 CHAPTER 3

DRESSING THE PART:
DEPICTIONS OF NOBLE COSTUME
IN IRISH HIGH CROSSES

Maggie McEnchroe Williams

You Are What You Wear

In the tale of King Niall of the Nine Hostages, progenitor of the powerful Úi Néill dynasty, leadership is bestowed upon the young Niall by a beautiful, finely dressed lady:

Like the end of snow in trenches was every bit of her from head to sole. Plump and queenly fore-arms she had: fingers long and lengthy: calves straight and beautifully coloured. Two blunt shoes of white bronze between her little, soft-white feet and the ground. A costly full-purple mantle she wore, with a brooch of bright silver in the clothing of the mantle. Shining pearly teeth she had, an eye large and queenly, and lips red as rowanberries... "Who art thou?" says the boy. "I am the Sovranty," she answered.¹

This personification of leadership is not only presented as a beautiful creature, but also as a wealthy noblewoman who is exquisitely dressed. Her costume includes elaborately woven textiles and a precious brooch that effectively prove her privileged social standing, wealth, and political prominence. Although she initially appears to Niall as a hideous hag, once he lies with her, she is transformed into the stunning image of kingship described above. Her metamorphosis shows that she is a powerful shape-shifter, while her chosen identity as a comely lady in a fine purple mantle confirms that she has earthly powers as well. In fact, her physical attractiveness and expensive garments serve as immediate signals of her

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social and financial status, and those same visual attributes legitimate her ability to dole out power. This mystical figure of “Sovranity” displays both the physical perfection and the expensive attire that were the hallmarks of early Irish kings, queens, and warriors.

The precise depiction of certain types of attire on the sculptures known as high crosses served to construct and perpetuate a particular notion of authoritative costume in medieval Ireland. The crosses are enormous artifacts—some of which are nearly 20 feet high—and they are characterized by a ring encircling the intersection of their shafts and arms. Their surfaces are adorned with relief sculptures including elaborately carved geometric designs as well as sophisticated figural compositions. I have chosen several relief carvings that appear on three of the crosses—at Clonmacnois, county Offaly; Monasterboice, County Louth; and Kells, County Meath. In each relief, male figures appear wearing a specific style of dress that consists of an amalgam of ancient and medieval fashions. Their clothing serves to define their identities as Irish kings and noblemen, establishing a firm visual code for upper-class male Irish costume.

This notion of selecting a certain style of dress and fixing it in a particular state in order to serve as a definitive sign of a culture’s chosen identity is not unique. For example, the Scottish kilt serves an analogous function. The modern kilt is a familiar indicator of a particular heritage, and it is generally thought to have derived from an ancient fashion. However, as Malcolm Chapman has demonstrated, the kilt was only adopted as a “traditional” style of dress in the late eighteenth century. Chapman concludes that the reconstruction of this antiquated costume from a variety of sources had to do with a contemporary eighteenth-century political need for self-definition, and that it became most effective in that capacity within the tourist industry. As Chapman shows, Scottish Highland dress was devised in order to define a cultural and political identity that contrasted native Scotsmen with non-Scottish outsiders; it is a costume that was actively and intentionally created to embody a particular cultural “tradition.”

Similarly, the carvings of noblemen and kings on the Irish high crosses portray a specific, codified language of dress that signifies the individuals’ cultural, political, and class identities. In fact, as I will demonstrate, the carvings depict a rigidly defined costume that is used to signal a particular class of Irish man. Moreover, the sculptures depict garments that fit descriptions in texts whose dates span thousands of years, suggesting that the attire is not representative of a fleeting trend or a contemporary fashion. The connection between style of dress and an Irish noble identity was permanently and publicly advocated on the crosses.