Struell Wells: pagan past and Christian present

Finbar McCormick

The complex of buildings at Struell Wells, near Downpatrick, Co. Down, is the most extensive at a holy well in Ireland. It comprises two wells, two bathhouses and the ruins of a church. Nearby is a natural rock feature known as St Patrick’s Chair. The earliest reference to the wells is likely to be in the eighth-century Fíacc’s hymn, which records the site being visited by St Patrick. The earliest reference to their healing powers can be dated to the eleventh or twelfth century and the site continued to be a focus of pilgrimage at midsummer until its suppression in the nineteenth century. The site seems to be unique in that bathing in the wells constituted an integral part of the rituals performed by pilgrims. A recent study of the holy well phenomenon in Ireland has suggested that the rituals associated with them have their origins in the Counter-Reformation. The evidence from Struell, however, strongly suggests that it was an important sacred site in pre-Christian times.

The wells at Struell are located in a small valley between two rocky hillocks about 3km east of Downpatrick, the burial-place of St Patrick according to the seventh-century Life written by Muirchú.1 It is a similar distance south of Saul where, according to the same source, Patrick met Díchu and made his first conversion in Ireland.2 A small stream, the Struell, runs through the valley, to the immediate south of which are located the well and bathhouse complex (Fig. 1). The stream terminates in a small pond about 400m to the north-east of the site. According to Patrick McKay the name Struell is derived from An t’Sruthail, which means ‘the stream’.3 The first edition of the Ordnance Survey map (1834) indicates that the wells were located within a small cluster of houses, though most of these have now disappeared. The buildings on the site comprise the ruins of a church, the Drinking Well, the Eye Well, and the Men’s and the Women’s Bathhouses. To the south of the site, on the side of a hill, is a natural outcrop formation known as St Patrick’s Chair. The 1834 map also the records the position of a ‘thorn’, no doubt a holy tree associated with the wells.
The Drinking Well (Figs 2, 10)

The Drinking Well is enclosed in an oval-shaped, mortared-domed, corbelled building (Fig. 2). A series of three steps lead down into a shallow well, which is about 0.25m deep. An outflow culvert is located on the south-east side of the building. The inside of the roof displays evidence for wickerwork in the mortar, a form of construction associated with the later medieval rather than early medieval period. The doorway has been much repaired but a carved fragment of the original door mouldings survives (Fig. 3). This form dates generally to the medieval period somewhere between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries.4

The outside of the building has been re-rendered since the monument was taken into state ownership in 1936. Set into the northern outer face of the building there is a small slab with a simple incised linear cross, 19cm high, with expanded terminals in the form of triangles (Fig. 4). Although the cross is essentially undatable, simple crosses with expanded triangular terminals are sometimes found on early Irish medieval ecclesiastical sites such as Maghera, Co. Down, and several Scottish sites.5 Leo McKeown recorded that the cross was found during work that occurred ‘during recent improvements’ about 60cm from the Drinking Well, between the well and the church.6

This has always been regarded as the main well on the site. It is referred to as the ‘mother of the well’ in Richard Dobbs’s mid seventeenth-century account of the site.7 In one nineteenth-century source this well is called ‘the well of life’.8 In Fr Edmund
MacCana’s description of 1642 he noted that the well ‘is commonly called the tub’. His description also makes it clear that this is the well that was traditionally associated directly with St Patrick: ‘In this tub the holy man, our Patrick, as an untiring athlete, used to spend a great part of the night, stark naked, singing psalms and spiritual songs’. Dobbs, in his description, noted that this well was only ‘ankle deep’ and could hold ‘half a dozen men’. The water within the well is presently rather still, though there is a very slight flow via the outflow culvert referred to above.

The Eye Well
(Figs 5, 10)

This is a small, narrow, rectangular well with a corbelled roof (Fig. 5). Two steps lead down to a shallow ‘well’ that is fed from an inflow culvert under the north wall with an outflow at the base of its eastern wall. The roof is corbelled with a pointed exterior appearance. R. H. Buchannan recorded the well as part of his Lecale group of corbelled wells and pig sties, a group that are characterised by a distinctive local method of corbelled roofing. The Eye Well was noted in the mid eighteenth century by Walter Harris, while it is not mentioned in the two mid seventeenth-century descriptions of Dobbs and MacCana.

The Women’s Bathhouse or the Limb Well
(Figs 5–9)

The Women’s Bathhouse is located at the southern end of the site, immediately east of the Men’s Bathhouse (Fig. 6). It is a rectangular, unroofed building built into the raised ground to its north. From the inner north wall a spout, about a metre above the floor, pours a continuous stream of water. The present stone spout is a replica of the original that was broken about twenty years ago. The ground floor is flagged with a shallow drain running from below the spout along the centre of the building and exiting through
The base of the southern gable wall. An illustration of the interior published by P. D. Hardy in 1836 shows the spout to be pouring into a barrel that overflows onto a flooded floor (Fig. 7). The door is located in the eastern corner of the building. The carved door mouldings are of a simple type that can generally be attributed to the medieval period, some time between the thirteenth and the fifteenth century (Fig. 8). There are four square internal recesses in the walls that are likely to have originally housed wooden cupboards. The only window is in the southern wall immediately below the gable level (Fig. 9).

Fig. 5 (above): *The Eye Well with bathhouses in the background c. 1920*  
(Photograph reproduced courtesy of the Trustees of National Museums Northern Ireland; Green Collection).

Fig. 6 (left): *Bathhouses*  
(after Jope).
Fig. 7: The Women’s Bathhouse. The left view is from Hardy.

Fig. 8: The Women’s Bathhouse door mouldings.

Fig. 9: The bathhouses viewed from the south-east.
The building is described in a report of a papal nuncio, Bishop Cheiricati, who visited the site in 1515. The nuncio had been to the penitential site at Lough Derg in Co. Donegal, and had then travelled to Downpatrick from where he made some local excursions. The site he refers to as Calvano is undoubtedly Struell. His description states that ‘in the village of Calvano a stream gushes out from under a mountain, and falls down into a small open building.’ Both MacCana and Dobbs also mention this well, but do not ascribe a name to the building. It is presently known as the Women’s Bathhouse, but in the nineteenth century was also referred to as the Limb Well. Hardy makes a reference to what can only be the north gable of the Women’s Bathhouse: ‘Near the top of the gable of the building that encloses the principal well was a carved figure of the saint’s face, now nearly worn away; but the penitents seem to think it necessary to put their fingers in the wall connected with it. They then touch the remnant of the figure with their hands, which they devoutly kiss’. This figure no longer exists.

The Men’s Bathhouse or the Body Well
(Figs. 5, 6, 9)

This is the most substantial and complex building on the site. It is aligned at right-angles to the Women’s Bathhouse and has a vaulted stone roof covered with large roofing slabs. It has a door in both gable walls and a row of small windows on the northern and southern walls immediately below the wall heads. The northern wall, as in the case of the Women’s Bathhouse is set into raised ground. The western door is entered via several steps which lead into rectangular room with benches along its northern and southern walls. Beyond this is smaller room containing a rectangular sunken bath, about 1.5m deep, into which one descends by a flight of steps. The water enters the bath through a stone pipe at ground level on the north side and exits from the bottom of the bath on its southern side.

The outer room functioned as a changing-room before entering the sunken bath. The third room in the building is at a lower level and is entered through a doorway located immediately opposite the door to the Women’s Bathhouse. It is a long, narrow room with a bench along three of its walls. It functioned as a changing-room before entry into the Men’s Bathhouse opposite.

There are no early records of the building of the Men’s Bathhouse, but nineteenth-century sources attribute its construction to Lady Cromwell ‘for the use of males and females separately’. Lady Elizabeth Cromwell (1674–1709) became the owner of the manor of Downpatrick on the death of her father in 1687. The bathhouse can therefore be dated to c. 1700. Nineteenth-century sources refer to the building as the Body Well.

The church
(Figs 10, 11)

This is a long, plain structure lying immediately north of the Drinking Well (Fig. 10). The eastern gable wall is missing and the present ruin terminates at the stream’s edge and suggests that the original eastern end of the church, shown as standing in 1836, may have actually straddled the stream. The stream would consequently have run under the altar. The main door is at the western end with a subsidiary door midway along its southern wall. Plain rectangular windows are confined to the southern side wall (Fig. 11), a sure sign that funds were limited when the building was being constructed.
The record of the taxation of 1306 indicates that at that time Struell was a separate parish and by implication must have had a parish church. Harris noted that near one of the wells there stood ‘the ruins of a small Chappel, dedicated to St Patrick’. It is likely that this stood on the same site as the present remains because James O’Laverty observed that ‘the ruins of this chapel were repaired in 1750 by the Catholics’. The present remains, however, are clearly of one phase of building and suggest that the old...
chapel was completely demolished prior to rebuilding. All that remains of the medieval church are a few architectural pieces that have been incorporated into a modern wall next to the Drinking Well (Figs 12a and b). O’Laverty remarked that the building was never finished. The Ordnance Survey memoirs of 1836 state that the building work was stopped by Lord de Clifford, the landowner at the time. McKeown noted a later tradition that the church had in fact been roofed but that it was removed by a Protestant ‘mob’.23

The ‘chair’ is a natural rock formation located on a rocky outcrop about half way up the hillock overlooking the wells from the south (Fig. 13a). The chair is easily distinguishable from other natural outcrops because some stones are covered with graffiti comprising names, initials and the occasional date, the earliest being 1711. These carvings were undoubtedly made by pilgrims to the site.

St Patrick’s Chair
(Figs 13a and b)

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The earliest detailed description of the chair is that of Fr MacCana in 1642: ‘The bed of St Patrick on the hill opposite the above-mentioned stream, consisting of two large rocks, as it were the sides of a couch, and another large rock for the bolster. Upon this the most holy man used, towards the close of the night, in the open air, and under the cold sky, to seek a little rest for his wearied body’.24 The roughly contemporary account of Dobbs refers to the feature as St Patrick’s Chair.25 An illustration of a rather small pilgrim on a chair was provided by Hardy (Fig. 13b).26 O’Laverty noted that the chair had been partially destroyed some years previously by ‘some malicious person’ who had pushed over the ‘bolster’ stone.27
The water system and other features

Of the four ‘wells’ at Struell only one, the Drinking Well, is potentially a spring well. In the other three cases, both water inlets and outlets are present. The two bathhouses are fed from both the stream and the Eye Well. Northern Ireland Environment Agency files report the presence of stone-covered culverts but in some places these were replaced by pipes in the middle of the twentieth century. A preliminary ground-penetrating radar survey undertaken by Dr Alastair Ruffell of Queen’s University Belfast indicates a complex drainage system on the site and suggests that the system was modified on several occasions. It is also clear that the ground level has been artificially heightened to the immediate north of the bathhouses in order to raise the culverts needed to provide the fountains in both.

Formerly there were several cairns or stations present on the site that formed an integral part of the pattern for pilgrims. Their location, on the basis of O’Laverty’s descriptions are shown on Fig. 1.28 Local tradition records the presence of a graveyard lying immediately north-west of the eighteenth-century church,29 since human bones were sometimes found during ploughing. McKeown recorded the finding of human remains in the area between the Drinking Well and the church when the site was repaired in the 1920s.30 The small cross-inscribed slab, later inserted into the wall of the Drinking...
Well, was found among these remains. The 1834 Ordnance Survey map marks a ‘thorn’ being located to the north of St Patrick’s Chair (Fig. 1). No reference to this is made in any of the descriptions of Struell, but holy bushes or trees are a common feature of holy wells in Ireland. The fact that it was recorded by the nineteenth-century surveyors indicates that there must have been some extant folk tradition of the importance of the tree at Struell.

Patterns and ritual

Bishop Chiericati’s letter of 1515 provides the earliest description of the pilgrimage to Struell. He stated that ‘the pilgrims enter it [the Women’s Bathhouse] and say a Pater noster and an Ave Maria as well as prayer to St Patrick. They remain there on their knees with the water falling all the time on top of them; and this, they say was done by St Patrick’. Dobbs wrote his memoir in 1683 when he was forty-nine years of age, but his description is based on his boyhood memories when he lived near Downpatrick. His description, therefore, is likely to date to the 1640s. He describes the bathing in the Women’s Bathhouse along with the station to St Patrick’s Chair thus:

A little house now without a roof, where about 4 feet [high] it spouts out, and there people hold their heads and naked bodies under it, when they wash; it is extremely cold, and a flat broad stone whereupon it perpetually falls is so slippery, that what with it, and the coldness of the water, people do often fall and hurt their bodies. The Irish use meny [many] ceremonies here, and there are seldom to this day, less than three or four hundred persons here upon Midsummer Eve, yearly to wash and drink, and say their Pater Nosters. There is on the face of the Hill above it the Rock they call St Patrick’s Chair; to this chair I have seen people creep up on their bare knees from the well (the way worn bare, and slaty, sharp, stony ground) that they have been Bloody.

The most comprehensive description of the pilgrimage to Struell is provided in the account of Hardy in 1836. The pilgrimage usually continued for a week with the climax at midnight on Midsummer’s Eve (23–4 June) and the Sunday nearest that date. He noted that

  to this place about one thousand people resort every midsummer, for the purpose of doing penance. They come from all parts of Ireland, and even from Scotland and England. Besides these, there, there are always a large crowd of spectators, amounting probably to another thousand. For the comfort and accommodation of both, a number of tents are erected on the plain, where whiskey is sold, and entertainment of every kind is afforded.

Another observer remarked that some fifty tents were present, which were occupied by ‘whiskey dealers and cooks of potatoes and herrings’. Much of the ritual consisted of reciting prayers when completing rounds of the penitential cairns, a feature of most pilgrimages at holy wells, though some were more extreme than noted elsewhere: ‘A few, whose sins are of a milder cast may run up the path barefoot; but those who have been guilty of black and grievous offences, besides crawling upon their knees, must carry a large rough stone, with their hands placed upon
the back of their necks’. Part of the ritual necessitated the pilgrim to sit in St Patrick’s Chair: ‘Each penitent takes a seat in this chair, and is turned in it trice, by a person who acts as superintendent of this part of the ceremony, and who receives a penny from each for his trouble’. J. B. Doyle noted that the person who was in charge of St Patrick’s Chair ‘is not a native of Down, but comes from the west, and claims it as a hereditary right’.

What sets Struell apart from any other place of pilgrimage in Ireland, or elsewhere, is the naked bathing that occurred at the site. The records indicate that the purpose of the bathing was to cure illnesses and to protect health in the future. Lady Elizabeth Cromwell had tried to separate the sexes with the building of the Men’s Bathhouse, but this segregation had disappeared by the nineteenth century. Use of the Men’s Bathhouse was confined to those who could afford to pay for the privacy it provided:

If they can afford a few pence of admission money, they may enter the larger well, where they have room to undress; if not they must content themselves with the second or limb-well, into which they are admitted free of expense — being obliged, however, to strip themselves in the adjoining fields. All modesty is here thrown aside. As they approach the well, they throw off even their under garments, and with more than Lacedeemonian indifference, before the assembled multitude, they go forward in a state of absolute nudity, plunge in and bathe promiscuously.

In the evenings those attending appear to have indulged in more secular activities, which no doubt contributed to the attractions of the pilgrimage: ‘In [the] tents, and in the adjoining fields, under the canopy of a pure sky, they spend the whole night, quaffing the soul-inspiring beverage, and indulging in various gratifications to which the time and place are favourable; for it is understood, that while the jubilee continues, and as long as the happy multitudes remain on sacred ground, they cannot contract new guilt’. ‘R. P.’ noted in 1856 that as a consequence of these activities ‘many went away with more fresh wounds made than old sores healed’.

One of the most important features of the pilgrimage was the enactment of a ‘miracle’ on Midsummer’s Eve: ‘Precisely at twelve o’clock on each Midsummer Eve the water was accustomed to rise and overflow the large well, and all its miraculous powers, had then attained its maximum’. This was achieved by blocking, and unblocking, the flow of water from the stream. A report in a local newspaper, the partisan Downpatrick Protestant, noted that ‘bottles, jars and portable pitchers were brought into requisition to carry away the “first shot” of the doubly distilled holy water’ when waiting for the waters to flow at midnight on Midsummer’s Eve. At times the crowds were so great that it was necessary to remove the covers of the culverts so that the pilgrims could have access to the miraculous waters.

Attendance at holy wells on their saint’s day was an integral part of Irish Catholic religious practice during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The evidence indicates that this was also the case at Struell. Edmund O’Doran, the bishop of Down and Connor, sought permission from Rome in 1753 to have an indulgence officially approved for the pilgrims attending Struell and this was eventually granted in 1778.
Richard Pococke, writing in 1752, remarked that of the pilgrims that there ‘are a great number of priests near who give them absolution’.49 Towards the end of the eighteenth century, however, the Catholic Church began to turn against holy wells as it sought to replace popular Catholic religion, with its emphasis on holy wells, with a more formal religious practice such as the attendance at mass and confession.50 Local priests had partaken in the pilgrimage at Struell but this was discontinued about 1804.51 Reports indicate that the rituals at Struell scandalised the Catholic Church before ‘Protestant eyes’.52 Clearly, communal bathing was too much for Victorian sensitivities and the newspapers condemned ‘the indulgence of heathenism and debauchery’ and ‘pious orgies’ during the pilgrimage.53 At one stage the primate of the Catholic Church in Ireland, Archbishop William Crolly, had the site ploughed up because ‘there was a superstition among the Roman Catholics that it would be sacrilege to break the green sward surrounding the spring’.54 The pilgrimages seem to have ended by about 1870.

Discussion

The admittedly few documentary references indicate that Struell was an important place of pilgrimage in medieval Ireland. It was important enough to warrant the visit of a papal nuncio in 1515 and it was specified among the holy places in Ireland that a certain Heneas McNichiall of Armagh had to visit as penance for strangling his son in 1543.55 The holy wells at Struell are unusual in many ways. In the first instance the group of buildings associated with the wells is more extensive than any other in Ireland. Additionally the pilgrimages at holy wells are usually held on the feast of the saint to whom they were dedicated, but in the case of Struell it was held at midsummer, the feast of St John the Baptist. Even its association with a saint of the importance of St Patrick could not change the traditional date associated with the site. Finally, the form of ritual practised at Struell, i.e. the communal naked bathing, is unique for an Irish holy well. As will be demonstrated below, the ritual of bathing at Struell can be traced back to the early days of Christianity and beyond.

MacCana, as already noted, stated that St Patrick (allegedly) ‘used to spend a great part of the night, stark naked, singing psalms and spiritual songs’.56 The earliest reference to Patrick’s presence at the site is preserved in the Liber Hymnorum, an eleventh- or twelfth-century compilation that contains an earlier hymn to St Patrick attributed to St Fiac.57 The preface to the hymn claims that St Fiac, bishop of Sletty, was a contemporary of St Patrick, but the hymn is much later than this. On the basis of the internal evidence of the text, Whitley Stokes and John Strachan concluded that it dates ‘at the latest not much later than 800’.58 The section of the hymn dealing with Struell is as follows:

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\begin{align*}
ni \ congebed \ uacht \ sine \ do \ feiss \ aidche \ hi \ linhib: \\
for \ nim \ consenai \ a \ rige \ pridchaiss \ fri \ de \ i \ ndinnib. \\
I \ Slan \ tuaith \ Benna \ Bairche \ nisgaibed \ tart \ na \ liae, \\
\text{canaid c\text{'t salm c\text{eech naidch\text{}} do rig a\text{ingel ba gn\text{ae}.}}
\end{align*}
\]
Foaid for leicc luim iarum ocus cuilche fliuich immi:
ba coirthe a ñfrithadart ni léicc a chorp hi timmi.

The cold of the weather used not to keep him from spending the night in pools: he strove after his kingdom in heaven; he preached by day on heights.

In Slane north of the Benna Bairche — neither drought nor flood used to seize it, he sang a hundred psalms every night, he was a servant to the king of angels.

He slept on a bare flagstone then, and a wet quilt about him: his bolster was a pillar-stone; he left not his body in warmth.

The well referred to as Slán is stated to have been north of the Mourne Mountains (Benna Bairrche) and an eleventh- or twelfth-century gloss in the Liber hymnorum identifies Slán as being near Saul, which is about 3km from Struell, ‘because every person over whom the water passed used to become whole (slán), and it is by Saul’. There can be no doubt that the well and the flagstone referred to in the hymn are the well and the ‘chair’ at Struell.

St Fiacc’s hymn appears to describe Patrick in the act of christianising a well and flagstone that were of significant pagan importance. Tírechán’s Life describes several instances where Patrick converted wells to Christianity, usually by using their waters for baptism. He baptised the daughters of Loíguire at a well called Clébach, near Tulsk, Co. Roscommon, while he baptised St Erc at a well near Tara. At the well of Sine (in Corco Temme = the barony of Carra, Co. Mayo) he is said to have baptised ‘many thousands of people’. Tírechán’s Life describes a particular incident at a well called Slán, which seems to have been located in the same part of Co. Mayo, where its pagan nature is explicitly identified. He states that ‘the druids honoured the well and offered gifts to it as a god’. Patrick ‘converted’ the well and demonstrated its new status by baptising someone with its waters.

Baptism is the main means by which wells were changed to Christian use in Tírechán’s Life of the St Patrick. At Struell, however, the conversion necessitated the saint spending the night in the well, singing psalms. In her twelfth-century hagiography, St Monenna, of Killeevy, Co. Armagh, is described as performing a similar rite: ‘St Monenna went to her cold fountain in which she used to recite the whole Psalter on accustomed nights, sitting up to her breasts in water’. The well was then miraculously moved to a new, nearby location by the saint. As in the case of Struell, the well subsequently had curative powers ‘thereafter right up to the present day many with an infirmity recover their health through the bath in the name of the holy virgin’.

The pilgrims who came to Struell down to the nineteenth century partook in a bathing rite similar to the exertions undertaken by St Patrick in his efforts to convert the well’s usage from paganism to Christianity. St Patrick, in turn, is likely to have been imitating pagan bathing rituals that would have occurred on the site, presumably on Midsummer’s Eve. The coincidence between St John’s Eve and Midsummer’s Eve suggests that the early Church appropriated a pagan festival by placing it under the patronage of a
Christian saint. In Ireland the eve of St John is generally celebrated by the burning of St John’s bonfires, a practice that is widespread in many parts of Europe and North Africa. The fact that it occurs in both Christian and Muslim areas indicates that the origin of the practice predates both religions.

Bathing rituals are also traditionally associated with midsummer rituals and St John’s association with baptism would have made him a fitting choice for patronage of such a festival. Westermarck noted that midsummer ceremonial bathing in the sea, springs or rivers was practiced in Morocco, since it was believed that those who partook in the custom would ‘suffer from no disease during the whole year’. Bathing in the sea or ponds sometimes accompanied the St John’s Eve fires in parts of southern France in order to ward off sickness for the coming year. These practices date back to pre-Christian times. St Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), in modern Algeria, condemned Christians who continued to observe the pagan practice of bathing in the sea at midsummer: ‘On the birthday of St John the Baptist … in celebration of a pagan superstition, Christians come to the sea and there they baptised themselves’. The custom was also practised, and likewise condemned, in Europe. A sermon of St Caesarius of Arles (d. 542) states: ‘Let no one on the feast of St John dare to bathe in the fountains or marshes or rivers either at night or early in the morning; that wretched custom still remains from pagan observances’. There also appears to have been an early attempt to suppress the pilgrimage to Struell. A gloss on Fíacc’s hymn in the Liber hymnorum notes that ‘the Ulaid filled it in because of the troublesome crowds going out to it’. The evidence strongly suggest that the communal naked bathing that survived at Struell until the nineteenth century is likely to have been a survival from a pre-Christian midsummer festival. The dissolute night-time behaviour that could not accrue ‘new guilt’ if confined to the sacred ground may also be a pagan survival. Caesarius of Arles noted that the pagan midsummer activities included revelry in the form of the singing of ‘shameful, dissolute songs which are opposed to chastity and upright living’.

The primary aim of these bathing practices concerned healing and the preservation of health. It is therefore of no surprise that both Struell Wells and St Monenna’s Well were known for their curative powers. The fact that wells mentioned in St Fiacc’s hymn and Tírechán’s account of St Patrick are both named Slán (‘unimpaired’ ‘healthy’) confirms this conclusion. Relatively recent midsummer survivals indicated that this applied to animals as well as to humans. J. G. Frazer noted that in Morocco animals were bathed at midsummer because ‘they [the people] think that on that day water possesses a special virtue which removed sickness and misfortune’.

St Fiacc’s hymn indicates that Patrick was also concerned with christianising the stone chair as much as the well at Struell. Patrick rested on this after his nocturnal exertions in the well. It is clear that the chair comprised two parts, a horizontal and a vertical component. In the hymn the horizontal part comprised a lecc/leac or ‘flagstone’. Patrick’s ‘pillow’ or ‘bolster’ (frithadart) is described as a coirthe, which the Dictionary of the Irish Language defines as a ‘pillar’ or ‘standing stone’. This is undoubtedly the chair noted in later descriptions of the site. Both Elizabeth FitzPatrick and Charles Doherty have discussed in detail the role of leaca in Irish inauguration rites.
outlines several instances in Tírechán’s accounts in the Life of Patrick in which the saint appears to christianise specific rocks, on occasion using baptism as the means, as in the case of St Patrick’s Rock, Cashel, where he baptised the sons of Nad Froích. Doherty argues that, in these instances, Patrick was deliberately annexing pagan inauguration sites in order to bind them and the ‘dynasties associated with them more closely to Armagh’.75 Patrick’s actions at Struell appear to be recording a similar action, perhaps of an inauguration site of the Ulaíd or perhaps the Uí Bairche. Doherty has brought to the writer’s attention the unusual nature and significance of the verb *foaid* in the last section of St Fiacc’s hymn quoted above. He informs me that the term *fo-äid* means ‘to spend the night’ (in a place or with a person). But it also means ‘to have sex with’ and is the verb used in relation to inauguration as at Tara. The gloss on this word, *i. ni gebed di dul ind*, ‘it used not to keep him from going into it’, may suggest that the glossator and the author of the hymn were both quite well aware of the original use of this chair.76  

Fiacc’s description of Struell indicates that Patrick’s resting-place comprised a stone chair rather than a flagstone. Fitzpatrick’s extensive survey of stone chairs in the Irish tradition indicates that they were often associated with late medieval Gaelic inauguration rituals, especially in the north of Ireland.77 The most extensively documented example is the O’Neill throne at Tullaghoge, Co. Tyrone, which is described in Elizabethan sources. There are, however, no earlier accounts of stone chairs being used in inauguration ceremonies. Most ‘alleged “coronation” chairs’, as FitzPatrick calls many of them, are either undocumented or recorded in relatively recent times.78 FitzPatrick sees a progression between the use of flat flagstones (*leaca*), sometimes with footprint impressions, in inauguration ceremonies to stone chairs. She dates this change to some time between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries on the basis of a consideration of inauguration practices of the O’Neill at Tullaghoge. Ewan Campbell also supports a late date for the use of inauguration stone chairs, but notes that the presence of natural stone chairs at Dunadd and Dundurn might suggest their use in earlier times.79 If one accepts Doherty’s argument that St Patrick’s appropriation of certain rocks in Tírechán’s writings represent inauguration sites, the Struell example is of particular importance because St Fiacc’s hymn indicates that stone chairs were a part of pagan inauguration ritual in Ireland. Descriptions note that the pilgrim to Struell was obliged to turn three times clockwise on the chair. This may be a distant echo of early inauguration practices. F. W. L. Thomas observed that in a late medieval description of the inauguration of the Scottish lord of the Isles at Finlaggan, the nominator of the newly elected chief walked three times around the chief at the end of the ceremony.80  

In his comprehensive study of the role of the holy wells in Ireland, M. P. Carroll attacks the ‘widespread and uncritical acceptance of [a] pagan origins model’, instead suggesting that they are a post-Reformation phenomenon.81 The evidence from Struell shows that this is not the case. The early biographers of St Patrick make it clear that the early Church in Ireland was greatly concerned with neutralising the pagan powers of these wells, since their waters were regarded as divine.82 The evidence from Struell indicates that these wells were a focus of pagan worship on Midsummer’s Eve that involved both bathing for the relief of illness and the renewal and preservation of health.
Patrick Logan notes that there are wells dedicated to St John in all parts of Ireland and comments that the pilgrims generally gathered around them on the evening before the saint’s day. As at Struell, the waters of these wells ‘boiled up’ at midnight and for a further hour it was believed that ‘the water would heal anything’. It seems that such midsummer pagan rituals were not confined to wells as we understand them today. As mentioned above, St Augustine recorded midsummer bathing in the sea while St Caesarius noted the practice in fountains, marshes and pools. At Malin Head, Co. Donegal, an inter-tidal rock pool was known as a holy well. On St John’s Eve, James McParlan recorded in 1802 that the ‘ceremony finishes like the Indian Tamarodie, by a general ablution in the sea, male and female, all frisking and playing in the water, stark naked’. In Gougane Barra, Co. Cork, the ‘well’ comprised an enclosed part of the lake. There ‘washing and bathing’ continued throughout the night on St John’s Eve. Cattle were also driven into the lake ‘as a preventive against the murrain’. Holy wells are often associated with special stones and Struell provides an early documented case where Patrick christianises both a well and a rock. This suggests that some holy wells, notably those with associated saints’ beds or chairs, can now be considered as potential sites for early inauguration practices.

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NOTES

2 Ibid., pp 78–9.
4 Tom McNeill, personal comment.
9 Ibid.
12 Walter Harris, *The ancient and present state of the county of Down* (Dublin, 1745), p. 25.
13 Tom McNeill, personal comment.
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19 Hardy, Holy wells, p. 39.
20 William Reeves, Ecclesiastical antiquities of Down, Connor and Dromore (Dublin, 1847), pp 42–3.
21 Harris, County of Down, p. 25.
23 McKewon, ‘Struell Wells’, p. 29.
26 Hardy, Holy wells, following p. 30.
27 O’Laverty, Historical account, i, 251.
28 Ibid.
29 Joe Craig, personal comment.
30 McKewon, ‘Struell Wells’, p. 35.
34 Hill, Historical account, p. 383.
35 Hardy, Holy wells, p. 38.
37 Carroll, Irish pilgrimage, passim.
38 Hardy, Holy wells, p. 28.
39 Ibid., p. 39.
40 Doyle, Tours of Ulster, p. 78.
41 Hardy, Holy wells, p. 39.
42 Ibid.
43 ‘R. P.’, ‘St Patrick’s Wells’.
44 Hardy, Holy wells, p. 39.
45 Downpatrick Protestant, 28 June 1861.
47 S. J. Connolly, Priests and people in pre-famine Ireland 1780–1845 (Dublin, 1982); Carroll, Irish pilgrimage.
50 Connolly, Priests and people, pp 138–48; Carroll, Irish pilgrimage, pp 154–64.
52 Downpatrick Recorder, 13 June 1855.
53 Ibid., 30 June 1860.
54 Ibid., 4 Oct. 1862.
56 Reeves, ‘Irish itinerary’, p. 53.
58 Ibid., p. xxxvii.
59 Ibid., p. 315.
60 Bieler, Patrician texts, pp 135, 143–5.
61 Ibid., pp 152–3.
66 Westermarck, ‘Midsummer customs’, p. 32.
67 Frazer, Balder the Beautiful, i, 194.
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73 Frazer, *Balder the Beautiful*, i, 216.
78 FitzPatrick, *Royal inauguration*, p. 138.
86 Hardy, *Holy wells*, p. 94.
87 Ibid., p. 89.