



'I AM PATRICK':  
*The Life and Historical Context of Patrick*

**The Roman Imperium and Britain**

When Patrick was born in the late fourth century A.D., the Romans had been in Britain for roughly 350 years. In the first fifty years or so of Roman rule, there had been stiff resistance to the Romans in three regions in particular: by the Celtic tribes in what would become Wales; by Boudicca (d. 60/61), the Queen of the Iceni, inhabitants of present-day East Anglia, who led a massive rebellion; and by the Brigantes in northern Britain.<sup>1</sup> But after the suppression of the revolt of Boudicca, which came close to ending Roman rule in Britain, southern Britain was pacified. The northern Celts, the Brigantes, were suppressed in the 70s. As for what is now Scotland, Caledonia to the Romans, its conquest also provided major challenges to the invader. Despite a victory over the Caledonian tribes at Mons Graupius in north-east Scotland in 83,<sup>2</sup> the Romans eventually abandoned Scotland. For a period of time, between 142 and

1. Guy de la Bédoyère, *Roman Britain: A New History* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2006), pp. 31-44. On Boudicca, see the overview by T.W. Potter, 'Boudicca (d. AD 60/61)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 (<http://www.oxforddnb.com.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/view/article/2732>, accessed April 23, 2013).
2. For the main literary description of this key engagement, see Tacitus, *Agricola* 29-37. For a modern discussion of the battle, see Nic Fields, *Rome's Northern Frontier A.D. 70-235* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2005), pp. 8-10.

164, they occupied southern Scotland and built a defensive wall, the Antonine Wall, which ran across the Forth-Clyde isthmus. Eventually, though, the northern frontier was established at Hadrian's Wall in what is now northern England.<sup>3</sup>

South of Hadrian's Wall, the Romans crisscrossed the land with a network of roads and urban centres of importance, such as Eboracum (York), Glevum (Gloucester) and Londinium (London), were developed. Before the Roman conquest of Britannia, although the Britons had hill-forts and one or two places like Calleva (Silchester) that had certain features in common with Roman towns (*oppida*), there was no real urban culture where settlements had 'permanent architecture, clearly defined commercial and administrative areas, or residential zones'.<sup>4</sup> Roman rule also led to lavish villas dotting the countryside, built by the Romano-British upper class. Among these wealthy Britons, there grew to be an appreciation of and desire for Roman culture, and they subsequently sought to ensure that their children received a proper Roman education. The Roman historian Tacitus (c.56–c.120) depicts this eagerness of the British upper classes to acquire Roman culture in a famous text from his biography of Gnaeus Julius Agricola (40–93), the Roman general who was instrumental in extending Roman rule throughout northern Britain and who also happened to be Tacitus's father-in-law:

[Agricola] educated the sons of the [British] chiefs in the liberal arts. ... The result was that instead of loathing the Latin language they became eager to speak it effectively. In the same way, our national dress came into favour and the toga was everywhere to be seen.<sup>5</sup>

3. For an excellent study of the wall, see Nic Fields, *Hadrian's Wall A.D. 122–410* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003).
4. De la Bédoyère, *Roman Britain*, pp. 131–2.
5. *Agricola* 21, trans. H. Mattingly and revised S.A. Handford, *Tacitus: The Agricola and the Germania* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970), pp. 72–3. For a brief review of Agricola's career in Britannia, see De la Bédoyère, *Roman Britain*, pp. 42–7. See also the extremely helpful overview by Malcolm Todd, 'Julius Agricola, Gnaeus (A.D. 40–93)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 (<http://www.oxforddnb.com.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/view/article/48290>, accessed April 23, 2013).

It is not surprising that the members of this social stratum became genuinely bilingual, conversant in both their native British and the Latin of their rulers. On the other hand, the lower classes, especially those in rural areas probably knew little, if any, Latin.<sup>6</sup> The ability of Patrick to write in Latin, albeit imperfectly as we shall see, is a clue to his social origins: he was from the upper class of Romano-British society.<sup>7</sup>

At the close of the fourth century, however, the comfortable world of the Romanized British upper class was about to be shattered, never to be restored. During the last quarter of that century the Empire had suffered a number of severe body blows which would precipitate the total collapse of imperial rule in the West in the following century. Those momentous events were naturally not without impact on Roman Britain. During the winter of 406–407, the Rhine river, the natural northern frontier of the Western Roman Empire, froze to such an extent that a large number of Germanic warriors were able to cross over to ravage the Roman territories of Gaul and Hispania. They were never driven out. The following summer, Constantine III (d. 411), a usurper who had been elevated to imperial power by the army in Britain, crossed the Channel, ostensibly to repel the barbarians. The legions never returned.

In the decades that followed, the British sought to organize their own defence against Saxon raiders from the east and hit-and-run attacks by Irish pirates from the west. But with the departure of the legions, economic and cultural decay started to set in. Towns began to be deserted and the lavish villas of the upper classes abandoned. The monetary system began to suffer decay

6. Kenneth Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1953), pp. 97-106.

7. See the discussion of Patrick's social background by R.P.C. Hanson, *The Life and Writings of the Historical Saint Patrick* (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1983), pp. 4-5; E.A. Thompson, *Who Was Saint Patrick?* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1985), pp. 40-1; Máire B. de Paor, *Patrick: The Pilgrim Apostle of Ireland* (New York, NY: Regan Books, 1998), pp. 26-8.

and the Roman system of education also probably collapsed.<sup>8</sup> But what did not collapse or leave with the Roman legions was the Christian witness in the archipelago.

### The British church<sup>9</sup>

While Patrick's writings constitute some of the earliest literary evidence from an actual member of the British church, there is written testimony going back to the second century regarding the presence of Christianity in the British Isles. In the 190s the North African author Tertullian (fl.190–220), for instance, states in his *Against the Jews* that Christianity had spread so far it had reached Britain and had gone beyond the Antonine Wall. In answer to his question, 'In whom else have all the nations believed, than in the Christ who has already come?' he states that even 'places in Britain ..., though inaccessible to the Romans, have yielded to Christ.'<sup>10</sup> It may well be the case, as Roger Pearse has suggested, that this reference to the province of Britannia is due to its reputation for being remote,<sup>11</sup> though a reference a few years later by the learned Alexandrian exegete Origen (c. 185–253/254) to Christianity's presence in remote Britannia seems to indicate that Tertullian's knowledge, so far as it goes, is accurate. Origen was aware that the Christian faith had secured adherents in Britain by his day, for he asked, 'when ever did the land of Britain agree on the worship of one god before the arrival of Christ?' By the late second century/early third century, then, 'British Christianity was sufficiently well-founded and its membership sufficiently large that Christians in North Africa and Alexandria' knew of its

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8. Hanson, *Life and Writings of the Historical Saint Patrick*, p. 7.
  9. For an excellent study of the church in Roman Britain, see David Petts, *Christianity in Roman Britain* (Stroud, Gloucestershire/Charleston, SC: Tempus Publishing, 2003).
  10. *Against the Jews* 7. See also Joseph F. Kelly, 'The Origins of Christianity in Britain: The Literary Evidence' (Unpublished paper, May, 1983), pp. 4-5.
  11. See his web-page 'Adversus Judaeos (Against the Jews)' at his [www.tertullian.org](http://www.tertullian.org) (accessed April 23, 2013).

existence.<sup>12</sup> How Christianity first came to the shores of Britain is impossible to determine. Patristic scholar W.H.C. Frend plausibly suggested that it was brought there by merchants or by soldiers garrisoned in Britain.<sup>13</sup> Douglas Dales believes Jewish Christian traders in London to be the most likely bearers of the faith, for one of the early martyrs in Britain was a Christian with the Jewish name of Aaron.<sup>14</sup> But up until the fourth century very little is known with certainty, in the way of either literary or archaeological evidence, about Christianity in Britain. With the fourth century, however, there appear a number of statements about the British church and its bishops by contemporary authors on the continent.<sup>15</sup> Two that are of some import are those made by Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 299–373) and Hilary of Poitiers (c. 300–c. 368) to the effect that the British church had fully assented to the Nicene Creed and its condemnation of the fourth-century heresy, Arianism, which denied the full deity of the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup> As we shall see, a significant part of Patrick's spiritual bequest to the Celts in Ireland will be a doctrine of the Trinity that is in full accord with that of the Nicene Creed.

**The Nicene Creed:** The original Nicene Creed, issued at the Council of Nicaea in 325, did not contain a paragraph on the Holy Spirit. To rectify this lacuna, a new creed, which is also commonly called the Nicene Creed, was issued at the Council of Constantinople in 381. It runs as follows:

12. Kelly, 'Origins of Christianity in Britain', p. 5. cf. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Rev. ed.; London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 63, who believes that it was not until the middle of the third century that Christianity was securely established.
13. 'Romano-British Christianity and the West: Comparison and Contrast' in Susan M. Pearce, ed., *The Early Church in Western Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: B.A.R. [British Archaeological Reports], 1982), p. 6.
14. *Light to the Isles. A study of missionary theology in Celtic and early Anglo-Saxon Britain* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1997), p. 27. For the brief account of his death, see Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.7.
15. See Dales, *Light to the Isles*, pp. 27-8.
16. Athanasius, *Letter to the Emperor Jovian* 2; Hilary, *On Synods* 1.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, eternally begotten from the Father; Light from Light, true God from true God; begotten, not made, of one being with the Father; by whom all things were made. Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and on the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.

And we believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Archaeological evidence from third- and fourth-century Britain also confirms a growing acceptance of Christianity by the upper classes, a movement that was parallel to what was happening in the rest of the Empire.<sup>17</sup> Archaeologists have uncovered Christian places of worship dating to the fourth and fifth centuries, for example. One of the most interesting of these is at Lullingstone in Kent. Among a number of wealthy villas in the valley of the River Darent has been found a villa that contained at one point a Christian house-church. This villa was built towards the

17. For a discussion of the evidence for the existence of Christianity in Britain up to and including the fourth century, R.P.C. Hanson, *Saint Patrick: His Origins and Career* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 30-4; Charles Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to A.D. 500* (London: Batsford Academic and Educational Ltd., 1981); Kelly, 'Origins', pp. 5-9; Philip Freeman, *St Patrick of Ireland. A Biography* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004), pp. 59-60.

close of the first century, and in the following century it was substantially expanded by a man who clearly possessed considerable wealth. At the beginning of the third century, however, the villa was suddenly deserted and it lay derelict for the next fifty years or so. During much of this time the empire experienced major political and military challenges, and the dereliction of the villa may well have had something to do with these events. It was re-occupied in the final twenty-five years of that century, possibly during the time when the Emperor Diocletian was able to bring the Empire back from the brink of disaster (240–316). By 360–370, the owner was a Christian, and he deliberately adapted a wing of the villa to Christian worship. The remains of paintings on the walls of one of the rooms in this wing, now in the British Museum, have been reconstructed enough for us to identify a large chi-rho symbol surrounded by a wreath. It has also been possible to reconstruct a series of seven four-foot tall figures that adorned the west wall of this worship centre: each of the figures is clothed in beautiful, brightly coloured garments, and standing in the posture of prayer.<sup>18</sup> This was no doubt an estate chapel, available for the Christians who worked on the villa's property as well as for the people who lived in the villa.<sup>19</sup>

Then, by the turn of the fifth century we encounter for the first time prominent British churchmen: men such as Pelagius (375/380–423/429), whose perspective on the Christian faith brought about a far-ranging controversy with that colossal thinker of antiquity, Augustine (354–430); and Faustus (c.408–c.490), bishop of Riez and a well-known preacher in Gaul.<sup>20</sup>

18. See H.H. Scullard, *Roman Britain, Outpost of the Empire* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), pp. 119–21, 166–8; Roger J.A. Wilson, *A Guide to the Roman Remains in Britain* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1975), pp. 52–3; Petts, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, pp. 79–81.

19. Hanson, *Life and Writings of the Historical Saint Patrick*, pp. 8–9; Chadwick, *Early Church*, p. 63.

20. For Faustus, see J.G. Cazenove, 'Faustus (11)' in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*, eds. William Smith and Henry Wace (London: John Murray, 1880), II, pp. 467–70; Hanson, *Saint Patrick: His Origins and Career*, pp. 63–5.