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The Rhetorical Arts in Late Antique and Early Medieval Ireland

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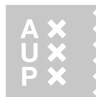

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Introduction: Early Irish Rhetoric

This book presents a study of the rhetorical arts in early medieval Ireland, c. 431-800 CE. It consists of three case studies of Latinate and vernacular texts that are unique but also representative of the various strands of early Irish learning. The early Irish tradition is vast, consisting of texts composed in Latin, as well as the largest corpus of vernacular literature in the medieval west. The social and historical contexts from which this learned tradition emerged is also remarkably complex. Therefore, this study can only provide a snapshot of what is certainly a fruitful area for rhetorical study.

To begin, it is appropriate to dispel myths often associated with early Ireland. First, the early Irish did not identify as 'Celtic'. In fact, Celtic does not designate an ethnicity, but a linguistic family. Though the early Irish spoke a Celtic language, they were culturally distinct from their Celtic speaking neighbours in modern-day England, Wales, and Scotland, and the origin of the Celtic language in Ireland is still debated, though it likely arrived in Ireland in the last few centuries BCE.[1] Therefore, speaking of a 'Celtic rhetoric' is troubled from the start.

An idea often associated with Celtic identity is Ireland's isolation from the western Latin world in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Scholars who maintain this position argue that since the Romans never colonized Ireland, their 'Celtic' culture was preserved, under the protection of a 'Celtic mist', as it were.[2] Therefore, the extant medieval manuscripts preserve something of the pre-Christian mythology and religion that would have been

1 See the summary of the debate and a definitive response in Sims-Williams, 2020

2 In an article that represents the first foray of historians of rhetoric into the Irish tradition, Johnson-Sheehan and Lynch, 2007, p. 1 write 'Ireland, however, offers us an interesting exception to Romanized Europe. The Island's remoteness allowed it to preserve much of its Celtic culture while keeping at arm's length the cultural influences of Rome and much of medieval Europe. The Irish traded with the Roman world, and eventually they were converted to Christianity after the arrival of St. Patrick in 431 AD. Nevertheless, Irish culture stood apart from European culture, especially during the crucial period of the so-called 'Dark Ages' from the fifth to ninth centuries. It was not until the date 1172 AD, when England's Henry II conquered Ireland, that we might mark Ireland's capitulation to European civic and educational practices – and then only as a conquered people'. As will be discussed at length below, the Irish were in continued communication and exchange with learned communities in Britain and western Europe from the fifth century on

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lost under Roman colonization. However, early Irish literature is preserved primarily in manuscripts that post-date the texts themselves, sometimes significantly. These manuscripts were composed and illuminated in Christian *scriptoria*, and the same is true of earlier exemplars from which texts were copied, so the extant evidence cannot be trusted to tell us much about any pre-Christian, 'Celtic' traditions. In addition to the Christian context of manuscript production, the Irish were certainly not isolated. Though Irish manuscripts and material culture are indeed distinctively Irish, from the beginning of the written record in Ireland in the fifth century CE the Irish maintained consistent contact with European neighbours, especially Britain and Spain, but also Gaul and Rome. Instead of the preservation of ancient Celtic beliefs and practices, what survives in manuscripts represents a composite, learned culture born of a multicultural, multilingual landscape.

This holds true for even the most seemingly archaic literary, learned, and legal texts that survive. Contemporary scholars have distinguished between 'archaic' and 'archaizing', and early Irish scribes were particularly fond of the latter. Many tales once considered to be of ancient origin due to linguistic dating have been demonstrated to be later compositions informed by secular and ecclesiastical Latin learning. Early Irish law offers a prime example. The civic code of Gaelic law survived as the primary means of social regulation until the invasion of the Anglo-Normans in the late twelfth century when it was partially eclipsed. However, from its earliest articulations in law-texts it was informed by Canon Law and explicated according to the Latin learned tradition. An essential component of all law-texts is an archaizing language, often put in the mouth of a legendary figure, known as *rosc*, a difficult, non-rhyming, alliterative, intentionally obscure style that was performed in judicial ritual. The language of such passages misled generations of scholars who dated these texts to an archaic period of the language's development. However, scholars now agree that the performance of such verse in judicial contexts is evidence of the importance of verbal art and ritual in the early Irish system of law.

A central argument of this book is that the early Irish were not isolated at the Empire's fringe or outside of European scholarly circles, but were immersed in the ecclesiastical and scholarly trends and debates of their time. From the ordination of Ireland's first bishop in 431 CE, Ireland was of interest to the Church in Rome and their attempts to manage the frontier. However, there is certainly something culturally distinct about early Irish literature and verbal art. As will be discussed below, their contributions to

and preserved in surviving manuscripts are texts that exemplify the outward looking orientation of early Irish scholars and the pervasive influence of Latin learning on the vernacular tradition

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grammatical, exegetical, and literary traditions is vast and well-documented, the Gaelic system of law is unique and fascinating, and their role in the transformation of the rhetorical arts in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages is under-appreciated. This study seeks to demonstrate the rhetorical arts in early Ireland as both unique from and indebted to the classical tradition.

Ireland and the Roman Frontiers

> *Behold how the Ocean, previously raging, has now paved the way for the feet of holy men; its barbarian heavings, which earthly rulers were unable to tame by the sword, the mouths of priests bind with simple words by virtue of the fear inspired by God; and the one who, when an unbeliever, neer had the least fear of bands of warriors, now, as a believer, already fears the tongues of humble men.'*
> Pope Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*[3]

A study of rhetoric in Ireland in the fifth through the eighth centuries must begin with the introduction of Christianity and Latin learning to the Latin West in Late Antiquity. The above epigraph from Gregory the Great's (540-604 CE) *Moralia in Job* reflects a deep satisfaction with the outcomes of the Church's attempts to spread Christianity throughout the 'barbarian' west in the fifth and sixth centuries CE, especially those islands that lay at the fringes of the Roman frontiers. Gregory's comments also speak to the importance of the rhetorical arts in the late antique and early medieval west as Christianity spread throughout Western Europe into regions transformed by the retreat of Roman legions and the 'age of migrations'. To fifth-century Romans, Ireland represented 'the end of the world', the very edge of human civilization, a land occupied by 'barbarian' races. In 'Sermon 82', preached a century earlier at Rome on the twenty-ninth of June, 441 CE, the feast-day of Peter and Paul, Pope Leo the Great (c. 400-461 CE) exalted this achievement:

> These men [Peter and Paul, as opposed to the fratricide Romulus and his victim Remus] are the ones who promoted you [Rome] to such glory that, as a holy race, a chosen people, a priestly and a royal city, and having been made the head of the whole world through the holy see of the blessed Peter, you came to rule over a wider territory through the worship of God than by earthly domination. For although you were exalted by many victories and thereby extended the authority of your empire by land and by sea,

3 Quoted in T.M. Charles-Edwards, 1993a, p. 12

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nevertheless what the toils of war subjected to you is less than that which a Christian peace has made obedient.[4]

Pope Leo here refers to successful missions in Britannia and Ireland and the effective management of the Western frontier.

By 431 CE, Ireland had its first bishop ordained by Rome, Palladius, evidence that substantial Christian communities had developed by the early fifth century, though Christians may have been present in Ireland much earlier. Ireland's patron saint, the Briton Patrick, established Christian communities throughout Ireland in the fifth century, baptising many, and inspiring a generation of nuns, priests, and bishops. A century later, the learned Irish monk, Columbanus (543-615 CE), was not only witness to the fruits of these efforts, but was a product thereof. An Irish *peregrinus* ('self-exiled monk'), Columbanus, ever loyal to the Rome of Peter and Paul, would carry the gospel throughout late antique Gaul, establish flourishing centres of learning and worship built on the strict asceticism and learned traditions of his native Ireland, and realize Leo I's dream of bringing Christianity to 'barbarian' kingdoms.[5]

The social and cultural landscape of Western Europe changed dramatically and continuously from the fifth century onwards. In 406 CE, Roman legions pulled out of Britannia, and in 410 CE Aleric and the Visigoths sacked Rome. Rome's power was waning in the west, and Emperor Honorius had no choice but to call his legions back to Rome, leaving the empire's frontiers in disarray. The exit of these forces exacerbated the already tumultuous situation, and as Roman forces departed Britannia, the Britons suffered a series of incursions by the *Scotti* and Picts, and conquest and settlement by the Angles and Saxons.[6] Though Rome would no longer have a military presence in Britannia and Western Europe, the Church would remain; the cultural impact would persist, with the chair of Peter and Paul secure in Rome. What Rome could not achieve through violence, the Church would achieve through winning hearts and minds. Some of the Germanic rulers would be baptized, and the power once secured by the sword would now be secured through Christian ideology.

As this study seeks to demonstrate, late antique and early medieval Irish learned communities maintained consistent communication with their British and Continental neighbours, and Christianity and the Latinate

4 Quoted in ibid., 1993, p. 2

5 See Riché, 1981

6 See the overview in Charles-Edwards, 2013, pp. 36-56

textual culture it proliferated in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages arrived in Ireland from Britain as early as the fifth century, if not before. Though it is true that Ireland was never colonized by the Romans, what we know of Irish history and literature was *written down*, *in books*, by churchmen, who were associated with the church in Britain and in Rome, and who were trained in late antique grammar and rhetoric. From the earliest written records, Irish scholars were multi-lingual, multi-cultural, and in continuous contact with scholarly communities in Europe.[7] Given the continued intercourse with scholars on the Continent, the rhetorical arts must have had a place in the great monasteries that rose to prominence in the sixth and seventh centuries and that were revered for their learning.

However, in many ways the case of Ireland is unique. Though the Irish were part of a continental community, there is something distinctively Irish about the extant manuscripts, the texts they preserve, and material evidence. In the sixth through the eighth centuries, we witness a flowering of manuscript illumination and Latin learning, especially in grammar and computistics (astronomical observation and calculation, especially of the date of the passion and Easter). Christian communities in Ireland, and those established on the Continent or in Britain by Irish churchmen, produced a vast Latin and vernacular literature that includes some of the greatest artistic monuments of the Middle Ages. Monastic communities capable of producing *Book of Kells* and *Book of Durrow*–as well as learned scholars such as Columbanus–were established between the sixth and ninth centuries. These communities developed a Gaelic orthography by the late seventh century, innovated manuscript design and layout, and produced a rich body of literature, as well as learned handbooks. Though many important manuscripts produced in Ireland have survived, many of those that contain earlier material[8] were compiled at a much later date, and the majority of the Irish manuscripts that survive were preserved in Continental centres of learning associated with the Irish.[9] This fact alone speaks to the extent of Irish intercourse with learned centres on the Continent throughout the Early Middle Ages.

The evidence demonstrates that the early Irish were fierce scribes and scholars, known by their continental colleagues for *serc léigind* ('a love of

7 Though this point will be elucidated at length throughout this study, see the essays collected in Flechner and Meeder, 2016; However, see also the review of this volume in O Hara, 2017; See also Contreni, 1992; idem, 1982; idem 1977

8 On linguistic dating of early Irish texts, see Stifter, 2013

9 On the survival and loss of medieval Irish manuscripts, see Ó Corráin, 2011-12

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learning'). Yet questions remain as to what rhetorical education in these centres looked like. What role might rhetorical education have played in the production of such significant texts? Had the trivium of the liberal arts found a home in Irish schools? What might contemporary histories of rhetoric tell us about the verbal, visual, and material rhetoric of early Ireland? These are the questions that inspire this study, a study which can only begin to scratch the surface, as the textual traditions of Ireland are vast and full of potential for the student of rhetoric.

The Latin learning of the early Irish church is where any study of the rhetorical arts in Ireland must begin. Though many historians of rhetoric have deemed the dawning of Christianity the death knell for the rhetorical arts, late antique Christians adopted and adapted secular arts from an early date, the most noted examples including Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, and Cassiodorus. As Elva Johnston writes, '… Christianity was supported by the vigour and rigour of classical education; reading and writing were all-important in the worship of the divine *Logos*'.[10] Even as social contexts transformed the rhetorical arts in important ways, they did not simply fade away. Ernst Curtius has reminded us that reception and transformation characterize classical learning in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.[11] As we will see, the early Irish are no exception. There was a native learned class present in Ireland before the arrival of the British Church; however, what survives is, if not outright Christian, syncretic work in which Latin secular and Christian learning merge with native traditions in the creation of a composite learned culture.

Christian learning arrived in Ireland by way of Roman Britain. Our earliest examples of rhetorical learning among British churchmen include Pelagius (c. 354-418 CE) and Gildas (c. 500-570 CE). Pelagius is best known as a heretic and enemy to Augustine (354-430 CE) and Jerome (c. 347-420 CE), witnessed in a series of letters debating the nature of grace.[12] Heresy aside, the letters reveal that Pelagius was likely educated in Roman Britain in a tradition of Roman rhetoric and perhaps in law.

Gildas, the author of *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* ('On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain'), wrote in a Hiberno-Latin that betrays a rhetorical education, one also likely received in Britain.[13] Gildas's Latin shares many 'hisperic' symptoms with a *Lorica*, often attributed to him, as well as the

10 Johnston, 2013, p. 4

11 Curtius, 1953, p. 19

12 See Rees, 1991 and 1998

13 For an edition and translation, see Winterbottom, 1978

Hisperica famina ('Western Orations'), a text of Irish provenance that will be discussed at length in Ch. 5.[14] Though the evidence is slim, there is enough to suggest that a form of Roman education persisted in sixth-century Britain. Fifth-century Roman Britons would have written and spoken Latin, though the Latin they wrote was not the Latin they spoke. Rome encouraged the noble classes of its western provinces to participate in Latin culture, reading the Latin authors, such as Vergil, and writing in grammatically correct Latin.[15] In fifth-century Britain, education and training in rhetoric were still essential to achieving social ascendency and political power, and something of this cultural institution survived into the sixth century.

In the fifth and sixth centuries the rhetorical arts were certainly undergoing transformation. Christianity was a religion of the book, and at its heart was the speech of God, 'an eloquence, teaching salvation, perfectly adjusted to stir the hearts of all learners', as Augustine had proclaimed, and the tools of rhetoric were put to Christian ends.[16] The Latin of the western provinces of the Empire was of a different kind than that of Antiquity, the Latin of Britain, and later Ireland, was the Latin of the Bible and of the Eucharist, a Latin that was appropriate for early Christians for whom Latin was most often a second language. Vernacular languages shaped and changed Latin in interesting and colourful ways, something we shall see especially in the case of hisperic style and the peculiarities of Hiberno-Latin.[17] Thomas Charles-Edwards explains that this Latin was 'not the highly polished Latin of the grammarian and the rhetor, educators of aristocratic youth, but the language of artisans, merchants, and shop-keepers … Nobody could translate the particular rhetoric of, say, the opening of St John's first epistle into Ciceronian Latin'.[18] Instead, Biblical Latin had its own eloquence, though not one recognized in classical schools, and not fully embraced by students of rhetoric to this day.

As was noted above, those few studies of Irish eloquence have suggested that distance from the Roman Empire is what makes Irish rhetoric unique and worthy of study and historians of rhetoric must turn to pre-Christian myths preserved in manuscripts. This view neglects the simple fact of literacy as a Christian phenomenon in early Ireland. Ecclesiastical learning

14 See Herren, 1974a, pp. 414-15

15 Charles-Edwards, 2003a, p. 108

16 Brown, 1967, p. 256

17 On the unique, and perhaps not-so-unique, features of Hiberno-Latin, see Orchard, 1987-88; Löfstedt, 1979

18 Charles-Edwards, 2003a, p. 109

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came from Britain to Ireland in the first three decades of the fifth century.[19] However, there is evidence of contact between the Romans in Britain, or at least the Romanized British, and the Irish as early as the fourth century CE. According to Ammianus Marcellinus, a late Roman historian, the Romans had a treaty with the 'Scotti' (the name given to the Irish), a treaty which, once broken in 360, led immediately to massive raids, and also to a major invasion concerted with other peoples.[20] One catastrophe that followed these events came in 367 when *Scotti* ('Irish'), Picts, and Saxons joined forces to attack the coasts of Roman Britain. This historical account makes it clear that Ireland was not a backwater of Europe, isolated from the rest of the western world, but that there was an effective political authority among the Irish that possessed large numbers of ships. At least one function of those ships had been trade between Ireland and Britain, including a slave trade, allowed under the terms of the treaty broken in 360.[21]

A result of this trade was very likely the arrival of Christianity from Britain to Ireland at an early date, but Rome would soon send a bishop to oversee Irish Christians. The *Life of St Germanus of Auxerre* written by Constantius of Lyon (fl. c. 480CE), bishop and former provincial governor, tells us that Germanus visited Britain with a colleague, Lupus, bishop of Troyes, in 429. This visit was motivated by concerns of Pelagianism spreading inside the British Church, a concern related to Rome's management of the deep frontiers of the Imperial government. Germanus was a fierce orator and, though we must take hagiographical accounts with a grain of salt, Constantius claims he emerged victorious in his debates with British bishops. The papal authority backing Germanus's visit was arranged by another Gallic bishop who would have a profound importance in the history of early Ireland, Palladius. It was the successful conclusion of this visit to Britain that led Pope Celestine to send Palladius to Ireland.[22]

In 431 CE, Prosper of Aquitaine's *Chronicle* tells us that Palladius (fl. 408-431CE), a highly educated, Gallic bishop, was ordained at Rome by Pope Celestine as the first bishop to the Christians already present in Ireland.[23] His mission was to ensure continuity with Rome in the midst of the so-called Pelagian heresy in Britain. Though the dates are not without debate,[24] sometime in the early fifth century the Briton, St Patrick, began his mission

19 See contributions in Pryce, 1998
20 See Charles-Edwards, 2003a, pp. 20-26
21 See Wooding, 2002
22 Charles-Edwards, 2003a, p. 26
23 See Mommsen, 1892, pp. 341-499
24 See pp. 107-22 below

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in Ireland, and it is with Patrick's two extant texts, the *Epistola ad Milites Corotici* ('Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus') and *Confessio* ('Confession') that the Irish rhetorical tradition begins.

With the arrival of Palladius and Patrick, Ireland entered into a relationship with Rome and Britain that would endure throughout our era, 431 CE-800 CE.[25] The evidence for the early period in Ireland is sparse, and for the fifth century we are limited to the writings of St Patrick. Nothing of Palladius's mission found its way into the historical record and, according to the annals and Patrician hagiography, it was short-lived and unsuccessful. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that Palladius would have brought books and the means of producing more along with him from Rome. Despite the dearth of evidence for Palladius's time in Ireland, we will see that Patrick's writings provide us with great insight into the nature of rhetorical education and practice in fifth-century Britain and Gaul. From the outset, a rhetorical history of fifth-century Ireland is a multicultural one. We can be certain that Patrick also brought with him to Ireland books and writing materials, and we can also be certain that among the Christian communities he established, schools were of the utmost importance. As was noted at the outset, Christianity is a religion of the book, and literacy was essential to reading Scripture. What this may have looked like, however, is a matter of pure conjecture. That being said, one can say with a fair degree of confidence that Patrick would have brought biblical codices, the Psalter (which was central to elementary education), and perhaps synodical decrees and writings of the Latin Fathers.[26]

Despite this relative dearth of evidence for the fifth and sixth centuries, Charles-Edwards argues that by the seventh century Christian religion and Latin culture had spread throughout the northern Atlantic region: 'As

25 On evidence of relations between the Irish and the southern English in the seventh century, see Herren, 1998

26 'Codices' is a more accurate term for representing the state of Scripture at this time, as canonization was incomplete and there existed no 'Bible' as a modern reader may think. Such a bound item did not exist until the thirteenth century. Patrick used the *Vetus Latina*, or *Old Latin Bible* regularly, though he also uses Jerome's Latin Vulgate, a Latin translation of the Greek Septuagint. O Loughlin, 2001, p. 48, writes 'It would be anachronistic to speak of 'Bibles', or even of 'the Scriptures' collectively. The notion of 'the Bible' lay centuries ahead, and even the notion of a pandect – a single very large manuscript containing all the books in 'the Canon' – was unknown. Equally, the notion of a fixed list of books – the Canon – was relatively new, and no single list had yet gained dominance, and the presence in Ireland (and elsewhere) of so many works now termed 'apocrypha' shows how long it took for one canon to establish itself'. Patrick likely brought with him the Book of Psalms, portions of the Old Testament, the Pauline Letters, and other miscellaneous items, and these were also likely recopied in Ireland

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the first monks had settled in the sandy deserts of Egypt, so the monks of the world's edge settled the deserts of the sea'.[27] The Christianity of the Roman Empire was transformed into a Christianity that could easily cross boundaries. Christian learning had come to Ireland from Britain, and the Irish would play an important role in the spread of Christian learning to communities in northern Britain, including Lindisfarne in Northumbria and Iona in Scotland, in the following centuries.

From Ireland, Christian learning would also find its way to Burgundy and northern Italy through the efforts of the Irish *peregrini*, monks who chose self-exile from Ireland. The background of this practice is complex. Some *peregrini* sought to take up the revered call to exile in pursuit of solitude across the ocean. Some ventured to islands in the north Atlantic, such as the Faroe Islands, and there enjoyed solitude. Some travelled to Gaul, where one might more easily find a safe space for monastic pursuit, as well as wealthy patrons to fund the monastery. Though *peregrinatio pro Christo* was not a custom limited to the Irish, the Irish took it up with particular enthusiasm, and there is evidence that this practice was revered in pre-Christian Ireland.[28] The most famous *peregrinus*, Columbanus, and his followers established monastic communities throughout Gaul and in northern Italy in the late sixth and early seventh century, monasteries that would be essential in the coming Carolingian Renaissance. Columbanus's extant letters and sermons, composed in the late sixth or early seventh century, reveal a man trained in an advanced Latin and capable of rhetorical dexterity.[29] Though written on the Continent in the last years of his life, the letters especially reveal something of the rhetorical and grammatical training Columbanus received in Ireland.[30]

From the seventh century forward, there is a wealth of medieval Irish literature in Latin and the vernacular, including a vast body of saga, hagiography, law-tracts, poetry, genealogy, grammars and other learned handbooks, exegetical works, as well as ecclesiastical and learned texts.[31] Though no rhetorical handbooks of Irish provenance survive (or have been

27 Charles-Edwards, 2003a, p. 115

28 On the Irish social background of Irish *peregrinatio*, see Meeder, 2019; Johnston, 2016; Charles-Edwards, 1976

29 For a sobering critique of earlier scholarship on writings attributed to Columbanus and a study of his style, see Smit, 1971

30 See Winterbottom, 1976, for a discussion of late antique rhetoric and Columbanus's style

31 For comprehensive surveys, see Ó Corráin, 2017; Charles-Edwards, 2005; Kenney, 1966; For surveys of vernacular literature, see Ní Mhaonaigh, 2006; Ó Cathasaigh, 2006; Carney, 2005; For a survey of Latin literature, see Ó Cróinín, 2005; Sharpe, 1997; Lapidge and Sharpe, 1985

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discovered), the literary evidence makes clear the importance of rhetoric in early Irish schools.[32] It is within these types of sources, in unexpected genres, that evidence for rhetorical learning lies.

Early Irish vernacular literature is broken into several periods: Proto-Goidelic, before fourth century CE; Primitive Irish period, fourth to sixth century CE; Archaic/Early Old Irish, c. seventh century; Old Irish, eighth to ninth centuries, CE; and the Middle Irish period, c. tenth-twelfth centuries CE.[33] The earliest Old Irish passages are primarily preserved in continental manuscripts including the Würzburg Glosses on the Pauline Epistles (mid-eighth century),[34] the Milan Glosses on a commentary on the Psalms (early ninth century),[35] and the St Gall Glosses on Priscian's encyclopaedic grammar.[36] Though Priscian was likely known in Ireland by the seventh century, the St Gall manuscript was written in the middle of the ninth century by Irish scribes, probably in Ireland. The Middle Irish period boasts a vast body of literature preserved in manuscripts of Irish provenance, including *Lebor na hUidre* (Book of Dun Cow) and Book of Leinster. Some of the texts preserved in these manuscripts may have been recorded from much older exemplars. In any case, Ireland boasts the largest body of vernacular literature in the medieval west.

The present work consists of three case studies representative of the potential of early Irish traditions for the student of rhetoric. In this, it is in no way comprehensive. However, it is my intention to introduce the student of rhetoric to the primary and secondary sources that are indispensable to a rhetorical history of early Ireland. I also provide a brief historical sketch of the western European and Irish contexts in order to better situate the rhetorical analyses that constitute the bulk of this study. In addition, I will also provide an overview of scholarship on secular and Christian learning in early Ireland. The texts chosen as the subject of each case study represent only some of the genres that offer promise for a history of rhetoric, but they also represent different facets of early Irish learning.

32 According to Czerny, 1874, p. 235, in the catalogue of the holdings of the St Florian library in the twelfth century, a *Rhetorica Ailerani* is given. This seventh-century writer was the author of the *Interpretatio mystica et moralis progenitorum Domini Iesu Christi* (See Breen, 1995b), as well as a shorter poem. Though a rhetorical analysis of the *Interpretatio mystica* may shed light on the rhetorical learning of Aileran, the *Rhetorica Ailerani* no longer survives

33 For those interested in learning Early Irish, see Stifter, 2006; see also the resources gathered here: https://www3.smo.uhi.ac.uk/sengoidelc/iul/ (accessed 17-03-2021)

34 For a digital edition of the glosses, see https://wuerzburg.ie/ (accessed 17-03-2021)

35 For a digital edition of the glosses, see Griffith and Stifter, 2014: https://www.univie.ac.at/indogermanistik/milan_glosses/ (accessed 17-03-2021)

36 For a digital edition of the glosses, see http://www.stgallpriscian.ie/ (accessed 17-03-2021)

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In Chs. 3 and 4, I provide a rhetorical analysis of St Patrick's writings, with special attention to the adaptation of Roman rhetoric to epistolography. Patrick's writings are the earliest extant in late antique Ireland, and in this they provide insight into a period in which evidence is slim, in both Ireland and Britain.

In Ch. 5, I will look at the *Hisperica famina*, an example of an Irish rhetoric likely composed in Ireland in the late seventh century. In this analysis, I uncover evidence that, in addition to Donatus, Isidore, and Priscian's *Praeexercitamina* (an adaptation of Hermogenes' *Progymnasmata*), the colloquia and *hermeneumata* of Late Antiquity were likely known by the authors of the *Hisperica*. I also discuss the style referred to as '*hisperic*' by scholars of Hiberno-Latin literature, an archaizing, deliberately arcane and affectedly learned style that is reminiscent of that of writers of the 'third sophistic',[37] such as Apuleius, Aulus Gellius, and Fronto.[38] Furthermore, I examine the metaphors used to describe eloquence and oratorical performance in light of early Irish literature.

Finally, I will turn to an example of the tradition of the secular learned classes of early Ireland, the *filid*. Here, I will briefly describe what is called *rosc*, a type of highly rhetorical, obscure, non-rhyming, syllabic, alliterative verse associated with the *filid*, a learned caste consisting of a union of ecclesiastical and secular scholars.[39] *Rosc* is found in many early Irish law-texts and sagas and possesses an archaizing, stylistic function. Though it is primarily a poetic form, it is also a non-metrical rhetorical style in direct speech, and the two are often combined.[40] It was likely developed in native verbal art, but its stylistic features include parallelism, homoioteleuton, amplification, abnormal word order, and word-play, which Johan Corthals notes are 'perfectly matched by Late and medieval Latin rhetorical and poetical style' and are strongly influenced by Latin and Christian culture.[41] It was the province of those verbal artists who

37 This term, 'third sophistic', is controversial and unsettled, but scholars agree that, though marking continuity with and change from the second sophistic, it begins around 250 CE and is predominantly the reserve of Christian writers indebted to the pre-Christian tradition in both the Greek and Latin speaking worlds. For an overview of definitions and debates, see Fowler and Puertas, 2014

38 See Pernot, 2005, p. 142

39 Breatnach, 1984, pp. 452-53 writes of the sub-categories of *rosc*: 'the first consists of syllabically regular lines with a fixed cadence and alliteration, but without rhyme; the second of lines with regular number of stressed words per line and alliteration; while the third type shows no apparent regular syllabic or stress patterns, but is heavily alliterative'

40 Corthals, 1996, p. 17

41 Ibid., p. 26

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possessed judicial authority, though it is often ascribed to legendary figures in law-texts and sagas. In order to understand *filidecht*, the craft of the *filid*, I will also look to an eighth-century, prosimetric learned text that appears in a fifteenth-century legal codex and that is associated with a poetico-legal school known as the *Nemed* School. The poem, titled here 'The Cauldron of Poetry and Learning', likely dates to the eighth century and describes the nature of verbal art and learning, the ranks and privileges of the *filid*, and the divine source of inspiration for verbal art. This poem is the product of secular and ecclesiastical collaboration and is a prime example of the syncretism that marks not only early Irish literature, but early Irish intellectual culture.

Historiography and Medieval Rhetoric

It is clear that the rhetorical arts were still a significant part of education throughout Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. However, these periods have received little attention from historians of rhetoric.[42] For some time, a historiographical problem has plagued the history of late antique and medieval rhetoric. Buying into the narrative of decline and rebirth–a narrative that served the ends of modernity–and taking ancient Greece and Rome as the pinnacle of culture, these historians believed that since the production of rhetoric handbooks and treatises ceased, the significance of rhetoric must have waned with the dawning of Christianity and the authoritarian, ascetic life of the monastery. With the waning glory of Roman civic life, rhetoric was no longer relevant. Therefore, the dominant narrative goes, if rhetoric is knowledge of speaking well on civil affairs, there must have been little use for it in a landscape dominated by 'barbarian' warlords or subject to papal authority. If rhetoric were studied, handbooks or other evidence would have survived, and the survival of numerous grammar handbooks must mean rhetoric had been swallowed up by grammar, leaving rhetoric a pale shadow of its former glory, having been reduced to discussions of tropes and figures.

It is my contention that evidence for the continued relevance of rhetoric does indeed exist, though we must look in the right places. The historian of medieval rhetoric must turn to a variety of genres, media, and modalities

42 For a challenge to this dearth in rhetorical history see especially Duncan, 2015, and the sources cited there

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and approach rhetorical artefacts as dynamic adaptations and syncretic compositions. Susan Jarratt states the historiographic problem succinctly:

> Traditional histories of rhetoric could be defined as those histories having taken as their subject matter chiefly documents explicitly calling themselves 'rhetorics': i.e., pedagogical treatises concerned with the composition and delivery of persuasive orations … This selection is based on a narrow definition of rhetoric as the teaching and performance of an opinion-based discourse for use in the social sphere as distinct from the poetic and the philosophical or scientific … The revisionary historian today will work with an expanded range of materials: not only the pedagogical treatises summarized in traditional histories, but any literary artefact as it operates to shape knowledge and effect social action.[43]

By the early Middle Ages, the uses to which rhetoric was put had changed, and the historian of rhetoric must look beyond the handbook tradition. This makes perfect sense, as rhetoric had always been versatile and adaptable.

As for those historians of rhetoric who have studied the Middle Ages, even the most prominent have found little of interest in the medieval rhetorical tradition prior to the twelfth century, and none of the major surveys treats texts of Irish provenance.[44] In the words of Martin Camargo, the Middle Ages have been treated as 'flyover country'.[45] The very notion of a 'middle age' limits our framework as within it 'middleness' is figured. It is a period necessary to the ends of those who would forward a narrative of decline from which the modern world has emerged. In kind, medieval rhetoric 'has been defined by what it is not – the "true", "authentic," or "primary" rhetoric that was lost in the collapse of classical culture and recovered in the Renaissance'.[46] The absence of 'new', or 'original', rhetorical treatises has led to this narrative of the discontinuity of rhetorical practice.

Yet studies of rhetorical innovation and application tell another story. Rhetoric has always been a fluid art, difficult to pin down and define. Many scholars maintain the Platonic view of rhetoric that distinguishes *verba*,

43 Jarratt, 1998, pp. 13-14

44 See, for example, the trailblazing scholarship of James J. Murphy, who revolutionized the study of medieval rhetoric, but who does not consider Irish texts. In large part this is due to the fact that many of the relevant texts have only been edited and translated in the last few decades, but also because rhetoric handbooks of Irish provenance have not survived; See Murphy, 2005; idem, 1978; idem, 1974

45 Camargo, 2003, p. 21

46 Ibid., p. 23

verbal expression, and *res,* the matter of speech. That is, content and form are distinguished, and rhetoric is simply a matter of style, ornament, and formal presentation. This is bound up in an understanding of truth as a verbal rapprochement of reality that is separate from language rather than understanding truth as produced within discourse. While an examination of the influence of handbook theory on rhetorical artifacts is not without merit, the *dissimulatio artis* inspired an attempt to conceal theoretical models. Therefore, a rhetorical analysis of late antique and medieval texts must push beyond contemporary theories or models for composition and tend to the rhetorical nature of the text itself, the reality it constructs and its persuasive potential. Even when considering handbooks, no one set of prescriptive rhetorical practices or rules could speak to the exigencies of a given moment of utterance or composition. In this regard, rhetorical practice is always situated and situational. In Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, rhetoric was Christianized and, as Rita Copeland explains, 'became attached to different methods and branches of knowledge–whether logic or poetics or theology–or to different practical aims, such as preaching, law, business or diplomacy'.[47] The historian of medieval rhetoric must therefore look beyond the rhetorical handbook to the wealth of medieval discourses that are rhetorical.

For some scholars of late antique Christian rhetoric, neglect of actual speeches and letters in the study of ancient rhetoric does a disservice to the rhetorical tradition. Instead, rhetorical artefacts have as much, if not more, to reveal about rhetorical practice than descriptive handbooks. In a rhetorical analysis of the *First Letter of Clement*, Odd Magne Bakke writes that even though rhetorical handbooks are descriptive, they necessarily systematize, and in this tendency the abstractions they represent fail to capture the wide range of practices from which they draw. If a rhetorical analysis of an ancient text consults only handbooks, 'there is a risk that one may over-systematize and overschematize, and force structures onto the letter which did not exist in actual contemporary rhetorical discourses or letters'.[48] Bakke's method takes the rhetorical artefact, in this instance a letter, as primary, and turns to the handbooks likely available to the author in order to see what the two might reveal. One must be careful not to force a rhetorical reading on a primary text in order to satisfy a preconceived notion of what proper rhetoric looked like in a given time and place. Not only does this lead to an unsatisfactory, if not misleading analysis, but also

47 Copeland, 1991, p. 176
48 Bakke, 2001, p. 23

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works against one's ability to determine the significance of a rhetorical artefact (or group of artefacts) to the history of rhetoric. Such an approach is also misleading in that a properly rhetorical letter, for example, may be rhetorical in its own right–in its purpose–but not fit with the 'norms' as perceived by contemporary scholars.

Another important consideration in this study will be the definition of rhetoric, which I will use in two distinct senses. The first is considered in the classical sense, though throughout Antiquity and Late Antiquity various definitions have competed since Aristotle's formal articulation of the art. While indebted to Greek rhetoric, Roman rhetoric is distinct, and undoubtedly figures such as Cicero, Quintilian, and pseudo-Cicero had a profound and lasting influence on the rhetorical arts of the Middle Ages.[49] For these rhetoricians, rhetoric is, in essence, *vis persuadendi* ('persuasion'). However, it is also the art of speaking and writing well on *civila negotia* ('civic affairs'), whereas grammar is the art of speaking or writing correctly.[50] There is also a moral component to the orator's craft. Quintilian famously wrote that the orator is '*vir bonus dicendi peritus*' ('a good man speaking well').[51] The orator who composes epideictic rhetoric must be able to recognize what is *honestas* ('morally worthy') and *turpia* ('morally reprehensible').[52]

By the fifth century, encyclopaedic works grew in popularity, and in these texts classical learning was condensed into textbook form, a form embraced by many Christian scholars. These include Cassiodorus's *Expositio psalmorum* (*Commentary on the Psalms*) (c. 540-50 CE) and *Institutiones Divinarum et Saecularium Litterarum* (*Principles of Sacred and Secular Literature*) (543-55 CE), Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* (*Etymologies*) (c. 630 CE), and Martianus Capella's *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* (*The Marriage of Mercury and Philology*) (c. 410-20 CE).[53] Though following Roman rhetoricians, Cassiodorus saw no reason for students to pore over the entirety of Quintilian or Cicero. Some scholars have read the *Expositio psalmorum* (hereafter *CP*) of Cassiodorus as an *ars rhetorica*, and this had possibly

49 See Ward, 2018, for a detailed examination of the persistence of Roman rhetoric in the Middle Ages

50 Giomini and Celentano 1980, pp. 24-25

51 All references to Quintilian's *Instituio Oratoria* rely on the edition of Butler, 1922; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 2.21.4-6

52 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 2.20.8

53 There are a number of commentaries on Capella's *De Nuptiis* dating to the ninth century, three of which are the work of Irish scholars working in Carolingian circles. For an overview of these manuscripts, see Esposito, 1910, reprinted in Lapidge, 1990, pp. 499-507

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arrived in the Irish monastery at Iona by the seventh century.[54] Cassiodorus wrote in *CP* 'You masters of secular literature, realise that from the psalms have flowed forth your figures of speech, your proofs of different kinds, your definitions, your teachings about all disciplines, for in these writings you find enshrined what you realise was said long before the existence of your schools'.[55] For Cassiodorus, the principles of ancient rhetoric were abundant in scripture, and a student need not read the speeches of great orators to gain mastery over the art.

Yet the influence of Cicero remained strong and, as Laurent Pernot writes, from Antiquity to modern times the notion of rhetoric based upon his works was not limited to public discourse, 'but concentrated in itself the potentialities of literature, science, and humanism', constituting a 'very broad and overwhelming conception of rhetoric, which opened to rhetoric a vast domain and to whose spread cultural institutions have contributed'.[56] Rhetoric came to have an influence on history, literature, liturgical texts, epistolography, and even architecture, and it is in such texts that the student of rhetoric in early medieval Ireland must turn.[57] John O. Ward writes that classical rhetoric served the Middle Ages in a variety of ways, and it 'provided guides and tips for the appropriate use of humour, on increasing memory capacity, on analysing legal issues, on acting and gesture, for oral and written style, conversation, letter-writing, or speech-making' and, in short, 'it was made to fit every kind of situation requiring or benefiting from persuasive or effective communication'.[58] In kind, Matthew Kempshall warns 'Concentrating on material drawn from Cicero and Quintilian risks giving the impression that the study of rhetoric in the Middle Ages was simply a case of the recovery and transmission of a single 'classical' mode of analysis and, as such, that rhetoric constituted a more or less static art and discipline throughout most of this period'.[59]

The second definition of rhetoric that will be used in analysis of secular verbal arts is that inspired by the American philosopher and rhetorician

54 O Loughlin, 2001, p. 51; For Cassiodorus's *Expositio psalmorum* as an *ars rhetorica*, see Astell, 1999

55 'Cognoscite, magistri saecularium litterarum, hic schemata, hinc diuersi generis argumenta, hinc definitions, hinc disciplinarum omnium profluxisse doctrinas, quando in his litteris posita cognoscitis quae ante scholas uestras longe prius dicta fuisse sentitis' (*Expositionum libri psalmorum* 23.10.192-196)

56 Pernot, 2005, p. 121

57 On rhetoric and history, see Kempshall, 2011; on rhetoric and the architecture of Augustan Rome, see Lamp, 2013; on rhetoric and the arts in the Middle Ages, see Carruthers, 2010

58 Ward, 1995, p. 10

59 Kempshall, 2011, pp. 11-12

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Kenneth Burke. This conception of rhetoric challenges the Platonic distinction between *verba* and *res*. Burke's dramatistic approach to rhetoric posits all language as persuasive, and he defines humans as symbol-using animals who, through symbolic action, construct social reality. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke defines rhetoric as 'The use of words by human agents to form attitudes or induce actions in other human agents' and 'the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols'.[60] Burke's dramatistic definition of language as symbolic action that induces action and constructs social reality, that exerts through speech a persuasive action on an audience, is a useful heuristic for examining verbal art in early Irish texts. It serves to take us beyond a limited understanding of rhetorical practices, or rhetoric as an art of expression, and it gives us the tools necessary to develop an understanding of early Irish rhetorical practices, both secular and Christian.

Burke's understanding of rhetoric has been of value to studies of 'cultural rhetorics'. That is, though Hellenic and Hellenistic cultures are often viewed as the harbingers of the rhetorical arts as a formal system of persuasion, cultures the world over place oratory at the centre of social life. Numerous recent studies on the oratory of Indigenous cultures, Native American cultures, ancient Chinese and Egyptian cultures, and African cultures, have helped to decenter scholarly discourses that have in large part treated rhetoric and oratory as a western phenomenon.[61] Indeed, oratorical performance is central to the social lives of numerous cultures, and the verbal art forms that emerge from and shape such cultural contexts are worthy of study in their own right, without recourse to the western tradition. The current study will treat both late antique rhetoric as it was transmitted to Ireland, as well as distinctively Irish oratory as it is seen in a syncretic form in the *Hisperica famina* and the 'Cauldron of Poetry and Learning'.

A Note on Periodization

There have been several important contributions to our understanding of the interaction of Irish and late antique literature, studies that demonstrate

60 Burke, 1950, pp. 41-43

61 Cultural rhetorics is the preferred term as 'comparative rhetorics' tends to perpetuate the western v. non-western binary in which western rhetoric rests in a position of superiority. For a discussion of these matters and an advanced theoretical positioning and methodology, see Powell et al, 2014; For model studies, see especially Stromberg, 2006; Lu 1998; Hutto 2002

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convincingly the influence of Roman literary models and rhetoric on Irish saga of the Middle Irish Period.[62] Though such studies have influenced the methodology of the present study, the focus here is the earlier body of literature produced during the so-called 'Golden Age of Irish Learning', the fifth century through the early ninth century CE. This era is nearest the arrival of Christian learning from Ireland's late antique neighbours and prior to the disruptions and turmoil of the 'Viking Ages', begun in earnest around 795 CE, but intensifying around 830.[63] It is important to note, however, that Irish learning by no means ceased after the Viking Wars, and that Roman influence on Irish literature continued throughout the Middle Ages.[64]

This study focuses on representative texts produced between c. 431-800 CE. When speaking of the pre-Carolingian Era, or late antique and early medieval Ireland, one must note that periodization is a necessary and troubled act. Any attempt at defining an era or period necessitates exclusion of that which does not fit the picture the historian wishes to paint. Arnaldo Marcone writes that: 'The precariousness of any kind of historical periodization is based upon two different elements: the historical research that precedes it and the different sensibility that different cultures and ages have for their past'.[65] Indeed, historiography and narrative of national origins are deeply ideological, something witnessed most clearly in the 'nativist' debate among Irish historians in the twentieth

62 See Clarke and Ní Mhaonaigh, 2020; Ní Mhaonaigh, 2017; idem, 2015; idem, 2014; Miles, 2011; idem, 2009; idem, 2007; Clarke, 2014; idem, 2009; O'Connor 2014; idem, 2013; Corthals, 1996

63 Ó Corráin, 1972, pp. 80-110 explains that the Viking invasions were a gradual yet destructive affair. The first recorded attack took place in 795, and a succession of attacks on monastic settlements on islands along the northern parts of both the west and east coast continued throughout the ninth century, increasing in intensity from 830. The coastal monasteries took the brunt of these southward, Norse incursions, and inland monasteries were largely unaffected. The Viking Age is often used as a cut off point for the 'Golden Age of Irish Learning', but Ó Corráin, 2015, has argued that though the consistent sacking of churches did indeed impact manuscript production and the wealth of the monasteries, the impact on learning and manuscript production was not as great as some have argued

64 Miles, 2011, p. 16, has warned against distinguishing between pre-Carolingian and Carolingian learning in Ireland as the latter term suggests that the period following the 'Golden Age of Irish Learning' stands in its shadows. It is not my intention to promote a narrative of the decline of Irish learning following the ninth-century Viking Wars, but to stress to the non-expert the extent and influence of the Irish learned tradition in this early period, a period almost entirely glossed over by historians of rhetoric

65 Marcone, 2008, p. 10

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century.[66] Nonetheless, periodization is a necessary aspect of historical study.

As we will see below, Ireland maintained communication with Christian Rome and British and Continental colleagues throughout our period. This troubles the waters when distinguishing the late antique and early medieval periods. In short, there is no clear cut-off date between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, and the geopolitical circumstances of a given region must be taken into consideration.[67] Late Antiquity, c. 200-600, is a period that emerged in response to the narrative of decline that dominated traditional historiographies, narratives that sought to create a clear distinction between the classical and the Christian.[68]

But Christianity did not emerge in a vacuum, and the rituals, beliefs, and values of early Christianity are a development of the Mediterranean world. As we see in late antique and early medieval Ireland, Christian practices were adapted to Irish society in new and unique ways. Though there is no clear and absolute moment of transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Medieval in Ireland, we must see the Irish as both unique from and concomitant with the cultural movements of sub-Roman Britain and Gaul and, later, Western Europe. The early Irish were inheritors of the Christian learned traditions of Late Antiquity, but the Irish tendency was reception and transformation. This is perhaps witnessed most clearly in the early development of vernacular literacy shortly after the introduction of Latin to Ireland's shores. Therefore, these periods generally used by historians serve as an easy and recognizable reference point, but they do not apply to Ireland in the same ways they might to Roman Britain and Gaul. However, as the early Irish church developed an independent, if not composite, literary identity, and as Irish scholars established practices and beliefs that distinguish them from their British neighbours, we may identify a fluid and dynamic point of transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages in Ireland in the seventh and eighth centuries.

The complexities and difficulties of periodization aside, the fifth through the eighth centuries represent the earliest stratum of literary activity in Ireland. Scholars have identified a number of subsequent, medieval 'renaissances', such as the Carolingian Renaissance, the Benedictine Reform, the

66 For a comprehensive summary of these debates, see Johnston, 2013, pp. 20-25; Wooding, 2009

67 Ando, 2008, p. 32, provides an overview of periods from influential historians, ranging from a genesis in 150, 200, 250, 395, or 425 to a terminus in 600, 700, 750, or 800

68 Brown, 1971, proposed the 'long Late Antiquity period' and included not only western Europe, but the Roman and Sasanian territories in the east

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Ottonian Renaissance, and the Twelfth-Century Renaissance. However, the early period demonstrates the continuation of intense intellectual activity well before these movements and problematises the very idea of 'renaissance', suggesting instead a continued intellectual movement marked by varying degrees of intensity in part due to socio-historical contexts. Of course, the survival of manuscript evidence is a limitation on the historian's understanding of the extent and nature of learning.

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