

CHAPTER 11

Ireland at the Edge of Time and Space

Constructions of Christian Identity in Early Medieval Ireland

Katja Ritari
University of Helsinki

Abstract

Conversion on a deeper level entails a change in identity, on both the communal and the individual level. It requires a reorientation of one's identity regarding one's place in the world in relation to the divinity (or divinities, depending on the religion in question). The Christianization of Ireland in the Early Middle Ages was a process spanning centuries, starting with St Patrick and other missionaries in the 4th century and continuing until the 6th and 7th centuries, when we have St Columbanus with a self-assured Christian identity writing letters to the pope, among others, and the followers of St Patrick, Muirchú and Tírechán turning St Patrick's life and deeds into hagiography. Adomnán, another 7th-century hagiographer, writes of the holiness of St Columba on the island of Iona in the Inner Hebrides with a view over the whole Chris-

How to cite this book chapter

Ritari, Katja. 'Ireland at the Edge of Time and Space: Constructions of Christian Identity in Early Medieval Ireland'. In *Being Pagan, Being Christian in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages*, edited by Katja Ritari, Jan R. Stenger and William Van Andringa, 255–276. AHEAD: Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.33134/AHEAD-4-11>.

tendom despite his remote geographical location. Christian identity should, furthermore, be otherworldly in character, as its orientation should always be towards the true home of Christians in heaven – as evidenced by these early medieval Irish authors writing about what it means to be a Christian in this world.

Keywords: religious identity, conversion, Early Middle Ages, Ireland, Christianity, Christianisation

Introduction

The conversion, or rather the Christianisation, of a country brings about the forging of a new religious identity. Christianity poses new questions about the identity of the people and entails the need to tie local historical traditions concerning the origins of the land and its inhabitants into the grand scheme of the biblical history of salvation. In Ireland, this forging of a new identity happened from the 5th century onwards. Unfortunately, most of our sources are no earlier than the 7th century, when monastic authors started writing down their traditions and narratives concerning their institutions' past. Therefore, our written sources give a limited view of the actual process of Christianisation, constructed from the point of view of a mostly Christian culture looking into its own past.

Identity construction can happen on two levels. First, there is the identity of an individual asking 'Who am I?' and 'What is my place in the society and in the world?' At this level, the introduction of Christianity restructures the worldview of the individual, creating a new type of orientation in relation to personal relationships with the supernatural, new rules of behaviour and new mental maps of the world, both natural and supernatural. Second, conversion also affects collective identities. In this case, I am talking of the national identity of the Irish as part of Christendom. Forming a collective identity means drawing a line between 'us' and 'them', here Christians and pagans, and building communal cohesion through a shared understanding of the group's past and present.

Medieval Christian identities were simultaneously local and 'global', since by becoming Christians people became members of the larger collective of Christendom while also retaining or constructing identities at a more local level. With the advent of Christianity came Christian learning as well, which necessitated locating Ireland in both space

and time within this larger framework of the world and its past. The aim of this chapter is to explore various early medieval narratives concerning the Irish people and their place in the world, and the ways in which these narratives played a part in the construction of an Irish Christian identity – on both individual and communal levels – in their authors' present. These narratives concerned not only the past and the present, however, but also the future: medieval authors saw history teleologically progressing towards the end and the judgement awaiting all. It is this eschatological aspect of Christianity and its relationship to constructions of Christian identities which I want to explore in this chapter. How did early medieval Irish learned authors see the Irish people as a Christian *gens* located in this world *vis-à-vis* God's eternity in the other world? What did becoming a Christian mean for them from this eschatological perspective? How did they locate Ireland in both space and time, and what did that mean for their Christian identity?

St Patrick and the Island at the Edge of Space and Time

Ireland was located at the edge of the known world; it was the last piece of land before the ocean.¹ Its location was also peripheral in time, since St Patrick, the 5th-century proselytiser of Ireland, saw his own work as the fulfilment of the biblical prophecy in Mt 24:14: 'This gospel of the kingdom will be announced all over the world, as testimony to all the nations, and then will come the end.'² Patrick saw his own work in Ireland within the framework of God's salvation history: the conversion of Ireland would mark that the end is near, since Patrick's mission brought the Gospel to the furthest reaches of land.³ Patrick saw history in a teleological light: everything on this earth happens as decreed by God, and time is progressing towards its end, where eternity awaits. Earthly history should therefore be understood within this eschatological framework. This means that conversion happens not only on the earthly but also the eschatological plane: by becoming Christian, a person or a people joins those who are potentially saved at the final judgement.

St Patrick's extant writings, the *Confessio* and *Epistola ad milites Corotici*, are the earliest extensive written sources on the conversion of Ireland. Although Patrick was not an Irishman but a Briton first

brought to Ireland as a slave, I will briefly discuss his writings here, since many of their themes pertaining to Irish Christianity are echoed in the treatises of Irish authors of later centuries. In the *Confessio*, Patrick defends his work in Ireland against certain unspecified accusations. His main justification is the mission he has received from God: he presents himself as a humble servant of the divine. By appealing to a higher authority (i.e. God) than any earthly one, he can shield his mission against possible criticism by British bishops regarding his authority to engage in missionary work in Ireland.⁴ Patrick's writings are not very useful from a historian's point of view for determining the exact place or time of his mission, but they can be used to study his worldview and his understanding of the work he was doing in Ireland.⁵

As a Roman Briton⁶ first brought into Ireland as a slave and later returning as a missionary, Patrick defined his identity through the experience of being an outsider in a hostile country. At the beginning of his *Confessio*, he writes: 'God brought to bear upon us the wrath of His anger and scattered us among many peoples [*in gentibus multis*], even to the uttermost part of the earth, where now, in my lowliness, I dwell among strangers.'⁷ When describing his youth as a captive in Ireland, he calls himself a *profuga*, 'a fugitive, wanderer or exile', someone living among alien people (i.e. an outsider).⁸ When writing about his work among the Irish after his return there, Patrick states that he is toiling 'for the salvation of others.'⁹ This is the rationale for his work: he is working not to achieve fame or status but to open up the possibility of salvation to the pagan and alien people living in Ireland. Patrick has a clear sense of destiny; he did not come to Ireland of his own choice but was sent there by God. He writes:

Thank God always, God who showed me that I should believe Him endlessly to be trusted, and who so helped me that I, an ignorant man, in the last days should dare to undertake this work so holy and so wonderful, in such fashion that I might to some degree imitate those whom the Lord already long ago foretold would announce His Gospel in witness to all nations before the end of the world. And as we have seen it written, so we have seen it fulfilled; behold, we are the witnesses that the Gospel has been preached to the limit beyond which no one dwells.¹⁰

Here we see clearly that in Patrick's mind, Ireland was in a biblical sense one of the nations to which the Gospel would be preached before

the end comes.¹¹ He furthermore writes about his own role, quoting Acts 13:47: 'I have set you to be a light to the nations, that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth.'¹² Patrick therefore sees himself as an instrument of God through whom the work of God is consummated. Through his mission, the history of the Irish is set within the wider framework of salvation history and God's plan for the human race. The conversion of the Irish means that those who, in Patrick's words, previously only celebrated idols and unclean things are now made into people of the Lord and sons of God, the daughters and sons of their leaders becoming virgins of Christ and monks.¹³ He furthermore writes about the Irish as the people God has found in the outermost parts of the earth.¹⁴ The Irish people are here treated as a collective, a people at the furthest limits of habitable space and thus witnesses to the fulfilment of God's promise that the Gospel would reach the ends of the earth.

Patrick's *Epistola ad milites Corotici* is a public letter written to excommunicate the soldiers of a certain warlord named Coroticus, who had taken some of Patrick's newly converted Christians as slaves.¹⁵ In the *Epistola*, Patrick writes that he does not count the soldiers of Coroticus as his compatriots, nor as compatriots of the Roman saints, but as being in fellowship with demons.¹⁶ In this way, he makes a distinction between the citizens of God and those of the devil. The identity of a Christian is thus based on the knowledge of belonging to the same company as those who have already been saved (i.e. the saints), while the bloodthirsty marauders who 'live in death' are among the damned. Patrick sees his own role as that of a father who has 'begotten' the newly converted, innocent Christians taken as slaves by Coroticus' men.¹⁷ By being converted to Christianity, Patrick's followers have gained a new life and joined the community of the saved. The men of Coroticus, however, are not pagans but Christians, since Patrick writes that one should not accept their alms or associate with them unless they free the captives and make peace with God by doing penance with tears (*Epistola* 7; see also *Epistola* 21). What differentiates them from Patrick's flock is thus not a lack of baptism but their lifestyle and disregard for God's laws. He writes of them as allies of the *Scottorum* – that is, the pagan Irish not yet converted to Christianity – and the apostate Picts in Scotland (*Epistola* 2 and 12). What unites these peoples is apparently their ultimate destiny in hell. Accordingly, the line drawn between the citizens of God and those of the devil is based not on their

baptismal status but on their eschatological fate (i.e. their status after the judgement).

Further on in the *Epistola*, Patrick repeats the apology for his work in Ireland by writing about his role as a servant in Christ, toiling among foreign people for the ineffable glory of eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹⁸ Noting that God made him into one of the hunters and fishers foretold to be coming in the last days, he again stresses the motif of being a stranger in a strange country and of getting his mission directly from the Lord Himself.¹⁹ He even refers in a defensive tone to John 4:44, which points out that nobody is a prophet in their own country, thus underlining his role against the accusations coming from his homeland.²⁰

Muirchú, Tírechán and the National Saint

The same motifs of a divine mission and teleological view of history can be found in the *Life of Patrick* written by Muirchú in the second half of the 7th century – that is, a couple of hundred years after Patrick's time. Muirchú's work belongs among the oldest surviving hagiographical works from Ireland, along with another work on Patrick by Tírechán, the *Life of Columba* by Adomnán, the *Life of Brigit* by Cogitosus and another work on Brigit known as the *Vita prima*.²¹ In Muirchú's *Life*, we can see that the process of building the cult of Patrick as the national saint is already under way. Here Patrick is presented as the sole proselytiser of Ireland, as both the Moses and the apostle of the Irish.

As Moses, Patrick delivered the Irish from the bondage of paganism just as Moses released the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. This time, however, the physical Holy Land is replaced by the New Testament image of the heavenly kingdom to which the people are being led. Muirchú explicitly compares the two figures, stating that Patrick also had to march for 28 days through the desert when he escaped Ireland in his youth (*Vita Patricii* I 2) and that Patrick's guardian angel Victorius hid in a burning bush on a roadside (*Vita Patricii* II 5). Furthermore, Patrick lived to the respectable age of 120, just like Moses (*Vita Patricii* II 7). Just as the Israelites were the chosen people of Moses, the Irish were destined to be the chosen people of Patrick, and he was sent to them as their prophet to free them from the ignorance of paganism.

In addition, Patrick had the function of the apostle of the Irish. He brought the Gospel to Ireland, thus opening up the possibility of salvation for the Irish.²² In Muirchú's view, the Gospel spread both in space and time from the Holy Land of the apostolic times to the Ireland of Patrick, where he himself was an inheritor of it. The apostolic role of Patrick is clearly spelled out in the episode in which Patrick, towards the end of his life, encounters Victoricus in the burning bush. Another angel acts as Victoricus' mouthpiece, giving him the message that he should turn back on the road and return to Saul – where he was coming from – instead of continuing to his main church in Armagh (*Vita Patricii* II 5). As Patrick knew that his death was approaching, this meant that his passing away would happen not in his favourite church in Armagh but in Saul.²³ Patrick was handsomely compensated for this inconvenience, however, since the angel promised that his four requests would be granted by God. Patrick's first request concerned the pre-eminent role of Armagh within the Irish Church. The second request dealt with Patrick's authority to judge anyone who at the hour of death recites a hymn composed about Patrick. The third request specifically concerned the destiny of the descendants of a man called Díchu, who had been the first to receive Patrick in Ireland, thus securing mercy in the afterlife for his progeny. The fourth dealt with the judgement of all the Irish: 'all the Irish on the day of judgment shall be judged by you [i.e. Patrick], as is said to the apostles: "And you shall sit and judge the twelve tribes of Israel", so that you may judge those whose apostle you have been.'²⁴ The first request is the only one which concerns earthly matters, while the other three all deal with posthumous judgement. This underlines the importance of the eschatological perspective for Christianity: becoming a Christian is not only a matter of earthly alliances, but fundamentally it is about the posthumous destiny of the soul. The second request deals with personal judgement at the hour of death and the fourth with collective judgement at the end of time. In both cases, Patrick is the one doing the judging. By reciting the hymn in honour of Patrick, a personal relationship is established between the saint and the person commemorating him, while Patrick's work of converting the Irish means that they are singled out as his people. Patrick's role as the spiritual father of the Irish provides them with his protection, not only in this world but also in the world to come. The Irish are therefore united, as Patrick's progeny and the community of the Irish encompass all the Irish, including the living and the dead.

They are one Christian nation, whose destiny in the afterlife lies in the hands of their own apostle, Patrick, who will judge them. This soteriological argument reinforces Patrick's role among the Irish saints: as the apostle of the Irish, Patrick is the premier saint, the national saint, who has power over their destiny in the afterlife. Therefore, his veneration should hold a special place among the Irish, and from his apostolic role also logically follows the claim that Patrick's church in Armagh should have ecclesiastical superiority. Thus, the political propaganda in the *Life* is closely tied in with its spiritual message, and the two reinforce each other.²⁵

The other 7th-century work on St Patrick written by Tírechán is much briefer and focuses on listing the churches founded by Patrick and the people he ordained for them. It is usually known under the name *Collectanea*, which underlines its nature as a collection of material pertaining to the churches founded by Patrick. Instead of using a biographical structure, the *Collectanea* follows the saint's itineraries around Ireland. In this way, it deals more with the laying of foundations for an organised Church in Ireland than with exciting narratives about Patrick's encounters with pagans, which form the core of Muirchú's work. The motivation for the writing of both works, however, has to do with presenting Patrick as the sole proselytiser of Ireland and, consequently, his successors as having authority over all the churches founded by him.²⁶ This aim can be clearly seen in episodes in which contesting claims for some churches are mentioned. One instance concerns a church that Patrick founded in a place called Mag Tóchui, which in Tírechán's time belonged to the community of Clonmacnoise, causing the men of that place to groan.²⁷ Tírechán goes on to mention that the community of Clonmacnoise had recently claimed several churches which originally belonged to Patrick but had apparently been deserted because of an epidemic.²⁸ Tírechán sets out his argument for Patrick's authority, stating:

Moreover, my heart in me is filled with love for Patrick, for I see that deserters and arch-robbers and warlords of Ireland hate Patrick's monastic network [*paruchia*], for they have taken away from him what belonged to him and are therefore afraid, for if an heir of Patrick would investigate his *paruchia*, he could restore for him almost the whole island as his *paruchia*, because i. God gave him the whole island with its people through an angel of the Lord, ii. he taught them the law of the

Lord, iii. he baptised them with the baptism of God, iv. he made known the cross of Christ, v. and he announced [Christ's] resurrection. But they do not love his *familia*, because i. it is not permitted to take an oath against him, ii. over him, iii. or concerning him, iv. and it is not permitted cast lots against him, because all the primitive churches of Ireland are his, but he overrules whatever is sworn.²⁹

Investigating the churches that belong to Patrick is exactly what Tírechán sets out to do in his work: he traces the origins of various churches in different parts of Ireland to the Patrician mission, thus claiming that they belong under his jurisdiction. He furthermore claims here that an angel of the Lord gave the whole island to Patrick, and thus Patrick and his heirs in Armagh have authority over the people. According to Tírechán, the elements of Christianity that Patrick introduced to the Irish include the law, baptism, the cross and Christ's resurrection: baptism makes the people Christians; by following the law they live like Christians; the cross is the symbol of Christians; and knowledge about the resurrection forms the core of Christian teaching. Christ's death, symbolised by the cross, and his overcoming of death through the resurrection, are the good news brought by Christianity: through his death and resurrection, Christ opened the possibility of salvation to all baptised Christians who lead their lives according to the Christian laws.

In Tírechán's work, Patrick does not come to Ireland alone. Instead, he is accompanied by a number of ecclesiastical personnel of Gaulish origin.³⁰ Moreover, in the list of bishops and deacons ordained by Patrick, three of them are specified as being of Frankish origin.³¹ The origins of Irish Christianity, therefore, lie in the hands of these outsiders, including the Briton Patrick himself. In a further episode, Tírechán relates that Patrick staffed a large church he had founded in Mag Glais with two of his monks, Conleng and Ercleng, who are identified as barbarians.³² Their alien status is underlined by Bieler, who translates the term *barbarus* in the *Collectanea* as 'non-Roman' (*Collectanea* 20). Tírechán here seems to differentiate between those who are of native origin and those who are from outside the island, like the Gauls and the Franks.

In one episode, Patrick retreats to a mountain called Mons Aigli (i.e. Croagh Patrick) to fast for 40 days and nights, following the examples of Moses, Elias and Christ (*Collectanea* 38). Furthermore, he follows

God's command to the holy men of Ireland to climb this mountain to bless the Irish people (*Hiberniae populos*). While there, he is able to appreciate the fruits of his labour, and the holy men of Ireland come to visit their father (*ad patrem eorum uissitandum*), thus clearly expressing Patrick's dominion over them. From this high vantage point (falsely presented as the highest peak in Ireland), Patrick has command over his missionary field. All the Irish – including the saints – should venerate him as the father of their Christianity, according to Tírechán. Their identity as Christians is thus linked to their national saint, by means of whom the possibility of salvation was first offered to them.

The fate of the pre-Christian Irish is described in an anecdote in which Patrick resurrects from an enormous grave (about 36 metres in length) a huge man who had lived a hundred years earlier.³³ Weeping bitterly, the man gives thanks for being awakened even for a short while from his pains. Patrick offers him the option of believing in the God of heaven and receiving the baptism of the Lord, whereby he would not have to go back to the unhappy place where he had been. This takes place, and eventually the giant is laid again in the grave. This episode graphically illustrates that before the coming of Patrick the men of Ireland were doomed to hell, and only the baptism and belief in the Christian God brought by the saint freed them from this fate.

In another episode Patrick encounters King Loíguire, but the king is unable to accept the faith since his father had decreed that Loíguire should be buried on the ridges of Tara, like his forefathers, with his weapons facing his enemies.³⁴ Burial practice is here presented as dividing the pagans from Christians. By accepting the Christian faith and consequently being buried like a Christian, Loíguire would abandon his ancestors, siding with the Christians in the afterlife.

Columbanus, the Self-Confident Irishman on the Continent

Between Patrick and his hagiographers there exists a gap of a couple of hundred years with a very limited number of written sources. Saint Columbanus, the Irish monk who founded several monasteries on the continent and died there in 615, provides the foremost exception. He produced a voluminous body of writings, including sermons, letters, monastic rules, a penitential and religious poetry. Although most of Columbanus' career took place on the continent, he clearly wrote as

an Irishman, and thus we can use his writings to study the Christian identity of his age.³⁵ Of course, as a highly learned and widely travelled Irishman he is an exception, but nevertheless we can get a glimpse in his writings of how 6th-century Irish ecclesiastics perceived their identity as Christians.

Although Columbanus lived in a period which can still be considered fairly early in terms of Irish Christianity, he does not show any insecurity or feelings of inferiority with regard to his cultural background. In a letter to a French synod concerning the different methods of *paschal computus*, he writes:³⁶

but I admit the inmost conviction of my conscience, that I have more confidence in the tradition of my native land in accordance with the teaching and reckoning of eighty-four years and with Anatolius, who was commended by Bishop Eusebius, the author of the ecclesiastical history, and by Jerome, the holy writer of the catalogue, for the celebration of Easter, rather than to do so in accordance with Victorius, who writes recently and in a doubtful manner, and without defining anything where it was needed ... But you yourselves choose whom you prefer to follow. Prove all things, and hold what is good. Far be it then that I should maintain the need to quarrel with you so that a conflict among us Christians should rejoice our enemies, meaning the Jews or heretics or Gentile heathen ... for we are all joint members of one body, whether Franks or Britons or Irish or whatever be our race.³⁷

Columbanus sees himself first of all as a Christian, a member of a united body consisting of different peoples and set apart from the non-Christians (i.e. Jews, heretics and pagans). Despite their differences in some practical matters, like the method of defining the date of Easter, all the Christian peoples (*gens*) are united as one body and separated from those who are outside of the Catholic Church.

Columbanus is so secure in his Christian identity that he does not shrink from advising and criticising even the pope himself. In his letter to Pope Boniface IV written in the context of the 'Three Chapters' schism, Columbanus defends his own credentials, saying:

For all we Irish, inhabitants of the world's edge, are disciples of Saints Peter and Paul and of all the disciples who wrote the sacred canon by the Holy Ghost, and we accept nothing outside the evangelical and apostolic

teaching; none has been a heretic, none Judaiser, none a schismatic; but the Catholic faith, as it was delivered by you first, who are the successors of the holy apostles, is maintained unbroken.³⁸

From this letter it becomes clear that Columbanus considered the Irish to be part of a universal Christendom and the Catholic Church, not a separate 'Celtic' church, as has sometimes been suggested. A self-assured product of the Irish Church, he was not shy to raise his voice and instruct the ecclesiastical – and probably also secular – powers, especially considering the trouble he got into with some of the Frankish leaders, even though he came from a remote island at the world's edge.

In Letter II, Columbanus refers to himself as one who has 'entered these lands as a pilgrim' (*in has terras peregrinus processerim*). He thus positions himself as an outsider in relation to the representatives of the French Church, to whom the letter is addressed. Furthermore, being a pilgrim holds special significance for him, since the metaphor of pilgrimage for the lifelong quest for heaven is a recurring theme in his sermons.³⁹ In them, he calls for his audience, the monks of his monasteries, to adopt the attitude of a pilgrim, who keeps his eyes focused on the end of the journey – namely, the encounter with the sacred in the true home in heaven – without letting the sights on the way distract him. Therefore, pilgrims should always remember that as long as they are in this world, they are still on the way and in a foreign country, and everything they see here is just transitory.⁴⁰ While this idea of lifelong pilgrimage inspired Columbanus himself to leave his home and entrust his destiny in foreign lands to the hands of God, in his sermons he stresses the adoption of the attitude of a pilgrim rather than actually leaving one's monastery. Accordingly, the idea can be seen more in relation to an internal movement than to physically wandering around. Nevertheless, numerous Irish monks left their homes as a *peregrinus pro amore Dei*, like Columbanus himself, seeking to serve God outside of their home territories in Ireland, on islands in the sea or in foreign countries.⁴¹ The idea of pilgrimage, for Columbanus, thus held an otherworldly connotation. When he refers to himself as a pilgrim, it not only means his being an outsider in another country but serves as a metaphor to comprise his whole life and his attitude towards worldly existence.

Adomnán and Columba on the Island of Iona

The same idea of life as a pilgrimage is present in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*, the late 7th-century *Life* of the founder of the monastery of Iona in Scotland, who died in 597. Columba is said to have left Ireland *pro Christo perigrinari uolens* (VC 2nd preface),⁴² while a saintly youth named Fintan wishes to come to Columba *deserens perigrinaturus adiret* (VC i.2). Thus, being a pilgrim means dedicating one's life to seeking the heavenly kingdom. As a saint, Columba has fulfilled this quest in its most perfect form, showing himself ready for heavenly life while still on earth.⁴³ In this way, as well as through his vocation as an abbot, he leads by example, showing the way to heaven for others to follow.⁴⁴

Columba's influence is by no means limited to his Hebridean home in Iona. According to his *Life*, he received a constant stream of visitors from Ireland and he himself travelled widely in Ireland, among the Picts in Scotland and among the Irish in the Scottish kingdom of Dál Riata. In spirit, his reach is even wider; for example, in a vision he witnesses an Italian city being consumed by fire (VC i.28). The *Life* was first and foremost written for a monastic audience in Iona and other Columban monasteries in Ireland, but it was clearly expected to also reach a greater audience, including Irish ecclesiastics outside of the Columban *familia* and perhaps even in Northumbria.⁴⁵ Adomnán sought to convince his audience that the significance of Columba's holiness was not limited to Iona alone but was more universal in nature, and that therefore he should also be venerated as a saint outside of the Columban *familia*. At the end of the *Life*, Adomnán directly makes the case that Columba's name should be venerated not only in Ireland and Britain but also in Spain, Gaul, Italy and even Rome itself (VC iii.23).

Columba's saintliness is based on his perfection as an ideal monk, and thus Adomnán's treatment of Christian identity is closely intertwined with monastic ideals. For him, the model Christian leads a monastic life by following in the footsteps of the prototypical monk, Columba. Adomnán's worldview is more universal than specifically Irish, as he held that monastic life could be led everywhere in Christendom and, accordingly, Columba should also be adopted as a model by people outside of his immediate environment. Although he lived on a remote island at the edge of the known world, Adomnán's learning was based on his broad knowledge of Christian literature. His other surviving work, *De Locis Sanctis*, a treatise concerning places in the Holy

Land, reveals a keen interest in and familiarity with the world outside of the British Isles.⁴⁶ Geographically speaking, Iona was connected to the wider world by the ocean, and the *Vita Columbae* mentions visitors sailing to Iona from Ireland, Scotland and even Gaul, as well as monks from Iona sailing in all directions, including the furthest reaches of the known world in the north.⁴⁷ Adomnán locates Iona on the outermost edge of the Britannic ocean, but despite its remoteness it is very much part of the wider Christian world.⁴⁸ For him, Iona is hallowed ground frequented by the visitations of angels and sanctified by the presence of the holy man's grave.⁴⁹ Despite its location, it has produced a saint worthy of veneration, even in Christian centres such as Rome. Therefore, it is just as possible to lead a holy life and reach heaven in remote corners of the earth such as Iona as in the more central regions.

In the first preface to the work, Adomnán apologises to his audience for the occurrence of Irish names in the Latin text, saying:

Let them not despise the publication of deeds that are profitable and that have not been accomplished without the help of God, on account of some unfamiliar words of the Irish tongue, a poor language, designations of men, or names of tribes and places – words which, I suppose, are held to be of no value, among other different tongues of foreign peoples.⁵⁰

Here Adomnán is clearly expecting that his work will reach an audience that does not understand Irish. Furthermore, he writes here from the superior perspective of a learned ecclesiastic, for whom Latin was the language of writing and learning. While Irish was the local vernacular of the Irish, a people with their own language just like other foreign peoples, Latin was the universal language uniting all Christians together. Again, Adomnán argues that the deeds of Columba – accomplished with the help of God – merit a wider audience, despite his personal provinciality.

In the second preface, Adomnán locates Columba temporarily in the end time in a prophecy put into the mouth of a certain Mochta, a British disciple of Saint Patrick: 'In the last years of the world will be born a son whose name, Columba, will become famous through all the provinces of the islands of the ocean, and will brightly illuminate the last years of the world.'⁵¹ Adomnán here presents Columba's work in an eschatological and providential perspective: God has destined him

to bring light to the people living on the islands of the ocean (i.e. the outermost edges of the known world) in the end time. Furthermore, he argues that Columba's significance is not limited to his immediate surroundings but should spread more widely throughout the islands of the ocean. As Columba's successor, writing approximately a hundred years after the saint's death, Adomnán must locate his own time within the same eschatological context – the end time is near – and relevancy: by venerating Columba and following his example, one can follow his footsteps to heaven. The *Life* opens with this prophecy about Columba's role as a bringer of light, and it closes with the saint being taken to heaven and a plea for his fame to reach even Rome (VC iii.23). In between, Adomnán demonstrates Columba's holiness by relating his prophetic abilities (Book i), miracles of power (Book ii), and visions of heavenly light and angelic apparitions (Book iii). As a saint, Columba has reached the goal of Christian life right after his death, thereby leading the way for others to follow. In an episode concerning a penitent named Librán, the saint foretells that this follower will die in one of Columba's monasteries, thus playing his part in the Kingdom of God with the elect monks of Columba, awakening from the sleep of death to resurrection.⁵² By means of penance and leading a life of obedience as a monk, Librán is thus able to secure himself a place among the elect in heaven, but unlike the saint, he has to slumber in the sleep of death in the grave before being resurrected with the monks among whom he is buried. Book iii of *Vita Columbae*, which is dedicated to visions of heavenly light and celestial beings, has several examples of souls being carried to heaven by angels at the moment of death. Among these are also members of the laity who have led virtuous lives, while the *Life* also features examples of wicked men being carried to hell by demons.⁵³ These souls seem to have been judged right at the moment of death so that their souls could be taken immediately to heaven or hell, while their bodies wait in their graves for resurrection.⁵⁴ Christian life was thus viewed in an eschatological light: all deeds performed on earth will be weighed and either rewarded or punished in the afterlife. Columba's saintly status means that he is already in heaven and can intercede from there on behalf of those venerating him, thus securing a special place for his elect monks. Adomnán argues that because Columba's significance as a saint exceeds any geographical boundaries, he merits veneration not only by the Irish but by Christians elsewhere. He can protect those who remember his name, both in this life through

his miracles and in the life to come.⁵⁵ Adomnán's identity as a Christian and a successor to Columba in the role of abbot of Iona is markedly international: despite his peripheral geographical location, he is well connected to the rest of Christendom, physically by the sea and spiritually through his learning. The Irish are among the Christian peoples called to the path to heaven, but the power of their saint, Columba, transcends Ireland and Scotland and he should be venerated more universally.

Irish Christians and the Path to Heaven

The earliest of the Irish authors considered in this chapter is Columbanus, who died in 615 and in whose writings a strong Irish Christian identity is already evident. It is apparent that Columbanus considered himself to be equally as Christian as any other member of the Christian Church. As a monastic leader, he felt that he had the right to take part in ecclesiastical politics and advise leaders of other churches. About half a decade later, the hagiographers of Patrick were arguing for a special place in the providential history of the Irish as followers of Patrick, their own apostle, since it was through his work that the Irish had become Christians. Furthermore, in these hagiographical works we can see the outsider, Patrick, adopted as an insider and as the father of all Irish Christians, while the pagan Irish are made into the outsiders, since they are not included in the community of the potentially saved. In his own writings, Patrick himself underlines his role as a foreigner in a foreign country, but this can also be read spiritually as reflecting the alienation that Christians should feel in this world, which is at a remove from their true home in heaven. In the early medieval Irish tradition, as exemplified by the writings of Columbanus and Adomnán, this topos should clearly be read spiritually in light of the lifelong pilgrimage of Christians to the heavenly kingdom. Becoming a Christian therefore entailed adopting this eschatological perspective, which is always directed towards the judgement and the rewards and punishments awaiting in the afterlife.

Notes

- 1 On the classical topos of the ocean and its islands, see Scully (2011, 3–15).
- 2 Patrick, *Confessio*, 40: Praedicabitur hoc euangelium regni in uniuerso mundo in testimonium omnibus gentibus et tunc ueniet finis. For other references to Ireland being located at the ends of the earth, see *Confessio*, 38, 51.
- 3 On Patrick's understanding of his mission and his location in space and time, see Charles-Edwards (2000, 214–16); O'Loughlin (2005, 63–78).
- 4 See, for example, Patrick, *Confessio* 9–15. On the accusations and Patrick's mission, see Charles-Edwards (2000, 216–29); Flechner (2011, 125–33); O'Loughlin (2005, 60–62).
- 5 On the problems of using Patrick's writings as historical sources, see Etchingham (2016, 187–96).
- 6 In *Confessio* 1, Patrick tells us that his father was a decurion, a local minor Roman official and a deacon, and his grandfather a presbyter.
- 7 *Confessio* 1: Dominus induxit super nos iram animationis suae et dispersit nos in gentibus multis etiam usque ad ultimum terrae, ubi nunc paruitas mea esse uidetur inter alienigenas.
- 8 *Confessio* 12. On the translation of this word, see O'Loughlin (2005, 147 n. 65). The same word is used in Patrick, *Epistola* 1.
- 9 *Confessio* 28: satagerem pro salute aliorum.
- 10 *Confessio* 34: Deo gratias semper agere, qui mihi ostendit ut indubitabilem eum sine fine crederem et qui me audierit ut ego inscius et in nouissimis diebus hoc opus tam pium et tam mirificum auderem adgredere, ita ut imitarem quippiam illos quos ante Dominus iam olim praedixerat praenuntiaturos euangelium suum in testimonium omnibus gentibus ante finem mundi, quod ita ergo uidimus itaque suppletum est: ecce testes sumus quia euangelium praedicatum est usque ubi nemo ultra est.
- 11 On Patrick's terminology for pagans and Christians, see Charles-Edwards (2016, 259–71).
- 12 *Confessio* 38: Posui te lumen in gentibus ut sis in salutem usque ad extremum terrae. Vulgate: Acts 13:47: posui te in lumen gentibus ut sis in salutem usque ad extremum terrae.
- 13 *Confessio* 41: Unde autem Hiberione qui numquam notitiam Dei habuerunt nisi idola et inmunda usque nunc semper coluerunt quomodo nuper facta est plebs Domini et filii Dei nuncupantur, filii Scottorum et filiae regulatorum monachi et uirgines Christi esse uidentur?
- 14 *Confessio* 58: plebem suam quam adquisiuit in ultimis terrae.
- 15 On the letter and the identity of Coroticus, see Charles-Edwards (2000, 226–30); Dumville (1993, 107–15).
- 16 *Epistola* 2: non dico ciuibus meis neque ciuibus sanctorum Romanorum sed ciuibus daemoniorum.
- 17 *Epistola* 2: Sanguilentos sanguinare de sanguine innocentium Christianorum, quos ego in numero Deo genui atque in Christo confirmaui!
- 18 *Epistola* 10: seruus sum in Christo genti exterae ob gloriam ineffabilem perennis uitae quae est in Christo Iesu Domino nostro.
- 19 *Epistola* 12: unus essem de uenatoribus siue piscatoribus quos olim Deus in nouissimis diebus ante praenuntiauit.

- 20 *Epistola* 12: propheta in patria sua honorem non habet.
- 21 On these *Lives* and the tradition of writing hagiographies in Ireland, see Herbert (2001, 327–34); McCone (1984, 26–34).
- 22 On the sources and models for Muirchú's presentation of Patrick as an apostle, see O'Leary (1996, 287–301).
- 23 On differing traditions concerning Patrick's burial place, see Sharpe (1982, 40–43).
- 24 Muirchú, *Vita Patricii* II 6: Hibernenses omnes in die iudicii a te iudicentur, sicut dicitur ad apostolos: 'et uos sedentes iudicabitis duodecim tribus Israel', it eos quibus apostolus fuisti iudices.
- 25 On the political propaganda in the *Life of Patrick*, see Doherty (1991, 81–88). On Muirchú's understanding of the meaning of Irish conversion, see O'Loughlin (2000, 87–108, 2002, 124–45, 2005, 112–30).
- 26 On Tírechán's motives for writing, see Herbert (2001, 330–31); McCone (1984, 31–32); Swift (1994, 53–82).
- 27 Tírechán, *Collectanea* 47. See also *Collectanea* 22.
- 28 *Collectanea* 25: sed quaerit familia Clono, qui per uim tenent locos Patricii multos post mortalitates nouissimas.
- 29 *Collectanea* 18: Cor autem meum cogitat in me de Patricii dilectione, quia uideo dissertores et archiclocos et milites Hiberniae quod odio habent paruchiam Patricii, quia substraxerunt ab eo quod ipsius erat timentque quoniam, si quaereret heres Patricii paruchiam illius, potest pene totam insolam sibi reddere in paruchiam, quia Deus dedit illi i. totam insolam cum hominibus per anguelum Domini ii. et legem Domini docuit illis iii. et bapuzismo Dei bapuzitauit illos iv. et crucem Christi indicauit v. et resurrectionem eius nuntiauit; sed familiam eius non diligunt, quia i. non licet iurare contra eum ii. et super eum iii. et de eo iiii. et non lignum licet contra eum mitti, quia ipsius sunt omnes primitiuae aeclesiae Hiberniae, sed <supra> iuratur a se omne quod iuratur.
- 30 *Collectanea* 3: Venit uero Patricius cum Gallis ad insolas Maccu Chor et insola orientali, quae dicitur Insola Patricii, et secum fuit multitudo episcoporum sanctorum et praespiterorum et diaconorum ac exorcistarum, hostiariorum lectorumque nec filiorum quos ordinauit.
- 31 *Collectanea* 7: De nominibus Francorum Patricii Episcopi tres. The Frankish followers of Patrick are mentioned also in *Collectanea* 29, where they are specified as consisting of 15 brothers and one sister.
- 32 *Collectanea* 20: Venierunt ad campum Glais et in illo posuit celoram magnam, quae sic uocatur Cellula Magna, et in illa reliquit duos barbarus Conleng et Ercleng monachos sibi.
- 33 *Collectanea* 40. See also the next episode *Collectanea* 41 for another example of the destiny of pagans. In this episode, Patrick and his charioteer pass a cross next to two new graves. When Patrick asks who is buried under the cross, a man replies from the grave, telling that he is a pagan and somebody had accidentally put the cross on his grave rather than the next one. Patrick moves the cross to its rightful place. When they continue their journey, his charioteer asks why Patrick did not offer baptism to the pagan in the grave, but the saint does not reply. The hagiographer then ventures to explain that perhaps God did not wish the man to be saved.

- 34 *Collectanea* 12. Muirchú tells a quite different version of the encounter between Patrick and Loíguire. In his *Life*, this lengthy episode forms the culmination of the whole work.
- 35 On the career of Columbanus, see Bullough (1997, 1–28).
- 36 On the letters of Columbanus, see Wright (1997, 29–92).
- 37 Columbanus, Letter II: *sed Confiteor conscientiae meae secreta, quod plus credo traditioni patriae meae iuxta doctrinam et calculum octoginta quattuor annorum et Anatolium ab Eusebio ecclesiasticae historiae auctore episcopo et sancto catalogi scriptore Hieronymo laudatum Pascha celebrare, quam iuxta Victorium nuper dubie scibentem et, ubi necessare erat, nihil defientem ... Vos vero eligite ipsi quem sequi malitis, et cui melius credatis iuxta illud apostoli, Omnia probate, quod bonum est tenete. Absit ergo ut ego contra vos contendem congregiendum, ut gaudeant inimici nostri de nostra christianorum contention, Iudaei scilicet aut heretici sive pagani gentiles ... unius enim sumus corporis commembra, sive Galli, sive Britanni, sive Iberi, sive quaeque gentes.*
- 38 Columbanus, Letter V: *Nos enim sanctorum Petri et Pauli et omnium discipulorum divinum canonem spiritu sancto scribentium discipuli sumus, toti Iberi, ultimi habitatores mundi, nihil extra evangelicam et apostolicam doctrinam recipients; nullus hereticus, nullus Iudaeus, nullus schismaticus fuit; sed fides catholica, sicut a vobis primum, sanctorum videlicet apostolorum successoribus, tradita est, inconcussa tenetur*
- 39 On this theme in the sermons of Columbanus, see Ritari (2016, 47–90). On the sermons of Columbanus, see Stancliffe (1997, 93–202).
- 40 See especially Columbanus, Sermons IV, V, VIII. On the feeling of alienation and the life of pilgrimage in Christianity, see Claussen (1991, 33–75); Ladner (1967, 233–59).
- 41 On Irish ideas concerning *peregrinatio* in early medieval Irish Christianity, see Charles-Edwards (1976, 43–59); Hughes (1960, 143–51); Ritari (2016).
- 42 In VC i.7, there is a reference to the same event, which states that the saint sailed away from Ireland to be a pilgrim (*uir beatus de Scotia perigrinaturus primitus enauigauit*). In VC i.13, a man comes as an exile to the saint, who is on pilgrimage in Britain (*ad sanctum in Britanniam perigrinantem*).
- 43 VC 2nd preface: *quamuis in terra positus caelestibus se aptum moribus ostendebat.*
- 44 On Adomnán's vision of the role of the abbot and the goals of monastic life, see Ritari (2011, 129–46).
- 45 On the writing and purpose of the *Life*, see Herbert ([1988] 1996, 47–56); Nilsen (2007); Picard (1982, 160–77).
- 46 On this work and Adomnán's learning, see O'Loughlin (2007).
- 47 See, for example, (visitors from Gaul) VC i.28; (to and from Ireland) i.30, ii.14, 36, iii.7; (to and from Scotland) i.33–34, 41, ii.11, 26–27, 32, iii.14; (to the north) ii.42. On the idea of the ocean in VC, see Scully (2007, 209–30).
- 48 VC iii.23 : *in hac parua et extrema ociani britannici commoratus insula.* On Adomnán's mental maps, see O'Loughlin (1996, 98–122, 2007, 143–76).
- 49 See VC iii.23: 'And even after the departure of this most gentle soul from the tabernacle of the body, this same heavenly brightness, as well as the frequent visits of holy angels, does not cease, down to the present day, to appear at the place in which his holy bones repose.' For discussion, see Jenkins (2010, 35–37).

- 50 VC 1st preface: Et nec ob aliqua scoticae uilis uidelicet lingae aut humana onomata aut gentium diuersas uilescunt linguas, utilium et non sine diuina opitulatione gestarum dispiciant rerum pronuntiationem.
- 51 VC 2nd preface: In nouissimis, ait, 'saeculi temporibus filius nasciturus est cuius nomen Columba per omnes insularum ociani prouincias deuulgabitur notum, nouissimaque orbis tempora clare inlustrabit.
- 52 VC ii.39. For a detailed analysis of this episode, see Ritari (2015, 391–400).
- 53 For righteous people being taken to heaven, see VC iii.6–7, 9–14; see also i.1, i.31, ii.25; for wicked men being taken to hell, see VC i.1, i.35, i.39, ii.22–23, ii.25.
- 54 On the destinies of souls in VC and Adomnán's vision of the judgment, see Ritari (2009, 152–67).
- 55 On Columba's posthumous miracles, see VC ii.44–46.

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