

**Charles Doherty, 'Latin Writing in Ireland', in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, gen. ed. Seamus Deane (Derry: Field Day Company 1991), Vol. 1, pp.61-63.**

[...]

The words represented on Ogham stones give us the earliest surviving form of the Irish language, which, at this time, had case endings rather like Latin. We may look upon these stones as an attempt by the Irish to acquire some of the elements of Roman civilization. Barbarians everywhere strove to imitate the ways of the higher civilization, and the Irish were no exception. We can see this in the way that they adopted technical innovations during this period. It is not surprising, then, to find that the Irish language borrowed many words from Latin as it was used and pronounced in Roman Britain. Linguists have been able to date the borrowing of these words to the fifth and sixth centuries.

It is against this background that we may view the introduction of Christianity into Ireland. Some of the earliest Latin vocabulary borrowed into Irish consists of religious terms. It is clear that some of the Irish had been accepting Christianity in a casual way from the fourth century onwards and that by the first few decades of the fifth century there were communities of Christians in Ireland. There is no evidence of martyrs in the conversion of Ireland, probably because the Irish would have seen Christianity as yet another aspect of the higher civilization and therefore something to be acquired. They were polytheistic and this would have allowed for the easier acceptance of the new religion.

Our first reliable date in the fifth century is a reference in the Chronicle of Prosper of Aquitaine under the year 431, when he records that the pope, Celestine, had ordained the deacon Palladius as bishop and sent him to those of the Irish who believed in Christ. This event must be seen in the light of the background of the Pelagian heresy. Pelagius, a Briton of the late fourth century, denied the existence of original sin and taught that man could be saved by the effort of his own will. This view spread, from the late fourth century on, throughout the western church and, although the teachings of Pelagius had been condemned at a number of early fifth-century councils, they were still influential in Roman Britain. Indeed, at a later period in Ireland, there were texts that ultimately derived from Pelagian schools, although the Irish did not follow his teachings. There was a fear that this heresy might spread among the new communities of Christians in Ireland, so Palladius and his helpers (who were almost certainly based at Auxerre in France) were sent to organize them along orthodox lines and to link them directly with the papacy. Thus, our earliest official Christian contacts are with the church of Gaul. It is possible to trace the activity of the members of this mission to Leinster and the Irish midlands. It is also possible that the short collection of synodal decisions extracted below is the work of this group, but we cannot be certain.

The two documents that we can be sure are from the fifth century are by a Romano-Briton called Patrick: his *Confession* and his *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*. Patrick's own words, halting and inarticulate, give us a glimpse of the world of Roman Britain that was soon to disappear, and a sense of the Christian spirit that soon was to spread so rapidly throughout Ireland. For Patrick, to be Roman was to be Christian and he saw himself as a roving missionary in the north of Ireland. His most successful foundation was to be Armagh, as we can see in the seventh-century documents. The Irish soon accepted this poorly educated, humble bishop as their apostle. His central text was the Bible, which shadows all

his writing. His Latin was poor; yet it was men like Patrick who introduced the Irish to the Latin alphabet and the basic elements of grammar. In particular, Patrick espoused monasticism; he longed to visit the brethren in Gaul. It is surely no coincidence that the earliest manuscript of the 'life' of St Martin of Tours, the father of monasticism in the northwest of Europe, is in the *Book of Armagh* beside material about Patrick. The earliest churches in Ireland had been episcopal, but it was the monastic church that was to provide the inspiration for Christianity in Ireland during the following centuries.

The early monastic schools of Ireland probably owe a greater debt to the early episcopal schools than is realized or is capable of proof. Many of the early monastic founders were educated in Leinster, in the area where the Gaulish mission would have been most active. Here there would have been books and influence from Romano-Gaulish schools. There was a distinct group in the Irish church in the late sixth and seventh centuries called the Romani. They are brought to our attention through the controversy concerning the correct date on which to celebrate Easter and are associated with some statements in the canon law collection—the *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*. The Romani seem to have stood for the episcopal church and favoured the church in Ireland developing along administrative and liturgical lines similar to those found in Rome and on the Continent. The other party, the Hibernenses, favoured a more monastic church, which suited conditions in Ireland particularly well. The Romani may be associated with the old domnach churches (free independent episcopal churches) mentioned in the *Liber Angeli* and in Tirechan's notes on Patrick. By the seventh century they were anxious to use canonical scriptural texts and to study patristic writings critically. They still retained their prestige, but eventually had to integrate with the major monasteries. It is possible that the Romani give us a link with the oldest ecclesiastical schools in Ireland.

Those parts of Europe that had been romanized spoke Latin. Ireland had never been conquered and so Latin had to be taught as a foreign language. Tirechan, writing in the 680s, mentions alphabet stones erected by the early missionaries. The teaching of grammar would have been essential. It is not surprising that many of the grammars of the late Roman world have come down to us by way of an Irish manuscript tradition; nor is it surprising that the Irish were famous as teachers or that they were in such demand in later centuries.