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 Antiphonary of Bangor, and a copy of Adamnan'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, by the 6th and 7th centuries, while ca. 876 Hearit 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 Uraoth bi Ceaca (Little Grammar, 7th century), seven grades of poet or fili existed, and the highest grade, the fili, the chieftain, was equal in dire, or honor-price, to the king of one tooth (a “people,” or tribe). A master jester held the same status. And when this native tradition met Christianity, its ancient respect for words and their inculcation 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 preserved in writing around 600, but we have no manuscripts of these texts written in Ireland in that period. The lyric poetry written during the Old Irish period survives accidentally as it were, often quoted as examples in metrical treatises written 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 14th-century Féilti Oengusao (Martyrology of Oengus) records that “Caimin the Bald was the scribe of Colman of Saighit.” It is he that wrote the wonderful manuscript, namely Caithin’s Journey, with its many illuminations, and this book still remains in Saighit.” Clared of Saighit is one of the saints traditionally believed 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-spreading monastic (confraternities) of the 6th century, was well known as a scribe. In his Life of Columba Adamnan records many incidental references to reading and writing at Iona, Columba’s central foundation.

Adamnan 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 writing, or at a time when he was writing,” or “when the holy man sat writing in his hut.”

From Adamnan 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. Adamnan also tells us that water could not harm the books that Columba wrote upon the hilltop, that reading aloud from books Columba had written was found to relieve drought, and that the Holy Scriptures, beginning with the psalms, but including all things necessary to the daily office. We hear, for example, that Pinnian of Clonard, studying with “St. Fortkernus, learned psalms and hymns, with other ecclesiastical matters,” and that St. Daraus, set to learning psalms, “made a great improvement in a short time, easily learning things taught to her by 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. Caneinn “went to Caneinn in the night, privately, so that Caneinn would write for him on the walls.” We do not follow this student as he returns to his cell and copies out what Caneinn has written, but we do catch sight of Caneinn 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 still largely lost. Only two Irish manuscripts may 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, had written part of Psalms XXX and XXXI. These tablets were found by a man cutting turf in Springmount Bog in the townland of Ballylutherland.
Co. Antrim. They are now in the National Museum of Ireland. Each tablet measures 31 mm. wide x 74 mm. tall x 6 mm. thick, and each is hallowed to a depth of 1 mm. leaving a raised border, about 30 mm. wide. Each of these tablets is made of a single piece of stone. Their sides are 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 hallowed areas of the tablets were first covered with wax, a pointed tool, or stylus, which seems to have been used to write 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 prominent wedge-shaped finials used on letters or parts of letters beginning with a straight down stroke, b, d, p, q, m, n, and f for example. Another is the way the scribe makes the lengths of the initial word(s) gradually diminish from an exaggerated size to that of the text proper at the beginning of a verse or other textual division. This decorative technique is generally known as the diminuendo effect. The 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 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 instead of d instead of ð, and texts written in Half-Uncial using both s and S. 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 if 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 practices 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 the three 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 Lettering and New Common Writing? Some scholars see a continuous line of evolution from Rustic Capital to Half-Uncial, and from Uncial to 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 the question of the date of the Springmount Bog tablets, New Common Writing, and its associated diglyphic 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 use forms adapted from Ancient Common Writing, namely ð (a), n (n), ñ (ñ). 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 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.D. 390, 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 9th 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 7th century is the fragmentary psalter known as the Codex of St. Columba, as we have seen, was well known as a scribe. Tradition says he was a master of both Irish secular and monastic writing. He was a prominent member of the Cassellion Simon (Kindred of Conall), and stood in line without the high kings. A famous story says that Columba once visited his friend Fintan and secretly copied one of his books. Fintan discovered the deed and demanded the copy. Columba refused. The high king ruled in favor of Fintan, saying, "to the copy 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 cumbuch 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. 864. The man who commissioned the cumbuch was Cathbar Ua Domnaill. The Ua Domnaill, or O'Donnells, who became the dominant branch of the Conél Conaill, were Columba's relatives. In the later Middle Ages, the cumbuch and its contents became the cathach, or "battle", of the O'Donnells. Carried three times sunrise around the Conél 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 Lavlor, 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 a for initials where the tablets use k, and tolerates t, r, and s. Uncial forms which the tablets do not allow. Both the tablets and the Cathach use wedged finals on upright strokes; both use diminuendi. Both use ligatures, punctuation, and word separation.

None of these characteristics is inconsistent with a 5th-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 a of the tablets showed us that the source of the a of the Cathach was current in Ireland before the middle of the 6th century, and the tablets make it clear that wedged finals and diminuendi had developed by that time as well.

The earliest Irish scriptoria, then, must...
have differed in their preferences for Æ and A. D, N and n, R and r, S and ℳ. In the area typified by the tablets, a hand using Æ, N, R, S, and ℳ had developed by the late 5th or early 6th century. In other scriptoria, scripts must have developed using the constellation of Æ, N, R, S, and ℳ found in the Cathach. The hand of 6th century varied from scriptorium to scriptorium, Æ, N, R, S, and ℳ in different proportions in different scriptoria. 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 Æ 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 5th 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 Ullias. 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 monk 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 Iona (Co Down) to the continent. And indeed, the Irish script of the Ambrosian manuscript shares certain characteristics with the bog tablets that neither share 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 north-east, Atlan-Bangor scriptural tradition. The Cathach belongs to a Columban-Iona-Derry-Kells tradition, which became the dominant Irish scriptural 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 at which Irish script has been re-cast in a more stately form than it shows in the Cathach. Comparisons of ligatures and other ornamental 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 Æ occurs more often and in a greater variety of positions (e.g., fuelt, cleistor, phomisli) in the Ambrosian manuscript than in the Cathach, while the use of ℳ 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 625, 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 scriptural tradition, the other to two different. 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 tactfully named Antiphonary of Bangor, written no later than 680-690. The other is a copy of Adamnan’s Life of Columba, made no later than 713. This manuscript is usually known as the Schaffhausen Adamnan, 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 inaccurately as Irish Minuscule and Irish Majuscule. The Cathach, the bog tablets, and the Irish Ambrosian script are all examples of Irish Majuscule, as are the Field account book, the Book of Armagh, the Book of Dimna, the Antiphonary of Bangor, and the Schaffhausen Adamnan. All are 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 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 and centuries and beyond. It was written new 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 vied to one degree or another with the script after manuscript, not on Irish Minuscule (for “cursive is not a synonym for ‘Minuscule’ but on the type of script the true Minuscule had been refined. In its most proper and elegant forms, the Majuscule was used for master works such as the Book of Durrow and Kells.

Irish Minuscule also continued to be written. Having evolved from Irish Majuscule through a reform worked upon Irish-Majuscule-written-curiously, the Minuscule went on to become the Irish script per excellence. Even after the success of the script developed under Charlemagne discouraged the use of Irish script, in writing books in Irish, 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.
In the 6th century, the Cenél ní Dógaín and Cenél Conaill branches of the Northern Uí Neill were consolidating their control over the north of Ireland. Since the script of the Cúchulainn was probably the script used by the monastery under the control of St. Columba, a member of the Cenél Conaill branch of the Ulaid dynasty, it would have been natural for that script to gain prestige as the Ulaid branch gained power. The tablets, however, were found in the territory of the Uí Uaidh, a group whose political influence was on the wane in the 5th century, giving way, in fact, before the power of the Uí Néill dynasty. It is not too surprising that the script of the tablets was faded as the political influence of the Uí Uaidh diminished.

Clearly then, by the year 700, the time of the Scalabhainn's Adamnán, Irish script had had a long history. Few books have survived from this period, and with the exception of the Cúchulainn, 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 everyday 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 (old 7th century) and the Book of Kells (before 804) are 130 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 Aidan's to Northumbria (655), continued and expanded. And everywhere the Irish went, they brought their script.

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

Irish missionaries who answered King Oswald's request for Irish teachers brought writing to Northumbria along with their

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The art of the handwriting 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 6th century. Third, by the end of the 6th century, the dominant Irish scribal tradition seems to reflect its political setting, the richest and most lengthy books, such as Durrow, Lindisfarne and Kells, textually 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.

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