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The Irish Theology: Formation of Celtic Christianity in Ireland
(5th to 9th Century)

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Introduction

At the arrival of Christianity, in fifth century Ireland, the legendary St. Patrick swept the land to rid it of its pagan and barbarian ways. At the end of his life he claimed to be the savior of the Irish, in his self-written *Confessio*, because he brought the word of God:

How has this happened in Ireland? Never before did they know of God except to serve idols and unclean things. But now, they have become the people of the Lord, and are called children of God. The sons and daughters of the leaders of the Irish are seen to be monks and virgins of Christ!¹

St. Patrick claimed that the Irish were completely barbaric and did not believe in Christianity before he came. St. Patrick asserts that by his work the Irish converted to Christianity, but as the record clearly states only the sons and daughters of leaders, no mention is given for the those not of noble birth. The conversion of Ireland was not as simple, nor as quick as St. Patrick claimed it was in his writings. The conversion was a process, not an overnight success attributed solely to one man. As Christianity slowly crept its way through Ireland, concessions were made both by the pre-Christian Irish and Christian missionaries, adapting to each other's traditions and customs to form a new branch of the faith.

The conversion process began in the fifth century and by the ninth century, created a new culture in which pagan elements and Christianity amalgamated. Before the fifth century Ireland was coming out of its Iron Age, which lasted roughly 500 BCE to 400 CE, during which time long standing traditions were created.² Irish myths reveal that the culture was based around war

¹ St. Patrick, "*The Confessio*," trans. Padraig McCarthy. *Saint Patrick's Confessio*, accessed May 3, 2016, http://www.confessio.ie/etexts/confessio_english#01, 41.

² Tomás Ó Fiaich, "The Celts I," in *The People of Ireland*, ed. Patrick Loughery, (New York: New Amsterdam Book, 1988) 29.

raids, feasting, and constant interactions with nature.³ The pre-Christian Irish had a Celtic pagan religion which the early Christian missionaries tried to replace. However, when reading the primary sources, such as St. Patrick's and St. Brigid's *Vitae*, there are pagan customs remnant in the texts but presented as Christian, showing a synthesis of traditions. Overall, the conversion process used the method described by historian Tomás Ó Fiaich as "inculturation" and was a peaceful process, creating no martyrs for the Christian faith.⁴

The most important connection made during the conversion process was the learned men and royals of Ireland with early monastic founders. The interactions between the early Irish monastic founders and the pre-Christian Irish influenced the ways in which early monasteries were established and why Christianity was introduced the way it was. By establishing the Christian faith on the basis of Irish learning, the early church worked with the learned men to establish a written vernacular language and develop an education system. From those education centers Irish myths, hagiographies and illuminated manuscripts were transcribed, preserving the pre-Christian past within the Christian era. Ultimately, the two cultures adapted to each other, through varying levels of incorporation regarding different aspects of society, creating a culture which was both Christian and native to Ireland.

Previous historic research has tended to focus on the concept that the Irish conversion process was unique and exceptional compared to other continental Christian conversions. While many of the researchers from the nineteenth and twentieth century provided a wealth of knowledge and insight on the conversion process, they ignored the fact that Ireland was not the only one to retain its pagan roots; this concepts can be described as "Irish Exceptionalism." The

³ *Gods and Fighting Men: The Story of the Túatha Dé Dannan, and the Fianna of Ireland*, ed. Lady Augusta Grey, (London: John Murray, 1904); *Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster*, ed. Cecile O'Rahilly, (Dublin, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1970).

⁴ Ó Fiaich, "The Celts I," 31.

earliest phase of such scholarship began in the late nineteenth century and focused primarily on translating the manuscripts, dating from the fifth to ninth century, pertaining to annals, myths, and hagiographies.⁵ These manuscripts lead to conclusions by the historians Kathleen Hughes, Charles Thomas, Thomas Ó Fiaich, Francis J. Byrne, and Hugh De Blacam, who claimed that the retainment of pre-Christian customs was wholly unique to Ireland.⁶ The scholars focused on topics such as the organization of pre-Christian Ireland and later the monastic settlements, mythology, hagiographies, and incorporation of the two ontologies assuming the conversion process of adaptation only happened in Ireland. Irish Exceptionalism is still a prevalent research method that provides essential and factual historical accounts for pre-Christian Ireland and the conversion process, regardless of the fact that its historical uniqueness is slightly exaggerated.

The idea that a pagan culture survived into the Christian era, of course, is not new or unique to Ireland. When observing the conversion processes throughout Europe, many of which involve societies from Celtic origins converting to Christianity, connections to the pagan past occur in every narrative. Acknowledging the connections of other conversion processes was a new historiographic trend, starting in the 1970s, with historians such as Keith Thomas, Valerie Flint, Karen Louise Jolly, Adrian Bredero and James Russel.⁷ This scholarship showed the

⁵ Prominent scholars chosen for this task are assigned by The Royal Irish Academy and are picked for their historical knowledge of Ireland as well as the languages of Old Irish and Latin. John O'Donovan, John Gwynn, Owen Connellan, R. A. Stewart Macalister, and Ludwig Bieler are among the early scholars chosen.

⁶ Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, (New York, Cornell University Press, 1966); Charles Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*, (London, B.T. Batsford LTD, 1981); Ó Fiaich, "The Celts I;" F. J. Byrne, "Early Irish Society," in *The Course of Irish History*, eds T. W. Moody and F. X. Martin, 43-60, (Niwt, CO: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1967); Hugh De Blacam, *The Saints of Ireland: The Life-Stories of SS. Bridgid and Columcille*, (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1942).

⁷ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, (Great Britain: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971); Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Adrian H. Bredero, *Christendom and Christianity in*

various was that Christian missionaries incorporated native customs, who knew that adaptation was the best way to gain followers to the Christian faith. These scholars' studies looked at the British Isles as well as modern day Germany and France, all of which reveal that survival of native, pagan culture was commonplace, though what elements remained could differ. While this paper does not compare the Irish experience to the continental conversions, it is important to note that Ireland was not exceptional in retaining pagan elements but did carry distinctions from what elements remained. Examination of the textual and material sources that remain from the fifth to ninth century identifies where the distinct pagan remnants are found.

The primary sources most vital to understanding this transition from the pre-historic period to the era of Christianity are the myths, hagiographies, and illuminated manuscripts. The literary sources come in the form of manuscripts, which means they are fragmented into several different books, which have been pieced together by historians based on date and related subject, such is the nature of medieval sources.⁸ A single manuscript can contain different subjects that do not relate to the entirety of the book such as writing that relate to a saint, a short description of a law code from different centuries, all next to annals recording historical events. Many manuscripts have survived wars, raiding, and were handed down and kept in secret during Viking invasions and English rule, particularly from the late ninth century to the seventeenth century, therefore many sections of the manuscripts have either been damaged or lost to time.⁹ The manuscripts that remain have been pieced together and now provide the foundation for historical research of the conversion process.

the Middle Ages: The relations between Religion, Church and Society, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994); James C. Russell, *Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Socio-historical Approach to Religious Transformation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁸ Lawrence Ginnell, *The Brehon Laws: A Legal Handbook*, (London, The Gresham Press, 1894), 11.

⁹ Ginnell, *The Brehon Laws*, 13-15, 24,

The surviving manuscripts most important for this study is the myth *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, the hagiographies of Muirchú's *Life of Saint Patrick* and the *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae*, as well as the illuminated manuscripts of *The Book of Durrow*, *The Book of Lindisfarne* and *The Book of Kells*.¹⁰ Irish myths provided insight to the pre-Christian society as well as the valiant nature of the heroic tradition which is carried into Christian hagiographies. St. Patrick's and St. Brigid's *Vitae* reveal the conversion process in a competitive manner for who had greater supernatural power against the pagan druids. Furthermore, heroic and folklore traditions appeal to the native population in order to make an easy transition and gain followers. The illuminated manuscripts, especially the Chi Rho page in the *Book of Kells*, show how art, understood to be 'Celtic,' is used to decorate Christian symbols. Together these manuscripts show the connection to the learned class of pre-Christian Ireland and a fusion of their culture with Christianity.

The culture of Ireland after Christianization is a culture that shows a synthesis of two ontologies. This culture came from the work with the learned Irishmen and Christian monks which resulted in a new language, a new education system centered on scholarship, art reflecting Celtic motifs within Christian gospels, and mythic syncretism in the hagiographies of Ireland's patron saints. The relationship between the pagan past and the Christian era was the work of the learned elite and monks which was based around adaptation and continuation found in the origins of the conversion process. This research may not be new to the field of Irish Studies but it

¹⁰ *Táin Bó Cúalnge; The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, vol. 10 in *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae*, ed. and trans. Ludwig Bieler, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979); "Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae (Latin Life of St. Brigit c. 750)," in vol. IV of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, eds Angela Bourke, Siobhan Kilfeather, Maria Luddy, Margaret Mac Curtain, Gerardine Meaney, Mairin Ni Dhonnachada, Mary O' Dowd, and Clair Wills, (New York, New York University Press, 2002); Robert G. Calkins, *Illuminated Book of the Middle Ages*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); "Book of Kells." Unpublished manuscript. Trinity College Dublin Digital Collection http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/#folder_id=14&pidtopage=MS58_002r&entry_point=3,

increases understanding and preservation of a culture and way of life that was created during a time of change.

Historical Context

When studying the conversion process of Ireland, it is important to first look at the Irish society before Christianity came to better understand how and why this religion was introduced and integrated the way it was. The influence of the Celtic social structure firmly rooted in Ireland carried into the Christianization process and forced the religion to adapt to its customs. The Celts had come in two waves — one from the Continent, the other from Britain — and had firmly established themselves in Ireland by 100 BCE.¹¹ The invading Celts brought a new Indo-European language and culture that was adapted by the pre-historic settlers who arrived before the Celts, but no textual sources survived from the time because there was no formal writing system.¹² These invasions transformed Ireland into a Celtic land, one that united separate kingdoms by a common culture, social structure, and legal system.¹³

Early Irish society was predominantly rural and had no real towns or villages.¹⁴ Families often lived far apart on individual farms, called a *ráth*, which were built on hilltops and protected by earthen mounds.¹⁵ These farm settlements were continuations of the prehistoric settlers who had arrived before the Celts and had built their “farmhouses” within forests that had been cleared

¹¹ O Fiaich, “The Celts I,” 27.

¹² Of the sources that do survive, sagas and myths, they are written centuries later, in a Christian context, and provide only a glimpse of what society looked like, supported by archaeological evidence. Peter Woodman, “Prehistoric Settlers” in *The People of Ireland*, ed. Patrick Loughery, (New York: New Amsterdam Book, 1988), 24.

¹³ Ó Fiaich, “The Celts I,” 29.

¹⁴ Moody, T.W. and F.X. Martin, “Early Irish Society: 1st-9th Century,” in *The Course of Irish History*. (Cork: Mercier Press, 1967), 41.

¹⁵ Ó Fiaich, “The Celts I,” 31.

in a circular enclosure to form a natural defense and barrier for their livestock and crops, which were spaced far from other homes.¹⁶ Social life was rooted in pastoral and agricultural traditions; dairy farming and grain cultivation accounted for daily substance and were the primary modes of production for Celtic Ireland.¹⁷ The unique climate of Ireland supported this lifestyle, as year round rain meant that there was always food for cattle and natural irrigation.¹⁸ The early Irish society produced enough surplus for itself and the people lived in general prosperity with what they cultivated.¹⁹

Ireland's decentralized political structure was similar to their dispersed farming environment. The land was divided up into numerous small petty kingdoms known as the *túatha*.²⁰ There was a distinction between the most powerful ruling families of the North, centered in Tara, and the South, ruling from Cashel.²¹ An individual king's primary role was to lead in battle and conduct the *óenach*, an assembly of the people within the *túatha* to conduct business.²² As a whole, there was no political unity between *túathas*; the common culture, rather than political confederation, most profoundly unified the people in pre-Christian Ireland.²³ After

¹⁶ These earthen mounds, having lost the houses contained within them because they were built of wood, are the 'ringforts' of the modern landscape. These ringforts have been protected because of the superstition associated with them in that disturbing them brings a curse to one's family. O Fiaich, "The Celts I," 31.

¹⁷ Byrne, "Early Irish Society," 51.

¹⁸ Woodman, "Prehistoric Settlers," 22.

¹⁹ Ó Cróinín, "*Early Medieval Ireland*," 108.

²⁰ Moody and Marin, "Early Irish Society," 44.

²¹ David Thornley, "Historical Introduction," in *The Government and Politics of Ireland*, by Basil Chubb, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970), 3.

²² Moody and Martin, "Early Irish Society," 42. The *óenach*'s origins are traced back to ancient funerary games. As a continuation of this they were held on ancient burial grounds. These *óenachs* were a special occasion in Irish society, not only did it bring the rural society together for business, but it was also a time in which games and horse-racing took place as a sort of celebration. Francis John Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, (London: C. Tinling & Co. Ltd., 1973) 30-31.

²³ Moody and Martin, "Early Irish Society," 51.

the seventh century the distinction between different túathas became more prominent, and eventually larger family dynasties encompassed many of the old túatha of the fifth and sixth centuries.²⁴

Within the túatha a person was either a nobleman or a freeman who worked for a lord.²⁵ Few exceptions are found, however, including outsiders from foreign lands and slaves, but these people did not hold any legal power or rights within a túatha, as Irish freemen were only given legal standing within the túatha they were born into.²⁶ Kings were at the top of a hierarchical chain, nobles followed, then freeman, with slaves being the lowest rank of society.²⁷ Freemen did not leave the túatha, unless on a war raid ordered by the king, and were forced to not only remain loyal to their king but also to pay taxes to him.²⁸ There were two forms of society that took hold in Ireland that gave lords and kings their power and wealth; control over cattle and crop cultivation and another that encouraged craftsmanship skills, which were then taxed and controlled by lords.²⁹ This system placed heavy reliance on the freeman's relationship and dependence on their lord, an essential part of Irish society and something that only intensified after the seventh century to form the system in place during the High Middle Ages.³⁰

By the fourth century Christianity was beginning to be introduced to Ireland and intermixing with Irish traditions. Trading interactions between the Christian Roman British and

²⁴ Byrne, "Early Irish Society," 48-49.

²⁵ Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, 28.

²⁶ Moody and Martin, "Early Irish Society," 45; Fergal McGrath, *Education in Ancient and Medieval Ireland*, (Dublin: Grenville Printing, 1979), 36

²⁷ Thornley, "Historical Introduction," 3.

²⁸ Byrne, "Early Irish Society," 46-47.

²⁹ Nerys Patterson, *Cattlelords and Clansmen: The Social Structure of Early Ireland*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 45-47.

³⁰ Moody and Martin "Early Irish Society," 47.

Ireland during the fourth century reveals that many in the southeast of Ireland were exposed to Christian thought before any formal Christian missionaries arrived on the island.³¹ Trade had exposed enough Irishmen to Christianity that small communities were beginning to practice the faith late in the fourth century.³² The Christian followers grew into a large enough population to draw the eyes of Rome by the early fifth century.

In the year 431 CE, a man by the name of Palladius was sent to Ireland by Pope Celestine.³³ Palladius was ordained the first bishop to Ireland for Irish Christians, as told by Prosper of Aquitaine in *The Chronicle*, written in 455 CE.³⁴ *The Chronicle* is the first record of an authorized Christian missionary being sent from Rome. There is a great significance in *The Chronicle* because the record states that Palladius was “the first bishop to the Irish who believed in Christ,” meaning there were already Christians in Ireland that pre-dated St. Patrick arrival.³⁵ Though little written evidence survives beyond *The Chronicle*, there are church foundations found in Leinster that date to the mid-fifth century which suggest where Palladius’ work may have taken place.³⁶

Palladius’ missionary work was only in the south of Ireland, for by the time St. Patrick went to the north, in 432 CE, he only found pagans and nonbelievers.³⁷ The northern region of

³¹Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*, 302.

³²Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*, 302.

³³ Deanna Brooks, “Prosper’s Chronicle: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Edition of 445” (Masters Thesis, University of Ottawa, 2014), 75.

³⁴ Brooks, “Prosper’s Chronicle,” 75; *The Chronicle* is manuscript containing the history of the Roman Empire shortly before its demise. Prosper was a highly educated bishop from Aquitaine, writing in a similar manor to St. Jerome’s histories. Prosper was of the aristocracy and had friendly relations with Pope Celestine, therefore his source is seen as more reliable than those of St. Patrick’s. Brooks, “Prosper’s Chronicle,” 1-3.

³⁵ Brooks, “Prosper’s Chronicle,” 75.

³⁶ Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*, 304

³⁷ Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, 31.

Ireland gave birth to the legend that is St. Patrick. St. Patrick wrote in his autobiographical hagiography *The Confessio* that he traveled around Ireland, with ease, from túatha to túatha, even though that was not allowed at the time of his mission in Ireland alluding to his power and influence as a saint.³⁸ St. Patrick stated that the people he had baptized had tried to give him gifts and he continuously refused — yet he had enough money and goods to bring to a new king anytime he met one.³⁹ Dr. John T. Koch, a historian of Celtic Studies, makes the argument that St. Patrick’s refusal of gifts was part of a cultural custom that the Irish understood, which was clientship.⁴⁰ If St. Patrick did not accept gifts or money, the intended giver would have been indebted to St. Patrick and the only way to repay him then was to convert and devote the intended giver’s life to the church.⁴¹ St. Patrick, having lived in Ireland before as a slave, would have understood how society worked and was able to use it to his advantage to secure followers and power.

Thus Christianity was introduced to the Irish who already had strongly rooted traditions. As St. Patrick had been to Ireland before he was able to articulate the faith in a manner that presented a better option than the pagan faith. The result was that Christianity held an open approach to Irish traditions and customs, which were incorporated to the faith and produced a new system.

³⁸ St. Patrick, “*The Confessio*.” Freeman were not allowed to leave the túatha in which they were born into because they held no legal standing outside that particular túatha. Traveling or even permanently leaving was dangerous for a freeman because they were regarded as outcast of society, were unprotected, and if they left permanently it meant they had not ties to a family or the land — both essential in Irish society. Byrne, “Early Irish Society,” 48.

³⁹ St. Patrick, “*The Confessio*.”

⁴⁰ John K. Koch, “The Early Chronology for St. Patrick (c.351- c.428): Some New Ideas and Possibilities,” in *Celtic Hagiography and Saints Cults*, ed Jane Cartwright, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 110.

⁴¹ Koch, “The Early Chronology for St. Patrick,” 110.

Monastic Development

The establishment of monastic centers in Ireland shows how the missionaries adapted to the pre-existing culture because many of the continental structures did not fit with Irish practices. St. Patrick initially introduced episcopal administration, for his education and training as a man of faith was in Britain and Gaul both fashioned under the episcopal system, therefore he introduced what he knew.⁴² However, the episcopal system did not work in Ireland because there were no towns, so church leaders quickly adapted to a system that worked for them. By the late sixth century what developed was the monastic life, modeled on the foundations of the túatha.⁴³ The layout of early monasteries resembled the farmhouse: a ringfort protection around the church which were surround by huts for the monks.⁴⁴ The monastery was led by an abbot, who functioned similarly to a king of a túatha, with monks below that authority who lived a rigorous and devoted life.⁴⁵ Daily chores included a fixed amount of time for prayer and study, with little time for sleeping or eating.⁴⁶ Labor also constituted a large portion of the monks' time and resembled the farming traditions of the Irish. Before going to the monasteries, young monks would have spent time working in their family's farms and living in a túatha, so early monks modeled monastic settlements on what they had previously encountered.

Monasteries were often founded near royal forts, suggesting a link between the aristocracies and the church.⁴⁷ Land granted to humble priests to build the monasteries typically

⁴² Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, 34; Scherman, *Flowering of Ireland*, 97.

⁴³ Katherine Scherman, *The Flowering of Ireland: Saints, Scholars and Kings*, (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1981), 97.

⁴⁴ Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, 63; Scherman, *Flowering of Ireland*, 297.

⁴⁵ Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, 63, 78.

⁴⁶ Scherman, *Flowering of Ireland*, 106.

⁴⁷ Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, 76.

came with attachments from the upper echelons. Land was vital to Irish society and was tied to the whole family, in that one person in the family did not have sole rights to sell it without permission from the entire group.⁴⁸ As a result the donating family maintained power over the monastic land, by placing a member as the leading abbot which was then passed through the family, keeping a vested interest in both the monastery and the land.⁴⁹ Furthermore, early monastic leaders were often the sons or daughters of kings, which further maintained the power of the royal family through the church. With Christianity on the rise, monastic settlements flourished throughout the island.

The earliest monastic settlements of St. Enda, who founded the monastery of Aran, and St. Columcille, who founded several monasteries in Northern Ireland and Iona, established connections with Irish royalty. St. Enda was the son of a king, who was sent to study under St. Ninian in Scotland, and returned without any interests to his royal claim.⁵⁰ This led St. Enda to renounce the world and travel to Inishmore, the largest of the Aran Islands just west of Galway Bay, where he founded his monastery around 480 CE.⁵¹ Likewise St. Columcille, known also by his Latin name St. Columba, was the son of a king and heir to the throne of Tara, but from an early age he sought the church, not his crown.⁵² These saintly founders established an early trend in which prominent Irish heirs who were raised with the knowledge of túatha administration, received highly respected educations in foreign monasteries then returned and renounce their claims to establish their own monasteries. The connection to royalty granted the monastic

⁴⁸ Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, 76.

⁴⁹ Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, 77.

⁵⁰ Scherman, *Flowering of Ireland*, 103, Scherman uses primary sources from Adamnan's *Vita S. Columba*, The Venerable Bede, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, *Theasaurus Palaeohibernicus*, *Book of Lismore*, St. Broccan's "Hymn to Brigid".

⁵¹ Scherman, *Flowering of Ireland*, 103.

⁵² De Blacam, *The Saints of Ireland*, 72-73, 78-79.

founders land, prestige, respectability and preserved the pre-Christian Irish social hierarchies into the monastic context.

Early Irish saints had further connection to the most respected caste of pre-Christian Irish society, the *aés dána*. The learned individuals, called the *aés dána*, of pre-Christian Ireland included the *filí*, *Brehons*, doctors, lawyers, and craftsmen.⁵³ Of the group, the *filí*, also known as druids, were the most important for a *túatha* because they were the masters of Irish lineages, myths, praise poems, and “magic.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, they were known for their satire which was the most important influence for the “social conscience.”⁵⁵ As St. Brigid of Kildare was raised by a druid, scholars believe that she was given that name as a manifestation of the pagan past.⁵⁶ Further connections can be seen with St. Finian, who founded a monastery at Clonard in 515 CE, and was fascinated with the work done by the *aés dána* — the students who came to his monastery learned Irish laws, myths, and history which preserved and propelled the *aés dána* knowledge into the Christian era.⁵⁷ St. Columcille also established a center for learning, both secular and ecclesiastical, that merged the studies of the *aés dána* with that of Latin learning — the result is the manuscripts of *The Book of Durrow* and *The Book of Kells*, to name the most famous.⁵⁸ With the inclusion of *aés dána* learning, the monastic centers incorporated native Irish and Christian study, formulating a new focus for monastic education.

These early saints created environments centered on learning, not only of scripture but also of pre-Christian Irish history and culture. The earliest examples of cultural continuation and

⁵³ Ó Fiaich, “The Celts I,” 32.

⁵⁴ Ó Fiaich, “The Celts I,” 32-33.

⁵⁵ McGrath, *Education*, 37.

⁵⁶ De Blacam, *The Saints of Ireland*, 16; Scherman, *Flowering of Ireland*, 111.

⁵⁷ Scherman, *Flowering of Ireland*, 110.

⁵⁸ Scherman, *Flowering of Ireland*, 154, 162.

adaptation happened in centers otherwise rigidly controlled. The early founders' connections to the learned and wealthy class of society sparked their interest in Irish culture and they used their monasteries and influence to preserve and even promote learning of pre-Christian Ireland.

Monasteries merged the Christian learning with the native styles, which created a new education environment leading to an Irish written language and allowed for pre-Christian myths and art to combine with Christianity. St. Enda's, St. Brigid's, St. Finian's, and St. Columcille's monasteries were the building blocks which propelled Ireland into an age of coalescence between Irish and Christian customs.

Education

The realm of monastic education found inspiration from the native schools and incorporated practices reflecting the connections to the learned native tradition. Before the arrival of Christianity the *aés dána* were the sole students allowed to participate in formal education centers.⁵⁹ The native schools focused on learning through memorization and, at the end of twelve years of study, individuals were expected to know Irish traditions, myths, history, lineages, and law codes.⁶⁰ These schools were not open to the lower sector of society as only the elite inherited the right to participate in such learning.⁶¹ The *aés dána* were the protectors and preservers of the culture in pre-Christian times, but they never wrote anything down.⁶² This can be seen by the simple fact that there are no surviving texts predating the arrival of Christianity

⁵⁹ Ó Fiaich, "The Celts I," 32.

⁶⁰ *Acuraicept Na N-Éces: The Schools Primer*, trans. George Calder, (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1917), xxi; Kathleen Hughes, "The Golden Age of Early Christian Ireland," in *The Course of Irish History*, edited by T. W. Moody and F. X. Martin, 61-76, (Niwt, CO: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1967), 76. These schools would have been far enough away from regular society but close to royal and wealthy families, for it was their sponsorship that kept the centers running. Furthermore, the *aés dána* stayed within their own communities and only went into public during festivals, during which they were gifted by society because of their importance. McGrath, *Education*, 55.

⁶¹ Ó Fiaich, "The Celts I," 33.

⁶² Proinsias MacCanna, *Celtic Mythology*, (London: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Limited, 1970), 20.

and as the Ogham language was the only written language, yet very complicated to transcribe anything, it must be assumed that the schools had not relied on texts but centered on an oral tradition. As early as the seventh century the *aés dána* started to work with the monasteries because monks recorded information only the learned men would have memorized, such as myths and later the history recorded in annals, suggesting a connection between the two.

The early monastic founders' connection to the *aés dána* meant that the founders had been exposed to the native training styles and carried that into their monasteries. Learning had an established importance in Ireland, before Christian schools arrived, and integrating that part of society would have been essential since the *aés dána* was highly praised and respected.⁶³ The result of this prestige and connection from early missionaries created monastic learning schools, especially the scriptoriums, which were dedicated to learning and producing manuscripts.⁶⁴ In contrast, monasteries on the continent under Benedictine rule were based on manual labor and study of scripture, not the production of manuscripts or learning outside the word of God.⁶⁵ Monasteries in Ireland were initially exposed to local customs of learning and that emphasis remained at the heart of monastic life.

The early Irish monasteries incorporated numerous forms of learning and allowed that education to reach different levels of society. There is no evidence in Ireland that reveals any objection to pagan learning, in fact monks were not only taught Irish traditions but also read the

⁶³ Especially in regards to the *filí*, the *aés dána* were given the highest of protection in law codes, as well as the highest punishments to be paid if harm fell on them. This level of protection shows the value they held in society. McGrath, *Education*, 59; Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, 13.

⁶⁴ McGrath, *Education*, 92.

⁶⁵ *The Rule of St. Benedict*, trans by Anthony C. Meisel and M. L. del Mastro, (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1975), 86-87.

Greco- Roman classics.⁶⁶ References to the classics can be found in Muirchú's *Life of Saint Patrick* where both the Greek Cyclops and astronomy are mentioned; Muirchú equated King Coroticus' cruelty to the Cyclops and mentioned there was a period in which night did not fall by stating that "Hesperus did not send the shadows which bring along the stars."⁶⁷ Monastic schools were further significant in that they were open to the secular public as well as to the monks, whereas native schools were only open to those who inherited the *aés dána* status.⁶⁸ The education that thrived in Ireland was able to foster learning of scripture, Latin, vernacular Irish, and the native culture, especially through myths. The work done in these new education centers meant that stories from the pre-Christian past were recorded for the first time, which provides the knowledge historians have today.⁶⁹ It should be noted, however, that any manuscript created in the monasteries was done under the authority of Christianity and the tales are likely revised in order to pertain to the Christian message. This can best be seen by the addition of euhemerism, in the opening of annals, law codes, and language texts, because the monks were trying to situate the new schools to times when other civilization, such as the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, were thriving.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, the incorporation of education from the *aés dána* cultivated

⁶⁶ McGrath, *Education*, 76-77; Students read the works of Plato, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Claudian, etc., the point was not to take their mythological significance but the literary importance. These works are known to have been studied because quotes from the works have been found in the *Life of St. Columba*, the *Life of St. Brendan* and numerous annals of the time.

⁶⁷ *The Patrician*, 103, 119.

⁶⁸ De Blacam, *The Saints of Ireland*, 60-61.

⁶⁹ Manuscripts such as the *Book of Ballymote*, *The Book of Leinster* and *The Book of the Dun Cow* are evidence of the monastic schools. They recorded the myths of the *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, *The Wooing of Etain*, and *Túatha Dé Dannan* which were orally transmitted before being recorded into manuscripts in monasteries.

⁷⁰ *The Dispersal of the Nations*, part I of *Lebor Gabala Erenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland*, ed. and trans. R. A. Stewart Macalister, (Leinster, Ireland: Leinster Leader Limited, 1984); *Introduction to Senchus Mōr and Law of Distress*, vol. 1 of *Ancient Laws of Ireland: Senchus Mōr.*, ed. John O'Donovan and W. Nelson Hancock, (Dublin: Hodges, Smith, and Co., 1895); *Acuraicept Na N-Éces: The Schools Primer*, trans. George Calder, (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1917).

learning on a broader scale, both in study and access, and lead to the synthesis found in language, myths, hagiographies and illuminated manuscripts.

Developing Language

Latin influence on native practices and Christian learning is found in the development of the Irish written language of Gaelic. In order to understand the development of Gaelic, the precursor of the written language Ogham must first be explored. Before the coming of the Latin language with Christianity the only written language in Ireland was Ogham. This was a complicated method of inscribing dash marks across a fixed line, into rocks which took a long time, even for short inscriptions. The formation of an inscription was related to trees, as the words and letters were named after trees and the resulting image looked like a tree with letters that dashed off from a base line resembling branches.⁷¹ As the process was hard, Ogham Stones were often only used as grave markers or landscape indications. Ogham stones have been found predominately in the south east region of Ireland, where over three hundred inscriptions exist, while roughly fifty others have been found in Britain and Wales — but only in areas conquered by the Irish, so historians consider the Ogham language to be predominately of Irish use.⁷² When Christianity brings the Latin language, Ogham begins to disappear and a new written vernacular language emerges.

A connection between the work of the *filí* and monks is prevalent in a text called the *Auraicept*, which traces the origins of Ogham and Gaelic. The *Auraicept* is found in *The Book of Ballymote*, *The Book of Leinster*, and *The Yellow Book of Lecan*, which were recorded around the twelfth to fourteenth centuries but based on manuscripts and oral traditions dating to the seventh

⁷¹ *Auraicept Na N-Éces*, 57, 89.

⁷² MacCanna, *Celtic Mythology*, 56.

and eighth centuries.⁷³ The original manuscripts containing the *Auraicept* were created in County Sligo and County Laois, where are in the north and south of Ireland showing a range of access to the manuscripts.⁷⁴ The book stated that Ogam, who was a poet, physician, and magician found in the Irish myth *Túatha Dé Dannan*, created the language during the reign of his brother Bres, a king of Ireland dated to the eighteenth century BCE.⁷⁵ This established the lineage of the Gaelic language that is created from the first writing system native to Ireland, Ogham. *The Auraicept* provides the origins of the Gaelic language in respect to Hebrew, Greek and Latin.⁷⁶ With a pseudo-historical placement of the Gaelic language alongside Latin it justifies the Gaelic language's place in the monasteries by making it as respectable as Latin. Additionally, the text is presented in the same manner of Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* and *Origins*, therefore it follows a standard used in Latin grammar schools, furthering its credibility in the Christian context.⁷⁷ Thus, the *Auraicept* shows an adaptation of the native culture with the language of the filí being developed and perpetuated in Christian education.

The Gaelic written language is an instance where the church is asserting its influence over the native culture. While Ogham was the precursor to Gaelic, it is Latin that the new language is modeled after. However, the *Auraicept* makes continual reference to the fact that Ogham was the language of the “learned” and “poets,” creation of written Gaelic, then, meant that the filí needed to know Latin to transcribe written Gaelic from Ogham origins into Latin

⁷³ *Auraicept Na N-Éces*; “Medieval and Earl-Modern Irish Language Manuscripts,” *The Library of Trinity College, Dublin*, accessed May 28, 2016, <https://www.tcd.ie/Library/manuscripts/collections/medieval-irish.php>.

⁷⁴ “Medieval and Earl-Modern Irish Language Manuscripts.”

⁷⁵ *Gods and Fighting Men*, 9; *Auraicept Na N-Éces*, 273; “The Earliest Period to the Year 1616,” vol. 1 of *Annala Rioghachta Eireann: Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters*, trans. by John O’Donovan, (Dublin: Hodges, Smith and Co., 1854), 23.

⁷⁶ *Auraicept Na N-Éces*, 13.

⁷⁷ *Auraicept Na N-Éces*, xxxi.

(Figure 1).⁷⁸ The *Auraicept* is essentially a Grammar book, similar to those of Latin found in the monasteries, but for the Gaelic language. As the *Auraicept* is so closely based off Isidore's writings, Latin grammar books are believed to have been commonplace in Irish monasteries.⁷⁹ The manuscript provided a guide to pronunciation, use of gender, active and passive words, and the origin of the language in reference to Latin.⁸⁰ Use of this manuscript in Christian schools, again shows the work done between the filí and monks, but also shows an attempt to incorporate the native Irish language, which was only orally preserved, into Christian learning.

Myths

The myths of Ireland help to create a picture of what the pre-Christian culture would have been, as they depict life from the Iron Age in Ireland. The *Táin Bó Cúalnge* is the longest myth that comes from the Ulster Cycle, which is most important and revealing cycle of the Heroic Age, equated to the same time period of the Iron Age.⁸¹ The heroic tales are best preserved in three manuscripts: the *Book of Leinster*, the *Book of the Dun Cow* and the *Yellow Book of Lecan*, of which the *Book of Leinster* provides the longest and fullest description of the *Táin Bó Cúalnge* that survives.⁸² The Ulster Cycle is based off the, supposedly true, heroic accounts of the King of Ulster and that county's most important warriors.⁸³

The most outstanding feature of the Heroic Age is the constant battles between the túathas, or small kingdoms, of Ireland in which a single hero valiantly wins such battles. In the

⁷⁸ *Auraicept Na N-Éces*, 13, 17, 273.

⁷⁹ *Auraicept Na N-Éces*, xxxi- xxxiv.

⁸⁰ *Auraicept Na N-Éces*, 27-49.

⁸¹ MacCana, *Celtic Mythology*, 97

⁸² *The Cattle-Raid of Cualnaga (Táin Bó Cúalnge)*, translated from *Leabhar na h-Uidhri and The Yellow Book of Lecan*, trans by L. Winifred Faraday, (Cambridge: Publication Medieval Irish Studies, 2002), 5-6; These manuscripts survive from the twelfth and fourteenth centuries but were based off long standing oral traditions and earlier manuscripts. "Medieval and Earl-Modern Irish Language Manuscripts."

⁸³ *The Cattle-Raid of Cualnaga*, 4.

Táin, for example, it is stated clearly that “when the men of Ireland gather in one place, among them will be strife and battle and broils and affrays,” insinuating that war is common for the Irish.⁸⁴ The hero, Cu Chulainn, does not lose in battle and is prophesied by druids to the opposition that “He will lay low your entire army, and he will slaughter you in dense crowds. Ye shall leave with him all your heads,” showing his ability to kill entire armies single-handedly.⁸⁵ Battles are recorded as beginning with a feast the night before as well as concluding with a feast where the best of food and drinks were provided for the soldiers and were hosted by the king and queen who led the army.⁸⁶ Furthermore, the *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, shows an intimate relationship with nature. The stories are used to explain the natural world with landscape features caused by the battles of men — fords, rivers, mountains and even strange stone markings are named for battles and deaths that took place on a given spot.⁸⁷ Animals are also given a prominent spot in the *Táin* this particular myth is based on a war raged to obtain the best bull in Ireland, but also the frequent encounters with deer, cattle, ravens, foxes and hares by the traveling warriors.⁸⁸ The myths show that in Ireland, while warfare was commonplace, so too were celebrations and appreciation of the natural world.

The transcription of myths in the early medieval period is a testament more to the work done by the *filí* and monks together than the meaning of the myths themselves. Prior to the

⁸⁴ *Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster*, eds. Cecile O’Rahilly (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1970), 144. Wars also take prominence in the early recordings for Irish annals in which entries of battles and subsequent deaths are only broken up when a saint is born or dies. *Annala Rioghachta Eireann; The Annals of Ulster: To AD 1131*, part 1, trans. Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983).

⁸⁵ *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, 144-145.

⁸⁶ *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, 140, 142.

⁸⁷ *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, 173-176, 187, 188, 191, 211.

⁸⁸ *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, 149, 169-170, 173, 182, 200, 267. Interactions range from circling around deer, wearing raven feathers as armor, living with animals and the queen who constantly travels flanked by different animals.

Christian conversion the conservation of Irish myths was the responsibility of the *filí*, who among many jobs was responsible for learning all the myths of Ireland's Heroic Age.⁸⁹ The *filí* passed their myths orally because they had no way of writing them down until the coming of Christianity which brought the written language of Latin. As the myths were recorded in Latin manuscripts it must be assumed that the monks and *filí* were working together, but no evidence survives with the exact details of how that work was done or to what extent. Irish myths were recorded by Christian monks, so it must be taken into consideration that the monks would have heavily edited the myths to coincide with the Christian consensus that the pagan religion was bad. Since the original myths were of oral tradition, there is no way to know the original message of the myths or to compare what the church redacted. The importance of the myths, like the *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, comes from the fact that they were written down at all, showing that the monasteries took steps to preserve the native Irish culture. However they were first told, the monk who wrote the surviving text stated at the close:

A blessing on every one who shall faithfully memories the *Táin* as it is written here and shall not add any other form to it.⁹⁰

This explicitly meant that regardless of how the myth was originally told the recorded version, approved by the church, was how it was supposed to have been transmitted from that point on.

Myths, such as the *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, exist in a pseudo-historical state, having many of the sites throughout Ireland explained and named by battles and deaths that took place in the myths. As the relationship between the higher levels of society and the church, the writing of myths can be seen as a cause done for that higher level of society, who still recognized and

⁸⁹ McGrath, *Education*, 37; Ó Fiaich, "The Celts I," 32-33; Byrne, "Early Irish Society," 60.

⁹⁰ *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, 272.

appreciated the pre-Christian past that the myths pertained to.⁹¹ If the church was trying to appeal to the upper echelon, adapting the pagan myths was a way to show that the church was willing to allow the traditions of the Heroic Age, which were highly valued, to continue. What resulted is that the myths became a historical account for how place names were granted rather than a perpetuation of the pagan religion; if historically contrived, the myths could continue into the Christian era. The church maintained their overall disapproval of the pagan religion by adding a disclaimer from the author:

But I who have written this story, or rather this fable, give no credence to the various incidents related in it. For some things in it are the deceptions of demons, other poetic figments, some are probable, others improbable; while still others are intended for the delectation of foolish men.⁹²

This maintained the stance of the church that pagan myths are full of demons and nonsensical elements but production meant the church could show cohesion to its supportive upper level of society while influencing the surviving pagan message within the myth.

Hagiography

The genre of hagiography for early Irish saints provided a context in which Christianity could prove itself to be the better option in terms of faith. Hagiographies pertain to writings involving the life of a saint, and cover an extremely wide range of topics and actions carried out by saints.⁹³ Saints are considered people who have already entered heaven and whom God often works to perform miracles through.⁹⁴ It is important to note that this genre of writing is not

⁹¹ While the commissioners of the manuscripts are unknown, books were extremely valuable so the only people who would have been able to afford to produce them and read them would have been of higher status.

⁹² *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, 272.

⁹³ Thomas Head, "Hagiography," *The ORB: The On-line Reference Book for Medieval Studies*, College of Staten Island, City University of New York, ed. Kathryn Talarico, accessed May 19, 2016, <http://www.the-orb.net/encyclop/religion/hagiography/hagio.htm>, 1.

⁹⁴ Head, "Hagiography," 1-2.

biographical, but rather stories which perpetuate actions which portray the sanctity of a saint.⁹⁵ In the case for Ireland, the *Vitae* of St. Patrick and St. Brigid provide context for native traditions existing in the Christian era as the saints essentially wield supernatural powers to show the superiority of the Christian faith over the pagan faith.

Early Irish hagiographies were stories of how the saints projected the message that the Christian God was superior to the pagan religion in a manner that was relatable for the Irish. For that reason, folklore and heroic traditions echo through the lives of saints who perform an exuberant number of miracles to literally and metaphorically battle the pagan religion and druids of the Irish. The *Life of Saint Patrick*, recorded by Muirchú sometime in the seventh century, depicts St. Patrick coming to Ireland in the fifth century and converting the entire island to Christianity. St. Patrick's hagiography is consistent with the Irish heroic tradition in that it blatantly provides a single savior for the former heathens of Ireland who are converted through the miracles of one man alone, St. Patrick.⁹⁶ Muirchú opens his *Life* by stating that Palladius, St. Patrick's predecessor, was not accepted by the Irish to even come to the island and preach, which would make St. Patrick's mission the only to reach Ireland.⁹⁷ By opening the hagiography with this statement, St. Patrick is placed as the sole hero, a concept the native Irish understood and

⁹⁵ Head, "Hagiography," 3.

⁹⁶ In the *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, the hero Cú Chulainn is more valiant than all the other warriors in Ireland and never once loosed a battle, even if his rivalry is almost matched in skill.

⁹⁷ *The Patrician Texts*, 73, 75, 77. Muirchú's version of Palladius' story is found to be untrue, for church foundation in the south of Ireland are related to the time Palladius was in Leinster. Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*, 304. Therefore Palladius was not rejected before coming to the island as Muirchú states.

appreciated from their heroic tales.⁹⁸ Thus the foundations of St. Patrick's deeds and miracles are established in the native heroic tradition.

Irish hagiographies attest to the greatness of their saints by the quantity and magnitude of the miracles performed, seen through the *Life of St. Patrick* and *The Life of St. Brigid*. The hagiographies depict miracles in a variety of ways in order to challenge pagan traditions. St. Patrick initiates pagan rivalry by lighting a fire before the fire of Tara for the celebration of his first Easter in Ireland.⁹⁹ When the King of Tara and his most powerful druids confront him for the act St. Patrick kills one of the druid's, by praying, which scares the others to run from him.¹⁰⁰ This early challenge shows that St. Patrick does not need to listen to the king or the druids because his ruler, God, is superior to all and works through St. Patrick. After the first encounter with the King of Tara and his men, St. Patrick has a battle with the king's second druid, to see which of the two has the superior supernatural power.¹⁰¹ St. Patrick's power is granted by God and untimely wins over the druid's power because the power of God is unquestionably greater. St. Brigid was given the same heroic treatment in her *Vita*, written by Cogitosus in the mid-seventh century.¹⁰² In this *Vita*, St. Brigid is seen gallivanting around Ireland on a horse drawn

⁹⁸ An Irish hero's most notable features are bravery, charity, intelligence, and the ability to accomplish the task presented to the hero. Most importantly a hero accomplishes their tasks alone and are received as the only hero in any particular tale. Hughes, "The Golden Age," 79.

⁹⁹ *The Patrician Texts*, 83. St. Patrick arrives during an important pagan festival at Tara. There was a rule that during the festival the King of Tara must light the first fire of the night before others could light their own. Lighting a fire before Tara's was punishable by death.

¹⁰⁰ *The Patrician Texts*, 89.

¹⁰¹ *The Patrician Texts*, 95. Many saints battle pagans in order to show superiority of their God over pagans, seen in "The Martyrdom of Perpetua, A Christian Woman in Roman North Africa (circa 200 CE)," in *Accounts in World History*, ed, Thomas Sanders, Samuel Nelson, Stephan Morillo and Nancy Ellenberget, (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), "The Martyrdom of Saint Alban and His Companions," in *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans., Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin Books, 1990). The difference here is that St. Patrick is not in a dream and he wins over the pagans.

¹⁰² "Cogitosus's *Life of St. Brigid the Virgin*," in *St. Patrick's World*, Liam de Paor, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1993).

chariot, the same warriors used in battle in the *Táin*.¹⁰³ St. Brigid, however, is capable of performing a miracle in which she can ride with a single horse, after one of her horses ran off, rather than two displaying her superiority over the native tradition.¹⁰⁴ St. Patrick and St. Brigid became the new heroes for the Irish so that the heroic tales the people valued remained, but they now focused on a Christian hero, not a pagan one.

St. Brigid provides a further example of how pagan practices were assimilated into Christianity as St. Brigid is equated with the Celtic goddess, Brigit. In the Irish myth, *Túatha Dé Dannan*, a disruption is given of a pagan goddess Brigit who is a poet, healer and smith worker.¹⁰⁵ Her features are characterized as having one half of her face beautiful and the other mangled.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, the name Brigit meant “fiery arrow” in Irish.¹⁰⁷ St. Brigid, who was raised by a druid, or *filí*, perpetuates the same features as the goddess Brigit. St. Brigid prays to have her face mangled so she can take her vows and her monastery at Kildare was renowned for its production of metal work as well as the continuously fueled fire in which the nuns watched.¹⁰⁸ There is no way to discover which figure existed first or to undoubtedly prove which influenced the other. However, the similarities of St. Brigid to a pagan goddess show that the church made a Christian saint to replace the pagan goddess — or a pagan goddess to resemble a Christian saint — widely worshipped by the learned class, since she was a goddess of poets. By providing a Christian replacement, pagan cultic practices for the goddess found a place in the Christian faith.

¹⁰³ “Cogitosus’s *Life of St. Brigid the Virgin*,” 214; *Táin Bó Cúalnge*.

¹⁰⁴ “Cogitosus’s *Life of St. Brigid*,” 214. In the *Life of Perpetua*, a saint from North Africa, she is seen taking on a role traditionally asserted to a man, as St. Brigid does when she rides on her chariot. “The Martyrdom of Perpetua,” 172.

¹⁰⁵ *Gods and Fighting Men*, 2.

¹⁰⁶ *Gods and Fighting Men*, 2

¹⁰⁷ *Gods and Fighting Men*, 2.

¹⁰⁸ “Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae”, 64, 67; De Blacam, *The Saints of Ireland*, 41, 54.

The adaptation of St. Brigid reveals the way that the church incorporated pagan elements into the Christian culture, instead of rejecting it altogether.

The early hagiographies also presented a folklore style that appealed to the native Irish oral literature. When St. Patrick is confronted by powerful pagan kings he often entices the use of animals to aid him, harking on the connection to the natural world the pre-Christian culture valued. To escape the King of Tara, St. Patrick disguised himself and his men as deer and when challenged by the King Coroticus, St. Patrick wins by turning Coroticus into a fox, both demonstrating folkloric miracle working.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, the alter at Armagh, St. Patrick's primary church, was determined by the sighting of a miracle doe on the spot and later his burial place is chosen by cattle who stopped in Downpatrick while carting his body, deciding the location of St. Patrick's grave.¹¹⁰ The frequent relation to animals relates the miracles to the folklore elements of the Irish because of the constant interactions with nature and wildlife. As a result Muirchú established the Apostle of Ireland as a better option to pagan religion, but also as a relatable figure through adaptation.

Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae also made St. Brigid appealing to the native population by producing favorable items among the natives from unfavorable conditions. St. Brigid's capability to frequently produce enough food for the needy, showed that the Christian God always gives to

¹⁰⁹ *The Patrician Texts*, 93, 101. Cú Chulainn was often referred to a "little deer" by his foster father and his chariot drive insinuating that deer were held in high esteem if their greatest hero was called a deer as a term of endearment. In Cogitosus's *Life of St. Brigid* he depicts a miracle in which an Irish king has a pet fox that was highly trained. The fox is killed and St. Brigid replaces the king's fox with a wild one who is able to perform the same tricks in order to save the man who killed the original fox. "Cogitosus's *Life of St. Brigid*," 215. In St. Alban's *Vita*, he too conceals a Christian from pagans, but only hides the man, she does not turn anyone into an animal, "The Martyrdom of Saint Alban," 52.

¹¹⁰ *The Patrician Texts*, 111, 121. Deer frequently appear in the *Táin* as reference to a hero, showing a high value from the culture. The basis of the *Táin* is to fight a war for a praised bull, again showing that society highly respected cattle if they were willing to wage war over it. As cattle farming is still an important feature in society, having the cattle choose St. Patrick's grave site still holds a strong message.

those who need and ask of God's help, establishing that the Christian faith provided more for the people. St. Brigid went a step further by turning water into beer, a clear distinction of an Irish saint providing an essential element of everyday Irish life, whereas other saints would turn water into wine.¹¹¹ By making beer, and often in abundance for all those in need, St. Brigid appeals to the wider mass of believers and provides what the *Vita* states as "exceptional," curative, miracle beer. St. Brigit's *Vita*, then, provides the hagiographer's choice to incorporate an Irish native custom and associate it with an Irish native saint to gain likability and respect for St. Brigit. Hagiographies placed the Irish saints as continuations of what the Irish valued of their leaders and heroes. This was achieved by providing the same services but better, and often on a grander scale, so the Irish would choose the Christian saints because the power of God made the saints superior to anything the pagan religion could offer.

Illuminated Manuscripts

Illuminated manuscripts contain critical evidence presenting a synthesis of culture, for it is between the pages of Christian scripture that a new artistic style was created from the existing one. The most substantial manuscripts that survive from the fifth to ninth century are *The Book of Durrow*, *The Book of Lindisfarne* and *The Book of Kells*. *The Book of Durrow* is one of the earliest illuminated manuscripts of Ireland, having been produced around 650 CE at a monastery founded by St. Columcille in Durrow, Ireland.¹¹² *The Book of Durrow* features art of both geometric images: spirals, ribbon interlace, knot work and zoomorphic images which intermix throughout the pages. By incorporating the art commonly referred to as "Celtic" art, by historians, archaeologist and art historians, shows that monks decidedly chose to adhere to the

¹¹¹ "Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae," 66, 67, 69.

¹¹² Calkins, "The Insular Gospel Book," 33

native traditions instead of the common Christian traditions found on the continent.¹¹³ The Book of Durrow was badly damaged during the period lasting from the Viking Wars through English occupation of Ireland, roughly the late ninth to the seventeenth centuries.¹¹⁴ The ink and vellum were most notably deteriorated when the book was dipped in water creating a cure for sick cattle in the eleventh century because the book was thought to be a tertiary relic.¹¹⁵ However, the images reflect the Celtic styles already common of the island and the carpet pages even resemble Celtic warrior shields dating to the Iron Age (Figure 2).¹¹⁶ *The Book of Lindisfarne* was written in 698 CE at the monastery of Lindisfarne, located in Northumbria which had been founded by monks of St. Columcille following the Celtic Irish model of Christianity.¹¹⁷ *The Book of Lindisfarne* perpetuates Celtic styles, especially when observing the carpet pages in which not a single space is left void of geometric designs (Figure 3). Likewise, the Celtic trinity spiral knot work displayed on the Xpi, or Chi Rho, page symbolizes the way in which Celtic traditions were used to understand the complex nature of the trinity to new converts (Figure 4). Thus the *Book of Durrow* and *The Book of Lindisfarne* employs Celtic designs for the developing iconography of insular Christianity.

The Book of Kells shows the way in which folklore elements were added to the developing insular manuscript art. *The Book of Kells* was created around 800 CE but its location

¹¹³ It is known that there was foreign influence for manuscripts at the monasteries because the gospels follow both pre-Jerome and Jerome sequences, therefore, there were examples from the continent as to the production of manuscripts. This means that the monks were aware of the artistic styles used as well as the layout on continental illuminated manuscripts. Calkins, "The Insular Gospel Book," 36, 49

¹¹⁴ Bernard Meehan, *The Book of Durrow: A Medieval Masterpiece at Trinity College Dublin*, (Boulder, CO: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1996), 13-14.

¹¹⁵ Meehan, *The Book of Durrow*, 13-14.

¹¹⁶ Meehan, *The Book of Durrow*, folio 192v, 64. The Iron Age lasted roughly 500 BCE to the coming of Christianity by 400 CE. Ó Fiaich, "The Celts I," 29.

¹¹⁷ Calkins, "The Insular Gospel Book," 63; Margaret Deanesly, *History of the Medieval Church*, (Florence, KY: Routledge, 1969), 43.

is vague as it was either made at the monastery of Iona then moved to Kells because of Viking raids, produced solely at Kells, or partially at both.¹¹⁸ The Chi Rho pages features all the images acquainted with Celtic art that is the geometric forms: interlace bands, knots, trumpet patterns, which are interwoven with birds, cats, fish, and monsters (Figure 5). Such images resemble the folklore traditions, as well as the everyday interactions related to nature and wildlife as seen in the *Táin Bó Cúalnge*. Furthermore, the colors used to decorate the pages resemble those the royalty and warrior class wore into battle, as depicted in the *Táin*.¹¹⁹ The use of bright colors in the insular manuscripts differs from the use of gold leaf abundant in many continental books.¹²⁰ The decoration of the Chi Rho page is the capstone for Christian and Celtic imagery for Irish manuscripts because it incorporates two very important styles of the time to come together as one symbol signifying Christ. The continual appearance of Celtic art in the aforementioned manuscripts means that the monks used the art, associated with the pre-Christian culture, so frequently it became synonymous with Irish Christian art. Within two centuries the illuminated manuscripts progressively embodied native traditions, both artistically and through the use of folklore. Illuminated manuscripts were of the most valuable possessions of monasteries and the presence of native elements attest to how respected the culture was, even within the Christian community.

Conclusions

The fifth through the ninth centuries was a time of unparalleled inclusion and development. The pre-Christian world of Ireland was accepted into the new Christian religion incorporating the existing society, in various degrees, instead of purging well-rooted Irish

¹¹⁸ “*Book of Kells*.”

¹¹⁹ The royalty wore garments of purple, blue, black, green, yellow and grey, *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, 139. The warriors wore green, red, white, gold and silver, *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, 142.

¹²⁰ Calkins, “The Insular Gospel Book,” 97, 102.

traditions. Likewise, the church in Ireland was founded by leaders with elite, political, and cultural ties to the pre-Christian society, and the Irish church therefore conformed to the customs the clergy knew were respected of the Irish past. A synthesis of both pre-Christian and Christian cultures ultimately created something new that borrowed elements from both ontologies and presented it as one. The new education system, written Gaelic language, Irish myths, hagiographies and illuminated manuscripts are the best representations of the synthesis dating to the fifth to ninth century.

Research on the conversion process helps to shed light on the realities of the Irish conversion instead of adhering to the concept of Irish Exceptionalism. Understanding that this process may not be unique for Ireland identifies the areas where there are differences from other conversions making those more prominent and relevant. Furthermore, this research identifies a culture which is still present in Irish society today and preserves that culture even further. Ultimately the pagan society and the Christian missionaries peacefully integrated through cooperation and adaptation and created new traditions during a time of change.

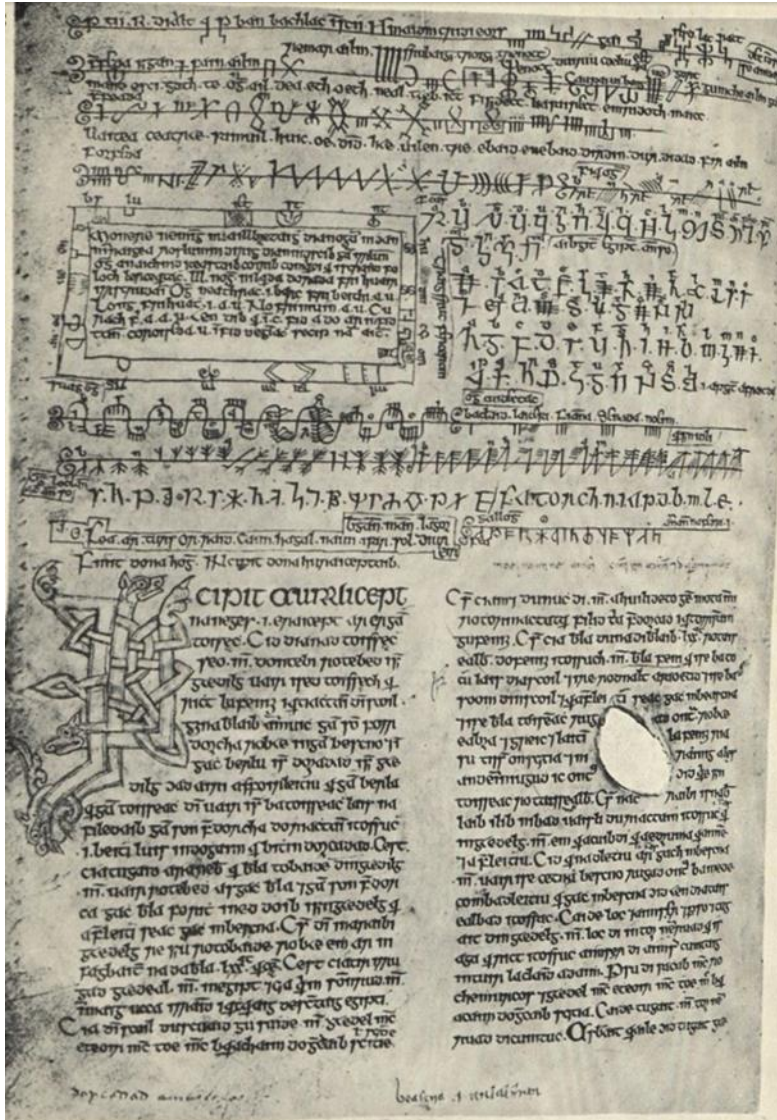


Figure 1: *Acuraicept Na N-Éces: The Schools Primer*. Translated by George Calder. Edinburgh: John Grant, 1917. 311.

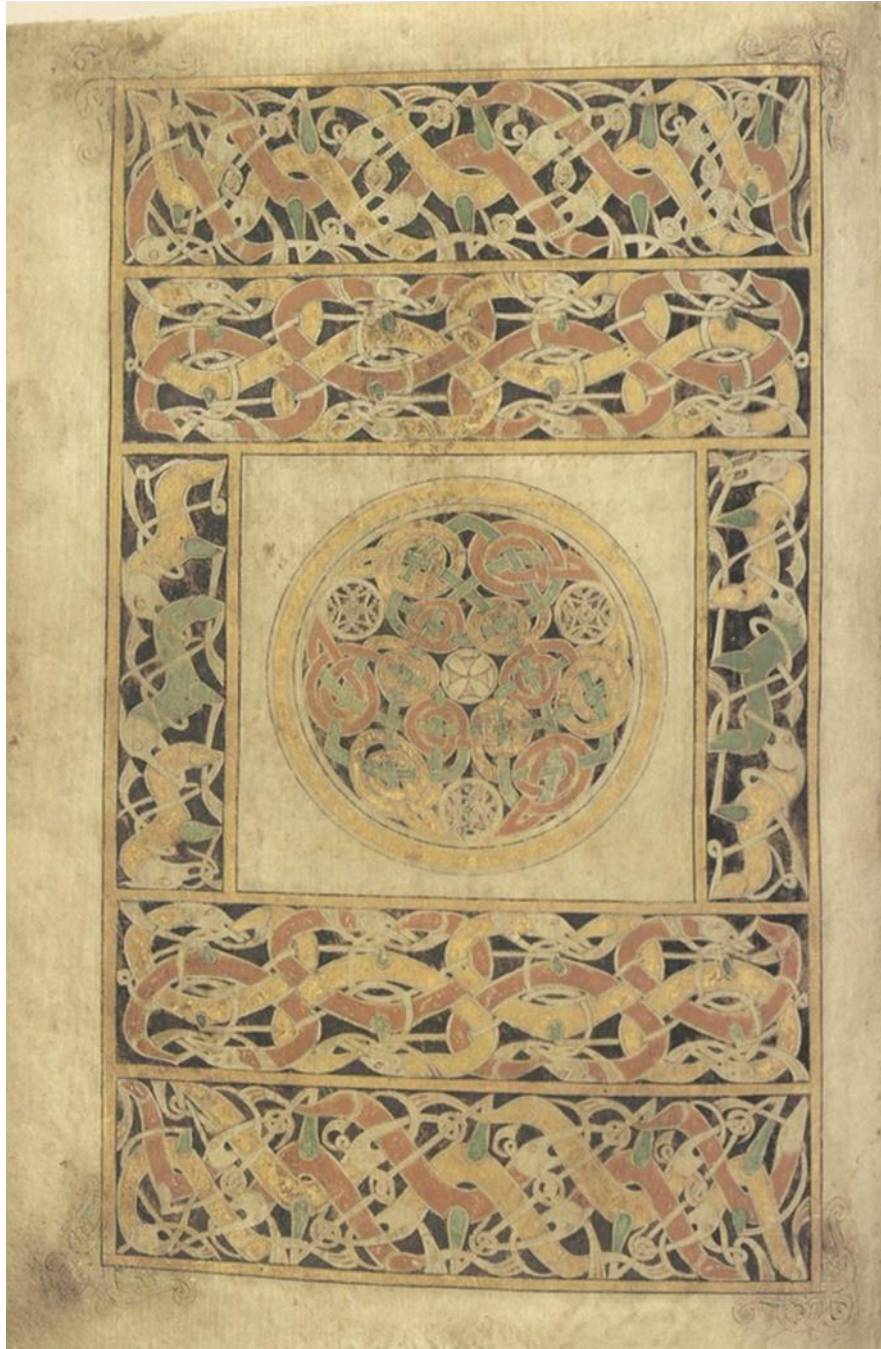


Figure 2: Meehan, Bernard. *The Book of Durrow: A Medieval Masterpiece at Trinity College Dublin*. Boulder, CO: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1996. 64.



Figure 3: Lindisfarne Gospel: St. Matthew, Cross Carpet Page. Circa 7th Century, British Library, MS folio 26v.
<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/tp/lindisfarne/accessible/pages9and10.html#content>



Figure 4: Lindisfarne Gospel: St. Matthew, Second Initial Page. Circa 7th Century, British Library, MS folio 29. <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/ttp/lindisfarne/accessible/pages11and12.html#content>

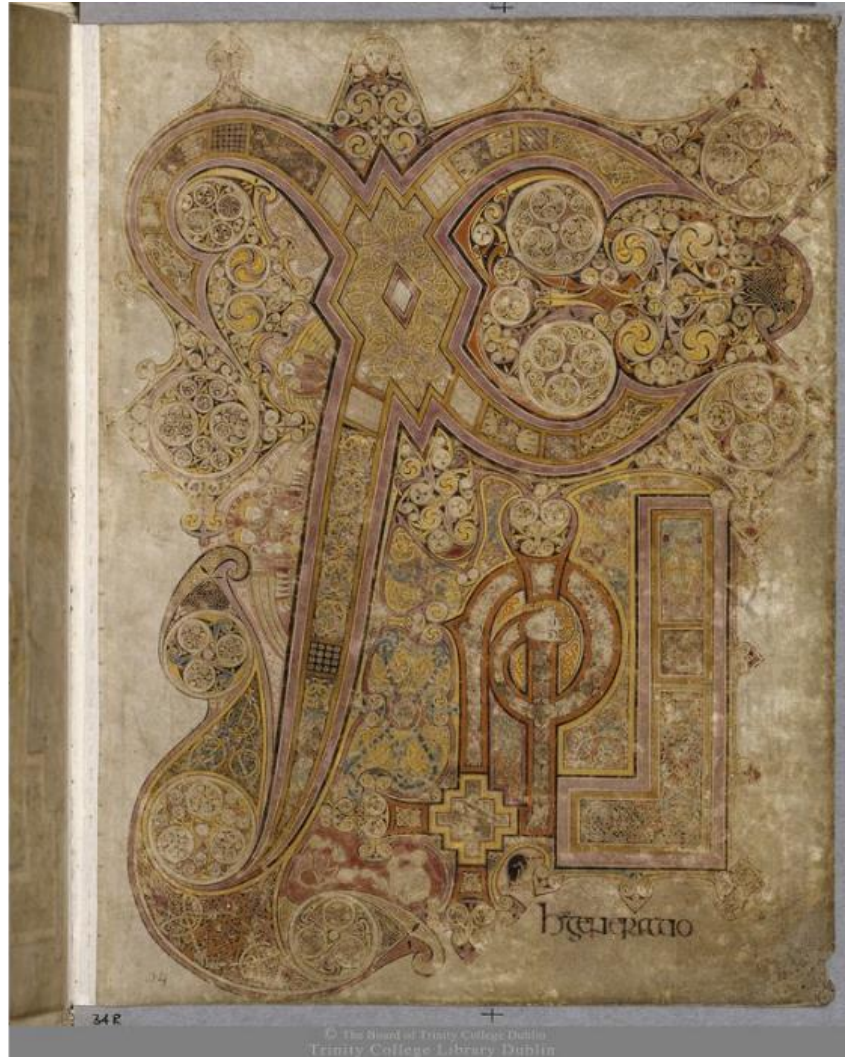


Figure 5: Book of Kells: Gospel of Mathew, Christi Autem Generatio. 800 CE, Trinity College Dublin, MS Folio 346.
http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/#folder_id=14&pidtopage=MS58_034r&entry_point=67

Appendix

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