

Kenyon College

Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture

Volume 4 | Issue 3

2014

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Recommended Citation

. "Finds shine light on medieval religious rituals on Mayo Island, Caher." *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 4, 3 (2014). <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol4/iss3/14>

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Finds shine light on medieval religious rituals on Mayo Island, Caher

A medieval pilgrimage “round,” or circuit, has been identified on the Mayo island of Caher, which archaeologists believe shines fresh light on 1,000 year old religious practices in the west of Ireland. A maritime pilgrimage comprising a circuit of the island takes place annually a fortnight after Reek Sunday, but recent fieldwork has identified an outer arc of altars or “leachts,” making up a second and larger pilgrimage circuit on the south and west sides of the island. Some of these are now only faintly visible and their existence appeared to have been lost after the island was abandoned in 1838, according to archaeologist Michael Gibbons.

Mr Gibbons says Caher’s ecclesiastical complex developed over a number of phases and includes a late medieval chapel and a series of stone crosses, some of which are set up in small stone altars as pilgrimage stations. A holy well also survives to the north of the island. A wall chamber is similar to one on Inishmurray off Sligo, and may have been used by visitors who confined themselves for several days to experience visions, or by solitary religious people known as “anchorites” to contemplate.

Mr Gibbons, who has long been a critic of the method of conservation and rebuilding used by the State on Skellig Michael, says the late medieval landscape and built heritage of Caher is “now among the most valuable in Ireland as it has remained untouched by the conservers.” Caher has not been the subject of a modern survey program and “a good deal of its archaeological heritage remains unmapped,” he notes.

Read more at: http://archaeologynewsnetwork.blogspot.com/2013/12/finds-shine-light-on-medieval-religious.html#.U8_f3LHw_cs

