

A Follow-up on the discussion of the Cathars and how the gospels spread to Ireland and contributed to Celtic spirituality—

We had a wonderful discussion that included mentioning the Cathars (in France) and how the gospel(s) - particularly John- spread to Ireland and contributed to Celtic spirituality. The Cathars were most prominent in the 12th century in southern France, Germany, and Italy. They were terribly persecuted for their dualistic beliefs (among other things).

We owe a great deal to the Irish Christian communities – one I read about years ago in the book *How the Irish Saved Civilization* by Thomas Cahill was published in 1995. It's a short well-written book by a respected scholar literate in Greek and Latin, early Christian and Jewish writings.

In the book, Cahill outlines “the Western World as it existed around the year 400, its political structure, its religious basis in its magnificent achievements, literature and philosophy. Then he shows us how this world disappeared under the waves of the Barbarian invasions. Literacy declined, books vanished into the fires of illiterate warriors and cities emptied. The Dark Ages overcame classical civilization.

But in Ireland there was no fall. It had never been built up in the first place. The Irish squabbled happily among themselves, content with their bards and poets. Saint Patrick changed all that with his missionary conversion of the Irish. They took to Christianity at once, and once introduced to the idea, became not just literate but scholarly. Isolated monks gathered here and there to pray and study. And to copy. They had a fierce delight in the written word. Most importantly, they copied everything they could get their hands on from saintly lives to the works of Livy.

A generation later, the monkish monasteries began to send out missionaries of their own. They colonized first Scotland then Northern England, planting monasteries in their mode, complete with scriptoriums. In another generation, Irish monks spread across Europe founding astonishing numbers of monasteries. Irish monk-scholars popped up everywhere, in France, in Germany, in the Alps and all the way to Italy. Some of the most famous and important monasteries in Europe were founded by Irish holy men.

And in every one of these dozens, scores of holy retreats, young monks copied madly everything that they could get their hands on. Without the holy dedication and patience of these men much of the ancient lore of the classic age would be forever lost, as much as in spite of their efforts."

Cahill does mention that part of what they copied was "pagan texts" though does not specifically mention gnosticism, non-canonical texts, etc. And he is a bit androcentric. However, he does spend a fair amount of time on St. Brigid of Kildare, the Irish double monasteries (where both women and men lived), abbesses and even female bishops of whom Rome was unaware or even cared about (at least early on). So I'm sure that women monastics also spent time transcribing all sorts of texts.

He specifically mentions that St. Augustine (early 400s) and Pope Gregory “the Great” (reigned 590-604) were particularly anti-books - and we all know their attitudes about women and their place in the Church!

Through legend, we've heard that many texts, including John, found their way to Ireland. The New Testament was codified around 400. The purging of so-called heretical texts was about the same time - could some of those texts have made their way to France and subsequently Ireland?

In some of our past Magdalen Community meetings, we have used readings from *The Gospel of the Beloved Companion* which, along with the Gospel of John, was revered in the Languedoc (southern part of France). For those of you unfamiliar with it, this book ‘reads’ much like the Gospel of John does and provides what “could” be the complete text of the original Gospel of Mary. Both were written originally in Alexandrian Greek – one might surmise the same followers authored both-- but for right now that point is theoretical.

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