

A medieval medical text links Ireland to the Islamic world

By Atlas Obscura, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.02.19

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Image 1: A copy of Volume III of "The Canon of Medicine," which is a five-volume medical encyclopedia by 11th-century Persian physician and polymath Ibn Sina, also known as Avicenna. A 15th-century Irish translation of the text was recently discovered, indicating how Avicenna's learning crossed borders and distances in medieval times. Photo from Ray Tang/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

The discovery of two sheets of centuries-old parchment has revealed an exciting link between medieval Ireland and the Islamic world. The two sheets of calfskin vellum were found lodged into the binding of a book from the 16th century. However, the pieces of parchment are more than a century older than the book in which they were found. The sheets contain a rare Irish translation of a Persian medical text that was originally written in the 11th century. For the last 500 years, the parchment had been sitting in a family home in Cornwall without anyone realizing its importance.

"I suppose [the owners] just took a notion to photograph it with their phone and they sent the photograph to one of the universities in England, who sent it to another university, and eventually it got to me," says Pádraig Ó Macháin. He has spent his life working with medieval Gaelic manuscripts. Ó Macháin is the head of the modern Irish department at University College Cork in Cork, Ireland. For him, identifying the translation as a medieval Irish medical text was easy, but he needed some help to determine the original source.

A 15th-Century Irish Translation

Ó Macháin is the founder of Irish Script on Screen, Ireland's first large-scale digitization project. The aim of the project is to create digital images of ancient Irish manuscripts and to make the images accessible online along with explanations. He shared the image of the parchment fragment with Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha, a specialist in Irish medical texts at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. She identified it as a passage from the first book of an influential five-volume work called "The Canon of Medicine." The book was written by 11th-century Persian physician Ibn Sina, also known as Avicenna. Ibn Sina was renowned for his wide range of knowledge, and the work is considered the foundational textbook of early modern medicine. While many references to Ibn Sina and his work pop up in old Irish medical texts, this is the only known evidence of a full translation of his encyclopedia. "This is one of the most influential medical books ever written," says Nic Dhonnchadha. "So the fact that it was being studied in Ireland in the 15th century was certainly a link to the Islamic world."

A "Precious Text" Hidden In The Binding

"The Canon of Medicine" was originally written in Arabic, Ibn Sina's native language. However, experts believe that this Irish edition was likely translated from a Latin version of the book, as there are Latin words and terminology scattered throughout the Irish text. The heading at the top right of the page is Ibn Sina's preface to his canon, written in Latin. It gives thanks to god and explains that one of his friends asked him to write a book about medicine. One sheet of parchment lists the contents of the encyclopedia, while the other details the anatomy of the jaw, teeth, nose and throat.

It was not uncommon for people to use scraps of old manuscripts to bind newer books as the world transitioned from handwritten to printed words in the 15th and 16th centuries. However, it would have been unusual for a precious text like Ibn Sina's to have been taken apart on purpose. "These kinds of manuscripts would have been very valuable to the people who owned them," says Nic Dhonnchadha. "Anyone who owned it would have been unlikely to part with it." Many manuscripts were destroyed during England's encroachment of Ireland, and the scholars believe that the canon manuscript suffered such a fate. It's just a stroke of luck that this fragment was salvaged and used to bind a much-less-interesting administrative text.

"A Unique Collection Of Medical Knowledge" In Gaelic

Ó Macháin hopes the find can help overturn some misconceptions about Ireland at that time in history. "Ireland was very much pre-urban, and we remained pre-urban until the 17th century," he says, "but what people don't understand is that there were great schools of learning here, including medical schools." Unlike medical schools in England or continental Europe, students in Irish medical schools studied in Gaelic rather than in Latin. This created a unique collection of medical knowledge in the language of the common people. Nic Dhonnchadha's upcoming full translation of the manuscript will reveal some key differences between the Latin version and its Irish counterpart.

"This is an example of learning in its purest form, it transcends all boundaries, it transcends cultures and religions, it unites us all in a way that other things divide us," Ó Macháin says. "That's very personally important to me because I think learning is without borders." He adds, "This is maybe an opportunity to express that and make people understand it."

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following BEST describes Pádraig Ó Macháin's approach to identifying the text in the pages?
- (A) Ó Macháin quickly recognized the translation as a medieval Irish medical text, but realized he would need the help of Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha to identify the original source of the information there.
 - (B) Ó Macháin immediately uploaded the text of the translation to Irish Script on Screen, and was approached by Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha about the best way to accurately identify the source of the pages.
 - (C) Ó Macháin slowly realized that the text that had been sent to him was older than the book that held it, and needed the help of Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha to identify it as a medical text.
 - (D) Ó Macháin eventually enlisted the assistance of Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha to identify the text, but had already completed the full translation from Gaelic back into the original Latin and Arabic.
- 2 How does the author develop the idea that the manuscript pages are a rare and unlikely discovery?
- (A) by introducing the difficulty of the work being done by the project Irish Script on Screen and elaborating on their digitization
 - (B) by illustrating how and why the medieval owner of the manuscript chose to preserve pages about the anatomy of the face
 - (C) by explaining where the pages were before their discovery and describing the fate of most manuscripts in medieval Ireland
 - (D) by exploring the journey of the pages in their translation from Arabic into Gaelic and demonstrating how much Latin remains

- 3 Read the following sentence from the section "A 15th-Century Irish Translation."

She identified it as a passage from the first book of an influential five-volume work called "The Canon of Medicine."

Which words and phrases from the section help to explain what "canon" refers to?

- (A) digitization; parchment fragment
 - (B) images accessible; influential
 - (C) 11th-century; full translation
 - (D) foundational textbook; encyclopedia
- 4 Read the following words and phrases from the section "A Unique Collection Of Medical Knowledge In Gaelic."

1. *unique*
2. *purest form*
3. *transcends*
4. *opportunity*

How do these words and phrases contribute to the tone of the article?

- (A) They convey a sense of shock and relief regarding preservation of pages from the manuscript.
- (B) They convey a sense of anxiety and urgency over the need to locate more pages of the manuscript.
- (C) They convey a sense of skepticism and doubt about conclusions drawn from the manuscript pages.
- (D) They convey a sense of awe and admiration for the learning evidenced in the manuscript pages.

Answer Key

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