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Landscape and Sacred Sites

There are two aspects of the Celtic Christian tradition that seem to be generally well known. First, the Church was unusually influenced by monasticism. Second, the Celtic form of monasticism was characterised by a strong ascetical tendency and by the existence of numerous hermits living in wild and isolated places. However, the significance of both of these elements is a matter of quite subtle interpretation. The 'desert' or wilderness in its various forms has exercised a peculiar fascination for spiritual seekers throughout Christian history. This is especially true of the originators of what we call the 'monastic movement' in Syria, Palestine and Egypt in the fourth century.

Christian monasticism . . . originated in the kingdom of the scorpion and the hyena: a world of rock and heat. Several centuries later the biographers of holy men in north-west Europe depicted their subjects as seekers after landscapes and environments which were correspondingly forbidding.¹

There have been plenty of attempts to describe a special connection between religious experience and 'the desert', however the latter is understood.² Even in the west, this connection is not unique to Celtic Christianity. The history of the western Church throughout the Middle Ages is full of anchorites who fled into the wilderness — that is to say, to islands or to forests. The theme of the 'desert' is common to many monastic and hermit texts. It is both a paradise, where people may live in harmony with wild animals, and at the same time a place of trial where ascetics encounter the inner and outer demons.

Deserts: Seclusion or Access?

It is interesting to note that in the Celtic lands quite a number of traditional Christian sites are commemorated in modern place names by the various local words for 'desert'. Thus in Scotland

it is Dysart, in Wales it is Dysserth or Dyserth and it is Diseart in Ireland. In the Hebrew scriptures there are close ties between the wilderness, the ocean, and the themes of death and the other world. These same themes and connections are apparent in the Celtic tradition as well. While earlier traditions probably played a part, it may be that the Celtic ascetics who went to sea in search of 'the desert' had also been encouraged by their regular monastic reading of the Old Testament. Adomnan's *Life of Columba* speaks of the monks who 'have recently gone out desiring to find a desert place in the sea that cannot be crossed'.³

The great Celtic saints such as Columba of Iona and Cuthbert of Lindisfarne seemed to find their special 'deserts' on the borderlands of normal settlement patterns. The British Isles are full of caves, Roman ruins, islands and coastal headlands with Celtic Christian associations and remains. Indeed, almost all the islands around the coast of Britain have remains of chapels dedicated to Celtic saints.⁴

The Irish medieval 'penitentials', or handbooks for priests concerning confession, indicate that spiritual values and social expectations were in a constant state of tension in the development of Christian community. The uneasy reciprocity between these values was reflected in the wide range of sites chosen by Celtic ascetics for their life-style. Some sites were obviously marginal places shunned by ordinary people. Other sites were comfortable and attractive places with access to natural and human resources. Indeed, they were often already social centres of some significance. Recent scholarship has emphasised how the choice of religious sites took account of both spiritual and practical factors. Many notable sites were close to good natural resources such as water. Others were deliberately associated with traditional holy places. In both cases, therefore, these sites were places where ordinary people tended to live already or where they regularly gathered for cultural, political and religious purposes.⁵

A wealth of archaeological evidence suggests that the most favoured natural sites for religious settlement were those that offered a combination of seclusion and access.⁶ While the writers

of Celtic saints' lives frequently praised their heroes for fleeing human society, the reality of saintly lives was more ambiguous. If we look at the geographical spread of monastic communities we see that the ascetical deserts, especially in Ireland, were rarely far away from settlement clusters or ring forts. In Wales, it has been suggested that many Celtic churches were placed near what were called bond-vills, that is to say, nucleated settlements of serfs around the residence of a local lord. This development took place in the immediate post-Roman period. So large numbers of what are today isolated church sites are the result of the decline in bond-vills by the time of Anglo-Norman settlement rather than of a deliberate option for isolation.⁷

Even the biographies of Celtic saints gave mixed reviews to the extreme solitaries. The story of the Irish St Mochuda records that he denounced St Cronan for his supposedly inconsiderate behaviour because the latter had withdrawn to a remote hermitage. 'To a man who avoids guests and builds his church in a wild bog, away from a level road, I will not go.' On the other hand, a life of St Cronan himself suggests a different story but similar values. Here Cronan moved his monastery because people failed to find him. 'I will not be in a desert place where guests and poor people cannot easily find me, but I will stay here in a public place.' Apparently he then settled at Roscrea where today there is a Cistercian monastery.⁸

Yet, to the modern eye, many of the sites we know about still appear to be very remote and wild. For example, there were the many island sites. Caldey Island off the coast of South Wales, where there is a modern monastic foundation, was popular with individual hermits or small groups of ascetics. Off the coast of Brittany, the small archipelago of Bréhat in the Gulf of St Malo had monastic settlements on a number of islands. Ile Lavré, dedicated to St Bredoc, had a monastery built in the ruins of a Roman villa. Its plan closely resembled fourth- or fifth-century Syrian monastic *lauras* and indeed it has been argued that the island's name is derived from the Syriac word. This, if accurate, would reinforce the belief of some historians that there were

close connections between Celtic and eastern Mediterranean monasticism.⁹

We need to remember, however, that the Celtic lands often had inhospitable landscapes and few trackways. For this reason, the sea was a means of connection and communication as well as a cause of separation. This may explain the popularity of those islands, such as Lindisfarne off the Northumbrian coast or Mont St Michel in northern France, that were cut off at high tide but otherwise attached to the mainland. Peninsulas and headlands offered the same mixture of seclusion and accessibility as the tidal islands. A number of seventh-century monastic settlements along the coast of Northumberland in North East England, such as St Abb's Head, Hartlepool, Tynemouth and Whitby, followed such a pattern of favouring headland sites.

Undoubtedly, religious sites such as Iona, Lindisfarne and Bradwell-juxta-Mare (on the coast of present-day Essex) were wild places, battered by strong winds and thundering seas. The more ascetic Celtic monastics seem not to have feared the wildness of sea nor quailed before lashing rain, gales or bitter cold. However, from the available evidence, it would be false to suggest that either remoteness or discomfort were the sole or universal motivations for Celtic religious settlement. Nor is it the case that the more inhospitable the site the more virtuous the community or individual ascetic! For example, although Bede may have been a biased witness, he wrote with disapproval of St Abb's Head. In doing so, he quoted the criticisms of the Irish monk Adamnan concerning the feasting, gossiping and wearing of rich and elaborate garments.¹⁰

Hills and Forts

Not all Celtic ascetics settled near the sea. Inland hilltops were also favoured sites. Malmesbury in Wiltshire, later a wealthy Benedictine Abbey, seems to have taken its name from a seventh-century Irish hermit Mailduibh who lived on top of the nearby hill. The visually extraordinary Glastonbury Tor, which rises sharply out of the surrounding Somerset plain, appears to have been occupied by a British monastic settlement in the sixth

century. Hilltops, rather like headlands or tidal islands, had a dual purpose. In this case they were both naturally isolated yet conspicuous. Their purpose may not have been so different from the pillars of Syrian ascetics such as Simon Stylites. In addition, of course, hills and high places featured prominently in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as religious sites or focuses for mystical encounters with the divine. This may have appealed to the biblically-minded Celts.

The practical problem with settlements on hills is that they tend to lack convenient water sources. While this may have attracted the more hard-bitten ascetics, it was actually more common for Celtic monastic settlements to be founded on level ground overlooking running water. In Ireland, the foundation of the monastery of Maedoc at Ros Imber was linked to a legend concerning the place where angels sang. But Ros Imber was also the spot where a lough met two rivers. This provided a ready means of access as well as a plentiful supply of water and fish. Monastic settlements by springs or wells may have continued ancient traditions of holy places. However, the reason why such water sources were thought of as holy in the first place may be inextricably linked to the practical necessities of drinking, cleansing and healing.¹¹

While Ireland had never been occupied by the Romans, and Scotland only intermittently so, old forts and walled towns provided Celtic monks with shelter all over the former Roman Province of Britain. This was particularly the case with the system of nine stone forts, the so-called 'Saxon Shore', that stretched around the South East coast from Norfolk to Hampshire. So, for example, St Cedd built his (still surviving) church at Bradwell in Essex from the stones of the former Roman fort of Othona. St Fursa occupied Burgh Castle. At Reculver in Kent there was a church dating from 669. At Richborough, also in Kent and the most important Roman monument in Britain, there are the remains of chapel foundations. What seems to have attracted Celtic ascetics to the former territory of the Roman military commander known as 'The Count of the Saxon Shore' was once again a combination of relative

isolation from the land and yet ease of access and movement by sea.

So there can be no doubt that it was the ascetical aspirations of the Celts that attracted them to many of the places that we know were religious settlements, whatever social or economic reasons may also have come into play. The island of Inner Farne drew Cuthbert into greater solitude from Lindisfarne partly because it had the daunting reputation that no one could stay there long because of the attacks of demons. Cedd probably chose as his home what is now the village of Lastingham on the edge of the North York Moors because the bleak landscape was daunting in itself and, according to Bede, was remote and more suited to robbers.

Cedd chose a site for the monastery among the high and remote hills, which seemed more suitable for the dens of robbers and haunts of wild beasts than for human habitation. His purpose in this was to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah: 'in the habitation of dragons, where each lay, shall be grass, with reeds and rushes', so that the fruits of good works might spring up where formerly lived only wild beasts, or men who lived like wild beasts.¹²

It was the isolated, remote settlements (or those that eventually became such) that have often survived best. This is because they were not plundered for their stone. Ireland is particularly well-equipped with ancient sites because the landscape has not been overtaken by a major industrial revolution. In contrast, many English sites are now surrounded by towns and industrial, or former industrial, sites. Bede's Jarrow, for example, lies on the outskirts of a large industrialised town. This contrasts sharply with the empty bays and windswept headlands of rural Ireland. As Kathleen Hughes, one of the leading modern historians of the Irish Church, has noted,

A hundred yards outside the monastic enclosure the physical experience is the same for us as for them: 'A clear-voiced cuckoo sings to me', the sound of the 'white-waved sea' is unchanged.¹³

One of the most dramatic and remote examples of a surviving

Irish site is Skellig Michael, 8 miles off County Kerry. Here a rock, 2000 feet from end to end and 715 feet high, rises abruptly out of the sea. The monastic site was more or less at the top. The settlement was contemplative yet consisted not of a single hermit's cell but of a community of six people with two chapels, a cemetery and a garden.¹⁴ Inishmurray, off the coast of Sligo, also appears remote but its unusually large stone enclosing wall, *cashel*, may mean that it took over from a prince's fort.¹⁵

Settlements and Travel

The idealisation of remoteness expresses only one aspect of Celtic, and especially Irish, religious settlement. Nearly all the major sites that grew into important monasteries are in fact on major travel routes or at least, in terms of ancient human geography, in relatively accessible places. The setting of the monastic settlement on the island of Nendrum or Mahee on the western shores of Strangford Lough in Northern Ireland is interesting. The site is on the *landward* side of the island, facing the mainland. So it seems that the founder, St Mochaoi, who had arrived by sea, chose a site where there was a territory to evangelise in front while behind was the sea lough with its potential for contact with the outside world. There was in fact an important gateway in the outer earthwork complete with janitor's cell that led to a quayside. This emphasises the supreme importance of sea communications to such sites. The site utilised an old ring fort though it does not seem that it was still occupied in a military or civil way.¹⁶

The windy and rainy environment of Ireland provided only a limited range of choices for safe and comfortable settlements. For example, hills stood comfortably apart from the soft, boggy soil of the valleys which made cross-country travel so difficult. It is not surprising that some of these dry 'islands' also boasted secular forts: for example, Armagh and Cashel. Estuaries, lake-sides and coastline were the natural communications routes for a land that was largely without roads. This no doubt explains the settlements on Strangford Lough and on the Isle of Iona

which conveniently straddled the sea route from Ulster to Scotland.¹⁷

It is an interesting question as to how far the pattern of religious sites in Ireland reflects traditional Irish settlements and how far the imported ideals of desert monasticism. In the end, it is difficult to distinguish the two. This is because spiritual ideals were so effectively inculturated into the social fabric and embedded into the realities and limitations of the landscape. The archaeology of the Irish Church tends to suggest that traditional building structures and social forms were frequently adapted to church use. This means that even after careful excavation it is not always possible to tell the difference between a secular site and a religious one. Often the only distinguishing features would be the presence of religious artwork or evidence from burials.

The typical religious settlement seems to have been enclosed within a *vallum*, or bank of earth (as at Iona) or of stone, that often resembled an ordinary ring fort. Indeed, there are several examples of sites where an actual fort was reused for religious purposes or where monastery and royal fort co-existed in the same general enclosure. In early Christian Ireland, monasteries were the only truly nucleated settlements. Although they were sometimes referred to as 'cities' they also contained specialised religious communities and centres of learning. The settlement at Clonard, for example, seems to have accommodated more than a thousand people.¹⁸

Boundary Places

It has been suggested by some recent scholars that monastic settlements were often deliberately sited on the boundaries between kingdoms.¹⁹ The motivation for this seems to have been complex. Some of the reasons were quite practical and tend to reinforce a sense that religious groups and their sites were closely associated with secular society rather than rigidly separated from it. Thus, boundary lands had traditionally been seen as suitable places for royal forts. Public events such as fairs were held there. It is also likely that the boundaries between territories marked the lines of the few routes that ran across the landscape.

Moreover, it seems that the boundaries of kingdoms were sometimes occupied by ritual sites used for assemblies or more general pre-Christian religious activities. Monastic settlements in these places were in some sense in continuity with this religious tradition. However, the issue is deeper than this. The Celts also had a fascination for the spiritual quality of boundary places. Living on physical boundaries also symbolised a state of liminality – of living literally and spiritually on the margins or between two worlds, the material one and the spiritual one. We have already seen that Lastingham in Yorkshire, like so many Celtic sites, was frontier territory. Lastingham was on the border between the rich agricultural settlements of the Vale of Pickering and the wilderness of the high moors. Boundaries and frontiers of a physical kind were among the places where Celts experienced the veil that separated this world and the other world to be particularly transparent.

Sacred Landscapes

So, in choosing sites for religious settlements different spiritual and practical factors were taken into consideration. Place had a sacred significance. The Christian Celts were as concerned as their ancestors had been about the issue of the sacred landscape and about good or evil places. They accepted that two worlds came together at certain familiar places in the landscape. Christian ascetics therefore sought out places where, in some special way, heaven appeared to meet earth. These boundary or frontier places were sometimes associated with traditional sacred places such as woodlands or wells. Some of the great Christian sites retain references to these links in their names. Thus Kildare derives from the words *Cell Dara* or 'the church of the oak wood'. In other places Christian monuments were raised at traditional tribal burial centres. This is because cemeteries, as we shall see, were rather obvious boundary places – doorways from this material world into the spiritual world.

In general, the surviving evidence suggests that Christian religious settlements depended a great deal on the traditional markers in the landscape. This fact was frequently glossed over

in specifically Christian stories of origin. Thus, the choice of places was sometimes reinterpreted in hagiographies in terms of saintly or angelic guidance. However, this very method of authenticating choices bears an uncanny resemblance to traditional Celtic approaches to these matters. Here visions of spirits, demons or the gods often played a role!

Spiritually speaking, for Celts not just *any* place in the landscape would do. There was a sense that certain kinds of places had more spiritual potential. This could be because of geography or association. There was another factor that came into play. Individuals and groups of ascetics also seemed to have had a belief that there was *one* precise location in the sacred landscape of the world that was particularly potent for their spiritual destiny. The religious texts associated with the wandering pilgrims, as we shall see in Chapter 5, spoke of them 'seeking the place of their resurrection'. Thus if ascetical wanderers eventually found a place where they chose to settle this was not simply because it was remote, offered material security or even because it was deemed to have some general supernatural significance. It was in a quite specific way discerned to be their particular doorway to heaven.²⁰

I hope that I have shown how choices of religious sites reflected certain spiritual values and not merely practical considerations. In summary, three dimensions stand out. First, in the search for holiness and spiritual experience there was a creative tension between the desire for seclusion and the wish to be accessible and open to society at large. This expresses in a particular way a theological balance between transcendence and immanence in the Celtic Christian experience of God. Secondly, there was an unusually symbiotic relationship between the monastic style of Church life and traditional social organisation. This is particularly true of Ireland but, as my comments on late Romano-Celtic Britain show, by no means exclusively so. What we might call monasticism became not merely a specialist way of life for a small number of ascetics but in some form or other *the* way of being Church. Speaking more broadly, spirituality was not something detached from social values and

organisation but was intimately entwined with them. This was apparent not least in the extraordinary continuities of ancient holy places in people's consciousness and religious behaviour. Thirdly, there was a fascination with borderlands and liminality particularly associated with a strong sense of the closeness of the 'other' world to the world of everyday experience. To an extent, all places were points of access, or doorways to the sacred. But certain places or points were marked off as special or particular, for example, cemeteries, monastic enclosures or certain natural features with a long spiritual history.