

A Seventeenth Century Dried Cat from Ennis Friary, Co. Clare

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In this paper the 1893 discovery of an immured dried cat at Ennis Friary is noted from a contemporary newspaper account. Its entombment is suggested to have taken place in the early seventeenth century, and it is compared to a series of related finds from medieval and early modern contexts in Britain and Ireland. The motives for the immurement of dried cats are considered, and it is suggested that such phenomena represent muted or reduced forms of the widespread, custom of foundation sacrifice.

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The somewhat bizarre discovery of an 'ossified' cat in a sealed wall-niche in the Franciscan Friary, Ennis, Co. Clare, was reported on in an edition of the *Munster News* dated the 11th of February 1893. Attention was first drawn to this reference some years ago by Rev. Ignatius Murphy in this *Journal*, 18(1976), 80. The newspaper report runs as follows:

On Wednesday, while some labourers were employed at excavations in the disused Protestant Church, built on portion of the ruins of the old Franciscan Abbey, Ennis, the preservation of which has been undertaken by the Board of Works, they came on a strange discovery in a niche of the Church—the ossified remains of a cat; there is the skin on the body, most of the teeth perfect, and even the hirsute appendages on the face. From the position of the niche in a deep recess cemented over, the theory would suggest that the animal must have been built into it; but, whether in a moribund state or alive, is a moot question. In the interior of the latter-day church there is erected a mural tablet 215 years old. This will give an idea of the antiquity of the building that is now being dismantled, and which will be [*sic*] an addition to the old Abbey. The skeleton is in the possession of that lover of antiquarian lore, Mr. Charles R. Pilkington, Causeway, Ennis, who prizes it so highly that he says money would not buy it.

Unfortunately details of the precise location of the discovery within the friary were not recorded in the *Munster News* report. The 'excavations' mentioned, however, clearly refer to the works undertaken there by the Board of Works during 1893 following the investiture of the site as a National Monument. These were visited by T. J. Westropp and appear, on the basis of his brief accounts of them (1893 and 1895), to have largely consisted of the dismantling of the post-medieval and early-modern additions to the original fabric of the nave of the friary church. This building had been adapted in 1615 to serve as a parish church by Donough, Earl of Thomond (Westropp 1893, p. 121), and had remained in use as Ennis' Protestant church until the 1880s. Westropp records that on removing the "thick mass of plaster and whitewash" from its internal wall faces a number of blocked arched recesses, which he termed *sedilia*, were uncovered in the north wall (*ibid.*, p. 121). The hoods of these recesses had been hacked away prior to their blocking, which presumably took place in the seventeenth century.

The niche in which the dried cat was found was, according to the newspaper report, located "in a deep recess cemented over". It would seem very likely that this recess was

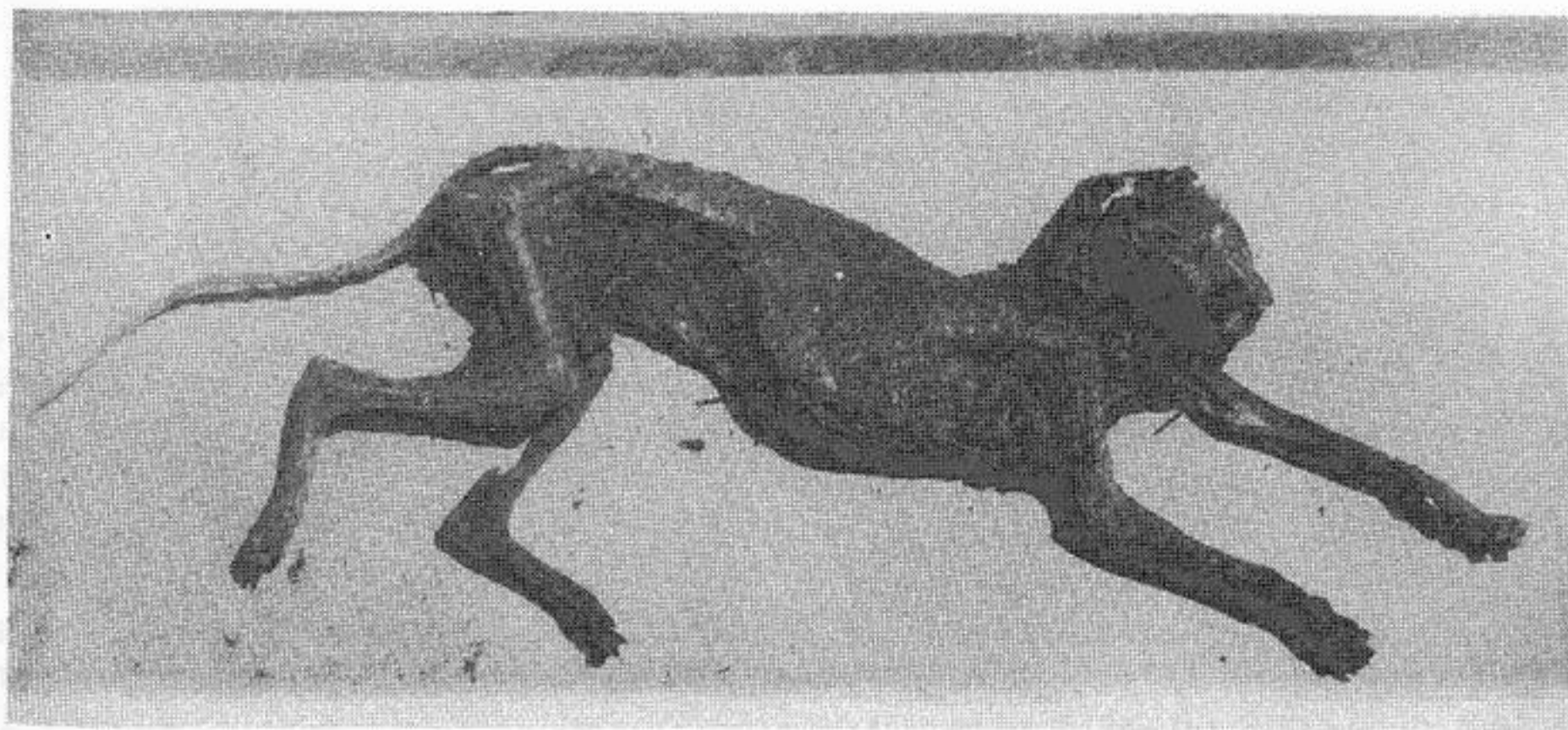
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one of those features rediscovered in the north wall of the nave and reported on by Westropp, and that the immurement of the cat, therefore, took place during the Earl of Thomond's seventeenth century alterations to the nave.

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The practice of deliberately entombing cats in the structure of buildings is well attested and has been discussed by Howard (1951). The fur of such cats is invariably absent as a result of the process of partial putrefaction which causes the hairs to drop out of the follicles, but their skin, however, usually remains, as was the case with the Ennis cat. In a number of cases the cats have been posed in lifelike attitudes, and some are accompanied by a similarly disposed rodent, indicating that the cats were already dead when placed in position. They may have undergone a preparatory process of smoking or partial desiccation. The original reports which document the discovery of such cats variously describe them as 'mummified', 'desicated', 'ossified' and so on, though the term *dried cat* is now generally applied to such cases.

At least twenty instances of the discovery of dried cats enclosed in the fabric of buildings are on record from Britain (Howard 1951; Rushen 1984; Merrifield 1987, pp. 130-131). Examples have also come to light on the Continent and in Scandinavia (Howard 1951; Hartland 1937, p. 113). In addition to the Ennis cat, at least three other cases are on record from Ireland. The first and best known of these was discovered in Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin, in 1878 when the organ was moved from the roodscreen to the north transept (Chart 1907, p. 141). In this instance the cat was posed in a lifelike attitude, survived in a "dry and leathery but undecayed condition" (Illus. 1) and was accompanied by the similarly preserved body of a posed rat which has, unfortunately, recently been stolen. Both were contained in a glass case which apparently fitted into a niche in the roodscreen behind the organ which was built in 1857 (Stokes 1983, p. 12). The second Irish example was discovered in 1916 during alterations to a house in Dame Street, Dublin (Howard 1951, p. 149). Few details are on record about this cat, but it is known to have been found in



Illus. 1. Dried cat, posed chasing a rodent (since stolen), from Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin.
(Photo: Alice Dennehy)

a lath-and-plaster partition on the ground floor of this late eighteenth century Georgian house. Similarly, no records are known to exist as to the original provenance of the third dried cat, recorded by Howard as being formerly kept in a public house in Phibsborough, Dublin (1951, p. 150).

It would seem quite likely that many discoveries of this type in Ireland have gone unrecorded, and that the practice of enclosing dried cats in buildings was not an uncommon one. The use of the term 'cat and clay' to describe buildings of tempered earth in Co. Derry during the eighteenth century (Gailey 1984, p. 55), tempts one to speculate that it may have been customary in that part of Ireland to place dried cats in the walls of mud houses.

A brief examination of the British evidence assists in placing the Ennis and other Irish dried cats in context. There, the majority of the twenty or so documented examples derive from domestic buildings. A now destroyed cat, for instance, was discovered in a fourteenth or fifteenth century house in Bridgewater, London, and was said to have been "of ebony colour, its mouth open in a snarling way, and its forepaws raised defensively as if striving to fight off an enemy" (Howard 1951, p. 149). Another, surviving only in skeletal form, was discovered in 1972 in a Tudor house at Milford, Surrey (Merrifield 1987, p. 131). Parallels for the practice of immuring dried cats in ecclesiastical buildings—as at Ennis and Dublin's Christ Church—are few, but include the discoveries in St. Clement Dane's Church and the Church of St. Michael Royal, London. The St. Michael's cat was discovered in a sealed passage under the roof, and it is thought to have been placed there by Sir Christopher Wren's masons when the church was rebuilt between 1687 and 1691 (Howard 1951, p. 149). It is still preserved in the church and from its stance, with raised head and open mouth, it undoubtedly was posed after death.

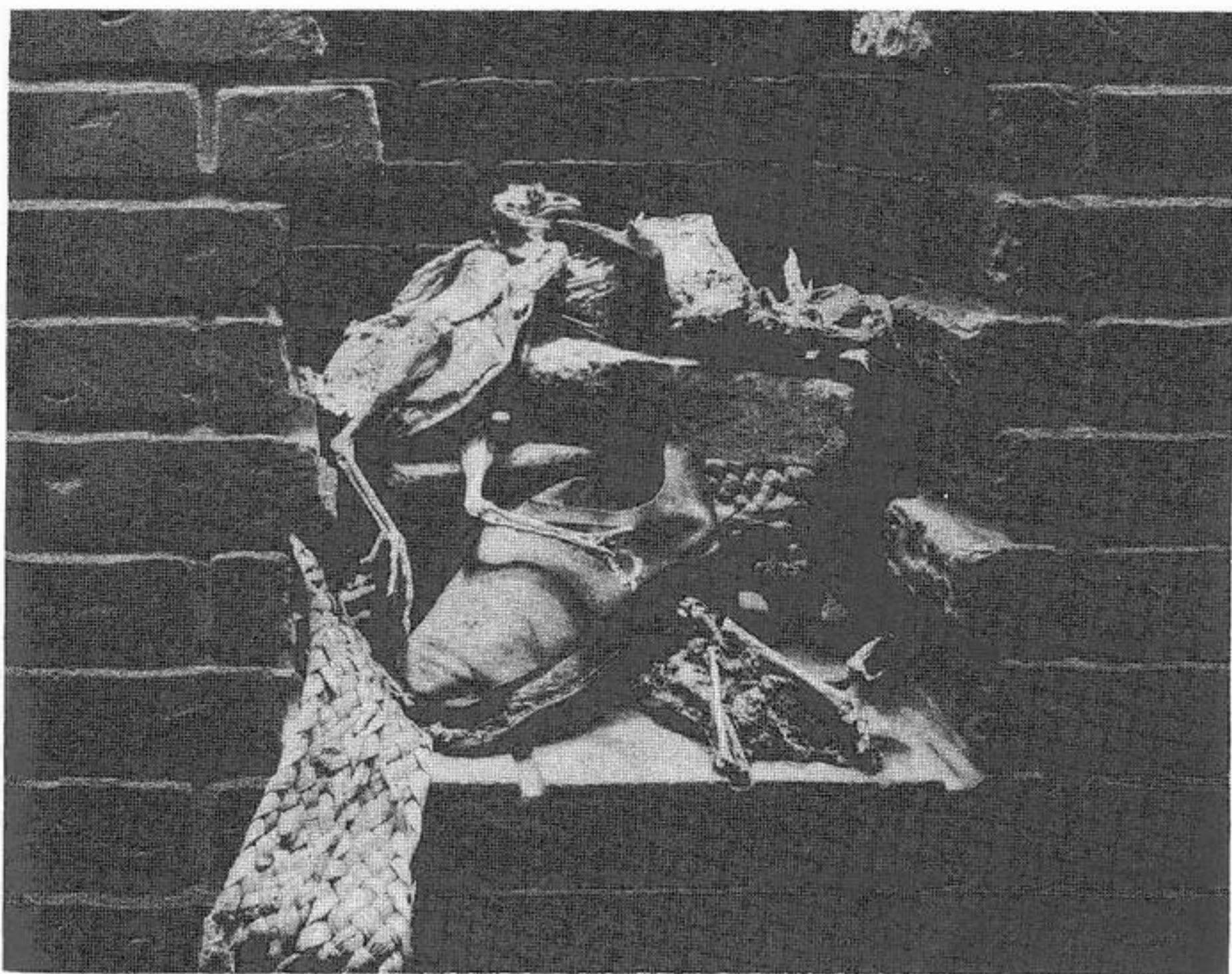
Although in a number of cases the actual location of dried cats within buildings has not been documented, it does appear that they are most commonly found in walls, both external and internal. In a number of instances—as at Ennis—it is recorded that they occurred in specially prepared cavities or niches. At Hay Hall, Birmingham, for instance, the posed bodies of a bird and a cat "with gaping jaws and extended claws", were discovered facing each other in a square wall cavity, c.25 cms. deep, which was surrounded by heavy oak (Howard 1951, p. 149). Examples, however, have also been found beneath floors and in roofs. During the removal of thatch from a cottage at Pilton, Peterborough, in 1890, for example, the dried bodies of a pegged down cat and a rat were discovered. These were so arranged as to give the impression that the former was chasing the latter (Howard 1951, p. 149).

Reassuringly, there is little evidence to support the hypothesis put forward by Hartland (1937, p. 113) that the cats under discussion were walled-up alive, given that in the majority of cases where records were made it is clear that the moribund positions of the animals were unnatural. Rather, it appears to have been the usual practice to pose the cats in lifelike stances before drying and immuring them, though whether candidates for this procedure were selected from the living feline population or not is unknown. It is not apparent from the meagre details recorded about the Ennis cat whether it was posed or not, but the likelihood would appear to be that it was.

Although the majority of recorded dried cats appear to have been immured alone, a significant number were accompanied in death by dried specimens of their more common types of prey. As noted above, the Hay Hall cat was enclosed in a wall-niche with a bird, while the Pilton and Christ Church examples were accompanied by rats. Some dried cats were actually posed with their prey in their mouths, such as the example with a rat discovered

in a house of uncertain, but pre-1880, date at Lothbury, London (Howard 1951, p. 149). Perhaps the most dramatic cat-and-prey arrangement, however, is that from a house at Southwark, London. Discovered beneath woodwork of sixteenth century date, the cat holds a rat in its jaws "which appears to be struggling to escape, with its legs extended, its mouth wide open and its tail erect", while another rat, beneath the cat's forefeet, "writhes upwards as if to bite its captor" (Howard 1951, p. 149). Only one instance of a dried cat being immured with a mouse has been recorded (Howard 1951, p. 150), though it would perhaps appear likely that the desiccated remains of such a diminutive creature could easily go unnoticed.

Prior to investigating the possible reasons for the immuring of dried cats, it is necessary to briefly note other discoveries which appear to be related to these in nature. Very much rarer than dried cats as finds from buildings are dried chickens. One such was found in the last century at Porch House, Devizes, Wiltshire, which dates from c.1470, but by far the most spectacular deposit of this kind was discovered in 1963 in a bricked-up recess in the Tudor-period Lauderdale House, London (Merrifield 1969, pp. 101-103). This recess contained the dried bodies of four chickens, two of which had been strangled, and two apparently walled-in alive (for an egg had been laid following their enclosure), as well as a number of odd shoes and other items (Illus. 2). Dried chickens as finds from buildings



Illus. 2. Dried chickens and other items from Lauderdale House, London.
(Photo: Museum of London)

are not known to be on record from Ireland, although, as will be noted below, domestic fowl were occasionally used in some areas in foundation sacrifices. A much more common form of foundation deposit in Ireland was that of the horse's skull. These were buried in the foundations and beneath the floors of dwelling-houses until relatively recent times, and were also occasionally buried in bridges and churches (Ó Súilleabháin 1945). This practice is also on record from Britain and Scandinavia (Merrifield 1987, pp. 123-125).

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The motive behind the immurement of dried cats in buildings, which appears to have been a not uncommon practice from at least the medieval period into early modern times, is unclear. A consideration of the contexts and circumstances of such finds however, combined with that of quasi-magical folk-practices and of the ancient belief that cats possess supernatural powers, suggests that dried cats were placed in buildings either as a form of foundation sacrifice or as vermin scares.

The rather elaborate arrangements, instanced above, of dried cats posed with their prey, certainly supports the suggestion that these were intended to act in some way as vermin scares. That they would not have been visible to the rodents they were meant to deter is unimportant, given the probability that such deposits were essentially viewed as charms. This practice, however, should probably be viewed as secondary and arising from a rationalization of the ancient custom of the foundation sacrifice (Wood-Martin, 1902, vol. II, p. 6, states that sacrificing a black cat is "certain to remove ill-luck from a house").

The practice of making foundation sacrifices when erecting a new building has very early origins and is known from many parts of the world (Hartland 1937, pp. 109-115). As a rite of commencement its aim appears to have been to bind a spirit to the new building for apotropaic and prophylactic purposes. To this end human sacrifices were occasionally made, as witness a number of archaeological discoveries on excavated Iron Age hillforts in Britain (Merrifield 1987, pp. 50-51) and elements in the Irish hagiographical tradition (Hartland 1937, pp. 114-115). Animal sacrifices were much more common, however, and the custom of burying horse's skulls under floors in Ireland is seen as a sanitized form of the earlier foundation sacrifices (Ó Súilleabháin 1945, p. 50). Other survivals of this rite in Ireland include the practice, recorded in Leitrim in the last century, of killing a hen and allowing its blood to drip into holes at the corners of a building (Duncan 1899, p. 118). It seems beyond doubt that the immuring of cats is another manifestation of such foundation sacrifices.

It may well have been the case that cats were regarded as particularly appropriate animals for such sacrifice, given the remarkable place which they held in superstition. From being worshipped as divinities in pre-Roman Egypt they came to be seen as associates of the devil in Europe in the later Middle Ages. They were credited with being witches' familiars, were surrounded by mystery and magic, and were sacrificed by drowning and burning on certain Christian feast-days (Howard 1951, p. 150; Tabor 1991, pp. 49-57). This demonic view of the cat also appears to have been current in later Medieval Ireland, judging from the contents of a 'churl's tale' collected by an English traveller in Co. Wexford (Malcomson 1868, pp. 187-192).

In summary, therefore, the dried cat discovered in Ennis friary in the last century appears to have been the subject of a seventeenth century reduced form of foundation sacrifice. The find affords an interesting glimpse of pseudo-magical belief and practice in Clare at this time.

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