Title

Hidden Sacred Places of the Catholic Mass: Irish Ecclesiastical Influence in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.

Abstract

There have been Irish ecclesiastical influences on Scotland from the earliest of times. In the sixth and seventh centuries Columba and his followers dominated the history of Irish influence in the east of the country and on islands such as Iona and Islay (Swift 1987, 38). Crossing linguistical barriers and political divides the influence of Columbus persisted in Scotland until the eleventh century (Swift 1987, 25). This article looks at Irish influence in respect to sacred places of Catholic worship before, during and after the Penal Era in Scotland. The Jesuits and the Franciscans were the two main religious orders operating across Scotland through various Catholic Missions from the Reformation onwards although other orders such as the Benedictines and Vincentians were active too. In both countries Gaelic peoples experienced repressive penal legislation and were forced to create new places for worship. Whilst much has been written about Catholicism in both countries, few attempt to discuss Irish ecclesiastical influence in Scotland in respect to the sacred places where Mass was celebrated. Through a comparison of sites in both countries, I argue that the movements of priests between Ireland and Scotland encouraged the adoption of hidden sacred places of worship in Scotland that mirrored those used for the celebration of the Catholic Mass in Ireland.

Main Text

The Williamite revolution of 1690-1691 ensured the dominance of the Protestant minority in Ireland and both Williamite and Jacobite forces had seen themselves

engaged in a war of religion fighting for constitutional principles (Hill 1988, 99). It was the climax of the Reformation and of the long struggle between Protestant and Catholic political, social, and economic rivalry for supremacy in Ireland (Hayton 2004, 10). The Treaty of Limerick marked the end of the revolution, but Protestants believed its terms to be much too favourable towards the Catholics (Bartlett 1990, 1). They were deeply suspicious of the articles and believed that as long as the Stuart Pretender continued to be recognized by the Vatican and Versailles their position in Ireland would remain threatened (Bartlett 1992, 17). Penal Laws were passed between 1695 and 1756, although it is reasonable to argue that Ireland's Roman Catholics had been in a state of suppression from as early as Tudor times. The degrading and dividing influence of the Penal Laws, which were enacted in defiance of a Treaty intended to guarantee Catholics freedom from oppression on account of their religion and their impact upon the Catholic Church and religious practice has come to define this period (Elliott 2009, 165).

The introduction of the Banishment Act of 1697 required all regular clergy, bishops, and those exercising ecclesiastical jurisdiction to leave Ireland. Their expulsion was carried out in a highly efficient manner and those regulars, such as the Jesuits and Franciscans, who remained, or filtered back into the country, found refuge amongst wealthy Catholic families or remained under the pretext of being secular clergy, eventually registering under the Registration Act (English Statute, 1703, 2 Anne, c.7, sec. 1). Secular priests served in a specific parish and were ordained into a particular diocese rather than being a member of a specific religious order such as the Jesuits or Franciscans. All registered priests were required to take an oath of abjuration, denying the right of James III to the throne and accepting Queen Anne as the rightful and lawful queen (English Statute, 1703, 2 Anne, c. 6, sec. 15). Few

priests took the oath and those who refused forfeited any legal status which the Registration Act had offered them, resulting in a disruption to religious services. Priests were forced into hiding and the doors of the Catholic Mass Houses were closed (Connolly 1992, 276).

Just as it can be argued that Ireland's Catholics had been in a state of suppression since Tudor times, institutional anti-Catholicism was also a feature in Scotland for almost two centuries beginning with the Reformation. With the abolition of the Pope's authority in Scotland in August 1560, saying or hearing the Catholic Mass became a criminal offence. The 'Act anent the Mass', variously repeated and amended in 1560, 1564 and 1567, meant that anyone caught saying Mass could, as a minimum, have their goods confiscated or be banished from Scotland. A third offence was punishable by death (Prunier 2020, 38). In 1594, the Scottish Parliament approved an even harsher measure aimed at first-time offenders, ordering them to be 'executed to the death' (Burns 2018, 112).

This paper begins by analysing the similarities and differences in Penal legislation between the two countries. The existence of the Scottish kirk was unique to Scotland, and this is discussed within the context of Catholic worship, pilgrimage and superstitions. The paper then discusses the history of the Franciscan and Jesuit missions to Scotland and reflects on the life of an itinerant priest. Finally, I compare some of the hidden sacred spaces in Scotland to those within Ireland to conclude that the movements of priests between Ireland and Scotland encouraged the adoption of hidden sacred places of worship in Scotland that replicated the celebration of the Catholic Mass in Ireland.

Many of the Penal Laws passed in Scotland were similar to those enacted in Ireland. Catholics were debarred from holding public office and from many other

occupations including their employment in the education of children or serving in Protestant households. At the financial cost of their Catholic parents, Catholic children were to be removed and raised by Protestant relatives or by anyone endorsed by the Lord Advocate for Scotland. Missionaries made valiant efforts to establish schools for Catholic children, but with little success and so knowledge of the Catholic faith was often handed down from generation to generation through oral tradition (Macdonald 1978, 59).

In 1700 the Scottish Act for Preventing the Growth of Popery prevented Catholics from purchasing, selling or inheriting immovable property. Any property that Catholics were due to inherit had to be passed to a Protestant relative instead (Prunier 2020, 39). As in Ireland, fines were payable for all offences and rewards were offered to priest-catchers for the capture of priests and their congregations. Further Acts of the General Assembly directed at the provision of a clergy were passed in Scotland between 1700-1717 and in 1726, 1737, 1756 and 1786. The General Assembly intended these Acts to counter religious dissent such as ‘irreligion’, episcopalianism, and the trafficking Catholic priests, and ensure loyalty (Withers 1988, 138).

A Letter from the Commission of the General Assembly to all Presbyteries was sent on 14 August 1735. Attached was a copy of a previous letter dated 10 November 1720 (Prunier 2013, 150). The letter dated 10th November 1720 requested information that Presbyteries send information to His Majesty’s advisors or solicitor of all ‘Popish Heritors’, and of those in possession of any lands since the year 1700. It also requested information about any houses or other places possessed by Priests, Jesuits or Bishops, or any buildings used for Popish Mass meetings or Popish schools, (Prunier 2013, 154). Similar information was collected in Ireland through the *Report on the State of Popery* in 1731.

In the twenty years that followed the Reformation Parliament of 1560, the Penal Laws that were passed in Scotland resulted in the seizure of both Church land and revenues which, in turn, caused the destruction of Catholic Church organisation. Those priests who chose to remain Catholic had to conceal their activities and were dependent upon the protection of sympathisers or the remoteness of their parish (McInally 2014, 33). Whilst the Catholics suffered under a wide range of both political and civil disabilities, it appears that only one Jesuit priest was ever put to death in Scotland. John Ogilvie was hanged at Glasgow in 1615, not for holding Catholic beliefs but for treasonable activities (Brown 1992, 73). The situation was similar in Ireland where McBride highlights that no priest was executed for a 'Penal' offence, with the possible exception of Timothy Ryan who was convicted at the Limerick assizes of 1726 for officiating at a 'mixed' marriage (McBride 2009, 233). Bishop (2018) also finds little evidence for the murder of priests during Penal times despite the stories and images that remain within popular culture and folklore (Bishop 2018, 17).

Whilst similarities between the two countries were evident, there are also striking differences. In Scotland, the ruling committee of the parish church was the kirk session, and although not legally recognised, it grew in power as the magistrate's court in criminal law from the Scottish Reformation onwards. The kirk session, despite a decline in its power, was to remain a persuasive force among many Catholic communities well into the nineteenth century (Brown 1987, 11).

Outward conformity to Protestantism, whilst secretly remaining Catholic in private was known as Crypto-Catholicism and it remained a constant worry for the Scottish kirk (Burns, 2018, 113). These Crypto-Catholics often set aside large rooms or lofts which were turned into a hidden chapel. Two excellent examples still exist in

Scotland, one at Traquiar House, in Peebleshire, and the other at Provost Skene's House in Aberdeen (Anson 2010, 126). Kirk sessions relied on informants to provide evidence of what has become known as 'underground Catholicism'. Not every informant acted out of blameless or moral concern. Kirk sessions repeatedly pressed crypto-Catholics to name other members of their secret congregations which often led to false or rushed accusations. Other informants sometimes acted out of greed or jealousy, hoping to exact revenge on those who had wronged them (Burns, 2018, 121-122). Once identified, the community tried to suppress their Catholic neighbours. This was mostly achieved through ecclesiastical sanctions as well as the kirks who intended to redeem Scottish Catholics from their errors (Burns 2018, 113). The kirks waged a war of redemption, mostly achieved through humiliation during ceremonies of repentance.

The repentance ceremony was meant to emphasize the kirk's boundless capacity for forgiveness and was also designed to be a deeply shameful experience. It was often compounded by other petty humiliations, not least the use of a seat, in various forms, for the repentance ceremony. Both Todd (2002) and Burns (2018) have written extensively on the use of repentance stools and pillars with a number of examples still surviving today. In the parish of Holy Trinity, St. Andrews, there is a seventeenth-century stool which is low, solid, and has four legs but no back or arms. There is also a narrow-seated bench for multiple participants. It has a high back with the word 'Repentance' painted on it clearly stating its intended purpose. More examples can be found in the Museum of Scotland where there is a stool from Greyfriars, Edinburgh. The stool is about a meter high, square-seated with four legs and a footrest and may have been known as a repentance 'pillar', according to Todd (2002). The height of the stool would have purposely prevented those repenting from

placing their feet on the floor. The other example from Monzie, in Perthshire, is a low narrow and backless bench, that would have been known as a ‘form’ (Todd 2002, 131). The stool, regardless of its form, was always positioned to face the congregation and often seems to have been elevated on a platform. The pillar of repentance at Elgin was so high that, in 1594, a penitent could not make her assigned appearance because the ladder belonging to the pillar of repentance had been taken away (Todd 2002, 132). Some parishes encouraged greater humiliation by commissioning stools with just two legs which were specifically designed to tip or wobble if the penitent did not sit up straight (Burns, 2018, 123). Public humiliation could extend beyond the limits of the repentance stool. In 1647, the presbytery of Paisley ordered the recusant Margaret Hamilton to repent from her bed. The bed was brought from her home to her parish church and the presbytery explicitly required her to remain on her bed for the entire four-mile journey (Burns, 2018, 123).

It is interesting to note that there was often a specific place for repentance to take place. This was not a new phenomenon in either Catholic or Protestant churches in Western Europe. For centuries prior to the Reformation, penitents were expected to stand beneath the high altar for the duration of the Mass. In subsequent years, Protestant churches placed the penitents beneath the pulpit. The seating of penitents in the place of repentance on a seat that segregated them even more from the congregation seems to be unique to the Reformed Scots (Todd 2002, 132).

The ceremony of public repentance was tightly choreographed. It began with the penitent walking to church bareheaded and sometimes barefoot. The compulsory wearing of sackcloth was a visual demonstration of the equality of all persons before God. In Scotland, penitents were often required to stand at the kirk door immediately

before the sermon and watch in silence as the congregation walked past them. The penitent was only allowed to walk to the repentance stool once all the congregation were seated (Burns, 2018, 123). The penitent then had to listen as the Church of Scotland minister preached a sermon on the errors of ‘popery’ whilst they sat looking at the congregation on the stool of repentance (Burns, 2018, 122).

The tradition of dressing penitents in linen or sackcloth for the performance of their confessions was as much a part of the tradition in Scotland as elsewhere throughout Europe. Whilst it was humiliating to wear linen and sackcloth, the more coarsely woven sackcloth appears to have been preserved in some parishes for the worst offenders (Todd 2002, 143). The penitent was often requested to wear a paper hat or other paper label noting the offence. But, as Todd points out, undress was just as important as dress. Being barelegged, barefooted, or bareheaded was intended to exacerbate the penitent’s humiliation by exposing those parts of the body which usually remained unseen. This was undertaken to emphasise the inappropriateness of the sinner’s behaviour (Todd 2002, 147).

One important aspect of Catholic culture in both Ireland and Scotland was the celebration of feast days, pilgrimages and the various ritual practices associated with them. In Scotland, the kirk struggled to suppress traditional feast days for, as Burns (2018) notes, the enticement of a day of rest, socialising and drinking proved resistant to both parish discipline and religious affiliation. The kirk sessions were, however, more successful in suppressing pilgrimages and visits to Holy wells and other sacred springs. It is possible that their popularity may have waned because they provided great opportunities for Scotland’s ministers to hide and eavesdrop on the conversations of those attending. At the Reformation there was almost a thousand Holy wells and sacred springs across Scotland and the identification of

religious dissidents at these sacred places was often aided and abetted by the involvement of the local parish community. In 1581 the Records of the Parliaments of Scotland record the denouncement of ‘the perverse inclination to superstition through which the dregs of idolatry still remain in various parts of the realm’ and where suspected papists gathered together ‘by using pilgrimages to certain chapels, wells, crosses and other monument of idolatry’ (Burns, 2018, 120).

Despite the best efforts of the kirks, by the early decades of the seventeenth century, visits to Holy wells and chapels as well as folk customs and traditions continued (Macinnes 1996, 78). In Knoydart, in 1600, the Catholics requested the waters of Loch Hourn to be blessed. The Loch was known for its fishing, and it was hoped that the blessing would bring back the herring which had disappeared from its shores (Blundell 1917, 62). In Barra, the islanders had a great devotion to Holy water and their requests for its provision were often mentioned in seventeenth-century writings (Blundell 1917, 6). In Arisaig, as late as 1959, Maclean (1959) reflects on the existence of the old practice of approaching graveyards with the coffin *deisal* (sunwise), a folk practice rooted in ancient custom and belief (Maclean 1959, 84). Walking seven times, *deasil*, around a house was believed to surround it with an invisible ring of protection through which the fairies influence could not penetrate (MacGregor 1949, 160). Visits to holy wells and other shrines were also outlawed in Ireland under the Penal Laws (McBride 2009:198) and the sunwise circuit remains a familiar feature of numerous national, regional and local pilgrimages in Ireland today (Mac Cana 2011:132).

The survival of folklore amongst Catholic communities in the Outer Isles is believed by MacGregor (1949) to have survived due to superstitious beliefs. Many believed in

fairies, brownies, witches, water-horses, and apparitions as well as using ‘water of silver’ to protect their cattle and not wishing to go out in boats with ministers, red-haired women and hens (MacGregor 1949, 156-194). In the Outer Hebrides, for example, it was believed that a child would be exposed to the dangers of the Little Folk and the Evil Eye until it had been baptised into the faith. One form of protection was to place something made of iron, such as a nail or horseshoe, in the infant’s cradle (MacGregor 1949, 159) and it is interesting to note that, in Ireland, the famous Gaelic poet Máirtín Ó Direáin (1992) reflevcts on this in his poem:

Níor thugais ó ríocht dhorcha

Caipín an tsonais ar do cheann,

Ach cuireadh cranna cosanta

Go teann thar do chliabhán cláir.

Cranna caillte a cuireadh tharat;

Tlú iarainn os do chionn,

Ball éadaigh d’athar taobh leat

Is bior sa tine thíos.

From your dark realm you brought

No lucky caul around your head,

But the ritual wands were placed

To protect you in your cradle.

Useless sticks were placed around you;

An iron tongs above,

Beside you a piece of your father’s clothing,

A poker placed in the fire.

As in Ireland, the two main religious orders operating across Scotland through various Catholic Missions from the Reformation onwards were the Jesuits and the Franciscans. However, the Scottish Lowlands and Scottish Highlands differed in their faith along with the strategies of the various religious orders. One of the first missions undertaken in Scotland, following the Reformation, was by Irish Franciscans who were the main presence in the Highlands and Islands between 1617 and 1637. The Irish and Scottish languages are closely related dialects that until the seventeenth century shared a standard written language, and this significantly helped the success of the Irish Franciscan mission. Whilst there were never more than six priests involved at any one time, the mission made a lasting impact on the area which became known as the Popish Bounds (Prunier 2020:38). Four Irish speaking Franciscans from Ulster reputedly yielded ‘great harvests’ for the faith from 1619 onwards (Macinnes 1996, 79). The Franciscans were able to reinforce the Catholic faith that had been passed down orally through the generations (McInally 2014, 41) living in the Highlands and the area was to remain their domain with only one Jesuit priest operating in the same area (Macinnes 1996, 78). During the Franciscan mission the celebration of Mass took place in the open air. In 1625, despite the roofless churches of St Barr, in Barra, and St Dinnan, in Eigg, Father Cornelius Ward chose to celebrate Mass in open spaces where the large congregation could see him and follow him (MacDonell and McRoberts 1966, 71). Baptisms were also celebrated in the open air in Strathglass, where Father John Farquharson used a font-shaped rock for the service, called ‘clach a’ Bhaistidh’ (MacDonell and McRoberts 1966, 72).

When the Irish Franciscans withdrew from their mission in 1637, due to political and cultural pressures, there was no place in Scotland where Catholic priests could carry out the rites and ceremonies of the liturgy safely. Many travelled to Bunamargy in County Antrim, in Ireland, but the journey across the sea was often dangerous and difficult. However, here at the Franciscan Friary, they were able to assist at the daily Masses celebrated at the ‘privileged altar’ when, in addition to the Eucharist sacrifice, a plenary indulgence was granted. Indulgences represent gifts from God, through His Church, to help penitents in their desire for eternal salvation. Visits to Bunamargy enabled Scottish Catholics to enjoy the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and to make the popular Franciscan devotion of the Stations of the Cross (Anson 1970, 37). This traditional Catholic practice, originating in early Christian times, allows Catholics to meditate and reflect on the sufferings of Christ from his condemnation to his burial by stopping at different ‘Stations’ along a set route, or within a set space such as a church, and reciting specific prayers. Bunamargy became a refuge for Scottish Catholics and many were confirmed there. Father Hegarty acted as the Guardian of the friary and Definator of the Irish province**.** The Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, simply known as Propaganda, was established in 1622 and was responsible for missionary activities. In 1640 Father Hegarty informed Propaganda that, within a four-month period, over one thousand men and women had been reunited with the Church at Bunamargy and that around five hundred of them came annually from Scotland (Anson 1970, 39). The success of this Franciscan mission provided a solid platform for other missions to build upon in later years, especially following the ascension of William III to the throne in 1689 when those laws already in place against Catholics were enforced with renewed vigour, and additional Penal Laws introduced.

In contrast to the Franciscans, the Jesuits worked mostly with the aristocracy, receiving shelter and protection by lodging in their homes. Roberts (2020) outlines the various phases of Jesuit missions in Scotland where they had no real presence in the Highlands and Islands until the seventeenth century. During this time, they were able to support communities in the Grampian Mountains thanks to the benevolence of Catholic nobility based in the Scottish Lowlands (Roberts 2020, 103). It is interesting to note that, despite the religious differences between the Scottish Lowlands and Highlands, a number of Lowland lairds frequented the Franciscan friary at Bunamargy (Anson 1970, 39). It was the gentry and mercantile families in Ireland too that often retained Jesuit clergy in their homes, providing both financial support and protection (Lennon 1986, 82). The *Report on the State of Popery in Ireland*, in 1731, acknowledged that 'most of the wealthy Papists' had 'private Chappels in their Houses, where Mass is often celebrated' (Catholic Historical Society of Ireland 1913, 131).

In later times, the Jesuits expanded their ministry into the Highlands and Islands of Scotland with noteworthy success in areas such as Braemar and Strathglass (Roberts 2020, 111). A few remote castles still remained in the north east of Scotland where it was possible to maintain a priest. Among them was Aboyne, where from 1637 to 1642 a secular priest named Gilbert Blackhall (often spelt Blakhal) acted as chaplain, having succeeded several previous Jesuits. His hostess was the Viscountess of Aboyne and the castle proved an ideal centre for missionary work. Mr Blackhall covered a wide area, usually on horseback, and in all kinds of weather. He travelled between Deeside in the south and Buchan in the northeast as well as northwest to Strathbogie. Whilst on his travels he had a narrow escape from drowning when his hat together with a little valise made of red Spanish leather,

containing his vestments, chalice, altar-stone and other accoutrements were carried away by a flood. He maintained a diary which he later printed entitled *A Brief Narration of the Services done to Three Noble Ladies*. The other two ladies in question were Lady Isabella Hay, who was the eldest daughter of the 9th Earl of Erroll and Lady Henrietta Gordon, who was the daughter of Lady Aboyne. Lord Aboyne maintained an open house and was hospitable on a lavish scale. He welcomed in the poor and found them work where possible. The castle was described by Father James Macbreck as 'a sort of asylum for Catholics for celebrating of divine worship'. (Anson 1970, 37).

The trials of Mr Blackhall show how difficult the life of a priest could be, and few were prepared for the harsh realities of the life of an itinerant in the Highlands and Islands. Prior to the Reformation most priests in Scotland, as elsewhere, had received their education in universities. However, it was decreed by the Council of Trent in 1563 that priests were to be trained in seminaries in the future. In theory, this was a commendable idea but, in practice it was not possible in many Protestant countries. Like its English and Irish counterparts, the Scottish Mission, had been forced to set up its training colleges abroad in European countries where Catholicism prospered (Watts 1999, 8). However, being trained in a country where the Catholic faith was not proscribed, failed to prepare priests for the harsh realities of life on the Scottish Mission (Watts 1999, 9).

In Scotland, as in Ireland, priests remained vulnerable at all times, but even more so when they were undertaking essential duties such as celebrating Mass, writing to fellow priests and bishops, and making essential journeys. They tried to celebrated Mass in the safety of private homes or outhouses, but this was not always possible. Sometimes there were no private houses or outhouses available. On other

occasions the crowds were so large that there was no alternative but to hold services in the open fields. Such occasions exposed the priest, and they were all too visible to potential spies and informers (Watts 1999, 11). The authorities of the State and the Kirk were active in arresting priests, so it was essential that missionaries moved to different parts of Scotland or, sometimes, they had to leave the country completely as in the case of the Franciscans retreating to Bunamargy in Ireland. Despite the many precautions taken, each of the Irish Franciscans was arrested and imprisoned at least once during their mission (McInally 2014, 48).

The majority of Scottish Catholics who lived in the Highland and Islands were extremely poor and lived a life of subsistence with very little to spare. Despite the tradition of Highland hospitality, they were often only able to provide for their missionary priests for a few weeks each year (McInally 2014, 47). A Report sent to the Father General in 1702 paints a vivid picture of the hardships endured by itinerant priests in the Highlands and Islands who shared the poverty of their communities. Father Robert Strachan reported that people were so poor that they had to keep their cattle in their own dwellings and that he had to make do with straw or heather for his bed. He lived on butter, cheese and milk, and remarked that he hardly ate meat and fish only very occasionally. Whilst he drank water and beer, wine was only ever drunk at the altar (Anson 1970, 99). Others report eating barley bread and only drinking cold water (Mullett 1998, 109).

The landscape was often mountainous and difficult. In 1707 Bishop Gordon encountered difficult terrain when visiting Knoydart. He remarked how his party had found it necessary to scramble, sometimes on all fours, along rude mountain paths, with precipices and morasses to negotiate. Conditions underfoot were so wet that their feet were never dry (Blundell, 1917, 63). The Jesuits quickly adapted to their

surroundings and the communities they served. Father Seton took on the role of a priest-healer using the medical skills that he already possessed. Father Strachan acted as a social worker, often responsible for resolving local disputes. Both journeyed by day and night over steep and pathless hills traversing mountainous and rugged regions to tend to their flocks (Mullett 1998, 109).

Those crossing to the Islands also faced a difficult journey. Father Cornelius Ward describes his journey from Mull to the house of Clanranald in August 1625 ‘From the island of Mull I started my journey with two attendants [who acted as guides, porters and Mass servers]: for five whole days [we travelled] over rough mountain slopes and through daunting loneliness of the forests, and, had we not had the protection of the right hand of the Most High, we would not have escaped in one almost certain danger of drowning. Hunger and thirst became daily more pressing and, after the fatigues of each day, there was no place to lie down except the bare ground at the mercy of the inclement night air’ (Giblin 1964, 74). In 1700, Bishop Nicholson accompanied by Mr Thomas Innis, travelled extensively throughout the Highlands and Islands both on foot and by boat. They set of from Preshome travelling on foot through the Great Glen until they reached the Atlantic Ocean. From here they travelled by boat to avoid detection and visited Arisaig, Eigg (via Rum), Canna, South Uist, Benbecula, and Barra (Anson 1970, 99). Rum is one of the islands highlighted by Maclean (1959) where Catholics were forced to attend Protestant schools and churches. He uses the facetious term ‘Yellow stick’ to describe the enforcement of the Church of Scotland amongst the community of Catholics here right up until the late 1800s (Maclean 1959, 63). It was also necessary to travel by boat if there were no usable roads on shore (Blundell, 1917, 64). Travelling by boat was difficult and they record being tossed on the waves of a strong oncoming tide

and feeling in great danger (Blundell, 1917, 124). When the Bishop left Arisaig and sailed for the Hebrides, the various swirling currents beat up against each other with such tremendous force that the voyage became a very dangerous one. So bad were the conditions on this stretch of Ocean that it was only safe to cross in an open boat during three months of the year (Blundell 1917, 126).

Mission policy in Scotland was to assign a priest to a home in the district where he had been born and raised. Whilst at home the priest could usually count on the discretion of neighbours regardless of their faith. The real risk was when travelling away from home. Priests tried to disguise themselves as best they could, wearing disguises and travelling by night. During the day they would hide themselves away making the most of local byres, caves, or forests (Watts 1999, 12). Father John Innes was reported to have disguised himself as a master, servant, musician, painter, brass worker, clock maker and physician (Anson 1970, 99). Priests never sent letters by public post, rather entrusting them to the care of friends. Personal names and religious titles were never used, instead individual were referred to by ‘Mr’ and their initials or went by aliases. So that letters could not be clearly understood by anyone other than their intended destination, mission letters contained coded language and so priests were referred to as ‘labourers’, the seminaries as ‘shops’ and students as ‘prentices’. (Watts 1999, 11).

Despite travelling in disguise, the presence of a portable Mass kit could betray a priest’s true identity. The Mass kit would have contained the altar stone, linens, crucifix, candles and charts (Ryan 1957, 24). The chosen Mass Rock would only have been transformed into a Holy altar once the required flat square stone tablet had been placed upon it and been duly consecrated by the priest, translating an otherwise ‘unholy’ space into a Holy altar for the celebration of the Catholic Mass. As

early as 1186, legislation discovered within the Latin text of an eighteenth-century transcript in the *Novum Registrum* at Christ Church Cathedral Dublin and issued by Archbishop John Comyn, required that ‘if a stone of sufficient size to cover the whole altar cannot be had …. A square and polished stone be fixed in the middle of the altar where Christ’s body is consecrated, of a compass broad enough to contain five crosses and also to bear the foot of the largest chalice’ (Moss 2006, 81). The Mass kit was a necessity for the celebration of Mass and would have been carried by sea from island to island or over rough mountain terrain between the various Catholic communities. Bishops often made difficult journeys in the company of a manservant, providing both protection and assistance in carrying equipment. Bishop George Hay (1729-1811), whilst travelling about Strathbogie, carried the requirements for Mass in two enormous saddle-bags. The saddle-bags were often so full that a very wide stable door was required so that both horse and valise could fit through (Blundell 1917,19-20). Among the most important items carried by missionary priests in the Highlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were wheaten bread and wine both essential for the celebration of Mass. They were happy to produce their own wheaten bread, but it was difficult to obtain supplies locally (MacDonell and McRoberts 1966, 76). Priests would travel great distances to obtain their suplies and, in 1636, Father Cornelius Ward mentions travelling to from the West Highlands to Edinburgh on foot for his supplies of wine and wheaten flour (Giblin 1966, 173). In order to cook altar breads for the celebration of the Mass the priests also needed bread-irons and these were requested by Father Ward in a list of essential mission requirements sent in 1624 (Giblin 1966, 173). The custom of baking altar breads remained a regular practice in Scottish country churches after the Penal era and

examples of bread-irons may still to be found in the sacristies of some rural churches (MacDonell and McRoberts 1966, 77).

In 1677 the priest Mr Alexander Leslie received a commission from Propaganda that he was to tour Scotland in order to gather information concerning the state and needs of the Catholic church. The main purpose was to learn where, and to what degree, Catholicism still survived. He estimated the number of communicants in the whole of Scotland to be no more than two and a half percent of the national population. In areas such as Moidart, Arisaig, Morar, Knoydart, Glengarry, Barra, Uist, Benbecula, and several of the small Hebridean Islands, the majority of people were Catholics (Watts 1999, 4). In Moidart Catholics and Protestants were divided geographically by a bridge spanning the Sheil River where it flows out of Loch Sheil to the west, with Protestants to the south at Ardnamurchan and Catholic Moidart to the north (Maclean 1959, 66). In Strathglass, Coll, Tiree and Eigg, nearly everyone was Catholic and there were also substantial numbers in Lochabar, Aberdeenshire, Banffshire, Buchan and Galloway (Watts 1999, 4). That does not mean that the Church of Scotland had no influence in these areas. Glencoe, Ballachulish and Appin just south of Lochaber were strongholds of Scottish Episcopalianism (Maclean 1959, 128). On the Island of Eigg old Donald MacKay was forbidden to play his fiddle and subsequently sold it to a pedlar for ten shillings, it having cost him ten young bullocks to buy it. And, in Skye, Reverend Macleod set fire to a pile of bagpipes and fiddles that was reputedly as high as a house (Maclean 1959, 92). Catholics existed in smaller numbers in Inverness town, Perthshire and beside Solway Firth, and in Lowland districts such as Clydesdale and Lothian there were very few Catholics. In sizeable areas of the country, he discovered that Catholicism had ceased to exist completely (Watts 1999, 4).

The experience of the Catholic Church in the Scottish Highlands was markedly different from that in the Lowlands following the Reformation. The Kirk was established at speed in the Scottish Lowlands and Catholicism almost eradicated. This was achieved by depriving Catholics of their leaders and removing a potential source of resistance and disrupting what remained of their community (Burns, 2018, 114). The small scattered Catholic communities that did remain in the Lowlands and the South of Scotland were forced to hide their true religious affiliation (McInally 2014, 44). In contrast, in the Scottish Highlands, as the pre-Reformation clergy died out they were not replaced by the ministers of the Kirk. Ninety percent of Scotland's Catholics were found in a narrow band of country that stretched from the northeast coast to the western Islands. Apart from the Enzie, Strathbogie and the Garioch, all the significant Catholic areas lay within the Highlands and Islands (Watts 1999, 4). The existence of a feudal clan society in the Highlands and Islands meant that the people who lived there were bound by ties of kinship and a shared Catholic faith. Parts of the Highlands and Islands were remote, impenetrable, primitive and poor. Their Gaelic language and their dress set them apart from other areas of Scotland, but their communities were composed almost entirely of Catholics (Watts 1999, 6). There were few clergy to service the Highlands and Islands with a resulting lack of organised religious instruction and divine worship (Macdonald 1978, 56).

In the Highlands and Islands Mr Leslie was struck by the eagerness and simple devotion of the people who 'in spite of their natural ferocity were as lambs in the presence of a priest, and as firm in their faith as rocks'. 'Their cries for priests of their own never left our ears', he reported, and wherever he went people tried every means to encourage him to remain with them (Watts 1999, 6). Despite a stronghold of Catholicism in the Highlands and Islands, the implementation of various Penal

Laws and their inconsistent application across the decades and centuries made life unpredictable for Catholic orders. Despite the Statutes of Iona in 1609, by which the chiefs of the west were compelled to renounce the Catholic faith and accept the Presbyterian form of religion, many Catholics were prepared to encourage the missionaries. People gladly listened to the preaching of the Gospel of Christ as they had learned it from previous generations (Macdonald 1978, 57). As a result, missions in Scotland tended to focus on the Highlands and Islands, but the strategies undertaken did vary amongst the different orders.

The Reformation in Scotland put an end to the building of Catholic churches for over two hundred years and it is likely that the chapel at Stobhall, near Perth, which was erected in about 1578, was the last place of Catholic worship that was built in Scotland (Anson 2010, 125) until the rebuilding of St Ninian's, in the Enzie of Banffshire, in 1688 (MacDonell and McRoberts 1966, 72). Until the Catholic Relief Bill was imposed in 1793 it was a criminal offence to be present at any meeting where there was 'an altar, Mass book, vestments, Popish images, or other Popish trinkets' (Anson 2010, 125). In Scotland, as in Ireland, the celebration of Mass became a secret affair taking place in hidden places such as private chapels and homes, barns, outhouses or in the open air.

The problem faced by Catholics in Scotland was the provision of priests and several attempts were made to set up seminaries in the homeland. Thomas Innes attempted to set up a seminary at Glenlivet in the Highlands (Watts 1999, 21) and Bishop Gordon subsequently tried to set up a seminary at Eilean Bán on Loch Morar in Lochaber (Watts 1999, 24). Neither attempt was entirely successful but, in 1716, a hidden seminary was established in the Braes of Glenlivet. The main territories of the Gordons were in Aberdeen and Banff but further territories in Deeside were

acquired through marriage (Maclean 1959, 29). The Braes formed part of the Duke of Gordon's estate in Banffshire and the area was surrounded by mountains on all sides (Anson 1970, 113). Bishop Gordon had been aware that the seminary on Eilean Bán had been in a precarious position as it was too close to the coast and, therefore, vulnerable to surprise attacks by sea (Watts 1999, 26). In many aspects the sea had been a great friend to the itinerant priests who were able to move easily by boat around the coastline. In Ireland too, there were a number of hidden coastal sites where priests travelled to and from sites by boat. In 1708, authorities had identified priests landing on the coast in Schull in County Cork (Burke 1914, 176) where the Toormore Mass site may be found (Bishop 2016, 12).

Scalan lay in the parish of Inveravon which, in 1716, was a good distance from any roads and very difficult to access. Whilst a coast road ran from Inverness to Cullen, inland routes remained wild and rough. There were three reasonably well-trodden hill paths to and from Scalan in addition to one low path that crossed the great open Moss of the Carrachs (Watts 1999, 33). The house at Scalan, owned by Mr John Gordon, was constructed almost mostly from turf and is likely to have been wooden framed with turf used for the walls and roof (Watts 1999, 33). It is thought to have consisted of just two rooms that were extended to increase the space available (Watts 1999, 35).

In 1721 the General Assembly set up a special Commission to look at the persistent problem of Catholicism in the Highlands and Islands. The Commission's Report, which was presented the following year, reported that children were still receiving a Catholic education in many areas of the Gordon estates, often from private tutors or through a number of small schools that were able to cater for larger numbers of children (Watts 1999, 44). The Commission were also fully aware of the existence of

Scalan. The seminary was well known to the Kirk authorities and was considered a prime example of an alarming ‘increase of popery’ (Watts 1999, 45). The Synod of Murray, recorded in the *Report on State of Popery in Scotland*, described Scalan as a ‘dangerous nursery of popery’ (Prunier 2013,186).

Plate 1: Scalan, Braes of Glenlivet. Photograph author’s own.

By 1725 the Kirk had become far more aggressive towards Catholics, an activity that was encouraged by a grant of 1000 Crowns ‘for the reformation of the Highlands and Islands’ offered by George I (Watts 1999, 60). Persecution began in earnest in the spring of 1726 and the Gordon lands bore the brunt of it with priests and missionaries arrested and imprisoned. But it was perhaps the backlash from the Jacobite Rising in 1745 and the Battle of Culloden that had the worst impact on the seminary. Catholic clergymen became prime targets of the military occupation of the Highlands and the north-east of Scotland which continued well into the 1750s. As in Ireland, a number of priest-catchers took advantage of the laws to secure rewards leading to the arrest of priests (Prunier 2020, 39). Orders were given that all Papist chapels or places where Mass was celebrated must be demolished, and all priests arrested (Anson 1970, 146). In Lower Banffshire, four chapels were burnt to the ground (Watts 1999, 94). In the North of Scotland, immediately following the Battle of Culloden, at least ten priests were arrested and, according to William Duthy who was stationed at Scalan, priests lived ‘in continual fear’ of being searched, seized and imprisoned (Prunier 2020, 41).

With such military occupation and opposition, there was little hope for Scalan. On the morning of the 16th May 1746 a detachment of troops surrounded the seminary. Anticipating an attack, Mr Duthie, the Superior at Scalan, together with the students,

had already evacuated the property and moved their belongings out of the seminary along with furniture, bedding, crockery, cutlery, vestments, clothing, books and documents. These were hidden in places nearby and the students were dispatched to a number of different houses in the neighbourhood to hide. Mr Duthie went up into the hills to a good vantage point to view the activity (Watts 1999, 94). The orders of the troops were to destroy the seminary. Once it had been searched and found to be empty, they set fire to it and remained to watch it burn (Watts 1999, 94).

Despite the burning of Scalan, the Kirk were once again dismayed at the return of priests to the area and by 1747 they were concerned that priests were already 'trafficking openly' again so soon after the Government's punitive action. They sent formal 'Representation' to the Duke of Gordon to complain that Mass houses had been erected once more on his lands in Glenlivet and Strathavon (Watts 1999, 97). In 1749, Mr Duthie commenced work on a new house at Scalan building on what was left of the existing foundations and walls (Watts 1999, 98).

In Ireland, barns or byres were often the setting for the celebration of the Mass in Penal times. In the parish of Magherafelt, in County Derry, stories were told by parents and grandparents about Catholics passing off their plain church building as a farm building to escape hostile attention in pre-Emancipation days (Bradley 2007/8, 275). In the more rural districts of Scotland Mass was similarly celebrated in barns or byres. St Ninian's Church in Tynet, situated between Fochabars and Buckie in the Enzie district, began life as a sheepcote. Built just after the Battle of Culloden, it was lengthened in the nineteenth century to provide room for a larger congregation. Square-headed sash windows have replaced the original narrow openings in the walls (Anson 2010, 126) but this Penal chapel is still in use today.

Plate 2: St Ninian's Church, Tyney. Photograph author's own.

In Dufftown in Scotland in the 1780s Mass was celebrated in the farmhouse of Tullochallum and a complete set of religious wall hangings were kept at the location to cover the temporary altar. One of the farmer's sons had the honour of transporting the altar stone and chalice, with other necessities, from Shenval to the farmhouse. When the house was not large enough for the congregation, Mass was celebrated in a nearby 'kiln' (Roberts 1990, 227). Corn-drying kilns were part of rural life in Scotland and consisted of either free-standing stone towers (that resembled dovecotes) or a structure built on to the end of a barn. The corn was dried on wooden slats which sat above a fire, and each kiln had a 'killogie' or porch-like covered space that was large enough to shelter the kiln-man. When Mass was celebrated the 'killogie' would have provided shelter for the altar and the priest (Roberts 1990, 227-9).

Shelter for the altar and the priest was an important aspect of outdoor Catholic worship as evidenced from Ireland as early as 1614. When the Synod of Kilkenny met in June 1614, they acknowledged that Mass in profane places was justified by 'the calamity' of the times. However, they called for a canopy to be placed over the altar to ensure the dignified celebration of the Eucharist (Ó Fearghail 1990, 206). The Synod of the province of Armagh decreed in February of the same year, 'Let nobody dare to celebrate Mass in any place that is not above reproach, that is smokey or fetid, that contains the stalls of animals or is otherwise dirty; nor in places that are too dark and without enough light; but not in the open unless the number of the congregation demands it or persecutions compel it. Then care must be taken that the altar is safe from wind and rain, and from any dirt that is liable to fall on it….Moreover it must be secure, firm, large enough, not tilting, unsteady or too

narrow' (quoted in McKavanagh 1974, 15-18). In Gaelic the word *scalan* or *sgailean* were often used to refer to a cover for the altar and priest (Roberts 1990, 228).

In 1807 the priest who was in charge of the Glengarin mission in Scotland wrote that he was in a pitiable situation in Corgarff. It appears that the priest had been evicted from his home in Ordachoy which he had used as a place of worship. With nowhere else for the Catholic community to go for Mass, he operated in a 'wretched dark kiln' (Roberts 1990, 227-8 he cites from Lachlan McIntosh (Glengairn) to William Maxwell (Edinburgh), 8th September, Blairs Letters, Scottish Catholic Archives). Further evidence of a relationship between Catholic Mass sites and kilns is suggested through research conducted by Terence Maxwell in Barbados (Maxwell Personal Comment 21st February 2024).

Irish missionary priests made excellent progress in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and often celebrated Mass in the open air as they had done in Ireland, using a Mass Stone as an altar. Two such sites still exist in the traditionally Catholic district of Lochaber in the Western Highlands of Scotland and a further one on South Uist. In Vatersay, in the Outer Hebrides, there is a large stone called *Beannachan* where the priest said Mass and in Mingulay, on Barra, the priest hid at a place known locally as *Leab an t-Sagairt* (Tobar an Dualchais 2025a). In Scotland the Irish designation *Carraig an Aifrinn* or 'Mass Rock' is not used, instead they are known as *Clach na h-aifrinn* or 'Mass Stones'.

The Mass Stone on the summit Maol Doire, Brae Lochaber is a long irregular boulder which has a flat upper surface. It stands in isolation on the summit of the brae where Glen Roy opens into Glen Spean. As is typical of Mass sites, there is no documentary evidence for the celebration of Mass here, but memories and traditions

have been passed down orally from generation to generation. The Mass Stone can be easily identified through the addition of a Latin cross, but it is uncertain when this cross was added (MacDonell and McRoberts 1966, 72).

The Glen Roy Mass Stone is located where the Cranachan Road meets the road through Glen Roy, although it is not in its original position and is just a fragment of a boulder that would have originally been much larger. The stone originally stood on the righthand side of the Cranachan Road on a steep bank overhanging a burn. Initially, when the land began to erode, the stone fell into the burn but was lifted out and replaced back in its original position. However, in the late eighteenth century, the burn continued to erode so the stone was lifted again but this time placed in a safer position on the opposite side of the road (MacDonell and McRoberts 1966, 73). The Calum Maclean Project, which is based at the department of Celtic and Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, focuses upon the collected archive materials of the renowned folklorist and ethnologist Calum I. Maclean (1915-1960). On 20th January 1951 he interviewed Donald MacDonald from Bohuntine who confirmed that the stone was known as a Mass Stone because a Priest had said Mass there (The Callum Maclean Collection SSS NB 7, 654)

In contrast to the cross on the Maol Doire Mass Stone, a chalice has been carved on the Mass Stone in Glen Roy. This was done in the 1970s by Donald Campbell Macpherson (1842-80), who was a native of nearby Bohenie and a noted Gaelic scholar. He carved the chalice in order to preserve the local tradition of the stone's use for the celebration of Mass during the Penal days. The older inhabitants of the area remember that they were not allowed to play near the stone or to touch it when they were children, and that it used to be protected by a wooden fence (MacDonell and McRoberts 1966, 73). The carving on the Glen Roy Mass Stone is very similar to

the carving that can be found on the Sylane Mass Rock which is located in Corofin in County Galway in Ireland, also a post-Penal era addition.

Plate 3: Glen Roy Mass Stone, Roybridge. Photograph author's own.

Plate 4: Carving on Glen Roy Mass Stone, Roybridge. Photograph author's own.

Plate 5: Sylane Mass Rock, Corofin, County Galway, Ireland. Photograph author's own.

Plate 6: Carving on Sylane Mass Rock, Corofin, County Galway, Ireland. Photograph author's own.

Angus Cameron, who lived in the Glen Roy area, found a little silver Mass Cruet measuring just 2 ¼ inches high in the burn near the Mass Stone around 1880 (MacDonell and McRoberts 1966, 73). The letter 'A' (for Aqua) was engraved on the side of the cruet, suggesting that it would have held the water used in the Mass. The silversmith's mark indicates that it was made by James Moore who was Warden of the Dublin Guild of Goldsmiths, in the year 1837 or 1838. Presumably, the Mass Stone was still in occasional use around this time despite both a chapel at Achluachrach and a church at Bunroy having been available in the post Penal era. In Ireland, despite the availability of local chapels, Mass Rocks continued to be used in the parish of Inchigeelagh well beyond Penal times. The Mass Rock at Carriganeela was used by locals up to the 1950s and Curraheen is believed to have been used up until the appointment of Father Holland as Parish Priest in 1816 when its use was superseded by Mass in a private cottage in the village prior to the building of the Catholic church in 1842 (Ryan 1957, 27). The Mass Stone in Glen Roy could have been similarly used, perhaps for the convenience of locals nearby or simply to continue the tradition of the outdoor celebration of the Catholic Mass. This would not

be unusual in Scotland. MacDonell and McRoberts point out that religious services continued to be held out of doors in the Scottish Highlands in the nineteenth century and that the oldest inhabitants of the island of Belnahua remember how their Church of Scotland services were held in front of the cave, which gives the island its name, when fine weather permitted. It was also common in the Church of Scotland to hold part of the communion services outside the church in fine weather when the congregation was larger than usual (MacDonell and McRoberts 1966, 74).

A conversation with author Marius Kociejowski revealed that there is also a Mass Stone on South Uist where we are told by Blundell (1917) that, in 1700, Bishop Nicholson celebrated Mass in a tent on the beach and confirmed over 800 people at 12 Stations (Blundell 1917, 28). Kociejowski (2025) discusses the presence of secret Mass houses that were also used for Mass, baptisms and marriages on the island. The old crofter's cottage known as *tigh pobol* and located at Garryhallie dates to the early seventeenth century and was used to house two chests. One chest held the priest's vestments and the other possibly contained the Mass kit and altar cloth. Another secret Mass house was located at South Lochboisdale. In Cape Clear in County Cork, in Ireland, a similar chest was observed. It was found by the late Father Leader who was a Parish priest of Rath. While he was observing Stations in a house there, he observed a box in the corner of the room. He was told that there was a tradition that it was brought there by a priest in Penal times. On opening the box he found that it contained a priest's vestments and also a beautiful chalice bearing the inscription 'Convent of the Friars Minor of Timoleague' (NFCS 319, 5).

Plate 7: Mass Stone North Uist. Courtesy of Marius Kociejowski.

According to interviews undertaken by Kociejowski, the priest on South Uist would collect his vestments and Mass kit from *tigh pobol* and walk in the direction of Loch Hallan where he would say Mass. The loch extended all the way to Kilphedar and was an essential part of the island's communication and transport system. The Mass Stone sits in a small area called *Grianaig* or 'a sunny place', which soon turns into *Rudh'an t-Sagairt* or 'the peninsula of the priest' (Kociejowski 2025). It is interesting to note that there is a cross carved into the west face of this Mass Stone. An interview with Angus MacLellan (1869-1966) in the *Tobar an Dualchais* archives also revealed information concerning a further site on South Uist by the river in Frobost where a big stone was used to celebrate Mass in Penal days (Tobar an Dualchais 2025b)

Placenames such as *Rudh'an t-Sagairt* are one of the most enduring ways in which religion can influence the landscape (Park 1994, 241). These names can often include a term that is indicative of the sacred nature of a particular space (Radimilahy 2008, 85). Placenames and the narratives associated with them have often functioned as an everyday mode of commemorating past events of local significance (Beiner 2007, 210). In Ireland placenames include *Carraig an Aifrinn* or 'Mass Rock', *Clais an Aifrinn* meaning 'Mass Ravine', *Páirc an tSéipéil* or 'Chapel field', *Faill an Aifrinn* or 'Mass cliff', *Leaca na hAltora* indicating a flat stone or rock altar, *Cábán an Aifrinn* or 'Mass Cabin', *Cnocan na hAltorach* meaning 'small hill of the altar' and *Gleann an Aifrinn* indicating a 'Mass Glen'. There are similar placenames in Scotland with *Allt na h-aifrinn*, or 'Mass Burn', and *Creag an t-sagairt*, or 'Priest's Rock'. In Teanassie in Kilmorack Parish, Inverness-shire, Donal Ross of Beauly recalled a burn known as *Allt na h-aifrinn* where local tradition referred to a dell that ran alongside a burn where Mass was celebrated. This was not far from

Ardnish Point where the name of *Port na h-aifrinn*, or ‘harbour of the Mass’, commemorated the celebration of Mass there in July 1707 by Bishop James Gordon (MacDonell and McRoberts 1966, 75).

As locations of a distinctly Catholic faith, Mass sites are important historical, ritual and cultural sites that present a tangible connection to a shared heritage between Ireland and Scotland. The Jesuits and the Franciscans were the two main religious orders operating across Scotland through various Catholic Missions from the Reformation onwards. Although there were significant differences in the Scottish Catholic experience when compared to their co-religionists in Ireland, there were similarities in respect to their places of worship. Open air worship had been a feature of Catholic life in Ireland since the Reformation, and it continued to provide an opportunity for the celebration of the Eucharist in both countries until church building once again became a feature of Catholic life.

Plates

Plate 1: Scalan, Braes of Glenlivet. Photograph author’s own.

Plate 2: St Ninian’s Church, Tynet. Photograph author’s own.

Plate 3: Glen Roy Mass Stone, Roybridge. Photograph author’s own.

Plate 4: Carving on Glen Roy Mass Stone, Roybridge. Photograph author’s own.

Plate 5: Sylane Mass Rock, Corofin, County Galway, Ireland. Photograph author’s own.

Plate 6: Carving on Sylane Mass Rock, Corofin, County Galway, Ireland. Photograph author’s own.

Plate 7: Mass Stone North Uist. Courtesy of Marius Kociejowski.

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