

Soiscéal Molaisse – St Molaisse’s Gospel Shrine

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— LOUGH ERNE —
PILGRIM WAY

Introduction:

In the early 11th century AD, about a thousand years ago, the abbot of St Molaise's monastery on Devenish Island commissioned a goldsmith to make an ornate shrine for holding St Molaise's gospels, a book still known by its Irish name, Soiscéal Molaise.

The shrine, its top now missing, is composed of openwork plates of gilded silver attached to a rectangular box made of copper alloy (Mullarkey 2004, 124). The small dimensions of the shrine indicate that the gospel book was a pocket-sized one, for private use rather than in church services (Henry 1967, 58). It was, however, large enough to accommodate a thicker book than the normal 'pocket' gospels, suggesting that it contained either more full-page illuminations than usual or perhaps other texts (Ó Floinn 1989, 62).

The goldsmith, Gillabaithín or Giollabaithín (Mullarkey 2007, 58), designed the gospel shrine as a sealed container in which the manuscript was to be permanently stored (Mullarkey 2004, 124).

It is one of eight surviving book shrines from Ireland ranging in date from the late 8th century to 1534 AD and the design appears to be a typically Irish one differing from book cases in continental Europe which were also made to provide protection for prestigious or revered liturgical books but could if required be easily opened (ibid.124).



Evangelists' Symbols on the front of the Shrine:

The most striking images on the main face are the cast gilded-silver symbols of the four evangelists with Latin inscriptions naming each symbol and corresponding evangelist and a small cross in front of each name.



Reading clockwise from top left these are:

+MATH +HO+MARC: +LEO +IOHAN +AQUILA

+LUCAS +UITAL They translate as: Matthew (Man), Mark (Lion) John (Eagle) Luke (Ox) (Ó Floinn 1989, 57). Commended for their 'sensitive modelling', (Henry 1967, 121) these are prominently placed in the openings above and below the arms of a ringed cross and surrounded by cast, stamped and filigree panels of interlaced patterns. When newly made this shrine and particularly its front must have been a spectacular sight, with the warm golden glow of the evangelists' plaques and surrounding openwork, the beauty of the gold interlace work, the sparkle of what was very probably a large setting of rock crystal in the centre and of four polished ruby red stones at the perimeter, only one of which now survives (Ó Floinn 1983, 161).

What is extraordinary about these evangelist symbols is how the stylised treatment of the wings with their angular zigzag shapes dominates the design, giving it an exceptional strength and vigour. Decorated with cross-hatching, the wings emerge from full spirals at shoulder level with similar spirals frequently used to denote wing joints and terminals. In an arrangement described by one scholar as bizarre (Henry 1967, 121), the wings form loosely interlaced patterns, each one slightly different, which completely cover the upper body of all four evangelist symbols.

Matthew wears a knee-length tunic decorated with conjoined scrolls known as peltae and ending in a narrow hem decorated with vertical lines. Strangely, the lion representing St Mark wears the same kind of tunic with identical hem, but decorated with overlapping semicircular shapes rather than scrolls. The sturdy legs of the ox of St Luke are clearly shown as is the eagle of St John with feathered breast, fan-shaped tail and large sharp talons. Below the eagle's beak is a tear-shaped drop which Ó Floinn suggests may represent a drop of blood (Ó Floinn 1989, 57). Mullarkey believes it may also have symbolised wine, oil, or a simple teardrop: oil and wine are associated with St John and a teardrop could refer to St John's presence at the Crucifixion and his sorrow at the death of Christ (Mullarkey 2007, 54-55).

After exploring in some depth the many stylistic and iconographical parallels between the evangelist symbols on the Soiscéal and those in the late 9th century Gospel book of Mac Durnan, and in the St Gall, Trier and Turin Gospels, Mullarkey is convinced that the inspiration for the design of the Soiscéal evangelists came from a four-evangelist page in an Irish manuscript of the 8th or 9th century (ibid.53-59). One of his most interesting ideas is that the manuscript which inspired the Soisceal may have been the very book – St Molaisse's gospels – for which the shrine was being made.

The back of the shrine

The well preserved silver sheet attached to the back of the shrine is pierced to form an openwork pattern of twelve equal-armed crosses surrounded by other geometric shapes. The copper alloy core of the shrine, visible in the spaces between these shapes is beautifully gilded and decorated with knot-work, curvilinear and geometric patterns. Unusual features are the four oval shapes on the perimeter: two contain ring-chain motifs of Viking type, the remaining two have human heads, both with either hair indicated or perhaps helmets with foliate decoration. Mullarkey (ibid.58) has found parallels for similarly placed human heads in the Turin Gospels and on the four evangelist symbols page of the Trier Gospels.

Hinged mount to hold a carrying chain or strap

The shrine originally had two matching hinged mounts of cast copper alloy (Mullarkey 2004, 130) but only one survives, the other replaced by a more recent substitute made of sheet bronze. The hinge mount is made up of two parts with connecting loops allowing the upper part to swivel and another small loop on the upper part to allow the shrine to be carried on a strap or chain around the neck.

Surprisingly, the position of these mounts on the short narrow sides meant that the evangelist figures on the front of the shrine would have appeared sideways rather than upright when carried, although this arrangement is not unique, occurring also on the 8th century Lough Kinale book shrine (ibid. 126-127). For many years some scholars believed that this hinge mount and some other parts of the shrine originally belonged to an earlier type of shrine and were reused in the making of St Molaise's shrine, but this view is no longer held (ibid. 124-130).

The upper part of the hinge mount has a central plate decorated with a cross composed of a stepped pattern. It has a silver inlay in its central square and remains of red enamel in the surrounding cells. The lower part is also decorated with a cross, a more complex version of the upper one, and the setting in the centre is rectangular, showing remains of red enamel. The arms of the cross are inlaid with silver and traces of red enamel also survive in the surrounding cells.

The silver colour of the inlay and the red of the enamel work echo the colours on the front of the shrine while the sparkle of blue glass from the circular settings (only one of the four original settings survive) would have formed a pleasing contrast with the ruby red stones on the front. The lower part of the mount ends in a well-modelled animal head with pointed fangs below its snout and with eyes represented by glass studs, now missing (ibid. 130-138).

An evangelist portrait?

A cast panel below the hinged mount shows an ecclesiastic with forked beard, wearing a full-length tunic and cloak and holding a book in the left hand and in the right what Ó Floinn describes as an asperge for sprinkling holy water or a flail (Ó Floinn 1989, 57-58). The figure is flanked by pairs of interlaced animals. Mullarkey suggests that the ecclesiastic may have been interpreted in different ways, on different levels, depending on the erudition of the audience (Mullarkey 2007, 69). Francoise Henry, interpreting the book as a representation of one or all of the gospels, has suggested that the figure may represent an evangelist (Henry 1967, 121). In this context it would be more appropriate for an evangelist to hold a holy water sprinkler, suggesting the bestowing of blessings, than a flail. Interestingly, the shrine contains four empty panels similar in size to this one, which could have accommodated representations of the other three evangelists and possibly, in the central panel on the long side of the shrine, the figure of Christ. A suggestion that it portrays St Molaisse (McKenna 1897, 35) is unlikely, given that the representation of native saints in Ireland is not considered as a feature of early medieval times but one associated with the later medieval period (Ní Grádaigh 2008, 83-84). An alternative interpretation of this figure with its distinctive forked beard is that it portrays Christ. It may be significant that Christ is shown with a forked beard on three bronze Crucifixion plaques in the National Museum of Ireland, one from Clonmacnoise, the origin of the other two unknown (Henry 1967, 122-123, Pls. 8, 153, 154) and of course the gospel book and asperge would also be appropriate symbols for Christ.

What the inscription tells us

An Irish inscription on the base firmly establishes that the shrine was made for the monastery of Devenish in the early 11th century: it provides both the abbot's name, Cenn Failad, who was in charge of the monastery from 1001 until his death in 1125, and that of the skilled craftsman, Gilla Baithín who designed and produced the shrine. By restoring missing letters in the inscription, Ó Floinn has suggested that the name Ua Scannlan was also included in the inscription (Ó Floinn 1989, 58, 61). Coencomtach Ua Scannlain was erenagh (Irish airchinneach) of Devenish, a term often interchangeable with abbot, but which in this context meant an administrator of church property, perhaps including the care of relics. This proposition, if accepted, could narrow down the making of the shrine to between 1001-1011 AD, the period between the death of the abbot preceding Cenn Failad in 1001 and that of Ua Scannlan in 1011 AD. However one writer finds the hypothesis unlikely, seeing an unsatisfactory discrepancy between the use of personal names for the abbot and craftsman and that of the family name for the erenagh (Bourke 2005, 34, footnote 72).

The inscription as restored by Ó Floinn is as follows:

OR DO ... NFAILAD DO CHOMARBA MOLASI LASAN DERNAD IN CUMTACHSA DO HLAN 7
DO GILLABATHÍN CHERD DO RIGNI IN GRESA

'A prayer for ...nfailad successor of Molaisse who caused this shrine to be made, for ..nlan (a prayer) for Gillabaithín the goldsmith who made it'.

The place of St Molaisse's shrine in Devenish monastery

There can be little doubt that St Molaisse's gospel book was an important relic for the monastery on Devenish and much revered by the monastic community and by visiting pilgrims. With the completion of its shrine in the early 11th century it was probably kept in a small wooden reliquary church suitable for displaying it and other relics associated with St Molaisse. In the 12th century the small stone church known as St Molaisse's House was built, and its various archaic architectural features suggest that it was carefully designed to replicate in stone some of the features of the earlier wooden church and it may also have been built on the same site (Lanigan Wood 2014, 878-879). Ledwich, writing in 1790, records that it contained the relics of St Molaisse (Ledwich 1790, 517) and it may also have been the burial place of St Molaisse. In 1844 the antiquarian Edmund Getty and some companions spent a day excavating the western part of the church's interior and found human remains of one individual (Getty 1856, 186-187).



St Molaisse's Shrine in more recent times

For many centuries the gospel book and shrine were in the care of hereditary custodians from Kilmore diocese, the O'Meehan family of Ballaghameehan, Co Leitrim, where the church and holy well, formerly in Devenish parish, were dedicated to St Molaisse (Doherty 1986, 370). Over time the custodianship appears to have passed to other O'Meehans living in the adjacent dioceses of Clogher or Elphin leading to arguments between the bishops and priests of the three dioceses as to where the shrine should be kept (McKenna 1897, 37).

Indeed there is a tradition that an Elphin O'Meehan burned the original gospel book, supposedly in the 12th century, in an attempt to end these disputes (ibid.) More misadventures were to follow: in the late 18th century the shrine containing a 'manuscript on parchment' was lent to a priest from Sligo or Roscommon but was returned in a damaged condition and without the manuscript (Ó Floinn 1989, 51): then another Meehan, this time from Manorhamilton sold some of the decorated parts of the shrine to a Sligo watchmaker.

The reverence long shown for the shrine manifested itself not only in a belief that it had miraculous healing powers but also in more unusual ways (McKenna 1897, 37-38). McKenna recounts many stories about its frequent use for detecting thieves throughout the north of Fermanagh, Leitrim and Sligo. The penalty for giving false testimony was said to be madness in this world and damnation in the next! Sometimes after receiving a deposit of £5 for its safe return, the custodian lent it for resolving legal problems and making contracts. It was even sent for by a presiding judge in Sligo Courthouse around 1840 to swear in some witnesses whose oath on the bible could not be relied upon! All these activities had come to an end before 1859 when the Royal Irish Academy purchased the shrine by public subscription for £45 from Charles Meehan of Latoon near Rossinver who had bought it from the then hereditary Meehan custodian around 1840 (Ó Floinn 1989, 52). The shrine is now in the National Museum of Ireland.

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