

# The Pagan Influences on Christian Art in Ireland

Caitlin Hutchinson

Faculty Advisor: Shelley Perlove  
Department of Art History  
University of Michigan – Dearborn

The spread of Christianity in its first centuries did not immediately reach Ireland due to the island's remoteness and its pagan culture. This culture had been in place for centuries, long after the Celtic presence on the continent was reduced by the invading Romans in the first centuries after Christ. By the fifth century, however, Christian missionaries gained a foothold in Ireland, with the result that over time, Christian and early pagan/Celtic traditions became fused. This fostered the creation of a unique Christian culture that reached its fullest development during the Medieval Age. The evolution of this culture as it presented itself in Irish art and the investigation of how the Celts adopted the new beliefs with modifications are the subjects of this paper.

"Celtic" was a language once spoken in Europe and became the name of the people who spoke it and shared common customs. Celts flourished in Continental Europe before they spread to the British Isles and Ireland.<sup>1</sup> The centuries of Celtic dominance on the European continent ended when Rome conquered and assumed control of the area near the turn of the millennium. Roman historians viewed the early people of Ireland, the area classically known as Hibernia, as barbarians for they had "no cities and founded no empires."<sup>2</sup> However, this observation does not mean that the early Irish peoples did not have a vibrant society or complex belief system. They were cattlemen and farmers who lived in small villages. They were also fierce warriors, who made battle a large part of their culture.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1: Newgrange, Ireland, Entrance and Roof Box,

Since the majority of early Irish lived an agrarian existence, their livelihoods depended on climate and seasonal changes. They developed a theosophy that centered on the weather and the influence of heavenly bodies, both of which made their agrarian life possible. Nature was viewed as "a manifestation of divinity not as a 'fallen' creation..."<sup>4</sup> which contrasts with the Roman Christian view that emphasized the separation of heaven from earth.

The early Irish views of life and death are seen in their creation, and later in the Celtic appropriation, of the burial chamber of Newgrange alongside the Boyne River in County Meath. The site is an excellent representation of a passage tomb structure, which honored the dead and prepared them for an afterlife.<sup>5</sup> It was built approximately 2500 B.C.E., but the structural integrity has remained intact and the corbelled roof covered by a tumulus has been consistently waterproof for the past four millennia.<sup>6</sup> It is 85 meters (250 feet) in diameter, 13.5 meters (40 feet) in height, and covers about one acre of land.

The great tumulus of Newgrange contains curious characteristics that suggest a dependence upon the cosmos in the beliefs and rituals of these early agrarian inhabitants of Ireland. Newgrange was arranged to enable a solar ceremony to occur on the winter solstice.<sup>7</sup> At dawn, the sunlight enters through a roof box above the entrance of the tomb (Figure 1) and travels down a 62 foot passage to illuminate the chamber as well as the carved solar images



Figure 2: Detail of Triskele, Newgrange, Ireland  
Image by Caitlin Hutchison

(spirals, zigzags, lozenges (<>), and swastikas) at the end of the passage.<sup>8</sup> One image described as “three spirals combined to form a triskele” (Figure 2) carved here and again on the entrance stone, stands out above the rest and is a design unique to Ireland. This and the other symbols show the significance of the sun in the lives of this agrarian people.<sup>9</sup> As the Celtic tribes moved into Ireland, they adopted Newgrange as their own and gave it a crucial role in their own mythology and religion, such as in the legends of the Tuatha dé Danaan and Cú Chulainn. The adoption of ideas not their own became a characteristic of the Celtic people and would be repeated when

the Christians came in contact with them.

Another important feature of Celtic Pagan art which evolved from the early symbols, are interlace, plaitwork, key patterns, spirals, as well as zoomorphic and plant designs; these are found on monuments throughout Ireland.<sup>10</sup> The designs resemble natural forms found in Ireland, such as vines and other plant life. The painstakingly beautiful details of Celtic designs were not created to copy nature exactly, but the intricate geometric figures were employed to decorate their metalwork and carvings.<sup>11</sup> Plaitwork imitated common weaving and its importance revolved around the idea that the spirit lives on after death.<sup>12</sup>

The contemplation of life and death is found in every culture. How a culture regards the afterlife affects how they live their life on earth. The idea of a glorious afterlife did much to inspire Celtic warriors to be fierce in battle.<sup>13</sup> They did not fear death and their burial sites were revered locations for rituals and religious festivals. Celtic folk tales speak of immortals who were aided by spells or magic springs that allowed them to be given new life after death.

An important example of warrior mythology is the two-faced stone sculpture from Boa Island in County Fermanagh (Figure 3). The statue stands 73cm (29 in) high, 45cm (18 in) wide on its broadest sides and 30cm (12in) on its narrower sides.<sup>14</sup> The designs are carved in relief and the sculpture is essentially two dimensional.<sup>15</sup> The two heads follow a Janus-form and are nearly identical with large, schematic, triangular shaped heads whose chins end in a point. The heads are the largest and most detailed areas of the statue and serve as the focal point. Their lentoid eyes are large in comparison to the other facial features. The figures do not have necks, but their heads rest directly on their shoulders with two thin arms carved across each of the torsos.



Figure 3: Stone Sculpture, Boa Island, Ireland, Image by Jon Sullivan of pdphoto.org

One of the most important beliefs within Celtic pagan culture revolved around the veneration of the human head. It was the most common Celtic pagan religious symbol denoting divinity or otherworldly powers.<sup>16</sup> The Celtic pagans believed that the soul resided in the head and, even when severed, it still contained life and power. The person who possessed the severed head of an enemy would benefit from its power. Archeologist Anne Ross wrote “Heads of prized enemies were taken, impaled on spears or fastened to saddles of the horses and born home in triumph.... thereafter impaled on stakes about the houses and fortresses of the Celtic chiefs and placed in places of worship.”<sup>17</sup> Over time, sculptured heads could be found outside homes or important structures and they retained the same significance and veneration as severed heads. The Janus-head type is important, not only because more heads means more power, but also

because it upholds a traditional pagan belief of honoring the dead and looking into the future, which is celebrated during the festival of Samhain on November 1.

Celtic art, which embraced a benevolent polytheism and a warrior ideal, was in strong contrast to the beliefs presented in early Christian art. When Christian missionaries first reached Ireland, they preached a dualistic faith based on the conflict between good and evil. Salvation and deliverance from evil could only be achieved through the acceptance of Jesus Christ, a martyred god, whose willingness to suffer for all men placed him outside the warrior ideal. Those who became adherents of this faith in the early centuries of the current era secretly worshipped in house churches and interred their dead in abandoned salt caves outside the city of Rome, where Christian art first became established.

The earliest Christian art used symbols rather than realistic portrayal to present the message of Jesus and to teach ideas and stories that only followers could discern. The idea behind the work was more important than the artistry involved in its making. The art of the catacombs centered on the miraculous power of Christ, his command over nature, and his promise to save those who believed in him. The common themes of the artwork consisted of Old Testament stories that emphasized divine intervention in the deliverance of the faithful, which offered typological parallels to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>18</sup> One such example of Christian art, found in the Catacomb of San Callisto, refers to the miracle of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fish (Figure 4). After a sermon, Christ multiplied a small meal consisting of bread loaves and fish, which sustained the crowd of five thousand. The idea that there should be someone to take care of and feed them was a powerful message given to people who often went without food. Jesus took care of physical as well as spiritual hunger. He gave hope to all those who believed that there was a better life and that it could be obtained through him.



Figure 4: Loaves and Fish, Catacombs of San Callisto, Italy, Image copyright: Photo Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology

As the Christian faith grew in numbers, this religion became a powerful force in the empire. In 313



Figure 5: Labarum Cross

C.E., the Emperor Constantine recognized Christianity as a legitimate religion with the issuance of the Edict of Milan. Sixty-seven years later, the Emperor Theodosius declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire and accepted the Nicene Creed as its legal doctrine. Christian art now contained powerful images of the New Testament and worship took place in converted Roman basilicas. No longer was the Christian mystery presented in crude paintings hidden in catacombs deep beneath the earth. With state sponsorship, art was made from the finest materials, rendered by professional artists, who placed it in the most visible and venerated areas of the church.

The most emotionally difficult portrayal for early Christian artists was the crucifixion. This punishment was reserved for the worst criminals in the empire and presented grave problems in sacred presentation. Although Christ appeared only rarely on the cross before the fourth century, eventually Christian artists chose to make the cross a symbol of victory over death. The cross became a symbol of sacrifice as well as one “of life eternal, of redemption and resurrection through faith.”<sup>19</sup> Several variations of the Christian cross,

Figure 8: Detail of East Side of Moone Cross, Image by: F & K Schorr

such as the Labarum cross (Figure 5) and later the Latin cross came about when the Christianity became dominant.<sup>20</sup>

A significant medium for the transmission of Christianity was manuscript illumination. Early Christian illuminations were taken from the Bible, but not of its entirety, as only sections, such as the Pentateuch, Psalms, and the New Testament, were illustrated.<sup>21</sup> The images portrayed were subjects chosen to highlight important passages, crucial to Christian doctrine and thought. Illumination played a major role in the missionary efforts of Ireland and provides us with some of the best examples of the fusion of Irish and Christian art.

One such example of manuscript illumination from the continent is the depiction of the Pentecost taken from the Rabbula Gospels (Figure 6), written in 586 C.E.<sup>22</sup> The Apostles faced the dilemma of how to fulfill the teachings of Jesus with their leader no longer physically present. Ten days after Christ ascended to Heaven, while Mary, the Apostles, and other faithful were gathered to feast, a mighty wind rushed through the home and tongues of fire were placed above their heads. It was the Holy Spirit descending upon them and commanding them to preach the word of God. The disciples discovered that the Holy Spirit had not only given them the power to speak in different tongues in order to reach out to all the people in the world, but also the courage to carry out Christ's message to the unknowing.

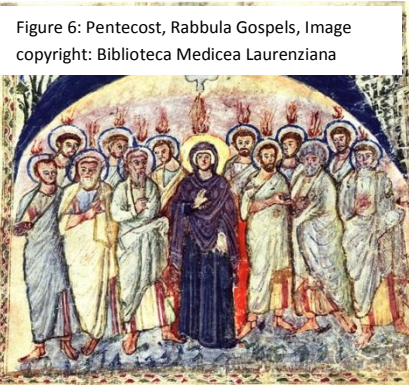


Figure 6: Pentecost, Rabbula Gospels, Image copyright: Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana

Sometime during the fourth century, it was believed that Christianity was introduced to Ireland by Roman missionaries who came from England. Pope Celestine officially sent Palladius to convert the people in 421 C.E. However, the most effective missionary who came to Ireland was Saint Patrick, who converted large numbers of Celts. By 438 C.E. Christianity had so many adherents that the high king of Ireland, Laoghaire, organized a committee to decide the future of the faith in Ireland.<sup>23</sup> The laws became known as the Seanchus Mor and held a mixture of Irish and Christian

beliefs. The Celts, in general, accepted the beliefs, but would not let go of many of their pagan traditions. Irish paganism granted tolerance to Christianity because the missionaries compromised in order for the Celts to convert. This compromise is demonstrated in their art.

The first example of Irish Christian art that displays this fusion is an Irish High Cross, which is a standing stone, but the entire slab is carved into a cruciform shape. This particular cross is dated between the seventh and ninth centuries, found in the old abbey in the village of Moone in County Kildare. It stands seventeen and a half feet high, and is made of granite (Figure 7).<sup>24</sup> The cross has a pyramidal base from which rises a rectangular shaft that is intersected near the top by a shorter rectangular shaft and connected by four arches, forming a circle. The circle connecting the arms of the cross is a significant feature of the majority of Irish high crosses derives from a pagan Celtic cosmic symbol representing the sun wheel, like those depicted at Newgrange. This image was easily fused with Christian symbols to represent the heavens as well as life without end. One of the faces of the cross contains



Figure 7: High Cross at Moone, Ireland Image by: F & K Schorr



an image of Christ, embraced by the circle, inferring that His followers will receive eternal life.

The four sides of the cross are covered with carved images placed tightly together. Displayed on the east

side are the Twelve Apostles below an image of the crucifixion (Figure 8). The twelve apostles, as well as the image of Christ and the two men depicted at his sides, are reminiscent of the janus-head statue of Boa Island described earlier. The large triangular heads with lentoid eyes are the dominant body part on these schematic figures, the majority of which lack arms. Along the shaft on all sides of the cross are images of *animalia*, as well as the familiar Celtic symbols of spirals and lozenges along with intertwining serpents in the familiar interlace pattern.<sup>25</sup>

A theme found consistently in the images of the Moone Cross, as well as other Irish High Crosses, is divine intervention and miracles. The West side of the base contains the Old Testament images of Daniel and the lions, Abraham sacrificing Isaac, and Adam and Eve, which are all examples of God's divine intervention. The North and South faces of the cross contain the Miracle of the Fish and Loaves, the Flight into Egypt, and the Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace on its emphasizing the role of the miraculous.

Depicted on the cross are two scenes Anthony (Figure 9), who was an important the early medieval period because he was a alone and devoted his life to Christ.<sup>26</sup> Monastic factor in the development of Christianity in because of the art and knowledge these fostered. It was in the seclusion of these monasteries of Ireland during the seventh century that the illumination of manuscripts reached full expression. This occurred at the same time that the art and culture of the rest of Europe fell into decline due to the Germanic invasions. The isolation of Ireland allowed the land to remain untouched by the unrest and disorder of the continent. Irish monks preserved knowledge from the continent in illuminated manuscripts.<sup>27</sup>



Figure 9: Detail of West Side of Moone Cross, Image by: F & K Schorr

The style of the manuscripts created in Ireland was unique due

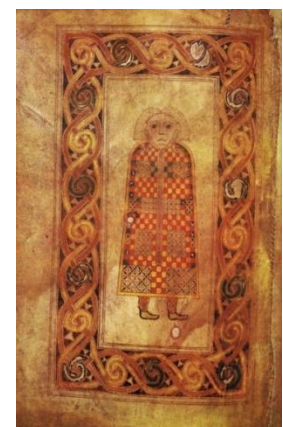


Figure 10: Carpet Page, Book of Durrow, Image copyright: Trinity College Library, Dublin

to the images that derived from pagan Celtic art. The oldest book of this kind that originated in Ireland is the Book of Durrow dated from the seventh century. It is evangelical in content and is written in Latin in insular script. It contains 248 folios depicted on vellum measured at 247 by 228 mm.<sup>28</sup> Each of the four books of the gospels is preceded by a depiction of the author and a carpet page (except for the portrait of Matthew which is now misplaced).<sup>29</sup> The Folio 3v from the Book of Durrow is an example of an Irish carpet page that exhibits Celtic decoration and Christian text (Figure 10). The dominant images depicted on this particular page are the triple spirals or triskeles. This solar symbol, which also conveys the Irish belief in the power of three, was transferred into Irish Christian art, where it represented the Holy Trinity. The circle and the twining interlace depicted on the High Cross has the same

meaning within Durrow as it does The human of Durrow

Figure 11: St. Matthew, Book of Durrow, Image copyright: Trinity College Library, Dublin



the Book of on the monument. images (Figure 11) display the fusion

of Christian and Celtic art with their schematic frontal faces and bodies with little expression or personal characteristics.

Another illuminated manuscript, known as the Book of Kells, is one of Ireland's most treasured relics. On the 339 folios (330 by 250 mm) of calfskin is written the four gospels in Latin in the insular majuscule style.<sup>30</sup> With its red, black, blue, green, purple, and gold pigments used to create bold and dynamic images, the gospel was described as "the product of cold-blooded hallucination."<sup>31</sup> An illumination taken from the Book of Kells, is the Monogram page (located on folio 34R) (Figure 12), which has no precedent in classical art.<sup>32</sup> The Greek letters X (Chi), P (Rho), and I (Iota) dominate the illumination, for together they are the first three letters of the Greek spelling of Christ, the first word written in St. Matthew's gospel. The X is placed at the curving section of the P, similar to the Labarum form of the cross.<sup>33</sup> Placed within and around the letters, numerous Celtic symbols appear in the form of triskeles and swastikas, designs, and interlace, which decorate and give further meaning to the illumination. Another Celtic feature promoting warrior culture emerges in the disembodied heads of Christ and angels, which have blond hair and almond shaped eyes.



Figure 12: Chi-Rho-Iota Page, Book of Kells, Image copyright: Trinity College Library, Dublin

With manuscript illumination, the fusion of Irish and Christian art reached its fullest expression. Images featured in illuminated manuscripts created in the isolated monasteries of Ireland are perfect examples of how the word of Christ, illuminated with Celtic forms, transformed pagan symbols into Christian images. These images, rendered at the same time as the Irish High Crosses, defined Christianity in Ireland and utilized the same figures and miraculous stories found in early Christian art, but with the geometric forms and symbols of Celtic art.

Christianity was able to advance quickly in Ireland, not only because of the power of Christ's message, but also because of the use of art to educate the people. The policies of the Christian leadership that permitted the Irish to retain many facets of their pagan culture was also a contributing factor. Christians connected Irish mythology with Christian scripture; the heroes of old worked with the Christian saints to bring about early Irish Christianity.<sup>34</sup> Over time, the symbols featured in their art lost their original meaning, as did many of the pagan traditions, and came to serve the Christian mission in Ireland.

#### Notes

1. Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick. A History of Pagan Europe. (New York: Routledge, 1995) 7.
2. Duncan Norton-Taylor. The Celts. (New York: Time-Life Books, 1974), 23.
3. Ibid. 14.
4. Jones and Pennick 2.
5. Sean O'Riordain. Newgrange and the Bend of the Boyne. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1964) 18.
6. Byrne, Martin "Passage at Newgrange." *The Sacred Island*. 27 March 2009. <<http://www.carrowkeel.com/sites/boyne/newgrange/newgrange2b.html>>.

7. Knowth. "Newgrange Megalithic Passage Tomb." Knowth. 27 March 2009. <<http://www.knowth.com/newgrange.htm>>.
8. O'Riordan 54.
9. Ibid. 60.
10. Derek Bryce. Symbolism of the Celtic Cross. (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1989) 59.
11. Henry Francoise. Irish Art: in the Early Christian Period (to 800 A.D.). (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1965) 206.
12. Bryce 60.
13. Norton-Taylor 100.
14. A.T. Lucas. Treasures of Ireland: Irish Pagan and Early Christian. (New York: The Viking Press, 1974) 24.
15. Anne Ross. Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967) 146.
16. Ibid. 61.
17. Ibid. 64.
18. C.R. Morey. Christian Art. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1958) 6.
19. George Willard Benson. The Cross: Its History and Symbolism. (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1983) 23.
20. Ibid 30.
21. Kurt Weitzmann. Late Antique and Early Christian Book Illumination. (New York: George Braziller, 1977) 13.
22. Ibid. 104.
23. Jones and Pennick 99.
24. Schorr, F.J. & K.D. "Moone High Cross." F.J. & K.D. Schorr. 7 April 2009. <<http://highcrosses.org/moone/index.htm>>.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. P. Francastel. Medieval Painting. (New York: Dell Publishing, 1967) 13.
28. Howie, Elizabeth. "Dublin, Trinity College MS A.4.5 (57) — Gospel Book (Book of Durrow)." University of North Carolina. 15 April 2009 <<http://www.unc.edu/celtic/catalogue/manuscripts/durrow.html>>.
29. Ibid.
30. Edward Sullivan. The Book of Kells. (London: Studio Editions, 1992) 35.
31. Bernard Meehan. The Book of Kells. (London, Thames and Hudson, 2006) 9, as quoted by Umberto Eco, Italian Medievalist.
32. Sullivan 15; Fred S. Kleiner. Gardner's Art Through the Ages: the Western Perspective. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2010) 290.
33. Sullivan, 15.
34. John A. MacCulloch. Celtic Mythology. (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004) 206.

## Bibliography

- Benson, George Willard. *The Cross: Its History and Symbolism*. New York: Hacker Art Books, 1983.
- Bryce, Derek. *Symbolism of the Celtic Cross*. York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1989.
- Bryne, Martin "Passage at Newgrange." *The Sacred Island*. 27 March 2009. <<http://www.carrowkeel.com/sites/boyne/newgrange/newgrange2b.html>>.
- Francastel, P. *Medieval Painting*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1967.
- Francoise, Henry. *Irish Art: in the Early Christian Period (to 800 A.D.)*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1965.
- Harbison, Peter. *Irish High Crosses*. Drogheda, Ireland: The Boyne River Valley Honey Co., 1994.
- Howie, Elizabeth. "Dublin, Trinity College MS A.4.5 (57) — Gospel Book (Book of Durrow)." University of North Carolina. 15 April 2009 <<http://www.unc.edu/celtic/catalogue/manuscripts/durrow.html>>.
- Jones, Prudence and Pennick, Nigel. *A History of Pagan Europe*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Kleiner, Fred S. *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: the Western Perspective*. 13 Ed. Vol.1 Boston: Wadsworth, 2010.
- Knowth. "Newgrange Megalithic Passage Tomb." Knowth. 27 March 2009. <<http://www.knowth.com/newgrange.htm>>.
- Lucas, A.T. *Treasures of Ireland: Irish Pagan and Early Christian*. New York: The Viking Press, 1974.
- MacCulloch, John A. *Celtic Mythology*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004.
- MacKillop, James. *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Meehan, Bernard. *The Book of Kells*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2006.
- Mitchell, Frank G. and Harbison, Peter. *Treasures of Irish Art 1500 B.C.-1500 A.D.* New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Alfred A. Knopf, 1977.
- Morey, C.R. *Christian Art*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1958.
- Norton-Taylor, Duncan. *The Celts*. New York: Time-Life Books, 1974.
- O'Riordain, Sean. *Newgrange and the Bend of the Boyne*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1964.

- Porter, Arthur. *The Crosses and Culture of Ireland*. New York: Benjamin Blon, Inc., 1931.
- Ross, Anne. *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967.
- Russel, Jeffrey Burton. *Medieval Civilization*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1968.
- Schorr, F.J. & K.D. "Moone High Cross." F.J. & K.D. Schorr. 7 April 2009.  
<<http://highcrosses.org/moone/index.htm>>.
- Sullivan, Edward. *The Book of Kells*. London: Studio Editions, 1992.
- Weitzmann, Kurt . *Late Antique and Early Christian Book Illumination*. New York: George Braziller, 1977.