

From the ‘King of the Waters’ to Curative Manuscripts: Water and Medicine in Medieval Irish Textual Culture

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In the opening section of his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed in 731 CE, the scholar and historian Bede famously refers to the practice of curing snake-bite by giving the patient a drink of water that contains the scrapings of leaves from Irish manuscripts:

Denique uidimus, quibusdam a serpente percussis, rasa folia codicum qui de Hibernia fuerant, et ipsam rasuram aquae inmissam ac potui datam talibus protinus totam uim ueneni grassantis, totum inflati corporis absumsisse ac sedasse tumorem.

For instance we have seen how, in the case of people suffering from snake-bite, the leaves of manuscripts from Ireland were scraped, and the scrapings put in water and given to the sufferer to drink. These scrapings at once absorbed the whole violence of the spreading poison and assuaged the swelling.¹

This passing observation, which is set within the wider context of Bede’s generally laudatory comments about the healthfulness and plentifulness of the island of Ireland in comparison to Britain,² encapsulates two interrelated themes that are central to the following discussion. On the one hand, it evokes the literal concept of water as an element essential for the restoration and preservation of bodily health – a substance that can be mixed with other ingredients and ingested, often as part of a medicinal remedy measured and prepared by a healer. On the other hand, the fact that Bede’s anecdote can be read as an allegory for the power of the Word of God to combat the evil of Satan

1 Colgrave B. – Mynors R.A.B. (eds. and trans.), *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: 1969) I, i.20–21.

2 On this motif and its context, see e.g. Byrne A., *Otherworlds. Fantasy & History in Medieval Literature* (Oxford: 2016) 143–151.

(the serpent) suggests that it might also be understood to express the deeply-rooted symbolic function of water as a means to attain not only physical, but also spiritual purity.³ Bede's specification that scrapings from the leaves of Irish manuscripts should be used in the preparation of this curative drink may allude, moreover, to a particular association between Ireland and the production of sacred books that were thought to have acquired certain miraculous qualities by virtue of having come into contact with their saintly owners.⁴

A wide range of early Irish written sources survive that enrich our understanding of Bede's account insofar as they illustrate the profound interconnectedness between physical and spiritual modes of healing in early Christian culture, as well as the centrality of water in medieval approaches to curing both body and soul. While much evidence for these themes can be found in well-known (or at least better-studied) Irish-language literary genres of the early medieval period, such as hagiographical, penitential or narrative texts, this preliminary survey of the topic will also introduce some previously unpublished material from the large, but comparatively neglected, corpus of Irish vernacular medical writing, which likewise offers much valuable insight into the function and representation of water as a medicinal element in the Middle Ages.

1 The *Christus medicus* Metaphor and Sainly Healing in Medieval Irish Literature

An explicit connection between spiritual and physical healing can be traced to an early period in Christian culture. The metaphorical depiction of Christ

3 For the allegorical interpretation of Bede's comment, see i.e. Brown M.P., "Hagiography or History? Early Medieval Approaches to Establishing Origin and Provenance for Insular Copies of Scripture", in Moss R. – O'Mahony F. – Maxwell J. (eds.), *An Insular Odyssey: Manuscript Culture in Early Christian Ireland and Beyond* (Dublin: 2017) 24–41, 29.

4 The connection made by Bede between Ireland and the curing of snake-bite is also reflected in early English medical texts, where ritual incantations containing garbled Irish linguistic forms are found for ailments thought to have been inflicted by snakes or 'worms'. It has been argued that references to the 'demon-worm' in these contexts may have had an eschatological significance in relation to sicknesses reflecting a spiritual punishment of some kind: see Arthur C., "Charms", *Liturgies and Secret Rites in Early Medieval England* (Woodbridge: 2018) 73–80. On the influence of Irish scholars and liturgical books on other aspects of ecclesiastical culture in early Britain, see e.g. Campbell J., "The Debt of the Early English Church to Ireland", in Ní Chatháin P. – Richter M. (eds.), *Irland und die Christenheit: Bibelstudien und Mission* (Stuttgart: 1987) 332–346, and Hughes K., "Evidence for Contacts between the Churches of the Irish and English from the Synod of Whitby to the Viking Age", in Clemoes P. – Hughes K. (eds.), *England Before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitelock* (Cambridge: 1971) 49–67.

the Physician – the Divine Healer of mankind's spiritual diseases (*Christus medicus*) – is a frequent *topos* in the works of influential figures such as Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine, although it appears to have been introduced by Tertullian, who described Christ's work on earth as that of a preacher (*praedicator*) and healer (*medicator*).⁵ Thus Augustine wrote in his *De doctrina Christiana* (1.14.13) that 'the wisdom of God, in healing mankind, has employed Himself to cure it, being Himself Physician and Medicine both in one'.⁶ In several of his sermons, Augustine sought to establish a 'contrast between the humility and omnipotence of the Divine Physician on the one side, and the pride and frailty of man on the other', and emphasised Christ's devotion to his spiritual patients by comparing the saviour's ordeal on the cross to the reassurance offered by a physician who agrees to taste unpleasant medicine first:

The Physician Himself, though no such medicine is necessary for Him, drinks what He does not need, in order to cheer up the patient. Addressing, as it were, the reluctant patient, and encouraging him in his state of trepidation, He drinks first. 'The cup', He says, 'of which I am about to drink (Matt. 20:22; Mark 10:38). In Me there is no disease which could be cured by this cup, and yet I am going to drink of it so that you, who are in need of drinking of it, may not refuse it'. You see now, brethren, whether, after receiving such a great medicine, the human race ought still to be sick. Now God is humble, while man is still proud.⁷

Comparable medical metaphors abound in penitential texts that were written in Ireland as early as the sixth century, where penance is seen as the cure for sins and other spiritual ailments. This concept is most elaborately set out in the 'B-text' of the Latin *Penitential of Columbanus*, most probably written at some point after 575:

Diuersitas culparum diuersitatem facit paenitentiarum. Nam et corporum medici diuersis medicamenta generibus componunt. Aliter enim uulnera, aliter morbos, aliter tumores, aliter liuores, aliter putredines, aliter caligines, aliter confractiones, aliter conbustiones curant. Ita igitur etiam spirituales medici diuersis curationum generibus animarum uulnera

5 Arbesmann R., "The Concept of 'Christus Medicus'", *Traditio* 10 (1954) 1–28, 6.

6 Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, ed. H.J.S.Vogels, *Aurelii Augustini episcopi Hipponensis De doctrina christiana libros quattuor, Florilegium patristicum* 24 (Bonn: 1930) 1.14.13 (See Vogels, 8; and trans. Arbesmann, "The Concept of 'Christus Medicus'" 13).

7 *Ibidem* 11 and 15, citing the sermon edited by J.J. Migne in *Patrologia Latina* 38.781. On the reception of the *Christus medicus* theme in late-medieval England, see also the discussion by Rawcliffe C., *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England* (Stroud: 1995) 18–25.

morbos [culpas] dolores aegritudines infirmitates sanare debent. Sed quia haec paucorum sunt, ad purum scilicet cuncta cognoscere, curare, ad integrum salutis statum debilia reuocare, uel pauca iuxta seniorum traditiones et iuxta nostram ex parte intellegentiam (ex parte namque prophetamus et ex parte cognoscimus) aliqua proponamus.

Diversity of offences causes diversity of penances. For doctors of the body also compound their medicines in diverse kinds; thus they heal wounds in one manner, sicknesses in another, boils in another, bruises in another, festering sores in another, eye diseases in another, fractures in another, burns in another. So also should spiritual doctors treat with diverse kinds of cures the wounds of souls, their sicknesses, [offences], pains, ailments, and infirmities. But since this gift belongs to few, namely to know to a nicety all these things, to treat them, to restore what is weak to a complete state of health, let us set out even a few prescriptions according to the traditions of our elders, and according to our own partial understanding, for we prophesy in part and we know in part.⁸

The voluminous corpus of hagiographical literature that survives from medieval Ireland demonstrates that saints, as earthly representatives of the Divine Healer, were naturally seen to perform a similar role to that of Christ the Physician. While Wendy Davies has noted that comparatively few of the miracles depicted in Irish hagiographical texts relate specifically to healing,⁹ those which are found in such narratives often depict water as a key element in the curative process.¹⁰ For example, in what may have been intended to echo of Jesus's transformation of water into wine for the Wedding at Cana (John 2:1–11), the author of the ninth- or mid-tenth-century *Vita Tripartita* (a bilingual *Life* of Patrick, the preeminent saint of Ireland) describes how Patrick blessed a vessel full of water, which then turned into honey and was used to heal ailments: 'Ro ucc Patraic iar sin lestar lais docum ind uisci, ⁊ ro lín ⁊ ro sén in n-uisce coró sóad i mmil, ⁊ ro ícc cech ngalar ⁊ cech n-ainces forsa tardad (.i. roboí do chretaib léo)'. (Then Patrick brought a vessel with him to the water, and he filled it, and blessed the water so that it was converted into honey, and it

8 Bieler L., *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin: 1975) 98–99; for further examples of such medical metaphors in the Irish penitential texts, see *ibidem* 46–47.

9 Davies W., "The Place of Healing in Early Irish Society", in Ó Corráin D. – Breatnach L.-McCone K. (eds.), *Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney* (Maynooth: 1989) 43–55, 44–46.

10 On the representation of water in early medieval hagiographical literature of the Insular world, see also Hugh Magennis's chapter in this volume.

remedied every disease and every ailment to which it was applied, that is, they held it as a blessed object).¹¹ As Niamh Wycherley has noted, the text explains that this water was regarded as a *cretair*, a term which seems to have referred to a consecrated object or relic believed to possess special powers.¹²

Natural and man-made sources of water, such as wells, springs and rivers, feature prominently in early Irish literature as symbols of ritual cleaning and rebirth, and in the extant texts this symbolism is closely associated with the use of such sources for baptismal purposes.¹³ It is therefore not surprising to find that Irish saints are portrayed as having the ability to instil healing properties into wells and other bodies of water. For example, a text written in the first half of the twelfth century claims that St. Monenna, having immersed herself in a cold spring while chanting the psalter, was able to order the water from this source to follow her up a mountain. She then created a 'permanently hot' bath from it that had the power to heal invalids, and which seems to have subsequently come to be associated with St Kevin:

Et accessit sancta Monenna ad frigidum fontem suum, quo solitis noctibus sedens usque ad mamillas in aqua totum decantare solebat psalterium, et imposita benedictione cum baculo suo, iussit aquam in nomine Dei paths omnipotentis sequi illam. Et secessit inde ad culmen proximi montis, quo preparauerat balneum, post se trahens suum baculum. Et aqua secuta est eam usque ad summum. Et uirtute sancte uirginis aqua detracta de imis, in balneo recepta, gratia Dei fit semper calida. De inde usque ad hunc diem multi habentes infirmitatem in nomine sancte uirginis per balneum recipiunt sanitatem. Et dixit sancta uirgo ad Cheuin: 'Ecce balneum tibi offero in honore tuo et non deficiet aqua in eo'. Et uocatum est balneum Cheuin quia sancta Monenna dedit illud tiranno ut eriperet eum a diabolo.

And St Monenna went to her own cold fountain in which she used to chant the whole psalter on accustomed nights, sitting up to her breasts in water, and casting a blessing with her staff she ordered the water in the name of God the Father Almighty to follow her. And she withdrew from there to the top of the nearby mountain on which she had made ready

11 Mulchrone K. (ed. and trans.), *Bethu Phátraic* (Dublin: 1939) 8 (ll. 170–172).

12 Wycherley N., *The Cult of Relics in Early Medieval Ireland* (Turnhout: 2015) 125.

13 Bitel L.M., *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland* (Cork: 1990) 73. On the connection between holy wells and baptism, see also Ray C., *The Origins of Ireland's Holy Wells* (Oxford: 2014) 89–92.

a bath drawing her staff behind her. And the water followed her right to the top. And the water being drawn by the power of the holy virgin from the depths and received in the bath by the grace of God became permanently hot. Thereafter right up to the present day many with an infirmity recover their health through the bath in the name of the holy virgin. And the holy virgin said to Kevin: 'Behold I offer you the bath in your honour, and the water in it will not fail'. And the bath is called Kevin's because St Monenna gave it to the chieftain in order to snatch him from the devil.¹⁴

In some instances, the saint's intervention at an aqueous source is framed as an effort to convert and condemn unchristian practices. Thus Patrick's seventh-century biographer, Tírechán, recounts how the saint visited a certain well in Findmag that was referred to by the local people both as *Slán* ('good health') and as the *rex aquarum* ('king of the waters') because it was thought to have certain supernatural powers. The narrative explains that 'some wise man' had made a shrine for himself under the water in order to preserve his bones from burning:

Et uenit ad fontem Findmaige qui dicitur Slan, quia indicatum illi quod honorabant magi fontem et immolauerunt dona ad illum in modum dii. Fons uero quadratus fuit et petra quadrata erat in ore fontis (et ueniebat aqua super petram .i. est per glutinationes) quasi uestigium regale, et dixerunt increduli quod quidam profeta mortuus fecit bibliothicam sibi in aqua sub petra, ut dealbaret ossa sua semper, quia timuit ignis exust<ion>em; quia adorabant fontem in modum dii. Et indicata est Patricio causa adorationis, et ipse zelum Dei habuit de Deo uiuo, et dixit: 'non uerum quod dicitis, quod rex aquarum fons erat' (quia dederunt illi nomen "aquarum rex").

And he came to the well of Findmag, which is called Slán, because he had been told that the druids honoured the well and offered gifts to it as to a god. The well was of square shape and the mouth of the well was covered with a square stone (and water flew over the stone, that is through ducts closed with cement) like a regal trail (?), and the infidels said that some

14 Ulster Society for Medieval Latin Studies, "The Life of Saint Monenna by Conchubranus: Part I", *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society* 9.2 (1979) 250–273, 268–269; on the background to this text, see Esposito M., "The Sources of Conchubranus's Life of St. Monenna", *English Historical Review* 35.137 (1920) 71–78. The episode cited here is also noted in Bitel, *Isle of the Saints* 187.

wise man had made for himself a shrine in the water under the stone to bleach his bones perpetually because he feared the burning by fire; and they worshipped the well as a god. And Patrick was told the reason for its worship, and he had the zeal of God for the living God, and said: 'It is not true what you say that it was the king of the waters' (for this is the name they gave the well: 'king of the waters').¹⁵

Having thus intimated that only the Christian God could be king of the elements, Patrick then proceeded to bless the stone over this well and lift it away before the eyes of 'the magicians and pagans of that region' (*magi et gentiles regionis illius*), revealing only water beneath. The site subsequently became a shrine to the Christian saint himself.¹⁶

There is an echo of this hagiographical episode in the Irish saga-narrative *Cath Maige Tuired* ('The [Second] Battle of Mag Tuired'), argued to have first been composed in the ninth century and later reworked in the eleventh or twelfth.¹⁷ The tale recounts the war between the supernatural races of the Fomoiré and the Túatha Dé that were believed to have inhabited Ireland before the arrival of the first Gaelic settlers, and the victory of the Túatha Dé over the Fomoiré is explained as having resulted in part from the actions of the healer-figure Dían Cécht and his children, Octriuil and Míach, who were able to restore mortally-wounded men to life by casting them into a well called *Sláine* ('health') and chanting incantations over it. Thus here again, an aquatic source is explicitly linked to the concept of healing. In this case, however, the imagery of the scene evokes the opposing element of fire in a paradoxical fashion, since it is claimed that the warriors were thrown into the well in order to

15 Bieler L., *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin: 2004) 152–153.

16 According to Catherine Swift ("Tírechán's Motives in Compiling the *Collectanea*: an Alternative Interpretation", *Ériu* 45 (1994) 53–82, 58, n. 29), the church site associated with this well in the thirteenth century was named 'Slánpatrick', and has been identified by Kenneth Nicholls with a church in the townland of Ballynew, parish of Aglish, Co. Mayo: see also the latter's "Tobar Finnmuighe – Slán Pádraig", *Dinnseanchas* 2 (1966–1967) 97–98.

17 Only a single copy of the text survives in the sixteenth-century London, British Library MS Harleian 5280; see Gray E. (ed. and trans.), *Cath Maige Tuired. The Second Battle of Mag Tuired* (London: 1982) 54–55. On the dating of the work, see also Murphy G., *Saga and Myth in Ancient Ireland* (Dublin: 1955) 19, and Ó Cathasaigh T., "Cath Maige Tuired as Exemplary Myth", in de Brún P. – Ó Coileáin S. – Ó Riain P. (eds.), *Folia Gadelica: Essays Presented by Former Students to R. A. Breatnach* (Cork: 1983) 1–19, 1. For a more recent discussion of the so-called 'Mythological Cycle' of tales, see Carey, *The Mythological Cycle of Medieval Irish Literature*.

‘kindle’ them (*doberiuð bruth*) so that they would be ‘more fiery’ (*ániu*) the following day:

Is edh dano doberiuð bruth isna hógaib nogontais ann, comtar ániu íare nauhárach: fo bíth roboí Díen Cécht & a dí mac & a ingen .i. Ochtríuill & Airmedh & Míach oc dícetul foran tibrat .i. Sláine a hainm. Focertididís a n-athgoíte indte immairlestis; botar bí notégdis esde. Batir slán a n-athgoíte tre nert an díctail na cethri lege robátar imon tibrat.

Now this is what used to kindle the warriors who were wounded there so that they were more fiery the next day: Dían Cécht, his two sons Octriuil and Míach, and his daughter Airmed were chanting spells over the well named Sláine. They would cast their mortally-wounded men into it as they were struck down; and they were alive when they came out. Their mortally-wounded were healed through the power of the incantation made by the four physicians who were around the well.¹⁸

The healing power of the well is underscored by the narrator’s subsequent comment that *ainm n-aild dano din tibroid-sin Loch Luibe, ar dobered Díen Cécht ind cech losa rouhótar a n-Éri* (‘another name for that well is *Loch Luibe* [“Lake of the Herbs”], because Dían Cécht put into it every herb that grew in Ireland’).¹⁹

It is apparent from many Irish sources that purificatory healing rituals of this kind were perceived as a natural extension of everyday bathing practices. For example, Patrick is said to have baptised the two daughters of the pagan king Lóegaire when ‘they came to the well [called Clébach], as women are wont to do, in the morning to wash, and they found the holy assembly of bishops with Patrick beside the well’ (*et ecce duae filiae regis Loiguirí Ethne alba et Fedelm rufa ad fontem [qui dicitur Clebach] more mulierum ad lauandum mane uenierunt et senodum sanctum episcoporum cum Patricio iuxta fontem inuenierunt*).²⁰ That bathing the sick was a regular practice in medieval Irish society is likewise indicated by commentary on the seventh-century medico-legal tract *Bretha Crólige* (‘Judgements concerning blood-lying’), which specifies that bathing facilities, a bed and the services of a doctor should be among

18 Gray, *Cath Maige Tuired* 54–55.

19 Ibidem 56–57.

20 Bieler, *Patrician Texts* 142–143 (§26). As Elizabeth Boyle has pointed out to me, this episode evokes the scene depicted in John 4:6–53, where Jesus first conversed with a woman of Samaria who had come to draw water at a well, and then went on to heal the son of a ruler in Cana.

the things provided for a person on sick-maintenance: 'Geall .vii. cumal fri tairechtain a legha ⁊ a focruicthi ⁊ a leptha, ⁊ a letheneclann do dia nelaidther impo'. (A pledge worth seven cumals [is due] for providing him with leech and bathing and bed, and half his honour-price [is due] to him if there be evasion of these [duties].)²¹

The healing function of baths is also reflected in Irish saga-narratives such as the famous epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ('The Cattle Raid of Cooley'), in one version of which the duelling warriors Cú Chulainn and Ferdia are said to have had curative baths containing clay (*foithraicedh criadh*) prepared for them during a truce in their contest.²² A more unusual bath is prepared for the wounded warrior Cethern mac Fintain, who, after having rejected the fatal prognosis of fifty different doctors, was finally examined by the king Conchobor's physician Fingín. The latter gave him two options: one to accept a treatment that would take a whole year but would save his life; and the other to accept a cure that would make him fit to return to battle immediately, but would only allow him to survive for another three days. In the fashion of a true warrior, Cethern chose the latter course, and so Fingín ordered him to immerse himself in a 'marrow bath' (*smirammaid*) prepared from the pulped flesh, bones and hides of cattle.²³

The *Christus medicus* metaphor is again evidenced in analogous episodes from hagiographical literature, where saints are portrayed as healing the ill or injured by bathing them in water that they themselves have already used. For example, St Moling is said to have restored a demented youth to sanity by washing him in his own bath, while St Comgall cured a leper by immersing him in a tub in which he himself had bathed.²⁴ The latter account no doubt reflects a wider *topos* of washing the feet or ulcerated bodies of lepers that is well attested in sermons, homilies and hagiography from other contemporary literary traditions. Carole Rawcliffe has noted that, although this procedure 'performed an important therapeutic function, the overwhelming purpose of

21 Binchy, "Bretha Crólige" 44–45; the passage is also noted by Lucas A.T., "Washing and Bathing in Ancient Ireland", *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 95.1/2 (1965) 65–114, 67. For the healing function of baths in the Middle Ages, see Chapter 3 of this volume.

22 Best, "Comhrag Fir Diadh & Chon Chulainn. Táin Bó Cúailnge", *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 10 (1915) 274–308, 303; cited in Lucas, "Washing and Bathing" 67–68.

23 O'Rahilly C. (ed. and trans.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin: 1967) 101–105 and 235–240; cited in Lucas, "Washing and Bathing" 67.

24 Both of these episodes are noted by Lucas, "Washing and Bathing" 68. For the tale concerning St Moling and the demented youth, see de Smedt C. – de Backer J., *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae ex Codice Salmanticensi* (Edinburgh – London: 1888) 822–823; for that concerning St Comgall and the leper, see Plummer C. (ed. and trans.), *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, 2 vols (Oxford: 1910) II, 19.

the exercise was spiritual rather than hygienic'; she illustrates this by reference to the legend of the Magdalen, who had bathed Christ's feet with her tears both during his life (John 13:4–15) and again when he hung *quasi leprosus* on the cross, prompting a further outpouring of grief.²⁵ Rawcliffe also observed that the curing of leprosy by immersion in water is prefigured in the Old Testament by the cleansing of Naaman the leper in the Jordan seven times, once for each of the seven deadly sins (2 Kings 5).²⁶

A comparable association between washing and carnal sin is found in an anecdote from the Old Irish ecclesiastical document known as the 'Monastery of Tallaght', in which the Clonmacnoise anchorite Laisrén, described as 'quite naked and free from sin, with nothing on his conscience', but also 'infirm with disease' (*imnocht imdilmain cen ní for a cubus [...] hi luibri galair*) is taken home by a student (*mac cleirchib*) who puts a cloak under him. That night Laisrén sees a 'carnal vision' (*aislingi coildnidi*) for the first time in his life; as he subsequently performs a penitential vigil, an angel visits him and explains that this sinful vision had resulted from the fact that the cloak he slept upon had not been washed since it was used by a wedded couple – 'for any cloak that is taken from a lustful couple, a demon accompanies it so long as it is not washed' (*arnach brat berair do áos étraich conamteit demmun airet nat negar 7 cetera*).²⁷ The purificatory function of water as an element understood to be capable of washing away carnal sin was clearly an enduring concept: in her 2019 account of the Magdalene laundries, or institutions for so-called 'fallen women' and babies run by the Roman Catholic orders in Ireland until the late twentieth century, Caelainn Hogan interviewed a woman adopted from Bessborough House in 1988, who

[...] was told that when she was brought home to her adoptive parents' house, her granny had insisted on washing her. Catherine²⁸ suspected this was a 'moral thing', rather than a result of her infant body being actually dirty after her stay in the institution. She was baptized twice, first

25 Rawcliffe C., *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Stroud: 1995) 142–144. On the origins and enduring concept of 'Christ-as-leper', see *ibidem* 60–64.

26 *Ibidem* 125.

27 Gwynn E.G. – Purton W.J., "The Monastery of Tallaght", *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 29 (1911/1912) 115–179, 155. On this episode and its parallels in a medical context, see Hayden D., "A Sixteenth-century Irish Collection of Remedies for Ailments of the Male Reproductive Organs", *Celtica* 33 (2021) 248–276, 260–261.

28 A pseudonym.

at Bessborough, and then a second time in her parents' local parish – another form of cleansing.²⁹

2 Water and Healing in Medieval Irish Medical Texts

Evidence comparable to that outlined above from Irish penitential, hagiographical, and narrative literature can also be found in the less well-studied corpus of Irish-language medical texts. The latter comprise a substantial number of vernacular translations of Latin works that circulated across western Europe during the late-medieval period, as well as many collections of herbal cures, instructions for making textual amulets, and verbal charms, some of which may ultimately derive from the early medieval period. For example, a remedy book compiled in the early sixteenth century by the North Connacht physician Conla Mac an Leagha, who was probably drawing on a range of sources of varying dates, includes several cures that specify the use of *uisce choisricthe* ('consecrated' or 'holy' water) in the preparation of a drink that is to be ingested by the patient:³⁰ 'Eölus do togairm na fola *mista* ⁊ *ar galur fūail* .i. *lus na croici do bruit ar medg ⁊ uisce coisregta do cratad air ⁊ ibed iarum ⁊ iccaid*. ('A prescription for inducing the menses and for urinary disease, i.e. boil fennel in whey and sprinkle holy water on it and let him drink it then, and it heals').³¹ Two other references to *uisce choisricthe* are found elsewhere in this same collection, one in a section concerned with ailments of the stomach (*gaile*), and the other in a chapter of cures for urinary disease; in both cases, the holy water is to be 'shaken' or 'sprinkled' (*crothaid*) either on the other ingredients of the recipe or on the patient themselves.³² In yet another remedy

29 Hogan C., *Republic of Shame: Stories from Ireland's Institutions of 'Fallen Women'* (Dublin: 2019) 191.

30 On the scribal background, contents and dating of this remedy book, see i.e. Hayden D., "Three Versified Medical Recipes Invoking Dían Cécht", in Ahlqvist A. – O'Neill P. (eds.), *Firfesso: A Festschrift for Neil McLeod* (Sydney: 2018) 107–123; and "Attribution and Authority in a Medieval Irish Medical Compendium", *Studia Hibernica* 45 (2019) 19–51; and Nic Dhonnchadha, "An Irish Medical Treatise on Vellum and Paper from the 16th Century", in Ó Macháin P. (ed.), *Paper and the Paper Manuscript: A Context for the Transmission of Gaelic Literature* (Cork: 2019) 111–125.

31 RIA MS 24 B 3, p. 75.15–16. In this and the following citations from unpublished manuscript sources, expansions are indicated by italics, missing letters are supplied in square brackets, and length-marks, where not found in the manuscript, are marked using a macron over vowels. Word-division and punctuation are editorial.

32 See RIA MS 23 N 29, fols. 3r12–13 (which also specifies the use of *uisce ferthuna*, 'rainwater') and fol. 8r38 (where the verb *crothaid* is implied), respectively.

for impotence, the instructions are more ritualistic in nature: after reciting an incantation, the water is to be placed in a yew-wood vessel (*soitheach iobhair*) and then sprinkled over the patient morning and night for nine days.³³

A fourth cure from Conla Mac an Leagha's collection illustrates the use of consecrated water for healing both physical and spiritual afflictions in an even more obvious way. This remedy is claimed to work not only against an 'ailment of the head' (*cendgalar*, perhaps referring to some kind of mental illness in this context), but also against harm of a supernatural variety, including 'injury caused by evil eye' (*aidmilled*)³⁴ and other attacks by demons: 'Ar cendgalur ⁊ ar aidmilled ⁊ ar *gach* n-urcad donīt demna ar daineb .i. ūir *ceithri roiligi*, lintur drocta dīb ⁊ *uisce ceithri prīmtiprat* arna coisergad faiur ⁊ fer dā tinnsaigin ⁊ folcad as'. ('Against headache and injury from the evil eye and every [harmful] cast that demons make upon people, i.e. [take] the clay of four graveyards, fill a tub with it and [put] consecrated water from four eminent springs on it, and pour it on the man and wash him with it.')³⁵ Here it is noted that the consecrated water (*uisce [...] arna coisergad*) to be used for the washing should be drawn from 'four eminent springs' or 'wells' (*ceithri prīmtiprat*) and mixed with the 'soil of four graveyards' (*ūir ceithri roiligi*) – a detail that recalls the reference to the aforementioned 'baths containing clay' (*fothraicedh crīadh*) that were prepared for the wounded warriors Cú Chulainn and Ferdia during the truce from their duel in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. The specification that the clay should come from four graveyards suggests, however, that the earthly substance may have been understood to have been sanctified by association with the remains of saints who had been buried near church structures, which were themselves often located in close proximity to holy wells. Celeste Ray has observed that 'as soil from saints' graves was often considered curative and blessed (and is still packed in the mouths of those suffering toothaches in the twenty-first

33 For an edition and translation of this text, see Hayden, "A Sixteenth-century Irish Collection of Remedies" 267; the same publication (258) also notes an implicit parallel for the remedy in an episode from the Old Irish hagiographical *Life of Brigit*. The language of the oral incantation is considered in Hayden D., "The Context and Obscure Language of Medical Charms in a Sixteenth-century Irish Remedy Book: Four Case Studies", in Kobel C. (ed.), *Obscuritas in Medieval Irish and Welsh Literature* (Dublin: forthcoming).

34 The verbal noun *aidmilled* has the general meaning of 'complete destruction' or 'ruin', but is also attested in several instances with the more specific sense of supernatural harm or 'bewitchment', perhaps from a cast of the evil eye; this is what seems to be the meaning here. On comparable attestations of the verbs *millid* and *aidmilled* in other Irish literary sources, see Borsje J. – Kelly F., "The Evil Eye and Early Irish Literature and Law", *Celtica* 24 (2003) 17–20.

35 RIA MS 24 B 3, 43:27–9 (my translation). I am grateful to Siobhán Barrett for drawing my attention to this example.

century), waters flowing close to a saint's pure remains might also have been consumed without concern for disease, but rather in hopes of the opposite'. In illustration of this, Ray cites the legend pertaining to St Odhrán, who was thought to have been buried alive 'to purify the land of Iona from any devilish genius in preparation for the construction of Colum Cille's church there'.³⁶ A possible play on this theme, in which the terrestrial element to be mixed with water takes the form of saintly excrement, is found in an anecdote from the *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* concerning the seventh-century king of the Northern Uí Néill, Áed Uaridnach. Áed is said to have stopped to wash in a river that flowed through the monastic town of St Muru in Donegal, but just as he was raising a handful of water to his face, he was cautioned by one of his men, who warned him that the clergy's privy was located over the water of the river. Their dialogue continued as follows:

'An ann," ar an rí, "téid an clereach féin ar imthelgudh?'

'As ann go deimhin,' ar [an] t-óclach.

'Ní namá," ar an rí, "cuirfead fom aighidh, acht cuirfead um bél, 7 ibhadh (ag ól trí mbolgoma de), úair as sacarbaicc leam an t-uisce i ttéid a imthelgun'.

'Is that where the cleric himself [St Muru] goes to defecate?' asked the king.

'It is indeed,' said the young man.

'Not only will I put it on my face,' said the king, 'but I'll also put it in my mouth, and I'll drink it' – drinking three gulps of it – 'for the water his faeces go into is a sacrament to me'.³⁷

Áed's display of piety naturally results in promises of rewards from St Muru, and the anecdote has been read as 'an allegorical statement on the proper relations between king and cleric, or (to speak anachronistically) between church and state', since 'it is evidently only proper that Áed, future high king of Ireland, should wash in and drink from the wastewater of that representative of the church, St Muru'.³⁸ In light of these examples, it might be argued that

36 Ray, *Holy Wells* 103–104, citing MacLeod Banks M., "A Hebridean Version of Colum Cille and St Oran", *Folklore* 42.1 (1931) 55–60, and Herbert M., *Iona, Kells, and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Dublin: 1988) 261.

37 Davies M.T., "Kings and Clerics in Some Leinster Sagas", *Ériu* 47 (1996) 45–66, 45, citing (with minor adjustments) Newlon R.J. (ed. and trans.), *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, (Dublin: 1978) 6–7. My thanks to Elizabeth Boyle for bringing this example to my attention.

38 Davies, "Kings and Clerics in Some Leinster Sagas" 48.

the specification in the medical remedy cited above, according to which the elements of water and earth should each be sought from four different sources, simply echoes the tetradic structure of the Gospels – a symbolism that would have no doubt had a strong resonance in the context of a cure intended to combat the ill effects of demons (*demna*) in particular.

There is some uncertainty regarding the precise meaning of the second element in the term *pr̄imtipra* ('eminent spring' or 'well') used in Conla Mac an Leagha's aforementioned remedy for *cendgalar*. The translations given in the historical dictionary of the Irish language (eDIL), s.v. *tipra*, include 'well', 'spring', 'fountain' and 'source', perhaps suggesting that fresh water is implied.³⁹ In this regard, it is noteworthy that a number of other remedies in Conla's collection emphasise the 'purity' of the water to be drawn from a *tipra* by prefixing the word with the element *f̄ir-* (lit. 'true' or 'veracious'); this prefix is also attested in other contexts where it evidently denotes a substance that it is in a state of 'freshness', as opposed to being stagnant or stale.⁴⁰ The concept of 'fresh' water is also often linked to that of water that is 'moving', and the further association of the latter with a state of good health is clearly evident in other vernacular medical traditions of the medieval period, where running water appears to have been thought to serve the function of carrying away disease. For example, it is specified in an Old English ritual cure for an erysipelatous swelling, found in two separate collections of medical remedies, that one should 'first take a stick of hazel or elder wood, inscribe your name on it, cut three incisions on (the erysipelatous spot), fill the name with your blood, throw it over your shoulder or between your thighs into running water. Cut the incisions and do all this in silence'.⁴¹

Similar imagery is found in a collection of Irish medical remedies in British Library MS Harley 546, dated to 1459, where a cure for epilepsy (*epilenncia*) recommends the following:

39 See eDIL, s.v. *tipra* (dil.ie/40932). An Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language, based on the Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language (Dublin: 1913–1976). Accessed May 14, 2024. www.dil.ie.

40 Cf. eDIL, s.v. 1 *f̄ir* A(c) (dil.ie/22171), which defines *f̄irthipra* as 'a spring', and also cites the examples of *f̄iruisce* 'fresh water' (opp. to brine), 'spring water', and *f̄irlemnacht* 'fresh milk'. I have identified eight examples of the collocation *uisce f̄irtibrat* (some with slight variations of spelling) in the medical collection considered here.

41 Storms G., *Anglo-Saxon Magic* (Gravenhage: 1948) 74–76. The remedy in question is included in the collection of cures known as 'Bald's Leechbook', found in British Library MS Regius 12 D xvii, fols. 1r–108v (probably compiled in the mid-tenth century), as well as in the compilation of remedies, charms and prayers known as the 'Lacnunga', preserved in London, British Library MS Harley 585, fols. 130r–193r (written around the year 1000).

Coilech derg ocus a cenn do buain d'éinbéim de ocus a ae do bein as ocus ben díb an domblas ocus ben a cridi as ocus cuir in domblas ann ocus cengal snáithi fó bél in cridhi ocus bruith galún d'uisgi tráighes ar an croidi ocus tabair cúic fiuchtha nó a sé air ocus eabar re náí lá ocus re náí naidhchi ocus curtar a fuigill re sruth ocus re fairgi ocus adnaither in cailech a comrac na ceithre sligeadh mar nach mbenfa nech ris ocus ícaid.

Take a red cock, and at a stroke dock him of his head; take out his liver, thence extract the gall and insert into his heart [already taken out ad hoc]; the orifice of which draw close with a thread. Upon the heart [so prepared] let seethe a gallon of water drawn from a fallen tide, and let it have five boils or six. For nine days and nine nights be this potion drunk, and the remnant cast out to be carried off by the sea-tide. For the cock, have him buried at the meeting of four ways, where none shall meddle with him, and it cures.⁴²

The suggestion here that one should sacrifice a cock in order to cure an afflicted patient no doubt draws upon a long medical tradition of using animal parts in treating various kinds of diseases, typically on the basis of a perceived correspondence between some feature or attribute of a given animal and the ailment to be cured.⁴³ In the case of epilepsy, for example, one might compare the remarks of the fourteenth-century English physician John of Gaddesden, who noted that the incinerated ashes of a cuckoo might be served in a drink to an epileptic patient, and that some people were inclined to carry a cuckoo's head around the neck, because 'the cuckoo has epilepsy every month, so that some say that it has the property of curing this disease by drawing the matter to itself'.⁴⁴ However, the additional observation in the Irish text that a

42 British Library MS Harley 546, fol. 18r2–6; O'Grady S. (ed. and trans.), *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the British Library [Formerly British Museum], Volume 1* (London: 1926; repr. Dublin: 1992) 182–183. The fully digitised manuscript and a more recent catalogue of its contents can be viewed online at www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_MS_546 (last accessed May 14, 2024).

43 For a general overview of the subject, see e.g. MacKinney L., "Animal Substances in materia medica: a Study in the Persistence of the Primitive", *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 1.1 (1946) 149–170.

44 Demaitre L., *Medieval Medicine: the Art of Healing, from Head to Toe* (Santa Barbara, CA: 2013) 143–145. The treatment of epilepsy by sacrificing a cock or hen is also attested in later folklore; for example, in the nineteenth century Arthur Mitchell recorded instances of a black cock being buried alive as a remedy for the disease in Wester Ross and elsewhere in the north of Scotland, and suggested that such practices had their roots in Antiquity: see Miller A., "Superstitions in the North-west Highlands and Islands of Scotland, especially

medicinal potion for epilepsy should be made with *uisce tráighes* (lit. ‘water which ebbs’) that has been boiled five or six times may again indicate a common perception that it was best to use pure or fresh water in the preparation of medicinal remedies. It is possible that the occurrence of the phrase in this context alludes to the seashore wells that are well found across many parts of Ireland and often associated with the curing of diseases.⁴⁵ Patrick Logan cites the following description of one such well in Moyarta parish, Co. Clare, made in the first half of the nineteenth century by Eugene O’Curry in his letters for the *Ordnance Survey of Ireland*:

About a furlong east of the [church of Teampull-an-Aird in Kilcradaun townland], at the bottom of a cleft in the very face of the headland, is the fresh water Holy Well of St. Cradaun, ranking among the most popular wells in Ireland for the cure of all diseases, but more especially diseases of the eyes and limbs. The well is sunk in the solid rock and is overflowed by the salt sea at every full tide but the moment the tide recedes the water in the well is as pure and fresh as ever. There is a small cave or recess in the cliff behind it in which people are in the habit of spending whole nights in prayer in fulfilment of vows made in times of danger from sickness, drowning, etc.⁴⁶

Here ‘fresh’ or ‘pure’ water is considered to be that which is left in the source after the salt water of the sea has subsided.⁴⁷ The instruction in our remedy for epilepsy to cast out the remnants of the potion so that they can be carried off

in Relation to Lunacy”, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 4 (1860–1862) 251–288, 274–276.

45 Siobhán Barrett has drawn my attention to a separate remedy in RIA MS 24 B 3, 44.29, for a lye to cure *galar cinn* (‘ailment of the head’), which similarly specifies that *uisce típraide tráiges* (‘water from an ebbing source’) should be used if the ailment occurs in the spring (*a n-errach*). She has speculated that the phrase might refer to a turlough, a disappearing or seasonal lake found mostly in limestone areas in the west of Ireland; this type of source floods annually in autumn through springs and fissures in the limestone, but drains in the springtime. It is unclear, however, whether the water from such sources was historically understood to have any special healing powers.

46 Logan, *The Holy Wells of Ireland* 57–58; for the text, see O’Donovan J. – O’Curry E. – O’Flanagan M., *Letters Containing Information Relative to the Antiquities of the County of Clare: Collected during the Progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1839, with Letters and Extracts Relative to Ancient Territories in Thomond, 1841*, 3 vols (Bray, Co. Wicklow: 1928), accessed May 14, 2024, https://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/history/osl/moyarta2_st_cradanns_well.htm.

47 On the description of tides and the consistency of water in early medieval sources, see the Introduction to this volume 1–27.

by the sea-tide (*curtar a fuigill re sruth ocus re fairgi*) is, moreover, reminiscent of the aforementioned Old English ritual cure for an erisypelatous swelling, where the reader is advised to symbolically cast away the disease in running water.

Another comparable example of this theme is found in a separate early English cure for a 'holy drink' intended to prevent 'tricks of elves' and 'every temptation of the fiend'.⁴⁸ This recommends that 'an immaculate person silently [...] fetch half a jar of running water against the current' (*hat unmælnæ mon gefeccean swigende on gear streame healfne sester yrnendes wæteres*) and mix this with certain herbs in a paten on which have been inscribed the following words, drawn from the Gospels of John and Matthew and from the Psalms:

In principio erat verbum usque non comprehenderunt et plura ("In the beginning was the Word" up to "they did not comprehend" and again'; John 1 :1–5)

Et circumibat Jesus totam Galileam docens usque et secuti sunt eum turbae multae ("And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching" up to "and great multitudes followed him"; Matthew 4 :23–5)

Deus in nomine tuo usque in finem ("O God, by thy name" up to the end'; Psalm 53)

Deus misereatur nobis usque in finem ("May God have mercy on us" up to the end'; Psalm 66)

Domine deus in adiutorium usque in finem ("Help, O Lord God" up to the end'; Psalm 69)

These words would clearly have resonated in the context of a medicinal remedy to combat demons, since the passage from the Gospel of Matthew describes how Jesus healed 'all manner of sickness and every infirmity' among the people of Galilee and Syria, including those who 'were possessed by devils, and lunatics', while Psalm 53 is a prayer for help in distress. The reader of this ritual cure is subsequently instructed to 'carefully wash the writing from the paten' into the water (*and þweah þæt gewrit of ðan husldisce þær in swiðe clæne*), which has been mixed with certain herbs and hallowed wine; the resulting

⁴⁸ The text of this cure is found in the aforementioned collection of remedies, charms and prayers known as the *Lacnunga*, on which see above, n. 41.

substance is then to be consumed by the patient in church after singing Masses and reciting various litanies.⁴⁹

The idea that a potable medicine could be created by bringing water into contact with powerful words or letters such as these is also attested in the following Irish remedy for *cuthach*, a term which literally means ‘madness’ or ‘frenzy’, but was probably understood to indicate epilepsy:⁵⁰

Ar chu[th]ach⁵¹ .i. rūsca critaich ⁊ gilcaide, berbtur ⁊ do-berur a cūa ⁊ scribthur naoi mūti isin cūa, id ōn .b.c.d.:g.p.t.:f.k.q.: ⁊ ainm in duine eter gach dā mūit dīb ⁊ sechtmad ūathaid āis ēsca, nó i sechtmad nó .21. do-nīter, ⁊ ibed in duine in lind-sin asin cūa gu cend naomaide.⁵²

For *cuthach* (‘rage, madness’) i.e. bark of a poplar tree and of a reed are boiled, and it [i.e. the liquid] is poured into a cup, and nine mute consonants are written in the cup, that is *b, c, d – g, p, t – f, k, q* and [write] the name of the person between every two of those letters and on the seventh day of the lunar cycle – it is done either in a seven or a 21-day period – and let the person drink that liquid from the cup for nine days.

The explicit liturgical instructions found in the aforementioned English remedy are absent from this Irish cure, as is any specification that the water to be used should come from a fresh or moving source. The Irish text is comparable, however, insofar as it recommends combining certain herbs with water and then drinking the concoction from a cup on which something has been written (in this case, a sequence of letters and the name of the afflicted individual).⁵³ The act of consuming powerful words or letters, either by eating

49 Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic* 232–235; the passage is found in British Library MS Harley 585, fols. 137r–138r, digitised at The British Library, accessed November 3, 2023, https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=harley_ms_585_f001r. For discussion of a similar remedy (albeit without any reference to running water) from the early English medical compilation known as ‘Bald’s Leechbook’, see Jolly K., *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill, NC: 1996) 119–120.

50 It is included in a chapter on cures for this disease in Conla Mac an Leagha’s remedy collection.

51 The intervocalic ‘t’ appears to have been written in the manuscript with a mark of lenition above it, but the symbol is now so faded as to be almost illegible. The reading given here is supported, however, by the headings of the remedies which immediately precede and follow this passage.

52 RIA MS 24 B 3, 92.29–93.4.

53 On the significance of the letters cited in this particular example, see Hayden, “The Context and Obscure Language of Medical Charms”.

or drinking them, also has many parallels in other early medical traditions, and was probably based on the rationale that the liquid or food in question would have absorbed the magical power of the symbols; similarly, the act of washing powerful words or letters with water is clearly analogous to the way in which water was poured over holy relics, shrines and tombs of the saints, collected in a bottle, and then drunk by the faithful.⁵⁴

The healing power of sacred words is also reflected in an Irish context by the use of entire manuscripts, or parts thereof, as associative relics on the basis that they were thought to have once come into contact with saintly figures, and therefore acquired certain miraculous properties.⁵⁵ A number of surviving early Insular religious manuscripts, such as the Book of Mulling (Dublin, TCD MS 60, a pocket Gospel-book), the *Cathach* of Colum Cille (Dublin, RIA MS 12 R 33, a psalter), and the Stowe Missal (Dublin, RIA MS D ii 3, a sacramentary) were enshrined in precious metalwork containers because they were believed to have once been in the possession of a particular saint. The perceived apotropaic function of these objects is indicated, for example, by accounts of how the later medieval hereditary keepers of the *Cathach* carried its shrine into battle with them in order to ensure divine favour.⁵⁶ In a comparable way, vernacular Irish medical remedy collections contain many instructions for making textual amulets that could be worn on the body in order to protect the bearer against enemies or heal particular afflictions.⁵⁷

Water again plays a central role in several accounts of such associative relics, as is illustrated by legends concerning manuscripts that appeared intact and undamaged after being retrieved from a river or other source, much as the saint with whom they were linked was said to have survived trials by drowning.⁵⁸ Textual amulets made from fragments of vellum could also indirectly serve as

54 Skemer D.C., *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: 2006) 137 n. 30.

55 Wycherley, *Cult of Relics* (Turnhout: 2015) 38, has noted that the use of such associative relics is increasingly evidenced in Irish sources from the eighth and ninth centuries onwards.

56 Brown, "Hagiography or History?" 24–27.

57 For a comprehensive study of textual amulets in medieval culture more widely, see Skemer, *Binding Words*. For discussion of some Irish examples, see Nic Dhonnchadha A., "Michael Casey's Medical Transcripts in Gilbert MS 147", *Éigse* 60 (2019) 112–113 (on the amulet known as the 'Seven Sleepers of Ephesus') and Rempt, "And Straightaway the Fountain of Her Blood Dried Up' (Mark 5: 29): Constructing a Template for Late Medieval Irish Obstetric Charms".

58 Brown, "Hagiography or History?" 28–29; see also Ó Floinn R., "Insignia Columbae I", in Bourke C. (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba* (Dublin: 1997) 136–161, 150–151, where it is noted that Adomnán 'recounts two instances of how books recovered from rivers in

healing agents after coming into contact with water: thus the seventh-century cleric Adomnán, in his hagiographical account of the life of Saint Columba, reported that the saint was able to heal a broken hip by sprinkling water on it in which a box containing a blessing inscribed on vellum had been dipped.⁵⁹ Almost a thousand years later, in his 1627 translation of the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, Conell Mageohegan gave the following account of Columba's activities:

He wrote 300 bookes wth his one hand. They were all new Testaments, left a book to each of his Churches in the Kingdome, which Bookes have a strange property which is that if they or any of them had sunck to the bottom of the Deepest waters they would not lose one letter, signe, or character of them, w^{ch} I have seen partly myselfe of that book of them which is at Dorow in the K^s County, for I saw the Ignorant man that had the same in his Custody, when sickness came upon cattle, for their Remedy putt water on the booke & suffered it to rest there a while & saw alsoe cattle returne thereby to their former or pristin state & the book to receive no loss.⁶⁰

The saintly relic to which Mageohegan refers here is most likely the seventh-century codex known as the Book of Durrow (Dublin, Trinity College MS A 4. 5), which contains an illuminated copy of the Gospels. Its association with Columba, the supposed founder of the Durrow monastery, evidently led to a perception that the codex had a kind of salvific power capable of healing bovine affliction.

3 Conclusion

Although Bede's anecdote concerning the preparation of an antivenin in the first book of his *Ecclesiastical History* might at first be viewed as a mere passing remark set in the context of a much lengthier account of the conversion of the English people to Christianity, it nonetheless serves to shine a spotlight on the rich textual culture of medieval Ireland, as well as on the close connection

Ireland were ruined, save only those parts written in Columba's own hand which were miraculously protected as if kept in a cover or case.

59 Bitel, *Isle of the Saints* 186–187, citing Anderson, A.O. – Anderson M.O. (eds.), *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (London: 1961) 336–338.

60 Murphy, *The Annals of Clonmacnoise, being Annals of Ireland from the Earliest Period to A.D. 1408* 95–96.

between spiritual and physical modes of healing in the medieval world more broadly. This discussion has aimed to highlight some aspects of these themes by examining the representation of water as a curative element in medieval Irish textual sources. As a symbol of spiritual cleansing closely associated with baptismal practices, hydrological imagery played a central role in early Irish hagiographical, penitential and narrative sources that sought to demonstrate the power of Christianity and of the saints who were its earthly representatives. Such symbolic representations of water were never far removed, however, from its physical significance as an element used for cleansing the body of impurities. The nexus between these literal and symbolic portrayals is perhaps best illustrated by material drawn from the comparatively unexplored realm of Irish-language medical writing, where liturgical practices often melded seamlessly with practical advice concerning the administration of natural substances for healing purposes. It is clear from this survey that there is still much to be discovered with regard to how the full range of manuscript sources extant from medieval Ireland might inform our understanding of the intellectual history of that region and its relationship to other contemporary cultures and literary traditions.

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