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Saint Patrick: A Hagiographical Study

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Molly Kluever

Molly Kluever is a junior English and Theology double-major at the College of Saint Benedict. In Fall 2018, she spent the semester abroad in Galway, Ireland, where she had the opportunity to study the Irish-Christian tradition in its original context. Unsurprisingly, the figure of St. Patrick was broached early in the course. Fascinated by the myriad of ways religion has influenced the development of literature, Molly decided to write her term paper on the conflicting images of St. Patrick found in the saint's own writings and in the dramatic accounts of his life written by hagiographers in the centuries following his death. The resulting essay – “St. Patrick: A Hagiographical Study” – attempts to articulate how both fact and fiction played a role in shaping the legendary Irish saint.

SAINT PATRICK: *A Hagiographical Study*

A scholar attempting to study the life of St. Patrick faces several challenges. First of all, she must decide *which* St. Patrick she hopes to find: Does she want the slave-turned-missionary found in the two primary sources written by the Irish bishop's own hand? Or would she prefer the druid-destroying miracle man that lives in the hagiographies of men such as Muirchú and Tírechán? Unfortunately, the historical facts of the life and work of Saint Patrick cannot be found entirely in the *Confessio* or the *Epistola*, nor can they be confidently drawn from the works of any "hagiographic spin-doctors."¹ If, however, she seeks the Patrick whose evangelization efforts during the fifth century firmly established Christianity in Ireland – a feat that shaped not only the social landscape of the island but also that of the Christian Church as a whole – then she is in luck. This "third Patrick," so to speak, isn't merely a historical man. Indeed, the St. Patrick who created Christian Ireland may be more myth than reality, but reality built the myth. A scholar must appreciate both parts of St. Patrick in order to understand how he built the Christian Church in Ireland – and how the Irish Christian Church built him.

Let's start with the facts. In his *Confessio*, St. Patrick tells us he was born around 415 AD. His father Calpornius was a deacon and the family lived at Bannavem Taburniae, or possibly another combination of those letters. When he was sixteen, raiders kidnapped him and sold him into slavery in Ireland, where he worked as a shepherd for six years before escaping back to his family in Britain. He eventually became a deacon, and then a priest, and then at some point after his return, he experienced a vision that instructed him to return to Ireland as a missionary to the pagans.² Alongside these biographical details, Patrick reveals some specific details about his mission. While serving as a Bishop in Ireland, he claims to have

1 Alfred P. Smyth, "Bishop Patrick and the Earliest Christian Mission to Ireland," in *Christianity in Ireland: Revisiting the Story*, The Columba Press, 2002, 13.

2 "Confession," Saint Patrick's *Confessio*, §1, 16-24, 27.

“baptized so many thousands of people,” which is to be expected of such a saint.³ However, he also states that he “gave gifts to kings” and “gave out not less than the price of fifteen persons” to buy off “the judges in those regions,” two deeds that speak of a shrewd and practical missionary.⁴ Patrick also gives us a few anecdotes – such as the conversion of the noble Irish woman in §42 and a fourteen-day imprisonment in §52 – but clearly the *Confessio* was not written as a scrapbook for posterity. In fact, the majority of the historical truth found in the *Confessio* entails Patrick’s character, rather than his deeds.

The first three lines of the *Confessio* practically summarize the entire work. We learn its author (“Patrick”), his social background (“a simple country person”), his sense of humility (“I am a sinner . . . and the least of all believers”), and the reason for his confession (“I am looked down upon by many”).⁵ Patrick’s humility in particular permeates the entire document. He variously describes himself as “a stone lying deep in the mud,” “a wretched orphan,” and “a sinner without learning.”⁶ This constant self-deprecation could be purely genuine, of course: such debasement is often found in the writings of great saints. However, it may also serve a rhetorical purpose. More than anything else, the *Confessio* serves as Patrick’s response to accusations of embezzlement and other unnamed sins being levied against him by high-ranking clergy, and painting himself as a simple but faithful servant of God merely trying his best reads as an effective defense.⁷ Patrick wields his humility towards a different end in his *Epistola*, a scathing letter of excommunication written to the soldiers of Coroticus, who had helped Scots and Picts to slaughter recently-baptized Christians.⁸ In it, he bolsters the authority of his own words of condemnation by piously suggesting they actually come from

3 “Confession,” §50.

4 *Ibid.*, §52, 53.

5 “Confession,” §1.

6 *Ibid.*, §12, 35, 62.

7 Michael Staunton, *The Illustrated Story of Christian Ireland: From St. Patrick to the Peace Process*, Emerald Press, 2001, 10; Smyth, 15.

8 “Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus,” Saint Patrick’s *Confessio*, §2-3.

God Himself.⁹ Such instances of multipurpose modesty reveal a highly competent rhetorician hiding behind the poor Latin.

Patrick's strategic posturing in his primary sources, however, leaves little room for other biographical information that would allow us additional insight into the birth of the Irish Christian Church. The chronicles of Prosper of Aquitaine mention the ordination and commissioning of Palladius to Ireland in 429, but little else is said about the mission of Patrick's predecessor; they are wholly silent about Patrick.¹⁰ In fact, it wasn't until the Irish monks began copying Prosper's chronicles into the Irish annals – and realized that their beloved saint hadn't been included – that Patrick received an “official” date of arrival in Ireland: 432 AD.¹¹ And while that fudged date may not be too far from the truth, its ambiguity cannot be acceptably resolved. Indeed, a significant amount of uncertainty surrounds the life and work of Saint Patrick outside of what he himself tells us. Tarlach Ó Raifeartaigh states in his article “The Enigma of Saint Patrick” that between 493 and 600 AD, only three authenticated written references to the saint exist: two obituaries that mention Patrick in passing and the Hymn of Secundinus.¹² Written and oral traditions in the early Irish Church surely would have been full of stories – both true and not-so-true – about Patrick. However, Saint Patrick wouldn't break out of his humble reality until the dawning of his new hagiographical life the mid-seventh century.

Writing the hagiography of a saint is not the same thing as writing a biography. It is easy to accuse hagiographers of being poor historians, but such a criticism is unfair. First of all, hagiographers often had little accurate history to go on. As seen above, there are few authentic written records about the life of St. Patrick outside of what he himself wrote. Patrick's hagiographers, therefore, were forced to fill in all the gaps left in the historical record. Of course, there would have been oral traditions and stories about St. Patrick at their disposal, but by that

9 “Letter,” §20.

10 Smyth, 13.

11 Smyth, 15.

12 Tarlach Ó Raifeartaigh, “The Enigma of Saint Patrick,” *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society* 13, no. 2 (1989): 7-8.

point, we are already in the realm of what G.H. Doble called the “local gossip,” a source undoubtedly distorted by time and repetition.¹³ Once the wells of history and tradition dried up, hagiographers had no choice but to simply begin making up stories. The resulting *Life* of a saint thus may be almost entirely fabricated. However, this historical inaccuracy is still valuable to history. As Doble explains, even if the stories of a saint are fake, “the saint himself is not a fictitious person.”¹⁴ We know that St. Patrick held a special place in the psyche of the early Irish Church because of the level of devotion paid to him in his hagiographies. Additionally, examining hagiographic works reveals the personal agendas of their authors.

Though many hagiographers would eventually contribute to the legend of St. Patrick, two men in particular deserve our attention now: Muirchú and Tírechán. Historical records tell us that Muirchú must have been an important Irish clergyman, as he was present at the Synod of Birr in 697.¹⁵ Nothing is known about Tírechán outside of what can be found in or deduced from his *Collectanea*.¹⁶ Both men wrote their *Lives* of St. Patrick in the mid- to late-seventh century. And even though both works incorporate biographical details given by Patrick in his *Confessio*, the Patrick of hagiography is quite different from the Patrick who wrote the *Confessio* and the *Epistola*. But it is this legendary Patrick that has, as Ó Raifeartaigh writes, “ever since held the field in the popular imagination.”¹⁷

A close reading suggests that Muirchú and Tírechán sought to achieve two primary goals with their hagiographies. First, they hoped to emphasize the preeminence of the Church of Armagh.¹⁸ In his essay “The Irish Variant,” Dominic Alexander relates that most hagiographies were written in order to link a saint with a specific monastery and thus award the monastery with the applicable “rights

13 G. H. Doble, “Hagiography and Folklore” *Folklore* 54, no. 3 (1943): 324.

14 Doble, 325.

15 Thomas O’Loughlin, “St. Patrick: The Legend and the Bishop,” *History Ireland* 14, no. 1 (2006): 18.

16 Terry O’Hagan, “Tírechán: Biography and Character Study,” *St. Patrick’s Confessio*, §4-5.

17 Ó Raifeartaigh, 1.

18 Staunton, 21; O’Hagan, §8.

and prestige” that come from such an association.¹⁹ St. Patrick never mentions Armagh in his *Confessio*. However, Muirchú, the less-subtle propagandist of the two hagiographers, makes the link between Patrick and the Armagh church explicit multiple times. A lengthy anecdote details the gift of the land of Armagh to St. Patrick, and at the end of the work, Muirchú boldly makes Armagh’s preeminence Patrick’s “first request” of the angel Victor before his death.²⁰ Establishing the authority of Armagh would have been of the utmost importance in the seventh century and beyond in the competitive climate of the early Irish Church. However, with regards to the legend of St. Patrick as we know him today, Muirchú and Tírechán’s second goal – propelling St. Patrick into the heroic company of other Christian saints – proves to have the most contemporary relevance.

The hagiographic genre preceded the early Irish Church; thus, Muirchú and Tírechán were tasked with creating an Irish saint who would embody all of the “essential characteristics” of other Christian saints.²¹ All of the modesty and humility found in the *Confessio* was a good start, but both men decided that Patrick’s piety could be made even more remarkable. Muirchú, once again, has a stronger flair for the dramatic, and writes of Patrick reciting “all of the psalms and hymns and the Revelation of John and all the spiritual canticles” every day, in addition to signing himself one-hundred times an hour.²² And not only was such prayerful compulsiveness added to the *Lives* of Patrick, but also were Patrick’s “anguished” and apologetic acknowledgements of his own inadequacy ignored in the hagiographies – not to mention removed from the *Confessio* itself in the *Book of Armagh*.²³ These redactions suggest that Patrician apologists sought to create a legendary St. Patrick that didn’t merely complement the historical

19 Dominic Alexander, “The Irish Variant,” *Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages*, Boydell and Brewer, 2008, 68.

20 “Muirchú’s Text in English,” *Saint Patrick’s Confessio*, §I.24, II.6.

21 Alexander, 58.

22 “Muirchú,” §II.1.

23 Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland, 400-1200*. Routledge, 2013, 46.

Patrick but in fact replaced him. The creative liberties taken with the source material also demonstrates the hagiographers' dedication to crafting a St. Patrick that fit the mold of not only a Christian hero but that of a traditional Celtic hero, as well.

St. Patrick's Christianity, after all, was competing against the pagan religion for souls. The hagiographers knew what they were up against, and they responded effectively. Alexander explains how, in constructing their Christian legends, they may have purposefully recycled pagan Irish motifs in order to "demonstrate the superiority of Christian heroes, or at least their ability to compete on equal terms with past heroes."²⁴ That's the reason for the unsaintly amount of violence in the *Lives* of St. Patrick: more than likely, the good bishop wouldn't have wanted a druid's brain "smashed to pieces" on the ground, nor would he have agreed to let a druid burn to death in a house.²⁵ But the legendary Patrick, the Christian hero, needed to assert his – and God's – dominance over paganism. The great, and sometimes horrific, deeds found in the hagiographies evidence the early Irish Church's need for "grand claims" to defend itself.²⁶ And, on another level, the posing of St. Patrick amongst the world of traditional Celtic magic and beliefs exemplifies Christianity's more general need to be "mediated" through the familiar in order to be accepted.

The hagiographies of St. Patrick employed the rhetoric of Celtic heroes to allow for St. Patrick's recognition by early Irish citizens as one. Richard Johnson-Sheehan and Paul Lynch argue in their essay on ancient Irish rhetoric that the Irish utilized a "narrative-based rhetoric" that differed from the more systematic Greco-Roman rhetoric.²⁷ Muirchú's and Tírechán's argument for a reverential cult of St. Patrick, therefore, is found in the narrative of the hagiographies themselves, in the saint's mighty acts and miracles. And while this

24 Alexander, 83.

25 "Muirchú," §1.17, 1.20.

26 Alexander, 66.

27 Richard Johnson-Sheehan and Paul Lynch, "Rhetoric of Myth, Magic, and Conversion: A Prolegomena to Ancient Irish Rhetoric," *Rhetoric Review* 26, no. 3, (2007): 234.

could be said to be the case for the entire genre of hagiography, the Irish context of St. Patrick's *Lives* adds another dimension to this consideration: Patrick himself within the stories utilizes narrative-based rhetoric. In Tírechán's *Collectanea*, Patrick is asked by some maidens, "Who is God?"²⁸ His response is not one that St. Augustine, the master of systematic Christian rhetoric, would have given. Rather, he responds quite like an Irish bard:

"Our God is the God of all men, the God of heaven and earth, of the sea and the rivers, God of the sun and the moon and all the stars, the God of high mountains and low valleys; God above heaven and in heaven and under heaven, he has his dwelling in heaven and earth and sea and in everything that is in them; he breathes in all things, makes all things live, surpasses all things, supports all things; he illumines the light of the sun, he consolidates the light of the night and the stars, he has made wells in the dry earth and dry islands in the sea and stars for the service of the major lights."²⁹

As Johnson-Sheehan and Lynch point out, eloquent language served as a "prelude to power" in Irish mythology.³⁰ St. Patrick's use of language within the hagiographies, however, goes even further than mere heroic posturing in order to bolster his appeal to legendary status.

St. Patrick often triumphed over the druids through his control of the natural world. For instance, in Muirchú's *Life*, Patrick bests the druid Lucet Máel by vanishing the summoned snow and fog.³¹ "Natural magic" was a major source of power for Irish druids and bards, and thus by competing – and winning – on that same level, Patrick's place among the ranks of Irish legend is further cemented.³² Of course, parallels between Jesus Christ – whose words combat chaos in such pericopes as the Stilling of the Storm – and St. Patrick were intended

28 "Tírechán's Text in English," *Saint Patrick's Confessio*, §26.

29 "Tírechán," §26.

30 Johnson-Sheehan and Lynch, 234.

31 "Muirchú," §1.20.

32 Johnson-Sheehan and Lynch, 244.

by the hagiographers, as well. However, the link between the rhetoric of Irish legendary heroes and Patrick's power of speech ought not to be overlooked in favor of pure Scriptural parallelism.

In fact, St. Patrick's eloquence deserves recognition even outside of the realm of hagiography. Patrick, remember, was not purely the mythical creation of Muirchú, Tírechán, and the hagiographers who followed them. Some of the stranger aspects of his legend likely contain more truth than first meets the eye. Two hundred years before his hagiographers needed to translate the Patrician mission, Patrick had to present *himself* in a way his Irish audience could recognize.³³ It's the only way he would have survived while traveling around the island; here is also where his reference in the *Confessio* to buying off kings earns new meaning. Johnson-Sheehan and Lynch posit that Patrick likely disguised himself as a druid, as there "was no cultural category for a Christian bishop."³⁴ And in order to be an effective missionary, he undoubtedly would have adopted the rhetorical practices of the people he hoped to convert.³⁵ In these small ways, then, the historical St. Patrick holds his own against his hagiographical self.

The search for the "real" St. Patrick thus requires a clarification: Who is the "real" St. Patrick? Patrick J. Corish wrote that "the first tribute paid to Patrick was to spin a legend about him which so deformed him that he would not recognize himself."³⁶ He does have a point. The St. Patrick who wrote the *Confessio* and the *Epistola* would likely balk at the hero presented in the hagiographies of Muirchú and Tírechán. But to say that this manipulated version of the saint is not "real" undermines the impact it has had on Ireland. After all, the very real history of the Irish-Christian Tradition has been shaped by the legendary St. Patrick – a man who, as I've attempted to demonstrate, was not pure fantasy but an amalgamation of myth and reality. He heard "the voice of the Irish

33 Johnson-Sheehan and Lynch, 248.

34 *Ibid.*, 244.

35 *Ibid.*, 244.

36 Patrick J. Corish, "St. Patrick and Ireland," *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society* 4, no. 2 (1961): 121.

people” calling him to return to Ireland to evangelize, and he answered that call.³⁷ He may not have battled druids or raised giants from the grave, but he did make such a profound impact on the early Irish Church that hagiographers considered it reasonable to pretend that he did. So, in a world of two Patricks – a Patrick of reality and a Patrick of legend – it is perhaps best to say that there really exists only one – St. Patrick of Ireland.



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37 “Confession,” §23.

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