

THE ORIGINS OF IRELAND'S HOLY WELLS

Celeste Ray

Archaeopress Archaeology

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Cover image: St Colmán's Well, Slievemore, Achill Island, Co. Mayo

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Contents

Introduction	1
1: Water Veneration and Votive Deposition in Prehistoric Northern and Western Europe	11
2: Iron Age Evidence, Continuity, and the “Celtic” Question	21
3: Iron Age Water Deities.....	39
4: Holy Wells and Sacred Springs as Archaeologically-Resistant Sites.....	44
5: The Contested Origins and Materiality of Irish Holy Wells.....	55
6: Supermundane Wells of the Iron Age and the Early Irish Literature	65
7: Irish Sacred Wells of the Early Christian Era and the Conversion Model.....	79
8: Sacred Springs and Conversion Strategies in Britain and on the Continent	85
9: Christian Holy Wells and Baptism	89
10: The Origins of Rounding and the Interconnectedness of Wells.....	93
Conclusion.....	111
Endnotes	114
Appendix A: Irish Excavation Reports of “holy wells” from Excavations.ie (as of June 2014).....	128

Appendix B: Holy Wells in the County Archaeological Inventories of Ireland130

List of Figures131

Bibliography132

Index160

Introduction

Fostered by our daily physical need for water, hydrolatry is panhuman. Sacred wells and springs can be found around the globe: Zamzam at Mecca is the holiest well in Islam, visited by millions annually on the *Hajj*; India has its hallowed wells, pools and *tirthas*; and Mexico has its holy water *aguajes* and Mayan *cenotes*. Water bodies, particularly wells, fountains, springs and streams, are liminal places cross-culturally and may be considered portals to other worlds. Particular water sources also have *genii loci* and are deemed to have healing powers. In Judeo-Christian and Muslim traditions, a monotheistically-agreeable saint, *zaddik*, or *wali* might be associated with a sacred well. Jerusalem had the healing Pool of Siloam and the Pool of Bethesda (whose waters' curative abilities were activated by angelic visits). Aboriginal Australians still greet ancestors at water holes that they created in Dreamtime. Shinto *kami* (spirits) dwell in Japanese springs. Across mid-twentieth century China, hundreds of episodes of "holy water fever," among both Han Chinese and ethnic minorities, drew thousands of people to water sources with newly-discovered miracle-working properties bestowed by a resident supernatural (Smith, 2006). For Buddhist Burmese, Shin U Pa Gota is the "saint" of all waters and the Irrawaddy is the Anglicized term for "the river that brings blessings" (Salak, 2006). Mami Wata has become the generalized name for healing spirits who inhabit a variety of water bodies in Cameroon, Ghana, Niger and Nigeria (Drewal, 2008). Zulu speakers in South Africa encounter *Inkosazana*, the mermaid deity of healing and fertility, (and may offer her a goat) at the edges of pools she inhabits and through which she may drag the petitioner to an underwater land of ancestors (Bernard, 2008). In Madagascar springs (and stones) are associated with the more-feared-than-venerated *vazimba* (the first known inhabitants of the earth) who require offerings at these sites and can cause illness and calamity if displeased or healing and fertility if placated (Radimilahy, 1994:83, 85). Freshwater spirits or nymphs (the Naiades) were even sub-classified by the Ancient Greeks according to their preference of abode: the *Crinaiae* occupied wells and fountains, the *Limnades* lived in lakes, and the trickster *Eleionomae* dwelt in marshes and wetlands. Greeks often built *Asklepieions* beside springs, which is where the *Pegaeae* resided. For the Romans, *Appias* was a *Crinaiae* who dwelt in a well at the heart of the capital city and the four *Camenae* (associated with prophecy and childbirth) also protected wells and springs.

In Ireland, *toibreacha naofa* (holy wells) and *toibreacha beannaithe* (blessed wells) are water sources, usually springs (but sometimes ponds or lakes), which are sites of religious devotion.¹ In distinction from a human-excavated hole or

shaft for the collection of water, *holy* “wells” most commonly appear on their own and can also include seepage pools, and even the hollows of rocks or the cavities on trees left by broken branches where dew and rain collect. Holy wells can have structures over them, and stone impoundments with steps into their waters, or they can simply be unadorned depressions in the ground. [Figs. 1 & 2] Whether they are now along the edges of busy roads or within landscaped gardens, these sacred sites are commonly dedicated to a saint and their waters can be “blessed with a cure” for particular ailments. In historic times, Ireland’s holy wells have recognizable patterns in cures (what illnesses their waters could resolve) and in saint dedications. In my ethnographic research, cultural consultants commented that into the second half of the twentieth-century, almost every rural community had a blessed well with a remedy for something, and between the wells of neighboring townlands one could find a ready cure for eye complaints, sore throats and head, back, tooth or stomach aches. Some wells were known to be stronger than others, so that if “your local” failed you, you had recourse to more powerful ones elsewhere. Interviewees who were children in the 1930s and 1940s recalled being taken to wells in other counties for sports injuries or particularly stubborn warts.



FIGURE 1: ST PATRICK'S WELL AT BOYLE,
CO. ROSCOMMON

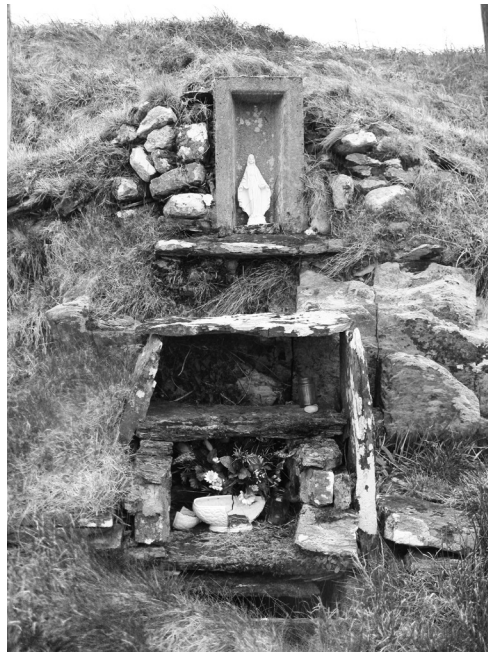


FIGURE 2: GOULADOO HOLY WELL,
CO. CORK

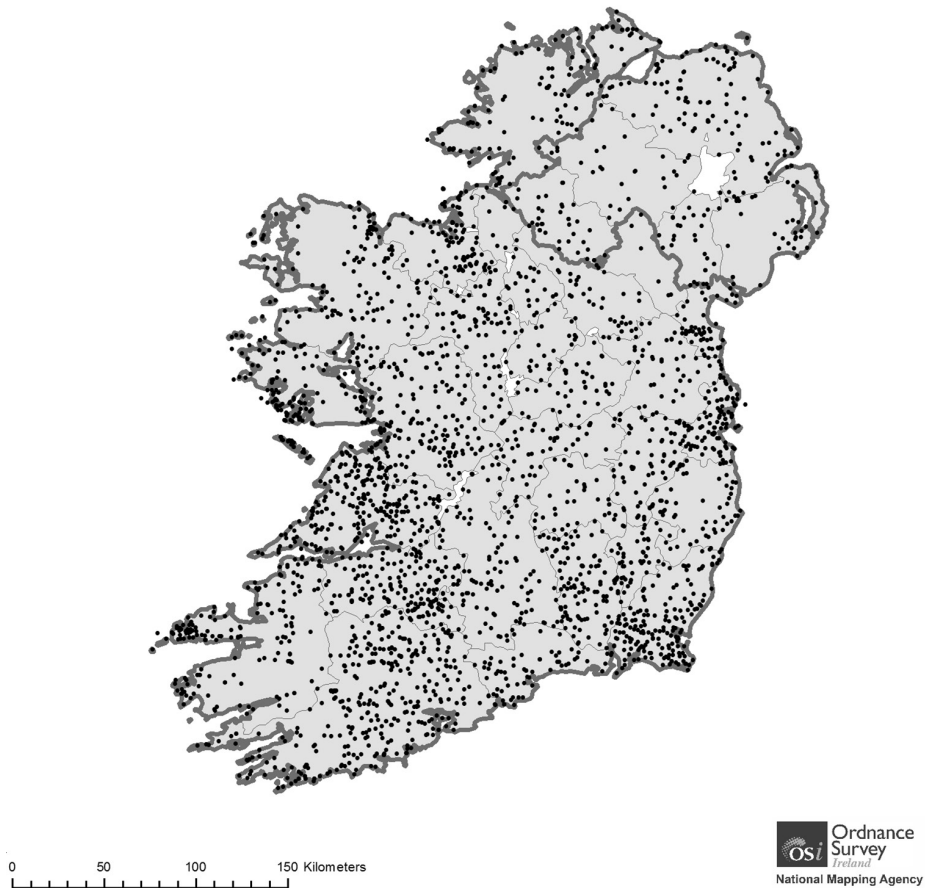


FIGURE 3: DISTRIBUTION OF HOLY WELLS

SOURCES: NORTHERN IRELAND SITES AND MONUMENTS RECORD
(NORTHERN IRELAND ENVIRONMENT AGENCY: HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT DIVISION) AND THE
NATIONAL MONUMENTS SERVICE (DEPARTMENT OF ARTS, HERITAGE AND THE GAELTACHT).

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Saint dedications for Irish wells are frequently to “saints in the Irish tradition,” who were never officially canonized and may have enjoyed a prior, pagan existence (Johnson, 2002; Ó Cróinín, 2005; Ó hÓgáin, 1999; Ó Riain, 2011). Over the centuries, many of these dedications have been replaced with those to universal saints by Anglo-Norman reformers, the Tridentine Reforms of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and even with Pope Paul IV’s suppression of unapproved saints following Vatican II. Others have been forgotten over time, yet still a geographic patterning persists with male saints having predominantly local

or national dedications and female saints, excepting St Brigid (one of Ireland's triad of heroic saints), having more regional distributions (Ray, 2011). Visiting an Irish holy well involves "paying the rounds:" circumambulating a well clockwise (sunwise), saying a set number of prescribed prayers, and, depending on the reason for the visit, perhaps proffering some type of votive (all of which resonates with historical practices at wells in Scotland, Wales, Brittany, and elsewhere). A well's landscape context might be studded with other thaumaturgical features known as "stations" (a sacred tree, an unusually-shaped boulder, or church ruins, for example). Prayers are also offered at stations in a circuit that is called in Irish *an turas* (the pilgrimage).² Undertaken at any time, these localized pilgrimages are the traditional feature of annual "patterns" or patron days, when communities gather wellside on, or close to, the associated saint's feast day. Such folk liturgies (accepted as efficacious through generations of repetition rather than through sanction by official religious authorities) are heterodox and renegotiated over time.

Varied folk liturgies may still be found at holy wells across Europe from Greece to Austria, Hungary, Russia and Poland, and even at a few outlasting the predominance of the Dutch Reformed Church in the Netherlands, such as those at Heiloo and Roermond. While relatively few remain in active use, Denmark boasts 650 holy wells (Glob, 1971:288); a conservative estimate of the number for England is 2000 (Bord and Bord, 1985:37); Wales has at least 1,179 (Jones, 1992 [1954]:9; see also Ings, 2011, 2012) and Scotland has perhaps over 1000 (Morris and Morris, 1982).³ At the close of the nineteenth century, William Gregory Wood-Martin noted there were approximately 3,000 holy wells in Ireland (1895:143). This figure was certainly an underestimate as more than five decades earlier, Ordnance Survey workers reported the loss of holy wells in almost every county. In 2014, the National Monuments Service documents the location of 2996.⁴ [Fig. 3] Many wells have been lost in recent decades due to new farming techniques and mechanization, cattle trampling, afforestation, road widening, and, most commonly, to residential and commercial construction. Development near many sites has negatively impacted the water quality so their waters are not employed or consumed as they were even one or two generations ago. Despite the loss of these sites, they have yet to be systematically studied by archaeologists. In 1992, Arthur Gribben published a 179 page annotated bibliography of sources on holy wells and sacred waters in Britain and Ireland, yet even that considerable effort excludes hundreds of mostly site-specific articles on Irish wells (works of folklorists, antiquarians, historians, and also popular accounts). In the last two decades, several books have considered selections of wells or the wells of a particular county, but few of these are for an academic audience and only one, a guidebook by Finbar McCormick to Struell Wells in Co. Down (2011), was authored by an archaeologist.⁵ (Archaeologist Elizabeth FitzPatrick also

contributed insights on the ecclesiastical history and archeology of the monastery of Leitir Lugna, Co. Offaly, with a description of the associated *Tobar Lugna*, to a community publication on the occasion of the well's restoration (1995).) Most publications consider wells as isolated oddities and their wider significance—their distribution and dedication patterns, and how their locations and associated practices relate to social, political and economic forces in different eras—remains largely unexplored. Despite their presence in various forms cross-culturally and their isolated treatment by historians, folklorists and antiquarians wherever they occur, holy wells remain an understudied archaeological resource.

When considered as archaeological sites, holy wells can present unique challenges for study. In the Republic, hundreds are still very much in use as sacred sites. Archeological investigation could be seen as violating prescribed behaviors specific to wells and their precincts, or as destroying the very qualities perceived to make wells thaumaturgical (for example, moving a flagstone thought to have been positioned by a saint as a place for prayers, or disturbing a nearby mound or cairn considered a saint's "grave"). Practices associated with holy wells (annual cleanings in advance of a pattern day in addition to regular maintenance and landscaping) can also make holy wells archaeologically-resistant sites, but we know very little about what holy wells may retain in terms of ritual deposits or votive offerings as very few have been even partially excavated and fewer of those have been properly investigated for their own value. Any archaeological data collected on wells has generally been acquired in advance of development in a well's vicinity or during community renovation of a well, not because wells have been considered as archaeological sites themselves. Under one percent of wells in the records of the National Monuments Service have been excavated to any extent.⁶ Dismissed as the fetish of the folklorist, holy wells have been ignored in some county archaeological inventories and other surveys as lacking archaeological attributes. Yet, holy wells often have built structures or surrounds, can be lined, and have associated sacred stones. Some such stones, serving as stations, might be fifty meters from the site and demarcate the area of ritual activity, or punctuate a wider sacred landscape of two or three hectares.

Archaeologists have not seriously investigated holy wells, not only because of their continued use, but, perhaps in part, because of popular and antiquarian fascination with these sites. Sacred wells have long been popularly associated with Iron Age origins and the limited scholarly nods to wells have become tangled in current debates about the Celticity of that era. Despite the wide acceptance of water veneration in Bronze Age Europe, several scholars have questioned, or emphatically denied, the possibility that Iron Age Europeans venerated springs before the Romans taught them how. Jane Webster hyperbolically claimed that archaeological evidence for Iron Age ritual at wells is "almost non-existent." For

Britain, Webster claims that wells are “not part of an Iron Age ‘Celtic’ tradition, but attest to the development of Romano-British traditions of practice and belief” (1997a:141).⁷ James Rattue has declared that the presentation of a continuous use of holy wells from pagan into Christian times is “most compelling and most dangerous” because it is “the preference of the pleasant over the real” (1995:1-2). Sociologist Michael Carroll flatly states that “not only were holy well cults and rounding rituals not a part of *Celtic* tradition in Ireland, they were not an important part of the *Christian* tradition in Ireland through to the sixteenth century” (1999:17).

For the better part of the last three centuries, holy-well-practices have generally been assumed to be the survival of pre-Christian pagan traditions. Antiquarians, Catholic reformers, and anti-Catholic reformers, as well as more recent popular media and oral tradition, have insisted on it.⁸ Philip Dixon Hardy (editor of the *Dublin Penny Journal* and a member of the Royal Irish Academy) wrote that “the stations and holy wells” of Ireland were “remnants of Heathen Superstitions” (1836).⁹ The famous Oscar’s father, William Wilde explained:

most of our holy wells were objects of veneration, perhaps of worship, long prior to the spread of Christianity in Ireland, when the Pagan altar, the sacred grove, and Druid priest, were their general accompaniments; and, therefore, it cannot be wondered that so many unchristian rites and ceremonies should still attend the practices observed there by the uneducated (1849:46-47).¹⁰

Just over a century later in 1954, geologist, aerial photographer and prolific author on Irish saints, Daphne Pochin Mould would write “Pattern day and the pilgrimage to holy well and ruined chapel, to the heights of Croagh Patrick and the island in Lough Derg, are things both Catholic and Irish, in which are interwoven, like the strands of a Celtic design, the symbols and ideas of the universal Church with others native to our soil” (131). Through the 1960s, scholars firmly stated that the principle evidence for Celtic water cults “is provided by inscriptions, place-names, reliefs, and by comparison with Gallic deities and Irish mythology” (Alcock,1966:2) or that while “the cult of wells, pools and lakes” is “more weighty and impressive from the Continent...it is remarkably convincing for Britain” through “three main sources of evidence for native religion,” those being classical sources, the archaeological record, and literature (Ross, 1996 [1967]:48).¹¹ Current categorical dismissals of an Iron Age origin (for any holy well) frequently derive from a single-disciplinary bias or, employing a superficial survey of other disciplinary accounts, downplay the evidence relied upon by earlier authors without actually disproving it.

Each well site has its own biography and depositional and ritual practices associated with sacred springs have surely evolved over time with changes in religion, population and even ecology and climate. Some rejections of a “Celtic” origin are reactions against claims for the great antiquity of well practices and their continuity, as Webster remarks “since time immemorial” (1997a: 137). Since the work of Edward Shils (1981), and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), we no longer discuss tradition as static, but as continually evolving, being invented or renegotiated, and selectively perpetuated or suppressed. Antiquarians and popular culture discourse on holy wells might suggest that “if x (the Celts worshipped here), and y (people of our own age worship here), then z (what people do here today has been handed down for generations from the Celts)” without of course ever needing to prove “x.” Rather than refine or qualify interpretations of multi-period votive deposition, scholars challenging a continuity paradigm instead have argued the opposite: Anne Ross argued the evidence for Celtic well veneration was “massive” (1996 [1967]:22), Webster argued it is “almost nonexistent” (1997a:140).¹² While Webster, and also Kelly (2002), have suggested holy well veneration is a Roman introduction (even in Ireland), Döring argues that such pagan practices could never have endured beyond the Roman era:

Even now the opinion, that the newly created Christian spring sanctuaries succeed pre-Christian cults or that existing Christian spring sanctuaries can be traced back to pre-Christian times, is still occasionally expressed. . . This theory is rooted in the romantic mythological tradition of the 19th century. In opposition to this view, we have to stress that there is no persuasive clue for the survival or revival of proven local pagan spring cults in Christian times. . . . (2003:13-14, translation by Eberhard Sauer, 2011:508).

Dismissing Irish holy well traditions as post-Reformation inventions, Carroll even bizarrely argues they arose from psychoanalytic rationales associating Irish Catholicism with scatological symbolism (Carroll, 1999:185). Because arguments have been overstated and evidence of “a” is interpreted as “**A**” (in upper case and bold font) this does not validate arguments that “a” is really “**B**.” Yet, the new mantra that holy wells are in no way a legacy of “Celtic” practices has been repeated uncritically as were the statements to which it is reactionary.

In the 1980s, a decade of colorful optimism and yuppiedom, academics reveled instead in doubt. While historians and sociologists deconstructed tradition, James Clifford gave angst to cultural anthropologists about “ethnographic authority” (1988) and Binford (1987) and Shanks and Tilley (1987) polished archaeological anxieties about the presentist dilemma (that we unavoidably remake the past in our own image). We should regularly reflect on how both scholars and non-academics rewrite prehistory to fit a paradigm or their own cultural worldview,

but arguing as John Barrett has done, that “the past only exists through our writing it into being” is hardly productive or true (1991:2). What we make of patterns in material culture is of course subjective, but patterns exist. Simplified definitions of “the past” in tidy units with broad ethnonyms encompassing those who peopled the age need to be regularly revisited and transcended. In Irish archaeology, Barry Raftery was one of the first in the 1990s to note that on the “most ‘Celtic’ of islands, the material remains of the earliest ‘Celts’ have yet to be found” (1991:31) and to wonder, with John Waddell, how later La Tène art styles and Celtic languages arrived in Ireland (1994, 2006; Waddell, 1995, 2009). The millennium of the Irish Iron Age (c. 500 BC to AD 400) was surely diverse in its peopling. To frame island-wide discourse of even early medieval times with the generic ethnonym applied to users of a new metal technology is handy, but not illuminating, and historian Elva Johnston was right that we should be wary of “the excessive romanticisation of a frequently imaginary “Celtic” society in Ireland” (2001:302). What John Collis has called “the grand narrative” of the Celts (2008:35) was taken for granted in academia and heartily embraced in popular culture and retraining the scholarly lens on regional and local variations in Iron Age evidence has yielded interesting new perspectives. Yet, considering the local, the regional and the grand narrative are not mutually exclusive; these goals should be complementary checks at each scale of study. Transcending the counter-posed invasion hypotheses and gradualism of 20th century archaeology, John Barrett does productively emphasize, with Mark Bowden and David McOmish, that within the Iron Age, periods of stasis could of course be punctuated with “distinct horizons of change—major shifts that may have occurred within a generation,” and they also sensibly advocate keeping multiple scales in focus (local and sub-regional sequences of course converge and yield patterns of large-scale uniformity). They offer the example of how each individual hillfort “reflects the strategies of a local population but these monuments appear to be part of larger-scale socio-economic or political changes” (2011: 440-443). Such equanimity has not characterized recent scholarship on holy wells in which any possibility of continuity is decried and diffusionist models are actually advanced to explain practices which, found cross-culturally and cross-temporally, would actually be odd to find missing from indigenous Irish tradition.

Scholarly perceptions of who and where “the Celts” were, have evolved over the last two decades so that academics can now find themselves at odds with the descendant communities whose ancestors they study and which remain committed to understandings of their own local, regional or national culture and identity as “Celtic.” Academics who have dismissed a Celtic identity for Iron Age islanders may now also deconstruct cultural practices that are popularly held to be a “Celtic inheritance” (including well veneration) as invented traditions. But holy wells do not have an Edward Williams like the Welsh Eisteddfod, or

a Sir Walter Scott like Scottish Highlandism, or even a historical point at which they appear as something novel and previously unknown. Rather, the early Irish myths, sagas and hagiographies (the oldest vernacular literature in Western Europe) reference both pagan and Christian sacred wells (even offering a prayer for the blessing of wells), and also give us some of the first references to rounding rituals. Archaeological evidence affirms pre-Christian votive deposition at wells and other watery sites in Ireland, in Scandinavia and on the continent. Holy wells of some variety have always been, and spring veneration long preceded the Iron Age, no matter by what ethnonyms we call that era's population.

Holy wells and their ritually-employed surroundings are an example of sacred landscapes par excellence. Some Irish holy well sites that are still in ritual use have been venerated for centuries, and others for well over a millennium. Many wells have been rededicated over the centuries, after the Anglo-Norman religious reforms, for example, or during a twentieth-century Marian year. Others were "discovered" to be holy only in the seventeenth century and some locally-known wells were only invested with sacrality and "a cure" in the nineteenth century by healing priests. The popular claim that holy wells in general have pagan origins has been rightly challenged, but requires qualification rather than blanket negation as some wells clearly do have pagan pasts. Finds from the few excavated sites and the recurrent motif of supernatural wells in the early medieval literature describing pre-Christian Ireland affirm that the sacrality of springs and wells preceded the Iron Age to Christian era transition. Multi-period depositions at particular sites indicate, if not continuous veneration, at least repeated, ritual re-use (with perhaps quite different accompanying rituals and presiding *genii loci*) across the *longue durée*.

When I first began ethnographic research at holy wells in the year 2000, I was struck by how *turasanna* (the localized pilgrimages at wells) shared many features in common around the country and yet were idiosyncratic to each well site. Could an introduced paradigm have been gradually reworked to suit local topographies and previously venerated landscape features? How long could that take and how did water sources come to be recognized as special? Yet, since water veneration occurs cross-culturally, might the rounds and votive deposition more simply be the historic expression of much older paradigms for the veneration of watery places, some of which have been significant in multiple periods? Need diffusion and conformity be seen in opposition to endurance of local tradition, or could a more ambiguous process explain the *turas* in which a punctuated dialectic between local and regional (and international) paradigms has yielded sites considered distinctly Irish, yet which have parallels in form and associated practices elsewhere? While invariable ritual practices and understandings of sacred watery sites have not been handed down through millennia, a flexible paradigm of venerating sacred water has. That paradigm can have patterned expressions specific to certain periods (such as the selective Bronze Age deposition

of swords and weaponry in rivers and the placement of different types of “offerings” in bogs). Many Irish holy wells have of course acquired sacrality since the Middle Ages as a pre-existing paradigm for sacred and curative wells was Christianized and emplaced in new landscapes. The expansion of the holy well “package” we expect from historic times (presiding saint, stations, votives, rounding rituals) relates to many factors including religious reforms, saint cults’ ties to local dynastic powers, changes in land use and ownership, and population growth, just as the disuse and loss of wells over time (traceable since the nineteenth century) also connects to social, religious, and economic changes.

This volume considers the origins of holy wells beginning with a survey of prehistoric patterns in votive deposition at watery places.¹³ The second and third chapters focus on the Iron Age evidence for indigenous spring veneration and consider how new orthodoxies emerging from the Celtic question limit our understandings of sacred springs and their landscapes. Based on archaeological finds, classical practices, cross-cultural examples, and historical accounts, the following chapter examines how the types of votives, rituals and stewardship associated with sacred springs shapes the archaeological record at these sites generally. The fifth considers the materiality of Irish holy wells specifically with reference to contemporary theories about their origin, existing documentation of well sites, the significance of multi-period finds, and the underappreciation of these sites as archaeological resources and as “monuments.” Since some archaeologists and social scientists have dismissed the Early Irish literature as yielding scanty evidence for the pre-Christian and early medieval existence of holy wells, the sixth chapter considers their critiques, the types of literature surviving for us and their biases, and the potential analogies offered by nearly 20 tales from the myths and sagas that involve supermundane wells. The following two chapters consider evidence for the ritual use of wells and springs in the early Christian era in Ireland and in Britain and on the continent. A ninth chapter considers their Irish employment in baptism and the tenth considers evidence for the origins of holy well “rounding,” localized rituals that were materially enshrined in some sacred landscapes at the latest by the close of the first millennium. The volume concludes with new perspectives on studying holy wells, not as isolated sites, but as the foci of sacred landscapes that are interconnected at multiple scales through patronage and ritual practice.