

## Saint Patrick: Approaches to a controversial figure

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## **Abstract**

This bachelor's thesis explores the concept of 'Saint Patrick'. A case study of Saint Patrick, the study approaches the figure from a holistic point of view. Accordingly, it is not the purpose of the study to discuss solely the historicity of the Patrician legend; both the historical and the unhistorical, and further, the past and the present are seen as essential to the figure. On a more general level, the thesis addresses the question of how to approach a figure that is inherently fictitious. Essential to this question is the concept of hagiography. The study shows that attitudinal problems remain in terms of saints. In accordance with more recent trends in the study of saints, this thesis adopts a wider view of what is historical.

The present study argues for a dualistic understanding of the concept 'Saint Patrick': namely, the figure is a combination of the historical man who flourished in the fifth century and the posthumously developed image of a saint. Moreover, the study demonstrates that Saint Patrick is a construction. Emphasising the significance of the community behind a saint and his/her cult, the 'clientele' of a saint, the study discusses the dynamics involved in the construction of a saint. Importantly, understanding Saint Patrick requires a knowledge of the historical and religious context in which the figure has developed. Further, the study demonstrates the importance of appreciating the concept of sainthood in terms of Saint Patrick. Significantly, it is the memory of a person that forms the basis for the creation of a saint.

More specifically, this thesis analyses the 'problem' of Saint Patrick. The analysis shows that the problematic nature may be understood on a variety of levels. The study concludes that, due to its long history, the concept of Saint Patrick is a complicated one, and the most useful approach is therefore to accept the complexity and focus on the history of the concept. The thesis argues, too, for an understanding of Saint Patrick as a product of Irish history. Considering his historical importance, the study of Saint Patrick is valuable in its own right, but may be seen, too, as instrumental in understanding the history of the Irish.

## Tiivistelmä

Tämä kandidaatintutkielma käsittelee Irlannin suojeluspyhimystä Pyhää Patrikia, jota tutkitaan kokonaisvaltaisesti, käsitteenä. Tutkielman tarkoituksena ei ole siis tarkastella ainoastaan pyhimyksen historiallista paikkansapitävyyttä, vaan laajemmin sisältäen sekä pyhimyksen historiallisen että kuvitteellisen puolen, jotka kuuluvat molemmat olennaisena osana Pyhän Patrikin käsitteeseen. Yleisemmällä tasolla tutkielma pohtii, miten suhtautua historiallisesti merkittävään hahmoon, joka sisältää myös paljon kuvitteellisia piirteitä. Tähän kysymykseen liittyy olennaisesti hagiografian eli pyhimyselämäkerran käsite. Tutkielma osoittaa, että pyhimyksiin liittyy edelleen asenteellisia ongelmia. Pyhimysten tutkimuksen nykysuuntauksia heijastellen tutkielma omaksuu laajemman näkökulman historiaan.

Tutkielma esittää Pyhän Patrikin käsitteen muodostuvan kahdesta osasta: 400-luvulla vaikuttanut piispa ja tämän kuoleman jälkeen kehittynyt pyhimys tulisi pitää erillään. On tärkeää huomata, että 'Pyhä Patrick' on konstruktio. Tutkielma tarkasteleekin, mitä tekijöitä pyhimyksen rakentumiseen liittyy painottaen erityisesti yhteisön, pyhimyksen "asiakaskunnan", merkitystä. Jotta voisimme ymmärtää Pyhää Patrikia paremmin, meidän täytyy tuntea se historiallinen ja uskonnollinen konteksti, jossa tämä hahmo on kehittynyt. Lisäksi on tärkeää ymmärtää, mitä pyhyyden käsite pitää sisällään. Huomautettakoon erityisesti, että pyhimys rakentuu aina henkilön muistolle.

Tarkemmin sanottuna tämä tutkielma analysoi Pyhän Patrikin ongelmallisia piirteitä osoittaen, että näissä voidaan nähdä useita eri tasoja. Tutkimus tulee siihen lopputulokseen, että Pyhän Patrikin hahmo on monimutkainen johtuen sen pitkästä historiasta, minkä vuoksi on hyödyllisintä hyväksyä tämä monimutkaisuus ja keskittyä tarkastelemaan käsitteen historiaa. Tutkimus esittää myös, että Pyhä Patrik tulisi nähdä Irlannin historian tuloksena. Ottaen huomioon pyhimyshahmon historiallisen merkittävyyden Pyhä Patrik on jo itsessään tärkeä tutkimuskohde. Pyhän Patrikin tutkimus auttaa meitä kuitenkin myös ymmärtämään Irlannin ja irlantilaisten historiaa.

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## 1 Introduction

Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, is a complicated figure, not least as a subject of academic study. Joseph F. Kelly states that Saint Patrick “has long been a point of great scholarly controversy” and “remains notoriously difficult to study” (“*Who*” 1043; “*Saint*” 610). Marjorie Chibnall, in her review of E. A. Thompson’s *Who Was Saint Patrick?* even refers to “the treacherous bog of Patrick studies” (641). In fact, when it comes to Saint Patrick, even distinguished scholars seem to become confused: in the case of Thompson, for instance, Chibnall comments that “regrettably”, this quagmire that is Patrick studies “has claimed yet another illustrious victim” (ibid.). Ironically, it seems then, that the controversial and difficult nature of Saint Patrick and Patrick studies is one of the few aspects widely acknowledged among scholars; a pronounced element in a field otherwise marked by its confusion and intricacy. This bachelor’s thesis explores the problem of Saint Patrick. I believe this to be a relevant topic, for it seems that, although intrinsic to Patrick studies, the controversial nature per se is rarely explicitly discussed, the question appearing most often as a given that is not specified. I intend therefore to analyse the complicated nature of Saint Patrick, exploring both the controversial elements themselves as well as their possible sources.

In the present study, the word ‘controversial’ is used, in the first place, to refer to the past as well as the ongoing debate between scholars, i.e. to Saint Patrick’s disputed and polemical elements, but can be understood, too, in a broader sense to reflect all aspects that are in some way or other either uncertain or questionable, ambiguous or contradictory, improbable or even suspicious. Keith J. Egan describes Saint Patrick as “a figure frustratingly lost in endless legends for most readers” (548). However, despite his mythical image and the unhistorical facts about him, Saint Patrick remains a relevant topic, for his historical importance cannot be denied: in Kelly’s words, “[t]he sources do not permit us to speak with confidence about many aspects of his life and career, but he is historically so important that something must be said” (“*Who*” 1043). Tomás Ó Fiaich states that “Irish history properly speaking must begin with St Patrick, the author of the earliest documents known to have been written in Ireland” (53). Furthermore, the saint “holds an important place in the church history of the British Isles” (Kelly, “*Saint*” 610). Saint Patrick’s historical significance is thus another universally accepted aspect.

Besides his historical importance, Saint Patrick remains significant even today. Importantly, Thomas O’Loughlin observes that Patrick “continues to fascinate people at the beginning of the third Christian millennium” (*Discovering* ix). In fact, Patrick seems to be regarded with renewed interest, as “[o]ver the past fifty years, there has been a steady stream of new books, articles and television documentaries about him” (ibid.). This new surge of interest is perhaps most apparent in the way that his feast day has come to be celebrated. Indeed, considering the staggering proportions of St Patrick’s Day festivities and the global interest therein, it might be said that Patrick is more popular than ever. It is important to note that, despite the manifest secular side that his cult has developed—visible in the ‘Plastic Paddy’-style revelries on 17 March—the fact alone that he is remembered where many others have been forgotten, is by no means insignificant. In the words of Stephen Wilson, “cults could decline after a period of widespread popularity”, and “new saints could displace old ones” (7). Lastly, Patrick’s significance may be considered, too, in terms of his predominance over other Irish saints at present as well as in the past: in the words of Cormac Bourke, “[a]mong the saints’ cults of medieval Ireland that of Patrick is paramount” (“Patrick”); moreover, although not the only one, he is the principal patron of Ireland (O’Loughlin, *Discovering* ix).

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the Patrician legend. It should be noted, however, that it is not the intention of the present study to discuss solely the historicity of the legend. Here, it seems important to consider what exactly is meant by ‘Saint Patrick’. It may be said that this figure is essentially a combination of two aspects: first, the historical person, who may or may not have existed, and second, the largely unhistorical image of a saint that has been accumulating around this historical person. Both need to be taken into consideration when studying Saint Patrick. In O’Loughlin’s words,

most of what we say about Patrick – and, more importantly, the framework within which any facts relating to him are viewed – belongs to the cult of the saint. Such a cult of a saint always involves far more than what most people in the early twenty-first century would associate with the term ‘history’ or ‘biography’ (*Discovering* 4).

Further, as G. H. Doble argues, while the “stories about [a saint] are very often fictitious”, “the saint himself is not a fictitious person” (325). Thus, it may be said that, when it comes to Saint Patrick, we are dealing with not just the historical Patrick but also the history of a saint’s cult

whose existence is undeniable. In sum, on the one hand, it seems important to make a distinction between the man and the saint; on the other hand, it seems equally important to appreciate the relationship between the two aspects.

Building on Doble's aforementioned observation, the present study examines the figure of Saint Patrick in its entirety. It therefore follows that equal weight is given to both the historical and the unhistorical, and furthermore, to the past and the present. A case study of Saint Patrick, this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive description of the concept 'Saint Patrick', and to demonstrate that this figure is indeed a complex and complicated one; moreover, it examines the evolution of Saint Patrick in the context of Irish history. It should be noted that 'Irish' is used here to refer to the island of Ireland, not the present-day Republic of Ireland. I will begin my study with a description of the historical and religious context insofar as it is relevant to the present topic. Accordingly, chapter 2 examines the history of saints' cults, while chapter 3 discusses the study of saints, introducing some important concepts in the field. This theoretical part concluded, I will proceed to a discussion of saints in the specific context of Ireland in chapter 4. This chapter necessarily includes a brief outline of the Christianisation process of the island and early Irish Christianity. Chapter 5 is an introduction to Saint Patrick, namely an overview of our present knowledge and understanding of him, ranging from the fundamental written sources used in Patrick studies to a brief account of Patrick's life and career and the later formation of his cult and image. Based on the findings made in the previous chapters, chapter 6 is an analysis of some of the controversies and difficulties as to Saint Patrick and Patrick studies. Finally, the findings and their possible implications will be discussed in the conclusion in chapter 7.

## 2 Saints and their cults

In order to fully appreciate Patrick's saintly aspect, it is important to consider, first, what exactly this status involves. Indeed, the simple definition of a saint as a 'holy' or 'canonised' person is grossly inadequate. Thus, the present chapter explores the history of saints' cults and the concept of sainthood. However, it should be noted that the subject is a complex one and covers centuries of history: consequently, significant changes have occurred over time in terms of the concept of a saint, the criteria for sainthood, the manifestations of devotion, as well as the designation or canonisation process, although as Wilson argues, there are some "structural features which may be seen across cultures and across time" (8). A detailed examination is therefore beyond the scope of the present thesis, and the subject will be addressed only insofar as it is relevant to the present study and contributes to a better understanding of the phenomenon Saint Patrick. In brief, it is the purpose of the present chapter to assess the forces and dynamics involved in the construction of a saintly image. Accordingly, it aims to demonstrate the consequent importance of a holistic approach to saints: namely, appreciating the duality, the person and the saint.

We may begin by asking who exactly these saints are. Sara E. Ellis Nilsson describes a saint as "someone who is deceased and has been recognized for a life of piety and good works" (4). Three implications follow from this description: firstly, in the words of Pierre Deloof, "[o]nly the dead can be saints" (194). Significantly, the day of death of the person was considered to be "the day on which a saint was born in heaven" and was therefore usually celebrated as the saint's feast day (Ellis Nilsson 4). Secondly, the saintly status depends on certain aspects of a person's life. These credentials have varied significantly, however. In fact, "[a]ccording to the early Christian theological definition, everyone who entered heaven was a saint" (ibid.). Later, "[l]ocal churches honoured certain of their members who had fallen victim to persecution" (Deloof 191). However, "[b]y the time Christianity was an accepted religion of the Roman Empire, opportunities for martyrdom were becoming a scarce commodity" (Ellis Nilsson 4). Consequently, "in the Late Roman Empire, new concepts of sainthood emerged" (Wilson 3). Thus, asceticism was "assimilated to martyrdom", and "sanctity was also ascribed to those who spread the gospel among the heathen or who governed the Church with piety" (ibid.).



Finally, it may be added that the existence of saints depends on people recognising them as such: in the words of Delooz, “[o]ne is never a saint except *for other people*” (194). First, it should be noted that saints were venerated, not worshipped, as worship “was due to God alone” (Wilson 4). Moreover, saints “were to be venerated, not in themselves but only as possible ‘channels of grace’ from God” (ibid.). This indicates a central role that saints had in people’s lives: intercession. As O’Loughlin states, saints “interceded, protected, and intervened with their acts of power” (*Discovering* 11). Therefore, “Christians had recourse to their saints in all circumstances of adversity, in the hope of securing help from them” (Wilson 16). Further, the diversity of saints reflects the manifold needs that people may have: as Wilson states, “Christian saints were often specialists, giving aid in particular circumstances” (17). Patronage may be seen as intercession on a specialised level. According to Ellis Nilsson, patron saints “were assumed to give protection to a person, a specific group or place”, and “one in particular was usually chosen because of certain special qualities or the fact that a part of a saint’s life corresponded well with the characteristics of a certain group” (40). Indeed, saints often seem as if custom-made: for instance, “a saint who had had his/her eyes poked out as part of his/her martyrdom would be a likely candidate for patron saint of blindness or of blind people” (ibid.). In sum, saints exist because people need them. Further, appreciating a saint’s ‘clientele’ is important, as its qualities contribute to those of the saint.

Besides intercession, saints’ cults “fulfilled an extraordinary variety of functions” (Wilson 16). Wilson explains the status of saints by referring to the “two spheres” found in most religions, namely “a higher god or gods” and “lesser divine beings” (2). Saints belong to the latter, being “more familiar, in closer touch with mortals, and [...] concerned with mundane matters” (ibid.). Thus, as Wilson argues, these “‘godlings’ fill the void between the everyday human world and the distant rulers of the cosmos” (ibid.). In fact, saints “were a way of making the Church more appealing to the average believer” (Ellis Nilsson 10). In addition, Thomas O’Connor states that saints were also “a practical moral example to follow” (“saints”). Saints were therefore of benefit to the Church: Ellis Nilsson argues that “[a]lthough Church officials were at first opposed to the cults of saints [...], they eventually accepted the necessity of the practice due to its importance to the general congregation and used it for their own advantage” (4). Furthermore, “in addition to their role in religious devotion”, “cults of saints had a legitimization function for new and old institutions” (Ellis Nilsson 10). According to Wilson, many local churches in Late Antiquity and the

Early Middle Ages “rested their prestige and their authority” on claims about apostolic saints (3). Moreover, patronage “frequently had a political element”, and “within the Church, cults were used to promote and defend the interests of individual monasteries and churches, of religious orders, of dioceses and of the papacy” (Wilson 26). Further, Wilson adds that secular authorities and groups, too, “sought to utilize [the power of the saints] to their own advantage” (33). Thus, the benefits of saints were acknowledged outside the religious sphere as well.

The process of designating saints is a complicated area and has changed over time. However, it is important to note that in the first thousand years AD saints were designated by a local church, i.e. without papal intervention (Delooz 191). Initially, “[a] person became a saint when he or she was accepted by society as such and was promoted by a religious authority figure within the Christian community, such as a bishop” (Ellis Nilsson 4). Thus, “saints are first and foremost local saints”, and originally, “they were exclusively local” (Delooz 194). This again suggests the importance of the religious communities behind the cults. In the words of Ellis Nilsson, “cults of saints are by nature a communal phenomenon and are to some extent constructed by societies that have need of them” (30); moreover, “saints are never created in vacuum, but are created by and for other people, sometimes not even contemporaries of the saint in question” (ibid.). Importantly, Delooz argues that sainthood “depends on a community’s recollection of a dead person’s past existence” (194). Furthermore, the “whole process of beatification and canonization, throughout its historical evolution, has depended on memories that people have retained of the past” (ibid.). Being thus “situated in recollection” (ibid.), the concept of sainthood seems to imply something beyond the historical.

This is supported by O’Loughlin who refers to

*the memory of the saint as perceived by a community of religious faith, who see not just the person someone in the fifth century might have met, but the significance of the person within a story of salvation of which they themselves are part (Discovering 4).*

In fact, sainthood does not require the historical existence of the person to whom sanctity is ascribed. Indeed, the historicity of saints varies: “in the last resort saints do not need to have

existed at all, and this is true of more than one” (Delooz 195). According to Delooz, “[m]ost saints were once real people” (195). However, “[a]ll saints are more or less *constructed* in that, being necessarily saints *for other people*, they are remodelled in the collective representation which is made of them” (ibid.). Moreover, a constructed saint may be as important as a ‘real’ one: in the words of Ellis Nilsson, “[w]hether a particular saint was a real person or a construction, this embodiment of the power of God lent all saints special intercessory powers” (32). Furthermore, “[t]hese constructions are cause for reflection, for they are not totally arbitrary” and consequently “tell us something about the social groups who were responsible for them” (Delooz 196).

The popularity of saints does not seem to correlate with the historicity of their legend either, for as O’Loughlin points out, “we have great fun with ‘Santa Claus’ without worrying about St Nicholas of Myra” (*Discovering* 6), a fourth-century bishop of whom “nothing certain is known” (“St. Nicholas”). Saint Nicholas has undergone a process of secularisation. According to Wilson, it has been suggested that “the saint as a social type is in the decline in the modern period, being incompatible with a materialist and secular society” (6). However, formal canonisation statistics indicate otherwise: “new saints are being produced at a steady rate”, and “devotion to saints is very much alive in Western Europe today” (ibid.). Further,

[a]ny simple thesis of the modern decline of the saint [...] takes a very narrow view of sanctity, ignoring the whole phenomenon of secular ‘martyrs’ [...]. It ignores, too, the way that so many popular heroes are assimilated to the saints with their tomb or grave cults, the cherishing of their relics and the erection of statues of them (ibid.).

Wilson may have been writing in the early 1980s, but his view is supported more recently by O’Loughlin, who states that “[m]any of the same cultural phenomena that in the past were linked to the cult of saints can be found today in the interest we take in ‘celebrities’” (*Discovering* 14). Significantly, O’Loughlin argues that “[w]hile we must not try to disguise the differences between our worlds and those of the past, we should also note that there are continuities, and while the cult of saints may mean less within the Christian churches, the human dynamics that are at play in saints’ cults seem to be as active as ever” (ibid.).

The present chapter has demonstrated the usefulness of a holistic approach to saints: namely, considering both the historical person and the saint. While many saints are based on important

historical people, after the death of the person the saint develops its own existence and another kind of importance, which might make a focus on the historical person seem too narrow a view. In addition, the overall image of a saint is a complicated construction, which is based both on the historical person and elements added posthumously, often in accordance with the special needs of the saint's clientele. It should be noted that this argument is only made in terms of the present thesis; the appropriate approach naturally depends on the point of view of each study. While it may be said that intercession is the fundamental reason why saints exist, saints have proved useful in other ways as well, both in the lives of individuals and on a more institutional level. It is significant to note that saints and their cults have functions beyond the strictly religious and devotional ones. Saints have a long history, and cults of saints have evolved according to societal changes. In any case, noteworthy are the 'human dynamics' involved.

### 3 Study of saints

The present chapter deals with the study of saints, focusing on the literary evidence used in the field. A key concept to the field is introduced, namely hagiography, which has to do with the writing of the lives of saints and is therefore important in terms of the construction of a saint. As demonstrated in chapter 2, cults of saints are not stagnant, but adapt to changes in society. Further, we have seen the importance of the community behind a saint's cult. Wilson argues that the history of saints' cults "reflects the profoundest changes in mentality and social structure" (7). Wilson points to the "changing notions of sanctity and in the preferred types of saint", and moreover, "the changing avatars of particular saints over time, seemingly superficial but representative of fundamental transformations" (ibid.). According to Ellis Nilsson, the "cult of saints was an important and central part of medieval life and belief" (10). Wilson states that "[t]hose who have examined the sociology of saints are agreed that they reflect the structure of the societies which produce and honour them" (37). Cults of saints "provided social groups with cohesion and dynamism and are important in the study of societies which practice a common religion" (Ellis Nilsson 30).

Scholarship therefore agrees on the importance of the study of saints and their cults. In fact, saints constitute a much-studied subject of academic study: as Wilson observes, the subject has "attracted more scholarly attention over the centuries than most" (1). Nevertheless, Wilson, writing in 1983, refers to a recent "revival" in the field in terms of "new methods and approaches" (ibid.). This has mostly to do with attitudes towards hagiographical sources, which in the past have often been dismissive to say the least. Importantly, recent scholarship has adopted a more open-minded approach to hagiography, taking in the words of Wilson, "a wider view of what is 'historical'" (ibid.). Yet, it seems that even in the 21st century the concept remains problematic. Hilary Powell depicts hagiographical texts, "describing the lives of centuries-old saints", as "notoriously problematic sources for modern-day scholars" (171). Moreover, Thomas O'Loughlin states that hagiography is "a genre we neither respect nor value" (*Discovering* 8). Given this history of controversy, it seems appropriate to discuss the problems relating to the literary evidence used in the study of saints and assess what needs to be taken into consideration when dealing with the sources.

The term ‘hagiography’ itself, a combination of the Greek words for ‘holy’ and ‘writing’ (OED “hagiography”), is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (ODE) as “the writing of the lives of saints”, the word ‘life’ signifying here a biography of a saint. The Latin word *vita* is often used in this context as well. The present chapter focuses on saints’ *vitae*, but it should be noted that ‘hagiography’ includes all writings and written records dealing with saints, as well as the study of these sources (Ellis Nilsson 35). One of the key aspects of hagiographic writings is their mythical and unhistorical side, which has often made the genre a problematic one: in extreme cases hagiography has been denounced as “chronological nonsense” (James Campbell qtd. in Powell 171), and the texts as “audacious fabrications, products of lying and ambition” (Hippolyte Delehaye qtd. in Powell 171). Furthermore, the derivative nature of the lives is “an often-cited cause for condemnation as the same tedious and clichéd stories occur time after time with predictable regularity” (Powell 171). Another aspect that has drawn much criticism is their distinct laudatory nature. Saints’ lives are definitely eulogistic, in fact so much so that today the word ‘hagiography’ is even defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of English* as “a biography that treats its subject with undue reverence” and has thus become a synonym for any work—ecclesiastical or secular—that seems ‘overpraising’. The meaning suggests that some prejudice remains against hagiography, for modern readers seem to be automatically suspicious of hagiographical texts due to their fictitious and idealised nature.

The latter seems particularly problematic: O’Loughlin argues that “[a]ny work that dishes out praise, and sets out deliberately to extol someone and make us admire her/him is seen by us as a ‘whitewash’, propaganda or simply an attempt to con us” (*Discovering* 8), adding that “we do not expect anyone to be wholly good or beyond criticism” but “want to know our people ‘warts and all’” (ibid.). Thus, it may be said that the concept includes much that “does not sit well with us” (ibid.). Powell argues that this “sense of frustration arises from the expectation that hagiography ought to be historical” (171). Significantly, however, “to believe this rather misses the point” (ibid.). Dorothy Bray argues that “[m]edieval hagiography was less concerned with historical accuracy than with fidelity to an ideal image manifested in the holy man” (11). Importantly, Ellis Nilsson argues that “[w]riting a *vita* was a form of sanctity propaganda in the promotion of a saint” (37), and that “a saint was made through the creation of a *vita*” (38). As for the derivative nature of hagiography, the “*topoi* found in saints’ *vitae* were important elements in proving that a person was a saint” (ibid.). Therefore, a description of childhood, for instance, is often “based on earlier

models of how a saint's childhood should have been" (Ellis Nilsson 37) Similarly, that hagiographical texts are exalting is obvious; further, it is the whole 'point' of these texts, which are in fact "intended to praise a saint or demonstrate her/his sanctity" (O'Loughlin, *Discovering* 8).

Thus, paradoxically, while the criticism is valid, inasmuch as all of the aforementioned points are completely accurate, these 'faults' are not arguments against the value or usefulness of hagiographical evidence. Here, the right approach becomes crucial. Powell argues for a holistic approach "that apportions equal weight to both the apparently factual and the fictitious" (171). Furthermore, scholars seem to agree, as Powell states, that the most useful approach is to examine "not what the texts say about the past, but what they disclose about their present" (ibid.). The works must be seen in their contemporary context: further, "it is important to consider both their function and reception" (Powell 172). According to Powell, "[t]here is broad agreement that the primary purpose of hagiography was edificatory, to provide enlightenment through the power of example" (172). This is supported by the fact that saints were important role models. Nevertheless, Powell argues that a *vita* "may have been made to serve many uses", and consequently, "hagiographic texts had to operate on several levels" (172). For instance, "their sermonic application demanded features guaranteed to appeal to a vernacular audience" (ibid.). According to Powell, "[r]ecognition of the need for universal appeal has resulted in a reappraisal of the historical importance of hagiography" (172). In addition, "[r]ecent historiography has emphasised the overlap between clerical and lay culture" (Powell 173). This seems important in terms of Irish saints, as "[s]cholars working on Celtic hagiography have long been alert to the crossover between saints' *vitae* and folktales" (Powell 174).

A central part of saints' cults, hagiography is a useful genre, albeit controversial and misunderstood at times. The term itself, reflecting the evolution of the concept over time, has different meanings as well as some derogatory undertones. However, it may be said that the concept has to some extent been rehabilitated. Indeed, according to Evelyne Patlagean, these are sources which history "can no longer afford to overlook" (104). Today, scholarship seems to agree on their potential usefulness, focusing more on assessing the right approach to these sources. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the study of saints requires one to be critical of the literary evidence and conscious of the dynamics involved, such as the intended audience as well as the interests and motivations of the writers. It is important to examine the function of these texts, i.e.

why they are what they are; why particular saints were chosen and given their respective traits and legends. In any case, as the present study deals with the concept and image of Saint Patrick, i.e. the different layers of which this figure consists as a whole, and moreover the aspects which have contributed to him being controversial, it follows that the unhistorical or overpraising nature of hagiography is not an obstacle here but, on the contrary, a useful premise for further conclusions.



#### 4 Early Irish saints and the Christianisation of Ireland

The present chapter examines cults of saints in the specific context of Ireland. However, a brief overview of early Irish Christianity must first be provided. It says a great deal about the importance of Saint Patrick that it is virtually impossible to discuss the history of Christianity in Ireland without mentioning him: the story of the Christianisation of the island is closely linked to his. According to the traditional narrative, Patrick arrived in Ireland in 432 and went on to convert “more or less the whole island” (O’Loughlin, *Discovering* 3, 45). In reality, those early stages of Christianity in Ireland are largely shrouded in mystery due to the lack of literary evidence; indeed, Patrick’s writings constitute the “only contemporary narrative of the conversion of Ireland to Christianity” (Ó Fiaich 53). However, in the contemporary *Chronicle* of Prosper of Aquitaine, under the year 431 is recorded the following: “To the Irish believing in Christ, Palladius having been ordained by Pope Celestine, is sent as first bishop” (qtd. in Bartlett 3). According to Thomas Bartlett, the year 431 is the first authentic date in Irish history (1). The above record of Palladius is the full extent of our knowledge of him in relation to Ireland; whether he ever arrived there is not known (Bartlett 3). Nevertheless, Bartlett observes that the entry in the *Chronicle* is important, as it demonstrates firstly that there were Christians in Ireland in 431; secondly, that “they were sufficiently numerous to warrant a bishop”, and thirdly, that Ireland had not had a bishop yet, since “Palladius was to be the first” (ibid.). Trade relations with Roman Britain and Gaul account for the existence of Christians in Ireland at the time, the earliest of whom would have been either migrants or prisoners (Ó Fiaich 53; Bartlett 3). Yet, according to Richard Woods, “a well-organized church had not taken hold” (“Ireland: History”).

Thus, although the details remain obscure, the fifth century marks the beginning of Christianity in Ireland on a more organised level. In the words of O’Loughlin, it is then that Christianity “begins to be a force in Irish society” (*Discovering* 45). The early Irish church was unique in terms of its administrative organisation: in Britain and on the Continent “bishops and dioceses were the norm”, whereas the Irish church soon adopted a monastic organisation, “centred on the abbot and his monastery” (Bartlett 11). According to Bartlett, monasticism was “the distinguishing feature, the central characteristic, of the early Irish church” (13). This is usually “ascribed to the fact that Ireland had never been part of the Roman empire, and hence had never been carved up administratively like Britain and much of continental Europe” (ibid.). Further, the system “may well

have mirrored Irish society” (ibid.). In addition, Ó Fiaich refers to the “tendency of the Irish temperament towards an ascetic way of life” (57). It should be noted that Irish monasteries were distinctly more humble settlements than those on the Continent (Ó Fiaich 58). Irish monasticism was characterised by its severe asceticism (Ó Fiaich 62). Importantly, “[c]opying of manuscripts formed an important part of the monastic occupations” (Ó Fiaich 60): this art culminated in the illuminated manuscript, “one of the greatest glories of Irish monasticism” (Ó Fiaich 60–61).

The seventh and eighth centuries form the golden age of early Christian Ireland: according to Kathleen Hughes, it was then that monasteries “rose to positions of wealth and power” (70). A significant feature of this era is the “fusion of Irish and Latin cultures” (Hughes 73). Importantly, Proinsias MacCana states that “Ireland had a learned and literary — though not literate — class long before writing, or even Christianity, reached Ireland” (1). These “traditional savants” were known as *filidh* (ibid.). Hughes states that “[t]hese two kinds of education, written Latin and oral Irish, *could* have remained completely distinct” (67). This was not the case, however, and “[b]y the end of the sixth century, the church (that is to say monasteries) and the *filidh* had come to terms and from that time on there is evidence of an ever-increasing practical cooperation and assimilation between them” (MacCana 1). It is significant to note that Christian monks recorded “pre-Christian myths and sagas of the Celts from the oral versions of the bardic schools” (Woods, “Ireland: History”). Due to this interaction, Hughes argues that “[t]here must have been people in Ireland, educated in the church, who could read and write Latin but who knew and loved the old tales” (68). Further, clerics “writing the lives of the saints, were influenced by the generally accepted idea of what a hero should be like” (Hughes 69).

Wilson observes regional variations in saints’ cults: some areas produce and honour many saints, while others “few or none at all” (7–8). Ireland belongs to the former, although “only a small number [...] have been officially canonized by the church” (O’Connor, “saints”). The recent Christianisation process may account for the prevalence of saints in Irish society. Sverre Bagge states in connection to the Christianisation of Norway that “[t]he existence of local saints is likely to have been an important factor in strengthening the position of Christianity in the population” (qtd. in Ellis Nilsson 9). In addition, Ellis Nilsson argues that “[d]uring the initial development period [...] the cult of saints was one of the principal ways for the young Christian community to create a feeling of identity and ‘historical consciousness’” (9). According to Clare Stancliffe,

founder saints were “of particular significance in early medieval Ireland” (11). As elsewhere, saints helped make religion more appealing to the public: O'Connor states that saints “personalized and localized the dogmas of the faith”, adding that the cults of “such early Irish saints as Brigid and Finian are good examples of this” (“saints”). Curiously, Ó Fiaich states that “while paganism put up a stiff fight before being overthrown, Ireland was the only country in western Europe whose conversion produced no martyrs” (55). However, O'Loughlin argues that “there is a long-standing link between martyrdom and monasticism that honors the latter as a type of and substitute for the former”, adding that “[e]arly monastics consciously saw their lives as a prolonged martyrdom”, as monasticism meant “the death of the self for life in Christ” (“Martyrs”).

Saint Patrick is not the only patron of Ireland, the two others being Colum Cille and Brigid. Colum Cille (c. 521–597) is an important Irish saint, although his influence may be seen most clearly outside Ireland, in Britain: he famously founded a monastery on the island of Iona in the Hebrides and from that location undertook the conversion of Pictland in present-day Scotland (Bartlett 22–24). While hagiographical elements have been added to his legend, Colum Cille's historical existence seems undeniable. Brigid, the saint of Kildare, on the other hand, “is a figure of legend more than history”, according to Richard Sharpe (“Brigid”). Sharpe states that it seems clear that her hagiographers did not have “any clear historical information” (ibid.). However, the cult of Brigid is interesting in that “there is evidence already from the 10th century to suggest that the cult began from the Christianization of a pagan goddess” (ibid.) Here, it should be noted that there has been some controversy around Christian saints in terms of their connection to earlier pagan elements. It has been argued that the cult of the saints was of pagan origin, as “[s]triking similarities existed in the form of their respective cults, and dates of festivals and sites of worship were identical” (Wilson 2). As for Ireland, Bartlett states that it is clear that “Christianity in Ireland, as elsewhere in continental Europe, adopted and adapted pagan practices and heathen ceremonies to its own purposes” (7). Wilson states that

Catholic scholars have accepted that pagan sites and festivals were Christianized via the cult of saints, but see the process as one of opposition rather than osmosis (2).

Thus, saints Lives often “represent the saint as a missionary battling with and triumphing over the old religions” (ibid.). Wilson adds that “even where it was agreed that pagan elements were

present in the cult of the saints, this was very often seen as a necessary compromise with mass converts or gross peasants” (ibid.). This indicates the adaptive tendencies of saints and their cults.

Though its initial stages remain largely a mystery, the history of Christianity in Ireland may be seen as beginning in the fifth century. The written evidence however becomes fuller only in the seventh and eighth centuries. The early Irish church is characterised by its monastic organisation and severe asceticism. In terms of the present study, it is significant to note the interaction between Christian monks and the *filidh* from roughly the sixth and seventh centuries onwards, which seems important in terms of Irish hagiographic writing. Saints’ cults “flourished in Ireland” (Sharpe, “hagiography”), which may be linked to the recent Christianisation process of the island. The early Irish church was “entirely bereft of martyrs” in the strictest sense of the word (Bartlett 3), but there is a connection between monasticism and martyrdom. Finally, it seems important to note the relationship between Christian saints’ cults and earlier pagan elements.

## 5 Saint Patrick

The purpose of this chapter is to present an overview of the figure Saint Patrick, a concept which, in accordance with the holistic approach of the present thesis, may be divided into two inherent aspects, the historical man and the saint. Accordingly, the present chapter, too, is twofold: the first part is an examination of Patrick's life. This will include a description of, first, his origins and background, and second, his later missionary work in Ireland. It should be noted that this description is introductory in nature; the different theories as to Patrick's life and career will be discussed further in the following chapter. Our knowledge of the historical Patrick is based, primarily, on two works written by himself, the *Confession* and the *Letter to Coroticus*, the former being the most important of the two. However, neither being autobiographical, they do not disclose much about Patrick's life or his mission (Bourke, "Patrick"). Importantly, the two works written by Patrick are the only extant contemporary literary evidence as to his life. Other important sources include some brief entries in the Irish annal collections, possibly "based on genuine information", but not contemporaneous, and Patrick's hagiography, written by Muirchú and Tírechán, dating from "the second half of the seventh century" (Stancliffe 1–2). The second part of this chapter deals with the history of the saint. Here, an overview of the evolution of his cult is provided.

'Patrick' is the anglicised name of a bishop and missionary, known as 'Patricius' and 'Pádraig' in Latin and Irish, respectively. Scholarship agrees that he flourished in the fifth century, although the exact dates of his birth and death are debatable (Bourke, "Patrick"). Although he dedicated his later life to the Irish, Patrick was not from Ireland, but from Roman Britain (ibid.). Patrick was born in the late fourth or first half of the fifth century to a family of free birth and belonging to the local gentry (Stancliffe 4). His father was a deacon and grandfather a priest (ibid.). The location of his home village, Bannavem Taburniae (*Confession* 1), is disputed. At the age of sixteen he is captured by Irish raiders and taken to Ireland where he is to spend the following six years in captivity as a slave, "tending sheep in the woods and on the mountain" (Ó Fiaich 53). Again, the exact location in Ireland is debatable; Stancliffe suggests somewhere near Killala Bay, in co. Mayo (4). More significantly, however, this will mark a turning point in Patrick's life, for it is only in captivity in Ireland that Patrick experiences his spiritual awakening. In Patrick's own words, "there the Lord 'opened my understanding to my unbelief'" (*Confession* 2). Patrick's *Confession* points to his

ascetic way of life during his captivity, which he seems to regard as leading up to his spiritual awakening (*Confession* 16). Following a nightly revelation in which God speaks to him, Patrick escapes his master (*Confession* 17).

Patrick sets off on an eventful journey back home, which he ultimately reaches, too. From his account it may be inferred that this was only after several years (*Confession* 21–23). Patrick recounts miracles and revelations during that journey and being tried by Satan (*Confession* 18–22). Once back at home with his parents, Patrick has a dream, in which he is invoked by the Irish to return to them. Patrick's own words seem worth recounting:

And it was there, I speak the truth, that 'I saw a vision of the night': a man named Victoricus – 'like one' from Ireland – coming with innumerable letters. He gave me one of them and I began to read what was in it: 'The voice of the Irish'. And at that very moment as I was reading out the letter's opening, I thought I heard the voice of those around the wood of Foclut which is close to the Western Sea. It was 'as if they were shouting with one voice': 'O "Holy Boy", we beg you to come again and walk among us' (23).

As Stancliffe states, Patrick "took this dream as God's call to him to return to Ireland and preach the gospel there" (5). The idea of a divinely inspired mission is emphasised in Patrick's *Confession*: in Patrick's words, "[God] inspired me [...] so that I should faithfully serve [...] the people to whom Christ's love brought me, and to whom he gave me for the rest of my days" (13). However, there appears a significant gap in Patrick's narrative as to what happens after the dream. Patrick does not elucidate the period before his arrival in Ireland in terms of his training or ordination, for instance. The only reference is his account of apparently being challenged about his mission by some of his "superiors" (*Confession* 26). The date of his arrival in Ireland is not stated either. O'Loughlin argues that "a date for his mission in the latter half of the fifth century seems to fit most closely with the evidence we have" (*Discovering* 46).

Nor does Patrick go into the details of his mission, stating that even a partial description "would take a long time" (*Confession* 35). He does, however, state "how God, the all-holy one, often freed me from slavery and from twelve dangers which threatened my life, as well as from many snares and from things which I am unable to express in words" (*ibid.*). This implies that his mission was not an easy one. Nevertheless, it seems to have been somewhat successful, for Patrick refers to

“the many thousands of people” that he has baptised (14). In terms of his mission, there is widespread agreement that it concentrated on the northern half of Ireland, probably “north of a line running from Galway to Wexford”, according to Ó Fiaich (55). This is supported by the fact that “[m]ost of the churches which later claimed St Patrick in person as their founder are situated in this half of the country” (ibid.). Moreover, Stancliffe states that “[p]lace-name evidence [...] suggests a broadly northern sphere of authority for Patrick” (9). The date and place of Patrick’s death is not known, although “the traditional date of 17 March, which is attested by Muirchú, may well be accurate” (Stancliffe 7). O’Loughlin concurs that this is “almost certainly” the case, “as the date [...] of a holy person’s death is one of the basic elements in any cult”, whereas the year is less relevant (*Discovering* 46).

With the death of Patrick begins the accumulation of his legend. The origins of the cult of Saint Patrick, on a more official level, may be traced back to the seventh century. It is then that Armagh “began using the figure of St Patrick in pursuit of its own far-reaching claims” (Stancliffe 11). Therefore, “Armagh’s first extant document, the *Liber angeli* (probably c.650), portrays Patrick as the apostle of all the Irish, with his base in Armagh” (ibid.). In the words of Stancliffe, “[t]he germ of the idea of Patrick as the ‘national apostle’ for the whole of Ireland appears here” (ibid.). Propaganda exercised by Armagh “led to widespread recognition of St Patrick’s special status” (Stancliffe 12). While Armagh’s contribution is important, it should be noted, as Stancliffe states, that “[i]ts success was partly due to the fact that there was already some recognition of Patrick’s position elsewhere in Ireland” (11). O’Loughlin argues that “when Patrick died [...] there were communities that looked to him as their spiritual father”, adding that among these communities “his memory was cherished and celebrated” (*Discovering* 97). Nevertheless, “it was Armagh that capitalized upon this widespread respect to promote Patrick’s claims as the apostle of the Irish” (Stancliffe 11). Armagh’s efforts eventually paid off, when in the twelfth-century “it was assigned the primacy” (Stancliffe 12). Thus, it may be said that Armagh had an interest in Patrick gaining as wide a clientele as possible.

Patrick’s seventh-century hagiography by Muirchú and Tírechán is part of Armagh’s propaganda (Stancliffe 11). The first hagiographic work in the vernacular, the *Tripartite Life*, dates roughly from the ninth or tenth century; the work “built upon its predecessors and represents the apogee of Patrician hagiography” (Bourke, “Patrick”). Besides the propagandist motives of the

hagiographers, it seems important to appreciate the wider historical context in which they worked: noteworthy is the contemporary interaction between Christian monks and the *filidh*. Indeed, according to Sharpe, Muirchú's *vita* is "full of fantastic stories that owe much to Irish secular tales and to folklore" ("hagiography"). Furthermore, Stancliffe argues that

[t]he figure of St Patrick early developed a far wider aetiological role than functioning simply as a symbol of Armagh and its rights; for once Patrick became regarded as the bringer of the Christian dispensation to all Ireland, stories were told about him in the vernacular to demonstrate the accommodation reached between the church on the one hand, and pre-Christian traditions and their guardians on the other (12).

Accordingly, Patrick was associated with mythological heroes, such as Cú Chulainn and Oisín (ibid.). Story-telling should not be overlooked, for in early medieval Ireland "written documents never superseded oral traditions as a legitimizing instrument" (Stancliffe 11). Thus, importantly, "the figure of Patrick was not restricted to Armagh or the ecclesiastical sphere, but could enter the world of traditional native learning and story-telling, and thus reach a wide lay audience throughout Ireland" (Stancliffe 12). Thus, Saint Patrick's clientele continues to grow, as his legend is made more appealing to a wider public.

The twelfth-century Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland meant the beginning of a "new phase of relations between Ireland and Britain" and had consequences for the cult of Saint Patrick as well (Stancliffe 13). John de Courcy "engineered the discovery" of the remains of Patrick, Colum Cille and Brigid at Downpatrick in 1185 (Bourke, "Patrick"). De Courcy "zealously promoted the cult of Patrick", his aim apparently being to promote Down as a pilgrimage site (Stancliffe 14). Further, his actions included "commissioning a more serviceable life" (ibid.): the life, written by Jocelin, "rendered Patrick's story in a guise more appealing to the Anglo-Norman world" (14). In addition, Patrick was "recognized as 'the patron and apostle of Ireland', and his authorization from the pope was emphasized" (ibid.). Stancliffe sees John de Courcy's acts as significant in that they "ensured that the cult of St Patrick would be promoted in those parts of Ireland held by the English, as well as within Irish-held areas" (14). Importantly, St Patrick "would be a saint for all" (ibid.). In fact, it may be said that in the initial stages of the development of Saint Patrick, his cult was very inclusive, for it was in the interests of the different parties involved that the cult should thrive, and that Patrick would be known right across Ireland and beyond.



However, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries mark a turning point in this respect, as later centuries saw the adoption of the saint for more exclusive purposes. According to Stancliffe, in the conflicts ensuing the Reformation and Counter-Reformation and “the effective conquest and colonization of Ireland”, St Patrick “was called upon to exemplify opposing views” (14). Both Catholic and Protestant ecclesiastics made claims on Patrick being their founder saint (ibid.); further, “both sides pressed the figure of Saint Patrick into a predetermined mould” (ibid.). Saint Patrick became increasingly a political instrument as well. According to Bourke, after the Reformation “[g]rowing nationalist sensibilities [...] found a focus in Patrick as figurehead of an Irish identity” (“Patrick”). Significantly, in Catholic Ireland “the traditional image of St Patrick as depicted in the medieval lives” still persisted (Stancliffe 14): noteworthy is the “emphasis of the ‘Tripartite life’ on St Patrick’s looking after the Irish in exchange for their loyalty” (Stancliffe 13). As Stancliffe argues, “Patrick, the protector of the Irish, was well suited to appeal to Catholics in this period” (14–15). Then again, nineteenth-century Irish nationalists looked more and more to the Fenian world (15–16). In fact, Stancliffe argues that “[t]he role of St Patrick in the development of Irish nationalism is a complex matter” (15). It should be noted that Saint Patrick was important for the Protestant community as well. In sum, Saint Patrick’s clientele had become divided.

The history of St Patrick’s Day reflects the divisions within the saint’s clientele. In Ireland both Catholics and Protestants have a long history of celebrating the day (Stancliffe 15). It should be noted that “the relatively simple celebrations” of St Patrick’s Day in Ireland were quickly “outstripped” by the celebration of his feast day abroad, in America in particular (Stancliffe 16). The first St Patrick’s Day parade on record took place in New York in 1762 (ibid.). Considering the status of 17 March today as the Irish National Day, it seems important to note that the celebrations were initially

dominated by protestants of Ulster extraction who were loyal to Britain. It was only when America had won its independence, and after the suppression of the 1798 rising and subsequent Act of Union, that the ethos changed and toasts were drunk to Ireland’s total emancipation from Britain (ibid.).

Further, “the mid-nineteenth-century flood of Irish Catholic émigrés, reluctant exiles from their homeland, led to the St Patrick’s day celebrations being charged with a nationalistic and nostalgic

fervour” (ibid.). The tradition of celebrating St Patrick’s Day with parades was eventually exported to Ireland in the twentieth century (ibid.). This seems largely restricted to the Catholic community, though. However, “Church of Ireland protestants also celebrate the feast of Ireland’s apostle in their own, less flamboyant way” (ibid.). Significantly, Stancliffe states that Saint Patrick “continues to be recognized as the patron saint of Ireland by all Irish people, Catholic and protestant alike, although the different traditions still maintain their distinctive images of the national saint” (16).

This chapter has provided firstly a brief outline of the historical Patrick, although it may be said that the details of his life remain obscure. However, Patrick’s *Confession* indicates several qualifications for him becoming a saint. First, Patrick refers to visions and miracles during his life. Secondly, it may be said that sanctity was ascribed to him due to his martyrdom, which should be understood in a wider sense to include his missionary work, ascetic way of life, and personal sacrifices. If little is known about Patrick the historical person, the stages in the evolution of his cult are relatively well known. The cult of Saint Patrick, on a more organised level, may be traced back to the seventh century. The history of his cult is interesting in that different groups have adopted the saint as their own, thus contributing to the legend. It is of interest to note that both the religious and the secular sphere has had an interest in Patrick. It may be noted that Saint Patrick has had a wide clientele from the beginning. However, the Reformation marks a turning point in the history of Saint Patrick, as his clientele will be divided thereafter. It may be noted that the history of Saint Patrick is closely tied to the history of Ireland itself, and indeed, the British Isles.

## 6 Problem of Saint Patrick

This analysis divides into three parts—three aspects from which problems tend to arise: the literary evidence, the historical Patrick, and lastly, the image of the saint. The problem of Saint Patrick is, in the words of Kelly, “one of sources” (“*Who*” 1043). Their problematic nature may be understood in terms of their quantity and quality. Firstly, the two works written by Patrick constitute the only extant contemporary sources. Patrick’s works, which cannot be dated accurately, are followed by a silence of roughly two centuries, as written evidence as to Patrick did not emerge until the seventh century. The lack of literary evidence is liable to make us question his whole existence. However, the lack of contemporary literary evidence should be seen in context: Ireland had an oral tradition of transmitting information, not a literary one, and Patrick’s works are the first extant literary documents in Ireland (Ó Fiaich 53). According to F. J. Byrne, it is only in the fifth century AD that Irish history “properly begins” (39). In addition, Catherine Swift refers to “the lack of research on early Irish history” (“*Uí Néill*”). The period remains obscure: in the words of Bartlett, “[i]f we know little about Ireland in the two centuries before Patrick, we know even less about the island (and Patrick) in the two centuries after him” (10). Patrick’s hagiography, dating from the seventh century, coincides with the time when documentary evidence in general “becomes fuller” (Byrne 40). In conclusion, it may be said that the historical context makes the absence of literary evidence seem distinctly less suspicious.

The usefulness of the literary sources available depends on what is being studied. In terms of the historical man, Stancliffe argues that “[a] reliable account of Patrick must be drawn primarily from what can be inferred from his two authentic works” (1). Patrick’s hagiography, while constituting an essential part of the history of his cult, should be seen mainly as proof of a tradition of remembering Patrick: namely, “as evidence for the cult of Patrick in the seventh century, not the historical Patrick of the fifth” (Stancliffe 2). Similarly, the Irish annals, not being contemporary, “simply record the presence of traditions at their time of writing and should not be used as ‘raw’ factual evidence” (O’Loughlin, *Discovering* 45). While scholarship agrees on the reliability and authenticity of Patrick’s works, there is still “room for almost unlimited controversy over the interpretation of the texts”, for Patrick’s Latin “is difficult even for skilled Latin scholars” (Chibnall 641). Further, “[m]uch desirable information is excluded from Patrick’s account” (Stancliffe 4). It should be noted, though, that Patrick was not writing an autobiography. Moreover, Patrick was

addressing his contemporaries: as Kelly states, “the saint’s own two brief writings, both intended for fellow Romano-Britons, do not provide many clues to times or dates” (“*Saint*” 610). In sum, the literary sources in Patrick studies are in many ways unsatisfactory or completely lacking, and it follows that our knowledge of Patrick, the historical man, is deficient.

Furthermore, the little that is known is riddled with disputed aspects. For instance, in the case of the location of his home town in Britain and the date of his arrival in Ireland, various possibilities have been suggested. As Kelly states, “[t]he combination of Patrick’s historical importance and the fragmentary nature of the evidence about him has produced a plethora of competing and strenuously argued theories” (“*Life*” 652). One of the key issues is the proximity of Patrick’s mission to that of Palladius, of which no literary evidence exists. O’Loughlin states that the traditional date of Patrick’s arrival in Ireland, 432, is “suspiciously close to the date of Palladius’s mission”, adding that all the sources where the date is given are from the seventh century or later and “were written with an awareness of Prosper’s *Chronicon*” (*Discovering* 45). Further, according to Stancliffe, it has been argued that “the reason why there are no early Irish traditions about Palladius [...] is that traditions of his life were conflated with those of Patrick at an early date” (2). Stancliffe sees this as “plausible”, although “unprovable” (*ibid.*). Bartlett blames Patrick’s hagiographers for removing “all mention of Palladius from the record” in order to “airbrush from the record any rivals” and to promote Patrick “as the sole instrument of conversion” (4). Secondly, Ó Fiaich states that the “problem of dating the saint’s work in Ireland [...] has brought forward the theory of the two Patricks: a Roman missionary who came in the 430s, and a British missionary who arrived a generation later” (56). O’Loughlin seems to doubt the validity of the theory (*Discovering* 45). However, the details of his life aside, it may be said that no scholar seems to doubt the existence of a Patrick.

Despite the paucity of historical information, Saint Patrick has undeniably become the most important Irish saint. Furthermore, Saint Patrick has developed an exceedingly mythical image. Bartlett describes how “the fugitive, though real, Patrick of history [has] been transformed by the laying on of legends over the centuries to become the fictitious St Patrick” (10). Bourke states that “[t]he 20th century has seen the entrenchment of a popular and largely unhistorical view of Patrick” (“Patrick”). It might be suggested that the mythical elements added posthumously have made the historical man seem equally mythical. In the words of O’Loughlin, “ignoring the

difference in perspectives between a medieval hagiographer and modern historian has bedevilled much that has been written about Patrick" (*Discovering* 4). Whatever is true about the historical man, the saint contains much that can be termed as constructed. To assess Saint Patrick's level of constructedness, it may be said that, compared with Colum Cille and Brigid, for instance, he is something from the middle: the saint, although constructed, has been built on a historical basis. In any case, it has been demonstrated that being constructed does not detract from the status of a saint; essentially, in terms of the cult, it does not matter whether a saint is real or constructed. Therefore, the most useful approach is to ask why the Patrician legend is what it is; the adding of unhistorical elements must be seen in context. The previous chapter, by examining the history of his cult, has cast light on the dynamics that have been involved in the construction of Saint Patrick. Essentially, it may be said that the story of Saint Patrick reflects the history of the people who venerate him. Patrick has been used for aetiological purposes and as a political instrument. The cult has evolved in response to the needs of Saint Patrick's clientele. The story of the saint has been developed often with the aim of making him more appealing to the public.

In any case, problems tend to arise when the historical man is compared with the hagiographical account of the saint, let alone with the very secularised present-day image of the figure. Patrick's feast day is celebrated as the Irish National Day; moreover, Saint Patrick has become a symbol of Irishness. Yet, Patrick was not Irish himself, and the fact that he came from Britain has sometimes been a sore point for the Irish. In his *Confession*, Patrick refers to Ireland as an 'alien land' and expresses his longing for home [1, 43]. All this may seem contradictory in terms of Patrick's present status. However, the figure has had a long journey to be where he is now. Patrick dedicated his life to the Irish, which made him the perfect choice for their intercessor. Furthermore, Saint Patrick's significance seems to be based on the fact that the Irish have so often needed him, although this need has taken different forms during the history of the saint. First, Patrick's role in the story of the Christianisation of the island was emphasised; the saint was therefore important for the early Irish Christian community. Here, it might be added that Saint Patrick contributed to the harmony achieved between pagan and Christian elements. Later, due to historical events, Patrick became a defender of the Irish against the English. Thus, Saint Patrick became used for political purposes. Wilson argues that "[n]ational patrons are of special importance in the modern period for nations lacking full independence", adding in relation to Saint Patrick that "the cult provides a focus that is otherwise lacking and allows an expression of

patriotic feeling in religious guise that might not be possible in more direct form” (34). Finally, the Irish diaspora, more recently, has been able to relate to Saint Patrick, and in particular, to the idea of exile intrinsic to his story. As President Michael D. Higgins stated in his St Patrick’s Day Message of 2017, “[i]t is appropriate that we celebrate as our National Day the Day of St. Patrick, whose own life story was one of hardship and migration” (Higgins). Saint Patrick’s story clearly resonates strongly with the Irish.

Yet, to say that Saint Patrick is the patron saint of ‘Ireland’ is somewhat ambiguous. History has made this role complicated. It may be said that the present-day St Patrick’s Day festivities emphasise Patrick’s role for the Republic of Ireland and Irish people of a Catholic denomination, hiding the fact that both Catholics and Protestants have a long history of celebrating the day. Moreover, Saint Patrick is historically significant for both communities. There is both a religious and political dimension here: namely, both the Catholic and the Protestant church has tried to appropriate Patrick as its founder saint, and in addition, Saint Patrick has been used to advance political agendas. Today, this might be considered an issue mostly in Northern Ireland where St Patrick’s Day has the potential to bring out some exclusive and controversial aspects, such as the use of the Irish tricolour. Indeed, Stancliffe argues that the parades in Belfast have “a nationalist, republican flavour” (16). At the unveiling of a mural of Saint Patrick in loyalist Belfast in 2016, the former First Minister Arlene Foster in fact stated that St Patrick’s Day is “very Gaelicised”, referring to the consequent sense of alienation within unionist and loyalist communities in terms of celebrating the day (McCurry, *Belfast Telegraph* 11 Mar. 2016). In his reply in the *Belfast Telegraph* a few days later (15 Mar. 2016), Brian M. Walker, Professor Emeritus of Irish Studies at Queen’s University, Belfast, argued that, despite the controversial history of the day, St Patrick’s Day is once more “seen as a day for people of different backgrounds and traditions to share the Christian legacy and inheritance of St Patrick” (Walker). Significantly, Walker, referring to the “new maturity” in the way historical events and people are commemorated, described the day as “an opportunity [...] for all to enjoy a non-threatening and pluralist sense of Irishness” (ibid.). Thus, it might be said that Saint Patrick has the potential to unite people as well.

St Patrick’s Day on 17 March has become a global phenomenon. The publicity value of Saint Patrick and his feast day is fully acknowledged: “[b]y the 1990s a new feature of St Patrick’s Day was an effort by the Irish Government to promote Ireland abroad and to connect with members of

the Irish diaspora” (Walker). Furthermore, there is a political dimension to his feast day as well. It may be said that Saint Patrick has to a great extent been secularised, at least in terms of his feast day, which might be seen as undermining his saintly status. However, it should be noted that patron saints have a long history of being used as advertisements and political instruments. In any case, Wilson emphasises that

saints belong to and reflect the societies which produce and honour them, and no one would expect late-twentieth-century believers or non-believers to have the same saints necessarily as the contemporaries of [...] St Francis of Assisi, or to regard them in the same way (Wilson 6–7).

Further, if we are struck by the secular nature of the festivities on St Patrick’s Day, we might consider Wilson’s statement that “saints’ festivals [...] were times of general social interaction” in medieval times (16); moreover, “festivals and pilgrimages might provide the only opportunities for courtship [...] in traditional societies” (Wilson 16–17). In addition, Wilson argues in relation to the history of pilgrimage that “the recreational element [...] should not be ignored” (13). This suggests that we should avoid prejudices towards medieval societies: namely, considering the people nothing but devout Christians. In any case, in terms of saints, it is the community, the people behind the cult, that matters; saints only exist for the people who venerate them. Therefore, ‘Saint Patrick’ being the success story that it is, it might be suggested that the saint continues to respond to the needs of his clientele.

Any student of Patrick immediately encounters the problems relating to the sources available. In fact, the whole problem of Saint Patrick is largely due to the nature of the literary evidence. First, the sources are not numerous—in fact, we can talk about their complete absence as well—and second, the few extant ones are problematic in terms of the information provided and/or their reliability. Therefore, while scholarship seems to agree on the existence of a Patrick in some form, many aspects of his life and mission remain unknown. Compared with our knowledge of the historical man, the saint may appear simply too good to be true, and indeed, he is just that: constructed. Importantly, we can see why Patrick was chosen as the patron saint of Ireland, and further, why his legend evolved the way it did. Saint Patrick’s controversial nature is also related to the internal divisions of his clientele, which ultimately, is the result of events in Irish history. Finally, to echo the views of O’Loughlin as to the modern status of saints (*Discovering* 14), it might

be said that, while Saint Patrick and his cult have transformed significantly over the centuries, the human dynamics involved remain very much the same.



## 7 Conclusion

In this thesis I have demonstrated that the concept of Saint Patrick divides essentially into two parts: the man and the saint. Naturally, we may be interested solely in study of the historical Patrick; however, 'Saint Patrick' necessarily includes both aspects. Saint Patrick is a difficult figure in many respects, and moreover, on both an academic and popular level: the problem of Saint Patrick includes aspects ranging from theories about the historical man to his image as a saint. It might be said that Saint Patrick's overly mythical image has been due to a failure of appreciating the duality of the concept. Saint Patrick has a long history, and it follows that the figure is a complex one. Significantly, we are dealing with centuries-old accumulation of legend. Further, Saint Patrick is the result of a combined effort: it is important to be aware of the social groups behind the construction, who have all moulded and remodelled the saint according to their respective interests. Moreover, Saint Patrick may also be seen as a product of Irish history. The most useful approach is therefore to embrace the complexity and focus on the history of the concept. An examination of the history of the cult is instrumental in understanding the end result, which has perhaps little to do with the man living in the fifth century.

This thesis is a reflection of the author's process of initiation into the field of Irish Studies, and as such might be useful to other students in this field. For although a study of a particular saint, the thesis keeps to a general level. Indeed, it has been beyond the scope of the study to examine in detail, for instance, Patrick the historical man. While the study is not profound in this respect, it provides nevertheless a comprehensive analysis of the concept of Saint Patrick. One of the key aspects of Saint Patrick is his role as a patron saint. The study has demonstrated the importance of appreciating the community behind a cult: firstly, it helps us understand the dynamics involved in the construction of a saint. Secondly, the clientele has a direct impact on the saint's image and role. Saint Patrick clearly reflects his clientele: the concordance with Irish national identity is apparent. The saint has appealed to a wide audience and has continued to develop so as to respond to the needs of his clientele, which may account for the success of his cult. Indeed, Patrick's fame seems to be steadily growing; his cult shows no signs of declining.

Saint Patrick's significance may seem surprising vis-à-vis how little is known at present about the person to whom sanctity was once ascribed. However, Patrick has had a pivotal role in the story of

the Irish. Further, it seems that there has often been a need for the saint. Thomas O'Loughlin suggests the usefulness of a study of "how memory works within communities as they hand on their traditions from generation to generation", for "if we can appreciate that process we might have a perspective on both the legends and the significance that has been given to Patrick" (*Discovering* 7). The importance of the study of Saint Patrick relates to his role in the history of Ireland and the Irish. In the history of the figure we note all the major historical events: the Christianisation of the island and the consequent shifts in society; the Reformation and the ensuing religious disputes; the conquest and colonisation of the island by the English as well as the partition of Ireland and the political consequences they had. The present thesis reveals several aspects which merit further study: one of these might be the use of saints in the Christianisation process of Ireland; in addition, the history of Saint Patrick as a political instrument seems important. The history of Saint Patrick represents truly the history of Ireland itself.

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