

Gallarus Oratory

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Marion Dowd

Gallarus Oratory

This contribution to **Folklore Focus** records folk beliefs attached to the well-known early medieval oratory.

GALLARUS ORATORY on the Dingle Peninsula is one of the most iconic buildings of early medieval Ireland. A small, corbelled, drystone church measuring just 4.6m by 3.1m internally, it has often been described as resembling an upturned boat. It is the only surviving intact example in the country. Though formerly believed to date from the eighth century, it is now generally accepted that Gallarus was constructed in the twelfth century. Directly opposite the narrow doorway is a small window on the east wall. A tradition still widespread in the west of Dingle claims that those who can squeeze through the window are assured a place in heaven.

In 1937, schoolgirl Máire Ní Shíthig collected the following story from Eoghan Mac Síthig, a farmer who lived near Gallarus:

Bhí fear agus bean ann fadó. Bhí mac leó i Ameirioca. Oidhche amháin do thaidhbhriugh sé go bhfaigheadh a mhuintir trí crócaí óir i Sáipéilín Ghallairais. Dubháirt sé leó an cúnne na bhfaighidís é, agus gurbhé an oidche ba mó tóirnaighe agus splannac a thíainig riamh. An fáid a bhéidís á



Above: Window in the east wall of Gallarus Oratory (James Bonsall).

chuardach gan aon eagla do teacht ortha. Scríobh sé abhaile chúcha annsan agus dúbháirt sé an scéal leó. Ó íochtar na h-Éireann do'beadh iad. Cuireadar chun bhóthair agus i gcaitheamh na slighe dóibh bhídís ag cur tuairisg cén áit a raibh Gallaras. Ar deireadh thángadar go dtí an t-Sáipéilín. Do reabhadar an áit agus fuaireadar an ór agus bhailiugheadar leó ar maidin. Connaic na daoine an áit tamall na dhiadh sin. Bhí an áit reabhta síos go dtí an gaoithean (NFCS 0421:318;
www.duchas.ie/ga/cbes/4678393/4675912).

[There was a man and woman long ago. They had a son in America. One night he dreamt that his parents would find three crocks of gold in Gallarus church. He told them the corner they would find it in, and that it would be the night

with the worst thunder and lightning that had ever occurred. They shouldn't be afraid while they were searching for it. He wrote home to them then and told them the story. They were from the north of Ireland. They took to the road and on the way they were enquiring where Gallarus was. Finally they arrived at the little church. They dug up the place and found the gold and off with them the next morning. The people saw the place a while after that. The place was dug down to the subsoil.]

'Hidden treasure' is a universal and cross-cultural folklore motif. Thousands of such stories are documented by the National Folklore Collection across all parts of Ireland. The location of the treasure is often revealed in a dream and it usually consists of gold. Unlike the Gallarus folk-tale, however, those in search of the treasure are not often successful. **AI**