Fflotila Caergybi

Marged Pendrell

Published on: Oct 08, 2020

License: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0)
My intention for this project is to work on a timeline flotilla of vessels, to explore the movement of people across the Irish Sea to and from the port of Caergybi (Holyhead) and the port of Dublin, highlighting chosen times and narratives throughout history.

I aim to begin with researching the early inhabitants, paying particular attention to specific times in history or to certain stories associated with the port e.g. the sixth-century St Cybi who gave the town its name of Caer Gybi.

As part of the project, I aim to include a larger scale ‘Cwch Caergybi’ (Holyhead Boat), made in collaboration with groups from within the community of the port.

The Working Process

| When did people begin to cross the Irish Sea, who were they, and why did they do it? |

Initially inspired by the incredible legends of early journeys – stories of saints and pilgrims, and the sagas of the Norse Vikings – my flotilla will be a dynamic mix of fact and fiction, inspired by research into these ancient small vessels.

My own journey for this project began with a visit to Parc Gwledig Morglawdd Caergybi (Holyhead Breakwater Country Park) when it opened in early July after lockdown. I spent the morning walking the headland around North/South Stack. The archaeological evidence of life on the headland around Holyhead/Caergybi since Neolithic times is extensive. I explored the Tŷ Mawr Hut Circles or Cytiau’r Gwyddelod (Irishmen’s Huts) and ended eventually at Caer y Tŵr, the Iron Age hill fort on the summit of Holyhead mountain. The Trefignath Burial Chamber, south of the port is older, around 3,750 BC.

Sitting and looking out towards Ireland on the edge of these high cliffs, I was aware of the vulnerability of the small sea craft and, as I watched the ferries coming in from Ireland, acutely aware of the contrast in scale of modern-day transport.

People have migrated for various reasons of survival and this headland has had a strong social history with the sea. The OS map of the area I was looking at that morning gave me clues to many of the stories of this land.
The coastline of Ynys Môn (Anglesey) is dotted with small harbours or landing coves, which existed long before the modern-day ferry terminal port. Many of these are have the names of sea birds and marine animals, or are descriptive of the land, but some seem to hold the key to past experiences.

It left me wondering what these small boat approaches would be like.

For example, below Cytiau’r Gwyddelod is Porth y Gwyddel (the Irishman’s Harbour), Porth Saint (the Saint’s Harbour), Porth y Gwîn (The Harbour of the Wine, probably from the wrecks), and Porth y Corwg (The Harbour of the Coracle).

This land, which I now experience as a well-trodden tourist network of paths, would have had a wildness, difficult to imagine.

The Irish Sea has been a travel line for the movement of people, ideas and goods from early times.

What of the crossing itself? To find out more I arranged a visit to the Maritime Museum to have a look at their maps, and their historical collection of maritime history of the port.

My research, looking at the threads of narrative that connect the past of this landscape has been fascinating. Unlike today, the coastlines of early times played a prominent part in earlier civilisations.

The attentiveness of the medieval monks, crossing the sea which lay before me, held my imagination. Although these early voyages weren’t recorded, with no evidence remaining of the small boats, most of these early vessels, e.g. the curragh, and the coracle types are still in use today.

Many of the place names, such as Ynys Gybi (Holy Island) and Caer Gybi (Holyhead) are evidence of the early fifth- and sixth-century voyages of monks from the monasteries of Ireland. They began their searching for places that were suitable for contemplation and Christian teachings at a time when the Irish were the most learned people in Europe.

Ancient Boats by Sean McGrail gave an insight into the indirect evidence that from early times; seas were not insurmountable obstacles to people’s movements. The building and use of water transport came well before the domestication of animals or skills in agriculture, and made use of available materials, such as wood, wicker and animal hide.

For my early flotilla, I focused mainly on the forms of the Irish Currach (or Curragh), which is a boat shape, roughly with a length to width ratio of 5:1, and the Welsh Coracle
which is oblong or even round.

In making this flotilla of vessels, my aim is to capture qualities of the age or a particular story, more than to create realistic vessels.

As a sculptor, I am always interested in exploring a range of materials and challenging new ways of working with them. The initial vessels I made were inspired by the simplicity of Iron Age Broighter boat which I saw in the National Museum of Ireland years ago and had hoped to revisit. It is a gold model of a curragh, the earliest depiction of a sailing ship from Ireland.

Marged Pendrell, *Cychod Bregus* (Fragile Boats)
Fragile Boats

Formed in metal and covered with a ‘skin’ of alchemical gold leaf, these fragile vessels aim to depict the transformative and yet vulnerable quality of the lives of the early Saints of Ireland as they reach the shores of Wales. They are a reference to St Cybi in particular, who gave the port of Caergybi its name.

One of the golden curraghs carries his bones, which were reputedly stolen from the monastery at Caer Gybi where he lay. A number of possible culprits are held responsible for this, but one thread of tradition was that they were taken (by Irishmen, or pirates during Owain Glyndŵr’s rebellion) to Dublin.

The other vessel has a cargo of fishbones, referencing the practicality of the sea journeys.

Bibliography

Sean McGrail, Ancient Boats (1983)
Barry Lopez, Arctic Dreams (1986)
Tim Severin, The Brendan Voyage (1978)
Websites

History of St Cybi’s Church
New Life of St Cybi Discovered
Anglesey through the ages
Living Water Ways: Navigating Lockdown, Remembering Máiréad
Dark Age Boats

Marged Pendrell
8 October 2020