

CONFERENCE REPORT

“CHARMS, CHARMERS AND CHARMING: INNOVATION AND TRADITION”

(MAY 6–8, 2016, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE CORK, IRELAND)

The ninth international gathering of the Committee for Charms, Charmers and Charming took place at University College Cork in Cork city, Ireland from Friday 6th to Sunday 8th May, 2016 and was the largest conference of this ISFNR Committee to date. Under the title “Charms, Charmers and Charming: Innovation and Tradition”, the two day conference brought together scholars from nineteen countries and several academic disciplines, including folklore, medieval studies, Celtic studies, study of religions and literary studies. The conference was jointly hosted by the Departments of Folklore and Ethnology, Early and Medieval Irish, and Study of Religions of the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences at University College Cork.

The theme of the conference was chosen with the aim of enabling participation from a diverse range of disciplines. Charms, charmers and charming are often associated with “traditional” cultural systems. The conference aimed to juxtapose the study of traditions with an exploration of the dynamics of innovation which has come with modernity, pluralism, globalisation, and digital and virtual worlds. An important aspect of innovation includes the evolving ways in which charms and charmers have been viewed in different societies over time and the development of new theoretical and conceptual lenses and methodological approaches through which charms, charmers and charming are approached. The very diverse contributions at the conference proved that this goal was made manifest.

The conference, comprising fifty-four participants, of which forty six were speakers, was organised in parallel sessions, with a whole day dedicated to papers on Irish charms and charming traditions. For the first time the Charms, Charmers and Charming annual conference also featured keynote speakers; Professor Johannes Dillinger of Oxford Brookes University gave a lecture entitled “Charms and the Divining Rod: Tradition and Innovation in Magic and Pseudo-Science, 15th to 21st Centuries” (featured in this volume) and John Carey, Professor of Early and Medieval Irish at University College Cork delivered the keynote for the Irish charms section, “Charms in Medieval Irish Tales: Tradition, Adaptation, Invention”.



St Declan's Holy Well, Ardmore. Photographer Ciarán Ó Gealbháin.

Continuing the tradition of including a dedicated panel for specific charm types, this year there was a panel on the *Flum Jordan* charm that included papers on Irish, Latvia and Finnish variants. Noteworthy amongst the sessions that spoke directly to the conference theme was the panel “Tradition and Innovation in Charm Scholarship”. The four papers presented in this panel explored historical and contemporary approaches to charms both in national contexts (Finland/Karelia and Croatia) as well as international endeavours. The papers from Jacqueline Borsje as well as Emese Ilyefalvi (featured in this volume) address questions of the future of comparative cross-cultural research in the light of advances in digital humanities.

The second day of the conference included most of the Irish contributions with eleven papers covering medieval manuscript traditions up to contemporary charming practices, with the two days of the conference representing one of the largest ever gatherings of Irish charm specialists, including John Carey, Barbara Hillers, Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, Ilona Tuomi, Jacqueline Borsje, Marie-Luise Theuerkauf, Maebhe Durston, Joseph J. Flahive, Cathinka Dahl Hambro, Ksenia Kudenko, Shane Lehane, Denis McArdle, Tatyana Mikhailova, Bairbre Ní Floinn, Deirdre Nuttall, Stiofán Ó Cadhla, Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, David Stifter, and Nicholas Wolf.

Papers from these special panels will be published in a book titled *Charms, Charmers and Charming in Ireland: Tradition and Innovation* edited by John Carey, Barbara Hillers, Ilona Tuomi and Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, to be published by the University of Wales Press with a projected publication date of 2018. This will mark the first dedicated volume dealing specifically with Irish material related to charms and charming.

The two days of academic papers and lectures was followed by an excursion to the medieval coastal settlement of Ardmore in county Waterford which is famous for its built heritage, holy well and associated “pattern day” or patron saint’s day pilgrimage, and rich folkloric tradition. Thirty-three conference participants joined us on the day-trip and there was a lot of interest in Ardmore as a site of folk religiosity and local healing practices. The group was brought on an educational tour with local tour guide Liam Suipéal to sites of interest, including St Declan’s Stone, the round tower and the old church. Participants from landlocked countries were especially happy to visit the seaside and hear stories about the significance of the locality and, due to the nature of the research of the group, they were happy to experience local landscapes, customs and cultural traditions.



St Declan’s Stone, Ardmore. Photographer Ciarán Ó Gealbháin.

On the first night of the conference, delegates were invited to Cork City Hall where they were addressed and welcomed to the city by the Deputy Lord Mayor Joe Kavanagh. The conference was generously supported by University College Cork's College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences, the School of Irish Learning, Cork City Council's Lord Mayor's Office, and Fáilte Ireland National Tourism Development Authority's Conference Ambassador Programme, and Cork Convention Bureau. As part of the conference pack, each conference participant was given a coloured linen conference bag, an ogham stone design bookmark, and a conference postcard. Dr Jenny Butler, a member of Fáilte Ireland's Conference Ambassador Club, was honoured for her role in co-organising this conference, and for bringing an estimated €81,000 in tourism and business revenue to the region, by being nominated for an award at the Cork Convention Bureau's Third Annual Cork Conference Ambassadors' Awards held at the Cork International Hotel on 19th December 2016. Overall, this was a highly successful conference and we are delighted to present the proceedings here of our colleagues' most valuable work.

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