La Vie de S. Sané: A Seventeenth-Century Life of Saint Senan

ALBERT LE GRAND (1629) - Translated by JEAN-MICHEL PICARD (1993)

In 1978 Jean François Simon, an author and historian from Plouzané, a town in north-western Brittany, discovered a link between his birthplace and Kilrush, Co. Clare, when he came to translating Plouzané into English - Plou is the Breton word for Parish and Zané, he discovered, was the equivalent for Senan, name of the Irish 6th-century saint associated with Inis Cathaigh or, as it is known in English, Scattery, the island in the Shannon Estuary just off Kilrush. That same year, in consequence of his discovery, Monsieur Simon and three companions travelled to Kilrush to check out the St. Senan connection, and also with a view to having their town, Plouzané, twinned with Kilrush for historical, cultural and social reasons. Their mission was successful, and in October 1982 the twinning charter was signed. Since then the bond between the two towns has gone from strength to strength, and over 1,000 Bretons have visited Kilrush, with a visit to Scattery as a sine qua non for each visitor.

In 1992, Michael Aiden Donnellan, the Office of Public Works' official caretaker of Scattery, accompanied the Kilrush twinning association's party on its visit to Plouzané. When there, they visited the local St. Senan's Well which Monsieur Christian Poullaouec, President of Plouzané twinning group, told them that in its history and curative powers it closely resembles Tobair Seandain on Scattery.

The Kilrush group also met the parish priest of Plouzané, l'abbé Albert, who had sculpted a fine statue of St. Senan for his parish church. Mr. Donnellan asked him if there were any local records pertaining to St. Senan and Plouzané. The reply was in the affirmative, and Mr. Donnellan was presented with a photocopy of “La Vie de S. Sané, Evesque Hybernois, Titulaire de la paroisse de Plouzané en Leon, le 6 Mars”, from Les Vies des Saints de la Bretagnes Armorique, written in 1629 by Albert Le Grand, de Morlaix, hagiographe.

Through the good offices of Paul McMahon, Architect in the National Parks and Monuments Branch, Office of Public Works, Mr. Donnellan was able to get the 1629 account expertly translated by Dr. Jean-Michel Picard, of the Department of French, University College, Dublin. The Thomond Archaeological Society is grateful to all the above for permission to publish the translation in our Journal, and to our longtime member Liam de Paor for his introductory comments outlining the importance of this newly brought-to-light Life of Saint Senan.

E.R., Hon. Editor.

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INTRODUCTION

St. Senan of Inis Cathaigh (Scattery Island) is one of the more elusive early Irish saints. The medieval accounts of his life (one, in metrical form, in Latin, found in the Salamanca Codex and elsewhere, another in Irish), together with shorter anecdotes preserved here and there, give us nothing that could be termed historical. They are collections of legends and mythological tales, with a few standard hagiographical wonder-stories. He was, like his next-door neighbour St. MacCreiche of Liscannor, or like St. George of England, (both equally
fabulous characters), a dragon- or monster-slayer. St. Patrick too, with whom St. Senan is associated in the legends, ultimately acquired a reputation for hostility to serpents. The Life of St. Senan became extremely popular, especially in Thomond (although he is reckoned a North Kerry saint — from Aireacht Uí Chochubhair, the “Arakt” of the text which follows), and was much copied in the modern manuscripts that circulated widely in Munster in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. John Lloyd, the Limerickman who taught school in the parish of Dunaha and who wrote a guide to Co. Clare, made a translation into English, which in turn was much copied. The scribe Antony O’Brien, who also taught school in Dunaha and was a friend of Eugene O’Curry’s father, copied this as part of his first exercise in producing a manuscript book, and noted on the last page:

“Finished by me Anthony O’Brien, September 25th 1780 at Querrin in the west of County Clare, and Parish of Dunaha, it being a wet morning.”

(R.I.A. MS 25 E 11)

The Life here translated from the French differs considerably from these versions, although it draws in part on them, and is of great interest as a specimen of Counter-Reformation hagiography, embodying a considerable element of the Irish tradition and showing a knowledge of early-seventeenth century Thomond and North Kerry. This is not surprising, since it was written on the Breton coast at Plouzané, where the cult of St. Senan had been brought, no doubt by seafarers from the Shannon mouth. It is too much to say that St. Senan himself, as the story would have it, spent some time at Plouzané, since we know nothing whatever about him, or even if he ever existed. However, it is not impossible.

LIAM DE PAOR

Translation

Life of Saint Senan

Irish bishop and patron saint of the parish of Plouzané, diocese of Leon.
Feast day: 6 March.

I. Saint Senan, one of the patron saints of our diocese of Leon, was from the Irish nation and was given by God to complete what Saint Patrick had begun in that island, as Saint Patrick himself had prophesied long before. One day, several lords from the future country of Ireland had asked him about religious matters and Patrick replied that soon a child would be born, named Sanus, a holy child given by God, who would achieve the conversion of the whole island and would succeed him as bishop. Some time later this prophecy was fulfilled, for Senan was born in a territory called by the natives Arakt, near the famous river named Shannon which flows through the city of Limerick; this territory of Arakt was in the province of Munster, County of Kerry, Diocese of Ardfer, even now, in spite of the rage of the English heretics, the saint is still greatly revered there and people still use the fearful oath called in their language An neorannach Sheanan. This oath comes from the fact that in their country there was a sort of iron circle or collar, formerly used by Saint Senan, which was put around the neck of people called to take an oath at a trial. If their oath was truthful no harm was done to them, but if they perjured themselves, the iron collar immediately strangled them.

Although the Breviary of Leon says he was born in Scotland, it must be pointed out that at that time and long after Hibernia and Scotia were synonymous and one term was used for the other and vice versa. This is clearly shown by Bede in Book Three of his English History, by
Thomas Messingham, a modern author, in his Preamble to the *Lives of Irish Saints*; by Hugh Cavello, Archbishop of Armagh, Primate of Ireland, and by several other authors.

II. His father was named Herkan and his mother Cogella, and were respectable and rich people. The prodigies which surrounded his birth made it plainly obvious that he would some day be a great saint. Among other signs, when his mother was in labour, as she was in the greatest sufferings, she grasped a staff in her hands to relieve the pain and suddenly the staff, which was dry and half rotten, started to sprout in her hands, producing green leaves and fruit, to the utter amazement of everyone there. The most clever and judicious among them drew the conclusion that the child who was being delivered would flower some day like the palm and would develop in the garden of the Church like the cedar of Lebanon.

As soon as he was weaned and although still a child, he started to welcome and practice abstinence, which he especially cherished throughout his life. One day, as he saw his mother having a meal early in the morning, he reprimanded her, with due respect and modesty, saying that God had ordered precise hours for giving oats to that donkey — he meant for feeding our mortal body — and that our first duty was to feed our soul as the most noble part of ourselves. His mother accepted this reprimand with good grace and put it to good use.

III. On seeing his good nature, his intelligence, and his taste for virtue, his parents decided that he should study and they sent him to school. There, combining piety and the study of the Holy Scriptures, he quickly became so renowned for his holiness and wisdom that the whole country revered him more as an angel than as a man. When he had completed his studies, he came back to his parents where he lived in silence and meditation and spent all his time in prayers, contemplation of divine matters and reading of the Holy Scriptures. But his father and mother who, as is the way of the world, looked unfavourably on God’s affairs, did not like this way of life and accused him of being a weakling and a coward.

Once, among other instances, as his parents were moving house and found themselves in difficulty about carrying the household furniture, Saint Senan did not bother to help them but kept on with his holy exercises. His mother, greatly upset, came to him and scolded him bitterly because, while his father, herself and all the other members of the household worked, he alone, although young and strong, did nothing and kept his arms folded and useless. The young holy man was not troubled by this outburst and replied softly that they should leave behind his share of furniture to carry and that, when he finished his prayers, he would without fail carry his share to the appointed place. So they did and they left him a pile of furniture and utensils to carry. Meanwhile he went on saying his prayers, persisting in his customary proximity. In the evening, in order to appease his parents, he decided to carry whatever had been left to him. But God spared him this burden for all the furniture was miraculously transported to the appointed place. On seeing this, his parents gave thanks to God and were careful not to worry him anymore in this way, leaving him in peace to carry on with his religious exercises.

IV. Once, as he travelled in the country with his mother and other relations and friends, they were overtaken by nightfall and bad weather and had to find shelter in the nearest village. But they lost their way and after going in all directions, they found themselves at the door of a castle. They asked the inhabitants if they could spend the night there but — contrary to the usual practice among this nation which is most hospitable — the people inside were not charitable and refused. Cogella and her companions were much saddened by this but Saint Senan consoled them, predicting that they would shortly witness a horrible
punishment for this lack of grace and hospitality. Suddenly, when they were some distance away, the castle with its outbuildings, woods, forests, canals and other properties disappeared underground and became a big lake.

Another day, as he reached the banks of the Shannon with his mother in order to pass to the Province of Thomond — in the territory which was then the county of the lords counts O’Brien, the ancient royal family of Thomond — they were unable to find any boat in which to cross the water. The nearest bridge was that at Limerick, some twelve to fourteen leagues away, but he miraculously crossed this large river, or rather this sea strait for at this point it is four to five leagues wide, and arrived with his mother, safe and sound on the other side.

V. As one of his uncles, a brother of his father, and several other noble persons were crossing the Shannon — a very dangerous and impetuous river — their boat, although near the bank, was beaten furiously by the waves and sank, drowning all on board. When he heard the news, Saint Senan prayed God and brought them back to life. But, as they feared to sin again and fall from God’s grace, they said they preferred to forgo the pleasures of staying in this life rather than to return to face the dangers and the risks to their eternal salvation. So they begged the saint to allow them to die immediately. He granted their request and buried them. How wonderful that God bestowed on his servant such complete power over life and death!

Since he wanted to serve God perfectly, he fully renounced the world and gathering together a number of equally devoted young men he retired to the wilderness. There, he built a small monastery and devoted himself to his Maker’s service. When he had served God there for a number of years, Saint Patrick recalled him and conferred on him all the holy orders including the priesthood. When Saint Patrick saw his death approaching, he convoked his canons and reminded them of the revelation he had had of the prophecy which he had once made about Saint Senan, exhorting them to choose him as bishop and his successor. They complied with this and they all elected him as bishop and worthy successor of Saint Patrick.

VI. As soon as he was consecrated, to the great joy of the whole island, he immediately set to work and did so much that he eradicated all idolatry from Ireland, most scrupulously visiting his diocese and removing any abuse which may have developed among the new Christian communities. In order to get more help and support in this holy crusade, he founded several fine monasteries in which he settled many great and wise persons who helped him to carry the weight of his episcopal duties. If I wanted to make a list of all his virtues, it would never be finished since he had them all and in such quality and perfection that he seemed to be more an angel come down from heaven than a mere mortal. Also, God made him illustrious and famous by the great miracles which he wrought through him.

VII. In time of drought in the episcopal house, he miraculously provided a good spring in which a woman was bold enough to bathe her small child. A monk, a disciple of Saint Senan, passed by and reprimanded this woman, praying God that such a bold action be punished. His wish was granted for she let the child fall from her hands and he was swept along into a pond below the spring where he drowned. The poor mother, utterly distraught, went to complain to Saint Senan about the wrong done to her by the monk. The holy bishop called the monk and ordered him to go to the pond and recover the child alive or else to jump into it. He obeyed and, most strangely, as he was testing the depth of the water with his staff, he discovered that it was as firm and solid as earth. He walked on the water and in the middle of the pond, found the child playing there. He carried him back to the land without the child getting wet in any way and Saint Senan returned him to his mother, thus performing three
great miracles at the same time: the punishment of the mother’s lack of respect, the monk walking on the water and the resurrection of the dead child.

VIII. Saint Senan, carefully considering the most true saying of our Lord that one must leave everything in order to serve Him well and perfectly, resolved to go into voluntary exile from his country for the love of the One who had exiled Himself from Heaven in order to redeem him, and had remained on this earth among men for thirty-three years. He resigned from the bishopric, making sure that it was well provided for, and set out to sea with a few of his monks. Fortunately, he landed on the coast of Leon, at the tip of Perzell, parish of Plougouvelin, near Le Conquet, not far from the point and abbey of Saint Mathieu, also called Loen Maho Traoun; from there, they walked inland to the place where the parish of Plouzané now stands. On this site, there was then a temple dedicated to pagan gods, as I have discovered. The circular gable of the church, built as a half lantern, makes this a likely conjecture for one can indeed see that, although a very ancient building, the church has nevertheless been joined, as if attached, to that lantern. I have also discovered from local tradition that the tower of the sub-parochial Church of Loc-Maria, 700 yards distant from Guic-Sané, was formerly an oratory dedicated to their false and pagan deities and was at that time located in the middle of a thick forest which they called Lucos. And in front of this church one can see on both sides of the main road two big stone crosses which are said to have been erected by Saint Senan once he had converted the local people to the Christian faith. In acknowledgement of this, the crosses have been held in great reverence ever since and have served as places of sanctuary and immunity for wrongdoers. Once they reached the point on the main road between these two crosses, they could not be apprehended by the law and this is why the place was called Menehy Sant Sané.

IX. Saint Senan stopped in this place and began to preach and teach the people who until then were mostly pagan. Having converted them in a short time, he purified their temple and dedicated it to God and there he celebrated the sacred mysteries of the Mass. At one end of the graveyard of Guic-Sané, one can see a large cross cut from a single piece of green stone and in front of it stands a stone altar table raised on four pilasters made of granite. Local tradition holds that this is the altar on which Saint Senan celebrated his first mass after their conversion. Going out of the church, on the left side of the porch, there is a large cross made of granite, with unknown characters written on it, which, if they could be read, would throw much light on the matter. So, Saint Senan settled with his monks on a site not far from Guic-Sané, which is still called Ar Cloasir, i.e. the Cloister, where, with the help of local inhabitants, he built little cells to make up a small monastery. As there was no water, he obtained a good spring which even now is called Feunteun Ar Cloasir, i.e. the Cloister’s fountain, a very good and plentiful spring. I studied this fountain carefully in 1624 and noticed that its coping was made from a cross of red stone, cut in the ancient fashion, with some unknown characters.

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1 These two crosses still exist. They are 0.80 m high, placed on bases of 2 m and 1.85 m high. There are 10 metres between them and they are situated on both sides of the little square at the west entrance of the village. Formerly there were only three metres between them and they were in a little wood which was called Couc ar c'haas (i.e. wood of grace or refuge). Any criminal or wrongdoer could find refuge between the two crosses and was immune from prosecution, being under the protection of St. Senan.

2 This cloister is still known by this name. It is located a short kilometre away from the village. Every year, on Whit Sunday, before High Mass, the procession of Loc-Maria joins that of Plouzané to conduct together the “Round” of the Cloister, which is called Tro sant Sant. Many faithful do the same “Round” individually, with their beads in their hands, either on the same day or during the octave (Communication from the Reverend Father Mingant, parish priest of Loc-Maria-Plouzané).