

EGYPTIANS IN IRELAND: A QUESTION OF COPTIC PEREGRINATIONS

by Robert K. Ritner, Jr.

The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.

Oscar Wilde

The Critic as Artist

The Book of Antiphons of the Monastery of Bangor, Ireland, contains a poem about the monastery regimen of which the following quotation is a part:

Domus deliciis plena Super petram constructa
Necnon vinea vera Ex Aegypto transducta . . .¹

The home to which the poem refers is, of course, the monastic organization itself, born on Egyptian soil in the fourth century, and eventually spreading throughout the West. But nowhere did it attain such pervasive importance as in Ireland. Maire and Liam de Paor note the presence of Egyptian-oriented monasticism in the British Isles during the fifth century,² and such monastic communities were encountered by both Patrick in the fifth century and Augustine of Canterbury in 597, in Ireland and England respectively. Similar communities continued to exist in Britain as a tradition in opposition to Roman authority, and Bede makes frequent references to their non-Catholic practices.³ In Ireland, however, in contrast to the Western diocesan system, monasticism provided the main organization of the Church. Church leaders, moreover, were selected from among the monks themselves, a practice which lasted at least until the twelfth-century arrival of the chronicler Giraldus Cambrensis with the invading Normans. The close similarity to the structure of the Coptic Church—monastically oriented in form and leadership—as well as the early and somewhat mysterious spread of Christianity into the British Isles, has led many to postulate factors of Coptic influence, if not direct participation by Coptic missionaries.

The issue concerning the “Coptic factor” in Irish civilization is not an unsupported one. Archdale King and Alfred Butler have noted similarities

Mr. Ritner is a graduate of Rice University and is presently a student in Oriental Studies at the University of Chicago.

in the ecclesiastical peculiarities of the two communities, while Françoise Henry has been instrumental in establishing artistic similarities. Other scholars have equally concerned themselves with various aspects of postulated influence, but co-ordination of the evidence used to establish the Coptic hypothesis has been lacking. Thus not only has the theory not been judged by its proponents as a cohesive whole, but its detractors as well have far too often been able to content themselves with a simple dismissal, as in the case of Pierre Du Bourguet, S.J., "History, even in Ireland, and despite the establishment of monasticism there, has not preserved a single trace of Coptic influence."⁴ It is hoped that while this essay can scarcely resolve the issue, it can achieve a confrontation between the findings of such scholars as Butler and Henry in co-ordination with new observations.

Perhaps the least-investigated aspect of Egyptian influence in Ireland is that of literary parallels. A minor incursion of such influence may be postulated for the Irish *Imram Maeile Duin*, the text of which is dated no later than the eleventh century. Within the "voyage of MaelDuin" the hero and crew set sail in pursuit of murderers, and in keeping with this genre of voyage tales encounter a vast array of islands, each representing an aspect of the Celtic netherworld. An exception, however, is island 19.

In another island are many trees with singing birds. An aged hermit, whose clothing is his hair, tells them that the birds are the souls of his kindred and that he is fed daily by the ministry of angels.⁵

The obvious additions by the Christian scribe are noted by Arthur Brown, who considers the "bird/soul" a "doubtless Christianization of fairies appearing in bird form." It is conceivable, though not probable, that the reference is to the feeding of Elijah by ravens in the desert. Here, however, the birds are clearly distinguished from the angels who feed the hermit, and unlike Elijah's ravens are furthermore specifically depicted as the "souls of his kindred." The birds thus become nothing more than vestigial imagery in a biblical interpretation, and one might do well to search for another. Such a bird/soul motif, while not uniquely Egyptian, nevertheless enjoyed within that society a fundamental importance distinct from that of the frequently-encountered totemic figure of shamanistic societies or their descendants, as in Ireland and Scandinavia.⁶ Typically, the bird is the symbol of the ascent toward the heavens by the shaman or the soul, and is thus the medium of contact with the divine.⁷ In Egypt, however, while retaining this primitive association, the *ba* or bird/soul was specifically related to actions regarding the corpse of the deceased and the affairs of earth; among which the continued acquisition of sustenance from the living was the most important. The *ba* was in fact the aspect in which "the dead could be manifest upon earth,"⁸ and the form in which the dead would receive nourishment from their rightful provider: "it similarly occurred to the surviving kinsman responsible for the well being of their relative after

his death."⁹ Thus the appearance of bird/souls in conjunction with a kinsman as recipients of sustenance may be made explicable with the inference of Egyptian influence, while it merely remains incoherent if considered a degenerate reference to Elijah. Further, the extremeness of the central figure's ascetic practices in regard to dress, while indicative of the excesses of the Egyptian desert fathers, is certainly an undocumented and highly dubious feature of Elijah's desert retreat. Most importantly however, island 19, like the others in the series, represents a state of permanence—a determined approach to life in contrast to a purely temporary flight by a prophet. Unlike the prophet, who returns to society, the anchorite remains because of the isolation and deprivation which the island affords: goals in themselves for the Coptic and Irish monks, leading the former to begin the eremitic life and the latter to extend it even to Iceland before Scandinavian colonization. If the island's hermit is a figure for Elijah, it is Elijah seen in the guise of a Coptic or Irish hermit.

Beyond providing transmitted motifs in isolated segments, Egyptian literature may also have inspired a complete genre of medieval literature: The Debate Between the Body and the Soul. Poetry within this genre, continuing as late as the nineteenth century, finds its base in eleven Irish, Old English, and Middle English homilies, themselves derived from Latin homily and prose debates. The substance of these debates is, with minor elaborations, the accusation of the body by the soul for the former's indulgence in the evils of the world. This world, in which the body has participated, is depicted as riddled with distrust, covetousness, and damnation. The soul repents of its connection with this earth and then is snatched away into hell:

body! þou dedyst brew a byttyr bale,
to þi lustys whanne gannyst loute,
þi sely sowle schal ben a-kale

.....
euere þou hast be coveytows
falsly to getyn londe and hows.¹⁰

Prior to these redactions however, as early as the second millennium in Egypt, *The Dispute with His Soul of One Who is Tired of Life* was given expression. Here it is the man who cries to his soul of the vileness of this world:

To whom shall I speak today?
Men are covetous
Every one seizes his neighbor's goods.

.....
To whom shall I speak today?
There are none that are righteous,
The earth is given over to the
workers of iniquity. . . .

.....
 Death is before me today
 As when a sick man becometh whole,
 As when one walketh abroad after
 sickness.¹¹

Although medieval expressions of this tradition are heavily imbued with Christian dogma, the original device of the debate between body and soul over the relative worth of earthly existence remains. The conclusion of the argument is the same in both—life is the child of despair. Extensive analysis of the motif is found in Louise Dudley's *The Egyptian Elements in the Legend of the Body and the Soul*, wherein she determines direct correspondences between the Latin homily forms and the Egyptian originals.¹² A potential mode of transference is also forthcoming. Francis Lee Utley alludes to the imported tradition "which itself may go back to a legend about St. Macarius, one of the Egyptian desert fathers of the fourth century."¹³

The desert fathers or their spiritual descendants may well have disseminated literary motifs through the simple diffusion of ideas or actual voyages, but one would expect the influence of monks to be more strongly in evidence in ecclesiastical matters. This does, in fact, appear to be the case. Among the Irish religious practices potentially derived from Coptic sources none has been so frequently cited as the use of the clochette or handbell by the mendicant monks. The use of bells, unknown in the dominant Greek Church before A.D. 900, is found in Egypt as early as the reign of Justinian.¹⁴ In Ireland, the earliest developed figure sculpture distinguishes ecclesiastics by a handbell. Eighth-century examples include the Bishop's stone at Killadeas (figure 1) and a White Island figure, both in county Fermanagh. British and Irish church records attest to the use of handbells as early as the sixth century, and Alfred Butler postulates that the round towers found across Ireland (Kells, Monasterboice, Inis Cealtra) served as belfries.¹⁵ Moreover, the handbell was a symbol of the office of bishop, conferred upon the candidate at his consecration. That St. Patrick is also identified with the clochette has led Archdale King to consider this aspect of his iconography "in imitation of Coptic bells."¹⁶

Irish use of the tau cross, a crozier whose shape suggests the Greek letter Tau, in place of the Western shepherd's crook as the bishop's staff of authority is also, in Butler's words, "a very striking coincidence with eastern usage, and adds another link to the evidence connecting the early Irish and oriental churches."¹⁷ Butler further asserts a derivation of the tau-cross from the *crux ansata* or *ankh* of ancient Egypt. The tau crozier, as known in Coptic Egypt, is crowned with two retorted spiral branches in the form of serpents, resembling the Greek custom but distinct from Latin forms. In Ireland the whirl or serpent motif upon a tau cross is commonly found both in manuscript illustrations and on carved crosses. Clonmacnois, Kells, Monasterboice, North Cross Castledermot (figure 2), and Durrow crosses

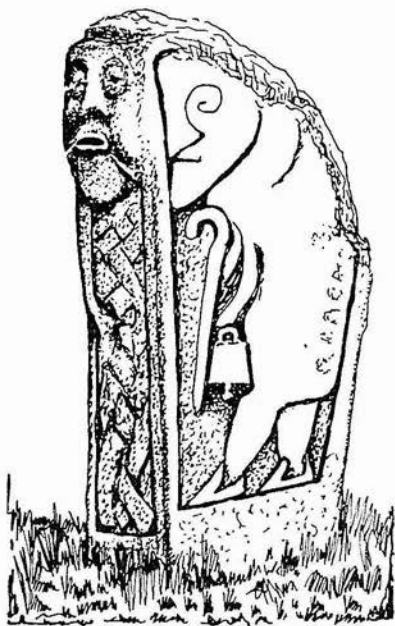


FIG. 1. KILLADEAS, THE BISHOP'S STONE. Eighth century? Reprinted from *Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland* (London: B. T. Batsford, Ltd., 1966), by permission of the author, Estyn Evans.



FIG. 2. CASTLEDERMOT, THE NORTH CROSS, EAST SIDE. Tenth century. Reprinted from *Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland* by permission of the author.

provide examples of this motif. Although only one tau crozier (twelfth century, county Kilkenny) has survived, it is extremely similar to Coptic versions, its branched ends resolved in two opposing fanged serpents or eels.

The oriental origin of a further Celtic practice may be postulated from the latter Church's use of a crown instead of the Western mitre for bishops. In this Butler finds "the closest analogy with Coptic practices."¹⁸ The mitre in its Latin form is "quite unknown to Coptic bishops" and unrepresented in any Coptic painting. Rather, a crown set with jewels distinguishes a bishop. In Ireland the bishop's crown is found on bas-reliefs until the six-

teenth century. In a sixth-century Irish life of St. Samson, the Saint sees in a dream "three eminent bishops adorned with golden crowns."¹⁹

The religious vestments of Gaul, the geographic intermediary for presumed Coptic activity, also appear to reveal Egyptian influence. The *ἐπιμανίκια*, cuffs of silk or other costly material, were typical of the canonical dress of the early Coptic clergy, although their use was restricted to ordination ceremonies by the nineteenth century. Such sleeves, often resembling gauntlets with closed sides and width tapering toward the hand, are found in sixth-century Gaul. Their presence leads Butler to consider Coptic inspiration, "perhaps by some colony of Egyptian monks, such as we know came over to Gaul and Ireland in the earliest Christian times."²⁰

The book of the Gospel itself in Ireland is of a form atypical of the West, being tightly bound within an embossed case of silver or bronze. Such enclosed missals and gospels are found as early as the sixth century, and the practice was continued at least until the eleventh century in Ireland, spreading into England in the twelfth. *The Book of Armagh*, the *Psalter of St. Columba*, the *Book of Dima MacNathi*, the *Miosach*, and the *Stowe Missal* may serve as examples. Perhaps not surprisingly, a precedent for this practice exists in the Coptic Church, where the outer case of the sealed gospel "is generally of silver and embossed with Coptic lettering and designs of Cherubim, flowers, and crosses."²¹ The resemblance between ancient Irish and Coptic customs in this regard is indeed "close and curious."²²

The introduction of the flabellum, or processional fan, represents an entirely oriental insertion into Irish Christianity. Depictions of its use include the Virgin and Child in the *Book of Kells*, which incorporates three attendant angels with flabella (see figure 3). An object occasioned more by necessity than pageantry in the sultry southern Mediterranean, the fan is of ancient origin, found in processional representations of earliest Pharaonic Egypt. As with other motifs, the sixth century is again the period of its first documentation in Ireland.

This century, moreover, provides the first Irish illuminated manuscripts, the prime example of Celtic artistic genius, and the center of the controversy regarding Coptic influence in Irish art. Within the early manuscripts two motifs are noticeable: the "pointillé" or use of red dots to surround and emphasize letters and ornaments, and the "Flechtband" or interlace which also characterizes the Irish style in stone and bronze. Françoise Henry, having analyzed the distinct change in Irish manuscripts from *Cathach* of the sixth century to the *Chronicle of Orose* (manuscript D. 23 sup.) of the seventh, notes the introduction of pointillism. "C'est exactement le traitement du début du livre que l'on trouvera constamment en Irlande du VIIIe au XIIe siècle."²³ For this new style, Henry proposes a Coptic origin.

Le pointillé a été étudié maintes fois. D'origine copte, employé en semis ou en surcharge dans les peintures murales des monastères du désert égyptien, il a passé à l'art byzantin.²⁴



FIG. 3. VIRGIN AND CHILD WITH ANGELS, folio 7^v of The Book of Kells. Late eighth century? Photo by The Green Studio Ltd., reproduced with permission of the Board of Trinity College, Dublin.

Further she states:

D'autres éléments de la décoration et spécialement, la page d'ornements du D. 23 sup; qui a d'étroits parallèles dans des reliures coptes du VI^e. siècle et des panneaux sculptés des stèles coptes, semblent indiquer que c'est plus particulièrement vers l'Égypte qu'il faut se tourner pour trouver l'inspiration première de ces manuscrits.²⁵

In opposition to Coptic influence, direct or otherwise, is Joseph Raftery who, in "Irische Beziehungen zum koptischen Aegypten," insists upon a purely Irish origin for decorative pointillism.

In Irland finden wir sie in der frühesten Handschrift des Landes, die uns erhalten geblieben ist, in dem sog. Cathach, dem » Krieger « , die um 550 geschrieben wurde.²⁶

Raftery also advances the highly cogent argument that, while Coptic manuscripts display singularly advanced illustration, no such manuscript earlier than extant Irish examples exists. Thus with bemused irony he postulates an Irish influence upon Coptic decoration. The recent discovery and publication, however, of the Coptic Glazier Codex, ca. A.D. 400, has provided the long postulated Coptic prototype.²⁷ Thus with a tangible Coptic illustrated manuscript predating the earliest Irish example by a century and a half, the theory of Irish origin for manuscript decoration as proposed by Raftery becomes tenuous.

It must further be noted that Raftery's analysis of pointillism fails to appreciate distinctions of style, and thus ignores the development, delineated by Henry, between the spare *Cathach* and the advanced *Chronicle of Orose* redaction. While the latter, as previously noted, displays a parallelism with eighth- to twelfth-century models, the former contains but the underlining of capitals and not the blocks of red dots that emphasize whole words in advanced models. The intervening factor for the development of the motif might thus be of Coptic origin.

Raftery also denies Egyptian influence in his analysis of the interlace. Rather, he suggests, the inspiration for the pattern is found on native bronzes of the third century. Here again, however, he ignores stylistic distinctions and equates geometric spirals with an advanced system of vines and animals. Curiously, Henry considers the true interlace system seen on later bronze work to be derived not from these early geometric expressions but from manuscript pages.

Mais l'entrelacs qui recouvre l'arc est un motif nouveau qui va avoir toute une série de parallèles dans des objets émaillés et bientôt dans la décoration de la pierre et du parchemin. Il se peut qu'il ait la même origine égyptienne que les pointillés des manuscrits.²⁸

To be sure, molded animal forms are found in the early *Cathach* text, but the plant and animal motif had already been highly developed in Coptic Egypt a century earlier, as seen, for example, on the doors of Cairo's Church of Sitt Barbara. Here the universal "tree of life" symbol has been subjected

to an atypical artistic formulation to yield an almost abstract interlace arising from a central vase. Amid the recoiled vines, animal figures feed upon the tree's fruit, becoming one with the overall spiral pattern. Moreover, it already demonstrates a significant feature of both Coptic and Irish ornamentation: the *horror vacui*, a well-evidenced tendency in the late period of Egyptian art. A second-century sarcophagus from Thebes provides an example of this development, which culminates in Coptic art.²⁹ The deceased is portrayed upon the lid of the coffin superimposed upon a tree of life whose writhing limbs and fruits exhaust all available space within the composition. Gaston Maspero considers the proliferation of ornament in Egyptian religious decoration to derive from the fear that

the empty spaces were like so many breaches, through which evil influences might penetrate. . . . Thus the Ptolemaic and Roman temples are literally peppered with scenes and inscriptions, the closer and more minute as the date of construction advances.³⁰

Such a theory might thus explain the inherited stimulus for both the Coptic and Irish superabundant ornamentation.

Later Coptic works, for example a frieze in the Benaki collection in Athens,³¹ continue the development of the motif from the Thebes sarcophagus and Sitt Barbara doors, to present an interlace so subsumed within the design theme of the spiraling vine that the animal figures can be distinguished only with difficulty. The strength of the design is conveyed in the emboldened, high-relief, central spiraling vine. Thus it appears that a fusion of the Egyptian vine/animal motif with the native geometric system of ornament, noted by Raftery, could well be responsible for the Irish interlace as found in manuscripts and on the stone and advanced bronze works, and one may understand the opinion of Maire and Liam de Paor that the interlace is derived "almost certainly from Coptic sources."³² The method of transmission is often considered to be the celebrated Coptic tapestries, which also show a vine/spiral motif in steady development from pagan times. Among the more intricate tapestries is that dated from the fourth or fifth century entitled "Vase with Grape Harvest"³³ (figure 4). Here again, as in Irish works, animal forms are intertwined with branches to produce a composition of interlace virtually devoid of unused space. Ludmila Kybalova remarks upon the parallel spirit of such artistic creations among the Celts and the Copts; both were "content with the minor arts."

If we compare illuminated Celtic manuscripts . . . with Coptic fabrics, we find a close relationship of form and content, despite basic differences in craftsmanship.³⁴

As a specific example of a transmitted manuscript design, one may turn again to the Kells Madonna, already connected with Egypt by the inclusion of flabella. Françoise Henry directs her analysis of the Madonna to the surrounding angels:

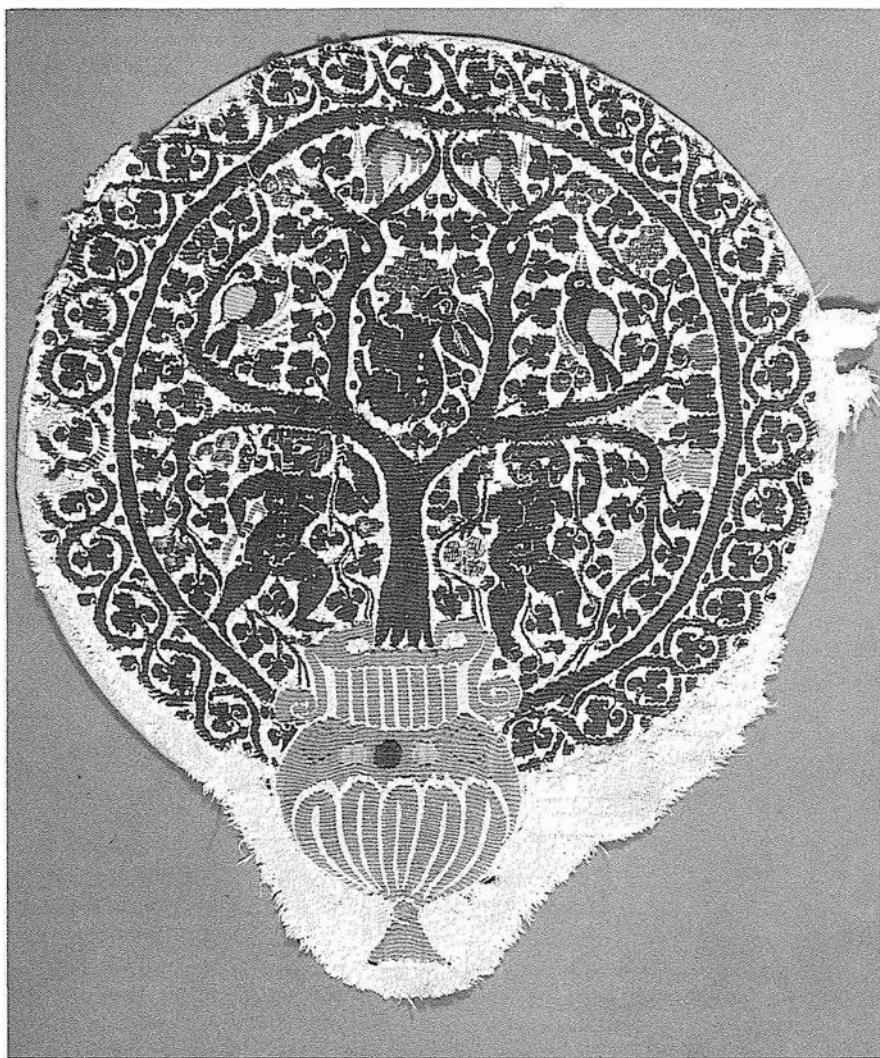


FIG. 4. VASE WITH GRAPE HARVEST. Coptic tunic insertion. Fourth or fifth century. Photo courtesy Uměleckoprůmyslové muzeum (Museum of Decorative Arts), Prague.

Turning to us, they point towards the central group with a slightly ineffective gesture which brings our eyes a little too high. Their wings provide the composition with a series of triangular patterns.³⁵

The triangular arrangement, probably an elaboration or symbol of the trinity, finds widespread representation in the East. Klaus Wessel's plate #6 in *Koptische Kunst* demonstrates the same division by the use of a curtain. Much closer parallels also occur widely. Henry notes the same device of wings and pointing gestures in a ninth-century manuscript page of the Pierpont Morgan collection (figure 5). Figure 6, from the same collection,³⁶ provides another example, and Armenian examples in stone date from the seventh century. Here, however, the gestures are fully understood; the hands are just level with the head of Christ.

One cannot help thinking that the painter of the *Book of Kells* imitated some illumination of the same type as that of the Coptic manuscript, but that he placed his angels slightly higher, without realizing that their gesture was thereby rendered almost meaningless.³⁷

An additional curiosity concerning this Madonna is the placement of the Christ child. Contrary to standard depictions, the child is in profile, "flung across his mother's lap." Both E. Kitizinger (*The Coffin-Religion Relics of St. Cuthbert*) and Henry suggest Oriental origins for this representation.

The publication of the Sinai Madonna has provided us with one element at least of such representations: the child seated across his mother's lap.³⁸

The origin of such a pose would seem to lie in the "Galaktotrophousa" or Isis-suckling-Horus imagery of Pharaonic date, maintained into the Graeco-Roman period, which contributed the form for the Madonna and Child statuary of Christian times. Thus the profile rendering in the Kells manuscript points to an Egyptian tradition of millennia. Other points of intersection between Christian representation and late hellenized Egyptian iconography may be noted in the Louvre's sandstone Horus relief of the fifth or sixth century (figure 7).³⁹ Here Horus, slaying Set in the guise of a crocodile, has assumed the armor of a Roman centurion and spears his divine adversary from horseback. The similarity to the iconography of St. George, for example, is striking.

These cross-currents are also noticeable in the stone art of Ireland. The form of stone sculpture which found its greatest expression in Ireland was the "high cross." These are first known in such sixth- and seventh-century steles as those of Inishkea North and South in county Mayo, and Reask, county Kerry (figure 8). In each of these primitive steles the distinguishing feature is a circumscribed Greek cross presented in seeming imitation of a flower. Indeed, the latter stele has assimilated the petalled cross to a system of stem and coiled offshoots. Such depiction of uniform motifs amid or in the guise of plant life is a common feature of Coptic tapestry, perhaps revealing an attempt to disguise the cross and thus to escape persecution. Compari-



FIG. 5. MADONNA AND CHILD. Coptic miniature, dated A.D. 893. Reprinted from *Pagan and Christian Egypt* (New York: Arno Press, 1969) by permission of The Pierpont Morgan Library.



FIG. 6. MADONNA AND CHILD. Coptic miniature, dated A.D. 895 or 898. Reprinted from *Pagan and Christian Egypt* by permission of The Pierpont Morgan Library.



FIG. 7. HORUS MOUNTED. Egyptian sandstone relief. Fifth century? Photo courtesy of the Louvre.



FIG. 8. REASK, CROSS-PILLAR. Reprinted from *Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland* by permission of the author.

son of these crosses with the fourth- and fifth-century “Rosette with Lions” in the Arts and Crafts Museum in Prague is most profitable. Here four lotus blossoms have been joined to produce a Greek cross, and the whole is encircled by the Coptic motif of interlace. Depiction in this manner is by no means hieratic—as early as the third or fourth century a “Cross with Rosettes” fragment contains green four-petal “rosettes” resembling a four-leaf clover.⁴⁰ If the Copts indeed brought iconographic representations of the cross to Ireland, it is precisely in this floral guise that they would have done so. Moreover, in the crosses of Inishkea North and South a further uniquely Egyptian element seems fused with the petal cross. The circular flower rises from a straight stem, from each side of which protrudes an arm terminating in a recoiled tau form (lotus motif?). The result is to produce a “handle cross”—a Christianization of the Egyptian *ankh*. The *crux ansata* was maintained in the Coptic Church to demonstrate the foretelling of Christianity by the pagan gods, and its appearance in Ireland is quite instructive. Another cross-slab of the seventh century in Fahan Mura, county Donegal, is ornamented with an interlaced cross surmounted on its eastern face by two opposing falcons “qui occupent tout le pignon et dont l’analogie est frappante avec des oiseaux placés de la même façon sur des stèles coptes.”⁴¹ Indeed, the falcons directly reflect their origin in the profile Horus-falcon imagery of Pharaonic Egypt. Such precise delineations necessarily weaken the role of coincidence or parallel development.

When one turns to the evolved high crosses of the ninth and tenth centuries, one again confronts persuasive indications of an Irish-Egyptian link. Among the themes represented upon these crosses, one of the most pervasive (South cross, Castledermot, Moone Abbey cross, Armagh cross, among numerous other examples) is that of the meeting of Paul and Anthony in the Egyptian

desert. While Raftery remarks that the representation was not unknown to other Western artists, he fails to remark upon the degree of importance that it attained in Ireland—unlike its relatively minor status elsewhere. Apparently the Irish considered these Egyptians to be their special patrons, and if one accepts Coptic missionary activity in Ireland, the pronounced importance of this iconography is understandable.

Of all the Irish motifs for which one may demonstrate an Egyptian origin, none is so suggestive of Egyptian influence as the representation of Christ in glory. The cross of the scriptures (Clonmacnois), the Tower cross (Kells), the cross of Muiredach (Monasterboice), and the cross at Durrow all contain an example of this curious Irish motif. Christ stands in a frontal position with his arms folded upon his breast, a staff in each hand, one a cross and the other a tau staff or flowering bough, which Henry postulates to be a symbol of the resurrection. The position of these staffs is at the least “strongly reminiscent of those held by Osiris in Egyptian funerary carvings.”⁴² Although the crook and flail of Osiris have been supplanted by the cross and tau staff, the identification is easily made—as shown in Henry’s juxtaposition of the two motifs. In addition to these attributes noted by Henry, the Osiris identification is carried further in several examples. The Tower cross of Kells contains an “Apocalyptic Vision,” in which Christ not only holds the previously noted staffs, but actually bears atop his head a crescent moon, within the horns of which a solar disk rests! Such insignia as staffs and solar crown are dramatically significant, as they had long been distinguishing trappings of Pharaonic Egyptian divinity. Their absolutely foreign nature to early Irish tradition cannot be overstressed. Yet these representations without precedent in Ireland attain dominant graphic status. This imagery is also encountered in the *Lichfield Gospels* (St. Luke, figure 9) and in the *Book of Kells* (Matthew, in the Four Symbols of the Evangelists, figure 10; also in a small inset of the temptation miniature). “It remains the characteristic representation of Christ in glory in Irish carvings.”⁴³

Nor is the Osiris/Christ link exhausted with these identifications. One may note in the cross of Muiredach (Monasterboice) a final unification which perhaps gives explanation to the merger of the two figures. Here Christ in the presence of an audience, and carrying his staffs, stands above a “weighing of the soul” relief. The tiny figure of the soul is visible in one pan of the scale, which is attentively presided over by St. Michael. The relation of this scene to the Egyptian prototype of the last judgment, in which Thoth occupied Michael’s position and Osiris that of Christ, is sufficiently close to be illuminating. Henry theorizes that the Copts adapted the native Egyptian last judgment to Christian usage. This new hybrid “then spread out of Egypt adapted to celebrated texts, that of the prophet Daniel: Thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting, and that of Job: Let him weigh me in a just balance.”⁴⁴



FIG. 9. ST. LUKE, FROM THE LICHFIELD GOSPELS. Eighth century. Drawing by Kathleen Much.



FIG. 10. MATTHEW, FROM THE BOOK OF KELLS, Four Symbols of the Evangelists. Drawing by Kathleen Much.

Other trappings of the Egyptian pagan deities are perhaps visible in the reliefs styled as the whispering by demons into the ears of St. Anthony the hermit. The “demons” in these reliefs (Moone, South cross at Castledermot) consist of human bodies surmounted by animal heads—horned animals, birds, and dogs. As “demons” tempting Anthony they are particularly appropriate, for the gods of the old age are indeed the devils of the new, and these representations evoke quite well the gods of Egypt in a medieval expression. But how, one may ask, did the Irish attain such a poignant expression of Egyptian motifs? Although borrowing its arrangement, this scene is certainly not a simple depiction of the “Dompteur” motif, in which the Father God of war supplants the Mother Goddess, tree of life, or byre figures and wrestles the heraldic animal symbols of nature, which the female figures had suckled. Here the flanking beasts are but partly animal, and do not represent the ambivalent forces of nature, but have become demonic. One feels in the choice of arrangement that not only has the representation changed, but that the fundamental outlook of the artist has become one of ascetic disdain for natural forces, surely a perversion of the “Dompteur” motif which had previously represented the mastery of nature.

Other curiosities of Irish representations include the Clonmacnois and Durrow panels. In these resurrection panels birds are shown flying into the mouths of the dead. The arrival of the bird signifies the return of the soul and the moment of the resurrection. Henry quite justifiably places the origin

of this bird/soul in Egypt. This *ba* or bird/soul, as analyzed earlier, symbolized the power of the dead to roam the earth again, and was often depicted flying above the corpse. The *ba* is most often represented with a human head. Although the Clonmacnois and Durrow panels do not show this feature, the Breac Moedoic shrine (of late—ninth to eleventh century—manufacture) contains such a combination. Regarding these figures, A. T. Lucas states:

Whatever their prototypes may be, the penguin-like birds and their human companions which form two of the "columns" have no recognizable relatives among the creatures to be found in the Irish repertoire.⁴⁵

A final speculation may be directed toward the architecture of the monasteries themselves. In their architectural planning, Otto Meinardus notes "distinct similarities" between the Coptic monasteries of Egypt and Ethiopia and the Irish monasteries of the sixth century. Neither society, in responding to growth, constructed a large central church as was typical in the West. Rather they created of the monastic complex a network of housing and numerous small churches. Coptic monasteries have as many as five or occasionally even seven churches. Specific parallels to Irish structures in Ethiopia are listed by Meinardus as Debra Bizen, Debra Libanos, and Debra Gabre Manfas Qeddus.⁴⁶

Only with difficulty could one accept the transmission of architectural developments by tapestries, and indeed the variety and extent of proposed Coptic influence in Ireland has understandably led many to adopt a theory of direct Coptic activity. A. S. Atiya, in analyzing the missionary activities of the early Coptic Church, states that there is "little doubt" regarding the arrival of Coptic monks in the British Isles "on the edge of medieval Europe."⁴⁷ Such faith in the missionary ability of Egyptian monks is certainly strengthened by the historically-documented tenacity of these cenobites to seek isolation. Fortunately in the case of Switzerland, a specific Coptic monk, St. Mauritius, may be named as a possible cultural link.⁴⁸ Martyred with the Theban legion in A.D. 285 in Switzerland, Mauritius became an object of local veneration, and his statue presently stands in St. Moritz. Three of his companions, Felix, Regula, and Exuperantius, were believed to have reached the Lake of Zurich, where they baptized converts until they were beheaded by Roman officials. The Grossmuenster crypt and Wasserkirche in Zurich, as well as the Fraumuenster cloister across the Limmat River, are associated with their activity. Moreover "the three headless saints with heads in hand are the subject of the arms of the city of Zurich."⁴⁹ Other Coptic saints in Switzerland include St. Warina of Garagos (Upper Egypt), venerated at Zurich at Aargau, and St. Buqtor (Victor) whose relics were taken to Geneva in the fifth century.⁵⁰ Further evidence for the presence of Egyptians in Switzerland has been noted in the atypical predominance granted within that country to St. Anthony, the founder of Egyptian monasticism. Charac-

teristically, a praying Anthony with staff and handbells adorns the city seal of Uznach, one of twenty-one Swiss communities dedicated to the Egyptian anchorite. That Bavaria as well was conversant with this image may be seen in a fifteenth-century anonymous engraving which contains a seated Anthony holding an identifying tau staff from which are suspended two clochettes.⁵¹

Specific Coptic influence is also found in the seventh-century writings of St. Isidore of Seville (a writer very popular in Ireland), whose description of the *casula*, or episcopal chasuble, is drawn not from Western garments, but from a hooded Coptic prototype. Indeed, Isidore speaks of this "garment provided with a cowl" by the precise Coptic term for chasuble, ΚΟΤΚΑΙΟΝ.⁵² The use of this vestment differentiation appears to have survived in parts of Europe until at least the tenth century. J. Schwartz, in confronting the present unanimous assignment of Coptic origin to certain bronze objects found in seventh-century European tombs, disputes the classification but is forced to conclude only that Byzantine and Coptic bronzes are difficult to distinguish, and that sea routes favor a Byzantine origin.⁵³ Thus these objects, found primarily in Switzerland and the British Isles, must remain questionable, but possible, examples of Egyptian influence.

Within Ireland itself, Coptic activity might be inferred from the *Stowe Missal*, the earliest Irish missal extant, which gives a prominent position to Egyptian desert fathers of the fourth century.

The text . . . reads in the second column as follows (fol. 32 v^o): pauli — antoni — et certerorum patrum heremi sciti.⁵⁴

The regimen of the monastic saints residing in Egypt is further related to Ireland through the discovery of an Irish "guide book," now in the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, for visitors to the holy land of Scetis in the Nitrean valley of Egypt. As late as 825, the Irish monk and geographer Dicuil in his *De Mensura Orbis Terrae* speaks of having learned the geography of Egypt from a fellow brother. Indeed, actual reference to Egyptians in Ireland is contained in the litany of St. Oengus in the *Book of Leinster*: "Seven Egyptian monks in Disert Ullaigh, I invoke unto my aid through Jesus Christ."⁵⁵ The "disert" or "desert" in which we find these monks represented is an isolated hermitage, so styled in Ireland in memory of their Egyptian desert origin.⁵⁶

The question of sea routes, considered unfavorably by Schwartz, has been more recently examined by Maire and Liam de Paor. They view favorably the possibility of Coptic activity in Ireland at the fifth century's close.

The old sea routes to western France and the Mediterranean—the route of the wine trade—almost certainly remained open in spite of the barbarians and it seems most likely that there were some direct contacts between Ireland and Egypt.⁵⁷

The discovery of further examples of identical pottery in Coptic and Irish ruins has prompted Françoise Henry to write in 1974 that "the explanation

of how these contacts took place is also now forthcoming, as traces of an extensive trade between the Near East and the coasts of Ireland, Scotland, and England have been found in quantity."⁵⁸ Thus she opts for the medium of "insular monks" as the founders of the Coptic/Irish link. Specific evidence of such direct naval contact even during the seventh century is attested by the skeptical Schwartz himself:

La Vie de Saint Jean l'Aumonier, patriarche melkhite d'Alexandrie, mort en 616, parle d'un transport de blé en Angleterre fait par un bateau de l'Eglise d'Alexandrie.⁵⁹

Curiously, Irish legendary history maintains tales of such voyages. English apocryphal tradition has long held the founding of British civilization to have been by the Trojans and Brutus. In Ireland, and transmitted by Irish monks to Scotland, there is an alternate, though less well known, tradition reported by William Matthews.⁶⁰ It appears that the Irish race, and the Scots by adoption, are the descendants of Gathelus and Scota (hence Scotland), the daughter of Pharaoh. Leaving Egypt for Ireland during the plagues, they brought Egyptian colonists—and the stone of Scone. Such was the bitterly defended tradition of Ireland and Scotland until the seventeenth century. Then, amid the labors of Enlightenment revisionists, a new history was born, sweeping all Egyptians from Ireland. Perhaps it is time to rewrite her.

NOTES

1. Françoise S. Henry, *L'Art Irlandais*, 3 vols. (La Pierre-qui-Vire [Yonne]: Zodiaque, 1963-64), I, p. 79.

2. Maire and Liam de Paor, *Early Christian Ireland* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958), p. 50.

3. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 136, 146, 198, 200, and 224, among others.

4. Pierre du Bourguet, S. J., *Coptic Art* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 191.

5. Arthur Brown, *The Origin of the Grail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943), p. 274.

6. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism* (Princeton: Bollingen, 1964), p. 179 (for Irish shamanistic bird/soul survival), p. 381 (Scandinavian).

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 479 ff.

8. Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 100.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

10. *Modern Language Notes* 42 (1927): 102-106.

11. Adolf Erman, *The Ancient Egyptians*, trans. Aylward M. Blackman (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 90-91.

12. Louise Dudley, *The Egyptian Elements in the Legend of the Body and the Soul* (Baltimore: J. H. Furst Co., 1911).
13. Francis Lee Utley, "Dialogues, Debates, and Catechisms," *A Manual of the Writings of Middle English* (New Haven: The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1972) vol. 3, p. 691.
14. Alfred Butler, *Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 79-80; hereafter cited as Butler.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
16. Archdale King, *The Rites of Eastern Christendom* (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1947-48), p. 375.
17. Butler, p. 229.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
23. Henry, *L'Art Irlandais*, vol. I, p. 78.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Joseph Raftery, "Irische Beziehungen zum koptischen Aegypten," in *Christentum am Nil* (Recklinghausen: Bongers, 1963), p. 264.
27. Françoise Henry, *The Book of Kells* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 213.
28. Henry, *L'Art Irlandais*, vol. I, p. 80.
29. See photograph in Carl Jung, *Man and his Symbols* (Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjiga, 1969), p. 133.
30. Gaston Maspero, *Art in Egypt* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), p. 234.
31. *Bulletin de la Société d'Archeologie Copte* (Le Caire: L'Institut Française Orientale), vol. 5, plate 5.
32. De Paor, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 114.
33. Ludmila Kybalova, *Coptic Textiles* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1967), p. 88.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
35. Françoise Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 79.
36. Plates 12 and 13, *Pagan and Christian Art in Egypt* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, 1941), Morgan manuscript nos. 612 and 574.
37. Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions*, p. 79.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
39. *Koptische Kunst* (Essen: Gemeinnuetziger Verein Villa Huegel, 3. Mai bis 15. August, 1963), catalogue no. 77.
40. Kybalova, *Coptic Textiles*, pp. 79 and 93.
41. Henry, *L'Art Irlandais*, vol. I, p. 162.
42. Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions*, p. 164.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

44. Ibid., p. 170.
45. A. T. Lucas, *Treasures of Ireland* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 131.
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47. A. S. Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity* (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 54.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Otto Meinardus, *Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts* (Cairo: American University of Cairo, 1961), p. 28.
51. Ibid., p. 26.
52. Butler, p. 198.
53. J. Schwartz, "A Propos d'Ustensiles 'Coptes' Trouvés en Europe Occidentale," in *Bulletin de la Société d'Archeologie Copte* 14 (1950): 51.
54. Meinardus, *Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts*, p. 26.
55. Atiya, *History of Eastern Christianity*, p. 54.
56. Raftery, "Irische Beziehungen zum koptischen Aegypten," p. 262.
57. De Paor, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 50.
58. Henry, *The Book of Kells*, p. 213.
59. Schwartz, "A Propos d'Ustensiles 'Coptes.'" p. 51.
60. William Matthews, "The Egyptians in Scotland," in *Viator* 1 (1970): 298.

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