



## **Terms and Conditions of Use of Digitised Theses from Trinity College Library Dublin**

### **Copyright statement**

All material supplied by Trinity College Library is protected by copyright (under the Copyright and Related Rights Act, 2000 as amended) and other relevant Intellectual Property Rights. By accessing and using a Digitised Thesis from Trinity College Library you acknowledge that all Intellectual Property Rights in any Works supplied are the sole and exclusive property of the copyright and/or other IPR holder. Specific copyright holders may not be explicitly identified. Use of materials from other sources within a thesis should not be construed as a claim over them.

A non-exclusive, non-transferable licence is hereby granted to those using or reproducing, in whole or in part, the material for valid purposes, providing the copyright owners are acknowledged using the normal conventions. Where specific permission to use material is required, this is identified and such permission must be sought from the copyright holder or agency cited.

### **Liability statement**

By using a Digitised Thesis, I accept that Trinity College Dublin bears no legal responsibility for the accuracy, legality or comprehensiveness of materials contained within the thesis, and that Trinity College Dublin accepts no liability for indirect, consequential, or incidental, damages or losses arising from use of the thesis for whatever reason. Information located in a thesis may be subject to specific use constraints, details of which may not be explicitly described. It is the responsibility of potential and actual users to be aware of such constraints and to abide by them. By making use of material from a digitised thesis, you accept these copyright and disclaimer provisions. Where it is brought to the attention of Trinity College Library that there may be a breach of copyright or other restraint, it is the policy to withdraw or take down access to a thesis while the issue is being resolved.

### **Access Agreement**

By using a Digitised Thesis from Trinity College Library you are bound by the following Terms & Conditions. Please read them carefully.

I have read and I understand the following statement: All material supplied via a Digitised Thesis from Trinity College Library is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of a thesis is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or for educational purposes in electronic or print form providing the copyright owners are acknowledged using the normal conventions. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone. This copy has been supplied on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

# **IRISH BOOK SHRINES: A REASSESSMENT**

## **VOLUME I (A)**

By

Paul Anthony Mullarkey

PAUL ANTHONY MULLARKEY

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Ph.D

**TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN**  
**DEPARTMENT OF THE HISTORY OF ART**

April 2000





THESIS  
5620.1



N

This thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at any other university. It is entirely the candidate's own work.  
The Library may lend or copy the thesis upon request.

**To Linda**

## SUMMARY

The aim of this thesis is to attempt to determine the dates and sequence of the constructional phases of the Irish book shrines. There are eight known book shrines from Ireland, and in order of chronology they are: the Lough Kinale book shrine, the Soisceál Molaisse, the Shrine of the Stowe Missal, the Shrine of the Cathach, the Misach, the Shrine of the Book of Dimma, the Shrine of the Book of Moling and St Caillin's book shrine. The historical references to the lost book shrines of Durrow and Armagh, and the Kells cover/shrine have also been assessed. Due to inadequate publication and the complex multi-period additions to the shrines, the sequences and dates of the constructional phases have been misinterpreted in the past. Recent research on the primary inscriptions on the Shrine of the Stowe Missal and the Soisceál Molaisse have necessitated narrowing the dates in which these shrines were constructed. However little research has been carried out on the late medieval phases of the shrines and this thesis has provided a full dating sequence for all phases of the shrines.

The first part of this thesis has traced the development of Coptic, Early Christian, Byzantine, Carolingian and Ottonian, Anglo-Saxon and Irish book covers. The systematic criteria used to survey the material have been the historical sources, depictions in various media and surviving examples. The role of Continental book boxes as possible shrines for manuscripts has been evaluated, and it has been proposed that the origin of the Irish book shrines derives from the liturgical rites of Early Christian Rome. The second part, and core, of the thesis is a comprehensive investigation and analysis of four eleventh-century book shrines. These are the Soisceál Molaisse, the Shrine of the Stowe Missal, the Shrine of the Cathach and the Misach. The shrines were recorded in detail by measurement, sketches and photography, with particular attention being paid to evidence for lost components, differential patination, wear patterns and the distribution of nail/rivet holes. Comprehensive descriptions of the four shrines are included as an appendix to the thesis. A full photographic record of all eight book shrines, along with relevant comparable material, has been included. Each of the four book shrines were assessed under the following headings: History, Previous Accounts, Inscriptions, Iconography, Stylistic Analysis and Discussion. The third part of the thesis is an assessment of the information obtained from the investigation of the four book shrines. From this information, technological and archaeological features of the structure and decoration of the shrines have been evaluated: binding strips, wooden cores, strap fittings



and openwork plates. These features on the remainder of the book shrines were incorporated into the research, and more general topics were considered and discussed, particularly the accessibility to the contents of the shrines, factors influencing the enshrinement of books, the social and ritual uses of book shrines and the role of the goldsmith and patron in the commissioning and manufacture of the shrines.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### VOLUME I

LIST OF PLATES	x
LIST OF FIGURES	xvi
LIST OF TABLES	xvii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT	xviii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xix
INTRODUCTION	1
Background and scope of the thesis	1
Methodology	3
Sources	4
Previous Research	4
Structure of the Thesis	7
CHAPTER ONE: THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF BOOK SHRINES IN MEDIEVAL IRELAND	9
The evolution of writing materials	9
The introduction of book covers	12
Historical references	13
Depictions of book covers	15
Surviving book covers	16
Coptic book covers	17
Late Antique, Early Christian and Byzantine book covers	17
Carolingian and Ottonian book covers	19
Irish and Anglo-Saxon book covers	22
The role of the book in early medieval Ireland	22
Historical references	22
Depictions of book covers in Insular art	27
Surviving book covers	34
Anglo-Saxon covers	34
Irish Early Medieval book covers	35
Mounts from Insular and Anglo-Saxon book covers	38
Relationships between carpet pages and book covers	43
The origin of book shrines	46
Liturgical sources	46
Book boxes in Western Europe	48
Literary references	48
Depictions of book boxes	49
Surviving book boxes	49
The book as a reliquary	52

<b>Irish book shrines</b>	53
Hagiographical and historical source	54
Depictions of book shrines	57
Evidence of book shrines from observations of manuscripts	63
Evidence of known book shrines from historical sources	63
Mounts from book shrines	73
<b>Evidence for book shrines in Scotland and Wales</b>	76
 <b>CHAPTER TWO: THE SOISCEÁL MOLAISSÉ</b>	78
History	78
Previous Accounts	81
The inscriptions	84
Iconography	86
Front	86
Short side B	93
Stylistic Analysis	95
Front	95
Short sides A and B	99
Ecclesiastical figure	99
Strap hinge	100
Zoomorphic ornament	107
Base	121
Summary	128
Discussion	129
 <b>CHAPTER THREE: THE SHRINE OF THE STOWE MISSAL</b>	155
History	155
Previous Accounts	157
The inscriptions	159
Iconography	166
Short sides A and B	166
Long side A	170
Long side B	177
Base	184
Front	184
Stylistic Analysis	186
Short side A	186
Short side B	188
Long side A	188
Long side B	191
Base	196
Front	197
Summary	200
Discussion	201
 <b>CHAPTER FOUR: THE SHRINE OF THE CATHACH</b>	215
History	215
The military career of Daniel O'Donel	220



Re-discovery	221
Betham's interventions	222
The Mayo Ordnance Survey letters	224
<b>Previous Accounts</b>	227
<b>The inscription</b>	230
<b>Iconography</b>	235
<b>Stylistic Analysis</b>	244
Short sides	244
Long sides	257
Base	265
Late Medieval phase	265
Heraldic beasts	269
Foliate motifs	270
Engraved figures	271
Acanthus leaves	273
Trefoil leaves	273
Contoured knotwork	274
<b>Discussion</b>	275
 <b>CHAPTER FIVE: THE MISACH</b>	 292
History	292
Previous accounts	295
The inscription	299
Iconography	300
Stylistic Analysis	306
Base	306
Short sides	306
Beast-head escutcheons	309
Long sides	310
Summary	312
Late medieval phase	313
Die-stamped plates	313
Settings	323
Crucifix figure	324
Binding strips	324
Summary	325
<b>Discussion</b>	327
 <b>CHAPTER SIX: ASSESSMENT OF THE EVIDENCE</b>	 343
Constructional features	343
Accessibility	354
The role of the goldsmiths	357
Iconography	368
Factors influencing the enshrinement of books	368
Social and ritual uses of book shrines	371
 <b>CONCLUSIONS</b>	 374

## VOLUME II



APPENDIX ONE: DESCRIPTION OF THE BOOK SHRINES.....	1
The Soisceál Molaisse.....	1
Construction.....	1
Description.....	2
Front.....	2
Short Side A.....	10
Short Side B.....	14
Long Side.....	21
Base.....	25
The Shrine of the Stowe Missal.....	30
Construction.....	30
Description.....	31
Detached base.....	31
Short Side A.....	34
Short Side B.....	36
Long Side A.....	38
Long Side B.....	41
Front.....	44
The Shrine of the Cathach.....	49
Construction.....	49
Description.....	49
Short Side A.....	49
Short Side B.....	52
Long Side A.....	55
Long Side B.....	60
Base.....	65
Front.....	66
The Misach.....	80
Construction.....	80
Description.....	80
Short Side A.....	80
Short Side B.....	83
Long sides.....	87
Base.....	88
Front.....	89
APPENDIX TWO: OVERALL DIMENSIONS OF THE BOOK SHRINES.....	102
APPENDIX THREE: LIST OF TECHNIQUES AND MATERIALS PRESENT ON THE SHRINES.....	103
The Lough Kinale Shrine.....	103
The Soisceál Molaisse.....	103
The Shrine of the Stowe Missal.....	104
The Shrine of the Cathach.....	105
The Misach.....	106

The Shrine of the Book of Dimma	.....106
The Shrine of the Book of Moling	.....107
St Caillin's Shrine	.....107
APPENDIX FOUR: GLOSSARY OF TERMS	.....108
BIBLIOGRAPHY	.....112

VOLUME III

PLATES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

VOLUME III

FIGURES AND RADIOGRAPHS

## LIST OF PLATES

- Plate 1.a:** Codex Amiatinus, f.Vr. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana MS 1 (after Skubiszewski 1995). **b:** Drawing of bindings displayed in f.Vr, Codex Amiatinus (after Haseloff 1978).
- Plate 2.a:** Portrait of St John the Evangelist, f.291v, Book of Kells, TCD MS 58. **b:** Detail of f.200r, depicting warrior, Book of Kells, TCD MS 58.
- Plate 3.a:** Icon of Christ Pantocrator, Monastery of St Catherine, Egypt (after Weitzman 1978). **b:** Coptic book binding from Hamuli, Fayum, Egypt. Cairo, Coptic Museum, Nag Hammadi Codex II (after Needham 1979).
- Plate 4:** Covers from the Gospel Book of Theodelinda, Monza, Cathedral Treasury (after Hubert et. al 1969).
- Plate 5:** Lindau Gospels, upper cover, New York, Pierpont-Morgan Library, M1 (after Lasko 1994).
- Plate 6:** Lindau Gospels, lower cover, New York, Pierpont-Morgan Library, M1 (after Lasko 1994).
- Plate 7.a:** Cover of the Codex Aureus of St Emmeram, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (after Beckwith 1989). **b:** Cover of gospel book of the Metz school, Paris, Bib. Nat. Ms Lat. 9838 (after Lasko 1994).
- Plate 8:** Cover of gospels (cod. 139) by Roger of Helmarshausen, Cathedral Treasury, Trier.
- Plate 9:** Depictions of ornamental book covers. **a:** Codex Millenarius, f.18r (Kremsmunster, Stiftsbibliothek, Cim.1). **b:** Codex Millenarius, f.110 (Kremsmunster, Stiftsbibliothek, Cim.1). **c:** Book of MacDurnan, f.115v (London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 1370). **d:** Codex Aureus, f.9v (Stockholm, Royal Library, MS A.135). **e:** Trier Gospels, f.1v (Domschatz Codex 61). **f:** Sherbourne Pontifical, ff.15b (Paris, Bib. Nat., Ms lat.943). **g:** Detail of cross base, Auckland St Andrew, Durham. **h:** Detail of sarcophagus, Caistor, Northamptonshire.
- Plate 10.a:** Covers of the Stonyhurst Gospels of St John, London, BL, Loan MS 74 (after Henderson 1987). **b:** Front cover of the Cadmug Gospels (*Codex Bonifatianus* III), Fulda, Landesbibliothek (after Haseloff 1981).
- Plate 11:** Covers of the Victor Codex (*Codex Bonifatianus* I), Fulda, Landesbibliothek, (after Wilson 1961).
- Plate 12.a:** Openwork mount from Whitby Abbey, Yorkshire (BM). **b:** Book mount, unprovenanced, Bonn, Landesmuseum (after Wilson 1964).



- Plate 13.a:** Openwork mount, Breakey Lough, Co Meath (NMI). **b:** Cross, copper alloy, Cloyne, Co Cork (NMI).
- Plate 14:** Carpet Page, f.94v, Lindisfarne Gospels, London, BL, Cotton MS Nero D.IV (after Backhouse 1981).
- Plate 15.a:** Drawing of cast mount from the Phoenix Park, Dublin (after Hall 1974). **b:** Detail of f.94v, Lindisfarne Gospels (London, BL, Cotton MS Nero D.IV). **c:** Openwork mount from the Phoenix Park, Dublin (NMI). **d:** Cast mount from the Phoenix Park, Dublin (BM).
- Plate 16.a:** Front cover of book box, monastery of St Fridolin, Sackingen, Germany, (after Steenbock 1965). **b:** Cover of book box from the Uta codex, Munich Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. lat.13 601 (after Steenbock 1965).
- Plate 17:** Cover of book box from Seitz, Germany, National Museum, Nuremburg, Germany (after Steenbock 1965).
- Plate 18:** Pair of book covers, Morienvall, Noyon Cathedral Treasury (after Steenbock 1965).
- Plate 19.a:** Detail of east face of high cross, Kilfenora, Co Clare (after Harbison 1992). **b:** Figure of an angel, copper alloy, Rise farm, Oppdal, Norway (after Youngs 1989).
- Plate 20.a:** St Calixtus, north transept portal, Rheims cathedral (after Sauerlander 1972). **b:** Lismore crosier, detail of ferrule (NMI).
- Plate 21.a:** Gilt-copper alloy boss, Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly (NMI). **b:** Side view of book box from Seitz, Germany; National Museum, Nuremburg, Germany (after Kahsnitz 1980).
- Plate 22.a:** Copper alloy mount, Skansar, Norway. **b:** Copper alloy mount, Hofstad, Norway (after Wamers 1985).
- Plate 23:** Soisceál Molaisse, front, photograph taken prior to 1868.
- Plate 24:** Soisceál Molaisse, front.
- Plate 25:** Soisceál Molaisse, short side A.
- Plate 26:** Soisceál Molaisse, short side B.
- Plate 27:** Soisceál Molaisse, long side.
- Plate 28:** Soisceál Molaisse, base.
- Plate 29:** Soisceál Molaisse. **a:** Detail of hinge on escutcheon, short side B. **b:** side view of beast head on escutcheon, short side B.
- Plate 30:** Soisceál Molaisse, **a:** Detail of tool-marks on base. **b:** Filigree panel, front.



- Plate 31:** Shrine of the Stowe Missal, base.
- Plate 32:** Shrine of the Stowe Missal. **a:** Wood on reverse of base. **b:** Interior of shrine.
- Plate 33:** Shrine of the Stowe Missal. **a:** Short side A. **b:** Short side B.
- Plate 34:** Shrine of the Stowe Missal. **a:** Long side A. **b:** Long side B. **c:** panel 2, long side A.
- Plate 35:** Shrine of the Stowe Missal. **a:** Panel 2, Short side A. **b:** Panel 2, Short side B.
- Plate 36:** Shrine of the Stowe Missal. **a:** Detail of incised lines, panel 1, long side A. **b:** Panel 1, long side B.
- Plate 37:** Shrine of the Stowe Missal, front.
- Plate 38:** Shrine of the Cathach, front.
- Plate 39:** Shrine of the Cathach, base.
- Plate 40:** **a:** Shrine of the Cathach, interior of shrine. **b:** wood on reverse of front.
- Plate 41:** Shrine of the Cathach, short side A.
- Plate 42:** Shrine of the Cathach, short side B.
- Plate 43:** Shrine of the Cathach. **a:** Detail of short side A. **b:** Detail of short side B.
- Plate 44:** Shrine of the Cathach, long side A.
- Plate 45:** Shrine of the Cathach, long side B.
- Plate 46:** Shrine of the Cathach, detail of heraldic beasts on front.
- Plate 47:** The Misach, front.
- Plate 48:** The Misach, base.
- Plate 49:** The Misach. **a:** Short side A. **b:** Short side B.
- Plate 50:** The Misach. **a:** Long side A. **b:** Long side B.
- Plate 51:** The Misach. **a:** Beast-head on short side A. **b:** Beast-head on short side B and detail of setting no. 5.
- Plate 52:** The Misach, front. **a:** Detail of setting no. 1. **b:** Detail of setting no. 3.
- Plate 53:** Book shrine, Lough Kinale, Co Longford. **a:** Front. **b:** Perspective reconstruction of shrine.

**Plate 54:** Book shrine, Lough Kinale, Co Longford. **a:** Side panel 1 (after conservation).  
**b:** Side panel 2 (prior to conservation).

**Plate 55:** Book shrine, Lough Kinale, Co Longford. **a:** End panel 2 (after conservation).  
**b:** Strap attachments (prior to conservation).

**Plate 56:** Book shrine, Lough Kinale, Co Longford. **a:** Corner pillars. **b:** Binding strips. **c:** Base plate (all components prior to conservation).

**Plate 57:** Shrine of the Book of Dimma, front (TCD Library).

**Plate 58:** Shrine of the Book of Dimma, reverse.

**Plate 59:** Shrine of the Book of Dimma. **a-b:** Long sides. **c:** Short side.

**Plate 60:** Shrine of the Book of Moling. **a:** Front. **b:** Reverse of front plate.

**Plate 61:** Shrine of the Book of Moling. **a:** Interior of shrine. **b:** View of base.

**Plate 62:** St Caillin's Shrine, front (Diocesan Museum, St Mel's cathedral, Longford).

**Plate 63:** St Caillin's Shrine, base.

**Plate 64:** St Caillin's Shrine. **a-b:** Short sides.

**Plate 65:** St Caillin's Shrine. **a-b:** Long sides.

**Plate 66:** St Caillin's Shrine, front. **a:** Detail of ecclesiastics. **b:** Detail of crucifix.

**Plate 67:** Domhnach Airgid Shrine, front (NMI).

**Plate 68:** Domhnach Airgid Shrine, base.

**Plate 69:** Domhnach Airgid Shrine. **a:** Long side A. **b:** Long side A with late-medieval additions removed.

**Plate 70:** Domhnach Airgid Shrine. **a:** Long side B. **b:** Short side A.

**Plate 71:** Shrine of St Patrick's Tooth, front (NMI).

**Plate 72:** Shrine of St Patrick's Tooth, reverse.

**Plate 73:** St Manachán's Shrine, front (Boher church, Co Offaly).

**Plate 74:** Reliquary known as the Breac Maedhóg. **a:** Front. **b:** Side panel showing harper (NMI).

**Plate 75:** Reliquary known as the Breac Maedhóg. **a-b:** Details of ecclesiastics on front.

**Plate 76:** **a:** House-shaped shrine, Lough Erne, Co Fermanagh (NMI). **b:** Shrine of St Lachtin's Arm (NMI). **c:** The Alfred Jewel, North Petherton, Somerset, Ashmolean



Museum (after Webster and Backhouse 1991).

**Plate 77:** Corp Naomh shrine, front (NMI).

**Plate 78:** Corp Naomh shrine, reverse (NMI).

**Plate 79:** Bell shrine crest, River Bann (NMI). **a:** Front. **b:** Reverse.

**Plate 80:** Shrine of St Patrick's Bell, front (NMI).

**Plate 81:** Shrine of St Patrick's Bell. **a:** Side panel. **b:** Reverse.

**Plate 82.a:** Shrine of St Patrick's Bell, base plate. **b:** Bell shrine crest, Killua Castle Collection (NMI).

**Plate 83:** Bearnán Conaill bell shrine, Inishkeel, Co Donegal (BM). **a:** Front. **b:** Reverse.

**Plate 84:** Bearnán Conaill bell shrine, Inishkeel, Co Donegal. **a-b:** Sides.

**Plate 85:** Clogán Óir bell shrine (NMI). **a:** Front. **b:** Side panel

**Plate 86:** Inisfallen Crosier (NMI). **a:** Composite photograph from the nineteenth century. **b:** Collar knop.

**Plate 87:** Inisfallen Crosier. **a:** Detail of crook. **b:** Ferrule.

**Plate 88.a:** Inisfallen Crosier, detail of knop 2 showing animal ornament. **b:** Detail of purse mount, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, England (BM).

**Plate 89:** British Museum Crosier, collar knop (after MacDermott 1955).

**Plate 90:** British Museum Crosier, **a:** Animal ornament from knop 1. **b:** Upper binding strip (after MacDermott 1955).

**Plate 91.a:** Clonmacnoise Crosier, crook and upper shaft (NMI). **b:** Durrow crosier, detail of crook showing beast-head (NMI).

**Plate 92.a:** Lismore Crosier, crook and collar knop (NMI). **b:** Crucifixion plaque, Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly (NMI).

**Plate 93.a:** Plaque from a ?book cover, Holycross, Co Tipperary (NMI). **b:** Cross of Cong, detail of basal knop (NMI).

**Plate 94:** Cross of Clogher (Monaghan County Museum). **a:** Front. **b:** Sides.

**Plate 95:** Processional cross, Lislaughtlin, Co Kerry (NMI).

**Plate 96.a:** Brooch-pin, copper alloy, Kilmainham-Islandbridge, Dublin (NMI). **b:** Pendant brooch, Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly (lost). **c:** Conical mount, copper alloy inlaid with red enamel, Fishamble St, Dublin (NMI E172:2798).

- Plate 97:** Buckle, copper alloy, Bishop's Lough, near Castlepollard, Co Westmeath (NMI E499:463). **a:** Front. **b:** Detail of front. **c:** Reverse.
- Plate 98:** Bone motif-pieces, CCP, Dublin. **a:** E122:16060. **b:** Detail of E122:6566. **c:** Detail of E122:18115 (NMI).
- Plate 99.a:** Bone motif-piece, Shandon, Dungarvan, Co Waterford (NMI).  
**b:** Openwork plaques from Dublin excavations: upper left, Fishamble St (E148:1345); upper right, CCP (E122:394); lower left, High St (E71: 4134); lower right, High St (E71:5113).
- Plate 100.a:** Pilgrim's badge, High St, Dublin (NMI E71:2888). **b:** Seal matrix, Monastery of the Holy Trinity, Tuam (NMI).
- Plate 101.a:** Arthur Cross, front, detail of shaft (Hunt Museum; after Hunt 1955).  
**b:** Ivory statuette of the Madonna and Child, Saint-Chapelle, Paris (after Gaborit-Chopin 1978).
- Plate 102:** Evangelist portraits, Book of Deer, Cambridge, University Library, MS LI.6.32. **a:** Mark, f.16v, **b:** Luke, f.29v.
- Plate 103.a:** Symbols of the four evangelists, f.1v, Book of MacDurnan, London, Lambeth Palace Lib., MS 1370 (after Henry 1967). **b:** The Second Coming, f.2a, Turin Gospel fragments, Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale, Cod. O.iv.20 (after Henry 1967).
- Plate 104:** Southampton Psalter, Cambridge, St John's College, MS C.9. **a:** David and the Lion, f.4v. **b:** Beginning of the Second Fifty f.39r (after Henry 1967).
- Plate 105:** Two initials from the *Liber Hymnorum*, TCD MS. E.4.2. **a:** 6r. **b:** 5r.
- Plate 106.a:** Crucifixion scene, f.69, epistles of St Paul, Würzburg, Univesitatsbibliothek Cod. M.p.th. (after Alexander 1978). **b:** 'Doorty' cross, Kilfenora, Co Clare, west face (after Harbison 1992).
- Plate 107.a:** Muiredach's Cross, Monasterboice, Co Louth, west face. **b:** High cross, Duleek, Co Meath, east face (after Harbison 1992).
- Plate 108.a:** Effigial slab, St Brigit's Cathedral, Kildare. **b:** Effigial slab, Newtown Jerpoint, Co Kilkenny (after Hunt 1974).
- Plate 109:** St Canice's Cathedral, Kilkenny. Detail of West doorway showing censing angels.
- Plate 110.a:** Cross-slab, Eassie, Forfarshire, Scotland (after Ritchie 1989). **b:** Detail of front of St Manachan's Shrine showing figures.



## LIST OF FIGURES

**Figure 1:** Soisceál Molaisse, front.

**Figure 2:** Soisceál Molaisse, Short Side A.

**Figure 3:** Soisceál Molaisse, Short Side B.

**Figure 4:** Soisceál Molaisse, Long Side.

**Figure 5:** Soisceál Molaisse, diagram of decorated base plate.

**Figure 6:** Shrine of the Stowe Missal, base.

**Figure 7:** Shrine of the Stowe Missal, Short Sides A and B.

**Figure 8:** Shrine of the Stowe Missal, Long Sides A and B.

**Figure 9:** Shrine of the Stowe Missal, front.

**Figure 10:** Shrine of the Cathach, Short Sides A and B.

**Figure 11:** Shrine of the Cathach, Long Sides A and B.

**Figure 12:** Shrine of the Cathach, front.

**Figure 13:** The Misach, front.

**Figure 14:** Soisceál Molaisse, animal ornament, Types 1-2.

**Figure 15:** Soisceál Molaisse, animal ornament, Types 3-4.

**Figure 16:** Soisceál Molaisse, radiograph of Long Side.

**Figure 17:** Shrine of the Stowe Missal. **a.**Diagram of Short Side B. **b.**Cross-section of base. **c.**Restored inscription on base plate (after Ó Riain 1991a).

**Figure 18:** Shrine of the Cathach. Radiograph of SSA with sketch of zoomorphic ornament.

**Figure 19:** Shrine of the Cathach. Radiograph of SSB with sketch of zoomorphic ornament.

**Figure 20:** Shrine of the Cathach. Radiograph of front.

**Figure 21.a-c:** The Misach, sketch of zoomorphic ornament on the sides.

**Figure 22:** Motif-pieces, Christ Church Place, Dublin. **a.**E122:323 (after O'Meadhra 1979). **b.**E122:6567.

**Figure 23:** Motif-pieces, Christ Church Place, Dublin. **a.**E122:8760 (after O'Meadhra 1979). **b.**E122:16264.

**Figure 24:** Motif-pieces. **a.**High Street, Dublin, E71:708 (after O'Meadhra 1979). **b.**Fishamble Street III, Dublin, E190:148.

**Figure 25.a.** Strap-end, Christ Church Place, Dublin, E122:17157. **b.**Strap-end, Fishamble Street III, Dublin, E190:7045. **c.**Decorated mount, Christ Church Place, Dublin, E122:5853.

**Figure 26.a.** Clonmacnoise crozier, drawing of animal ornament on crook. **b.**Cross-slab, Kirriemuir, Forfarshire, Scotland (after Allen and Anderson 1903).

### LIST OF TABLES

<b>TABLE 1: Stylistic parallels for the Shrine of the Cathach</b>	.....263
<b>TABLE 2: Constructional features of the book shrines</b>	.....344

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT

AP:	Abstract Panel
AFP:	Abstract Filigree Panel
Bib. Nat:	Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
BL:	British Library
BM:	British Museum
CCP:	Christ Church Place
GO:	Geneological Office
LS:	Long Side
NLI:	National Library of Ireland
NMI:	National Museum of Ireland
RIA:	Royal Irish Academy
SS:	Short Side
TCD:	Trinity College Dublin
UCD:	University College Dublin
ZFP:	Zoomorphic Filigree Panel
ZP:	Zoomorphic Panel



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Roger Stalley for accepting me as a post-graduate student and for his guidance, encouragement, endless patience and constructive criticism. I am indebted to the Director of the National Museum, Dr P.F. Wallace, for his motivation and support, for putting the resources of the museum at my disposal, and for allowing me to refer to and illustrate unpublished material from his excavations. Eamonn P. Kelly, Keeper of Irish Antiquities, has encouraged me throughout my years of study, allowed me to refer to unpublished material in the Irish Antiquities Division and provided valuable discussion on the Lough Kinale Shrine. I am particularly grateful to Raghnaill Ó Floinn for sharing his expert and extensive knowledge on relics and shrines, his comments and suggestions on drafts of the Cathach and Misach chapters and his translation of German and Irish texts. Mary Cahill, Andy Halpin, Nessa O Connor, Margaret Lannin and former colleague Adrian Kennedy of the Irish Antiquities Division have also provided encouragement and assistance. I would also like to thank other colleagues in the National Museum: John Murray, graphic artist, for his expert guidance, good humour and patience in composing and formatting the graphics and figures. Valerie Dowling, senior photographer and David Monaghan, assistant photographer, for the photography and printing. Rolly Read, Head of Conservation, for granting me the time to complete the thesis and for taking the radiographs. Clodagh Doyle for her moral support, advice and assistance. Many thanks are also due to Rosaline Murphy, Michael Heffernan and Gerry Hurley.

I am grateful Dr Ruth Johnson, curator of Dublinia, for her encouragement, assistance with the layout of the thesis and for allowing me to cite freely from her unpublished thesis. Special thanks are due to Dr Bernard Meehan, Keeper of Manuscripts, Trinity College, for stimulating discussion on all aspects of book shrines and for allowing me access to the Shrine of the Book of Dimma. William O' Sullivan, former Keeper of Manuscripts, Trinity College, who kindly shared his expertise on manuscripts and shrines and provided me with some of his unpublished notes. Anthony Cains, conservator, Trinity College Library, for discussion on the decoration and structure of early book bindings and for permission to refer to his unpublished drawings of the covers for the Book of Armagh. Cormac Bourke, Department of Antiquities, Ulster Museum, for access to the material from the Shanmullagh hoard and valuable constructive criticism. My thanks also go to Dr Niamh

Aideen Ireland, National Archives, for her assistance in tracing unpublished antiquarian correspondence. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Dr Michael Ryan, Director of the Chester Beatty Library and former Keeper of Irish Antiquities, who recognised my interests in early medieval art, arranged my introduction to Roger Stalley and encouraged my efforts throughout the years.

Last but not least my family including my mother, for her encouragement and financial support and my dear wife Linda for typing the first draft of this thesis and, more importantly, for her patience, support and many sacrifices during my years of studying.

### **PHOTOGRAPHIC ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The unattributed photographs in the plates are courtesy of the following institutions: The National Museum of Ireland, plates 13, 15.c, 20.b, 21.a, 23-75, 76.a-b, 77-82, 85-88.a, 91-100; The British Museum, plates 12.a, 15.d, 83-4, 88.b; The Board of Trinity College, Dublin, plates 2, 105, 109. Plates 13.a, 29-30, 32, 34.c, 35-36, 40, 43, 46, 51-52, 54.a, 96.c, 97-98, 99.b are by the author.

Figures 22.b, 23.b, 24.b, 25.a-b are by John Murray; Figure 26.a by Rosaline Murphy, all courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland



## INTRODUCTION

### **Background and aims of the thesis**

The writer has worked as an archaeological conservator in the Irish Antiquities Division of the National Museum of Ireland for the past eighteen years, specialising in the conservation of metals. When the Lough Kinale Book Shrine was acquired in 1986 the writer was selected to undertake the conservation of the artefact.<sup>1</sup> During the preliminary description and investigation of the shrine, the other book shrines in the NMI were examined for comparative structural, technical and stylistic features. However due to the complex multi-period construction and inadequate publications of the shrines, it was not possible to answer these questions and determine the individual phases.<sup>2</sup> At this time the writer was interested in pursuing a part-time degree in archaeology but was persuaded, by the then Keeper of Irish Antiquities, Dr Michael Ryan, to undertake research for an M.Litt thesis in the Department of the History of Art, Trinity College, Dublin, under the supervision of Prof. Roger Stalley. As a result of the writer's experience with the conservation and investigation of the Lough Kinale Book Shrine, it was suggested that an aspect of book shrines be considered, and to feature a technical and/or conservation element.

Originally the scope of the thesis was to provide a complete catalogue of all the Irish book shrines, commencing with the examples housed in the NMI. The principal aim was to determine the date and sequence of the individual phases and, in addition, to address the problems identified by scholars, principally the lack of full publication of major artefacts and the limited research into Irish ecclesiastical metalwork of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.<sup>3</sup> Due to the comprehensive detailed description and analysis required, and the wide date range (c.800 to 1536 AD) of the book shrines, it was decided to restrict the thesis to a detailed investigation of the four Irish eleventh-century book shrines in the NMI, and to use the evidence to examine and compare the remainder of the book shrines. After three years part-time research, and on consultation with the writer's supervisor, the format, structure and

---

<sup>1</sup> Kelly, E.P., 1991, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> While certain book shrines were published in some detail in the earlier part of this century, more recent studies have been limited to exhibition catalogues and conference proceedings. MacDermott published an admirable account of the British Museum, St Mel's and St Dymphna's crosiers (1955, 1957) which, although based on style, attempted to resolve the various phases of ornament.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan 1987b, 66; Edwards 1990a, 145. However Ó Floinn has undertaken a number of studies on Irish metalwork of the eleventh and twelfth centuries (1987a, 1987b, 1994, 1997b).



research objectives of the thesis was deemed to be worthy of progression to the Ph.D register.

There are eight known book shrines from Ireland, and in order of chronology they are: the Lough Kinale Shrine, the Soisceál Molaisse, the Shrine of the Stowe Missal, the Shrine of the Cathach, the Misach, the Shrine of the Book of Dimma, the Shrine of the Book of Moling and St Caillin's book shrine. The historical references to the lost book shrines of Durrow and Armagh, and the Kells cover/shrine will also be examined. In addition a number of mountings and fragments from possible book shrines will be assessed.

The Domhnach Airgid has been described as a book shrine by some writers and a reliquary by others.<sup>4</sup> Given the uncertainty regarding its function, it has been excluded from this thesis. It does not appear to have been made to accommodate a manuscript but as a container for miscellaneous fragmentary relics. A recent study of the Domhnach has proposed that the primary decorated plates were originally components of a house-shaped shrine of eighth-century date.<sup>5</sup> However it will be referred to in detail for comparative purposes. The Lough Kinale shrine has been published by E.P.Kelly and the present author has intimate knowledge of the shrine through ongoing conservation work.<sup>6</sup> Again, this shrine will be used for comparative purposes and its importance lies in the fact that it is the earliest of the series, and is unscathed by later additions or repairs. A brief history and description of the Shrine of the Book of Dimma has been published.<sup>7</sup> As there has been no recent publication on St Caillin's Shrine, it was recently loaned to the NMI so that a full examination, description and photographic survey could be carried out.<sup>8</sup> The Shrine of the Book of Moling has not been examined at first hand as it is in private possession, but was loaned to the NMI for recording in 1978.<sup>9</sup> As a result there is a comprehensive description and photographs in the NMI archives. The shrine has a simple, but different, construction,

---

<sup>4</sup> Armstrong and Lawlor 1917-19; Crawford 1923, 155; Raftery 1941, 115-9; Mitchell 1977, no.66; Ó'Floinn 1983, no.85.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson 1997, 67-8; 234-236.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly 1993, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Ó Floinn 1982, 25-39; Ó Floinn 1983, no.83.

<sup>8</sup> Murphy 1888-91, 1892; Raftery 1941, 164.

retaining little decorative components, and as a result will be only used for general comparative purposes.

## Methodology

Due to the complex nature of the structural phases, the inscriptions associating the shrines with historical personages, and the lack of adequate publication, it was decided to attempt to reveal the various phases and determine a dating sequence. Except for the Shrine of the Book of Moling, all the book shrines were thoroughly examined by means of a binocular microscope, fibre-optic lights and more recently, radiography. The shrines were recorded in detail by measurement, sketches and photography, with particular attention being paid to evidence for lost components, differential patination, wear patterns and the distribution of nail/rivet holes. It required from three to five days to fully record each book shrine, and it was also found necessary to re-examine them periodically in order to clarify specific points. The Shrine of the Book of Dimma was investigated and recorded in the manuscripts reading room, Trinity College Library, and St Caillin's Shrine was borrowed from St Mel's Diocesan Museum, Longford, in order to carry out a full examination, description and photographic survey.

The writer has had the opportunity to investigate all relevant comparative material and artefacts held in the NMI, with particular attention paid to reliquaries, ecclesiastical artefacts and decorative metalwork contemporary with the shrines.<sup>10</sup> Other relevant material, particularly components from the large hoard of metalwork from Shanmullagh, Co Armagh, in the Ulster Museum, has been examined at first hand. From the writer's involvement in international travelling exhibitions some comparative material has been examined at close quarters, or through display cases.<sup>11</sup> Indirect evidence of book shrines, such as the physical

---

<sup>9</sup> The shrine is the property of Mr Andrew Kavanagh, of Borris House, Borris, Co Carlow.

<sup>10</sup> Among the artefacts examined at first hand were: St Patrick's and St Senan's Bell Shrines, the Shrine of St Lachtin's Arm, the Shrine of St Patrick's Tooth, the Domhnach Airgid, the Corp Naomh, the Breac Maedhóg, St Manachán's Shrine, the Cross of Cong, the Moylough Belt Shrine, the Lough Erne house-shaped Shrine, and the Clonmacnoise, Lismore, Inisfallen and St Dymphna's crosiers.

<sup>11</sup> The following museums with comparable material have been visited in the course of the writer's work: the British Museum, London; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh; National Museum of Wales, Cardiff; York Castle Museum; the Liverpool Museum; Danmarks Nationalmuseum, Copenhagen; Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm; Altes Museum, Berlin; Staatliche Museen Preubischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin; the Musée de Louvre, Paris; Musée de Cluny, Paris.



state of certain manuscripts demonstrating impact damage and copper staining, may indicate that they were formerly contained within shrines. This aspect will also be investigated.

## Sources

The primary sources are the book shrines themselves. The Irish Antiquities Division of the NMI holds various descriptive notes, conservation records, drawings and photographs of the Irish book shrines in its archive. The shrines of the Cathach, the Book of Dimma and the Misach passed through Sir William Betham's hands, where they underwent restoration and repair. His correspondence and notes were potentially of great importance for the original appearance of the shrines. These are held in various institutions: the National Library of Ireland, the Genealogical Office, the Royal Irish Academy, the Gilbert Library (Pearse St, Dublin) and the National Archives.<sup>12</sup> In the Genealogical Office alone there are c.12,000 partially indexed items of Betham's correspondence relating to heraldic and genealogical matters, some of which deal with his book shrines. The above institutions also hold records of other correspondents in the form of unpublished letters, records and sketches relating to book shrines.

## Previous Research

This section reviews the literature pertaining to the Irish book shrines. In general the published accounts on book shrines have been limited to individual shrines, based on inscriptions, iconography and style, with little generalisation or attempts to assess the shrines as a group. Only the general accounts of book shrines will be considered as the relevant chapters incorporate all previous accounts on the individual shrines. Charles Vallency was the first to comment on a book shrine, that of the Book of Moling, which he named the *Liath Meisicith*.<sup>13</sup> Sir William Betham, in his capacity as Ulster king of-arms, acquired the Misach and the Shrine of the Book of Dimma, and borrowed the shrine of the Cathach. He published his accounts and engravings of these shrines in 1826, briefly mentioned the Shrine of the Stowe Missal, and identified Vallency's *Liath Meisicith* as the Shrine of the Book of Moling.<sup>14</sup> He was the first to notice that the shrines were sealed, generally constructed

---

<sup>12</sup> Documents concerning legal proceedings against Betham, and which contained evidence on the state of the Shrine of the Cathach, were destroyed in the fire in the Four Courts, Dublin, during the Civil War of 1922.

<sup>13</sup> Vallency 1784, 13-15.

<sup>14</sup> Betham 1826, *passim*.



around a wooden core, and 'which soon acquired a sanctity of character as the depositories of the holy writ'.<sup>15</sup> The first reference to the shrines as a coherent group was Wakeman's *Handbook of Irish Antiquities* (1848), where he perceptively observed that the shrines were often of multi-period construction.<sup>16</sup> In his account he relied on Betham's research and referred in some detail to the Cathach, Misach and Dimma.<sup>17</sup> In 1861 Eugene O'Curry referred to book shrines, where he provided an adequate description of the Cathach.<sup>18</sup> In Petrie's publication of the inscriptions on the Soisceál, Stowe, Cathach, Misach and Dimma shrines, Margaret Stokes furnished a brief description and a summary of the previous accounts of the shrines.<sup>19</sup> She was the first scholar to provide a comprehensive list of all known Irish book shrines in her concluding notes to this same volume.<sup>20</sup> Possible parallels from the Continent were discussed and she incorporated the historical references to the lost shrines of Durrow, Armagh and Kells.<sup>21</sup> In a later publication this account was expanded to include brief descriptions of the Soisceál and Stowe shrines, with references provided to records of Scottish book shrines.<sup>22</sup>

In the first two decades of this century guides to the various collections of Irish antiquities held in the National Museum were published.<sup>23</sup> George Coffey's guide provided a brief summary of the book shrines, including photographs and a description of the Soisceál, while Westropp provided much the same information and keenly noted that 'The ornamentation of this (the Soisceál Molaisse) and all other dated work should be especially noted by students, as it enables us to fix probable dates for other uninscribed examples.'<sup>24</sup> In

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>16</sup> Wakeman 1848, 161-4.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. In the third edition of Wakeman's guide Cooke (1903, 349-52) used the term 'cumdachs', and included the Soisceál Molaisse, and the shrines of the Stowe Missal and Moling.

<sup>18</sup> O'Curry 1861, 322-36.

<sup>19</sup> Petrie 1878, *passim*.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 158-9.

<sup>21</sup> St Caillin's shrine and the shrine of the Book of Moling were omitted from her list.

<sup>22</sup> St Caillin's shrine was listed for the first time and the errors in her list of dates were rectified (1887, 72-79).

<sup>23</sup> Coffey 1909, 44-46; Westropp 1911, 8-10.

<sup>24</sup> Westropp 1911, 8.

his thorough list of shrines, Henry Crawford provided a descriptive summary and bibliography on all of the Irish book shrines, including possible mountings from other book shrines.<sup>25</sup> Adolf Mahr published a terse account of book shrines in 1939, and two years later Joseph Raftery, relying on previous accounts, discussed them as a distinct group of reliquaries, and published the first full photographic survey, including a description and reassessment of the structure of the Soisceál Molaisse.<sup>26</sup> Little else was published until the De Paor's book on *Early Christian Ireland* (1958) where they were included along with other classes of reliquaries.<sup>27</sup> In Henry's survey of medieval Irish art, she introduced the comparative study of metalwork which allowed her to formulate various groups of artefacts based on the range and type of techniques, and to identify possible locations of workshops, including one centred at Kells which may have produced the Cathach and Misach book shrines.<sup>28</sup> Lucas dealt briefly with the Soisceál and Stowe shrines, producing excellent photographs of the figural ornament, and in a later seminal survey of the use and role of relics and reliquaries, provided examples of miracles pertaining to books.<sup>29</sup> The catalogues published in tandem with the exhibitions of Irish treasures to the United States of America and Europe allowed a review of the shrines of the Stowe Missal, Book of Dimma and the Soisceál Molaisse, where they were given separate entries.<sup>30</sup> More recently the Cathach and Misach book shrines have been discussed along with other artefacts in Ó Floinn's modification of Henry's schools of metalworking, but two of the book shrines were omitted as they did not readily fit into any category.<sup>31</sup> The inscriptions on pre-Norman reliquaries, which incorporate some of the book shrines, have been evaluated by Micheli.<sup>32</sup> Susan Nunan devoted a chapter to book shrines in her thesis, where she dealt principally with the function

---

<sup>25</sup> Crawford 1923, 77, 152-7.

<sup>26</sup> Raftery 1941, 55-6, 115-21.

<sup>27</sup> De Paor, L and M 1958, 164-66.

<sup>28</sup> Henry 1968, 120-21; 1970, 74-122.

<sup>29</sup> Lucas 1973a, 127-30; 1986, 9, 11-13. Charles Doherty also produced an important paper (1984) on the use of relics in early Ireland.

<sup>30</sup> Cone (ed.) 1977. The catalogue entries were composed by Frank Mitchell; In Ryan (1983a, ed.), the relevant catalogue entries were written by Ragnall Ó Floinn, and he dealt with them briefly in his introductory essay (1983, 61).

<sup>31</sup> The Soisceál and the Stowe book shrines. Ó Floinn 1987a, 179-187.

<sup>32</sup> Micheli 1995, nos. 3, 5, 7, 12.



and form of the enshrined manuscripts, apotropaicism and the miracles associated with books.<sup>33</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to evaluate in detail publications of Continental relics and reliquaries. The most comprehensive survey to date, Braun's *Die Reliquiare des Christlichen Kultes und ihre Entwicklung* (1940), and Smith and Cheetham's *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities* (1908) did not include any class of reliquary which could be regarded as a book shrine. Peter Brown has discussed the development, role and function of relics in the Late Antique and Early Christian periods,<sup>34</sup> while, more recently American scholars have begun to explore the physical nature topic of relics and shrines.<sup>35</sup> There have been valuable accounts of the use of relics and reliquaries in England, particularly by Charles Thomas and David Rollason.<sup>36</sup> A number of unpublished theses on related themes have also been appraised.

There have been some worthwhile technical studies of artefacts, for example the Ardagh chalice<sup>37</sup> and the Moylough Belt Shrine,<sup>38</sup> while comprehensive accounts have been produced on the British Museum, St Dymphna's and St Mel's crosiers,<sup>39</sup> the Derrynaflan chalice<sup>40</sup> and the Anglo-Saxon helmet from Coppergate, York.<sup>41</sup>

### Structure of the thesis

Chapter one of this thesis will examine the evolution of writing materials and book covers from the Coptic, Early Christian, Byzantine, Carolingian and Ottonian periods. The

---

<sup>33</sup> Nunan 1992, 104-34.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, P. 1976, 1981. See Herrmann-Mascard (1975), for a summary and analysis of the cult of relics.

<sup>35</sup> Drake-Boehm 1997; See Bynum and Gerson (1997, n.5) for a recent survey of the literature pertaining to relics and reliquaries.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas 1971, 132-166; Rollason 1989, 23-59.

<sup>37</sup> Organ 1973, 237-71.

<sup>38</sup> O'Kelly 1965, 149-88.

<sup>39</sup> MacDermott 1955, 1957 and more recently Johnson (1997, 195-217).

<sup>40</sup> Ryan 1983b; 1985a.

<sup>41</sup> Tweedle 1992.



systematic criteria used to survey the material will be the historical sources, depictions in various media, and surviving examples. The same criteria will be applied to study Insular book covers. The role of Continental book boxes either as containers or possible shrines for manuscripts will be evaluated, and the hypothesis that the origin of the Irish book shrines lies in the liturgical rites of Early Christian Rome will be assessed. Also investigated is the documentary evidence for book shrines from England, Scotland and Wales.

Chapters two to five form the core of the thesis and provide a detailed examination of the Irish eleventh-century book shrines, where they are considered under the headings of History, Previous accounts, the Inscriptions, Iconography, Stylistic Analysis and Discussion. Chapter six is an assessment of the evidence and the application of this information to the remainder of the book shrines. Finally the last chapter provides a summary of the conclusions.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF BOOK SHRINES IN EARLY MEDIEVAL IRELAND

### The evolution of writing materials

In Egypt, from the fourth millennium BC to the Late Antique period, the conventional writing material was papyrus, which was obtainable only from the Nile Delta and parts of the Middle East. The plant, which is a species of reed, grows with its roots submerged in water and can attain heights of ten to fifteen feet. The soft pith from the interior of the stem was cut into strips, which was then built up into alternate horizontal and vertical layers and hammered flat. The strips were then dried, polished and burnished to form a writing surface. Egypt held the monopoly on papyrus production until the invasion of Alexander the Great.<sup>1</sup> Pliny the Elder has provided a detailed account<sup>2</sup> on the preparation of papyrus scrolls, and from the Late Antique period Cassiodorus has supplied a valuable description of the manufacture and utilisation of papyrus as a writing material.<sup>3</sup>

Papyrus had certain disadvantages: it was produced in the form of rolls with an average length of thirty to thirty-five feet, which made it cumbersome for the reader as he had to use both hands to unfurl the roll as he proceeded to read. When the end of the roll was reached it had to be rolled in the reverse direction for the next reader. The issue of its fragility is debatable, but it was probably no more or less subject to deterioration than subsequent writing materials.<sup>4</sup> The action of rolling and unrolling, however, would have resulted in the abrasion of the ink and pigments from the surface. Papyrus was still in use for legal documents and charters up to the early middle ages.<sup>5</sup>

The origin of parchment<sup>6</sup> as a writing material is unknown but it was in use in Persia

---

<sup>1</sup> Skeat 1969, 55-58.

<sup>2</sup> *Naturalis Historiae*; Book XIII:21.

<sup>3</sup> *Variae*, Book XI:38; translation in Barnish (1992, 159-60).

<sup>4</sup> Pacht (1986, 13) proposed that it is a delicate material, while Stevenson (1989, 136) contends that it is resilient - 'no more fragile than good-quality paper'.

<sup>5</sup> See Bischoff (1990, 8) for further references for the use of papyrus in the medieval period.

<sup>6</sup> This is a generic term for prepared animal skins - usually sheep, goat or calves.



in the fifth century BC where there is an historical reference to 'royal skins' as a material for recording chronicles.<sup>7</sup> Its use became widespread throughout the Classical world due to the fact that its production was not constrained by climate and could be locally made. Parchment was utilised in roll form which was achieved by sewing separate skins together; however this was more labour intensive to produce than papyrus rolls which were pasted together. Parchment was also more difficult to roll than the more flexible papyrus.<sup>8</sup> When not in use papyrus and parchment rolls were protected by storage in a *capsa* which was a cylindrical container with a close fitting lid. A portrait of Virgil in the Late Antique manuscript the *Vergilius Romanus* depicts a large cylindrical *capsa* fitted with a fastening clasp and carrying handles.<sup>9</sup>

Another form of early writing material were thin wooden or ivory tablets with an interior recess to accept wax. A metal stylus was used to inscribe short notes on the wax surface. When the notes were obsolete, or as alterations or deletions required, the wax was smoothed down with the warmed spatulate end of the stylus, leaving the wax prepared for further memoranda. These developed in the Greco-Roman period, and as the jottings became more elaborate the number of wooden leaves increased. These tablets are known as diptychs if constructed of two leaves; triptychs for three leaves and polyptychs for examples with more than three leaves. They were held together by a string or leather thongs which passed through holes pierced along the edges. The two outermost boards were plain so as to form a protective cover, unlike the interior boards which were recessed on both surfaces. This gathering of wooden leaves was known as a codex/caudex from the Latin *caudex*: a log of wood. Although writing tablets were superseded by the parchment codex, they did not become completely obsolete and continued in use up until the later medieval period where they were used for private correspondence and teaching aids.<sup>10</sup> A significant find of waxed wooden tablets were discovered in Springmount bog, Co Antrim, in 1906. These contain the

---

<sup>7</sup> Skeat 1987, 63.

<sup>8</sup> Pacht 1986, 13-14.

<sup>9</sup> Rome, Vatican Library 3867, f.3v. This manuscript has been dated to the fourth century AD (Weitzmann 1977, fig. 3).

<sup>10</sup> Bischoff 1990, 14. A set of wax tablets provided with a decorated leather cover was discovered in a bog near Maghera, Co Derry, around 1845 (NMI Wk. 378:a-1). They have been dated to the sixteenth century (Coffey 1909, 2-4).



text of psalms thirty to thirty-two and date to the early seventh century AD.<sup>11</sup> Accounts of their use are recorded in hagiographical literature, for example the twelfth-century 'Irish life of St. Columcille', where the saint blesses 'a hundred splendid writing-tablets'.<sup>12</sup> A valuable description of the manufacture and use of wooden tablets is recorded in verse form in the seventh-century Irish text known as the *Hisperica Famina*.<sup>13</sup> Other types of tablets were also used, recessed, but without wax, the memoranda were inscribed directly onto the wood with a stylus and ink. Numerous examples of these, excavated from the Roman settlement at Vindolanda, Hadrian's Wall, were used primarily for accounts and private letters.<sup>14</sup> A less common form of writing material is the lead sheet inscribed with a sharp point. Over eighty are known from the temple of Sulis Minerva, Bath. Dating from the third and fourth centuries AD, they were used in a ritual fashion for cursing.<sup>15</sup>

A more luxurious form of writing tablet was the consular diptych. These were derived from ivory diptychs which were presented as gifts between prominent Roman families. In their later manifestation they were distributed as gifts by Roman high officials on obtaining the position of consul. The earliest diptych is that of Probus (c.408 AD), and they were manufactured until the office was abolished: 534 AD in Rome and 541 AD in Constantinople.<sup>16</sup> Many of these diptychs owe their survival to the fact that they were reused in adorning Late Antique, Carolingian and Ottonian book covers.

The next significant episode in the history of the written word is the invention of the codex, which developed from the multi-leaved wooden tablets of the Roman era. It may be defined as quires of folded sheets of parchment or papyrus, cut into separate leaves and secured by sewing. Parchment leaves were more convenient and lighter than the wooden tablets, which were unwieldy. They could also be reused, as the carbon ink could be washed or scraped off. Further advantages of the codex were that both sides of the sheet were capable of taking ink or pigments, and to a greater thickness, as the material was not subject

---

<sup>11</sup> Mullarkey 1991, no.64.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert 1988, 259.

<sup>13</sup> Herren 1974, 107.

<sup>14</sup> These tablets have been dated to c.100 AD (Bowman and Thomas, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> Stevenson 1989, 137.

<sup>16</sup> Needham 1979, 21; Gough 1973, 124-7.

to the stress and strain of being rolled and unrolled. Consultation and cross-referencing of passages of the text was now more convenient and long texts could be incorporated into a codex by increasing the number of leaves. The greater capacity of the codex could enable it to hold, on average, six times more text than the roll.

The first reference to a codex is c.85 AD when the Roman poet Martial wrote several epigrams extolling the virtues of the 'book with many folded skins' in which copies of the works of Classical authors, such as Homer, Virgil, Cicero, Livy and Ovid were transcribed. He also advertised the latest editions of his poems in the new codex format.<sup>17</sup> The origin of the Christian codex probably occurred c.70 AD; the new Christian sect had a decided preference for the codex, while pagan literature continued to appear in roll form until c.300 AD.<sup>18</sup> It appears that the Christians deliberately wanted to differentiate the scriptures in codex from the more common roll, which the pagans were more familiar with.<sup>19</sup> The codex became the predominant form for all literature when Christianity was officially recognised as the state religion by Constantine the Great in 313 AD.<sup>20</sup> In the following centuries the Christians saved the valuable Classical literature for posterity by transcribing the texts from roll to codex. Gospel books were copied and distributed quickly to cope with demand for the flourishing new religion, which in turn, led to the wide availability of the codex.

### **The introduction of book covers**

These leaves required a cover in order to protect them from handling and damage; in the initial stages of development the outermost leaves or a loose sheet of parchment were wrapped around the quires. These later evolved into more substantial leather or wooden covers which offered a greater degree of protection. Christianity was a religion whose focus was the book 'a witness to the promise of salvation - a symbol scarcely less potent than the cross'.<sup>21</sup> As these books contained the Divine Word of God, they would have had elaborate

---

<sup>17</sup> Skeat 1987, 66-7; Weitzmann 1977, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Rolls were the dominant form when used for administration purposes, such as charters and patent rolls, and these continued in use up until the late medieval period. See n.5 above.

<sup>19</sup> Skeat 1987, 72-3; Pacht 1986, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Pacht, *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 10



covers adorned with jewels, silver and gold to reflect the sacred nature of the contents.

### Historical references

The earliest reference to decorative book covers is cited by the eleventh-century Byzantine chronicler, George Cedrenos, who recorded that the Emperor Constantine (in the twenty-first year of his reign, 326-7) ordered a gospel book to be bound in gold covers furnished with pearls and precious stones, for presentation to the 'Great Church'.<sup>22</sup> In 332, a letter from Constantine the Great to Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, ordered him to supply fifty vellum Bibles for use in the new churches of Constantinople. Furthermore, Eusebius relates<sup>23</sup> that the Bibles were supplied in 'expensively worked containers'.<sup>24</sup> A letter of St Jerome (384 AD) condemns the use of costly bindings. He derided 'wealthy christian women whose books are written in gold on purple vellum and clothed with gems'.<sup>25</sup> Flavius Cassiodorus (485-580), the Roman lawyer, consul and senator who held various high offices under King Theodoric in Ravenna, founded the monastery of Vivarium when he retired from public office. The monastery was a centre of scribal activity as Cassiodorus had dedicated the remainder of his days to compiling, transcribing and recording biblical texts. Cassiodorus related the provision for decorated book-covers in his *Institutiones*:

We have supplied artisans, well trained in bookbinding, so that the beauty of the sacred writings should have a comely outward appearance ... For these artisans we have adequately pictured in a book many varieties of bindings, so that each may choose from it whatever style of covering pleases him.<sup>26</sup>

Further confirmation for decorated bindings at Vivarium is provided by a full page miniature in the Codex Amiatinus, a vulgate Bible written in the monastery of Monkwearmouth/Jarrow and dated shortly before 716 AD [Pl.1.a].<sup>27</sup> The folio depicts either Ezra (an Old Testament priest) or Cassiodorus as a scribe, seated before an open press

---

<sup>22</sup> See Needham (1979, 21, n.1) for further references.

<sup>23</sup> Book IV: 36 of his 'Life of Constantine'; Migne, J.P. (ed.) 1857-1912, PG, CXXI, col.561.

<sup>24</sup> Skeat 1987, 78-79.

<sup>25</sup> Needham 1979, 21; Migne, PL XXII, col.418.

<sup>26</sup> Needham 1979, 55.

<sup>27</sup> Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana. MS Amiatinus 1; f.V r; Alexander 1978, no.7; Backhouse 1991, no.88.



in which is shelved a Bible divided into nine volumes. It is recorded that Ceolfrid, abbot of Monkwearmouth/Jarrow, brought back a single volume bible, known as a pandect, from Italy in the late seventh century where he had three copies transcribed at his monastery. The Codex Amiatinus is the only complete surviving copy of the original pandect; some twelve folios have survived from a second copy.<sup>28</sup> As this miniature represents a faithful copy from the original sixth-century Codex Grandior from Vivarium, then the covers of the nine-volume Bible displayed in the press should at least resemble book bindings of sixth- to eighth-century date. Bruce-Mitford has illustrated the miniature in a line drawing, as the original is somewhat indistinct.<sup>29</sup> This drawing clearly shows the decoration on the covers, as well as the titles on the spines. Furthermore Casey has drawn attention to an open codex on the floor to the right of the foot-stool which bears abstract ornament of indeterminable nature.<sup>30</sup> Haseloff has further elucidated these covers by illustrating them individually, as the miniature depicts them in a distorted manner.<sup>31</sup> This illustration shows that the decoration consists of geometric forms based on lozenge, cruciform and triangular motifs [Pl. 1. b]. Since the covers in the Amiatinus miniature are of a red/brown colour, it can be inferred that these were intended to represent leather covers with the decoration formed by a combination of stamping and tooling.

There is a mosaic depiction of a book press in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, which is dated to the second quarter of the fifth century AD.<sup>32</sup> The press, which is open, displays four individually bound Gospels resting on two shelves. Perhaps Cassiodorus, when he served Theodoric at Ravenna, took notice and was influenced by this representation. When he retired to Vivarium this depiction of a book cupboard with codices openly displayed may have provided the inspiration for a similar scene in the Codex Grandior. This, in turn, was copied at the scriptorium of Monkwearmouth/Jarrow and can be seen in the Cassiodorus/Ezra miniature in the Codex Amiatinus.

<sup>28</sup> The Middleton Leaves, BL, Additional MS 45025; the Bankes Leaf, BL, Loan MS 81; Backhouse 1991, no.87 (a-b).

<sup>29</sup> Bruce-Mitford 1969, fig.1.

<sup>30</sup> Casey 1984, 19, no.1.

<sup>31</sup> Haseloff 1978, fig.4.

<sup>32</sup> Beckwith 1986, fig.20.

Nordenfalk has proposed that a loose leaf inserted into an early medieval manuscript from Corbie, France, which displays five different types of interlace patterns, could have been used as a pattern page for depicting designs for book covers.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, on stylistic and historical grounds, he maintains that this is the pattern page that was provided by Cassiodorus for the benefit of his book binders at Vivarium.<sup>34</sup>

Further references to book covers are recorded in the *Liber Pontificalis*, a chronicle which records the lives of the first ninety Roman Popes. Under the entry for Hormidas (514-523) it is recorded that, along with other ecclesiastical plate 'Gospels with gold covers and precious jewels, weighing 15 pounds ...' were presented by the orthodox Emperor Justin as an offering for prayers answered.<sup>35</sup> Also, during the pontificate of Vitalian (657-672) it is noted that he sent to St Peters, Rome, by envoys: '... gold Gospels decorated around with pearls of wonderous size.'<sup>36</sup> McKitterick has provided references to further examples of ornate book covers of the Merovingian and Carolingian periods.<sup>37</sup>

### Depictions of book covers

Book covers have been depicted in various media: mosaic, wall painting, ivory, metalwork and illuminated manuscripts, from the Early Christian and Byzantine periods up to late medieval times. These representations provide visual corroboration for the opulent examples cited in historical sources. Some of the more significant examples include the following: a portrait bust, executed in mosaic, which depicts an ecclesiastic holding a large book with a decorated cover depicting the symbols of the four evangelists arranged around a central jewelled cross. This was uncovered during excavations in the fifth-century AD catacombs adjacent to the church of San Gennaro, Naples.<sup>38</sup> This depiction is unusual as it shows figural subjects on the cover; the decorative schemes are usually based upon applied mounts forming cruciform abstract compositions. There is a rare survival of a pre-

---

<sup>33</sup> Paris, Bib. Nat., lat. 12190; Nordenfalk 1974, 230.

<sup>34</sup> See the relevant passage from *Institutiones*, p.13 above. O'Meadhra (1987b, 121-2, fig.83 and forthcoming) argues that the page is later and should date to the period 600-800 AD.

<sup>35</sup> Davis 1989, 46.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>37</sup> McKitterick 1989, 151, 156-7.

<sup>38</sup> Nees 1978, 4-5.



iconoclastic sixth-century encaustic icon of Christ Pantocrator, from the monastery of St Catherine, Egypt.<sup>39</sup> This was painted in Constantinople and depicts Christ in a frontal pose cradling a large codex with a decorated cover in his left arm [Pl.3.a]. The decoration consists of a gold background to which pearls and precious stones are attached forming a central latin cross. The corners of the cover and the extremities of the applied cross also bear representations of ornamental mounts and precious stones. In the renowned apse mosaics of San Vitale, Ravenna, which are dated to c.547 AD, there is a scene portraying the Emperor Justinian and his suite in which one of the deacons holds a large, imposing book. The cover is adorned with jewelled mounts and pearls in the form of a medallion with lentoid-shaped extremities.<sup>40</sup> In the chapel of Theodotus, church of Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome, there is a fresco of the Crucifixion in which Christ is shown wearing a colobium. On his left stands St John with a large gospel book decorated with jewelled mounts in the form of a cross with a large central medallion. The fresco is dated to 741-752.<sup>41</sup>

All of the above examples depict the covers in a similar fashion, with opulent settings containing pearls and precious stones arranged to form a central cross on a gold background. Haseloff has classified and commented on depictions of book covers as found in metalwork, ivories, manuscripts and mosaic from the Late Antique to the Ottonian periods.<sup>42</sup> His typology is based on the form of cross and decoration present on the cover.<sup>43</sup>

### Surviving book covers

The physical evidence for surviving book covers corroborate the historical references and opulent depictions referred to above. A wide variety of book covers survives from the cited periods, ranging from plain undyed calf leather to masterpieces of European art such as the covers for the Lindau Gospels. Some of the more significant examples are described below.

---

<sup>39</sup> Chatzidakis 1967, 197-208; Weitzman 1978, pl.12.

<sup>40</sup> Beckwith, 1986, 114.

<sup>41</sup> Gough 1973, 183.

<sup>42</sup> Haseloff 1978, 1-46.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* A to E, figs. 2-7.



## Coptic book covers

Coptic covers are significant as they offer an impression of what Irish early medieval leather covers may have looked like.<sup>44</sup> Among the most notable are a hoard of thirteen fourth-century AD Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi, Egypt, which were discovered some fifty years ago preserved in a jar. Eleven of these had their original leather covers in place, some of which were decorated, the most elaborate having a tooled St Andrew's cross with additional scroll-work and an ankh (*crux ansata*) applied by ink.<sup>45</sup> A second hoard, of nearly sixty parchment volumes, were found in 1910 in a stone cistern near Hamuli, Fayum, Egypt. They range in date from the seventh to the tenth centuries AD and are believed to be the library of the ancient Coptic monastery of St Michael of the Desert.<sup>46</sup> Included in the hoard was a pair of leather covers from a gospel book of seventh- to eighth-century date, which are considered to be the finest of all extant Coptic book-bindings.<sup>47</sup> The elaborate covers consist of a background of gilded leather on to which was sewn openwork red leather tracery in the form of multiple crosses, rosettes and scrolls. In addition, annulets of coloured leather were attached to the gilded ground [Pl.3.b]. Robert Stevenson has illustrated and discussed the diverse types of crosses and their symbolism which are present in the decoration of these covers.<sup>48</sup>

## Late Antique, Early Christian and Byzantine book covers

The book covers from the Late Antique and Early Christian periods have been published in detail by Steenbock<sup>49</sup> while Beckwith and Haseloff have surveyed the Byzantine examples.<sup>50</sup> However some of these require consideration as they have a bearing on the Insular covers discussed later. One of the earliest examples, which dates from the second half of the fifth century, is the ornate ivory covers from northern Italy, now housed

---

<sup>44</sup> Sir William Betham referred to the now lost boards of the Cathach as 'very like that with which eastern mss. are bound' (1826, 110); see p.36 below. See Nordenfalk (1974) for relationships between Coptic and Insular book bindings.

<sup>45</sup> Cairo, Coptic Museum, Nag Hammadi Codex II; Needham 1979, 5-6.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 2.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-16.

<sup>48</sup> Stevenson 1982, 9, fig.4. See Werner (1990a, 1990b *passim* and 1994, 462, 483-4) for further discussion and comprehensive references to the symbolism of the cross.

<sup>49</sup> Steenbock 1965, *passim*.

<sup>50</sup> Beckwith 1986; Haseloff 1990.

in Milan Cathedral Treasury.<sup>51</sup> These emulate the form and decorative layout of Early Christian Consular diptychs and portray scenes from the life of Christ. The front cover has a central *Agnus Dei*, fabricated from gold and cloisonné enamel, while the back cover displays a prominent jewelled cross. The Antioch Treasure includes a pair of gilt-silver book covers, along with a single cover of different design. All were fabricated from a number of thin silver sheets decorated by repoussé and were originally mounted onto wooden boards.<sup>52</sup> Each of the pair depicts a saint standing under an arcade, one, identified as St Paul, holds an open book, while St Peter carries a processional cross. An ornate border comprises a vine-scroll sprouting from a centrally placed amphora and terminating on either side of a cross at the top centre. The single cover, from the same treasure, has a similar border of vine-scrolls and birds enclosing two unidentified saints holding books and supporting a large free-standing latin cross.<sup>53</sup> This cover would have enclosed a gospel book while the other pair were likely to have enclosed a book of the Epistles. All three covers are dated from the late sixth to early seventh-centuries AD. Book covers have, however, survived in greater numbers from the middle-to-late Byzantine periods and are decorated with a range of opulent settings, usually a combination of pearls and enamels on a gold background.

Very little evidence for book covers remains from the 'Dark Ages' of Western Europe. One notable exception is the sumptuous set of covers from the Gospel Book of Theodelinda, Queen of the Lombards, housed in the Cathedral Treasury at Monza [Pl.4].<sup>54</sup> The borders consist of cloisonné garnet settings, the patterns of which are similar to the openwork leather decoration on the Ragyndrudis codex and some Coptic covers.<sup>55</sup> A large jewelled cross with expanded ends is mounted onto a gold background along with four antique cameos which are placed in the angles of L-shaped frames. Two horizontal bands with a dedicatory Latin inscription are placed parallel to the arms. Gregory the Great donated these two covers, along with other gifts, to the sovereigns at Monza in 603. Hubert has attributed the covers to a workshop in Rome and has dated them to the period of

---

<sup>51</sup> Steenbock 1965, no.5; Gaborit-Chopin 1978, no.18; Beckwith 1986, ill.120.

<sup>52</sup> Frazer 1978, no.554; Painter 1977, nos.148-9.

<sup>53</sup> Frazer 1978, no.555.

<sup>54</sup> Steenbock 1965, no.12; Hubert et al. 1969, 231; Conti 1990, 352-3.

<sup>55</sup> Fulda, Landesbibliothek, Codex Bonifatianus II. Haseloff 1978, 1-46; See Harbison (1986, pl.4:4-f) for an illustration of the cover and pp.35-6.



Gregory's pontificate (590-604).<sup>56</sup>

### Carolingian and Ottonian book covers

In the Carolingian and Ottonian periods book production proliferated under Imperial and ecclesiastical patronage, as seen by the output of Ada, Reims and Corbie schools. There were also scriptoria active at Tours, Trier, Cologne and Echternach.<sup>57</sup> Lorsch became a royal monastery in 772 and was an active centre for book production. Library catalogues of the eighth century exist from the ecclesiastical centres of Fulda, Wurzburg and Wandrelle, and ninth-century catalogues from St Riquier (Centula), Reichenau and St Gall.<sup>58</sup> These schools produced many elaborate manuscripts, including missals, sacramentaries, psalters, gospels, and bibles, many of which had opulent covers reflecting the divine nature of their contents. Some of these covers are fabricated from ivory, which was then mounted on to wood, but the majority were produced from metalwork adorned with precious stones, enamels and filigree. Over 7,000 books survive from the ninth-century Carolingian schools. It is estimated that over 50,000 books were produced during this period.<sup>59</sup>

At this stage it is sufficient to list the more notable examples,<sup>60</sup> commencing with the sumptuous covers of the Lindau Gospels.<sup>61</sup> The upper cover displays a figure of Christ executed in extremely fine gold repoussé on a jewelled cross along with expressive figures of the Virgin, St John, two unidentified female saints, two pairs of mourning angels and personifications of the sun and moon [Pl.5]. The elaborate cruciform mountings in the quadrants are raised on short pillars while the jewel-encrusted borders and frames have collets in the form of stylised acanthus leaves. These mounts and collets would have borne the weight of the cover when open, thus protecting the delicate repoussé work from impact damage. The gold figural panels, which appear to be influenced to a certain degree by the

---

<sup>56</sup> Hubert, Porcher and Volbach 1969, 231.

<sup>57</sup> Dodwell 1993, chs. 4,7.

<sup>58</sup> Mc Kitterick 1989, 163, 165-69.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, 163

<sup>60</sup> Lasko (1994) has published a detailed chronological and stylistical survey of the principal Carolingian and Ottonian book covers.

<sup>61</sup> New York, Pierpont-Morgan Library, M1. This gospel book was written at the abbey of St Gall in the third quarter of the ninth century (Needham 1979, 24).



Reims and Tours schools of painting, have been assigned to the Court School of Charles the Bald (840-77), and the cover was possibly made at the Abbey of St Denis where Charles was secular abbot from 867-77.<sup>62</sup>

The lower cover is less opulent than the front but bears a variety of zoomorphic and figural ornament, as well as highly accomplished enamel and garnet work [Pl. 6]. The design consists of a large, silver-gilt latin cross with expanded ends which frame a bust of Christ executed in cloisonné enamel in addition to sunk enamel plaques with zoomorphic motifs. In the four quadrants there are silver chip-carved plates decorated with Anglo-Carolingian animal ornament, while placed within the upper and lower shafts of the cross are two medallions which contain lively gripping-beast ornament. There is general agreement on an early ninth-century date for the lower cover and the Southern Rhine region of Germany as the location of the workshop.<sup>63</sup> As the Lindau Gospels post-date the lower cover by some fifty years it has been argued that the covers were originally attached to a more luxurious manuscript, one of the quality of the Codex Aureus of Emmeram.<sup>64</sup> Jewelled covers, because of their intrinsic value, and as they are not integral to the binding, might easily have migrated from one codex to another.<sup>65</sup> The back cover has numerous additions from the thirteenth/fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, including foliate borders, plaques bearing figures of the evangelists, and semi-precious stones in settings which imitate the form of the original mounts pl.no \*\*\*\*. <sup>66</sup>

The gold cover of the Codex Aureus of St Emmeram displays a repoussé 'Christ in Majesty' set in a rectangular frame of precious stones, surrounded by panels depicting the four evangelists and scenes from the Life of Christ [Pl. 7.a].<sup>67</sup> Chalice-shaped collets on small pillars retain emeralds, pearls and sapphires interspersed with filigree scroll-work. The

---

<sup>62</sup> Steenbock 1965, no.21; Needham 1979, no.6; Lasko 1994, 57.

<sup>63</sup> While Steenbock (1965, 92), Lasko (1994, 1-4) and Needham (1979, 26) have dated the lower cover to c.800, Guilmain (1971, 13) dates it to the 'very early years of the ninth century'. Haseloff (1990, 86-88) and Wilson (1991, 168-70) prefer a date of c.825 on the basis of the developed Anglo-Carolingian ornament and the gripping-beast motifs.

<sup>64</sup> Needham 1979, 22; Lasko 1994, 3, n.11. See n.61 above for the date of the manuscript.

<sup>65</sup> Needham, *ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Needham (1979, pl.p.25) has illustrated and highlighted these later additions.

<sup>67</sup> Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek. Steenbock 1965, no.20; Lasko 1994, 54-55; Beckwith 1989, 51.

cover is dated to c.870 AD and attributed to the Reims/Saint-Denis workshop.<sup>68</sup>

Ivory plaques have been used extensively for decorating book covers, and although less ostentatious, they display a subtle luminosity due to the nature of the material. The later Metz school of ivory carving consists of approximately forty pieces of which twenty-eight have been used on book covers.<sup>69</sup> They were highly regarded and tended to be reused and recycled for a number of later covers. One of the finest quality ivory plaques which is still retained in its original metalwork frame is the cover of a purple Gospel book of the Metz school [Pl.7.b]. The manuscript is dated to c.840 and the cover shortly after this.<sup>70</sup> The frame consists of enamel plaques mounted on to gilt-silver triple leaf collets. It is also one of the rare examples to have an inscription on the front and is executed in the same rustic capitals as found in the manuscript.<sup>71</sup> From the Romanesque period there is an elaborate book cover made by Roger of Helmarshausen, who is believed to have been Theophilus, the metalworker and author of *De diversis artibus*.<sup>72</sup> The cover, from the cathedral treasury of Trier, and which dates to c.1100, displays four splendid gold repoussé plaques depicting the symbols of the evangelists.<sup>73</sup> Although denuded of its principal settings for precious stones, the cover is a good example of the range of metalworking techniques explained in his treatise and includes numerous small settings, a background of tendril-like filigree and colourful cloisonné enamels [Pl.8].

Now that the accumulated evidence from historical references, depictions and surviving examples of book covers from western Europe has been assessed, the Insular material will be evaluated using the same criteria. As noted below, the absence of 'treasure bindings', which can be defined as opulent covers fabricated from gold and/or gilt-silver with polychrome settings and figural plaques, is probably due to the despoilations of ecclesiastical foundations during the Tudor and Cromwellian periods. However there are historical references to book covers which, allowing for exaggeration in the sources, would

---

<sup>68</sup> Lasko 1994, 54-55,

<sup>69</sup> Goldschmidt 1914, nos. 38-39, 81-119; Gaborit-Chopin 1978, 68 ff; Lasko 1994, 59-61.

<sup>70</sup> Paris Bib. Nat. Ms Lat. 9838; Steenbock 1965, no.33; Lasko 1994, 39, n.12.

<sup>71</sup> Lasko, *ibid*.

<sup>72</sup> Hawthorne and Smith (eds) 1979; Buckton 1994.

<sup>73</sup> Lasko 1994, 166.



have had comparable decoration to the European examples cited above. In a later section the possible mountings from a number of such bindings which survive in the archaeological record will be discussed.<sup>74</sup>

## **Irish and Anglo-Saxon book covers**

### **The role of the book in early medieval Ireland**

Books were highly regarded in early medieval Ireland, where there was a deep tradition of oral learning and a celebration of the acquisition of literacy. The earliest surviving texts, from the early seventh century, mainly comprise poetry, legal and genealogical texts.<sup>75</sup> The earliest Irish Christian texts were fragments of gospels, missals and psalters, including the *Usserianus primus* and the Cathach, which date from the late sixth to the early seventh century.<sup>76</sup> Literacy was well established in the ecclesiastical centres of Ireland by 600 AD. The Irish Christians placed a primary emphasis on the written word as a sacred sign and the gospels were revered as they were the Divine Word of God, the text basic to the Christian faith and essential to the performance of the liturgy. While there are no direct references to this in Ireland a parallel can be found at the synod of Hatfield, where, in 680, the authority of the gospels were recognised and recorded by Bede:

... we the venerable bishops of the island of Britain assembled in conclave at the place which is called in the Saxon language Haethfeld, having the most holy Gospels before us, herby unite to proclaim the true and orthodox faith.<sup>77</sup>

Hagiographical accounts and miracles concerning books will be discussed at a later stage.<sup>78</sup>

### **Historical references**

In early medieval Ireland books were produced on a large scale. Bede records that

---

<sup>74</sup> See pp. 38-43 below.

<sup>75</sup> Stevenson 1989 ,158.

<sup>76</sup> TCD MS 55; Alexander 1978, no. 1; RIA MS 12 R.33; Alexander 1978, no. 4; O'Sullivan 1994, 175-81.

<sup>77</sup> Colgrave and Mynors 1969, IV:17; Nunan 1992, 104. See pp. 46-48 below.

<sup>78</sup> See pp. 54-57 below.



in the eighth century English students who had travelled to Ireland to study were provided with the necessary books free.<sup>79</sup> Not all of these books would have required covers; some may have had the outer leaves left blank or else a loose wrapping of parchment may have formed a protective sheet. There is an germane incident in Jonas 'Life of Columbanus' in which Athala, the second abbot of Bobbio who was close to death, arranged to have the monastery's manuscripts bound in order to preserve them.<sup>80</sup> This incident would appear to indicate that the majority of manuscripts were left unbound, particularly in monastery libraries where they were used for study purposes. However service books used in the liturgy would have been bound as befits their contents, and personal books, such as pocket gospels, would have required a cover as they were more subject to wear and tear, especially if they travelled outside the confines of the monastery. When bindings were used for mundane volumes they would have been of plain, undyed leather covering wooden boards.

There are hagiographical accounts for the fabrication of decorated book covers in early medieval Ireland. In the Irish life of St Dageaus, Abbot of Inishcealtra (d.587), he is described as '... equally skilful in making covers for books, which he adorned with gold, silver and jewels.'<sup>81</sup> A further reference to the same saint can be found under the entry for the 18 August in the Martyrology of Donegal. John O'Donovan translated the passage as follows: 'He was a celebrated artificer. It was he that made 150 bells, 100 crosiers, and who made cases or covers for 60 Gospels.'<sup>82</sup>

There is also a pertinent reference in Tirechán's seventh-century account of Assicus, the goldsmith of St Patrick:

*Assicus sanctus episcopus faberaerus erat Patricio et faciebat altaria(e) bibliothicas qua(drata)s faciabat in patinos sancti nostri prohonore Patrici episcopi, et de illis tres patinos quadratos uidi, id est patinum in aeclessia Alo Find et tertium in aeclessia magna Saeoli Super altare Felarti sancti episcopi.*

Assicus the holy bishop was a coppersmith (in the service) of Patrick, and he

---

<sup>79</sup> Colgrave and Mynors 1969, III:27,195.

<sup>80</sup> McGrath 1979, 88, n.28.

<sup>81</sup> Kenney 1929, 383-4. Lawlor (1916, 310) provides a different reading: (Dageaus) '... not only copied Gospels but also made a beautiful case in which to keep them'.

<sup>82</sup> Cited in Todd and Reeves 1864, 223.

made altar-plates and square casks for the patens of our Saint in honour of bishop Patrick, and three of these square patens I have seen in Armagh, Ail Find, and the great church of Seól on the altar of the holy bishop Felartus.<sup>83</sup>

Bieler's translates *bibliothicas* in the above passage as 'casks' but the more probable meaning would be a covering or book shrine for a book.<sup>84</sup> Michael Ryan, in his reference to this passage, used the term 'bookcovers'.<sup>85</sup>

There are numerous documentary references to decorated Anglo-Saxon book covers. A ninth-century poem, *De Abbatibus*, by Aethelwulf, contains invaluable information concerning the architecture, furnishings and decoration of a contemporary Anglo-Saxon church. In the section describing the fittings there is a reference to: 'Sacred books ... and these (books) are covered by plate of bright ductile gold.'<sup>86</sup> Dodwell has provided further references to donations of gospel-books with decorated covers to ecclesiastical foundations by royal and ecclesiastical dignitaries.<sup>87</sup>

The renowned Insular illuminated manuscript, the Lindisfarne Gospels, has a colophon on f.259r which was written in the third quarter of the tenth century by Aldred, Provost of Chester-le-Street.<sup>88</sup> This may refer to the original cover of the manuscript and the relevant passage reads:

And Aethelwald, Bishop of the Lindisfarne-islanders, impressed it from (or on) the outside and covered it - as he well knew how to do. And Billfrith, the Anchorite, forged the ornaments which are on it on the outside and adorned it with gold and with gems and also with gilded-over silver - pure metal.<sup>89</sup>

Brown has argued that this was indeed a cover or binding and not a shrine or book

---

<sup>83</sup> Bieler 1979, 140-41.

<sup>84</sup> Prof Marvin Colker, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, (B. Meehan, pers. comm) translates *bibliotheca* as noted above. *Theke* in Greek means a case, box, or chest to store something, and Bieler translated this as 'cask', presumably an abbreviation of casket.

<sup>85</sup> Ryan 1988a, 36.

<sup>86</sup> Taylor 1974, 167.

<sup>87</sup> Dodwell 1982, 202-3.

<sup>88</sup> London, BL, Cotton MS Nero D.IV; Alexander 1978, no. 9.

<sup>89</sup> Brown and Bruce-Mitford 1956-60, 5; Brown 1956-60, 84-85.



box, as the work described was done to the book and not to a separate artefact.<sup>90</sup> Ryan has disputed this hypothesis and argued that Billfrith's work may have been carried out on the front of a book box.<sup>91</sup> The evidence will be assessed below.

The passage from the colophon is an apt demonstration of craft division: the book binder and goldsmith. Aethelwald 'impressed it and covered it'; this phrase would appear to be a reference to the stamping and tooling of the leather on the cover. Book binding would have entailed the preparation and processing of the vellum, the folding and sewing of the quires, and the subsequent attachment of the covers by stitching.<sup>92</sup> Aethelwald would also have had experience in the construction of wooden covers and the cutting out and decoration of the leather by tooling, stamping and possibly gilding. However a metalworker would have been required at some stage to fabricate the metal stamp for impressing the leather cover.<sup>93</sup> For the majority of book covers this would have been the extent of the decoration.<sup>94</sup> In the case of a more luxurious or 'treasure' binding, a goldsmith would have been employed to fabricate and attach the ornate metal mountings, such as bosses, medallions, fastening clasps and corner pieces. A rare set of early covers with both tooled and stamped decoration as well as metal mountings, are the covers of the Victor Codex [Pl.11].<sup>95</sup> In this case the metal mounts have been attached to the tooled and stamped leather with little regard for the underlying decorative scheme.<sup>96</sup> This would indicate that two separate craftsmen were associated with the decoration of the covers, unless the binder was also the person who attached the mounts, thus obscuring his own handiwork.<sup>97</sup> Surely he would have arranged the stamped decoration so that it would not be obscured by the metal mounts? Alternatively these mounts may have been added some time after the leather covers were made in order to protect them from damage and wear, but Wilson, who made

---

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., Brown 1956-60, 87.

<sup>91</sup> Ryan 1994, 272.

<sup>92</sup> For an excellent detailed technical description of the binding process employed on the Carolingian and Insular manuscripts at St Gall see Szirmai (1995, 158-174).

<sup>93</sup> This would only apply if there was no stock of stamps present in the workshop.

<sup>94</sup> For example the covers for Armagh, Fulda 3 and Stonyhurst. See pp. 36-38 below.

<sup>95</sup> Fulda, Landesbibliothek, *Codex Bonifatianus I*; Wilson 1961, 199-217.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 205, 215, fig.3. .

<sup>97</sup> This practice can also be seen on late medieval covers, for example Needham 1979, no.20.

a study of these covers, regards the mounts and cover as contemporary. However this interpretation is open to question and it is probable that the stamped decoration is earlier, with the mounts added subsequently to reinforce the cover.<sup>98</sup>

In some circumstances, the decoration of a book cover would be the work solely of a goldsmith. The binder would have left plain wooden boards for the goldsmith to apply the mountings to. Therefore in some examples there was no need to fabricate stamped and tooled leather covers. In the surviving luxurious bindings of the Carolingian, Ottonian and Romanesque periods the wooden boards are covered by plates of gilt-copper alloy, silver, gilt-silver and, more rarely, gold.<sup>99</sup> On to these were applied various mountings and collets containing precious stones, along with filigree, enamel, ivory and gold repoussé panels bearing abstract, zoomorphic and figurative ornament. There are three reasons for the use of decorative mountings on these covers: (1) the manuscript contained the Divine word and teachings of God and the covers were required to indicate the venerable contents. (2) Luxurious Carolingian and Ottonian manuscripts were usually produced under royal and/or ecclesiastical patronage and had sumptuous covers to reflect the status of the patrons. (3) Due to the large size and weight of these manuscripts the standard leather and wood bindings would have become scuffed and damaged through wear associated with the opening and handling of the manuscript. The addition of metal mounts would have both enhanced and protected the binding from damage. As a corollary these precious bindings and manuscripts would have required protection against wear and damage when not in use and it would only be a small step for the goldsmith to fabricate a box to house the manuscript. Eventually, this in turn would have been embellished with various materials and mountings to reflect the prestigious contents.<sup>100</sup>

If we return to the Lindisfarne colophon and the work of Billfrith, who 'forged the ornaments which are on it on the outside and adorned it ... with gilded over silver'; this would appear to imply that he had either overlaid Aethelwald's impressed cover (with gilt-silver plates) or else, a more likely scenario, constructed a box in which to contain and protect the venerated Gospels. Brown's contention that the work was done to the book could

---

<sup>98</sup> Wilson 1961, 215.

<sup>99</sup> See examples listed above, pp.17-22.

<sup>100</sup> This aspect will be dealt with in more detail in a later section, see pp.46-51.



still apply as the box/container would have been regarded as an integral part of the book by the time the colophon was written in the tenth century and may have been regarded as a shrine.<sup>101</sup>

A further account of the Lindisfarne Gospels, written in the early twelfth century by Symeon of Durham, who had knowledge of the manuscript, refers to it as: '... the Gospel Book, adorned with gold and precious stones.'<sup>102</sup> The manuscript was said to have been lost overboard during a violent storm in the Solway Firth when two church dignitaries were fleeing to Ireland to escape the Danes with the shrine of St Cuthbert in 875. After the intercession of St Cuthbert a search was made at low tide and the Gospel book '... which still has all its splendour of jewels and gold on the outside and the original beauty of its letters and pages within ... was recovered.'<sup>103</sup> These references to the manuscript may well allude to its box, as it is unlikely that it would have travelled far without a protective container. However Symeon's account could indicate an elaborate cover as by the twelfth century the cover may have been refurbished with new decorative mountings.

In the hagiographical references to St Dageus, the passages appear to imply that he was foremost a goldsmith, who was also skilled in making covers and/or boxes for books.<sup>104</sup> Again, allowing for hyperbole, the covers were probably of the luxurious type where the wooden boards were completely covered with metal mountings and sheets.

### Depictions of book covers in Insular art

This section evaluates depictions of book covers to see if they concur with the historical references and to provide visual evidence for the decorative scheme on covers.

All the major Insular manuscripts of the eighth and ninth centuries, the Book of Kells, the Lindisfarne, Echternach and Lichfield Gospels, St Gall Codex 51, the pocket

---

<sup>101</sup> Brown and Bruce-Mitford 1956-60, 5.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 21-3; Dodwell 1982, 97-8. The loss of a precious manuscript and its subsequent recovery from water unharmed was a common hagiographical episode, see pp. 55-56 below.

<sup>104</sup> See nn. 81-2 above for references.

gospel books of Moling and Dimma, the Book of Armagh, and the MacDurnan Gospels portray figures holding books with both plain and decorated covers.<sup>105</sup> The majority of these covers are plain, of red colouration with a gold or black border.<sup>106</sup>

A survey of the Book of Kells<sup>107</sup> produced a total of thirty-five illustrations of covers in the manuscript, of which five have some semblance of decoration.<sup>108</sup> The colours used are of a limited nature: on the plain covers, usually red, white or yellow. Decoration, where it occurs, is executed in green, purple or brown pigments forming simple geometric devices, for example saltires, lozenges, fret and step-patterns or combinations of all four. The decoration<sup>109</sup> does not appear to reflect surviving Insular and European examples which have been ornamented with tooling and blind stamps as well as ornamental metal mounts. The covers depicted in Kells have been decorated with the same repertoire of abstract motifs which are common throughout the manuscript. Cains has inferred that the original binding of Kells would have resembled the cover depicted on f.32v. His observations are as follows:

The cover is rendered in orange vermillion which could represent the crimson of Cordovan leather, a white tawed goatskin ... dyed on the surface with an organic red such as kermes or madder. The wooden boards would have been of thin-quartered oak with slightly rounded edges.<sup>110</sup>

These are a result of his researches into the construction and decoration of the original covers for the Book of Armagh<sup>111</sup> and of his expertise gained from the study and conservation of numerous medieval book covers. He does not deliberate on the type of

---

<sup>105</sup> TCD MS 58; Alexander 1978, no. 58; London, BL, Cotton MS Nero D.IV; Alexander 1978, no. 9; Paris, Bib. Nat. MS lat.9389; Alexander 1978, no. 11; Lichfield Cathedral, s.n.; Alexander 1978, no. 21; St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 51; Alexander 1978, no. 44; TCD MS 60; Alexander 1978, no. 45; TCD MS 59; Alexander 1978, no. 48; TCD MS 52; Alexander 1978, no. 53; London, Lambeth Palace Lib., MS 1370; Alexander 1978, no. 70.

<sup>106</sup> Casey (1984, *passim*) provides a catalogue of all book covers depicted in Insular manuscripts.

<sup>107</sup> TCD MS 58; Alexander 1978, no. 58. The writer used the facsimile, Fox (ed.), 1990.

<sup>108</sup> There may be more than five, but some illustrations are too faded, or else suffer loss of pigment to be able to state definitely whether decoration was intended. Some of the covers which appear to be open and display panel decoration may represent wax tablets.

<sup>109</sup> Except for f.291v, see below.

<sup>110</sup> Cains 1990, 206.

<sup>111</sup> TCD MS 52; Alexander 1978, no. 53.



decoration in Kells, but for a manuscript of this standing there would have at least have been some form of stamping and tooling in addition to decorative mounts.

The full page portrait of St John the Evangelist (f.291v) in the Book of Kells is depicted enthroned with a large decorated book held in his left-hand [Pl.2.a].<sup>112</sup> It displays a purple lozenge on a light brown background, framed by a red and black border, which has a semi-circular field in each corner giving rise to a cruciform shape with concave arms; this decoration may represent tooled motifs. There is also a faint red saltire painted over the purple lozenge. The lozenge prominently displayed on this cover is very similar to those depicted in the cupboard of the Ezra miniature, in which five of the eight covers have a large central lozenge.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, Calkins has argued that the covers bearing a lozenge motif in the Ezra miniature are volumes of the Old Testament.<sup>114</sup> He has also discussed the symbolism of the lozenge form equating it with cosmological significance: the four points can refer to the four winds, the four corners of the earth and the four cardinal points.<sup>115</sup> Lozenges can also be seen in the *Majestas Domini* miniature in the First Bible of Charles the Bald, which is dated to 845/6, where the four evangelists, four prophets and the symbols of the evangelists are placed at salient points of the lozenge.<sup>116</sup> A second example of a *Majestas Domini* placed within a lozenge is present in the less accomplished Grandval Bible, which is dated to 834/43.<sup>117</sup> Hollander has illustrated the probable origin of the lozenge with mandorlas at the corners: a symbolic diagram of the world from an astronomical manuscript written at Salzberg c.818.<sup>118</sup>

There are also depictions of book covers with decorative mountings in the corpus of

---

<sup>112</sup> TCD MS 58; Alexander 1978, no. 58.

<sup>113</sup> Haseloff 1978, fig.4. See pp. 13-15 above for discussion of the Ezra miniature.

<sup>114</sup> Calkins 1986, 77.

<sup>115</sup> Richardson (1984, 32,45; 1996, 24-25) has drawn attention to the Christian symbolism of the lozenge and provides examples where it is prominently displayed on prestige artefacts and manuscripts, for example the Chi-Rho page (f.34r) and f.290v in the Book of Kells, on the west face of the high cross at Moone and on the fronts of the 'Tara', Roscrea and other elaborate penannular brooches (ibid., figs.7,8,9c,9b,1a,10). Richardson has argued that a single lozenge displayed probably represents Christ, the Logos. For further discussion on the cosmological imagery of the lozenge see Whitfield (1997, 498-9, n.19) and Werner (1994, 474, n.118).

<sup>116</sup> Paris, Bib. Nat. MS lat.I, f.330v; Calkins 1986, pl.50; Dodwell 1993, pl.58.

<sup>117</sup> London, BL, MS. Add. 10546, f.352v; Dodwell 1993, pl.55.

<sup>118</sup> Vienna, Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 387, f.1341; Hollander 1990, pl.64.

Insular manuscripts housed on the continent.<sup>119</sup> In his discussion on the metal mounts attached to an Anglo-Saxon bookbinding at Fulda, Wilson cited a depiction of a supposed metal-mounted bookbinding held by the symbol of St Matthew in the Echternach Gospels.<sup>120</sup> These take the form of small rectangular clasps positioned along the edges of the page. As lettering is shown, the interior of the codex, rather than the cover, is depicted and therefore Wilson was mistaken as these mounts are not representative of those shown on covers.

More typical examples of decorated book covers include the four evangelist symbols page in the Trier Gospels, where the portrait bust of a figure is shown holding a book cover adorned with five small circular mounts in the form of a cross [Pl.9.e].<sup>121</sup> These mounts may have been intended to represent metal bosses or settings of glass, amber or precious stones. The manuscript is dated to the second quarter of eighth century.<sup>122</sup> The symbol of St Matthew placed in the tympanum above the evangelist portrait in the mid eighth-century Stockholm Codex Aureus holds a red cover with a black border which has three applied mounts: a central medallion flanked by two rectangular mounts, all of which appear to be attached by protruding nails [Pl.9.d].<sup>123</sup> These mounts, which most likely represent metal plaques and a boss or medallion, are dark-grey with a black border. Three red clasps hold the covers in a closed position, and as the folios are evident, a book cover, and not a book shrine or reliquary is depicted. Whereas the covers depicted in the Book of Kells do not clearly show the type of decoration employed, that is, whether stamped or tooled leather, this example clearly shows separate mounts attached to the cover. The figure in the right medallion placed above the capital holds what may be a red book cover decorated with blind tooling in the form of a black saltire and gold dots. However the black saltire may also indicate a fold-over flap on a book satchel.<sup>124</sup> The evangelist portrait of St Luke from the ninth-century Book of MacDurnan holds a book which has three circular medallions placed

---

<sup>119</sup> *Contra* Ryan 1994, 272.

<sup>120</sup> Paris, Bib. Nat. MS lat.9389, f.18v; Alexander 1978, no. 11; Wilson 1961, 213, Nordenfalk 1977, pl.9.

<sup>121</sup> Trier, Domschatz Codex 61, f.1v; Alexander 1978, no. 26, pl.114.

<sup>122</sup> A similar cover is held by St Matthew, f.18v, in the same manuscript (Alexander 1978, pl.111).

<sup>123</sup> Stockholm, Royal Library., MS A. 135, f.9v; Alexander no. 30; Brown 1991, no.154.

<sup>124</sup> There is a good illustration of this in Nordenfalk (1977, pl.36) and Webster and Backhouse [(eds) 1991, pl. 154].



along the upper edge [Pl.9.c].<sup>125</sup> Although it is likely that the object held by St Luke is a book cover, with the medallions representing clasps or decorative mountings, these are comparable to the decorated medallions found on the side panels of the Lough Kinale book shrine [Pl.54].<sup>126</sup>

The most elaborate bindings depicted are those held by the evangelist symbols of Sts Mark and Matthew (ff.110, 18r) in the Bavarian Codex Millenarius, which has been dated to c.800 AD.<sup>127</sup> The lion of St Mark holds a large codex which has three prominent mounts fixed to the cover: two of these are right-angled corner mounts, while the central one consists of an openwork circular medallion [Pl.9.b].<sup>128</sup> There are also faint lines which form a lozenge shape framing the octofoil mount. This latter mount is very similar in form to three octofoil openwork mounts excavated from Whitby Abbey, Yorkshire, and which have been described as mounts from book covers or shrines [Pl.12.a].<sup>129</sup> The angel of St Matthew holds a large codex with has a red cover on to which are placed three right-angled corner mounts, four circular medallions (of bird's-nest type) which appear to retain central studs, and a central rectangular plaque with a red quatrefoil mount [Pl.9.a].<sup>130</sup> These depictions will be discussed further below.

From the later Anglo-Saxon period there are several depictions of book covers, mostly plain, but some exhibit mountings. Two elegantly drawn figures of God the Father and God the Son from the Sherbourne Pontifical are depicted with each holding a large codex which has a mount in the shape of a latin cross with a central boss and expanded terminals [Pl.9.f].<sup>131</sup> These crosses are painted black and contrast with the fine line drawing of the figures. The manuscript is dated to the last quarter or the tenth century.<sup>132</sup>

---

<sup>125</sup> London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 1370, f.115v; Alexander 1978, no.70; Henry 1967, pl.L.

<sup>126</sup> Kelly 1993, fig.20:3.

<sup>127</sup> These are also known as the Kremsmunster Gospels (Kremsmunster, Stiftsbibliothek, Cim.1) - See Neuman De Vegvar (1990, n.32) for further references.

<sup>128</sup> Illustrated in Neumann de Vegvar (1990, fig.17) and Skubiszewski (1995, 72).

<sup>129</sup> Webster 1991, no.107 (a).

<sup>130</sup> Skubiszewski 1995, 70-74.

<sup>131</sup> Paris, Bib. Nat., ms lat.943, ff.5b,6.

<sup>132</sup> Temple 1976, no.35, pls.135-6; Turner 1984, no.34.

As with manuscript illumination, there are numerous depictions of book covers in metalwork, sculpture and ivory carving but only a small amount of these show decorative covers. In Irish early medieval metalwork all the depictions of books appear plain, but wear and corrosion may have effaced any decorative details that were present. For example, the eighth-century figure of an ecclesiastic from Aghaboe, Co Laois, holds a crosier in his right hand and a book in his left and the worn figure on the crest of the tenth-century Corp Naomh shrine holds a book in front of his chest [Pl.77].<sup>133</sup> Representations from the eleventh and twelfth centuries include the ecclesiastic on the side of the Soisceál Molaisse and the figures on the Breac Maedhóg and St Manachán's shrine who hold small unadorned books [Pls.26,75,110.b].

One indirect metalwork representation of a possible book, albeit the most elaborate, is to be seen in a prominent position between the terminals on the front of the Hunterston brooch. Stevenson argued that this rectangular panel, which is composed of filigree and amber settings forming a cross, resembles a miniature book cover.<sup>134</sup> He contended that its form may have been determined by a prototype which incorporated a small reliquary box between the terminals. The form of the cross, a large central rectangle with four smaller rectangular arms emanating from it, conforms to Steenbock's 'Codex Aureus' group of book covers.<sup>135</sup>

There are, however, two rudimentary depictions in metalwork of decorated book covers from the Anglo-Saxon period. A crudely incised plaque from Hexham, which is dated to the late seventh or early eighth centuries and may be a mounting from a book cover, portrays a saint holding a book cover or shrine to his chest.<sup>136</sup> The cover is ornamented with an incised cross and a semi-circular line. The second example is found on the front of the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon house-shaped shrine from Mortain, France.<sup>137</sup> On the front face there is a half-length figure of Christ who holds a partially obscured book cover which

---

<sup>133</sup> Ryan 1983, no.46; De Paor, M. 1977, no.56. For a recent review of the dating of this shrine see Johnson (1997, 230-233).

<sup>134</sup> Stevenson 1974, 40, fig.3:a. This panel, which is usually obscured by the pin of the brooch, is illustrated in Nieke (1993, 130, fig.15:2) who has also discussed the symbolism of this panel.

<sup>135</sup> Steenbock 1965, 37-8, figs. 26-8.

<sup>136</sup> Webster 1991, no.104.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., no.137.



is decorated with small repoussé bosses.<sup>138</sup> These form a central rosette with an additional line of single bosses along the edges.

As with metalwork, all the representations of book covers in stone have suffered wear, erosion and damage, so any decoration, which would have been either carved in relief, incised or painted, is now absent. Harbison's catalogue of the Irish high crosses provides approximately twenty-five examples of figures holding books, all of which have plain covers.<sup>139</sup> A rare decorated example is found on the twelfth-century carved effigy of a bishop with outstretched arms from Aghalurcher, Co Fermanagh, who holds a crosier in his right hand and a book in his left hand.<sup>140</sup> The figure is extremely abraded but the outline of a relief cross with circular terminals can be discerned on the carving.

In Pictish and Anglo-Saxon sculpture there are many representations of books, particularly from the Northumbrian and Yorkshire regional schools. However, as with the Irish material, there are few examples of books with decorated covers. A portion of an early ninth-century sarcophagus from Caistor, Northants., depicts an ecclesiastic holding a book which is decorated with a cross composed of four triquetra knots [Pl.9.h].<sup>141</sup> A cross base from Auckland St Andrew, Durham, portrays an ecclesiastic holding a book in his draped left hand.<sup>142</sup> The cover has a central boss with a semi-circular mount on each corner [Pl.9.g].

The few Insular and Anglo-Saxon depictions referred to above do not compare to the Late Antique, Carolingian, Ottonian and Byzantine examples which are much more extravagant. However the form and disposition of the mounts are similar on all depictions: they usually comprise medallions and bosses, interspersed with rectangular plaques and L-shaped mounts to form compositions based on a cross. The Insular depictions are either small-scale (as seen on manuscripts) or restricted by the medium (stone sculpture) which are

---

<sup>138</sup> Haseloff 1978, fig.3:1.

<sup>139</sup> 1992, *passim*.

<sup>140</sup> McNab 1986, pl.56; McNab 1987-8, pl.8a; Hickey 1986, 58, fig.20b.

<sup>141</sup> Cramp 1977, pl.58b; Webster and Backhouse (eds), 1991, fig.22. This depicted cover is analogous in layout and motif to the cover of the Cadmug Gospels [Pl.10.b] (see pp.36-37 below).

<sup>142</sup> Cramp 1984, vol.1,ii, pl.5:15.

not capable of rendering the elaborate detail of a decorated cover. Depictions from the Late Antique, Carolingian, Ottonian and Byzantine periods are found in large-scale decorative programmes such as fresco and mosaic which have not survived in the Insular world but are capable of displaying a book cover in all its glory. Other media where book covers are depicted such as devotional ivories and icons are also lacking in the Insular record. Treasure bindings would have been known in Insular art but would have lacked the pearls, gemstones, cloisonné enamels and the lavish use of gold as seen on Late Antique, Carolingian, Ottonian and Byzantine covers. The corresponding Insular covers would have been restricted to the known materials and techniques: gilt and tinned copper alloy mounts, stamped foils, filigree, and polychrome champlevé enamel copper alloy mounts. The next section will attempt to determine if this meagre evidence of the depictions is corroborated by surviving book covers.

### Surviving book covers

**Anglo-Saxon covers.** There are a small number of surviving Insular and Anglo-Saxon book covers which will now be discussed. The earliest, and smallest, are the covers of the Stonyhurst Gospels of St John [Pl. 10.a].<sup>143</sup> This book was discovered within a red leather satchel inside St Cuthbert's coffin during the translation of his relics to the sanctuary of Durham Cathedral in 1104, and has been dated to c.698 AD.<sup>144</sup> The cover is manufactured from goatskin, stained crimson and is attached to thin boards of birch. The skin on the upper cover, while damp, was moulded over cord to form a decorative vine-scroll motif which is framed, top and bottom, by a tooled rectangular panel of interlaced knotwork, and by a simple two-strand interlace pattern. The back cover is decorated with incised lines forming a step pattern which is bordered by three rectangles. These tooled lines were filled with blue and yellow pigment which still survives in most areas.<sup>145</sup> The binding is of interest as it demonstrates the skill of the book-binder rather than the metalworker, whose mountings usually obscure the binder's tooled leather ornamentation.

The most elaborate of the Insular and Anglo-Saxon bindings is the Victor Codex which is dated from the mid-to late-eighth century, and is preserved in the Landesbibliothek,

---

<sup>143</sup> London, BL, Loan MS 74. The dimensions of the covers are 13.8 x 9.2 cm.

<sup>144</sup> Backhouse 1991, no.86.

<sup>145</sup> Powell 1969, 45-53.



Fulda.<sup>146</sup> It consists of two leather-covered oak boards with twenty-two metal mounts still in place [PI.11].<sup>147</sup> The leather is a cherry-red colour, and is decorated with stamps forming palmette, rosette and floral motifs. Bronze die-stamped panels, decorated with interlace, are inset into silver triangular and L-shaped mounts which are situated along the edges and corners of the binding. These latter mounts have ornithomorphic terminals. It is a large binding, with each cover measuring 28.5 x 14.2 cm.

Two other book-bindings, also associated with St Boniface, survive in the Landesbibliothek, Fulda. The cover of the Ragyndrudis codex is incomplete, with only approximately one third of the upper cover surviving.<sup>148</sup> Haseloff has published a comprehensive account and has reconstructed the original decorative scheme.<sup>149</sup> From the method and style of the decoration it appears to be related to Coptic covers, such as those from Hamuli, Egypt.<sup>150</sup> It consists of a double sheet of leather which is attached to wooden boards. The outer leather sheet is pierced to form cruciform, hexafoil and lentoid openwork motifs disposed around a central cross with rectangular terminals. A contrast is achieved with the lower sheet which is dyed a red colour and is visible through the apertures. The manuscript is believed to date from the early part of the eighth century and originated from the scriptorium of Luxeuil, where it appears, the cover was also manufactured. The third cover will be discussed in the next section.

Pollard has produced a catalogue of sixteen surviving Anglo-Saxon bindings, all of undecorated leather attached to wooden boards and dating from the tenth to the twelfth centuries.<sup>151</sup>

### **Irish Early Medieval book covers**

Documentary evidence records that covers originally existed for the psalter of late

---

<sup>146</sup> *Codex Bonifatianus I*; Wilson 1961, 199-217.

<sup>147</sup> As stated above (p.30), Wilson is correct in his dating of the metal mounts to the eighth century but the stamped leather cover may be earlier.

<sup>148</sup> *Codex Bonifatianus II*.

<sup>149</sup> Haseloff 1978, 1-46; See Harbison (1986, pl.4:4-f) for an illustration of the cover.

<sup>150</sup> See p.17 above for references.

<sup>151</sup> Pollard 1975, 130-59.

sixth- to early seventh-century date known as the Cathach.<sup>152</sup> When the shrine was opened in 1813 by Sir William Betham, he found, in with the manuscript : '... a thin board covered with red, leather, very like that with which eastern mss are bound...'<sup>153</sup> Unfortunately the subsequent fate of the cover is unknown, and there are no records of the size, shape or decoration. If this was the original cover for the Cathach, it would have been the earliest surviving example of a European leather binding. There may have been some form of decoration, but Betham's terse reference to 'eastern mss' is tantalising. A plain red leather cover would have no particular affiliations to any provenance, but surviving Coptic, Syrian and Islamic covers are usually ornamented with stamping, tooling and/or openwork patterns. This may imply that the cover of the Cathach was decorated in a similar manner.

Of the surviving Irish book covers the most complete are those of the Cadmug Gospels, a manuscript which is believed to be Irish and dates from the second half of the eighth century [Pl.10.b].<sup>154</sup> The diminutive dark-red leather cover, of similar size to the Stonyhurst Gospels, is decorated with fine incised lines forming a St Andrew's cross with a triquetra knot placed in each quadrant.<sup>155</sup>

The original covers for the Book of Armagh, the manuscript of which dates to c.807, were rediscovered in 1961 by John Waterer while examining the leather satchel associated with the manuscript.<sup>156</sup> Betham provided a brief description of the original covers, but at this stage there were remains of a secondary black leather cover in place which obscured the original decoration.<sup>157</sup> These covers comprise oak boards lined with vellum and covered with kermes or madder-dyed goatskin. Although the goatskin covers are in a bad state of repair the original decoration has been resolved and reconstructed by Anthony G. Cains, Trinity College Library. The decoration was applied by creasing and stamping which formed a repeating pattern of a triquetra knot placed within a palmette along the edges, and a panel of knotwork contained within a square field in each of the corners. In the centre there is a

---

<sup>152</sup> RIA Ms No.12 R 33; Alexander 1978, no.4.

<sup>153</sup> Betham 1826, 110.

<sup>154</sup> Fulda, Landesbibliothek, *Codex Bonifatianus* III. Alexander 1978, no.49.

<sup>155</sup> Haseloff 1981, 64. The dimensions of the cover are 12.5 x 11 cm.

<sup>156</sup> TCD MS 52; Alexander 1978, no.53; Meehan 1997, 91.

<sup>157</sup> Betham 1827, 251.



large rectangular panel of two-strand angular interlace punctuated by stamped circles. There are also fragmentary remains of a copper alloy clasp and numerous late medieval tin nails which partially obscure the original decorative scheme.<sup>158</sup> Cain's analysis has led him to conclude that the manuscript's binding structure is of Carolingian type. The tooled and stamped decoration on the covers have their closest parallels on the Continent. Comparable examples can be seen on the lower cover of a manuscript from the Abbey of St Gall<sup>159</sup> and three covers attached to manuscripts which were written in the scriptorium of St Denis at the beginning of the ninth century.<sup>160</sup> However the motifs present on the Armagh covers, triquetra knots, palmettes and angular interlace, are prevalent in Irish medieval art. It would appear unlikely that mundane covers of the required size were obtained from abroad specifically for the Book of Armagh and thus the Armagh covers should be considered Irish.

The Stowe Missal also has an early binding consisting of oak boards covered with vellum and strips of red-stained kidskin.<sup>161</sup> Anthony Cains considers these to be, at the latest, eleventh or twelfth century in date, and possibly contemporary with the manuscript.<sup>162</sup> There is also a portion of leather excavated from an early eleventh-century level in Fishamble St, Dublin, which is decorated with tooled parallel lines and a single stamp in the form of a ringed cross and may therefore be a fragment of a book cover.<sup>163</sup>

From the four book covers cited above three can be considered Irish. The covers for the Cathach manuscript were lost in the last century and cannot be assessed, but it is probable that a personal psalter would have had covers of local manufacture. The various mountings which may have formed part of a book cover will now be assessed using the evidence of depictions and surviving examples from Late Antique, Carolingian and Ottonian

---

<sup>158</sup> This information was relayed by Tony Cains in an unpublished talk **Bookbinding in Early Christian Ireland**, read to the RSAI on the 14 May 1990. I wish to acknowledge Tony Cains' generosity in discussing the nature of the decoration, and in providing me with a copy of his reconstructed decorative scheme for the Armagh covers.

<sup>159</sup> St Gall Cod. 457 (s.ix); Szirmai 1995, 172-74, fig.29.

<sup>160</sup> Paris, Bib. Nat. MS. lat. 1611; Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Augiensis lxxiv; Vezin 1988, figs. 17, 19.

<sup>161</sup> RIA MS D.ii. 3; Alexander 1978, no. 47; Dolan 1983, no.53.

<sup>162</sup> Pers. comm.

<sup>163</sup> Unpublished, E172:2748, Fishamble Street, Sq. 1. This identification as a fragment of a book cover has yet to be confirmed.

periods.

### Mounts from Insular and Anglo-Saxon book covers

There are numerous mounts in existence which have been described as adornments for book covers. However, from the extensive range of mounts discovered in Ireland, England, and from Viking burials and settlements in Scandinavia it is difficult to determine which were used specifically for adorning book covers. For example the Athlone crucifixion plaque has been previously described as a decorative mount for a book cover,<sup>164</sup> but as Ryan points out, crucifixion plaques may have been utilised for processional crosses, altar frontals, reliquaries or other ecclesiastical artefacts of which we have no knowledge.<sup>165</sup>

With the recent discovery of two Irish early medieval ecclesiastical treasures: the Lough Kinale Book Shrine and a wood and metal processional cross from Tully Lough, Co Roscommon, many miscellaneous plaques, bosses, mounts and binding strips can now be seen to have functioned as shrine or cross mounts, rather than book mounts. Both the Lough Kinale shrine and the Tully Lough cross display very similar hemispherical bosses decorated with Ultimate La Tène motifs.<sup>166</sup> This shows that metalworking centres produced a number of components which could be employed on a wide range of complex artefacts and were not manufactured specifically for one type of object.

When attempting to identify mounts for book covers from the large quantity of potential material, certain criteria should be observed in order to narrow the range of possibilities. A factor to take into consideration is the size of the manuscript; small pocket gospel books, such as Cadmug and Stonyhurst,<sup>167</sup> would have tended to avoid large applied mounts, as these would have caused strain to the binding. Larger codices, such as luxurious gospels or pandects, would have had mounts of robust construction in order to re-enforce and protect the corners and edges of the covers. The use of a cross on book covers (as seen on the depictions referred to above) would have served as an apotropaic device, and would

---

<sup>164</sup> Mitchell 1977, no.29.

<sup>165</sup> Ryan 1989, no.133; 1994, 271, n.5.

<sup>166</sup> Kelly 1993, 173-4.

<sup>167</sup> Fulda, Landesbibliothek *Codex Bonifatianus* III; Alexander 1978, no. 49; The St Cuthbert Gospel of St John, London, BL, Loan MS 74.



have demonstrated that the enclosed manuscript was a gospel book.<sup>168</sup> The cross may be a single applied mount, or a more common method, the mounts would have been arranged or positioned in the form of a cross.

Using the criteria outlined above, the following copper alloy mounts may have adorned book covers. The first to be considered are the Irish mountings of eighth- and ninth-century date from Viking burials and settlements in Scandinavia and Germany. Typical examples are a rectangular plaque from Alstad, Norway, and an L-shaped plaque from Sogge, Norway.<sup>169</sup> Wamers has published the Sogge mount and described it as part of a mounting from a book-cover. The shape and size of this mount corroborates his identification.<sup>170</sup>

Egil Bakka has commented on and illustrated some of the above pieces in greater detail. For example, he considers the Alstad mount to be a mount from a book cover.<sup>171</sup> A lozenge-shaped plaque from Bjorke, which has fine chip-carved interlace and beast-heads disposed around an Anglian cross, has also been discussed and described as a mount from a book cover.<sup>172</sup> The cross on this mount can only be perceived when the mount is rotated 45 degrees, and not as a rectangle. This led Bakka to compare the mount to the prominent lozenge featured on the book held by St John (f.291v) in the Book of Kells and to the volumes depicted in the cupboard in the Ezra miniature in the Codex Amiatinus [Pls.2.a;1.b].<sup>173</sup>

A number of objects surviving from Anglo-Saxon and Irish contexts can be described as mounts from book-covers using the criteria outlined above. Three openwork mountings, in the form of octofoils enclosing superimposed crosses and decorated with chip-carved interlace and beast heads, were excavated from Whitby Abbey, Yorkshire and are dated to

---

<sup>168</sup> Kelly 1994, 282-3.

<sup>169</sup> Warners 1985, nos. 19, 39; pls.9:3; 6:3.

<sup>170</sup> Warners 1983, 290.

<sup>171</sup> Bakka 1963, 37-40.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 12-15; Wamers 1985, no.46, pl.10:3.

<sup>173</sup> TCD MS 58; Alexander 1978, no. 58; Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana. MS Amiatinus 1; Alexander 1978, no. 7. These parallels have previously been noted, see pp.13-14, 29 above.

the mid-eighth century [Pl.12.a].<sup>174</sup> Cramp also discussed these mounts and supported the hypotheses that they are mounts from book-covers.<sup>175</sup> The low relief casting and the cruciform design provides further proof for this function. Additional evidence, which has not been remarked upon by previous scholars, may be seen in the Codex Millenarius where the symbols of St Mark and St Matthew hold books with a central mount which appears to be in the form of a cross within an octofoil [Pl.9.a,b].<sup>176</sup> These depictions are analogous to the Whitby mounts. This manuscript was produced near Salzberg, Bavaria, a region whose church was organised by Anglo-Saxon clergy in the eighth century and some of the decoration in the manuscript demonstrates Insular traits.<sup>177</sup> The Abbey of St Peter, Salzburg, was ruled by Abbot Virgil, an Irish scholar who was trained at Iona.<sup>178</sup>

Wilson has drawn attention to an unlocalised mount in the Landesmuseum, Bonn, which is of similar form and decoration to the Whitby mounts. It is illustrated and described with the dominant cross in a diagonal position.<sup>179</sup> If, however, the mount is rotated at an angle to conform to a lozenge shape [Pl.12.b] it can be seen that the decoration and form also resemble the Bjorke mount. Indeed the openwork and zoomorphic ornament as well as the lozenge configuration would tend to view this mount as a composite of the Bjorke and Whitby mounts, and is thus even closer to the Millenarius depiction in the angel of St Matthew. These metalwork parallels, as well as the Codex Millenarius depictions outlined above, would indicate that this is also a mount from a book cover.

A recent acquisition by the NMI, which was recovered from Breakey Lough, Co Meath, fits the criteria for a mount for a book cover [Pl.13.a]. The cruciform shape, low relief and the nail holes at the ends of the arms show that this would have adorned a book cover. It is a cast openwork mount in the form of a cross with triangular-shaped voids at the

---

<sup>174</sup> Webster 1991, no.107:a.

<sup>175</sup> Cramp 1993, 67-8.

<sup>176</sup> Kremsmunster, Stiftsbibliothek, Cim. 1. These are also known as the Kremsmunster Gospels.

<sup>177</sup> Neumann de Vegvar 1990, 17.

<sup>178</sup> Webster 1991, 171.

<sup>179</sup> Wilson 1964, 15, pl.1:b.



ends of the arms, and is fabricated from tinned copper alloy.<sup>180</sup> The decoration comprises linked peltae and trumpet scrolls surrounding a central asymmetrical circular motif, all of which can be paralleled to the decoration on the Clonmore house-shaped shrine and would indicate a date in the late-sixth to early seventh centuries AD.<sup>181</sup>

Two mounts, of similar shape and decoration, and dated to the eighth-century, were discovered in the Phoenix Park, Dublin, during the last century. One, from a Viking grave of a female, was adapted as a brooch; the find circumstances of the second are unknown but may have originated from the same grave. Both are triangular in shape and fabricated from gilt-copper alloy [Pl. 15.c,d]. The mount from the Viking grave is solid cast and decorated with a pair of addorsed beasts with back-turning heads.<sup>182</sup> The second mount is a delicately cast openwork design decorated with Ultimate La Tène motifs and animal interlace.<sup>183</sup>

From the shape and low relief decoration it appears that these functioned as mounts to embellish and protect the corners of an elaborate book cover, possibly a large heavy binding subject to wear, such as the Victor Codex, which has triangular mounts in this position [Pl. 11].<sup>184</sup> It has been suggested that the openwork mount, in addition to being described as a mount for a book cover, could also have been attached to a book shrine, altar or other form of reliquary.<sup>185</sup> However, a striking parallel for mounts of similar form is found on f.94v of the Lindisfarne Gospels [Pl. 14].<sup>186</sup> This cross-carpet page appears to mimic an ostentatious metalwork book cover or shrine which was rendered into two dimensions by the skill of the illuminator. Other authors have elicited metalwork parallels for the ornament in this page but have not commented on the similarity of the Phoenix Park mounts.<sup>187</sup> Backhouse has compared the ornament of the central medallion to the millefiori

---

<sup>180</sup> NMI RD:656. The mount was recovered from a crannóg in Breakey Lough by a metal-detectorist.

<sup>181</sup> Bourke 1993a, 1994/5, 1995b.

<sup>182</sup> Hall 1974, 40-43.

<sup>183</sup> Ó'Floinn 1989b, no.145.

<sup>184</sup> Fulda, Landesbibliothek, *Codex Bonifatianus I*. See pp.34-35 above for a more detailed description of this cover.

<sup>185</sup> Ó'Floinn 1989, 150.

<sup>186</sup> London, BL, Cotton MS Nero D.IV; Alexander 1978, no. 9; Backhouse 1981, pl.27.

<sup>187</sup> For example Calkins (1983,74).

and garnet inlays in the Sutton Hoo shoulder clasps<sup>188</sup> but the medallion is more likely to be an imitation of a cloisonné enamel or glass stud, examples of which were excavated from Lagore, Co Meath and Deer Park Farms, Co Antrim.<sup>189</sup> The four rectangular fields placed near the corners bear Ultimate La Tène decoration akin to that found on the reverse or the 'Tara' and Hunterston brooches.<sup>190</sup> Placed equidistant around the central medallion are four triangular panels which appear to float above the background of interlace.<sup>191</sup> The two lower panels contain contorted beasts and birds entangled in interlace, while the upper fields display a pair of confronted beasts with interlaced necks and hindquarters [Pl.15.b]. A mount of Phoenix Park type, with similar truncated ends and zoomorphic decoration, must have been the model which Eadfrith had in mind when illuminating this page.<sup>192</sup> If the hypothesis is correct that carpet pages acted as interior covers for protecting the *Initia* (in this instance the *Initia* of St Mark's Gospel) and that the design of carpet pages imitated book covers,<sup>193</sup> then Eadfrith may have followed convention by reproducing an idealised book cover, box or shrine. The disposition of the triangular panels in the carpet page form a negative cross composed of interlace with the medallion at its centre. The background of interlace may emulate an elaborate tooled leather book cover, and may imply that the decorative leather was overlain by contemporary metal mounts. Metalwork mounts of Phoenix Park type may have been placed in from the corners on a cover to form a negative cross in conjunction with other mounts, such as a central medallion or lozenge-shaped plaque. Conversely, the decoration on the lower cover of the Stonyhurst Gospels<sup>194</sup> consists of incised lines forming a stepped/grid pattern which compares to the rectangular grids found on inlaid glass and polychrome enamel studs, such as those present on the stand from the Derrynaflan paten and on the front of the Lough Gara buckle.<sup>195</sup> The yellow and blue pigments which were inlaid into the lines of the book cover may have been intended

---

<sup>188</sup> 1981, 74-5.

<sup>189</sup> Ó'Floinn 1989b, no.209; Webster 1989, no.210.

<sup>190</sup> Ryan 1983a, no.48; Spearman 1989, no.69.

<sup>191</sup> Backhouse 1981, pl.51.

<sup>192</sup> The ends of the openwork mount appear to have been deliberately snipped off thus forming truncated ends.

<sup>193</sup> Kitzinger 1974, 17.

<sup>194</sup> The St Cuthbert Gospel of St John, London, BL, Loan MS 74.

<sup>195</sup> Ryan 1983b, pls. 70-71; Ryan 1989, no.46.



to imitate gold or silver metallic grids inlaid into studs.

The relationships between the Phoenix Park mounts and the Lindisfarne carpet page, and their influence on the design for book covers will be discussed further below.

### **Relationships between carpet pages and book covers**

The late Robert Stevenson considered the term 'carpet page' a misnomer due to its connotations with Oriental textiles and proposed the term 'screen page' as an alternative. He followed Victor Elbern's research, who contended that these pages had an apotropaic function and were used to 'fence off and delimit the entry to the sacred and ritual mysteries metaphysically as well as physically'.<sup>196</sup> These issues of apotropaicism have been dealt with in detail by other scholars. Lawrence Nees has proposed that the imagery of the four evangelists was regarded as an apotropaic element in England from the tenth century onwards. When associated with a cross, the image became even more potent and was used in elaborate ceremonial rituals for the fertilisation of barren fields.<sup>197</sup> Furthermore, in manuscript illumination, the use of a prominent cross filled with interlace was also considered to be a powerful apotropaic symbol, as knots, which are a fundamental component of interlace, were used as magical talismans.<sup>198</sup> These interlace-filled crosses were used to protect and guard the sacred Word of God, present in the gospels, from intrusive malevolent forces. Therefore, symbols such as the interlace-filled cross, were used as apotropaic devices on manuscript frontpieces,<sup>199</sup> carpet pages,<sup>200</sup> book covers,<sup>201</sup> and book shrines.<sup>202</sup> In a further paper Nees discussed the relevance and presence of cross carpet pages in Syriac manuscripts of the sixth and seventh centuries, where, in conjunction

---

<sup>196</sup> Stevenson 1982, 15; Nordenfalk 1974, 225.

<sup>197</sup> Nees 1978, 5.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., n.29. See Kitzinger (1993, 3-6) for further examples of knots and interlace used as apotropaic devices.

<sup>199</sup> The Book of Durrow, TCD MS 57, f.2r.

<sup>200</sup> For example the Book of Lindisfarne (London, BL, Cotton MS Nero D.IV), folios 2v, 26v, 94v, 138v, 210v (Backhouse 1981, pls. 19, 24, 28, 31, 34).

<sup>201</sup> A fifth-century mosaic depiction of a book cover in San Gennaro, Naples, where Evangelist symbols are disposed around a central cross (Nees 1978, figs.2-3). See above pp.15-16.

<sup>202</sup> The front of the Soisceál Molaisse bears the symbols of the four evangelists placed around a central cross which contains panels of knotwork and interlaced filigree [Pl.24].

with magical inscriptions, they functioned as apotropaic devices.<sup>203</sup> He has also surveyed the apotropaic use of crosses and evangelist symbols in Early Christian texts, pre-Carolingian book illumination, Insular and Armenian crosses, and the Merovingian funerary complex at Hypogée des Dunes, Poitiers.<sup>204</sup> These observations corroborate Stevenson's and Elbern's researches.

Robert Calkins has discussed and expanded Nees' observations and applied them to the realm of the Insular gospel books, as well as providing a review of theories for the origin of cross-carpet pages from textiles and metalwork.<sup>205</sup> He concluded that carpet pages were intended to function as 'interior covers', opening and closing the entire text and prefacing the incipits of each gospel. Furthermore he proposed that a metalwork cover, such as the depiction of a book cover held by Christ Pantocrator at Mount Sinai and the surviving metalwork covers of Queen Theodelinda at Monza and the lower cover of the Lindau Gospels, were the source of inspiration for carpet pages and may even suggest the form and decoration for the original cover for the Lindisfarne Gospels [Pls.3.a,4,6].<sup>206</sup> Kitzinger, in his discussion on the relationships between Early Christian and Byzantine book covers and interior painted front-pieces on Eastern manuscripts, deduced that in certain cases the design of the cover took primacy, and that the miniaturist followed and based his decorative scheme on the layout and design of the book cover.<sup>207</sup> The cited metalwork examples demonstrate that the decorative scheme on the Lindisfarne carpet page (f.94v), is based on a book cover adorned with metalwork and polychrome mountings.

Robert Calkins, in discussing the sole carpet page in the Book of Kells, which consists of a striking double-armed cross floating above panels of complex zoomorphic interlace, proposes that it functions as a 'prefatory cover, as a container of the most sacred word, the name of Christ'.<sup>208</sup> The 'name of Christ', the Chi-Rho, is found on the next leaf (f.34r) and the symbolic resonance of its decoration has been the subject of much discussion

---

<sup>203</sup> Nees 1980-81, 134-42.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 138-9.

<sup>205</sup> Calkins 1983, 49, 53, 57-60.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 57, 74.

<sup>207</sup> Kitzinger 1974, 17.

<sup>208</sup> TCD MS 58, f.33r; Calkins 1983, 90-91.



and interpretation. Werner has viewed f.33r as representing the True Cross and as referring to the crucifixion as well as alluding to the Incarnation and Resurrection within a Christological framework.<sup>209</sup> He has also provided a summary of the literature on the symbolism of the Kells Chi-Rho page.<sup>210</sup> Susan Nunan has dealt briefly with the subject of apotropaicism in Insular manuscripts and describes the double-armed cross (f.33r) in Kells as 'giving the appearance of a large reliquary or book shrine'.<sup>211</sup> The frenetic Ultimate La Tène ornament on the roundels can be compared to the decoration on the Donore discs and the Jatten bowl-shaped fitting<sup>212</sup> while the vibrant square-shaped fields in the corners resemble enamelled truncated pyramidal bosses as seen on the Antrim cross and on an Irish mount from the Oseberg ship-burial.<sup>213</sup>

The writer's analysis of the ornament and form of the metalwork mounts and their analogies with the decoration on carpet pages corroborates Kitzinger's and Calkin's hypotheses that certain carpet pages imitated the decorative scheme of book covers or shrines. However with the passage of time influences worked both ways with iconographical subjects present in manuscripts forming the principal design elements for book covers and shrines.<sup>214</sup> While there is a lack of depictions of decorated book covers in Insular art in comparison to examples found on the Continent, the above discussion demonstrates that indirect images of book covers can be discerned in certain manuscript carpet pages. Now that the evidence for book covers has been examined from the perspective of literary references, depictions and surviving covers and mounts, the same methods shall be used to assess the evidence for Irish book shrines. However, the origin of book shrines will be considered first.

---

<sup>209</sup> Werner 1994, 460-2.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., n.41.

<sup>211</sup> Nunan 1992, 105-6.

<sup>212</sup> Ryan 1989, no.63; Webster 1989, no.62.

<sup>213</sup> Harbison 1976, 18-21, pls. X,XI; Youngs 1989, no.52.

<sup>214</sup> For book covers see Lasko (1994) and Steenbock (1965). The front of the *Soiscele Molaise* is directly based on a four evangelists symbols page from an Irish pocket-gospel book of eighth/ninth-century date.

## The origin of book shrines

In this section the use of the gospel book in the liturgy of the Early Christian church and how this led to the employment of book boxes in Continental Europe will be examined.

### **Liturgical sources**

After Constantine the Great proclaimed the Christian faith as an official religion in 313 AD, Christians became more overt in their celebration of the rituals and services of the church. The gospels, which were the focus of veneration, were displayed prominently in the church. In the church councils of Nicaea (381 AD), the third and fourth of Constantinople (362 AD), the councils of Ephesus (431 AD), Chalcedon (451 AD), and in the Roman synods of 642, 745 and 969 AD, the gospels were enthroned on the altar with great solemnity at the commencement of the assembly.<sup>215</sup> A sixth-century representation of the enthroned gospels is present above the cornice of the great central imperial door of Hagia Sophia.<sup>216</sup> The gospels were the only object permitted to share the altar with the consecrated host. On these occasions the gospels were considered to be the Incarnation of Christ himself, as a witness and presider of the assembly discussions. This custom was also enacted at the Palm Sunday processions where the carrying of the gospel book was intended to represent Christ.<sup>217</sup> The sixth-century Gospels of St Augustine, which may have been brought to England during his mission, was stored on the high altar of the Abbey of St Augustine at Canterbury, along with other relics, until the late Middle Ages.<sup>218</sup> It is still used today, where an oath is taken on the Gospels in the ceremonies accompanying the enthronement of the new Archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>219</sup>

Eamonn Ó Carragáin has provided a detailed account of the liturgical ceremonies pertaining to gospel books, with particular reference to the Book of Kells.<sup>220</sup> The *Apertio Aurium* (the opening of the ears) was a set of Lenten ceremonies in which the gospels were

---

<sup>215</sup> Smith and Cheetham 1908, 1009.

<sup>216</sup> Kahler 1967, 29-30, ill.62.

<sup>217</sup> Jungmann 1986, 285-6.

<sup>218</sup> Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 286.

<sup>219</sup> Nunan 1992, 104-5; Backhouse 1991, no.1. See p.22 above for a reference to a similar ceremony at the synod of Hatfield in 680.

<sup>220</sup> Ó'Carragáin 1994, 398-418.



presented and displayed to a mainly illiterate audience. During this ceremony those to be baptised (the catechumens) presented themselves and were exorcised and given instruction.<sup>221</sup> A significant liturgical ceremony which is relevant to the origin of book shrines is the *Ordo Romanus Primus*.<sup>222</sup> This describes how the Eucharist was celebrated by the pope in a solemn stational mass in Rome, c.700 AD. Ordo 1 describes the papal procession to the stational church. On special feast days the more luxurious liturgical vessels and the 'great gospels' were transported in a solemn procession from the Lateran to the church at which the stational mass was to be held. The book was carried in a sealed casket or box<sup>223</sup> under the personal seal of the *Vesterarius*, who was the official of the Lateran who was in charge of the *Vestiarium*, a building akin to a treasury. The primary function of the casket was to protect the precious binding from theft or loss, but also, as Jungmann states, the gospel book which represents Christ's Word is honoured, his entry solemnized, and the removal of the gospels from the box would have heightened the sense of liturgical drama.<sup>224</sup> When the procession arrived at the church, the box was unsealed, and the book removed and carried by an acolyte whose hands were veiled by his outer garment.<sup>225</sup> As the acolyte reached the altar, a subdeacon removed the book from his covered hands and enthroned the gospels on the altar. When the pope was fully vested, he arose after prostration and kissed both the gospels and the altar. When the gospel was to be read the deacon approached the altar, kissed the gospels and solemnly brought the codex to the ambo in a procession consisting of two acolytes, two subdeacons and the deacon bearing the gospels. After the reading the deacon was blessed by the pope and the gospels reopened in the sanctuary whereupon they were kissed by all the clerics in order of rank. Finally, the book was replaced in its box, re-sealed and brought back to the Lateran by an acolyte.<sup>226</sup> In the *Apertio aurium* and the *Ordo Romanus Primus* the gospel book was treated with the

---

<sup>221</sup> See Holder (1994, 101, n.2) for Bede's comment on this ritual.

<sup>222</sup> The primary reference for the Roman liturgy in the Early Christian period is Andrieu (1931-61). The sections which are relevant to the ceremonies outlined below are: *Ordos I*, numbers 20-22, 29-31, 51, 59-65; *Ordo II*, numbers 73, 76-77, 83, 87-90. Summaries of these ceremonies may be found in Jungman (1986, 51-2, 67-74, 284-9) and Klauser (1979, 60-64).

<sup>223</sup> Ó'Carragáin (ibid., 414) describes the sealed casket as a 'book shrine', but this is a misnomer as the enclosed gospel book would need to have attained the status of a relic in order to merit this description. The writer has used book box as a more suitable term.

<sup>224</sup> Jungmann 1986, 285.

<sup>225</sup> The 'great gospels' used on major feast days, required two acolytes to support and carry them.

<sup>226</sup> Ó'Carragáin 1994, 413-16.

greatest reverence. When it had left the church the congregation's attention was then directed to the eucharistic ceremonies which took place on the altar during the offertory and canon of the mass.

Before the evidence for Irish book shrines is studied in detail, the literary and physical evidence for book boxes and shrines in Continental Europe in the early medieval period needs to be appraised.

### Book boxes in Western Europe

Three terms have been used to describe the containers for manuscripts: book boxes and book caskets; the word shrine has been used for one example.<sup>227</sup> The writer has followed Steenbock's terminology and used the term 'book box'. A survey of Braun's corpus of European medieval reliquaries does not include any possible book shrines.<sup>228</sup>

### Literary references

A reference to a book box is contained within the inventory of the Treasure of Centula (St Riquier) which was compiled in 831. Along with chalices, patens, reliquaries, crowns, censers and other liturgical artefacts there are: 'One gospel book, written in gold and its silver box set with jewels and gems. Two other boxes for gospel books, of silver and gold, and a folding chair made of silver, belonging to them ...'.<sup>229</sup> Davis-Weyer correctly inferred that the chair listed in the inventory was used to display the gospels during church ceremonies.<sup>230</sup> These book boxes were not regarded as reliquaries, as these were listed together in a separate section of the inventory.<sup>231</sup>

In Gregory of Tours *Historia Francorum* there is an episode which relates how a church treasury was looted by the Arians, who made off with: 'sixty chalices, fifty patens, ... twenty gospel cases'. (*Nam sexaginta calices, quindecim patenas, viginti evangeliorum*

---

<sup>227</sup> See p.51 below.

<sup>228</sup> Braun 1940, *passim*.

<sup>229</sup> Davis-Weyer 1971, 96.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, See pp.46-48 above for this practice.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.



*capsas detulit, omnia ex auro puro ac gemmis praeciosis ornatas*).<sup>232</sup> The word *capsa* translates as 'case' rather than shrine or cover, which would indicate that these were accessible containers used to store valuable service books.

### Depictions of book boxes

There are no definite depictions of book boxes from early medieval Europe, only decorated book covers. However, one possible depiction is the late tenth-century Ottonian ivory plaque in the Stadtbibliothek, Frankfurt, which depicts a priest celebrating mass in front of the altar.<sup>233</sup> The priest stands in an orans pose with the liturgical objects: chalice, paten, candlestick and sacramentary all arranged on the altar. Pacht describes a second rectangular object on the altar as a closed gospel book, but as there is little detail shown it could also be a book box for the sacramentary in use.<sup>234</sup>

From the above information it can be inferred that there were embellished containers used for the storage and transportation of gospels and other liturgical books in western Europe from at least the sixth or seventh century. They do not appear to be reliquaries, as the evidence of the Centula inventory and the *Historia Francorum* shows.

### Surviving book boxes

Frauke Steenbock, in his study and catalogue of decorated book covers from Europe, includes three book boxes which are discussed below.<sup>235</sup>

From the monastery of St Fridolin, Sackingen, Germany, there exists a front cover of a book box, dating from the end of the tenth century, which depicts the Crucifixion and the Fall of Man [Pl.16.a].<sup>236</sup> It is executed in repoussé gilt-silver, of poor quality workmanship, and the decoration also consists of ten hemispherical bosses placed around the border. The cover is notable for its lack of filigree, glass, enamel or precious stones. The

---

<sup>232</sup> The citation is taken from *Gregorii episcopi Turonensis Miracula et Opera Minora* Book III, ch.10, lines 2-23, MGH, *Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum* I, 2 (Krusch, B. ed., Hanover 1885). Translations of this text can be found in Dalton (1927, 107) and Brown P. (1977, 12).

<sup>233</sup> Lasko 1994, 107, n.81, pl.150.

<sup>234</sup> Pacht 1986, 35, pl.33; it is plain except for two clasps on the long side.

<sup>235</sup> Steenbock 1965, *passim*.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.* no.39; also illustrated in Schiller (1972, no.370).

box is reputed to have contained a missal dating from the eleventh or twelfth centuries. Due to the poor quality of the decorative work on the book box, it is unlikely that it would have contained a prestigious manuscript. Originally from St Servatius, Maastricht, and now in the Musée du Louvre, Paris, is a cover of a book box, dating to the first quarter of the eleventh century.<sup>237</sup> The box is dated by an inscription which refers to Beatrix, a sister of the Empress Gisela of Hungary, the third wife of Conrad II.<sup>238</sup> The decoration is much more accomplished and elaborate than the box from Sackingen. In the centre there is a crucifixion scene with the Virgin and St John, along with personifications of the sun and moon, all placed beneath a jewelled and enamelled arcade. The wide border has a wealth of filigree, cloisonné enamel plaques and precious stones. In each corner is set a cloisonné enamel plaque bearing an evangelist symbol. No documentary record survives of any manuscript previously contained within the box but the presence of evangelist symbols on the front would indicate a gospel book.

The most sumptuous of the surviving book boxes was made to hold the Uta codex, which was the gospel book belonging to Uta, the second Abbess of Niedermunster, and thus can be dated to 1002-1025 [Pl.16.b].<sup>239</sup> The case has both a front and back and consists of a wooden box which is covered with gold foil. The front has filigree, cloisonné enamel plaques and precious stones mounted around an imposing gold repoussé figure of Christ in Majesty, who holds a jewelled book in his left hand. Lasko has attributed this book box to a Regensburg workshop.<sup>240</sup> There are also thirteenth-century additions to the front consisting of four die-stamped plaques decorated with the symbols of the evangelists which indicate that it was in use for a prolonged period of time. This case was never sealed; the manuscript was always accessible as it was used in liturgical ceremonies.

Steenbock, does, however include a 'book shrine' in his catalogue: this example is from Seitz, Germany, which is now in the National Museum, Nuremberg, Germany and is dated from the late tenth-to the early-eleventh centuries [Pls.17,21.b].<sup>241</sup> It consists of

---

<sup>237</sup> Steenbock 1965, no.56.

<sup>238</sup> Lasko 1994, 123, n.71.

<sup>239</sup> Munich Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. lat. 13 601. Steenbock 1965, no.59.

<sup>240</sup> Lasko 1994, 132-3.

<sup>241</sup> Steenbock 1965, no.44.



a wooden box in two halves which is covered on the lid with a layer of parchment and a series of cast and die-stamped copper alloy mounts. The base is gilt-copper alloy while the sides are covered with stamped foliate strips. A large cross with a rectangular aperture is attached to the front, along with twelve silvered decorative bosses. The cross, sides and frames of the box are decorated with stamped zoomorphic ornament containing a combination of winged dragons, birds' heads, grotesque animal masks and palmettes. Originally there was a clasp which held the two halves in a closed position, this was altered when the box was repaired, c.1300. Steenbock has proposed Lombardy as the place of manufacture.<sup>242</sup>

Although Steenbock has described this as a book shrine, there is no record of any manuscript and from his description the box does not appear to have been sealed.<sup>243</sup> Moreover at a later stage in the same entry he refers to as a *Buchkasten* (book case) without justifying his change of terminology.<sup>244</sup> Wilson, who also described it as a book box, has commented briefly on the nature of the zoomorphic decoration and compared it to tenth-century Anglo-Saxon metalwork, suggesting that an Anglo-Saxon artist may have had some input into the design and decoration.<sup>245</sup> Lasko contends that it may have been a gift from eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon England to the monastery of Seitz,<sup>246</sup> but it is more likely that the manuscript contained within would have comprised the preeminent gift, rather than the book box. A recent summary catalogue of the collections of the Nuremburg museum have also described it as a *Buchkasten* (book case) and dated it to the ninth-century with a possible origin in the workshops of the court of Charles the Bald.<sup>247</sup>

Another link which the early medieval book has with relics is when the cover is used to house inserted relics. This is dealt with in the following section.

---

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Wilson 1963, 46.

<sup>246</sup> Lasko 1994, 113, n.9.

<sup>247</sup> Kahsnitz 1980, no.21.

## The Book as a reliquary

As seen from the above evidence there are no definite examples of book shrines known from Continental Europe. A book shrine is here defined as a sealed container, usually of rectangular shape, which held a manuscript which had attained the status of a relic. Book boxes were most likely used as protective containers for the manuscript when not in use, and as a means of safely transporting the book from one location to another.

Francis Wormald has provided instances of books, which were associated with saints or venerated ecclesiastics, being stored on the high altar of certain cathedrals. For example, the Gospels of St Augustine, Canterbury, and the *Liber Vitae* of Durham, were kept on the altar for liturgical use.<sup>248</sup> In addition he has cited evidence for the practice of securing relics in compartments of book bindings. Two gospel books at Glastonbury were kept with the reliquaries due to the fact that relics were secured within their covers.<sup>249</sup> Harbert has cited Continental examples of late medieval bindings containing relics of the True Cross and saints, as well as late medieval inventories of St Albans Abbey, York Minster and Lincoln Cathedral which describe books with relics set into their bindings. None of these has survived.<sup>250</sup>

There are, however, two examples of books as relic holders which are included in Steenbock's catalogue. The earliest, which dates to the tenth century, is a pair of covers from the nunnery of Morienvall which is now housed in Noyon Cathedral Treasury [Pl.18].<sup>251</sup> It consists of a series of openwork bone and ivory plaques which have suffered a good deal of damage and wear. On the back cover these plaques, which retain cruciform-shaped openings, formerly enclosed relics of various saints, Marcellus, Castor, Simplicianus and Serotinus, all of which are now missing.

The second is the cover for the Berthold Missal, a late Romanesque work of the second decade of the thirteenth century which was commissioned by the abbot of Weingarten

---

<sup>248</sup> Wormald 1974, 94.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Harbert 1974, 108.

<sup>251</sup> Steenbock 1965, no.37; Lasko 1994, 89-90.



Abbey, Germany.<sup>252</sup> An inscription along the edges of the upper cover names the saints: George, Oswald, Bartholomew, Thomas, Peter, Paul, James and the Virgin Mary, whose relics are set in compartments beneath the existing metalwork. The opulent gilt-silver cover has a similar cruciform layout to the Codex Aureus of St Emmeram with a large cast figure of the Madonna in majesty surrounded by figures of angels, saints and evangelists. Elaborate filigree and settings of precious stones decorate the cross and frame of the cover.

### Irish book shrines

It has been proposed that Irish book shrines may have emulated the sealed book box used in the ceremonies of *Ordo Romanus Primus*.<sup>253</sup> It is not difficult to imagine a prestigious Irish monastery wishing to emulate the splendour of Roman liturgical ceremonies. Ó'Carragáin has cited the earliest documented Irish pilgrimage to Rome, when clerics, as delegates from the synod of Mágh Léine, were present at Easter in 631.<sup>254</sup> This reference, Cummian's letter, states that the delegates brought back with them: '... Relics of the holy martyrs and writings ...'. They would also have been very observant of the liturgical ceremonies in the 'chief of cities'. These ceremonies were carefully recorded and used as models from which local rites could have been developed.<sup>255</sup> Irish liturgical practices during the early medieval period were eclectic and derived from many sources, but had a strong Roman basis.<sup>256</sup> Unique features were also introduced, including archaic elements which were superseded in Europe by the eighth century.<sup>257</sup> Given that the Irish attempted to conform as much as possible to Roman usage, the liturgical rites from *Ordo* 1 emerge as a credible source for the impetus for the Irish series.

The early medieval Irish had a liberal attitude to enshrining certain insignia of their saints, in particular bells, crosiers, belts, garments and books. This practice occurred only

---

<sup>252</sup> New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M.170; Steenbock 1965, no.116; Needham 1979, no.10.

<sup>253</sup> Ryan 1989, 129; Ó'Carragáin 1994, 414.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 407, n.27.

<sup>255</sup> Ó'Carragáin has also detected direct Roman liturgical influence in the Stowe Missal and has cited literary references to Roman mass rites in the *Vita Prima* of St Brigit (ibid., 409).

<sup>256</sup> Ryan 1985a, 133. Ryan (ibid., 123-33) provides a useful summary of the probable sources for the Irish liturgy.

<sup>257</sup> Stevenson, J. 1987, lviii-lxii.

sporadically in Europe.<sup>258</sup> The Irish clerics had a generous regard for the written word and this is why books thought to belong to saints attained their revered status.<sup>259</sup> The exalted status of the gospel corresponded to the nature of its contents: the Divine Word of God, and the manuscript would have been further exalted if it was associated with a local saint. Containers would have been used for the most prestigious of the gospel books, and, after a period of time these boxes may have become associated with a book belonging to a particular saint. It would only have been a short step to have them permanently sealed in order to preserve the sanctity of the relic. As the enclosed manuscript was now unavailable for liturgical ceremonies, the book box may have attained the status of a secondary relic due to its revered contents.<sup>260</sup>

### Hagiographical and historical sources

There are many miracles associated with saints' books in Irish hagiographical literature, a common episode is the loss or immersion of the book in water and its retrieval some time later in perfect condition. St Ciaran's book was found dry after being left out of doors for a night in which there was a downpour of rain.<sup>261</sup> St Declan's gospel book was revered by his community and many miracles were worked through it.<sup>262</sup>

The sacred nature of books associated with St Columba is recounted in Adamnán's life of the saint, which is dated to 688-697.<sup>263</sup> One peculiar example is the 'book of glass of the Ordination of Kings'.<sup>264</sup> This was reported to be of heavenly origin as it was presented to St Columba by an angel when he was in the throes of spiritual ecstasy. It contained prayers and ceremonial for the Consecration and Coronation of kings as well as the names of all the future kings of Dal Riada. Byrne has perceptively suggested that the

---

<sup>258</sup> Ó'Floinn (1994) has produced a useful and informative booklet on Irish relics and shrines.

<sup>259</sup> See pp.22-28 above for further information on this aspect.

<sup>260</sup> These aspects of accessibility and the secondary relic status of shrines is discussed in the Chapter 6 (see pp.354-57).

<sup>261</sup> Macalister 1921, 30.

<sup>262</sup> Plummer 1910, II, li; Lucas 1982, 9; Nunan (1992, 124) and Plummer (1910, I, cxxxviii) provide further examples and references to miracles effected with saints' books.

<sup>263</sup> Anderson 1991, xlii.

<sup>264</sup> Anderson 1991, III:5.



'book of glass ' may refer to an enamelled or jewelled cover,<sup>265</sup> but a recent opinion contends that it alludes to the mystical nature of the book.<sup>266</sup> During a period of prolonged drought in Iona, passages were read from Columba's books and his white tunic was paraded around in order to induce rain.<sup>267</sup> Another episode relates how his books and vestments were laid on the altar and with fasting, singing the psalms and invoking the saint's name, a favourable wind was obtained to allow the safe passage of a cargo of timbers from the mainland to Iona.<sup>268</sup>

There are two further episodes concerning Columba's writings which miraculously survived immersion in water for a number of weeks while other books were retrieved in a deteriorated state. Both miracles are similar in nature:

... a certain young man falling from a horse and was drowned in the river (Boyne) ... and remained under the water for twenty days. And just as when he fell he had books enclosed in a skin satchel under his arm ... When his body was brought back to dry land, and the satchel was opened ... the page written by the holy fingers of Saint Columba was found dry, and not at all injured, as though it had been kept in a coffer (*scríniolo*).<sup>269</sup>

The next episode is as follows:

... a book of hymns for the week, written in the hand of Saint Columba, fell from the shoulders of a boy who had slipped from a bridge, and, with the skin satchel that contained it, was submerged in a certain river of the region of the Lagen.' (The book remained in the water for some three months until it was found by some women who returned it. When Iógenán, a Pictish priest, opened the rotten satchel) ... he found his book undamaged, and as clean and dry as if it had remained all that time in a coffer, and had never fallen into the water.<sup>270</sup>

What these miracles reveal is the comparison of the condition of a book in a 'coffer': 'undamaged ... clean and dry' with those books exposed to the deteriorating actions of the

---

<sup>265</sup> Byrne 1973, 255.

<sup>266</sup> Sharpe 1995, n.359.

<sup>267</sup> Anderson 1991, II:44.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., II:45.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., II:8. See Bannerman (1993, 20) for the origin of the word *scrinium*.

<sup>270</sup> Anderson 1991, II:9.

water: 'not merely damaged, but even rotten'. The word 'coffer' would indicate a book box, but the latin word *scríniolo* translates as 'little shrine', which would imply that this coffer would have been sealed thus maintaining the book in a clean and dry condition.<sup>271</sup> This may have been possible if the manuscript was wrapped in a sheet of vellum before been placed in the box, thus affording it greater protection against the environment. However from examination of manuscripts formerly kept within shrines, such as the Usserianus Primus, the Cathach, Stowe Missal, the Books of Durrow, Dimma and Moling, they have lost their original covers and display staining and impact damage around the corners and edges of the folios.<sup>272</sup>

A similar incident to those above is described in the First Latin Life of St Ciaran. The gospel book of the saint was accidentally dropped into a lake by one of his followers. After some time a cow, while bathing in the lake, became entangled with the book satchel and dragged it onto the shore. When the decayed leather satchel was opened the gospel book was found: 'perfectly dry and clean, without any moisture, as though it had been preserved in a book case.'<sup>273</sup>

The word *cumdach*, which translates as case, cover or shrine, or in some instances ornament,<sup>274</sup> is the conventional term used to refer to the covering or enshrinement of a book. *Cumtach* is a verbal noun which literally means a 'building' or 'construction'. Although *cumdach* has been used as a specific term for book shrines, it is not exclusive. It has also been used in the verbal form (*ro cumtaig*) where it refers to the covering of the shrine of St Patrick's Bell, the inscription which dates the shrine to c.1100.<sup>275</sup> It is, however a useful term as it denotes a covering for a book, but is not specific to it being a shrine, which may be defined as a sealed container, and may also refer to a book box.

<sup>271</sup> However Ó'Floinn (1997, 139) has maintained that the word *scrín* 'appears to indicate a reliquary housing the corporeal remains of a saint'.

<sup>272</sup> TCD MS 55; Alexander 1978, no. 1; RIA MS 12 R.33; Alexander 1978, no. 4; RIA MS D.ii. 3; Alexander 1978, no. 47; TCD MS 57; Alexander 1978, no. 6; TCD MS 59; Alexander 1978, no. 48; TCD MS 60; Alexander 1978, no. 45. See pp.63-64 below for further discussion on this point.

<sup>273</sup> Macalister 1921, 33.

<sup>274</sup> DIL, 267.

<sup>275</sup> Ó'Floinn 1983, 167-8.



Indirect evidence of cumdachs are found in hagiographical literature of the early medieval period.

In Eddius Stephanus's near contemporary Life of St Wilfrid (634-709/10), there is a chapter concerning the building and dedication of the church at Ripon, founded 671-8. Eddius states that St Wilfrid:

*Nam quattor evangelia de auro purissimo inmembranis purpuratis, colorati, pro animae suae remedio scribere iussit: necnon et bibliothecam liborum eorum, omnem de auro purissimo et gemmis pretiosissimis fabrefactum, compaginare inclusores gemmarum praecipit ... ;*

... had written, for his soul's good, a book of the Gospels, (done in letters of finest gold, on parchment all empurpled and illuminated) and had ordered jewellers to make a case for them, also of the purest gold and set with precious gems.<sup>276</sup>

The word *bibliothecam* can mean a covering or book shrine for a book,<sup>277</sup> but as it was enclosing a contemporary manuscript, that is, one written by St Wilfrid, the term is more likely to refer to a book box. If the box was manufactured and sealed after his death, and incorporated a book regarded as a relic of St Wilfrid, then the term shrine would be justified. The description would suggest an elaborate book box used to store and transport a luxury manuscript such as that described in the Centula inventory.<sup>278</sup>

### Depictions of book shrines

Depictions of book shrines are difficult to interpret due to the ambiguous nature of the objects shown, which are plain rectangular artefacts which may represent satchels (for books, relics, reliquaries), reliquaries, book boxes or the rational which was a component of ecclesiastical dress. In most of the following examples these objects are shown suspended from the neck of a figure, usually an ecclesiastic. Most of the depictions occur in sculpture and metalwork; they are rarely encountered in manuscript illumination.<sup>279</sup>

<sup>276</sup> Colgrave 1927, ch.17,36.

<sup>277</sup> See n.84 above for further information on this word.

<sup>278</sup> See p.48 above for the Centula inventory and other Continental book boxes.

<sup>279</sup> See the object held by Luke in the Book of Macdurnan (London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 1370, f.115v) [Pl.9.c]. On balance it is probable that it represents a decorated book cover, see p.30 above.

The enigmatic White Island figures, Co Fermanagh, which probably date to the tenth century, include a figure tentatively identified as 'Christ Holding a Gospel Book'.<sup>280</sup> The rectangular box-like object is situated on the lap of the figure. However, this is not the usual position for a book, they are normally held or supported by the crook of the arm. It is possible that this may represent a book shrine; it is of similar size and shape to the Lough Kinale book shrine, and from the position of the strap hinges on the Kinale shrine it would have been supported in a similar manner.<sup>281</sup> On the Kells Tower Cross there is a panel depicting two seated figures supporting rectangular objects on their knees.<sup>282</sup> They are not held flat, like the White Island example, but yet appear too large to represent books. According to Harbison, who suggests that the figures represent Sts Patrick and Columba, the rectangular object on the right bears a ringed cross carved in relief, which due to weathering can only be discerned in raking light.<sup>283</sup> Due to their size and unusual position there is a possibility that these box-like objects may represent book shrines /boxes.

Two late eleventh / early twelfth century high crosses: the West cross at Kilfenora and St Patrick's cross at Cashel, bear imposing figures of an ecclesiastic on one face and a crucifixion on the other. On the west face of the cross head at Cashel a plain rectangular satchel or book shrine is suspended from the neck of an ecclesiastic by two straps.<sup>284</sup> On the east face of the Kilfenora cross a similar plain rectangular object is suspended from the neck of the Crucified Christ [Pl.19.a]. In this latter example the straps are crossed to form a St Andrew's cross.<sup>285</sup>

Another possibility for the rectangular object suspended from the neck of an ecclesiastic is a rational. This was a component of a bishop's, or other high-ranking ecclesiastic's dress. It was an imitation of the ceremonial breastplate worn by the Old Testament Jewish high priest and can be seen on the Ezra figure in the Codex Amiatinus

<sup>280</sup> Hickey 1985, 36, no.14:b.

<sup>281</sup> Kelly 1993, 168-74.

<sup>282</sup> North side of shaft, top panel.

<sup>283</sup> Harbison 1992, no.127, fig.966.

<sup>284</sup> Harbison 1992, no.34, fig.905.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., no.136, fig.375



The enigmatic White Island figures, Co Fermanagh, which probably date to the tenth century, include a figure tentatively identified as 'Christ Holding a Gospel Book'.<sup>280</sup> The rectangular box-like object is situated on the lap of the figure. However, this is not the usual position for a book, they are normally held or supported by the crook of the arm. It is possible that this may represent a book shrine; it is of similar size and shape to the Lough Kinale book shrine, and from the position of the strap hinges on the Kinale shrine it would have been supported in a similar manner.<sup>281</sup> On the Kells Tower Cross there is a panel depicting two seated figures supporting rectangular objects on their knees.<sup>282</sup> They are not held flat, like the White Island example, but yet appear too large to represent books. According to Harbison, who suggests that the figures represent Sts Patrick and Columba, the rectangular object on the right bears a ringed cross carved in relief, which due to weathering can only be discerned in raking light.<sup>283</sup> Due to their size and unusual position there is a possibility that these box-like objects may represent book shrines /boxes.

Two late eleventh / early twelfth century high crosses: the West cross at Kilfenora and St Patrick's cross at Cashel, bear imposing figures of an ecclesiastic on one face and a crucifixion on the other. On the west face of the cross head at Cashel a plain rectangular satchel or book shrine is suspended from the neck of an ecclesiastic by two straps.<sup>284</sup> On the east face of the Kilfenora cross a similar plain rectangular object is suspended from the neck of the Crucified Christ [Pl. 19.a]. In this latter example the straps are crossed to form a St Andrew's cross.<sup>285</sup>

Another possibility for the rectangular object suspended from the neck of an ecclesiastic is a rational. This was a component of a bishop's, or other high-ranking ecclesiastic's dress. It was an imitation of the ceremonial breastplate worn by the Old Testament Jewish high priest and can be seen on the Ezra figure in the Codex Amiatinus

---

<sup>280</sup> Hickey 1985, 36, no.14:b.

<sup>281</sup> Kelly 1993, 168-74.

<sup>282</sup> North side of shaft, top panel.

<sup>283</sup> Harbison 1992, no.127, fig.966.

<sup>284</sup> Harbison 1992, no.34, fig.905.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., no.136, fig.375

and depicts an erect figure with arms bent outwards from the elbow as if in an orans pose. The figure wears a long tunic, and Urnes style snakes intertwine around the slender arms and legs. A rectangular satchel/reliquary is held at the midriff by a strap suspended from the neck. This strap, like the crucifixion on the Kilfenora example, crosses over at mid-chest level. While no definite interpretation has been provided for the Lismore figure, one might suggest a possible Crucifixion image.<sup>294</sup> The position of the arms, the cruciform shape of the panel and the crossed aspect of the straps would lend weight to this hypothesis.<sup>295</sup> The St Andrews cross formed by the overlapping straps may be an allusion to the Greek letter *Chi*, which is both a sign of the Cross and the initial letter of His name, *Christus*. Furthermore, the rectangular object may represent a satchel or book shrine which contain the gospels, the True Word of God, symbolic of Christ the Redeemer.

Both of the angels on the short sides of the Stowe Missal book shrine have a recessed setting in the centre of their chest bordered by silver wire: one setting retains a red glass stud [Pl.35]. Two incised lines, which are extremely worn but still retain gilding, run from the neck to the setting. These most probably represent straps, and the setting, highlighted by a glass stud, would indicate that an exalted object, such as a shrine or relic, is indicated. Another figure of an angel, from Oppdal, Norway, which is deemed to be Irish and of eighth/ninth century date, has an incised rectangular panel on the chest, which like the examples above, probably represents a satchel or shrine [Pl.19.b].<sup>296</sup> Rationals would not be an element of an angel's garb but manuscript depictions of angels holding books are common so the rectangular panels may represent book shrines.

Rectangular objects suspended from the necks of ecclesiastics are more common in Pictish, late Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Danish sculpture. Examples include a Pictish cross-slab from Papil, on the Shetland Island of Burra, which has a pair of hooded clerics placed on either side of a large cross-head. Each holds a crosier and the two outermost figures have

---

<sup>294</sup> Unknown to the writer Elizabeth Farnes had also proposed this interpretation due to 'the position of the arms and the interlace pattern which is similar to the rope tying Christ to the cross on several of the Scripture Crosses' (1975, 78).

<sup>295</sup> The positioning of the arms are paralleled in the crucifixion scene on the early fifth-century wooden doors at the church of Santa Sabina, Rome. See Gough (1973, fig.106).

<sup>296</sup> Youngs 1989, no.134.



a plain rectangular object suspended from their necks.<sup>297</sup> It is difficult to establish if the satchels are worn on the chest or slung over the shoulders as their heads are seen in profile, but the bodies are shown in an ambiguous pose which could be either frontal or profile. Another example of a standing profile cleric with a crosier and satchel can be seen on cross slab 7 from St Vigean, Angus.<sup>298</sup>

A brief survey of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Danish sculpture has figures shown frontally with a satchel/reliquary on the chest, for example St Mary Bishophill, York, and Stonegrave, Yorkshire.<sup>299</sup> The enigmatic cross from Nunburnholme, Yorkshire, has two figures with rectangular objects held in front of the chest. The satchel/ reliquary on side 4 of the cross has no straps and is decorated with a single line of pellets, while side 2 has two straps suspended from the shoulders of the hooded figure and three lines of pellets.<sup>300</sup> Lang identified two different hands in the carving of the cross and argued that the figure on side 2 is a later copy of the figure on side 4.<sup>301</sup> He also questioned the identification of these objects as book satchels and posited that they may be representations of a rational.<sup>302</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain what exactly these rectangular artefacts indicate. If they represent books, reliquaries or rationals they probably served to endow status or prestige on the depicted figure by acting as a badge of authority. Casey has commented on this aspect with regard to the depictions of figures holding books:

By merely holding a book the figure was conferred with exalted status - the eye is drawn to him. He is holding the Word of God, because he can read and have access -he is on a higher plane than the observer. The figures may be saints or even Christ - at least the status of a cleric.<sup>303</sup>

Where the rectangular objects are depicted in conjunction with other common

---

<sup>297</sup> Allen and Anderson 1903, III, 11; Stevenson and Close-Brooks 1982, 34.

<sup>298</sup> Allen and Anderson 1903, III, fig. 278.

<sup>299</sup> Bailey 1980, 232.

<sup>300</sup> Lang 1976, pls. V:b, VI:a.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 79-86.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, 85. This identification was also proposed by Bailey (1980, 232).

<sup>303</sup> Casey 1984, 163-4.

ecclesiastical attributes, such as crosiers and bells, then it is likely that a book box/satchel for transporting books or reliquaries is shown. In these circumstances the figures are usually shown in profile. However, where the figure is depicted frontally, and the rectangular object is the sole attribute and becomes the focus of attention, it is probable that what is depicted is a more potent symbol, probably a book shrine or other class of reliquary.

In manuscript art the squat figures depicted in the tenth-century Book of Deer are crudely portrayed with enigmatic artefacts held in front of their chests.<sup>304</sup> Folios 1v and 86 show the four evangelists disposed around a central medallion. The two lower figures appear to have rectangular objects suspended from their chins or necks. Folios 16v, 29v [Pl. 102] and 41v depict full page evangelist portraits of Mark, Luke and John, respectively, where each has a rectangular object held at chest level. However these objects are more elaborate (due to the greater space available for decoration) and are ornamented with fret patterns and dotted saltires arranged in a cruciform pattern.

Are these depictions intended to represent portable reliquaries, book boxes/shrines, books or satchels? Hughes and Jackson have proposed that the objects may be satchels or house-shaped shrines.<sup>305</sup> The upper triangular section has been interpreted as the roof-portion of a house-shaped reliquary, with the figure's hands hidden behind the shrine to act as supports. This is a valid observation, but certain aspects do not conform to this suggestion. In all cases the apex of the roof portion terminates beneath the chins of the figures, forming a triangular shape. All roof portions of house-shaped shrines terminate in a horizontal, not triangular, gable unless they are depicted end-on, which is unlikely. Due to the crude nature of the illustrations, it is difficult to propose a definite identification of what these objects are. They appear to be too large to represent book covers, and these are usually portrayed held in the hand. The triangular area may represent carrying straps which suspend the object from the figure's neck, but as the straps terminate below the chin rather than around the neck this is a debatable point. However, since the figures are evangelists the balance of probability would indicate that the objects depicted are gospels contained within a book shrine or satchel.

---

<sup>304</sup> Cambridge, University Library, MS LI.6.32; Alexander 1978, no.72; Hughes 1980, 22-37; For a recent discussion on the date and decoration of this manuscript see Johnson (1997, 285-299) who has concluded that it is probably Irish and dates to the tenth century.

<sup>305</sup> Hughes 1980, 28; Jackson 1972, 10.



## Evidence of book shrines from observation of manuscripts

The physical condition of certain manuscripts can also convey evidence for having been stored or transported in a book shrine. The oldest Irish manuscript, the *Usserianus primus* gospel fragments, which are dated from the second half of the sixth to the early seventh century, display evidence of impact damage: the outermost folios, in addition to the corners and edges of the manuscript, are abraded from wear.<sup>306</sup> This wear pattern is adjudged to have been caused by the manuscript moving within a book shrine during handling and/or transportation. Furthermore, the edges of the folios are stained green, most probably the result of direct contact with the interior copper alloy plates of a book shrine.<sup>307</sup> This copper staining may imply that the manuscript was enclosed in a shrine, the inner plates of which would have been fabricated from copper alloy, although the outer plates may have been of precious metal.<sup>308</sup> The staining may be the result of moisture causing localised corrosion from direct contact with the copper alloy and subsequent storage in a damp environment. This staining would also imply that the book shrine did not have an interior wooden box. It is possible that the staining may also be the result of the manuscript coming into contact with another copper alloy artefact, such as the metal fittings from a book cover, but this would be restricted to localised staining of the folios. Other manuscripts which demonstrate impact damage, but no copper staining, are the Book of Durrow, the Cathach and the Book of Moling, all of which were enclosed in book shrines for varying periods of time.<sup>309</sup>

## Evidence of known book shrines from historical sources

The earliest known book shrine which can be dated by an inscription which relates to known historical personages was the shrine for the Book of Durrow, which survived many vicissitudes until it was taken from the Library of Trinity College, Dublin, during the

---

<sup>306</sup> TCD, Ms 55. Alexander 1978, no.1.

<sup>307</sup> I am most grateful to Mr William O'Sullivan (former Keeper of Manuscripts, Trinity College) and Mr Anthony Cains (Conservation Laboratory, Trinity College) for information and discussion on this subject. For a recent palaeographical study on the *Usserianus primus* see O'Sullivan (1994a, 175).

<sup>308</sup> As seen on the Soisceál Molaisse and Dimma book shrines.

<sup>309</sup> TCD MS 57; Alexander 1978, no. 6; RIA MS 12 R.33; Alexander 1978, no. 4; TCD MS 60; Alexander 1978, no. 45.

military occupation in 1689.<sup>310</sup> The shrine is first referred to in a note in the appendix to the introduction of *The Martyrology of Donegal* which was compiled and edited by Michael O'Clery between 1620 and 1630. This note, written around the year 1630, locates the manuscript to Durrow: 'The Book of Columcille, i.e. the Book of Durmhaigh, is in Durmhaigh itself, in Cinel Fiachach ... written in Gaidhelic letters, the New Testament, with a binding of silver and gems.'<sup>311</sup> This account is of great significance as it describes gems as a method of decoration on the shrine, which are not referred to in subsequent accounts.

On the 16 June 1677, Roderick O' Flaherty, an historian, antiquarian and Irish scholar, visited Trinity College Library where he viewed the Book of Durrow and its cumdach. He recorded details of the manuscript and shrine and transcribed an Irish inscription which was engraved on a silver cross attached to the shrine. His notes and reading of the inscription were bound with the manuscript and are numbered f.Iiv.<sup>312</sup> Unfortunately he failed to transcribe the remaining inscription on the arm of the cross which recorded the name of the craftsman. The recorded inscription is as follows: *+oroit acus bendacht choluimb chille do Fland Macc Mailsechnaill do Righerenn lasa ndernada cumdach so* which translates as: 'The prayer and blessing of Columb Cille's to Fland Mac Maelsechnaill, for the King of Ireland, who caused this shrine to be made.'<sup>313</sup> Flann Sinna, son of Deir Máelsechnaill, was king of the Southern Uí Neill between 879 and 916 and these years present the probable dates within which the shrine was commissioned. Flann was an active patron of ecclesiastical activities during his reign. He is named in the inscription present on the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise and was a co-patron in the building of the great stone church at the same site in 904.<sup>314</sup>

---

<sup>310</sup> TCD MS 57; Alexander 1978, no. 6. The most recent study on the manuscript has been provided by Meehan (1996).

<sup>311</sup> Todd and Reeves 1864, xl; Luce et. al 1960, 66.

<sup>312</sup> Luce et. al 1960, 32.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid. This inscription has recently been the source of some debate. Micheli (1996, 28-30), in her paper on Irish Inscriptions, has called into question the identification and titles of the personages named on the inscription and argued for a possible eleventh-century date. However Ó Floinn (1997a, 151-153) has refuted her arguments and restated the case for dating the shrine to between 879 and 916.

<sup>314</sup> AFM. Ó Floinn has delved into the various phases of patronage-led activity at Clonmacnoise (1995, 254). For the most recent discussion on the inscriptions present on the Cross of the Scriptures, Clonmacnoise, and others of the same group see Harbison (1994, 82-87).



A further decorative detail may be gleaned from the earliest catalogue of the manuscript (1688) in Trinity College, which describes the cumdach as *laminus argenteis*.<sup>315</sup> It is not known whether this refers to the silver cross, as described by O'Flaherty and Marsh, or to additional silver plates. William O'Sullivan has established that the Book of Durrow was referred to as the 'cupboard ms.' and did not warrant a shelf mark in the 1688 catalogue. This was due to it having being stored in, or adjacent to, its cumdach, which in turn was kept under lock and key in a cupboard.<sup>316</sup> Archbishop Narcissus Marsh, who was Provost of the College from 1679 to 1683, states, in a letter dated 30 November 1699, that:

I remember to have seen the silver cross on the cover of the book whilst I was provost of the College ... but in the time of the late Revolution that ornamental silver cross was taken away; and 'tis well the book itself was preserved, which is now bound up in a plain brown rough cover in 4to.<sup>317</sup>

From the above seventeenth-century accounts it may be inferred that the cumdach was decorated with an inscribed silver cross and possibly additional silver plates, as well as gems and/or glass insets. Marsh's term 'ornamental' may imply that settings or other decorative techniques were present on the cross. The brown leather cover, also referred to by Marsh, may have been the original manuscript cover or a replacement used to protect the manuscript since the theft of the cumdach ten years earlier.

King Flann probably commissioned the shrine for the Book of Durrow due to the mistaken belief that the manuscript was written by St Columba in 500 AD.<sup>318</sup> A similar misapprehension, that St Patrick was the author of the *Canon Phadraig*, the Book of Armagh,<sup>319</sup> resulted in a shrine being commissioned for the manuscript in 937 by King Flann's son, Donnchad, who was the Uí Neill high king at that time. The account of this event is recorded in the AFM: 'Canoin Phadraig was covered by Donnchadh, son of Flann, King of Ireland'. Unlike the lost shrine for the Book of Durrow, there are no surviving

---

<sup>315</sup> D.1.6, 1688.

<sup>316</sup> Luce 1964, 79, n.160.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> TCD MS 52; Alexander 1978, no. 53; Meehan 1997, 91-101.

accounts of its appearance or condition. Bourke has proposed that the prominent cross on the front of the shrine of St Patrick's Bell (c.1100 AD) may have been intended to reflect a similar design on the earlier shrine for the Book of Armagh [Pl.80].<sup>320</sup> He has also suggested that the shrine may have resembled the front of the Soisceál Molaisse, which has a cross with the symbols of the four evangelists in the quadrants [Pl.24]. This is a possibility since the Book of Armagh contains a full New Testament, with a page bearing the four symbols of the evangelists (f.32v), and the front of the shrine may have reflected the decorative scheme and iconography of the manuscript contained within. As the Book of Armagh had a set of original covers the cumdach commissioned functioned as a book box/shrine and not a cover.<sup>321</sup>

The most prestigious Insular Gospel Book, the Book of Kells, has, as befits its status, elicited the most comment regarding the form and composition of its cumdach which is referred to in the Annals of Ulster for the year 1006 AD (recte 1007). The entry reads as follows:

*Soiscelae mor Coluim Cille do doubgait [isind aidhci asind airdom iartharach i ndaim liac moir Chenannsa; primh-mind iarthair domain ar ai in comdaigh doendai]. In soscela sin do foghbail dia fichet adaig ar dib misaib iar ngait de a oir 7 fot tairis.*<sup>322</sup>

This passage translates as:

The great Gospel of Colum-Cille was wickedly stolen by night from the western sacristy in the great stone church of Cenannas. It was the most precious object of the Western World on account of the human ornamentation. This Gospel was recovered after two months and twenty nights, with its gold having been taken off it and with a sod covering it.<sup>323</sup>

This entry has been the subject of much discussion and analysis due to its ambiguous nature. Was it celebrated because of the manuscript, shrine or cover, and was it stolen

---

<sup>320</sup> Bourke 1993a, 42-3.

<sup>321</sup> See p.36-7 above.

<sup>322</sup> See Meehan (1990, 317, n.6) for a comment on the text in the entry enclosed by brackets.

<sup>323</sup> Passage and translation taken from AU.



because of its cover, shrine and/or contents? Ryan<sup>324</sup> has comprehensively assessed and commented on all the recent literature regarding the annal entry.<sup>325</sup> He concurs with the general thrust of the AU entry but has had the original text of the entry studied by Prof. Mairé Herbert in order to clarify the palaeography and orthography.<sup>326</sup> From this, and after examining all the sources, Ryan has interpreted the relevant sections of the entry as 'the chief relic of the Western World ' which was stolen 'on account of its cumdach / reliquary / shrine' rather than 'precious object' and 'human ornamentation'. He has also incorporated the entry in the *Chronicon Scotorum* which presents additional information on the Kells cumdach: 'after its gold and silver had been stolen off it.'<sup>327</sup> He has concluded that the account refers to the theft of an ornamental case/box or shrine, rather than a decorated book cover. Recently, Cormac Bourke has also subjected this entry to linguistic analysis and elucidated some of the ambiguous terms.<sup>328</sup> The conclusions drawn are that the manuscript in question was stolen 'for the sake of the man-made cumtach'.

Henry used the evidence of the loss of approximately 10 folios at the beginning and end of the Book of Kells to support her view that an elaborate book cover, similar to the Monza and Codex Aureus covers [Pls.4,7.a], was violently removed from the manuscript along with the missing leaves.<sup>329</sup> Ryan has disagreed with this hypothesis due to the lack of evidence for Irish Treasure-bindings in the archaeological record and from depictions of plain book covers in Insular manuscripts, concluding that a relatively plain leather cover may have functioned as a binding.<sup>330</sup> Nevertheless, such depictions do exist and there are also a number of Irish mountings from Viking graves in Scandinavia which may have been components from book covers.<sup>331</sup> Another factor to consider is that the loss of folios from Kells could have occurred during the subsequent vicissitudes of the manuscript and may not

---

<sup>324</sup> Ryan 1994, 270-74.

<sup>325</sup> Henry 1974, 150-52; Henderson 1987, 179,194-5; Meehan 1990, 318-9; the research by Nunan (1992, 120-122), where she agrees with Ryan's conclusions, should also be taken into account.

<sup>326</sup> Ryan 1994, 273; The original text of the entry is in MS Rawlinson B 489, Bodleian Lib., Oxford.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 270; Chron. Scot. 224, under the year 1005.

<sup>328</sup> Bourke 1999, 76-9.

<sup>329</sup> Henry 1974, 152.

<sup>330</sup> Ryan 1994, 271-72.

<sup>331</sup> See pp. 27-34 above for depictions of book covers and pp.38-43 for possible book mounts.

be related to the theft of the cumdach in 1007.<sup>332</sup> However there is a possible scenario which may reconcile these differences of interpretation. It is highly unlikely that such a luxurious and prestigious gospel book would have been left with a relatively plain cover. The form may have been tooled and embossed leather with applied metal mountings, as seen on the covers for the Victor codex [Pl.11]. If the book was stored on the main altar of the church and used only for liturgical ceremonies then there would have been no need for an elaborate case.<sup>333</sup> If, on the other hand, the manuscript was stored away from the altar and/or brought on circuit and used in ceremonial processions it would have required a protective container, similar to the book box used in *Ordo Romanus Primus*. This would not have been permanently sealed as the manuscript would have been deemed a potent symbol and the Columban community would have required access to utilise its status to exact tribute on relic circuits as well as for liturgical and devotional ceremonies. The utilisation of such a book box would have heightened the sense of liturgical and ceremonial drama when it was opened and the book removed and displayed before the congregation. From the above it is likely that the manuscript had, at the time of the theft, both a cover and an elaborate container. The evidence presented above would suggest that when it was stolen from the treasury it was stored in its box, the thief discovered his additional spoils and either stripped the precious mountings from the cover, or if he had little time, removed the covers from the manuscript.

According to Ryan and Herbert, the annal entry of 1007 refers to the gospel in question as the 'chief relic of the western world'.<sup>334</sup> The Iona community, who had produced the book c.800, would have been aware that this was not a direct associative relic of Columba, and therefore did not intend to keep the manuscript inaccessible in a sealed container.<sup>335</sup> As noted above it was of more benefit to the monastery of Kells to utilise the association of the manuscript with Columba and garner the status, therefore the hyperbole in the annal entry would have helped achieve this aim.

The box would have been made in the period between when the manuscript was

---

<sup>332</sup> See Meehan 1990, 319-29.

<sup>333</sup> As the Gospels of St Augustine were stored at Canterbury, see p.46 above.

<sup>334</sup> See n.326 above for reference.

<sup>335</sup> See Meehan (1994, 90-92) for a summary of the dating and provenance of the Book of Kells.



written (c.800) and the date of the annal entry (1007). A box may not have been made for the Book of Kells until Columba's relics were transported from Ireland to Scotland in 829, or to Ireland in 831, 849 or 878.<sup>336</sup> The ninth century would have been an opportune time to have a box commissioned in order to afford protection and status to their revered manuscript.

Alternatively, the box may have only been manufactured under the patronage of a powerful clan or king when the manuscript eventually reached Ireland. Kelly has argued that a shrine would have been commissioned by a Uí Neill king, as Kells is located in Uí Neill territory and Columcille was a direct descendant of the royal line of the Uí Neill.<sup>337</sup> He has proposed Flann Sinna (879-916) or his son Donnchadh (916-944) as likely candidates for commissioning the enshrinement of the Book of Kells.<sup>338</sup> Henderson has also advanced Uí Neill patronage as Flann was a descendant of the first Meath Uí Neill to become King of Ireland, Domhnall Míde, who promulgated the 'Law of Colum Cille' and was buried at Durrow in 764.<sup>339</sup> To quote Henderson: 'The enshrining of a great book by Royal orders, then, was an act of public relations, a political as well as a devotional gesture'.<sup>340</sup> This act also procured status, and the action may have been to counteract the patronage of a rival dynasty. Henderson vacillates when ascribing a date for the commissioning of the Kells cumdach and suggests that it may have been of ninth-or tenth-century date or that a date contemporary with the eighth century date of the book is also possible.<sup>341</sup> From the above information pertaining to the active patronage of the Southern Uí Neill dynasty, Flann Sinna would appear to be a likely candidate. If the Book of Kells did arrive with the other Columban relics in 878 (the year before he attained kingship) and if the Book of Durrow was already on Irish soil, then the act of enshrining/covering both books simultaneously would have earned him greater prestige in the early years of his reign. He would also have

---

<sup>336</sup> AU 286-7, 308-9, 334-5; Henderson 1987, 189-90; Meehan 1994, 90-91; For a comprehensive discussion on the movements of Columba's relics see Ó Floinn 1997a and Bannerman 1993, 29-30, 42-3.

<sup>337</sup> Unpublished lecture **The shrine of the Book of Kells - a suggested reconstruction** presented to a conference 'Kells as a Heritage Town' in Kells, Co Meath on 10/7/94. The writer assisted E.P. Kelly in the research for this paper but contends that a book box, and not a shrine, was commissioned.

<sup>338</sup> See p.64 above for Flann Sinna's activities as a patron.

<sup>339</sup> Henderson 1987, 193-4.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid.,

been aware that the Books of Durrow and Kells were traditionally attributed to his venerable ancestor, Columba. However by the first decade of the tenth century King Flann mac Máel Sechnaill had attacked Kells, as his wayward son, Donnchad, was apparently using it as a base. Perversely this action may have been to protect the monastery as it would have become a target for Donnchad's enemies.<sup>342</sup>

Another likely patron, who, as Stalley has argued, was involved in the commissioning of the Tower Cross at Kells, was Máel Brigte mac Tornáin (891-927).<sup>343</sup> He was designated *comarba* of Colum Cille, and was exceptional in also holding the position of abbot of Armagh. He was a skilled politician and diplomat, and it was during his reign that Kells attained the head of the Columban paruchia.<sup>344</sup> Bannerman has established that the title *comarba* Colum Cille was only granted to the keeper of the *insignia* of the saint, which most likely arrived in Kells in 878 from Iona along with the enshrined corporeal remains of Columba.<sup>345</sup> As the shrine of Columba would have been regarded as the principal relic, the accompanying insignia may well have included the Book of Kells. Since Máel Brigte obtained the keepership of these relics he may have arranged to have them enshrined / re-enshrined, along with the erection of the Tower Cross, in order to celebrate and proclaim the position of Kells as head of the Columban federation.

There are other factors which may suggest a late ninth to tenth century date for the commissioning of the box. The additional information in the *Chronicum Scotorum* which relates that silver (in addition to gold) was also taken from the shrine is relevant. Silver was not used in large quantities prior to the Viking incursions. By the tenth century silver was obtainable through the medium of Viking trade. In the eighth and ninth centuries the principal form of cast decoration consisted of gilt and tinned copper alloys, as found on the Lough Kinale shrine, Tully Lough cross and many other miscellaneous mounts and fittings. The first known use of cast silver decoration on a reliquary is the openwork frames on the sides of the Soisceál Molaisse which dates to the early years of the eleventh century. However silver was used frequently in the ninth and tenth centuries for personal ornaments

---

<sup>342</sup> AU 903 (*recte* 904); Herbert 1988, 81; Stalley 1997, 133.

<sup>343</sup> Stalley 1994, 263-4; 1997, 133.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, 1994, 264; Herbert 1988, 77.

<sup>345</sup> Bannerman 1993, 26, 43; Ó'Floinn 1997a, 138-9.



such as bossed penannular, thistle and kite-shaped brooches, as well as liturgical vessels such as the Derrynaflan hoard. The cumdach for the Book of Durrow, which dates to 879-916, was adorned with a 'silver cross' when seen in the seventeenth century.<sup>346</sup> Therefore the use of silver on the cumdach for the Book of Kells might indicate a date from the mid-ninth century until c.1000 AD. These dates also incorporate Máel Brigte mac Tornáin's reign (891-927) as *comarba* of Colum Cille.

It is not possible to determine the decorative scheme on the lost cumdach for the Book of Kells, although Kelly and Henderson have independently proposed a similar form of figural ornament comprising the symbols of the four evangelists disposed around a cross.<sup>347</sup> Unfortunately the only original surviving fronts of book shrines are found on the Lough Kinale, Soisceál Molaisse and Dimma. The fronts of the Stowe, Cathach and Misach cumdachs were refurbished in the later medieval period [Pls.24,37,38,47].<sup>348</sup> The Lough Kinale Book Shrine does not bear any figural iconography, although there is likely to be an implicit iconographical basis to the zoomorphic ornament present on the front. If the Kells book box was commissioned shortly after the manuscript was produced, in the early ninth century, it may have been fabricated from gilt and tinned copper alloy with no overt iconography, as seen on the Lough Kinale book shrine. However if it was produced in the late ninth or tenth centuries it is likely that it had figural decoration as during this time iconography became more overt. This celebration of iconography can be seen on the scripture crosses of the ninth and tenth centuries and, at the beginning of the eleventh century, on the front of the Soisceál Molaisse [Pl.24]. Furthermore the Book of Kells has a variety of subtle iconographic programmes which the patron may have wished to emulate by displaying suitable scenes on the front of the book box. Moreover if Máel Brigte mac Tornáin was the patron, the Kells book box may have been produced at the same time as the Tower Cross at Kells, which exhibits a wealth of figural iconography.<sup>349</sup> E.P. Kelly has proposed that there may have been additional iconographical scenes along the sides of the

---

<sup>346</sup> See pp.63-66 above.

<sup>347</sup> Henderson 1987, 194-5; See n.337 above for the reference to E.P. Kelly's paper.

<sup>348</sup> A large proportion of the original front of the shrine of the Book of Dimma survives, but it does not have any figural iconography, only panels with animal ornament [Pl.58].

<sup>349</sup> See Stalley (1994, 1997) for the iconography of this cross.

cumdach, including panels bearing abstract and zoomorphic ornament.<sup>350</sup> This is possible as the sides of the early eleventh-century shrine of the Stowe Missal bear a number of panels which appear to form a narrative scheme but the loss of panels preclude a proper iconographic analysis [Pls.33,34].

From the above this writer would gravitate towards Kelly's and Henderson's views, that the front most probably exhibited figural iconography disposed around a central cross. It is probable that the Kells book box was fabricated from silver, along with gold in the form of gilding and filigree and glass or enamel settings. Due to the esteem the manuscript was held in, there may have been rare materials which have not survived in the archaeological record, such as ivory panels.

There are two aspects of the annal entry upon which previous commentators have failed to address. As seen above, the manuscript and container were stolen from the *airdam/erdamh*. Recent research has suggested that this term refers to a small annexe to a larger church which functioned as a treasury and probably stored relics.<sup>351</sup> Ó'Carragáin has shown that the equivalent of an *airdam* in Early Christian Rome, the *vestiarium*, would have stored the papal collection of liturgical garments, and vessels such as the 'great gospels' and the 'great chalice and paten'.<sup>352</sup> If artefacts such as these were stored in the treasury were they not present during the theft? A prestigious monastery such as Kells would have had a number of relics, shrines and liturgical vessels and fittings. Liturgical artefacts and relics, including a model of Solomon's Temple, were stolen from the great altar of Clonmacnoise in 1129.<sup>353</sup> Therefore either the thief was highly selective or else involved in a 'snatch-and-grab' raid and grabbed the most imposing artefact leaving other valuables behind. The annal entry may not provide the full record of events but usually the annals are prone to exaggeration and there is no mention of any other valuables having been stolen in the same raid. Secondly, after taking the container and possibly the mountings from the cover, the thief did not destroy or discard the manuscript. It was found a few weeks later concealed beneath a sod. These actions would seem to indicate a planned, rather than an

---

<sup>350</sup> See n.337 above.

<sup>351</sup> Meyvaert 1989, 11, n.22; Ó'Carragáin 1994, 401, n.9; Ó Floinn 1995b, 255-6.

<sup>352</sup> Ó'Carragáin 1994, 401, n.9, 414.

<sup>353</sup> AFM, CS. Ó Floinn 1995b, 255-6.



opportunistic theft, and the perpetrator may have held the manuscript in esteem due to his subsequent actions. The robbery may have been intended to embarrass the Columban community at Kells and the thief may have revealed the location of the book after a number of weeks. These actions would support Meehan's hypothesis that the theft may have been an internal feud connected with the struggle over the abbacy due to the resignation of Muiredach and his replacement by Ferdomnach.<sup>354</sup>

To summarise: the annal entry records the theft of the Book of Kells along with its elaborate cover and book box. The box was probably of ninth- to tenth-century date and Máel Brigte mac Tornáin may have been the patron. The theft appeared to be selective and the perpetrator may have revealed the location of the manuscript after a short time.

### **Mounts from book shrines**

Before the surviving corpus of Irish book shrines is introduced, some of the decorative metal mountings which may have been components of book shrines will be examined in some detail.

When attempting to identify mounts formerly attached to book shrines, there is insufficient evidence from the surviving shrines as nearly all have had their original decorative programme removed or refurbished in the later medieval period. An added complication is that mounts from book shrines and book boxes are virtually impossible to distinguish as they are likely to be similar in form. The presence of binding strips and corner clamps indicates that the container was sealed and thus functioned as a shrine, as seen on the Lough Kinale shrine [Pl.56]. The recent discoveries of this shrine and the Tully Lough cross has led to the identification of some miscellaneous detached mounts which can now be seen to have functioned as shrine mounts.<sup>355</sup> However, these mounts do not appear to have been specific to one class of shrine. Nearly identical hemispherical mounts are found on the Tully Lough cross and the Lough Kinale shrine, and may have also have been used on book boxes. Mounts from shrines tend to be robust and heavily cast due to the amount of use necessary for the transportation and handling, which lead to wear and deterioration. They also retain large shanks on the reverse of medallions and strap-hinges for attachment

---

<sup>354</sup> Meehan 1990, 319.

<sup>355</sup> Kelly 1993, 168-74.

to thick pieces of wood. One distinction noted, from an examination of the mountings on the Lough Kinale shrine and the Tully Lough cross, is that mounts for attachment to artefacts forming closed containers (such as house-shaped shrines, book shrines/boxes and possibly altars) have a centrally-placed projecting shank with a perforation to accept a retaining pin. These shanks perforated the timber and were held in place on the other side by a pin which passed through the shank at right angles. However, mounts, particularly bosses, for attachment to two-sided artefacts (such as processional and altar crosses, doors) have no projecting shanks. The reason for this may be that when two bosses of similar dimensions are aligned on a cross the projecting shank from one boss hinders the attachment of a second boss. It is not possible to fit the retaining pin on the shank, which now protrudes on the reverse side, as the space is now occupied by the opposing boss. On the Tully Lough cross all the high relief mounts (hemispherical and pyramidal bosses, concave plaques with high relief decoration) have flanges and are attached to the wood by nails which perforate the flanges. These projecting flanges and the nails are concealed by applied binding strips which also help retain the mounts in position. On the Lough Kinale Shrine all the mountings are held in place by projecting shanks with retaining pins, all of which are hidden as they are situated within the shrine. The above distinction may not apply to large shrines, altars and doors, as these may have had a combination of mountings attached by different methods.

The published mounts all originate from the eighth to ninth centuries AD; few mounts survive from the tenth to twelfth centuries. The following mounts are classified into bosses, plaques and studs and all are of copper alloy unless otherwise specified. Ó Floinn has referred to the close relationship in form and decoration of the cast gilt-copper alloy boss from Clonmacnoise to the bosses adorning the front of the Lough Kinale book shrine [Pls.21.a, 53].<sup>356</sup> However using the criteria outlined above, the lack of a projecting shank may imply that this boss was utilised on a processional cross. An elaborate hemispherical boss from Valle, Norway, which is decorated with fine animal interlace and has four settings, may have been placed in a prominent position on the front of a book shrine.<sup>357</sup> Other large bosses and medallions, looted from Irish sites, and subsequently discovered in Viking graves, include the medallions and bosses from Hantveit, Vangsnes,

---

<sup>356</sup> Ó'Floinn 1989, No.142.

<sup>357</sup> Webster 1989, no.144.



Flahammer and Lilleby, Norway.<sup>358</sup> A finely cast medallion, from Hofstad, Norway, has projecting flanges representing a human head and arms, and ultimate La Tène decoration in the central field. The form and decoration of this mount is paralleled by the medallions with projecting beast heads on the sides of the Lough Kinale Shrine [Pls.22.b; 54.a].<sup>359</sup> Mention should also be made of the most elaborate, technically complex and largest of all extant mounts, the boss from Steeple Bumpstead, Essex, which must have formed the centrepiece of a large ornate reliquary. It is dated to the first half of the eighth century and is considered to be of Irish manufacture.<sup>360</sup>

Decorated plaques of robust construction may also have featured as mounts for book shrines. The cast copper alloy square plaque from Inchbofin Island, Co Westmeath, is decorated with a central cross raised on a truncated pyramid, surrounded by a frieze of animal ornament.<sup>361</sup> The prominent cross would indicate that this mount was attached to an ecclesiastical object. The mount has secondary perforations for attachment. There is no shank or projecting flange, so it may have formed a component of a cross, altar or ecclesiastical fitting. A substantial right-angled mount from Skansar, Norway, is decorated with abstract foliate ornament on the frame and has a large truncated pyramidal boss positioned on the corner [Pl.22.b].<sup>362</sup> The shape of this mount would imply that it formed a protective corner piece on a large rectangular artefact, most probably a book shrine. A pair of finely cast gilt mounts from Crieff, Perthshire, are decorated with a combination of human, beast and bird-heads on the border while the central field has glass settings surrounded by meshed interlace.<sup>363</sup> The mounts appear to have been components of a suite of interlocking mounts disposed around a central medallion. Spearman suggests that their most likely function was to adorn a book shrine because of their relationship with Insular manuscript traditions.<sup>364</sup>

---

<sup>358</sup> Wamers 1985, nos.70, 23, 61, 57, 127; pls. 4:5, 12:2, 13:1-3.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., no.24, pl.19:1; Bourke et al. 1988, 91; pl.Xia.

<sup>360</sup> Youngs 1993, 147-9.

<sup>361</sup> Ryan 1989, no.146.

<sup>362</sup> Wamers 1985, no.131, pl.13:4.

<sup>363</sup> Spearman 1993, 135-42, figs. 16:1,2.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 140

An early twelfth-century mount from Cloyne, Co Cork, in the form of a Greek cross and decorated with human figures, may have functioned as a mount for a book shrine [Pl.13.b].<sup>365</sup> The extremities of the arms are pierced for attachment, and the form of the cross closely resembles the late medieval cross on the front of the Shrine of the Book of Dimma [Pl.57].

Undecorated components such as angle plates, binding strips and clamps may have been used on a wide variety of shrines. The large hoard of ecclesiastical metalwork from Shanmullagh, Co Armagh, includes a number of straight-edged and angled binding strips, some of which closely resemble those found on the Lough Kinale shrine. One particular example consists of a vertical tubular pillar which is analogous to the vertical corner binding strips on the Lough Kinale Shrine [Pl.56.a].<sup>366</sup> However the height of the pillar is c.5 cm, is too shallow to enable a manuscript to be contained within a box of that height; it may have been a binding strip from a portable altar.

#### Evidence for book shrines in Scotland and Wales

Ireland is not the only country to have records of early medieval book shrines, as the church in pre-Norman Scotland and Wales were influenced by Irish practices. In Scotland there are two historical references to lost book shrines/boxes. At Banchory, Kincardineshire, the compiler of the Aberdeen Martyrology claimed to have viewed the relics of St Ternan in 1530. Amongst these was his Gospel of St Matthew: 'enclosed in a metal case covered with silver and gold.'<sup>367</sup> Since this manuscript was regarded as a relic of the saint, the 'case' would most probably have functioned as a shrine. There is also a record of the cumdach (silver case) of the gospels, made by Bishop Fothad before 960, which was seen on the high altar at St Andrews Cathedral in the middle of the fourteenth century.<sup>368</sup> This cumdach/case may have been a book box rather than a shrine as there is no direct association with a saint.

---

<sup>365</sup> Ó'Floinn 1983, no.82.

<sup>366</sup> Bourke 1993a, ill. p.29.

<sup>367</sup> Henderson 1993,209; Anderson 1881,145-6.

<sup>368</sup> Anderson 1881,145.



Pryce records Welsh hagiographical references to enshrined gospel books associated with saints, and to the gospels, allegedly written by Gildas, covered with gold and silver which were in the church of Llanacarfán in the 1120s or 1130s.<sup>369</sup>

---

<sup>369</sup> Having become aware of these references at a late stage, it was not possible to consult the primary references cited in Pryce's paper (1992, 25-26).

## CHAPTER TWO: THE SOISCEÁL MOLAISSÉ

### HISTORY

Until recently, there has been a lacuna in the recorded history of the Soisceál Molaisse from when the shrine was manufactured in the eleventh century up until the mid-nineteenth century, when George Petrie investigated local reports concerning its 'miraculous healing powers'.<sup>1</sup> However, a recent publication of a poem, which dates to the second quarter of the fifteenth century, considers the rights of the coarb of St Molaisse.<sup>2</sup> Verse 12, which pertains directly to the Soisceál, reads as follows: 'If the very great family of Flannagán were to go to battle fittingly, the "Soisceál Molaisse" would be their banner on every single occasion'.<sup>3</sup> The Ó'Flannagáin family ruled the territory of Tuath Rátha<sup>4</sup> from the late-thirteenth century until the mid-sixteenth century. The northern annals record fifteen Ó'Flannagáin chiefs of Tuatha Rátha between 1303 and 1537, and their chief stronghold was at Baile Uí Fhlannagáin, a crannóg in Lough Erne.<sup>5</sup> By 1542 Tuath Rátha was subsumed into the territory and rule of Maghnus Ó'Domhnaill of Tír Conaill.<sup>6</sup> The use of a book shrine as a battle talisman is encountered in episodes involving the renowned shrine of the Cathach where it was paraded clockwise around the army before commencement of battle.<sup>7</sup>

The coarbs of the Soisceál were the O'Meehan (Ó'Mithighán) family, who were associated with Devenish from at least the fourteenth century, where they are referred to in an obit of 1336.<sup>8</sup> The same family are recorded as coarbs of Ballaghmeen,<sup>9</sup> from the early-fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries. McKenna has stated that the O'Meehan clan spread over the Dioceses of Clogher, Kilmore and Elphin, and that the possession of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Petrie 1855, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ó'Canann 1994, 7-25.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>4</sup> A sub-kingdom which roughly comprises the modern barony of Magheraboy, Co Fermanagh, and which incorporates the island of Devenish.

<sup>5</sup> AU, AFM; Ó'Canann 1994, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> See pp.371-72 of the Conclusions chapter for further examples of these practices involving relics and shrines.

<sup>8</sup> AFM.

<sup>9</sup> Near Rossinver, Co Leitrim, which was formerly in the parish of Devenish.



Soisceál was a source of great discontent between the bishops and priests of these Dioceses.<sup>10</sup> He also maintained, without corroboration, that during the twelfth century an Elphin O'Meehan, in a bid to end the controversy, burned the manuscript which was contained within the shrine. In addition a Manorhamilton Meehan is said to have removed some of the decorative components from the shrine and sold them to a Sligo watchmaker.<sup>11</sup>

Thomas Ó'Canann has examined and analysed in some detail the political history of the coarb families of Devenish, whereas MacKenna's publication is a simplified account with a number of inaccuracies. Ó'Canann has provided a list of eight families who held the title of coarb of St Molaisse from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries.<sup>12</sup> He has suggested that since the collegiate church of St Molaisse on Devenish was a *Céile Dé* foundation, they were instrumental in electing their own abbot or coarb from the group of families traditionally associated with Devenish. The fortunes of the coarb families fluctuated until the O'Meehans gained ascendancy in 1336. However, the office of coarb was still in a state of transition, with disputes between the various factions until the Ó'Flannagáins eventually succeeded in wresting control of the rights of the coarb from the older families in the fifteenth century.<sup>13</sup> The implied message of the poem appears to be that the spoils of the church should be left to the older coarb and erenagh families, who were attempting to hold on to their customary prerogatives in the face of secular intrusions by the more powerful Ó'Flannagáin.<sup>14</sup>

The shrine first attracted serious scholarly study when George Petrie read an account of a Petty Sessions case in a Sligo Newspaper, c.1835, in which one party insisted that the other would perjure himself on the gospels: '... but that he would be satisfied with the man's oath if it were made on the Soisgeal Molaisse.' The trial was adjourned until the shrine could be obtained whereupon 'the defendant was unable to screw up his courage to

---

<sup>10</sup> McKenna 1931, 37.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> From the annals, AU and AFM.

<sup>13</sup> Ó'Canann 1994, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

the taking of the oath on this dreaded object, and so let judgement pass against him.'<sup>15</sup>

In a letter to Lord Dunraven, dated 19 October 1843, Petrie related that he had forgotten the existence of the shrine and congratulated Dunraven for obtaining temporary possession of the Soisceál.<sup>16</sup> Lord Dunraven had obtained the shrine on loan in 1843 from a Mr John Wynne of Hazelwood, Co Sligo, who in turn had borrowed it from a tenant farmer of his, who was the keeper of the shrine. Dunraven brought the shrine to Dublin and left it in the possession of Petrie for some weeks, who wanted to study it in more detail. During this time Petrie interviewed the keeper of the shrine and was informed that in the late eighteenth century, the shrine was lent to a priest named McLoughlin, who lived in either Sligo or Roscommon. The shrine contained a 'manuscript on parchment', but when it was eventually returned, after much tribulation, the manuscript had disappeared and the shrine was 'mutilated'.<sup>17</sup> McKenna provided a different set of circumstances and chronology for the destruction and damage to the manuscript and shrine.<sup>18</sup>

Petrie had obtained the Soisceál on loan in order to exhibit it at a lecture on the history and inscriptions of the shrine, which he read to the Royal Irish Academy on the 25th of June 1855.<sup>19</sup> On the 26th November, Reeves and Petrie were requested to prepare a submission, in order to raise subscriptions for the purchase of the shrine for the RIA. Their submission<sup>20</sup> records that the shrine passed into the hands of a Mr Charles Meehan of Latoon sometime after 1843 and remained in his possession until the end of April 1859, when it was obtained by Alexander Smullen, the Bishop of Kilmore, for the Academy at a cost of £45. The Academy, however, had not enough funds to cover the cost of purchase, and the minute books record the progress in obtaining the funds through public subscription from 24th November 1860 until 27th April 1861, when it was eventually purchased.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Petrie 1855, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Stokes 1868, 276-7.

<sup>17</sup> Petrie 1855, 2.

<sup>18</sup> McKenna 1937, 37.

<sup>19</sup> PRIA VI, 1855, 251; the text of the lecture appeared in **Saunders's Newsletter** 28th June 1855.

<sup>20</sup> Dated 30th June 1860; Ó Floinn 1989a, 53-4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-4.



An electrotype of the shrine was made by the Dublin jeweller, James West, in 1855, and was purchased by the Academy in 1856.<sup>22</sup> The shrine was loaned for exhibition to the South Kensington Museum in 1862,<sup>23</sup> and to Burlington House, London, in 1930. It was transferred to the Irish Antiquities Division of the National Museum in 1879 and is registered R.4006.

### **PREVIOUS ACCOUNTS**

Besides the Academy proceedings regarding the purchase of the shrine, Petrie's paper to the Academy on the shrine was published in Saunder's Newsletter for 28th June 1855. Margaret Stokes published a comprehensive description of the shrine, as well as some episodes from the Life of St Molaisse, and Petrie's reading of the inscriptions.<sup>24</sup> Three engravings, taken from photographs, were also included in her paper.<sup>25</sup> Stokes also edited Petrie's corpus of Christian inscriptions, where the inscriptions were published in detail, along with a concise history and description of the shrine.<sup>26</sup> She provided a brief description and recorded the inscription on the Soisceál in her subsequent publication.<sup>27</sup> An engraving of the front face was also supplied, which showed some of the filigree ornament and settings restored, though this was not disclosed in the text.<sup>28</sup> George Coffey, in his guide to the Early Christian antiquities of the RIA, furnished a brief account

---

<sup>22</sup> This may be the electrotype which was acquired by the NMI in 1938 (NMI 1938:9744) and is currently on loan to Fermanagh County Museum.

<sup>23</sup> Robinson 1863, 48.

<sup>24</sup> Stokes 1871, 144-50.

<sup>25</sup> In the NMI Irish Antiquities Division photographic archive there is a copy of a photograph of the front of the Soisceál, which was included in Margaret Stokes's photograph album that was compiled shortly before Christmas 1868. This photograph [Pl.23] shows a filigree panel with animal ornament present in the upper left semi-circular panel in the centre of the cross head. An engraving taken from this photograph was published in Stokes (1871, pl.xxi), but the details of the filigree panel were rendered incorrectly. It is not known when the original photograph in Stokes album was taken but the panel was missing when an illustration of the front was published in Coffey (1909) and Westropp (1911). However the original photograph showing the filigree panel appeared in Mahr (1939, pl.20:1). Recently the original glass plate negative of the front of the shrine has been discovered in the NMI photographic archive.

<sup>26</sup> Petrie 1878, 90-1.

<sup>27</sup> Stokes 1887, 74-5.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., fig. 36. This engraving includes the lost panel but the details are idealised and there are no zoomorphic elements.

of the shrine and reproduced photographs of the front and long side of the shrine.<sup>29</sup> Two years later Westropp published a similar guide to the Irish antiquities collections of the NMI, where he included a paragraph on the shrine and noted the relevance of the inscription 'as it enables us to fix probable dates for other uninscribed examples'.<sup>30</sup>

Throughout the first two decades of this century, the Cathach, Misach and the Domhnach Airgid shrines were published in detail, but the Soisceál Molaisse did not receive the same attention, possibly due to the previous publications. Henry Crawford allocated it a paragraph in his list of Irish shrines and reliquaries, and McKenna published an admirable, though somewhat inaccurate account, where he collated local reports and traditions associated with the shrine.<sup>31</sup> Adolf Mahr included a terse description and published the photograph from c.1855, which included the now lost filigree panel from the front.<sup>32</sup> In 1941 Joseph Raftery published a brief description and maintained that the shrine was originally house-shaped, that it was later converted into a book shrine, and that the enamelled hinge was of eighth-century date. He agreed with the conventional dating for the remainder of the ornament.<sup>33</sup> This was the first publication to provide photographs of all sides of the shrine. Macalister provided a translation and date for the inscription which differed slightly from previous readings. He also declared that the word *Molasi* was inscribed by a different hand to the rest of the inscription.<sup>34</sup>

In Maire MacDermott's publication of the British Museum Crosier she compared some of the animal ornament to the zoomorphic panels on the Soisceál, which she described as 'archaic'.<sup>35</sup> In a later paper she also adduced parallels between the zoomorphic ornament of the Soisceál and the crosiers of St Dymphna and St Mel.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Coffey 1909, 44-5, pl.viii.

<sup>30</sup> Westropp 1911, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Crawford 1923, 154; McKenna 1931, 33-40.

<sup>32</sup> Mahr 1939, 18. See n.25 above for the documentary evidence regarding the photograph.

<sup>33</sup> Raftery 1941, 119-21; pls.57-8. This view was restated when he published a summary catalogue (Raftery 1980, no.57) of Cone (ed. 1977).

<sup>34</sup> Macalister 1945, 124-5.

<sup>35</sup> MacDermott 1955, 81, 93.

<sup>36</sup> MacDermott 1957, 173.



Francoise Henry followed MacDermott in viewing the animal ornament as a culmination of a tenth-century style and also accepted Raftery's hypothesis that the Soiscéal originally functioned as a house-shaped reliquary.<sup>37</sup> Lucas commented briefly on the shrine and provided enlarged photographs of the back, long sides and front.<sup>38</sup>

The Soisceál Molaisse was one of the major Irish art treasures which were exhibited at different venues throughout the United States of America in 1977. For this purpose an exhibition catalogue was produced, and Mitchell composed the entry where he followed Raftery and Henry in advocating a two phase construction.<sup>39</sup> For the second travelling exhibition, this time to venues in Europe, another, albeit more detailed, catalogue was published with photographs of the front, back and one of the short sides. In this entry Ó Floinn dated the enamelled hinge and portions of the shrine to the late eighth/early ninth-century.<sup>40</sup>

More recently Ó Floinn has published new information on the acquisition of the shrine, and has restored some missing letters from the inscription, thus permitting a revised date for the construction of the shrine.<sup>41</sup> Charles Doherty has examined the relationship between the monastic federation of Drumlane and Devenish in the middle ages, and suggested that church properties at Ballaghmeen, near Rossinver, Co Leitrim, were set aside by Máedóc's federation for the use of the clergy of Devenish. He also recorded some of the local traditions regarding St Molaisse.<sup>42</sup> O'Canann's publication has already been referred to with regard to the use of the Soisceál as a battle standard. Stevick has recently analysed the underlying geometrical ratios in the construction and design of the front of the shrine.<sup>43</sup> Ruth Johnson has included the shrine in her doctoral thesis on the tenth-century hiatus in Irish art, where she has formed the same conclusions on the dating of certain

---

<sup>37</sup> Henry 1967, 120-22.

<sup>38</sup> Lucas 1973a, 128-30, fig.84.

<sup>39</sup> Mitchell 1977, no.57. Maire de Paor wrote the accompanying essay which also advocated a two-phase construction for the shrine (1977, 149).

<sup>40</sup> Ó Floinn 1983, no.75.

<sup>41</sup> Ó Floinn 1989a, 51-63.

<sup>42</sup> Doherty 1986, 369-71.

<sup>43</sup> Stevick 1994, 243-46; 1995, 5-8.

elements of the shrine as this writer.<sup>44</sup>

### THE INSCRIPTIONS [Pls.23-24, 27]

There are two sets of inscriptions on the shrine, the front, which displays the names of the evangelists and their symbols, and the long side which provides the dedicatory inscription. The inscriptions on the front are engraved into the vertical silver frames flanking the side of each evangelist plaque. The strip to the left provides the name of the evangelist, that to the right the title of the symbol. All the inscriptions are in Latin and each name is prefaced by a cross. Commencing in a clockwise manner from the top left they read as follows:

+MATH +HO +MARC: +LEO +IOHAN +AQUILA +LUCAS +UITAL  
which translates as: Matthew (Man), Mark (Lion), John (Eagle), Luke (Ox).<sup>45</sup>

The inscription on the long side is in Irish and commences, where it is preceded by a cross, at the bottom left corner, adjacent to ZP4. It has been previously published with minor variants in translation and orthography.<sup>46</sup> Until recently there has been no attempt to restore the missing letters in the damaged lacuna on the short end, but Ó Floinn has republished his translation with a restoration of the missing letters.<sup>47</sup> His reading is as follows:

+OR DO ... NFAILAD DO CHOMARB 7 MOLASI LASAN ...  
IN CUTACHSA DO ... NLAN + 7 DO GILLABAITHÍN CHERD DO  
RIGNI I GRESA

with the expansions included:

OROIT DO ... NFAILAD DO CHOMARB 7 MOLASI LASAN DERNAD  
IN CUMTACHSA DO ... NLAN + 7 DO GILLABAITHÍN CHERD DO  
RIGNI IN GRESA

Which translates as:

---

<sup>44</sup> Johnson 1997, 226-30.

<sup>45</sup> Ó Floinn 1989a, 57. The colon symbol after MARC may represent a punctuation mark (*punctus*). *Puncti* marks are also present on the inscription on the base plate of the shrine of the Stowe Missal.

<sup>46</sup> See pp.81-82 above for these references.

<sup>47</sup> Ó Floinn 1989a, 58-62.



A Prayer for ... nfailad successor of Molaise who caused this shrine to be made, for ... nlan and (a prayer) for Gillabaithín the Goldsmith who made it.

There are three personal names, besides St Molaise, referred to in the inscriptions: ... *nfailad* can be identified as Cennfailad Mac Flaithbertach, abbot of the monastery of Devenish, who died in 1025 AD.<sup>48</sup> The previous abbot's death, Cathalan Ua Corcain, is recorded in an obit in 1001.<sup>49</sup> These obits imply that Cennfailad attained the position of abbot sometime after 1001, and before 1025, which is the conventional period to which the shrine is dated. The name of the craftsman, Gillabaithín, is not recorded in any of the surviving annals, genealogies or historical texts. The third word ...*nlan* is also a personal name. Ó Floinn, using the sequence of names found on inscriptions of similar date elsewhere, has inferred that this person was an ecclesiastic with status below that of an abbot.<sup>50</sup> The name of the most important ecclesiastic, usually the abbot, is afforded primacy in the inscription. Using the evidence of the annals, Ó Floinn has also proposed that the missing name is that of Coencomrach Ua Scannlain, *airchinneach* of Devenish. The term *airchinneach*, which translates as an administrator of monastic property, was interchangeable with *comarba*, which meant successor or heir. Both terms could refer to the abbot of a monastery, who could combine both functions. From the above, the restored portion of the inscription would now read: DO [UA SCA]NLAN. The obit of Ua Scannlain is 1011<sup>51</sup> and therefore, according to Ó Floinn, the shrine was manufactured between the years 1001 and 1011. A recent paper by Micheli has questioned Ó Floinn's modification of the inscription, but concluded that 'Ó Floinn is probably right in filling the gap with the name Scannlain'.<sup>52</sup>

Ó Floinn has also observed that whereas Ua Corcain and Cennfailad are described in their obits as abbots or successors (*comarba*) of Molaise in the AFM, in the AU they are both described as *airchinneach*. He suggests that there may have been a dispute over

---

<sup>48</sup> AFM.

<sup>49</sup> AFM.

<sup>50</sup> Ó Floinn 1989a, 61.

<sup>51</sup> AFM.

<sup>52</sup> Micheli 1996, 14-15.

the office of abbot of Devenish in the early eleventh century.<sup>53</sup> The last of the Ua Conghaile abbots, Cormac, died in 996,<sup>54</sup> and the next Ua Conghaile regained office after the death of Ceannfailad in 1025. It is significant that the shrine was commissioned when control of the abbacy was wrested from the Ua Conghaile and it may, therefore, have been used as propaganda, in order to bolster the position of the Mac Flaithbertach claimants.<sup>55</sup>

One aspect of the shrine which has been neglected so far is the palaeography of the script. Ó Floinn has stated that the Latin inscription on the front and the Irish inscription on the long side are both executed by the same hand, even though the standard of lettering on the front appears to be inferior to that on the front.<sup>56</sup> Macalister contended that the word 'Molasi' on the long side was executed by a different hand due to the space on either side of the word, and the blanks were left for the insertion of the name at a later stage.<sup>57</sup> Examination of the script and letter forms indicates that all the script on the long side is the work of a single scribe. The evidence would agree with Ó Floinn's observation that the inscription on the long side is primary as it is pierced by rivets used to secure the openwork side in place.

## **ICONOGRAPHY**

The figural iconography of the shrine is confined to the front and SSB.

### **Front [Pl.24]**

The iconography of the front face is dominated by the symbols of the four evangelists. These symbols are taken from Ezekiel's first vision (1:5-10), and later modified for a Christian context in the Apocalyptic vision of John in the Book of Revelation (IV:6-8), where each of the symbols were animals with human hands, six wings and multiple eyes. The first symbol was in the form of a lion, the second a bull, the third had a human face and the fourth resembled a flying eagle. The correlation of these symbols

---

<sup>53</sup> Ó Floinn 1989a, 61.

<sup>54</sup> AFM.

<sup>55</sup> Other aspects of the inscription and commissioning of the shrine will be discussed below, see pp.140-41.

<sup>56</sup> Ó Floinn 1989a, 58.

<sup>57</sup> Macalister 1949, 124.



to the evangelists, according to St Irenaeus and later modified by St Jerome, is found in the opening of the gospel texts. The man represents Matthew because his gospel commences with the genealogy of Christ; the lion represents Mark whose gospel opens with a voice crying in the wilderness; the ox, as a sacrificial beast, symbolises St Luke, whose gospel begins with the account of the sacrifice of the priest Zacharias, and the eagle represents John whose spiritual message transports man to the heart of divinity, as well as being the bird that flies closest to heaven.<sup>58</sup> According to exegetical tradition St Matthew symbolised Christ's incarnation, the lion of St Mark his resurrection, the ox of St Luke his passion, and the eagle of St John his ascension.<sup>59</sup> They were also associated with the four aspects of Christ: royal, priestly, human, spiritual and four aspects of Christ's mission: divine origin, priestly ministry, human generation, and prophetic spirit.<sup>60</sup>

In Insular and Early Christian art the four evangelist symbols are usually depicted around a central cross, or found surrounding a figure of Christ depicted in bust or *Majestas Domini* form. The four quadrants forming a cross recall 'Christ's redemption, continually expressed to successive ages through the four gospels'.<sup>61</sup> As expected, and because of the nature of the manuscript, a page displaying the evangelist symbols is found in nearly all of the major Insular gospel books from the Book of Durrow to the Book of Deer where in their position preceding the individual gospels and canon tables they would have symbolised the harmony and unity of the gospels.<sup>62</sup> In some representations the symbols are shown without any attributes such as wings, books or halos, and are thus known as

---

<sup>58</sup> Hall 1984, 129.

<sup>59</sup> Webster 1986, 165. For a full discussion on the extent of multivalent symbolism applicable to the four evangelists in the Insular exegetical tradition see McNally (1971, 111-122), Cronin (1995, 111-17) and O'Reilly (1995, 290-309).

<sup>60</sup> Cronin 1995, 111-12.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>62</sup> Besides the Books of Durrow and Deer (TCD MS 57, Alexander 1978, no. 6; Cambridge, Univ. Lib. MS li.6.32; Alexander 1978, no. 72) other manuscripts include the Durham Gospels, Durham, Cathedral Library, MS A.II.17 (Alexander 1978, no. 10); The Lichfield Gospels, Lichfield Cathedral, s.n. (Alexander 1978, no. 21, pl. 81); the Trier Gospels, Domschatz Codex 61 (Alexander 1978, no. 26, pl. 231); the St Gall Gospels, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 51 (Alexander 1978, no. 44); the Book of Kells, TCD MS 58 (Alexander 1978, no. 58); the Book of Armagh, TCD MS 52 (Alexander 1978, no. 53, pl. 246); the Macdurnan gospels, London, Lambeth Palace Lib., MS 1370 (Alexander 1978, no. 70, pl. 250). See Meehan (1994, 36-54) and Cronin (1995, 113-4) for a discussion on the Kells evangelist symbols. For the most recent discussion on the Book of Deer see Johnson (1997, cat no. 312, 285-299).

terrestrial symbols.<sup>63</sup>

The evangelist symbols on the front of the *Soisceál* are unusual as regards their attributes and poses, as they do not possess halos, books or forelimbs, but do retain wings. All are shown standing in an upright position, which is standard for the man and eagle, but the ox is depicted in an unique three-quarter view, and the lion appears to be endowed with anthropomorphic qualities. He wears a decorated tunic, and except for the large beast head, he is analogous in all other respects to the man. Due to the fact that the lion is depicted clothed, Werner has suggested that the symbols are a later manifestation of a composition which also influenced the four evangelists page (f.2r), in the Book of Durrow, in which they are shown standing upright in a frontal pose with no books, the only attribute present is a halo on the eagle.<sup>64</sup> Werner described these Durrow figures as 'zoo-anthropomorphic' and proposed a Coptic manuscript as the original source.<sup>65</sup> This hypothesis was disputed by Nees, which in turn was challenged by Werner.<sup>66</sup>

While Werner's hypothesis of a Coptic origin for the evangelist symbols in the Book of Durrow is plausible, it is unlikely that this is also the source for the *Soisceál* evangelists. The *Soisceál* figures are probably taken directly from a four evangelist page in an Insular manuscript, most likely a pocket gospel of eighth-to ninth-century date. There is a four evangelist page from the ninth-century Book of MacDurnan which shows the evangelist symbols in an upright position, winged but lacking halos and books [PI.103.a].<sup>67</sup> The decoration is quite elaborate, with the bodies and wings subsumed in a torrent of abstract ornament, while the heads remain relatively naturalistic. The positions of John and Mark are transposed in relation to the *Soisceál* figures. In other Insular manuscripts bearing a four evangelist symbols page, the Trier and Lichfield Gospels, the

---

<sup>63</sup> For example the Book of Durrow (TCD MS 57; Alexander 1978, no. 6; Werner 1969, 25-6; Meehan 1996, 43-50) and the Trier Gospels (Trier, Domschatz Codex 61; Alexander 1978, no. 26).

<sup>64</sup> TCD MS 57 (Alexander 1978, no. 6; Werner 1969, 7).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>66</sup> Nees 1978, 3-8; Werner 1981, 23-33.

<sup>67</sup> London, Lambeth Palace Lib., MS 1370, f.1v; Alexander 1978, no.70.



Book of Kells and the Book of Armagh,<sup>68</sup> the figures are in the same position as the Soisceál, that is, with the eagle of St John in the lower right quadrant and the lion of St Mark in the upper right. Other indications that the Soisceál relied on a manuscript prototype, and not another medium, is the presence of the Latin inscriptions denoting both the names of the evangelists and their symbols on the silver frame flanking the panels. The use of names accompanying evangelist symbols is a rare occurrence in Insular manuscripts, and where they occur, only the name of the symbols are included, as in the Trier Gospels and the Book of Armagh.<sup>69</sup> An exquisite gold and niello plaque from Brandon, Suffolk, depicts a half-length zoo-anthropomorphic figure of St John with an accompanying inscription denoting 'St John the Evangelist'.<sup>70</sup>

If, as seems most likely, a four evangelist page from a pocket gospels was the model for the front, perhaps the front was copied directly from, or influenced by, the manuscript due to be enshrined, thus forging a strong link between relic and shrine. The names, along with the inscription on the long side, may have been executed by a scribe, and not the goldsmith, and copied directly from the manuscript. On the other hand it appears unusual that a manuscript, written for a literate audience, would need to include the names of the symbols in addition to those of the evangelists; these would have been evident if the illuminations were of a similar quality to the depictions on the front of the shrine. Perhaps the names of the symbols acted as directions from the scribe to the goldsmith in order to ensure that he understood and positioned the symbols in their allocated places around the cross.

Another feature, probably derived from a manuscript source, is the curious D-shaped projection in the Luke panel. This may be a chair pommel which was present in an evangelist portrait but was misinterpreted by the goldsmith and rendered as a featureless shape. A spherical chair pommel is depicted in an unidentified evangelist portrait in the Maeseyck Gospel fragments.<sup>71</sup> The twisted pose of the Soisceál Luke, with his legs turned

---

<sup>68</sup> The Trier Gospels, Trier, Domschatz Codex 61, f.1v (Alexander 1978, no. 26); Lichfield Gospels, Lichfield Cathedral, s.n. (Alexander 1978, no. 21); Book of Kells, TCD MS 58 (Alexander 1978, no. 58); Book of Armagh, TCD MS 52, f.32v (Alexander 1978, no. 53).

<sup>69</sup> Alexander 1978, pls. 114, 230. See n. above for full references.

<sup>70</sup> Webster 1991, no.66a.

<sup>71</sup> Maeseyck, Church of St Catherine, Trésor, s.n., f.1; Alexander 1978, no. 22, pl. 87.

outwards as if he was sitting sideways whilst facing the spectator, may have been due to the presence of a throne in the model. Another possibility is that the D-shape reproduces a semi-circular cross-bar terminal, as found in the portrait of St Mark in the Lichfield Gospels.<sup>72</sup> In the Trier Gospels, the evangelists Mark and Luke are depicted standing on decorated footstools, a possible source for the decorated rectangular panels beneath Matthew and Mark on the Soisceál.<sup>73</sup> There are also two prominent enigmatic D-shaped fields, incorporating interlaced human figures, which flank the Virgin and Child miniature in the Book of Kells.<sup>74</sup> These may have functioned as space-fillers as they serve no purpose in the miniature.

Before other examples of four evangelist pages in Insular manuscripts are examined, there is the peculiar feature of the tear-drop shape suspended from the beak of the eagle. This has not been referred to in previous publications and the writer knows of no parallels in early medieval Insular art. This drop may represent a tear-drop or a drop of blood. St John was revered as the disciple who was closest to Christ and was considered to be the most spiritual of the evangelists.<sup>75</sup> As he was present at the crucifixion the drop may be a tear-drop, alluding to his lamentation of Christ's death on the cross in order to redeem mankind. The blood of Christ, shed on the cross, was understood to have redemptive qualities which were symbolised by the eucharistic sacrifice of communion. The evangelist symbols have also been paired with four liquids. John is associated with oil which has symbolic resonances with light and anointing, it is from his gospel opening that the divine light is said to shine.<sup>76</sup> The drop on the tip of his beak may represent this sacred liquid. Another anomaly is the presence of ears on the eagle. The only other manuscript in which these are found is the eagle in the four symbols page in the Book of MacDurnan [Pl.103.a].<sup>77</sup>

A bird which does have direct eucharistic symbolism is the pelican. According to

---

<sup>72</sup> Lichfield Cathedral, s.n.; Alexander 1978, no. 21, pl.80.

<sup>73</sup> Trier, Domschatz Codex 61, ff.80v, 125v; Alexander 1978, no. 26, pls. 112, 113.

<sup>74</sup> TCD MS 58, f 7v; Alexander 1978, no. 58; Meehan 1994, ill. 7.

<sup>75</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the mystical qualities of St John, see pp.211-13 of the Stowe chapter.

<sup>76</sup> O'Reilly 1995, 295.

<sup>77</sup> London, Lambeth Palace Lib., MS 1370; Alexander 1978, no. 70.



the Physiologus the female smothered her young by an excess of love but the male bird restored them to life by piercing its side and shedding his blood over them.<sup>78</sup> This image symbolises the redemptive powers of Christ's blood. While there are no acknowledged representations of the pelican in Insular art before the Gothic period, it does appear in the borders of a page depicting the Baptism of Christ in the Armenian Etchmiadzin Gospels, which are dated from the late sixth to the early seventh century.<sup>79</sup> In the depiction the pelican is shown in the act of piercing its breast while positioned above a chalice and below a paten.<sup>80</sup> The eucharistic imagery is made more potent by positioning the pelican between the liturgical vessels which accommodated Christ's body and blood in the sacrifice of the Mass. In addition, in each of the corners of the page there is a portrait bust of an evangelist.

However there is a direct connection, albeit at a much later date, between St John and the pelican. A fourteenth century literary reference, in Dante's *Paradiso* (1315-21), refers to the Apostle John as: 'he who leant upon the breast of Christ our Pelican'.<sup>81</sup> This reference may have been assimilated from earlier traditions, such as the Golden Legend.<sup>82</sup>

Finally, the image of the four evangelist symbols disposed around a cross would have served as a potent apotropaic image. The use of interlace, which was deemed to have magical properties, to decorate the cross, would have made it an even more effective apotropaic image.<sup>83</sup>

Evangelist symbols are relatively rare in Irish and Anglo-Saxon sculpture and metalwork. The only definite occurrence of evangelist symbols in Irish sculpture is the evangelist slab from Athlone.<sup>84</sup> This inscribed slab is now in two pieces: a smaller portion

---

<sup>78</sup> For the development of the Physiologus as a source for iconography and imagery see Clarke and McMunn (1989, 2-4).

<sup>79</sup> Yerevan, Ms. Matenadaran 2374.

<sup>80</sup> Illustrated in Beckwith 1986, pl.118.

<sup>81</sup> 25:112; Hall 1984, 86.

<sup>82</sup> Ryan, W.G. 1993, *passim*.

<sup>83</sup> For further discussion of this aspect see pp.43-45, Chapter 1.

<sup>84</sup> Ó Floinn and Fanning 1985, 115-23.

bearing the symbol of St Matthew, winged and holding a book, was discovered in the nineteenth century and is now in the collections of the NMI, while a larger piece displaying the symbols of Mark and Luke was discovered in the Franciscan graveyard at Athlone in 1979.<sup>85</sup> This high quality carving depicts three evangelist symbols disposed around a ringed cross which has lozenge-shaped arms filled with peltae and fret patterns. The authors have dated this slab from the late-ninth to the early-tenth centuries and suggest Clonmacnoise as the most likely place of origin.<sup>86</sup> In a recent paper Ó Floinn has reiterated this hypothesis, and that the slab was probably removed from Clonmacnoise to Athlone sometime in the late seventeenth century.<sup>87</sup>

The occurrence of evangelist symbols in Irish high crosses is extremely rare, which is unusual considering the wealth of iconographic scenes present on these monuments. Only two crosses have possible evangelist symbols, the Tower cross at Kells and the North cross at Duleek. Whereas Henry suggested that the two beasts flanking Christ in the centre of the cross-head at Kells are the lion of St Mark and the ox of St Luke, both winged and holding books, Harbison is more tentative and argues that the species cannot be identified and do not possess books.<sup>88</sup> Examination of the carvings support Harbison's view, but they are extremely eroded leaving interpretation of the scene somewhat subjective. On the south side of the shaft at Duleek there is a rampant lion holding a book in its forepaws, while on the top of the north side there is a panel depicting an angel<sup>89</sup> in a frontal pose holding a book in his left hand.<sup>90</sup> While Harbison does not refer specifically to evangelists in his discussion on *Majestas Domini* compositions,<sup>91</sup> Crawford and Henry would appear to be correct in identifying the Duleek figures as evangelist symbols.<sup>92</sup> The identification of the lion of St Mark is correct, but, as can be seen from Harbison's photograph, the

---

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 115, pl.7.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>87</sup> Ó Floinn 1995a, 252.

<sup>88</sup> Henry 1967, 73; Harbison 1992, 110-111, fig.355. Roger Stalley (1994, 259-60) has also cast doubt on their identification as evangelist symbols.

<sup>89</sup> Crawford (1926, 8) identified this as the eagle of St John.

<sup>90</sup> Harbison 1992, no. 87, figs. 242, 244.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 301-2.

<sup>92</sup> Crawford 1926, 8; Henry 1967, 73.



figure on the north side is a winged human figure and not an eagle. Cramp has collated the occurrence of evangelist symbols in Anglo-Saxon sculpture but they do not have any traits which would help resolve the peculiarities of the Soisceál figures.<sup>93</sup>

To the writer's knowledge there are no depictions of evangelists or their symbols in early medieval Irish metalwork, but recent excavations from the middle-Saxon ecclesiastical site of Hartlepool, Cleveland, has produced clay moulds dating from the late-seventh to the early-eighth-centuries. One of these bears a finely-modelled calf blowing a trumpet.<sup>94</sup> This has been identified as the symbol of St Luke and the mould may have been used to cast a metalwork plaque for adorning a cross, book cover or shrine. The gold plaque bearing a zoo-anthropomorphic symbol of St John from Brandon has already been referred to above.<sup>95</sup>

### **Short side B**

#### **Ecclesiastical Figure [Pl.26].**

This finely cast figure holds a book in his left hand, and what might be an asperge or flail in his right. These attributes invest him with ecclesiastical authority. He may represent a saint, martyr, prophet, apostle or even an evangelist, but this latter suggestion is unlikely due to the presence of their symbols on the front of the shrine. Previous writers<sup>96</sup> have tentatively identified the figure as St Molaisse, whereas Henry opted for an evangelist.<sup>97</sup>

A major difficulty with any proposed identification of this figure is that it may have been part of a more expansive iconographical scheme. There are three spaces on the long side and one on SSA which would have held plaques of the same size. If the missing long side had a similar decorative scheme, then there would have been three additional plaques, leading to a total of eight. The other seven plaques may also have displayed single figures or scenes, which may have assisted in resolving the identification of this figure. It also has

---

<sup>93</sup> Cramp 1978, 120-130.

<sup>94</sup> Webster 1991, no. 106:b. There is a possibility that this beast could also represent the apocalyptic image of the lamb in the Book of Revelation.

<sup>95</sup> See n.70 above.

<sup>96</sup> Stokes, M. 1871, 148; Petrie 1878, 91; Coffey 1909, 45; McKenna 1931, 35.

<sup>97</sup> Henry 1967, 121.

to be considered that where there are iconographic programmes executed in metalwork, and of similar date, positive identifications are also lacking.<sup>98</sup> In these examples, the schemes are not complete and there are also figures missing. The identification of the figure as St Molaisse, while not improbable, is extremely hard to justify without the aid of the full programme.

The attributes of the figure are the book and the rod, the latter of which has been provisionally identified as a brush or asperge<sup>99</sup>, and a scourge, flail or asperge by Ó Floinn.<sup>100</sup> Raftery was less committal and suggested a sceptre or short knobbed staff.<sup>101</sup> Other possibilities may be a flabellum, sheaf of wheat or a palm frond. The palm frond, which was a sacramental object blessed before the principal Mass on Palm Sunday, symbolises the triumph and resurrection of Christ.<sup>102</sup> It is also found as an attribute of St James the Minor, although this originated in late Gothic art and would not have been current at this period. The asperge was an attribute of St Benedict,<sup>103</sup> but this, along with other attributes of saints and martyrs did not become established until the thirteenth century with the compilation in 1260 of Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, a collection of the lives and legends of the saints and martyrs, which had a profound influence on later Christian iconography.<sup>104</sup>

If the figure's right hand was positioned beneath his left, he would then be in an 'osiris' pose, of which there are many examples in early medieval Insular art.<sup>105</sup> This pose is also present on figures in late Anglo-Saxon metalwork, for example, the Fuller brooch and the Alfred jewel [Pl.76.c].<sup>106</sup> Another feature of the figure is his forked

---

<sup>98</sup> For example on the sides of the shrine of the Stowe Missal and the fronts of the Breac Maedhóg and St Manachán's shrine [Pls.34-35,73-4].

<sup>99</sup> Stokes 1871, 148; Coffey 1909, 145; McKenna 1931, 35; Mitchell 1977, 183.

<sup>100</sup> Ó Floinn 1983, 162; 1989a, 57.

<sup>101</sup> Raftery 1941, 120.

<sup>102</sup> Werner 1973, 12.

<sup>103</sup> Hall 1984, 44-5.

<sup>104</sup> Ryan, W.G. 1993; Mâle 1961, 272-4.

<sup>105</sup> See Farr 1986, 132, n.59 for examples.

<sup>106</sup> Webster 1991, nos. 257, 260.



beard. This is an unusual trait but can be seen on two of the figures on the front of the Breac Maedhóg and on three of the figures on St Manachan's shrine [Pls.75,73,110.b].<sup>107</sup> Two of the crucifixion plaques also depict Christ with a forked beard [Pl.92.b].<sup>108</sup> Beards are common in Insular manuscripts where they are sometimes depicted in an abstract manner, appearing in marginal drolleries and minor decoration.<sup>109</sup> However forked beards are rare and are only evident in iconic images. The portrait of St Luke in the Macregol Gospels has a bifurcating beard and the portrait of St Mark in the St Gall Gospels has a forked beard which intertwines with his moustache.<sup>110</sup> Of the above figures with forked beards, none has been identified, except for Christ on the crucifixion plaques, but this does not assist in the identification of the Soisceál figure.

Without the full complement of panels it is not possible to make a positive identification of the figure. He may simply denote an ecclesiastical dignitary, saint, apostle or martyr. The attributes do not help further the identification. The book is common to all manner of saints and ecclesiastics, and the other object may be an asperge, flail or palm frond. The palm frond as an early Christian symbol of the Resurrection may represent Christ. The lack of a halo on the figure is not critical as there are no halos depicted on Christ on the series of metalwork Crucifixion plaques or on Christ as depicted in ff.32v and 114r in the Book of Kells.<sup>111</sup> The forked beard has also been seen on Christ on the crucifixion plaques, but on the Soisceál figure this feature may be just a stylistic convention.

## **STYLISTIC ANALYSIS**

### **Front [Pl.24]**

#### **Evangelist Symbols**

---

<sup>107</sup> Kendrick and Senior 1937, pl.xxxix: a,f,i. Figure (a) grasps the strands of his forked beard. For a general survey on the iconography of beards, although the paper omits a number of pertinent Irish examples, see Gjaerder (1964, 105-114).

<sup>108</sup> The Clonmacnoise and an unlocalised plaque (NMI R.2917); Bourke 1993b, fig.21.1:a,b. A forked beard is also present on the figure of Christ on the Calf of Man stone crucifixion plaque, see Cubbon (1983, 16).

<sup>109</sup> For example, in the Book of Kells, TCD MS 58; (Alexander 1978, no. 58; Meehan 1994, 71, pls. 15, 43, 44, 80, 90, 93).

<sup>110</sup> Macregol Gospels, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. D.2. 19 (Alexander 1978, no. 54, pl.263); St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 51 (Alexander 1978, no. 44, pl. 207).

<sup>111</sup> Bourke 1993b, 168-74; TCD MS 58; Alexander 1978, no. 58; Meehan 1994, pls. 63, 53.

Most of the iconographic parallels drawn from the Insular manuscripts do not provide stylistic affinities, except for accepted conventions such as posture, attributes and dress.<sup>112</sup> As stated previously, the closest iconographic parallel is the four evangelist symbols page in the Book of MacDurnan, which is dated to the late ninth century [Pl.103.a].<sup>113</sup> They are positioned in rectangular quadrants surrounding a cross with expanded ends and a central roundel. Their bodies are a loosely contained vortex of spirals and C-scrolls. Matthew is placed frontally, but with his head in profile. His hair, which is curled at the nape of his neck, is similar to the Soisceál Matthew, and his body of interlocking peltae and C-scrolls resembles the decoration of his tunic, although the ornament is more restrained and contained within the garment. All the MacDurnan symbols display scrolled shoulder joints. The ox has his body and head in a frontal pose, and the ears with adjacent comma-shaped fields which develop into horns are similar to those of the ox on the Soisceál. The eagle has comparable scale-like tail feathers. The symbols of the evangelists placed in the corners of the portrait of St Mark in the St Gall Gospels also exhibit stylistic parallels with the Soisceál symbols.<sup>114</sup> Three have frontal bodies and profile heads while St Matthew has a frontal body with his head turned slightly to one side. Mark and Luke have tightly coiled spirals where the wings emanate from the body, as seen in the Soisceál figures, while the eagle of St John bears similar well defined talons and tail feathers.

The symbol of St Matthew on the Soisceál has been classified as Style A2 in McNab's study of twelfth-century figure sculpture, whose bodies are defined as schematic, almost rectangular blocks.<sup>115</sup> Other figures included in this class are the figures on the Barrow Valley crosses, the symbol of St Matthew in the Book of Durrow and the metalwork figure from Aghaboe.<sup>116</sup> This type of figure is rendered in a crude, almost

---

<sup>112</sup> For example those cited from the Book of Durrow, TCD MS 57; the Trier Gospels, Trier, Domschatz Codex 61 and the Book of Armagh, TCD MS 52 (Alexander 1978, nos. 6, 26, 53).

<sup>113</sup> London, Lambeth Palace Lib., MS 1370; Alexander 1978, no. 70. Henry (1967, 121) has already drawn attention to the similarity between the Soisceál and Macdurnan evangelist figures.

<sup>114</sup> St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 51, Alexander 1978, no. 44, pl. 207.

<sup>115</sup> McNab 1987-8, 69-70.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., fig.2:a-f.



careless fashion, in the evangelist figures in the tenth-century Book of Deer [Pl.102].<sup>117</sup> The hatched angular wings on the figures are not found in other representations in Insular art but St Matthew's hairstyle, curling outwards from the neck and ending in a volute, can be seen on the figure on the lower knop of the Lismore crosier and on a similar figure on the Cloyne cross [Pls.20.b, 13.b]. Interlocking peltae are also present on the breast of Christ on the Athlone crucifixion plaque.<sup>118</sup>

The head of Mark displays some archaic Insular traits and is close in style to beasts depicted in metalwork, for example, the finely cast quadrupeds on the reverse of the Killamery brooch.<sup>119</sup> The beasts share the same comma-shaped eye terminating in a volute, splayed jaws, triangular ears, scrolled joints and hatched bodies. Both panels are framed by a rope moulding. There are also stylistic links between the beast-head on the strap hinge on SSB, and the heads of Mark and Luke on the front. This will be considered in more detail in the discussion section.<sup>120</sup>

The eagle of St John has some parallels in metalwork, although nothing attains the fine detail and modelling present on the Soisceál. Where parallels do exist, they are found in eighth- to ninth-century metalwork, those on tenth- to twelfth-century pieces are more abstract and lack the detail of the earlier examples.<sup>121</sup> In the earlier period, birds appear frequently on the more elaborate ninth-century penannular brooches, such as the large Ardagh brooch which has three birds cast in full relief, and the smaller brooch from the same hoard which has birds with back-turned heads and hatched bodies in the upper margins of the terminals.<sup>122</sup> However the cast gilt-silver panels on the reverse of the 'Tara' brooch bear superbly modelled birds with exquisite detail which are comparable to

---

<sup>117</sup> Cambridge, Univ. Lib. MS li.6.32, Alexander 1978, no.72, pls. 331, 335; Hughes 1980, 22-37; Johnson 1997, cat no. 312.

<sup>118</sup> Ryan 1989, no. 133.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., no.80.

<sup>120</sup> See p.148 below.

<sup>121</sup> For example the birds perched above the horsemen on the reverse of the Corp Naomh bell shrine, [Pl.78] and on knop 2 of the British Museum Crosier (MacDermott 1957, figs.4, 6) [Pl.90]. Twelfth century examples, cast in openwork, are found on the reverse of the Cross of Cong, St Patrick's Bell shrine and the shrine of the Book of Dimma [Pls.81,57].

<sup>122</sup> Ryan 1983a, no.51 c,d.

the Soisceál eagle.<sup>123</sup> These rapacious birds are arranged in a frieze on the lower margins and display long curving beaks, tripartite claws, scrolled shoulder joints and scale-like feathers. This type of animal ornament may have been present in the enshrined manuscript and may have inspired the craftsman to emulate these figures.

There are no evident parallels for the eagle of St John in early medieval Irish sculpture, although a substantial portion of carvings have suffered weathering, damage and wear leading to loss of detail. However, there is a portion of an Anglo-Saxon cross from Brixworth, Northants, which dates to the eighth/ninth centuries and provides a good parallel.<sup>124</sup> This is carved in low relief and depicts an eagle with outstretched wings, a wedge-shaped tail and head turned to the right. There are no feet shown and the beak is short and rounded, but the stance, detailing of the wings, abstract patterning and shallow relief would tend to indicate that it may have been dependant upon a manuscript or metalwork model.

If birds are relatively rare in non-manuscript insular art, bovines are virtually non-existent, except for the bulls carved on Pictish class I and II slabs. With the added peculiarity of the twisted pose consisting of a frontal head and profile body the range is even more limited. As noted above the emphatic joint spiral and hatched bodies are common traits on eighth- to ninth-century Irish metalwork. At present a parallel for the entire beast can not be found in the corpus of Insular art, but along with the other figures, it was probably inspired by a metalwork or manuscript exemplar.

The outline of the cross on the front of the Soisceál resembles those found on the scripture crosses of the ninth and tenth centuries. An unusual feature of the Soisceál cross is the placement of the nodes on the outer curve of the ring, where they intrude into the evangelist panels. These are normally found on either the inner curve of the ring on stone crosses, for example, the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise, or on the inner curve of the arms, as seen on Muiredach's and the Tall cross at Monsterboice [Pl.107.a].<sup>125</sup>

---

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., no.48. The panel is illustrated in Haseloff 1987, Fig.10:e.

<sup>124</sup> Illustrated in Wilson 1964, pl.II:b.

<sup>125</sup> Harbison 1992, pls. 132, 481, 496.



The two zoomorphic gold filigree panels will be included in the section dealing with the zoomorphic ornament on the sides of the shrine. Except for two panels, the abstract ornament on the front is conventional and requires no detailed assessment. However panel AFP 6 has a free ring which binds the knotwork elements, and this ring-knot is a West Viking trait, but is ultimately derived from the Borre metalwork style.<sup>126</sup> The stamped silver panel in the corner also bears a distinctive motif, as the strands of the knot form a debased closed pretzel loop, which was widely used in ribbon ornament of the Borre style.<sup>127</sup>

The parallels cited for the ornament and figure style of the evangelist symbols on the front of the shrine are derived from manuscripts and metalwork of eighth to ninth century date, principally the MacDurnan and St Gall gospels along with the Killamery and 'Tara' brooches. This would indicate that the front is based on a manuscript exemplar of eighth to ninth century date.

### **Short Sides A and B**

#### **Ecclesiastical Figure [Pl.26]**

This figure is classified as Style A1 by McNab in her study of twelfth-century Irish figure sculpture.<sup>128</sup> These figural types have realistic rounded forms with the contours of the body well defined, and the style is epitomised by the tenth-century scripture crosses at Monasterboice, Clonmacnoise and Durrow. The central figures on the shaft of the west face of Muiredach's cross at Monasterboice bear a striking resemblance to the Soisceál ecclesiastic in style, proportion, relief and attire [Pl.107.a].<sup>129</sup>

Parallels from manuscript illumination are widespread, but as the figures are portrayed in two dimensions they do not have the same convincing realism found in sculpture. McNab has drawn comparisons between the Soisceál ecclesiastic and the portrait of St Mark in the Book of MacDurnan.<sup>130</sup> Both are tightly framed within a rectangle, and

---

<sup>126</sup> Lang 1988a, 10-12; Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1966, Pl.XXVII:f,i,k.

<sup>127</sup> Fuglesang 1982, 146.

<sup>128</sup> McNab 1987-8, 268-9.

<sup>129</sup> Harbison 1992, no.174, pls.480-2.

<sup>130</sup> London, Lambeth Palace Lib., MS 1370; McNab 1987-8, fig.1:a,c. Alexander 1978, no. 45, pl. 354.

the outlines, proportions and drapery patterns are also similar. Other parallels are the portrait of St Mark from the St Gall Gospels and the evangelist portraits, notably St John, from the Book of Moling.<sup>131</sup> In these latter portraits the heads of the evangelists interrupt the upper horizontal line of the frame in the same manner as the Soisceál figure. These have similar body proportions but the drapery patterns are more abstract. However, in the illustration of the Second Coming from the eighth-century Turin Gospel fragments, Christ's stance with his arms crossed mid-way across his chest and feet turned outwards with his head touching the top of the frame is the closest of all the manuscript parallels to the Soisceál figure [Pl.103.b].<sup>132</sup> The hatched bands on Christ's cloak are remarkably similar to the Soisceál figure's attire.

There are also parallels to be found in metalwork: the group of ecclesiastical figures on the side of the shrine of the Stowe missal have similar proportions, attire and facial characteristics, but do not exhibit as much detail [Pl.34]. Conversely the ecclesiastic figures on the front of the Breac Maedhóg are finely cast and bear elaborate detail [Pl.75]. The cloaks of the male figures resemble the Soisceál figure, where they terminate in a scroll and display a tunic with a decorated hem. The Breac figures have comparable proportions, but the drapery folds are more rigid and do not show the underlying contours of the body. The figures on the Clonmacnoise crucifixion plaque are also comparable. Christ has the same facial characteristics, ears placed high on the head and forked beard; however the drapery patterns are more abstract and the hands larger [Pl.92.b]. The drapery on the figures of Stephaton and Longinus have an analogous arrangement of hatched bands as the Soisceál ecclesiastic, while Longinus has the same straight hem decorated with short vertical lines. Christ's head, as well as the panel of a warrior flanked by two pairs of animals on the shrine of the Stowe Missal, interrupt the upper horizontal line of the frame [Pl.34.c].

### Strap Hinge

Various authors have expressed an opinion on the original function and date of this component; they do not consider this to be an original component of the shrine and maintain that it is a mount from a house-shaped shrine. This issue will be considered in the discussion section. For the purposes of this section the various motifs, overall form and

<sup>131</sup> St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 51; TCD MS 60; Alexander 1978, nos. 44, 45, pls. 207, 210-12.

<sup>132</sup> Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale, Cod. O.iv. 20; Alexander 1978, no. 61.



decorative techniques will be evaluated, and a date independent of the inscription will be arrived at through motif and stylistic comparisons. The assessment will commence with the beast-head.

**Beast-Head [Pl.29.b]:** With its triangular-shaped ears set behind the head, swollen brow with circular eyes and hatched snout, this resembles the animal-heads found on tenth-to eleventh-century metalwork such as strap-ends, binding strips on crosiers and the beast-heads which terminate kite-brooches. Antecedents for these beast-heads may be found on the apex of the earlier pendant-shaped brooches such as the lost example from Clomacnoise and the unlocalised brooch, inlaid with filigree panels in the NMI [Pl.96.b].<sup>133</sup> These earlier beast-heads display naturalistic features with a rounded brow, well-defined snout and triangular ears.<sup>134</sup> The animal-head terminating the early ninth-century 'Alfred Jewel' is comparable to the Soisceál beast-head. Although more compact in shape, it bears the same circular eyes in comma-shaped fields, raised brow and ears placed flat on the back of the head [Pl.76.c].<sup>135</sup> However the beast-heads on native strap-ends usually have a low relief brow and short snout due to the function of the object, which requires a narrow thin end in order for it to pass through the accompanying buckle or loop.<sup>136</sup> Most strap-ends were simply made, the eyes, rather than being set, were denoted by engraved lines, and the rest of the ornament was also the result of post-casting decoration.<sup>137</sup>

Similar to the Soisceál beast-head are the heads of the erect cat-like creatures adorning the upper shaft of the late eleventh-century Clonmacnoise Crosier [Pl.91.a].<sup>138</sup> Although the snouts are plain, do not taper and terminate in a volute, the overall shape with the prominent brow, circular eyes (inset with blue glass studs) and triangular ears, appear to be a later manifestation of the Soisceál beast. A later, more developed version

---

<sup>133</sup> Somerville 1993, 97-99; Whitfield 1997, 500-501.

<sup>134</sup> Somerville 1993, fig.13, pl.6.

<sup>135</sup> Webster 1991, no.260.

<sup>136</sup> One exception to this is the strap-end excavated from the monastic site at Nendrum, Co Down. This has a high relief beast-head similar to that on the Soisceál. O'Meadhra, who has reviewed the metalworking evidence from the site, has dated this strap-end to the tenth/eleventh centuries (1987b, 71-75, fig.50:a).

<sup>137</sup> See Richardson (1993, 152-159) where she has discussed the ornament, in the main consisting of ring-chains, from a series of Irish strap-ends dating to the tenth and eleventh centuries. Johnson (1997, 184-92) has refined Richardson's dating and incorporated some recent finds of buckles and strap-ends in her thesis.

<sup>138</sup> Also Illustrated in Ó Floinn 1983, 67.

with foliate ornament on the snout can be seen on the beast-heads on the binding strips and above the carrying handles of St Manachan's shrine [Pl. 73].

Similar beast-heads are also found in sculpture, for example, on the underside of the ring of Muiredach's cross, Monasterboice. On this panel two snakes form a figure-of-eight pattern and encircle three disembodied human heads.<sup>139</sup> The snake-heads are feline-like and retain fine detail: they are triangular in shape, have short tapered snouts, triangular ears set back behind the head, and eyes with lentoid-shaped pupils.

It is worth surveying beast-heads from eighth to ninth-century-metalwork in order to compare and contrast styles. In general, heads of this early type are fabricated from gilt-silver or gilt-copper alloy with the decoration executed in a *kerbschnitt* manner. The snouts and nostrils terminate in a spiral, the ears are pricked, and the decoration, usually consisting of ultimate La Tène motifs, is symmetrical along the long axis. Beast-heads of this type are prevalent on the 'Tara' and Cavan brooches, the animal-head handle from the Donore hoard, the elaborate beast-head on one of the Islandbridge lead weights, and on the sides of the Lough Kinale shrine [Pl. 54].<sup>140</sup> MacDermott cited stylistic parallels for the beast-heads terminating the lower binding strips on St Mel's crosier with the animal heads on the Tara, Roscrea and Cavan brooches.<sup>141</sup> However, these broad heads on the crosier have large flattened ears and eyes and hatched snouts, and MacDermott cited the Soisceál beast-head as the closest analogy. She dated the crosier to the mid-tenth century, but more recently Michelli has argued for a date in the eleventh century, while Bourke prefers a ninth century date.<sup>142</sup>

The only beast-head found terminating a hinge on a house-shaped shrine is the animal mask, of gilt-copper alloy, on the end of the ridge pole of the ninth-century Bologna shrine which has a hatched, spiralled snout, comma-shaped eyes, and an unusual feature of an extended tongue.<sup>143</sup> This is similar to the Soisceál beast-head but fits more

---

<sup>139</sup> Harbison 1992, no. 174, pl. 477.

<sup>140</sup> Illustrated in Youngs 1989, 77; Ryan 1989, nos. 73, 64; Ó Floinn 1992, no. 357.

<sup>141</sup> MacDermott 1957, 188, pl. lxii.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 191; Michelli 1986, 383; Bourke 1987, 170-2. See Johnson (1997, 203-10) for a review of the dating of these crosiers.

<sup>143</sup> Blindheim 1986, 18, 52, fig. 53; Youngs 1989, no. 132.



readily into the eighth and ninth century animal-heads discussed above.

The style of the animal-head on the Soisceál strap hinge appears to be transitory between eighth- and ninth-century animal-heads which display spiralled snouts, Ultimate La Tène chip-carved decoration and pricked ears, and the late eleventh-century beast-heads which usually have Ringerike or Urnes-style moustaches, lip lappets, rounded snouts and bulbous eyes, for example, the escutcheons on the short sides of the Misach and the heads terminating the crest of the Lismore and Durrow Crosiers [Pls.51,92.a,91.b]. However, in the early twelfth century naturalistic beast-heads reappear in the metalwork associated with the Cross of Cong school.<sup>144</sup> These can be found on the binding strips of the Cross of Cong, on the arms of the cross on the front of the Shrine of St Patrick's Tooth, and, in a more elaborate version, on St Manachan's shrine [Pls.71,73]. They are also found on Romanesque doorways, for example, the Nun's church at Clonmacnoise.<sup>145</sup> One notable difference is that the ears on the Cong group beast-heads are erect and rounded in shape.

The herringbone motif on the lugs of the hinge is found on Irish brooches of the early medieval and Viking periods, for example on the looped pin head of a ringed-pin terminating in a bird head, which Whitfield has dated to the later ninth or early tenth centuries.<sup>146</sup> However it is also found on the pin head of the luxurious early twelfth-century silver kite-brooch excavated from Waterford city, the more mundane copper alloy example from the Fishamble St excavations in Dublin, and on two of the arms of the cross on the late eleventh century-to early twelfth-century copper alloy plaque from Holycross, Co Tipperary [Pl.93.a].<sup>147</sup> A more relevant parallel which exhibits a herring-bone pattern, the elaborate buckle from Castlepollard, Co Westmeath, will be discussed below.

Another motif present on the lower section of the hinge is the simple step-fret pattern which frames the enamel field. This frames the decorated fields on the lid and sides

---

<sup>144</sup> Ó Floinn 1987a, 186.

<sup>145</sup> Henry 1970, pl. 76.

<sup>146</sup> NMI W.298. Whitfield 1997, 508, n.27; This pin is also illustrated in Somerville 1993, pl.8.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., no.11; Somerville 1993, 85, pl.1:a,b.

of a decorated wooden box excavated from a tenth-century level at CCP, Dublin.<sup>148</sup> In addition, the enamel field on the upper section is bordered by a very worn lozenge and slash motif **[Pl.29.a]**.<sup>149</sup> This motif may be an insular rendition of the Classical bead-and-reel ornament. It is present on the sides of the head of the lost kite-brooch from Clonmacnoise which has been dated to the late ninth/early tenth century **[Pl.96.b]**.<sup>150</sup> A version of this motif, which consists of alternating lozenges and discs, can be seen on the edge of the ninth-century Anglo-Saxon Strickland disc-brooch.<sup>151</sup> This motif becomes more prevalent in Irish metalwork of the tenth and eleventh centuries.<sup>152</sup> It is present on the upper band of knop no.1 of the British Museum Crosier, knop 2 of the Inisfallen Crosier, on the frames of two of the crucifixion plaques, one from Clonmacnoise, the other unlocalised, and on the binding strips on the reverse of the Domhnach Airgid **[Pls.90.b,88.a,92.b,68]**.<sup>153</sup> Henry has referred to a copper alloy mount, possibly a cross terminal, which has a border consisting of a lozenge and slash motif.<sup>154</sup> There are also unpublished copper alloy mountings from the Dublin excavations which are decorated with lozenge and slash motifs. A large boss and a cruciform mount, both from Fishamble St, have borders decorated with this motif.<sup>155</sup> A related motif, which consists of alternating rhomboids and slashes,<sup>156</sup> is present on the perimeter of three unpublished convex circular mounts, two from CCP and one from Fishamble St.<sup>157</sup> All these mounts

---

<sup>148</sup> Lang 1988, 5, DW 6, fig.6.

<sup>149</sup> One aspect of this motif which has not been discussed by previous writers is its possible relationship with the 'Borre' ring-chain motif. The Dublin and other strap-ends with the ring-chain motif (discussed and illustrated by Richardson 1993, 152-60) differ from the motifs on the reverse of the Corp Naomh in only one respect - the presence of flanking curves which serve to link the lozenge-shaped elements. Recently Dr Ruth Johnson (1997, 188-89) has independently reached the same conclusions, that is, that the lozenge-and-slash motif is related to the ring-chain motif.

<sup>150</sup> Whitfield 1997, 500-501; Somerville 1993, 98-9, fig.13.

<sup>151</sup> Webster 1991, no.189.

<sup>152</sup> De Paor (1977, 149) proposed that this motif was introduced in the ninth/tenth centuries. Johnson (1997, 345-6) also sees it introduced in the late ninth to early tenth century.

<sup>153</sup> MacDermott 1955, pl.xxxii; Bourke 1993b, 175-81, pls. 21.1a, 21.1b.

<sup>154</sup> Henry 1967, 123-4, pl.55; Johnson 1997, cat no. 270.

<sup>155</sup> Excavation nos. E172:16546, E172:9663; Johnson 1997, cat nos. 127, 132.

<sup>156</sup> This variant of the lozenge and slash motif can be seen on lower horizontal border on the reverse of the crest of the Corp Naomh bell-shrine **[Pl.78]**

<sup>157</sup> Excavation nos. E122:8934, E122:16811, E172:12846.



were found in contexts dating to the late tenth and eleventh centuries. This motif appears to be confined to metalwork. No examples have yet been detected by the writer in Irish manuscript art or stone sculpture.

The disposition and shape of the cells retaining enamel, that is, a cruciform step pattern, finds its closest parallel on the early eighth-century belt-buckle from Lough Gara, Co Sligo.<sup>158</sup> However, a technical variation on the Soisceál hinge is the exclusive use of red enamel with no contrasting colour in the intervening and/or surrounding cells. Polychrome champléve enamel using a rectilinear grid pattern invariably contains red and yellow enamel, and in some cases millefiori and/or other glass insets. In the enamels of the tenth and eleventh centuries there are similar rectilinear and step patterns with more elaborate designs such as palmettes and triquetras, as found on the knops of the Clonmacnoise Crosier [Pl.91.a].<sup>159</sup> While the Prosperous crosier has been dated to the ninth century, the form of some of the enamel cells would be more in keeping with a late tenth /early eleventh century date.<sup>160</sup> Insular mounts of circular form from the tenth century also bear rectilinear and stepped fields inlaid with red enamel.<sup>161</sup> An unpublished conical copper alloy mount excavated from an early eleventh century level in Fishamble St, Dublin, is decorated with a rectilinear grid inlaid with red enamel [Pl.96.c].<sup>162</sup> This pattern resembles the enamels on the Soisceál hinge and the Prosperous crosier; in addition the use of monochrome red enamel would link it to the Soisceál hinge. In the twelfth century the use of enamel becomes more widespread and appears to be associated with, or originate from, the Cross of Cong school of metalworking.<sup>163</sup> These champléve enamels

---

<sup>158</sup> Ryan 1989, no.46.

<sup>159</sup> Ó Floinn 1983, no. 77.

<sup>160</sup> Bourke 1987, 168; Johnson 1997, 210-217.

<sup>161</sup> For example a mount from the 1963 excavations in High St, Dublin (E43:2340; Lucas 1973b, no.8).

<sup>162</sup> This artefact (excavation no. E172:2798) may have been a decorative harness mount, as there are two perforated tags on the reverse. The lower flange is tinned. There is evidence from the Dublin excavations for the production of enamelled copper alloy artefacts. A kite-shaped brooch from Fishamble St retains a small amount of red enamel in the central field (Somerville 1993, 85, no.3, Pl.1:a,b; Whitfield 1997, no.9). A stone mould for casting kite-shaped brooches was excavated from CCP (Ibid., 63). There is also an unpublished enamelled harness mount (E122:14689) and chips of red enamel (E122:12448) from CCP.

<sup>163</sup> Ó Floinn (1987a, 186) has not referred to the characteristic enamels which are found on the Cross and St Manachan's shrine of this group. As Henry (1970, 77) indicated, these enamels are also found on the Glankeen bell shrine.

are usually found in the form of studs and plaques, with the red and yellow fields arranged in curvilinear and angular patterns, quite unlike the rigid geometrical fields of the tenth and eleventh-century enamels. These enamels are found on the Cross of Cong, St Manachan's shrine, the Glankeen bell shrine and a vessel escutcheon from Clonmacnoise [Pl.73].<sup>164</sup>

In the lower section the central cruciform field appears to be filled with a silvered copper alloy, except for the central rectangular field which retains red enamel. This technique, which does not appear in the archaeological record, may be the result of a later repair.

From the evidence above, using the herring-bone, lozenge and slash and step-fret motifs, the technique of red enamel inset into a simple grid, the absence of gilding, and the style of the beast-head, the majority of the parallels cited are of tenth and eleventh century date. This evidence for dating the strap-hinge also corresponds to the date of the shrine furnished by the inscription.

Further evidence for a date coeval with the construction of the shrine is found on a copper alloy buckle, which was recovered by a metal-detector in Bishop's Lough, near Castlepollard, Co Westmeath [Pl.97].<sup>165</sup> This shares a number of features and motifs with the Soisceál strap-hinge. It is made from cast and engraved copper alloy and terminates in a beast-head, the tip of which is missing. On the lugs of the buckle frame, as on the lugs of the Soisceál hinge, there is a herring-bone motif, while on the sides of the buckle there is a step pattern, similar to the step-fret border on the hinge. In addition, on the body of the buckle there are two circular fields, which formerly held hemispherical bosses, the borders of which are composed of a lozenge and slash motif. The features of the damaged beast-head are incised rather than cast. The triangular ears set back on the head, the punched eyes in comma-shaped fields and the tapering cross-hatched snout are all paralleled on the Soisceál head.<sup>166</sup> These motifs when appearing singly have been used

---

<sup>164</sup> Henry 1970, pls. 18, 42-45. For the Clonmacnoise escutcheon see Henry 1956, pl.X:g; Lucas 1973a, fig. 83.

<sup>165</sup> NMI registration number E499:463.

<sup>166</sup> It has come to the writer's attention that a remarkably similar buckle, albeit smaller in size, was excavated from a Viking grave in Eigg, Scotland (Grieg 1940, 69-70, fig.40). The other artefacts are undiagnostic as regards date and the grave may date to the tenth century. Caroline Patterson (who, along with Prof Graham-Campbell is producing a corpus of Viking burials in Scotland) has agreed to forward the exact find-circumstances and probable date of the Eigg grave when the material is studied in detail.



as indicators of date, but the presence of all three: herring-bone, lozenge and slash and step-fret on a single artefact, along with the beast-head, would place this object in the same chronological horizon as the Soisceál strap-hinge.<sup>167</sup> The style and layout of the ornament on this buckle would also relate it to the series of strap-ends from the Dublin excavations whose date range from the tenth to the late-eleventh centuries. Few of these have been published but Richardson has discussed those bearing ring-chain motifs.<sup>168</sup> Typical examples are illustrated in **Fig.25.a-b**.<sup>169</sup>

From the above evidence it is likely that the Castlepollard buckle is of similar date to the Soisceál strap-hinge, and in turn is related to strap-ends from Dublin and the north Midlands. E.P. Kelly has shown that there have been large amounts of buckles, strap-ends and ring-pins recovered from crannógs in the Southern Uí Néill territory, especially those ruled by the Clann Cholmáin kings in the tenth century.<sup>170</sup> A large number of these artefacts have been recovered illegally by treasure hunters from crannógs in the north Midlands which are analogous in form and decoration to the Dublin series. This material was obtained through trade with Dublin and was most likely fabricated there as 'objects found on these Viking-age habitations, located within the kingdom of Meath, are indistinguishable from those found in deposits of similar age in Dublin.'<sup>171</sup> This trade was due to the political dominance exercised over Dublin by the kings of Meath.

### **Zoomorphic Ornament [Figs.14-15]**

The purpose of this section is to analyse and survey the general characteristics of the animal ornament on the shrine. Instead of attempting to assess the style, composition and motifs of each panel separately, or to group the panels from each of the sides, the full complement of panels will be taken into consideration in an attempt to provide a classification.

On SSA there are six zoomorphic panels, on SSB there are ten, and on the long side

---

<sup>167</sup> Johnson (1997, 98-99) has also agreed that this buckle should date to the tenth century.

<sup>168</sup> See nn. 136-7 above for further references to strap-ends.

<sup>169</sup> See also Lang 1988a, fig.118 and Wallace and Ó Floinn 1988, 18.

<sup>170</sup> Kelly 1988, 86; For the most recent discussion on the dating of these artefacts see Johnson 1997, 80-84, 184-193.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

there are six.<sup>172</sup> On the front there is a single zoomorphic panel, executed in filigree and photographic evidence of a second panel, while there are two further panels with zoomorphic ornament engraved onto the copper alloy sheet on the reverse, which produces a total of twenty six panels. Of the twenty six panels thirteen contain a single beast, the remainder pairs of beasts, which yields a total of thirty nine beasts.<sup>173</sup> In addition there are the four animals flanking the ecclesiastic on SSB which are not constrained to the same extent by the frames of the panels, giving a grand total of forty-three beasts.

The animals are grouped, irrespective of where on the shrine they appear, according to the form of the body, whether tubular or contoured, the disposition of the limbs and appendages, and specific traits such as the feet, eyes, jaws, lappets and other features. This is not always dependant on whether they form single or paired animals and the classification is obtained from individual animals. They fall into four general types, with a number of sub-groups, but there are also similarities between types as the differences are not always distinct. Certain zoomorphs could be assigned to more than one type as they share certain forms, but classification is based on the greatest number of specific features and not the overall disposition.

### **Type 1**

This type is sub-divided into three sub-groups, all of which show profile bipeds, and share widely-splayed jaws with curling lips and small rounded heads. Except for the type 1:C animals, all others have tubular serpentine bodies.

**Type 1:A.** There are six zoomorphic panels<sup>174</sup> included in this type: ZP1 and 2:SSB and ZP1, 4, 5 and 6 from the LS, which comprise four single beasts and two pairs. The salient features of this type are tubular bodies of serpentine form, small heads with rounded foreheads with the eyes represented by a single dot, widely-splayed jaws with curled lips, and a neck collar. Where they can be recognised, their feet consist of an extended toe/claw and a single ball. The thighs of ZP5 and the right beast on ZP1:LS have a single contour line. Panels ZP1 and 2:SSB, contain a single serpentine beast with a possible limb, while

---

<sup>172</sup> Recent radiographs have revealed a single type 1:A beast beneath the late medieval sheet metal [Figs. 14, 16].

<sup>173</sup> One panel, A1 on the reverse, is extremely worn and appears to consist of a single beast and a disembodied head of a second. For the purposes of this survey they will be considered as a pair.

<sup>174</sup> Henceforth abbreviated to ZP.



ZP1 and 4:LS have opposing beasts who intersect at the centre of the panel. The beasts in ZP5 and 6:LS have bodies which form a loop, while the animals in ZP4:LS, are more elongated with tendrils running parallel with the body, leaving little space. The animals in ZP1:LS are similar and more compact with loose knotwork at the left end of the panel. While panel ZP5:LS has the same head and body type, it is arranged loosely into the panel with angular offshoots originating from the head lappet, hindleg, tail and tongue. The beast in ZP6:LS, also has a thin angular strand intertwining around the body. ZP1 and 4 have two blank fields at each end of the panel.

**Type 1:B.** This type consists of three panels, the upper two beasts flanking the ecclesiastic on SSB (SSB: EP left and right), and SSB:ZP7, which contains a pair of profile addorsed beasts. These animals are similar in all respects to Type 1:A except they are more finely modelled, with a greater depth of relief, and have oval eyes. The greater detail and relief in SSB:EP is probably due to the panel having being cast, rather than engraved, as with the remainder of the panels.

**Type 1:C.** There are two panels in this type SSB:ZP3 and ZP8, which have the same features as types 1:A and C, but have contoured, instead of the typical tubular bodies. The animals in this sub-group display the classic pose of paired beasts, which have heads, necks, lappets and forelegs intersecting in the centre of the panel. In these examples one of the animals bites his partner's elevated hindleg.

## **Type 2**

The beasts in these panels are classified primarily on head type which are large with rounded foreheads, circular or comma-shaped eyes, and closed naturalistic jaws with blunt snouts. The trunk and neck are single width and double-contoured, but the limbs and lappets are more slender, looping in and around the body. Joints are indicated by a curl and in one panel, ZP6:SSA, the foreleg runs parallel along the short end of the panel. Where the feet can be discerned they consist of a single ball-and-claw.

**Type 2:A:** There are four panels which conform to this type: zoomorphic panels 2, 3 and 6 from SSA and ZP10:SSB, and as the layout of the animal ornament is similar to ZP3:SSA, the zoomorphic filigree panel from the front of the shrine. There are paired beasts in ZP3 and 6, and the filigree panel, where the heads are placed at opposite ends of the panel. There are single beasts in ZP2:SSA and ZP10:SSB, the body of the former loops around the neck, while ZP10 is unusual in that the beast is elongated and contorted to fill the panel, the dimensions of which would usually accommodate paired beasts.

**Type 2B:** This sub-group consists of two panels, SSB:ZP6 and E6 from the reverse. Both are included due to their large naturalistic heads and jaws, head lappets, and the ribbon-shaped contoured body on ZP6. Panel E6 is effaced through wear and too small to enable any details to be determined. ZP6 has an unusual comma-shaped eye and beak-like jaws.

**Type 3A:** This type consists of four panels, SSA:ZP1, 4 and 5, and SSB:ZP3, each with a single beast, whose bodies loop around forming a figure-of-eight. In each example the body, of equal width and contoured, has limbs and appendages which are narrower, and the beasts are engaged in biting parts of their anatomy. The heads, which are all placed in the lower half of the panel in SSA, are rounded with circular eyes and short gaping jaws, and lack head lappets.

**Type 3B:** Only one panel, SSB: ZP4, is included in this sub-group, and it displays a pair of intertwined animals. They bear all the characteristic features (contours, rounded heads, biting jaws) listed for 3:A, the only difference is that there is a pair of beasts which are not arranged in a figure-of eight.

**Type 4:** This type consists of three panels, SSB: ZP5 and LS: ZP2 comprising a pair of beasts, and SSB:ZP9 depicting a single elongated animal. The panels on SSB have double-contoured bodies of similar width, small oval heads and eyes, gaping beak-like mouths, and trailing head lappets forming a discontinuous plait-like pattern. In these two panels the feet are similar in having a ball-and-claw foot, with the upper digit extending to a greater length. In ZP5 the hind joints are represented by a curl. Panel LS:ZP2 is included in this type due to the beasts having rounded heads with trailing lappets and short beak-like jaws. Gilding and wear has obscured most of the details in this panel.

Besides the above four types there are two pairs of animals which defy classification: the lower left and right animals flanking the ecclesiastic on SSB, and panel A1 from the reverse, which contains two addorsed dog-like beasts, which are small and the details too worn to allow comparisons to be made. The beasts flanking the ecclesiastic have similar looping tendrils and coiled hindquarters but are unique in respect of their frontal heads, long curving necks, pricked ears and upright stance. These feline-like animals, with the interpenetrating figure-or-eight loops and sinuous curves display some of the precursors of Urnes-style compositional traits.



The animal on the lost filigree plaque does not readily fit into any of the types described above. This may be due to the semi-circular shape of the panel which has resulted in the animal's body forming a sinuous curve. The closest beasts are type 2, which have coiled bodies and gaping jaws; these may be seen on LS: ZP5 and ZP1 and 2:SSB.

The above classification of zoomorphic ornament will be used as a basis for comparison to similar zoomorphic ornament on other artefacts. The purpose of this analysis is not to attempt to narrow the dating of the Soisceál. This is unlikely as it is confined to within ten years by the evidence of the inscription. However the analysis may elucidate the origin of the style within Irish art and serve to trace its development on other later and undated pieces.

As determined from the analysis of the zoomorphic ornament there is no overall style, and the animals have been divided into four principal types, with a number of sub-groups. However the beasts do display a number of shared features, irrespective of the type. All are profile bipeds or quadrupeds with ribbon-shaped bodies of even width, which are either tubular or contoured. The bodies form loops, either singly, or intertwine around an opposing beast. Except for the Type 2 dog-like beasts, the remainder of the zoomorphs have small rounded heads with splayed jaws, circular or oval eyes, and head lappets, tails, and in three examples, tongues. In general there is little free space in the panel imparting a sense of congestion.

It is not necessary to label this style with a term already manifested within the corpus of Insular art. Nevertheless, some of them exhibit traits which could be considered Jellinge in character, which is defined by double contours, appendages as fetters, scrolled leg joints, nose-folds and the symmetrical interlocking of identical beasts about a horizontal axis.<sup>167</sup> Lang's argument that the 'Jellinge' label should not be assigned too hastily to profile ribbon quadrupeds with contours can be applied to the Soisceál beasts.<sup>168</sup> For example he has illustrated a comparison between a zoomorph from the Soisceál (ZP9:SSB) and one of the zoomorphs from the Otley cross-shaft, demonstrating their similarities in style and layout. By applying the typical features and stylistic traits of the Jellinge style, even a profile quadruped from the ninth-century MacReagol Gospels, except for some

---

<sup>167</sup> As defined by Lang (1986, 254).

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 254-7.

minor details, can conform to the rigid definition of the style.<sup>169</sup>

The first group of artefacts in which parallels for the *Soisceál* beasts are to be found are the crosiers. MacDermott, in her detailed account of the British Museum Crosier, did not attempt a typological classification of the animal ornament but defined them in broad terms: whether profile, frontal, single or paired.<sup>170</sup> The layout of the animal ornament differs from the *Soisceál* in that they are adapted to fit triangular, T-shaped, or square panels which curve around the knops of the crosier. Although the beasts on the British Museum Crosier have circular and oval eyes, splayed curling jaws and ribbon-shaped bodies they differ from the *Soisceál* zoomorphs in a number of respects.

- 1) The British Museum Crosier beasts are more naturalistic, with more space around the bodies which enables the ornament to be distinguished more readily. For example animal no.30 on knop 1 is contorted in a similar manner to the *Soisceál* Type 2:A beast in SSA:ZP2 [Pl.90.a]. In both instances the body loops back on itself with the hindleg placed in a diagonal position behind the neck. The forelegs run parallel with the neck and a slender lappet emanates from the back of the head. However the *Soisceál* beast is less angular with thicker shorter jaws and his lappet loops in and around the body.
- 2) A number of the British Museum Crosier beasts have long tongues, in some cases evolving into forelegs or tails. Tongues only appear in three panels on the *Soisceál*, LS:ZP5, and the upper beasts flanking the ecclesiastic (SSB:EP, left and right).
- 3) There is a range of animal species found on the British Museum Crosier, for example, birds, snakes, fish-tailed beasts and a stag.<sup>171</sup> In general the animals found on the *Soisceál* can only be described as dog-like, feline or serpentine.

As would be expected there are similarities in the animal ornament. On knop 3 of the crosier the paired opposing beasts intersect in the centre of the panel, where their necks, head lappets and forelegs all run parallel in a diagonal line.<sup>172</sup> This arrangement is mirrored by the opposing beasts from LS:ZP1 and ZP3 on the *Soisceál*, who share the same rounded heads, circular eyes and gaping curling jaws.

---

<sup>169</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. D.2. 19; Alexander 1978, no. 54; Lang 1986, figs. 3 and 4.

<sup>170</sup> MacDermott 1955, 81-91.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., figs.9:1, 11:18, 11:8, 13:3 and 11:7 respectively.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., fig.14, nos.15, 16.



The portions of the British Museum Crosier which display the animal ornament discussed above have been dated to the ninth, late-ninth to early-tenth, and the eleventh centuries AD.<sup>173</sup> The evidence presented below would indicate a late-tenth to mid-eleventh century date, based on comparisons with the Dublin motif pieces and the foliate ornament present on the binding strip.

MacDermott has compared the animal ornament on knop 1 of St Dymphna's Crosier to that on the Soisceál, notably SSB:ZP10 (Type 2:A). There are eight rectangular panels on the knop and each contains single or paired beasts with curled jaws, lappets, spiral joints and interlaced tongues and tails.<sup>174</sup> One panel contains a single animal whose body forms a figure-of-eight and other panels display pairs of intertwining beasts.<sup>175</sup> St Mel's crosier has a wealth of zoomorphic and abstract ornament with over one hundred and seventy panels dispersed around the knops and crook. Nevertheless, while the zoomorphic decoration can be compared to St Dymphna's and the British Museum crosiers, there is little in common with the Soisceál beasts. MacDermott has dated St Mel's Crosier and knop 1 of St Dymphna's Crosier to the middle of the tenth century.<sup>176</sup> Bourke has proposed a ninth century date for both crosiers while O'Meadhra favours a date in the tenth to eleventh centuries.<sup>177</sup>

The combination of abstract and zoomorphic panelled ornament on the crosiers is also found on the Soisceál, but except for API and AP2 on SSA, which appear to be unfinished, the abstract motifs on the Soisceál have thicker strands, in most cases contoured and forming more complex patterns. The goldsmith had problems with the layout of the abstract ornament on the Soisceál, as there are errors present on panels AP3 and 4:SSA; AP1 and 2:LS and the filigree panel AFP6 from the front. In contrast the interlace strands on the British Museum, St Dymphna's and St Mel's crosiers are thinner, of higher quality and form well defined patterns.

---

<sup>173</sup> Bourke 1987, 170-1; MacDermott 1955, 106; O'Meadhra 1987a, 161; Johnson (1997, 200-203, 210) has dated the relevant ornament on the crosier to the second half of the tenth century.

<sup>174</sup> MacDermott 1957, 172-3, pl. liii.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., pl. liii:a,b.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 175, 195.

<sup>177</sup> Bourke 1985, 151-64, 1987, 170-72; O'Meadhra 1987a, 161. See Johnson (1997, 203-10) for a review of the dating of these crosiers.

The Inisfallen Crosier, which was discussed briefly by Henry,<sup>178</sup> has panels of zoomorphic ornament on the crook and knops. Unfortunately no valid parallels can be made, due to overcleaning which has left the decoration on certain panels extremely difficult to perceive and, in addition, corrosion products which obscure details of the ornament. From the areas that can be discerned there appear to be zoomorphs with looping ribbon-shaped bodies, head lappets and gaping curling jaws, with the spaces around the bodies being filled with tight angular interlace [Pls.86,87.a]. One panel from knop 2 has a single profile beast, similar to the Soisceál animals, with a ribbon-shaped body; the body contorted into a V-shape, with the fore and hindlegs tucked beneath and running parallel with the body [Pl.88.a]. Also evident are splayed jaws with a long tongue and head lappet, both of which intertwine around the body forming knots in the spaces between the body and the frame of the panel. The Inisfallen Crosier has been dated to around the middle of the eleventh century.<sup>179</sup>

From the above examination of the British Museum, St Dymphna's, St Mel's and the Inisfallen crosiers, it can be observed that certain parallels can be drawn with the more abstract beasts, but overall the crosier animal ornament is more naturalistic and the range of species more diverse. This progression towards abstract, ribbon-bodied profile beasts culminate in the zoomorphic ornament of the Soisceál. These Soisceál-type beasts are prevalent in certain Dublin motif-pieces, which also incorporate zoomorphic ornament with Trewhiddle, early Insular and even Anglo-Carolingian features.<sup>180</sup>

The Dublin motif pieces, which provide the closest parallels for the Soisceál zoomorphic ornament, will be assessed next. The first to be examined is a slate motif-piece from CCP which is replete with zoomorphic and abstract motifs in rectangular, square, trapezoidal, circular and semi-circular panels, containing single and paired beasts [Fig.23.a].<sup>181</sup> The majority of these beasts are profile ribbon-shaped bipeds and quadrupeds with head lappets, oval eyes, splayed stubby jaws with curled ends, and coiled fore- and hind-quarters. The following panels can be compared with the Soisceál

---

<sup>178</sup> Henry 1970, 85-6.

<sup>179</sup> See the Cathach chapter (pp.252-3) for a more detailed discussion on the dating of this crosier.

<sup>180</sup> O'Meadhra 1987a, 161.

<sup>181</sup> E122:8760. O'Meadhra 1979, no.27; Graham-Campbell 1980, 137, no.477; Ó Floinn 1983, no.74:c.



zoomorphs: 27 A10 (centre-left position) is paralleled by the type 1:C beasts (SSB: ZP8; LS:ZP3) where the head, necks and forelegs intersect in the centre of the panel.<sup>182</sup> The Soisceál beasts bite the elevated hindleg of their partner, while the bodies of 27 A10 curl around the hindleg. Panel 27 A19 (lower-centre position) shares with the type 4 animal (SSB:ZP5), the short stubby jaws, looping bodies, interstices filled with knotwork and joint spirals. This motif piece is dated to the late eleventh century due to the presence of a Ringerike-style tendril.<sup>183</sup> However, as this motif is lightly scratched on to the reverse surface, it may well be secondary; the other motifs on the front are more deeply carved.<sup>184</sup> It is also questionable whether the motif-piece should be dated according to a foliate scroll which exhibits Mammen, rather than Ringerike, characteristics.<sup>185</sup>

A second stone motif-piece from the Winetavern St excavations, which has been dated to the mid-tenth century, bears two small panels (63 A4, B4) which contain serpent-like animals.<sup>186</sup> They have coiled, contoured bodies, rounded heads, circular eyes and beak-like jaws. These resemble the type 1:A animals, ZP 1 and 2 from SSB, which also have coiled bodies, rounded heads and eyes with beak-like jaws.

Many parallels can be elicited from other bone motif-pieces excavated from CCP. A previously published piece has a number of features in common with the Soisceál zoomorphic ornament.<sup>187</sup> One panel displays a pair of intertwined profile ribbon beasts with their heads placed in opposite corners of the panel **[Fig.22.b]**. They have curling splayed jaws, rounded heads with oval eyes and share a common head lappet. These are analogous to the Soisceál type 2:A beasts, exemplified by the panel SSA:ZP3, and the zoomorphic filigree panel from the front. These beasts have a foreleg running beneath the jaw, contoured bodies and a common head lappet. However the Soisceál beasts are less constricted, having more space around the bodies. The rounded heads and curling jaws are also apparent in the type 1 beasts. A second panel on the motif-piece has a pair of

---

<sup>182</sup> The numbers (27 A10, etc.) refer to individual motifs in O'Meadhra's 1979 catalogue.

<sup>183</sup> Ó Floinn 1983, 161.

<sup>184</sup> Motif 27B1, **[Fig.23.a]**.

<sup>185</sup> Dr Ruth Johnson (Pers. comm).

<sup>186</sup> E81:8910. Lucas 1973b, no. 41a; O'Meadhra 1979, no. 63; O'Meadhra 1987a, 161.

<sup>187</sup> E122:6567. Graham-Campbell 1980, no.477; O'Meadhra 1987a, 161, fig.3.

crouching beasts with crossed necks and forelegs, the heads and jaws are similar, but the rounded bodies and limbs are more naturalistic [Fig.22.b]. The joints are indicated by curls and there is the distinctive feature of the tongues evolving into the opposing beast's tail. Some of these characteristics can be seen in the Soisceál zoomorphs, for example, the type 1:A beast on LS:ZP1 where although the beasts have the same rounded bodies, curling lips and crossed necks, the torsos are more elongated due to the length of the rectangular panel. This attitude of intertwined necks and forelegs, along with the splayed curling jaws can be observed on the type 1:C beasts, for example, LS:ZP3 and SSB:ZP8. This motif piece also has a panel containing a Borre ring-chain with four contoured vertebral elements which can be compared to the motifs on the corners of the reverse of the shrine.<sup>188</sup> Unfortunately the above motif-piece was found in a disturbed context which provided no indication of date.

There are also parallels present on three unpublished bone motif pieces from CCP. The first piece<sup>189</sup> has the now common profile ribbon beasts with contoured bodies, sharing a common head lappet and tail, rounded head and eyes, curling lips, and the heads on long necks in opposite corners [Pl.98.a]. In this example the joints are indicated by a hook and the composition is less sinuous, that is, the bodies of the beasts are more angular. The same parallels on the Soisceál can be cited as for motif-piece E122:6567, for example, type 2:A beasts: SSA:ZP3. This motif-piece is dated to c.1050 on the basis of stratigraphical and coin evidence.<sup>190</sup>

A second bone motif-piece contains a panel showing a single profile ribbon animal with its head in the centre of the panel and its hindlegs and neck looping to form a figure of-eight composition [Fig.23.b].<sup>191</sup> The head lappet threads through the neck and foreleg, while a long tongue evolves either into a tail or the triquetra knot, which is placed behind the shoulder joint. This is similar to the Soisceál type 3:A beasts which contain a single zoomorph with the head placed centrally and a looped neck and hindquarters, for example, SSA:ZP4 and ZP5. Panel ZP1 from the same side has the head at one end, and

---

<sup>188</sup> See Richardson (1993, 143-4) where she discusses this motif on the shrine and Johnson 1997, cat no. 12.

<sup>189</sup> E122:16060.

<sup>190</sup> Johnson 1997, Appendix 3, 103.

<sup>191</sup> E122:16264



in common with the motif-piece, there is a triquetra knot used as a space filler. A type 3:A beast, SSB:ZP3, also has a head in the centre with a looping neck and hindquarters, but in this example it has long splayed jaws and more angular limbs with an elevated hindleg. This latter Soisceál beast is paralleled by a second unpublished motif piece<sup>192</sup> which, although unfinished, bears a repeating motif of a single profile beast with splayed jaws, extended head lappet and tongue intertwining with its spiralled neck and hindquarters [Pl.98.b]. There are details lacking, such as eyes, joint spirals or contours, but the composition and the feature of its tongue forming a bar terminal at the end of the panel is paralleled on SSB:ZP3.

In general the CCP motif pieces share a number of zoomorphic features, especially with types 1, 2 and 3 from the Soisceál. Although the dates provided by the stratigraphy and coin association indicate a date from the early- to mid-eleventh century, some of the more pertinent motif-pieces have no context and are dated purely on art-historical grounds. An issue worthy of consideration is how long were the motif-pieces in use before deposition or loss? Were they used as a pattern book for showing to clients and thus utilised over a number of years and retained for future commissions, or were they discarded soon after use? These factors would have a direct bearing on the date as a motif-piece in use for twenty years and then discarded in an early-eleventh century context may have been carved at the end of the tenth century. These CCP school of motif-pieces may have been from a small school or workshop active over a short period of time. These would have been turned out by a limited number of craftsmen, hence the similarities in style and layout. Johnson has also commented on the parallels in the animal ornament on this small group of motif-pieces and classified them as 'wholly Irish in their treatment'.<sup>193</sup>

Before parallels are elicited for the Soisceál zoomorphs in other media there is another eleventh-century book shrine which also exhibits panels containing animal ornament, the long sides of the shrine of the Cathach. Panel ZP6 from LSA of the Cathach has the now familiar profile ribbon-shaped beasts whose necks and forelegs intersect in the centre of the panel, and have oval eyes, splayed stubby jaws and single ball and claw feet [Pl.44]. As noted above this composition is exemplified by Soisceál type 1:C beasts, for

---

<sup>192</sup> E122:6566, found in an unstratified context.

<sup>193</sup> Johnson 1997, 335-6, 67-70.

example, LS:ZP3 and SSB:ZP8. The proportions of the Cathach beasts are more naturalistic with more space around the animals, and their tongues evolve into the tails of the opposing beast where they form bar terminals at the ends of the panel. There are five panels containing a single animal on the Cathach, the first, ZP5:LSA [Fig.11], is an extended zoomorph with gaping jaws and curled lips but the hindlegs and head lappet are conjoined through a bifurcating strand. This treatment of the hindlegs can be observed on a type 4 beast on the Soisceál: SSB:ZP9, but the definition of the limbs and tail can be followed, unlike the Cathach panel which is more ambiguous. The other two relevant panels containing single beasts, ZP3 and ZP4 from LSA of the Cathach, have their heads in the centre and a looping contoured body forming a figure-of-eight composition, and these can be paralleled in the type 3:A beasts, for example SSB:ZP3 from the Soisceál.

On cursory examination, the Cathach beasts may appear to be typical Soisceál zoomorphs, but the stylistic features are distributed among the different types. The figure-of-eight composition of the body can be seen in the type 3:A beasts, especially ZP1 from SSA which displays an extended neck with a triquetra knot used as a space filler. However in this type the heads are more rounded with larger jaws and circular eyes. The head lappet, splayed jaws and rounded heads of the Cathach panels (ZP1-5, LSA) are present in types 1:A-C from the Soisceál. In general, the Cathach beasts are simpler and more naturalistic, but have the Soisceál features of extended tails, lappets and have no ears. Also on long side A of the Cathach there is a panel (AP2) which displays a carrick bend knot with a bar terminal at each end. This same motif is found on panels AP1 and 2 from SSA of the Soisceál.

From above it can be seen that certain features of the Soisceál beasts can be paralleled on the long sides of the shrine of the Cathach. This should act as a caution for using stylistic and typological parallels exclusively as an aid for determining date or provenance, as the Cathach is dated by an inscription to 1062-98, which is some fifty to eighty years later than the Soisceál. Other factors, such as the range of techniques and the construction and fabrication details of the shrine should also be considered when assessing date. The origin and development of the Soisceál zoomorphic ornament, with particular reference to the excavated material from Dublin, will be dealt with in the discussion section. It has also been proposed elsewhere in this thesis that there is a possibility that the



shrine of the Cathach may have been made in Dublin.<sup>194</sup>

There are very few parallels for the Soisceál beasts in stone carvings, high crosses and architectural sculpture. A rare example are the panels containing zoomorphic interlace on the sides and reverse of the Dysert O'Dea cross.<sup>195</sup> The Dysert beasts have similar jaws, eyes and looping configuration of the bodies to the Soisceál beasts, but the overall composition is more regular and the secondary appendages such as lappets, tongues and tails are more sinuous and are indicative of the Irish Urnes style.<sup>196</sup> However as the Dysert O'Dea cross is dated to the mid-twelfth century, the parallels may be seen as a later manifestation of the Soisceál zoomorphic ornament, albeit in a more regular and extended composition.<sup>197</sup>

Parallels from manuscripts of tenth- to eleventh-century date are more commonplace than sculptural parallels. The Southampton Psalter has affinities in its animal ornament to the Soisceál.<sup>198</sup> Henry has dated this psalter to the early tenth century while Alexander proposed a date in the early eleventh century.<sup>199</sup> The illustration of 'David and the Lion' (f.4v) from the psalter has panels of animal and abstract ornament framing the page [Pl.104.a]. The beasts on the long sides of the page have short wedge-shaped jaws, circular eyes, double-contoured bodies and tendril-like lappets looping around and forming knots within the spaces between the bodies. These features are typical of the Soisceál type 2:A paired beasts with their elongated bodies forming rhythmic loops, exemplified by ZP3 and ZP6 from SSA, and LS:ZP4. The four similar panels on the top and bottom of the page have a different type of beast, the body and limbs are of the same type as the animals on the sides, but the jaws, which bite the body, are long and narrow, and the body forms a figure-of-eight pattern. These long-jawed creatures are found as type 3:A beasts on the Soisceál, ZP1, 4 and 5 from SSA, where the bodies also form figures-of-eight and are

---

<sup>194</sup> See pp.290-91 of the Cathach chapter.

<sup>195</sup> Harbison 1992, no.91, figs.263-5.

<sup>196</sup> Similar Urnes style beasts are found on the sides of the Glendalough Market cross (Harbison 1992, no.113, figs. 305-6).

<sup>197</sup> De Paor 1955-6, 70; Harbison 1992, 383-4.

<sup>198</sup> Cambridge, St John's College, MS C. 9; Alexander 1978, no. 74.

<sup>199</sup> Henry 1967, 106; Alexander *ibid.* Johnson (1997, 316) dates the manuscript from the later tenth to early eleventh centuries.

engaged in biting their bodies and limbs. The position of the head and form of the body of ZP4 and ZP5:SSA above, are similar to the aforementioned panels.

The large initial (f.39r) in the same manuscript has four panels of animal ornament: a single beast each side, and two pairs of intertwining animals on the bottom [Pl.104.b]. The single beasts are curved with their hindlegs extended out behind them and display a prominent ear. All the single beasts on the Soisceál have either a backward facing head or a contoured body, but the type 4 extended beast (SSB:ZP9), with the head in the corner of the panel, bears a slight resemblance. However the narrow body is not as naturalistic as the manuscript depiction, it has a disjointed appearance due to the intertwining strands cutting across the torso. The intertwining beasts on the bottom of the page are similar to those on the sides of the 'David and the Lion' miniature except that the heads are in opposite corners of the panel and the bodies form a single, rather than a double, loop. The parallels cited for the Soisceál above, namely type 2:A beasts, also apply here, especially ZP3 from SSA and the filigree panel from the front.

The importance of the animal ornament on the Soisceál, as determined and analysed above, is its general cohesiveness. It is limited to profile bipeds and quadrupeds which appear canine or serpentine, with one possible feline.<sup>200</sup> There are no birds, stags, or distinct serpents. As the shrine provides one of the few fixed points in Irish art of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries the animal ornament will be designated 'Soisceál-type' beasts. Although similar ornament appears on earlier artefacts, for example, the British Museum, St Mel's and St Dympna's crosiers, and the classic 'paired-animal' pose, typified by the Soisceál type 1:C beasts, can be found on the reverse of the Kilmainham brooch, the Steeple Bumpstead boss, and on a motif-piece from Lagore, which range in date from the early eighth to the early ninth century.<sup>201</sup> These animals also appear on artefacts contemporary with the shrine, such as the motif-pieces from CCP, Dublin, but they appear in profusion, and attain their purest form, on the shrine.

### Openwork plates

The form of the openwork silver sheets with L-shaped apertures at the corners and T-shapes along the edge can be compared to the front of the late eighth-century house-

---

<sup>200</sup> The lower animals flanking the ecclesiastical figure on SSB [Pl.26, Fig.15].

<sup>201</sup> Ryan 1989, no. 74; Youngs 1993, fig. 17.3:f,i; O'Meadhra 1979, no. 88-91; O'Connor 1983, no. 61.



shaped shrine from Copenhagen. There is a cast copper alloy frame rivetted to the front faces which consists of an interlocking grid which produces large L and T-shaped openings.<sup>202</sup> In addition there are also three rectangular mounts in the centre of the grids. Although these frames do not have the same spatial configuration as the Soisceál openwork sheets, a similar type may have been present on an eighth-to ninth-century reliquary, which in turn may have influenced the configuration of the Soisceál sheets.

#### **Base [Pl.28; Fig.5]**

The most striking element on the back of the shrine is the openwork silver sheet and this is the earliest dated example of this type on an Irish reliquary. The conventional pattern consists of T-shaped voids along the edges, L shapes in the corners, with the central field filled with alternating cross-shaped and rectangular openings. The back of the Soisceál differs from all other examples by having a decorated plate set behind the openwork plates, the remainder have a plain sheet of either copper alloy, silver or gold foil.<sup>203</sup> Another unusual feature of the back plate is that it is framed by two sets of parallel lines enclosing plain rectangular fields, all other openwork plates extend to the edges of the sheet.

Geometrical patterns first appear in Irish metalwork of late-seventh to early-eighth century date as cells for champlevé enamel incorporating L, T and cross shapes. The Lough Gara belt buckle has cross shapes and T shapes, while other mounts such as the Irish shrine escutcheon from Breedon-on-the-Hill and the Moylough Belt Shrine bear rectilinear cells.<sup>204</sup> The cell patterns of enamelled artefacts do not conform to the conventional pattern and no organic openwork mountings survive from this period. True openwork frames are to be found rivetted to the front face of the eighth-century house-shaped shrine from Copenhagen.<sup>205</sup>

It is evident that the decorative scheme of the Ossory group of crosses is based on

---

<sup>202</sup> Youngs 1989, no.131.

<sup>203</sup> The origin and parallels of the openwork plates are discussed in the Chapter 6.

<sup>204</sup> Ryan 1989, nos. 46-47; Youngs 1989, no.50.

<sup>205</sup> Youngs 1989, no.131.

metalwork prototypes and this is typified by the Ahenny crosses.<sup>206</sup> However the Ahenny group do not have any panels which can be directly compared to the openwork panels under discussion. Panels imitating the conventional L, T and cruciform shapes are encountered on the ninth-century high crosses from Kilree and Killamery, Co Kilkenny, and on the base of the cross from Monaincha, Co Tipperary.<sup>207</sup> These panels are found in the same position on Kilree and Killamery, on the shaft panel directly above the centre of the head. As noted below these openwork plates may have been used to signify a reliquary, which may imply that the model on which these high crosses were based may have been a reliquary cross. It has been argued that a reliquary cross may have been the model for the Ahenny crosses; and this would explain the archaic decorative features which were imitating an earlier metalwork jewelled cross of some importance.<sup>208</sup>

Stone sculpture of the eleventh and twelfth centuries also displays panels of openwork decoration of the type found on the Soisceál. For example on the north face of the 'Doorty' cross at Kilfenora and the east face of Dysert O'Dea cross, Co Clare, as well as the east and south faces of the base at Cashel, Co Tipperary.<sup>209</sup> A large grave slab from Inishcealtra, Co Clare, is decorated with a ringed cross which is surrounded by a field of recessed crosses.<sup>210</sup>

The openwork pattern on the reverse of the Soisceál has parallels with bone and antler plaques recovered from the excavations in Dublin, which date to the eleventh and twelfth centuries. There are nineteen fragmentary plaques which exhibit combinations of pierced openwork elements, usually consisting of L, T and cross shapes. All the plaques are bordered by parallel lines, which in most examples enclose ring and dot motifs. The majority of the plaques are not directly comparable as they have circular or semi-circular openwork patterns alternating with the geometrical voids. Only four plaques contain a

---

<sup>206</sup> See Edwards (1983, 5, 30-32) for the dating and a summary of the literature on the crosses from the kingdom of Ossory. In a paper read to the Fourth International Art Conference, Cardiff, on 4th September 1998 entitled **Politics and Patrons: archaeology, artefacts and methodology**, Raghnaill Ó Floinn has advanced convincing historical evidence for the dating of the Ahenny group of crosses to the third quarter of the ninth century, based on the patronage of Cerball mac Dunlainge, king of Ossory, who died in 888.

<sup>207</sup> Edwards 1990b, 40-44; Harbison 1992, no.162, fig.446; no.146, figs.409, 412, 470.

<sup>208</sup> See n.206 above for the reference to this forthcoming paper.

<sup>209</sup> Harbison 1992, no.133, fig.370; no.91, fig.264; no.34, fig.94.

<sup>210</sup> Liónard 1961, fig.20:5.



pattern which is comparable to the conventional openwork plates, and these are dated by context and stratigraphy to the eleventh and twelfth centuries [Pl.99.b].<sup>211</sup> Three of these are too fragmentary to ascertain whether there were intervening squares in the central field.

From the surviving dimensions of the excavated plaques most appear to have been rectangular in shape when intact. Ó Floinn considers the plaques from the urban excavations as imports which may originally have belonged to shrines and book covers, and furthermore that these imports could have inspired local craftsmen.<sup>212</sup> However, it is also possible to provide an alternative explanation. The local craftsmen may have taken inspiration from the high-status goldsmiths who may have been working on ecclesiastical commissions which incorporated openwork metal plates, as seen on the Soisceál. It would have been straightforward for accomplished craftsmen working in bone and antler to produce similar plaques, and use them to adorn secular artefacts. Furthermore, they do not appear to be the type of artefact which would be imported, as the skills necessary for their manufacture were already present in Dublin. Rather than see these mounts as having an ecclesiastical function, they are more likely to be from caskets, boxes or furniture.<sup>213</sup> Two sides of wooden boxes, which were excavated from the Viking levels at Dublin, had bone and antler plaques attached by nails.<sup>214</sup> However, these plaques are not comparable as they are smaller in scale, solid, and decorated with hatched lines and dot and circle motifs, but do demonstrate how these plaques may have been utilised as mounts for boxes or caskets. Over sixty plaques of this latter type have been recovered from the Dublin excavations and they are similar in size and decoration to others excavated from Viking-age levels in Winchester and York.<sup>215</sup>

There are also four openwork bone plaques recovered from the excavations in

---

<sup>211</sup> All unpublished: E71:5113 and E71:4134 from High St, E122:394 from CCP and E148:1345 from Fishamble St.

<sup>212</sup> Ó Floinn 1998c, 196.

<sup>213</sup> There are two unpublished bone plaques (E191:198-9) which were discovered during the excavation of street cuttings in Dublin in the mid-nineteenth century. These have been described as mounts from book covers by Breen (1980, 46-7, nos.466-67) but are more likely to be casket mounts.

<sup>214</sup> E190:7107 from Fishamble St and E122:16343 from Christ Church Place.

<sup>215</sup> MacGregor (1985, 197-203) has discussed and provided further references to bone and antler caskets and their mounts from the Roman to the late Medieval period in England.

Waterford city, one of which may have had the conventional decorative pattern.<sup>216</sup> Hurley refers to these, and the other twenty-eight bone plaques, as casket mounts which could have been included on both religious and secular artefacts.<sup>217</sup>

The layout of the border framing the openwork field on the reverse of the Soisceál, consisting of plain rectangular fields interrupted by compass-drawn circles on the sides and lentoid-shaped fields in the corners, resembles the design of certain pages in Insular manuscripts. For example the rectangular panels with concave ends can be seen on the borders of the previously discussed 'David and the Lion' miniature in the Southampton Psalter, although in this example the panels are filled with zoomorphic and abstract decoration [Pl. 104.a].<sup>218</sup> In the same manuscript the 'David and Goliath' miniature has panels of the same shape, but these contain only abstract decoration.<sup>219</sup> Perhaps the reverse of the Soisceál is unfinished, and it may have been intended to fill the empty fields with zoomorphic or abstract decoration. Attention has already been drawn to the two unfinished panels, AP1 and AP2 on SSA.<sup>220</sup>

Engraved lentoids can be seen in the right-angled panels, E1 and A6, on the decorated copper alloy plate behind the openwork silver sheet, and parallels for these can also be found in manuscripts. The evangelist symbol page of St Mark in the Book of MacDurnan has a lentoid in each of the corners, and there is a lightly incised lentoid in each of the four corners adjacent to the writing surface, on the set of writing tablets from Springmount bog, Co Antrim.<sup>221</sup> This same motif also appears in metalwork, as a motif placed in corners, and can be observed on the inner frame on a ninth-century plaque, possibly a book mount, from Inchbofin, Co Westmeath, on the pinhead of the large

---

<sup>216</sup> E527:833:3, E527:1551:10, E527:1648:4; Hurley 1997b, Fig. 17:3:3,6,9. Since only a small section of plaque E527:1619:5 (Fig. 17:3:15) survives, it is difficult to be certain of the pattern but a single cross shape survives.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 658, 663.

<sup>218</sup> Cambridge, St John's College, MS C. 9, f.4v; Alexander 1978, no. 74.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., Henry 1967, pl.N.

<sup>220</sup> See pp.149-50 below for discussion of this aspect of the shrine.

<sup>221</sup> London, Lambeth Palace Lib., MS 1370; Alexander 1978, no.70, pl.354; Henry 1967, pl.42; Mullarkey 1991, no. 64.



Ardagh annular brooch, and on the crucifixion plaque found near Tynan, Co Armagh.<sup>222</sup>

The convention of placing human heads in the corner of a rectangular field was already present in eighth-to ninth-century Insular manuscripts. In the four evangelist symbols page of the eighth-century Trier Gospels, there is a lightly drawn human head emanating from each of the corners of the page.<sup>223</sup> Although faded, the upper and lower left corners have a length of hair extending sideways from their heads, while those on the right are hairless and contained within an oval field, similar to the cowl-like surround of the Soisceál heads. A second manuscript which also displays human heads projecting from the corners of the frame is the 'Second Coming' page from the Turin Gospels [Pl.103.b].<sup>224</sup> The upper right corner depicts an angel blowing a trumpet while the other three corners have an emphatic human head, each of which is framed by a wide band which extends along the sides of the decorative borders. There is a lentoid-shaped extension projecting from the crown of the head at the bottom right; a similar motif may have given rise to the foliated cap/hair on the Soisceál heads. This fashion of placing human heads in the corner of full-page illustrations continued into the late Anglo-Saxon period. In an early tenth-century manuscript, there is a pair of naturalistic human heads with tendril-like tongues, placed in the upper corners of the miniature 'Christ enthroned with Martyrs, Confessors and Virgins'.<sup>225</sup> In Ireland, this convention continued into the late medieval period, where finely-cast human heads, placed in the corners, are present on one of the short sides of the Domhnach Airgid and on the front and base of St Caillin's shrine [Pls.69.a, 62-3].

It has been argued that the human heads with the foliated caps engraved into the silver sheet, and some of the motifs on the copper alloy backing plate, owe their origin to ninth-century Anglo-Saxon Trewhiddle-style metalwork.<sup>226</sup> The non-zoomorphic elements of the Trewhiddle style are defined by small panels of ornament contained within beaded borders, principally motifs of fleshy foliate sprays which terminate in a bud, with nicks

---

<sup>222</sup> Ryan 1989, nos. 146, 76; Bourke 1993b, Fig. 21:e.

<sup>223</sup> Trier, Domschatz Codex 61; Alexander 1978, no. 26, pl.114.

<sup>224</sup> Biblioteca Nazionale, Cod. O.iv. 20, f.2a; Alexander 1978, no. 61.

<sup>225</sup> Cotton Galba A.XVIII, f.21; Temple 1976, no. 5, pl. 33.

<sup>226</sup> O'Meadhra 1987a, 161.

along the length of the stem.<sup>227</sup> None of these pure forms appears on the decorated base-plate of the Soisceál. However the foliated hair/cap on the human heads do resemble the trilobe foliate motifs placed above the head of the figure of sight on the Fuller brooch.<sup>228</sup> The parallels cited below for the ornament on the backing-plate demonstrate that these motifs were already present in the repertoire of Irish art in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries.

The motifs on the base plate of the Soisceál consist of various combinations of interlace, step, chevron, saltire, cruciform and fleshy S-shaped scrolls [Fig.5]. For example the interlocking step pattern (panel E6) and the guilloche motif (panels A3-A5) are present on the narrow bands framing knops 1 and 2 of St Mel's Crosier.<sup>229</sup> Foliate motifs, not unlike those adorning the Soisceál heads, are also found on the same crosier.<sup>230</sup> Running S-scrolls, which are similar to the fleshy scrolls in panels B1, C1-C5, E2 and E4 are to be seen, though somewhat worn, on the central band of knop 2, and the lower binding strip of St Dymphna's Crosier.<sup>231</sup> A disc-shaped mounting, excavated from tenth- to eleventh-century levels at CCP, Dublin, has a border of linked S-scrolls which are similar to the Soisceál panels cited above.<sup>232</sup>

Other parallels for the ornament on the copper alloy back-plate of the Soisceál are to be seen on the tenth-century North and South crosses at Castledermot, Co Kildare.<sup>233</sup> The fleshy scrollwork which is prevalent on the base, shaft and rings of the North cross and also to some degree on the South cross, is present on the back-plate: panels B1, C1-C6, E2 and D6. Lang has published the hogback monument<sup>234</sup> from this site and has

---

<sup>227</sup> Wilson and Blunt 1961, *passim*. An example of the late Trewhiddle style can be seen on the early tenth-century Anglo-Saxon disc brooch now in Stockholm (Backhouse and Turner, 1985, no.17). All the decoration is abstract and foliate in character and contained within small panels with beaded borders.

<sup>228</sup> Webster 1991, no.257.

<sup>229</sup> MacDermott 1957, pls.lx, lxi.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 189, fig.6:5,6.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., pls.liv:a, lv:b.

<sup>232</sup> Unpublished, E122:16453.

<sup>233</sup> Harbison 1992, nos. 36-7; Johnson (1997, 259-61) dates these crosses from the late ninth to the early tenth centuries.

<sup>234</sup> Lang 1971, 154-8.



drawn attention to the ring-twist pattern on the south side of the shaft of the North cross which he sees as evidence for contacts with the Allertonshire workshop in North Yorkshire.<sup>235</sup> In addition, the scrollwork interspersed with pellets and lozenges on the base of the North cross<sup>236</sup> may be related to the distinct group of sculpture from Cumbria designated the 'Spiral-Scroll' school which bear analogous motifs.<sup>237</sup> Nevertheless these shared motifs need not indicate a direct relationship, but perhaps a transmission of styles through Dublin, which was only 30 miles away. Wallace regards Dublin as a catalyst for the interaction between Leinster and Northern England in the tenth and eleventh centuries and contends that there are references to contacts between the Dublin Vikings and Castledermot and Old Kilcullen.<sup>238</sup> There may be some slight evidence of these contacts present in the archaeological record. The distinctive cross with bifurcating expanded terminals carved on the Castledermot hogback can be compared to the upper cross incised into the base of a wooden box from an early eleventh-century level at Fishamble St, Dublin and the crosses on a large leather satchel from the same site.<sup>239</sup>

The vertebral ring-chain motif present in the two lentoid fields, while not a common motif in Irish art, can be found on motif-pieces, decorated wooden artefacts and strap-ends from the Dublin excavations,<sup>240</sup> the Ballinderry gaming board and belt-buckles and strap-ends from various sites in the north midlands [Figs.22.b, 25.a].<sup>241</sup> This motif, along with the foliated caps on the Soisceál heads in the other two lentoid-shaped fields, and the presence of Trewhiddle-style beasts on a bone motif piece from Dublin,<sup>242</sup> are indicative of cross-cultural artistic links through Dublin. The Hiberno-Norse inhabitants of Dublin maintained commercial and political links with the Irish Sea Lake, especially Northern

---

<sup>235</sup> Lang 1986, 252; 1988b, 95-6.

<sup>236</sup> Harbison 1992, figs. 101-3.

<sup>237</sup> Bailey 1980, 196-206. Johnson (1997, 346-7) has also discussed and drawn attention to the spiral motifs on tenth-century high crosses, for example Drumcliff, Boho, Muiredach's, the South cross at Clonmacnoise and Durrow (ibid., cat nos. 417, 411, 425, 416, 418).

<sup>238</sup> Wallace 1986, 216.

<sup>239</sup> Lang 1971, 157; Lang 1988a, DW 7, fig.10. The leather satchel is unpublished (E141:5213).

<sup>240</sup> Two bone motif pieces: E122:6567, (referred to above) and E43:2327 from High St (O'Meadhra 1979, no. 30). Two strap-ends (E122:17157, E190:5327), Illustrated in Lang 1988a, figs. 118, 122.

<sup>241</sup> See Richardson (1993, 140-8) where she has listed and discussed these artefacts.

<sup>242</sup> E122:9732. See O'Meadhra 1987a, 161, pl.1a, fig.2.

England and the Isle of Man. Lang has labelled this style 'West Viking' in his discussion of the interplay of various motifs which appear on a number of decorated wooden artefacts from the Dublin excavations.<sup>243</sup>

## Summary

From the above discussion on the stylistic parallels it is possible to discern influences from different media. The placement of the four evangelist symbols around a cross on the front would have been inspired by a similar page in a gospel book of eighth-to ninth-century date. The Book of MacDurnan is the closest in style, but the *Soisceál* figures have archaic traits such as the emphatic joint spirals, hatching and linked peltae which would indicate a manuscript of eighth to ninth century date. On the reverse the human heads placed in the corners are also found on manuscripts of eighth to tenth century date, and the layout of the rectangular panels surrounding the openwork field can be seen on the 'David and the Lion' and other miniatures in the Southamton Psalter which has been dated to the tenth/eleventh centuries.

The ecclesiastical figure on SSB is similar to the evangelist figures in the pocket gospel books of eighth to tenth century date, including the MacDurnan Mark, and in metalwork on the sides of the eleventh-century shrine of the Stowe Missal [Pl.34]. Also on SSB the strap-hinge has motifs consisting of lozenge and slash, step/fret and herringbone, which are present on tenth- and eleventh-century metalwork and some of the decorated wood from the Dublin excavations. The form and decoration of the beast-head on the strap-hinge can be paralleled on the binding strips of St Mel's crosier and strap-ends and buckles from Dublin, Nendrum and other sites in the north Midlands. In particular the Castlepollard buckle provides a number of relevant parallels.

The *Soisceál*-type beasts have precursors on some of the panels on the crosiers of St Mel's, St Dymphna's and British Museum Crosier, as well as later manifestations on the long sides of the shrine of the Cathach. However striking parallels have been cited from a number of bone motif pieces of early- to mid-eleventh century date from the CCP site in Dublin. The panelled animal ornament in the 'David and the Lion' miniature and f.39r of the Southamton Psalter also provide analogies for the *Soisceál*'s zoomorphic decoration.

---

<sup>243</sup> Lang 1988a, 3, 10-16.



The openwork pattern on the reverse is present on bone plaques from the Dublin excavations. Dublin may also have been the source for some of the West Viking stylistic elements such as the Borre ring-chain, the foliated caps on the reverse of the shrine, the pretzel loop and ring-knot on the front, and some of the abstract ornament on the long sides of the shrine. Wallace has assessed the historical, political, ecclesiastical and commercial links between Viking Dublin and England.<sup>244</sup> This is represented in the archaeological record by coins, ceramics, metalwork (lead and copper alloy Disc-brooches, strap-ends), ivories, scabbards, two of which are inscribed with Anglo-Saxon names, and raw materials such as jet. Wallace sees this material as stemming, not from an English settlement in Dublin, but rather from a strong English commercial presence, the evidence for which is found on the waterfront sites of Fishamble St / Wood Quay but is not apparent to the same extent in the sites in the centre of the Viking town such as High St and Winetavern Street.

Finally, the shrine as it now appears is in an impoverished state. It would have appeared more opulent in its original condition. One long side is missing and there are also gold filigree panels lacking from the front, and, if the same decorative layout was utilised, filigree would also have adorned the sides as the openwork lacuna in the silver sheet are the same shape. There are also four cast gilt-copper alloy plaques missing from two of the sides which would have provided additional evidence for style as well as iconography.

## DISCUSSION

The first aspect to consider is the shrine's construction and to assess Raftery's hypothesis that the Soisceál Molaisse was originally a house-shaped shrine which was modified in the eleventh century by the addition of silver openwork plates.<sup>245</sup> He argued that the binding strips were typical of house-shaped shrines of eighth to ninth century date, and that the strap-hinge from SSB was also from a similar shrine, and should date to the eighth century. As a corollary he proceeded to maintain that the copper alloy plates were also primary, being the lower portion of a house-shaped shrine. Further evidence cited was the size and shape of the Soisceál, which, he contended, was close to other house-shaped

---

<sup>244</sup> Wallace 1986, 201-221.

<sup>245</sup> Raftery 1941, 120; 1980, no.57. His arguments were subsequently accepted by Henry (1967, 120-2), Mitchell (1977, no.57) and Ó Floinn (1983, 161).

shrines and not to book shrines.

First, Raftery's argument that the binding strips belonged to a house-shaped shrine will be evaluated. As described above the strips are fabricated from silver. This would be unique on a house-shaped shrine as all the Insular shrines recently discussed and classified by have binding strips of copper alloy, in some cases tinned or gilded.<sup>246</sup> Binding strips of copper alloy are found on reliquaries throughout the Viking and Romanesque periods, for example, St Patrick's Bell-shrine, and the Misach. Silver binding strips are rarer and are found on the shrine of the Cathach and the Cross of Cong.<sup>247</sup> It would be noteworthy in the early medieval period to find silver squandered on relatively unimportant constructional elements such as binding strips. The Ardagh chalice, one of the most opulent liturgical vessels in early medieval Europe, bears a copper alloy binding strip on the rim of the bowl.<sup>248</sup> Silver, through the medium of Viking trade, loot and exchange, only became plentiful in the late ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>249</sup> However silver is found on the front faces of the Monymusk reliquary which would appear to have been made in Scotland, in an area of strong Irish influence.<sup>250</sup> The silver may have been obtained from recycling Late Roman or Pictish silver hoards.

From scrutiny of the interior of the Soisceál, and with the aid of radiography, it is possible to see that the binding strips appear to be attached to the copper alloy plates by rivets which pierce flanges and tags which extend beneath the openwork silver plates. Extant binding strips on the large Lough Erne, Monymusk, Shannon, Emly, Melhus, Setnes, Abbadia San Salvatore and Bologna house-shaped shrines were held in position by nails.<sup>251</sup> Aside from the rivet holes on the copper alloy backing sheets which correspond to the constructional elements, there are no other rivets or holes present on the Soisceál which would indicate evidence for attachment of earlier strips. From this evidence above

---

<sup>246</sup> Ó Floinn (1989/90, 52-4) has listed fourteen shrines.

<sup>247</sup> See Chapter 6 for a comparative survey of binding strips.

<sup>248</sup> Ryan 1983a, no. 51:a.

<sup>249</sup> The most recent research on Viking-age silver hoards is provided by Sheehan (1998, 166-202) and Ó Floinn (1998a, 153-61).

<sup>250</sup> Spearman 1989, no.129.

<sup>251</sup> See descriptions in Blindheim (1984, 33-53).



it is argued that the binding strips on the Soisceál are unlike those on the eighth/ninth-century series of house-shaped shrines in two respects: the use of silver and the method of attachment to the copper alloy backing sheets. However, in order to establish to what phase of the shrine the strips pertain to, the copper alloy plates, which are contemporary, will be considered next.

If these plates are to conform to those found on the Insular house-shaped shrines of eighth- to ninth-century date, certain constructional features should be apparent. All the later (eighth/ninth century) series of house-shaped shrines bear applied metal mountings of circular, lozenge or rectangular form which are attached to the sides, roof and base plates by perforated metal lugs.<sup>252</sup> These lugs pass through aligned slots, usually rectangular, in the backing plate and/or the wooden core and are retained in place by a pin which passes through the perforation at right angles.<sup>253</sup> Areas of metal are also removed on the backing sheets to accommodate the hinges, which allow the lid to open. If Raftery's hypothesis is correct and the Soisceál is the base of a house-shaped shrine, then there should be slots and indentations present in the copper alloy sheet. An examination of the interior has shown that there are no such slots or repair patches, except for the holes on the short sides for the strap-hinge. All the rivets and holes relate to the openwork silver sheets and the inset panels; there are no additional or redundant holes for earlier mountings. It is extremely unlikely that the Soisceál would be a shrine which was unhinged and had all applied mounts attached by solder. From the above, the silver openwork sheets and binding strips are coeval with the copper alloy sheets, and considering the lack of evidence for earlier applied mountings, the evidence demonstrates that all of the above constructional elements belong to the primary, that is, eleventh-century phase of the shrine.<sup>254</sup>

Before the date of the strap-hinge is discussed, mention should be made of Raftery's remark that the Soisceál differs in its size and shape from other book shrines but is close to other 'hip-roofed reliquaries'.<sup>255</sup> However, as shown, house-shaped shrines range in

---

<sup>252</sup> Ó Floinn's (1989/90) groups 2 and 3 shrines which consist of Abbadia San Salvatore, 'Emly', Melhus, Setnes, River Shannon, Copenhagen, Bologna, the large Lough Erne and Clonard shrines.

<sup>253</sup> These slots are evident on the front of the larger Lough Erne shrine, see Youngs (1989, 137).

<sup>254</sup> Ó Floinn (1989a, 54, 57) independently reached the same conclusions, based on the physical state of the copper alloy plates and binding strips, but supported Raftery's hypothesis that the strap-hinge was of eighth/ninth century date.

<sup>255</sup> Raftery 1941, 120.

length from 8 cm (Clonmore) to 19 cm (Clonard).<sup>256</sup> Using the dimensions of Ó Floinn's group 2 and 3 intact shrines of eighth to ninth century date, there are eight examples which have a length to width ratio ranging from 1:2.11 (Clonmore) to 1:2.78 (Bologna), with a mean value of 1:2.44.<sup>257</sup> When the dimensions of the Soisceál are calculated they provide a ratio of length to width of 1:1.74, which is well outside the range for the series of house-shaped shrines. Therefore Raftery's argument that the Soisceál is similar in size and shape to other house-shaped shrines is invalid. However, he is correct in stating that the Soisceál differs from all other book shrines. There are no typical dimensions for book shrines, as they vary in size in order to accommodate the manuscript, which may range from a small pocket gospel book such as the Book of Dimma to a large luxurious gospel book such as Kells or Lindisfarne.<sup>258</sup> This is why book shrines, from the large Lough Kinale Shrine to the much smaller Soisceál, do not form a homogenous group; only the shrine of the Cathach, the Misach and St Caillin's shrine are of similar size and shape.<sup>259</sup> Other factors which would determine the dimensions of the shrine include whether the manuscript had a cover (of wood or wood/leather) which would require a larger shrine, and the presence of a wooden core in the interior of the shrine.<sup>260</sup> Therefore, as indicated above, the dimensions of the Soisceál do not fall within the range of the surviving series of house-shaped shrines, and furthermore, there are no typical dimensions for book shrines as they are dictated by the size of the enshrined manuscript.

Finally, the function and date of the enamelled strap-hinge on SSB will be considered. As stated above, Raftery dated this component to the eighth century, and this probably persuaded him to view the Soisceál as a re-modelled house-shaped shrine.<sup>261</sup> On initial examination the form of the strap-hinge, with two triangular components connected by lugs, the lower terminating in a beast-head, the upper perforated to accept a carrying strap or chain, resembles those strap-hinges found on the sides of the Insular house-shaped

---

<sup>256</sup> Ó Floinn 1989/90, 52-3.

<sup>257</sup> San Salvatore, Emly, Melhus, Setnes, Monymusk, Copenhagen, Bologna and the large Lough Erne shrine. Dimensions taken from Blindheim 1984, *passim*.

<sup>258</sup> TCD MS 59; Alexander 1978, no. 48; TCD MS 58; Alexander 1978, no. 58; London, BL, Cotton MS Nero D.IV; Alexander 1978, no. 9.

<sup>259</sup> See Kelly (1994, 280-6, Fig.1) for the relationship between the sizes of book shrines and manuscripts.

<sup>260</sup> These aspects will be considered in more detail in Chapter 6.

<sup>261</sup> Raftery 1941, 120.



shrines. Of the thirteen known shrines, seven bear escutcheons on the short sides.<sup>262</sup> The lower components are semi-circular or D-shaped with additional projecting mounts, except for Melhus which is butterfly-shaped. Excluding San Salvatore and Copenhagen, all are embellished by a combination of gilding, tinning, chip-carving and engraving. None of the above components terminate in beast-heads. Four of the above shrines, Monymusk, Melhus, San Salvatore and Bologna, still retain the upper components of the strap-hinge, the latter example terminates in a beast-head. All of these are rectangular and are approximately 2 to 2.5 times the length of the lower component. The reason for the additional length of the upper component was to prevent the attached chain or strap from snagging the projecting ridge pole. If the upper components were of similar length to the Soisceál strap-hinge the carrying strap would fall either in front or behind (not above) the gable, thus leading to instability during transportation, with the strap causing the shrine to tip backwards or forwards. Therefore, there was a practical element in the function of the upper components: they allowed the shrine to be transported with the strap/chain held above the ridge pole in a stable position.

From the above evidence it appears highly unlikely that the strap-hinge on the Soisceál was ever attached to a house-shaped shrine. In addition the stylistic analysis of the motifs and the form of the beast-head produced, not an eighth/ninth-century date, but a tenth-to eleventh-century date, which is consistent with the date determined by the inscription. Some of the more archaic stylistic features may have been influenced/modelled by an earlier shrine. As discussed, the front appears to be modelled on a four symbols evangelist miniature of eighth to ninth century date. Further confirmation that the strap is coeval may be seen in the similarities between the head of St Luke, the Ox, on the front of the shrine, and the beast-head on the hinge. Both have a swollen brow with the eyes to the side, triangular ears set back on the head, and a hatched tapering muzzle with two lines defining the snout [Pls.24,26]. It is likely that both are the work of the same goldsmith, Gillabaithín.<sup>263</sup> Therefore, the evidence cited above clearly demonstrates that the strap-hinge is contemporary with the remainder of the shrine and should thus be dated to 1001-1011.

---

<sup>262</sup> Both Lough Erne shrines, Monymusk, Copenhagen, Melhus, San Salvatore, Bologna and the detached mount from the Emly shrine (Ó Floinn 1989/90, pl.iii).

<sup>263</sup> See pp.148-49 below for further discussion of this topic.

There are two strap escutcheons, one original, the second a later copy, for the attachment of a carrying strap or chain.<sup>264</sup> Due to the narrow width of the suspension loop on the original hinge it is more probable that a chain was used for carriage of the shrine. Since the shrine was in the form of a box the upper component did not need to be inordinately long. Escutcheons for carrying straps are also found on the sides of the Lough Kinale Shrine, and on the Misach where a carrying chain still survives. However due to the differing sizes and form of the shrines the escutcheons were normally placed in the centre of the short sides, thus allowing the shrine to be carried with the front facing or at right angles to the spectator rather than facing away, which would be the case with the Soisceál. There is also documentary evidence for transportation of the shrine in a leather satchel.<sup>265</sup>

To summarise, there is no reason to suppose that the Soisceál originally functioned as a house-shaped shrine. Examination of the construction and analysis of the style demonstrates that all the components of the shrine are contemporary and of eleventh-century date.

The next aspect of the shrine to consider is whether the contents were accessible.<sup>266</sup> The missing long side may have been removed during unwarranted intervention by a priest named McLoughlin in the late eighteenth century. George Petrie obtained this information from the keeper of the shrine who also stated that the manuscript was lost and the shrine 'mutilated'.<sup>267</sup> If the shrine was fully sealed, then McLoughlin would have had to remove one of the sides in order to gain access to the manuscript, and in the process damaging the binding strips and possibly the side as well. If the shrine was intended to open, there would have been no need to inflict damage.

In order to determine whether the shrine was intended to be sealed a detailed examination was made of the edges and binding strips. Unfortunately solder obscures the ends of three of the four binding strips. The visible end, at the junction of SSA and the

---

<sup>264</sup> Due to the narrow width of the loop on the hinge it appears more probable that it held a chain.

<sup>265</sup> McKenna 1931, 38.

<sup>266</sup> See Chapter 6 (pp.354-57) for a discussion of this topic.

<sup>267</sup> Petrie 1855, 2.



back, shows that while the copper alloy backing sheet of the back is chamfered, the backing plate on SSA curves slightly outwards in order to engage with the binding strip. However the edges of the plates at the open end do not curve, they are straight. This may indicate that these ends were not intended to be retained by the binding strips but possibly by some other means. As with SSA and the reverse, the edges of the missing side may have been curved outwards, thus still forming a sealed box. Some form of binding strip would have been required as the underlying backing sheets extend from below the openwork silver sheets on the edges of the front, back and short sides.

Although the ends of the binding strips are obscured by solder, they exhibit damage which may have occurred when the shrine was mutilated in the eighteenth century. It is also likely that some of the binding strips are nineteenth century in date which involves further complexities in trying to assess the various phases of construction. There are two unpublished letters by George Petrie to Lord Adare in the National Library which refer to repairs carried out to the shrine.<sup>268</sup> In a letter dated 20th January 1844, Petrie informs Lord Adare that the shrine: '... is now with Sawyer - the silversmith - to have it put in order'.<sup>269</sup> In the next letter, dated 12th February 1844, Petrie recounts to Lord Adare that: 'I have had the reliquary cleaned ... and the rim of silver made perfect so as to bind all the parts together and the bindings and (word undecipherable, possibly 'casings' or 'housings') have all been taken out '.

From the above it is apparent that Sawyer replaced some of the binding strips and applied solder to secure any loose strips in place. The doubtful word 'casings'/'housings' may refer to the openwork silver sheet or the evangelist plaques on the front. Petrie's primary concern would have been to have the shrine cleaned of dirt and tarnish so as to reveal the inscription. While in his possession Sawyer probably cleaned and polished the other decorative components.<sup>270</sup> He may have also inserted the brass threaded screws which retain the escutcheon on SSA in place.

---

<sup>268</sup> NLI Ms.792, letter nos. 453, 454.

<sup>269</sup> This is likely to be Richard Sawyer, gold and silversmith, who had a premises at 64 Fleet Street, Dublin, from 1830 to 1848.

<sup>270</sup> The missing filigree panel from the front [Pl.23, Fig.15] may have been lost during the cleaning and repair.

Another aspect of the construction to consider is whether there was originally a wooden core in the interior of the shrine, thus restricting the space available to accommodate a manuscript. As the interior of the Soisceál is accessible it is possible to see the rivets for attaching the mountings and sheets to the backing plates. All these have their ends hammered flush with the backing plates. If there was intended to be a wooden core there would have been nails in place of rivets, as the sharp points and additional length of the nails would have been required to penetrate the wood, thus providing additional stability to the construction. In addition, the position of the perforations in the shanks of the strap-hinge, where they would have been secured in place by retaining pins, correspond to the present thickness of the plates of the shrine. This is additional evidence to indicate that the strap-hinge was fabricated specifically to fit the thickness of the backing plates of the Soisceál.

One disadvantage with the lack of a wooden core is that if the ends of the rivets were not hammered completely flat, there would have been sharp protrusions which may have snagged the enshrined manuscript. The shanks of the strap-hinges would also have been a source of potential damage to the manuscript. A cover would have afforded some protection; as an additional safeguard against abrasive damage the manuscript may have been wrapped in a sheet of vellum or textile.<sup>271</sup> However, if the shrine was inaccessible, the physical well-being of the enclosed manuscript state may not have been of concern.

From the iconographical and stylistic analyses of the front of the shrine it was determined that the four evangelists disposed around a cross were modelled on a similar page from an Irish gospel book of eighth-to ninth-century date. As stated above the front may have been copied directly from the manuscript due to be enshrined, thus forging a potent link between relic and shrine. Additional evidence for the enshrinement of a gospel book is the title of the shrine, which is first recorded in the early fifteenth-century poem of Somhairle Séimh Ó'Canann as the *Sosgéal Mlaisi*, where its use as a battle talisman is referred to.<sup>272</sup> The name *Sosgéal Mlaisi* translates as the 'gospels of St Molaisse' and intimates that the enshrined relic was most probably an illuminated pocket gospel book.

---

<sup>271</sup> See Chapter 1, p.63, for examples of manuscripts which have suffered impact damage due to transportation in a book shrine or box.

<sup>272</sup> Ó'Canann 1994, 17-19.



The restrictive internal dimensions of the shrine, 133 x 115 x 746 mm, would have accommodated a pocket gospel book.<sup>273</sup> Of the surviving pocket gospels, only two would have fitted inside into the Soisceál, the Cadmug Gospels and a single leaf from an Irish gospel book, depicting an evangelist.<sup>274</sup> However, if the fifteenth century traditions are credible, then there may well have been a gospel book either written by/or associated with St Molaise. Since St Molaise's obits are recorded as 563 and 570 (AU; AFM) it is unlikely, but not impossible, that a manuscript of this date was preserved in the shrine.<sup>275</sup> However, as noted above in the style and iconography sections, the front of the Soisceál is likely to be based on a gospel book of eighth to ninth century date. The size of the shrine, and thus the enclosed manuscript, would have accommodated a pocket gospel book, and these were not introduced until the eighth century. The appearance of a four evangelist symbols page in an Insular manuscript first occurs in the late-seventh/early eighth century Book of Durrow, and is unlikely to have originated as early as the late sixth century.<sup>276</sup>

If the shrine did not contain a manuscript contemporary with the saint, what are the alternatives? It is conceivable that a pocket gospel book of eighth-to ninth-century date may have been believed by the faithful, in the early eleventh-century, to have been directly associated with St Molaise. These misconceptions have prevailed before: the Books of Armagh, Durrow and possibly Kells were enshrined under royal patronage in the belief that they were written by St Patrick and St Columba.<sup>277</sup> It has also been shown that scribes, who could have produced an illuminated pocket gospel book, were active at Devenish in the ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>278</sup>

The earliest surviving Latin life of St Molaise, which is of thirteenth/fourteenth-

---

<sup>273</sup> For pocket gospel books see Alexander (1978, nos. 45 to 51) and McGurk (1956, *passim*).

<sup>274</sup> Cadmug Gospels, Fulda, Landesbibliothek, Codex Bonifatianus 3, (125 x 112 mm), Alexander 1978, no. 49; London, BL, Add. MS 40618, (130 x 101 mm), Alexander 1978, no. 46; Henry 1957, pl. XXIII.

<sup>275</sup> AU, AFM.

<sup>276</sup> TCD MS 57; Alexander 1978, no. 6; See Werner (1969, 3-17) for the probable origin of the evangelists symbols page. Meehan (1996, 21-2) has recently summarised William O'Sullivan's arguments (1985, 353-4; 1994, 85) for dating the Book of Durrow, on palaeographical grounds, to the early eighth century.

<sup>277</sup> See pp.63-73, Ch.1, for a discussion on the enshrinement of these manuscripts.

<sup>278</sup> Ó'Floinn 1989a, 62. The obits for the scribes include two abbots: Martain (868, AFM) and Fogartach (985, AFM)

century date, was compiled as a homily to be read on his feast-day, September 12th.<sup>279</sup> The late Irish Life of St Molaise records miracles pertaining to gospel books associated with the saint. One episode relates how the sons of Declan miraculously transcribed the gospels of St Molaise in the space of two days and one night.<sup>280</sup> A second incident occurred when St Molaise arrived in Rome on a pilgrimage. He was due to say mass in the presence of the Pope but lacked the necessary liturgical trappings when a missal/gospel book<sup>281</sup> was miraculously transported from Heaven to the altar. St Molaise took the gospel book, along with relics of Sts Peter, Paul, Laurence, Clement, Stephen, Martin and the Virgin Mary back with him to Ireland.<sup>282</sup> It may be possible that this life contains some factual elements from an earlier version, for example, an Early Christian gospel book may have been brought back from a pilgrimage to Rome by members of the Devenish community in the seventh or eighth century.<sup>283</sup> This in turn, as a possible exotic manuscript, may have become associated with St Molaise and may have been eventually enshrined. On consideration, however, the enshrined manuscript is likely to have been an Irish gospel book of eighth/ninth century date.

The monastery of Devenish did not escape the Viking raids to which other monasteries were subjected. In 836 'All the churches of Lough Erne ... and Daimhinish were destroyed by the gentiles',<sup>284</sup> and in 923 'a fleet of foreigners on Lough Erne ... and they plundered the islands of the lake and the territories round it to and fro'.<sup>285</sup> These raids may have left the monastery despoiled and in need of income to re-build or carry out repairs to the buildings. Raleigh Radford has suggested that the reason the Devenish community moved temporarily to Clonmacnoise was as a result of the Viking raids, as the obit of Martain in 868 describes him as 'abbot of Cluain MicNois and

---

<sup>279</sup> See Plummer (1910, II, xv-xxii, lxiv, pp.131-40) and Raleigh-Radford (1970, 55-6) for an outline of the life. Sharpe (1991, 248, 311) has reassessed and provided a textual analysis of the VSH including the Latin life of St Molaise.

<sup>280</sup> O'Grady 1892, 21.

<sup>281</sup> *Soscéla beg Molaise* which translates as 'St Molaise's little gospel book'.

<sup>282</sup> O'Grady 1892, 29-30.

<sup>283</sup> Harbison (1991, 29-31) has referred to pilgrimages undertaken by Irish clerics and saints to Rome in the early medieval period. Ó'Carragáin has discussed Cummin's letter in relation to the relics and books brought back with the delegates of the Synod of Mágh Léine who were in Rome in 631 (1994, 407-9).

<sup>284</sup> AU.

<sup>285</sup> AU.



Daimhnis'.<sup>286</sup> An annal entry for 891 appears to corroborate this as it records that 'Maelachaidh, Vice-Abbot ... of Cluain Mic Nois and Abbot of Daimhins suffered martyrdom ...'.<sup>287</sup> In order to raise funds this would have been an opportune time to commission a life of St Molaisse and/or enshrine a relic directly associated with the saint.

Saints' lives, either in a new form, or with additional episodes inserted into the existing one, were, in some instances a record of land-holding and were used to increase property rights. An example of this is Tirechán's *Breviarium* which was used to establish St Patrick's successors claim to churches by invoking the saint's supposed itinerary in the northern half of the country.<sup>288</sup> As well as been used for the promotion of the status of the monastic community, the lives also influenced the public perception of the church as a pilgrimage centre or as a prestigious burial ground. They may also have been engaged to initiate and manipulate political links with new or intrusive dynasties.<sup>289</sup> If an early life of St Molaisse existed it may have alluded to a gospel book associated with the saint. This would have been an opportune time for a gospel book associated with the saint to miraculously appear, or to attribute powers to an existing gospel book of early Christian date.

To summarise the above: from the layout and decoration of the front and the restrictive size of the shrine it appears that the shrine may have contained a pocket gospel book of eighth-to ninth-century date. The name of the shrine 'Soisceál' provides a further link as it translates as 'gospel'.<sup>290</sup> This gospel book may have been commissioned, in tandem with a life of the saint, to enhance the status of the community or to act as a focus for exacting funds for the refurbishment of the monastery after Viking raids or general disrepair. Another possibility is that there may have been in existence a gospel book contemporary with, or used by the saint, to which may have been attributed miraculous powers. A third, but less probable, option is the possibility that the monastery had in its

---

<sup>286</sup> AU.

<sup>287</sup> AFM. Ralegh-Radford 1970, 56-7. The possibility should not be overlooked that Clonmacnoise may have held sway over, or allied with Devinish for other political or ecclesiastical reasons.

<sup>288</sup> Doherty 1982, 303-6; Sharpe 1991, 13.

<sup>289</sup> Doherty 1986, 364-5.

<sup>290</sup> The term gospel book in the early medieval sources was used to describe all manner of books, see pp.23-27 in Chapter 1.

possession an Early Christian gospel book brought back from a pilgrimage to Rome, and which later became associated with St Molaisse.<sup>291</sup>

The next aspect to consider is why was the shrine commissioned in the eleventh century? In his study of the inscription on the shrine Ó Floinn observed that the Ua Conghaile family had provided four abbots of Devenish in the tenth century: Maelmeadh Mac Congaile (d.922), Colman Mac Congaile (d.955), Fogertach Ua Conghaile (d.984) and Cormac Ua Conghalaigh (d.996).<sup>292</sup> In 996 the line of succession was broken and the next abbot was Cathalan Ua Corcraín, who died in 1001. His successor was Ceannfailid Mac Flaithbertach who died in 1025 and whose name is recorded on the shrine's inscription. After the death of Ceannfailid, the Ua Conghaile regained control of the abbacy after a hiatus of twenty-nine years with the ascendancy of Colman Cam Ua Conghaile (d.1038).<sup>293</sup> The new holders of the ecclesiastical offices may have wanted to generate a more permanent link with St Molaisse and simultaneously enhance their own status. One of the methods would have been to commission a shrine and this act involved recording the names of the new coarbs and erenaghs for posterity on the long side of the shrine.

A feature of the inscription which has not been previously commented upon is the absence of a secular patron(s). Of the surviving ecclesiastical metalwork with intact pre-Norman inscriptions only the Lismore crosier and the River Bann bell-shrine crest lack a reference to a secular patron in their inscriptions.<sup>294</sup> It is possible that there may have been a corresponding inscription on the missing long side, but as there is space available (on the short end adjacent to the beginning of the inscription) this is highly unlikely. Since there are relatively few inscribed artefacts it is difficult to determine if the various patrons and commissioners observed rules governing the content and form of inscriptions. It has been argued that the placement of names within an inscription is determined by the rank

---

<sup>291</sup> The sixth-century Gospels of St Augustine, written and illuminated in Italy, were supplied by Pope Gregory the Great to St Augustine to assist in his missionary activities (Backhouse 1991, no.1).

<sup>292</sup> All obits from AFM.

<sup>293</sup> AFM.

<sup>294</sup> The following artefacts have inscriptions which refer to secular patrons: The shrines of the Stowe Missal, Cathach, St Patrick's Bell, St Lachtin's Arm and the Cross of Cong. The lost book shrines for the Books of Armagh and Durrow were also associated with secular patronage. See Michelli (1996, 6-8, *passim*).



and status of the persons involved in the commissioning of the shrine.<sup>295</sup> The lack of a secular patron on the Soisceál's inscription may be the result of the shrine being commissioned in haste, with no time to organise a secular patron, or perhaps the local dynasty were unwilling to act as patrons for the incumbent ecclesiastical dignitaries. However these are speculative considerations which have no historical evidence to support them. There is a (?)late medieval account which relates how four clerical students from Devenish wanted to establish from a local king what share of gold and silver obtained from a melee was due to the monastery. When the king learned that the students were from Devenish he ordered that all of the gold and silver was to be used to ornament St Molaisse's relics (*minda*) 'namely his shrine (*scrín*), his *minister* and his crosier'.<sup>296</sup> This episode may encapsulate some factual remnants, in that a local ruler provided funds or precious metals for the enshrinement or refurbishment of St Molaisse's relics.

The next aspect of the shrine to consider is where it may have been manufactured. From the analysis of the style and decoration a number of parallels were found with material of tenth and eleventh century date excavated from Dublin. The following parallels were noted: the zoomorphic ornament of the shrine was compared to a number of motif-pieces from CCP, and the abstract motifs (lozenge-and-slash, step-fret and herringbone), and beast-head from the strap-hinge, all have parallels with the decorated wood and strap-ends respectively. Evidence for enamel working in Dublin, similar to that on the inset panels of the strap-hinge, was also cited. In addition the presence of the Borre ring-chain and exotic Trewhiddle motifs on the base plate, and the pretzel knot on the front would have been current in Dublin at the time of the shrine's manufacture.

According to O'Meadhra's assessment of the Dublin motif-pieces and associated metalwork (crosiers, shrines, mountings) she concluded that the Cathach and Soisceál shrines may have been made in close contact with the Dublin school.<sup>297</sup> It is an attractive proposition to attribute the Soisceál to a Dublin workshop, most likely to CCP where the metalworking area was centred. As well as crucibles, slag, ingots and ingot moulds, scrap metal, moulds, unfinished artefacts and wire this site also produced the greatest

---

<sup>295</sup> Ó Floinn 1989a, 61.

<sup>296</sup> Kelly, D.H. 1880, 103; Lucas 1986, 12. McKenna (1931, 23-4) has provided a more detailed account of this episode.

<sup>297</sup> O'Meadhra 1987a, 161.

concentration of motif-pieces,<sup>298</sup> the majority of which were decorated with panels of zoomorphic ornament comparable to the Soisceál. Christ Church Place was deemed to be the 'most affluent and densely settled' of all the excavated sites in Dublin and produced the richest finds.<sup>299</sup> O'Meadhra has determined that the CCP motif-pieces were directly associated with fine-metalworking, and that their closest parallels are with metalwork, especially ecclesiastical artefacts. She also proposed that this location may have been the centre for goldsmiths/craftsmen associated with the early foundation of Christ Church Cathedral.<sup>300</sup>

From the above it seems apparent that Dublin would have had the resources, wealth, expertise, and commercial and artistic contacts in which to carry out such a commission. However, there are flaws in the claim for Dublin as the origin of the shrine; would Dublin have provided a suitable environment for ecclesiastical commissions? As proposed above the front of the Soisceál appears to be based on a four evangelists miniature from a pocket gospel of eighth/ninth century date. Would the patron have allowed such a revered manuscript to travel to Dublin in order to be copied? However the goldsmith may have taken a preparatory sketch of the manuscript from Devenish to Dublin.

The metalworking area at Christ Church Place may well have been attached to the cathedral and employed for ecclesiastical and royal commissions. However this may not have occurred in the period in which the Soisceál was manufactured: 1001 x 1011, as the foundation of the first cathedral in Dublin did not commence until at least 1028.<sup>301</sup> Therefore the CCP workshop, which has also provided evidence for metalworking in the tenth-century, would not appear to have been dependent on a local ecclesiastical foundation at this time. Roger Stalley has investigated the question of what was in place at Christ Church Place before the foundation of the first Cathedral and how the church acquired the site.<sup>302</sup> The site is perched on top of a prominent ridge and would have been an ideal site

---

<sup>298</sup> O'Meadhra 1987b, 43, 48.

<sup>299</sup> Murray 1983, 54, 59. Johnson (1997, 65-70) has also studied the CCP motif-pieces. They range in date from the early-tenth to early-thirteenth centuries and there is a cluster of twenty five pieces which are decorated with similar animal ornament which date from the early- to mid-eleventh century.

<sup>300</sup> O'Meadhra 1987b, 50-1.

<sup>301</sup> Wallace 1986, 203.

<sup>302</sup> Pers comm.



for a royal residence, perhaps King Sitric's palace. Stalley's argument may have some validity. There is a lack of historical evidence from the Irish sources but his hypothesis is supported by late Anglo-Saxon documentary evidence. Wulfstan, a monk from the Benedictine abbey of Winchester, recorded invaluable evidence for the organisation of goldsmiths involved in the fabrication of the reliquary for the translation of St Swithun in 971.<sup>303</sup> As they did not operate from the monastic workshops they were lay goldsmiths but were assembled together by king Edgar at his own residence commonly called the 'great villa'.<sup>304</sup> A similar scenario may have occurred at CCP, with Sitric eventually granting a plot to the church authorities. Eventually this may have housed goldsmiths used to undertake royal and ecclesiastical commissions and included a mint and a centre for validating and standardising weights and measures. The goldsmiths would have been using motif-pieces and a local school may have developed which undertook the fabrication of a shrine to house the manuscript from Devenish.

Another consideration to assess is whether Dublin was Christian or pagan at this period. Due to intermarriage between the native Irish and the Dublin Norse, in addition to commercial and political links, Dublin would have accepted the Christian religion as a cosmopolitan facet of a prosperous urban centre. Wallace is of the opinion that Dublin had been Christianised in the late tenth century; certainly King Sitric established a bishopric in 1028 on his return from a pilgrimage to Rome.<sup>305</sup>

Was the political climate in Dublin favourable for the production of ecclesiastical commissions in the period 1001 x 1011? Between 936 and 1015 there were at least thirteen unsuccessful attacks on Dublin by the native Irish.<sup>306</sup> By the year 1000 the Dublin Vikings had been effectively quelled and the town managed to survive until its capture by Máel Sechnaill in 1015.<sup>307</sup> However, as Clarke has demonstrated, through analysis of the archaeological and topographical evidence, Dublin's economic development coexisted with

---

<sup>303</sup> Dodwell 1982, 67.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Wallace 1986, 203.

<sup>306</sup> Clarke 1991, 109-12.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 110.

the ongoing conflict.<sup>308</sup> Since the Dublin Norse were unsuccessful in warfare they concentrated on their trading and commercial links. Wallace has deduced, from the archaeological and historical evidence, that Dublin's commercial and political contacts shifted from northern Britain in the early tenth century to a reciprocal flourishing English interest in Dublin in the late tenth and eleventh centuries.<sup>309</sup> It is significant that the Soisceál was fabricated within the period when Dublin had established a fragile political stability with no successful attacks by the native Irish.

Another likely origin for the shrine is where the commission originated: the monastery of Devenish. O'Meadhra has cited and discussed hagiographical references to a school established at Devenish by St Molaisse, where his pupils were taught 'letters, writing and crafts'.<sup>310</sup> Unfortunately there is no supporting archaeological evidence for fine metalworking or craft activity at Devenish. The monastery was continuously occupied throughout the tenth and eleventh centuries and would have had some form of craft working, perhaps of a more mundane nature, to allow for self-sufficiency.<sup>311</sup> It was not unusual for a shrine to be made in a workshop not attached to the monastery, as it may not have had the relevant expertise or resources to undertake a major commission. For example the shrine of the Stowe Missal, although associated with St Ruadhán and Lorrha, was most likely manufactured in Clonmacnoise by Donnchad Ó'Taccáin.<sup>312</sup> The shrine of the Book of Dimma, although directly linked with Roscrea, was probably manufactured in a workshop at Roscommon. It is included in Henry's Cross of Cong school of metalwork.<sup>313</sup>

In Ó Floinn's re-assessment of Francoise Henry's regional metalworking schools in the eleventh and twelfth centuries he argued that there were no major workshops in the

---

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 113-7.

<sup>309</sup> Wallace 1986, 203.

<sup>310</sup> O'Meadhra 1987b, 101, 103. The primary source cited is De St Dagaeo, ch.5, *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Irish Manuscripts Commission 1947).

<sup>311</sup> See McKenna (1931, 90-91) for a list of abbots affiliated with Devinish and Ryan (1988a, 33-45) for a useful survey of the evidence for craft working at monasteries and other centres.

<sup>312</sup> See the relevant section in the chapter on the shrine of the Stowe Missal.

<sup>313</sup> Ó Floinn 1982, 35; 1987a, 186.



northern half of the country at this time.<sup>314</sup> One of his arguments regards the annal entry for 1090, cited by Henry, in which the relics of Columcille were transported from Tír Conaill to Kells, along with twenty-seven ounces of silver, in order to be enshrined.<sup>315</sup> However, recent research has shown that the annal entry for 1090 should not be used to date the shrine of the Cathach, as the relics were most likely sent on a circuit of Tír Conaill and the 140 ounces of silver was the amount collected as tribute.<sup>316</sup> This does not necessarily infer that there were no active workshops in the northern half of the country. There may have been workshops associated with monasteries outside of the Columban federation and active within their own sphere of influence.

One site for a metalworking centre, although lacking the requisite archaeological evidence in the period concerned, is Armagh, head of the Patrician federation, and one of the most prestigious monastic cities in Ireland at this time. Recent excavations have uncovered metalworking areas of eighth and ninth century date.<sup>317</sup> A more recent hoard of ecclesiastical scrap metal from Shanmullagh, Co Armagh, which dates to the eighth/ninth centuries, includes portions of shrines, liturgical fittings and elaborate mountings. Bourke has proposed Armagh as the provenance and possibly the place of manufacture and has also maintained that the shrine for the Book of Armagh, which was commissioned by Donnchad Mac Flainn in 937, was manufactured at Armagh despite the ongoing Viking raids.<sup>318</sup>

Armagh was subjected to raids from both the Vikings and the native Irish. In 832 Armagh was raided three times in the one month, which, as Ó'Corrain has indicated, displays the inherent wealth of the city and its environs. As well as ecclesiastical treasures, Armagh would have been replete with livestock, provisions and possibly slaves.<sup>319</sup> In 996 the Airgialla raided 2,000 cows from Armagh, and in 1090 approximately one hundred

---

<sup>314</sup> Ó Floinn 1987a, 180.

<sup>315</sup> Henry 1970, 89-91. Herbert 1988, 92-3. The other artefacts in Ó Floinn's 'Cathach' group which was centred at Kells, include St Mura's bell-shrine, the Misach and the British Museum Crosier, all of which appear to have associations with St Columba (1987a, 180-1).

<sup>316</sup> See pp.281-82 of the Cathach chapter.

<sup>317</sup> See Ryan (1988a, 40-2) for further references and a summary of the Armagh excavations.

<sup>318</sup> Bourke 1993a, 20-22, 38.

<sup>319</sup> Ó'Corrain 1972, 89.

houses were burnt in the city.<sup>320</sup> Brian Boruma, when he visited the city in 1005, donated twenty ounces of gold to the clergy of Armagh and supported its claim to primacy. Charles Doherty has presented annalistic evidence for Armagh having the use of coinage in the local exchange in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.<sup>321</sup> The above evidence demonstrates that Armagh was a centre of concentrated wealth, and even though subjected to frequent raids it had the resources and capacity to enable it to recover from such setbacks. Therefore from the references above, and although lacking archaeological evidence for eleventh-century craft activity, Armagh must have had its own metalworking area in the environs of the city. As Devenish is geographically close to Armagh, the monastery may have availed of its greater resources and expertise.

Other monasteries, such as Clonmacnoise and Kells, would have also have been capable of undertaking such commissions. It is not possible to determine if all monasteries retained goldsmiths workshops, they may have availed of the services of goldsmiths from the larger monasteries or urban centres. Kells is the most likely origin for the shrine of the Cathach due to the inscription on the shrine and the charter evidence referring to a 'MacAedha cerd' in the Book of Kells.<sup>322</sup> The side panels of this shrine have a remarkable similarity to a bone motif-piece excavated from High Street, Dublin, in 1971 and Dublin has not been completely ruled out as a possible location for the manufacture of the shrine.<sup>323</sup> If the shrine of the Cathach had no inscription associating it with Kells it would have been provenanced to Dublin on the basis of this motif-piece. This demonstrates the risk of relying solely on stylistic forms and motifs for provenance. Sitric Mac Meic Aedh may have been trained in a Dublin workshop where he absorbed Scandinavian stylistic elements, perhaps moving to Kells at a later period where he was engaged as a goldsmith. This scenario may also have occurred at Devenish. The community may have employed an itinerant goldsmith who had either trained or worked in Dublin where he would have been exposed to a range of stylistic influences: Insular, Scandinavian (Borre) and Anglo-Saxon (Trehwiddle), which he successfully utilised and integrated into the decoration of the Soisceál.

---

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-9.

<sup>321</sup> AU 1031, 1097; Doherty 1980, 82.

<sup>322</sup> See O'Meadhra (1987b, 165-6) for an analysis of the Kells charter entry and the discussion section in the Cathach chapter (pp.233-34).

<sup>323</sup> O'Meadhra 1979, no.32; Ó'Floinn 1983, no.74a; See n.184, Chapter 4, for further references.



Dublin has been proposed as the origin for a number of artefacts, due to the size and nature of the site, its rich archaeological deposits and the remarkable preservation rate of the artefactual material. This provides a prejudicial comparison in relation to other sites from the tenth to twelfth centuries. Even if large scale excavations were to take place on a major monastic site the range of potential artefacts recovered would be restricted due to inferior preservation on dry land sites and, in some cases, the disturbed nature of the sites due to the insertion of modern burials. The CCP locality in Dublin still remains the most likely of all the sites referred to above for the manufacture of the Soisceál or the origin of the goldsmith, due to the analogous zoomorphic ornament present on the motif-pieces from this site and the evidence for metalworking activity. It is also evident that Dublin, through its commercial, political and ecclesiastical links, would have been the source for the Borre and Trewhiddle motifs on the shrine. O'Meadra has rightly drawn attention to the lack of historical references to Dublin as an artistic centre and postulates that this may have been due to the fact that the historical sources are the product of a religious environment and hence were biased towards recording only the ecclesiastical, not secular, centres used for manufacturing.<sup>324</sup> It is also notable that neither Henry, or Ó Floinn included Dublin as a possible centre for any of the motifs or styles associated with the metalworking schools.

The stylistic analysis detected evidence that the shrine is probably the work of a single craftsman, and the following observations support this hypothesis. In the examination of the zoomorphic decoration it was shown that the proportions, style and layout of paired beasts on the filigree panel (ZFP1) on the front was analogous to ZP3 from SSA, which is executed in engraved silver [Fig. 14]. These panels, although in two different mediums, were fabricated by the one hand. It is also apparent that the same craftsman executed all the engraved zoomorphic panels on the sides. The Type 2 beasts have less points of comparison with the remainder of the animal ornament but rather than proposing a different hand, it may be that the goldsmith was deliberately varying the range of animal ornament. An accomplished artist would have wanted to show his diverse technical abilities and range of zoomorphic ornament.<sup>325</sup> The craftsman was conservative in the species or type of

---

<sup>324</sup> O'Meadhra 1987b, 164.

<sup>325</sup> This point raises the reliance of the art historian / archaeologist on the traditional Darwinian evolutionary methods for dating artefacts on stylistic grounds. If the Type 2 Soisceál animals were the sole form of zoomorphic decoration on a separate artefact with no other distinctive motifs, it may well be allocated an earlier or later date on comparison with the remainder of the animal ornament on the Soisceál. Therefore caution should be observed when attempting to date zoomorphic decoration purely on variations and differences in form and motifs, such as the CCP motif-pieces, as these variations may be the work of a single artist over a restricted

animals: profile bipeds and quadrupeds, some serpentine the others appear canine and feline. Some appear crude but this is due to differential wear, abrasion and the application of gilding at a later stage which obscured details of the decoration. The two panels containing animal ornament on the reverse plate (E6 and A1) are also in the style of the engraved silver panels.

There is also evidence to support the claim that the same craftsman worked on the elegantly cast silver and copper alloy plaques on the front and side of the shrine. The ecclesiastic panel on SSB is flanked by four beasts which share a number of features with the zoomorphic decoration on the sides and would indicate the same hand [Pl.26].<sup>326</sup> The animal ornament on this panel has more detail and has greater relief than the remainder of the zoomorphs elsewhere on the shrine. This is because this panel was cast and not engraved. It would be improbable that two different craftsmen, one to execute the figures, the other the zoomorphic decoration, worked on the same panel. As a corollary the same craftsman who designed and executed the decoration on the ecclesiastic panel on SSB must have produced the evangelist figures on the front. The figures share the same tapering facial shape with oval eyes, straight drapery hems with beaded ornament, and the fine cross-hatching on the ecclesiastic's cloak is also present on the bodies of the symbols of Luke and John on the front. A correlation can also be produced between the evangelist plaques and the strap-hinge on SSB. The head of St Luke with its hatched tapering muzzle and flat triangular ears appears to be a rendering in two dimensions of the projecting beast-head on the strap-hinge. The detailing of the triangular ears on the beast head with a heart-shaped indentation on the base is also apparent on the eagle of St John and, in a more elongated version, on the lion of St Mark. The profile head of St Mark can also be compared to the beast-head on the strap-hinge: both display hatched jaws, bulbous snouts, two prominent fangs and a circular eye contained within a comma-shaped field [Pls.24,29.b]. In addition some of the simple abstract motifs on the borders of the strap-hinge (step-fret, guilloche) are present on the decorated base plate on the reverse of the shrine.

From the observations above it is proposed that the same craftsman executed the filigree panels and therefore the engraved panels with zoomorphic ornament on the sides

---

period of time.

<sup>326</sup> The lower flanking animals have been assigned to Type 1:B.



and base plate, the zoomorphs on the ecclesiastical panel and the figurative panels on the front and sides, as well as the strap-hinge on SSB.

Analysis of the decoration has shown that not all of the work is as competent as the finely cast figurative panels. The abstract panels of gold filigree flanking the stud collars on the terminals of the cross (AFP 1-4) contrast with the carefully laid out zoomorphic filigree panels which are of more complex construction. While some of the coarseness may be due to damage, the angular knotwork flanking AFP 2 and 4 is carelessly laid out and unsymmetrical, possibly due to the misalignment of the central setting. The execution and composition of AFP 6 in the upright arm is also somewhat inexpertly done. The oval setting in the centre of the cross is off-centre; it impinges upon the border of the upper inset cast silver panel.

Some of the abstract decoration engraved into the silver frames on the sides cannot be claimed to be high quality work. For example the craftsman appears to have lost his way in the complex pattern on AP 3, SSA and AP 1 and 2 on the long side where mistakes have disrupted the knotwork patterns. Is this due to carelessness in laying out the pattern, by way of a grid or dots, or was a wax or lead patrix impressed into a clay mould for casting the panels? The errors would indicate that these panels were engraved directly into the silver. If these mistakes were present on the wax/lead patrix it would have been simple to rectify them before impressing the clay with the prepared pattern. The goldsmith may not have been as competent in abstract ornament, or else, he left it in the hands of an assistant. Although some of the zoomorphic panels are obscured by gilding or have suffered wear it can still be observed that the layout, execution and detailing of the beasts is second rate on certain panels: ZP1 and 2 from SSB and ZP2 from the long side.

Another feature of the shrine is that a number of areas were left unfinished. The most apparent are AP1 and 2 from SSA where, unlike the engraved panels on this and the other sides, the pattern is lightly scribed into the metal. Also present in these panels are a number of punched dots which may have been used as a grid to layout the design. This is further evidence that the panels were not cast but laid out with a scribed line and subsequently engraved. Detailed microscopic examination of the other panels on the shrine may lead to the identification of further pattern aids such as dots or grids. This may be indirect evidence of the shrine having been manufactured in an active workshop which had restricted time, and was thus unable to finish off some of the areas.

Zoomorphic panels 1 and 4 on the long side are narrow rectangular panels which exhibit a framed blank area at the narrow ends; this feature is more evident on ZP1. These blank areas may have been intended to contain abstract motifs to flank the central zoomorphic design. Another possibility is that after experimentation with the lay out of the design the craftsman decided to constrict the length of the panels. The first zoomorphic panel to be engraved may have been ZP1 which he made shorter, so leaving the framed blank areas at each end of the panel. With the subsequent panels he retained approximately the same area for the zoomorphic decoration but did not outline the blank ends to the same extent. There are also plain areas of silver flanking the panels in the central spine of the sides, for example, ZP2 and 3 from the long side, ZP3 and 6 from SSA and ZP7 and 10 from SSB. However none of these panels have the blank areas outlined.

It has already been suggested that the parallel lines, interrupted by compass-drawn circles, which frame the openwork field on the reverse, may have been intended to contain abstract or zoomorphic ornament, similar to the layout of some illuminated manuscripts. Nevertheless where the panels abut the corner lentoids, and with the decorative motifs on the backing plate, this would have given rise to a congested effect with little free space between the decorative fields. There may have been a change in the design as the openwork field is more visually effective as a contrast to the plain silver borders.

The distinctive toolmarks present on the lentoid-shaped fields on the reverse have previously been commented upon [Pl.30.a].<sup>327</sup> Is this an area where the craftsman did not remove the burrs from the grooves after the engraving process, or do we have evidence for a second hand? It is noteworthy that these distinctive toolmarks correspond to the more exotic motifs on the shrine, the Borre ring-chain and human masks with a Trehviddle-like floriated cap, and the method of execution does not appear elsewhere on the shrine. However the facial characteristics of the masks: down-turning mouth, lentoid-shaped eyes and wedge-shaped nose, appear on the figure of St Matthew and the ecclesiastic on SSB. Due to the wear present on the high-relief castings it is not possible to ascertain if the lines of the nose extend into the cheeks, as seen on the face mask. Therefore it appears probable that the same craftsman executed all these panels.

Another feature is the lavish use of silver in the construction of the shrine. It is used

---

<sup>327</sup> See Appendix 1.



for the openwork plates on all sides, the cast figurative plaques on the front and short side, and the binding strips. This would be expected in the late Viking age when the use of silver, as arm-rings, large brooches of thistle and penannular type and the abundant hoards of hack silver, was widespread.<sup>328</sup> The decoration on these silver artefacts is restrained, with simple cast or stamped motifs and little embellishment except for gilding, and in some cases settings of glass. The silver openwork sides on the Soisceál exhibit engraved decoration, but in its original state the shrine would have appeared opulent with the intervening spaces filled with a combination of filigree and cast figurative plaques. Silver is used on other pre-Norman reliquaries, but to a much lesser extent, where it is usually present in thin sheets or foils rather than the solid silver present on the Soisceál.<sup>329</sup>

A final consideration regarding the construction is to assess how long it would have taken the craftsman to fabricate the shrine. This is not possible to estimate without recourse to other technical studies of artefacts using known manufacturing methods, tools and materials of the medieval period. In 1991 an elaborate sword-guard, considered to be of Irish manufacture and dating to the late eleventh century, was recovered from Small's Reef, some seven miles off the Welsh coast. A replica was made for display purposes, using, where possible, methods, tools and techniques contemporary with the artefact. The original guard is of hollow cast brass with engraved zoomorphic ornament, inlaid with silver and niello. The replica took 52.75 man hours, approximately one week, to make.<sup>330</sup> An accomplished goldsmith of the eleventh century would have completed these tasks in less time. The detailed study of the Derrynaflan chalice by Ryan has estimated that it was made 'within a year'.<sup>331</sup>

From these two examinations it may be possible to estimate the time taken to construct the Soisceál Molaisse as this is the most complete of the eleventh-century book shrines. The Small Reefs sword-guard is comparable to the Soisceál as the zoomorphic

---

<sup>328</sup> For the most recent discussion on the use of silver in Viking age Ireland see Sheehan (1998) and Ó Floinn (1998a, 153-61).

<sup>329</sup> Silver appears in sheet form on the base plate of the shrine of the Cathach, the reverse and certain panels on the sides of the shrine of the Stowe Missal shrine, and the sides of the Cross of Cong. The front, crest and openwork sides of the shrine of St Patrick's Bell and the openwork zoomorphic plaques on the front of the shrine of the Book of Dimma are fabricated from cast silver [Pls.39,31,33-34,80-81,57].

<sup>330</sup> Craddock 1995, 33-4.

<sup>331</sup> Ryan 1985, 208.

decoration was engraved and not cast, but the engraved ornament on the Soisceál would have been easier to achieve as silver is a softer metal than brass. The sword-guard has the added complexities of silver and niello inlay, but the Soisceál includes labour intensive filigree work. The Derrynaflan chalice bears eighty-four filigree panels but there is no engraved decoration, it is all cast. Bearing in mind that when complete there would have been a more extensive decorative scheme on the Soisceál, such as filigree and cast figurative panels, an approximation of the time taken to complete the shrine by a single craftsman would be between three and five months.

The shrine was refurbished at some time in the late medieval period. This work consists of a second layer of gilding on the front and sides, the replacement escutcheon on SSA, and on the long side the remnants of coarse silver filigree, and the two fragments of gilt silver. The fragments of gilt-silver filigree, also on the long side, may be of fourteenth-to fifteenth-century date as silver filigree is found on a number of late medieval shrines such as the Cathach, Misach and the Stowe Missal. Unfortunately the sole motifs from this phase, the rudimentary hatched diagonal lines on the silver strips, and the shape and decoration of the animal head from the escutcheon, can not be used as dating criteria as they are not specific to any one period, but are probably contemporary with the other additions. To attempt to narrow the date range beyond this is speculative as there is so little of late medieval date remaining on the shrine.

The shrine may have been refurbished at a time when the office of coarb of Devenish was under threat from a number of factions. Ó'Canann has demonstrated that in the second quarter of the fifteenth century the *Céile Dé* community merged with the parish church of Devenish, the title 'comharba of Molaisse' disappeared, the Úí Fhlannagáin family usurped the benefices of Devenish and the bishop of Clogher entered into the local politics of Devenish. As a consequence of these events a poem on the traditional coarbal privileges was composed in order to bolster the ancient rights. This may have been commissioned by the coarb Meadóig Ó Taichligh in the period of his office 1419-27.<sup>332</sup> As the Soisceál is referred to by name in the poem, it would have been an apt time to repair it as it was the chief relic of St Molaisse and may have been used to remedy the ensuing loss of prerogatives against the intrusive factions. These areas require further historical research.

---

<sup>332</sup> O'Canann 1994, 16-17.



Finally, there is historical evidence for the various uses for which the shrine was put to in a social context. The fifteenth-century poem has established that it was used as a battle standard.<sup>333</sup> McKenna related some of the local traditions associated with the shrine and states that it was supposed to have had 'miraculous powers of healing', was used in the 'detection of theft' and became 'a talisman upon which oaths were sworn and solemn obligations entered into'.<sup>334</sup> It was also lent out for a returnable fee of £5, in order to formulate contracts and clear cases. For these purposes it was transported in a leather satchel which was suspended from the neck by means of straps. McKenna has related a specific incident, which occurred in the mid-nineteenth century, of a cattle dealer who had a £10 note stolen from him in a Manorhamilton lodging-house while he was inebriated. The doors of the house were shut (thus denying access to intruders) and the landlord sent for the *Soisceál*, whereupon everyone there cleared themselves on the shrine, including a servant girl. Later that evening she lost her reason and recalled where she had hidden the money.<sup>335</sup> The shrine was employed in the hinterland of Ballaghmeehan, near Rossinver, Co Leitrim, and as far afield as counties Fermanagh, Leitrim and Sligo.<sup>336</sup> Doherty has claimed that Ballaghmeehan may have been a collecting point for the tribute due to Devenish from the kingdom of Bréifne.<sup>337</sup>

From examination of the shrine it can be seen that there is excessive wear on the heads of the symbol of St Matthew on the front and the figure of the ecclesiastic on SSB. Although these figures are higher in relief than the other cast panels on the shrine the wear may be the result of the faithful rubbing these figures when engaged in oath-taking (or other activities associated with the shrine) in the misapprehension that the figures represented St Molaisse. This may be further evidence that the shrine was sealed because if the manuscript was accessible, it, rather than the shrine, would have been the object of attention. However it is very difficult to quantify wear and abrasion on the raised figures,

---

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 22, line 12.

<sup>334</sup> McKenna 1931, 37-8.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-8.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>337</sup> Doherty 1986, 370.

as it may have occurred after the manuscript was lost or stolen.<sup>338</sup>

---

<sup>338</sup> A significant paper by Thunmark-Nylén (1993) has analysed the degrees of wear on 604 Viking box brooches, and, allowing for variations, demonstrated that certain brooches may have been in use for up to 160 years (*ibid.*, 231-33). While there is no direct correlation, the wear on the book shrines and the box brooches, it may be possible in the future to approximate the relative degree of wear, accepting that the shrine would not have been subject to daily use.



## CHAPTER THREE: THE SHRINE OF THE STOWE MISSAL

### HISTORY

The first account of the Stowe Missal was published in 1819 by the Rev. Charles O'Connor, librarian to the Duke of Buckingham. In his appendix to the catalogue of manuscripts in the Stowe Library, O'Connor submitted a description of the shrine of the Stowe Missal and the concomitant inscriptions.<sup>1</sup> His description was flawed, and he rambled on at length on inconsequential details, such as the Druidic powers ascribed to rock crystals. At this stage one long and one short side of the shrine were detached '... the oak ... having yielded to the ravages of time'.<sup>2</sup> O'Connor also published the first known engravings of the shrine; these were appended to the second volume of his *Rerum Hibernicarum Scriptores Veteres*.<sup>3</sup> Certain details of the shrine were misunderstood and others rendered in an idealised manner.

The next phase in the history of the shrine was when the contents of Stowe House were partially dispersed and the manuscripts catalogued for public auction in 1849. However the manuscripts were saved by the intervention of the fourth earl of Ashburnham who purchased the entire collection in the same year. The shrine was later examined at Ashburnham Palace in May 1855 by the then President of the Royal Irish Academy, James Henthorne Todd. In his paper, which was read before the Academy on 23 June 1856, he dealt with the inscriptions present on the shrine, and on the missal contained within.<sup>4</sup> Todd's description of the shrine was all of two lines, he referred the reader back to O'Connor for details.<sup>5</sup>

The Stowe collection of manuscripts was purchased by the state from the fifth earl in 1883. It was divided into two lots; the majority were transferred to the British Museum while the manuscripts pertaining to Ireland, along with the shrine of the Stowe Missal,

---

<sup>1</sup> O'Connor 1819, 28. The manuscript is preserved in the Royal Irish Academy, RIA MS D ii 3. See Kenney (1929, no. 555), and Alexander (1978, no.45) for further references.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> O'Connor 1825, Appendix.

<sup>4</sup> Todd 1859, 3-27.

<sup>5</sup> O'Connor 1819.

were deposited in the Royal Irish Academy in October 1883.<sup>6</sup> The shrine was displayed alongside its accompanying manuscript in the RIA until its transfer to the National Museum of Ireland in June 1929.<sup>7</sup>

In 1925 Thomas O'Rahilly elucidated previous misconceptions associated with the early history of the shrine.<sup>8</sup> All the preceding writers<sup>9</sup> followed O'Conor's account by assuming that the shrine had been discovered in Germany, c.1784, by John Grace of Nenagh, Co Tipperary, who was an officer in the Austrian service under Archduke Francis. O'Rahilly uncovered a reference to 'the book of Ruadhán of Lorrha' in his researches concerning a text of an Irish poem composed by Aindrias MacCruitín in 1735.<sup>10</sup> Other copies of the poem referred to the same book and its shrine in similar terms. These accounts stated, that when discovered, this manuscript could not be deciphered by the Irish scholars of Ormond, so Aindrias MacCruitín was summoned to O'Kennedy's house at Lorrha, where he succeeded in providing a translation of the manuscript. MacCruitín records these facts in the title of the poem, which he composed shortly after his visit in order to commemorate the discovery.<sup>11</sup> O'Rahilly was able to correlate the story of the discovery of the manuscript and shrine from the other five copies of the poem, each providing additional and/or conflicting information. One of the copies refers to an O'Kennedy of Lackeen, in the parish of Lorrha, while another version states that the manuscript was found by O'Kennedy 'built into the walls of an ancient house or castle'. The 'O'Kennedy' was John O'Kennedy, founder of Lackeen Castle, who died in 1766. The castle of Lackeen was rebuilt in the eighteenth century by O'Kennedy, and it was during this time that the manuscript and shrine were discovered, c.1733.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Warner 1915, viii.

<sup>7</sup> Registration numbers 1883:614a; 1929:1315.

<sup>8</sup> Read before the RIA on January 26th 1925 and subsequently published in 1926.

<sup>9</sup> Petrie 1878, 96-8; Warner 1915, vii-viii; Crawford 1923, 153-4.

<sup>10</sup> O'Rahilly 1926, 95-109.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, appendix, 106-9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 104. Lackeen, Abbeville Td. Co Tipperary. A recent guide has been produced on this site, see Sweetman and O'Brien 1999.



Subsequently the manuscript and shrine came into the possession of a Mr Dalton of Grenanstown, near Nenagh. O'Rahilly suggested that Sir Richard Grace, M.P. and bibliophile, acquired the manuscript and shrine from Dalton and presented them to the Marquess of Buckingham. When Charles O'Connor was compiling the catalogue on the Stowe manuscripts he was informed by the Duke that the manuscript and shrine had come from the Grace family and was connected with Nenagh.<sup>13</sup> O'Connor presumed that it was John Grace, and not his brother Richard, and since the former was a captain of carabineers in the Imperial Service in Germany, O'Connor promulgated the mistaken belief that the objects were discovered in Germany. The missal and shrine were probably secreted in the walls of Lackeen castle during the monastic suppressions of the mid-sixteenth century.<sup>14</sup> The subsequent history of the shrine and manuscript has been related above, while the history prior to their secretion in Lackeen castle is dealt with in the inscription section below.

### PREVIOUS ACCOUNTS

Aside from the references cited in the previous section, the next person to examine the shrine was Margaret Stokes and her results were subsequently published in her edition of Petrie's corpus of inscriptions. Although her account of the shrine is terse, she records that the cumdach '... is square in form ... the material of this box is oak, covered with plates of silver'.<sup>15</sup> Westropp included a brief description of the shrine in his guide to the Early Christian antiquities of the NMI.<sup>16</sup>

The most comprehensive study of the shrine and missal to date was published in two volumes by Sir George F. Warner, for the Henry Bradshaw Society.<sup>17</sup> The first volume consisted of a facsimile of the manuscript, while the second consisted of a

---

<sup>13</sup> Warner has deduced (1915, vii) that the Missal and shrine were probably acquired in 1818/9 as the descriptions did not appear in O'Connor's catalogue of 1818 but were included in the appendix of 1819.

<sup>14</sup> O' Rahilly, 101-102.

<sup>15</sup> Petrie 1878, 96-8. An abbreviated version of this account was subsequently published in Stokes (1887, 75-8).

<sup>16</sup> Westropp 1911, 9-10.

<sup>17</sup> Warner 1906, 1915.

commentary on the missal along with a comprehensive description, a study of the inscriptions, and the first known photographic reproductions of the entire shrine.<sup>18</sup> In 1923 Crawford included a brief, but incorrect description of the shrine in his list of Irish shrines and reliquaries.<sup>19</sup> Kenney contributed an extensive bibliography on the manuscript and perceptively suggested that the manuscript and shrine probably never left the territory of east Munster, contrary to what other writers had said.<sup>20</sup> Adolf Mahr provided a brief description and photographs of the shrine.<sup>21</sup> Subsequent descriptions of the cumdach have been published by Joseph Raftery, who was disparaging about the ornament on the sides and did not incorporate O'Rahilly's research on the shrine's history.<sup>22</sup> Macalister dealt with the shrine's inscriptions in his corpus, while Aubrey Gwynn provided a brief history of the monastic site of Lorrha and summarised O'Rahilly's account of the discovery of the shrine.<sup>23</sup> F.J. Byrne published a little known but useful account of the history of the shrine and manuscript.<sup>24</sup> Henry and Lucas's accounts were brief and Mitchell's catalogue entry was inaccurate in some of the details.<sup>25</sup> Ragnall Ó Floinn provided an expanded catalogue entry with a reliable reading of the inscriptions, although he slightly extended the dating bracket for the eleventh-century phase.<sup>26</sup> Pádraig Ó Riain's and Micheli's recent research on the redating of the shrine will be dealt with in the inscription section below.

---

<sup>18</sup> Warner 1915, xlv-lviii.

<sup>19</sup> Crawford 1923, 153-154.

<sup>20</sup> Kenney 1929, no. 555, 693-4.

<sup>21</sup> Mahr 1939, 18, pls. 18:1,2.

<sup>22</sup> 1941, 154-5. However, in a later publication (1980, no.58) he described the side panels as 'delightful', where he also suggested a date of about 1023.

<sup>23</sup> Macalister 1949, no. 932; Gwynn 1962, 47-50.

<sup>24</sup> Byrne 1967, 38-50.

<sup>25</sup> Henry 1970, 82-83; Lucas 1973a, 128-30; Mitchell 1977, no. 58, 184-5.

<sup>26</sup> Ó Floinn 1983, no. 76.



## THE INSCRIPTIONS [Pls.31,37]

In this section the inscription on the edges of the detached base will be described and commented on, followed by the mutilated inscriptions on the cross arms and finally the late medieval inscriptions on the front of the shrine.

The Irish inscription along the edges of the base commence at the top left corner and reads in a clockwise direction, terminating at the top left beneath the square panel of knotwork. The large script, which Micheli describes as 'a conscious display of virtuosity', is clear and well executed.<sup>27</sup> A distinguishing palaeographical feature of this inscription is the presence of a number of *punctus* which are used to indicate the spaces between separate words. On the inscription they are formed by triangular or lentoid-shaped punch marks. They are represented below by a colon (:). This account modifies slightly the reading provided by Ó'Floinn.<sup>28</sup>

BENDACHT:DE AR CECH ANMAIN AS A HARILLIUTH:

+OCUS:DO MACCRAITH:HU DONDCHADA:DO RIG CASSIL:

OR DO DONDCHAD:MACC BRIAIN:DO RIG HEREND

+ OR DO DUNDCHAD:HU TACCAIN DO MUINTIR:CLUANA:DORIGNI

which translates as:

The blessing of God on every soul according to its deserts  
And for Mac Craith Ua Donnchadh, King of Cashel  
A prayer for Donnchadh Mac Briain, the King of Ireland  
A prayer for Donnchadh Ua Taccain of the Community of Cluain who made (the shrine).

Charles O'Conor was the first person to attempt to decipher the inscriptions, but his efforts were described by Todd as 'full of inaccuracies' as O'Conor had presumed that the inscriptions on the detached base and front were contemporary.<sup>29</sup> By referring to the annals for obits of the kings named in the inscriptions, Todd provided a chronology for the

---

<sup>27</sup> Micheli 1996, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Ó'Floinn 1983, 163-165.

<sup>29</sup> O'Conor 1819, appendix; Todd 1856, 3.

shrine. Donnchadh Mac Briain, son of Brian Boru, was king of Ireland from 1023-64<sup>30</sup> and Mac Craith Ua Donnchadh, king of Cashel, died in 1052.<sup>31</sup> This limited the dates for the construction of the shrine to between 1023-1052.<sup>32</sup> Margaret Stokes and Warner followed Todd's readings of the legible portions, but refrained from reconstructing the mutilated inscriptions on the cross arms.<sup>33</sup>

Thomas O'Rahilly, in his seminal paper on the history of the Shrine, challenged and revised these dates. He reasoned that rather than obtaining kingship in 1023, Mac Raith Ua Donnchada did not actually obtain power until after the death of his first cousin, Carthach, king of Cashel, in 1045, with whom he was at war.<sup>34</sup> This evidence, therefore, further constricted the dates for the manufacture of the shrine to between 1045-1052. J.F. Kenney independently came to the same conclusion.<sup>35</sup> These dates were accepted by subsequent commentators on the shrine, although Raftery ignored, or was unaware of, these revised dates and cited the 1023-52 date.<sup>36</sup> Macalister and Ó Floinn were more circumspect, relying on a slightly broader range of 1042-1052.<sup>37</sup>

All of the above authors (except for Todd who almost succeeded in identifying one of the persons) failed, or did not attempt to restore the damaged inscriptions on the cross arms. Margaret Stoke's conviction that '...it was not only impossible to identify them, but very difficult even to guess what they might have been...' may have influenced later opinions on the inscriptions.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> AFM.

<sup>31</sup> AFM.

<sup>32</sup> Todd 1856, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Petrie 1878, 94-95; Warner 1915, xlvi-xlvi.

<sup>34</sup> O'Rahilly 1926, 96-97.

<sup>35</sup> Kenney 1929, 694.

<sup>36</sup> Raftery 1941, 155. However in a later publication (1980, no.58) he proposed a date of 1023.

<sup>37</sup> Macalister 1949, 104-107; Ó Floinn 1983, 164.

<sup>38</sup> Petrie 1878, 95.



In a recent paper, Professor Pádraig Ó Riain has elucidated and further developed the political history of the protagonists named on the edges of the base, and also successfully restored the mutilated inscriptions on the cross arms.<sup>39</sup> This has provided a more confined range of dates for the construction of the shrine. The remainder of this section follows Ó Riain's pivotal paper.

Ó Riain has argued that O'Rahilly's assertion<sup>40</sup> that Mac Raith attained the kingship of Cashel is erroneous. There were no recognised 'kings of Ireland' in the period between 1014 and 1072 when Brian Bóruma's grandson, Tairdelbach, was offered the high kingship. The only instance in which Donnchad Mac Brian came close to attaining high kingship, during his reign 1014-64, was in 1025 when he extracted hostages in the midlands and had Patrick's successor at Armagh visit him in Kincora. Mac Raith was also in contention for the title of king during the period of conflict with Donnchadh in Ossory in 1027.<sup>41</sup> The kingship of Cashel had become vacant in 1025 with the death of Dúngal Ua Donnchada, who was from the same family as Mac Raith. Therefore, the protagonists were both involved in power struggles to try and attain kingship in the period after 1025. It therefore made good political sense for the commissioner of the shrine to be generous both to Donnchadh and Mac Raith and bestow the titles they were in contention for on the inscription on the shrine.

When the shrine was refurbished in the fourteenth century the metalworker, Domhnall Ó Tolari, cut away the central section of the cross so as to accommodate a large quatrefoil-shaped setting. In doing so he also removed a significant portion of the inscriptions which were present on the cross arms. The legible portions<sup>42</sup> of the inscriptions on the vertical arm are as follows:

+ ORDO[      ]MAIN:H

---

<sup>39</sup> Read 25 June 1991, published 20 December 1991. An abridged version of this paper was also published, see (Ó Riain 1991a).

<sup>40</sup> O'Rahilly 1926, 97.

<sup>41</sup> See Ó Riain (1991b, 287-8) for the annalistic references.

<sup>42</sup> Ó Riain (1991b, 288) has included the letters *h* of *cath* and *n* of *ndernad* in the second line of the inscription although they are not fully visible. As the right-hand shaft of *h* and the left-hand shaft of *n* have been cut away they are not incorporated below.

The first name ends in *Main* and, according to Ó Riain, by referring to names recorded in the annals and genealogical lists, the only plausible full form of the name is that of *Mathgamain*.<sup>43</sup> This restoration also implies that six to seven letters were lost when the late medieval setting was inserted. Also, by following the grammatical and epigraphical rules, *dernad* on the second line must have been preceded by *Las* or *Lasan*. This infers that the second name *Cath* can have lost, at most, three letters. Therefore the only solution in this instance is *Cathail*, genitive of *Cathal*. The restored inscription can thus be read as:

+OR DO [MATHGA]MAIN:H  
U CAT[HAIL LASA N]DERNA<sup>D</sup>

'A prayer for Mathgamain grandson of Cathal at whose behest (the shrine) was made'.

The only documentary reference to Mathgamain, grandson of Cathal, is found in the Annals of Inisfallen for the year 1037:

Cu Chaille son of Ceinneitig, king of Muscraige, with his son, was slain in front of the stone church of Lorrha after he had been forcibly taken from the altar; and Mathgamain grandson of Cathal was slain on that same night.

Ó Riain has reasoned that Mathgamain was the abbot of Lorrha as the formula *lasa ndernad* (at whose behest) usually accompanies the name of the local abbot or prior on other inscribed shrines.<sup>44</sup> The other four names on the shrine belong to the three kings and the metalworker. It would have been highly unusual to omit the name of the abbot from the inscription.<sup>45</sup> The legible portions<sup>46</sup> of the inscription on the transverse arm are

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 289, n.37.

<sup>44</sup> Ó Floinn (1989b, 61) has used the same reasoning of order of hierarchy to restore a portion of the damaged inscription on the Soisceál Molaisse.

<sup>45</sup> For further references see Ó Riain 1991a, 290-291.

<sup>46</sup> Ó Riain (1991b, 291) has included the letter *d* of *hud* although part of the curved spine is missing, making it resemble *t*. It is not incorporated below.



as follows:

+OC[     ]IND  
HU[     ]LAIG:

The first two letters are a portion of the regular formula for inscriptions: *ocus do* which translates as 'and for'.<sup>47</sup> Therefore space remains for only one further letter. As there is a small right-angled portion of a letter visible, a *C* or *F* before the *I* in the first line, the name has to be *Find*, since there is no such name as *Cind*. For the name beginning with *D* and ending in *Laig* (genitive form), the annalistic indices and pedigrees provide only two candidates: *Donngalach* and *Dúngalach* (nominative form ending in *lach*), therefore allowing space for either four or five letters. The former is the correct version, allowing space for five letters. The restored reading of both lines is therefore:

+OC[US DO F]IND  
HU [DUNGA]LAIG

'and (a prayer) for Find Ua Dungalaig '

The obituary notice for Find Ua Dungalaig can be found in the AFM for 1033 where he is described as 'lord of Muscraige'.<sup>48</sup>

In the above restorations there are four to five letters lost in each line of the transverse inscription and six or seven in the vertical inscription. This would still have left space for a small central setting, which was probably removed in the late medieval period to accommodate the present quatrefoil shaped mounting [Fig.17.c].

From the above information, the previous accepted dates of 1045-52 now have to be revised. The latest possible date for the construction of the shrine is 1033, the death of Find Ua Dungalaig; Mathgamain died in 1037. For an earlier date we must refer back to

---

<sup>47</sup> For further examples of this formula see Ó Riain 1991b, 292, n.57.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 292-3 for further references concerning the career of Find.

the first two kings named on the shrine: Donnchad son of Brian Bóruma and Mac Raith Ua Donnchada. In 1026, both were rivals involved in a power struggle. Donnchad, as leader of the Dál Cais, was a claimant to the high kingship, and Mac Raith of the Eoganacht of Cashel, was trying to accede to the kingship of Cashel. Lorrha was positioned in close proximity to the territories of both claimants and, therefore, it would have been politically expedient for the church to have kept its loyalties neutral until one of the rulers prevailed. For this reason both kings were named in the inscriptions on the shrine; the positioning of the names on the arms of the cross, rather than on the subordinate borders, would have determined their status. Therefore the revised dates for the construction of the shrine now stand as 1026-33. Ó Riain prefers a date soon after 1026.<sup>49</sup> Micheli has also revised the dating of the shrine, independent of Ó Riain's researches, but has called into question Mathgamain's status.<sup>50</sup> She contends that he may have been the king of Loch Lein and not an abbot, and that it was only during 1033, before the death of Find, that the shrine was made.<sup>51</sup> Her arguments have not yet been subjected to critical analysis.

The other person referred to on the inscription on the shrine is the craftsman, Donnchadh Ua Taccáin. While there is no direct reference to Donnchadh in the annals or pedigrees, Ó Floinn has noted annalistic references for two O'Taccáin priests who were attached to Clonmacnoise.<sup>52</sup>

The later medieval inscriptions on the front of the shrine are more straightforward. The inscription commences on the top left corner and reads clockwise around the edges. These are also in Irish, and the following is the reading published by Ó Floinn.<sup>53</sup> The inscription is interrupted at intervals by the settings and these are represented by an asterisk within a curved bracket (\*).

---

<sup>49</sup> Ó Riain 1991b, 295.

<sup>50</sup> Micheli 1996, 16-18.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> AFM 996, 1168; Ó Floinn 1995a, 257. Other aspects of the links between the Uí Tadgáin and Clonmacnoise will be dealt with in the discussion section (pp.205-7).

<sup>53</sup> Ó Floinn 1983, 165.



+OR DO PLIB DO RIG: URMU[MAND]...  
 ...[C]UMDAIGED:IN MIN(\*)DSA: 7 DO AINI:DO M  
 NAI+DOMHNALL:O TO(\*)LARI:DO CORIG:MISI  
 + OR:DO GILLA RU(\*)DAN:U MACAN:  
 DON COMARBA LA(\*)SAR CUMDAIGED

A prayer for Pilib, King of Ormond...  
 ... (who) covered this shrine and for Aine his wife  
 Domhnall Ua Tolari arranged me  
 A prayer for Giolla Ruadhan Ua Macain the successor by whom this was  
 enshrined.

The bottom plate has an inscription in Lombardic characters which has not yet been satisfactorily deciphered.

+OR:AE(\*)  
 C:HUCEI(\*)

O'Rahilly has argued that HU CEI can be translated as *O'Kenn*.<sup>54</sup>

Pilib Ua Cennetig (O'Kennedy) became King of Ormond in 1371, and his death, along with his wife, Aine, is recorded in the annals for 1381.<sup>55</sup> Giolla Ruadháin Ó Macáin was the abbot of the Augustinian priory of Lorrha who commissioned a manuscript primarily devoted to genealogies.<sup>56</sup> There is no historical information concerning the craftsman, Domhnall O'Tolari. From the above information, therefore, these additions to the shrine may be dated to between 1371 and 1381.

With the benefit of Ó Riain's restoration of the damaged inscriptions, it is now possible to supply the remaining lacuna in the history of the shrine. The identification of Mathgamain as abbot of Lorrha, who commissioned the shrine, places the shrine firmly at Lorrha in the second quarter of the eleventh century. The fourteenth century inscription

---

<sup>54</sup> O'Rahilly 1925, 97, n.4.

<sup>55</sup> AFM.

<sup>56</sup> Ó Riain 1991b, 288.

also refers to an abbot of Lorrha, Giolla Ruadháin Ó Macáin, so the shrine was still present in the monastery at this period. Thomas O'Rahilly has related the history of the shrine from c.1730 until the present day, and has provided convincing evidence that the shrine was secreted in Lackeen Castle during the mid-sixteenth century suppression of the monastery.<sup>57</sup> *It would be highly unusual if the shrine was not kept at Lorrha between 1381 and the mid-sixteenth century, therefore providing us with a near complete record of the shrine's existence.* The missal has been dated to the period 828-833, and recent palaeographic research has detected a local 'North Tipperary' style of writing which may indicate that it was written at Lorrha.<sup>58</sup>

## **ICONOGRAPHY**

### **Short Sides A and B [Pls. 33, 35; Fig.7]**

The medallions depicting an angel placed between paired beasts is a variant of a common theme in early medieval Insular art. This theme has been interpreted as 'Daniel in the Lions' Den', 'Christ between two living things' or 'Jonah and the Whale'.<sup>59</sup> At this stage it is worth commenting on some of the more unusual aspects of the iconography of these mounts.

Human forms placed between paired beasts are commonplace in Insular metalwork and sculpture but the Stowe medallions are the sole example of angels, rather than male figures, in this posture. An example of the latter is depicted on the crest of an unlocalised bell shrine from the Killua Castle Collection, the front of which shows a bearded *Orant* figure with upraised arms, placed between two serpent-like beasts with gaping jaws [Pl.82.b].<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, the lower edge of the shrine is missing where the tunic and feet may have been positioned. The garment may have followed the curve of the flanking medallions and so curved outwards like wings. If wings were intended, the incised lines and triangular fields may have been intended to represent wing feathers. There may have

---

<sup>57</sup> O'Rahilly 1926, 101-6.

<sup>58</sup> See Ó Riain (1991b, 295, n.78) and pp.213-14 below.

<sup>59</sup> A detailed discussion of the iconography of these medallions is presented, as well as references, in the section dealing with panel 2 of LSA, see below pp.171-74.

<sup>60</sup> Ryan 1989, no.137.



been space for centrally placed feet, similar to the design of the small angel on panel 3, LSB. This example, then, would present a precursor for the Stowe angels. In contrast there are salient features present on the Killua figure which are not found on the angels, namely the beard, cowl and the *Orans* attitude. On balance it is more likely that the figure on the bell shrine represents 'Christ between two living things' or 'Daniel in the Lions' Den' rather than an angel.

Brooch-pins also depict human figures between beasts, but always in the form of disembodied heads. Another related example in gold filigree is found on the girdle band of the Derrynaflan Chalice.<sup>61</sup> Two bearded disembodied human masks are placed alongside two beast and two bird heads. The human masks are placed at the ends of the panel with their crowns touching the frame while the two beast heads (one inverted) grasp the chins with splayed jaws. The smaller bird-heads act as space fillers.

Paradoxically the closest parallel for the Stowe angels, in iconography as well as style, are the furthest removed in time and distance. On the gold and cloisonné enamel purse-lid from the renowned boat burial at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, England, dated c.625 AD, there are two plaques depicting a male figure with legs splayed, placed between two dog-like beasts [Pl.88.b].<sup>62</sup> The relative proportions and stance of the beasts strongly resemble the beasts on the Stowe medallions, except that they do not form a circular composition. It is difficult to assess the exact attire of the moustached figure. The notched band which encircles the waist is most likely a belt/girdle, and the vertical strip placed between the legs may represent a crotch band. There appears to be a garment with a high-necked collar worn on the upper torso. The two beasts have their forepaws placed upon the figure's shoulders with their hindlegs positioned behind and between the figure's splayed legs, with their tails curling in front of his feet. Each beast touches the side of the figure's head with their gaping jaws. Other apparent features include a large circular eye and reclining ears placed behind the head. As with the Stowe beasts, each Sutton Hoo animal has a beaded collar around the neck.

Bruce-Mitford has described these plaques as 'man-between-beasts', and has drawn

---

<sup>61</sup> Ryan 1993, 159, fig.18.2.

<sup>62</sup> Bruce-Mitford 1978, 522.

prototypes and parallels from the Swedish Vendel period.<sup>63</sup> However he did not provide a detailed discussion of the theme and its possible Christian connotations, although other artefacts in the Sutton Hoo ship burial, such as the Late Antique silver spoons and bowls, display Christian symbols. Rather than a pagan theme, it is possible that a rendition of the Biblical episode 'Daniel in the Lion's Den' or 'Christ between two living things' is shown. Depictions of these scenes are found in all media from the continent during the Merovingian and Frankish periods.<sup>64</sup> Ryan has discussed the origin and iconography of the motif which has been traced to Germanic and ultimately Classical sources, notably Oceanus between paired dolphins.<sup>65</sup> The multivalent iconography associated with the Stowe panel will be discussed along with panel 2, LSA in the section below.

A noticeable feature of the figure on the Sutton Hoo purse lid is the position and gesture of the hands. His arms are bent upwards at the elbow with the forearms and hands placed in front of the chest. The thumbs face outwards and the fingers are splayed as if he is grasping his shoulders. Is this an *orans* pose? Usually the forearms are held upwards, parallel to, or in front of the chest with the palms of the hands facing outwards. Due to the size, composition of the scene, or technical constraints imposed by the size of the garnets, the hands were incorporated into the body of the figure. Another possibility is that the goldsmith did not fully comprehend the model he was drawing upon.

The closest comparison, however, is the purse mount from Sutton Hoo, England.<sup>66</sup> This exhibits three figures (a man and two beasts) in a similar composition to the Stowe medallion, as well as sharing some of the details, for example, the beaded collar on the neck of the beasts [Pl.88.b]. It is not proposed that there is a direct link between the Stowe and Sutton Hoo mounts, but from the style, composition and iconography there is a strong possibility that the Stowe medallions are based on an earlier exemplar, or drew upon a model similar to the Sutton Hoo plaques. Merovingian or Frankish belt buckles

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 521-2.

<sup>64</sup> Peter Lasko (1971, 81-89, pls. 74-78) has illustrated Frankish examples of 'Daniel in the Lions' Den' in metalwork, ceramics and sculpture. He has postulated that it originates from the episode of St Menas between his camels, as depicted on Pilgrims' flasks.

<sup>65</sup> Ryan 1993, 159.

<sup>66</sup> Bruce-Mitford 1978, 522; Previously cited in the iconography section, see pp.167-8 above.



portraying 'Daniel in the Lions' Den' may have been one such source.<sup>67</sup> Another possible origin for the Stowe medallions may have been early Christian ampullae and pilgrims flasks, as both of these types were circular in form and displayed scenes of Christian iconography such as the crucifixion.<sup>68</sup>

In Irish early medieval sculpture scenes of a human figure between two beasts are commonplace. Helen Roe has identified them as the Old Testament subject of 'Daniel in the Lions' Den'.<sup>69</sup> Harbison has classified the subject into five separate variants, depending on the number and stance of the lions.<sup>70</sup> Harbison's type C, Daniel between two vertical lions, which is closest in composition to the Stowe medallions, is found on four high crosses: Arboe, east face; Killary, east face; Monasterboice 'Tall Cross', north face and the Oldcourt base, east face.<sup>71</sup> A further example, although the stone is so weathered that Harbison is tentative in his identification, is found on the east face of the composite cross in Armagh Cathedral.<sup>72</sup>

Another feature found on the medallion angels is the rectangular setting centrally placed on the chest. On SSA there is a red stone setting; the stone is missing from the setting of SSB, but the cell is bordered by silver wire. In both examples incised lines run from the shoulders to the setting and these probably represent straps. The settings may represent one of three items: a book shrine, portable reliquary or a satchel. On balance it is more likely to be a book shrine or portable reliquary as satchels are usually depicted worn sideways on the shoulders.<sup>73</sup> If these objects are taken to be book shrines, then three ecclesiastical insignia are depicted on this shrine: the bell and crosier on panel 3, LSB, and the book shrine on the medallions on the short sides. As noted the bell would originally

---

<sup>67</sup> It has been suggested that the large buckle on the Moylough belt-shrine may have copied an elaborate Frankish reliquary buckle (Ryan 1989, no.47).

<sup>68</sup> For example see Roe 1965, figs. 5:1, 7:2; Lasko 1971, pl.79.

<sup>69</sup> Roe 1945, 2-8; Daniel VI, 16-23.

<sup>70</sup> Harbison 1992, 227-229.

<sup>71</sup> Harbison 1992 no.8, figs.31, 373; no.47, fig.414; no.175, figs.497, 764; no.187, fig.528; O'hEailidhe 1987, 107.

<sup>72</sup> Harbison 1992, no.11, fig.45.

<sup>73</sup> For a discussion on this aspect of satchels, see pp.58-62, Chapter 1.

have been highlighted by the inclusion of an enamel or glass inlay, which is now missing, in order to harmonise with the other coloured settings.

The iconographical significance of a book shrine as an attribute of an angel has not yet been resolved.<sup>74</sup> Perhaps the angels should be seen as apotropaic guardians of the sacred contents of the shrine (the gospel of St John, the liturgy of the Mass) keeping the flanking beasts who represent malevolent forces, at bay with their outstretched wings. A copper alloy figure of an angel from Rise farm, Oppdal, Norway, has a rectangular object, described as a book, on its chest [Pl. 19.b].<sup>75</sup> Although the figure has suffered extensive wear there appear to be straps suspending the reliquary from the neck. As this angel is shown with a sword, and may thus be described as one of the cherubim who guarded the gates of Paradise,<sup>76</sup> it would have had an apotropaic function, as posited above for the Stowe angels.

#### Long Side A [Pls. 34.a, 36.a; Fig. 8].

**Panel 1:** Also included in this section is the similar foliate panel from LSB. Both these panels represent a tree or bush, rather than meandering branches and shoots. The central stem and side shoots are prominent in the design, therefore a tree, rather than a vine-scroll, which would have conspicuous berries, fruit or buds, is represented. It is not possible to know whether there is any iconographical significance to this panel, or if it was used simply as a decorative device alternating between figurative and geometrical motifs.

A specific iconographic interpretation may be the 'Tree of Life'. This rose from Golgotha, the centre of the world, where Adam lived, died and was buried, and where Christ was crucified. The legend of the True Cross describes the use of the wood of the 'Tree of Life' for the Crucifixion cross. The Tree was therefore seen to be prefiguring the Cross on which the fate of mankind was to be determined, and was to carry the second

---

<sup>74</sup> There are depictions of angels with books on Insular manuscripts and Irish high crosses: the flanking angels on the ascension scene on the west face of the capstone of Muiredach's Cross appear to hold books and at Duleek a frontal winged figure is shown holding a book on the north side of the cross shaft (Harbison 1992, nos. 174, 87; figs. 915, 244). For the examples in the Book of Kells see Meehan (1994, 34, pls. 31-33, 36).

<sup>75</sup> Youngs 1989, no. 134. This figure is discussed at greater length as a possible stylistic parallel for panel 2, LSA. See pp. 188-89 below and Chapter 1, pp. 57-62 for further depictions of book shrines.

<sup>76</sup> Genesis 3:24.



Adam predestined to die on the same day and hour in the same place.<sup>77</sup> The cult of the True Cross originated when Helen, the mother of Constantine the Great, was said to have uncovered Christ's cross on the Hill of Golgotha. This was replaced, c.440, by Theodosius II, with a jewel-encrusted cross, which led to the adoration and veneration of the cross. The cross then became a symbol for the figure of the exalted Christ, and for Christ on the cross as victor over the power of death.<sup>78</sup>

**Panel 2:** The design of this panel, a standing figure between four beasts, would appear to represent 'Daniel in the Lion's Den', a common theme on the iconographical programmes of Irish high crosses. Warner, in his detailed description of the shrine, identified this scene as 'probably a debased representation of "Daniel in the Lions' Den"'.<sup>79</sup> Daniel is shown surrounded by four beasts, two on either side, on the following high crosses: Ahenny south, east face of base; Kells Market Cross, centre of head; Castledermot North, west face; Castledermot South, west face; Clones South, east face panel 3 and centre of head; Drumcliffe, east face; Drumcliffe, upper portion of shaft housed in the NMI; Galloon West cross, east face; Galloon head fragment, east face.<sup>80</sup> Henry has shown that the 'Help of God' cycle of prayers were prominent in the Irish liturgy c.800, and also provided a partial iconographical programme for Irish high crosses.<sup>81</sup> These prayers invoke episodes of the Old Testament in which divine intercession saved the faithful from impending doom and include, for example, 'Noah's Ark', 'Jonah and the Whale', 'The Sacrifice of Isaac', 'The Three Children in the Fiery Furnace' and 'Daniel in the Lions' Den'. These same favours were sought by the early Christian Irish in their hour of need, and thus the crosses were considered a suitable medium on which to display these themes, as well as providing a didactic function.

---

<sup>77</sup> See Werner (1990a, 100, n.18; 1990b, 180-82, n.22) for additional commentary and references to the iconography and legend of the 'Tree of Life'. Richardson (1995, 178-80) has commented briefly on the legends of the 'Crux Gemmata' on the same site.

<sup>78</sup> Schiller 1972, 7-9.

<sup>79</sup> Warner 1915, lii.

<sup>80</sup> Harbison 1992, no.7, fig.22; no.126, figs.337, 771; no.36, fig.103; no.37, figs.109, 765; no.48, fig.126; no.80, figs.219, 937; no.81, fig.226; no.108, fig.294; no.109, fig.298.

<sup>81</sup> Henry 1967, 142-5.

Ó Carragáin has argued for a more complex and subtle interpretation of these scenes on the Irish high crosses and maintains that both prayers and crosses invoked the traditions of scriptural typology.<sup>82</sup> Multivalent expressions of iconographical themes have also been explored in depth by Jennifer O'Reilly, who, for example, has discussed the various interpretations that may be elicited from the 'Arrest' miniature (f.114<sup>r</sup>) in the Book of Kells.<sup>83</sup> However the Book of Kells has additional complexities of textual relationships with which to supplement the visual iconography.

On this panel, however, an unusual feature is that 'Daniel' is shown with a beard and is holding a sword across his upper thighs. As far as can be ascertained Daniel is usually depicted unarmed and clean-shaven. Therefore the introduction of the sword would negate the need for God's intervention as 'Daniel' would not be an innocent victim. Thus the identification of the male figure as 'Daniel' is theologically suspect. Lucas has provided alternative meanings that may be attributed to a standing figure flanked by two animals, as found depicted in various media over a long period of time and space.<sup>84</sup> This secondary, but not necessarily alternative explanation, is drawn from the Greek Septuagint version of verse 3:2 in the Old Testament Book of Habakkuk: 'In the middle of two living things you will make yourself known; when the years draw near you will be recognised; when the time comes you will appear'. This biblical episode could be taken as a typological portent for the second coming of Christ.<sup>85</sup> Lucas has further expounded on St Jerome's commentaries on this verse, and on the additional meanings that may be derived, for example, that the 'Two Living Things' signify the Old and New Testaments.<sup>86</sup> Ó Carragáin has also considered this issue and has examined the liturgical uses of the Canticle of Habakkuk and its role in providing multivalent symbolism.<sup>87</sup> To St Jerome, the most profound possible interpretation of the phrase *in medio duorum animalium*

---

<sup>82</sup> Ó Carragáin 1987, 119-120. He has also employed multivalence themes for interpreting the iconography of the Monasterboice high crosses (1994, 430).

<sup>83</sup> O'Reilly 1994, *passim*)

<sup>84</sup> Lucas 1987, 96.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ó Carragáin 1994, 422-23.



*innotesceris* ('you will be known in the midst of two animals') is the Trinity, in which the Father is made known through the Son and the Holy Spirit. Bede also commentated on the Canticle, and related it to two moments in Christ's life: the Transfiguration, in which Christ was made known between Moses and Elijah, and the Crucifixion in which he was revealed between the two thieves.<sup>88</sup> Therefore from both Jerome's and Bede's commentaries the flanking *animalia* could, for a monastic audience, convey a variety of human, animal, inanimate, abstract or angelic forms.<sup>89</sup>

Shirley Alexander has explored the Daniel themes on Irish high crosses in detail, employing biblical exegesis to resolve some of the peculiar iconography.<sup>90</sup> For the examples at Clones and Kells Market cross she has noted that Daniel is surrounded by representations of David, the sacrifice of Isaac, and the man between masked figures. Since the west side of Kells depicts the Crucifixion, 'Daniel on the east side may be interpreted as the prefiguration of the Crucifixion, or as the prophet of the Second Coming, or of the Resurrection'.<sup>91</sup> Therefore Daniel seen in the crucifixion pose suggests the prophet as the prefiguration of the Incarnation, the Passion, the triumph of Christ, and of the Resurrection.<sup>92</sup>

There remains one other iconographic possibility for this panel. Helen Roe identified many scenes from early Christian Irish art as episodes from the David cycle: 'The anointing of David', 'David kills the Lion', 'David and Goliath', 'David as Harpist', 'David Dancing' and 'David as Warrior/ King'.<sup>93</sup> This last David scene will be examined in greater detail to try and elucidate the above panel. Two scenes of a standing /seated warrior placed between two beasts are found on the high cross at Durrow (south face) and

---

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., n.72.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 423.

<sup>90</sup> Alexander, S. 1997, 99-114.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>93</sup> Roe 1949, 52-4. In a later publication Roe (1981, 60) attributed regal connotations to the 'David as Warrior' scenes and was thus described as 'David Rex'. Harbison (1992, 210-222) has since expanded the number of 'David' scenes to twelve.

the west cross at Monasterboice.<sup>94</sup> Both figures are bearded, wear long tunics and hold circular shields; the Monasterboice figure has a bird perched on his shield while the Durrow figure grasps a sword and spear. The flanking beasts are placed waist-high with their limbs facing outwards. Roe has interpreted the beasts as derivations of lion supports found on Late Antique thrones as depicted on consular diptychs.<sup>95</sup> These diptychs in turn influenced later author portraits found as front pieces to psalters and luxury bibles. The artist involved may have misunderstood the lion supports and rendered them as fully fledged beasts on either side of the central figure. Harbison has identified these figures as 'David as King' and interpreted the flanking animals as David's sheep.<sup>96</sup> The figure in the Stowe panel has the animals at waist height, but there are other inconsistencies: the figure is semi-naked with no shield, there are four animals (definitely not sheep) instead of two and the limbs of the animals are facing inwards rather than outwards. The two upper animals may have been incorporated as space-fillers.

What is depicted in the Stowe panel might be a conflation of differing iconographic themes: 'Daniel in the Lions' Den / David surrounded by four dogs / David as Warrior', or else a model consciously introduced to act as a multivalent form.<sup>97</sup> While these might be interpreted in religious terms, the lack of sufficient identifying iconographic features indicate that the panel may be no more than ornamental. Unfortunately some of the missing panels from the sides of the shrine might have presented other scenes to help clarify the iconography of this and other panels on the shrine.

**Panel 3:** This abstract geometrical pattern would not have any direct iconographical significance but the deliberate use of both negative and positive cruciform shapes would imply some form of apotropaicism. The multiplicity of cross forms, where they are used as a form of abstract decoration, was masterfully appraised by the late Robert

---

<sup>94</sup> Roe 1949, fig.9; 1981, 60, pl.1; Harbison 1992, no.175; fig.746.

<sup>95</sup> Roe 1949, 52-4; Gough 1973, pls. 110-111.

<sup>96</sup> Harbison 1992, 222, figs.250, 746.

<sup>97</sup> In this regard Isabel Henderson has proposed that the lion in the 'David fighting the Lion' scene on the ninth-century St Andrew's sarcophagus, may have been derived from an earlier Daniel model transmitted in Pictland (1986, 109). In this episode David is shown with a short sword strapped to his thigh.



Stevenson.<sup>98</sup> He provided examples of negative cross-types and their pervasiveness in all media (manuscript illumination, textiles, mosaics, wood-carving, sculpture, architecture and metalwork) from the early Christian period to the Renaissance and commented on their apotropaic function.<sup>99</sup>

**Panel 4:** No specific iconographic connotations can be attributed to this single figure of an armed warrior, but it may have secular implications of kingship and power. If an attempt is made to try and posit a 'David' cycle as part of the iconographical programme of the shrine, then this figure might, tentatively, be interpreted as Goliath. However Roe has shown, Goliath is usually depicted with imposing armour whereas this warrior appears to be naked, although he does hold one of Goliath's attributes, a long spear.<sup>100</sup>

Isabel Henderson has convincingly teased out the various aspects of the David iconography present on the ninth-century St Andrew's sarcophagus.<sup>101</sup> Included on the monument is a scene of 'David as Warrior' in which the protagonist, who is in pursuit of two animals, is armed with a spear and rectangular shield.<sup>102</sup> The proportions, high relief modelling and clothing of the figure would appear to suggest an Early Christian prototype. The Stowe panel depicting the armed warrior/hunter may represent an isolated scene from a unified David cycle.

A more viable alternative may be that this figure is part of a hunting or battle scene enacted as a narrative cycle along the sides of the shrine. The orientation of the panels would support this view, as the armed warrior with his spear projecting outside the frame may have been intended to be seen to progress to the next hunting scene, the stag and hounds in panel 1, LSB. This latter panel displays an intrusive spear on the edge of the frame, which is possibly meant to represent the weapon carried by the warrior in the

---

<sup>98</sup> Stevenson 1981-2, *passim*.

<sup>99</sup> See Chapter 1, pp.43-45, where the apotropaic function of carpet pages is discussed, and Chapter 6, pp.349-53, where the origin and function of openwork plaques are evaluated.

<sup>100</sup> Roe 1949, 47.

<sup>101</sup> 1986, 92-3.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, pl.5.9c.

previous panel.

The scenes of the warrior, stag and hounds on the Stowe shrine may have originated as part of a larger hunting or narrative cycle which the craftsman adapted as a model, but had to restrict the size and scope of the scenes in order to fit the sides of the shrine. A scene depicting warriors in combat is present on the west face of the base of the Kells Market Cross.<sup>103</sup> Two figures, either kneeling or running, are armed with shields and spears and face three kneeling warriors armed in a similar manner. On the south face of the base of the same cross there are four armed horsemen, and these may be associated with the warriors.<sup>104</sup> As the horses appear to be prancing, perhaps a military display or parade prior to battle was intended? Further hunting and processional scenes involving stags can be found on the west side of the shaft of Kells Market Cross, which show a stag impaled by a spear from an adjacent hunter, while a rampant hound leaps on its back. On the north side on the base of the same cross there are two well defined stags at the head of a procession of animals, who are been driven forward by a figure (Noah?) with a long staff.<sup>105</sup> A similar scene consisting of a procession of beasts with a stag in front, driven by a man with a spear and shield is present on the east side of the base of the Kells Tower Cross and on the west side of the base of the South Cross at Castledermot.<sup>106</sup> On the arm of the west face of the high cross at Killamery, Co Kilkenny, Roe has described a stag-hunting scene similar to that found on the shaft of the Kells Market cross.<sup>107</sup> It is best to follow Roe's description, as the scene is very lightly carved, and the stone effaced: 'A horseman armed with a spear, with three hounds pursuing a stag, on to the back of which one of the dogs leaps'.<sup>108</sup>

There are also Scottish parallels for the armed warrior. On a class II Pictish cross-slab from Eassie, Forfarshire, Scotland, which is dated to the eighth/ninth centuries, a

---

<sup>103</sup> Harbison 1992, no.126; fig.339.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, fig.334.

<sup>105</sup> Roe 1966, 31, 35, pls.viii, xi; Harbison 1992, no.126, figs.340, 342.

<sup>106</sup> Roe 1966, 13, pl.ii; Harbison 1992, nos. 127, 37; figs.347, 977.

<sup>107</sup> Roe 1969, 44, pl.xix, 1; Harbison 1992, no.146, fig.412.

<sup>108</sup> Roe, *ibid.*



striding warrior accompanied by a stag and hounds are placed on either side of a low relief cross [Pl.110.a].<sup>109</sup> The warrior carries a long spear over his right shoulder, and a rectangular shield in his left hand. The details are effaced, but it can be seen that he wears a cloak and has a 'Kells-type' profile, elongated jaw-line, pointed nose and jutting chin, similar to the Stowe warrior.<sup>110</sup> His gait is vigorous and he appears to be advancing towards the upright stag depicted on his right, beneath the opposite cross arm. There are two other animals placed below the stag which may represent hounds participating in a hunt. The lower animal has the same elongated sinuous body as the upper beasts on panel 2, LSA.

Depictions of hunting and battle scenes are commonplace on Pictish monuments, for example, Hilton of Cadboll and the Aberlemno churchyard slab, and may have been used to exhibit the social status of the local ruling elite.<sup>111</sup> Alcock contends that these hunting scenes of nobles and kings were there to act as reminders to the local inhabitants of their wealth and of the hunting and riding services to which they were entitled to demand.<sup>112</sup> Carol Farr has referred to the secular figures, such as the armed warrior above, which appear as marginalia in the Book of Kells and on Pictish carved stones [Pl.2.b]. She has concurred with Alcock that these figures represent native aristocratic prestige and authority and were the 'class of the *literati* in control of monastic culture'.<sup>113</sup> As these depictions of secular authority are found in both carvings and manuscript art, it is probable that they were also portrayed in metalwork. One such example may be the hunting scenes incorporating the armed warrior, stag and hounds on the sides of the shrine under discussion.

### **Long Side B [Pls. 34.b, 36.b; Fig.8]**

**Panel 1:** This panel shows a stag in combat with two hounds.<sup>114</sup> Similar scenes of stags

<sup>109</sup> Allen and Anderson 1903, 218-219; Ritchie 1989, 2.

<sup>110</sup> As defined by McNab (1987-8, 272).

<sup>111</sup> Alcock 1993, figs. 28.3, 28.5.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>113</sup> Farr 1995, 142-3; Alcock, *ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Stags and hounds involved in hunting and processional scenes have been cited above for panel 4, LSA.

in a prominent position are depicted on the cross shafts from Bealin, Co Westmeath and Banagher, Co Offaly, both of which have been dated to c.800 AD.<sup>115</sup> The Banagher shaft shows the stag within a square panel with its foreleg ensnared in a deer-trap, while placed below there is a hound who bites the stag's outer hind leg. A single stag, framed in a panel, is present on the west face of Moone High Cross<sup>116</sup> and on the enigmatic Tibberaghny pillar stone which may date to the ninth century AD.<sup>117</sup> Henry has also noted a stag and snake in combat carved on the large decorated cross-slab from Gallen Priory, Co Offaly.<sup>118</sup> There are also examples of stags executed in metalwork: a triangular panel on knop 2 of the British Museum crosier depicts a comical stag with crossed limbs and long curling antlers. The form of the stag has been ingeniously adapted to fit the shape of the panel.<sup>119</sup> A twelfth-century depiction of a stag is found carved on one of the archivolts on the Romanesque doorway at Killeslin, Co Offaly.<sup>120</sup>

Can an iconographical interpretation be derived for the hunting scenes involving stags as described above? Francoise Henry, in her publication on Irish high crosses, has discussed the iconography of stags. Psalm 42 describes the stag as 'thirsting for running waters' and this became a symbol of the soul thirsting for God, which in turn, was interpreted as the figure of Christ pursuing a soul.<sup>121</sup> Harbison has also referred to stylistic antecedents for the hunting scenes portrayed on the Irish high crosses but presents scant information on the iconography.<sup>122</sup> Alcock, in his discussion on the numerous hunting-scenes depicted on Pictish Class II monuments, has provided a summary of the Christian iconography associated with the stag hunt. Alcock has provided alternative

---

<sup>115</sup> Hicks 1980, 10-13, fig.2; Harbison 1992, no.20, fig.66; no.22, fig.73.

<sup>116</sup> Harbison 1992, no.181, fig.967.

<sup>117</sup> Roe 1982, 33, pl.xiii; Harbison 1992, no.224, fig.628.

<sup>118</sup> Henry 1967, 123. It is extremely difficult to distinguish a snake in the published photographs (Kendrick 1939, plate I), but a drawing of the slab by Ursula Mattenberger (in Herity 1993, fig.23.3d) depicts a snake dangling from the mouth of the stag.

<sup>119</sup> MacDermott 1955, 189-90, Fig.11.

<sup>120</sup> Henry 1970, fig.26.

<sup>121</sup> Henry 1964, 52.

<sup>122</sup> Harbison 1992, 317-8.



interpretations for scenes involving stags and hounds: Christ representing the stag, pursued by the devil in the guise of hounds; or the stag as the Christian soul persecuted by devils and temptation, or the Christian soul in pursuit of Christ and salvation.<sup>123</sup>

A scene representing a stag and serpent, executed in filigree, is present on one of the panels of the eighth-century paten from Derrynaflan, Co Tipperary. A standing stag faces a rearing serpent amid a background of interlace, a second panel from the paten depicts a solitary stag in a field of interlace.<sup>124</sup> Ryan has discussed the iconography of the stag and serpent and related them to an episode in the *Physiologus*, which is a late antique collection of fables involving animals to which were attributed Christian meanings. One of these fables describes:

A stag drinking from a pool of the water of corruption; the stag swallowed a snake, was mortally wounded and lost his antlers. He was guided to a stream, where he drank clear water, was cured, and his antlers restored.<sup>125</sup>

In another rendition the stag spews out the snake and tramples on it, a reference to the conquest of Satan. In Psalm 42 Christ is described as the 'Redeemer from sin.... Christ who vanquished the serpent'.<sup>126</sup> The stag is also associated with baptismal imagery and St Ambrose refers to the stag and snake in his commentary on Psalm 42, which is the tract used for the blessing of the font during the Easter Vigil.<sup>127</sup> In Early Christian catacomb paintings, as well as mosaics at Galla Placidia, Ravenna, and the churches of Sts Cosmo and Damian and St John Lateran, Rome, the individual stag (or deer) was seen to represent Christ, the Redeemer from sin, Christ who vanquished the serpent.<sup>128</sup>

Stags are depicted in a symbolic manner in Carolingian manuscripts, of late-eighth

---

<sup>123</sup> Alcock 1994, 233.

<sup>124</sup> Ryan 1987b, 72; 1994, 84-86, pl.3,4. This scene is related to the stag and serpent on the Gallen Priory slab referred to above.

<sup>125</sup> Ryan *ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Schiller 1971, 131, 140.

<sup>127</sup> Ryan 1994, 84.

<sup>128</sup> Ryan 1994, 85-6; Schiller 1971, 131, 140.

to early-ninth century date, from Charlemagne's Court school. They are shown flanking the Fountain of Life, along with other creatures such as peacocks and hounds, in the Soissons Gospels and Godescalc's Gospel Lectionary.<sup>129</sup> A solitary stag, rearing on its hind legs, is depicted on f.302r in the Book of Kells.<sup>130</sup> It does not appear to bear any direct iconographical significance to the text or related illustrations.

**Panel 2:** This foliate motif is discussed along with panel 1, LSA.

**Panel 3:** This panel depicts two ecclesiastics flanking an angel, who in turn, is perched above a seated harpist. The ecclesiastic on the left holds a bell, while the right grasps a crosier which is placed between his legs.

Ecclesiastics with their insignia of office are a common feature on metalwork, sculpture and manuscripts of the early Christian period. A similar ecclesiastic on the side panel of the near contemporary Soisceál Molaisse book shrine, holds a book and a flail or asperge in his hands [Pl.26]. The eleventh /twelfth century figures on the Breac Maedhóg possess a variety of attributes, both secular and ecclesiastical: books, vials, swords, staffs and processional crosses [Pl.75].<sup>131</sup> Other ecclesiastical figures, executed in copper alloy, include the eighth-century Aghaboe figure with a book and crosier,<sup>132</sup> and the twelfth-century St Manachan's shrine-type figures [Pls.73,110.b].<sup>133</sup> Like the Breac Maedhóg figures, the St Manachan shrine group also have mixed secular and ecclesiastical attributes. This iconography persists into the later medieval period, the die-stamped ecclesiastics on the fronts of the Misach and St Caillin's book-shrines hold crosiers, books and cross-staffs [Pls.47,62].

The sculptural programmes of the high crosses and other carvings provide many

---

<sup>129</sup> Paris, Bib. Nat. Ms.lat. 8850, f.6v; Ms. nouv. acq. lat.1203, f.3v; Dodwell 1993, 52-56; Beckwith 1989, ill. 23, 24.

<sup>130</sup> Book of Kells, TCD MS 58; Meehan 1994, 76-7; pl.105.

<sup>131</sup> Henry 1970, 117-119.

<sup>132</sup> Ryan 1983a, no.46.

<sup>133</sup> For a recent discussion on these figures see Bourke (1988, 112-26) and McNab (1987-8, 280-1).



examples of figures portrayed with bells and crosiers. A few pertinent examples will suffice. On the south face of the cross at Kinnity (Castlebernard) Co Offaly, dated to the ninth century, there is a scene of a seated harpist (David?) with a bird perched above, and facing him is a standing ecclesiastic holding a crosier and bell.<sup>134</sup> The north side of the cross shaft at Old Kilcullen, Co Kildare has a panel with a figure wielding an axe at a supine figure. In his other hand he holds a crosier, while a bell and a rectangular object (a book, altar or reliquary?) are placed on either side of the crosier above his head.<sup>135</sup> A mid-ninth century date has been assigned to this cross on historical grounds.<sup>136</sup> These figures with bells, crosiers (and sometimes books), have not yet been adequately resolved, perhaps there is no coherent iconography and these attributes are used as insignia for distinguishing ecclesiastics as symbols of authority, power and prestige.<sup>137</sup> One of the White Island statues depicts an ecclesiastic holding a short crosier and bell. Helen Hickey has suggested that it may represent Christ as 'Abbot of the World', as an inward facing crosier indicated the rank of abbot.<sup>138</sup>

In her paper on the David cycle in Irish art, Roe presented a valuable account on the appearance of 'David as Harpist' in metalwork, stone sculpture and manuscript illumination.<sup>139</sup> This has been superseded by Harbison where he has identified eight harpist scenes on the high crosses, but does not include scenes from other media.<sup>140</sup> On the gable end of the Breac Maedhóg [Pl.74.b] and the Tower Cross at Kells a bird is perched on, or just above, the harp.<sup>141</sup> According to Harbison, this bird represents the Spirit of the Lord who appeared to David at the time of his anointing by Samuel. David

---

<sup>134</sup> De Paor 1987, 137, fig.8:2; Harbison 1992, no.35, figs.97, 711.

<sup>135</sup> Ó Floinn 1994, fig.14; Harbison 1992, no.189, fig.535.

<sup>136</sup> Byrne 1987, 127-129.

<sup>137</sup> Casey 1984, 163-4. See Farr (1995, 142) who interprets figures holding and presenting books in the Book of Kells as representing the upper ranks of the clergy.

<sup>138</sup> Hickey 1985, 41, fig.14-f. Hickey followed Henry and Marsh-Micheli (1987, 808) in this iconographic assumption, but there is no source cited.

<sup>139</sup> Roe 1949, 54-9.

<sup>140</sup> Harbison 1992, 210-222.

<sup>141</sup> Roe 1949, fig.12, 47, 51; Harbison 1992, no.127, figs.346, 718.

was regarded as a prefiguration of Christ as King, and also the ancestor of the house to which Christ belonged.<sup>142</sup>

If the Stowe harpist figure is to be seen to represent David, could it be possible that placed directly above him is not an angel, but the Holy Spirit as a bird endowed with anthropomorphic qualities? A bird with anthropomorphic attributes, the human head, could also embody a conflation of evangelist symbols: St John (the eagle) and St Matthew (the man).<sup>143</sup> Another possible interpretation is that the figure of David, as harpist, is surrounded and protected by an angel positioned above, acting as an emissary of the Lord, and flanked by two ecclesiastics with their insignia representing the authority of the Church. A tenuous hagiographical association is found in the *Navigatio Brendani*. In the relevant episode St Brendan appeared disinterested when a clerical student played for him on the harp. The saint explained that his lack of attention to earthly music was due to the fact that he had heard the singing of the angel Michael in the form of a bird, and he could never again experience this rapture in the realms of the world.<sup>144</sup> It is unlikely that the Stowe panel is in any way related to this episode, but it demonstrates that associations between angels, in the form of birds, harpists and ecclesiastics were known in the early Christian period. A more mundane reason may be that the angel is no more than a space filler, used to create a symmetrical composition.

Can any consistent iconography be derived from the above panels and is there a common theme or narrative associated with the figured scenes? As discussed above the medallion angels may represent 'Daniel in the Lions' Den' or 'Christ between Two Living Things' but on balance it is likely that they represent angels. The figure on panel 3, LSA, is unlikely to be an image of Daniel due to the presence of a sword which would negate the need for God's intercession. The other possibility may be David surrounded by dogs, as in Psalm 22. The striding warrior could possibly be an obscure rendering of Goliath, or an episode from a secular narrative scene. Christ capturing a soul is one interpretation

---

<sup>142</sup> Harbison 1992, 210.

<sup>143</sup> Conflation of evangelist symbols is extremely rare in early medieval Irish art. The conflation or 'shape-changing' of evangelist symbols has been remarked upon by Cronin and occurs in the canon tables of the Book of Kells, for example, canon 2 (f.2v) where the symbol of Luke, the ox, displays an eagle's body (Cronin 1995, 113-4; O'Mahony 1994, pl.2).

<sup>144</sup> Kenney 1929, 419; Ryan 1993, 158.



for the scene involving the stag and hounds, and finally, David as Harpist might be implied in the ecclesiastics' panel. Unfortunately, there is no unequivocal evidence to propose a 'David' theme for the above three panels. The possibility arises that there was no coherent iconographic programme planned for the shrine, and what we see is a garbled mix of narrative scenes, iconography, hagiography and possibly episodes from some unknown historical episode or legend. This is not an unlikely probability: the eighth-century Derry-naflan paten, even with its full complement of filigree panels including figurative, abstract and zoomorphic scenes, does not present a coherent iconographic programme.<sup>145</sup>

A major problem concerning the iconography of the shrine is the absence of seven panels, at least two of which would have contained figurative subjects if the present decorative scheme on the shrine followed a logical sequence. A concave-sided plaque would have been positioned adjacent to the central medallion on SSA. The outline of the plaque can be discerned by the position and distribution of nail holes and by comparing the differential patination of the underlying copper alloy sheet. If the design of the other concave panels is compared, then this panel would have had either a foliate or geometric motif. There are two figurative panels missing from the long sides, one from each end, if the alternating sequence of figurative and abstract panels was followed. This leaves four missing panels, all D-shaped, and these would have been positioned on the ends of the short sides. It is impossible to deduce whether the panels contained abstract, geometric, foliate, or figurative designs. Stamped panels, gold filigree and/or settings for glass or enamel are a possibility, as these are noticeable by their absence in the technical repertoire of the decorative scheme. Whereas the other missing panels might have become dislodged through handling and wear and tear, or removed and used as charms, the filigree might have been removed for a more practical purpose, to recycle, barter, or it may have been stolen. This practice was not unknown as some of the decorative panels were removed from the Soisceál Molaisse by one of the hereditary keepers and sold to a Sligo watchmaker.<sup>146</sup> Portions of the front of St Patrick's Bell Shrine were removed in the nineteenth century 'to be used as charms against disease and other evils'.<sup>147</sup>

---

<sup>145</sup> Ryan 1994, 86. Likewise the iconography of the ninth-century chalice from the same hoard has a variety of themes which have not yet been resolved (Ryan 1993, 160).

<sup>146</sup> McKenna 1931, 37.

<sup>147</sup> Ó Floinn 1994, 18.

**Panel 4:** This has been previously discussed along with panel 4, LSA.

**Base [Pl.31; Fig.6].**

No specific iconographic connotations can be ascribed to this portion of the shrine. If the late medieval additions are disregarded, a simple latin cross with an asymmetrical central setting would have been present [Fig.17.c].<sup>148</sup> This cross, as on other book shrines (Lough Kinale, Soisceál Molaisse, Book of Dimma) would have functioned as an apotropaic device protecting the precious contents from malevolent forces.

**Front [Pl.37; Fig.9]**

The iconography of the late medieval engraved figures on the silver plates is more straightforward, and does not pose as many problems as the enigmatic scenes on the sides. Nevertheless, the choice and arrangement of the figures appear somewhat confused. Christ is portrayed on the cross in the usual Gothic manner with his head sagging onto the chest and eyes closed in death, a knee-length loincloth, an exaggerated flex of the hips and knees, and the feet crossed and pierced by a nail. This became a familiar image from c.1200 A.D.

The next figure to the right was described by Mitchell as an 'abbess holding a book' and by Hourihane as St Brigid. However this figure does not appear to be female.<sup>149</sup> Ó Floinn was more correct in identifying the figure as the mourning St John, holding in his left hand a book, with his right hand held up to his face in a gesture of mourning.<sup>150</sup> This representation of St John first appears in the seventh to eighth centuries in early Byzantine art. On the lid of the Fieschi reliquary the figures of St John and the Virgin, executed in cloisonné enamel, are placed on either side of the crucifixion in the Passion scene.<sup>151</sup> This image became commonplace in Carolingian and Ottonian manuscripts, metalwork and ivories, and in medieval art thereafter.

---

<sup>148</sup> Ó'Riain 1991b, 292.

<sup>149</sup> Mitchell 1977, 185; Hourihane 1984, 882-3.

<sup>150</sup> Ó Floinn 1983, no.76.

<sup>151</sup> New York Metropolitan Museum; Schiller 1972, 94, pl. 331; Shore 1940, 61-69.



The third figure wears the attire of a bishop, with the right hand emphasized in a gesture of blessing. Ó Floinn has suggested that this bishop may be a representation of St Patrick or St Thomas a'Beckett, while Hourihane proposed St Patrick.<sup>152</sup> Other ecclesiastics wearing similar attire appear on the fronts of the Domhnach Airgid and the Cathach, Misach and St Caillin's book shrines [Pls.67,38,47,62].

The bottom left panel depicts the Virgin with the Christ Child held in her left arm while the fingers of her right hand hold a small circular object, which Margaret Stokes identified as a globe.<sup>153</sup> Mitchell described the Virgin as suckling the child, while Bradley stated that her right hand holds her breast.<sup>154</sup> At first glance this would seem to be a reasonable assumption, but on closer inspection certain features appear awkward and do not fulfil these interpretations. Even allowing for the erratic and sketchy execution of these engraved figures, and if the circular object is a nipple, it is placed in the centre of her chest, outside her robe. Secondly, all images of the Nursing Madonna portray her seated with the child in her lap, not in a standing position.<sup>155</sup> However, if a stone sculpture of the Virgin and child from St Lorenz, Nuremberg, dated c.1310, is examined, certain features are apparent which are also depicted on the Stowe Virgin and Child scene, even when allowing for differences in style and media.<sup>156</sup> The St Lorenz Virgin wears a similar floriated crown; her left hip sways outwards while her head cranes back to view the Christ child held in her left arm. A well defined apple is held on the palm of her right hand. This then, would appear to be the circular object which the Stowe Virgin holds, although the finer details are absent. An apple also provides an appropriate iconographical feature: it symbolised the Mother of God as a personification of the new Eve.<sup>157</sup> This feature would have been familiar on Gothic figures of the Madonna and child which would have been common in Ireland before the Reformation. A closer parallel, and a type which

---

<sup>152</sup> Hourihane 1984, 861-2; Ó Floinn 1983, 70.

<sup>153</sup> Stokes 1887, 78.

<sup>154</sup> De Paor 1977, 185; Bradley 1987, 272; Hourihane stated that she held 'some unspecified object' (1984, 920).

<sup>155</sup> An example of the conventional pose may be seen on the front of the Domhnach Airgid shrine [Pl.67] (Mac Leod 1987, 253).

<sup>156</sup> Schiller 1971, 108-9; pl.282.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 108.

the craftsman may have had in mind when drawing up the figures, is an ivory statuette from Saint-Chapelle, Paris, dated to 1265-79 [Pl.101.b].<sup>158</sup> This exquisite statuette has the same contrapposto pose as the Stowe and St Lorenz examples, with the Christ child in her left arm and an apple in her right hand. Although there is no crown present on her head, circular perforations and a pronounced flange indicate that a metalwork crown was originally fitted to the statue.<sup>159</sup>

There is nothing innovative or novel in the iconography of the above scenes, all are common subjects found during the fourteenth century and later. A lack of coherence is apparent in the arrangement of the panels, for example, it would be expected that a mourning Virgin (not a nursing Madonna) and St John would be placed on either side of the foot of the cross, not separated into two discrete panels as they are at present. The craftsman may have derived his figures from diverse sources or else preferred to use elements of a complete scene to fill the available space between the arms of the cross. The figure of the bishop may have been taken from a different composition as he is the only three-quarter length figure: the remainder are full-length.

## **STYLISTIC ANALYSIS**

### **Short Side A [Pls.33.a, 35.a; Fig.7]**

**Panel 1:** The analysis of this foliate motif will be considered in the section dealing with panel 2, LSB, as the stylistic elements are easier to discern in the latter panel.

**Panel 2:** The comparable medallion from SSB will be included in this discussion. Many of the iconographic parallels which have been previously cited also exhibit stylistic affinities. A gilt-copper alloy brooch-pin from Islandbridge, Dublin, which dates to the ninth century, depicts two beast heads with gaping jaws engulfing two small human masks placed above and below a circular setting [Pl.96.a].<sup>160</sup> The beast's heads are treated in the same fashion as the Stowe animals, with small circular eyes (originally set with glass

---

<sup>158</sup> Gaborit-Chopin 1978, no. 144.

<sup>159</sup> As seen on a Gothic ivory statuette from Saint-Denis, Paris: Gaborit-Chopin 1978, no.142, pl.158.

<sup>160</sup> Ó Floinn 1992, no.358:b.



studs), well defined, rounded, cheeks and long necks enclosing a panel of simple knotwork. Unfortunately the centre of the brooch has suffered damage leading to loss of surface. The human masks on this pin cannot be used for comparative purposes as they are too worn and show little detail. A brooch-pin from Grousehall, Co Donegal, c.800 AD, has a similar composition of two beast heads framing a field with a centrally placed human mask.<sup>161</sup> As with the Islandbridge and Stowe medallions the beast heads have a circular eye, in this example inset with amber, elongated open jaws and a panel of interlace on the neck. Perhaps the annular form of a ringed pin or brooch initiated the concept of a circular composition for the Stowe panel.

Surprisingly there are two close parallels for the Stowe angel, not in Ireland, but in Forfarshire, Scotland. Both depict an angel in the same unusual pose, wings extended and pointed downwards from the body, akin to a bird holding its wings out to dry. On a class II Pictish cross slab from Benvie there are two winged angels, each in a separate panel on either side of the upper cross shaft.<sup>162</sup> The stone has undergone considerable weathering so details are virtually non-existent. The angels have four wings: the lower pair have a straight outer edge while the inner edge curves outwards from the elbow, which is denoted by a roundel. The head and body are in roughly the same proportion as the Stowe angel, and the angel wears a similar long tunic with a flared hem. A more convincing parallel, however, is found on a broken slab from Kirriemuir [Fig.26.b].<sup>163</sup> An angel with the same lunate-shaped wings is carved in relief, and retains some fine detail. The arms and upper torso appear to be composed of pellets in relief with two discs on the chest also containing small pellets. The vestment has V-shaped contoured lines, the lower four of which terminate in a simple volute. The hem of the garment has a crude step pattern, from which two feet protrude. A triangular shaped head exhibits worn features, but the shape and size of the wings, long tunic and circular discs at the shoulders all relate this carving to the Stowe medallion angels - even allowing for the differences in media and technique. The unusual pellets may be a sculptural rendering of the metalwork technique of granulation and the circular discs may be representations of glass or enamel studs.

---

<sup>161</sup> Ó Floinn 1989b, no.91.

<sup>162</sup> Allen and Anderson 1903, 247, fig.260a.

<sup>163</sup> Slab no.4, Allen and Anderson 1903, 260, fig.270.

### **Short Side B [Pls. 33.b, 35.b; Fig.7]**

**Panel 1:** This motif of intersecting diagonal lines and circles is uncommon in Irish art; no exact parallels can be cited at present. A more elongated version of this pattern, where the circles are linked by diagonal lines to form lozenge-shaped fields with circles at the angles, is found on the crooks of some eleventh- and twelfth-century crosiers, for example, St Blathmac's crosier, where the lines are highlighted by inlaid silver strips.<sup>164</sup> This latter motif is also found in stone carving: the eleventh- to twelfth-century altar frontal from Glendalough, Co Wicklow, displays lozenge-shaped fields with circles at the intersections.<sup>165</sup> Ultimately this motif is Classical in origin, where it appears on the decorative scheme used in the vault of Hadrian's villa at Tivoli, where it forms interconnecting circles and rectangles and is also found on the coffered vaults of the early fourth-century AD Basilica of Maxentius, Rome, which bear circles linked by high relief cruciform mouldings.

**Panel 2:** See panel 2, SSA for discussion.

**Panel 3:** This openwork geometric panel of alternating positive and negative squares forming a cruciform pattern is a common motif in metalwork, sculpture and bone. More elaborate versions including L, T and cruciform openings are found on the long sides of the shrine. The origin, use and a comparative analysis of all relevant openwork plaques will be discussed elsewhere.<sup>166</sup>

### **Long Side A [Pls. 34.a, 36.a; Fig.8]**

**Panel 1:** This is a square openwork panel with a tree-scroll motif. The analysis of this foliate motif will be considered in the section dealing with panel 2, LSB, as the stylistic elements are easier to discern in the latter panel.

**Panel 2:** This figure has stylistic affinities with a gilt-copper alloy mount, of eighth to ninth century date, from Rise farm, Oppdal, Norway. The mount was recovered from a

---

<sup>164</sup> Raftery 1941, pl.91.

<sup>165</sup> Ó Floinn 1995a, fig.3.

<sup>166</sup> See Chapter 6, pp.349-53.



tenth-century Viking grave, and is considered to be of Irish manufacture [Pl.19.b].<sup>167</sup> There may not appear to be many common stylistic features; one is a bearded man, the other a clean-shaven angel, but on close inspection certain similarities become apparent. The most striking is that both figures share the same stance, with a sword placed diagonally across the midriff. The dimensions and form of the two swords are similar, except for the prominent chape present on the Oppdal sword. Only the lower portion of the angel's legs are depicted, albeit in a simplified manner, with the ankles truncated by a plain horizontal moulding.<sup>168</sup> No arms or hands are evident; instead elongated, flared wings originate from shoulder spirals. The relative proportions of the neck to head are more naturalistic in the Oppdal angel. Even though the Stowe figure is bearded, his rounded head and facial features, sub-rectangular mouth with thick lips and deeply recessed eyes resemble the Oppdal angel, but these similarities are probably due to the consequences of wear on the raised surfaces. As the angel is now detached from its original mounting it is difficult to ascertain if it was part of a larger scheme, perhaps from the side of a reliquary or a large ecclesiastical fitting. This angel has several features which relate it to other figures on the Stowe shrine. The scrolled shoulder joints and incised rectangle on the chest are found on the angels on the short sides. The sub-oval head, recessed eyes and cap-like hair style are similar to the two ecclesiastics on panel 3, LSB.

The two lower hounds are depicted in a naturalistic manner. This is uncommon at this period as animals depicted in metalwork are usually shown intertwined with other zoomorphs, or else have interlace or extended anatomical appendages such as from limbs, lappets and tails.<sup>169</sup> No convincing parallels have yet been discovered for these animals, although a later, more abstract type, is seen on the knop panels of the twelfth-century Cross of Cong. These quadrupeds, of Irish Urnes style, have hatched bodies and necks, spiralled joints and long snouts and are displayed in combat with an interlaced serpent [Pl.93.b]. Naturalistic animals are however, found in sculpture of the ninth and tenth centuries. The (?)lambs, goats and birds inhabiting the vine-scrolls on the shafts of the Kells Tower cross, Clonmacnoise South and Muiredach's Cross are depicted in a

---

<sup>167</sup> Youngs 1989, no.134. This mount is also discussed in the iconography section, p.170.

<sup>168</sup> It is possible that this angel may be in a seated position but the torso appears too elongated to correspond to this posture.

<sup>169</sup> For example see the range of animals depicted on the Soisicéal Molaisse [Figs.14-15].

naturalistic manner with limbs, heads and torsos modelled in high relief with their anatomical details in proportion.<sup>170</sup>

The two upper animals in the Stowe panel are sinuous in appearance, but have no interlaced appendages or lappets. These beasts, of simple form, may be derived from the tubular animals found on the margins of ninth-century annular brooches, for example, the Roscrea and Killamery brooches.<sup>171</sup> A more telling comparison are the enigmatic tubular bird-like animals on the reverse of the gold penannular brooch from Loughan, Co Derry, which also have smooth, featureless bodies and limbs.<sup>172</sup>

**Panel 3:** This openwork geometric panel of alternating positive and negative squares forming a cruciform pattern is a common motif in metalwork, sculpture and bone. The origin, use and a comparative analysis of all relevant openwork plaques will be discussed elsewhere.<sup>173</sup>

**Panel 4:** Even allowing for wear incurred on this panel, the finish and detail of this figure are of lower quality compared to the other panels on the shrine. This profile warrior has relevant parallels in Insular metalwork, manuscripts and sculpture. Harbison, in his paper on crucifixion plaques, has cited similarities between the Stowe warrior and the figure of Stephaton on the Clonmacnoise plaque [Pl.92.b].<sup>174</sup> These include the angle that the spear is held at in relation to the frame, the curl of hair/helmet at the nape of the neck, the elongated jaw with prominent nose and the large oval shaped eye. However Stephaton has stockier proportions and, although worn, is a more accomplished casting with fine modelling and detail. McNab has also analysed and discussed this figure and included it in her sub-group of figures displaying a 'Kells' type profile, that is, sharply pointed nose,

---

<sup>170</sup> These are conveniently illustrated by Harbison (1992, figs. 988-90). He has briefly discussed the inhabited vine-scroll and suggests that it was transmitted to Ireland through England, more specifically Northumbria (*ibid.*, 323-4). Edwards has provided a more detailed background on the incidence of the vine-scroll in Ireland (1986, 26-7).

<sup>171</sup> Ryan 1989, nos. 79-80.

<sup>172</sup> Ryan 1989, no.83.

<sup>173</sup> See pp.349-53 of Chapter 6.

<sup>174</sup> Harbison 1980, 35.



jutting chin with long jaw line, and a large lozenge-shaped eye.<sup>175</sup> This type is exemplified by a warrior depicted on f.200r in the Book of Kells who has the same facial characteristics, and also displays a circular shield and long spear as present on the Stowe warrior [Pl.2.b].<sup>176</sup> Another example executed in metalwork, which bears a 'Kells' profile is the pair of horsemen which flank the ecclesiastic on the front of the Corp Naomh shrine. They also exhibit the long curl of hair running down the back of the neck [Pl.77].<sup>177</sup>

### **Long Side B [Pl. 34.b, 36.b; Fig.8]**

**Panel 1:** Whereas this panel has many iconographic parallels, stylistic comparisons are more difficult to locate. None of the sculptural scenes, Bealin, Banagher, Moone, Gallen Priory, Kells South and Market crosses displays the same detailing of the body and joints.<sup>178</sup> This could be due to wear and erosion of the stones, or more probable, that fine detail is easier to achieve in metalwork. The deeply hatched body and spiralled joints of the stag are reminiscent of some ninth-century beasts, typified by the profile quadruped on the reverse of the Killamery brooch.<sup>179</sup> The tubular body and limbs of the hound also resemble the marginal animals on the ninth- to tenth-century annular brooches.<sup>180</sup> The stag and dogs of this panel could also be considered as precursors to the 'Irish Urnes' combat theme between a large profile quadruped and a smaller serpent; one naturalistic, the other sinuous. A good example of this may be seen on the knop panels of the twelfth-century Cross of Cong. [Pl.93.b].

**Panel 2:** This displays an openwork tree-scroll motif. Patterns of trees, bushes and vine-scrolls are comparatively rare in Irish metalwork and sculpture of the early medieval

---

<sup>175</sup> McNab 1987-88, 272, 280; fig.3:g.

<sup>176</sup> TCD MS 58; Alexander 1978, no. 58. There is also a second warrior depicted on f.4a in the Book of Kells. He bears a well-defined spear and circular shield and is shown in a crouched position in combat with a peacock (Meehan 1994, 59; pl.66).

<sup>177</sup> Mitchell 1977, no.56; McNab 1987-8, 277; fig.3:f; Johnson 1997, 230-233, cat.80.

<sup>178</sup> Harbison 1992, no.20, fig.66; no.22, fig.73; no.181, fig.967; no.127, fig.347; no.126, figs.340, 342.

<sup>179</sup> Ryan 1989, no.80.

<sup>180</sup> See parallels cited on previous page.

period, but are more prevalent in Northumbria and Scotland during this time.<sup>181</sup>

O'Meadhra has compared the foliate panel on the bone motif-piece from Shandon, Dungarvan, Co Waterford with the foliate motifs on the Stowe shrine [Pl.99.a].<sup>182</sup> She has claimed that they '... share identical minor details such as the treatment of offshoots where these continue onto the frame surrounding the motif....'.<sup>183</sup> Granted, there are similarities between these two panels, but the Dungarvan motif would be more correctly described as loose, sinuous interlace with lobed terminals with no apparent central stem or trunk. A more distinct rendering of a tree scroll motif is present on the reverse of the crest of the tenth-century Corp Naomh bell shrine [Pl.78].<sup>184</sup> It is a simple composition comprising two curling shoots sprouting from a central stem which terminate in a triple bud. Two large addorsed beasts are incorporated into the design. Another rare example of a vine-scroll in Irish metalwork is found on a panel on St Mel's crosier.<sup>185</sup> It is similar in composition to the lower section of the panel in question, but the details of the stem and leaf-forms are easier to discriminate. The symmetrical arrangement of the scroll, with the flared base and inward-curving stems, is comparable to the plant motif on the front cover of the Stonyhurst Gospel of St John [Pl.10.a].<sup>186</sup>

The foliate panels on the long sides of the shrine bear a close resemblance to motifs depicted on two high crosses. On the east face of the shaft on the tenth- to eleventh-century cross at Drumcliffe, Co Sligo, the tree placed between Adam and Eve has a similar arrangement of four spiralled branches emanating from a central stem.<sup>187</sup> The branches terminate in trefoil-shaped leaves. A closer parallel is found on the east face of the shaft

---

<sup>181</sup> See Webster and Backhouse (1991, nos. 99, 101, 112-116, 133-35, 138, 140 and 160) for examples in various media of the vine and inhabited scroll in Anglo-Saxon art. A list of the occurrence of the vine-scroll motif in Irish early medieval sculpture is appended to Edwards (1986, 31-33).

<sup>182</sup> O'Meadhra 1979 no.64; O'Connor 1983, no.71.

<sup>183</sup> O'Meadhra 1987a, 162.

<sup>184</sup> Edwards 1986, 32.

<sup>185</sup> The panel is situated on knop no.2. MacDermot 1957, 189-90, fig.6:5.

<sup>186</sup> London, BL, Loan MS 74. This cover is discussed in more detail in Chapter 1, p.34.

<sup>187</sup> Harbison 1992, no.79, fig.218.



on the tenth-century north cross at Duleek, Co Meath.<sup>188</sup> This design shares identical minor details: the same flared stem/trunk with central aperture, spiralled offshoots and lobed terminals placed in the corners, but the Duleek example contains buds [Pl.107.b]. Like the Stowe motif, the Duleek foliage is placed within a separate panel and is framed by a plain moulding.

**Panel 3:** In this panel the two ecclesiastics will be considered first followed by the two smaller central figures. Iconographic parallels for the grouping of similar figures have already been cited, some of which also exhibit close stylistic links.

The two ecclesiastics on this panel have been classified as 'Style A1' figures by McNab, which is exemplified by the figures displayed on the tenth-century scripture crosses at Monasterboice (Muiredach's), Clonmacnoise and Durrow [Pl.107.a].<sup>189</sup> These characteristics are as follows: realistic rounded bodily contours, large heads sinking into the shoulders and thick drapery falling in even curves. Analogous traits are also seen in manuscript illumination, for example, the evangelists in the MacDurnan Gospels.<sup>190</sup> This 'A1' style is also found in metalwork: the figure on the side of the Soisceál Molaisse, which also presents the closest comparison for the Stowe ecclesiastics [Pl.26]. This figure is securely dated to 1001-1011 by the inscription on the shrine which places both book shrines approximately twenty years apart. However they can be regarded as broadly contemporary as the craftsmen drew upon traditional figure styles of the eighth and ninth centuries for the figure style.<sup>191</sup> It is apparent that the two figures share the same stocky proportions, large heads and heavy drapery with hatched and contoured bands. Each wears a long tunic with straight hemline, and a loose cloak draped around the shoulders. The heads, both of which interrupt the edge of the frame, are sub-triangular and share the same facial features: oval eyes, flattened nose and down-turning mouth. All three ecclesiastics hold insignia, the Stowe figures have a crosier and bell, while the Soisceál figure holds a flail and book. On the Breac Maedhóg there is an array of full length ecclesiastics with

---

<sup>188</sup> Harbison 1992, no.87, fig.239; Crawford 1926a, 4.

<sup>189</sup> McNab 1987-88, 265-97.

<sup>190</sup> Lambeth Palace Ms. 1370; Alexander 1978, no.70; Henry 1967, pls. 36, 42, 44.

<sup>191</sup> McNab 1987-8, 287-8.

various attributes [Pl.75]. Although the execution and detail of these figures are of a higher standard, they are not too far removed in style from the Stowe ecclesiastics and have similar traits such as the bodily proportions and thick drapery folds loosely wrapped about the figures. They also appear to be less severe and iconic in appearance with an element of playfulness in their varied poses and attributes.

There are also parallels to be found in stone sculpture, the figures found on the scripture crosses have already been referred to. The ecclesiastic portrayed on the twelfth-century cross in Downpatrick cathedral shares some features with the Stowe ecclesiastic holding the crosier.<sup>192</sup> Both have similar proportions and vestments. One distinctive trait is the manner in which the crosier is held with the right hand extending from the edge of the cloak, with the ferrule of the crosier placed on the ground between the feet. Unfortunately the head of the Downpatrick figure was defaced in the past so no worthwhile comparisons can be made.<sup>193</sup>

The two smaller central figures will now be discussed. The lower figure of a seated harpist is a common theme on many ninth- and tenth-century high crosses: Kells Tower and Market crosses, Castledermot North, Castledermot South, Graiguenamanagh North Cross, Durrow, Clonmacnoise, Cross of the Scriptures and Ullard.<sup>194</sup> Most of these depictions are eroded so it is difficult to determine stylistic details, with only the general pose and proportions apparent. In this context the closest parallels may be found on the Castledermot crosses. These harpists are seated on a low chair with a straight back, with the head in the frontal position and the body in profile, with the harp supported on the knee. The only pre-Norman example of a harpist executed in metalwork is that found on the gable end of the Breac Maodhóg, but it has little in common stylistically with the Stowe harper, as it is much more elegant with a wealth of fine detail [Pl.74.b]. Depictions of harpists are rare in Insular manuscripts and do not provide any relevant stylistic comparisons.

---

<sup>192</sup> Harbison 1992, no.73, fig.205.

<sup>193</sup> See McNab (1987-88, fig.1) for comparative illustrations of the Stowe, Soisceál, Breac, Muiredach and Downpatrick figures.

<sup>194</sup> Harbison 1992, no.127, figs.346, 718; no.126, figs.337, 771; no.36, figs.103, 719; no.37, figs.110, 888; no.116, fig.311; no.89, figs.248, 939; no.54, figs.138, 720; no.231, fig. 642; Roe 1949, fig.12.



Comparisons for the small angel/bird placed on top of the harpist are more commonplace. Harbison has compared the Stowe angel/bird with the angel placed above Christ on the lost crucifixion plaque from Co Mayo.<sup>195</sup> The design of this plaque is known only from an antiquarian watercolour, but Harbison has drawn attention to the form of the wings which have a straight outer edge, clockwise spiralled shoulder joint and incised parallel lines. Other details such as facial features are too indistinct for comparative purposes. There are also variations: the angel on the crucifixion plaque has well-defined legs and feet emerging from a short tunic, while the compact Stowe angel has only feet (or talons?) protruding from the lower edge of his wings. A manuscript parallel for this angel is found on the crucifixion miniature in the eighth-century Würzburg Epistles of St Paul [Pl.106.a].<sup>196</sup> In this scene a pair of birds and a pair of angels are depicted flying below the thieves' crosses. The two winged angels have the small rounded head, large feet and compact body with wings folded inwards as seen on the Stowe angel. As these creatures have prominent tail feathers, the depiction would appear to represent anthropomorphic birds or angels.

Angels of similar form are also found on a limited number of high crosses. The closest in form, proportion and detail is that encountered on a scene of the Flagellation of Christ, on the end of the arm of Muiredach's Cross.<sup>197</sup> Placed above Christ are three miniature angels; the two flanking angels have large rounded heads, compact squat bodies and folded wings. Another relevant parallel are the bird/angels perched on the upper arms adjacent to the ecclesiastic, on the west face of the 'Doorty' cross in Kilfenora, Co Clare [Pl.106.b] These also have squat bodies with large rounded heads.<sup>198</sup>

The closest comparison, however, for the Stowe angel is depicted on one of the panels on the front of the Breac Maedhóg [Pl.75]. On either side of a central male figure holding a book and vial are placed two columns, each comprising three zoo-anthropomorphic figures. They are arranged in a vertical array in totem pole fashion. The

---

<sup>195</sup> Harbison 1980, 35, pl.3.

<sup>196</sup> Folio 7v, Cod. M.p.th. f.69; Alexander 1978, no. 55, pl. 265.

<sup>197</sup> Harbison 1992, no.174, fig.367.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., no.133, fig.367.

upper and lower members are raptorial birds (eagles?), while the middle figure has a bird's torso, feet and wings, with a human head of uncanny realism, executed in extremely fine detail. Both this example and the Stowe angel are placed on top of another figure, and flanked by ecclesiastics. So, as well having comparable forms, both figures are arranged in a similar composition. This parallel also lends weight to the hypothesis that the Stowe 'angel' is in fact a bird displaying a human head.

**Panel 4:** This openwork geometric panel of alternating positive and negative squares forming a cruciform pattern is virtually identical to panel 3, LSA. The origin, use and a comparative analysis of all relevant openwork plaques will be discussed elsewhere.<sup>199</sup>

#### **Base [Pl. 31; Fig.6]**

The form of the applied cross will be considered first. According to Ó Riain's restoration of the missing letters from the arms of the cross, a central asymmetrical space would have been present in the centre of the cross [Fig.17.c]. This would probably have been similar to the setting, which is now lost, in the centre of the cross on the front of the Soisceál Molaisse. Also common to both shrines are the rectangular panels of knotwork inset into the corners, only one panel of which survives on the Soisceál. The D-shaped panels positioned on the end of the cross arms bear similar motifs to the inset panels on knop no. 2 of St Mel's Crosier.<sup>200</sup> A more valid parallel is a group of memorial slabs from Clonmacnoise, which Ó Floinn has dated from the late ninth to the late tenth centuries.<sup>201</sup> These slabs bear latin crosses with a central medallion and semi-circular terminals which contain rudimentary fret, step and knotwork motifs. While the cross arms on the Stowe cumdach are not as flared as those on the Clonmacnoise grave slabs, they do have the semi-circular terminals containing interlace motifs.

The cruciform arrangement of the Stowe base with a border and corner motifs is found on some Ottonian Book Covers. In the Bayer Nationalbibliothek, Munich, there is an elaborate Gospel cover of c.1000-1010 with a central latin cross adorned with gem

---

<sup>199</sup> See pp.349-53 of Chapter 6.

<sup>200</sup> Mac Dermott 1957, pl.lxi.

<sup>201</sup> Ó Floinn's Type B slabs (1995a, 353-4).



settings.<sup>202</sup> A complex central oval setting is fabricated from four concentric oval borders of beaded gold wire with a row of precious stones and pearls alternating around the outermost register. The cover is extremely opulent and its decoration and layout are based upon the *Crux Gemmata*, the gems and pearls are set in complex frames mounted onto a filigree base with die-stamped gold sheet, bearing zoomorphic and plant motifs, placed in the spandrels of the arms. The corners and ends of the cross arms are emphasised by square frames made from beaded wire which enclose gems. The Stowe base displays a simpler, less ornate, version of these corner mounts, by way of the inset panels decorated with knotwork. High relief settings would have been prone to damage if the shrine was stored flat on its base.

Another feature on the Stowe base which is also found on Continental metalwork is the openwork patterns situated between the arms of the cross, consisting of chequer-board and triangular shaped apertures cut into the copper alloy sheet, which in turn is covered with silver. These same patterns, using the same technique, are found on the legs of the portable altar of Bishop Werl, made by Roger of Helmarshausen c.1100.<sup>203</sup> Theophilus devotes a chapter to the fabrication of openwork panels from copper and silver sheets in his treatise on metal-working.<sup>204</sup> He stipulated the use of openwork plaques for book covers in which the design (consisting of figural, zoomorphic or foliate motifs) is lightly scribed onto the metal surface and then cut out with an iron chisel. Whereas the chequer-board pattern is common in Irish art from the ninth century onwards, the triangular motif makes its one-and-only appearance on the Stowe book shrine. The portable altar post-dates the Stowe shrine, but it is probable that this motif was present on Continental metalwork of an earlier date. From the above there are some techniques and elements of the design which can be paralleled in Continental metalwork.<sup>205</sup>

### **Front [Pl. 37; Fig.9]**

In this section the engraved figures placed between the arms of the cross will be

---

<sup>202</sup> This Gospel book was presented to the cathedral of Bamberg by the Emperor Henry II; (Steenbock 1965, no.47; Lasko 1994, 123-4, n.75; pl. 177).

<sup>203</sup> Lasko 1994, 163-4, pls.224. The feet of this altar are gilt, rather than silvered copper.

<sup>204</sup> Hawthorne and Smith 1979, III:72.

<sup>205</sup> See Ó Floinn's paper (1997b) for other influences on Irish metalwork from the Continent.

analysed. There are numerous ecclesiastical figures depicted on the fourteenth- to fifteenth-century phases of other shrines, most of which are either die-stamped or executed in repoussé.<sup>206</sup>

Parallels for the engraved figures are to be found on the additions to the Shrine of St Patrick's Tooth, which date to c.1350, and exhibit a remarkably similar style and technique. The reverse of the shrine has two gilt silver panels inlaid with niello, situated between the arms of an applied cross. The engraved wavy lines, which are executed by a rocked graver, are used to provide a textured background to contrast with the plain figures, as seen on the Stowe figures. East Galway has been proposed as a provenance for the Shrine of St Patrick's Tooth, due to the name of a Galway saint, Benen, present on the shrine's inscription.<sup>207</sup> Ó Floinn has proposed that the style of the engraving on the Shrine of St Patrick's Tooth and Stowe are so close that they may be the work of one craftsman.<sup>208</sup> The figure of the bishop on the Shrine of St Patrick's Tooth wears comparable vestments to the Stowe bishop, and also has the right hand raised in blessing and a crosier held in the left hand [Pl.72]. This figure is of higher quality than the Stowe figures, as the proportions are more naturalistic, the drapery is less erratic with a preference for parallel lines, and the engraving more confident with more concern for detail. In contrast the Stowe figures seem to have been executed in haste or by a less skilled craftsman. It is reasonable to infer that the late medieval phase on both objects stemmed from a common workshop or school, as both objects are of similar date, provenanced to within fifty kilometres of each other and share the technique of the engraved wavy lines. However, there are appreciable differences in style which would indicate that they were executed by different hands, but most likely trained in the same workshop tradition. Unfortunately there are no annalistic or historical references to the craftsman involved, Domhnall O'Tolairi, so it is not possible to provide further information on his genealogy or provenance.<sup>209</sup>

---

<sup>206</sup> Repoussé and die-stamped figures are present on the Cathach, Misach and Domhnach Airgid shrines. On the sides of the Domhnach the engraved scenes are of a much higher standard [Pls.38,47,67,69-70].

<sup>207</sup> Ó Floinn 1987a, 186.

<sup>208</sup> Ó Floinn 1996, 40; pl.5. I have commented on the striking similarities between the Stowe and Fiacal figures in a previous draft of this chapter.

<sup>209</sup> Petrie 1878, 96.



Sculptural parallels are few: a carved full-length effigy of Bishop de Ledrede (c.1361) in St Canice's Cathedral, Kilkenny, has comparable attire and holds a crosier decorated with a foliate volute, which is similar to the Stowe bishop.<sup>210</sup>

The depiction of the mourning St John is commonplace on later medieval additions to shrines, where he is usually placed to the left of Christ, as seen on the fronts of the Shrine of the Cathach, the Domhnach Airgid, and the Shrine of the Book of Dimma [Pls.38,67,58]. Neither of the above figures bears relevant stylistic comparisons but this is due to the fact that they are either cast or executed in repoussé. A crucifixion scene depicting a mourning St John and the Virgin Mary is present on the decorated screen wall at Kilcooley Abbey, Co Tipperary.<sup>211</sup> The parallels provided for the standing Virgin and child in the iconography section also produce the closest stylistic parallels.<sup>212</sup>

The Gothic tracery flanking the central setting is also common on metalwork of this period. Below the crest on the front of the Shrine of St Patrick's Tooth there is an openwork gilt-silver arcade, each of which forms a trefoil aperture with triangular openings below [Pl.71]. Similar trefoil niches are also found on the early fifteenth-century Arthur Cross [Pl.101.a], where the patterns are formed by die-stamping, and on the knops of the Limerick Crosier, where they are cast.<sup>213</sup> Late medieval stone sculpture also exhibits varying forms of tracery, the closest to the Stowe is that found on the tomb niche at Kilfenora, Co Clare, which has been dated to the second quarter of the fifteenth century.<sup>214</sup> In particular the canopy bears cusped ogival piercings and trefoils in a combination comparable to the silver mounts on the front.

There are also parallels in Continental metalwork: a gilt-silver and ivory book cover from Germany (possibly Cologne) which dates to the twelfth century, but with additions

---

<sup>210</sup> Hunt 1974, no.140; pl.112.

<sup>211</sup> These carvings are dated to c.1450-1520 (Stalley 1987, 194-6, pl.225).

<sup>212</sup> See pp.185-6 above.

<sup>213</sup> These designs are present above the Nativity scenes on the front of the cross (Hunt 1955, 86-7; pl.IX:a-c). See Hunt (1952, pls. X, XI, XX) for the Limerick Crosier. The cusped ogee arch is also found on some of the elaborate English metalwork of the Gothic period (Alexander and Binski 1987, nos. 463, 584-5, 587, 608).

<sup>214</sup> Leask 1960, 173-4; pl.xxvi:b.

from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, bears similar tracery placed within lozenge shaped panels.<sup>215</sup> This cover also demonstrates that the practice of refurbishing shrines and book covers throughout their period of use was not just an Irish phenomenon.

## Summary

From the above analysis of the style it can be inferred that no innovative elements were introduced, the goldsmith drew primarily on influences from the preceding eighth to tenth centuries with tendencies towards greater naturalism in the animal ornament. It has been shown that the closest parallels for the medallions on the short side are found in metalwork of eighth-to ninth-century date, such as brooch-pins, the Killua Castle Bell Shrine crest as well as the early seventh-century Sutton Hoo purse mounts. It is worth citing a passage from Lucas, pertaining to the medallions on the short sides, where he encapsulates the conservative aspects of the style:

Nothing could be more conformist in conception or execution than the two roundels on the other sides of the shrine which, except for some technical details, might have come out of a workshop of the eighth century.<sup>216</sup>

Valid comparisons have been proposed for the figure between the four beasts (panel 2, LSA) and the Oppdal angel mount. The panel depicting the ecclesiastics fits more readily into the scenes portrayed on high crosses of ninth and tenth century date, but also compares with the ecclesiastic on the side of the Soisceál Molaisse. The parallels are found more readily in sculpture, rather than metalwork, due to the resilient nature of stone and the portability and fragility of decorative metalwork. The striding warrior has a 'Kells' type profile which is found in all media from the eighth to eleventh centuries. The 'Clonmacnoise' type crucifixion plaques, which share features with many of the figures on the shrine have been the subject of controversy as regards date. Johnson has summarised and reviewed the conflicting opinions on the dating, which range from the late ninth-century to the early-twelfth century.<sup>217</sup> The writer would favour a date from the early- to mid-eleventh century for the Clonmacnoise crucifixion plaque on the basis of the

---

<sup>215</sup> Needham 1979, no.12, 46-48.

<sup>216</sup> Lucas 1973a, 129.

<sup>217</sup> Bourke 1993b, 178-9. Johnson (1997, 220-226) has argued for a date in the late tenth to the early eleventh centuries based on the dating evidence provided by comparable material from the Dublin excavations.



Ringerike decoration, which is analogous to the panelled foliage ornament on the long sides of the Shrine of the Cathach [Pls.44,92.b]. The only novel stylistic element present in the decoration of the shrine is the combat scene between the stag and hounds, perhaps to be seen as a precursor to the more abstract theme found in twelfth-century Irish Urnes metalwork. All this evidence for a continuing tradition of style should not appear too surprising, bearing in mind the conclusions reached by McNab in her study of twelfth-century figure sculpture.<sup>218</sup>

This shrine has the most extensive and varied array of openwork plaques found on any Irish medieval reliquary. The base has chequerboard and triangular patterns, the long sides exhibit the conventional pattern while SSB has a chequerboard pattern and circles linked by diagonal lines.

## DISCUSSION

The first aspect concerning the construction of the shrine is to determine whether the detached portion served as a lid or base. This is an issue which has provoked differing opinions: Henry described it as the 'underpart', Mitchell as the 'bottom' whereas Ó Floinn referred to the detached portion as a 'lid'.<sup>219</sup> The constructional features and decorative techniques that would require the detached portion to function as the original front of the shrine will now be assessed. If the detached portion was the original front, the technical procedure in the fourteenth century would have been as follows. The craftsman, Domhnall O'Tolari, would have had to remove both the front and back of the shrine, refurbish them and switch them around, while at the same time making any technical adjustments necessary so that the front and base were secure in their new positions. The 'front' with the cross was maintained in a relatively intact condition (except for the insertion of the quatrefoil setting), possibly to avoid completely desecrating the shrine or to refrain from removing all of the inscriptions. The fittings would have been removed from the base and the new decorative scheme mounted onto the original copper alloy backing plate. With this method the original front would have suffered less damage from refurbishment but was then relegated to a subsidiary position on the reverse of the shrine. This portion also

---

<sup>218</sup> McNab 1987-8, 287-8.

<sup>219</sup> Henry 1970, 82; Mitchell 1977, 184; Ó Floinn 1983, 163.

exhibits a cross, most likely functioning as an apotropaic device. Therefore, to accept the detached portion as the original 'front' Domhnall O'Tolair (or indeed his patron Philip O'Kennedy) would have needed to have a sense of responsibility and posterity in order to respect the integrity of the shrine, and transpose the front and back. At the same time the refurbishment would have been more laborious by having to refit and adjust the plates into their new positions.

The following points provide evidence to support the view that the detached portion is in fact the base, and not the lid.

1) All Irish reliquaries of rectangular form have their original dedicatory inscriptions on the reverse or sides, the later medieval inscriptions are less critical of placement and can be found on both the front and back.<sup>220</sup> The inscriptions on the Shrine of the Cathach and St Patrick's Bell Shrine are situated on the reverse, the inscription on the Soisceál Molaisse is on one of the long sides. Shrines of circular cross-section, such as crosiers and arm reliquaries, have their inscriptions on the drop and the vertical binding strips. If the detached Stowe portion is the front it would be an unusual occurrence to have the inscriptions on this section and not on the reverse.

2) The reverse of most rectangular reliquaries are fitted with openwork plates, for example, the Soisceál Molaisse, the Shrine of the Cathach, the Misach, St Patrick's Bell, St Caillin's shrine and the Corp Naomh [Pls.28,39,48,81.b,63,78]. The Shrine for the Book of Dimma was refurbished during the later medieval period, which entailed the removal of the original base plates. However the late medieval front of Dimma bears four openwork plates [Pl.58]. Four openwork panels are situated between the arms of the cross on the Stowe portion, and therefore, from the evidence of the other reliquaries, it is most likely that it functioned as a base plate.

3) It has been suggested in point 1 above, that the craftsman involved in the refurbishment of the Stowe shrine may have had some sense of posterity by not destroying all the original fittings on the front and switching them to the reverse. This would have been exceptional. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the Cathach, Misach, Domhnach Airgid and Dimma shrines all had their original fronts removed and replaced with a new scheme, consisting of figures of ecclesiastics, saints and heraldic beasts. The craftsmen involved did

---

<sup>220</sup> Where the late medieval inscriptions are primary they are usually found on the front, for example, on the front of the shrine for the Book of Moling and on the front and reverse of St Caillin's shrine [Pls.60.a,62-3].



not aspire to preserve these fronts by switching them to the reverse, the original gold and silver was probably recycled to provide the material for the construction of the front.<sup>221</sup>

4) From the abstract and figurative panels surviving on the Stowe shrine it can be inferred that when all the panels were in place it would have presented an ornate decorative scheme. It would seem unlikely that the front of such an elaborate shrine would have had a mundane front with no figurative panels; a development of the iconographic scheme present on the sides, or panels depicting evangelists, or such like, would be expected. Since the figurative panels have their tops aligned with the present front, this demonstrates that this was the original front of the shrine. It is highly unlikely that all of these panels would have been dismantled in the past and replaced upside down.<sup>222</sup>

5) At present the detached portion does not fit exactly onto the reverse of the shrine. This fact has been used as evidence to support the theory that this portion is the front. It should be apparent, however, that the shrine has undergone many vicissitudes, for example, after discovery in the walls of Lackeen Castle the shrine was forcibly opened, and, in more recent times, replacement wooden sides have been added. These modern sides have altered the original dimensions of the box, but there are nails on the edges of the lid which still align with corresponding holes on the sides of the box. However it is not possible to align more than one set of these nails and holes due to a slight increase in width of the box.

Taking the above points (1-5) into consideration, it is apparent that the detached portion originally functioned as the base and not as a lid/front as previously proposed by other writers.

One constructional feature of the shrine which is missing is the binding strips.<sup>223</sup> As confirmed from the descriptions, the front, back and sides of the shrine have metal backing plates with curved edges and nail holes used to engage tubular binding strips. These would have functioned, along with nails, as a method for securing the separate components. These binding strips were possibly removed in the fourteenth century when

---

<sup>221</sup> This issue of recycling materials is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, pp.364-66.

<sup>222</sup> The foliate panel (no.1) on LSA is positioned upside-down. This may have occurred when the shrine was been assembled as the symmetrical design is similar in a reversed position. It is also possible that the panel was removed and replaced in the wrong position at some stage in the subsequent history of the shrine.

<sup>223</sup> Binding strips will be discussed in detail in the Chapter 6.

Domhnall O'Tolair refurbished the shrine, but it would be expected that contemporary replacements would have been provided if the original strips were discarded, or the original strips modified to conform to the new assembly. The solder present on the upper edges of the three sides and on corresponding areas on the lid may date from this time. It is also probable that the binding strips were removed when the shrine was discovered c.1733 as O'Rahilly has noted that when the shrine was found it was securely fastened.<sup>224</sup> After deliberation the shrine was opened to gain access to the interior, this act would have entailed forcibly removing the binding strips, which were probably not considered important enough to warrant preservation.

This discussion on the presence of binding strips leads to the question if it was possible to gain access to the manuscript within the shrine during its use in the monastery of Lorrha. In the description of SSB it was observed that the copper alloy backing plate had straight edges, unlike the other three sides, which had curved edges. This would indicate that this side functioned in a different manner from the other sides and was not secured in place by binding strips, but they may have been present to lend a coherent appearance to the shrine. Therefore, the possibility arises that this was, in fact, a detachable side. Unfortunately this is one of the sides which has a modern piece of wood on the reverse, thus making it impossible to evaluate the original constructional elements [Pl.32.b]. At present this side is secured by modern nails which penetrate the wood at an angle. If this side was not held in place by binding strips, there had to be an alternative method to secure it, otherwise it may have become detached. At the same time a feature had to be designed to allow the side to slide across its full length, so as to facilitate the removal or contact with the manuscript inside. The most efficient solution would necessitate constructing the removable side from two separate wooden elements. The proposed method would be as follows: the ends of the wood on the front, bottom and one of the long sides would have been fashioned to form a groove in a tongue-and-groove mechanism [Fig.17.a]. The upper piece of wood, in the form of the tongue, would have been attached to the removable side by nails and inserted into the groove, thus allowing it to be slid along the length of the side. To open or remove the side, it would have been necessary to grasp the edge of the plate and slide it along the groove by pulling it towards the user. The copper alloy backing plate and separate panels would have been attached to

---

<sup>224</sup> O'Rahilly 1926, 103.



the upper piece of wood by nails. Because of the wear and tear involved in withdrawing the side and the delicate nature of the joinery, a replacement may have been required after a period of time. The modern replacement piece is a simple rectangular piece of wood, nailed into place, thus rendering the removable side redundant. This system of a sliding lid with tongue and groove mechanism was current at this period, the mid tenth-century decorated wooden box and lid from the Christ Church Place excavations, Dublin, has this form of sliding mechanism to enable the lid to be removed.<sup>225</sup> There is also a possibility that the wooden core of the Domnach Airgid originally had a removable lid as the long sides have rebates to accept a sliding lid.<sup>226</sup>

The shrine has no evidence for fittings with which to engage a carrying strap.<sup>227</sup> The lack of straps on the Stowe shrine would have resulted in more direct handling, perhaps accounting for the excessive wear on some of the panels. Direct handling would have occurred when the shrine was touched, or more likely rubbed, by the faithful for the purpose of swearing oaths, pledges and healing. The shrine would also have been exposed to handling and subject to wear when taken out on circuit on the saint's feast day or when used in liturgical ceremonies. When not in use the shrine was probably stored in a treasury or sacristy attached to the church. Furthermore, after the shrine was refurbished in the fourteenth century, it would have had a large rock crystal setting on the front and base - leading to instability if the shrine was laid flat. The shrine may have been displayed on a cushion or a pad with a textile wrapping.

Since the physical aspects of the shrine have now been discussed questions of a more abstract nature will now be considered, where and why was the shrine made? Who was the craftsman, and did he work alone or as the head or overseer of an atelier? Fortunately by using the evidence of the inscriptions on the shrine it may be possible to resolve some of the above questions.

Donnchadh Ua Taccáin, who was responsible for the eleventh-century fabrication

---

<sup>225</sup> Lang 1988a, DW6, 51-52, fig.6. A second box (DW7, 52, fig.10) although it has lost its lid, has a groove with which to engage a sliding lid. For further examples see *ibid.*, DW 17, 28 and 101.

<sup>226</sup> Armstrong and Lawlor 1918, 106, pl.v.

<sup>227</sup> The role of strap fittings on book shrines will be considered in Chapter 6.

of the shrine, is referred to in the inscription as 'of the community of Cluain', and was most probably an ecclesiastic. As he is not described *cerd*, which can be translated as a metalworker who specialised in gold and silver work, he may have acted as a workshop organiser or overseer, rather than actively participating in the fabrication of the shrine.<sup>228</sup> However since the number of surviving inscriptions on metalwork are limited it would be rash to draw any definitive conclusions. Previous accounts of the inscriptions on the shrine,<sup>229</sup> have all followed Todd in positively identifying 'Cluain' as Clonmacnoise.<sup>230</sup> Petrie, O'Rahilly, Harbison, Ó Floinn and Micheli have all erred on the side of caution, stating that the identification 'may have been' or is 'probably' Clonmacnoise.<sup>231</sup> O'Rahilly argued that 'Cluain' might also refer to Clonfert, Clonmenagh or Clonfertmulloe.<sup>232</sup> Without doubt Clonmacnoise was one of the most prestigious monasteries at this time, and Harbison and Ó Floinn have commented on the stylistic links between the figures on the shrine and on the Clonmacnoise group of crucifixion plaques.<sup>233</sup> Recently Ó Floinn has stated that the shrine of the Stowe Missal is 'a definite Clonmacnoise product ... made by Donnchadh Ua Taccáin, a member of the Clonmacnoise community, for the monastery of Lorrha.'<sup>234</sup> Annalistic references to the O'Taccains are scarce: the Uí Tadgaín provided two priests of Clonmacnoise and they may have been related to the Uí Tadgaín kings of Tethbae, some of who were buried at Clonmacnoise.<sup>235</sup> Clonfert is not mentioned in the annals to the same extent as Clonmacnoise during the period from the late-tenth to the mid-eleventh centuries. Art historical evidence has also been presented with regard to the form and motifs on the cross on the base of the shrine which can be compared to the crosses carved on the

---

<sup>228</sup> The only inscribed pre-Norman shrine where the term '*cerd*' is used is on the Soisicéal Molaisse.

<sup>229</sup> Stokes (1894, 77), Warner (1915, xlvii), Crawford (1923, 153), Raftery (1941, 154) and Henry (1970, 82).

<sup>230</sup> Todd 1856, 94.

<sup>231</sup> Petrie (1878, 94), O'Rahilly (1926, 100-101), Harbison (1980, 35), Ó Floinn (1983, 165), Micheli (1996, 8).

<sup>232</sup> O'Rahilly, *ibid.*

<sup>233</sup> According to information from the topographical files in the NMI, the Clonmacnoise plaque (1935:506) is described as found 'near Clonmacnoise - exact circumstances unknown'.

<sup>234</sup> Ó Floinn 1995a, 257.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, AFM 996, 1168.



Clonmacnoise memorial slabs.<sup>236</sup> Another possible link with Clonmacnoise, although tenuous, is the presence of the stag and hounds on the long side of the shrine. Hicks has included the Banagher and Bealin Cross shafts in a 'Clonmacnoise' school of sculpture.<sup>237</sup> Both these shafts have stags: Bealin also has a hound displayed in a prominent position, and even though they are dated to c.800 AD, stags might have persisted as a iconographical subject in the Clonmacnoise milieu until the eleventh century.

The monastery of Lorrha would have had a prosperous community in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and it would have been unusual for it not to have had a small workshop for manufacturing functional metal objects. These artefacts might have been of a mundane nature such as iron knives, copper vessels and simple tools and implements. When the patron decided to commission a shrine, they may have looked to its neighbour, Clonmacnoise, for a distinguished goldsmith or a goldsmith who trained there. There may have been a secondary reason for the choice, to foster or improve relationships between the two foundations and record the name of the prestigious monastery involved, 'Cluain', on the shrine's inscription. It is probable that the goldsmith fabricated the shrine within the confines of the monastery of Lorrha, where there would have been more control over the provision of materials, expenditure and the progress of the work.

There are also records of other reliquaries and artefacts associated with St Ruadhan which were housed at Lorrha. Husband-Smith has recorded the existence of a silver arm reliquary of St Ruadhan which was kept at Lorrha until the suppression.<sup>238</sup> No further records exist of this important shrine. T.L. Cooke had in his possession a bell, known as the 'Bell of St Ruadhan', presented to him by a Rev O'Brian of Lorrha.<sup>239</sup> This bell, of cast copper alloy and quadrangular in shape, most likely dates to the eleventh or twelfth centuries and is at present housed in the British Museum.<sup>240</sup> There is also a reference in the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* to a Viking raid on Lorrha. In the entry for 845, an

---

<sup>236</sup> Ó Floinn's Type B slabs which he dates from the late-ninth to the late-tenth centuries (1995a, 253-4).

<sup>237</sup> Hicks 1980, 10-13.

<sup>238</sup> Husband-Smith 1854, 217.

<sup>239</sup> Cooke 1852, 62.

<sup>240</sup> BM 54, 7-14, 1. Bourke 1980, 206, no.59.

incursion from the Norse of Dublin plundered Lorrha ' ... where they broke the shrine of Ruadhan (*scrín Ruadhan*)... '.<sup>241</sup> Ó Riain contends that this may be a reference to the Stowe book shrine, but recently it has been demonstrated that the word *scrín* indicates a reliquary housing the corporeal remains of a saint.<sup>242</sup> The text of *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* has recently been dated to 1103-1113.<sup>243</sup>

Donnchadh was the ecclesiastic who may have acted as an overseer and also directly involved in the manufacture of the shrine. From the detailed study of the shrine it is possible to deduce that only one person was involved in the design, layout and construction, but some minor tasks (such as cutting out the openwork geometric panels, preparing the copper-alloy sheets, maintaining tools, pouring castings) may have been carried out by an apprentice or assistant. There is a wide range of techniques present on the shrine, some conventional, but in addition more archaic techniques such as glass studs inlaid with wire, backings of gold foil, and the presence of die-stamped sheet silver. A novel technique, not found elsewhere in Irish medieval art, is the use of vellum as a backing material behind some of the openwork panels.<sup>244</sup> By consulting the metalworking treatise, written c.1100, by Theophilus, it is apparent that the various techniques were well within the abilities of a competent goldsmith.<sup>245</sup> Theophilus has described all the techniques present on the shrine, as well as some that are not encountered, for example the use of niello, enamelling and filigree. As stated above these techniques may have been present on the original front or on the missing panels from the sides of the shrine.

Some of the work on the shrine can be considered careless, for example the misaligned geometric panels on the base, and the unfinished appearance and lack of detail on the striding warrior (panel 4, LSA). These may be due to haste, indifference, or the partial work of an apprentice. The silver sheet which covers the copper alloy core of the

---

<sup>241</sup> Todd 1867, 16.

<sup>242</sup> Ó Riain 1991b, 294, n.73; Ó Floinn 1997a, 139.

<sup>243</sup> Ní Mhaonaigh 1995, 354-77.

<sup>244</sup> Sheets of parchment were used as a backing material on the front of the Seitz book box, see Chapter 1, pp.51-2 [Pls.17,21.b].

<sup>245</sup> Hawthorne and Smith 1979, Book III, *passim*.



foliate panels on the sides should have been thinner, as the detail present on the core was obscured by the thickness of the sheet. This may be why the junctions and crossing points of the tendrils were lightly engraved on the surface of the sheet in order to highlight the detail [Pl.36.a].

Diagnostic stylistic traits which are common to two or more panels are apparent, thus lending credence to the hypothesis that the shrine is the work of a single craftsman. If, for example, the stag (panel 1, LSB) is compared with the two lower dogs flanking the figure with the sword (panel 2, LSA) there are many similarities evident. All exhibit deeply contoured bodies and necks, spiralled joints and well-defined hind-quarters. The stances are alike: the necks form a sinuous curve with the muscular chest which stems from an arched back. The heads, mouths and eyes are also comparable. Both panels display an openwork configuration of a beast confronting or biting a more elongated animal with a tubular body. Deeply incised contours are another characteristic feature present on the larger animals. These toolmarks are also present on the wings of the angels on the short sides. A further link is the tear-drop shaped tail of the rampant hound in the stag panel which is comparable to the tails of the beasts flanking the angel in the medallions [Pls.36.b, 35].

The two medallions on the short sides would appear to have been cast from the same mould, but on close inspection many differences emerge [Pls.33,35]. These variations are not just confined to details such as linear patterns (drapery, wings) which may be the result of post-casting work. If the negative spaces between the angel and beasts are examined, it is apparent that the proportions and curvature of the angels' heads, shoulders, wings and the hindquarters of the beasts are all dissimilar. This would indicate that either they were cast from different models, or else a blank disc was cast and all the figures and decoration are the result of post-casting work. This latter option is unlikely as it would be extremely labour intensive. It is more likely that a lead or wax model for impressing the clay may have been retouched between castings, leading to the minor differences in detail which can now be seen.

Even allowing for wear, all the frontal human figures bear the same facial characteristics. All have rounded heads, high foreheads, glass studs representing the eyes,

semi-circular ears, short straight mouths and short parallel strokes denoting the hair. The figures encroach onto the edges of the frames, as seen on the heads of the ecclesiastics, the head and feet of the 'Daniel' figure and the spear, shield and head of the warrior. Also the frontal, wedge-shaped feet of the medallion angels can be seen on the ecclesiastic holding the crosier in panel 3, LSB. There can be no doubt that the same hand fabricated all three foliate panels and the four openwork geometric panels on the sides.<sup>246</sup> All have plain frames and most are backed with a combination of gold foil and leather. The plain chequerboard pattern on panel 3, SSA is comparable to the openwork panels on the base of the shrine. The goldsmith also set up an aesthetic contrast between the copper alloy, silver and gilding on the panels. The copper alloy panels were backed with silver sheet and the nail-heads were capped with silver, while the panels covered with silver sheet were backed with gold foil and the nails had copper alloy caps.

Even though the panels are the work of one craftsman he exploited two contrasting styles: the dynamic pose and actions of the beasts, who are shown in profile and are involved in biting, prancing and combat with each other and their human partners. In comparison the human figures are portrayed in static frontal poses with expressionless faces. The exception to this is the 'Warrior' figure who is depicted in profile and appears to be in the act of walking. He also exploited the difference in relief between the animals, who are all in low relief, and the human figures who are rounded and cast in near full relief.

Finally it is worth deliberating on why the book shrine was commissioned. When the shrine was opened c.1730, the manuscript was found to be relatively intact. The manuscript consists of a portion of the Gospel of St John, the missal, two folios of an Irish tract on the mass and some spells against ailments.<sup>247</sup> Since this manuscript was worthy of enshrinement it must have attained the status of a relic, most likely by having been the personal property or else written by a local saint or venerated ecclesiastic. The gatherings are in different hands, so the fragments can not all have been written by the one scribe.

---

<sup>246</sup> Foliate panels: SSA panel 1, LSA panel 1, LSB panel 2. Openwork geometric panels: SSB panels 1, 3, LSA panel 3, LSB panel 4.

<sup>247</sup> For a full bibliography and illustrations of the decorated pages see Alexander (1978, 68-70). F.J.Byrne has also contributed a useful discussion on the contents of the manuscript (1967, 40-51).



As the manuscript has an almost rustic form of script and decoration it is more likely to be the personal possession of an ecclesiastic and used for private devotion. The manuscript, therefore, may have been thought to have been a portion of St Ruadhan's gospels, with his personal missal and one or two passages written in his own hand. However these manuscripts cannot, on palaeographic grounds, be dated earlier than the late eighth century, whereas St Ruadhan's obit is 585. Therefore the present manuscript cannot be directly associated with the saint. It is possible that sometime after the late eighth century, these were all bound together under the assumption that they were the personal writings or possessions of the saint, and as his cult gained recognition throughout the years, a shrine was commissioned for this manuscript.<sup>248</sup>

A further reason why the manuscript was enshrined may be due to the fact that the enclosed manuscript contains eleven folios of St John's gospel, which was regarded as the most potent and mystically conceived of all four gospels. John identifies himself as the disciple Christ most loved; his gospel is regarded as most spiritual and it emphasises Christ's divinity.<sup>249</sup> John was the evangelist who witnessed the crucifixion and later visited the sepulchre on Easter morning.<sup>250</sup> This led to the employment of John's passion narrative during Holy Week, and the use of his account of the Crucifixion on Good Friday.<sup>251</sup> The spiritual aspects have been expressed by Nunan: 'The contemplative opening text of John, concerned primarily with the transcendental aspect of the word, was seen by exegetes as a swift departure to celestial heights.'<sup>252</sup>

In Kathleen Hughes's study of the tenth-century pocket gospel book known as the Book of Deer, she drew attention to the fact that the portrait of John was the most elaborate, with six angels and a cross surrounding the evangelist.<sup>253</sup> Certain passages of

---

<sup>248</sup> A similar misconception during the medieval period was that the Books of Kells and Durrow were written by St Columba (See pp.63-73 of Chapter 1).

<sup>249</sup> John 21: 20-24.

<sup>250</sup> John 18:25,35; 20:1-10.

<sup>251</sup> Werner 1994, 477.

<sup>252</sup> Nunan 1993, 110.

<sup>253</sup> Hughes 1980, 23-37, pl.II. Cambridge, University Library, MS li.6.32; Alexander 1978, no. 72.

the text and some of the lower margins were decorated with arabesques and a half-page illumination was added to the end of the gospel. In addition John's was the only gospel which was complete; the other three were left unfinished.<sup>254</sup>

Other pocket gospel books also appear to pay special reverence to the gospel of St John: the Book of Dimma emphasises John as it is the only evangelist symbol page, the other three are portraits and are not of the same artistic quality.<sup>255</sup> In addition the gospel of St John is written on a separate quire. In the Book of Moling the gospel of John has a greatly corrected text and pre-dates the other three gospels on palaeographical grounds.<sup>256</sup> The Stonyhurst Gospel of St John may have been written specifically for liturgical use associated with the last mass said for St Cuthbert.<sup>257</sup> Hughes has also referred to the twelfth-century John of Salisbury's account of St Cuthbert using the Gospel of John for healing.<sup>258</sup> The three pocket gospels, Dimma, Moling and Deer, all include a mass for the sick and they may have been used as a sacred talisman, akin to a relic, to help effect a cure.<sup>259</sup> Patrick Sims-Williams, in his review of Hughes, has suggested that the evangelist portraits and *Initia* of Deer may have served an apotropaic function.<sup>260</sup> Other gospel passages and lections concerning the healing power of Christ and on the power of his apostles and saints may have initiated this practice.<sup>261</sup>

From the above, therefore, it is possible that the manuscript belonged to an eminent ecclesiastic or was directly associated with a saint, thus causing it to be enshrined. F.J. Byrne has explored a different theme and proposed one of the reasons why the manuscript was enshrined: '... as it was the earliest Irish copy of the Roman Canon of the Mass at a time, when after the disruption caused by the Viking period, contacts with Rome were

---

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>255</sup> TCD MS 59; Alexander 1978, no. 48.

<sup>256</sup> Nunan 1993, 110-111; TCD MS 60; Alexander 1978, no. 45.

<sup>257</sup> Backhouse 1991, no.86; London, BL, Loan MS 74.

<sup>258</sup> Hughes 1980, 35.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 35-6.

<sup>260</sup> Sims-Williams 1985, 308.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.



being established and many kings, including Donnchad,<sup>262</sup> were making pilgrimages to the holy See'.<sup>263</sup> This is a worthwhile, but speculative hypothesis, as it is difficult to declare that the Stowe Missal is the earliest Irish copy when it is not possible to estimate the production and re-use of liturgical manuscripts in the early medieval period.<sup>264</sup>

Further grounds for enshrinement include the fact that the manuscript also contains a portion of the gospel of St John, which, as demonstrated above, was regarded as the most spiritual. In addition there are also three spells to ward against ailments and the order of the Visitation of the Sick. These inclusions may have led to the manuscript being used in the healing of the sick and as an apotropaic device. Perhaps the gospel of John, as well as the missal and spells, belonged to an ecclesiastic who was able to effect miracle cures among the local populace and clergy. When he died, his personal instruments of healing were considered worthy of enshrinement as they would have thought to have absorbed his power and sanctity through direct association. It may have been believed that the shrine also absorbed this potent source of healing and it may also have been used for this purpose. This use of a shrine, rather than the contents as a secondary relic for healing, is attested in early medieval Ireland and the concept probably stems from the use of *brandea* as secondary relics in the Late Antique and Early Christian periods.<sup>265</sup>

Recent research by Padraíg Ó Riain has proposed a date of 828-33 for the two martyrologies of saints composed at Tallaght and for the Stowe Missal, if links do indeed exist between them.<sup>266</sup> The script of the Stowe Missal has also been studied in depth by William O'Sullivan and a 'North Tipperary' style, as found in the Book of Dimma, deduced. He has also suggested that the missal may be a copy of a Tallaght original made at Lorrha, as Lorrha had an active scriptorium from the late eighth century.<sup>267</sup> All the above evidence points to Lorrha as the monastery from where the manuscript originated

---

<sup>262</sup> Donnchadh Mac Briain, who is referred to in the shrine's inscription.

<sup>263</sup> Byrne 1967, 50.

<sup>264</sup> See Ní Chatháin (1980, 130-31) who has surveyed the extant Irish early medieval liturgical tracts.

<sup>265</sup> Brown 1981, 88; Thomas 1971, 136-8. This aspect is also discussed in Chapter 6.

<sup>266</sup> Ó'Riain 1991b, 295.

<sup>267</sup> In *ibid.* 295, n.78.

and remained until its enshrinement in the early eleventh century.<sup>268</sup> Ó Riain maintains that St Ruadhan, the patron Saint of Lorrha, is the saint associated with the missal and therefore the shrine.<sup>269</sup>

This writer would have to agree with Ó Riain's statement of regret that the shrine and missal bear the title 'Stowe' even though this episode only accounts for thirty years of its long and varied history. At this stage a more fitting title would be the 'Lorrha' missal and shrine, bearing in mind it remained in that locality for c.800 years since its manufacture.<sup>270</sup>

---

<sup>268</sup> Gwynn (1962, 51) independently came to the same conclusion and proposed that the manuscript was written in Lorrha in the early ninth century.

<sup>269</sup> Ó Riain 1991b, 294.

<sup>270</sup> O'Rahilly (1926, 99-100) also proposed that the missal should bear this title.