

# IRELAND AND THE BIRTH OF EUROPE



# INTRODUCTION

Ireland joined the European Economic Community, the forerunner of the European Union, in 1973, half a century after regaining independence. But Irish participation in the development of European identities dates back more than a thousand years.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, Europeans built on its foundations to develop their own culture and identity. A people who had never been part of that empire played an important role in this great enterprise. Of the scholars who journeyed from across Europe to play their part in the emerging Schools on the Continent, many came from Ireland, and theirs was the longest lasting presence.

This is the story of the part played by Irish scholars and missionaries in the early history of the European idea, especially their cultural role in the consolidation of the empire built by the Carolingians, an empire that covered most of western Europe.

St Columbanus was the first of these Irish missionaries and scholars to make their home on the Continent. Around 600 CE, he wrote ‘of all of Europe’ (*totius Europae*), becoming the first to use the expression in reference to the Continent’s cultural identity after the collapse of the Roman Empire.

Discover in this exhibition how Columbanus and his followers contributed to the shaping of a European heritage that endures today.

# Columbanus's mission

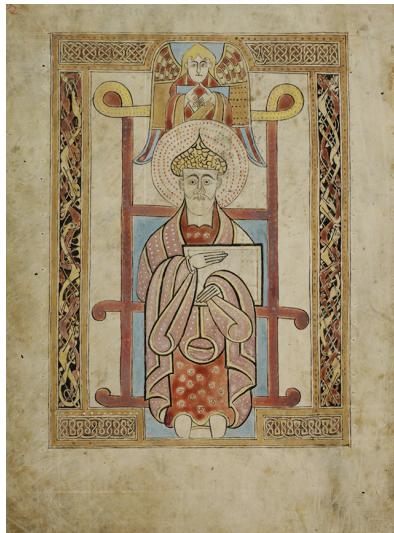
Around the year 590, Columbanus left the Irish monastery of Bangor for the Continent, where he established a succession of monasteries: Annegray, Fontaine and Luxeuil in the Vosges mountains, and Bobbio near Genoa. Some of the leading figures of Continental Christianity were educated at these renowned centres of learning.

The last of Columbanus's foundations was the monastery of Bobbio. One of the objects that journeyed from Ireland to Bobbio is the Bobbio reliquary (below), a container for the corporeal remains of a revered saintly figure. Its decoration has clear associations with objects found in Ireland.



**Bobbio reliquary**  
Photography by Alma Pro

# the abbey of st gallen



**Irish Gospel book, miniature of St Matthew**  
St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 51, p. 2  
– Irish Gospel Book preserved in St Gall

The Swiss city of St Gallen is named after St Gall who, by tradition, was an Irishman and follower of Columbanus. The monastery of St Gallen grew into one of the most powerful institutions in the region and its library, the Stiftsbibliothek, became famous for the extent of its holdings.

# the irish at the carolingian court

The Carolingian Empire began in the year 800 when Charlemagne, king of the Franks and of the Lombards, was crowned ‘Emperor of the Romans’ in Rome. After the Carolingians, this title continued to be used by the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire for the next thousand years. The empire of the Carolingians expanded to cover a vast territory from northern Spain to central Europe.

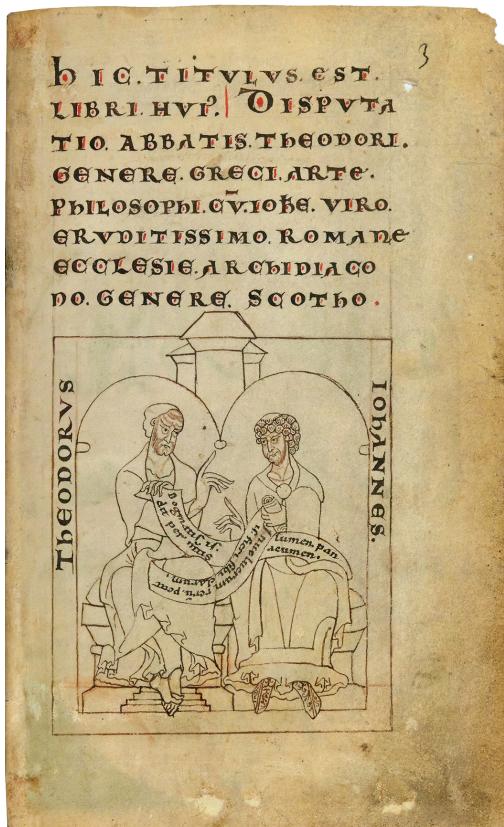
An eighth-century Gospel of St John is prefaced by a miniature (portrait) of the evangelist (right). The script and iconography show clear Irish influences, and the book may have been produced in Ireland or under Irish influence on the Continent. The wooden covers of the book are inlaid with ivory diptychs (panels) as the book may have been intended for presentation to the emperor Charlemagne as a coronation gift.

24.



**St John's Gospel, miniature of St John**  
St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 60, p. 4

# SCHOLARS AND SCHOLARSHIP



**Depiction of John Scotus ('a most wise man ... of the Irish nation') debating with abbot Theodore Honorius Augustodunensis, *Clavis Physicae*. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 6734, fol. 3r**

Learning was prized by Carolingian rulers who sought to create a cultural identity for their peoples and so promote unity within their vast empire. Irish scholars took up leading roles in court and cathedral schools across the empire, where they taught and composed tracts on astronomy, geography, and theology. They chronicled events that shaped the destiny of their hosts, and composed poetry praising their patrons.

John Scotus Eriugena achieved fame as a scholar, philosopher, and an expert in Greek. He spent much of his career at the court of emperor Charles the Bald, grandson of Charlemagne. He is best known for his masterpiece, *Periphyseon*, a Neoplatonic cosmography, and for translating Greek works into Latin at the request of the emperor.

# shaping european culture

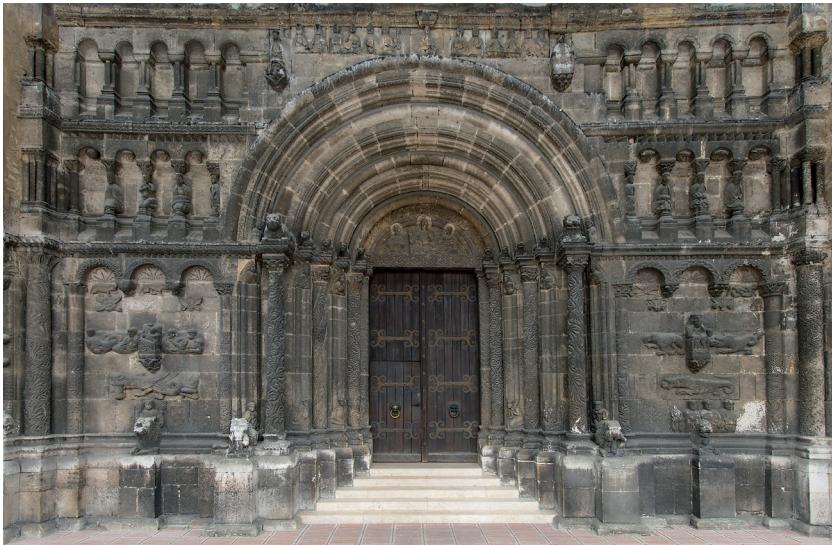


Illustration from  
*Tnugdal's Vision*  
Simon Marmion, *The Beast Acheron*, 1475.  
Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum,  
ms 30, fol. 17 (87).  
MN.141.17.17). Digital  
image courtesy  
of Getty's Open  
Content Program

Early Irish learned culture was remarkable for its sophistication and was shared across Europe, making an important contribution to Western society at a formative stage and giving moral and legal guidance to kings and emperors.

In Regensburg's *Schottenkloster* ('Irish monastery'), the mid-twelfth-century Irish monk Marcán wrote the story of Tnugdal, an Irish knight who was presumed to have died but returned to life after three days with tales of hell's punishments for the wicked, and the joys of heaven for the virtuous. Robbers were made to cross a narrow bridge with protruding nails while monsters waited in the stormy lake below. Others were fished from a fiery pit with pitchforks and hurled into snow. This popular story was translated into many languages. In the image above, Fergus and Conall, heroes from Irish saga, hold open the jaws of hell, while Tnugdal looks on.

# the IRISH in the GERMANIC LANDS



**Schottenportal,  
Regensburg,  
Germany**  
Gerald Richter,  
Morsbach Verlag

The last significant expansion of Irish Christianity in Europe occurred with the emergence of a network of Benedictine monasteries in Austria and southern Germany that recruited exclusively from Ireland.

These *Schottenklöster* ('Irish monasteries') extended their influence through dependent houses established as far distant as Kyiv, symbolising the universal appeal of their monastic ideals. The network peaked around the year 1230, and went into decline in the fifteenth century.

# the measure of the earth



## *Navigatio Brendani*

Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg, Cod. Pal. Germ. 60, fol. 179v

Columbanus taught that the order to love God and neighbour could be fulfilled through exile and lifelong pilgrimage. In time, he was followed from Ireland by scholars, theologians, philosophers, and poets who left accounts of journeys – real and imaginary – that educated and entertained for centuries.

The *Brendan Voyage* was one of the most popular travel tales of the Middle Ages. Written in Latin by an Irish monk sometime before 800, it describes the journey of St Brendan and his fourteen followers who set sail from Ireland in search of the Promised Land. On the way, they encounter strange creatures and natural wonders – a strange pillar of glass (perhaps an iceberg) and an island of fire (a volcano). Intended to entertain and give moral instruction, the tale survives in dozens of manuscripts and many vernacular translations.

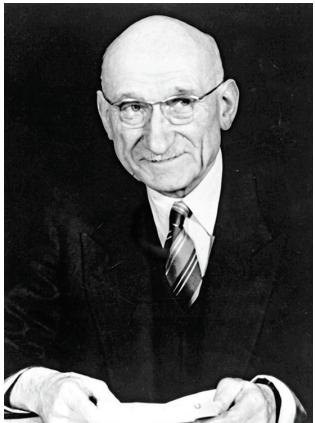


**St Columbanus**, neo-gothic mural in the church of St Pierre-le-Jeune, Strasbourg  
Photo by Nick Thompson used under Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 2.0,  
from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/pelegrino/3740029289/>

# SCHUMAN, COLUMBANUS AND THE EUROPEAN IDEA



**Jean Monnet at the League of Nations, 1922**  
By Genève Boissonas. Fondation Jean Monnet, Lausanne



**Robert Schuman, 1958**  
European Communities / HAEU, JP-312

'If I were to begin again, I would begin with culture.' These words, attributed to Jean Monnet, one of the founders of the European project, recognise the EU as a community of citizens united by shared values. That ideal has deep historical roots. From the seventh century, Irish scholars and missionaries played an influential role in fostering harmony through cultural contact.

In July 1950 French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman gave a speech in Luxeuil-les-Bains to commemorate the 1400th anniversary of Columbanus's birth, in which he spoke of the Irishman as 'the patron saint of all those who seek to construct a united Europe.' His words echo the sentiments of Columbanus himself who wrote of a spiritual identity that superseded national allegiance: 'we are all joint members of one body, whether Franks or Britons or Irish or whatever our race be'. The notion of a shared culture as the foundation of the European ideal remains the greatest legacy of Columbanus and the generations of Irish scholars who followed him to Continental Europe.



**Front cover image:**

**Depiction of Columbanus and his disciple Gall crossing Lake Constance from a fifteenth-century manuscript**  
St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 602, p. 33 – Vitae of German saints

---

## Credits

---

Researched, written and curated by Dr Damian Bracken, University College Cork, and Dr Angela Byrne for the Department of Foreign Affairs

Graphic design by Studio Suss



An Roinn Gnótháí Eacártha  
Department of Foreign Affairs

