

Public Abstract

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This thesis will examine Irish views of the classical world primarily through texts written in Ireland and on the continent by Irishmen up to the beginning of the Carolingian period (with brief glances to the period ahead), but also through some archaeological evidence and a few references to Irish scholars by their contemporaries. This Irish evidence will show that the Greeks represented the law of number together with great, ancient deeds (associated with each other through the primal act of Creation) while the Romans represented the law of letter with the accompanying great words. Taken individually, remarks made by early medieval Irish writers about classical language and literature may seem random or trivial to the casual observer, but this is not the case. Though they did not make their conception of Rome and Greece explicit, they nevertheless betrayed this very conception by their use of classical material. The Greeks were the wise heroes, skilled in the science of number. The Romans were the lawgivers and rulers, skilled in the use of writing. Great deeds belonged to ancient Greece, a great kingdom, to the Romans. As the Greek civilization was older, it was more worthy of respect in Irish thought, and thus the language of ancient Greece, both through its association with the nobility of its famous figures and through its suitability to numerical scientia, was the most suited to exalted topics and heavenly things.