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Who is Patrick? – Answers from the Saint Patrick's Confessio HyperStack.
Supporting Digital Humanities, Copenhagen 17 - 18 November 2011, Conference Proceedings.
Ed. Bente Maegaard.

Cologne, 2013-02-20

Supporting Digital Humanities

Copenhagen 17 - 18 November 2011

Conference Proceedings

Editor: Bente Maegaard

Papers sorted by first authors

Who is Patrick? – Answers from the Saint Patrick's *Confessio* HyperStack

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Abstract

Not everyone realizes that there are two Latin works, still surviving, that can definitely be attributed to Saint Patrick's own authorship. On 14th September 2011 the Royal Irish Academy published his writings in a freely accessible form on line, both in the original Latin and in a variety of modern languages (including Irish). Designed to be of interest to the general public as well as to academic researchers, the Saint Patrick's *Confessio* Hypertext Stack includes such features as digital images of the medieval manuscripts involved, a specially commissioned historical reconstruction that evocatively describes life in pre-Viking Ireland, articles, audio presentations, and some ten thousand internal and external digital links that make it truly a resource to be explored.

1. Introduction*

The Saint Patrick's *Confessio* Hypertext Stack Project is about Patrick, patron saint of Ireland, who is an integrating figure in that he provides a sense of identity for the whole of Ireland, as well as for its constituent parts, the Republic, the North and abroad. His cultural and spiritual heritage can be claimed by almost any established political or social community on this island. Every year, March 17th is of course celebrated as Saint Patrick's Day.

But who is Patrick? This breaks down into two questions: first, what makes him and his work important? And, second question: what do we, what do scholars know about Patrick? There are two Latin works that can definitely be attributed to Patrick's own authorship. They were almost certainly composed in the fifth century and they are, in fact, the very oldest texts, in any language, written in Ireland that have survived. They survive in eight extant manuscript copies – one of them being in the famous Book of Armagh, produced in the early ninth century and on display in the Library of Trinity College (MS TCD 52). The seven other copies have survived only in manuscripts located outside Ireland, in England[1] and France[2], produced between the tenth and the twelfth century.

The first work attributed to Patrick is a short open letter, *epistola*, directed against a British chieftain, Coroticus, and his armed followers, in which Patrick excoriates and excommunicates them for having slaughtered some and kidnapped and enslaved others of his newly baptized Irish converts to Christianity' (Stancliffe, 2004; cf. Bourke 2009; Kelly, 2011). The second work is a far more informative source as regards Patrick's biography, and is the text we are focusing on here, namely Patrick's *Confessio* – an outstanding and exceptional piece of Latin literature, having been written outside the pale of Roman civilization, between antiquity and the Middle Ages. It is an open letter as well, apparently written to ecclesiastical superiors in Britain in answer to unspecified charges.

What can be deduced from these texts as regards the historical Patrick? First of all: Patrick really existed. We can say this because these writings allow us, in fact, to define the historical Patrick as the author behind these fifth-century texts, and thus as the very first recordable individual that we can identify for certain in Ireland. This means that everything one might state about the historical Patrick – any theory or historical statement – must at least be in line with what can be deduced from either of these works – or, if not, any discrepancy or contradiction must be explained.

Some generally accepted facts in brief are as follows: Patrick was born in Britain, probably in the southwestern region or Wales (*Confessio* 1, cf. 23). When he was nearly sixteen, his family's estate was raided by Irish pirates and he with many others was taken to Ireland as a slave (*ibid.*). There he was set to work as a herdsman (*ibid.* 16) and during that time an inner conversion towards the Christian God took place (*ibid.* 2). He escaped after six years (*ibid.* 17). He became a Christian priest and his belief that he was exceptionally blessed by the grace of God grew constantly until it formed a firm conviction. Encouraged by a vision in a dream – by the so-called 'call of the Irish' (*ibid.* 23) – he returned to Ireland as a missionary. He referred to himself as a bishop (*ibid.* 26; *Epistola* 1) and played a major part in converting the Irish to Christianity (*Confessio* 51).

So much for the historical facts and deeds according to Patrick's own writings. Please note that there's nothing about Patrick banishing snakes from Ireland; nothing about victorious contests with the druids; nothing about overthrowing pagan idols and cursing kings and kingdoms – not even the shamrock is mentioned! But those elements

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* This paper is an adapted and slightly modified version of the 'About' section of the HyperStack online.

[1] MS London, British Library, Cotton Nero E.1. (Worcester, ca. 1000 AD); MSS Salisbury, Cathedral Library 221 & 223 (Salisbury, twelfth cent.; interim MSS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Fell 4 & 3); MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson B 480 (17th cent. transcript of the Book of Armagh).

[2] MS Paris, Bibliothéque nationale de France, lat. 17626 (Saint-Corneille, Compiègne, tenth cent.); MS Rouen, Bibliothèque Municipale 1391 (Jumièges, eleventh cent.); MS Arras, Bibliothèque Municipale 450 (Saint-Vaast, twelfth cent.).

are an important part of the popularly held image of Patrick. The point is that these elements and many others came to be attributed to the figure of Patrick in later times. To put matters briefly, the historical Patrick – a real man located in time and space, whose name one can think of as being spelled with a capital P – is different from the figure of the saint, a legendary construct that grew over the centuries, or 'patrick with a small p': Patrick ≠ patrick

2. HyperStack Objectives

2.1. The Real Patrick

Both the historical and the legendary Patrick are important and interesting, but we believe that our understanding and appreciation of both will be enhanced if we can disentangle them. Accordingly, the St Patrick's *Confessio* Hypertext Stack Project aims to give Irish society as direct access as possible to the historical Patrick. This is not so as to disillusion people, but rather to elucidate and inform their notion of their patron saint.[3] In order to achieve this the project aims to build up a comprehensive digital edition to make accessible to academic specialists, as well as to interested lay people, all the textual aspects of the real St Patrick's own work.

2.2. Approaches

A guiding principle throughout for the presentation of the resources provided is the centrality of the text of the *Confessio*. Therefore, the first thing that online visitors encounter is what Patrick actually wrote, in his own words or in the visitors' own vernacular, be it English, Irish, Italian, Portuguese or German (so far). From this point onwards, typical visitors, who by that means have found themselves being drawn into reading for themselves what Patrick actually wrote, are invited to find their way through the dense net of textual layers and background information in answer to questions that are likely to arise in their minds. For example: 'What is the original text for these paragraphs?' – which leads to the Latin text version. And then: 'What do these paragraphs look like in the Book of Armagh (or in any other manuscript witness)?' – which leads to the facsimile of the relevant page within the particular manuscript (in the case of the Book of Armagh, that executed by Ferdomnach, scribe of the monastery there, around the year 807). And, if visitors are unable to decipher the original script, then they may wonder: 'What does this text look like in a so-called diplomatic transcription?' – which will lead to a scan, from one of only four hundred weighty copies that were produced, of the highly elaborated and detailed transcription by John Gwynn, printed and published by the Royal Irish Academy in 1913.

2.3. Where are the Snakes?

At this stage, a question that will inevitably arise in the mind of a typical visitor to the online site will be: 'Why does what I am now reading seem different from what I think I know about Patrick? Where are the snakes? Where are the druids and kings?' This question prompts the opening of a whole horizon of tradition and perception of the Saint and his work. It leads, in particular, to one of the earliest witnesses to the transformation and construction of the figure of patrick (with a small p!) as someone who was perceived as having been a powerful founder of monasteries, and it leads to the political and cultural centre of Armagh. This witness is Muirchú's Latin *Life* of Saint Patrick, compiled around the year 680, about two hundred years after Patrick's death, in order to corroborate the predominant role of Armagh as the 'Rome of Ireland'. This account does include the druids, the kings – and plenty of magic. And this account went on to influence the generally-held perception of Patrick more than his own writings did. Nontheless, the snakes are still missing in Muirchú, and are only introduced after another five hundred years, in the twelfth century, by the Cistercian hagiographer Jocelin of Furness.

In order to elucidate why Muirchú adapted the account of St Patrick as he did, the Stack provides not only Muirchú's original Latin text and an English translation (cf. below) and, again, a facsimile and transcription of the Book of Armagh testimony, but also a modern composition, *Seeking Patrick*, written on behalf of the Stack activity by Derick Mockler. This entertaining and highly readable narrative imagines the circumstances in which that first known biography of the Saint could have been written, and also provides a scenario in which the writing could have been carried out. It is historical fiction rather than history. Nevertheless, every effort has been made to avoid violating any known historical fact. An audio version of *Seeking Patrick*, read by the author himself, is also provided.

3. HyperStack Resources

3.1. The Stack

With regard to the needs of academic research, the Stack gathers together high-resolution scans of all extant manuscript testimonies, along with manuscript descriptions and, in the form of a meta-edition, reproductions of the most relevant editions that have been published. These are:

- the canonical version of the critical text, established in the scholarly edition by Ludwig Bieler in 1950;
- the fundamental edition by Newport J.D. White, published in 1905 – and a unique copy of the same edition with handwritten annotations by Ludwig Bieler, dating from the time when he was preparing his own 'definitive edition' in the 1940s – a curious chapter in the modern transmission of the text, kindly put at the project's disposal for digitisation by Professor Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (NUI Galway);
- the *editio princeps*, the first ever printed version of the *Confessio*, edited by Sir James Ware in

1656 and based on the Irish and British manuscript copies only;

- the Bollandist edition in the Acta Sanctorum by Daniel Papebroch (1668), based on MS BM Arras at a time when the two folios that are missing today were still present;
- the diplomatic transcription of the Book of Armagh by John Gwynn, printed and published by the Royal Irish Academy in 1913 as mentioned above;
- the facsimile print edition of the same manuscript, published by Edward Gwynn and the Irish Manuscripts Commission in 1937, for the purpose of producing which the codex was disbound to enable photographs to be taken of the entire page, including the full width of the inner margins.

The original Latin text of *Confessio* and *Epistola* as well as the translations of both are delivered by the Stack as electronic texts in the strict sense. Electronic text versions are also provided of Patrick's two earliest biographers, Muirchú and Tírechán, both in their Latin originals and in English translations (Bieler, 1979). All other text layers listed above appear as PDF facsimiles. The HyperStack resource is then completed as a comprehensive Virtual Research Environment by an elaborated, annotated bibliography of about 1000 bibliographic entries related to the historical Patrick.

3.2. Special Features

Beside the above mentioned novel and audiobook by Derick Mockler the Stack is accompanied by a range of articles such as: an introduction to *St Patrick's Writings* by David Kelly; an essay by Elizabeth Dawson on the *Pillars of Conversion in Muirchú and Tírechán*; and a *Biography and Character Study of Tírechán* by Terry O'Hagan.

In addition, in an attempt to make the *Confessio* even more accessible, a recording of the *Confessio* has been made on behalf of the Stack activity, arranged and performed as a dialogue version in English by Dr Kathrine Younger (Dublin Institute of Technology) and Dr Anthony Harvey (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin).

What is missing, obviously, is the pictorial. And, clearly, modern perceptions of the figure of St Patrick have been greatly influenced by his representation in the visual arts throughout the centuries. Moreover, internet users are known to be very fond of images, so one should reckon with the likelihood of a strong demand for visual representations on the part of the typical visitor to the HyperStack. This has created a dilemma, because a principal intention of the HyperStack has been to get away from these powerful, question-begging images of the figure of St Patrick so as to focus on the textual evidence of his own writings. Instead of tackling this dilemma with ideological textual puritanism, it was deemed reasonable to take a more positive, pro-active way: by providing a study on significant historical representations of Patrick – *The Staff, the Snake and the Shamrock: St Patrick in Art* – composed on behalf of the HyperStack by Dr Rachel Moss, historian of art at Trinity College Dublin.

4. HyperStack Architecture

4.1. What is Most Fundamental?

What is most fundamental for a multi-layered edition? Most fundamental is not the *text itself*, but the *structure* of the text. The editor has to impose such, or else rely on an existing canonical structure, in order to be able to align all the textual components of the work in its totality.

Among the existing editions, Bieler's scholarly edition of the *Confessio* has been chosen to be the core and centre of the HyperStack architecture. Bieler's edition enjoys canonical status among scholars. His edition of the text, based on that of Newport White, established a canonical structure for analysing the work, in the form of a linguistic code that is structured by word, by line and by paragraph, and so can be clearly referenced. As it is to Bieler's edition that most references point, it is here that the interconnecting strands of the different text layers – facsimiles, transcriptions, editions, translations etc. – are brought together.

Of course, there is really no such thing as a 'definitive edition', and every edition results from a certain editorial creed, an attitude or approach towards textuality. Nevertheless, Bieler's edition is an excellent attempt to reconstruct an approximate original of the *Confessio*, the archetype Σ, which Bieler claimed to be 'the source of all our evidence, whether direct or indirect' (1950: 27). And even though stemmatological justification strategies for editing medieval texts bear a series of caveats, the established critical text, the reconstruction of Σ, which is believed to have been an autograph, is based on the textual evidence of all extant manuscript testimonies, and is furnished with a most diligent critical apparatus where all variant readings are recorded.

4.2. From Print to Screen

There are two further reasons that have legitimated the choice of Bieler's edition. Firstly, the copyright for this edition already lay with the Royal Irish Academy. And secondly, a digital text version was already available as part of the digitized, full-text *Royal Irish Academy Archive of Celtic-Latin Literature* (ACLL),[4] itself part of the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from Celtic Sources* (DMLCS) project.

The electronic text version taken from the ACLL database is, as it were, flat, or two-dimensional; that is, the text is undressed of all its academic framework (apparatuses etc.) in order to fit it into a database that aims to incorporate the whole corpus of Latin texts from Celtic sources into a searchable but single-layered expanse of text. This expanse may be thought of as very wide, but very thin. In contrast, and as a kind of case study, the HyperStack intends to cover just one single – if the most iconic – text from the entire corpus, but in full depth. A tower has been

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[4] The second (developed and expanded) edition, ACLL-2, compiled by Anthony Harvey and Angela Malthouse, was published by Brepols in 2010 at <http://www.brepolis.net/>. Originally modelled upon Brepols' existing CLCLT (now LLT, the *Library of Latin Texts*), ACLL is designed to constitute with that corpus the beginnings of a pan-European electronic library of patristic and medieval Latin material.

built at one point on the flat plain of text; a third dimension has been added.[5]

In order to achieve this, the existing electronic text version must be complemented and enriched with all the relevant textual information that lies beyond, beside or beneath it, both metaphorically, as regards the antecedent textual tradition, and literally, as regards the features and functionalities of the printed edition, since these indicate the contextual characteristics of the 'text itself' according to the conventions of philology in the lachmannian tradition of textual criticism.

For the purposes of the HyperStack, Bieler's edition has been deeply encoded digitally, along with its entire academic framework; that is, with its threefold apparatus, namely:

- the *apparatus criticus*, indicating all variant readings in the manuscripts and emendations;
- the *apparatus fontium*, indicating sources and parallel text traditions;
- the *apparatus biblicus*, indicating biblical references to specific bible versions.

Furthermore, numerous commentary notes that were first published by Bieler in 1951, as well as additional notes and corrections that were published in 1966, are deeply encoded and included in the electronic text.

The features and functionalities of the print edition have been transposed into the electronic text version, not by seeking to reproduce the layout of the printed text on screen, but rather by making explicit its complex system of textual information and references (lemmata, sigla etc.) in order to make this machine-readable. On the other hand, in order to guarantee the usability and sustainability of the resource, the raw data have had to be kept and stored in a format that is both independent of any particular device or software and is also adaptable to ongoing technical change. The appropriate format is commonly considered to be XML: eXtensible Mark-up Language.

While HTML – HyperText Mark-up Language – is used for web presentation, encoding *how* textual information is intended to be displayed on the screen, XML in contrast is used as a language to describe other languages (basically, a meta-language). As such XML is appropriate for encoding text *as it is* or, at least, *as it is meant to be*.

The structure of the XML file created, and the naming of its tag elements and the attributes used, are as far as possible in accordance with the latest guidelines of the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) consortium, which collectively develops and maintains the *de facto* standard for the representation of texts in digital form. For the purposes of the HyperStack it proved necessary to tag each word of the *Confessio* and to give to each word a unique identification number. Any apparatus note or reference then points explicitly, in a machine-readable way, to the element in question: a word, a range of words, a manuscript, a group of manuscripts, an article etc. and,

from this information, links, pop-ups, lists, registers etc. are automatically generated for the web presentation.

As regards the macro structure, the paragraph level is used to align the electronic text version of the original Latin with the translations, division by division, while the folio and column level is used to align the Latin original with each of the manuscript facsimiles. From these highly structured TEI XML data all the different text versions of the *Confessio* are generated and organised as one Stack of closely interlinked text layers, all provided free online in order to enable any interested person, lay or scholar, to click through the different manuscripts and text versions passage by passage, and thus to retrace, reconstruct and proof-check any established version of the text.

4.3. Realization

The HyperStack project was conceived and is overseen by Dr Anthony Harvey, editor of the Royal Irish Academy Dictionary of Medieval Latin from Celtic Sources (DMLCS). It has received three years' state funding[6] for one postdoctoral researcher (from September 2008 to August 2011) and, each summer, for one postgraduate intern. One additional 6-month intern joined the project on external funding from a European-funded Erasmus Mobility Grant. Crucial support for the realization of the HyperStack has been given by the Digital Humanities Observatory (DHO) and a series of its Digital Humanities specialists. Furthermore, the value of the Stack and its resources is greatly enhanced by the contributions of volunteer collaborators and project partners. Last, but by no means least, the project has been enormously facilitated by the courtesy of libraries, editors and publishers as regards matters of reproduction and copyright.

5. What is the HyperStack about?

5.1. Humanities, Politics and Society

Firstly, on the political level the project is part of a larger initiative, by the Irish Higher Education Authority, to promote nation-wide the digital humanities in an international context. This initiative has been labelled *Humanities Serving Irish Society* (HSIS); as a centrepiece of this initiative, the DHO was created as 'a sophisticated web-based humanities resource, which will store, preserve and provide access to the increasingly complex range of e-resources now being created in the humanities' (HSIS website). In connection with the efforts that are being made by the DHO to achieve this, the HyperStack serves as a kind of guinea-pig in its delivery of much-needed academic content as a test-base for the various digital applications involved. The HyperStack, being part of Academy Digital Resources (ADR), serves as a foundation upon which visions and ideas from digital scholarship can be realized. Ironically, at present the DHO is winding up for the lack of further funding due to recession and the economic crisis of the Irish state. So

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[5] As a matter of fact, the desirability of attempting this was first flagged a quarter of a century ago (Devine, 1987: 69). Definite plans were laid in the 1990s by Dr Anthony Harvey and the then Chairman of the DMLCS Editorial Board, Professor Proinsias Mac Cana, but could not be pursued at that time in the absence of funding.

[6] Funded under the Irish government Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions (PRTLI), Cycle 4.

what about the future usability and sustainability of the HyperStack? Institutional connection is crucial to guaranteeing the durable and ongoing maintenance and availability of any digital resource – just as are libraries for the preservation and availability of books and journals. The HyperStack resources are well defined and created according to the current standards of text encoding precisely in order to enable their migration and implementation into bigger collections of digital resources hosted and maintained by future centres of competence and expertise. What remains essential, at this stage in the evolution of digital scholarship, is a certain amount of faith in the generations of scholars to come. It is, though, the author's explicit conviction that there is no way back to the traditional publication format of the printed book.

5.2. Digital Philology

This leads to a second, more strategic consideration. The HyperStack is a case study of how to deal with text transmission and how to deal with the academic heritage of the print era, since that constitutes so much a part of the transmission of historical texts. And this is closely related to the fundamental question: Is the book any longer really the most appropriate medium for exploring and representing such a highly complex thing as textual tradition – even though books were the very medium by which the tradition has reached us? Unsurprisingly, the answer given here can only be no. One might nevertheless be more than happy with the great achievements of scholarly editions realized in print. On the other hand a comprehensive scholarly edition, as exemplified by the St Patrick's *Confessio* Hypertext Stack, is simply incapable of realization between the covers of a book.

5.3. Patrick

Finally, economic recession and media-revolution aside, the HyperStack is first and foremost about Patrick, that fascinating historical figure, who is uniquely accessible to us through his own writing, composed well over a millennium and a half ago.

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