

Holy Wells

Sources of water, particularly lakes and streams have been places of wonder and pilgrimage for millennia across the world. The Irish people take this a step further by using wells for a similar purpose. Holy wells are not unique to Ireland. They are found in both England and Scotland, but by far the largest number of holy wells are to be found in Ireland. These wells take many forms ranging from your typical wishing well type to a mere hole in the ground that may be fed by a small stream. But regardless of the form they take, they are all seen to have a mystical power emanating from both pagan and Christian sources.



It is believed that the practice of making a pilgrimage to a holy well far pre-dates Christianity in Ireland. Wells were often believed to harbor the spirits of goddesses while some were associated with the salmon or hazel trees. That these practices still exist today speaks to the connection that even 21st century Irish people have with the land and their ancestors.

There is a myriad of reasons that people frequent holy wells. Some will go just for the solitude and to get away from the bustle of modern life. Others believe that the wells have curative powers and will either dip their hands in the water to bless themselves or family members with it or take a drink of the water. Some wells actually have cups available for that purpose. Many wells have blackthorn or hazel trees growing in close proximity. These trees are often adorned with scraps of cloth called clooties that are tied to the trees as votive offerings to the spirit of the saint or goddess.

With little influence from Rome, the early Irish church developed traditions and practices distinct from those practiced on the continent. Converting holy wells from their original pagan Celtic purposes to be associated with a Christian saint was part of this process. This lasted until the counter reformation when the influence of Rome started the process of stamping out many practices of the Celtic church. Fines and other punishments were levied on those who gathered at holy wells and other sites. The objective was to move religious practices to the churches where the bishops and priests would be able to exert more control over religious practices. Obviously, this was only partially successful.

For example, there are dozens of wells across Ireland associated with St. Brigid. Brigid is actually the Christianized goddess Boann who gave her name to the River Boyne, Ireland's second longest river. Boann was the cow goddess and among other things promoted fertility. She is sometimes depicted as being part of the tripartite goddess The Cailleach. Is it any wonder that such an important and powerful Celtic entity would become Ireland's second most important Christian saint?

Wells obviously played a huge part in the lives of our ancestors, primarily as sources of clean, life-giving water. This function in combination with the Irish capacity for myth making might have led to so many of them being considered sacred. Wells



gave many locales their names. Any location with Tubber, Tobair or Tobar got its name from a well associated with a powerful being. Tobair Brid in Sligo is one example. The name simply means Brigid's Well. There are hundreds of placenames in Ireland with similar designations.

The reason we still see otherwise unremarkable sources of water as sacred places is, as Manchán Magan says in his book *Listen to the Land Speak* that "Holy Wells are Multidimensional spaces.....that are ultimately about faith combining with elemental forces, and faith is not about reason, but beyond it."

More information can be found on the following websites.

<http://www.megalithicireland.com/index.html>

<https://www.irishcultureandcustoms.com/ALandmks/HolyWells.html>

Pictured is the holy well located in Carraroe in Co. Sligo. Clouties are visible in the picture at top left. Pictures are courtesy of Anne Farrington.