

Rachel Moss, Felicity O'Mahony and Jane Maxwell (eds), *An Insular Odyssey. Manuscript Culture in Early Christian Ireland and Beyond*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017. 336 pp. full colour illustrations. €55.00 (hbk). ISBN 978-1-84682-633-7

Recent years have seen a burgeoning interest in studying medieval manuscript sources not merely as repositories of individual texts, but as complex artefacts upon which multiple disciplinary perspectives can be brought to bear in such a way as to yield new insights into their contents, transmission and wider historical significance. In the specific context of medieval Irish vernacular textual culture, for example, this trend has been well illustrated by 'Codices Hibernenses Eximii' series of conferences and proceedings volumes that began in 2012, and which has sought to shed new light on some of the most valuable late-medieval Irish manuscripts preserved in the collections of the Royal Irish Academy by examining them from the complementary perspectives of their palaeography, codicology, iconography, textual contents and historical transmission. The work that underpins cross-disciplinary initiatives of this kind has been greatly facilitated by the increased availability of digital images of many medieval manuscripts, rendering them far more accessible to both academics and members of the wider public across the globe.

The seventeen contributions to this volume, which focuses instead on some of the most significant early medieval written sources preserved in the archives of Trinity College Dublin, similarly demonstrate the rich rewards that can be reaped from adopting a multifaceted approach to the study of medieval manuscript culture. The collection marks the retirement of Bernard Meehan, keeper of manuscripts at the Trinity College Library between 1983 and 2016, and known for his extensive work on famous codices such as the Book of Kells and the Book of Durrow; his distinguished contribution to the field is recognised in an opening tribute

by his former TCD colleague, Peter Fox (pp. 21-3). In addition, the volume draws substantially upon research undertaken as part of the Early Irish Manuscripts Project, a collaboration between the Conservation Department of the TCD Library and the Department of History of Art and Architecture in the College, which in 2014 secured the necessary funds to conserve, analyse and digitize four major Insular gospel books - the *Codex Usserianus Primus*, the Book of Dimma, the Book of Mulling and the Garland of Howth - in order to enable greater public and scholarly access to some of the earliest written monuments to the beginnings of Christianity in Ireland.

Several chapters in the book deal specifically with these four manuscripts: thus Mark Stansbury examines the palaeographical features of the *Codex Usserianus Primus* (pp. 42-54), while John Gillis and Bernard Meehan consider the codicology and scribal features of the Book of Dimma (pp. 86-113), and Rachel Moss revisits the provenance, contents and iconography of the comparatively little-known TCD MS 56, or the 'Garland of Howth' (pp. 260-82). Other early gospel books in the TCD collections also receive attention, however, as illustrated by Heather Pulliam's discussion of the significance of colour and number in illuminations from the Book of Durrow and other manuscripts (pp. 138-58), as well as Michelle P. Brown's study of references in various Insular manuscripts to named figures within the history of the early Christian church in Ireland and Britain (pp. 24-41). A recurrent theme throughout the volume is the importance of these manuscript sources as testaments to networks of intellectual exchange between Irish, Insular and continental ecclesiastical centres during the early medieval period. This strand is foregrounded in Dáibhí Ó Cróinín's contribution (pp. 55-75), which revisits the question of the origins of the earliest liturgical manuscript fragments preserved in the abbey of Echternach, and argues for their association with the Irish monastic foundation of Rath Melsigi (now Clonmelsh, Co. Carlow).

Similarly, Colleen M. Thomas investigates why the evangelists portrayed in Irish pocket gospel books are depicted wearing shoes, whereas representations from other contemporary Insular and continental manuscripts show them either barefoot or wearing sandals. She draws on textual, iconographic and archaeological evidence to present a convincing case that the Irish manuscript makers ‘rejected the models inherited from the Mediterranean’ and ‘selected footwear for the evangelists that was familiar and demonstrably local’ - a strategy in keeping with other features of the gospel books that reflect their suitability for personal use (pp. 194-212). The long and eventful history of many of the manuscripts discussed, some of which continued to travel around even well into the modern period, is exemplified in Claire Breay’s concluding discussion of the famous Lindisfarne Gospels, now held in the British Library. Her detailed archival work brings into focus the ways in which ‘changes in curatorial focus and broader developments in approaches to public engagement with national treasures’ can provide insight into how attitudes to cultural heritage have shifted over time (pp. 302-20).

Two chapters highlight some of the more technical achievements of the TCD manuscript conservation project. Susie Bioletti and Allyson Smith summarise the findings of their analysis of pigments on the four gospel books that were the main focus of the project, providing interesting insight into the experimental techniques used in analysis of the codices and comparing their results to similar studies of other Insular gospel books (pp. 114-27). The theme of manuscript pigments is also taken up in the following chapter by Paul Mullarkey, who draws on the archaeological evidence of a little-known eighth-century hinge from a tomb-shaped Irish reliquary to argue that the use of decorative pigments by medieval Irish goldsmiths on the one hand, and the techniques and materials employed by contemporary manuscript illuminators on the other, overlapped and informed one another (pp. 128-137).

It is not surprising to find that a number of chapters in the volume are concerned with what is probably the most famous codex held in the Trinity College Library, namely the Book of Kells (TCD MS 58). Denis Casey draws on early Irish legal material in an effort to establish the size of the herd of cows that would be required to produce the vellum in the manuscript, with a view to gaining insight into the value placed on the manuscript by those who were involved in its composition (pp. 76-85). While his conclusions inevitably rest on certain assumptions concerning the precise origin of the codex and the extent to which socio-economic organisation was consistent across the Gaelic world, his discussion as a whole nevertheless offers a nuanced assessment of the complexities involved in the production of early medieval illuminated manuscripts. The striking iconography of the Book of Kells is treated in chapters by William Endres (pp. 213-30) and Felicity O'Mahony (pp. 231-48), while Francis Newton and Robert G. Babcock consider fragments of a Latin gospel book, now preserved in the Geheimes Staatsarchiv in Berlin-Dahlem, that are written in a similar Insular minuscule script and may have derived from a book written in the same scriptorium (pp. 249-59).

A broad view of medieval Irish manuscript culture is taken by Timothy O'Neill (pp. 283-301), who examines the evolution of smaller initials in Irish manuscripts (both Latin and vernacular) between c. 500 and c. 1500. His expert analysis adds a thought-provoking dimension to our understanding of the relationship between members of early medieval Irish ecclesiastical communities and the later learned families who played such a crucial role in preserving the textual tradition of previous generations. In this regard, O'Neill's discussion also calls attention to the possibility that many interesting new findings may yet emerge from comparative analysis of the research produced by the Early Irish

Manuscripts Project and that stemming from the conferences that have formed part of the aforementioned *Codices Hibernenses Eximii* series.

This possibility is also indicated by other chapters in the volume which, although they are not specifically concerned with the contents of the great late-medieval vernacular codices, nevertheless inform our understanding of texts preserved exclusively in those later sources. For example, Carol A. Farr examines the art historical and palaeographical contents of the three single-leaf fragments in St Gallen Codex 1395 that have been attributed to Irish contexts, and suggests that they bear a relationship to several manuscripts produced in the northeast and midlands regions of Ireland (pp. 175-93). Her work thus adds a new facet to previous discussions of the textual contents of some of those fragments, such as the four Old Irish healing charms written on the back of a page that features a portrait of St Matthew, which have often been compared to charms attested in much later Irish-language manuscripts. Intriguing connections between the contents of early Insular gospel books and the vernacular medical traditions of both early and later medieval Ireland also emerge from the chapter by Dominique Barbet-Massin (pp. 159-74), which revisits the circular drawing on the last page of the eighth- or early-ninth century Irish pocket gospel book known as the 'Book of Mulling' (TCD MS 60). The image in question features two concentric circles with crosses and inscriptions in Irish, some of which appear to associate the names of the four evangelists with the cardinal points, and was previously thought to represent a plan of the monastery of St Mullin's with high crosses around it. However, Barbet-Massin suggests that it should instead be understood as 'the visual representation of daily prayers acting as protection, which had to be recited in the morning on rising', noting the fact that the image is juxtaposed on folio 94v of the manuscript with a liturgical morning prayer service that 'may also have been used in special circumstances as protection from the yellow plague, against which St Moling was considered

the saint protector' (p. 162). Further evidence in favour of her argument for the prophylactic function of the image might be gleaned from vernacular healing remedies and charms in later medieval Irish medical manuscripts, most of which have never been published or examined in detail. These often include features reminiscent of those highlighted by Barbet-Massin's study of the circular image in the Book of Mulling, e.g. instructions to perform certain liturgical rituals such reciting the *Pater Noster* while making the sign of the cross at various intervals, or advice to consume medicinal preparations at particular times of day while facing in a specific cardinal direction - a reminder of the profound interconnectedness of spiritual and physical modes of healing in medieval culture.

One particular strength of this book is the very large number of high-quality colour images - over 140 in total - that accompany all of the chapters. Not only do these images greatly facilitate readers' assessment of various arguments put forward by the contributors concerning the palaeographical, codicological or iconographical features of the manuscripts discussed, but they also clearly demonstrate how modern technology has revolutionised the way that scholars, including those who do not have direct or easy access to manuscript sources, can now approach the study of images and texts. A striking example of this is found in Rachel Moss's study of the Garland of Howth (TCD MS 56), where recent digital images of the illuminated pages in the manuscript are contrasted with chromolithographs produced by Margaret Stokes *ca* 1866, the latter of which had for many years offered 'the best impression to be gleaned' of the pages in question. Moss notes that while Stokes's chromolithographs were quite accurate in their detail, 'the gaudy restoration of colour further enhanced the reputation of the manuscript as an oddity, best relegated to the footnotes of an otherwise "golden age" of national art' (p. 260). Thanks to the work of the Early Irish Manuscripts Project, however, we can now

gain a more nuanced perspective on the history of both this manuscript and other important Insular codices.

The editors of this volume are to be congratulated for producing a varied and wide-ranging, but also cohesive and rigorous, collection of essays that pay fitting tribute to the scholarship of Bernard Meehan and the work of the TCD Early Irish Manuscripts project. The book will be of interest to a broad audience of academics specialising in various aspects of early and later medieval Irish manuscript culture, the history of liturgy, missionary activity, and the transmission of ideas between the Insular world and centres of learning on the European continent. In addition, however, it is also a valuable and accessible resource for members of the wider public who wish to explore in more depth some of the most famous manuscript treasures held in the library of Trinity College Dublin.

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