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Beehives on the border: Liminal humans and other animals at Skellig Michael

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Abstract

In the early middle ages, a community of Irish monks constructed a monastery outpost on the lonely Skellig Michael just offshore of County Kerry. These skelligs served as a mysterious boundary land where the known met the unknown, the worldly wrangled with the spiritual, and the very parameters of humanity itself were brought into question. Amid a period of great transition in Irish society, the monks willfully abandoned the luxuries of developing Western civilization on the mainland (and on the continent more broadly) to test their endurance through religious asceticism on a craggy island more suitable to birds than bipeds. This article reimagines the Skellig Michael experiment as a liminal space, one that troubles premodern efforts to disassociate from animality in an era when “human” and “animal” were malleable concepts. As Western society transitioned from animist paganism to anthropocentric Christianity and Norman colonial control, the Skellig Michael outpost (which survived into the 1300s) offered a point of permeability that invites a critical rethinking of early Irish custom. This article applies theories of liminality and Critical Animal studies to address the making of “human” and “animal” in the march to “civilization,” arguing that species demarcation and the establishment of anthroparchy has been central to the process.

Keywords

Borders, Irish studies, human-animal studies, liminality, vegan studies

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Introduction

Approximately 1300 years ago, a community of Christian monks braved the rough waters of the Atlantic Ocean to establish a rustic monastery on a small rocky island (*skellig*¹) off the Western coast of County Kerry, Ireland (Figure 1) (Horn et al., 1990). As was typical of religious projects of the so-called “Dark Ages” of Europe, these monks were experimenting with asceticism in denying themselves the

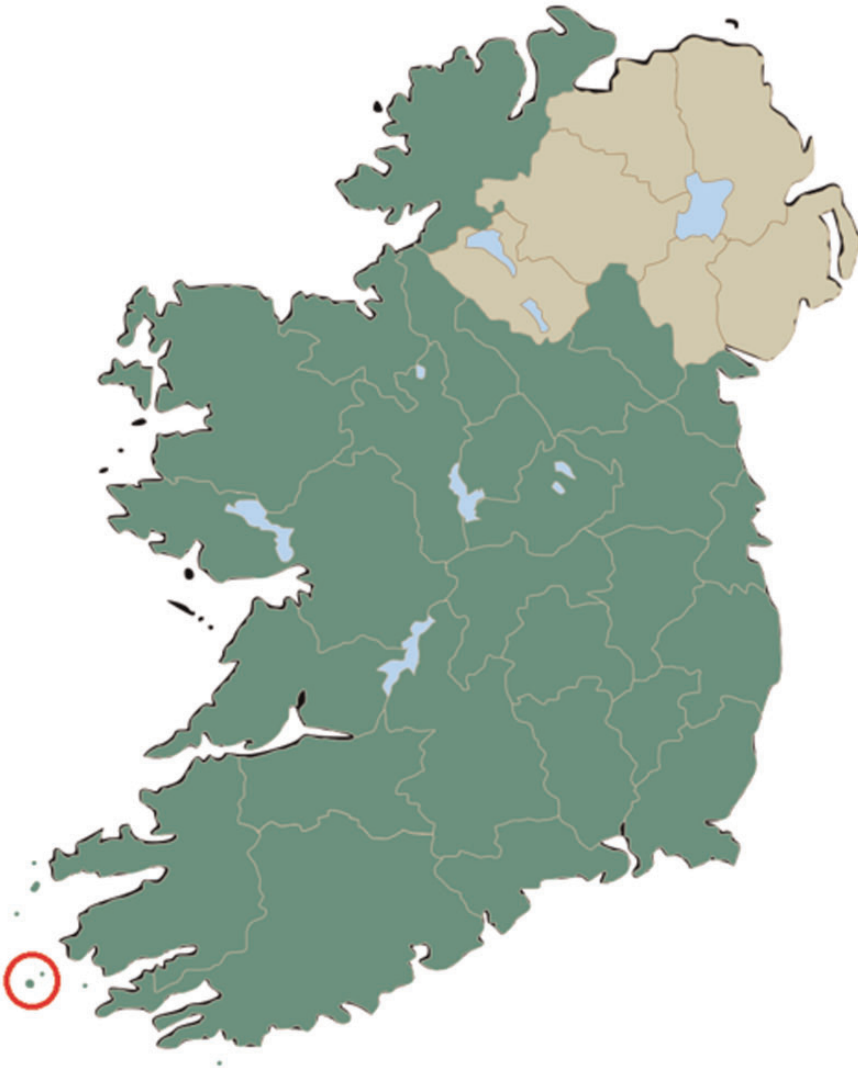


Figure 1. Skellig Islands, Ireland. Adapted from Wikimedia Commons.

comforts and security of human civilization on the mainland as a transformative performance of religious values and lived critique of prevailing customs. Soaked from constant rain and crashing waves, the craggy outcropping of jagged rocks made for extremely difficult living with few available resources to sustain human life. Although the monks may have chosen this spot as a demonstration of their devotion, the eighth-century experiment also illuminates the demarcation that was calcifying between humans and other animals across Europe at the time. As civilization gradually developed on the mainland, the skellig monks were actively *decivilizing*.

Perhaps, as Matthew Cole has observed of ascetic practice, they were hoping to enhance “the spiritual quality of human life” and achieve “transcendence of the material world” (Cole, 2011: 68). Cole furthers that Christian abstinence was “practiced to purify the soul and facilitate the contemplation of God,” and, subsequently, it served as an ideological foundation to the rise of monasteries. Survival on the skellig depended on scavenging, subsistence gardening, collecting rainwater, and sheltering in stone huts. In these ways and more, the monks seemingly reverted to a prehistoric, animalistic livelihood. They communed with the divine and thousands of seabirds, forgoing the comforts of civilization and the dictates of Rome.

This paper revisits and reimagines the history of Skellig Michael, what researchers have described as “one of the most daring architectural expressions of early Irish monasticism” (Horn et al., 1990: 23). The skellig was a site largely unsuitable to human habitation and was chosen for exactly that reason. Supporting structures, building surfaces, shelters and trail work had to be assembled from the mountain itself. The danger of the construction and habitation occurred “along the very boundary between life and death” coming “as near to God as the physical environment would permit” (Horn et al., 1990: 23). Ascetic solitaries like Skellig Michael were popular in Ireland, particularly in the so-called “dark ages” of the 6th and 7th centuries, but this particular site is unique in its perilous location. Adding to its mystique is the curious scarcity of premodern record (Bolger, 2011), leaving historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, and sociologists like myself to interpret its story with the advantage of hindsight and the hindrance of time.

To this last point, I must emphasize that this paper (which applies contemporary theory to the archaeological remnants of a cultural phenomenon transpiring in an era that left little written record to history) is ultimately speculative. The skellig, however, was clearly chosen for its seeming uninhabitability, and, for this reason (bolstered by the obvious religious function of the settlement), Skellig Michael might serve as a space of *liminality*, existing as it does on the border of Christendom between land and sea, celestial and terrestrial. Furthermore, the monastery constructed there was established in a period of Western Europe that was in considerable transition. Many boundaries were in question. Most notably according to Critical Animal Studies (CAS) scholars, was that between humans and the natural world (Ko, 2019). Skellig Michael is a site that forces a reckoning with this relationship—written records are not necessary for understanding that

integrating into raw, wild nature was fundamental to the site's settlement. This intentionality coupled with the ongoing cultural constructions of the time offers a useful case study in CAS, particularly in the lesser examined postcolonial region of Ireland. This article draws on the concept of liminality to offer a new interpretation of Skellig Michael's cryptic social function. I argue that, as a liminal space itself, it reflects a more general liminal epoch of Irish society, one characterized by significant religious, cultural, and colonial transition. As a microcosm of these wider shifts, the monastery represented a space in which the normal order of Irish society (and European society) was made malleable. I suggest that humanity's changing relationship with other animals in modernizing Ireland is key to this phenomenon.

Prior to Norman colonization, the Irish Church itself had functioned in a liminal state having deviated considerably from the Roman Church and effectively blending Catholic and animist pagan ideologies. Although the true rationale behind Skellig Michael is unknown, animality surely factored into its design as it encouraged intentional exposure to the elements as well as full immersion in nonhuman habitats far removed from the comforts of human habitations on the mainland. Norman colonization and the reform of the Irish Church introduced new rules of behavior to civilize (read: humanize) the Irish, eliminate animism, and institutionalize animal agriculture. This structural shift coincided with the dissolution of the monastery, its liminal role likely moot in a newly civilized Ireland. Animality is key to what Elias observes of the wider civilizing process transpiring in the West: a concerted effort to uplift rationality and self-control and restrain the "more animalistic human activities" associated with instinct and affect (Elias, 1982 [1939]: 230). There may well have been a relationship between the liminal positionality of the monastery and Ireland's transitioning and increasingly anthropocentric social hierarchy. As Ireland was moving from its indigenous ways to European ways, the Church and the colonial state institutionalized, and, ultimately, the Irish culturally evolved from "animal" to "human," liminal spaces provide glimpses into the malleability of these boundaries. They function as a sustained in-betweenness that evidence the social construction of particular states of social organization.

Liminality and human/nonhuman borderlands

At the turn of the 20th century, anthropologist van Gennep (2004) queried the role of ritual across cultures, noting the importance they held in moving individuals, groups, or entire societies across states of being (Thomassen, 2015). Turner (1999) expanded on this effort some decades later, emphasizing the symbolic importance of the *transition* between states—the *in-betweenness*—that van Gennep had only minimally theorized. Sociology, too, has theorized on the social importance of ritual, but historically less so on the process of transition achieved within ritual (Thomassen, 2009). Liminality, as van Gennep understood it, was an "interstructural situation" (234) or "phenomena and processes of mid-transition"

(243). This theoretical interpretation apparently failed to appeal to fact-focused sociologists such as Émile Durkheim.

Nonetheless, according to van Gennep, liminal situations formed the “basic building blocks of culture” and offered a “fruitful darkness” for social development (243). Despite Durkheim’s disinterest, it is this relationship between liminality and social construction that speaks to sociology. Liminality, for that matter, is often couched in religiosity. Certainly, Bourdieu (1992) and Weber (2011) took interest in the role that religious ritual played in manufacturing social structure. Szakocjai (2009) and Thomassen (2009) further that Weber’s interest in the structuring of society holds relevance with regard to his observation that charismatic leadership can manifest a political state of liminality by disrupting the status quo and hastening change. Just how this change becomes institutionalized as part of the permanent social structure is certainly aligned with sociological inquiry as well. Bourdieu (1984), for instance, examined the manufacture and maintenance of group distinctions (primarily within the French social class system) through arbitrarily defined concepts such as high or low culture, good or bad taste, or degree of social capital, noting their utility in sustaining a hierarchically structured society. The arbitrariness of these concepts and their capacity to adjust as needed to maintain class boundaries also suggests an indirect recognition of liminality’s utility. Like Durkheim (2013), however, Bourdieu was unconvinced that ritual played anything more than a functional role in structural maintenance and overlooked liminality as a contributing variable (Willey, 2016).

More recently, liminality has been applied to critically analyze the construction of species boundaries and anthropocentrism. CAS centers the role of Nonhuman Animals² in social transition, noting that other animals hold historical importance in the making of modern civilization (Wischermann and Howell, 2019). Howell (2020) forwards the concept of “liminanimality” which stresses the fluid borders between species, “wild” and “domesticated,” and “nature” and “civilization.” This fluidity troubles the associated rituals of socially prescribed interactions between humans and other animals. In this, there is an explicit recognition of human supremacy: “More important is to accept that animals live much or all of their lives in human-dominated or human-influenced environments, to such an extent that they can hardly avoid being treated as liminal beings” (Howell, 2020: 401–402). While Howell is right to emphasize the negative consequences facing liminanimals, it is also the case that humanity’s proximity to them has consequences for humans as well. Take, for example, Zehnle’s (2019) study of certain tribespeople in colonial Sierra Leone who believed they could transfigure into leopards. These humans-cum-leopards ritually killed and cannibalized villagers who had been lured into the bush, and the sensationalization of this human-nonhuman liminality was likely related to the ongoing transition from, in colonialist terms, “primitive” to “civilized” as British rulers worked to develop and control African societies. Indeed, sociologists have pointed to the importance of Nonhuman Animals in symbolically representing the “other,” a politically potent category employed in the construction of social relations (Hobson-West, 2007). Debase

(2017) might regard this as evidence of the longstanding “bifurcation of nature” project initiated in the West as it began to modernize in the 17th century. This process was also identified by ecofeminists in the mid-20th century with a more explicit acknowledgement of collateral damage to Nonhuman Animals (Gaard, 1993).

Constructing the human/nonhuman boundary in Ireland

Debaise’s work responds to the current environmental crisis and the potential for new ways of thinking that respect the affects of all living beings, but, for the purposes of this paper, Debaise also invites us to consider cultural interpretations of humanity’s relationship with other animals before “nature as an event,” as he terms it, transpired on the cusp of modernity. In the case of Ireland, this is no easy task given its historical and geographical complexity. Indeed, Ireland is a heavily colonized region, having been controlled by the Celts, Christians, Vikings, Normans, and British across its several thousand years of human inhabitancy. Skellig Michael was no exception despite its seclusion. It had been raided at least once by the Vikings and it was also impacted by various power struggles between warring Irish kingdoms (Bolger, 2011). In the premodern era, the encroachment of the Church, which accounts for the hermitage’s initial founding, was the most dramatic influence on Irish society. Social division can support and sustain domination; this extends beyond divisions based on class, gender, and species to also include the consequences of colonial expansion. Indeed, colonialism has depended heavily on the strategy of “divide-and-conquer” by emphasizing the cultural differences between colonizer and the colonized. Critical Animal Studies scholars have argued that a primary means of achieving this type of stratification is through the humanization of the dominant class and the animalization of the subjugated class (Ko, 2019; Nibert, 2013). Boundary-making of this kind began early in the history of Ireland. Having been a cattle-based society for much of its existence, Ireland has economically relied upon the killing and milking of other animals for thousands of years (Doherty, 2011). This would, of course, necessitate some acknowledgement of species difference. Yet, with the influx of Christianity, the differentiation between human and other animals would become more robust, corresponding with the intensified agricultural exploitation of other animals (Author’s research, 2021; Green, 1992). The doctrines of the Christian religion were interpreted to entail the domination of “all God’s creatures,” and through this licensure of dominion, humans were denoted as separate from the “animal kingdom” (Mason, 1993).

Christianity famously thrived in Ireland due to its regardful incorporation of existing pagan belief systems, but the Church did take interest in establishing clear symbolic and physical separation between “man” and “beast.” Forbidding the practice of hippophagy was one such measure, a decree speculated to have been based on the transgressive nature of liminal horses who occupied the early Christian world as both free-living “wild” animals *and* domesticates

(Meens, 2002). The Irish avoid eating horse flesh to this day, despite its moderate popularity in mainland Europe. Indeed, there were a number of food taboos related to human/nonhuman liminality, including the refusal to eat pigs and other animals known to have eaten the corpses of humans. Among the clergy, the complete abstinence from animal products was sometimes followed as a means of their differentiating themselves from the laity. Although not practiced on the skellig, vegetarian (and sometimes vegan) consumption was also associated with physical and spiritual clarity (Kelly, 1997). To further differentiate themselves from their animal origins, monks and nuns characteristically limited or forwent pleasures or necessities, such as sex, stimulants, or even food (either by circumscribed diets or fasting). As these examples suggest, the social construction of animality and humanity's position in relation to them was relevant to the development of early Irish society and its stratification system. Animals must be defined as "other" so as to serve as a point of comparison for the human as central (and superior) subject (Hobson-West, 2007), but the demarcation between human and other could be ritually blurred.

This liminality, again, was religiously charged, indicating that the Skellig Michael hermitage could have been intentionally constructed to capitalize upon the in-betweenness of the place. Turner observed this of St. Patrick's Purgatory, another island-bound monastery in the north of the Republic, for instance (Turner and Ross, 1995). As for Skellig Michael, Horn et al. (1990) argue that the site plays on the endeavours of St. Anthony, a hermit of the 4th century whose history would remember as the "Father of All Monks" (Horn et al., 1990). Anthony characteristically wandered and travelled in wild spaces (most famously the desert), confronting a variety of "temptations" in the form of bizarre Nonhuman Animals, monsters, and human-like liminimals such as a centaur and a satyr. The Irish monks setting up shop in the wilds of the soaking Atlantic Ocean were certainly living the obverse of St. Anthony's desert retreat, but the place's test to human survival on the edge of the known world amidst teems of birds surely offered an Irish equivalent to his ascetic penchant for the liminal. Life could not be more austere than that which teetered on the skellig, here where its humans subsisted as animals in challenging elemental conditions.

The anthropology of liminality previously outlined does emphasize that liminal spaces serve as sites of ritual transition. Although archaeological and historical record offer little in the way of concrete evidence, it could be the case that novice monks journeyed to the island to intentionally experience elemental hardship and communion with other animals under the guidance of more permanently settled hermits who might have guided the process.³ van Gennepe (2004) notes that ritual ceremonies, which entail the separation and seclusion of novices from their society, can last for up to several years. The initiate may undergo alterations to their body, adhere to new food taboos, and adopt new lexicons. Might variations of these ritual characteristics have transpired at St. Michael's monastery as well?

Given the considerable attention the skellig monks paid to homesteading (including the management of fresh water, garden terraces, and, most tellingly, a

cemetery), the monks likely expected to remain there indefinitely. However, the moderate import of goods and new inhabitants obviously did transpire; the monastery was not completely isolated. It is possible, then, that monks, having completed their rite of passage, would have returned to the mainland as enlightened acolytes who retained a “special magico-religious quality” (van Gennepe, 2004: 82). The inhabitants of these monasteries did exude a cultural mystique in the contemporary imagination, and this could be a testament to the higher consciousness the ritual experience at Skellig Michael was believed to bestow upon its graduates.

In an era when the meaning of “human” was still under construction, projects like Skellig Michael demonstrate that humanity and animality were not necessarily so distinct. As an *Irish* hermitage, Skellig Michael further informs this speculation as it resisted the orthodoxy of mainland Europe’s Christian practice. Ireland’s indigenous paganism (perhaps due to its colonized status and geographic separation) persisted with some robustness within the new Christian tradition. Pagans (a term that originally referred to those who lived rural, subsistence lifestyles) came to be associated with wild, uncivilized subhumans living opposite to civilization. Conversely, pagan animal symbols were co-opted by the Church to teach Christianity and normative “human” behavior, gradually absorbing indigenous peoples into the new state structure: “Christianity opposed the social bond existing between man [sic] and nature” explains Halder (2009): “Indeed, while borrowing from pagan animal lore, Christian literature of this kind completely opposes pagan zoolatry and places instead a vertical bond between man-below [sic] and God-above” (77). The modernizing West was a society moving from a state of community with other animals to one of dominance over them. Premodern Irish culture, but especially the hermitage, blurred the boundaries of “traditional” and “civilized,” and thus lends insight into the West’s eventual bifurcation of nature. Twelve kilometers of ocean separating the skellig from the Irish coast served as both buffer to modern dictations and barometer of liminal persistence.

Human-animal liminality in Irish waterscapes

In underscoring the relationship between humans and other animals, I should take care not to understate the importance of the natural setting. Skellig Michael not only represented the most westerly border of known Christendom, but Irish folklore saw these sacred skelligs as existing on the border to the Otherworld (Carragáin, 2013). Crannogs, circular dwellings constructed on stilts above inland bodies of water, were a sort of human-made variant first developed in Scotland and were also popular among early Christians in Ireland. The Irish also used these as a “watery citadel” for the maintenance of kingship, underscoring the island body’s elevated status in society (Crone, 1993: 251). Prior to these Christian constructions, Irish people sometimes settled atop knolls which, over time, might naturally transform into islands as geographic shifts inundated the land below with water or marsh. This potentially assigned a mystical quality to the occupancy remains above.

Irish mythology identifies Skellig Michael as the resting place of Donn, an ancient invader of Ireland whose fleet was tricked into treacherous waters whereupon they were all drowned by druid magic. He would thereafter occupy the southwestern coast of Ireland as the Lord of the Dead, his realm marking the boundary to the otherworld (Gilroy, 2000). Donn's name (which translates to "brown" in Irish) gives further indication of the shadowy association. Nearby Valentia Island, contrastingly, was associated with Mogh Roith, a druid mythologized as a long-lived sun god (the same island would become the site of the first transatlantic cable station in the 19th century, literally linking Ireland to life on the other side of the ocean). The seas surrounding the skelligs, then, had long been identified as a liminal space between the living and the dead. That Donn was both a mortal made immortal and an invader made gatekeeper of Ireland's borders only adds to the liminal qualities of the space. The skelligs were a symbol of the permeability of the human realm and the spiritual realm, an ethereal space within which visitors from the mainland could consider the boundary between humans and other animals, the natural and the supernatural.

Water was key to this boundary-making. Lakes, bogs, rivers, seas, and oceans were heavily conceptualized (and mythologized) as both sacred and threatening. They represented an unknown, otherworldly space, and much of this could be attributed to the animal life beneath the surface. Mythological hero Finn Mac Cumnaill, for instance, came to a doorway to an underground cave within which stood a woman who held a drinking vessel. When she closed the door, his finger is caught, but in putting the finger to his mouth to ease the pain, the watery residue granted him with sacred wisdom (an alternate version credits a salmon for granting these powers) (Dooge, 1996). The ancient Gaels toyed with this boundary in a number of ways. Ireland's famous Iron Age bog mummies, for instance, are thought to be the remains of kings who had been sacrificed with spectacular ritual and deliberately planted into the bogs in an effort to secure good harvest. Autopsies have revealed that these victims often prepared for their deaths by consuming a plant-based, frequently vegan meal. After centuries beneath the surface, their bodies take on an other-than-human form, shrivelled, leathery, ruddled, and most importantly, preserved long after their mortal remains should have decayed (Figure 2). That so many bog mummies are discovered by peat-cutters and thus emerged in a macerated state only adds to their monstrous, nonhuman appearance. These bodies were also deposited on ancient kingship boundaries, leading archaeologists to suggest that the practice may also have related to sovereignty rituals, in other words, class-based boundary-making (Kelly, 2012).

Situated in the Atlantic Ocean, Skellig Michael can certainly be understood as a watery citadel in its own right. At the time of its occupation, the Irish (and Europeans, for that matter, save perhaps the Scandinavians) had little to no knowledge of what lay beyond. Skellig Michael existed on the very outskirts of the medieval geographic schema. Saint Brendan the Navigator, who lived just before the hermitage was known to exist and founded many monasteries himself, was fabled to have traveled west of Ireland with several other monks in a



Figure 2. Bog body on display at the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin. Author's collection.

rudimentary watercraft made of cows' skin in search of the Garden of Eden (Roche, 1991). Their dangerous and lengthy journey tested not only their faith but their human endurance. It also challenged the human/animal boundary, as they met along the way many Nonhuman Animals with human characteristics, humans with supernatural powers, and monsters of the deep otherwise unknown to human society. Mortality itself was also uncertain in these ethereal spaces across the sea, as Brendan came upon various sites where youth, abundance, and fertility triumphed over death and decay.

The Navigator's legend was well known by the time of Skellig Michael's founding (given his considerable travels, he may have even visited the skellig). It is likely that the monks were also convinced that the ocean beyond coursed towards the divine. The water itself was also enigmatic (indeed, the ocean ecosystem is even today largely unexplored). Life in a variety of shapes and sizes exists under the surface, most of which is beyond human reach or view. The limits of the sea's depth and expanse were unknowable. Existence in the hermitage forced a reckoning with these mysteries—monks were thrust into the oceanic dreamworld, often at their own peril. Life there brought them in close communion with their own animal being and, at the same time, the possibility of transcending the restraints of an animal body.

Survival on Skellig Michael

Even today, the trip to Skellig Michael on modern watercraft is difficult and lengthy. Visitors are required to reserve a boat well in advance and captains will only risk the transversal in tolerable weather. Visitors are likely to be disappointed on more than one occasion before finally securing a trip. Even on fair-weather days, the hour-long excursion fights against heaving waters and choppy waves.

It seems unfathomable that medieval monks would have made the journey on small boats. There is no shore at the skelligs, as they are nothing more than craggy ocean outposts; premodern visitors could only alight the island through a cavernous recess at its base (since destroyed by the construction of a 19th century lighthouse). A helicopter pad carved into the face of Skellig Michael for emergency airlifts in the case of accidents is an ominous reminder of the island's dangerous terrain, but this soon fades from view as climbers begin the ascent. The skelligs are often slick with sea mist and shrouded in fog. There are no handrails here, and steep, slippery paths and stone steps are the only avenue to the monastery above.

There is no warm medieval hall awaiting visitors after the 218-m climb to the top, only a windswept and often drizzly compound. A prominent cemetery occupies the site (Figure 3), a testimony to the difficulties weighing on early inhabitants. Indeed, archaeological excavations have revealed skeletons which evidence extreme hardship and deprivation (Lynch, 2011). Skellig Michael is 54 acres in size, but very little of this is flat and usable for standard human developments. Monks had to improvise, constructing beehive huts from the copiously available rocks (Figure 3). The community was isolated, but it did maintain some trade with the mainland. Archaeologists have also recorded the skeletal remains of mainland species who were consumed as food and kept for their breastmilk (such as sheeps⁴ or goats and cows). Remnants of birds, fishes, limpets, oysters, and scallops have been unearthed as well and significantly outnumber that of mainland mammals. Other than birds, the primary nonhumans co-residing with the monks were the occasional grey seals. Mouses were present too (stowaways from the mainland) (Bourke et al., 2011). Less directly, other animals such as deers were present on the island as their antlers and bones were formed into combs, gaming pieces, and other domestic items used by the monks (Franklin, 2011).

Evidence of the monks' systematic violence against other animals living on the skellig for dietary supplementation (such as would suggest "hunting" or "fishing") has not survived. However, archaeological research on Church Island (another island a bit further north and closer to the coast of County Kerry that had been inhabited by monks in the same historical period) has uncovered evidence of human reliance on the flesh of birds undoubtedly predicated on killing rather than scavenging (O'Kelly, 1957). Skellig Michael monks likely gained sustenance from "fishing"⁵ and "hunting" birds and other sea mammals as well. To sustain themselves, however, they did rely heavily on gardening. Gardening was only possible on the site through the manipulation of the rockface, accomplished with sophisticated masonry of existing stones. Irrigation, at least, was not needed (no evidence remains of such a system), likely due to the heavy Irish rainfall. Archaeologists assume a heavy vegetable diet for skellig's human inhabitants given the aforementioned plant-based dietary expectations of medieval monks (Horn et al., 1990). What scant evidence remains suggests that they grew and consumed barley, oats, and various nutritive weeds (notably goosefoot) (Allen, 2011). Given their isolation from the mainland and limited arable space on the island, the typical use of bread as a dietary staple was impossible to maintain. It is



Figure 3. Cemetery and beehive hut on the monastery site. Author's collection.

for this reason (in addition to the spiritual benefits of gardening as a means of maintaining personal purity and independence from regular society) that archaeologists suggest that such extensive garden terracing was constructed. Two worn querns survived on the island, indicating that cereals cultivated on the island were processed in various ways (Franklin, 2011).

Becoming animal

Negotiating food was only half the battle. Skellig monks also needed to organize some sort of protection from the elements. The monastery is constructed only of island materials and, as would a bird's nest or a beaver's dam, it blends into its surroundings. The monk's stony ward was a world away from the growing towns of Dublin and Cork (established by Vikings in the 800s) or the thatched huts and looming towers and castles of the Irish countryside. The architecture of the island itself had to be adapted by the monks. Various platforms have been erected with stone walls to allow passage to unreachable areas and, ultimately, lofty sites for prayer and meditation at the south peak. Much of this handiwork goes unnoticed by visitors (and, for that matter, many researchers until extensive investigation in the 1980s) (Horn et al., 1990). Indeed, from the ocean, it would be difficult to ascertain any evidence of human habitation, and this was likely intentional. The interiors of the beehive huts they manufactured for domestic purposes are sturdy and surprisingly still given the din of squawking birds and crashing waves surrounding them. Acting as human-made caverns, the huts offer much-needed shelter from the chilly, wet ocean weather. Their entrances are small and low to the ground, forcing the inhabitant to stoop and crawl to enter them. In fact, much of the site requires similar animalistic movements in order to safely navigate. Staircases carved into the rock face are steep and paths hug the island, allowing little barrier from the edge (and the turbulent ocean waves 700 feet below).

Although the original monks may not have left explanation as to the design of their project, later pilgrims (and scientists) emphasized the harrowing dangers of ascending the skellig to the monastery and described the feat as "penance" (Croker, 1825: 375). For some scientists exploring the site in modern times, the scramble to the top was described in more adventurous terms: "No other monastery in Ireland was built on such difficult terrain; Skellig Michael is absolutely unique in this respect" (Horn et al., 1990: 72). When the site was still used as a pilgrimage, women and men alike would risk the ascent to the highest peak where a bit of masonry was provided to sustain the occupant for prayer and commune with heaven. Again, the island was likely chosen just for this reason. Monks must be humbled in scrambling the skellig as any other animal, cautious of the tenuousness of life as a matter of course. Passing birds, too, were fabled to fall into reverence, reportedly landing before flying over this most sacred spot and walking carefully across it before taking flight again (Croker, 1825). One can only imagine that this fable emerged from the fact that their ability to fly undermined the characteristic dangerousness of the skellig that had marked the site as appropriate for the religious experiment. That said, the birds themselves may have been an attraction. Birds, perhaps one of the most liminal of animals given their varied roles in human societies, have considerable symbolic meaning in the Christian (and Celtic) tradition with the added liminal quality of an ability to fly (rising above worldly restraints) and supposedly commune with god (Roque, 2010).

Life inside the beehives harken on humanity's animalism perhaps as much as the island's navigational infrastructure. Monks were less like bees in a hive and more like bats or prehistoric humans sheltering in caves. Grim though they may be, the hives do buzz with life. The skellig has provided an essential respite for seabirds who nest and rest on the island in great numbers (indeed, today it is designated a natural bird reserve). These huts, too, appear to be liminal spaces as lifeless rock alive with birds and shelters in the tempest. Their monumental presence on the island contributed greatly to the majesty of the place and its impact on visitors. One 19th century reporter describes:

On approaching the greater Skellig (at whose base our masted boat appeared an inconsiderable speck), the rushing sound of the waves dashing themselves into showers of white spray, and the shrill cry of birds, echoed from the wave-worn caves, came on the ear with a terrific and almost overpowering noise. (Croker, 1825: 375)

The thousands of gannets, puffins, terns, cormorants, gulls, fulmars, and other seabirds circling, landing, nesting, bobbing, and diving around the skelligs are as much a part of the landscape as the stationary rocks and crags. The aforementioned reporter furthers: "Upon ledges of inaccessible rock, countless rows of gulls and puffins were seen perched with extraordinary regularity, braiding the side of the rock, like strings of pearl upon dark hair; to nothing else could I compare the sight" (Croker, 1825: 375). The birds do not seem to differentiate the human-created rock formations from natural ones; hundreds of them nest in the crevices of the huts. Their chattering and movements create a humming ambience within. Undoubtedly, living within and among nature in this way allowed the monks some profound spiritual connection. At the very least, it likely reconnected them with their species essence, stripped as they were from the trappings of civilized life. Even in death, the birds and humans comingled. Archaeological excavations of burial sites find most of the monks' resting places have been thoroughly disrupted by burrowing puffins. Their earthly remains (consisting only of a few fragile bones and fragments) are interspersed with the bones of birds who had taken shelter in their graves over the years (Bourke et al., 2011).

Not surprisingly, the majesty of Skellig Michael and its spiritual affluence earned it a reputation in the medieval texts as a site associated with a number of miracles (Bolger, 2011). Miracles are more than the evidence of god; they suggest that boundaries and categories between humans, the natural world, and the divine are not so rigidly fixed as they could be mitigated by extraordinary circumstances or supernatural intervention. That the hermitage (founded by Saint Finian) was dedicated to Saint Michael (likely in the 10th century) underscores the monks' recognition that spiritual righteousness was troubled by the natural, earthly realm. Lofty religious sites on islands were frequently associated with this saint (comparable examples can be found in Cornwall and Normandy), but there could be greater symbolic relevance for the skellig monks. Beginning in the 4th century, Saint Michael was represented as slaying Satan in the form of a dragon (Figure 4).



Figure 4. St. Michael and Dragon. Albrecht Durer. 1498. *Apocalipsis cu[m] figuris*, Nuremberg Typ Inc 2121 A, Houghton Library, Harvard University, [Wikimedia Commons](#).

A mid-13th century account reports on Saint Patrick's banishment of demons from Ireland which was aided by Saint Michael at the skellig (Bolger, 2011). Saint Micheal's battle with the dragon may very well have had earlier Celtic relevance. Researchers have suggested that Irish lore frequently merged the symbolism of

water, sacred kingship, and the sacrifice of Nonhuman Animals and their breast-milk, an intersection that culminated in the emergence of dragon legends (Mac Mathúna, 2010). It is likely no accident, then, that the monastery was built on an island in the ocean (much like a crannog), centered sacrificial and ascetic behavior, and chose Michael slayer of dragons as the site's patron saint. In addition to his role in defending good over evil, I would venture that his imagery was useful in facilitating humanity's claim to its superiority (or at least its separation from its base animal origins). Saint Michael was also recorded as having punished the wicked with pestilent insects (Johnson, 2005). Nonhuman Animals, in other words, served in Michael's mythology as symbols of earthly wickedness and need for discipline. Adherents, then, had to balance their divinely granted dominance over the natural world as humans with an animal-like humility and subjugation under god. This tension speaks to the persistent liminal state the space offered to practitioners.

Becoming human

Eventually, the precious liminality that Skellig Michael held space for faced a new epoch of anthroparchy, a social structure that Cudworth (2011) identifies as human-privileging, hierarchical, and oppressive to Nonhuman Animals and the environment more broadly. As an oceanic outpost, however, the abandoned site remained an important, if fleeting, liminal holdout where visitors can experience many of the same rites of passage that early monks faced with few indicators of the many centuries that have transpired. As the hermitage fell into disuse, however, the human augmentations have been slowly reclaimed by landscape, returning the space to its animalistic origins. Across several hundred years, monks had used the natural materials available to them to assimilate into the skellig landscape, so successfully that the huts were cohabitated by human and avian residents. In the treacherous Atlantic Ocean, the human-constructed huts have become welcome aviaries for birds today. Many of the handholds and other constructions introduced to ease navigation of the rockface have been happily inhabited by both birds and hardy plants (so much so that archaeologists have difficulty deciphering naturally occurring features from monk-made). Natural rockfalls and the collapsing of various parts of the hermitage across time continue to soften this boundary between human and nonhuman.

Material conditions aside, the cultural changes that would transpire in Ireland resisted this blurring. I have suggested that the liminality of Skellig Michael, characterized by a (relatively) harmonious coexistence of human and nonhuman species, dissipated under Norman colonization and the reform of the Irish Church. Debaise (2017), recall, posits that nature is an "event," meaning that its cultural conceptualization with its distinctive bifurcation can be traced to political and philosophical developments as the West entered modernization. In Ireland, this process was already underway in the early stages of colonization. By the 11th century, the Irish church had become diverged considerably from that of the

continent, and the 12th century saw widespread reform aimed at greater assimilation. Researchers suppose that it was this reform era that hastened the end of Skellig Michael's habitation (Bolger, 2011). As the Irish monks were reined in, their liminal experiment was undermined and their species identity (as humans rather than animals) was reified. Irish reformers and Anglo-Normans introduced a litany of rules dictating of religious leaders, monks, and lay people. These included strict governance over sexuality and a restraining of aggressive tendencies (Flanagan, 2010).

As other scholars have noted, it is the introduction of rigid dictates of behavior and composure which have been essential in the maintenance of group distinctions, particularly those associated with efforts to civilize and demark the human (Fissell, 1999). Elias highlights the development of manners, for instance, in the making of "civilized man." Food preparation and consumption, by way of an example, came to entail certain etiquette. Likewise, manners developed to suppress other markers of animality lingering in human behavior, such as spitting or blowing one's nose. Explains Elias: "[...] people, in the course of the civilizing process, seek to suppress in themselves every characteristic that they feel to be 'animal'" (Elias, 1978 [1939]: 120). This civilization project itself, he furthers, denotes the formation of a self-consciousness at the national level: "[...] Western society seeks to describe what constitutes its special character and what it is proud of: the level of *its* technology, the nature of *its* manners, the development of *its* scientific knowledge or view of the world, and much more" (4). The civilization project seeks to highlight commonalities that should be shared among humans, but in seeking this homogeneity, it must confront and subdue heterogeneity. It is this element of civilization as an enforcer of ethnocentric sameness that "has the function of giving expression to the continuously expansionist tendency of colonizing groups [...]" (5). According to Elias, this emphasis on civility begins in the late 16th century, not long before Debaise (2017) claims the creation of a bifurcated "nature" would transpire.

With the institutionalization of the church in Ireland inlying larger colonization processes, Nonhuman Animals and the natural world in general would be objectified as a domain of the elite. "Wool," "meat" and dairy production intensified, for instance, while great Norman estates began intensively farming deers, rabbits, and "game" birds (Beglane, 2015). Indeed, the Norman conquest of Ireland introduced considerable agricultural developments, laying the groundwork for the human-supremacist industrial speciesism that would characterize Ireland under British colonization and into the present (Murphy and Stout, 2015). The closure of Skellig Michael signalled the end of Ireland's transitional era, foreshadowing a world in which human endeavours were less likely involve cooperation and coexistence with other animals but, instead, regularly exploited them as resources. As the Normans sought to tame the "barbarous" Irish, new rules of conduct and value systems clearly defined what it meant to be human: chaste, peaceful, devout, deferential to authority, and above all, *civilized*.

In the 19th century, efforts to improve Skellig Michael were undertaken. The masonry was stabilized and religious features were fitted for pilgrims. A lighthouse

was also installed at the base of the island. Most of these efforts caused irreparable damage to the hermitage and did not necessarily attempt to assimilate with environs (Gibbons, 2007), signalling the shift to an anthropocentric relationship with the space. The site would be inscribed as a UNESCO world heritage site in 1996, but this status has not adequately protected it from the damages of human encroachment. Today, the nonhuman inhabitants of the island, despite their remoteness, have been greatly impacted by modernization. Climate change, for instance, is a looming threat. Rampant pollution in the air (leading to corroding acid rain) and in the surrounding ocean waters have increased the precariousness of life on the skelligs. Gannets are now observed building their nests with plastic debris from the fishing industry rather than the safer organic materials available, such as seaweed (Ó Fátharta, 2018). The backfilling used to stabilize parts of the hermitage is riddled with 19th century crockery, brick, and other refuse introduced by the lighthouse staff who made both alterations and restorations to the site. One of the rainwater cisterns became a handy rubbish receptacle for modern visitors. There is also considerable 20th and 21st century trash infused throughout the site by burrowing birds (Bourke et al., 2011). The skellig itself, it seems, is becoming a product of human modernity, built of the very stuff of the industrial age produced in factories the world over. Thus, while some elements of the island have returned to nature following the monk's departure, others are heavily manipulated by modern humanity. The early hermitage once characterized as betwixt and between with regard to its human and nonhuman affiliation is now increasingly polarized.

Hollywood has also taken its toll on the site. With the filming of two *Star Wars* films in 2014 and 2015, tourism increased dramatically, filling hundreds of boats full of fans who trod across the site each visiting season. The filming itself (which entailed helicopters, night-time disturbance to feeding patterns for some species, and disruption of nesting for other species) was detrimental as well. Birding charities indicate that industry trumped conservation and avian well-being in the decision to allow filming at Skellig Michael:

Long-term effects on the island's breeding bird populations remain unknown, but there are disturbing reports that during filming, several hundred Black-legged Kittiwake chicks were blown by a helicopter from their cliff-ledge nests into the sea, where they drowned. (Hatch, 2015)

Despite some protest, the profits hoped to be earned from the immediate filming and subsequent tourism seem to have triumphed. Perhaps this outcome is unsurprising given that the country's economy continues to waiver in the years since independence.

Yet, the decision to film *Star Wars* on the skellig was more than a matter of imperial powers capitalizing on the economic vulnerability of the Irish state: the same promise of liminality of the skellig that lured so many pilgrims before continues to do so today. Producers actively searched for a filming site that gave a sense of realism, authenticity, and appeared to come from "another time and

place.” As one crewmember explained to the National Tourism Development Authority: “It’s an extraordinary place. It certainly fed into our *Star Wars* universe” (Fáilte Ireland, 2016). The liminality of Skellig Michael only intensified when drawn into the cinematic arts. Cinema itself constitutes a liminal state for the audience, absorbing viewers into a fantasy-made real, at least for a couple of hours. This is only more accurate of films like that of the *Star Wars* enterprise that transverse the earthly and the galactic realms in their settings. Liminal cinema, furthermore, does not shy from presenting an important postmodern critique, challenging, through reality-bending imagery and narratives, many long-held presumptions about human “progress” and inviting the audience to consider new ways of being and alternative values. Intriguingly, *Return of the Jedi*, one of the *Star Wars* episodes filmed at the skellig, has been declared by one critic as “the most vegan film ever made” (Blake, 2017). Nonhuman Animal rights group Mercy for Animals agrees: “[. . .] *The Last Jedi* shines as one of the most impressive films in recent memory when it comes to pro-animal messaging” (Solomon, 2017). To this last point, it is worth acknowledging the newly emerging field of Critical Animal and Media Studies (Almiron et al., 2016). Associated scholars are beginning to unpack the role that media plays in sustaining ideologies of human supremacy but also its potential for liberating other animals. CAS media scholars, it seems, also recognize cinema as a conduit for transformative liminal experiences.

Conclusion

Bjørn Thomassen summarizes of liminality: “Simply put, liminality is about how human beings, in their various social and cultural contexts, deal with change” (Thomassen, 2015: 40). Notably, liminality could be observed amidst the onset of modernity: as human society underwent one of the greatest transitions of its time, a number of institutions emerged to facilitate the process, only to persist indefinitely. Weber observed this of interminable bureaucratic institutions, for instance, but Critical Animal Studies scholars have also identified a type of liminality in the persistent connection between humans and other animals despite so many efforts to dislocate the two. It is this dance with modernity, boundary-making, and boundary-fudging that is key to Ireland’s story. Ireland’s transition to modernity arguably gathered momentum with the coming of Christianity and the establishment of British colonization, both processes that would render obsolete Ireland’s indigenous, animistic traditions. Skellig Michael, however, demonstrates that this enterprise was neither a linear nor absolute endeavour. Medieval, early Christian Ireland was a liminal space in and of itself.

By the 14th century, the Skellig Michael monastery had been abandoned. There were a number of reasons for the monks’ departure. The “little ice age” of the 1200s likely made life on the island, already precarious in the best of conditions, untenable. Religious trends were changing as well, and the exiled existence that had popularized projects like Skellig Michael across the British Isles and mainland

Europe was falling out of favour (Horn et al., 1990). Much of this shift could be attributed to the Norman colonization of Ireland, ironically justified by the “barbarousness” (read: animalism) of the Irish people (Flanagan, 2010). The tales of scribe Gerald of Wales frequently highlighted the animal-like nature of humans and the human-like qualities of Nonhuman Animals in Ireland for the entertainment and astonishment of the Anglo-Norman court. The inconsistent and unclear boundaries between humans and other animals perceived to persist in Ireland became a powerful impetus for Ireland’s foreign domination. Experiments like that on Skellig Michael would be terminated under this intervention.

For some centuries onwards, monks based on the mainland used the island intermittently until full-scale British colonization and the subsequent dissolution of monasteries in the 16th century moved the site into private ownership. Throughout these changes, the skellig remained a point of pilgrimage that was famed across Europe. I have suggested that this persistent fascination might be explained by the site’s liminal qualities. Surviving archaeological and historical evidence may be limited, but mythology indicates that the site straddles many realms. Indeed, life on Skellig Michael troubles the very *notion* of boundaries in an era in which boundaries were of increasing importance to the “civilizing” of Irish society. The monks’ exaltation of liminality, furthermore, exemplifies the possibility of confronting colonization through the ritualistic manipulation of the human/nonhuman divide, a particularly potent effort given the role that humanization has played in the civilizing project.

Today, Skellig Michael continues to attract tourists both domestic and international who may be interested in religious history, Irish heritage, birdwatching, archaeology, and film tourism. Heavy footfall from tourists (primarily due to the explosion of interest following the *Star Wars* filming) in tandem with the ravages of the elements, climate change, and time have begun to deteriorate the site. It is protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and bird sanctuary, but, eventually, the hermitage will be reclaimed by the rock and sea due to these cooperative human and natural processes. Although we cannot know the intentions of the skellig’s human settlers, perhaps this will be the ultimate fulfilment of the monks’ efforts—a full collapse of boundaries and total permeability between human and nonhuman, civilization and nature, life and death, and the sacred and profane.

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Notes

1. *Skellig* is an Irish word which refers to a rocky cliff or reef of rocks.
2. This term is capitalized to respect nonhuman personhood.
3. This possibility was raised by Reviewer 1.
4. Mass terms (such as “sheep” and “mice”) are edited to respect nonhuman personhood.
5. These terms are put in quotations to denote their euphemistic meaning.

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