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Easter Celebration in Seventh-Century Britain: Resolving Conflict within the Church

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In AD 664 a debate over the question of the correct Easter computus occurred in the abbey of Whitby, Northumbria. Both sides of the debate had presented their arguments and rebuttals. On one side was the Irish bishop of Northumbria, Colman. Opposing him was the stalwart figure of Wilfrid, an English priest and an up-and-coming figure in English ecclesiastical circles. Finally king Oswiu, who was presiding over this council, wryly smiled and asked the assembled clerics, “Who is greater in the kingdom of heaven, Columba or the Apostle Peter?”¹ The answer was a resounding vote of confidence in Petrine supremacy. Wilfrid won the day and Colman departed from Northumbria, eventually returning to Ireland. On the surface the so-called “Synod of Whitby” appears as a simple clash between Irish and English bishops over an obscure point of tradition, the calculation for the date of Easter. In reality Whitby was much more complex and to reduce it to a simple conflict between supposed Celtic and Roman churches does not do justice to the historical data. The English church was still very much in her infancy when Colman abdicated from Northumbria and missionaries on both sides of the debate were affected by its outcome. The underlying issues of tradition, authority and culture all played a role in the early evangelization of England and the Easter debates of the seventh century. The purpose of this article is to show that the discussion at Whitby was just the culmination of other discussions on the ecclesiology authority, cultural understanding and the early church traditions concerning a seemingly innocuous event like the date of Easter celebration.

The earliest Christian celebration of Easter (Pascha) coincided with the Jewish Passover. Melito of Sardis understood the Christian Pascha to coincide with Passover, i.e. it was always celebrated on the fourteenth day of the lunar month Nisan no matter what day of the week that was.² This was the common practice among Christians in Asia Minor and later came

¹“The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus,” in *Anglo-Saxon Saints and Heroes*, translated by Clinton Albertson, S.J. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1967), 105.

²Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha: with the Fragments of Melito and Other Material Related to the Quartodecimans*, translated, introduced and annotated by Alistair Stewart-Skyes (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 23-25.

to be known as Quartodecimanism, from *luna quarta decima* (the fourteenth moon). Another tradition that developed was always to celebrate Easter on the first Sunday following the first full moon after the equinox, thereby separating the Christian Pascha from the Jewish Passover.³ Polycarp of Smyrna was reported by Eusebius to have visited Rome in order to try and reconcile two different Easter methods. While both sides failed to achieve an agreement on a single agreeable method, both Pope Anicetus and Polycarp ensured that the issue did not become a matter of dogma and both sides maintained full communion. However, as the second century ended Rome took a stronger position on the issue, and Pope Victor I declared Quartodecimanism and the churches of Asia Minor heretical. Many in the western church, including Irenaeus, disagreed with this dogmatic position and chided Victor for his divisive stance. By the fourth century the council of Nicaea (325) had once again declared the condemnation of Quartodecimanism.⁴

The differences that emerged between the Celtic and Roman dates for Easter were primarily over two technical issues: 1) the date of the equinox and 2) the terminal limits for Easter. As early as the fifth century the early Irish church calculated Easter on the basis that the equinox occurred on March 25 and Easter could occur within the limits of lunar 14-20.⁵ Scholars refer to this Easter calendar today as Celtic-84, since it operated on an 84-year cycle. At Whitby, Wilfrid was arguing for the use of the Dionysian method that calculated Easter from an equinox of March 21 within the limits of lunar 15-21.

Several points need to be made in relation to these differences between Ireland and Rome concerning Easter. Firstly, Celtic-84 was not a Celtic invention. Though widely used in the Celtic speaking areas of Christendom (Britain, Ireland etc.), it was actually derived from Gaul. It was likely the work of Sulpicius Severus (c. 363-425), whose writings were very influential in the early Irish church.⁶ This is hardly surprising considering the huge influence Gaul had in both the early British church and in the first evangelistic missions to pagan Ireland. Ireland's first bishop, Palladius, was from Gaul and Saint Patrick referred warmly to the Gallic church in his *Confessio*.⁷ It is likely that Gaul had adopted the computus of Severus (Celtic-84) at the

³James F Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical: an Introduction and Guide (records of Civilization; Sources and Studies)*, Reprint ed. (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1966), 212.

⁴Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae*, 5.23-25.

⁵Daniel McCarthy, "On the Arrival of the Lateranus in Ireland," in *The Easter Controversy of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Its Manuscripts, Texts, and Tables: Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on the Science of Computus, Galway, 18-20 July 2008*, eds. Immo Warntjes and Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 75.

⁶David A. E. Pelteret, "The Issue of Apostolic Authority at the Synod of Whitby," in *The Easter Controversy of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* eds. Warntjes, and Ó Cróinín, 157.

⁷Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, "Who was Palladius, 'First bishop of the Irish?'" *Peritia* 14 (2000): 205-37.

council of Arles (314), which was attended by several British bishops. This same council mandated that all Christians should celebrate Easter on the same day.⁸ While the early Irish and British churches continued to maintain this older system inherited from Gaul, by 541 Gaul had abandoned Celtic-84 in favor of a different system developed by Victorius of Aquitaine.⁹

A second important point relating to these differences between Ireland and Rome is that it was in no way a unique issue to the Celtic church. The problems in producing a single workable Easter computus for the entire church were immense. No system was without its flaws and there were numerous times when Milan, Spain, Gaul and North Africa all celebrated Easter on different days. Sometimes Rome used the Alexandrian date and at other times Alexandria used the Roman date!¹⁰ Many times the choice of date was a political statement, as in 501 when during the Acacian schism Pope Symmachus kept Easter in Rome on March 25, when almost the entirety of Christendom celebrated it on April 22.¹¹ The point to remember is that Ireland was not unique in celebrating Easter on a different day to Rome; Spain, for example, did so likewise for much of the sixth century.¹² The Easter debate at Whitby does not demonstrate any support for an independent Celtic church, such a concept is without historical support and utterly alien to the early Irish conceptual framework.¹³ Rather it was part of a wider continental problem in producing a workable Easter computus that was scripturally and mathematically consistent.

The first signs of a conflict between the Irish and continental Easter dates were seen with the mission of Columbanus to Gaul in 591.¹⁴ Columbanus and the monks under his leadership had arrived in Gaul as *Peregrini pro Christo*. Merovingian patronage enabled him to establish several monasteries in Gaul. The issue concerning the date for Easter arose when the Columban houses insisted on following the Celtic-84 system while the Gallic church at this time was using the Victorian system. Columbanus' writings reveal a man of unresolved tension. He longs for unity and repeatedly writes of the dangers of division in the church. Yet at the same time he insisted on the superiority of his own native tradition and dismissed the Victorian tables in

⁸Richard Abels, "The Council of Whitby: A Study in Early Anglo-Saxon Politics," *Journal of British Studies* 23.1 (1983): 4. Liam de Paor, *St. Patrick's World* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 53-56.

⁹Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, "New Heresy for Old: Pelagianism in Ireland and the Irish Papal Letter of 640," *Speculum* 60 (1985): 508.

¹⁰Leofranc Holford-Stevens, "Church Politics and the Computus: From Milan to the Ends of the Earth," in *The Easter Controversy of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, eds. Warntjes, and Ó Cróinín, 6-7.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 11-12.

¹²Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (New York: ACLS History E-Book Project, 2001), 103.

¹³T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 91-92.

¹⁴Donald Bullough, "The Career of Columbanus," in *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin Writings*, ed. Michael Lapidus (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997), 10.

a letter to Pope Gregory as contradicting Scripture, and worthy of mockery rather than respect.¹⁵ In an effort to counter attack the bishops of Gaul he wrote several times to Rome in the hope of securing papal support for the Irish Easter date. The papacy remained silent and would not give a verdict on the matter. When papal support seemed unlikely Columbanus wrote again to Rome and to the bishops of Gaul in which he sought to at least secure the freedom for both traditions to live side by side. To the Gallic bishops he wrote, "Let Gaul, I beg, contain us side by side, whom the kingdom of heaven shall contain, if our deserts are good; for we have one kingdom promised and one hope of our calling in Christ, with whom we shall reign together."¹⁶ To the Pope he wrote reminding him of the example of diverse Easter traditions enabled to co-exist in the time of Pope Anicetus and Polycarp. However, having alienated the local Gallic bishops over the Easter question and the Burgundian king Theuderic II over the issue of the king's concubines, Columbanus was forced to leave Burgundy.

The controversy between Columbanus and the Gallic church was a foreshadowing of a similar conflict at Whitby. Columbanus had angered his political and theological opponents by refusing to submit to the tradition of the wider church. The survival and great benefit of the Columban monastic settlements in Europe was largely due to the abandoning of Celtic-84 by Columbanus' successors. By 627 the Columban monasteries at Luxeuil and Bobbio had adopted the Roman Easter date and continued their work of missions and theological training in Europe to great success.

The arrival of the Gregorian mission to England in 597 meant that the issue of Easter computus was now not only an issue for the Irish on the continent but now also in Britain. Gregory the Great had instructed Augustine (the bishop in charge of the mission) to be open to diversity of church practice. In Gregory's estimation whatever local ecclesiastical tradition was best suited to the needs of the fledging English church should be employed.¹⁷ As a whole Gregory was quite open to liturgical diversity even in matters like baptism.¹⁸ Gregory had initially called for the destruction of pagan English shrines and temples (*Epistle XI.66*) but later changed his instructions to allow for their conversion for use as churches.¹⁹ Gregory's sensitivity to Eng-

¹⁵Columbanus informed Gregory that "Victorius has not been accepted by our teachers, by the former scholars of Ireland, by the mathematicians most skilled in reckoning chronology, but has earned ridicule or indulgence rather than authority." G. S. Murdoch Walker, ed. *Sancti Columbani Opera (Scriptores Latini Hiberniae)* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1957), 7

¹⁶Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera*, 17.

¹⁷Bede, HE 1.27.

¹⁸Caitlin Corning, *The Celtic and Roman Traditions: Conflict and Consensus in the Early Medieval Church* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 74.

¹⁹Gregory the Great, "Selected Epistles of Gregory the Great, Bishop of Rome (Books IX-XIV)," trans. James Barmby, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, Volume XIII: Gregory the Great (Part II), Ephraim Syrus, Aphrahat*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1898), 85.

lish cultural conditions was not replicated in other areas of Christendom. In the case of resurgent paganism in the southern Italian church Gregory insisted in both the use of force and the destruction of all pagan shrines.²⁰ Gregorian policy was quite different in cases of pioneering missions to pagan lands rather than in areas already Christianized. The two greatest challenges to the Gregorian mission to England would prove to be the ongoing political conflict between the British and the English kingdoms and the intense conservatism of the Irish and British churches in matters of liturgy.²¹ Both of these factors would influence the Easter debate in Britain.

Augustine's failure to win the support of the British church in his mission was largely due to the ongoing wars between the British Christians and the pagan Anglo-Saxons. The British likely viewed a submission to Augustine as a submission to English power.²² Gregory had noted the British refusal to evangelize their English neighbors and remarked that the British bishops were in need of correction. For their part the British church's differences over Easter dating were part of the larger political issue concerning Anglo-Saxon expansion in Britain.²³ The Irish churches were also opposed to the Roman date for Easter that was being presented by Augustine and his successor Laurence, but largely for reasons of liturgical conservatism. In 610 an Irish Bishop named Dagan had refused to eat with Laurence or any of the Roman mission in England due to the Easter dating issue. Dagan's actions were akin to declaring Laurence heretical. In response Laurence wrote a letter to the Irish church wherein he urged the Irish to join them in the unity of the church and adopt the universal tradition of the church regarding Easter.²⁴ Easter was still very much a matter of orthodoxy for the Irish, since competing Easter systems claimed biblical support the issue was linked to the twisting of the Scriptures by opposing sides.

In 628 Pope Honorius wrote a letter to the Irish wherein he urged them to adopt the Roman Easter date for the sake of ecclesiastical unity.²⁵ Bede does not give the exact contents of the letter but we do know from the *Greater Chronicle* that Honorius had condemned supposed Quartodecimanism among the Irish.²⁶ This was an error on the part of Honorius, and Bede may have deliberately chosen not to include this erroneous accusation of

²⁰Robert McCulloch, "Gregorian Adaptation in the Augustinian Mission to England," *Missiology: An International Review* 6.3 (1978): 330-33.

²¹Douglas Dales, *Light to the Isles: Mission and Theology in Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Britain* (Cambridge, England: James Clarke & Co, 2010), 81, 85.

²²Corning, *The Celtic and Roman Traditions*, 78.

²³Gregory the Great, "Register of the Epistles of Saint Gregory the Great," trans. James Barmby, in vol. 12b, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, Volume XII: Leo the Great, Gregory the Great*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1895), 205.

²⁴Bede, HE 2.4.

²⁵Bede, HE 2.19.

²⁶Corning, *The Celtic and Roman Traditions*, 83. Bede was also likely not going to publish the fact that Honorius was advocating the Victorian table rather than the Dionysian.

Quartodecimanism against the Irish since he himself explicitly stated that the Irish were not Quartodecimanism.²⁷ Honorius' letter is the first time that the papacy linked the Celtic-84 computus with heresy. The response of the Irish church to Honorius's letter was to call a synod at Mag Léne in 630 where the majority of the assembled bishops and scholars agreed to adopt the new Roman Easter dating system. There was some dissention, however, mainly from Iona, and so a delegation was sent from Ireland to Rome to establish what was the universal custom of the church. They returned and confirmed the celebration of Easter according to the new system. For most of the Irish church this confirmed them in their decision to abandon the old Celtic-84 system in favor of the universal custom of the church. The churches in the north of Ireland and Iona held out, with the abbot of Iona Ségéne accusing those Irish who adopted the Victorian Easter of heresy.²⁸ In response an Irish bishop from the south of Ireland, Cummian, wrote a letter to Iona to urge them to reconsider their schismatic stance.

Cummian's letter is a strong response to the accusations of heresy from Iona. He first sets out to demonstrate the compatibility of the Victorian Easter to Scripture, then he marshals a litany of Patristic support in favor of his view. Lastly he calls on Iona to beware of the destruction that pride brings. He is alarmed that Iona and some of the churches in the north of Ireland can proudly resist the calls to ecclesiastical unity and instead insist, "Rome errs, Jerusalem errs, Alexandria errs, Antioch errs, the whole world errs; the Irish and British alone know what is right."²⁹ The issue for the majority of the Irish bishops was not simply what did Rome say, rather they were seeking a truly ecumenical answer to their quest for the correct Easter date. The Irish delegation sent to Rome had met with Hebrews, Greeks, Latins and Egyptians in order to establish the universal custom of the church. For Cummian it was simply pride that would prevent any Irish ecclesiastical leader from yielding to the universal celebration of Easter. Who after all were the Irish, asked Cummian, but a "pimple on the face of the earth!"³⁰ Iona in his view was hiding behind those revered Irish saints who had kept the old Celtic-84 system.³¹ To Cummian there was a stark difference between those Irish saints who in the past followed simply what had been handed down to them without knowing anything different in contrast to Iona who was dividing the Irish church simply because of their pride.³²

²⁷Bede, HE, 3.4.

²⁸Cummian, *Cummian's letter 'De controversia Paschali' together with a related Irish compustical tract 'De rationae computanti'* eds. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín and Maura Walsh (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies; Studies and texts, lxxxvi, 1988), 75.

²⁹Ibid., 81.

³⁰Ibid., 75.

³¹Cummian wrote, "Our elders, however, whom you hold as a cloak doe your rejection, kept simply and faithfully, without blame of any contradiction or animosity, that which they knew to be best in their day, and prescribed for their posterity thus, according to the apostle, test everything, hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil." Ibid., 75.

³²Bede presents a similar argument in HE 3.3.

Cummian's letter is of the utmost importance in order to understand Whitby in its proper context. By the 630s the Irish church had largely accepted the call to unity over the Easter question. Bishops like Cummian had attempted to demonstrate that the new Easter dating system was orthodox because it was scripturally consistent and universally accepted. Iona and some of the churches in the north of Ireland were still holding out, but their position can hardly be claimed to represent the views of the Irish church in general. Iona was quickly becoming isolated from both Ireland and Rome.

Around the same time as Cummian's letter Iona sent bishop Aidan to the English kingdom of Northumbria. His mission to Northumbria was a resounding success and Bede would later hold it up as his idealized picture of a spiritually vibrant church.³³ This is remarkable since Bede was well aware that Aidan still held to Iona's position on Easter. The Northumbrian church did not try to resolve the question of Easter during Aidan's tenure as bishop. His successors, however, were faced with opposition to their Easter tradition from two quarters; namely those Irish who had adopted the Roman date and the English bishops who sought to bring Northumbria into unity with the catholic tradition. Bede records how the most zealous advocate for the Roman Easter date in Northumbria was an Irish man called Ronan.³⁴ The disputes between Ronan and the Aidan's successor Finan were heated but achieved no consensus. Ronan had received his monastic training in Gaul, most probably in a Columban monastery that had already adopted the Roman Easter date.³⁵ When Finan died in 651 Colman, in whose episcopacy the synod of Whitby was called in 664, succeeded him as bishop of Lindisfarne.

The Irish mission from Iona to Northumbria was greatly assisted by the close relationship Iona had with king Oswald. His war to win the kingdom of Northumbria was supported by Iona's great founder, Columba.³⁶ Political alliance had offered Iona an open door for their mission to Northumbria and in many ways its successes in the time of Aidan were greatly helped by the support of the king. But as Whitby was to demonstrate, politics were to prove a double-edged sword for Iona's mission in Northumbria. The synod of Whitby was not a true ecclesiastical synod of the English church; the Archbishop of Canterbury was not present, for example. King Oswiu had summoned the synod and he alone would give the synod's verdict. In light of these criteria it is doubtful that Colman would have regarded Whitby as an ecclesiastical synod at all. In the Irish tradition kings did not have the authority to give a binding verdict on an ecclesiastical matter.³⁷ In reality Whitby was much more a matter of political expediency than doctrinal debate. Oswiu was keenly aware that his son, Alhfrith, had adopted the Roman

³³Bede, HE 3.26.

³⁴Bede, HE 3.25.

³⁵Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 125.

³⁶Bede, HE 3.1-2.

³⁷Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 281, 318-19.

date and had removed Irish monks from monasteries in his territory and handed them over the English priest Wilfrid.³⁸ Such an action was clearly a challenge to his authority as king. As it turns out Oswiu was right to be concerned about Alhfrith who was later to lead a revolt against his father.³⁹ His son who was allying himself with the pro-Roman party was attempting to outmaneuver him. Oswiu had been content to allow both the Irish and the Roman Easter dates to run concurrently in his kingdom. This meant that when the two systems had different dates for Easter some of his subjects would be fasting during Lent while others would be feasting at Easter.⁴⁰ This extraordinarily confused liturgical conflict was allowed to continue from the time of Aidan, who died in 651. Thus the real impetus for Oswiu's synod was less likely his concern for liturgical unity, though this is how Bede presents the situation, and more likely prompted by political expediency.⁴¹ Oswiu was going to abandon Iona for the sake of his kingdom.

In 664 the opposing sides made their arguments at Whitby, Colman on behalf of the tradition he had received from Iona and Wilfrid who claimed to represent to tradition of the universal church. Both sides stressed the apostolicity of their traditions, Colman cited the Apostle John as being in favor of his position, while Wilfrid claimed Peter and Paul. Both arguments were spurious; in reality no apostle had supported either camp's Easter computus. Still both sides wanted to bolster their claims with apostolic sanctity. Wilfrid also claimed that the Council of Nicaea in 325 supported his Easter dating system (which was the Dionysian); again this was erroneous as Nicaea had not adopted any specific computus.⁴² Wilfrid's argument was at times hostile and somewhat demeaning to the Irish whom he dismissed as stupid. Colman's allusion to Polycarp during the debate may have been a plea for toleration of both Easter traditions, since this was how Columbanus had employed it in 604.⁴³ In any case the argument climaxed with Wilfrid's reminder of the power of binding and loosing given to Peter. Importantly, Colman did not deny Petrine authority, and neither had Columbanus before him. According to Stephanus, Oswiu declared his verdict with a smile; Northumbria would officially adopt the Roman date.⁴⁴ Colman was never likely to have accepted the Roman Easter date at Whitby. From his perspective Whitby was not an ecclesiastical council, Oswiu did not have authority to regulate Colman's Easter observance. Furthermore, Colman was still under the authority of his Abbot in Iona, Cummeneus Albus, who was still resistant to change on the Easter question. Colman was forced to abdicate and return to Iona. His fellow Irish sympathizers and about thirty English monks who supported

³⁸Bede, HE 3.25.

³⁹Bede, HE, 3.14.

⁴⁰Bede, HE 3.25.

⁴¹Abels, "The Council of Whitby," 5.

⁴²Faith Wallis, *Bede: The Reckoning of Time: Texts Translated for Historians*, vol. 29 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), xxxviii.

⁴³Pelsteret, "The Issue of Apostolic Authority at the Synod of Whitby," 162.

⁴⁴"The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus," 105.

Iona's position followed his exodus from Northumbria.⁴⁵

The result of Whitby was a big loss for the Northumbrian church. The Easter debate had impacted the mission in northern England in several ways. Iona's role, which had established a flourishing Christian community in Northumbria, was now over.⁴⁶ However, it is certainly a mistake to conclude that Irish influence in the English church as a whole was now at an end. Colman's immediate successor as bishop of Lindisfarne was an Irish bishop called Tuda. Tuda was from the Irish tradition that had adopted the Roman date for Easter.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Ireland and her monastic schools continued to offer theological education to English students even after Whitby.⁴⁸ Irish schools formed a theological training ground for many English missionaries to the Germanic peoples of Europe.⁴⁹ But Iona's contribution of gifted bishops to the young Northumbria church was never to be seen again. The departure of the thirty or so English monks after Whitby was a further blow to the development of an indigenous trained clergy. The Gregorian mission had heavily stressed the importance of raising up the native English to serve in the English church. Though Wilfrid claimed to be an ally to the mission of Gregory, his actions at Whitby on behalf of Rome were truly anti-Gregorian.⁵⁰ The Northumbrian church may have been won over to the Roman Easter, but it was a divided church that in later years sorely lacked suitable theologically trained clergy.⁵¹ Iona's refusal to move beyond her own tradition had left her isolated.

Wilfrid's attitude towards the Irish in general did not help matters and only divided the Northumbrian church further. Following Whitby he went to Gaul to receive his episcopal ordination. His biographer Stephanus recalls (or invents) Wilfrid's speech to the Gallic bishops where he accuses the Irish of being Quartodecimans.⁵² Wilfrid would later boast that he had rooted out the poisonous weeds of Irish doctrine at Whitby.⁵³ Other leading figures in

⁴⁵Bede, HE 4.4. These English monks later formed a monastery in Mayo, Ireland.

⁴⁶T. M. Charles-Edwards, "Beyond Empire II: Christianities of the Celtic Peoples," in *Early Medieval Christianities, c. 600--c. 1100* eds. Thomas F. X. Noble and Julia M. H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 92.

⁴⁷Bede, HE 3.26.

⁴⁸Bede, HE 3.27.

⁴⁹Bede, HE 5.9-10. Margaret W. Peppercene, "Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*: A New Perspective," *Celtica* 4 (1958): 259-60.

⁵⁰"The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus," 143.

⁵¹Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People, with Bede's Letter to Egbert and Cuthbert's Letter on the Death of Bede*, translated by Leo Sherley-Price, revised by R. E. Latham, translation of the minor works, new introduction and notes by David Hugh Farmer (London: Penguin, 1990), 343-45.

⁵²"The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus," 106. Even if untrue of the Irish the name Quartodeciman was always a "handy stick with which to beat the Celtic dog." Charles Plummer, *Baedae Opera*, vol. 2 (London: OUP, 1896), 114, cited in Ó Cróinín, "New Heresy for Old," 507.

⁵³"The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus," 143. Some of Wilfrid's supporters accused Bede of heresy on the basis of his chronology of the incarnation, a charge that greatly upset Bede and which he vigorously denied. Wallis, *Bede: The Reckoning of Time*, 405-15.

the English at this time also began to make disparaging remarks concerning the Irish in general. The archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore, peevishly dismissed the Irish as ignorant and deceptive.⁵⁴ Aldhelm discouraged English students from traveling to Ireland for theological training, claiming the Irish schools were too worldly and philosophical, and that English schools could offer a better standard of education.⁵⁵ Aldhelm betrays a cultural superiority, which may have been borne out of the prolonged Easter debate with the Irish. Such statements completely ignored the important contribution of the Irish to the evangelization and education of the English church.⁵⁶ It is also in stark contrast to Bede who frequently praised the Irish and their contribution to English Christianity.⁵⁷

The wake of Whitby saw a growing number of powerful voices in the English church that were dismissive of the Irish or worse accused them of heresy. Iona and her refusal to accept the decision of the southern Irish at Mag Léne had resulted in her defeat at Whitby. By 703 Iona's intractability was evident even against her own abbot, Adomnán, a man noted for his theological and moral excellence.⁵⁸ Adomnán was persuaded of the orthodoxy of the Roman Easter date and convinced many both in Britain and northern Ireland to adopt it. He failed, however, with his own monks at Iona who still held out.⁵⁹ Remarkably, it was an English monk who had trained in Ireland, a man called Egbert, who finally convinced Iona to change her tradition in 716. Egbert was a man who loved and respected the Irish and won them over by his words and deeds. Bede, with evident delight, recounts how Egbert, an Englishman, was used to bring the Irish at Iona, who had first shared the Gospel with the English, back into fellowship.⁶⁰

It seems, however, that from Bede's perspective the role of Iona and her missionaries was sorely missed in the north of England. Bede's summary of the state of the church when Colman abdicated was that of a church that had benefitted greatly from the Irish. Bede praises the Irish bishops for their

⁵⁴Jane Stevenson, *The 'Laterculus Malalianus' and the School of Archbishop Theodore* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 10.

⁵⁵Aldhelm, *The Prose Works*, translated by Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren, (Totowa, NJ: D.S. Brewer, 1979), 154-55, 162-63.

⁵⁶According to James Campbell, "the debt of the early English church to Ireland is incalculable." James Campbell, "The debt of the early English Church to Ireland" in *Ireland Und Die Christenheit: Bibelstudien Und Mission = Ireland and Christendom: the Bible and the Missions*, eds. Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1987), 346.

⁵⁷Bede, HE 3.3, 3.13, 3.25, 3.27, 5.9, etc.

⁵⁸Bede called him "a wise and worthy man, excellently grounded in knowledge of the Scriptures." Bede, HE 5.15. The obedience to an Abbot was paramount in early Irish monasteries except in cases where the Abbot was teaching something false from the Scriptures, which it appears the monks of Iona considered Adomnán to be doing. Joseph F. Kelly, "Traditio Partrum in Early Christian Ireland" in *Tradition and the Rule of Faith in the Early Church: Essays in Honor of Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J.*, eds., Ronnie J. Rombs and Alexander Y. Hwang (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 257.

⁵⁹Bede, HE 5.15.

⁶⁰Bede, HE 5.22.

integrity of life, their refusal to gather wealth for themselves, and their excellent pastoral care of their English flock. It may indeed be a highly idealized picture presented by Bede but the point remains that in Bede's opinion the Irish had succeeded in establishing a thriving Christian community, his only objection was their later refusal to pursue liturgical unity with the Roman mission.⁶¹ When one compares this idealized picture of Northumbria under the care of Iona to the state of the English church in Bede's own day the differences are startling. Bede laments that the Northumbrian church has bishops that care little for the spiritual well being of their flocks and pursue wealth and comfort instead. Monasteries in Northumbria are described as dens of vice and luxury, and the laity are largely ignorant of even the basics of Christian doctrine.⁶² Bede recalled the bishops that came from Iona as men that lived and taught true doctrine and that the English flocked to the monasteries to be taught the word during the days of the Irish bishops.⁶³ While Bede was staunchly a supporter of the Roman Easter tradition, it does seem as though he lamented the loss of Iona's influence to the Northumbrian church.⁶⁴ The Easter debate had in many ways undermined the goal and purpose of the Gregorian mission in Northumbria. Key players on both sides of the Easter debate had undermined Gregory's aspiration that "difference of customs in holy church does not destroy the unity of faith."⁶⁵

⁶¹J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: a Historical Commentary* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), 130.

⁶²*Bede's Letter to Egbert*, translated by David Hugh Farmer, 341, 343-4.

⁶³Bede, HE 3.26.

⁶⁴Dales, *Light to the Isles*, 102.

⁶⁵This was what Gregory wrote to Archbishop Leander of Seville in Spain (d. 601). Quoted in Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland, 400-1200* (London: Longman Group UK, 1995), 151.