

## 35. THE HEROES OF IRELAND

**B**efore the year 300, when the great migration of nations began, the Batavians lived in the Betuwe in 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 in the southwest and the Tubantes in the east. The Migration Period (300-568) changed this dramatically. New tribes penetrated Western Europe.



*The Netherlands before the migration of Nations*

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 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 Western European countries. 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 completely 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. That didn't come till later. They possibly copied the Romans in this, as the Romans worshipped their gods through images.

The Germans 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 god's favour and avert looming disasters. Then they begged 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 to hold their barbaric feasts and banquets.

Their sacred forests were their temples.

Those times were crude and cruel.

Human life had little value for them.

That's how our ancestors lived for ages.

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



*Western Europe after the migration of nations.*

death while attacking their enemies, would lay awake at night for hours, filled with unspeakable fear during the stormy autumn nights when the moon flickered spookily between the fast-moving clouds. A night owl's piercing screech in the night's stillness 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 the noises of the night?

Because the fear of evil spirits ruled their lives.

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 *them* off! 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 they would subconsciously grope for their spear or club.

They feared the spirits of their ancestors, for they believed 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. They often abused this power.

The Germanics were very superstitious. They feared sorcerers and witches and did what they could to keep them as friends.

Poor, poor people!

They knew no better.

They thought 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!

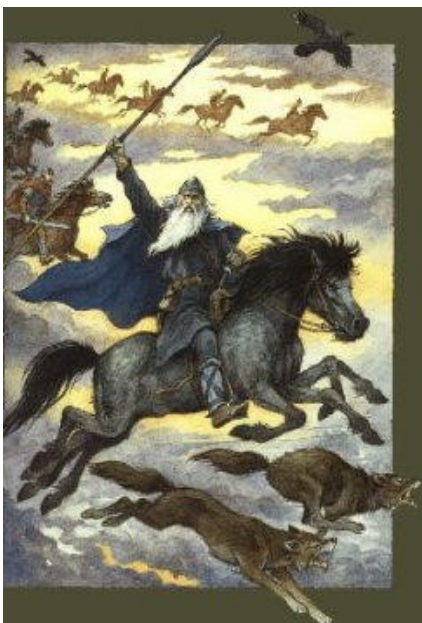
The Creator of heaven and earth was unknown to them.

They had never heard of the Lord Jesus.

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.



*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 Frijja) is the Scandinavian goddess of love and fertility (of 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)*

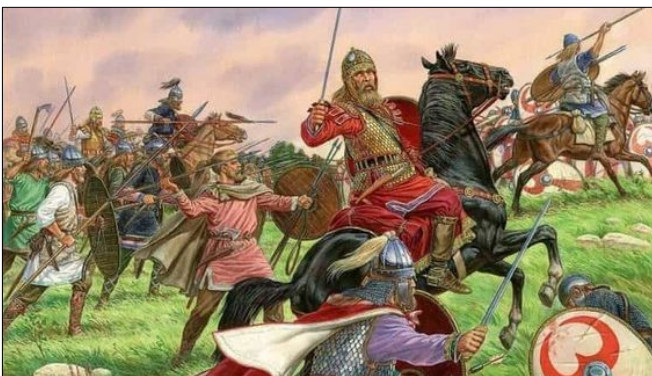


There, they would hunt on the eternal hunting grounds. There, they would drink beer out of the skulls of the conquered and defeated enemies. But the everlasting glory, where God will wipe away all tears and where we will glorify God perfectly, was unknown to them. They lived as pagans, and they died 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 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! *Their* work was hunting, fishing, gambling, and drinking beer!



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

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, care for 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 value at all. Yet these slaves were also people, created for a never-ending eternity. 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 established 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 boy wanders through Ireland's vast plains, tending a flock of sheep. Quietly grazing, the flock moves on. The young shepherd is not very busy. As long as he ensures 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 would stretch full length in the grass, thinking, reflecting, and pondering. 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, turns around, drives the flock back to their pen, and goes to his humble hut. He lies down on the straw, but he cannot sleep. Restlessly he tosses and turns. 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 he often 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 man?

What has happened to make him so unhappy?

That young man's name is Patrick or Patricius.



*"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."*

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 severe warnings. Secretly, he laughed about them.

One day, he and his little sisters walk along a Scottish beach. Suddenly a gang of Irish pirates appear from around a corner of the beach. They are quite close, so 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 runs to 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, at the mercy of 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 daily 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! Patrick repents from his former careless life. He prays to God to forgive him for 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, I will spend the rest of my life in Thy service. Then I will preach the gospel to those who do not know Thee."*

At times he gets depressed. Will God *ever* answer his prayers?

He does not know.

He has given the Lord plenty of reasons *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 has 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. A flock of sheep grazes in the distance. But when the boy tending the sheep sees them, he gets a big fright! The shepherd stands immobile for a moment, but then he turns around and rushes off with great leaps. 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 closer, he notices these strangers are not pirates because they are unarmed. Therefore, he need not fear *these* people! The chief approaches them and invites them to his farm, offering 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?



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

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

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 God's 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. With a drumroll, he first 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 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 in the fields, large groups of monks would leave the monastery and make their way to the virgin, uncultivated land. They dug up the soil and chopped down shrubs and trees, toiling from dawn till 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 the Irish who had learned to read could read them. Who will determine how much rich fruit that work has yielded? Only God knows.



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

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 he preached there for years. God richly blessed his work. 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 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 limit, 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 towards that faithful preacher increased steadily. One day they took him prisoner, but he managed to escape. But, disappointingly, they soon recapture him. They want to get rid of him, so they take him to the Frankish coast. A skipper just in the harbour is ordered to bring Columban Jr., with his helpers, back to Ireland. That was a setback! But suddenly, a violent storm arises. Wild, slashing waves beat against the slender vessel! The winds become dangerous.

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



*Columba, 521 – 597 Wikipedia.*

the harbour from which he just came. Soon after, Columban Jr. again steps ashore in the land of the Franks. 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 this chapter began.

Not surprisingly, Patrick is called the 'Apostle of Ireland.' It is a badge of honour! But, finally, Patrick died, aged over one hundred years. Then, that tireless preacher entered eternal glory. It may truly be said of him: "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 England and Ireland both came under the power of Rome soon after. 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 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 preaches the gospel. His work is also richly blessed. Many pagans believe and get baptised.

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

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 sent him to convert England to Christianity.

Soon disagreements 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 Ireland, Patrick's home country, became Roman Catholic. Now, the Irish church also had to acknowledge 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.

## 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 perform there as a means in God's hand?
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. Where else 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 nations to reject the yoke of Rome (Henry VIII of England). Why?

### REVIEW

Fill in the blanks.

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

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 for this.
2. What are the Five Pillars of Islam?
3. Identify the following: minaret, muezzin, hadji, Mecca, hegira.



The Irish church became Roman Catholic. This is the Anglican **St Patrick Cathedral** in Dublin, build between 1191 and 1270. It's Ireland's largest church and a very popular tourist attraction. It is built on the spot where Patrick, the apostle of Ireland, is believed to have baptised the first 5 converts. <https://www.tripsavvy.com/saint-patrick-cathedral>