

describes her words and actions in blunt terms: “But she threw the child aside, and repulsed her parents, saying: ‘Begone from me, enemies of God, for I know you not!’”³⁹

Once the so-called trial was over, the fate of the prisoners was sealed and the remaining days before the execution were spent in personal reflection, “more concerned about their worthiness, their loyalty to Christ,” according to Wright, “than about the suffering ahead of them.”⁴⁰ They met for prayer, shared their last meal—their agape love feast—and witnessed their faith to the crowd outside.

On the day of the execution the prisoners were brought to the arena where, according to Roman custom, the men were taken first to be tortured for the entertainment of the crowd before their execution. Satorius stopped at the gate for one last word of testimony with Pudens, the prison governor, who later turned to Christ and became a martyr himself. The men were then sent into the arena with a bear, a leopard, and a wild boar. Satorius was so mangled and bloody after the ordeal that spectators ridiculed him, shouting, “He is well-baptized!” Perpetua and Felicitas (who had given birth to her baby in prison) were stripped and sent into the arena to face a “mad heifer.” The gory torture soon became too much for the crowd, and the people began shouting, “Enough!”⁴¹

When this preliminary exhibition was ended and the young women were brought to the executioner, Perpetua called out to some grieving Christian friends, “Give out the Word to the brothers and sisters; stand fast in the faith, love one another, and don’t let our suffering become a stumbling block to you.”⁴² She was then taken to the gladiator to be beheaded. Whether due to hesitancy or lack of skill, his first blow was not sufficient. Perpetua cried out in pain, took the gladiator’s trembling hand and directed the sword to her throat, and it was over.

After this wave of persecution there followed fifty years of relative peace during which the church grew steadily. Many people who may themselves have never been able to pass such a test of faith were, nevertheless, attracted by the example of Perpetua and her comrades to a faith that demonstrated such serenity and courage.

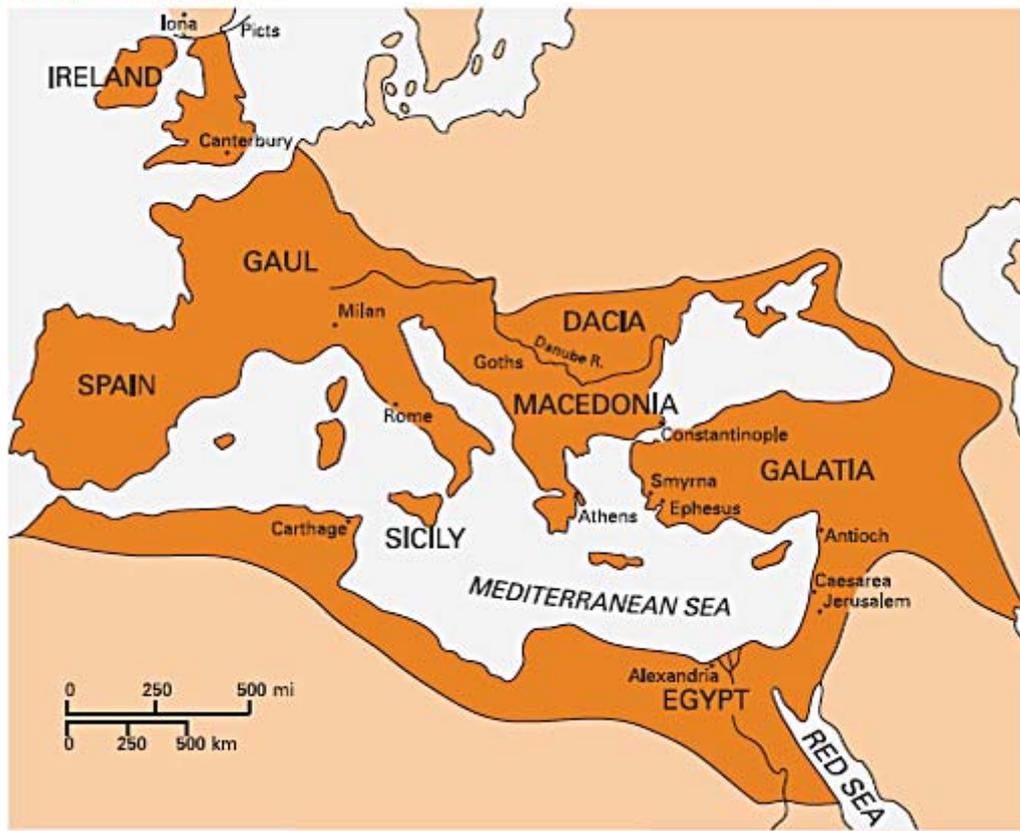
Ulfilas

Following the much-publicized conversion of Emperor Constantine in 312, the Roman Empire became nominally Christianized, and the vibrant testimony of the Christians seemed to decline. No longer did they suffer for their faith, for it was in vogue to be a Christian, and as a result, there was a weakening in spiritual fervor. Martyrdom from official persecution had become a terror of the past. The church and the state became closely allied, and Christianity was being used more and more as a means of fostering imperial expansion. Missionaries were viewed in a political light in the hope that their evangelistic efforts could bring outlying areas within the scope of Roman control.

Ulfilas was one such missionary. Though he himself was motivated by his desire to spread the gospel, in the eyes of Roman policy, his mission was well-suited to territorial expansion. Ulfilas was one of the greatest cross-cultural missionaries of the early church. His ministry was to the Goths, a barbarian tribe outside the Roman Empire living in the area of present-day Romania.

Born in 311, Ulfilas was raised in the pagan environment of the Goths. His mother is believed to have been Gothic and his father a Cappadocian Christian who was taken captive by Gothic raiders. When he was in his early twenties, Ulfilas was sent to Constantinople for diplomatic service. Here he spent several years and came under the influence of Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia, who taught him the Scriptures in Greek and Latin. Under Eusebius he served as a “reader,” ministering possibly to Gothic soldiers in the Roman army.

THE ROMAN EMPIRE



Eusebius, like most Byzantine bishops of his day, was Arian, or at least Semi-Arian, and this heretical teaching was passed on to Ulfilas. Arius, a contemporary of Ulfilas, was a popular and persuasive Christian preacher who is most remembered for his theological claims relating to the divinity of Christ. From Scripture passages that speak of Christ as “begotten of the Father” and the “first-born of all creation” he concluded that, though Christ was sinless and unchangeable and the Savior of mankind, he was essentially different from the Father and was therefore not God. Although this doctrine was overruled at the Council of Nicaea, many of the churchmen, particularly in the eastern portion of the empire, continued to hold the view—Ulfilas being one. But according to Latourette, “It was a mild form of Arianism which he professed.”⁴³

At the age of thirty, after spending nearly ten years in Constantinople, Ulfilas was consecrated Bishop to the Goths—those living north of the Danube outside the borders of the empire. His assignment was to evangelize the barbarians—“wild and undisciplined,” a “rude and crude sort, with a relatively low standard of living, dwelling often in ‘wagons’ because they had no fixed abodes.”⁴⁴ To such “simple people,” Stephen Neill suggests, Arianism “may have presented itself as a rather attractive simplification, since it set them free from the knotty controversies about the nature and person of Christ, to follow him as a leader and to concentrate on the already sufficiently difficult task of learning to live a sober, righteous, and godly life.”⁴⁵

For forty years Ulfilas conducted evangelistic work among the Goths, a work that was highly successful, though hampered by persecution. In 348 fierce opposition from a Gothic chieftain (who believed Ulfilas was seeking to bring the Goths under Roman domination) almost decimated the entire mission enterprise. Ulfilas, with the permission of the Arian Emperor Constantius, moved his Gothic Christian community across the Danube into safer Roman territory. Later some of these Christians returned to their people to serve as missionaries themselves.

The most enduring labor of love that Ulfilas bestowed on the Goths was his translation of the Bible into their native tongue, an unwritten language for which he had to devise an alphabet. This was “probably the first or second instance,” according to Latourette, “of what has since happened for hundreds of tongues—their reduction to writing by Christian missionaries and the translation into them by that medium of a part or all of the Scriptures.”⁴⁶ Ulfilas was scrupulously accurate in rendering an almost word-for-word translation from the Greek without losing the Gothic idiom, and the Goths and Vandals alike carried it with them as they moved from place to place in Europe.

Though Ulfilas’s translation was a monumental contribution to missions of the early centuries, even this area of his ministry has come under fire. He purposely omitted the books of Samuel and Kings from his translation because, in the words of an early church historian, “They are merely an account of military exploits, and the Gothic tribes were particularly devoted to war. They were in more need of checks on their warlike natures than spurs to urge them on to acts of war.”⁴⁷

Ulfilas died at the age of seventy while on a mission to Constantinople for the Gothic king. The longtime military rivalry between the Goths and the Roman Empire continued after his death. There were devastating attacks by the Visigoths against the empire, and the plunder continued for decades, climaxing on the night of August 24, 410, when Alaric and his army stormed Rome. But despite the military campaigns, the gospel continued to be preached to the Goths by Ulfilas’s faithful successors. They accompanied the wandering Gothic tribesmen to the battlefield and wherever else their caravans took them, prompting a sarcastic comment from the anti-Arian Ambrose of Milan: “Those who had formerly used wagons for dwellings, now use a wagon for a church.” But sarcasm aside, that “caustic comment,” writes V. Raymond Edman, “becomes a compliment for the men of faith who, like Paul, were ‘all things to all men, that they might by all means save some.’ Their doctrine, perhaps, was defective; their hearts were not. They sought service, not security; comradeship in Christ, not a cathedral; discipleship, not domination.”⁴⁸

Patrick

Shrouded in legend and glorified by sainthood, Patrick, Ireland’s great fifth-century missionary is one of the most misrepresented figures in church history. Popular opinion notwithstanding, Patrick was neither a Roman Catholic nor an Irishman, and his promotion to sainthood was bestowed at the Council of Whitby some two centuries after his death, most likely as an incentive for bringing the Celtic church under Roman Catholic domination.

Yet today he has become a man for all seasons. David Plotz sums up his prestige and popularity:

The scarcity of facts about St. Patrick’s life has made him a dress-up doll: Anyone can create his own St. Patrick. Ireland’s Catholics and Protestants, who have long feuded over him, each have built a St. Patrick in their own image. Catholics cherish Paddy as the father of Catholic Ireland. They say that Patrick was consecrated as a bishop and that the pope himself sent him to convert the heathen Irish.... Ireland’s Protestant minority, by contrast, denies that Patrick was a bishop or that he was sent by Rome. They depict him as anti-Roman Catholic and credit him with inventing a distinctly Celtic church, with its own homegrown symbols and practices.... Evangelical Protestants claim him as one of their own. After all, he read his Bible, and his faith came to him in visions.... Utah newspapers emphasize that Patrick was a missionary sent overseas to convert the ungodly, an