in Irish lakes in this period may have been votives (2002). Gabriel Cooney suggests that Neolithic votive deposition of human remains, pottery, and stone axes in Irish bogs, coastal wetlands, and rivers may be associated with a veneration of ancestral spirits (2000: 189, 130). Iron Age votives have been found at holy wells in current use such as St. Anne's well at Randalstown, County Meath (Raftery 1994: 182f., 213; Warner 1976: 282). The Irish sacred water tradition entered Christian practice from a previous and long-

lived existence and is a legacy of the syncretism that shaped indigenous visions of Christianity.

Early Christian missionaries taught where people already worshiped and folded pagan places of pilgrimage, including holy wells and trees, into the new faith. Hallowed sites and peoples' desire to access their supernatural power through votive gifts continued in perpetuity although the definition of the supernatural evolved. Sacred places remained numinous and charismatic, only the presiding spirit became instead an intercessor with the divine. While such sites of natural sacrality are also common elsewhere in the world, Ireland is unusual in Europe in retaining holy well visitation as a regular part of Catholic parish life. Well visitation is no longer as prevalent as it was two generations ago,

but in every county across the island of Ireland, holy wells remain sites of daily individual devotions and of annual “patterns,” or Patron days, when communities gather for wellside mass to honor the associated saint and affirm group membership and identity.<sup>3</sup> Based on over a decade of participant-observation at pattern days, visitation of almost 800 well sites, ethnohistorical research, and focus-group and individual interviews, this essay examines how the unique physical settings of wells have inspired devotional liturgies for engaging the supernatural, and how these localized “rounding” traditions affirm community and faith, and challenge many anthropological conventions about the process of pilgrimage.

### The Folk Liturgy of Rounding

Visiting an Irish holy well involves performing folk liturgies called “the rounds,” which are prayers and behaviors undertaken in a set order from which a pilgrim should not deviate. Folk liturgical practices are those accepted as efficacious through generations of repetition rather than through sanction from official religious authorities. Heterodox and regularly renegotiated, folk liturgies may be challenged, qualified, or supplemented by professional religious practitioners but they remain the community’s.

While the liturgy is the order of public services and prayer sanctioned by religious officials, folk liturgy, as defined by anthropologist Gwen Kennedy Neville, is a religious gathering, service, or ritual with patterns and uncodified rules shaped by populations rather than religious officials, which often takes place in the open-air and that can be sacramen-

tal (a means to grace) (2003: 9 f.; 1987: 45). Unlike Neville, who focuses on anti-structure in American Protestant gatherings and who defines folk liturgical practices as involving “symbols of rationality in contrast to symbols of magic and mystery,” I will argue that folk liturgies can be both highly structured and much more focused on “magic and mystery” than official practice (which may dismiss folk rituals as superstitious). Neville’s concept has applicability to a variety of religions, times, and places, and specifically references a ritual/devotional repertoire unlike the older “popular piety” and the very general “popular religiosity” or “vernacular religion” (Bowman and Valk 2012), “local religion” (Christian 1996), or “popular devotion” (Orsi 1996). While popular religiosity might broadly consider how congregants experience and live their faith considering fads or trends in music or apparel, for example, folk liturgy specifically addresses parallel practices of the faithful at outdoor sites (sacred places beyond those officially-sanctioned such as buildings) which are transmitted, and heterarchically reworked, through the generations.<sup>5</sup>

Per the above, I employ folk liturgies to mean ordered ritual and devotional practices at open-air sacred sites that emerge and also evolve from transgenerational community praxis. While Neville employs her concept as distinctive of Protestantism, the idea is useful in considering any faith with a hierarchical division of religious labor and “great tradition.” In folk liturgies are expressed understandings of the veneration of saints and blessed persons, pilgrimages and shrines, holy days, and religious work on behalf of the deceased. Most every organized faith has folk rituals enduring alongside (and occasionally in contravention of) what religious practitioners approve. Folk liturgy can well describe syncretic Andean celebrations of Qoyllur Rit'i (at the scene of

3 Even in County Dublin (home to over 25% of Ireland’s 4.5 million population), where holy well practices are least known, Gary Branigan identified seventy-nine still in existence (2012: 12f.).

4 Ethnohistorical research for this essay has considered wells in medieval saints’ lives, late medieval historical accounts and letters, seventeenth- through nineteenth-century antiquarian works on folk tradition, Protestant and travelers’ accounts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey “Name Books” (explaining toponyms) and their compilers’ correspondence (1834–43), and a 1934–37 survey about holy wells sent to school teachers by the Irish Folklore Institute. In 1935 the Institute became the Irish Folklore Commission and began the School’s Folklore Scheme (1937–38) through which children collected stories about a variety of subjects deemed of “national importance” in the still early days of Ireland’s independence (these accounts are available at County libraries and at the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin). Ethnohistorical research in part informs this essay’s discussion of patterns in wellside liturgies, beliefs about votives and the loss of well traditions. “Rounding” is a term employed by consultants in interviews.

5 “Folk” no longer implies “uneducated” and “popular” is more often used as “current” rather than in contrast to “elite” now, but theologian Paul Post interestingly employs “devotional ritual” to avoid condescension in describing popular liturgies (2007: 36). Of course, liturgy and ritual are not exchangeable, but I have not adopted Post’s term because although there are many similarities between folk liturgies and what Post nicely describes as “devotional rituals,” his definition of the latter notes they are “festive” and “characterized by consideration for or emphasis on emotion, empathy, and drama.” This can be, but is not a defining factor in, folk liturgies and, perhaps contrary to Post’s intention, seems to counterpose these against “rational” official forms. Also, Post’s definition implies broadly accepted formats, and well liturgies can be specific to place, community, and families. Individuals also have their own format of devotions from which they do not deviate, but which they might not share unless queried. This is more common with post-World War II generations and their greater emphasis on individualism.

an apparition of Christ) in the Cuzco region of Peru (Sallnow 1987), ritualized visitation of sacred sites by Buddhists in south-central Siberia's Tunka Valley (Metzo 2008), offerings made by Christianized Norwegian Saami at *seites* (sacred stones) (Broadbent 2010: 173, 214), or the incorporation of magical practices and amulets within Islam (van Bruinessen 2009). However, heterodox practices need not challenge believers' adherence to sanctioned teachings. Folk liturgies may affirm faith in the cultural context of one's own community, family, or life experience. Place-specific rounding traditions at holy wells often perpetuate the veneration of "saints in the Irish tradition" who were never officially canonized, but whose stories and sacred landscapes make sense of belief within local and regional frames.

Holy wells might be a part of larger pilgrimage sites or may be the focus of their own sacral landscapes.<sup>6</sup> A well's physical context might be studded with other thaumaturgical features. Proper visitation of a well may require preliminary movement around these "stations" with the recitation of a set number of prayers in a prescribed order unique to the site.<sup>7</sup> While individual prayer is usually considered non-liturgical, individuals rounding the stations are performing a folk liturgy. Praying at each station and then at the well, or saying one set of prescribed prayers while circumambulating the well, constitutes one "round."<sup>8</sup> A single round might suffice for those engaging in meditative prayer or as a daily spiritual exercise, but for those praying with an intention or specific petition, multiple rounds might be required (often in sets of 3, 6, or 9). "Doing" or "paying the rounds" (sometimes called "performing the stations") can take hours, but may be fulfilled in part on successive shorter visits (a round each Sunday or Thursday for three weeks, for example). The "payment" of prayers may be offered to the well's

presiding saint for interceding on the supplicant's behalf or directly to God. Approach to the well itself might occur in the middle of rounding, but is commonly the culmination of these syncretic folk liturgies. Devotees may then drink the water (often in three sips) or dip their fingers in the water and bless themselves by making the sign of the cross, flicking water around their bodies three times in the name of the Trinity, or anointing an ailing portion of the body. If, after performing the rounds, one sees a fish (a trout in some, a salmon in others, or occasionally an eel) one's request will be answered. The rounding process may also be called "the pattern" and the course one follows between stations is called in Irish "*an turas*," which means "the journey" or "pilgrimage," so that even those praying the rounds at their *local* holy well refer to their actions as pilgrimage.<sup>9</sup>

## Stations and the Pattern

Stations may take a variety of forms. Credited with supernatural personalities of their own, trees are often stations and recipients of votives. Trees sacred to a parish, and to the early Christian and pagan *túaths* (tribal settlements with petty kings), were called *bili*. Just as early medieval missionaries often built their foundations near supermundane springs, they also built them near the local *bile* (singular).<sup>10</sup> These two landscape features sacred to a tribe/*túath*, and later to the parish, are coupled in Iron Age sagas, in the medieval "*Lives of the Saints*," and today are considered an expected complement.<sup>11</sup> Both transferred in patronage from tutelary deities to heroic saints, who are often credited with the trees' creation by leaving their staffs thrust in the ground overnight beside a well – the waters of which they employed the next morning in baptizing those converted by the miraculous germination.

6 A well might itself be a station in a larger pilgrimage such as that honoring St Colmcille at Gleanncholmcille, Donegal or the ascent of Mam Ean (a high pass through the Maum Turk Mountains from which St. Patrick blessed what is now Connemara, County Galway) where pilgrims visit prayer stations, his well and his "bed."

7 "Station" is also a term employed to reference the celebration of mass in a private house (Fenning 2002: 141).

8 Tomás Ó Carragáin notes that Irish saints' "Lives" vividly describe a saint leading a procession of kings and elders right-hand-wise (*deiseal*) around the perimeter of his settlement (2010: 211). This seems to have been reenacted in medieval times on a saint's feast day or the anniversary of the site's foundation. Perhaps this is the origin of rounding, or perhaps this practice conformed to a paradigm with which the Irish were already familiar. A fourteenth-century account of St. Maedoc's life describes his devotions as taking "many hours going round crosses ... while thus at the monument (*ulaidh*) in psalms and genuflexions" (Gillespie 2004: 149).

9 Irish Christians have always emphasized local pilgrimage (Nolan 1983) and Kathleen Hughes commented that the eighth-century St. Samthann taught her disciples "God is as near to Ireland as to Rome or elsewhere – the way to the kingdom of heaven is the same distance from every land, so there is no need to go overseas" and noted a ninth-century poem beginning "to go to Rome, much labour, little profit" (1960: 147).

10 Ó hÓgáin (1999: 215); Bitel (1990: 44); Delahunt (2007: 208); Lucas (1963: 30f.).

11 Holy wells not only have trees, but can exist in them, usually at the site of a broken branch or indentation where dew and rain water collect. When, by tradition, a Protestant tried to close off St. Fintan's well at his foundation at Clonenagh in County Laois, the spring crossed the road and ran ten feet up a sycamore tree to lodge in its branches, which the devoted visited until the tree fell in a 1994 storm.

From Ireland's early medieval literature (dating from the six to the nine hundreds), we know people both feared and honored the *bile*. In some stories a piece of wood or bark from a *bile* could be apotropaic, in others, the removal of any part of the tree was a profanation. Bark from sacred trees such as St. Cranait's tree at Killuragh, Co Cork was considered protective against drowning and travel-sicknesses and emigrants carried pieces from two of her holy ash trees abroad in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Power 2000: 471).

The most common of wellside trees, whitethorn (hawthorn), ash and holly, are often called “rag trees” as they receive rags and ribbons both as votives and as containers of the illnesses or anxiety that may bring one to the site. The tree has come to perform the sacrificial act of bearing the devotee's concerns and further enabling the well to offer grace (though both impose conditions).

Irish trees are hardly unique in their connection to supernatural characters, healing, and ancestral wisdom; with roots reaching deep into the ground and branches stretching towards the sky, trees are *axis mundi* par excellence. Individual trees like Indra's wish-granting Kalpavriksha, Gautama Buddha's enlightenment-inspiring Bodhi, and Yggdrasil, the Norse ash that links and shelters all worlds and planes of existence, are internationally renowned. Susan S. Sered (1999) has written about how the sacred groves of Okinawa keep alive the memory of patron-like priestesses (*kami-sama*) and Nicholas Saunders and Dorrick Gray have recounted Amazonian beliefs in trees sprouting from ancestral culture heroes' ashes; carrying their souls heavenwards as they grew (1996). Irish sacred trees likewise recall the heroic actions and foundations of early female and male missionaries in the territories they claimed for conversion. Like the sprouting-staff origin stories, the tree station provides physical affirmation that miracles, or at least change, can happen. This is the station where one surrenders disbelief, fear, and anger in preparation for receiving grace. Like the Indian *kaavu* (sacred groves by a Hindu temple) which Uchiyamada describes as “the depository of sin and malevolence” (1998: 193), the wellside tree is a station of riddance in contrast to the giving waters of the well where devotees linger. (Some octogenarian and nonagenarian consultants who had actively stewarded well sites described wellside trees in this way and noted that it was at a tree they might say an act of contrition before blessing themselves with well water.) Because cloths or ribbons, or other votives, tied or hung on a tree are thought to be the repositories of angst and disease, many well devotees are careful not to touch others' when leaving

their own, and parishioners who occasionally clean away a surfeit of votives may go to the local priest for a blessing before carrying out their work. While people remove a fallen wellside tree, if it did not uproot they rarely risk supernatural repercussions by grinding the stump which continues to act as a votive-receiving station and a successor *bile* may be planted beside it on the next pattern day.

Stations may also include pre-Christian monuments as at Glencolmcille, County Donegal, where a 5,000-year-old megalithic court tomb is a station in St. Colmcille's four-hour long *turas* or an ogham stone near St. Mobhí's miraculous “crozier” well in Kilmovée Parish County Mayo (which came into existence when he struck the ground with his staff for baptismal water).<sup>12</sup> Stations in a well landscape may also include other natural features such as unusually-shaped stones where early Christian saints are said to have prayed (and in which they left indentations of their knees or elbows because of the fervor and duration of their meditations) (see Bord 2004; Zucchelli 2007). *Bullauns* (commonly considered stone querns dating from the Bronze Age to Medieval times) serve as stations and are often called wells themselves since they hold rainwater and dew (the Republic's Sites and Monuments Record lists almost 1,000 known *bullaun* stones).<sup>13</sup> *Bullauns* sometimes retain their grinders which are ritually moved and variously called “curing stones, cursing stones, or swearing stones” depending on the ritualist's intentions.<sup>14</sup> “Mass Rocks,” stone altars where mass was said secretly in Penal times and oddly-formed boulders can serve as stations which, in conjunction with the well, offer particular cures.<sup>15</sup> For example, for backache, one may sit in St. Patrick's stone “chair” in Altadaven, County Tyrone, recline on a rock on a hill above his well in Dromore, County Sligo, or climb under a stone altar at

12 Ogham stones are orthostats inscribed with an indigenous script, which may have emerged in the 4th century and are usually perceived to be grave markers (naming X as the son of Y) or territorial markers. In this case, the stone was found in a local structure and re-erected beside the well.

13 Even landowners respectful of holy wells (or their children who remember their parents' veneration of a site) have erected farm outbuildings beside holy wells in the 20th and early 21st centuries. When the well loses its landscape context, associated *bullauns* have been reused as planters or even dog bowls.

14 Late 19th-century priests are credited with “disappearing” many *bullaun* grinders and other “cursing stones” (Zucchelli 2007: 107). Veronica Strang notes three wells in England and Wales specifically known as cursing wells (2004: 87, note 11).

15 Between 1691–1760, Penal Legislation limited Catholic civil and religious rights. During the reign of Queen Anne attending pilgrimages to holy wells was a punishable offence. Penal Codes were differentially enforced across rural and urban areas and began to crumble by George III's reign.



**Fig. 2:** St. Lassair's curative wellside altar at Kilronan, County Sligo.

St. Lassair's well at Kilronan, County Roscommon. Whether prehistoric sites, trees or *bullauns*, stations at some point entered the cultural orbit of the holy well and derive their current cultural significance as part of the well landscape and its unique liturgy.

Rounds, then, are idiosyncratic to each site. Some stations may each entail multiple stops for prayer, so that one might say a set of prayers on either side of a prehistoric mound or at two locations within a church ruin as on St. Gobnait's *turas* at Ballyvourney, County Cork. One round at her complex has five stations that include eleven prayer stops. Some wells lack any built structures or adornment and associated stations, if any, may be hard to find without guidance from a local or the presence of votives. Other holy wells are within elaborate, multi-acre complexes with signs that offer pilgrims optional directions for full or abbreviated rounds. One may need to perform some prayers kneeling, some standing or repeat sets while circumambulating a station. Pilgrims may need to position their backs to a church ruin and renounce the devil or know when to remove their shoes, as at St. Patrick's holy well in Belcoo, County Fermanagh. Posted diagrams and other signage at wells with many stations also importantly indicate the direction in which rounds are to be performed. One must pay the rounds correctly to merit an answer to a petition and incorrect performance can be dangerous. Stations must remain on one's right-hand side as one circumambulates a well space in a sunwise or clockwise direction called the *deiseal*. To go the other way (*tuathal*) is unlucky, could offend the well, and cause it to move away, or might invoke a curse rather than a blessing.<sup>16</sup>

16 This favored direction is hardly unique to the Celts; many cultures emphasize a "sunwise" flow (Suzuki and Knudtson

Rounding may be done at any time, but well waters are believed particularly potent at midnight before a saint's feast day and to remain at full strength until the following midnight. Wells are also most active on Good Friday, Garland Sunday (the last Sunday in July), and August 15th, the commemoration of the Assumption of Mary.<sup>17</sup> When communities assemble for a pattern day in the twenty-first century, they may have mass, hymn-singing, even wellside confession, but performing the complete rounds *en masse*, as was the practice in the nineteenth century and into the mid-twentieth, is uncommon. Community members meet in smaller groups to say the Rosary at the site on the eve of a saint's feast day or complete the rounds together before or after a wellside service, either by plan or inspiration.

Prior to the pattern-day-mass at Saint Kieran's well in Castlekeeran, County Meath, a few dozen also gather for the Rosary at midnight in hopes of spotting the well's immortal trout (their appearance is a harbinger of answered prayer and they may appear at any time, but favor that pre-feast day moment). On the eve of Assumption day 2012, over 300 parishioners of all ages assembled for a midnight mass at Our Lady's well in Dundalk, County Louth, after which the faithful took away bottles of well water to keep in their homes for the coming year. In western County Clare, August 2nd is the day of St. McCrehy or Mac Reithe (a shadowy figure who once received tribute in cattle from "his people"). At Liscannor, on the Atlantic coast, the current and much-loved parish priest revived a pattern in which congregants say the Rosary together while circumambulating McCrehy's *leaba* (bed), a large rock revealed at low tide. Completing prayers, they deposit votive bouquets on the *leaba* (which may be kissed for healing), collect sand from near the bed (as protection against coastal storms and "storms of the mind"), and return to the shore to watch the incoming tide claim their offerings. Much more common than McCrehy's rounds is the practice at St. Patrick's well near Lough Gur in County Limerick in which parishioners first gather for a morning mass

1992: 155). Yi-Fu Tuan has pointed out that while the Chinese are "an exception to the rule," most cultures conceive of the left side as profane and the right and front as sacred (2005: 35, 42). The classical writers, Posidonius and Athenaeus among them, described the ancient Celts as following this directional taboo and the *deiseal* also appears in the Irish Iron Age sagas recorded by early Christian monks. Medieval texts note the practice of "passing to the right around a rock for good fortune" and of Irish saints (who could be quite vindictive) turning rocks, or sandals, left-handwise (*tuathal*) to curse people (Ó hÓgáin 1999: 211–214).

17 Garland Sunday replaced the old August 1st festival of Lughnasa.



**Fig. 3:** Laying flowers on St. McCrehy's bed near Liscannor, County Clare.

and stroll the short distance to their well to recite a few prayers while walking around the site together and then retire to a community hall (or nearby homes) for tea and fellowship on the saint's day.

### Rounding and Official Liturgy

Robert Redfield's classic distinction between "great traditions" (in this case, interpretation of sacred texts and official practice) and "little traditions" (the daily and local enactment of belief and folk practice) inspired Neville's "folk liturgy" (Redfield 1956; Neville: 1987: 77). Folk liturgies can and do draw upon official forms, and official religious practitioners may attempt to replace some aspects of folk liturgies with sanctioned formula, but this is a nuanced contending that matters more in some time periods than in others. For example, in the context of the Counter-Reformation, Pope Clement VIII granted indulgences in 1601 for pilgrimages to St. Gobnait's well at Ballyvourney (but followed up the next year with a "proper office" for her feast day). Wellside folk liturgies may respond to official practice, but their flexibility, place-specificity, and regular innovation distinguish them, and challenge anthropological assumptions about contemporary pilgrimage.

Rounding employs prayers from the Rosary, but in a site-specific format. Whereas a "decade" of the Rosary consists of one "Our Father" followed by ten "Hail Marys" and a "Glory Be," rounding at a well might require seven "Our Fathers" at one station or three "Aves" (Hail Marys) kneeling and three more standing at another station, and prayers might also, or specifically, address the well's patron saint. Prior

to the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman invasion (ostensibly to force Ireland into conformity with Roman Catholicism) the psalms, the "Our Father," and prayers invoking protection/aid from saint patrons were the core of Irish devotion accompanied by an unusual emphasis on bodily gestures and maintaining strenuous postures in prayer. Only with the 1210 "Statuta Synodalia" of Paris was the Ave Maria encouraged as a recitation and the Rosary, consisting of the Joyful, Sorrowful, and Glorious Mysteries, only became familiar around 1500 (Jungmann 2007: 38, 67). The Mysteries of Light were added by Pope John Paul II in 2002. The mysteries each feature a set of five stories from the lives of Jesus and Mary beginning with the Annunciation and concluding with the Coronation of Mary as the Queen of Heaven. Those praying the Rosary are officially encouraged to select a mystery and say one decade while meditating on each story. At a very few holy wells, like the much-frequented Tobernalt in County Sligo, stones mnemonic of the mysteries have been erected in the last two decades as part of the "doing up" of wells with more expendable income available during Ireland's "Celtic Tiger" years and as part of efforts of Post-Vatican II-trained clergy and laity to bring folk liturgy into conformity with church-advocated devotions (Post 2007: 35). In practice, however, wells generally retain their own sequence of prayers, movements, and "back stories."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The only shrine "officials" would be local family stewards and priests (while they are conducting a mass wellside). Up to three generations ago, some wells had an individual (generally self-appointed) who would sit most days at the well advising on the rounds, making sure the site suffered no violation, and occasionally collecting monetary "offerings" from visitors.

The term “station” derives from the ancient tradition of, what we call, stational liturgy in Rome in which the Bishop of Rome would celebrate liturgies in various churches throughout the city in rotation (beginning perhaps as early as the late 2nd or early 3rd century). Eventually other cities adopted the practice, each creating its own stational liturgy or procession between churches in relation to the city’s historical and topographical peculiarities (Baldovin 1987: 35–37). Evenou (1988: 244) notes that in Jerusalem “the liturgy meant a reliving of the gospel in its original setting” so that the Christian community commemorated “gospel events in the places, real or supposed, where they had occurred” and “stational liturgical services were suitable to the place and the day” (for, e.g., Bethlehem, the Upper Room of the Last Supper and Pentecost, the Mount of Olives, Golgotha). Tracing historical mentions of the Latin word *statio*, Baldovin argues the term was related to prayer and fasting by the beginning of the third century A.D. and that there was “a clear progression in the meaning of station: from fasting, to assemblies held on fast days, to ecclesiastical assemblies, to the place denoting liturgical assemblies” (1987: 144). Stational liturgies provided a model for the group (or individual) mini-pilgrimage for those who could not travel to Jerusalem: the Stations of the Cross. While this particular meditative practice now often overlays stations at wells, it is not commensurate with holy well station rounding.<sup>19</sup> The Stations of the Cross were popularized in fifteenth-century Europe by Franciscans who erected outdoor shrines recalling points of Christ’s Passion. Stations of the Cross now feature at a minor

ity of wells, most commonly at those dedicated to the Virgin Mary like that at Rosserk Abbey, County Mayo, or at Ballyhea, Castleharrison, County Cork (wells whose local dedications and traditions have already been overwritten). In part to reign in popular traditions, nineteenth-century priests installed the Way of the Cross at a few wells such as that of St. Fursey on Knocknadober (the hill of the wells) in County Kerry. Traditional visits to St. Fursey’s well occurred on the last Sunday in July (near the old pre-Christian holiday of Lughnasa) and were accompanied by a festive gathering on the mountain summit, but the 1885 erection of the Stations of the Cross leading from the well to the mountain-top refocused pilgrims’ intentions during their ascents (MacNeill 1962: 138; O’Sullivan and Sheehan 1996: 341f.). Where these stations are erected, they may at first supplement traditional rounds, but gradually replace them (sometimes they are positioned when local rounds have been forgotten). The Way of the Cross has also been relatively-recently installed at wells still under the patronage of indigenous saints, such as St. Brigid’s at Cullion in County Westmeath or St. Cormac’s near Ballyboy, County Offaly, where sanctioning priests have made the most of well refurbishment in the last few decades to shift folk practice towards approved forms of worship. The usually crowded overlay of these 14 stations (or 15 when the Resurrection is included as the central tenant of the gospels) can eradicate the layered palimpsest of well landscapes.<sup>20</sup>

Organic well stations have generally been fewer in number (only a few wells connected to major Irish saint cults have surviving stations numbering over five). Traditional well stations have served more as keys to unlock the power of the place and as components of formulas for a cure, for example, kneeling on a flagstone, saying seven “Aves” and the Apostles’ Creed, and then soaking a swollen ankle downstream from the sacred spring. Soil from a saint’s grave, or even that of a nineteenth-century priest with the reputation for healing abilities, might be packed around an ailing tooth or rubbed onto an eczema eruption after which the petitioner mentally recites the Rosary en route to the local holy well where the soil is washed away and the healing begins. While the emplacement of Stations of the Cross can displace local liturgies, in some cases, church-sanctioned prayers accompany the surprising endurance of folk liturgies.

19 Sociologist Michael Carroll, and others citing him, have suggested that doing the rounds came about only after the Reformation (Carroll 1999; Ó Giolláin 2005). These authors ignored the archaeological evidence and accounts of the early Christian hagiographies, which provide insights into the *mentalité* of Early Christian Ireland. Some saints’ *Lives* record details on the topographical location of a saint’s church or other foundation. “The Book of Lismore” (compiled in the second half of the 1400s) contains a much earlier Irish-language “Life of St. Finnian” and notes the sick will be healed if they repeat the Pater (the Our Father) at a flagstone near the saint’s well (Hughes 1987: 355, 357, 362). Martin Robinson notes that by the time Manus O’Donnell wrote his “Life of St. Columcille” in 1532, doing the rounds was a well-established idea and that hagiographers such as O’Donnell detailed how the early saints performed them and how they reattributed ancient tombs to Christian saints (1997: 117f.). Raymond Gillespie has noted sources that document rounding rituals in the early 16th century (2010: 228). Michael Herity has also suggested that cross-inscribed stones at many of the stations of the “Turas Cholmcille” in County Donegal date to around A.D. 700 and represent a local variant of similar stones found at like pilgrimage sites along Ireland’s west coast – indicating that stations are ancient indeed (1993: 9).

20 For an interesting discussion of the “imposition of church power” and “re-shapings of holy well sites” see Ronan Foley (2010: 43f.).

John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow claimed that “[i]n the Catholic tradition, pilgrimage has always been seen as a form of penance” (1991: 21). The Irish Church (prior to the Anglo-Norman invasion) was famous for initiating elaborate penitentials (rules for reconciling the sinner with God) for every conceivable sin (Hughes 2005: 324). Without attempting to draw any straight line between the traditions of the early Irish Church and those of recent centuries, the historical accounts of rounding in the late medieval period and of pattern days in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries do emphasize a penitential dimension that is less prevalent today.<sup>21</sup> Pattern days were an annual cleansing with trembling, remorse, and fasting before rounds performed on bare knees, but were followed by an evening, or days, of celebration and flamboyant sinning. Not many set rounds begin with an act of contrition now (nor do pattern attendees set to dancing once their rounds are paid). After Catholic Emancipation (1829) and with a focus on restoring the authority of the priest and importance of confession, the church building became the site of this religious labor. A devotional revolution was furthered by the Great Famine (1845–50) and the “demographic collapse” of laborers, cottiers, and small farmers who had retained what historians have called “traditional supernaturalism” (Hoppen 1989: 69; Corish 1985: 233). Attendance at mass was only around 30% in the 1830s, but rose to more than 90% following the famine when devotion to official practices of the universal church (such as the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Stations of the Cross and the new vision of private devotions as an obligation and as penance) began to supersede folk practices (Larkin 1972).

Many rounds are to be paid barefoot, though few may now visit stations unshod (other than on a pattern day). Rounds paid in bare feet have an obviously penitential dimension. Generally, however, those who perform penitential rounds at wells are private about it, unlike participants on famous national penitential pilgrimages, such as the purging ascents up Mt. Brandon in County Kerry (on St. Brendan’s day) or County Mayo’s Croagh Patrick where St. Patrick fasted against God about the sorrows of life.<sup>22</sup> When I first learned of holy wells

in Counties Galway and Donegal while a study-abroad student in the 1980s, I was kindly guided to sites by older consultants who recalled being sent on rare occasions to say prayers at the holy well as penance (sometimes by priests and sometimes by parents). Their emphasis on penance has been lacking in fieldwork conducted since 2000.<sup>23</sup>

Eade and Sallnow’s claim might be truer in past tense, but in view of historical narratives of pilgrimage for thanksgiving, to honor a vow, for supplication, for fertility, and to draw closer to the supernatural, it seems overstated. Few now associate their wells with punishment though they might ask for forgiveness while “at their rounds.” Perceiving “afflictions” as the wages of sin has permeated many faiths, but consultants’ narratives rarely related healing with forgiveness of sin in describing those who had “obtained the cure” from a well. Stories of someone cured from “the drink” were some of the few that link human agency with an ailment. The focus of Irish pilgrimage emphasizes state of mind and the precedents and power of local places. What Sallnow called “miracle discourse” predominates over “sacrificial discourse” in describing the *turas* (1991: 144). Asked if they considered rounds a penance, consultants between the ages of sixty and the late twenties, answered in the negative and described wells not as “guilt-ridden places,” but as scenes “of calming” and “restoration” where they feel thankful and at peace to be. Even where well-side confessions are still heard near a pattern day, and though one may leave behind anxiety or regret at the site, the sacred landscape is not characterized by these. Rather than solely compensating for iniquity, “payment” of the rounds can be made in advance for favors, in gratitude, or simply to “pay” a visit to, and confide in, the well patron. Through the centuries, saints were, and remain, one’s friends, and consultants regularly described rounding at the well as similar to visiting a friend’s place where they feel welcome and in company.

While official liturgies are periodically updated through lengthy discussion and debate (agreeing to reform in the Second Vatican Council took three years), folk liturgies are much more contextual and can change much more regularly and subtly. That

21 Saints’ day gatherings at Breton holy wells were called “pardons” for the forgiveness pilgrims sought, and many Irish sites had “penitential stations.”

22 Ireland’s most frequented pilgrimage complex (with 1.5 million visitors annually) is the national Marian Shrine at Knock, County Mayo, where fifteen people saw an apparition of Mary, St. Joseph, and St. John on the exterior of the parish church in 1879. Pilgrimage there retains a penitential aspect, but is focused on healing and, with its own airport, has be-

come the Irish Lourdes. County Donegal’s St. Patrick’s Purgatory on Station Island in Lough Derg, which has attracted international pilgrims for almost a millennium, retains the tradition three days of fasting and prayer with one all-night vigil, barefoot rounding, and the revised “Rite of Penance.”

23 Lawrence J. Taylor has noted the former penitential aspect of votive stones at St. Colmcille’s well on the steep slopes of Glencolmcille, County Donegal to which pilgrims would lug three heavy stones as penance (1995: 67).

said, rounding rituals have evolved dramatically to accommodate busier lifestyles in the last forty years. Rounding is still approached with gravity, and for particular intentions, one may go secretly and silently at odd times (at or before dawn, for example) and if the petitioner meets anyone who speaks along the way, the work is considered voided. However, practice is generally much more fluid. On the way to work or a lunch break, devotees might nip into the well site and say a quick prayer (occasionally leaving the vehicle running). In a pinch, a “drive-by prayer” might be offered in which drivers pull off the road or into a layby near a well and make the sign of the cross to bless themselves before continuing on, as older farmers are still apt to do when passing near a well site on a tractor. When asked if and when they might do this, consultants noted they had done so when they were in a hurry but felt they “couldn’t pass the well” unacknowledged, or when they were going to collect a child who was in trouble at school, on the way to a funeral, or on the way to a doctor’s appointment. For the latter three reasons, they noted they had intentionally driven a less direct route to their destination to pass by the well on their way.

While rounding is sombre labor, one may break the rounds by falling into conversation with others who happen by chance to be there at the same time (not something the same parishioners would do when stopping in a church building for prayers). Exchanges between prayers might be simple nods when one party arrives or departs the site, or they

might be a lengthy sharing of one’s burden or joys. Occasionally one practitioner may spontaneously invite others to pray for the same intention if it concerns them (the health of a neighbor or a shocking situation reported in the news). Those for whom physical mobility is a challenge might pray in their vehicles after parking as close to the well as possible (even when it is not in view) and engage a passer-by or another well visitor in bringing them well water. For others unable to visit the site and do the rounds, either because of poor health or having moved from their natal areas, parishioners may stand in as proxy pilgrims. Sometimes those who have moved across the country or abroad and have outlived friends in their hometowns, might write to the children of those friends or to the parish priest with a request that someone visit the well for them. Some proxy pilgrims might even mail a bottle of well water to the petitioner, collecting it after the rounds are paid when “the merit will be in it.” Proxy volunteers might also enlist the help of neighbors they happen to meet at a well with “might you add to your prayers?” In contrast to the liturgy of the mass, wellside liturgies’ flexibility is something on which consultants comment while also noting a perceived continuity of practice. As one County Kerry woman noted (visiting a St. Senan’s well in light rain) “my prayers may not always be the way my grandmother paid the rounds, it depends on what else I have going, but I’d rather say a few prayers here, where she did – even on a wet day – than inside a building.”



**Fig. 4:** Drinking from St. Gobnait’s second well at Ballyvourney, County Cork.

Rounding rituals also evolve with the waxing and waning of a particular well's popularity and that of church-advocated prayers. Stations are lost from memory and new ones may be integrated. For example, archaeologists uncovered a second well in 1952 beside the first station of St. Gobnait's *turas* at Ballyvourney and this well is now an accepted stop on the rounds. Prayers considered appropriate to a site can also evolve (as noted, Hail Marys did not enter the rounds until the thirteenth century). The relatively recent addition of the five "Mysteries of Light" to the Rosary has entailed some shuffling where the "Mysteries" have become a part of wellside prayers. On Our Lady's Island, County Wexford, pilgrims visited two wells and circumambulated the island reciting the pre-2002 Rosary of fifteen decades. When one consultant insisted that all twenty must now be said, I asked her how she managed the change, she replied with a laugh "I just walk slower." Meaningful renegotiation of rounding traditions has probably always been their most constant feature.

### The Votive and the Power of Place

An aspect of wellside liturgies that consultants most readily mention, but about which they are also most tentative, is the votive. Around the world there are commonalities in votive practices. From Ireland to Turkey, from China to Morocco, votives often take the form of strips of cloth or rags, which are tied to sacred trees and bushes. Also globally, the meaning of such offerings can be locally contested by visitors to the same sacred site. For example, Amots Dafni (2002: 325) found seventeen reasons why, despite official bans against tree veneration, Jews, Muslims, and the Druze tie rags to sacred trees in Israel and noted three of them occur around the world ("to transfer illness to the tree, to use a rag as a visiting card, and to pacify the tree's spirits"). For many regular holy well visitors, the work of rounding is their offering. For less frequent visitors or ones with a particular burden, votives may be offered in addition to prayer or may serve as a shortcut to accompany fewer prayers. Regular visitors might make a grand gesture of a religious statue, or renovation work, while the infrequent or one-time visitor might leave a more impromptu gift.

Votive deposition usually takes place near the conclusion of a well visit and is accompanied by an additional, and personal, prayer. As well as rags and ribbons, Rosary beads are common offerings, but a shell, pebble, button, shoelace, or anything that has been in touch with one's person is appropriate. To-



**Fig. 5:** Votives at St. Ina's well (the Skour well) by Lough Hyne, County Cork.

kens peculiar to prayer requests are frequently employed: lighters from smokers trying to quit, pencils from students approaching exams, inhalers for those coping with asthma. To cope with anxiety, sufferers drive nails or coins into a wellside tree. Because the practice eventually kills the tree, some sites such as St. Finn Barr's hermitage at Gougane Barra, County Cork, now have wooden crosses to receive the coins instead – preserving the tree and affirming its cross-like symbolism as "The Tree of Life" and the route to salvation and healing.

Two main perspectives on votive offerings emerge from devotees' narratives and they correlate with other environmental views. One interpretation is that supplicants must leave a gift for the spirit/saint of the well to ensure the outcome of petitions or in thanksgiving that prayers will be or have been answered. To take away a gift and leave nothing in return is considered an offensive act and some consultants said the blessing "might not stick." The other view (though these are sometimes conflated or offered as alternatives by the same narrator) is thought to be more recent and is that one actually deposits one's anxiety or ailment into the votive and leaves it behind for the well or tree to bear or absolve. In the case of a skin condition or wound, someone

might dip a rag in well water, rub the affected area, and then leave the rag behind with the belief that as it decays, the issue will heal. To speed this along, many people now use tissues and, particularly in the North, these may be tucked into stone walls near wells. Perhaps because of the United Kingdom's vigilance over "health and safety" standards, signs now also appear at wells in the North such a St. Mochua's in Derrynoose, County Armagh, requesting that people do not deposit rags.<sup>24</sup>

These views relate to Bird-David's distinction between giving and reciprocating environments; an idea elaborated by Kay Milton (Bird-David 1990; Milton 1996: 116–126). Those leaving worry and disease-infected votives on trees or by the well perceive a "giving environment" in which the power of the place provides unconditionally.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, those leaving a votive as a gift for the *genius loci* describe themselves in more of a reciprocating relationship with the environment in which the well will answer one's needs if one fulfills obligations to respect and steward the site. This is perhaps especially evident with the leaving of votives, such as saints' scapulars, souvenirs, or bottles of water from other pilgrimage sites in Ireland or from places abroad such as Lourdes, Medjugorje, or Padre Pio's church in Italy's San Giovanni Rotondo – as if the mana from those sites could be thus transported to enhance that at the place of the deposit.<sup>26</sup> Consultants who described their liturgical actions wellside as "paying the rounds" rather than "doing" them also most strongly viewed their labor, time, and emotional investment as a form of payment or offering in an on-going relationship with the well. Those who describe such a relationship as recipro-

cal are also most likely to believe in the water's self-renewing purity and to, for example, wash a body part in water they would then drink, or wash their faces with water they scoop from under an algae cover.

Regular visitors to the same wells could express quite contrasting views on whether well landscapes were "giving" places or if humans owed them reciprocity for their benevolence. Many paths to wells in towns are littered with candy wrappers and some roadside wells contain floating rubbish, yet consultants did not always perceive this as diminishing "the strength" of a well. While stories abound about offended wells withholding their blessing, or even moving away, some visitors nevertheless clearly hold a strictly "giving" view of these sites as places where one deposits troubles. Narrators with this perspective tend to visit wells less as an offering of their time for devotions and more for a purpose (to solve a problem) and be somewhat less involved in community pattern days. Although they express gratitude and respect, they do not communicate a sense of obligation to the well or an idea that they *can* "repay" it. However, those who describe votives as gifts often comment on stewardship concerns such as a desire to "protect" the well from development, tourism, ill-treatment, or contamination from new farming practices and fertilizer runoff. Those who articulate a reciprocating view more regularly visit their wells, participate in parish gatherings, and are most involved in stewarding roles such as annual, pre-pattern day "clean-ups," painting any stone surrounds or gates, removing overgrowth and landscaping the sites. That contrasting perspectives exist about votives, being such a basic element of wellside folk liturgies, highlights the variety of ways of engaging sacred landscapes even within shared local traditions.

24 Some well sites in the Republic of Ireland have notices emphatically instructing pilgrims to drink from the well source and to bathe only from a pool of diverted well water, as at St. Declan's Well of Toor near Monagally (Móin na gCailleach), "Bog of the Hags," County Waterford.

25 These notions contrast with Charles R. Menzies and Caroline Butler's definition of "Traditional Ecological Knowledge" as being "grounded in a spiritual and reciprocal relationship between the people and their environment" (2006: 10). A giving relationship can also be "traditional" not only as exemplified by votive deposition, but by the redemptive role of the *bile* (or sacred tree).

26 Of course, this is much like the desire to populate medieval churches with thaumaturgical relics and compares in some ways to medieval and early modern foundational deposits. As Vesa-Pekka Herva and Timo Ylimaunu have noted, deposited objects "infused their special properties" into new structures (2009: 239). They also invoke the work of Paul Davies and John G. Robb discussing the appropriation of petrified material from sacred springs (*tufa*) in the construction of British chapels and churches on springhead sites to imbue the structures with the characteristics of the spring (2002).

## The Materiality of Rounding

Based partly on accounts from the first Ordnance Survey of Ireland (1824–1842), Wood-Martin claimed in 1895 that there "cannot be less than three thousand" holy wells throughout the island of Ireland (143), and the National Monuments Service has since documented over 2,900 across the Republic. As every parish had at least one and many parishes had multiple wells, the often-repeated figure of 3,000 is an underestimate. Many wells have recently been lost to new farming techniques, stock raising, forestry, EU-required road widening, and the real-estate and building boom beginning in the mid-1990s with the so-called "Celtic Tiger" econo-

my (the ripple-effect of which may be said to have lasted until 2008). While destruction of the archaeological record in general has been greatly accelerated by affluence, the loss of holy wells has been locally contentious.<sup>27</sup> The disappearance of wells, unless supernaturally provoked by an offense or dramatically filled-in by “the Protestants,” has more commonly resulted from the gradual erosion of community practice and placelore.

Patterns exist in forgetting as well as remembering. After pattern day gatherings have ceased, the steps of the wellside folk liturgy are next to go when a community begins to (as consultants said) “fail their well.”<sup>28</sup> Memory of stations then fade (one at a time as a well’s precincts shrink), followed by recollections of the specific cure or cures of a well, and next in the sequence is the identity of the well’s patron saint. The last piece of the complex of ritual, placelore, and belief that vanishes from transgenerational knowledge is the physical location of the well. There are some variations on this process; the fact that St. Brigid may have once had a well in a townland might be remembered after its exact location is lost, but generally well traditions dissipate in that order.<sup>29</sup>

Where rounding is perceived as most efficacious, the practice keeps a well active. The longevity of wells is then, tied to enduring folk liturgy – often in connection with some of the oldest saints in the Irish tradition. Ireland’s early saint cults are in some ways still “in place” and their original territories can be mapped, to some extent, by well dedications. Although sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers appropriated the oldest Irish churches (commonly dedicated to Irish saints, but now often in ruins with the decline in Protestant population), and while Roman Catholic churches built after Catholic Emancipation (1829) had new locations and new dedications, enduring holy wells suggest patterns in the geographical distribution of saint cults. For example, I have

27 In 2005, *The Economist* ranked Ireland as having the highest quality of life in the world. A real estate and construction boom has dramatically altered Irish landscapes; between twenty-six and thirty percent of houses across the island of Ireland have been built since 1996. Every community has newcomers, known as “blow-ins,” who are the contemporary equivalent of the nineteenth-century “Protestant” in stories about recent destructions of holy wells.

28 Comparing the 19th- and 20th-century sources mentioned in footnote 3, newspaper accounts over the last century, and considering participant-observation and extensive interviewing since 2000, a distinct sequence emerged in the forgetting and “loss” of a well.

29 St. Brigid is also the primary default saint when a well’s patron cannot be recalled (secondly is St. Patrick). Varying greatly in size from one acre to several thousand, townlands are Ireland’s smallest administrative units of land.

found the surviving wells of regionally important female saints including those “in the Irish tradition” to be strongly patterned. Each of the four ancient Irish provinces retains well sites and current devotion to some of these oldest “saints,” some of whom perhaps had origins among pagan supernaturals.

Ireland’s comparatively few female saints did something of merit besides save their virginity: they revived the dead, slew dragons, made cows and humans fertile, founded an abbey or church, performed miracles, converted tribal chiefs, and educated future male saints. One of the triad of heroic Irish saints along with Patrick and Colmcille, Brigid has wells across the nation, but her main shrines are in Leinster (the Southeast) and well dedications for other female saints remain regionally patterned today: Gobnait and Ité in Munster (the Southwest), Monenna (or Darerca) in Ulster (the North), Attrac-ta and Lassair in Connaught (the Northwest).<sup>30</sup> Lassair has one outstanding well remaining in North County Cork because of immigration of her devotees at some point prior to the Viking invasions. Likewise, the cult of St. Inigh Baoith (Inón Buí), which seems to have arisen in County Clare (where she had at least 17 wells), spread through devotees’ immigration across northern and central Munster. Memory of these locally- and regionally-venerated women, and sites associated with their cults, survived the Anglo-Norman invasion and Roman Catholicization of Ireland, the Protestant Reformation, the Tridentine Reforms of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,<sup>31</sup> the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Penal Codes, the Great Famine, nineteenth-century clerical attempts to stifle folk liturgies, and Pope Paul VI’s suppression of unapproved saints following Vatican II.<sup>32</sup> Rounds at their wells remain some of the more traditional, the most likely to be paid in the Irish language, and the

30 Until the works of Dorothy Ann Bray (1992, 1999), Lisa M. Bitel (1996), Elva Johnston (2002), and Catherine McKenna (2002), very little scholarship has explicitly addressed Irish female saints beyond St. Brigid. Explanation for the enduring patterning in their well dedications is to be found in the differing monastic traditions, inheritance practices, and dynastic histories of the provinces. Ó Cadhla repeats the caution of earlier writers that there were at least a dozen Brigidas and almost as many Gobnaitis (2002: 12). Women of that name who founded settlements or hermitages coalesced in folk memory over the centuries and may have acquired properties of former female pagan powers (MacNeill 1962: 274; Ó Riain 2011).

31 “Tridentine” refers to the Council of Trent (1545–1563) which defined church doctrines in answer to Protestants and stressed conformity of belief and practice.

32 Vatican II was the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, which Pope John XXIII opened in 1962 and Pope Paul VI concluded three years later.

least likely to have acquired official devotional overlays such as the Stations of the Cross.<sup>33</sup>

### Conclusion: The Sociospatial Dialectic of Rounding at the Holy Well

Considering localized holy well practices to be pilgrimage (as well devotees do) inverts many of the classic anthropological conceptions of the pilgrimage process. While Turnerian analysis views pilgrimage as anti-structural, it may have its own elaborate structure, and while anthropologists have argued that pilgrimage can temporarily free one from secular statuses and roles, pilgrimage practices in a localized context can also reinforce these (Turner and Turner 1978). Through what Christopher Y. Tilley has called “a sociospatial dialectic” (1994: 17), landscape, liturgy, and identity (personal, familial and community) are all mutually constitutive in the ritual space of the holy well. Contemporary well visitors tell the history of their townlands, their parishes, and their families with references to wellside gatherings and recall particular community and biographical happenings by association with features in these sacred landscapes. In some rural areas, well visits might coincide with the most memorable events of a person’s youth: being photographed wellside after first communion, visiting with one’s team before a big match to quaff the waters for good luck, praying with other secondary students and one’s parish priest before “Leaving Certificate” exams. Older consultants who met their spouses at a pattern day event (and returned each anniversary to pay the rounds) note, which individuals are deemed the result of their parents’ wellside prayer for a child; which community members still did their rounds into their late eighties or nineties; or they might recall the last sighting of a now-deceased friend at a wellside gathering. Moving through the sacred landscape of the well site involves what Tilley calls “a continuous presencing of previous experiences” (1994: 28) and since landscapes tell stories, as Tim Ingold notes “[t]o perceive the landscape is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance” (2000: 189). Rites of passage and events of the community become wound up in stories about a sacred gathering place and associated with the presiding saint’s benevolence. Much of the conversation at well gatherings revolves around memories of community figures, so that these sacred landscapes are evocative of past generations of

the community and also of transgenerational ties to those present.

Nineteenth and twentieth-century emigrants often took pebbles from the bottom of wells or bottles of well water with them abroad as effective talismans against numerous mishaps such as drowning and shipwreck and some twenty-first-century emigrants have been sent on their way with the same. Returning to natal areas after long absences (for education or career) today, individuals might visit a well alone as a personal act of devotion and thanksgiving, to experience their spirituality in an unguarded space, and to reconnect with place, or they might go with family members so that the well visit becomes a kin-religious gathering. Dispersed natives of County Carlow plan their annual vacations to travel home for the pattern day at St. Moling’s Well and their always-coinciding family reunions. Doing the *turas* then takes on a new meaning and revises some conventional anthropological insights on pilgrimage. Distinguishing Roman Catholic from Protestant pilgrimages, Gwen Kennedy Neville has described Protestant pilgrims as individuals “returning home” “seeking to travel back into sets of ritual relationships” with kin and place and Catholic pilgrims as going out into the world, leaving kin and place, to seek “greater spirituality” (1987: 15, 26). Irish pilgrimage has always atypically focused on local spiritual experiences (Nolan 1983) and those removed from kin-religious networks increasingly return to places that encapsulate faith, natal community, and family. Pilgrimage for Catholics can also be “returning home.” While Simon Coleman and John Elsner view travel and “the constant possibility of encountering the new” as an element distinguishing pilgrimage from other religious ritual (1995: 206), pilgrimage can be seeking the familiar. Alan Morinis has argued that there are two overarching patterns to pilgrims’ quests: 1) to become more like the supernatural, or 2) to tap into the power of the supernatural at sacred places (1992: 90). To these we can add a drive to reengage with the *habitus* of kin-religious groups and to physically revisit sacred sites affirmative of that *habitus*.

Within communities, widely divergent opinions of holy well rounding exist.<sup>34</sup> One might occasionally meet a parish priest praying at the local well, as I did on a number of occasions, but many parish priests refuse to become involved in pattern days and retired or neighboring priests might be “borrowed” for a wellside service. Although a well may

33 Excepting Ireland’s second most popular pilgrimage site honoring St. Brigid at Faughart, County Louth.

34 Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman nicely summarize anthropological visions of pilgrimage as producing *communitas* or contestation (2004: 3–5).



**Fig. 6:** The pattern at St. John's well, Nenagh, County Tipperary.

have active visitation and stewardship, even some community members who regularly attend mass may dismiss holy well beliefs as *pishogues* (superstitious traditions or spells invoked for protection or to bring harm to another). Some participants at pattern events may not have faith in wells or religion, but attend because “my mother would not have missed it,” or “my grandfather always brought me here on the day.” They attend as a community event that, as one consultant commented “remind us who our neighbors are and that we are responsible for each other.” Others who never attend mass in church will come to services at holy wells in their home parish and beyond. Consultants over sixty who fall into this category may have long-lived critiques of “the church” that predate abuse scandals. Into the 1960s, when Vatican II changed church perspectives on burying unbaptized infants and “Limbo,” holy wells could become the site of a *cillín* or an infants’ burial ground. (Unbaptized children were ineligible for burial in consecrated ground and their bereaved parents might bury them instead near holy wells, consecrated by generations of prayer and folk liturgies.) Some *cillíní* also became the burial places for older children and adults (who could include the mentally ill, women who died in childbirth, the unknown, the shipwrecked, and suicides) (Murphy 2011: 409). These stories are only now openly dis-

cussed and wellside *cillíní* are being landscaped and sign-posted. When official doctrine has denied comfort, grace could yet be requested at the local well.

In the last three decades, social norms and the Irish relationship to the church have altered with unexpected celerity and some of those devastated by over a decade of investigations into child abuse at institutions run by religious orders have left the church, or at least its buildings, for more regular engagement with open-air folk liturgies. Priests in some places have renewed wellside gatherings to attract parishioners back into the congregation. Michael Winkelman and Jill Dubisch have described pilgrimage as enabling “social healing,” noting that pilgrimage sites may also be connected with historical events, nationalism, and the reenactment of multiple visions of the past which allows for “the realignment of self with broader cultural patterns” (2005: xxviii). The localized pilgrimage and folk liturgies at Ireland’s holy wells serve as a means to social healing, as a metonym for home, in affirmation of community identity, and to reconcile faith with local and regional practice and understanding. Place-specific, wellside folk liturgies may be regularly renegotiated, may be performed alone or in groups, annually or anytime, but their performance resonates with local histories and evokes one’s community both past and present. Speaking

about what comes to mind as he pays the rounds, an octogenarian in County Offaly recounted boyhood memories of friends and family, times of worry and of celebration, and explained how his confidence in his faith was nurtured by experiences at the well. When I asked if an annual pattern gathering still took place, he replied “but that is the thing, every day is a pattern day when you pay your rounds at the well.”

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