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Iberian Roots, Irish Nation



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Through kinship with Spain, how did Ireland negotiate its cultural, religious, and historical legitimacy in the face of colonialism, contributing to the emergence of an Irish national consciousness?

Introduction

Why did Ireland so fiercely insist on descent from Spain?

My research reveals how nations fabricate the legitimacy they are denied. The solution to Ireland's medieval crisis of biblical anonymity and English encroachment was the **Lebor Gabála Érenn**: an elaborate origin myth tracing the Irish to Noah, to Spain, and to the Milesians. Tracing this invented kinship across three periods — medieval, early modern, and modern — I argue **the Spanish connection was never a static legend but an adaptable instrument** for negotiating Ireland's cultural, religious, and historical legitimacy.

Medieval

- ❖ Biblical Framing: Lebor Gabála Érenn (LGÉ) invented a biblical framework, **tracing Ireland back to Japhet, the son of Noah**, giving the newly converted nation a Christian pedigree.
- ❖ Spanish-Milesian Link: The omission of Ireland in Christian doctrines led medieval scholars to forge ties with **Spain, the “mother of races”**.² The Milesians mythically sailed from Iberia to Ireland, drawing on the name Míl Espáne ('soldier of Hispania')
- ❖ Encroachment: LGÉ was a political tool during periods of English encroachment under Richard II and Henry IV. Manuscripts' **long genealogical tracts allowed Irish nobles to assert their ancient right to rule** and defend their property against territorial threats.

Early Modern

- ❖ Barbarism: British writers labelled native Irish barbarians. Geoffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* refuted claims, arguing that Ireland compared to any European nation in "valour, in learning, and in being steadfast in the Catholic faith".³
- ❖ Preserving Language: *Foras Feasa* was written in Irish. **Retaining its mother tongue** was vital to ensure **the true story of Ireland remained accessible to its people rather than being diluted by translation**.
- ❖ Counter-Reformation: Irish migrants and exiled scholars looked to Spain for military and financial support. The Irish College of Salamanca petitioned King Philip III, reminding him of their **shared Milesian heritage and moral obligation to support fellow descendants**.

Modern

- ❖ Nationalism: Scholarship laid the cultural foundations for Irish nationalism. **Spanish elements of the myth dwindled, but the underlying mythology persisted**, shifting focus on **independent sovereignty** and a **distinct Celtic origin story**.
- ❖ Unity: **Discontent with English rule** led Anglo-Irish Protestants to adopt Gaelic history as their own. This shared affinity united Catholic and Protestant Gaels under **a broader national identity**.
- ❖ Xenophobia: Nineteenth-century British politics fostered **anti-Irish prejudice**. Despite this hostility, **Ireland's enduring cultural identity** highlights an oppressed people using their own historical and mythological narrative to refuse foreign definition.

Conclusion

Myths need not be true to be transformative. Across centuries of invasion and Reformation, Ireland's claim of kinship with **Spain** endured — because it **provided** what history would not: **a place at the table of Christian civilisation, a dignified origin to counter barbarism, and a genealogical weapon against foreign claims to Irish land**. If Ireland can forge its identity from invented genealogies — then there is hope for every people still struggling to be seen, still writing their own origin stories. **Ireland's past is not a treasure to be guarded, but a torch to be passed.**



Fig. 1. Stone-carved artwork, National Library of Ireland, Dublin. Photograph by author, 12 June 2026.

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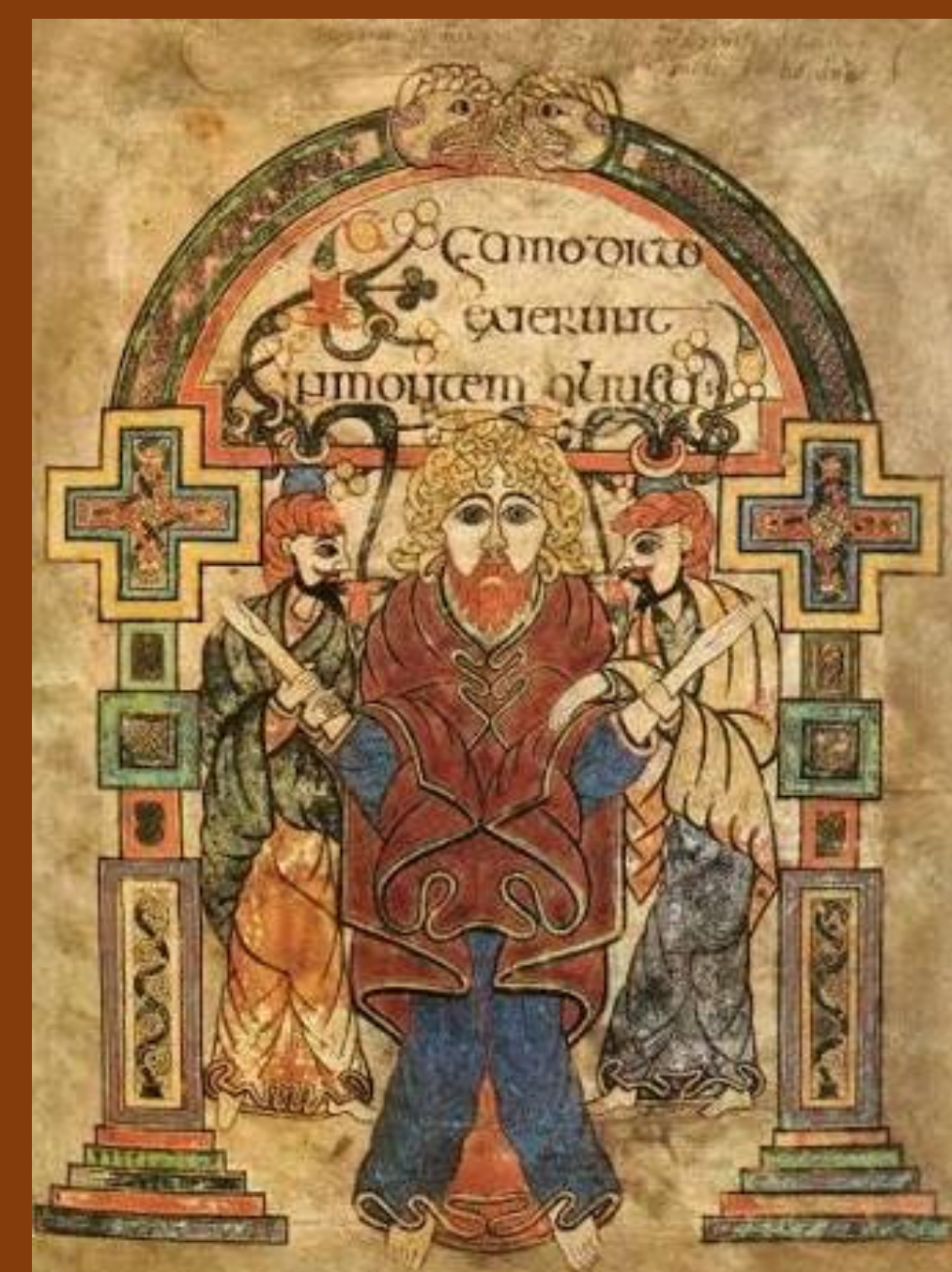


Fig. 2. 'The Arrest of Christ', folio from the Book of Kells (c.800). Image accessed via Historum discussion thread, "Irish illuminated Art from the Early Medieval Period" (General Michael Collins, 30 October 2012)

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