

# The Intersection of Ethnicity and Material Culture: Manuscripts, Book Shrines and Political Realities in Late Medieval Gaelic Ireland

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## Abstract

This article approaches the material culture of late medieval Gaelic Ireland as an active locus for the negotiation and display of group identities.<sup>1</sup> It works against assumptions about the failures of material and book culture to present evidence of ethnic identity in the medieval period. It uses Florin Curta (2007)'s productive, valuable theories about ethnic markers in the archaeological record to analyze material objects, specifically the Book of Ballymote and various refurbished book shrines, for evidence of ethnic identity markers generated by the external pressures of shifting power relations. Thematically, these objects are linked by deliberate associations with a perceived ancestral past, with the ultimate purpose of asserting claims over territory in times of dispute and change. This article argues that markers of group identity, and therefore ethnicity, are discernible in the contents and purposes of these objects, when analyzed in their appropriate historical contexts. The analysis of these objects is therefore a productive method of thinking about the function of ethnicity in late medieval Gaelic Ireland, with possible implications for other culture groups and periods across the medieval period.

## Introduction

The study of ethnicity in the medieval period is fraught with issues of language, nationalism, a lack of survival of evidence, and at times the improper application of modern boundaries and ideas to the cultures of the past (Bartlett 2001; Jones 1997, 106–127; Smyth 1998). Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider the function, extent and formation of medieval ethnic groups if one is to understand historical causality. Late medieval Gaelic Ireland, for example, which can perhaps be characterized by the activities of strong, familial groups, requires an understanding of ethnic identity as it existed in the medieval period and the identity markers which accompanied it. The intersection of written and archaeological sources is particularly ripe for consideration, though the two types of sources often stand at

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1 'Gaelic Ireland' is a shorthand label for 'the communities and territories' of Ireland held by Gaelic chieftains in the period between the Norman invasion and the Tudor reconquest (Simms 2009, 9; see also Simms 1987, 10–20).

either side of a methodological and disciplinary divide. When brought together, these points of intersection can be particularly productive for analysis.

Recent archaeological studies of ethnicity in the medieval period debate the extent to which it is possible to use written sources to explain the formation of medieval ethnic groups (Curta 2007, 160).<sup>2</sup> Additionally, modern theorists have generally agreed that it is not possible to use artifacts of material culture and landscape assembly sites to explain this formation, either—Sebastian Brather, for example, has stated that ‘ethnic identity in the past is beyond the reach of archaeology’ (2004, 27; Curta 2007, 162). Florin Curta, however, has destabilized these assumptions, arguing instead that medieval ethnicity, which he casts as ‘a form of social mobilization used in order to reach certain political goals’, was ‘just as embedded in sociopolitical relations as modern ethnicity’; as such, ethnicity in the medieval period is both ‘a matter of daily social practice’ and ‘a function of power relations’ (2007, 184). In the context of Gaelic Ireland, particularly, the performance of ethnic identity might allow for the achievement of specific political goals. As ‘a matter of daily social practice’, this performance consists of the manipulation and display of material culture, as ‘emblemic style was the way of communicating by non-verbal means about relative identity’ (Curta 2007, 184). Therefore, material culture is an acceptable medium by which to understand medieval group identities, which are relative to one another. Ethnic identification is generated by interaction with different groups, at which point ethnic markers become distinct (Curta 2007, 168). Finally, Curta argues, it is ‘changing power relations’ which necessitate these displays of group identity (2007, 184).<sup>3</sup>

In the context of late medieval Gaelic Ireland, this dynamic of changing power relations is central to understanding aspects of the surviving material culture, the function of Gaelic Ireland’s ethnic groupings, and the behavior of Gaelic Irish noble patrons. Using material culture to find evidence of separate identity groupings, this study examines the ways in which Gaelic Irish noble families displayed ethnic identity markers for political purposes. In doing so, it demonstrates the possibilities offered by reconciling different types of evidence on opposing disciplinary lines, and brings archaeological theories of material ethnicity, infrequently applied to studies of late-medieval Ireland, to bear on a culture which can benefit from such an analysis. By reconciling written and material record, it is hoped that additional

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2 I am indebted to the generous assistance and comments of Dr Elizabeth FitzPatrick, who to my knowledge is the first scholar to apply Florin Curta’s lines of thinking to late medieval Gaelic Ireland, and provided the impetus for this study; thanks are also due to Natasha Summer and to the anonymous reviewer of this article for very helpful comments.

3 These displays of group identity can be equated with Brather’s social process of ‘internal definition’, which, together with its binary of external definition, is ‘at work in the transactional nature of ethnicity’ (Curta 2007, 184 and 168; Brather 2004, 27).

light might be shed on the activities of Gaelic Irish noble families and how performative, relative ethnicity informed, constructed and shaped their behavior.

In particular, these noble families, reacting against the increasing centralization of power by the English Crown and shifting power dynamics with other Gaelic families, manipulated elements of material culture in order to evoke and perhaps even conceptually restore an earlier period of independent kingship (FitzPatrick 2015a).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, these families looked to the past for distinct cultural markers which would aid them in this endeavor:

Such continuity as the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century leaders show with their twelfth-century predecessors is in great measure the outcome of a deliberate choice ... Most, though not all, of these paramount chiefs were descended directly or collaterally from the provincial kings of the twelfth century, and thus had everything to gain by constant reference back to the rights exercised by their ancestors in former times (Simms 1987, 16 and 19).<sup>5</sup>

In so doing, these Gaelic lords renewed material traditions, artistic styles, inauguration practices, and dwelling-place choices in order to establish and strengthen links to a perceived ancestral past. They chose sites of historical (and pre-historic) significance for their inaugurations (FitzPatrick et al. 2011, 163). They also commissioned bardic poems that commemorated inauguration events and dwelling sites, often with reference to heroes and sites of the ancient past and codified in *duanaire* books which, in part, sought to strengthen familial dynasties and ancestral claims to territory (O’Conor and Finan 2002, 74–75; Simms 2001, 246–267; Simms 1980, 132–145). Genealogies and histories were mined, and also generated, in order to prove ancestral claims to territory; older material objects evocative of a past period of independence were refurbished and used as symbols of continuity and dominance over particular territories. In the following pages, I examine aspects of this manipulation of material culture for political gain through analyses of the Book of Ballymote, and the respective shrines of the Stowe Missal, the book of St Caillin of Fenagh, the Cathach of Colum Cille, and the Book of Mulling, using objects representing the intersection between material and written

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4 Indeed, Katharine Simms writes, ‘Much of the hardest fighting in the Gaelic resurgence took place between the Irish themselves as the major chiefs sought to impose their authority on their neighbours’ (1987, 19).

5 This tension between continuity and change is troubling for the scholar of medieval Gaelic Ireland and must be constantly negotiated; we have to stress that artistic continuity is not the result of a static and unchanging society but a purposeful ‘revival’ of older cultural traditions in reaction to societal and political instability. For further discussion of the term ‘revival’ see FitzPatrick 2015a, who observes that ‘kingship titles were not “revived” in any meaningful long-term capacity but rather, publicized’.

culture to demonstrate that material culture was not merely a *reflection* of ethnicity in the medieval period but an active—and reactive—part of its negotiation.<sup>6</sup>

### *Manuscript Culture*

The period of Gaelic resurgence was marked by a program of literary production which ‘reached its peak in the early years of the fifteenth century’, with the survival rate of manuscripts from 1370 to 1500 contrasting the ‘virtual absence of manuscripts in the period 1150–1350’ (Carney 1987, 689–690). These books include the Yellow Book of Lecan, the Great Book of Lecan, the Book of Uí Mhaine, Leabhar Breac, and the Book of Ballymote, all created between 1350 and 1500. The main purpose of these books seems to be to recollect an earlier period of territorial sovereignty and cultural production: they preserve earlier material and new compositions which, James Carney writes, were ‘not directly creative’; rather, they contain histories and genealogies of the patron’s kin group which often made claims to territories no longer under that family’s control (1987, 690).<sup>7</sup> The aim, Carney argues, was ‘to recreate Ireland as it was in the past, and as it should be in the present if certain events had never happened’; as such, Anglo-Norman families are never mentioned (1987, 689–690).

The Book of Ballymote (Dublin, Royal Irish Academy MS 23 P 12) is one such compilation. Dated to the end of the fourteenth century, the manuscript is a miscellaneous collection of pseudo-historical texts, genealogies and poems (Ó Concheanainn 1981, 20). Based on evidence in the colophons, it appears to have been created in Co. Sligo under the patronage of the Mac Donnchadha family of Corann and Tír Oilella, written by three scribes who were pupils of one Domhnall Mac Aodhagáin (Mulchrone 1934, 1611).<sup>8</sup> The chief scribe, Maghnus Ó Duibhgeannáin, was a member of the learned Uí Dhuibhgeannáin family of Cill Rónáin, ‘*ollamhain* to Clann Mhaelruanaidh Thuaidh (i.e. Clann Donnchaidh of Tír Oirealla, etc.) at this time’ (Ó Concheanainn 1981, 22 n. 22).<sup>9</sup> The Uí

6 For further discussion of book shrine refurbishments and the emergence of the *pailís* as material expressions of kingship by the late medieval Gaelic elite, see FitzPatrick 2015a.

7 The most popular example might be the poem in the Book of Uí Mhaine called ‘Triallam timcheall na Fódla’, written by Seoán Mór Ó Dubhagáin, a historian to the Ó Ceallaigh lord of Uí Mhaine, and finished by Giolla na Naomh Ó hUidhrín sometime before 1420, which describes the topography of Ireland prior to the Anglo-Norman invasion ‘as seen by scholars who lived about two centuries’ later (Carney 1987, 690).

8 Domhnall Mac Aodhagáin was a member of a hereditary brehon family ‘attached to’ several families in Connacht and Munster; members of this family worked as scribes in one centre of late medieval Irish manuscript production in central and north-west Ireland (Henry and Marsh-Micheli 1987, 795 and 792).

9 Ó Concheanainn is citing the *Annals of Connacht*, (AConn s.a. 1340.14, 1357.6, 1384.20); the *Annals of Connacht* were themselves written by scribes from the Uí



(Fig. 1: Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS 122, f. 46r. By permission of the President and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Oxford; cf. the Book of Ballymote, Dublin, Royal Irish Academy MS 23 P 12, f. 8r. By permission of the Royal Irish Academy © RIA)

Dhuibhgeannáin were also historiographers for the Mic Dhiarmada of Magh Luirg, and their seats were at Cill Rónáin, Co. Roscommon and also Castlefore, Co. Leitrim, where they once had a poetry school (Henry and Marsh-Micheli 1987, 798–799; FitzPatrick 2015b, 172–174).

The vast network of learned families operating in this period may have allowed scribes to travel, and the copying of older texts seems to have gone hand-in-hand with the copying of older styles of decoration (Henry and Marsh-Micheli 1987, 795). Those manuscripts which survived the Anglo-Norman colonization would have been accessible to scribal learned families, who visited monastic libraries to copy texts, and their imitation of earlier styles of decoration is evident (Henry and Marsh-Micheli 1987, 783–784). In the Book of Ballymote, the use of interlace, chiefly in the book’s initial letters, can be read as a deliberate reference to this earlier period of Irish book production. Henry and Marsh-Micheli note that some of the initial letters in the Book of Ballymote recall those of the Corpus gospels (c. 1120), ‘especially that in the beginning of St Mark’s gospel’, and were probably copied from a manuscript of that era (see Fig. 1; 1987, 800). It is immediately

Duibhgeannáin family. I assume that Tír Oirealla refers to Tír Oilealla. Ó Concheanainn isolates Maghnus Ó Duibhgeannáin as the overseer of the project due to his name and the link between his family and the Mac Donnchadha of Corann.

apparent that the shape and decoration of the initial letter in the Corpus gospels, or some exemplar like it, is loosely imitated in the initial letter on folio 8r of the Book of Ballymote. Similarly, the initials in the *dindshenchas* section of the Book of Ballymote uniquely alternate between ‘wire’ and ‘ribbon’ initials, suggesting that its exemplar did the same (Henry and Marsh-Micheli 1987, 800). This type of alternation is indeed common in extant psalters of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries (Henry and Marsh-Micheli 1987, 800). The book’s prevailing spirit of ‘antiquarianism’, as this impulse might be called, can also be seen in its textual contents, in which very little, save the genealogical material linking the Mac Donnchadha ruler to his ancestral past, is contemporary with the date of its creation. The use of *corr-litir* script and some cases of diminuendo further references earlier Irish manuscripts—the entire book seems to have been made with the intention of invoking and reviving an earlier period of cultural production and artistic style.

What is the purpose of this style which so thoroughly and deliberately references an earlier period? The contents and decorative style of the manuscript can be interpreted in the context of the political struggles surrounding its creation, as an aspect of displays of group identity motivated by ‘changing power relations’ (Curta 2007, 184). The date of lengthy genealogical sections of the Book of Ballymote supports this interpretation: colophons on folios 62r and 105v list Toirdhealbhach Óg Ó Conchobhair as king of Connacht, narrowing the date range of these genealogical passages in the codex to between 1384 and 1406, as he claimed the title during that time (Mulchrone 1934, 1611). Another colophon on folio 66r lists Tomaltach mac Taidgh Mac Donnchadha, the book’s patron, as king of Tír Oilella, Airteach and Corann; therefore this portion of the manuscript must post-date his rise, as he took control of Tír Oilella in 1383 (AFM s.a. 1383, O’Donovan 1848, 689–690; Mulchrone 1934, 1611; Henry and Marsh-Micheli 1987, 798). This date range can be tightened to a *terminus ante quem* of 1397, when Tomaltach died, an event which surely would have been recorded in the genealogies if they were written after that event. Thus this section of the Book of Ballymote can be dated to 1383–97 (Ó Concheanainn 1981, 20), a period in which Tomaltach would have been solidifying his authority over Tír Oilella after his father died. This was a perfect time to commission a manuscript containing genealogies, histories and decorations that referenced and glorified an ancestral past, and thus reinforced the suitability of Tomaltach’s rule.

Further need for this propagandistic project is suggested by the war over succession to the rulership of Connacht following the death of King Ruaidhrí Ó Conchobhair in 1384, further ‘changing power relations’ which would motivate assertions of distinct group identity, in this case through identification with an ancestral past (Curta 2007, 184). The title of king of Connacht was claimed by rivals Toirdhealbhach Ruadh, descendant of Fedlimid Ó Conchobhair (ob. 1316), and

Toirdhealbhach Óg, descendant of Fedlimid's brother Toirdhealbhach (ob. 1345; Cosgrove 1987, 576–577). The destabilization caused by the war of succession over the kingship of Connacht, much of which spilled over into Tír Oilella, and even resulted in the death of one of Tomaltach's sons in 1388, would have motivated the Mac Donnchadha family to strengthen its territorial claims (AConn s.a. 1385, 1386, 1388, Freeman 1944, 351–359). Toirdhealbhach Óg's classification as king in the aforementioned scribal colophon suggests that Tomaltach sided with him in the war over succession, an alliance which is corroborated by the *Annals of Connacht* (AConn s.a. 1384.2, Freeman 1944, 351).<sup>10</sup>

In light of these political circumstances, the creation of the Book of Ballymote in the final decades of the fourteenth century can be viewed as a response to a perceived threat to the stability and sovereignty of Tír Oilealla. The Mac Donnchadha family sought to reaffirm their territorial holdings in the face of frequent raiding and an uncertain future. They did this in part by commissioning hereditary historiographers to write down their genealogies, solidifying their dynasty's claim to an ancestral past between the covers of a book that invoked the cultural strength of pre-Norman Ireland and its distinctive artistic style through displays of interlace and zoomorphic initial letters.

For the modern viewer, the use of this artistic style by Gaelic scribes is complicated by the fact that interlace was also used by illuminators of early medieval England, and may also have been considered a part of English cultural heritage by this time. However, it is unlikely that the Gaelic Irish would have been aware of or interested in the cultural links between the Irish and Northumbrian churches in the early medieval period and the resulting 'Hiberno-Irish' style of manuscript illumination that we speak of today. In the case of the Book of Ballymote and its contents, which establish and maintain an image of pre-Norman Ireland, the use of interlace and zoomorphic forms are more simply read as a purposeful invocation

10 AConn 1384.2: *Da ri do denam ina inat iar sin .i. Toirrdelbach Ruad mac Aeda meic Fedlimid do rigad do Macc Diarmata & do Clainn Murcertain & do taischaib Connacht archena .i. do thaisichaib Sila Muredaig, ocus Toirrdelbach Occ mac Aeda meic Toirrdelbaig do rigad d'O Chellaig & do Clainn Ricairt & do Domnall mac Murcertain h. Conchobair & do Clainn Dondchada. Cur fas cocad coitcend hi Condachtaib uli iar sin & co ndernsatur uilcc imda & urtha & airne da esi sin*, 'Two kings were then made in his stead. Toirrdelbach Ruad son of Aed son of Feidlim was installed by Mac Diarmata, the Clan Murtagh and the rest of the Connacht chieftains, that is, the Sil Murray; and Toirrdelbach Oc son of Aed son of Toirrdelbach was installed by O Cellaig, Clanrickard, Domnall son of Muirchertach O Conchobair and the Clann Donnchada. General war sprang up throughout all Connacht after this and they did much damage and committed slaughterings and plunderings afterwards' (Freeman 1944, 350–351). The succession struggle drew to a close when Toirdhealbhach Óg was murdered by the son of Toirdhealbhach Ruadh in December 1406; after several protracted battles, the murdered man's cousin Cathal Donn emerged victorious against the rival branch of the family in 1409 (Cosgrove 1987, 577).

of the past by an illuminator conscious of his models and reacting to the political realities of the day.

## Book Shrines

The refurbishment of book shrines during the period of the Gaelic resurgence can also be considered in Curta's terms of ethnicity markers exhibited as a response to external pressure (see also FitzPatrick 2015a). Ragnall Ó Floinn describes the use and reuse of relics for political purposes in the late medieval period: 'A number [of relics] have survived from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that can be linked to prominent Irish families, who saw the decline in the fortunes of the English administration as a chance to re-establish older claims to kingship' (1994, 8). Material culture was manipulated—in this case literally, as metalworkers and goldsmiths remodeled the surfaces of book shrines with hands and tools—in order for patrons to lay claim to a distinct cultural heritage, in this case through relics with divine connotations. Eight book shrines are extant from medieval Ireland, and five of them were refurbished in the later medieval period, often with inscriptions that make reference to patron and artist in a claim to ownership and territory (Hourihane 2003, 116; Ó Floinn 1994, 40). Their cast figures and *repoussé* metalwork imitate an earlier period of Irish art (Hourihane 2003, 128). In each case examined here, the historical contexts make clear particular political goals.

The Shrine of the Stowe Missal (National Museum of Ireland, Dublin, 1883:614a), made in the eleventh century by a monk of Clonmacnoise, was refurbished sometime before 1381 by Pilib Ó Ceinnéidigh, who styled himself 'King of Ormond'. He commissioned an artist to superimpose elaborate metal crosses with inset gems on both sides of the shrine, covering the existing eleventh-century decoration. A new inscription was added; it reads, 'A prayer for Pilib, King of Ormond [who] covered this shrine and for Áine his wife / Domhnall Ua Tolari arranged me / A prayer for Giolla Ruadhan Ua Mecain the successor by whom this was enshrined' (Ó Floinn 1994, 8; Hourihane 2003, 117).<sup>11</sup> The political circumstances of the shrine's refurbishment provide clues to the significance of this act.

At the time of the shrine's refurbishment, the Uí Cheinnéidigh family was engaged in a struggle with the Butler Earls of Ormond, who were experiencing a gradual collapse; the fourteenth century, generally speaking, saw the shrinking of their colony and an increase in the independence of the Uí Cheinnéidigh (Nicholls 1972, 167). It is safe to say that Pilib Ó Ceinnéidigh's style as 'King of Ormond'

11 In the original, the inscription reads, '+OR DO PILIB DO RIG URMU[MAND] / CUMDAIGED . IN MINSÁ . DO AINI DO MNAI / + DOMHNALL O TOLAIRI DO CORIG MISI + / OR DO GILLA RUDAN . U MANAC .. DON COMARBA LASAR CUMDAIGED'.

was probably not universally recognized; however, the shrine's inscription indicates that he fostered aims to re-establish an independent kingship. As a relic of a previous age, the Stowe Missal (Dublin, Royal Irish Academy MS D ii 3, s. viii/ix) would have held great symbolic power, both cultural and religious, and Pilib Ó Ceinneídigh seemed to be highly aware of its significance; by using it, he makes his claim to territory with reference to an earlier period of political and cultural sovereignty.

Like the interlace in the Book of Ballymote, the iconography of refurbished book shrines often makes reference to earlier styles of Irish art. The back face of the Shrine of St Caillin of Fenagh (Co. Leitrim), for example, reproduces the 'openwork cruciform design of twelfth-century examples', and the stylized cast figure of the Crucifixion 'is part of a group of such representations of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in which an Insular stylization comes to the fore, and may have been an attempt to replicate earlier stylized figures' (Hourihane 2003, 128; see also Ó Floinn 1994, 8). Ó Floinn notes that this shrine is 'structurally almost identical' to book shrines of the eighth century, a result of deliberate imitation (1994, 8). Like the Shrine of the Stowe Missal, an inscription records the names of patron and artist: 'Pray for the man who covered the shrine of Caillin, that is, Brian, son of Eóghan Ruairc, and for Maighréad (?), daughter of Brian, and the year of our lord was 1536. A Hail Mary' (adapted from Hourihane 2003, 117).<sup>12</sup> Four figures in the right-hand corner of the shrine depict Brian, Maighréad (?), and other members of the Ó Ruairc dynasty (Hourihane 2003, 129–130). As in previous examples, the date of its refurbishment coincides with a significant event in the history of the family: according to the *Annals of the Four Masters*, 1536 is the year in which 'Brian, son of Eóghan, who was son of Tigernán Ó Ruairc, was styled the Ó Ruairc, and he pulled down Caislen-an-chairthe [now Castlecar]'.<sup>13</sup> The embellishment of the shrine might have been commissioned for the occasion of Brian's accession to the Ó Ruairc lordship of West Bréifne, as it existed in the 1530s, when the Gaelic Irish resurgence was coming to a swift end. According to the Book of Fenagh, which the shrine contained, St Caillin claimed relation to the legendary Senchán Torpéist, who famously recovered the lost *Táin Bó Cúailnge* through conversations with Fergus mac Roich; correlation to the legendary heroes of the Ulster Cycle would have only strengthened Brian Ó Ruairc's claim to rightful kingship (Walsh 1940).

12 The original reads, 'ORAIÐ: DON: MFIR: DO CVMDAIGH: AN MINNSA: CAIL/ LIN: ADHON: BRIAN: MAC EOGAIN: /RVAIRC: AGVS: MAIGREITE: INGIN/ HBRIAN: AGVS: DÓ: BI: AOIS: AN/TIGEARNA: AN: TAN: SE: BLIANA/DEG: AR: XX: AR: M: AR/CCCCAIBH: A: MARIA'.

13 AFM 1536.16: *O Ruairc do ghairm do brian mac eoghain mic tighernáin uí ruairc 7 caislén an chairthe do leccadh lair* (O'Donovan 1848, 1434).

The book shrine most famously used by a noble family of the late medieval period is probably the Shrine of the Cathach of St Columba (National Museum of Ireland, Dublin, R 2835). Originally made in the second half of the eleventh century for Cathbarr Ó Domhnaill, this shrine was used as a battle standard by the Uí Dhomhnaill of Tír Conaill from that point forward (Hourihane 2003, 118). It contained the seventh-century Cathach ('battler') of St Columba, the earliest extant Irish psalter (Dublin, Royal Irish Academy MS 12 R 33), and the Uí Dhomhnaill family seems to have been acutely aware of its talismanic power. According to Maghnus Ó Domhnaill, early sixteenth-century author of the *Betha Colaim Chille* (in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson B. 514), the shrine was 'carried righthandwise three times around the armies of the Cinél Conaill to bring them victory' (Lucas 1986, 17; Lacey 1998). Furthermore, in the *Betha Colaim Chille*, the eponymous saint leads the Uí Néill into the Battle of Cúl Dreimne using the Cathach as a battle standard. As this story is unknown prior to this sixteenth-century *vita*, it is likely that Maghnus Ó Domhnaill is attempting to link his family's military competence to a precedent of saintly power: after all, not only did the shrine 'have to instill fear into the enemy', Hourihane writes, 'it had to instill confidence into the army of the O'Donnells following it' (2003, 118; Overbey 2012, 204 n. 6). The author himself, the youngest son of Aodh Ó Domhnaill, lord of Tír Conaill, fought against the Uí Néill in 1510 and 1511, and seems to have taken initiative in the creation of propaganda for his family's cause (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle 1918, xxxiii–xxxvii).

Similar to the shrines previously discussed, the Shrine of the Cathach was altered in the late fifteenth century with the addition of images of Christ in Majesty, the Crucifixion, and St Columba. Overbey notes that this symbolism of victory over death is fitting for a battle talisman (2012, 204 n. 6). The refurbishment occurred in the context of a war between the Uí Dhomhnaill and the Mic Dhiarmada of Magh Luirg; the *Annals of the Four Masters* and the *Annals of Ulster* mention the capture of the shrine as a battle-trophy by the Mic Dhiarmada in 1497, and its restoration to the Uí Dhomhnaill two years later in a gesture of peace (Overbey 2012, 204 n. 6; Lucas 1986, 17). The era of Maghnus Ó Domhnaill and the *Betha Colaim Chille* was similarly characterized by 'internecine strife', between Aodh Dubh Ó Domhnaill and his sons in a struggle for succession which worsened after his death. A saint's life reinforcing the Columban origin of the Cathach, the *Betha Colaim Chille's* use as a battle standard, 'and hence the divine protection and righteousness of its owner', was 'an important propagandistic tool in this period of internal and external contestation' (Overbey 2012, 204 n. 6). Maghnus Ó Domhnaill's motivation for strengthening the link between Colum Cille and his family's battle standard is evident in these circumstances. The Shrine of the Cathach attests to the continued, repurposed use of objects which held enormous

symbolic and political power in the struggle for defense and expansion of ancestral territories in late medieval Gaelic Ireland.

The final example that will be considered here is the Shrine of the Book of Mulling in conjunction with what is known as the Kavanagh Charter Horn, both owned by Art Mór Mac Murchadha Caomhánach, self-styled king of Leinster from 1375 to 1416/17. Art Mór had the shrine made in 1402 for the eighth-century pocket gospel, the Book of Mulling, and in another example of a book shrine being used to make claims to territory, the inscription under the rock crystal setting names him as king of Leinster (Ó Floinn 1994, 8 and 37; see also FitzPatrick 2015a). This claim is roughly contemporary with Art Mór's conflict with Richard II of England, who came to Ireland in 1399 with the intention of forcing Art and his 'sub-kings' to give up their lands in Leinster (Watt 1987, 391–392); Art Mór also raided Wexford several times in the early years of the fifteenth century (Cosgrove 1987, 543). Thus the creation of the shrine and accompanying inscription may have been an assertion of kingship at a time when it was under imminent threat. By laying claim to the late eighth-century Book of Mulling, the king may have been reinforcing a sense of historical and artistic continuity reaching back to the early medieval period.

Art Mór also owned and refurbished the Kavanagh Charter Horn, an elephant ivory horn mounted by brass bands which had been in the Caomhánach family for generations (Ó Floinn 1994, 8; Ó Floinn 1981, 269–278; Enright 1996; FitzPatrick 2004). Unlike the inscriptions previously discussed, which are in the vernacular, the rim of the horn is inscribed in Latin: 'TIGERGANUS . O . LAUAN . ME . FECIT . DEO . GRACIAS . IHC' (Ó Floinn 1981, 269). Ó Floinn dates the rim mount to the fifteenth century based on its 'debased egg-and-dart motif', stylistically similar to a contemporary horn in Copenhagen (1981, 273). The horn symbolizes ancient kingship rites depicted in medieval Irish literary motifs, in which sovereignty was recognized through ceremonial drinking, and reminds the viewer of the longevity of the Mic Mhurchadha Caomhánach dynasty's possession of the kingship of Leinster. Art Mór seems to have been highly conscious of the need to rearticulate his kingship and territorial claims against Richard II's threat, and he used material objects evocative of the past in order to achieve this goal (Ó Floinn 1981, 270).

## Conclusion

The above examples represent only a fraction of the evidence that can be furnished in order to analyze the use of material objects as ethnic markers in Gaelic Ireland. Throughout this period, Gaelic Irish families seeking to revive their particular brand of kingship reconstructed an earlier period of political independence through the appropriation and refurbishment of existing objects that symbolically and artistically recalled the past. They manipulated both political history, by means of

recording genealogies and histories that reinforced ancestral claims, and artistic history, by means of reviving earlier Insular styles. It is evident from the political motivations underlying the revival of earlier styles of Irish art that the artistic productions of this period should not be regarded as emblematic of a ‘revival’ per se but as an assertion of group identity partly as a reaction against external pressures. These external pressures, it is important to note, were not always English: Gaelic Irish families were in conflict with each other as often as they were with the Crown, and these conflicts proved just as productive in the generation of external ethnic markers. Thus, we can conclude that any definitions of Gaelic Irish ethnicity must be confined to the level of the kin group alone, an assertion that goes against generalizing assumptions about the homogeneity of Gaelic Irish ethnicity and culture. Though greater cultural generalities can be seen from the modern point of view, the Gaelic Irish nobility themselves did not seem to extend ethnic or cultural identification beyond the boundaries of their kin groups. This analysis of the individual, underlying political circumstances surrounding the production and repurposing of material objects, at the nexus of the written and material record of Gaelic Ireland, suggests that material culture can indeed take an active role in the negotiation of ethnicity. Material culture is not a passive reflection of this identity but an active and dynamic locus for its adaptation and negotiation in a changing world.

### Abbreviations

AConn *Annals of Connacht*

AFM *Annals of the Four Masters*

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