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# The History and Heritage of Mass Rocks with particular reference to West Cork

By Hilary Bishop

## **Introduction and context**

In Ireland, the period 1530-1750 witnessed major changes in the organisation of Irish society.<sup>1</sup> Rather than being simply an inert backdrop to the momentous events that accompanied the advent of Protestantism in Ireland and the energetic attempts of the Roman Catholic faith to resist annihilation, the landscape provided a powerful arena for future devotion that shaped the profound theological, liturgical, and cultural transformations that mark this crucial period.<sup>2</sup>

The Penal Laws were passed between 1695 and 1756 and their impact upon the Catholic Church and religious practice has come to define this period<sup>3</sup>, although it may be argued that Ireland's Roman Catholics had remained in a state of suppression from Tudor and Stuart times.<sup>4</sup> The introduction of the Banishment Act of 1697 required all regular clergy, bishops and those exercising ecclesiastical jurisdiction to leave Ireland. Their expulsion was carried out in a highly efficient manner and those regulars, such as the Jesuits and Franciscans who remained, or filtered back into the country, found refuge amongst wealthy Catholic families or remained under the pretext of being secular clergy, eventually registering under the Registration Act (2 Anne (1703) c.7 Section 1). All registered priests were required to take an oath of abjuration, denying the right of James III to the throne and accepting Queen Anne as the rightful and lawful Queen (2 Anne (1703) c.6 Section 15). Few priests took the oath and those who refused forfeited any legal status which the Registration Act had offered them. This resulted in a disruption to religious services. Priests were forced into hiding and the doors of Catholic chapels and Mass Houses closed.<sup>5</sup>

Whilst the Penal Laws managed to limit the public expression of Catholicism, they did not ensure the elimination of Catholicism nor



*Plate 1 Altar Mass Rock, County Cork*



*Plate 2 Cooldaniel Mass Rock, County Cork*





*Plate 3 Derrynafinchin Mass Rock, County Cork*



*Plate 4 Gournaboughtee Mass Rock, also known as Carraig an tSéipeil, County Cork*



did they result in the mass conversion of Catholics.<sup>6</sup> Despite Mass Houses being closed and chapels appropriated by Protestant authorities, Mass continued to be celebrated secretly at venues including barns and out-houses and in private homes. It was frequently celebrated under trees and bushes, in ditches and in the open air at altars known as Mass Rocks situated in fields and glens or on mountain sides.

County Cork, which consists of both the diocese of Cork and Ross and the diocese of Cloyne, has enjoyed something of an extensive and systematic study of its archaeological and historical sites by the Cork Archaeological Survey team based in University College Cork.<sup>7</sup> It also benefits from a wealth of local knowledge located within the records of the Folklore Archives held at University College Dublin. The Archaeological Survey of Ireland (ASI) lists a significant number of Mass Rock sites for county Cork, and my ongoing research suggests the potential number of Mass Rocks in the county is in excess of 400 sites. This figure, however, must be treated with some caution as Mass Rocks were both temporally and spatially mutable.

By their very nature, many Mass Rock sites are in remote or inaccessible places, on private land, or simply overgrown and impossible to locate or access. A number have been removed or buried. Whilst Ordnance Survey Manuscripts and Memoirs, Ordnance Survey Maps and historical maps and charts can prove useful in the identification of archaeological sites, early cartographers had no cause to publicise Catholic places of worship by putting them on maps, for fear that this might have been misunderstood as a gesture of legitimisation. As a result, many government officials paid little attention to Catholic places of worship.<sup>8</sup> Even with updated sources available from Ordnance Survey Ireland many Mass Rock sites remain absent from cartographic sources.

The majority of Mass Rocks are known primarily at a local level with information passed down orally from generation to generation and they are often cared for by the local community or landowner. For example, the altar stone in the townland of Ballyally, Castlehaven South, was cared for by Mr O'Donovan. He advised that very few people in the vicinity were aware of the altar stone in his field which he maintained annually by cutting down briars, rushes and nettles around the site.<sup>9</sup>

Emphasising care in the creation and choice of space, a Mass Rock site had to create a space that held meaning and importance for the different aspects of the eucharistic celebration. The size and proportions



*Plate 5 Gortnamuckla Mass Rock, County Cork*



*Plate 6 Rectangular loose stoned wall, Cullomane West Mass Rock, County Cork*

of the space had to be sufficient to support the celebration of Mass in all its component parts. Whilst sites needed to either possess the relevant attributes for the celebration of Mass or be adapted accordingly, many sites appear to have been chosen because they were already perceived as 'sacred' in some way. This sacredness may have resulted from a certain topographical feature such as a 'special' rock or the presence of a sacred water source or tree. Other sites may have been chosen because they had already been made sacred by repeated ritual use in the past.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Location and Nature of Mass Rocks**

Landscapes are an important expression of the relationship that exists between people and place, and they encompass an ensemble of ordinary features which constitute an extra-ordinarily rich exhibition of both the course and character of any given society.<sup>11</sup> The Irish landscape became an arena for open air piety, devotion and worship during the Penal era as persecution and proscription compelled Irish Catholics to embrace familiar settings which were framed with deeper cultural meaning. Research in County Cork indicates that the spatial distribution of Mass Rock sites is reflective of a more traditional or Gaelic strand of Irish Catholicism<sup>12</sup> and this is further supported by the location and nature of Mass Rocks.

Mass Rocks are often located within townlands which display a rich archaeological heritage.<sup>13</sup> The Mass Rock in Carriglusky, Kilfaughnabeg, is situated within a ringfort (NFC309, p.283) and the Mass Rock in Cooradarrigan, Schull, lies close to boulder burial sites.<sup>14</sup> The Mass Rock lying in a field fence at Garranes South, Drimoleague, was removed from its original position within a *fulacht fiadh* during reclamation work.<sup>15</sup> Occasionally, archaeological features themselves are used as Mass Rocks as in the case of the Mass Rock in the townland of Altar, Schull.

There is no record of the Altar wedge tomb (Plate 1) being re-used as a Mass Rock in the Archaeological Survey of Ireland database. However, the Office of Public Works states that the site was re-used and re-interpreted by subsequent communities from pre-historic times through to the Penal era. Already a sacred place during the Bronze Age between 1250-500BC, ritual use of the site continued into the Iron Age between 124-224AD. They advise that the wedge tomb was subsequently used as a Mass Rock by priests during the eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup>





*Plate 7 Glenville Mass Rock, County Cork*



*Plate 8 Curraheen Mass Rock, County Cork*

The Cooldaniel Mass Rock (Plate 2) is located in the modern-day parish of Kilmichael, an ancient parish that dates back to at least 1493<sup>17</sup>. Situated in undulating pasture, the Mass Rock is a wedge tomb sheltered by higher ground to the north and commanding excellent views of the surrounding area. The building of wedge tombs in the final Neolithic/Early Bronze Age c. 2500-1500 BC represented the first wide-spread appearance of megalithic tombs in the Cork region. Wedge Tombs show a markedly western distribution and high densities exist in the Munster region<sup>18</sup> so it is understandable that their re-use prevails in this area. The construction of these monuments appears to have been followed by a broadly complementary distribution of Stone Circles and other related monuments in the Middle-Late Bronze Age.<sup>19</sup> This is particularly significant given that another Mass Rock at Derrynafinchin (Plate 3) appears to have been incorporated into a stone circle.

A wedge tomb existed primarily as a shrine associated with the ancestors through sanctification, offering and sacrifice but at another level the tomb was an important symbol of group identity ‘contributing to the symbolic construction of their community through the physical expression of a common sense of belonging and identity’.<sup>20</sup> Christianity in Ireland achieved a remarkable symbiosis between these native institutions and the new religious orthodoxy, permitting the complementary coexistence of the two ideologies.<sup>21</sup> This has clearly continued into modern times with the re-use and re-interpretation of wedge tombs as Mass Rocks and this practice is not restricted solely to County Cork. Westropp identified a number of priests celebrating Mass on ‘dolmens’ such as at *Altoir Ultacht* in County Clare and at Knockshanvo, on the hill of Knockaphunta beyond Broadford (Westropp 1900, p.89). Other examples include a re-used wedge tomb at Scrahallia in Cashel, Connemara<sup>22</sup>, *Altoir Ula* in Cashel, county Galway<sup>23</sup> and the Srahwee or *Altoir* Wedge Tomb in Clew Bay, County Mayo.

### **Cup-marked and other Stones**

The Coorleigh South Mass Rock altar comprises a cup-marked stone with eleven possible cup-marks. The ASI<sup>24</sup> describes a cup marked stone as a ‘stone or rock outcrop, found in isolation, bearing one or more, small roughly hemispherical depressions, generally created by chipping or pecking’ and dates them to the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age (c. 2500 - 1800 BC). Another Mass Rock, at Killinga, is comprised of a





*Plate 9 Kilnadur Mass Rock, County Cork*



similar stone.<sup>25</sup> The tradition of using cup-marked stones in Ireland can be traced back to the Neolithic period when such stones were used in the construction of Newgrange passage tomb.<sup>26</sup> Linking the symbolism of these sacred stones with the symbolism of sacred water, the water found within the small bowl-like hollows is believed to be especially efficacious.<sup>27</sup>

There is also evidence of pre-historic rock art stones being used as Mass Rocks. In County Mayo, St Patrick's Chair bears marks on its upper surface believed to be fire holes associated with sun worship and is believed to have been used as a Mass Rock. Additionally, the Bohea Stone which contains a significant amount of pre-Christian rock art, the supposed footprint of St Patrick and an incised Cross was also used as a Mass Rock. Both sites are accessed along the *Tóchar Phádraig*, a route regularly followed by pilgrims from Ballintubber Abbey to Croagh Patrick.<sup>28</sup>

### Stone Circles

There is a wealth of stone circles in County Cork and the Mass Rock at Derrynafinchin<sup>29</sup> (Plate 3) forms part of a stone circle on the southwestern slope of Conigar Mountain, in the Shehy Mountain range. The symbolism of water is again highlighted at the site which is located between two streams at the end of a narrow valley of the Coomhola River. Excavations carried out at the site by Ó Nualláin and published in 1984 reveal a boulder burial centrally placed within the circle<sup>30</sup> suggesting that this was already a ritual site by the Bronze Age. Another significant feature of the Derrynafinchin Mass Rock site (Plate 3) is the presence of a bullaun stone.

The Gournahoughtee Mass Rock (Plate 4), also known as *Carraig an tSéipeil*, is described by Father Ryan as a 'little chapel' located on the south side of Pipe Hill.<sup>31</sup> Here, the unique shape of the large rock outcrop resembles the two gable ends of a chapel building making this an easily identifiable and well-known local topographical feature (Plate 4). The sacred nature of this topography would be invisible and irrelevant to any stranger passing by the site. The grassed area in front of the Mass Rock forms a level platform which would have provided a practical space for worship and the remains of a low wall at the west side of the site indicate that a shelter or wind break had been constructed, perhaps to shelter the priest and his congregation during Mass. Whilst it is difficult to assess whether walls or windbreaks were contemporary



*Plate 10 Inscribed Cross, Kilnadur Mass Rock, County Cork*



*Plate 11 Offerings, Beach Mass Rock, County Cork*

or later additions, these appear at a number of sites.

At Cappaboy Beg in Bantry, the Mass Rock site known locally as *Clais an Aifrin* or 'Ravine of the Mass', is located in a secluded hollow and surrounded by a robustly built wall. A similarly constructed wall encloses the Mass Rock at Gortnamuckla (Plate 5). The presence of a surrounding wall is not unique to the Cork area and may also be found at the Cahernacole Mass Rock in The Neale, County Mayo. In contrast, at Gortnahoughtee, Shehy Beg and Cullomane West, the walling appears far more rudimentary. The wall at the Cullomane West Mass Rock would have provided welcome shelter for the congregation as well as a place to rest (Plate 6). When situated in upland areas, the possibility that these walls were a deliberate addition in order to mask the view of the site from lower down a hillside cannot be ignored.

The cliff face at Glenville overhangs the Mass Rock and would have provided some shelter for the priest during the celebration of Mass (Plate 7). Another significant feature at this particular site is three naturally occurring steps that are formed within the bedrock that lead up to the altar. On the mountainside at Ballyhooley, three similar rough steps lead up to the Mass Rock altar<sup>32</sup> and at Loughane East three steps are also formed within the bedrock. Whilst in the majority of cases these steps are present in the natural bedrock around the site, occasionally they have been built into the furniture of the site and the Mass Rock at Beach (Plate 11) provides an example of this. At the Coolnaclehy Mass Rock the steps that lead up to the altar have been deliberately chiselled out of the rock.<sup>33</sup> It is possible that these steps are intended to mimic the approach to the altar within Catholic Churches.

Some Mass Rocks are man-made and they are often built into or onto an existing natural landscape feature such as a cliff face or rock outcrop, as occurs at the Beach Mass Rock (Plate 11). Alternatively, they can stand alone as an independent feature as found at Curraheen (Plate 8). There does not appear to be any one design for man-made Mass Rocks but it is clear that considerable work is likely to have gone into their construction. The Curraheen Mass Rock (Plate 8) sits in a secluded rock hollow set back from the roadside close to the village of Inchigeelagh and this is one of the most picturesque and well-maintained sites visited, as well as one of the most accessible (Plate 8). The base of the Mass Rock is made up of individual stones which form a plinth upon which a large flat stone sits. On top of this stone, raised by two pillar stones, sits another flat slab so that a small box like structure,



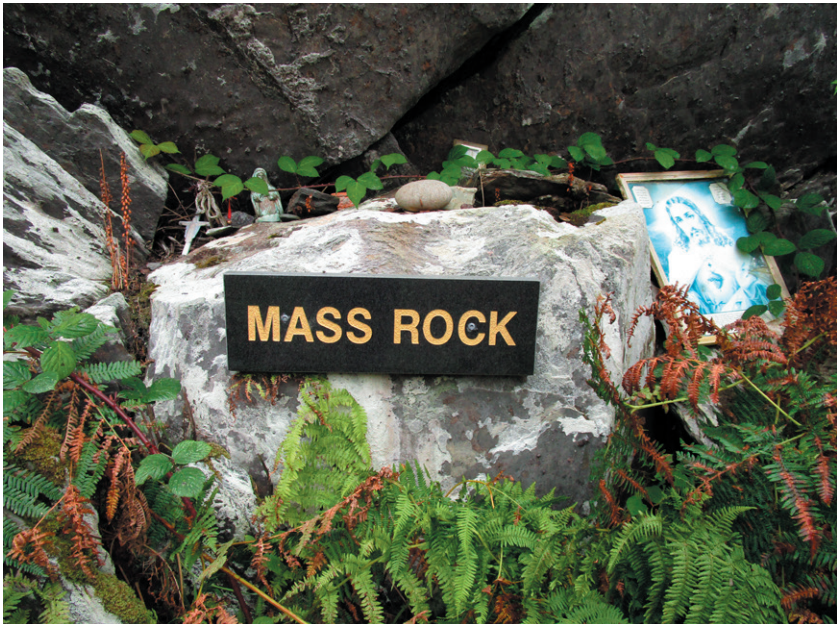


Plate 12 Offerings, Calloras Oughter, County Cork

or *reredos*, is formed.

The terms *altare*, *mensa* and *altarium* are used to designate an altar. The *reredos* is a permanent structure situated behind an altar that is used for the display of paintings, sculptures or to house relics. It can rest either on the rear of the *mensa* or on a substructure behind the altar.<sup>34</sup> Local shrines figured prominently in late medieval devotional life in Ireland and, as such, played a key role in the access of the laity to the sacraments.<sup>35</sup> During the Counter-Reformation, traditional Irish cults continued to focus on relics and pilgrimage sites.<sup>36</sup> A number of Mass Rock sites visited including Coolaclevane, Coolmountain and Kilnadur (Plate 9) appear to have a purpose built *reredos* suggesting an unbroken stream of tradition down through the ages. Whilst these *reredos* were empty at the time of the visits, a Penal Cross had been placed in the *reredos* at Curraheen (Plate 8).

Caves were also a feature of worship in Penal times and Bolster records that the Monks of Kilcrea celebrated Mass in the Mass Rock chamber in the caves to the south of Ovens Bridge.<sup>37</sup> In Walterstown, Mass took place in a natural cave overlooking the Strand where the Priest accessed the site using a rowing boat. It was also celebrated in an

underground cave in Shanbally.<sup>38</sup> In Ardglass there is an underground site known as the Mass Cave where an iron cross was discovered buried in the rock.<sup>39</sup>

## Sacred Water

There is a high prevalence of holy-water features and sacred stones at Irish pilgrimage sites<sup>40</sup> and my research demonstrates a similar correlation at Mass Rock sites. A preponderance of sites visited were located besides lakes, rivers, streams, fords, wells and Holy wells as well as by the sea.<sup>41</sup> The symbolism reflected by the element of water occupies a most important place amongst the sacred spaces of many nations<sup>42</sup> and Ireland is no exception. The power and regenerative force of water is acknowledged as an important aspect of Irish mythology as it played a central role as a creative force in the cosmic religiousness of pre-Christian communities; individuals drank from it, were immersed within it, or carried out specific rituals at it.<sup>43</sup> In early Gaelic culture sacred springs were strongly linked to the healing cult of gods and goddesses with the veneration of water gods and the ritual deposition of valuables evident among the pre-Christian Irish.<sup>44</sup>

There is a Mass Rock located in Goulanes near the River Mealagh known as *Cnocán an Áltórach* or 'little hill of the altar'.<sup>45</sup> Coastal sites include the Mass Rock in Altar, Schull and the Drombeg Mass Rock which lies within a burial ground adjoining a ringfort overlooking the bay at Clonakilty.<sup>46</sup> In Castlehaven, a shelter for celebrating Mass lay within a large field now known as Drishane Slide because the site slopes down to the harbour between the village and Castlehaven. Previously the field was known as *Baile an Aifrinn* (NFCS 298, p.209). Similarly on Heir Island a Mass Rock in high ground overlooks *An Tráigh Mór* and another on the side of the hill looks out over a sandy beach at the Reen.<sup>47</sup>

The Beach Mass Rock (Plate 11) is found in a spectacular location with commanding views across the Bantry Bay. Adjacent to a Holy well, this close association with sacred water appears to be a feature at a number of other sites including Calloras Oughter (Plate 12), Coolnaclehy, Enniskeane, Foherlagh, Kinneigh, Bealnamorrive and Curraghrour East. In addition to the house-hold based 'stations', which were themselves a response to the restrictions of the Penal laws, and chapel-based activities, the practice of visiting Holy wells was one of the main expressions of Catholic devotion in pre-Famine Ireland<sup>48</sup>.



*Plate 13 Ardrah Mass Rock, County Cork*

In Analeentha townland, the Holy well of St John the Baptist was itself used as a place for open air Mass in Penal days (site notice). The Mass Rock in Mohonagh, Aughdown, is close to a blessed well that, according to local tradition, never runs dry. The Mass Rock has shelves that served as the altar in Penal days and, a short distance away, is a large stone believed to be a lookout post.<sup>49</sup>

At the site of the Beach Mass Rock (Plate 11), a small hollowed out boulder known as a bullaun stone was found beside the Holy well and others are found associated with Glenbower Wood and Shehy Beg Mass Rock sites. Research has also revealed that one of two bullaun stones at an ancient forge in the townland of Knockaganny, County Mayo, was believed to have been re-used as a Mass Rock. Bullaun stones are natural boulders that contain one or more man-made depressions and, whilst various explanations have been offered for their use, their exact purpose continues to be the subject of much speculation.<sup>50</sup> A tradition of bullaun stones being used for cursing is known at Clocha Breacha



on Innishmurray<sup>51</sup> and at the Pass of Keinmaneigh near the pilgrimage site of Gougane Barra in Cork.<sup>52</sup> They are found in many contexts including but not limited to Holy wells<sup>53</sup> often occurring at places which may have been connected with pilgrimage<sup>54</sup>. In folk tradition, bullauns are frequently associated with the healing properties of the water that gathers in their basins, fitting into the framework of small local pilgrimages or patterns which are held on specific days at hallowed local sites. Bullaun stones are also found in ecclesiastical settings<sup>55</sup> and occasionally pilgrims inscribe crosses on these stones, as occurs at Adrigole in County Cork.<sup>56</sup>

Inscribed crosses are a feature at many pilgrimage sites but this ritual 'tagging' is not restricted to bullauns and Holy Wells. It is also evident at a number of Mass Rock sites. At a Mass Rock high up in the mountains in Loughisle, Kilcommon there is an incised cross cut into the stone<sup>57</sup> whilst the Killesk Mass Rock has a cross carved onto its flat surface<sup>58</sup>. The Kilnadur Mass Rock (Plate 10) has a small Latin cross inscribed onto its outer face as do the Mass Rocks at Ballycurrany West and Liscroneen. The Mass Rocks at Boleynanoultagh<sup>59</sup>, Farlistown<sup>60</sup> and Tawnies Lower<sup>61</sup> are also reported to be cross-inscribed.

Numerous crosses had been etched across the rock face at the Glenville Mass Rock (Plate 7) possibly using pebbles from the riverbed and, at the Curraheen Mass Rock (Plate 8), a small cross has been etched into the lower slab. At the time of the visit, a Penal cross had been placed in the box cavity at Curraheen. The veneration of crucifixes, particularly Penal crosses, has remained a feature of Catholic tradition at pilgrimage sites such as Lough Derg and Lady's Island.<sup>62</sup> These small wooden crucifixes of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century must have played a singularly important part in the religious life of the people during the Penal era.<sup>63</sup> A number of other votive offerings had been left at the Curraheen site (Plate 8) including a metal crucifix, a number of large quartzite pebbles and flowers contained within a vase. An extensive array of votive offerings had been left on the Beach Mass Rock altar (Plate 11) including rosary beads, vases, plant pots and flowers and statues of the Virgin Mary as well, the Sacred Heart and St. Jude (Plate 10). Offerings were also found at Glenville (Plate 7) and at Calloras Oughter (Plate 12). Such offerings represent one of the best-known examples of religious ritual and a number of authors<sup>64</sup> believe this reflects a continuation of the ancient ritual of votive offerings evident during the pre-historic period.



*Plate 14 Ledge, Cullomane West Mass Rock, County Cork*

It is possible that water sources such as streams and rivers may have been used as a way to guide the congregation to the Mass Rock site or, alternatively, to mask footprints that would otherwise have been identified by authorities eager to curtail the celebration of Mass.<sup>65</sup> Mass Rock sites close to the shoreline would have facilitated the arrival and departure of massing priests and such activities were acknowledged by the authorities in Cork and recorded in historical records such as the *Report on the State of Popery 1731*<sup>66</sup>. Indeed, Schull was one of the sites along the Cork coast where authorities had already identified priest landing by 1708.<sup>67</sup>

The practicality of choosing a Mass Rock site close to a water source may also be reflected in its use within the celebration of Mass. Water has a special place in the ritual of every Catholic Mass and, in the past, there has always been a general custom of providing water, or wine and water, for the communicants to drink as ‘purification’ after Communion.<sup>68</sup> Sites may have been situated near rivers in order to provide water for a

meal after communion or for washing.<sup>69</sup> The importance of water for the purpose of celebrating Mass is discussed by Father Henchy who believed that three wells close to the Coolnaclehy Mass Rock may have been used in Penal times as Holy Water or Baptismal fonts.<sup>70</sup>

## Sacred Trees

A number of trees are recorded throughout the history of religions, including trees of life, immortality and knowledge. Such trees have 'come to express everything that religious man regards as pre-eminently real and sacred'<sup>71</sup>. At Loughane East, a large oak tree stands beside the Mass Rock. Ancient rites connected with the verification of the spirit of the oak tree are recorded in *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, The Book of Invasions, a core text in the Irish mythological cycles.<sup>72</sup> At Ardrah, a crab apple tree is almost woven into the Mass Rock (Plate 13). This ancient tree was used as a food source in Ireland and can be traced as far back as the Neolithic period with crab apple seeds recovered from a pre-historic house at Tankardstown, County Limerick.<sup>73</sup> Known for its healing properties both physically and mentally, the crab apple tree is often associated with the Otherworld. Many Irish customs performed at *Samhain* (a Gaelic festival which heralds the coming of winter and the end of the harvest) are associated with the crab apple tree because of this connection.<sup>74</sup> In Irish mythology, the hazel tree was believed to be the god of *Mac Cuill* son of *Cermait* and, in a number of medieval texts, the hazel has frequent saintly, angelic or Otherworld associations along with the yew and ash.<sup>75</sup> Other trees with magical properties often feature in Irish tales of voyages or journeys to the Otherworld<sup>76</sup> and Cusack identifies the Oak of Moone or *Eo Mugna* in County Kildare, the Yew of Ross and the *Bile Tortan* ash tree as amongst the most sacred trees in Ireland.<sup>77</sup>

Trees and woodlands remained integral elements of Irish culture up to the mid-seventeenth century. From this point onwards, aggressive English expansion resulted in a transformation of the Irish landscape, denuding it of its trees and forests so that they became simply 'a memory and a metaphor for the Irish'.<sup>78</sup> By 1720/1730 the woodland culture that had existed for centuries in Ireland had been shattered<sup>79</sup> but, despite this, folklore repeatedly speaks of sacred trees and bushes where Mass was often celebrated during Penal times. In *Garrda na Sgeac*, Longueville, Mallow, there is a whitethorn tree known as Callaghan's Bush where it is believed Mass was said.<sup>80</sup> In Stannard's Glen near



Lismire, Mass was celebrated under the branches of a large oak tree located at the source of a stream which flowed through the wood.<sup>81</sup> In Upper Scarteen, Newmarket, there is a glen known as *Gleann an Aifrin* or the ‘Glen of the Mass’<sup>82</sup> where a tree, known locally as the Chalice Tree, is believed to mark the spot where the chalice was hidden in Penal times.<sup>83</sup> When the tree blooms each year, the blossoms are of a rich red colour and its trunk is long and straight giving the tree its name.<sup>84</sup> Mass continued to be celebrated under this tree until about forty years ago (personal comment). The Mass Rock at *Clais na hAltóra* in Skibbereen lies on the northern side of the hill a short distance from *Tobar na Sceabhrach* or the well of the tree.<sup>85</sup>

## Sacred Stone

Irish folklore continues to emphasise the sacredness of stone as well as the idea that stone is a container of supernatural power. It is thought that the erection of standing-stones by pre-historic communities served as a way of marking or ‘socialising’ the environment, but such stones would also have held a religious significance of their own and would have increased the sacredness of such sites. In Ireland, there was a common custom of swearing on stones and a belief that stones could move about and speak oracles on certain occasions.<sup>86</sup>

There remains an emphasis upon stone in Irish Catholicism with stones, stone circles and piles of small stones routinely encountered at sites associated with Holy wells. Such stones are often the focus of the rounding rituals performed at these sites.<sup>87</sup> Sacred stones, particularly megalithic monuments and natural rock formations are certainly more common in Irish pilgrimage contexts than elsewhere in Europe.<sup>88</sup> The sacredness of stone is also clearly apparent in its use as the Mass altar, this having always been the preferred material for altar use, although there is some evidence for the use of wooden altars during the later middle-ages. As early as 1186, legislation prohibited priests from celebrating Mass on a wooden table and advised that altars should be made from stone of a sufficient size to cover the whole altar. If this was not possible then legislation dictated ‘a square and polished stone be fixed in the middle of the altar where Christ’s body is consecrated, of a compass broad enough to contain five crosses and also to bear the foot of the largest chalice’<sup>89</sup>. Wooden altars were only permitted in chapels, chantries and oratories but, even then, a plate of stone had to be ‘firmly fixed’ into the wood.<sup>90</sup>

A sense of respect for the altar has always been intimately connected with the celebration of Mass within the Catholic faith.<sup>91</sup> In Penal times the priest would have carried a station box. Having unhinged the sides and the front of the station box, the priest would have rested the station box on the flat surface provided by the Mass Rock. The station-box would have contained the altar-stone, linens, crucifix, candles and charts and its compactness and portability would have allowed for a speedy departure should the need have arisen.<sup>92</sup> The chosen rock would only have been transformed into a Holy altar once the required flat square stone tablet had been placed upon it and been duly consecrated by the priest, translating an otherwise 'sacred' but 'unholy' space into a Holy altar for the celebration of the Catholic Mass.

### **Height of Mass Rocks**

Mass Rock altars are generally between 0.5m and 1m in height.<sup>93</sup> This would have been a practical necessity given that the altar would have held the sacred tablet and other ritual ornaments of the sacrament. Many Mass Rocks provide a naturally flat surface for the altar, including those found at Curragbeg in Castlehaven, Ballyally in Castlehaven South, and Knocknamonhalagh in Aughadown. Those that do not, such as Shehy Beg, Gortnahoughtee (Plate 4) and Derrynafinchin (Plate 3), appear to have had a separately mounted and dressed altar stone which often remains present at the site.

A number of Mass Rocks appear to have natural hollows or depressions within the rock or holes that appear to have been deliberately cut. At the Dromore Mass Rock, the water which collects in the natural hollow of the rock is reported to have special qualities as it is of an unaccountable brown colour, the natural cavity remaining full even in the height of summer.<sup>94</sup> The Kilgilky North Mass Rock is an irregular limestone block with a flat weathered upper surface and a cavity on the western side, near its base.<sup>95</sup> At Ballycurrany West, the Mass Rock has depressions which were reportedly used to hold the chalice and candles during Mass. Similar is found in the Mass Rock overlooking the Reen on Heir Island. In the Mass Rock at *Cum an tSagairt*, Ballingeary, there are large natural depressions either side of the boulder which were believed to house the Mass candles. A similar feature is found at Coomleigh East where there are six candle holes.

The irregular shape of the Dromaclarig Mass Rock boulder forms two natural horizontal ledges suitable for holding the various

ornaments required for the celebration of Mass whilst the Mass Rock at Cullomane West has a ledge which appears to have been deliberately cut out on the north-east side of the rock (Plate 14). The ledge was used by the priest to rest his book during Mass (personal comment) and it is possible that the same was true at other sites such as Drombeg. The existence of shelf-like feature or pulpit is also a feature at Mohonagh and Ardura Beg.

## **Dating Mass Rocks**

In July 1564, concerned with adherence to newly introduced enactments aimed at a general re-organisation of current church practice, the legatine commission issued instructions jointly to Archbishop Creagh of Armagh and David Wolfe. As nuncio in Cork, David Wolfe was to 'authorise the use of portable altars on which Mass could be celebrated with due solemnity and reverence in suitable places outside the churches'. With reference to David Wolfe alone, he was 'to consider and report as to the transfer ... Of cathedrals oppressed by heretics or otherwise deserted by Catholics, to neighbouring towns or other places where Mass and other divine offices may be more conveniently celebrated'.<sup>96</sup> By apostolic brief dated 3 April 1581, faculties to use such portable altars were extended to reliable and trustworthy priests in the dioceses of Cork and Cloyne<sup>97</sup> allowing them to administer all the sacraments except Orders and Confirmation. These faculties were restated in a second brief issued by Sixtus V in July 1589.<sup>98</sup>

Surviving seventeenth century records of the English administration describe the activities of Catholic preachers and their role in encouraging the laity to disobey secular authority. On 11<sup>th</sup> October 1613, a Franciscan friar named Turlogh McCrobyn is reported to have delivered a sermon in the woods in County Londonderry to more than 1000 people including fourteen other priests.<sup>99</sup> In 1614 there was further evidence of Mass in the open air. The Synod of Kilkenny confirmed that, due to there being few chapels available to Catholic congregations, Sunday Mass was to be celebrated not only in private houses, generally those of the landed gentry or merchants, but also in barns or outhouses as well as in the open air.<sup>100</sup> Whilst the celebration of Mass in profane places appears to have been justified by 'the calamity' of the times<sup>101</sup> the Synod was clearly concerned and called for a canopy to be placed over the altar to ensure the dignified celebration of the



Eucharist.<sup>102</sup> Clearly echoing the concerns of this 1614 Synod, the Synod of the province of Armagh decreed in February of the same year:

Let nobody dare to celebrate Mass in any place that is not above reproach, that is smokey or fetid, that contains the stalls of animals or is otherwise dirty; nor in places that are too dark and without enough light; but not in the open unless the number of the congregation demands it or persecutions compel it. Then care must be taken that the altar is safe from wind and rain, and from any dirt that is liable to fall on it....Moreover it must be secure, firm, large enough, not tilting, unsteady or too narrow.<sup>103</sup>

The use of a canopy continued into more recent times. The Fermoy Mass Rock, adjacent to Sunday's Well, was covered by a large canopy in Penal times to protect the priest and the altar from the bad weather.<sup>104</sup> Tradition tells of the possibility of a Mass shelter in Drishane, Castlehaven.<sup>105</sup>

## **Conclusions**

The history of Catholicism is an essential component in the history of modern Ireland and the Penal Laws remain an emotive and misunderstood subject. Despite the potential for Mass Rocks to help frame Irish Catholicism within a broader political, economic, cultural and social context, little research has been undertaken to date. This localised study allows for a deeper understanding of Mass Rock sites in Skibbereen and the wider Cork area and an opportunity to reflect upon the location and nature of sites.

The practice of receiving Holy Communion during Mass, the central sacrament in Catholic tradition, linked the congregation bodily to the sacred space of the Mass Rock. Mass would have been an occasion that brought the priest and parish community together on a regular basis helping to create and preserve their sense of identity during difficult times<sup>106</sup>. Today, the physical expression of reverence or veneration toward the sacred is demonstrated by the continued celebration of Mass at a number of sites across Ireland. Their continued use reflects and helps reconstruct and legitimise contemporary Irish identity whilst providing a tangible and experiential connection to Irish heritage and tradition.

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