

# **AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE NATURE, BELIEFS, AND PRACTICES OF THE CELTIC CHURCH**

By examining the Church in Ireland, Scotland and western Britain (generically the 'Celtic Church') before the Great Schism of 1054 this article investigates the possibility that the Celtic Church held an equal place in the one family of Apostolic Catholic Orthodox Churches existing from the early centuries of Christianity. It also clarifies some aspects of the nature, beliefs, and practices of the Celtic Church and in so doing, dispels many of the myths surrounding this period of Church history prevalent in the Celtic Spirituality movements today.

## **THE INITIAL DEBATE**

The nature and practice of Celtic Christianity, or Spirituality, have been hotly debated over the centuries. The debate begins with James MacPherson the Scottish poet who, in the mid-eighteenth century, used genuine heroic Gaelic ballads attributed to 'Ossian', loosely translated and significantly augmented, from which to hang a picture of romantic supernaturalism regarding the Scottish Highlanders. It was an effort to rehabilitate the public's view of Scots after the 1745 rebellion in support of Charles Edward Stuart. 'Ossian' influenced people globally and locally and from Robert Burns to Free Church ministers, to think that if the ancient virtues expressed in Ossian existed then, they exist presently, preserved in the picturesque and dramatic landscape. It forms part of the modern inheritance colouring all things Celtic.

Another influence on this romantic view of the Celts came in the nineteenth century from Ernest Renan, a theologically trained and highly qualified student of ancient languages. He became disaffected from orthodox Catholic belief and developed an interest in the ethnic religious practices of Brittany. Both the Celtic Church in Brittany, and the Celts of Britain and Ireland, in his view had a purity through isolation that existed nowhere else. Renan not only infused the Celts with a peripheral existence, a propensity to dreams, and a pure faith, he also credited them with an enlightened approach to the integration of Paganism and Christianity. No race, he claimed,

took over Christianity with so much originality...The Church did not feel herself bound to be hard on the caprices of religious imagination, but gave fair scope to the instincts of the people (Gougaud, & Picard, 1992, p.46).

He imagined the Celtic Church as unencumbered by creeds and as open to Pagan practices as Christian rituals. This idea persists today in many 'Celtic Christian' groups (Meek, 2010, p.47).

Many books of recent decades on Celtic Spirituality, by authors such as Esther de Waal and Dr. Ian Bradly, suggest a re-discovered tradition, drawing contrasts with the Church in her current existence and suggest there are lessons to be learned from these new discoveries. The writings of Bradly and de Waal have inspired further creations by other authors, all of which endeavour to teach 'Celtic' lessons. There is little historical analysis or content in writings of these sorts, rather conclusions are drawn from fragments of information and fleshed out with the writer's own opinions and conclusions (Meek, 2010, p. 14-16).

Meek (2010) continues:

The quest [for the Celtic Church] has become a postmodern national obsession - but its theoretical roots lie much farther back in history. In fact, the contemporary construction appears to be largely a reinvention, or rediscovery, of patterns which came to the fore in the eighteenth and (pre-eminently) the nineteenth century (p.37).

The Church of the historical Celts lies further back in time. The recent BBC series *The Celts: Blood, Iron and Sacrifice* reveals the history and presence of the Celtic nations from the west of Ireland to Turkey, and of their gradual defeat by the Romans. It tells of the trade routes established by the Celts in the Mediterranean and Atlantic and of their connections with the Phoenicians, also how the Romans made use of those trade routes and kept them open. The only Celtic tribes not conquered were those of Scotland and Ireland. The Roman historian Tacitus records a brutal nation ruled by Druids who carried out barbaric sacrificial rites. The Romans, to underline their control of the British Isles, sent troops, under General Gaius Suetonius Paulinus, to annihilate the Druids at Mona (Anglesey) around 57AD. The Romans conquered the last Celts of southern Britain around 60AD at the Battle of Watling Street against Boudica and the united Celtic tribes, just north of what is now Birmingham. ("The Celts: Blood, Iron and Sacrifice - BBC Two", 2017).

It is this history that lays the foundation for Christianity to take root in Celtic Britain, on the mainland in Wales, Cornwall, and Scotland, as well as Ireland; a history that brought Christianity both from the western Roman Empire, and from Byzantium and Egypt in the east, through trade and invasion.

## CHRISTIANITY'S ARRIVAL

It is believed that the people of Britain were first exposed to Christianity when the Romans arrived in Britain. Bede writes that King Lucius of Britain, in 156AD, wrote to the pope asking to become a Christian under his direction (Bede, Sherley-Price, & Latham, 1976, p.42).

It is possible however, that Christianity arrived in Britain, and specifically in Ireland, by another route, making it a pincer movement from the Christian East and Christian West. Edward Gibbon wrote in 1776:

The public highways, which had been constructed for the use of the legions, opened an easy passage for the Christian missionaries from Damascus to Corinth, and from Italy to the extremity of Spain or Britain ("Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire", n.d.).

Eusebius reputedly wrote: 'The apostles passed beyond the ocean to the isles called the Brittanic Isles' (Morgan R. W., 1978, p.108). It is known that there were British representatives present at of the Council of Arles, called by Constantine in 314AD, indicating an established Church presence. These are the British representatives who signed the canons adopted at Arles: Eborius, bishop of the city of York in the province of Britain, Restitutus, bishop of the city of London, Adelfius, bishop in the city of Cærlon-on-Usk, Sacerdos, priest, and Arminius, deacon (Cheyney, 1908, p. 31-32).

Tertullian wrote, it is believed, between 198AD and 208AD, '*Adversus Iudaeos*' (An Answer to the Jews). In Chapter VII. The Question Whether Christ Be Come Taken Up, he says:

For whose right hand does God the Father hold but Christ's, His Son?... For upon whom else have the universal nations believed, but upon the Christ who is already come? For whom have the nations believed...tarriers in Egypt, and inhabitants of the region of Africa which is beyond Cyrene, Romans and sojourners...and manifold confines of the Moors, all the limits of the Spains, and the diverse nations of the Gauls, and the haunts of the Britons-- inaccessible to the Romans, but subjugated to Christ...?

... the Britons are shut within the circuit of their own ocean...But Christ's Name is extending everywhere ("Ante-Nicene Fathers", n.d.).

It may be assumed from this that the trade routes established by the early Celts, and later maintained and expanded by the Roman Empire, served as paths for the Christian message to infiltrate Ireland and the western seaboard of Britain at a very

early stage. Indeed, by 150AD Ptolemy, the Greek geographer and mathematician, had drawn a detailed map of Ireland with towns on the coast, and tribes, detailed on it. The documentarian, Bob Quinn (2005), deduced from his investigations that this knowledge was gleaned from Mediterranean sailors who lodged copies of their 'portolans' (navigational maps) at the great Alexandrian library (p.65). The Greeks also knew of this Western Isle and referred to it as a 'Holy Isle'; the very same 'Isle' that Ptolemy had mapped (p.196).

It is probable that this trade continued into the seventh century despite invasion, or perhaps because the invaders had used the same trading routes themselves. Recently analysed black remnants from the Sutton Hoo boat burial, thought to be pine tar, have been revealed by experts at the British Museum and Aberdeen University as bitumen from Syria. 'Proving a "far-reaching" Anglo-Saxon trade network' ("Sutton Hoo bitumen links Syria with Anglo-Saxon England - BBC News", 2016). This, and the preceding data, indicate that Christianity may have reached Western Britain and Ireland by various routes, rather than only one.

Donald Meek (2010) claims that archaeology provides a degree of information from stone engravings and similar artefacts, but that only so much can be deduced from this. To move further forward, literary sources need examination e.g. the lives of the saints and other notable people (p.127).

Meek (2010) gives some insight into notable people of the time. Pelagius was a lay monk, born in 335AD in Great Britain or Ireland, and he was in Rome for a time. Ninian is connected with the monastic settlement in Whithorn, but all that is known about him is from Bede, and that information is confusing in trying to identify him (p.127). He is said to be a Briton and had been 'regularly instructed in the mysteries of the Truth in Rome' (Bede, Sherley-Price, & Latham, 1976, p.146). Again, the Bishops' presence at the Council of Arles indicates there were probably early Christian communities established in at least three major locations, as Bishops were only provided to existing communities. Bede mentions the martyrdom of Aaron & Julius at what is thought to be Caerleon during the Diocletian Persecution between 303-311AD (p.47). However, little is known about the post-Roman period. Before the Norman invasion, there are records of thirty-five religious foundations, mostly in the south and southeast of Wales, of the rest of Wales relatively little is known. St

Sampson (fifth century), originally from the monastery at Llanilltud (said to be very influential in Welsh monastic development) can be traced to Cornwall, where it is believed he founded monasteries, and then into Brittany (Meek, 2010, p.130). Also, at Pennant Melangell in the centre of the country, St Melangell is known to have founded a female monastery in the seventh century. Another female Saint of that era was Winifred from North Wales who finally became Abbess of a monastery founded in Gwytherin in Denbighshire. Also mentioned around that time is Saint Beuno who was from Caernarfon (Lowry, 1983).

There is a record from Prosper of Aquitaine's Chronicle, of Palladius being consecrated by Pope Celestine and sent 'as Bishop to the Irish who believe in Christ' (Meek, 2010, p.131) in 431AD. It seems clear that there were believers in Ireland at that time. It is possible that Palladius and Patrick worked concurrently in different areas of Ireland. Patrick is known for his work in the North, possibly Palladius was working around Leinster. Although monasticism thrived during and after Patrick's time, bishops also had a significant role, this means there were non-monastic Christian communities too. 'We must not be trapped into the common error...that monasticism was the sole form of Christian organization' in Ireland (p.131-133).

This extract by an anonymous author of 750AD, from the *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, gives a brief overview of the first recorded period of Christianity in Ireland from around 440 - 543AD (translated from the Latin):

The first Order of Catholic Saints was in the time of Patrick. And then all were Bishops, famous, holy and full of the Holy Spirit, 350 in number, and founders of Churches. They had one head, Christ, and one leader, Patrick. They had one mass, one celebration, and one tonsure from ear to ear. They celebrated one Easter, on the 14th moon after the vernal equinox, and what was excommunicate from one Church, all excommunicated. They did not reject the ministrations of women or marriages; because they were founded on the rock of Christ, they did not fear the wind of temptation. This Order of saints lasted for four reigns; that is, through the time of Laeogaris, and Aila Mult, and Lugada son of Laeogarius, and Tuathail. All these Bishops came from the Romans, the Franks, the Britons and the Scots (Haddan, & Stubbs, 1878, p. 292)

In other words, they followed the Celtic date for Easter and the Celtic tonsure and were united in one liturgy. They had monasteries in which women looked after them (this will be explained further in the section on Monasticism), and the Bishops came

from across Celtic and Roman lands. This would indicate that the Irish Church was in communion with the Romano-Byzantine churches, despite the different tonsure and Easter date and that they shared a liturgy and habit that was compatible with the rest of Christendom.

It seems likely that Christianity arrived and took root in Britain through the influence of Rome and via established trading routes from other regions. There were Bishops, indicating established Christian communities, by the fourth century, and connection with the Apostolic Church. Monasticism thrived, and the Church appears strong and unified.

## **ARCHITECTURE AND ARCHAEOLOGY**

There is an indication of the probable transference of ideas between various Christian cultures. This is evidenced by archaeological discoveries linking Celtic regions to other Christian lands.

Quinn (2005) maintains that most Coptic missionary work took place in Ethiopia and Nubia, but also that Coptic and Syrian refugees settled in southern Gaul in the early centuries after Christ, bringing with them the Coptic Christian faith and the tradition of eremitic 'desert' monasticism. This type of Christianity seems very close in nature to that of the Celtic Church, some of whose monastic settlements were small scattered dwellings on tiny rocky islands (Skelligs) off the Irish coast of Kerry (p.197). Skellig Michael is thought to have been founded in the sixth century. It is also interesting to note the similarity in shape between the beehive huts of Ethiopia and the stone dwellings of the hermits. The hermit dwellings on the Skelligs were beehive in shape and used the local stone rather than the prevalent grass of Ethiopian huts. However, this idea may be fanciful as stone huts of this structure are found throughout what was the Ancient Celtic world, in differing intensities. They are 'very numerous in France, as far North as Burgundy, in Spain and Portugal, in some parts of the south of Italy, in Istria and Dalmatia, and probably all over the Balkans' (Radford, 1959). This design dates back into Neolithic time, and some huts of this style are built to this day in parts of Europe.

Archaeology has revealed a similar pattern of monastic settlement on the Skelligs to those of St Anthony's monastery in Egypt. The first monastery of St Anthony, formed around 361AD, was a scattering of separate cells surrounding an Oratory or Church where they would say the Divine Liturgy and other liturgical services. There was a communal building used as a refectory. The emphasis was on asceticism and isolation. As time went on these settlements became places of refuge from persecution, and they developed into communities out of convenience and shared lifestyle. (Meinardus, 1992, p.5).

The Beehive structures also echo the cave monasteries found throughout the Middle East, particularly in Syria, as they were built half under the cliff faces and into the caves and hillsides of the islands, see Figures 1 and 2 in the appendix. Such settlements are also found in Georgia on the borders of Russia. The Assyrian monk



St. David Garejeli, and his thirteen companions ("Syrian Fathers | The Georgian Church", n.d.), founded one such cave monastery in the sixth century. It is situated about fifteen miles southeast of Tbilisi and comprises many Churches and Chapels, hundreds of cells as well as several refectories and other domestic rooms, all hollowed out of tufa cliffs (Unesco Centre, n.d.) and ("David Gareja Cave Monastery", 2012).

Although the construction of the monastic buildings was different on mainland Britain, being angular wood or stone buildings, monasteries undoubtedly existed as evidenced by preceding comments on the Church in Wales. The recent discovery of the remains of seven individuals, carbon dated to the late fifth or early sixth century, at Beckery Chapel near Glastonbury indicates a monastic settlement, predating Iona Abbey (late sixth century), on the Celtic mainland of Britain; it also pre-dates Glastonbury Abbey (seventh century). Archaeologists in the 1960's discovered fifty to sixty skeletons on the same site. The majority were male; there was one female (possibly their patron) and some boys (probably novice monks). However, 'the balance of male and female remains and the new scientific evidence meant there was little doubt the burial ground had been a monastic cemetery' ("Beckery Chapel near Glastonbury - BBC News", 2016).

Work on multiple church groups in Wales and Western England with origins in the period between 250 and 750AD was presented at an archaeological conference in 2010. It reported that

In Anglo-Saxon England these [church] groups tend to be axially aligned, but in the west the layout of these complexes is more dispersed and related to the layout of church groups in Brittany and north-west France. Scottish examples include Iona and Howmore, South Uist, not surprisingly these conform to the 'Atlantic' pattern rather than the Anglo-Saxon (Campbell, 2004, p.180).

Whithorn Priory was reputedly founded by Ninan in the early sixth century, and this is borne out by archaeological data. The Venerable Bede writing around 731AD reports a new Northumbrian Bishopric being established at Whithorn, in southwest Scotland (Müldner et al., 2009, p.1120). This site ties in with another, Caherlehillan, a renowned archaeological site in Ireland overlooking Valencia harbour.

The stone enclosure of the 5th-6th century surrounds an early phase of timber church, at least four early stones with peacock decoration, and rectangular houses. The timber four-post church has a possible ablation drain and the

phase has produced imported Mediterranean amphorae of the 6th century. (Campbell, 2004, p.180).

There are several exciting points to note here. Peacocks appear in Christian art from earliest times in Egypt, Ethiopia, Byzantium and the Western Roman Empire, most notably in the catacombs. They are a symbol of eternal life; more will be said in the section on art. Notably on the same stone is a carving representing a flabellum (fan). These are liturgical items and closely associated with peacocks. The imports from the Mediterranean and the early rectangular buildings on the site connect the Irish Church with mainland Britain and the Continent, and combined with the preceding data, to the wider universal Church. The presence of male and female burials is also notable as women were found at Whithorn and Beckery Chapel. They are thought possibly to be high-status beneficiaries or pilgrims at Whithorn (Müldner et al., 2009) and Beckery, as previously mentioned; but there are other possibilities, explored later in the discussion about monasticism.

The variety of activities found on this site are very similar to Whithorn, but the scale of operation is larger here. It is possible that there were partly independent monastic tenants, craftspeople, working under the protection of the Church but not solely for the Church, as the activity indicated would produce more goods than the monastery required. Most of the craftwork activity is datable to the ninth and tenth centuries. It is thought that this site may serve as a model for similar Scottish sites like Whithorn (Campbell, 2004, p.181).

Another site, excavated by Time Team in 2009 on the Isle of Mull, potentially gives further insight into the connection between the Celts and the practices of the Coptic and Orthodox Churches. Time Team discovered an early monastic settlement with a chapel, previously timber and replaced by a stone structure. Under the altar position was found a void containing bones (relics) ("Time Team S17-E02 Mull", 2013). This is suggestive that the person lying under the altar was, probably, a local saint.

An altar is not consecrated in the Coptic or Orthodox tradition unless it contains the relics of a saint ("Coptic Sanctuary", 2017). In Orthodox practice, portable altars are created by a cloth, called an Antimension and containing relics of a saint, being laid on any appropriate surface. The Antimension acts as the altar. A portable wooden altar was buried with St Cuthbert of Lindisfarne (Hart, 2015). The site has strong connections with Iona, and the founder is thought to have been associated with St

Columba. Also found at the site was an outdoor reliquary and fragment of the associated standing stone Celtic Cross. With the reliquary, there was evidence that this was a pilgrimage site from the presence of round white quartz pebbles not native to the area. Such pebbles are commonly found on sites throughout the Western Isles and Ireland at places of pilgrimage. Carbon dating sets the site around the sixth to eighth centuries. It was abandoned around the eleventh or twelfth century ("Time Team S17-E02 Mull", 2013).

The archaeological finds at Celtic monastic sites indicate a connection to Egypt, and other places in the then Christian world, in the style and arrangement of their buildings. It also demonstrates a probable concurrence in liturgical practice and lifestyle. Saints were venerated, evidenced by the votive pebbles. The decoration on stones, the existence of altars, and church buildings indicate that liturgy was an integral part of their lives.

## LITURGICAL TEXTS

Having established its early arrival and establishment in Britain, and the varied influences upon it, the following section examines the manner of Christian faith and practice in the Celtic Church.

It appears that in mainland Britain, it was a Church recognised by Constantinople and therefore in communion with the Romano-Byzantine Patriarchate (the one 'Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church' as it appears in the creed adopted at the Council of Nicaea in 325AD). The aforementioned Bishops' presence at the Council of Arles, strongly suggests there were established Christian communities in major centres by the mid-fourth century. There is no written evidence of the Church in Ireland until some centuries later, but the presence of the faith is demonstrated by liturgical documents, the archaeological remains, and in the lives of the Saints.

Although there is little written evidence, a relevant archaeological find has recently come to light. The remains of a Psalter found in an Irish bog in 2006, the 'Faddan More Psalter', is believed to date from c.800AD. The most interesting part of this discovery is the leather cover:

Tiny fragments of papyrus were discovered in the lining of the Egyptian-style leather binding of the manuscript...The discovery of Egyptian papyrus represents the first tangible connection between early Irish Christianity and the Middle-Eastern Coptic Church and has confounded some of the accepted theories about the history of early Christianity in Ireland...The manuscript sat upright in the bog for over 1,000 years suggesting it may have been thrust into the soaking wet ground as the holder fled ("Manuscript dug from bog - Independent.ie", 2010).

Although the monastery at Birr was nearby, there is nothing tangible connecting it with the psalter. However, Birr was one of a collection of midland monasteries on the main route from the north into Munster (Smyth, 1982). It was a time of conflict and skirmish, and it is possible the book was being taken to a place of the safety. The route was dictated by the landscape, as it was a strip of fertile land bordered by forests and bogs. 'Evidence of the regular use of the route will be found in the Lives of Colman of Lynally and Mo-Chuda of Rahan' ("A Monastery at Durrow - Offaly History", n.d.).

The Psalter takes its place by the side of the 'Book of Kells' and the 'Book of Durrow', two other great illuminated Irish manuscripts. It begs the question of

whether the Irish Church owes more to the Coptic tradition than that of Roman Catholicism.

Thomas Cahill (1996) writes in his introduction *How the Irish Saved Civilisation* that Ireland had one 'moment of unblemished glory' (p.3). When the Roman Empire fell, and its cities were burned and looted and their literature destroyed, the Irish were copying all the Western literature they encountered, even that of Pagan scholars. He further makes the bold claim that it was from this legacy in Ireland that the Greek, Roman, and Christian cultures were re-integrated into Europe.

The Celtic Church was a liturgical church in a golden age of literacy and learning between 500-800AD. Its scholars and monastics were respected across Europe. There are some manuscripts from this time, examined in detail by Revd. MacCarthy D.D. (1886) in an article entitled *On the Stowe Missal*. The Stowe Missal is the oldest known Irish Mass-book still existing. The manuscripts compared, in an effort to piece together the Hiberno-Gallican usage of the liturgy, are the Bobbio Missal (written in Irish 'belonging perhaps to the Roman writing used in the British Isles before conversion of the Angles'. But due to various names in the canon it was unmistakably compiled for a Church in France (p.151)), the Reichenau, Gothic, Gallican and Frankish missals. The manuscripts together provide the Liturgy of an almost complete Mass.

The Stowe Missal is vellum, it comprises sixty-five folios, and the contents include: Excerpts from the Gospel of St John, Missal, Order of Baptism (*Ordo Baptismi*), Order of Visitation of Sick, including Extreme Unction and Communion, Irish Tract on the Mass and Three Irish Spells (p.136-137). The spells, or prayers, are for the healing of lost eyesight in which John 9:6-7 is quoted, for a thorn, and for strangury (p.171). It is believed to have been compiled between the mid to late fourth century and no later than 628AD. Each section is a gathering of folios that were originally used separately and then collected together into a book at a later stage, they are not all the same date, but from the script they can be identified as Irish in origin. There are various revisions of the text, all based on the Gallican Missal with Irish, Latin and Roman additions. In short, by comparison among different manuscripts, including fragments of manuscripts of the time, MacCarthy has discerned which parts were of Irish use. Everything points to the use of the Gallican mass, commonly found in

Europe, in Ireland with some specific local additions. Two prayers, the 'Depricatio' and the 'Cum Omnibus', offer proof that the Clementine Liturgy (from Antioch) was used 'at least in part' (p.157).

Not mentioned in the titles of the missal, although included in it, is the 'Irish Tract' (**Cursus** Scottorum). This omission is because it deals with the Daily Office, the celebration of the Canonical Hours, not with the Mass. One of the proofs given for this is that the author, it is thought, lived in the first quarter of the seventh century and was a disciple of Columbanus, the Irish ascetic, missionary and founder of monasteries. Part of Columbanus's rule refers to 'De Synaxi, ergo, id est, de **Cursu** psalmodum et orationum modo canonico' (the service is the canonical office of psalms and prayers). Columbanus notes that the office of psalms and prayers had variations in their tradition (p.162). Offices are said each day at the hours of Terce (Matins), Sext, None, and at Vespers at the lighting of the lamps around 6 p.m. Services are not necessarily identical, but are generally so.

MacCarthy sums up:

The importance of the Missal and Tract lies herein, that they present the Texts, and data for discrimination, of the various Masses current in Ireland from the introduction of Christianity to the middle of the eighth century: rescuing from oblivion...the forms in which Liturgy found expression in the Irish Church during the golden era of her sanctity and learning (p.163).

Two notable parts of the liturgy that spring from the pages of the Missal are the Litanies and the preparation of the Eucharistic bread. Only a few points from the liturgy will be examined here. The following paragraphs compare the preparation of the bread for the Eucharists of the Celtic, Orthodox and Coptic Churches.

The selection of the bread and the fraction of the bread are separated in the Coptic Church, in the Orthodox Church the fraction occurs during the 'Proskomedia' (preparation) performed just before the liturgy begins. In the Coptic Church it occurs at the consecration. Particular loaves are selected before the liturgy begins, and the process is similar in both churches. Common to both Churches, the bread is made of wheat and water. Modern practice is varied, some Orthodox use yeast, but traditionally others use starter (sourdough) from the previous batch of Prosphora (Communion loaves). In that sense, the bread is unleavened and is a similar method and result to the bread found in North Africa today. The Copts always use yeast,

representing the sins of the world carried in Christ's body to the cross. Both stamp the bread and use round loaves to represent 'Jesus Christ, having no beginning or end as Christ is without beginning or end; the Alpha and the Omega, the Eternal Son of God' (Bishop Mettaous, n.d., p. 99-100). The pattern of the stamp plays a role in the fraction of the loaf and what each part of the bread represents. Similar round breads are depicted in second-century scenes of the Eucharist in the Catacombs of Rome. It seems unlikely, given the necessary fragmentation seen in the following paragraphs, that an unleavened wafer type bread was used in the Celtic tradition. The Coptic and Orthodox Churches are very clear that the bread becomes the body of Christ and that no fragment should be lost, there seems no reason to presume that the Celtic Church viewed it differently. A thin hard bread would shatter and create too many crumbs to be practical or satisfactory.

The Celtic method of fraction bears a striking resemblance to both the Coptic and Orthodox traditions as the following paragraphs will demonstrate, although it probably follows the Coptic tradition more closely. Figure 3 in the appendix illustrates how the fragments were laid out on the paten at the fraction. They were placed in a cruciform pattern. In the centre was the piece from which the Celebrant communicated, as in the Coptic and Orthodox Churches. Other fragments represented those prayed for or those present, the Bishops, the Priests, other clerical orders, Anchorites and Clerical Students, innocent youths, penitents, married people and first communicants. The fraction was on the paten 'the body of Christ being broken upon the tree of the Cross' (MacCarthy, 1886, p.264). The halves were then placed together again 'a figure of integrity of the Body of Christ after Resurrection' (p.264), as in the Coptic rite. Other parts were separated off, one to represent the wounding of Christ by the spear (p.264). This is in common with the Orthodox preparation (Grasos, 2010). One half is submerged in the wine later, at the point of consecration as with the Copts. According to MacCarthy (1886) 'the process so elaborately described here has been found in no other Western Missal'. Bishop (Saint) Gregory of Tours (sixth century) described it as a book par excellence (p.164).

In the Orthodox Church, the priest and deacon prepare the bread by taking five loaves, in the Russian tradition, and one large loaf in the Greek tradition.

Preparing one large cube of bread to be “the Lamb” (the consecrated bread which becomes the Eucharistic Body of Christ), and making other commemorations as well...The priest places the Lamb in the midst of the diskos (...paten...), and then takes...nine ranks and classes of saints...represented by name in the form of nine other particles [The Archangels and Angels, The Prophets, The Apostles, The Holy Fathers, The Martyrs, The Holy Ascetics, The Holy Unmercenaries, The Ancestors of our Lord, Joachim & Anna, Saint of Day, Saint whose Liturgy is celebrated]. [Further] particles are removed as the names of various living people are commemorated...particles are removed as various departed people are commemorated...these various particles are arranged around the central Lamb so that the diskos represents Christ surrounded by those whom He loves ("The Rite of Proskomedia", 2016)

The Coptic Church selects its Eucharistic bread during the Offertory from an uneven number of loaves presented (3 or 5 or 7). The best loaf is chosen to be the ‘Lamb’. The centre of the stamp is called the Spadikon (The Lord). At the fraction, during the consecration prayers, the loaf is divided in two, one-third and two-thirds, so that the Spadikon is not damaged. Each part of the loaf stamped to represent the twelve Apostles is removed, other parts called gems are also removed and laid out on the paten as limbs, in a cruciform arrangement. Ultimately the Spadikon is dipped in the consecrated wine so combining the body and the blood of Christ (Bishop Mettaous, n.d.). In Orthodox tradition, the fragments removed from the loaf (not The Lamb) are placed in the wine, and the people receive it together.

During the Orthodox Proskomedia, and as part of the Coptic Offertory, prayers are made over the bread for the living and the departed as presented on lists from the congregation. Particles are removed from the bread for those remembered in both traditions. In the Coptic tradition, all the pieces cut or removed are replaced to make a whole loaf again. Both Orthodox and Coptic Priests partake of The Lamb and the Spadikon respectively, which is always centrally placed on the paten or diskos.

It appears that in the Celtic Church this ritual is the preparation for the liturgy and its omission in other manuscripts ‘shows this portion of the Rite to have been traditional, and is an evidence of antiquity’ (MacCarthy, 1886, p.163). Adamnan (Abbot of Iona Abbey 679–704AD) writes that it was the deacon’s duty to prepare the holy gifts before the liturgy began, and old Penitentials assign substantial punishments for neglect of this office, this agrees with the rubrics of the ‘Irish Tract’ (p.163). It is the priest and deacons together of the Coptic and Orthodox churches that make these preparations.



Water and wine are combined in the chalice in all three traditions, and during the Liturgy, there are coverings and uncoverings of the elements by cloths or veils with various and similar theological significances. There is a suggestion in the rubrics that the bread was wrapped in a cloth at one point during the Celtic ceremony (p. 246), just as it is in the Coptic Church (Bishop Mettaous, n.d., p.104).

The Celtic 'Deacon's Litany' is almost identical to the Orthodox litanies said by the Deacon in the 'Liturgy of St John Chrysostom'. MacCarthy (1886) quotes the Greek from the Deacon's Litany in the 'Constantinopolitan Liturgy' in his notes on this (p.199). It begins in Latin: 'Dicamus omnes ex toto corde, et ex tota mente: Domine, exaudi et miserere; Domine, miserere' (p.199), which is:

Let us say with our whole heart, and with all our mind also: O Lord, hear us and have mercy on us; Let us pray...

In the Orthodox Litany:

Let us all say with all our soul and with all our mind, let us say. People: Lord, have mercy

Following are each translated line from the Latin of the Stowe Missal (SM) (Warner,1915), compared to the present Orthodox Litany (OL) ("Liturgy of St John Chrysostom", 2015):

SM: You Who do look upon the earth, and it trembles. Hear my prayer [O Lord above] [Ps. ciii]

OL: For the peace from above and for the salvation of our souls. Let us pray to the Lord.

SM: For peace, quiet and the deepest tranquillity in our times of the Holy Catholic Church, which is from one end to the ends of the earth;

OL: For the peace of the whole world, for the stability of the holy Churches of God, and for the union of all. Let us pray...

SM: For their Shepherd, N, the bishop, the presbyters, and deacons, and all the bishops and all the clergy, and to all. Oramus

OL: For his all holiness, Patriarch N., N. our Archbishop, and N. our Bishop, for the honourable order of presbyters, for the diaconate in Christ, for all the clergy and the people. Let us pray...

SM: For this place, and dwellers in it; for religious emperors; And the Roman army. Oramus.

OL: For our Sovereign Lady, Queen Elizabeth, the Royal Family, her Government, and all in civil authority. Let us pray...

- SM: For all those who are in high positions; on behalf of the virgins, the widows, and the orphans. Oramus.
- For Pilgrims and Travellers and seafarers; For penitents and catechumens. Oramus.
- OL: For those who travel by land, air or water, for the sick, the suffering, for those in captivity, and for their safety and salvation. Let us pray...
- SM: For those who are the fruit of mercy in the Holy Church and choose the virtue of the Lord, hear our prayers. Oramus.
- OL: Again we pray for those who bear fruit and do good works in this holy and venerable house, for those who labour in its service, for those who sing; and for the people here present who await thy great and rich mercy. Let us pray...

Illustrated by the comparison above, the Litanies of the two churches run closely in parallel. They are also nearly aligned in expression.

As noted in the introduction, a misnomer about the Celtic church was its tolerance of the Druidic religion. Christian Celts worked with their neighbours and were in some degree dependent on Pagan landowners for the founding of Christian settlements as in the account of Daire granting the land Arrd Machae (Armagh) to St Patrick (p.188). As a consequence perhaps, there was a prayer in the Mass, 'Hanc-convertas', that the founder (or one who enabled the foundation) of a Church might be converted from idolatry (p.165). It seems that this kind of land donation was such a common occurrence that it required regulation. MacCarthy (1886) quotes a canon of the first Synod of St Patrick (c.457AD) (translated from the Latin):

If a person has entered into the people, he shall not baptise, nor offer, nor consecrate, nor build up the Church, until he receives permission from the Bishop; he of the Pagans who seeks permission is unacceptable (p.166).

Further, the thirty-first canon of the Second Synod of St Patrick says (translated from the Latin): 'The Pagans who believe receive penance before Baptism' (p.166). The prayer 'Hanc-convertas' is, according to MacCarthy, older than the date of its transcription, it refers to the national Church and is from a very early period of the Church's existence in Ireland (p.166).

The Celtic Christians, as in the Coptic and Orthodox Churches, and consequently in the Roman Catholic Church, prayed for those who had died and invoked the prayers of the Saints (p.156, p.192 and p.206). As the preceding paragraph indicates, it was a canonical Church. It was a disciplined Church with rules. It is known, for example,

from various sources, that St Patrick studied under Bishop, later Saint, Germanus of Auxerre in Gaul. He was sent by St Germanus 'to Rome to receive episcopal consecration, and formal authority to preach the Gospel in Ireland' (Healy, 1905, p.81). Everything was done with proper authority and by ordination within the Apostolic Succession.

It was a penitential Church. There are records of many Penitentials, the Roman, the Bobbio, the Parisiense to name but a few. These few mentioned, in part, all derive their contents from the penitential of Columbanus of Bangor, later of Bobbio, who died in 651AD (Kenney, 1929, p.243).

The Old-Irish penitential begins:

The venerable of Ireland have drawn up from the rules of the Scriptures a penitential for the annulling and remedying of every sin, both small and great. (p.242).

This penitential has eight sections relating to eight principal sins, and each has a preface. The prefaces make up a discourse on the deadly sins.

The extant versions go back to an archetype...which was already in a dilapidated condition when the first of these copies was made. It was probably an old penitential book that had been long in use (p.242).

The ceremonial extracts examined in the preceding paragraphs demonstrate that the Celtic Church appears to have been liturgical and closely aligned to the practices of other Apostolic Churches. It is also apparent from evidence of synods and episcopal consecration that the Celtic Church was disciplined and ordered.

## MONASTERIES

The previous section has established that the Celtic Church was disciplined, liturgical and ordered, and therefore aligned to other Apostolic churches. It follows that its monasticism would also be so, which this next section hopes to prove.

In early Christianity some monasteries were mixed in gender, but it was not the norm. St Anthony (c. 251-356AD) for example when he began his monastic life sent his little sister to be brought up by a separate community of faithful virgins (Athanasius et al., 2003, p.60-61). In the Orthodox Communion, there are some mixed monasteries remaining today, the Monastery of St John the Baptist, in Tolleshunt Knights in Essex being one example. Men and women live separately but worship and eat communally, but separated. In Church, the men are on the right, in front of the Icon of Christ and women are in front of the Theotokos on the left.

There were 'double monasteries' in Celtic Gaul, and some in Anglo-Saxon England, there are also reported to have been some in Ireland. Cogitosus writes in the prologue to his 'Life of Brigid'

That not only did she rule nuns, but also a large community of men, who lived in a separate monastery. This obliged the saint to call to her aid... bishop, S. Conlaeth, to be the director and spiritual father of her religious; and at the same time, to be bishop of the city. The church at Kildare, to suit the necessities of the double monastery and to accommodate the laity, was divided by partitions into three distinct parts. One of these was reserved for the monks; one for the nuns; while a third compartment was intended to suit the requirements of the laity (O'Hanlon, 1877, p.175).

After the Second Council of Nicaea in 787AD double monasteries became illegal. Apparently, it had not worked in some places as it should:

Double monasteries are henceforth forbidden. If a whole family wishes to renounce the world together, the men must go into convents for men, the female members of the family in convents for women. The double monasteries already existing may continue ... but must observe the following ordinance: Monks and nuns may not reside in one building, for living together gives occasion for incontinence. (Hefele, & Clark, 1894, p.385).

The tradition continues today. Married couples are accepted into the monastic life within Orthodoxy once their children are grown, but not into the same house and never living together. Both members of the couple must become monastics, the Church will not accept the breakup of a marriage through one person becoming monastic and the other not.

Monastics were mobile. Isotopic evidence at Whithorn Priory corroborates the fact that senior clerics were 'imported' into an existing community. The investigation results revealed that the lay people had had a local upbringing and diet, and the senior clergy had come from further afield; it also showed a correlation with other monastic sites examined in this way (Müldner et al., 2009, p. 1130). Further, the data provides 'a glimpse into the diverse origins of individuals buried at a major centre of pilgrimage' (p.1131).

The evidence shows that Irish monks and clergy travelled in Europe, from the history and manuscripts already discussed, and also documents such as the Reichenau Primer (from Reichenau Abbey). In this is found a reflective poem rather than a religious one, 'Pangur Ban', in Old Irish. It was written anonymously at some time in the ninth century by an Irish monk. It is a poem about his white (Ban) cat named 'Pangur Ban'. The verse is similar to the poetry of Sedulius Scottus, and there is conjecture that he is the author as he lived and wrote at that time in Reichenau (Greene, & O'Connor, 1990).

The monastic Celtic Church was also missionary. Not only did Irish monastics travel into Scotland, England and onto the continent but Leslie Hardinge (1972) says there are records of them travelling to Iceland and beyond (p.11).

The monks of Iona were called by King Oswald (c. 604 – 642AD) despite their differing Easter date, to convert the Northumbrians, and Bede speaks kindly of them: 'Bishop Aidan a man of outstanding gentleness, holiness, and moderation. He had a zeal in God' (Bede, Sherley-Price, & Latham, 1976, p.146). Even after the Synod of Whitby in 664AD

Though Bede no longer excuses Iona for heretical practices, he never portrays it as negatively as he does the British. Churchmen from this monastery had helped in the conversion of Northumbria, while he believed the British had not (Corning, 2006, p.116).

This quotation indicates that, although not approved of, the Easter date possibly did not result in a formal excommunication.

These findings would suggest that monasteries ran similarly to those throughout Christendom, with similar rules. It also shows that Celtic monastics were valued as missionaries and educators.

## ART

Christian art is an expression of faith and doctrine found throughout the world. It offers an insight into the theology and practice of the Church and supplements the written word. A comparison of illustrations in the illuminated manuscripts may provide an indication of the influences on the Irish illuminators.

Peacocks, as mentioned previously, have much symbolism attached to them, especially from the Greeks. They believed Peacock flesh was incorruptible, so the birds came to symbolise eternal life. The eyes in the tail perhaps represented an all-seeing God or Church (Ferguson, 1954).

Peacocks occur in the Christian art of Egypt, Ethiopia, Greece, Rome and Ireland. They appear in paintings, in illuminated manuscripts, carved onto gravestones and in mosaics. Figures 4 to 11 in the appendix illustrate the breadth of their popularity and the variation of their style. This again demonstrates the international place that Celtic Christianity held within Christendom and the strong links to the earliest expressions of the faith.

The flabellum carved with the peacock on the stone at Caherlehillan is fascinating. Flabella are depicted in the Book of Kells (Figure 12), these bear a resemblance to those used in the Maronite and Orthodox Churches. As liturgical items they have been in use in churches from the earliest times. From the rubrics, they were initially for practical purposes.

In the Liturgy of St. Clement, translated from the Apostolical Constitutions, a rubric runs thus : 'Two deacons on each side of the altar hold a fan made of thin vellum, fine linen, or peacocks feathers, to drive away flies or gnats, lest they fall into the chalice' (Butler, 1884, p.46).

They have now become symbolic and represent the Cherubim in the Orthodox tradition. They are taken in procession at the Great Entrance with the Eucharistic elements, and also appear at the Gospel. The use has faded out of use in western Christendom, although there are records of them in Western Church inventories as late as the thirteenth century (p.52). It is possible to deduce that they were used in a similar symbolic and liturgical fashion in the Celtic Church.

The 'Book of Trier', an illuminated Gospel Book from the eighth century, and now kept in Trier Cathedral, was produced by two scribes. The one, Thomas, used

the insular style similar to that of Lindisfarne (Diebold, 1996). In it, a composite figure by Thomas, representing the four Gospel writers appears to be holding a flabellum and a Eucharistic lance (Figure 13) (Butler, 1884, p.52). This is interesting because it confirms liturgical practice. The knife was, and is, used for the fraction of the bread at the Eucharist and the flabella were, and are still used as already discussed.

Depictions of Christ and the Theotokos, when comparing the Ethiopian (or Coptic) representation and the Celtic representation, are remarkable in their similarities (Figures 14 to 17). The Theotokos is presented in an almost identical fashion, apart from more elaborate decoration in the Book of Kells. Although the arm positions of Christ Enthroned are slightly different the posture, demeanour and theological message are alike. Christ the Word, ruler of the Universe (Pantocrator) blessing creation from His throne. This indicates an influence through books, by personal contact or some other way between the cultures producing this art. It is also interesting to note the strong similarity between the black wizened image of the devil, bereft of all light, in the Kells 'Temptation of Christ' and that which appears in the Orthodox icons of 'The Ladder of Divine Ascent' and the 'Healing of the Possessed Boy' (Figures 17-19).

The last point to make in this section is regarding the art inside and out of the Celtic church building. The early wooden constructions are gone. They may have been very decorative, but the stone carcasses are all that is left of their replacements (Henry, 1965, p.87).

It appears that icons were probably in use in the Celtic Church and other parts of Britain. Cogitosus, again in his 'Life of Brigid' (written c.750), describes the interior of the church at Kildare. There were gold embellished shrines for the relics of St Brigid and St Conleath on either side of the altar. It had an ornamented altar; there were pictures, it had decorated windows and a carved door. He also describes a rood screen or iconostasis with two doors; it was decorated with pictures and linen hangings. Apparently, this bears a striking resemblance to the Church erected by Benedict Biscop in 680AD; he brought 'pictures' from Rome to decorate his Church. There is also a record of St Augustine carrying an image of Christ on wood (an icon) when he met the King of Kent c.597 (p.90).

It appears that art was greatly valued by the Celtic Church. It was apparently used widely in Churches and worship. This discussion also shows that influences in art were shared across continents and cultures, indicating that the Celtic Church's reach was not isolated to a single island.



## CONCLUSION

The process of learning the truth about the Celtic church is a jigsaw puzzle. It is a journey of discovery, and is continually being transformed by new discoveries such as the Faddan More Psalter.

This work attempts to demonstrate that the Celtic Church was part of the one family of Apostolic Catholic Churches that existed from the first century until the great Schism of 1054. The Celtic Church appears to have been Orthodox in its teaching and worship, governed collectively by Bishops. There is evidence that when there were important differences of opinion and practice, they called synods and made collegial decisions, as did the rest of the universal Ancient Church. This resulted, eventually, in a common Easter and tonsure across Britain and Ireland. There may have been some less important local customs that differed in places; these exist today within the Coptic and Orthodox Communion.

Apparently, they were people who consecrated bread and wine in a similar fashion to the Coptic and Orthodox Churches. They prayed for the departed and believed in the intercession of the Saints; they were people who baptised for the forgiveness of sins, who were Trinitarian in theology, who also venerated relics and icons, and did not accept Pagan worship. Their Bishops, Priests, and Deacons were ordained in the Apostolic Succession. These insights tend to dispel the myths of the romantics in the eighteenth century that persist into the modern spiritual arena, as mentioned in the introduction. Undoubtedly many lovely literary compositions arose from the early centuries of the Celtic Church, but the nature of the whole Church cannot be judged by them. It is surprising to note that while the romantics were devising an apparently less than accurate picture of the Celtic Church, serious academic scholars were discovering its probable orthodoxy, as evidenced by the reference list of this dissertation.

The evidence indicates an international Church that had influence across Europe and gave and received teaching to and from the Christian middle-east and Romano-Byzantine West. They were missionaries, educators, pilgrims and the people of the Celtic Church if alive today would, it appears, find a comfortable home in the Orthodox or Coptic Churches and even to some degree in the Roman Catholic

Church. It seems unlikely that they would recognise themselves in the 'Celtic' worship of the modern age.

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# APPENDIX



Figure 1 ("Skellig Michael Monastic Site", n.d.)

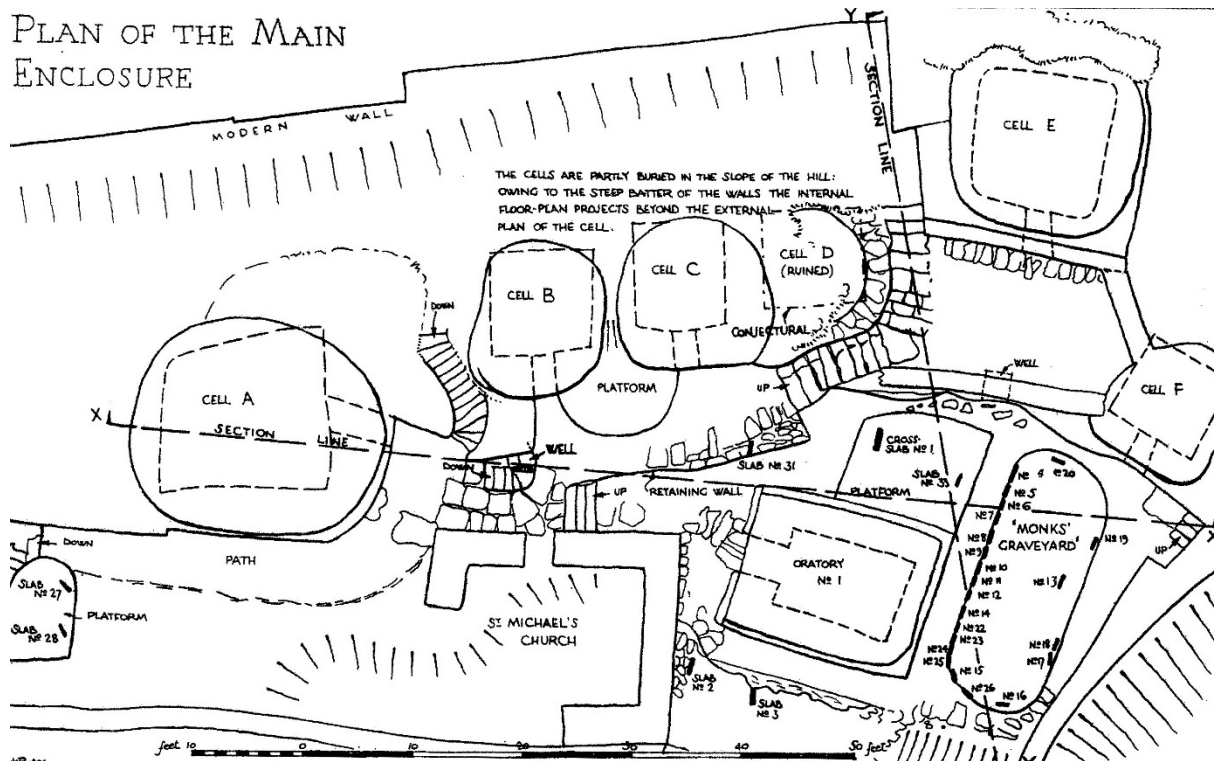
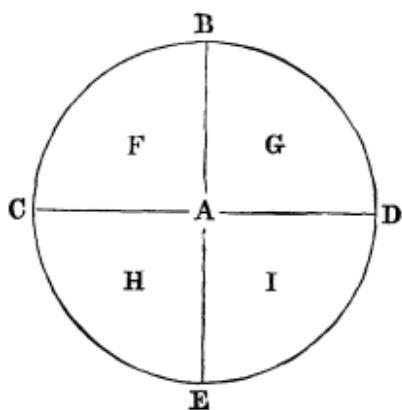


Figure 2 (de Paor, 1955)

The following diagram will illustrate the distribution.



- A (1) Middle part—Celebrant.
- AB (7) Upper part of shaft—Bishops.
- AC (7) Left part of cross-piece—Priests.
- AD (7) Right part of cross-piece—Inferior grades.
- AE (7) Lower part of shaft—Anchorites [and ?].
- F (9; i.e., 5 + 4) Upper left angle—Clerical students.

G (9; i.e., 5 + 4) Upper right angle—Innocent youths.

H (9; i.e., 5 + 4) Lower left angle—Penitents.

I (9; i.e., 5 + 4) Lower right angle—Married (65) people and first communicants.

<sup>s</sup> *In tui ofires*, literally, *he who offers*. In the express mention of a single celebrant in this place, as well as in sections 11, 12, 13, and in the *Cum omnibus* of Ba(15), we obtain a catena of original proofs that joint Consecration was not the custom of the Early Irish Church.

<sup>h</sup> Here we have bishops and priests not consecrating, but communicating in the same manner as the inferior orders and the laity—confirming what we learn from Adamnan (i. 40; iii. 17), that individual Celebration was not practised in large monastic establishments. In fact, with the great numbers of episcopal and sacerdotal rank belonging to those communities, that described in the Text was the only practicable arrangement.

Figure 3 (MacCarthy, 1886, p.256)

## PEACOCKS IN CHRISTIAN ART



Figure 4 Possibly from Thebes, Egypt. Coptic period, 8th century AD ("Limestone gravestone at The British Museum Images", n.d.).

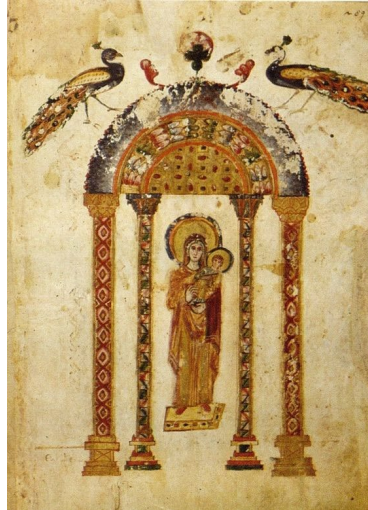


Figure 5 Two Cross Slabs 7<sup>th</sup> century. One with a peacock on it. May connect it with North Africa ("Caherlehillan, County Kerry", 2014).





**Figure 6** Egypt, Byzantine period, 6th century ("Hanging with Christian Images", n.d.).



**Figure 7** The Holy Virgin in a shrine (Folio 1b). The Rabbula Gospels, or Rabula Gospels, 6th century illuminated Syriac Gospel Book (Kiraz, 2001).



**Figure 8** Stone with relief depicting fish, peacock and quadruped in relief, sandstone, found in the Christian area near the temple of Luxor, Coptic civilization, 6th-7th century ("Stone with relief depicting fish, peacock and quadruped in relief,...", n.d.).



**Figure 11** The Book of Kells, folio 292r, c. 800; Gospel of John ("Book of Kells - Britons, Gaels, Picts, Angles and Vikings - Scotland's History", n.d.).



**Figure 9** Peacock above orante (figure of a young woman with hands lifted in prayer), Cubicle of the Velata, Catacombs of Priscilla, Rome - second half of the third century ("Peacock as an Ancient Christian Symbol of Eternal Life -- Early Christian Symbols of the Ancient Church", n.d.)



**Figure 10** Fragment belonging to Cim basilica (Mostar, 5-6AD). Stone bas-relief decorated with a peacock probably the decoration of a lintel ("Early Christian Decorations", 2015).



## COMPARISONS



**Figure 12** Book of Kells. A section of Folio 7v containing an image of the Virgin and Child showing the angels holding flabella. (Archive, n.d.)



**Figure 13**  
Created:  
between circa  
700 and circa  
750. Gospel of  
Trier (folio 5v),  
signed by  
Thomas  
(Borchart,  
2001).



**Figure 14**  
Book of  
Kells, Folio  
32v, Christ  
Enthroned  
(Mitchell,  
& Boltin,  
1977).



**Figure 15** Christ  
in Majesty, from  
the Monastery of  
St Anthony, Egypt  
("St Anthony  
Monastery, Red  
Sea, Egypt", n.d.).



**Figure 16**  
Book of  
Kells.  
Folio 7v  
containing  
an image of  
the Virgin  
and Child  
(Archive,  
n.d.).



**Figure 17**  
Manuscript  
TCD MS 1497,  
a book of  
devotions to  
the Virgin  
Mary, from  
Ethiopia  
(undated).  
("Virgin and  
Child", 2015).



**Figure 17** Attacking the devil. In this full-page miniature, Christ, at the summit of the Temple, is being tempted by the devil. ("History Ireland - Ireland's History Magazine", 2017)



**Figure 18** Orthodox icon of the Ladder of Divine Ascent ("St. John Climacus - The Rungs of His Ladder of Divine Ascent", n.d.)



**Figure 19** Vignette from the icon of the Healing of the Possessed Boy ("2014.03.30. St John of the Ladder. Healing of the Possessed Boy. Sermon by Priest John Johnson", 2014)