

Patrick Crosses the Shannon

The Life and Writings of St. Patrick with Appendices, Etc

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St. Patrick at Magh Slecht.

I. — Probable Route.

St. Patrick's visit to Magh Slecht is, next to his great conflict with the Druids of Tara, the most noteworthy incident in his missionary career. It is very briefly narrated in two short paragraphs of the Tripartite, but we must examine it at greater length.

‘ Thereafter (that is, after he left Granard) he went over the water to Magh Slecht, the place in which was the chief idol of Ireland, namely, Crom Cruaich, covered with gold and silver, and twelve other idols covered with brass, about him.’ The water here referred to seems to be the chain of small lakes stretching from Drumshambo Lough to Gulladoo Lough on the borders of Co. Cavan. There are eleven or twelve of them in all, and they form the mearing line between Longford and Leitrim in modern, as they probably did between Teffia and Magh Rein in ancient, times.

It is expressly stated by Tirechan that Patrick went from Granard into Magh Rein, [1] and therein ordained Priest Bruscius, and founded a church for him in that place. It is not easy to identify this church or Priest Bruscius, of whom the following curious story is told by Tirechan :—After his death he appeared to another saint who dwelt in Inchicairbre—in Latin, *Insula generis Cothirbi*—and said to him : “ It is well for you whilst you have your son with you, but I am afflicted in death, for I am alone in the desert and my church is deserted and empty ; no priests offer the Sacrifice near me.” For three nights the island saint had the same vision, so on the morning of the third day he rose early, and taking pick, shovel, and spade, he opened the lonely grave of Bruscius and carried off his bones with him to his own island, where they rested in peace. It would be interesting to identify this island, but even 1,000 years ago the scribe in the Book of Armagh noted on the margin that the place was uncertain. [2] Perhaps it was Church Island in Garadice Lough. There was certainly an ancient church on the island, but whether it was the one here referred to or not is still uncertain.

In its wider sense, Magh Rein designated the whole of the great undulating plain of southern Leitrim, but it was more properly applied to the fertile plain around Fenagh, which in all the old books is called Fenagh of Magh Rein, for it was its capital and religious centre. There is a Lough Rein a little to the north of Fenagh, which probably gave its name to the plain, and the lake itself was so called from Rein, the nurse of Cobhthach, son of King Conaing. The youth was drowned in the lake, and his nurse, in trying to save him, also perished there, but gave her name to the lake for ever. [3]

From immemorial ages Fenagh of Magh-Rein was famed in bardic story, and was, certainly, both in pagan and Christian times, one of the great religious centres of the land. Its

ancient name was Dunbaile, and before the Conmaicne established themselves in Magh-Rein, this territory as well as Magh Slecht was held by a Firbolgic tribe, named the Maisraige, who were certainly there in the time of St. Patrick, since they slew Conal Gulban near Fenagh in A.D. 464, a deed of which they greatly boasted, for he was the bravest of all the sons of Niall the Great.

Magh Slecht lay to the east of Magh Rein, but O'Donovan is not accurate in saying that no part of it lay in the County Leitrim. The entry in the Annals of the Four Masters, under date A.D. 1256, proves that beyond doubt a great part of the parish of Oughteragh, north of Ballinamore, formed a part of Magh Slecht. It is true that it also extended into the modern County Cavan, comprehending the level part of the barony of Tullyhaw, through which the light railway now passes, by Ballymagauran to Ballyconnell, in County Cavan. Magh Slecht formed a part of what was afterwards called Breifne O'Reilly, but Magh Rein belonged to Breifne O'Rorke, the dividing line being marked by the existing boundary between the diocese of Kilmore and of Ardagh. The parish of Oughteragh is in the diocese of Kilmore, and its boundary passes about one mile north of Fenagh and less than a mile south of Edentenny, the last-named being thus a part of Magh Slecht.

II.—Situation of Magh Slecht.

In our opinion Edentenny is the undoubted Plain of Adoration, where 'Crom Cruaich and his sub-gods twelve' were adored by the pagan Irish from time immemorial. It is well, therefore, to bear in mind that the name Magh Slecht has been used in two senses—first, to designate a great wide-spreading plain in the baronies of Tullyhaw and Carrigallen, and, secondly, to imply the actual scene of the idol worship, which was, in our opinion, at Edentenny, between Fenagh and Ballinamore.

The aspect of the place is such as would at once strike a visitor as marking a most appropriate place for druidic worship. It is a limestone ridge about 400 yards long and 80 or 90 yards wide. On the eastern side the ridge is bounded by a steep escarpment rising from the low ground. From the base of this rocky wall there issues full-born, like the fountains of the Jordan, a strong, clear, and rapid spring, powerful enough to turn a mill, coming out, as it were, from the very heart of the hill. This is, no doubt, a subterranean stream coming down from the lakes of Fenagh and Rein, some two miles to the south. But there is no visible connection between them, and it would strike a simple people as if the river-god dwelt within his rocky halls beneath the ridge, and poured out for man, and beast, and field, this perennial fountain so beautiful in the abounding wealth of its crystal waters. If the Irish held the king of waters to be a god it is no wonder they adored him on the green brow of the ridge that gives birth to this grand fountain. On its northern and western side the ridge is bounded by a deep gully running all round it except on the south, where the ridge falls slowly to the level of the surrounding plain. This gully is in winter oftentimes filled with water, and was, in our opinion, the 'fossa' of Slecht to which reference is made by Tirechan, for, when filled with water, especially in the low ground to the east, where it joins the bed of the stream, the term would be most appropriate.

This ridge itself is fitly called Longstones, which appears to be an attempt at giving an English equivalent for the Irish name Cairginns. It was a seat of the Druids both before and after the arrival of St. Patrick, for they always set up near the royal dun, and Dunbaile had been for ages a 'holy regal place,' as the Book of Fenagh styles it. We note proofs of their presence on the ridge and all around it; and, beyond doubt, they chose an admirable site, for it was visible from afar; their sanctuary was isolated by nature itself; and the wondrous water-god was ever pouring out the life-giving stream from the very heart of their sacred shrine. On the flat summit of the ridge there are still remaining traces of two circular stone

enclosures such as the Druids used, and close at hand are the wonderful stones, or slabs, which have given their names to the place. One is now prostrate—an immense slab about eighteen feet long by four broad ; the other is still standing, but inclining to the west, and is partially buried in the soil. Another, close by, is also standing, but inclines to the east. Between them is a third slab, nearly sunk in the soil, and of smaller dimensions. The whole place is suggestive of druidical worship, and we have no doubt it was the true scene of the striking incidents narrated in the Life of St. Patrick.

From time immemorial it was a sacred place in the estimation of the pagan Irish. [4] The great King Tighearnmas, who flourished long before the Christian era, and is credited with being the first smelter of gold in Ireland, held a great assembly of the men of Erin on this very spot for the worship of Crom Cruaich, whom the Four Masters describe as the Chief idol of Erin at the time. But he and three-fourths of his people with him perished at that festival, which was held on November eve, and the Christian chroniclers say that their death was in punishment of the impious rites which they used on that occasion. But it still continued to be the Field of National Adoration down to the time of St. Patrick, and there can be no doubt that it was to destroy the grim idol of the Firbolgs that St. Patrick took his journey to Magh Slecht.

From Granard, as we have seen, he crossed the country to the north-west, and came into the plain of Magh Rein most likely by Ballinamuck and Cloone. When he arrived there, perhaps in the early Autumn of 435 or 436, he saw the people in the distance prostrate before the idol. [5] This sight excited his angry zeal, and before he had yet reached the spot he protested against the idolatry in a loud, commanding voice, whence the spot where he stood was called Guth-ard. that is the ‘ loud-shout.’ Those who know the ground can easily realize the scene. As we have said, the place was an isolated ridge, surrounded on the south-east at least by the waters of the great fountain bursting from its rocky face. Then Patrick, drawing nigh, ‘ saw the idol from the water (afterwards) named Guth-ard, because he uplifted his voice, and when he drew nigh to the idol he raised up his hand to strike it with the Staff of Jesus’ ; but before he touched it the idol fell prone ‘ on its right side,’ for to the south was its face, namely, to Tara, and the mark of the Staff still remains on its left side, and yet the Staff did not move out of Patrick’s hand ! Such is the version in the Tripartite of the overthrow of the idol and it seems to imply, as Colgan renders it, that Patrick’s cry from the water, with his threatening gesture, overthrew the idol, and left the imprint of the Staff of Jesus on the stone, although he really did not strike the idol with his Staff at all ; and the same account is given by Jocelyn.

The Tripartite adds that, ‘ the earth at the same time swallowed up twelve other images as far as their heads, and they still stand thus in token of the miracle.’ This no doubt refers to the circle of druidical stones standing round the principal idols, and traces of some of them may still be seen on the ridge ; but whether the others vanished or were carried off by quarrymen must remain an open question. That a stone circle did exist there is, we think, quite evident ; and we spent some hours of a summer’s day examining the place and its neighbourhood. ‘ Patrick, too, cursed the demon that dwelt within the idol, and drove him to hell,’ and all the people with Laeghaire, the King, who, it appears, was there adoring at the time, saw the demon, and they feared they would perish except Patrick drove him back to hell. In this conflict Patrick acted with ‘ prowess against the idol,’ and hence it came to pass that the brooch or fibula, which fastened his cloak or cope, fell off and was lost in the heather, so he caused the grass or heather to be pulled up until he found his brooch ; ‘ but no heather grows there more than in the rest of the field.’ It is difficult to see how heather ever grew in it, for the limestone rock crops up everywhere, and heather does not love the limestone. The word rather means ‘ herbage’ than ‘ heather,’ and of the former there is a good crop.

It may be assumed as fairly certain that the idols in question were the huge slabs now prostrate on the ridge, for such standing stones were always held sacred by the Druids, and their sacred enclosures were always surrounded by such blocks of stone. From the earliest times these slabs, topical of the water-god who sent forth the rushing stream from the bowels of the hill, were covered with plates of bronze, and sometimes no doubt also with plates of gold and silver, whilst the lesser idols in the circle were merely covered with bronze. They were ancient—very ancient—idols in this sacred place, and so Patrick resolved utterly to destroy them. He succeeded at least for a time ; but we know from the Book of Fenagh that the druidical worship still lingered on near its old home, for in the time of St. Caillin, one hundred years later, the Druids of Fenagh and Magh Slecht opposed him and his clerics, and kept their old unclean rites and ceremonial, reviling the saint at the same time in very filthy language. But Caillin was a ‘ blazing fire ’ to destroy the enemies of God and his Church ; so he transformed the Druids ‘ into forms of stone ’ in presence of all the multitude. And there they are still on the crest of the Longstones ridge to testify the fact to future ages. It is clear that the scribe did not wish that Caillin should in his own country be outdone by Patrick.

III. — Church of Magh Slecht.

There are two other things worthy of note in connection with Magh Slecht—first, St. Patrick’s Well, and, secondly, the church which he founded there. The Tripartite refers to the first very briefly :—“ There at the ‘ Plain of Adoration ’ is Patrick’s Well, in which he baptised many.” A little to the north of Fenagh, just under the road to Magh Slecht, there is around, deep, and limpid spring, under a spreading ash tree, which all the people regard as a holy well. We asked if it were St. Patrick’s Well. Yes, our informant thought so ; and it is just such a well as St. Patrick would have blessed for the baptismal rite. It is close to a deep stream, coming out of the rock, over which there still remains in *situ* a splendid example of the dolmen or cromlech, which usually marks a hero’s grave. We know that Conal Gulban was killed at Fenagh by the Firbolgs, and it is highly probable that this monument marks his grave. But the well is not in Magh Slecht properly speaking, although near the meaning ; it is rather in Magh Rein, and hence we can hardly think it is the holy well referred to in the Tripartite. There is another well, however, at Edentinny, close to the Field of Adoration, and it was either there or in the copious fountain that issues from the face of the rock itself, that Patrick baptised his converts on the great day when he overthrew the ancient idols.

It is also stated that he founded a church in that place, namely, Domnagh Mor Maige Slecht, and he left therein Methbrain, called also Patrick’s Barbarian, a relative of his own and a prophet, who foretold, as Tirechan adds, many wonderful things. There is no old church or churchyard, as far as we could ascertain, in the immediate neighbourhood of the place, and the church founded by Patrick must, as its name implies, have been an important one. Hence, we are inclined to think that this Domnach Mor is identical with the parish church of Ballinamore, some two miles to the east. It is called the Church of Oughteragh, or Oughter-ard, and has given its name to the whole parish, which was certainly a portion of the ancient Magh Slecht. We may add that the whole district is very interesting and is full of memorials of the past. Unfortunately we had no local seanachie to guide us in our explorations. The expression, however, used by Tirechan here is very significant. He says that Patrick sent his relation, the ‘ Barbarian ’ Methbrain, to the dyke of Slecht, where he founded this Domnach Mor. [6] As we have already stated, the dyke appears to have been the low ground through which the great fountain flowed into the Dale river, and the church of Oughterard is really over this dyke or marshy hollow. The word Barbarian merely means that Methbrain was not like Patrick himself and most of his relatives, a Roman citizen, and hence the family of the Saint gave him this title as a cognomen, or rather nickname, although, as it is expressly stated, he was a relation of the Saint, and had, doubtless, like the rest of his relations, accompanied or followed Patrick from Britain to Ireland.

IV.— Patrick Crosses the Shannon.

The next stage in Patrick's journey brings him from Magh Slecht to the Shannon. His road lay due west by the roots of the Iron Mountain, on the line of the present light railway to Drumshambo, at the head of Lough Allen. It is a picturesque road, skirting many small but beautiful lakes, and affording several sweet glimpses of exquisite rural scenery. Tirechan says that Patrick came, due west, to the bed of the Shannon, where his charioteer Buadmoel by name, died, and was buried.

Patrick crossed the river at a place called Snám-dá-En, [7] the Swimming Ford of the two Birds. O'Donovan says this Ford was near Clonmacoise, and that Patrick must have crossed the river there. There may have been a place of the same name at Clonmacnoise, but the narrative here clearly implies that he crossed over into Magh Ai, at Doogary, and near Tir Ailella, now Tিরerrell, which anciently came as far south as the Boyle River, a tributary of the Shannon separating Magh Ai from Tir Ailella. We have carefully gone over this ground, and with the help of the parish priest [8] easily identified all the places referred to in the narrative of the Tripartite. About one mile-and-a-half north of Battle Bridge the Shannon cuts through a ridge now called Drumboylan, forming at the point a considerable island. The stream here is very rapid, but shallow, and the stepping-stones that formed the ancient ford may still be seen on the bank, foot-worn on the top and water-worn on the sides by the stream that surged around them for 2000 years. The Board of Works have recently cleared the river bed at this point, [9] and so removed the stones. They erected at the same time a foot-bridge across the stream for the convenience of the people. When the river is full a fierce current runs beneath in the main bed of the river ; yet an old man assured us, that although scores of people had fallen into the stream when the river was in flood, no one was ever drowned there, owing to St. Patrick's blessing the ford. The tradition of his having crossed the river at this point is quite vivid in the minds of the people ; and they also show where Buadmoel, Patrick's charioteer, died on the right bank of the river, and also the green meadow on the brow of the ridge overlooking the Shannon, where he was buried, nigh to the little church that bore his name—Cell-Buaidmoel. The church itself has disappeared, but its site can still be traced, and human bones were quite recently found on the spot. It is said, too, in the village, that the very flagstone on which he lay when he was dying is preserved in the floor of the house next the ford, which was probably built on the very spot, for the wall is now partially over the flagstone. The name of the village—Drumboylan—is, undoubtedly, a corruption of Drum-Buaidmoel, a vocable easily shortened into Drumboyle or Drumboylan. From Drumboylan by the river's ford, the old road led straight to Doogary, the ancient Duma Graid, called *tumulum-Gradi*, by Tirechan, in the Book of Armagh. The village is about two miles from the ford, and still bears its ancient name, but there are no traces of an old church ; nor, indeed, is it stated that any church was founded there. But at this point it would appear that Patrick, before going further South, met the sons of Ailell, who crossed the Feorish River to greet him before he left their territory, and there he ordained Ailbe, ' who is in Shanco'— Sen-chua— as a priest to minister to the sons of Ailell. The narrative seems to imply that Ailbe was ordained then and there. In that case he was in all probability at the time a member of Patrick's religious family.

St. Patrick in Roscommon.

I. — Patrick at Doogary.

When Patrick crossed the Shannon, he touched the north-eastern extremity of the great Roscommon plain of Magh Ai in its widest sense. [10] The royal palace of Cruachan, to which Patrick was, in accordance with his usual practice, making his way, was in the heart of Magh

Ai, near Tulsk ; and there Mael and Caplait, two brothers, Druids both, dwelt with the daughters of King Laeghaire, of whose education they had charge. The Druids knew Patrick was coming, for they must have heard what had taken place at Magh Slecht, and they were preparing to receive him ; so, as soon as he crossed the great river, ‘ they brought a thick darkness over the whole of Magh Ai, through the power of the devil, for the space of three days and three nights.’ Then Patrick bent his knees in earnest prayer to God, and blessed the plain, so that it became lightsome once more for all except the two Druids. Whereupon he gave thanks to God, who banished the darkness from Magh Ai.

The spiritual darkness, at least, soon disappeared from that fair and wide-spreading plain. That the Druids might, by the power of the devil, have brought storm and darkness over the plain, can hardly be doubted by those who remember the plagues of Egypt, and believe with St. Paul that the demons are rulers of this air and princes of darkness in high places. But they could not frighten away Patrick, who was strong in faith and the power of the Saving Name of Him who is the true Light of the world.

We are told that when Patrick ordained Ailbe as chief priest at Doogary, he, at the same time, told him of a stone altar in Sliabh Hy n-Ailella under the ground, with four glass chalices at the angles of the altar ; “ beware,” he added, “ of breaking the edges of the excavation.” [11]

This is a strange statement, which has greatly puzzled the Saint’s biographers. How did it come to pass that there was an altar and chalices in this remote and rather wild part of the country. The most probable conjecture is that Patrick passed that way long before when making his escape from Slemish to Killala. [12] Anyone can see that his direct course would lie across the country, by the head of Lough Allen, over this very Sliabh Hy n Ailella, now called the Bralieve Mountain, and thence across the plain of Corann to Ballina. In this way the fugitive Christian youth might have come across some Christian family or hermit amongst the Hy Ailella, and have been entrusted with the secret of this cave, which was, as it were, a catacomb for the scattered Christians of the district.

The statement is certainly confirmed by one fact, which we ourselves observed. In the summer of 1898, accompanied by the Bishop of Elphin, we went to visit the old church of Shancough, or Shancoe, which is situated about a mile to the west of the modern church of Geevagh, but in a far more commanding and picturesque site, that affords a noble prospect of the long, brown range of Sliabh-Ailell mountain. The ancient church was, as usual, built near the rath of the chief, of which some traces still remain. We asked our guide was there a cave near at hand, and soon discovered its existence within twenty yards of the church door. The entrance was partially closed up ; but one of the young men present assured us that it extended underground as far as the church. This cave must, in old times, have been very roomy, and was probably connected with the church. There is every ground to believe that this is the identical cave referred to in the Tripartite, and that it was the seat of Christian worship before St. Patrick ever crossed the Shannon. Chalices of glass, or crystal, were certainly used in early times, when it was difficult to procure the precious metals, or even bronze cups, for the Sacred Mysteries.

Of St. Ailbe, the first priest ever ordained west of the Shannon, we know nothing else. His feast day was the 30th January, [13] that of Ailbe of Emly was 12th September. His ‘ bed’ and ‘ well’ are high up on the mountain’s brow, in full view of his ancient church, but some three miles away, in a wild and lonely spot. It is probable that he retired to live there as a solitary in his old age ; and wished to be buried, as he had lived, alone with God, on the bare face of the mountain. The tradition that he was ordained by St. Patrick is still very vivid amongst the

people ; and they have a great veneration for his ‘ bed’ and ‘ holy well.’ From his cell on the lone mountain crest, he had full in view the whole parish over which Patrick had placed him. There he prayed for his people in his old age, as, no doubt, he prays for them still in his high place near St. Patrick in heaven.

At Doogary also, or perhaps at Shancough, for the text is vague, Patrick baptised the holy Mane or Maneus, whom Bishop Bron, son of Icne, ordained some years later, and who was placed over the church of Aghanagh on a southern arm of Lough Arrow in this same Tirerrell country. It is a beautiful spot, too, this old church of Aghanagh, standing over the lake shore, looking to the warm south, with fertile fields around, where the monks of old wandered in the sweet repose of their heavenly seclusion. But now, like so many other ancient churches, it is shrineless and roofless, open to the wind and rain, a lonely but a very beautiful home of the dead. The country around, the ancient Tir-Ailell, now Tirerrell, is very picturesque. Its lakes particularly are strikingly beautiful, and all abound in fish. Lough Arrow, Lough Kee, Lough Skean, the Keadue Lough, and several smaller sheets of water are all visible from any commanding point on the hills which overlook them, and lend a wonderful charm and variety to a landscape which lacks no element of beauty—neither wood, nor water, nor hill, nor dale, nor rushing river. [14]

The ordination of Ailbe and the baptism of Maneus at Doogary are both interesting facts, and give rise to some enquiries here. ‘ Who was this Ailbe ?’ There are only two of the name mentioned in our Calendars, Ailbe of Emly, and this Ailbe of Shancoe. The festival of the former is, as we have seen, quite a different day from that of the latter, and this second Ailbe was son of Ronan, of the race of Conal Gulban. Where then did Patrick first meet him ? Most probably at Tara, or somewhere in Meath four or five years before, for he was a young prince of the royal family. Finding a suitable youth for the sacred ministry, Patrick at once took him into his own family or retinue, where he received the necessary instruction for the priesthood ; and, as the foreign missionaries were now almost exhausted, Patrick ordained this youth for a church which was not far from his own country of Tirconnell, and where he probably had some friends amongst the chieftains of the district.

Mane or Maneus, whom Patrick baptised, was merely a youth of ten or twelve at the time. He was afterwards ordained by Bron, son of Icne, and we know from the Life of St. Finnian of Clonard that he lived to be a very old man at Aghanagh, for St. Finnian met him there probably some seventy years after the events here recorded.

These things took place at Doogary in the modern parish of Ardcarne or Tumna, which got its name from the Woman’s Tomb, that is from St. Edania, who is buried in the old church by the Boyle River, of which she is patron and most likely founder.

From Doogary Patrick went, so far as we can judge, southward across the Boyle River at Cootehall into Maghglass. Moyglass, as it was called in later times, is the green and fertile plain extending along the Shannon’s western shore from Carrick to the bridge of Carnadoe near Rooskey. It is low-lying for the most part, and liable to floods in winter ; but then, as now, the green fields of its higher uplands were fertile and densely populated. So Patrick, declining a little eastwards from his straight road to Cruachan of Magh Ai, founded the church of Kilmore Maige Glass, not far from the river’s bank, in a green meadow, which still bears the ancient name. There he founded a church, in which he left two of his household, called Conleng and Ercleng. The names are rather British than Irish ; and indeed he could hardly have found time hitherto to train any of the natives, especially of the West, for the service of the Church. In after time Kilmore Maige Glass, or Kilmore na Shinna, [15] as it was called later on, became a famous church, and at the present time gives name to a parish in the diocese of Elphin. The Patrician church has completely disappeared : but a ruin of later date

still marks the holy ground, and is surrounded by a densely-populated churchyard, where the rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

II. — Patrick at Elphin.

From Moyglass, Patrick went into the territory known as Corca Ochland, as it is called in the Tripartite. It was north of Sliabh Badgna, now Slieve Bawn, the most conspicuous object on the southern horizon ; but it was on ‘ this side,’ that is, to the south of Hy Ailella, for the men of Tirerrill then claimed as their own all the mountain land from Lough Gill, near Sligo, to the neighbourhood of Elphin. At the present time the district is comprised in the barony of Roscommon, and was always considered a part of Magh Ai. But the term ‘ Corcagh Achlann’ was in later times more properly applied to the eastern part of the district from Strokestown to Elphin, which was the tribe-land of the O’Brennans and O’Hanlys.

Two brothers were biding in that place, that is, near Elphin, namely Id and Hono ; Druids they were and owners of the fertile plain around them. Patrick, as usual, asked the site of a church. Then said Hono to Patrick : —“ What wilt thou give me for the land” (that you want) ? “ Life eternal,” answered Patrick. Then said Hono, “ You have gold ; give me some of it.” Patrick thereupon replied, “ I have given away all my gold ; but God will give me more (to give you).” And God did give him more. For, thereafter, Patrick found a lump of gold where the swine were rooting, and he gave that mass of gold to Hono for his land. *Tir-in-Brotha*, that is, ‘ the Field of the Lump,’ ‘ is its name,’ says the Tripartite. But though Patrick gave the gold to Hono, he liked not his avarice in selling the field to God, wherefore he added, “ Thou shalt not be a king, nor shall any of thy seed reign after thee.” Then fear conquered avarice, and Hono burst into tears, so that Patrick, touched with pity, added, “ Although thou shalt not be king, nor thy seed—still he shall not be king, whom thou and thy posterity will not accept and ordain.” If they were not to be kings, they were yet to be, to some extent, king-makers. ‘ And that has been fulfilled,’ adds the author, ‘ for the race of Mac Erce (sons of Hono) are the mightiest and firmest in Connaught, but they never ruled as over-kings of the Province, nor, indeed, as kings at all.’ This Hono, or Ono, was son of Oengus, son of Ere Derg, son of Brian, [16] the great father of the Connaught Kings.

When the promise was made, and he had got his gold, Hono the Druid gave to Patrick his own royal dwelling, on the crest of the beautiful ridge of Elphin, to be the site of the new church. It was then called Emlach Onand, from the name of its owner, ‘ but to-day it is called Ail Find, from the White Stone which Patrick took up from the stream just in front of the church.’ It is not unlikely that this was deemed a ‘ sacred stone,’ from which the fountain flowed, and that it was worshipped by the Druids as the god of the waters. Wherefore, Patrick took it up out of the fountain, which he blessed at the same time. But the rock still remained on its margin before the church, and ever after gave its name to the church, the parish, and the diocese—that is Ail Finn—the Rock of the Clear Stream, from which the apostle had raised it. The ancient church of Elphin is gone, the rock is gone too, but the fountain flows for ever clear and strong before the door of the ‘ new’ Protestant church, that now stands on the site of the edifice founded by St. Patrick.

Over this church of Elphin Patrick placed Bishop Assicus, and Bite, son of the brother of Assicus, and Cipia, mother of Bite, or Biteus, the Bishop. They were of the race of Hono the Druid, for Patrick had promised, and said, “ Thy seed shall—not reign—but be blessed, and there shall be victory of laymen and clerics from thee for ever, and they shall have the inheritance of this place.”

Herein Patrick showed consummate prudence. The family of Hono were of the priestly caste ; but they were also of the royal race of Connaught, and hence possessed a double in-

fluence. To set up a Briton or a stranger in Elphin would have been a dangerous experiment, so he chose one of their own race to be the bishop of the place, a skilled artisan, too, in metal-work, just such a man as he wanted to do the work of the Church. The mention of Bite, nephew of Assicus, shows that the former was now rather advanced in years, and that his title as bishop was rather an honorary one. The work was to be done by Bite, but Assicus was the nominal ruler, and the holy mother of Bite, the nephew of Assicus, undertook to look after the new church in those ways which a woman can best manage. The name of Assicus is not found in that form in our ancient martyrologies, but the Martyrology of Tallaght commemorates Asaach [17] under date of April the 26th, which has long been regarded as the feast day of Assicus of Elphin. This goes to show that our Assicus of Elphin must be identified with Essa or Essu, who is described as one of the three artisans of Patrick in the lists of his household. His nephew, Bite, is the second, and Tassach, who ‘gave Patrick the Sacrifice’ at his death, was the third; so that Elphin supplied two of the famous artificers of Patrick, who were, perhaps, the most indispensable and most valuable members of his religious household.

This is recognised by the Author of the Tripartite, for he adds that the ‘Holy Bishop Assicus was Patrick’s copper-smith; and he made for Patrick altars and square patens and book-covers, in honour of Patrick, and one of these patens (doubtless with its cup) was in Armagh, and another in Elphin, and another in Domnach Mor Maige Seolai, on the altar of Felart, the holy bishop of the Hy Bruin Seolai, far west from Elphin’—near Headford, in the Co. Galway.

We are told that Imlech Onand [18] was at that time the name of the place where Ono dwelt, which he offered to Patrick to be the site of his church, ‘but,’ adds the Tripartite, ‘it is called Ail-Find to-day. The place is so named from the stone (ail) which was raised out of the well that was made by Patrick in the green, and which stands on the brink of the well; it is so called from the water.’ [19] The writer first says the place got its name Ail-Find from the ‘White Stone’ taken out of the water; then he seems to say that the stone gets its name from the clear water, so that Elphin would mean the Stone of the Clear (Stream), rather than the White Stone (over the well).

The ‘clear stream’ of most excellent water is still flowing in the ‘green’ before the spot where the church of Assicus once stood. But the white stone itself which stood on its margin was broken and carried off for building material, it is said, by the Rector of the Protestant church, which now stands on the commanding site where the original church of Assicus formerly stood. The Catholic church is at the western end of the town, a new and very commodious edifice.

The subsequent history of Assicus, as told in the Tripartite, is not without its own pathetic human interest, and the mere recital of the story is of itself an evidence in favour of the authenticity of those ancient documents.

“Assicus thereafter in shame, because of a lie told by him—or, rather, of him—went in flight into the North to Sliabh Liacc (now Slieve League) in Tir Boguini. He abode there seven years in an island (that is Rathlin O’Beirne), and his monks went a-seeking of him, and at length, after much trouble, they found him in the mountain glens—(Glen Columcille)—and they brought him away with them, but on his journey home he died in the wilderness, and they buried him at Raith Cungai, in Sereth—now Racoan, near Ballintra—for he declared that he would not go back again into Magh Ai on account of the falsehood that had been circulated there. Hence came the proverb, ‘it is time to travel into Serthe,’ [20] that is, we may assume, to do penance. But the holy old man was rightly deemed a saint in Serthe, and the king of the land gave to him, and to his monks after his death, the grazing of a hundred cows, with their calves, and of twenty oxen, as a permanent benefice. ‘His relics are in Raith

Cungai, and to Patrick belongs the church,' as it belonged to his disciples, ' but the community of Columcille and Ard Sratha have taken possession of it' [21]

The venerable Assicus, if he sinned, did penance. It is a far cry from Elphin to Rathlin O'Beirne, a small, storm-swept island at the very extremity of south-western Donegal. Even at the present day, though green and fertile, no one dwells there but the lighthouse keeper. There is no lonelier spot around the wild west coast of Ireland, yet there he dwelt away from men for seven long years, sometimes, perhaps, coming ashore to the glens, where his monks found him working at his craft, after long seeking throughout the black North. Reluctantly, it seems, he consented to return. ' He was ashamed to go back to Magh Ai,' because of the lie told there, and he sickened by the way—the long, rugged road that leads down to the North—between Ballyshannon and Ballintra, at a place that still bears the ancient name, shortened into Racoon, in Magh Serthe. There he died, and there they buried him as a saint on the summit of a small round hill to the west of the highway near Ballintra. We searched the place in vain for any trace of his grave. It is still used as a burial place for children, but the planter who got the ancient site of his monastery in Tirhugh knows nothing of Assicus. Still, he has spared the holy spot, and the grave of Assicus has not yet become common earth. In our view this noble shame of the artist-bishop, bred up, as he was, in paganism, is a higher testimony to his virtue and nobility of character than if a whole volume of miracles were attributed to him by later, but less trustworthy, writers.

Thereafter Patrick went from Elphin to Dumacha Hy n Ailella—the Mounds of the Hy Ailella—and there he founded a church known as Senchell Dumaige, the Old Church of the Mounds. This place [22] is only one mile north-west of Elphin, on the very verge of the southern bounds of what was then the territory of the sons of Ailell. It still bears its ancient name, and gives title to the parish of Shankill, west of Elphin.

The old church was just at the cross-roads beyond the Deanery, and the ' mounds' that gave it its ancient name may still be noticed. But, the building itself has now completely disappeared, although the graveyard is still much frequented.

It may be, however, that the Mounds of the Hy Ailella does not signify that the territory was theirs, but that it was merely a place name, where some of that clan fell in battle, and so their burial mounds gave the place its name. It seems rather to have been in Magh Ai. At this point Patrick was at the meeting of three territories, Tir Ailella, Corcu Achlann, and Magh Ai, in its stricter sense, which designated merely the royal demesne of the Connaught kings. Their palace lay straight before him to the south-west, about four miles distant, on the brow of the beautiful ridge which overlooks one of the fairest scenes in Ireland.

But before leaving Shankill, Patrick, as usual, provided for the future of the young church which he founded there. He left in it Maichet and Cetchen and Rodan, a chief priest, and, moreover, Mathona, the sister of the youthful Benen. There Mathona received the veil from Patrick and from Rodan, and thus became their spiritual daughter. It is interesting to observe how carefully Patrick provided for his clerics and for his nuns, according to their seniority, so to speak. First of all, he left the two Emers at Cionbroney. They were the earliest holy maidens whom he ever knew in Ireland, and now he leaves, at least for a time, Mathona, the sister of Benignus, who was probably the next of the Christian maidens, who, following her holy brother's example, resolved to give her life for Christ. Of Maichet and Cetchen, the presbyters of Shankill, we know nothing. Their names appear to be British, and it is not improbable that they were amongst the British disciples of Patrick who had followed him to Ireland. Only one Rodan is mentioned in the Martyrology of Tallaght under date of the 25th of September. The name merely is given.

The text of the Tripartite would seem to imply that from Shankill Patrick went into the Tirerrill country and founded the church of Tamnach (Taunagh) beyond Lough Arrow to the north, over which Mathona was either then or later on appointed Superioress. [23] Our view, however, is that these things are said by anticipation of what occurred afterwards, that Patrick from Shankill went straight towards Cruachan, which was his purpose from the beginning, and that the visit of the Saint to North Tirerrill took place at a later period, after he had gone round through the west of Connaught. It is likely, too, that this Mathona was sister, not of Benen of Meath, but of Tirerrill, as we shall see later on.

From Shankill, then, Patrick went by the high ridge stretching over the small lakes and marshes that intervened on the south by Cloonyquin towards Tulsk or Tomona. It was the road to Cruachan, and he probably pitched his camp for the night not far west of Tulsk. When the morning sun rose over the hills near the Shannon he and his clerics went at sunrise to the well, namely Clebach, on the eastern flanks of Cruachan Hill. The well is there still, a great rushing fountain coming out from the rocks just under the road from Tulsk towards Cruachan, close to the spot where stood the ancient church built expressly to commemorate this most touching scene in the whole history of St. Patrick. Even the old chroniclers felt its charm, and were almost melted into poetry when they described it. It never fades from the mind of those who read the history of St. Patrick, and to this day no one can ever hear the story unmoved. But to appreciate it fully, one must visit the place or, at least, try to realize the scene.

[1] Et venit in campum Rein et urdinavit Bruscum presbyterum, et ecclesiam illi fundavit.—
Rolls *Trip.*, Vol., II. 311.

[2] On the upper margin—‘Isbaile inso sis asincertus.’

[3] *Book of Fenagh*, page 251.

[4] There was the King idol of Erin—namely, Ciom Cruaich, and around him twelve idols made of stones, but he was of gold. Until Patrick’s advent he was the god of every folk that colonised Erin. To him they used to offer the firstlings of every issue and the chief scions of every clan. ‘Tis to him that Erin’s King, Tighernmas, son of Follach, repaired on Hallow-tide together with the men and women of Erin in order to adore him, whence is Magh Slecht, ‘Plain of Prostration.’—*Dinds*.

[5] There is good reason to think that Patrick came there on the last Sunday of summer, commonly called Garland Sunday. But of old it was called Domnach Cromdubh, the Sunday of Black Crom, which was originally a pagan festival, but afterwards became a Christian festival, and is commemorated in our Calendars on the 31st of July. This would seem to imply that in that year the 31st July was Sunday, but this is merely a conjecture.

[6] Miltens (for misit) autera Patricius Methbrain ad fossam Slecht, barbarum Patricii propinquum qui dicebat mirabilia in Deo vero.’—The expression shows that the fossa was at some distance from the Plain of Adoration. It also shows that some of Patrick’s British relations were not Roman citizens, and hence this Methbrain is described as a barbarian.

[7] The ford is called Bandea by Tirechan. It is said that Patrick went into the harbour (port) at once, that is, crossed to the other side at once, and that Buadmoel died there, which seems to imply that he died on Ilie Roscommon shore, and this is borne out by the living tradition of the place.

[8] The Rev. Father Meehan.

[9] The Shannon here is not navigable, but a canal has been cut east of the river from Lough Allen which joins the river at Battle Bridge.

[10] In the strict sense Maigh Ai extended ‘from Clonfree, near Slokestown, to the bridge of Castlerea, and from the high ground, a little north of Roscommon, to the Turloughs of Mantua,’ where it meets Moylurg; but, in a wider sense, it included Moylurg and much of the surrounding territory. See *Hy Fiachach*, p. 179.

[11] Et dixit, cavendum ne frangantur ore fossure — e being put for at.

[12] There is no ground whatsoever for assuming that Patrick himself had ever preached the

Gospel there on any previous occasion ; but he may have seen the cave or heard of it from others.

- [13] He is called in the *Martyrology of Tallaght*, Ailbe Cruimtir, that is. Priest Ailbe, which shows he was never raised to the Episcopate. There are only two saints of the name in our calendar, Ailbe of Emly and Ailbe of Shancoe. The *Martyrology of Donegal* says the latter was son of Ronan, of the race of Conal Giilban.
- [14] Aghanagh has a special interest for the author, for it contains the sepulchre of his ancestors in the nave of the church, and stands on the land that once formed part of Baile O'Heligh or Healystown, now Hollybrook. It is called by both names on the Ordnance map.
- [15] In our opinion Kilmore of Moyglass, or Kilmore na Shinna, is not the Kilmore Duitribh where Columba, at a later period, founded a great church. Columba's Kilmore of the Wilderness was, in our opinion, the ancient church which gives its title to the present diocese of Kilmore or Cavan.
- [16] The text of the Tripartite has Bron, but we believe it is an error for ' Brian,' the elder brother of Niall of the Nine Hostages, and the great ancestor of all the Connaught Kings.
- [17] It is quite clear that Asaach, Essa, and Essu must be regarded as different forms of the same Irish name ; and that Assicus was regarded as the Latin equivalent, which is the form used in the *Tripartite*.
- [18] That is Ono's Marsh or Meadow. Tirechan calls it Imliuch Harnon ; but it is probably the same name corrupted by the transcriber.
- [19] De aqua nuncupatur (locus).
- [20] This proverb would seem to imply that the falsehood was spoken by Assicus himself, otherwise it would have no point.
- [21] This passage seems to imply that the Columbian house at Drumhome in the neighbourhood encroached on the possessions of the monks of Racoon, and denied the claims of Armagh as mother church. The monks of Aidstraw also appear to have seized some of the land.
- [22] Colgan places it in Ciarraige Arne, barony of Costelloe, Co. Mayo ; but this is clearly a mistake, Archdeacon O'Rorke places it at Carradoo, Co. Sligo. There was a Sencell in Ciarraige, but not this one, as Colgan himself explains elsewhere. At Carradoo there is no old church at all, although it is said there was a nunnery at Carricknahorna.
- [23] The *Book of Armagh* (Rolls, p. 314) clearly shows that it was *Mathona*, not Patrick, who went through the mountain of the Hy Ailella at this time, and founded the church in Tamnach, which, at a later period, was visited by Patrick. The nominative to the verb *exiit* is not Patricius but Mathona.

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