The Harp in Irish Folklore

Mike Baldwin

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Introduction

Folklore, the orally transmitted beliefs, customs, stories, and practices of a particular culture or group, is at the heart of a nation's identity. A branch of anthropology, it is the study of society and culture, dealing specifically with the psychology and spirituality of humanity. Through its collection and dissemination, we explain the mundane, and give meaning to the unfamiliar, strange, and supernatural.[1] Folklore holds the knowledge and rules of social organisation, explains weather, how and when to plant crops, and how to treat ailments. It warns of danger, recalls tales of the past, and reminds us of belief systems, ceremonies, and events that are important to the communities in which we live. It is shared through the traditions of storytelling, singing, music, dance, and other art forms. Where it survives, it is an integral part of a culture's identity, a preservation of its traditions and values.

Ireland, perhaps more than any western nation, is steeped in folklore and mythology. It's Gaelic matronym, Éire, is derived from Éiru, the goddess of sovereignty of the land. According to myth a triumvirate of sister goddesses, Banba, Éiru, and Fódla, held sway over island of Ireland, but couldn't decide after whom to name the land, so, magnanimously, they asked the Bard of Armagh to adjudicate. That he chose Éiru is clear, if not on record. However, her sisters were not forgotten. Fódla's name was given to literary Ireland and Banba to poetic.

For the people of Ireland, folklore is a vibrant, living thing, and the harp a cornerstone, though this could have been very different. Fragile and ephemeral, folklore is easily lost, and once gone it is gone forever. National disruption risks a generational break in its oral transmission, and invasion, occupation, war, famine, and emigration are writ large over Ireland's turbulent history. The nation's people, language, traditions, and folklore were subjected to centuries of oppression and attempted deletion at the hands of the English. Persecution, which began with the Norman lordship, was extended under the English Tudor monarchs. Henry VIII changed Ireland from a lordship to a kingdom and further suppressed her culture, ordering, amongst other actions of cultural annihilation, the destruction of harps and execution of harpers. Ironically, it was Henry who adopted the harp as a national symbol, adding it to the royal coat of arms and Irish coinage. Oppression deepened under Elizabeth I; despite this, the Gaelic harp[2] became fashionable amongst the English aristocracy - Elizabeth I and James I both kept harpers at their court.

The Gaelic harp continued to suffer throughout the 17th and early-18th centuries due to the penal laws. However, by the middle of the 18th-century, attempts were being made to save the instrument and its music, and its use, albeit limited, continued into the late 19th century.

By the beginning of the 1900s, after many false starts, Irish rule was on the cards. At first, many Irish were disinterested, content to maintain the status quo. However, the events that followed the 1916 Easter Rising, namely the execution of fourteen Irish men at Kilmainham Gaol, fostered widespread public hostility which conspired with international politics in the shape of the Great War. The Irish War of Independence followed, and after centuries of subjugation, Ireland

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[1] Edwin Sidney Hartland, *Folklore: What is it and what is the good of it* (London: Nutt, 1899), pp.46-47.

[2] The term Gaelic harp is adopted here as this instrument was not only found in Ireland, but in Scotland too – the Gaelic speaking nations. It also differentiates it from the modern 'celtic' harp, whilst distinctly Irish in its origins, this is a descendant of the classic instruments of the late-eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries.

won independence from Great Britain. It was at the birth of the Irish Free State that the harp became truly symbolic of the nation.

There comes a time in every culture when its folklore is collected, collated, and written down. This often occurs at a time of crisis and almost certainly change, for it is at these moments its owners recognise its value and importance. On the establishment of the Irish Republic in 1937, its government formed the National Folklore Commission to gather and record what remained of the nations' orally transmitted folklore. The children of Ireland's National Schools were recruited to gather and record the folklore of their local areas. This source, now available online, provides a rich seam for folklorists, and some stories are included in this book. Others are gathered from historical sources and books that discuss the harp or the music of Ireland.

The growing interest in the Gaelic harp as a musical instrument, and the publication of texts about it, began in the nineteenth-century, and sit within the field of musicology. The examination of how it was made, its form, and development, again beginning during the late-nineteenth century, belong within the field of organology (the study of musical instruments), the encoding of which corresponded with the establishment of the National Folklore Commission and the Republic. It is from this broad seam that this book has emerged.

A harp-type instrument has been present in Ireland for over 2,000 years, but the Gaelic harp (sometimes referred to as ancient Irish or wire-strung) is around 1,000 years old. It is an instrument of dualities; symbolic and literal, masculine and feminine, secular and religious, earthly and supernatural. For nearly a millennium it has been gifted with musical, magical, and political voices – all three often intertwining. But what is the Gaelic harp? Francis Bacon described it thus:

> An Irish [meaning Gaelic] harp hath open air on both sides of the strings; and it hath the concave or belly not along the strings, but at the end of the strings. It maketh a more resounding [resonant] sound than a bandora, orpharion, or cittern, which have likewise wire strings. I judge the cause to be, for that open air on both sides helpeth, so that there be a concave; which is therefore best placed at the end.'[3] He added, 'no harp hath a sound so melting and prolonged as the Irish harp.'[4]

On the combination of different instrument sounds, Bacon noted that the Irish harp and bass viol 'agree well […] but the virginals and the lute; or the Welsh harp and Irish harp […] agree not so well.[Error! Bookmark not defined.] Whilst Bacon clearly admired the Irish harp, the Welsh were less complimentary. Davydd ap Gwilym, the fourteenth-century Welsh poet, compared its sound to 'the screaming of young sprawling crows in the rain, to the gabbling of a lame goose among corn, and to the rumbling of a rough millstream.'[5]

Over recent centuries various names have been given to the harp in Ireland, including tíompan, timpan, cruit, and clairseach, and different meanings have been attributed to these at different times. According to Bunting (1796) there were four types of harps in Ireland; the *cláirseach* (the common harp), the *cinnard-cruit* (the high-headed harp), the *crom-cruit* (the 'down-bending' harp), and the *ceirnin* (a portable harp played by clerics). Ledwich (1804), however, tells us that the tíompan is a drum, 'a kind of tambour, consisting of a skin strained over an iron hoop or ring, and beat with the fingers or sticks',[6] but Gunn (1809), just a few years later translates tiompan (without

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[3] Francis Bacon, *Works of Francis Bacon* (London: Johnson, 1803), p.310.
[4] Michael Conran, *The National Music of Ireland* (London: Johnson, 1850), pp.186-187.
[5] John Leyden, *The Complaynt of Scotland: written in 1548* (Edinburgh: Constable, 1801), p.152.
[6] Edward Ledwich, *Antiquities of Ireland* (Dublin: Jones, 1804), p.250-251.

the accented i) as harp,[7] and O'Mahony (1857), named only two harp types, 'one of which he called *cláirseach* and the other *cruit*. Armstrong (1904) explains that the *cláirseach* had between 32 and 45 strings, at least one surviving fragment (from the Dalway harp) indicates that some had two rows of strings for at least part of the compass.[8] The *cruit* was smaller with 30 strings or fewer. Both instruments had bodies hewn from a solid piece of timber, hollowed from the back, the necks and pillars shaped from curved timber limbs. The former instrument is supposed to have been mostly used for martial strains, and for songs of triumph and of joy, the latter for romance and sadness.

The Gaelic harp is integral to the nations' folklore, yet, for centuries, little was recorded. For a culture with a long scholarly tradition this is perhaps surprising. There were occasional reports or stories noted by scribes visiting from overseas who sought to characterise the Irish. Occasionally it appeared in court records, but, for the most part its place, albeit important, was preserved in oral tradition – the nation's folklore. It is through the likes of Bunting (1796), and Armstrong, who published his seminal *Irish and Highland Harps* in 1904, not to mention numerous writers in between, that knowledge of the Gaelic harp became available. They recorded the language of the harp, saving words that would have been lost. The performer upon the *cruit* was called *cruitiri*, whilst the player of the *cláirseach* was called *clairseoir*."[9] O'Dónaill (1977) translates *clairsech* as harp, and *cruit* as small harp; curiously, the same word also means 'to have a hump', perhaps referring to the shape of the harp's neck. O'Dónaill also gives us some names for the parts which make up the instrument (Figure 1), translating *ceann* as the *head* of the harp; *coim*, meaning waist, referring to the body or soundbox, *corr* being the harp's neck; and *lámhchrann* (meaning handle) being the pillar. To this, Armstrong (1904) added *crann gléasta*, the tuning key.[10]

The music of the Irish harp was sophisticated and complex, and each string was named, as though characters or actions, mirroring the description of the musical scale in western art music. For instance, two strings lying together were called caomluighe, literally meaning 'to lie down' but referred to as sisters (tonic), gilly caomluighe of servant of the sisters (supertonic), an dara tead os cionn caomluighe or second string over the sisters (mediant), and an treas tead os cionn caomliughe - third string over the sisters (subdominant).

Harpers, mostly male and often blind, were held in great esteem and, before penal times, were patronised by the gentry, living amongst their households. In later years, as the patronage system collapsed, many became itinerant musicians. All would have held a large repertoire of pieces, many composed, and some were well-versed in European art music, able to play the works of great composers. Today, Gaelic harp is commonly viewed as a solo instrument, but, as Bacon noted, it's combined well with other instruments, and it was played in consorts too. The folklore of the Gaelic harp and harper is rich and deep. In gathering a small portion of it here, it has been necessary to dive deep into historical documents. What follows is at times mystical and other times mundane. Some of it is humorous and some tragic. Here are tales from deep history and stories. Here are mythical beings and creatures, perhaps analogous with the harp and harper. Here be dragons!

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[7] John Gunn, *An Historical Enquiry on the Performance on the Harp in the Highlands* (Edinburgh: Constable, 1807), p.35.
[8] While this may come as a surprise to some, there were parallels in Europe, where harps with two (arpa doppia and arpa de dos ordenes) and three ranks (arpa a tre registre) were played.
[9] John O'Mahony (trans), *The History of Ireland* (New York: Haverty, 1857), p.xxxviii.
[10] Robert Armstrong, *The Irish and Highland Harps* (Edinburgh: Doughlas, 1904). p.39. Modern Irish dictionaries translate crann gléasta as tuning fork, not tuning key.

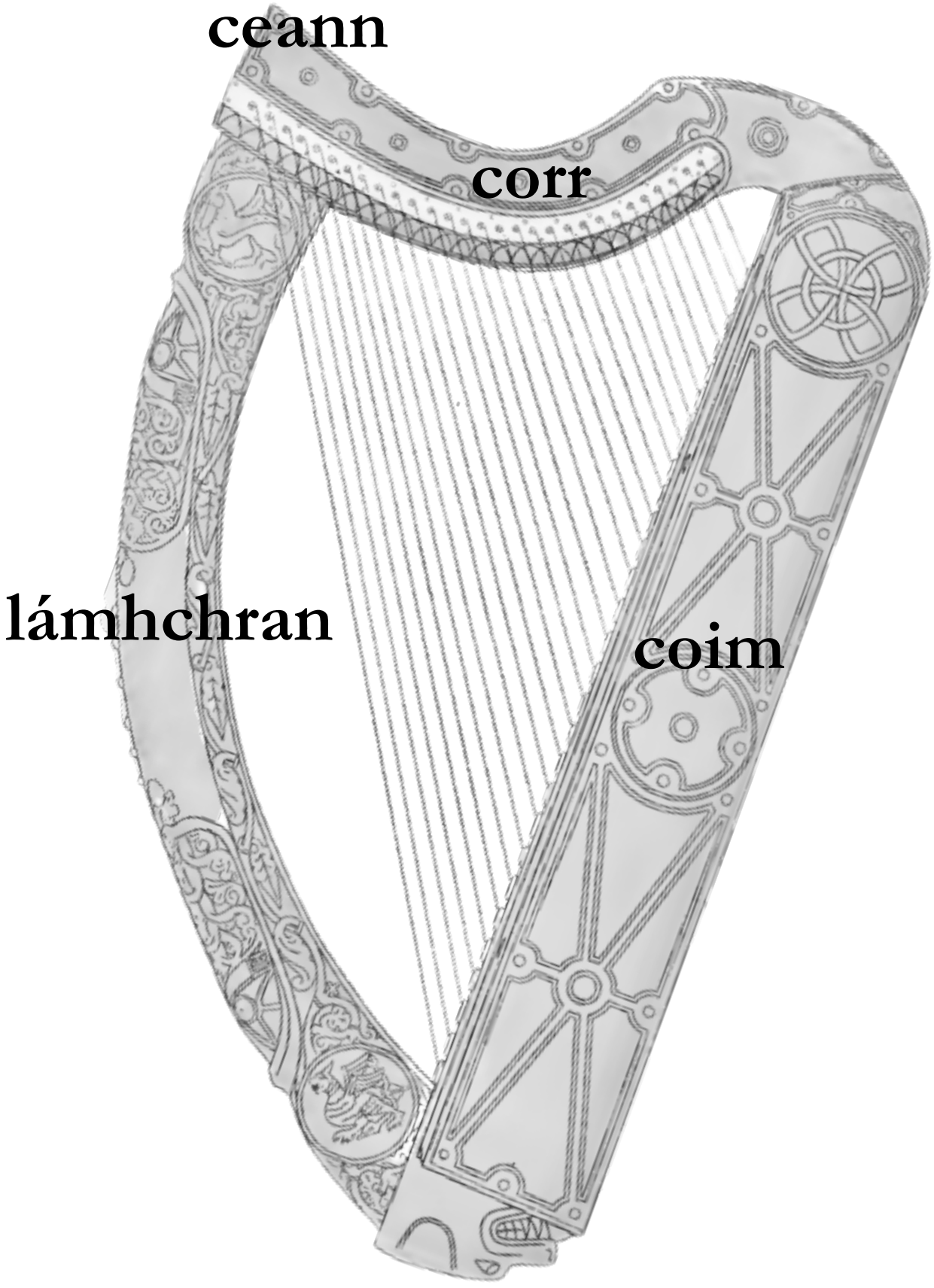

Figure 1. Parts of the Gaelic Harp.

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Origins

The origin of the ancient Gaelic harp is the theme of the most ancient legends. O'Curry, in his *Gaelic Explorings*, recounts an old story entitled *The Defence of the Great Bardic Company* which tells how the first harp came to be made.

> This the tale of Cull, a man, and Canoclach Mhor. his wife. Canoclach hated her husband and fled away from him. But he persistently followed her. Through forest and wilderness, she still ran, eventually reaching the seashore of Camas. As she walked over the ribbed sand, she came upon the skeleton of a whale and the wind, passing through the sinews of the dead monster, made a murmuring. Listening to this strange music the woman fell asleep, and her husband, who was hard on her tail, came up. He greatly marvelled how it was that his wife had fallen asleep and, casting about in his mind for a reason, he decided it must be the sounds made by the wind in the tightly strung sinews of the whale. He went into the wood and, taking a limb of a tree, he made it into the framework of a harp. He put strings on it made from the sinews of the whale, and that is how the first harp came to be made.[11]

For millennia, some harp strings have been made of gut, though commonly from sheep not whale. Perhaps the originator of this story was aware of this. Thomas Moore, in his song, *The Origin of the Harp*, offers an alternative creation story in which a love-lorn mermaid is transformed into a harp, her 'gold tresses' becoming it's strings (Figure 2). Moore was using poetic licence, but there is fact here too. Some forms of harp were (and still are) strung with horsehair. His song is part folkloric explanation of the harp's creation, part metaphor for Erin - Ireland.

'Tis believed that this Harp, which I wake now for thee
Was a Syren of old, who sung under the sea;
And who often, at eve, through the bright waters roved,
To meet, on the green shore, a youth whom she loved.

But she loved him in vain, for he left her to weep,
And in tears, all the night, her gold tresses to steep,
Till heaven look'd with pity on true-love so warm,
And changed to this soft harp the sea-maiden's form.

Still her bosom rose fair - still her cheeks smiled the same
While her sea-beauties gracefully form'd the light
And her hair, as, let loose, o'er her white arm it fell,
Was changed to bright chords uttering melody's spell.

Hence it came, that this soft harp so long hath been known
To mingle love's language with sorrow's sad tone;
Till thou didst divide them, and teach the fond lay
To speak love when I'm near thee, and grief when away.[12]

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[11] Redfern Mason, *The Song Lore of Ireland* (New York: Wessels & Bissell, 1910), p.5-7.
[12] Thomas Moore, *The Irish Melodies, National Airs, Sacred Songs etc.*, vol. 3 (New York: Sadlier, 1874), p.87.

Figure 2. The Origin of the Harp, illustrated by Daniel Maclise. Moore (1842).

Viewed through a nationalist lens, Moore's writing represents the sorrow and joy of Irish history, and the grief of immigration and loss. Further, it echoes music of the ancient harp music - geantraí (happy music), goltraí (melancholic music), and suantraí (sleep-inducing music).

Its impossible to say when the harp first appeared in Ireland and impossible to imagine Ireland without the harp. Ledwich (1804) suggests that it was received the Saxons, or from trade with the Baltic states in the 4th- or 5th centuries.[13] Its presence in Ireland almost certainly predates this. There are records of Irish harper through-out the British Isles and in continental Europe from Roman times, their importance indicated by access and proximity to royalty. Indeed, Ethodius I, king of Scotland (164-197), was slain by an Irish harper who he'd invited to sleep in his chamber[14]. Shortly before ascending to the throne in 1272, Edward I travelled to the Holy Land with his harper. Attacked by an assassin with a poisoned knife, his harper rushed to his aid, saving his life.[15]

Archaeology

Archaeological discoveries indicate the presence of harps in Ireland in prehistory. Crannogs, Iron- and early-Christian-age artificial islands built over water, typically with one or more dwellings, are a rich source of material. Their collapse preserves artefacts, often in anaerobic conditions. An ox-horn tuning pin was found at on such site site near Ardakillen, Co. Rosscommon,[16] a bone one was discovered at the Mote of Greenmount, Co. Louth in 1870,[17] and two metal ones were found on a crannog site near Clones, Co. Monaghan in 1935.[18] A fragment of a bronze pin, one and three-quarter inches long, pierced, with the head shape into a rough dodecahedron, was found during the excavation of a rath at Dunbel, Co. Kilkenny (Figure 3)[19]. It is likely that these pins represent millenia of harps in Ireland.

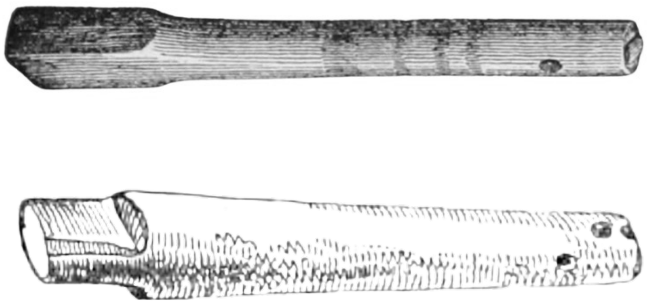

Figure 3. Top -Bone harp tuning pin found at Greenmount in 1870. Leslie (1908), p.17. Bottom - Harp peg discovered at Toomullin, Co. Clare.

[13] Edward Ledwich, *Antiquities of Ireland*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Jones, 1804), p.230.
[14] Joseph Haydn, *Dictionary of Dates*, 6th ed. (London: Moxon, 1853), p.551.
[15] Edward Jones, *Music and Poetical Relicks of the Welsh Bards* (London: Jones, 1794), p.38.
[16] William Robert Wilde, *A descriptive catalogue of the antiquities of animal materials and bronze in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy* (Dublin: Hodges, 1861), p.340.
[17] Leslie, James, *History of Kilsaran* (Dundalk: Tempest, 1908), p.17.
[18] W.G. Wood-Martin, *The Lake Dwellings of Ireland, or Ancient Lacustrine Habitations of Erin, commonly called crannogs* (Dublin: Hodges, 1886).
[19] A rath is strong, circular earthen enclosure, of the site of a fort.

Less frequently, larger items are excavated on archaeological sites such as the early mediaeval harp neck at a crannog site at Carncoagh, Co. Antrim[20] (Figure 4). The metalwork of another instrument was discovered in a bog at Taughboyne, Co, Donegal in 1863; it's timber parts crumbled on excavation and the remain are now lost.

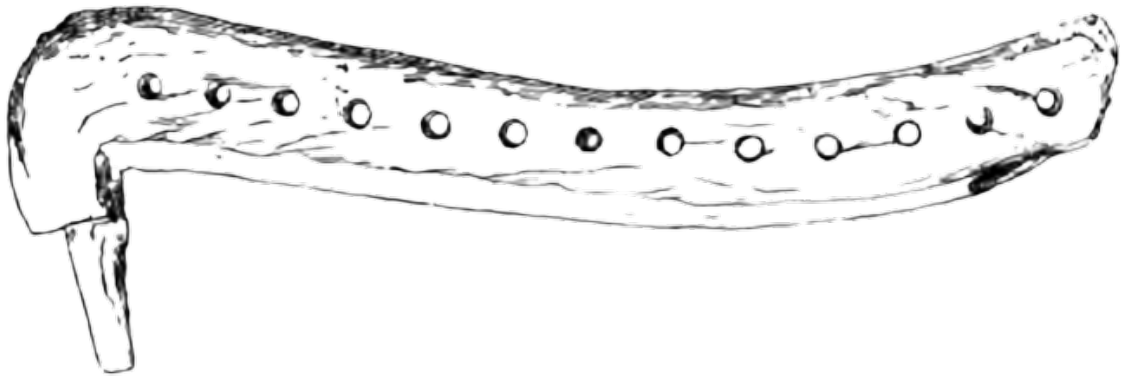

Figure 4. Harp neck recovered from a crannog site at Carncoagh, Co. Antrim. Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, Ser. 5, Vol. 7, 1897. pp. 114-115.

Perhaps the greatest archaeological harp discovery, the metal ornaments and parts of an instrument, were found at a crannog site near Ballinderry, Co. Westmeath (Figure 5). Holes in one piece suggest it was a 35-string instrument. A number of mountings, all highly decorated were found also, their style apparently early, though a brass plate inscribed I.H.S. suggests a sixteenth-century date. It is plausible that the harp was in use over an extended period of time and modifited at least once. According to Henry Joy of Belfast, another harp was dug from Coolness Moss, on the estate of Sir Richard Harte near Newcastle, between Limerick and Kilkenny around the year 1800. Found at twelve spades depth, estimated by the diggers to represent the passing of 1000, the anaerobic conditions had resulted in the preservation of several tuning pins and three metal strings. The harp was given to one Dr O'Halloran. On his death it was placed in a lumber room and later consigned to the flames by his cook. Whilst there is no record of its appearance, several gentlemen who saw it reported that it was different in construction to harp in use when discovered.[21]

In 544 C.E. Amergin MacAmalgaid compiled Dinnseanchas, meaning 'Lore of Places', a collection of histories, which amongst other things discussed Irish music. It related that in the time of Geide, monarch of Ireland, 'the people deemed each other's voices sweeter than the warblings of a melodious harp.[22] The Gaelic harp probably existed by the seventh or eighth centuries when was it was alluded to in the Brehon laws. The Brehon, an ancient judge, was arbiter of statutes that governed everyday life. These laws, at least initially, were held in the oral tradition and were surprisingly fair. If a man on whom a family dependend was injured, the guilty party would not only pay for his medical attendance, but also for a substitute to carry on the injured party's occupation. Fines were laid down for the loss of limbs, the amount depending upon how the victim used them before the incident.

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[20] William J, Knowles, Portion of a harp and other objects, found in the crannoge of Carncoagh, Co. Antrim. *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Ser. 5, Vol. 7, 1897. pp. 114-115.
[21] James Bonwick, *Who are the Irish?* (London: Bogue, 1880), p.78.
[22] '*The Bards of Ireland*' in The Dublin Penny Journal, no.3, vol.1, 14 July 1832, p.22.

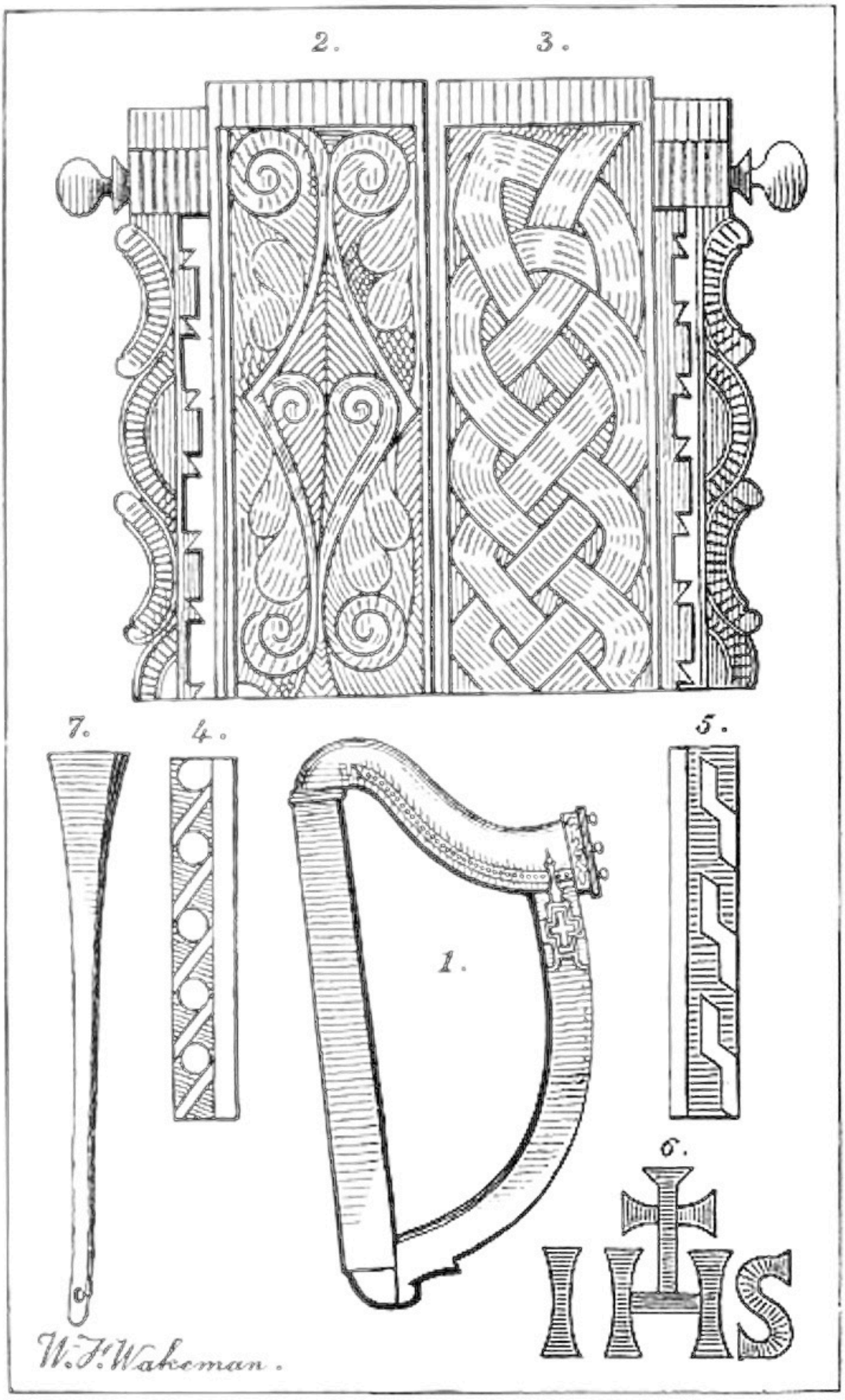

Figure 5. Parts of the Ballinderry harp together with a reconstruction of how the harp may have looked (Wood-Martin, 1886). Plate 28.

For injury to (or loss of) a non-domimant hand, a farmer, for instance, might expect greater restitution than a scribe. One who knocked a nail from a harper's finger would pay more than if they inflicted the same injury on another party.[23] That a harper's nails were important indicate that it was played with the nails as it the case with the Gaelic harp which is commonly strung with brass. Ironically, eight centuries later, 'the quarrelsome propensities' of a harper named O'Kane, were kept in check by the threat of his fingernails being cut.[24]

Ireland was not unique in protecting its harpers by law. In Wales, Howel's laws, named after Howel Dda (910-940), a tenth-century Welsh king, dictated that an assaulted harper should receive four-times the compensation than another person in their position.[25]

Iconography

Early representations of harp-type instruments are found on the 9th-century south cross at Castledermot, Co. Kildare, and a high cross at Durrow Abbey, Co. Offaly (Figure 6). On the first the harp is square.[26] On the latter, the harp has already taken on its triangular form, indicating that the three-sided harp was in Ireland by the end of the nineth century at the latest. A contributor to the National Folklore Collection from Graigeunamanagh, Kilkenny wrote of another cross in the ground of St Fiacre's Church, Ullard.

> It is well sculptured, and each side is decorated with ornamental interlacing designs. In the centre is the representation of the Crucifixion, above which are two human figures. Underneath the figure of our Saviour are also two human figures. The carving in the left arm is almost obliterated, as is also the figure of the harper playing on his harp in the other arm.

The earliest recognisable representation of the Gaelic harp (c1100 C.E.) is found on the Breac Maodhóg (Figure 7),[27] a house-shaped shrine believed to have been a battle standard. The instrument depicted is more developed than that on the Castledermot high cross, and its components, a neck, pillar and soundbox, are clearly identifiable. The harp, by the 12th-century, had reached an advanced state of development.

Having retained if not gained importance, harps continued to be depicted in monastic settings into the late middle ages. A memorial stone for a harper (c1500) at Jerpoint Abbey, Thomastown, Kilkenny, shows a recognisably Gaelic harp (Figure 8). Where history and folklore *tell* us that Gaelic harper was a person of importance, this carving *demonstrates* it; this is not the itinerant musician of later centuries but a highly-valued member of a quasi-aristocratic class. The commissioning of such a monument can only have been undertaken by a person of means; it is inconceiveable that a court musician in later years would have been recognised in such a way. The stone is weathered but a partial engraving survivies, 'HIC JACET WILLMS OHA…HA…`` translated as 'Here lies William O'Houlahan'. Assuming a date of c1500, Houlahan would have likely been a harper to the local Butler family, the Earls of Ormond who resided at Kilkenny Castle, presumably the seventh or eighth Earl.

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[23] Laurence Ginnell, *The Brehon Laws: A Legal Handbook* (London: Unwin, 1894), p.196.
[24] James Bonwick, *Who are the Irish?* (London: Bogue, 1880), p.78.
[25] Jones (1794), p.28.
[26] Margaret Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow* (Dublin: The Academy, 1898).
[27] Margaret Stokes, *The Breac Moedog* (London: Nichols, 1871).

Figure 6. The south cross of Castledermot, west face (top). The High Cross of Durrow (bottom) (Stokes, 1898).

Figure 7. Breac Máedóc reliquary (Stokes, 1871)

William Butler (1426-1515) was the 7th Earl; his only child, Margaret (1454-1539), married Sir William Boleyn (1451-1505); their grandaughter, Anne Boleyn, would become Henry VIII's ill-fated second wife. The 8th Earl, Piers Butler (1467-1539) was descended through the fraternal line, however, Piers lost the title to Sir Thomas Boleyn (1477-1539), father of Queen Anne, in 1528, only regaining it on his death ten years later.

Depictions of the Gaelic harp are also found in Scotland around the same time. A 14th-century tomb slab at Keill, Argyll, Scotland depicts perhaps the most detailed Gaelic harps carved in stone, bearing close resemblance to surviving instruments at Trinity College, Dublin, and Museum of Antiquities, Edinburgh. Other finely carved ornaments perhaps reveal something about the tomb's intented occupant. The harp is accomompanied by an ornate sword, a comb and sheers, and mythical beasts, including a griffin. If we are to give these meaning, it may be argued that the incumbant was a swords man (perhaps a knight) and harper – the link between the harp and battle maintained, as in Ireland. Traditionally, the griffin protected against evil but was later adopted by Christianity, representing the human and divine. For the knight the griffin was an heraldic emblem, signifying leadership and strenght. The worn engraving, 'ET D…..EIL' perhaps refers to the McNeils who resided nearby, 'FECIT ME FIERI' meaning 'it [he] made made me happen' – he had me made.[28] At Kilcoy Castle, a pair of mermaids, each holding a harp, are carved on a mantlepiece, dated 1679,[29] the form of which is similar to surviving instruments (Figure 8).

The presence of the Gaelic harp in continental Europe is evident in art. The Danish painter, Reinhold Thimm (d.1639) portrayed a Gaelic harp in his painting of Christian IV's musicians (1619) depicting its use at the Danish royal court, accompanied by a viola da gamba, lute and flute. The Gaelic harp was popular in Denmark at the time. In painting *David before Saul* (1631-32), a common theme at the time, Rembrandt chose to depict the Gaelic and not the European instrument.

[28] T.P. White, *Archaeological Sketches in Scotland: District of Kintyre* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1873). pl. 36.

[29] David MacGibbon and Thomas Ross, *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland, vol. 2* (Edinburgh: Douglas, 1887), p.253.

Figure 8. (Left) The Harper of Jerpoint, drawn by William Frazer (after George V. Du Noyer) undated. NLI, PD 1975 TX 10 (83). (Right) Stone slab, Keill, Scotland. White (1873). (Bottom) Mantlepiece at Kilcoy Castle. MacGibbon & Ross (1887)

Figure 9. Christian IV's Musicians (1619), Rosenborg Castle, Copenhagen.
Public Domain.

Figure 10. David Playing the Harp before Saul. Rembrandt Van Rijn (1631-32). Stadel Museum, inv. 498 (right). Public Domain.