

New Investigations at Liathmore- Mochoemog (Leigh)

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“You have in your midst the ruins of a Monastery from which was spread around the light of faith long before Holy Cross or even Cashel became known”. Thus Dr. Harty, Archbishop of Cashel, referred to the monastery of Leigh, Two Mile Borris, when on a visit to Moycarkey parish at the beginning of this century. “For here St. Mochoemog lived and laboured and here he died, and here his earthly remains were laid to rest among those of his religious brethren”.

St. Mochoemog was the foster child of St. Ita and the companion of St. Brendan and he was equal in sanctity to any of the great host of Irish saints, who in the Golden Age made Ireland the light of the Western World. There is very little known of St. Mochoemog's early life, but St. Ita who is said to be his foster mother was born in Waterford. She founded a famous nunnery at Newcastle, Co. Limerick. She died in 650 A.D., and is venerated to this day in parts of the Diocese of Limerick. St. Mochoemog grew up under her guiding hand until he was twenty years of age and then he went to Bangor to complete his studies. Fitted for his mission he proceeded south and on the slope of Sliab Bloom Mountain he built his monastery which, after a short time, he left in charge of a brother monk while he himself continued to the place now called Leigh. The local chieftain at first decided to resent his coming but at sight of the Saint his heart was softened and he offered St. Mochoemog any part of his territory. The Saint explained that he only wanted a wild retired spot. “Then”, said the chief, “I have a certain lonely and deserted place thickly covered with woods near a bog, and this I grant to you and the Almighty if you are satisfied”. The Saint accepted the grant and was conducted to the place by a swine herd. When he

came to the place a bell he had with him sounded. The little bell was given to him by St. Ita, and in giving she said, "It will sound when you come to your place of resurrection". "This is the place", said the saint, and looking around he saw a wild hog which looked to be quite tame and welcomed him like a gentle dog. The saint pleased with its behaviour said "As this Hog is Liath or grey let this district be called Liath". The word Liath changed to Leigh which is the name of this place to this day. St. Mochoemog was a hermit and here he gathered around himself a group of men wishing to devote their lives to prayer. For five hundred years the monastery at Leigh was famed for sanctity and learning and it numbered Brian Boru among its patrons. A long line of abbots succeeded St. Moch-oemog. "Leigh should be a Holy Place, it should be a place of pilgrimage, but strange to say it has been forgotten and neglected". This was the situation when a priest of the diocese wrote about it before Archbishop Harty's time.

But a change has taken place; thanks to Archbishop Harty, Leigh ruins are now a National Monument. The church and oratory have been cleaned and preserved and strengthened against further decay. This is a suitable tribute to the place, for when St Patrick was just one hundred and ninety years in Heaven St. Moch-oemog got warning that his end had come, and calling his monks he blessed them and blessed Leigh. This was in the year 655 A.D. and the holy man was buried with great solemnity in his own monastery of Leigh which he loved so well. Nine abbots who succeeded him are also buried at Leigh.

Cuangus — Died 746

Edhunch — Died 767

Conmail — Died 792

Beachleabhire — Died 838

Bubhdealbh — Died 868

Flaithin — Died 894

Flannagan ua Loncain — Died 900

Macclenna was slain — Died 935

Conaing — Died 1015

There is no mention of Liathmore after 1015 as far as I can discover so it really is open to guess work as to what really happened after this date. Did the monastery fade out of existence as a community of monks? If so there may be a reason for it. In 1180 the Cistercians founded an abbey at Kilcooley about five miles away and about 1200 a Cistercian abbey was founded at Holy Cross. These may have contributed to the decline at Liathmore-Mochoemog.

In the Festivals of Angus, an eight century Irish book, the 13th March is allotted to Leigh and in the same book is a prayer of which the following is a translation by Professor O'Looney.

“May Mocaenoc protect us,
To the eternal protection to come
Cuangus the chaste of perfect knowledge
From Liath Moir, good the two men”.

Excavations 1968-69

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Whatever we choose to believe of the above events it may be seen from Mr. Holmes' account that Liathmore-Mochoemog was an important centre of Christianity between the seventh and eleventh century. That it served most of south Tipperary and Kilkenny is evident from the da Paor's map of the principal monasteries (1). Like most monasteries the site is now marked by a church, the stone survivor of a community that mainly used wood and wattle-and-daub for its dwellings. The small rectangular church at Liathmore-Mochoemog is thought to be of eighth-century date and may be the work of Abbot Cuangus who died in 746. (2). But Liathmore-Mochoemog is unusual in having a second church on the site, one which began as a similar structure to the small church but which was greatly enlarged and rebuilt between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries long after the monastery had faded from existence. Both churches have been discussed by Leask. (3)