

Andy Foley

Ireland in the Dark Ages

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### Irish Hagiographies as Tools for Conversion

Christianity is unique in that it has the ability to evolve in certain aspects for different cultures in order to make it more appealing and logical to the native people being converted. This unique ability has led to the worldwide spread of Catholicism in the past couple hundred years. In Ireland, however, Catholicism has been present since the fifth century. Because of this, it was actually Celtic monks that played a pivotal role in spreading Catholicism to other countries. These monks quickly realized that they must adopt the Catholic doctrine to the cultures and societies at hand if they wanted to be successful. In order to do so, these monks started recording much of their own history and that of saints around them, relating what they wrote to topics that would interest their future audiences. It was understood by the authors that some of the most effective tools were going to be biographies composed of a combination of pagan ideals and miracles in which the saint at hand showed similarities to Jesus. Through the creation of an image of a Catholic church that was readily available for access by the common man, authors of different saints lives were able to establish an attractive alternative to the pagan ideals that the Irish had believed in for so long. In his compilation of short biographies on Irish saint's lives, Daphne Pochin Mould described the typical Irish saint's life as a "standardized series of wonder and miracle themes, taken from Irish pagan sagas and from scripture," as they often times met this mold.<sup>1</sup> Histories of saints such as Brendan, Columba, Columban and would

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<sup>1</sup> Mould, Daphne Pochin. *The Irish Saints*. (Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds LTD, 1964), 8

often contain miracles that were similar to those performed by Jesus, as the recorder attempted to make the saint appear as Christ-like as possible in order to be as effective a tool for conversion as possible.

One such type of miracle, the control of weather in the face of doubting disciples, is a reoccurring theme found in both the New Testament and the lives of many Irish Saints. Jesus had a commanding control of the weather and used this to show his holiness to those around him when they demonstrated fear or lack of faith in God. The books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include a situation where Jesus was able to calm the winds and storms while they are out on the sea. In this story, Jesus and his disciples board a small boat, which heads out onto clam waters. Upon Jesus falling asleep, a storm approaches and creates a situation that terrifies the disciples. They quickly awaken Jesus who immediately questions their faith, asking, “Why are you terrified, O you of little faith?”<sup>2</sup> Jesus quickly calms the storm and the disciples consequently acknowledge his might as one that can control something as great as the weather and sea.

Similar situations can be seen in saint’s lives, as they are able to influence the weather or sea in the presence of their own disciples. In the *Navagatio Brendani*, the story of Brendan’s journey’s throughout the treacherous North Atlantic, Saint Brendan often finds himself having to reassure his disciples that it is God who controls their journey, pointing out that “God is their helper, sailor, and helmsman, and that he guides” them.<sup>3</sup> With each occurrence comes a consequent favorable wind shift or current change, thus proving Brendan’s saintly connection with God. In one instance in particular, Saint Brendan also question’s the faith of his disciples in God, as they attempt, without success, to quickly paddle to a near island. Brendan points out that

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<sup>2</sup> Mt 8:26

<sup>3</sup> John J. O’Meara, trans., *The Voyage of Saint Brendan: Journey to the Promised Land* (Ireland: Humanities Press, 1974), 10.

God is “the pilot and sailor of our boat” and that it is “he himself that guides our journey just as he wills.”<sup>4</sup> Shortly thereafter the boat drifts towards the island and Brendan’s special relationship with God is demonstrated once again.

The life story of Saint Columba, the Irish missionary of the sixth century that made many trips between northern Britain and Ireland, also contains situations where the saint is able to influence the conditions in the weather.<sup>5</sup> In the account of his life and miracles as told by Adomnán, there are several instances where he is able to pacify terrible winds and seas by praying to God.<sup>6</sup> Through prayer Columba was also able to be granted winds that favored whomever he was praying for.<sup>7</sup> Adomnán recounts of how through prayer to St. Columba he was granted, on several occasions, winds that benefited the cause he was trying to accomplish. Each time Adomnán would praise Columba for hearing his prayer, as “God gave a fast and fair voyage without the labour of rowing for St. Columba’s sake.”<sup>8</sup> Again, through his account of the life and miracles of Columba, Adomnán creates a picture of a saint that shares a relationship with God that allows him to impact the weather. By illustrating this, Adomnán’s story became a more effective tool for conversion, as the works of God in real Saint can be shown.

Saint Columbanus, who lived shortly after Saint Columba, was also able influence the weather to his benefit. While Brendan’s and Columba’s lives contain excerpts in which God’s will influences the sea, a slightly different incident in Columbanus’ life is still able to demonstrate the saint’s special relationship with God. In this instance, Columbanus was able to clear the clouds and rain in order to save a crop during harvest season. Upon ordering four holy

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<sup>4</sup> O’Meara, *Saint Brendan*, 36.

<sup>5</sup> Mould, *Irish Saints*, 94.

<sup>6</sup> Adomnán of Iona, *Life of St Columba*, trans. Richard Sharpe (New York: Penguin, 1995) 163.

<sup>7</sup> Adomnán, *Columba*, 165; 200-201.

<sup>8</sup> Adomnán, *Columba*, 202.

men to pray to God to cease the terrible rains, Columbanus and other monks were able to collect a great crop with ease.<sup>9</sup> While this miracle concerned a harvest rather than a sea, it too shows later audiences the connection between an Irish saint and God and how they could influence something as great as weather just as Jesus had done on Galilee.

When comparing these three Sainly miracles to the well-known real miracle, it can be seen as to how these could be used as tools for conversion. These details were certainly done intentionally, as making a saint look more Christ-like would aide in the use of that saint's life story as an argument for Christianity in the world in which Celtic monks were trying to convert. Thomas Clancy accounts for this in his article in *Christian History*, arguing that Columba's "legendary powers were famous enough for his monks later to convince the Picts to convert."<sup>10</sup> Weather plays a large role in the lives of people in the North Atlantic, and the incorporation of this would have boded well for pagans under influence to convert. By giving the audience a hope in someone that they could pray towards or have confidence in, future monks had an easier job in the future.

Another distinct sort of miracle that both Jesus and the Irish saints performed was the control over the provision and condition of food. Some of Jesus' most famous miracles included his multiplication or production of food in times of need. His very first miracle, in fact, involved wine. While Jesus was at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, the wine ran out, leaving the guests displeased. Jesus was then able to turn several pots of water into wine better than the original.<sup>11</sup> Another well-known miracle of Jesus' involving food occurred shortly after he had finished preaching to a crowd of 5,000. His disciples came to him, full of worry over their low food

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<sup>9</sup> Monk Jonas, *The Life of St. Columban*, trans., Dana C. Munro (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1897-1907), §21.

<sup>10</sup> Iona's Tough Dove. Clancy, Thomas Owen. *Christian History*; 1998, Vol. 17 Issue 4, p27.

<sup>11</sup> Jn, 2:1-11.

supply. Jesus told them to feed the crowd with the five loaves and two fish that they had. Afterwards, there was more food leftover than they started with, yet the crowds were more than satisfied.<sup>12</sup> These miracles, along with miracles such as his ability to assist fishermen like Simon, whom Jesus directed to the bountiful part of the sea, displayed Jesus' control over nature.<sup>13</sup> The authors of the Gospel would have recorded miracles concerning food because they viewed it as important information that could be used for means of conversion.

Similarly, authors of the saint's lives would have included information that they viewed as beneficial to converters. The information they chose to include often imitated actions that Jesus had performed. As food was nearly always scarce in the pre-modern world, a miracle concerning food would have drawn interest from the unconverted. In the story of Saint Brendan's voyages, his miracles often entailed his miraculous provision of food in the wake of starvation at sea. Just as Jesus provided bread and fish to the crowd of 5,000, Brendan too was able to provide bread and fish to the disciples following him, producing a feast from nothing.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the journey, the common theme of food being miraculously provided is attributed to Brendan, although always through the grace of God. Whenever the group becomes hungry, Brendan is quick to find a solution, each time praising God for his graciousness.<sup>15</sup> Brendan also mimicked Jesus' miracle of directing Simon to the part of the sea abundant with fish. While on an island, Brendan directed his followers to a distant part of the island, where he promised they would find water and plants suitable for their needs. And, just as Simon found more fish than he could handle, Brendan's disciples found everything that they were in need of as well.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Mt, 14:15-21.

<sup>13</sup> Lk, 5:4-10.

<sup>14</sup> O'Meara, *Saint Brendan*, 11-12.

<sup>15</sup> O'Meara, *Saint Brendan*, 14, 28, 41.

<sup>16</sup> O'Meara, *Saint Brendan*, 41.

This ability did not stop with Brendan, however, as the same ability to perform miracles with food and drink can be found in the life of Saint Columba as well. Adomnán, the author of Columba's life, compared Columba's miracles to that of Jesus in his recounting of Columba's miracles. Columba's first miracle in particular, in which he transformed water into wine, is directly compared to the aforementioned first miracle of Jesus, performed at Cana. Adomnán described Columba's actions, noting that it was agreed upon by those in attendance that "the Lord made this the first proof of power in his disciple, performing the same miracle that he himself had worked as the first of his signs at Cana of Galilee."<sup>17</sup> Adomnán wanted the audience to view Columba as similar to Jesus in order to make the biography an affective of tool as possible, and does so through his comparative analysis of the two. Adomnán includes other miracles, although without mentioning their similarities to Jesus, which could also be compared. Adomnán also tells of how Columba performed miracles such as turning a tree's bitter fruit into "wonderful sweetness",<sup>18</sup> bestowing a ripe crop onto a layman they had offended,<sup>19</sup> and directing fisherman to a more plentiful catch of fish.<sup>20</sup> Adomnán's inclusion of these miracles in his biography created a saint that, like Jesus, appealed to everyone's needs, as everyone needed food.

This ability to replicate and provide food could be seen in the lives of saints such as Columbanus as well. Just as Brendan had directed those with him to the location of food when hungry, Columbanus too ordered his starving companions to travel into a low valley in search of fish whose location he had already known. The author, Monk Jonas, notes that Columbanus ordered the food cooked immediately, as he "knew that the food had been prepared for himself

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<sup>17</sup> Adomnán, *Columba*, 154.

<sup>18</sup> Adomnán, *Columba*, 155.

<sup>19</sup> Adomnán, *Columba*, 155.

<sup>20</sup> Adomnán, *Columba*, 168.

by God.”<sup>21</sup> Columbanus was also credited by Jonas with a miracle very similar to Jesus’ feeding of the crowd of 5,000. While at a monastery in Fontaines, Columbanus prayed to God, asking God to multiply their food and drink just as Jesus had satisfied “five thousand in the wilderness.”<sup>22</sup>

As seen in each individual saint’s life, their miracles pertaining to food were almost always mentioned. To the Irish, a source to which they can turn to rely on and believe in for the provision of food would have been attractive when being converted. To someone that had yet to be converted, a saint’s biography in which God provides food through the saint would appear as a positive. The author’s of each saint’s life wanted to make it clear that “Not only does God guide his servants on their way” but that “he also supplies them with food and drink.”<sup>23</sup>

Whoever played the role of supplier would have been an important member of society as all would have turned to them for food. Abbot’s played this role for their community.<sup>24</sup> By establishing through writing that saints, who were essentially abbots of some monastery, could produce food with ease through the grace of God, authors constructed a biography of a Jesus-like figure which could in turn be used as a tool for later conversion.

The ability to heal was another power held by Jesus that the saints were often equipped within their hagiographies. Jesus often healed the crippled, a miracle performed in each of the four Gospels. In Luke, Matthew, and Mark a similar story is told where Jesus heals a crippled man.<sup>25</sup> Jesus also heals a crippled man in John, whom he cures simply by commanding to get up

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<sup>21</sup> Jonas, *St. Columban*, §18.

<sup>22</sup> Jonas, *St. Columban*, §28.

<sup>23</sup> Glyn S. Burgess et al., *The Brendan Legend: Texts and Versions*. (Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV), 58.

<sup>24</sup> Burgess, *Brendan Legend*, 262.

<sup>25</sup> Lk 5:17-26. Mt 9:1-8. Mk 2:1-12

and sin no more.<sup>26</sup> In each of these instances, Jesus heals those that have sinned upon them asking for forgiveness. Jesus also performed miracles in which he healed the blind. In John, a recount of an instance in which Jesus healed a man born blind is told. In this story Jesus spits into the clay, rubs it onto the man's eyes, and commands him to wash in a pool. The man returned able to see, and Jesus was praised for his work.<sup>27</sup> Mark tells of a similar story in which Jesus heals a blind man in Bethsaida.<sup>28</sup> Just as he did in John, Jesus miraculously cures a man of blindness and sends him on his way.

Columbanus and Columba share similar abilities in their acts of healing for their followers. In Adomnán's story of Columba, a story is told where Saint Columba healed six men close to death with holy water. These men in turn used the water to heal other men and their livestock. It worked instantly and the men were said to have "praised Christ in St Columba with exceeding gratitude."<sup>29</sup> This type of healing miracle, in which Columba healed men on the verge of death, was one that Adomnán included frequently, crediting Columba with the same miracle at Druim Cett and also with his companion Fintan on the other side of Druim Alban.<sup>30</sup> Saint Columbanus' miracle pertaining to healing was more similar to Jesus' healing of the blind. While in Orleans, a blind man was brought forward to Columbanus so that he may be healed. Columbanus asked for everyone to pray after "seeing the man's faith" and upon "touching the man's eyes with his hand...made the sign of the cross."<sup>31</sup> Again, the people praise God through the saint, giving Columba credit for the miracle performed as a messenger of God.

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<sup>26</sup> Jn 5:1-18

<sup>27</sup> Jn 9:1-12

<sup>28</sup> Mk, 8:22-26

<sup>29</sup> Adomnán, *Columba*, 157-158.

<sup>30</sup> Adomnán, *Columba*, 159, 179.

<sup>31</sup> Jonas, *St. Columban*, §41.

Each healing miracle performed by the Irish saints could be compared to a miracle performed by Jesus, establishing a relationship between God and the saints that the authors would have wanted to be recognized. In each case, the people present were said to have praised God through the saints, whom they saw as the mediator through which God was acting. For missionaries, a set of tales with which they could use as examples of how God can benefit the pagans and aid in ailments they might be enduring would have been useful. Through faith, it was emphasized, one could experience a longer life without the physical hindrances of being blind or crippled.

In addition to the previously mentioned miracles, authors of the saint's lives also included smaller miracles to bolster the saint's reputation as a connection to God and reason for why one should convert. Often times in the Bible, Jesus is able to see the devil and talk to him. In one instance in particular, Jesus drives the devil out of people possessed by demons.<sup>32</sup> Some of the authors of the different saints' lives also included miracles in which the saint at hand saw the devil and drove him away. For Saint Brendan, this miracle occurred while members of his party were asleep. Upon seeing the devil at work among them, Brendan sat down and prayed all night.<sup>33</sup> Not only did Saint Brendan scare the devil away, but because of his actions God placed a meal before them. Columba was also able to scare the devil away. Adomnán tells of Columba's ability to see the devil and expel him in his account of how Columba chases the devil from a milk pail. In this miracle, a boy named Colmán was returning from milking a cow and Columba stopped him. Columba reached towards the pail, made the sign of the cross, and immediately the devil left.<sup>34</sup> Just as Jesus miraculously expelled the demons from the sick

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<sup>32</sup> Mt 4:23-25.

<sup>33</sup> O'Meara, *Saint Brendan*, 12.

<sup>34</sup> Adomnán, *Columba*, 166.

people, Brendan and Columba were able to expel the devil as a work of God. This would have been appealing to those being converted as they saw evil in their pagan lives as well. By giving the saints these powers, the authors of these two hagiographies gave alluring characteristics to the saints and church. Miracles like these created an image of men that could solve Irish evils through the work of the God they were able to imitate.

Jesus was not, however, the only person from scripture that the hagiographies emulated. Brendan and Columba both had interactions with a water beast that had similarities with the whale that swallowed the prophet Jonah in the Old Testament. In the Hebrew book of Jonah the Prophet Jonah was swallowed by a whale where he remained for three days. It was not until Jonah prayed that he was released from the whale by God's command.<sup>35</sup> Brendan and his crew also ran into problems with a large water-beast, known to them as Jasconius. Upon disembarking on a strange island and making camp, Saint Brendan remained in the boat while the others slept. Upon the island moving out to sea in the middle of the night, Brendan said to his terrified disciples, "God revealed to me during the night in a vision the secret of the island."<sup>36</sup> This was not, however, the last time that Brendan and his crew would encounter Jasconius. Later on the journey, while the party sailed along, Jasconius was seen in the distance, quickly approaching with rage. While the others panicked, Brendan told them to not worry and turned to the heavens, saying to God, "Lord, deliver your servants, as you delivered David from the hand of Goliath, the giant. Lord, deliver us, as you delivered Jonas from the belly of the whale."<sup>37</sup> As soon as these words were said, a mightier monster came from the other direction, attacking and killing the first monster.

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<sup>35</sup> Jon, 2:1-11

<sup>36</sup> O'Meara, *Saint Brendan*, 19.

<sup>37</sup> O'Meara, *Saint Brendan*, 40.

Saint Columba also had a miracle with a water beast, coming during his travels through the land of the Picts. While crossing the River Ness, he came across a group of men mourning the death of another, whom they claimed had been killed by a water beast. Upon hearing this, Columba ordered one of his companions to swim out into the water. As soon as he was at the middle, a large water beast could be seen quickly swimming, jaws open, towards the surface where the man was wading. Columba simply made a sign of the cross, and the beast retreated as if “pulled back with ropes.”<sup>38</sup> Everyone present was astonished at Columba’s control over the beast, especially the “heathen natives”, who in turn “magnified the God of the Christians.”<sup>39</sup> From each affair, God’s mercy for his flock in danger can be seen. Each excerpt, in their respective hagiography, would have been useful for those working on conversion as it portrayed a merciful God that could act through saints in order to protect his disciples on earth.

Another prophet whose miracles had similarities with those performed by Irish saints was Moses from the Old Testament. Among Moses’ well known miracles included his encounter with the burning bush. From within the burning bush, which never consumed the bush but constantly burned, Moses saw God who appeared in order to talk to him.<sup>40</sup> The age old interest and mystery behind fire can also be seen in the lives of Saint Brendan and Saint Columba. While visiting a monastery, Brendan and his companions witnessed an arrow dart in and out of a chapel, lighting each candle as it went.<sup>41</sup> In Saint Columba’s hagiography, Adomnán tells of an instance where Columba had blessed a salt block and given it to a family, who in turn hung it on their wall. The village later burned down, destroying everything except the small section of wall

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<sup>38</sup> Adomnán, *Columba*, 175-176.

<sup>39</sup> Adomnán, *Columba*, 176.

<sup>40</sup> Ex, 3:1-21.

<sup>41</sup> O’Meara, *Columba*, 31.

from which the block hung.<sup>42</sup> While these two miracles do not have a passage from the Bible to which they can be directly compared, they do emphasize the power behind fire and acknowledge the mystery of it just as was done with Moses' encounter in Exodus. Their power over fire, even if the slightest, would have been a correlation appreciated by pagans.

In order to make more effective tools for later conversion, authors of hagiographies of saints like Brendan, Columba, and Columban often included miracles similar to those performed by Jesus because they constructed an image of a holy church that could be accessed from ordinary people living among them. To most of the people that would have been pressured into conversion, all that they had known was their pagan set of beliefs. In order to further their interest in the newly arrived church, missionaries needed to find a way to best relate to the local culture, a unique ability of Christianity. Christianity has always been most successful in the cultures it is introduced when the missionaries make an effort to evolve certain aspects that pertain to the local culture, thus increasing the likelihood that they may find a lesson from within it. Whether these saints actually performed the miracles mentioned earlier, is unknown. What is known, however, is that the hagiographers were missionaries themselves. They would have understood the need for a more effective tool with which they could use for their missionary work. By creating an image of a Jesus that could control aspects of their lives and nature that interested them, such as the weather or food supply, authors of saints' lives created a church that had Irish interests in mind. By then creating an image of an Irish saint that could harness these powers and control hardships they endured, authors created a church that was more accessible to someone doubting its usefulness to them.

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<sup>42</sup> Adomnán, *Columba* 159-160

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