In September I will be presenting a paper to the Castledermot Historical Society concerning the historical and archaeological evidence for pilgrimage in Co. Kildare during the medieval period. I started working on the paper earlier in the week and I was reminded of the description of pilgrims arriving at monastery of St Brigit at Kildare. This account was recorded in the seventh century Life of St Brigit.

And who can count the different crowds and numberless peoples flocking from all the provinces- some for the abundant feasting, others for the healing of their afflictions, others to watch the pageant of the crowds, others with great gifts and offerings – to join in the solemn celebration of the feast of the saint Brigit who, free from care, cast off the burden of the flesh and followed the lamb of God into the heavenly mansions, having fallen asleep on the first day of the month of February (Connolly & Picard, 1987, 27).

As Peter Harbison notes in his book Pilgrimage in Ireland the surviving literary evidence for early medieval pilgrimage in Ireland is ‘sparse and sporadic….. So meagre is our information in most cases that we know little more than the names of places known to have been the goal of a pilgrim’ (1991, 51).

With this in mind the above text, although brief, provides a unique glimpse of pilgrimage at an important shrine in early medieval Ireland.

The pilgrimage described above was taking place on the feast day of St Brigit the first of February. Medieval sources from Britain and the Continent suggest that while pilgrims were free to perform pilgrimage at any time during the year (and many did), the main bursts of pilgrim activity, was focused on the eve and day of the saint’s feast. The feast day became the primary focus of devotion due to the belief that the saint’s powers and presence at the shrine was at its most potent on his or her feast day (Davies 1988, 5-6; Hopper 2006, 108; Sumption 1975, 23-24). On a practical note as all public holidays in the medieval world were church feast days, it was probably easier for ordinary people to organise travel and pilgrimages on such days.

The Life also provides a valuable insight into the motives of pilgrims. The text suggests that some came to Kildare for healing, others to offer thanks in the form of gifts and some merely to enjoy the festivities and celebration of the feast day. The text also gives a sense that the pilgrimage experience at Kildare was a mixture of pious devotion and secular celebration. The combing to devotion and celebration is recorded at many European shrines during the early and later medieval period. The co-existence of devotion and celebrate or the sacred and profane can also be seen in the mass pilgrimages early modern period to holy wells on the Patron day or Saints Feast day.

In the coming weeks I hope to expand on this brief discussion of pilgrimage at Kildare and other Irish sites during the early medieval period.

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If a pilgrim wanted to undertake a long distance pilgrimage and expected to travel comfortably, they had to expect a very big bill. Many rich pilgrims needed a year's income and were forced to sell their land to the church. Although the religious authorities recommended that true pilgrimage should be undertaken in poverty and on foot, many richer pilgrims did not. In the later Middle Ages the uniform became more elaborate. After the find of the suit of a pilgrim, worn by pilgrim from Nürnberg during his trip to Jerusalem 1595, we have been able to establish how the uniform of a pilgrim may have looked. They travelled in long (often blue) robes which served as coats and sleeping bags and wore a wide-brimmed hat. Andrew Palmer, Trans., The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles. Including Two Seventh-Century Syriac Apocalyptic Texts Translated by Sebastian Brock and a Historical Introduction by Robert Hoyland. (Translated Texts for Historians, 15.) Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993. Paper. Eight Illustrations, Chiefly of Byzantine Architecture of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries; One Facsimile of a Page From Studite Psalter of the Eleventh Century. 105. 6d. Net. | The pilgrimage of Croagh Patrick. | Festival of Lughnasadh. Search for Kildare Abbey flourished over the years and became known as one of the most reputable monasteries in Ireland. It is said that the lost manuscript, the Book of Kildare was written at Kildare Abbey and some even believe it to be the original Book of Kells. As she claimed the title of Abbess of this foundation she had a considerable amount of power. After her death in 524 AD, she was laid to rest in a tomb before the high altar in her abbey church in Kildare. After many years, her remains were exhumed and transported to Downpatrick to rest with the two other patron saints of Ireland, St Patrick and Columba. The skull of St Brigid was