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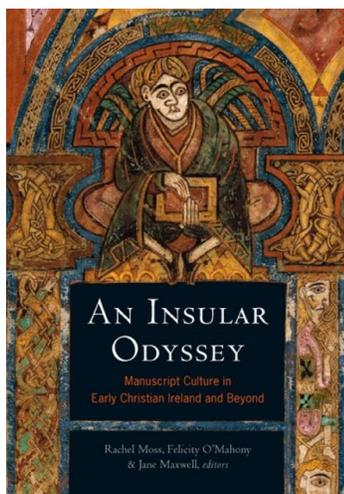
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Book Review: *An Insular Odyssey. Manuscript Culture in Early Christian Ireland and Beyond*. Edited by Rachel Moss, Felicity O'Mahony, and Jane Maxwell (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017). 336 pages, full color illustrations.

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This beautifully produced collection of seventeen essays can be read as serving three purposes. The first two are methodological, and are vital to the continuing study of early medieval manuscripts from Ireland and northern Europe broadly. First, the essays vividly demonstrate the importance of conducting a close and thoughtful inspection of manuscripts, both their material form and the scripts and imagery they contain. Second, the volume encourages scholars to do so on a much wider selection of manuscripts than has been customary. As Carol Farr notes in her essay, art historical studies of this material (including my own) have long favored “the early, the unified, and the spectacular” (193) and while the Books of Durrow and of Kells do again come in for particular attention, those essays are complemented and enriched by others focusing on lesser-known manuscripts such as the Book of Dimma and the Garland of Howth. In the course of this review, I will try to articulate how I see these themes coming together in this volume.

Before highlighting individual contributions, however, I want to note the third purpose of this book, which is fittingly supported by the previous two. Though not stated outwardly (seemingly in keeping with the current aversion to *festschriften* among academic publishers), the volume serves to pay tribute to Bernard Meehan, who served as keeper of manuscripts at Trinity College Library from 1983 to 2016. Best known for important monographs on the Book of Durrow and the Book of Kells, Meehan also worked to foster research on the collection as a whole while also managing the expanding public interest in the more famous manuscripts.

During Meehan's tenure as keeper, the Book of Kells and other later manuscripts were imaged and disseminated digitally to the public, mirroring a welcome trend in the field as a whole. Interestingly, and likely not coincidentally, the spread of digitization has run parallel to a resurgence of interest in the codicology of medieval manuscripts, emphasizing their nature not as a sequence of disembodied images, but as complexly constructed, multimedia objects. Several of the essays demonstrate the richness of such research. Susie Bioletti and Allyson Smith offer a very useful survey of the pigments that have been identified in early medieval Irish manuscripts via X-ray fluorescence and Raman spectroscopy, proving insights into the production process of individual codices and general trends across the region. Denis Casey, in the course of trying to answer the seemingly straightforward question of how many cows were necessary to produce the Book of Kells, provides a short, but productive overview of the organization of agricultural land and labor and the role of monastic institutions in both. And a joint essay by Meehan and John Gillis on the Book of Dimma deftly describes the nature of the book as a composite object that has changed considerably over the centuries. These changes seem to have served both its personal use as a pocket gospel and later its role as a cult object as it was enshrined in the twelfth century. The study is remarkably detailed and rich, and it provides a vivid reminder of the need to think about the

dynamic changes undergone by medieval manuscripts not as aberrations to a perfect original form, yet inherent to their nature.

While codicology has seen a renewal of interest in the midst of the broader “material turn” within the humanities, the allied discipline of paleography is still unfortunately discounted in the general discourse. Several essays in this volume testify to the value of paleography, the most striking of them being an essay by Francis Newton and Robert G. Babcock connecting some tiny fragments preserved as binding waste with the scriptorium that produced the Book of Kells. A model example of how paleography depends on the marriage of careful visual analysis with textual criticism and codicology, the essay struck me as a wonderful case study to share with students wondering how and why they should care about such a seemingly arcane field. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín’s essay, meanwhile, might serve to show students just how sharp paleographical disputes can be, as he enters once more into the spirited debate around the place of Rath Melsigi in early medieval monastic and missionary networks. Ó Cróinín’s discussion exhibits the wide frame of reference necessary for paleography to bear on historical debates, but, unfortunately, occasionally indulges in the common impulse to elide broad localizations of manuscripts into attributions to specific scriptoria. The risks of relying too heavily on paleography as a tool for localization are highlighted by Mark Stansbury’s essay, which emphasizes the need to consider the relationship between genre and script in the course of a discussion of the manuscript known as *Usserianus Primus* and the Springmont Bog tablets. A similar point might be seen in the essay by Timothy O’Neill, which looks at the development of different scripts for small initials across a millennium of Irish manuscript production, ending with an interesting observation about the eventual enshrinement of antiquarian “animal-ribbon” and “knotted wire” initials as the favored style among noble patrons in the later Middle Ages. The capacity of manuscripts to exist somewhat polytemporally—standing within the time they were made while simultaneously harkening back to



Figure 1 St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek Cod. Sang. 1395, p.426. Photo: St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Creative commons

revered exemplars and looking forward to their own eventual enshrinement as such—underlies Rachel Moss’s careful and much-needed discussion of the

Garland of Howth. As Moss unpacks the script, decorative style, and iconography of the manuscript, she builds a convincing case that the book was not produced in the eighth or ninth centuries, as often asserted, but more likely in the eleventh century, though with distinct reference to earlier, perhaps venerable, manuscripts. Similarly, Carol Farr subjects the fragments collected together in St Gallen Codex 1395 (**Fig. 1**) to careful and multidisciplinary art-historical scrutiny and in the process sharpens our understanding of the geographic and ideological affinities that might be discerned among early Irish manuscripts as a whole.

Given how much Bernard Meehan has done to advance our understanding of both the iconography and the programmatic themes of the Book of Kells, it is not surprising that many of the essays in this volume concern themselves with art-historical interpretation. Some essays focus on discrete iconographic elements, such as Colleen Thomas's discussion of the possible meanings associated with the evangelists' shoes, while others take the chance to dive once more down the rabbit-hole of Kells' notoriously idiosyncratic and allusive imagery, as does Felicity O'Mahoney. Both essays reminded me that, much as there is to be gained from large synthetic studies of the material, there is also considerable progress to be made in smaller, more focused analyses. It has long been recognized that, as religious objects, many manuscripts feature decorations that serve to aid and deepen devotional practice, and several of the essays focus on this aspect of their function. Dominique Barbet-Massin revisits the somewhat enigmatic circular drawing at the end of the Book of Mulling, which has been unsatisfactorily described as a kind of site plan for the high crosses at an unidentified monastery. Following Lawrence Nees, Barbet-Massin builds an argument that the drawing has more to do with religious practice than any kind of physical depiction, and presents a convincing argument that the diagram is connected to rituals of protective prayer. Her interpretation gains credence when read in conjunction with William Endres's exploration of the resonances between the writings of John Cassian and the imagery of the Canon Tables in the Book of Kells. Endres's argument is particularly welcome in that it foregrounds both the importance of the Coptic intellectual legacy and also the significance of the Canon Tables within the manuscript, doing both so convincingly that it made me eager to see more work on both topics. Heather Pulliam also considers how the decoration might have enhanced the devotional experience of a manuscript, but her approach is more adventuresome and ambitious than the rest of the volume. Rather than adhering to the logocentric approach that underlies traditional iconography, Pulliam considers how the figural and non-figural decorations of Insular

Gospel Books are carefully constructed to bewilder the observer through their use of ambiguous forms, complex line, and variegated color. There is a prayerful component to this as well, as the devout beholders aspired to lose themselves in the divine just as they might feel themselves lost in the designs. Pulliam's incorporation of numerological interpretation into her reading might be surprising at first, since it seems to signal a return to a more static iconography, but when presented in conjunction with her wonderfully sensitive formalist readings, numerology emerges as complementary mode in which the manuscripts were experienced, rather than simply read.

The experience of books—the ways they were framed and thus defined for their beholders—serves as the subject for two essays that bookend the volume. In a characteristically wide-ranging and rich discussion, Michelle Brown traces different means by which early medieval Christians constructed the sanctity of the codex, particularly through the association of books with particular saints. For anyone interested in how, à la Leah Price, Christian communities did divine things with books in the early medieval British Isles, this essay provides a rich overview. Claire Breay's closing essay provides a somewhat analogous, if more focused, discussion from the modern period. Carefully detailing the exhibition history of the Lindisfarne Gospels, Breay provides a fascinating capsule history of the reception of medieval manuscripts from the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries. Most interesting in this narrative is the gradual process through which the manuscript shifts from being seen as a textual witness of early Christianity in England draped in "barbarous" ornament to the present-day perception of it as an artistic masterpiece that happens also to be a religious book. Another virtue of Breay's history is how it traces the ways that the exhibition practices at the British Museum and later the British Library sometimes ran counter to popular perceptions of the book, while amplifying them other times.

Taken together, the essays in this volume can be seen not only as a fitting tribute to Bernard Meehan but also as a snapshot of the state of manuscript studies in the

twenty-first century, presenting manuscripts as complex textual, artistic, material, and social objects. Most of the essays are, to be sure, resolutely traditionalist, reflecting an overall tendency in early medieval studies to resist methodological approaches that carry the whiff of scholarly fashion. But in several cases this reliance on tried-and-true methods is a function of the considerable primary research that still needs to be done on the material, and their continuing usefulness is borne out by the insights provided by many of the essays. The careful positivism of Newton and Babcock's essay has given us the gift of recognizing a precious scrap from the scriptorium of the Book of Kells, while Pulliam's speculative readings highlight how looking imaginatively will enrich our understanding of these works. This volume convincingly reminds us that the field is all the richer when it makes room for many approaches. 🐼