

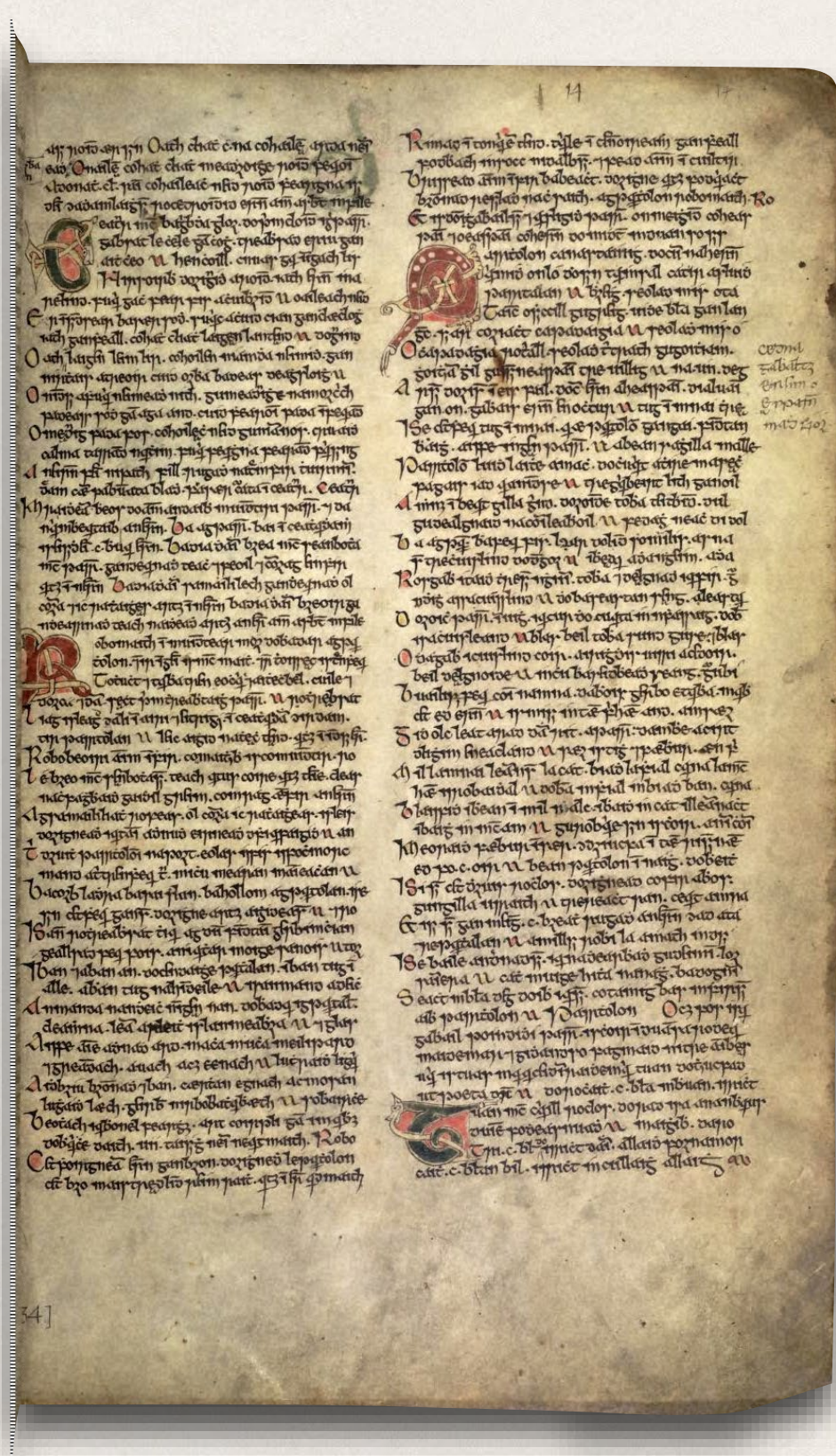
The Natural World in Early Ireland

An Tionól Saoránach / The Citizens' Assembly

Four plains were cleared by Partholón in Ireland: Mag Ethrige (Sligo) in Connacht, Mag Ítha (Wexford) in Leinster, Mag Latharna (Antrim) in Dal nAraide, Mag Lí (Derry)....For Partholón found no plain in Ireland before him but the Old Plain of Elta in Édair (Clontarf/ Howth).

Seven lake-bursts over the land of Ireland in the time of Partholón: Loch Mesca (Lough Mask), which first burst forth in the third year after the first battle. In the twelfth year after the coming of Partholón into Ireland, the burst of Loch Con (Lough Conn) and of Loch Dechet (Lough Gara)

❖ From Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, iii, pp 10-11, 14-15)



The coming of Partholón to Ireland
RIA MS P 12 (Book of Ballymote), f. 14r
Online at www.isos.dias.ie

Land & Law in Early Ireland

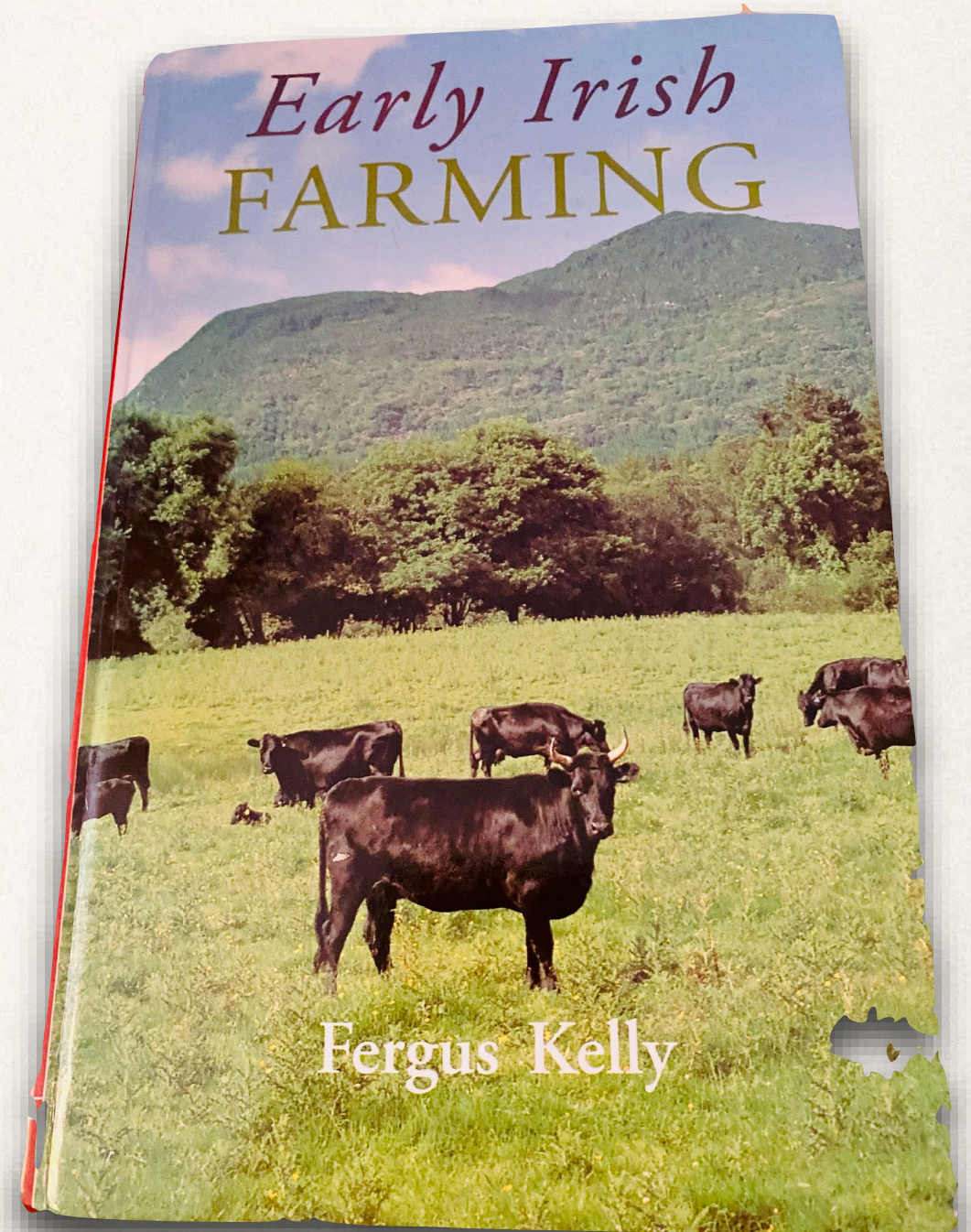


Bone motif piece from Lagore (NMI), 8th-9th century
Photo © Elva Johnston

- ❖ Society from the 5th-12th century
- ❖ Dispersed settlement dependent upon rural economy
- ❖ Varied land use & agricultural practice
- ❖ A system of law & landownership that balanced family & individual rights

Naming the Land

- ❖ Different land types:
 - ❖ *achad* (pasture, field) *clúain* (meadow), *mag* (plain)
 - ❖ *crúach* (hill), *druim* (ridge), *slíab* (mountain),
 - ❖ *daire* (oak woodland), *fid* (wood), *ros* (wooded promontory, height),
 - ❖ *loch* (lake, inlet), *inis* (bog island, island), *móin* (bog)



Managing Animals

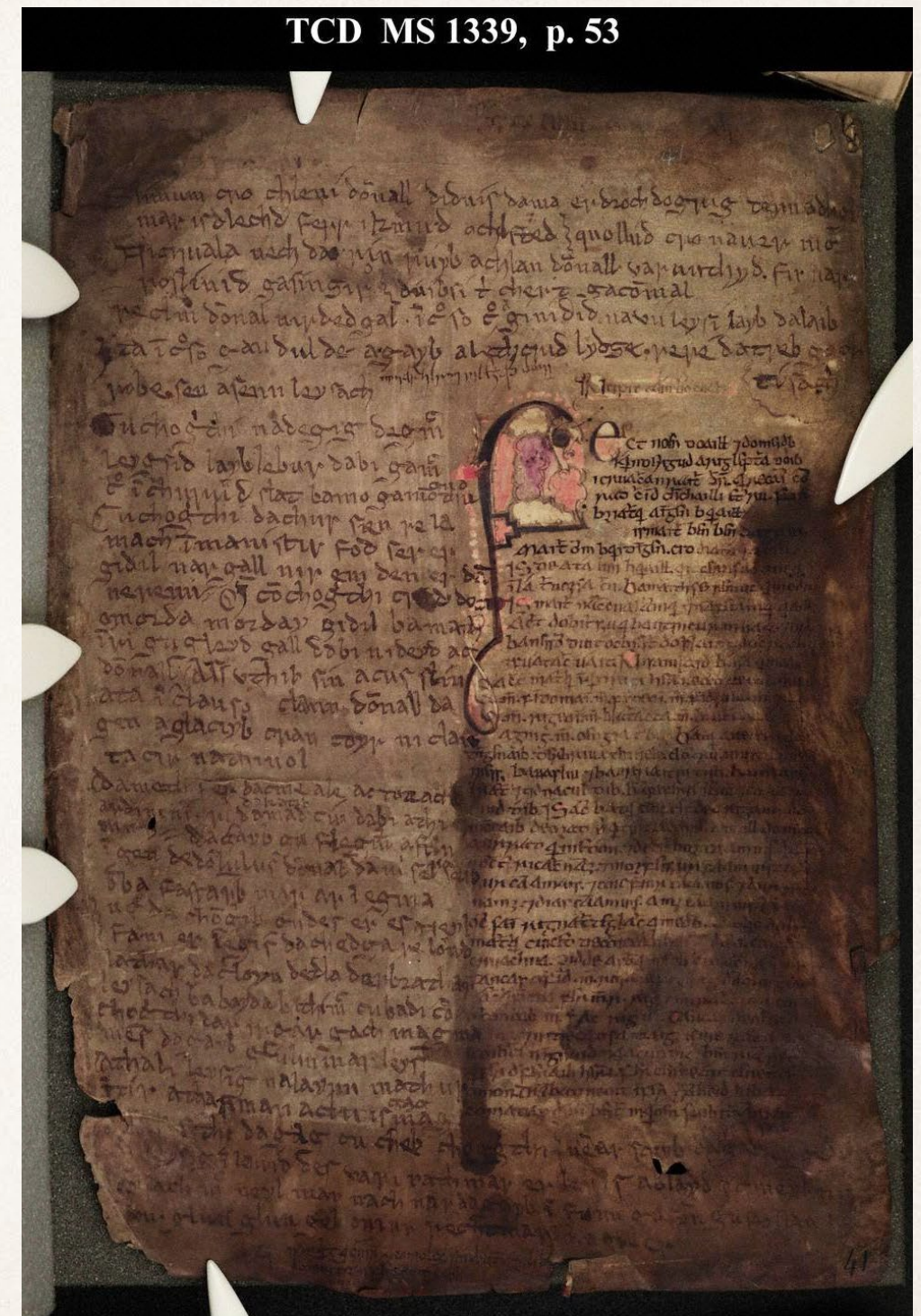


Cat, Cross of the Scriptures, Clonmacnoise
Photo © Elva Johnston

- ❖ Livestock: cattle (used to measure individual status and value), sheep, pigs, goats, fowl
- ❖ Horses: draft, riding
- ❖ Bees: special importance given to beekeeping
- ❖ Dogs: high status as guard & hunting dogs (see story of Cú Chulainn), but also as pets
- ❖ Cats: associated with the supernatural, the domestic space and as pets

Then their herds of cows, their cattle and their droves were brought to them from the woods and waste places of the province. They were counted and reckoned and recognised, and they were of equal size and equal number. But among Ailill's cows there was a special bull. He had been a calf of one of Maeve's cows, and his name was Findbennach. But he deemed it unworthy of him to be counted as a woman's property, so he went and took his place among the king's cows. It was to Maeve as if she owned not a penny of possessions since she had not a bull as great as that among her livestock.

❖ From O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, p. 139



The opening of the *Táin*
TCD MS 1339 (Book of Leinster), p. 53
Online at www.isos.dias.ie

Managing the Waters

- ❖ Fisheries exploited through the construction of weirs, which could be owned individually or by kindred groups
- ❖ Limitations on size of weirs to prevent over-fishing
- ❖ High fish yields were a sign of prosperity associated with a good king
- ❖ Highest status fish is the salmon, but also references to trout and eels

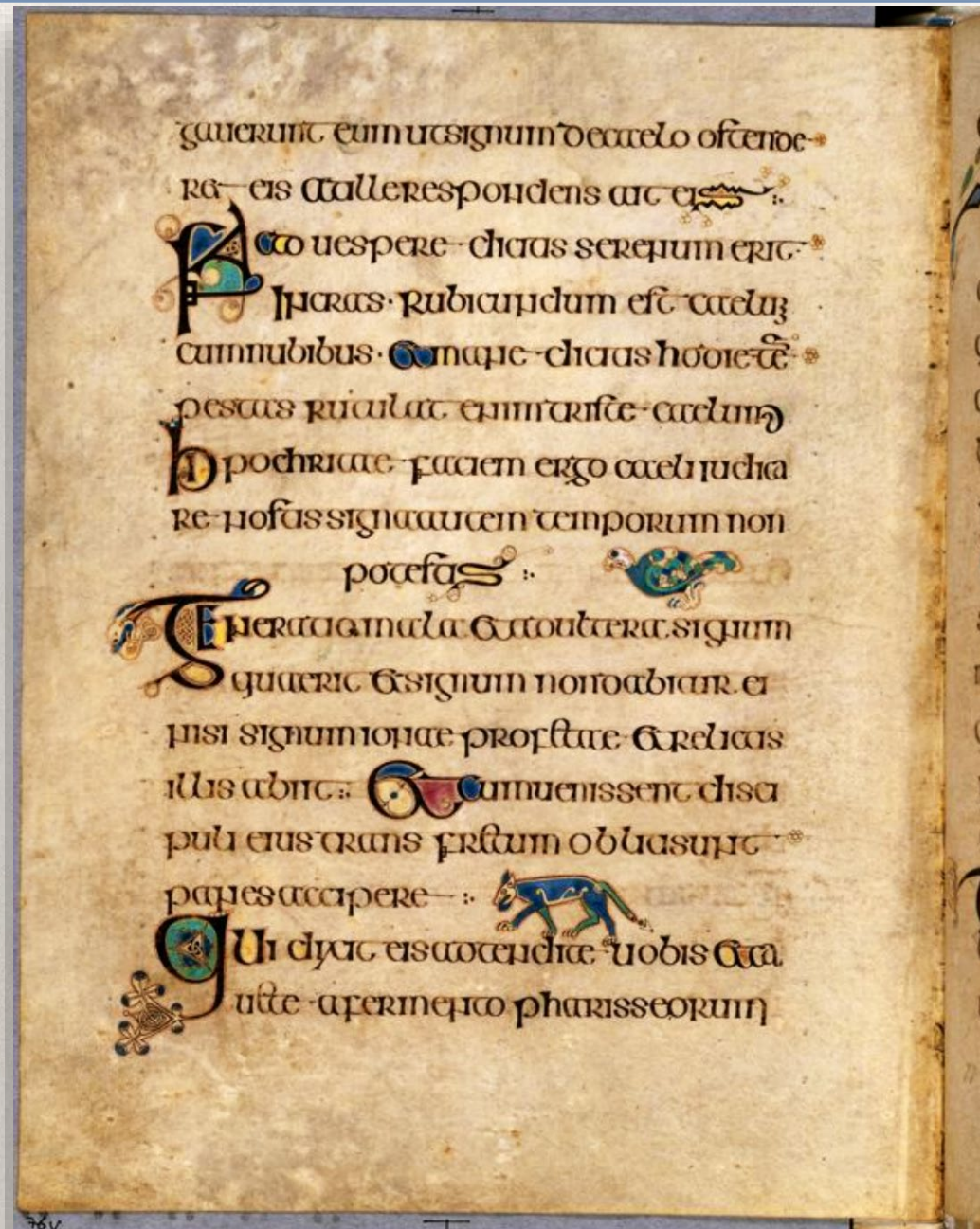


A decorative fish

TCD MS 52 (Book of Kells), f. 112r

Online at digitalcollections.tcd.ie/collections/ks65hc20t

The Wilderness



- ❖ The wilderness consisted of ocean, bog, woodlands & was associated with lawlessness, foraging, asceticism
- ❖ Animals such as foxes, deer, wild pig and especially wolves (*cú allaid, fáelchú, mac tíre*)

The Air Above

- ❖ Domestic birds were part of the Irish diet but there was special attention given to wild birds as predators and as signs of the supernatural

there.' The Macc Óc went to Loch Bél Dracon, and there he saw the three fifties of white birds, with silver chains, and golden hair about their heads. Óengus was in human form at the edge of the lake, and he called to the girl, saying 'Come and speak with me, Cáer!' 'Who is calling to me?' asked Cáer. 'Óengus is calling,' he replied. 'I will come,' she said, 'if you will promise me that I may return to the water.' 'I promise that,' he said. She went to him, then; he put his arms round her, and they slept in the form of swans until they had circled the lake three times. Thus, he kept his promise. They left in the form of two white birds and flew to Bruig ind Maicc Óic, and there they sang until the people inside fell asleep for three days and three nights. The girl

'The Dream of Óengus

From: Gantz, Early Irish Myths and Sagas, p. 112



UCD-OFM MS A1 (Psalter of St Caimín), p. 1

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Thoughts

For the early Irish the land and its resources were something to be managed as practically as possible. They also recognised the existence of wildernesses which offered both opportunity and danger