

OF BLOOD, BOOKS, AND HOLY MEN

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"The intimacy of your love used to rejoice me greatly when I was with you," the monk, teacher, scholar, and poet Alcuin wrote to the monks of Lindisfarne after the monastery had been sacked on June 8, 793, "but conversely, the calamity of your tribulation saddens me greatly every day, though I am absent." Alcuin wrote from the court of Charlemagne, where he had heard the terrible news of the first of a number of Viking raids that would eventually devastate the monasteries of Northumbria in the ninth century. Himself a native of those northern lands, he received word of the barbaric acts of devastation with great pain, and sought to offer reasons for such an improbable conclusion to the history of a venerable religious institution which began with Aidan in the seventh century:

. . . the pagans desecrated the sanctuaries of God, and poured out the blood of saints around the altar, laid waste the house of our hope, trampled on the bodies of saints in the temple of God, like dung in the street. . . . Either this is the beginning of greater tribulation, or else the sins of the inhabitants have called it upon them. Truly it has not happened by chance, but is a sign that it was well merited by someone. But now, you who are left, stand manfully, fight bravely, defend the camp of God. . . . If anything ought to be corrected in your Grace's habits, correct it quickly. . . . Do not glory in the vanity of raiment; this is not a glory to the priests and servants of God, but a disgrace. Do not in drunkenness blot out the words of your prayers. Do not go out after luxuries of the flesh and worldly avarice, but continue steadfastly in the service of God and in the discipline of the regular life, that the most holy fathers, who begot you, may not cease to be your protectors.¹

It could not have happened by chance, because nothing in the Christian world of the early Middle Ages happened by chance alone, but was "a sign that it was well merited by someone." Alcuin interprets the attack as God's punishment for the laxity of His people – the suggested remedy is order and true monastic discipline, so that the saints-protectors who stood so firm during the early years of the establishment would not cease to shield the servants of God from danger.

Whether the attacks were brought about by the sins of the inhabitants or not, they were certainly the beginning of much greater tribulation. The closing decade of the eighth century merely foreshadowed events of the ninth and tenth, when the prayer "From the fury of the Norsemen, Lord, deliver us" echoed throughout a ravaged Europe. Alcuin, dying in

¹ Alcuin, "Letter of Alcuin to the monks of Lindisfarne" in *English Historical Documents*, ed. David C. Douglas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 778.

804, did not live long enough to witness the exodus of the monks of Lindisfarne with the relics of their patron saint in 875. He did notice, however, adverse changes taking place late in the eighth century in the religious centers of Northumbria including Lindisfarne, "a place more venerable than all in Britain," a place whose influence on Northumbria and England encompassed the domains of art, religion, and politics.²

"In the year of our Lord 565," Bede writes, "there came from Ireland to Britain a priest and abbot named Columba, a true monk in life no less than habit."³ The exact reason for Columba's leaving Ireland is unknown both to the author of *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and to modern scholars. Most probably he and his twelve companions departed from Ireland as voluntary exiles setting out on a *peregrinatio pro deo*, pilgrimage or exile in the name of God, a practice common among the Irish monks as a form of penance for private sins or a response to a higher calling.⁴ Iona, then known as Hy, an island in the Hebrides about five kilometers long and two-and-a-half wide, became the abode of the wandering Irishmen. Soon, a circle of huts arose around a larger hut which housed the abbot of the new monastery, Columba. A modest refectory, scriptorium, guesthouse, and other structures were built later as the community expanded, for the island began to attract novices from among the Irish, Britons, and Saxons, and eventually became a center of Irish missionary activity in the north of Britain.⁵

Late in 633, King Oswald, upon assuming the throne of Northumbria, decided that "the whole race under his rule should be filled with the grace of the Christian faith." He appealed to the monks of Iona, requesting a "bishop by whose teaching and ministry the English race over whom he ruled might learn the privileges of faith in our Lord and receive the sacraments."⁶ Oswald's gesture did not mark the first time Christianity made its way to Northumbria – Paulinus, the energetic Archbishop of York, succeeded in baptizing King Edwin of Northumbria in 627 – but the course of events during the momentous years 632-633 resulted in the collapse of the Canterbury-appointed archbishopric. During those years Cadwallon of Gwynwed, aided by Penda, the pagan king of Mercia, overran Edwin's realm. The king of Northumbria died in the battle of Hatfield; his widow, daughter Eanflæd, other remaining family members, and Paulinus fled to the kingdom of Kent. Only Paulinus'

²Alcuin, "Letter of Alcuin to Ethelred, King of Northumbria (793, after 8 June)" *ibid.*, 776.

³Bede, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), iii. 4 (222-3).

⁴Columba, known also as Columcille (Colum Cille – "Column of the Church") was born in 521 into a princely Irish family. According to his biographer Adamnan, after copying a passage of Jerome's text of the Scriptures without permission, Columba refused to return the copy to its source, and a battle between clans ensued. Later, Columba was enjoined by his soul-friend (confessor) to convert "to Christ as many souls as the number slain in the battle." John T. McNeill, *The Celtic Churches, A History: A.D. 200 to 1200* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 89.

⁵*Ibid.*, 92-3.

⁶Bede, iii. 3 (219).



Map of the British Isles marking locations relevant to the early history of Lindisfame

deacon James remained, and although he did play a role at the council of Whitby in 663, his missionary activity following King Edwin's demise was not decisive for the setting up of Christianity in Northumbria.⁷

The territories north of the river Humber fell, briefly, under the control of Cadwallon, but soon:

Oswald's army overpowered and annihilated its enemy,
leaving the battlefield behind it in rivers of blood
until the wicked Cadwallon himself fell, paying the price
for his treachery, dying amid the massacre of his men,
and yielding a brilliant victory to that splendid king.⁸

The victorious Oswald's choice of Iona as the source of the Christian religion, by which his newly acquired kingdom and people "might learn the privileges of faith in our Lord," did not come as a surprise to those who knew him. He and his brother Oswiu, as the heirs to the throne of Bernicia, had been forced to leave their homeland when their uncle Edwin, member of the rival Northumbrian house of Deira, became king. In 617, the boy princes followed the Roman military road behind the Antonine wall, arriving at Columba's island. Their stay at the isle in the Hebrides proved a formative experience for the boys, especially Oswald, whose piety "was to leave its stamp on his eight-year reign."⁹

Thus, late in 634, more than a year after his rising to the throne, the king of Northumbria received a delegate from the Iona community, Aidan. Aidan, the future bishop-abbot of Lindisfarne, was not the first Irishman to attempt to "minister the word of faith" to Oswald and his people. Bede writes of "another man of harsher disposition" who returned back to his monastery, having found the Northumbrians "intractable, obstinate, and uncivilized." After some deliberation, the monks of Iona agreed that Aidan "was worthy to be made a bishop and that he was the man to send to instruct those ignorant unbelievers,"¹⁰ and kindly dispatched the goodly monk among the heathen subjects of their former guest, Oswald. The choice turned out to be of great benefit to the Northumbrians:

Aidan taught the clergy many lessons about the conduct of their lives but above all he left them a most salutary example of abstinence and self-control; and the best

⁷Richard Humble, *The Fall of Saxon England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 21; Bede, ii. 20 (203-4); F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 116.

⁸Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, edited and translated by Peter Godman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 27.

⁹Gareth W. Dunleavy, *Colum's Other Island* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1960), 16.

¹⁰Stenton, 118; Bede, iii. 5 (229).

recommendation of his teaching to all was that he taught them no other way of life than that which he himself practised among his fellows.¹¹

Aidan's strength of character, humility, behavior that set example to others, as well as his relentless pursuit of learning, earned him great respect from the king and the inhabitants of Northumbria, and after Oswald's grant to him of the island of Lindisfarne in the North Sea across from the royal fort of Bamburgh, the monastery established thereon grew to reflect the energy and zeal of its founder.

An insular sanctuary like Aidan's former home, Lindisfarne was accessible from the mainland on foot two times a day during low tide. There, on open sea yet within sight and reach of the "bustling hive of industry" of Bamburgh, Aidan and his followers, aided by royal and noble donations, lay the ground for an establishment whose influence on Northumbria would reach far beyond religious issues.¹² The Iona-generated conversion proved more lasting than the earlier one sponsored by Canterbury. While Paulinus' mission practically ended with the Archbishop's flight to Kent, "the conversion of Northumbria" by Aidan and his followers "was no merely nominal acceptance of beliefs and rites but the leavening of life and the adoption of a new culture." This would become apparent after 641, the year of the battle of Maserfield, when Oswald died while fighting against King Penda. The results of Aidan's mission held firm in Northumbria, and "by 663, the revised date of the Synod of Whitby, what was by far the greater part of England, a stretch of territory greater than the whole of Ireland, had become permanently Christian under the influence of the Celtic mission and was being served by preachers and bishops trained under Irish teachers at Lindisfarne."¹³

The Celtic forms of monasticism and Christianity, which exerted their sway in northern England through Lindisfarne, presented an almost irrefragable model of behavior for the Northumbrians, and a challenge to the Benedictine monks. Bede, praising Aidan's zeal, implied that the Celtic monks' asceticism inspired respect among the laity and clergy alike. While the continental Benedictine order and its *Rule* did place emphasis on "self-renunciation, prayer, and physical work," it strove to maintain a degree of moderation, even in the renouncement of the world.¹⁴ This was not the case with the Irish monks. Not only

¹¹Ibid., 227.

¹² Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 163.

¹³McNeill, 108; Although some historians consider 664 to be the year of the Synod of Whitby, in this essay I have followed the dating used by F. M. Stenton, i.e. 663. His explanation of the dating of the council is on page 129 of his *Anglo-Saxon England*. According to the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* it was held "in September or October 663 (possibly 664)." Joseph R. Strayer, ed. *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol.12 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989), 626.

¹⁴"We are therefore now about to institute a school for the service of God, in which we hope nothing harsh nor burdensome will be ordained." Saint Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, translated by Cardinal Gasquet (New York: Cooper Square, 1966); 6. Irish monks accepted the Benedictine Rule only as the Roman observance of Christianity began to spread after the Council of Whitby. Stenton, 159.

was fasting a frequent exercise; some monasteries permitted their members to have only one meal a day, and the nightly hours, interrupted by religious services, were "passed in condition of studied discomfort."¹⁵ But the practice of asceticism did not end with an exacting observance of dietary and regimen regulations. An Irish monk confessed his transgressive deeds and thoughts to an *anmchara*, a 'soul-friend,' and determined his penance – "medicine for the soul" – according to an elaborate system, later documented in the Penitential Books. Depending on the severity of the offense, the sinner could spend time immersed in ice-cold water, or recite psalms, especially long psalms, the one-hundred-and-seventy-six-verse-long Psalm 119, for instance, up to seven times, while standing with his arms stretched out.¹⁶ Finally, there was the *peregrinatio*, mentioned earlier in connection with Columba. Irish and, later, British *peregrini* like Columban (Columbanus) introduced Irish learning and enthusiasm for self-renunciation to the continental Western Europe.

Irish monasteries were renowned for their learning. Novices and scholars from England and the continent found the Celtic monastic houses replete with rare manuscripts which, along with scribes and artists, "were exchanged freely." Members of Hibernian *familiae* revealed an acquaintance with the writings of a number of the Church Fathers, Virgil, Horace, Juvenal, and with the expositions of the liberal arts by Martianus Capella and Boethius, but the principal emphasis lay on the study of the Scripture. Irish monks-exegetes began their studies by acquiring knowledge of Latin, until they could read fragments of the works of classical Roman authors and the Latin Fathers; only then were they allowed to commence their biblical studies. Because of Ireland's isolation from the continent, a peculiar form of Latin characterized by exotic words and obstruse sentences, the so-called 'Hesperic style,' developed in the Celtic monasteries.¹⁷

Irish scribes adapted the Classical Mediterranean script to produce the 'half uncial,' and a pointed minuscule script. Illuminators, exhibiting Coptic and Syrian influence in their work, created such masterpieces as the *Cathach of St. Columba*, the *Book of Durrow*, and the *Book of Kells*, whose maze-like successions of patterns distinguish Celtic art in Ireland, Britain, and in the Celtic foundations in mainland Europe.¹⁸ Finally, monks-stonemasons,

¹⁵McNeill, 82.

¹⁶Evans, 81; McNeill, 83; John McNeill adds: "That vivacious Celts in large numbers subjected themselves to these inconveniences remains something of a wonder. It is a lesson in the possibilities of human nature under the impulses of devotion." Ibid.

¹⁷Dunleavy, 33, 120-134.

¹⁸The approximate date of the making of the *Book of Durrow* is 650-700; the *Book of Kells* was finished around 800. Ibid, 125; The *Cathach*, "traditionally, if improbably associated with the hand of Columba himself," dates to about 600. Carol L. Neuman de Vegvar, *The Northumbrian Renaissance* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1987), 75-8.

at first carving patterns and symbols into simple stone slabs, produced free-standing crosses, more than thirty of which are still standing in Ireland.¹⁹

Unostentatious like its zealous, resolute inhabitants, a Celtic monastery was often but an isolated assembly of huts surrounded by a wall. Irish ecclesiastical organization adjusted itself to the division of the island's inhabitants into clans. Thus, monasteries honored allegiance to the tribes of their founders; and since Ireland, unlike the continent, boasted no traditional urban centers, an Irish bishop would either live in a monastery under the authority of the local abbot, or the function of bishop would be held by the abbot himself. Celtic Christianity, moreover, differed from the Roman practice in its tonsure, its manner of consecrating bishops, its lack of common, binding rules, and, perhaps most importantly, in its way of computing the date of Easter. The Celts used an older method of determining Easter based on a Jewish tradition of an eighty-four-year-unit, at the expiration of which the cycle of Easters, measured in full-moons, would commence again. In the first quarter of the sixth century, the Roman church adopted a new schedule of cycles worked out by Dionysius Exiguus. As a result of this measure the Celtic and Roman Easter dates ran asynchronously, which added yet another reason for the Romans to suspect the strange, excess-prone, stubbornly individualistic Hibernian monks.²⁰

Established as a daughterhouse of Iona (monastery founded by the members of the motherhouse of Iona), Lindisfarne displayed most of the characteristics of an Irish monastery, even as a center of learning, albeit on a somewhat limited scale. Despite generous gifts to the monastery, Lindisfarne remained modest in appearance and size. Instead of embellishing the buildings, Aidan used most of the acquired wealth to buy the freedom of slaves whom he educated. Even his Iona-raised successor Finan, intending to build a church "suitable for an episcopal see," chose the simple "Irish method, [constructing] not of stone but of hewn oak, thatching it with reeds."²¹ Through the missionary activity of the monks of Lindisfarne, Celtic learning, discipline, and austerity diffused throughout Northumbria and beyond. Direct Lindisfarne influence can be identified in the origins of the foundations of Lastingham, Whitby, Ripon, Tynemouth, Gilling, Coldingham, Melrose, Barrow, and Crayke; Celtic elements can be also discerned at Glastonbury, Abingdon, and Malmesbury. Within twenty years, Sir Frank Stenton wrote, Aidan and his followers had re-established Christianity in the north. This Celtic version of Christianity, aided by royal

¹⁹McNeill, 128; The crosses marked places of burial, preaching, or churchyards. "The origins of the standing stone crosses of England and Ireland are obscure and controversial." The evolution of Irish stone-carving arrived "fairly late in Irish art. A purely Irish origin of the stone cross is unlikely, as development in England is roughly simultaneous, if not earlier." de Vegvar, 153-4.

²⁰Evans, 79; McNeill, 110-111; The Celtic monks shaved the hair above the forehead, leaving a line from one ear to the other, behind which hair was allowed to grow. Scholars suggest Druidic origin for the shape of Celtic tonsure. The Roman tonsure, on the other hand, left a band of hair around the head reminiscent of the crown of thorns. McNeill, 114; Bertram Colgrave, trans., *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* (NY: Greenwood Press, 1969), 316.

²¹Dunleavy, 18; *ibid.*, 38; Bede, iii. 25 (295).

grants to Aidan and his successors, resulted in the institution of an entire network of monastic foundations.²²

The supremacy of Lindisfarne as the chief monastic center and the only bishopric in Northumbria did not remain unchallenged. King Oswald was defeated and killed by Penda at Maserfeld in 641. His brother Oswiu, having reunited Northumbria and avenged Oswald's death by killing Penda in battle in 654, became the overlord not only of Northumbria, but also, for more than a year, of the newly conquered territories of Mercia and South Anglia.²³ Fulfilling a vow he had made before the battle, King Oswiu founded twelve monasteries, and consigned his barely-one-year-old daughter Ælflæd to a nunnery. About ten years later, however, events forced Oswiu to think of the Church as much more than a mere receptacle for endowments. During his reign and Finian's episcopacy, as Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* records, "there arose a great and active controversy about the keeping of Easter." Oswiu's wife Eanflæd, daughter of the Northumbrian King Edwin, who received her education in Kent, observed Easter as a Roman Christian. Oswiu, who still remembered the years spent with his brother at Iona, remained faithful to Celtic observance. Because of the inconsistencies between the Celtic and the Roman setting of the date of the ceremony, "it sometimes happened that Easter was celebrated twice in the same year, so that the king had finished the fast and was keeping Easter Sunday, while the queen and her people were still in Lent and observing Palm Sunday." Needless to say, such aberrations caused concern at Oswiu's court. When Colman replaced Finan as bishop of Lindisfarne in 661, the situation became even more strained, and the points of contention between the Irish and the Romans grew to include tonsure "and other ecclesiastical matters." At last, "it was decided to hold a council to settle the dispute at a monastery called *Streanæshealth* (Whitby)."²⁴

Queen Eanflæd and her allies were only a part of the pro-Roman party at Lindisfarne and Northumbria, a group whose persistent growth can be traced back to Finan's episcopate.²⁵ James, the deacon who continued his missionary work in the north after Paulinus' flight, too, supported the Roman claims in the controversy, while Hilda (the abbess of Whitby), Cedd (the bishop of the East Saxons), and Colman stood on the side of the Irish. But the most vocal participant of the council was probably Wilfrid, whose opening words on behalf of the Romans immediately outlined the real problem:

²²Dunleavy, 23-25; Stenton, 118; Rosemary Cramp, "The Artistic Influence of Lindisfarne within Northumbria," in *St Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community to AD 1200*, eds. Gerald Bonner et al. (Wolfeboro, NH: Boydell Press, 1989), 213.

²³Stenton, 82-4; Yorke, 78.

²⁴Bede, iii. 25 (295-7); *ibid.*, 299; Translator's footnote: "The difference could be as much as a month, as happened in 631 when the Roman Easter fell on 24 March and the Celtic Easter on 21 April."

²⁵Godfrey, 114.

The Easter we keep is the same as we have seen universally celebrated in Rome, where the apostles St. Peter and St. Paul lived, taught, suffered, and were buried. We also found it in use everywhere in Italy and Gaul when we travelled through these countries for the purpose of study and prayer. We learned that it was observed at one at the same time in Africa, Asia, Egypt, Greece, and throughout the whole world, wherever the Church of Christ is scattered, amid various nations and languages. The only exceptions are these men and their accomplices in obstinacy, I mean the Picts and the Britons, who in these, the two remotest islands of the Ocean and only in some parts of them, foolishly attempt to fight against the whole world.²⁶

Not a word about the intrinsic validity of either of the Easter calculation methods found its way to the oration; the argument rested solely on the authority of the two saints, and on the urgent need for conformity within the Church. Although Bishop Colman of Lindisfarne retorted to Wilfrid's provocative challenge with a reference to St. John's respect for the older tradition, he could not compete with him. The impassioned defender of the Roman Church pointed out that a close observance of the Jewish calendrics was no longer necessary, because St. Peter himself initiated a new precedent by celebrating Easter only on Sundays, and, moreover, because even "all the successors of St. John in Asia since his death and also the whole church throughout the world have followed this [new] observance."²⁷ Wilfrid's presentation being over, Colman kept his silence and King Oswiu, preferring not to contradict and anger Heaven's doorkeeper, acquiesced to abandon his former views. The council was adjourned.

Ultimately, as the tone of Wilfrid's speeches suggests, the principal issue at Whitby was that of Rome-imposed homogeneity versus Celtic individualism. Wilfrid, whom the "omnipotent God filled . . . with light from Heaven / that he might drive from the land foul shades of ignorance," was representative of a new generation of Northumbrian Christians. Born in 634, he visited Rome in 654, received a papal blessing, and became acquainted with the "true and untainted" ecclesiastical rules. Wilfrid and his Northumbrian-born sojourner Benedict Baducing (Biscop) were impressed by the splendor of Rome's ceremonies and architecture – so unlike the dour severity of Iona and Lindisfarne crouching at the remote limits of the earth – and became ardent supporters of unification of the Church. These men did not acquire their education in an atmosphere suffused with respect for Aidan's Celtic heritage, and looked up to Rome as their model of ideal Christian practice. After receiving land from King Ecgrith, and founding the twin monasteries of Monkwearmouth (674) and Jarrow (681), Benedict Biscop would become the main agent in the dissemination of Benedictine Rule in Northumbria.²⁸

²⁶ Bede, iii, 25 (301).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 303.

²⁸ McNeill, 109; Alcuin 1982, 49; Godfrey, 113-116; *Ibid.*, 154-5; de Vegvar, 112; Stenton, 184.

Realizing “that his teachings were rejected and his principles despised,” Colman requested that Eata of Melrose become the new abbot, and left Lindisfarne with those who refused to subscribe to the authority of Rome. After returning briefly to Colman’s motherhouse on Iona, the group which included all the Irish whom he had brought together at the island of Lindisfarne, and about thirty Englishmen, proceeded to settle on the Island of the White Heifer, Innisbofine, off the western coast of Connacht in Ireland. Unfortunately, Colman’s new monastery did not enjoy peace for long. The Celts, inveterate wanderers that they were, preferred to roam about the countryside, especially during the busiest days of the harvest in the summer, and a conflict soon developed between the industrious Englishmen and their less industrious but no less hungry brethren of Hibernian origin. Colman was forced to seek another place, moving the English monks from the island to a place known as *Muig éo* or Mayo. There, Bede writes in an encomium of his assiduous countrymen, the monks adopted a better Rule – probably the Rule of St. Benedict – and could be seen still, involved in honest hard work to support themselves.²⁹

Colman’s separation from the Lindisfarne community did not presage an Irish exodus from Northumbria. Not only Irish monks and scholars, but the spirit of asceticism and penitential discipline – accompanied, perhaps, by that need for roaming which Bede frowned upon – endured, eventually embedding itself in the English version of Roman Christianity. In practical terms, however, the situation at Lindisfarne after Whitby changed rather dramatically. By the end of 663, after the brief episcopate of Tuda, the see of Northumbria split as Wilfrid became bishop at his monastery of Ripon, and Ceadda – brother of the East Saxon Bishop Cedd who took part in the Synod of Whitby – was assigned to the see of York.³⁰

Not long after the Synod of 663 an eclipse of the sun appeared, and was followed by a sudden pestilence which stormed through England and Ireland, killing Tuda of Northumbria, and Deusdedit, the archbishop of Canterbury. Wigheart, a priest chosen to replace Deusdedit, died en route to his consecration in Rome. The papal office had to decide on a candidate to fill the vacancy in England at a difficult time, for the epidemic brought about a marked decrease in the numbers of the faithful. Finally, in 668, Theodore of Tarsus was consecrated archbishop of Canterbury, and in the following year, accompanied by Wilfrid of Ripon, and an African-born monk, Hadrian, he arrived in Kent. Theodore’s subsequent visit to Northumbria resulted in his appointment of Ceadda as the bishop of Mercia, and in the reunification of the see of Northumbria under Wilfrid.³¹

In 670, Oswiu’s son and heir, Ecgfrith, the man who aided Benedict Biscop’s monastic establishments at Monkwearmouth and Jarrow, became king of Northumbria. By this time the Roman ecclesiastical structure of England under the leadership of Theodore had

²⁹Bede iii. 26 (309); *ibid.*, iv. 4 (347-9).

³⁰Stenton, 123-5.

³¹Bede, iii. 27 (311-312); *ibid.*, iv. 1 (329-337); Stenton, 130-5.

recovered to such an extent from the panic and relapse into paganism which accompanied the blightful years before, that in 672 a council was held in Hertford. Theodore's high position caused him to become involved also in numerous purely secular matters and conflicts, mainly due to the close relationship between the ruling families of England and the clergy. In 677, Theodore deposed Wilfrid from his Northumbrian bishopric, apparently because the latter cleric's incessant encouraging of Ecgfrith's wife to join a monastic order did not please her husband. Thus, the see of Northumbria was divided again, this time into three episcopates: Deira, with its seat in Whitby; Bernicia, centered alternatively on the monasteries of Hexham and Lindisfarne; and Lindsey. Eata, the abbot of Lindisfarne chosen earlier by Aidan, became the bishop of Bernicia, and was succeeded in 684 by Cuthbert, a solitary monk of Lindisfarne.³²

The period between 685 and 750 at Lindisfarne has been described as one distinguished by an eagerness to assimilate the new culture introduced at the Synod of Whitby. It bore witness to the reign of King Aldfrith, and the two-year-long episcopate of Cuthbert, the monk-solitary who occupied the island of the Inner Farne. Aldfrith, who succeeded Ecgfrith in 685/6, had spent some time prior to his reign at Iona, and his naturally inquisitive mind found much early inspiration among the Irish monks. The king's interest in learning foreshadowed a more extensive movement of intellectual and artistic revival, known as the 'Northumbrian Renaissance,' which began to surface after his death in 705.³³

Bishop Cuthbert's "works of virtue, like those of the apostles, became an ornament to his episcopal rank." A pupil of the Irish monk Eata at Melrose, the obedient and devoted Cuthbert deservedly rose to the position of the prior of the monastery, and like his predecessors began to campaign against pagan idolatry with which his lay flock responded to times of ill fortune. Still later, as Bede's account continues, Eata "transferred him to the island of Lindisfarne so that there also, by his authority as prior, he might teach the brothers how to keep the Rule and illustrate it by his own behavior." As Cuthbert "grew in merit" he adopted a solitary way of life at the Inner Farne, where his new appointment found him in 684. During his brief episcopacy, the Celtic spirit still held its sway at Lindisfarne, although as bishop Cuthbert accepted Roman Easter, and respected the Rule of St Benedict. But the most fascinating events, which ultimately made an authentic saint out of Cuthbert, occurred after his death:

³²Stenton, 135-140; The participants at the council of Hertford agreed on points reaffirming the common observance of Easter, and ending of monks' wandering "from place to place, that is, from monastery to monastery" unless accompanied by a letter written by their abbot. Bede, iv. 5 (349-355).

³³Carl Nordenfalk, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting* (New York: George Braziller, 1977), 9; Rosemary Cramp divides the history of early medieval Lindisfarne into three phases: 1. 635-685, when the Irish element dominated, 2. 685-750, and 3. 750-875, period marking the end of the peaceful coexistence between the monastery and the secular rulers. Cramp, 216.

... the divine providence wished to show still further in what glory Saint Cuthbert lived after his death ... so He put it into the heart of the brothers, eleven years after his burial, to take his bones – which they expected to find quite dry, the rest of the body, as is usual with the dead, having decayed away and turned to dust – and to put them in a new coffin in the same place but above the floor, so that they might be worthily displayed. ... They did so and, opening the grave, they found the body intact and whole as if it were still alive, the joints of the limbs flexible and much more like a sleeping than a dead man.³⁴

The frightened monks of Lindisfarne reported the miracle of the incorruption of Cuthbert's flesh to their abbot who joyfully received part of the Saint's clothes, kissing them with great affection.

Cuthbert's body was promptly transferred to a new, elaborately carved coffin, and placed on the sanctuary's floor. Numerous miracles of healing ensued almost immediately afterwards. The cult which grew with an unexpected rapidity after Cuthbert's death was accompanied by a creative response at Lindisfarne and Northumbria. Between 699 and 704, an anonymous *Life* of the Saint appeared, to be followed by Bede's compositions in prose (c. 704) and poetry (before c. 721).³⁵

Lindisfarne in the early eighth century was no longer the modest abode of its founder from Iona. Its wealth grew with donations from kings and noblemen, and the enshrinement of St. Cuthbert was executed with a sumptuousness befitting a royal court, rather than a monastic house.³⁶ The *Lindisfarne Gospels*, a work associated with the early stages of the cult of St. Cuthbert, and written sometime before 721, bear witness to a monastic house with extraordinary resources. Dedicated to Saint Cuthbert, this splendid manuscript, perhaps the most well-known among the extant Celtic books, was written and illuminated by a single artist who clearly worked within the tradition of insular calligraphy represented by the *Book of Durrow*. Although the colophon assigns the manuscript's authorship to Bishop Eadfrith (698-721), it is probable that an unknown, extraordinarily gifted monk, unburdened by administrative duties, completed the work and used the bishop's name as a gesture of respect and humility. But regardless of its authorship, the *Lindisfarne Gospels* exemplifies

³⁴ Bede, iv, 30 (443-4).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, iv. 27-30 (431-445); Colgrave, 131-139; D. P. Kirby, "The Genesis of a Cult: Cuthbert of Farne and Ecclesiastical Politics in the Late Seventh and Early Eighth Centuries." *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 46 (1995).

³⁶ Even before the miracle of incorruption of the flesh, Cuthbert "was honored like an emperor." His body was wrapped in a precious cloth, dressed in a white dalmatic, a chasuble of silk *purpura*, and interred in a stone sarcophagus. A cross, made of gold and garnets, adorned his chest. Alan Thacker "Lindisfarne and the Origins of the Cult of St Cuthbert" in *St Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community to AD 1200*, eds. Gerald Bonner et al. (Wolfeboro, NH: Boydell Press, 1989), 103-109; Peter Hunter Blair, *Northumbria in the Days of Bede* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 132-5.

Lindisfarne's ambiguous position: "loyal to Rome in dogma and practice after Whitby, but essentially Celtic in spirit."³⁷

The initial close relationship of Aidan's isle with monasteries throughout Northumbria left its traces in the preservation and development of the insular half-uncial in the scriptoria of the monastic houses which gradually superseded Lindisfarne in importance. Another significant manuscript, the *Codex Amiatinus*, is the work of seven scribes and one illuminator of the joint monasteries of Jarrow-Wearmouth; and other manuscripts, such as the *Echternach Gospels*, the *Durham Gospels*, and the *Book of Chad* whose precise authorship and date is a matter of debate, testify to the vigor of Celtic art in Northumbria years after Rome's right opinion triumphed.³⁸

Despite the artistic perfection of the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, the monastery itself gradually lost the preeminent position it enjoyed in Northumbria in the middle of the seventh century. Benedict Biscop's twin houses of Jarrow and Wearmouth gained ascendancy as their founder, collecting manuscripts during his travels to the continent and Rome, prepared the ground for a substantial library. Biscop's Benedictine foundations were no longer built in the simple and haphazard fashion of Celtic monasteries; the new, imposing edifices followed the axial orientation of the major local church, and revealed their builders' skills through their intricate decoration. When Biscop's successor, Ceolfrith, died in 716, the book collection at Jarrow boasted nearly six hundred volumes, an amazing number for the period. It was this very library that allowed the Venerable Bede to collect material for his works, a detailed list of which marks the last pages of his *Ecclesiastical History*.³⁹

In 735, the year of Bede's death, the see of York was elevated to metropolitan status, and during the archbishopate of Egbert supplanted Biscop's Jarrow as "the home of English letters."⁴⁰ Egbert was a pupil of Bede, and his new school at York remained faithful to the life's work of the monk-scholar who spent most of his life at Jarrow. Alcuin, who was placed in charge of York's library in 767, left us an account of its inventory in his long poem *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*. Although rich in patristic and Christian works, the collection of books at York was somewhat weak in classical texts. The seven liberal arts which were taught there relied on Cassiodorus and Boethius, not on Martianus Capella whose *Marriage of Mercury and Philology* was popular among the Irish scholars. In its selective

³⁷de Vegvar, 170-1; Thacker, 105; Michelle P. Brown, "The Lindisfarne Scriptorium," in *St Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community to AD 1200*, eds. Gerald Bonner et al. (Wolfeboro, NH: Boydell Press, 1989), 151-163.

³⁸Brown, 55.

³⁹de Vegvar, 113-119; Godfrey, 206; Bede, v. 24 (561-571); Bede's work *De Temporum Ratione* popularized in England the counting of years from the Incarnation, which was developed by Dionysius Exiguus in the sixth century; Bede's other writings included commentaries on the Scriptures and on the writings of the Fathers of the Church, lives of saints, as well as works dealing with mathematics and history.

⁴⁰C. J. B. Gaskoin, *Alcuin: His Life and Work* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), 33-36.

approach to learning, the school of York marked a definite move away from the liberal attitude of the Celtic foundations of an earlier era.⁴¹

The fact that of the fifteen kings who ruled the Northumbrian lands in the eighth century, five were murdered and six were deposed and exiled, suggests a certain degree of instability in the region. Save for the reign of King Ceolwulf, who temporarily halted the process of decline, Northumbria weakened throughout the century. Its southern neighbor Mercia emerged as a superior kingdom in the area, producing the first "prototype king of England" in the person of Offa.⁴² Northumbrian clergy and monks apparently succumbed to the general feeling of insecurity, as some of the thirty canons adopted at the Council of Clovenshoo in 747 reminded them not to indulge in excessive drinking, to remember their vocation, maintain discipline, and improve the standards of education and learning. Bede, writing about two decades earlier, hinted at the laxity of the monastic discipline when he described the impeccable virtue of Aidan, contrasting it with "modern slothfulness." Even at Lindisfarne things were no longer the same after King Ceolwulf ended his successful reign in 737 by abdicating, joining the monastic community, and introducing the *familia* to the drinking of wine and beer.⁴³

Then, in 793:

. . . terrible portents appeared over Northumbria, and miserably frightened the inhabitants: these were exceptional flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine soon followed these signs; and a little after that in the same year on 8 January the barrying of the heathen miserably destroyed God's church in Lindisfarne by rapine and slaughter.⁴⁴

The Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul was desecrated; the standing crosses of Lindisfarne, crosses which echoed the rhythm of Celtic decorative patterns of Iona, were thrown to the ground; the altar was spattered with the blood of monks; and manuscripts like the *Lindisfarne Gospels* were ripped from their expensive bindings and destroyed.

The 'heathen' who reached the northeastern coast of England in 793 were Norwegians who marked the first wave of Viking invaders and raiders. Among the theories explaining the sudden migration of the Vikings in paths radiating from the Scandinavian peninsula,

⁴¹Stenton, 188; Gaskoin, 36.

⁴²Yorke, 86-8; Stenton, 91-3; Humble, 25.

⁴³Godfrey, 260-4; Gaskoin, 45; Bede, iii. 5 (227): "Ceolwulf, thinking it beneath the dignity of a Christian to be immersed in earthly things, abdicated the throne after a reign of eight years, and assumed the monastic habit at Lindisfarne." William of Malmesbury, *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, trans. J. A. Giles (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1847), 61.

⁴⁴The editor of the present edition provides the following footnote: "The Ides of January, probably a mistake for the Ides of June (8 June) which is the date given by Simeon of Durham." G. N. Garmonsway, trans., ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1953), 55-57.

some emphasize overpopulation, internal dissensions, tensions between the social classes, or foreign pressure; others point at the role of the climate in the creation of an impetus for the mass exodus. Most probably, as Johannes Brøndsted suggests, the attraction of loot and the potential for lucrative trade were among the chief attractions of the oversea enterprise.⁴⁵

Exposed on an undefended island, and made wealthy by the donations stimulated by the cult of St. Cuthbert, Lindisfarne projected like a bait into the North Sea, ready to be taken by warriors ignorant of Hesperic Latin and thoroughly uninterested in the practice of Christian holiness. Alcuin, who had just returned to the continent from England where he was involved in a disputation against image-worship, responded to the horrifying news with a series of letters. "Truly it has not happened by chance," he writes to the Lindisfarne *familia*, "but is a sign that it was well merited by someone." He was well aware of the decline of discipline and learning in his native Northumbria, and interpreted the sudden attack as God's warning.⁴⁶ As the attack on Jarrow the following year showed, the Norsemen were interested in loot rather than prophesy, but the Norwegian raids did indeed prove to be a "warning."

Although the Norsemen proceeded to lay waste the Irish foundations on Iona and the Isle of Man, Northumbria remained untouched until the Danes embarked on their conquest in the ninth century. Despite severe damage, Lindisfarne did not immediately cease to exist. It received land grants in the ninth century, its community having resumed a semblance of normal existence. But the steady decline that preceded the raids, combined with the loss of manuscripts, made Aidan's monastery but a shadow of its former presence.⁴⁷ Finally, in 875, under the threat of attacks from Denmark, the community departed altogether, taking with them the relics of Cuthbert, and the illuminated manuscript which would later become known as the *Lindisfarne Gospels*.

⁴⁵Johannes Brøndsted, *The Vikings*, trans. Kalle Skov (Baltimore: Penguin, 1965), 31-39.

⁴⁶Although three Viking ships landed in Dorset in 789, the Northumbrians did not expect an attack. Sawyer, 210-1.

⁴⁷Cramp, 214.