

Review: *The Cradle of European Culture:
Early Medieval Irish Book Art* (Dora and
Schnoor)



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REVIEWS

The Cradle of European Culture: Early Medieval Irish Book Art. Edited by Cornel Dora and Franziska Schnoor. Verlag am Klosterhof, Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen, 2018. 116 pp. €25. ISBN 978-3-906819-30-3.

While the Book of Kells never strays too far from the public imagination, other early Irish gospel books and insular illumination in general are less well known. Early medieval Irish/insular manuscript production is however enjoying something of a revival in recent scholarship and curatorial practice, with efforts both to reassess the work of early Irish scribes and book artists and also to bring their manuscripts to the attention of a wider audience.

Over the past several years, rather than focusing on the concept of ‘insularity’ and isolation, scholarly meetings and publications have attempted to situate Insular artistic production in a more inclusive, and broader European, context. This is perhaps best encapsulated by the title of the seventh international conference on insular art held in Galway in 2014, *Islands in a Global Context* (Newman et al. 2017). Richard Gameson also recently edited a volume revisiting the Lindisfarne Gospels and situating its production and ornamentation in the context of Christian Anglo-Saxon interactions with Ireland, Italy, and beyond (Gameson 2017). Equally projects such as the Bank of America Merrill Lynch Trinity College Dublin Gospel Books Project have attempted to introduce early medieval Irish manuscripts to a general contemporary audience. The project was led by Rachel Moss and Susie Bioletti and examined four early gospel books, Codex Usserianus Primus, the Garland of Howth, the Book of Dimma, and the Book of Mulling. In addition to organizing a conference on the theme and publishing their findings (Bioletti and Moss 2017), the investigators curated an exhibition which could be viewed online and thus was made widely accessible (Moss et al. 2017). In a similar vein, Moss also recently published a beautifully illustrated guide to the Book of Durrow in association with the British Library and their exhibition, *Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Art, Word, War* (Moss 2018).

It is within this context that the abbey library at St. Gallen published *The Cradle of European Culture: Early Medieval Irish Book Art*, a catalogue accompanying an exhibition on Insular manuscripts held at the library from March to December 2018. The foreword by Cornel Dora, director of the abbey library, touches on both strands mentioned above, opening with the statement that ‘St Gall and Ireland go back a long way together’ and closing by highlighting the concern for ‘reaching out to a broader audience’, for which reason the book was published in both German and English (translation into English by Katherine Vanovitch). Indeed, Dora dedicates the book to ‘Ireland and the Irish, to their cultural heritage and their refreshing sense of

humour', the tone indicating from the outset that the exhibition and catalogue were aiming to draw the public eye (p. 6).

The text consists of eight brief chapters written largely by the editors, Cornel Dora and Franziska Schnoor, with contributions from Philipp Lenz, Karl Schmuki, and Andreas Nievergelt, and an introduction prepared by Dáibhí Ó Cróinín. The introduction, 'Ireland and St Gall', provides a concise overview of the Irish origins of St Gall from both a historical and legendary perspective, beginning with the expulsion of the Irish from Burgundy in 610. The author also explores the early accumulation of Irish books, or at least books written in the Irish fashion, in the abbey library. The earliest library catalogue, Codex Sangallensis 728, dates to the second half of the ninth century and lists twenty-eight texts from Virgil to Boethius, all written in an Irish hand, distinguished by the librarian as *libri scottice scripti*. Ó Cróinín concludes the introduction with a consideration of whether historical accounts of Irish pilgrims and visitors to St Gall can be associated with any of these listed texts and/or extant manuscripts in the collection.

The subsequent chapters are structured around catalogue entries for a select number of manuscripts, usually three in each chapter. Each entry is about a page in length and typically speaks to an individual page or note within the manuscript. For example, the remarks on Codex Sangallensis 225, a compendium volume of diverse materials from the healing arts to hagiography, are used specifically to illustrate the differing methods of calculating the date of Easter (p. 41). On the other hand, Schnoor's entry on the *Penitential of St Finnian*, a sixth-century text preserved in a ninth- and tenth-century manuscript, takes a wider approach. It offers the reader an overview of the text before elaborating on particular details such as the penance for a priest who has committed murder: banishment for ten years with enforced fasting for seven of those years and reparations and service required upon his return (p. 46). The entries are accompanied by an illustration on the facing page — in St Finnian's case, the opening of the penitential. The selections are prefaced by a one-page introduction on the theme of the chapter: 'The Fall of Rome and the Rise of Ireland'; 'Bible and Church'; 'Monastic Rules and Penance'; 'Saints of Ireland and St Gall'; 'The Irish Contribution to Cultivating the Seven Liberal Arts'; 'The Irish Gospels of St Gall and its Family'; 'Irish Influences on Initials Decorated in St Gall'; and finally 'Guests and Teachers from Ireland at the Abbey of St Gall.'

Such brief descriptions and explanatory notes are well suited to a general audience. The authors raise ideas and issues such as *peregrinatio*, the difficulties in accurately calculating the feast of Easter (as mentioned above), and the Irish style of tonsure versus the standard European one, and draw attention throughout to the role played by Ireland in both the early medieval church in Europe and the Carolingian Renaissance (pp. 26, 34, 38, 41, 50 and 67). Mindful of the challenges associated with displaying books (and perhaps the sense of humour described in the foreword), the entries also frequently highlight some of the more eye-catching statements, such as the earliest references to the Loch Ness monster, the saying that Rome was not built in a day (*cum nec*

Roma una die sit condita), the miracle of Magnus and the beer, a description of Ireland as an island 'rich in milk and honey', and the rather more vivid description of a monk returning home rather than maintaining his earthly wandering as akin to 'the dog who returns to his vomit' (pp. 32, 33 51, 55 and 63).

Importantly the exhibition and accompanying catalogue bring these early Irish books to light for the wider European public and, as to be expected, the volume is therefore handsomely illustrated. There are thirty-seven colour full or half page images of the manuscripts throughout, including a beautiful double page spread of the St Mark the Evangelist portrait and *Incipit* from the late eighth-century Irish Gospels of St Gall, and four colour details of initials with ribbon knot ornamentation. There is also one monochrome image of a badly faded portrait of St Columba of Iona which has been digitally enhanced. In fact, the illustrations are given almost equal weight to the text, with nearly one in every two pages consisting of an image. These illustrations are not however numbered or otherwise related to their role within the exhibition, and in some cases multiple images of the same book occur across different chapters, and so from the point of view of the volume as a catalogue it is rather difficult for the reader to form a sense of the nature and scale of the display.

This awkward relationship between the illustrations and the exhibition is paralleled in the relationship of the text to its reader. The exhibition was designed to draw new eyes, so short, sharp, snappy essays are an ideal introduction, but the very brevity of these essays is at times problematic. With few words to spare for explanations, a new reader is expected to be familiar already with the stipulations of the Rule of St Benedict or the writings of Bede, and with technical terms such as 'rustic capitals', 'uncial' and 'half-uncial' (pp. 11, 40, 44 and 55). Likewise, the title, *The Cradle of European Culture: Early Medieval Irish Book Art*, suggests an exhibition dedicated to the arts of the book, and yet the script — the defining factor in the ninth-century librarian's choice to classify the *libri scottice scripti* as distinctive (p. 12) — is largely ignored beyond occasionally identifying it, while the illumination is only considered in two of the eight chapters, and the volume does not consider the actual production of manuscripts or the pigments and materials used at the time.

In some ways this volume falls somewhere between its new reader and the academic reader familiar with early manuscript production and the early medieval world. In the chapter concerning the Irish Gospels of St Gall Dora provides a succinct review of the recent literature on the manuscript and situates the gospel book within a stylistic group originating in the midlands or potentially the north-east of Ireland, based on arguments proposed by Carol Farr (2017). The length of the introductory page does not allow for an engagement with these arguments or an exploration of new ideas but it ends on a hopeful note that research to come will allow for links between Ireland and St Gall to be further established (pp. 74–85). Similarly, the eighth and final essay, curiously (and presumably playfully?) numbered '&', considers the case of Codex Sangallensis 11, written c. 760–80, under the heading 'Was an insular script ever used at the Abbey of St Gall?'. The response briefly refers

to the difficulty in tracing evidence, the presence of an Anglo-Saxon minuscule, 'a few hints of Irish features' in glosses in the manuscript, and a marking thought to be in Ogham script in the lower margin of one of the folia. For the new reader this must seem a peculiar question to pose and a difficult answer to follow without a proper discussion of what an insular script looks like or what characteristics define it as opposed to any other form of script. The author then proceeds to state that 'this sole indication that Ogham was used at the Abbey of St Gall constitutes uncertain evidence, for the impression left in the parchment by this entry is very weak, and it has not yet been definitely deciphered nor its text meaningfully interpreted' (p. 101). The response thus reads as an invitation to further scholarly research.

The team at the abbey library at St Gall are to be commended for their efforts in bringing their rich collection of early Irish manuscripts to the fore through this exhibition and for encouraging continued investigation in the field. Perhaps the catalogue might however have spared a few additional words in order to provide its wider audience with a greater appreciation for the objects themselves, the knowledge they contain, and the cultural heritage they represent.

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