

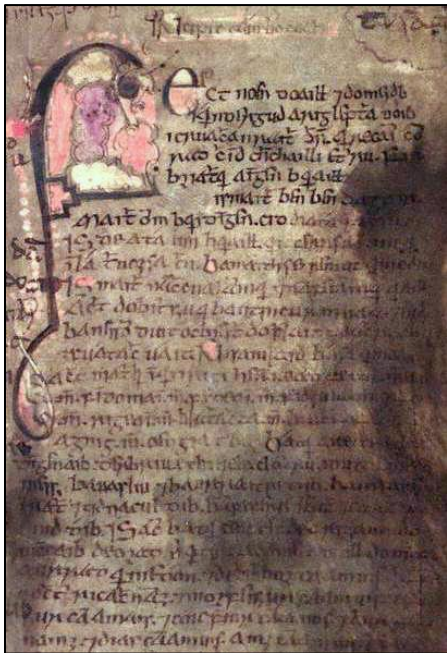


Diversifying the Teaching of the History of Rhetoric Series:

## Medieval Irish Rhetorical Traditions

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### Situating Irish Rhetoric



*Book of Leinster*

The medieval Irish rhetorical tradition begins in the fifth century CE with arrival of the Romano-Briton bishop, Patricius, better known to us today as St Patrick. With the arrival of the Church in the fifth century came literacy, and the following centuries saw a flowering of Latinate and vernacular literature and learning, including grammatical handbooks (both Latin and vernacular), poetry, liturgical texts, hagiography, hymns, poetry, saga, *dindshenchas* (“lore of place-names”), triads, scriptural and grammatical commentaries, and law-texts. The Irish were known by their British and Continental colleagues for *serc léigind* (“a love of learning”), and in the earliest centuries the Irish monastic schools had a stellar, international reputation.

Verbal art and oratory were central to early Irish society, with native practices of satire, praise, the pronouncement of legal judgments, and the recitation of saga all represented in the extant literature. Indeed, Irish social

structure was in many ways defined by such oratorical roles. However, these traditions must be understood within the context of the late antique and early medieval world.

In many ways, the intellectual history of medieval Ireland is the intellectual history of the Christian Latin West. However, Irish learning and literature is clearly distinct and reflects Irish social and cultural values as much as the influence of the Latin tradition. Contemporary scholars often refer to Irish learned and literary texts as “syncretic.” The tradition is vast, but some texts are better suited for a history of rhetoric class. I will organize this resource according to period, language, and genre. The Early Modern period is also quite important, as by the thirteenth century Irish scholars were intensely engaging with Roman epic and Virgilian commentaries, and by the fourteenth and fifteenth century, the Irish were working within the contemporary trends of Continental Europe and Britain, but always with a distinctly Irish “flavor.”

However, I think it important to first dispel some of the myths associated with early Ireland. Throughout the twentieth century, there was a strong tendency among scholars and in



popular culture to paint a picture of early Ireland as one shrouded in “Celtic Mists.” Outside of the reaches of the Roman Empire, “Celtic” culture was preserved, and the surviving texts provide a window on the Iron Age. Indeed, these perspectives still persist today. However, as early as the third century CE, the Irish were involved in maritime trade with Roman Britons and the Mediterranean World, and the introduction of Christianity had a profound impact on Irish culture and society. With the exception of the inscriptions on standing stones known as ogham stones, all of the surviving texts we have from the early period are exactly that, texts. The ogham stones, along with the carved standing crosses, are excellent examples of material rhetoric, and these date to the pre-historic era, some perhaps as early as the third century CE, though the majority dating to the fifth century. Ogham is an alphabet that consists of a series of dashes across a line representing the Roman alphabet, and ogham stones likely marked burial sites and territorial boundaries. Importantly, this form of writing pre-dates the arrival of Christianity.

With the introduction of Christianity came the introduction of literacy, and it is likely that the extant manuscripts were produced within monastic *scriptoria*. Also, the early Irish did not see themselves as “Celts,” but rather as Gaels, and the identification of the Irish as Celts is a linguistic one. Such descriptions are fraught, and the student of early Ireland must tread carefully. Therefore, treating this literature as evidence of Celtic culture and mythology is controversial. This being said, the Latin and vernacular learning of early medieval Ireland is a rich resource for the student of rhetoric, and as more editions and translations of medieval texts become available, this tradition will change the dominant narratives of histories of medieval rhetoric.

## Latinate Texts – 5<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries

The Latinate tradition in Ireland begins with St Patrick whose writings survive in several continental manuscripts, as well as a ninth-century Irish manuscript known as *Liber Ardmachanus*, or *Book of Armagh*. The surviving writings are the *Epistola ad Milites Corotici* (*Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*) and *Confessio* (*Confession*). Scholarly consensus holds that, though these texts survive in much later manuscripts, they can be dated linguistically to the fifth century. Patrick was born to a noble Romano-British family in the fourth century. Though his dates and exact place of birth cannot be assigned with certainty, he tells us in his writings that his father was a *decurion*, another way of describing a *curiales*, a member of the ruling class that managed Roman provinces for the Empire. Patrick was wealthy, and his father and grandfather were also members of the clergy. He was captured and enslaved by the Irish at the age of about 16, but he escaped a few years later and returned home. Soon after, he likely studied in southern Gaul where he would eventually take clerical orders and return to Ireland as a bishop. His bishopric was not authorized by Rome, but likely by the Roman British Church. Patrick tells us he renounced his title to nobility, as well as his inheritance, in order to follow his Christian calling. In this, we see evidence for Patrick having been trained within the milieu of Paulinus of Nola or a similarly oriented monastic community in late fourth-century Gaul.



The *Epistola* is a letter of admonishment to a Romano-British king, Coroticus, for his raiding and slaughter of numerous recently converted Christians in Ireland, many of whom were sold into slavery among the “apostate Picts.” A rhetorical analysis of this letter has revealed that Patrick was trained in a form of Roman rhetoric, though within a monastic context. The letter’s organization, skilled deployment of numerous rhetorical figures, impactful appeals to pathos, and sophisticated chains of scriptural allusion (in place of the traditional Roman allusion to Classical sources), all bear the mark of a complex rhetorical performance. Though there are few allusions to texts other than the Latin Vulgate and *Vetus Latina* Bibles, the letter is clearly a product of rhetorical training. It is important to note, too, that letters were intended to be read aloud and performed in Late Antiquity. A letter was often sent with a skilled messenger, accompanied by an envoy, and the whole display would have been performed in front of a large audience. Patrick’s *Epistola* is of interest to historians of rhetoric not only for evidence of the continuation of rhetorical education in late fourth- or early fifth-century Britain, but also as a rhetorical artifact. Patrick’s letter provides us with an early example of rhetorical practice in Ireland, but it also sheds much light on sub-Roman Britain. A century later, the British writer Gildas will be of great interest.

Patrick’s *Confessio* is a written response to allegations made by “*seniores*” of the British Church who had called a synod to question the legitimacy of his bishopric in Ireland. The *Confessio* is reminiscent of Augustine’s *Confession*, and within this fascinating text we find much evidence for the nature of rhetorical learning in the Late Antique West. There are dreams and visions built on complex figuration, skillful deployment of rhetorical figures and, again, a hooking and chaining of scriptural allusions all set to the purpose of Patrick’s defense of his mission to Ireland. Finally, both of Patrick’s extant writings also point to a shift in stylistic values and the dominance of not only biblical learning, but also *simplicitas* (simplicity of style) and *rusticitas* (rusticity), both humility *topoi* that grew in importance in the fourth through the seventh centuries.

Though Patrick’s writings are the earliest, the Latinate tradition is extensive in early medieval Ireland. Perhaps most famous for his rhetorical abilities is the Irish *peregrinus* (“self-exiled monk”) Columbanus (543-615 CE), who has left a wealth of writings. Among these, we find five letters, numerous sermons, a monastic rule, and perhaps even poetry, though the authenticity of the poems is contested. Columbanus writes in a style referred to as “*Hisperic*.” *Hisperic* Latin was common throughout the Insular world in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, and several British and Irish writers exemplify this bombastic, highly ornamental, and archaizing tendency. Columbanus provides some of the earliest substantiated evidence for the nature of Irish monasticism and monastic learning in late sixth- and early seventh-century Ireland.

As a *peregrinus*, Columbanus left Ireland in the late sixth-century to spend the rest of his life in Merovingian Gaul, establishing important monasteries (especially Bobbio and Luxeuil) and getting involved in Church affairs. *Peregrinatio* among the Irish is worthy of rhetorical study in its own right. Columbanus’s biographer, Jonas, writes of him that he dedicated himself to *litterarum doctrinis et grammaticorum studiss* “the study of literature and grammar.” This dedication to study of the liberal arts reveals itself most fully in

Columbanus's letters. In Letter IV, Columbanus writes to Pope Boniface, admonishing him for his poor handling of the "Three Chapters Controversy," an incredibly brave move that best captures his rhetorical zeal. This letter, as well as his letter to Pope Gregory the Great are prime examples of Christian rhetoric in Late Antiquity.

A text representative of a fusion of native and ecclesiastical learning is the *Hisperica Famina* ("Western Sayings"). This collection of verse written in *Hisperic* style includes description of the daily life of a student, common objects found in the monastery, as well as landscape descriptions. These descriptions, however, are set in the midst of a rhetorical battle between a group of monks and wandering scholars who debate who has the most rhetorical skill. Gabriell Knappe has argued that the *Hisperica* were likely influenced by Priscian's Latin translation of Hermogenes' *progymnasmata*, the *Praeexercitamina*. Stone has followed Knappe's lead, placing the *Hisperica* within the context of Late Antique rhetorical practices and Irish learning.

There are a number of surviving hagiographies that demonstrate the influence of secular and ecclesiastical learning, including Virgil (especially Jonas's *Life of Columbanus*). Hagiography draws on epideictic rhetoric and is a prime example of the versatility of the rhetorical arts in the late antique and early medieval periods.

Though there are a number of other important texts listed in the primary sources, the last texts to be discussed will be the grammatical. In the seventh century, interest in grammatical handbooks proliferated in Ireland. In order to contribute to Latin Christendom, the Irish, who were not native Latin speakers, had to learn the language. Donatus was too difficult, as his grammar was intended for native Latin speakers. Therefore, Irish scholars created their own grammatical handbooks, several of which survive today. In at least one instance, the Irish author of the grammar adapted Donatus for a beginning student and replaced all pagan allusions with Biblical examples, thus Christianizing Donatus. An important seventh-century vernacular grammar, the *Auraicept na nÉces* ("The Scholar's Primer"), demonstrates early linguistic theorizing and serves as an important book for understanding the ogam alphabet. In these handbooks, there is active linguistic theorizing and sections of rhetorical figures.

## **Rhetoric and the Vernacular Tradition**

The vernacular of early Ireland is known to scholars today as Old Irish, *Sengoídelc*. It is an Indo-European language of the Goidelic Celtic family. For this reason, Irish culture is often identified as a Celtic culture; however, it is important to note that the early Irish were not aware of a shared linguistic cultural heritage among themselves and their "Celtic" neighbors. Vernacular Irish is divided into three distinct periods. The Old Irish period (or archaic Irish) is witnessed in texts composed between 600-900 CE. The Middle Irish period ranges from 900-1200 CE, and Early Modern Irish from 1200-1600 CE. Most evidence for the language and literature of the Old Irish period comes from later manuscripts, many dating between 1100-1500 CE, though the texts they contain have been dated linguistically and based on text-internal evidence to as early as the 630s. The ninth-century *Book of Armagh* is the oldest manuscript containing continuous Irish prose, but the late eleventh-century *Lebor na hUidre*

(“Book of Dun Cow”) is the oldest manuscript containing complete secular material in prose and verse. By the ninth century, Irish began to replace Latin as the chosen medium in Irish monastic *scriptoria*.

## Vernacular Law-Texts and Saga

Before the coming of Christianity, there was a learned caste in Ireland known as the *Áes Dána* (“people of arts”). By the seventh century, the native learned caste had come to be known as the *filid* (*fili*, sg., *filid*, pl.), and evidence from early law-texts shows they worked alongside clerical scholars in *scriptoria*, and in some cases one could be both a *fili* and a cleric. The *filid*, sometimes translated as ‘poet-jurist,’ but also containing the archaizing meaning ‘poet-seer,’ practiced *filidecht*, which covered the entire field of poetry, history, genealogy, biography, grammar, ancient lore, and the law. Poetry and law were closely associated, as the law-texts often represent judgments being rendered in a form of verse called *roscad*, a highly rhetorical and ornamented form of speech found in law-texts and saga. In addition to the *fili*, there was also the *brithem*, who was a judge who could not travel widely like the *filid*, but was required to stay with the king of a *túath* at all times.

Irish legal specialists composed the largest body of vernacular legal texts in all of medieval Europe. The *filid* gave judgments in a type of verse known as *roscada* (sg. *roscad*). The language of *roscada* is obscure, highly stylistic, performative, and rhetorical, and it often consists of maxims or aphorisms. Such passages are marked by a marginal ‘r’ in manuscripts which is often translated as ‘retoric.’ While the nature and origin of such discourse is debated, Johan Corthals argues that though there may have been a native verse prior to the arrival of Latin learning, it developed in textual form from late antique rhetorical traditions. It is also a possibility that *roscada* were intentionally obscure (*dorcha*, ‘darkened’) and archaic, as this may have given it an air of authenticity, and it may have also served to protect the coveted knowledge of this elite, learned class.

*Roscada* are central to the law-texts, one of which quotes the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* in Latin. The pronouncement of judgment in legal contexts, as well as the narratives that often surround them, provide the student of rhetoric with insight into the syncretic nature of the learned legal tradition. Poetry was also important in the legal tradition, and the poem “The Cauldron of Poetry and Learning” has been noted for its fusion of native and Roman learning, drawing on the myth of a sacred well, the Well of Segais, from which all knowledge flows forth, and on which a student must call when reciting poetry or judgments.

Of all vernacular literature produced in medieval Ireland, the “sagas” have received the most scholarly attention. This vast tradition is often divided into four cycles: The Mythological Cycle, The Ulster Cycle, The Finnian Cycle, and the Cycle of the Kings (or “Historical Cycle”). For a student of rhetoric, the speeches within the saga texts are perhaps of greatest interest.

By the tenth and eleventh centuries, Irish scholars had begun “translating” Roman epic. These translations, however, are loose, and represent the practice of *imitatio* and *aemulatio*.



In the midst of this scribal activity, we also see an increase in the production of saga texts, and Roman epic had a profound influence on the shape the sagas took. Though treated for years as evidence of Irish mythology and as materials only worthy of the fringes of medieval literature, scholars believe that Irish scribes saw both Roman epic and the sagas they produced as historiography, or “pseudo-historiography.” In late antique and early medieval historiography, direct speech was a central concern, and progymnastic exercises such as *ethopoeia* and *prosopopeia* were central to the composition of history. Though the Roman texts were drawn on in a number of ways, the Irish sagas clearly represent Irish tales that have come down through oral tradition. Therefore, the speeches in these sagas offer an excellent source for understanding the interaction of native and classical oratorical traditions. The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*Cattle Raid of Cooley*) and *Togail Troí* (*Destruction of Troy*) are prime examples, the former being the most extensive and popular native saga, the latter being the first vernacular translation of Dares Phrygius’s *Destruction of Troy* in the Middle Ages. Since Dares’s Latin text is stylistically bare bones, there is much to be said of the speeches in the Irish translation.

## Visual Rhetoric in Early Ireland

In addition to this wealth of vernacular texts, the Irish are famous for manuscript illuminations, the most famous examples including *Book of Kells*, *Lindisfarne Gospels*, *Book of Durrow*, and *Book of Armagh*, to name only the most famous. These manuscripts are visually stunning and a fantastic example of the visual rhetoric of manuscript illumination. There are also a number of surviving ogam stones and inscribed crosses that demonstrate the importance of material rhetoric in the medieval Irish landscape.

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