



# CONSTITUTIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

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## ARTICLES

- James M. Buchanan and Dwight R. Lee     Cartels, Coalitions and Constitutional Politics
- James A. Dorn     Madison's Constitutional Political Economy: Principles for a Liberal Order
- Daniel J. Elazar     The Multi-Faceted Covenant: The Biblical Approach to the Problem of Organizations, Constitutions and Liberty as Reflected in the Thought of Johannes Althusius
- Johannes Althusius     An Early Contractarian Constitutionalist (Excerpts from his *Politica Methodice Digesta*)
- Bruce Yandle     Organic Constitutions and Common Law

## REVIEWS

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Richard E. Wagner

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# 4

## A Wandering Image of the Sirens

Brendan McElroy, John Considine  
and James Elkins

The picture on the cover of this journal is Odysseus, tied to the mast of his ship, listening to the song of the Sirens: a familiar image, but an unexpected icon for this journal. The familiar story comes from the *Odyssey*:



First you'll approach the Sirens, who charm all  
Men who come near them. He who witlessly  
Draws near and listens to the Sirens' voice  
His wife and infant children never shall  
Stand joyful by, when he comes home. Instead  
The Sirens with their shrill song shall him charm.  
They sit in pastures. Yet around them lies  
A heap of rotting men, mere skin and bone.  
Drive past this place, but first knead honeyed wax  
And stop your comrades' ears, lest any hear.  
But if you wish yourself to hear their song,  
Have your men tie you up both hand and foot  
Upon the swift ship's mast-box, standing up,  
With cables lashed around, so that you may  
Delight in listening to the Sirens' song.  
But if you beg your comrades and demand  
Release, they are to bind you closer still.



— Homer, *Odyssey* 12.39–54: *The Sirens*, newly translated by Keith Sidwell

### *The sirens in economic theory*

Two economists at the University College Cork, Brendan McElroy and John Considine, were interested in the fact that this journal has taken the picture of Odysseus and the Sirens as an emblem of what is called in economics the *time inconsistency problem*. This arises when it is known that the incentives facing



individuals will change due to the passage of time, making it unlikely that they will carry out plans that benefit all participants. The journal of *Constitutional Political Economy* uses the image of the Sirens to illustrate the use of binding rules to overcome the time inconsistency problem. Here is how the editors of the journal explain it in the journal's inaugural issue:

[*Constitutional Political Economy's*] logo is a representation of the familiar Homeric account of how Ulysses heard the Sirens' singing, and survived. By exploiting elements of his natural and social environment, Ulysses was able to subvert certain inclinations of his future self, inclinations that he knew would be destructive of his overall interests but which would nevertheless prove irresistible when they arose. Ulysses imagined the alternative possible futures; he isolated the best for himself; but he required the technology of mast and rope to secure the best possible future. He established for himself a private constitution, a set of more or less binding rules that constrain his future choices (Brennan and Kliemt, 1990, 125).

#### *The time inconsistency problem in more detail*

The less than perfect enforcement of contract in some third world countries, for example, results in the majority of markets in these countries being *spot markets*, where both sides of a transaction fulfil their obligations on the spot. Similarly, a government may seek to balance the public sector budget over the business cycle, running a deficit to stimulate the economy during recessions and keeping a surplus during boom times. However, the temptation to spend the surplus or cut taxes during boom times may prove too great, leading to a fiscal policy that has a destabilizing effect on the business cycle, with excessive booms and deeper recessions.

The inability of individuals to commit to a course of action means that many potentially beneficial economic exchanges are not consummated. To avoid such a problem there is a need to provide a commitment mechanism such as enforceable rules and laws.

The time inconsistency problem arises in many areas of Economics including investment decisions in developing countries and budgetary policy. Many entrepreneurs do not undertake potentially profitable investments in developing countries because the less than perfect enforcement of contract law means that they cannot get a credible commitment from other entrepreneurs in these countries. Would you produce and deliver goods if you knew that if payment is not received, the contract may be unenforceable?

Budgetary policy provides another example of the benefit of rules. A government working in the public's interest would attempt to balance the public sector budget over the business cycle, running a deficit to stimulate the economy during recessions and keeping a surplus during boom times to balance things up. However, the temptation to spend the surplus or cut taxes during boom times may





prove too great, leading to budgetary policy having a destabilizing effect on the business cycle, with excessive booms and deeper recessions. To prevent governments from succumbing to this temptation, some economists believe that governments should be bound by the constitution to balance their budget. Indeed, the E.U.'s Growth and Stability Pact is a variant of such a rule.

#### *The sirens in the history of art*

So: the image seems appropriate for *Constitutional Political Economy*, but there are other dimensions to the image that have — apparently — little to do with economics.

In the history of art, the image of the Sirens has been used for many purposes. They have represented licentiousness and “animal appetites.” They have been taken as emblems of the *femme fatale*, and they were popular in turn-of-the-century decadent art. In the late nineteenth century, they represented Oriental culture (even though they were Greek).

#### *The sirens in philosophy*

And there is still more to the story of the Sirens: it has also been used in Anglo-American philosophy, as an emblem of the problem of *akrasia*, weakness of will: a philosophic problem wholly unrelated to the time inconsistency problem or to the moralizing uses of the past. In this way the history of images continues on its uneven way.

#### *What's strange about this*

In the history of art, images are usually thought of as having continuous histories: a picture like this might be used to make an ethical point, then a moral one, then a sexual one — all the meanings flow into one another, growing organically as cultures and communities change. The study of such meanings is part of iconography.

But in recent art history, scholars have been paying more attention to images that don't behave so well: their meanings jump and shift unpredictably. Historians such as Georges Didi-Huberman have pointed out how images can resurface at unexpected times and places, and with unpredictable functions. The result is a kind of psychoanalysis of culture rather than a historiography. Images have lives that go well beyond their intended uses, and beyond the disciplines that may want to own them. (In the United States, Ajax, a great hero of the *Iliad*, lives on as a laundry detergent.) Even an image from the journal *Constitutional Political Economy* can make its way into a history of images that is open to wider models of influence. The time inconsistency problem is just one episode in the



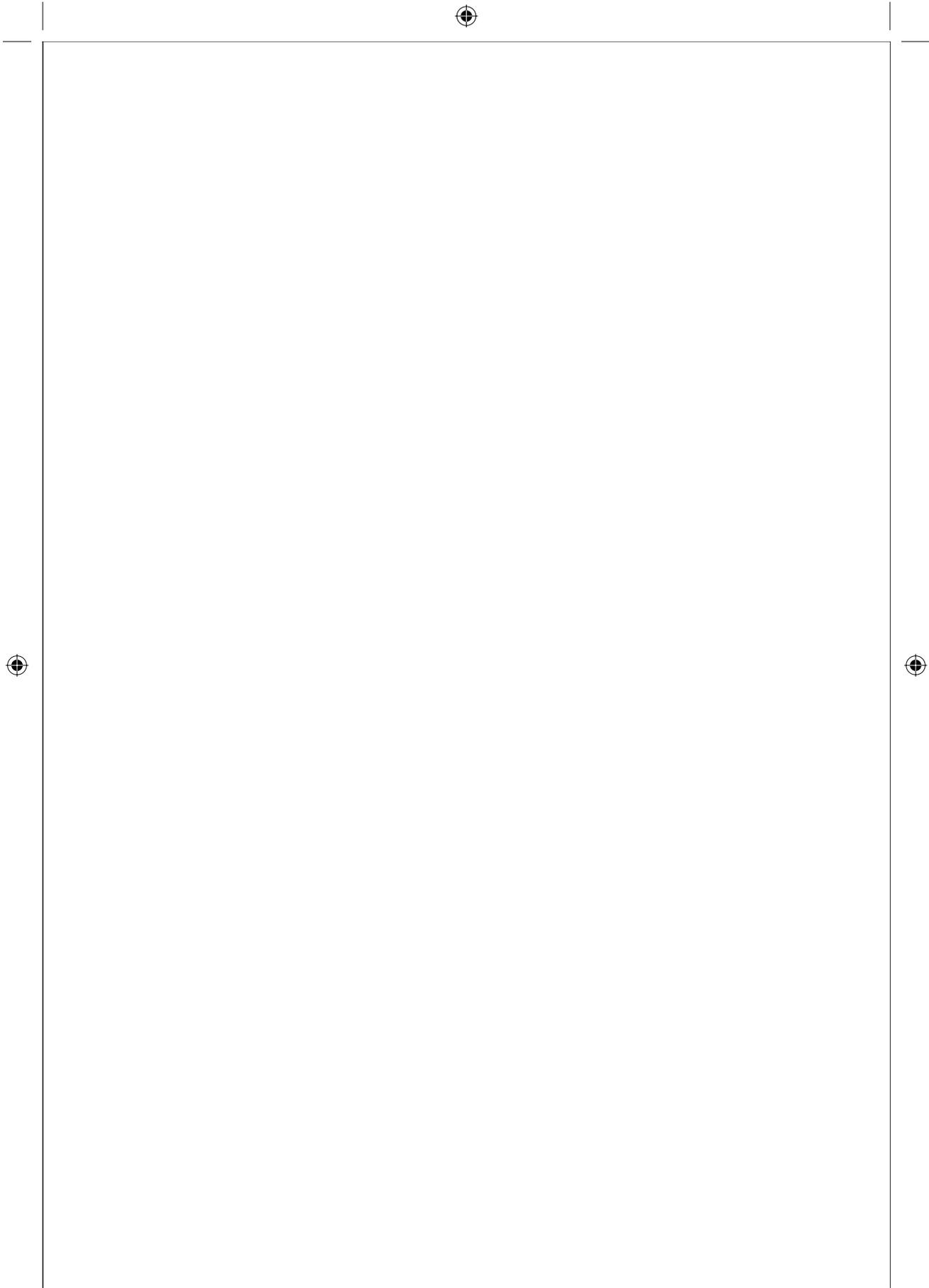


history of images of the Sirenes, and the methodology that might link it to its other appearances in art and in philosophy has get to be invented.

*For further reading*

G. Brennan and H. Kliemt, "Logo Logic," *Constitutional Political Economy* 1 no. 1 (1990): 125-27; J. Buchanan and G. Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1962); G. Brennan and J. Buchanan, *The Power to Tax* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Press, 2000); Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953); and Georges Didi-Huberman, *l'Image survivante, Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Minuit, 2002). The "logo" was also noticed by Hartmut Kliemt of the University of Duisburg-Essen, in an essay called "The Rationality of Rational Fools: The Role of Commitments, Persons and Agents in Rational Choice Modeling" (available on the university's website, accessed August 2006).









## 5

# Color Terms in Medieval Ireland

Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh and John Carey

Some languages have hundreds of words for colors; others have just a few. According to one linguist, the normal number of “basic” color terms in any language is eleven: beyond that the color terms are dependent on particular references (“peach,” “lavender,” “Payne’s gray”).

There are three variables in color names: their forms in different languages (“red,” “Rot,” “rouge”); what they denote (reflectances, spectra); and the concepts that supposedly order them (“primaries,” “color wheels”). According to some theories, color names evolve principally when there is a need: people coin them and adapt them in response to their environment. Another theory is that the evolution of color terms is governed as much by linguistic rules as it is by perceptual constraints.

In our field of medieval Irish studies, color theory remains largely unexplored, and many intriguing questions remain open. For instance, the Irish (and Welsh) adjective *glas* can refer to the colors which we call “blue,” “green” and “grey”; how were these colors perceived by people who made no verbal distinction between them? According to the color theorists Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, languages which do not make this distinction stand at a relatively early point in the development of a color vocabulary: but how do we square this with the passionate love of color which is so obvious in medieval Irish art and literature?

### *The Book of Ballymote and Ogam script*

The manuscript illustrated here is in the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin. It was written around 1400 in the town of Ballymote, in County Sligo in northwest Ireland, under the patronage of a family named MacDonagh, by various hands. Much of the content of the *Book of Ballymote* consists of Gaelic historical, legendary and genealogical material, as well as translations of classical works, but it also includes a unique grammatical treatise entitled *Auraicept na n-Éces* or “The Scholars’ Primer.” *Auraicept na n-Éces* is the first attempt at a systematic analy-





sis of the structure and grammar of the Irish language and is one of the earliest European vernacular grammars in any language. The author was interested in many aspects of the Irish language, including the Ogam alphabet.

Ogam (pronounced AWG-am or OH-am; spelled Ogham or Ogam) is a script whose letters take the form of lines, like hatchmarks. The earliest Ogam takes the form of notches carved in standing stones; it is known as Orthodox Ogam. This early alphabet used a series of twenty characters arranged in four groups. The first photo is a standing stone in Ireland, marked with Orthodox Ogam; the inscriptions are usually names.

There is another, later type of Ogam, usually referred to as Scholastic Ogam, which is found in medieval manuscripts. This later form takes Orthodox Ogam as a starting point and develops many variations of the alphabet.

The author of *Auraicept na n-Éces* was particularly interested in the classification system of Orthodox Ogam: the different sets of names for the Ogam letters, which are arranged in four groups of five characters. These four groups in the Ogam alphabet are identified by the first letter of each group: B, H, M, A. In *Auraicept na n-Éces* the author was so taken with this classification system that he tried to group many other things, in no way connected with sound, under the letter headings. This resulted in groups which he labeled with titles such as “King Ogam,” “Boy Ogam,” “Water Ogam,” “Cow Ogam,” and “Sow Ogam.” The page illustrated here has a number of such schemes. One paragraph in particular concerns visual metaphors for Ogam letters (in the red rectangle).

### “Color Ogam”

What we are interested in here is “Color Ogam”; it is of particular significance to those researching the history of color classification and terminology. The final illustration here is a detail of the “Color Ogam” passage. Below it is a transcription, in traditional Irish font, followed by the same in a modern font, and finally a translation. The groups are groups of letters in the Ogam alphabet, so the author is saying that one letter, like “A” in our alphabet, symbolizes “white,” and another, say “B,” symbolizes “grey,” and so forth.

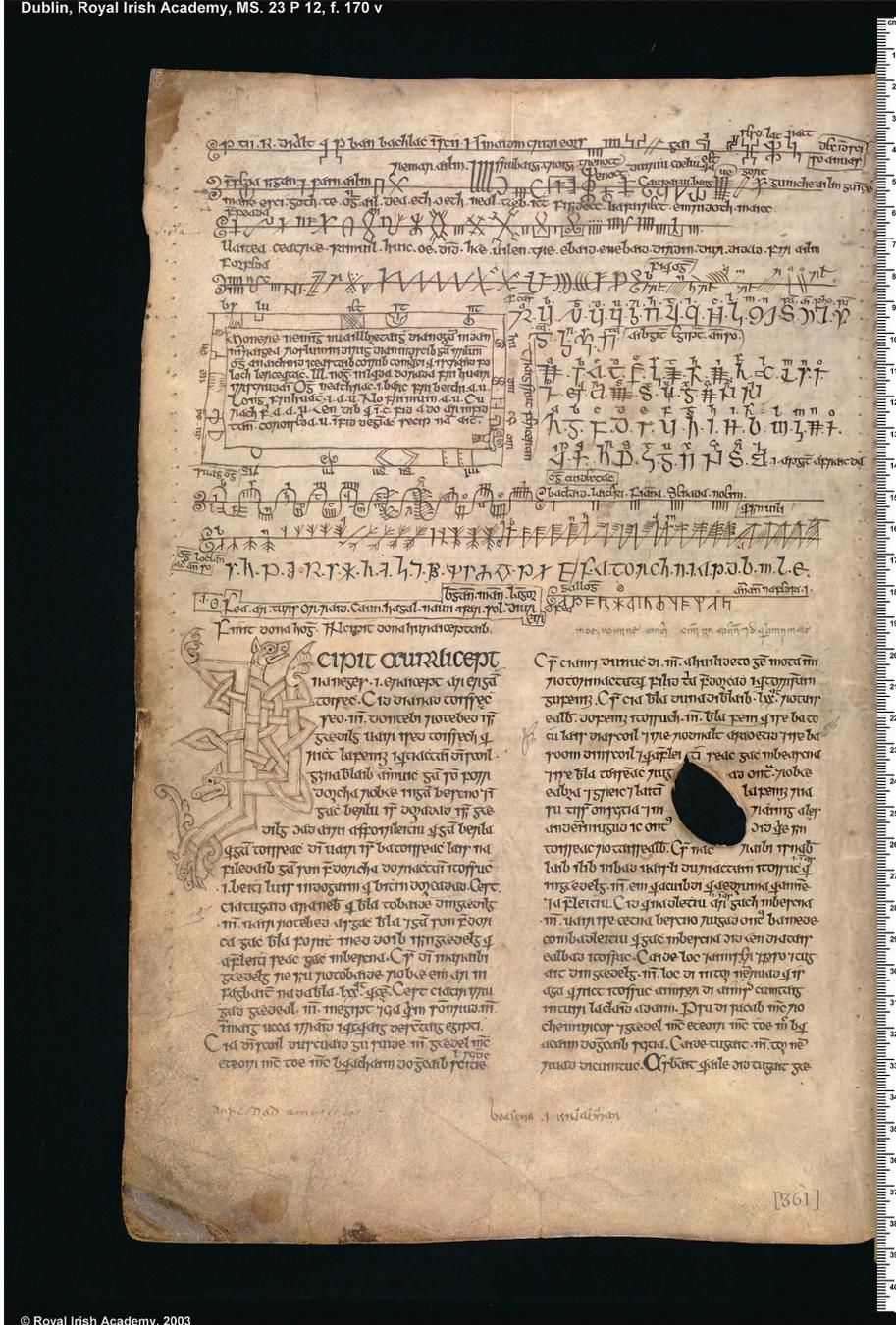
### *The inaccessibility of past color worlds*

What, then, was the color experience of this writer? Are these color-terms meant to convey the range of his perceptions?

Why did he group certain colors together? Some of these color words are familiar in modern Irish, but the history of color terms warns us not to conclude that if the scribe who wrote this were here, he would agree with us on the identification of any of the colors.

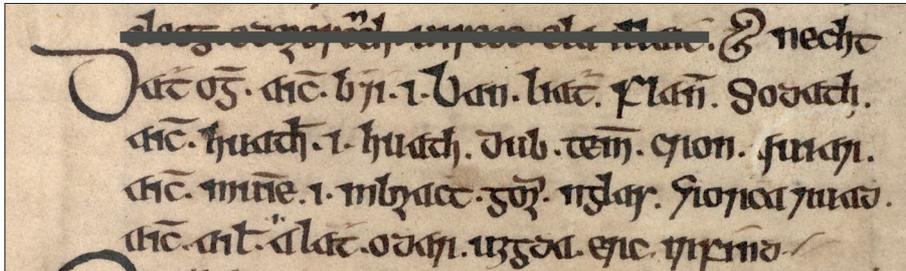


Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS. 23 P 12, f. 170 v



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Dathogam. Aicme bethi .i. ban, liath, flann, sodath, necht.  
 Aicme huatha .i. huath, dub, temen, cron, quiar.  
 Aicme muine .i. mbracht, gorm, nglas, srorca, ruadh.  
 Aicme ailme: alath, odhar, usgda, erc, irfind.

Dathogam. Aicme bethi .i. ban, liath, flann, sodath, necht.  
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 Aicme ailme: alath, odhar, usgda, erc, irfind.

Colour Ogam. Group B, i.e., white, grey, blood-red, fine-coloured, clear.  
 Group H, i.e., earth-coloured, black, dark, brown, jet.  
 Group M, i.e., variegated, deep-blue, light-green/blue, bright, brownish-red.  
 Group A. piebald, dun, resin-coloured, speckled, very white.

Other terms are unfamiliar, and some would not be thought of as a color at all. (What color is “speckled”?) The conceptual problem of re-imagining words into visual phenomena is even more intractable here than it is in, say, contemporary color science, where at least the problems can be quantified. In this case, color is entangled in language, culture and history.

*A hidden motive*

This example shows just how difficult, how tricky, it can be to try to understand other people’s color perceptions. It also shows how odd the history of Ogam script is, from inscribed stones — studied in Chapter 22 — to elaborate and eccentric symbolic schemata. But there is another message here as well: this is the length to which we have to go if we want to enlist medieval Irish as a “visual” discipline. Some fields are just intrinsically non-visual, or resistant to visual meaning, and that recalcitrance has to be taken seriously in any project of analyzing visuality.

*For further reading*

The manuscript can be seen in all its 100MB splendor on [www.isos.dias.ie](http://www.isos.dias.ie) (Royal Irish Academy: MS 23 P 12, ff. 168v, 169r, 169v). Information on Orthodox Ogam: Damian McManus, *The Ogam Stones at University College Cork* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2004); Francesco Benozzo, *Landscape Perception in Early Celtic Literatures* (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003); James Elkins, *The Domain of Images* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1999). For Scholarly Ogham see: Heidi Lazar-Meyn, "Color Terms in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*", in *Ulidia*, edited by J.P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (Belfast: December Publications, 1994), 201-205; George Calder, *Auraicept na n-Éces: The Scholars' Primer* (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1917). General background on medieval Irish color perception: John Carey, "Cosmology in *Saltair na Rann*", *Celtica* 17 (1985), pp. 33-52; Clare Stancliffe, "Red, white and blue martyrdom" in *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe*, edited by Dorothy Whitelock et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Good introductory sources for color philosophy and science: *Color: Art and Science*, edited by Trevor Lamb and Janine Bourriau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); John Gage, *Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993); Hazel Rossotti, *Color: Why the World Isn't Grey* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); Berlin Kay, *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

