



The Advent of Christianity.



While much remains uncertain, and the origin of Christianity in our islands still remains largely unknown, it seems reasonably clear that there were Christian communities in Britain in the days of *Tertullian* and *Origen*, and that in Ireland there were well-established communities well before the fifth century - well before, that is to say, the missions of *St Palladius* and *St Patrick*. The evidence suggests that in Britain, at least in northern and western Britain, Christianity had a continuous history from Roman times. Our surviving documents lead us to conclude that from one of these British Christian communities, perhaps in Strathclyde or the Solway area, St Patrick received a call to convert the Irish; and that, having received consecration as a bishop, he established the Roman form of Christianity in the northern part of the island, essentially in the territory of the *Uí Néill*.

Tertullius, writing in 196AD, says that 'those localities of the Britons hitherto inaccessible to the Romans had become subjects to Christ', and that 'the kingdom and name of Christ have extended to places which defied the arms of Rome'.

For the early history of Christianity in Ireland apart from Patrick's *paruchia* we have little direct evidence. On the whole, however, we have reason to believe that it was widespread before the coming of St Patrick; that it had reached southern Ireland from the Mediterranean areas, perhaps through Aquitaine and Spain; and that it was well established at an early date. Already in the traditions of the sixth century, Ireland comes before us as an Island of Saints (*sancti*), thickly studded with anchoritic and monastic settlements, "as the outermost ripple of the great monastic movement of the Greek and Coptic Churches of the East".

The advent of Christianity, then, can be ascribed to the Roman *invasions* and their somewhat precarious occupation of Britain. Wherever there were Roman settlements it is likely that there were Christians - perhaps some of the soldiers, perhaps traders attracted to the settlements. But there was no great invasion of Christianity into our lands. It appeared, quietly, and in small degree. It existed alongside the ancient Roman ways and did not seem to be counted as being offensive by the bards and druids of the local tribes. In this way, then, it may first have arrived in Pictland of Alba. Although the Roman expeditions were miserable in their achievements, there were, for a number of years, Roman settlements extending well into north-east Pictland (or southern Pictland as *Ptolomey* would have it). Can it be argued, then, that Christianity first arrived and spread up the Dee and Don valleys from the temporary (but substantial) Roman encampments at places such as *Normandykes*, *Raedykes*, *Kintore* and *Durno*? I think that the answer has to be - yes!

Of course, we must understand that this 'advent' was not a sudden event but rather a gradual conversion - a little like the gradual invasion of the land by an incoming tide and, like the tide, the strength of Christianity may have ebbed and flowed for many years. It is without doubt the case that Christianity reached different parts at different times. Those areas and tribes situated near the ancient pathways through and across the mountains were probably the first to be exposed to the work of the missionaries from *Whithorn*. Different Christian centres seem possibly to have favoured certain routes north and this is not very surprising. The men from *Whithorn* seem to have favoured either the coastal route or that over the passes of *Glenshee* to *Kindrochit* (Braemar) and thence down the valley of the River Dee. *Kentigern* seems to have arrived by one of *the Mounth* passes before going north via *Glengairn* and the

valley of the River Don to the lands of *Enzie*, north-east of present-day Huntly. Deer seems to have been a centre from which the Word was propagated, as was Banchory in later times. What influence there was from Iona and Lismore seems to have come mostly from the lands of the River Spey eastwards, whilst there was also an eastwards movement from Applecross.

In these early days, then, the Celtic Church (if there is such a thing) was very much of the same nature as the Church of Gaul and was of a predominantly Roman form. Indeed, it may be argued that, although on the outer edges geographically, the influence of the British Church on the continent was substantial – perhaps disproportionately so! However, because of the basically rural nature of the country, Britain never had, in these early days, the great bishoprics which can be found in Gaul located in the towns which were then growing apace. Britain's bishops can be better understood as being "regional" in their nature although there is some evidence that in Wales there was something more akin to the Gaulish model of bishops with fixed *sedes* (sees). The importance of the British Church can easily be seen in the fact that its bishops were called to the continental Councils of the time (*Arles* in 314; *Nicaea* in 325; *Rimini* in 359) and, in a "negative" sense, in the fact that one of the great "heresies" of the time, [Pelagianism](#), was born in Britain. Although scorned on the continent, the advent of Pelagianism demands that we accept that there was a considerable depth of theological thinking and ability within the British Church of the age.

Many of the [differences](#) attributed to the Early Church which slowly developed in later times can be explained by a tardiness to accept the continental reforms to the Roman ways. Perhaps caused by geographical isolation but also contributed to by politics, these differences were, we must remember, never of a theological nature. The Celtic Church was, in this sense, always orthodox.



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