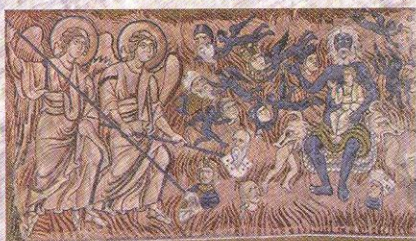


Last Things First: Doomsday and the Hereafter in Medieval Ireland



Details from the great Last Judgment mosaic in the cathedral of Torcello, in the Venice lagoon

Every culture of which we have knowledge has pondered the mystery of what awaits us after death: such pondering is probably an essential part of what it is to be human. European ideas on the subject have their roots in post-exilic Judaism, but this tradition was, in the centuries before Dante's *Divine Comedy*, largely shaped by vision narratives of specifically Irish background. Thanks to a grant from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS), members of the Department of Early and Medieval Irish will be devoting the next three years to a project whose name - *De Finibus*, or "Concerning the Last Things" - reflects its focus on medieval Irish accounts of the Last Judgment and the afterlife.

Arguably the oldest western European vision text, and also one of the most influential, is the *Life of Saint Fursa*, written not long after its subject's death around the year 649. At the heart of the work are a series of what would nowadays be called near-death experiences: in a state of coma, the saint's soul leaves his body and is conducted by angels to regions of reward and punishment. The nightmarish vividness of portions of the narrative, in particular, its evocation of the spiritual nature of the flames of hell, lends it an uncanny verisimilitude. Nevertheless, the *Life of Saint Fursa's* literary roots are not difficult to recognise. Like almost every medieval Christian visionary, Fursa (or his

biographer) owes a debt to the widely disseminated *Apocalypse of Paul*: inspired by Saint Paul's own allusion to a mysterious visit to the "third heaven", and probably written in Egypt in the second or third century.

Péronne, the French monastery where Fursa's remains were buried, was one of the centres of Irish influence on the Continent; it is very likely there that the *Life of Saint Fursa* was written. Did the story find its way back to Ireland? Direct evidence is scant, and relatively late, but there are more oblique indications that Fursa's visions were indeed known in Ireland early in the Middle Irish period. A single manuscript preserves an incomplete copy of an account, dated to the tenth century, of the experiences of a monk named Laisrén. Tantalizingly, the text breaks off when Laisrén has only just reached the threshold of hell; but details in an earlier section make it clear that the *Life of Saint Fursa* was the author's principal source. He himself, however, seems to have been responsible for the striking description of the onset of Laisrén's out-of-body adventure, brought on by sustained fasting:

He saw that the church in which he was was bright, and the night was not yet over. And he saw a bright shape between the chancel and the altar. The shape said to him: "Come to me!" The body of the cleric trembled all over at that voice, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot. And he saw his soul

*The shape said to him: “Come to me!”
The body of the cleric trembled all over
at that voice, from the crown of his
head to the sole of his foot. And he saw
his soul suddenly above the crown of
his head, and he did not know by what
way it had gone out of the body.*



Soul being carried to heaven, by Hieronymus Bosch

suddenly above the crown of his head, and he did not know by what way it had gone out of the body.

The only edition and translation of the *Vision of Laisrén* was published a century ago, and it has barely been studied since then. One of the outcomes of the project will be a new edition, and a thorough analysis, of this brief but crucially important text.

Much more elaborate is the work known as the *Vision of Adomnán*: although its notional protagonist was a celebrated abbot of Iona who died in 704, the date of composition was probably some three centuries later. Like the author of the *Life of Saint Fursa*, the writer took the basic structure of the *Apocalypse of Paul* as his starting point; but he embellished his materials with an extravagant imaginative sensibility which was all his own. His description of heaven is characterized by intense curiosity concerning the inexpressible experience of contemplating God directly; while his account of the regions of the lost does not suffer by comparison with many of the most gruesome passages in the *Inferno*:

*There are, then, great hosts there standing
always in jet-black marshes which reach
to their girdles. They wear short icy cowls.
They never rest nor pause, but the girdles are
burning them with both cold and heat. Hosts
of demons are all around them with fiery
lumps in their hands, beating their heads,
and perpetually accusing them. The faces of
all of those wretches are turned to the north,
and there is a harsh bitter wind right against*

*their foreheads along with every other evil.
There are red fiery showers falling on them
every night and every day, and they can
never avoid them but endure them forever
with wailing and lamentation.*

The *Vision of Adomnán* survives in five manuscripts, and a fragment of its conclusion has been preserved in several more. Some of these copies have been published individually, but the witnesses have never been brought together in their entirety, much less critically edited. A central aim of the project will be the production of such a critical edition, as part of the *Corpus Christianorum*, Series Apocryphorum.

The Last Judgment also preoccupied the medieval mind, and in this respect the Irish were far from being an exception. Another of the goals of *De Finibus* will be to elucidate the interrelationships of the several Irish texts which list the signs of the approaching end. Work is already underway on an edition of the *Ten Poems of the Resurrection*, an eschatological composition appended to the great Biblical sequence known as the *Psalter of the Verses*.

By the middle of the twelfth century a network of Irish monasteries, adherents of the Benedictine reform which was one of the driving cultural forces of the age, spanned the German-speaking countries. Their mother-house was in Regensburg and one Marcus, a Regensburg monk, penned a vision text whose popularity far outstripped that of any of the works which I have so far mentioned. 154 manuscripts of the original

Latin survive, and it was translated into most of the languages of Europe. In conspicuous contrast to the austere Laisrén, the hero of the *Vision of Tnugdall* loses consciousness in the middle of a sumptuous dinner in Cork (already, it seems, the culinary capital of Ireland). In the nether regions Tnugdall encounters, among others, characters from the Ulster cycle of heroic tales; while in paradise he meets various recently deceased Munster dynasts, giving the tale a contemporary political relevance which foreshadows aspects of the *Divine Comedy*. The project will probe what the *Vision* has to tell us about the links between twelfth century Regensburg and Munster, as well as exploring the fascinating echoes which resonate between this text and another Middle Irish narrative set in Cork: that comic masterpiece the *Dream of Mac Con Glinne*.

The above gives only a very incomplete picture of the range of medieval Irish apocalyptic and eschatological literature – and, indeed, of the goals of the *De Finibus* Project. It is a rich field, in which there is much still to be done: in supporting such study, the IRCHSS will be furthering our understanding of one of the principal areas in which Ireland transformed the European imagination.

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