

The Life of St. Patrick¹

(ca. 390 – ca. 460)

The Myth of St. Patrick

The conventional picture of St. Patrick presents him as a modern bishop with miter and pastoral staff, banishing snakes from Ireland, teaching the Trinity by the example of the shamrock, overcoming the opposition of the high-King of Ireland, holding familiar discourse with a guardian angel, and climbing mountains to commune with God. Not a single one of these details is historical: miters were not invented until at least over 500 years after his death, the snake story emerges 300 years after his death, and the shamrock a millennium later.

The World of St. Patrick

Patrick was raised in pre-Anglo-Saxon Britain, the Romans who ruled most of the island called it Britannia. The Roman Empire circled the Mediterranean and stretched across modern Europe south of the Danube, west of the Rhine. Julius Caesar made punitive raids against Britannia during the Gallic Wars, but it was Emperor Claudius whose legionnaires conquered and Romanized it after 43 AD, though they were not able to subject the northern portions of the island nor Scotland (now Ireland, “Irish” translates a word which is literally “Scots;” it is the word used throughout Europe for the Irish until the ninth century). The empire began to crumble in the third century due to internal decay, rampant inflation, unstable leadership, and military setbacks. Roman fortunes revived in the fourth century beginning with Constantine, but fractured once more by century’s end. This decline was the setting of Patrick’s life.

Little is known of the Christian movement in Britannia. Roman soldiers and settlers likely brought Christianity to the island in the first century. It grew to sufficient strength to send three bishops to the Council of Arles in Gaul in 314 (Eborius, Restitutus, and Adelfius). Pelagius came from Britannia at the end of the same century.

The Life of St. Patrick

Patrick was born in Britain, likely in the western or Southwestern coastal area, of upper class or aristocratic parents. His father (Calpornius) was a deacon in the church, his grandfather a presbyter. He appears in the record as an administrator responsible for raising the taxes for the imperial government in the area. Since Patrick indicated that he was not raised in a religiously devoted home, scholars have suggested that his father’s attachment to the church was to avoid taxation (Constantine’s devotion to Christianity was expressed positively in not taxing the clergy. Consequently there was a rush of wealthy upper-class people into Holy Orders). At the century’s end there was a move to close this loophole in the tax laws by forcing wealthy churchmen to surrender a good portion of their estates. This may indicate that Calpornius (who was a church officer, owned a villa with a large staff, and was an administrator) could be all these things because the hold of the empire was lessening in Britannia at this time.

¹ Dr. John Hannah presented this paper at Westminster Theological Seminary, Dallas, on February 16, 2000.

The date of Patrick's birth is uncertain, but there are several important clues that point to ca. 390. We know that the Roman educational system broke down as the empire began to shrink in 408 under the onslaught of tribal intrusion. In this context Patrick's education was suddenly halted because a raiding party from Scotland (Ireland) captured him. His lament of educational deficiency (writing skills and oratory) suggests that he was not able to complete the *rhetor*² stage of the three-tiered Roman educational system (*ludus* to age twelve comprised reading skills and some mathematics, *ludus grammaticus* to age seventeen included grammar and literature, and *rhetor*). It appears that Patrick was a captive from 405-411 in Ireland and returned there as bishop about 430. We know from his writing that he was a slave, a herder, for six years.

He describes the location of his captivity as on the "Western Sea," which could only mean on the western side of the island on the Atlantic (at this time Ireland was conceived as the end of the earth with the vastness of the uninhabited sea beyond it).

We can be fairly certain that he was captive in the northwestern part of the island because upon his escape he traveled 200 miles to the eastern coast. This would suggest that he found a ship returning to Britannia on the southeast coast. Another clue is that the journey home by sea was twenty-eight miles.

Contrary to tradition, the evidence suggests that Patrick was not trained in Gaul, but in Britannia for the missionary task. His linguistic ability would certainly have been more advanced had he been trained in Gaul. He seems to have spent the time between his return from Ireland until his return in Britannia and was sent by his native church.

The Missionary Work of St. Patrick

I am a slave in Christ to an outlandish nation because of the unspeakable glory of eternal life which is in Jesus Christ our Lord." (*Letter to Coroticus*)

I have thrown myself into the hands of Almighty God who reigns everywhere as the prophet says, "Cast your care upon the Lord and he will nourish you." (*Confession*, 55)

Patrick returned to Ireland in 430 and spent the remainder of his life there. The inhabitants of the island were Celtic; there were no towns. The political organization was that of numerous tribal units with ruling kings. Irish law was not a written one because there was no writing at all in ancient Ireland. There were likely pockets of British settlers on the island because Patrick notes their presence. A missionary named Palladius seems to have preceded him. He described his missionary endeavor in this fashion:

I, Patrick, a sinner, very badly educated, in Ireland, declare myself to be a bishop. I am quite certain that I received from God that which I am. I live among barbarian tribes as an exile and refugee for the love of God; God Himself is the witness that this is true.... I am compelled by zeal for God and the truth of Christ has aroused me out of affection for my

² Rhetoric, or writing and speaking.

neighbors and children for whom I have given up country and kinsfolk and my own life even unto death. (*Letter to Coroticus*).

Because I truly am a debtor to God, who gave me so much help that many people were reborn into God through me and afterwards were confirmed and that clergy were ordained everywhere for them for a people who had recently come to belief whom God chose from the ends of the earth as long ago he had promised through his prophets.... (*Confession*, 38)

The Christianity of St. Patrick

St. Patrick believed that he was called of God to preach the gospel to the last nation to be evangelized in the last days. He believed that Christ would return in judgment after the gospel was preached throughout the entire world. Ireland was thought to be that last nation; the Romans viewed it as the end of the world. Thus, Patrick was motivated by a strong, immediate eschatological hope. Says Hanson (*Saint Patrick* [New York: Seabury Press, 1983], 23), "Patrick was called by God to preach the gospel to the last nation in the last days."

Among all the books of the New Testament, Patrick most frequently quotes the Epistle to the Romans. He appears to have had a practical grasp of justification by faith and the gospel.

For the sun which we see rises every day for our benefit at his behest, but it will never reign nor will its radiance endure, but all who worship it will come to a bad end in wretched punishment as well. But we who believe in and adore the true sun, Christ, who will never die, nor will anyone who has done his will, but he will last for ever just as Christ lasts for ever, Christ reigns with God the Father almighty and with the Holy Spirit before ages and now and for all ages of ages. Amen. (*Confession*, 60)

He appears to have interpreted the Bible from a literal perspective; he did not concern himself with allegorization or far-fetched speculation.

Patrick appears to have had several dreams through which he was given guidance.

And it was there [as a slave in northwestern Ireland] one night I hear a voice saying to me in a dream, "You have been right to fast because you will soon return to your country," and next after time I heard a Message saying to me, "Look, your ship is ready".... (*Confession*, 17)

While in Britain, he had a vision of a book entitled, *The Cry of the Irish*, and a voice called to him: "Holy boy, we are asking you to come and walk among us again," and I was struck to the heart and I was not able to read any further and at that I woke up. God be thanked that after several years the Lord granted to them according to their cry." (*Confession*, 23)

The *Letter to Coroticus* suggests that Patrick's work among the Irish was not appreciated by some in his native country, some derided his authority and belittled his work ("...even though I am despised in some quarters" (1). It appears that a raiding party from Britain, a nominally Christian people, killed some of Patrick's followers ("...the blood of innocent Christians, whom

I have begotten in large numbers for God and have confirmed [baptized] in Christ”) (2). The letter is an excommunication document and an affirmation of his divine authority under God.

I am the object of resentment. What am I to do, Lord? I am greatly despised. Here are your sheep savaged and made a prey, and by the gangsters already mentioned, at the behest of Coroticus with evil intent. One who betrays Christians into the hands of Irish and Picts [‘the painted people’] is far from the love of God. Voracious wolves have swallowed up the flock of the Lord, which was increasing in Ireland nicely as a result of hard work. (*Letter*, 12)

One of his biographers (RPC Hansen) faults him for being too much obsessed with his own sense of inadequacy. (I would see this as a remarkable Pauline quality.)

I was like a stone that lies deep in the mud, and he who is mighty came and in his compassion raised me up and exalted me very high and placed me on the top of the wall.... (*Confession*, 12)

So now I commend my soul to my most trustworthy God on whose behalf I am carrying out a mission, for all my humble status, but because he has no respect for persons he has chosen me for this post that I should be among his lowest servants. (*Confession*, 56)

Christianity flourished in Ireland as semi-monasticism dominated. From Ireland missionaries were sent to Scotland, Britain, and Europe. The most famous monastery throughout the Medieval Period was established on an island between Ireland and Scotland: Iona.

Consequently I must teach from the rule of faith of the Trinity, without fear of danger to make known the gift of God and eternal comfort, to promulgate the name of God everywhere fearlessly and faithfully, so as to leave after my death a legacy to my brothers and my children whom I have baptized in the Lord, so many thousands of people. (*Confession*, 15)

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