

The Life of Saint Gobnait

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2025

Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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1. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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2. This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA Celtic Studies

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3. This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

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Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the help, support and guidance provided by Professor Jane Carwright, whose depth of knowledge and passion have been part of my inspiration to undertake this course, and the team at the University of Wales, Trinity St David, who have been kind, caring and considerate throughout my time at the university.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Kate, who gave me the confidence in my mid-40s to attempt to complete an undergraduate degree, and then continued to give me the confidence to undertake my Masters. This confidence made me realise that I could do it, and that age (and my own perceived lack of ability) was not a barrier to learning. Who would have thought that when we met back in our own mists of time circa 1981, that our education journeys would mirror each other, and that our desire for learning would be re-ignited in our 40s. For her courage for taking the plunge and encouraging me to do the same, I will be eternally grateful.

And finally, I would like to thank my partner Jeff who is my rock, my support and my world. Without you, my love, I would not be able to do the things that I love, and your unwavering optimism, guidance, encouragement and love is wonderful - to bask in that "glow" is to feel truly blessed. You are my very own Saint, for that, and a million other reasons, thank you.

This thesis is dedicated to my darling dad who would be so proud of me. You would have enjoyed this educational journey that I have been on Dad, and would have been with me every step of the way, championing, gently chiding, and always supporting.

This is for you Dad.

Abstract

This dissertation aims to present a historical contextualisation and discussion surrounding the life of Saint Gobnait, who was supposedly a saint from the sixth or seventh century in Ireland. The areas of research will be undertaken using primary and secondary sources, as well as any extant evidence, and will encompass the folk-lore and myths that surround Saint Gobnait.

Saint Gobnait is considered to have lived and died in Ireland, during a time when Ireland was undertaking significant changes following the introduction of Christianity in the fifth century. The fact that there is any mention of her in the annals of history is significant, and this dissertation will consider who she was, and how she was incorporated into the sheer fabric and make-up of Ireland.

This analysis will consider geographical and archaeological evidence which is still evident today, as well as considering the background to the legend that has evolved around Saint Gobnait, and how this is reflected in modern society. This analysis will take into consideration both physical sources and reminders such as buildings and shrines, as well as the evidence for a more cerebral view of Saint Gobnait which will encompass the residual iconography, the continued dedication of worship, and the representations that can be evidenced in modern life.

This hagiographical discussion will centre on the life of Saint Gobnait, and her interaction with her surroundings, the folk-lore that has evolved from her legend, as well as how this can be seen in other legends associated with other saints.

At the end of this dissertation, we will be able to consider all of the evidence that has been discovered, and try to determine whether or not Gobnait was a person, and if so, did she become a saint.

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Introduction

This dissertation aims to examine the Life of Saint Gobnait, who is purported to be a sixth century saint who lived in Ireland. The potential lack of extant material is something that will be taken into consideration, and ideas around why there is a lack of material to support someone who, on the surface of it, appears to still be a popular saint and is still venerated today in Ireland, will be examined. There will be a comparison between the evidence that is available – whether directly or indirectly – in ancient sources to that which can be evidenced today will be discussed, and suggestions will be made as to why Saint Gobnait appears to still be a revered part of society in Ireland.

The significance of continuing to develop the ideas and research that have already been undertaken by scholars in a marginalised area, will help us to continue developing the narrative around women and their place in history in general, and the role that they played and continue to play. This is essential to ensure that people like Saint Gobnait are not relegated to the margins of history, but become more and more “front and centre” in the rich history of not only Ireland, but of the world. It is easy to dismiss the value that women have added throughout time as they are not always represented within historical documentation, and so any research into the area of women is something that should be embraced and developed so as to bring those people “out of the shadows, and into the light”.

It should be noted, that whilst no “official” Life (*vitae*) for Gobnait exists, there are hints of her scattered throughout various historical sources like breadcrumbs, and by following those breadcrumbs, it has allowed historians to see a wider picture of her, her life, and her continuing legacy. Those sources, scarce as they may be, alongside the folklore that has evolved over the centuries that seem to support and encourage the idea of Gobnait, will provide context and guide the reader to consider whether the evidence that will be provided in this dissertation supports the theory that Gobnait did exist, and if so, to what extent she is still regarded as vital to communities in Ireland.

The sources considered will be ancient texts, such as *The Martyrology of Donegal* and *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, as well as more modern research, and will also consider

the visual legacy that is available, and the continuing narrative that seems to be evolving around Gobnait that appears to enhance her legend and encourages the integration of her image into the minds of new generations.

The study of ancient texts are not without some challenges – whether that be a location issue due to where the ancient texts may be being housed, or on a more practical level, given the age and history of those texts, it may be difficult to see the sources in person. Since the Covid-19 pandemic in 2000, there has been a surge towards digitisation, and this has, I believe, benefitted the history community in some way, as ancient texts are now available through a plethora of on-line sources, and are now much more accessible, not only to academics, but to people who have an interest in history – and this can only be a good thing. There is something to be said about researching in a library and using the skills of the librarians to help find some elusive piece of text, but I have found that I still have access to excellent librarians on-line who have gone above and beyond in helping me locate sources and texts. This method of researching using all available sources is one that is the most appropriate as it allows the researcher to consider all of the evidence that is presented, as well as to think about “missing” evidence, and to really think about the question of why Saint Gobnait appears to still be very relevant today.

The limitations that may prevail are the lack of extant sources and material, and this is something that needs to be taken into consideration when researching an individual from the sixth or seventh century, where reading and writing were not in the normal purview of everyday life; rather they were something for the elite and usually only for elite men, and this will have affected what stories and information were considered worthy of preserving in written form. To try to counter this, this dissertation will also consider the physical attributes that still remain and the sanctity that is in place with regards to some of those topographical remains.

This dissertation aims to look at all of the available research to consider who exactly Saint Gobnait was to an earlier society, and what she means, if anything, to more modern day societies. It is interesting to note, that her perceived image is one that is replicated with ease, and a quick search on an on-line store, for example, will return

hits for items such as t-shirts, mugs and bags, alongside artworks and prints, as well as linking her to bees – the joys of an algorithm.

The first part of the dissertation will consider the early life of Gobnait, and briefly look at the journey she undertook to reach her final destination – Ballyvourney. We will examine the journey, noting her progression, and more importantly, the evidence that may be in place to support this journey.

We will then examine what we believe is known about the life of Gobnait in relation to the miracles that she is alleged to have undertaken, and the stories that are still prevalent today around some of those miracles; the powers of prayer and pilgrimage are which still evident today; and any links to other saints and their own miracles which may overlap with Gobnait. This will be followed by a consideration of her journey to get to Ballyvourney.

Moving on, it is important to consider Gobnait, her legends and the tales that have evolved over time and whether or not these are seen elsewhere in history, as well as looking in more detail at the site of Ballyvourney. We will be able to consider some of the physical structures that remain, and consider why these are still very much a focal point for worship and adoration.

The final part will concentrate on the modern day legend of Saint Gobnait, and whether she is still someone that has any prominence within the local community, and the wider area. We will consider whether there is any evidence that the cult of Saint Gobnait has dissipated over the years, or whether in fact, it has grown and is now as appealing today as it was over history. The conclusion will draw together all of the evidence that we have seen, and offer a conclusion as to whether or not Saint Gobnait existed, what she may have represented, and what she may continue to represent today.

Throughout the research that has been undertaken, many different variations on the name “Gobnait” have been seen, including Gobnat(t), Gobnet, Gobnait and Gubinet,

to name a few¹, as well as the anglicised versions of Abigail/Abby, Deborah and Judith. As there is no one standard name, I have taken the liberty of using the form provided by the author of the source, or the actual source itself, and for my own writing, I have chosen to use the name “Gobnait” throughout, in the same way that I have chosen to interchange “Gobnait” and “Saint Gobnait” – this in no way reflects a lack of reverence, but rather a more stylistic approach to my writing.

Again, throughout the research process, various spelling of Ballyvourney have been provided, including Bellyvourney, and as Ballyvourney is a Gaeltacht village, then the official name for Ballyvourney is Baile (or Bhaile) Bhúirne (or Mhúirne), and again, these words will be interchangeable throughout this dissertation.

Similarly the use of St Abban/St Abbán depends on the particular author, and I have attempted to ensure that I have followed the author’s preference wherever possible.

¹ Other names that I have come across have included MoGobnat, Gobnait, Gobtta, Ghobnat, Gobnit, Gobbonet, Gopnat, Gubeneta, Gobnata, Gobnet

Chapter One : A Saints' Life

It is important to acknowledge that trying to find primary sources to support the life of someone who reportedly lived in the sixth century is incredibly challenging. The lack of primary sources and source material is something that Kim Curran² noted when looking for sources for Scottish and Irish female religious in the medieval ages, and says that not only was it 'rare to find surviving evidence of those pieces of material culture'³, but to find the evidence for those women who existed in the margins of history can be really challenging. Joseph Falaky Nagy notes that the focus has to be on etiological narratives preserving what society needs to know and understand from its own history,⁴ and Nagy says that they 'treat [a] saint's life as a reflection of a collective tradition'.⁵ Ganly comments that saints were held in very high regard, and most Irish saints are 'believed to have lived at some point between 400-700AD, a period often referred to as "The Golden Age"'.⁶

The importance placed on trying to understand the role of women in history is one that has not necessarily been considered with the same "weight" as that of the role of men, and it is essential to consider that this inequality is something that is potentially rooted in bias, whether intentional or not. Maeve Brigid Callan notes that our understanding of the past has to be based on those interpretations that has been placed on the evidence that is available at that specific moment in time,⁷ which would suggest that as more evidence comes to light, then those interpretations will shift and develop to encompass new data and information. Callan continues by saying that the view of history is not necessarily a constant view, and that as new evidence is uncovered, then this will influence and help expand current thinking of that subject matter –

² Kimm Curran, 'Looking for medieval female religious in Britain and Ireland: sources, methodologies and pitfalls', in *Monastic Life in the Medieval British Isles*, ed. by Karen Stöber, Julie Kerr and Emilia Jamrozak, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018), pp. 159-172 (p. 163).

³ Curran, p. 165.

⁴ Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland* (Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 8 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv5rdzzb>> [accessed October 2025].

⁵ Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients*, p. 23.

⁶ Ellen Elizabeth Ganly, 'St. Abban of Moyarney: The Past is always with us', *The Past: The Organ of the Uí Cinsealaigh Historical Society*, No. 35 (2021), pp. 96-106 (p. 96). <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48635744>> [accessed November 2025]

⁷ Maeve Brigid Callan, *Sacred Sisters: Gender, Sanctity, and Power in Medieval Ireland* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), p. 17 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvscxtfj>>.

'historians change [history] all the time',⁸ and this desire for more understanding is one that drives new research and progression around a subject matter. Bias is something that should be acknowledged as this can potentially be a driver and a barrier to discovery, and any "narrator" will always have their intended audience in mind, as well as understanding the context in which the research has been conducted. Callan says that by taking women and making them part of the narrative rather than restricting them to the margins means that history can be 'a more complete and meaningful picture of the past, and its relevance for the future can emerge'.⁹

Helena Concannon raises the question when looking at saints, and in particular female saints, if it really matters whether or not we can say for certain that a saint lived, and if so, then must we pinpoint when they may have lived or where they were born – in essence, Concannon asks if it really matters if we do not have a definitive chronological timeline for a saint,¹⁰ and Robert Bartlett notes that Lives did not necessarily follow any structure and were instead 'an exercise in persuasion [with the purpose being] to persuade the reader that its subject was a saint',¹¹ and this might explain why some Lives are more of a collection of personal anecdotes rather than a linear account of an actual life. From an academic perspective, it is not always possible to know more about a saint, and this is both the frustration and reality of research, which also holds a tantalising glimmer of hope that a clear answer can be discovered. It would seem important that there are still stories of saints "cemented" within modern day constructs, and that these saints are talked about, are worshipped, and are, for want of a better word, still "relevant". If we decide that we can only consider people who we can absolutely, 100% confirm as once living, then this will severely limit our "database", and could mean that an opportunity to discover or rediscover parts of our history are overlooked, or worse still, simply ignored. By looking at how modern day interprets the past is a good reflection on relevance, and by examining how Gobnait is still prevalent in today's world would suggest, certainly at first glance, that her story is one that still garners significant interest and attention, and not only from a very local

⁸ Callan, *Sacred Sisters*, p. 18.

⁹ Callan, *Sacred Sisters*, p. 18.

¹⁰ Helena Concannon, 'The Holy Women of the Gael', *The Irish Monthly*, Vol. 45, no. 524 (1917), pp. 83-93 (p. 86) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20504722>> [accessed November 2025].

¹¹ Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*, (Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 518-9.

group of people, but people from all over the world. Karen Jankulak¹² cites David Dumville who suggests that trying to look at a period of history and provide a “slick” account of what has happened by ‘combining all of the available, and often wildly contradictory, witnesses [into] something that is [...] coherent and officially whole’¹³ is rarely successful. It is important to recognise that without extant information available, it will be difficult to prove, one way or the other, if what we now rely on is actual fact or not. History is not that neat.

The spread of civilisation and the sharing of different cults may help or hinder the dissemination of a particular story or folklore, and it may mean that the origin story is lost in the mists of time, but by different communities adopting and adapting a story or lore surely helps to preserve that memory. This can be seen today with migration and cultures and customs being undertaken outside of the country from which they originated, and this re-inventing of traditions is one that has probably been going on since people realised that they could travel, and something that Jankulak ponders by saying that ‘shared cults may arise from early medieval emigration from Britain to Brittany’.¹⁴ This shared history encourages a more diverse population, whilst preserving those traditions and anchoring them firmly in the present. And who doesn’t like the idea of a good story!

Callan observes that saints lives are idealised images and whilst they may be based on truth, they cannot necessarily be taken as an accurate account of those that they say they represent, and continues by noting that the ‘vast majority of extant early medieval Irish evidence is assumed or known to have been produced by men’,¹⁵ which, Callan suggests, could mean that we only know about history that men have decided we should know about, and therefore it is this potentially skewed and sexist version of history that Callan is seeking to address.

¹² Karen Jankulak, ‘Adjacent Saints’ Dedications and Early Celtic History’, in *Saints’ Cults in the Celtic World*, ed. by Steve Boardman, John Reuben Davies and Eila Williamson (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013), pp. 91-118 (p. 90).

¹³ Jankulak, p. 92.

¹⁴ Jankulak, p. 91.

¹⁵ Callan, *Sacred Sisters*, p. 18.

Patricia Lysaght notes that certain types of tales were told at different events and would be used to almost “rally the troops” as the narrative would be adjusted to each social setting and gathering so that it encompassed the audience. Lysaght notes that storytellers can be seen in glimpses in Irish literature, and that these storytellers were professional and learned, and were in receipt of patronage for their services.¹⁶ Lysaght suggests there were different levels of storytellers – some were very skilled and engaging, whilst there were also storytellers who were ‘less elite practitioners [...] who catered for a less privileged audience’.¹⁷ This idea that, depending on who you were, meant you might potentially receive a better tale is again, evidence of bias, and it is important to consider these different experiences that the audience would have when watching or listening to the same tale, and bear that in mind when examining sources from specific periods of time.

The tradition was for tales to be told at gatherings – whether private in-house gatherings, or for much larger audiences – and that they would be spoken performances, or maybe acted out with scenery and possible supporting “actors” would help the audience understand the nature of the tale, and as noted by Angela Bourke, these could be “told” in a variety of ways, namely ‘spoken, recited, chanted or sung’,¹⁸ and that these different ways of communicating these tales meant that they were accessible to all as they allowed people to identify with the tale and the messages that it contained. Nagy notes that there is evidence that ‘organized castes of professional knowers and verbal performers [did exist] in Ireland’,¹⁹ and Bourke notes that this ‘oral culture persists as an important medium of creative expression and [...] of record keeping’,²⁰ with the skill of the storyteller could be pivotal in gaining the attention of the audience, and helps to frame and capture a specific moment of time, or perhaps more importantly, helps to preserve traditions and to demonstrate to an audience the importance of those traditions.

¹⁶ Patricia Lysaght, ‘The Wonder Tale in Ireland’, in *A Companion to the Fairy Tale*, eds. by Hilda Ellis Davison and Anna Chaudhri (Boydell & Brewer, NED-New edition, 2003), pp. 169-190, (p. 170) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv136c2rg.15>> [accessed November 2025].

¹⁷ Lysaght, p. 170.

¹⁸ Angela Bourke, ‘General Introduction’, in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volume IV: Irish Women’s Writings and Traditions*, ed. by Angela Bourke, and others (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), pp. 1191-1197 (p.1191). <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1fkqbdv.36>>.

¹⁹ Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients*, p. 9.

²⁰ Bourke, p. 1191.

Samantha Meigs notes it was important to establish your own lineage, not only for your own family, but also those around you – enemies and friends alike, and whilst ‘literacy was low and written records were few, the burden of recall fell to the poets who were expected to know the history of any family or place in Ireland, and be able to repeat this information on demand’.²¹ The idea that tales of saints were a popular topic for oral storytelling is one that has been noted by many others, and has been instrumental in preserving these myths, but a note of caution should be included at this point, which is to say that a storyteller is only as good as their own memory, and this may explain why tales became more elaborate or embellished as time went on, and this should be remembered when considering these texts and tales. The idea that over time these tales have almost become a game of “Chinese Whispers” is one that any academic would bear in mind, and therefore it is imperative to devote sufficient thoughts and time to not only looking at the available texts, but also to look at the setting from which they have evolved, and consider other influences such as changes in kings, the invasion of the Normans, the disestablishment of the church or any other such events which will have impacted on any tales that have been preserved.

The tradition of storytelling is one that is important cross-culturally, and was used to promote a narrative that was applicable to the government or rulers of the day. Ellen Ganly comments that whilst no texts survive from the exact date that Saint Gobnait existed, any texts that were written would have been done so many years, possibly hundreds of years, after the fact, and Ganly notes that it is possible if not probable that when the texts were being transcribed or written down, elements of those texts could have been adapted to reflect the contemporary political interests of the day.²² Ganly suggests that the use of a saint’s life could be a way not only of promoting that saint, but also could be used to add leverage to political or local intentions, especially with regards to the church.²³

²¹ Samantha A. Meigs, *The Reformations in Ireland: Tradition and Confessionalism, 1400-1690* (Macmillan Press, 1997), p. 9 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25710-2>>.

²² Ellen Elizabeth Ganly, ‘St. Abban of Moyarney: The Past is always with us’, *The Past: The Organ of the Uí Cinsealaigh Historical Society*, No. 35 (2021), pp. 96-106 (pp. 96-7) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48635744>> [accessed November 2025].

²³ Ganly, ‘St. Abban of Moyarney’, p. 97.

There will always be challenges regarding how the lives of any one have been noted and preserved in different documents, and saints' lives are no different. Whilst the narrative and stories may have changed – whether through embellishment or the shift in political and historical focus – it is also worth considering how they were preserved over periods of time, and how those hagiographical interests and methods have changed over the centuries.²⁴ As discussed by Richard Sharpe, early lives were simply not written down at the time of inception, and therefore a writer would be working retrospectively, and would have to rely on the few sources that may be available to them. Sharpe does comment that if we are not able to identify an author of a work, then it would be hard to place that Life in context despite there being possible information provided in the 'annals or martyrologies or place-name dedications about the actual saint'.²⁵ This is echoed by Dorothy Ann Bray who says that 'most *vitae* are literary creations produced in a literate and monastic milieu, for the purpose of reading [and they follow] certain compositional principals, similar to the folk narrative',²⁶ and notes that this transcribing of oral traditions follows the conventions found in *vitae*.²⁷

²⁴ Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives: An Introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2011), p. 8 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198215820.003.0001>>.

²⁵ Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives*, p. 10.

²⁶ Dorothy Ann Bray, 'The Study of Folk-Motifs in Early Irish Hagiography: Problems of Approach and Rewards at Hand' in *Studies in Irish Hagiography Saints and Scholars*, ed. by John Carey, Máire Herbert, and Pádraig Ó Riain (Dublin: Four Courts Press Ltd, 2001), pp. 268-277 (p. 270) <<https://archive.org/details/studiesinirishha0000unse>> [accessed November 2025].

²⁷ Bray, 'The Study of Folk-Motifs', p. 270.

Chapter Two : Locating Saint Gobnait in Extant Material

There is no Life for Saint Gobnait, no neat package that provides us with a clear answer of who she was, when and where she lived, and what she was like. Whilst there are glimpses of her scattered throughout some ancient texts, these do not provide a coherent definition of who she was, and these fragments are just that; they do not talk about the woman that she may have been, nor provide anything about her day-to-day life. Instead, researchers are left to gather the strands that are available, and apply learning to what is, and just as importantly, is not said about Gobnait. The fact that there are potted entries for her in ancient texts would suggest that she was someone who was, at some point, important, and this can also be demonstrated in the legacy that has been left behind, which will be discussed in more detail shortly.

Returning to the legend of Saint Gobnait, it is by delving into the margins of history that we can find reference to her and her Life. There are many stories that are linked to Gobnait, and these will be touched upon, but it is important to firstly look at the historical texts to see where and in what context she appears.

Gobnait does appear in various medieval calendars, such as *Féilire Óengusso*; the Martyrology of Tallaght; the Martyrology of Donegal, and the Martyrology of Gorman, but as noted by Maeve Brigid Callan, these tell us very little about her as a person.²⁸ Callan says that by looking at female saints that do not have a *vitae* would help us to 'broaden our understanding of the complexity and empowering aspects of female religious experience in medieval Ireland'²⁹, and by looking at these more marginalised figures could help to put them into context, and also to highlight gaps in knowledge, which could help direct research moving forward. The idea that there are more women who have yet to be "discovered" is an interesting one, and one that requires more investment of time and resources to explore those "outer reaches" of existing text and documentation, as well as the physical remnants of their potential sites. Over the past few years, there has been renewed interest in looking at women and their contribution to history, and this should be encouraged. As our understanding develops, then new

²⁸ Maeve Brigid Callan, *Sacred Sisters: Gender, Sanctity, and Power in Medieval Ireland* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), p. 170 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvscxtfj>>.

²⁹ Callan, *Sacred Sisters*, p. 157.

areas to search may become more apparent, and with the advent of digitisation, this could in turn, allow for more in-depth studies of existing materials. It is interesting to note that Dorothy Ann Bray says that the Lives are, at best, 'good folklore, [and] at their worst, they are bad literature and even worse history'.³⁰ Surely with comments being made by academics such as Bray, more diverse research needs to be undertaken to see if there are more noteworthy sources that could be investigated.

The *Acta Santcorum Hiberniæ* is a collection of stories which covers the Lives of Irish Saints, and was collated in the seventeenth century by John Colgan. John O'Hanlon notes that within the *Acta Santcorum Hiberniæ* is a reference to St Gobnata who was 'a descendant from Conaire the Great, King of Ireland [and was] born probably at Boirenn, now Ballyvourney'.³¹ Kelly notes that Gobnait, who was also called Abigail by the English, and 'known in Ireland as Gobnait, Gobnit, Gobinet, and Gobnata [as well as] Deborah and Judith'³² was probably a member of the McCarthy dynasty that lived in Muskerry, rather than being the daughter of O'Connor Sligo.³³ This idea that Gobnait is descended from possible royal lineage is one that is echoed by Vivenne Keely, and notes that the association between a saint and a royal line would allow more emphasis to be placed on an exalted status and connections that are not necessarily worldly.³⁴ Keely cites an entry in *The Martyrology of Aengus* which says that Gobnait came from Muskerry, and was noted as a 'sharp-beaked nun',³⁵ and this image can be seen in more modern interpretations of Gobnait which will be explored further on this dissertation.

³⁰ Dorothy Ann Bray, 'The Study of Folk-Motifs in Early Irish Hagiography: Problems of Approach and Rewards at Hand' in *Studies in Irish Hagiography Saints and Scholars*, ed. by John Carey, Máire Herbert, and Pádraig Ó Riain (Dublin: Four Courts Press Ltd, 2001), pp. 268-277 (p. 268) <<https://archive.org/details/studiesinirishha0000unse>> [accessed November 2025].

³¹ John O'Hanlon, *Lives of the Irish Saints : with special festivals, and the commemorations of Holy persons* (Dublin, 1875), p. 463 <<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112107843572>> [accessed November 2025].

³² M.T. Kelly, 'Saint Gobnata, and her Hive of Bees, *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, Vol III (Second Series) (1897), pp. 100-106 (p. 100-01) <<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044090328717>> [accessed November 2025].

³³ Kelly, p. 101.

³⁴ Vivenne Keely, '(Re)Thinking Out Gobnait: Memory and Presence in Folklore and Landscape', in *Women and Pilgrimage*, ed. by E. Moore Quinn and Alison T. Smith (Virginia, USA: CABI, 2022), pp. 78-92 <<https://doi.org/10.1079/9781789249392.0000>>.

³⁵ Keely, p. 79.

Keely notes that whilst there is no specific *Vita* for Gobnait, there is 'rich folklore concerning her, which is centered in counties [of] Cork and Kerry'.³⁶ Some of this rich folklore is contained in the Irish Schools' Folklore Collection, which was the result of some 5,000 primary-school children in Ireland between 1937 and 1939 collecting folklore from their family, friends and neighbours, and this resulted in a vast volume of pages on a variety of topics, which included history, folk-tales, local customs and holy places.³⁷ By assimilating the oral traditions that have been collected and catalogued from each county in Ireland allows for an accumulation of folklore.³⁸ Bourke notes that 'oral traditions live alongside writing and print culture',³⁹ and that all of them combined help to provide a unique insight into life.

The contributions to this project included references to Gobnait, and the legends that were attributed to her, including her lineage, and Keely notes that at times, Gobnait has been placed in all four provinces in Ireland, as well as, in one case, originating in France,⁴⁰ along with contributions saying that Gobnait was of royal birth, and also some stating that 'her father was a pirate and robber of shrines'.⁴¹ France was also mentioned elsewhere in the Folklore Collection with a tale being recanted that Gobnait was the daughter of a 'powerful leader of France [who sold her] to a sea captain with instructions to throw her into the sea'.⁴² The sea captain decided to not throw Gobnait overboard, but rather decided to leave her at Ventry Bay, and it is from there that she started her journey in Ireland. This idea of Gobnait being associated with a pirate is echoed by Ó hÉalughthe suggests that it is a Kerry tradition for the origin of Gobnait, to say that she was the 'daughter of a foreign sea-robber'.⁴³

In *A dictionary of Irish saints*, Pádraig Ó Riain includes an entry for "Gobnait" under the entry for Ciar of Kilkeary, and says that 'Gobnait, Ciar and Sciath [are the] three

³⁶ Keely, p. 78.

³⁷ Keely, p. 79.

³⁸ Angela Bourke, 'General Introduction', in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volume IV: Irish Women's Writings and Traditions*, ed. by Angela Bourke, and others (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), pp. 1191-1197 (p. 1193) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1fkqbdv.36>>.

³⁹ Bourke, p. 1194.

⁴⁰ Keely, p. 80.

⁴¹ Keely, p. 80.

⁴² Keely, p. 81.

⁴³ D. Ó hÉalughthe, 'St Gobnet of Ballyvourney', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, Ser. 2, Vol. 57, No. 185 (1952), pp. 43-61 (p. 55) <<https://corkhist.ie/>> [accessed November 2025].

holy virgins of the descendants of Conaire'⁴⁴, and they are part of the family group known as 'Múscraighe [and that] Gobnait [was the] daughter of Meacher'.⁴⁵ There are also other entries potentially relating to Gobnait which include "Gobnait" which is attributed as the female version of Goban, which means "smith",⁴⁶ as well as including her under "Abigail (Abby)"⁴⁷ and "Deborah".⁴⁸ There are also further entries for "Gobnait (Gobnad) of Ballyvourney".⁴⁹ This association with "smith" may be, in part, based on the hypocoristic (or "pet name") *Gobba* which is from *gabha*, which Ó Riain suggests has the added feminine suffix of *-nat/-nad* added.⁵⁰ Ó Riain also notes in the entry in *The Dictionary of Irish Biography* that the 'non-hypocoristic form [...] was borne by Goibniu, smith of the Tuatha Dé Danann, an Irish version of the Celtic smith-god known in Wales as Govannon',⁵¹ and this association with Goibniu could imply that Ballyvourney was a 'sacred place going far back into the prehistoric period'.⁵² It is also suggested by Ó Riain in *The dictionary of Irish saints*, that there are links from the name "Gobnait" to Brigid 'whose pagan precursor and namesake was also regarded as a patron of ironworking'.⁵³

This association with "smith" would coincide with the fact that Gobnait was considered to be the patron of ironworkers,⁵⁴ and this potential association will be discussed further within the dissertation.

There is an entry for "Gobat" in Charles Plummerts' *Latin Lives of the Irish Saints, 1910*⁵⁵ as well as an entry in *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* under the entry

⁴⁴ Pádraig Ó Riain, *A dictionary of Irish saints*, (2011), p. 167 <<https://archive.org/details/dictionaryofiris0000oria>> [accessed November 2025].

⁴⁵ Ó Riain, *A dictionary of Irish saints*, p. 167.

⁴⁶ Ó Riain, *A dictionary of Irish saints*, p. 368.

⁴⁷ Ó Riain, *A dictionary of Irish saints*, p. 51.

⁴⁸ Ó Riain, *A dictionary of Irish saints*, p. 260.

⁴⁹ Ó Riain, *A dictionary of Irish saints*, pp. 368-9.

⁵⁰ 'Gobna(i)t', in *The Dictionary of Irish Biography* [online] <<https://www.dib.ie/biography/gobnait-a3502>> [accessed December 2025].

⁵¹ 'Gobna(i)t', in *The Dictionary of Irish Biography* [online].

⁵² Cork County Council, *Archaeological Heritage of County Cork*, (Cork: 2020), p. 191 <<https://www.corkcoco.ie/sites/default/files/2023-06/archaeological-heritage-of-county-cork-2020.pdf>> [accessed December 2025].

⁵³ Ó Riain, *A dictionary of Irish saints*, p. 368.

⁵⁴ Ó Riain, *A dictionary of Irish saints*, p. 368.

⁵⁵ Dorothy C. Harris, 'Saint Gobnet, Abbess of Ballyvourney', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol 8, no. 2 (1938), pp. 272-277 (p. 273) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25510140>> [accessed November 2025].

“Gobnet”⁵⁶ which states that Gobnet was born in County Clare, and fled to the Aran Islands to escape a family feud. In *The Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Ó Riain cites the connection between Gobnait and the church of Ballyvourney, as well as stating that she is the patron of other churches⁵⁷

Michael O’Clery notes an entry in *The Martyrology of Donegal* where Gobnait is listed as ‘Gobnat, V. at Moinmor, Feb. 11’⁵⁸, and another listing states that ‘she was of the race of Conaire, son of Modh-Lamha, monarch of Erin; she is of the race of Heremon’.⁵⁹ In *The Martyrology of Gorman*, which was, according to Whitley Stokes, ‘created in the latter part of the twelfth century by an Irish abbot [and subsequently] transcribed [...] in 1630 by one of the Four Masters, Michael O’Clery’,⁶⁰ Gobnait is listed as ‘Gobbnat, virg., Feb. 11, where the glossator says that her church was at Móin Mór in the south of Ireland, i.e. probably Moanmore near Mallow.’⁶¹ Ludwig Bieler evidenced from *The Calendar of Cashel* an entry which says that ‘O,Cuív, Brian, Two poems of invocation of Gobnait. – Éigse VI. 4 (1952) 326-32’⁶² which again refers to Gobnait within a manuscript – and in this case, this entry was located in a liturgical calendar, which adds weight to the notion the Gobnait. Located within *The Martyrology of Oengus The Culdee*, which Whitley Stokes says has been ‘ascribed to the year 800 or thereabouts’,⁶³ has identified various listings for Gobnait including a listing un February which says ‘My Gopnat with pure goodness, as to God’s love was opulent

⁵⁶ David Farmer, ‘Gobnet’, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 5th edn., (Oxford University Press, 2011) <<https://www-oxfordreference-com.uoelibrary.idm.oclc.org/display/10.1093/acref/9780199596607.001.0001/acref-9780199596607-e-736>> [accessed November 2025].

⁵⁷ ‘Gobna(i)t’, in *The Dictionary of Irish Biography* [online] <<https://www.dib.ie/biography/gobnait-a3502>> [accessed December 2025].

⁵⁸ Michael O’Clery, *The Martyrology of Donegal : A Calendar of the Saints of Ireland*, trans. by John O’Donovan (Dublin, 1864), p. 511 <<https://archive.org/details/martyrologydone00reevgoog>> [accessed November 2025].

⁵⁹ O’Clery, *The Martyrology of Donegal*, p. 47.

⁶⁰ Whitley Stokes (ed.), *The Martyrology of Gorman : edited from a manuscript in the Royal Library Brussels* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1895), p. Preface, vii. <<https://archive.org/details/martyrologyofgor09gormuoft>> [accessed November 2025].

⁶¹ Stokes (ed.), *The Martyrology of Gorman*, p. 368.

⁶² Ludwig Bieler, ‘Manuscript studies in Ireland (1951-1952), in *Scriptorium*, Tome 7 no. 2 (1953), pp. 323-325 (p. 324) <https://www.persee.fr/doc/scrip_0036-9772_1953_num_7_2_2760> [accessed November 2025].

⁶³ Whitley Stokes (ed.), *The Martyrology of Oengus The Culdee : edited from ten manuscripts, with a preface, translation, notes and indices* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1905), p. Preface, vii. <<https://archive.org/details/martyrologyfoen29oenguoft>> [accessed November 2025].

[...],⁶⁴ as well as these following entries - 'My Gobnat from Muscraige Mitaine, i.e. a sharp-beaked nun, Ernaide is the name of the place in which she is in. Or Gobnat of Bairnech in Móin Mór in the south of Ireland, and of the race of Conaire is she [...]',⁶⁵ and 'Gopnat, Gobbnat, Feb. 11, a virgin, at Móin Mór'.⁶⁶

Ó hÉalughthe notes in a journal article for the *Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*,⁶⁷ that others have also written about Gobnait, such as Henry Fitzsimon who wrote of her as 'Gobinetta Virjo, iuxta Corcagiam celeberrima'; Dáibhidh Ó Bruadair – a poet - invokes Gobnait in "*Is Bocht mo Bheatha*"; and that Don Philip Súilleabháin in *Historiae Catholicae Iberniae Compendium* notes that Gubeneta is among the great saints of Ireland.' Ó hÉalughthe also notes that Seathrún Céitinn wrote about Gobnait and noted that in '1645, Nuncio Rinuccini and Monsignor Massari heard Mass at St Gobinets'.⁶⁸ This apparent endorsement by the Monsignor of the importance of Gobnait and her church is powerful.

These entries would appear to demonstrate evidence of Gobnait, and it is worth considering at this point, that it is evidence such as this, along with genealogies and saints' lives that would '[make] up the body of historical writing [and] "saint-lore" ... and these served both as an emblem of continuity and as part of the framework of kinship and hereditary function [...]'.⁶⁹ and would become part of the history of an area, a family, or a person.

Whilst I was conducting my research, I came across an entry in *Heritage Artefacts of County Cork* which is a website set up and managed by Cork City Council, which says that whilst no life for Gobnait of Baile Bhuirne survives, they do note that, up until the seventeenth century, there was a specific Life that related directly to Gobnait, but that

⁶⁴ Stokes (ed.), *The Martyrology of Oengus The Culdee*, p. 60.

⁶⁵ Stokes (ed.), *The Martyrology of Oengus The Culdee*, p. 73.

⁶⁶ Stokes (ed.), *The Martyrology of Oengus The Culdee*, p. 424.

⁶⁷ D. Ó hÉalughthe, 'St Gobnet of Ballyvourney', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, Ser. 2, Vol. 57, No. 185 (1952), pp. 43-61 (pp. 47-48) <<https://corkhist.ie/>> [accessed November 2025].

⁶⁸ Ó hÉalughthe, 'St Gobnet of Ballyvourney', p. 48.

⁶⁹ Samantha A. Meigs, *The Reformations in Ireland: Tradition and Confessionalism, 1400-1690* (Macmillan Press, 1997), p. 28 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25710-2>>.

this was 'subsequently lost'⁷⁰, and it was this life that has possibly been the main source of the rich tradition that now surrounds Gobnait. I did not find any other direct reference to this Life existing solely in the name of Gobnait, so it would be interesting to discuss this further with the Council to try and establish how they have come to this conclusion when all of the evidence so far has not suggested that there ever was a Life, and nor has one been created and then lost.

The sources that do describe the origin story of Gobnait are located with the Lives of other Saints, and it is to these that we now turn to look at more details of Gobnait and her life.

⁷⁰ Cork County Council, *Heritage Artefacts of County Cork*, (Cork: 2021), p. 187 <<https://www.corkcoco.ie/sites/default/files/2023-06/heritage-artefacts-of-county-cork-2021.pdf>> [accessed December 2025].

Chapter Three : The Journey

As discussed earlier in this dissertation, the journey of how Gobnait arrived at Ballyvourney is one that is not clear, although there is evidence at Ballyvourney that does confirm that Gobnait did arrive and settle there. Was Gobnait, as has been previously suggested, descended from a pirate, which may emulate one of the myths that surrounds Saint Patrick of him being kidnapped and taken from Ireland to Wales by marauders, or did she receive a visit from an angel who gave Gobnait explicit instructions to travel as a pilgrim and establish a convent. The latter suggestion is one that has become intrinsic to the Life of Gobnait, and we will look at that in a little more detail.

Whilst on *Inis Óirr* (Inisheer), Gobnait was visited by an angel, who gave instructions to Gobnait about her mission. It is noted that on *Inis Óirr* there are the ruins of *teampaillín Gobnait*, ‘an eleventh century small temple or church [and] adjacent to these ruins is a *clochán* [which is] a small beehive-shaped cell which was the standard-shaped dwelling for hermits in early Celtic monasticism’.⁷¹ Gobnait was told that her journey would involve her travelling to find her destination, and whilst on that journey she would meet with three, then six, and finally with nine white deer, and it would be at that final point when she saw the nine white deer that she would know that she had reached the end of her journey. Vivienne Keely notes that there is a distinct lack of specifics concerning this journey that Gobnait undertook, the method by which she travelled, and the route or routes she may have taken. There is nothing recorded regarding any interactions that Gobnait may have had along the way, and no mention of how she was received by the local population. This has raised questions around whether it was common during this early period, to see lone females travelling, or was Gobnait in fact accompanied by someone, or was she part of a larger group or pilgrimage? How long did this journey take? What, if any barriers did she meet? These questions and others around the specifics of her journey will not be answered as there is no direct evidence except to say that along her purported route, there are churches,

⁷¹ Vivienne Keely, ‘(Re)Thinking Out Gobnait: Memory and Presence in Folklore and Landscape’, in *Women and Pilgrimage*, ed. by E. Moore Quinn and Alison T. Smith (Virginia, USA: CABI, 2022), pp. 78-92 (p. 81) <<https://doi.org/10.1079/9781789249392.0000>>.

shrines and wells which are associated with her, such as the small church that Gobnait is said to have built at her first stop of Dunquin, where ‘upon finding three deer, [she] built a small church [which is known as] *Cill Gobnait*’.⁷² Keely notes that Gobnait stopped when six deer were seen, and this village is now called Kilgobnet,⁷³ and then finally stopped when she saw the nine white deer in Ballyvourney. As noted by Ó hÉalughthe, it is unusual that, having ‘set out on her journey into Munster from Connacht’,⁷⁴ nothing has been written about her tutor or fellow students, as this would be a detail that is included in other Lives of Saints which document their own journeys.

A similar version of her journey suggests that she was the daughter of King Connor, but she could also have been the daughter of ‘a King of Leinster, a King of Sligo, and a King of Munster’.⁷⁵ Whilst this might seem a little random and vague, what is being suggested is that she was of royal lineage, and that she was born from “someone” rather than just anyone. There is a legend which says that whilst she was a ‘princess at her father’s court In Leinster, [she] had a vision’,⁷⁶ and that vision was from an angel who told Gobnait ‘to go and found a monastery’,⁷⁷ and when Gobnait asked where this was to be founded, the angel told her that she would need to travel and that as she was travelling she would come across eight deer, and that this would be the sign for her to build her monastery in that location. It is suggested that the people of Ballyvourney would like Gobnait to have come from the royal line of the King of Munster, as this would then make her a local saint.⁷⁸

Keely suggests that the ‘circumstances of her commissioning as pilgrim are reminiscent of Abraham’s calling’⁷⁹ where Abraham was guided to leave his home and travel to an unknown destination that would be made clear to him as he travelled. The angelic “vision” is not one that can be placed in any source material, and is therefore

⁷² Keely, p. 81.

⁷³ Keely, p. 81

⁷⁴ D. Ó hÉalughthe, ‘St Gobnet of Ballyvourney’, *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, Ser. 2, Vol. 57, No. 185 (1952), pp. 43-61 (p. 43) <<https://corkhist.ie/>> [accessed November 2025].

⁷⁵ B.M., ‘The Legend of Ballyvourney’, *Donahoe’s Magazine*, Vol. LVI (1906), pp. 285-290 (p. 286) <<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89069283836>>[accessed November 2025].

⁷⁶ B.M., ‘The Legend of Ballyvourney’, p. 286.

⁷⁷ B.M., ‘The Legend of Ballyvourney’, p. 286.

⁷⁸ B.M., ‘The Legend of Ballyvourney’, p. 286.

⁷⁹ Keely, p. 80.

probably just a legend that has evolved over time. The sources that have been considered do not appear to document the exact journey that Gobnait seems to have undertaken, but they are primarily in agreement that a woman left the Arran Islands and went on a pilgrimage to somewhere in the county of Cork.⁸⁰ This lack of written evidence has meant that various villages and parishes have laid claim to Gobnait, and this can be seen by the various place names that have been attributed to her, along with churches, ruins, and wells. This is echoed by Ó hÉalughthe who notes that on her journey to Ballyvourney, wherever Gobnait stopped, legends were established and some of this physical geography still remains such as the well at Ballyagran which is called “St Deborah Well”.⁸¹ It would seem that there is a plethora of places that are attributed to Gobnait, and it seems unlikely that for each of these places that they were either on her pilgrim route to Ballyvourney and/or that she actually did visit them all. It is more reflective of the status of her cult that places were named in her honour rather than to mark an actual visit. If you were able to map out all of the places that are associated with Gobnait, however tenuously, then this might actually be an indicator to demonstrate her influence across the whole of the region.

The Life of Gobnait is intertwined with that of St Abbán (the son of a Leinster king)⁸² who is said to have journeyed through the south of Ireland, before founding a nunnery at Ballyvourney and installing Gobnait as Abbess, where she resided until her death.⁸³ This narrative has been challenged and an alternative suggestion noted by John O’Hanlon is that St Abban travelled through the territories and met with Gobnait and ‘seems to have formed a very exalted opinion of her virtues and good sense’⁸⁴, and O’Hanlon comments that Gobnait was already in a property – which could be the nunnery, and that this had been built on property that already belong to Gobnat’s family⁸⁵ which is very different to the more usual assumption that it was St Abbán who founded the site at Ballyvourney. Another theory is that St Abbán chose to install

⁸⁰ Keely, p. 79.

⁸¹ Ó hÉalughthe, ‘St Gobnet of Ballyvourney’, p. 52.

⁸² Ellen Elizabeth Ganly, ‘St. Abban of Moyarney: The Past is always with us’, *The Past: The Organ of the Uí Cinsealaigh Historical Society*, No. 35 (2021), pp. 96-106 (p. 96) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48635744>> [accessed November 2025].

⁸³ B.M., ‘The Legend of Ballyvourney’, p. 286.

⁸⁴ John O’Hanlon, *Lives of the Irish Saints : with special festivals, and the commemorations of Holy persons* (Dublin, 1875), p. 463 <<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112107843572>> [accessed November 2025].

⁸⁵ O’Hanlon, *Lives of the Irish Saints*, p. 463.

Gobnait because she was ‘probably a near relation of the chief who had given the site for the foundation’,⁸⁶ and this is echoed by Dorothy Harris who notes that ‘St Abban [...] died in AD. 650, [and he] built a nunnery [...] and presented it to St Gobnata, who was descended from Conor the Great.’⁸⁷

Meigs comments on the fact that ‘many early Irish saints were members of the great noble families’⁸⁸, and this association between the nobility and saints was potentially an attempt to invoke some sort of protection from the saint to their kinsmen. The location of monastic settlements also helped to underpin idea of protection.

Ó hÉalughthe notes that there is also suggestions that St Abbán were actually related, and were brother and sister⁸⁹, but whilst this cannot be confirmed, the fact that St Abbán is allegedly buried at Ballyvourney - as noted in the lower portion of the map at Figure 1⁹⁰ which shows Ballyvourney and the surrounding area, including a location for “St. Abban’s Grave” – and could possibly suggest that the site (or the people involved with the site) were of huge importance to St Abbán.

⁸⁶ M.T. Kelly, ‘Saint Gobnata, and her Hive of Bees, *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, Vol III (Second Series) (1897), pp. 100-106 (p. 101) <<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044090328717>> [accessed November 2025].

⁸⁷ Dorothy C. Harris, ‘Saint Gobnet, Abbess of Ballyvourney’, *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol 8, no. 2 (1938), pp. 272-277 (p. 272) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25510140>> [accessed November 2025].

⁸⁸ Samantha A. Meigs, *The Reformations in Ireland: Tradition and Confessionalism, 1400-1690* (Macmillan Press, 1997), p. 13 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25710-2>>.

⁸⁹ Ó hÉalughthe, ‘St Gobnet of Ballyvourney’, p. 46.

⁹⁰ Ordnance Survey, *OS Six-inch Ireland, 1829-1969*. Cork, sheet 58 (1903) <<https://maps.nls.uk/view/247666986#zoom=5.3&lat=2823&lon=9301&layers=BT>> [accessed December 2025]



Fig 3.1. Ordnance Survey, OS Six-inch Ireland, 1829-1969. Cork, sheet 58 (1903) <<https://maps.nls.uk/view/247666986#zoom=5.3&lat=2823&lon=9301&layers=BT>> [accessed December 2025]. Reproduced with permission of the National Library of Scotland.

Chapter Four : Saint Gobnait The Beekeeper, and Her Legends and Tales

It is noted that ‘in both Irish and international folklore [...] bees have been revered as almost sacred in nature for centuries’,⁹¹ and Eimear Chaomhánach comments that in ancient Egyptian mythology, there was a belief that bees were the tears from the sun god Ra, and that this is similarly embraced in Irish folk tradition which ‘[believes] that bees were introduced to the world via the tears of deities, often when experiencing pain and torment’.⁹² Eva Crane observes that honey has, since primitive man, been seen not only as a food, but has also been used for its medicinal and preservative purposes, as well as in ‘magico-religious rites’,⁹³ and that this is reflected in the many ‘ancient Irish and Welsh laws that provide many references to bees and honey’.⁹⁴

The introduction of bees to Ireland can potentially be dated to around the late fifth or early sixth century, and this can be evidenced by the introduction of *Bechbretha* or the Irish bee-law, and the fact that this specific law was established would demonstrate the considerable importance bees and their products had in the early Irish economy.⁹⁵ There may be some linguistic evidence that suggests bees may have been in Ireland prior to this date, and the appearance of similar words for “bee”, “honey” and “mead in other languages such as Welsh, Cornish and Breton, could also indicate that bees may have been in Ireland earlier than thought, brought to Ireland by ‘Celtic-speaking people [who brought with them] knowledge of bee-keeping’.⁹⁶

The introduction of bees to Ireland is supposedly found in early Irish traditions, and are associated with Saint Mo Domnóc whose Life was noted in the *Life of St David*,

⁹¹ Eimear Chaomhánach, *The Keeper of Bees : Bees and Beekeeping in Irish Folklore* (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 2024), p. 17.

⁹² Chaomhánach, *The Keeper of Bees*, p. 36.

⁹³ Eva Crane, ‘History of Honey’, in *Honey: A Comprehensive Survey*, ed. by Eva Crane (New York: Crane, Russak & Company, Inc., 1975), pp. 439 – 488 (p. 467) <<https://archive.org/details/honeycomprehensi0000unse>> [accessed November 2025].

⁹⁴ Crane, p. 468.

⁹⁵ Thomas Charles-Edwards, and Fergus Kelly (eds.), *Bechbretha: An Old Irish Law-Tract on Bee-Keeping* (Dublin & Dundalk: W. & S. Magowan (Ireland) Ltd, 1983), p. 42. <<https://archive.org/details/bechbrethaoldiri01thom>> [accessed November 2025].

⁹⁶ Charles-Edwards and Kelly (eds.), *Bechbretha*, p. 41. <<https://archive.org/details/bechbrethaoldiri01thom>> [accessed November 2025].

who said that Modomnoc was a well-known Irish saint of Tibragny, although it should be noted that the name *Madomnu* was noted⁹⁷ on a stone at Llanllyr, Cardiganshire, which would suggest that this saint had links to both Ireland and Wales. The *Life of St David* notes that bees did not exist in Ireland until such times as Modomnoc took them with him.⁹⁸ This idea that the introduction of bees was down to Modomnoc is displayed with a sign in the graveyard at Tybroughney, which is a monastery that Modomnoc founded in the sixth century.⁹⁹

Chaomhánach notes that there are other saints who are also associated with bees, namely Saint Bega – also known as Saint Bees – who was the daughter of an Irish king and rather than get married, she fled Ireland, and whilst floating on a skiff or straw hive, she landed on the Cumbrian coast where she established a convent, and this place is known today as St Bees.¹⁰⁰ Another saint is Saint Brigid who kept bees and brewed mead, whilst Saint Ambrose is the patron saint of honey hunters or beekeepers.

As noted by Jane Cartwright, it is common for ‘the same saints (or at least saints with similar names and traditions) [to be] venerated in more than one of the Celtic-speaking regions of Europe’¹⁰¹, and this is evident from the legends and tales which are attributed to more than one person, as we have just seen. This evidence of the dissemination of similar tales and folk-lore could be down to the movement of people, or it could be something more, such as the “power” of the saint and how this might be harnessed within the current socio-political status. There is also an element of demonstrating the reprisals that Gobnait would undertake if she felt that it was necessary, and this may have been to establish her spiritual authority over the local

⁹⁷ A.W. Wade-Evans, *The Life of St. David*, ed. by Eleanor Hull (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; New York and Toronto: The Macmillan Co., 1923), p. 104. <https://archive.org/details/MN5136ucmf_5> [accessed December 2025].

⁹⁸ Wade-Evans, *The Life of St. David*, p. 22.

⁹⁹ Louise Nugent, ‘The Tybroughney Pillar Stone Co Kilkenny’, *Pilgrimage in Medieval Ireland*, 2013. <<https://pilgrimagemedievalireland.com/2021/05/22/the-tybroughney-pillar-stone-co-kilkenny/>> [accessed December 2025]

¹⁰⁰ Chaomhánach, *The Keeper of Bees*, pp. 46-47.

¹⁰¹ Jane Cartwright (ed.), *Celtic Hagiography and Saint's Cults* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p. 2.

community, and the wider landscape, and demonstrated her protective powers against injustice.

There are various legends and tales relating to Gobnait and bees, such as a time when a chieftain asked Gobnait for help to recover stolen cattle. At the time of asking, Gobnait was standing in ‘the convent garden, where she cultivated simple herbs [...] and where she also kept her beehives’.¹⁰² Gobnait agreed to help and ‘made the sign of the cross upon the nearest *biachra*, or “beehive”, which was changed into a brass helmet’¹⁰³ and one version of the tale, Gobnait took her hive and chased off the marauders by shaking her hive and letting the bees fly out. A slightly different variation on this tale, is one where the local chieftain was named as being the head of the local O’Herlihy family (sometimes spelt as O’Herlihies), and that in order for Gobnait to help, she made it a condition that the chief would become a Christian, whereupon she then made ‘a cross above the bee-hive [and] the bees became kernes and the hive a brass helmet’.¹⁰⁴ As an aside, the O’Herlihys were the ‘custodians of her cult’¹⁰⁵ and ‘were the hereditary wardens of the church of St Gobnait, at Ballyvourney’,¹⁰⁶ and Fr. Daniel O’Herlihy is actually buried at Ballyvourney and is part of the “rounds” that are undertaken at the church – his grave is located at Station 8.¹⁰⁷

Gobnait did not just use bees as her “weapon of choice” – she also used, according to legend, a ball or *bulla*, and this was used to destroy a castle what was under construction by, according to legend, a ‘Pagan chief’.¹⁰⁸ It seems that each week, Gobnait would throw the *bulla*, which would destroy the castle, and once this was done, the *bulla* would return to Gobnait so that she could repeat this action again and

¹⁰² M.T. Kelly, ‘Saint Gobnata, and her Hive of Bees’, *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, Vol III (Second Series) (1897), pp. 100-106 (p. 101) <<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044090328717>> [accessed November 2025].

¹⁰³ Kelly, p. 102.

¹⁰⁴ Edith M. Guest, ‘Ballyvourney and Its Sheela-Na-Gig’, *Folklore*, Vol. 48, no. 4 (1937), pp. 374-384 (p. 378) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1257536>> [accessed November 2025].

¹⁰⁵ Pádraig Ó Riain, *A dictionary of Irish saints*, (2011), p. 368 <<https://archive.org/details/dictionaryofiris0000oria>> [accessed November 2025]

¹⁰⁶ George Sigerson, John O’Daly and John O’Daly, *The Poets and Poetry of Munster: a Selection of Irish Songs* (Dublin, 1860), p. 46. <<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b4084745>> [accessed November 2025]

¹⁰⁷ Vivienne Keely, ‘(Re)Thinking Out Gobnait: Memory and Presence in Folklore and Landscape’, in *Women and Pilgrimage*, ed. by E. Moore Quinn and Alison T. Smith (Virginia, USA: CABI, 2022), pp. 78-92 (pp. 87-8) <<https://doi.org/10.1079/9781789249392.0000>>.

¹⁰⁸ B.M., ‘The Legend of Ballyvourney’, *Donahoe’s Magazine*, Vol. LVI (1906), pp. 285-290 (p. 288) <<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89069283836>> [accessed November 2025].

again. Eventually the builders left, and the castle was never built. This *bull*a was also supposed to have healing properties, and as such, it was sought out by the locals so that they could use it to try and heal themselves and their cattle. Unfortunately people did not always return the *bull*a once they had finished with it, so Gobnait fixed it to the church at Ballyvourney to ensure that it did not leave the area. There is now an 'agate ball representing the *bull*a [and it is] embedded in the external wall of the ruined church at Gobnait's site [and it forms] part of the rounding ritual.'¹⁰⁹

There are two tales that pertain to her well; one of which is that when water was scarce, a 'Protestant chieftain helped himself to water from her well [and] it would not boil, so he poured it into another vessel to wash his feet, whereupon his feet were scaled',¹¹⁰ and the other water related tale is that supposedly people who drew water from Gobnait's well but did not use that water for healing, found that they could not boil the stolen water.

Other legends and tales are synonymous with Gobnait, such as the one linked with a well and a moat at Kilgobnit, and it was said that 'whoever stood there on St. Gobnata's day would certainly be married within the year',¹¹¹ or the legend where she protected the locals at Ballyvourney against plague and pestilence by drawing a line on the ground 'beyond which the plague could not come',¹¹² and this spot is still known as Gorten-na-Plagha, or the 'Field of the Plague'.¹¹³ At a church in Mallow (Móin Mór), there is a figure carved into stone which has a modern day inscription that reads 'St Abigail expelling the plague'.¹¹⁴ Could this be in reference to the Field of Plague at Ballyvourney, or is this something different? If this is in reference to Ballyvourney, then this inscription could demonstrate the disbursement of knowledge and lore throughout Ireland, but the challenge would arise to know if this is a more recent dedication, or

¹⁰⁹ Vivienne Keely, '(Re)Thinking Out Gobnait: Memory and Presence in Folklore and Landscape', in *Women and Pilgrimage*, ed. by E. Moore Quinn and Alison T. Smith (Virginia, USA: CABI, 2022), pp. 78-92 (p. 84) <<https://doi.org/10.1079/9781789249392.0000>>.

¹¹⁰ Keely, p. 84.

¹¹¹ Kelly, p. 103.

¹¹² Keely, p. 84.

¹¹³ John O'Hanlon, *Lives of the Irish Saints : with special festivals, and the commemorations of Holy persons* (Dublin, 1875), p. 464 <<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112107843572>> [accessed November 2025].

¹¹⁴ Catriona MacLeod, 'Some Mediaeval Wooden Figure Sculptures in Ireland. Statues of Irish Saints.', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol. 76, no. 4 (1946), pp. 155-170 (p. 167) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25510580>> [accessed November 2025].

one that has been around for a long time. Jankulak¹¹⁵ notes that some caution should be applied to dedications, and that not all should be viewed as stable and should instead be seen as something that could and would be affected by local legends and the shifts over time in the local “landscape”. This potential shift in not only importance but also in understanding is one that surely has to have changed over time? The idea that a saint falls in and out of favour is an interesting one, and something that cannot be overlooked.

These accounts helped to lay the foundation for Gobnait, and to cement her ‘formidable spiritual authority [...] to overcome adversaries and difficulties,’¹¹⁶ and to demonstrate to others that she was capable of using her bees in such a way as to ‘correct behaviours perceived to be injurious to her and the local community [and this] act of divine vengeance’¹¹⁷ was key to her ability to use her spiritual authority to control and direct situations. As time evolved, and Gobnait’s spiritual dominance was established, then the nature of the reprisals disappeared, and were replaced by Gobnait demonstrating her healing powers.

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, evidence of similar folk-lore and tales which mirrored those tales relating to Gobnait is available, and a few examples are one that relates to a Cornish folk-lore tale which was about a squire, who seeing that he was about to be arrested, flung a couple of bee-hives at the troopers where the bees promptly swarmed out and attacked the troopers.¹¹⁸ Another similar tale, this time coming from Germany, features two bakers’ apprentices, who having heard some commotion happening outside of the towns walls, mounted parapets and saw the enemy engaged in planting ladders. The two apprentices flung some bee-hives amongst the enemy, and the bees attacked the enemy who promptly left.¹¹⁹ This lore is evidenced by the stone inset into the walls which show the two apprentices and is a timely reminder to others of what fate may await.

¹¹⁵ Karen Jankulak, ‘Adjacent Saints’ Dedications and Early Celtic History’, in *Saints’ Cults in the Celtic World*, ed. by Steve Boardman, John Reuben Davies and Eila Williamson (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013), pp. 91-118 (p. 99-100).

¹¹⁶ Keely, p. 81.

¹¹⁷ Keely, p. 83.

¹¹⁸ Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould, *A book of folk-lore*, (London: Collins’ clear-type press, 1928), p. 12 <<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/miua.1880494.0001.001>> [accessed November 2025].

¹¹⁹ Baring-Gould, *A book of folk-lore*, p. 13.

This particular legend could also be seen in something pertaining to Gobnait, which is that there is an effigy carved into a stone and embedded in the wall of the church in Ballyvourney which is supposed to be the image of a thief who stole some tools from the church, and despite trying to escape found that they had never left the church. This effigy was placed on the wall and known as Gobnata's thief – *Gadaidhe Dubh* - and was supposed to act a deterrent to any other would-be thieves.¹²⁰ This *Gadaidhe Dubh* is also known as "The Black Robber",¹²¹ and 'other similar heads are found in many Romanesque churches in Ireland [which are] either decorating the keystone of an arch, or all the voussoris of one arch-ring of a doorway'.¹²²

Back in Ireland, another tale that relates to Gobnait is one where a powerful chief asked Gobnait for help as a war was going to be taking place, and the chief realised that his own troops were inadequate. Gobnait decided to help, and in the field where the war was due to place, there was a bee-hive which Gobnait used and changed all of the bees into spearmen who rushed out of the bee-hive and attacked the enemy. When the rout had taken place, the chief returned to the site, and 'found that the straw hive had been metamorphosed into an article shaped like a helmet and composed of brass',¹²³ and this, according to Baring-Gould demonstrates that this tale is true. O'Hanlon notes that an 'ancient bronze bell of St Gobnate [is] preserved in Ballyvourney parish',¹²⁴ and it would be interesting to know if this bronze bell and the helmet shaped item that Baring-Gould discusses are in fact one and the same.

As it is, the helmet has become part of the folk-lore surrounding Gobnait, in as much as it became a revered object in its own right, with people supposedly travelling miles to partake in its healing properties for themselves and for dying relatives. The lore is that if you were able to 'procure a drop of water from it [then this] will secure their admission into heaven'.¹²⁵ This idea of "healing waters" is something that is replicated

¹²⁰ O'Hanlon, *Lives of the Irish Saints*, p. 466.

¹²¹ Irish Heritage News, *Who was the Ballyvourney thief, an Gadaidhe Dubh?* (19 June 2023) <<https://irishheritagenews.ie/the-ballyvourney-thief-an-gadaidhe-dubh/>> [accessed December 2025]

¹²² Françoise Henry, T. H. Mason, 'The decorated stones at Ballyvourney, Co. Cork', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, Vol. 5 (1952), pp. 41-42 (p. 42) <<https://corkhist.ie/>>. [accessed November 2025]

¹²³ Baring-Gould, *A book of folk-lore*, p. 13.

¹²⁴ O'Hanlon, *Lives of the Irish Saints*, p. 468.

¹²⁵ Baring-Gould, *A book of folk-lore*, p. 14.

throughout the world, whether it is pilgrims heading to Lourdes, or people bathing in the Ganges River, this idea that a drop of sacred water is precious is one that is continued to this day, and it was noted that at times, Ballyvourney was almost as much of a sacred site on Whitsunday and could rival Lourdes or any other Continental shrine. Ballyvourney is still very much on the pilgrimage route.¹²⁶

A more recent example of the bees coming to rescue people is one that Chaomhánach discusses and says that when people were being driven out of their homes in the Bodyke Evictions of the 1880s in County Clare, the local community prayed for help, and supposedly ‘a swarm of bees appears and descends, fighting off the landlords’.¹²⁷

Baring-Gould hypothesises that the bees were regarded as an integral part of the community, and that they would go by the name of “the Birds of God” or “Mary’s birds”, and were, according to Baring-Gould, a link with the Spirit.¹²⁸ This idea that the bees should be told about important events such as a death in the family, is still demonstrated today. When Queen Elizabeth II died, the Royal Beekeeper was dispatched to announce this death to the bees.

This idea that the bees were able to perform miracles is something, as Bray notes, that whilst looking like a miracle and magic, actually ‘arose from the power of God and the rewards of faith [which were] reinforced by the miracle.’¹²⁹ It is interesting to note that Bray differentiates between miracles, which were seen as rewards and followed a conventional pattern regarding a saint, whereas witch-craft ‘invoked the spectre of idolatry and disobedience.’¹³⁰

¹²⁶ B.M., ‘The Legend of Ballyvourney’, p. 289.

¹²⁷ Chaomhánach, *The Keeper of Bees*, p. 62.

¹²⁸ Baring-Gould, *A book of folk-lore*, p. 14.

¹²⁹ Dorothy Ann Bray, ‘Miracles and wonders in the composition of the Lives of the early Irish saints’, in *Celtic Hagiography and Saint’s Cults*, ed. by Jane Cartwright (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 136-147 (p. 141).

¹³⁰ Bray, ‘Miracles and wonders’, p.141.

Chapter Five : Ballyvourney (Bhaile Mhúirne)

Ballyvourney is the place that Gobnait finally saw the prophesised nine white deer, and it was here that she stopped her journey. The site that has evolved over the centuries is one that is today still very much in use, and this chapter will consider the establishment of the site, the relics, antiquities and shrines that still remain, and the impact that the site has on modern day. The use of the word “monastery” in this chapter refers to both a monastery and a nunnery.

As discussed in previous chapters, the general consensus is that St Abbán either founded, or helped to found, a monastery on the site at Ballyvourney, which he then gave to Gobnait, and whilst nothing remains of the monastery itself, there are the remains of Gobnait’s Church which is now a burial ground. It is noted that within a papal bull, issued by Pope Clement VIII in 1601, that the popularity of a well located within the grounds ‘shows the great repute in which the saint was held’,¹³¹ and that a special indulgence was granted to those who prayed at the church on the feast day of Gobnait which is 11 February, and also observed on Whitsunday with Whitsunday (or Whitsun) being seen as ‘the season [...] for wonders in the Celtic or pre-Celtic world [and being seen as a] pagan divinity’.¹³² It is noted that back in the late 1800s at Kilgobnet, a huge fair would take place on 11 February and people would come from far and wide to attend.¹³³

The site at Ballyvourney consists of quite a large area, and encompasses not only the ruins of the old church and the foundations of a house associated with Gobnait, but also carved stones, wells and springs, the remains of a cell (*St Gobnet’s cloghaun*), and a new chapel. The carved stone, which stands close to the chapel has been dated to be contemporary with Gobnait, and is located a little way from the church. The stone is made of sandstone and faces east and west. Located on the arms of the cross is a

¹³¹ B.M., ‘The Legend of Ballyvourney’, *Donahoe’s Magazine*, Vol. LVI (1906), pp. 285-290 (p. 289) <<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89069283836>> [accessed November 2025].

¹³² Edith M. Guest, ‘Ballyvourney and Its Sheela-Na-Gig’, *Folklore*, Vol. 48, no. 4 (1937), pp. 374-384 (p. 380) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1257536>> [accessed November 2025].

¹³³ D. Ó hÉalughthe, ‘St Gobnet of Ballyvourney’, *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, Ser. 2, Vol. 57, No. 185 (1952), pp. 43-61 (p. 52) <<https://corkhist.ie/>> [accessed November 2025].

‘maltese cross within a double circle’¹³⁴, and at the top of the right arm of the cross is ‘a crude attempt [at a] *Chi Ro*’,¹³⁵ which Harris notes is one of only five stones in Ireland to bear this symbol. There also appears to be a small figure in some sort of ecclesiastical garb which is located above the *Chi Ro*, and there is a desire for this figure to be a carving of Gobnait herself, although this could never be proven, although it is known locally as ‘Saint Gobnet’s Stone’.¹³⁶ What it does show though is that the image, dress and hairstyle suggest to Harris that this styling is indicative of someone who lived in the first half of the seventh century.¹³⁷ Moss notes that crosses were erected in Ireland from at least the early part of the sixth century.¹³⁸

Throughout the site it can be noted that elements of existing structures have been worked and re-worked into other buildings. This is typical of a site that has had a long period of inhabitation and is common across the world. This reuse of materials was practical, but it can mean that our modern day interpretation can be a little “confused” when trying to understand the true nature of a site or area. Moss notes that just as a village must grow and adapt to the requirements of the parishioners, then sites such as Ballyvourney would also need to grow and to reflect changes in beliefs, as well as religion.¹³⁹

The importance of a site like Ballyvourney cannot be underestimated. If Gobnait was someone who did live in the community, then once she had died, this site would become the focus of cultural memories of her, and this cultural memory can be seen today – with the establishment of a shrine, the ability to visit and touch relics, and the option to relive some of those tales that have been associated with Gobnait by being able to see the sites and the items involved. All of these elements combined make this site an invaluable commodity, and would allow the church to capitalise both financially

¹³⁴ Dorothy C. Harris, ‘Saint Gobnet, Abbess of Ballyvourney’, *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol 8, no. 2 (1938), pp. 272-277 (p. 276) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25510140>> [accessed November 2025].

¹³⁵ Harris, ‘Saint Gobnet, Abbess of Ballyvourney’, p. 276.

¹³⁶ Michael J. O’Kelly, ‘St Gobnet’s House, Ballyvourney, Co. Cork’, *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, Ser. 2, Vol. 57, No. 185 (1952), pp. 18-40 (p. 37) <<https://corkhist.ie/>> [accessed November 2025].

¹³⁷ Harris, ‘Saint Gobnet, Abbess of Ballyvourney’, p. 277.

¹³⁸ Andrew Carpenter, and Rachel Moss, eds., ‘Introduction’, *Art and Architecture of Ireland Volume I: Medieval c. 400-c. 1600*. 1st edn., vol 1, (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2015), pp. 1-8, (p. 7). <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14jxtv1.16>> [accessed November 2025]

¹³⁹ Carpenter and Moss, *Art and Architecture*, p. 4.

and spiritually on that memory of Gobnait. This continued use of Ballyvourney just helps to provide “proof” that Gobnait was important and still is important, although this does not necessarily prove that Gobnait was a real person who lived at Ballyvourney, but the idea that she just might, and that you, as a person can follow in her footsteps and visit the same site that she lived in, is something amazing. The idea that the site is not blocked off to anyone and in fact, it is quite the opposite with people doing rounds on a daily basis, to those who come to celebrate the Feast Days, to the move into tourism with Ballyvourney being on the “map” of places to visit. Whilst doing my research, I was surprised to find that Ballyvourney even has an entry on Tripadvisor!¹⁴⁰

Much has been written regarding how rounds or *turas* take place at any religious site in Ireland, and it is no different at Ballyvourney. Pilgrims will follow a set pattern, stopping to pay their duties at various “stations” which are the natural or built elements of the site, and as they walk round the site a set number of times, they will recite set prayers a set number of times.¹⁴¹ What is different at Ballyvourney is that at some of these stations, the artefacts that can be seen and touched are linked to her story, such as at Station 7 when a pilgrim can touch the Sheela-na-Gig, or at Station 9 when a pilgrim can reach into a recess and touch the *bulla*.

Turning now to look in some detail at some of the artefacts that are still in use today, and the first one that we will consider is a statue of a woman, carved from oak and held in safety in the sacristy of the church. This statue is thought to be some 1,400 years old, and is purported to be a carving of Gobnait herself,¹⁴² and whilst the condition of the statue is poor, it has been said that she is ‘dressed in her robe of office’.¹⁴³ Harris also notes that there are similarities with this statue to one that has been attributed to St Catherine and is housed in the Museum of Dublin and MacLeod notes that only five wooden statues are known, and they represent various saints and

¹⁴⁰ https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attraction_Review-g2369286-d6210941-Reviews-St_Gobnait_s_Monastic_Site-Ballyvourney_County_Cork.html

¹⁴¹ Vivenne Keely, ‘(Re)Thinking Out Gobnait: Memory and Presence in Folklore and Landscape’, in *Women and Pilgrimage*, ed. by E. Moore Quinn and Alison T. Smith (Virginia, USA: CABI, 2022), pp. 78-92 (p. 79) <<https://doi.org/10.1079/9781789249392.0000>>.

¹⁴² B.M., ‘The Legend of Ballyvourney’, p. 286.

¹⁴³ Harris, ‘Saint Gobnet, Abbess of Ballyvourney’, p. 274 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25510140>> [accessed November 2025].

are found in the locale that is closely associated with the saint and their grave.¹⁴⁴¹⁴⁵ MacLeod likens the relic to contemporary statues found elsewhere in Britain, such as those at Wells Cathedral, the Church of St James in Bristol, and the Butler Church at Gowran, Kilkenny, where effigies are cloaked in a similar dress and style, and posed in similar ways.¹⁴⁶

The statue as shown in Figure 5.1., measures around 75.5cm x 18cm and depicts Gobnait dressed in a nun's habit with a headdress. Traces of paint can still be seen, but generally the wood has been polished clean by pilgrims who rub the statue "for luck". On the reverse side of the figure there appears to be a depression which may indicate that the statue at one time was perhaps strapped to a pole and carried in some sort of pilgrim procession.¹⁴⁷ Keely comments that on 11 February, the statue is 'placed on a table in the main body of the church [and] pilgrims bring a ribbon or a strip of cloth, measure it out along the length of the statue [...] and then cut their piece of ribbon to take home with them to guard against illness'.¹⁴⁸ The pilgrims worship at this statue, and go round it on their knees saying a certain number of paters, ave's and credo's.¹⁴⁹ Richardson, in 1727, notes that in the past, people would offer up prayers and give a monetary donation to protect them from getting sick and in particular from getting the "small pox", and wonders if the popularity of this statue may have declined at all when the guardians of the statue – the O'Herley's – 'died [...] of the small pox'.¹⁵⁰

In recent times, an application was made and awarded for funding to create a 3D image and a replica of the statue as the original had suffered so much over time, and also, it was noted on Feast Days that the queue of pilgrims waiting to see the statue

¹⁴⁴ Catriona MacLeod, 'Some Mediaeval Wooden Figure Sculptures in Ireland. Statues of Irish Saints.', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol. 76, no. 4 (1946), pp. 155-170 (p. 155) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25510580>> [accessed November 2025].

¹⁴⁵ MacLeod notes that the saints are St. Molaise, 6th century Presbyter-abbot of Innismurray, Co. Sligo; St. Molua, 6th century abbot of Killaloe, Co. Kilkenny; St. Maolruan, 8th century bishop of Tallaght, Co. Dublin; St. Gobnat, 6th century abbess of Ballyvourney, Co. Cork; and St. Mo Cheallóg, 7th century abbot of Killmallock, Co. Limerick.

¹⁴⁶ MacLeod, 'Some Mediaeval Wooden Figure Sculptures in Ireland', p. 166.

¹⁴⁷ Cork County Council, *Heritage Artefacts of County Cork*, (Cork: 2021), p. 186-7 <<https://www.corkcoco.ie/sites/default/files/2023-06/heritage-artefacts-of-county-cork-2021.pdf>> [accessed December 2025]

¹⁴⁸ Keely, p. 85).

¹⁴⁹ John Richardson, *The Great Folly, Superstition, and Idolatry, of Pilgrimages in Ireland*, (1727), p. 70. <<https://archive.org/details/greatfollysupers00rich>> [accessed November 2025]

¹⁵⁰ Richardson, *The Great Folly, Superstition and Idolatry*, p. 71.

was huge, so it was decided that a replica would be made that would be on permanent display. In Figure 5.2 you will see the image of the 3D image, the replica and the original.



FIG 5.1. *Statue of St. Gobnait, Ballyvourney*, (2021), (p. 186). Photograph used and reproduced by kind permission of Cork County Council. Photo credit: Connie Kelleher <<https://www.corkcoco.ie/sites/default/files/2023-06/heritage-artefacts-of-county-cork-2021.pdf>>



FIG 5.2. The image shows the two replicas either side of the original statue – the replica on the right of the image is the one created using 3D, and the replica on the left is carved from wood. Use of image by kind permission of Amanda Clarke, Holy Wells of Cork & Kerry (<https://holywells cork and kerry.com/>)

This idea that the touching of the statue could cure ailments is one that still continues to this day, and when people are able to see the shrine, they invariably end up kissing it for protection, or rubbing pieces of cloth on it. People still drink from the well to help with cures and ailments, and as told to O’Sullivan,¹⁵¹ a local parishioner commented that they had an unwell member of their family who was taken to the shrine, and subsequently recovered and lived to 96 – this suggests that the belief in the healing power of Gobnait still continue to this day.

¹⁵¹ Marc O’Sullivan, ‘Cork in 50 Artworks, No 16: Statue of St Gobnait at Ballyvourney, by Séamus Murphy’, *Irish Examiner*, 9 August 2021 <<https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/artsandculture/arid-40353905.html>> [accessed December 2025]

In the grounds of Ballyvourney and located next to St Gobnait's Well, is a tree. From it hangs adornments of ribbons and strips of cloth, and these, Keely notes, have been left by pilgrims and are supposed to have come from people who are unwell with the thought that the tree could absorb the any wrongdoings.¹⁵² Scriven notes that holy wells are an important part of our heritage, and that the one at Ballyvourney is 'part of a historical complex'¹⁵³ which is still visited, and where people will leave their offerings, as well as take photographs and share their experiences. With the advent of social media, these images spread very quickly and reach a much wider audience.

At Ballyvourney is a more modern statue which was sculpted by Séamus Murphy out of limestone which shows Gobnait on a plinth, and on the plinth are deer and beehives. Gobnait is wearing a cloak and holding rosary beads. The location of this statue is at Gobnait's house.

Located on the walls of the church is a Sheela-na-gig (*Sigla na gcioch*) and these 'old, bald, naked female figures'¹⁵⁴ could be seen as symbols of fertility, although there is no absolute definition around them, or their actual significance. Dor comments that this grotesque carved sculpture may have some very complex cultural meanings, and given that the Sheela's display oversized genitals, it may actually tell us more about who created them – men – rather than they do about anything else. Dor suggests that the term "Sheela-na-gig" 'is [not] recorded before the early seventeenth century, when it often referred to women of loose morals, or simply old hags,'¹⁵⁵ and continues by saying that their over 'exaggerated sexual characteristics suggest less an erotic/pornographic aesthetic [...] than a connection with fertility and/or apotropaic rites'.¹⁵⁶ Dor comments that throughout the medieval Christian world, Sheela's could

¹⁵² Keely, p. 85).

¹⁵³ Richard Scriven, *Holy wells in Cork*, (Ireland: University College Cork, 2025), <<https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17828>> [accessed November 2025]

¹⁵⁴ Georgia Rhodes, 'Decoding the *Sheela-na-gig*', *Feminist Formations*, Vol. 22, no. 2, (Summer, 2010), pp. 167-194, p. 167 <<https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/ff.2010.0004>>.

¹⁵⁵ Juliette Dor, 'The Sheela-na-Gig: An Incongruous Sign of Sexual Purity', in *Medieval Virginites* Bartlett, ed. by Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans and Sarah Salih (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 33 - 55, (p. 35).

¹⁵⁶ Dor, p. 36.

be seen along pilgrim routes – was this to ‘embody temptations, dangers and deceits of sensuality’?¹⁵⁷

This Sheela was part of the trifecta that pilgrims would follow when making their rounds at Ballyvourney, and the first was to touch the Sheela with a handkerchief, then take that handkerchief and touch their votary, before finally putting their hand into a niche in an outside wall, and touching a smooth round object known as Gobnait’s Bowl, and it was said that each time a pilgrim did this, then they were transferring the virtue of the object to themselves.¹⁵⁸

During some archaeological work at the site, and specifically some excavations at the site of the church, evidence of ancient ironworking emerged such as the discovery of multiple pits which had residue of large lumps of iron slag in them, which is representative of iron smelting.¹⁵⁹ The evidence of these works has linked Gobnait to being the Saint of Ironworkers. It is noted that skilled metalsmiths were highly valued by cult leaders who wanted the metalsmiths to create impressive objects which a leader could use to help enhance their reputation. The craft of metalworking was seen, according to Wright, as supernatural, and those that undertook it were thought to be ‘magical’.¹⁶⁰ This idea that Gobnait was either a metal worker or smith, or at least was supporting a smith being at Ballyvourney, cannot be answered exactly, but the location of the evidence of iron smelting and working certainly would suggest that this was something that Gobnait would have known about. A question that could be posed here is in regard to the fact that the name Gobnait is, as has been discussed earlier, potentially the feminine form of *gabha/gobha*. Is the use of the feminine form deliberate in so much as what if the site was being used by a smith who was a man, but to appeal to women, this has, over time, changed to represent a female. As noted earlier, Callan proposed that by placing women in a more central position, then this would help to provide a complete picture of the past. We know that certainly until fairly recently, it

¹⁵⁷ Dor, p. 37.

¹⁵⁸ Edith M. Guest, ‘Ballyvourney and Its Sheela-Na-Gig’, *Folklore*, Vol. 48, no. 4 (1937), pp. 374-384 (p. 375) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1257536>> [accessed November 2025].

¹⁵⁹ O’Kelly, ‘St Gobnet’s House, Ballyvourney, Co. Cork’, pp. 18-20.

¹⁶⁰ D.W. Wright, ‘Crafters of Kingship: Smiths, Elite Power, and Gender in Early Medieval Europe’, *Medieval Archaeology*, 63.2 (2019), pp. 271-297, (p. 271) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00766097.2019.1670922>>.

was men who drove the narrative around history – whether this was because it was only men who initially were trained to read and write, or the fact that it would be men contracting other men to write their own lore and preserve their lineage.

It is interesting to note how much interaction the pilgrims do have with Ballyvourney, and maybe because they can be so interactive and can move around freely, then ‘pilgrims [get] to experience the dynamic of reciprocity more deeply [thereby] invoking Gobnait’,¹⁶¹ and this symbiotic relationship between Gobnait, Ballyvourney and the pilgrims, helps to keep this site “alive” and provides for an ‘active agency of landscape through the mutuality of giving and receiving’¹⁶² and this sacred landscape is what continues to draw pilgrims. This idea that the love that the people of Ballyvourney have, not only for the surrounding countryside but also for Gobnait, is, as noted by Ó hÉalughthe, ‘deeply-rooted, sincere and vigorous’,¹⁶³ and the fact that vast numbers of people pay rounds (*turas*) both individually and as large groups should demonstrate that Gobnait is an integral part of life.

¹⁶¹ Keely, p. 88.

¹⁶² Keely, p. 78.

¹⁶³ Ó hÉalughthe, ‘St Gobnet of Ballyvourney’, p. 61.

Chapter Six : Saint Gobnait and the Continuation of Her Legacy

And finally, this chapter will consider the continuation of the legacy of Gobnait and whether or not she is still considered “relevant”. I believe the evidence provided in the previous chapters which has spoken clearly about the history of the Life of Gobnait is evident, and the fact that some relics and ruins are still in use, is fascinating, given that Gobnait does not necessarily have her own Life.

In 1909, the Guild of Irish Art-Workers in Dublin was formed and the premise of that group was for craftsmen and women to come together to ‘play a key role in visualizing the better-known literary and linguistic Revival [...] as Ireland sought her own cultural identity’.¹⁶⁴ Harry Clarke, as part of the group, was a young and upcoming artist who was commissioned to create eleven stained glass windows depicting nine Irish saints for windows that would be in the Honan Chapel, which was a ‘project [that] was intended to be a showcase for the Irish Arts and Crafts movement’¹⁶⁵. The Honan Chapel was completed during the First World War, and it shows a pride in Ireland’s past and a hope for its future. The Chapel is known for representing some of the best artwork from Irish Arts and Crafts movement, including the windows made by Clarke.¹⁶⁶

‘The “St Gobnet” was a drawing of one of five designs for windows depicting saints that Clarke produced in his bid for the Honan Chapel Commission’,¹⁶⁷ and this drawing evolved to become the window that is now installed in the Honan Chapel. The window, as noted by Keely, is ‘completely dependent on themes drawn from the folkloric tradition [and] depicts [Gobnait] as a tall, gorgeously costumed woman with flaming red hair, a high forehead, beaked nose and long tapering fingers.’¹⁶⁸ As can be seen

¹⁶⁴ Nicola Gordon Bowe, ‘Preserving the Relics of Heroic Time: Visualizing the Celtic Revival in Early Twentieth-Century Ireland’, in *Synge and Edwardian Ireland*, ed. by Brian Cliff, and Nicholas Grene (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2012), pp. 58-83 (p. 58) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199609888.003.0006>>.

¹⁶⁵ Patricia J. Rogers, ‘Bees and Butterflies: Two Drawings by Harry Clarke’, *Journal of Glass Studies*, 39 (1997), pp. 206-211, p. 209 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24190174>> [accessed November 2025]

¹⁶⁶ The Honan Chapel, University College Cork, *History of the Honan Chapel*, (n.d.) <<https://honanchapel.ie/history/>> [accessed December 2025]

¹⁶⁷ Rogers, ‘Bees and Butterflies’, p. 207.

¹⁶⁸ Vivenne Keely, ‘(Re)Thinking Out Gobnait: Memory and Presence in Folklore and Landscape’, in *Women and Pilgrimage*, ed. by E. Moore Quinn and Alison T. Smith (Virginia, USA: CABI, 2022), pp. 78-92 (p. 82) <<https://doi.org/10.1079/9781789249392.0000>>.

in the image (see Figure 2), Gobnait is shown in her magnificently coloured robes including a silver cloak and a veil, which feature bee-hive designs, and she is holding a wooden crozier in one hand, and in her other hand is a miniature of her church at Ballyvourney. Encompassing the head of Gobnait is a halo which is used to signify that she is a saint, and to the left of her head, a white crystal line can be seen which represents the one that Gobnait drew to protect Ballyvourney from the plague as discussed in Chapter Four. The obvious motif that is repeated in the scene is the bee, and these are not only obvious, but also hidden slightly such as the one near the end of the panel located near the hem of her cloak. Clarke has been incredibly clever when designing this window as he has used hexagonal tiles (or honeycomb-shaped lozenges) within the structure to represent a honeycomb.



FIG 6.1. Picture of St Gobnait depicted in a stained glass window designed and created by Harry Clarke, and located within the Honan Chapel, Cork, (n.d.). Photograph used and reproduced by kind permission of the Governors of the Honan Hostel. Photo credit: Gerard Swift Photography (2022) <<https://honanchapel.ie/history/>> [accessed December 2025].

Another artist who was also part of the same guild as Clarke, Wilhelmina Geddes, created some small embroidered panels of which one of them was created, in 1918, for Gobnait and is 'one of a series of sodality banners in County Galway.'¹⁶⁹ This banner shows Gobnait setting her bees against marauders.

Other mediums in which Gobnait can be seen are poems, such as the one entitled 'Gobnait's Shrine'¹⁷⁰ in which the imagery of Gobnait can be evidenced and linked to the tales that we have discussed in previous chapters. Other more recent poetry can be seen by the poem entitled 'Long Distance Swimmer' in which Molloy appears to rely on the myths that have emerged concerning Gobnait, such as when Molloy incorporates the vision that Gobnait had when she was told to undertake her pilgrimage and not stop until she came across nine deer, or the nod to the people hanging strips of cloth onto the bush that is located at Ballyvourney.¹⁷¹ Another poem, written in 2007¹⁷² was about Lady Isabella Augustus Perse Gregory who was an Irish writer and playwright and was part of the late nineteenth century Irish literary renaissance.¹⁷³

This idea of a contemporary poem relying on legends is not unique, but it was nice to find when I was conducting my research.

When undertaking my research, I decided to look at whether or not the name Gobnait was still popular. As you can see from the table below, the results were fairly low. The data was only available when three or more people registered the name, so it could be that there are more people called Gobnait born from 1964 but they do not appear on the table, and nor would they appear if Gobnait was used as a second or subsequent name. The most popular year appears to have been 1975 with eight girls

¹⁶⁹ Bowe, p. 76.

¹⁷⁰ Katie Donovan, 'Gobnait's Shrine', *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 51 (Autumn, 1996), pp. 78-79 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25578674>> [accessed November 2025].

¹⁷¹ Dorothy Molly, 'Long-distance Swimmer', *The Poems of Dorothy Molloy* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), pp. 167-168. <<https://www.proquest.com/publication/7299408?accountid=10792>>

¹⁷² Moya Cannon, 'Lady Gregory at Cill Ghobnait', *Irish Pages*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2007), pp. 224-226 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/30057382>> [accessed November 2025].

¹⁷³ 'August, Lady Gregory', in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, [online], ed. by Britannica Editors (May 2025) <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augusta-Lady-Gregory>> [accessed November 2025]

being registered with the name Gobnait, and the last time it was registered was in 1981.

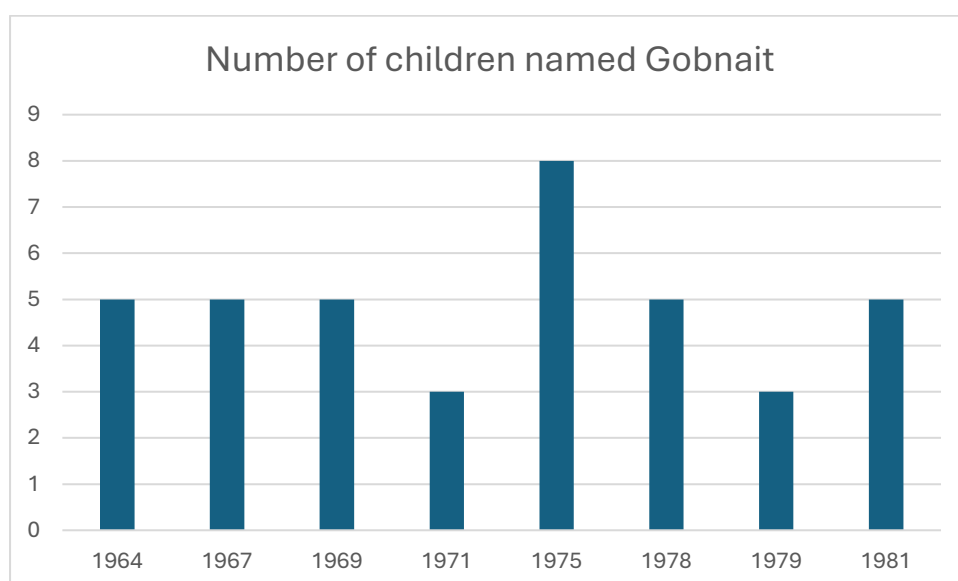


Table 6.1. Girls names in Ireland with 3 or more occurrences between 1964 and 2024 ©CC0 1.0 Universal

It was interesting to note that recently (in September 2025) there was a Culture Night 2025 held in the streets of Killarney, and part of that parade was a ‘street presentation of Celtic mysticism and magic as Aisling Ghobnait [was] brought to town by Mothú Street Spectacle Performers’.¹⁷⁴ As noted in the article that appeared in Killarney Today, the spectacle – which was inspired by the legend of Gobnait – and reimaged this into a street performance to demonstrate the importance of Gobnait in Irish culture. The article noted that Gobnait ‘has a legacy as [a] warrior and is patron saint of bees and ironworkers.’¹⁷⁵ As seen in the images that accompanied the article, the performers carried an oversized image of Gobnait, and other performers carried bees and sheep (instead of deer). The whole performance looked amazing!

¹⁷⁴ John O'Mahony, 'Aisling Ghobnait to bring real drama to streets of Killarney', *Killarney Today*, 15 September 2025 <<https://www.killarneytoday.com/aisling-ghobnait-to-bring-real-drama-to-streets-of-killarney/>> [accessed November 2025]

¹⁷⁵ O'Mahony, 'Aisling Ghobnait'

The Irish Traditional Music Archive (ITMA) is home to the largest, most comprehensive collection of Irish traditional music, and within their archive was a listing for Brenda Castles who has composed, in recent times, a reel dedicated to *St Gobnait's Well*.¹⁷⁶

Another example of Gobnait being part of today, is an installation in the local secondary school at Coolnasmear, Dungarven. Figure 6.2 shows a stained glass window depicting Gobnait with her flaming red hair and holding a beehive, as well as showing some people being attacked by the bees, and two white deer. These images are taken from the lore that we know is associated with Gobnait. There is also shown at Figure 6.3 a close up image of one of the bees.

¹⁷⁶ Brenda Castles, *St Gobnait's Well*, reel, (Dublin: The Irish Traditional Music Archive (ITMA) [n.d.]), < https://www.itma.ie/scores/281607_06/#close > [accessed December 2025]



FIG 6.2. *St Gobnait, Co Waterford*, [stained glass], (Installed at Scoil Naomh Gobnait, Coolnasmear, Dungarven, Co. Waterford) < <https://joymcallen.ie/stained-glass#&qid=1&pid=9> > [accessed December 2025]. Use of images by kind permission of Joy McAllen (<https://joymcallen.ie/>) © Joy McAllen



FIG 6.3. *Close up of bee*, [stained glass], (Installed at Scoil Naomh Gobnait, Coolnasmear, Dungarven, Co. Waterford) < <https://joymcallen.ie/stained-glass#&gid=1&pid=9> > [accessed December 2025]. Use of images by kind permission of Joy McAllen (<https://joymcallen.ie/>) © Joy McAllen

Other examples of places that still continue the name and themes that have emerged from the folk-lore surrounding Gobnait are,

- 9 White Deer microbrewery in West Cork (<https://www.9whitedeer.ie/>)
- Coláiste Ghobnatan which is an inter denominational college which teaches all subjects through Irish and is located in Ballyvourney (<https://www.colaiasteghobnatan.ie/>)
- Book store named after the thief An Gadaidhe Dubh and was located in a village near Ballyvourney, but has since closed (https://www.instagram.com/gadai_dubh_books/)
- A song using a poem about Gobnait (<https://simondevoil.com/track/2733756/saint-gobnait>) and the poem is by

Christine Valters Paint (<https://headstuff.org/culture/literature/poem-week-st-gobnait-place-resurrection/>)

- Gobnait as a dragon slayer in a poem (<https://allpoetry.com/poem/15642059-St-Gobnait-The-Dragon-Slayer-by-Gregmillhorn>)
- Has an entry on TripAdvisor (https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attraction_Review-g2369286-d6210941-Reviews-St_Gobnait_s_Monastic_Site-Ballyvourney_County_Cork.html)
- In February 2025 there was a musical based on the life of Gobnait performed at the Cork Opera House (https://youtu.be/djB-tC6b4XI?si=r_QRr8KkLIs62Yv4) and this was a sold out production

Chapter Six : Conclusion

Jankulak noted, when talking specifically about Cornwall and Brittany, that these two regions were ‘replete with notably obscure saints’,¹⁷⁷ and the same can be said about Ireland. Jankulak continues that it is important, when describing genealogy, that the ‘anchoring of kindreds in a coherent framework of relationships which stretched back to their forefathers’ first arrival in the island’¹⁷⁸ is evidenced in the entries and literature that we have considered regarding Gobnait. The association not only with Abbán, but also trying to place her as descended from royalty, is the desire to demonstrate her pedigree and her lineage. Bowen notes the challenges regarding the *Lives of the Saints* that were written, as they would have been composed potentially many centuries after the fact, and would have been influenced by ‘medieval monkish imaginations and deliberate Norman reorientation of their theme’.¹⁷⁹

This brief look into the Life of Saint Gobnait has proved interesting. The texts and lore that exist around her, despite her not having her own *Life*, does not seem to have diminished her place in society and whilst ‘it is clear [...] that other miracles make up the major proportion of the *vita* of an Irish saint and are integral to the composition of Irish hagiography’,¹⁸⁰ these “stories” seem to have resonated with people throughout time.

Coming into this dissertation, the question was more centred around whether or not Gobnait was someone that could have lived in Ireland during the sixth or seventh century. The fact that Gobnait is still someone who is revered today, is a reflection not only of the preserved oral traditions that accompany her, but also of the cultural customs and “lived” experience that people still have on a day-to-day basis. This, as noted by Callan, reflects the fact that ‘Gobnait inspired many legends attesting to her

¹⁷⁷ Karen Jankulak, ‘Adjacent Saints’ Dedications and Early Celtic History’, in *Saints’ Cults in the Celtic World*, ed. by Steve Boardman, John Reuben Davies and Eila Williamson (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013), pp. 91-118 (p. 91).

¹⁷⁸ Jankulak, p. 117.

¹⁷⁹ E. G. Bowen, ‘The Travels of the Celtic Saints’, *Antiquity*, 18 (1944), pp. 16-28, p. 16. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X0001824X>>

¹⁸⁰ Dorothy Ann Bray, ‘Miracles and wonders in the composition of the Lives of the early Irish saints’, in *Celtic Hagiography and Saint’s Cults*, ed. by Jane Cartwright (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 136-147 (p. 139).

great holiness and [her] harmony with animals and nature',¹⁸¹ and I think, when considering the legacy of Gobnait, the observations made by Callan are accurate in so much as the memory of Gobnait is strong enough to have survived and to still be significant today, and this is a very powerful reminder that whilst there is no dedicated *Life*, Gobnait has still managed to remain relevant.

As noted by Bray, it is possible that saints were seen as 'a political force in the community, interceding with petty kings, opposing tyrants, exacting tribute, and, by the by, acting as a spiritual figure'.¹⁸² Whilst we have no way of knowing exactly what sort of person Gobnait was, would we assume, given the little that we do know, that she fit into this mould that Bray talks about? One of the tales told about Gobnait was how she wanted to protect one of her fellow nuns who was sick, from learning about the death of St Abbán, so Gobnait supposedly asked God to ensure that her "sister" would not hear the approaching funeral cortege and mourners, and this wish was granted. This, as noted by Concannon 'seems to [be] one of the most human and tender stories in all [of the] Saint Literature.'¹⁸³

We are unable to say for certain whether or not Gobnait was a saint, or whether she was a woman who was kind and took pleasure in helping people, we will never know, but the evidence that is available does seem to suggest that she was certainly "of this world" at one point. I was surprised by how much her story is being revived in Ireland and believe that Gobnait is definitely worth research. She offers a look into a culture and history that is rich with events, lore and ritual, and although she poses challenges due to the lack of extant material, the material that is available does seem to support the thoughts that she was "real".

¹⁸¹ Maeve Brigid Callan, *Sacred Sisters: Gender, Sanctity, and Power in Medieval Ireland* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), p. 29. <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvscxtfj>>

¹⁸² Dorothy Ann Bray, 'The Study of Folk-Motifs in Early Irish Hagiography: Problems of Approach and Rewards at Hand' in *Studies in Irish Hagiography Saints and Scholars*, ed. by John Carey, Máire Herbert, and Pádraig Ó Riain (Dublin: Four Courts Press Ltd, 2001), pp. 268-277 (p. 273-4) <<https://archive.org/details/studiesinirishha0000unse>> [accessed November 2025].

¹⁸³ Helena Concannon, 'The Holy Women of the Gael', *The Irish Monthly*, Vol. 45, no. 524 (1917), pp. 83-93 (p. 92-3) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20504722>> [accessed November 2025].

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