

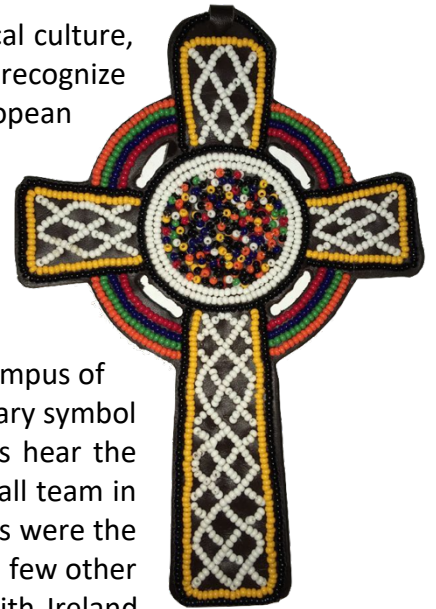


February 2018

Dear Friends and Support Partners,

February is “Black History Month” in America. As a missionary and Church historian from America who has lived in sub-Saharan Africa for over a decade, this seems an appropriate time to share this story.

Whenever I show this cross to Americans who know a bit of history or historical culture, they recognize its shape — “It’s a Celtic cross.” Because they know me, they recognize the Maasai beadwork and appreciate the cultural synthesis between the European Christian and African Maasai styles. But when I’ve shown this to our friends in Kenya, I get a different response — “Oh, wow, that’s an Ethiopian Coptic cross done up with Maasai beadwork!” They admire the synthesis between the two African cultures. There’s a historical reason behind this difference in interpretation.



This is an example of a Celtic cross. (This one stands, nearly 18 ft tall, on the campus of Milligan College in East Tennessee.) Celtic crosses are a primary symbol of Celtic Christianity. Now I suppose that some Americans hear the word “Celtics” and only think of the professional basketball team in the city of Boston. But most are aware that the Celts were the ancestors of the Irish, Scots, and Welsh (along with a few other groups). Celtic crosses are especially associated with Ireland and Scotland. Most of us have at least a vague awareness of Celtic Christianity — thinking of St Patrick, shamrocks, and maybe of green beer.



St Patrick’s story is well-known. He was captured as a boy from his home in what is now England (long before the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes immigrated to the island) and was forced to live as a slave. Eventually he was able to escape. Later, as an adult and a committed Christian, he received a vision comparable to the Apostle Paul’s vision of the Macedonian (see Acts) which led him to go back to Ireland to share the gospel — the good news (about Jesus) — with his former captors and slave masters. After being trained by Coptic (African) Christians, he became a pioneering missionary evangelist and church planter. As such, he is regarded as the “patron saint” of Ireland and the founder of Celtic Christianity. It was this vibrant Celtic Christianity that evangelized Scotland and then re-evangelized first England (once it had become England, after the invasions of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes) and then most of Western Europe (after the Western Roman Empire had collapsed and been overrun by various barbarian tribes, the ancestors of modern Europeans). This is, to quote the title of Thomas Cahill’s well-known book, [*How the Irish Saved \[Western\] Civilization*](#).

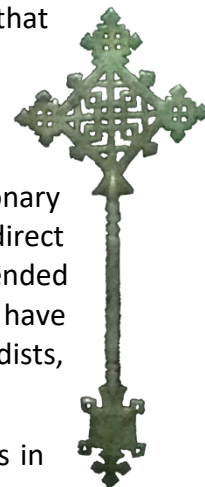
But in most tellings of this story, the prelude and the second chapter have been forgotten. Before Patrick was a missionary, he was trained by African monks. After he planted the Church in Ireland, it was the second and third generation missionaries who established that Church. And this brings us back to that first image I shared — the cross made of Maasai leather and beadwork and designed like a Celtic/European ... or is a Coptic/African? ... cross.



Some of those second and third generations of missionaries to Ireland were from the Coptic Church. The Coptic Church was historically found in the lands now known as Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia — in Africa. Archaeologists have found ruins of Coptic Nubian church buildings as far inland as Lake Chad. Shortly after St Patrick's time, the African Church sent some of her best and brightest to serve as missionaries in Ireland. To my knowledge, they never returned home. They left a sunny land of date palms to labor in a land with what seemed like 9 months of winter, where the inhabitants were so uncivilized that they painted their bodies blue, were illiterate in the incomprehensible language which they spoke, and traditionally practiced human sacrifice. Those missionaries from the African Church established the Celtic Church. It turns out that they took their artwork with them. The Irish

apparently liked the African Coptic designs and fully incorporated them into their own culture. ... Oh, I nearly forgot to mention the prelude to this story — before he became a missionary, Patrick himself had been trained by African church leaders. ... Over a thousand years later, we've mostly forgotten that the Celtic Cross had its origins as a symbol of African Christianity.

The Coptic Church of Africa, then, was the godparent of the Celtic Church in her infancy. Without the contribution of Africans to Celtic Christianity, the Irish would not have saved [Western] civilization. All of English-speaking Christianity has a direct debt to the Irish missionary movement and therefore an older debt to those African missionaries in Ireland. For the direct spiritual descendants of the Celtic Church — all Presbyterian Churches and Churches descended from the Presbyterians, the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, any Churches which have been impacted by the revivals of the Great Awakenings (which includes most Baptists, Methodists, and indeed every single group that is at all evangelical) — this debt is particularly strong.



When predominately white American congregations send missionaries or support missions in Africa, they are not being cultural or religious imperialists. They're paying down a dividend on an ancient investment. The African Church invested in the pagan, barbarian ancestors of white European and American Christianity. When Europeans and Americans labor for the gospel in Africa, they are returning what they owe to Africans. **So to those of you who are investing in God's Kingdom in Kenya — THANK YOU.**

And that, in the words of Paul Harvey, "is the rest of the story."

grace and peace to you in our Lord and Friend Jesus,

Joshua & Ruth

joshua & ruth barron

missionaries in Kenya

Would you or someone you know like to partner with us financially?

Send us an email at Joshua.Ruth@BarronFamilyMission.net,
or visit BarronFamilyMission.net online and click the "GIVE ONLINE" link on the right sidebar.

Copyright © 2018 Joshua & Ruth Barron. All rights reserved. Barron Family Updates.