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SCOTLAND'S SACRED WATERS: HOLY WELLS AND HEALING SPRINGS

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*Introduction*¹

WATER plays a fundamental role in religious worldviews. It manifests as: a chaotic primordial element in multiple cosmologies, the source from which the universe emerges; a great flood that wipes out an unworthy human race in the Old Testament and Near Eastern and Greek mythologies;² a gateway to the 'otherworld' and site of ritual deposition in Celtic cosmology; and as a healing and purifying element in pre-Christian and Christian religious practices.³ Water is essential for human life, an elixir that falls from the skies, appears on flowers at dawn, and collects in dells, valleys, rivers, and ponds in an almost miraculous fashion. It symbolises prosperity and enhances fertility. Mircea Eliade deemed water a 'celestial symbol', that

existed before the earth (as in Genesis 1:2, 'Darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters') ... [W]aters symbolize the universal sum of virtualities; they are *fons et origo*, 'spring and origin', the reservoir of all the possibilities of existence; they precede every form and *support* every creation ...

¹ Our thanks are due to Donald Barrett and Nicholas Bromfield for their encouragement and support over the years.

² See the Akkadian creation epic, 'Enuma Elish', and the Sumerian myth of the flood, in J. B. Pritchard (ed.) *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), pp. 31–39, 28–30.

³ Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition* (London: Cardinal Books, 1974 [1967]), p. 46; Richard Morris, 'Baptismal Places: 600–800', in Ian Wood and Niels Lund (eds), *People and Places in Northern Europe, 500–1600* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1991), p. 18.

the symbolism of water implies both death and rebirth. Contact with water always brings a regeneration ... In whatever religious complex we find them, the waters invariably retain their function; they disintegrate, abolish forms, 'wash away sins'; they are at once purifying and regenerating.⁴

Although the salt-water oceans cover a majority of the planet, sacredness is generally ascribed to fresh water, and sites including wells, lakes, springs, rivers, and waterfalls have drawn pilgrims throughout history, across vast geographical distances, and from varying religious and spiritual traditions.⁵

This article will analyse the transformative element of water, commencing with a brief sketch of its role in Celtic mythology and folklore. This is followed by an exploration of the history and function of several holy wells in Scotland, including: the Well of St Triduana in Restalrig, Edinburgh; Saint Fillan's Well; and the well dedicated to Saint Maelrubba, the apostle to the Picts, on an island in Loch Maree. The article will detail the association between holy wells, sacred springs, and healing, and the way in which pre-Christian Celtic beliefs concerning the veneration of water have been assimilated into Christian rituals, such as baptism and the practice of pilgrimage to holy wells, for fertility and miraculous cures. Folkloric practices that survive to, or have been revived, today are also considered.

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), pp. 128–131.

⁵ F. E. Peters, *The Hajj: The Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 10; E. Alan Morinis, *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition: A Case Study of West Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 19; and D. J. Hall, *English Medieval Pilgrimage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 24.

Pagan and Christian Sacred Waters: Healing and Pilgrimage

To the Celtic peoples of Ireland, Scotland, and Europe in general, water was often connected with the (female) divine and worshipped as a source of life and prosperity. The importance of water to the Celts can be observed in the names of rivers and waterways in Europe, which are often those of Celtic goddesses. Thus the Seine in France is named for Sequana, and in Scotland the river Dee commemorates Deva, the Clyde is named for the Clodagh, and the Tay after the goddess Tawa.⁶ The same pattern is visible in Ireland, where the Boyne is named for the goddess Bóinn and the Shannon after Sinainn, and in England, where the river Thames recalls the goddess Tamisa and the Severn, Sabrann.⁷ Celtic peoples associated springs and wells with specific divinities, worshipping at such sites and according them certain magical properties, most commonly connected with healing. Archaeological excavation at the shrine of Sequana at the source of the Seine, the *Fontes Sequanae*, has yielded more than two hundred pre-Roman votive figures, and an extensive Roman-era temple complex.⁸ During the medieval period, following the gradual Christianisation of the British Isles, sacred springs and wells were often given a new divine association, as Christians sought to replace pre-existing pagan worship at these sites with Christian practices and devotions.

Yet popular pagan hydrolatry could become an issue for Christians, as water sources could not be cut down or broken up, as sacred groves and pillar monuments could be.⁹ Water was vital to

⁶ Sharon MacLeod, *Celtic Myth and Religion: A Study of Traditional Belief, With Newly Translated Prayers, Poems, and Songs* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), p. 40.

⁷ Janet and Colin Bord, *Sacred Waters: Holy Wells and Water Lore in Britain* (London: Paladin, 1985), passim.

⁸ Miranda Green, 'The Celtic Goddess as Healer', in Sandra Billington and Miranda Green (eds), *The Concept of the Goddess* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 28.

⁹ Carole M. Cusack, *The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), pp. xv, 15, 70, 79, 90, 96, 173.

human life, and baptism, a ritual requiring water, signified the rebirth into a new life as a Christian. The Catholic Church sought to transform customs at holy wells and other water sources through Christian rituals, constructing a Christian façade over older traditions.¹⁰ Water shrines dedicated to local deities were co-opted as baptismal sites, with the patron goddesses of springs and wells pagan being displaced by the Virgin Mary or a Christian saint. Churches were frequently built over, or beside, water sources. Anne Hamilton observed '[t]here were ... practical reasons for building a church close to a good water supply, and it is surely this source which has sometimes come to be regarded as a holy well.'¹¹ However, it may be that Hamilton has missed the point, and it is because the water was sacred that the church was erected on that site.

The Christian custom of pilgrimage to sites associated with saints fitted easily with pre-Christian traditions where travel to sacred places to communicate with gods, or more minor supernatural beings like water nymphs, by means of making votive offerings or participating in other ritual acts, was common. M. A. Hall has noted that Pagan 'cults of heroes and the perceived relics of heroes'¹² encouraged comparisons with the heroic saints that the Church associated with sacred water sites, rendering the transition between the two relatively seamless. Belief in the presence of minor supernatural beings persisted beyond the Christianisation of the British Isles, and early modern antiquarians recorded instances of villagers leaving food and offerings at wells for the sprites or fairies. W. S. Corder's study of cult practices at wells observed a range of offerings, from simple bread and cheese at the Cheese Well, Minchmoor, Peebleshire, and at

¹⁰ Bord and Bord, *Sacred Waters*, p. 19.

¹¹ Kathleen Hughes and Anne Hamlin, *The Modern Traveller to the Early Irish Church*, London: S.P.C.K., 1977, pp. 108-109.

¹² M. A. Hall, 'Of Holy Men and Heroes: The Cult of Saints in Medieval Perthshire', *The Innes Review* 56, no. 1 (2005), p. 61.

Bride's Well, Corgarff, Scotland, while bread, cheese and a silver coin were the dues paid at a well in Dunnat, Caithness ... A piece of silver was left at the Gask Well, Turriff, Scotland. The offerings at these wells were taboo, a curse falling upon anyone who should attempt to interfere with them.¹³

The offerings were designed to appease or win the favour of spirit beings or saints, and in the case of seeking healing for illnesses, a form of sympathetic magic prevailed, in that tokens that often represented the ailment (a leg, a head, an arm, and so on) were deposited in the water shrine. This symbolic transfer of ailment from the petitioner to the water no doubt resulted in some cures, which enhanced the holiness of the source, and convinced people that it was 'extremely unlucky to take anything from a healing well, for that disease that had been left behind would transfer to the thief.'¹⁴

The ailments that could be cured by contact with sacred water were multitudinous. As Christianity spread throughout Europe, saints and the places associated with them developed wide-ranging medical specialities. For example, St Triduana, a putative fourth century Greek saint who it is claimed arrived in Scotland with St Regulus (Rule) around 337 AD, had special powers to heal eye disease. When Nechtan, a local chieftain, directed unwelcome sexual attentions at Triduana, she allegedly tore out her eyes and sent them to him as a token of her commitment to purity and distaste for him.¹⁵ From that time she resided at Restalrig, Edinburgh in seclusion, and was buried there. At the close of the Middle Ages King James III (1452-1488) built a two-storey hexagonal structure over the wellhead, beside St Margaret's parish church in Restalrig, in 1477. The well had

¹³ W. S. Cordner, 'The Cult of the Holy Well', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 9 (1946), p. 32.

¹⁴ Lizanne Henderson, 'Charmers, Spells and Holy Wells: The Repackaging of Belief', *Review of Scottish Culture* Vol. 19 (2007), p. 15.

¹⁵ John Foster, 'The Legend and Shrine of Saint Triduana', *British Journal of Ophthalmology* Vol. 37 (1953), p. 764.

acquired a reputation for the treatment and cure of eye afflictions,¹⁶ and had become a place of pilgrimage, with further royal grants in 1496 and 1527, from James IV and V. It was recognised as a place of healing until 1560 when the church was reduced to a ruin by Reformers, who proclaimed that ‘the kirk of Reſtalrig, as a monument of idolatry, be raysit and utterlie caſt down and deſtroyed’.¹⁷

So-called ‘eye wells’ are rare, and one possible origin of this devotional behaviour connects ſuperſtitions that wells may be an *oculus dei* with the myth of Odin’s ſacrifice of an eye in order to drink from Mimir’s well in Scandinavian mythology. The god ſacrifices an eye, whereas pilgrims’ eye diſeaſes are cured (which is akin to the diſcuſſion of body part votives above).¹⁸In the nineteenth century it was reſtored; the well-ſhrine re-opened, pilgrimages were reinstated, and a ſtatuette of St Triduana was re-erected. In the modern era, pilgrims make the ſhort walk from nearby St Triduana’s Catholic Church to the well on her feaſt day, 8 October.¹⁹ Interestingly, by the time of the revival of the pilgrimage the beautiful hexagonal ſtone building that covered the well-head had been removed to Holyrood Park, where it had been re-erected over the Well of the Holy Rood in 1860, by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.²⁰ This was becauſe Reſtalrig churchyard was partially reſumed when the North British Railway Depot was conſtructed.

¹⁶ Helen M. Dingwall, *A History of Scottish Medicine: Themes and Influences* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), pp. 30–31.

¹⁷ David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, Third Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 468.

¹⁸ Peter B. G. Binnall, ‘Some Theories Regarding Eye-Wells.’ *Folklore* 56, no. 4 (1945), p. 363–364.

¹⁹ Foſter, ‘The Legend and Shrine of Saint Triduana’, p. 765.

²⁰ Bord and Bord, *Sacred Waters*, p. 193.

Healing Mental Illness Pt 1: Saint Fillan's Pool, Strathfillan

The healing powers of the Celtic water sources held an attraction for both local people and pilgrims in vernacular Christian devotion during the Middle Ages. In the sixteenth century Protestants mounted a determined campaign to close down the sacred water sites and pilgrimage practices. This was resented deeply by many who adhered to the Catholic faith or simply desired the continuance of old ways because of their perceived efficacy. At St Drostan's Well, near Newdosk parish church in Fettercairn (St Andrews Diocese), the preferred technique was to poison the well. The motivation for this action is said to be the jealousy of local doctors, whose rate of cure fell was far lower than that of the saint. Villagers were angered and threatened to kill the doctors once their villainy was known, but unfortunately the records do not supply the resolution of the conflict.²¹ Drostan (c. 560–630) was a monk of Iona under Saint Columba, and became Abbot of the monastery of Deer around 600. He ended his life as a hermit in Glenesk, Angus, and his biography is reconstructed from entries in the *Book of Deer* (c. 1135) and the *Aberdeen Breviary* (1507).

The shrine dedicated to Saint Fillan, an early eighth century abbot, is the Holy Pool in the River Fillan, in Strathfillan, Perthshire. This sacred water site is effective against a range of maladies, but became famous for its curative powers in cases of mental illness. Saint Fillan became a monk in Ireland, possibly at Taghmon in Wexford, and was later a hermit at Pittenweem, in Fife. When he died he was buried at Strathfillan, and his cult became sufficiently important that Robert the Bruce carried the arm relic of Fillan during the battle of Bannockburn in 1314, with the saint receiving credit for the Scottish victory over the English.²² There is no

²¹ Terje Oestigaard, 'The Topography of Holy Water in England After the Reformation,' in Karen V. Lykke Syse and Terje Oestigaard (eds), *Perceptions of Water in Britain from Early Modern Times to the Present: An Introduction* (Bergen: University of Bergen Press, 2010), p. 23.

²² Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. 178.

historical evidence for the saint's efficacy in cases of mental illness, but the River Fillan is deep and cold, and as Dan M'Kenzie notes, 'the shock produced by the sudden immersion would probably sober, for a moment at least, the raging maniac'.²³ Belief in the power of Saint Fillan to cure lunacy persisted until the nineteenth century, and folklorists have speculated on the relationship between the moon, which was connected to mental illness, and also had power over tides and large bodies of water.

The rituals accompanying the cure at Strathfillan have been unusually well-documented, and the site was famous from the Middle Ages to the modern era, with certain relics of Saint Fillan (chiefly his bell and staff) surviving unmolested by the Protestant reformers.²⁴ A. D. Lacaille describes the curative process as follows:

in order that the cure should be effective, the afflicted were taken to the riverside towards the end of the moon's first quarter. Where a rocky point projects into the river, men were plunged into the water on one side and women on the other. The patients were then required to gather nine stones from the river-bed and on coming out to go to the top of the rock, twenty feet in height, and to walk three times round three heaps of stones, the accumulations of countless dippings. It was necessary after each turn to deposit on each heap one of the stones from the river-bed. After this ceremony, the devotees proceeded to the ruins of St Fillan's Chapel, about a mile away to the east of their immersion. Here they were tied to a great stone with a large hole in it, and the ancient bronze bell of St Fillan was placed for an instant upon their heads. The patient was left in the ruins all night long, and in the morning he was found to be free from his bonds, a cure was deemed to have taken place.²⁵

This remarkable account places curative power in the waters, the gathering of stones to place on cairns above the river, being blessed

²³ Dan M'Kenzie, 'Children and Wells', *Folklore* 18, no. 3 (1907), p. 254.

²⁴ A. P. Forbes, 'Notice of the Ancient Bell of St Fillan', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, Ninetieth Session (1870), pp. 265–267.

²⁵ A. D. Lacaille, A. D. 'The Bull in Scottish Folklore, Place-Names, and Archaeology: With Plates III–VIII', *Folklore* 41, no. 3 (1930), pp. 229–230.

by Saint Fillan's bell, and keeping vigil throughout the night in the chapel.

The enduring appeal of Saint Fillan's shrine may be due to the paucity of viable treatments, let alone cures, for mental illness prior to the development of modern psychiatric drugs, which meant there were always people in need of the comfort that healing springs afforded. Thomas Pennant, writing in 1774, testified that there was an 'abbot' (who may have been a Catholic cleric, but equally could have been a freelance hermit layman) resident in the Vale of Saint Fillan, who took upon himself the care of the 'disordered in mind'.²⁶ Pennant connected the circumambulation of the cairns 'deasil, or turning from east to west' with Druidic practices, and similarly comments upon the significance of performing the action three times. In Sir Walter Scott's epic poem *Marmion*, which concerns the tragic defeat of the Scots at the Battle of Flodden Field in 1513 at which James IV and most of the Scots nobility perished, the shrine is described as follows:

Thence to Saint Fillan's blessed well,
Whose spring can frenzied dreams dispel,
And the crazed brain restore.²⁷

In 1845 the Reverend Alexander Stewart contradicted Pennant's earlier report, claiming that no cures took place, and that locals declined to credit the shrine with miraculous powers; rather it was only gullible people from far places that visited in the hope of a cure. As a Minister of the Kirk he protested as a matter of course. But late nineteenth century folklorists James MacKinlay and J. G. Campbell reported it as having been used to heal lunatics in living memory, at least until a farmer threw his mad bull into the water, which caused

²⁶ Andrew Simmons (ed.), Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides, 1772*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn Limited, 1998 [1774], p. 389.

²⁷ Sir Walter Scott, 'Marmion', in *The Complete Works of Sir Walter Scott: With a Biography, and His Last Additions and Illustrations*, vol. 1, (New York: Conner & Cooke, 1833), p. 384.

the pool to lose its ‘miraculous virtue’.²⁸ Modern guidebooks and websites testify to the shrine’s popularity as a tourist attraction, though not as a site of mental health cures, to the present day.

Healing Mental Illness Pt 2: St Maelrubba’s Shrine, Loch Maree

The shrine dedicated to Saint Maelrubba (also given as Mourie or Maree) is another renowned site of healing miracles in Scotland. Maelrubba (c.642–c.722) was an Irish monk from Bangor who ‘founded a monastery at Applecross (Ross and Cromarty) on the west coast ...[and] also built a church on an island [Inchmaree or Isle Maree] in Loch Maree’.²⁹

²⁸ Emily Donoho, ‘The Madman amongst the Ruins: The Oral History and Folklore of Traditional Insanity Cures in the Scottish Highlands’, *Folklore* 125, no. 1 (2014), p. 35.

²⁹ Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. 312.



Loch Maree. Photographed by Donald Bromfield, 2016. Reproduced with permission.

Pennant visited the site in 1772, and noted the presence of a grove on the island, ‘of oak, ash, willow, wicken, birch, fir, hazel, and enormous hollies’.³⁰ This leads him to speculation about the possible Druidic origins of the site, which he thought were confirmed by the circular stone-walled burial site beside the shrine (despite it having been identified in other sources as a defence built by the saint himself). The cure of the mentally ill at this site has several of the motifs already noted at Strathfillan, including the pilgrimage journey and immersion in the holy waters, but with some distinctive elements of its own. Ceri Houlbrook writes that:

[i]n the south-west corner of the island, there once stood a well said to have been consecrated by St Maelrubha. It was widely believed in the surrounding districts that the water from this well could cure lunacy, and a pilgrimage to Isle Maree became the central aspect of

³⁰ Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides*, p. 331.

a much larger ceremony, designed to cure the mentally ill. Bulls were supposedly sacrificed on the loch's shore and libations of milk poured onto the beach, before the sufferer was taken Isle Maree, given water from the well to drink, and then dipped into the waters of Loch Maree three times.³¹

From Pennant, further details emerge: the shrine altar is a tree stump, the ill person must first drink of the well water, then be immersed in the loch three times, and that he or she may reside at the shrine for days or weeks and repeat these processes until relief is experienced.³² Lizanne Henderson adds that a cure was more likely to emerge after rain when the well was full, rather than when the water level was low.³³

The popularity of the Inchmaree holy well continued to the late nineteenth century. The antiquarian Arthur Mitchell, writing in 1881, noted that, despite Dingwell Kirk Sessions in 1656 specifically targeting Saint Maelrubba's shrine, more than two centuries later devotions which he described as 'the adoration of wells' were still very much in evidence.³⁴ Mitchell's analysis of the rituals at the well is valuable, because he records the Church of Scotland's judgement that such rituals were 'heathenish', but offers the corrective that it was Christians who had recourse to the shrines:

it would be difficult, I imagine, to find in any land a religious ceremonial more heathenish than the sacrifice of a bull to a local deity; but the heathenish of the practice in Innis Maree is made even more clear by some things which we learn from the Presbytery records. We are told that there were monuments of idolatry in the

³¹ Ceri Houlbrook, 'The Wishing-Tree of Isle Maree: The Evolution of a Scottish Folkloric Practice', in Ceri Houlbrook and Natalie Armitage (eds), *The Materiality of Magic: An Artifactual Investigation into Ritual Practices and Popular Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015), p. 128.

³² Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides*, p. 331.

³³ Henderson, 'Charmers, Spells and Holy Wells', pp. 15–16.

³⁴ Arthur Mitchell, *The Past in the Present: What is Civilization?* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1881), p. 167.

island, and stones which were consulted as to future ends; that the people gave adoration to wells, and poured milk upon the hill as oblations; and that there were certain 'poor ones', called 'Mourie, his devilans, and owning the title', who received the sacrifices offered to him. We are surely entitled to ask what things are done by the heathen more foolish, more degraded, or more idolatrous than these things? Yet they were not done by heathens, but by people who had enjoyed, for a thousand years and more, the blessings of that religion which, beyond all other agencies, has proved the greatest civilizer of mankind.³⁵

The Catholic culture of medieval Scotland embraced religious practices that combined elements of folk practice, Christian doctrine, and pre-Christian customs, in a fashion that might be termed syncretism, which Helmer Ringgren defined as 'any mixture of two or more religions'.³⁶ While the Kirk objected to all of the devotions conducted at wells, certain elements, for example the bull sacrifices, were more repugnant to clerical commentators.

By the mid-nineteenth century the well was dry, and in the present day no archaeological remains of the chapel can be identified, though the foundations of the circular wall are still visible. Loch Maree is a popular tourist destination, as it is a place of great natural beauty, and its many small islands are nature reserves for rare wildlife. It remains an interesting shrine because it combines well water, bathing in the loch, the presence of holy trees, in particular an oak that was studded with coins that pilgrims had pressed into the bark. Pennant's Druidic fancies were in a sense justified at Inchmaree, because Classical accounts of Druidic sanctuaries often stressed the twin elements of a water source and a sacred tree or grove. An example is Lucan's epic poem *Pharsalia* (c.60 AD), which describes Julius Caesar's army felling the sacred grove near Marseilles),³⁷ and Alden Watson notes the location of the royal

³⁵ Mitchell, *The Past in the Present*, pp. 166–167.

³⁶ Helmer Ringgren, 'The Problems of Syncretism', in Sven Hartman (ed.), *Syncretism* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1969), p. 7.

³⁷ Cusack, *The Sacred Tree*, pp. 65–57.

inauguration tree, the Yew of Ross (*Eo Rossa*), by the river Barrow near Leighlin, a tree that was felled through the pious efforts of Saint Molaise.³⁸

From Miracles to Health: A Modern Transformation of Water Sources

This article has emphasised holy water sources at which healing of physical and psychological or psychiatric illnesses was sought by pilgrims from the Middle Ages to at least the mid-nineteenth century. Scotland is peculiarly rich in holy wells and sites of water veneration, which reiterates the argument made above that whereas holy trees were felled, it was harder to destroy Pagan sacred water shrines, and they tended to be co-opted by the Christian churches.³⁹ Not all holy wells and springs are limited to mental and physical health; the motif of the severed head, which appears in ancient Celtic water sites such as the Well of Coventina at Carrawburgh on Hadrian's Wall, where a sculpted head of a male was recovered along with other votive offerings, also features.⁴⁰ In Scotland, the theme of the severed head is found in a number of water shrines, including the Well of the Head, in Wester Ross, which offered a cure for epilepsy. Gary R. Varner explains that

after the sun has begun to set, they would solicit the well's guardian for permission to approach the well. In silence, the individual would climb the hill to the well, take the ritual skull from its silver casket and walk three times deosil (sunwise) around the well. The guardian

³⁸ Alden Watson, 'The King, the Poet, and the Sacred Tree', *Etudes celtiques* 18 (1981), p. 168.

³⁹ Scotland's only notable surviving sacred tree is the Fortingall Yew, in Perthshire; see Carole M. Cusack, 'Scotland's Sacred Tree: The Fortingall Yew', *Sydney Society for Scottish History Journal* 14 (2013), pp. 107–121.

⁴⁰ Lindsay Allason-Jones, 'Coventina's Well', in Sandra Billington and Miranda Green (eds), *The Concept of the Goddess* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 107–119.

then dipped the skull in the water and handed it to the individual in the name of the Trinity. At that time, the guardian assigned the 'prohibitions' to the person. If everything was done according to plan, a cure would be forthcoming.⁴¹

The motif of drinking from a holy skull is known from other British water sites, in particular the well of Saint Teilo (c.480–566), at Llandeilo Llwydarth in Wales.⁴²

In Scotland there are a number of wells that are associated with severed heads, but the majority of these are not religious or spiritual, but rather secular and connected with historical events, specifically with murders that result in decapitations, often in which the severed heads are deposited or cleansed in the well. The most famous of these wells is the Well of the Seven Heads by Loch Oich in the west Highlands. This sinister monument resulted from internal tensions in the MacDonald family, which began with the killing of brothers Alexander and Ranald MacDonald on 25 September 1663. The murderers were Alexander MacDonald and his six sons, and a local poet, Bald Iain, encouraged Sir James MacDonald to pursue vengeance. Sir James applied to the Privy Council and received documents that enabled them to seek vengeance, and his brother Archibald led a revenge squad, assisted by Bald Iain, and the seven murderers were themselves killed and their heads severed and wrapped in a plaid. Bald Iain washed them in Loch Oich, where the site is now commemorated. The heads were exhibited on a gallows in Leith, Edinburgh.⁴³

A further function of holy water sites was the assurance of human fertility. Women were frequent devotees at holy wells, and Saint

⁴¹ Gary R. Varner, *Sacred Wells: A Study in the History, Meaning, and Mythology of Holy Wells and Waters*, second edition (New York: Algora Publishing, 2009), p. 128.

⁴² R. Shane Tubbs, Marios Loukas, Mohammadali M. Shoja, Nihal Apaydin, E. George Slater and W. Jerry Oakes, 'The Intriguing History of the Human Calvaria: Sinister and Religious', *Child's Nervous System*, 24 (2008), p. 421.

⁴³ Anon, 'Severed Heads in Bloody Clan War', *The Scotsman*, 28 March (2006), at <http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/seven-severed-heads-in-a-bloody-clan-war-1-466376>, accessed 25 August 2016.

Mary's Well at Orton promised healing in three distinct domains. That of eye disease has already been covered in the discussion of the shrine of Saint Triduana at Restalrig, and that of whooping cough has been mentioned regarding the well of Saint Teilo in Wales. The distinctive offer of this well was that barren women were encouraged to attend the well on the 'three Saturdays before and the three Saturdays following Lammas' (1 August), and if they circumambulated thrice and bathed, while singing a chant, they would become pregnant.⁴⁴

Conclusion

With the advent of modernity, there was an explicit shift from miracles and divine associations to a model of health facilitated by spas and secular wellness practices.⁴⁵ In Edinburgh, Saint Bernard's Well at Stockbridge exemplifies these trends; is an elegant neo-Classical temple, designed by Alexander Nasmyth and erected in 1778, on the Water of Leith walk between the port of Leith and the source of the Water of Leith in Balerno.⁴⁶

The Classical goddess Hygeia is depicted as the personification of the healing waters, despite the well being dedicated to Saint Bernard. In the medieval period, two types of journey to holy water sites were undertaken for transformative reasons. As Dominique Beth Wilson notes, pilgrims' actions were directed to 'healing and relief of sickness', which focused on a physical transformation, but also journeys were undertaken for penitential reasons, 'to discharge a

⁴⁴ Varner, *Sacred Wells*, p. 128.

⁴⁵ Alastair Durie, 'Medicine, Health and Economic Developments: Promoting Spa and Seaside Resorts in Scotland c. 1750-1830', *Medical History* 47 (2003), pp. 195-216.

⁴⁶ Benedict le Vay, *Eccentric Edinburgh* (Chalfont St Peter: Bradt Travel Guides, 2004), p. 151.

penance for sins committed, where the pilgrim seeks a more spiritual transformation'.⁴⁷

This article has discussed a number of holy wells and sacred water sites in Scotland from the pre-Christian period, through the Catholic Middle Ages to the modern era. It has been demonstrated that medieval and early modern communities participated in a range of activities that were not exclusively Christian, but incorporated folk traditions and syncretistic notions. These traditions continued in rural communities until the mid- to late-nineteenth century, gradually moving away from saintly patronage and magical thinking to modern notions of health and wellness, in which treatments for mental illness under the rubric of Western scientific medicine replaced religious understandings of madness and physical afflictions. In the contemporary era, these water sites are now part of Scotland's magnetism for tourists, rather than retaining an exclusively religious appeal.

⁴⁷ Dominique Beth Wilson, 'Sacred Water: Pilgrimage to and Veneration of Holy Wells by Pagans and Christians in the British Isles', in Pamela O'Neill (ed.), *Exile and Homecoming: Papers From the Fifth Australian Conference of Celtic Studies 2004* (Sydney: Sydney Series in Celtic Studies 8, 2005), p. 336.



*Statue of Hygeia, St Bernard's Well, Stockbridge. Photographed by Donald Barrett, 2014.
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