columban christian influence in northumbria, before and after whitby

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Abstract
The Synod of Whitby of 664 has traditionally been regarded as the great ‘set-piece’ debate between the so-called ‘Celtic’ and Roman churches in Britain, and as the turning-point for Irish – and more specifically Columban – ecclesiastical domination in Northumbria. In his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, the principle source for the Synod, Bede declared that after Whitby, ‘all present … gave up their imperfect rules’. But to what extent could Columban influence be completely eradicated in seventh-century Northumbria? This paper examines the role that Columban clergy from Iona played during the formative period of the Christian church in Northumbria, and then considers the Synod of Whitby. It is shown that Northumbria and the Irish Christian world, including Columban Iona, were not cut off from one another after 664. Irish and Columban influences continued to reach Northumbria in the late seventh and eighth centuries, if less directly, and Northumbrian literate culture was still characterised by its substantial Columban/Irish flavour developed prior to the events at Whitby.

The Synod of Whitby of 664 has traditionally been regarded as the great ‘set-piece’ debate between the so-called ‘Celtic’ and Roman churches in Britain, and as the turning-point for Irish – and more specifically Columban\(^1\) – ecclesiastical domination in Northumbria (and beyond).\(^2\) In his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* [Ecclesiastical History of the English People], the principle source for the Synod, Bede declared that after Whitby, ‘all present … gave up their imperfect rules’.\(^3\) But to what extent could Columban influence be completely done away with in seventh-century Northumbria? Indeed, the evidence that the Columban church was

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1 The term ‘Columban’ is used here to refer to the Christianity and clergy of Iona, so as to provide a differentiation from the church and clerics of mainland Ireland.


3 *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People* ed and trans B Colgrave and R A B Mynors (Oxford, 1969) III.25. All references to the *Historia ecclesiastica* [*HE*] will be cited by book and chapter from this edition, though I have varied Colgrave and Mynors’s translation in some of the subsequent quotes to give a more literal meaning.
fundamental in the establishment and development of Christianity in Northumbria is both abundant and undisputed, and is well-supported in the secondary literature. As explained by David Dumville, the nominal Christianisation of at least half of Anglo-Saxon England through the seventh century was brought about by Irish clerics and their Anglo-Saxon trainees. Granted, Northumbria had seen the introduction of Christianity under King Edwin in the late 620s, spear-headed by the Roman bishop Paulinus and, after Paulinus fled on the death of Edwin in 633, his ministry in York was continued by James the Deacon. However, it was under the bishops from Iona that Christianity ultimately triumphed. It is the aim of this paper, therefore, to first of all examine the process by which


6 HE II.20.

7 I Wood, ‘Conversion’ 120-122 in M Lapidge, J Blair, S Keynes and D Scrugg (ed), The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England (Oxford, 1999), notes that Columban and Irish clergy in Northumbria may have been assisted in their work because they were evangelising in an area that had already been exposed to Christianity.
Christianity was fostered in Northumbria under the instruction of Columban/Irish clergy. The paper will then go on to consider the Synod of Whitby, and its consequences, in order to demonstrate that Columban/Irish influence and interaction with Northumbria did not simply stop after 664, but continued into the late seventh and eighth centuries.

The Columban mission to Northumbria

The introduction of Columban Christianity into Northumbria occurred as a result of the exile of the sons of Æthelfrith to Dalriada, c616-633. The exiles, including the future Northumbrian kings Oswald and Oswiu, were converted from paganism during their long stay in Dalriada, with Bede stating that they were ‘instructed in the faith as the Irish [Scottish] taught it and were regenerated by the grace of baptism’. Æthelfrith’s sons were, therefore, inculcated into a Christian tradition which differed from that which was being promulgated at the time in Northumbria by the Roman Paulinus, under the sponsorship of Æthelfrith’s enemy Edwin. Iona was founded in or soon after 563 by St Columba who, according to Adomnán of Iona, his hagiographer, had ‘set sail from Ireland to be a pilgrim’. While it is likely that Christianity had reached Dalriada before Columba’s arrival, it is with the saint that the Christian record in the

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9 *HE* III.1. See also *HE* III.3, III.25, and *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba* trans R Sharpe (Harmondsworth, 1995) I.1. All references to the *Vita Sancti Columbae* will be cited by book and chapter from this translation. Eanfrith, Oswald’s and Oswiu’s older brother, was also converted, but apostatised when he returned to the kingship of Bernicia in 633 (*HE* III.1, III.9).


11 *VC* I.7. See also *VC Second Preface*: ‘Columba sailed away from Ireland to Britain, choosing to be a pilgrim for Christ’. The dating of, and circumstances surrounding, Columba’s departure from Ireland and foundation of Iona are discussed by A Macquarrie, *The Saints of Scotland: Essays in Scottish Church History AD 450-1093* (Edinburgh, 1997) 74-76; Richter, *Ireland and Her Neighbours*, 49-53; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, 12-15.
west of Scotland begins. And indeed, although the process of its growth is not well documented, Iona soon came to head a network of churches and monasteries not only in Dalriada but also in mainland Ireland and in Pictland.

When Oswald eventually returned to Northumbria on the death of his elder brother Eanfrith in 634, and was victorious over Cadwallon and Penda at Heavenfield (Denisesburn), Bede says that he ‘was anxious that the people under his rule should be filled with the grace of the Christian faith’. In the context of Oswald’s own conversion, it is not surprising that it was to Iona that he sent for a bishop to teach and minister to his new subjects. Oswald’s choice of Iona as the source for a mission to Northumbria may have also been influenced by its high status at the time and by the existence of Columban daughter-houses in the north amongst the Scots of Dalriada, and perhaps the Picts, which might have been able to assist in the process of conversion. In addition, a request to Iona may have had the added benefit of differentiating Oswald’s Christian rulership from that of Edwin, who was allied with the Roman south and who clearly had not benefited from his recent conversion to Christianity. Barbara Yorke has speculated whether the choice of the Columban monks, as Celts, assisted in the integration of the resident British substratum within an expanding Northumbria. While one should be wary of expecting any necessary ecclesiastical unity between the Britons and the Dalriadans, it is nevertheless probable that at the time their clergy had more in common with one another than with the Roman clergy in the south.

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14 *HE* III.3.
17 B Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1990) 86. See also N J Higham, ‘Britons in northern England in the early middle ages: through a thick glass darkly’, *Northern History* 38 (2001) 5-25, at p 14, who bravely suggests that the Columban missionaries in Northumbria would have ‘grafted themselves on a raft of existing Christianity, even as far as using the same cult sites and employing and validating their staff’.
18 The notion that there was any such thing as a ‘Celtic Church’ has been thoroughly discounted by W Davies, ‘The Celtic Church’, *Journal of Religious History* 8 (1974-1975), 406-411; Davies, ‘Myth of the Celtic Church’, 12-21; Hughes, ‘Celtic Church: a valid concept?’, 1-20.
19 See Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, 283 note 122, for a discussion of Dalriadan/Irish and British ecclesiastical contact. Ireland had of course been subject to the
Bede says that Aidán was dispatched from Iona forthwith, and was granted the island of Lindisfarne as his see ‘in accordance with his wishes’. His choice of Lindisfarne was probably influenced by its physical similarity to Iona – as close as was likely to be found within the territory of Northumbria – and arguably by its proximity to the royal residence at Bamburgh. Together with other Columban clergy who also travelled south, Aidán proceeded to extend the Christian faith throughout Northumbria, preaching the gospel, teaching, and building churches, and Oswald for his part supported Aidán by not only endowing land for monasteries but also acting as interpreter for the Irish-speaking bishop.

This is a reasonable summary of the conversion as presented by Bede, though it scarcely reveals the significant effort that would have been required to mount a mission which, at least initially, would have been organised from Iona. The marshalling of a mission from Iona would have required consideration of a number of practical administrative matters. To begin with the issue of language: the mission will have meant, over time, a substantial infiltration of Irish-speaking clerics into Northumbria.

evangelisation of British missionaries such as Patrick. There is also evidence from Adomnán’s Life of Columba of British and Dalriadan contact. Adomnán mentions a Briton who died on Iona (VC III.6), and an Irishman who was sent by Columba to spend 12 years in penance among the British (VC I.22).

20 HE III.3.
22 HE III.3, III.5, III.6. In addition to Lindisfarne, other monasteries that were established during either Oswald’s or Oswiu’s reigns include Melrose on the Tweed, and Coldingham in the vicinity of St Abb’s Head about 20 km north of Berwick-upon-Tweed. For what it is worth, R Gardner, ‘Kentigern, Columba, and Oswald: The Ripon connexion’, Northern History 35 (1999) 1-26, at p 16-19, also comments on a dedication to St Columba near Ripon at Topcliffe-on-Swale (North Yorkshire). Although the earliest record is not until 1303, Gardner supposes that this dedication may have been in memory of the saint who brought Oswald victory at Heavenfield.

24 M Richter, ‘Practical aspects of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons’ 362-376 in Ni Chatháin and Richter, Irland und die Christenheit, at p 363, has suggested the more neutral term of ‘agents of conversion’ in place of ‘missions’ or ‘missionaries’; he argues that ‘professional’ clerics were only part of the conversion equation.
effective, missionaries would have needed to be able to communicate their Christian message to the Northumbrians, that is, if they intended to teach by more than just their personal examples of holiness. 26 This in turn would have necessitated some consideration of how to cope with an initial language barrier. Bede says that Aidán himself ‘was not completely at home in the English tongue’, and required the king to translate to his ealdormen and thegns. 27 Clearly, this was one way in which the linguistic divide could be overcome, and it might be expected that the king’s example was followed by the other Northumbrian exiles who had similarly learned Irish while abroad. 28 However, reliance on the former exiles would have become less practicable as the number of Irish clerics increased and as they travelled farther afield. 29

Moreover, although the evidence that Iona had previously conducted evangelical work amongst non-Irish speakers is limited only to Bede’s story of Columba converting the Picts, 30 it should not be expected that the Columban mission would have been so haphazard and unsophisticated as to rely solely on the services and goodwill of what was probably a relatively small cohort of nobles and their retainers. The existence of dedicated interpreters attached to the mission is, therefore, a distinct possibility, as is the training of the Columban missionaries themselves in Old English, either before or after they departed from Iona, as well as the formulation of a Christian vocabulary in this new vernacular. 31 Bilingualism or even multilingualism would not have been unknown in a northern socio-political milieu which was characterised by overlordship, tribute collection and hostage-taking. 32 In this regard, the two ‘Saxons’ who were resident amongst the Iona community in the time of Columba were probably not

26 Richter, ‘Practical aspects of the conversion’, 375. Bede, for example, comments on Aidán’s pious model (HE III.5).
27 HE III.3.
28 We know, for example, that Oswiu was also fluent in Irish (HE III.25).
31 Bullough, ‘Missions to the English and the Picts’, 85; Dumville, “‘Beowulf’ and the Celtic world’, 111, 116; Higham, _Convert Kings_, 212.
unusual; 33 others like them might have either returned to Northumbria as
interpreters or helped to familiarise the Columban missionaries with Old English. 34 Some of the captives/slaves whom Aidán ransomed while in Northumbria may also have served in this capacity. 35 The success of the Columban missionaries is a testament to their eventual ability to deal with the language problem, and there is enough evidence to suggest that Aidán himself became conversant with Old English. 36

Beyond the matter of language, was there any advance discussion of what David Dumville refers to as a ‘mission-theology’, the approach by which Christianity was to be promulgated amongst the Northumbrians? 37 The fact that the mission was not a Columban initiative, but rather was founded as a result of Oswald’s request for a bishop, means that the amount of forethought may not have been comparable, say, to the earlier Roman mission to Kent. 38 Nevertheless, a strong sign that some consideration was given to how to preach to the Northumbrians is provided in Bede’s account

33 In his Life of Columba, Adomnán states that two ‘Saxons’ were said to have been living on Iona during the lifetime of the Saint (ob 597): Genererus Saxo [ie the Saxon], described as the baker and a very devout brother (VC III.10), and Pilu Saxo, who was at Iona four years before Columba died (VC III.22). According to Moisl, ‘Bernician royal dynasty and the Irish’, 114, ‘Saxon’ was Adomnán’s term for any Anglo-Saxon.

34 Dumville, “‘Beowulf’ and the Celtic world’, 111-112, notes the preparations that were made for the Roman mission of 596-597 to Kent. Bede states that Pope Gregory arranged for Frankish interpreters to accompany St Augustine and his companions (HE I.25). Gregory also educated captured Anglo-Saxon boys to serve as interpreters. See A W Haddan and W Stubbs (ed), Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland, Volume 3 (Oxford, 1869-1878) 5; O’Neill, ‘Irish cultural influence on Northumbria’, 13-14.

35 HE III.5.

36 In Bede’s account of Oswald acting as an interpreter for Aidán (HE III.3), we are told that the bishop had ‘not acquired a perfect knowledge of the English language [Anglorum linguam perfecte non nouerat]’ (emphasis added, and not following Colgrave and Mynors). This implies that Aidán had some knowledge of the language. Bede subsequently relates an account of Aidán conversing with Oswine of Deira (HE III.14), during which an Irish priest asks the bishop a question ‘in his native tongue [suus lingua patria]’ so as not to be understood by the rest of the company. The implication is that, up to that point, Aidán had been conversing in Old English. See Higham, Northern Counties, 281; O’Neill, ‘Irish cultural influence on Northumbria’, 13.

37 Dumville, “‘Beowulf’ and the Celtic world’, 116-118. Richter, ‘Practical aspects of the conversion’, 371, notes that little evidence survives of how people were actually persuaded, on the ground, to convert to Christianity in the seventh century.

38 Dumville, “‘Beowulf’ and the Celtic world’, 113; Higham, Convert Kings, 209-10. Sharpe, Adomnán of Iona, 253 note 43, suggests that during the process of negotiating for a bishop Oswald visited Iona, perhaps accompanying the first, unnamed missionary when he returned to Northumbria.
of the life of Aidán. Bede says that Aidán was not in fact the first missionary sent from Iona to preach to Oswald’s people, a point often overlooked in discussions of the Columban mission. The first unnamed cleric was said to be a man of ‘harsh/austere disposition’ [austerioris animi] who, after some time preaching to the Northumbrians, met with no success because they ‘were unwilling to listen to him’. He consequently returned to Iona and reported that he had failed in his task because the Northumbrians were ‘intractable, obstinate and of barbarous temperament’ [indomabiles et durae ac barbarae mentis]. A council was subsequently held to discuss how best to bring the Christian message to the Anglo-Saxons and at this meeting Aidán made known his views that a more gentle and measured approach to Christianisation was to be recommended. Aidán’s notions were adopted, and he was chosen as the man to lead the renewed mission. What this testimony reveals is that there was discussion on Iona of what amounts to a mission-theology: a rule of temperance and moderation that was intended to characterise the Columban approach to conversion.\footnote{HE III.5.} To this end, the unnamed cleric’s efforts might be regarded as an unintended ‘fact-finding mission’ to measure the temperament of the Northumbrians when at home. Though he was not himself effective, this cleric’s initial foray provided a point of departure for the subsequent mission under Aidán.

The Columban missionaries, therefore, would have made some effort to accommodate their mission strategy to the language and sensibilities of the Anglo-Saxon Northumbrians. But they themselves would have had a strong influence on the Northumbrians. The mission brought the kingdom of Northumbria within the familia of the community of Iona.\footnote{Kirby, Earliest English Kings, 89. Adomnán speaks of Columba’s church as a matrix ecclesia, a ‘mother church’ (VC I.5), which might be taken to imply leadership over a hierarchy of other churches.} The secular rulership of the realm under Oswald and then Oswiu was ethnically Anglo-Saxon, with a probable Irish/Scottish flavour. But its ecclesiastical governance was, as a result of the mission, obedient to Ionan authority. There does not appear to have been any attempt to revive Paulinus’s bishopric at York, even though a Roman presence remained.\footnote{Kirby, Earliest English Kings, 89. The continued tenure of James the Deacon at York has already been mentioned, but Dumville, ““Beowulf” and the Celtic world”, 111, does not think that Paulinus left behind any substantial body of Roman clergy.}
Aidán, who was bishop of Lindisfarne 634-651, and his successors Finán (651-661) and Colmán (661-664), were all appointed from Iona, and at least initially, many of their acolytes would have come from Dalriada or Ireland. It is unknown exactly how many Columban and other Irish clergy, over time, travelled to Northumbria, but it may be surmised that their presence was vigorous. Bede says that, after Aidán’s arrival, ‘many came from the country of the Irish [Scots] into Britain’. The Columban clergy proceeded to instruct, train and eventually ordain Northumbrian students. Such training would have served as an additional means for cultural transmission, and in this way the kingdom was further supplied with a cohort of native Anglo-Saxon clergy who were indoctrinated in the Columban tradition.

Dumville’s description of the situation is apt:

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43 HE III.5, III.17; The Annals of Ulster (to AD 1131), Pt I Text and Translation, ed S Mac Airt and G Mac Niocaill (Dublin, 1983) sa 651. All references to the Annals of Ulster [AU], will be cited by corrected year from this edition.
44 HE III.17, III.25; AU sa 660.
45 HE III.25, III.26, IV.4; AU sa 668.
46 Dumville, “Beowulf” and the Celtic world’, 110; Richter, Ireland and Her Neighbours, 103-104.
48 The most frequently-cited example is of the 12 Anglo-Saxon boys trained by Aidán (HE III.26). See also HE III.5, regarding Aidán ransoming captives/slaves, many of whom became his students.
49 Irish-trained Anglo-Saxon clergy named by Bede include: Utta, abbot of Gateshead, and his brother Adda, priest to the Middle Angles (HE III.15, III.21); Betti, another priest to the Middle Angles (HE III.21); Trumhere, bishop of the Mercians, the Middle Angles and the people of Lindsey (HE III.21, III.24); Cedd, bishop of the East Saxons and also the first native Anglo-Saxon bishop, consecrated in the mid-650s (HE III.21, III.22); Eata, abbot of Melrose, and of Lindisfarne after 664 (HE III.26); Cudda, who is recorded as living at Lindisfarne (he was Wilfrid’s master there), and who appears to have become abbot at some point after 664 (The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus: Text, Translation and Notes ed B Colgrave (Cambridge, 1927) 2; Bede, Vita Sancti Cuthberti auctore Beda ed and trans B Colgrave Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede’s Prose Life, Text Translation and Notes (Cambridge, 1940) 37). All references to the Vita Wilfridi [VW] and Bede’s Vita Sancti Cuthberti auctore Beda [BedeVCuth] will be cited by chapter from these editions. There are also others whom Bede specifically mentions as having spent time in monasteries in Ireland, such as Chad, bishop of York and then bishop of the Mercians and the people of Lindsey (HE III.28, IV.3), and Tuda, who briefly became bishop of the Northumbrians at Lindisfarne after Colmán (HE III.26).
Monasteries were founded by Irishmen, and the English continued to be pupils. They learned to read and write from the Irishmen: they were taught to read, write, and speak Latin; they were instructed in all aspects of Christian faith and learning by Irishmen; under the eye of Irish masters, they became scribes and illuminators of manuscripts, metalworkers, stonemasons, and so on. All aspects of Northumbrian (and Mercian) Christianity in the first generation will have been Irish, making due allowance of course for the non-Irish circumstances in which the missions operated.50

The education of the new Northumbrian clergy would also have involved the transmission of Irish Latin texts: bibles, prayer books, penitentials, martyrologies and saints’ Lives; works of exegesis and commentary, grammar and computistics.51 Indeed, during the seventh century, Ireland’s literary output was relatively strong, and many works probably found their way into Anglo-Saxon England via the activities of the Columban missionaries and other pilgrims.52 Specific studies have considered Irish influence on aspects of early Anglo-Saxon private prayer53 and on the writings of Bede himself.54 Part of the success of the Columbans in Northumbria may have been because, like the Anglo-Saxons, they came to Christianity as ‘barbarians’ and Latin was for them also a foreign language.55 Their pedagogical methods were probably more specifically attuned to the ‘barbarian’ mind, and they may have had a greater appreciation for the norms of a tribal society than the Roman missionaries.

Dumville, ““Beowulf” and the Celtic world”, 115. This is not to discount other influences: see Campbell, ‘Debt of the early English Church’, 340-342.

51 Bieler, ‘Ireland’s contribution’, 215-226; Bonner, ‘Ireland and Rome’, 101-116; Bullough, ‘Missions to the English and the Picts’, 87-88, 95-96; Dumville, ““Beowulf” and the Celtic world”, 118; Hughes, ‘Evidence for contacts’, 59-64, provide examples of particular texts. O’Neill, ‘Irish cultural influence on Northumbria’, 14-19, argues that the aim at this stage would have been to educate the native Northumbrian clergy as missionaries rather than scholars.


The influence of the mission from Iona extended beyond Northumbria, into Middle Anglia, Essex and Lindsey and also into Mercia after Penda’s defeat at the battle of Winwaed in 655.\(^{56}\) This was the period during which Oswiu was at the height of his authority, and thus most able to extend his control.\(^{57}\) The placement of clergy subordinate to Lindisfarne in these kingdoms was no doubt part of his political strategy.\(^{58}\) In the 650s, Irish clergy were consecrated as bishops by Finán of Lindisfarne, including Diuma, who became bishop of the Middle Angles, Mercians and the people of Lindsey, and his successor Ceollach,\(^{59}\) as were Irish-trained Anglo-Saxons such as Cedd, who became bishop of the East Saxons.\(^{60}\) Finán also baptised Peada, king of the Middle Angles,\(^{61}\) and Sigeberht II ‘the Saint’, king of the East Saxons.\(^{62}\) Perhaps, 20 years earlier, Oswald took Columban clergymen with him when he attended the baptism of Cynegils, king of the West Saxons.\(^{63}\)

It should be acknowledged that the Irish Christian presence in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms was not the exclusive province of Columban missionaries.\(^{64}\) There were Irish clergy abroad in Anglo-Saxon England prior to the kingship of Oswald and the arrival of Aidán in 634 who do not appear to have been associated with Iona. Bede speaks of an Irish bishop named Dagán travelling in southern Britain at the beginning of the seventh

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\(^{56}\) \textit{HE} III.24.


\(^{59}\) \textit{HE} III.21, III.24. Wulfhere, king of the Mercians c658–675, may also have granted land at Hanbury (Staffordshire) to an Irish abbot called Colmán. See H P R Finberg, \textit{The Early Charters of the West Midlands} (Leicester, 1972) 86 note 195. It should be noted that the Roman bishop Paulinus had also been active in Lindsey (\textit{HE} II.16).

\(^{60}\) \textit{HE} III.22.

\(^{61}\) \textit{HE} III.21.

\(^{62}\) \textit{HE} III.22.

\(^{63}\) \textit{HE} III.7. Bede does not mention any Columban clergy as being present at this event (in 635), giving prime place to the Roman bishop Birinus. There is also the possibility that Malmesbury in Wessex was founded by the Irish Maeldub. Bede renders Malmesbury as \textit{Maeldubi Urbs}, ‘city/town of Maeldub’ (\textit{HE} V.18), and Maeldub is included in an Old English list of saints’ resting places. See D W Rollason, ‘Lists of saints’ resting-places in Anglo-Saxon England’, \textit{Anglo-Saxon England} 7 (1978) 61–93, at p 65, 93.

century.\textsuperscript{65} Dagán refused to eat with Bishop Laurence of Canterbury and his fellow-bishops Mellitus and Iustus.\textsuperscript{66} It is quite likely that the Irish monk Fursa, who founded a monastery at \textit{Cnobheresburg} (Burgh Castle, Norfolk) in East Anglia, also came to Britain independently of the Columban mission.\textsuperscript{67} He is said by Bede to have left his native Ireland on pilgrimage with a few companions,\textsuperscript{68} arriving directly in East Anglia during the brief reign of Sigeberht, who came to the throne c630-631.\textsuperscript{69} Although contact may have been established at some stage with the Columban see at Lindisfarne, Fursa and his community at \textit{Cnobheresburg} seem to have had more direct ties with Irish communities on the Continent.\textsuperscript{70} The Irish cleric Rónán, who disputed with Bishop Finán in the 650s over the dating of Easter, is a further example: he had trained independently in Francia and Italy.\textsuperscript{71} Thus, the Irish in Anglo-Saxon England did not all come under the jurisdiction of Aidán and his successors at Lindisfarne, and there were doubtless other Irish communities too.

Nevertheless, the main point to be emphasised is that the Columban clergy from Iona possessed significant control over the \textit{formative} period of the Christian church in Northumbria, and beyond. As Dumville states,
formative influences are not such as are easily suppressed or allowed to disappear’.72 Thus, even though Northumbria was later exposed to other Christian conventions, particularly from the Roman south, the fundamental nature of Northumbrian Christianity will have been laid down during this Columban period. It is in this light that the Synod of Whitby will now be considered.

The Synod of Whitby and its aftermath

The most expansive and frequently-cited account of the Synod of Whitby,73 of 664, is in Bede’s Historia ecclesiastica,74 although the shorter version in Stephen of Ripon’s Life of Wilfrid, written c710-715, predates and was used by Bede.75 For Bede, the Synod represented the climax of a long-standing dispute in the north of Britain – ‘patiently tolerated’ while Bishop Aidán was alive – between Columban/Irish and Roman religious observances. These were primarily over the dating of Easter, but also over ‘other ecclesiastical matters’ such as the correct form of tonsure.76 Bede’s account has on one side of the debate Bishop Colmán and his Columban/Irish clergy, supported by Abbess Hild of Whitby and Bishop Cedd of the East Saxons, and on the other, Bishop Agilbert, lately of the West Saxons, supported by his priest Agatho, James the Deacon, Queen Eanflæd’s priest Romanus, Oswiu’s son Alfrith, sub-king of Deira, and Wilfrid, then abbot of Ripon, who spoke for Agilbert. Oswiu acted as adjudicator. Both cases were presented and, on the strength of the Petrine argument put forward by the Romanists, Oswiu decided in their favour. Bede was thus able to proclaim triumphantly that all there, ‘both high and low, signified their assent, gave up their imperfect rules, and readily accepted in their place those which they recognised to be better’.77

The Synod of Whitby has been the subject of much modern discussion, which will not be recounted here at any length. There are numerous works which have examined the calendrical arguments,78 the

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72 Dumville, “‘Beowulf’ and the Celtic world”, 116. See also Bradley, Celtic Christianity, 26; Cramp, ‘Northumbria and Ireland’, 185; Richter, Ireland and Her Neighbours, 104.
73 ‘Whitby’ is the later Scandinavian name for the monastery called Streanaeshalch, established c657 under Abbess Hild (HE III.24). The name Whitby is now used by convention to label the Synod, although the OE Streanaeshalch would be more accurate.
74 HE III.25.
75 VW 10.
76 Abels, ‘Council of Whitby’, 3; Smyth, Warlords and Holy Men, 119.
77 HE III.25.
matter of the correct tonsure,\textsuperscript{79} and the secular and ecclesiastical political dimensions of the debate.\textsuperscript{80} Most recent authors conclude that Bede exaggerated the importance of the Easter controversy in his presentation of the dispute, that as a ‘master computist’ he inflated this issue over others that were perhaps of less interest to him and less germane to his purposes.\textsuperscript{81} In this regard, the Synod tends no longer to be viewed as an ‘ecclesiastical end-game’ revolving solely around matters of correct Christian practice, but rather as a more complicated event that was as likely to have been convened for secular political as for religious reasons.\textsuperscript{82}

This is not to say that the Easter question, as well as the tonsure, was of no importance in seventh-century Britain; it would be wrong to conclude that these issues did not matter to people such as Colmán, Agilbert, Wilfrid and the other clergy of the day.\textsuperscript{83} The resurrection of Christ was (and is) the central tenet of the Christian religion. The Easter commemoration was, therefore, the most important feast of the Christian calendar, as well as being the date from which other significant holy days were calculated, such as Ash Wednesday and Palm Sunday.\textsuperscript{84} While the


\textsuperscript{81} Abels, ‘Council of Whitby’, 19; Foster, \textit{Picts, Gaels and Scots}, 90; Higham, \textit{Convert Kings}, 255-256; Kirby, \textit{Earliest English Kings}, 102-103. Both Abels (4-5, 12-13) and Higham (256) have argued that the Synod of Whitby is unlikely to have been called due to any immediate crisis over the date of Easter in 664, but rather was precipitated by political developments, including a growing antagonism between Alfrith and his father Oswiu, and, perhaps more importantly, Oswiu’s desire to play a role in deciding the new archbishop of Canterbury after Deusdedit’s untimely death in 664 due to plague (\textit{HE} IV.1).

\textsuperscript{82} Abels, ‘Council of Whitby’, 5, 12; Cowdrey, ‘Bede and the “English people”’, 510; Thacker, ‘Bede and the Irish’, 38.

\textsuperscript{83} Macquarrie, \textit{Saints of Scotland}, 161.
Roman see itself vacillated on the most accurate method of calculating Easter until the first half of the seventh century, during the second half of that century and into the eighth, the issue increasingly attracted accusations of schism. Aldhelm strongly implied as much regarding the bishops of Dumnonia in the 670s. Stephen of Ripon similarly accused the Irish and British clerics of being schismatics, and the Irish-trained clergy in Northumbria of belonging to the unorthodox ‘Quartodeciman party’. Irrespective of whether or not these particular labels were accurate, the fact still remains that such claims were made. As Kenneth Harrison states, irregular practices attracted an ‘odour of heresy’. The nature of the tonsure itself was not likely to have been sufficient grounds for schism – Ceolfrith, in his letter of c710 to king Nechtan of the Picts, regarded it as irrelevant to personal salvation – but rather came to be seen as the way one’s ecclesiastical allegiance was communicated.

It remains debatable, however, whether Oswiu, in making his decision at Whitby, was moved by the subtleties of the computistics that were presented to him, or was graced by a sudden and hitherto unlooked-for revelation concerning the errors of his own Columban upbringing. He may, rather, have realised that he could not afford to be labelled a schismatic by Rome if he wished to continue his imperium over an Anglo-Saxon south that was otherwise conforming to Roman practice. Also not to be ignored is the earlier dispute that Bede records as having occurred between Bishop Fínán and the itinerant cleric Rónán, both Irishmen, nor the concurrent disagreement over Easter that was being played out across the Irish Sea, between southern and northern Irish churches. The Easter controversy was not one which merely engaged Roman against Celt.

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87 VW 5.
88 VW 14; also VW 12.
89 For instance, Bede himself indicated that the Irish, in their calculation of Easter, were not Quartodecimans; that is, they did not celebrate the Resurrection on the actual day of the Jewish Passover (HE III.4, III.17). See also Bieler, ‘Ireland’s contribution’, 214; Thacker, ‘Bede and the Irish’, 38-39.
91 HE V.21.
94 HE III.25.
95 Harrison, ‘Episodes in the history of Easter cycles’, 307-319; Harrison, ‘Letter from Rome to the Irish clergy’, 222-229; Richter, Ireland and Her Neighbours,
Notwithstanding the reasons for which the Synod of Whitby was convoked, what is germane for the current examination is what resulted with regard to the Columban presence in Northumbria. As already indicated, the Synod has often been presented as the turning-point of Columban influence in Northumbria. Implicit in Oswiu’s decision in favour of the Roman party was his rejection of Iona’s jurisdiction in Northumbria and his acceptance of the hierarchy of the Roman Church. This means that any Columban clergy resident in Northumbria and its tributary regions would have been required to relinquish allegiance to the community of Iona and submit to papal authority, or leave. Thus, Bede says that when Bishop Colmán, Iona’s representative in Northumbria, ‘saw that his teachings were rejected and his principles despised’, he left his see. Together with ‘all the Irish he had gathered together on Lindisfarne … [and] about thirty English’, he travelled first to Iona and subsequently to Ireland, where he established a monastery on Inishbofin (County Mayo), later relocating the English contingent to the new site of Mag Eo on the Irish mainland, which became known as Mag Eo na Saxan [Mayo of the ‘Saxons’]. Colmán was the last bishop in Northumbria to hail from Iona and it is with him that Iona’s formal authority in Northumbria can be said to have ended; subsequent bishops and senior ecclesiastics were all Anglo-Saxons appointed from within an increasingly self-aware Anglo-Saxon church. Colmán’s immediate replacement was the Anglo-Saxon Tuda who, as Bede makes clear, had trained and been consecrated in southern (but not

204-216; Sharpe, Adomnán of Iona, 36-38; M Walsh, ‘Some remarks on Cumman’s Paschal Letter and the Commentary on Mark ascribed to Cummian’ 216-229 in Ni Chatháin and Richter, Irland und die Christenheit.


98 HE III.26. In this chapter, Bede appears to contradict his previous statement that all present at Whitby abandoned the older ways and adopted Roman practice (HE III.25). In HE III.28, he further tells that the ‘Irish [Scots]’ living among the Anglo-Saxons either conformed to Roman usages or returned home.

99 HE IV.4; AU sa 668, 732. Higham, Convert Kings, 259, has proposed that the clergy who left with Colmán were likely to have been senior men, as well as Colmán’s personal following of monks from Lindisfarne (keeping in mind that some of this community elected to remain). For a full, if slightly dated, account of the Anglo-Saxon monastery at Mayo, see N K Chadwick, ‘Bede, St Colmán and the Irish Abbey of Mayo’ 186-205 in N K Chadwick (ed), Celt and Saxon: Studies in the Early British Border (Cambridge, 1963). On Colmán’s initial foundation on Inishbofin, see Dumville, ‘Derry, Iona, England’, 104.
northern) Ireland, and specifically followed Roman custom. But Bede also talked of other Columban-trained Anglo-Saxon clerics who elected to remain in Northumbria. These clerics included: Chad, who followed Tuda as bishop to the Northumbrians (c665-669) when the see was temporarily relocated to York, and who subsequently became bishop to the Mercians; Cedd, who returned to his see amongst the East Saxons; Eata, formerly of Melrose, who became abbot of the reduced community of Lindisfarne in 664; Cuthbert, who followed Eata to become his prior at Lindisfarne; and Hild, who continued as abbess of Whitby until her death in 680.

Further, potentially more significant, changes to the ecclesiastical organisation of the erstwhile Columban north came with the arrival of Theodore as archbishop of Canterbury in 669. In church councils starting with the Synod of Hertford in 672, Theodore insisted on adherence to a reorganised diocesan structure, with bishops being required to keep to their own dioceses and clergy and monks being forbidden from wandering about without the permission of their superiors. This gives rise to speculation as to whether this last directive was targeted at Columban/Irish and Columban/Irish-trained *peregrini*. In addition, Theodore required that all clergy ordained by Columban or British bishops be reordained by a Catholic bishop. Similarly, churches consecrated by Columban/Irish clergy had to be reconsecrated. Arguably the most symbolic of these was Theodore’s rededication of the church on Lindisfarne in honour of St Peter, the very saint in whose name the Columban case at Whitby had been defeated. Lindisfarne had been the centre of the Columban church in

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100 *HE* III.26.
101 *HE* III.28, IV.3.
102 *HE* III.26.
103 *HE* III.26.
104 *HE* IV.27.
105 *HE* IV.23.
106 *HE* IV.1, IV.2. Bede refers to Theodore as ‘the first of the archbishops whom the whole English church consented to obey’: *HE* IV.2. He might thus be the first to be accurately labelled *archbishop*.
107 See *HE* IV.5. Hughes, ‘Evidence for contacts’, 52, notes that the councils of the southern Irish *Romani* that were held at roughly the same period attest to similar concerns.
108 Theodore, *Poenitentiale* II.ix.1: Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents III*, 197. See Hughes, ‘Evidence for contacts’, 52; Kirby, ‘Bede and the Pictish church’, 9; C Stancliffe, ‘The British church and the mission of Augustine’ 107-151 in R Gameson (ed), *St Augustine and the Conversion of England* (Stroud, 1999) at p 110. Chad, for example, was reordained (*HE* IV.2; *VW* 14, 15), as he had been created bishop by Wine, with the assistance of two British bishops (*HE* III.28): see Grimmer, ‘Bede and the Augustine’s Oak Conferences’, 117.
109 *HE* III.25.
Northumbria, and still possessed some of Aidán’s relics even after Colmán’s departure, and indeed was ruled by an abbot, Eata, who was appointed according to Colmán’s specific request.\textsuperscript{110} This rededication, perhaps more than any other, would have broadcast the new order that was being imposed in Northumbria.

Yet, despite the obvious changes to ecclesiastical governance that occurred in Northumbria after the Synod of Whitby, Columban influence would not have been completely eradicated. After 664 the Northumbrian Church was still substantially staffed by Columban-trained clergy.\textsuperscript{111} These clergy would have formed a significant post-Whitby Columban faction.\textsuperscript{112} Their acceptance of Roman authority and canonical practice would not automatically have extinguished their previous years of training.\textsuperscript{113} The continuation of existing practice can be glimpsed in Bede’s account, for example, when he reports Chad’s habit after becoming bishop of the Northumbrians of travelling on foot because he ‘sought to instruct his hearers in the ways and customs of his master [Aidán] and of his brother Cedd’\textsuperscript{114}. Admittedly, Archbishop Theodore later sought to amend Chad’s ways – encouraging him, for example, to travel on horseback as befitting a bishop\textsuperscript{115} – but this only serves to demonstrate the tenacity of the customs at the time. As Roman influence grew in Northumbria under Theodore and his successors, and under the resolutely partisan Romanist bishop Wilfrid,\textsuperscript{116} it might be supposed that the Columban flavour was gradually

\textsuperscript{110} HE III.26. Thacker, ‘Bede and the Irish’, 46, argues that Bede’s ‘careful’ mention of this piece of information attests to his continued respect for the Columbans and their contribution.

\textsuperscript{111} Bieler, ‘Ireland’s contribution’, 213-214; Dumville, “‘Beowulf’ and the Celtic world’, 115; Higham, Convert Kings, 256; Thacker, ‘Bede and the Irish’, 46-48. Sharpe, Adomnán of Iona, 96-97, also points out that even the Roman party at Whitby was hardly immune from Irish influence. Bishop Agilbert, for instance, had completed some of his training in Ireland (HE III.7), and Wilfrid had spent some of his early years being educated at Lindisfarne (HE V.19; VW 2).

\textsuperscript{112} Abels, ‘Council of Whitby’, 16, coined the phrase ‘post-Whitby “Irish” faction’; I have chosen to be more specific in my usage. A subsequent cohort of Columban-influenced bishops was appointed after the diocesan restructure of Northumbria and Lindsey in 678: Eadhæd, who had been a companion of Chad, became bishop of the people of Lindsey, and later bishop of Ripon (HE III.28, IV.12); Bosa, who had trained at Whitby where Abbess Hild presided, became bishop of Deira at York (HE IV.12); Eata, then abbot of Lindisfarne, became bishop of Bernicia probably at Hexham (HE IV.12). There was a further restructuring in the 680s. See Kirby, Earliest English Kings, 105-106, for a discussion of late seventh-century diocesan arrangements.

\textsuperscript{113} Richter, Ireland and Her Neighbours, 94.

\textsuperscript{114} HE III.28.

\textsuperscript{115} HE IV.3.

\textsuperscript{116} Wilfrid’s career is quite complicated. Suffice it to say that he enjoyed several stints as a bishop in Northumbria: c669-678, 685-692, 706-709. For a brief
watered down. But subsequent kings of Northumbria such as Aldfrith (685-705) maintained Dalriadan/Irish sympathies. Many of the essentials of Christian practice, the Easter calculation and the tonsure notwithstanding, may have continued without substantial alteration until the reforms of the tenth century.

It should also not be presumed that external communications between Northumbria and Dalriada and Ireland were irrevocably disrupted after Whitby. Granted, it is likely that Oswiu’s decision engendered some ill-will amongst the community of Iona, and amongst the cohort of ecclesiastics who accompanied Colmán to Inishbofin and Mag Eo. This might have resulted in the Columbans feeling the need to assert the authority of their own traditions and could have led to the development of a certain self-conscious ‘Columbanism’, especially within Colmán’s following who had chosen exile so as to maintain their independence. Indeed, it has been suggested that Abbot Cumméne’s (657-669) Liber de virtutibus Sancti Columbae was written soon after 664 as a reaction to the Columban defeat. This is the earliest known piece of hagiography about the saint. Thus, it is possible that there was a hiatus in contact with Iona,

Grimmer, ‘Exogamous marriages of Oswiu’. Ceolwulf (729-737) may also have had Dalriadan connections. In the Annals of Ulster (sa 731) he seems to have been known by the Irish name Eochaid, which implies some level of familiarity: ‘Eochaid’s [entry into] clerical life / Cuthwine’s son, king of the Saxons, is imprisoned’ [Clericatus Echdach / Filius Cuidini, rex Saxan constringitur]. This refers to the temporary deposition and tonsuring of Ceolwulf son of Cuthwine in 731. See Dunville, “‘Beowulf’ and the Celtic world’, 114; D P Kirby, ‘King Ceolwulf of Northumbria and the Historia Ecclesiastica’, Studia Celtica 14-15 (1979-1980) 168-173, at p 169.

Dunville, “‘Beowulf’ and the Celtic world’, 116. It might also be considered whether the Anglo-Saxon Cuthbert’s anchoritic tendencies were at all informed by his exposure to Columban training earlier in his career. On this issue, see Bullough, ‘Missions to the English and the Picts’, 94-95, who adds that ‘familiar thought-worlds and their forms of expression are only slowly and reluctantly abandoned for new ones’.

Bradley, Celtic Christianity, 5.

This passage is found inserted into Adomnán’s Life of Columba (VC III.5). The fragment principally concerns a prophecy of St Columba regarding Aedán mac Gabráin and his descendants, that they should never show hostility to Columba or his successors or his kin in Ireland, else they will be punished by God. See Sharpe, Adomnán of Iona, 357-359 note 360, for a full discussion of Abbot Cumméne’s book.

Higham, Convert Kings, 259; Smyth, Warlords and Holy Men, 121. J M Picard, ‘The purpose of Adomnán’s Vita Columbae’, Peritia 1 (1982) 160177, at p 173-175, also argued that Adomnán’s Vita Columbae was written (c700) in part as a reaction to Northumbrian attacks on St Columba.
although this was not long-lasting. Indeed, Adomnán visited Northumbria at least twice during Aldfrith’s kingship, first after Ecgfrith of Northumbria’s defeat in 685 at Dunnichen and then two years later. Apart from releasing the hostages captured during Ecgfrith’s raid on Brega in 684, it is possible that Adomnán travelled to Northumbria in the hope that links between Iona and Lindisfarne could be re-established. It had only been 20 years since the Synod of Whitby, so many of the monks who had lived there under Colmán would still have been alive, and indeed, Adomnán might have expected some support on this matter from his amicus Aldfrith. Adomnán’s presentation of his tract De locis sanctis, ‘The Holy Places’, to Aldfrith, with its laudatory preface in honour of the king, would certainly have been flattering, and Bede indicated that Aldfrith was well pleased with the book. In any event, re-association does not appear to have occurred.

According to Bede, Adomnán’s visit (he only knew of one) was of a different nature, more geared toward him observing ‘the canonical rites of the church’. In Bede’s rather partisan account, Adomnán was exhorted to abandon his incorrect observance of Easter by people more learned than himself, including Bede’s own abbot Ceolfrith, and was persuaded to adopt Roman custom. Bede goes on to say that Adomnán was unsuccessful in converting his own community on Iona to orthodox practice, but that he did manage to persuade most of the northern Irish churches to come into line. The final conversion of Iona was brought about in 716, several years after Adomnán’s death, by the Northumbrian cleric-in-exile Ecgberht. Adomnán’s involvement in the Easter dispute continues to be a matter of debate, but most scholarly opinion now has it that Bede’s account of Adomnán’s conversion and his subsequent actions, and his account of Ecgberht’s sojourn on Iona, were deliberately arranged and edited so as to demonstrate to his readers the primacy of the Anglo-Saxon church over the

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122 See Grimmer, ‘Exogamous marriages of Oswiu’.
123 As argued by Sharpe, Adomnán of Iona, 48.
124 VC II.46.
125 HE V.15. Bede provided an edited version of the tract in his Historia ecclesiastica (HE V.16, V.17), and was quite laudatory himself about Adomnán’s wisdom, learning and holiness. On De locis sanctis, see Macquarrie, Saints of Scotland, 163, and especially Sharpe, Adomnán of Iona, 47, 53-55.
126 HE V.15.
127 HE V.15. From the account in HE V.21, it appears that Adomnán did not abandon his form of tonsure.
128 HE III.4, V.22; AU sa 716.
129 Adomnán mentions the Easter dispute only once, and briefly (VC I.3), and then only regarding the churches of the Irish. See Bradley, Celtic Christianity, 19; Bullough, ‘Missions to the English and the Picts’, 92; Duncan, ‘Bede, Iona and the Picts’, 13-14, 35; Kirby, ‘Bede and the Pictish church’, 14-15; Picard, ‘Purpose of Adomnán’s Vita Columbae’, 164-165; Sharpe, Adomnán of Iona, 49.
Columbans. Bede was concerned with showing how Northumbria’s debt to Iona and to Ireland for promulgating the Christian faith was repaid in full by Adomnán’s change of heart while in Northumbria, and by Iona’s final conversion to Roman practice at the hands of Ecgberht. While there is no reason that Adomnán’s adoption of Roman practice should be seen as solely due to the efforts of Ceolfrith and the other Anglo-Saxon clerics he met, Bede’s account does reveal that some level of contact, however indirectly, must have persisted between Northumbria and Iona. And indeed, Bede’s report of Ecgberht’s death on Iona in 729 shows that he continued to have access to information from the island.

Adomnán was not the only abbot of Iona to travel to Northumbria after 664. According to the Chartres manuscript of the Historia Brittonum, Abbot Sléibíné (752-767) visited the monastery of Ripon at some point during his abbacy. While the precise reasons for his visit are unknown, it is said that during his stay he obtained information regarding the date of the Anglo-Saxon adventus. Sléibíné therefore appears to have had an interest in chronological and historical matters; Kathleen Hughes postulated that he might also have travelled to York, because at the time the school there was quite famous, with Alcuin becoming its master in 766. Alcuin’s correspondence reveals that other Irishmen came to York, including a teacher named Colcu and a student named Joseph, and Alcuin frequently

130 For example, Picard, ‘Purpose of Adomnán’s Vita Columbae’, 163-166; Macquarrie, Saints of Scotland, 163-164; Sharpe, Adomnán of Iona, 48-53.
132 Sharpe, Adomnán of Iona, 51-53, 76. Macquarrie, Saints of Scotland, 163, also states that, ‘It would be wrong to interpret Adomnán’s “conversion” as bowing to English cultural imperialism. Iona and its abbots were too self-confident for that, and it must be remembered that the Gaels and Picts had broken free of English political domination only three years before’.
133 HE V.22.
134 Duncan, ‘Bede, Iona and the Picts’, 39; Gardner, ‘Kentigern, Columba, and Oswald’, 20; D Ó Cróinín, ‘Early Irish annals from Easter-tables: a case restated’, Peritia 2 (1983) 74-86, at p 85. The manuscript was destroyed during World War II; the relevant section is reprinted by Ó Cróinín. Ó Cróinín suggested that the visit occurred early in Sléibíné’s abbacy.
135 According to Gardner, ‘Kentigern, Columba, and Oswald’, 1-7, 20, Jocelin’s twelfth-century Life states that St Kentigern had deposited St Columba’s crozier at Ripon. Gardner mentions the possibility that Sléibíné intended to visit Ripon in order to view this heirloom of his monastery’s patron, but this might be placing too much trust in this very late source.
136 Hughes, ‘Evidence for contacts’, 55.
met Irishmen when he was in Northumbria. That Sléibíne travelled to more places than Ripon while in Northumbria is possible.

There is further evidence of Irish clerics resident within Northumbria after 664. An Irish penitent named Adomnán was said by Bede to have been living in the double monastery of Coldingham in the early 680s; it was he who foretold its destruction by fire. According to Æthelwulf’s De abbatibus, composed in the early ninth century, an Irish scribe and illuminator called Ultán came to live at an unnamed monastery in the vicinity of Lindisfarne in the early eighth century; he may have been recruited to be master of the scriptorium there. Beyond Northumbria, an Irish monk named Dícuill was mentioned by Bede as heading a very small monastery of five or six brothers at Bosham in Sussex, c680. At a similar time, Aldhelm remarks in his letter to Heahfrith that Archbishop Theodore was ‘hemmed in by a mass of Irish students’; doubtless they came to study with this master from Greece, and with his colleague Hadrian, probably at the school in Canterbury. Kathleen Hughes also makes mention of Irish clerics apparently living in Mercia in the late eighth and early ninth centuries.

Anglo-Saxon clerics continued to travel to Ireland after 664. Bede’s statement that Anglo-Saxon students journeyed to Ireland is supported by

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137 Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistola IV no 7, 31-33. Hughes, ‘Evidence for contacts’, 56. Colcu appears to have been in York in 790.

138 HE IV.25.

139 Æthelwulf’s De abbatibus, §viii ed A Campbell (Oxford, 1967) 18-19. See also Campbell, ‘Debt of the early English Church’, 344-345; Cramp, ‘Northumbria and Ireland’, 198; Hughes, ‘Evidence for contacts’, 56; L Nees, ‘Ultán the scribe’ 104-105 in R M Spearman and J Higgitt (ed), The Age of Migrating Ideas: Early Medieval Art in Northern Britain and Ireland (Edinburgh, 1993); Richter, Ireland and Her Neighbours, 107-108, 145-146. There is a slim possibility that this unnamed monastery was an Anglo-Saxon house in Ireland, but the consensus in the literature places it near Lindisfarne.

140 HE IV.13. One might speculate as to his relationship, if any, with the Dícuill who was with Fursa in East Anglia (HE III.19). For more information on Fursa and Bosham, see Campbell, ‘Debt of the early English Church’, 334-335, 338.


143 HE III.27. In this chapter, Bede tells us that there were ‘many English [de gente Anglorum], both nobles and commoners, who, in the days of Bishops Finán and Colmán, had left their own country and retired to Ireland’. It is unlikely that they
Aldhelm’s letter to Heahfrith and by another to Wihtfrith.144 Aldhelm’s letters show that the practice persisted into the last quarter of the seventh century, in spite of his strong disapproval.145 This retreat to Ireland for learning was by no means unusual in the seventh and eighth centuries: Ireland was a destination for students from the Continent as well.146 Anglo-Saxons not only sought education in Ireland, but also established monasteries there, at Mayo for example, as mentioned earlier.147 According to Bede, Mayo was explicitly established as an Anglo-Saxon house, with Colmán moving his Anglo-Saxon brethren there from Inishbofin after a dispute with his Irish monks.148 Mayo continued to be staffed by Anglo-Saxons ‘gathered there from the English provinciae’ into the eighth century, when it was said by Bede to have ‘adopted a better Rule’.149 Presumably this should be taken to mean that, despite its foundation as a Columban community, it eventually conformed to Roman observance. Mayo grew in status to become an episcopal see, which by 786 was subject to York.150 In that year, Ealdwulf was consecrated bishop of the church of Mayo by Archbishop Eanbald of York at Corbridge (Northumberland).151 Clearly, Mayo did not long remain some isolated cell of Northumbrian exiles, but came to participate fully in the ecclesiastical order of Anglo-Saxon

would have felt any need to rush home after they had heard the verdict of the Synod of Whitby.


145 The letter to Heahfrith shows Aldhelm in fine form, tendentiously arguing for the merits of an Anglo-Saxon education over an Irish one. T M Charles-Edwards, ‘Language and society among the Insular Celts 400-1000’ 703-736 in M J Green (ed), The Celtic World (London, 1995) at p 726, argues that at Aldhelm’s level ‘issues of scholarly and national prestige came together’. See also Lapidge and Herren, Aldhelm: The Prose Works, 143-146, for a discussion of this letter.

146 See for example James, ‘Ireland and western Gaul’, 362-386; Richter, Ireland and Her Neighbours, 137-156; Thacker, ‘Bede and the Irish’, 59.

147 Bede states that some of the Anglo-Saxons in Ireland ‘devoted themselves faithfully to the monastic life, while others preferred to travel around the cells of various teachers and apply themselves to study’: HE III.27.

148 HE IV.4.

149 Bede tells us that Mayo was still occupied by Anglo-Saxon monks in his time: HE IV.4. Indeed, AU sa 732, records the death of its bishop, Gerald, who was English.


151 Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia, Volume II ed T Arnold (London, 1882-1885) sa 786. The Historia Regum [HR] is cited by year from this edition. Eadwulf was also present at a provincial church council at York later in the same year, where he subscribed to decrees put forward by the papal legate George, bishop of Ostia, and his assistant, Wigbod (Haddan and Stubbs, Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents III, 460). See also Charles-Edwards, ‘Language and society’, 706; Hughes, ‘Evidence for contacts’, 51.
England, evidence again of continuing contact between Britain and Ireland. Alcuin, who wrote to Ealdwulf’s predecessor Leudfrith (c773-786), and to the ‘peregrini of the Church of Mayo’ (c793-804), regarded Mayo as a flourishing Anglo-Saxon community, and the monastery only drops out of the written record in the Viking period. Other communities in Ireland contained Anglo-Saxon monks, such as Rath Melsigi (Clonmelsh, County Carlow) where Ecgberht studied, and Tulach Leis na Saxan (Tullylease, County Cork); further locations are likely in Munster and at Armagh.

**Conclusion**

It can be shown that Northumbria and the Irish Christian world, including Columban Iona, were not cut off from one another after the Synod of Whitby. The changes to ecclesiastical organisation in Anglo-Saxon England brought about in the years after the Synod, especially by Archbishop Theodore, would have helped promote Roman orthodoxy. But this should not be taken to mean that there was an Irish or Columban ban in Anglo-Saxon England after 664. Northumbria and the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms remained attractive to Irish monks, as did Ireland to the Anglo-Saxons. Irish and Columban influences continued to reach Northumbria in the late seventh and eighth centuries, if less directly, and Northumbrian literate culture would still have been characterised by its substantial Columban/Irish flavour developed prior to the events at Whitby. Kathleen Hughes concluded that the seventh and eighth centuries were ‘the time of greatest mutual influence’ between the Irish and

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152 See *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistola* IV no 2, 19, for the letter to Leudfrith, and *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistola* IV no 287, 445-446, for the letter to Mayo. See also Chadwick, ‘Bede, St Colmán and the Irish Abbey of Mayo’, 191; Hughes, ‘Evidence for contacts’, 51-52. In the second letter, Alcuin talks of the regular contact which he had with the community via the monks who visited him.


155 See Hughes, ‘Evidence for contacts’, 53; Richter, *Ireland and Her Neighbours*, 147-148. O’Brien, ‘Contacts between Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England’, 93-102, has drawn attention to a number of ‘intrusive’ male and female burials broadly datable to the sixth and seventh centuries that do not conform to normal mortuary practice within early medieval Ireland. The burials contain features which are consistent with pagan or very early Christian Anglo-Saxon practice. In Bede’s time there was also an Anglo-Saxon monk named Hæmgils ‘living in solitude in Ireland’: *HE* V.12.


Anglo-Saxon churches.\textsuperscript{158} In the north, this influence was largely the result of the efforts of the Columban missionaries from Iona and the foundations laid down during the Columban period, c634-664. Even Bede, a Romanist who sought edification in the rule of orthodoxy, could not fail to comment on the debt owed by the Northumbrian church to the community of Iona and the Irish nation, who had ‘willingly and ungrudgingly taken pains to communicate its own knowledge and understanding of God to the English nation’.\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{158} Hughes, ‘Evidence for contacts’, 67.
\textsuperscript{159} HE V.22.