

---

### «*Croch Saithir*: Envisioning Christ on the Cross in the Early Medieval West»

(Cork, Ireland, 29th-30th March 2010)

The «*Croch saithir*: Envisioning Christ on the Cross» conference invited participants working in a variety of fields across the medieval period to offer a re-evaluation of representational strategies used to explore and understand a defining moment in the Christian tradition, the Crucifixion of Christ. Twenty-eight scholars from the disciplines of liturgy, archaeology, art history, history, medieval literature and cultural studies presented papers that reassess and redefine the historical, soteriological and doctrinal implications of the Passion. The conference was organised by Dr Juliet Mullins, Dr Jenifer Ní Ghrádaigh and Dr Richard Hawtree of the «Christ on the Cross» project based at University College Cork and funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences ([www.christonthecross.org](http://www.christonthecross.org)). The conference was designed to complement the work of the «Christ on the Cross» project, which focuses upon textual and material representations of the Passion in early medieval Ireland (ca. 800-1200 AD), by bringing together scholars working on Irish, Insular and Continental material from ca. 500-1500. Although the individual contributors were each working in distinct fields and a variety of sources and methodological approaches were adopted, the overall conclusions that emerged from the dialogue that ensued emphasised that individual material and textual visions of the Crucifixion are best understood in relation to the broader context of European depictions, from County Clare, Ireland to Monreale in Sicily and from the carvings on the wooden doors of Santa Sabina in Rome to the stone crosses and cross slabs standing in Northumbria.

The *Croch saithir* conference invited three plenary speakers to address participants; each plenary represented a different intellectual tradition, discipline,

methodology and approach. Dr Jennifer O'Reilly from the School of History, University College Cork offered a paper on «The Mystery of the Cross and the Identity of Christ» in which she examined early Irish manuscript images of the Crucifixion and the distinctive Christology expressed within them. Dr Louis van Tongeren of the Institute for Liturgical and Ritual Studies, Tilburg University, spoke on the theme «Images of the Cross in Text and Ritual for Good Friday (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries)». His paper was concerned with the development of the liturgy of the Cross for Good Friday from the fourth century, when the true Cross was supposedly rediscovered by Helena, mother of Constantine, to the tenth century, when local rituals and traditions were gradually supplanted and a uniform celebration slowly emerged. The presentation by the third plenary speaker, Professor Celia Chazelle of the Department of History in the College of New Jersey, Princeton, complemented both the previous plenaries and offered a vision of the crucified Christ that invited participants to consider the place of the Passion in the practices of the Church today. In «The Mass and the Eucharist: "Image" of the Crucified Christ in the Christianization of early medieval Europe», Chazelle examined evidence for the ritual structures adopted by ordinary people across Europe and the developing ideology surrounding the Mass and Eucharist in the Frankish territories of the eighth and ninth centuries. The case studies offered by these three speakers provided the perfect platform from which to launch discussion of topics that re-emerged in other papers. Across the two days, contributors engaged with common issues of concern and demonstrated the uniformity of conviction in the power of the Crucifixion shared across the diverse regions, materials and media under consideration.

The plenary sessions were interspersed amongst seven other sessions devoted to a variety of approaches and source material. The first, «The Irish Textual Tradition», included papers on «The Cross in Ninth-Century Liturgical Sources» by Dr Thomas Whelan, «Sacrifice and Salvation in Echart Ua Cúanáin's poem on the Eucharist» by Dr Elizabeth Boyle, «Preaching the Passion in the Irish homiletic tradition» by Dr Juliet Mullins and «The legacy of the early medieval Christ on the Cross in Irish Bardic Religious Poetry (ca. 1200-1600)» by Dr Salvador Ryan. The second session was devoted to the question of «Presence and Absence», with presentations on «The Function and Iconography of the Cross in the Asturian Kingdom» by Dr César García de Castro Valdés, «The Blythburgh Tablet: Envisioning the Wounds of Christ» by Professor Carol Neuman de Vegvar, «*Lectio divina* and *visio divina*: reading the Cross in the Insular world» by Dr Christine Maddern, and «The Hanged Gods: Christ, Odin and the Gosforth 'Crucifixion'» by Amy Miller. The final session of the day focused upon exegetical strategies in the late-antique tradition and included papers on «Christ's Passion in fifth-century Rome: Formulating an iconography of Crucifixion» by Dr Felicity Harley-McGowan, «Trading on the Coin of Time in the Crucifixion Chronolo-

gy» by Dr Eric Graff and «The Volto Santo's Legendary and Physical Image» by Dr Michele Bacci.

The second day was opened with a session on «Reading the Material and Immaterial Image». Dr Richard Hawtree spoke on «Christ on the Cross in Eriugena's 'Carmina' for Charles the Bald», Dr Kees Veelenturf offered a paper on «The Open Eyes of the Crucified Christ» and Dr Griffin Murray gave a stimulating presentation on «The Irish Crucifixion Plaques: A Reassessment». In the second session on «The Romanesque Tradition and its Legacies/Painting and Sculpting Christ» we were offered papers on «From Langford to South Cerney: The Rood in Anglo-Norman England» by Dr Richard Marks, «Romanesque Crucifixion Imagery in Ireland» by Dr Jenifer Ní Ghrádaigh, «Romanesque Majestats, a kind of Christus Triumphans in Catalonia» by Dr Jordi Camps i Sòria and «Medieval Painted Crosses in Italy: Perspectives of Research» by Katharina Christa Schüppel. In the session on «Beauty and Drama: Image, Theology and Liturgy», Dr Rosa Bacile spoke on «Medieval Liturgical Drama: The Burial Arrangements of King William II and the Passion of Christ mosaics, Monreale Cathedral», Professor Elizabeth Parker offered a paper on «Christ on the Cross in Antelami's Parma Deposition» and Dr Małgorzata Krasnodębska-D'Aughton and Dr Edel Bhreathnach spoke together on the topic of «Piety, pictures and the Passion of Christ: the iconographic programme of Ennis friary». The final session of the conference was devoted to the «Manuscript as Manipulative Medium» and included three papers: «Gilding the lily: ornamenting the crucified Christ in Insular art» by Dr Heather Pulliam, «Crucifix and Crucifixion in an Early Breton Gospel Book: The Opening Diptych of Angers MS 24» by Dr Beatrice Kitzinger and «The Glorious Christ: the illustration of psalm 21 in the Bury St Edmunds Psalter (Vatican Library, Ms. Reg. Lat. 12)» by Dr Cécile Fouquet-Arnal.

As the above summary should indicate, the conference brought together scholars working across different disciplines and within diverse contexts. Yet, amidst the variety of approaches to Christ on the Cross put forward, the conference papers as a whole demonstrate that those responsible for the textual and material culture of the Middle Ages never forgot the importance of Christ's suffering and its paradoxical relationship with his divine triumph. Out of this awareness, writers and artists from Ireland to Sicily shaped a theological debate that remains central to the Western intellectual experience and continues to inspire devotional reflections centred upon the vision of Christ upon the Cross.

Dr Juliet MULLINS  
«Christ on the Cross» Project  
University College Cork  
Cork, Ireland  
j.mullins@ucc.ie  
www.christonthecross.org