

A Church of Two Halves:

*A Search for Unity in the British Isles
from the Fifth to Seventh Centuries*

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This dissertation is the result of my own work. Material from the published or unpublished work of other historians used in the dissertation is credited to the author in the footnote references. The dissertation is approximately 9,750 words in length.

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Abstract

This dissertation will look at the development of the Church in the British Isles from the fifth to seventh Centuries, through the case study of Monasticism.

Monasticism is a good case study as not only are there primary source documents, something rare for this period. But, monasticism also involves a social/ cultural aspect of history. In some cases the history of the Church can be insular, but the case study of monasticism introduces a breadth of historiography otherwise not available. One of the main threads in the historiography concerns

itself with the structure of both the Roman and Celtic Churches. This dissertation will look at the structures of the Roman and Celtic Churches up until the Synod of Whitby in 664. The Synod of Whitby was said to have taken place to help forge unity between the two separate Churches particularly over the question of Easter, the Sacrament of Baptism, and the style of tonsure. The dissertation will look at the first missions to England and Ireland, and examine whether a lack of Roman occupation in Ireland changes the structure of the Irish Church compared to the English/Roman model. This dissertation will then go on to explain whether the Synod of Whitby's sole goal was to solve ecclesiastical issues to mend the bridge between the two Churches, or whether the Synod was called under the pretences of more political motives.

Introduction

This dissertation examines the development and characteristics of male and female monasticism in the British Isles between the fifth and seventh centuries. In 410, the Roman soldiers departed Britain, leaving behind Roman structure and systems which had an enduring influence. While England is said to have reverted back to pagan origins, aided by the Anglo-Saxon invasions, Augustine and his mission to Canterbury in 565, were easily able to incorporate and develop old Roman structures. Conversely, Ireland had never been part of the Roman Empire and therefore did not have governing and administrative systems associated with Roman Christianity. This dissertation looks at how having, or lacking, old Roman systems changes the direction, character, and development of monasticism.

Chapter One, considers Augustine and, his mission, and whether the introduction of a Roman mission created a Roman Church in Britain, or whether the invasion of the Anglo-Saxons establish a distinctively English Church. The chapter traces the formation of this mission and the many “monastic

enterprise[s]” and rules that stem from the establishment of Roman Church.

Discussion on the institution of the double monastery is given, as an example, to show the factors that affected the development of the early Church in this period. Chapter Two, examines how Christianity was brought to Ireland, the system of administration used, and the effect that Celtic Christianity had upon the British Isles. This is portrayed through the distinctive feature in Celtic monasticism of *peregrinatio* and *paurchia*, made possible due to lack of administrative structures in place. Chapter Three concludes the discussion through an examination of the Synod of Whitby in 664. The Synod of Whitby was held, as discussed by Bede, to deal with ecclesiastical matters such as the dating of Easter, the Sacrament of Baptism, and the style of tonsure. The Synod of Whitby is an interesting event to use as a case study for two reasons. One reason is because the Synod of Whitby served the political motives of the Northumbrian king behind an ecclesiastical mask. Secondly, while the Synod of Whitby focused on seemingly minor issues, this was a gateway for the reorganization and reformation of both the Celtic and Roman Churches.

Explaining the development and characteristics of male and female monasticism in the British Isles between the fifth and seventh centuries is a very significant task. The decision to focus on the development of monasticism, instead of the Church as whole, was so an in-depth and rich understanding of the Church maybe received, instead of a vague understanding of the institution of the as a whole. Although, while historians have looked at aspects of this question, it is

difficult to undertake an in-depth discussion on the matter. This is due to problems surrounding the reliability of sources. Nonetheless, there is a selection of primary sources that relate to this question and can help us infer the main aspects and influences in the development of monasticism.

A major primary source that can help answer this research question is that of the numerous hagiographies available. Hagiographies are an important source as they highlight the important issues and chart the progression of the Church, as well as displaying concepts of sanctity and power structures that are important aspects of monasticism. Biographies on ‘The Lives of the Saints’ can be valuable sources to use as case studies. Andre Vauches calls monasteries “Nurseries of Saints”¹, as saints not only came from, and more often than not founded, monasteries. It was also the job of monks at the monasteries to continue the cult of the saint after his death.² The use of hagiographies as a credible source is surrounded by historical debate about how they are to be used. Andre Vauchez comments that many hagiographies have a similar narrative framework³. He suggests this is because saints were part of the Christian ideal of striving to be perfect like Christ, in image and likeness.⁴ The hagiographies reflect this goal/ambition. For example; the use of the gospels, the healing of the sick, and raising people from the dead, just as Jesus did, are all apart of the

¹ Andre Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrel (New York: University of Cambridge Press, 1997), 18.

² Ibid

³ Ibid, 147.

⁴ Andre Vauchez, “The Saint”, in *Medieval Callings*, eds. Jacques Le Goff, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (London and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 313.

hagiography framework. Vauchez confirms the idea that hagiography is like a type of historiography, as the writing and development of saint's lives within a temporal framework shows the societal view of sanctity throughout the centuries.⁵ The works of Bede and Gildas, primary authors of this period, have often come under the same critique as the hagiographies. For example, Bede's credibility issues stem not only from him being an author of hagiographies, but his credibility of primary sources, and the way *Ecclesiastical History* is written, is very similar to the framework of hagiographies.

Beyond the primary sources, the historiography of the development of the Christianity in the British Isles is drawn in from many areas. Alexander Walsham argues that an area of "sustained research" is on the buildings, furniture, and landscape of the British Isles to explain the development of Christianity.⁶ The reason Walsham argues for this approach to research is, not only does it supplement primary written records, but that landscape is also part of an economic, social and cultural backdrop.⁷ This type of historiography can be viewed as a bridge between the primary source and scholarly output.

Within the study of history, historiographical themes and ideas develop over time. The discussion of women in the institution of the Church/monasticism has

⁵ Ibid, 313.

⁶Alexander Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, & Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3-4.

⁷ Ibid, 6.

thus witnesses change. Feminist scholars inserted and acknowledged women and their role in the Church. Stephanie Hollis, John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank, Helen Jewell, and Henrietta Leyser are influential scholars in the 1980's and 1990's who paved the way for more scholarship on women in the Church to be part of the historiographical discussion. Recent scholarship always incorporates women and their role in the Church. However, they are often no longer the centre of discussion.

While this dissertation looks particularly at Christianity, it also considers the theme of a new nation developing and entrenching its identity. Leopold Von Ranke was an advocate of history being discussed inside of a national framework.⁸ Simon Schama and Hugh Kearney discuss the advantages and disadvantages of framing history within a national approach.⁹ Kearney argues that while historians may believe they are discussing a history of 'Britain,' there is often a specific nation centred within their studies.¹⁰ My own study is an example of this. While the title of this dissertation says 'development of monasticism in the British Isles', I am particularly looking at England and Ireland. My use of the term 'British Isles' refers to an overarching area which was not strictly defined by borders. I chose the case studies of England and Ireland, and excluded Scotland and Wales, because they are the key figures within the early development of the British Church.

⁸ Hugh Kearny, *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations*, 2nd ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1.

⁹ A theme in both of their books; Simon Schama, *A History of Britain: At the Edge of The World BC3000-AD 1603* (London: The Bodley Head, 2000); Hugh Kearny, *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations*, 2nd ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Kearny, *The British Isles*, 1.

However, one of the disadvantages of focusing on the history of a single national identity leads to assumptions of national myths and ideologies.¹¹

Kearny also asserts that a single national history, as proposed by Von Ranke, is an easy and tidy way for the historian to section his work.¹² Indeed, scholarship framed around the concept of nation still has its place as this provides opportunity for focused study. For example, *British Civilisation: An Introduction*, by John Oakland includes chapters on politics, legal systems, and economy, which introduce the wider context surrounding the beginnings of the Christian Church.¹³ However, as this dissertation will show, a geographical boundary does not imply a cultural boundary. For example, as will be seen in Chapter Two, the Celtic missionaries from Ireland not only effected changes to the development of the Churches in Northumbria but also across Europe. The idea of nation is important as it adds to the historiography and scholarship to an area of research that is not currently in vogue.

Julia M.H. Smith's, *Europe after Rome: A New Cultural History 500-1000*, exemplifies the modern historiography of the Church and its development.¹⁴

Smith discusses the dwindling interest in the field since the 1960's, and how it has been taken up by "distinctive national historiographical traditions".¹⁵ Smith, in her work, employs a revisionist approach, similar to what is applied in this

¹¹ Ibid, 1.

¹² Ibid, 3.

¹³ John Oakland, *British Civilisation: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁴ Julia M. H. Smith, *Europe After Rome: A New Cultural History 500-1000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Ibid, 3.

dissertation.¹⁶ Using the techniques of “the new cultural history”, Smith applies a deep cultural reading to understand Europe after Rome.¹⁷ Applying a cultural lens on politics, economy, the role of the Church, the place of women, and the position of the laity, gives a deeper and richer understanding to the development of the Church.

All of the historiographical trends mentioned in this introduction are useful. However, the study of the Church is vast and cannot be studied in isolation. How the Church affected the lives of women, the economy, trade, and the development of state are all a part of the history of the Church. By embracing all of the historiographical trends with a revisionist approach, we are able to explore and come to a deeper understanding of the questions surrounding the history of the Church. New historiographical approaches help us understand certain aspects of the Church and its development more clearly. Because of this, I believe that the study of the development of the Church will never be complete as it is open to so many interpretations. But a revision of the numerous historiographies and its interpretations is something that gives us a greater understanding on the development of the Church and helps us to consider the future direction of scholarship.

¹⁶ Ibid, 3-4.

¹⁷ Ibid, 4.

Chapter One:

Augustine's Mission: Roman Or British?

The introduction and development of Christianity to the British Isles, in the fifth to seventh century, has two key players: The Roman and Celtic missions. This chapter traces the re-conversion of Christianity into England and the uniqueness of this re-conversion. After the Roman soldiers marched out of England in 410, the hierarchies and structures of a Roman system seemed to stay. This became, what could be seen as, an easy re-integration of Christianity into England for the Roman missionaries. However, new barbarian settlers, the regress back to pagan cults, and the neighbouring Celtic missionaries, created difficult work for the Roman missionaries to infiltrate and have full religious control over former Roman Britain. This chapter charts the re-conversion of Roman Britain with Augustine and his missionaries. It then, looks at the development of Church and monasticism, through the case studies of rules and monasteries. Finally this chapter will consider the integration of Church and State, through the case studies of double monasteries.

The history of Britain's re-conversion to Christianity from the fifth century onwards is one of remarkable transformation. Britain, in this period, was a

mosaic of cultures that progressed at different rates of development.¹⁸ In 596, forty monks were sent from Rome in a missionary effort to convert the Anglo-Saxons, which their Frankish neighbours had failed to do.¹⁹ Among this first missionary group was Augustine of Canterbury who first went to Kent and set up Canterbury. Canterbury was to be modelled on Rome and be the religious epicentre of Britain.²⁰ The monks sent on the first mission to Canterbury became the religious forefathers of Britain and were emulated for centuries.²¹ From this original mission, Pope Gregory the Great pressed Augustine to continue onto the next phase of the Roman Church mission. After Augustine became bishop, a symbol of authority, the next task was to spread the Christian message to London and York.²² This Roman mission was a “monastic enterprise”²³ and although Augustine was a bishop, he too was to live with his clergy like Jesus and the apostles in the earliest days of the Church.²⁴ Bede in his work *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* writes of a correspondence between Pope Gregory and Augustine. Pope Gregory urged Augustine to live like Christ among the clergy by saying:

¹⁸Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), xxiii.

¹⁹Margaret Truran, “The Roman Mission,” in *Monks of England: The Benedictines in England from Augustine to the Present Day*, ed. Daniel Rees (London: The English Benedictine Congregation, 1997), 20.

²⁰ Ibid, 24.

²¹ Ibid, 25.

²² Ibid, 26-27.

²³ Ibid, 28.

²⁴ Ibid, 29.

But because you, brother, are conversant with monastic rules, and ought not to live apart from your clergy in the English Church, which, by the guidance of God, has lately been converted to the faith...²⁵

Pope Gregory urges Augustine to not just live with the clergy but to make it a lifestyle by forsaking everything earthly for Christ. Everything was to be held in common and no private property was to be owned, although there was some exception for those who wanted to marry.²⁶ These married couples were part of minor orders.²⁷ This is seen again in the correspondence when Gregory says to Augustine:

[Y]ou ought to institute the manner of life which our fathers followed in this manner of life in the earliest beginnings of the Church: none of them said that anything he possessed was his own, but that they had all things in common.²⁸

It is not clear whether Augustine had a copy of Benedict's Rule with him to help establish these guidelines that Pope Gregory was giving²⁹. The rule that was followed however was the *Regular Mixta*, incorporating pieces from many traditions including Celtic ideas and ascetics elements from the east. This rule was also that of guidance and not something of strict adherence.³⁰

²⁵Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, eds. Judith McClure and Rodger Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), Book I, Chapter 27, P42.

²⁶Truran, "The Roman Mission", 29.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid; Wilfrid is credited with bringing it to the north at a later date, it is possible he however obtained a copy from Canterbury.

³⁰Ibid, 29; for further reading, Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History* (New York: Longman Publishing, 1992), 11-30.

Augustine's Roman mission was made a reality due to the kings in each region. The British Isles in this time period was not ruled by one leader. The co-operation of the regional kings allowed Augustine and his men to enforce structure and rules showing, from early on, that there was a relationship between the Church and the State.³¹ In the early days of the missionaries, we do not see individual people being converted, but rather whole families and tribes at a time. This often happened with a conversion of a king, which would in turn lead to the conversion of his people.³² An example of this was when Aethelburgh of Kent married the pagan king Edwin of Northumbria. This marriage facilitated the conversion of Edwin and the Northumbrian region until his death in 632, where we see monasticism and the Church change hands to a Celtic strand, which caused rifts that will be discussed in future chapters.³³ Just as there was no strict monastic rule, there were also no strict rules or regulations applied to the newly converted in Britain. Joseph H. Lynch argues that people living in Britain in the fourth and fifth century saw no difference between their religion and that of early Christianity.³⁴ However by the sixth century a State Church was being established with allegiance to the Roman Church.³⁵

³¹ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 37.

³² Ibid.

³³ Benedictia Ward, "The Northumbrian Renaissance and its Missionary Dimension," in *Monks of England: The Benedictines in England from Augustine to the Present Day*, ed., Daniel Rees (London: The English Benedictine Congregation, 1997), 56.

³⁴ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 1.

³⁵ Ibid, 11.

The Church and monasticism became more closely intertwined in the first half of the sixth century. This can be seen in the work of Gildas who was writing in this period. Between the publication of Gildas' *De Excidio* and the *Fragments*, monasticism and the Church became interlinked. This is because the Church not only expanded but also became more diversified.³⁶ Clare Stancliffe argues, that this change is clearly detected in Gildas' work because he participated in a period of crucial development and growth for monasticism and its consolidation with the Church.³⁷ Gildas wrote during 'the age of the saints', and saw the effect and influence of the Celtic and eastern monastic traditions on monasticism in Britain.³⁸ The Synod of North Britain made reference to what a "bishop, priest, deacon, *doctor*, (ecclesiastical scholar), abbot and monk"³⁹ was. This shows that there was an attempt to define an understanding of monasticism in this period. However, the attempt to strictly define monasticism in early Britain was complex. One reason for this is that there were different influences that impacted the development of monasticism. Such as Celtic and Gaulish strands, as well as influences from the aesthetics in the East.⁴⁰

Another reason that makes understandings of monasticism complex is that definitions in this period are quite different than what we might conceive them to be. This is particularly true of the definition of 'monasticism' and

³⁶ Clare Stancliffe, "Christianity Amongst the Britons, Dalriadan Irish and Picts", in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol 1, ed. Paul Fouracre, 1st ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 437.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 439-440.

‘monasteries’. The issue with the term monasticism is defining the difference between monasteries and a community of men.⁴¹ In the sixth century there would have been what we considered as monasteries, men living together with vows and a rule they follow, under the direction of an abbot-like leader, only a small percentage of them would have gone into higher orders such as priest and abbot.⁴² Gildas, however, comments that there were men who also gave pastoral care, as well as withdrawn monks.⁴³ One example of there being both withdrawn monks and those living in communities is illustrated by Gildas, when on the discussion of penance a “Presbyter or deacon without monastic vow”⁴⁴ is mentioned. This demonstrates that people were living a monastic way of life without taking monastic vows or being part of “holy orders” which followed a strict rule.⁴⁵ These communities that gave pastoral care in Britain are not well documented, in comparison with their withdrawn brothers who often followed rules of manuscript writing, which helped pass down their own monastery’s history.⁴⁶ When conversion was happening in this period, so too was consolidation. Evangelisation was based in monasteries, which in turn helped the monasteries flourish and develop into institutions.⁴⁷ Kings, nobility, and the elite, upon conversion, often endowed money or buildings to the monks to help

⁴¹ Ibid, 439.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Gildas, “Gildas on Penance” in *The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, ed and trans by Michael Winterbottom (Sussex: Phillimore & Co. LTD., 1978), Verse 3, P84.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Stancliffe, “Christianity Amongst the Britons, Dalriadan Irish and Picts”, 439-431.

⁴⁷ Nikola Proksch, “ The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries to the Continent”, in *Monks of England: The Benedictines in England from Augustine to the Present Day*, ed. Daniel Rees (London: The English Benedictine Congregation ,1997), 53.

with the missionary cause, which in turn helped form monasticism into an institution and away from small random communities.⁴⁸

From the fourth to the early sixth centuries in parts of Roman Britain that had escaped Anglo-Saxon invasions we see a type of Roman Villa monastery.⁴⁹ This is where members of the elite class lived in villas that were also a type of religious community⁵⁰ By the sixth century (perhaps as early as the late fifth century) monasticism was still diverse, but more institutionalised than it had been at the end of the fourth century.⁵¹ During this time period monastic rules not only became stricter, but different rules and variations of these rules were being applied to monasticism, not just in Britain but also across Europe.⁵² While these rules started to appear and be put into practice around the fourth century, they really paved the way for the Benedictine rule, which came into effect in the sixth century. This Benedictine rule may have changed over time and it is possible it was first brought to Britain with Augustine.⁵³ Within the Benedictine rule, the authority of the abbot became complete.⁵⁴ The monks were to be kept busy so useful tasks such as labour, manuscript copying, preaching, or missionary work were part of the daily tasks in a monastery.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 139.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 139.

⁵¹ Ibid, 97.

⁵² Ibid, 86.

⁵³ Ibid, 194.

⁵⁴ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 32.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

It is through Bede, and his discussion of his monasteries Wearmouth and Jarrow, that we learn the most about monasticism.⁵⁶ As Benedicta Ward argues, there were two kinds of monasteries at the time. First, there were double monasteries, which catered for both nuns and monks and were supervised by an abbess.⁵⁷ Secondly, there was a very English system known as minster.⁵⁸ The minster system, was, where monasteries were also the main administrative centres for the bishop to execute his authority over a diocese.⁵⁹ However, Bede's monastery was neither a double monastery nor did it follow the minster system. The monastic houses of Jarrow and Wearmouth operated on an early Christian model, and placed huge importance on the education of monks, with the aim of producing scholars.⁶⁰ The other monasteries of Northumbria, and especially that of Melrose, focused on both a pastoral and reflective type of monasticism instead of the closed monastic system that developed in the later Middle Ages.⁶¹

Double monasteries, were another type of monastic institution, throughout this period underwent a period of consolidation and change. Mary Bateson argues that there always had been religious men and women living together in faith, and that the key to understanding the concept behind the double monastery is to

⁵⁶ Ward, "The Northumbrian Renaissance and its Missionary Dimension", 61.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 60-61.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 197.

know that the nuns and monks were not mixed but lived in separate houses.⁶² These double monasteries began in the north under the influence of the Celtic mission.⁶³ A princess, a female member of the royal family, or a female from an elite family often ruled a nunnery or double monastery.⁶⁴ It was a good way to secure land and to continue the line of dynastic or family interests.⁶⁵ Double monasteries were powerful institutions and the abbess was often well educated and obtained considerable power.⁶⁶ In Bede's *Ecclesiastical History and Life Of Cuthbert*, we see the double monastery of Coldingham with the reputation as a place of sinful disrepute. It was seen as a scandalous centre where both men and women were continually living in sin due to their co-inhabitation. In Book IV of *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede mentions that the monastery of Coldingham was burned down. Bede argues that the cause of the fire was attributed to carelessness but states:

However, all who knew the truth were easily able to judge that it happened because of wickedness of those who dwelt there especially of those who were suppose to be its leaders.⁶⁷

Bede continues that within the monastery:

⁶² Mary Bateson, "Origin and Early History of Double Monasteries", in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (New Series, Vol.13, 1899), 138.

⁶³ Ibid, 197.

⁶⁴ Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 202.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book IV, Chapter 25 (23), P219-220.

[M]en and women alike, are sunk in slothful slumbers or else they remain awake for the purposes of sins. And the cells that were built for praying and reading have become haunts of feasting, drinking and gossip, and other delights.⁶⁸

However in contrast, Whitby, a double monastery under the guidance of the Abbess Hilda, was notorious for its good reputation. This reputation was of such a high standard that the Synod of Whitby was held there. Hilda is remembered not only for being given the privilege of hosting the Synod of Whitby, but also, for having five bishops who originated from this double monastery while under her care.⁶⁹ Bede writes that Hilda's double monastery was known for its positive reputation because she imposed a strict Rule:

[T]eaching them to observe strictly the virtues of justice, devotion, and chastity and other virtues too, but above all things to continue in peace and charity.⁷⁰

However these double houses were ruled, they soon all came under enforced reformation.

After the Synod of Whitby, Theodore of Tarsus was appointed as Archbishop of Canterbury in 699. This in turn allowed the enforcement of diocesan hierarchies and structure, which provoked serious changes for English monasticism.⁷¹ One example of this is that pastoral care was no longer to be taken up by the

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995), 25-26.

⁷⁰ Ibid, Book IV, Chapter 23 (21), P211.

⁷¹ Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 198.

monks.⁷² Examples like this shows an interesting correlation between the Synod of Whitby soon followed by the appointment of Theodore and his enforcements. Theodore was appointed to make sure that the Roman Easter was implemented.⁷³ Nonetheless, at the same time, a movement away from monasteries and a focus on bishoprics and diocesan structure perhaps suggests that that Synod of Whitby was more influential than first thought. Furthermore, in the late seventh and eighth centuries the number of priests decreased. One way to resolve this was to procure slaves so that they could be trained as priests.⁷⁴ However, this caused some tension as elites and slaves were expected to be on the same level working side by side.⁷⁵ The monasteries were also used as training centres for the priests.⁷⁶ Because of these tight changes, as well as a new fear brought on by the new barbarian threat of the Vikings, nunneries and double monasteries were no longer profitable. Double monasteries were often inhabited by daughters or nieces of wealthy landowners, kings etc. Women often ran these houses and were overseen by priests and Bishops. Under the new changes, nuns were to stay within their cloisters and not be seen. This meant nuns were unable to economically aid the monastery, unlike male monks who were still allowed to travel and bring in income, in the form of relics, via

⁷² Ibid, 198-199.

⁷³ Stancliffe, "Christianity Amongst the Britons, Dalriadan Irish and Picts", 448-449.

⁷⁴ Leyser, *Medieval Women*, 26-29; This was first implemented by Bishop Aidan of Lindisfarne, this scheme was also used some years later to send slaves as missionaries in Germany. Head of Monasteries and Double monasteries were however elites, with Leyser using Hilda of Whitby as an example.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 199.

“business trips”.⁷⁷ These tight regulations forcing women to be enclosed in these monasteries made them more reliant on the bishops and priests in residence. Therefore, the nuns became more of a burden. Accordingly, because double monasteries were seen as places of reputable sin, and did not bring in income, double monasteries were a clear target for reform.⁷⁸

The monastic development of England is multi-causational. Many influences from cultural, political, and economic shaped the development of monasticism and because of this a conclusive history is hard to write. Monasticism from the Roman mission has been moulded from the influences surrounding it such as, the papacy, bishops, kings and other influential people of power. Other cultural influences such as the Celtic mission, and eastern ascetics have also influenced and changed monasticism. Monasticism, as we have also seen, was affected by economic considerations as well as social change due to the Viking raids. In the coming chapters we will see the theme of monasticism being influenced via multiple elements, especially by those in power.

⁷⁷Jane Tibbets Schulenburg, “Strict Active Enclosure and its Effects on the Female Monastic Experience (c.a 500-1100)”, in *Distant Echoes: Medieval Religious Women Volume One*, ed. John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank (Oxford: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1984), 71-77.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Chapter Two:

Irish Mythmaking: Structure or Anti-Structure?

One of the main threads in the historiography, of the development of the Church in the British Isles, is the difference between ‘England’ and ‘Ireland’ and how the cultural differences between the two nations created very different churches until the Synod of Whitby in 664. This difference stems from the fact the England was situated in what was known as Roman Britain. Ireland was not part of Roman rule and so cultural, political, social, economic and religious life was very different. Because there was no over-arching structures, nor an initial Roman mission to Ireland, the question remains: how did the Celtic Church develop, in particular monasticism, an institution which seems to thrive under rules and regulation. This chapter will firstly consider the original ‘mission’ to Ireland, and how this effected the perceptions of monasticism in Ireland. Secondly, this chapter will consider the concept of *peregrinatio* as a distinctive feature of Irish monasticism. Finally, a discussion on concepts of organization and administration within Irish monasticism, and how it is compared and integrated with the Roman system, will be discussed.

Scholars are still unable to say with certainty who was the first missionary to Ireland. By contrast, there is ample information on Augustine and his first mission to Britain in 596. Throughout this chapter, a continuing theme is how the Celtic Church, and by default monasticism, cannot be compared to the British Church because of the ambiguity still evident in Celtic Christian scholarship of this period. While I will attempt make comparisons between the Roman and Celtic Churches where possible, the history of the early Celtic Church has its own unique story of what shaped and moulded its progression. This chapter will look at the question of who could have been the first missionary to Ireland, and how that answer in turn affects how we look at the organisational structures and development of the Irish Church. Throughout this chapter examples will be given via the saints, both male and female, who were part of the monastic structures in question.

The first reliable date of the Irish Church suggested by scholars is AD431.⁷⁹ This date comes from the Chronicle of Prosper of Aquitaine who writes: “To the Irish believing in Christ, Palladius, having been ordained by Pope Celestine, is sent as first bishop”.⁸⁰ Placed in contrast to the Roman mission, Augustine was the first missionary to Britain and the first bishop. However, when Prosper writes the line “To the Irish believing in Christ”, this alludes to the fact that the

⁷⁹ Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland: 400-1200* (London: Longman, 1995), 14.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Irish had already been converted.⁸¹ This shows that the Irish had been converted to Christianity without the Roman systems enforced, for example position of bishop. While the statement suggests that the Irish were deep enough in faith to warrant a bishop, it could also suggest that a bishop was sent to ensure the Irish were adhering to the “true” faith of the Roman Catholic Church. The need to send a bishop from Rome, hints at an early attempt to control and assert power in the early days of the Church. The statement also alludes to the idea that the Celtic Church was established and there was a structural system for the placement of a bishop. This latter idea refutes a central historiographical assumption that because Ireland was not an old Roman province that they did not adhere to the dioceses structure of the Roman Church.⁸²

Much attention is placed on the provenance of who was the first missionary to Ireland because, if that point is known, then we have a better idea of which sources are more reliable than others. For example, if Saint Patrick is confirmed as the founder of Ireland, then hagiographies of his life will have more weight than simply being considered as myths of a historical figure. So the question remains, if Palladius was not the founder of Christianity in Ireland then who was? Irish tradition attributes Saint Patrick the Christian father of Ireland. The only reliable primary sources we have of Patrick are his own biographies in his letters *Confessio* and *Epistola*.⁸³ These sources come from manuscripts known

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid, 23.

as the Book of Armagh.⁸⁴ However, there are some problems/limitations with these sources. Historians argue that these sources have similar credibility issues to the hagiographies, in that any information that does not portray Patrick in a heroic or Christ-like light may be cast from the record.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, these two sources from Patrick are our best sources of information to help piece together how Christianity came to Ireland. There is very little personal information about Patrick in his records. We know however, that Patrick was a Briton and that he was taken captive in a raid by Irish pirates to Ireland - it was at this time he was converted. Once home, Patrick underwent an epiphany and decided to become a missionary in Ireland.⁸⁶ No dates are given in his records. The issue of Patrick being the first missionary comes to a head when we realise that he does not mention that he had been sent by the Pope in Rome.⁸⁷ Palladius' records confirm this with his mission in 431 there is no mention of a previous mission.⁸⁸ Because Patrick did not undertake an 'official' mission we do not know the sphere of where his mission extended. Patrick writes that his mission spread over the isle, and provides no detail of another bishop being present.⁸⁹ Muirchú maccu Machtheni, who wrote a seventh century hagiography of Patrick, as well as modern scholars, tend to view the proliferation of Patrick's missionary efforts

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 25; Patrick, "Declaration", in *St. Patrick: His Writings and Muirchu's Life*, ed. and trans. A.B.E Hood (London: Phillimore & Co Ltd., 1978), verse 1, P41; verse 12, P43; verse 28, P47.

⁸⁷ Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 25.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ John T. McNiell, *The Celtic Churches: A History A.D. 200-1200* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 51-52.

as limited. Seventh and eighth century documents show that there were numerous attempts to trace Patrick's steps with no real reliable success.⁹⁰

So, as has been established, we are unable to definitively conclude who brought Christianity to Ireland. However, we do know that Patrick and Pallidus contributed to Christianity being the major religion by the sixth century. What is clear however, is the contributions that Patrick made to the Church. This contribution is exemplified by the number of religious conversions he inspired among both males and females and how he successfully encouraged many to enter the religious way of life. In his *Confessions* he talks more frequently of monks and nuns than he does of the converted laity. Patrick is especially proud of his achievement in converting several of the pagan king's children to a monastic life.⁹¹ Patrick concentrated on the conversion of women, urging a life of celibacy for the unmarried, and discouraging marriage for those who had become widows.⁹² Patrick regularly speaks, often with awe, of women 'taking the veil'.⁹³

A distinctive feature in Celtic monasticism was the conversion to monastic life via the mission idea of *peregrinatio*. This idea was similar to what Patrick did; to take part in a mission far away from one's homeland, never to return.⁹⁴ This

⁹⁰ Ibid, 52-66.

⁹¹ Michael Richter, *Medieval Ireland: The Enduring Tradition* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillian Ltd., 1988), 45.

⁹² Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 29.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Tomás Ó Fiaich, 'Irish Monks on the Continent', in *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, ed. James P. Mackey (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 103.

mission of *peregrinatio* is linked with the idea of *paurchia*, a type of diocese or area, but is not to be likened to an Augustine mission of founding a church a type of religious order.⁹⁵ Celtic missionaries who founded these establishments were often members of the nobility. The missions often crossed political and territorial boundaries. This was able to be done due to a lack of strong administrative systems in place, such as the Roman system.⁹⁶ Kathleen Hughes writes that this missionary idea helped the Irish Church flourish and form its own identity, especially in the sixth and seventh centuries as they went on missions over the continent and wider Europe.⁹⁷ The question still unanswered in the historiography is: if the Irish missionaries travelled through the continent, converted the people, and set up monasteries why do they not share common rules?⁹⁸ For example Gaul and eventually Britain followed the Benedictine rule while Spain did not.⁹⁹

This idea of *peregrinatio* and *paurchia*, infiltrated into Britain and became distinctive features of the Celtic Church.¹⁰⁰ In 634, the newly appointed King Oswald of Northumbria turned to the isle of Iona, a stronghold of Celtic monasticism, for missionaries to convert his new kingdom. A selection of the historiography asserts that after the death of Edwin, Northumbria reverted back to paganism.¹⁰¹ Oswald who had been forced into exile was baptised in the

⁹⁵ Richter, *Medieval Ireland*, 63.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 65.

⁹⁷ Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1966), 91.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 102.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁰ Stancliffe, "Christianity Amongst the Britons, Dalriadan Irish and Picts", 438.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 457; Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* Book III, Chapter 1, P110.

Celtic tradition.¹⁰² Oswald's invitation for conversion started Aidan's *paurchia* mission. Aidan, who was from Iona, went to Northumbria where he set up his famous monastery at Lindisfarne and was consecrated a "Bishop for the Northumbrians".¹⁰³ This is where Celtic and Roman traditions began to interact and at times clash with each other. With a strong conversion by the Celtic monks happening in Northumbria (and with the help of Oswald), the monks continued their mission further south to Mercia. Until, the Synod of Whitby in 664, this area was a strong hold for Celtic monasticism and under the control of the abbot of Iona.¹⁰⁴

Within the Celtic brotherhood, the abbots ruled the monasteries with the Bishops taking part in perfunctory duties on special occasions, such as Easter and Christmas.¹⁰⁵ Because the Bishop was not the head of a diocese, the Celtic Church implemented a totally different structure to the Roman/British Church, if any structure at all. Britain was an ex-Roman province and so the Christian institutions from Rome fitted with in the social and cultural life of Britain.¹⁰⁶ However, in Ireland there was no Roman influence and the way the Roman Church and then the British ruled their Church, did not transfer into their culture. Therefore, the Celtic Church was far less structured in its organization in comparison to the British Church.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Stancliffe, "Christianity Amongst the Britons, Dalriadan Irish and Picts", 438

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Richter, *Medieval Ireland*, 62.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Throughout the historiography there is a variety of opinions regarding organisational structure and development of the Celtic Church. One argument is that when Christianity came to Ireland there was an attempt for it to be implemented in the same fashion as the Roman Church. However, because of cultural differences, the monastic structure flourished better, and this is where the Celtic Church found its identity. Peter O'Dwyer writes that, by the sixth century, the leadership of the Celtic Church changed hands from the bishops to abbots of large monasteries.¹⁰⁸ O'Dwyer argues that the major establishments of Armagh, Kildare, Lismore and Iona show this transition.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, Michael Richter argues that Christianity easily absorbed and spread in areas that had been part of the Roman Empire, and had residual Roman organisational structures in place. Ireland however, was the first Western country, to consider, how to assimilate this religion into their culture, which had not been part of the Roman Empire, and did not have Roman cultural frameworks in place.¹¹⁰ Richter argues however, that while the Celtic Church had occasional differences from the Roman Catholic Church the central issues and doctrine were never distinct.¹¹¹

Furthermore, Ó Cróinín argues that while single bishops ruling over a territorial diocese were put in place in the early fifth century, this system soon crumbled as

¹⁰⁸ Peter O' Dwyer, 'Celtic Monks and the Culdee Reform', in *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, ed. James P. Mackey (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 140.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 141.

¹¹⁰ Richter, *Medieval Ireland*, 61-62.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 62.

there was no overarching administration to support it, nor did it work with the “peculiar nature of Irish society”.¹¹² Monasticism, without the Church administration and structure, was the system that worked best in Ireland. Ó Cróinín argues that some houses were of superior ‘mother’ stature to others and were connected to smaller ‘daughter’ houses, which were control by an abbot.¹¹³ Thus it would seem a confederation or *paurchia* took on the diocesan role overcoming territorial and political boundaries; Iona and the mission to Northumbria would be a prime example of this.¹¹⁴

From this, another historiographical trend emerges stating that while the Celtic Church was indeed monastic there was no real unity or structure throughout the Church, with each establishment being unique. Due to this uniqueness the Roman Church easily absorbed the Celtic Church. As John T. McNeill notes:

In religious and cultural life the Celtic churches experienced a large measure of unity, but they never sought a mutual coordination in structure and control that could have made of their various parts one externally visible church.¹¹⁵

Ireland failed in this unification of the Church, McNeill argues, because politically the clans of Ireland were still unable to all work together. Due to this,

¹¹² Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 148.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 147.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*; Richter, *Medieval Ireland*, 61.

¹¹⁵ McNeill, *The Celtic Churches*, 193.

McNeill asserts, the Irish missionaries and the establishments they founded were easily absorbed into the structures of the Roman Church.¹¹⁶

Peter Berresford Ellis takes on a similar argument in his work with women in the Church.¹¹⁷ Ellis argues that in the early Christian Church there is evidence that women in the Celtic Church were able to perform Mass and the Sacraments.¹¹⁸ Despite this, there was opposition to this practice from the Roman Church. For example, three Roman bishops wrote to the Breton priests to stop these “abuses”.¹¹⁹ Ellis comments that a comprehensive study of women and their role in the early Celtic Church has yet to be written. However, there are some surviving accounts of the lives of a few influential women in the Church which helps us form an idea of the role of women in this period.¹²⁰ Women such as Brigid of Kildare and Hilda of Whitby were highly influential. However, towards the eighth century the position of such women, in role and social stature, diminished, as well as the institutions they ruled - such as double monasteries. Furthermore, from this period not only were the women’s roles diminished but also their position in history, they took on the substantive traditional Roman position underneath the male saints and leaders.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 212.

¹¹⁷ Peter Berresford Ellis, *Celtic Women: Women in Celtic Society and Literature* (London: Constable and Company Ltd, 1995).

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 142.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 143.

¹²¹ Ibid.

The third key historical trend is accepted by most scholars. This strand supports that *paurchia* was a type of diocese, which did not follow the traditional Roman diocesan guidelines, and crossed political and geographical lines.¹²² O’Dwyer argues this in his discussion of the transition of bishops to abbots of large monasteries. He uses the examples of the major establishments of Armagh, Kildare, Lismore and Iona, to show just how far a single institutional influence could spread. Iona was the most popular example of this outside of Ireland.¹²³ Ó Cróinín, too, covered this idea in his examination of ‘mother’ and ‘daughter’ houses.¹²⁴ Ellis, in his discussion on women of Ireland, comes to the same conclusion.¹²⁵ The idea of the double monastery, or more specifically the case study of Hilda of Whitby, shows women - family members of founding saints or other abbots - continuing the *paurchia* within the female sphere.¹²⁶ Clare Stancliffe, while arguing that the Celtic Church varied in each area because of the unstable and fluid political situation, comes to the conclusion that *paurchia* was the most common way to form a kind of structured administration or diocese.¹²⁷ Kathleen Hughes states this idea as her thesis. In her book *The Church in Early Irish Society*, Hughes argues that *paurchia* was a type of diocese, and that while Bishops had some authority they were more of a figurehead, and the abbot ran the day-to-day affairs of the Church.¹²⁸ This type

¹²² Richter, *Medieval Ireland*, 61.

¹²³ O’ Dwyer, ‘Celtic Monks and the Culdee Reform’, 140-141.

¹²⁴ Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 147-148.

¹²⁵ Ellis, *Celtic Women*, 142-143.

¹²⁶ Clare Stancliffe, ‘Religion and Society in Ireland’, *In The New Cambridge Medieval History*, ed., Paul Fouracre, 1st ed, Vol 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 415-418.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 417.

¹²⁸ Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, 50.

of structure, Hughes and other scholars comment, was not hugely different to the Roman system.¹²⁹

In light of all this discussion however, we can conclude, that tensions stem from Roman Church. The issues with the Celtic Church were its autonomy and that the Roman Church was unfamiliar with this.¹³⁰ The Synod of Whitby forced a Roman system of structure on the Celtic Church in 664. Until this point, the Celtic Church had spread Christianity not just in Ireland but also in Britain and across the continent.¹³¹ The reason that the Celtic Church was integrated into the Roman Church, instead of vice versa, McNeill argues, is that in the Celtic Church saints were seen as superior to kings.¹³² While kings had temporal authority on earth, saints were able to interact from heaven. Also, the saints founding monastic establishment made these claims more compelling, with the housing of the saint's relics and subsequent miracles that came from this. However, in England this was not the case. The attitudes and decisions of the kings in England worked in conjunction with, and in some cases actually controlled, the course of the Church.¹³³ As we will see in the final chapter, the Roman Church was the agreed representative body in the British Isles, and was perhaps more about power both in the papacy and with the kings in Britain, than about right or wrong doctrine.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ McNeill, *The Celtic Churches*, 109.

¹³¹ Ibid, 108.

¹³² Ibid, 119.

¹³³ Ibid.

Chapter Three:

Synod of Whitby: Consolidation or Territorial Gain?

As has been suggested throughout this dissertation, the development of the Celtic and Roman Church, through the case study of monasticism, was shaped not only by ecclesiastical, but also, political motives. There are many factors that contributed to the development of monasticism in the British Isles, one major factor being political motives. In this chapter I will present the argument that the Synod of Whitby in 664, was more than a synod to resolve the Easter question. But rather, the Synod had political motives both for the kings of England and the Papacy. Firstly, this chapter will look at what was the Easter question and how it had been addressed and dealt with before the Synod. Secondly, a short discussion of the Synod of Whitby and the methodological issues of the primary sources will be addressed. Thirdly, political motives and the backdrop to the event will be discussed to place the Synod in its wider context. This will incorporate a discussion from the historiography of what this can say about the intention of the Synod and the development of the monasticism in the British Isles.

The dating of Easter was seen as such an important issue because the ecclesiastical year is situated from it. If the dating of Easter changed it would

affect every aspect of the Church. The ‘Easter question’ revolves around the dating of Easter and what was the appropriate and correct date to celebrate this festival. Both the Roman and Celtic missionaries brought with them two different dates, and, with their teaching, the respective dates were used. Through the historiography of the Easter question, we see not only the development of monasticism, but also political motivation, becoming clearer in the development of the Church. The first instance in which Bede mentions the “incorrect date” of Easter is in his *Ecclesiastical History*. Bede comments that the Western Saxons did not keep the “proper” time for Easter.¹³⁴ Bede also mentions, “they did other things too which were not keeping with the unity of the Church”.¹³⁵ It seems that Bede is hinting at issues, such as incorrect tonsure and sacrament of Baptism, that were brought to the Synod of Whitby but he does not go into much detail.

A historically monumental instance over the Easter question is when Augustine, with the aid of King Ethelbert, talked to the Bishops, priests, and teachers of the surrounding lands.¹³⁶ Bede comments again that Britons do not keep the date of Easter at the proper time. After much discussion, Augustine comes to an ultimatum. Augustine acknowledges that in many ways the Britons’ customs are different from that of the universal Church, but if they submit on three points then their practices will be tolerated. The three points were: to keep Easter at the proper time, to perform Baptism rites in accordance with the Holy Roman

¹³⁴ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* Book II, Chapter 2, P71.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid, P71-4.

Church, and, to preach the word of the Lord in the British Isles in fellowship with the Roman Church.¹³⁷ The Britons declined, marking the first real divide between the two churches.

However, this ultimatum did not seem to hugely divide the church. Again Bede writes in his in *Ecclesiastical History* that the Britons and the Irish do not keep the same date for Easter, but they also did other things “which were not in keeping with the unity of the Church”¹³⁸, this perhaps hinting again at other issues that were supposedly brought to the Synod of Whitby.¹³⁹ In book two, Bede writes of a man named Laurence, who was Augustine’s successor. Laurence tried to convert the Britons and Irish, via a letter from him and other bishops, to the proper time keeping without much success.¹⁴⁰ The letter shows some hostility against the Irish:

[B]efore we knew them we held the holiness both of the Britons and of the Irish in great esteem, thinking that they walked according to the customs of the universal Church: but upon becoming acquainted with the Britons, we still thought that the Irish would be better.¹⁴¹

Later in Bede’s account, he writes of a strongly worded letter that Pope John wrote to the Irish about the dating of Easter, stressing in some instances, that

¹³⁷ Ibid, P73.

¹³⁸ Ibid, P71

¹³⁹ Ibid, Book II, Chapter 4, P75-6.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, P75-77.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, P76.

celebrating the festival on a different day could be considered heresy.¹⁴²

However strong the tone of this letter, a schism had not yet resulted between the two Churches over the dating of Easter. In Book three, Bede writes that “[t]he Northern province of the Irish”, “the whole nation of the Picts”, and “[t]he Irish people who had lived in the south of Ireland”, celebrated Easter at the wrong time.¹⁴³ This did not seem to be an issue because the head abbots, Aidan and then Fiain, were adored for their holy and pious nature and they were forgiven for this sin.¹⁴⁴ This highlights, within the Celtic Church, the importance put on sanctity of an individual, particularly saints, over a ruler and regulations.

However, after the death of Fiain when Colman was appointed, the issue seemed to be regarded as more of a pressing issue and the Synod of Whitby was called.¹⁴⁵ Interestingly, the accounts from Bede on the issue of keeping the wrong date for Easter goes from tolerable, to a grave sin that needs to be dealt with, not only by the Church but also the king. In the previous instance of trying to convert the Britons and Irish to follow the correct date of Easter, it had previously been men of the Church, but in 664 the king now has the power to correct and reform.

¹⁴² Ibid, Book II, Chapter 19, P103; Pope Honorius had also sent a letter the Irish about the Easter question, although not much detail is given.

¹⁴³ Ibid, Book III, Chapter 3, P113

¹⁴⁴ Richard Abels, “The Council of Whitby: A Study in Early Anglo-Saxon Politics”, in *Journal of British Studies*. Vol.23, No.1, (Autumn, 1983), 3.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

The Synod was held at Whitby, in a double monastery headed by the Abbess Hilda.¹⁴⁶ While Bede does not give much attention to Hilda, she actually mediated the Synod.¹⁴⁷ Hilda, and the monastery, became famous due to her participation in the Synod. If it was not for the accounts of Bede and Eddius Stephanus we may have never learnt of this influential and powerful woman, who frequently sought and gave advice to kings, princes, and elites.¹⁴⁸ Within the historiography, the dating of the Synod of Whitby is recorded as either 663 or 664. The primary source accounts of the Synod are by Bede and Eddius Stephanus but neither supply an exact date. Bede gives the year of 664 however this has been disputed, particularly by the historian Sir Frank Stenton.¹⁴⁹ Richard Abels argues that careful examination of the sources sees the Synod dated as “late summer or early autumn of 664”.¹⁵⁰ Due to Bede being the main primary source used I have decided in this instance to use the dating of 664.

Attending the Synod was Oswiu, the King of Northumbria, and his son Ealhfrith. Bishops Colman and Agilberht argued for the Celtic and the Roman Church respectively. Bishop Colman brought some of his followers, and Hilda, who was trained in the Celtic Church, and her followers supported Colman. Agilberht brought the priests Agatho and Wilfrid¹⁵¹, as well as James and

¹⁴⁶ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book III, Chapter 25, P154; Various spellings, in this instance I will use Hilda.

¹⁴⁷ Leyser, *Medieval Women*, 36.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

¹⁴⁹ Abels, “The Council of Whitby”, 20. ; See also F.M Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed,(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 129.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ It is from *Life of Wilfrid* by Eddius Stephanus that we have a second primary source other than Bede.

Romanus. Bishop Cedd was present as interpreter and mediator.¹⁵² King Owsiu opened the Synod by saying the churches should be united as one, by observing one God, and one rule by which to celebrate the sacraments.¹⁵³ This was perhaps an instance, by Owsui, hinting at his possible agenda of power and consolidation he wanted to achieve from the Synod. Bede writes that the Synod of Whitby was called due to the “question of Easter and of the tonsure and other ecclesiastical matters,”¹⁵⁴ Eddius Stephanus writes that it was “to discuss the proper time for celebrating Easter.”¹⁵⁵ There is no mention of issues surrounding baptism and tonsure being addressed in Stephanus’ account.

The accounts of the Synod of Whitby given by Bede and Eddius Stephanus show a straightforward debate, between the Celtic and Roman Church, where the Roman dating of Easter clearly is superior, so much so that King Oswui turns his back on his Celtic roots in support of the Roman dating. Recent histrography however has produced in-depth reading and interpretation of the two primary sources and their authors. The common conclusion is that there was more to the Synod of Whitby than the dating of Easter.

Upon reading the primary sources it is clear that both authors were supporters of the Roman Church. Bede for example was a monk of the monasteries of

¹⁵² Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History*, Book III, Chapter 25, P154.

¹⁵³ Ibid, P154-155.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, P154.

¹⁵⁵ Edduis Stephanus, “The Life of Wilfrid”, in *Lives of the Saints*, trans by J.F. Webb (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), 141.

Wearmouth and Jarrow, known for its scholarly output.¹⁵⁶ Although, there had been a Celtic influence involved in the foundations of these monasteries, Bede was writing seventy years after the Synod of Whitby.¹⁵⁷ Bede was firmly rooted in a time when the ecclesiastical reforms that had happened after the Synod were in place.¹⁵⁸ Bede portrays himself as an ardent upholder of the Roman Church and its authority.¹⁵⁹ Richard Abels argues that there was more to the Synod than liturgical issues¹⁶⁰. Abels argues that because of Bede's own biases, he emphasised the liturgical over the political.¹⁶¹ This need to emphasise the liturgical issues comes not only from his religious background, or the current need to promote "Christian unity among the English people".¹⁶² This emphasis also comes from Bede's in-depth fascination with the calculation and computation of the dating of Easter.¹⁶³ This preoccupation with the dating of Easter not only takes emphasis away from the political issues at the Synod of Whitby, but also other issues discussed at the Synod, such as the issues around the Sacrament of Baptism and the style of tonsure.

Eddius Stephanus' account of the Synod of Whitby, written soon after the event, is also littered with biases and inconsistencies. Stephanus, was a priest and a contemporary of Colman and Wilfrid, who were both present at the Synod.

¹⁵⁶ J. F. Webb, intro and trans., *Lives of the Saints* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), 9.

¹⁵⁷ Vesna Lopičić, "Cultural Studies Between Fact and Fiction: The Synod of Whitby and its Interpretations", in *Linguistics and Literature*, (Vol5, No 1, 2007), 13.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ J. F. Webb, intro and trans., *Lives of the Saints*, 9.

¹⁶⁰ Abels, "The Council of Whitby", 2.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

Stephanus' account of the Synod of Whitby is via a hagiography on the *Life of Wilfrid*.¹⁶⁴ Wilfrid was a staunch defender of the Roman position and dating of Easter. The object of any hagiography is to glorify that said person/ saint.

Wilfrid being a staunch defender of the Roman position, was what he was to be known and exalted for, and any other interpretation or empathy for the Celtic mission would in turn be a discredit to Wilfrid. Wilfrid's hagiography was also written at time when the Roman church was getting a strong hold on the British Isles and supported by political approval. This Roman bias is clearly seen in Stephanus' account of the Synod. He recalls Colman speaking with "complete confidence", but the saintly hero of the story, Wilfrid, spoke "as humble as usual".¹⁶⁵

Beyond the authors, and their points of view, an in-depth reading of the sources gives us other useful interpretations for the purpose of the Synod other than the Easter question. In Eddius Stephanus' account of the Synod of Whitby he writes that King Oswui gave his decision "with a smile on his face".¹⁶⁶ Vesna Lopičić writes that the reason for this mysterious smile may imply a "wise" and "contrived" answer.¹⁶⁷ This smiling answer Lopicic argues, was already rehearsed and given perfect opportunity to be used. Lopicic argues that the king knew when he called the Synod, which road he had to go down.¹⁶⁸ The question

¹⁶⁴ Lopičić, "Cultural Studies Between Fact and Fiction", 13.

¹⁶⁵ Eddius Stephanus, "The Life of Wilfrid", 142.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Lopičić, "Cultural Studies Between Fact and Fiction", 16.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

that then arises, is why did Owsui need to rehearse an answer? John Oakland answers this question in a statement when he writes:

English conversion was encouraged by the Saxon kings who considered that the hierarchical example of the Christian church would support their royal authority. The church also provided advisers and administrators, through whom the kings could control their kingdoms more efficiently. The connection between church and state was consequently established at an early stage in English history.¹⁶⁹

The idea taken up by English kings was to obtain full control over all aspects of his people. For the Church, if this meant a blanket rule, and a whole kingdom following their church as called for by the king, then their mission was complete. This system would only work with the Roman Church, compared with the Celtic Church, because of the rules, structures, and hierarchies already in place.¹⁷⁰ This agreement with Church and State is seen in the examples given about the double monasteries. Royal women and blood lines were not only important in terms of securing land or control, but also in terms of the women who became abbesses became “brides of Christ”.¹⁷¹ By marrying a royal women to the Church the royal families interests in all aspects were kept protected and in tact.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Oakland, *British Civilization*, 299.

¹⁷⁰ Lopičić, “Cultural Studies Between Fact and Fiction”, 16.

¹⁷¹ Leyser, *Medieval Women*, 20; N.J Higham, *The Convert Kings: Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 36.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

N.J Higham, in his work, deflates the arguments previously set that the Synod dealt with purely ecclesiastical matters.¹⁷³ One argument that arises for why King Oswui called the Synod when he did was because of the religious difference in his own house.¹⁷⁴ Oswui, while of Celtic upbringing, was married to a woman named Eanflaed who was of Roman belief. This caused conflict, because, while one group in the royal court were fasting, another was celebrating Easter with a feast.¹⁷⁵ Higham refutes this argument saying that, up to the time the Synod was called, the king and queen had been married for twenty years with no conflict. This suggests that there had to be another reason why the Synod was called.¹⁷⁶

Higham argues, for Oswui, ecclesiastical authority and the chance to manipulate that authority was the king's agenda.¹⁷⁷ "The Synod", Higham writes "was about power, and that fact should be acknowledged". This thirst for power comes from Oswui's fear that he was about to lose his power.¹⁷⁸ In *Ecclesiastical History* Bede suggest that both Oswui and his son Alhfrith organised the Synod.¹⁷⁹ Alhfrith, in this period, was ruling Deria under his father's charge. Alhfrith also converted to the ways of the Roman Church, and by default gained political support from the Roman Church.¹⁸⁰ This added a further religious tension to the

¹⁷³ Higham, *The Convert Kings*, 256.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Francis S. Betten, "The So-Called Council of Whitby, 664A.D.", in *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol.13, No.4 (Jan., 1928), 623.

¹⁷⁶ Higham, *The Convert Kings*, 256.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 257.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History*, Book III, Chapter 25, P154.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

already “political and dynastic tensions” in Northumbria.¹⁸¹ Adding to this further historians, in particular that of Henry Mayr-Harting, stress the responsibility that Alhfrith had in evoking need for the Synod.¹⁸² If the Synod went in Alhfrith’s favour he would place political pressure on his father Oswui, which would weaken him and allow Alhfrith to rule all of Northumbria.¹⁸³ In this period the succession of Anglo-Saxon kings was uncertain. A son did not automatically get his father’s position. Strong kings were able to designate the next ruler, or an election after the king’s death was another option.¹⁸⁴ This is clearly a chance Alhfrith wished not to take.

With this in mind, the smile by Oswui in Edduis Stephanus account of the Synod of Whitby, is now less than surprising. Oswui’s verdict was not because of the validity of the arguments presented to him but it was planned all along. The smile was because he found the perfect ‘reasoning’ for his decision. This is also perhaps, why his decisions on the Sacrament of Baptism and the Tonsure outcomes are not mentioned. Oswui found the perfect scenario in the argument of the Roman dating of Easter. From this Oswui was able to manipulate this argument to serve his needs¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ Abels, “The Council of Whitby”, 5.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 10.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹⁸⁵ Higham, *The Convert Kings*, 258.

The Synod of Whitby, although used in this instance as a case study, shows the peak of the development of monasticism in the Church in Britain. Until 664, the Church of Britain had not only been divided, but was a mosaic where some rules applied in some places but not in others. The Synod, and then the appointment of Bishop Theodore five years later, saw the British Church become part of the Church of Rome.¹⁸⁶ However this does not mean that the Celtic Church was extinguished immediately. The character of the Irish Church was still present in places like Lindisfarne and Iona.¹⁸⁷ However, due to the lack of overarching structures it had to be integrated into the Roman system.¹⁸⁸ With the appointment of Roman rule, distinctively British institutions became more Roman, such as the abolition of double monasteries, and women performing sacraments. Women after the Synod of Whitby were now suppressed in this Roman rule. The development of the British Church became that of the Roman Church, and the Synod of Whitby was the apex of this change of direction and future development.

¹⁸⁶ Richter, *Medieval Ireland*, 95.

¹⁸⁷ McNiell, *The Celtic Church*, 115.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 109.

Conclusion

As this dissertation has shown, the history of monasticism in the British Isles in the fifth to seventh centuries is complex and extensive. A comparative study of looking exclusively at England and Ireland is a complicated task. This is because geographical borders do not necessarily amount to cultural or political borders. While this dissertation is geographically broken into looking at England and Ireland, it is not confined to these borders. Augustine started his mission in Kent but his influence reached modern day Scotland. Irish monasticism may have started in Ireland but areas of England and greater Europe soon felt its presence. The development of monasticism, as has been discovered, was part of a standardised system, and was in the hands of the elites, kings, bishops and Popes. The history of monasticism, contemplated through the case study of the Synod of Whitby, is a perfect example of this. Within the historiography the argument that having or lacking old Roman systems changes the direction, character, and development of monasticism, is both correct and incorrect. John T. McNeill argues that at the Synod of Whitby the Celtic Church knew they were going to fail. This was due to the absence of “central authority”

within the Celtic Church.¹⁸⁹ Because of this, the Celtic Church was easily overpowered and integrated into the Roman Church system.¹⁹⁰ However, J.F Webb argues, that there was not as much separation between the Churches as was once believed.¹⁹¹ Webb argues that the term ‘Celtic Church’ is misleading and that the Celts also respected the Pope and the Catholic Church.¹⁹² The differences stem from “ritual and administrative” reasons that had arisen from “geographical remoteness”.¹⁹³ The need to highlight this separation by Oswui in 664 was to not only reassert his authority, but also to extend his power and influence. Therefore, we see the decision of the Roman and Celtic Church in the hands of a very bright and competent king in 664. This was made possible by the lack of Roman systems and administration in the Celtic Church.

¹⁸⁹ McNiell, *The Celtic Church*, 109-111.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ J. F. Webb, intro and trans., *Lives of the Saints*, 9.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

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