

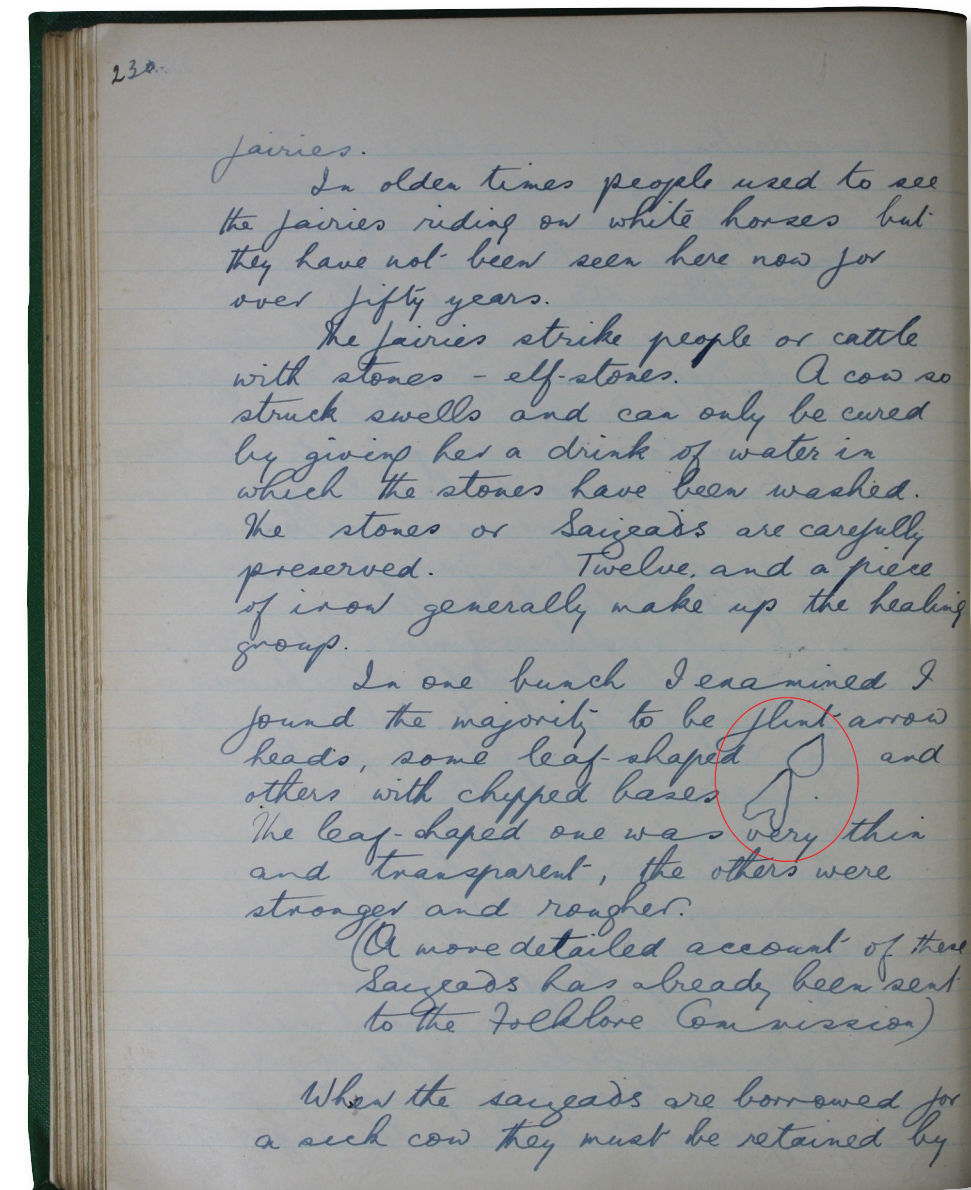
FAIRY FLINT AND LITHIC LORE

Marion Dowd looks at the use of prehistoric artefacts in traditional folk medicine.

Between 1937 and 1939 the Irish Folklore Commission initiated a groundbreaking project by engaging national schools around the country to document local folklore and traditions. Some 50,000 schoolchildren from 5,000 schools across Ireland contributed to the undertaking. The Schools' Collection constitutes one of the principal components of the National Folklore Collection (NFC), now housed in University College Dublin. A substantial proportion of the material is available online at www.duchas.ie, and much is of relevance to archaeologists. This article highlights one fascinating aspect from a cursory exploration of the online Schools' Collection (NFCS): the use of prehistoric lithics in traditional folk medicine (Fig. 1).

Elf darts and fairy stones

In rural farming communities in post-medieval and modern Ireland, prehistoric lithics discovered in the course of agricultural work, particularly Neolithic and Bronze Age arrowheads, were believed to derive from the fairies. Prehistoric lithics—as well as post-medieval gun-flints, fossils and unusual pebbles—were known by a variety of names, including elf darts, elf stones, elf shots, fairy darts, fairy stones, *saighead* (fairy dart) and *gae*

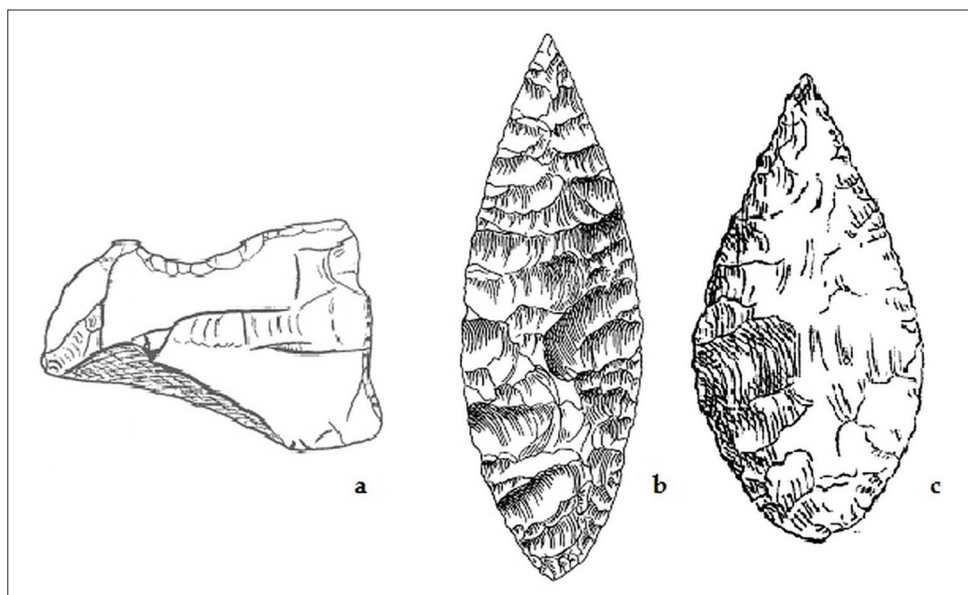


síe (dart or spear of the *sí*). The prevailing belief was that these objects were charged with supernatural agency and had the power to reverse ill health, primarily in cattle, thereby averting poverty, hunger and misfortune. This reinvention of archaeological objects in traditional popular medicine encourages us to consider the complex and evolving biographies of certain artefacts many millennia after they were discarded or abandoned (Dowd 2018). Several antiquarians writing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries documented the use of prehistoric artefacts in folk medicine (Fig. 2), and material collected by the Irish Folklore Commission reveals that this was widespread throughout the country.

Folklore relates that prehistoric lithics were believed to have been thrown, fired or dropped by the fairies. The 'Good People' had

a particular fondness for firing elf darts at people or cattle with the intention of inflicting a fatal illness so that they could be 'taken' to the fairy realm. Another common belief was that elf darts accidentally struck cattle that were caught in the crossfire of fairies playing at night. Cutting down or interfering with a whitethorn tree was sure to attract fairy wrath, and in Swanlinbar, Co. Cavan, it was believed that the Little People sought revenge for this insult by shooting a cow. The missile was 'an elf-stone which was a piece of fine flint which they got in the field'. The treatment was to

Above: Fig. 1—Description of the cure for elf shot, written by schoolteacher Patrick Caulfield in the late 1930s, including sketches of Neolithic arrowheads (NFCS 0139:230). Image reproduced by permission of the National Folklore Collection (www.duchas.ie).



Left: Fig. 2—(a) Neolithic flint hollow scraper from Coragh, Co. Cavan, that was used to prevent milk from being bewitched; (b) Neolithic leaf-shaped flint arrowhead used to cure elf-shot animals; (c) Neolithic leaf-shaped flint arrowhead used in the late nineteenth century (probably in Antrim) for curing cattle by boiling it together with soot, soil, salt and meal (see Dowd 2018 for references).

Below: Fig. 3—The Tawnywaddyduff *saigheads* from Belderrig, which include prehistoric scrapers and flakes and a post-medieval gun-flint (M. Dowd).

collect a can of water from a bog hole and give it to the animal to drink. The journey to and from the bog had to be undertaken in complete silence if the cure was to be effective (NFCS 0968:181).

A collection of elf darts known as the 'Tawnywaddyduff *saigheads*' was recently brought to my attention by Professor Emeritus Seamus Caulfield of UCD School of Archaeology. The *saigheads* had been used in traditional folk medicine around Belderrig, Co. Mayo, and were given to his father, Mr Patrick Caulfield, in the 1970s. The collection consists of fifteen flint and chert lithics, including a Neolithic hollow scraper, two convex scrapers, several complete and broken blades and flakes, waste flakes and a post-medieval gun-flint (Fig. 3). The treatment for cows that had been elf-shot involved wrapping the lithics in a rag, placing the bundle in a bucket of water and then giving the water to the animal to drink. Patrick Caulfield was a schoolteacher and in the 1930s he described some of the Belderrig folk medicine practices for healing elf-shot animals. He noted that the 'healing group' generally consisted of twelve pieces of flint and one fragment of iron. A sick cow could be cured by giving her a drink of water in which the *saigheads* had been washed. One assemblage that he examined consisted mainly of flint arrowheads, including Neolithic leaf-shaped and hollow-based varieties, which he sketched (Fig. 1). The *saigheads* were kept by the farmer who had borrowed them until sought by another neighbour, and in this way artefacts passed from family to family around the locality. It was 'not right' to return them if

they had not been asked for, and Mr Caulfield recorded that even though they moved from house to house they remained the property of the original owner (NFCS 0139:230–2).

Many collections of elf stones consisted of natural pebbles rather than archaeological artefacts, or a combination of both. Local

historian and folklore collector Joe McGowan of Mullaghmore, Co. Sligo, has in his possession a collection of elf stones consisting of nineteen naturally rounded pebbles (Fig. 4). This is one of two collections of elf stones known to Mr McGowan, and as a child he discovered a third set hidden in his father's byre. The Mullaghmore elf stones were last used c. 2007 by a farmer from Rosnowlagh, Co. Donegal, to treat a sick bull. The cure was to place the elf stones and a silver coin into water that had been taken from a specific





Left: Fig. 4—Joe McGowan with a collection of elf stones from Mullaghmore (M. Dowd).

three-mearing stream in Mullaghmore (a stream or drain where three townlands or farms meet) (Fig. 5). The water was given to the ailing animal to drink and the elf stones were passed three times around its body. Afterwards, the animal was measured from head to tail three times using a finger-to-elbow unit of measurement. If the measurements were the same the animal would be cured, but any inconsistency implied continuing ill health or death.

A man too wise to work for a living

Elf stones were handled with great care and were an important item in the medicine bag of a traditional folk healer, variously known as a wise woman/man, cunning woman/man, herb doctor, fairy doctor, gentle doctor, cow doctor or quack doctor. These folk healers were believed to have the requisite skills and powers to cure an elf-shot animal. Curiously, the offending elf dart that had caused the illness often had the power to provide the cure. An account from Rakeeragh, Co. Monaghan, explained that elf shot in cattle was best treated by the 'elf doctor' or 'fairy man', who was described as 'usually a man that was too wise to work for a living for he could live and be under the influence of drink most of all his days by reason of his uncanny profession' (NFCS 0958:169). At Kilross, Co. Sligo, the 'handy man' would come to the farm with his purse of elf stones, rub the animal's back with the

'peculiar shaped small stones' and measure her. The farmer fetched water from a three-mearing stream and it was given to the cow to drink. She was measured again, and if the measurements had decreased this indicated a successful cure (NFCS 0179:051–2). When cattle were struck by a piece of flint and collapsed owing to the *cualadh saighead* at Clifden, Co. Galway, the 'little bag of fairy stones' was fetched and boiled in a drink for the animal (NFCS 0004:028–9).

An elf doctor in Rakeeragh, Co. Monaghan, always carried several 'flint elf arrows' on his person, which he rubbed over the animal while reciting prayers and incantations in Irish. To treat the illness, a plough coulter was heated in the fire and passed around the cow several times, repeating incantations until the elf dart 'melted' into the animal's body (NFCS 0958:170). A cow at Dromore West, Co. Sligo, had been struck by elf stones and the 'man who had the cure' was sent for. He boiled some elf stones in water together with a florin, a penny and a halfpenny and gave the water to the cow to drink (NFCS 0167:129–30).

Falling foul of the fairies

Folklore about archaeological sites and artefacts often reveals a blurring of modern chronological boundaries. In particular, early medieval ringforts, believed in folk tradition to be fairy dwellings, were frequently linked to prehistoric lithics and cases of elf shot. A schoolteacher at Castlegal, Co. Sligo, recorded that cattle could be elf-shot if a landowner damaged a ringfort (NFCS 0156:016). At Ballymagaraghy, Co. Donegal, a vet confirmed a farmer's suspicion that the fairies had fired a 'flint stone' at his cow near a ringfort. The fairy-shot cow was cured by feeding her gunpowder mixed with an egg (NFCS 1118:333). Brother Angelo Mac Shámhais of Clifden National School wrote of a woman who was driving her cattle past a ringfort when the herd was attacked by fairy flint flying through the air. One cow was struck and collapsed. The woman searched the ground, picked up dozens of flint fragments, boiled them in the cow's drink and thereby cured her (NFCS 0004:028–9). Brother Angelo remarked that every district had a little bag of curing stones and those that he had seen were

worn from constant use. Similarly, a schoolteacher at Skerdagh, Co. Mayo, noted that 'in times gone by' there was a bag of elf stones in every house (NFCS 0086:091).

Cows were the primary targets of fairy darts, though occasionally humans were attacked, particularly if the fairies wanted to 'take' the individual. This belief may have been an attempt by communities to explain the sudden onset of physical or mental illness. A woman from Dromore West, Co. Sligo, noticed a supernatural fairy wind surrounding her one day when returning home with a wooden pail of milk. When she arrived at her house the wind died down, but she noticed two elf stones embedded in the pail, which she believed had been thrown by the fairies (NFCS 0167:129–30). A Donegal woman once saw the fairies throwing flint at her (NFCS 1083:245). The advice from Belderrig was that if someone was struck by an elf stone s/he should pick it up and retain it for future cures (NFCS 0139:230–2). In Mayo, a woman walking through fields with a child on her back returned home to find the child chewing an elf stone that had been thrown by the fairies. In the same area, two men cutting hay once heard two elf darts whizzing past, but their attempts to locate the objects proved futile (NFCS 0086:091).

The cure

Numerous variations of cures associated with elf darts survive in the NFC records. Treatment typically involved placing the lithics or pebbles into a bucket of water together with other items (often iron, gold, silver and bronze), giving the water to the sick animal to drink and/or rubbing the water over the animal's body. Prayers or secret incantations were often recited and the animal was measured to determine whether the cure had been effective. At Coragh, Co. Cavan, an ailing animal was treated by placing five or six pieces of flint, a silver object and horseshoe nails into a jug. At midnight the jug was filled with water taken from a stream located on the boundary of two townlands. The water was then dropped onto the spot where the cow had been struck and some was given to her to drink. As at Swanlinbar, the journey to and from the stream and while the cure was taking effect had to be conducted in absolute silence. If the prescribed method was faithfully adhered to, the cow would recover the following morning



Above: **Fig. 5—Joe McGowan points out the three-mearing stream in Kilkilloge townland, Mullaghmore, where water was traditionally sourced for using with elf stones to counteract fairy-induced illness in cattle (M. Dowd).**

(NFCS 1001:372). An old man from Tullychullion, Co. Donegal, was remembered in the 1930s as having had the cure for elf shot, though he had been dead for several decades. His method had been to collect residues from nine pots, scrape off part of the cow's hooves and horns, and clip hair from her back. He then measured the cow three times from tail to nose using the elbow-to-finger technique. The scrapings and hair were put on a plate and burned under the cow's nose while reciting 'secret words' (NFCS 1083:244).

The effortless melding of Christian belief with popular religious practices is evidenced in numerous accounts. When a cow had been elf-shot at Carns, Co. Sligo, a man who had a set of nine white stones that had been fired by the 'Good People' was sent for. A gold ring, a 'silver' sixpence or threepence, a 'copper' penny or halfpenny and rosary beads were put into a jug of holy water with the elf stones. A pinch of salt, hay and water from a three-mearing drain were added. The water was poured into another vessel, then rubbed on the animal's back and over its ears, eyes, nose and mouth while saying 'In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost'. The jug containing the solid elements was brought over the cow's back and under its stomach

three times, repeating the holy blessing. It took one day for the cure to take effect, after which the elf stones were taken out of the jug and retained for future use (NFCS 0155:530; NFCS 0156:018).

From an archaeological perspective, the reuse of prehistoric artefacts in folk medicine practices raises a variety of questions. Where did these artefacts originate from? Were they discovered through the destruction of monuments? When did such folk practices begin? Can we see evidence for similar traditions in early medieval and medieval Ireland? In some cases these traditions may explain the recovery of archaeological material in seemingly modern contexts. Rather than dismissing such finds as *ex situ*, we might consider that they relate to modern folk medicine. One contributor to the Schools' Folklore project from Cloonlurg, Co. Sligo, recorded: 'There are not many elf stones in the country. My grandfather had one long, long ago and it is still in our house' (NFCS 0183:261). The phenomenon also provides

insight into how communities made sense of the vestiges of the past that they encountered on a day-to-day basis. Farming communities frequently viewed prehistoric artefacts as 'exotic' fairy objects that could be used to treat illnesses inflicted by the fairies. These potent items belonged in the purse of a fairy doctor, not in a museum display cabinet. Concurrent with such beliefs, antiquarians were interpreting the same artefacts as relics of past human populations and archaeological activities. These competing narratives deserve equal attention in modern archaeological scholarship, but unfortunately folk beliefs are often dismissed as superstitions of little value. In reality, the National Folklore Collection reveals the continued cultural appreciation of many prehistoric artefacts and their central role in traditional folk medicine rituals of recent centuries. ■

Acknowledgements

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Reference

- Dowd, M. 2018 Bewitched by an elf dart: fairy archaeology, folk magic and traditional medicine in Ireland. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 28 (3), 451–73.

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