

# Revival of Máméan Shrine

The pilgrimage site at Máméan in County Galway is reputed to be the mountain pass where St Patrick saw the western coast for the first time. Fr Mícheál Mac Gréil describes some of the recent history of the pilgrim path.



Maumeen-Pass, two thousand years ago it was an important Celtic shrine.

Máméan (the pass of the birds) is a Patrician shrine on a pass in the Maamturk Mountains between Recess and the Maam Valley in North Connemara. It is in the tradition of Croagh Patrick (southwest Mayo). Both shrines were places of popular divine worship in Pre-Christian times. It is believed that St Patrick visited the shrine, blessed the Holy Well and slept on a stone flag while there. (The stone flag has been chipped away by devout pilgrims over the years). By degrees, Máméan became a major place of Christian

pilgrimage over the years.

According to 'Aistir an Iarthair', St Patrick visited Máméan in 441 AD on his way from Kilmaine to Aghagower and Croagh Patrick. Throughout the centuries the annual pilgrimage to Máméan became a very 'popular pattern' with a wide range of activities, as well as prayers and devotions. During the early part of the twentieth century the extra-curricular celebrations were not approved of by the clergy and Máméan began to lose its attraction in favour of Croagh Patrick and 'Cnoc Mhuire'

(Knock). Support declined to a few loyal families.

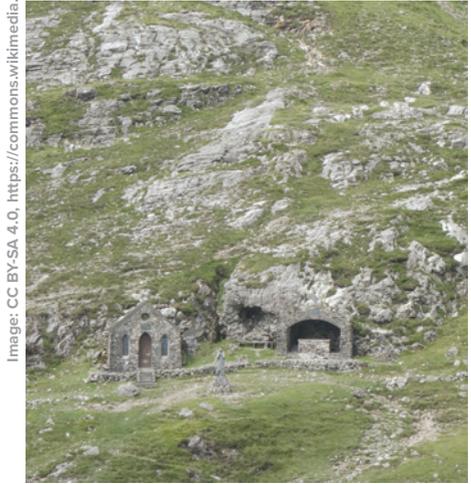
In July 1979, I offered Mass at St Patrick's Bed (Leaba Phádraig) in Máméan for an Irish Language Youth Camp (Ógras) and local residents. At the end of Mass £34 were left on a rock beside the Leaba, and I suggested that we use it to build a proper altar (Carraig Aifrin) voluntarily. I also promised to offer Mass there every year as long as my health would enable me.

During 1979–80 a voluntary committee was founded (Coiste Mháméan) with Michael Conroy as chairperson, Caitlín Bean Uí Thiarnaigh as secretary and Lorna Keogh as treasurer. A public altar and the Stations of the Cross were constructed voluntarily under the leadership of Tommy Coyne, a local stonemason.

On the first Sunday of August 1980, Archbishop Joseph Cunnane of Tuam consecrated the altar and I was given the privilege by the Archbishop of formally establishing the Stations of the Cross (Turas na Croise).

Two major annual pilgrimages were established, i.e., Mass and Stations of the Cross every first Sunday in August and Stations of the Cross every Good Friday. Both ceremonies would commence at 3pm. 'Caoineadh na dTrí Mhuire' (in totality) would be sung and a list of the local dead (who passed away during the year) would be read out and remembered. All ceremonies would be in the Irish language.

The revival of the Máméan Pilgrimage was much greater than expected. Large numbers of pilgrims attended. In 1985, a small chapel was built to mark the 1600th anniversary of the birth of St Patrick in 385 AD, also a beautiful statue of St Patrick (as a Shepherd) was



Maumeen Chapel at Máméan Pass in County Galway

created by Clíodna Cussen and a new Holy Well was blessed by Archbishop Neary in 1993 to meet the demands of the pilgrims. The path to the altar on both sides was duly repaired by local schemes. Archbishop Francis Duffy led the pilgrimage in August this year.

Two other artists deserve mention. Sculptor John Coffey of Westport created the Máméan Cross (a copy of which is on each of the stations). The images on each station were created by Sister Pius (Margaret Dyer) of Westport Convent of Mercy, as were the four portraits on the stained-glass windows in the chapel of Our Lady, St Joseph, St Bridget and St Patrick.

Note: 'Máméan' translates as 'pass of the birds', and you can notice small birds swooping in and out of burrows under large rocks with views through the Maamturk mountains to the peaks of the Twelve Bens. The Máméan walk is part of the Western Way Hike. Many seminarians of Tuam archdiocese helped in the development of the pilgrim site.