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Finding the Text of the *Libri Sancti Patricii*

The earliest Latin documents of any length written in Ireland—indeed anywhere in the British Isles—are the two, short fifth-century letters of St. Patrick. In the *Epistle to the Soldiers of Coroticus*, Patrick condemns a British warlord for his slave raids against Irish Christians, while the *Confession* is a moving defense against charges of corruption in the fledgling Irish church.

As part of my research for an edition of the *Libri Sancti Patricii* for the Library of Early Christianity series for the Catholic University of America Press, I have been collecting and studying the seven medieval manuscripts of Patrick's letters in an attempt to best determine the original readings. The great variations within the two letters provide a challenge to anyone attempting to determine the original texts. The oldest manuscript, Trinity College 52 (*The Book of Armagh*) dates to 807, but has only parts of the *Confession* and omits the *Epistle* entirely. Other manuscripts, such as BM 1391 from Rouen, have been badly damaged and are also incomplete.

My paper will look briefly at the importance of these letters for the study of early Latin in Ireland, then explore both general and specific problems of editing these unique texts. The first problem will be why the *Book of Armagh* omits much of the *Confession*. Is this an instance of deliberate editing out of unwanted passages or does the manuscript preserve instead the original text which has been modified by later scribes? I will also explore specific points in the textual tradition. One example occurs at the very opening of the *Confession*, in which Patrick declares himself *contemptibilis* in the *Book of Armagh*, but *contemptibilissimus* in the other six manuscripts—a very early use of such a superlative adjective. A number of such variants in the manuscripts will be considered, some of which have significant impact on the meaning of the texts.

I will include a handout with images of important manuscript passages.