

**Saint Patrick and the Druids:
A Window into Seventh-Century Irish Church Politics**

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Abstract

In seventh-century Ireland, the priest Muirchú maccu Machtheni composed the *Life of Saint Patrick* at the direction of Aed, bishop of Sletty. The hagiographer represents the saint in such a way that, though he is clearly a champion of the Christian cause, he also demonstrates similar characteristics to the pre-Christian guardians of Celtic culture and religion, the Druids. At times, Muirchú's Patrick seems like a Christian Super-Druid – a religious leader who can do just what the Druids do, but even more. This technique is the principle method by which Muirchú incorporates the idea of supersession into his work: one religion outdoes and surpasses another. I am investigating Muirchú's hagiography in light of this theme and in light of the historical context, including information about the Druids, the Irish church, the hagiographical genre, and Saint Patrick's own autobiography, the *Confession*. Through analyzing selected passages of the *Life* in conjunction with this historical evidence, I trace the appearance of supersession, especially as it relates to Christianity overtaking Celtic paganism, and then discuss the historical reason that the idea of change would figure so strongly into Muirchú's story. The hagiographer wrote at a time of controversy in the Irish church, and the strength of the theme of supersession supports the claim scholars have made that his work was in fact a propaganda piece.

Acknowledgements and Dedication

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This thesis is dedicated to two Catholic British Islanders whom I greatly esteem, one woman and one man.

The first is my dear friend Paula Muldoon, the Irishwoman who introduced me to the Roman Catholic Church and all its beautiful traditions. Paula is a more excellent friend than I can express in a few short sentences – steadfast, intelligent, kind and wise. I am flattered by her wish to read this finished thesis.

The second is Saint Patrick himself, whose courage and resolve I admire and could only hope to imitate. After escaping a people who had enslaved him, he actually returned to them because of his conviction that their immortal souls were in grave danger. Though time has blurred many of the details of his life, the unshakable concern for humanity at the center of his story commands my sincere respect.

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Introduction

I have little talent, dubious authorities, and am subject to lapses of memory; I have only feeble insight and a poor style; but I am prompted by dutiful and loving affection and am obedient to the command of your holiness and dignity.

- Muirchú maccu Machtheni
Life of Saint Patrick, Preface

Thus states Muirchú just before he begins his seventh-century hagiography of the Irish saint Patrick. As was customary in that day and age, he begins his scholarly work in an apparent state of utter humility, acknowledging his own faults but nevertheless so devoted to his commissioner that he bravely undertakes the task set before him. Yet the work he produced continues to be a subject of scholarly inquiry so many centuries after its creation. Written by a priest in Leinster at a time in Irish ecclesiastical history shrouded in controversy and dissent, the implications of this brief account of Patrick's life shed light on the positions of the commissioner, the writer, and the intended audience.¹ A hagiographical narrative often reveals more about its author than about its subject.

Through an analysis of selected portions of Muirchú's *Life of Saint Patrick*, this thesis will attempt to search out the hagiographer's goals in writing as he did under the direction of Aed, Bishop of Sletty, during a critical time of debate in the Irish church. The primary method of accomplishing this will be through consideration of Patrick as a character in the hagiography. In several ways, Patrick comes across as what I call a Christian "Super-Druid." While Muirchú portrays him as carrying out a mission for the Christian God, he also gives the saint certain characteristics of the leaders of the Celtic pagan religion with which he contends. Key to my analysis is the idea of the passing of

¹ Morris, John, introduction to *St. Patrick: His Writings and Muichú's Life*, by Saint Patrick and Muirchú maccu Machtheni, edited and translated by A.B.E. Hood (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978), 1.

the old and the coming of the new, which figures strongly in the account. In Patrick's story, one religion replaces another, and this idea of supersession enters the hagiography over and over again in different contexts. Keeping these elements in mind, the thesis will examine how Muirchú's portrayal of Patrick plausibly indicates his purpose in writing. In addition, in order to better understand Patrick's similarities to a Celtic Druid, some mention will be made of key characteristics of these guardians of pre-Christian religion.

The thesis will begin by laying a foundation for understanding the hagiography, then move into an analysis of the text itself. In the first chapter, I will discuss relevant aspects of the pre-Christian Celtic society in Ireland and then situate the text in its Christian context, including the genre of hagiography. The chapters that follow will analyze portions of Muirchú's text, showing how the similarities between Patrick and the Druids become increasingly more overt as the story progresses. All the while, the idea of supersession will serve as the lens through which I examine the work, and the conclusion will provide a suggestion of why the hagiographer stresses this notion in light of the historical context.

I will be using A. B. E. Hood's translation of the *Life*, as well as the original Latin which he has included in his edition. Unfortunately, Muirchú's text survives in imperfect form in several manuscripts, though most of the hagiography survives in the *Book of Armagh*, or "A." In Hood's words, "Only a tentative reconstruction of the text of Muirchú is possible here. 'A' is used as the foundation, and its evidence is supplemented from elsewhere only when the manuscript is physically defective or the sense and Latinity suspect."² I have also used Hood's edition of Patrick's autobiography, the

² Saint Patrick and Muirchú maccu Machtheni, *St. Patrick: His Writings and Muichú's Life*, A.B.E. Hood, editor and translator (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978), 21.

Confession, to aid my analysis of the *Life*. The oldest copy of the *Confession* is also found in the *Book of Armagh*, though again, the text has imperfections and other manuscripts have been useful in its reconstruction.³ A third primary source worth mentioning here is the Bible, from which I have drawn various stories with parallels in Muirchú's work. I have used the 10th Anniversary Edition of Zondervan's New International Version Study Bible for this purpose.

Scholars have expressed varying opinions about the controversy in this particular moment in the history of the Irish church. Though "I have only feeble insight and a poor style," I hope that this close reading of key portions of the *Life* will shed further light on the issue and will enhance the work on the subject that has come before it. I attempt to highlight Muirchú's emphasis on change and the overpowering of one concept by another because I believe that it parallels the controversy of the Irish church at the time. The conclusion will provide details of this debate; suffice it to say here that the church found itself at a religious crossroads, just as did the Ireland of Patrick's time. I hope that through analyzing the *Life* I will be able to suggest a plausible link between the two situations, illuminating a bit more of the ecclesiastical history of Ireland.

³ Hood, *St. Patrick*, 17.

Early Irish Pagans and Christians

Fundamental to Muirchú's account of St. Patrick is the concept of supersession. The Patrick he creates encounters a society already under the influence of another religious order, and thus his challenge lies in convincing the nation that his belief system is more powerful and ought to be adopted by the Irish. During this process, he encounters the guardians of the existing religion, whom he must defeat. In order to understand the relationship between St. Patrick and these leaders, we need to understand something of who they were historically. Also, before we can say anything about the reasons the author stressed supersession, we need to learn a bit about the Irish church in which this author took part. An examination of parts of the social organization, values, and belief system of the Celts on the one hand and an exploration of the medieval Irish church and the hagiographical genre on the other hand will serve to address these issues.

Of note is the Irish societal structure, since it proves important to the religious significance of certain of its members. As far as the different pieces of evidence show, the pre-Christian Celts had a society composed of kings, nobility, professionals, other freemen (farmers, who also served as soldiers when necessary) and those not free.¹ Central to the societal structure was the family: the clan, or *cenél*, and within the clan the smaller kindred unit, or *fine*.² The seventh- and eighth-century law codes give us an idea of the functioning of these units; the members of the *cenél* worked together to support the

¹Lloyd Laing, *The Archaeology of Celtic Britain and Ireland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 15, 17. Peter Berresford Ellis, *The Druids* (London: Constable and Company Limited, 1994), 29. Some scholarly debate exists as to the identity of this societal class. Lloyd Laing simply calls its members "the unfree, including slaves" (Laing 17); Peter Berresford Ellis asserts that the name of "slave" is incorrect and that this class included "those who had forfeited their civil rights... [consisting] of criminals undergoing punishment, prisoners of war and hostages" (Ellis 29).

A word on Ellis: while his research is scholarly, he writes *The Druids* for the general public and does not use footnotes in his work. Therefore, I shall be using his work primarily for the interesting arguments he contributes to the Druidic debate or in conjunction with evidence from other sources.

² Laing, *Archaeology*, 16.

whole *cenél* and to allow for an aristocratic class of warriors who concerned themselves with war and raiding (particularly cattle-raiding, a common occurrence in Celtic life).³ The men of the smaller *fine* shared a great-grandfather.⁴ Legally, members of the same *fine* were to some extent responsible for one another; for example, “if a man killed someone and could not pay the honour price... then the *fine* was liable for it.”⁵ The society was thus structured around the family.

Religiously, the Irish kings played an important role for their communities in that their standing with the deities affected the entire tribe.⁶ A different king presided over each tribe’s territory, or *tuath*; a tribe often consisted of multiple *cenél*.⁷ In order to become king, a man had to be physically perfect (i.e. unmaimed), a member of the royal family, and visibly in good standing with the gods.⁸ For a period of time, the man likely had to learn about the duties of a king and pass tests before he was ready to be initiated.⁹ The initiation ceremony concretely represented the king’s link to the gods: he “married” his people group’s tutelary goddess.¹⁰ In addition, certain taboos, or *geisa*, applied to the king: if he violated one of these, he would offend the gods and lose their favor.¹¹ If hardship came to the tribe during the king’s rule, the people were technically free to replace him.¹² The king’s political responsibilities included leading battles, protecting his territory, and overseeing the *tuath*’s governmental assembly, or *oenach*; he was not

³ Laing, *Archaeology*, 16.

⁴ Laing, *Archaeology*, 16.

⁵ Laing, *Archaeology*, 16.

⁶ Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 172.

⁷ Laing, *Archaeology*, 16.

⁸ Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, 172.

⁹ Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, 172.

¹⁰ Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, 172.

¹¹ Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, 172.

¹² Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, 172.

responsible for the legal matters of the *tuath*.¹³ Whenever he voyaged through his territory, he also received gifts from his nobles.¹⁴ Later on, the crucial connection between a leader and the divine would be paralleled by the structure of the Irish church.

If the king's legal powers were so limited and his sacral role was to keep his people in the gods' favor, who held more extensive, active power over the religious institutions which held pre-Christian Irish society together? The answer lies in an examination of the social class thus far called "professional" but which can now be referred to by its Irish name: the *áes dána*, or "men of art."¹⁵ Modern scholars categorize the members of this social class in different ways. Doris Edel differentiates between the *filid* ("the professional men of learning" – Stuart Piggott notes that this word first meant "seers"), the *brighemain* ("a separate branch of specialized jurists"), and the *druí* (English Druid, "the pre-Christian religious authority").¹⁶ Peter Berresford Ellis places all such people into a single category of Druid.¹⁷ Nora Chadwick insists that the Druids were not priests at all, since no classical sources give them that name.¹⁸ Lloyd Laing argues that "under the category of *áes dána*... came smiths, jurors, poets and bards... The Druids (pagan priests, p. 28) were in this category until Christianity became dominant and they were superseded by churchmen."¹⁹ Due to the shakiness of the evidence, with the classical writers describing those whom they conquered and the Irish sources appearing only after Christianization, the variety of opinions should not be surprising.

¹³ Laing, *Archaeology*, 17.

¹⁴ Laing, *Archaeology*, 17.

¹⁵ Laing, *Archaeology*, 19.

¹⁶ Doris Edel, *The Celtic West and Europe: Studies in Celtic Literature and the Early Irish Church* (Portland, Oregon: Four Courts Press, 2001), 25, 113; Stuart Piggott, *The Druids* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1968), 114.

¹⁷ Ellis, *Druids*, 14.

¹⁸ Nora K. Chadwick, *The Druids*, Second Edition with foreword by Anne Ross (Cardiff, Wales: University of Wales Press, 1997), xi, 2.

¹⁹ Laing, *Archaeology*, 19.

For my purposes, I will group all of the above-mentioned “professionals” into the same class, as Laing suggests, because the religious responsibilities of its members are fluid rather than confined to certain people in the group. All the members of this learned class, whether poets or magicians or priests or judges, are potentially relevant because of this fluidity. I will refer to this class as the *áes dána*. St. Patrick in Muirchú’s text uses religious practices similar in some ways to the practices of these guardians of Celtic religion. A study of the various roles and responsibilities of this class and the ways in which they carried out their duties, especially when compared with church beliefs, will illuminate a relationship to some of Patrick’s actions.

Moreover, since my inquiry is focused on changing religious practices of Ireland, the problem of terminology becomes less important because of the natural Irish tendency to group the *áes dána* into one class that included the Druids. Piggott notes:

In the Irish scheme of things Druids designated as such are not normally in the dominant position the Gaulish (or at least Caesar’s) evidence implies, but are contained within the men of art who were the men of learning, and also included the *filid* who were at once seers and wise men, and the repositories of the oral traditions not only of myth, legend, and family history, but of the formalized language and techniques of prosody in which these were preserved and transmitted, and the jurists responsible for customary law.²⁰

Thus, if such intellectual functions were all assigned to a social group considered a collective entity in the Celtic Irish mind, all members of this class may be analyzed as a group to some extent.

Indeed, even in Irish myth, the roles of poet, seer, priest, magician, *et cetera* are not so separately defined as the modern mind might make them. Among the tales leading up to the Irish epic the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (*The Cattle Raid of Cuailnge*), one finds an

²⁰ Piggott, *Druids*, 49.

example in the story of “How the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* was Found Again.”²¹ This story begins with the Irish poets in assembly and Senchán Torpéist attempting to remember the entire *Táin*, but neither he nor any of the poets can do so. Senchán promises to bless any of his students who will go to Letha to retrieve one version of the story which had been taken there, and one of them, Emine, volunteers, along with Muirgen, Senchán’s son.

It happened that the grave of Fergus mac Roich was on their way. They came upon the gravestone at Enloch in Connacht. Muirgen sat down at Fergus’s gravestone, and the others left him for a while...

Muirgen chanted a poem to the gravestone as though it were Fergus himself... A great mist suddenly formed around him – for the space of three days and nights he could not be found. And the figure of Fergus approached him in fierce majesty, with a head of brown hair, in a green cloak and a red-embroidered hooded tunic, with gold-hilted sword and bronze blunt sandals. Fergus recited him the whole *Táin*... Then they went back to Senchán with their story, and he rejoiced over it.²²

Though the text does not specifically call him “Druid,” Muirgen smoothly shifts from poet to conjurer to seer. He begins holding a poet’s position, one that the modern reader does not necessarily associate with the supernatural, and then proceeds to perform an action which would commonly be associated with a religious leader: waking the dead. This is not to say, of course, that all members of the professional learned Irish class performed all of these functions, but merely to demonstrate that different vocations within this class could actually have been more sacred or supernaturally driven than one might at first imagine.

Though one must always remember the Christian lens that serves as our primary window into the world of the pre-Christian *áes dána*, we can still glean bits and pieces of what their cultural and religious positions may have been. In Irish works of literature,

²¹ Thomas Kinsella, translator, *The Tain*, Second Edition, Second Issue (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1-2, 255.

²² “Before the Tain: How the Tain Bo Cuailnge Was Found Again,” in *The Tain*, translated by Thomas Kinsella, Second Edition, Second Issue (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1-2.

Druids “sacrifice, prophesy, heal, teach, make magic and give counsel.”²³ In some cases, they would even select the next king (with divine help) from among the eligible royals.²⁴ They also had ways of passing their knowledge to their pupils; generally, scholars accept that this was done orally. This knowledge included “poetry, epic, genealogy, anecdote, law and custom.”²⁵ Druids, *filid*, and bards all learned their craft in special schools, likely meeting in woodland clearings and studying and memorizing for between seven and twelve years; in fact, bardic schools remained in Ireland through the Christian period and into the seventeenth century.²⁶ Here lies one example of an aspect of pagan Celtic culture that survived the country’s conversion to Christianity; the people retained and continued to pass on the wisdom of their ancestors, even if they did so in a Christian context.

Thus the *áes dána* guarded the culture of the ancient Celts. They also guarded the religion, though members of the *áes dána* “were properly speaking only regulators of the relationship between deities and people, there to conduct rites and interpret signs. In the last resort they seem to have been expendable.”²⁷ The important thing was to have a favorable king; one could do without the services provided by the *áes dána* if absolutely necessary. Again, the role that comes to mind when one thinks “priest” was shared somewhat among different members of the class; doctors and bards, for example, could also have gifts of magic, talking with the gods, or prophesying.²⁸

One of the rites performed by these mediators may have been a pagan version of baptism of children, which is said to have existed in the Celtic religion; however, the

²³ Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, 171.

²⁴ Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, 175.

²⁵ Piggott, *Druids*, 51.

²⁶ Piggott, *Druids*, 113-114.

²⁷ Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, 172.

²⁸ Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, 171.

sources for this are Christian and their authors could have been adding Christian elements to the actions of their ancestors, as Ronald Hutton asserts.²⁹ This possible crossing of the Christian back over to the pagan is reminiscent of the opposite effect – the crossing of the pagan into the Christian, or that which Edel terms “integration.”³⁰ Elements of the former pagan culture lingered beneath the Christian surface of Ireland once the church took over, remaining to some extent in the mentality of the people rather than in more concrete evidence, such as the bardic schools which, as already mentioned, carried on for centuries after Christianization.

Additionally, Edel suggests that the Irish learned class found much Old Testament material with which they could identify as far as “learned and literary traditions”; she concludes, “Quite understandably there was a strong tendency to compare the inhabitants of the island with the Israelites, and the Irish men of learning, both secular and ecclesiastical, with the priests and levites of the Old Testament.”³¹ Edel additionally cites evidence that in the seventh century the Irish *filid* also found similarities between the Old Testament writing style and their own, further solidifying the link between the Irish and the Israelites.³² The Irish identification with the Old Testament and its stories will become important for Muirchú’s text, for, as we shall see, he records stories of Patrick that mirror epic Israelite tales, sometimes modeled quite closely on a particular story.

The structure of Celtic kingship and its purpose of mediation between humans and the divine influenced the Irish ecclesiastical organization, providing another example of “integration.” St. Patrick’s mission to Ireland was itself different from the way of doing

²⁹ Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, 171.

³⁰ Edel, *Celtic West*, 19.

³¹ Edel, *Celtic West*, 27.

³² Edel, *Celtic West*, 26.

things in the British and Gallic churches (also former Celtic lands), largely because of the different societal structure: unlike Britain and Gaul, Ireland had not experienced Roman invasion to the extent of having Roman-style cities established.³³ The church could not, therefore, so easily latch onto towns as loci of power; “the ecclesiastical city seems to have been only gradually grafted on to Irish thinking,” notes Kathleen Hughes.³⁴ However, the fact that Patrick came from a well-established church tradition with a particular manner of running itself cannot be denied (and Muirchú in fact insists upon it), and in his day the Irish church shared many similarities with the British and Gallic churches.³⁵

In any event, the church structure in Ireland worked well with the pre-existing system of tribal territories (as opposed to cities). Hughes notes that that “[t]he position of the tribal bishop corresponded to the position of the petty king within his *tuath*.”³⁶ Within monasteries, the position of the abbot of the primary church in a group of monasteries was similar to that of an over-king, and other monasteries could be added to the group; additionally, the monks within the system could travel outside the territory and still be considered part of the group.³⁷ Just as the king under the pagan system ruled a *tuath* and acted as a vital connection between gods and men, the bishop presiding over the *tuath* under the Christian system became the people’s new essential link to the divine.

The international church as a whole had many other established traditions beyond its organizational structure, one of these being the task which Muirchú set out to do – the

³³ Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, Second Edition (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1980), 35.

³⁴ Hughes, *The Church*, 35.

³⁵ Hughes, *The Church*, 35; *Vita* 9. All quotations from Muirchú’s *Life (Vita)* and Patrick’s *Confession (Confessio)* are from: Saint Patrick and Muirchú maccu Machtheni, *St. Patrick: His Writings and Muirchú’s Life*, A.B.E. Hood, editor and translator (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978).

³⁶ Hughes, *The Church*, 78.

³⁷ Hughes, *The Church*, 78.

production of hagiography. The term denotes a biography of a saint. No matter what other ends Muirchú may have been trying to achieve with his writing, he was still producing such a work, and the hagiographical genre has characteristics of its own. In the foreword to their edition of Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend* – a thirteenth-century collection of hagiographies – Helmut Ripperger and Granger Ryan define the hagiographical saint.³⁸ Though the collection was compiled several centuries after Muirchú set down his tale of St. Patrick, many of the characteristics they point out apply. Ripperger and Ryan paraphrase the commentary of Père Delehaye on hagiography, writing:

He points out that the curious thing about legends, hagiographical or otherwise, is that behind the ultimate author who puts them down in writing, there is a hidden 'author,' anonymous and manifold, whose memory stretches back through generations: this 'author' is the masses, the people themselves. The true matter of the legend is fashioned by the mind and soul of the people, and added to, or even at times substituted for, what is authentically known of the saints. The legends of the saints show us not so much the particular personalities and deeds of a certain number of individuals, as the ideals of the people from whose heart the legends sprang.³⁹

Such is certainly the case with Saint Patrick, especially as we are fortunate enough to have his own autobiography still in existence. For some portions of his hagiography, as we will see, Muirchú follows Patrick's account of himself quite closely; in other parts, the reader encounters what modern historians believe can only be the stuff of legend. Yet he uses it all in creating his hagiography, taking what the people have fashioned their hero to be and recording it in his version of the tale, likely in order to gain their favor. Thus as we study the Patrick of this hagiography, we must keep in mind not only the aims

³⁸Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine*, translators and adapters Helmut Ripperger and Granger Ryan (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., Inc., 1941), vi.

³⁹Ripperger and Ryan, *Golden Legend*, x.

of the author but the underlying bits of Irish experience and tradition which could render the piece universally appealing.

Muirchú's Patrick appeals not only to the "Irish" heart but also to the "Christian" heart of his audience, which would expect Patrick to demonstrate certain saintly characteristics. Continuing with their paraphrase of Delehaye's work, Ripperger and Ryan also note:

The saint is the truly perfect man. He must have all the virtues, and be free of every fault. His wisdom must be such as exceeds human powers. He must work all imaginable wonders, outdo the greatest magicians in magic, conquer the power of the Devil himself. He must be the master of Nature, able to dominate the fiercest beasts, and to command the winds and the sea. The direst torments cannot daunt him, the most puissant princes are unable to dismay him. Whether the saints are men or women, strong or feeble, of mature age or infants in arms, they still speak, reason, argue, act, and conquer death with the power of God, and no power under God can overcome them.⁴⁰

As we will see, Patrick embodies many of these traits of a perfect saint. He performs feats that prove him powerful over nature, government, magicians, and yes, even the Devil. In this way, Muirchú's hagiography is not so very different from other saints' lives; Patrick is in many ways a stock saint, fitting to an extent Ripperger's and Ryan's comment that "[i]n general, the saints as here portrayed [in the *Golden Legend*] possess little individuality."⁴¹ Any analysis of a hagiography must acknowledge these characteristics which hold true of so many saints' lives.

Even so, the particular circumstances of the penning of any hagiography have important consequences for the story. Thus even though the feats Muirchú's Patrick performs share characteristics with those performed by saints in so many other stories, we can still draw conclusions about what the author may have been trying to accomplish and

⁴⁰ Ripperger and Ryan, *Golden Legend*, x.

⁴¹ Ripperger and Ryan, *Golden Legend*, xi.

find evidence of the impact of the surrounding environment. This thesis will first examine what can be derived from the text itself; later, the concluding remarks will discuss in greater detail the specific issues facing the Irish church at the time of Muirchú's writing.

Muirchú's preface to the *Life of Saint Patrick* (hereafter referred to as the *Vita*, part of its Latin title) opens the text with hints about the historical context. He states that he is writing at the direction of the bishop Aed, and his words also indicate the authority he tries to establish for his hagiography relative to other records of Patrick's life. He writes:

Quoniam quidem, mi domine Aido, multi conati sunt ordinare narrationem utique istam secundum quod patres eorum et qui ministri ab initio fuerunt sermonis tradiderunt illis, sed propter difficillimum narrationis opus diversasque opiniones et plurimorum plurimas suspiciones nunquam ad unum certumque historiae tramitem pervenierunt[.]

Many, my lord Aed, have attempted to organise this particular narrative in accordance with the tradition handed down to them by their fathers and by those who have been storytellers from the beginning, but because of the grave difficulties involved in recounting it and of differing opinions and numerous persons' numerous conjectures they have never succeeded in reaching the one sure path of historical fact[.]⁴²

Muirchú first notes that the facts about Patrick have not been properly set down in the past, and by acknowledging the grave difficulties everyone has had in recounting the tale, he indicates that he knows something of these past efforts. This would help to convince his readers that he has done the best he can to produce a tale as close to the facts as possible, even though he willingly admits that the search for said facts is a difficult one. Additionally, he makes it clear that hagiography is "an ocean never yet attempted or embarked on by any barque except only that of my father Cogitosus."⁴³ Cogitosus had

⁴² *Vita* Preface.

⁴³ *Vita* Preface.

previously written a hagiography of St. Brigit.⁴⁴ By establishing that his hagiographical enterprise is a fairly unique one, Muirchú sets himself up as an authority on Patrick and therefore trustworthy.

In the remainder of his preface, Muirchú speaks of himself in the traditional early medieval style: he assures the reader that he is hardly worthy to write the story of Patrick's establishing the church in Ireland. He says that he has "little talent, dubious authorities, and [is] subject to lapses of memory; [he has] only feeble insight and a poor style[.]"⁴⁵ Nevertheless, he goes on to say that he is "prompted by dutiful and loving affection and [is] obedient to the command of your holiness and dignity [that is, Aed]."⁴⁶ The reader of the time would understand this discourse as the usual false modesty that writers employed before beginning to write anything, and Muirchú's phrases would not necessarily detract from his authority or make his readers doubt him.

Muirchú's story of Patrick presents a conflict between the existing religion and that which the saint wishes to bring to Ireland. Now that we know the context surrounding the characters he creates, both historically and within the hagiographical genre, we can begin to investigate the work itself and the ways in which Muirchú incorporates supersession.

⁴⁴ Morris, "Introduction," 12.

⁴⁵ *Vita* Preface.

⁴⁶ *Vita* Preface.

Elements of Paganism in Muirchú's First Chapter

In any instance in which one concept replaces another, an established distinction between the two ideas helps to clarify the reasons that the new concept should be adopted. The opening chapter of the *Vita* accomplishes just this purpose. Although Muirchú later includes moments during which Saint Patrick exhibits qualities similar to that of a Druid, in this section he insists upon separating the saint from the pagan culture around him. Even this early on, however, certain of Patrick's qualities bear similarities to those of the pre-Christian leaders.

These qualities emerge quite subtly at the beginning of Muirchú's text. In chapter one of the *Vita*, Muirchú begins his tale with the early life of the saint, during which he "was captured and brought to this island of barbarians [Ireland] and was kept as a slave in the household of a certain cruel pagan king."¹ During this time period, Patrick intensifies his relationship with God. Here, from the very beginning of his narrative, Muirchú begins to clarify the distinctions between Patrick and the pagan Irish simply in the language he uses to describe them. In the preceding paragraph of the *Vita*, Muirchú mentions that Patrick's father is a church deacon and his grandfather a Christian priest, identifying him with Christianity and holy men even before he describes his spiritual experience. The king to whom Patrick is enslaved, however, Muirchú calls "cruel." The passage contrasts the holy saint with his ungodly captors as the hagiographer attempts to create a gap between them; the contrast sharpens in the sentences which follow, describing Patrick's

¹ *Vita* 1. I have not given the original Latin in brief quotes such as this one because I find it too cumbersome for the narrative. However, the curious reader may refer to Hood's book, which gives both the Latin and the English translation for each work.

conversion experience and how “at this point the Spirit [of God] became fervent within him.”²

Not only does Muirchú separate Patrick from the pagans, he also identifies him with the ancient Israelites, who followed the laws of the God of the Bible before the coming of Christ and Christianity. As I have already mentioned, the Irish church tended to identify itself with the Old Testament and stories of the adventures of the Israelites before the birth of Christ.³ The many miraculous occurrences in this first portion of the Bible serve as useful parallels for Muirchú’s discussion of Patrick’s supernatural saintly abilities, and the Irish audience of the day would have understood the comparisons. At this point in the chapter, Muirchú identifies Patrick’s actions during his period of slavery with the practices of the Old Testament Psalmists:

Qui sexennium more Hebraico <in ea captivitate exegit>, cum timore Dei et tremore, secundum psalmiste sententiam, in vigiliis et orationibus multis.

He spent six years in captivity, in accordance with the Jewish custom, in fear and trembling before God, as the psalmist says (*Psalm 54, 6*), and in many vigils and prayers.⁴

This reference to Hebrew practices is just one of several that Muirchú includes, as we shall see. In making such a comparison, Muirchú helps his seventh-century Irish audience better understand Patrick. The readers can recognize the tradition and accept Patrick as a truly Irish holy man, which in turn would ease their acceptance of Muirchú’s text. He also becomes a hero in the same sense as the Old-Testament men idealized by the

² *Vita 1.*

³ Edel, *Celtic West*, 26-27.

⁴ *Vita 1.* As he says on the page before his introduction, Hood uses this type of bracket to indicate “word(s) omitted from manuscript(s), and to be inserted.” The italicized words in parentheses are his own.

Israelites, following God diligently and, later on, performing miracles and supernatural rescues in His name.

Before Patrick can change the hearts of the Irish, the God of Christianity must change the heart of the saint. The hagiographic summary of Patrick's conversion matches the account of the saint's own *Confessio* (hereafter, *Confessio*) fairly well. Both describe Patrick's fervent prayers while he works as a slave, explaining that it was during this period of captivity that he truly made a decision to follow the God of Christianity.⁵ All throughout the *Vita*, however, the similarities and differences with the *Confessio* are of interest for determining what Muirchú chooses to emphasize, embellish, or add to the information in the *Confessio*. In general, Muirchú's chapters describing Patrick's conversion and early life provide similar basic facts to those found in the *Confessio*, which makes the subtle differences even more fascinating. Later on, however, many of the events in the *Vita* describing Patrick's actual ministry to the Irish cannot be found in the *Confessio*, including the climactic clash with the Druids which will be discussed later in this thesis. This is not to say that Muirchú invented these stories, for he likely draws from other sources besides the saint's own work.⁶ Importantly, though, the specific material he chooses to introduce provides rich examples of supersession, as we will later see.

As an example of the differences between the *Confessio* and the *Vita* when describing the same story, consider the description of Patrick's prayer life in each work.

The *Confessio* says:

Sed postquam Hiberione deveneram, cotidie itaque pecora pascebam et frequens in die orabam; magis ac magis accedebat amor Dei et timor

⁵ *Confessio* 16, *Vita* 1.

⁶ See page 66.

ipsius et fides augebatur et spiritus agebatur, ut in die una usque ad centum orationes et in nocte prope similiter, ut etiam in silvis et monte manebam, et ante lucem excitabar ad orationem per nivem, per gelu, per pluviam, et nihil mali sentiebam neque ulla pigritia erat in me – sicut modo video, quia tunc Spiritus in me fervebat.

But after I reached Ireland, well, I pastured the flocks every day and I used to pray many times a day; more and more did my love of God and my fear of Him increase, and my faith grew and my spirit was stirred, and as a result I would say up to a hundred prayers in one day, and almost as many at night; I would even stay in the forests and on the mountain and would wake to pray before dawn in all weathers, snow, frost, rain; and I felt no harm and there was no listlessness in me – as I now realise, it was because the Spirit was fervent within me.⁷

Muirchú also recounts Patrick's experiences with God, using in some places nearly the same words. The high amount of similarity in the following passage from the *Vita* makes the differences between the two accounts especially visible:

Cencies in die et cencies in nocte orabat, libenter reddens <quae Dei sunt Deo et quae Caesaris Caesari>, incipiensque timere Deum et amare omnipotentem Dominum; nam usque ad id temporis ignorabat Deum verum, sed tunc spiritus fervebat in eo.

He used to pray a hundred times a day and a hundred times a night, gladly giving to God what is due to God and to Caesar what is due to Caesar and beginning to fear God and to love the Lord Almighty; for up to that time he had no knowledge of the true God, but at this point the Spirit became fervent within him.⁸

The passage from the *Vita* is an edited version of the *Confessio*, which is to be expected because, as we will later find, Muirchú focuses more on the acts of Patrick during his time as a missionary in Ireland than on the events in his early life. Notably, however, Muirchú makes both an omission and an addition to this portion of Patrick's story.

Patrick stated: "I would even stay in the forests and on the mountain and would wake to pray before dawn in all weathers, snow, frost, rain," a phrase which Muirchú does not

⁷ *Confessio* 16.

⁸ *Vita* 1.

bother to include. In its place, Muirchú makes reference to one of Christ's commands, saying that Patrick was "gladly giving to God what is due to God and to Caesar what is due to Caesar and beginning to fear God and to love the Lord Almighty."⁹ He implies that, while Patrick was faithful to his earthly master through his service as a slave, he made certain he did not neglect his duty to his heavenly master, the God of Christianity. Could this simple substitution have a substantial purpose?

As already stated, Druidic ritual and religion were often associated with nature; in particular, Druidic schools likely met in forest clearings. One of the most meaningful learning periods of Patrick's life, and an extremely spiritual time for him, took place largely "in the forests and on the mountain." Muirchú may have had any number of reasons for deleting the description of the location of Patrick's prayer sessions, but one likely purpose is a wish to distance Patrick from the rituals and learning methods of the Druids, emphasizing instead Patrick's relationship with Christ through explaining how Patrick followed his commandments. Muirchú's Patrick may well be "in the world," giving service to his earthly master just as Christ told his followers to give Caesar his due; but he ought not to be "of the world" – that is, he ought not to have any spiritual practices that are reminiscent of Druidic religious ritual.¹⁰ Muirchú insists upon Patrick's holy and obedient actions, setting him up as an example for the reader and further clarifying his distinction from the ungodly.

Indeed, throughout the remainder of the chapter, Muirchú furthers his efforts to separate Patrick from the pagan culture to which he feels called. A good example can be

⁹ "Then [Jesus] said to them, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.'" Matthew 22:22. All quotations from the Bible are from: *The NIV Study Bible*, 10th Anniversary Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: The Zondervan Corporation, 1995).

¹⁰ There is a Christian saying, "Be in the world but not of it"; see II Corinthians 10:2-4, James 4:4.

found at the very end of the chapter, which describes how Patrick escaped his pagan Irish master and fled under divine guidance on a ship back to Britain. Note Muirchú's repeated emphasis on the non-Christian characteristics of the pagans and their contrast with Patrick's holiness, particularly in the words I have underlined below:

[C]um ignotis barbaris gentilibusque homnibus multos et falsos deos adorantibus iam in nave sibi parata, deserto terreno gentilique rege cum actibus suis et accepto caelesti eternoque Deo, in comitatu sancti Spiritus ex praecepto divino aetatis suae anno xxiii. ad Britannias navigavit.

[I]n the twenty-third year of his life he left the earthly, pagan king and his works, received the heavenly, eternal God and now sailed for Britain by God's command and accompanied by the Holy Spirit in the ship which lay ready for him; with him were barbarian strangers and pagans who worshipped many false gods.¹¹

This separation of the saint from the surrounding pagans emphasizes his holiness, and it is common in hagiographical works.¹² Interestingly, though, Muirchú glosses over early portions of Patrick's spiritual life in favor of emphasizing this distinction. He mentions to his readers that the saint's spiritual experiences during his period of slavery "can hardly be counted by anyone" and that they include "visits from Victoricus, an angel sent to him by God," "great miracles known to almost everyone" and "divine prophesies."¹³ As an aside, he includes a few phrases giving summarizing hints of two of these prophesies.¹⁴ All in all, his account of Patrick's supposed early divine encounters leaves many unclosed gaps and unanswered questions.

¹¹ *Vita* 1.

¹² Karla Taylor, private communication (approximately) 5 November 2008; Scott DeGregorio, private communication 10 November 2008.

¹³ *Vita* 1.

¹⁴ *Vita* 1. Interestingly, these two prophesies are the only two such "spiritual experiences" from this period found in the *Confessio*. Muirchú may have confused the timeline of the other events he mentions, which are similar to happenings later in Patrick's life, or he may have been drawing on traditions not written down by Patrick.

If he had chosen to describe these many spiritual incidents, Muirchú could have presented a strong case for the holiness of Patrick and his divine favor. However, the hagiographer chooses to make his point by contrast and separation from the pagan religion. What can we conclude from this? Apparently, Muirchú attempts two things: one, to insist that the pre-Christian religion is evil; and two, to insist that Patrick had nothing to do with this religion. These two points may sound simple, but the reason that he has to do these things is key to understanding the chapter.

Muirchú had to establish his character's absolute independence from the pagans to whom he had been sent. If the Patrick of the *Vita* were too much like the people he tries to Christianize, the urgency of his entire mission would be in jeopardy. Thus Muirchú takes time at the very start of the story to show that Patrick has a holiness and a purity of which the Irish pagans are in desperate need. Muirchú establishes that a change must come to the Irish that will cleanse them of their wickedness, and Patrick in his godliness is the perfect person to enact such a change. The stage is set for a work on the subject of supersession.

Curiosities of the Second Chapter

Muirchú continues to establish the need for supersession in his second chapter. Not only does he further stress the difference between Patrick and the non-Christian Irish, he provides concrete evidence of Patrick's superiority through his miracle-working abilities. Yet at the end of the chapter, the character begins to show the first subtle signs of similarity with the leaders of the pagan religion. Later on in the narrative, these similarities will become even more evident, presenting Patrick as a leader who supersedes the Druids very well precisely because he shares characteristics with them.

Muirchú's second chapter includes a brief but interesting mix of biblical references and pagan-Christian relations. At this point in the narrative, Patrick has fled his masters and found the ship whose existence was miraculously revealed to him; he is on his way back to Britain with "barbarian strangers and pagans who worshipped many false gods."¹ Following the passage by ship, he and his unholy travel companions continue their journey over land. In the first part of this chapter's first sentence alone, Muirchú refers to three Old Testament stories:

Ternis itaque diebus totidemque noctibus quasi ad modum Ionae in mari cum iniquis fluctuans, postea bis denis simul et octenis diurnis luminibus Moysico more, alio licet sensu, per desertum fatigatus, murmurantibus gentilibus quasi Iudei fame et siti pene deficientibus[.]

So for three days and as many nights he was tossed at sea with the ungodly, like Jonah, and after that for the space of twenty-eight days he toiled through the wilderness, just as Moses did, though with a different significance; as the pagans almost collapsed from hunger and thirst, they grumbled, like the Jews.²

As we have seen, Muirchú places many Old Testament references throughout his hagiography in the Irish style of identification with the pre-Christian Hebrews. One might

¹ *Vita* 1.

² *Vita* 2.

expect the Irish hero Patrick to be compared to great biblical heroes like Jonah and Moses. Notably, however, the pagans are compared to the Jews – God’s holy and chosen people. Why would Muirchú make such a parallel? Did he wish to create some kind of sympathy for them before later incorporating a story of their conversion?

No such conversion takes place; instead, Muirchú stresses the fact that although these men do receive help from the God of Christianity when at the ship’s captain’s urging Patrick calls to him on their behalf, these men remain completely separate from God’s chosen people and his chosen messenger Patrick:

[...] turmae misertus, spiritu contribulatus, merito coronatus, a Deo magnificatus, abundantiam cibi ex grege porcorum a Deo misso sibi velut ex coturnicum turma Deo adiuvante prebuit. Mel quoque silvestre ut quondam Iohanni subvenit, motatis tamen pessimorum gentilium merito porcinis carnibus pro locustarum usu. Ille autem sanctus Patricius nichil gustans de his cibis, immolaticum enim erat, nec esuriens nec sitiens mansit illesus.

[...] he took pity on the band, he was troubled in spirit, was deservedly crowned, was magnified by God – he supplied them with an abundance of food from the herd of pigs sent him by God, just as Moses fed the Children of Israel from the flock of quails with God’s help. There was also wild honey to succour them, as it once did John; however, instead of locusts pork had been substituted on account of those wicked pagans. But Patrick did not so much as taste this food, for it was a sacrificial offering, and he remained unharmed and neither hungry nor thirsty.³

Thus Muirchú continues his theme of separating Patrick from the non-Christians around him, emphasizing their wickedness and his goodness. Along with this, he refers to these biblical stories in order to demonstrate Patrick’s abilities and to show his similarity to Old Testament heroes. Patrick calls upon God to have mercy on his companions, and God, approving of his servant, sends a perfectly appropriate form of help for the people – just as in the stories of Jonah and Moses. Jonah, too, sailed with a group of men who

³ *Vita* 2.

worshipped pagan gods; because of his relationship with the God of Judaism, Jonah was able to secure divine help for these men in a time of great danger from the elements.⁴ Moses led the Israelite community through the wilderness and mediated between God and his people when they complained of hunger.⁵ Moreover, Patrick is “deservedly crowned” and “magnified by God,” further indications of strong divine favor. Patrick is not only a mediator between God and man but a kind of leader favored by the divine.

In relation to a pre-Christian Celtic understanding of the world, as we have said, a king who enjoyed the approval of the gods in turn fostered a materially blessed Celtic community. While the Druids as mediators with the divine were important, and while they carried out an active part in the religious leadership of the society, their role differed from that of a king. As I have already quoted Hutton as saying: “In the last resort [the Druids] seem to have been expendable.”⁶ In the end, the *tuath* depended upon the standing of its king for blessings from the gods.

In this sense, Patrick assumes a role in this hagiographical moment that resembles that of a Druid as a priest and miracle worker but that even supersedes this form of leader. The saint is indispensable for the well-being of the pagans around him. He offers them a service like that of a Druid but even better – more like that of a king in that his role is more important for the community’s relationship with God. Direct comparison between Patrick and a Celtic king is not appropriate throughout the entirety of Muirchú’s hagiography; nevertheless, I will use this example to highlight the idea of supersession.

In this early chapter of his work, we can already see elements of Muirchú’s establishment of Patrick as a leader similar to a Druid, but better. By all appearances,

⁴ Jonah 1:3-16.

⁵ Exodus 16.

⁶ Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, 172.

Muirchú purposefully elevates Patrick to the level of the Old Testament heroes Jonah and Moses. A deeper examination of the saint's status among these pagans reveals his power to be even greater than that of Celtic religious authorities. Patrick, and with him his religion, has come to match and overshadow the power of what has already been established for generations amongst the Celts. The example found in this short chapter of the *Vita* gives a tiny glimpse of the power of the new religion to supplant the old.

A comparison of this episode with Patrick's *Confessio* provides an example of Muirchú's embellishment of Patrick's story for his own purposes. Patrick and the other men in the ship are starving in the wilderness, and just as in Muirchú's story, the captain of the ship asks Patrick to pray to his God for help. I will quote the portion of the story that deals the most with the Christian God's work as it is the part most pertinent to my present argument. Patrick tells his readers:

Ego enim confidenter dixi illis: 'Convertimini ex fide, ex toto corde ad Dominum Deum meum, quia nihil est impossibile illi, ut hodie cibum mittat vobis in viam vestram usque dum satiamini; quia ubique habundat illi.' Et adiuvente Deo ita factum est; ecce grex porcorum in via ante oculos nostros apparuit... et post hoc summas gratias egerunt Deo, et ego honorificatus sum sub oculis eorum, et ex hac die cibum habundanter habuerunt.

I told them confidently: 'Turn trustingly and with all your heart to the Lord my God – because nothing is impossible for Him; and this day He will send you food for your journey until you are fully satisfied; for He has an abundance everywhere.' And with God's help it turned out so; lo and behold, a herd of pigs appeared in the way before our eyes... and after this they gave grateful thanks to God, and I gained great respect in their eyes, and from that day they had plenty of food.⁷

While Muirchú emphasizes Patrick's actions in his account, in his autobiography Patrick portrays himself as merely an accessory to the miracle. As quoted above, Muirchú's Patrick "took pity on the band... was troubled in spirit, was deservedly crowned, was

⁷ *Confessio* 19.

magnified by God [and] supplied them with an abundance of food from the herd of pigs sent him by God, just as Moses fed the Children of Israel from the flock of quails with God's help." The Patrick of the *Confessio* simply points the pagans in the right direction and, "lo and behold," God does the rest. In fact, Patrick even specifically tells his companions to trust in his God, and they thank this God once they see the result.

Indeed, the saint essentially converted these men, a triumph for Christianity early on in his career but one that Muirchú fails to mention. The absence of this brief conversion story is puzzling, since the Patrick of both the *Vita* and the *Confessio* clearly has a mission to bring pagans to the God of Christianity. By this omission, however, we can see the emphasis Muirchú places on Patrick's actions and on his holy supernatural powers. What began in the *Confessio* as a simple command to trust in God becomes a power-laden conjuring of a miracle. The incident sets the tone for the way in which the Patrick of the *Vita* will later give strong demonstrations of the supernatural power he has from God – a power exaggerated from that of the Patrick of the *Confessio*. Muirchú's Patrick later finds his abilities useful in confrontations with the Irish Druids: he can outdo their miracles and win wonder-working contests, and he does so in a style quite similar to that of the Druids themselves.

In the same vein, Muirchú sometimes deemphasizes spiritual moments to which Patrick as an author gives a good deal of weight. One case in which Muirchú's version of a situation is arguably too sketchy is an incident of a satanic attack on Patrick, which directly follows the miracle of the feeding of the pagans. Muirchú's account reads thus:

Eadem vero nocte dormiens, temptavit eum satanas graviter, fingens saxa ingentia et quasi comminuens iam membra eius; sed invocato Helia bina voce, ortus est ei sol qui refulgens expulit omnes caliginum tenebras et restitutae sunt ei vires eius.

And as he slept that night, Satan attacked him violently, forming huge rocks and as it were already crushing his limbs; but he called on the name of Helias twice, the sun rose on him and with its beams it drove away all the gloom of darkness, and his strength was restored to him.⁸

From this passage, Patrick calls on the sun directly to come to his defense against the Devil. Such an action is quite bizarre, considering the saint was by both his own account and that of Muirchú a holy man of the Christian God. Through examining what the *Confessio* has to say about this experience in Patrick's life, however, the full story behind Muirchú's brief summary emerges:

Eadem vero nocte eram dormiens, et fortiter temptavit me Satanas... et cecidit super me veluti saxum ingens et nihil membrorum meorum praevalui. Sed unde mihi venit ignarum in spiritum ut Heliam vocarem? Et inter haec vidi in caelum solem oriri et dum clamarem 'Helia, Helia' viribus meis, ecce splendor solis illius decidit super me et statim discussit a me omnem gravitudinem; et credo quod a Christo Domino meo subventus sum et Spiritus eius iam tunc clamabat pro me, et spero quod sic erit in die pressurae meae, sicut in evangelio inquit: 'In illa die,' Dominus testatur, 'non vos estis qui loquimini, sed Spiritus Patris vestri qui loquitur in vobis.'

Now that same night I was asleep, and Satan attacked me violently... and there fell on top of me a huge rock, as it were, and I was completely paralysed. But what gave me, in my spiritual ignorance, the idea of calling on Helias? And meanwhile I saw the sun rising in the sky and on shouting 'Helias, Helias' with all my might, see, the brilliance of that sun fell on me and at once shook me free of all the weight; and I believe that I was aided by Christ my Lord and that His Spirit was already crying out for me, and I hope that it will be so in the day of my affliction, as He says in the gospel: 'In that day,' the Lord declares, 'it is not you who speak but the Spirit of your Father who speaks within you.'⁹

The *Confessio* explains God's role in the incident according to Patrick: Christ helped him to call out for aid. Presently we will investigate the strangeness of the entire incident, even as it appears in Patrick's account, but for the moment I would like to ponder the

⁸ *Vita* 2.

⁹ *Confessio* 20.

question of why Muirchú would leave God out of the incident entirely. True, the hagiographer has just described, in the same chapter, God's blessing of Patrick as he provided food for the pagans. Thus the reader already has the power of God in mind when encountering this passage. However, just as Muirchú emphasized Patrick's powers rather than God's in the miracle of feeding the pagans, the hagiographer has attributed the banishing of Satan's attack to Patrick's own strength in crying out to Helias rather than to God's power. The *Confessio*, on the other hand, attributes to God Patrick's ability to call out to Helias, which is implied by the rhetorical question: "But what gave me, in my spiritual ignorance, the idea of calling on Helias?" Again, Muirchú has shifted the focus from deity to saint.

Thus when compared with the saint's account of his own life, these incidents lessen the role of God and emphasize the power of Patrick; the next logical question is, why? Isn't the Triune God the center of Christianity and the reason behind the entire religion? Yet Muirchú seems to make Patrick into the all-powerful character of the hagiography in contrast to the glory which the saint gives to God in the *Confessio*. Muirchú's Patrick is more ostentatious, as will become even clearer with later examples in the text.

Muirchú has created a self-confident, powerful Patrick who will later be able to combat the Druids and win. This is not to say that Muirchú denies that the saint's powers came from God. Rather, the hagiographer focuses on the person of Patrick more than does Patrick himself in the *Confessio*, and Muirchú sometimes does so at the expense of emphasizing God's power. These beginning chapters in Muirchú's work comprise only a glimpse of the strength Patrick will have when later dealing with the *aes dána*, but

Muirchú sets these incidents up quite well by establishing Patrick's strength so early on in the hagiography. We cannot ignore that the Patrick of the *Vita* ultimately draws his powers from God; Muirchú does establish the relationship between the holy man and the divine through including Patrick's strong prayer life in the first chapter and through pointing out that God gave him the power to perform the miracle in which he feeds the pagans, even if God is deemphasized. Still, Muirchú ultimately focuses his attention on the actions of the saint instead of on the source of those actions. His Patrick later becomes a powerful Druid-fighter, a hybrid of saint and successor to the *aes dána* who shares some characteristics of his opponents in order to outdo them.

Now let us turn to the strange and apparently non-Christian incident with the sun, as found in both the *Vita* and the *Confessio*. As is evident from the passages quoted above, Muirchú drew his material for this story from Patrick's own account of his life; the incident itself is not one of the hagiographer's own invention in order to mold the character for his own purposes. Thus, aside from what we have already noticed above regarding the differences between the two documents, many of the peculiarities in this story will apply not only to Muirchú's image of Patrick but also to Patrick as he describes himself, which potentially makes the stakes more interesting.

The primary question to consider is why Patrick would in both texts call on the sun instead of directly on Christ as a defender against Satan. In the Gospels, Christ drives out demons through his own powers; if Patrick is a man in service to Christ, shouldn't Christ's powers over the satanic realm suffice? Yet the Patrick of the *Confessio* believes that Christ gave him the idea to call out to the sun instead of on him directly, almost as if the sun were a manifestation of God or some sort of deity.

Unlike Irish paganism, Christianity is a monotheistic religion. In the Old Testament, the God of the Hebrews, who becomes the God of the Christians in the New Testament, makes it clear that he is the only one who ought to receive worship, as he said to Moses when giving him the law for the Israelites: “Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.”¹⁰ Even more interestingly, later on in the *Confessio*, Patrick himself condemns all who worship the sun:

Nam sol ist quem videmus <ipso> iubente propter nos cotidie oritur, sed numquam regnabit neque permanebit splendor eius, sed et omnes qui adorant eum in poenam miseri male devenient; nos autem, qui credimus et adoramus solem verum Christum, qui numquam interibit – neque qui fecerit voluntatem ipsius, sed manebit in aeternum quomodo et Christus manet in aeternum, qui regnat cum Deo Patre omnipotente et cum Spiritu Sancto ante saecula et nunc et per omnia saecula saeculorum, Amen.

For this sun which we see rises daily for us at [Christ’s] command, but it will never reign nor its splendour endure; no, all that worship it shall be doomed to dreadful punishment. But we who believe in and worship the true Sun, Christ, who will never perish – nor will anyone who has done His will but he will abide for ever just as Christ abides for ever, who reigns with God the Father Almighty and with the Holy Spirit before the world began and now and for ever and ever, Amen.¹¹

Even though Patrick compares Christ to the sun, he clearly differentiates between the two in this passage, just as he has differentiated between Christ and the sun during the satanic attack. He then goes on to glorify Christ and show his eternal authority with God the Father over the world. If Christ so greatly outshines the earthly sun, as Patrick says here, then we can still ask the question: why would he have called out to the sun earlier and not to Christ directly?

From the above-stated evidence from both the Bible and Patrick’s own insistence, it is clear that the idea of calling out to the earthly sun does not come from Christianity.

¹⁰ Exodus 34:14.

¹¹ *Confessio* 60.

In fact, judging from Patrick's need to insist that "all that worship [the sun] shall be doomed to dreadful punishment," we can glean a hint that sun worship was one of the traditions against which Patrick had to fight as a missionary to the Irish. In condemning sun worship so strongly, one might think that Patrick is trying to retract and clarify his statement about calling out to the sun in his dream, realizing that he may have misled his readers into thinking that the sun is worthy of worship. This could well be part of his motivation, but something else is also going on, given the fact that he chose to leave the story of the attack in the *Confessio* at all and that this rebuttal comes forty paragraphs after the attack account. This reverence for the sun is a remnant of pre-Christian religion that made its way into Patrick's account as well as Muirchú's.

We have already seen the negative evidence from Patrick's account which implies that the Celts had some sort of sun god. This hint is augmented by the Irish legend of the Druid Mug Ruith, who has strong associations with the sun and who some scholars argue is a diminished version of a sun god.¹² Ellis points out:

Mug Ruith is a euphemistic form of *Roth*, meaning wheel which is a representation of the sun... He is also able to dry up waters, which is a significant attribute of sun gods... He drives a chariot of white metal with lustrous gems, the light of which makes night into day... [He] carries a solar wheel, the *Roth Fáil* or 'wheel of destiny,' which can blind those who see it.¹³

Although Mug Ruith is a Druid in the tale and not a god, his supernatural powers are god-like, and his existence provides evidence that the Irish Celts honored the sun in some way. Combined with the evidence from the *Confessio*, we can conclude that the Celts likely worshipped the sun.

¹² Ellis, *Druids*, 73.

¹³ Ellis, *Druids*, 73-74.

Patrick's calling upon the earthly sun for help in the *Confessio* and the *Vita*, then, appears to be a leftover bit of pagan tradition. We do not even have to examine Muirchú's Patrick alone in order to find this trace. The hagiographical holy man of God in whom Muirchú wants us to believe still clings to a piece of the religion guarded by the Irish Druids. Yet again, the hero of his hagiography acts a bit like a pre-Christian Druid. In this instance, the similarity is not simply with regard to his manner of carrying out his supernatural abilities, as it will be later on when he competes with the Druids in miraculous contests. Strikingly, Muirchú does not even attempt to mask this bizarre and relatively obvious moment of affinity with Celtic religion which Patrick experiences; one would think he could have made his hagiography more convincing by clarifying God's role in the incident (as in the *Confessio*) or by leaving it out completely.

What could possibly be the implications of such an obvious intrusion of a pre-Christian element? One possible explanation for the presence of the sun is the need for concession. In their attempts to convince the Irish of the truth of Christianity, Patrick and Muirchú may have consciously integrated the tradition of revering the sun into their accounts as a way of gently easing any pagan-minded readers into believing Christianity and its powers. If so, this would not be very different from other elements of paganism we have already discussed which remained in the Celtic church, such as the structure of the church which mirrored Celtic kingship and the continuation of the schools of the *áes dána*. In order to convince the Irish to adopt the fundamentals of Christianity, missionaries could perhaps concede certain points, even theological ones.

The argument of the sun as a concession finds its strongest support in two passages from the texts, one from the *Confessio* and one from the *Vita*. The first passage

in question, from the *Confessio*, has been quoted above; the heart of the quote is: “[b]ut we who believe in and worship the true Sun, Christ, who will never perish.” Patrick takes a pagan deity, the sun, and compares him to the Christian deity, Christ. To some extent, he legitimizes the pagan adoration of the sun because of its similarity to and reflection of Jesus. By contemplating the sun and its brilliance, a pagan could understand the beauty and power of the divine, and, not knowing any better, worship this earthly object. Once this pagan is exposed to Christianity, however, the sun becomes only a representation for the true being worthy of all adoration – Christ. Patrick’s clear distinction between God and an earthly symbol for God works quite well if a concession of pre-Christian custom is his aim.

The passage in Muirchú’s work which easily lends itself to concession of sun reverence concerns a young lady from Britain and her encounter with Christianity:

[C]uiusdam regis egregia filia, cui nomen erat Monesan, Spiritus sancti repleta auxilio, cum quidam eius expeteret amplexus coniugalis, non adquevit <neque> cum aquarum multis irrigata esset undis ad id quod nolebat et deterius erat compelli potuit. Nam illa cum inter verbera et aquarum irrigationes solita esset interrogare matrem et nutricem utrum compertum haberent rotae factorem qua totus illuminatur mundus, et cum responsum acciperet per quod compertum haberet solis factorem esse eum cui caelum sedes est, cum acta esset frequenter ut coniugali vinculo copularetur, luculentissimo Spiritus sancti <consilio> illustrata <dicebat>: ‘Nequaquam itaque hoc faciam.’ Quaerebat namque per naturam totius creaturae factorem, in hoc patriarchae Abraham secuta exemplum.

[A] certain king’s remarkable daughter, called Monesan, full of the help of the Holy Spirit, when someone asked for her hand in marriage, did not consent; nor could she be forced to what she did not wish and what was a worse course, even when she had large quantities of water poured over her. For amid beatings and drenchings with water she used to ask her mother and her nurse whether they knew the maker of the disc by which all the world is given light, and when she received an answer which gave her to know that the sun’s maker is He whose seat is heaven, when she was repeatedly pressed to be united to a husband in the marriage bond, she would reply, enlightened by the brightly shining counsel of the Holy

Spirit: 'I shall certainly not do this.' For she looked for the maker of all creation through nature, following in this the example of the patriarch Abraham.¹⁴

Monesan's parents, having heard of Patrick, search him out, and the woman converts; she then dies, and her remains are honored as holy relics.¹⁵

The most important part of this tale for our present purposes is the mention of the sun and its role in Monesan's conversion. Her curiosity about the God of Christianity comes from wanting to know the origins of the sun. Her desire to find out who created it endures even after being mistreated; her passion for God, augmented by the help of the Holy Spirit, is unbreakable. The story exemplifies the idea of concession by giving an example of how an ignorant pagan girl, guided by an earthly object which the Celts considered to be a god, comes to realize that the God of Christianity must exist.

A story like Monesan's works perfectly for a hagiographer who wants to show that pre-Christian pagans had the right idea about the existence of a supreme being but simply misinterpreted one of his symbols for the being himself. Patrick's statements in the *Confessio* differentiating between the created and the creator serve the same purpose, showing Christ to be the "true sun" which supersedes the earthly sun. If these two passages were the only ones which made reference to the sun as a religious object in either one of the texts, we would have a strong case for their inclusion as examples of concession of pagan beliefs. However, the account of Patrick's nighttime rescue by the sun complicates the matter, presenting a confusing disjunction.

The bizarre differences in the account of the spiritual attack appear alongside an equally bizarre similarity. Interestingly, the pattern of Monesan's conversion echoes in

¹⁴ *Vita* 27.

¹⁵ *Vita* 27.

some way the pattern of Patrick's satanic attack. Just as Patrick in his *Confessio* calls to the sun for help at Christ's prompting, Monesan longs for Christ at the sun's "prompting." The great theological curiosity, however, lies in the reversal of the roles of the sun and Christ. In Monesan's case, the ultimate goal is salvation through Jesus Christ; in Patrick's case, the ultimate goal is salvation through the sun. If Muirchú and Patrick wanted all of their references to the sun to show how contemplation of this object could lead someone to Christianity, why should the authors show anyone – least of all, a saint – being led to the sun through the help of the God of Christianity?

The likelihood of Patrick's and Muirchú's awareness of pagan sun deities is high; their goals of showing the grain of truth in this practice are highly likely as well, in light of the passage including Monesan and the idea of Christ as the "true sun." The puzzle, then, lies with their apparent acceptance of Patrick's aid from the sun as not contradicting the fundamentals of Christianity. The two authors have allowed this piece of Celtic culture to creep into their work; Muirchú does not even bother to Christianize it the way Patrick does.

After a careful analysis of the passages involving the sun, this peculiar incident appears to be another example of a fragment of Celtic culture that manifests itself in the work of a Christian. Such a fragment that contradicts Christian theology is quite curious and should be treated as an isolated case rather than a fundamental of Irish Christian theology, unless evidence from other sources indicates that it is a common thread. Through further investigation of this peculiarity, I will attempt to propose plausible reasons for its inclusion in both accounts.

First of all, a return to the question of Christ as the true sun who outshines the pagan deity will be useful. Possibly Patrick's cry to the sun was actually a call to Christ, meaning that the sun is exactly equal to Christ. If this is the case, no inconsistency exists; Christ merely gave Patrick the strength to call upon himself, and he saved Patrick as a result. Such an explanation would be plausible in Muirchú's account; perhaps the reason that Christ is not mentioned at all is because Christ's presence is already implied in the sun. Here is the relevant piece of Muirchú's passage again: "he called on the name of Helias twice, the sun rose on him and with its beams it drove away all the gloom of darkness, and his strength was restored to him." Although the imagery would be fairly hidden, "the name of Helias" might be equivalent with the name of Christ.

Muirchú may have been expecting his early medieval readers to immediately make the connection to Christ. According to Michael W. Herren and Shirley Ann Brown: "the image of Christ the true Sun, a favourite image of the late Roman world, was utilized by some of the earliest Insular writers."¹⁶ In Muirchú's text, it is conceivable that his audience may have immediately caught the reference and accepted it as a direct representation of Christ because it was such a common theme. Examining the manner in which he handles other scriptural comparisons, however, calls this possibility into question. For example, in the passage already quoted above, when comparing Patrick and those with him on the sea voyage to people in the Old Testament, he states each comparison explicitly rather than assuming that the reader will catch his drift:

So for three days and as many nights he was tossed at sea with the ungodly, like Jonah, and after that for the space of twenty-eight days he toiled through the wilderness, just as Moses did, though with a different

¹⁶ Michael W. Herren and Shirley Ann Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity: Britain and Ireland from the Fifth to the Tenth Century* (Rochester, New York: The Boydell Press, 2002), 137.

significance; as the pagans almost collapsed from hunger and thirst, they grumbled, like the Jews. (emphasis mine)

Also, Muirchú's above-quoted story of Monesan separates the earthly sun from Christ, stating:

[S]he used to ask her mother and her nurse whether they knew the maker of the disc by which all the world is given light... she received an answer which gave her to know that the sun's maker is He whose seat is heaven... she looked for the maker of all creation through nature. (emphasis mine)

Muirchú explicitly explains how Monesan used an object found in nature to discover the God who created it; she does not call out to the sun as if it were Christ Himself. Given the way in which Muirchú differentiates between each person or object in his comparison, I still find something odd about Muirchú's account of the sun's rescue of Patrick. The common use of Christ as the true sun, however, could nevertheless be useful to the hagiography: Muirchú could have glossed over Patrick's account of the attack, leaving an explicit mention of Christ out of the story in hopes that his readers would take the sun to actually be Christ.

All this sheds little light on the root of the pagan problem in Patrick's *Confessio*, however. Patrick even more clearly distinguishes between the sun and Christ, explaining how he called on one with the help of the other, as seen in the passage already quoted:

But what gave me, in my spiritual ignorance, the idea of calling on Helias? And meanwhile I saw the sun rising in the sky and on shouting 'Helias, Helias' with all my might, see, the brilliance of that sun fell on me and at once shook me free of all the weight; and I believe that I was aided by Christ my Lord and that His Spirit was already crying out for me. (emphasis mine)

Perhaps the most striking phrase is "the brilliance of that sun fell on me and at once shook me free of all the weight." The words "that sun" (Latin *solis illius*) seem to specify Helias, the earthly sun which was physically rising. If the Spirit of Christ "was already

crying out for [Patrick]” to Helias, then the language of Patrick’s account points to help given to Patrick by the earthly sun through the aid of Christ, which leaves the root question of why Patrick would write such a thing in his autobiography. The phrase “I was aided by Christ my Lord” is slightly ambiguous: it could mean that Christ was the one who performed the rescue, or it could mean that Christ aided Patrick in knowing to call out to Helias. The difference between Christ and the earthly sun remains, just as there is a difference between the two in the above-mentioned section in which Patrick condemns sun worship.

Whence does this problem of confused religious practices stem, then? Ludwig Bieler presents a theory:

This strange experience testifies to a certain fusion in Patrick’s mind of the prophet Elias [Elijah] and the sun-god Helios. This fusion was common in ancient Christian art and literature... It had two causes: the similarity of their Greek name-forms (*Helias--Helios*), and the reminiscences of the sun-god in his chariot that were evoked by the fiery chariot in which the prophet was taken to heaven... There may have been at the back of Patrick’s mind some dim recollection of a picture or mosaic representing the assumption of (H)Elias after the traditional representations of Helios driving through the sky.¹⁷

Bieler reduces what Patrick believes is a supernatural satanic attack to a nightmare, and then explains a psychological reason for the incorporation of a pagan Greek deity and an Old-Testament prophet into that nightmare. Though Patrick appears to be convinced that this incident was no simple nightmare, the idea that “Helias” was a mixture of a Greek god and a Jewish hero plausibly explains the situation, especially since, as Bieler maintains, the imagery was common in ancient art.

¹⁷ Saint Patrick and Saint Secundinus, *The Works of St. Patrick; St. Secundinus, Hymn on St. Patrick*, Ludwig Bieler, Ph.D., translator, (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1953), 84 (note on section 20 of the *Confessio*).

The explanation also lends itself as evidence for a combination of pagan and Christian elements in this experience and thus in both texts in which it appears. The proposal that Patrick is calling in part on Elijah is not so very different from the Catholic idea of calling on a saint in an hour of need. If indeed Elijah were to arrive in his heavenly chariot of fire in order to banish the Devil, then a Christian would understand the act as being accomplished by God through the mediation of the saint. This is a legitimate partial explanation of the incident, but now the question of what to do with the element of the pagan deity remains.

Bieler goes on to state that “[t]he sun that dispelled Patrick’s nightmare was, of course, understood by him as the *sol verus*... --Christ.”¹⁸ He then notes the common use of Christ as the true sun in opposition to pagan sun gods.¹⁹ Though his observation of Christ being presented as the only true God who outshines all sun gods is fascinating and somewhat pertinent, it is still rather confusing that both Christ and a type of sun god are part of Patrick’s account and that salvation from the Devil in this case comes with the help of an entity which resembles a pagan deity. The instance does not appear to support the common contrast of Christ and the pagan sun gods but to practically oppose it.

In the end, Bieler’s reference to Elijah as Helias fits neatly with the Christian idea of veneration of the saints and is close to being a call on God’s power. However, the inclusion of the sun as a saving power still calls to mind the pagan sun god of the Celts – a deity to whom, logically, Patrick would have had more immediate exposure than he would have had to the Greek god Helios. As Karla Taylor has paraphrased the old saying, “if you hear hoofbeats in the park, you don’t think, ‘Aha, zebras!’ The Celtic sun

¹⁸ Bieler, *Works*, 84.

¹⁹ Bieler, *Works*, 84.

association just seems so much closer to home ('no, horses')."²⁰ Yet again, Patrick as he appears in both the *Confessio* and the *Vita* displays a piece of pagan Irish culture, rendering him similar to a Druid.

The displays of power and religious peculiarities found in Muirchú's second chapter merely set the stage for the remainder of the hagiography. Later on, Patrick's encounters with the Druids show him to be even stronger against them while still retaining interesting similarities to them. The appearances of Patrick's pagan-like characteristics will become less cryptic, and these characteristics will help him conquer the pagan religion and introduce Christianity to Ireland.

²⁰ Karla Taylor, e-mail message to author, March 4, 2009.

The Epic Climax

The climax of Muirchú's hagiography constitutes the height of his theme of supersession. The reader watches as Patrick confronts the Druids, his competitors for the favor of the Irish people and the gatekeepers of the religion he is trying to overthrow. The story builds in excitement, leading up to a supernatural contest which ultimately ends in the downfall of the Celtic religion as Christianity triumphs over it. As I have already mentioned, the story of the climax itself does not figure into the *Confessio*; however, this major deviation from Patrick's autobiography proves a powerful asset for Muirchú as he builds on his theme of supersession.

In this climax, Muirchú describes Patrick's superiority to the Druids through direct comparison of his actions with theirs. Patrick's story also continues to be similar to some of the tales of the Old Testament, but the author adds a notable and interesting comparison of the saint to Christ. In all of this, Muirchú brings his readers up to and through the work's climactic events as he shows the passing of one order in favor of another.

After describing Patrick's encounter with Satan and his salvation from it by "Helias," Muirchú describes the steps the saint takes in order to return to Ireland as a missionary, as well as other events that happened to him during this time of preparation and study.¹ In this section Muirchú also confirms Patrick's legitimate relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, a claim which would strike a chord with his intended audience for reasons that will be discussed later. Of Patrick's ordination, Muirchú says:

Patricius et qui cum eo erant declinaverunt iter ad quendam mirabilem hominem summum episcopum, Amathoregem nomine, in propinquo loco habitantem. Ibi que sanctus Patricius, sciens quae eventura erant illi,

¹ *Vita* 3-9.

episcopalem gradum ab Amathorege sancto episcopo accepit; sed etiam Auxilius Iserminusque et caeteri inferioris gradus eodem die quo sanctus Patricius ordinatus est. Tum acceptis benedictionibus, perfectisque omnibus secundum morem[...]

Patrick and his companions turned aside to a wonderful man, a very important bishop called Amator, who lived nearby. And there St. Patrick, knowing what was to happen to him, received the rank of bishop from the holy bishop Amator, as also Auxilius and Iserminus and others received lesser orders on the same day as St. Patrick was consecrated. They received the blessings, everything was performed in the customary way[...]²

Note how he goes to great lengths to insist upon the legitimacy of Patrick's entrance into the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church: Muirchú vouches for the character of the presiding bishop, names others who were ordained by the same man at the same time, and assures the reader that everything was carried out properly according to church protocol. He presents Patrick as a perfectly legitimate Roman Catholic bishop, ready to take on the heathens of Ireland.

Muirchú ends this portion of the story with Patrick's obedient voyage towards Ireland, telling of how Patrick "avoided all detours, except for the ordinary business of travelling (for no one seeks the Lord by idleness), and then he hurried across our sea with all speed and a favourable wind."³ In the next chapter, Chapter 10, he turns to the events which take place meanwhile in Ireland. Loegaire, "the fierce heathen emperor of the barbarians... reigned in Tara, which was the Irish capital."⁴ This king "had had wise men, wizards, soothsayers, enchanters and inventors of every black art who were able in their heathen, idolatrous way to know and foresee everything before it happened," and

² *Vita* 9.

³ *Vita* 9.

⁴ *Vita* 10.

the two most honored of these were Lucetmael (or Ronal) and Lothroch (or Lochru).⁵

Once again, Muirchú sets up a contrast between the guardians of pagan religion and the holy man Patrick, pitting one source of miraculous power against another. Later on, Patrick's encounters with these men will prove him to have the upper hand in supernatural arts.

For now, these Celtic soothsayers foretell Patrick's arrival:

Et hii duo ex sua arte magica crebrius profetabant morem quendam exterum futurum in modum regni cum ignota quadam doctrina molesta de longinquo trans maria advectum, a paucis dictatum, a multis susceptum, ab omnibusque honoratum, regna subversurum, resistentes reges occisurum, turbas seducturum, omnes eorum deos destructurum, et eiectis omnibus illorum artis opibus in saecula regnaturum. Portantem quoque suadentemque hunc morem signaverunt et profetaverunt[.]

These two repeatedly foretold by their magical arts that there would come to be a certain foreign practice like a kingdom, with some strange and troublesome doctrine; a practice brought from afar across the seas, proclaimed by a few, adopted by many and respected by all; it would overthrow kingdoms, kill kings who resisted, win over great crowds, destroy all their gods, and after driving out all the resources of their art it would reign for ever and ever. They also identified and foretold the man who would bring and urge this practice[.]⁶

Muirchú takes the opportunity to remind his audience that Patrick's religion came from "across the seas" and is "like a kingdom"; the subtle words could be taken as a reminder that ultimately, Christian practices originated in other lands. Patrick was a legitimate, ordained member of the "kingdom" (with Rome as its head) who would introduce the governmental structure of this realm to the pagan Irish.

Muirchú also prepares his audience for the future encounters between the two religions. Here he has established that the heathen magicians have legitimate powers of foretelling the future, which, as he tells us a few sentences later, prove to be accurate:

⁵ *Vita* 10.

⁶ *Vita* 10.

“And this is just as it later turned out,” he says, after giving a few further details about the nature of the pagan prophecies.⁷ This brief recognition of these men’s power will make Patrick’s triumph even more noteworthy later; he will be able to match and surpass their powers, and Roman Catholicism will vanquish Irish paganism.

The heathens’ telling of the future also hearkens back to another of Muirchú’s themes: the allusions to Old-Testament stories. Many examples of prophecy can be found throughout the Old Testament, and even in the New Testament. Often, as in the stories of the prophet Daniel and the patriarch Joseph, the pagan magicians are unable to interpret a ruler’s prophetic dream whereas the man of God can. Even though such is not the case here, both Muirchú’s text and these biblical stories include the concept of heathen prophecy. Muirchú has continued his Old-Testament references.

So Patrick returns to Ireland heralded by pagan prophecy, and Muirchú makes it absolutely clear that he has come to rid the land of heathen practices once and for all. After recounting some of Patrick’s first acts on the island, the hagiographer turns to the tale of the saint’s first Easter there. Patrick and his companions must choose where to hold their holiday festivities. Muirchú writes as though, with divine inspiration, Patrick wishes to pick a fight with the indigenous religious order at this time: they feel God wants them to celebrate Easter

in campo maximo, ubi erat regnum maximum nationum harum quod erat omnis gentilitatis et idolatriae caput, celebrari, ut hic invictus cuneus in caput totius idolatriae, ne possit ulterius adversus Christi fidem insurgere, sub malleo fortis operis cum fide iuncti sancti Patricii et suorum manibus primus inlideretur; et sic factum est.

in the great plain where there was the greatest kingdom of these peoples, the capital of all paganism and idolatry, so that here an invincible wedge could be driven into the head of all idolatry to prevent it ever again rising

⁷ *Vita* 10.

against the faith of Christ, with the hammer-blows of a resolute deed linked with faith, a hammer first wielded spiritually by St. Patrick and his followers; and so it turned out.⁸

The violence of this imagery prepares the reader for the upcoming showdowns which will take place as a result of Patrick's choice of location for the holiday celebration. Patrick will indeed deliver the metaphorical "hammer-blows of a resolute deed linked with faith"; Muirchú will show him in all his supernatural glory conquering the Druids and their weaker ungodly magic, rendering him Christ's Super-Druid. One could also observe from this discourse that Patrick, as an ordained Roman Catholic bishop, pioneered Catholicism in Ireland; again, we will later examine reasons for Muirchú's insistence on the saint's authority.

Now Muirchú comes to one of the great confrontations between Patrick and the Druids. The fourteenth chapter explains how Patrick traveled to the appointed site of the Easter celebration, and then the fifteenth chapter picks up with the doings of the pagans. According to Muirchú, one of their festivals takes place on the same day as that which Patrick had intended to celebrate Easter, and thus a large gathering of Druids joins King Loegaire to commemorate this feast. Muirchú explicitly compares this assembly of government officials and workers of pagan magic to that of the Old Testament king Nebuchadnezzar, one of the kings whom the prophet Daniel and his companions Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego served.⁹ All these people "were summoned to Loegaire, as once upon a time to King Nebuchadnezzar, at Tara, their Babylon."¹⁰ The festival must have involved the lighting of some kind of sacred fire, for Muirchú then tells his reader that "[t]hey also had a custom, which was made known to all by

⁸ *Vita* 13.

⁹ For the story of the fiery furnace, which bears some similarities to this tale, see Daniel 3.

¹⁰ *Vita* 15.

proclamation, that if anyone in any part of the country, be it near or far, lit a fire before one was kindled in the king's house, in the palace of Tara, his soul would perish from among his people."¹¹ Our saintly hero, in a deliberate act of defiance (based on his assumed knowledge of this proclamation and the earlier mention of the religious "hammer-blows" he intended to deal out), "as he celebrated holy Easter, lit a divine fire, very bright and blessed, and as it gleamed in the darkness it was seen by almost all the inhabitants of the flat plain."¹² Muirchú here reveals the divinely-inspired strategy involved in selecting this particular plain: not only was it near the location of the heart of Irish paganism, but a paschal fire would be clearly seen by all in the vicinity – a bold and bright testament to the glory of the Christian God.

Continuing with the theme of the story of Daniel, Muirchú gives the reader a discourse from the king's advisors. This speech bears striking similarities to the one given in Daniel 3 to King Nebuchadnezzar during the affair of Daniel's fellow exiles and the fiery furnace. In the *Vita*, the advisors say:

Rex, in aeternum vive. Hic ignis quem videmus quique in hac nocte accensus est antequam succenderetur in domu tua, id est in palatio Temoriae, nissi extinctus fuerit in nocte hac qua accensus est, nunquam extinguetur in aeternum; insuper et omnes ignes nostrae consuetudinis supergradietur; et ille qui incendit et regnum superveniens a quo incensus est in hac nocte superabit nos omnes et te, et omnes homines regni tui seducet et cadent ei omnia regna, et ipsum implebit omnia et regnabit in saecula saeculorum.

O king, live for ever. This fire which we see and which was lit this night before one was lit in your house, that is, in the palace of Tara, will never be put out ever unless it is put out this night on which it has been lit; and what is more, it will surpass all the fires of our practice; and he who lit the fire and the coming kingdom by which it was lit this night will overcome us all, and you, and will win over all the men of your kingdom, and all the

¹¹ *Vita* 15.

¹² *Vita* 15.

kingdoms will yield to it, and it will fill all things and reign for ever and ever.¹³

Note the word-for-word opening of the similar passage in Daniel 3 and the other parallels to the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace. The three Israelite exiles also set themselves up in a position of defiance to a king who refuses to recognize the God of Israel, and the king's advisors tell him the following:

O king, live forever! You have issued a decree, O king, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon – Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – who pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.¹⁴

Both stories have the idea of the God of the Bible being set against a pagan god or gods, with the man or men of God pitted against the highest ruler of the land and his counselors (and just as the three Jews victoriously escape the fiery furnace unharmed, Patrick will find supernatural victory over the high king). Both stories also involve fire, though the purpose of the fire in each tale is rather different. Muirchú has again incorporated the Old Testament, and in doing so he effectively continues the motif of one religion outdoing another.

Even more relevant, however, is the setup for Patrick's God to outdo the pagans' gods. The coming confrontation is the most striking example of Muirchú's Patrick acting as a Christian Super-Druid. Muirchú is trying to create a hero of whom all of Ireland can be proud, and the competitions he wins against the pagan Druids do exactly that. Muirchú

¹³ *Vita* 15.

¹⁴ Daniel 3:9b-12.

continues the story in the next chapter, explaining King Loegaire's decision to investigate the illegal fire and execute whoever is responsible. As Muirchú tells it:

Iunctis igitur ter novem curribus secundum deorum traditionem et assumptis his duobus magis ad conflictionem prae omnibus optimis, id est Lucetmael et Lochru, in fine noctis illius perrexit Loiguire de Temoria ad Ferti virorum Feec, hominum et equorum facies secundum congruum illis sensum ad levam vertentes.

So yoking twenty-seven chariots as the tradition of the gods demanded and taking these two wizards, Lucetmael and Lochru, the best of all for this confrontation, Loegaire proceeded at the close of that night from Tara to the Burial Ground of the men of Fiacc (Slane), with his men and horses facing towards the left, that being the fitting direction for them.¹⁵
(parentheses and enclosed words Hood's)

Here Muirchú creates further expectation for an epic battle with his insistence that the pagans have brought the best of the best to encounter Patrick. Not only is the party under the direction of the highest king in the land, but there are “twenty-seven chariots as the tradition of the gods demanded” and “two wizards, Lucetmael and Lochru, the best of all for this confrontation,” not to mention the fact that the match is to take place on a pagan burial ground – the dead have supernatural connotations in many religions. With all of this pitted against a man already favored by God and ordained by the Roman Catholic Church, the battle is bound to be a notable one; whoever emerges victorious will have good reason to claim Ireland for his deity.

The remainder of the chapter describes how the Druids advise the king to wait for them nearby while they bring Patrick to him, “so that [Patrick] will do obeisance to [the king] and it will be [the king] who will be lord and master.”¹⁶ Loegaire agrees, and in the following chapter, Patrick is brought before him. The Druids decide not to get up from where they sit when the saint arrives, saying that “whoever rises at his approach will

¹⁵ *Vita* 16.

¹⁶ *Vita* 16.

believe in him afterwards and do obeisance to him.”¹⁷ In spite of this decision, as Patrick comes to them singing a psalm, “just one, with God’s aid, refused to obey the wizard’s words, namely Ercc, son of Daeg, whose relics are now venerated in the city called Slane, and he rose; and Patrick blessed him, and he believed in the eternal God.”¹⁸ Here we have a preliminary moment in which Patrick effortlessly confounds the Druids: by the help of his God, one of their own leaves them for no apparent reason simply at the saint’s approach and the words of his song, which tells of putting faith in God rather than in horses and chariots.¹⁹ Muirchú also adds that this former pagan became a saint, thus incorporating a piece of Irish history into his narrative and potentially further winning over the hearts of his audience.

The next stage is a verbal argument between the religious leaders. The Druid Lochru “was insolent to the saint’s face and had the effrontery to disparage the catholic faith in the most arrogant terms.”²⁰ Muirchú’s phrasing here relays shock at such impertinence and is calculated to invite his reader to marvel at a man so overtly anti-Christian. In the following sentences, the master Druid receives his divine come-uppance:

Hunc autem intuens turvo oculo talia prominentem sanctus Patricius, ut quondam Petrus de Simone, cum quadam potentia et mango clamore confidenter ad Dominum dixit: ‘Domine, qui omnia potes et in tua potestate consistunt, quique me missisti huc, hic impius qui blasfemat nomen tuum elevetur nunc foras et cito moriatur.’ Et his dictis, elivatus est in aethera magus et iterum dimissus foras desuper, verso ad lapidem cerebro, comminutus et mortuus fuerat coram eis; et timuerunt gentiles.

St. Patrick glared fiercely at him as he spoke, as once Peter did with Simon, and then, with strange power, he shouted aloud and confidently addressed the Lord: ‘O Lord, who can do all things and in whose power all things lie, who sent me here, may this impious man who blasphemes Your

¹⁷ *Vita* 17.

¹⁸ *Vita* 17.

¹⁹ *Vita* 17.

²⁰ *Vita* 17.

name be now carried up out of here and die without delay.’ At these words the wizard was carried up into the air and then dropped outside from above; he fell head-first and crashed his skull against a stone, was smashed to pieces and died before their eyes; and the heathen were afraid.²¹

Muirchú’s battle scene makes the transition from verbal to physical through the power of words spoken by the saint. The Druid’s insults of Christianity had no physical effect; however, Patrick’s prayer to counter it results in a dramatic death. Patrick has taken an action of a pagan magician and has done it better with the help of his God.

Also interesting to note is the fact that, out of all the biblical figures who ever called upon God to defeat a spiritual enemy, Muirchú makes a reference to Peter – the apostle from whom the Roman Catholic Pope is said to have spiritually descended.²² In the tradition of the head of the Roman Catholic Church, Ireland’s hero calls out and destroys a pagan magician. Muirchú has inserted yet another subtle reference to Rome.

In the next chapter, King Loegaire commands his men to kill Patrick, intending a physical retaliation for the saint’s physical action. Yet again, Patrick calls on God for help, and this time a scene reminiscent of the Old Testament story of Gideon ensues. Darkness comes over the pagans, they attack each other in mass confusion, an earthquake ruins their horses and chariots and sends them running off towards a nearby mountain, and in the end only Loegaire and seven other pagans remain.²³ In the book of Judges, the

²¹ *Vita* 17.

²² Simon was a sorcerer whom Saint Peter killed by rebuking the demons who allowed him to fly. Simon fell to earth and broke open his head. Patrick has even more agency in killing the Druid because he both causes the “flight” in the first place and ends it. (The story of Peter and Simon can be found in the *Golden Legend*, June 29.)

In 3.25 of *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (eighth century), Bede also tells a story involving the Easter controversy in which Wilfrid appeals to St. Peter as the head of the church and uses this appeal to argue that the Roman method of dating Easter is superior. (Saint Bede, *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, editors (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).)

²³ *Vita* 18.

young Hebrew warrior Gideon defeats the Midianites while hopelessly outnumbered: God causes the Midianites to both run in terror and turn on each other when the Israelites surprise them.²⁴ The fate of the chariots and horses is similar to that of the Egyptians when pursuing Moses and the Israelites across the supernaturally dried-up Red Sea: when the Egyptians try to follow the Jews across the seabed, God causes the water to destroy them: “The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen – the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.”²⁵ Muirchú again likens Patrick to ancient Israelite heroes who led God’s people to victory against people groups who did not acknowledge the biblical deity. Just as Moses and Gideon did, Patrick establishes the superiority of this God over the powers of other nations and their rulers. At this point the pagans have primarily shown their earthly and governmental strength; they will invoke their supernatural strength in the chapters to come.

For now, the pagan governmental power comes to pretend to worship the God of Christianity. The queen begs Patrick to spare Loegaire’s life if he will bow to the Christian God, and in fear Loegaire acts as if he is praising God.²⁶ Following this,

paululum gradiens vocavit rex sanctum Patricium simulato verbo, volens interficere eum quo modo. Sciens autem Patricius cogitationes regis pessimi, benedictis in nomine Iesu Christi sociis suis octo viris cum puero, venit ad regem. Enumerat eos rex venientes, statimque nusquam comparuerunt ab oculis regis dempti; sed viderunt gentiles octo tantum cervos cum hynulo euntes quasi ad dissertum. Et rex Loiguire mestus, timidus et ignominiosus cum paucis evadentibus ad Temoriam reversus est deluculo.

the king, going a little way off, called St. Patrick over on some pretext, with the intention of killing him some way or other. But Patrick, aware of

²⁴ Judges 6-7.

²⁵ Exodus 14:28.

²⁶ *Vita* 18.

the wicked king's thoughts, first blessed his companions (eight men and a boy) in the name of Jesus Christ, and came to the king. The king counted them as they approached, and immediately they disappeared clean out of the king's sight; the heathen saw just eight deer with a fawn heading, as it were, for the wilds. And king Loegaire, saddened, frightened and humiliated, returned at dawn to Tara with the few survivors.²⁷

The men's transformation into deer is a curious example of Patrick's power over nature, which, as we saw earlier in this thesis, Ripperger and Ryan have pointed out as a characteristic of the ideal saint. Certainly the incident is an example of the holy man's use of God's power to escape and outwit a pagan ruler: Loegaire is apparently too terrified to attempt to kill the deer, or perhaps he does not realize that the deer are in fact Patrick and his followers. This particular method of escape, however, becomes interesting in conjunction with the Druidic connection to nature already discussed. Even before a competition of miracles takes place, Patrick has already demonstrated that he has a connection to the Lord of all creation and can use this God's power to manipulate nature in such a way that his pagan opponents are outwitted. This miracle comes just before a supernatural contest proposed by a Druid and thus prepares the reader for the direct comparison of powers to come.

On Easter, the day after this confrontation, Patrick and his followers arrive at Tara to crash Loegaire's pagan party. "St. Patrick, accompanied by only five men, came to do battle and speak for the holy faith in Tara before all the peoples, though the doors were shut, just as we read about Christ."²⁸ Presumably, Muirchú is talking about metaphorical, spiritual doors. Even though he had encountered such hostilities the night before, Patrick appears before the king, undaunted (like any perfect saint) and ready to continue to his

²⁷ *Vita* 18.

²⁸ *Vita* 19.

holy mission. Muirchú continues to use terms of battle and violence, causing his reader to anticipate another action-rich scene.

When Patrick steps into Loegaire's hall, Muirchú takes the opportunity to introduce another moment of conversion – the second of the Easter sequence. Again, the conversion is achieved by the simple act of standing up at the saint's approach:

“Dubthach was the only one of the heathen to rise in honour of St. Patrick; and the saint blessed him, and he was the first to believe in God that day[.]”²⁹ According to Muirchú, this particular convert later became a bishop, and now his venerated remains are in Sletty – where Aed, Muirchú's commissioner, is currently bishop. Muirchú has given his readers another bit of Irish history of which they can be proud, showing how another one of their pagan ancestors quickly turned to follow Christ. Aed must have enjoyed, or perhaps even insisted upon the inclusion of, this small history of the reliquary at Sletty.

The clash of supernatural powers, which is the great crowning moment of Patrick's career as described by Muirchú, has finally been set up. Hoping to “test him about things to come,” the pagans invite Patrick to dine with them; Patrick, “knowing what was to come, did not refuse to eat.”³⁰ Both parties are preparing for a battle of supernatural abilities. Muirchú's battle is divided into three stages; notably, the number three had religious significance for both Celts and Christians. As Ellis puts it, for the Celts, “Three was the number of all things. Most of their gods were three personalities in one.”³¹ In Christianity, God himself is three persons in one – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Muirchú has chosen an appropriate number to relate to this supernatural battle, a number which represents a fundamental part of both belief systems.

²⁹ *Vita* 19.

³⁰ *Vita* 19.

³¹ Ellis, *Druids*, 128.

The Druid Lucetmail, the second (and only surviving) member of Loegaire's chosen duo for the previous night's events, begins the confrontation by emptying a bit of liquid from his goblet into that of Patrick. Although Muirchú does not identify the type of liquid in each cup, the main point is not the contents of each goblet but the saint's supernatural handling of them. Patrick reacts by blessing his goblet, the contents of which solidify except for the liquid which Lucetmail had added, which drips out of the goblet when Patrick turns it upside-down.³² After Patrick blesses the goblet again, the contents become liquid once more, "and everyone was amazed."³³ The saint with his God-given powers has outdone the Druid and his pagan magic; importantly, he has done so in the sight of everyone at the feast, strengthening the case for Christianity before pagan leaders.

Thus Patrick passes the first stage of miraculous testing without any great danger to himself, to other people, or to the surrounding environment. Lucetmail's second set of challenges proves to be more complicated:

Et post paululum ait magus: 'Faciamus signa in hoc campo maximo.' Respondensque Patricius ait: 'Quae?' Et dixit magus: 'Inducamus nivem super terram.' Et ait Patricius: 'Nolo contraria voluntati Dei inducere.' Et dixit magus: 'Ego inducam videntibus cunctis.' Tunc incantationes magicas exorsus induxit nivem super totum campum pertingentem *ferenn*; et viderunt omnes et mirati sunt.

After a little while the wizard said: 'Let us perform signs on this great plain.' And Patrick replied: 'What signs?' The wizard said: 'Let us bring snow upon the land.' And Patrick said: 'I refuse to bring what is contrary to God's will.' And the wizard said: 'I shall bring it in the sight of all.' Then he began his magical spells and brought snow upon the whole plain, deep enough to reach men's waists; and all saw and were amazed.³⁴

³² *Vita* 20.

³³ *Vita* 20.

³⁴ *Vita* 91.

Here Muirchú contrasts the Druid's violation of God's will with the obedient restraint exercised by the saint. Even when he is challenged to show off the supernatural powers which he quite obviously possesses (as he is about to decisively prove), Patrick does not yield to this temptation when it "is contrary to God's will." This passage is reminiscent of the temptation of Christ in the wilderness; Satan challenges Christ to demonstrate his miracle-working abilities, but Christ refuses, knowing that he has no reason to test God's power while remaining confident that God would allow such miracles to take place if a true need arose.³⁵ Thus Muirchú's Patrick imitates the trust in God demonstrated by his savior, and the Druid becomes a tempter like the Devil. I will return to this idea a little later, for in fact this entire competition is parallel to Christ's temptation.

Lucetmail proves to be a less powerful miracle worker than he pretends to be, however:

Et ait sanctus: 'Ecce videmus hoc; deponere nunc.' Et dixit: 'Ante istam horam cras non possum deponere.' Et ait sanctus: 'Potes malum et non bonum facere. Non sic ego.' Tunc benedicens per totum circuitum campum, dicto citius absque ulla pluvia aut nebulis aut vento evanuit nix. Et clamaverunt turbae et mirati sunt et compuncti sunt corde.

And the saint said: 'Right, we can see this; now take it away.' He said: 'I cannot take it away before this time tomorrow.' And the saint said: 'You can do evil, and not good. It is not like that with me.' Then he gave his blessing over the whole plain round about, and the snow disappeared quick as a flash, without any rain, clouds or wind. And the crowds shouted and were quite amazed and were filled with remorse.³⁶

Muirchú clarifies that while Lucetmail is powerful, his power must come from an evil source: it takes Patrick's holy blessing to break the spell he has cast over the plain. Good proves more powerful than evil, undoing what the evil has accomplished and restoring

³⁵ Matthew 4:1-11.

³⁶ *Vita* 20.

Tara to the state in which God wills it to be. Patrick's actions resemble those of Lucetmail in that both demonstrate power over nature, but Patrick's Christianized version of the Druid's actions show the weak points of Druidic magic, which the people can clearly see.

This second set of tests has a second stage: an even more clearly evil action by the Druid:

Et paulo post invocatis demonibus induxit magus densissimas tenebras super terram in signum; et mormuraverunt omnes. Et ait sanctus: 'Expelle tenebras.' At ille similiter non poterat. Sanctus autem orans benedixit, et repente expulsae sunt tenebrae et refulsit sol. Et exclamaverunt omnes et gratias egerunt.

Soon after, the wizard invoked demons and brought very thick darkness on the land as a sign; and they all muttered. And the saint said: 'Drive away the darkness.' But he could not. And the saint gave a blessing in prayer, and suddenly the darkness was driven away and the sun shone. And they all shouted aloud and gave thanks.³⁷

Once again, Patrick's blessing and the power of a prayer to the God of Christianity triumph over Druidic magic; this time, Muirchú goes so far as to say that a demonic presence was behind this magic. Interestingly, we have already seen Patrick dispelling Satan's powers and the sun shining through in the end. Muirchú clarifies God's role in the event this time by mentioning that the blessing was given as a form of prayer, and the seventh-century reader would likely recognize the allusion to Christ as the true sun. This reference connects Patrick even more powerfully to Christ and further demonstrates the superiority of the one religion over the other.

The third and final set of tests involves physical danger. The king first proposes that both the Druid and the saint cast their books into the water, and the owner of the

³⁷ *Vita* 20.

books which emerge unharmed will be the one to whom the king and his followers pay homage.³⁸ Apparently Loegaire, having seen the outcome of the first tests, begins to be swayed towards Patrick's God rather than remain angry with him for disturbing the religious ceremony and killing one of his best Druids. Patrick accepts the challenge willingly, but Lucetmail declines, saying that Patrick "considers water to be his god."³⁹ Muirchú says as an aside that the Druid must be referring to the baptisms Patrick has performed.⁴⁰ So Loegaire suggests they use fire as a trial instead, and though Patrick remains just as willing to do so, Lucetmail insists that Patrick "worships in turn in alternate years now water, now fire as his god."⁴¹ Lucetmail could be referencing the Paschal fire of the night before, but a more likely explanation – and the one which Muirchú may be nudging his reader to believe – is that Lucetmail is now merely making excuses because he knows his books would withstand neither fire nor water.

After denying that he thus worships fire and water, Patrick next proposes an alternative version of the test: "But you go yourself, and one of my boys will go with you into a house which stands apart and is closed up, and my garment will be about you, and yours about my boy, and you will then be burned together."⁴² Interestingly, Lucetmail agrees. Perhaps he has greater confidence in his ability to keep himself from burning than to keep his books from burning, but likely Muirchú wants the reader to believe that the

³⁸ *Vita* 20. Modern scholarship generally accepts that books of sacred Druidic knowledge did not exist because of prohibitions on writing such things down, though according to Ellis, a (supposedly) fifth-century Christian source and other early secular sources contend that Irish books – even religious ones – did exist at the time (Ellis, *Druids*, 162-166). If no such books existed, Muirchú could have been guilty of a careless historical inaccuracy here, or he could have been drawing on what he knew from the Christian sources available to him. Whether Muirchú's Patrick is anachronistic or if his encounters with Druidic books are echoes of the experiences of the true Patrick is difficult to say. Muirchú may even have given his Druidic characters books in order to give Patrick another area in which to outdo them.

³⁹ *Vita* 20.

⁴⁰ *Vita* 20.

⁴¹ *Vita* 20.

⁴² *Vita* 20.

Druid derives his confidence from the thought of being wrapped in Patrick's garment. In this way, Muirchú shows not only the governmental leader beginning to be convinced of Patrick's (and therefore Christianity's) superior power but also the religious leader's growing conviction of the same.

In any event, the supernatural contest plays out as Patrick suggested, with the added twist of the house being specially constructed for them such that the side in which Lucetmail stands is made of green wood, which would not burn as easily, and the side for Patrick's boy is made of more flammable dry wood.⁴³ The setup recalls another Old Testament tale, that of Elijah and the prophets of Baal, found in I Kings 18. Elijah engages in a contest with the prophets of the pagan god Baal in hopes of convincing the Israelite king Ahab to return to worshipping the God of Israel instead of Baal.⁴⁴ Each side attempts to light a fire on an altar solely by calling on his deity, and the prophets of Baal, after crying out to him for a long time, cannot complete the task. When it comes to be his turn, Elijah instructs his altar to be doused in water first; then, calling on the God of Israel, he lights the altar with an all-consuming and supernatural fire, which "burn[s] up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also lick[s] up the water in the trench [around the altar]."⁴⁵ Patrick displays a similar confidence in the God of the Bible as the house containing Lucetmail and his boy (named Benignus) is set on fire:

Et factum est in illa hora, orante Patricio, ut consumeret flamma ignis magum cum demedia domu viridi, permanente cassula sancti Patricii tantum intacta, quam ignis non tetigit. Felix autem Benineus e contrario cum demedia domu arida; secundum quod de tribus pueris dictum est, non tetigit eum ignis neque contristatus est nec quicquam molesti intulit; cassula tantum magi, quae erga eum fuerat, non sine Dei nutu exusta.

⁴³ *Vita* 20.

⁴⁴ I Kings 18:16-46.

⁴⁵ I Kings 18:38b.

And it came about in that hour, as Patrick prayed, that the fire's flames consumed the wizard with the green half of the house, leaving only St. Patrick's robe untouched – it was not touched by the fire. Benignus, on the other hand, was more fortunate, as was the dry half of the house; the fire did not touch him, as is written of the three boys, nor was he distressed nor did it inflict any harm, except that the wizard's robe which had been about him was burned up, by the will of God.⁴⁶

Lucetmail obviously misplaced his trust in the physical object of Patrick's robe. The "magic" which he had expected to find in it did not exist outside the power of God, which was invoked by Patrick's prayers. This is truly an example of the power of one religion over another as opposed the power of one person over another, and forces larger than any one individual are at work. The idea of the power not of the individual but of the institution behind the individual could strike a chord in his audience as a parallel to the power of Rome.

As mentioned earlier, Muirchú paints Patrick as similar to Christ in this section. In fact, the entire set of tests parallel Satan's temptation of Christ in the wilderness. Once again, the number three factors in: Christ endured three trials. The first of these involves human sustenance, just as in Patrick's first test of liquid in a goblet. In Christ's case:

After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"⁴⁷

Christ counters this first food-related temptation peacefully, just as there is no violence in Patrick's response to Lucetmail's tampering with his cup.

The second of Christ's trials involves the potential for physical danger, just as did Patrick's third test:

⁴⁶ *Vita* 20.

⁴⁷ Matthew 4:2-4.

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”⁴⁸

Though Christ did not actually endanger himself as Patrick endangered Benignus, the potential for harm is inherent in both tests. Both tests involve trust in God to avoid that danger – Patrick through carrying out the act and praying for protection, and Christ trusting that the scriptural promise is true but also trusting a scriptural warning against testing God.

Christ’s third test involves refusing inappropriate interaction with the Devil, just as the second part of Patrick’s second test involved dispelling demons:

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’” Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.⁴⁹

Christ refuses to worship Satan and also causes him to flee, after which heavenly beings come to him; Patrick also has to dispel darkness caused by demons conjured by Lucetmail, and as he does so, the sun, representing Christ, breaks through. Thus even though the temptation of Christ and the testing of Patrick have some differences, the existence of fundamental similarities could indicate that Muirchú was at least partly inspired by this biblical passage.

The significance in this parallel comes from comparison of Patrick to Christ and Lucetmail to the Devil. Continuing with the idea of the power behind the individual being more important than the individual himself, Muirchú has again demonstrated that the God

⁴⁸ Matthew 4:5-7.

⁴⁹ Matthew 4:8-11.

of Christianity is more powerful than the powers behind the pagan religion, which he claims are demonic. The position of Lucetmail in relation to his gods is the same as the position of Patrick in relation to his God; here again, the triumphant saint can be seen as a type of Christian Super-Druid.

Returning to the weaving of the number three throughout the tale of this confrontation, Muirchú notably records three important conversions that result from this process. I have already mentioned the first two – one taking place the night before and the second the day of Easter, with each convert eventually rising to become a bishop whose remains are later venerated. The third conversion is King Loegaire himself, though he does not make his decision so willingly. Loegaire is quite upset about the death of his other great Druid and tries again to kill Patrick, but “at Patrick’s prayer and at his voice the wrath of God came down on the ungodly people and many of them perished.”⁵⁰ Patrick then gives Loegaire an ultimatum: convert or die. “And the king was terrified and shaken at heart, and the whole city with him.”⁵¹ Finally, the third conversion comes about, with Loegaire declaring: “It is better for me to believe than to die.”⁵² With the support of his followers, he “and many others” convert to Christianity, though the saint assures him that his combative resistance to Patrick and to the faith have cost his descendants the kingship of Ireland.⁵³

Thus Muirchú concludes the great climax of his work; the remaining chapters describe various adventures of the saint as he encounters both opposition and success in

⁵⁰ *Vita* 20.

⁵¹ *Vita* 20. Interestingly, the phrase “and the whole city with him” is also used in chapter 16, and Muirchú there compares the situation to the anxiety of Herod and the city of Jerusalem at the prediction of the coming of Jesus Christ, the King of the Jews.

⁵² *Vita* 21.

⁵³ *Vita* 21.

Ireland (such as the young woman who converted based upon her contemplation of the sun). He introduces the remaining chapters with these words:

Sanctus autem Patricius, secundum praeceptum Domini Iesu iens et docens omnes gentes bapitixansque eas in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus sancti, profectus a Temoria praedicavit Domino cooperante et sermonem confirmante sequentibus signis.

And St. Patrick, according to the Lord Jesus' command going and teaching all nations and baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, set out from Tara and preached, with the Lord working with him and confirming his words with the following signs.⁵⁴

The Great Commission – Christ's command to baptize all nations – comes at the end of the Gospel of Matthew; it is thus appropriate that Muirchú should end his great climax with these words.⁵⁵ Just as the four Canonical Gospels are followed by the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament, Muirchú's most important story of Patrick is followed by accounts of others of his acts. The Christian Super-Druid has vanquished his most formidable foes and can now set about the work of convincing the people of the power of the Christian God.

Through the successful conversions relayed in this chapter, Muirchú reinforces the theme of supersession by giving his readers a picture of the concept in action. One religion loses its prestige in Ireland and bows to another, firmly anchoring the hagiographer's theme at the center of his story. Now that we have seen how he has handled the concept throughout, we can draw conclusions about his incorporation of the idea.

⁵⁴ *Vita* 22.

⁵⁵ Matthew 28:19-20.

Super-Druid, Perfect Saint

Patrick emerges as a Christian Super-Druid within the text in both overt and subtle ways. Muirchú at first separates Patrick from his pagan surroundings as much as possible; he even neglects to mention that some of his most powerful times of soul-searching took place in nature, where the Druids would have worshipped. As the hagiography progresses, however, Patrick becomes more and more Druid-like as he demonstrates more and more of his supernatural abilities, until finally he is pitted against the Druids themselves in a great climactic battle of the supernatural. Additionally, Muirchú compares Patrick to heroes of the Old Testament and to the greatest hero of the Christian faith, Jesus Christ. This affiliates him strongly with Christianity and highlights the theme of supersession once more – Patrick embodies characteristics of both the old and the new orders of the biblical religion. The hagiographer has painted a powerful figure, indeed.

The pieces of paganism which can be extracted from the text work to support the idea of something new outdoing something old. Every time we see evidence that Patrick has pagan tendencies, it is as if he is saying to the existing Irish religious authorities: “I can do all that you do, yet more.” The direct challenges Patrick faces in Muirchú’s climax prove him to be stronger than the Druids in every instance, and the saint himself nicely summarizes the reason for this: “You can do evil, and not good. It is not like that with me.”¹ Muirchú’s Patrick offers miraculous evidence for the power of Christianity over Irish paganism, and in the end, he succeeds in converting the most powerful king in Ireland. His religion replaces that of his non-Christian counterparts, the Druids.

¹ *Vita* 20.

Patrick's "pagan" attributes are integrated into his Christian attributes – so well that they are scarcely detectable. While his worship of the Christian God in an outdoor setting, his calling on "Helias" to defeat Satan, and his transformation of himself and his followers into deer all parallel the Druidic religion's fascination with nature and its power, he performs his miracle-working in the name of the Christian God. Patrick truly has become the perfect saint and the perfect hero because he has proudly carried the banner of Christianity while still maintaining elements of ancient Irish culture rooted deep in the sentiments of Muirchú's audience.

The theme of the new overtaking the old runs through the work not only in Christianity's replacement of paganism but also in the types of biblical stories Muirchú incorporates. Especially striking is the account of Patrick's climactic confrontation with a Druid, which parallels both the story of Elijah and that of the temptation of Christ. On the one hand, the reader identifies a story from the Old Testament, when God's people were still under the Law of Moses; on the other hand, the reader can see Patrick as a type of Christ, who came to fulfill this law and establish a new religious order in the New Testament. Throughout the piece, Muirchú provides a strong feeling of the coming of the new and the passing of the old.

This underlying dynamic finds a parallel in the history of the Irish church of Muirchú's day. By the seventh century, the time of Muirchú's writing, certain oddities of the Irish church methodology had come to be at the center of controversy. The debate had been triggered by the arrival of Irish missionaries to Britain and to the continent, who brought with them distinctive ways of carrying out their Christianity, the most disturbing

of which being the differing date for the celebration of Easter.² The church in Rome insisted upon uniformity, and the different nations which had been influenced by Ireland managed to work out the discrepancies between the two methodologies within themselves, each reaching agreements that worked in its own country.³ The situation in Ireland itself, however, was a bit trickier. In the early seventh century, southern Ireland was largely in favor of the Roman style while northern Ireland preferred the established Irish methods.⁴ In the middle of this moment of tension, Muirchú wrote the *Vita* at the direction of his commissioner, Aed, the Bishop of Sletty; Sletty was located in southern Ireland and favored Roman practices, as evidenced by its adherence to the Roman date for Easter in the 630s.⁵ Aed likely worked alongside the church leaders in Armagh, which was in the north and would thus be an important ally in convincing the rest of the north.⁶ Some of Muirchú's hagiographical information likely comes from these contacts in Armagh.⁷ John Morris argues that the *Vita* simply presents the facts about Patrick's life (as well as possible, considering the temporal distance from the actual events) and that it insists

that Patrick was a properly consecrated Roman bishop, trained by the orthodox Germanus, appointed as the immediate and legitimate successor of Palladius [who had been bishop to the Christian Irish], whom the Pope had personally consecrated. His narrative concentrates upon Patrick's origins and arrival and is simplified by reaching a climax with Patrick's triumph at Tara, the traditional centre of the High King of Ireland. The account of the High King's formal conversion did duty for the conversion of Ireland and avoided much troublesome further detail.⁸

² Hughes, *The Church*, 103.

³ Morris, "Introduction," 12.

⁴ Morris, "Introduction," 12.

⁵ Hughes, *The Church*, 115; Morris, "Introduction," 13.

⁶ Hughes, *The Church*, 116; Morris, "Introduction," 13.

⁷ Hughes, *The Church*, 116; Morris, "Introduction," 13.

⁸ Morris, "Introduction," 5, 13.

Ultimately, the northern Irish agreed to conform, although it took many more years to completely bring this about in practice.⁹

Morris provides an easy and clean purpose for Muirchú's hagiography: an instrument in converting the north to the Romanized ways of the south. However, as Hughes points out, the Easter controversy was a large part of the debate over Romanization, and Muirchú wrote a large section of the *Vita* concerning what happened on Patrick's first Easter as a missionary without once mentioning the particular day on which he celebrated it.¹⁰ She observes: "The moral is the downfall of the old druidical order at Tara, and the victory of the new *magus* [or Druid]."¹¹ Solving the Easter controversy itself is not Muirchú's purpose; both Morris and Hughes assert that the primary purpose of the work is the passing of one order and the coming of another. The question remains, which of their suggestions do the text and the surrounding historical context indicate more? Or is there a way to reconcile the two opinions?

Perhaps Muirchú wished to help coax the northern Irish into submission by reminding them that the passing of the religion of their fathers gave way to the marvelous religion they all now shared, Christianity. In the same manner, the passing of the traditional Irish church methodology would yield a better adherence to the faith taught by their revered father, Patrick. The fact that Muirchú references the Easter controversy without insisting upon a particular date could be a subtle hint. He uses inconspicuous methods, like this example and his detailing of Patrick's ordination, to convince the northern Irish rather than making his purposes more obvious and potentially driving them away. In the end, the effect he achieves is a firm but subtle reminder that all of Ireland

⁹ Hughes, *The Church*, 115-116; Morris, "Introduction," 13.

¹⁰ Hughes, *The Church*, 117-118.

¹¹ Hughes, *The Church*, 118.

was once united under one way of carrying out its faith, and the work serves as a call to return to that faith.

The strength of this theme in conjunction with the surrounding historical evidence supports the proposal that Muirchú had an agenda when composing this work. Based upon the overall feeling of change in the hagiography as well as Muirchú's insistence on Patrick's consecration, the theory that Muirchú's work was a subtle propaganda piece, and not an unnuanced factual record of Patrick's life, holds true. Muirchú has made it clear that this ideal Irish Christian hero sprang from the Roman Catholic Church. Through inconspicuous undertones and small hints, he has demonstrated that there would be no shame in changing current Irish methodology and returning to this institution. If Muirchú aimed to write a book that would be friendly to the northern Irish as well as the southern Irish, he has accomplished it through giving his hero just enough traits to gain Irish favor while still maintaining the glory of the Christian message which they all endorse in one form or another.

Through continued research of seventh-century politics in the Irish church, perhaps even more definite conclusions of Muirchú's goals in writing this hagiography will emerge. Whatever his position in the controversies of the seventh century and whatever his instructions from Aed, Muirchú has in any case created a hagiographical hero of whom the Christian Irish can be proud. The story of a man so central to the history of Irish Catholicism must have resonated with Muirchú's readers, and modern interest in the work testifies to the hagiographer's skill in telling a tale well worth reading and studying.

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