

KATHLEEN HUGHES MEMORIAL LECTURES 16

ELVA JOHNSTON

When Worlds Collide?
Pagans and Christians in Late Antique Ireland



DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC
&
HUGHES HALL

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Kathleen Winifred Hughes (1926-77) was the first Nora Chadwick Reader in Celtic Studies in the University of Cambridge. Previously (1958-76) she had held the Lectureship in the Early History and Culture of the British Isles which had been created for Nora Chadwick in 1950. She was a Fellow of Newnham College, and Director of Studies in both History and Anglo-Saxon, 1955-77. Her responsibilities in the Department of Anglo-Saxon & Kindred Studies, subsequently the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, were in the fields of Irish, Scottish, and Welsh history of the early and central Middle Ages. Her achievements in respect of Gaelic history have been widely celebrated, notably in the memorial volume *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe*, published in 1982.

The Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lectures both acknowledge her achievements and seek to provide an annual forum for advancing the subject. The lecture is hosted in Hughes Hall in conjunction with the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic. The lecture is published as a pamphlet each year by the Department.

Hughes Hall was founded in 1885 to take women graduating from the universities and give them a one year training to become teachers. Originally called the Cambridge Training College (CTC) it was re-named in 1948 in honour of its first Principal, Elizabeth Phillips Hughes, who had been one of the early students of Newnham College and became a respected leader in the theory and practice of education. E. P. Hughes came from Wales and was a proponent of the language and culture of Wales. But, apart from this Welsh heritage, there is no known connection between the College and the scholar now commemorated in this series of lectures. Hughes Hall became a full college of the university in 2006. Enquiries about entry as a student are always welcome. Information can be found on the college website at <http://www.hughes.cam.ac.uk/prospective-students/graduate-admissions/>

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When Worlds Collide?

Pagans and Christians in Late Antique Ireland

I. From Catacomb to Crannog: Imagining Conversion to Christianity

... she ranged over an exceptionally wide field of learning, and she had to an unusual degree a gift for setting very different fragments alongside each other so that they could light up barren landscapes and show new paths in what had been dead ends of history.¹

These are the words of Kathleen Hughes, spoken in appreciation of Nora Chadwick in a lecture delivered in November 1976. They equally applied to Hughes' own work. The lecture was published the following year, the year in which she died. Four decades have since passed and it is a great honour to give this lecture in her memory. Kathleen Hughes' legacy is evergreen in areas as diverse as investigating the origins of the medieval chronicles, exploring the social environments of early Insular penitential literature and, above all, in untying knotty problems of church organisation and ecclesiastical learning.² Her insights flowed from an impressive mastery of texts in Latin and the vernacular, texts that Hughes situated within nuanced frameworks of social developments and material cultures. Her writing is marked by a clarity that few others in the field have achieved. While research

¹ Kathleen Hughes, *The early Celtic idea of history and the modern historian*, Inaugural Lecture as Nora Chadwick Reader in Celtic Studies, University of Cambridge, 5 November 1976 (Cambridge 1977).

² Kathleen Hughes had an impressive range of publications. For a sample, see her *The Church in early Irish society* (London 1966) and *Early Christian Ireland: introduction to the sources* (London 1972). A representative collection of her articles is published in *Church and society in Ireland, AD 400–1200*, edited by David N. Dumville, Variorum Collected Studies Series 258 (London 1987).

has greatly diversified in the last forty years, Hughes remains profoundly influential and always worth reading. Whether one agrees with her or not, no serious scholar can discuss the origins of the Irish Church, or the growth of its distinctive Christian culture, without reference to her perceptive scholarship and to her uniquely creative ability to appreciate culture within its own fine-grained contexts. Kathleen Hughes' early Irish Church had many mansions, being more generously proportioned than many another reconstruction. Strikingly, her early medieval Irish culture was never monolithic nor comprehensible within a single interpretative scheme.

This paper takes her insights as a starting point in order to reconsider Irish conversion to Christianity, in particular its implications for the mental and material worlds of the fifth and sixth centuries. How did the processes of religious change impact upon them? To what extent was conversion transformative? These are not straightforward questions, especially as late antique Ireland, although connected with its Roman neighbours in important ways, was also significantly different from them, not least in social organisation. As Kathleen Hughes asked in her classic *The Church in Early Irish Society*:

By the time of the late Empire the normal meeting-place for Christians was not the dim austerity of the catacombs, but the civilized comfort of a Roman villa. How would Christianity transplant to the crannogs, forts, and ranches of the insular Celts?³

What Hughes suggests is that conversion was not simply an act of exchanging sets of religious belief but took place within ongoing contexts of acculturation that she acutely realised were two-way. Christianity changed pagans but pagans also helped shape Christianity: they ensured that the

³ Hughes, *Church in early Irish society*, 10.

religion flourished through localisation within a broad doctrinal unity. This is not an aspect of her research that she developed to the same extent as her focus on church organisation, partly because the historiographical environment was so different. Hughes wrote in an era when the history of institutions was a dominant field of historical discourse, although even here she was ahead of her time. Hughes did not emphasise high politics to the detriment of other aspects of scholarship and her institutions were about people as much as the structures that they created.

However, a major limiting factor was archaeological: the material and interpretative breakthroughs that make the archaeology of late Iron Age and early medieval Ireland so exciting occurred after her death.⁴ Indeed, it is remarkable what Hughes achieved, given these evidential constraints. It is now clear that her question about the apparent dichotomy of villa owner and crannog dweller was perceptive, even if scholars are likely to argue that they shared a spectrum, albeit one encompassing great geographical and social divergences. A steady flow of archaeological projects and publications has challenged long-established theories about life in late Iron Age Ireland and its perceived poverty and insularity.⁵ One of the most important factors was Ireland's position as a transmarine frontier of the Roman Empire.⁶ Classical writings show that the island mainly came to attention as a source of potential

⁴ This ranges from the first through to the seventh centuries. Useful publications include Christiaan Corlett & Michael Potterton (eds), *Life and death in Iron Age Ireland in the light of recent archaeological excavations* (Dublin 2012); Jacqueline Cahill Wilson et al. (eds), *Late Iron Age and 'Roman' Ireland* (Dublin 2014).

⁵ Jacqueline Cahill Wilson, 'Romans and Roman material in Ireland: a wider social perspective', in Cahill Wilson et al. (eds), *Late Iron Age and 'Roman' Ireland*, 11–58 and '*Et tu, Hibernia?* Frontier zones and culture contact — Ireland in a Roman world', in Sergio Gonzalez Sanchez & Alexandra Guglielmi (eds), *Romans and barbarians beyond the frontiers: archaeology, ideology and identities in the north* (Oxford 2017) 48–69.

⁶ Elva Johnston, 'Ireland in late antiquity: a forgotten frontier', *Studies in Late Antiquity* 1/2 (2017) 107–23; Cahill Wilson, '*Et tu Hibernia?*'.

economic exploitation or as the origin of barbarian raiders that threatened Roman territories in Britain.⁷ The fifth-century writings of St Patrick, *Epistola ad Milites Corotici* and *Confessio*, illustrate the dynamics on a personal level. Irish raiding in Roman Britain, co-existing alongside trade connections between the islands, was central to his experiences of slavery in Ireland, as well as to his escape and subsequent mission.⁸ Moreover, as Patrick's career shows, links between Ireland and Britain furthered the development of Christianity in Ireland. Indeed, the existence of Irish-speaking communities in western Britain highlights the limitations of treating Ireland in isolation; between the fourth and sixth centuries these communities contributed to the permeability of Irish society at a crucial phase of cultural formation.⁹ In addition, comparative perspectives show that religious change in Ireland was a regional manifestation of broader developments whose impact stretched from beyond the eastern borderlands of the Roman Empire to the wide expanses of the Atlantic ocean. It is no longer possible, nor desirable, to see Irish history as beginning with the mission and writings of Patrick nor to formulate it through the inevitability of Christian triumph. Assumptions of success arguably obscure the complex negotiations through which the earliest Christians had to establish

⁷ Philip Freeman, *Ireland and the Classical world* (Austin TX 2001) 28–128 usefully collects the relevant references. See also, T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge 2000) 158–59.

⁸ Patrick, *Confessio*, 18, in David Howlett (ed & trans), *Liber Epistolarum Sancti Patricii Episcopi: the Book of Letters of Saint Patrick the bishop* (Dublin 1994) 62–63.

⁹ The Irish communities in Britain appear well-established by the sixth century but pinpointing their origin is problematic. Ewan Campbell, 'Were the Scots Irish?' *Antiquity* 75 (2001) 285–92, critiques models of Irish settlement in northern Britain. See Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 158–63 for an overview. Their impact is discussed in Elva Johnston, 'Literacy and conversion on Ireland's Roman frontier: from emulation to assimilation?', in Nancy Edwards, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh & Roy Flechner (eds), *Transforming landscapes of belief in the early medieval Insular world and beyond, Converting the Isles II* (Turnhout 2017) 23–46.

themselves in a non-Christian society. These Christians lived side-by-side with pagans whose active choices, whether to oppose, tolerate or support Christianity, shaped the future of the religion on the island. The stories of early Irish Christians cannot be told without also telling those of pagans.

This paper is an attempt to unpick the strands of acculturation that were identified by Kathleen Hughes and to situate them within the contexts outlined above. It will examine the relations between pagans and Christians through spatial, social and geographical dimensions, especially during the fifth and sixth centuries when the Church began to become established and grow. In particular, the focus is being shifted away from considerations of institutional organisation, an area that has been illuminatingly researched not only by Hughes but in reaction to her by scholars including Richard Sharpe, Donnchadh Ó Corráin and Colmán Etchingham.¹⁰ This is not to downplay its importance; it simply aims to consider other aspects that have been less well-explored and whose significance is not appreciated to the same degree. The relationships between pagans and Christians are pivotal. The former group is frequently treated as incidental to the narratives that it helped create. Yet, it is impossible to really understand the evolution of Christianity in a vacuum. Placing pagans back into their own histories allows scholars to ask what part did they play in the growth and development of late antique Christianity in Ireland?

¹⁰ Hughes, *Church in early Irish society*, especially 39–120. The subsequent debate has produced an extensive literature. Representative examples include Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘The early Irish churches: some aspects of organisation’, in Donnchadh Ó Corráin (ed), *Irish antiquity. Essays and studies presented to M. J. O’Kelly* (Cork 1982) 327–41; Richard Sharpe, ‘Some problems concerning the organization of the Church in early medieval Ireland’, *Peritia* 3 (1984) 230–70. The fullest treatment by far is Colmán Etchingham, *Church organisation in Ireland AD 650 to 1000* (Naas 1999).

II. The Problem of Identifying Religious Affiliation

This question poses terminological and contextual challenges. It is dangerous to imagine a binary opposition of ‘Christian’ versus ‘pagan’ where worlds collided. This collision is sometimes imagined in early Irish scholarship as only being resolved through the triumph of Christianity or its emasculation.¹¹ Part of the difficulty is that Irish non-Christian religious affiliations are a matter for debate because there is hardly any direct contemporary textual evidence concerning their shape and content. Apart from the arguable cases of ogam inscriptions, we have no writings by Irish pagans. Moreover, a significant proportion of ogam stones, perhaps very many, commemorated Christians.¹² Even Patrick, a rare first-hand witness to Irish paganism is laconic, only picking out sun and idol worship for comment and, in both instances, he fits Irish practices into pre-conceived ideas of what pagan beliefs were expected to resemble.¹³ Biblical archetypes and the pervasive influence of *interpretatio Romana* were significant factors for commentators such as Patrick.¹⁴ Furthermore, the extensive early medieval reimagining of the Irish pagan past was thorough, anachronising and deeply

¹¹ Jonathan Wooding, ‘Reapproaching the pagan Celtic past — anti-nativism, asterisk reality and the late-antiquity paradigm’, *Studia Celtica Fennica* 6 (2009) 61–74, usefully summarises the main positions. See also Elva Johnston, *Literacy and identity in early medieval Ireland* (Woodbridge 2013) 16–23.

¹² The fullest study of the classical ogam inscriptions is provided by Damian McManus, *A guide to ogam* (Maynooth 1991). Their Christian contexts are discussed by Catherine Swift, *Ogam stones and the earliest Irish Christians* (Maynooth 1996). Possible pre-Christian contexts are explored by Anthony Harvey, ‘Languages and literacy in mid-first-millennium Ireland: new questions to some old answers’, in Edwards, Ní Mhaonaigh & Flechner (eds), *Transforming landscapes of belief*, 47–63 and by Johnston, ‘Literacy and conversion’, 27–39.

¹³ Patrick, *Confessio*, 41 (idolatry), 60 (sun worship) (Howlett, *Book of Letters*, 78–41, 90–91).

¹⁴ James Palmer, ‘Defining paganism in the Carolingian world’, *Early Medieval Europe* 15/4 (2007) 402–25, provides an illuminating discussion of parallel descriptions of Germanic paganisms.

contextual.¹⁵ It can be a highly misleading witness. However, as has been pointed out by Jonathan Wooding, a lack of direct knowledge does not mean that pagan beliefs should be dismissed nor should it be assumed that all later descriptions of them completely lack value.¹⁶ There are similar complications in the material evidence. Thus, while archaeologists can locate ritual pre-Christian sites, it is extremely difficult to identify specific beliefs or even broad patterns, although areas of practice can be highlighted, such as the importance of particular Neolithic sites or the prevalence of votive depositions.¹⁷

However, naming the holders of those beliefs is not straightforward. I have generally chosen to use the term ‘pagan’, despite its problematic nature; it is not meant to assume the existence of structured organisations or religious systems to be compared or contrasted with those of Christians in a simple manner. In origin, the words that came to denote pagans (*pagani*, *gentiles*) and paganism (*pagania*, *gentilitas*) were used as broad brackets to separate Christianity from the myriad polytheistic cults of the Roman Empire; the terms purposefully lacked nuanced distinctions between different non-Christian religious beliefs.¹⁸ As a result, they frequently functioned as verbal otherings that actually defined Christianity, making it easier to portray paganism as demonic or as directly antithetical to the word of God.¹⁹ The image of a structured Irish pagan priesthood opposing early

¹⁵ Kim McCone, *Pagan past and Christian present in early Irish literature* (Maynooth 1990) 1–28; Mark Williams, *Ireland’s immortals: a history of the gods of Irish myth* (Princeton NJ 2016) 290, 490–93.

¹⁶ Jonathan Wooding, ‘Tyrannies of distance? Medieval sources as evidence for indigenous Celtic and Romano-Celtic religion’, in Ralph Haeussler & Anthony King (eds), *Celtic religions in the Roman period: personal, local, and global* (Aberystwyth 2017) 57–70.

¹⁷ Williams, *Ireland’s immortals*, 5–12, sums up the evidence.

¹⁸ Palmer, ‘Defining paganism’, 403–04

¹⁹ Palmer, ‘Defining paganism’, 402.

Christianity, partly a creation of seventh-century Irish hagiographers, echoes this dynamic. In an important passage of his *Life of Patrick*, written towards the end of the seventh century, Muirchú moccu Machthéni remarked:

His autem omnibus gestis in conspectu regis inter magum Patriciumque ait rex ad illos: 'Libros uestros in aquam mittite et illum cuius libri inlessi euasserunt adorabimus'. Respondit Patricius: 'faciam ego', et dixit magus: 'nolo ego ad iudicium aquae uenire cum isto; aquam enim deum habet'; certe audiuit bap̄tisma per aquam a Patricio datum.

After this contest between the druid and Patrick in the king's presence the king said to them: 'Cast your books into the water, and he whose books remain unharmed, him we shall adore'. Patrick answered: 'I will do so', and the druid said: 'I do not want to undergo a test of water with him; for water is a god of his'. He had heard, no doubt, that Patrick baptized with water.²⁰

Muirchú portrays pagan *magi*, literary amalgamations of the New Testament figure of Simon Magus and the druids of Irish traditions, as through-the-looking-glass clerics.²¹ They possess books, presumably a type of scripture, a hierarchy and religious festivals, one of which is suspiciously aligned with Easter. Muirchú's *magi* tell the reader a great deal about St Patrick and his powers but far less about pagan religion.²² There is no reason to doubt that actual late antique Irish druids performed a priestly function but it is very doubtful that their organisation ever resembled that of the Christian

²⁰ Muirchú, *Vita S. Patricii*, I.20 (8) in Ludwig Bieler (ed & trans), *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin 1979) 94–95. See Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Reading Muirchú's Tara-event within its background as a biblical 'trial of divinities'', in Jane Cartwright (ed), *Celtic hagiography and saints' cults* (Cardiff 2003) 123–35.

²¹ Simon Magus became a mainstay of apocryphal traditions. For Muirchú's place within these see Alberto Ferreiro, *Simon Magus in patristic, medieval and early modern traditions* (Leiden 2005) 206–07; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 195–96.

²² Edel Bhreathnach, 'Temoria: Caput Scotorum', *Ériu* 47 (1996) 67–88, demonstrates that the events at Tara evoke the *geisi* (taboos) of Irish sagas.

Church.²³ Similarly, examinations of the pagan priesthoods of the later Roman Empire show that most differed in important ways from the Christian ecclesiastical class. They rarely employed permanent religious professionals, and were less expensive to maintain.²⁴ Undoubtedly, the druids were also different. However, it is a fraught task to extrapolate from the repurposed druids of Christian hagiography to their earlier late antique counterparts. Moreover, while druids lingered into the eighth century, by this point they are likely to have changed significantly.²⁵ It is even worth speculating that Muirchú's druids might echo the extent to which those few who survived into his era had, chameleon-like, assimilated to the contours of Christianity.

Despite these difficulties, the word 'pagan' has the advantage of highlighting religious difference. 'Non-Christian' will also be used, especially in discussing those areas of social custom that ultimately proved to be amenable to acculturation between pagan and Christian. It is a broader term than pagan as it encompasses non-Christian society more generally: religion was one of many elements including family structure, social organisation and economic transaction. Not every aspect of a culture or a person's affiliation was necessarily tied up with religion. The extent to which religious affiliation was important personally or to groups fluctuated with time and circumstance. Modern sociological theories of 'groupism' emphasise the vitality of personal affiliations and the extent to which they have the capacity to change throughout an individual's life.²⁶ For instance,

²³ Wooding, 'Tyrannies of distance', 58–59.

²⁴ Ian Wood, *The transformation of the Roman west* (Leeds 2018) 72–73.

²⁵ Bridget Slavin, 'Coming to terms with druids in early Christian Ireland', *Australian Celtic Journal* 10 (2009) 1–27, considers the evidence in detail.

²⁶ Roger Brubaker, 'Ethnicity without groups', *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européenne de Sociologie*, 4/2 (2002) 163–89 is an important study. The

Tertullian, writing in the early third century, portrayed Carthaginian Christians as either radically distinct from their pagan neighbours or as so embedded in civic culture that the two groups were worryingly indistinguishable.²⁷ This is because pagans and Christians participated in a broadly-based society in which religious belief was not always the most important aspect of identity. This is not to say that religious belief did not, at times, become the primary focus of an individual's or a group's affiliation. The traumatic events and consequences of the great persecution of Diocletian produced powerful communal reactions that proved to have long-term consequences.²⁸ Another good example of the complexities is the well-preserved civic architecture of Sagalassos in Turkey. Significantly, pagan monuments were treated in a variety of ways following widespread conversion of the town's population to Christianity: some were destroyed, others were hidden from view while yet others had crosses carved upon them or were repositioned. Furthermore, figurines of the local god Kakasbos continued in production throughout the late Roman period, even after conversion.²⁹ This is a more nuanced picture than heated contemporary accounts of the destruction and vandalism of pagan sites by Christians imply.³⁰ And, as a number of scholars have convincingly demonstrated, the

application of group theories to late antiquity is central to Éric Rebillard & Jörg Rüpke (eds), *Group identity and religious individuality in late antiquity* (Washington DC 2015).

²⁷ Discussed by Éric Rebillard, *The care of the dead in late antiquity*, translated by Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings & Jeanine Routier-Pucci (Ithaca NY 2009) 8–10, 69–71.

²⁸ Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, *A threat to public piety: Christians, Platonists, and the Great Persecution* (Ithaca NY 2012).

²⁹ Jeroen Poblome, 'Dionysiac oinophoroi from Sagalassos found in Egypt', in Willy Clarysse, Antoon Schoors & Harco Willems (eds), *Egyptian religion in the last thousand years part i: studies dedicated to the memory of Jan Quaegebeur* (Leuven 1998) 205–26: 213.

³⁰ This is not to say that there was no religious vandalism at Sagalassos. The pagan relief in the Neon Library may have been targeted; discussed by Marc Waelkens et al., 'The Sagalassos Neon Library mosaic and its conservation', in Marc Waelkens & Lieven

borders between the mundane and divine shifted throughout late antiquity, meaning that customs, communal practices and material cultures could become permeable to Christianity and vice-versa. Social structures, drained of overt religious content, were co-opted by Christians.³¹ Thus, Christianity, in its many forms, was profoundly influenced by the cultures that it encountered and out of which it emerged. With these provisos in mind what can be said about the initial contacts made between pagans and Christians in late antique Ireland?

III. The Shared Worlds of Pagans and Christians

These contacts are not recorded. They probably first occurred between Romano-British traders and travellers and their Irish counterparts. These were also mirrored in the interactions between Irish-speaking communities settled in Britain with British and Romano-British populations. Individual and stray, these initial meetings were unlikely to have carried much short-term significance, but they were a beginning. Another way of considering the problem is to approach it slant, examining not only particular moments of Christianisation, such as those associated with Patrick and Palladius, but the social and cultural matrices within which they functioned. These in their turn throw an indirect illumination upon religious affiliations and the parameters through which pagans and Christians related to each other. Indirect light is better than no light at all. The first Irish Christians inhabited

Loots (eds), *Sagalassos V: report on the survey and excavation campaigns of 1996 and 1997* (Leuven 2000) 419–47: 436–37; Poblome, ‘Dionysiac oinophoroi’, 212–13.

³¹ See especially, R. A. Markus, *The end of ancient Christianity* (Cambridge 1990) 6–30 and ‘From Caesarius to Boniface: Christianity and paganism in Gaul’, in Jacques Fontaine & Jocelyn N. Hillgarth (eds), *The seventh century: changes and continuity* (London 1992) 154–68.

a world where the majority of their neighbours were pagan. To what extent did they share common material cultures? It is now well-established that Ireland and Roman Britain enjoyed trade connections, with the Irish east coast being particularly significant in this regard.³² Mercantile wares, indicated by potsherds from amphorae found on Irish sites, point to a market for products such as wine and olive oil.³³ It is likely that the Irish exported hides, livestock and, perhaps, slaves in return. Patrick, as mentioned earlier, escaped Ireland by taking passage on what appears to have been a merchant vessel.³⁴ Irish trade was not only in perishable consumables. Items of personal adornment and toiletry implements, mainly of Romano-British origin, have also been found on Irish sites.³⁵ It is not clear if these were primarily for personal use and display or were employed as votive offerings, but it is probable that both practices existed.³⁶ Moreover, the imports inspired Irish innovations. For example, the penannular-type brooch, creatively adapted from Romano-British models, became a standard vehicle for elite display in Ireland for many centuries.³⁷ And this sense of adaptation

³² Cahill Wilson, 'Romans and Roman material in Ireland', 11–58.

³³ Amanda Kelly, 'The discovery of Phocaeen Red Slip Ware (PRSW) Form 3 and Bii ware (LR1 amphorae) on sites in Ireland—an analysis within a broader framework', *Proceeding of the Royal Irish Academy* 110C (2010) 35–88; Cahill Wilson, 'Romans and Roman material', 22–29.

³⁴ Patrick, *Confessio* 18 (Howlett, *Book of Letters*, 62–63), where, however, he only uses the common word for ship, 'nauis'.

³⁵ See, for example, the toilet implements listed in J. D. Bateson, 'Roman material from Ireland: a reconsideration', *Proceeding of the Royal Irish Academy* 73C (1973) 21–97: 64 (no. 3), 73 (no. 22), 80–82 (no. 41), as well as pins and brooches, some of which are native emulations of Roman types at 82–83 (no. 42).

³⁶ Jacqueline Cahill Wilson, 'Lost in transcription: rethinking our approach to the archaeology of the later Iron Age', in Corlett & Potterton (eds), *Life and death in Iron Age Ireland*, 15–33.

³⁷ H. E. Kilbride-Jones, 'The evolution of penannular brooches with zoomorphic terminals in Great Britain and Ireland', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 43C (1935–37) 379–455. Long-term developments are considered in Niamh Whitfield, "'More like the work of fairies than human beings": the filigree on the "Tara" Brooch a

is also, even more radically, a characteristic of the ogham script, for it looks nothing like the Roman alphabet upon which it was based. Phenomena such as adornment choice, the development of a script and even the use of Roman objects for ritual deposition all suggest contexts in which the new could be adopted and adapted,³⁸ helping shape a social landscape in which a heavily romanised Christianity was not completely alien. The new religious affiliation drew sustenance from convergences in culture.

It is worth thinking further about the significance of objects and the communities that used them. In particular, the biography of material objects from design through manufacture, distribution, use and re-use is illuminating.³⁹ Their stories demonstrate how individuals and societies deploy objects, what they value in them and the extent to which they are central to self-presentation. Was this a factor in how the earliest Irish Christians interacted with their pagan neighbours, especially as they must have inhabited the same social and geographical spaces? Did Irish Christians embrace distinctive forms of dress or hair-style? One thinks of the saying ascribed to Patrick in the *dicta* of the Book of Armagh: ‘if you are Christians you have to be Romans’.⁴⁰ While this is a later statement, it serves as a reminder of the social and visual languages of Irish Christianity, for which there is little firm evidence before the sixth century. This is not altogether

masterpiece of late Celtic metalwork’, *ArcheoSciences, Revue d’Archéométrie* 33 (2009) 235–41.

³⁸ Johnston, ‘Literacy and conversion’, 39–42.

³⁹ Chris Gosden & Yvonne Marshall, ‘The cultural biography of objects’, *World Archaeology* 31/2 (1999) 169–78; Jody Joy, ‘Reinvigorating object biography: reproducing the drama of object lives’, *World Archaeology* 41/4 (2009) 540–56.

⁴⁰ Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 124–25 (*ut Christiani ita ut Romani sitis*). The passage is interestingly discussed by Denis Bethell, ‘The originality of the early Irish Church’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 111 (1981) 36–49: 41–42. Niamh Whitfield, ‘Aristocratic display in early medieval Ireland in fact and fiction: the dazzling white tunic and purple cloak’, *Peritia* 27 (2016) 159–88, demonstrates the social importance of clothing in early medieval Ireland.

surprising as even in the Mediterranean Christian heartlands the simple cross only became popular towards the end of the fourth century; before this, the Chi-Rho had been the dominant symbol.⁴¹ So it remains a question as to how the earliest Christians marked themselves as a special community and even to what extent their affiliations were expressed through visual symbolism and special objects. Was it possible to tell a pagan and a Christian apart in fourth- or fifth-century Ireland? Liturgical practice must have been a major area of distinction, a point to which this paper will return.

Moreover, did Christians participate in the regular aspects of communal life? Or, on the other hand, did they define themselves as separate, especially during times of crisis? And what might such separate affiliations tell us about non-Christian cultural values? After all, it must be remembered that pagans were not necessarily tolerant of a Christian presence, leading inevitably to some conflict. The writings of Patrick are invaluable witnesses to a range of inter-religious tensions. He emphasises a deeply pragmatic accommodation to pre-existing social structures while concomitantly highlighting distinct Christian affiliations. Patrick was aware of the need to support his Christian converts. Most lived among pagans, rather than forming separate communities. This led to inter-generational conflicts, with pagan parents opposed to their Christian children.⁴² The role of women was a flashpoint; they were also among Patrick's most important followers.⁴³ The endemic violence of the Irish Sea region was a further source of danger.⁴⁴ Who would protect Patrick's followers? He was keenly conscious that he

⁴¹ David Petts, *Christianity in Roman Britain* (Stroud 2003) 104.

⁴² Patrick, *Confessio*, 42 (Howlett, *Book of Letters*, 80–81).

⁴³ Patrick, *Confessio*, 42 (female converts), 49 (women as gift-givers) (Howlett, *Book of Letters*, 80–81, 84–85).

⁴⁴ This is one of the contexts underlying Patrick's *Epistola* (Howlett, *Book of Letters*, 25–39).

relied on the good-will of pagans in order to preach his message. He enlisted the local elites for protection, including a group who may well be associated with druids, and deftly employed strategies of gift-giving.⁴⁵ Without their help, he could never have succeeded. This did not stop him praising a Christian particularism that he defines in opposition to paganism and apostasy.⁴⁶ In fact, Patrick strongly emphasises Christian orthodoxy, perhaps hinting at the existence of other Irish Christian communities that were less doctrinally pure. Of course, he could simply be stressing his own adherence to correct belief in an Augustinian framework.⁴⁷ He also foregrounds radical lifestyle choices, especially celibacy. Resistance to the celibate vocation suggests that it challenged social norms. Christian celibacy was more than an individual choice because it contributed to the formation of new organised classes of religious professionals. Therefore, while pagans and Christians were probably largely indistinguishable in material culture, there were fault-lines. It is easy to envisage how local communities were presented with rival sources of authority, competing for their patronage.

Nonetheless, nascent communities of Irish Christians connected the island with its neighbours in new ways. For example, I have suggested elsewhere that Palladius was not only sent to Ireland as a bishop in 431 but that he functioned as an envoy for the Irish Christian community, fulfilling

⁴⁵ Patrick, *Confessio*, 37, 49, 52 (Howlett, *Book of Letters*, 76–77, 84–85, 86–87).

⁴⁶ Patrick, *Epistola*, 2 (Howlett, *Book of Letters*, 25) is particularly clear.

⁴⁷ Patrick, *Confessio*, 4 (Howlett, *Book of Letters*, 54–55). This is not to suggest the presence of Pelagianism in Ireland. The possibility of Pelagianism in the Irish Church was raised by J. F. Kelly, ‘Pelagius, Pelagianism and the early Christian Irish’, *Mediaevalia* 4 (1978) 99–124. The general context is explored in Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 202–14. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, ‘Who was Palladius, “first bishop of the Irish”?’ *Peritia* 14 (2000) 205–37, suggests a novel personal connection between Palladius and Pelagianism. See also the full treatments by Alison Bonner, ‘Was Patrick influenced by the teaching of Pelagius?’, *The Journal of Theological Studies* 63/2 (2012) 572–607 and especially *The myth of Pelagianism* (Oxford 2018).

a role that bishops had in the late Roman world.⁴⁸ For whom would he have been an envoy and why? One possibility is that he may have facilitated communication between Irish barbarian elites and at least two distinct groups, local Christian communities and Romano-Britons across the Irish Sea. It is probable that the Irish were open to diplomatic overtures in the 430s, especially as this was a period which saw a resurgence of Roman power in the west, albeit one of brief duration.⁴⁹ Irish Christian communities may well have played a pivotal role in such overtures. This is even more likely if Palladius' actions are linked with the anti-Pelagian mission to Britain, led by Germanus, bishop of Auxerre. This link seems probable, although it should be noted that the main source for the inference, Prosper of Aquitaine, was a highly active partisan of the anti-Pelagian position. Therefore, he had his own reasons for recording Germanus' mission through a doctrinal lens as well as emphasising papal-led initiatives in Ireland.⁵⁰ However, on a pragmatic level Germanus would have been in contact with Romano-British elites, an advantage to Palladius.⁵¹ A return to more peaceful conditions on the frontiers was desirable for Romano-Britons.⁵² Furthermore, would native Irish Christians have had a concern for their

⁴⁸ Elva Johnston, 'Religious change and frontier management: reassessing conversion in fourth- and fifth-century Ireland', *Eolas* 11 (2018) 104–19. The diplomatic role of bishops is examined by Andrew Gillett, *Envoys and political communication in the late antique west, 411–533* (Cambridge 2003); Claudia Rapp, *Holy bishops in late antiquity: the nature of Christian leadership in an age of transition* (Berkeley, CA 2005) 155–289.

⁴⁹ Ian Wood 'The fall of the western empire and the end of Roman Britain', *Britannia* 18 (1987) 251–62.

⁵⁰ Bonner, *Myth of Pelagianism*, 271, 300, casts a reasonable doubt on Prosper's reliability although it is unlikely that this makes him inherently counter-factual in all cases.

⁵¹ Wood, 'Fall of the western empire'; Johnston, 'Religious change and frontier management,' 113–18.

⁵² Patrick, *Confessio*, 1 (Howlett, *Book of Letters*, 32–33) refers to thousands of his fellow countrymen being in Irish captivity.

Romano-British counterparts enslaved in Ireland? At the very least, they cannot have been ignorant of their existence and Patrick, for obvious personal reasons, was aware of the precarious position of slaves.⁵³

The presence of a self-aware Christian community is further attested in early penitential and penitential-style literature.⁵⁴ Kathleen Hughes argued that they evince a suspicion of the secular legal system and hint that the very high status given to clerics in that system had not yet been established consistently in customary practice.⁵⁵ This was firmly in place by the second half of the seventh century and afforded the ecclesiastical elite extensive rights that placed them on a par with kings.⁵⁶ However, Hughes probably over-states the case, although she was right to note the importance of the penitentials for understanding evolving Christian practice. Moreover, the penitentials, by their very nature, emphasise normative Christian behaviour and so may foreground distinctions that were not present in all communities, or as important as the penitentials imply. The career of Columbanus († 615), at the end of the sixth century and the beginning of the seventh, also offers insights, although at this point Christians were in the majority. But when did this occur? Donald Bullough, for instance, has suggested that Columbanus' family were first generation Christians.⁵⁷ This may be the reason for the fact

⁵³ Patrick, *Confessio*, 1 (British slaves), 42 (female slaves) (Howlett, *Book of Letters*, 32–33, 80–81).

⁵⁴ The dating of the early penitentials and their relationships are complex. The best single volume introduction is Rob Meens, *Penance in medieval Europe, 600–1200* (Cambridge 2014). The main Insular texts are edited by Ludwig Bieler, *The Irish penitentials* (Dublin 1963).

⁵⁵ Hughes, *Church in early Irish society*, 44–56.

⁵⁶ Liam Breatnach, *The early Irish law text Senchas Már and the question of its date*, Quiggin Pamphlets on the Sources of Gaelic History, 10 (Cambridge 2011), presents extensive evidence for the compilation of the *Senchas Már* in the second half of the seventh century.

⁵⁷ Donald Bullough, 'The career of Columbanus', in Michael Lapidge (ed), *Columbanus: studies on the Latin writings* (Woodbridge 1997) 1–29: 3.

that he appears not to have been fostered, as was common among the Irish elites, but raised by his mother.⁵⁸ She may have wished to ensure that her son remained part of a separate Christian community with distinctive values. This is plausibly one factor underlying the rigorism of Columbanus, as reported by Jonas, on issues such as marital custom. Columbanus championed concepts of legitimacy and monogamy that were largely absent in Irish vernacular law but which were central to Christian ideology.⁵⁹ If anything, this is an area that demonstrates the limits of Christianisation. Early Irish systems of reproduction reinforced the social position of the kindred and the Christian ideal of permanent monogamy gained little traction.⁶⁰ The conversion of the majority of the Irish to Christianity came at the price of important social compromises of the type that Columbanus was unwilling to make.

As the example of Columbanus shows it is useful to think about the vitality of customary practices and the eventual incorporation of some of their elements into emergent Christian society. This incorporation worked to strip them of overtly problematic associations, mirroring the permeability between the mundane and divine seen throughout the late antique west.

⁵⁸ This is the implication of Jonas, *Vita Columbani*, I.2, edited by Bruno Krusch, *Ionae Vitae Sanctorum Columbani, Vedastis, Iohannis* (Hanover & Leipzig 1905), 154. See also Alexander O'Hara & Ian Wood (trans), *Jonas of Bobbio: Life of Columbanus, Life of John of Réomé and Life of Vedast* (Liverpool 2017) 98–102. The possibilities are discussed in Elva Johnston, 'Movers and shakers? How women shaped the career of Columbanus', in Alexander O'Hara (ed), *Columbanus and the peoples of post-Roman Europe* (Oxford 2018) 69–89.

⁵⁹ Jonas, *Vita Columbani*, I.19 (Krusch, *Ionae Vitae*, 187–88).

⁶⁰ Fergus Kelly, *A guide to early Irish law* (Dublin 1988) 102–05, provides context. Mechanics of inheritance and marriage are discussed by Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Women and the law in early Ireland', in Mary O'Dowd & Sabine Wichert (eds), *Chattel, servant or citizen: women's status in church, state and society. Papers read before the XXIVth Irish Conference of Historians* (Belfast 1995) 45–57. The assumption that Irish marriage customs should be interpreted as polygynous is questioned by Liam Breatnach, 'On Old Irish collective and abstract nouns, the meaning of *cétmuintir*, and marriage in early medieval Ireland', *Ériu* 66 (2016) 1–29.

Indeed, it is how the early medieval Irish, themselves, approached matters. In the Pseudo-Historical Prologue of the *Senchas Már*, a text which has been dated to the eighth century,⁶¹ it is suggested that a harmonious blend of Christian doctrine and native custom is not only possible but desirable. The text is a celebration of the compromises that brought it into existence. Tellingly, St Patrick, who is portrayed as the instigator of this marriage of religion and tradition, relies on native experts, all recent converts: he is joined by two other bishops, three kings, two poets and an authority on Irish law.⁶² Between them they legitimise a legal system in which traditional norms and Christianity are aligned. The story is a complete invention but a significant one. It is a parable which argues that non-Christian did not necessarily mean un-Christian and that, crucially, converts played an active role in shaping their religious and social spaces. This is reflective of the realities of Christianisation. Across the Roman and post-Roman worlds non-Christian customs long endured.⁶³ For many centuries being a Christian meant living to the rhythms of traditional practices that were a legacy from pagans. For example, *Vita Columbani* portrays Columbanus as objecting to

⁶¹ John Carey (ed & trans), 'An edition of the Pseudo-Historical Prologue to the *Senchas Már*', *Ériu* 45 (1994) 1–32. Kim McCone, 'Dubthach maccu Lugair and a matter of life and death in the Pseudo-Historical Prologue to the *Senchas Már*', *Peritia* 5 (1986) 1–35, considers the date and context while Patrick Wadden, 'The pseudo-historical origins of the *Senchas Már* and royal legislation in early Ireland', *Peritia* 27 (2016) 141–58, places it within the broader perspective of early barbarian laws and royal lawgiving.

⁶² Carey, 'An edition', 12 (text), 19 (translation).

⁶³ This is particularly the case for burial customs. See, for instance, Rebillard, *Care of the dead*, for north Africa; Frédérique Blaizot, 'Inhumation and cremation in Roman Gaul: continuity or discontinuity of the burial practices', in Andrea Faber et al. (eds), *Körpergräber des 1–3 Jahrhunderts in der Römischen Welt: Internationales Kolloquium Frankfurt am Main 19.–20. November 2004* (Frankfurt 2007) 305–21, for Gaul; similar issues are discussed by Elizabeth O'Brien, 'Pagan or Christian? Burial in Ireland during the 5th to 8th centuries AD', in Nancy Edwards (ed), *The archaeology of the early medieval Celtic churches* (London 2009) 135–54.

sacrilegious feasting at a pagan shrine by the Alamanni.⁶⁴ The saint is shocked that baptised Christians celebrate side-by-side with pagans. This fascinating passage suggests the power of cultural continuities, particularly in mixed groups of pagans and Christians. Feasting was a shared event that helped solidify communal connections and, in this case, cut across religious divides. The feasting did not turn the Christians into pagans but does highlight their intertwined spaces of social practice.

Thus, depending on context, native customs could be integrated into Christian life or, alternatively, be viewed as problematic. An example of the latter is the celebration of *Feis Temro*, an important royal inauguration ceremony with pre-Christian roots.⁶⁵ However, it was only by the later sixth century that it came to be seen as profane and antithetical to a truly Christian kingship. It appears to have been last held in 560 by Díarmait mac Cerbaill († 565), an Uí Néill overking who was also remembered as a major patron of the church of Clonmacnoise.⁶⁶ Yet, while Díarmait's Christianity is sometimes portrayed as contingent,⁶⁷ there is no reason to think that the king did not self-identify as Christian.⁶⁸ The most plausible explanation is that Díarmait's religious affiliation was one among the many that he held; another was being king of Tara. He had a portfolio of loyalties that were

⁶⁴ Jonas, *Vita Columbani*, I.27 (Krusch, *Ionae Vitae*, 213–14). The context of the passage is examined by Alexander O'Hara, 'Columbanus *ad locum*: the establishment of the monastic foundations', *Peritia* 26 (2015) 143–70: 163–65.

⁶⁵ D. A. Binchy, 'The fair of Tailtiu and the feast of Tara', *Ériu* 18 (1958) 113–38.

⁶⁶ Binchy, 'Fair of Tailtiu', 136–37; T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Diarmait mac Cerbaill, d. 565', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online at <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/50101>.

⁶⁷ Francis John Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London 1973) 96–97; Charles-Edwards, 'Diarmait mac Cerbaill'.

⁶⁸ On the other hand, the depiction of Díarmait as ordained by God in Adomnán is likely a manipulation of the image of the king. See Adomnán, *Vita Columbae*, I.36 in A. O. Anderson & M. O. Anderson (eds & trans), *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (Oxford 1991) 64–67.

expressed through different activities. Like the Christians of Sagalassos, Irish responses to their pagan past were complex. Some aspects were embraced while others were deemed unacceptable and which category an activity fell into depended upon a variety of changing social circumstances.

IV. Changing Worlds: Christian Space and Time

The sixth century was the decisive era during which the template for a Christian Ireland, rooted in its own past, came into being. The consolidation of Christianity and its spread in institutional form was already well in progress by the time truly contemporary evidence for it becomes available, particularly in the form of the early medieval chronicles.⁶⁹ These contain the obits of early generations of ecclesiastical founders. Even so, historians are not in a position to answer basic questions about the scale of sixth-century ecclesiastical communities. When did Irish churches begin to grow in earnest? For example, the evidence for increases in production associated with an ecclesiastical economy, such as water mills and weirs, comes from after 600, although it must have earlier origins.⁷⁰ By way of contrast, A. H. M. Jones' classic study of the social history of the later Roman Empire included estimates of the number of clergy in different dioceses.⁷¹ Similarly,

⁶⁹ Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 99–159; Nicholas Evans, *The present and the past in medieval Irish chronicles* (Woodbridge 2010) 115–70.

⁷⁰ Adam Lucas, *Wind, water, work: ancient and medieval milling technology* (Leiden 2005) 76–81; Niall Brady, 'Mills in medieval Ireland: looking beyond design', in Steven Walton (ed) *Wind and water in the middle ages: fluid technologies from antiquity to the renaissance* (Tempe AZ 2006) 39–68. The intersections of technology, economy and religious change are considered in Wendy Davies & Roy Flechner, 'Conversion to Christianity and economic change: consequence or coincidence?', in Roy Flechner & Máire Ní Mhaonaigh (eds), *The introduction of Christianity into the early medieval Insular world*, *Converting the Isles I* (Turnhout 2016) 377–96.

⁷¹ A. H. M. Jones, *The later Roman Empire 284–602, a social, economic and administrative survey* (Oxford 1964) 713–15, 873–94.

Ian Wood has suggested that in the Merovingian period most dioceses in the Gallic provinces had over 100 clergy with a total of around 10,000 clerics, including those in minor orders.⁷² Admittedly, the type of administrative documents upon which these figures are based are generally not available for Ireland, making numbers more difficult to aggregate. One useful source, although of somewhat later date, is provided by the *Additamenta* in the Book of Armagh. This text illuminates how Armagh built up its property portfolio through transactions that ranged from the substantial to the very small.⁷³ As Wendy Davies has pointed out property changing hands was fundamental to the establishment of Christianity.⁷⁴ By the seventh century, the Church was so embedded within society that it could afford rampant political rivalries.

These rivalries took place in geographical spaces across the island. However, it is inadvisable to extrapolate directly backwards from the dense ecclesiastical networks of the seventh century. The evidence for these networks, particularly Tírechán's *Collectanea* and, somewhat later, the martyrological texts suggests caution.⁷⁵ These indicate that cults could change location, be appropriated or otherwise manipulated to cohere with current realities. The cult of the sons of Draigin provides a concrete example of the processes in play. Tírechán tells the story of the conversion of the seven sons of Draigin, the most prominent being Macc Erce, to Christianity.

⁷² Wood, *Transformation*, 63–67.

⁷³ Edited and translated by Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 166–79.

⁷⁴ Wendy Davies, *The Llandaff Charters* (Aberystwyth 1979) and *Welsh history in the early middle ages: texts and societies*, Variorum Collected Studies Series 915 (Aldershot 2009); see also the comments of Wood, *Transformation*, 91–104.

⁷⁵ Tírechán, *Collectanea* (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 122–66). The most important of the martyrologies in this context is R. I. Best & H. J. Lawler (eds), *The Martyrology of Tallaght from the Book of Leinster and MS. 5100–4 in the Royal Library, Brussels* (London 1931). The text is ninth-century with opinions differing on how early within the century to place it. Key contributions include Pádraig Ó Riain, *Feastdays of the Irish saints: a history of Irish martyrologies* (Brussels 2006); David Dumville, 'Féilire Óengusso: problems of dating a monument of Old Irish', *Éigse* 33 (2001) 19–48.

They are associated with Leigue Cemetery at the mouth of the River Moy, near Ballina, Co. Mayo.⁷⁶ By the time of the compilation of the Martyrology of Tallaght, early in the ninth century, the cult site had moved several miles northwards and westwards up the Atlantic coast towards Killala, to Cell Róa (Kilroe, Co. Mayo).⁷⁷ The saintly teleportation is also attested in the Tripartite Life of Patrick, parts of which were compiled around the same time.⁷⁸ Fortunately, in this instance, the change in geographical location can be traced but this is not always the case. Other evidence, such as the use of the toponym *domnach*, derived from Latin *dominicum* (the Lord's place), are significant indicators of early churches.⁷⁹ However, a great deal of work still needs to be done in mapping the expansion of Christianity over time. Fortunately, a number of important archaeological projects makes this more feasible than it has been in the past.⁸⁰

Another potentially fruitful line of inquiry is to consider the physical spaces occupied by Christians. How did they differ from those of pagans? At first there may have been little or no difference, at least externally. Patrick, for example, never once refers to an Irish ecclesiastical building in his writings. While it would be a mistake to argue *ex silentio*, it does intriguingly suggest that bespoke structures did not yet exist. This would not

⁷⁶ Tírechán, *Collectanea*, 42–45 (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 156–59). I would like to thank Terry O'Hagan for pointing out the Leigue Cemetery connection to me.

⁷⁷ Best & Lawler, *Martyrology of Tallaght*, 33 (April 15).

⁷⁸ The dating of the Tripartite Life is much debated but it seems likely that a core ninth-century text was revised in the tenth century. See Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 11–13. The cult site features in Kathleen Mulchrone (ed), *Bethu Phátraic: the Tripartite Life of Patrick* (Dublin 1939) 86.

⁷⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 184–85, argues that *domnach* ceased to be productive after the fifth century.

⁸⁰ Important sources include Aidan O'Sullivan et al. (eds), *Early medieval Ireland, 400–1200: the evidence from archaeological excavations* (Dublin 2014) and Tomás Ó Carragáin & Sam Turner (eds), *Making Christian landscapes in Atlantic Europe: conversion and consolidation in the early middle ages* (Cork 2016).

be surprising. For example, in late Roman Britain, early ecclesiastical buildings are difficult to identify and it is probable that house churches, externally indistinguishable from secular buildings, were favoured.⁸¹ Their spaces may only have been marked internally by the presence of an altar or liturgical vessels. Moreover, this type of simple sacred space could well have been incorporated into a larger non-ecclesiastical building. As Irish Christianity expanded and accumulated property, it found itself in a position to construct formal ecclesiastical structures, the first of which may not have long predated the late fifth century. Unfortunately, because of the prevalence of organic materials in their construction, especially before the ninth century, these do not survive. Many were of wood and earthen churches are also attested in the literature.⁸² However, later stone churches consciously modelled themselves on their older counterparts, giving a good sense of the basic form.⁸³ This shows that early churches were constructed according to conscious choices that radically divided pagan from Christian. The simple rectilinear unicameral churches, orientated west-east, used by Irish Christians presented a striking contrast with 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.⁸⁴ Because these Irish churches drew on the established architectural choices of Roman late antiquity, their revolutionary nature has not been recognised. Roman

⁸¹ Charles Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (London 1985) 181–84; see also Petts, *Christianity in Roman Britain*.

⁸² Tomás Ó Carragáin, *Churches in early medieval Ireland* (Yale CT 2010) 17–19.

⁸³ Ó Carragáin, *Churches in early medieval Ireland*, 36–37.

⁸⁴ An overview of the royal sites is provided by Bernard Wailes, ‘The Irish “Royal Sites” in history and archaeology’, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 3 (1982) 1–29; dwelling places are discussed in O’Sullivan et al., *Early medieval Ireland*, 47–138 and Aidan O’Sullivan, ‘Early medieval houses in Ireland: some perspectives from archaeology, early Irish history, and experimental archaeology’, *Eolas* 10 (2017) 77–88.

churches, modelled on the secular basilica, were statements of continuity with the social and political power of Roman state buildings. This was not the case in Ireland where that shared architectural vocabulary simply did not exist. Instead, the churches proclaimed something innovative and definitively Christian through their very shape.

New spaces were wrapped into new ways of marking the passage of time. Measuring time is not simply a method to record events; it is central to human perceptions of reality and underlies basic senses of causation.⁸⁵ Calendars, which organise time into fixed periods such as years, months and days, allowed the temporal flow to be broken into units suited to human societies and group activities. Time could be treated as recurrent and measurable, stretching into the past and forward into the future. Through measuring days, indicating seasons or identifying particular special times, calendars profoundly shaped social life and organisation. The Christian calendar was fixed and anchored in historical and historicising events; it was determined by specific calculations that meant dates could be determined in advance.⁸⁶ Christians imbued their calendar with a strong sense of the sacralisation of time through the liturgical cycle. This contrasted with the experiences of the pagan Irish, not necessarily in the complexities of time-reckoning, but in origins. It is difficult to reconstruct pre-Christian Irish time measurement in any detail, although there have been efforts;⁸⁷ for example,

⁸⁵ Sacha Stern, *Calendars in antiquity: empires, states, and societies* (Oxford 2012) 1–21.

⁸⁶ Stern, *Calendars in antiquity*, 3.

⁸⁷ The Coligny Calendar, in particular, has inspired speculation. Eoin MacNeill, ‘On the notation and chronography of the Calendar of Coligny’, *Ériu* 10 (1926–28) 1–67, treated it as a Celtic calendar. It is now accepted that it needs to be placed within its own Gaulish and Roman contexts: Sacha Stern, ‘Calendars, politics, and power relations in the Roman Empire’, in Jonathan Ben-Dov & Lutz Doering (eds), *The construction of time in antiquity: ritual, art, and identity* (Cambridge 2017) 31–49: 44–48; see also, Stephen

it is fairly clear that the quarter-days of *Imbolc*, *Beltaine*, *Lughnasad* and *Samain*, recorded in early medieval texts, were of ancient origin.⁸⁸ Indeed, *Beltaine* (May), *Lughnasad* (August) and *Samain* (November) were incorporated into the names of the months. The fact that they are keyed to the passage of the seasons helps account for their longevity.

However, the Christian calendar undoubtedly brought innovations, ones which proved to be among the most transformative features of Christianisation. It has been pointed out the Christian calendar must have been almost unknown in Ireland before the introduction of that religion.⁸⁹ On the other hand knowledge of Roman calendars may well have been disseminated by Romano-British traders or, perhaps, Irish individuals or communities in Britain. At first, this may only have extended to the Julian calendar without the liturgical additions introduced by Christians. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín has identified what may be the earliest list of Irish names for the days of the seven-day week. Intriguingly, the list draws on the usual Roman names alongside what look to be creative coinages. Yet, these latter are not obviously Christian.⁹⁰ There are no clear equivalents to the liturgically inspired *cétáin* (Wednesday / first fast), *dardóin* (Thursday / day between two fasts) and *aíne* (Friday/ fast). This list may point to a transitional period when knowledge of the Julian calendar was proliferating but had not yet been fully integrated with Christian liturgy and practice. Undoubtedly, the

McCluskey, 'The solar year in the Calendar of Coligny', *Études Celtiques* 27 (1990) 163–74.

⁸⁸ These correspond with the beginnings of February, May, August and November, respectively. *Lughnasad*, associated with the pagan god Lug, was the most important: Williams, *Ireland's immortals*, 23–27. It had remarkable longevity, although it changed over time. See Máire MacNeill, *The festival of Lughnasa: a study of the survival of the Celtic festival of the beginning of harvest* (Oxford 1962).

⁸⁹ Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, 'The oldest Irish names for the days of the week?' *Ériu* 32 (1981) 95–114: 98.

⁹⁰ Ó Cróinín, 'The oldest Irish names', 97–99.

Christian calendar's extra liturgical aspects gave it a particularly effective cyclical emphasis that was powerfully and simultaneously keyed to divine, mundane and individual time. It is a testimony to the success of Christian communities that their calendar was ultimately adopted so enthusiastically by the Irish that their older forms of time-reckoning were almost completely superseded. After all, calendars functioned through communal agreement; communities had to accept their authority for marking time, for without this it could not be co-ordinated at group levels.⁹¹ Moreover, it is worth speculating that Irish interest and expertise in *computus* was first inspired by a desire to master something that was new and innovative.⁹² How better to understand one's place within the Christian world than through measuring its time?

In fact, there is a telling difference between the complete adoption of the Christian calendar when compared with the robust survival and creative development of Irish customary law. One explanation is that customary law was adaptable to the new religion becoming, in effect, a Christian jurisprudence.⁹³ But this adaptability worked two ways and the vernacular legal system placed certain limits on normative Christian behaviour, as already mentioned. It is where the fingerprints of pagan Ireland can still be

⁹¹ The point is convincingly made by Susan Druker-Brown, 'The politics of calendars', *Cambridge Anthropology* 21/3 (1999–2000) 9–17.

⁹² There is now a large literature on Irish *computus* and its broader international contexts. Good starting points are Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Irish history and chronology* (Dublin 2003); Immo Warntjes, *The Munich Computus: text and translation. Irish computistics between Isidore of Seville and the Venerable Bede and its reception in Carolingian times* (Stuttgart 2010); Immo Warntjes & Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (eds), *Late antique calendrical thought and its reception in the early middle ages. Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on the Science of Computus in Ireland and Europe, Galway, 16–18 July, 2010* (Turnhout 2017).

⁹³ The importance of Christianity is emphasised in the influential article by Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach & Aidan Breen, 'The laws of the Irish', *Peritia* 3 (1984) 382–428.

dimly discerned. However, pagan calendars were apparently more difficult to assimilate. Certain elements, such as the calculation of the number of months or the length of the year were potential points of convergence. On the other hand, religious festivals presented far greater difficulties. With the partial exception of the quarter-days, these were largely replaced by a time marked by saints, by monastic hours and by the great ecclesiastical festivals. Furthermore, the significance of Irish elites embracing a system of time, based on accepted events and theories of causation, cannot be underestimated. Throughout the early middle ages, the Irish literate elite were inspired by Christian histories and calendars. And, it is at this point, in an Ireland where bundles of individual and group affiliations came to be placed within a Christianised framework, that it is necessary, once again, to return to the relationship between pagans and Christians, to where it all began.

V. After Worlds Collide

The title of this paper, ‘When Worlds Collide’, comes from a pulp science-fiction novel by Philip Wylie and Edwin Balmer, published in 1933 and subsequently made into a Hollywood film in 1951.⁹⁴ Briefly, the novel describes how two rogue planets enter the Solar System. One of them destroys the Earth while the other usurps Earth’s orbit, replacing it. The big nations send rockets to this planet with colonists before the earth is splintered. Apart from the bad science, the novel presents the new world as a second chance for humanity’s few survivors. It is an apocalyptic event that results in a rebirth; the experiences of the apocalypse transform the

⁹⁴ Philip Wylie & Edwin Balmer, *When Worlds Collide* (New York 1933); *When Worlds Collide*, directed by Rudolph Maté (Paramount Pictures 1951).

characters. In a sense, this is how scholars often think of late antique Ireland. A new world, a new chance, emerges from the destruction of old ways of life. However, its less well-known sequel, *After Worlds Collide*, published in 1934, problematizes the apocalyptic renewal promised in the first novel.⁹⁵ The heroes find that the old systems of political organisation — communism and capitalism — still persist. They inhabit a new architecture, living in a beautiful city constructed by advanced aliens who have conveniently exited the scene. Yet, human frailties thrive. The novel ends on an uncertain note, balancing the old and the new. It is not so much about rebirth but about the persistence of custom, even in the face of vast changes. This too reminds us of the experiences of late antique Ireland. Persistence of the old, innovation of the new, change and custom: these are not necessarily opposed. It is only if we look beyond colliding worlds of belief that we will identify the complex dynamics of the conversion era, one whose far-flung patterns touched the villa owner and the crannog dweller. And, in this way, we can begin to understand their stories, suspended, as they are, in that creative space between belief and practice.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Philip Wylie & Edwin Balmer, *After Worlds Collide* (New York 1934).

⁹⁶ I would like to thank Máire Ní Mhaonaigh for her very helpful feedback in finalising this paper.

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