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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Of fairies and folklore: the power of crystals in nineteenth-century rural Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Folk beliefs in fairies and their power over natural and culturally produced objects, in particular quartz crystals, are common in modern Ireland and have existed in the fabric of Irish culture deep into Ireland's prehistory. Irish scholars agree that quartz crystals are given powers of healing, as well as to curse and ward off curses. The work presented here aims to explain the meaning of eight quartz crystals found on two neighbouring sites in County Cork, Ireland. The data comes from two sites (Collins Site I and II) located in adjacent farm fields in Lackaghane, County Cork, and together span the years from ca. 1780 to 1915.

KEYWORDS

Crystals; fairies; folk beliefs; nineteenth-century rural Ireland; material culture

Introduction

In 1999, an innocuous bush had the power to halt a large-scale highway-building project in Ireland. The bush became the focal point of an intense dispute between the local community and developers for nearly a decade. The proposed highway, the M18 motorway, intended to provide a continuous link between Limerick and Galway, was delayed and ultimately rerouted to avoid damaging the shrub. The conflict over this stretch of proposed highway occurred at Latoon Creek, County Clare. The plant's importance lies in its prominence in local folk history as a fairy bush. Local folklorist or *seanchi* (storyteller) Eddie Lenihan has argued that this was no simple bush, as it is known historically as a central meeting spot for warring fairy communities of Connaught and Munster, a tradition that continues today and extends thousands of years into Ireland's past (Mulvaney 2019; Phelan 2024). According to contemporary farmers in the area, a fairy presence remains. Most have noted seeing night-time lights and greenish residue in and around the bush. As a result, the local community believes that removing or destroying the fairy bush would enrage the supernatural community, leading to misfortune and perhaps casualties on that stretch of the highway (Grainger 2023). After a decade of prolonged controversy, the section of highway was rerouted to avoid the bush. This example illustrates that folk beliefs such as these are common in modern

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Ireland and have existed in Irish culture continuously since the depths of Ireland's prehistory.

The work presented here explains the meaning of 8 quartz crystals found at two neighbouring sites in County Cork, Ireland. The data come from two sites (Collins Site I and II) located in adjacent farm fields in Lackaghane, County Cork, and together span the years from ca. 1780 to 1915. Irish scholars, albeit in a pre-Christian Ireland context, commonly argue that quartz crystals possess powers of healing and well-being, as well as the ability to curse and ward off curses brought about by fairies. It is known that, throughout the world and over time, many cultures have empowered natural materials, such as quartz crystals, to make sense of and attempt to control the changing world around them. In this context, such objects explain both known and unknown phenomena. This idea, the belief in the controllable powers of the supernatural in the physical realm, provides the foundation for this paper.

In terms of archaeology and Ireland's deep past, there is a continuum of folk beliefs and material symbols spanning a vast period of Irish history and prehistory. While the presence of quartz crystals has been extensively studied archaeologically in Ireland's prehistoric context, their presence in a post-medieval archaeological context has not been recorded. The following pages will cover the archaeology and the sites under study to provide the archaeological context for the quartz crystals found in cultural contexts. The archaeological context provides the framework for our tentative argument that these natural materials became part of the cultural material assemblage and, as a result, were imbued with social and cultural meaning at the intersection of the supernatural world of fairies and the world of farming families. Common folklore and ethnographic evidence refer to crystals as having healing powers during fairy curses, as well as the ability to ward off theft or intrusion by fairies. The contention put forth here is that the crystals found at both sites were valued for their properties of healing, curing, and/or purifying, and for cathartic practice to express an Irish sense of coherence in the nineteenth century, as it was something they could do in the face of social and economic instability.

The materiality of Irish folk belief

Crystals have had many uses across time and space. They have been used as beads and game pieces, in jewellery, as statues, and as healing agents (Moore and McClean 2010, 158). The etymology of the word crystal traces back to the Greeks, with the earliest written form 'krystallos'. The word is likely pre-Greek in origin, from 'króstallos' (Beekes 2010, 787), however, hundreds of years ago. Krystallos combines the Greek 'krýos', which means icy or cold, with 'crusta', which means hard surface. Since antiquity, crystals have been adored for their elegant beauty, but their role extends far beyond their physical attributes. It has been used for other purposes, both for change in this world and the supernatural.

In Ireland, crystals are an important part of pre-Christian spirituality and healing practices. Archaeological evidence provides key insights into prehistoric and protohistoric beliefs and behaviours. One of the most prominent archaeological sites in Ireland is the Brú na Bóinne complex, home to Newgrange, Knowth, and Dowth, as

well as many other passage tombs (Hensey 2015, 10, 15). Excavations at these and other complexes and megaliths in Ireland reveal that white quartz and crystals are ubiquitous in cultural deposits (Thompson 2004, 358). At Newgrange, several scatterings of white quartz were found in stone circles, mounds, and burial tombs, and at Knowth, there was a large collection of quartz believed by archaeologists to have been intentionally placed around the main entrance (Mitchell 1992, 128; Thompson 2004, 359). Moreover, Hensey (2015, 156) argues that the heavy presence of crystals in the chamber at Carrowmore, built a half-millennium before Newgrange, underscores the importance of this naturally occurring material, which played a significant role in ritual activities and behaviours, especially those related to cultural values towards life, death, and the supernatural.

At the beginning of the Christian period (fourth century CE), spiritual life and practices changed. Over time, Christian missionaries spread throughout the country, establishing the monastic system and institutionalizing it within Irish society (Gleeson 2020, 72; O'Sullivan et al. 2014, 10). Even as the rapid rise of Christianity reshaped Ireland's social landscape, it did not mark the death knell for earlier beliefs, cures, and rituals related to otherworldly people and things that held sway over life and death, and over good fortune and misfortune in everyday life (Thompson 2005, 117). This processual transformation is evident in the shift from the cultural realms of pre-Christian Ireland to the religious realm of Christianity. The rationalization and manifestation of the otherworldly natural realm occurred through the narrative of sí and the folk tradition of fairies and fairy forts.

The word sí does not refer only to fairies, the landscape, the mounds, and the trees and shrubs they are believed to inhabit. Although archaeologists view these landscapes and megalithic sites as spanning various epochs in Irish history, local Irish communities have long understood that such sites are strongly linked to the sí tradition (Thompson 2004, 335). The earliest reference to the sí dates to the seventh century CE and discusses the presence of fairies in the physical world. This belief extends deep into Irish history, spanning thousands of years. Part of the significance of quartz in Irish folk medicine and popular ritual was its close association with Neolithic passage tombs, regarded in folk tradition as places of the sí (Thompson 2005, 111). In some parts of the country, quartz was considered 'fairy stones', and quartz pebbles were also used by fairy doctors (Thompson 2005, 115, 116). Natural quartz crystals, as well as worked quartz or agate beads and spheres, were employed to ward off or cure diseases, particularly those afflicting cattle. Using quartz in the construction of a house or outbuilding was generally considered forbidden and unlucky because of its close association with the fairies (Dowd 2018, 458).

We began this study with the fight to save a fairy bush. The importance of this event reflects a continuum in the modern community's belief in a supernatural world that exists alongside and, at times, intrudes upon our physical, natural world. It is one story among many in Ireland. However, it illustrates how the concept of the supernatural, including fairies and magic, remains present in modern Irish culture and thus would have been part of daily life in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century rural Ireland (Evans 1989, 110; Gazin-Schwartz 2001; Moore and McClean 2010, 158; Thompson 2005, 117, 133; Waddell 2011, 194). This brief overview provides evidence

of the common belief in fairies and in the magical and healing properties of crystals in Irish folk practice over time. We suggest that eight crystals in the assemblages were imbued with symbolic capital and considered to have power to heal and to harm, to conjure or cast out curses, and/or to promote good fortune and health: whether for the individual and household or for their crops, livestock, and secondary products such as milk, butter, and cream. The aim here is to use a 'continuum-based model' that provides structure for understanding not only the origins of rituals and the symbolic meanings of things such as quartz crystals, but also their shifting meanings and uses over time within different social contexts.

Post-medieval archaeology of spirituality: crystals as cultural objects

The natural properties of the crystals are not magical. Nevertheless, the importance of these objects is conferred by the larger collective society. Their power derives from their natural form and geometry. It is imbued with magical qualities through rituals and cultural concepts of purity and danger, as well as healing, all grounded in the natural world and cosmology (Douglas 1970, xii; Hodder 1982, 125). Overall, there are cross-cultural similarities in the use of crystals and in the beliefs and practices associated with them; however, it is important to note that such beliefs and practices have their own contexts and histories of development. The angles and translucence of quartz crystals often inspire metaphorical associations with an object that can aid in summoning an element of a spirit or spiritual power into a particular space, as part of a material composition and the accompanying oral recitations performed during its placement. What is important here is the understanding of the learned symbolic order, drawn from the social order, which allows for the powers of symbols and their presence in the archaeological assemblage.

Archaeology seeks to make sense of the material world of the past. Meaning resides where objects, whether singular or found together in a series, speak to more than function and form, becoming symbols that structure social relations and give meaning to cultural behaviours, actions, and identities (Cashman 2006, 138; Gosden and Marshall 1999, 169; Van Wormer 2006, 37; Woodward 2007, 3). Context is fundamental to how meaning is made in objects. Both Arjun Appadurai (1986) and Nicholas Thomas (1991; 1994) argue that cultural context is essential for determining meaning and symbolism, both for a group at a particular time and for archaeologists' interpretation. This is especially true for making sense of eco-facts within cultural contexts. In our case, crystals serve as a symbolic medium to achieve specific outcomes.

Nowhere is the power of objects, natural or culturally produced, more evident in the historical period than among enslaved Africans and African Americans. The presence and importance of natural items within African American magical and religious systems in the United States have been well studied across space and time (e.g. Franklin 1997; Morgan 1998; Russell 1997; Samford 1996; Singleton 1999; Wilkie 1997). Lucas (2014, 106), in examining the overlap of cultural identities and experiences, notes that natural and culturally produced objects within the same context take on new meaning that surpasses their prior meanings. Lucas

looks at enslaved African Americans creating spirit bundles and caches composed of various items, such as pierced coins and spoons, other metal objects, cowrie shells, beads of a variety of colours, mirror fragments, and, relevant to us, quartz crystals. Quartz crystals are significant in other bundles. In the excavations at the New Salem plantation, archaeologists recovered quartz in connection with a bundle of iron objects tightly packed together, thought to represent an offering (Delle 2019, 73). Mark Leone (2005, 200) recovered several African spirit bundles in his excavations. For instance, during the excavation of the Charles Carroll House, Leone revealed *in situ* caches of artefacts and ecofacts intentionally placed together. These included fourteen quartz crystals, half a dozen white bone discs (buttons), two coins, straight pins, a smooth black pebble, and the bottom of a pottery bowl with a blue asterisk on it, located around eighteen inches below the modern dirt floor (Leone 2005, 200). The collection, and similar collections found at other sites, came to be identified as spirit bundles. The strength of the materials in the symbolic order lies in the collection of materials within the bundle.

Power can take many forms. As we have discussed, crystals are imbued with the power that families invested in them during times of great struggle, and African American spirit bundles present a similar quandary. In the African context, the spirit bundle, which often included quartz crystals, was likely placed in the ground by a ritual specialist to manage spirits in the house or to protect its inhabitants from them (Leone 2005, 203). Magical practices in the African American community are neither homogeneous nor a singularly definable facet of the African American experience (Wilkie 1997, 82).

Building on archaeological work from the 1990s, the material culture and African-influenced religious traditions in the New World are now much clearer, allowing us to understand the meaning of spirit bundles and their function in magico-religious spheres and communities. Spirit bundles can serve many functions: they can harm, be used for or on the dead, or even heal. Medicinal spirit bundles were often used alongside herbal remedies. As with crystals, which are given the power of healing, spirit bundles were also attributed this power and did not require a professional practitioner, as they were part of a family's own magico-medical repertoire (Wilkie 1997, 86). Just as Irish families acted on what they could do with the materials they had, the African American community did the same. In both cases, Irish resilience during the Great Famine and African American resilience to the oppressive racialised hierarchy in the United States demonstrate how objects are imbued with meaning and power based on social circumstances.

While the focus of this article is on healing with crystals, there are also acts of harm that can come from crystals and spirit bundles alike. For example, in certain African American traditions, there are items called 'conjure balls, bottles, and bags' (Puckett 1968, 231). These bottles could be used to protect the owner from hexes or curses, but they could also be used to inflict harm upon another. By placing one of these bottles in a house's floorboards or near doorsteps, the intended person who passes over it would be tricked in some fashion (Wilkie 1997, 88). Within these bottles, there were commonly roots, snakeskins, iron nails, needles, hairballs, keys, bodily fluids or pieces, and other accouterments. A witch bottle

was found during archaeological investigations at the University of Maryland Centre for Environmental and Estuarine Studies at Horn Point in Dorchester County, Maryland, in January of 1983. The bottle was recovered from a hearth or chimney at the White Oak site (Wilkie 1997, 89).

In non-African American contexts, common cultural objects and eco-facts have been found archaeologically both alone and in bundles. Thus, the idea of spirit bundles or spirit middens is not confined to African culture, as a growing body of literature documents such folk rituals across many cultures and over time and space (e.g. Becker 1980; Cofield 2014; Davidson 2015; Fennell 2000; 2007; Kelly 2012). In historical archaeology, the study of witchcraft and magic has produced numerous archaeological examples of so-called spirit bundles, including, but not limited to, witch bottles, horse skulls, shoes, written charms, and more, from the early modern period to well into the twentieth century. Kelly (2012, 16–17) has identified a historic-period example of a 'spiritual midden' at a house site in Wicklow, Ireland. In the United States, Christopher Fennell (2000; 2007) has studied the use of these items and cultural practices among European immigrant groups in the nineteenth century. In an archaeological context, many European conjuring traditions resemble those of known African American bundles (Cofield 2014, 86). Materially, this includes the prevalence of reflective items such as glass and quartz crystals, as well as Christian medallions and charms, often found near kitchen hearths (Fennell 2000, 300–302).

In material culture studies, particularly in relation to sites in Ireland, understanding the archaeology of spiritual practices and the material correlates across numerous ethnicities and cultures underscores the key role of quartz crystals and their potential to carry meanings related to values, memories, and a profound sense of safety and stability when encountering the incorporeal. The symbolism attached to objects plays an active part in the social strategies and intentions of individuals and/or groups, reflecting patterns in cultural behaviour while also having the power to change or alter those behaviours (Hodder 1982, 75, 185; Miles 2022, 13, 270, 276). Symbolism becomes more intense in contexts of ritual or magic. To discern the idea of 'magic' is to understand and contextualize the worldview of the people of rural Ireland and how they see the world around them and beyond (Augé 2014, 166). By doing this, we can understand the continuum of Ireland's belief (to varying levels over time and space) in concepts such as banshees and fairies, and in the 'other' world where differing rules, actions, symbols, and behaviours apply. It becomes a study of 'cultural logic' in space and time (Augé 2014, 166; Gazin-Schwartz 2001, 267). The presence of the other world is rationalized through behaviour, ritual, action, and ultimately particular objects or a series of objects that mediate and form the context of social relationships (Robb 2010, 494). The common denominator is that several cultural objects are kept together for a ritual or religious purpose. Most consider those items to be imbued with symbolic meaning and important objects that reveal otherwise unknown aspects of those cultures (Fennell 2000, 282–283). It speaks to the behaviours and rituals of conjuring, in which the symbolic power of materials provides physical, real-world results (Lucas 2014, 109).

The archaeology of everyday life: Collins sites I and II

The most dynamic period in Ireland's modern history spans the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. It is marked by social and cultural transformations and upheavals that brought both conflict and success, yet it remains structured by trauma and instability. These developments were felt most intensely by rural Irish farming and labouring families. Currently, little is known archaeologically about this dynamic period, and historical treatments do little to illuminate the social aspects and everyday lives of the common people. The archaeology presented here seeks to address this relative silence in the material record and give voice to the lives of everyday people and to the meaning of their material assemblages, which speak to personal and communal identities, values, and behaviours. The excavations are part of the larger program directed by Dr. Stephen A. Brighton. The annual field school is part of a larger research project delving into the material history of the Irish Diaspora in Ireland. It is a long-term, sustainable historical archaeological program exploring the dynamics of Ireland's material world between 1750 and 1922. The aim is to illuminate the material world that shaped the daily life of rural Ireland. Part of the program involves work completed in two neighbouring fields, labelled Collins I and II, in a place called Lackaghane. The artefacts reveal the types of commodities associated with tenant-farming families from 1780 to 1915. The townland of Lackaghane, County Cork, is in the Barony of West Carbery (East Division) and 5 miles (8 kilometers) from Skibbereen town (Figure 1). In the nineteenth century, the fields were part of two rental properties associated with tenant farmers. Like other townlands surrounding Skibbereen, it is featured prominently in the narrative of the Great Hunger in West Cork and is vital to understanding how everyday life was shaped by capitalism, colonialism, and famine over time.

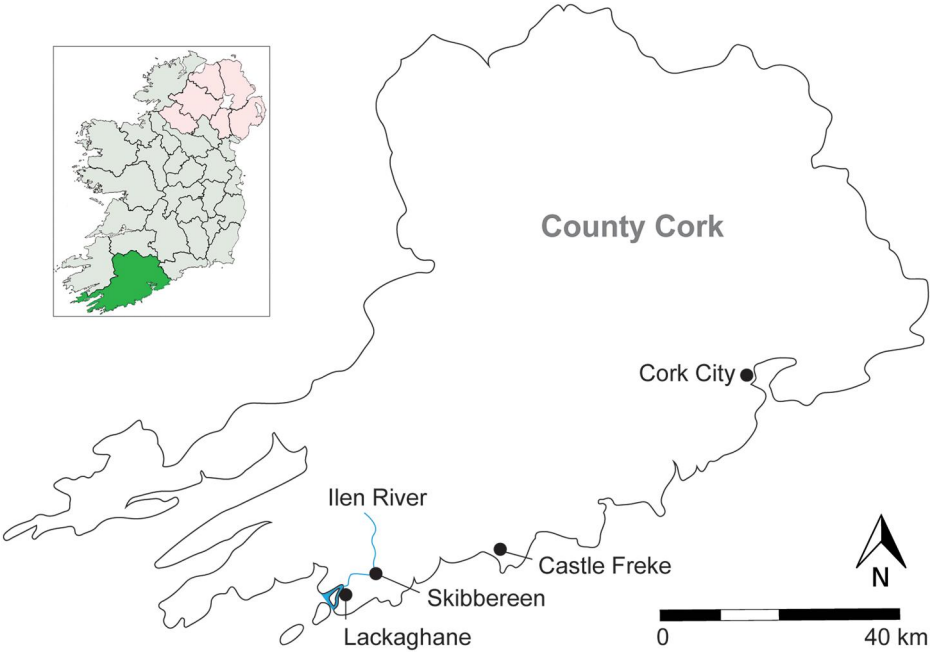

Figure 1. Map of the project area within County Cork.

Collins I (ca. 1860–1915)

Today, the Collins I site consists of the ruins of a dry-laid stone cabin. The McCarthy family built the cabin in the early 1860s (Figures 2 and 3). The home represents a typical building style for small farming families in southwest Ireland. Vernacular architecture comprises buildings locally made and based on traditional forms (Upton 1983, 262). Nineteenth-century Irish vernacular houses were typically single-story. Some single-story dwellings had a loft space. The loft served as storage and as a sleeping area for the children living in the house (Aalen 1997, 147; Danaher 1993, 41; O'Reilly 2011, 193–197).

The building measures 10 metres (33 feet) by 6 metres (20 feet) and is a single-story, direct-entry or open-plan structure with a side gable roof and gable-end hearths (Figure 4). The building is three bays across on the south elevation and single-pile-deep along the west elevation. The south elevation has a central door opening with windows on either side, making it a direct-entry dwelling. The open floor plan is divided by a partition into family spaces. The eastern third, with the larger hearth, is the kitchen and main living space. The western third has a small hearth, and the room serves as the adults' sleeping quarters. Drawing from the 1901 House and Buildings Return (B1) and Return of Out-Offices and Farm-Steadings (B2) forms, the cabin had a thatched roof. In sum, the cabin exemplifies what a typical farming family would construct in the late nineteenth century.

Figure 2. Photograph of the standing cabin ruin at Collins Site I (photograph taken by Stephen Brighton).

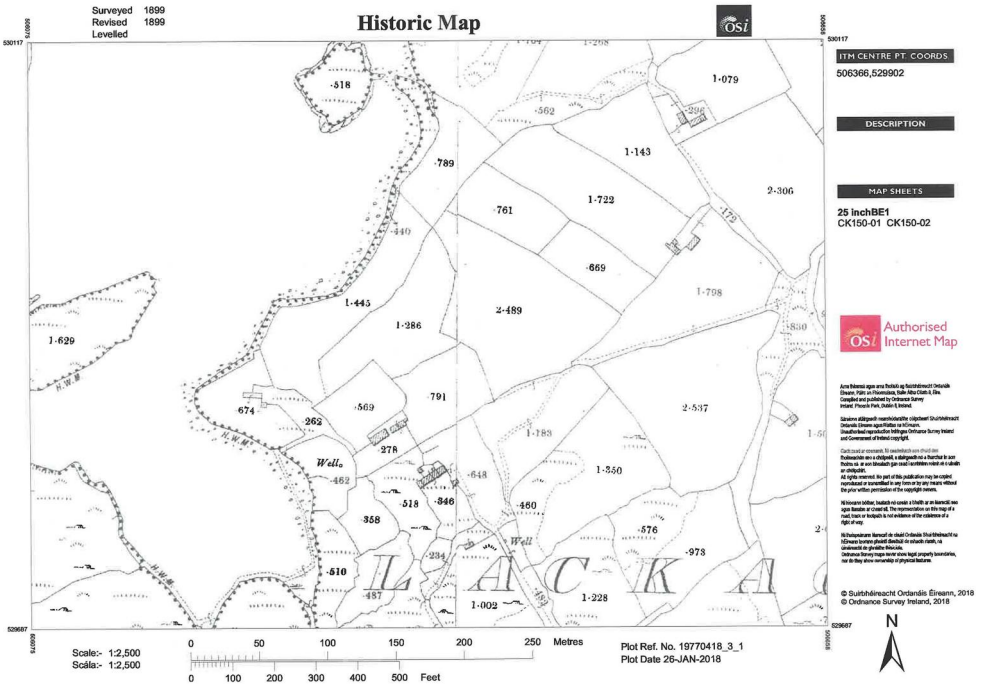

Figure 3. 1892 Ordnance Map of Lackaghane showing both Collins I and II sites.

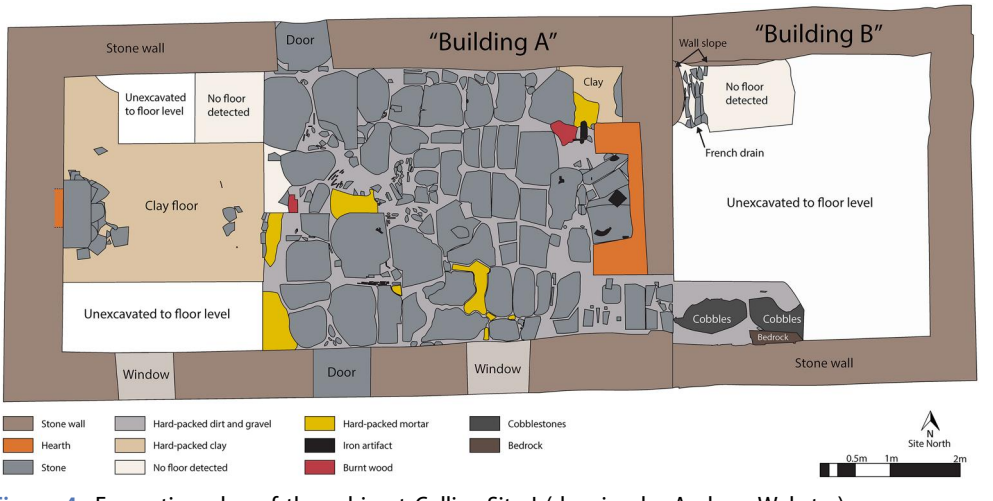

Figure 4. Excavation plan of the cabin at Collins Site I (drawing by Andrew Webster).

The McCarthy family (c. 1850–1911)

According to the 1901 census, twelve people lived in the cabin at the turn of the twentieth century. Peter McCarthy, aged 73, was listed as head of the household, with his wife, Mary, 72, at the top of the family hierarchy. Residing with Peter and Mary were their adult sons: John, 40; James, 25; and Jeremiah, 22. Also living here were

John's wife, Catherine (Kate, née Geaney), 40, and their three children: Peter, 8; John, 6; and Mary, 5. The household also included two young visitors: Mary and Maggie Hallihane, aged 15 and 6, respectively. Peter and his wife, Mary McCarthy, were both relatively old; Peter was 73, and Mary was 72. He was born in 1829, and she in 1828, and they would have been in their late teens and early twenties during the Great Hunger.

The girls were granddaughters of Peter and Mary McCarthy and cousins of John and Kate's children, but not daughters of those present in the house. Research is ongoing, but it is clear that Peter and Mary had more children than those listed in the 1901 household. Baptismal records indicate that Peter and Mary had 11 children, 9 of whom survived to adulthood. Family genealogy and newspaper records show that at least 4 of these 9 emigrated to the United States and settled in California. According to the graveyard and civil records, Mary McCarthy died on 19 October 1908 and was buried in nearby Tullagh Graveyard. Her husband, Peter, died on 4 September 1909, with daughter-in-law Kate McCarthy, John's wife, present in the cabin at the time of his death. The 1911 Cancellation books show that, following Peter's death, son John McCarthy became head of household. Sometime before the 1911 census, John and his family moved to the neighbouring townland of Creagh. The McCarthy family left the property sometime between 1909 and 1911, following the deaths of Peter and Mary.

The Lordan family (c. 1911–1915)

While the McCarthy family represents the origins of the cabin and life at this spot in Lackaghane, the Lordan family's arrival signifies the cabin's decline and the end of habitation here by 1915. The Lordan family's tenure at the cabin is short. Ironically, their brief stay and violent removal are directly tied to the archaeological recovery of the materials. Their story forms the crux of this narrative. Their short stay on the property was marked by conflict from day one and can be reconstructed by numerous court and bank records left in their wake.

On 1 June 1911, Cornelius Lordan acquired the land previously held by the McCarthy family (Cork County Eagle and Munster Advertiser, 12 Sept. 1914). Census data indicate he moved into the dwelling with his wife, Ellen, and son, Patrick John. Cornelius repeatedly failed to pay the half-yearly annuity due on the land, and the property was auctioned to the neighbouring Geaney family in January 1915. The family was evicted shortly thereafter (Cork County Eagle and Munster Advertiser 19 Dec. 1914, 5; 26 Dec. 1914, 5). According to newspaper reports (Cork County Eagle and Munster Advertiser 18 Sept. 1915, 9), Cornelius appears to have disappeared around this time, leaving Ellen alone, presumably with their now 15-year-old son to care for. Despite the eviction, Ellen remained on the property. The new owners, the Geaney family, took Ellen to court three times to try to get her to leave. During her third court appearance, 'somebody went and burned the house down so she could not go in again' (Cork County Eagle and Munster Advertiser 18 Sept. 1915, 9). We do not yet know what happened to Ellen, Cornelius, or Patrick Lordan. No definitive trace of them has been found in the archival record, and if they ended up in the

Skibbereen Workhouse, those records were lost in a fire during the War of Independence.

In this case, history alone does not tell the full story of the Lordan family and their contentious relationship with neighbours. Archaeology, specifically site formation processes, has provided much information about the forced removal of the Lordan family and, perhaps more importantly, a snapshot of how they lived in the cabin before their tragic departure. The archaeology reveals the humanity within this narrative and details the intimate lives of the individuals who struggled within the larger socio-economic and political structure of post-Famine Ireland. To date, archaeology has recovered household and personal items belonging to the Lordan family, and the stratigraphic layers within the house have documented the destruction of the home and the Lordans' personal possessions.

Collins II (ca. 1775–ca.1835)

The Collins II site is an open field adjacent to the Illen River to the north and west, with the standing ruin of the McCarthy/Lordan cabin (Collins Site I) to the south. In the nineteenth century, the field was home to three structures, each shown on the 1842 Ordnance Survey map (Figure 5). The map shows two small square buildings, with the third, located between them, a larger rectangular structure. Currently, the smaller buildings are believed to be outbuildings, such as stables, or perhaps one-room cabins rented to landless labourers. The rectangular building is believed to have

Figure 5. 1842 Ordnance Map of Lackaghane showing both Collins I and II sites.

been the home of a tenant or small farming family (Aalen 1997, 157; Danaher 1993, 40–41; Evans 1989, 42). It is unknown at this stage, the specific

The beginning and end dates apply to the buildings. Archaeological evidence tentatively points to the 1780s as the earliest possible start date and to sometime after 1842 as the time of leaving the site. It is known that the structures were inhabited, as evidenced by the 1842 Ordinance map, and abandoned before the creation of the 1892 Ordnance Survey map.

Occupants of Collins site II

The historical record is incomplete. Griffith's Valuation is the only substantial clue currently available about the family or families who occupied this landscape. Across the entire area, it lists 8 surnames (comprising 16 families). Of the 16 families, 12 pay rent directly to the representatives of Lady Carbery, while 4 pay rent to small farming families living in Lackaghane, suggesting they are either landless labourers or tenant farmers, as they pay rent only for a house and a small garden. Four of the families pay rent to either John Geany (three families) or John Davis (one family). Therefore, the smaller buildings may be the homes of landless labourers. At the time of writing, it is unclear who is occupying the property under study, and further research is ongoing. The first season of excavations and the artefacts recovered indicate that at least one family lived in this field between 1780 and 1830.

Excavations at Collins sites I and II

From 2018 to 2023, excavations at Collins Site I completed 34 excavation units. The work focused exclusively on the ruin's interior, the rear north yard, and the outbuilding to the east. A total of 3,705 artefacts were recovered. Much of the effort was directed at uncovering the entire historic floor or ground surface within the standing ruin. During investigations, the soil covering the cabin's interior was found to be quite shallow, reaching depths of only 20–60 cm below the modern ground surface. Directly beneath this layer lay the historic floor surface, with flagstones in the eastern two-thirds of the interior, in the cooking and living area, and a hard-packed clay surface in the smaller western room used as a sleeping chamber. The historic ground surface in the house – whether hard-packed clay or flagstones – was overlain by a layer from the top down to just above the floor, consisting of burned organic material, including wood and what appears to be thatch from the roof. The interface between this layer and the floor surface was dated to 1,300, with a terminus post quem (TPQ) of 1911, based on a British halfpenny of that date. The artefacts consisted of refined and coarse earthenware ceramic vessels, glass bottles and glasses, remnants of clothing such as cufflinks and buttons, cooking vessels, farming tools, and coins, to name but a few. All the materials showed signs of having been burned either by direct exposure to flames or by the fire's extreme heat. One of the faceted crystals was recovered from inside the cabin, in the same layers as the cultural material.

Figure 6. Photograph looking east of the living space in the cabin and the large kitchen hearth (photograph taken by Stephen Brighton).

The unit where the artefacts were found (1010E 5006 N) is important because it revealed the area within and in front of the large kitchen or cooking hearth along the cabin's eastern wall (Figure 6). The unit produced several unique artefacts, alongside typical nineteenth- to early twentieth-century materials one would expect to be in or at the opening of a kitchen hearth, such as three cast-iron pot lids and part of a cauldron. However, other, more personal and decorative items were also found alongside cooking-related iron objects. Personal artefacts recovered along with the cooking pots include a glass inkwell, a copper alloy candlestick, a Catholic religious medal associated with the Virgin Mary, as well as pieces of a delicate blue transfer-print porcelain saucer, two pieces of clear bevelled glass thought to be part of a mirror, beads, and a piece of burnt cloth (Figure 7). It is hypothesized that these items once rested on a wooden mantel above the hearth and were knocked to the ground when the cabin was destroyed by fire. The crystal was found among this assemblage, and it is thought that it, along with the religious medallion, was kept in a cloth bag or pouch, as represented by the burnt remnant of cloth also recovered from this unit (Figure 8).

Outside the cabin, investigations were conducted in the building to the east of it. It is believed to be one of the numerous buildings mentioned in the historical record. It is illustrated on the 1899 Ordnance Survey map as one of the six outbuildings listed in the 1901 census building form, which records a stable, a cow house, a calf house, a dairy, a piggery, and a fowl house. Little cultural material was recovered from within and around this building that would reflect its function. Cultural material, including redware and refined ceramics, suggests a yard scatter or trash midden

Figure 7. Catholic medal found next to kitchen hearth and alongside the quartz crystal (photograph taken by Stephen Brighton).

Figure 8. Quartz crystal found inside cabin a at Collins I site (photograph taken by Stephen Brighton).

near this area. Three of the four quartz crystals were found in cultural layers within and around this building.

In 2024, the research shifted to the adjacent field (Collins Site II). The excavations revealed the subsurface remains of one of the three buildings. Because this was the first season, the purpose was exploratory, to locate any remnants of the three buildings shown on the Ordnance maps. Therefore, the eastern portion of the field was targeted. Once evidence of a foundation was uncovered in the southeastern portion of the field, the remaining excavations focused on determining their extent. Twelve of the units contain evidence of a building foundation (Figure 9). The evidence includes above-ground remnants of the wall, collapsed and scattered just above and adjacent to the remaining single course of the dry-laid stone foundation. Currently, the excavations have uncovered the northwestern part of a larger rectangular building.

The units outside the wall also provided evidence of the use of the landscape surrounding the structures. The units all contained a scattering of artefacts dating from the last decade of the eighteenth century to ca. 1840. Context 1: sod and topsoil are consistent throughout the site. Most of the artefacts recovered from this context were located towards the bottom or at the interface with Context 2, which appears consistent across units and is interpreted as the historic ground surface. In this context, most of the artefacts ($n = 380$) were recovered. Further supporting this conclusion is the relative uniformity of the layer below this, which is reddish-orange soil, a natural horizon, and absent cultural material. The tentative conclusion drawn here is that the houses were abandoned in the mid-nineteenth century and razed sometime after the turn of the twentieth century to make the field useful for farming. The excavations strongly support this hypothesis, and the artefacts recovered conclusively point to a pre-1850s occupation by at least one family.

Artefacts ($n = 802$) were recovered from units both in the field north of the building and within the building's outline, including four quartz crystals dating from 1780 to 1840. The majority of the 2024 collection is diagnostic and consists of refined and coarse earthenware. Based on the presence of sherds with shell-edge decoration (scalloped rim with straight lines) and sponge-ware on pearlware (1815-ca.1825), the site's terminus post quem (TPQ) is ca.1815. The remaining refined ceramic sherds predate the 1820s and consist mostly of pearlware (1775–1825) in various decorative types. The coarse and refined earthenware unearthed in the 2024 excavations show evidence not only of the expected utility and practicality (i.e. locally produced redwares) but also of the household's participation in this global trade and the mass consumption of luxury ceramic goods.

Four pieces of quartz crystal were found in numerous cultural contexts across the 2024 excavations. The pieces themselves are not worked or cut and are considered 'eco-facts'. However, their presence in soil contexts containing large numbers of cultural materials suggests potential use within cultural contexts and as part of the material culture associated with specific behaviours, rituals, and beliefs (Figure 10). Three quartz crystals were found outside the cabin, along the rear yard near the outbuilding or stable. Unit 1026E 5009 N was opened to locate the corner and gable-end wall. Upon opening the excavation, context 1 was densely packed with root mass and decomposing wood intermixed with soil. Context 1 yielded many artefacts, including

Figure 9. Excavation of wall sections of the main cabin at Collins site II (photograph taken by Stephen Brighton).

redware, stoneware, pearlware, glass, and a quartz crystal. Context 1 extended through the unit, as did context 2 when opened. Many stones from context 1 extended into context 2 upon opening, and context 2 also extended across the unit.

Figure 10. Quartz crystal recovered in a cultural context near the foundation wall of the main cabin at Collins II site (photograph taken by Stephen Brighton).

Context 2 was packed with root mass and decomposing wood believed to be modern. Context 2 also yielded redware sherds, blue pearlware, undecorated pearlware, a foot of a clear wine glass, and stoneware.

In the field north of the exposed foundation, a quartz crystal was recovered from Unit 1033E 5023 N. This location lies just northwest of the small northern square buildings on the 1842 map. It is currently believed to be an outbuilding, possibly stables. The crystal was found at the level of the historic ground surface (Context 2) and associated with a variety of cultural material, consistent with the surrounding units. The artefacts include coarse redware vessels, undecorated pearlware from at least one bowl, and bottle glass. The shattered remains of objects from rural life provide a solid timeline of habitation in this field and, over time, will reveal much about daily domestic life and the presence of folk beliefs before and after Ireland's Great Hunger.

Regarding the archaeology at both sites, the quartz crystals are considered part of the assemblage. Although unmodified, we contend that they were socially meaningful and embodied cultural meanings related to nature, the supernatural, and perhaps fairies. Thus, the eight crystals are eco-facts. The excavations did not set out to deliberately find and recover items of magic and spirituality. However, as more crystals were recovered within culturally based proveniences, the question shifted from dismissing them as simply natural materials – like so many naturally occurring stones throughout an excavation – to considering their cultural purpose. What matters is the timing within space, which gives artefacts a sense of larger cultural meaning. This is particularly the case with 'eco-facts', as naturally occurring quartz crystals now have culturally assigned symbols among the farming families living here. What is important are the natural attributes of quartz crystals that enable them to serve as a

symbolic tool for rationalizing and protecting both people and animals from the natural and supernatural worlds around them.

The materiality of conjuring in rural Ireland's early modern period

Daily life in nineteenth-century rural Ireland was built on separate yet always overlapping worlds. On the one hand, most rural Irish were devout, and much of their day-to-day life revolved around the tenets of their faith, while an unseen other world operated alongside it. Catholic rituals were meant to replace 'pagan' rituals based on the natural calendar and seasonal Pagan agricultural pageants. However, belief in the magical properties of the 'holy' natural springs (holy wells), charms, effigies, and rituals associated with death, such as keening, remained prevalent well into the twentieth century. The quartz crystals found at the Collins sites express rural Irish 'cultural logic' in the belief that such objects counteract ill will and curses, thus offering protection. This cultural worldview is constructed of symbolism and the ordered logic of cultural values, reflecting communal morals and values (Arensberg 1989, 166).

Ethnographic evidence from the first half of the twentieth century reveals the prevalence of belief in fairies and its impact on everyday life (Arensberg 1989, 167). To the rural Irish, the realm of fairies governs health, wealth, and luck. These things are in the hands of the 'good people', either through a curse or directly from the fairies themselves, for one misstep or another (Arensberg 1989, 167; Arensberg and Kimball 1968, 131; Messenger 1983, 98). This relationship is structured around concepts of malice and good and bad luck – the Otherworld is the world of the fairies. To prevent ill will or appease the fairies, daily practices include leaving nightly portions of food and water, or the seemingly mundane task of never throwing dirty water out of the cabin at night, as it may hit fairies passing along the numerous fairy paths during their nightly visits to cabins. Angering them risks retribution. This typically takes the form of illness affecting one's hen, pig, or cow, or, in the most drastic case, a child (Arensberg 1989, 168; Messenger 1983, 101). The resulting illness usually lasts until the insult is rectified or the curse is lifted. In more serious, though rarer, cases, the result is death.

In many cases, the materials or objects used to counter ill will or curses are mundane and homely. Out of context, eggs become a sign of witchcraft; a pinch of salt protects against evil; and iron cures (Arensberg 1989, 174). In this way, quartz crystals, once removed from their natural context and either strung on a string or leather or placed in a small bag with medallions of Catholic saints or the Virgin Mary, become something else, symbolically charged and socially empowered to do or provide something. Crystals are not, in and of themselves, magic, but what they are believed to be able to do is reflected in their presence in the archaeological assemblage. Once in a cultural context, the pieces become objects of power and cure that protect against the unseen (Arensberg 1989, 174).

The crystal recovered from the cabin's interior, near the kitchen hearth, was found alongside burnt cloth, beads, and a medallion of the Virgin Mary. In this case, the crystal is firmly within a cultural context and was most likely placed in a bundle with the medallion and beads, with the medallion worn as a necklace, all kept in the cloth

pouch and on the mantle. In this context, the quartz crystal is an amplifier of magic and, within this sort of Irish spirit bundle, amplifies prayers for protection and well-being from both the world of the fairies and the religious realm (Evans 1989, 300–301). Along with the other items in the bundle, it served to draw on spiritual energy, maintaining a sense of purity against malevolent spirits, energy, and intentions. In effect, the crystal's power for personal healing and well-being rests on its association with other cultural objects.

At Collins Site I, it is worth considering that Ellen Lordan may have created something akin to a spiritual bundle to counteract a hostile environment with their neighbours. This act was the culmination of mounting fears and a need for protection from the ill will of the Lackaghane community. The Lordans were victims of vigilante justice. Prior to the arson, their short stay on the property was marked by conflict from day one. Their troubles began in the community because they were originally from the townland of Drishanebeg, approximately 7 km east of Lackaghane. We contend this is important to the rapid onset of conflict because the Lordans were outsiders. Typically, in rural Ireland, family names were and still are closely tied to the lands they inhabit. When an outside family moves in, or when there are property disputes, conflict can become deeply personal, rooted in familial heritage and a deep sense of ownership or belonging to the land. This type of conflict seems apparent in Lackaghane—during the few years the Lordan family lived on the property, they were brought to court several times by their neighbours, the Geaney family.

Troubles were everywhere for the Lordan family. First, court records show that on several occasions, Cornelius Lordan trespassed his cows onto his neighbour Patrick Geaney's land, causing severe damage to Geaney's potato crop. According to the records, this ill will extended to Geaney's relatives and friends in Lackaghane. Second, it is unclear whether they refused or were unable to pay their half-yearly annuity due on the land. In effect, the family was labelled squatters, and the land and house were sold at auction to the neighbouring Geaney family in January 1915 (Cork County Eagle and Munster Advertiser 19 Dec. 1914, 5; 26 Dec. 1914, 5). Ultimately, the Lordans' tenure in Lackaghane came to an end with the burning of the cabin's thatched roof.

Archaeology, particularly site formation processes, has provided substantial information about the forced removal of the Lordan family and, more importantly, a snapshot of their daily lives in the cabin before their tragic departure. The archaeology reveals the humanity in this narrative and details the intimate lives of individuals who struggled within the larger socio-economic and political structures of post-Famine Ireland. To date, archaeology has recovered household and personal items belonging to the Lordan family and documented the stratigraphic layers within the house that explain the site's abandonment. Several useful items were left behind intact, such as matching pieces of teaware and iron cooking pots. These and other examples meet the criteria for 'de facto refuse' found at sites abandoned quickly, such as during an eviction (Orser 2006; Schiffer 1983, 683; 1987, 89–90; Stevenson 1982, 241–242). Artefacts within the cabin, including those found with the quartz crystal, show signs of burning or exposure to extreme heat. Among the burned assemblage are the quartz crystal, burnt cloth, and the Virgin Mary medallion. While not

effective in the scenario, it appears that Ellen Lordan made a rational yet unheeded plea to the world of fairies for protection and good fortune as hostile feelings grew and eventually surrounded the Lackaghane community.

Seven of the eight quartz crystals from both sites are located near outbuildings believed to be a barn or a stable. In rural life, it is where animals are housed at night. It is a vital activity area outside the home. The presence of the crystal reflects the oral history and ethnography concerning rituals, sympathetic magic, and the protection of animals from the fairies. There is folk and ethnographic evidence for the importance of crystals in rural Ireland. In terms of the crystals from both sites found outside the houses and near the stable, there is strong evidence that they played a significant role in the health and well-being of their cows and their by-products (milk, butter, cream). Drawing from Lady Wilde (1991, 12), crystals are generally used for protective purposes for cows. Wilde refers to 'elf stones', which are quartz pieces, unworked, occurring naturally, but have innate powers of protection from the fairies. When ailments occur or prevent the like, which includes not only illness in the cow but also its failure to yield milk, the product from a cow is sour, it is then suspected that foul play or a curse is the cause, and the cow is under the spell of fairies. Typical cures include having the cow walk around an ancient stone monument near a holy well 3 times; casting an 'elf stone' (quartz) each time, and if unsuccessful, the 'elf stone' or quartz is wrapped in cloth and placed in a vessel of water to drink (Wilde 1991, 12). Especially dangerous for cows, vulnerable to curses and fairies, comes the first 3 days of May, when it is believed that fairies had their greatest power given to them by the 'Evil One' and thus farmers guarded their cows through the night, lighting fires with branches from the rowan (Wilde 1991, 112). Early-twentieth-century ethnographers have noted these rituals and beliefs regarding curses on a family's livestock. Cows, milk, and butter have historically always been the most vulnerable to the supernatural (Evans 1989, 303; Messenger 1983, 101). Whether it is a new season or a new process or activity involving cows, milk, or butter, all due ceremony is taken (Evans 1989, 303; Messenger 1983, 101). The cow and the products form an important part of the survival of farming families. The crystals present at the Collins sites represent how farmers went to great lengths to create protection against the unknown.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the presence of quartz crystals in cultural contexts offers tantalizing evidence of Irish folk practices. The presence of the quartz crystals is compelling for two reasons. First, in an area where quartz is naturally occurring, it is not ubiquitous at either site. In total, 8 quartz crystals are found between the two sites. Second, all the quartz pieces are found in cultural contexts. The pieces are found in cultural layers with large numbers of mass-produced contemporary artefacts related to everyday life. In short, crystals are but one piece of a larger array of materials and objects that, when put together, form a larger sense of cultural behaviours.

It is difficult to say with certainty what they were exactly used for based on archaeological excavation alone. We have presented many ideas, based on folklore and archaeology, about what that purpose could be. There is sufficient evidence to

confirm that these are within a cultural context, as cemented by folklore and archaeology. While 'spirit bundle' is an evolving term, the crystal, found alongside other ritual memorabilia, provides the necessary context to claim that it is ritualistically significant.

Our current perspectives on folk beliefs and spiritual practices shape how we interpret the past. In the context of crystals for healing or conjuring, it is easy to dismiss these ideas based on our modern biases, thus relegating their importance in daily life to the outlandish rather than the culturally significant. This narrative began with a simple shrub and its culturally infused symbolic power to halt and re-route a major highway project. The story emphasizes the continued belief and practices existing in parts of rural Ireland. The interpretations here are tentative, and much work needs to be done; however, the presence of such objects in a cultural context offers provocative insights and possibilities that move beyond the everyday physical world into another realm. In Ireland, this supernatural world is often referred to as the 'Otherworld', the world of the fairies, or the *sí*. In this world, quartz is regarded as a natural multiplier of magic; it increases the power or effectiveness of a curse or prayer. Whatever the exactitude of the usage may be, there is little doubt that crystals have played an important symbolic role in the deep history of Irish culture.

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