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Book Review of Karen Overbey, *Sacral Geographies: Saints, Shrines, and Territory in Medieval Ireland*

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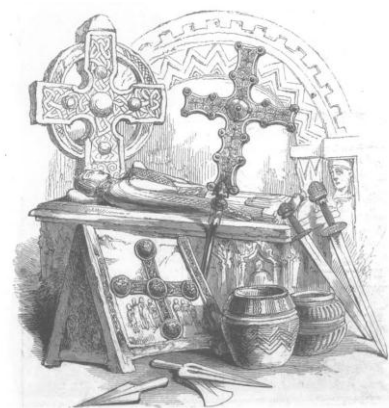
Book Review of Karen Overbey, *Sacral Geographies: Saints, Shrines, and Territory in Medieval Ireland*. Turnhout, Brepols, 258 p., 126 b/w ill. + 27 color ill., 210 x 275 mm, 2012. ISBN: 978-2-503-52767-3.

By Louise Nugent, Archaeologist and Independent Scholar

Sacral Geographies. Saints, Shrines and Territory in Medieval Ireland by Karen Overbey, is an interesting and thought-provoking exploration of the topic of Irish medieval relics and reliquaries. While previous works on the topic have focused on the morphology, typology, and iconography of relics and reliquaries, this book provides an excellent critique of relics and reliquaries from an art-historical point of view, exploring the political context of their construction, and their use in defining territorial boundaries and space (secular and ecclesiastical) through procession and movement within the landscape.

Visually the book is exquisite, with ample images of the magnificent reliquaries. The lack of maps is a drawback, as they would have enhanced the reader experience especially those unfamiliar with medieval Irish history and geography.

The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter one, *Making Space*, examines the process of collecting relics and reliquaries by antiquarians in 18th-19th-century Ireland and how these objects were used to re-affirm Irish Identity. In particular, it provides insights into the motivations of Irish antiquarians, such as George Petrie, who collected many of Ireland's ancient relics, obtaining them many from the families of hereditary keepers. 19th-century Ireland suffered economically, so parting with the relics which their families had, for centuries, guarded and cared for came more easily. This chapter explores how the newly acquired relics and reliquaries were housed and displayed and how they were used to dispel negative national stereotypes of Ireland by the emerging Nationalist movement. There is a fascinating discussion of how and why some genuine medieval reliquaries were displayed along with 19th-century replicas at the Dublin Great Industrial Exhibition of 1853.



Display, Antiquities Hall of the Dublin Great Industrial Exhibition, *The Exhibition of Art-Industry in Dublin* (1853), p. 59.



Figures on St Manchán's Shrine
Photo: Karen Overbey.

The chapter provides an excellent discussion of the political mood of the time and charts the move from private collections of relics and antiquities into a national collection, with the creation of the National Museum of Ireland, undergoing a “geographical transformation or spatial rupture” becoming items of national importance. While reading this chapter, I visited the annual pilgrimage at Ballyvourney, Co. Cork, Ireland, in honor of the Irish St. Gobnait. Part of the modern pilgrimage includes the veneration of a small, wooden, 13th-century statue of the saint which is kept locally within the parish. Each year local people continue to observe a centuries

old tradition called “taking St. Gobnait measure” where ribbons are measured against the statue and taken away and used for healing. The statue is also carried to local people who are ill and in hospital. It emphasized how right Overbey was in this hypothesis, because by removing the statue from community and placing it in a museum would completely change the meaning and significance of the statue, ending a number of long-held traditions. Many of the relics acquired by antiquarians were once sacred object in their own local community and most were still located in the vicinity of the church or monastery they were originally house in but by removing them from this local place they now became pieces of art, decorated container of the saints to be looked at and admired, symbols of Ireland’s golden age of craftsmanship. The move divorced the religious aspect of the reliquaries and they become in a sense empty containers housed in a Museum. Yet on the other hand if the mass collection had not taken place one wonders how many of these reliquaries would survive today.

Chapter two, *Holy Ground: St. Mancháin’s Shrine*, explores the creation, imagery, function of the reliquary of St. Mancháin’s shrine, honoring the founder of the monastic settlement at Lemanaghan Co. Offaly. In an intriguing discussion, the author explains the imagery of St. Mancháin’s shrine, its making, and later refurbishment within the political context of the time. In particular, Overbey makes a strong case for the shrine being commissioned by Toirrdelbach Ua Conchobair during this bid to become High King of Ireland, and that the later alterations to the shrine in the 13th century were connected to Toirrdelbach’s descendant Ruadhri Ua Conchobair. The shrine, then, had a dual function: being of a reliquary of the saint while also expressing the political aspirations of successive members of the Ua Conchobair dynasty. The small, portable shrine was probably used in ritualistic circuits to aid in defining secular and ecclesiastical territories.

Following a common early Christian tradition of mid lands Ireland, the settlement at Lemanaghan was built on an island in a bog. Overbey posits that Lemanaghan was a remote and isolated place. This is not necessarily so. Lemanaghan was far from isolated from the rest of the world and would have been linked into surrounding settlement through a complex system of roads and routeways. Bogs were no barrier to travel in early and later medieval Ireland as

excavations of the surrounding bogs have revealed a complex system of roads dating from the 6th-17th century. Their connection is also supported by placename evidence, such as the nearby village of Boher, whose name means “road.” Chapter three, *Remapping Life of Colum Cille*, explores the re-creation of the landscape of a saint through the 12th-century Irish text of the *Life of St. Colm Cille*. The *Life*, written in the form of homily, was designed to be read aloud on the saint’s feast day. The text expands the traditional landscape of the saint by providing additional holy sites connected to Colum Cille that were not mentioned in earlier medieval texts or were founded in the centuries following the saint’s death, including a full list of the extent of the Columban federation of monasteries in the 12th century. The author shows how the text was designed to allow the saint to cement links with Columban foundations such as Kells, Swords, and Moone founded long after his death. The text legitimizes the expanded Columban territories, recounting how the saint visited certain sites and by the saint’s choosing to leave behind either relics or one of his followers to lead the monastery. Overbey also discusses the earlier landscape of the saint in earlier Latin versions of his *Life*: Adomnán’s 7th-century *Vita Columbae*, & Manus O’Donnell’s 16th-century *Betha Colaim Chille* and also provides a sound discussion of the development of the sacred landscape of St. Colm Cille at Iona and beyond.

Chapter four, *The Domnach Airgid: Inside & Out*, discusses the reliquary shrine Domnach Airgid which translates as the “Silver Church.” Overbey untangles the complex story of the shrine and its subsequent association with St. Patrick. The shrine began as a reliquary: a yew box with a sliding lid, this simple box was transformed into a solid shrine in the 8th century when it was covered with decorated bronze sheets. The shrine was refurbished yet again in the 14th century by the Abbot of Clones to “rearticulate the lineage of the community and the history of Clon” (p. 111). This refurbishment covered the shrine with silver-gilt panels adorned with images of various Irish saints including St. Patrick, St. MacCartan, and a gilt figure of the crucifixion. Overbey expertly discusses symbolism of this imagery, placing the shrine and its refurbishments within the ecclesiastical and political context of the time.



Shrine of St. Patrick's Bell, 1094-1105, Armagh. Photo: National Museum of Ireland.

Chapter five, *Bells Relic and the Monastic Voice*, examines the role and function of medieval bell relics and reliquaries. The author provides an interesting discussion of the

Monymusk Reliquary, 8th century. Photo: National Museum of Scotland



symbolism of the imagery on Irish bells and their reliquaries and explores the bells role as props in ritual such as liturgical procession and the promulgation of laws. Overbey charts the use and function of bells within the monastic world and the transition of some as functional objects to the relics of saints. The chapter also explore the role of the saint's bell in hagiography. For

example, St. Berach used his bell during processions round the outer limit of monastery at Glendalough. Ringing the bell, he warded off plague by singing maledictory psalms against demons. Irish hagiography also describes how saints used bells to establish a community. Bells were known to ring spontaneously to indicate where a monastery should be built.

Chapter six, *Crosiers, Relics, and the Performance of Territorial Authority*, provides a detailed discussion of the crosier reliquaries, and a fascinating analysis of the crosier as a relic: their function and meaning within society, and the visual narrative of their decoration. It examines the imagery, refurbishment, and symbolism of various examples of Irish crosiers such as St. Féichin's Crosier. Like hand bells, crosiers had a dual function as symbols of ecclesiastical office and containers for the saint's relics (here associated in the form of the *Bachall*, e.g. saint's staff, or corporeal relics). She proposes that reliquary crosiers were symbols of lineage and succession, acting as physical links to the founding saint, and therefore used to reinforce the authority of the church, such as ceremonial circuits and processions to define and enforce spiritual and territorial boundaries.

The final section of the book, *Afterword Open Spaces*, focuses on pilgrimage. Overbey rightly points out the scarcity of contemporary historical accounts of pilgrimage in early and later medieval Ireland, leading to past neglect of the topic by Irish academics. Nonetheless, it has started to become an active field. Peter Harbison's excellent study of early medieval pilgrimage in his book *Pilgrimage in Ireland: The Monuments and the People*, has done much to progress the study of this area. Published excavations of pilgrimage sites on the west coast of Ireland at *Illaunloughlan Island: An early medieval Monastery in County Kerry* (White Marshal & Walsh 2005), *High Island: An Irish Monastery in the Atlantic* (White Marshal & Rourke 2000), and *Innishmurray: Monks and Pilgrims in an Atlantic Landscape* (O'Sullivan & Ó Carriagáin 2008), and on-going research on the east coast at the shrine of Glendalough and its surrounding landscape, by the School of Archaeology, University College Dublin, have also added greatly to our understanding of pilgrimage in early medieval Ireland. While we can never have a complete picture of the entire pilgrim landscape at any point during the medieval periods by applying a multi-disciplinary approach that combines historical and archaeological evidence we gain a clearer image of past pilgrim landscapes of Ireland.

Overbey raises some very interesting ideas in this section, but unfortunately due to the brevity of this chapter (which is an afterword), these ideas are not developed to their fullest. She explores the development of the pilgrim landscape at Lough Derg using 12th, 15th and 16th - century texts to illustrate the rites and commemorations of pilgrims at the site. There is much merit in her ideas that medieval clerics "framed traces of the saint's bodies in the landscape primarily through biblical and Christological reference."

She also briefly discusses how religious metalwork, such as reliquaries and processional crosses, could be "decommissioned" from their original monastic function and "appropriated to a new use," as objects of personal devotion, with many uses at sites which formerly were not associated with any relics. For instance, what appears to have been a broken metal cross and fragments of a bell were venerated at Lough Derg by lay pilgrims in the 17th century, yet there are no references to relics playing a role in the pilgrim rituals by earlier medieval pilgrims to the site. Similarly Murrisk Abbey, at the base of Croagh Patrick, recorded in 1652 as possessing a number of relics of St Patrick (including his teeth and the Black Bell of St. Patrick), which were used in the pilgrim rituals of post medieval pilgrims, at the Summit of the holy mountain until the 1800's. As at Lough Derg historical sources suggest that relics didn't play a part in medieval pilgrimage at the site. Unfortunately the author doesn't have space to explore how



Domnach Airgid (Silver Church) shrine, 14th century. Photo: National Museum of Ireland.

the process happened and whether it was a result of the Reformation or had begun earlier.

The pilgrim landscape of the 18th-19th century incorporates many relics of the saint in the form of holy wells, caves, and stones. Some of these features are also mentioned in medieval Lives of the some Irish saints, suggesting that some might have an ancient history. In post-medieval and modern pilgrimage traditions, many of these “natural relics” are touched by pilgrims as part of their prayers and rituals. Overbey discusses two stones associated with St. Colmcille: his pillow on Iona and the “An Glacach” or “hand stone” found on Tory Island (that has since disappeared). The later appears to have a bullaun stone which was recorded as a relic of the saint in the 16th-century text *Betha Colaim Chille* or Life of St. Colum Cille. Pilgrims have always had a desire for physical contact with the holy places or relics. Modern Irish pilgrims still take home water from holy wells which follow European accounts of medieval pilgrims taking home water, dust, or oil from holy shrines.

Overbey points out that St. Colmcille’s relic pillow on Iona shows wear from pilgrim contact. She argues that the saint, through his perceived contact with the stone such as “an Glacach” on Tory Island or his pillow on Iona, turned these stone into a relics which pilgrims could touch -- process no doubt replicated elsewhere.

The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of belt shrines which, although interesting, one wonders if it would not be more effective to have discussed the reliquary earlier in the book. Given my personal interest in pilgrimage, I found this to be the most interesting section of the book. The author covers a lot of ground and raises many interesting ideas in this short section. I would have really liked the author to have expanded her discussion and examine in more detail how ordinary pilgrims interacted with relics during medieval times, if this changed over time, and what role of procession played for the lay population of medieval Ireland. Also of interest would be a discussion of how the lay population’s relationship with relics changed from the medieval to post-medieval times and the role of the Hereditary Keeper of relics. Yet, it is based on the author’s excellent work, that such research can be built.

On the whole this is a marvelous book and adds much to earlier studies of Irish relics. The book has shown relics and reliquaries are more than just beautiful artifacts created to honor the saint; they could create holy space through procession and movement. They tell the story not just of the saint and religious devotion, but also of the social and political landscape of the time they were created and refurbished. The author also shows the importance of a multidisciplinary approach which combines art history, historical sources, and hagiography to obtain the fullest picture of the role and function of these artifacts through time. The volume provides a clear and

Bearnán Conaill (St. Conall's Bell), 8th-9th century bell with 10th century bronze plate. Photo: British Museum.



informative discussion of Irish relics and reliquaries, while raising many new and interesting ideas.