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LEGAL CLAWS

Codifying cats in medieval Celtic laws.

Words by Jonathan Feakins.

Sometime in the ninth century, an anonymous Irish monk doodled a charming ode to his four-legged cellmate:

Messe ocus Pangur Bán
Cechtár nathar fria saindan

Pangur Bán and I at work
Adepts, equals, cat and clerk

In eight verses, furry confidant and expert mouser Pangur Bán was immortalized.

More than once, the scribes of the medieval Celtic world gave their mouse-hungry companions some serious thought. Multiple tracts of early Celtic law endeavored to delineate the value of these fabulous creatures. An eighth-century Irish legal guide, the *Senchas Már*, included an entire *Catslechta* (“Cat Sections”), which judged feline worth by two primary metrics: their mew, and the “virtue of its paw.”

It identified and defined specific cats, including the *breone* (“This is a cat, and she has purring and protecting (or an inarticulate cry), and three cows are paid for it if it has both.”), the *baircne* (“The name of a cat which is on a pillow beside women always.”), and the unforgettable *rincne* (“A children’s cat, for the reason that it torments the small children, or the children torment it.”).

Tenth-century Welsh king Hywel Dda (“Howel the Good”), meanwhile, stipulated that not only should cats be judged by their mousing ability but by whether or not they went “cat-erwauling every new moon.” If a cat came, tragically, to harm, Hywel insisted that its human should be compensated with a pile of wheat as tall as the cat was long.

None of which answers the question: what is a Pangur Bán? Bán translates rather directly as “white,” but pangur? Pangur may refer to “fulling,” a step in ancient clothmaking where wool was cleaned, often by hand (or foot).

You might be forgiven, therefore, for imagining that this must have been one cat that made excellent biscuits. 🐾

During a virtual court proceeding in Texas in 2021, attorney Rod Ponton accidentally forgot to turn off a Zoom filter that gave him the face of a sad kitten. “I’m not a cat,” he said.

In French Lick Springs, Indiana, a municipal decree was passed in 1939 requiring all local black cats to wear bells on Friday the 13th so that residents could avoid them.