Monasticism and Myth: The Conceptualization of Celtic Christianity

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Abstract

Early sources for Celtic Christianity, such as the Venerable Bede, gives one the impression that a unified Celtic Church opposed Roman Christianity among the British Isles. Recently, Mark Williams and Tomás Ó Cathasaigh have highlighted the significant cultural contributions of Celtic culture and literature to the emerging Christianity. Meanwhile, Bernhard Maier argues that the modern notion of a Celtic Christianity originated in a lack of familiarity with the blended Christian and Pagan traditions that was common throughout early Christian traditions in Ireland. This social narrative of a Celtic Christianity is also supported by the concept of a perceived "cultural nationalism" (biased both for and against Celtic Christianity).

This paper examines the question of whether Roman Christianity confronted a unified Celtic Christianity in the early Medieval period, focusing on the Celtic realm. To assess this unity, the paper explores the cultural importance of written narrative for Celtic societies, the social effect of Celtic monasticism, and analyzes the theory that Celtic Christianity coalesced into a unified Church that could oppose the Roman Church. The paper argues that while the development of literary narratives and the rise of monasticism in Celtic societies contributed

significantly to the growth of a non-Roman Christianity in the region, evidence is lacking for a unified "Celtic Church" in the early Medieval period.

Keywords: Christianity, Celtic, Monasticism, Medieval

During the early Medieval period, monasteries in Ireland, Scotland, and northern Britain developed their own religious interpretations and traditions that were inconsistent with Roman Christianity. This division in religious traditions fostered the theory of a "Celtic Church" that functioned in a religious and political opposition to the Roman Church. This paper argues that while the development of literary narratives and the rise of monasticism in Celtic societies contributed significantly to the growth of a non-Roman Christianity in the region, evidence is lacking for a unified "Celtic Church" in the early Medieval period.

In Late Antiquity, Ireland's tribal culture had a unique writing system and a distinct appreciation of history and oral traditions. This culture of knowledge can be connected directly to the *Filid.* The *Filid*[i] were historians and poets who maintained an oral history of the tribes of Ireland. Poets had immense political agency within Ireland and Scotland, with the most accomplished *filid* ranking above tribal warriors and serving as councilmen to kings. This culture of respect to poets and those who could pass down religious beliefs through oral traditions means that even before Christianity was brought to the Celtic world, there was a culture of appreciation for the recording of narratives. This oral tradition was an essential part of Irish culture and resulted in a pre-Christian cultural community that prioritized learning, priming it for the evolution of monasticism. The linear script of Early Ireland, Ogham, became more widespread by the Middle Ages.[ii] By this time, Ogham was utilized by Irish monks to make

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glosses within the margins of their Latin texts, leaving bits of proverbial wisdom[iii] or even small comments about the scribe's day.[iv] These Ogham glosses prove that, while Christianity became the avenue for access to education in Ireland, the traditional modes of writing persisted.[v]

Christianity was likely present in the Celtic world among early British slaves and their descendants beginning in the early 400s; there is also a chance of early converts existing in small communities in areas that had been exposed to Roman Britain. Historian B. W. O'Dwyer argues that the original work of missionaries "…was that of conversion, establishing bishops, churches, and the seeds of monasticism, but with the preservation of the indigenous traditions… Early Christian Ireland came to represent a unique amalgamation of Latin Christianity and pagan Celtic society and culture."[vi] Since the region lay beyond Rome's borders, it lacked a traditional hierarchy with a bishop, resulting in church communities centered around monasteries.

The earliest missionaries to Ireland were Roman Christians, but during the sixth and seventh century Irish monks conducted intense missions to Scotland and Northern Britain. Of these missionaries, one of the most recognized was Saint Columba (or Saint Columban). Almost all early missionary accounts from Ireland have been lost. What we do know is that St. Columba was an Irish missionary who established the monastery at Iona and helped to convert Scotland and much of northern England. He did not leave any written monastic rules, however one was attached to him in the later medieval age, and certain passages associated with him reflect the spirit of early Irish monasticism. The 7th century account of the *Life of Saint Columba* by a monk known as Jonas attests to these efforts.[vii] The monastic rule later attributed to *Columba*, "Three

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labours in the day, viz., prayers, work, and reading," reflects the cultural importance of education previously seen in early Irish culture that was now being spread.[viii]

The exponential growth of the Celtic monastic tradition during the early Middle Ages marks the expansion of Celtic culture. Due to Irish-trained missionaries, O'Dwyer writes, "For this brief period of the second half of the sixth and the first half of the seventh century a resurgent Celtdom was the culturally dominant expansionist force."[ix] These Irish missions produced several non-Roman monasteries across Ireland, Scotland, and on the European continent. This spread of "Celtic Christianity" was specifically noted by the production of illuminated manuscripts, which O'Dwyer has further written were "an expression of the Celtic culture [and its Celtic-Irish monasteries]…and take their meaning from, that religious cultural entity, since it was the monastic church that had the monopoly of manuscript illumination."[x] The pre-Christianity Celtic respect for oral tradition plus the new influence of monasticism meant that the region's written sources from the early Middle Ages were created through the collaboration of both monastic churches and secular orders of learning. Illuminated manuscripts, such as the Book of Kells, represent the beginning of "early Irish narrative literature," in the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries, however much of it may owe "to the vigorous oral tradition which not only preceded it but continued unabated alongside, and that the creation and survival of that literature show that the early Irish churchmen were not only open to, but deeply involved in, the extra-ecclesiastical lore of their country."[xi] Yet these manuscripts and the monasteries that produced them do not establish that there was "Celtic Church." Still, the cultural traditions of the Celtic world that were intertwined with Christianity in this region led to further cultural separation from Roman Christianity.

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The history of Christianity in Celtic countries is one that is rich in religious and cultural importance, especially in how it evolved separately from Rome. The more communal hierarchical structure, greater focus on art and literature, and difference in liturgical traditions gave Celtic Christianity a distinct culture. Yet, these liturgical traditions (such as a different calendrical date for Easter) soon clashed with the Roman Christian tradition. This clash sparked the call by King Oswy of Northumbria for a synod at the monastery of Whitby in 664 CE. There, delegates from both the Celtic and Roman traditions defended their liturgical calendars.

We only have two primary sources directly discussing the Synod of Whitby (600s CE): *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* by The Venerable Bede[xii] (written sometime between 720 and 730) and *The Life of Wilfrid* by Stephen of Rippon.[xiii] Bede wrote with a religious agenda, and his bias towards the religious superiority of the English Church as the successor to Rome is a strong undertone throughout his writing. He focuses on the arguments put forth by both the Bishop Wilfrid and Bishop Colman.[xiv]

Bishop Wilfrid is intent on reestablishing the primacy of Romanized Christianity over the Celtic Christianity spread by Irish missionaries. "A major aim of the Ecclesiastical History is to show the superiority of the English Church over the Celtic, and it is understandable that the monks of Iona should be described as ignorant and unlearned, and certainly stubborn if not verging on the heretical…"[xv] Asserting Rome's authority derives from the apostle Peter, Wilfrid bases his argument on the doctrine of apostolic succession, or the divine line of teachings and religious power that is continued through the office of the Pope.[xvi] Bishop Colman argues from the Celtic tradition of Saint Columba but seems to put forth a less compelling argument than Wilfrid (Bede gives Wilfrid two long sections for his debate against Colman's one short section).

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This disparity in textual time allotted to the bishop's arguments supposes that anything outside of the Roman tradition is erroneous. The text gives the impression that the Celtic tradition defended by Colman has no real argument against the Roman liturgical tradition, a reflection of Bede's bias. By the 600s, Irish missionaries were moving across Europe, bringing their liturgical traditions with them; it is probable to assume that these traditions were being taught across Ireland, Scotland, and the European continent and that such traditions, especially ones formed within a monastic system, should have substantial evidence for their continued teaching. Yet, there is no evidence to be found. The lack of other surviving sources makes it difficult to discern if the monasteries of Ireland and Scotland complied with the decisions of King Oswy as quickly as Wilfrid assert that Colman does.

The Synod of Whitby was a pivotal moment in the evolution of Christianity in the Celtic world.[xvii] The liturgical traditions of Celtic Christianity and the differences in religious practices were a cultural threat to the Roman Church and, as Nick Ratkay states, "By implementing the Roman liturgical rite throughout the British Isles, the dissident Celtic church was brought into communion with Rome and mainstream Christianity."[xviii] It is likely through Bede's interpretation of the Synod of Whitby that the idea of an opposing "Celtic Church" which stood against the Roman Church was further conceptualized. However, the decision made by King Oswy at the Synod of Whitby effectively supported Bede's interpretation and, starting in the 600s, invited the Roman Church to extend a more aggressive level of influence over Celtic monasteries. Bede's projection of the political power of a "Celtic Church" combined with the lack of immediate primary sources about the conversion of Ireland and Scotland to Christianity have resulted in a vague, almost mystical nature to the evolution of Christianity within the

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Celtic world. The lack of textual evidence has likely added to the mythos of a decisive "Celtic Christianity" that was a strong religious and political force against Roman Christianity.

The tradition of appreciation for literature, both written and oral, was an intrinsic part of the Celtic world and was greatly influential in the evolution of monasticism within Ireland and Scotland. "[This region produced] a society which had two sets of cultural institutions, one indigenous, and oral in its medium, the other ecclesiastical and literate."[xix] The evolution of illuminated manuscripts was significant in preventing a complete lack of written works from the early Middle Ages and encouraged religious and cultural growth within a successful conversion structure, even without the influence of Rome. While manuscripts such as the Book of Kells and the Life of Saint Columba illustrate Celtic culture, they do not offer full evidence of a "Celtic Christianity."[xx] There were marked differences in early Roman Christian and Celtic Christian practices., and Celtic Christianity continued to evolve and change after the Synod of Whitby, however increasing Viking raids followed by a series of Synods in the 1000s continued to bring Celtic Christianity in line with Roman Christianity. Ultimately, there was never a unified "Celtic Church" that stood in equal opposition against the Roman Church; it was the cultural and religious traditions created within the Celtic world that were a threat to the control and legacy of the Roman Church.[xxi]
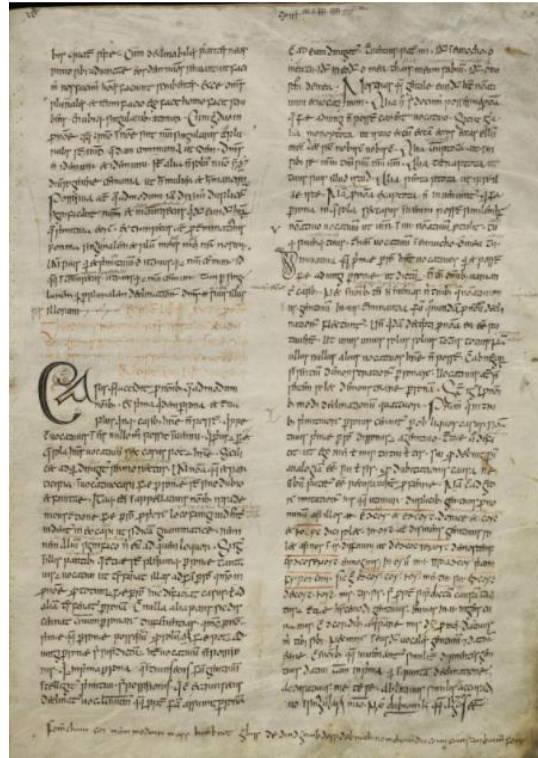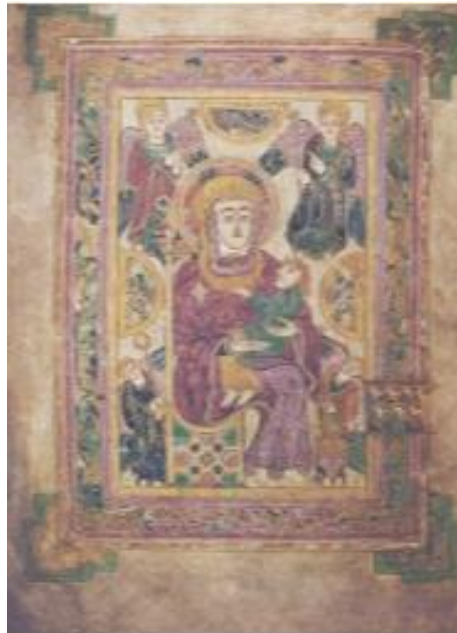
Appendix

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

i *Fili,* plural *filid* In Old Irish. *Filidh,* plural *filidhean* in Scottish Gaelic. *Feelee* in Manx Gaelic. For the sake of continuity in the paper, the Old Irish *fili* will be used to reference this class of poets in a general sense.

ii Early traces of Ogham have been found scratched into standing stones. By the Middle Ages, Gearóid Trimbles notes: "…The Ogham alphabet was later embraced by… some of the learned class of the Irish church, as its own self-confidence, sense of identity and international influence greatly increased from the sixth century onwards." (Gearóid Trimble, "OGHAM GLEANINGS FROM AN IRISH MANUSCRIPT IN THE SWISS CITY OF ST GALLEN." *History Ireland* 21, no. 5 [2013]: 16-18). Accessed December 4, 2020. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41988318.

iii Figure 2. Chronicled for the year 1193, is a Latin inscription in Ogham letters: 'Numus honoratur / sine numo nullus amatur' ("Money is honored, without money nobody is loved").

iv McManus notes, about Figure 2, "The [definition] together with other contexts shows the basic meaning to be 'excessive ale consumption' with the logical extensions 'excessive drunkenness' and 'massive hangover', the last probably the meaning intended in the Priscian Oghams. Damian McManus, A Guide to Ogham, Maynooth Monograph 4 (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1991), 133.

v When academics first point to the ancient law texts of Ireland being written down in the 600s, while they are mostly anonymous, there is evidence that suggests that "the early Irish law texts were written in a context of cooperation between ecclesiastics and lay academics, which also included the involvement of practicing members of the legal profession." This evolution of cooperation between both learned members of lay cultural traditions and ecclesiastics traditions (likely members of monasteries) was made possible because of initial respect afforded

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to the cultural traditions of Ireland and other Celtic countries when the Christian church first attempted to gain a presence in them. "Early Irish Literature and Law (2006–7)." In *Coire Sois, The Cauldron of Knowledge: A Companion to Early Irish Saga*, edited by BOYD MATTHIEU, by CATHASAIGH TOMÁS Ó, 121-30. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014. Accessed December 2, 2020. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvpj7bnr.15. 125.

vi B. W. O'Dwyer, "Celtic-Irish Monasticism and Early Insular Illuminated Manuscripts", in *The Journal of Religious History*. Vol 15, no 4, December 1989. 426.

vii "Rule of Saint Columba". A. W. Haddan and W. Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland* II, i (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1873), pp. 119-121.

viii Ibid, 119-121.

ix B. W. O'Dwyer, "Celtic-Irish Monasticism and Early Insular Illuminated Manuscripts", in *The Journal of Religious History*. Vol 15, no 4, December 1989, 435.

x IBID, 426. The continuing religious importance of these illuminated manuscripts is heavily supported by the modern social fascination with the Lindisfarne Gospels, The Book of Kells, and the Book of Durrow. "…it has long been supposed that this genre of illuminated manuscripts is the product of a Celtic-Irish religious culture." IBID, 427.

xi "Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative (1984)." In *Coire Sois, The Cauldron of Knowledge: A Companion to Early Irish Saga*, edited by BOYD MATTHIEU, by CATHASAIGH TOMÁS Ó, 35-50. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014. Accessed December 3, 2020. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvpj7bnr.10. Page 40.

xii Access to all five books can be found through the following website: http://www. fordham.edu/halsall/basis/bede-book1.html.

xiii Written around 710 CE. Rippon was also identified as Eddius Stephanus.

xiv Colman is the successor of the successor of Finan, who was the successor of Bishop Aidan, who preached in accord with the liturgical traditions of Columba.

xv B. W. O'Dwyer, "Celtic-Irish Monasticism and Early Insular Illuminated Manuscripts", in *The Journal of Religious History*. Vol 15, no 4, December 1989. 429.

xvi Saint Peter is envisioned in Christianity as being the first pope and having received from Jesus a direct position of religious command, the papcy and his teaching passed on through the papcy are seen as directed passed down from Jesus. The papacy was created and organized as being the physical presentation of the Christian Church and faith.

xvii "The strategic placement of the Synod of Whitby in the Ecclesiastical History suggests that Bede viewed the adoption of Roman practice as a climax or turning-point in the history of the English and Irish churches." Nick Ratkay, "The Synod of Whitby", in *Obsculta*, Vol 1, No 1: 39-43. May 1, 2008. https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol1/iss1/20. 40.

xviii IBID, 39.

xix "Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative (1984)." In *Coire Sois, The Cauldron of Knowledge: A Companion to Early Irish Saga*, edited by BOYD MATTHIEU, by CATHASAIGH TOMÁS Ó, 35-50. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014. Accessed December 3, 2020. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvpj7bnr.10. Page 50.

xx "...The eleventh and twelfth centuries witnessed a series of reforms and innovations in the Irish church, which brought ecclesiastical structures in ever-closer line with developments in Britain and on the continent." Bernhard Maier, "Gaelic and Catholic in the Early Middle Ages." In *Irish Catholic Identities*, edited by RAFFERTY OLIVER P., 21-31. Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2013. Accessed December 3, 2020. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt18mbf11.6. 23.

xxi Some modern academics believe that the recent refocusing on the idea of a united "Celtic Christianity" has come from concepts such as modern nationalism. Maier comments, "...It may also be attributed to a corresponding lack of familiarity with early Christian traditions among the general public... Moreover, ideas about a distinctly Irish (or 'Celtic') spirituality have been closely related to a kind of cultural nationalism, prevalent during most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which was hardly conducive to a dispassionate and critical sifting of the evidence." Bernhard Maier, "Gaelic and Catholic in the Early Middle Ages." In *Irish Catholic Identities*, edited by RAFFERTY OLIVER P., 21-31. Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2013. Accessed December 3, 2020. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt18mbf11.6. 26-27.

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Figure 1. 5th - 7th century CE. Ogham Stone, View: located on the driveway to the Colaiste Ide

    School. https://library-artstor-

    org.excelsior.sdstate.edu/asset/CANYONLIGHTS_DB_10312430148.

Figure 2: Priscian, Institutiones grammaticae, Ninth century Ireland. Translater unknown.

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Found in Damian McManus, *A Guide to Ogham*, Maynooth Monograph 4 (Maynooth: An

Sagart, 1991), 133.

Figure 3. ca. 760-820.. Gospel Book (Book of Kells), fol. 7v .. Place: Dublin: Lib., Trinity

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