1 EARLY IRELAND, AD 431–1169

Origins

May I begin in the year AD 431? It is the first authentic date in Irish history and provides a reassuringly firm vantage point from which to survey the next sixteen hundred years or so. Ireland, and Irish history, are of course much older than that. The oldest rock in Ireland – Inishtrahull, off the north coast of county Donegal – is reckoned by geologists to be some 1,700 million years old and archaeologists tell us that Ireland was first inhabited some 10,000 years ago – very recent in European terms; but for some 8,000 of those years we know next to nothing. True, the inhabitants of the island during those eight millennia (we may call them for convenience the pre-Celts) did leave behind them elaborately designed and precisely calibrated passage-tombs, some decorated with spirals and whorls, such as those at Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth, which command the bend of the River Boyne; but of the builders of these architectural treasures – their hopes, their desires, their religion, their language and their society – we know little, and can only wonder. At Newgrange the tomb, built *c.* 3,200 BC, is the oldest known astronomically designed structure in the world; the rifle-shot of sunlight that penetrates deep into the burial chamber during the winter solstice (21 December) has proved particularly fruitful in setting the imagination racing.

That we know little of these early inhabitants of Ireland has by no means prevented the creation or fabrication of origin legends, which, over the centuries, have sought to give historic legitimacy to contemporary institutions and to validate contemporary political stances. A manuscript *History of Ireland* compiled in *c.* 1819, but based on seventeenth-century compositions (which in their turn borrowed from the twelfth-century compilation, *The Book of Invasions*, the core of which can be dated to the seventh century), states baldly, 'The first [inhabitants] that landed upon this island were three Spanish fishermen drove upon the coast by a storm'. Happily, after some discussion of how the wives and families

of Capa, Laighne and Luasat arrived, the anonymous scribe had a moment of doubt and confessed: 'Note, this landing of the fishermen is deemed fabulous'.

Fable or not, the legend of a Spanish origin, and the story of successive waves of invaders each of whom were assimilated to the 'native' stock, proved enduring. The Irish admiration for the writings of the seventh-century Isodore of Seville was one benign aspect of this; but in the late sixteenth century, when Hugh O'Neill, the Gaelic chief then in revolt against English rule, was soliciting Spanish military aid, he made much of a shared ancestry between the Irish and the Spanish, boasting that a thousand years before the birth of Christ 'a king called Milesius sent his sons with a fleet of sixty ships which sailed from the port of La Corunna to conquer and populate Ireland'. In the 1930s those (on both sides) in favour of Irish intervention in the Spanish Civil War cited the legend of *Míl Espáinne*, or common Milesian ancestry, in their favour.[1] Similarly, by 1800 the notion of Gaelic antiquity had been appropriated by various contending groups on the island who sought to nail their contemporary anxieties by anchoring themselves to a prehistoric past and a splendid pre-Christian civilisation. Nor by that time had the legends of invasions and of *Míl* run their course, for in the nineteenth century older notions of race and romance were added to the cocktail of national identity to produce the stereotype of the feckless, fun-loving, if improvident, Celt, a standing rebuke to the equally stereotypical, hard-headed, sober and dull Saxon.

The archaeological and historical evidence for pre-Christian Ireland unfortunately does not enable us confidently to discern fable from fact. It seems that around 700 BC the *Keltoi* or Celts, migrating or, very probably, fleeing from northern Europe in the face of Roman and Germanic expansion, moved into Ireland, and by the first century AD their language and culture had been firmly established; but quite how, and precisely when, all this was done remains a mystery. It cannot be emphasised strongly enough that there are no archaeological findings to support the later literature of full-scale invasions and pitched battles; and in the absence of these most modern scholars have inclined towards a more benign, assimilative and absorptive contact between the Celtic newcomers and the neolithic natives. And yet it seems perverse to dismiss entirely the view that the incoming Gaels – the last of the Celtic peoples to arrive – treated the existing population any differently from other invaders in other lands, or indeed at other times. That they were a small but powerful band of warriors, early *conquistadores*, seems incontrovertible, for there is no evidence of large-scale settlement. The discovered material remains of the Celts in Ireland would hardly fill a wheelbarrow and, significantly, most of what the archaeologists have found has to do with weaponry. The likely scenario is that the invading Celts killed some of those who opposed them, dispossessed others and exacted tribute from

the rest. Minority or not, by the first century AD the Gaels, their language, laws and culture were supreme, and their royal forts at Tara, Eamhain Macha and Dún Ailinne (and others likewise probably taken over from their predecessors) bore testimony to their power, if not to their unity, for rivalry, division and disputed successions were endemic among their numerous kings. But to return to 431 . . .

Palladius and Patrick

In the contemporary *Chronicle* of Prosper of Aquitaine under the year 431 we read: 'To the Irish believing in Christ, Palladius having been ordained by Pope Celestine, is sent as first bishop' (*Ad Scottos in Christum credentes a papa Caelestino Palladius primus episcopus mittitur*). Prosper has an earlier reference to Palladius in 429 which shows him as an enemy of the Pelagian heresy. Unfortunately that is the extent of the historical record concerning Palladius and Ireland. The later Irish annals make no mention of him and, apart from the two one-line entries in Prosper's *Chronicle*, we are entirely in the dark concerning what Palladius did or where he went in Ireland (or indeed if he ever went there). Admittedly a much later source does cite a tradition that Palladius was martyred by the Irish soon after his arrival, but this is unreliable by virtue of its distance from the period and in any case very unlikely, for the early Irish church was so entirely bereft of martyrs that one so illustrious would surely have attracted many notices. None the less the mention of Palladius' mission is of the greatest significance for it reveals clearly that there were Christians in Ireland in 431; that they were sufficiently numerous to warrant a bishop; and finally that Palladius was to be the first.[2]

These early Christians in Ireland, it has been surmised, may have come from Britain as migrants, or as prisoners captured on raids, and the earlier reference to Palladius and heresy may indicate that he was dispatched to Ireland because of concerns that heresy was gaining a hold among the small number of Christians there. But it was not Palladius who was to become the 'Apostle of Ireland', but a Briton, Patrick, who, according to a seventh-century source, arrived in Ireland in 432 AD, suspiciously close to the date of Palladius' mission. The coincidence of the two dates – 431 for Palladius and reputedly 432 for Patrick, and perhaps also the approximation of the two names (Palladius/Patricius) – led to confusion between the two men, argument as to the order in which they arrived in Ireland and even conjecture about the existence of two or more Patricks. Given Patrick's modern status as the patron saint of the Irish, and icon of Ireland, this latter speculation, when published in the 1940s, was denounced as something akin to

national sabotage. And yet the blame for this unsatisfactory state of affairs lies not with the historians but with Patrick's hagiographers from the seventh century and later, who were so determined to inflate Patrick's reputation, airbrush from the record any rivals and boost Armagh's claims to precedence in the Irish church, that they excised all mention of Palladius from the record and sought to have only 'Holy Patrick, our Papa' as the sole instrument of conversion. In fairness Patrick himself may have colluded in the spin, for in his writings, two unique documents incontestably by him, he too makes no mention of Palladius. And yet while Patrick's *Confessio* and his *Letter against the soldiers of Coroticus* ignore his presumed predecessor, they do tell us something about Patrick and much about fifth-century Ireland.[3]

The context within which the *Confessio* was written, possibly in the late 470s, need not detain us. Patrick was apparently betrayed by a close friend, who had revealed some 'sin' that Patrick had committed in his youth, and which possibly called into question his fitness as a bishop. In his defence Patrick composed a *Confessio* or declaration. In this document he divulges a few details of his own history: he gives his name, his father's name (Calpurnius) and his grandfather's name (Potitus). He tells us that his father was a minor Roman official who had a small estate, and that he, Patrick, was brought up in relatively comfortable circumstances – the family had servants – near Bannaven Taberniae, possibly present-day Carlisle on the Anglo-Scottish border. On this estate Patrick, along with many others, was seized by Irish raiders, and carried back with them into slavery. After six years working as a shepherd 'beside the western sea', during which time his faith in Christ was strengthened, Patrick managed to escape back to Britain on board a ship. However, after some years in his parents' home he received a vision in which he was begged to return to Ireland to preach the gospel there, which he duly did. There he baptised 'many thousands of people', with the result that

> it came about in Ireland that people who had no acquaintance with God, but who up to now always had cults or idols and abominations, are recently – by this dispensation – made a people of the lord, and are known as children of God. Sons of the *Scotti* [=Irish raiders] and daughters of the chiefs are openly monks and virgins of Christ.

These details are infuriatingly vague. Beginning the well-known Irish tradition of 'whatever-you-say-say-nothing', Patrick notoriously gives no date for any of his adventures; he omits the names of all of those who were enslaved with him; he says nothing about the people he met, or who helped him escape; and out of all the places that he visited, travelled to or was confined in, he names only two – neither of which has been satisfactorily identified. In exasperation

one Irish historian has exclaimed that 'Patrick could hardly have told us less if he had not bothered to write at all'.[4] Nor is the second document by Patrick any more revealing. His blistering *Letter against the soldiers of Coroticus* was prompted by their 'unspeakably horrible crime', an attack on newly baptised Christians, some of whom they slew, others hauled off into slavery and – for the women – into whoredom ('they have distributed young Christian girls as prizes'). Patrick understandably excoriates Coroticus' thugs as 'allies of the *Scotti* and the apostate Picts . . . bloodthirsty men embrued in the blood of innocent Christians', but as before, he gives no details about the date or location of the outrage. While Coroticus might have been the first (though assuredly not the last) recorded British commander whose soldiers massacred people in Ireland, he remains a shadowy figure and his identity is unclear. He has tentatively been linked with a British king of Dumbarton of the same name, but it is by no means certain that they are one and the same. And yet, for all their vagueness and imprecision these documents – incontestably composed by Patrick in the fifth century – shed light on the Ireland to which he was dragged as a slave and to which he returned as a missionary.

St Patrick's Ireland

We may begin with the prevalence of slavery. Patrick's fate was clearly not uncommon. As the Roman empire in Britain began to crumble in the early decades of the fifth century, attacks by *Scotti* became more daring and more devastating – Patrick tells us that many thousands were seized along with himself. Historians have suggested that Patrick used the term 'thousands' simply to signify 'many'; but his Latin was precise, even if his dates and place names were not. He may well have meant that thousands were in fact seized and it may be that these captives were the main way in which Christianity came to Ireland, for it is clear that Palladius and, initially, Patrick set out to minister to existing Christian communities. Equally, these captives may suggest how Roman influence spread in Ireland. Famously, no Roman legionnaire ever set foot in Ireland, and in later centuries the fact that Ireland had lain outside the Roman empire was held to explain irremediable Irish barbarism. However, with the collapse of Roman rule in Britain in the early 400s, of which the increasingly daring raids of the *Scotti*, and the proliferation of Irish settlements in what is now Wales were both cause and symptom, a process which may be called the romanisation of Irish culture began. Not the least of the many ironies in the history of Ireland is that 'Rome', its language, literature and its religion, came to Ireland in the period when Rome itself was succumbing to the barbarian onslaught.

From Patrick's writings we also learn that he worked as a shepherd in the far west and this highlights the obvious point that fifth-century Ireland was a wholly rural society in which cattle and sheep-rearing were all important. In later centuries land would be the key indicator of a person's social and political standing and authority; but in Patrick's time, livestock counted for everything; many of the Irish law tracts that survive (admittedly, dating from the late sixth century) have to do with livestock. However, dead stock too were valuable: Patrick tells us that, on his escape from captivity, he and the sailors killed some pigs and ate their flesh. Again, the fact that forests figure prominently in Patrick's narratives indicates just how much of Ireland was wooded at that time; but from archaeological evidence, it is clear that arable farming was also practised – wheat and oats were planted, and barley and flax too. Bee-keeping would have been carried on during Patrick's time, though he makes no mention of it. Patrick also writes that he escaped on board a ship and this detail reveals the nexus of trading, settling and preying that connected the sister islands of Ireland and Britain.

Patrick's writings also shed some light on the position of women in early Ireland. In his *Confessio* he tells us that 'there was a certain blessed noblewoman, of Scottic [=Irish] origin, mature and beautiful whom I baptised', and who had been commanded by an angel of God to be a 'virgin of Christ'. And in his *Letter against Coroticus* he writes that he could not count the number of 'daughters of chiefs' who had done likewise and become nuns. He also reveals that, on occasion, these 'religious women . . . would spontaneously offer me gifts or throw some of their personal ornaments on the altar', but that he declined, for fear of scandal, to accept them. Again, he claimed that he had baptised slave women, and he admitted that both sets of women, the well-born and the slaves, had to withstand 'harassment and false accusations' and 'continual fears and threats' from their parents and masters in order to draw nearer to the Lord.

These are significant details. Early Irish heroic literature may be full of warrior women, such as Queen Medb, powerful and sexually voracious, but the reality was rather different. In the early Irish law tracts women were defined as 'legally incompetent, senseless' and on a par with slaves, children and the insane. However, this bleak assessment is not entirely borne out by the individual laws that have come down to us. Women, especially propertied women, and widows had certain protections; and in the matter of marriage and divorce, Irish women were probably 'ahead' of their sisters in continental Europe. For example, the Irish law tracts set out nine types of sexual union, with the first type ('union of joint property') down to the sixth and seventh types (union through willing abduction) being allowed, but with the eighth (union through rape) and the ninth (union between two insane persons) being forbidden. The matter was further

complicated by the widespread practice among the very well-to-do of polygamy, in which the concubine was apparently valued less – in the eyes of the law – than the 'chief wife'. Divorce too was common, though while a man had any number of reasons to divorce his wife (among them infertility, abortion, infidelity, child-killing or even for being a slattern about the house), the wife had relatively few, among them if her husband were impotent, homosexual, violent or was given to blabbing about what happened 'under the blankets'. In such cases the divorced woman might receive compensation and might have her 'bride price' returned. We may compare this with the situation under Burgundian law where a woman attempting divorce was to be drowned in a cesspit. And, as noted, Irish women were free to dispose of their own jewellery as they saw fit – something which, notwithstanding Patrick's doubts, the church was quick to welcome. Significantly, Patrick encouraged his female converts, his virgins of Christ, to flout social conventions and it might be argued that in doing so he was very daring, even quietly revolutionary.

Lastly, in an aside, Patrick discloses that when he sought to flee Ireland on the ship, he entered into terms with the sailors, but that he 'refused, for fear of God, to suck their nipples'. This startling remark – given matter of factly – has been a cause of some embarrassment to Patrician enthusiasts, but it has to be seen in the context of Patrick's detestation of 'cults or idols and abominations' which he had dedicated his life to overthrowing. What Patrick was doing was pointing to the prevalence of pagan practices – sucking nipples was a way to pledge loyalty – and in doing so he was making the obvious point that the Ireland in which he had been a slave was largely pagan.

Like so much else, the nature of Irish paganism remains obscure. None of the pagan teaching was committed to writing, and the first Christian writers were so determined to obliterate all record of pre-Christian beliefs and practices that they deliberately drew a veil over them and, with a shudder of revulsion, moved on. Modern scholars have resisted too precise a definition of pagan beliefs on the grounds that since pagans evidently drew little distinction between what might be called the supernatural and the natural, nor should we. From Patrick's writings we learn that sun-worship was a central tenet of the pagans among whom he ministered, though given the Irish climate, devotion must have been sporadic rather than constant. Undoubtedly some woods, rivers and wells held sacred significance too. Later traditions have Patrick doing battle with a priestly caste of druids, and it is likely that the *filid* or poets, and brehons or judges, also exercised priestly powers. What is clear is that Christianity in Ireland, as elsewhere in continental Europe, adopted and adapted pagan practices and heathen ceremonies to its own purposes. Thus 'patterns' (festivals held in honour of a local saint), *turasanna* (local pilgrimages) and the great harvest festival of

Lughnasa (1 August), still celebrated to an extent in Ireland, all probably trace their origins to pagan practices.

Consider the history of Tara, county Meath.[5] For a thousand years before Patrick, Tara had been a vital pagan site (their Babylon, according to one seventh-century writer) in which kings had been inaugurated following the Feast of Tara or *Feis Temro*, a primitive fertility rite. Tara was also the royal fortress in which Patrick had overcome, according to later tradition, the heathen high-king, Lóegaire mac Néill (their 'Nabuchodonosor') and his druids (but note that Patrick in his writings does not mention Tara). Notwithstanding these powerful pagan associations (indeed, because of them) in later centuries the site was colonised for Christianity and synods of bishops were held there; and it was also the power-centre of the Ó Néill dynasty, sometimes described as high-kings of Tara, until the early middle ages. The potent resonances of this pagan place persisted: archaeological evidence suggests that in the year 800 Tara was little more than 'a series of undulations in the grass', but a thousand years later the Meath rebels of 1798 used it as a rallying and assembly point; and in 1843 Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator, was canny enough to stage one of his 'monster meetings' on its slopes. In 1850 the discovery of the 'Tara' brooch – a bronze clasp overlaid with gold, amber and glass (figure 1.1) – served to anoint the site as the *fons et origo* of Celtic art and design, and the brooch itself quickly joined the harp, the colour green and the shamrock as emblems of essential and authentic Irish identity.

The find confirmed Tara's pre-eminence as a place sacred to the Irish, and belonging to them alone; threats from outsiders were seen off in a robust fashion. In 1902 a group of British Israelites, believing that the Ark of the Covenant lay under Tara, to the fury of the Irish started illegal excavations at the site. This 'desecration' was speedily ended through pressure from an unlikely alliance of W. B.Yeats, Arthur Griffith, Douglas Hyde and George Moore.[6] Similarly, when in 1915 Ishbel, Lady Aberdeen, the then viceroy's wife and a headlong enthusiast for all things Irish, sought to have Tara added to her title, she faced popular clamour at her temerity. Mere enthusiasm for things Irish emphatically did not bring membership of the 'Celtic' race. The tactless Lady Aberdeen and her husband had no option but to compromise, and instead they made do with Aberdeen and Temair, the latter word an approximation of the Gaelic version of Tara, and thus curiously less open to objection. In 2008, a battle royal raged over a proposed motorway route which threatened to wreck the integrity of the Tara site.[7]

During her time at Dublin Castle, Lady Ishbel Aberdeen had involved herself in various projects to help the Irish poor and she promoted the products of Irish cottage industries, particularly Irish lace. She also hosted many Irish nights at

1.1 Tara brooch. Probably made in the eighth century and found on a beach near Drogheda in 1850, the Tara brooch, along with the Ardagh chalice, also eighth century, was highly prized by cultural revivalists in late nineteenth-century Ireland as proof of early Ireland's superiority in material civilisation. National Museum of Ireland.

the castle, most notably perhaps a St Patrick's night ball on the eve of the Great War, when guests danced Irish jigs and were then given a special treat – songs in Irish 'heard in the Castle for the first time'. Just as the memory, the mystery and the romance of pagan and royal Tara had survived long after Tara itself was 'in grass', so too had the fugitive, though real, Patrick of history been transformed by the laying on of legends over the centuries to become the fictitious St Patrick, patron saint of the Irish whose feast day, 17 March, would be commemorated wherever there were Irish.

This astonishing outcome could not have been predicted in the fifth century. If 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. His name is not mentioned in any extant record or annal for well over a hundred years after his death (variously given as 461 or 493), and it was another hundred years before any attempt at a biography was made. The first effort at Patrick's story was essayed by Muirchú, who placed him firmly in Armagh and portrayed him as a superhero from the early Irish sagas rather than as the modest, all too human (though still quite remarkable) individual revealed in his writings. Muirchú also established the cheering tradition that on Judgement Day Patrick would sit alongside Jesus when the fate of the Irish was to be determined; less-favoured nations would have no one to intercede for them. Intriguingly, Muirchú also appears to have incorporated details from Palladius' life into Patrick's. His confused work, not surprisingly, has been dismissed as revealing 'an unconquerable bias towards inaccuracy'.[8]

Muirchú's efforts were supplemented by one Tírechán, whose overriding motive in writing about Patrick was likewise to establish the primacy of Armagh in the Irish church, and who therefore needed to establish (fabricate if need be) a Patrician connection to Armagh by claiming that Patrick built his church and was buried there. These two seventh-century hagiographers in effect launched the legend of Patrick, and later medieval scribes enthusiastically embellished it. Secular rulers too soon realised the potency of Patrick: the Ó Néill dynasty had already used Patrick to legitimise their ascendancy from the seventh to the tenth centuries and when, in the late twelfth century, the newly arrived in Ireland soldier of fortune, John de Courcy, attempted to conquer the kingdom of Ulster (present-day Antrim and Down) he aligned himself with Patrick by striking coins with his own name on one side and Patricius on the other. He also promoted the cult of Patrick, doubtless believing that this would give his land-grab some domestic and historic validation.

And so it continued: by the end of the seventeenth century, the fable of Patrick's banishment of the snakes from Ireland had been added to the literature (a Roman writer had noted the absence of snakes from Ireland over two hundred years