

Niamh Wycherley, *The Cult of Relics in Early Medieval Ireland*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2015. xi+254pp. €75.00. ISBN 978-2-503-551-84-5

This wide-ranging and thoughtful work is the first dedicated study of the cult of relics in medieval Ireland. It addresses a long-standing gap in the study of early Christian Ireland, appearing almost thirty years after T.A. Lucas's 1986 article on the same subject. Myriad advances in our understanding of early Medieval Europe have taken place since then, particularly in the areas of Hiberno-Latin literature, archaeology, and linguistics, which show that Ireland was not intellectually estranged or distant from its continental neighbours. Yet, scholars (generally Anglophone) have continued to interpret the scarcity of evidence for relic veneration in early Ireland as proof of Irish idiosyncrasy or disinterest in the phenomenon. Wycherley ably addresses this by drawing together evidence from several disciplines to reconstruct a broad picture of how Irish relic cults operated. As she notes, the dearth of direct evidence for aspects of cultic activity such as *translatio* requires such an approach, and there is much in this work to interest scholars from various backgrounds.

The study focusses on the seventh to ninth centuries, an intellectually- and socially-exciting period in Irish history that Wycherley brings to life by examining relic cults through several lenses. Chapter one charts the emergence of relic veneration in the Late Antique Mediterranean as a socially-driven phenomenon. Chapter two examines the centrality of *locus* or place for the veneration of corporeal relics, including discussions on *ad sanctos* burial and Rome's influence on the modelling of cultic veneration. Chapter three looks at evidence for *translatio* in early hagiographical and cultic texts to draw out how Churches cemented their authority over place and past through the continued authority of a saint or holy figure. Chapter four examines the

archaeological evidence for the effects that emerging relic veneration and pilgrimage had on the organisation of ecclesiastical sites. Chapters five and six work together to show how the early Church used the ideology of relic cults to develop frameworks of sanctity that integrated it into the socio-political sphere. Chapter five looks at how relics and insignia as symbols of saintly authority came to be used to bind oaths and promulgate laws, while chapter six examines the role they played in ecclesiastical ‘circuits’ and several important social changes they effected. Wycherley also includes an annotated appendix of terms related to relics which the non-linguist in particular will find helpful.

The study has a relatively tight chronological focus which does not do it a disservice, but leaves the reader wishing it had gone further. One of Wycherley’s main theses is that relic veneration helped to shape prominent social institutions such as oath swearing (pp.130-40) and it would be highly interesting to see these developments charted over a longer period. Coming at the subject from a historical perspective, Wycherley makes extensive use of early literary sources to tease out from their narratives the different ways in which relics were employed. Her knowledge of the early hagiographical texts is notable, and she draws on the Lives of Ireland’s three chief thaumaturges—Patrick, Brigit, and Columba—to build a rounded image of the role and importance relics had from an early stage (see especially pp.69-72). In particular, drawing out the Patristic influences behind Cogitosus’s description of the church at Kildare in his *Vita Brigitae* (pp.46-50)—most importantly Isidore—demonstrates a contemporary understanding of an entire system of ecclesiastical governance that relied on relics to “prove” the continued authority of a church’s founder in its episcopate. However, the study does not sufficiently situate these hagiographical works within their complex political context, and important caveats in their transmission could have serious implications for how we read their evidence. For

example, the *Vita Brigitae* is preserved in an entirely continental manuscript tradition. Work by Donnchadh Ó Corráin and Pádraig Ó Riain & Dagmar Ó Riain-Raedel has shown that cultic literature transposed from Ireland to the continent was often tweaked to suit mainland European sensibilities or expectations, and it is possible that elements of Cogitosus's narrative (and that of the *Vita prima*) are not as contemporaneously accurate as Wycherley appears to assume.

In other areas a more forensic scrutiny of the source material would have facilitated deeper investigation. For example, in chapter three Wycherley analyses the story of Bruscius in Tírechán's *Collectanea* as evidence for *translatio* in seventh-century Ireland. She draws on the *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* to contextualise this episode yet does not reference its Book 51 on visions of the dead in dreams. Much of what the *Hibernensis* has to say on this and the practice of *ad sanctos* burial (across Books 15, 44, and 51) derives from Augustine's *De cura pro mortuis gerenda*, a work Wycherley includes in her bibliography. Here Augustine was at pains to explain that the dead cannot visit the living in dreams, but rather angels assume their form to petition the living on their behalf. The *Hibernensis* cites crucial passages from *De cura* 12 and 18 almost verbatim, yet its source text has been corrupted to argue the opposite of Augustine's original. This is the only surviving Patristic treatise on *ad sanctos* burial and visions of the dead meaning it may not be representative of all medieval thought on the matter. It is possible that other intellectual positions appropriated and amended elements of *De cura* although it would be difficult to ascertain how and why this occurred. Yet, recognising the divergence between Patristic and Irish thought raises some important questions around the theology informing our narrative sources.

The final two chapters offer an important contribution to our understanding of early Church organisation and its relationship with

society. Through case studies of social conventions such as oath swearing (pp.130-40) and frameworks of patronage (pp.160-68), Wycherley impressively flips the lens to tease out lay and political influences on ecclesiastical developments. In this, she demonstrates the speed and extent to which relic veneration penetrated Irish society, provoking lay and ecclesiastical powers to re-shape or perhaps re-negotiate pre-existing social paradigms to serve political purposes as much as for spiritual needs. In particular, her analysis of saints' *insignia* to promulgate laws (pp.141-50) demonstrates how secular alliances prompted the Church to undertake the enforcement of political agendas while simultaneously maintaining community devotion by bringing the saint(s) closer to the people, thus binding the Church into the very fabric of society. Through her analysis, Wycherley reminds us that underneath the impression of divinely-ordained systems presented in the early ecclesiastical literature lay a dynamic and evolving two-way process of social negotiation, which it can be easy to overlook or miss.

Readers from various backgrounds can learn much from this work and its interdisciplinary approach to a subject that, like many aspects of early Ireland, is often indirectly evidenced. In particular, non-specialists or newcomers to the study of early Christian Ireland will benefit from the book's high-level findings on early Irish ecclesiology. In drawing out the influences driving the development of Irish relic cults Wycherley also strengthens our understanding of the island's intellectual and cultural relationship with the continent—one of the book's main stated aims. Yet, her interpretation of this evidence shows us that far from simply accepting and implementing pre-packaged frameworks of sanctity the early Irish exercised a great degree of intellectual creativity in melding pre-existing social frameworks with aspects of cultic veneration. In drawing attention to this (along with much else!) this work offers several exciting avenues for future research in the field.

Shane Lordan,
School of History
University College
Dublin
Shane.lordan@ucd.ie