

Was St. Patrick Italian? Historians have long debated his Roman lineage

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His parents were Roman and he didn't see Ireland until his teens

He is the primary patron saint of Ireland, but was most likely born in Roman Britain and didn't make it to the Emerald Isle until he was kidnapped by Irish pirates at the age of 16.

Does that mean he was Roman? British?

Could St. Patrick have actually been... Italian?

Accounts of his birth vary. Even the year isn't known for sure, although historians generally say he was born around 390.

According to researchers at the History Channel, Patrick was born "in what is now England, Scotland or Wales — interpretations vary widely — to a Christian deacon and his wife. His birthplace doesn't mean Patrick was a Brit, however, at least not technically. During his lifetime, the British Isles were occupied by the Romans, a group that included Patrick's parents and thus the saint himself. It is unknown whether his family, thought to have been a part of the Roman aristocracy, was of indigenous Celtic descent or hailed from modern-day Italy."

St. Patrick's lineage

Patrick's father's name was Calphurnius (also written as Calpurnius), according to most reports and his mother was Conchessa. (The site biography.com notes, "Patrick's mother...was a close relative of the great patron St. Martin of Tours. Patrick's grandfather was also a member of the clergy.")

Patrick wrote in Latin, and signed his works "Patricius." In some accounts of his life, Patrick was given the birth name Maewyn Succat, but historians do not agree on this.

He escaped his Irish enslavement at the age of 21 and fled to Britain before traveling to France and Rome. He joined the clergy and later returned to Ireland, eventually becoming a bishop.

His feast day, March 17, is believed to be the day he died, but, again, accounts vary.

But was St. Patrick Italian?

L'Italo-Americano, the biweekly Italian-American organization established in 1908, insists on its website italoamericano.org that Patrick was, indeed, a paisan.

As contributor Maria Gloria writes on the site, “Patrick’s parents were Romans. The Romans ruled England at the time. Calpurnias, Patrick’s father, was a high Roman diplomat living in England, but a Roman citizen.”

And how do Irish publications feel about this? At Irish Central (and irishcentral.com) at least one contributor, Monica Lewis, believes that Italians should “reclaim” St. Patrick’s Day. In a humorous piece that first appeared in the Erie Times News, Lewis wrote, “St. Patrick... was the son of a Roman diplomat living in England. So where’s the freaking bruschetta?”

Whatever his ethnic lineage, St. Patrick is an integral part of Irish identity. As Wikipedia notes, “The symbolic resonance of the Saint Patrick figure is complex and multifaceted, stretching from that of Christianity’s arrival in Ireland to an identity that encompasses everything Irish. In some portrayals, the saint is symbolically synonymous with the Christian religion itself.”

Until more definitive information comes along, it’s probably a good idea to say that Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland and leave it at that, especially if you’re discussing this with Irish friends who don’t exactly warm up to the idea.

Of course, if you want a little chianti with your corned beef on St Patrick Day, that’s your call.