

Anthony Harvey and Franz Fischer (eds), *The St Patrick's Confessio Hypertext Stack* www.confessio.ie. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, online since September 2011

Pádraig McCarthy (transl.), *My Name is Patrick: St Patrick's Confessio*. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2011. 42pp. €5.00 ISBN 978-1-904890-84-3

The term 'Digital Humanities' is particularly fashionable at the moment in third-level strategic plans, funding applications and quarterly reports. However, what is meant by the term and how directly useful any particular digital initiative might be to an area of the humanities is not always immediately apparent in the generalised terminology sometimes adopted in the debate. All such misgivings, however, can be negated by pointing to the example of the *Confessio* hypertext stack launched in September 2011 by a team based in the Royal Irish Academy. One does not need to be technologically adept to immediately realise the potential of this wonderful new tool which has been put at our disposal. Within a highly professional and visually sophisticated package lies an invaluable resource for those studying Early Christian Ireland. The initial funding for the Hypertext Stack was provided by the PRTLTI (Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions) and therefore the site contains many elements designed to appeal to the general public as well as a more scholarly audience, with features aimed at both constituencies. The audio presentations, such as the introductory video, and in particular the recording of the English translation of the *Confessio*, provide a sense of the historical Patrick through his own words for the interested non-specialist. These features also provide excellent resources for schools and anyone interested in Ireland's cultural heritage. Furthermore, there are elements of the site which will be useful for third-level teaching, drawing

students into the area and encouraging them to undertake their own independent research.

Pádraig McCarthy deserves full credit for the quality of the English translation which is written in a straightforward, accessible style. The force of his translation lies in the striking immediacy of the first person narrative, giving the sense of a real person with an authentic voice emerging from the text. The translation is available also as a separate booklet for sale on the RIA website. In both the online and printed versions, there are just enough endnotes to elucidate some obscure references and to highlight biblical allusions without interrupting the flow of the monologue. As well as an English translation, Mac Philibín's translation into Irish (1961) is reproduced alongside translations in Italian, Portuguese, German, and Samuel Ferguson's English verse translation. Although the focus of the Hypertext Stack is the *Confessio*, the Latin text of St Patrick's *Epistola* is also supplied with accompanying translations into English, Irish, Italian and Portuguese. Supplying translations in various languages in this manner will hopefully open up the material to a wider European academic community and encourage scholars of Late Antiquity to view Patrick as a product of that time and culture.

One of the most important tools which the HyperStack has made available to researchers is the reproduction of digital images from the eight manuscripts in which St Patrick's writings survive. This includes the first ever digitally captured image of the text from the oldest surviving witness, the ninth-century Book of Armagh. The Book of Armagh is also the only manuscript of St Patrick's writings still in Ireland: the other manuscripts belong to collections in England (London, Salisbury, Oxford) and France (Paris, Rouen, Arras), and range in date from the tenth to the seventeenth centuries, testifying to both the range and longevity of St Patrick's cult across Europe. Although some of these manuscripts were

available digitally before this, there is a considerable advantage in having all the sources for the *Confessio* easily available and comparable on the same website. This format highlights possible directions for future digital humanities projects where the electronic medium can be employed as an exciting tool to create new avenues for research by grouping manuscripts, not by the collections in which they are held, but by the texts which they contain.

In addition to the manuscripts, the site reproduces all the printed editions of St Patrick's works, allowing us to trace the developments within the field over almost four hundred years. Reproducing the early printed works is a particular service to scholarship, since the first printed edition of the *Confessio* and *Epistola* by Sir James Ware and the 1668 Bollandist edition in the *Acta Sanctorum* are not widely available. This is also the case with the diplomatic transcription of the Book of Armagh by John Gwynn and the facsimile print of the same manuscript, where the two texts connected with the saint are also reproduced. N.J.D. White's edition of St Patrick's works is also available on the website. The core of the hypertext stack, however, is Ludwig Bieler's 'canonical' edition of the *Confessio*, first published in 1950. The principal Latin text supplied on the website is Bieler's and the translations are based on this text, so that his edition functions as the fixed point around which the rest of the site is built. The true treasure for the specialist lies in this section of the site, because not only is Bieler's reconstruction of the original Latin text supplied but also all of his *apparatus criticus*, notes and Biblical references. This online reproduction of the edition is then used as the superstructure on which layers of roughly 10,000 hypertext links are built. It is this myriad of external and internal links which creates a truly invaluable and unique tool for research.

One of the most innovative and exciting features which demonstrates what can be done digitally with texts is the fact that each

siglum in Bieler's critical apparatus has a live hyperlink to the relevant section in the digital image of the manuscript. Therefore, the rationale behind each one of Bieler's editorial decisions can be investigated immediately by calling up the image of the relevant manuscript folios. One can also compare the readings of the other editors on the same site. Thus an exercise which would be cumbersome, at the very least, while using the printed editions, manuscript facsimiles, etc., is swiftly facilitated with the aid of a new digital resource. This feature opens up many new possibilities with regard to research and may even provoke some re-assessment of Bieler's text. The fact that a number of texts of the Vulgate and *Vetus Latina* are now available online also makes comparing the Biblical references supplied by Bieler a much less arduous task.

In order to complement this hypertext of Bieler's edition, there are also a number of articles supplied under the 'Special Features' section of the website in order to situate Patrick's writings in their historical context. David Kelly's article 'St Patrick's Writings: *Confessio* and *Epistola*' was specially commissioned for the website and helps the reader to situate Patrick in the context of fifth-century Britain. It also provides interesting insights into the culture, education and latinity of late Roman Britain, and of Patrick as a product of that culture.

Two other articles concentrate on Patrick's early biographers and examine their motivation and methodology in building the hagiographic dossier of the saint: Elizabeth Dawson, 'Pillars of Conversion in Muirchú and Tírechán: Two Case Studies' and Terry O'Hagan, 'Tírechán: Biography and Character Study'. These articles enable us to comprehend the biographers' methods and the context in which the modern image of the saint was invented. The website also provides the texts of the two Latin lives of St Patrick by Muirchú and Tírechán, respectively, with English translations. This is an important feature of the site since it

allows the user to see how the historical Patrick whose voice speaks so clearly in the *Confessio* becomes the later, legendary patron saint. Two further pieces on the site address this question: Derick Mockler's 'Seeking Patrick', which is aimed at the general reader, and Rachel Moss's comprehensive investigation of the iconography of the saint in 'The Staff, the Snake and the Shamrock: St Patrick in Art', which will appeal to those interested in the development of hagiographical stereotypes.

Another reason for which the RIA team deserve high praise is that they have not 'hidden' any of their work; instead of that they have altruistically supplied quite detailed descriptions of their methodology and processes in creating the hypertext stack. One case in point is the excellent piece by Randall Cream on 'The Technologies of the HyperStack', which will serve as an invaluable template for anyone considering a similar endeavour. The explanation of the background of the project and how its aims developed over time is also very interesting in this respect. The fact that the site is so evidently useful and allows access to the words of St Patrick in a way not possible heretofore means that traffic on the site has been quite busy since its launch. According to recent information released by the RIA, visitors from over 108 countries have already viewed the site, and since St Patrick's Day (of March 2012) visitors from the USA have now outstripped the Irish visitors to the site. The most visited sections are the English translation of the *Confessio*, the Latin original, the bibliography and the excellent article by David Kelly.

It is hoped that the achievements of the HyperStack team will stimulate debate as to the future direction of the digital humanities in an Irish context. It is a fascinating example of what is possible when you bring technological expertise and scholarship together. It is not digitisation for digitisation's sake but the creation of a truly useful scholarly tool and consequently a new methodology. It would be

wonderful to see more documents relating to the Patrick dossier, especially those in Irish, added to the site — e.g., the Tripartite Life — although this may already be in the pipeline. Perhaps in future years references to Patrick in other medieval works such as martyrologies, litanies and prayers in Irish as well as Latin could in some way be incorporated to create the complete St Patrick dossier on one website representing not only the historical man but the legendary saint as well. In addition, the ‘Special Features’ section could be embellished with more essays addressing the texts critically, especially now that the period of initial funding, with its emphasis on educational purposes, has elapsed.

The editors already state on the site that many aspects of the HyperStack are still works in progress, in particular the bibliography, and in this case they ask for assistance from all of us in sending them titles in order to complete the list of secondary literature. In bringing all these documents relating to St Patrick’s *Confessio* together in one place the team behind the HyperStack have proved themselves worthy successors of the medieval scholars who created the Book of Armagh. In a certain sense the work by the RIA team is a twenty-first century version of the endeavour undertaken in medieval Armagh to create the *libri Patricii* in which all materials related to the saint would be gathered in one place.

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