

Recommended Citation

Pankey, Emma (2012) "The Tradition of Separate Burials in Ireland: Cilliní and Place," *Spectrum*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/spectrum/vol2/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Journals and Publications at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spectrum by an authorized editor of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact Scholarly.Communication@unh.edu.

Spectrum

Volume 2
Issue 1 *Fall 2012*

Article 1

9-1-2012

The Tradition of Separate Burials in Ireland: Cilliní and Place

Emma Pankey

University of New Hampshire, Durham

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/spectrum>

The Tradition of Separate Burials in Ireland: *Cilliní* and Place

By Emma Pankey

Introduction

Ireland's historical use of separate burial places for the interment of unbaptized children followed the traditional teachings and prohibitions of the Catholic Church. Specifically, Canon 1239 stated that infants who died prior to having undergone the rite of baptism were prohibited from being buried in a blessed cemetery (Woywod 1957:51). Church theology holds that unbaptized individuals exist in separation from the rest of the Catholic community on multiple temporal and spatial scales. In life, unbaptized individuals cannot receive ecclesiastical rites and in death their remains are separated from consecrated burial grounds as a reflection of the belief that they are separated from the baptized in the afterlife (Garattini 2007:194). Without receiving baptismal rites, a child was not cleared of original sin and therefore was forbidden from entering Heaven. Instead of being condemned to Hell, it was believed that the souls of unbaptized infants went to Limbo, a place between Heaven and Hell that had the qualities of a liminal purgatory (Murphy 2011:410).

In addition to unbaptized infants, it is known that other types of individuals were also excluded from burial in consecrated grounds. These included murderers, the mentally ill, women who died in childbirth, strangers to local communities, shipwrecked sailors, religious heretics, and those who had committed suicide, among others (Garattini 2007:194, Murphy 2011:409). The lives and deaths of these individuals deviated from perceptions of normal life-courses. Like unbaptized children, they were considered to belong to a category of otherness which warranted that their remains be separated from usual burial places. Often, such adults were buried in the same location as unbaptized infants. As a monument class, few *cilliní* have been excavated in comparison to Ireland's numerous other monument types. Those that have been excavated, such as the *cilliní* at the Killalee Church ruins in Killarney, County Kerry, confirm that infants, older children that were several years of age, as well as adults, were buried in *cilliní* (Dennehy 2001:21-22). Thus, the term 'children's burial ground' does not reflect the wide age range of of the individuals that were buried at many of these grounds.

Separate Infant Burials and Cilliní

Historically in Ireland, when a baby was born stillborn or when a child died prior to baptism it was common for a male family member to bury the individual's remains at night, away from public attention, and without ceremony (Finlay 2000: 413). A site which was the location of repeated burials was known as a *cillín* (plural, *cillíní*). This is an Irish term that can be broadly defined as a historic burial ground for unbaptized children that was constructed away from the consecrated burial grounds of an Irish community. Other Irish names that were popularly used to denote these sites include, *calluragh*, *ceallúnach*, *caldragh*, and *lisín*. The anglicized name killeen is also used. Some *cillíní* are simply called 'children's burial grounds' (Murphy 2011:410).

The history of *cillíní* use in Ireland is long and their origin is not fully understood. The dating of excavated *cillíní* has tended to place the origin of this mortuary tradition in the post-medieval period, however some researchers trace separate infant burial in Ireland to the Early Medieval period and pre-Christian ideology (Wilkins 2008:8). It is widely proposed, however, that the strict enforcement of Canon Law following the Counter-Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries may have induced a proliferation of *cillíní* construction (Donnelly and Murphy 2008, cited in Murphy 2011:410-11).

The first documentary evidence that references a *cillín* is from 1619 (Murphy 2011:410). Many *cillíní* were also marked on Ireland's first and second Ordnance Survey maps when *cillíní* burial grounds are known to have been actively used in Ireland.¹ While the use of many of these burial grounds declined towards the end of the nineteenth century and most were disused in the early twentieth century, some communities continued to inter individuals at *cillíní* until the 1960s (Finlay 2000:409 ; O'Sullivan 1996:323 ; Garattini 2007:194). It was in the '60s that the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church relaxed the position of the Church towards the idea of Limbo (Murphy 2011:411). Vatican II conceded that there is hope that unbaptized infants can enter Heaven and in 1969 the Church introduced a funeral rite for unbaptized infants. The practice of infant burial at *cillíní* is now obsolete, however, it is still remembered in living memory by many people (Finlay 2000:408, Murphy 2011:416).

Locational Attributes of *Cillíní*

¹ Ordnance Survey Ireland is the national mapping agency of Ireland. It was founded in 1824 as the Ordnance Survey Office and in 1846 the first OSI mapping survey of the country was completed. Records of place names were also compiled in the Ordnance Survey Name Books.

The location and existence of hundreds of *cilliní* may be unknown to modern people; however, the known location and placement of hundreds of others tells a different story. The greatest concentration of *cilliní* is in the west of Ireland. Several modern archaeological surveys have recorded the geographic location of *cilliní* within specific counties and other land areas. In County Galway alone there are almost 500 recorded *cilliní* (Crombie 1990, cited in Murphy 2011:410). A 1996 survey of the sites and monuments of the Iveragh Peninsula which was conducted by the South West Kerry Archaeological Survey included *cilliní* and children's burial grounds as an individual monument category in their survey. Using Ireland's nineteenth century Ordnance Survey maps and records, field survey, and information gathered from local people, the survey team identified 116 *cilliní* on the peninsula (O'Sullivan 1996:234). Around the same time of the South West Kerry survey, a second researcher identified around 250 *cilliní* in County Kerry (Dennehy 1997, cited in Murphy 2011:410).

Numerous types of locations were chosen for the placement of *cilliní*. Land located directly outside of church grounds and graveyards, often along boundary walls, was sometimes set aside for individual or mass infant burials. Place boundaries, cross-roads, fields, the shores of water bodies, barren land, and aesthetically striking places such as cliff-sides were also common *cilliní* locations (Finlay 2000:418, Garattini 2007:194, Murphy 2011:409). A significant number of *cilliní* were also constructed at, near, or inside pre-existing monuments, constructions, and places of past use that were abandoned or in ruins at the time of *cilliní* construction. In County Kerry, Emer Dennehy has found that nearly half of all the *cilliní* identified in the county were associated with past sites (Dennehy 1997:37-39, cited in Murphy 2011:417). Locations for *cilliní* associated with past monuments and constructions include early ecclesiastical enclosures, medieval churches, holy wells, cross slabs, shrines, ringforts, cahers, tower houses, *fulacth fiadh*, and megaliths (Finlay 2000:411, O'Sullivan 1996:323). These range from historic to prehistoric, and pagan to disused Christian sites.

Interpretational Perspectives on Cilliní and the Use of Place

While a significant amount of research has assessed the traditions and folklore associated with *cilliní*, their regional distributions, and the osteology of individuals uncovered during excavation, less work has been done to analyze the significance of *cilliní* as places. This paper regards *cilliní* first and foremost as burial monuments. These monuments represent the materialization of values and ideas at places on

physical landscapes. In both historic and modern times *cillíní* have influenced ideas about the places where these burial grounds are located and, in turn, these places have influenced ideas about *cillíní* and the individuals buried at *cillíní*.

It is well documented that the physical separation of the remains of unbaptized infants from consecrated graveyards reflects the spiritual and social separation of these individuals (Finlay 2000:408). Additionally, it is believed that specific geographic locations were deliberately selected for the placement of *cillíní* in order to create symbolic associations between unbaptized infants and places. A common interpretation is that poor quality land and out-of-the-way places may have been selected for the placement of *cillíní* because these places were seen to mimic the marginalized social status of the interred (Garattini 2007:195). Similarly, the placement of *cillíní* at land boundaries may have been carried out to represent the in-between state of the souls of the interred in the afterlife.

The placement of *cillíní* at or near older prehistoric and historic monuments and constructions has also been regarded as significant. In their survey of the Iveragh Peninsula, O'Sullivan and Sheehan state that abandoned ecclesiastical sites may have been selected for *cillíní* placement to infer sanctity to the burials (323). For instance, it is possible that while three ruined Medieval churches on the peninsula were no longer the sites of religious activity at the time that *cillíní* were constructed near them, the former sanctity of the churches may have influenced the choice of placement for the associated *cillíní*. Likewise, the placement of *cillíní* at or near prehistoric monuments and constructions such as Medieval ringforts and Neolithic and Bronze Age megaliths may have been chosen because these places symbolized the otherworldly or mythological nature of the past and pre-Christian history (Finlay 2000:411-12, O'Sullivan 1996:323). *Cillíní* themselves are sometimes associated with supernatural beings. O'Sullivan and Sheehan report that a *cillín* at the townland of Killurly in County Kerry is known locally as a 'giant's grave' (O'Sullivan 1996:332). There is also the possibility that, like abandoned ecclesiastical sites, folklore about the former religious function of sites such as prehistoric megaliths, standing stones, and stone rows was an impetus for *cillíní* placement.

The reuse of previously sacred places, or sites of past importance and contemporary mythological significance, for the placement of *cillíní* can be interpreted multiple ways. Such reuse can be viewed as creating associations of liminality between *cillíní* burials and the ambiguous sanctity of the past.

Past monument and construction reuse can also be viewed as a form of resistance. Places that were sacred in the past may have been chosen for infant burials as a way to circumvent the Church's prohibition on the burial of unbaptized infants on consecrated grounds. Places of former sanctity could also simply have been thought of as the next best burial location if remains were excluded from being buried at actively used consecrated burial grounds. In this way, the reuse of the past landscape would represent the use of the past to create associations of sacredness and ultimately legitimation for *cilliní* burials.

If we follow the interpretation that the placement of *cilliní* in association with past monuments and constructions was purposefully carried out to create ideological associations about liminality, marginalization, or sanctity, then this may reveal ideas about a community's collective understandings of the past (Holtorf 1998: 24). The construction of *cilliní* at places of past use and ritual activity marks one of multiple uses for these places. For these uses to change, so too would cultural understandings about these places have had to change. For example, cultural memory would have had to reformulate ideas about the original function or significance of sites that originally served utilitarian purposes, such as *fulacht fiadh*, in order for symbolic associations of sacredness between *cilliní* and the past be able to be created at these places (Finlay 2000:412, Holtorf 1998:24).

Alternatively, conceptions about the symbolic placement of *cilliní* were challenged by Eileen Murphy in her recent paper on historic mortuary ritual and the psychology of infant death in Ireland. Murphy contends that a practical explanation for the siting of *cilliní* is more plausible, and that to explain the placement of *cilliní* in marginal locations or in association with past monuments, it is necessary to view these places from a functional perspective. The fact that Irish Catholics were not landowners following the British conquest of Ireland in the seventeenth century may have most strongly influenced the geographic placement of *cilliní*. Marginal land, old monuments, and abandoned buildings may have been some of the only options for the placement of *cilliní* by those who did not own land (Murphy 2011,418). Furthermore, agriculturally unproductive land as well as pre-existing monuments and buildings that had been abandoned but remained on the landscape would have offered safety for *cilliní* burials.

Attempts to create a sense of monumentality for *cilliní* could also have influenced their placement at disused constructions. Mortuary monuments are usually constructed with the notion that they will be

permanent and monuments often do survive on local landscapes for long periods of time (Levy 1989:159). In this regard, the continuation of memory is an important factor in the construction of mortuary monuments. In contrast to victims of infanticide whose remains were typically disposed without burial in eighteenth century Ireland, the parents of unbaptized infants may have chosen to site burial grounds at places of past construction since these places offered protection from grave disturbance (Murphy 2011:417). If so, then the placement of *cillíní* near past monuments and constructions was an act of memory making that worked to inscribe these places with parental grief over child loss.

Ultimately, reasons for the placement of *cillíní* on particular types of landscapes and at places which were the sites of past activity are difficult to ascertain. Folklore and oral history present both ideas about liminality and infant burial as well as parental grief and affection for lost infants (Murphy 2011:417). What is certain is that *cillíní* were not randomly located. Whether for ideological, symbolic, emotional, or functional purposes, the placement of many of these burial grounds represents an active use of local landscapes, features, and places which can be visualized in the material form of *cillíní* burials that remain on the modern landscape.

The Life-Histories of Places and the Classification of Cillíní

Following Cornelius Holtorf's work on the reuse of ancient monuments, *cillíní* which were constructed at or near older monuments and constructions represent one phase in the "life-histories" of these sites (1998:34). For many places which were reused as children's burial grounds, their history of human use is both dynamic and prolonged. The island of Illaunloughan located in the Portmagee Channel between the south Kerry coast and Valencia Island is one such site. Illaunloughan is only one hectare in area and during low tide episodes it can be reached on foot from the mainland. Between 1992 and 1995, excavations carried out by the University of California, Los Angeles' Overseas Research Project revealed the settlement evolution and changing use of the island.

Radiocarbon dates of 640-790 Cal. AD were found for a stone oratory that overlay two earlier sod-built structures and a *leacht* which related to the island's use as a hermitage. While the burials from the early phases of the site's settlement were exclusively male, Late Medieval burials included females and infants. This suggests a shift from the island's original eremitical function. Additionally, a gable-shrine on the island continued to be used after the stone oratory had become disused (Doyle et al. 2001). In the

nineteenth century Ordnance Survey Name Book records, Illaunloughan is recorded as 'a burial place for children and adult strangers' (O'Sullivan 1996:308).

Place names and the classification of sites containing *cilliní* offer insight about how people have thought about and related to *cilliní* in the past and the present. Of the thirty *cilliní* associated sites that O'Sullivan and Sheehan discussed in the early ecclesiastical section of their survey, twenty-three were named as graveyards or children's burial grounds in the first and second Ordnance Survey records when *cilliní* were actively used for burials in Ireland (O'Sullivan 1996). In this case, the use of these sites as children's burial grounds represents both the physical and referential re-appropriation of these places. Three sites were not marked on the Ordnance Survey maps but are reported to now be locally known as *ceallúnach* (O'Sullivan 1996). Interestingly, an early ecclesiastical site in Killabuonia was recorded as being a '*cellurach*' in 1957 but is now known locally as a 'church site' (O'Sullivan 1996:298). It is possible that differences in the names used to describe places containing *cilliní* reflect differences in how particular communities view these sites.

The ways that archaeologists think about and classify associated *cilliní* is often different from how people thought about and classified these places historically and how modern people reference these places presently. When studying sites that contain *cilliní*, archaeologists are usually more concerned with the original use of the sites or with site activity that occurred prior to the construction of *cilliní*. In their Iveragh Peninsula survey, O'Sullivan and Sheehan list associated *cilliní* by reference numbers that direct readers to the sections of their survey publication that detail the category of sites that *cilliní* containing sites were originally constructed or used for (O'Sullivan 1996:335). For example, to read about the thirty *cilliní* that the survey authors found associated with early ecclesiastical sites readers must turn to the early ecclesiastical site section. On the other hand, readers can find information about the seventy-two non-associated *cilliní* in the children's burial grounds section (O'Sullivan 1996:324-335).

Separating *cilliní* which are associated with past constructions and those which are not raises questions about what determines how a site containing a *cilliní* is classified. By separating *cilliní* located near past constructions under the category of site that they are associated with, an unsaid message that *cilliní* are less important than their associated features is conveyed. At the end of the background information O'Sullivan and Sheehan give on early ecclesiastical sites they write, "It is unclear when

individual sites finally went out of use, though some may have been abandoned in the twelfth century. . . .but the majority were thereafter used only as *ceallúnaigh*" (O'Sullivan 1996:248). While they would be correct to state that the original use of the discussed sites had ended, to contend that the sites which were subsequently used as *cillíní* "went out of use" is misleading. In fact, the use of these sites as *cillíní* was the next socially revealing chapter in the history of the human use of these sites. *Cillíní* should not be viewed as an afterthought that came subsequent to a site's abandonment, but rather as a later edition to the story of a place's human use. *Cillíní* attached new meanings to places, and it is even possible that *cillíní* built upon and reshaped ideas about the original use and function of individual places.

The Modern Treatment of *Cillíní*

It must also be remembered that human interaction with *cillíní* did not stop after their initial construction and use. Modern communities continue to think about, relate to, take action towards, and reuse *cillíní* and the physical spaces they are located at. The current attention given to blessing *cillíní* represents a revisited ritual use of these places. While they were not the sites of typical Irish Catholic religious ritual at the time of their construction and use, many *cillíní* have been incorporated into the modern religious care of local communities. There is much shame in contemporary Ireland regarding the historic practice of separate infant burial. Memorials and plaque inscriptions dedicated to those interred at various *cillíní*, such as pictured in Figure 1, are modern attempts to amend historic wrongs.

In 2011, the BBC released a documentary titled "Limbo Babies". The film seeks to draw attention to the issue of infant burial on non-consecrated grounds in Ireland. In the film, mothers and family members, whose lost infants were buried in an outlying part of Belfast's Milltown cemetery decades ago, fight to reclaim the mass infant graves where their loved ones were buried. The land where these graves were located had been sold to the Ulster Wildlife Trust for the creation of a nature preserve in 2000. While this land has now been restored to cemetery grounds, the contention over the land is indicative of the genuine emotional relationship that many contemporary Irish people have with *cillíní* burial grounds and the individuals interred at them ("Limbo Babies" 2010).

The activist group Hidden in Unconsecrated Ground works to promote legislation that protects *cillíní* and separate burial grounds, to create a national register of these sites to record their geographic location, and to recognize these burial grounds through the dedication of site markers (HUG Alliance

2012). This group aims to reclaim the places where *cilliní* are located, to transform them into sites of active remembrance, and to address the stigma surrounding the issue of separate infant burial in Ireland. Reclaiming the places where *cilliní* are located is a way to reclaim the memory of the individuals who were buried at *cilliní*.

In contrast to the *cilliní* which are now the sites of modern memorials, many other *cilliní* have been repurposed since their construction and use as burial grounds. As described in the site descriptions of O'Sullivan and Sheehan's survey, numerous, perhaps hundreds, of *cilliní* are unkempt and overgrown with vegetation (O'Sullivan 1996). Near the ruins of Templenakilla church in Eightercua, County Kerry, modern land improvement operations have leveled the boundaries and burial ground of a disused *cilliní* (O'Sullivan 1996:354-355). The leveling of *cilliní* occurred both in recent times and at least over a century ago in some cases. Whereas a *cilliní* at Dunloe Lower, County Kerry was leveled during the 1960s, the Ordnance Survey records from 1896 report that a *cilliní* at Kealariddig, County Kerry had been leveled to reuse the land for agricultural purposes. If widespread, such leveling operations would make it hard to estimate how many *cilliní* were ever in existence in Ireland.

Where *cilliní* survive in poor states of preservation, these areas have often been used to deposit stones and debris from nearby field clearance operations. An Early Medieval caher in Spunkane, County Kerry, recorded as 'Cathair Chon' in Ordnance Survey records, was reused as a *cilliní* and then was reused again as a modern garbage dump (O'Sullivan 1996:194). Similarly, a sewage tank was installed within the enclosing bank of a *cilliní* in Killelan East, County Kerry (O'Sullivan 1996:332). Although at odds with efforts to protect and memorialize *cilliní*, the reuse of *cilliní* for purposes such as agricultural reclamation offers insight about the social history of these places. Like the sale of land that contained infant burials at Milltown Cemetery, the destruction of *cilliní* is likely part of what has provoked the actions of the *cilliní* protection movement.



Fig. 1 A modern memorial dedicated to the individuals who were buried at a cillín on Achill Island, County Mayo. "In Remembrance Of The Babies And All The Dead Buried Here. May They All Rest In Peace."

Conclusion

"Placeless souls: bioarchaeology and separate burials in Ireland"

The above statement is the title of a 1998 Master's thesis on the practice of separate infant burial in Ireland and the bioarchaeology of excavated separate burials.² The characterization of individuals interred at *cillíní* and separate burials as "placeless souls" is entirely misrepresentative of the role that place played in the construction of *cillíní* and the current social importance of places where *cillíní* are located. To reconstruct meanings from *cillíní* burial practices and remains, it is necessary to understand meanings of place. This is because locations for the construction of *cillíní* were deliberately chosen and attributes of geography and place may have meaningfully influenced this choice.

² Lynch, L.G. 1998. 'Placeless souls: bioarchaeology and separate burials in Ireland.' Unpublished MA thesis. University College Cork.

Individuals interred at *cilliní* were far from placeless souls in the past, and, despite having been thought to go to a separate place in the afterlife and having been buried in separate burial grounds, they are also not placeless in the present. *Cilliní* continue to be a part of Irish landscapes. Dedications and blessings at *cilliní*, the prayers of those who visit them, and efforts to preserve these burial grounds are all testaments to the importance of these places. Additionally, the locations of *cilliní* constructed in association with past monuments and constructions should be viewed as places with evolving life-histories of use and ideology. The fact that *cilliní* continue to be sites of reuse, debate, reverence, and scholarship attests to the longevity of these places and their life-histories.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Anthropology and University of New Hampshire.

Bibliography

BBC Documentary

2010 'Limbo Babies'. Directed by Alison Millar. BBC documentary.

Dennehy, Emer A., and Lynch, Linda G.

2001 Unearthed Secrets: A Clandestine Burial-Ground. *Archaeology Ireland* 15(4): 20-23.

Doyle, I., Jennings, D., and MacDermott, J. with Challinor, D. and Lambrick,

2001 Illaunloughan, Co. Kerry 92E0087 *In* Unpublished Excavations Survey 1930-1997. Oxford Archaeological Unit for the Heritage Council of Ireland. Online Publication: http://heritagecouncil.ie/unpublished_excavations/section12.html.

Finlay, Nyree

2000 Outside of Life: Traditions of Infant Burial in Ireland from *Cillín* to Cist. *World Archaeology* 31(3): 407-422.

Garattini, Chiara

2007 Creating Memories: Material Culture and Infantile Death in Contemporary Ireland. *Mortality: Promoting the Interdisciplinary Study of Death and Dying* 12(2): 193-206.

Holtorf, Cornelius

1998 The Life-Histories of Megaliths in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. *World Archaeology* 30(1): 23-38.

H.U.G. Alliance.

2012 Hidden in Unconsecrated Ground Mission Statement.

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/72409962/Hidden-in-Unconsecrated-ground-Mission-Statement>.

Levy, Janet E.

1989 Archaeological Perspectives on Death Ritual: Thoughts from Northwest Europe. *Anthropological Quarterly* 62(4): 155-161.

Murphy, Eileen M.

2011 Children's Burial Grounds in Ireland (*Cillín*) and Parental Emotions Toward Infant Death. *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 15(3): 409-428.

O'Sullivan, Ann and Sheehan, John

1996 The Iveragh Peninsula: An Archaeological Survey of South Kerry. University College Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press..

Wilkins, Brendon

2008 The Origins of the Irish *Cillín*: The Segregation of Infant Burials within an Early Medieval Enclosure at Carrowkeel, Co. Galway. Paper presented at the Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference, Columbia University.

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/18686459/The-origins-of-the-Irish-Cillin-the-segregation-of-infant-burials-within-an-early-medieval-enclosure-at-Carrowkeel-Co-Galway>.

Woywod, Stanislaus and Smith, Callistus.

1957 A Practical Commentary on the Code of Canon Law (revised ed.). New York: Joseph F. Wagner.