

A head for the cure

Legends of head cults have captured the public imagination more than most other ancient religious practices. However, what has escaped attention is that the head cult survived in an interesting form up until modern times. Mr and Mrs Samuel Carter Hall, during their tour of Ireland in about 1842, recorded an incredible story concerning the reverence in which local people held the bones of the monks at Burrishoole Abbey on the shores of Clew Bay near Newport, Co. Mayo:

'At Burrishoole, there was pointed out to us a recess, in which the collected bones are believed to be those of the monks. The skulls contained here are regarded with especial veneration; and, even now, it is by no means uncommon for the peasantry to borrow one of them, when a member of the

family is sick, and to boil milk in it which is given to the sufferer, as an infallible cure; the skull, when the object has been answered, is carefully restored to the heap. We examined several that had external marks of fire; and all our doubts upon the subject were removed, for a woman actually came while we were speculating concerning the matter, took a fragment of one away in her apron, and in reply to our questions, did not hesitate to assure us of her conviction that the draught so prepared would cure "her poor babby".'

This story has always intrigued me, but I had my own doubts about its authenticity until I came across this late nineteenth-century photograph of Burrishoole Abbey from the Wynne Collection. In fact, this account of the use of human skulls for medicinal purposes is not unique. At the end of the eighteenth century the skull of the famous musician Turlough O'Carolan, then kept at Kilronan church in north Roscommon, was boiled in milk, which was considered by locals to be a cure for many disorders, especially epilepsy. In Grose's *Antiquities of Ireland* (1796) Edward Ledwich records that a skull at Clontuskert Abbey in County Roscommon was similarly boiled in milk and used as a cure for epilepsy.

Such a cure may well have ancient origins in pagan Ireland; however, the practice may not be as unchristian as it might at first seem. What is particularly interesting is that, long before the developments of science had reached the remote communities of Ireland, a connection had already been made between epilepsy and the brain, here represented by the skull. It could be argued that traditional medicine was *ahead* of its time! ■

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