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Ireland: Savior of Civilization?

Abstract

One of the most important aspects of early medieval Ireland is the advent of Christianity on the island, accompanied by education and literacy. As an island removed from the Roman Empire, Ireland developed uniquely from the rest of western continental and insular Europe. Amongst those developments was that Ireland did not have a literary tradition, or more specifically a Latin literary tradition, until Christianity was introduced to the Irish. Once introduced to the island through Christianity, however, the early Irish mastered the language with astonishing pace.

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Patrick Burke

One of the most important aspects of early medieval Ireland is the advent of Christianity on the island, accompanied by education and literacy. As an island removed from the Roman Empire, Ireland developed uniquely from the rest of western continental and insular Europe. Amongst those developments was that Ireland did not have a literary tradition, or more specifically a Latin literary tradition, until Christianity was introduced to the Irish. Once introduced to the island through Christianity, however, the early Irish mastered the language with astonishing pace. Irish historian Dáibhí Ó Cróinín even mentions that “Irish Latin writers were indistinguishable... from their continental counterparts.”¹

Indeed, the Irish were very adept with the Latin language. They were so adept in Latin and so well versed in Christian scripture and teachings that Irish missionaries began spreading to other parts of Western Europe to educate and teach Latin. A country which had been Christianized as late as the mid to late fifth century was, by the end of the eighth century, producing scholars and missionaries that were at least as educated and well versed in Latin as those on the continent, if not more so. Thus, missionaries moved to the continent for the purpose of spreading and preserving Christianity, just as Patrick and Palladius had done in Ireland centuries before.

This missionary work and all that built up to it is the subject of Thomas Cahill’s book *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, wherein Cahill attempts to prove that, by preserving, copying, and noting the Latin texts, both Christian and pagan, the Irish essentially saved civilization. Following the fall of Rome and the subsequent destruction of literary centers throughout Europe, the Irish, according to Cahill, surged through the continent in their missionary work, bringing with them the lost pieces of civilization. Cahill’s account, however, contains quite a few holes. Other than the glaring flaw that his definition of civilization is restricted to a Western European classical tradition, Cahill’s assertions rest largely on assumptions. For example, though information on St. Patrick is limited, Cahill still boldly states “As these transformed children of Patrick’s heart lay down the swords of battle... they very much remained Irishmen and Irishwomen.”² He not only makes assumptions about Patrick but of Ireland as a whole.

What, then, can be made of Cahill’s account? Cahill’s tendency to exaggerate or misinterpret what little information exists on medieval Ireland complicates the validity of his argument. His use of the phrase “saved civilization” their rapid mastery of the Latin written language, development of a Hiberno-Latin

1. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, “Hiberno-Latin Literature to 1169,” in *A New History of Ireland Vol. 1: Prehistoric and Early Ireland*, ed. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (Oxford University Press), 371.

2. Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), 148.

style, and subsequent missionary work on the continent permanently transformed Latin Christian culture in Western Europe, thereby making them a “Pioneer of Nations”³ rather than a savior of civilization.

Understanding how Ireland changed Western continental Europe requires an understanding of why Ireland was fundamentally different from Western, Roman Europe, especially in regards to literacy. Latin literacy was not introduced to the island until at least the fifth century with the advent of Christianity, and even then literacy was limited to the clergy and upper class nobility of society.⁴ The most obvious conclusion to be drawn, then, is that an oral tradition permeated all facets of society up to and beyond the introduction of literacy to Ireland, as it is the “sole possibility for the preceding period.”⁵

Early Latin literacy in Ireland, then, was incorporated into a society already well adapted to a pre-existing oral culture, unlike Romanized Europe. The generally accepted and widely believed origin of literacy in Ireland was the arrival of Christianity, namely through the figures Palladius and Patrick. Stevenson mentions that the first piece of continuous prose from Ireland originated from Patrick, a Roman Briton, in or around the middle of the fifth century.⁶ The late arrival of Latin is also consistent with the fact that Ireland was never part of the Roman Empire. Thus, an incorporation of Latin into a society already well adjusted to an oral culture necessarily resulted in a hybridization of sorts. A uniquely Irish style of Latin, and as a result Christianity, evolved.

Hiberno-Latin, a result of the hybridization between Latin and the pre-existing Irish oral culture, played an integral role in transforming Western Europe. This is, of course, not meant to suggest that Latin in Ireland undertook new forms or that it was even varied much from continental Latin. As Ó Cróinín states, “There were no dialectical differences, in the true sense, between the Latin written (and spoken) in Ireland and the lingua franca of Europe; and the vernacular influence on Irish Latin, which is sometimes claimed as substantial, never in fact amounted to much.”⁷ Rather, Hiberno-Latin or Irish Latin pertains to the ways in which Latin was learned, used, and propagated, especially in relation to continental Latin.

One such distinctive feature of Hiberno-Latin was its development under a largely monastic setting. As Ó Cróinín points out, Hiberno-Latin by the mid sixth century was rooted in a monastic setting nearly unique to Ireland. Although the Britons also partook in the monastic tradition to an extent, Irish

3. Eoin Mac Neill, “A Pioneer of Nations,” *Studies, an Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 11 no. 41 (1922), 13.

4. Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in early Irish Literature* (Co. Kildare: Maynooth Monographs, 2000), 5.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Jane Stevenson, “The Beginnings of Literacy in Ireland,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* vol. 89C (1989): 130. Accessed 1 December 2012.

7. Ó Cróinín, *New History of Ireland*, 371.

scholarship, exegesis, and other such Christian writings existed almost exclusively within the monastic setting.⁸ Monasticism would have implications for the future of Christianity both in Ireland and on the continent.

Unlike the continental church, the Irish church was dependent on numerous families who were often tied to specific churches and monasteries. Professor of history at the National University of Ireland, Colmán Etchingham shows that dues were paid “to the community which depended directly on the church as tenants.”⁹ Essentially, the early Irish church was regional in nature, making a uniformly applied diocesan structure difficult if not impossible. While this difference alone is not responsible for changing Western Europe, the fact that the Irish system was so markedly different than the rest of continental Europe would later influence the episcopal system on the continent.

The prevalence of the monastic system throughout Ireland in the early medieval period has a number of implications for the future missionary work done on the continent, during which the Irish would change the face of Western Europe permanently. The importance of the monastic lifestyle in Ireland during this time is not merely the fact that it was different. Ireland’s monastic system is important for what it did.

Life in the monastery was difficult. Frequent fasting, minimal tolerance for “idle talking,” and dedication to self-sustainment made for an extremely rigorous and focused scholarly endeavor.¹⁰ Because the lifestyle was so rigorous, the monks seldom had time to do much other than pray or work. From Adamnán’s *Life of St. Columba* to gospel copies, the monastery on Iona played a crucial role in not only reinvigorating the continent with important Latin material but also in forwarding society as a whole. All of these contributions were made possible by the educational system in early medieval Irish society.

The Irish contribution to the transformation of Western Europe is rooted in the unique educational system. Starting from the late sixth century and continuing zealously throughout the seventh century, the monastic schools embarked on biblical exegesis, Latin and Irish grammar, and even computational learning, none of which were assigned to any specific specialists as they would be in our time.¹¹ Rather, the many monasteries throughout Ireland, North and South, participated in all such scholarly activities.¹² The ability of these monks to grasp such a wide range of concepts, and then to further put them into practice through biblical exegesis, transcription, and a whole range of other things suggests a profound level of scholarly work inside these monasteries.

Equally as important is the Irish monks’ style of learning Latin. Essen-

8. *Ibid.*, 373.

9. Colmán Etchingham, “The Early Irish Church: Some Observations on Pastoral Care and Dues,” Trinity College, Dublin. (1991): 99.

10. Ludwig Bieler, *Ireland, Harbinger of the Middle Ages* (London: Oxford University Press 1963), 40.

11. Ó Cróinín, *New History of Ireland*, 377.

12. *Ibid.*

tially, the Irish were forced to devise new strategies for teaching and learning Latin to an Irish-speaking audience. What emerged was a highly sophisticated list of nouns, verbs, syntactical notation, and an overall emphasis on the basics of grammar and vocabulary memorization as opposed to the highly elaborate and elegant antiquarian grammarians.¹³ This unique way of approaching Latin is what is meant by Hiberno-Latin. Because the Irish learned Latin in a highly structured way, and because Latin was not the native tongue for the Irish scholars, Their Latin in many cases exceeded that of the continental Latin speakers and writers.

The complete deconstruction of the language also gave the Irish scholars an advantage when teaching Latin, as “the mysteries of Latin syntax and sentence structure could be graphically unraveled, adding to the effectiveness of oral instruction.”¹⁴ While better Latin does not necessarily indicate transformation for Western continental Europe, better Latin and an increased ability to teach Latin greatly facilitated the Irish monks’ spread of Christianity on the continent. The increased effectiveness of oral instruction also allowed the Irish monks on the continent to establish their monasteries, even in the face of resistance by the diocesan church leaders.

Beyond mastery, the Irish Latin writers are praised for their “remarkable skill in language, purity of style, and versatility of ideas,” while suggesting that their writing contains classical influences.¹⁵ This sentiment is echoed in Ó Cróinín’s writing, frequently referring to the Irish writers, Columbanus in particular, as “first-rate” or at the same level as their “continental counterparts.”¹⁶ Unlike the ecclesiastical Latin of the continent, Mac Neill’s suggestion that their writing contains glimpses of classical Latin implies a variation from the commonly used Latin and demonstrates a Hiberno-Latin used by the Irish. The Irish scholars, who were inevitably Christian clergy members, had acquired a firm grasp on Latin, both ecclesiastical and Classical, something many continental Latin writers could not even accomplish. Rather than merely preserve the Greco-Roman “civilization,” the Irish actually transformed it by using their own variation of Latin-based scholarship.

Numerous contributions by the Irish are evident even today. Of the most important contributions the Hiberno-Latin scholars made to continental Christianity was the use of penitentials. First used in Ireland, the penitentials eventually spread across the entire Romanized Christian Europe. Even Rome itself adopted the use of penitentials, and still the practice of giving penitentials exists today in the Roman Catholic Church. Alongside the penitentials, the early medieval Irish church established the conducting of private confessionals, a practice which was, again, adopted by the continental church.

13. *Ibid.*, 376.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Mac Neill, “Beginnings of Latin Culture in Ireland Part II,” 460.

16. Ó Cróinín, *New History*, 374-375.

The significance of both the penitentials and private confessionals demonstrates an incredibly influential Hiberno-Latin tradition. These instances, however, are only additions or minor, superficial changes. While incredibly important, the Irish were responsible for a much larger structural transformation on continental Europe, one which is based in the unique educational system of the Irish following the assimilation of Latin into their culture.

The missionary work of Irish monks was ultimately what transformed continental Western Europe. As previously mentioned, the Irish system was unique in that, unlike the continental system, Irish Christianity was hierarchically structured under a monastic system. This monastic system not only allowed the Irish to develop their grammatical, disciplinary, and computational skills, but also allowed for the creation of Hiberno-Latin on the island. Eventually, Irish monasticism began to spread to other Christian islands and to continental Western Europe.¹⁷ Cahill's suggestion that the Irish saved or preserved civilization simply by reintroducing classical texts and Christian ideology to a desecrated civilization is shown to be incorrect. The Irish, besides simply reintroducing recopied texts, introduced for the first time Irish monasticism and distinctly Irish ideology which remained on the continent long after the missionary period.

Columbanus' missionary work serves as an example of the long-lasting effects the Irish missionaries had on Western Europe. Although Columbanus is an exceptional case when considering Irish missionaries, his work abroad both spreading Christianity and establishing Irish monasticism on the continent emphasizes transformation rather than preservation of Western European "civilization." Columbanus founded missionaries across the Frankish and Lombardian kingdoms, establishing a firm Irish tradition in each of these areas. In fact, the Irish were so successful in affecting change on the continent that Columbanus himself was largely responsible for converting Duke Agilof of Lombard, the same man who would later grant Columbanus oversight and control of the monastery of Bobbio.¹⁸

Two of the most prominent monasteries founded by Columbanus, the monastery of Bobbio and the monastery of Luxeuil, demonstrate the transformation on the continent created by the Irish monks. According to Bieler, these monasteries were "in sense daughter-houses and were still connected to the Irish monastic tradition and Ireland itself but were recruited locally."¹⁹ This suggests that Columbanus' missionary work did not simply transplant a Latin, Christian tradition onto the continent but rather transformed the church system on the continent, a system which included Irish monasticism, an institution Bieler specifically mentions.²⁰ The locals themselves partook in Columbanus' Irish monastery, both in Frankish and Lombardian territory. In involving the locals,

17. Bieler, *Ireland: Harbinger*, 65.

18. *Ibid.*, 92.

19. *Ibid.*, 91-92.

20. *Ibid.*, 65.

the system becomes ingrained in their way of life, necessarily changing their previous manner of existence and thus transforming the continent. Irish missionary work, then, can be seen as the culmination of Ireland's Hiberno-Latin tradition, their complete mastery over Latin, and their uniquely monastic style of Christian organization.

Cahill's book *How the Irish Saved Civilization* fails to address many important topics. Besides ignoring Ireland's contributions through an Irish context, Cahill also fails to acknowledge that their Latin contributions were not merely for preservation purposes but were, in fact, transformative and invocative of change. The unique nature of the Irish church and the Irish scholars' development of Latin led to a completely different cultural phenomenon than that of continental Western Europe. Such a phenomenon was made all the more striking by the fact that Ireland was never part of the Roman Empire. Latin and Christianity were adopted and introduced on their own terms, without the infrastructures of Rome. The full impact of the uniquely Irish system was felt through missionary work.

Ireland, then, was a country which greatly affected change. Bieler even suggests that, amongst other things, the Irish contribution to society in the early medieval period made them "a harbinger of the Middle Ages. Not, to be sure, the only one, but one of the most effective."²¹ Bieler's view of the Irish was that they were so transformative and affecting of change that their contribution, amongst others, led to the Middle Ages. While this assertion may seem bold, even unbelievable, the preservation of Latin on the continent and a newly monastic infrastructure provided a standard for many disillusioned countries after the fall of the Roman Empire, thus providing the context for the Middle Ages. While the Irish may not have necessarily "saved civilization," their rapid mastery of the Latin written language, development of a Hiberno-Latin style, and subsequent missionary work on the continent permanently transformed Latin Christian culture in Western Europe.

21. Ibid., VII.