Status, Reputation, Office

Columba was the unquestioned leader on Iona, with his status described as *abbas*, *pater*, *sanctus pater*, *patronus*, and *senior*. The term 'abbot' recognised Columba as Father of the Community and invested him with a level of authority equal to that enjoyed by a father in any sixth-century household. Benedict went as far as to state that an abbot held the place of Christ in a monastic community, and had the titles 'lord' and 'abbot' out of honour for Christ Himself.[1] Benedict stressed also that high honour brought with it high responsibility, and abbots should be aware that, 'at the fearful judgement of God, not only the abbot's teaching but his disciples' obedience will come under scrutiny'. The Irish Church viewed its abbots likewise.

Columba was also his community's patron (*patronus*), since he was considered to have been the founder of Iona's monastery, discounting any Christian presence on the island before his arrival. In due course his protective patronage was viewed as continuing beyond his death, and all subsequent abbots of Iona were regarded as heirs of Columba (*comharba Choluim Chille*).[2]

In the Irish system, each major monastery had its own *paruchia*, consisting of groups of geographically scattered religious houses, each acknowledging the abbot of the main monastery as the common head.[3] The abbot was autonomous within his *paruchia* and, if he had the ability to lead his communities with inspirational zeal and energy, then the *paruchia* could expand almost limitlessly. No higher ecclesiastical authority dictated the limits of its bounds. Subsidiary monastic settlements were managed by a senior monk, often carrying the title of

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1   Benedict, *The Rule*, II, LXIII.

2   Markus, *Conceiving a nation*, 157. Markus suggests that subsequent abbots 'inherited' something of Columba's authority. When Adomnán wrote about Columba, he was underlining his own authority as Columba's successor.

3   Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources*, 71.

'prior', who was appointed by the abbot and subject to him.[4] Iona, plus its subordinate institutions in Scotland and Ireland, formed Columba's *paruchia*, with Columba selecting monks from his own community to govern the daughter-institutions under his authority.[5] In these appointments, kinship was as important as in secular society,[6] and few without kinship ties to the abbot were ever appointed to authority roles. This was accepted as normal within the prevailing culture. Columba made his cousin Baithéne prior of the daughter-monastery on Tiree, and he appointed his uncle Ernan as prior on Hinba.[7]

CREDIBILITY

Despite the growing importance of monasteries, monasticism was not a recognised part of Church order in the same way as the diocesan system was. However influential the monastic movement became, it was essentially a para-organisation. Likewise, taking a monk's vow was not the same as being ordained to one of the three recognised offices of deacon, priest, or bishop. Similarly, abbacy was merely about being the leader, guardian and mentor of a group of monks, with each abbot elected by the monks themselves and not appointed by the wider Church. Nor was an abbot's appointment an ordination. Abbacy was a function, not an office. Throughout Christendom there were only three universally recognised clerical offices, and abbacy was not one of them. At the Columban daughter-monastery on Lindisfarne the post of abbot was combined with that of bishop (at the insistence of the Northumbrian kings), but the ordination which accompanied that appointment related to the abbot's episcopal role and not to his abbacy. Deacons, priests, and bishops were regarded as having been established by divine command, with their terminology mentioned in the New Testament, but monks were not. Nor were abbots. Such roles, however commendable, were humanly instituted. For some, this created a problem with Columba.

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4   cf. Benedict, *The Rule*, LXV: 'The prior for his part is to carry out respectfully what his abbot assigns to him and do nothing contrary to the abbot's wishes or arrangements.'

5   Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 33.

6   In an early-medieval context 'secular' meant 'non-monastic' in contrast to the modern meaning of 'non-religious'. Thus, there could be 'secular priests' and 'secular monks'.

7   Adomnán refers to the post of prior four times. Twice Baithéne is termed prior of Iona's daughter-monastery on Tiree (I:30; I:41). Ernan is referred to as prior on Hinba (I:45). Luigne is referred to as prior on the 'island of Elen' (II:18).

In the early 700s Bede was scholar-in-residence at the Wearmouth-Jarrow monastery in northern England. His day job was as 'principal private secretary' to the abbot, alongside which he busied himself with bookish activities, writing his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, his *Lives of the Abbots*, plus an array of biblical and religious treatises. Bede belonged to the Roman Church tradition, which had advanced steadily northwards ever since Augustine of Canterbury arrived in Kent in 597. In his *History*, Bede wanted to celebrate the achievements of his own Church tradition, but was also aware that an Iona mission, based on Lindisfarne, had evangelised parts of Northumbria several decades before the Roman Church arrived. That Lindisfarne mission achieved brilliant results despite its heyday of supremacy being surprisingly brief – from the early 630s when King Oswald first invited missionaries from Iona, until 664 when it was eclipsed by the Roman tradition after the Synod of Whitby.

Bede was intellectually and spiritually convinced of the superiority of his Roman tradition. Nevertheless, he had no intention of editing out the contribution made by others. Bede was fair-minded. He was aware of the saintliness of men and women such as Aidan, Cuthbert and Ebbe. And although Bede disagreed profoundly with many of their practices, he accepted that their reputations transcended ecclesiastical divisions. Bede also knew that these spiritual giants had a faith moulded by Iona spirituality, even if some of them had never visited the island.[8] He was also aware that it was Columba who had made Iona what it was, and so Bede included Columba in his *History*. This brought two problems.

THE PROBLEM OF STATUS

Bede's first difficulty concerned Columba's reputation as it was now viewed in Northumbria. At Whitby, Wilfrid had been the main protagonist for the Roman Church over against the Columban tradition, and he insinuated doubt about the validity of Columba's ministry. Wilfrid was a brilliant if an unscrupulous debater. He lambasted what he saw as the arrogance of the Irish Church in thinking it was correct and the rest of the Christian world was wrong: 'The only people who stupidly contend against the whole world are those Irish men, and

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8   Bede, *Life of Cuthbert*, XVI, lauded Aidan. Herren and Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity*, 40, suggest that Bede saw Aidan's model of the abbot-bishop as consistent with Pope Gregory's recommendations to Augustine of Canterbury.

their partners in obstinacy the Picts and Britons.'[9] Wilfrid knew that if he could undermine Columba's personal spiritual legitimacy, then his opponents would be seriously weakened. He therefore hinted heavily that Columba was well-meaning but misguided. Crucially, Columba was suspect in that he had only been an abbot and never a bishop. In the Roman Church, bishops were the leaders, strategists, authority figures, and the men whose advice and direction could be followed with confidence. Abbots were not mentioned in Scripture, but bishops were. Abbots were not part of an apostolic succession in an unbroken line from the first apostles, but bishops were. Throughout Christendom, it was bishops, not abbots, who were bestowed with authority through ordination. Columba had never been ordained to the office of bishop. Therefore, to what extent had his role ever been valid? Had he been self-appointed? Had he usurped a leadership position which should belong to a bishop whose abilities, gifts, and orthodoxy were recognised by the wider Church? Wilfrid pushed his arguments home, damaging Columba's standing in Northumbria; and when Bede wrote about Columba, he knew this was a problematic issue for many of his readers.

Bede was never as abusive in his comments as Wilfrid could be, but he was equally uncomfortable with the Irish set-up, and particularly with what he understood to be its relationship between bishop and abbot. It was not that the Irish Church had no bishops: it had scores of them. But the available literature does not portray bishops of the Irish Church as the power-players, which bishops of the Roman tradition were. In the Roman Church it was the bishop who had power, whereas in the Irish Church that belonged to the abbot. An Irish bishop was a spiritual person rather than a leader. Meek notes that an abbot such as Columba, who was the central figure throughout the Iona *paruchia*, was in effect the 'chief executive officer' of a group of businesses, 'closer to our own management-driven form of secular life than we might dare to think: and abbots of monasteries, like Chief Executives of our day, were powerful people'.[10]

Lying behind this were the different ways in which the Roman and Irish Churches were organised. In the Roman Church the base unit was

9   Bede, *History*, III:25.
10   D. Meek, 'St. Columba and Celtic Christianity' in Randall (ed.), *In Search of Colmcille*, 35.

the geographical diocese, of which the diocesan bishop was head. But in the Irish Church the base unit was the monastery, where the abbot held sway.[11] The diocesan structure of the Roman Church evolved from the political structures of the later Roman Empire, with the Church on the Continent copying the Empire's form of secular governance. But Ireland had never been colonised by Rome, and Irish society had never been organised on the Roman model. Instead, the Irish Church modelled itself on the core structures of indigenous Irish society, which were the various tribes or *tuaths*. Thus, whereas the Roman Church was geographically organised, the Irish Church was, by and large, tribally organised with an emphasis on kinship ties.[12] Each monastery had an association with a particular *tuath*, making the Irish Church a decentralised organisation.[13]

Diocesan bishoprics were not unknown in early Irish Christianity; and Curran, Hughes, and Markus all suggest that later monastic writers may have exaggerated the role of the abbot and may have downplayed the role of diocesan bishops during Ireland's earliest Christian period.[14] Similarly, Máire and Liam de Paor are aware of a view that Patrick's Church was not primarily monastic, with Patrick described as placing bishops and priests in charge of churches, and with only one instance in his era of a church being handed over to an abbot.[15] Be that as it may, it was centuries after Columba before a truly diocesan system was re-introduced to Ireland. During the 'golden

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11   MacLauchlan, *The Early Scottish Church*, 165, argues that when Patrick planted 300 bishops in Ireland the term 'bishop' equated to that of 'presbyter', 'priest', or 'pastor', rather to that of diocesan bishop. This interpretation is contested.

12   De Paor, *Early Christian Ireland*, 50f.

13   Herren and Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity*, 4.

14   Curran, *The Antiphonary of Bangor and the Early Irish Monastic Liturgy*, 159ff., points out that the earliest missionaries to Ireland may have tried to introduce a diocesan system. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources*, 71ff., argues that ancient Irish Law Tracts may be more reliable indicators than monastic texts for what really happened during the sixth and seventh centuries. She notes that these indicate a continuing power tension between bishops (who regarded themselves as having diocesan powers) and abbots of monasteries, but that the later writers of history, the monastic scribes, gloss over this. Monastic scribes give the impression that bishop's powers were non-existent. When the Irish Church exported itself to Argyll etc., it did so through the monasteries, which partly explains why Bede thought that abbots were all-powerful. Hughes holds that the Law Tracts, from the earliest days of the Church in Ireland, may more truly represent what was happening on the ground, since they deal with real life legal situations, and not 'edited' history; cf. Markus, *Conceiving a Nation*, 138f.

15   De Paor, *Early Christian Ireland*, 33.

years', the monastery was the fundamental unit, not the diocese, and abbots carried more power than bishops. Bede was aware of this. He did not approve:

> Iona is always ruled by an abbot in priest's orders, to whose authority the whole province, including the bishops, is subject, *contrary to the usual custom.* This practice was established by its first abbot Columba, who was not a bishop himself, but a priest and a monk.[16] [my italics]

In writing that Irish bishops were subject to abbots, Bede may have misunderstood their relationship. Nevertheless, Columba not being a bishop was a major stumbling-block, and Rome struggled with the legitimacy of any Church which was not *de facto* governed by bishops. How could a Church not governed by bishops be approved by God? Ninian, Patrick, and Augustine of Canterbury had all been bishops, but not Columba. Bede's ideal was Cuthbert of Lindisfarne who was both abbot and bishop.[17] But in Ireland there was no extensive ecclesiastical hierarchy as was rapidly developing in the Roman Church.[18] In Ireland the abbot was king. Moreover, in Ireland, although the Pope was deeply respected, neither he nor any part of the Roman Church was deemed to have authority over what happened there. All of this was a problem. Had Columba ever been a legitimate leader, appointed and approved by God? From the viewpoint of the Roman tradition the answer was 'No'.

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16   Bede, *History*, III:4. Markus, *Conceiving a Nation*, 140, argues that Bede may be citing Iona as an *exception* to what was found everywhere else (even in Ireland); that bishops exercised day-to-day authority in the Church; and that the phrase 'contrary to the usual custom' implies contrary to the usual custom in Ireland, not just contrary to the custom of the Roman Church. However, Markus's argument is heavily dependent on his interpretation of Bede and on Irish documents from two centuries later than Columba.

17   Clare Stancliffe, 'Cuthbert and the polarity between Pastor and Solitary' in Bonner, G., Rollason, D. and Stancliffe, C. (eds), *St. Cuthbert, His Cult and Community to A.D. 1200* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 1987), 40; cf. Herren and Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity*, 171, '[Cuthbert] was a model figure for Bede in that he governed Lindisfarne as a monastic bishop after the fashion of Augustine at Canterbury.' Given that there was no resident bishop on Iona, presumably monks were ordained priests by bishops in Ireland or brought from Ireland for the purpose. Who ordained Aidan as a bishop before he went to Northumbria? Was he given the title in retrospect? cf. Barbara Yorke, *The Conversion of Britain: 600–800*, 153.

18   Similarly, in the indigenous Irish political system the primary allegiance was to the local 'lord' or 'king', with no 'central government'; cf. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources*, 53.