

St. Patrick in the History of Ireland

While St. Patrick is one of the most widely-known figures in Irish history, he was not actually of Irish lineage. St. Patrick was born to wealthy British Celtic parents in the late fourth century. When he was sixteen, the young Patrick was captured by a group of Irish raiders attacking his family's estate. He was forced into slavery in Ireland and made to work as a shepherd. Today, historical and archaeological evidence offers us a glimpse of the Ireland that Patrick would have known.

Pre-Christian Ireland was populated by the ancient Celts (pronounced with a hard "C"), a tribal people who once ranged across much of Western, Central, and Southeast Europe. Through conquest by the Romans and other peoples the Celts lost most of the territory they had controlled. The ancient Celts were a warlike people who lived primarily by pastoralism and farming. Cattle were so important to the ancient Celts that a person's worth was measured by how many cattle he or she owned. They practiced cattle-raiding, wore lavish personal ornamentation, produced intricate decorative art, and developed a rich tradition of poetry, storytelling, mythology, and oral history.

Before the coming of Christianity, the ancient Celts of Ireland practiced a nature-based religion and worshipped many gods and goddesses, with different tribes showing preferences for different deities. Because of religious taboos on writing, most knowledge was passed down by word of mouth, so much information about the beliefs of the pre-Christian Celts has been lost. We do know that erudite druids formed the priestly class of the ancient Celtic people. In addition to officiating at rituals, they acted as physicians, lawyers, judges, and keepers of the oral traditions, or historians. They may have studied for as long as twenty years to memorize the myths, histories, and incantations verbatim. Patrick would bring the spiritual hegemony of the druids in Ireland to an end.



After more than six years of slavery, Patrick reportedly dreamt that the voice of God was instructing him to leave Ireland. He escaped soon thereafter, walking nearly two hundred miles to the Irish coast, from where he sailed to Britain. Back in his homeland, Patrick is supposed to have received another revelation from God, this time in the form of an angel telling him to return to Ireland as a missionary. He spent over fifteen further years in Britain studying to become a priest and then returned to the land of his captivity. Once again in Ireland, he ministered to the fledgling Christian population already there and converted many more of the Irish to Christianity.

In his twenty-nine years as a missionary in Ireland, Patrick is said to have baptized 120,000 people and founded three hundred churches. Popular myths tell of St. Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland, but,

in fact, Ireland had no snakes. The legends about Patrick removing snakes are probably symbolic references to his efforts to end the pagan practices of the Irish people, since certain Christians equated paganism with devilry and Satan is associated with snakes in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The connection between St. Patrick and the shamrock probably has a more historical basis. Three-sectioned shamrock leaves may have been particularly important to the pagan Celts before Patrick's coming since the druids considered three to be a magical number. Patrick used this symbol with which the ancient Irish were likely already familiar to explain the Christian concept of the Trinity and to represent the cross of Jesus.

Modern Ireland's overwhelmingly Christian population is in large part the legacy of St. Patrick.

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