

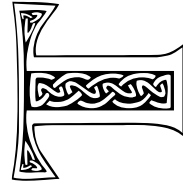
## The Irish origins of Purgatory

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*Motto: “Purgatory – what a grand thing!  
- St Catherine of Genoa.<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction



he idea of metaphysical purifying fires is present already in early Christianity, but only in the Catholic creed was it developed into a more complex group of beliefs and doctrines about the Purgatory (from lat. *purgare* = “to make clean”, “to purify), which received their official formulation at the Council of Trent (1545–1563):

Whereas the Catholic Church, instructed by the Holy Ghost, has, from the sacred writings and the ancient tradition of the Fathers, taught, in sacred councils, and very recently in this oecumenical Synod, that there is a Purgatory, and that the souls there detained are helped by the suffrages of the faithful, but principally by the acceptable sacrifice of the altar; the holy Synod enjoins on bishops that they diligently endeavour that the sound doctrine concerning Purgatory, transmitted by the holy Fathers and sacred councils, be believed, maintained, taught, and every where proclaimed by the faithful of Christ. But let the more difficult and subtle questions, and which tend not to edification, and from which for the most part there is no increase of piety, be excluded from popular discourses before the uneducated multitude (Trent XXXV, 232–233).<sup>2</sup>

Even this doctrinal formulation remains quite ambiguous when it comes to the ontological status of purgatory, i.e. it does not provide a clear answer whether purgatory is a temporal place or a mental condition for souls after death (*Catechism* III.1030–1032). The fact that the ambiguous ontological status of purgatory is not

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<sup>2</sup> For the Council of Trent I have used the edition and translations of James Waterworth (1848).

resolved by this doctrinal formulation is revealed by the need of influential eclectics, like Pope John Paul II, to comment on the matter in order to stress the metaphorical nature of purgatory.<sup>3</sup> Such statements reveal that representing purgatory as a place is common in popular religion. But how and when were such spatial representations of purgatory created in the first place?

As pointed out above, the official theological indoctrination of the idea came relatively late, in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. In the bitter disputes of the following century between the Catholics and the Protestants, the latter often reproached Catholics for their belief in Purgatory, which Luther referred to as “the third place” and an “invented” world which is not mentioned in the Bible (Le Goff 1981, 1). However, it probably comes as no surprise for this audience that purgatory was not an invention made by and during the councils mentioned above. References and allusions to a purgatory can be found from much earlier sources. As the concept of purgatory did not have any official status in the Catholic tradition, these allusions and descriptions are not always compatible with each other. Neither do they form a logical description of purgatory. Indeed, following the guidelines of Jacques Le Goff it is better to think that before the Council of Florence we are dealing with a process, where different ideas, beliefs, and traditions come together and enter into a dialogue that will lead to the birth of the idea-complex that we call today “purgatory”.<sup>4</sup>

Most religions have to deal with the problem of how to communicate very abstract and conceptual ideas to ordinary people living their everyday lives. After all, while religions often define themselves as dealing with the “invisible otherness”, “something completely different”, or the “unspeakable” or the reality beyond human understanding, how can we understand what religions want to tell us and make it relevant to our lives? Well, as the philosopher David Hume pointed out long ago, and as has been confirmed by the experiments of modern psychology and brain sciences, one common and widely used cognitive strategy is to make the ideas and concepts more concrete by giving them spatio-temporal characteristics (Hume 1757; Holyoak & Thagard 1995; Barrett 1999, 325–339; Boyer 2001).<sup>5</sup> In

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<sup>3</sup> John Paul II gives his view on purgatory in a general audience held at the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1999 (See [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/audiences/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_04081999\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_04081999_en.html)).

<sup>4</sup> Le Goff points out that the noun *purgatorium* did not exist before the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Le Goff 1984, 3). Le Goff is a nominalist, which means that he tends to think that, in order to exist, a mental or conceptual thing must have a name (i.e. a word for it). While this obviously is not the case, I do think he has a point here stressing the fact that the notion of purgatory as a concrete place seems to be a late invention.

<sup>5</sup> The historian Mary Carruthers has actually shown how the European scholarly traditions from Antiquity onwards consciously applied this principle in their techniques of mnemonics (Carruthers 1990).

order to make this point clearer and at the same time provide a background for understanding the belief environment giving birth to the concept of purgatory, it is best to take a short look into the development of Christian cosmology.

### **Before purgatory**

Cosmology is the term for the study of cosmic views in general but also for the specific view or collection of images concerning the universe held in a religion or cultural tradition (Bolle 1987, 100). A cosmology is always a narrative. This means that it is a presentation of reality from a point of view. The narrative basis of cosmologies is most clearly visible in religious cosmologies, where cosmic views and images are usually approached from the perspective of their importance for understanding the fate and place of humankind. Thus, Christian cosmology tends to describe the world in terms of what happens to human beings after death. This description inherited its basic structures from the cosmological visions of Judaism and the Hellenistic cultures of the Mediterranean (Le Goff 1984, 2). So let us take a short look at these two.

The Judaic cosmology, as reflected in the Hebrew scriptures, distinguished between the world above, i.e. *shamayin* (“heaven”) or the abode of Yahveh, and the earth, or the world of humans. Furthermore, under the earth was *she’ol*, an ambiguous term used at times to refer to the grave or tomb itself, and sometimes to an obscure realm of shadows, where the dead existed without their souls. Originally, the dead were not thought of as having an individual existence in Judaism. Instead, they were conceived as a faceless collective existing in a joyless realm. However, after the Babylonian exile the Jewish understanding of the meaning of *shamayin* changed, mainly due to influences from Zoroastrianism, in which it was believed that a judgement of individuals at death was conducted by God: the righteous were destined for eternal joy, and the unrighteous ones were condemned to eternal torture. In Judaism, this idea was expressed in terms of the righteous living with God forever, and the unrighteous condemned to a deprived existence in the subterranean chambers of *she’ol* (Long 1987, 130; Tober & Lusby 1987, 237–238).

In contrast to Judaism, the belief in the posthumous survival of the soul has a longstanding tradition in ancient Greece. For example, Homer – one of our earliest sources for the beliefs and customs of the Greeks – relates in the *Iliad* how gods punish or reward souls at death (*Iliad* 3.278–279, 19.259). Thus, while in Judaism the righteous humans continued to live a corporeal life with their souls intact, and the unrighteous ones continued to exist without their souls, in Greek tradition it was the soul (*psyche*) that survived, while the corpse turned to dust and

disappeared. Hades was the realm of the soul-beings (*eidolon*). It was visualized as an enormous cave below the surface of the earth, where the *eidolon* could flit around as shadows, without consciousness and totally incommunicative, unless they were provided with blood offerings by the community of the living. However, in later tradition we can find even in Greece the idea that the righteous ones are being rewarded and the unrighteous ones punished according to their deeds while living (Long 1987, 129).

In Christianity, the cardinal importance of Heaven was stressed from the beginning. It was not only the abode of fulfilment and bliss for the righteous ones, but also the abode of the divine, a separate sacred reality, where Jesus dwelled before his earthly life, and where he went again after his death and resurrection. Hell was the opposite of Heaven, the place of torment for those unrighteous ones who had sinned against God and did not believe in Jesus. Early Christian visions of Hell were borrowed from both Judaism and Classical mythology, but the main difference was that the distinction between Heaven and Hell was much sharper than in Judaism. They were conceived as totally different realms. In addition, while in Judaism, God was the lord of both *shamayin* and *she'ol*, in Christianity Hell was presided over by Satan and his fallen angels (Tober & Lusby 1987, 238–239).

Early Christian writers soon started to feel somewhat uncomfortable with such a strict division between the fates of those who had lived a righteous life and those who had sinned. What about those peoples who had sinned only once or a few times, or whose errors could be taken as minor ones? What about people who had lived a righteous life but had never believed in God or Jesus? It is these kinds of ideas that gave birth to the idea, expressed e.g. by the third century write Origen, that the power of the saving will of God extended beyond the limits of the earthly life. Thus, a general understanding arose that humans were granted an opportunity for spiritual and moral purification and eventual salvation even after death. Origen went actually so far as to claim that Hell is only a temporary punishment after death, and that everybody will be finally taken up to Heaven. This suggestion was not accepted by the Church and turned Origen into a heretic, but the idea of “temporary punishments” after death gained ground and was accepted by, for example, Augustine, who has been called, by scholars and the Catholic Church alike, the main architect of the doctrine of Purgatory (Pelikan 1971, 355; Le Goff 1984, 62).

The original image of such temporary punishment was the purifying fire. Origen took this idea from the Old Testament, where fire is often depicted as a divine instrument, and from the New Testament, where an idea of baptism by fire

can be found in the Gospels (Lk 3:16). However, it looks like Origen was actually equating this purifying fire with the last judgement made by God at the end of times. His purgatory was, therefore not a place but a divine institution (Le Goff 1984, 55–56). Augustine, on the other hand, thought that this purgatorial time applied only to those few who were not totally good, but not godless either, and that this time of purification occurred between the time of death and the Last Judgement. However, as Augustine appears to be more interested in Hell than in this purgatorial phase, he does not provide any actual descriptions of what he envisioned these purgatorial fires to be like (Le Goff 1984, 65–57).

According to Le Goff this vagueness connected with Purgatory lasted until c. 1170 when for the first time the word “purgatory” starts to occur as a noun in the texts, before that time it was found only in such adjectival expressions as *ignis purgatories*, *loca purgatoria*, and *poenae purgatoriae*. He argues that before the 12<sup>th</sup> century purgatorial fires were basically understood to be in Hell, i.e. purgatory was not understood to be a separate and independent “third place” like in the later tradition. Indeed, as le Goff is a nominalist, i.e. he believes something does not really exist before it is named, he argues that Purgatory did not actually come into existence before the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Later scholars have pointed out that this kind of nominalistic thinking might turn out to be too drastic and it would be better to talk about the widening of the notion of Purgatory in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, rather than of its birth. However, the question Le Goff raises is interesting and the origins of the idea of a separate and concrete realm of Purgatory, which entered into the 12<sup>th</sup> century theological discussions, is certainly relevant for our understanding of the formation and nature of Christian beliefs and traditions (Pontfarcy 1995, 94–95).

### **The third place**

Le Goff answers this question himself by pointing out that during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries a change occurred in how thought was organised. Before that time, the natural way of thinking was based on binary patterns, like God vs. Satan, Heaven vs. Hell, Life vs. Death, clergy vs. laity and so forth. However, since the integration of the Old Indo-European barbarian civilizations into the Christian world the situation slowly changed and gave birth to more pluralistic patterns of thought, exemplified, for example by the ideological division of society into three orders: those who pray (*oratores*), those who fight (*bellatores*), and those who work (*laboratores*). Indeed, as ternary patterns like the one above seem to be typical for Indo-European traditions, it comes as no surprise that the same type of divisions into three became the prevailing type for patterning thought. The birth of

Purgatory as the third place in addition to Heaven and Hell could, and should, be taken as one expression of this new way of thinking (Le Goff 1984, 226–227).

Le Goff constructs his hypothesis on the basis of the writings of Georges Dumezil, who suggested that the ternary logical model would be a defining feature of all Indo-European traditions, prevailing even when all other features in the society change or disappear (E.g. Dumezil 1958). This view has been challenged more recently, and the division of the medieval society suggested by Le Goff, for example, has been shown to be too simplistic (Bredero 1983, 78). Moreover, several scholars, including Richard Southern, A.H. Bredero and Aron Gurevich, have pointed out that “purgatory” has actually been used as a noun earlier than in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, as suggested by Le Goff (See Pontfarcy 1995, 94–95). Thus, the birth of Purgatory, as defined by Le Goff, cannot be explained simply in the context of Scholastic theology – as Le Goff is doing – but we must look for other sources of origin.

Southern argues that Purgatory was invented in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century as a means for the Church to control the new sources of income. The Church had evolved into a prosperous land-owning institution, independent of secular lords and noble families. This also meant that it could not rely on such great political and military families financing the Church in the future, so means for gaining funds from a broader basis, including the whole population of an area, had to be invented. According to Southern, Purgatory was the creation of this process. A.H. Bredero, again, points out that all the early references to Purgatory can be found in monastic sources. Thus, the origins of Purgatory should be searched from the monastic culture of the Middle Ages. While I tend to agree with Bredero, his suggestion that Purgatory can be explained as a neologism born in the context of the flowering of Latin literature in the twelfth century can hardly be taken to be very informative or satisfactory (Pontfarcy 1995, 94–95).

The monastic origins of Purgatory are also stressed by Aron Gurevich, who points out that at least one monastic writer, Othlo of St. Emmerman, used the noun “purgatory” in the title of a chapter about penalties to which sinners were subjected in *purgatorio*. The importance of the contribution of Gurevich for the present article is that it suggests that the influence of popular tradition should be taken into account when discussing Purgatory. Othlo seem to have borrowed themes and representations from the popular culture of his time. Indeed, according to Yolande de Pontfarcy, another text, written in the 1180s by an anonymous Anglo-Norman monk, seems to demonstrate both the monastic origins of Purgatory as well as its reliance on popular culture of its time. This text is the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sanctii Patricii* (“The treatise on St. Patrick’s Purgatory”).

The story centres on a journey to the other world undertaken by a knight named Owein. The entrance to the other world is a cave or a pit known from the Irish tradition as “St Patrick’s Purgatory”, which can be found on an island in a lake in North-western Ireland, Lough Derg in County Donegal (Pontfarcy 1995, 95).

Le Goff recognises the importance of this source, because from his perspective it shows how the writer has adopted the system of three categories and the idea of an intermediary place (Le Goff 1984, 193). However, I would agree with Pontfarcy that the importance of this text is of a whole different nature. Robert Easting, who has provided a detailed analysis of the *Tractatus*, points out that the writer of the text does not ever refer to Purgatory in general but always to St. Patrick’s Purgatory proper, that is, to the cave or pit described as the entrance to the other world (Easting 1986, 37). Pontfarcy points out that this is not only something typical for this particular tract, but to other contemporary works as well. Gerald of Wales, writing around the same time, describes St. Patrick’s purgatory in the following terms:

There is a lake in Ulster, which contains an island divided into two parts. One part contains a very beautiful church with a great reputation for holiness, and is well worth seeing. It is distinguished above all other churches by the visitation of angels and the visible and frequent presence of local saints.

But the other part of the island is stony and ugly and is abandoned to the use of evil spirits only. It is nearly always the scene of gatherings and processions of evil spirits, plain to be seen by all. There are nine pits in that part, and if anyone by any chance should venture to spend the night in any one of them – and there is evidence that some rash persons have at times attempted to do so – he is seized immediately by malignant spirits, and is crucified all night with such severe torments, and so continuously afflicted with many unspeakable punishments of fire and water and other things, that, when morning comes, there is found in his poor body scarcely even the smallest trace of life surviving. They say that if a person once undergoes these torments because of a penance imposed on him, he will not have to endure the pains of hell – unless he commit some very serious sin (Topography §38).

While Gerald does not mention the name of the island in this earlier recension quoted here, he does call it St Patrick’s Purgatory in the second Recension (Pontfarcy 1995, 96). This naming might actually be due to Gerald becoming aware of the *Tractatus*. A third source, the *Vita Sancti Patricii* written in 1186/87 by Jocelin of Furness, and not influenced by the *Tractatus*, clearly demonstrates that the name St. Patrick’s Purgatory was not an invention of the anonymous Anglo-Norman monk, but more likely he borrowed it from the existing monastic and popular traditions of Irish Christianity (Pontfarcy 1995, 96).

At this point I would like to turn my attention to a couple of details in the descriptions of St. Patrick's Purgatory. First, these are the earliest extensive descriptions of Purgatory, where it is not only visualised as a place, but also as a place where very different kinds of torments and trials – not just purgatorial fire - are available. Moreover, these trials are not supervised by God, nor are they based simply on any sins done by the one attending Purgatory. Instead the torments are due to evil spirits and the whole idea appears to be connected with the idea of a spiritual struggle and a trial of faith. Indeed, the writings of Gerald even imply that it would be possible to visit Purgatory before any sins have been committed and – because of the ordeal – afterwards commit some minor sins, and still go to Heaven! Secondly, contrary to what Le Goff seems to think, St Patrick's Purgatory is not a "third place" i.e. it is not described as a separate realm. All three texts mentioned above agree that St Patrick's Purgatory is situated in our own realm. It is a place that can be reached by living human beings, and there are no hints at this point that this Irish version of Purgatory would be open to the dead waiting for the Last Judgement, or that from there it would be a direct path or bridge to Heaven and Hell. Indeed, the only way out from the Irish Purgatory appears to be back into this world. Again, the description of Gerald can even be read as evidence for him believing in the purgatorial fires in Hell – something that can be avoided by visiting St Patrick's Purgatory while still living.

These three works, especially the *Tractatus*, were extremely popular in the monastic culture of the medieval period. However, as I see it, they are not in themselves responsible for the belief in Purgatory. Instead, the authors are describing what they consider to be an earthly substitute for the purgatorial torments waiting in Hell for those who, before they can be pass on to Heaven, must be purified from their sins. Because of their popularity, the texts with the descriptions of these substitute ordeals soon became the models for later discussions of Purgatory in general. This transfer of images from St Patrick's Purgatory into Purgatory in general began probably already in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century, as described by Le Goff, and it gained its peak in Dante's *Divina Commedia*, as shown by Pontfarcy (1996). However, before I can conclude my own discussion of the topic, one additional question must be dealt with, i.e. where did the Irish get the idea of an earthly Purgatory.

### **The origins of Purgatory**

In order to do this, let us take a second look at what Gerald wrote about St. Patrick's Purgatory, and what we know about the place today. He begins by locating the place on an island in a lake in Ulster. As pointed out above, the lake in

question is Lough Derg, which today is directly on the border of Ulster and the Republic of Ireland. However, Station Island – the location of the Purgatory – is today on the side of the Republic, i.e. Co. Donegal. It has been a popular centre for pilgrimage from the times of Gerald until the present. Thousands of pilgrims visit the island every year between June 1st and August 15<sup>th</sup>. While this popularity appears to stem, at least partly, from the medieval popularity of the texts above, it seems clear that the island had some ceremonial importance even earlier – at least on a local scale. This is implied already in the name of the island. It comes from the Latin term *station* meaning “a guard-post” or a “post of duty”. In a religious framework this term was used in a penitential context, referring to a place where an individual could contemplate his past deeds and search peace with God, or simply “penitential exercises”.<sup>6</sup>

This interpretation is backed by the second piece of information that Gerald gives us. He writes that the island is divided into two parts, the one having a beautiful church and being visited by angels and saints, and the other being stony and ugly and occupied by evil spirits. The description might sound more like a fairytale, but some truth appears to be found in it. We know from history that St. Patrick’s Purgatory, or more accurately the community of the Augustinian canons who were in charge of the Purgatory, originally occupied two islands instead of one. Station Island, where the cave that was believed to be the Purgatory was located, was the smaller and less attractive of the two. The community with its church building and living quarters occupied the bigger island until the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. At this time the community had almost died out and, because of this, they abandoned the bigger island and moved to Station Island (see Pontfarcy 1988, 7–34).

According to James Kenney, an ancient monastery existed on the island before it was re-occupied by the Augustinian canons. This earlier monastery was under the patronage of, and perhaps founded by, St. Da-Bhec-óg. However, this monastic community of the Celtic church had apparently ceased to exist before the Augustinian takeover sometime in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century (Kenney 1968, 355). As is well known, the practice of Christian monasticism has its origins in Egypt, where, beginning in the late third century, men withdrew to the deserts and mountains in order to meditate and fast in solitude. Indeed many of these hermits lived originally in solitude in caves until they started to create communities living in isolated settlements, which later on developed into the monasteries of medieval Christianity (Kingsley 1987, 30). During the development of Christian

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<sup>6</sup> More information about the modern pilgrimage to St Patrick’s Purgatory is available from <http://www.loughderg.org/>, which is the official internet site of Station Island.

monasticism, the original asceticism and austerity of monastic life, including poverty and a simple lifestyle, were among those aspects of monastic ideals that were not often followed in practice. However, they remained among the monastic ideals, and seemed to have been important at least on those occasions when a member of the community was thought to have become too much involved with the life and pleasures of the world outside the monastic community. Among the early Christian communities, early Irish monasticism had the reputation of being more inclined to true asceticism than other Western churches, and many continental monks actually travelled to the island in order to gain access to a simpler lifestyle. This is the reason Ireland gained the name of “the isle of the saints” (See Bitel 1990).

The Irish church gained its reputation not only from its ascetic ideals but also from its handbooks of penance i.e. penitentials (see Bieler 1963). Indeed, the Irish penitentials apparently functioned as examples for penitentials in other parts of Western Europe, and they are generally considered to be the most genuinely original Irish contribution to medieval Christianity. According to these texts, the Irish penitential practice involved, among other things, the public separation of penitents from the rest of the community, and their exclusion from the sacraments pending absolution of their sins. In addition different kinds of individual rituals or tasks of penance were assigned for specific sins, including sexual relations of all kinds (for monks), wet dreams, abortion, use of contraception, abstinence from sexual behaviour (for lay persons), drinking in the same house with a pregnant woman, keening the dead and so on (Ó Cróinín 1995, 198–199). Some of the individual forms of penance sound very harsh to modern readers. For example, in some of the penitentials we can read about “the crucifixion”. This was a form of penance, where the penitent stood without clothes, in the middle of the river, holding his hands and feet as if he had been crucified. This could go on for hours and the meaning was that during that time the penitent would get some vague idea of how Christ had suffered for him, and at the same time be purified through the process of taking some part of these sufferings on himself.

Interestingly, turning back to the description of St Patrick’s purgatory by Gerald, it is the metaphor of crucifixion that he uses to describe the sufferings of those who attend St. Patrick’s Purgatory. Additionally, he describes that there are nine pits on the island that according to him are the actual centre points of the Purgatory. The attack of the malign spirits happens while the visitors are in these pits. This description sounds similar to the penitential beds of the early Irish church known from archaeology and other sources. Gerald does not mention the cave described in the *Tractatus*, but we know that a cave existed on the island. The

cave – the original entrance to the Purgatory, could well have been the original focus and resting place for the penitent monks ordered to stay on the island, supporting the general idea presented here. Unfortunately, the cave was filled in and replaced by a chapel in 1790, so archaeological evidence seems to be unavailable in this case.

What we apparently have here therefore is a survival of the traditions of penance of the early Irish church. Through the descriptions of the practises by the writer of *Tractatus*, by Gerald, and – more importantly – by Dante following these earlier sources, these practises of penance became the sources for the visions of Purgatory in medieval Christian literature. The obvious, and final, question at this point is why did Gerald – among others – connect the Station Island community and its practises of penance with Purgatory and with Patrick.

This is a more complicated issue. To begin with it should be mentioned that there are no historically attested associations connecting St. Patrick with the island. The early documents do not mention Patrick attending the island, and the earliest document connecting St. Patrick with Co. Donegal is the early 8<sup>th</sup> century *vita* of Patrick by Tirechán. There are, of course, a number of churches in the area that according to the tradition are founded by St. Patrick. However, such dedications cannot be taken to be historically reliable and cannot, therefore, be used as a proof of anything. According to Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, the only legend connecting Lough Derg and St. Patrick is the story of how the saint banished a monster into the lake. This story can be as old as from the 7<sup>th</sup> century, but there is no certainty about it (Ó hÓgáin 1990, 360).

In order to solve this problem, I suggest that we turn our attention to *Vita Sancti Patricii* written by Jocelin of Furness in 1186/87, containing another description of St. Patrick's Purgatory. The interesting thing in this text is that in it St. Patrick's Purgatory is not situated on Station Island at all. Instead, Jocelin places it on Croagh Patrick, a mountain in Co. Mayo (Kenney 1968, 355). What makes Jocelin's testimony interesting is that in contrast with Lough Derg and Station Island, Croagh Patrick has strong connections with St. Patrick. For example, in the 7<sup>th</sup> century saint's Life by Tirechán, Patrick is said to have climbed the mountain in order to communicate with God. We read that he spent forty days and forty nights on the mountain, and birds were so numerous there that they were troublesome to him. The story was developed onwards in later Lives, such as the Irish *Bethu Phátraic*, written between 896 and 901. Here the reason for the saint to climb the mountain is to get God to promise him that Patrick is allowed to judge all the Irish on the Last Day, instead of God. An angel appears to Patrick telling him that what he asks is too much and – therefore – God would not give it to

Patrick. However, Patrick refuses to accept this. He says to the angel that he will not move from that place until he dies, or receives what he is seeking. At this point the birds start harassing him for forty days and he spends that time without eating or drinking. In the end the saint manages to banish the birds by ringing his bell. A second angel appears telling that after all this God has decided to give to Patrick what the saint requires of him (Ó hÓgáin 1990, 358).

This legend makes the mountain very important for the Irish Christians. Traditionally it has been interpreted as a tale which explains why Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland. As a sacred site, Croagh Patrick has, therefore, a special status for all Irish Catholics. Every year, on the last Sunday of June, pilgrims arrive in order to climb the mountain while reciting prayers and performing penitential exercises. According to the tradition a proper pilgrimage to the mountain is made barefoot and includes spending one night in vigil at the summit (O'Connor 1998, s.v. *Croagh Patrick*). For the present discussion, the revealing detail in this tradition is the belief that it is Patrick who through his sufferings on the mountain is allowed to judge the Irish Christians on behalf of God in the Last Judgement. Jocelin writes:

On the summit of this mountain many have the custom of watching and fasting, thinking that after this they will never enter the gates of Hell, They consider that they have obtained this from God through the merits and prayers of Patrick. Some who have spent the night there relate that they have suffered the most grievous torments, which they think have purified them from all their sins. For this reason many call this place the Purgatory of St. Patrick (De Furness 1809, 189–90).

In the beginning of this article I demonstrated how the early Christian writers, like Origen and Augustine, thought that purgatorial fires could actually be taken as the basic medium for judgment on the Last Day. If we are to believe Jocelin, according to the medieval Irish tradition the test of fire at the Last Judgement could be avoided by imitating the sufferings of Patrick on the mountain. In other words, as Jesus is thought in Christian tradition to have died for the sins of humankind beforehand, according to the Irish tradition the sufferings of Patrick on the top of Croagh Patrick relieved the followers of the saint from the purgatorial fires. This equation of the purgatorial fires of the Last Day and the penitential exercises performed on the pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick gave birth to the custom of calling the latter by the name of St. Patrick's Purgatory.

So here we have it. This seems to be the end of the story. There is one final detail to be solved, i.e. how did the name of St. Patrick's Purgatory become attached to Station Island on Lough Derg. One possibility is that St. Patrick's Purgatory was commonly used as a metaphor for centres of pilgrimages in

medieval Irish Christianity. However, this seems unlikely, as we have no documentary evidence for this kind of tradition. Additionally, it should be kept in mind that the pilgrimage to Station Island appears to be a relatively late tradition. Originally, the place was used only by the local monastic communities for their own penitential exercises. Apparently, the island was opened for public pilgrimage by the Augustinian Canons, who took charge of the place in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century. It was probably after this time that the name of St. Patrick's Purgatory was attached to the place (Pontfarcy 1995, 97).

The Augustinian canons must have been aware of the traditions connected with Croagh Patrick and they could have borrowed the idea of St Patrick's Purgatory for several different reasons. For example, they might have thought – as Pontfarcy suggests – that borrowing the name of the most popular Irish pilgrimage of their time could transfer some of its importance and aura to their own pilgrimage. They might have opted for this strategy simply in order to gain some of the economic advantages that pilgrims would bring to the community, or they might have wanted to bind their own community more securely into the Patrician heritage of Irish Christianity. Or maybe they saw some close parallels between the penitential exercises on Croagh Patrick and on their own island, and thought that these two could be equated on the basis of their theological function. Whatever their original reason, history has shown that they were more successful than what they could hope for. Station Island pilgrimage with its penitential exercises not only became internationally more popular than the pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick, but it turned out to become the source for the later medieval visualisations of Purgatory in general.

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