

## 35. THE HEROES OF IRELAND

**B**efore the year 300, when the great migration of nations began, the Batavians dwelt in the Betuwe (The East of The Netherlands, see map): The Frisians in the North of that country. The Caninefates in the dunes in the West. The Marezates in Zeeland (South West of The Netherlands) and the Tubantes in the East.



*The Netherlands before the migration of Nations*

The Migration Period (300-568) changed this dramatically.  
New tribes penetrated Western Europe.

After 568, we no longer hear anything of any of these tribes except the Frisians. They continued to live in the North West of The Netherlands, Belgium, and Northern France. The Saxons settled in the East and the Franks in the South. The new arrivals absorbed the earlier tribes through marriage or simply mingled in with them.

But even though the inhabitants of the Netherlands changed, one thing did not change! Before the great migration of nations, paganism reigned in The Netherlands. After the migration, paganism was still rife in The Netherlands and most other countries of Western Europe. They served the ancient Germanic gods.

### THE ANCIENT GERMANIC TRIBES

True, the people in the South of France worshipped the God of the Bible - think of Blandina - but the Northern tribes were still entirely in the power of idol worship. Their chief god was Wodan. Besides him, they worshipped Donar, the god of thunder, Thor, the war god, Freda, the goddess of love and more.

Images?

No, at first, the Germanic tribes did not have images. They didn't come till later. They possibly copied the Romans in this as they worshipped their gods through their images.

The Germanics worshipped their gods in 'sacred' forests.

That's where they brought their sacrifices to please and satisfy their gods.

That's how they tried to win their favour and avert looming disasters. Then they pleaded for victory in their countless wars.

The pagan priests would foretell the future. They would pretend to read this from the intestines of the sacrificial animals.

The Germanic tribes didn't have stone or wood temples in which to hold their barbaric feasts and banquets.

Their sacred forests were their temples.

That's how our ancestors lived for ages.

Those times were crude and cruel.

Human life had little value for them.

Seemingly they lived peacefully, but in reality, their life was driven by fear and dread. Those stalwart Germanics, who seemed fearless, defying



*Western Europe after the migration of nations.*

death while attacking their enemies, would lay awake at night for hours on end, filled with unspeakable fear during the stormy autumn nights, when the moon flickered spookily between the fast-moving clouds. The piercing screech of a night owl in the stillness of the night made them tremble. The slightest rustle of a sleeping bird on the roof of their humble hut made them cower in the rough bearskins in which they had wrapped themselves.

What made them so afraid?

Why did they cringe and tremble at any noise at night?

Their whole life was ruled by the fear of evil spirits.

Those poor pagans believed that the earth, water, and air were full of good and evil spirits, and no pointy spears or heavy clubs could fight off those evil spirits. Neither bravery in battle nor contempt of death helped against *them*.

During those long sleepless nights, they longed for the rising of the sun, which would drive away all those evil spirits. When they slept, nightmares

often tormented them. Then, subconsciously, they would fumble for their spear or club.

They feared the spirits of their ancestors, for they believed that these could harm them. That's why they faithfully celebrated their feasts- for-the-dead and brought them sacrifices. It is not surprising that the priests and priestesses had a lot of power and influence over those ignorant people. Unfortunately, they often abused this power. The Germanics were very superstitious. They were afraid of sorcerers and witches and did what they could to keep them as friends.

Poor, poor people!

They knew no better.

Danger lurked everywhere.

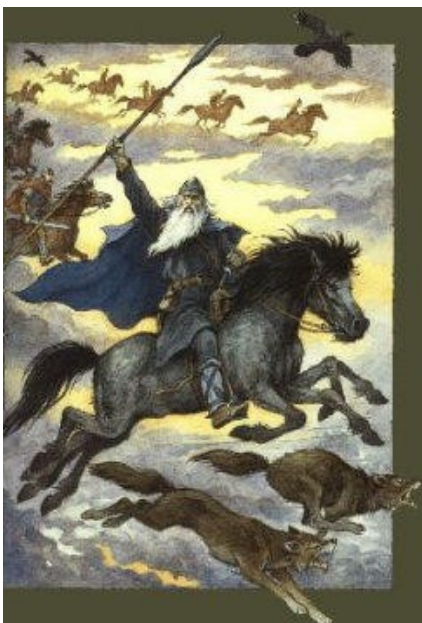
The terror of death haunted them.

No, the glorious death on the battlefield did not worry them, but the dread of evil spirits getting them at night terrified them.

They did not know the only true God!

The Creator of heaven and earth was unknown to them.

They had never heard of the Lord Jesus.



*Wodan was the chief god of the Germanics. He was the god of knowledge and wisdom, war, and death. Accompanied by wolves and ravens and seated on his eight-legged horse he spurs on the warriors. Our 'Wednesday' is based on the name 'Wodan'.*



*Freya (also Frija) is the Scandinavian goddess of love and fertility (both animal and the land) and the wife of Odr or Ottar. She rode in a chariot pulled by two cats the size of lions. An early form of Freya was Frya, an earth goddess. Our 'Friday' is named after her.*



*Thor is a hammer-wielding god, the god of storms, thunder, and lightning. Our 'Thursday' is named after this god. (Wikipedia)*

They also believed in a heaven, but not as we do. Their heaven was Valhalla! There they would continue their earthly life, but then without fear. There they would hunt on the eternal hunting grounds. There they would drink beer out of the skulls of the conquered and defeated enemies. But the eternal glory, where God will wipe away all tears and where we will glorify God perfectly, was unknown to them. They lived as pagans, and they died as pagans.

Sure, they were hospitable. A stranger would find a safe shelter in their simple hut. Nobody ever knocked at their door in vain. They were honest. They never stole from each other. Woe to him who made himself guilty of stealing! They were also trustworthy. If they had given their word, they would not break their promise. A promise was sacred to them.

But on the other hand, they could be unspeakably cruel. Enemies knew no mercy at their hands. They used brute force in the many bloody wars they waged, killing and wounding however they wished.

The Germanics liked to drink beer. When they had had a few too many, they knew no mercy and spared no one. At times they were even cruel to their own wives and children. When they were a bit drunk from too much beer and were gambling with each other, they sometimes gambled away their wives and children so that they were carried off as slaves, sometimes to the farm of a good neighbour with whom they were friends. It could even happen that they gambled themselves away. Did they work hard for their family? Oh no, the *men* did not work!



*They used brute force in the many bloody wars they waged with each other. (deviant ART)*

*Their* work was hunting, fishing, gambling, and drinking beer!

Did they till the ground and take care of their cattle?

No way, their wives and slaves had to do that.

The Germanic women did not have an easy life.

They had to keep house, take care of the children, the field, the cattle, and much more.

What about the slaves?

The Germanics treated them like animals.

Worse, the life of a slave was of no account at all. Yet these slaves were also people, created for a never-ending eternity. So, they also had a soul to lose. But who was interested in the lot of a miserable slave? Nobody, and it seemed impossible to change that. That was one of those national customs with which one must not meddle.

And yet...?

A change *did* come!

Those cruel, rough, superstitious pagans finally *did* bend their knees before the living God, the Creator of heaven and earth. They *did* bid farewell to their idols. Much later, one would hear psalms and hymns glorifying God at the same places where before they used to celebrate their rough pagan feasts.

Did that happen overnight?

No way, it took ages before paganism disappeared from those countries.

Many times, the conflict between paganism and Christianity was violent and horrible. But the Word of God conquered. God planted His Church in those countries. And all the raging of the prince of darkness could not prevent that!

How did it all happen?

Listen!

I cannot tell you everything, but I will tell you enough to show that God's ways are excellent, that nothing is too hard for the Lord, for He is the *Almighty One*.

#### **PATRICK THE SLAVE (385-461)**

A sixteen-year-old young man wanders through the vast plains of Ireland, tending a flock of sheep. Quietly grazing, the flock moves on. The young shepherd is not very busy. As long as he sees to it

that the sheep do not wander too far away and stay together, he need not do anything else. So, he has lots of time to think! Sometimes, when the sheep lie down to chew their cud, he also stretches full length in the grass, and he thinks, reflects, and ponders. But his thoughts are not pleasant!

Just look at him!

He heaves a deep sigh, and his eyes fill with tears. And then, all alone on the plains of Ireland, he folds his hands and prays. Who is that young man?

Why is he so sad? He has such a peaceful, easy life!

He spends hours staring into the vast distance, and when evening finally descends on the Irish countryside, he heaves another big sigh and turns around, driving the flock back to their pen, goes to his humble hut and lies down on the straw. But he cannot sleep. Restlessly he tosses and turns on his bed of straw. At times he gets up, bends his knees, and prays. But who will hear the anxious sighs of that boy?

Who sees the hot tears he cries?

Who hears the stammering words he whispers?

No one!

When he finally dozes off, worn out from all his worrying and thinking, he dreams about the dreadful things that have happened, and often he jumps up with a startled cry, raising both arms as if he wants to ward off an enemy. But what is the matter?

What fearful memories torment that young boy?



*"O God, if ever I may become free again, then I will spend the rest of my life in Thy service. Then I will go and preach the gospel to those who do not know Thee."*

What has happened to make him so unhappy? That young man's name is Patrick or Patricius. We'll just call him Patrick. He is a slave!

He was not born into slavery, oh no.

He is only just in Ireland.

How different it was at home with his father and mother.

His father and mother?

His eyes fill with tears. Will he ever see his parents again?

He has given them so much sorrow!

Thinking of that, he closes his eyes.

He still sees the sad face of his mother.

He used to live in Scotland. His dad was a deacon, and his parents probably originally came from France. His father and mother were Christians.

We do not know why they moved from France to Scotland. How often they admonished him because he lived so indifferently! He didn't care very much about religion. Why should he? He was still young, with his whole life ahead of him! And so, he ignored their serious warnings. Secretly he laughed about them.

One day he and his little sisters were walking along a Scottish beach. Suddenly a gang of Irish pirates appear from around a corner of the beach. Since they are quite close, it is impossible to escape. The pirates roughly grab both little girls and drag them away. Patrick can still hear their terrified cries for help! With frightened eyes, Patrick sees it all happen. For a moment, he is shocked! Then he starts to run and help his two sisters, but a whack from a club on his head causes him to fall unconscious to the ground. When he regains consciousness, he is securely bound and completely helpless, delivered up to the pirates.

The Irish pirates take him to Ireland, where they sell him as a slave to a chieftain. He does not know what has become of his little sisters. And now he must tend the sheep every day and wander along the vast grassy Irish plains. That is what upsets him.

He still hears his mother's warnings. If only he had listened to her! But now it is too late! Now the Lord is punishing him for his indifference! Now he might have to be a slave for the rest of his life! Now Patrick repents from his former careless life. He prays to God to forgive him his grave offences. If he could only ask his mother to forgive him! Many times, he sighs:

*"O God, if ever I may become free again, then I will spend the rest of my life in Thy service. Then I will go and preach the gospel to those who do not know Thee."*

At times he becomes despondent. Will God ever answer his prayers?

He does not know.

He has given the Lord plenty of reason *not* to listen to him!

Then fear and doubt creep into his heart.

The weeks and months become years.

And yet, God *did* hear the sad sighs of that young man. He saw the hot tears he wept! At God's time, He *would* answer those prayers!

After six long years of being a slave, he receives an opportunity to escape from the house of his master. After some dangerous encounters, he succeeds in leaving Ireland and walks on Scottish soil again. What must have gone through his mind? I'm sure that he thanked the Lord for his successful escape! And now he is approaching his parental home again. He throws his arms around his mother, who had become grey from grief. What a homecoming that was! How happy those parents were! Their son, whom they had thought dead, had returned so unexpectedly! They had not counted on *that* anymore! Their joy became even greater when they saw what a significant change had taken place in their child. How wonderful are God's ways! He truly hears and answers prayer!

### PATRICK THE MISSIONARY

In the year 432 after Christ, a company of strangers steps ashore on Irish soil. Calmly, they advance deeper into the country. The vast wide plains lie before them. In the distance, a flock of sheep is grazing. But when the boy who is tending the sheep sees them, he gets a big fright! For a moment, the shepherd stands immobile, but then he turns around, and with great leaps, he rushes off. He imagines that those strangers are a gang of pirates and runs to warn his master! Soon some heavily armed Irishmen come running. They will either kill those strange intruders or send them packing! Yet these men do not flee, but they calmly stand and wait. When the Irish chief gets



*Saint Patrick sent to Ireland by the Pope; wall mosaic in [St Mary's Cathedral, Kilkenny](#). (Wikipedia)*

closer, he notices that these strangers are not pirates because they are unarmed. Therefore, he need not fear *these* people! The chief approaches them and invites them to come to his farm, where he offers them food and drink. He is amazed when one of those strangers addresses him in the Irish language. How is that possible? Is that unknown man an Irishman?

No, he is a Scot, but he knows Ireland well. For six long years, he has also wandered through the Irish plains. So, this part of the country is familiar to him. That stranger is . . . Patrick!

Patrick, who as a slave had promised that if he regained liberty, he would spend the rest of his life in the service of the Lord, has, by grace, kept his promise! After his unexpected homecoming, he studied hard for several years in Scotland, and then, with twenty-four helpers, he went to Ireland to preach the gospel to the Irish pagans.

At that Irish farm, where he had such a hospitable reception, he spoke about Christ Who came to bring salvation to the lost.

He preached in Ireland with tireless zeal. He travelled from village to village and from city to city. First, with the roll of drums, he called the people together, and then he brought them the joyful message of the gospel, and the Irish people listened attentively to him because he addressed them in Irish, their own language!

The Lord richly blessed Patrick's preaching and worked with His Spirit in many Irish hearts. Patrick

also composed many songs and hymns about God's great work of redemption. He made those songs fit the same tunes to which the Irish sang their many pagan songs! When he sang them, the people listened with bated breath and even greater attention!

That preaching bore much fruit. Many Irishmen, both chiefs and ordinary people, repented. They rejected pagan idolatry and were baptised.

Patrick built many churches and founded many monasteries where thousands of monks lived. There have been monasteries where three thousand monks lived. Patrick provided for them as a father.

These monks were not idle; oh no, on the contrary. Early in the morning, while the dew was still on the fields, large groups of monks would leave the monastery and make their way to the virgin, uncultivated land. They dug up the soil, chopped down shrubs and trees, toiling from dawn to dusk, to make the fields fruitful. Then, late in the evening, they returned, tired but satisfied. Others copied good books and translated them into the Irish language so that the

Irish who had learned to read could read them. Who will determine how much rich fruit also that work has yielded? Only God knows.

Others studied all day, and when they had finished their studies, they went out to preach the Word of God to the pagans. No, those Irish monks were not lazy! At that time, the Irish monasteries were a blessing to the country. If only it had stayed that way!

As missionaries, those Irish monks were a blessing for many. They set out in groups of thirteen men. One was the leader, and the other twelve were his helpers. They set out joyfully and faced many dangers, often death. One day the fruits of their labour will become known.

Some Irish monks crossed over to England and worked to make that a Christian country. I will mention a few of those Irish missionaries.

### COLUMBAN

A certain Columba (senior), set out with twelve helpers from Ireland to Scotland, and there he preached for years, with many blessings. He founded many monasteries and built churches

where the baptised Scots could meet to conduct their religious services. He faced many dangers, but nothing discouraged him. That's why Columba (senior), is often called the Apostle of Scotland.

Another Irish monk named Columbanus or Columban (junior), set out in the year 580, at the age of thirty, with twelve helpers to the land of the Franks. At that time, the Frankish Empire was already a Christian country. But when Columban jr. set foot on the shores of the Frankish Empire, he noticed a sad decline among the Frankish Christians. The monks in the Frankish monasteries were living very sinful lives and set a bad example. Columban jr. preached



*....and the Irish people listened attentively to him because they were addressed in Irish*

earnestly against those sins, but he received much opposition. Enmity grew. The monks caused him and his helpers to suffer want, for the people, stirred up by the Frankish monks, refused to supply them with food. At times they had nothing to eat but tree bark and wild herbs.

However, when their distress had reached its height, the Lord gave deliverance. Someone sent Columban several horses laden with food. How happy he must have been! It was proof to him that the God of Elijah still lived.

However, the hostility of the Frankish monks for that faithful preacher increased steadily. One day they took him prisoner, but he managed to escape. But, unfortunately, they soon re-captured him. They wanted to get rid of him, and so they took him to the Frankish coast. A skipper, who was just in the harbour, was ordered to bring Columban jr. with his helpers, back to Ireland. That was a setback! But suddenly, a violent storm arose. Wild, slashing waves beat against the slender vessel! The winds become dangerous.



*Columba, 521 – 597 Wikipedia*

The ship is at the mercy of huge waves. The skipper fears that he will drown! He sees the avenging hand of God in this exceptionally violent storm. Quickly he returns to the harbour he had just left. And soon after, Columban jr. again steps ashore in the land of the Franks. So, the attempt of the Frankish monks to get rid of that missionary fails.

Are Columban and his helpers discouraged because of all this?

Do they abandon their difficult task?

Not at all!

With undiminished zeal, Columban begins to preach again. Again, he defies the hatred and opposition of those hypocritical Frankish monks.

Finally, he leaves the country of the Franks with his faithful companions and travels to Switzerland. He remains there for three years. But there, too, he experiences much opposition, and he needs to flee to the Lombards in Italy. There he dies peacefully.

Indeed, we may count him among the heroes of Ireland. That man sacrificed a lot for the truth. A life full of changes, cares, troubles, and sorrow lay behind him.

After his death, his helpers continued the work. Finally, they arrived in the land of the savage, uncivilised Alamanni. We will hear more about those people in the next chapter.

They brought the gospel to those Alamanni. Oh, how much those Irish missionaries have done! They spent their life in the service of the Lord. They scattered the seed everywhere, and rich fruits would come at God's time because that labour is never in vain. That has all been the fruit of Patrick's preaching in Ireland, with which we started this chapter.

It is not surprising that Patrick is called the "Apostle of Ireland." It is a badge of honour! But, finally, Patrick died at the age of more than one hundred years. Then that tireless preacher entered eternal glory. Of him, it may be truthfully said: "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth, and their works do follow them."

The pope of Rome did not influence Patrick and all the Irish missionaries. What a pity that soon after, England and Ireland both came under the power of Rome. How did that happen?

### ROMAN CATHOLIC INFLUENCE

In chapter 32, we told you about Gregory the Great, the powerful pope of Rome. He was the man who introduced the most dreadful errors into the Roman Catholic Church. He was the man who abused the great gifts God had given him. Well, *that* pope has done a lot for mission work! He sent an abbot of a monastery, with forty monks, to England to bring Christianity there. That abbot's name was "Augustine"! This was *not* Augustine, the church father, bishop of Hippo in North Africa. This abbot Augustine, who Gregory had sent to England, was a different man. In the year 596, Augustine and his forty helpers arrive in England, where he brings Christianity. His work is also richly blessed. Many pagans believe and get baptised.

And now we must pay careful attention. There are now two churches in England. One was the Irish church which the followers of Patrick founded. The other was the Roman Catholic Church which abbot Augustine and his helpers founded.

The Irish church did not acknowledge the pope. The Irish church was entirely free from the pope and Rome and wanted nothing to do with the pope. But Augustine *did* acknowledge the pope, for pope Gregory had just sent him to Christianise England.

Soon a disagreement arose between those two churches.

That was to be expected!

The Irish church continued to refuse to acknowledge the pope. That disagreement became open hostility. Throughout England, the Roman Catholic Church opposed the Irish church. We could say lots about that struggle. Finally, after many years, the Roman Catholic Church 'conquered' the Irish church. What a terrible development that was! England, Scotland, and now also Ireland, the land of Patrick, became

Roman Catholic. Now the Irish church also acknowledged the pope of Rome as the head of Christ's Church here on earth. Now the purity of the Irish church was lost because abbot Augustine introduced all the errors of Rome there.

Ages later, England and Scotland freed themselves from Rome. We will hear more about that. But it is noteworthy that even to this day, the Irish people remain Roman Catholic.

Later we hope to tell you how the Reformation penetrated England and Scotland and how God reformed His Church! God will deliver His Church from the power of Rome.



Columbanus in Frankish Gaul

### QUESTIONS

1. Describe the religion of the early Germanic tribes.
2. Why were the tribes so fearful in times of peace?
3. How come the priests and priestesses had so much power?
4. What was the Germanic view of Valhalla or heaven?
5. What does this view of heaven tell us about their religion?
6. What were some of their most prominent characteristics?

7. How was labour divided among the Germanic people? How were slaves treated?
8. What change finally came to the tribes?
9. Describe the early life of Patrick.
10. How did God use this period of slavery to his benefit?
11. How was Patrick delivered from slavery?
12. Why did Patrick return to Ireland?
13. What work did he, as a means in God's hand, perform there?
14. Describe the work of the Irish monks.
15. Identify Columba. Why is he called the 'Apostle of Scotland'?
16. Identify Columbanus. What did he observe in the Frankish empire?
17. What opposition did he meet in this area?
18. To what other areas did Columbanus go?
19. Why is Patrick called the 'Apostle of Ireland'?
20. Identify the abbot, Augustine. Why were there two churches in England?
21. State the difference between the two churches.
22. Which church won the victory in England, Scotland, and Ireland? How did this change later?

#### FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. You have read of the extensive fears of the early Germanic tribes. Proverbs 23:17b reads: *'but be jealous for the fear of the Lord all the day.'* What is the difference between these two types of fears?
2. Is Patrick the same Patrick whose holiday The Irish commemorate on March 17? Why don't we celebrate this day?
3. The British Isles (Scotland, England, Wales, Ireland) were the last to acknowledge the pope's supremacy. Can you give a reason for this? They

were also the first to nationally throw off the yoke of Rome (Henry VIII of England). Why?

#### REVIEW

Fill in the blanks.

1. A church in Asia Minor -O----
2. The 'Bible' of the Islam religion -O---
3. The heaven of the Germanic tribes ---O----
4. The Apostle of Ireland -O-----
5. Another name for Mohammedanism ----O
6. The Apostle of Scotland ----O--
7. Fought the Mohammedans in France ----O-
8. A Germanic god O----
9. The god of the Mohammedans ---O-
10. Abbot who brought Roman Catholicism to England -----O-
11. Pilgrimage to Mecca ----O
12. Missionary to the Franks -----O
13. City to which Mohammed fled O-----

The circled letters spell the name of one of the fastest-growing religions today.

#### RESEARCH TOPICS:

1. Research to find statistics on the growth of Islam in the past forty years in Africa. Compare the growth rate of Islam and Christianity on this continent. Which one is growing the fastest? Give possible reasons why this is true.
2. What are the Five Pillars of Islam?
3. Identify the following: minaret, muezzin, hadji, Mecca, hegira.