

## Sacral Geographies: Saints, Shrines, and Territory in Medieval Ireland

**Review Number:**

1371

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 24 January, 2013

**Author:**

Karen Overbey

**ISBN:**

9782503527673

**Date of Publication:**

2011

**Price:**

£80.00

**Pages:**

300pp.

**Publisher:**

Brepols

**Publisher url:**

**Place of Publication:**

Turnhout

**Reviewer:**

Sarah Erskine

Karen Overbey's monograph is undoubtedly a welcome addition to the weighty collection of (predominantly antiquarian) archaeo- / art-historical studies focusing on medieval Irish relics and reliquaries, a healthy proportion of which is judiciously consolidated and summarised throughout the book. Such studies, combined with Overbey's own independent researches, frame intelligent and thought-provoking ideas that seek to situate a selection of medieval Irish reliquaries in their various contexts of space and place. For me, Overbey's core conception of 'sacral geographies' is the book's greatest achievement and one which should provoke new scholarship in the field. This book should also encourage those working in cognate disciplines to engage with Ireland's rich array of religious material culture to further our view of the intellectual, cultural and social nuances of its medieval past. The author's refusal to begin and halt her enquiry at the traditional boundaries of historical periodisation at the start / close of the Viking and Norman eras in Ireland, which she accomplishes by effortlessly manoeuvring between the 7th and 14th centuries, must also be credited as such successful attempts are comparatively lacking.

Overbey commences her exploration of *Sacral Geographies* by briefly introducing Kildare's cultic landscape and her view that it:

'[is] grounded in an understanding that space is socially produced: the shrines, the sanctuary, the monastery, the Irish church – all, rather than absolute or 'natural' spaces, are local and

contingent, and their significance is generated through interests and regulated through representation' (p. 4).

Slightly later in the introduction Overbey sets forth her dedication to analyse:

'[T]he ways in which territories were mapped, remapped, manipulated, conflated, and disposed ... and to the role of reliquaries in those territorial histories. The topography of the medieval cult of saints in Ireland is not unified but fragmented, and my effort is not a national (meta)narrative ... it is not *a* geography, but multiple, overlapping sacral geographies' (p. 10).

Both quotes are indicative of similar statements that expound what the book as a whole aims to achieve. In between these flashes of clarity, however, the prose in the introduction in particular is at terms overly concerned with theoretical positioning. It appears as though the author has struggled to express her global theories in a clear manner, and yet subsequent chapters manage this much better. Nonetheless, I fear that reading the introduction alone might rule out the book's appeal to an audience beyond academia. Perhaps scholars whose specialisms lie outside the author's might also tire of the 'overloaded' prose style. Some readers – especially historians – who are interested in placing such studies of medieval Ireland into a broader European perspective, or vice versa, may consequently disregard this book as merely a work of art-historical research and interpretation, which would be to miss altogether Overbey's aptitude for interdisciplinarity.

Historians of saints' and relic cults and of hagiography, in particular, should persevere beyond the introduction, if only for the sake of posterity, to seek to counteract the author's statement that: 'Medieval Ireland's devotional topography, I argue, is not a fixed map of sites to which a pilgrim (or an historian) advances' (p. 9). The historical contexts and textual developments of saintly material culture in hagiographical narratives, of which there are many not yet studied in depth in this vein, is, for example, another line of enquiry which for historians could potentially reveal a deeper, less idealised, understanding of the diversity, movement and development of medieval Ireland's devotional landscape.<sup>(1)</sup> In addition, much still remains to be thought about as regards corporeal relic veneration in medieval Ireland in various ways, especially more analysis of hagiographical narratives and less concentration on how scant the archaeological evidence is. To Overbey's credit, however, and despite the fact that only a modest section of the introduction dwells on current historiography on the matter, she states that in chapters two and three some emphasis is placed on the important presence of bodily relics in medieval Ireland through the imagery and portability of reliquaries (pp. 5–8); although this particular area still warrants more attention in general, at least Overbey does not omit a serious intellectual inclusion of corporeal relics in her study as most others have in the past.

Following the introduction is the first chapter, which homes in on 19th-century antiquarianism. Overbey states that, whilst antiquarian 'interest in Irish reliquaries established their aesthetic and historical importance, it also distanced them from local contexts of production and use'; the author respects this important idea throughout (pp. 13–14). The discovery and collection of medieval Irish reliquaries in this century and their subsequent display is at this chapter's core. With this Overbey emphasises the need to learn lessons from the 19th-century emergence of nationalist rhetoric, which she states obscured the deeper contextual and social meanings of Irish reliquaries, thus inviting the 'cultured' 19th-century observer to think that 'container and contained correspond directly, and the history of Ireland is an open book' (pp. 33–4). This chapter sets a solid foundation on which to build a bridge to allow the idea of the 'sacral geographies' of reliquaries to travel to the medieval past. It is also a fantastic and provocative introduction to the complex and 'politicised' historiography of 19th-century antiquarian scholarship, which charts the movement of medieval Irish reliquaries from private collections to national galleries.

Overbey's second chapter concentrates on the 12th-century shrine of the seventh-century abbot St Manchan. The shrine itself is the only survivor of its type and was opened in the early 20th century and found to

contain corporeal relics, which is indeed a rare find in surviving medieval Irish reliquaries. Overbey argues that St Manchan's Shrine was not imitating any other reliquary, but that it was rather 'inventive', drawing on 'a variety of traditions, including the archaic forms of the tomb-shrines to create a new and powerful statement of the saint's significance in the twelfth century' (p. 41). The chapter's main strength undoubtedly lies in the author's interpretation of the shrine's complex artistic features, particularly the engraved figures, which makes for a lively discussion of the reliquary's political contexts during its second phase in the 12th century.

The third chapter focuses on the 'remapping' of St Columba's travels around Ireland, where, just as depicted in the 12th-century Irish life of Colum Cille, the saint founded many monasteries and churches, leaving various relics in each of them. Although the chapter's contents predominantly focus on the 12th century, the author nonetheless compares and contrasts the Irish life to others in Columban hagiographies, such as Adomnán's seventh-century *Vita Columbae*, Manus O'Donnell's 16th-century *Betha Colaim Chille* and 12th-century *dindshenchas*, or 'place-naming tales'. There may be too much reliance on historically-focused secondary scholarship in this chapter in particular, namely Máire Herbert's groundbreaking *Iona, Kells and Derry* (2), and I feel this is generally a weakness throughout the work. Despite this, the chapter's strengths reside in the author's navigation of the topography of the 12th-century life and the identification of the relics mentioned in that text, which allow Columba's 'sacral geographies' to be traced on Ireland's medieval landscape.

Chapter four focuses on a reliquary associated with St Patrick of Armagh, the *Domnach Airgid*, or the 'silver church' (the outer structure of which can be dated to the 14th century), by unpacking its complex physical / visual and textual history. Overbey is most successful in her endeavor to evaluate the issues of patronage, politics (especially between Armagh, Clones and Clogher), and the reliquary's wider social and cultural reception, thereby creating a thread between this and the previous two chapters; the unpacking of the hagiography in particular in this chapter is very good and clearly presented. As well as examining the contextual / historical nuances, of the reliquary's exterior (Overbey's core strength as an art-historian), these developments are also compared to the shrine's interior space, i.e. the relic/s, which the author rather hazily claims as being:

'[A] signifier of local (and later, national) identity, [which] was converted several times, and so my aim in this chapter is to negotiate modern and medieval mythographies, and the vectors of inside and outside.' (p. 11)

This aim is achieved here, despite the much larger scope of the idea itself.

Chapters five and six deal with the largest category of reliquaries found in medieval Ireland, namely bells and crosiers respectively, many of which are notoriously difficult to date. Chapter five on 'bell relics and the monastic voice' opens with a brief sweep of the transition from bell to relic, emphasising that these relics were capable of performing 'both practical and ritual functions in medieval Ireland' (p. 115). The author is as ever consistently strong on art-historical analysis and subjective interpretations of the possible symbolism of reliquaries more generally, which in the context of bell-reliquaries she explains clearly and comprehensively. Perhaps the most thought-provoking aspect of this chapter, however, is the brief section entitled 'the monastic voice', which Overbey unpacks in the context of cursing and satire, though I would estimate that much more needs to be followed up in this vein (pp. 126–8). Also impressively conveyed in this chapter is the author's overriding idea that:

'[T]he imagery of the bell shrine crests positions the monastic voice at this sacred centre: the elements of an iconography of performance – an orating monk, members of the laity, symbols of protection and salvation – stress the power of the monks to ensure social stability... The primary voice of the bell is communal; but through that communal speech is conveyed a number

of values and claims about the social order. These claims – to territorial integrity and divine authority – are to be heard by audiences not only within the monastic enclosure, but also beyond its walls’ (p. 145).

Overall this chapter fits well with the book’s overriding idea of ‘sacral geographies’, even though it does not offer the type of micro-history visible in previous chapters (pp. 11–12).

Chapter six analyses the physical composition, imagery, and interpretations of crosier-reliquaries, the nature of the relics they might have contained, and their performance of territorial authority. The discussion of relics in particular is interesting, with the author’s slant on the images of saints on the crosier-drops (which are small hollow compartments at the end of the crook which contained relics) being that they were where ‘the bodies of the saints are represented not literally or corporeally but rather metaphorically’ (p. 163); this, as mentioned above, should allow for more serious intellectual evaluations of the importance of corporeal relic veneration in medieval Ireland. The chapter’s section on St Findchú is its core strength, being most entertaining to read as well as serving to expound the author’s theories on the relationships between crosier, saint, and earthly and spiritual territories. The section on the ‘spatial histories’ of crosiers is also enlightening, arguing that some of the tenth- and 11th-century crosier-reliquaries may have been produced in understudied regions, such as Inishmurray, which Overbey asserts were a part of the ‘active production of monastic identity’ (p. 176). As with the chapter before it, this section fits well enough with the book’s overall idea of ‘sacral geographies’.

Finally, the book’s afterword summarises and in parts complements the author’s reflections on ‘sacral geographies’ more generally, as well as emphasising that reliquaries in medieval Ireland were more than just containers for saintly relics. Overbey takes the opportunity in this section to question whether non-monastic viewers in medieval Ireland engaged with relics and reliquaries, particularly with their images and forms,

‘Or how shrines might have shaped topographies other than those of religious or political territories? Were there, in other words, unofficial, contradictory, or differential geographies of the holy body?’ (p. 183)

Of course one perhaps obvious answer is pilgrimage, an area which Overbey does well to incorporate into her idea of ‘sacral geographies’, given that it possesses a potentially large area of scholarship in its own right, and which is in need of fresher approaches. This is despite the author’s own admission that many of the most popular sites of holy pilgrimage in Ireland, such as Croagh Patrick, are not (and I insert my own words of caution in this statement) ‘[known to have been] associated with shrines or reliquaries either by extant objects or in textual traditions’ (p. 186). A (dare I suggest, inadequate) discussion of medieval Irish belt shrines is left as the last section of the book’s text. Overbey concludes the smooth flow of her overriding idea of ‘sacral geographies’ by aptly and vividly describing these reliquaries as:

‘[C]harged spaces, full of both absence and presence, compassing a space where holy bodies and human bodies changed places ... [She poignantly ends] It is not empty, it is *space*’ (p. 19)

My general thoughts on Overbey’s *Sacral Geographies* are very positive indeed, and, even though I have expressed some reservations in certain sections of this review, none of them can detract from the author’s careful exploration and fluid expression of the idea of ‘sacral geographies’, which I must repeat is the book’s greatest achievement. What I have failed to mention, however, is that this book is punctuated throughout with a beautiful array of photographs (many of which are the author’s own) of various ecclesiastical sites and reliquaries, which suitably complement the text. However, that said, it is my feeling that those who are unfamiliar or even slightly familiar with the complexities of medieval Ireland’s local ecclesiastical and secular politics would appreciate more maps. I must also use this opportunity to reiterate that historians in

particular should not see this study as a model of how research into saints' and relic cults in medieval Ireland should necessarily be approached. Although I have already stated that *Sacral Geographies* would not generally appeal to a non-academic audience, scholars – including senior undergraduates and postgraduates – who venture beyond the introduction should nonetheless find this book's contents entertaining in some parts, highly satisfying in most, and provocative enough to encourage future responses and development.

## Notes

1. Sarah Christine Erskine, *The Relic Cult of St Patrick between the Seventh and the Twelfth Centuries in its European Contexts: A Focus on the Lives*, (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, June 2012).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Dublin, 1996).[Back to \(2\)](#)

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1371>

## Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/47074>