

The Reification of Sceilg Mhichíl  
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The history of Skellig Michael is shrouded in mystery: from the earliest times to the present, memories of shipwrecks, ghosts and graveyards have associated the place with death and the Otherworld. The choice of St Michael, the arch enemy of satanic forces, as patron saint of the rock reinforces the grim feeling that its steep slopes and hardly accessible peaks have been a key battleground for the endless struggle between light and darkness, good and evil, life and death. The scanty evidence that has survived from the distant past leaves ground for so many conjectures that imagination and irrationality have surreptitiously found their way to the heart of rational modern and contemporary interpretations of the site, to the extent that it is difficult to know if the heritage of Skellig Michael that is being handed down to present and future generations is a fake or not. Yet preservation and conservation have been on the agenda for decades, particularly since 1996, when the island and its early monastic remains were added to the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Heritage policies naturally raise several questions. Should ancient sites be made untouchable, turned into museums and venerated as sacred?<sup>1</sup> Or should life be breathed into them for fear that heritage might come to be understood as fixed, inert, in other words dead and irrelevant?<sup>2</sup> In any case, heritage is a social construction, and attitudes to it are but one aspect of the tyranny of the present over the past. This paper will examine Skellig Michael in this perspective. Because of the rich folklore associated to the site and possible parallels that can be drawn with comparable sites in Europe, it will also argue that the site's intangible cultural heritage deserves as much attention as its currently acknowledged tangible and natural heritages.

As all World Heritage Sites, Skellig Michael was considered for inscription on the UNESCO list on account of its « outstanding universal value ». <sup>3</sup> According to its *Management Plan 2008 – 2018*, « it is the interaction between the monks of Skellig Michael and the island's topography in what was physically a harsh environment that gives the site its outstanding universal value ». <sup>4</sup> Besides, « the Skelligs islands have been recognized as two of Ireland's most important sites for breeding seabirds for several hundred years ». <sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Christophe Charle argues that there are similarities between the cult of saints in the Middle Ages and the cult of heritage sites today. « Pour une sociologie historique du patrimoine », in Duanmu Mei et Hugues Tertrain (eds), *Temps croisés I*, Paris, Editions de la maison française des sciences de l'homme, 2010, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> « Faire passer dans notre patrimoine le souffle de vie et en finir avec une vision trop répandue selon laquelle le patrimoine ne serait qu'un ensemble de choses inertes », *Rapport Querrien*, 1982, quoted by Dominique Poulot, « De la raison patrimoniale aux mondes du patrimoine », in *Les mondes du patrimoine, Socio-anthropologie* 19, 2006, <https://socio-anthropologie.revues.org/753>. Accessed 29 April 2017.

<sup>3</sup> It is held to have « cultural and (...) natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries » and to be « of common importance for present and future generations of humanity ». *Skellig Michael World Heritage Site Management Plan 2008-2018*, 2008, p. 21.

<http://www.ahrga.gov.ie/app/uploads/2015/10/skellig-michael-world-heritage-site.pdf>. Accessed 29 April 2017

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* p. 14.

Management Plan was elaborated by the Irish Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Office of Public Works.<sup>6</sup> Over the years, the mission of the OPW has been « to protect, conserve and promote an appreciation of Skellig Michael ».<sup>7</sup>

As is generally the case with heritage sites, Skellig Michael has been an important asset for the economic development of the Iveragh Peninsula and a balance has been sought between economic and conservation imperatives, in particular to address what Mark McCarthy calls « the complex outcomes of commodifying heritage for tourism and other purposes ».<sup>8</sup> It is clear that the case of Skellig Michael perfectly exemplifies all tensions that arise from the need to combine preservation and market criteria or environment protection and the development of tourist attractions, amenities and services. Since 2008 and the beginning of the crisis, government policy has shifted towards a greater and greater instrumentalisation of heritage to suit economic purposes as is made clear by the Heritage Council's *Strategic Plan for 2012-2016*, which stresses « the need to contribute to national recovery and to demonstrate how heritage can be a resource for social and economic development ».<sup>9</sup> Supporting employment has become a priority in this context, even if the Council remains committed to the defence of heritage as « a vital part of our identity and sense of place ».<sup>10</sup>

It is generally understood that Heather Humphreys<sup>11</sup> enthusiastically welcomed the filming of *Star Wars* Episodes 7 and 8 on Skellig Michael because it meant jobs, indirectly promoted tourism and boosted the Irish film industry. However, her controversial decision was deliberately taken « in breach of long established conservation policy for the World Heritage Site » and in defiance of An Taisce's warning about « potential adverse impacts on ecology and archaeology as well as general site impact disturbance ».<sup>12</sup> There is evidence that the site was actually damaged during the filming,<sup>13</sup> but the government obviously deemed benefits more significant than harms. Further concern is raised by the confidentiality clauses protecting Disney-Lucasfilms' intellectual property<sup>14</sup> and the rumour of a Walt Disney Company digital copyright of Skellig Michael that might make it illegal for anyone to upload

<sup>6</sup> OPW website, Heritage Services, <http://www.opw.ie/en/heritage/>. Accessed 29 April 2017. The Office of Public Works is in charge of « caring, maintaining and operating the country's most important heritage sites »

<sup>7</sup> This has involved supervising major archaeological excavations and conservation work, and publishing a ground-breaking stratigraphic report summarizing the results of archaeological campaigns from 1986 to 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Mark McCarthy, « Historico-Geographical Explorations of Ireland's Heritages. Towards a Critical Understanding of the Nature of Memory and Identity », in Mark McCarthy (ed), *Ireland's Heritages : Critical Perspectives of Memory and Identity*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *The Heritage Council, Strategic Plan 2012 – 2016*,

[http://www.heritagecouncil.ie/content/files/strategic\\_plan\\_2012\\_2016.pdf](http://www.heritagecouncil.ie/content/files/strategic_plan_2012_2016.pdf), p 6. Accessed 29 April 2017.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Heather Humphreys was Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht from 2014 to 2016.

<sup>12</sup> An Taisce, « Letter to Heather Humphreys TD », 20th August 2015,

[http://www.antaisce.org/sites/antaisce.org/files/re\\_proposed\\_star\\_wars\\_filming\\_on\\_skellig\\_michael\\_world\\_heritage\\_site.pdf](http://www.antaisce.org/sites/antaisce.org/files/re_proposed_star_wars_filming_on_skellig_michael_world_heritage_site.pdf). Accessed 29 April 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Lorna Siggins, « Star Wars Filming behind 'Incidents on Skellig Michael », *Irish Times*, 26 September 2015, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/star-wars-filming-behind-incidents-on-skellig-michael-1.2366928>. Accessed 29 April 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Fintan O'Toole, « Beyond Belief – Why grant Disney's Skelligs Wish for Star Wars ? », *Irish Times*, 1 September 2015, <http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/fintan-o-toole-beyond-belief-why-grant-disney-s-skelligs-wish-for-star-wars-1.2335310>. Accessed 29 April 2017. In Fintan O'Toole's estimation, « once Skellig Michael becomes Luke Skywalker's refuge, (...) it ceases to be the edge of the world and becomes one of the world's quotidian commodities ».

images of the island for ten years.<sup>15</sup> Twenty years ago Ruth McManus perceptively noted that the commodification of heritage involved the risk of *Disney-ification* of the past.<sup>16</sup> Little did she probably expect how literal the threat might become.

What she had in mind at the time was the process that made it possible to turn heritage into tourist attractions, which implied the elaboration of a fake authenticity based on a biased, distorted and oversimplified interpretation of the Irish past for tourist consumption. Fáilte Ireland's current « Visitor Experience Development » policy for the Skellig coast echoes this analysis. It is also reminiscent of the Tourist Board's 1997 « Ireland – Live a Different Life » campaign that emphasized « emotional experience » as « the core brand essence for Ireland tourism ». <sup>17</sup> The « Operator Workbook » actually recommends to submit « unique selling propositions » <sup>18</sup> partaking of « experiential tourism » on grounds that « visitors who feel they are getting authentic and immersive experiences are willing to spend more, stay longer and visit again ». Unsurprisingly, « Journeys inspired by the Skelligs monks » feature prominently among the « quests » inspired by the saleable aspects of the local history listed in the booklet. <sup>19</sup> The « Skellig experience visitor centre » actually offers the visitor the possibility to « experience many aspects » of the island « while remaining on dry land ». <sup>20</sup>

Reification however doesn't stop there. Recent controversies over OPW conservation policies suggest that the archaeological site itself may be the victim of overzealous archaeologists' imagination. The controversial restoration of some of Skellig Michael structures has caused the alarm of several experts, in particular field archaeologist Michael Gibbons whose dramatic call in 2006 led to a UNESCO mission in 2007. In October 2006 the Tara Foundation had uploaded a video on You Tube entitled « Skellig Michael : the Fabrication of History » <sup>21</sup> that pointed at the damages caused by the conservation policy. It accused the Office of Public Works of substituting conjecture for evidence and investigation and of destroying the authenticity of the site. Michael Gibbons himself commented that « the potential value of Skellig Michael for future researchers is being destroyed », since « genuine archaeological remains have been replaced by faux-monastic twenty-first century imitations ». <sup>22</sup> The UNESCO mission eventually confirmed Skellig Michael's World Heritage

<sup>15</sup> Vox Hiberionacum, « Disney to Enforce Star Wars Copyright of Skellig Michael for Ten Years », April 2016, <https://voxhiberionacum.wordpress.com/2016/04/01/disney-star-wars-copyright/>. Accessed 29 April 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Ruth McManus, « Heritage and Tourism in Ireland –an unholy Alliance ? », in *Irish Geography* 30-2, 1997, <http://irishgeography.ie/index.php/irishgeography/article/view/385>. Accessed 29 April 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted by Mark McGovern, « 'The Cracked Pint Glass of the Servant' : The Irish Pub, Irish Identity and the Tourist Eye », in Michael Cronin and Barbara O'Connor (eds), *Irish Tourism: Image, Culture and Identity*, Cleveland, Buffalo, Toronto, Sydney, 2003, Channel View Publications, p. 96.

<sup>18</sup> Fáilte Ireland, *Skellig Coast - Visitor Experience Development Operator Workbook*, 2016, p.7, <http://www.failteireland.ie/FailteIreland/files/3d/3d865a5b-cd60-4f72-972f-cb9634ba3ffb.pdf>. Accessed 30 April 2017.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid* p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> « Experience the Skellig islands », The Skelligs Experience visitor centre website, <http://www.skelligexperience.com/>. Accessed 6 May 2017.

<sup>21</sup> « Skellig Michael : the Fabrication of History », <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpXgBveqjY>. Accessed 30 April 2017. See also Brian Guerin, « The Importance of Skellig Michael », in *Tara Foundation Magazine*, Winter 2007/2008, <http://www.tara-foundation.org/The-importance-of-Skellig-Michael.php>. Accessed 1 May 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Gibbons, « Restored to death ? Skellig Michael's World Heritage Status under Threat », in *20th Century/ Contemporary History*, 3, May/June 2007 and *History Ireland*, <http://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/restored-to-death-skellig-michaels-world-heritage-status-under-threat/>. Accessed 30 April 2017.

status but noted the obvious alterations, destructions and tentative reconstructions provoked by restoration crews. Not only is the fabrication of heritage a sign of the tyranny of the present over dead generations, but it is a sign of its tendency to model representations of the past for future generations<sup>23</sup> within the framework of what Martine Fournier calls « patrimonially correct » UNESCO policies.<sup>24</sup>

Whether deliberately or inadvertently, imagination and emotion are actually never far away when it comes to discussing Skellig Michael and the island is moulded to suit the needs, the dreams or wishes of visitors. Even Michael Gibbons gets carried away in a You Tube video where he unquestioningly evokes the supposedly 6th and 7th century monks who settled on the island « to worship Our Lord » and « keep the Devil at bay ».<sup>25</sup> First, the Official Archaeological stratigraphic report published in 2010 indicates that it is impossible to date stone buildings except St Michael's Church, which may fairly safely be ascribed to the tenth century, and the carbon dating of finds, including human remains, shows that none of the artefacts recovered may be older than the 7th century.<sup>26</sup> As for the first mention of the monastery in a written document, it dates from the 8th century. Nothing is known about its origins, and the tradition of its creation by St Fionan in the 6th century appears legendary. In an article published in 1994, French archaeologist Christian Lassure goes as far as to express doubt concerning the antiquity of the so-called monastic cells which are not attested before the middle of the 18th century. In his estimation, there is no proof that they were ever part of the initial monastery.<sup>27</sup> As for Gibbons's reference to the Devil coming « from the four corners (dark corners) of the world », <sup>28</sup> it undoubtedly comes from legendary traditions for which no uncontested evidence exists.

It appears in reality that there is much more to Skellig Michael than the tangible heritage, made up of buildings and artefacts. *The Management Plan 2008 - 2018* itself does acknowledge the existence of a form of intangible heritage there but it does so in very vague terms:

The presence of the monks on the island for such a long period of time has bequeathed us more than just physical remains. They have imbued the place with a strong sense of spirituality, which is palpable to anyone who has had the opportunity and privilege of spending time there. The physical remains bear testament to the

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<sup>23</sup> Jean Davallon, « Comment se fabrique le patrimoine », Sciences humaines.com, [https://www.scienceshumaines.com/comment-se-fabrique-le-patrimoine\\_fr\\_12550.html](https://www.scienceshumaines.com/comment-se-fabrique-le-patrimoine_fr_12550.html). Accessed 30 April 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Martine Fournier, « l'obsession patrimoniale », *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Michael Gibbons, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ON4v1TBRUJg>. Accessed 30 April 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Edward Bourke, Alan Hayden and Ann Lynch (eds), *Skellig Michael, Co Kerry: The Monastery and South Peak – Archaeological stratigraphic report : excavations 1986-2010*, Dublin, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and OPW, 2010, pp. 369-371. Pdf version accessible online, [http://www.worldheritageireland.ie/fileadmin/user\\_upload/documents/Skellig\\_Michael\\_Excavations\\_Intro.pdf](http://www.worldheritageireland.ie/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/Skellig_Michael_Excavations_Intro.pdf). Accessed 30 April 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Christian Lassure, « Les cabanes en pierre sèche de Skellig Michael (Comté de Kerry, Irlande) : vestiges authentiques du monastère du Haut Moyen-Age, fabrique mystique des XVIe –XVIIe siècles ou casemates à poudre pour la construction du phare du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle ? », *L'archéologie vernaculaire XVIII*, 1994, [https://www.pierreseche.com/mythe\\_skellig.html](https://www.pierreseche.com/mythe_skellig.html). Accessed 30 April 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Gibbons, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ON4v1TBRUJg>. Accessed 30 April 2017.

remarkable achievements of the monks, which cannot fail to invoke a sense of wonder and awe.<sup>29</sup>

Testimonies by early visitors to the site, the rich local lore and intriguing documents of various kinds point at much more than that subjective feeling. They also suggest a more complex history than the usually accepted story, which runs as follows : some time in the 7th century, early Christian monks left the mainland to live an ascetic life on Skellig Rock as was customary in the early Irish Church. Exposed to incredibly harsh conditions, confronted in due time to Viking raids, several generations of monks are said to have endured hardships until the late 12th or early 13th century, when they left the island to settle in Ballinskelligs' Augustinian monastery. There is evidence that Skellig rock was not abandoned at that stage and it is said to have become and remained a major European pilgrimage site throughout the Middle Ages and later centuries.<sup>30</sup> Whatever complements may be added to this uncontroversial summary rest on interesting coincidences and largely unexploited sources.

The forgotten heritage of Skellig Michael has attracted the attention of few academics and the only detailed - but still very limited - analysis of the question is a 2012 article by [Mairéad Nic Craith](#), entitled « Heritage Politics and Neglected Traditions: A Case-Study of Skellig Michael ». <sup>31</sup> Apart from the lighthouse-keeping and boatmen's narratives, which are of no interest to us here, what the author sees as a « unique aspect of the island's intangible heritage » is the tradition of Skellig Lists, which, she says, « remain a vastly under-researched resource ». <sup>32</sup> The Skellig Lists are the remnants of matchmaking and wedding customs that were still vivid when the Irish Folklore Commission investigated the matter. They take the form of rhymes which seek to ridicule bachelors and old maids into going on pilgrimage to Skellig Michael on Shrove Tuesday in order to repent of their sins, court and find a suitable partner. There is evidence that the visit to Skellig was the cause of much merriment on the mainland as on the island. Lady Wilde writes that « the proceedings degenerated into such mad carnival of drinking and fun that priests denounced the pilgrimage and forbade the annual migration to the Skelligs ». <sup>33</sup>

It can be argued that there is more than meets the eye in this intriguing practice. To start with, it refers to a time when the monks of Skellig accepted to conduct marriages later in the year than the Church on the mainland. In those days marrying was prohibited during Lent but curiously Lent apparently started later on the island than elsewhere and late marriages were possible. The usual explanation according to which the monastery retained the Julian calendar after the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in 1583 is hardly convincing since Ballinskelligs Abbey, which owned the island and controlled pilgrimages there, had been closed five years previously, as a result of Elizabeth I's Reformation policy. The monks had deserted the island centuries before anyway. The only other possible interpretation takes us

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<sup>29</sup> *Skellig Michael World Heritage Site Management Plan 2008-2018*, p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> In 1756 Charles Smith noted that the pilgrimage attracted fewer devotees at the time of writing than twenty years previously, but it survived until well into the 19th century.

<sup>31</sup> Mairéad Nic Craith, « Heritage Politics and neglected Traditions : A Case-Study of Skellig Michael », in Regina Bendix, Aditya Eggert and Arnika Peselmann, *Heritage Regimes and the State*, Göttingen, Göttingen Studies in Cultural Property Vol 6, Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2012, pp. 167-168.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid* p. 170.

<sup>33</sup> Lady Wilde, *Legends, Charms and Superstitions of Ireland*, Mineola, New York, Dover Publications, (1919) 2006, p. 255.

back to the controversies between the early Irish Church and Rome over the computation of the date of Easter. The Synod of Whitby brought the Irish Church into conformity with Rome in 664 but if this conjecture is correct, we have to admit that, for some reason, the monastery on Skellig island may have been left out of the agreement, or else that in the early years of its existence, it was associated with pre-Christian practices. Indeed, coincidentally, the late date of Easter in the early Church brought its celebration close to 1 May, the old seasonal festival of Beltaine, the end of the dark half of the year, which was associated with sun worship, and took the form of fire rituals. Very little is known about this festival except that it had to do with fertility. In later Irish folklore, May Day dew was expected to enhance sexual attractiveness, and sexual license was part of the annual festival in England,<sup>34</sup> which is consistent with later traditions associating May Day with courtship.<sup>35</sup> The tradition of the pilgrimage of bachelors and spinsters to Skellig Michael is an interesting coincidence in this perspective.

The suspected association of Skellig Michael with Easter and Beltaine goes further as the medieval and early modern penitential pilgrimage precisely took place at Easter. Besides, according to the 12th century authors of *Lebor Gabála Érenn, The Book of the Taking of Ireland*, the landing of the sons of Míl in Ireland on May Day is associated with the Skellig area. Three of the brothers unhappily drowned off the coast of Kerry, among them Ir, whose body was taken to the island of Skellig, and his eldest brother, Donn, leader of the expedition and Milesian king, who was buried in nearby Bull Island, also named after him as Donn's House, or *Tech Duinn*.<sup>36</sup> This episode is all the more interesting as Ir's burial place is described as « Sceilic of the spectres »,<sup>37</sup> while a 9th century poem recalls Donn's « mighty testament to his hundredfold offspring » in the following terms: « You shall all come to me, to my house, after your death ». <sup>38</sup> Skellig Rock and Bull island therefore featured as realms of the dead in a region of Ireland traditionally associated with the Otherworld. In collective memory, Donn became an image of the Lord of the Dead, who takes the souls of the departed to the Otherworld. In later folklore, he was seen as « galoping in the clouds » on stormy nights,<sup>39</sup> while ghosts haunted the coasts of Skellig Michael.

In their seminal book on *Celtic Heritage*, Alwyn and Brinley Rees estimate that the initial pilgrimage to Skellig Michael, probably connected to the cult of Donn, was « manifestly pre-Christian », as it involved a classic mountain-climbing ritual.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, pilgrims had to heave their way up the precipitous slopes of the South Peak, squeeze through the « needle's eye », a narrow chasm between two rocks and finally kiss an upright stone jutting out of the summit. Often identified as a cross by contemporary archaeologists, this stone certainly didn't look like one, as is made clear by the photos taken before it disappeared

<sup>34</sup> Patricia Monaghan, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore*, New York, Facts on File, 2004, p. 42.

<sup>35</sup> Carl Lindhal, John McNamara and John Lindow, *Medieval Folklore : A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs and Customs*, Oxford, OUP, 2000, p. 18.

<sup>36</sup> R.A. Stewart Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, Dublin, Irish Texts Society, 1956, section VIII, pp. 31-73

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid* p. 107.

<sup>38</sup> Poem by Mael Muru of Othan (died A.D. 887), quoted by Bruce Lincoln, *Death, War and Sacrifice, Studies in Ideology and Practice*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1991, p. 34.

<sup>39</sup> Ali Isaac, « Donn, the Mysterious Lord of the Dead », Irish Central, <http://www.irishcentral.com/roots/donn-the-mysterious-irish-lord-of-the-dead>. Accessed 1 May 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Alwyn and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1961, p. 98.

in the late 1970s. Often referred to as « the stone of pain », it was mysteriously called « Stone of Donn », on a map drawn by John Windele, who visited the island in 1851, which is another interesting coincidence.<sup>41</sup> Yet witnesses also described a cross carved on the stone, and the Christian penitential pilgrimage is well attested in the Middle Ages, once the monks had settled in Ballinskelligs.

Several legends suggest that this highly symbolical site was christianised at an early date as so many other pagan sacred places. It is interesting in this respect to note that tradition ascribes the creation of the monastery to 6th century Saint Fionan, but that it is not included in the extant list of his foundations. This is all the more intriguing as it has been argued that « the cult of Fionan probably replaced the cult of pagan god Lug, both in Northwest Donegal and in South-West Kerry ».<sup>42</sup> This would certainly be consistent with a local tradition of seasonal battles between the solar god Lug and the forces of darkness embodied by Donn. As in Lough Derg, it would seem that St Patrick himself was called to the rescue and added to the legend at some stage to contribute to saving souls from Purgatory. The tradition - unconfirmed by archaeological excavations - that there used to be an underground tunnel on Skellig rock, « rediscovered and blocked again by the departing monks », <sup>43</sup> confirms that just like Lough Derg, it might have been a privileged entry to the Sídh.

In this perspective the legend according to which St Patrick's ultimate battle with the serpents took place on Skellig Rock deserves special mention, especially as the site was eventually dedicated to St Michael some time between 950 and 1044.<sup>44</sup> The very dedication of the site to this most symbolical saint is highly significant since a parallel can be drawn between the dragon slayer and the man who banished snakes from Ireland. In both cases we may suggest that the serpent is another name for Satan embodying paganism. There is evidence that the cult of St Michael developed in Ireland in the 10th and 11th centuries. It has also been suggested that Irish traditions about St Michael influenced perceptions on the continent. A curious story whose first mention can be found in an 11th century French manuscript written by Baudri de Bourgueil, bishop of Dol, tells about a short sword and shield that were venerated at Mont St Michel. These weapons were supposed to have been used by St Michael to kill the dragon in Ireland. According to the legend, the archangel asked Irish peasants to bring them to his dedicated mount on the continent. They first mistook the place for Monte Gargano in Italy before they were eventually advised by Michael to go to Normandy. The story became a standard element of the legendary history of Mont St Michel

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<sup>41</sup> The map is reproduced in Walter Horn, Jenny White, and Grellan Bourke, *The Forgotten Hermitage of Skellig Michael*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, University of California Press, 1990, p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> Dónall McGiolla Easpaig, « Placenames and early settlement in county Donegal », in William Nolan, Liam Ronayne and Máiread Dunleavy (eds), *Donegal: History and Society*, Dublin, Geography Publications, 1995, pp. 167-168.

<sup>43</sup> Brad Olsen, *Sacred Places – Europe: 108 Destinations*, San Francisco, CCC Publishing, 2007, p. 83.

<sup>44</sup> In the *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters* entries for these two dates refer to the monastery. One reads "Age of Christ, 950. Blathmhac of Sgeillic died"; the other reads "The Age of Christ, 1044. Aedh of Sgelic-Mhichil," This is the first reference to the monastery's new name. Historians suggest that it was dedicated to St Michael some time between these two dates. Ed. John O'Donovan, Dublin, Hodges, Smith & Co, 1856, vol. 2, pp. 666-667 and 844-845. Pdf version can be accessed online: <https://ia902705.us.archive.org/3/items/annals01odonuoft/annfaals01odonuoft.pdf>. Accessed 2 May 2017.

and witnesses commented that they had seen the sword and shield up until the end of the 19th century.<sup>45</sup>

Interestingly, both Mont St Michel, linked to the nearby island of Tombelaine, and Monte Gargano in Italy, now both dedicated to the archangel, were previously associated with Celtic Pagan God, Gargan and his father Belenos, celebrated at Beltaine, who seem to have shared many characteristics with the Donn/Lug couple. Both Gargan and Donn have been assimilated to the god Julius Caesar called the Dis Pater, a father figure, perhaps another face of the Dagda, the master of life and death, who reigned over the land of the dead and ensured the passage between this world and the next. Another parallel between these sites is that they were initially associated with graves and upright stones, probably of neolithic origin, that used to stand at the top of the hills. Lord Dunraven noted in his classic description of Skellig Michael in 1875 that Ir «was buried near the summit of the rock, where a cromlech was standing up to a late period»,<sup>46</sup> and there are similar comments about the continental sites. To this we may add two arguably relevant insular traditions about St Michael; first the medieval Irish tradition according to which St Michael conducted the dead to judgment and, second, what Maria Elena Ruggerini analyses as «the unusual iconography whereby St Michael is represented as a bird».<sup>47</sup> If we admit that in pagan Celtic times birds were the messengers of the Otherworld, we may suggest that the dedication of Skellig rock to St Michael served the purpose of both taking over local pagan traditions and symbolising the victory of Christianity over paganism.

In spite of all this, Windele's curious account of an ancient cult of the dragon on Skellig Michael in 1851 was dismissed by Peter Harbison without much further examination in the 1970s.<sup>48</sup> In the same way, if we except the reference to *The Book of the Taking of Ireland*, no allusion is made to possibly pre-Christian traditions in the sanitized interpretation of Irish history for tourists. This leads us to an examination of the ideological dimension of heritage when it comes to mirroring and projecting a certain perception of Irish identity.

It can easily be argued that the implicit message conveyed by today's official presentation of Skellig Michael and the Skellig Coast is derived from early twentieth century conceptions of Irish identity. It is particularly associated with the deep faith of a Christian country, as it takes the shape of the celebration of the early monks' extreme form of asceticism, but the link with traditional Irish national identity markers doesn't stop there. In 2012 the Irish government expressed the wish that the official name of Skellig Michael be changed, which the UNESCO approved. Since then, «the name of the property» has been

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<sup>45</sup> Dom Jean Huynes, *Histoire générale de l'Abbaye du Mont St Michel au Pêril de la Mer*, Rouen, A. Le Brument, 1872, pp. 137-146, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k486064z>. Accessed 2 May 2017. Maximilien Raoul, *Histoire pittoresque du Mont St-Michel et de Tombelène*, Paris, Librairie Abel Ledoux, 1834, p. 155.

<sup>46</sup> Lord Dunraven, *Notes on Irish Architecture*, London, G. Bells and Sons, 1875, p. 34, [https://archive.org/details/gri\\_33125007823475](https://archive.org/details/gri_33125007823475). Accessed 5 May 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Maria Elena Ruggerini, «St Michael and the Dragon from Scripture to Hagiography», in Karin Olsen and Luuk Houwen (eds), *Monsters and the Monstrous in Medieval Northwest Europe*, Leuven, Peeters, 2001, p. 39.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Harbison, «John Windele's visit to Skellig Michael in 1851», in *Journal of the Kerry Archaeological and Historical Society* 9, 1976.

« Sceilg Mhichíl in English as well as in French », <sup>49</sup> a sign that globalised Ireland claims its attachment to the Gaelic language and culture more than ever. It can finally be argued that in the same way as George Petrie pressed for an understanding of Newgrange as the epitome of the modern nation's culture, <sup>50</sup> 19th century descriptions of Skellig Michael, particularly that of Lord Dunraven in 1875, served the same purpose. <sup>51</sup> Yet in recent documents, the nationalist component of heritage in the Skellig area mostly focuses on its connection with Daniel O'Connell, which makes it « the cradle of Ireland's nationhood ». <sup>52</sup> However, it is also « the cradle of Gaelic civilisation » as the location of the first successful Gaelic or Milesian landfall in Ireland ». <sup>53</sup>

It is quite striking that globalised, de-christianised, post-nationalist Ireland should resort to the old-fashioned identity markers of the de Valera era to attract contemporary tourists. This may be an Irish illustration of Jean Davallon's analysis of today's « obsession with heritage » as « an original form of continuity production in a society that emphasizes rupture and innovation rather than reproduction and tradition ». <sup>54</sup> It may also be a marketing strategy carefully elaborated by those who are trying to sell the kind of Ireland that the « key market segments of the Skellig Coast », that is to say « the culturally curious » and « the great escapers », want to find and are willing to pay for. <sup>55</sup> Such cynicism stands in sharp contrast with the tone of fisherman Des Lavelle's classic entitled *The Skellig Story*, first published in 1976, which was obviously inspired by the author's love for the place and his desire to share his passion with visitors. <sup>56</sup>

Nevertheless the pagan subtext of Skellig Michel's history has re-emerged uncontrolled in the past few years and the island has again become a place of pilgrimage for those who have left traditional religions behind and are attracted to alternative spiritualities of all kinds. The adepts of Celtic Christianity and Celtic neopagans see it as a « thin place », where they believe « encounter with the Holy is immediate and overwhelming ». <sup>57</sup> Pilgrimage to the island has thus been interpreted as « a rehearsal for the soul's journey to eternity » <sup>58</sup>, on account of the old associations with the pagan islands of the Otherworld and St Michael. New Age activists who believe in the existence of ley lines <sup>59</sup> also see Skellig Michael as a very special place at the far end of the St Michael or Apollo line, that is the alignment of ancient sites historically linked with sun cults and dedicated to St Michael. In a video posted on You Tube, a group of such British visitors enthusiastically note that this line is running through the row of beehive

<sup>49</sup> UNESCO « Changes to Names of Properties Inscribed on the World Heritage List: Sceilg Michíl », Decision 36 COM 8B.2, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/4773>. Accessed 5 May 2017.

<sup>50</sup> George Petrie, « New Grange », in *Dublin Penny Journal* 1, pp. 305-306.

<sup>51</sup> Lord Dunraven, *Notes on Irish Architecture*, pp. 23-35.

<sup>52</sup> Fáilte Ireland, *Skellig Coast - Visitor Experience Development Operator Workbook*, p. 32.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid* p. 33.

<sup>54</sup> Jean Davallon, « Comment se fabrique le patrimoine », p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> Fáilte Ireland, *Skellig Coast - Visitor Experience Development Operator Workbook*, p. 7.

<sup>56</sup> Des Lavelle, *The Skellig Story*, Dublin, The O'Brien Press, (1976) 1993.

<sup>57</sup> Cintra Pemberton, *Soulfaring – Celtic Pilgrimage Then and Now*. Harrisburg, Morehouse Publishing, 1999, p. 13.

<sup>58</sup> Seán O'Duinn, « The Cult of the Dead in Early Irish (Celtic) Spirituality ». In Pádraigin Clancy, *Celtic Threads*. Dublin, Veritas, 1999, pp. 68-69.

<sup>59</sup> Ley lines were first identified by photographer Alfred Watkins in 1925. They are presented as significant ancient alignments of monuments. One such straight line connects a number of religious sites dedicated to St Michael, among which Skellig Michael. This line is also called Apollo line. New Age theorists and activists consider that ley lines are sources of energy saturated with spiritual power.

huts and they feel Apollo and Athena currents spiralling together as in a dance.<sup>60</sup> For the same reason, a young Irish woman who calls herself MaRa LuaSa sees Skellig Michael as an “ancient planetary portal of light”, “a beacon for celestial energies”, “a portal for the divine masculine to emerge”, in a word “a power node” that “must be protected by us, children of Gaia”, especially as both forces of darkness and light can be felt to operate at this place of extreme planetary importance.<sup>61</sup> There is little doubt that the adepts of Jediism, the new religious movement based on the philosophical teachings of the fictitious Jedi masters of the *Star Wars* series will also feel attracted to the island, presented in episodes 7 and 8 as the location of the first Jedi Temple and the site of an interplanetary struggle between light and darkness, an unexpected reminder of the significance of Skellig Michael since the origin.<sup>62</sup>

In 1910, the island of Skellig Michael was described by George Bernard Shaw as « part of our dream world ».<sup>63</sup> In 2015, J.J. Abrams the director of *Star Wars VII (The Force Awakens)*, chose it as a location for his film on grounds that it was « a miracle » from « another time and place ».<sup>64</sup> Yet at the same time, the Skellig Ring Drive « has been named one of the top regions in the world for travellers in 2017 ». Lonely Planet describes it as « a spot of timeless beauty » worth seeing « now that it’s coming to prominence on the silver screen ».<sup>65</sup> It seems in fact that the preservation of heritage is more and more giving way to its interpretation as recreation. It appears that merchandization, globalisation but also paradoxically conservation and the emergence of alternative spiritualities have resulted in the such instrumentalisation of Skellig Michael that its integrity is now threatened. It may be time to investigate and systematically collect all traditions and legends about the Skelligs so that the wealth and meaning of their intangible heritage may be recognized. Unless this is done, they may ultimately disappear. Indeed, in the UNESCO definition « intangible cultural heritage can only be heritage when it is recognized as such by the communities, groups or individuals that create, maintain and transmit it – without their recognition, nobody else can decide for them that a given expression or practice is their heritage ».<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Skellig Michael, Ireland – Featured in *Star Wars : The Force Awakens*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4nr-bKHFIQ>. Accessed

<sup>61</sup> « Skellig Michael – ancient planetary portal of light – Star Wars VII Connection » <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aL1nIo6QLZ8>. Accessed 6 May 2017.

<sup>62</sup> *The Last Jedi*, trailer, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/video/2017/apr/14/star-wars-last-jedi-trailer-film-current-sequel-trilogy-video>. Accessed 6 May 2017.

<sup>63</sup> George Bernard Shaw, letter written from Parknasilla Hotel, Sneem, 18th September 1910, <http://www.stefangeens.com/gbs.html>. Accessed 6 May 2017.

<sup>64</sup> « JJ Abrams sought authenticity of Skellig Michael », You Tube Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wB4Niuobrr4>. Accessed 6 May 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Fáilte Ireland, « The Skellig Ring Drive », in *Celtic Times*, <https://theceltictimes.com/index.php/places-main-menu1/the-skellig-ring-drive>. Accessed 6 May 2017.

<sup>66</sup> UNESCO, « What is Intangible Heritage ? », UNESCO website, <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>. Accessed 7 May 2017.