

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 60: How the Irish Were Saved

## Patrick and Celtic Christianity: Did You Know?

Things Celtic are the rage today, whether it's Celtic spirituality, Celtic music, or Celtic history. A September 1998 search on Amazon.com, an online bookstore, turned up 1,200 books that have something to do with the word *Celtic*.

A search of "Jesus Christ" on Yahoo.com revealed only 896 web sites, but a search of "Celtic" turned up nearly a thousand (976).

### The first Europeans

The original Celts were tribes that emerged from central Europe about 1000 B.C. and spread over much of Europe by 300 B.C. They shared a common language and, in large degree, a common culture—but not a common name. They were called *Keltoi* or *Galatians* by the Greeks and *Gauls* or the *Galli* by the Romans, who thought of them as a brutal, militaristic people.

Maybe that's because Rome, and Julius Caesar in particular, spent a lot of money and men repelling their incessant attacks (recorded in one of the most famous Latin works, Caesar's commentary on the Gallic Wars).

When the Romans finally proved victorious, the Celts retreated to what was then considered the edge of civilization: areas we now call England, Scotland, and Ireland.

### "You foolish Celts!"

The Celts who defeated Greek armies in Asia Minor liked what they saw and settled down in an area that became Galatia. It is possible that some of the converts the apostle Paul scolds in his letter ("You foolish Galatians!") were descendants of Celts.

### Peaceable kingdom

The Celts of Ireland were the first major people group to be evangelized successfully without violence. For a culture so reputedly bloodthirsty and "barbarian," this was some accomplishment.

### Patrick paradoxes

Patrick, the Catholic patron saint of the Irish, was so designated as a result of popular devotion and long-standing custom, not an official canonization process. (The Roman Catholic church has made official designation of relatively few patrons.)

Also, Patrick wasn't Irish but came to Celtic Ireland as a British missionary. He so loved the Irish, though, by the end of his life, he often made himself one, saying "We have been born in Ireland."

Finally, did Patrick really use the shamrock to explain the Trinity to the Irish? It is impossible to know

historically if he did or didn't.

### **Unidentified swimming objects**

The Irish Celts are famous for their story telling, and that's partly because of the countless legends and fables that have arisen about their saints.

Surrounded as they were by water, many stories had to do with the sea and sea monsters.

Brendan the Navigator celebrated Mass on the back of a whale, which he thought was a small island until it swam away. Columba is said to have confronted Scotland's Loch Ness Monster, the first reported sighting in history.

### **Punishment to fit the sin**

Celtic Christianity is renowned for its monasticism, and its monasticism for its rigorous asceticism, which resulted in, among other things, "The Penitentials." These were handy guides for abbots and pastors to determine the appropriate spiritual discipline for various offenses. Correct punishments for thievery, sorcery, lying, etc., were all detailed.

Close to a third of the Irish penitentials covered sexual infractions. For example, a cleric who lustfully dreamed of a woman had to live on bread and water for seven days—but it was six years of the diet for impregnating a nun.

### **Boston Keltics?**

Today Celtic language and culture are still alive in such places as Wales, Ireland, and Scotland. But confusion, at least about how to pronounce the name, persists. The French call them *selts*, Italians prefer *chelts*, whereas most of the English speaking world (except basketball fans from Boston) says *kelts*.

### **The CH Timeline: Celtic Christianity**

**390 B.C.** Celtic tribes (called the "Gauls") sack Rome

**58-50 B.C.** Julius Caesar is victorious in Gallic Wars. Surviving Celts retreat to British Isles

**415** Patrick born in Roman Britain's northern frontier

**430/31** Irish slavers capture Patrick

**431** Pope Celestine I sends Palladius to Ireland

**437** Patrick escapes, returning to Britain in the 440s

**460/61** Patrick arrives in Ireland as a bishop and missionary

**492/93** Patrick dies

c. **500** Brigit founds Kildare

**557** Columba leaves Ireland for Iona

**c. 590** Columbanus begins mission to the Continent

**597** Augustine, on a mission from Rome, arrives in Britain

**635** Aidan begins mission to the English at Lindisfarne

**664** Synod of Whitby: Celtic Christians agree to abide by Roman traditions.

**793** Vikings attack Lindisfarne, one of their earliest raids

**1014** Irish defeat Vikings at Clontarf

**1170** Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland.

***Patrick dates are the estimates of Liam de Paor, Saint Patrick's World (Notre Dame, 1993)***

### **"Interminable Fun"**

Irish monks belie the notion of monasticism as a joyless life separate from creation. In fact, Irish monks enjoyed both the created world and their scholarly task, as indicated in a poem written around A.D. 800:

Myself and White Pangur are each at his own trade; he has his mind on hunting, my mind is on my own task.

Better than any fame I prefer peace with my book, pursuing knowledge; White Pangur does not envy me, he loves his own childish trade.

A tale without boredom when we are at home alone, we have—interminable fun—something on which to exercise our skill ...

The job he does every day is the one for which he is fit; I am competent at my own job, bringing darkness to light.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 60: How the Irish Were Saved

## **Patrick and Celtic Christianity: From the Editor**

**A Tradition for Neo-Pagan Times**

Mark Galli

Celtic Christianity seems archaic, a Christian tradition exiled to an obscure past, when druids and magicians roamed the green hills of Ireland. Spiritual nostalgia hypnotizes us with the fabled heroics of Patrick and Brigit, of Aidan and Hilda, among others. But that very nostalgia, even if celebrated in the spirit of an Irish wake, seems to signal that Celtic Christianity is dead and buried.

And yet it lives—not simply in the New Age mysticism that reaches back to Celtic paganism for inspiration. An increasing number of Christians rooted in historic, orthodox Christianity are rediscovering the faith of the ancient Irish.

Take the Community of Aidan and Hilda, which recently started in the British Isles. These people describe themselves as "a body of Christians who wish to live wholeheartedly as disciples of Jesus Christ, and to express this in a way that draws inspiration from the lives of Aidan and other Celtic saints." They don't live together, but they do make common vows to live in simplicity (not necessarily poverty), chastity (that is, virtuously, whether single or married), and in obedience to God.

Their mission, they say, arises out of "a heart for the lost." They want to evangelize our neo-pagan age just as the first Celtic missionaries did their pagan age: by first creating communities that "develop a disciplined spirituality that will make us effective in our witness to Christ in the world."

Then there are all the environmentally concerned Christians, like myself, who find inspiration in Celtic prayers, which show a profound appreciation for creation without mistaking it for the Creator.

Others still find the study of Celtic Christianity historically fascinating. This branch of Christianity was not nurtured in a Roman or Byzantine environment but grew out of something completely different: Celtic culture and language.

There are some hurdles to studying Celtic Christians. Because of the many legends and fables that have sprouted up around Celtic saints, it's often difficult to get at the core history. Protestants quarrel with a few Celtic practices, like the hyperdevotion to saints, and some wonder whether Celtic Christianity retained some measure of pagan superstition. Despite the difficulties, though, Celtic Christianity continues to fascinate and shape believers from all traditions.

In terms of what exactly was unique about Celtic Christianity, you'll see different views expressed in this issue. Rather than edit unique views of diverse writers into a homogeneous whole, we let the diverse opinions stand.

Yet this is just another indication that Celtic Christianity is alive—as a subject of study, a topic of debate, and a Christian tradition that speaks to our times.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 60: How the Irish Were Saved

## Patrick the Saint

Behind the fanciful legends of the fifth-century British missionary stands a man worthy of embellishment.

Mary Cagney

A fleet of 50 *currachs* (longboats) weaved its way toward the shore, where a young Roman Brit and his family walked. His name was Patricius, the 16-year-old son of a civil magistrate and tax collector. He had heard stories of Irish raiders who captured slaves and took them "to the ends of the world," and as he studied the longboats, he no doubt began imagining the worst.

With no Roman army to protect them (Roman legions had long since deserted Britain to protect Rome from barbarian invasions), Patricius and his town were unprepared for attack. The Irish warriors, wearing helmets and armed with spears, descended on the pebbled beach. The braying war horns struck terror into Patricius's heart, and he started to run toward town.

The warriors quickly demolished the village, and as Patricius darted among burning houses and screaming women, he was caught. The barbarians dragged him aboard a boat bound for the east coast of Ireland.

Patricius, better known as Patrick, is remembered today as the saint who drove the snakes out of Ireland, the teacher who used the shamrock to explain the Trinity, and the namesake of annual parades in New York and Boston. What is less well-known is that Patrick was a humble missionary (this saint regularly referred to himself as "a sinner") of enormous courage. When he evangelized Ireland, he set in motion a series of events that impacted all of Europe. It all started when he was carried off into slavery around 430.

### Escape from sin and slavery

Patrick was sold to a cruel warrior chief, whose opponents' heads sat atop sharp poles around his palisade in Northern Ireland. While Patrick minded his master's pigs in the nearby hills, he lived like an animal himself, enduring long bouts of hunger and thirst. Worst of all, he was isolated from other human beings for months at a time. Early missionaries to Britain had left a legacy of Christianity that young Patrick was exposed to and took with him into captivity. He had been a nominal Christian to this point; he now turned to the Christian God of his fathers for comfort.

"I would pray constantly during the daylight hours," he later recalled. "The love of God and the fear of him surrounded me more and more. And faith grew. And the spirit roused so that in one day I would say as many as a hundred prayers, and at night only slightly less."

**On The Mountain. Legend holds that Patrick rang a large bell**

After six years of slavery, Patrick received a supernatural message. "You do well to fast," a mysterious voice said to him. "Soon you will return to your homeland."

Before long, the voice spoke again: "Come and see, your ship is waiting for you." So Patrick fled and ran 200 miles to a southeastern harbor. There he boarded a ship of traders, probably carrying Irish wolfhounds to the European continent.

After a three-day journey, the men landed in Gaul (modern France), where they found

(held in a reliquary, at the National Museum of Ireland) on the top of Eagle Mountain, now called Croagh Patrick. Depending on the legend, the bell scared away either Ireland's snakes or its demons. Patrick's other relic, a staff supposedly given to him by Jesus, was burned as an object of superstition in 1538.

only devastation. Goths or Vandals had so decimated the land that no food was to be found in the once fertile area.

"What have you to say for yourself, Christian?" the ship's captain taunted. "You boast that your God is all powerful. We're starving to death, and we may not survive to see another soul."

Patrick answered confidently. "Nothing is impossible to God. Turn to him and he will send us food for our journey."

At that moment, a herd of pigs appeared, "seeming to block our path." Though Patrick instantly became "well regarded in their eyes," his companions offered their new-found food in sacrifice to their pagan gods.

Patrick did not partake.

### **The prodigious son returns**

Many scholars believe Patrick then spent a period training for ministry in Lerins, an island off the south of France near Cannes. But his autobiographical *Confession* includes a huge gap after his escape from Ireland. When it picks up again "after a few years," he is back in Britain with his family.

It was there that Patrick received his call to evangelize Ireland—a vision like the apostle Paul's at Troas, when a Macedonian man pleaded, "Help us!"

"I had a vision in my dreams of a man who seemed to come from Ireland," Patrick wrote. "His name was Victoricius, and he carried countless letters, one of which he handed over to me. I read aloud where it began: 'The Voice of the Irish.' And as I began to read these words, I seemed to hear the voice of the same men who lived beside the forest of Foclut ... and they cried out as with one voice, 'We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us.' I was deeply moved in heart and I could read no further, so I awoke."

Despite his reputation, Patrick wasn't really the first to bring Christianity to Ireland. Pope Celestine I sent a bishop named Palladius to the island in 431 (about the

time Patrick was captured as a slave). Some scholars believe that Palladius and Patrick are one and the same individual, but most believe Palladius was unsuccessful (possibly martyred) and Patrick was sent in his place.

In any event, paganism was still dominant when Patrick arrived on the other side of the Irish Sea. "I dwell among gentiles," he wrote, "in the midst of pagan barbarians, worshipers of idols, and of unclean things."

### **Demons and druids**

Patrick did not require the native Irish to surrender their belief in supernatural beings. They were only to regard these beings in a new light as demons. The fear of the old deities was transformed into hatred of demons. If Christianity had come to Ireland with only theological doctrines, the hope of immortal life, and ethical ideas—without miracles, mysteries, and rites—it could have never wooed the Celtic heart.

Predictably, Patrick faced the most opposition from the druids, who practiced magic, were skilled in secular learning (especially law and history) and advised Irish kings. Biographies of the saint are replete with

stories of druids who "wished to kill holy Patrick."

**Pilgrims.**  
On the last Sunday of each July, between 25,000 and 30,000 pilgrims pass the saint's statue and climb to the top of Croagh Patrick, commemorating the saint's fasting there for 40 days and nights. Carbon dating of church ruins at the 2,710-foot summit has shown it dates from Patrick's day, supporting the legend that says Patrick climbed it.

"Daily I expect murder, fraud or captivity," Patrick wrote, "but I fear none of these things because of the promises of heaven. I have cast myself into the hands of God almighty who rules everywhere."

Indeed, Patrick almost delighted in taking risks for the gospel. "I must take this decision disregarding risks involved and make known the gifts of God and his everlasting consolation. Neither must we fear any such risk in faithfully preaching God's name boldly in every place, so that even after my death, a spiritual legacy may be left for my brethren and my children."

Still, Patrick periodically avoided such confrontations by paying protection money: "Patrick paid the price of 15 souls in gold and silver so that no evil persons should impede them as they traveled straight across the whole of Ireland," wrote one biographer.

Patrick was as fully convinced as the Celts that the power of the druids was real, but he brought news of a stronger power. The famous *Lorica* (or "Patrick's Breastplate"—see [I Rise Today](#)), a prayer of protection, may not have been written by Patrick (at least in its current form), but it expresses perfectly Patrick's confidence in God to protect him from "every fierce merciless force that may come upon my body and soul; against incantations of false prophets, against black laws of paganism, against false laws of heresy, against deceit of idolatry, against spells of women and smiths and druids."

According to legend, it worked. The King, Loiguire, set up a trap to kill Patrick, but as the bishop came near, all the king could see was a deer. (Thus the Breastplate has also been known as the Deer's Cry.)

There was probably a confrontation between Patrick and the druids, but scholars wonder if it was as dramatic and magical as later stories recounted. One biographer from the late 600s, Muirchoe, described Patrick challenging druids to contests at Tara, in which each party tried to outdo the other in working wonders before the audience:

"The custom was that whoever lit a fire before the king on that night of the year [Easter vigil] would be put to death. Patrick lit the paschal fire before the king on the hill of Slane. The people saw Patrick's fire throughout the plain, and the king ordered 27 chariots to go and seize Patrick . . .

"Seeing that the impious heathen were about to attack him, Patrick rose and said clearly and loudly, 'May God come up to scatter his enemies, and may those who hate him flee from his face.' By this disaster, caused by Patrick's curse in the king's presence because of the king's order, seven times seven men fell. . . . And the king, driven by fear, came and bent his knees before the holy man . . .

"[The next day], in a display of magic, a druid invoked demons and brought about a dark fog over the land. Patrick said to the druid, 'Cause the fog to disperse.' But he was unable to do it. Patrick prayed and gave his blessing, and suddenly the fog cleared and the sun shone. . . . And through the prayers of Patrick the flames of fire consumed the druid.

"And the king was greatly enraged at Patrick because of the death of his druid. Patrick said to the king, 'If you do not believe now, you will die on the spot for the wrath of God descends on your head.'

"The king summoned his council and said, 'It is better for me to believe than to die.' And he believed as did many others that day."

Yet to Patrick, the greatest enemy was one he had been intimately familiar with—slavery. He was, in fact, the first Christian to speak out strongly against the practice. Scholars agree he is the genuine author of a letter excommunicating a British tyrant, Coroticus, who had carried off some of Patrick's converts into slavery.

"Ravenous wolves have gulped down the Lord's own flock which was flourishing in Ireland," he wrote, "and the whole church cries out and laments for its sons and daughters." He called Coroticus's deed "wicked, so horrible, so unutterable," and told him to repent and to free the converts.

It remains unknown if he was successful in freeing Coroticus's slaves, but within his lifetime (or shortly thereafter), Patrick ended the entire Irish slave trade.

## **Royal missionary**

Patrick concentrated the bulk of his missionary efforts on the country's one hundred or so tribal kings. If the king became a Christian, he reasoned, the people would too. This strategy was a success.

As kings converted, they gave their sons to Patrick in an old Irish custom for educating and "fostering" (Patrick, for his part, held up his end by distributing gifts to these kings). Eventually, the sons and daughters of the Irish were persuaded to become monks and nuns.

From kingdom to kingdom (Ireland did not yet have towns), Patrick worked much the same way. Once he converted a number of pagans, he built a church. One of his new disciples would be ordained as a deacon, priest, or bishop, and left in charge. If the chieftain had been gracious enough to grant a site for a monastery as well as a church, it was built too and functioned as a missionary station.

Before departing, Patrick gave the new converts (or their pastors) a compendium of Christian doctrine and the canons (rules).

## **Self doubt**

Despite his success as a missionary, Patrick was self-conscious, especially about his educational background. "I still blush and fear more than anything to have my lack of learning brought out into the open," he wrote in his **Confession**. "For I am unable to explain my mind to learned people."

Nevertheless, he gives thanks to God, "who stirred up me, a fool, from the midst of those who are considered wise and learned in the practice of the law as well as persuasive in their speech and in every other way and ahead of these others, inspired me who is so despised by the world."

Over and over again, Patrick wrote that he was not worthy to be a bishop. He wasn't the only one with doubts. At one point, his ecclesiastical elders in Britain sent a deputation to investigate his mission. A number of concerns were brought up, including a rash moment of (unspecified) sin from his youth.

His **Confession**, in fact, was written in response to this investigation. Reeling from accusations, Patrick drew strength from God: "Indeed he bore me up, though I was trampled underfoot in such a way. For although I was put down and shamed, not too much harm came to me."

If Patrick was not confident about his own shortcomings, he held a deep sense of God's intimate involvement in his life. "I have known God as my authority, for he knows all things even before



they are done," he wrote. "He would frequently forewarn me of many things by his divine response."

Indeed, Patrick recorded eight dreams he regarded as personal messages from God. And scattered throughout his **Confession** are tributes to God's goodness to him: "Tirelessly, I thank my God, who kept me faithful on the day I was tried, so that today I might offer to him, the Lord Jesus Christ, the sacrifice of my soul. He saved me in all dangers and perils . ...So, whatever may come my way, good or bad, I equally tackle it, always giving thanks to God."

According to the Irish annals, Patrick died in 493, when he would have been in his seventies. But we do not know for sure when, where, or how he died. Monasteries at Armagh, Downpatrick, and Saul have all claimed his remains. His feast day is recorded as early as March 17, 797, with the annotation; "The flame of a splendid sun, the apostle of virginal Erin [Ireland], may Patrick with many thousands be the shelter of our wickedness."

### **Ultimate model**

It is difficult to separate fact from fiction in the stories of Patrick's biographers. It is historically clear, however, that Patrick was one of the first great missionaries who brought the gospel beyond the boundaries of Roman civilization. According to tradition, he had established bishops throughout northern, central, and eastern Ireland. Only Munster, in the south, was to remain pagan until a century after Patrick's death.

Patrick was the ultimate model for Celtic Christians. He engaged in continuous prayer. He was enraptured by God and loved sacred Scripture. He also had a rich poetic imagination with the openness to hear God in dreams and visions and a love of nature and the created.

He is, then, most worthy of the appellation **saint**, as one "set apart" for a divine mission. As such, he became an inspiring example. Hundreds of Celtic monks, in emulation of Patrick, left their homeland to spread the gospel to Scotland, England, and continental Europe.

It is a legacy Patrick was proud of: "For God gave me such grace, that many people through me were reborn to God and afterward confirmed and brought to perfection. And so then a clergy was ordained for them everywhere."

**Mary Cagney, a former editorial resident at Christianity Today, has written a screenplay titled A Celtic King.**

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#### **More resources:**

The best starting place to learn about Patrick is with his own words. Few doubt his authorship of the autobiographical **Confession** and his angry **Letter to Coroticus**,

available in several books, including a [new translation](#) by John O'Donohue.

The works are also available in [Saint Patrick's World](#)

by Liam de Paor. Combining primary source documents with an informative 50-page "introduction," it should be in the library of anyone interested in this topic.

If you're interested in more detail, check out the biography [In the Steps of St. Patrick](#) by Brian De Breffny.

#### **Links:**

The author of this piece, Mary Cagney, is a former editorial resident for the news department of [Christianity Today](#), where she wrote several articles on the [North Ireland](#) peace process.

St. Patrick's

**Confession** is also available [online](#), as is his [Letter to Coroticus](#).

Some time between the fifth and eighth centuries, a biographical hymn was written about Patrick.

Traditionally attributed to Fiacc, a fifth-century Bard, the [Hymn of Fiacc](#) is one of the few accepted primary sources for the life of St. Patrick other than his own writings.

Biographies of Patrick abound on the Web. There's a large one at the [Treasury of Irish Folklore](#).

There's [The St. Patrick You Never Knew](#) at

**American Catholic**, a tour company's [True Legend of Saint Patrick](#), and a [biography](#) that doubles as a rant against Catholicism.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Ending Human Sacrifice

How Patrick may have convinced the Celts to turn from ritual killings to the one who died for all.

Thomas Cahill

All early peoples sacrificed human beings. One has only to remember Agamemnon's sacrifice to angry Artemis of the most beautiful thing he possessed, his daughter Iphigenia. But this was a story of the Greek Iron Age, no more present to the Romanized world into which Patrick was born than public executions are to ours. For us, it is a strain to find **any** surviving elements of sacrifice—cut flowers, Christmas trees, vigil lights, and the Mass may be the last vestiges—but in the Roman world animal sacrifices were still offered.

It seems that at some point in the development of every culture, human sacrifice becomes unthinkable, and animals are from then on substituted for human victims. The story of the binding of Isaac in Genesis may constitute symbolically just such a turning point in the history of the Jews—when Abraham's God tells him it is no longer required that he sacrifice his only son but may substitute a ram instead. The Irish had not reached this point and were still sacrificing human beings to their gods when Patrick began his mission.

They sacrificed prisoners of war to the war gods and newborns to the harvest gods. Believing that the human head was the seat of the soul, they displayed proudly the heads of their enemies in their temples and on their palisades; they even hung them from their belts as ornaments, used them as footballs in victory celebrations, and were fond of employing skull tops as ceremonial drinking bowls. They also sculpted heads—both shrunken, decapitated heads and overbearing, impassive godheads—and a favorite motif was the head of a tri-faced god, for three was their magical number, and gods and goddesses often manifested themselves as three.

The Irish would have said here [in Christ] is a story that answers our deepest needs.

Why do human beings do these things? The psychological mechanism is not far to find, since there is probably not a reader—even the most convinced atheist—who has not offered from time to time an old-fashioned **quid pro quo** prayer: if you let me pass this exam, I will return to church; if you make sure my wife doesn't learn of my infidelity, I will give my next bonus to charity. The theology—the view of god—that lies behind these imprecations is of an arbitrary trickster, a bad parent who can be coaxed, flattered, and manipulated. If belief in such a god is strong and primitive enough, it is easy to see how it can lead to human sacrifice: **Here, take him, not me!** The impassive godhead demands someone's blood. **Let it not be mine!** And if we study the faces of the Celtic gods, we can have no doubt that only blood could satisfy most of them.

But we delude ourselves about the complex history of religious feeling if we think that all sacrifice—human included—can be reduced to this base motive. Whatever the Irish felt, we feel. For all the terror of the Celtic cosmos and the blood thirstiness of the Celtic gods, no human society could hold together for long if it understood sacrifice only along the lines of the savage tribe in **King Kong**, offering terrified beauties to the Beast.

This caricature is belied by the most direct evidence of human sacrifice that we have found to date—the prehistoric corpses of Tolland Man, Grauballe Man, the Borremose Man, dug out of Danish bogs in the 1950s, and an even more intriguing discovery recently made in a remote English bog. The Danish bodies may be Celtic; the English one—a man discovered in 1984 and dug out of the peat of

Lindow Moss, an ancient bog south of Manchester—certainly is, and may even be Irish.

These bodies all owe their amazing state of preservation to the chemical properties of the peat, which has leatherized the skin but left it otherwise intact, so that we can see every physical detail—even smiles lines around the eyes—just as we could have in life. All the bodies were sacrificed, and all the faces are at peace. In other words, all went willingly, one might almost say happily, to their sacrificial deaths—like Isaac, trusting to the last in the goodness of the sacrificing priest and, even more important, in the goodness of the father god.

That Lindow Man was a sacrifice there can be little doubt. His hands are uncalloused, his nails beautifully manicured. Thus, he was an aristocrat, though, strangely, he cannot have been a warrior, for his body shows no evidence of the scars of battle. Indeed, leaving aside for the moment the marks of his elaborate execution, he appears to be without blemish of any kind. According to British archaeologists Anne Ross and Don Robins, he was a druid prince who had come from Ireland about A.D. 60, as the Romans were asserting their control and expunging druidism. He offered himself as a sacrifice to the gods for the defeat of the Romans. Ross and Robins even think they know his name—Lovernius, the Fox-Man. Certainly, he had dark red hair and a full beard (like a druid, unlike a bushily mustached warrior) and wore around his left forearm a circlet of fox fur, the naked man's only adornment.

The most conclusive evidence that the bog men were sacrificed is the story their bodies tell of the manner of their deaths.

Each submitted himself naked to an elaborate, ritualized Triple Death. In the case of Lindow Man, for instance, his skull was flattened by three blows of an ax, his throat garroted by a thrice-knotted sinew cord, his blood emptied quickly through the precise slitting of his jugular. Here is the ancient victim of sacrifice, the offering made out of deep human need. Unblemished, raised to die, possibly firstborn, set aside, gift to the god, food of the god, balm for the people, purification, reparation for all—for sins known and unknown, intended and inadvertent. Behold god's lamb, behold him who takes away the sins of all.

Patrick declared that such sacrifices were no longer needed. Christ had died once for all. I'd bet he quoted Paul, his model, who in his letter to the church at Philippi recited this mysterious poem about sacrifice, the oldest Christian hymn of which we have record:

Though he possessed divine estate  
He was not jealous to retain  
Equality with God.

He cast off his inheritance,  
He took the nature of a slave  
And walked as Man among men.

He emptied himself to the last  
And was obedient to death—  
To death upon a cross.

And, therefore, God has raised  
him up  
And God has given him the Name-  
which-is-above-all-names,

That at the name of Jesus all  
In heaven high shall bow the knee  
And all the earth and depths

And every tongue of men proclaim

That Jesus Christ is Lord—  
To the glory of the Father.

Yes, the Irish would have said, here is a story that answers our deepest needs—and answers them in a way so good that we could never even have dared dream of it. We can put away our knives and abandon our altars. These are no longer required. The God of the Three Faces has given us his own Son, and we are washed clean in the blood of this lamb. God does not hate us; he loves us. Greater love than this no man has than that he should lay down his life for his friends. That is what God's Word, made flesh, did for us. From now on, we are all sacrifices—but without the shedding of blood. It is our lives, not our deaths, that this God wants. But we are to be sacrifices, for Paul adds to the hymn this advice to all: "Let this [same] mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus."

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#### **More resources:**

Thomas Cahill's bestselling [How the Irish Saved Civilization](#) and his latest book, [The Gifts of the Jews](#) are the first two volumes of his planned seven-part ***Hinges of History*** series.

#### **Links:**

For more on human sacrifice and religion, check out [The Gods Must Be Hungry](#) by

Jerry Adler.

For more on Lindow Man and the bog people, there's an interesting and entertaining article (with great pictures such as the one we use above) in the art magazine [Tension](#).

A slightly more academic treatment is available at the [University of Texas](#)

If you're interested in the preChristian Celtic world, Aedeon Cremin is director of the Celtic Studies Foundation at the University of Sydney, has put much of her textbook, [The Celts in Europe](#), online.





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## Rooted in the Tradition

Celtic Christianity is not as theologically unique as many have supposed.

Gilbert Márkus

Newly emerging churches nearly always recycle old, pre-Christian ideas to serve their new faith, stitching together the pagan past and the Christian present.

In the Mediterranean world, Christian philosophers reshaped neo-Platonism. In early Christian Gaul, thousands of pagan well-spring shrines were converted into Christian sites, while Pope Gregory the Great told the English church not to destroy pagan shrines but to reuse them, "changing them from the worship of devils to the service of the true God."

We see the same process in the early "Celtic" church Christians who spoke the ancient Celtic languages: Gaelic, Welsh, and Pictish. These first Celtic Christians wove their new-found faith in Christ into their ancient languages and cultures. Columba, for example, reportedly blessed a Pictish well where a malign spirit lived and turned it into a Christian place of healing.

What was the nature of the Celtic Christianity that emerged from this enculturating process? Today many moderns long to find something different in Celtic Christianity a beautiful spiritual tradition unlike the messy and compromised history of the larger Western tradition.

There is nothing distinctively Celtic about the sense of God's presence in the natural world.

But how different was it?

### Nature lovers?

"The bird which calls from the willow, / Lovely its little beak with its clear call. / Tuneful yellow bill of the firm black fellow / A lively tune is sung, the blackbird's voice." So wrote one ninth-century poet in Gaelic. This kind of writing is one of the most instantly attractive aspects to modern admirers of Celtic Christianity.

Celtic Christians have left us some lovely poetry celebrating the natural world as God's creation. But medieval Christians in England and Europe also delighted in creation. There is nothing distinctively *Celtic* about the sense of God's presence in the natural world. Consider Augustine of Hippo, seeking God in and through

nature's beauties: "With a great voice they cried out, 'He made us.' My question was the attention I gave to them; their response was their beauty."

Celts were also aware of the dangers of the natural world, as an eighth-century Irish prayer makes clear: "Deliver me, almighty Lord God, from all dangers of land and sea and waters, and from the phantasm of all beasts and birds and quadrupeds and serpents ) from lightning, thunder, hail and snow, from rain and winds, earth's dangers."

Saints are often shown having dealings with animals, yes, but such stories are not illustrations of some Celtic ecological consciousness. More often they were meant to demonstrate how God's grace and power were present in the holy man or woman.

## Not just monasteries

The early Celtic church had a strongly monastic element. From the beginning, Patrick had established primitive communities of monks and nuns, just as his contemporaries had in Gaul and Italy. By the end of the seventh century, abbots controlled monasteries and "families" of monasteries whose wealth, power, and influence were enormous. In some tellings, the picture, especially of Ireland, is of a church almost entirely composed of monks (and a handful of nuns) dedicated to work and prayer.

This view is partly a result of distorted evidence. There were no cities like those in Europe, which had powerful bishops who could support libraries and scholarship on an impressive scale. In the rural Celtic world, monasteries were the only institutions with the resources to create the manuscripts we now depend on. Small rural churches serving local lay populations left no such traces.

In fact, ordinary Christians and their ministers played important parts. Laws written around A.D. 700 show that bishops had a central pastoral role. The so-called Rule of Patrick mandates "a chief bishop for every tribe, to ordain their clergy, to consecrate their churches, to be confessor to princes and chiefs, and to sanctify and bless their children after baptism." Furthermore, the highly status-conscious laws give the bishop honor equal to that of the king.

The Rule of Patrick also describes the ordinary pastoral and sacramental roles of the clergy. They must baptize, "for there is no dwelling in heaven for the soul of someone who has not been baptized with lawful baptism." The clergy must also say Mass and give Communion, and they must pray for and bury the dead.

Lay people and their pastors, though they have left little trace in the great monastic writings, clearly abounded in large numbers. In Ireland alone, there are more than 6,000 place-names containing the element *Cill-*, the old Gaelic word for church.

## Praying with the Celts

Far from being culturally and religiously isolated from Europe, the Irish and Welsh prayed in Latin for most liturgical purposes, just as their Christian brothers did throughout the Western Church. We still have several Celtic manuscripts in which the prayers of the Mass, baptism, and anointing of the sick are recorded all quite similar to those in other parts of the European church. In monasteries, the psalms formed the core of common prayer and private devotion. Psalm 118 in particular, the *Beati*, was greatly loved and honored: "As a man at the foot of the gallows would pour out praise and lamentation to the king, to gain his deliverance; so we pour forth lamentation to the King of Heaven in the *Beati*, to gain our deliverance."

Alongside the psalms, biblical canticles (such as the Magnificat), and hymns both Latin and vernacular were popular.

Vernacular prayers we have more in Gaelic than in Welsh were less ecclesiastical in feel. They reflect a more personal or domestic use. Such prayers include praises of God, prayers to his saints, requests for protection, and blessings. Some even seem more like magical charms than prayers.

A prayer against headache runs: "Head of Christ, eye of Isaiah, forehead of Noah, lips and tongue of Solomon, throat of Timothy, mind of Benjamin, chest of Paul, joint of John, faith of Abraham: Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts."

## Cult of saints

Celtic churches are also said to have had a singular devotion to their saints. But in this too they are very much like their sister churches in Europe. A vast literature focuses on the spiritual powers of these saints and of their relics and the need for devotion to them. According to one eighth-century source, a certain man died and went to heaven: he had never done any good at all, except that "on lying down and rising up he recounted the saints of the world."

Particular saints were closely associated with particular places. Many great saints were also linked to powerful noble families, lending an aura of divine approval to whole dynasties. In fact, if a local saint was not already linked to a rising dynasty, his life story might be rewritten to give religious legitimacy to the new rulers.

## Unity and difference

Far from being different, Celtic Christianity was very much like the faith of the church elsewhere. And there's a good reason for this. A striking feature of early Celtic literature is its close connection to European writing.

The island monastery of Iona, for example, may seem exotically remote to many moderns, but it was fully immersed in the international theological culture of its age. By the early eighth century, the Iona library contained works by Basil and John Cassian, Jerome, Augustine, Philip the Presbyter, Sulpicius Severus, Athanasius, Gregory the Great, and many others.

Of course, there was also a great deal of what we might now call "folk Christianity" the faith of a largely peasant population as well as native poetry and lore. But monks and clergy were also great scholars in European terms and contributed greatly to international learning.

There were differences in detail between the Celtic Christians and their continental neighbors: church architecture, Easter dates, inheritance laws, and local traditions. But almost all the main features of early Celtic Christianity could be found anywhere in Catholic Europe, where every tribe and tongue and nation made the gospel their own.

The Celts found their own way of retelling the old story all the while sharing one recognizable faith.

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## More resources:

Gilbert Márkus edited [\*Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery\*](#) with Thomas Owen Clancy, who also wrote for this issue.

Markus also edited [\*The Radical Tradition: Revolutionary Saints in the Battle for Justice and Human Rights\*](#).

He's also known for his recent translation of Scotland's oldest law, the [\*Law of Innocents\*](#).

## Links:

If you like discerning between what's historical Celtic Christianity, and what's more recent invention, check out [\*Surveying the Saints\*](#), by Donald E. Meek (who also wrote for this issue.)

For a dissenting opinion, read [\*\*\*The Case for the Celtic Church\*\*\*](#), Allison Veronica Carroll's master's thesis at University of St. Andrews' Department of Medieval History from September 1993.

If you resonate with more modern admirers of Celtic Christianity, check out one of the better [Celtic Christianity](#) pages.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 60: How the Irish Were Saved

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## Ascetic Superstars

Irish monks and nuns are famous for their spiritual heroics.

Lisa Bitel

As a young woman, Íte refused her lunch so often that God sent an angel to bring it from heaven. But the seventh-century Irish abbess was not so easily turned from other ascetic practices. As a tenth-century commentary told it, Íte carried a huge stag-beetle in the flesh of her side, under her clothes, which gnawed upon her day and night.

One day, though, when the insect got loose, Íte's sister nuns immediately killed it. Their abbess sternly reproved them: "Where has my fosterling gone?" she demanded. "For that deed, no nun shall ever rule after me."

Irish monks and nuns such as Íte are famous for their severe asceticism. Even in the early Middle Ages, others marveled at the bizarre ways of the Irish.

Monasticism was unique in Ireland. It wasn't bishops in cathedrals as much as abbots in monasteries who set the pace for Christianity there. To understand Celtic Christianity, then, we need to understand Celtic monastic life, especially the ascetic marvels of Irish monks and nuns.

### The routine of devotion

Daily life in monasteries varied considerably. The most populous monasteries, such as Clonmacnoise or Kildare, were run by noblemen and women who had turned to the religious life—though sometimes abbots were married men with children, who also lived in the monastery.

An Irish monastery could be a single mud hut occupied by an aging hermit, or a little family farm with a small shrine in the back pasture, or a sizable settlement with hundreds of houses, churches, and estates. The greatest monasteries of Celtic lands were large villages peopled by priests, bishops, monks, and nuns—as well as their families, along with farmers, craftsmen, traders, pilgrims, and tourists.

The officers of a monastery were often kinsmen; nephews followed uncles in the abbacy, and brothers shared the responsibility of governing the community. When a noble family dominated a particular monastery or group of monastic houses, members were able to pass offices and ecclesiastical property to the next generation. They were also able to attract donations of land and goods from powerful relatives in secular life. In fact, rejects and losers from tribal politics—younger sons, leaders of less successful clans, or women—continuously filled leadership positions in Irish monasteries.

Unfortunately, aristocrats did not always leave their politics behind when they entered the enclosure. Monastic communities sometimes assisted their secular kinsmen in battle, and occasionally even went to war against each other. In 836 the monastic annals noted the monks of Armagh came down to Kildare and actually started a fight within the holy complex of Saint Brigit. One famous king of the province of Munster, Cormac mac Cuilennáin, was also a monk, bishop, and scholar; he was slain in battle in 908.

A monk's routine depended upon his status. Those who grew up inside the monastic enclosure were educated since childhood in the Psalms, which they repeated daily. They learned prayers, hymns, Bible, theology, church laws, penitentials, and the histories of their patron and other saints. They might also have training in secular laws, which monastic scribes copied, or in the poems and sagas and histories of his people. An educated monk might even become a poet.

Those less educated might be another kind of *manach*, which could mean both "monk" in the sense of a man in holy vows or just a laboring client of the men and women who prayed for a living—in other words, a farmer or herder living on monastic property.

Even if he were under vows, he might have had duties other than learning and praying. Irish monasteries are justly famous for the art they produced, including metalwork, sculpture, and illuminated manuscripts. Others took more mundane jobs. One early eleventh-century poet made a list of the different members of an ideal monastery:

"Psalm-singer, beginning students, historian (who is not insignificant), instructor, teacher of ecclesiastical law, head teacher with great knowledge.

"Bishop, priest and deacon, subdeacon (a noble course,) Lector, porter, swift exorcist, the excellent holy man is renowned.

"Erenagh, his assistant, vice-abbot, cook (proper and right), counselor, steward, alternate vice-abbot."

Women's communities were normally much smaller and poorer. The nuns had to do everything themselves, unless they had a couple of tenant-farmers to supply food, or pious relatives who made donations. They spun and wove, kept their huts clean, milked their cows, and made their own meals, which could be meager.

The only exception was Kildare, Brigit's double monastery of men and women in the south of Ireland, which had a well-decorated cathedral (in the Irish sense of a large stone church) and attracted pilgrims and other visitors.

"Who can count the different crowds and numberless peoples flocking in from all the provinces," demanded Cogitosus, Brigit's biographer, "some for the abundant feasting, others for the healing of their afflictions, others to watch the pageant of the crowds, others with great gifts and offerings."

Still other monks and nuns lived out their days alone, but not in the severe and austere life of ite and her kind. Instead, in small wood-and-mud huts, they kept a cow or two, and accepted gladly the gifts of an occasional loaf or basket of vegetables from local farmers. Their desire for a solitary life and time to spend simply yearning for God informed many an Irish lyric and must have drifted through the hearts of even the busiest abbot in the most bustling monastery.

Whatever their politics or other occupations, all the monks and nuns of early Ireland were familiar—either in life or through the exquisite poetry of their religious colleagues—with the lonely huts of the hermits. As Manchán supposedly sang in this poem of the tenth century:

O Son of the living God, old eternal King, I desire a hidden hut in the wilderness that it may be my home.

A narrow little blue stream beside it and a clear pool for the washing away of sin through the grace of the Holy Ghost.

A lovely wood close about it on every side, to nurse birds with all sorts of voices and to hide

them with its shelter . ...

A beautiful draped church, a home for God from heaven, and bright lights above the clean white Gospels.

### **Desert Fathers of the northern isles**

In the midst of this routine devotion, there was a passion for great spiritual achievements. The same zeal that inspired the monks of the Egyptian desert and Syria—which sent Simeon Stylites up his pole and caused the Desert Fathers to subsist on a few beans a week—drove many of these professional Christians of the rainy northern isles to fasting, intense prayer, sexual denial, and exile.

Fasting marked a Christian leader as different. What good was it to withdraw from society if one continued to resemble everyone else? The refusal of rations, in a world where starvation was common, was a special sign of self-denial and intense spirituality. Thus most monks and nuns refused meat and liquor, except on special occasions like Easter.

The particularly holy demonstrated even greater piety by denying themselves food for days at a time, or living on almost nothing. Coemgen, for instance, subsisted on grasses and water. Moling only ate when he entertained: "The holy bishop ... used to fast every day except Sundays and high feast days until sunset unless guests or pilgrims arrived." Comgall went further: he refused to allow himself or his monks to eat for days at a time, thus accidentally starving some of his followers to death.

Holy men and women were also marked by ascetic prayer. Coemgen, while munching his grasses, prayed for days on end, often in intensely uncomfortable positions. He once remained so still while saying his prayers that birds nested in his outstretched palm. Other times, he lay face-down in the mud while praying.

The Céili Dé (Clients of God: a group of reforming monks from the eighth and ninth centuries) were famous for their rigorous schedule of prayers.

One of their documents records about their leader, "He sings the Hymn to Michael before sleeping, and the Hymn to Mary in the morning. ... Afterwards he sings the Hymn to Michael as well as the **Beati** and **Hymnum dicat**, on Sunday at midday. The Hymn to Mary, however, he sings as well as the **Beati** on Sunday evening. This is what he performs: a hundred genuflections and a cross-vigil with the **Beati** and **Hymnum dicat** and **Unitas** or **Cantemus**. The cross-vigils he performs thus: Hymn to Michael with one cross-vigil, Hymn to Mary with the next, and so alternately."

In addition, the reformers were to have the Gospels read aloud at meals and to repeat all 150 psalms daily, along with several Paternosters (the Lord's Prayer). If monks felt like adding self-flagellation, they were welcome. One nun was famous for refusing to rise or sit down without chanting a prayer.

The Irish monastics were even more famous for sexual denial—not because they were prudish but because sexual behavior was one of the major means of identifying Christians in a barbarian world. Christians practiced monogamy (rather than the polygamy common in pagan Europe), avoided divorce, and shunned sexual intercourse for any purpose other than procreation within marriage. And their leaders were to be resolutely celibate.

A twelfth-century story about the much-earlier Moling tells how a laywoman of dubious morality approached him while he sat in the bath. The cleric prevented himself from sexual adventures by pinning himself to the tub with an awl.

Coemgen took precautions, too. Whenever he heard sheep bleating, he headed the opposite

direction, reasoning that where sheep bleated, shepherdesses lurked; where women were, so was temptation; and where temptation existed, do did sin and damnation.

The greatest ascetic achievement of the Christian Celts was their passion for pilgrimage. In many early medieval societies, exile was considered a horrible punishment. But Irish churchmen and women took up permanent pilgrimage voluntarily, leaving behind home, families, and even Ireland itself for the wilderness. Only by cutting themselves off from everything familiar could they truly devote their minds and bodies to God. Like Augustine of Hippo, the ascetic Irish believed that every Christian was an alien in the carnal world.

Yet, in the intensely local world of the first millennium, pilgrimage could be as close as the other side of the hill or behind the gates of the monastic enclosure. Nuns, for example, rarely retreated further than their isolated communities. One aged saint explained to Columbanus that she would have gone into permanent exile if she had been a man, but her woman's nature kept her home.

But nothing stopped men from taking up the staff and hitting the road, with Patrick providing the original example. Columbanus leaped over his mother's grieving body, which was draped across her threshold, in order to head for the Continent and a life founding monasteries. The most famous pilgrim of the medieval north was Brendan, the Irishman who set off in a boat and landed, after years of wandering the seas, on the shores of the "Land of Promise." Brendan's trip to the "desert in the ocean" earned him sainthood as well as fame in manuscript versions of his adventures that circulated throughout Europe for centuries.

### **No thoughtless devotion**

Not all Celtic monks practiced rigorous asceticism. Even the famous Céili Dé had its cynics. Maelruain, one of their superiors, remarked sourly of an enthusiastic genuflecter that "a time will come to him before his death when he shall not perform a single genuflection." In fact, the old hermit's feet seized up "on account of the excessive amount [of genuflections] he had performed in other days."

Still, those who practiced severe asceticisms knew their practices brought no benefits without heart. Though such practices could discipline the spirit, no mere genuflection, no arduous journey, could redeem a soul bereft of genuine religious devotion.

"Going to Rome is lots of effort, little profit," advised one poet; "You won't find the King you seek there unless you take him along."

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#### **More resources:**

Both Lisa Bitel's [Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian](#)



[Community in Early Ireland](#) and [Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland](#) are in print.

**Links:**

Lisa Bitel is also co-editor of [Matrix](#), an online collection of resources for the study of medieval women's religious communities.

One "fan" of [Celtic monasticism](#), Anthony Bradshaw, has devoted a site to the topic.

Examples of Celtic monastic outputs, including [poetry](#) and the [Book of Kells](#), are everywhere online.

Here's a site wholly devoted to [Medieval](#)

[book](#)  
[production.](#)

Interested  
in particular  
saints?

There's a  
wealth of  
sites and  
pages  
devoted to  
[Ite](#),  
[Coemgen](#),  
and others.

There's a  
group of  
believers  
online who  
are still  
trying to live  
by the rule  
of the [Celi](#)  
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Want to  
visit the  
ruins of the  
incredible  
monastery  
of Skellig  
Michael?  
Here's some  
[information.](#)

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 60: How the Irish Were Saved

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## Iona's Tough Dove

**Though named for a gentle bird, the ascetic Columba wielded enormous influence with chieftans and kings—even after he died.**

Thomas Owen Clancy

Scion of the most powerful family in the north of Ireland, founder of monasteries, and instigator of missions to the Picts and the English, Columba is undoubtedly the most important saint associated with Celtic churches.

Legends about him grew over the centuries, and many of the stories must be treated with caution. One of the more famous paints him as a sort of Christian sorcerer's apprentice, naughtily copying his master's precious psalter by the light of his own hand, and thereby sparking a major battle!

So too, hundreds of poems, some quite romantic in their descriptions of nature, others simple devotional verses, were attributed to the saint long after his death. Nevertheless, through the obscuring mists of his legends, it is possible to make out an outline of this key figure in the early Gaelic church. In fact, of all the Celtic saints, he is also the one about whom we know the most historically.

### Fox and dove

Columba was born of royal stock around 521, in northwestern Ireland's Donegal. Although destined for the church by an early age, his noble birth gave him insight and influence in the political world.

Legend tells us that his original name was Crimthann ("fox") and that when he was trained as a priest he changed it to Columb, ("dove"), later known to all as Colum Cille: "dove of the church." It has become something of a tradition in modern times to view the saint through the twin lenses of these names: the astute fox on the make, and the peacemaking and peaceable dove.

He apparently took part in a battle in 561 between his near and more distant cousins; this led to his exile and even excommunication for a time. Yet his biographer and successor, Adomnán, saw it differently, glossing over his excommunication, and telling us only that: "In the second year following the battle of Cúl Drebene, when he was 41, Columba sailed away from Ireland to Britain, choosing to be a pilgrim for Christ."

Despite the skeletons in Columba's closet, his efforts in Scotland reveal a man who had learned much in his 41 years, enough to establish a string of monasteries in the Inner Hebridean islands off the west coast of Scotland. This monastic system anticipated later orders such as the Cistercians and Carthusians.

Iona, a small island off the larger Hebridean island of Mull, was the fertile center of this system. Remote to modern eyes, Iona was at the hub of early medieval sea lanes that brought pottery and perishable goods north from France and the Mediterranean. Still, Iona was intended as a true monastery, a place set apart for Columba and his brethren.

Other island monasteries, such as one on Tiree, housed lay-folk serving out penances for their sins. Another island housed older, more experienced monks living as holy anchorites.

Iona, however, trained priests and bishops, and Columba's reputation for scholarship was great when he died (though we have little of his own work). From Iona, priests and monks ranged far and wide, founding churches in Scotland and seeking "deserts in the ocean" (lonely, distant islands).

## **Mighty monk**

Columba's legends give us a flavor of both the fox and the dove. *The Life of Columba*, by Adomnán, is packed with stories about Columba conversing with angels, sending an angel to rescue a monk falling from a roof, and being whipped by an angel to convince him to ordain God's (rather than his own) choice for king of the Gaelic colony in Scotland.

He is seen rapt in contemplation, seeing "with a mind miraculously enlarged ... the entire orbit of the whole earth and the sea and the sky around it." From these visions, he proclaims prophecies, sends monks to help distressed people, or prays to refresh his tired monks laboring in the fields.

Columba holds his own with kings. Though he prays for the military success of kings whom God has chosen, he argues with angels over their appointment. He faces down the king of Picts through his power, blasting him with loud psalms, throwing wide his strong oak doors, and besting the magic of the king's druids. He even defeats wild animals: a fierce boar drops dead on the spot, and a strange monster on Loch Ness runs from his power.

Though Columba's power is often depicted in entertaining form, his influence was in fact the key to winning over the kings of Gaelic Scotland, and his legendary powers were famous enough for his monks later to convince the Picts to convert.

After his death, Columba's political and military power became a key element in his cult. His relics were taken into battle by minor Irish chieftains and Scottish kings—one of his relics preceded the victorious Scottish army at Bannockburn in 1314.

One particular appearance, decades after his death, to the English king of Northumbria was pivotal in the history of Christianity in Britain. That king was Oswald, who had been raised in exile in Iona. As Oswald fought the battle in which he secured his kingship, Columba towered above the field promising victory, as one modern scholar puts it, like Batman over Gotham. In 635, Oswald sent for missionaries from Iona to renew the flagging Christianity of Northumbria with their monastic sobriety and good works.

## **Posthumous achievements**

Columba was a poet, scholar of wide-learning, monastic founder and leader, a visionary churchman. At the time of his death on June 9, 597, he was already celebrated.

Though more monk than missionary, Columba established churches in Scotland that went on, in time, to evangelize the Picts and the English. The legacy of the monasteries he founded, which drew constantly on the inspiration of their patron saint, multiplies many times the influence of the man himself. Fittingly, at the end of the *Life*, Adomnán has his hero ascend the little hill near the monastery on Iona, and declare;

"This place, however small and mean, will have bestowed on it no small but great honor by the kings and peoples of Ireland, and also by the rulers of even barbarous and foreign nations with their subject tribes. And the saints of other churches too will give it great reverence."

One way Columba's influence was felt after his death was the Law of Innocents enacted by Adomnán in 697. This law sought protection for non-combatants (in the midst of a militarized society) and for women (in danger from domestic violence, common abuse, and appalling labor conditions).

Adomnán's Law imposed strong punishments against offenders. It is a remarkable landmark in the history of law.

Adomnán records many tales of Columba as a protector of innocents, and these tales reinforce the stern message of the Law. In the most famous, Columba is a young boy, studying in a meadow with his tutor. A young girl appears, pursued across the plain by a vicious thug, who spears her at the very feet of the clerics. Appalled, the tutor cries, "How long, Columba, my holy son, will God the true judge let this crime and our dishonor go unpunished?" Columba calls down God's wrath on the killer, who falls dead on the spot.

It is difficult to summarize his accomplishments, but one memorial composed after his death does it better than most:

"He was learning's pillar in every stronghold,  
he was foremost at the book of complex Law.  
The northern land shone,  
the western people blazed,  
he lit up the east with chaste clerics."

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**More resources:**

Thomas Owen Clancy edited [Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery](#) with Gilbert Markus, who also wrote for this issue.

Penguin Classics still publishes Adomnan's [Life of Columba](#).

**Links:**

[The Columba home page](#), includes The Life of St. Columba by Adomnán (English and Latin versions), a bibliography, and more.

Adomnan's Life of Columba is available elsewhere in [English](#) and [Latin](#).

Columba's famous [rule](#) is also online.

Iona Abbey has their own page devoted to the [poet, prophet, and sage](#), as does Geoffrey O'Riada's [Celtic Orthodox Christianity](#) site, the [Ecole Initiative](#) and the musical group [Iona](#).

There's an official site for [Iona](#) (the island),

as well as  
an official  
[Iona](#)  
[Community](#)  
site.

Want to go  
to Iona?  
There's  
plenty of  
[travel](#)  
[guides](#) out  
there and  
stories from  
[past visitors](#).

To get you  
in the  
mood, here  
are some  
[images](#) of  
Iona today  
and an  
article on  
the [history](#)  
of the  
island.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 60: How the Irish Were Saved

## The Festive Abbess

Legendary Brigit brought joy and the burning presence of God.

Kathy Mulhern

"I should like a great lake of ale for the King of Kings; I should like the angels of Heaven to be drinking it through time eternal." So begins Brigit's prayer as recorded in an eighth-century manuscript. The prayer goes on to describe the party as one in which "barrels of peace" and "vessels of charity" lead to good cheer. Clearly, this Brigit was no ascetic. On the contrary, Brigit's style as abbess of Kildare was that of the perfect hostess, always welcoming the great and the lowly with equal warmth, serving generously and meeting every need.

This is but one of the many aspects of Brigit's life that scholars debate—some even argue she is a complete fabrication, a Christianized version of the pagan Celtic goddess of the same name. The historical Brigit is now impossible to recover in the forest of legend and fact that has come down to us. Still, this Brigit is the one who has been revered by generations of Irish Christians.

In many respects she is the female counterpart of Patrick and is beloved among the Irish as "dove among birds, vine among trees, sun among stars." She lived to serve Jesus by feeding the poor and vanquishing misery wherever she found it. Her fondness for beer is only an extension of her merry approach to life. Legend even tells us that she once supplied a man with an aphrodisiac so that his wife would find him irresistible.

Her inauspicious beginning—born out of wedlock in 454 and raised by a druid—only serves to reinforce the homeliness and sympathy Brigit is best known for. She embraced society's outcasts as her own family, and freely dispensed the grace that flowed through her.

Her generosity even extended to things that didn't belong to her. It is said her relationship with her father, rocky at times, reached a flashpoint over this. When he once left her alone in his chariot, Brigit gave away her father's sword. When he returned, his anger burned so hotly, he dragged her before the king. The king, too, was outraged and demanded an explanation.

Undaunted, Brigit declared that, were the king's riches and properties hers, she would give them all away to "the Lord of the Elements." Later, even her community would protest because of her generosity, Brigit kept giving away all they had to live on.

And there were other legendary complaints. Brigit (whose name means "bride") defeated the arranged marriage by pulling out an eyeball, apparently restored later; she snoozed through Patrick's sermon (though many accounts say their lives did not overlap); she cursed those who got in her way (a bad habit left over from her druid background); she embarrassed her companions by washing their guests' feet.

Nevertheless, everyone felt in her the burning presence of God loving all those within her reach, cherishing the lowly, making peace between enemies. This included having authority over men. As the story goes, her local bishop was reading over her the words of consecration as she took the veil. Suddenly he was overcome by God's presence and read instead from the service for ordination of a bishop, giving Brigit apostolic authority.



She is said to have directed one of the few known double monasteries in Ireland, overseeing both men and women. And Brendan the Navigator also recognized her divinely appointed role. When, in his travels, he met a sea monster who honored Brigit, he sought her out and asked her to hear his confession.

## **Druid conversion**

The stories of Brigit help us see the process of conversion in Ireland. Sharing the same name as a Celtic goddess, Brigit stands on the threshold between pagan religion and Christian spirituality. The goddess Brigit was a deity of fire; before the Christian saint's birth, a "fiery pillar" was seen near Brigit's mother. She is reputed to have hung her wet coat from a sunbeam. She could tame wild boars, and her blood could heal the sick.

Tangled as all these myths are, the symbolic transition from druidism to Christianity is made clear in the accounts of her childhood. Abandoned by her father, Brigit and her mother were taken into the home of a druid, who raised the young girl as his own. The druid awakened one day to find angels baptizing Brigit, and when she was grown, the druid returned her to her father and relinquished his claims.

Later her druid foster-father sought baptism himself and joined Brigit's company, establishing new ties of Christian community.

Brigit was an example of the Celtic respect for women's spiritual gifts and legal rights. As Roman traditions replaced Celtic ways and the authority of a woman became an institutional embarrassment, later hagiographers downplayed Brigit's influence.

Nevertheless, after Brigit died in 524, she remained in her people's memory as a spiritual leader of great humility and power, a woman of joy and deep compassion, a friend to those with broken hearts and broken bodies.

***Kathy Mulhern is editor of The Art of Tradition (Living the Good News, 1998) and Our Family Book of Days (Living the Good News, 1997)***

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### **More resources:**

Kathy Mulhern is editor of [Our Book of Days: A Collection of Family Memories and The Art of Tradition: A Christian Guide to Building a Family.](#)

### **Links:**

The full text of Brigit's "Heavenly Banquet" poem (quoted at the beginning of this article) is available [online](#).

Brigit is nearly as popular on the Internet as Patrick. There are two lengthy discourses ([one](#), [two](#)) on Brigit from the Catholic Information Network alone.

Here's the entry in the [Catholic Encyclopedia](#), as well as its entry for her biographer, [Cogitosus](#).

Or the [biographical sketch](#) from San Francisco's St. Brigid Catholic Church. And [another](#) from Geoffrey O'Riada's Celtic Orthodox Christianity site.

You can also read some stories of miracles attributed to her at [Tales of Brigit, the Mary of the Gael](#).

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 60: How the Irish Were Saved

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## I Rise Today

The most famous Celtic prayer shows why the Celts are known for exalting both creation and the Creator.

Patrick

I rise today  
in the power's strength, invoking the Trinity  
believing in threeness,  
confessing the oneness,  
of creation's Creator.

I rise today  
in the power of Christ's birth and baptism,  
in the power of his crucifixion and burial,  
in the power of his rising and ascending,  
in the power of his descending and judging.

I rise today  
in the power of the love of cherubim,  
in the obedience of angels  
and service of archangels,  
in hope of rising to receive the reward,  
in the prayers of patriarchs,  
in the predictions of the prophets,  
in the preaching of apostles,  
in the faith of confessors,  
in the innocence of holy virgins,  
in the deeds of the righteous.

I rise today  
in heaven's might,  
in sun's brightness,  
in moon's radiance,  
in fire's glory,  
in lightning's quickness,  
in wind's swiftiness,  
in sea's depth,  
in earth's stability,  
in rock's fixity.

I rise today  
with the power of God to pilot me,  
God's strength to sustain me,  
God's wisdom to guide me,  
God's eye to look ahead for me,  
God's ear to hear me,  
God's word to speak for me,  
God's hand to protect me,

God's way before me,  
God's shield to defend me,  
God's host to deliver me,  
    from snares of devils,  
    from evil temptations,  
    from nature's failings,  
    from all who wish to harm me,  
    far or near,  
    alone and in a crowd.

Around me I gather today all these powers  
against every cruel and merciless force  
to attack my body and soul,  
against the charms of false prophets,  
the black laws of paganism,  
the false laws of heretics,  
the deceptions of idolatry,  
against spells cast by women, smiths, and druids,  
and all unlawful knowledge that harms the body and soul.

May Christ protect me today  
against poison and burning,  
against drowning and wounding,  
so that I may have abundant reward;  
Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me;  
Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me;  
Christ to the right of me, Christ to the left of me;  
Christ in my lying, Christ in my sitting, Christ in my rising;  
Christ in the heart of all who think of me,  
Christ on the tongue of all who speak to me,  
Christ in the eye of all who see me,  
Christ in the ear of all who hear me.

I rise today  
in power's strength, invoking the Trinity,  
believing in threeness,  
confessing the oneness,  
of creation's Creator.

For to the Lord belongs  
salvation,  
and to the Lord belongs salvation  
and to Christ belongs salvation.  
May your salvation, Lord, be with us always.

—*"Saint Patrick's Breastplate,"*  
*Old Irish, eighth-century prayer.*

***Prayer from Oliver Davies and Fiona Bowie, Celtic Christian Spirituality: An Anthology of Medieval and Modern Sources (SPCK, 1995). Used with permission.***

## Patrick and Celtic Christianity: A Gallery of Extravagant Tales of Remarkable Faith

The legendary exploits of four early Celtic leaders.

Kathy Mulhern

### ***"The Navigator"***

#### **Brendan of Clonfert**

(484-577 or 583)

Brendan epitomizes the bittersweet Celtic path of *peregrinatio*, the passion for pilgrimage piercing the longing for home and family. Even his appellation, naming one of the communities he established, Clonfert, and the title he earned, Navigator, captures this dichotomy.

Though we know for certain that he was a prominent Celtic leader and a wanderer, most accounts of his adventures come to us through the *Voyage of Brendan*, written five centuries after his death. There we read that Brendan's travels, in the company of numerous fellow-monks, took him to many earthly and heavenly places, and ultimately to "the Land of Promise."

One account tells us that, as Brendan roamed uncharted seas, he encountered Judas Iscariot, temporarily released from his tortures on Sundays and feast days. Some even wonder if Brendan's travels took him across the Atlantic to North America. Extravagant as some of these tales are, Brendan's questing life symbolizes the spiritual yearning for the dwelling place of God.

### ***"The Waterman"***

#### **David of Wales**

(c. 520-589 or 601)

"Be joyful, brothers and sisters. Keep your faith and do the little things that you have seen and heard from me."

With these words, David (called holy Dewi by those who loved him) gave his final blessing to a city gathered to say goodbye. David typified the early Welsh attraction to the Eastern monastic traditions, and his story is one of renunciation.

In their ascetic path of restraint, he and his followers made sure their journey into holiness would not be tripped up by the "little things." Poverty, physical labor, and long hours of prayer characterized David's life and that of his monks. His nickname, the Waterman, came from his abstinence from alcohol. It may also be tied to the legend that, at Bath, he purified its contaminated water and bestowed upon its springs perpetual warmth for bathing.

Though severe, David's life, legend tell us, was replete with the miraculous. Angels foretold his birth, directed his work, served as his companions, appeared in his dreams, spoke to him of his impending death, and sang as they escorted him to heaven.

When Findbarr, a fellow abbot, was returning to Ireland via Wales, David gave him his horse and his blessing. These two simple gifts enabled Findbarr to cross the sea on horseback. Brendan, most

impressed by Findbarr's account of David's blessing, exclaimed, "Wonderful is God in his saints!" and planned to seek out this great saint. (Brendan and Findbarr met at sea, the one on horseback and the other residing temporarily on the back of a whale.)

In typical Welsh fashion, David reportedly traveled to Jerusalem, where the patriarch ordained him archbishop. This legend enabled his followers to promote his see in Wales against that of Canterbury as the seat of Britain's archbishop.

David's gift of spiritual acumen, revealed to his father 30 years before he was born, was recognized by all the British people and he became the model for godly living. At the council he called at Caerleon, he led the opposition to the Pelagian heresy (which held that people can take the first important steps toward salvation by their own efforts without Divine grace).

Early Celtic art shows David on a hill with a dove resting on his shoulder, symbolizing both the wisdom and the prominence accorded him. If even half the events reported of him are historical, David was a passionate and pious Welshman whose leadership skills and spiritual gifts deeply influenced early British culture.

### ***"Headless" monastery head***

#### **Comgall**

(c. 517-603)

"My soul-friend has died and I am headless ... for a man without a soul-friend is a body without a head."

So declared Comgall when he heard of the death of his confessor. This vivid expression reveals Comgall's deep commitment to community life as the way of holiness, a conviction that resulted in his establishing one of Ireland's largest and most renowned monasteries, Bangor.

Bangor resulted from Comgall's personal sacrifice: a local bishop dissuaded the young Comgall from pursuing his dream of being a missionary. The sudden loss of this closely-held ambition drove him into retreat, with a handful of companions, to a nearby island. There they entered a life of severe asceticism—so harsh that several of his friends died.

When Comgall emerged from this time of exile, he was ready to take on his life's work—the founding of Bangor. By the abbot's death, the monastery had fathered so many other monasteries that Comgall had 3,000 monks under him. One of his most famous students was the missionary Columbanus. Comgall tutored him for more than 20 years (before the young student's pilgrimage of penance and mission work), thus fulfilling vicariously Comgall's own youthful dreams.

### ***Jewel of Whitby***

#### **Hilda**

(614-680)

She was a dream come true for Britain—literally.

When Hilda was only an infant, her mother, Breguswith, had an unusual dream in which she was searching for her husband. In typical dreamy illogic, Breguswith looked under her clothing where she found a jewel that shed light over all of Britain. Hilda was that jewel for the seventh century.

According to Bede, she spent her "earthly life devoted to the work of heaven"—to the advancement of peace and charity, the eradication of economic inequality, an intimacy with Scripture, and the pursuit of good works. Her keen appreciation of the unique gifts and personalities of those under her direction

enabled her to recognize and empower the lyrical talent of Caedmon, England's first poet.

Hilda displayed mature leadership when she worked for the unity of the church even against her personal opinions. While abbess of Whitby, her reputation for wisdom led to the king's scheduling the famous Roman-Celtic synod there (see "Culture Clash", p. 38). Though Hilda favored the Celtic tradition, she yielded to the council's decision to adhere to Roman rites, and her example influenced others to do the same.

Her royal lineage turned out to be the least significant thing about her. Abbess of a large monastery, mentor to future leaders of church and nation, adviser to peasants and kings, Hilda was "Mother" to all who knew her. While Patrick receives no mention in the Venerable Bede's history, Hilda's life is told with honor.

—Kathy Mulhern

### **Missionary Inflexible**

***The handsome and hot-headed Columbanus was one of Western Europe's most successful evangelists ever.***

According to Columbanus's first biographer, writing a mere 28 years after his subject's death, "Columbanus's fine figure, his splendid color, and his noble manliness made him beloved by all." And therein lay the problem: "He aroused ... the lust of lascivious maidens, especially of those whose fine figure and superficial beauty are wont to enkindle mad desires in the minds of wretched men."

As a young man, he was afraid he was on the brink of giving in to such vain "lusts of the world," so he sought the guidance of a local female hermit. "Away, O youth, away!" she advised. "Flee from corruption, into which, as you know, many have fallen." Columbanus left, shaken, to pack his things to take up the monastic life. When he told his mother he was leaving, she became so distraught, she blocked the doorway. But Columbanus was undeterred, "leaping over both threshold and mother."

Thus began the peripatetic life of one of the most successful missionaries in history.

Columbanus continued his studies with Comgall of Bangor, whose monastery was famous for its rigidity. Not only did Columbanus thrive there, but he codified such austerity into two rules for monasteries—one for individual monks, the other for communities. These rules could be extremely harsh: merely desiring to hit someone meant 40 days on bread and water. Actually hitting someone (and drawing blood) meant penance for three years. Even speaking ill of the rules meant exile from the community.

Yet Columbanus had another side, which some of his sermons and letters suggest. A letter to Pope Boniface IV is loaded with puns about the previous pope, Vigilius: "Be vigilant, I urge you, pope, be vigilant and again I say be vigilant, since perhaps he who was called Vigilant was not." In a letter to Gregory the Great, he made puns on Pope Leo's name: "A living dog is better than a dead Leo [lion]." Columbanus is also credited with a spirited "Boat Song" which was chanted by monks rowing up the "two-horned Rhine."

As playful as he could be, Columbanus was painfully serious about his faith. In his 40s, he left Bangor to follow God's command, which was the same command given to Abraham: "Get thee out of thy country." With 12 companions, he left for Gaul, large parts of which had reverted to paganism (and the remaining Christians were likely nominal or Arian heretics). He founded three monasteries in rapid succession—An negray, Luxeuil, and Fontaine—each one growing so quickly new ones had to be created.

Before he could build many more, he had a run-in with the polygamous king, Theuderic, and his mother, Brunhilde, and was thrown out of the country. It wasn't the only dispute in the hot-blooded monk's life.



He feuded with popes, kings, bishops, and even his own followers. (After Gall, one of his most faithful disciples, became ill and could not travel, Columbanus forbade him to say Mass. The ban was not lifted until Columbanus was on his deathbed.)

Columbanus and his men roamed the continent, preaching in what would become France, Germany, and Switzerland. Finally, he traveled to Northern Italy to convert the Lombards. There, in his 70s, he took part in the construction of Bobbio, the first Italo-Irish monastery, where he died November 23, 613. His legacy was extraordinary: He and his disciples founded at least 60—and possibly more than 100—monasteries throughout Europe.

—*Ted Olsen, assistant editor*

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### **More resources:**

Kathy Mulhern is editor of [Our Book of Days: A Collection of Family Memories and The Art of Tradition: A Christian Guide to Building a Family.](#)

### **Links:**

Did Brendan really discover America? Daniel Sullivan, the author of ["St. Brendan's Isle,"](#) seems to think so.

More Brendan pages are available at the [Ecole Initiative](#), [Who was Brendan the Navigator?](#) and the [Catholic Encyclopedia.](#)  
An

exceptionally good [biographical sketch](#) is located on the Tara Music Company's site.

Geoffrey O'Riada's Celtic Orthodox Christianity site has a bio of [David of Wales](#). There's [another one](#) from a Welsh tour company.

The ***Catholic Encyclopedia*** has [Comgall](#) covered, and his [Bangor Abbey](#) has its own home page.

The ***Catholic Encyclopedia*** also covers [Hilda of Whitby](#), of course (if it's an important character from the middle ages, you can bet it's in the ***Catholic Encyclopedia***). So does James Kiefer's [Christian Biographies](#) site.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 60: How the Irish Were Saved

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## Be Thou My Vision

One of today's popular hymns began as a medieval Irish prayer.

James D. Smith III

Millions worldwide have found in the humble prayer text and lyric tune "Be Thou My Vision" a vehicle for praise and worship. It offers a singular voice of fierce devotion rooted in medieval Celtic Christianity that is still relevant today.

The eighth-century prayer was composed in Old Irish:

Rob tu mo bhoile,  
a Comdi cride.  
Ni ni nech aile,  
acht ri secht nime ...

Only in this century did this text find its English translation. Mary Byrne rendered it into literal English prose in 1905:

Be thou my vision,  
O Lord of my heart.  
None other is aught  
but the King of the seven heavens.

Be thou my meditation  
by day and night;  
May it be thou that I behold  
even in my sleep.

Be thou my speech,  
be thou my understanding,  
Be thou with me,  
be I with thee.

Be thou my father,  
be I thy son.  
Mayst thou be mine,  
may I be thine.

Be thou my battle-shield,  
be thou my sword.  
Be thou my dignity,  
be thou my delight.

Be thou my shelter,  
be thou my stronghold.  
Mayst thou raise me up  
to the company of the angels.

**Be** thou every good  
to my body and soul.  
Be thou my kingdom  
in heaven and on earth.

**Be** thou solely  
chief love of my heart.  
Let there be none other,  
O high King of Heaven.

**Till** I am able  
to pass into thy hands,  
My treasure, my beloved,  
through the greatness of thy love.

**Be** thou alone  
my noble and wondrous estate.  
I seek not men,  
nor lifeless wealth.

**Be** thou the constant guardian  
of every possession and every life.  
For our corrupt desires are dead  
at the mere sight of thee.

**Thy** love in my soul  
and in my heart—  
Grant this to me,  
O King of the seven heavens.

**O** King of the seven heavens  
grant me this—  
Thy love to be in my heart  
and in my soul.

**With** the King of all, with him  
after victory won by piety  
May I be in the kingdom of heaven  
O brightness of the son.

**Beloved** Father,  
hear, hear my lamentations;  
Timely is the cry of woe  
of this miserable wretch.

**O** heart of my heart,  
whate'er befall me,  
O ruler of all,  
be thou my vision.

It remained for Eleanor M. Hull, in her 1912 *Poem Book of the Gael* to offer a metrical, poetic version of Byrne's work in twelve rhymed couplets that have been used by editors since to arrive at versions of the four-stanza hymn so widely treasured today.

Concurrently, Patrick W. Joyce was publishing the traditional tune SLANE (named for a hill near Tara where St. Patrick challenged druid priests in lighting the paschal fire). Thus paired with the English text,

the "Be Thou My Vision" sung today first appeared in the Irish ***Church Hymnal*** in 1919.

***James D. Smith III is pastor of Clairemont Emmanuel Baptist Church in San Diego, and an editorial adviser for Christian History.***

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### **Links:**

Have a midi player? (If you have Windows 95 or 98, the answer is yes.) Listen to the hymn [online](#).

***James Smith, an adviser for Christian History, is also a fan of baseball history. He has published articles on baseball history in the Biographical Dictionary of American Sports, The National Pastime, and Baseball Research Journal. His article "This Was Paradise: Voices of the Pacific Coast League Padres, 1936-1958" was published in the Journal of San Diego History.***



# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 60: How the Irish Were Saved

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## Culture Clash

**What happened when Roman and Celtic Christianity squared off at the Synod of Whitby?**

Louise Elaine Burton

In A.D. 603, Celtic Christians of the British Isles had a vexing problem. Augustine, a Christian missionary, had recently arrived on their shores from Rome and not only condemned some of their Christian practices but demanded they submit to his authority.

In their perplexity, seven British bishops and other learned men consulted a "wise and prudent hermit." Should they abandon their own traditions and submit to the missionary?

"If he is a man of God, follow him," the hermit answered. "If Augustine is meek and lowly in heart, it shows that he bears the yoke of Christ himself, and offers it to you."

The bishops inquired further, "How can we know even this?"

"If he rises courteously as you approach, rest assured that he is the servant of Christ and do as he asks. But if he ignores you and does not rise, then, since you are in the majority, do not comply with his demands."

When the bishops and Augustine met again, Augustine did not rise; the meeting was a failure. The Celtic bishops refused to recognize Augustine as their archbishop, and Augustine prophesied the deaths of the Celtic bishops.

This was definitely a low point in the history of cross-cultural communication, and it illustrates a gap that existed between the Celtic and Roman churches.

The missionary, later known as Augustine of Canterbury (not to be confused with the more famous Augustine of Hippo) had been sent by Pope Gregory I in 596 to convert the pagan Angle and Saxon invaders of Britain. Augustine was prepared for pagans but not for other Christians.

Two centuries earlier, while Goths and Visigoths sacked the continent, Angles and Saxons overran Britain and nearly wiped out the Celtic church in what is now England. Christians were slaughtered, enslaved, or driven to the edges of the British Isles. Communication between the Celts and the rest of the world was broken. The church that remained, primarily in Ireland and Wales, learned to function on its own.

Meanwhile, as the western Roman Empire crumbled under waves of Germanic invaders, the bishop of Rome (the pope) and the church stepped in to fill the power vacuum. Popes such as Leo and Gregory advanced the role of Rome's bishop as supreme authority of all Christendom. With barbarian threats, heresy, and other chaos abounding, uniformity of practice and submission to this uniform authority became crucial—seen as necessary ingredients of godliness.

When the dust of over a hundred years of plunder and conflict settled, communication was reestablished between the Celtic and Roman churches. But by that time, they hardly recognized each other.

Augustine looked on these wild Celtic Christians with suspicion. They acted so differently from civilized people in Rome! He hadn't really wanted to come here in the first place. He felt out of his element in the wilds of Britain. The Celts' unwillingness to submit to his authority looked suspiciously like heresy.

The Celtic Christians, in turn, looked at Augustine apprehensively. They were used to a more independent, less uniform way of organizing church life—hence the monasteries dotting their islands. Unaware of the changes in the wider church world, they were not prepared for these strange new demands and concerns. Hadn't they been faithfully keeping the old customs of the church for centuries? How could it be that they were now in the wrong?

The two groups of Christians went their own ways after this first unsatisfactory encounter. The Celts continued to "stubbornly prefer their own customs to those in universal use among Christian Churches," as the Venerable Bede (the first great English church historian, and writer of the account of the Celts versus the Romans) put it. For the next 60 years, the two sides were able to more or less avoid each other.

When the Celts began missionary work among the English, where Roman missionaries were already working, the two groups met again. The "aberrant" practices of the Celts were painfully obvious to the Romans. Celtic monks shaved their heads so strangely. More significant, Celtic bishops were under the authority of a monastery abbot rather than an archbishop, and Celtic monasteries were semi-autonomous.

And the Celts' method of fixing the date of Easter didn't match the way the rest of Christendom set the date for celebrating this most holy of days.

This Easter tension was perhaps felt most strongly in the royal chambers. King Oswy of Northumbria followed the Celtic method of fixing Easter while his wife, Queen Eanfled, followed the Roman method. Thus it was said that some years, while the king was feasting and keeping Easter, his wife was fasting and keeping Palm Sunday.

The Celts followed one of the oldest methods, using an 84-year calendar. The Romans, however, had adopted a newer method, fleshed out by rigorous church councils. Obviously, the decisions of these councils were not communicated to the Celtic Christians, who inhabited a "corner of a remote island," as they were described by the Romans.

The differences seem trivial to us, but to a church extending its authority to the ends of the earth, they were not. And the Celts were not easily persuaded that Rome's church was preeminent, and that all Christians should be under its authority and rule.

The Roman Christians could finally stand it no longer. They persuaded Oswy to call a meeting in 664 at an abbey in Whitby. The goal was to decide the date to celebrate Easter. Both parties would present their arguments, and King Oswy would decide the matter.

Agilbert, a bishop, and Wilfrid, a priest, represented the Roman church, while the Celts were represented by a rather wild-looking group of men, including two bishops, Colman and Cedd. The account of the Venerable Bede (completed in 731) is the only surviving account of the meeting.

Bishop Colman spoke first: "The Easter customs I observe were taught me by my superiors, who sent me here as a bishop, and all our forefathers, men beloved of God, are known to have observed these customs. And lest anyone condemn or reject them as wrong, it is recorded that they owe their origin to the blessed evangelist Saint John, the disciple especially loved by our Lord, and all the churches over which he presided."

Bishop Wilfrid responded, "Our Easter customs are those that we have seen universally observed in Rome. ... We have also seen the same customs generally observed throughout Italy and Gaul. ... [and] by men of



different nations and languages at one and the same time, in Africa, Asia, Egypt, Greece, and throughout the world wherever the church of Christ has spread. The only people who stupidly contend against the whole world are these Scots and their partners in obstinacy, the Picts and Britons, who inhabit only a portion of these the two uttermost islands of the ocean."

Wilfrid followed up with further insults: "Do you imagine that ... a few men in a corner of a remote island are to be preferred before the universal church of Christ throughout the world? And even if your Columba was a saint potent in miracles, can he take precedence before the most blessed Prince of the Apostles, to whom our Lord said: 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church?'"

When Oswy heard that Peter held the keys to heaven, the debate was over.

"Peter is guardian of the gates of heaven, and I shall not contradict him," the king said. "Otherwise, when I come to the gates of heaven, there may be no one to open them, because he who holds the keys has turned away."

Though most Celts subsequently submitted to the decision, Colman and his followers returned to Iona, where they were still free to continue the traditions of their forefathers. Iona held to their own manner of keeping Easter for another 150 years. A few parts of the Celtic church resisted even longer.

Still, the Synod of Whitby marked a turning point; the differences between the Romans and the Celts could no longer be tolerated. It was only a matter of time before Roman Christianity prevailed in all of the British Isles.

*Louise Burton is librarian for Free Lutheran Seminary in Plymouth, Minnesota.*

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#### **Links:**

Bede's account of the [Conversion of England](#), including the Synod of Whitby, is online.

Other sites concentrate wholly on Bede's account of Bede's account of the [Synod](#).

Augustine of Canterbury was deservedly

famous for a lot more than his run-in with Celtic Christians, as [The Mission of St. Augustine of Canterbury](#) site makes abundantly clear.

For another brief secondary source, check out the [Ecole Initiative](#) and the [Catholic Encyclopedia](#).

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 60: How the Irish Were Saved

## The Fury of the Northmen

The Viking invasions destroyed the glory of Celtic monasticism.

Georgia Beaverson

**Ann. 793**—In this year dire forewarnings came over the land of the Northumbrians and miserably terrified the people; these were extraordinary whirlwinds and lightnings, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine soon followed these omens; and soon after that, in the same year, the havoc of heathen men miserably destroyed God's church on Lindisfarne."

The "miserable heathen" portrayed in this account from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* were the Vikings. Popular legend portrays them as swift, merciless marauders; pagans who attacked the holy places of Ireland, Scotland, and elsewhere without regard for anything but accumulating wealth. No wonder Celtic monks prayed regularly, "From the fury of the Northmen, O Lord deliver us."

In the late eighth century, Ireland was a land of petty chieftains, all of whom fought vigorously and frequently to become High King. Ireland's economy had not yet risen above that of a pastoral society, and it possessed no true towns or cities.

It did, however, possess monasteries—lots of them. Not merely religious havens, they were miniature towns and centers of economic and political power. In fact, they functioned as the main financial institutions of their time, repositories for the priest-kings. Rivalry between tribes meant these repositories were plundered repeatedly, long before any Viking raiders appeared.

Archaeologist Magnus Magnusson explains, "A short experience of the country would have taught even a freelance Viking band that a raid on an Irish monastery was a sound economic proposition." Thus in 793, they performed their first recorded raid on a monastery: Lindisfarne.

At first, the Vikings held a raiding season, from May to September each year, then returned home to winter in Norway. Over a 25-year period, 26 important attacks were recorded in the Irish Annals alone. Many more went unrecorded. In addition, rich or important Christians were held for ransom or sold into slavery.

Eventually, the Vikings began to settle (their original motive for exploring the region). By the 830s, the Northmen targeted larger inland monasteries and set up settlements in Ireland. They attacked Armagh and took Forannán, its abbot, captive along with Saint Patrick's relics. Forannán returned, with the Patrick relics, the next year—no doubt having been ransomed at great expense.

In time, Viking *longphorts* (fortresses) like Dublin and Limerick became thriving centers of international trade, nurtured by Viking merchants. These Scandinavian merchants and warriors helped create the first true towns in Ireland, which lifted Ireland out of a purely pastoral economy.

Eventually, the Northmen integrated into Irish society. The pragmatic Vikings, seeking trade with increasingly Christian nations, followed the Irish into Christianity. They began to endow their children with Irish names. Though raids continued for another half-century, by the late 800s, Vikings had become permanent inhabitants of Ireland.

**Georgia Beaverson is a writer from Madison, Wisconsin, and owner of the Green Linnet Workshop for writing and editing.**

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### **Links:**

Here's  
[what's left](#)  
of  
Lindisfarne.

Some kid  
wrote a  
[description](#)  
[of](#)  
[Lindisfarne.](#)

It reads  
like a kid's  
writing,  
but it has  
great  
photos.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 60: How the Irish Were Saved

## The Link: Modern Myths of the Medieval Past

Much that is heralded as Celtic Christianity today is neither Celtic nor Christian.

Donald E. Meek

*Link: Modern Myths of the Medieval Past*

If you go into any of the larger bookshops and look in the sections designated **Religion or Mythology** or even **New Age**, probably you will encounter books on "Celtic" themes, including "Celtic Christianity."

The subject can also be encountered beyond the bookshops. It is actively fostered by some religious communities, and Celtic liturgies are being produced for those who wish to incorporate such prayers into their worship. Study guides are available for those wanting to explore Celtic Christianity in group discussion.

It is easy, indeed comforting, to assume that modern Celtic Christianity offers the public a rediscovery of a faith well-known in the early medieval period but subsequently lost.

But does it?

### Reality of the past

Much in the modern explanations of Celtic Christianity does go back to the medieval Irish, much that is unique in the history of Christianity.

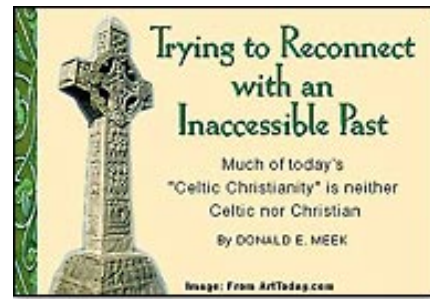
It is easy, indeed comforting, to assume that modern Celtic Christianity offers the public a rediscovery of a faith well-known in the early medieval period but subsequently

Celtic Christianity has left us many splendid legacies: stone crosses, beautiful metal artifacts, remote churches. Literature from this period has survived, too: sermons in Gaelic/Irish, and hymns and poems from the early Middle Ages. A few early Irish hymns have been translated into English, like "Be Thou My Vision," and "Saint Patrick's Breastplate." Some modern writings on Celtic Christianity are concerned with the exposition of these early hymns.

How Celts pursued their faith was unique in many respects because they adapted it to the social structures of their time and place, a predominantly rural society. For example, Irish monasteries, which came to be mini-cities, adapted the traditional ring-fort of early Irish society.

Consequently, Celtic Christian faith differed in some ways from the Roman Christianity practiced in Europe. For example, the Celts kept Easter at a different time and had a different shape of tonsure (monastic head shaving), though gradually these differences were ironed out. Otherwise, the Celts adhered to the same fundamental doctrines of faith.

### Current Celticism



lost.

This, however, is not the Celtic Christianity often presented today. To be sure, modern interpretations of Celtic Christianity range from pagan to evangelical Protestant (the latter deeply influenced by the charismatic and house-church movements). Yet most writers tend to look back to the Celtic period as a kind of golden age.

Several emphases resonate throughout the writings of modern "Celtic Christians," depending on the theology of the writer. Six of the most prominent are:

***God's nearness, or immanence, rather than his transcendence.*** According to devotees of Celtic Christianity, God is all around, involved in people's daily life ("immanent"), rather than distant, alien, and overly holy ("transcendent").

***God's love rather than his judgment.*** Some enthusiasts claim Celtic Christians had little or no sense of sin.

***Simplicity of structures.*** The modern church is portrayed as little more than a religious bureaucracy, and early non-Celtic missionaries, like Augustine of Canterbury, are seen as power-hungry clerics wanting to control others. The ancient Celts, on the other hand, were allegedly gentle and mystical.

***Tolerance of paganism.*** Some writers argue that Celtic Christianity simply absorbed Celtic paganism. Celtic Christians, it is claimed, were kind to secular culture. The modern church, by contrast, has written off too much of the secular world.

***Feminism.*** Celtic Christians, it is said, had abbesses and female druids and were not devoted solely to male ministry.

***Environmental concern.*** It is claimed that Celts lived happily with nature, whereas modern Christians have dominated and spoiled it.

## Then and now

Given the range of genuine texts, one can find something that seems to support one claim or another (e. g. the Celts' love of nature or the immanence of God), but it is doubtful whether one can extrapolate a systematic Celtic theology that justifies these claims. There was no one Celtic church, only a variety of monastic centers that celebrated faith in similar but diverse ways.

Furthermore, many of the supposed features of Celtic Christianity are responses to falsely perceived contrasts. Indeed the Celts had a deep appreciation of God's immanence, but also of his transcendence: "Be Thou My Vision" repeatedly exalts the "high King of Heaven."

They gloried in God's love, but they also feared his judgment. The composer of the ***Altus Prosator*** ("High Creator," a hymn usually ascribed to Columba) wrote, "It seems doubtful to no one that there is a hell down there ... where there is screaming of men, weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Christians in Celtic lands may have created simpler ecclesiastical structures, but only because their social situation or spiritual aspirations demanded it. The larger Irish monasteries were often complex in terms of layout and the number of buildings within the enclosure. Hermits lived in simple cells, but not all monks were hermits.

Celtic Christians certainly weren't always tolerant toward paganism; stories of the saints confronting and defeating druids (even causing their deaths), like Patrick at Tara, abound in Irish literature. Some early

Irish poets, like Oengus Cele De, rejoice in the triumph of Christianity: "Paganism has been destroyed though it was splendid and far-flung; the kingdom of God the Father has filled heaven and earth and sea."

As far as feminism, the stories of Brigit, even if they are true, are the exception that prove the rule: social structures in the medieval world were patriarchal.

And as for the environment: they may have appreciated creation more than their European brethren, but as Gilbert Márkus puts it, "There is nothing distinctively *Celtic* about the sense of God's presence in the natural world."

The current movement, then, is mostly a reflection of the needs and feelings of modernity, and that is one reason it is so popular. To put it simply, Celtic Christianity is partly seen as a remedy for modern maladies.

Many today are wearied of existing trends in politics and national life, having suffered burnout in the fiercely competitive world of the 1980s and 1990s. Many are also weary of conventional churches, which they feel have failed to address contemporary issues. During the 1980s, a number of concerns, from ecology to ecclesiology began to surface in the British Isles (and elsewhere).

The environment was a primary concern. As cities grew, the ozone layer began to deplete. Questions about how to use land and how to care for the natural world became significant. Celtic lands began to be viewed afresh as a region where life could be lived as God and nature intended.

There was also increasing fascination with simple lifestyle, frustration with global mass culture, increased support for women's rights, more concern about mistreatment of animals, and a host of other issues.

The churches have faced criticism because of their failure to tackle these issues, and they've seen massive changes in the religious map. Beginning in the 1960s, people in the West began to show interest in Eastern religions. The growth in global communication and increasing ease of transport allowed the East to evangelize the West in new ways.

Those disillusioned with contemporary Christianity could now choose from a menu of alternative religions. The various items on the menu could be mixed on a single dish; religion was now becoming a matter of personal taste rather than ecclesiastical imposition. The New Age movement, a pastiche of cults and *isms*, ancient and modern, Eastern and Western, became pervasive.

As some people went East to find new religions, others dug back into history to find a remedy for their disillusionment. This was how Celtic Christianity was "rediscovered." In many circles, Celtic Christianity is a kind of hodgepodge of past and present, with modern issues much to the forefront. It presents aspects of the past, but it is also deeply influenced by contemporary trends.

## **Christianity today**

In terms of classic evangelical theology, even much of ancient Celtic theology (which mirrored medieval Catholic theology) can be questioned: Celtic Christians celebrated the Mass, applied penance, and believed in the powers of saints and relics. They lived long before the Reformation and belonged to the Catholic faith. We must view them in that context. There is much that all Christians can appreciate in the hymns, prayers, and stories of Irish saints, although their message can be fully understood only by diligent scrutiny of the texts in their original forms.

Modern Celtic Christianity, however, is very much a mixture of philosophies and ideas, bringing under

one label a range of products, old and new. Much of it is a construct made to meet the needs of the postmodern spiritual consumer. It is indeed necessary for the church to address modern concerns, but the solutions lie not in a retreat to a mythical Celtic past but, as always, in a sensitive Christian engagement with the present and the future.

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#### **Links:**

If you liked this article, be sure to check out Meek's article [Surveying the Saints](#).

For a dissenting opinion, read [The Case for the Celtic Church](#), Allison Veronica Carroll's master's thesis at University of St. Andrews' Department of Medieval History from September 1993.

If you resonate with more modern admirers of Celtic Christianity, check out one of the better



[Celtic  
Christianity](#)  
pages.

Here's one  
group is  
trying to  
recreate a  
[Celtic  
spirituality](#).

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 60: How the Irish Were Saved

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## Patrick and Celtic Christianity: Recommended Resources

### Patrick and Celtic Christianity

When it comes to Patrick," wrote Thomas Cahill in his notes for *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, "no one agrees with anyone about anything. ... There is not a datum of Patrick's life that has not been questioned, including his existence. During the course of the twentieth century, moreover, the library of Patrician studies has grown into 'a mountain of Himalayan proportions,' to quote E.A. Thompson."

Unfortunately, much of that mountain is, to put it mildly, rubble.

While some writers question the existence of Patrick, others treat the subject with such careless research that their books are filled with traditions from the last two centuries.

Skepticism and awe are both helpful historical tools. But beware of material with too much of either.

### In Their Own Words

The best starting place is with Patrick's own words. Few doubt his authorship of the autobiographical Confession and his angry *Letter to Coroticus*, available in several books, including a new translation by John O'Donohue (Doubleday 1998).

The works are also available in *Saint Patrick's World* by Liam De Paor (University of Notre Dame, 1993). Combining primary source documents (including lives of saints, lists, and councils) with an informative 50-page "introduction," it should be on the library of anyone interested in this topic.

Or you can get the writings of Patrick and other Celtic Christians, including their hagiographies, for free online. Two of the best places: *The Ecole Initiative* ([www.evansville.edu/~ecoleweb/](http://www.evansville.edu/~ecoleweb/)) and *The Christian Classics Ethereal Library* ([ccel.wheaton.edu](http://ccel.wheaton.edu)).

### Bestsellers and Scholars

Cahill's *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (Doubleday, 1995), still on the bestseller lists as of press time, has been attacked by some scholars as too misty-eyed and dependent on legends. Still, it's one of the better popular books on the subject, and **Christian History** readers should enjoy how Cahill brings the major characters to life.

Lisa Bitel's *Isle of the Saints* (Cornell University Press, 1990) takes a wide-ranging, but detailed look at life in the monastic community. With sections about the theft of relics to "the politics of food," it's engaging and readable for such a scholarly book.

Another "starter" book on the subject is the appropriately named *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, edited by James P. Mackey. With 14 essays on Celtic theology, Scripture commentary, monasticism, missions, liturgy, prayers, hymns, literature, and art, it's a rather expansive introduction (sadly, it lacks an index).

It's very difficult to understand Celtic Christianity without knowing something about the Celtic scenery and

the early Celtic religion. Nigel Pennick's ***Celtic Sacred Landscapes*** is full of fascinating stories about Celtic holy places, both Christian and pagan.

### **Past and Present**

For those interested in Celtic culture in general, from 500 b.c. to more modern times, both ***The Celtic World*** by Barry Cunliffe (St. Martin's, 1990) and ***The World of the Celts*** by Simon James (Thames and Hudson, 1993) are beautifully illustrated and thorough.

On the other hand, if you're more interested in Celtic Christianity today and how it relates to the Celtic Christianity of Patrick, Columba, and Bridgit, check out ***Exploring Celtic Spirituality: Historic Roots for Our Future*** by Ray Simpson (Hodder & Stoughton, 1995) and the video ***Island Soldiers*** (Newbridge, 1997, distributed by Vision Video).

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