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Experiencing maritime pilgrimage to St Mac Dara Island in Ireland: Pilgrims, hookers, and a local saint

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Abstract

With a focus on maritime pilgrimage to St Mac Dara island in Ireland, the authors discuss and examine how participation in maritime pilgrimages affects the participants and produces a unique pilgrimage experience. By using this research, the authors define the main characteristic of maritime pilgrimages and establish a point of reference for future maritime pilgrimage research, building their interpretation on ethnographic material. They argue that maritime pilgrimages produce a unique embodied experience because of the power of the seascape, which frames and shapes the experience of the pilgrims on maritime pilgrimage but also the embodied experience of the researchers. Although the reasons for going on maritime pilgrimage may change over time, and the role of the pilgrimage practice is different for the local community, the embodied experience of the pilgrims is still shaped by the seascape, becoming the most attractive and stable part of this pilgrimage.

KEYWORDS: maritime pilgrimage, pilgrimage experience, embodied experience, St Mac Dara Island seascape

Introduction

On Sunday, July 15, 2017, some twenty boats, including motorised trawlers and a few of the iconic Galway hooker sailboats with their russet-red sails and black hulls departed from the quay at Carna, on the Connemara coast of Ireland. The flotilla carried perhaps 300 pilgrims in successive waves a mere two kilometres offshore to the tiny, uninhabited Mac Dara Island. For this special event, pilgrims arrived from nearby towns and villages along with others who came from faraway places in Europe and the Americas, many returning to the ancestral home specifically to take part in the *Féile Mhic Dara* (Mac Dara Festival).[1] Local residents, spurred on by the restoration of the island's 12th-century church in the 1970s, helped in reviving the nearly forgotten pilgrimage. Of the man and the pilgrimage bearing his name, journalist Kate Phelan (2017) writes:

> This 6th-century hermit saint cuts something of an enigmatic figure, with little in the way of historical records to illuminate him. But what is known for sure is that St. Mac Dara is believed to offer protection to sailors, fishermen and all who brave stormy seas … The annual festival held in his name is one of the most important days on the region's calendar … Imbued with a deep sense of shared local custom and spirituality—and believed to keep mariners safe throughout the year with a Mass held in honour of his life. Participants enjoy some time on the island before being ferried back home in the afternoon, where festivities continue in Carna in the form of live music and céilidh dances.

In this brief passage, contemporaneous to our visit to Mac Dara, we see nostalgia and folklore coupled with religion and recreation in an unproblematic way. However much more of interest lies beneath the surface of this pilgrimage. The Mac Dara pilgrimage paradoxically preserves a familiar, ancient religious ritual structure with prescribed movement connected to translocation over water, now put in service for the promotion of local heritage and advancement of the decidedly secular interests in the present. There are several well-known and thoroughly studied pilgrimages in Ireland including St. Patrick's Purgatory at Lough Derg (Maddrell & Scriven, 2016; Griffin, 2007; Lehrhaupt, 1985; Nolan, 1983; Carleton, 1881), Our Lady of Knock Shrine (Walsh, 2000; Lehrhaupt, 1985; Nolan, 1983), Croagh Patrick (Gibbons, 2014; Shovlin, 1991) and many

[1] Although the journalist Kate Phelan (2017) writes about this event as a festivity, we should be aware that the festive part that includes regatta of the sailing boats and socialising in the local pub is just a part of the pilgrimage. The locals refer to this religious practice as pilgrimage, which enables us to also observe it and interpret it as such. Our key local informant explained to us during the interview: 'We usually have, as I said, all other activities, a festival would usually be a weekend before or the weekend after. You are familiar with the Galway Hookers, the regatta of the second class of those or the largest, would always take on the McDara day, it is also the national the biggest race on the 16th July… But you know what, its something that even if we did not have much of any of other activities around the festival, the actual pilgrimage would always be there.'

local-level pilgrimages to holy wells (Ray, 2010, 2015; Carroll, 1999; Logan, 1980), which we draw into a limited comparison with Mac Dara.

However, what makes this pilgrimage special and different from many others, and what motivated our research interest in it, are its maritime aspects. Maritime pilgrimages are ritual practices that include boat travel for persons or icons as part of the actual ritual structure. Translocation of the sacred object and/or people also includes processing towards or over the sea to a location that has historical and/or folkloric connections with the object or the pilgrimage place. The pilgrimage to MacDara Island qualifies as it requires one to go by boat. Since there is no dock, the boat has to be small enough to approach the shore, and both pilgrims and visitors have to be nimble enough to jump off the boat and traverse the submerged boulders to get to the shore. This maritime pilgrimage resembles many others that sacralise the mariners and the sea (Gertwagen, 2006; Remensnyder, 2018).[2] It emerges in specific geographical contexts where the population is oriented towards the sea where the basic resources and determinants of the local life, economics, culture and religion are found.

Maritime pilgrimages are about the relationship between mariners' religious beliefs, changes of everyday life, tourism, heritage, migrations, but also in some cases national identity, political economy, and the institutionalisation and heritagisation of the practices and sites. Hence, the effort to interpret them should likewise focus on the role played by the sea and seascape in forming and framing myriad cultural practices. We employ the concept of maritime pilgrimages as an etic analytic framework through which we observe the St Mac Dara pilgrimage. For our interlocutors and the participants, these are just pilgrimages, but from our outsiders' point of view, these are pilgrimages framed, formed, and created in strict connection to the seascape and maritime way of living.[3]

The main aim of this paper is to discuss and to examine, using the example of the maritime pilgrimage to St Mac Dara island, how participation in maritime pilgrimages affects the participants and produces a unique pilgrimage experience. By focusing on experiences, we want to define the main characteristic of the maritime pilgrimages and es-

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[2] Since January 2020, co-author of this paper Mario Katić is the prime investigator (PI) of Croatian Science Foundation research project titled Adriatic Maritime Pilgrimages in Local, National, and Transnational Context. The aim of this five year research project is to investigate maritime pilgrimages in Nin, Kukljica, Kornati (Croatia) and Perast (Monte Negro).

[3] A number of maritime pilgrimages are held around the world, such as Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer in France (Badone 2008), Virgen de Carmen in Spain, Madonna of Zečevo in Croatia, Madonna of Tarac in Croatia, Madonna of the Snow in Croatia, Madonna of the Rock in Monte Negro, Our Lady of the Navigators in Portugal, Santo Niño in Guatemala, Bom Jesus dos Navegantes in Brazil, etc.

tablish a point of reference for future maritime pilgrimage research. Although our methodological approach is elaborated in detail in the present paper, it is necessary to mention here that we visited the village of Carna before the pilgrimage going with the members of the local organising committee and local fishermen to the island to make the preparations for the pilgrimage, we also participated in the pilgrimage, and we had several interviews with the main organisers, a local priest, and former members of the organising committee three months after the pilgrimage event.

Mac Dara and his island

The enigmatic St. Sionnach Mac Dara, patron saint of fishers and sailors, a Christian convert, in the early 6th century sought a life of contemplation on the island but soon attracted a following of other hermits. As with many other local saints, little is known about Mac Dara from historical data (Berger, 1995; Harbison, 1991). Padráig Ó Riain notes, 'few saints have continued to attract as much devotion as Mac Dara, alias Sionach (Seanach) whose pattern is still observed annually on July 16' (Ó Riain, 2011, p. 416). Contrastingly, he receives only a passing mention in Seán Ó Súilleabháin's *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (1963, p. 554). Despite the dearth of attention from hagiographers, the man and his life are well known in the oral traditions of the Connemara region (Harbison, 1991).

The island proper lies adjacent to a landmass known as the Iorras Aithneach (pronounced *aye yor us eighth neach*), a name translating into English to mean the Windy or Stormy Peninsula. Carna and Cill Chíaráin are the two main villages in the parish of Moyrus located in a remote Gaeltacht (Irish Speaking) region with both landscape and culture orienting people toward the sea. Fishing in the numerous coves and a few barrier islands in Cill Chíaráin Bay has been a valuable cultural and economic resource for many generations. In his book, *Connemara: A Little Gaelic Kingdom* (2011), Tim Robinson, devotes an entire chapter to Mac Dara Island which he calls the "sheltering island" alluding to its importance as a place of refuge for fishers and travellers who might be hit by sudden stormy weather.

Although there is no contemporary ethnographic work on the St Mac Dara pilgrimage, there are several interesting and useful records that cover almost two centuries of the pilgrimage's past. These records include accounts of antiquarians searching for oral traditions and Irish heritage, as well as the works of travel writers and local enthusiasts. Vignettes of past pilgrimages reveal important features of past practices and provide a ready source of comparison and allow us to outline changes over time.

Writing about Connemara holy wells, in 1856 an anonymous writer (A Worshiper) mentioned the St Mac Dara holy well and described the geographic catchment area of the pilgrimage in those days:

> M'Darah's day is July 16, when hundreds of boats assemble there, each containing from 10 to 50 persons. If the weather be fine, the numbers are immense, coming from County Clare, Arran, Galway, and all along the coast from that round to Shirehead, or even Clifden, being a seaboard or between 90 and 140 miles.

In addition, the account provides details about the rites and ritual formula employed by participants:

> … in performing the station, each person commences by blessing himself, as it is called, 'in the name of the Father', then says the Lord's prayer, and going round the well from east to west, walking or on the bare knees, repeats seven Ave-Marias, and on coming to the starting point, repeats the Apostles' Creed. This is repeated seven times, and then the worshiper sprinkles himself with the water in the well, and when this is done the station is performed… (ibid.)

Another more detailed account of the Mac Dara pilgrimage by the antiquarian Francis Joseph Bigger, written in 1896,

> … the Saint's festivals are celebrated on the July 16 and September 28, on which occasions many of the inhabitants of the mainland pay their devotions to the Saint. A festival had been held two days previous to our visit last July, on which occasion, the day being stormy, only about 100 pilgrims had visited Cruach Mac Dara. The beaten tracks around the 'stations' were traceable, whilst little piles of stones, evidently counters, were to be seen at the corners. The well was dry, and its basin contained a few odd personal trifles …. (p. 103)

As with the previous passage, this description situates the pilgrimage in time and adds important references to the type of religious activities in which pilgrims would have engaged during their annual visit to the island. The reference to stations, counters and a well with trifles indicate that worship practices on Mac Dara in that era resemble in material terms, the votive practices found at holy wells elsewhere in Ireland (see Ray, 2015). The dual importance on the sacred places and religious practices is manifested in the following description of protective practices employed by fishermen, in honour of the saint, asking for his blessing and his help in fishing.

According to Bigger (1896):

> The boats that pass between Mason Head and this island have a custome to bow down their sailes three times in reverence to the Saint. A certain captain of the garrison of Galway, Anno 1672, passing this way and neglecting that custome, was so tossed with sea and storme, that he vowed he would never pass there again without paying his obeisance to the Saint; but he never returned home till he was cast away by shipwrack soon after. A few years after, one Gill, a fisherman of Galway, who would not strike saile, in contempt of the Saint, went not a mile beyond that road, when, sitting on the pup of the boat, the mast, by a contrary blast of wind, broke, and struck him on the pate dead, the day being fair weather both before and after. (p. 103)

The contemporary pilgrimage, according to our key local informant Mr O'Conghaile was revived by him, and his few friends from his generation, in the 1960s together with regatta of the sailing boats. In 1975, the roof of the church was re-constructed by the Office of Public Works, and Archbishop Cunnane co-celebrated Mass with nine priests on the island and a great gathering of people (O'Conghaile, 1996).

The most recent scholarly description of the pilgrimage is written by Peter Harbison (1991). He deftly captures the changing emphasis in the pilgrimage event.

> The modern pilgrimage, a rather joyful and colourful affair …, consists of a Mass said at around 1 pm on a makeshift altar at the eastern end of the church, recited in Irish, as is the homily, by the parish priest of Carna. During Mass, another priest sits a little distance apart in the Saint's 'bed', hearing confessions. As soon as Mass is over, a musician strikes up some music on an accordion, giving a festive character to the occasion. If the wind is right, the hookers foregathered offshore sail around the island in an afternoon regatta, by which time most of the pilgrims have been ferried back to the mainland. St MacDara's pilgrimage is one of the last pilgrimages along the west coast of Ireland which is still able to attract hundreds from the surrounding countryside and further afield—one of the last surviving links, surely, of a tradition which brings us back many centuries to the early days of Christianity in Ireland—if not before. (p. 99)

While the sources are sporadic, the general arc of change indicates that the religious practices connected to folk beliefs being performed at the pilgrimage have diminished in importance over time. The pilgrimage that we came to observe and participate in was already framed by festive, social, identitarian, and economic aspects of the pilgrimage starting to take the dominant role over the religious aspect.

Mac Dara associates place with a person, religion as well, but in this case, a more localised identity. Irish Catholicism, *sensu* Carroll (1999), marks its presence on Mac Dara in a different way. The restored Cruach Mac Dara (Mac Dara's Oratory) is a lauded specimen of Irish Ecclesiastical architecture (Harbison 1991). It is an important material testament to the saint's legacy and the history of religious power or lack thereof on the island. However, the church, much like the Galway hooker, serves as a symbol of identity for the local community, region, and even the country. Images of Cruach Mac Dara are displayed in an outdoor exhibit and the stained glass windows of the nearby, mainland church. Images of the island oratory are found in photographs on the walls of the pub and hotel and on t-shirts and other souvenir items. There was also a postage stamp bearing the image of Mac Dara's Oratory issued by the Republic of Ireland in 1983. The public display and consumption of this sacred image, however modest, underscore the significant contribution of the ancient monastic communities to Irish national identity. It serves to link the early saints and modern times, while simultaneously reinforcing local people's identification with a place whose role now includes promoting their lifeways in broader arenas of consumption. In this manner we can observe how pilgrimage to St Mac Dara, similar to other pilgrimages, as argued by Coleman and Eade (2018), are not in competition with secular assumptions but are actually articulating with them.

Owing to many factors, including out-migration, external regulations and markets, the artisanal fishing economy has diminished significantly in economic importance over recent decades in this part of Galway (Macken-Walsh, 2012). Despite this, the sea remains an important point of reference in a variety of local knowledge-forms including folklore and the geography of local fishing. Traditional boat building remain closely tied with the traditional small-scale fishing economy (ibid.) and has been revived somewhat by interests in preserving distinctive local watercraft (Walsh 2004).

The maritime pilgrimage to St. Mac Dara Island in 2017: Setting the context

With great deference to local custom, we began our visit to the village of Carna by meeting in its pub, which was owned coincidentally by one of the pilgrimage' principal organisers. The pub is located just off the main highway and is located in an old building that was formerly a hotel and private residence (Robinson, 2011). Upon entering the pub, it becomes immediately evident that these people are very much connected to the sea. The entire pub is decorated with photos, models of ships, fishermen, and images of the stone church and the island of St Mac Dara speak to their importance.

The pub serves as an important node of articulation for the pilgrimage. People begin and end their pilgrimage experience here. Most pilgrims gather in the big parking lot in front of the pub. Here they leave their cars, as we did, and hop on the local bus to takes them as close as possible to the Mace Head—a dock from where the pilgrims travel by boat to Mac Dara island. Likewise, after the pilgrimage concludes, the pub fills with the recent pilgrims who now assume another role with traditional Irish music setting the mood. As far as we have detected, excluding locals, the pilgrims going through pub are mostly interested visitors that are there to have fun and to participate in a very interesting and exotic practice of going to a small island on a pilgrimage by boat. In addition to the pub, Carna has a local hotel where pilgrims from outside of Carna or surrounding areas spend the night. On the day of the pilgrimage, we came to the hotel for breakfast and found ourselves in the company of a group of Irish-American expatriates from Carna and the region who return not only to participate in the pilgrimage but also to connect with their roots and enjoy a family gathering.

Image 1: Photos of the Galway Hooker and the stone church from the island of St Mac Dara in the local Carna pub (photo by authors)

The local parish church features a stained glass image of St Mac Dara church on the front windows, as well as an outdoor exhibit with information about the island and its namesake. On the day of the pilgrimage, the local priest is invited to say Mass on the island, but that is the extent of the involvement by religious authorities. Moreover, as the 2017 pilgrimage took place on a Sunday, the clergy had to coordinate the Mass offering

on the island with the regularly scheduled services in the village church. This juggling act demonstrates the importance to and the interdependence with the local community and this pilgrimage event.

At least two sub-groups of the local pilgrims to Mac Dara Island could be defined based on their religiosity. The first group includes an older generation, primarily of women, who still consider Mac Dara's day to be a religious pilgrimage and act in the manner of religious pilgrims. On the island, we met several women paying rounds around one of the altars, praying and circling seven times, as tradition requires, and as noted in the older descriptions of the pilgrimage.

However, there is also the younger generation to which the main organisers also belong. These people are in their late thirties and early forties and seem less interested in the religious aspect of this pilgrimage. As a group, they possess only a very vague knowledge about the oral traditions and the history of the pilgrimage. Our principal informant candidly admitted that she was not a practising Catholic but often felt a spiritual presence when she visited Mac Dara:

I am a baptised Catholic but I am not into Catholic church but I am still very much, when I am on that island there is something, I am not sure, but there is something amazingly, we were out there and it was a late evening and we had to rush to the sea and there was a shower coming in and we had to hurry and as soon as, three or four of us, and as soon as we got there it just stopped, everything stopped. Its amazingly peaceful and spiritual, there is something. I don't know what it is but I always believed that from a very early age that there is something special, there is something, even on the day itself when you could have literary over a thousand of people on the island in the same time. I am not religious, and I don't believe in the Catholic church, but it does not mean I don't believe in spirituality. And I do believe that there was this man and that he built this church but that does not mean he had the same beliefs as the catholic church, I doubt very much he did. So you know, Christianity or whatever you might called it has changed some much and I do believe in spirituality and I think he might have, I would say his spirituality was based more on nature and he was obviously a hermit, and I am not being disrespectful to the church, it was the church that kept the beauty of it, and even those who do not practice their faith would go on the mass on this day and never go to mass on any other day. It is centred around Catholicism, but that doesn't mean that you can't find a good in it.

As noted above, we observed a woman paying the rounds at an altar site. Her daughter was sitting near the altar and looking at the sea waiting for her to finish. Not wanting to

disturb the woman we approached her daughter and asked about her mother's praying but she was unable to explain what her mother was doing or how the pilgrimage had been performed in the past. She was also unaware of the place around which her mother was walking. Her answer to all the questions was that we would have to ask her mother. While anecdotal, this response illustrates an interesting paradox. There is a lack of knowledge about the pilgrimage, but the event is continuing through an emphasis on its cultural dimensions. The deterioration of oral tradition and knowledge about the places on the island is visible from the explanation from the pilgrims we saw paying the rounds. While engaged in an overtly religious and devotional practice, people disagreed about the correct number of rounds a person was required to make. One woman provided some insight into how much the oral traditions and folk knowledge about Mac Dara have deteriorated when she explained that she was making rounds around the grave of St Mac Dara. However, other local informants and the literature locate the bed (grave) of Mac Dara closer to the church. It turns out that she was, in fact, walking around an altar.

A variety of sources, including the literature cited from the 1980s and 1990s, and interviews with local informants, support the view that knowledge about the traditions of the pilgrimage has become vague. For example, the current organisers of the pilgrimage are very enthusiastic about the event but do not seem to be burdened with much factual knowledge. They were unaware if and where St Mac Dara is buried on the island. Furthermore, while historical references include descriptions about the *stations*, the current organisers are unable to locate the stations that pilgrims formerly visited and prayed around? As noted above, there is general uncertainty as to what kind of prayers and how many circles one should make around them.

In short, the organisers have no more knowledge about the pilgrimage than would a first-time visitor, who learned about Mac Dara through reading articles online which could be connected with the fact that most of them are not really religious. A majority of people are not actively participating in the Mass held on the island, but looking around, socialising, having fun, and similar. Some of them are tourists and visitors that do not even understand the Mass since it was presented in Irish language, but others were locals—young people and organisers who were out and about around the island. Based on our interviews, it seems that the locals were more excited by the Hookers regatta rather than attending the Mass or doing the stations around the island. They respect the tradition and want to keep the pilgrimage since it is very important for their local identity and heritage but also economically. The pilgrimage draws visitors, tourists, and immi-

grants; the pub, hotel, and the local shops all benefit from the pilgrimage. This was made sharply evident when we visited Carna again in October of the same year; the pub and hotel were both empty even on a Saturday evening. As our main informant explained to us:

> I think there is something especially locally here, people who live in other countries in emigration and they come home because of this, somebody described this last year it's like another Christmas, half into the year, you know, people come home for Christmas and for St MacDaras for like weakly holiday or whatever it is. You know people who live in the UK or in the States or in other countries, so you know, it is a definitely a very special thing for this area. So, July 16, whatever day that falls, every single year, that's the day everyone comes, it's like a local holiday. Some people obviously have to work and don't have too much choice, but a lot of people make sure they have taken that day off, and we go to the island.

Experiencing pilgrimage and the contemporary research of Irish pilgrimages

Pilgrimage studies have recently become a well-developed field (Turner & Turner, 1978; Eade & Sallnow, 1991; Morinis, 1992a; Dubisch, 1995; Frey, 1998; Eade & Coleman, 2004; Reader, 2005, 2013; Eade & Katić, 2014; Katić, McDonald, & Klarin 2014; Eade & Albera, 2015, 2017; Eade & Katić, 2017). However, it is only after more than two decades (Turner & Turner, 1978; Nolan, 1983; Harbinson, 1992) that scholars began to consider Irish pilgrimages in more detail and within the context of contemporary pilgrimage studies debates (Maddrell & Scriven, 2016; Scriven, 2018).

In addressing pilgrimage as a form of sacred mobility, Avril Maddrell and Richard Scriven observe contemporary pilgrimages at Lough Derg, Ireland, and in the Isle of Man within a regional historical geography of the medieval Celtic church and its continued influence today (Maddrell & Scriven, 2016). They highlight how, in the Celtic pilgrimage tradition, the embodied experiences of pilgrims provide insight into their practices, meanings, and associated power relations (ibid.). The contemporary pilgrims visiting St Patrick's island withdraw from their everyday lives, and sacrifice food and sleep over a three-day period in order to replicate the ascetic ethos of Celtic saints (ibid.). Pilgrims are also required to refrain from using mobile phones and other electronic devices in order to disengage from contemporary society (ibid.). Lough Derg is a highly structured pilgrimage that shapes the pilgrimage experience creating circumstances 'for meaningful moments and fellowship, alongside emotional and spiritual

encounters' (ibid., 309). There is even an official shrine policy requiring pilgrims to be fit and able to walk, fast, and endure twenty-four hours without sleep. Maddrell and Scriven see this as a way of preserving the originality and authenticity of the pilgrimage (ibid.).

It is interesting to note that in this creation of the illusion of originality and authenticity, the focus is on the island itself. However, the journey towards to island is neglected as an authentic and meaningful sacred element of the pilgrimage to Lough Derg. Maddrell and Scriven draw attention to the fact that as an island, Lough Derg creates 'a reflective liminal state which reflects its physical marginality' (ibid., p. 317), but it seems that the journey over the water to the island is not construed as an "official" part of the experience embodied by pilgrims. In contrast, "Praying the Keeills" on the Isle of Man is completely informal and free from institutional regulation and support. The landscape itself is seen as a spiritual resource and context for the experience as well as the medieval keeills themselves (ibid.). The maritime pilgrimage to St Mac Dara is more similar to Praying the Keeills than it is to the Lough Dergh pilgrimage. It is also informal in its organisation and more open to diverse pilgrims' experiences influenced by the landscape, but it is even more influenced by the seascape since the journey to the island by boats is the most important part of the St Mac Dara pilgrimage. Maddrell and Scriven's emphasis on embodied experience—movement that effects sensorial, emotional and affective stimulus—is methodologically and interpretively relevant for our research of the St Mac Dara maritime pilgrimage.

Expanding on this theme, in the introduction to the 2011 edition of Victor and Edith Turner's book, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, Deborah Ross emphasises that:

> … the Turners fostered and encouraged the "anthropology of experience", the idea that the anthropologist must exist fully inside the experience of those being studied. This approach would encourage the anthropologist' s own reflexive awareness as part of the fieldwork process. (p. xxxiii)

However, in *Image and Pilgrimage*, the Turner's do not write or use the experience perspective. Only in the conclusion of the book do they reference the importance of the experience and they do so in the context of explaining one of their most important concepts connected to the pilgrimage experience—*communitas*—presenting it as a feeling of endless power, and as a fact of everyone's experience (Turner & Turner, 1978).

It was Alan Morini (1992a) who first emphasised the methodological aspect of the experience while researching pilgrimage:

> There are methodological difficulties in trying to understand the highly individualised world of sight, sound, and smell, but we cannot neglect what the pilgrim may view as of utmost importance, what might motivate his journey, and what, in the end, may leave the most lasting impression. (p. 17)

In the context of maritime pilgrimage to St Mac Dara Island, the journey over the sea to a small, uninhabited island characterised by the medieval church is what influences the experience of this pilgrimage and leaves the most lasting impression on visitors.

Morinis (1992b) also touched on the problem of framing the pilgrim's experience:

> Many pilgrimages specify what a pilgrim must see, hear, touch, and taste. Austerities like fasting, self-mutilation, fire-walking, hook-swinging, and the like, which are common features of pilgrimage, also concern direct experience. It is valid to conceptualise pilgrimages as cultural channels along which individuals pass, carrying out actions (often specified) in pursuit of predictable experiences. (p. 21)

His comments are easily applicable to contemporary pilgrimages such as St Patrick's Purgatory. In its formality, it imposes the *right* experience of the pilgrimage evoking the time and place that no longer exists. In contrast, the contemporary St Mac Dara pilgrimage is more reflective of changes that have occurred over the last several decades in Ireland generally. However, it still offers a unique experience of the 21st-century maritime pilgrimage.

Although all pilgrimages involve some measure of an embodied experience, this aspect comes forth, especially in maritime pilgrimages. As Ian Reader emphasises, 'Pilgrims see and experience the pilgrimage in different ways, depending on their modes of transport' (2005: 188). Traveling by boat creates a different bodily and thus spiritual experience. Most immediately, the traveller does not exert the same level of physical energy or effort when travelling by boat. Furthermore, the sea is a 'dangerous and alien environment…in which man is poorly equipped to survive, … a realm that man enters only with the support of artificial devices' (Acheson, 1981, p. 276). Therefore, the pilgrim traversing water faces greater physical and perhaps spiritual risk while in transit to the sacred site than would a walking pilgrim. According to Phelan (2007):

> At sea the body is no longer central to perception. The combination of wind and waves takes effect not on the body but on the boat…size, depth and distance, position and direction, become relative to the boat, no longer relative to the person.

> The lived body still perceives, but this experience of the world is mediated through technology (p. 3).

We do not want to romanticise the maritime pilgrimage experience. We realise that many pilgrims arrive at Carna by cars and aeroplanes, as we both did coming from the United States of America and Croatia, respectively, but we argue that the real maritime pilgrim experience starts when reaching the docks and seeing the island and shapes of the church of St Mac Dara for the first time, and then travelling there with the only possible way—by boat—which is the most important aspect of the maritime pilgrimages both for the pilgrims and for the researcher.

In contrast, the meaning of the experience is ascribed by a particular form of movement, in this case travelling by boat, but also through the ways in which pilgrims derive meaning through their practice (Maddrell, 2011). This practice is framed, and meaning and experience are given, through the context of the seascape. Pilgrims embodied experience of landscape can easily be used to explain the embodied experience of seascape while travelling on boat since pilgrims in the same way encounter the seascape: 'visually and materially, engaging with it kinetically, sensually and imaginatively, both seeing and becoming part of the picture, literally and metaphorically marking and being marked by it (Maddrell, 2011, p. 17).

Since our main methodological approach was ethnographic research based on our participant observation of the pilgrimage, we want to emphasise how participant observation allows the ethnographer to approximate the sensory experiences of other pilgrims. We have also conducted interviews with the locals and pilgrimage organisers during visits to the village both before and a few months after the pilgrimage. This allowed us to see that the pilgrimage event stands in stark contrast to the regular pace of life. The village itself, but also the main *topoi* of the village—the pub and hotel—are all much quieter without the influx of visitors and pilgrims.

Doing our research and writing about this maritime pilgrimage, we have adopted an approach developed by Jill Dubisch (1995) when researching pilgrimage in Greece:

> I have not isolated my own response and experiences from other kinds of 'data', but rather have sought to integrate them in a way that I hope will allow them to serve as a 'window' for the reader as well as a pathway to theoretical insights. Such an approach gives fieldwork itself a central place in the development of anthropological theory. (p. 6)

Using this approach, we have put our experience on the central place using it to present and interpret maritime pilgrimage to St Mac Dara island. However, our experience is, as with every other pilgrim, influenced and shaped by other pilgrims and literature, by the talks and interviews that we had with the pilgrims and organisers, by historical objects and sites, the landscape and seascape. Hence, it is a result of what Ian Reader (2005) calls the 'emotional landscape of pilgrimage':

> … a term that incorporates not just the geographical features and structures that provide a setting for the pilgrimage, but also nonphysical matters that shape the emotional terrain in which pilgrims voyage. (p. 5)

Our embodied experience of the emotional landscape and seascape of maritime pilgrimage to St Mac Dara island resulted in our ethnographic vignette of the pilgrimage in 2017, together with our later visit to the village of Carna, the interviews we have conducted and the literature we have addressed. We have developed a description of an experience of a particular maritime pilgrimage that, we argue, depicts the main characteristics of experience involving maritime pilgrimage, in general.

Experiencing the maritime pilgrimage

As we have already argued, the folk beliefs and local religious practices connected to the sacred landscape of the island appear to be less important than they were in the past. In contrast, the key structural element—the journey over water—has remained significant as a defining feature of this pilgrimage. Regardless if you are a local or a visitor, as we were, you share equally in the enthusiasm and excitement while waiting for the boats to transfer you across to the sacred island as people have done for centuries.

We became personally aware of this key experience in maritime pilgrimage and its methodological significance even before the official pilgrimage event. Two days before the actual event, we met the owner of the pub and one of the organisers. We were invited to join two other members of the organising committee who were planning to visit the island of St Mac Dara in order to cut the grass and clean a bit around the church before the pilgrimage. We met them in the pub and had a couple of pints with them talking about pilgrimage and getting to know each other. At the appointed hour, we took a small open boat over to Mac Dara, but the sea was quite restless with big waves coming in from the Atlantic.

At the beginning of our journey, we asked one of them, a fisherman and boat maker, who personally made the boat we were driving if there would be a pilgrimage in two days if the sea were like this. He answered with laughter and answered, 'Of course not.'

Image 2: The view on the island from the Mace on our first visit (photo by authors)

Image 3: The boat that took us to the island (photo by authors)

We then asked if there would be a regatta, and he gave us a similar answer. Yet, here we were, heading out to the island in a tiny boat with three men we had met only two hours before in a pub. At that point, we asked ourselves if we were crazy to go out to the is-

land in weather like this. As we moved away for Mace and towards the island a couple of waves completely flushed the boat, soaking us with cold North Atlantic seawater.

Image 4: During our drive with the view on the island and sea (photo by authors)

During the twenty-minute voyage to the island, and back, we had our own, unique, embodied experiences of a maritime pilgrimage. As a passenger on an open boat in restless seas, you are more-or-less helpless and dependent on the sea and skills of the skipper. This state of vulnerability perhaps opens one up to a different spiritual realm but as an embodied experience, it gave us a glimpse of why fishermen may have started this pilgrimage, and why they needed a divine intervention and help. Situated between the harbour and open sea, St Mac Dara Island offers safe haven to fishermen and sailors, who are caught in dangerous seas and unable to reach the mainland.

As with any other pilgrimage, maritime pilgrimages reflect two general characteristics defined by Victor and Edith Turner: *liminality* and *communitas* (1978). As an island, similar to St Patrick's Purgatory, MacDara arguably, possesses more potential for liminality than would be found on a remote lake island (Maddrell & Scriven, 2016). On the other hand, the pilgrims' solidarity and communitas is also very important. Without the boats

you could not visit the island, you could not be the pilgrim so the role of the local community and the volunteers is extremely important in providing the transportation. Our own experience with the pilgrimage aligns with all the written accounts of the Mac Dara pilgrimage, all of which highlight the fact that the local fishermen provide transport on their boats from Mace to the island and back, free of charge, which is very important to all of them—something that makes them proud but is also a massive effort. All of them have to make the round for several times before all the pilgrims are safely transported to the island, and then, later on, they have to make the same rounds to get the pilgrims safely back. The pilgrims and the boat owners spend more time waiting for the boats, crossing the sea, and then waiting again to get back, than they spend participating in the Mass or on the island. In terms of time allocation alone, this pilgrimage is more about going to the island and travelling towards it, than spending time on the island itself.

Image 5: Approaching the island with shot blurred by the sea (photo by authors)

The experience of the journey and of the island was completely different on the day of the pilgrimage when hundreds of pilgrims were waiting to be transported; the Mace dock and the shores of the island were covered with the pilgrims. Two days after our unnerving experience with rough weather in an open boat, we reached the island again. However, this time it looked and felt like a different place. The entire island was covered in sunshine; it looked tame and cheery. At the same time, it was covered with pilgrims strolling around the island exploring its intriguing places, and trying to find the best lo-

cation for a picnic. Most of the pilgrims had food and drink with them, some of them laid around sleeping or enjoying the scenery, and only a few were praying and making rounds. It was a fascinating image to see seagulls flying above dozens of boats carrying hundreds of pilgrims towards shores. As there is no dock on Mac Dara, smaller boats ferried the passengers from larger vessels to the shore. At a glance, one would think that all of this was highly organised and not the spontaneous, voluntary happening that it actually is. Illustrating Turner's concepts of communitas, here we saw a mixture of local religious pilgrims, local enthusiasts, migrants, visitors, tourists and anthropologists. All were equally accepted, transferred and taken back.

Image 6: Disembarking on the island, completely wet (photo by authors)

Because of the different weather and the gathering, our perception and the experience of the island also changed—from a gloomy un-friendly place in shadows of the clouds, two days earlier, to a pleasant, picturesque place covered with happy and friendly people. If we had not visited the island two days earlier, we would not have this *knowledge*, feelings, and awareness. This fact is also important from a methodological point of view. The surroundings, the seascape around us, the boats bringing pilgrims, the view of the old Hookers anchored in the bay off the island, and then the reconstructed medieval Church of St Mac Dara, grave and the stations, all stimulated our senses and emotions. Romantic at times, and revealing at others. This experience and effects that the pilgrimage has is the same for all the pilgrims there, although, some of them came out of curiosity, seeking new experiences, and others were interested in the past and heritage. Just a

small number seemed to be religiously motivated. An elderly local woman we met, had been coming to pilgrimage since she was a small child. After paying her rounds, she sat on a stone near the church, attended the Mass and went home. Others were exploring the island, eating, drinking, playing with their children and dogs, sleeping—enjoying themselves—looking more at the seascape than towards the church and the Mass.

Image 7: Getting ready to leave Mace (photo by authors)

It was also a completely different experience for us as well since we had an opportunity to cross the bay, sailing on the restored hooker. We went with the same guy that took us over two days earlier, this time he offered to take us to the island on his hooker. We had to use another boat to reach the hooker anchored just beyond Mace. When he set sail, caught the wind, and sailed towards the island, we were exposed to a feeling that could be compared to feelings and emotions felt by so many other pilgrims before us. The only word that could come close to explain the feeling is perhaps *impressive*. Of course, our interpretation and emotions were coloured by our background is not to be compared with the emotions of a local fisherman whose life and heritage is represented by these more than hundred-year-old sailing boats. Our experience with the restless sea two days earlier, reach another level when we realised that this boat is guided and depended exclusively on the wind and sea. It helped us to try and understand those old legends about monks taking off in their small boats on sail and letting the wind decide the way (Harbinson, 1992). It also makes us think about fishermen's dipping their sail to St Mac Dara asking him to help them and give them good weather.

Image 8: Pilgrims disembarking on the island (photo by authors)

Image 9: Pilgrims during the Mass on the island (photo by authors)

In contrast, it showed us the identarian and touristic potential of these practices re-evaluating historical and architectural national heritage, regional maritime heritage, and local folklore heritage. It made clear to us why more and more people that are not connected to this region are interested in St Mac Dara pilgrimage, why emigrants are com-

ing back home to show their native home and heritage to their children, and why the local community is putting so much effort in sustaining this pilgrimage.

Image 10: Pilgrims leaving the island and waiting to be transported to that mainland (photo by authors)

Nevertheless, the St Mac Dara pilgrimage site is not also tourist-oriented but more for the locals. We can see that from a few anecdotes from our fieldwork, from when we were becoming acquainted with the pilgrimage, a position that could be compared to a first-time pilgrim/visitors. For example, during our interviews with the pub owner and fishermen, we later joined in cleaning around the church, they did not mention that there is no dock on St Mac Dara island, that only small boats can approach and that you have to jump from the boat onto the shore. For them, this information is well known, and there is no need to discuss it, but for a visitor/tourist that means that she/he has to be fit, healthy and wear adequate shoes and clothes. The very morning of the pilgrimage we learned from the bus driver taking pilgrims from the pub to Mace that they will not let us on the boats if we did not have life-jackets. Luckily, the pub owner stepped up again and saved the day by securing us two pairs. Needless to say that these kinds of "minor" details would be first on the list for tourist guide taking pilgrims to St Mac Dara pilgrimage, and you would find several shops specialised in water proof shoes, sun cremes, and life-jackets in Carna. Since there are no such shops, it is safe to conclude that this pilgrimage is not yet part of the religious tourist and pilgrimage market (Reader, 2013).

In contrast, most of the people that we met during our bus ride from the pub parking place to Mace were not locals, and all of them were on their first pilgrimage to St Mac Dara. During the short walk from where the bus left us to the Mace dock, we deliberately spoke with senior pilgrims, hoping to hear a description of what the pilgrimage looked like when they were young. To our great surprise, all of the "older" pilgrims were actually retired Irish pensioners living in Spain, visiting Carna for the summer, and came to see what the pilgrimage to Mac Dara was all about. This tourist-entertainment-economic aspect was limited to two trucks, one of which sold food, drink and t-shirts with St Mac Dara church on them; the other truck was closed and, after the Mass and the return of the pilgrims to Mace, the tarp was raised, and we realised it is a stage on wheels from which a traditional Irish band was playing music.

Our pilgrimage, like that of many other pilgrims, began and ended in the only local pub owned by one of the main organisers of the pilgrimage. It was another level of the experience framed by a mixture of music, food and drink, over which the pilgrims shared their pilgrim experiences looking forward to the next maritime pilgrimage to the island of St Mac Dara.

Concluding thoughts

Like most pilgrimages, maritime pilgrimages interact, cover, respond and influence different aspect of religious, political, economic, cultural, identitarian, and tourist context, but also everyday life. Nevertheless, what is specific for maritime pilgrimages is the connection of these pilgrimage practices with the sea and a unique embodied experience that these practices offer.

The professed focus of the Mac Dara pilgrimage is to venerate Sionnach Mac Dara, patron of fishers and mariners. For centuries, pilgrims came to ask for his protection or intercession on the sacred site that preserves his legacy and his earthly remains. However, fishing and maritime activities have declined sharply in the Connemara region in recent decades, perhaps reducing the need for his patronal oversight. Historical accounts and the actions of a few people we observed, and conversations we had indicate that paying rounds and completing stations were once appropriate and expected forms of devotion at Mac Dara's Island on pilgrimage day, but these now seem to be in decline or disarray. A final observation as we left Mac Dara Island after the pilgrimage seemed to punctuate this point. We watched as six hookers racing out to sea passed in turn between Mac Dara Island and the adjacent Mason Island; none of the six lowered their sails in the requisite salute to the patron saint.

As the first ethnographic report on St Mac Dara pilgrimage, and as far as we know, one of the first on maritime pilgrimage practices, we wanted to build our interpretation on our ethnographic material. A vital discovery here is the power of the seascape, which frames and shapes the experience of the pilgrims on maritime pilgrimage but also our own embodied experience with the pilgrimage event. Close dependence on the seascape for livelihood and communication shaped religious beliefs in this coastal region, including the promotion of a local saint to save them from dangers at sea, and help them in their work. With changes in everyday life that followed from decades of outmigration and Ireland's incorporation into the European Union and other globalising forces, the importance of local religious beliefs and oral tradition connected to this island waned. However, the seascape of this maritime pilgrimage has been constantly reshaped by successive generations of pilgrims who have interpreted it in a different way depending on the context.

Nevertheless, what has remained constant is the experience of travelling by boat going to a small uninhabited island. The current pilgrimage practice was revitalised and sustained as the annual visits to the island have become more important as symbols of local identity and heritage, tourist attraction and a practice that gathers long time emigrated locals. Because of this, the pilgrimage is becoming one of the main economic sources for the local community, which leaves us to conclude that the most attractive and stable part of this pilgrimage is the maritime aspect and unique experience it provides. The reasons for going on maritime pilgrimage may change over time, the interpretation and the expectations differ in contemporary pilgrimage, the role of the pilgrimage practice is different for the local community, but the embodied experience of the pilgrims still is shaped by the immutable seascape.

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Povzetek

Na primeru pomorskega romanja na otok St Mac Dara na Irskem avtorja razpravljata in preučujeta, kako udeležba na takšnih romanjih vpliva na udeležence in ustvarja edinstveno romarsko izkušnjo. S pomočjo te raziskave avtorja opredelita glavno značilnost pomorskih romanj in vzpostavita referenčno točko za prihodnje raziskave pomorskega romanja, pri čemer svojo interpretacijo gradita na etnografskem gradivu. Ugotavljata, da pomorska romanja prinašajo edinstveno utelešeno izkušnjo zaradi moči morske pokrajine, ki uokvirja in oblikuje izkušnje romarjev na pomorskem romanju, pa tudi utelešene izkušnje raziskovalcev. Čeprav se razlogi za romanje na morju sčasoma lahko spreminjajo in je vloga romarske prakse za lokalno skupnost drugačna, utelešeno izkušnjo romarjev še vedno oblikuje morska pokrajina, ki postane najbolj privlačen in stabilen del tega romanja.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: pomorsko romanje, romarska izkušnja, utelešena izkušnja, morska pokrajina otoka St Mac Dara

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