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Linking the past to the present through research of early Irish texts

by Carrie Bermingham

HEAD of the Department of Early Irish at Maynooth University, David Stifter, has been awarded €1.8 million in funding by the European Research Council (ERC).

Speaking to Liffey Champion in Maynooth University on Monday (16th March), Professor Stifter explained that there is a huge amount of texts from the early Irish period, roughly between the seventh and 10th centuries.

He will lead a team of five researchers for the project called 'Chronologicon Hibernicum - A Probabilistic Chronological Framework for Dating Early Irish Language Developments and Literature.'

Originally from Austria, he studied in Maynooth University in 1995/1996, and has been professor of Old Irish in the University since 2011. He is also author of *Sengoidele* which means Old Irish for Beginners; used internationally in universities.

"Most of these texts are synonymous and we don't know where they came from," said Professor Stifter.

"Obviously it would be great to have a better idea of set chronology. If you have a set chronology you can say much more about the cultural environment there at the time.

"The research we are doing, we will take those texts from a period that have a date, and we want to analyse them very closely. It will be very detailed, to look at the language variation within those texts," said Professor Stifter.

"Language is always changing so we have a rough idea of what it would look like in early text, but when you zoom into the exact details you see that there is a lot going on there."

They will look at how

that will give us a better understanding of the history of Ireland and intellectuality in Ireland.

"It is the case that early medieval Ireland was a beacon of learning and scholarship in Europe at that time, when not a lot was going on elsewhere in Europe.

"Irish monasteries had a high standard of learning, so it will get a better understanding of what is going on. It is of historical interest.

"It is important to give people a better insight, that is the bottom line really."

The texts produced in the relevant period are found mainly through manuscripts, housed in places such as Trinity College.

"A lot of text was produced in that period, and they survived mainly in manuscripts," said Professor Stifter.

"Most of them are somewhere in Dublin, and these texts have been printed in books over the last number

years," he said.

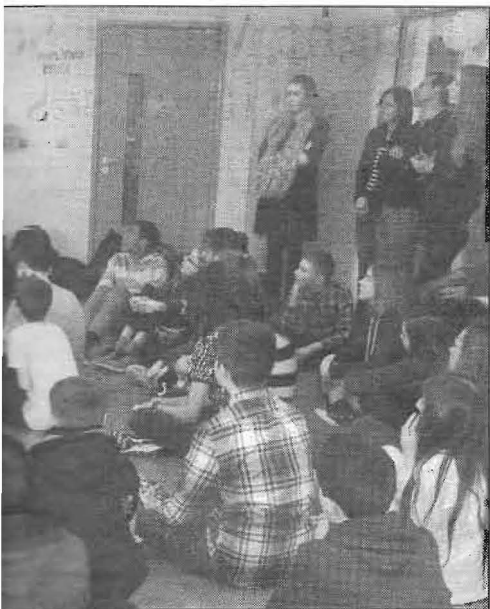
"So five years for a single person, for five persons is very very huge, it is massive. Hopefully it will have a massive impact not only here in Maynooth but on all Irish studies."

The award is seen as the gold standard for research funding in Europe. Professor Stifter is one of an elite group of recipients in the Social Sciences and Humanities Consolidator grant category for 2015.

In total, 516 applicants from 29 different countries competed for the funding and Professor Stifter was one of only two recipients in Ireland.

What drives him is understanding people who read the texts during the period being researched.

"It is working with ancient and medieval languages, reading the texts, understanding people who read these texts and to get to see the world people lived in through their own eyes."



Teacher Michael Griffin and retired Science Teacher John Griffin won the 2011 SciFest competition.



active has been chosen



Executive has been chosen

Current President of Maynooth Students' Union Ben Fitzgibbon said that one of his main goals this year was to increase the level of engagement with the student body in Maynooth University.

"Maynooth is a unique place to study third level education and we are such a close-knit group here that I wanted to ensure as many students as possible got their voices heard in this year's elections," said Ben.

"In early February a leadership campaign was launched to encourage the wider student body to consider running for an SU position resulting in tremendous success.

"36 people put themselves forward to run for an SU position, the largest number of candidates we've ever had."

Professor David Stifter, Head of Department of Early Irish at Maynooth University on Monday (16th March).

"That is these texts are important and we don't know when they came from," said Professor Stifter.

"However it would be possible to get a better idea of the language if you have a good knowledge you can say much more about the cultural environment there at the time."

"The research we are doing, we will take those texts from a period that have a date, and we want to analyse them very closely. It will be very detailed, to look at the language variation within those texts," said Professor Stifter.

"Language is always changing so we have a rough idea of what it would look like in early text, but when you zoom into the exact details you see that there is a lot going on there."

They will look at how changes occurred in the language over the centuries, using mathematicians to create statistical objectives.

From here, they will profile the language variations in the texts; resulting in a 'ChrinHib' database to serve as a reference point for the linguistic dating of Irish texts.

"We can then try to get a profile of how language is developed in detail. At the moment we know this roughly, but we want it much more precise than this," said Professor Stifter.

"The result we get from



Professor David Stifter, Head of Department of Early Irish at Maynooth University on Monday (16th March).

that will give us a better understanding of the history of Ireland and intellectual reality in Ireland.

"It is the case that early medieval Ireland was a beacon of learning and scholarship in Europe at that time, when not a lot was going on elsewhere in Europe."

"Irish monasteries had a high standard of learning, so it will get a better understanding of what is going on. It is of historical interest."

"It is important to give people a better insight, that is the bottom line really."

The texts produced in the relevant period are found mainly through manuscripts, housed in places such as Trinity College.

"A lot of text was produced in that period, and they survived mainly in manuscripts," said Professor Stifter.

"Most of them are somewhere in Dublin, and these texts have been printed in books over the last number of years, and we will be using these texts."

"Basically we can roughly say that these texts are old Irish, but normally people are not able to be more precise than that and we want to be more precise."

He explained that such funding is usually given to departments such as physics and engineering, meaning this award is particularly prestigious for the university.

"The timeline for the project is five years. That is quite a good amount of time. Normally if you apply for funding you get three

years," he said.

"So five years for a single person, for five persons is very very huge, it is massive. Hopefully it will have a massive impact not only here in Maynooth but on all Irish studies."

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"It is working with ancient and medieval languages, reading the texts, understanding people who read these texts and to get to see the world people lived in through their own eyes," said Professor Stifter.

"I want a better chronology of language development in early Ireland, of the literature of early medieval Ireland, but also making progress in the methodology of how we approach these languages."

"It is a great opportunity for me and a great opportunity for the university. I really got a lot of support from the university. This is really a big big thing, it is huge."

"It would not be possible without the support from the university but also from the ERC."

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