

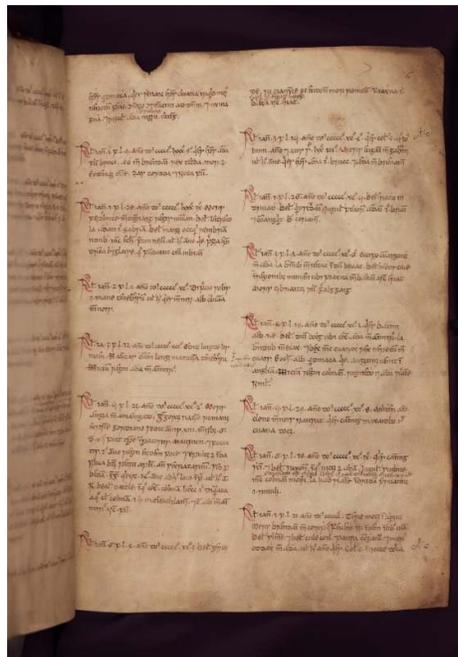
# Fermanagh

a story in **100** objects



The Annals of Ulster/ Annála Uladh (15th/16th-century manuscripts)

by Bernadette Cunningham



Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Rawlinson B 489, fol. 106r. Annals of Ulster for the years AD 1502-04.

The Annals of Ulster are one of the most important historical sources for medieval Ireland. Few other countries have such comprehensive medieval vernacular chronicles. The Annals were compiled in Fermanagh in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries under the patronage of the Maguires, lords of Fermanagh. The Fermanagh area supported well-endowed, hereditary, ecclesiastical families, and these were able to pursue cultural activities that included manuscript production. The annals contain short entries in chronological sequence on key people and events in Irish history from the fifth to the sixteenth century.

Two manuscript copies of the Annals of Ulster survive from the late medieval period. Their importance has long been recognized. They were prestige items when first produced, written by experienced scribes. Each of these two manuscripts has their own story to tell: of the scribes and scholars who worked on them in late medieval Fermanagh, the patrons who commissioned them, and the kind of history writing that was considered important by those who compiled them.

### **Contents of the Annals of Ulster**

These annals are a chronicle of medieval Irish history, arranged as individual annual entries – hence the name ‘annals’. They open with the coming of Christianity – Palladius in 431 and then Patrick in 432 – and continue down to the compiler’s own day. The annals were an attempt at a complete history of the political and ecclesiastical world of early Christian and medieval Ireland. They were based, in part, on older chronicles that had originated in a monastic context. However, the changing geographical emphasis throughout the centuries suggests a varied range of sources.

The early entries – up to the twelfth century – show a particular concern with ecclesiastical matters in Armagh and Derry and sometimes Meath. Later, there is more emphasis on secular politics, particularly in Ulster. There is another change in the thirteenth and fourteenth century, with a greater focus on people and events in Connacht. The contents of this section are somewhat similar to the Annals of Connacht. It is only in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that the entries in the Annals of Ulster begin to have a strong Fermanagh flavour, paying particular attention to the exploits of the Maguires.

Of all the surviving chronicles, the Annals of Ulster have the most comprehensive coverage of the northern half of Ireland. The main focus is on the ecclesiastical and political elite. These included abbots, canons, bishops, local kings and warlords, as well as some of the learned class. Ordinary people from the lower classes are not mentioned.

While historians and scribes are generally inclined to revise older sources that they consult for their own compilations, the scribes of the Annals of Ulster normally copied their

exemplars faithfully. In doing so, they preserved older forms of the language, making these annals an important source for the history of the Irish language (Ó Catháin, 1933).

### **Patrons and scribes of TCD MS 1282**

The patron of the Annals of Ulster was Archdeacon Cathal Óg Mac Maghnusa (d.1498). He was a prominent cleric in the late medieval diocese of Clogher, as well as a secular leader. In a fairly typical entry, the Annals of Ulster record Cathal Óg Mac Maghnusa's political status under the year 1488, noting that

Cathal Óg son of Cathal Óg son of Cathal Mór Mac Maghnusa was made Mac Maghnusa in this year by Mág Uidhir, that is, by Seaán son of Pilib Mág Uidhir and by the nobles of Fermanagh also.

It appears that Cathal Óg employed Ruaidhrí Ó Caiside (d.1541) to select and arrange the material while Ruaidhrí Ó Luinín (d.1528) worked as the scribe of the first manuscript. Ó Caiside was a member of a hereditary medical family from Cuil in Fermanagh. Ó Luinín was a member of a hereditary ecclesiastical family from Ard in Fermanagh.

As was usual at the time, the scribe wrote on vellum (calf-skin), using black ink. Ó Luinín's manuscript is now Trinity College, Dublin (TCD) MS 1282 (former shelf-mark H. 1. 8). The vellum pages measure approximately 29 x 20 cm, though some are irregular. The script is careful and clear. The pages are well laid out in double columns, with generous margins, and space is left for additions and annotations. Ó Luinín employed a neat minuscule script averaging 37 lines per column. The early part of the manuscript includes some additions by another contemporary scribe Ruaidhrí Ó Caiside (Mc Carthy, 2013, 446). There is some Latin in the very early part of the text dealing with the early Christian period, but most of the manuscript is written in Irish.

Ó Luinín worked on the original manuscript at Ballymacmanus Island (now Belleisle) to the south-east of Enniskillen, in the civil parish of Cleenish and Islands, County Fermanagh. A version of these annals was known in the seventeenth century as 'Leabhar Seanaidh Mac Maghnusa for Loch Érne' (the Book of Seanadh Mhic Mhaghnausa on Lough Erne), though

whether either of the extant manuscripts was that actual book is uncertain. The manuscript of that name consulted by the Four Masters in the 1630s contained entries down to the year 1532.

### **Scribes and patrons of Bodleian MS Rawlinson B. 489**

Ruaidhrí Ó Luínín had barely finished work on the original manuscript of the Annals of Ulster (after its patron Cathal Óg Mac Maghnusa had died), when work began on a copy of the text for a new patron, Ruaidhrí Mac Craith. This copy is now in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. It is a little more elaborate and written on better quality vellum. It measures 33 x 24 cm, and of the original 126 folios, 121 now survive. The manuscript is the work of two principal scribes, Ruaidhrí Ó Caiside and Ruaidhrí Ó Luínín. The scribal hands of these two men are very similar, but Brian Ó Cuív has concluded that Ruaidhrí Ó Caiside wrote as far as the entry for AD 952, and then Ruaidhrí Ó Luínín took over and wrote up to AD 1506. (Ó Cuív, 2001, 157). This reverses the scribal identifications suggested by Aubrey Gwynn in the 1950s, and followed by others. A third and fourth scribe joined in the work of transcribing the sixteenth-century entries, beginning with AD 1507. Subsequently, up to ten other scribes made some lesser additions to the same manuscript in the course of the sixteenth century. One of them identified himself as Matha Ó Luínín, writing in 1579.

Rawlinson B. 489 opens with an entry for AD 431 concerning Palladius, though the earliest vellum folio is darkened and no longer legible. Some folios have been lost later in the volume. Consequently some text is missing between the years 1131 and 1155 and again between 1307 and 1315. The gap at 1374-8 in their exemplar was dealt with by providing annual headings in the copy (fol. 80r) and leaving space for any information that might come to light. The last full entry is for the year 1541. It records the death of Ruaidhrí Ó Caiside, one of the principal scribes. There are a few later entries, the latest one relates to the year 1588.

Daniel Mc Carthy has deduced that the first manuscript (TCD MS 1282) was written between 1489 and 1505, while most of the second copy (Rawlinson B 489) was probably made between 1505 and 1507 (Mc Carthy, 2013, 451-4). TCD MS 1282 ends with the year

1504, but it is not complete. The first folio is numbered 12, and there are gaps for the years AD 1102-8, 1115-62 and 1374-8. The compilers may have decided to begin work on a second, neater copy before they had finished the first one.

### **Later history of the manuscripts**

The oldest copy of the Annals of Ulster appears to have stayed in the hands of the Ó Luinín family until the early eighteenth century. It was then acquired by antiquarian collectors in Dublin, before being purchased by TCD at auction in 1766. It was bought by Trinity's librarian in 1766 at the sale of John Fergus's library (Ó Cathain, 1988, 154). It had previously been owned by John Conry who might possibly have acquired it from one Cathal Ó Luinín (Charles Lynegar) who was in TCD in 1708. (Ó Muraile, 'Introduction' 1998, 21-2). The manuscript has recently been rebound in the Conservation Laboratory at TCD. The vellum leaves have been stitched into an entirely new binding, with oak boards, and a white spine made from pigskin.

The second copy of the Annals of Ulster had left Gaelic hands by the early seventeenth century and was owned for a time by Sir James Ware (1594-1666), auditor general of Ireland (O'Sullivan, 1997, pp 71-2). Ware's copy of the Annals of Ulster was used extensively by James Ussher (d.1656), Church of Ireland archbishop of Armagh. Ussher was a prolific scholar who had a particular interest in the ecclesiastical history of early Christian Ireland. After Sir James Ware's death his manuscript collection was inherited by his son, Robert, and was later acquired by Henry Hyde, 2nd earl of Clarendon. It was subsequently purchased at auction by James Bridges, later 1st earl of Chandos. When auctioned again in 1747 it was bought by Richard Rawlinson (1690-1755) an Oxford graduate and avid manuscript collector (Ó Cuív, 2001, xxvii-xxviii; O'Sullivan, 1997, 76). Rawlinson bequeathed it to the Bodleian Library where it has remained. It is still in the leather binding (now worn) that Sir James Ware had made for it, and it bears Ware's crest on the front and back covers.

## **The Annals of Ulster in print and online**

The first attempt to produce a printed edition of the Annals of Ulster was that of the Revd Charles O’Conor, chaplain to the Duke of Buckingham. His edition formed volume 4 of *Rerum Hibernicarum Scriptores*, published at Buckingham in 1826. His work was almost immediately dismissed by scholars as having little scholarly value.

A full dual language edition, with an extensive index, was published in Dublin in four volumes between 1887 and 1901, edited by William M. Hennessy and Bartholomew Mac Carthy. Some scholars were unhappy with the quality of this edition and translation, and in the mid-twentieth century Seán Mac Airt embarked on a new edition. The project was unfinished at the time of Mac Airt’s premature death. Gearóid Mac Niocaill continued the work and a new edition of the Annals of Ulster to the year AD 1131 was published in 1983. Later, the older Hennessy and Mac Carthy edition was reprinted in 1998 with a new introduction by Nollaig Ó Muraíle. Digital images of the Bodleian Library copy, Rawlinson B. 489, are accessible on the Early Oxford Manuscripts Online website (<http://images.ox.ac.uk>). Images of the earliest manuscript of the Annals of Ulster, Trinity College, Dublin, MS 1282, are not yet accessible online (November 2014).

The Annals of Ulster continue to be valued by historians and archaeologists as a highly significant documentary source for medieval Ireland. Continued research on the manuscripts themselves and their historical content will surely unlock further secrets of these 500-year-old Fermanagh treasures.

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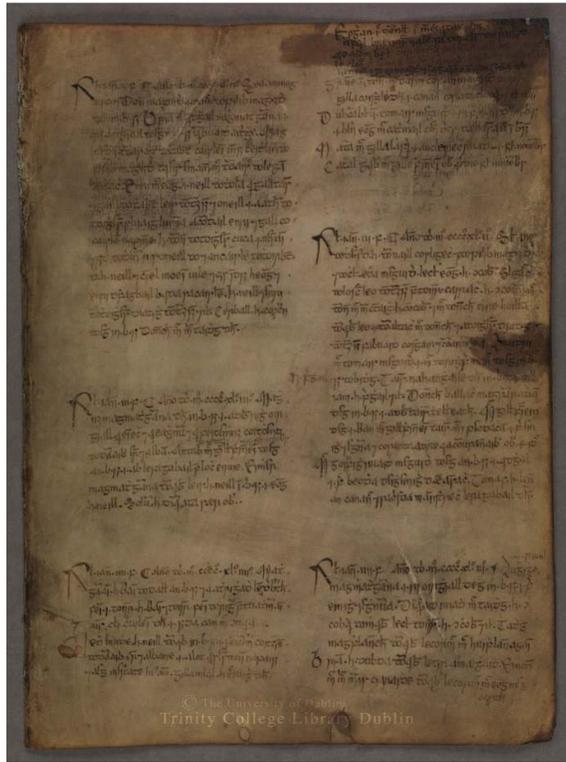
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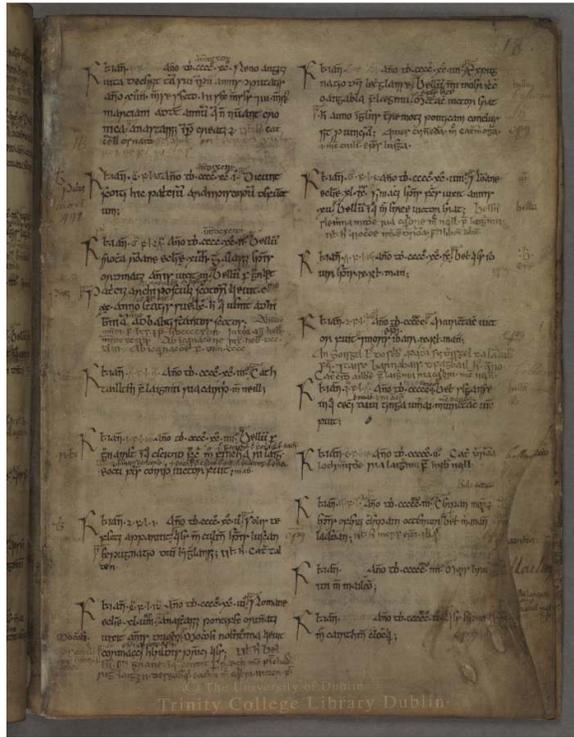
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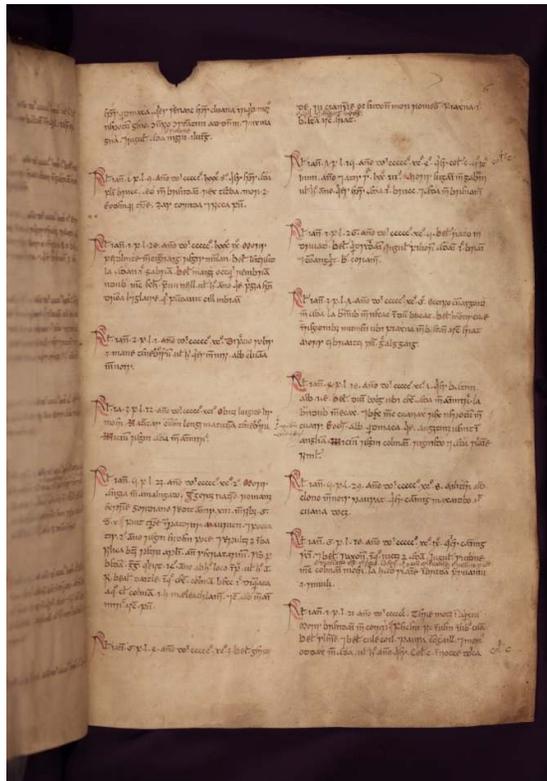
Trinity College, Dublin, MS 1282, fol. 116r. Annals of Ulster for the years AD 1442-1446.



Trinity College, Dublin, MS 1282, fol. 18r. Annals of Ulster for the years AD 490-505.



Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Rawlinson B 489, fol. 6r. Annals of Ulster for the years AD 588-600.



Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Rawlinson B 489, fol. 106r. Annals of Ulster for the years AD 1502-04.

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'Fermanagh: a story in one hundred objects' is a project involving people from the local community, historians and students from the University of Ulster.

Supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, this project is part of our 'Fermanagh Heritage Gateway' activity programme. The research project tells aspects of Fermanagh's diverse history through the selection and interpretation of one hundred key objects. Objects are locally important as well as of wider international significance.

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