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### *Author's Preface*

It will quickly become apparent to anyone reading this book that its origin lies in a perusal of Damian McManus' *A guide to Ogam* (Maynooth 1991). His analysis of the language found on ogam stones provides a relative chronology of the various inscriptions which can be used to break up the large corpus of these monuments into earlier and later types. More specifically, it allows us to distinguish stones with inscriptions which are fifth century or earlier (pre-apocope) from those which are late sixth or early seventh-century (post-syncope) in date. The purpose of this short monograph is to explore the archaeological implications of this chronology. I shall argue that the archaeological evidence for memorial pillars above inhumation burials and for dedicatory pillars marking Christian cemeteries both appear in the Irish archaeological record at roughly the same time as the earliest strata in the relative linguistic chronology of Irish ogam inscriptions. Furthermore, there are parallels to be drawn between Irish ogam stones and the Early Christian memorial stones of western Europe, both in terms of the motifs used to decorate the monuments and the formulae used in the inscriptions. I suggest, therefore, that the custom of erecting ogam stones stems largely from contemporary Christian practices on the Continent and in Britain and that analysis of these monuments provides us with concrete evidence for fifth-century Christian communities in Ireland.

This study began as a paper, versions of which were delivered at a conference on the early history of Mayo Abbey, April 1996, at the Tenth Irish Conference of Medievalists in Maynooth, June 1996, at the Medieval History seminar in University College Dublin, February 1997 and at the Medieval Postgraduate Seminar in St Patrick's College, Maynooth, February 1997. I would like to thank all those who commented on those occasions and in particular, Kim McCone, Damian McManus and Liam Breatnach who encouraged me to write it up for publication, who read earlier drafts of this work and who patiently answered all my questions on matters of historical linguistics while saving me from many errors. I would also like to thank Maria Medlycott for permission to publish some of the conclusions of her MA thesis on standing stones (UCD, 1989) and Colmán Etchingham for his efforts to promote grammatical English and remorseless logic. I alone, of course, am responsible for any errors that remain.

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Prehistoric standing stone, Ballintermon, Co. Kerry with a pre-apocope inscription - VOENACUNAS M... - probably of fifth-century date (*CIIC* 164)



## 1. IRISH CONTACT WITH LATE ROMAN BRITAIN

Probably the most famous character in medieval Irish history is St Patrick, a British boy captured by Irish raiders who escaped from slavery in Ireland but who later returned as a missionary. The story of his life is known from the autobiographical account in his *Confessio*, an apologia written towards the end of his life and apparently intended for clerics in Britain. Unfortunately, this text contains no dates so that Patrick, despite his fame, belongs to an unknown period in the history of the two islands. Attempts to define his chronology have provoked one of the liveliest and most impassioned debates in Irish historiography; the consensus today is that he lived sometime in the fifth century (Binchy 1962, 96-115, 165-8; Hanson 1968, 171-88) although the case made by Mario Esposito (1956-7) for a late fourth-century dating contains a number of points which have yet to be fully refuted (Koch 1990, McCone 1996, 92).

For the most part, this debate has focussed on the documentary evidence for Patrick, both his own writings and the rather later accounts composed by followers of his cult. The archaeological sources for the period in which Patrick was writing have come in for less discussion. Indeed, the only detailed investigation to date has been the papers arising from a Royal Irish Academy colloquium on Hiberno-Roman relations and material remains, held in 1975. The chief purpose of this short book is to look at a category of evidence which was not considered at that time, namely ogam stones. A number of these are fifth century in date and may provide us with contemporary data about St Patrick's world. I argue that the investigation of these monuments, and indeed of archaeological material in general has the potential to widen the debate beyond the "two dismal conundrums" which E.A. Thompson saw as having bedevilled most studies of Patrick; namely, what were the exact dates of the saint and what is the relevance of the later hagiographical legends and their annalistic by-products. Despite Thompson's strictures, these questions have remained the focus for the most recent studies of Patrick (De Paor 1993, Dumville 1993) and the need to broaden the enquiry remains.

Historians of both these islands tend to link Patrick's mission to a sudden upsurge of British contacts with Ireland towards the end of the fourth century. Donnchadh Ó Corráin's recent exposition of the orthodox position runs as follows:

Ireland lay outside the Roman Empire but was soon to be heavily influenced by it. This was inevitable and came notably in the wake of the decline of Roman power in the fourth and especially in the fifth century. Roman material in Ireland falls into two groups: an early one in the first and second centuries and a late one in the fourth century and after. .... The evidence of the fourth and fifth centuries points to close contact. As the Roman grip on Britain weakened, the Irish in the west and the Picts in the north (who had long been a threat as raiders) began to attack the province with growing success. Britain was devastated by a simultaneous attack of Irish, Picts and Saxons, from the west, north and east. Ammianus Marcellinus, a contemporary, calls it "a barbarian conspiracy". It marked one of the many stages of Roman collapse and Roman imperial rule effectively ended in the very early fifth century. Concurrently, Irish settlement in Britain began. It has been suggested that some of these settlements may have been formed with Roman encouragement or at least connivance, in the hope of setting up small buffer-states against further raiders. But this is uncertain.... Close relations with Britain, with Roman and latterly Christian culture brought about dramatic changes in Ireland. It is likely that the products of successful plundering expeditions changed the balance of power amongst dynasties within Ireland, and colonies abroad may have provided the resources for dynastic expansion at home (1989, 5-6).

Patrick's abduction by raiders is thus seen in the context of extensive Irish military activity in Britain which brought about concomitant development in Ireland itself. This activity brought about political change in the rule of both islands; the Roman administration was replaced by a series of small kingdoms led by warlords in Britain, some of whom were of Irish origin, whilst in Ireland, profits from raiding expeditions in Britain are said to have brought hitherto obscure dynasties to prominence.

There is no doubt that Irishmen did raid Britain at some point during the late fourth century and that they caused sufficient havoc to have been a matter of political and military concern to the Roman

administration. In addition to the barbarian conspiracy of 367 mentioned by Ammianus Marcellinus, the documentary evidence for an Irish presence in Britain at this time includes a panegyric of A.D. 399/400. This is addressed to the imperial commander of Western Europe and makes reference to the fact that the Irish had raised all Ireland against Britain and that “the sea foamed to the beat of hostile oars” (Miller 1975, 143; Salway 1993, 296; Platnauer 1922, ii 20). This refers to incursions of the fourth century; the same author also states that “ice-bound Hibernia wept for the heaps of slain Scotti” during the reign of the Emperor Theodosius who ruled from 379 to 395 A.D. (Platnauer 1922, i 289). Patrick himself, whatever his exact dates, refers to “thousands” of Britons captured or killed by Irish raiders (Conneely 1993, 25).

To extrapolate that this was the only type of contact between the two islands or that after a short burst of activity in the first and second centuries, there was a cessation of all contact until the fourth and early fifth, appears unwarranted. St Patrick, after all, also mentions that Irishmen were being sold to Picts at some point in this era (Conneely 1993, 54-5) and it seems unlikely that this trade began just as the ruling class of Roman Britain were under severe threat. Charles Thomas has seen fit to draw analogies between (i) Irish migration to Britain around the year 400, (ii) that which occurred after the potato famine of 1845-8 and (iii) the economic migrations of the 1980s (Thomas 1994, 3). This is merely to underline the geographical reality that Britain is the nearest landmass of any size to Ireland, that the shortest sea-crossing to mainland Europe is through Britain and that when the situation at home is bad, Irish people tend to seek better conditions abroad, most often in the neighbouring island. No-one would seriously suggest that the sum of all Irish/British contact is due to sporadic periods of island-wide turmoil in Ireland. Thus, while the view that Ireland was affected by the presence of Roman imperial power in Britain appears plausible, the suggestion that the collapse of that power coincided with the most significant period of Roman influence in Ireland requires more justification than it has had.

As Ó Corráin states, there is archaeological material of Roman provenance in Ireland of fourth- and fifth-century date. J. D. Bateson's indices (1973, 1976) indicate that, at present, this consists of coins, ingots, jewellery, some so-called ‘toilet implements’ and some sherds of pottery.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is a minimalist list. I have not included those objects which, though of Roman manufacture, are not specific to the fourth and fifth century.

The distribution of these finds appears to be loosely focussed on the major river systems and harbours: Dublin Bay, Belfast Lough, Lough Foyle, the Shannon estuary, the Boyne and Barrow rivers (Bateson 1973, Map 3). The type of sites on which this material is found include forts such as Freestone Hill, Co. Kilkenny or Loughshinny, Co. Dublin, sandhill sites such as Ballybunnion, Co. Kerry and prehistoric monuments such as the Giant's Ring, Co. Antrim or Newgrange, Co. Meath.

The archaeological evidence which most closely accords with the historical indications of fourth-century Irish raids is the hoard at Ballinrees, Co. Derry. This is made up of some fifteen thousand coins together with silver ingots and cut plate. Among the coins of Ballinrees were found *siliquae* of the usurper Constantine III who brought the British legions to Gaul in 407 and created a personal empire there. These were the last Roman coins to be brought into Britain and are very rare in these islands (Johns and Bland 1994, 167). It was said by the nineteenth-century commentators who published the original find that many of these coins were clipped (*ibid.*, 168), a feature which links the Ballinrees material with the numerous other hoards of late fourth-century date in Britain (Archer 1979).

Clipping apparently did not take place on the Continent and there is little evidence to suggest it was widespread in Britain before the end of the fourth century. A.S. Esmonde Cleary has argued that the fourth-century imperial prohibitions against the practice, which invoked the death penalty for transgressors, were effective as long as the coins were being collected for tax and that clipping must have taken place when the Roman authorities were no longer capable of raising revenue in Britain (Esmonde Cleary 1989, 139). At the same time, the sheer number of coins involved in many cases (one hoard in Hampshire has over a thousand coins whilst two others in Gloucestershire and Somerset have 1485 and 2045 respectively) implies that they were deposited in an era when coins were still relatively widely available. Furthermore, the lack of sub-Roman or Anglo-Saxon material associated with these hoards suggests that their deposition date did not long post-date the early fifth century. This would agree with Andrew Burnett's dating of the Ballinrees hoard to *c.* 407-11 (Burnett 1984, 165).<sup>2</sup> Archaeological evidence could, therefore, be used to

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Dolley (1976, 182) dated the Ballinrees find to *c.* 425 on the basis of an URBS ROMA coin from Trier contained in the hoard. Burnett has argued persuasively that this coin represents an antique British forgery and is useless for dating purposes.



supplement the historical references to fourth-century raiding and to imply that at least some Irish raiding on Britain may have continued into the early fifth century. Alternatively, as Malcolm Todd has argued for some Scottish hoards, the deposit at Ballinrees may represent a cash payment to a friendly dynasty outside the imperial borders (Todd 1985). Tacitus states, after all, that towards the end of the first century A.D. Agricola befriended *unus ex regulis gentis* (one of the minor kings of the <Irish> people), whom faction had driven from home, in the hopes that the Romans might be able to use him in the future (Hutton & Ogilvie 1970, 70-71). Esmonde Cleary has added additional weight to Todd's argument, pointing to the fact that re-examination of a number of hoards from outside the imperial frontiers correspond in weight to Roman pounds or multiples thereof (Esmonde Cleary 1989, 99).

K.S. Painter has suggested that the ingots found at both Ballinrees and at Balline, Co. Limerick may represent soldiers' pay which in the later fourth century was often measured in pounds as well as coin (Painter 1965, 84-8). This suggestion has been taken up by more recent commentators (Mytum 1981, 445-6; Raftery 1994, 216-7). These payments probably took place on the anniversary of imperial accession every five years and on the emperor's birthday. The quinquennial donative consisted of five gold *solidi* per man while the accession donative is typified by Julian's allocation of five gold *solidi* and a pound of silver to each man in his field army in 361 - one of the mobile forces or *comitatenses* who were the highest paid troops in the fourth century (Jones 1964, 608, 623-626). Given that standard deductions for bedding, food, clothing and weapons were made at source and that the majority of the Roman troops in Britain appear to have been the less well-off *limitanei* (frontier-troops) or *numeri* (type of auxiliary unit) (Jones 1964, 610, Breeze and Dobson 1991, 149-158), it seems unlikely that any soldier could have acquired the vast sums represented at Ballinrees in the course of his normal duties.

The suggestion is rather more plausible in the case of Balline which consisted of four ingots, in whole or in part and three pieces of silver plate. Official Roman seals are present on three of the four ingots and one bears an ISATIS stamp, which is paralleled at the Roman fort of Richborough. This site was excavated between the wars but unfortunately, the findings were not published until much later and the latest levels cannot now be dated precisely (Reece in Cunliffe 1968, 200-217). There are, however some 20,000 copper coins of the period 395-402 in the uppermost levels of



the Roman deposits which suggests that the Irish ingots may have left Britain prior to the beginning of the fifth century. Thus the Balline hoard could be used to suggest that some Irishmen may have been working as soldiers for the Roman army at the same time as others were raiding their frontiers.

Throughout the period of the empire, the Roman army had employed non-Roman troops. There are a variety of different terms for such men and modern scholarship appears to be moving away from earlier attempts to draw precise distinctions in their manner of recruitment and the duties which they performed. Troops known as *auxilia* (auxiliaries) are known from the first century A.D., when they were seen as less prestigious than the legionaries; there are many signs of local variation but some at least of these men could belong to a single "tribe" and be ruled by a "native" commander (Saddington 1975). Southern British auxiliaries of this kind were employed by Agricola in the battle against the Caledonii at *Mons Graupius* (Hutton & Ogilvie 1970, 78-9, 90-5). A memorandum of c. A.D. 92 found at Vindolanda refers disparagingly to such auxiliaries:

"The Britons are unprotected by armour. There are very many cavalry. The cavalry do not use swords - nor do the wretched Britons take up fixed positions (*or* remain seated?) in order to throw javelins (Bowman & Thomas 1987, 135-37).

Occasionally auxiliaries could be *peregrini* or men from outside the empire, particularly when the local commander needed to raise troops in a hurry (Dobson & Mann 1973, 192). Gradually, however, these auxiliary units attracted Roman citizens and Romanised provincials and lost their distinguishing characteristics of language and weaponry (le Bohec 1994, 25-27). They appear to have been replaced in the second century by *numeri*, again a word which appears to have a wide variety of meanings but some of whom represented *nationes* (ethnic groups) and appear to have been auxiliary units from both within and without the empire, favoured for their native fighting skills (Speidel 1975). A relatively large number of *numeri Brittonum* (native British troops) were stationed in Germany whilst Burgundians and Gernans from outside the imperial borders were stationed in Britain (Dobson & Mann 1973, 196; Southern 1989, 118, 132-8). North of Hadrian's wall, scouts or *exploratores* may

have supervised native gatherings at *loca* (assembly sites?) between the Wall and the river Tay in Perthshire river. It has been suggested that such men were likely to have been locals working for the Roman army (Richmond & Crawford 1949, 15; Frere 1991, 167).

That some Britons from far beyond the Roman borders were employed in the late fourth-century army is indicated by the discovery of what are called "cross-bow brooches" by the Moray Firth, near Moffat, Dumfriesshire and, as a variant type with native decoration, at Carn Liath in Sutherland (Salway 1993, 296; Curle 1931-2, 370-1; Ritchie 1989, 51). There are also the references to the Atecotti, a people who took part in the "barbarian conspiracy" of 367 and who appear to have provided troops for the Roman authorities in the later fourth century.<sup>3</sup> Jerome identifies these as *gens Britannica* (a British people) or possibly *gens Scoti* (sic, an Irish-speaking people) and their exact location remains unknown (Rivet & Smith 1979, 259). Thus, even though we have no very specific evidence for the employment of Irishmen in the Roman army, it seems quite plausible that some may have been.

Some slight corroboration of this suggestion can be found in what may be native Irish reflexes of Roman or Romano-British military culture. John Roche has recently drawn attention to the possibility of a Roman origin for the alder-wood shield covered with cow-hide which was found at Clonoura, Co. Tipperary (Roche 1993, 8-9; Raftery 1994, 146). Raftery has pointed to the fact that some of the best parallels for the Clonoura shield are found on Romano-British carvings from the Antonine Wall, dated to the mid second century A.D., and from Maryport, to the south of Hadrian's Wall (Raftery 1984, 127-129).

The Old Irish word for spear, *gai*, would appear to derive from Primitive Irish *\*gaisos* which may be related to the Gallo-Latin word *gaesum* (O'Rahilly 1946, 459; McCone 1995, 8) which was used to describe the long spear of certain Gallic peoples as early as the third century B.C. The general assumption has been that this represents an early Celtic word with reflexes in both Gaulish and Irish but it is worth noting that the Iron Age spear-butts which have survived from Ireland are nearly all of a distinctively insular type with parallels (where they exist) in

<sup>3</sup> The *Honoriani Atecotti seniores* and *iuniores* were enrolled by Stilicho during his recruiting campaign and posted to Gaul and Italy respectively (Miller 1976-8, 520, quoting D. Hoffmann, *Das Spätromische Bewegungsheer und die Notitia Dignitatum* (Bon. 1970). Unfortunately I have not been able to consult Hoffmann's work).

northern Britain rather than on the Continent (Raftery 1982; 1984, 108-127; 1994, 144). It is interesting, therefore, that certain units of *numeri* stationed by Hadrian's Wall were known as *Raeti Gaesati* from the Danubian province of Raetia, while other units, known simply as *Gaesati*, are witnessed elsewhere on the Continent (Southern 1989, 109).

A rather more convincing borrowing is the Old Irish word, *claideb* or sword. This has a suffix *-eb* which does not appear elsewhere in Irish and may be derived from a British loanword which Fergus Kelly (1971) suggested was borrowed during the sixth century. Damian McManus has subsequently refined this suggestion, arguing that the borrowing occurred after lenition and before vowel affection<sup>4</sup> and probably belongs to the fifth century (1983, 33-4). Other words borrowed during approximately the same period include *srían* from Latin *frenum* (meaning bridle) and *sroigell* from a postulated Vulgar Latin *\*fragillum*<sup>5</sup> from *flagellum*, meaning a whip (McManus 1983, 54). The most plausible context for such borrowings is through contact with a largely Latin-speaking military world. There is also the Old Irish word *capall*, "work-horse", which may be derived from a modified form of *caballus*, identified by one authority as Latin army slang for a pack-horse or nag (Thurneysen 1946, 567; Drummond & Nelson, 1994, 149). J. Vendryes, however, has suggested that this word was originally a Celtic loan into Vulgar Latin and that although the Old Irish form was influenced by Latin, there was probably an earlier pre-Latin equivalent (Vendryes 1987, 33-4). There are other loanwords, to which James Carney drew attention (1971, 69-70), including *legión*, Latin *legio* or legion and *trebun*, Latin *tribunus* or tribune.<sup>6</sup> As McManus has pointed out, however, Carney's view that these are very early borrowings does not rest on firm phonological grounds but rather on

<sup>4</sup> Lenition and vowel affection are two of the developments which help to define the relative chronology of early Irish. See chapter 3 for a discussion of these terms.

<sup>5</sup> An asterisk before an italicized word indicates that the word is not found in any early source but has been reconstructed as the probable ancestor of the forms which do survive. Again this concept is dealt with at greater length in chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup> Carney's full list is *arm* (Latin *arma*), *legión* (L. *legio*), *mil* or *cathmilid* (L. *miles*), *trebun* (L. *tribunus*), *Gall* (L. *Gallus*), *Alpión* (L. *Alpes*), *bárc* (L. *barca*), *long* (L. *navis longa*), *mir* (L. *murus*), *drauc* (L. *draco*), *grib* (L. *grypho*), *leo* (L. *leo*), *Mercúir* (L. *dies Mercurii*), *Saturn* (L. *dies Saturni*), *cland* (L. *planta*), *rómdae* (adj. from L. *Roma*) and *ór* (L. *aurum*). This includes words such as *cathmilid* which is a Middle Irish nominative and both Kim McCone and Damian McManus inform me that some, such as *legion* or *Alpión*, are likely to be late (post-syncope) borrowings given the long vowel in the final syllable. This means that they are likely to have been borrowed after the early seventh century.

historical assumptions that they could only have been relevant to Irishmen prior to the fall of Roman Britain (McManus 1983, 43). As we shall see in later chapters, military contact between Ireland and Britain continued into the sub-Roman period and the borrowing of all these words, together with the Clonoura shield, may belong to a fifth-century phase or even later. A similar shield is carried by the naked warrior on a Pictish symbol stone at Collessie in Fife which is normally dated to between the fifth and seventh centuries A.D. (Turner 1994, 321).

A combination of historical and archaeological evidence lies behind the orthodox model of Irish warriors operating in Britain between the second half of the fourth century and some stage in the early fifth century. This cannot, however, be the full story, for the different cultures of prehistoric Ireland give a fair indication of the close-knit and varied relationships of the two islands which have always existed. The court-cairns of Neolithic Ireland are paralleled in Scotland, the slightly later passage tombs occur over much of Atlantic Europe, including Britain, the Beaker folk are represented in both islands, and so forth (Megaw and Simpson 1979, 119-141, 178-207, 236-7, 285-97, 324-339, 344-445). John Waddell has stressed the point that metal artefacts found in prehistoric Ireland tend to reflect, for the most part, a shifting pattern of contacts across the Irish Sea (Waddell 1991, 9-13) This conclusion has been reiterated by Barry Raftery with specific reference to the La Tène material of the earlier Iron Age (1984, 326-333). Notwithstanding the occasional continental import into Ireland, mainly from Gaul, the majority of known parallels are with Britain:

Contacts between Ireland and Britain are increasingly evident as the Iron Age progresses. Stylistic overlaps, common forms, common techniques of manufacture and imports from one island to the other combine to indicate close and continuing links across the Irish Sea. In many areas of art and technology the distinctions between the two islands blur. Ireland's British connections were not confined to any one region but extended to widely dispersed areas of that island (Raftery 1984, 328).

The importance of these observations for our study cannot be over-emphasised. As Tacitus remarked towards the end of the first century



A.D., “In regard to soil, climate and the character and ways of its inhabitants, (Ireland) is not markedly different from Britain” (Hutton and Ogilvie 1970, 70-1). In Ptolemy’s mid second-century *Almagest*, he terms Britain *Μεγαλη Βρεττανια* or Great Britain while Ireland is *Μικρα Βρεττανια* or Little Britain (Rivet & Smith, 1979, 112). From the perspective of an Alexandrian Greek, the two islands clearly remained closely tied despite the fact that only one had been conquered by the Romans. Any interpretation of contacts between Ireland and Roman Britain should start with a recognition of the fact that, although Britain has by no means been the only cultural influence on Ireland throughout its history, it has undoubtedly been the strongest.

Traditionally, this influence has tended to be under-represented in studies of later Iron Age and early medieval Ireland. There appear to be a number of possible reasons for this. As was underlined in the 1991 volume of the journal *Emania*, devoted to “The origins of the Irish”, there has been a long-held assumption that Ireland became “Celtic” in both language and culture as a result of major Iron Age invasions of the country. As a result, archaeological investigation of the Irish Iron Age has tended to focus on the most overtly non-native artefacts and in particular, on the thin distribution of La Tène metalwork in the northern two-thirds of the country (Raftery 1983, 1984). Together with its predecessor, the Hallstatt culture, the European-wide La Tène is the archaeological culture most often associated by modern scholars with the peoples known as “Keltoi” in classical sources (T.G. Powell 1958, 15-114; Chadwick and Corcoran 1970, 1-63 but see now Renfrew 1987, 211-49). In the era prior to the widespread availability of scientific dating techniques such as radiocarbon and dendrochronology, La Tène artefacts also had the priceless advantage for Irish investigators of being tied into an accepted European chronology, based on the form of the artefacts and art-historical analysis of the ornament which adorned them. However, both Hallstatt and La Tène artefacts are relatively rare in Britain and the Continental input into the British Iron Age has been a matter of debate (Cunliffe 1991, 1-20, 60-93, 107-58) with the natural result that parallels are more likely to be sought on the Continent.

Moreover, the vast majority of Irish metalwork is composed of isolated finds. Many were discovered in the nineteenth century and the circumstances of discovery were poorly recorded. This meant that the Irish sites inhabited by the people using these objects could not be identified

and this, in turn, dramatically restricted our understanding of the period (Raftery 1984, 1). It is only in recent years, as excavation in Ireland has become more commonplace and our ability to date the excavated remains has been transformed, that the potential for a wider delineation of the Irish Iron Age has come about. As it happens, scholarly interest since then has tended to be directed towards the beginning of the Iron Age, a focus reflected in a recent synthesis of Irish prehistory (Cooney and Grogan 1994, 173-205). Though preliminary suggestions have been made by Richard Warner (1991) and Conor Newman (1995) and some useful work has been done on the specific topic of burials (O'Brien 1992, Eogan 1995, Corlett 1996), a detailed investigation of Irish culture around the middle of the first millennium A.D. has still to be undertaken. In its absence, it is hardly surprising that little systematic analysis has been done on Irish contacts with Britain during this period.

Another factor contributing to this situation has been the traditional approach to the study of Irish pagan religion(s). Although La Tène artefacts are relatively rare in Ireland and those of the Hallstatt period even more so, Ireland is normally seen as one of the "Celtic" countries *par excellence* by virtue of its language. Modern Celtic languages consist of Irish, Scots-Gaelic, Manx, Welsh, Cornish and Breton; early Celtic included the forebears of these together with Gaulish and Celtiberian (McCone 1996, 3-35, 67-70). The only extensive early literature in any of these languages to survive has been the sagas written in Old Irish, a number of which are believed to date to before the ninth century A.D. For all Celtologists, therefore, from Bohemia to Boston, these sagas have been the documentary sources most likely to give insights into primitive Celtic societies. After scholars in the nineteenth century had identified motifs, concerning head-hunting and feasting in particular, which were common to descriptions of Iron-Age Celts by classical writers on the one hand and Irish saga writers on the other (see Kenney 1929, 118-138 for bibliographic details), this belief became embedded in the discipline. The classic exposition in English has been Kenneth Jackson's (1964), which was primarily concerned with the social customs and literature of the Celts, but the approach has also proved highly influential in studies of Celtic religion. The monograph by Anne Ross (1967) and the more popular synthesis by Proinseas Mac Cana (1983) have both interpreted the archaeological and iconographical evidence for religious beliefs throughout the Celtic world between 500 B.C. and 500 A.D. in the light of medieval

texts in Old and Middle Irish and in Middle Welsh. Like the study of La Tène metalwork, the result has been to emphasize the comparative similarities between putatively Celtic communities across continents and millennia at the expense of possible parallels closer to home. Perhaps the most extreme example of this in recent years is John Koch's proposal that Ireland witnessed a continuum of religious observance from 1600 B.C. down to the introduction of Christianity in the fifth century A.D. and that this is recognisably Celtic from the outset (Koch 1991). According to his hypothesis, the impetus which caused this religion to develop was an eighteen year spell of poor summers, identifiable through dendrochronology as occurring between the years 1159 and 1141 B.C. The continuum is explained by "an accumulation of 1700+ years of oral tradition", which saw key elements of the most famous of Ireland's Old Irish epics, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, being created in or immediately after 1141 B.C. (Koch 1994). On a more mundane level, it is surely indicative of the path scholarship has taken in this field that in the textbook account of the Irish Iron age (Raftery 1994), the bibliography for the chapter entitled "Cult, ritual and death" includes only three references to British evidence (one of which is to a site in Wales) as opposed to twelve which refer to Celts in general or to the European mainland.

A third aspect of the problem arises out of the divisions between different fields of enquiry in insular scholarship. For someone like Nora Chadwick, whose work was focussed on the medieval 'Celtic west', it was possible to argue that "Roman occupation had not penetrated very deeply into the Celtic institutions of Britain" (Chadwick and Corcoran 1970, 68). For an archaeologist of Roman Britain such as Martin Henig, on the other hand: "it is clear that the Britons were not superficially Romanised; they became Romans" (Henig 1984, 43). The contrast is not one of date but of focus; the two bodies of evidence being investigated are almost totally separate. Whereas historians working on the documentary evidence for fifth-century Ireland have included such eminent specialists in the later Roman world as J.B. Bury (1905) and E.A. Thompson (1985), there has been little or no overlap amongst the archaeologists. What is more, an impressionistic survey would do little to encourage such dabbling. There is a vast gulf between the average Irish site of all periods, providing relatively little dating evidence, insubstantial structures and few artefactual remains and a Romano-British site of approximately middle rank, which

can seem to Irish eyes to be carpeted with datable pottery sherds and massive blocks of masonry.

Against this one must place Tacitus' categorical statement that the ways of Ireland's inhabitants were not markedly different from those of Britain. Given the relatively small amount of material in Bateson's catalogues, it seems clear that these ways did not include the Irish use of goods manufactured in Roman territories. One must look, therefore, to broader social realities to which Tacitus and Ptolemy may have been referring. One such may have been the employment of men in the Roman army for as outlined above, there is at least some evidence to suggest that certain Irishmen may have sought employment as soldiers, either in Britain or further afield. Another area is in the use of slaves, for the references in Patrick's writings make it clear that societies in both islands used slaves and that these could be acquired on either side of the Irish Sea (Conneely 1993, 25, 54-5).

Still other parallels may be found in the religious rituals performed by both societies. In his *Confessio*, Patrick states that immediately prior to conversion, the Irish worshipped *idola et immunda* or idols and abominations (Conneely 1993, 43). *Inmunda* in this period appears to have had connotations of sexual obscenity (Lewis and Short 1879, 895; Souter 1949, 186; Blaise 1954, 409). This brings to mind the roughly carved wooden figure from Ralaghan Co. Cavan with a gouged out pubic hole, possibly originally intended for a detachable penis. This was wont to be designated Iron Age in date (Ross 1967, 61) but Bryony Coles has recently published a calibrated radiocarbon date based on AMS dating techniques of 1096-906 B.C (Coles 1990, 326). A figure of roughly similar shape with zoomorphic head and erect penis is known from the Iron Age trackway at Corlea (Raftery 1994, 186-7), while another ithyphallic example from Kingsteignton in Devon was dated by Coles to between 426 and 352 B.C. There seems to have been a long-standing cult involving such figures in the prehistoric era but as yet, there is no evidence that they continued to be produced as late as Patrick's day.

It is interesting, therefore, that an emphasis on the phallus is a feature which tends to distinguish Romano-British depictions of the gods from their classical counterparts (Green 1976, 25-6). There is a possible depiction in the chalk-carving of Cerne Abbas in Dorset, for example and a number of the smaller bronzes of Hercules from Britain are ithyphallic. Phallic amulets are also common (see Green 1976, 47, 259; 1978, 89 for



details), some of which are carved with human heads (Ross 1967, 127-8). Ross has also drawn attention to the numerous examples of a phallic horned god from northern Britain who is equated in various locations with Mercury, Silvanus or Mars (Ross 1967, 201-15). It may be relevant here to note that an Old Irish text, possibly eighth-century, in describing inauguration rituals for the kings of Tara, refers to the *ferp cluche* or stone penis, also known as *Fál*, a word for king (Gwynn 1912, 134; DIL (1983), F 35:53 - 37:2). Given that one is attempting to limit the analysis to contemporary sources, however, this reference cannot be given the same weight as the material above.

If a preoccupation with the phallus is hardly diagnostic of a first millennium mindset, still less is it a secure basis from which to argue for cultural links between Ireland and Britain at this date. On the other hand, the parallels noted here take on added significance when one notes that an altar at Nettleton, Wiltshire is inscribed to the god Apollo Cunomaglos Corotica. When found, the altar was upside down, having been used as a hearth-side seat by squatters towards the end of the fourth century or later. The temple in which it was found was erected in the early third century and appears to have undergone some form of Christianisation around the year 330 (Wedlake 1982, 99-111, 135-6). The name Cunomaglos, which means "hound-lord" is found on an ogam stone at Arbory on the Isle of Man (Macalister 1945, 480) and both elements *cuno-* (dog) and *magl-* (prince/lord) are common in the personal names on ogam stones in Ireland (McManus 1991, 102-3). With the elements inverted, the name also occurs that of one of the sixth-century British kings excoriated by Gildas: "Maglocune" in the vocative (Winterbottom 1978, 102, McManus 1991, 177) and as "MAGLICUNAS" (in ogam) and "MAGLOCVN(1)" on a stone from Nevern, Pembrokeshire (*CIIC*, 424; *ECMW*, 353).<sup>7</sup> The distribution of this personal name, therefore, points to connections between Man and central Britain and the constituent elements of the name are also common in Ireland. This does not mean that Apollo Cunomaglos as a god necessarily travelled across the Irish Sea but the potential for him to have done so is clearly present.

Another god who should be mentioned here is Hefias, famously invoked by Patrick at the time of his travels through the desert:

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<sup>7</sup> Following the convention used in McManus 1991, ogam inscriptions are given in this work in ordinary upper case while Latin-letter inscriptions are given in bold upper case.

That very same night I was sleeping when Satan mightily put me to the test - I shall remember it as long as I am in this body. He fell upon me like a huge rock and I could not move a limb. But whence did it occur to me, ignorant in spirit to call upon Helias? And while this was happening, I saw the sun rise in the heavens and as I was crying out: "Helias, Helias", with all my strength, lo the splendour of that sun fell on me and promptly shook all heaviness from me and I believe that I was aided by Christ my Lord and that His Spirit was even then crying out on my behalf (Conneely 1993, 67).

R.P.C. Hanson and Timothy Powell have pointed to the ambiguity surrounding the syncretic relationship between Christianity and the cult of *Sol Invictus* (the Unconquered Sun), which had been promoted by the third-century Roman emperors and was the original family cult espoused by the Constantinian imperial dynasty (Baynes 1929, 345-48; Hanson 1980, 964-6; T.E. Powell 1992). *Sol Invictus* was also closely connected to the contemporary cult of Mithras, evidenced most clearly in the vicinity of Hadrian's Wall but also found in lowland Britain (Henig 1984, 97-109; Jones and Mattingly 1990, map 8:21). An intaglio gem-stone, depicting Jupiter Heliopolitanus, has been found at Corbridge, on Hadrian's Wall (Green 1978, 57) and an early fourth-century inscription *deo Mithrae et Soli Invicto ab oriente ad occidentem* ("To the god Mithras and to the Unconquered Sun from east to west") was found in the London Mithraeum (Henig 1984, 215).

Hanson and Powell have suggested that this widespread and ill-defined cult probably coloured Patrick's understanding of Christianity. This seems plausible. Elsewhere in the *Confessio*, Patrick explicitly condemns pagan solar religions:

For that sun which we see rises daily at God's command for our sake but it will never reign, nor will its splendour abide but all who adore it will come, as unhappy men, unhappily to punishment. We on the other hand who believe in the true Sun and adore Him, Christ, who will never perish (1993, 125).

Following Ludwig Bieler, Conneely argues that, in this extract, Patrick is juxtaposing the true *sol justitiae*, the Sun of Justice or Christ, which provides salvation, with the imperial sun, *sol invictus* which could destroy its worshippers (Bieler 1953, 84; Conneely 1993, 125-6). Hanson saw the cry of “Helias” as an appeal to Elijah and interpreted the above chapters as being a warning to the pagan Irish to reject sun-worship but he suggests that there is no evidence for such a cult in Ireland (Hanson 1983, 123 quoted in Powell 1992, 539). This may have been over-stated. While it is true that there is no archaeological trace of the male god associated with a spoked wheel which Green has identified as the Celtic sky and solar god (Green 1993, 55-61), T.F. O’Rahilly has drawn attention to the description of Elatha, who came to his mating with the goddess Ériu (Ireland) with *cóic roith óir* (five wheels of gold) upon his back (O’Rahilly 1946, 304-5). More convincing, perhaps, are the references to the goddesses Grian (“Sun”) and Áine (“Fiery-like”) associated with the *side* (sacred mounds) of Cnoc Áine (Knockainy, Co. Limerick) and the near-by Cnoc Gréne (*id.*, 286-290). Though the evidence for these figures stems entirely from the period after the introduction of Christianity, it is difficult to adduce any Christian symbolism which might explain their role.

The case of these two gods, Apollo Cunomaglos on the one hand and Helias on the other, point to the syncretic nature of some religious beliefs in Ireland and Britain during the fourth and fifth centuries. Roman traditions are here linked to both islands; Cunomaglus was a name composed of elements found on both sides of Irish Sea while Patrick, after a long period of captivity in Ireland, calls on a Romano-British god whose relationship to both Christian god and imperial overlord is one of great ambiguity and who might have had reflexes in an Irish solar cult. As Jane Webster has recently stressed, much of the work on Celtic gods has drawn on material which postdates the Roman conquest without giving sufficient credence to the modification of Iron Age Celtic belief which this implies (1995, 153-4). Webster draws attention to the fact, for example, that the linking of the names of Roman gods with Celtic ones appears to be a high-status practice (judging by the offices of the men who commissioned such inscriptions) while those who believed in pre-Roman Iron Age religions may not have been drawn to the Roman practice of inscribing dedicatory inscriptions (*ibid.*, 159). Any investigation of religious belief should,

therefore, take into account the subtle variations of cult and creed which probably existed at the time.

One of the most famous deposits of Roman material in Ireland is the collection of jewellery and gold, silver and bronze coins found at various locations around the mound of the Neolithic passage tomb at Newgrange, focussing on the entrance area (Carson and O'Kelly 1977). They range in date from the third century A.D. to the fifth or possibly the sixth. For Bateson, they may be votive offerings to a local god by Romans or people familiar with Roman customs (Bateson 1973, 31) while Thomas suggests more specifically that they were gifts from Romano-British traders (1981, 297). In contrast, Richard Warner has interpreted some if not all of this material as representing a military invasion by a mixed force of Romano-British mercenaries and repatriated Irish exiles into the Irish midlands in the years A.D. 250-350 (1995, 30). I have recently argued for the view that they represent deposits by Irish warriors who had spent time in Roman Britain either as raiders or as auxiliaries (Swift 1996).

All of these interpretations postulate some modification of native religious practice which is explained through contact with Roman Britain. One factor which has not been brought into the debate before now, however, is that there is evidence for Iron Age presence at Neolithic passage tombs on a number of Irish sites (Woodman 1992, 308; Raftery 1994, 180). Just down the river from Newgrange, at Knowth, a number of Iron Age inhumation burials were inserted around the perimeter of the largest passage tomb in the centre of the megalithic cemetery (Eogan 1974, 68-87; Raftery 1981, 196-7; O'Brien 1992, 131). At some point between the late first and the fourth centuries, two deep ditches were also dug around the perimeter of the main mound (Eogan 1991, 118-9). A grave at Newgrange produced beads similar to those in the inhumation graves at Knowth and may also be Iron Age in date (Raftery 1981, 192).

At the Carrowmore cemetery, in Co. Sligo, a concentration of skull bones and teeth was found inserted into Neolithic passage tombs. Dated samples of this material produced dates of 220 +/- 70 ad<sup>8</sup> and 310 +/- 80 bc and it appears that there might be as many as 23 individuals involved (Burrenhult 1980, 64-7). At Kiltierney, in Co. Fermanagh, a passage tomb in a necropolis of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments was remodelled to become the centre of an Iron Age burial complex, with an encircling

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<sup>8</sup> The use of 'ad' and 'bc' in lower-case letters denotes an uncalibrated radiocarbon date.



ditch being carved around it and nineteen small satellite mounds being created so that it became a microcosm of the situation at Knowth (Foley 1988, 24-6; Raftery 1994, 192-3). Other cases of the remodelling of mounds, this time Bronze Age in date, for Iron Age burials include Carrowbeg North and Pollacorragune, both in Co. Galway (Raftery 1994, 193-4). In addition, one might tentatively add to the above list the incorporation of a Neolithic passage tomb into the ceremonial assembly area at Tara, where some monuments are thought to be Iron Age in date (*ibid.*, 65-70, 180). Seventh-century documentary sources indicate that burial mounds, known as *fertae*, could be used as sites for important legal assemblies and it may be that the Tara mound was one of these (Swift 1996, 13-20).

At the passage tomb cemetery at Lough Crew in Co. Meath a large collection of worked bone flakes, together with glass, bone and amber beads, bronze and iron rings, bone pins and combs and an iron object, were found in Cairn H during amateur excavations in the middle of the last century (Raftery 1984, 251-263). The bulk of these finds apparently came from the southern chamber of the passage and particularly from around its entrance. They included copper spiral rings and two dumb-bell beads which Michael Herity has identified as Early Iron Age in type (Herity 1974, 235-7). The flakes, of polished cattle bone, include a tiny proportion ornamented in what is termed the Lough Crew/Somerset Style (Raftery 1994, 166-8). This is dated by Raftery "from the turn of the millenium onwards" and is found on a variety of objects dispersed through the northern half of Ireland, including a beehive quern from Clonmacnoise. As an artefact type, such querns are dated by Caulfield from the second century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. and by Raftery to the second or third century A.D. (Caulfield 1977, 123-5; Raftery 1994, 124). The Lough Crew/Somerset style also has analogues in Scotland on objects dated to the first two centuries A.D. (Warner 1983).

At the moment, these finds from Lough Crew would seem to provide a parallel for the Newgrange material, for both appear to represent votive deposits. A stray find of a Roman gold coin of late fourth-century date at the prehistoric monument known as the Giant's Ring outside Belfast (Bateson 1976, 173) may provide another. Iron Age activity on other early sites appear to represent modification for exclusive use as burial places and no evidence for ritual deposit outside the graves themselves has been noted.

A single close Irish parallel for the activity at Newgrange does little to resolve the question of who buried the jewellery and coins there. When one looks at the evidence from Roman Britain, however, the case for Roman influence is strengthened. In their report on the excavation of a multi-period complex at Uley in Gloucestershire, Ann Woodward and Peter Leach have listed a number of sites where Romano-British presence is indicated on prehistoric burial mounds (Woodward and Leach 1993, 304-5). These include a possible example at Uley itself, where two ditches have been interpreted as the putative remains of a Neolithic barrow beneath an Iron Age and early Roman enclosure. At Tidenham and Bisley, also in Gloucestershire, Roman altars were located on barrows while the Brean Down temple in Somerset was sited immediately to the east of a row of three unexcavated round barrows. More interesting from an Irish perspective was the discovery of six Roman coins in the facade area of the West Kennet long barrow as well as at a number of other prehistoric mounds (for details see Piggott 1962, 55-6). Roman burials have been discovered at the long barrow known as Hetty Pegler's Trum and in round barrows at King's Stanley, Minchinhampton and Withington. All these are in Gloucestershire. At Wayland's Smithy, Oxfordshire, the barrow was modified by digging two Roman ditches, one of which ran across the facade. All of these features, deposition of coins, insertion of burials and digging of ditches around barrows, appear to provide good parallels for the Irish situation.

More importantly perhaps, the general practice of making votive deposits at man-made shrines is one which is well attested in Romano-British religion but not in the Irish Iron Age where wet contexts, in rivers, lakes and bogs appear to be the preferred option (Raftery 1994, 182-185; Cooney and Grogan 1994, 197-8). It is noteworthy for example, that the fourth-century gold coin from Templeogue, Co. Dublin was found in a dried-out river bed (Bateson 1973, 47-8); such a location would seem to imply native practice. In Britain, by contrast, there is strong evidence for offerings at shrines (Green 1976, 43-50). Deposition of coins on such sites is relatively frequent as, for example, the thousands found in the temple-well dedicated to the Romano-British water goddess Coventina at Carrawburgh on Hadrian's wall (Breeze and Dobson 1991, 233). Jewellery was very much a feature of the finds at the Romano-British shrine of Uley where brooches, necklaces, earring, bracelets, pins and finger rings were all found (Woodward and Leach, 1993, 149-174). These

ranged in date from the first century A.D. to the seventh. In view of the Irish material, it is interesting to note that human burial at Romano-British shrines prior to the introduction of Christianity existed as a burial rite but was apparently rare (Watts 1991, 113-5).

A group of British artefacts which may possibly provide a parallel for the Lough Crew bone flakes are the leaf or feather-shaped plaques of metal of Roman Britain which were studied by Jocelyn Toynbee (1978, 128-47). These metal plaques are relatively common in shrines throughout the Western Empire, often being found in military areas, and they are dedicated to both Roman and native gods. They were still being produced after the introduction of Christianity, for Christianised examples have been found in the fourth-century treasure hoard at Water Newton (Painter 1977, 22). It is impossible to be too confident about this suggestion; the Lough Crew flakes are in such a fragmentary condition that it is impossible to be certain of their original dimensions and appearance but in the absence of any other clear prototype (Raftery 1984, 257), the possibility that they represent an Irish development equivalent to the Roman feather plaques seems worth mooting. A votive bone plaque of rather different shape and inscribed with an anthropomorphic figure is known from Great Casterton in the east midlands (Ross 1967, 233, fig. 123).

On the whole, the upshot of this enquiry is to support the notion that the Newgrange finds represent deposits made under Romano-British influence. Britain provides numerous parallels for the practice of dedicating coins and jewellery to the gods; with the exception of the finds from Giant's Ring and the river-bed deposition at Templeogue, Ireland has none, though it is possible that the collection of goods from Lough Crew may represent some native modification of this practice. What we see at Newgrange appears to be a specifically Romano-British practice which apparently spread to a very limited degree within Ireland, even though the coins at Newgrange range in date from between 209 and 395 (Bateson 1973, 46-7). Since the coin supply to Britain apparently dried up in the early fifth century and it is not known for how long coins remained in circulation (Johns and Bland 1994, 167-8)<sup>9</sup> the deposition dates may be even later, which accords with the possibility that some of the associated

<sup>9</sup> A rather different conclusion is drawn by Esmonde Cleary who would see all coinage disappearing from normal usage very rapidly after the withdrawal of the legions c. A.D. 408. This is part of a general model which sees the total collapse of Roman Britain as "nasty, brutish and short" (Esmonde Cleary 1989, 138-161)

jewellery may be fifth- or even sixth-century in date (Swift 1996, 3). Whoever the visitors were, they apparently kept coming back to Newgrange and making further gifts. Their donations indicate a long-term Romano-British influence which is not reflected in the small number of specifically Roman artefacts which have so far been found in Ireland.

In the light of the above argument, Patrick's statement that noble Irish women threw their jewellery onto the altar of his new god takes on added significance.

For although I am very inexperienced, I have nevertheless tried in some measure to keep my reserve even from the Christian brethren and the virgins of Christ and the religious women who used to make me little gifts spontaneously and would cast something from their ornaments on to the altar. These I would return to them and they would be annoyed with me for doing so (Conneely 1993, 73-4).

It may be that Patrick was here referring specifically to women whose communities had already been introduced to Romano-British cult practices of the pre-Christian era. As we have seen, specific parallels for votive deposits of jewellery are, as yet unknown outside Co. Meath. Should we, therefore, be postulating a location for Patrick's mission in the immediate vicinity of the Boyne?

The one placename in the *Confessio*, "*silva Focluti*" was said by the seventh-century bishop Tírechán to have been located by the river Moy in Co. Mayo (Bieler 1979, 156-8), but as Eoin MacNeill pointed out, the only manuscript which actually has the form *focluti* is the version of the *Confessio* in the *Book of Armagh*, where it forms part of the same dossier of Patrician propaganda as Tírechán's text. Other manuscripts have the forms *uoluti* or *ueluti* and MacNeill postulates that the original may have been *Silva Uluti* or the "wood of the Ulaid" (MacNeill 1923). Francis John Byrne has cited evidence that the Ulaid were a powerful kingdom around the middle of the first millennium, holding sway over much of north-east of Ireland from the Glens of Antrim to the Boyne (Byrne 1965). MacNeill's suggested emendation to *silva uluti* could, therefore, imply a location for Patrick's mission anywhere in this north-eastern part of Ireland.

Using other, non-archaeological, criteria, Thompson has put forward a case for believing that Patrick was addressing the *Confessio* to Britons



resident in Ireland (1985, 113-124). Thompson argued that Irishmen, as new converts, would hardly have been those involved in criticizing Patrick's conduct. Since Patrick was addressing himself to "readers" who could read Patrick's Latin text and who were in a position to condemn his literary style, Thompson deduces that such Britons were educated. He states further that his audience know "how I behaved amongst you from the time I was a young man" and since the only country in which Patrick is known to have spent a large proportion of his adult career is Ireland, these educated Britons were probably resident there. From textual analysis of the *Confessio*, Thompson thus arrived at the same conclusion as has been argued here: that Patrick's work was closely associated with Romanised communities resident in Ireland.<sup>10</sup> Such a conclusion coincides with Prosper of Aquitaine's description of the Irish mission of Palladius in 431 which was sent to people who had already accepted the official Roman religion, Christianity.

The discussion of pre-Christian religious practice to date should warn us of the dangers of assuming that people exposed to Roman influence prior to Patrick's arrival must automatically have been Britons resident in Ireland. It may be significant that Newgrange lies almost equidistant from both Slane and Knowth and within walking distance of both. The former is identified as a royal site with pretensions to island-wide dominion in our earliest documentary sources (Swift 1996, 16). The latter was, as noted above, an important Iron Age necropolis, which is known to have been a royal centre in 789 when the death of its king is noted in the *Annals of Ulster* (Byrne 1973, 392). A probable Romano-British presence there is indicated by the discovery of three sherds of *terra sigillata*, a bronze ligula, a stylus and an ear-scoop (Eogan 1991, 118; see also *id.*, 1968, 375), all of which, unfortunately were unassociated. In addition, Elizabeth O'Brien has argued that some of the extended Iron Age inhumations at Knowth represent a new Romano-British form of burial ritual introduced during the second century A.D. (O'Brien 1990, 38-9; O'Brien 1992, 131). Slab-lined graves present on the site she would date to the fourth century or later, again on British parallels (1990, 40). It seems clear that Knowth was occupied in the period during which the Newgrange finds were deposited and it may be that it was a royal centre

<sup>10</sup> Without vouchsafing reasons for his belief, Charles Thomas states that the first Christians in Ireland were Romano-British traders and their adherants (Thomas 1994, 89).

during that period. If this were so, it might provide the context for visits to this area by individuals influenced by Romano-British practices over a two-hundred year period.

The suggestion that the earliest Christian missions may have concentrated their attentions on Romanised areas which may have included centres of royal power has implications for their potential political influence on the native Irish. In particular, it may help to explain the apparently rapid spread of Christianity between the arrival of Patrick and the departure of Columbanus to the Continent c. A.D. 590 (Metlake 1914, 251). By the end of the sixth century, Columbanus could argue that the Irish church contained all dwellers on the island (Walker 1957, 38-9). If one is to accept such claims at face value, as eminent scholars such as Kathleen Hughes (1966, 39-56) or Donnchadh Ó Corráin (1994, 3) have done, than some explanation for the new cult's apparent popularity should be adduced.

The hypothesis that Irish Christianity may have been fostered in royal communities which had seen long-term contact with Romano-British customs finds some support in Patrick's writings:

And all that time I used to give presents to the kings, in addition to paying wages to their sons who would travel with me; and nonetheless they seized me with my companions and on that day they were keen and avid to kill me but my time had not yet come; and everything they found with us they seized and myself they bound in irons; and on the fourteenth day the Lord freed me from their power and all our belongings were also restored to us for the sake of God and the close friends with whom we had provided ourselves beforehand (Conneely 1993, 74).

This section in the *Confessio* implies that the success of Patrick's mission was directly dependent on royal support which he gained through bribes. When that support was withdrawn, the wealth of the mission could be seized and Patrick imprisoned. His only defence lay in the aid of the Lord and that provided by close friends whose good-will he had already gained; if the influence of these friends was sufficient to bend royal wills, it seems plausible that they themselves belonged to a relatively high grade in the social hierarchy. Elsewhere, in fact, Patrick states explicitly that daughters

of Irish kings - *filiae regulorum* - had become virgins of Christ through his teaching (Conneely 1993, 72, 79). One might wonder where Patrick's mission acquired the resources to enable him to bribe Irish kings and to pay their sons but if Patrick's mission was supported by a community such as is represented by the gold and silver finds at Newgrange, he may well have enjoyed a reasonable income based on the offerings (*oblationes*) which fifth-century congregations were expected to donate to their church (Jones 1968, 11)<sup>11</sup>

Patrick, of course, initially arrived in Ireland as a Christian slave but there is some evidence for other Christians of rather higher status in Ireland. Of the four ingots found at Balline, for example, one is inscribed with the *chi-rho* symbol typical of many Christianised artefacts of this date from Britain (Raftery 1994, 216; Thomas 1981, 105-8, 110-16, 122-7). Even if the suggestion that the Balline hoard represents payment of an Irish mercenary in the Roman army is not accepted, the presence of this ingot would appear to imply that some Irishmen may have learnt of the new religion through military service abroad. At Carbury Hill, Co. Kildare, a fragment of an unornamented jet spoon was compared by Raftery with communion spoons from Canoscio in Italy (Raftery 1984, 242). A parallel rather closer to home might be the silver spoons found in a number of late Roman hoards, most notably the Thetford hoard in Norfolk which appears to date to the 380s or 90s (Johns & Potter 1983, 171-2). A number of the Thetford spoons are inscribed with the name of the god Faunus, together with Celtic epithets (*ibid.*, 46-52) while still others had Christian symbols such as the fish or the palm tree which showed parallels with similar designs on the Canoscio spoons (*ibid.*, 40). Dorothy Watts has suggested that one should visualise the Thetford assemblage as belonging to a group of relapsed Christians who turned back to pagan gods after the accession of the emperor Julian in 360 (Watts 1991, 146-158). Whether or not one accepts this, it would seem that the Carbury spoon cannot be taken as firm evidence for Christian practice in Ireland although it does imply the

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<sup>11</sup> Thompson has argued that Patrick took nothing from his converts and that his money came from the sale of estates inherited from his father (1985, 95-102) but I believe that this is to misunderstand the text of the *Confessio*. Patrick does indeed say that he never demanded a half-*scriptula* (< *scripulum*) for baptism nor the price of his shoe for ordination (Conneely 1993, 46, 74) but he uses the word *poscere*, meaning to beg, to demand or to require. Unlike some episcopal colleagues (Lane Fox 1986, 504-17) Patrick relied on voluntary donations and did not extort dues; this is not to say that his converts never provided them.

importation by wealthy Irishmen of valuable cult objects from the Roman world.

At present, it would seem, therefore, that there were a number of different types of connections between Ireland and Roman Britain in this period. This is in accordance with the situation in prehistory when the two islands were in constant and varied contact. We have seen that both historical and archaeological materials suggest the existence of Irish raiders in Britain in the late fourth and very early fifth centuries and it seems likely that some Irish soldiers were concurrently employed by the Roman army. There is also some evidence for mutual influences in the field of religious ritual. Gods such as Cunomaglos may have been worshipped in Ireland as well as in Wiltshire while the name of the god Helias could be called upon by worshippers of the Christian god, the Roman emperor, the unconquered sun, the hero of an eastern mystery cult and possibly even of an Irish solar deity. The syncretic nature of his appeal warns against any attempt to over-simplify the confused nature of religious belief in this transition period between the polytheistic world of the pre-Christian Roman empire and the new monotheistic regime which was only installed as the sole imperial cult under the Emperor Theodosius at the end of the fourth century.

In Ireland one finds Iron Age activity which took place in and around earlier megalithic monuments and appears, for the most part, to have been focussed on burials. At a small minority of sites, however, there is evidence for the deposition of votive offerings; at Newgrange and the Giant's Ring these offerings were made up of Roman imports and the custom itself appears to have been more widespread in Britain than in Ireland. Patrick's references to women who throw jewellery, his call to Helias, his description of cult objects as *inmunda*; all these are also Romano-British features for which little or no evidence has been found in the Irish archaeological record. It may be that Patrick was merely describing paganism in general terms which could be easily understood by his British peers and that his remarks were not intended to be an accurate witness to contemporary practice in Ireland but to undermine in this way the only documentary source seems a trifle perverse. On the other hand, the suggestion that the individuals who joined Patrick's mission in Ireland were themselves heavily influenced by Romano-British culture has the merit of bringing the archaeological and documentary sources into harmony. It is also argued here that the mission probably took place under



Irish royal patronage which would help to explain the relatively rapid success of the new religion. The only area where there is archaeological evidence locating Romano-British cult practices in close proximity to native centres of political power is along the river Boyne and it is believed that sites such as Newgrange and Knowth provide modern scholars with the best available model for understanding the background against which Patrick operated.