

EARLY IRISH MANUSCRIPTS

The Art of the Scribes

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Ireland's early books are interesting both in and of themselves and as cultural artifacts. The following pages present an archaeological exploration of those books. An outline of the development of the script used will show that handwriting is a particularly sensitive reflection of the culture from which it springs, and that it sometimes tells us things about that culture which we can no longer learn from any other source.

But first we must consider a preliminary problem, that of finding the books to discuss. For, unhappily, manuscript books from early Christian Ireland are quite rare. Indeed, in the period before 700, only four manuscripts claim pure Irish parentage: a set of waxed tablets found in Springmount Bog, Co. Antrim, a fragmentary psalter known as the *Cathach* or "Battler" of St. Columba, a liturgical book known as the Antiphony of Bangor, and a copy of Adamnán's *Life of Columba*. It seems clear that Irish scribes living in Ireland wrote each of these four manuscripts, but four is a very small number. Were scribes very scarce before 700 in Ireland?

Probably not, for books have always been perishable, and the absence of numbers of manuscripts cannot alone prove absence of writing. Indirect evidence of early Irish literary activity and scribal production abounds, and even the most sceptical evaluation of that evidence leaves us with the conviction that these four manuscripts cannot have been alone.

The Irish have always loved words. In the pre-Christian period, when the literary and legal traditions of the country were committed to memory rather than parchment, jurists and poets were men of high status. The legal texts of this native tradition, once written down, filled many thick volumes. The poetry filled many more. We have no manuscripts of these texts written before 700, but it seems certain that the Irish accepted the Roman alphabet and the

habit of consulting written authority when they accepted Christianity (5th century). The religion of the book brought the arts of the pen.

As in the pagan period, early Christian Ireland produced literary works in great numbers, all preserved only in later manuscript copies. St. Patrick's *Confession*, an autobiographical essay in defense of his suitability as a missionary bishop, is one of the earliest of these. The list of grammatical, exegetical, computistical, and hagiographical works which the country's monks had produced by the year 750 is impressive, and by the 9th century, Irish scholars like the philosopher Johannes Scotus Eriugena had earned prominent places in the court circles of the Carolingian empire.

Even if we had lost all of these texts, we would still be aware of the early Irish love of learning. In a famous passage in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English*, the Venerable Bede tells us that:

At this time [664] there were many English nobles and lesser folk in Ireland who had left their own land during the episcopates of Bishops Finan and Colman, either to pursue religious studies or to lead a life of stricter discipline. Some of these soon devoted themselves to the monastic life, while others preferred to travel, studying under various teachers in turn. The Irish welcomed them all kindly, and, without asking for any payment, provided them with daily food, books, and instruction.

One such English student was Aldhelm of Malmesbury. Aldhelm had studied with the Irish teacher Maeldubh. His letter (ca. 686-690) to another monk who had studied in Ireland for six years, praises the Irish schools and tells us that they taught grammar (i.e. the Latin classics), geometry, and natural science, as a prelude to both the literal and figurative interpretation of the Scriptures.

The *Annals of Ulster* preserve the names

of some 86 scribes, probably from only the best known or better organized monastic schools, between the 8th and 11th centuries, while ca. 876 Heuric of Auxerre reports that Ireland, "facing the dangers of the sea, comes to our shores almost as a whole, with her flock of learned men."

The testimony to Ireland's scholarly productivity, then, begins early and is continuous. The pre-Christian society honored its legal specialists and its poets as highly as its kings. At the time of the legal text known as the *Uraicecht Becc* (*Little Grammar*, 7th century), seven grades of poet or *fili* existed, and the highest grade of the *filid*, the *ollam*, was equal in *díre*, or honor-price, to the king of one *túath* (a "people," or tribe). A master jurist held the same status. And when this native tradition met Christianity, its ancient respect for words and their interpreters created a setting in which Christian learning could quickly take root, while new institutions, fostering a new learned class, began to flourish.

Linguistic evidence indicates that the pre-Christian legal tradition began to be put into writing around 600, but we have no manuscripts of these texts written in Ireland in that period. The lyric poetry written in the Irish of the Old Irish period survives accidentally, as it were, often quoted as examples in metrical treatises written long after the poetry itself was composed. The most famous collection of material in Irish, the *Leabhar na hUidre* (*Book of the Dun Cow*), was written by several scribes, the earliest of whom died in 1106. And when we consider material written in Latin, the situation is only slightly less bleak.

Local traditions in the south of Ireland testify to the presence of Christian foundations prior to the mission of St. Patrick, and indeed, Palladius, the first bishop sent to the Irish, was sent in 431 by Pope Celestine "to the Irish believing in Christ." Christianity, founded on truth as revealed in the Bible, could not have rooted and spread in Ireland if copies of the Bible, or at least of the Gospels, had not been present there. But when we search for these early manuscripts we do not find them. Instead we find traditions.

The 9th-century *Féilire Óengusso* (*Martyrology of Oengus*) records that "Cairnech the Bald was the scribe of Cíarán of Saigir. It is he that wrote the wonderful manuscript, namely *Cíarán's Journey*, with its many illuminations, and this book still remains in Saigir." Cíarán of Saigir is one of the saints traditionally be-

lieved to pre-date St. Patrick, but the book, if it ever existed, has long since disappeared.

This particular book seems rather too elaborate a work to have been produced in the days before Patrick's 5th-century mission, but traditions from the century following that mission ring true. St. Columba, founder of one of the most powerful and wide-spread monastic *paruchia* (confederations) of the 6th century, was well known as a scribe. In his *Life of Columba* Adamnán (d. 704) provides many incidental references to reading and writing at Iona, Columba's central foundation. Adamnán says that Columba "... could not pass even the space of a single hour without applying himself to prayer, or to reading, or to writing, or to some kind of work," and he often introduces a prophecy or a miracle saying "while the holy man was reading," or "at a time when he was writing," or "when the holy man sat writing in his hut."

From Adamnán we learn that Columba had students, some of whom studied at his side and wrote down his sayings. He was disturbed when anyone handled books carelessly or spilled ink. Adamnán also tells us that water could not harm the books that Columba wrote himself, that reading aloud from books Columba had written was found to relieve drought, and that laying them upon the altar helped to bring favorable winds. Columba wrote, knew what his students wrote, and enjoined both teaching and writing upon his successor. He was writing a psalter the day he died. Adamnán does not give us details of the program of study at Iona or the names of the books in the monastic library there, but he makes us aware that Columba's milieu favored both students and scribes.

And Adamnán is not alone. Biographies of other 6th-century saints also contain references to writing. St. Fintan of Dún Blesci studied with St. Comgall at Bangor (6th c.), as did another Fintan, or Munnu, abbot of Tech Munnu. This Fintan of Tech Munnu later studied under St. Columba of Kilmore. St. Lasrianus, or Molaisse, pupil of St. Finnian of Clonard (6th c.), established a school at his own monastery, Devenish, and probably served as a teacher there. Occasionally he entrusted a child to someone else, as he did, for example, when the parents of St. Daygeus brought the boy to him "so that he might learn the science of letters." The school at Devenish seems to have occupied a building of its own, "in which Daygeus learned

letters, writing, and crafts," but most of the instruction was tutorial. We hear again and again that a student went to read with a certain master, but we seldom hear of these students in groups.

Students at a monastic school learned, first of all, the alphabet, written out for them on waxed wooden tablets, known as *ceracula*, or *pugillares*. Patrick may have used *ceracula* when he wrote *abgitir* (the alphabet) for his converts, and Cellach, the son of Dimma, king of Fothart, had a "waxed tablet with bronze tops (corners?)." Students also learned to write, though a minor miracle might be necessary to help those whose first attempts were completely illegible. Only after St. Comgall blessed the eyes and hands of one Bangor scholar did his writing improve:

A certain boy was learning to write, but no-one could teach him; indeed it was scarcely possible to tell whether the hand of a man or the claw of a bird had written what he wrote. And it continued this way for a long time. Finally, however, he went to Comgall, and the holy man blessed his eyes and hands. And his writing immediately improved, so that he excelled over the other writers. And in his lifetime, he was learned and skilled in this art.

Those who could read and write went on to study the Holy Scriptures, beginning with the psalms, but including all things necessary to the daily office. We hear, for example, that Finnian of Clonard, studying "with St. Fortkernus, learned psalms and hymns, with other ecclesiastical matters," and that St. Darerca, set to learning psalms, "made a great improvement in a

short time, easily learning things taught to her with her subtle mind, and tenaciously keeping what she had learned in the firmness of her memory." The student not only memorized psalms, but copied them as well, using a model written for him by his master. A certain boy who was studying with St. Cainnech "went to Cainnech in the night, privately, so that Cainnech would write for him on the wax." We do not follow this student as he returns to his cell and copies out what Cainnech has written, but we do catch sight of Cainnech, himself, writing as a student. He was so obedient to the sound of the bell that "writing the first half of the letter O, he left the other half undone, half-completed."

Literary evidence, then, shows us men reading and writing, teaching and studying, all over 6th-century Ireland. The books these saints and scholars wrote, however, are almost entirely lost. Only two extant Irish manuscripts can possibly have been written in the 6th century. We turn to these manuscripts now, paying particular attention to the scripts in which they were written. The scripts themselves will reinforce what the literary evidence has already suggested, that even in the 6th century Ireland's scribes had been busy for several generations, and that chance alone has kept us from seeing their products.

The earliest extant manuscript from Ireland is a set of six waxed tablets upon which someone, possibly a young scholar at a monastic school, has written part of Psalms XXX and XXXI. These tablets were found by a man cutting turf in Springmount Bog in the townland of Ballyhurtherland,

1
One of six tablets found in Springmount Bog in the townland of Ballyhurtherland, Co. Antrim, 5th-6th century(?). (National Museum, Dublin, 1914: 2.) This is tablet 3v.



| RUSTIC CAPITAL | ANCIENT COMMON WRITING | NEW COMMON WRITING | HALF-UNCIAL | UNCIAL | QUARTER-UNCIAL |
|----------------|------------------------|--------------------|-------------|--------|----------------|
| A | Ɽ | ⱡ | ⱦ | ⱦ | ⱡ |
| B | Ɫ | Ɫ | Ɫ | Ɫ | Ɫ |
| C | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| D | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| E | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| F | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| G | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| H | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| I | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| L | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| M | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| N | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| O | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| P | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| Q | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| R | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| S | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| T | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| V | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| X | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |
| Y | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ | Ɽ |

Co. Antrim. They are now in the National Museum of Ireland. Each tablet measures 210 mm. wide x 75 mm. tall x 6 mm. thick, and each is hollowed to a depth of 1 mm., leaving a raised border, about 30 mm. wide. The inner tablets are hollowed out on both sides, each thereby forming two pages for text. The two outer tablets are hollowed on one side only. Their other sides remain smooth, polished, and slightly convex, and fit easily into the palm. Holes bored through the entire stack of tablets made it possible to bind the wooden leaves to form a true book, or codex. The hollowed areas of the tablets are filled with wax. A pointed tool, or stylus, which seems to have moved freely over the wax, was used to write, or rather to inscribe, the text.

The script is already mature, that is, it

displays all of the letter forms and decorative features associated with Irish script of the 7th and 8th centuries. One of these features is the very prominent wedge-shaped finials used on letters or parts of letters beginning with a straight down-stroke, b, d, p, q, m, n, and u for example. Another is the way the scribe makes the letters of the initial word(s) gradually diminish from an exaggerated size to that of the text proper at the beginning of a chapter or other textual division. This decorative technique is generally known as the *diminuendo* effect.

A third characteristic of mature Irish script already found in the Springmount Bog tablets is the habit of mixing letter forms from heterogeneous alphabets. The Latin-writing world of the 5th century

2 Alphabets current in the Roman empire before and after ca. A.D. 100.

knew and used several distinct alphabets. The elements of these alphabets were generally kept separate from one another, though the divisions between the canons were never rigidly absolute. We do find, for example, texts written in Uncial using both n and N, b instead of B, d instead of D, and texts written in Half-Uncial using both r and R. Uncial and Half-Uncial were contemporary alphabets, and both were used for writing books; 5th-century scribes knew both of them. At the end of a line, or indeed to fill or conserve space anywhere else in the line, a scribe might use a letter from one of these scripts in a text written in the other. In many cases, personal or institutional preference seems to have violated the canons consistently. This is not surprising, since the canons themselves are simply the best approximations modern scholars have made to ancient practice, and have no ultimate authority apart from the manuscripts in which they are found. On the whole, however, these divisions do describe the groups found among the several different ways of forming individual letters. Irish script, however, including the script found on the bog tablets, consistently violates these canons, and does so in characteristic ways. The typical Irish alphabet, and the alphabet of the bog tablets too, uses forms usually found restricted to Half-Uncial script, others belonging to Uncial script, and still others proper to Quarter-Uncial script.

Of the scripts in Figure 2, the first two, Rustic Capital and Ancient Common Writing, are very closely related. The second arises by writing the first very rapidly; it is a cursive version, so to speak, of the first. The other four scripts pose a problem. By the 3rd century, all four were well established. New Common Writing seems to be a rapid form of these alphabets, related to them as Ancient Common Writing is to Rustic Capital. The problem, put simply, is this: What is the relation between Rustic Capital and Half-Uncial, or between Ancient Common Writing and New Common Writing? Some scholars see a continuous line of evolution from Rustic Capital and Ancient Common Writing to Half-Uncial and New Common Writing. Others see a complete break between these scripts.

For our purposes, it is not necessary to consider this problem in detail. I mention it simply because it has a bearing upon the question of the date of the Springmount Bog tablets. New Common Writing, and its associated dignified forms, began to be common ca. A.D. 100. Ancient Common

Writing and Rustic Capital belong to the years before 100. I have already said that the bog tablets use forms adapted from the entire gamut of New Common Writing, Half-Uncial, Uncial, and Quarter-Uncial script. They also use forms adapted from Ancient Common Writing, namely Ɽ (a), Ɽ (n), Ɽ (q), Ɽ (r).

In noting this I certainly do not mean to imply that the bog tablets were written in the period of the transition between Ancient Common Writing and New Common Writing. It would seem, however, that books or documents using a mixture of the elements found in the Ancient Common and New Common families of scripts were probably among the first manuscripts present in Ireland. They seem to have been used as models by the first Irish scribes, and were the sources from which the Irish developed their own script, the script first seen on the bog tablets. We cannot say where these models came from, or when they reached Ireland, but the script they contained, mixing elements proper to Ancient Common Writing with elements proper to New Common Writing, might have arisen in the 3rd century in an area where Ancient Common Writing had been slow to disappear. The text of the tablets places their sample of the script after A.D. 389, the year in which St. Jerome published the Gallican (later called the Vulgate) version of the psalms. The archaic features of the script, however, argue against a date as late as the 7th century and in favor of a rather early date for the tablets. It is not unreasonable to place them in the 6th century, and indeed, they may well represent a type of hand common in Ireland as early as St. Patrick's day.

The second Irish manuscript which can perhaps be assigned to the 6th century is the fragmentary psalter known as the *Cathach* of St. Columba. St. Columba, as we have seen, was well known as a scribe. Tradition says he was a master of both Irish secular and Latin Christian learning. He was a prominent member of the Cenél Conaill (Kindred of Conall), and stood in line for the high kingship of Ireland. A famous story says that Columba once visited his friend Finnian and secretly copied one of his books. Finnian discovered the deed, and demanded the copy. Columba refused. The high king ruled in favor of Finnian, saying "to the cow, her calf," but Columba refused to give the book up. The disagreement eventually led to a battle in which many men were killed, and as a result, Columba was exiled to Iona, there to win

as many souls for Christ as his stubborn behaviour had lost.

It is possible that the book behind this quarrel is the *Cathach*. An inscription on the *cumdach* or shrine made to hold the volume in the 11th century indicates that the manuscript was then kept at Kells, Co. Meath, the monastery which became the head of the Columban monastic confederation after the destruction of Iona by the Vikings, ca. 804. The man who commissioned the *cumdach* was Cathbar Ua Domnaill. The Ua Domnaill, or O'Donnells, who became the dominant branch of the Cenél Conaill, were Columba's relatives. In the later Middle Ages, the *cumdach* and its contents became the *cathach*, or "battler," of the O'Donnells. Carried three times sunwise around the Cenél Conaill before battle, it guaranteed victory. Today, the manuscript and its shrine remain the property of the current head of the O'Donnell family, who allows them to stay on deposit in the Library of the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin.

So traditional tales and historical ownership associate the *Cathach* with St. Columba and his family. Textual evidence, studied by Lawlor, places the manuscript before ca. 650. And from the point of view of the script, a 6th-century date is quite likely. We can compare the alphabets of the *Cathach* and the bog tablets by looking at Figure 4. The alphabets are rather similar, but there are important differences between them. The *Cathach* no longer uses any of the forms found in Ancient Common Writing, uses λ for initials where the tablets use Δ , and tolerates \mathcal{D} , \mathcal{R} , and \mathcal{S} , Uncial forms which the tablets do not allow. Both the tablets and the *Cathach* use wedged finials on upright strokes; both use diminuendi. Both use ligatures, punctuation, and word separation.

None of these characteristics is inconsistent with a 5-6th century date. In fact, similarities between the tablets and the script of a 5th-century Quarter-Uncial manuscript at Naples rather strengthen that date. The λ of the tablets showed us that the source of the λ of the *Cathach* was current in Ireland before the middle of the 6th century, and the tablets make it clear that wedged finials and diminuendi had developed by that time as well.

The earliest Irish scriptoria, then, must

THE SPRINGMOUNT BOG TABLETS

| | | | | | |
|---|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|
| a | α | a | α | μ | a |
| | λ | Δ | λ | Δ | Δ |
| b | b | b | B | | |
| c | | | | | |
| d | | | | | |
| e | a | e | e | | |
| f | | | | | |
| g | | | | | |
| h | | | | | |
| i | | | | | |
| l | | | | | |
| m | m | | | | |
| n | n | r | | | |
| o | | | | | |
| p | p | | | | |
| q | | | | | |
| r | r | r | | | |
| s | s | | | | |
| t | | | | | |
| u | | | | | |
| x | | | | | |

3
Alphabets found in the
Cathach and in the
Springmount Bog
tablets.

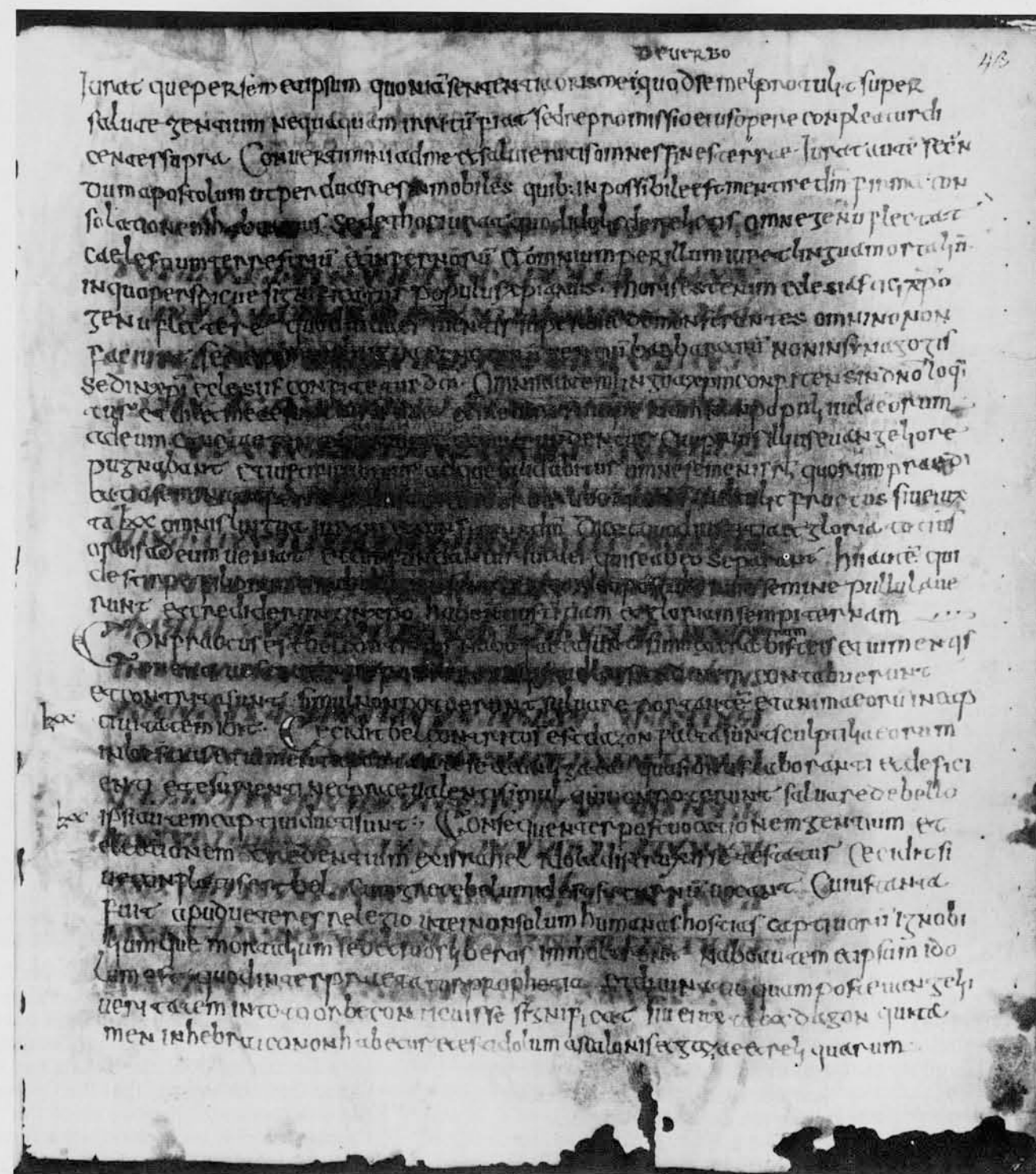
THE CATHACH OF ST. COLUMBIA

| | |
|---|-----------|
| a | λ |
| b | b |
| c | |
| d | d |
| e | e |
| f | |
| g | |
| h | |
| i | |
| l | l |
| m | m |
| n | n |
| o | |
| p | |
| q | |
| r | r |
| s | s |
| t | |
| u | |
| x | |
| y | y |
| z | z |

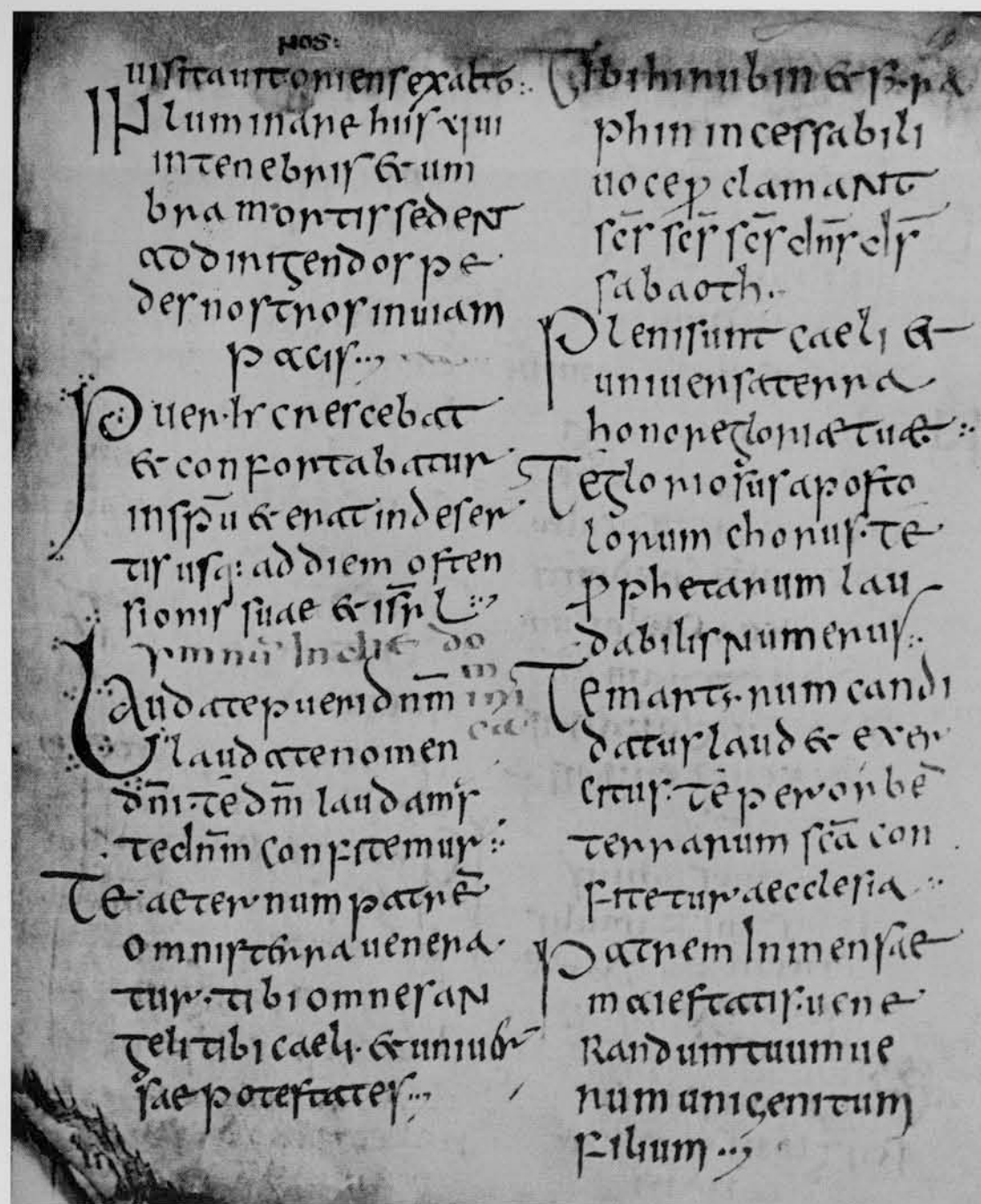
4
Irish script from the
MS. Milan. The page
has been darkened by
reagent applied to
bring out the Gothic

text which lies under
the Latin text of St.
Jerome. The Latin text
was probably finished
by A.D. 622 when

Atalán, who owned the
manuscript, died.
(Biblioteca Ambrosiana
S.45 sup.) Ante 622(?)
This is page 43.



cm 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18



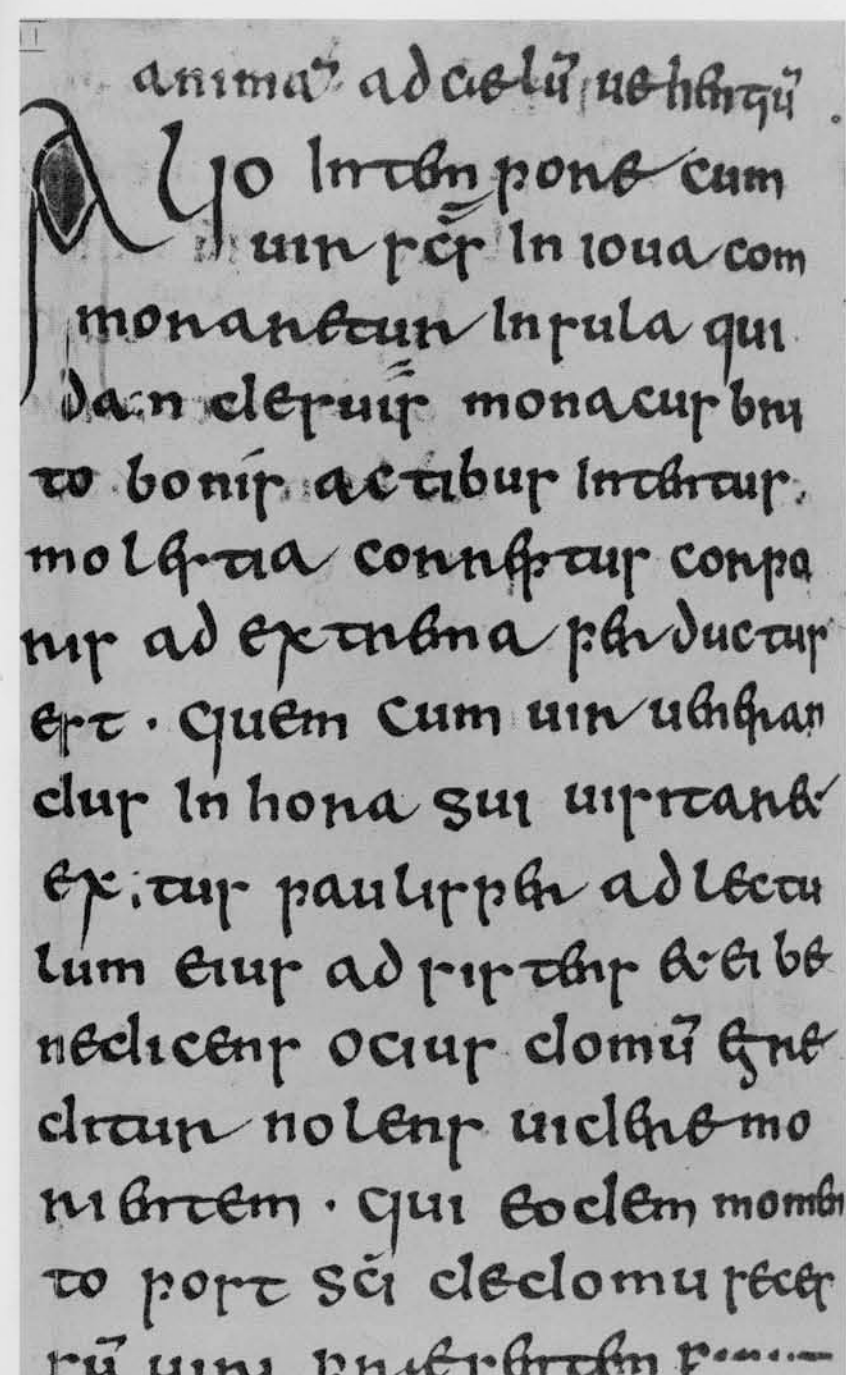
5
The Antiphony of Bangor, Irish Minuscule script. Not after 680-691. (Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, C.5 inf.) From fol. 10.

6
The copy of Adamnán's *Vita Columbae* (Life of Columba) known as the Schaffhausen Adamnán. Written by the scribe Dorbbéne who died in A.D. 713. Irish Minuscule script. (Stadt-bibliothek, Schaffhausen, Switzerland, Ms.Gen. I (ante 713). (Reproduced from Lindsay 1910)

have differed in their preferences for **D** and **d**, **N** and **n**, **R** and **r**, **S** and **s**. In the area typified by the tablets, a book hand using **d**, **n**, **N**, **r**, **s** had developed by the late 5th or early 6th century. In other scriptoria, scripts must have developed using the constellation of **D** and **d**, **N** and **n**, **R** and **r**, **S** and **s** found in the *Cathach*. The book hand of Ireland varied from scriptorium to scriptorium, **D**, **d**, **N**, **n**, **R**, **r**, **S**, **s** favored in different proportions in different places. The alternate forms of these letters must have been available to Irish scribes without any feeling that one was more proper than another. **A** may have

been the form used for initials even from the beginning, but we have no evidence of it from the tablets. Initial 'a' does not occur in the psalms they transcribe. Comparisons between the script of the tablets and that of the *Cathach* suggest that the *Cathach* is the more recent of the two since the *Cathach* eliminates archaic letter forms. If the tablets belong to the 5-6th century, the *Cathach* belongs to the 6th or the 7th.

A third sample of early Irish script, this one dated before 625, has features which seem to post-date the *Cathach*. The sample of script in question is found in a manuscript now in Milan, at the Biblioteca



Ambrosiana. This manuscript originally carried the text of the Bible as it was translated into the Gothic language by the Arian bishop Ulfilas. That original text was scraped from the parchment, and the cleaned sheets were used for a copy of St. Jerome's commentary on Isaiah. The copying of St. Jerome's text was finished before 625, and parts of the text were written by Irish scribes.

As it stands today, this Ambrosian manuscript has a 7th-century *ex-libris* saying that the book belongs to Atalán. Atalán (d. 622) was the second abbot of Bobbio, a monastery founded by the Irish

St. Columbanus (d. 612/14), namesake of St. Columba of Iona. If the manuscript belonged to Atalán, the Irish script in it is likely to have been written before he died, and thus, to have been written by Irish monks who had accompanied St. Columbanus on his journey from Bangor (Co. Down) to the continent. And indeed, the Irish script of the Ambrosian manuscript shares certain characteristics with the bog tablets that neither shares with the *Cathach*. In other words, the bog tablets, found in Co. Antrim, and the Irish script of the Ambrosian manuscript, probably written by monks from Bangor, testify to a northeast, Antrim-Bangor scribal tradition. The *Cathach* belongs to a Columban Iona-Derry-Kells tradition, which became the dominant Irish scribal tradition in the 7th and 8th centuries.

Since the *Cathach* and the Ambrosian manuscript belong to Irish traditions from two different areas, comparing their scripts is a delicate matter. Nevertheless, it is always useful to compare manuscripts of nearby origin, particularly when one is dated and the other is not. Altogether, the Irish script in the Ambrosian manuscript seems to represent a stage in which Irish script has been re-cast in a more stately form than it shows in the *Cathach*. Comparisons of ligatures and other cursive features underlie this observation and urge the conclusion that the *Cathach* belongs to the 6th century rather than to the 7th. Other details point in the same direction. The letter **R** occurs more often and in a greater variety of positions (e.g. *fueRit*, *cReator*, *pRomisit*) in the Ambrosian manuscript than in the *Cathach*, while the use of **S** decreases dramatically. Both of these trends continue in 7th-century Irish manuscripts surviving from Bobbio.

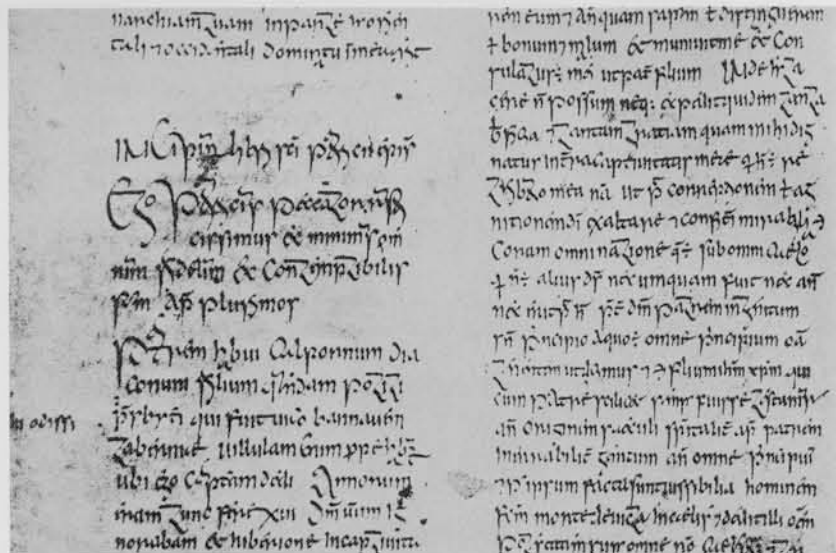
The Irish script of the Ambrosian manuscript may, then, belong to a period somewhat later than that of the *Cathach*, and as we may be fairly certain that the Ambrosian manuscript was written before 622, it seems rather likely that the *Cathach* belongs to the 6th century. The bog tablets fall somewhat earlier. Before 625, in sum, we have two manuscripts definitely written in Ireland whose exact dates are uncertain, and one manuscript as-good-as-certainly Irish, even though written abroad. This is a small number of manuscripts, but the nature of their scripts implies that there were others. Two belong to one scribal tradition, the third to another. And the scripts of all three are assured, the products of men working in well-established traditions. Both the scribes

and the script have already found their way.

From the rest of the 7th century, only two manuscripts indisputably written by Irish scribes survive. One of these is the inexactly-named Antiphony of Bangor, written no later than 680-691. The other is a copy of Adamnán's *Life of Columba*, made no later than 713. This manuscript is usually known as the Schaffhausen Adamnán, from the name of its present home. There are, of course, many manuscripts which are possible and even probable 7th-century Irish products in Milan's Ambrosiana, all of Bobbio provenance. Other collections of early Irish manuscripts are found at Turin, the Vatican, and St. Gall in Switzerland. Using manuscripts from these collections, it is possible to suggest the development of Irish script in the course of the 7th century. In the following paragraphs, I shall try to outline this development.

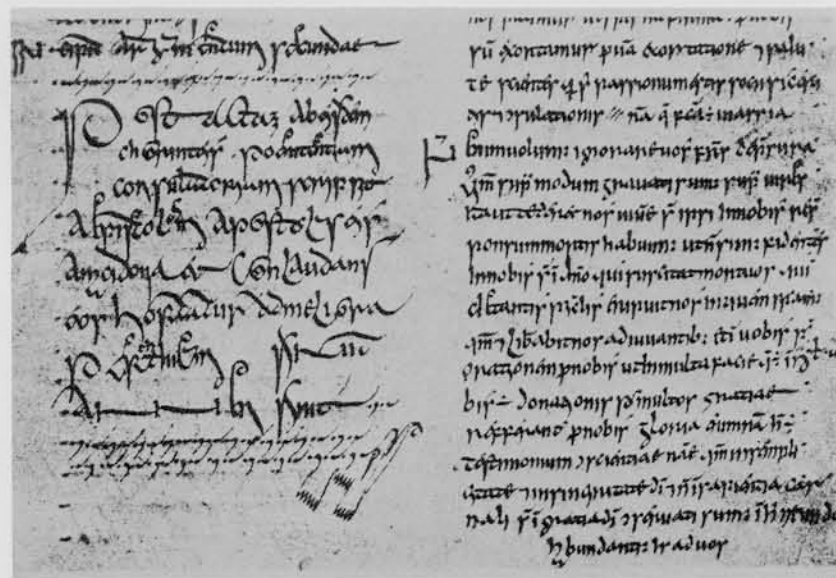
Irish script is commonly divided into two classes, known very imprecisely as Irish Majuscule and Irish Minuscule. The *Cathach*, the bog tablets, and the Irish Ambrosian script are all examples of Irish Majuscule, as are the Book of Durrow and the Book of Kells. The Book of Armagh, the Book of Dimma, the Antiphony of Bangor, and the Schaffhausen Adamnán are all examples of Irish Minuscule. When one examines these and other manuscripts carefully, the evidence suggests that Irish Majuscule script, having been refined from an informal hand, began to be written informally itself. It used frequent ligatures, reduced the number of strokes needed to make certain letters, and soon became difficult to read. A reform was instituted, and a second book hand emerged, a neater form of cursively-written Irish Majuscule: the script known as Irish Minuscule.

Irish Majuscule continued to be written even after Irish Minuscule had developed, throughout the 7th century and beyond. It was written now properly, now less properly. In its less proper forms it used more ligatures and more abbreviations than were absolutely correct in fully-developed Irish Majuscule, and this type of cursively-written Majuscule verged to one degree or another, in manuscript after manuscript, not on Irish Minuscule (for "cursive" is not a synonym for "Minuscule") but on the type of script from which the true Minuscule had been refined. In its most proper and elegant forms, the Majuscule was used for master works such as the Books of



7, 8

The Book of Armagh. Written by Ferdomnach whom the Annals of Ulster commemorate as "sapiens et scriba optimus Airdmachae" (Armagh's scholar and excellent scribe). Very pointed and expert Irish Minuscule. Ca. 807. From folios 22 and 122. (Trinity College, Dublin, 52.) (Reproduced from Lowe 1972, pl. 268)



9

The Book of Dimma. Probably written at Roscrea, Co. Tipperary in the second half of the 8th century by a scribe named Dimma. Irish Minuscule script, written cursively. From folio 64r. (Trinity College, Dublin, 59) (Reproduced from Lindsay 1910, pl. VI.)

Durrow and Kells.

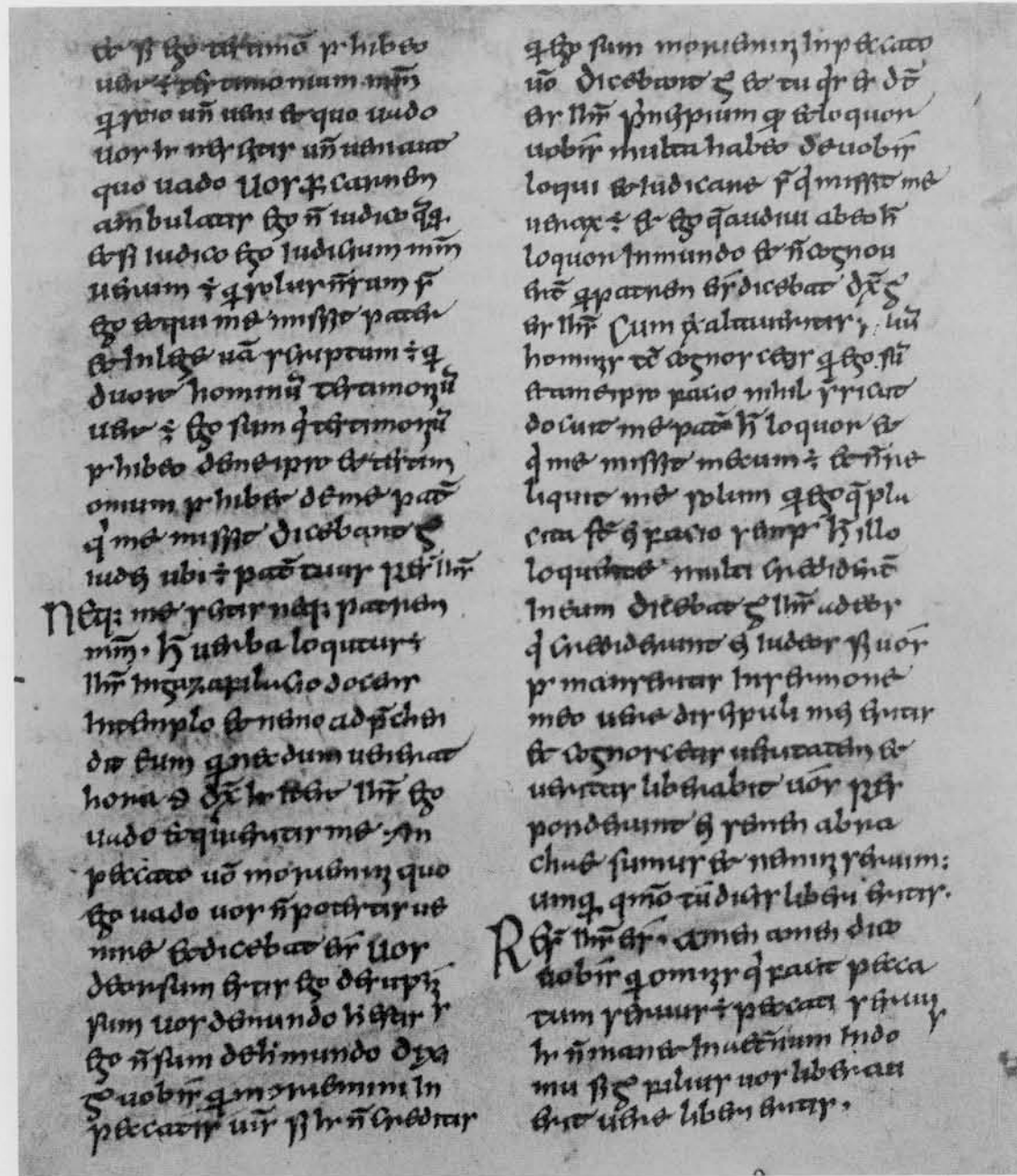
Irish Minuscule also continued to be written. Having evolved from Irish Majuscule through a reform worked upon Irish-Majuscule-written-cursively, the Minuscule went on to become the Irish script *par excellence*. Even after the success of the script developed under Charlemagne discouraged the use of Irish script for writing books in Latin, Irish scribes used their second national book hand, Irish Minuscule script, to write works in Irish. Indeed, Irish scribes continued to copy Irish records and literature in this script as long as the Irish scribal tradition lasted.

Analysis of Irish Minuscule manuscripts suggests that the script called Irish Minuscule is based on the Majuscule script seen in the *Cathach*. The Majuscule script seen in the Springmount Bog tablets stands outside this development, and had little permanent influence.

Why did the Majuscule of the *Cathach* become pre-eminent? The answer may lie in the social and political history of early Christian Ireland. Monasticism in Ireland received the imprint of early Irish society. In accordance with early Irish law, land could not be alienated from the kin group to which it belonged, even land given to the church. To solve this apparent impasse,

the abbots of monasteries were usually members of the wealthier and more influential kin groups, and the abbacies were normally hereditary.

It seems likely that uniformity of script would have been encouraged within each of the Irish *paruchia*. If uniformity was indeed encouraged, styles of script may have taken on regional political significance. There is no documentary evidence that this happened, no sign that the script of Armagh, for example, was adopted by a house upon joining the *paruchia* headed by Armagh. Nevertheless, the notion that script in Ireland may have had a political dimension is plausible.



10

Map showing some major centers of Irish monastic influence in Britain and the Continent, 6th to 12th centuries A.D.

- | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1. IONA | 22. AACHEN |
| 2. LINDISFARNE | 23. KÖLN |
| 3. BURGH CASTLE | 24. VERDUN |
| 4. MALMESBURY | 25. METZ |
| 5. GLASTONBURY | 26. MAINZ |
| 6. ANGOULÊME | 27. LUXEUIL |
| 7. MAZEROLLES | 28. ANNEGRAY |
| 8. TOURS | 29. FONTAINES |
| 9. AUBIGNY | 30. SACKINGEN |
| 10. ST. DENIS | 31. REICHENAU |
| 11. LAGNY | 32. RHEINAU |
| 12. ST. FIACRE | 33. KONSTANZ |
| 13. ST. GOBAIN | 34. ST. GALL |
| 14. SOISSONS | 35. MECKLENBURG |
| 15. LAON | 36. ERFURT |
| 16. RHEIMS | 37. WÜRZBURG |
| 17. PÉRONNE | 38. NÜRNBERG |
| 18. NIVELLES | 39. REGENSBURG |
| 19. WAULSORT | 40. WILPARTING |
| 20. FOSSES | 41. CHIEMSEE |
| 21. LIÈGE | 42. SALZBURG |
| | 43. MELK |
| | 44. WIEN |
| | 45. BOBBIO |
| | 46. LUCCA |
| | 47. FIESOLE |
| | 48. TARANTO |
| | 49. KIEV |

In the 6th century, the Cenél nEógain and Cenél Conaill branches of the Northern Uí Néill were consolidating their control over the north of Ireland. Since the script of the *Cathach* was probably the script of monasteries under the control of St. Columba, a member of the Cenél Conaill branch of the Uí Néill dynasty, it would have been natural for that script to gain prestige as the Uí Néill gained power. The tablets, however, were found in the territory of the Ulaí, a group whose political influence was on the wane in the 5th century, giving way, in fact, before the spread of Uí Néill dominance. It is not too surprising that the script of the tablets faded as the political influence of the Ulaí diminished.

Clearly then, by the year 700, the time of the Schaffhausen Adamnán, Irish script had had a long history. Few books have survived from this period, and with the exception of the *Cathach*, all are less well known than elaborate products such as the Book of Durrow and the Book of Kells. Nevertheless, it is to these unassuming volumes that one most appropriately turns for information about the scripts in every-

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day use. Those written for the high altar, books upon which the efforts of the most gifted scribes and painters were lavished, can tell us a great deal about the heights to which the artists of the island could ascend; inevitably, though, they stand outside the main line of development for the history of Irish script as a whole.

Between the Book of Durrow (mid 7th century) and the Book of Kells (before 804) are 150 years of writing. In this period, and particularly after 700, the number of surviving manuscripts is so large that it is impossible to treat them in a small space. These were also the years that first saw large numbers of Irish pilgrims abroad. The process begun by Columba's journey to Iona (563), Columbanus' to Burgundy and Lombardy (590), and Aidán's to Northumbria (635), continued and expanded. And everywhere the Irish went, they brought their script.

In Northumbria, the Irish influence in script was absolute. Aidán and the other

Irish missionaries who answered King Oswald's request for Irish teachers brought writing to Northumbria along with religion. These Irish missionaries taught the Northumbrians to write so well that it is almost impossible to tell whether an English or an Irish scribe wrote many 7th and 8th century manuscripts. Most scholars deal with this problem by simply calling the script of the British Isles "Insular" after ca. 650. In only a few cases has the problem of deciding precisely who wrote a particular manuscript, and where, stirred debate, and the point is usually moot.

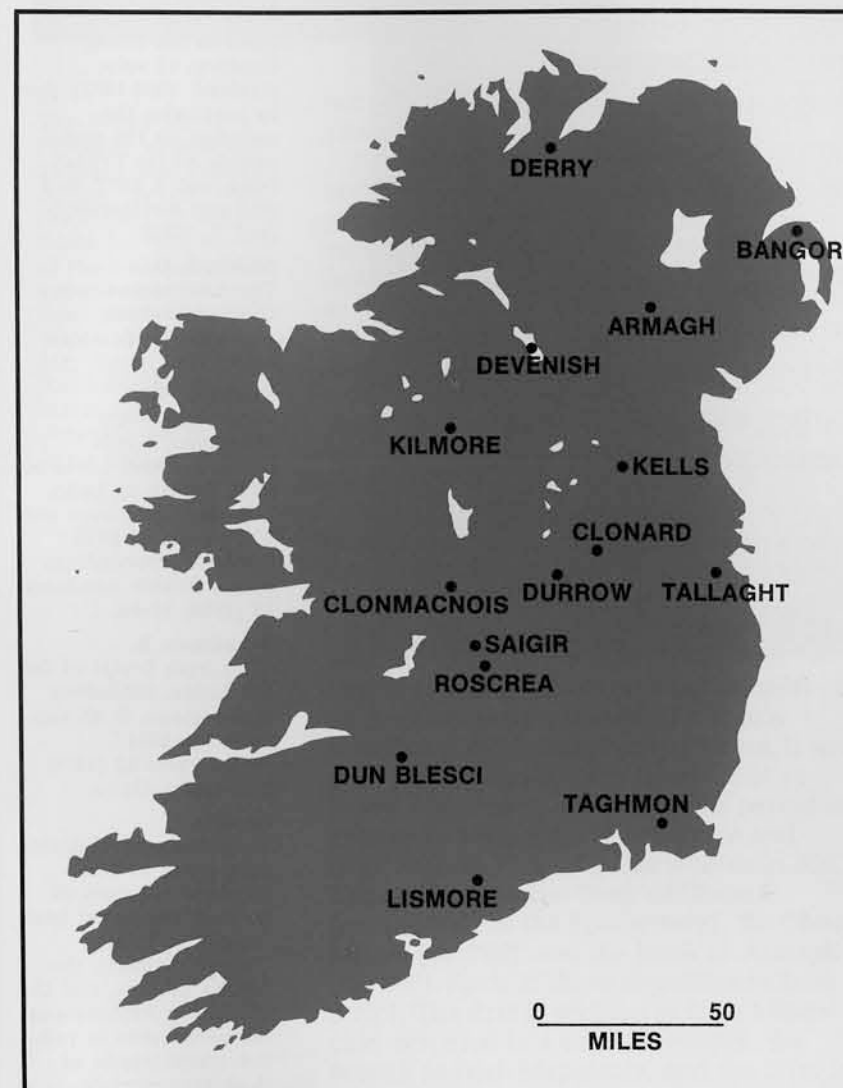
The Book of Durrow is a case of this kind, but I do not intend to address the question of the date and origin of this manuscript in great detail. A convenient summary of the arguments already exists in the introduction to the facsimile edition of the manuscript published in 1960. Unfortunately, analysis of the script used in the volume does not tip the balance in this problem, although on the whole, it seems clear that the Book of Durrow is an Irish product, at least in that it was produced in a milieu in which Irish scribal models predominated. In fact, it does seem to me that the burden of the evidence points to Ireland itself, and before 650 for the origin of this manuscript, though many disagree.

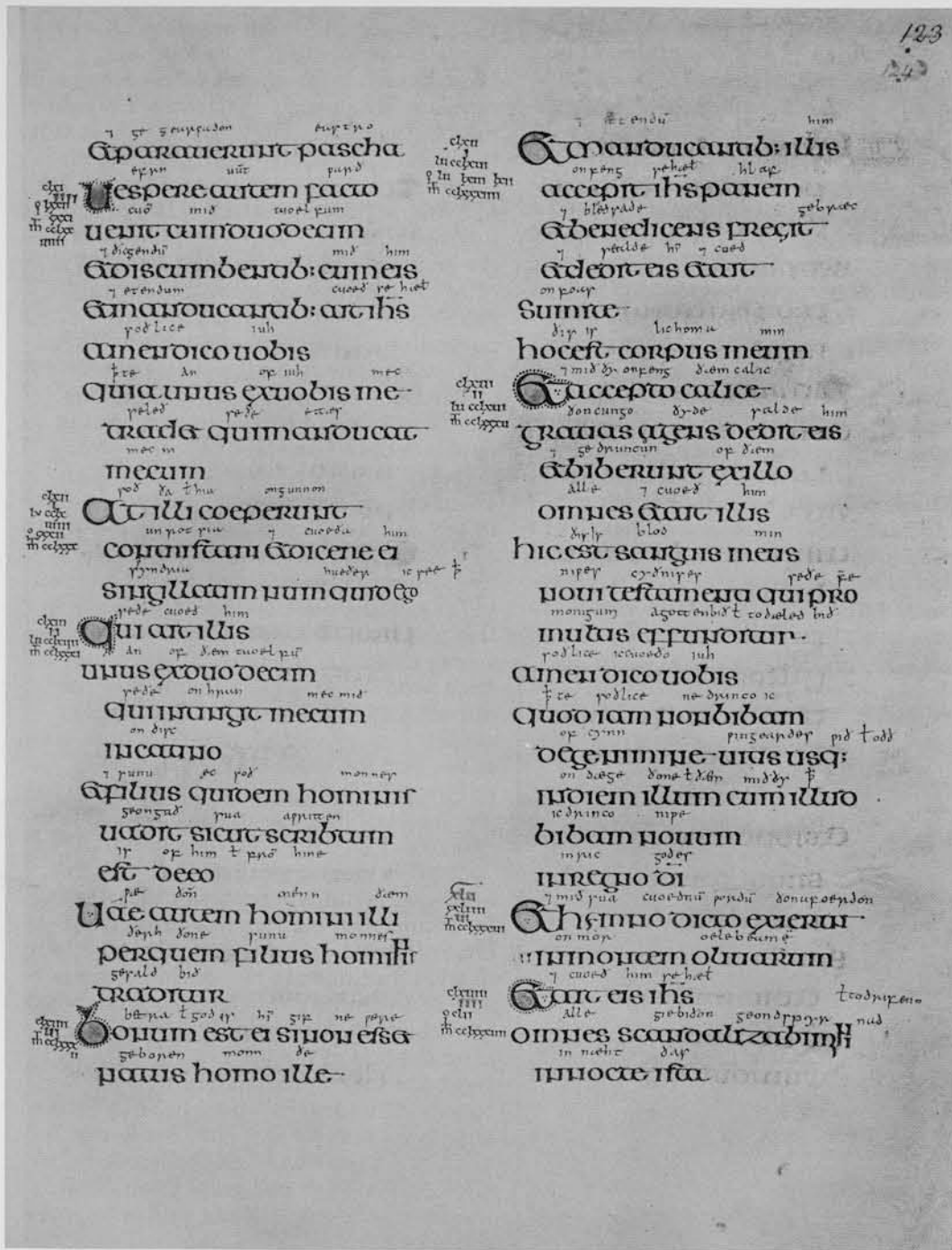
What is most important to emphasize, however, is not where this or that particular manuscript was written or by what kind of scribe, but the strength and vitality of Irish traditions in this period, even outside of Ireland itself. The Irish influence in Northumbria, for example, lasted long after the last of the missionary Irish had gone. Lindisfarne, founded by Aidán, continued under Irish born or Irish trained abbots for many years after his death. It remained a center of Irish religious influence, and of Irish calligraphy too. The Lindisfarne Gospels alone suffice to prove this was so.

The Lindisfarne Gospels are the most important manuscript Northumbria produced in the years around 700. A 10th-century colophon in the manuscript tells us that the Saxon monk Eadfrith, bishop of Lindisfarne from 698 to 721, wrote the text and executed the decoration. The binding and the jeweled gold and silver case in which the book was kept were the work of Aethelwald and Billfrith, also Saxon monks. So the Lindisfarne Gospels are not the work of Irish hands. And yet, the Saxon monks who made them were themselves Irish products. Their work shows a knowledge of certain continental motifs,

11

Irish monasteries mentioned in the text.





12
The Lindisfarne Gospels. Written at the end of the 7th century by Eadfrith, bishop of Lindisfarne from 698 to 721. Insular Majuscule script. From folio 124. (British Library, London, Cotton, Nero D. IV.) (Reproduced from Miller 1923, pl. XXVII.)

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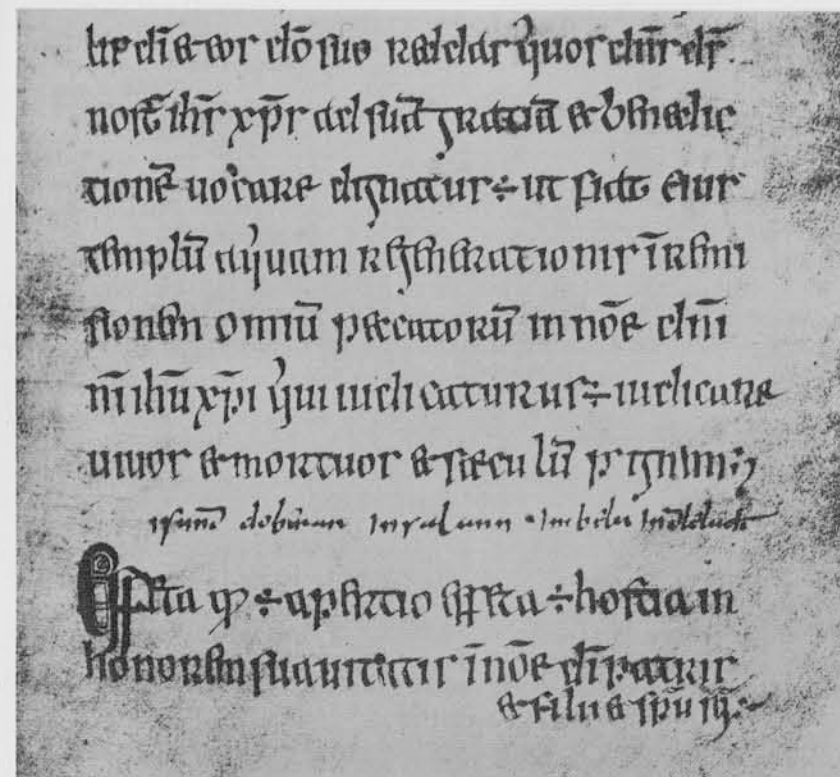
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Credits

Thanks are most gratefully given to The National Museum of Ireland, the Royal Irish Academy, Trinity College (Dublin), the British Library, and the Biblioteca Ambrosiana for permission to publish photographs of their manuscripts.



13

The Stowe Missal. Probably written at Tallaght, just south of Dublin, no later than the abbacy of Máel-Ruain (d. 792), the last of the bishops who appear on a list on folio 33r. Irish Majuscule script. Folio 51r. (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, D.II.3, fols. 12-67.) (Reproduced from Lowe 1972, pl. 268.)

but most clearly demonstrates all that Irish education and training had to offer.

Beyond the British Isles, Irish pilgrims and Irish script were becoming a constant presence. From Austria to Italy manuscripts of the 8th, 9th, and later centuries bear the marks of Irish (or Insular) scribes. Many are written in pure Irish script. Others were copied from Insular exemplars. The presence or misinterpretation of Irish abbreviations such as *h* (*autem*), *Θ* (*eius*), *H* (*enim*), *÷* (*est*) makes the Irish substrate of these manuscripts clear.

By the year 800, the Carolingian reform of learning had begun to popularize a book hand subsequently known as Carolingian Minuscule. This hand eventually swept all others before it on the continent, and it affected England strongly in the 10th century. Ireland alone resisted assaults on its national script. Indeed, if 800 saw Caroline script triumphant at Tours, it saw pure Irish script equally triumphant at home. Three manuscripts of this period are enough to testify to the brilliance and flexibility of Irish script as written in 800. These three are the Book of Dimma (second half of the 8th century), the Stowe Missal (ca. 792), and the Book of Armagh (ca. 807). Each of these is written in Irish script. The first is written in Irish Minuscule executed in a cursive fashion, the second in Irish Majuscule, and the third in

an extremely expert and very pointed Irish Minuscule. The wedged finials, diminuenti, decorative dots and punctuation, characteristic abbreviations, and letter forms from alphabets usually kept separate, instantly identify these manuscripts as Irish. Along with their incomparable contemporary, the Book of Kells, they display the enormous expressive power of early Irish script, and indeed of Irish art in general.

The art of the hand-written book, the art of the scribe, reflects the culture from which it springs in many ways. The script considered here, for example, reflects Irish culture first simply by existing, and thereby revealing that the sympathy for words found in pre-Christian Irish culture quickly smoothed the way for new Christian habits, the reading and writing of books. Second, even if we knew nothing of St. Patrick's 5th-century mission, the script of the earliest Irish manuscripts would suggest that writing and Christianity reached Ireland no later than the 5-6th century. Third, by the end of the 6th century, the dominant Irish scribal tradition seems to reflect its political setting. Fourth, the richest and most lengthy books, such as Durrow, Lindisfarne and Kells, testify unambiguously to the vitality, intensity, and brilliant creativity of the Irish *scriptoria*. Finally, the early appearance of Irish manuscripts in England and on the continent, and the long continuity of the Irish scribal tradition overseas, shows us the Irish as highly influential pilgrims and scholars.

Bella Schauman holds a B.A. from Bryn Mawr College and a Ph.D. from the University of Toronto. She has written several articles on manuscript topics and has completed a book on Irish script which is currently being considered for publication. She teaches Latin Palaeography and Medieval Latin at the Catholic University of America.