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Two Thousand Years of Christianity and Ireland

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more poignant because of the fact that the Temple Mount lay desolate, awaiting the arrival of the third Abrahamic faith, Islam, before it would again regain its former glory as a place of worship.

The age of Constantine was indeed a golden age – of a kind – for the Christian church. The prophecy of Isaiah that the lamb and the wolf would lie down together seemed to have been realised, and no doubt many fourth century Christians who had bitter memories of the imperial persecutions believed that to be the case. Whether or not the reconciliation was in the longer term interest of the Christian religion and its capacity to articulate the prophetic vision of Jesus, is indeed a moot point. Henceforth, the interest of empire and church were supposedly identical. Christian military crusades were undertaken against the new infidel without any thought as to whether these were genuine expressions of the spirit of him who said ‘love your enemy’. The new millennium is surely a suitable moment to reflect on the need to de-imperialise the Christian church in the west as a way of recapturing something of the original prophetic voice of the Galilean.

Suggestions for further reading:

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 -- *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean. A New Reading of the Jesus Story*, London and New York, Continuum, 2004.
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Patrick's conversion of Ireland to Christianity and the establishment of Armagh

Catherine Swift

My remit is to cover the thorny issues involved in the arrival of Christianity within Ireland and the establishment of the church settlement at Armagh. By way of introduction I should say that the following paper represents my personal assessment of the subject; there are a myriad of other possible views and the questions raised are still hotly debated. I use the word hotly advisedly; it was a long-suffering wife who once remarked in the early 70s that Patrician studies were a field in which no stone was left unthrown and many Patrician scholars today reiterate that comment with pride.

Arguments about Patrick's career and the scope of his mission have rumbled around the corridors of Irish academia since the days of Archbishop James Ussher in the seventeenth century. Much of this discourse is now limited to scholarly tomes but the one element which seems to have survived as part of popular folklore is the idea of the two Patricks, put forward by Professor T. F. O'Rahilly in 1954. This argument and indeed, the arguments about Patrick in general revolve, for the most part, around the problem of sources; apart from Patrick's own writings, the *Confessio* and the *Letter to Coroticus*, we have few sources which we can say are definitely fifth century in date. We have relatively plentiful sources, on the other hand, of later or indeed much later date, which purport to deal with fifth-century issues. Many scholars have tried to pick out the 'real' fifth-century facts from this later material while at the same time acknowledging that the bits which aren't real are propaganda for various church establishments.

One of the arguments behind the Two Patricks model, for example, is a reference in the *Annals of Ulster* to the elder Patrick

who is said to have died in 457. If you have an elder, you must have a younger, and hey presto, you have two Patricks. The trouble with all these arguments is that it has involved a lot of cherry-picking – what one scholar sees as real, another sees as propaganda. It seems to me that dispassionate people, looking at the list of entries in the *Annals of Ulster* (including the four different dates for the saint's death), would have very little difficulty in acknowledging that Irish annalists were very interested in Patrick but they don't appear to have known much about him. And unfortunately, what is true for the annals is also true for the lives of St Patrick, which are seventh century or later in date.

Equally, there is little which seems inherently trustworthy about the claims of saints Ailbe of Emly, Déclán of Ardmore, Ibar of Beggary Island and Ciarán of Seirkieran to be missionaries in Ireland before St Patrick. These claims come, almost entirely, from a thirteenth-century collection of saints' lives which appear to have been put together by a Leinsterman. The saints in question were patrons of important southern churches for the most part and churches that disputed the claims of Armagh to primacy during much of the period before the Normans arrived. In other words, as historians we can see good reasons for identifying these claims as propaganda while the arguments for seeing them as 'fifth-century facts' boil down in the end to a matter of faith.

Some may be surprised that I have not included St Brigid in this list of pre-Patrician saints. Our medieval sources are unanimous in stating that Brigid, as the daughter of a druid, was a contemporary of Patrick who lived and worked in an Irish world where Christianity was well-known. She herself is not said to be a missionary although she did bring many to a Christian way of life by her example and through her miracles. The belief that she represents a pre-Christian goddess transformed into an Irish saint is very much the creation of modern scholarship and is heavily dependent on the fact that the element *bri* in her name is found fairly frequently in Roman sources, both in Britain and on the Continent.

While our Irish lives of the saints are largely concerned with figures who were patrons of powerful churches in the pre-Norman period, another characteristic feature is their lack of interest in the conversion process. Saints are described as meeting pagans, performing miracles and as a consequence, their overawed audiences acknowledge the superiority of Christianity. It is only on very rare occasions that conversion is dealt with in a less stereotyped way. One such is the story about Patrick's arrival at Rathcroghan in Connacht, where two of the king of Tara's daughters were being fostered by druids. The two girls met Patrick and his retinue at the well, not knowing, so our author tells us, what people they belonged to, nor what region, nor whether they were men of the *síd* or other-world. They proceeded to ask them who they are and Patrick replied, that they should rather ask about God than about his race. In reply, the older girl made a speech:

Who is God and where is God and whose God is he and where is his dwelling place? Has your God sons and daughters, gold and silver? Is he ever-living, is he beautiful, have many fostered his sons? Are his daughters dear and beautiful in the eyes of the men of the earth? Is he in the sky or in the earth, or in the water, in rivers, in mountains, in valleys? Give us an account of him: how shall he be seen, how is he loved, how is he found, is he found in youth, in old age.

The girl's speech is very much a literary one; the Latin words show an interest in cadences and rhyme but as a seventh-century man's imaginative account of what a pagan might have said, it gives us real insights into the world of pre-Norman Ireland.

All this is, however, straying far from the fifth century. One solution to the problem of the 'real fifth-century facts' is to rely not so much on the documentary record, which, as we have seen, is controversial, but rather on archaeology. My first piece of evidence in this regard is a hoard of silver ingots, of Roman type, found in Balline in Co Limerick. One of these ingots comes from the workshop of a man named ISAS which the influential Roman historian F. J. Haverfield pointed out in 1900 was the

Latin form of the Jewish name Isaac (Collingwood & Wright 1990, 31). Isaac had a problem with his stamp-maker, the man who produced the tool which marked the ingots as his. When creating the stamp, the man produced a stamp in which the first S of Isas is reversed or written backwards. Ingots, bearing Isas' name and with exactly this same mistake have also been found in Kent, one on the legionary fort at Richborough and another on the beach near Reculver. There is nothing to date these ingots but it seems reasonable to assume they date to a period either before or not very long after the Roman withdrawal from Britain, in the early years of the fifth century AD. Here, then, we have a real fifth-century fact: a man with a Jewish name was producing silver ingots which ended up in both Kent and Limerick. The Christian significance of the find is reinforced by the presence, on another of the Balline ingots, of the *chi-rho* monogram, the sign which the early church connected with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine at the Milvian bridge.

A second 'fifth-century fact' concerns Irish ogam stones, pillars of stone, inscribed in a uniquely Irish alphabet with the names of individuals. These have traditionally been viewed by archaeologists as undatable except within very broad limits; we have no excavated example in its original context and there is nothing organic about a piece of stone which allows us to use our modern scientific dating techniques of carbon-fourteen dating or dendrochronology. On linguistic grounds, however, we can say that the name forms go through a variety of changes; just as Latin develops into the modern Romance languages of French, Italian and Spanish, so Irish moves from Primitive to modern Irish. The early stages in this linguistic progression can be seen on the ogam stones and linguists have identified the first recognisable stage, known as pre-apocope stones, as fifth-century in date.

When ogam stones are analysed in this way, it becomes apparent that the majority are of either fifth or sixth century date. More interestingly for our purposes, we begin to see that amongst the stones showing fifth-century styles, we find a num-

ber where the men being commemorated have Latin names: a son of Marianus at Rathglass in Co Carlow and another Marianus in Co Kerry as well as a man called Sagittarius or archer in Co Cork. Of sixth-century type we have a son of Marinus the sailor, another called Vitalinus in Co Kerry and a man named Amatus in Ardmore, Co Waterford. This last bears a name commonly found amongst early Christians but the possibility exists that some of the fifth-century stones also commemorate Christians – the stone of Marianus, from Co Kerry, for example, has an extremely elaborate cross on its front face.

In addition to the fifth-century style ogam stones that show individuals with Latin names, we also have fifth-century style ogam stones which apparently give an Irish version of the HIC IACET burial formula, found commonly on Christian memorials on the Continent and occasionally in Britain. The Irish version uses the word KOI, which is apparently a Primitive Irish word meaning 'Here'. Some of these KOI stones show characteristics of the fifth-century style and their Christian significance is enhanced by the presence of a cross on the front face of the stone.

Interestingly, there are a number of fifth-century ogam stones with crosses and/or inscribed with the KOI formula from the Dingle peninsula. The late Dr Thomas Fanning excavated an early ecclesiastical site from this area at Reask where he found but discounted a fourth-century C14 date for the earliest material on the site; he remarked that there was no reason to assume Christianity had been present in the area as early as the fifth century (Fanning 1981, 113-15, 121). I would argue that the presence of Christian ogam stones of fifth-century date in the immediate vicinity requires us to take that C14 date more seriously.

The second fifth-century fact, therefore, is that we have evidence for fifth-century Irish Christians commemorated on a number of ogam stones from the southern half of the country. Some of these Christians had Latin names and they used an Irish form of a burial formula common in the fifth-century Roman world. We do not know, unfortunately, whether there were Christians in the north of the country at the same time – most ogam stones

tend to be found in the south and all we can say so far is that there is no evidence of early Christian inscriptions on the relatively few stones found north of the Dublin/Galway line.

A third fifth-century fact is based on a stone found in the early Christian cemetery of St Mattias in Trier, on the western German border close to Luxembourg. This is the so-called Scottus stone and it reads: 'Here happily lies Scottus, who lived 65 years. His wife, Dulcis, erected this gravestone out of love. Oh Scottus, peace be with you.' The final prayer is obviously Christian and this is reinforced by the two doves at the bottom of the slab. The stone was dated to the fifth century by analogy with the handwriting on other graveslabs in the vicinity. Some of these slabs also include dating formulae in their inscriptions, which allows us to date the sequence of handwriting styles. The word *Scottus*, plural *Scotti* is, of course well known and there is some debate whether it is limited to Irishmen or whether it can be used to also refer to Scots – it is certainly used by Orosius to refer to inhabitants of the Isle of Man at the beginning of the fifth century AD. As a minimum, therefore, it would appear to refer to speakers of a Gaelic language. Thus, in Trier, we have the gravestone erected to the memory of a fifth-century Christian whose name implies that he was a speaker of Primitive Irish.

Bearing these three fifth-century facts in mind, (1) that silver ingots produced in a Christian milieu could end up both in Co Limerick and in Kent; (2) that fifth-century Christians, some with Latin names, are commemorated on ogam stones from southern Ireland and (3) that a Christian Irish-speaker was buried in a fifth-century graveyard in the Roman city of Trier, one can turn to the documentary sources. Immediately, one notes that just as with the archaeological material, we have two identifiable sources for Irish Christianity, one deriving from Pope Celestine and his emissary, Palladius; the other, the writings of the Romanised Briton, Patrick. As with our three facts, we see evidence of both continental and British influence, both arising out of the broader context of late Roman civilisation. That civilisation varied geographically as well as chronologically

– and in Britain, on Rome's most northerly as well as its most western frontier, the impact of imperial administration was at its lightest. It has often been noted that in the opening words of his *Confessio*, Patrick claims that his father and grandfather were both Christian clerics, that they owned a small villa and that, as he points out in his *Letter to Coroticus*, his father was a decurion, reinforcing the notion that he came from a relatively wealthy family which enjoyed many of the trappings of middle-class Roman culture. What has not, I think, been said before, is that identifying your father and your grandfather in this way is a particularly Celtic custom; Roman name-forms are not normally structured in this three-generational fashion. In other words, Patrick's background may have been influenced by Roman culture but he was also strongly marked by the conventions of the Celtic civilisations around the Irish Sea.

In this context, it is interesting to note Patrick's words about the people he had converted to Christ: they had, he says, the somewhat irritating habit of trying to put jewellery on his altar and they could not understand why he did not want them. This makes perfect sense in the cultural world of Romanised Britain. We have now excavated a number of Roman temples in Britain, some dedicated to gods with both Roman and Celtic names, and one of the features of these temples is the amount of jewellery and coins which have been placed as votive offerings within the shrine.

Patrick, however, says this was a habit not of his British kinsmen but rather of the Irish converts to Christianity whom he met in Ireland. It is not a habit which we can identify in Iron Age Ireland; the only Irish examples of such a custom is the existence of Roman coins buried around the entrance of Newgrange and a single Roman coin from the site of the great henge complex at the Giant's Ring, outside Belfast. Such coins were obviously imports and, indeed, the custom of burying them at these sites appears also to be an imported one. In short, if the Irish men and women whom Patrick encountered were in the habit of throwing jewellery at his altar, they were doing so because they had acquired this way of worship from pagan Roman Britain.

But who were these men and women? Many scholars have emphasised the possibility that he converted slaves, possibly fellow Britons captured by Irish raiders. One might also stress the passage in the *Confessio* in which the saint states that he had converted the sons and daughters of Irish kings together with a blessed Irish woman, born noble. Patrick also writes that he used to travel about with a retinue composed of kings' sons and that he used to give presents to their royal fathers in order to be allowed to conduct his missionary work. When he was captured on one occasion, apparently by some of these royal dynasts, he and his companions had sufficiently powerful friends to persuade his captors to let him free. In other words, Patrick's Irish mission operated within a high-status world of Irish nobility, in keeping with the provincial nobility of his family background in Britain. My suggestion is that we should identify those Irish nobles more specifically, as people who had already been Romanised to the point where they had adopted a number of the social customs of Roman Britain. Just as the earliest evidence for Irish Christianity is clearly derivative of the wider Roman world, so too, I would argue, Christianity in Ireland was most likely to have been accepted by those who already favoured the Roman way of life.

This identification of the social class and political instincts of Patrick's likely converts can also help to explain the original choice of Armagh as a centre of Patrick's cult. It is important to say 'a' centre rather than 'the' centre; the first detailed evidence that we have of Patrick's cult, in the later seventh century AD, does not, in fact, specify that Armagh was anything more than one of a number of churches in Ireland that claimed a special connection with the saint. The process through which the argument first for Patrick's primacy within Ireland and secondly for the settlement of Armagh as the seat of a national archbishopric was a long one; indeed, it was still being argued over in the twelfth century as the Normans arrived and continued to be a matter for debate throughout the history of the medieval colony. The details of that debate is a subject for another lecture and

another occasion; the purpose here is to outline the possible fifth-century reasons why a Christian cult centre, dedicated to Patrick's church, might have been established at Armagh in the first place.

It has often been suggested that Patrick chose Armagh because it was associated with a provincial kingdom of Ulster; the kingdom of Conchobar mac Nessa, his heroic nephew Cú Chulainn and the other so-called Knights of the Red Branch, men whose mythic exploits were renowned in medieval Irish legend. These suggestions were apparently strengthened by the results of the important excavations by Dudley Waterman at Navan fort, some miles outside Armagh city. These excavations, now published by Dr Chris Lynn, have produced a complex of prehistoric monuments including an Iron Age temple – the so-called Forty-Metre structure. The fortunate survival of the stump of the central post in this structure give us a felling date of 95 BC. Thus we have a major ritual centre at almost exactly the same date at which our medieval authors believed Cú Chulainn lived.

The problem with this interpretation is that these legends are all much later in date than the fifth century AD whilst the Forty-Metre structure is not only some distance from the church centre of Armagh itself but is also almost five hundred years too early. Tying the arrival of Patrick to this putative kingdom is akin to the difficulties about Patrician traditions in general; it is using non-fifth-century material to explain fifth-century events.

Instead, the answer may lie in the sculpture which was found in the foundations of the Protestant Cathedral of Armagh, when that was being rebuilt in the 1840s. The context of that sculpture is provided by excavations on Cathedral Hill in the 1960s and later, which showed that the cathedral was located within a massive pre-existing enclosure encircling the hill, and in the surrounding area. Twigs and branches from within the enclosure ditch give us C14 dates, with 95% probability of accuracy, to the period 130-600 AD. This enclosure was therefore in working use on the hill of Armagh in the fifth century.

The sculpture from within the site is varied. Perhaps most famous are the three animals known as the Armagh bears – only two of these unfortunately now survive. In Irish archaeology these are described as Celtic but they are Celtic only in the way that much of provincial Roman sculpture north of the Alps is Celtic; the sculptor has clearly been heavily influenced by the naturalistic styles originating in the Mediterranean. The closest parallels identified for them come from Senlis and Limoges in Roman Gaul. There are also a number of heads, at least some of which appear to belong to Romano-Celtic tradition of isolated stone heads, which we find attested from Provence to Donegal.

In addition, there is a small squat figure, described in 1974 by the Scottish expert, Dr Anne Ross, as being 'more at home in northern Britain than in northern Ireland', with his hair splaying out around his head in the manner of fourth-century Roman depictions of the *Sol Invicta* or the unconquered sun (Ross 1967, 477). She cites a parallel figure at Maryport; there are also similar statues from south-west England. Finally, there is the figure now on show in the Cathedral but originally from the townland of Tanderagee; a photograph of a similar figure, known as the 'Lurgan figure' is on show in the Armagh county museum. There is also a parallel figure from Roman Dijon in Burgundy and I have identified another in Scotland.

Statues of both humans and animals are a feature of Roman temples in both Britain and the Continent; it seems quite clear that the evidence from Cathedral Hill indicates the presence of a temple complex of Roman type. The presence of the *Sol Invicta* figure indicates that such a temple is likely to have been in existence in the fourth and fifth centuries when the cult of the Unconquered Sun was at its height – such a date coincides with the indications of the C14 dates from the surrounding enclosure ditch.

The literary account of the questions posed by the king of Tara's daughters to Patrick include the questions who is God, where is God and, most crucially, whose God is he? In recent years a number of Celtic scholars have been debating the possible pre-Christian significance of a phrase which occurs in a

number of Irish saga texts: *tongu dia tonges mo thiath*, 'I swear by the God by whom my people swear'. We do not know exactly where Patrick or indeed, his Continental counterpart, Palladius operated in Ireland but we have seen that the first evidence for Christianity in Ireland indicates that they included Irishmen who had translated Roman Christian burial formulae into their own vernacular as well as others, who used conventional Roman graveslabs when buried in Roman cities abroad. In Patrick's own writings we see that his mission resulted in converts among the native ruling class and ones who had adopted the cultural habits of Roman Britons worshipping at pagan temples. At Cathedral Hill, we see what is apparently a temple site of Romano-British type on the hill which later became the centre of the great ecclesiastical settlement of Armagh. The answer for the king of Tara's daughter is that Patrick's God was the Christian God, firmly ensconced as the sole religious cult in the fifth-century Roman world. He was the God who had been worshiped over three generations by Patrick's high-status British relatives and as a consequence of the fifth-century missions he became the God of those fifth-century Irish families who had already adopted Roman ways.

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