CHAPTER 10

Being Christian in Late Antique Ireland

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Abstract

Conversion to Christianity in late antique Ireland is frequently interpreted as the replacement of one set of practices, broadly and problematically defined as pagan, with new and transformative Christian ones. This assumes clear boundaries between being Christian and being pagan throughout the 4th and 6th centuries CE, the period during which Christianity and, eventually, its institutions became ever more important. However, a growing body of material evidence, alongside a reinterpretation of textual sources, illuminates blurred, shifting and deeply contingent boundaries. This aligns with what is known of Christian conversion elsewhere in Roman and post-Roman Late Antiquity. For example, burial practices, the use of epigraphy (ogam stones) and the demarcation of physical Christian spaces all highlight different aspects of complex and changing religious affiliations. Sometimes it is possible to pinpoint moments when the boundary between being Christian and being pagan shifted, as the example of the celebration of

the Feast of Tara by the Christian king Díarmait mac Cerbaill in 560 demonstrates. Throughout these formative centuries, Irish Christians and pagans lived side by side and shared the same environments. Ultimately, the much-analysed Christian culture of the 7th century grew out of these shared experiences.

Keywords: religious affiliations, early Ireland, burials, epigraphy, St Patrick

Framing the Debate

Understanding religious affiliation is notoriously complex, especially at the intersection of belief and practice. Where does one end and the other begin? How important are they in defining each other? What factors drive the relationships between rival forms of religious identification? Such questions are difficult to answer, either generally or specifically. For instance, how did late antique Christians interact with pagans? To what extent did these interactions vary due to diversity in local cultural norms (Brown 2003; Johnston 2018b)? Did these factors shape events in Ireland? And, of course, paganism was no more a monolithic entity than Christianity: both are fuzzy categories comprising a wide spectrum. One way to think about these related questions is through considering three snapshots and their significance. The first is from 3rd-century Carthage and is suggested by Éric Rebillard's influential study of North African burials in Late Antiquity (Rebillard 2009). In 212 CE, Tertullian addressed an open letter to Scapula, the proconsul of Africa, protesting pagan violation of Christian graves, presupposing a straightforward distinction between the two groups (*Ad Scapulam*, 1125–32. See Dunn 2002, 47–55; Rebillard 2009, 8–10). This can be compared with the 4th-century curse tablet from Romano-British Bath that makes a contrast between pagan (*gentilis*) and Christian (*christianus*), suggesting binary categories of religious affiliation (Burnham et al., 456–57). However, in his *De Idolatria*, Tertullian addresses the reality of an environment where Christian life was deeply embedded in a civic culture steeped in paganism. He objects to those Christians who feel free to sell incense for the temples even if they do not burn it for the idols themselves; he also objects to the participation of Christians in the civic life of Carthage, arguing that all festivals are idolatrous (Rebillard 2009, 169–71). Tertullian is disturbed at how easy it is to mistake a Christian for a pagan. Yet it is probable that

the Christians whom Tertullian criticised saw themselves not as pagan but as participants in a shared culture in which belief was only one of many facets. This is not to say that religious belief did not, at times, become a major focus of an individual's or a group's affiliation. For example, the trauma of the Great Persecution of Diocletian produced strong communal self-identifications and boundaries between 'us' and 'them', nourished by belief. These were expressed through Donatism in North Africa and less directly, although no less powerfully, in the Arian controversy (Digeser 2012).

The second snapshot is distant from 3rd-century Carthage, both in time and space. The origin story of the great collection of vernacular legal tracts known as the *Senchas Már* explores the foundations of early medieval Irish law, explicitly presenting it as an amalgamation of Christian belief and the best of native tradition (Carey 1994; McCone 1986). This story is embedded in a number of the tracts that make up the collection, the compilation of which has been placed in the second half of the 7th century (Breatnach 2011). A somewhat later introduction gives the fullest narrative (McCone 1986; Wadden 2016). It imagines St Patrick, a 5th-century Romano-British bishop who came to be celebrated as the 'apostle' of Ireland (Binchy 1962; Dumville 1993; O'Loughlin 1999, 1–47), overseeing a collection of laws built on a convergence of Christianity with custom (Carey 1994). St Patrick relies on native experts, all recent converts: he is joined by two other bishops, three kings, two poets and an authority on Irish law. The tale suggests that there is a difference between formal pagan beliefs and native practices. These practices were acknowledged to be of non-Christian derivation, but this did not make them inherently suspect. On a fundamental level, the text circumvents Tertullian's anxieties. The narrative does so in a way that deserves further comment. Most individuals in late antique Carthage or 7th-century Ireland are unlikely to have identified themselves singularly through the lens of religion. They were also members of families and social groups and lived in specific environmental and economic landscapes (Brubaker 2002; Rebillard and Rüpke 2015). The *Senchas Már* origin legend encodes this understanding on a social level by specifically naming culturally important groups, the aristocracy and the learned classes, in order to show them working hand in hand with the ecclesiastical elite.

However, the *Senchas Már*'s vision of an ecclesiastically directed acculturation, one which is presented as essentially harmonious despite

initial conflict, is not the only image that early Irish Christians had of their past. By the second half of the 7th century, the great church of Armagh had begun to solidify a position of pre-eminence among the Irish, founded on a canny appropriation of the Patrick legend alongside a highly successful drive for patronage, underpinned by extensive landholdings (Charles-Edwards 2000, 416–40; Ó Cróinín 2017, 172–85). Two hagiographers, Muirchú moccu Machthéni and Bishop Tírechán, composed highly embellished accounts of Patrick's career, telescoping the transformation of pagan to Christian into a single generation during the 5th century. However, Tírechán's *Collectanea*, in particular, displays anxieties about the persistence of pagans: they literally speak from the grave. His strategies for dealing with the talking dead are telling and constitute the final snapshot.

Tírechán's first description of a pagan burial sharply distinguishes it from Christian practice (*Collectanea* 12). In a short episode, the pagan king of Tara, Lóegaire mac Néill, tells Patrick that his father enjoined upon him to be buried in the traditional manner, armed with weapons and facing in the direction of the enemies of his family, the Leinstermen. Although fantastical, with no demonstrable basis in the material reality of early medieval Ireland, the anecdote is rich (O'Brien 2008, 2020). Here is the pagan past speaking, the ancestors themselves acting as an impediment to conversion. Yet, just as with Tertullian's writings, the idea that pagans and Christians might actually be similar runs through the *Collectanea*. The author shows that both groups practised extended inhumation burial. Tírechán tells how Patrick comes across a gigantic grave and, driven by curiosity, causes the corpse to rise to temporary life (*Collectanea* 40). The giant identifies himself as a swineherd, the grandson of Cass. He was killed violently by a warrior band. Patrick baptises the resurrected swineherd and saves his soul before he is returned to pious silence. This fascinating anecdote touches on issues such as the salvation of the pagan ancestors, a theme present in other accounts of conversion from outside Ireland (Meens 2014, 577–96). Tírechán's anecdote is also one of the earliest examples of the popular medieval literary trope of Patrick learning about the past from friendly pagans and fresh converts, acknowledging the value of non-Christian history (Nagy 1997).

Significantly, the swineherd's story is immediately followed by Patrick discovering two new graves (*Collectanea* 41). One is marked with a cross, but a post-mortem conversation reveals that the cross had been

accidently positioned over the wrong grave. Patrick corrects the error, removing the cross from the pagan burial and placing it over that of the Christian. His charioteer suggests that the saint could have sprinkled the water of baptism over the pagan grave ensuring salvation, but Patrick replies that it was not part of God's plan to save this particular man. Incidentally, the same basic tale, although not as well developed, is found in the work of the other Armagh hagiographer, Muirchú (*Vita Patricii* ii.2). The juxtaposition of the two episodes in the *Collectanea* is meaningful. It shows that Tírechán was concerned with the ultimate fate of the pagan ancestors but was unsure how to physically distinguish those who were saved from those who were damned. Indeed, Elizabeth O'Brien's pioneering research on Irish burials has shown that Tírechán's fears were well-founded. It is extraordinarily difficult to tell Christian and pagan burials apart at any point between the 4th and 8th centuries CE (O'Brien 1992, 2009, 2020). In fact, this problem is well represented in other regions of the late antique west, especially as the rite of extended inhumation was not Christian in origin (Blaizot 2007).

These snapshots serve to illuminate the difficulties, tensions and contradictions inherent in demarcating being pagan from being Christian, especially if one considers both textual and material evidence. Tertullian's *Ad Scapulam* may seem far removed from Tírechán's musings about a mistaken grave-marker, but they reveal a similar fear: that of appropriation, whether it be through pagan violation of Christian graves or through the misidentification of one for the other. This concern with the drawing of boundaries, physical as well as spiritual, is a powerful theme. Intriguingly, the sprinkling of baptismal water on a pagan grave as a form of Christianisation, although not realised, is suggested by Tírechán as one solution: it can turn a pagan burial into a Christian one, redrawing the spatial and temporal lines separating paganism from Christianity. The *Senchas Már*, on the other hand, presents a seemingly more positive model, one where continuities in practice were exempted from condemnation as pagan. Non-Christian origins did not imply that something was un-Christian or even relevant to religious affiliation. Strikingly, this model involved compromise, a blurring of boundaries and an understanding that 'them' might actually be part of 'us'. Nonetheless, revealing as these examples are, it is necessary to look before and beyond them to more fully explore the meanings of being Christian in late antique Ireland. They are reverse stepping stones, pointing back to the earlier processes that shaped the

gradual growth of Christianity. It is likely that Irish Christians were a minority well into the 6th century: their compromises with pagan neighbours helped establish the outlook of 7th-century writers, going some way to explaining their sense of the pagan in the present (Hughes 1966, 44–56; Johnston 2017a, 120–23). What were the affiliations of these early Christian communities? How did belief and practice intersect, and is this intersection echoed in a meaningful way in later writings?

Locating the Earliest Irish Christians

The difficulties inherent in this exploration must be emphasised. Contemporary written sources are sparse, especially from before the middle of the 6th century. While the classic ogam inscriptions, a corpus of more than 400 inscribed stones concentrated in south and southeast Ireland but also found in western Britain, offer some insight, it is one that is limited by content (Macalister 1945–1949; McManus 1991, 44–47). They mainly comprise names in primitive Irish, with a small minority including references to the profession of the individual commemorated by the monument (McManus 1991, 58). Difficulties of interpretation are exacerbated by the challenge of establishing an absolute chronology: origin dates for the ogam script range from the 2nd century CE to the 5th (McManus 1991, 78–100; Harvey 2017). Furthermore, although the earliest Irish Christians erected commemorative ogam stones (Swift 1997), it is doubtful that this is a Christian phenomenon per se, and it is likely that many of the extant stones are not expressions of religious affiliation (Johnston 2017b, 29–39). They seem to prioritise kindred relationships and, potentially, political aspirations (McManus 1991, 163–66; Swift 1997, 40–49). Indeed, ogam arguably speaks to another dynamic, the role of the Roman frontier in the formation of aspects of Irish elite culture. This eventually included Christianity but was by no means confined to it and, in fact, predated its 5th-century growth (Johnston 2017b, 23–46). But even these contexts have complications, as the Irish frontier features only sporadically in Roman textual sources, being most prominent in the 4th and 5th centuries, a period during which Irish barbarian raiders, known as Scotti, took advantage of Roman weaknesses in western Britain (Charles-Edwards 2000, 145–72; Johnston 2017a, 110–17). If anything, recent research breakthroughs have been in examinations of the arte-

factual legacies of connections between Ireland and the empire, particularly Roman Britain (Cahill Wilson 2014a). These challenge long-established theories about life in late Iron Age Ireland (Cahill Wilson 2014b). It is no longer possible to see late antique Ireland as entirely defined by the arrival of Christianity. Furthermore, conversion was not simply an act of exchanging sets of religious belief but took place within broader multivalent processes of acculturation (Hughes 1966, 10). Thus, in order to identify the earliest Irish Christians, scholars need to locate their pagan neighbours. Being Christian, and its implications for the mental and material worlds of the 5th and 6th centuries, cannot be appreciated in isolation.

Nonetheless, the evidential challenges outlined above have meant that historians tend to rely on a small number of key textual sources, dating from the 5th century, in order to situate the arrival and expansion of Christianity – the very sources that were so important for the hagiographical elaborations of the legend of St Patrick in the 7th century, already discussed. The most influential by far are the writings of Patrick, the *Epistola ad Milites Corotici* and *Confessio*. Both of these texts appear to have been composed when Patrick's mission in Ireland was well established but are also responses to crisis and critique (Ó Cróinín 2017, 45–50; O'Loughlin 1999, 14–47). Frustratingly, they present what are effectively one-sided conversations: the content of the criticisms directed at Patrick, as well as the nature of his audiences, can only be inferred from his own works, making these sources as circular as they are personal. Fortunately, there are broad contextual clues, including references to what appear to be continuities in civic life in Romanised Britain, the importance of monasticism in Gaul and practices of ransoming hostages from the Franks (*Epistola* 10; *Confessio* 1, 43; see also Dark 1993). Yet, these remain tantalisingly difficult to pin down, to such an extent that, although Patrick's 5th-century floruit is a cornerstone of Irish historiography, it remains unclear where he should be placed within that century (Dark 1993; Dumville 1993, 29–43; Charles-Edwards 2000, 214–33; Ó Cróinín 2017, 45–48).

This chronological imprecision is not a factor for the other major documents informing the narrative of the establishment of Ireland's early Christian communities. These constitute the brief contemporary comments of Prosper of Aquitaine, writing between the 430s and 450s (*Chronicle* 473; *Contra Collatorem* 271), alongside the probably less reliable *Vita Germani*, composed by Constantius of Lyon in the

470s or 480s (*Vita Germani*, 225–83). Prosper's statements are all that we know for certain about the appointment of Palladius, as the first bishop to the Irish believing in Christ, by Pope Celestine in 431, and subsequent claims for its success (Charles-Edwards 1993). In addition, Prosper touches on the mission of Germanus of Auxerre to combat Pelagianism in Britain, similarly at the Pope's behest, and suggests that Palladius was crucial to its inception. The *Vita Germani* expands on Germanus' activities in Britain but mentions neither Celestine nor Palladius, crediting the Gallic Church with the initiative (*Vita Germani*, 259, 269–71). The political biases of Prosper and Constantius have been usefully explored (Mathisen 1989, 115–43) and it seems likely that interest in Ireland fitted into papal policies to expand Christianity beyond the old frontiers of Roman power, hand in hand with fighting heresy (Charles-Edwards 1993; Wood 1984, 1987). There is a strong possibility that Palladius was appointed as an envoy to help manage the relationships between Irish secular authorities, Irish Christians and their Romano-British counterparts (Johnston 2018a). So, unlike the Patrick-related sources, those linked to the appointment of Palladius can be convincingly and closely contextualised. In a sense, these valuable documents offer mirrored challenges. Palladius can be politically situated but his experiences are largely lost because we have no other unambiguous contemporary records of his Irish episcopate; in contrast, Patrick's experiences are foregrounded in *Confessio* and *Epistola*, but the political landscape that he inhabited is obscured.

Nevertheless, as this brief discussion has shown, scholars can examine a reasonably extensive body of material, comprising archaeological, epigraphic and documentary evidence, dating to the period during which significant Irish pagan and Christian communities coexisted, from roughly the end of the 4th century to the mid-6th. However, much of its potential remains untapped by historians. Admittedly, there has been a considerable and often illuminating debate on the institutional growth of the Church (Etchingham 1999; Hughes 1966, 39–78; Ó Corráin 1981; Sharpe 1984), along with fruitful use of comparative frameworks (Flechner and Ní Mhaonaigh 2016; Ní Chatháin and Richter 1984). Yet insights into institutional developments have not been matched in other areas. Scholars have generally felt more comfortable discussing how the later Christian Irish felt about a vanished pagan past than thinking about the actual intersections of pagan and Christian communities (McCone 1990, 54–83). This tendency

has been amplified by a reductionist interpretation of pre-Christian experiences. It has long been the consensus that these are ultimately unknowable, particularly because there are few contemporary textual witnesses to Irish pagan beliefs. Even Patrick's discussion of them, a primary focus of his conversion efforts, is vague, allowing limited room for speculation (*Confessio* 38, 40, 58–59). In some respects, this reductionism has been a necessary corrective to a romanticisation of the pagan past and flawed efforts to reconstruct it from classical writings about the Celts or through analysing much later Irish vernacular literature (Jackson 1964; McCone 1990, 1–28). It can also be a trap: it should not be assumed that Irish pagans in Late Antiquity were defined solely by religious affiliation and that this is the only meaningful focus through which their lives can be examined. For instance, knowledge of the material culture of the 4th to the 6th centuries CE has expanded considerably (Cahill Wilson 2014b, 2017). It is possible to analyse the use of imported objects, including brooches, pins and consumables, by the Irish elite and explore what they reveal about the depth of contact with the Roman world, particularly Britain (Bateson 1973, 1976; Johnston 2017a). However, these explorations can rarely separate pagan from Christian, as obvious identifiers of religious affiliation are largely lacking before the 6th century and, as already mentioned, the burial evidence is not decisive. This is not altogether surprising, as a distinctively religious visual vocabulary began to complexify in the Christian heartlands only from the late 4th century. The simple cross became popular towards the end of that century; before this, the Chi-Rho had been the dominant symbol (Petts 2003, 104).

On balance, it is very likely that Irish pagans and Christians had a great deal in common, living in the same physical and economic environments, in much the same way as Tertullian's 3rd-century Carthaginians. These material realities underpin Patrick's comments on the personal, political and communal interactions of Irish pagans and Christians (Johnston 2018b, 14–15). He is acutely aware of a range of challenges. Patrick deploys at least two patterns, one emphasising accommodation to pre-existing social structures and the other more reflective of a distinct Christian identity being formed under conditions of stress. To take the former first: throughout the *Confessio*, in particular, it is clear that Patrick worked within contemporary power dynamics as much as possible; he does not directly challenge them and there is no sense that he seeks their replacement (*Confessio*, 86–89). In

a much-discussed passage Patrick describes the payments he makes to individuals who have local authority (*Confessio*, 86–87). This is not the place to speculate as to whether these were kings, judges or Druids (Ó Corráin 2013), but what it does show is a Christian leader working within pragmatic parameters that accept the dominance of non-Christians. Here, and elsewhere, Patrick operates through the time-honoured practices of gift-giving and enlisting the local elites for protection (*Confessio*, 76–77, 84–87). On the other hand, he strongly emphasises Christian particularism, defining it through a community of believers who are contrasted with pagans and apostates, Irish or otherwise. He foregrounds correct belief, aligning himself with Christian orthodoxy (*Confessio*, 54–55). However, his converts are frequently placed in positions of stress, often from parents but also, as the *Epistola* attests, due to the prevalence of raiding in the Irish Sea region (*Epistola*, 26–29). The familial conflicts, frequently described as intergenerational, acutely highlight the extent to which Christians and pagans lived within the same social spaces, making tensions inevitable. After all, defining oneself as Christian within these spaces could be problematic and disruptive of accepted norms. Patrick supports his converts through praising their special lifestyle choices, becoming monks, virgins and celibates. It is noteworthy, too, that although Patrick is understandably interested in elite conversion, he also emphasises that of women and shows awareness of the plight of Christian slaves, the latter a concern born out of deep personal experience (*Confessio*, 80–81).

Patrick's emphasis on celibacy as a way of being Christian raises the question of how these celibates distinguished themselves. Did they adopt particular forms of dress or hairstyle? This is a point that was important to Muirchú writing in the 7th century: he foregrounds the distinctiveness of clerical dress, although it must be remembered that this is retrospective (*Vita Patricii*, 76–77). The resistance to the celibate vocation among elements of the pagan population, at least as described by Patrick, suggests that it was a controversial choice in Irish society. Did it imply a distancing from local communities or, perhaps, the creation of rival sources of authority, in much the same way as Peter Brown suggests for the holy men of Syria and Egypt? (Brown 1971). The existence of self-aware and defined Christian communities is further attested in early penitential and penitential-style literature, although these are a product of later in the 6th century at the earliest (Meens 2014, 37–45). As Kathleen Hughes points out, they seem to express

some suspicion of the secular legal system and hint that the very high status ultimately given to clerics in that system had not yet been established consistently in customary practice (Hughes 1966, 39–56). This was in place by the second half of the 7th century, as the compilation of the *Senchas Már* shows. Another proviso is that the penitentials, by their very nature, focus on normative Christian behaviour and may highlight distinctions that were not present in all communities or as important as the penitentials imply. So, scholars are left to wonder how Patrick's Christians, and those of Palladius, marked themselves apart as special communities. Liturgical practice must have been part of this, although even here there are uncertainties around levels of participation, as well as the fact that the liturgy itself was in a state of flux (Bowes 2015; Petts 2003, 25). What can be said, more securely, is that Patrick shows an interest in credal teaching (*Confessio*, 54–55). Moreover, the communication between the papacy and Irish Christians, however indirect, that led to the appointment of Palladius as bishop implies an awareness of the importance of institutional stability, surely a major step in communal self-identification and organisation.

Creating Christian Spaces

There seems little doubt that the 6th century witnessed a decisive tipping point towards Christianity. Yet for something which seems so obvious and is implicit in the Christian literature produced from the second half of the 6th century, it can be difficult to trace, particularly before the Chronicle evidence becomes contemporary by the final quarter of the century (Evans 2010, 115–70; Hughes 1972, 99–159). This is especially so if the focus is on practicalities. These include the consolidation of Christianity in institutional form and its expansion across the island in the form of buildings, estates and graveyards. These attest to an era where being Christian in late antique Ireland was becoming normative. This did not mean that Christianity had not changed or adapted. Indeed, as already discussed, Patrick showed a keen understanding of the power structures of Irish society and worked within them. The celebration of Feis Temro (Feast of Tara) is an example of the persistence of group activities – ones that in hindsight came to be seen as incompatible with Christianity (Johnston 2018b, 20–21). The *feis*, an inauguration ceremony of pre-Christian origin, appears to have last been held in 560 by Díarmait mac Cerbaill, the Uí Néill overking.

It is recorded in the Annals of Ulster, and in a later interpolation the Clonmacnoise Chronicle texts note it as the last one ever to have been held (Binchy 1958). This same Díarmait, more than a century later, is praised by Adomnán, the abbot of Iona, as having been ordained by God (*Vita Columbae*. i.36). This is, more than likely, a manipulation of Díarmait's image by Adomnán. However, while Díarmait's Christianity is sometimes portrayed as contingent, there is no reason to think that the king did not self-identify as Christian (Byrne 1973, 96–97). His role as patron of Clonmacnoise was probably a decisive one. It is likely that Díarmait's religious affiliation was one among the many that he held; another was being king of Tara. He had intersecting loyalties. The survival of the Feast of Tara into the latter half of the 6th century emphasises the importance of customary activities. Are these activities in which the earliest Irish Christian communities participated?

In these contexts, it needs to be highlighted that one of the fundamental points of separation between pagans and Christians in late antique Ireland was the importance of a new category of religious persons to the latter, a category whose formation is emphasised by Patrick (*Epistola*, 26–29; *Confessio*, 78–83). It is unlikely that there was serious direct continuity between pre-Christian and Christian religious classes, apart from a few individuals. For example, examinations of the well-attested pagan priesthoods of the later Roman empire show that they differed in important ways from Christian ecclesiastical classes. They rarely employed permanent religious professionals, making them less expensive to maintain over time (Brown 2012). This is not to say that the Druids of late antique Ireland resembled classical priesthoods but to point out that the Christian model was not a normative one. However, by the 7th century the ecclesiastical elite was so well established in Ireland that it held a position of primary importance within the vernacular legal system and had become normative as a result. This contrasts with the remnants of the Druids, whose status was significantly lower, although the fact that they feature in the legal literature at all is suggestive of some form of survival (Slavin 2010).

However, scholars are not yet in a position to answer some basic questions about the size of 6th-century Irish ecclesiastical communities. There is as yet no equivalent to A.H.M. Jones's study of the social history of the later Roman empire which includes estimates of the number of clergy in different dioceses (Jones 1964, 713–15, 873–94). Clare Stancliffe has done the same thing for the diocese of Tours in

the 4th and 5th centuries and Ian Wood for the Merovingian period (Stancliffe 1979; Wood 2018). Projects estimating the extent of the built landscape of the early Irish Church are beginning to substantially fill the gap, but much remains to be answered (Ó Carragáin 2021). When did Irish churches begin to scale upwards, both physically and in terms of personnel, and how was this achieved? One model, of somewhat later date, is provided by the *Additamenta* in the Book of Armagh. They illuminate how that church built up its property dossier. Property changing hands was fundamental to the establishment of Christianity (Brown 2012, 291–300, 500–02; Jones 1964, 894–910). Regular donations were economically even more desirable than one-off grants, so the establishment of networks of patronage was absolutely crucial: they must have been a powerful push factor in the development of Irish ecclesiastical federations. These federations created definite Christian spaces. Furthermore, while the major evidence for increases in production associated with an ecclesiastical economy, such as water mills and weirs, comes from after 600, it must be partly rooted in 6th century property transactions (Brady 2006; Lucas 2005, 76–81). However, it is dangerous to extrapolate backwards from the dense network of churches that can be found in parts of Ireland from the 7th century. The evidence for this, particularly Tírechán's *Collectanea*, indicates that ecclesiastical rivalries were rampant and that the origins of different sites were contested (*Collectanea*, 140–41, 142–43, 160–61). Moreover, a wide distribution of Christian churches can be more indicative of geographical reach than of depth of belief.

Another potentially fruitful line of inquiry is to consider the actual physical spaces occupied by Christians. How did they differ from those of pagans? I have previously made a few preliminary points that are worth revisiting (Johnston 2018b). The first is that scholars have no certain idea of what structures the earliest Irish Christians employed. Extrapolation from elsewhere, however, especially late Roman Britain, provides likely scenarios, such as the use of the equivalent of house churches (Thomas 1985, 181–84). Christian spaces may not have differed much at all from secular buildings, perhaps distinguished only by the presence of an altar or liturgical vessels. The sacred space could well have been incorporated into a larger non-ecclesiastical building. As Christianity expanded, this model was replaced by one where the Church had the land on which to construct formal ecclesiastical structures. Unfortunately, because of the dominant use of organic materials

in their creation, especially before the 9th century, these do not survive to the present day (Ó Carragáin 2010, 17–19). But, as Tomás Ó Carragáin has shown, they were modelled according to conscious choices (Ó Carragáin 2010, 36–37).

Intriguingly, these conscious choices contrast with Roman developments, even though the latter are the direct inspiration for the form that Irish churches took. It has been demonstrated that on the continent and even in Britain, although the evidence is sparser for the latter, secular and ecclesiastical spaces overlapped, especially in the form of the basilica. Because of this, west–east orientation is not always a feature and it is sometimes difficult to identify churches because they are so similar to non-ecclesiastical buildings (Thomas 1985, 155–201). It was only later that a more distinctive palette emerged. To put it simply, late antique churches shared the same architectural vocabulary as Roman state buildings. This meant that the sense of social and political power associated with the secular basilica could be transferred to the churches. However, in Ireland this shared vocabulary did not exist. In a visually profound break, the simple rectilinear unicameral churches, orientated west–east, used by Irish Christians presented striking contrast, not continuity. The rectangular churches are completely different from the predominantly circular living spaces of round-houses and the circular or figure-of-eight structures found at pre-Christian cult centres such as Emain Macha (Wailes 1982). The architectural grammar, indeed the very vocabulary, is distinctively different. These churches may have been architecturally simple, but they made powerful statements (Johnston 2018b). This lies at the other end of the spectrum from the classic ogam inscriptions. Despite their clear debt to Roman epigraphy, the ogam stones situate themselves firmly within a native orthostatic idiom. They are a nativist appropriation. The churches, on the other hand, are not. This is not to say that practicalities did not shape their construction (Ó Carragáin 2010, 22). However, they functioned within environments defined as Christian.

Common Grounds? Pagans and Christians in Late Antique Ireland

By the 7th century a framework of Christian space was firmly established, but the memories of its construction still persisted. For the authors of the *Senchas Már*, Christianity had come to reinterpret and

recalibrate pre-Christian culture. This was not simply a matter of direct replacement, however. Being Christian in late antique Ireland evolved and changed. Small religious communities grew more substantial, and extensive property was accumulated. An internationally outward-looking Hiberno-Latin literature was the product of deep engagement with Christian scripture and literacy (Johnston 2013). But it is easy to forget that not everything was rooted in shifting religious affiliation. This was something of which early medieval writers were aware: they realised that customary practices, the rhythms through which individuals and communities communicated, were not necessarily or ideally factors in religious identification. After all, changes could be made to the meaning of a given practice rather than the practice itself being transformed. Tírechán, once again, provides an apposite example. Throughout his text Patrick traverses a landscape where wells are focal points for communal action and conversion (*Collectanea*, 134–35, 140–45, 148–55). In one case he comes across a well worshipped as a god. The saint blesses the well, removing its pagan associations. He then performs a baptism (*Collectanea*, 152–55). Thus, the well retains its special character but its significance is reinterpreted. Even more profoundly, writers such as Tírechán acknowledged that pagans and Christians had long coexisted and were frequently indistinguishable. They lived together in small rural communities, gathered at the same wells and were buried in the same familial plots. And in these shared spaces, for both the living and the dead, the pagans of late antique Ireland, their values and their customs, shaped emerging Christian identities.

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