Holy Wells and Headless Saints

By James Rattue

When I first read Major Buckley's article on St Teilo's Well in Source 2, I confess to having been devilishly amused at the number of people I was sure it would annoy. Like everybody else, I had swallowed the story without checking it because it was endorsed by impeccable sources, and seeing it so utterly debunked had a certain anarchistic frisson! I am not sure that the idea of the 'head-cult' need be entirely discarded; but it obviously needs drastic revision from the inflated statements that have been made about it.

Firstly, the idea that the 'head-cult' is exclusively or even predominately Celtic is very dubious, if all we have to go on are examples of folk stories involving heads which are extrapolated backwards to produce a religious motif. A few disparate examples illustrate this. St Julian of Brioude in the Auvergne, whose cult is first mentioned by Gregory of Tours in the sixth century, was beheaded next to a spring which was later held to cure headaches. Gregory also mentions the soldier-saint Géréon of Cologne, another decapitee with a well in the basilicate church built around his tomb [1]. At Volissos on the Greek island of Chios we find St Markella's Well: as usual, Markella was a pure virgin beheaded by her pagan father, although here the spring rose where a rock split open to receive the saint's body less her head [2]. That we insular British have heard so few of these stories is probably that we know so little about wells in the rest of Europe.

There are quite a few English head-wells too. The Bords themselves mention St Kenelm's at Clent and St Osyth's, Essex [3], but there are more obscure examples which are usually overlooked. St Juthware's Well at Halstock, Dorset was, again, created where the saint's severed head fell, along with a miraculous oak tree. Juthware is traditionally supposed to be the sister of
the Celtic saint Sativola of Laneast in Cornwall, but their legends are exactly the same and the geographical distance between them suggests that they were completely separate people [4]. Nobody at all mentions the Midlands saint Fremund, who has nothing remotely Celtic about him, but he has a legend featuring him washing his severed head in a well which may have been in the parish of Harbury in Warwickshire [5]. There are parallel uses which are clearly much younger than the Dark Age saints. St Thomas’s Well at Windleshaw was supposed to have risen where a priest was beheaded during the persecution of Roman Catholics, although the well-house nearby was built from the ruins of a fifteenth-century chantry of St Thomas. Even Battle Well at Evesham was said to have risen where the popular hero/saint Simon de Montfort was killed in 1265 [6].

I find it odd that nobody has discussed medieval occurrences of the ‘head-cult’ in the general context of the use of relics. It was quite usual to detach the heads of saints, even non-martyrs, to provide subsidiary shrines (this happened to St Hugh of Lincoln, for instance) and the use of skulls at wells for drinking, as quoted by Francis Jones, the Bords, the Morries, and all the usual sources (I almost said ‘suspects’, but that would be grossly uncharitable) is part of this: the bodily part of the saint imparts benefit to the water. Other relics behaved in the same way. Adomnan mentions that St Columba protected a community from plague by giving them bread which he had blessed and which was then dipped in water which was sprinkled over the people. St Wulfstan healed a blind High Wycombe girl with water hallowed by a broom which had itself been in contact with the Holy Lance! [7]. If you are going to use a body part for drinking water there is little to choose apart from the skull. There were alternatives: at Harbledown in Kent, pilgrims were sprinkled with water from the Black Prince’s Well using St Thomas Becket’s shoe [8]. Nor is the use of the skull for religious purposes even confined to the West, let alone the Celtic bits of it. The museum in which I work holds a skull used as a cup for libations in the Lamaistic brand of Buddhism, looted from the Chinese Emperor’s palace in 1860.

One of the problems with using hagiographical stories as evidence of local, concrete head-cults is the way in which they grow up. It seems suspicious that the earliest record of the head-motif in the legends of SS. Decuman, Fremund, Juthware, Kenelm, Osyth and Justinian all occur in one source, the Nova Legenda Angliae by John Capgrave. This is a collection of stories compiled in the mid-fourteenth century from the work of John of Tynemouth, who died in 1349, and accounts for most of what we know about a number of obscure saints. In many cases the writers of such books themselves had almost no information to go on (a name, a location, a well perhaps, a vague tradition of martyrdom) and had somehow to knit these elements into a convincing and instructive tale. Leland’s Collectanea, the notes he gathered for the history of England which he never managed to write, highlights this process by giving us only the bare bones of stories: we hear of ‘a spring of clear waters in the place where the body of [St] Etheldreda was buried’, or, even more laconically, just ‘S. Domnanverdh apud Beckeleiam’ [9]. The need to make up a good story by borrowing from legends which were already famous was not disingenuous: for medieval people, ‘truth’ meant adherence to the eternal divine model, not to ideas of historical fact. If you knew how one virgin martyr behaved, you could safely assume that they all behaved like that, even if the information you had didn’t state as much.

But we must not get too post-modern when considering the ‘head-cult’. Even if the notion of its survival into the middle ages is distinctly doubtful, there is something definitely going on in antiquity. Twenty years after Anne Ross, Ralph Merrifield has collected a new set of references to skulls in wells [10], and it is worth quoting a couple of these examples in case people have not encountered them. At Odell in Bedfordshire a skull was discovered very deliberately inserted into the lining of a Roman well; and, more gruesomely, two six-month old babies were found buried at the southeast and northeast corners of the Romano-British well-temple at Springhead in Kent. The one to the northeast had been beheaded. Some time after that, the temple floor was renewed, and two more infants were interred at the other corners; this time it was the southwestern child who was decapitated [11]. This is surely very suggestive evidence of some general ritual significance in Roman Britain, not so much of heads as such, but of decapitation – even if we can never discover exactly what it was about.

In sum, I think that ever referring to a ‘head-cult’ was a mistake. The word ‘cult’ implies some degree of structure and organisation, which seems to be putting too heavy a burden on the facts, and was not the intention of the more sober writers who used the phrase. It makes more sense to talk about a head-motif, while remembering that, folklore and hagiography being what they are, an individual story cannot prove an association with a particular locality or even person. But, as the Morries suggest, the general combination of wells and heads ‘is certainly more than could possibly be considered accidental’ [12], if by ‘accidental’ we mean purely random. Stories may have been borrowed from place to place and saint to saint, but the idea has to have originated somehow.
References


5. Horstmann *op.cit.*, p. 454. The well is not located, but was somewhere in the vicinity of this village.


8. V. Martin, 'Holy Wells in Kent', *Source (First Series)*, issue 2, p. 27.


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Isle of Man Holy Well project linked to http://asmanxasthehills.com/isle-of-man-holy-wells-project/
Journal of Antiquities A wide range of sites describes – a fair number of holy wells. Very informative and recommended.
London’s Springs, Wells & Waterways Group for those interested in ancient, holy, healings springs and the rivers of the capital
Madron well and chapel Facebook community
Megalithic Portal – Holy Wells The excellent wiki which has holy wells from throughout the globe listed. Essential!
Pinterest page
Sacred and Holy Wells of the Scottish boarders and beyond Facebook site
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Southampton Springs A nice blog focusing on springs, not necessarily healing or holy, in the English town. Worth a look!
St Clether’s Well facebook community
St Ruffin’s well restoration Facebook community Aiming to restore the lost holy well of St Ruffin
The Chalice Well, Glastonbury, Somerset
The Weeping Cross James Rattue Website by fellow knowledgable enthusiast, researcher and author James Rattue non holy well subject matter as well.
Well dressing Excellent calendar and archive of Derbyshire styled, but not based, well dressing customs
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A Headless Saint. Most holy wells have interesting folk tales associated with them and St Decuman’s is no exception. According to tradition, pagan robbers assaulted Decuman in his hermit cell and struck off his scalp. Decuman merely picked up his scalp, carried it to the well, washed it, placed it back on his head, and was instantly healed. Another, more dramatic version of the story says that Decuman’s entire head was lopped off, whereupon he carried it to the well, washed it in the healing waters, put it back on his shoulders, and carried on with life as normal. Yet another version