

An Analysis of the Role and Function of Saints Relics in the Cults of Celtic Saints

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Before the Reformation under King Henry VIII, when saints' relics were stolen and destroyed, their reliquaries stripped of jewels and precious metals and sold to the highest bidder, relics were a cornerstone of the Christian faith in Britain and Ireland¹. This was as true of the Celtic Christian traditions of Wales, Ireland and Scotland and their local and national saints' cults, as it was of the more traditional practices of the Catholic churches and their canonical saints' cults². Saints' relics were key features of worship, dedication, and veneration in the Celtic Church, they could provide supplicants with protection, healing and intervene in the physical world on behalf of the Holy³. They were present in churches across the Celtic world and were often viewed as places of Pilgrimage⁴, even to those from outside of the Celtic nations⁵. Henry V and Edward IV both made pilgrimages to St Gwenfrewys shrine to offer thanks for their victories, so prominent was the Welsh saints' reputation and influence⁶. There are two main categories of relics to consider, corporeal and contact relics⁷. Corporeal relics are the remains of the saints' physical body⁸, either their bones or the very rare incorrupt corpses where decay seems not to have touched the saints remains⁹. These were displayed for veneration and could be used to create holy water and oil or could offer healing through contact with either their remains or reliquaries containing them¹⁰. Contact relics were more common, these were objects which had come into contact with the saint's body in life or death and were therefore considered holy and infused with the saints' power¹¹. Such items include books, clothes, crosiers, bells¹², and secondary contact relics

¹ Rebecca Browett, 'Touching The Holy: The Rise Of Contact Relics In Medieval England', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 68.3 (2017), 493-509 (p.509)
<<https://www.proquest.com/docview/1904590090?accountid=130472&parentSessionId=7zHi%2BiN7RTsiVKtoqc9zMYTq2041YVpvZu5gvCz2CTM%3D&pq-origsite=primo>> [Accessed: 4th April 2023].

² Robert Bartlett, *Why Can The Dead Do Such Great Things?: Saints And Worshippers From The Martyrs To The Reformation*. (United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2013), p.59.

³ Gilbert Márkus, 'Dewars And Relics In Scotland: Some Clarifications And Questions' *The Innes review*, 60.2 (2009), 95-144 (p.95)<<https://web-p-ebsscohost-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=d7e18046-8e12-4057-8875-ff10fa2a7757%40redis>> [Accessed: 11th April 2023]

⁴ Kathryn Hurlock, 'Pilgrimage', in *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*, eds. by Janet Burton and Karen Stöber (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), pp.119-132 (P.120).

⁵ Hurlock, *Pilgrimage*, p.124.

⁶ Ibid. p.124.

⁷ Bartlett. *Why Can The Dead Do Such Great Things?* p.239.

⁸ Ibid. p.239

⁹ Ibid.p.100

¹⁰Ibid.p.12-13

¹¹John Crook, *English Medieval Shrines*, Paperback Edition. (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2016), p.7.

¹² Browett, *Touching The Holy*, p.501.

such as water containing dust which had contact with a saint's bones, or oil which had similar contact and could be used for cures¹³.

Relics such as these became a part of Christian practice because of the martyr saints and apostles etc. who were buried in the first days of Christianity, as a result of the persecutions and purges of Roman emperors such as Nero and Diocletian¹⁴. The faithful would gather at the graves of saints on the day of their death to celebrate their ascension to heaven, their lives and to hold feasts¹⁵. When these tombs or graves grew in popularity, the faithful would build churches over them to protect them, giving the saint a place of worship¹⁶ and creating a consecrated shrine to celebrate the Eucharist in¹⁷. Saints' relics became important as a sign of and an ideal of faith, especially as Christianity grew in strength once the purges ceased¹⁸. With no new purges there were no new martyrs and the new nations where Christianity was embraced had no native saints, therefore they began translating relics¹⁹. Saints' relics were translated to newly founded churches across Christendom to consecrate them²⁰ and to give the converted Christians of these areas a saint who could be their intermediary. This practice translated into the Celtic church, though with exceptions, such as Armagh's claim of having pieces of the True Cross²¹, these saints were native and were usually those who lived for their faith rather than died for it²². Saints venerated in Celtic nations, such as St Columba, were venerated as traditionally appointed local saints,²³ as, with exceptions such as St Patrick, these Celtic saints were not canonized by the Holy See²⁴. Their relics, however, held no less importance or power to the people of the Celtic church, both contact and corporeal relics were used in much the same way as the rest of Christendom. Though they did have some examples which were specific to the Celtic nations, these were bells, crosiers, and books²⁵, which do not appear to be venerated as relics outside of the Celtic nations.

For the purposes of this analysis, we shall look at the most prevalent ways that these relics were used in Celtic saints' cults, their various roles and functions and then provide examples of these uses from the church's history. These uses include swearing oaths, healing, use as battle standards/protection and objects of pilgrimage. As contact relics were the primary form of veneration due to the Celtic tradition against exhuming the bodies of saints and

¹³ Crook, *English Medieval Shrines*, p.16-17.

¹⁴ Bartlett, *Why Can The Dead Do Such Great Things?* p.3.

¹⁵ Ibid.p.3.

¹⁶ Ibid.p.8

¹⁷ Ibid.p.6.

¹⁸ Ibid.p.12.

¹⁹ Crook, *English Medieval Shrines*, p.8.

²⁰ Ibid.p.7.

²¹ Sarah Christine Erskine, *The Relic Cult Of St Patrick Between The Seventh And The Late Twelfth Centuries In Its European Contexts: A Focus On The Lives*. (Unpublished PhD Thesis; University of Glasgow, 2011) (p.94).

²² Bartlett, *Why Can The Dead Do Such Great Things?* p.17.

²³ Ibid.p.31.

²⁴ Ibid.p.59.

²⁵ Ibid.p.248.

instead erecting shrines around them, much of the reference material in this essay shall regard contact relics²⁶.

The most common role or function of relics in Celtic saints' cults were as objects of divine healing. This was a trait found across the relic cults of the Christian world, and was no less prominent in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. A frequent act associated with Celtic saints' relics was the achievement of healing miracles either through contact with corporeal and contact relics or through prayers and vigils said over them in their shrines²⁷. This could be achieved by imbibing water infused with dust from the saint's corporeal reliquary, or by being touched by oil poured through the saints' corporeal reliquary where it had come into contact with the saints' bones²⁸. Contact relics served much the same function, items of clothing such as belts were known to give healing to supplicants who came seeking the miracles of the saints²⁹. There are even instances of holy wells, a type of secondary relic created by miracles, often by the death of saints, which offered healing to the faithful³⁰. One notable example of this is the Holy Well of St Gwenfrewy, which sprung up where her blood had spilt after she was beheaded by Prince Caradog³¹. It is famed that people received cures for everything from blindness to diseased limbs through bathing in and drinking the waters from her Holy Well³². This was also achieved through contact with the stone of St Beuno, which is submerged in the well and would grant miracles to those who asked thrice for answers³³. Around the well grows a type of moss the faithful call 'St Gwenfrewys hair' which people take from the shrine as a personal secondary healing relic³⁴. The miracles of healing at St Gwenfrewys Well are so numerous that the shrine is decorated with reminders of her miracles; crutches left behind by cured pilgrims line the walls of the shrine as testament to the saints' relics healing powers³⁵.

There are many such relics in the Celtic cults which have similar healing abilities, prominent amongst these are stories regarding the use of secondary relics – specifically contact relics of dust and oil³⁶. These relics which have had intimate contact with the saints' bones or been retrieved from their reliquaries would have been mixed with water so that pilgrims or sick parishioners might imbibe the relic to be cured³⁷. One story mentions a nobleman's son who

²⁶ Browett, *Touching The Holy*, p.502.

²⁷ Márkus, *Dewars And Relics In Scotland*, p.124.

²⁸ Bartlett, *Why Can The Dead Do Such Great Things?* p.249.

²⁹ Erskine, *The Relic Cult Of St Patrick*, p.124.

³⁰ S Baring-Gould and John Fisher. *The Lives Of The British Saints: The Saints Of Wales And Cornwall And Such Irish Saints As Have Dedications In Britain: Volume 3*. (Wales; The Honorable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1911) (p.192).

³¹ Baring-Gould and Fisher, *The Lives Of British Saints*, p.192.

³² Hurlock, *Pilgrimage*, p.124.

³³ Lynne Heidi Stumpe, 'Display And Veneration Of Holy Relics At St Winefride's Well And Stonyhurst', *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 22 (2009), pp.63-81 (p.69) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41417138>> [Accessed: 12th April 2023]

³⁴ Stumpe, *Display and Veneration*, p.69.

³⁵ Ibid.p.67.

³⁶ Bartlett, *Why Can The Dead Do Such Great Things?* p.249.

³⁷ Ibid. p.249.

had fallen sick and was cured by virtue of a pilgrim, who bestowed on them sacred dust they had on their person, which had been collected from the tomb of St Margaret of Scotland³⁸. The dust was mixed into the water and when the nobleman's son drank the mixture, he was miraculously cured³⁹. This is quite a common story that repeats itself via many different Celtic saints' cults.

Other popular Celtic saints' relics are items of clothing, clothing that the saint may have been buried in⁴⁰ or even used to perform miracles during their lifetime⁴¹. By placing these items on or around a person suffering from illness or pain, the healing power of the saint would be called down to heal them⁴². A tale from an Irish cult tells of the belt of St Mochuda which was known to cure stomach complaints⁴³. It was sent to a King of the Island in the stead of St Mochuda himself, who was unable to attend his sovereign, it is said that when the King was wrapped in the belt, his stomach complaints ceased, and he was miraculously cured⁴⁴.

A final Celtic contact relic known for its healing capabilities was the bell of St Patrick, whilst it is not specified which of the bell relics belonging to St Patrick the legends speak of, it is clear the relic was highly venerated as a cure for ills⁴⁵. The renowned Vita penned by Jocelin speaks of a bell relic which was used to cast water onto pilgrims when swung, and that the water that fell off the bell was blessed with curative powers which healed pilgrims⁴⁶. The Vita also states that those who drank from the bell directly were instantly cured of their various ailments and that this was a treatment offered mainly to pilgrims who came specifically seeking out the bell of St Patrick for aid⁴⁷. This bell must have been well renowned indeed, as pilgrimage was often the last resort of a desperate person when concerning personal health, which demonstrates its important role in the St Patricks cults power and duties.

These relics of healing were also huge draws for pilgrims who would make what were often lengthy and dangerous pilgrimages to shrines containing saints' relics, to obtain their blessings and healing powers⁴⁸. This could involve donations to the shrine or offerings of money⁴⁹ and livestock⁵⁰ to the saints, which sustained the cults and their power.

³⁸ Ibid. p.249.

³⁹ Ibid.p.249.

⁴⁰ Browett, *Touching The Holy*, p.494.

⁴¹ Márkus, *Dewars And Relics In Scotland*, P.105.

⁴² A. T. Lucas, 'The Social Role Of Relics And Reliquaries In Ancient Ireland', *The Journal Of The Royal Society Of Antiquaries Of Ireland*, 116 (1986), pp.5-37 (p31) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25508904>> [Accessed: 12th April 2023]

⁴³ Lucas, *The Social Role Of Relics*, p.31.

⁴⁴ Ibid.p31.

⁴⁵ Erskine, *The Relic Cult Of St Patrick*, p.156.

⁴⁶ Ibid.p.156.

⁴⁷ Ibid.p.156.

⁴⁸ Ben Nilson, *Cathedral Shrines Of Medieval England*, Paperback Edition. (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2001), p.104.

⁴⁹ Hurlock, *Pilgrimage*, p.123.

⁵⁰ Erskine, *The Relic Cult Of St Patrick*, p.46.

This brings us into the second role or function of the Celtic saints' relics, drawing pilgrims in and accumulating tributes and devotions. Shrines and churches dedicated to powerful, well-known saints, which contained their relics, are well documented to have brought in substantial wealth, especially on their saints' days⁵¹. St Gwenfrewys Well drew in so many pilgrims for healing at the Basingwerk shrine, that it famously brought in £150 annually, a considerable sum at the time, due to their large collection of St Gwenfrewys relics and her sacred spring⁵². It is said one year on St Gwenfrewys feast day, charlatans managed to collect the sum of £5 at her shrine⁵³. If such a sum was collected from just a few pilgrims on a feast day, it is easy to imagine the shear wealth that the relics at Basingwerk could draw in on its saint's day alone⁵⁴.

A frequent part of this accumulation of devotions and tributes was the tradition of the Relic Circuits⁵⁵. These were ritual journeys where saints' relics would be taken on procession around local villages to be seen and venerated by the masses as they processed through the country⁵⁶. Some Irish saints were said to have bequeathed their relics to churches specifically for the purpose of collecting tithes owed to the church⁵⁷, such as St Maedoc, who dedicated a Bachall of theirs specifically for this purpose⁵⁸. On these circuits, priests of the saint's cult were able to collect tithes, duties and offerings given to the saint⁵⁹, often in times of great calamity such as famines, when people could essentially pay their saints for their blessings or protection, almost like a tax⁶⁰. They would also be carried around to enforce the collection of dues to the church from those who lived on its lands and surrounding areas, as a physical reminder of sorts, as it was said ill things befell those who failed to pay the church their due⁶¹, the relics then acted as a kind of saintly enforcer. This was not the only function of the circuits however, one of its earliest functions was to use relics as saintly reinforcement for the Laws of Saints, to which people were beholden⁶². For instance, the relics of Saints Peter, Patrick and Paul were documented to have been taken on a sacred Circuit in 734AD around Armagh⁶³. The purpose of this sacred circuit was to bring

⁵¹ Hurlock, *Pilgrimage*, p.120.

⁵² Ibid.p123.

⁵³ Ibid.p.123.

⁵⁴ Ibid.p123.

⁵⁵ Márkus, *Dewars And Relics In Scotland*, p.102.

⁵⁶ Gilbert Marcus, 'Iona: Monks, Pastors and Missionaries' in *Spes Scotorum: Hope of Scots. Saint Columba, Iona and Scotland*, eds. by Dauvit Broun and Thomas Owen Clancy (Edinburgh: T&T Clark LTD, 1999), pp.115-138 (p.125)

⁵⁷ Márkus, *Dewars And Relics In Scotland*, p.108.

⁵⁸ Lucas, *The Social Role Of Relics*, p.15.

⁵⁹ Niamh Wycherley, 'The Enduring Power Of The Cult Of Relics – An Irish Perspective', in *Making the Medieval Relevant: How Medieval Studies contribute to Improving Our Understanding of the Present*, eds. by Chris Jones, Conor Kosick, Klaus Oschema (Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2020) pp.239-252 (p250.)

⁶⁰ Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Columba, Adomnan And The Cult Of Saints In Scotland', in *Spes Scotorum: Hope of Scots. Saint Columba, Iona and Scotland*, eds. by Dauvit Broun and Thomas Owen Clancy (Edinburgh; T&T Clark LTD, 1999), pp.3-33 (p.18).

⁶¹ Márkus, *Dewars And Relics In Scotland*, p.102.

⁶² Lucas. *The Social Role of Relics*.p.15.

⁶³ Ibid.p.15.

the Law of Patrick into effect, which expressly forbade the killing of clergymen⁶⁴. So whilst collecting tithes and dues were a significant part of these circuits, they were not the relics only roles in them.

A further way in which these Celtic saints' relics were used was in the swearing of oaths, vows, and the agreement of treaties⁶⁵. People used saints' relics to make sacred agreements before God, Saints, and men, to make them binding in the eyes of both God and man⁶⁶ and to confirm to others that they would keep their agreements⁶⁷. If a person broke a vow or treaty confirmed using saints' relics, that person would suffer the holy wrath of the saint who had been invoked to confirm and watch their vow⁶⁸ - if they broke their vow then the saint would be insulted and take revenge⁶⁹. Therefore, the use of Holy relics for swearing oaths rather than the commoner act of swearing upon the Gospels, gave people trust in the words said and gave those who swore powerful compulsion to keep their oaths⁷⁰. This is because people were more fearful of breaking oaths upon relics like bells⁷¹ and crosiers than they were of breaking oaths sworn upon the Gospels, due to saintly retribution⁷². A grim account of a saints' vengeance comes from the legends of St Ciarán in the year 539AD⁷³. A young man swore upon the hand of St Ciarán and was found to have perjured himself, so the saint raised his hand and in placing it upon the neck of the man, decapitated him for his sin⁷⁴. The people of the Celtic church believed that St Ciarán's power lingered in his relics, as many who venerated the Celtic Saints believed of their own patrons' relics, and so after death St Ciarán's hand was used for swearing oaths and all were fearful of his wrath should they negate on them⁷⁵.

Amongst these relics are many that are seen to be entirely specific to the Celtic Church, such as the belts, crosiers and books once owned by notable national and local saints, which seemed to play key roles in many ceremonies⁷⁶. One such ceremony occurred in 1081AD when Gruffudd ap Cynan and the exiled King of Gwynedd, Rhys ap Tewdwr, came together in Mynyw to swear a solemn vow of unity against a common foe, the pretender to the Kings throne⁷⁷. The oath was sworn over the relics of St David, Wales patron saint⁷⁸. Their oath of unity would lead to military victory at Mynydd Carn, which was viewed to have been blessed

⁶⁴ Ibid.p.15.

⁶⁵ Márkus, *Dewars And Relics In Scotland*, p.115.

⁶⁶ Ibid.p.119.

⁶⁷ Ibid.p.121.

⁶⁸ Ibid.p.119.

⁶⁹ Ibid.p.119.

⁷⁰ Browett, *Touching The Holy*, p.501-502.

⁷¹ Erskine, *The Relic Cult Of St Patrick*, p.155.

⁷² Márkus, *Dewars And Relics In Scotland*, P.119.

⁷³ Ibid.p.120.

⁷⁴ Ibid.p.120.

⁷⁵ Ibid.p.121.

⁷⁶ Bartlett, *Why Can The Dead Do Such Great Things?* p.248.

⁷⁷ John Reuben Davies, 'Cathedrals And The Cult Of Saints In Eleventh And Twelfth Century Wales', in *Cathedrals, Communities and Conflict in the Anglo-Norman World*, eds. by Paul Dalton, Charles Insley and Louise J. Wilkinson (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2011) pp.99-116 (p.100).

⁷⁸ Davies, *Cathedrals And The Cult Of Saints*, p.100.

by the saint who clearly intervened on their behalf to ensure victory⁷⁹. This brought renown to the church at Mynyw, as it was shown to be a place of the supernatural intercession of St David on behalf of the exiled King, which earned peoples trust in the power of the church and St David⁸⁰.

As we see above, these relics were used for oaths of monumental importance to the Celtic nations, however they were used day to day as well⁸¹. As well as oaths of treaty, the Welsh laws required oaths to be sworn on relics, so the relics of Welsh saints paid a pivotal role in upholding the laws of man as well as the laws of God and saints⁸². According to the literature the smallest of cases might require an oath to be taken, and even offenders were allowed the defence of swearing upon a saints' relics to prove themselves innocent⁸³. Less well defined are the roles relics played in Scots laws, with the details being vague as to their importance⁸⁴. Details of the relics use in battle are much easier to find than their use in everyday Scots laws⁸⁵.

Ireland however had a great culture of oath swearing using the relics of saints, just as the Welsh did, which was at the core of their legal and political system⁸⁶. One example of oath swearing was as a part of a prisoner exchange in 1101AD, when Ulidias' King was returned to his people in exchange for the release and return of two close kin of his enemy, Domhnall Ua Lochlainn, who held him captive⁸⁷. The exchange was sworn over the 'Bachall Isa'⁸⁸, known as the 'Staff of Jesus', considered a powerful relic of both Christ and St Patrick⁸⁹, to assure the safe exchange of prisoners and assumedly, the safe departure of both parties⁹⁰. Such important events warranted the intervention of not just Ireland's most venerable saint but also the Son of God⁹¹, to risk their wrath would be unthinkable and therefore would have solidified the brief truce and exchange. Relics in this regard played pivotal roles in ensuring the continued belief of people in the saints' and the church, whilst also preserving important alliances and lives.

One final way that saints' relics were used was in a slightly risky manner. At times of great peril when war was inevitable, it became the role of saints' relics to act as protection for the armies comprised of their local sons⁹². Priests would carry the relics of Celtic saints onto battlefields to pray for victory against their enemies and to bless the soldiers with the saints'

⁷⁹Ibid.p100.

⁸⁰ Ibid.p.100.

⁸¹ Erskine, *The Relic Cult Of St Patrick*, p.124.

⁸² Márkus, *Dewars And Relics In Scotland*, P.121.

⁸³ Ibid.p.121-122.

⁸⁴ Ibid.p.122.

⁸⁵ Ibid.p.122.

⁸⁶ Wycherley, *The Enduring Power Of The Cult Of Relics*, p.250.

⁸⁷ Lucas, *The Social Role Of Relics*, p.28.

⁸⁸ Ibid.p.28.

⁸⁹ Ibid.p.9.

⁹⁰ Ibid.p.28.

⁹¹ Ibid.p.28.

⁹² David H Caldwell, 'The Monymust Reliquary: The Breccbennach Of St Columba?', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 131 (2002), pp.267-282 (p.274)

<<http://soas.is.ed.ac.uk/index.php/psas/article/view/9558>> [Accessed: 13th April 2023].

protection⁹³. There are examples of Celtic relics which were bestowed by their saints with the specific intent of providing protection from foes, so that their people may remain unharmed and protected by them even in death⁹⁴. The annals state that St Moninna gave to the nuns of the abbey where she resided as Abbess several of her relics, amongst them her hoe and a sheepskin which would protect them⁹⁵. She told her nuns that if they were to hold these relics whilst in the presence of enemies then they would not fall to them and victory would be theirs, she protected her nuns with her dying breaths⁹⁶.

Chief amongst these battle relics were the relics of St Columba⁹⁷ which were taken into battle on numerous occasions by the high lords of Scotland in both civil wars and wars against the English⁹⁸. Many of St Columbas relics were used in this capacity as battle standards and to bless battlefields with victory⁹⁹. An annal states that in 918AD the Scots used the crosier of St Columba to protect their troops against Viking invaders by carrying it into battle at Corbridge¹⁰⁰. This relic became known as a battle talisman in the aftermath of battle¹⁰¹. William I of Scotland similarly had his troops blessed and protected by St Columbas relics in 1178AD¹⁰². He had the incumbent Abbot of Arbroath use the 'Breccbenach'¹⁰³, more commonly known as the 'Monymust Reliquary'¹⁰⁴, to bless his troops before taking them into battle, instilling them with the saints blessing and protection¹⁰⁵. This was a common role of relics in Celtic saints' cults, with many armies using their saints' relics as battle standards or by literally carrying them into battle as seen at Corbridge. St Columbas relics may have been particularly special in this regard, as it is said that in life, he had the ability to prophesize the outcomes of battles¹⁰⁶. If St Columbas relics contained this same power, then this may explain why they were so beloved as battle talismans.

In Ireland further relics of St Patrick were pressed into service as battle talismans against the enemies of the Irish Kings¹⁰⁷. In 868AD King Niall moved against the son of the King of Bregia, taking into his battles several saints relics, chief amongst which was the Bachall Isa of Patrick and Christ¹⁰⁸. They were brought, amongst other relics, to serve and protect the King and his men and bring them success, as is similarly seen across the Celtic nations¹⁰⁹. The clan of the O'Donnell's of Ireland were also known to use the relics of St Columba and take them

⁹³ Ian Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths And Chasing Dreams*. (Edinburgh; Edinburgh University Press, 1999) p.24.

⁹⁴ Lucas, *The Social Role Of Relics*, p.20.

⁹⁵ Ibid.p.20.

⁹⁶ Ibid.p.20.

⁹⁷ Bartlett, *Why Can The Dead Do Such Great Things?* p.108.

⁹⁸ Ibid.p.109.

⁹⁹ Ibid.p.109.

¹⁰⁰ Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, p.24.

¹⁰¹ Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, p.24.

¹⁰² Ibid.p.55.

¹⁰³ Ibid.p.55.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.p.24.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.p.55.

¹⁰⁶ Bartlett, *Why Can The Dead Do Such Great Things?* p.30.

¹⁰⁷ Lucas, *The Social Role Of Relics*, p.17.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.p.17

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.p.17.

into battle¹¹⁰ - it would seem St Columba was widely associated with battles. The Clan had as its battle standard, the 'Battler' or 'Cathach' of St Columba, which was a reliquary containing within it a book of Psalms alleged to have been written by St Columba during his lifetime¹¹¹.

This appears to have been a common yet dangerous role of the relics, which is why young men were those who carried them into battle, instead of more experienced holy men¹¹². It is thought that these younger men would stand a chance of outrunning the enemy and preserving the saints' relics, preventing them being stolen by their enemies for their cults or as plunder¹¹³. Due to this, some seemingly lesser saints' relics were taken into battle as 'Saints Banners', which appear to be less mourned if lost¹¹⁴. They were a type of saintly symbol which is assumed to be a contact relic, until it simply became a symbol of the saint, with power only in its image¹¹⁵. The Breccbennach is thought to have possibly been a banner created from a garment which had wrapped the dead body of St Columba¹¹⁶ and would have perhaps been kept in the Monymust reliquary. This banner is said to have been used by the Scots when entering battle against the English, who were similarly armored in saintly protection¹¹⁷. Historians think that this banner may have been replaced when it became too ragged and decayed by its keepers at Forglen, to allow the relic to perform its other roles as a symbol of their right to possession of certain land titles bestowed upon the keepers of the relic¹¹⁸. A similar fate was said to have befallen the banner of St Cuthbert from Durham Cathedral during the medieval period¹¹⁹. In doing this, the relic would have lost its saintly connection and been a relic in name only, used for mortal gain rather than spiritual¹²⁰.

The relics of the Celtic saints' cults served many different purposes and roles, attempting to list them all here proves an impossible task, however they did hold other roles, St Patrick's Flagstone, where St Patrick was born, was reputed to identify liars¹²¹. Another use for bells was to aid in crowning monarchs, as the 'Bearnan' of St Fillan was used to in 1488AD at the coronation of James IV¹²². How these relics were used clearly varied from cult to cult, with no single type of object fulfilling the same role in each cult setting. Crosiers alone could be used as battle standards¹²³ and for swearing oaths¹²⁴ depending on whether they were in Wales, Scotland, or Ireland. The functions and roles of saints' relics in Celtic countries are as varied as their saints and traditions. I have endeavored therefore to slim down the use of relics to their key functions and roles within the Celtic church as my research has shown

¹¹⁰ Caldwell, *The Monymust Reliquary*, p.275.

¹¹¹ Ibid.p.275.

¹¹² Lucas, *The Social Role of Relics*, p.20.

¹¹³ Ibid.p.20.

¹¹⁴ Caldwell, *The Monymust Reliquary*, p.274

¹¹⁵ Ibid.p.274.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.p.274.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.p.274.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.p.274.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.p.274.

¹²⁰ Ibid.p.274.

¹²¹ Erskine, *The Relic Cult Of St Patrick*, p.170.

¹²² Márkus, *Dewars And Relics In Scotland*, P.126.

¹²³ Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, p.24.

¹²⁴ Márkus, *Dewars And Relics In Scotland*, P.119.

them to be, to do their miraculous stories justice. However, there are still many more legends regarding Celtic saints' cults which I need to explore, especially those supposed to alter natural events. For example, when the personally transcribed book relics of St Columba were used in conjunction with Holy rites to change the winds to protect ships carrying materials for their Church from a storm¹²⁵. With the annals of St Columba and St Patrick alone holding so many varied miracles attributed to various relics, it is impossible to imagine just how many varied uses and functions the relics of the hundreds of Celtic saints held.

Regardless of the multiplicity of roles and functions that relics played within Celtic saints' cults, there is one core function they all fulfilled. The relics were there to bring supplicants and pilgrims closer to God and the divine, via physical reminders of the Holy lives of saints¹²⁶. The saints provided people with an ideal of how to live their lives devoted to God, how true Christians should act¹²⁷. Their relics provided reminders of miracles and gave people hope for cures and protection, for the intervention of the saints and God in their lives¹²⁸. They brought people into contact with the Holy in a very tangible way and affected their lives in the day to day, from laws¹²⁹, to battles¹³⁰, to physical and spiritual health¹³¹, they even provided people with comfort¹³². The relics primary role was to serve as an inspiration of faith for those without it, to bolster those who were questioning and act as evidence of the rewards the faithful could reap if they were devout. They heightened the Christian spirit in individuals through their presence and their miracles¹³³. Relics may have had varied uses, but their true purpose was as a reminder of the power of God on Earth and to act as vessels for his divine will via the intervention of his saints¹³⁴. Through my research into the Celtic saints' cults, it is clear to me that the relics of saints and their cults were so utterly integral, not just to the Celtic Church but to people's everyday existence, that it is hard to imagine one without the other. In many ways relics were the heart of the Celtic saints' cults and of religious practise in the Celtic nations.

¹²⁵ Jennifer O'Reilly, 'The Wisdom Of The Scribe And The Fear Of The Lord In The *Life Of Columba*' in *Spes Scotorum: Hope of Scots. Saint Columba, Iona and Scotland*, eds. by Dauvit Broun and Thomas Owen Clancy (Edinburgh: T&T Clark LTD, 1999), pp.159-211. (p.171-172).

¹²⁶ David L Eastman, 'The Cult Of Saints' in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Ritual*, eds. by Juliette J Day, Richard DeMaris, Rickard Roitto and Risto Uro (New York; Oxford University Press, 2018), pp.676-683 (p.681-682).

¹²⁷ Eastman, *The Cult Of Saints*, p.681-682.

¹²⁸ Márkus, *Dewars And Relics In Scotland*, p.95-96.

¹²⁹ Lucas, *The Social Role Of Relics*, p.15.

¹³⁰ Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, p.24.

¹³¹ Crook, *English Medieval Shrines*, p.20.

¹³² Ibid.p.18.

¹³³ Eastman, *The Cult Of Saints*, p.680.

¹³⁴ Márkus, *Dewars And Relics In Scotland*, p.95-96.

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