

Pangur Bán

Pangur Bán is said to be the most famous poem in Old Irish, written about the 9th century at or around Reichenau Abbey. Reichenau Island is in Lake Constance in southern Germany. The Benedictine Abbey of Reichenau was founded in 724 by the itinerant Saint Pirmin, who is said to have fled Spain ahead of the Moorish invaders. The poem was written by an Irish monk about his cat, *Pangur Bán*. In 8 verses of four lines, the author compares the activities of his cat to his own scholarly activities; Pangur hunts for mice, while the monk hunts for words and knowledge.

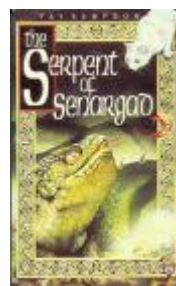
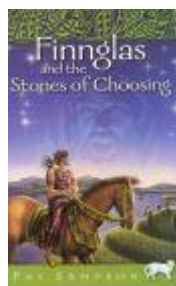
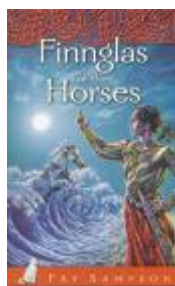
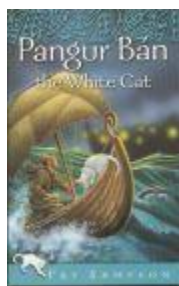


The poem is preserved in the Reichenau Primer, pictured above open to the page with the poem (lower left) and is now kept in St. Paul's Abbey in the Lavanttal. The book appears to have been a practice workbook in which the anonymous monk wrote down Latin hymns, grammatical texts, Greek language declination tables, astronomical tables, as well as Old Irish poems among them Pagur Bán.

It is written in insular script similar to that in more famous works like the Book of Kells. The style of the poem is said to be similar to the poetry of Sedulius Scottus. Scotus was, during the reign of the Emperor Lothair (840-855), one of a colony of Irish teachers at Liège.

A critical edition of the poem was published in 1903 by Whitley Stokes and John Strachan in the second volume of the *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*. The most famous of the many English translations is that by Robin Flower (below). In W. H. Auden's translation, the poem was set to music (for voice and piano) by Samuel Barber as the eighth of his ten *Hermit Songs* (1952-3).

Fay Sampson wrote a series of children's books based on the poem. They follow the adventures of Pangur Bán, his friend, Niall the monk, and Finnglas, a Welsh princess.



In the 2009 animated movie *The Secret of Kells*, which is heavily inspired by Irish mythology, one of the supporting characters is a white cat named Pangur Bán who arrives in the company of a monk. It was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature. A verse of the poem is read out during the credit roll.



Old Irish Text

Messe [ocus] Pangur bán,
cechtar nathar fria saindán;
bíth a menma-sam fri seilgg,
mu menma céin im saincheird

Caraime-se fós, ferr cach clú,
oc mu lebrán léir ingnu;
ní foirmtech frimm Pangur bán,
caraid cesin a macdán.

Ó ru-biam scél cén scis
innar tegdias ar n-oéndis,
táithiunn dichríchide clius
ní fris 'tarddam ar n-áthius.

Gnáth-huaraib ar greassaib gal
glenaid luch ina lín-sam;
os me, du-fuit im lín chéin
dliged ndoraid cu n-dronchéill.

Fúachaid-sem fri freaga fál

Translated by Robin Flower

I and Pangur Ban my cat,
'Tis a like task we are at:
Hunting mice is his delight,
Hunting words I sit all night.

Better far than praise of men
'Tis to sit with book and pen;
Pangur bears me no ill-will,
He too plies his simple skill.

'Tis a merry task to see
At our tasks how glad are we,
When at home we sit and find
Entertainment to our mind.

Oftentimes a mouse will stray
In the hero Pangur's way;
Oftentimes my keen thought set
Takes a meaning in its net.

'Gainst the wall he sets his eye

a rosc a nglése comlán;
fúachimm chéin fri fégi fis
mu rosc réil, cesu imdis.

Fáelid-sem cu n-déne dul,
hi nglen luch ina géchrub;
hi-tucu cheist n-doraid n-dil,
os mé chene am fáelid.

Cia beimini amin nach ré
ní derban cách a chéle;
mait le cehtar nár a dán
subaigthiud a óenurán.

Hé fesin as choimsid dáu
in muid du-n-gní cach óenláu;
do thabairt doraid du glé
for mumud céin am messe.

Full and fierce and sharp and sly;
'Gainst the wall of knowledge I
All my little wisdom try.

When a mouse darts from its den,
O how glad is Pangur then!
O what gladness do I prove
When I solve the doubts I love!

So in peace our task we ply,
Pangur Ban, my cat, and I;
In our arts we find our bliss,
I have mine and he has his.

Practice every day has made
Pangur perfect in his trade;
I get wisdom day and night
Turning darkness into light.