

A

LEVEL

THE CELTIC CHURCH

Origins, Development and Themes

FOR CCEA A LEVEL

2nd
EDITION



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EDUCATIONAL

Anne Hughes

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This book has been written to help students preparing for the A Level Religious Studies specification from CCEA. While Colourpoint Educational and the author have taken every care in its production, we are not able to guarantee that the book is completely error-free. Additionally, while the book has been written to closely match the CCEA specification, it is the responsibility of each candidate to satisfy themselves that they have fully met the requirements of the CCEA specification prior to sitting an exam set by that body. For this reason, and because specifications change with time, we strongly advise every candidate to avail of a qualified teacher and to check the contents of the most recent specification for themselves prior to the exam. Colourpoint Educational therefore cannot be held responsible for any errors or omissions in this book or any consequences thereof.

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Preface

THIS TEXT HAS BEEN specifically written to help both teachers and students meet the requirements of CCEA's GCE Religious Studies AS course on 'The Celtic Church in Ireland in the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries' and the A2 course 'Themes in the Celtic Church, Reformation and Post-Reformation Church'. Chapters 1–4 address the AS course and chapters 5–8 address the A2 course. Both sections also specifically address CCEA's requirement to explore 'other aspects of human experience'. Some advice has been given and a range of suggestions made in relation to this, throughout the text but students are advised to make and explore their own connections between the taught course and other aspects of human experience. The second section of the book also addresses synoptic assessment.

This book is essentially a collation of the work of a wide range of theologians and historians (ecclesiastical and other), such as Kenney, Bieler, Chadwick, Duffy, O'Loughlin, Ó Cróinín and Thomas to name but a few. Every attempt has been made to acknowledge sources and opinions in both the main body of the text and in the Bibliography. It is *important* that students show awareness of scholarly opinion in their A level responses but it is *essential* that students form their own arguments and use the scholarly opinion to support these. Students should avoid simply listing scholarly opinions in their answer.

At the end of each chapter, there is a summary of the main points in each topic. These can also be used to check knowledge and understanding of topics covered, or as a revision checklist.

I extend my thanks to many people whose support was invaluable in the writing of this book. Thanks to Wesley Johnston at Colourpoint Educational for giving me the opportunity to write this textbook. Thanks as well to Rachel Irwin, editor at Colourpoint, for the benefit of her professional advice. In particular, sincere thanks to Amber Hamill for her guidance and advice throughout. Her suggestions did much to improve the textbook. I would also like to thank Dominic Kealey for the encouragement he gave me in undertaking this project and for his help and advice in putting together the chapter on synoptic assessment. Thanks as well to Séan McIlroy and Mrs Louise Clarke, Our Lady and Saint Patrick's College, Knock for the

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Very special thanks to my family; my husband Gerry for his support and forbearance with a wife who was often distracted or preoccupied; to my children Rónán, Éile and Tiarnán, for their patience (and sometimes not!) with my frequent calls for 'technical assistance'! I am grateful for their tolerance of a busy wife and mum who seemed permanently attached to a computer and I dedicate this book to them.

Anne Hughes
January 2018

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The Arrival of Christianity in Ireland



CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter explores:

- The social, political and religious background to the arrival of Christianity
- The arrival of and evidence for Christianity in Ireland before Patrick
- The significance of references to Palladius
- The content, themes and purpose of Patrick's *Confessio* and *Letter to Coroticus*
- Portrait of Patrick that emerges from his writings
- The nature, successes and challenges of Patrick's mission

INTRODUCTION

A study of the world that Patrick came from and indeed the reality into which he came, is crucial for both an understanding of his writings and his mission.

The Roman Empire stretched from England to Africa and from Syria to Spain. The city of Rome was its heart. Patrick was a citizen of the Roman Empire. Two thousand years ago the world was ruled by Rome and Roman Britain (c AD 43–410) probably comprised England and Wales. There is little evidence to suggest that the far North of Britain had been Romanised.

Romans firmly believed that towns went with civilisation. Thomas (1981) argues, that in terms of the civilising effects of the Empire “innovations were primarily urban”. Thomas (1981) further argues that it was actually the south-eastern part of Britain which underwent the most “profound and Romanisation”. Patrick is thought to have come from an urban part of this area of Britain, which had been fairly effectively Romanised.

The Romans brought with them their language. Most historians agree that the spoken language of Britain was a Celtic tongue, ‘British’. Jackson (1973) believes it was spoken “from Penzance to Edinburgh”. After invasion by the

Empire, Roman Britain might well have been a bilingual province. While Patrick probably knew and spoke British (it was the language of law and politics), he would also have been familiar with Latin as the official language of the province of Britain. This could account, at least in part, for the much debated style of Patrick's Latin.

Roman Britain would have been influenced by the practice of religion brought by their invaders. Chandler (1978) believes that the inhabitants of Roman Britain might well have been 'nominal Christians', who believed in principle and perhaps practised publicly when the need arose, but without any real consistency or sincerity. This may be one reason for the religious apathy displayed by Patrick (*Confessio* 1).

In spite of all this, critical to any understanding of the Britain Patrick came from, is the slow but sure disintegration of the Roman Empire. Many reasons have been suggested for the collapse of the Empire. It may have been that the seeds of its destruction lay within itself, its might, sheer size, its slave-based economy, its increasingly burdensome taxation system, all contributing to its final demise.

Increased weakening gave rise to barbarian attacks all over the Empire. It became vitally important to defend Rome itself, so more and more troops were withdrawn from the frontiers of Britain. As Corish (1961) points out, "during Saint Patrick's lifetime the world seemed to be falling into ruin ... [The] greatest political organisation which had ever been known seemed to be broken beyond hope of recovery". Finan (1995) agrees: "out of such dark times did Patrick write. In a world breaking down, where an ancient civilisation was in decline ... where an already ancient Christianity was being overrun by the resurgent heathen".

Indeed, this backdrop is crucial to an understanding of his mission and writings. By 476 the great Roman Empire had effectively collapsed.

THE POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND TO THE ARRIVAL OF CHRISTIANITY IN IRELAND

Who were the Celts?

Most historians use the word 'Celt' to refer to an identifiable people who spoke a common group of six or so languages deemed to be 'Celtic', rather than an easily identifiable race as such. Nonetheless, some observers do identify some characteristics shared in common among Celtic tribal peoples. McNeill (1974) argues that the Celts were "essentially a single people" with racial characteristics in common, for example, "bodily stature,

facial features, clothing and war gear, religion, habits and temperament”. Powell (1958) agrees: “the term Celt ... should not necessarily be restricted to mean Celtic-speaking, which is a concept of academic thought of quite modern times”.

Although a powerful force in Europe from about 1000BC when the first Celtic expansion began, the Celts as a tribal force were largely subsumed into the growing Roman Empire. The conquest of Gaul during which the Celts were subsumed occurred in 51BC. The conquest was led by Julius Caesar who felt that the Celts were “too much given to faction” (quoted in Thomas, 1981) to retain a strong identity within the Empire. Ireland, however, lying as it did outside the realm of the Empire, essentially remained one of the final outposts of Celtic culture.

There is little concrete information about the precise condition of pre-Christian Ireland. Archaeological evidence can give us some insight but the written sources which we have available to us are chiefly from a later period. This is really the era of pre-history, although many scholars now assume that later written sources do reflect the practices that would have been current in Ireland in the 5th century.

Political background

The population of Ireland at this time would have been no more than half a million. Binchy’s classification of Celtic society at this time is most useful. He defines it as “tribal, rural, hierarchical and familiar” (Binchy, 1954).

Tribal

Celtic society was tribal in that the country was decentralised, with no high king (there is no record of a high king in Ireland until as late as the 8th century). It was divided up into around 150 small kingdoms or *tuatha*, which Ó Cróinín calls “a myriad of small tribal kingdoms, each separate and independent, and each ruled by its own king”. The term given to this grade of king in the law tracts is *rí*.

Irish law distinguishes between a minor king and an over-king. The over-king was probably the representative of a number of *tuatha* that had joined together to form an alliance or confederation, probably necessitated by the constant battling of one petty kingdom against another and the general strife characteristic of the period. Such a practice provided protection for vulnerable petty kingdoms. It is important to note that in terms of law, the over-king really had no rights superior to that of the petty king. Individual *tuatha* retained their independent status in law,

although they were obliged to pay tribute to the over-king. The only *tuatha* exempt from tribute were those whose own kings shared the dynasty of the over-king. Byrne (1967; 1984) points out that “all sub-king[s] ... acknowledged their inferior status by receiving gifts (*tuarastal* or ‘wages’) from the over-king”.

In royal families, each member of the king’s *deirbfhine* (up to four generations of family on the male line) could be elected as king. Sometimes a *tánaise rí*g, which was really an heir apparent, could be chosen in a reigning king’s lifetime to avoid dispute over succession.

The role of the king was primarily to lead his people in times of war and to represent them in times of peace. Although he sometimes settled disputes in his kingdom, he was not a judge and could not legislate in the sense of making laws. A king was essentially a figurehead. He was bound, in an almost sacred sense, to his people. Some seventh century documents refer to the king “as the embodiment of his people’s luck and prosperity” (Wallace-Hadrill, 1971).

Inauguration rites of kings often took place in sacred places where the ceremony involved a ritualistic ‘mating’ with the pagan goddess. Indeed, Liam de Paor (1996) points out that the “inauguration of the king of Tara was a symbolic mating (*feis*) with the goddess” (*Medb*). He goes on to argue that “prehistoric kingship ... was intimately connected with pagan beliefs and customs” (de Paor, 1996).

Rural

We know from Binchy’s work (1954) that Celtic society was also rural in the sense that there were no towns and cities. Most dwellings were isolated farmsteads dotted sporadically across a country, which was heavily forested.

The most common dwelling was probably a ring fort or *ráth*. These were usually enclosed by earthen banks, surrounded by a ditch and were approximately 30–40 metres in diameter. These dwellings were usually made with wattle and daub, but stone may have been used in the southwest where wood would have been scarce. Some 30,000 or so remains of these have been found throughout Ireland. Some also contained a *souterain* or underground passage. These may have been for the cool storage of food, or as safe hiding places in the face of an enemy attack.

Crannóg or lake dwellings were also common. These were artificial islands in the centre of a bog or lake, constructed from layers of peat and brushwood built on a foundation of logs. *Crannóg* were a kind of wickerwork house, round, oval or rectangular in shape, which were surrounded by a barrier of vertical logs. These dwellings may have been perceived as being safer from

attack by wild animals, but they were no safeguard against the damp.

There is little doubt that kings and noblemen had grander dwellings. Indeed, Brehon law (see p14) required that the king's house should be doubly ramparted. These were sometimes referred to as a *dún* (fortress) and may have been surrounded by two or more earthen banks with a ditch separating them. These tended to be built in more easily defensible locations, perhaps on a cliff-top or mountainside. In this sense they were hill forts rather than ring forts. In the southwest, where stone would have been more commonly used, some of the walls surrounding these hill forts were up to 13 feet thick enclosing an area of up to 90 metres in diameter. The isolation of these individual dwellings, as they have been found or excavated, is testament to the rural nature of early Celtic society.

There was a complete absence of any communication network across the island. For most people, travel between homesteads would have been a difficult journey, across mountain, bog or through forest. Regardless of the difficulties of the journey, travel was also dangerous because people did not have any rights outside their own *tuath*. Soldiers were usually on guard at the areas which marked the boundary of each *tuath*. Most people were not free to travel, unless special permission had been granted. Druids and some freemen (see p12) were allowed freedom of the 'highways' and could travel freely. The *Táin Bó* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley) tells us that "Each of Ulster's heroic warriors, had his day ... to take care of every man who came that way with poetry, and to fight any others." (Kinsella, 1969)

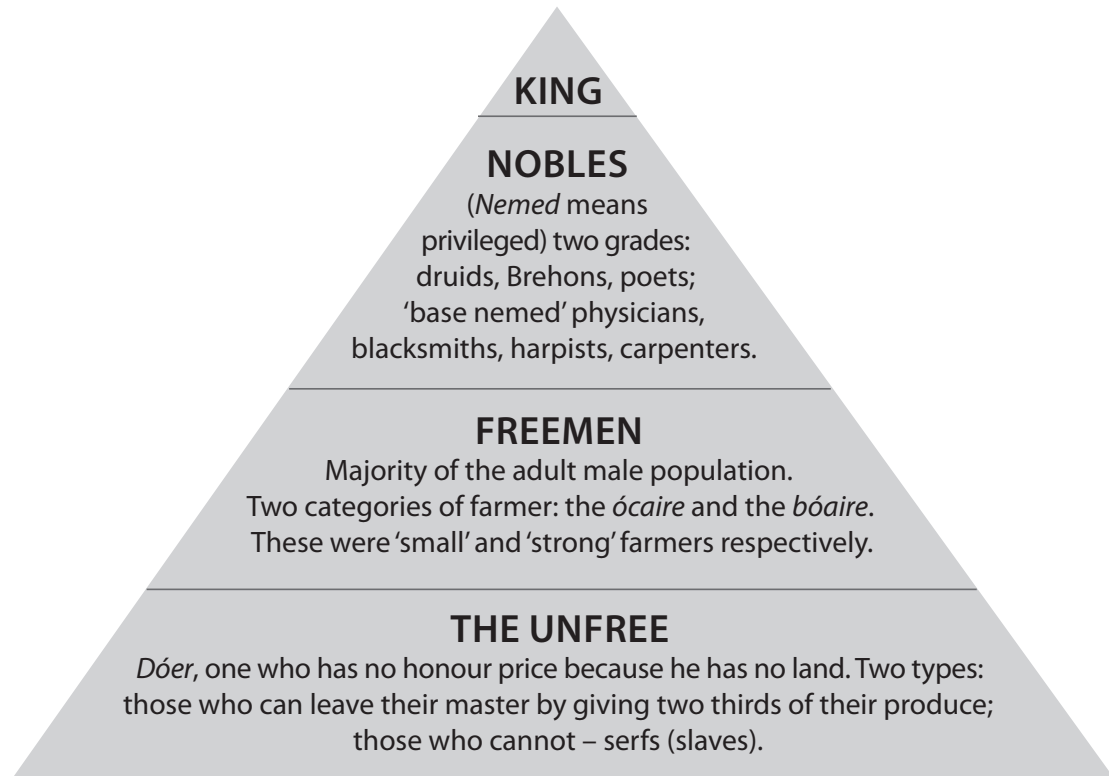
Hierarchical

Celtic society was fairly rigidly stratified or hierarchical in nature. It is possible to uncover four tiers of social structure (Kelly, 1991). The interesting thing about the stratification of Celtic society was that social mobility was possible. This is illustrated in the old Irish maxim "*Is ferr fer a chiniud*" which really meant that a man was better than his birth (Byrne, 1967; 1984). Rank was determined by birth but also by wealth and learning. It was possible to rise and fall in status.

Byrne (1967; 1984) points out that "a man's status was expressed in very material terms by his *eneclann* or 'honour price'". A man could only make a bargain or a contract to the value of his honour price and any damages owed to him were assessed on the basis of that honour price, according to Brehon law. The highest grade of nobleman had twenty *sét(s)* as his honour price, which was the maximum he could pledge and which he had to be able to pay if necessity demanded.

Relationships between the various social groups was dictated by the complex Brehon law (see p14).

The diagram below illustrates the four tiers of the social structure.



At the top of the hierarchy is the king, followed by nobles. The noble classes comprised the druids, the Brehons and the poets.

Beneath the nobles in status were the freemen. Byrne (1967; 1984) points out that “all freemen were landowning”. The *bóaire* seems to have been the highest grade of landowning freeman. Wealth was measured in terms of ownership of land (*cumal*) and cattle (the *bóaire* would have had land to the value of 63 milch cows). The home of the *bóaire* is described in the *Crith Gablach* (a legal poem from the seventh century):

All the furniture of his house is in its proper place ... work tools for every season ... a fire always alive, a candle on the candlestick without fail ... he owns seven houses: a kiln, a barn, a mill, a house of twenty-seven feet, an outhouse of seventeen feet, a pig-sty, a pen for calves, a sheep pen. He and his wife have four suits of clothes. (Binchy, 1941)

The *ócaire* were smaller farmers with a lower honour price. Those who had a trade were also considered free, for example, smiths, harpers, lawyers and physicians.