

CHAPTER 11

“Earth and Sky will be Ablaze”: The Apocalypse, Hell, and Judgment in Pre-modern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and Brittany

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11.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a brief overview of the evidence for apocalyptic beliefs, traditions, and literature and related visions of the afterlife, and its significance in the medieval and early modern Celtic societies. It draws upon a range of literary, historical, and visual evidence to examine the place of the apocalypse particularly in pre-modern culture and the imagination. Due to the breadth of material which is relevant to this topic, however, this essay is particularly concerned with select aspects of the evidence for the Last Days, Doomsday, and Judgment, descriptions of Hell, and the afterlife. In addition, the Celtic vernacular evidence for such traditions will be chiefly considered.

Gaelic Ireland and Scotland and Wales form the primary geographical focus of this study, though Brittany and Cornwall are also discussed. These countries all shared in the wider European tradition of popular literature dealing with otherworld journeys, and visions and descriptions of Heaven and Hell, embracing widely known Christian and Jewish apocryphal literature. It is notable that most, though not all, of the vernacular texts which survive are translations from the Latin as opposed to independent native traditions. Despite this, as we shall see, distinctive elements emerge, linked to native legal, historical, and literary traditions, which were unique to these countries.

However, while medieval Welsh, Cornish, and Breton languages, literatures, and traditions are considered separately here, wholly in c.400 A.D., they shared a common Brythonic language which was spoken across most of Britain and a literary tradition. Early forms of Welsh, Cornish, and Breton developed from their regional dialects and variations of Brythonic during the Early Middle Ages, as Anglo-Saxon and other encroachments gradually led to the loss of territory and speakers. Likewise, in c.400 is misleading. The same Brythonic language, albeit with regional dialects and variations, was spoken across much of Britain; they also shared a common literary tradition. Anglo-Saxon and other encroachments led gradually to loss of territory and speakers (some departing for Brittany) and the early medieval development of early forms of Welsh, Cornish, and Breton. Likewise, Gaelic Ireland and Scotland shared a common
language and literary tradition during the Middle Ages which eventually gave rise to Irish and Scottish Gaelic.

11.2 The Gaelic World: Ireland and Scotland

A wealth of apocryphal texts survive in the Gaelic vernacular. Indeed, it has been suggested that “we have in Irish probably the richest crop of apocrypha in any of the European vernaculars, probably in any vernacular language.” Surviving pre-modern apocryphal writings in Irish include Christian and Jewish apocrypha widely circulated in Europe and beyond as well as some apocrypha unique to Ireland itself, including *In Tenga Bithnua* (“The Evernew Tongue”). Martin McNamara’s seminal 1975 study of the apocrypha of the Irish church sought to identify and catalogue many texts concerned with apocalyptic themes. As a result of the excellent work of scholars like McNamara, Máire Herbert, John Carey, the Series Apocryphorum of *Corpus Christianorum*, and (most recently) the De Finibus Project based in the Department of Early and Medieval Irish at University College, Cork, a wide range of Irish apocryphal texts have been identified and edited in critical editions with translations. The fruits of this fine project were published as a two volume set entitled *The End and Beyond: Medieval Irish Eschatology* in late 2014.2

11.3 Visions of the Afterlife

Irish texts concerned with the fate of souls and their interim state in the afterlife abound, reflecting both native vernacular tradition and popular and widely known Latin and other texts in their composition. Including texts such as the *Visio Tnugdali* (“The Vision of Tundale”) and *Fís Adomnáin* (“The Vision of Adomnán”), these provide accounts of visits by named individuals to Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory. An interest in what happens to the soul in the afterlife is apparent from the 7th century in Ireland, and visions of the afterlife constitute an important body of evidence for pre-modern apocalyptic beliefs, perspectives, and concerns in an Irish context.

These texts also often provide answers to pressing questions centering around the soul’s experience after death, before and at judgment, including its punishment, location, and interim state. As Wright has argued, a variety of pos-

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1 McNamara (1975, 1).
2 As this volume had just been published as of going to press, detailed reference to its contents unfortunately has been impossible, though general reference has been made to it whenever possible. Those interested in medieval Irish eschatology, however, should be certain to consult this splendid set of volumes.