

CHAPTER VIII

Beautiful Book Making

THE most convincing evidence for the high level of artistry as well as culture which the Irish reached long before the end of the first millennium of the Christian era is to be found in the extremely beautiful books that were their handiwork. These we know not from tradition but from actual inspection. In spite of their highly destructible nature a goodly number of these have by singular good fortune been preserved for us for considerably more than a thousand years. We owe their conservation for all this time to more than good fortune however. It is evident that Irish devotion to the cult of beautiful things succeeded in preventing the vicissitudes of time and foreign invasion to say nothing of domestic wars and local disturbances of all kinds from bringing about the almost inevitable destruction of such eminently perishable objects.

To say that the most beautiful book in all the world was made during the eighth century or perhaps a little earlier in Ireland would be to arouse at once in most people the very definite reaction that any such superlative expression as that must surely represent an arrant exaggeration if not a positive misstatement. Bookmaking has developed so wonderfully in the modern times, while at the date men-