

Markus, G. (2017) Adomnán, two saints, and the paschal controversy. *Innes Review*, 68(1), pp. 1-18. (doi: [10.3366/inr.2017.0127](https://doi.org/10.3366/inr.2017.0127))

The material cannot be used for any other purpose without further permission of the publisher and is for private use only.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/253892/>

Deposited on 04 October 2021

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of  
Glasgow

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

*Gilbert Márkus, ‘Adomnán, two saints, and the paschal controversy’, *The Innes Review* 68 (2017), 1-18*

**Abstract:** We have long understood from Bede’s testimony that Adomnán, the ninth abbot of Iona, urged his monks to adopt the relatively new 19-year Easter cycle, but they – or many of them – remained faithful to the 84-year cycle which they had inherited. There are passages in the *Vita sancti Columbae* which show Adomnán using stories about St Columba in an attempt to deal with this situation, first of all to reduce the harm done to the community by the disagreement, urging fraternal charity; and secondly, as argued here for the first time, by using contrasting stories about two other saints, Ernéne and Fintan, to persuade his monks that Columba had prophetically foreseen the dispute over the Easter date, and that he had ‘cast his vote’ so to speak, with the saint associated with the 19-year cycle.

**Keywords:** Adomnán, Iona, Easter Controversy, *Vita sancti Columbae*, Fintan Munnu, Ernéne mac Craséni, Clonmacnoise.

Controversy over the calculation of the date of Easter must be one of the best-known aspects of the history of the early medieval Insular church. The dispute came to a head in AD 664 at the Synod of Whitby where the ‘Roman’ party persuaded the Northumbrian king, Oswiu, of the rightness of their 19-year Easter cycle, and where the 84-year cycle of the ‘Celtic’ party, who owed allegiance to Iona, was defeated. The account of the synod given by Bede in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* is the source for almost our entire picture of these events.<sup>1</sup> Yet Bede is partisan – he was, after all, a Northumbrian monk and supporter of the 19-year cycle – and historians have been too trusting of his account, engendering some misleading ideas about about Iona, her Columban monks, and the ‘Celtic’ and ‘Roman’ churches. Although it is not my purpose in this paper to address these ideas, I shall not use the formulae, ‘Roman Easter’ or ‘Celtic Easter’.<sup>2</sup> The description of the 19-year cycle as ‘Roman’ reflects the claim by Bede and his Northumbrian confrères that theirs was the ‘right’ and orthodox way to calculate it, dismissing the Iona monks as wrong and by implication un-Roman. But the defeated Iona monks had good reason to regard their 84-year cycle as having been that of an earlier Roman Easter; and they will rightly have regarded the 19-year cycle as an innovation, an Alexandrian calculation

---

<sup>1</sup> Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (hereafter *HE*) iii, 25. In this article, translations from original sources are my own, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> I shall discuss these questions in more detail in my forthcoming book *Conceiving a Nation* (Edinburgh University Press).

adopted in Rome only in the sixth century, using a table adapted for Rome's use by Dionysius Exiguus (which is why the 19-year cycle is often called 'Dionysiac').<sup>3</sup> There is little doubt that the conservative Ionan monks would have asserted, were we able to hear their voices on the matter, that they were just as Roman, and just as orthodox, as their opponents. Therefore, rather than simply accepting the view of the victors at Whitby that they were the true 'Romans', I shall distinguish between the two groups and their preferred calculations not with reference to their *romanitas* or lack of it, but in a more objective way. Rather than speak of a 'Roman' or 'Celtic' Easter, I shall refer to the 19-year or Dionysiac cycle and the 84-year cycle. And we should also remember that these were only two options among others available at the time, including the Easter table of Victorius of Aquitaine which was used by bishops of Gaul and Spain until the end of the eighth century, long after it had been abandoned in Rome.

Our present concern, however, is to examine the impact of this Easter dispute on the monastery of Iona, on her monks who were defeated at the Council of Whitby, and in particular on Adomnán, who was abbot of Iona from 679 to 704. How did he seek to deal with the consequences of the council's decision? We understand, again from Bede, that Adomnán, hitherto a supporter of the 84-year cycle, had accepted the 19-year cycle during a visit to the Northumbrian king, Aldfrith, when he was persuaded of the superiority of the Dionysiac calculation – perhaps by Ceolfrith, abbot of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow, who wrote about his own conversations with Adomnán some years later.<sup>4</sup> It seems that Adomnán visited Northumbria twice, apparently in AD 686 and 688, and we may assume that these conversations took

---

<sup>3</sup> Dionysius himself speaks of his cycle as a 19-year cycle, though in fact the complete cycle is a 532-year one:  $19 \text{ years} \times 4 \text{ (the period of leap years)} \times 7 \text{ (days of the week)}$ . The cycle may also be referred to as Alexandrian, as the Easter table offered by Dionysius was the one used in Alexandria, which differed from the practice in Rome until Dionysius' method was adopted there.

<sup>4</sup> *HE*, v, 15, 21.

place on one of these occasions.<sup>5</sup> Bede goes on to write of Adomnán's return to Iona, his failure to persuade his own monks to accept the Dionysiac Easter, and his subsequent departure for Ireland where he succeeded in persuading some non-Columban churches to change, only returning to Iona to die.<sup>6</sup> Now in these last observations there is a good deal of misinformation. There is no reason to think that Adomnán abandoned Iona following his failure to persuade the monks there, only to return in the last year of his life. His own writing in *Vita sancti Columbae*, and the chronicle kept by his own monks which survives embedded in 'The Annals of Ulster', both suggest that he continued to live on Iona, although making occasional visits to Ireland, and that he wrote his *Vita sancti Columbae* in response to the urging of his brethren.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the tension between the abbot and his community must have been difficult for all of them. No doubt there were some Columban monks who agreed with Adomnán, but he could not persuade the community as a whole to accept

---

<sup>5</sup> *Annals of Ulster* (hereafter *AU*), ed. Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill (Dublin, 1983) records for AD 686 that 'Adomnán brought back sixty captives to Ireland'. Although many entries of *AU* are recorded for the year before the date normally ascribed to them, this date appears to be accurate. These captives are presumed to be the prisoners taken by Ecgrith of Northumbria in his raid on Ireland reported in *AU* 685. Adomnán wrote in his *Vita sancti Columbae* of his visit to 'our friend King Aldfrith ... after the battle of Ecgrith' (presumably the battle of Nechtanesmere in AD 685), and then 'our second visit after two years': *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, ed. A.O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson (Oxford, 1991), 178 (VSC ii, 46).

<sup>6</sup> *HE*, v, 15, 21. For a different argument against Bede's account of Adomnán's return to Ireland and Iona, see Alfred P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men: Scotland AD 80–1000* (Edinburgh, 1984), 131. See also Jean-Marie Picard, 'Bede, Adomnán and the writing of history', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 50–70, at 63–4.

<sup>7</sup> See for example *AU* 692, 697, which describe Adomnán travelling to Ireland as if for a visit, clearly suggesting that he was normally resident in Britain. For further discussion see Clare Stancliffe, 'Charity with Peace: Adomnán and the Easter question', in *Adomnán of Iona: Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker*, ed. Jonathan Wooding *et al.* (Dublin, 2010), 51–68, at 52–3. To this evidence we might add that in VSC i, 2, when Adomnán is referring to Iona, he speaks of it 'in these parts' (*in his locis*), suggesting that he was in Iona when he was writing VSC in the 690s. Had he been in Ireland he would surely have referred to Iona as lying *in illis locis*.

the new Easter. His failure to effect this change in his own lifetime may shed light on what kind of obedience a Gaelic abbot might expect of his monks in the late seventh century, and on the interplay between the authority of a long-standing tradition and the personal and institutional authority of Adomnán, the abbot, who was urging a new practice. And it is important to remember here that the more conservative Ionan monks probably remained faithful to their tradition not out of loyalty to some abstract calculation, but because they associated their Easter with St Columba himself, the founding abbot of their monastery. This is certainly the implication of Bede's account of the argument at Whitby.<sup>8</sup> Further support for this appears in a poem written about Columba shortly after his death. *Amre Coluimb Chille* recounts among Columba's achievements:<sup>9</sup>

He read mysteries and distributed Scriptures among the schools,  
and he put together the harmony concerning the course of the moon,  
the course which it ran with the rayed sun,  
and the course of the sea.

These calculations of the 'harmony' of moon and sun strongly suggest a memory of Columba as promoting an Easter-computus, which is, after all, an attempt to juggle, among other things, the lunar and solar calendars. Asking the Ionan monks to abandon their 84-year cycle must have felt to them like asking them to break an intimate link with their founder and patron whose prayers were sustaining them in their monastic quest. They may have felt that they were being asked to choose between their founding abbot, Columba, and their present-day abbot, Adomnán. The purpose of this article is to shed some light on how Adomnán sought to deal with this tension, to continue to serve as *abbas* or 'father' in a community divided on this issue, and to ensure that the division did not break the bonds of fraternal charity which bound the community together.

In addition to this tension within the community, we may also briefly consider the place of Iona in the context of struggles for authority among the Gaelic churches in the late seventh century. At that time various churches were staking a claim to something like metropolitan authority over the others. Cogitosus used the prologue of his *Vita sanctae Brigidae*, probably in the 670s or 680s, to assert Kildare's claim to have an archbishop and to be 'the head of nearly all the churches of the Irish, and the chief over all the monasteries of the Gaels, whose *parochia* is spread over all Ireland,

---

<sup>8</sup> *HE*, iii, 25, where Wilfrid addresses the Columban monks, 'Concerning your father Columba and his followers, whose holiness you claim to imitate, and whose rule and commandments, confirmed by heavenly signs, you say that you follow ...'.

<sup>9</sup> *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery*, ed. & transl. Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus (Edinburgh, 1995) 108–9, 121.

from sea to sea’.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, or within a few years, Armagh was launching its own hagiographical account of why *it* should be the metropolitan church over the Irish. The author of *Liber Angeli* has an angel appear to Saint Patrick in a dream and announce to him:<sup>11</sup>

‘And the Lord God has given all the nations of the Gaels (*Scotorum gentes*) as a parochia to you and to this city which is named in the language of the Irish Armagh.’

By the 680s both Kildare and Armagh had probably accepted the 19-year Easter-cycle, while Iona was still using the 84-year cycle. This placed Iona in a dangerous position in respect of these ambitious churches because they could present the Dionysiac cycle as a touchstone of Christian orthodoxy, accusing the Columban *familia* of being schismatic or even heretical, and could thereby make claims over Iona and her daughter-churches in Ireland. In *Collectio canonum Hibernensis* it was declared that ‘all heretics, even if they are heads of major monasteries, when their heresy is exposed, are to be ejected from their seats with the consent of a synod’.<sup>12</sup> The ecclesiastical politics of the period, and the threat to Columban churches’ autonomy presented by Kildare and Armagh, must have urged Adomnán to make sure that he himself at least could not be accused of heresy on account of his espousal of the 84-year cycle. But the resistance of his community to change may have been a cause for concern from the point of view of Iona’s continuing independence and her control of her own daughter-houses in Ireland.

#### *A house divided*

We can only imagine what kind of disruption was caused in Iona itself, and among the Columban *familia*, that is the network of daughter-houses owing allegiance to the

---

<sup>10</sup> Cogitosus, *Sanctae Brigidae Virginis Vita*, Prologue, in *Trias Thaumaturga*, ed. J. Colgan (Louvain, 1647), 518–26: ‘caput pene omnium Hiberniensium ecclesiarum, et culmen praececellens omnia monasteria Scotorum, cujus parochia per totam Hibernensem terram diffusa, a mari usque ad mare extensa est ...’.

<sup>11</sup> *Liber Angeli* §8, in *The Patrician Texts in The Book of Armagh*, ed. & transl. Ludwig Bieler (Dublin, 1979), 184: ‘Ac deinde donauit tibi Dominus Deus uniuersas Scotorum gentes in modum paruchiae et huic urbi tuae, quae cognominatur Scotorum lingua Ardd Machæ’.

<sup>12</sup> *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*, ed. Hermann Wasserschleben (hereafter *CCH*) (Leipzig, 1885), xxxvii, 35: ‘Omnes heretici, quamvis magnarum urbium principes sint, denudata eorum heresi, a cathedris suis consensu sinodi ejecti sunt’.

abbot of Iona who was the *comarbae* or ‘heir’ of Colum Cille. It is unlikely that monks in one house observed Lent and Easter according to two different calendars; more likely is that the majority (or perhaps the senior monks) imposed their preferred cycle on the minority (or the juniors), against the consciences of the latter. Did all the Columban houses refuse to change, as Bede suggests, or did some accept the 19-year cycle?<sup>13</sup> If so, how did this affect the fraternal relationships between communities which had made different choices? If a monastery like Iona could successfully resist the will of its abbot on the matter of the paschal date, did this have a more generally corrosive effect on the relationship between the abbot and the monks? Certainly it seems that on the death of Adomnán in 704, the Ionan community was still divided on the issue of Easter, and for some years thereafter this division meant that two rival abbots exercised authority at once – something of a spiritual and constitutional disaster for a monastery, where ‘brothers dwelling in unity’ ought to have been at the heart of its common life. In the years following 704 ‘The Annals of Ulster’ record a number of persons – the annalists using various terminology – who claimed authority over Iona, and Thomas Charles-Edwards has offered a plausible picture of which abbots belonged to which of the two rival camps.<sup>14</sup> Even after Iona herself changed her celebration of the date of Easter in 716, it seems that the division persisted, which may suggest that following the ‘change’ there nonetheless remained a conservative faction.

<i>Adomnán's party: 19-year cycle</i>	<i>conservative party: 84-year cycle</i>
AU 707: ‘Dúnchad assumed the <i>principatus</i> of Iona.’	AU 710: ‘Conamail son of Failbi, abbot of Iona ( <i>abbas Iae</i> ), rests.’
	AU 713: ‘Doirbéne obtained the <i>kathedra</i> of Iona, and after five months in the primacy ( <i>in primatu</i> ) he died on Saturday, the fifth calends of November.’
AU 716: ‘The date of Easter is changed in the monastery of Iona’ ( <i>in Eoa ciuitate</i> ).	

<sup>13</sup> *HE*, v, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Charles-Edwards, ‘Iona, abbots of (act. 563–927)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004). On line at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/51141> (accessed 8 February 2017).

AU 716: ‘Faelchú son of Doirbéne, in the seventy-fourth year of his age, on Saturday, the fourth of the kalends of September, assumed the <i>kathedra</i> of Columba’.	
AU 717: ‘Dúnochad son of Cenn Faelad, abbot of Iona ( <i>abbas Iae</i> ), died.’	AU 722: ‘Feidilmid held the <i>principatus</i> of Iona.’
AU 724: ‘Faelchú son of Doirbéne, abbot of Iona, fell asleep. Cilléne the Tall succeeded him in the <i>principatus</i> of Iona.’	

In spite of this division which endured for more than three decades, the Ionan community somehow eventually found a way of restoring order and unity. It is worth bearing in mind here the direction given by *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*, especially as one of the two supposed compilers of the text, Cú Chuimne, was a monk of Iona around the time when the abbacy was divided and must have had personal experience of the damage which such division could do to a community:<sup>15</sup>

A church is not to be scattered on account of stubbornness, but it is to be gathered together like sheep in a sheepfold. An Irish Synod said: if by a stubborn opposition between the abbot and his monks some discord has arisen, let the pastor not scatter his flock, nor let the sheep flee the shepherd, but let them make peace with each other, saying, ‘I will go to the altar of my God.

This concern that the brethren should make peace with one another was at the heart of Adomnán’s response to the crisis of his abbacy. We might even say that it was one of the central concerns of his *Vita sancti Columbae*.

#### *Adomnán as peace-maker*

This concern has already been demonstrated in a fine article by Clare Stancliffe. In ‘Charity with peace’ she argued that in the closing chapter of the *Vita sancti Columbae* Adomnán sought to guide his monks out of the sterile opposition of the Easter dispute and into fraternal charity. Indeed, not only is the passage in question

---

<sup>15</sup> CCH, XXXVII, 37: ‘De eo, quod non dispersa esse debet ecclesia per contumaciam, sed congreganda est, ut oves in ovile. Sinodus Hibernensis: Si qua contumacia inter principem et monachos ejus per discordiam aliquam orta sit, non rejiciat pastor gregem suum in dispersionem, nec oves pastorem fugiant, sed invicem pacificentur, dicentes Introibo ad altare Dei mei’ (The Vulgate has *Introibo ad altare Dei* [Psalm 42. 4]).

found in the final chapter of *Vita sancti Columbae* (iii, 23); it is also a record, according to Adomnán, of the very last words of the dying saint:

‘I commend to you, my children, these last words, that you should have among yourselves mutual and unfeigned charity, with peace. And if you should observe according to the example of the holy fathers, God, who strengthens the good, will help you, and I, abiding with him, will pray for you; and not only the needs of this present life will be sufficiently given by him, but also the rewards of eternal good things will be given which are prepared for those who follow the divine commandments.’

Stancliffe has suggested that, in giving these last words to Columba, Adomnán was not only urging his monks to fraternal charity. She has argued that the dying words of Columba contain verbal echoes of a story in Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History*, originally written in Greek in 323 or 324, but cited by Adomnán in the Latin translation made in 410 by Rufinus of Aquileia.<sup>16</sup> In this story Eusebius recorded a dispute between Victor, bishop of Rome (189–198), and the churches of Asia led by Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus – a dispute concerning the date of Easter. In Eusebius’s account, the churches of Asia were celebrating Easter on the fourteenth day of *Nisan*, the day of the Jewish Passover. This celebration was ultimately rejected by the wider Church, and its followers were regarded as heretics referred to as Quartodecimans, roughly translatable as ‘fourteeners’.<sup>17</sup> The important point for our purposes, however, is how the *Ecclesiastical History* describes the outcome of this dispute about Easter. The Church’s highest authority, Victor, chose to excommunicate the Asian churches which had ‘decided to hold the old custom that was handed down to them’ – rather as the monks of Iona had thought themselves to have been doing, since their 84-year cycle was what had been handed down to them from Columba. Victor’s excommunication of the Asian churches did not please other bishops in the West,

---

<sup>16</sup> Stancliffe, ‘Charity with peace’, 62–8. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastica historia*, V, 24–6, trans. Rufinus, in *Die Kirchengeschichte: Eusebius Werke*, II, ed. E. Schwartz and T. Mommsen (Leipzig, 1903), 493–7.

<sup>17</sup> There are aspects of Eusebius’s account which suggest that he had misunderstood his sources, and that the second-century contention was not between Victor and the churches of Asia Minor, but was a more local dispute. As Eamon Duffy has put it, ‘Victor was not brawling randomly around the Mediterranean spoiling for a fight, but trying to impose uniformity of practice on all the churches within his own city, as part of a more general quest for internal unity and order ... Victor’s excommunication was aimed at Asian congregations in Rome, not fired broadside at churches over which he had no direct jurisdiction’: *Saints and Sinners: a History of the Popes* (New Haven, CT, 1997), 11–12.

however, ‘and they besought him to consider the things of peace, and of neighbourly unity and love’. Victor was admonished by Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, who recalled various holy men of the Church, both Quartodecimans and those who celebrated Easter on a Sunday, and remarked how they had all honoured each other and remained in peace and in communion with each other in spite of their differences. And it is precisely this passage – about how people differed on the date of Easter but managed to remain in peace – which is echoed by the words of the dying saint in Adomnán’s *Vita sancti Columbae*. Adomnán’s intention was to make a plea that ‘the things of peace’ should prevail through ‘neighbourly unity and love’, even when the brethren disagreed about Easter-dating. By echoing Eusebius’s language, Adomnán pointed his readers to the authority of Church-history in support of his view of the significance of the paschal controversy in his own time. And although this plea for peace may have been addressed in the first place to his own monks, urging them to mutual charity, he must also have had in mind the clergy and monks of other churches who were hostile to Iona’s 84-year cycle, in the hope of maintaining communion and effecting reconciliation with them.

#### *Two saints, two prophecies*

Stancliffe has pointed out that, although Adomnán was striving for harmony and communion among his monks, this did not compromise his own commitment to the 19-year paschal cycle. In the seventh-century Insular church where one party was maintaining that it, and it alone, comprised the true *Romani*, she notes how some authors demonstrated their *romanitas* by quoting passages from earlier works which could be read as suggestive of Roman authority, and that Adomnán did exactly this.<sup>18</sup> In the first preface of *Vita sancti Columbae* he echoed the words of Dionysius Exiguus, the author of the 19-year cycle which was now being used by the Church in Rome and by the Northumbrian Church, in the dedicatory letter attached to his own Easter table. He also leans heavily on Gregory the Great’s ‘Life of St Benedict’.<sup>19</sup> Such borrowings from authoritative sources would certainly have suggested to the attentive seventh-century reader Adomnán’s commitment to the 19-year cycle. In what follows, I shall suggest that *Vita sancti Columbae* has an even more direct assertion of Adomnán’s preference for the 19-year cycle than these passing echoes of authors who considered themselves *Romani*.

If we turn our attention from the end of *Vita sancti Columbae* to the beginning, we find, after the two prefaces, a list of forty-three chapter-headings for the first book of the *Vita*, followed by an announcement: ‘The text of the first book begins, concerning prophetic revelations’.<sup>20</sup> This in turn is followed by the first

<sup>18</sup> Stancliffe, ‘Charity with peace’ 53-4.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Charles-Edwards, ‘The new edition of Adomnán’s *Life of Columba*’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 26 (1993), 65–73, at 66–7.

<sup>20</sup> *Incipit primi libri textus de profeticis reuelationibus*.

chapter (VSC i, 1) which calls itself a *brevis narratio* or summary of Columba's 'miracles of power' – a fairly haphazard collection of very briefly stated miracles of various sorts, which are not, in fact, for the most part 'prophetic revelations' as the opening announcement of Book One would lead us to expect. It seems that VSC i, 1 has been slipped in, perhaps as an afterthought, interrupting the natural flow from the opening announcement to the beginning of the sequence of stories which are about prophetic revelations. It is only with VSC i, 2 that the accounts of prophetic revelations start, and we should therefore see this as the 'proper' (perhaps even the original) beginning of Book One. It is a strange feature of *Vita sancti Columbae*, when i, 2 is seen as the beginning, that it starts with two stories in which Columba prophesies the future greatness of two different monks. Both of the monks show devotion to Columba, and both of them are said by Adomnán to have a great reputation for holiness. The first story (VSC i, 2) concerns *Fintenus filius Tailchaini* who is more commonly known as Fintan, and sometimes by the hypocoristic form of his name, *Munnu*. Adomnán wrote that this man 'was afterwards regarded among all the churches of the Gaels as very famous'. The second story (VSC i, 3) concerns *Erneneus filius Craseni*, or Ernéne mac Craséni, a monk of Clonmacnoise who 'was afterwards famous among all the churches of Gaeldom, and very well known'. Apart from Columba himself, whose fame is implicit throughout *Vita sancti Columbae* and is made extravagantly explicit in VSC iii, 23, only Fintan and Ernéne are recorded by Adomnán as being famous in this way.<sup>21</sup> No other person – even among those who are called *sancti* – is accorded the kind of fame which Fintan and Ernéne enjoy. This seems to set these two men apart, to make them a pair, as does the fact that both men in these two stories show marked devotion to St Columba, and both become the objects of prophecy by St Columba in which they are praised for their holiness, scholarship, and wisdom.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> VSC, iii, 23: 'And this great grace was also bestowed by God on that man of blessed memory, that his name should deserve to be brilliantly renowned not only throughout our *Scotia*, and throughout Britain, the greatest of the world's islands, although he lived in this tiny and remote island of the Britannic ocean, but also as far as three-cornered Spain, and Gaul, and Italy which is beyond the Pennine Alps, and even the Roman city itself, which is the chief of all cities'.

<sup>22</sup> According to 'The Annals of Ulster', Fintan and Ernéne died in the same year, their deaths noted in a single entry in AU 635: *Quies Fintain m. Telchain et Ernaine m. Creseni* ('the resting of Fintan mac Telcháin and of Ernéne mac Craséne'). Is it a coincidence that these two men, whose obituaries appear together in the same annal entry, are the two men who appear together in the first two stories of *Vita sancti Columbae*? It has been suggested that Adomnán put their stories together in the first two chapters of his work, simply because he had before him a copy of the Ionan Chronicle in which the

A further possible pairing device is the fact that Adomnán gave very precise indications of his sources for the two stories. In the first, he stated that he was informed by an old priest, a monk of St Fintan, who had heard the story himself ‘from the mouth of the same Saint Fintan’, while the story about Ernéne was told to Adomnán by Faílbe, an earlier abbot of Iona, who had heard it from the lips of Ernéne himself during a meeting between Ernéne and Abbot Ségéne. There are other instances in the *Vita* in which Adomnán stated who his informants were for a story which he had just related; but these two are remarkably detailed, and being able to trace the stories back – not only to a reliable witness but to the very saints who were the subjects of the two prophecies – would give these two stories extra authority. And, as we shall shortly see, Adomnán wanted to make these stories as authoritative as possible, to remove any doubt as to their authenticity.

Before we turn to reflect on the reasons for Adomnán’s having made this pair of stories the opening of his book of prophecies, let us briefly summarise how Fintan and Ernéne appear in the two chapters. In the first story (VSC i, 2) we hear of Fintan, a holy monk in Ireland inspired by God to seek out St Columba and to become a *peregrinus* in his monastery on Iona. Before he arrived there, he learnt that Columba had died, but, despite this, he continued on his way to Iona to seek admission to the monastery from its new abbot, Baíthéne. He was warmly welcomed by Baíthéne, but was informed that, some time before his death, Columba had prophesied Fintan’s arrival saying that he was not to be admitted to Iona:

‘In the foreknowledge of God it is not predestined that [Fintan] should become a monk under some other abbot; for he himself has long since been chosen by God to be the abbot of monks and the leader of their souls to the heavenly kingdom. So you will refuse to keep this celebrated man in these islands of ours ... but relating these words to him you must send him back to Ireland in peace.’

Adomnán told how Fintan wept with gratitude, received Baíthéne’s blessing, and returned to Ireland to establish a monastery near the sea in Leinster, presumably a reference to Taghmon.<sup>23</sup>

The second story (VSC i, 3) tells how Columba visited ‘the brothers who lived in the monastery of St Ciarán at Clonmacnoise (*Clonoensi*)’, and how he was welcomed there by the monks with an extravagant outpouring of joy and devotion, ‘as

---

obituaries of Fintan and Ernéne were recorded together in that order. This entry in the Iona Chronicle later provided the information which finally appeared in ‘The Annals of Ulster’: Picard, ‘Bede, Adomnán, and the writing of history’, 54. I would argue, however, that this correspondence between *AU* and *VSC* may be a coincidence, and that there is a far more deliberate and pointed reason for Adomnán’s choice of these saints for his opening stories.

<sup>23</sup> Taghmon is *Tech Munnu*, ‘Munnu’s (i.e., Fintan’s) House’.

if he were an angel of the Lord'. They bowed to the ground, kissed him, and, singing for joy, led him to the church. They also made a *piramis* of branches with which they surrounded him, four monks carrying it as he walked along, to prevent his being troubled by the crowd of monks. In spite of this barrier, a young boy, 'very much despised because of his appearance and bearing', secretly sought to touch the hem of Columba's garment.<sup>24</sup> Columba reached behind him, seized the boy's neck, and pulled him forward. Ignoring the protests of the brethren who said 'Send him away! Why do you hold on to this wretched and naughty boy?', Columba told him to open his mouth and put out his tongue. Blessing the boy's tongue he went on to prophesy:

'Though he now seems to you to be despicable and quite worthless, let no one despise this boy for that reason. For from this hour not only will he no longer annoy you, but he will greatly please you. He will grow gradually, from day to day, in good conduct and in the virtues of his soul. And wisdom and prudence will increase in him more and more from this day on, and in this congregation of yours he will be a great figure. His tongue also will receive from God saving doctrinal eloquence.'

As we should expect in such a hagiographical story, what Columba had prophesied concerning Ernéne came to pass. But in concluding the story of the Clonmacnoise prophecy and its fulfilment, Adomnán added two further details by which he intended to alert the reader to what I suggest was his purpose here. The two details are important, and are as follows:

In those days the saint (Columba) prophesied many other things by the revelation of the Holy Spirit while he was a guest at Clonmacnoise. That is, concerning the dispute which arose many days later among the churches of Gaeldom concerning the variation of the Easter-festival; and also concerning some angelic visitations which were revealed to him, by which certain places within the enclosure of that monastery were visited by angels at that time.

This story of Columba at Clonmacnoise is the only place in all of Adomnán's writings where he explicitly mentioned the dispute about the date of Easter. It is his one direct reference to something which, as we have seen, must have cast a long shadow over his life, and over the life of Iona. Why did he mention it here? And why did he have St Columba, filled with the Holy Spirit, first of all prophesying that such a dispute would take place and secondly – in the same moment of divine inspiration – identifying places within the enclosure of Clonmacnoise which angels were in the habit of visiting?

---

<sup>24</sup> Clearly echoing the gospel-story about the woman with a flow of blood touching the garment of Christ (Matt. 9. 20).

*Easter at Clonmacnoise*

The answer to these questions lies partly in what we know of the history of Clonmacnoise and its own position during the Easter-dating controversy. A letter was written in 632 or 633 by an Irishman called Cumméne,<sup>25</sup> addressed to Ségéne the fifth abbot of Iona (623–652) and one *Beccanus solitarius*, ‘Beccán the hermit’, together with their wise men, urging them to adopt the nineteen-year paschal cycle which had recently been adopted by several southern Irish churches. From this letter, and from a letter of Pope Honorius mentioned by Bede,<sup>26</sup> we can reconstruct a series of events.<sup>27</sup>

628	Pope Honorius writes to the Irish churches urging the acceptance of the nineteen-year cycle.
630	A synod is convened in Mag Léne ( <i>in Campo Lene</i> ) at which several Irish churchmen unanimously agreed to follow the new paschal dating; but, following the synod, further dispute arose, instigated by a ‘whited wall’ ( <i>paries dealbatus</i> ) who rejected the decision.
631	Irish envoys went to Rome to make further enquiry about the celebration of Easter.
632	The Irish delegation return from Rome.
632/3	Cumméne wrote his letter to Ségéne, Beccán, and the wise men, urging observance of the 19-year cycle in common with the rest of the Church.

From this same letter of Cumméne we know that among the churchmen who participated in the Synod of Mag Léne was the abbot of Clonmacnoise, ‘the successor of Ciarán’ (*succesor ... Querani Coloniensis*); and given that this abbot was one of those who unanimously accepted the new 19-year Easter cycle at the synod, we can assume that from then on (and certainly after the dispute with the ‘whited wall’ was resolved by a visit to Rome the following year) Clonmacnoise was observing the new Easter.

When Adomnán wrote that Columba had visited Clonmacnoise and prophesied in the Holy Spirit about the paschal dispute, we must remember that both Adomnán and his readers would have been well aware that Clonmacnoise had been following the 19-year Easter-cycle for some six decades. And when Adomnán wrote that Columba, by the same inspiration of the Holy Spirit and almost in the same

<sup>25</sup> His identity cannot be established with any certainty. For discussion see *Cummian’s Letter ‘De controversia paschali’ and the ‘De ratione computandi’*, ed. & transl. Maura Walsh and Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (Toronto 1988), 7–15.

<sup>26</sup> *HE*, ii, 19.

<sup>27</sup> *Cummian’s Letter*, ed. & transl. Walsh & Ó Cróinín, 6–7.

breath as his prediction of the dispute, had identified the places where angels gathered within the enclosure of Clonmacnoise, his readers must have understood that this was a mark of the holiness of the place, a sign of divine approval. By combining these two observations in one narrative moment he implied divine approval (and therefore Columba's approval too) for Clonmacnoise's observance of the new Easter-date. This impression can only be reinforced when we note that Ernéne mac Craiséne, the monk whom Columba blessed and foretold would receive 'saving doctrinal eloquence', was a senior monk of Clonmacnoise at the time when that monastery adopted the 19-year paschal cycle, for he died (according to 'The Annals of Ulster') in 635. In conclusion, given what we know about Clonmacnoise's adherence to the new Easter, Columba's prophecy about the dispute, his observation of the angelic presence at Clonmacnoise, and his prophetic blessing of a most eminent member of its community, it looks very much as if Adomnán's intent in VSC i, 3 was to suggest to the monks of Iona that Saint Columba – in whose memory the Iona monks were rigidly adhering to the 84-year cycle – had himself prophetically foreseen and approved the 19-year cycle. (Note that I am not arguing that Columba did indeed foresee and approve it, but that Adomnán wanted to persuade his monks that he had.)

#### *Fintan's Easter*

If Adomnán was indeed treating VSC i, 2 and VSC i, 3 as a pair of stories, as I have suggested, and Fintan and Ernéne as a pair of saints whose stories implied something about the Easter-controversy, we may turn our attention to the profile of Fintan in his early medieval cult. Our principal source for his cult is a Latin Life, the earlier one of two which appear in the *Codex Salmanticensis*.<sup>28</sup> This manuscript, now in Brussels, was made in the fourteenth century, but the *Vita Prior* is one of the Lives in the codex identified by Richard Sharpe as belonging to what he calls 'the O'Donohue group' whose origin lies 'before or around 800'.<sup>29</sup>

In the *Vita Prior*, one of the stories told about Fintan at some length concerns his involvement in the paschal dispute. It is worth presenting the relevant parts of this text here:

---

<sup>28</sup> *Vita Prior Sancti Fintani seu Munnu abbatis de Tech Munnu* ('The First Life of Saint Fintan or Munnu, abbot of Taghmon'), in *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi*, ed. W. W. Heist (Brussels, 1965), 198–209. There is another Life of Fintan in *Codex Salamanticensis*, but it is not one of the O'Donohue Lives, and will not be discussed further here. The Life has been translated in full by Gilbert Márkus, *Brilliant Flame: St Munnu in Medieval Literature and his Church at Kilmun in Cowal* (Kilmartin, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives: An Introduction to the Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford, 1991), 297–339, esp. 334–8.

At one time there was a great council of the people of Ireland in the plains of Ailbe and there was an enormous argument among them for a whole year concerning the new Easter and the old Easter. For Laisrén of Leighlin with his people defended the new Easter and the new order, but other elders of Ireland praised the old Easter and the old order. Saint Fintan did not come immediately to this council, and all the people were waiting for him, for he was the principal and the first of those who defended the old Easter ... And that day, before Vespers, Fintan came to the council, and Fintan and Laisrén greeted each other ...

The next day Fintan said to Laisrén before all the people, ‘Now is the time for this council to finish, and for everyone to return to his own place. Briefly therefore I say three things to Laisrén. That is, let two of our books be put on the fire, a book of the old order and one of the new order, so that we might see which book escapes from the fire. Or else let two of our monks be enclosed in one house and let the house be set on fire, and we shall see which of the two will be delivered from the fire. Or else let us go together, Laisrén and I, to the grave of a dead monk, formerly a just man, and let us raise him up so that he might tell us which Easter is being celebrated this year in Heaven.’

Laisrén said to him, ‘I will not go into judgment against God’s judge,<sup>30</sup> for, because of the greatness of your work, if you were to command that Sliab Mairge be moved to the plains of Ailbe and the plains of Ailbe to the place of Sliab Mairge, God would do this for you.’

Then Fintan said, ‘Let each person therefore do what he believes and seems right to him.’<sup>31</sup>

Fintan clearly had a reputation, therefore, by the end of the eighth century, as a rigid defender of the old Easter. It is even possible that he was the ‘whited wall’, mentioned above, who defied the consensus over the new date of Easter which had been achieved at the synod of Mag Léne.<sup>32</sup> It is unlikely that Fintan obtained this reputation during the course of the eighth century, for what writer seeking to encourage devotion to a saint would attribute to him what had become an unorthodox teaching, unless that saint were already known to have espoused that teaching? We should deduce therefore that Fintan was known to Adomnán not only as a holy man, but also as the defender of the old 84-year paschal cycle.

### *Adomnán’s Easter*

---

<sup>30</sup> *Non ibo in iudicium contra brutum Dei*. I find *brutum* (‘brute, brutish person’) an unlikely word in this context, and suggest that Old Gaelic *brithem*, ‘judge’, lies behind it. Not going into judgment against God’s judge makes perfect sense.

<sup>31</sup> *Vita Prior*, §§29–30, ed. Heist, 207.

<sup>32</sup> See *Cummian’s Letter*, ed. & transl. Walsh and Ó Cróinín, 50, for discussion.

If I am correct in reading VSC i, 2 and VSC i, 3 as a pair of stories about two individuals on opposing sides of the paschal dispute, some details of these two stories begin to make sense as narrative devices by which Adomnán sought to draw his monks towards his own position and to the observance of the 19-year cycle.

(1) In Adomnán's story Fintan did not meet Columba.<sup>33</sup> Although he was 'burning with desire' to go to Iona and to become a monk of Columba, he was frustrated, for Columba had died before he arrived there; and although he received a blessing from Baíthéne, he was not blessed by Columba in person. By contrast, Ernéne did meet Columba, touched him, was touched by him, and blessed by him. There was a real personal connection here between Columba and Ernéne – a connection which Fintan never enjoyed.

(2) In spite of his own sanctity and his devotion to Columba, Fintan was not permitted to remain on Iona. He was told to return to Ireland to found his own monastery, symbolically driving a wedge between him and the island monastery of Iona, separating him and his 84-year cycle from Columba's monks.

(3) When Columba arrived at Clonmacnoise, the monks gave him great honour and erected a *piramis* around him. This is a word used elsewhere by Adomnán, in *De locis sanctis*, for the low stone feature (*humilem lapideam ... pyramidem*) which surrounded the tomb of the biblical King David outside the walls of Bethlehem.<sup>34</sup> Likewise he described the tomb of Rachel as surrounded by a stone feature (*de lapidea circumdatum pyramide*).<sup>35</sup> This suggests that, for Adomnán, a *piramis* is something with which the devout surround the body of a saint – dead in the case of David and Rachel, alive in the case of Columba.<sup>36</sup> By the use of this word, perhaps Adomnán

---

<sup>33</sup> He does meet Columba (*Columba Kille*) in *Vita Prior* §2, but he is only a little boy at this point. In *Vita sancti Columbae*, however, Fintan does not have this honour.

<sup>34</sup> *De locis sanctis*, ed. Denis Meehan (Dublin 1983), 76.

<sup>35</sup> *De locis sanctis*, 78.

<sup>36</sup> We may note that in *Vita sancti Ruadani* (§12) there is a cursing competition between the saint and the king of Tara, during which the king tells Ruadán, 'A very fierce boar shall dig up your *piramis* with its tusk' (*Aper ferocissimus suo dente tuam pyramidem perfodiet*). Given that this is the grave of a saint, the word *piramis* once again seems to suggest something shrine-like (*Vitae Sanctorum*, ed. Heist, 165). Likewise, in *Vita Prior Sancti Fintani*, §13, there is the story a nun or 'handmaid of God' (*ancilla Dei*) who came to Fintan and got him to abandon his newly built church; he blessed the place, but not her,

suggested that, at the hands of the monks of Clonmacnoise, Columba's body was to all intents and purposes enshrined.<sup>37</sup> In answer to the Iona monks' assertion that they adhered to the 84-year paschal cycle out of devotion to St Columba, the monks of Clonmacnoise demonstrated that one can have fervent devotion to the saint – with the consequent blessing of the saint – while following the 19-year cycle.

(4) Adomnán asserted that the source of his story about Columba's visit to Clonmacnoise and his blessing of Ernéne was Ernéne himself, who related it to Ségéne, Adomnán's predecessor as abbot from 623 to 652. This implies that Ségéne had met Ernéne face-to-face. Columba's prophecy about the holiness of Ernéne is therefore attested by the same Ségéne to whom Cummméne wrote his letter *circa* 632 urging him to join other Irish churches in observing the new paschal dating, but who had remained intransigent in continuing to support the old Easter together with his Ionan monks. Adomnán had therefore in his story cleverly recruited Ségéne to serve as a witness to the holiness of a man who opposed him in the dispute.

Stancliffe and others have reminded us that Adomnán saw beyond the hostilities arising from the paschal dispute, and urged his monks to 'charity with peace' even in the midst of this division. She was correct to highlight this aspect of Columba's death-scene in the *Vita* as a declaration of Adomnán's ecumenical intent. Nevertheless, Adomnán was not indifferent about when his monks celebrated Easter, and his stories about Fintan and Ernéne are designed to persuade them that, although both were famous and holy men and both friends of God, on this particular issue Columba was indicating in a hidden and prophetic way that Fintan was wrong and Ernéne was right. If that was so, fidelity to Columba's memory would urge the Ionan monks to adopt the 19-year paschal cycle, as Adomnán hoped that they would.

GILBERT MÁRKUS IS AN AFFILIATE RESEARCHER IN CELTIC AND GAELIC IN THE UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW.

---

telling her that, although he could not close heaven against her, 'few people will know your tomb' (*piramidem tuam pauci scient*) (*Vitae Sanctorum*, ed. Heist, 201).

<sup>37</sup> This impression is strengthened by Adomnán's remark that they met him 'as if he were an angel of the Lord' (*quasi angelo domini*), though clearly a bodiless angel cannot be surrounded by a *piramis*.