Pre-Norman Ireland holds a fascination for many people, scholars included, who in recent years have produced a large body of scholarship on different aspects of the history of and life in pre-Norman Ireland. Personally I come to the field of early Ireland not as a historian but as a student of Christian liturgy. I discovered that a great deal of academic work has been published on the archaeology, art, and architecture of this period, and that the place of the church in society in pre-Norman Ireland and also of various elements of church organization itself have been studied extensively. But I was surprised to learn that relatively little has been published either on the eucharistic liturgy as celebrated in the pre-Norman church or on the attitudes of the people of the day to the Eucharist.

This omission is all the more unusual given that so many of Ireland’s national treasures from the pre-Norman period are directly connected with the celebration of the Eucharist (one thinks, for example, of the Ardagh Chalice, the Book of Kells, and Cormac’s Chapel). In addition, a great deal of both the textual and archaeological sources for the study of pre-Norman Ireland and her culture in general, such as saints’ lives, penitentials, monastic rules, manuscripts, eucharistic vessels, church buildings and ecclesiastical complexes, are also directly related to the celebration of the Eucharist. Many of these have been individually studied, but there has been no modern attempt at a synthesis. Indeed, apart from the publication of some new editions of contemporary texts that deal with the Eucharist, there has been minimal publication directly relating to the Eucharist in pre-Norman Ireland since the 1881 appearance of F. E. Warren’s Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church. This is all the more lamentable as such a rich ensemble of contemporary historical source material is not to be found in present-day Britain. Indeed, it could be argued that
Pre-Norman Ireland rivals any other region of Christendom for such a wide variety of surviving early sources of the celebration of the Eucharist.

While Warren’s study remains an indispensable tool for the student of the liturgy in pre-Norman Ireland, it must be treated with a certain hesitation. He was writing in a specific time and place, and his work was conditioned by particular struggles in the Anglican Communion of his day, as well as his desire to find a non-Roman precedent for authentic British liturgy, which he thought he had found in the liturgical practices of pre-Norman Ireland. Moreover, much of the material Warren treated needs to be analyzed anew, particularly because some of the material that he presumed to be Irish (notably the Bobbio Missal) is no longer considered to have any direct connection with Ireland. Additionally, with the passage of more than 125 years, a number of previously unknown texts and artifacts have come to light. As well as reevaluating and supplementing the texts examined by Warren, this new study takes into consideration the social dimension of the Eucharist—its treatment in art and architecture and in the spirituality of the people of the time—placing them within the overall Western European cultural and liturgical context.

On another level I have noticed a tendency of historians to rely on older and somewhat out-of-date liturgical scholarship, and likewise a tendency on the part of many liturgical scholars to see Ireland as a peripheral region where the normal lines of Western church history supposedly do not apply. Therefore I hope that the present work can serve as a bridge between the various disciplines. In this sense I have endeavored to be particularly detailed in terms of the bibliographical information contained in the footnotes. Chapter 1 provides a historical synthesis of the period between the Christianization of Ireland and the coming of the Normans, both in terms of the history of Ireland and the general history of the Eucharist in the West. Chapter 2 analyzes the pre-Norman, Irish textual sources relating to the Eucharist. Liturgical manuscripts serve as the primary sources of information, but they are supplemented by many other contemporary texts. As many of them were not available to Warren, I hope to have provided a new synthesis of the eucharistic references from the litera-
ture of the pre-Norman period as a whole, taking advantage of the in-
sights gained from advances made by the sciences of liturgical studies
and liturgical theology since the turn of the twentieth century. These
advances are particularly important in regard to the scholarly treat-
ment of the experience of the laity in the liturgy, as the overly clerical
bias of earlier liturgical studies is less prevalent in contemporary
scholarship.

Chapter 3 examines the nontextual sources for understanding the
Eucharist in pre-Norman Ireland, including the study of the archaeo-
logical remains of church buildings and sites where the Eucharist was
celebrated. It incorporates an analysis of the relation of these elements
to the ecclesiastical site as a whole and the stational dimension of the
eucharistic rites celebrated there. As an appreciation of the physical
objects used in the celebration is also very important for an under-
standing of the actual liturgical experience, those surviving artifacts
associated with the celebration of the Eucharist, such as chalices and
patens, chrismals, reliquaries, and so on, are also studied, as well as
the iconographical sources, such as high crosses and manuscript illus-
trations.

Given the high quality and wealth of analysis provided by many
modern editions of those early Christian texts dealt with here and the
consequent difficulty in separating them into primary and secondary
sources, I have elected to have a single bibliography in this book. I
would like to draw the reader’s attention to my use of the abbreviation
“cf.” which is used to indicate a disagreement between two sources or
to provide an alternative interpretation to my own (when I want to
draw the reader’s attention to a particular reference I simply use the
word “see”). In quotations from published editions of Early Irish I
have elected to quote the text exactly as it is found in the published
edition and have not attempted to standardize punctuations and the
stylistic formalities of the original editors.

Many people graciously helped me with the research for this
book; I was constantly surprised by the generosity of so many who
gave of their time and provided expert opinions, bibliographies, and
even prepublication copies of articles in answer to my inquiries about
arcane matters of liturgy and history. It would have been impossible
to write this work to the same level of detail and interdisciplinary balance without this help.

I have always loved the liturgy and the early Christian heritage of Ireland. My academic interest in the Eucharist in pre-Norman Ireland started with my thesis for a Master's of Theology at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, Crestwood, New York. Doctor Paul Meyendorff directed this thesis and set me on the right path. I continued my research on early Irish eucharistic practice in writing a PhD thesis that I submitted to St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth, and which formed the basis for this present book. I would like to acknowledge the work of Rev. Dr. Liam Tracey, OSM, who directed the thesis, and Dr. Colmán Etchingham of the Department of History, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, who graciously helped a nonspecialist in the field of early Irish history and saved me from making too many historical blunders. My treatment of archaeology was greatly helped by Dr. Tomás Ó Carragáin of University College Cork. I would also like to acknowledge the role of Rev. Dr. Hugh Connolly, president of St. Patrick’s College, as the reader of the thesis and Rev. Dr. Paul F. Bradshaw, professor of liturgy at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, who served as the external examiner. Among the many other people who come to mind for their help are: Ana Abarca Lyman, Michael Adams, John Baldovin, Patrick Brannon, Cormac Burke, Sean Gibney, Yitzhak Hen, Hugh P. Kennedy, Maxwell Johnson, Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, Bernard Meehan, Thomas F. X. Noble, Tadhg O’Keeffe, Uinseann Ó Maidín, Pádraig Ó Riain, Michael Ryan, Marina Smyth, and Robert Taft. The transformation of this work from a manuscript to the present book is a result of the care and art of the editorial and production team at University of Notre Dame Press, and I particularly must acknowledge the labors of Matthew Dowd, Wendy McMillen, and Barbara Hanrahan in seeing this book through to press.

Many priests who are sent to do further studies have no choice in the subject they study. I was very fortunate to have the support of my own archbishop, the Most Reverend John Joseph Myers, archbishop of Newark, who granted me full freedom to pursue my love of liturgy, which led to this book. This love of liturgy is the fruit of the
faith that I received from my family and from the Roman Catholic Church herself, which in no small way is due to my involvement in the Neocatechumenal Way. I would like to acknowledge the love and reverence for the liturgy given to me by my catechists in the Neocatechumenal Way and in the formation that I received at Redemptoris Mater Seminary in the archdiocese of Newark. I consider myself fortunate to have studied under Canon Pedro Farnés, emeritus professor of liturgy at the Instituto Superior de Liturgia, Barcelona, who generously gave of his time to make many visits to our seminary and imparted to us a clear vision of the liturgical renewal providentially initiated by the Second Vatican Council.

Finally, a special word of thanks to my family and friends who supported me at every stage of this project, and to the staff of Redemptoris Mater Seminary who willingly covered many of my responsibilities in order to allow me to complete this book.

*Go méadaí Dia a stór.*
Liturgy cannot exist in a vacuum or even exclusively in texts. Unless one understands the cultural and historical background of pre-Norman Ireland’s Christians (the people of the day), there is little point in studying the Eucharist of that time. Unfortunately, because of a tendency on the part of liturgical scholars to see Ireland as somewhat different from other places in Western Europe, it was thought that the normal rules of liturgical history did not apply there. Some popular works have even imagined Ireland as a forerunner of modern-day hippie colonies with typically modern ecological concerns and lack of regard for authority. Although serious scholars usually shun such facile views, in the case of Ireland many have accepted the concept of a “Celtic church.” In recent years, however, this very nebulous concept has been called into question, as those who propose a “Celtic church” usually have something in mind that is quite different from reality:

They imagine that there were common beliefs, common religious practices, and common religious institutions in Celtic countries, and that these were distinct from beliefs, practice and institutions in England and on the Continent. They also imagine that the church in Celtic countries was distinctly saintly and monastic; moreover, it was individual, unorganized and the very opposite of Roman.

Happily, because nowadays many historians are studying pre-Norman Ireland, a clearer picture can be painted of the church and her place in that society.
Older histories tend to emphasize the differences between pre-Norman and post-Norman Ireland (and, to a lesser degree, the differences between pre-Viking and post-Viking Ireland). This book does not go far into post-Norman Ireland, but this outline of the historical background will identify many points of continuity between these periods. The liturgy of the post-Norman period was indeed quite different on many levels from that of earlier times, yet the seeds of many of these differences were already present before the Normans arrived. In fact, it is possible that the Irish church would have undergone similar changes by the thirteenth-century even if the Normans hadn’t come. This element of continuity will be important in understanding the liturgical evidence.

Confessional polemics arising from the post-Reformation history of Irish Christianity have also affected scholarship about the church in Ireland both before and after the Norman arrival. In this context the differences between the Irish church and her near neighbors are sometimes exaggerated. Whereas there were differences, they were not as substantial as they are often portrayed (and arguably they were no greater than the differences between any other two neighboring regions in Europe of the time).

As there are no extant insular written records for the period prior to the coming of Christianity, historians are left with writings about Ireland in classical sources and with archaeological evidence from Ireland itself. Their work is further hindered by the fact that most references to Ireland in classical authors are mainly given in the name of comprehensiveness and do not evince any real interest or knowledge about Ireland. In fact, only thirty-two classical authors mention Ireland, the earliest being Rufus Festus Avienus in his *Ora Maritima*, written in the mid-fourth century BC but perhaps drawing on fifth-century material. Most of these are token references in geographical
descriptions of the whole known world or in side-references to Britain. Apart from the approximate geographical location of Ireland, the few other details that are learned from these sources fall more into the category of trivia than real history. Diodorus Siculus in the first century BC mentions that there are cannibals on the island of Ireland. In his *Geography* (AD 19) Strabo adds that these cannibals are also incestuous, and his contemporary Pomponius Mela mentions in *De chorographia* that the island has a good climate for grain and cattle. But there was little positive to be said about Ireland in these earliest written sources. Around AD 200 Solinus records that:

*Hibernia* is inhuman in the savage rituals of its inhabitants, but on the other hand is so rich in fodder that the cattle, if not removed from the fields from time to time, would happily gorge themselves to a dangerous point. On that island there are no snakes, few birds and an unfriendly and warlike people. When the blood of killers has been drained, the victors smear it on their own faces. They treat right and wrong as the same thing. There have never been any bees there, and if anyone sprinkles dust or pebbles from there among the hives, the swarms will leave the honeycombs.

A few decades before St Patrick’s mission to Ireland, St Jerome (d. 420) adds the following about the Irish people:

Why should I speak of other nations when I myself as a young man in Gaul saw the *Atticoti* (or *Scoti*), a British people, feeding on human flesh? Moreover, when they came across herds of pigs and cattle in the forests, they frequently cut off the buttocks of the shepherds and their wives, and their nipples, regarding these alone as delicacies. The nation of the *Scoti* do not have individual wives, but, as if they had read Plato’s *Republic* or followed the example of Cato, no wife belongs to a particular man, but, as each desires, they indulge themselves like beasts.

The archaeological record confirms the view of these texts that Ireland was not accorded much importance by the Roman world. While there have been some archaeological finds in Ireland of Roman
material, these are not really very significant and not much can be inferred from them.9 A linguistic theory (founded on a fairly complicated linguistic analysis of Latin loan-words in Early Irish) was often advanced in older works for stronger pre-Christian contact between Ireland and the Roman empire, but more recent scholarship is hesitant to read much into this.10

There is evidence of human settlement in Ireland from about 8000 BC.11 These people inhabited different parts of the island and originally lived by hunting and gathering, but by about 4000 BC the practice of raising crops and rearing domesticated animals was introduced.12 There are some impressive extant monuments from the pre-Christian period. The Stone Age passage tombs of the Boyne Valley, which probably date to the fourth millennium BC, are some of the best and most complex monuments for that period from any region in the world.13 There was also significant metalworking, first in bronze and gold and, later, in iron. Many of these pieces were of a very high quality, as the Bronze Age (ca. 1000–700 BC) archaeological finds on display in the National Museum of Ireland bear witness. However, while great artistic skill was required to manufacture these artifacts, it would seem to have been used predominantly to provide artifacts for the elite rather than for society at large.14 Moreover, the artifacts themselves do not really tell us much about the people who manufactured them. One of the great unanswered questions of this time period is: When did Ireland become dominated by a Celtic culture, or when did the Indo-European language that was the ancestor of modern Irish become the dominant language on the island?15

Once again, we are faced with a lack of written evidence. It is known that when Christianity was introduced, the Irish spoke a Celtic language. But not much else can be said. Caution must be exercised in examining the “Celticness” of early Ireland, since next to nothing is known about the culture of the Celts. True, there are some references in classical authors, but these are very biased and, for example, very little can be learned about the people of pre-Christian Ireland from Julius Caesar’s comments about his Celtic adversaries in De bello gallico. Furthermore, even less can be said of the religious observances of the pre-Christian peoples of Ireland; most of what is “known” today about the druids is mere Victorian invention.16
Historical Background

ST PATRICK AND THE FIFTH-CENTURY ORIGINS OF THE IRISH CHURCH

I am very much God’s debtor, who gave me such great grace that many people were reborn in God through me and afterwards confirmed, and that clerics were ordained for them everywhere, for a people just coming to the faith, whom the Lord took from the utmost parts of the earth, as He once had promised through his prophets: To Thee the gentiles shall come from the ends of the earth and shall say: “How false are the idols our fathers got for themselves, and there is no profit in them”; and again: I have set Thee as a light among the gentiles, that Thou mayest be for salvation unto the utmost part of the earth.17

With its arrival to Ireland, Christianity had reached in the words of Patrick ab extremis terrae, or, as St Columbanus (d. 615) would explain to Pope Boniface in the early seventh century, the Irish were “inhabitants of the world’s edge.”18 This was the first time that the Latin church expanded beyond the boundaries of the Western Roman empire.

But it was precisely in this period that the Western Roman empire supposedly collapsed, with the population of the city of Rome dropping from half a million to only 50,000 between AD 450 and 550.19 This was the time when Rome itself was repeatedly invaded by barbarian tribes. While this “fall” of Rome is of significance, there has been a tendency to exaggerate the contrast between the Romans and the barbarians, whereas, in fact, the “fall” of Rome was not the total collapse of a civilization that is often imagined. Recent archaeological studies have pointed out that Roman influence penetrated deep into the barbarian territories, slowly inculcating aspects of Roman lifestyle and culture in these people.20 Even from the point of view of economy, there seems to have been very little decline in the trade in the ancient world between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages.21 On all the western frontiers, the barbarians became more and more Roman, while the Romans also adopted many of the barbarians’ customs.

Another popular modern mistake is to see these tribes as the ancestors of modern European nations. This is simply not true, as even
the tribes themselves were not ethnically defined. They were made up of fighting men (of both Roman and barbarian ancestry) and their dependents, and it was allegiance to a chief and not ethnicity that determined belonging. It is too simplistic to see them as marauding hordes who were only interested in rape and pillage, even if there was a certain amount of turmoil in the West as the empire’s center of gravity shifted eastward to Constantinople. It would be better to understand the barbarian tribes as being made up of people of diverse origins who were related to the Roman empire in different degrees and who, during this period, came to settle within the frontiers of what had been the Western Roman empire.

For the study of early Irish Christianity, one would probably be better off starting with a study of Britain than of the Continent. Britain (a Roman colony from AD 43 to 410) was more than likely the source of the evangelization of Ireland. There may also have been some direct interaction between Ireland and the Gaulish church, although it is hard to distinguish between the churches of Britain and Gaul at this time. During this period in both Gaul and Britain the church was organized along similar lines, and British bishops were in attendance at a number of early Continental councils. But while there was a certain continuity of Roman civilization on the Continent after the fall of Rome, this was not as true of Roman Britain. While Roman Britain had had quite an impressive civilization with villas, walled towns, and Hadrian’s Wall, this economy was largely based on the Roman military, and, when the legions left, the economy more or less collapsed. Indeed, archaeological reconstruction of post-Roman Britain paints a picture of a flattened landscape; many public buildings were abandoned, cultivated land may have reverted to wilderness, and there was a general fall in population.

Yet this post-Roman Britain also had a significant Christian presence. In the period of Late Antiquity, after the edict of Milan in 313, the empire had been the medium for the spread of Christianity. The empire’s support of the orthodox and catholic synthesis of Christianity was not simply a benevolent change of heart on the part of an establishment that had formerly persecuted Christianity; it was, rather, a pragmatic admission of the success of Christianity in con-
verting many people throughout the empire, as well as a growing conviction that monotheism was a better medium for the promotion and, indeed, the expansion of the empire itself. This was seen particularly in the Eastern provinces that became the Byzantine empire, but it was also a factor of the development of Christendom in the West.29

In Britain itself, it is possible that even the bulk of the population remained pagan well into the fifth century; nonetheless, the British church survived the fall of the empire and proved vital enough to evangelize Ireland.30 The first missionaries to Ireland, while possessing a Roman heritage, probably had a certain affinity for the cultural world they found in Ireland. Some aspects of Irish culture may have been comparable to the remnants of pre-Roman British culture.31 Whereas in later centuries there was a tendency for the Roman-British peoples to emphasize their Britishness in contrast to the Anglo-Saxon peoples converted by the newer Augustinian mission,32 at this stage they still considered themselves to be Romans.

These missionaries made the important decision that the introduction of Christianity into Ireland was to be accompanied by the introduction of Latin as the language of the liturgy and the scriptures.33 This choice may further point to the “Romanness” of the first missionaries.34 The introduction of Latin into Ireland would, in later centuries, prove to be of help in the evangelization of other nations.35 The Irish had an advantage in the fact that Latin was never the vernacular, and whereas the various Continental groups who spoke Latin had already begun to experience an onset of regionalism that would lead to the modern Romance languages, they were unable to stand back and appreciate Latin for what it was. This use of Latin, along with the new grammars, penitentials, law collections, and other works, played an important role in the next generations in the evangelization of other non-Roman people of the West such as the missions of St Boniface (d. 755) in Germany or even the eventual evangelization of Scandinavia.36

The first mention of Christianity in Ireland is a cryptic line in Prosper of Aquitaine’s *Chronica minora* which tells us that in 431, “Pope Celestine ordained Palladius and sent him to those Irish who were believers in Christ to be their first bishop.”37 Later on, in his encomium on Pope Celestine, Prosper (d. ca. 455) tells us that
He has been, however, no less energetic in freeing the British provinces from this same disease [the Pelagian heresy]: he removed from that hiding-place certain enemies of grace who had occupied the land of their origin; also, having ordained a bishop for the Irish, while he labours to keep the Roman island catholic, he has also made the barbarian island christian.38

Even allowing for some hyperbole, the claim that Celestine “kept the Roman isle catholic and made the barbarian isle christian” would indicate some success for Palladius’s mission. In the mid-eighth century St Bede the Venerable (d. 735) repeats the same information39 without adding much new. Little else is known about Palladius, and in later centuries, when Patrick was the undisputed national patron saint, Palladius’s presence in the ancient histories was explained by conveniently making him a disciple of Patrick, and even the traditional 432 date for the arrival of Patrick (a mere year after Palladius’s arrival) may well have been invented by later Patrician hagiographers to dispose of Palladius as quickly as possible.40 Today it must be admitted that Palladius was a significant historical character.41 Indeed, some modern scholars have even gone so far as to attribute papal backing to his mission.42 Moreover, Columbanus, who in the early seventh century is much closer to Palladius’s time than ourselves,43 can speak of the Irish as having been evangelized directly by Rome:

For all we Irish, inhabitants of the world’s edge, are disciples of Saints Peter and Paul and of all the disciples who wrote the sacred canon by the Holy Ghost, and we accept nothing outside the evangelical and apostolic teaching; none that has been a heretic, none a Judaizer, none a schismatic; but the Catholic Faith, as it was delivered to you first, who are the successors of the holy apostles, is maintained unbroken.44

Whatever may be the case regarding Palladius (and barring some significant discovery of new evidence, there can only remain some tantalizing theories as to his exact historical role), St Patrick holds pride of place as the apostle of Ireland.
Historical Background

Nowadays one could almost be forgiven for dismissing St Patrick as being so distorted by popular culture as to have next to no real historical importance. But not only was Patrick a real person, he has also bequeathed his autobiography to us—the only Latin work of its kind to be composed outside the boundaries of the empire in Late Antiquity. His *Confessio* tells of his being captured as a youth by Irish marauders and sent to Ireland as a slave, of his subsequent escape, and of how he eventually returned to Ireland as a missionary and established the church there.

Regardless of how much actual missionary work Patrick did, how many churches he founded and the probable existence of some Irish Christians prior to his mission (not to mention the persistence of paganism in Ireland long after his death), it is very important to stress that Patrick was recognized by the Irish as their patron saint. Already in the seventh century there was a widespread cult of Patrick, not only in the churches he founded but also throughout the whole of Ireland. Notwithstanding the difficulties of analyzing the success of Patrick’s mission or even of evangelization in general in Ireland, the sixth century, coming straight after one of the traditional dates for Patrick’s death (493), marks a radical change in Ireland on the level of material culture:

What caused Ireland after AD 500 to become so different from before was the new religion and with it the institution of the church. Even though many were not initially converted, the whole nature of society was transformed; the change was far more than just one of religion. Indeed, archaeologically most of the change seems to be related to settlement, subsistence agriculture and technology. The old order was completely revolutionized in all aspects of life.

Traditionally this change has been attributed to acculturation associated with the arrival of technology and farming innovations that accompanied the Christianization of Ireland (with Britain being the likely source for this influence). A number of causes other than Christianization have been recently posited, among them, refugees fleeing the fall of the Roman empire, slave raiders, Irish mercenaries
returning from service abroad, and bonds of kinship with Irish colonists in Britain. But I think that the new worldview of Christianity is a far more likely explanation for these changes. Material remains from Iron Age Ireland (the seventh to the third centuries BC) already point to a high level of technological development. Until the advent of Christianity these techniques were mostly used to produce luxury objects that were probably status symbols for the elite; in the early Christian period “craft production turned away from limited, individual works to mass produced goods.”

---

Early relations and polemics between the Irish and English churches

Christianity had been well implanted in Britain by 406, the year the Roman legions withdrew from there. Although it had been introduced into Britain through the medium of the Roman empire, the church did manage to survive without the protection of the legions. When pagan Saxon tribes arrived in Britain, the church was not destroyed by these newcomers, but it was not strong enough to convert them. So a new hybrid Roman British–barbarian society developed (which was to become the nation of England) in which Christian and Roman elements existed alongside pagan Saxon ones. The natural struggle between the Romanized Britons and the new arrivals might help to explain the hesitancy of the newer Saxon tribes to accept Christianity, which they considered to be the religion of their rivals.

While Ireland did not fully become even nominally Christian until the seventh century, there was a slow but sure acceptance of Christianity from the time of Palladius and Patrick and the other missionaries. This eventually led to the development of a new Christian commonwealth in the British Isles. To use Brown’s term, this was a “Celtic Mediterranean” made up of the original British Christians (the forerunners of the Welsh) and the Irish (including the inhabitants of their Scottish territories). While these peoples held many aspects of their culture in common, Christianity was an important part of the glue that bound them together. Even if the Irish and the Welsh were both Celtic peoples, speaking what are now classed as Celtic languages, these languages were probably mutually unintelligible and recourse had to be made to Latin as a common tongue.