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Adomnán of Iona's *Vita Sancti Columbae*: a  
literary analysis

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Edinburgh

2018

I confirm that this thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has been composed by myself, that the work in it is my own and that no part of it has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed:

(Duncan Sneddon)

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## Abbreviations

*ACC – Amra Choluimb Chille*

*AI – Annals of Inisfallen*

*AU – Annals of Ulster*

*AVSC – Anonymous Vita Sancti Cuthberti*

*BHL - Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina*

*BVSC - Bede's Vita Sancti Cuthberti*

*DLS – De Locis Sanctis*

*HE – Bede's Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*

*VSC - Vita Sancti Columbae*

*CGSH – Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae*

*DMLBS – Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*

*LS – Lewis and Short's Latin Dictionary*

*MLLM - Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus*

*NCLCL – The Non-Classical Lexicon of Celtic Latinity*

*NGML – Novum Glossarium Mediae Latinitatis*

*JRSAI – Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*

*OLD – Oxford Latin Dictionary*

*PSAS – Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*

*SHR – Scottish Historical Review*

## Abstract

Written in c. 700 at the island monastery of Iona, Adomnán's *Vita Sancti Columbae* (VSC) is an important source for the study of early medieval Scotland and Ireland.

This thesis analyses the text as a literary work, seeking to understand more about its internal logic and the ways in which it relates to other kinds of literary texts. These include Biblical texts, other early insular, continental and late antique hagiographies, vernacular secular sagas, legal texts, scholarly literature and wisdom literature. Adomnán did not necessarily know all of these texts, and some of them post-date him, but they provide a wider interpretative context for VSC. Adomnán's other known work, *De Locis Sanctis*, and texts connected to him, such as *Cáin Adomnáin*, will also be considered. I look for points of similarity and divergence between *Vita Sancti Columbae* and these other texts, which I term "adjacent literature", looking to see how the text relates to its wider literary and intellectual context. By taking this approach, we are able to understand the text better on its own terms, making it more useful as a source for historical study.

The text is studied, and set within its wider context, with respect to the following main areas:

### The Manuscripts of *Vita Sancti Columbae*: the visual construction of the text:

Considering the five surviving manuscripts of the first recension of VSC, but focussing especially on the earliest (Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, of near authorial date and Ionan provenance), this chapter considers how the visual presentation of VSC relates to its production and reproduction as a literary text. Page layout, illumination, the use of the Greek alphabet and different colours of ink and manuscript context are all discussed.

### Structure and Narrative Sequencing in *Vita Sancti Columbae*:

VSC is not a chronologically-structured account of Columba's life, but rather a hagiography made up of many short narratives that demonstrate his sanctity and power in different ways. These narratives are arranged thematically, with a basic tripartite structure, with one book concerned with prophecies, one with miracles and one with visions. The narratives within the three books are often arranged into small, tightly constructed clusters of related stories. This chapter is an investigation of both the overall structure of the work and the "micro-structure" of the sequencing of narratives.

### Language and *Vita Sancti Columbae*:

This chapter explores Adomnán's style as a Hiberno-Latin writer, including discussions of such techniques as hyperbaton, alliteration and *variatio*. Adomnán's use of and attitudes to Greek and Hebrew are also explored, as is his use of and attitudes to Old Irish.

### Sex, Women and Violence in *Vita Sancti Columbae*:

This chapter investigates Adomnán's presentations of sexual behaviour, the role of women as givers of advice, and the violence inflicted on the innocent. Several of the narratives about violence clearly have a strong gendered dimension, and relate in interesting ways to *Cáin Adomnáin*, and they are discussed in this light.

### Dangerous Beasts in *Vita Sancti Columbae*:

*VSC* contains several encounters with dangerous beasts of various kinds, some of which are not unambiguously identifiable. These episodes are studied in turn, including discussions about identifying the beasts, and investigating the functions that they have within the text.

### *Vita Sancti Columbae* and Cult Practice:

The thesis concludes with an exploration of the roles *VSC* might have played in the life of the Columban *familia*. The use of blessed objects and relics within the text is studied, with suggestions as to their relation to cult practice. The final section concerns the possibility that certain parts of *VSC* were intended to be used in processions, or to be read with the active participation of an audience.



## Lay Summary

Written in c. 700 at the island monastery of Iona, Adomnán's *Vita Sancti Columbae* ("Life of Saint Columba") is an important source for the study of early medieval Scotland and Ireland. It is not a biography of the saint, but rather a series of stories about him which demonstrate his sanctity and power.

This thesis analyses the text as a literary production, seeking to understand more about its internal logic and the ways in which it relates to other kinds of literary texts (such as Biblical literature, other saints' lives, secular sagas and wisdom literature). I look for points of similarity and divergence between *Vita Sancti Columbae* and these other texts, looking to see how the text relates to its wider literary and intellectual context. By taking this approach, we are able to understand the text better on its own terms, making it more useful as a source for historical study.

The text is studied, and set within its wider context, with respect to the following main areas:

- (1) The manuscripts of the text: looking at how illumination, the use of different alphabets and the layout of the page relate to the text. The visual presentation of the work is seen as integral to its literary construction.
- (2) The structure of the text: looking at how the short stories of the saint are arranged, and how they relate to one another.
- (3) Language: analysing Adomnán's Latin prose style, as well as his use of and attitudes towards other languages (Hebrew, Greek and Old Irish) within the text.
- (4) Sex, women and violence: looking at how Adomnán presents issues about sexual behaviour, attitudes towards women (especially as givers of advice), and the related issue of violence inflicted on the innocent.
- (5) Dangerous beasts: studying the messages conveyed by the fierce, dangerous and sometimes monstrous creatures that Adomnán includes in the text, and how Columba interacts with them.
- (6) Cult practice and the use of the text: how might the monastic communities dedicated to Columba have used the text? This chapter explores some possibilities for its role in the religious life of communities that revered Columba.

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*Tapadh leibh uile.*  
D.S.S

*Cho glic ri sagart agus eallach leabhraichean air.*

*Seanfhacal*



## Introduction

Adomnán of Iona's *Vita Sancti Columbae* ("The Life of Saint Columba") is one of the most important texts at our disposal for the study of early medieval Scotland.<sup>1</sup> Written in Latin in *circa* 700 at the island monastery of Iona, the text exists in two recensions, of which the first is the longer – the later, second recension is essentially an abridgement, about a third shorter than the first.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the conventional titles *Vita (Sancti) Columbae* are modern usages. None of the manuscripts of VSC include any titles for the text at all, and simply open with a notice introducing the preface.<sup>3</sup> In order to set workable parameters to this study, only the first recension will be considered. This recension is preserved in five manuscripts, representing two slightly variant textual traditions: Group A consists of Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek, Generalia 1 and Metz, Bibliothèque diocésaine, 270.3 MS1 (folios 1 recto – 79 recto); and Group B of British Library MS Additional 35110 (folios 96 verso to 143 recto), British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III (folios 192 recto to 217 recto) and British Library MS Royal 8D IX (1 recto to 70 recto).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, VSC. The standard edition is Alan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson (ed. and trans.), *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991 [2<sup>nd</sup> edn.]), and all quotations in Latin or in translation are from it, unless otherwise stated. The second edition is an improvement, but it omits many useful notes and much introductory material contained in the first. Where the 1961 edition is cited, it is because it contains something omitted from the 1991 edition. Where this earlier edition is used, or where I have altered the Andersons' translation, it will be clearly indicated. The text was first printed by John Colgan, along with the *vitae* of Patrick and Brigit in his *Trias Thaumaturga* (Louvain, 1647), and in the Bollandists' *Acta Sanctorum* volume for the ninth of June (Columba's feast day) in 1698. The first modern scholarly edition is William Reeves (ed.), *The Life of St. Columba, Founder of Hy. Written by Adamnan, Ninth Abbot of that Monastery* (Dublin: Irish Archæological and Celtic Society, 1857). Bishop Reeves's edition, though now badly out of date in many respects, still contains many useful notes, and remains valuable to the modern scholar. Reeves republished his edition, with English translation, in 1874 as part of the *Historians of Scotland* series. There were several further translations and editions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, all based on Reeves's text: Bishop Daniel MacCarthy (1860), A.P. Forbes (1874), J. T. Fowler (1895) – again with some useful notes, especially in the revised edition of 1920, and Wentworth Huyshe (1905). The most recent English translation, and the only one based on the Andersons' edition is Richard Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona, Life of St Columba* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995). Sharpe's translation is invaluable, not least for its extensive introduction and notes.

<sup>2</sup> That the longer recension is the older was established by Reeves on the basis of the very early date of the earliest extant manuscript, Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek, Generalia 1 (which is the longer version of the text) and on the uniformity of style between the "extra" sections and chapter headings (i.e. those parts of the longer recension not included in the shorter) and the rest of the longer recension, in Adomnán's distinctive style. This has not been challenged. See Reeves, *Life*, pp. xi – xiii; Anderson and Anderson, *Life of Columba* (1<sup>st</sup> edn.), pp. 11 – 12.

<sup>3</sup> VSC, First Preface.

<sup>4</sup> This designation of Groups A and B is taken from the Andersons. They do not include Metz, Bibliothèque diocésaine, 270.3 MS1, but as it is very closely related to Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek, Generalia 1 (as discussed in Chapter 1, below), I designate it "A2".

The precise date of *VSC*'s composition is not known. Adomnán died in 704, providing a secure *terminus ante quem*.<sup>5</sup> In the text of *VSC* itself, he mentions some events which are datable from other sources, such as his second visit to Northumbria, which he describes as taking place two years after the battle of Dunnichen, as well as a possible allusion to the Synod of Birr a decade later.<sup>6</sup> Stansbury has argued convincingly that Adomnán compiled and re-edited his work over a number of years, and had not completed his final revision of the text at the time of his death.<sup>7</sup>

Adomnán states that he drew on a number of different sources in compiling *VSC*, including previous written accounts of Columba, oral testimony and his own experience.<sup>8</sup>

*VSC* is not a chronological, linear biography of the saint, but rather a collection of around a hundred and thirty (with some variation in the different manuscripts) mostly quite short narratives about Columba's prophecies, miracles and visions of angels, demons and heavenly light.<sup>9</sup> Some episodes that we might expect to find in such a text, such as account of Columba entering holy orders, or becoming an abbot, or of him founding the monastery at Iona, are entirely absent from *VSC*: there were other aspects of Columba's sanctity, power and holy way of life that interested Adomnán far more than what we might consider such basic biographical details.

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<sup>5</sup> *AU*, *sub anno* 704, pp. 162 – 163.

<sup>6</sup> *VSC*, II.46; *AU* *sub anno* 686, pp. 148 – 149. *AU*'s reckoning is here out by one year, the battle was fought in 685. See Thomas Charles-Edwards (trans.), *The Chronicle of Ireland. Volume One: Introduction and Text* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), *sub anno* 686, p. 166, n. 2. *VSC*, II.45; *AU*, *sub anno* 697, pp. 156 – 157. Adomnán's visit to Northumbria is recorded in *AU*, *sub anno* 687, pp. 150 – 151.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Stansbury, "The Composition of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*", in *Peritia*, 17 – 18 (2003 – 2004), pp. 154 – 182, at p. 173.

<sup>8</sup> ... *sed ea quae maiorum fideliumque uirorum tradita expertorum cognoui relatione narraturum et sine ulla ambiguitate craxaturum sciat, et uel ex his quae ante nos inserta paginis repperire potuimus, uel ex his quae auditu ab expertis quibusdam fidelibus antiquis sine ulla dubitatione narrantibus diligentius sciscitantes didicimus.* [... but let him understand that I shall relate what has come to my knowledge through the tradition passed on by our predecessors, and by trustworthy men who knew the facts and that I shall set down unequivocally, and either from among those things that we have been able to find put into writing before our time, or else from among those that we have learned, after diligent inquiry, by hearing them from the lips of certain informed and trustworthy aged men who related them without any hesitation.] *VSC*, Second Preface. The only identifiable written source is Cumméne's *Liber de uirtutibus Sancti Columbae*, interpolated by the scribe Dorbbéne into the earliest surviving manuscript of *VSC*, and copies made from it, *VSC*, III.5. Adomnán cites chains of oral transmission fairly often, for instance in I.43, and I.49. Examples of stories drawn from Adomnán's own experience are in II.44 – 46, containing a series of miracles of which Adomnán claims to have been an eyewitness.

<sup>9</sup> ... *quae tamen inferius per tris diuisa libros plenius explicabuntur; quorum primus profeticas reuelationes, secundus uero diuinas per ipsum uirtutes effectas, tertius angelicas apparationes contenebit et quasdam super hominem dei caelestis claritudinis manifestationis.* [These things will be more fully discussed below, divided into three books, of which the first will concern prophetic revelations; the second, divine miracles effected through him; the third, appearances of angels, and certain manifestations of heavenly brightness above the man of God.] *VSC*, Second Preface.

In this introduction, we will give a brief summary of the biographical details of Columba and of Adomnán, including those writings which have been either securely or tentatively attributed to them. This will be followed by a review of existing scholarship on *VSC*, and then an outline of the argument of this thesis and a summary of the six thesis chapters.

## 1: The Subject and the Author

### 1.1: Columba

Columba, one of the most prominent saints of the early medieval period in Ireland and Scotland (usually known in Ireland by his Irish name Colm Cille, and in Scottish Gaelic as Calum Cille), was born in around 521, and died on the ninth of June, 597.<sup>10</sup> His parents, as Adomnán tells us, were Fedelmith (or Fedilmid), son of Fergus, and Ethne, daughter of Mac Naue.<sup>11</sup> His paternal grandfather, Fergus Cendfota, was the son of Conall Gulban, the son of Niall Noígíallach (“Niall of the Nine Hostages”), the progenitor of the Uí Néill. Columba was thus part of the powerful Cenél Conaill kindred, and cousin to Aéd mac Ainmerech, king of Tara.<sup>12</sup> There seems to be no particular reason to doubt the portrait Adomnán paints of Columba as a deeply devout man from his youth, studious in the pursuit of wisdom and rigorous in the keeping of fasts and vigils.<sup>13</sup> Even so, his membership of the social elite would certainly have expedited his progress in his ecclesiastical career. Little is known for certain about the detail of his earlier career, but by the time he left Ireland to found the monastery at Iona he was already approximately forty-two years of age.

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<sup>10</sup> *AU* records his death in 595 (pp. 96 – 97), but as Charles-Edwards demonstrates, it is here out by two years, and 597 is to be preferred: Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland: Vol. One, sub anno 595*, p. 118, n. 3. *AI* gives his death in 597, pp. 80 – 81. The annals state that Columba was seventy six years old when he died, which would give c. 521 as the year of his birth, depending on the month – which is not recorded in any early source.

<sup>11</sup> *VSC*, Second Preface. In addition to the information provided by Adomnán, there is a list of Columba’s monks and relatives, independent of Adomnán, appended to the text of *VSC* in each of the three B manuscripts, Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, pp. 237 – 239.

<sup>12</sup> There is a useful family tree diagram which illustrates the connections between Columba, Adomnán and other prominent figures from the Irish political and ecclesiastical spheres in the introduction to Sharpe, *Life*, Table 1. See also the genealogical material in Pádraig Ó Riain (ed.), *Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> *VSC*, Second Preface.

Columba has acquired a powerful reputation as the evangelist to the Picts, bringing the Gospel to the pagan peoples of early Scotland. This is largely based on the following passage in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*:

*Siquidem anno incarnationis dominicae quingentesimo sexagesimo quinto, quo tempore gubernaculum Romani imperii post Iustinianum Iustinus minor accepit, uenit de Hibernia presbyter et abbas habitu et uita monachi insignis nominis Columba, Britanniam praedicatus uerbum Dei prouinciis septentrionalium Pictorum, hoc est eis quae arduis atque horrentibus montium iugis ab australibus eorum sunt regionibus sequestratae... Venit autem Britanniam Columba regnante Pictis Bridio filio Meilochon rege potentissimo, nono anno regni eius, gentemque illam uerbo et exemplo ad fidem Christi conuertit...*

[In the year of our Lord 565, when Justin the second took over the control of the Roman Empire after Justinian, there came from Ireland to Britain a priest and abbot named Columba, a true monk in life no less than habit; he came to Britain to preach the word of God to the kingdom of the northern Picts which are separated from the southern part of their land by steep and rugged mountains... Columba came to Britain when Bridius the son of Malcolm, a most powerful king, had been ruling over the Picts for eight years. Columba turned them to the faith of Christ by his words and example...]<sup>14</sup>

Many modern scholars have followed Bede in attributing to Columba a leading role in the Christianisation of Pictland.<sup>15</sup> Others have noted that although Adomnán does record a handful of baptisms in Pictland, not one of our surviving Ionan sources, including *VSC*, makes any claim to his having converted either the Picts in general, or their king in particular, and Fraser urges caution about accepting too readily the eighth-century synthesis given by Bede.<sup>16</sup> Márkus points to archaeological evidence which indicates that there was already a monastic presence in Pictland during Columba's lifetime, and suggests that the Pictish king Bridei whom Columba

<sup>14</sup> Bede, *HE*, III.4, pp. 220 – 223.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Thomas Charles-Edwards, "Conversion to Christianity", in Thomas Charles-Edwards (ed.), *After Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 103 – 139, at pp. 123 – 124.

<sup>16</sup> *VSC*, I.33; II.32; III.14; Alfred P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men: Scotland, AD 80 – 1000* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), pp. 102 – 108; James E. Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland: Scotland to 795* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 94 – 115.



encounters in several episodes in Book II may have been a Christian himself, and not a pagan as is usually assumed.<sup>17</sup>

Columba himself has left us no writings that we can securely say are his. Certainly, we have no letters, commentaries or accounts of his own life, such as we have for other figures such as Patrick and Columbanus. The poetic elegy in his honour, “Amra Choluimb Chille”, attributed to a Dallán Forgaill, which seems to have been composed soon after the saint’s death, depicts him as a formidable scholar:

*Boí sab súithe cech dind,  
boí did oc libur léig-docht.*

(He was learning’s pillar in every stronghold,  
he was foremost at the book of complex Law.)<sup>18</sup>

*Raith rith rethes dar cais caín-denum.  
Faig feirb fithir.  
Gáis gluassa glé.  
Glinnsius salmu,  
Sluinnsius léig libru,  
libuir ut car Cassion.  
Catha gulae gaelaeis.  
Libru Solman sexus.  
Sína sceo imm-ríma-raith.  
Rannais raind co figuir eter libru léig.  
Legais rúna, to-ch-uaid eter scolaib screptra,  
sceo ellacht imm-uaim n-ésci im rith,  
raith rith la gréin ngescaig,  
sceo réin rith.*

<sup>17</sup> Gilbert Márkus, *Conceiving a Nation: Scotland to AD 900* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 120.

<sup>18</sup> *Amra Choluimb Chille*, ed. and trans., Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 96 – 128, § II.5 – 6. Clancy and Márkus argue for an early date for this poem, shortly after Columba’s death. Bisagni, however argues that while it may have been built on a core of sixth- or seventh-century material, there is linguistic evidence to suggest that in its present form it dates from the ninth: Jacopo Bisagni “The Language and Date of Amrae Coluimb Chille”, in Stefan Zimmer (ed.), *Kelten am Rhein: Akten des dreizehnten Internationalen Keltologiekongresses, Proceedings of the Thirteenth International Congress of Celtic Studies* (Mainz: Philipp Von Zabern, 2009) pp. 1 – 11.

*Rímfed rínd nime, nech in-choí cech ndiruais*  
*ro-Columb ó Chille -cúalammar.*

(He ran the course which runs past hatred to right action.  
 The teacher wove the word.  
 By his wisdom he made glosses clear.  
 He fixed the Psalms,  
 he made known the books of Law,  
 those books Cassian loved.  
 He won battles with gluttony.  
 The books of Solomon, he followed them.  
 Seasons and calculations he set in motion.  
 He separated the elements according to figures among the books of the Law.  
 He read mysteries and distributed the 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.  
 He could number the stars of heaven, the one who could tell all the rest  
 which we have heard from Colum Cille.)<sup>19</sup>

*at-gaill grammataig Greic.*  
 (he studied Greek grammar.)<sup>20</sup>

While not all of these activities would necessarily have resulted in the production of new texts (the study of Greek grammar, for instance), the references to glosses and computistic work, which seem too specific to be general statements about his erudition, point to a known body of scholarly work, none of which has survived.<sup>21</sup> However, Dallán also states that:

*Cot-luid la dó chétul do nim-íath íarna chroich.*  
 (He went with two songs to heaven after his cross.)

It has not proven possible to positively identify the two poems in question. While there are a great many manifestly later poems attributed to Columba which need not concern us here, the

<sup>19</sup> ACC, § V.

<sup>20</sup> ACC, § VIII.14.

<sup>21</sup> It is interesting that Adomnán presents a very different image of Columba. He is often depicted as a scribe, copying out texts, but never as a scholar composing new ones.

two which have tended to be considered as plausibly his are two Latin poems, “Altus prosator” and “Adiutor laborantium”.<sup>22</sup>

There is a very early Latin psalter from Ireland, traditionally known as the *Cathach* (“Battler”) and reputed to have been copied by Columba. While this attribution cannot be conclusively demonstrated, the tradition dates from the medieval period, and the manuscript itself appears to date from the sixth century, so the tradition is at least plausible.<sup>23</sup>

Columba was the subject of a great many medieval and early modern writings. From the medieval period, the most significant are, in addition to *VSC* and some poems in the anthology edited by Clancy and Márkus, two vernacular prose hagiographies. The earlier of these is sometimes called “The Old Irish Life of Columba” – which is a rather unhelpful title, since it is actually written in Middle Irish, rather than Old Irish. Máire Herbert, who has edited and translated the text, argues on linguistic grounds that it must have been composed some time after the year 1000, but before the end of the twelfth century.<sup>24</sup> This text draws some of its material from *VSC*, but is structured in a more straightforward, chronological, manner. There is also the huge compendium of Columban material compiled by (or at least under the direction of) Manus Ó Domhnaill in the 1530s.<sup>25</sup> This draws material from both *VSC* and “The Irish Life of Colum Cille”. While its basic arrangement is as a chronological account of Columba’s life, some of the borrowings from *VSC* retain Adomnán’s sequencing patterns.

## 1.2: Adomnán

Adomnán was a distant kinsman of Columba, as his great-great-great grandfather was Columba’s paternal uncle Sétna, son of Fergus Cendfota.<sup>26</sup> He seems to have been born in the

<sup>22</sup> Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 39 – 68; 69 – 80. As discussed below, Márkus has more recently argued for Adomnán’s authorship of “Adiutor laborantium”. As with Columba’s scholarship, any possible poetic compositions of his go entirely unmentioned in *VSC*.

<sup>23</sup> Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 12 R 33; Michael Herity and Aidan Breen, *The Cathach of Colum Cille: An Introduction* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), pp. 180 – 202; Edition, pp. 211 – 247; Translation, pp. 248 – 286. I follow Herbert in designating this text, “The Irish Life of Colum Cille”.

<sup>25</sup> Manus O’ Donnell, *Betha Colaim Chille/ Life of Columcille*, ed. and trans., A. O’Kelleher and G. Schoepperle (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1918).

<sup>26</sup> See the genealogical table in Sharpe, *Life*, Introduction, Table 1. For more genealogical information, see Ó Riain, *CGSH*.

620s, and entered young into an ecclesiastical career, as he had already been studying and teaching the Scriptures for thirty years by the time he was appointed as the ninth abbot of Iona in 679. How long he had been based at Iona prior to this, if at all, is unknown. A powerful intellectual and a well-connected political figure, he used his talents and position in a number of literary, theological and political endeavours.<sup>27</sup> For instance, in 687 (probably actually 686) *AU* records him returning sixty captives to Ireland, who had probably been taken to Northumbria in a raid on Brega by Ecgfrith in 684.<sup>28</sup>

This episode reflects a deep concern for innocent victims of the violence of the powerful, a concern which is very much present in *VSC*, and also lay behind Adomnán's major political achievement: a law to protect women, children and clerics from violence. This law is known by both Latin and Irish names – *Lex Innocentium*, for so it appears in *AU: Adomnanus ad Hiberniam pergit 7 dedit Legem Innocentium populis* (“Adomnán proceeded to Ireland and gave the *Lex Innocentium* to the people.”), and *Cáin Adomnáin*, the title given to the actual legal tract itself, most of which in its surviving form post-dates Adomnán considerably.<sup>29</sup> This law imposed a system of fines, to be paid to the Columban church, and other punishments for violence against women, children and clerics. Although, as shall be argued in this thesis, concern for all three classes of “innocents” is demonstrably present in *VSC*, within about a century of its promulgation, the law was primarily seen as being concerned with the protection of women in particular.<sup>30</sup>

There are also writings attributed to Adomnán which may or may not be by him. These include a commentary on Vergil's *Bucolics* and *Georgics*, preserved in several manuscripts from mainland Europe.<sup>31</sup> Thurneysen dated it to the late seventh century on the basis of its Old Irish

<sup>27</sup> Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry*, pp. 47 – 56, gives a detailed overview of Adomnán's abbacy.

<sup>28</sup> *AU*, *sub anno* 687, pp. 150 – 151.

<sup>29</sup> *AU*, *sub anno* 697, pp. 156 – 157. *Cáin Adomnáin* is a complex text, which had layers added to it over time. Parts of it may date from as late as 1000, while some other parts may genuinely be by Adomnán himself. Determining how much, if any, of it can reliably be said to be based on Adomnán's own work is not straightforward. See the discussion in Pádraig P. Ó Néill and David N. Dumville (ed. and trans.), *Cáin Adomnáin and Canones Adomnani, I* (Cambridge: Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, 2003) pp. xxiv – xl. See also Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, “Birr and the Law of the Innocents”, in Thomas O'Loughlin (ed.), *Adomnán at Birr, AD 697: Essays in Commemoration of the Law of the Innocents* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), pp. 13 – 32. In the interests of clarity, this text will be referred to as *Cáin Adomnáin* in this thesis.

<sup>30</sup> Ó Néill and Dumville, *Cáin Adomnáin and Canones Adomnani, I*, p. xxxvi.

<sup>31</sup> Whitley Stokes and John Strachan (ed. and trans.), *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus: A Collection of Old-Irish Glosses, Scholia, Prose and Verse. Volume II* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1903), pp. xvii – xviii, 46 – 48, 360 – 363.

glosses, which have been corrupted in the course of the text's transmission. This corruption might also apply to the commentary's attribution, which is to an "Adananus" or "Adannanus" (depending on the manuscript).<sup>32</sup> There is also a short regulatory text about clean and unclean food, known as *Canones Adomnani*, which is preserved in six manuscripts, all from Brittany, dating from the ninth to the eleventh centuries. Certain third-person references to an authority figure lead Ó Néill and Dumville to suggest that at least parts of the text might be better regarded as coming from Adomnán's followers passing on his teachings, rather than directly from Adomnán himself.<sup>33</sup>

As with Columba, a great many poems are attributed to Adomnán, many of them clearly of a much later date. It is possible, however, that he was indeed the writer of a short poem entitled, "Colum Cille co Día domm eráil" ("May Colum Cille commend me to God"), as discussed by Clancy and Márkus.<sup>34</sup> Márkus has also revised his earlier assessment of the authorship of "Adiutor Laborantium", which he and Clancy had regarded as being plausibly Columba's, and makes a good case for it being Adomnán's work.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, aside from *VSC*, the only text which we have which we can securely attribute to Adomnán's authorship is *De Locis Sanctis (DLS)*, a detailed description of sites of Biblical and early Christian events in the Holy Land.<sup>36</sup> Adomnán claims to have received the information for this work in person from a Gaulish bishop called Arculf, known only in connection with *DLS*, who had seen these places himself, but he certainly also draws upon written sources as well, including works by Isidore and Jerome.<sup>37</sup> *DLS* survives in over twenty manuscripts, and was, to a greater degree than *VSC*, the basis for Adomnán's high reputation as a scholar in the medieval period.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> James F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical. An Introduction and Guide* (Dublin: Pádraic Ó Táilliúir, 1929), No. 133, pp. 286 – 287.

<sup>33</sup> Ó Néil and Dumville, *Cáin Adomnáin and Canones Adomnani*, pp. xiii – xxiv.

<sup>34</sup> Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 164 – 176.

<sup>35</sup> Gilbert Márkus, "Adiutor Laborantium: a poem by Adomnán?", in Jonathan M. Wooding, Rodney Aist, Thomas Owen Clancy and Thomas O'Loughlin (eds.), *Adomnán of Iona: Theologian, lawmaker, peacemaker* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), pp. 145 – 161.

<sup>36</sup> Adomnán, *De locis sanctis*, ed. and trans. Denis Meehan, *Adamnan's De Locis Sanctis* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983).

<sup>37</sup> In addition to Meehan's introduction, see the full-length treatment in Thomas O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places: The Perceptions of an Insular Monk on the Locations of the Biblical Drama* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> Meehan, *DLS*, pp. 30 – 34; O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places*, pp. 5 – 7.

Adomnán himself came to be venerated as a saint, and is the subject of a vernacular hagiography composed at some point in the tenth century.<sup>39</sup>

## 2: Literature Review

Early medieval Scotland is notoriously poorly documented in comparison to, for instance, England, Ireland or France in the same period. It is not surprising, therefore, that a substantial text (running to 117 pages of Latin text in the standard edition) of known authorship, secure provenance and fairly secure date is widely used as a source of information for studies of many aspects of early Scottish, and to a lesser extent, Irish, history – including political, ecclesiastical, linguistic, legal and cultural (in the broadest sense). The most important general studies of the text, and studies on aspects of this which will not be investigated in this thesis will be included in this literature review; the individual chapters of the thesis will each include a discussion of existing scholarship on their themes.

With regard to how the text was put together, Gertrud Brüning's classic study of 1917, which demonstrates Adomnán's familiarity with such writers as Juvencus, Athanasius of Alexandria (in the Latin translation by Evagrius of Antioch), Sulpicius Severus and Constantius of Lyon, as well as his sources for Columban material, is still indispensable a century after it was published.<sup>40</sup> Máire Herbert's full-length study of the history of the Columban *familia* also looks closely at Adomnán's sources, the composition of the text, and gives an excellent example of how hagiography can, when sensitively used, be a vital historical source.<sup>41</sup> Stansbury's article on the composition of *VSC* makes an important contribution to understanding the compilatory nature of the work, and argues strongly that Adomnán had not finished his final revision of the text at the time of his death.<sup>42</sup> Bullough's two-part article in *SHR*, 1964 – 1965, giving an overview on Columba, Adomnán and Iona, is still useful.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Discussed in Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry*, pp. 151- 179.

<sup>40</sup> Gertrud Brüning, "Adamnans Vita Columba und ihre Ableitungen", *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 11 (1917), pp. 213 – 304.

<sup>41</sup> Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*. In this study, I follow Herbert in using the term "Columban *familia*" to mean the broad network of foundations under Iona's authority, rather than the more restricted sense of Columba's immediate retinue of followers.

<sup>42</sup> Stansbury, "The Composition".

<sup>43</sup> D.A. Bullough, "Columba, Adomnán and the Achievement of Iona, Part I", *SHR*, Vol. XLIII, No. 136 (1964), pp. 111 – 130; No. 137 (1965), pp. 17 – 33.

Adomnán's motivations for writing *VSC* have also been investigated. Jean-Michel Picard did so and looked at *VSC* as a highly nuanced text, addressing three quite different publics: those of Iona, Ireland and Northumbria and a wider European audience as well. He concludes by arguing that although *VSC* contains much propaganda for the Columban cult in contemporary disputes in ecclesiastical politics, Adomnán's fundamental aim was to write a faithful account of Columba's life and works, and in so doing to provide a model for Christian behaviour.<sup>44</sup> Herbert agrees with Picard that different audiences are addressed in *VSC*, although she is not convinced that a mainland European audience was necessarily one of them. Rather, she argues that the work is an attempt to heal the divisions brought about by the Easter controversy, demonstrating to the Northumbrians the worthiness and orthodoxy of Columba, and to the Columban *familia* the need for unity. Herbert sees Adomnán as demonstrating that "the resolution of contemporary contentions was to be found by looking to the example of the saintly life of Colum Cille, which was above all dispute."<sup>45</sup> Fraser, in contrast, points out the political messages Adomnán encoded into his work, and cautions against overestimating the impact of Whitby.<sup>46</sup> Thomas Owen Clancy has also studied Adomnán's motivations for writing *VSC*, stressing the pastoral aspects of the text, as well as Adomnán's personal investment in the Columban cult as a kinsman and successor of Columba, as well as its political dimensions.<sup>47</sup>

There have been some studies of *VSC* from a theological perspective, mostly by specialists on medieval theology. Katja Ritari used *VSC*, along with Cogitosus' *Vita Sanctae Brigidae* and the *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae* in her full-length study of moral theology in early Christian Ireland.<sup>48</sup> Thomas O'Loughlin also included a discussion on Adomnán in his *Celtic Theology*, and also studied Adomnán as a theologian in more depth in his *Adomnán and the Holy Places*.<sup>49</sup> Tomás O'Sullivan has also looked at the theology of a particular episode of *VSC*, the baptism

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<sup>44</sup> J.M. Picard, "The Purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae, Peritia*, 1 (1982), pp. 160 – 177.

<sup>45</sup> Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry*, pp. 142 – 148.

<sup>46</sup> Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 5 – 6, 121, 142 – 144, 192 – 193, 222 – 224, 248, 282 (for Whitby).

<sup>47</sup> Clancy, Thomas Owen, "Personal, Political, Pastoral: The Multiple Agenda of Adomnán's *Life of St Columba*", in Edward J. Cowan and Douglas Gifford (eds.), *The Polar Twins* (Edinburgh: John Donald Press, 1999), pp. 39 – 60.

<sup>48</sup> Katja Ritari, *Saints and Sinners in Early Christian Ireland: Moral Theology in the Lives of Saints Brigit and Columba* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> Thomas O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings* (London and New York: Continuum, 2000); O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places*.



and death of the pagan Artbranan in I.33.<sup>50</sup> There has also been a full-length study from a modern theological perspective by James Bruce.<sup>51</sup>

It should be noted that while scholars continue to use *VSC* as a source for ecclesiastical and political history,<sup>52</sup> it has also been used by scholars working on aspects of history that have only begun to emerge into the historiographical mainstream relatively recently, such as the histories of gender, sanctity and ethnic identities.<sup>53</sup>

Many studies of *VSC* have also looked at other Irish hagiographies, and set it in the context of the group of the four extant early Irish *vitae* (the others are those of Brigit by Cogitosus, and of Patrick by Muirchú and Tírechán). Ludwig Bieler's 1962 article remains a good starting point, and McCone has also written a wide-ranging article outlining some of the key features of Irish hagiography.<sup>54</sup> As to the application of this literature to historical scholarship, Kathleen Hughes included a chapter on hagiography in her general survey of the sources available for the study of early Christian Ireland. This is now slightly out of date, but remains useful.<sup>55</sup> More recent survey articles by Máire Herbert give a more up-to-date view, and take account of the (sometimes problematic) ways in which economic and social, as well as political and ecclesiastical, historians have been making use of hagiographical material in the period since Bieler's seminal article.<sup>56</sup> The development of hagiography as a genre of literature in Ireland

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<sup>50</sup> Tomás O'Sullivan, "The anti-Pelagian motif of the 'naturally good' pagan in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*", in Wooding, Aist, Clancy and O'Loughlin (eds.), *Adomnán of Iona*, pp. 253 – 273.

<sup>51</sup> James Bruce, *Prophecy, Miracles, Angels, and Heavenly Light? The Eschatology, Pneumatology and Missiology of Adomnán's Life of Columba* (Milton Keynes and Waynesboro: Paternoster, 2004).

<sup>52</sup> Some recent examples include Nicholas Evans, *A Historical Introduction to the Northern Picts* (Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen Department of Archaeology, 2014); James E. Fraser, "Dux Reuda and the Corcu Réti", in Wilson McLeod, James E. Fraser and Anja Gunderloch (eds.), *Cànan & Cultar/ Language and Culture: Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 3* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2006), pp. 1- 9; Fraser, *Caledonia to Pictland*.

<sup>53</sup> Lisa M. Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe, 400 – 1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013); Marie Therese Flanagan, "Strategies of Distinction: Defining Nations in Medieval Ireland", in Hirokazu Tsurushima (ed.), *Nations in Medieval Britain* (Donnington: Shaun Tyas, 2010), pp. 104 – 120.

<sup>54</sup> Kim McCone, "An introduction to early Irish saints' lives", in *Maynooth Review*, 11 (1984), pp. 26 – 59.

<sup>55</sup> Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources* (London: The Sources of History/Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), pp. 217 – 247.

<sup>56</sup> Ludwig Bieler, "The Celtic Hagiographer", *Studia Patristica*, 5 (1962), pp. 243 – 265; Máire Herbert, "Hagiography", in Kim McCone and Katherine Simms (eds.), *Progress in Medieval Irish Studies* (Maynooth: Saint Patrick's College, 1996), pp. 79 – 90; "Gnéithe den naomhsheanchas in Éirinn sa tréimhse réamh-Lochlannach", *Léachtaí Cholm Cille*, 30 (2000) pp. 65-74; "Latin and Vernacular Hagiography of Ireland from the Origins to the Sixteenth Century", in Guy Philippart (ed.), *Hagiographies, Vol. III* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), pp. 327 – 360).



has been well covered by Clare Stancliffe, while Richard Sharpe in a full-length study has looked at the growth and reshaping of Irish collections of *vitae* from the ninth century into the later middle ages.<sup>57</sup> While this scholarship tends to see *VSC* as a work of early Irish literature, and belonging to an essentially Irish context, James E. Fraser has a short, though useful, article setting it in the context of the tradition of medieval Scottish hagiography, a helpful reminder that the Gaelic world to which Columba and Adomnán both belonged can and should be seen in a wider context.<sup>58</sup>

Kim McCone's controversial landmark study on the impact of Christianity within early Irish literature included a discussion of hagiography, and particularly the links between the secular sagas and the later, vernacular hagiographies.<sup>59</sup> While much work has been done and is being done on hagiography, however, within Scottish and Irish literary history this genre sometimes has a rather curious position, sometimes being seen as a thing somewhat apart from the kinds of literature usually considered. For instance, of the two standard introductory survey books on early Irish literature, those by Myles Dillon and Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, both look at the large corpus of poetry and prose (including the saga "cycles"), but neither touches on hagiography at all.<sup>60</sup> In the Scottish context, it is instructive to look to the chapter on Latin prose literature in the first volume of the four-volume literary history of Scotland, edited by Cairns Craig.<sup>61</sup> Though now superseded in many respects, this series was a standard reference work in Scottish literary studies until quite recently. Quite astonishingly, the MacQueens comment that, "[d]espite the profusion of miracles attributed to Columba, [*VSC*] is a highly intellectual work."<sup>62</sup> This seems to betray a certain degree of distancing from and discomfort with something that is absolutely integral to Adomnán's work. If *VSC* is a highly intellectual

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<sup>57</sup> Clare Stancliffe, "The Miracle Stories in seventh-century Irish Saints' Lives", in Jacques Fontaine and J. N. Hillgarth (eds.), *Le Septième Siècle: Changements et Continuités: Actes du Colloque franco-britannique tenu au Warburg Institute les 8 -9 juillet 1988/ The Seventh Century: Change and Continuity: Proceedings of a joint French and British Colloquium held at the Warburg Institute, 8 - 9 July 1988* (London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1992), pp. 87 - 115; Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives: An Introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>58</sup> James E. Fraser, "Hagiography", in Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy and Murray Pittock (eds.), *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature: Volume One: From Columba to the Union (until 1707)* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 103 - 109.

<sup>59</sup> Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1991).

<sup>60</sup> Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1948); Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, *An Introduction to Early Irish Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009).

<sup>61</sup> John and Winifred MacQueen, "Latin Prose Literature", in R.D.S. Jack and Cairns Craig (eds.), *The History of Scottish Literature: Volume 1, Origins to 1660 (Medieval and Renaissance)* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), pp. 227 - 243.

<sup>62</sup> MacQueen and MacQueen, "Latin Prose Literature", p. 227.

work, this must be at least in part because of the way in which miraculous elements are integrated into the portrait Adomnán tries to paint of his subject. They are central to Adomnán's world view and central to the understanding of Columba which he tries to impart in his work, not incidental features we can set aside while we look for something that accords better with the intellectual biases and literary tastes of our own time. The MacQueens go on to say that, "[t]he modern reader tends to be less interested in [the theological aspects of Adomnán's work] than in some of the stories which he tells to illustrate his theme," as though these could be separated, "and in the unconscious assumptions which underlie these stories."<sup>63</sup> Seeking the value of VSC in natural and realistic description, they illustrate this with I.41, which features a relatively untroubling, low-key prophecy.<sup>64</sup> This approach seems not only to misrepresent the qualities of VSC, but it is also an entirely unhelpful way to go about finding and assessing them. What is intellectual or sophisticated or interesting about Adomnán's work must surely be sought in approaching the work as a whole and on its own terms, and in looking seriously at why Adomnán included the material he did – including material that might sit oddly with contemporary sensibilities.

In a still wider context, that of hagiography as a branch of Christian, and not merely of Insular Christian, literature, there has of course been a great deal of work done. The seminal work is Delehaye's *The Legends of the Saints*, still a vital starting-point more than a century after it was first published.<sup>65</sup> Other crucial points of reference include Heffernan's *Sacred Biography* and much useful synthesis is included in the introductions and apparatus in two major anthologies, *Soldiers of Christ*, edited by Thomas F.X. Noble and Thomas Head, and *Medieval Hagiography*, edited by Thomas Head.<sup>66</sup> The role of hagiography in the development of saints' cults was included in Peter Brown's classic work on cults, and also in Bartlett's recent monumental work on medieval notions of sanctity.<sup>67</sup> Many useful comparative perspectives are provided by more closely focused studies on certain areas and cults, such as Head's monograph on the hagiography of Orléans, Van Dam's work on hagiography in Gaul and

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<sup>63</sup> MacQueen and MacQueen, "Latin Prose Literature", p. 228.

<sup>64</sup> VSC, I.51.

<sup>65</sup> Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints*, trans., Donald Attwater (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998).

<sup>66</sup> Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographies in the Middle Ages* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Thomas F.X. Noble and Thomas Head (eds.), *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1995); Thomas Head (ed.), *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>67</sup> Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its rise and function in Latin Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1981); Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*

Stancliffe's monograph on Sulpicius Severus' treatment of Martin of Tours.<sup>68</sup> While this study does not attempt the kind of social and economic analysis that Jamie Kreiner undertook in her *The Social Life of Hagiography in the Merovingian Kingdom*, this work has been informed by hers, including her very useful synthesis of the ways in which hagiographic scholarship has responded to the turn towards social and cultural history, and of the approaches of the Paris and Vienna schools to *réécriture*, and to the importance of the collections of *vitae* in later manuscript compendia.<sup>69</sup>

### 3: The present thesis

While there are acknowledged limitations to its use, *VSC*'s ubiquity in the bibliographies of books and articles about early medieval Scotland is a testament to its position as the pre-eminent primary source for the study of Scotland in this period. This is due in part to the wealth of circumstantial and incidental detail which Adomnán includes, but in large part, too, to the paucity of other documentation. Be that as it may, *VSC* is not merely a mine of historical information: it is a work of literature, and it is my contention that it must be understood as such if it is to be understood or used as a historical source.<sup>70</sup> I follow Hayden White, who argued that in investigating historical source materials, it is not sufficient to assume that narrative accounts are a sort of neutral medium for transmitting information, with "literary" elements being confined to poetic or rhetorical decoration; rather, all aspects of the construction of the text, from the language used to the artificial formation of a coherent narrative from a set of historical events, must be considered as integral its interpretation.<sup>71</sup> Further, Gabrielle M. Spiegel has argued that, "[t]here is no way to determine *a priori* the social function of a text or its locus with respect to its cultural ambience. Only a minute examination of the form and

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<sup>68</sup> Clare Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer: History and Miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Raymond Van Dam, "Images of Saint Martin in late Roman and early Merovingian Gaul", *Viator*, 19 (1988), pp. 1 – 27; Raymond Van Dam, *Saints and their miracles in late antique Gaul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993);; Thomas Head, *Hagiography and the Cult of Saints: The Diocese of Orleans, 800 – 1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>69</sup> Jamie Kreiner, *The Social Life of Hagiography in the Merovingian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 3 – 9, 235 – 236.

<sup>70</sup> Clancy, "Personal, Political, Pastoral", p. 57; Máire Herbert noted the "methodological questions [raised by some historians'] use of Lives as reservoirs of data rather than as integral literary works, and in their use of undated Lives": Herbert, "Hagiography", p. 83. Although this criticism was directed primarily at economic historians, it could also be applied to Bitel's *Isle of the Saints*, which uses evidence from hagiographies, but shows little discrimination as to the dates of texts: Lisa M. Bitel, *Isle of the Saints Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990).

<sup>71</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

content of a given work can determine its situation with respect to broader patterns of culture at any given time.”<sup>72</sup> As will be demonstrated in this thesis, there are a number of episodes in *VSC* which have been misinterpreted by scholars seeking to uncover “what actually happened”, rather than to understand Adomnán’s literary motivations and influences. In doing so, some scholars have sought to demonstrate that Adomnán did not understand his source materials, and transmitted them poorly, making miracles out of mundane everyday occurrences through his ignorance.<sup>73</sup> In contrast, this thesis works on the assumption that Adomnán knew what he was doing, and that his aims and intentions can be discovered by investigating his work as a carefully, deliberately constructed literary work.

This study, then, is an investigation of several aspects of *VSC*, all of which are approached as literary issues, or as elements in the literary make-up of the text, as well as a few suggestions about how the Columban community might have used *VSC*. Throughout, *VSC* will be set in the context of “adjacent literatures”. By this is meant the broad range of literature in different languages and genres which border on *VSC* in different ways. These include religious literature (such as the Bible, Late Antique hagiography, insular hagiography contemporary with Adomnán), vernacular secular literature (such as sagas and wisdom literature), influential works of early medieval scholarship such as Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae* and also other writings which were an important part of Adomnán’s cultural and intellectual milieu (such as legal texts and penitentials). Adomnán’s other known writings, *De Locis Sanctis* and *Cáin Adomnáin*, are also included in this definition, though in its current form most of the latter post-dates Adomnán. It should not be inferred that Adomnán knew all of the works of adjacent literature that will be referred to in this study, but they do represent different strands of literature which provide a wider context for understanding his work. In attempting to find points of convergence and divergence across texts of different genres, this thesis will adhere to Antonio Gramsci’s formulation that

... critical activity must be based on the ability to make distinctions, to discover the difference underlying every superficial and apparent uniformity and likeness, and on the ability to discover the essential unity underlying every apparent

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<sup>72</sup> Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages”, *Speculum*, 65: 1 (1990), pp. 59 – 86, at p. 77.

<sup>73</sup> Most notably David Woods, “Four Notes on Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae*”, *Peritia*, 16 (2002), 40 – 67.

contrast and superficial differentiation.<sup>74</sup>

In this way, the ways in which *VSC* is similar to or different from texts across a range of religious and secular genres can be elucidated, helping us to assess it as a unique production in relation to a wider context, and not simply as a generic example of hagiography, with an assumed set of characteristics and literary affinities.

The aim of this thesis, then, is two-fold: firstly, to explore where *VSC* stands in relation to adjacent literatures and to early medieval practices of reading and writing; and from this to understand more about the literary, intellectual and cultural context in which it was produced. This will mean not only looking at *VSC* as a text, but also at Adomnán as an author, as a specific individual working within a wider literary context.

In each of the thesis chapters, the approach taken will be to describe the presence and function within *VSC* of each particular aspect studied, and then to bring in readings from adjacent literatures which will show how Adomnán approached these issues in ways which conformed with, contrasted with or innovated within the wider literary context in which he operated. Chapters 1 and 2, which are about manuscripts and language, respectively, will do so looking at the text as a whole, while chapters 3 – 6 will mainly consist of detailed readings of individual episodes in *VSC*. The individual episodes will also often be related to one another as well as to comparanda in other texts.

The chapters of the thesis are as follows:

1) The Manuscripts of *Vita Sancti Columbae*: the visual construction of text

This gives a description of the five manuscripts of the first recension, and looks at how factors such as the use of different ink colours, illumination, page layout and different alphabets relate to the literary nature of the text. The visual construction of the text in the surviving manuscripts is related to Adomnán's literary construction of the text, and the strategies employed by the scribes to reflect Adomnán's composition and to guide readers through it are examined, especially with regard to how the text approaches language, and to its structure. Changes to the visual nature of the text in response to changes in wider manuscript culture are considered, as is evidence from the manuscripts themselves about how they were used.

<sup>74</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. William Boelhower (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), p. 134 (Q 23 § 5).

## 2) Structure and Narrative Sequencing in *Vita Sancti Columbae*

VSC is introduced with a double preface, and the body of the work consists of many short narratives divided into three books by theme, with one book each focused on prophecies, miracles and visions. This chapter considers both the “macro” and the “micro” structures of the book, looking at how Adomnán arranges his material into his three large categories, and at the sequencing of narratives within them. Adomnán can be seen to both draw upon and radically depart from structural conventions in hagiography, demonstrating striking innovation within a tradition. The Gospels, classical biography and continental and insular hagiographies provide comparanda for this chapter.

## 3) Language and *Vita Sancti Columbae*

Adomnán’s use of language is studied, in two different senses. First, his style as a Latin writer is discussed, including his literary devices and his influences. These will be set in the wider context of Latin prose of the late antique and early medieval periods. Then, the presence of non-Latin languages (Greek, Hebrew and Old Irish) in this mainly Latin text is discussed, including what this might tell us about Adomnán’s thoughts about language, and the intended audience(s) of VSC. This will be set in the context of early medieval ideas – Irish and wider Christian – about language, languages and their social and religious significance. *DLS* helps to expand this discussion and throws interesting light on Adomnán’s approach to language.

Chapters 4 and 5 move to looking at certain themes within the text, rather than looking at the work as a whole in the manner of the previous chapters. These chapters provide case studies for the approach, with close readings of individual chapters in VSC set in relation to each other and to the wider context of adjacent literatures.

## 4) Sex, Women and Violence in *Vita Sancti Columbae*

This chapter explores Adomnán’s approaches to sexual sin and gendered behaviour in VSC. These are both set in the contexts of secular and ecclesiastical legislation, and of secular and religious literature. How Adomnán related to cultural and religious concerns about sex and gender will be discussed, using as a case study the role of women as givers

of advice, in which some episodes in *VSC* are set against religious, legal, secular narrative and wisdom literature to present a complex picture of competing ideas about gender. In the context of *Cáin Adomnáin*, this chapter will also discuss gendered violence in *VSC*.

#### 5) Dangerous Beasts in *Vita Sancti Columbae*

Several narratives within *VSC* feature creatures – not all of which are identifiable – which are presented as dangerous: a *cetus* (whale, sea-monster), a boar, a *bestia* and a large number of *bestiolae*. Here, I will discuss Adomnán’s presentations of these creatures, their physical locations and their functions within the text, informed by how such matters are treated in adjacent literatures, including in secular sagas, scholarly writings and the Bible.

#### 6) *Vita Sancti Columbae* and Cult Practice

Finally, I will discuss how *VSC* might have functioned within the Columban *familia*, and look at understanding the life of the text within it. This chapter makes some suggestions about the role(s) the text may have had within cult practice, informed by work on other cults. *VSC* contains several accounts about associative relics, including a few accounts of how they were used to effect miracles, and these are investigated in this chapter. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the context of cult practice for the reading of *VSC*, looking at how certain chapters might have related to the practice of the *familia*.

We shall now turn to the manuscripts of *VSC*, to the eight-hundred year manuscript tradition of this text, to see the part the visual construction of the text plays in its literary construction.









## Chapter 1

### The Manuscripts of *Vita Sancti Columbae*: the visual construction of the text

*Vita Sancti Columbae* exists in two recensions: the older, longer form; and the shorter, younger one.<sup>1</sup> In order to remain within manageable parameters, this study will focus on the first recension, a text which survives in five manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> The oldest of these, and the primary focus of this chapter, is Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, now held in the Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek in Switzerland, designated by the Andersons in their edition as “A”.<sup>3</sup> A copy of A, or a text very closely related to it, is in Metz, Bibliothèque diocésaine, 270.3 MS1, a ninth-century manuscript in the Bibliothèque diocésaine in Metz, France. The other three manuscripts, which represent a slightly variant textual tradition, are all now in the British Library in London. They are: British Library MS Additional 35110 (the Andersons’ “B1”); British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III (“B2”); and British Library MS Royal 8D IX (“B3”). Each of these manuscripts will be described, with attention paid to the visual construction of the text (page layout, the colours of ink used, the types of illumination used, the presence of Greek letters), with particular emphasis given to how this relates to the literary structure of the work.<sup>4</sup>

The manuscripts of *VSC* are less lavishly decorated than many of the more famous insular productions of the medieval period, and lack the extensive glossing and marginal “conversations” between author, scribe and reader that Dagenais sees as central to understanding the manuscript-based literary culture of the Middle Ages, and which are, rightly,

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<sup>1</sup> That the longer recension is the older was established by Reeves on the basis of the very early date of the earliest extant manuscript, Schaffhausen Generalia 1 (which is the longer version of the text) and on the uniformity of style between the “extra” sections and chapter headings (i.e. those parts of the longer recension not included in the shorter) and the rest of the longer recension, in Adomnán’s distinctive style. This has not been challenged. See Reeves, *Life*, pp. xi – xiii; Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, [1<sup>st</sup> edn.], pp. 11 – 12.

<sup>2</sup> A full listing of all surviving manuscripts of the second recension is in Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical*, pp. 429 – 431.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, pp. liv - lxii. The manuscript has been made available in high-quality images on e-Codices, the virtual manuscript library of Switzerland: <http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/de/list/one/sbs/0001> (accessed 30/09/2014).

<sup>4</sup> In the course of this research, I consulted Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1 online, in the images provided on e-Codices, and British Library MS Additional 35110, British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III, and British Library MS Royal 8D IX in person at the British Museum. I was unable to access Metz, Bibliothèque diocésaine, 270.3 MS1.

often the focus of studies on manuscript culture and literary pragmatics.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, interpreting the strategies of textual organisation, the use of different scripts and other aspects of the visual construction of the text is integral to understanding how *VSC* was read and experienced in the Middle Ages, including how this changed over time. The five extant manuscripts were produced in a timespan of about eight hundred years, and interesting elements of both continuity and change in the visual presentation of *VSC* can be observed over that period, in response to changes in manuscript culture.

### 1: Review of existing scholarship

Previous studies of the manuscripts of *VSC qua* manuscripts have tended to focus on Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, and for good reason, as its very early (and relatively secure) date and its excellent state of preservation make it a good witness to the history of Hiberno-Latin and to the development of insular script.<sup>6</sup> It is certainly the best-known and most easily accessible of the manuscripts. In addition to being available online in high quality images, it has been published in a full-sized colour facsimile with an accompanying volume of commentary, including a detailed codicological report, work on the letter-forms used in the manuscript, and its orthographical features.<sup>7</sup>

Metz, Bibliothèque diocésaine, 270.3 MS1 has slipped in and out of scholarly notice, and is the least well-known and least studied of the manuscripts. It was mentioned in the seventeenth century by Archbishop Ussher, but attracted no more scholarly attention until the middle of the twentieth.<sup>8</sup> Leclerq drew attention to the manuscript in *Analecta Bollandiana* in 1955, but his article is only four pages long, and is mainly concerned with describing the contents of the manuscript.<sup>9</sup> More detailed was Bieler's review of the Andersons' first edition of *VSC*, in

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<sup>5</sup> Dagenais, *The Ethics of Reading*; Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti, "Textuality in late medieval England: two case studies", in Päivi Pahta and Andreas H. Jucker (eds.), *Communicating Early English Manuscripts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 25 – 37.

<sup>6</sup> J.M. Picard, "The Schaffhausen Adomnán – a unique witness to Hiberno-Latin", *Peritia*, 1 (1982), pp. 216 – 249; Timothy O'Neill, *The Irish Hand: scribes and their manuscripts from the earliest times to the seventeenth century, with an exemplar of Irish scripts* (Mountrath: The Dolmen Press, 1984), p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> Damian Bracken (general editor), *The Schaffhausen Adomnán: Schaffhausen, Stadtbibliothek, MS Generalia 1* (Cork: ArCH Project, Department of History, University College Cork, 2008), 2 vols.

<sup>8</sup> Stansbury, "The Schaffhausen manuscript and the composition of the Life of Columba", in Damian Bracken and Eric Graff (eds.), *The Schaffhausen Adomnán: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek, MS Generalia 1: Part II, Commentary* (Cork: University College Cork and Cork University Press, 2014), pp. 70 – 89, at p. 71, n. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Leclerq, "Un recueil d'hagiographie colombanienne", *Analecta Bollandiana*, 73 (1955), pp. 193 – 196.

which he examined certain passages from the Metz manuscript to compare them with Schaffhausen, Stadtbibliothek, Generalia 1, while Picard has used the manuscript in his examinations of the Columban cult, and the network of Irish connections more generally, in northern France and the Low Countries.<sup>10</sup> The Andersons mention the manuscript briefly in their introduction, and though they say that they did not use it for their edition, readings from it are footnoted on a few occasions.<sup>11</sup> However, it seems that the manuscript is not as well known as the others of the first recension. For instance, it is not listed in the entry for *VSC* in the Van Hamel database, and neither Richard Sharpe, in the overview of the manuscript tradition in his translation, nor Nathalie Stalmans in her section on *VSC* and the sources of the Columban cult, make any mention of it at all.<sup>12</sup>

The “B” manuscripts have been studied primarily as textual witnesses, and for the genealogical and other miscellaneous information which they have appended to their texts of *VSC*.<sup>13</sup> Since Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1 is rather simply illuminated and has no carpet pages or complex iconography, and the “B” manuscripts are competent if fairly unremarkable productions from an artistic standpoint, none of the copies have received much attention from art historians.

This chapter is therefore the first detailed attempt to study the manuscripts of *VSC* from a literary perspective, and to try to integrate an understanding of the physical construction of the text with its intellectual construction, looking at how the literary and theological nature of Adomnán’s work is worked into its visual presentation.<sup>14</sup>

There have, however, been recent studies of other manuscripts in an insular context which take this integrative approach, such as Abigail Burnyeat’s work on *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, as well as two studies by Benjamin C. Tilghman, which both look at scripts and alphabets in early medieval

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<sup>10</sup> Ludwig Bieler, review of Anderson and Anderson, in *Irish Historical Studies*, 13 (1962), pp. 175 – 184; Picard, “Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae* and the cult of Colum Cille in continental Europe”, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 98 (1998), pp. 1 – 23; Picard “Schaffhausen Generalia 1 and the textual transmission of Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae* on the continent”, in Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (eds.), *Ireland and Europe in the early Middle Ages: texts and transmissions / Irland und Europa im früheren Mittelalter: Texte und Überlieferung* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), pp. 95–102.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, p. lv; p. 11, n. 10, p. 95, n. 124, p. 233, n. 261.

<sup>12</sup> Codecs: online database and e-resources for Celtic Studies, Stichting A.G. van Hamel voor Keltische Studies, [http://www.vanhamel.nl/codecs/Vita\\_sancti\\_Columbae\\_\(Adomn%C3%A1n\)](http://www.vanhamel.nl/codecs/Vita_sancti_Columbae_(Adomn%C3%A1n)) (accessed, 09/10/2016); Sharpe, *Life*, pp. 235 – 238; Nathalie Stalmans, *Saints d’Irlande: Analyse critique des sources hagiographiques (VII<sup>e</sup> – IX<sup>e</sup> siècles)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2003), pp. 84 – 86.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, pp. liv – lx.

<sup>14</sup> The following chapter of this thesis deals more fully with the literary structure of *VSC*.

insular manuscripts, though making no use or mention of any of the manuscripts of *VSC*.<sup>15</sup> My approach here will be informed by these works, as I seek to take a similarly integrative approach to the manuscripts of *VSC*.

## 2: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1<sup>16</sup>

### 2.1: Background and provenance

By far the earliest of our manuscripts, and the primary basis for the Andersons' edition, is Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1. It is currently held at the Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek in Switzerland, where it has been since at least 1795. Parts of the manuscript's history are obscure, but it was in the abbey at Reichenau, an island in Lake Constance, in 1621, having been there since at least the thirteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Ferdinand Keller studied the orthographical corrections in the manuscript, which he judged to have been made in a German hand of the early ninth century, so it has certainly been in mainland Europe for a very long time.<sup>18</sup> Despite its long presence in continental Europe, Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1 is usually believed to have been written at Iona itself, and very shortly after the composition of *VSC*, though neither of these things are stated explicitly in the manuscript itself. This supposition is supported both by the script, which is an Irish minuscule, and by the probable identity of the scribe.<sup>19</sup> The scribe gives us his name in the colophon, written in red:

*Quicumque hós uirtutum libellos Columbae legerit pro me Dorbbeneo deum*

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<sup>15</sup> Abigail Burnyeat, “*Córugud* and *Complilatio* in Some Manuscripts of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*”, in Ruairi Ó hUiginn and Brian Ó Catháin (eds.), *Ulidia 2: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 2005), pp. 356 – 374; Ben C. Tilghman, “The shape of the word: extralinguistic meaning in insular display lettering”, *Word & Image*, 27: 3 (2011), pp. 292 – 308; Tilghman, “Writing in Tongues: Mixed Scripts and Style in Insular Art”, in Colum Hourihane (ed.), *Insular & Anglo-Saxon Art and Thought in the Early Medieval Period* (Pennsylvania: Index of Christian Art, Department of Art & Archaeology, Princeton University and Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), pp. 93 – 108.

<sup>16</sup> Note that in discussion of this manuscript, I use page numbers, rather than folio recto/verso references. This is for the sake of simplicity as both the Andersons' edition and the E-Codices website both use page numbers, so following this usage should make it easier to look up references in this thesis in both the standard edition and the online photographic version.

<sup>17</sup> For the speculative, but quite plausible suggestion that the manuscript was brought to mainland Europe by Diarmait, abbot of Iona from 814 – 831x849, see Thomas Owen Clancy, “Diarmait *sapientissimus*: the career of Diarmait, *dalta* Dairge, abbot of Iona”, *Peritia*, 17 – 18 (2003 – 2004), pp. 215 – 232, at pp. 228 – 230.

<sup>18</sup> Reeves, *Life*, pp. ix – xvi; Jean-Michel Picard, “Schaffhausen, Stadtbibliothek, Generalia 1: the history of the manuscript”, in Bracken and Graff (eds.), *Schaffhausen Adomnán, Part II*, pp. 56 – 69, traces the history of the manuscript backwards from Reeves, through the work of eighteenth- and seventeenth-century scholars and into the early period, looking at the development of the Columban cult in mainland Europe as well.

<sup>19</sup> O'Neill, *The Irish Hand*, p. 62.

*deprecetur, ut uitam post mortem aeternam possedeam.*

[Whoever may read these books of the miraculous powers of Columba, let him pray to God for me, Dorbbéne, that I may possess after death eternal life.]<sup>20</sup>

Dorbbéne (various spellings are used by modern scholars, including “Dorbéne” and “Doirbéne”) is an extremely uncommon personal name: not a single person bearing it is listed in O'Brien's monumental *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*.<sup>21</sup> It occurs twice in the annals. In *The Annals of Ulster*, we find the following *obit* in the entry for the year 713:

*Dorbeni kathedrum Iae obtenuit, 7 .u. mensibus peractis in primatu, .u. Kl. Nouimbris die Sabbati obiit.*

[Doirbéne obtained the abbacy of Í, and after five months in the primacy he died on Saturday, the fifth of the Kalends on November (28 Oct.)]<sup>22</sup>

The name appears again under the year 724:

*Faelchu m. Dorbeni, abbas Iae, dormiuit. Cillenius Longus ei in principatum Ię successit.*

[Faelchú son of Doirbéne, abbot of Í, fell asleep. Cilléne the Tall succeeded him as abbot of Í.]<sup>23</sup>

It is generally assumed that the Dorbbéne whose death is recorded in 713 is our scribe. While this cannot be established beyond doubt, the combination of a rare personal name, the Iona connection and the evidently great age of the manuscript make it very plausible, meaning that Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1 is very likely the oldest surviving book from what is now Scotland.<sup>24</sup> The manuscript thus has an exceptionally early, near-authorial date: it was produced no later than a decade after Adomnán's death, and possibly even during his lifetime.

<sup>20</sup> VSC, pp. 234 – 235.

<sup>21</sup> M.A. O'Brien (ed.), *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1962).

<sup>22</sup> AU, sub anno 713, pp. 168 – 169. As “Dorbeni ab Iae” he is also listed among the dead for that date in *The Martyrology of Tallaght*, which dates from the late eighth- or early ninth-century: ed and trans. Richard Irvine Best and Hugh Jackson Lawlor, *The Martyrology of Tallaght from the Book of Leinster and MS 5100-4 in the Royal Library, Brussels* (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1931), p. 85.

<sup>23</sup> AU, sub anno 724, pp. 178 – 179.

<sup>24</sup> Reeves, *Life*, pp. xiii – xvi.

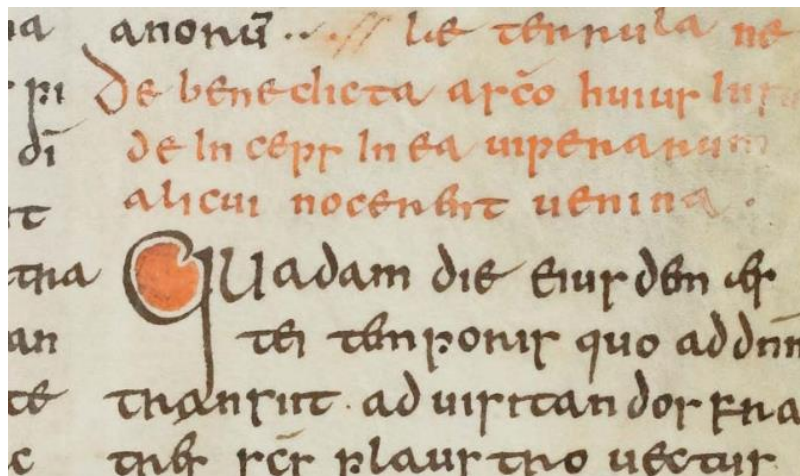
Thus, while it is not an autograph manuscript, and as we shall see Dorbbéne did reshape the text he received in interesting ways, it is very close indeed to Adomnán's own milieu.

## 2.2: The visual presentation of Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1

The text itself is complete, with no pages missing, and the copy of VSC is the only text in the manuscript, aside from a copy of the Lord's Prayer, which will be discussed below. It is written in a very clear, legible hand, laid out in two columns, the left-hand column generally being a little wider than the right. It measures 29 cm x 22.5 cm, and is ruled for twenty-eight lines per page. The manuscript has several navigational aids to help users locate chapters quickly. These are built into the design of the book by the use of different colours of ink (the main text being in black, with chapter headings in red), large letters at the starts of chapters, the visual emphasis of major textual divisions, and, for Book I, a contents list at the start. All of these will now be discussed, along with the use of Greek letters in the manuscript. The contents list for Book I is also written in rubric, as is the scribal colophon at the end of the text.<sup>25</sup>

### 2.2.1: Chapter initials and illumination in Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1

Initial letters of chapters are generally about two lines high, with a *diminuendo* in the following letters and words until the script is reintegrated to the normal size of the text, as in this fairly typical example from page 75:

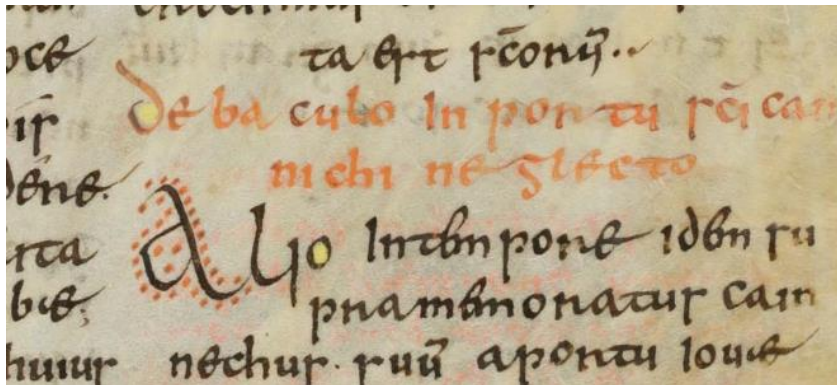


(Fig. 1: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 75)

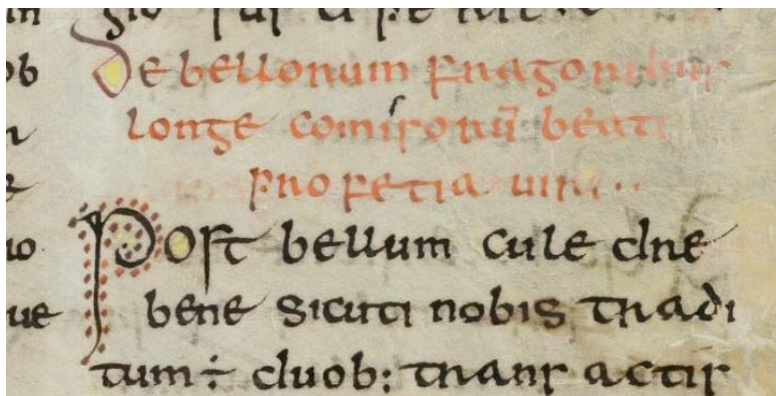
<sup>25</sup> Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, pp. 1 and 136. Eric Graff, "Report on the codex: Schaffhausen, Stadtbibliothek, Generalia 1" in Bracken and Graff (eds.), *The Schaffhausen Adomnán, Part II*, pp. 17 – 55, has a very thorough report on the physical and visual nature of the manuscript, including binding, collation of folios, letter forms and scribal conventions.



Decoration of the text in this manuscript is fairly sparse, and typically consists of filling the loops of As, Hs, Qs and Ss with red or, somewhat less often, yellow, or using those colours for small dots around or on the letters, as illustrated by the following fairly typical examples:



(Fig. 2: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 63. Note the yellow infilling of the initial *D* in *De*, in the title, of the terminal *O* of *Alio*.)



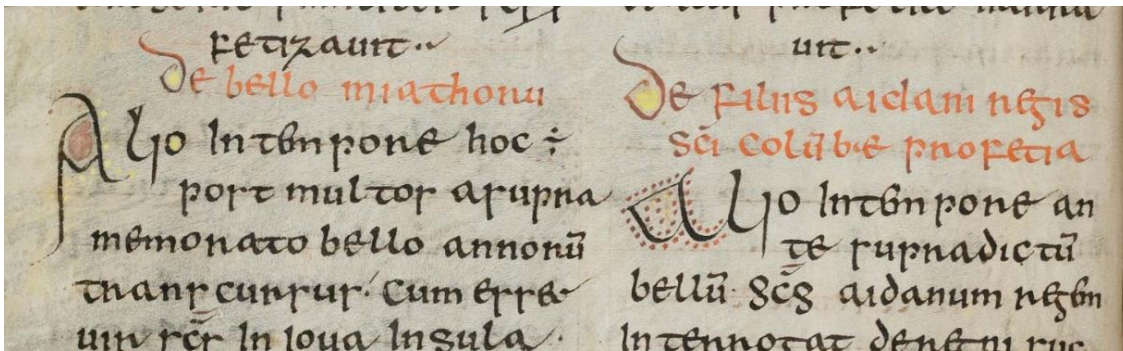
(Fig. 3: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 17. Note that the initial *P* of *Post* has dotting in red, yellow and black, that the *O* following it is infilled in yellow.)

This is a fairly typical form of illumination for insular manuscripts of this period, similar illumination using red dotting can be seen in, for instance, the eighth-century Northumbrian Gospel book, Cambridge University Library MS Kk.1.24.<sup>26</sup>

We can also observe occasional variation in the forms of letters used, as in the different kinds of initial *A* used in these the two consecutive narratives in Fig. 4, both of which begin the same phrase, *Alio in tempore*. This is a very common phrase, with which Adomnán introduces a great many of his narratives, and it seems that Dorbbéne is here simply introducing a degree of visual variation at this point:

<sup>26</sup> <http://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-KK-00001-00024/3> (accessed 27/04/2017)



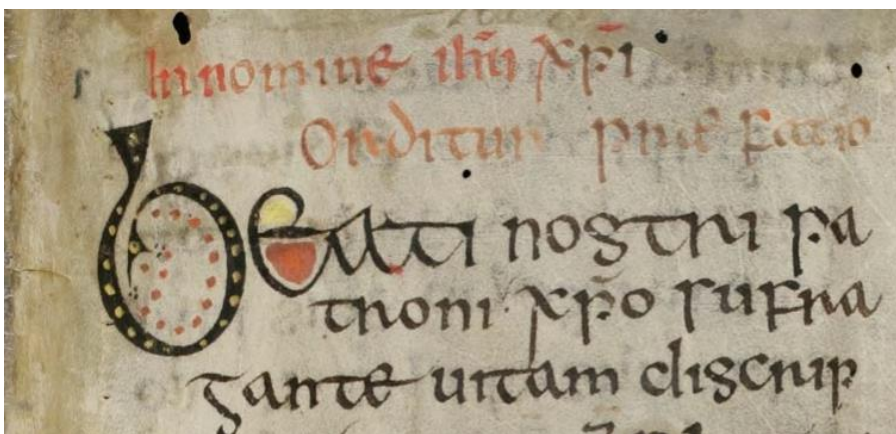


(Fig. 4: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 18)

### 2.3: Major textual divisions

There is a higher degree of decoration for the opening of *VSC* and for the initials of the three books, as might be expected for these important divisions in the text. Rather than being mere decoration, this gives a visual reinforcement to the literary structure of the work as a whole, a structure which has a deliberate theological and literary basis.<sup>27</sup> The visual elements of the text's structure are an integral part of the way that Dorbbéne presents *VSC* to us in this manuscript. They also serve a practical function, enabling the manuscript's users to navigate the text more easily, guided by decisions Dorbbéne made about the text's visual presentation.

In the first preface, we have the heading in rubric, a large initial *B*, decorated with dotting in both red and yellow, red and yellow infilling of the *E*, and the whole of the first line being written in larger letters than the rest of the main body of text:

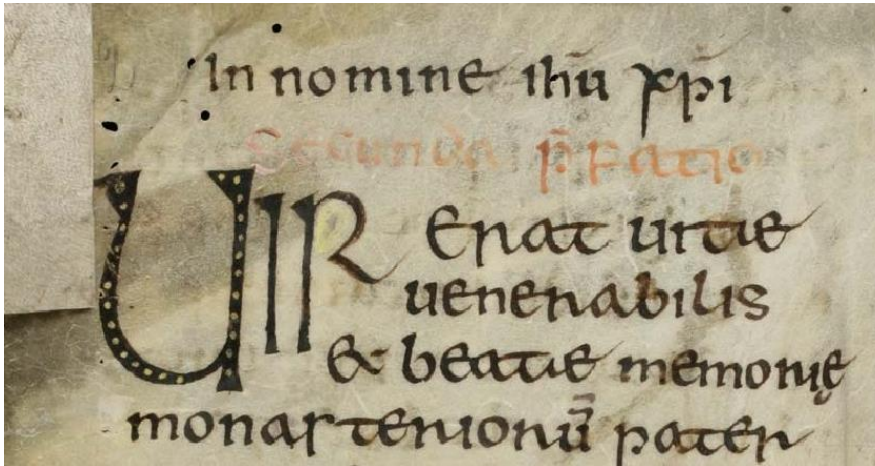


(Fig. 5: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 1)

Likewise, the Second Preface is introduced with a higher degree of decoration than that used for chapters in the main body of the text. The heading is divided into two lines (*In nomine Jesu*

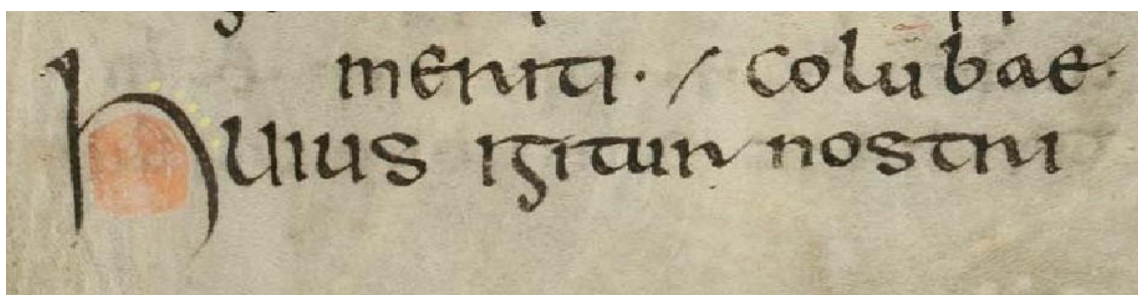
<sup>27</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, below.

*Christi* and *Secunda praefatio*), of which the first is written in black, and the second in rubric. After an initial *U* that is three lines high and decorated with yellow dotting (as noted above, initials are usually two lines high), there is a sharp *diminuendo*, with the *I* and *R* both being capitalised (the loop of the *R*, additionally, being infilled in yellow), and the text of the remainder of the first line is noticeably larger than the main body of text below.



(Fig. 6: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 2)

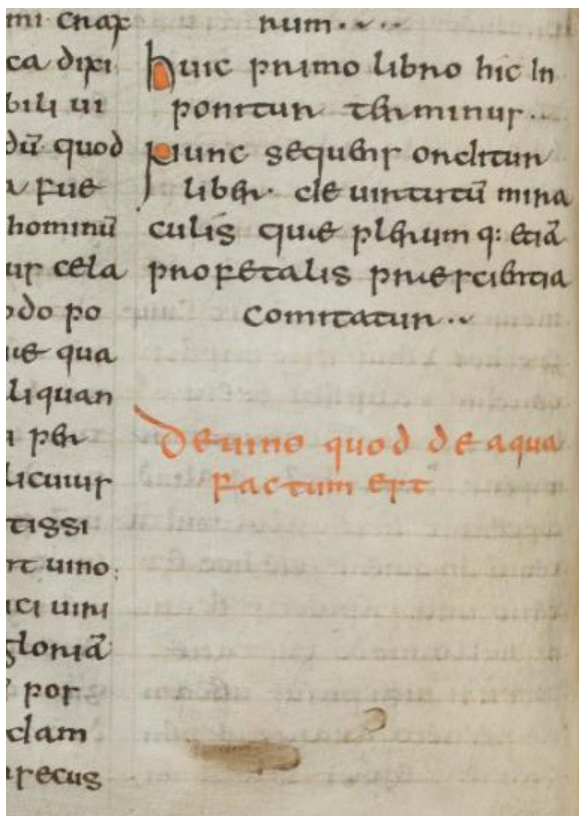
Within the Second Preface, one section is notably marked out. Here, Adomnán gives an overview of the structure of the work as whole, beginning *Huius igitur nostri Columbae uitam et mores describens*. Dorbbéne sets this section visually apart by the use of a large initial *H* in *Huius*, two lines high, with the loop infilled in red and yellow dotting on its outside, the rest of the word being written with a *diminuendo*, as seen in Fig. 7.



(Fig. 7: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 3)

The division between Book I and Book II is also noteworthy, and differs from the previous textual divisions in that it is spread over two pages, which face each other. On p. 52 of the manuscript, there are two statements, separated from the main body of the text, *Huic primo libro híc inponitur terminus* (“Here an end is put to this first book”) and *Nunc sequens orditur liber de uirtutum miraculis quae plerumque etiam profetalis praescientia comitatur* (“Now begins the next book, concerning miracles of power, which are often accompanied by prophetic

foreknowledge.”), indicating the end of the first book, and the beginning of the second, respectively.<sup>28</sup> Of course, the division also contains within it a degree of continuity, since the first book had concerned Columba's prophecies, and we are told that the miracles which are the subject of the second book “are often accompanied by prophetic foreknowledge.”<sup>29</sup> There are then two blank lines, which are followed by the heading for the first narrative of Book II: *De uino quod de aqua factum est* (“Of wine that was made from water”). The remainder of p. 52, some seven lines, is then left blank, and the initial A at the start of the narrative, five lines high, decorated with red dotting and infilling, is at the start of the next page. There is again a more striking *diminuendo* than is common for narratives in the main body of the text: clearly Dorbbéne felt that something special was called for to mark the opening of the book of Columba's miracles. Once again, the visual structure of the manuscript integrates well with the literary structure of Adomnán's work: Adomnán clearly felt that it was appropriate to begin this book in an impressive manner, doing so by opening with a miracle modelled on one of Christ's: the changing of water into wine at the wedding at Cana (John 2: 1- 11).

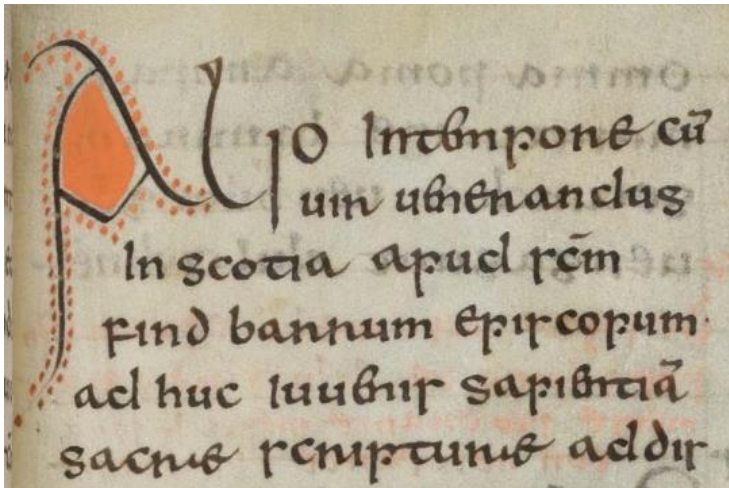


(Fig. 8: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 52)

<sup>28</sup> VSC, pp. 92 – 95.

<sup>29</sup> VSC, pp. 94 – 95.

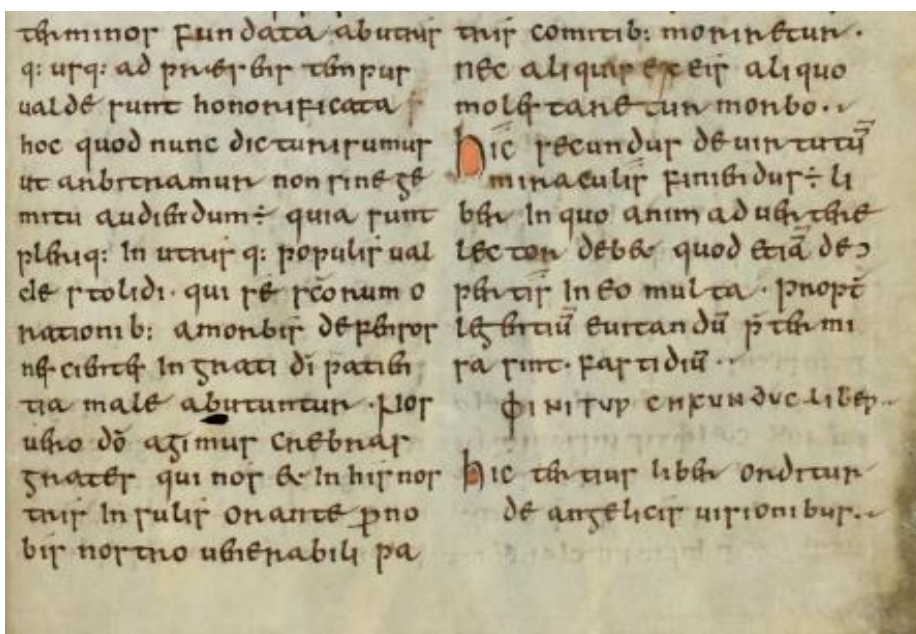




(Fig. 9: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 53)

The transition from Book II to Book III is again unique, having no parallel in this manuscript, or any of the others. Book II's *finit* is written in Greek characters on p. 103, followed by a blank line, and the statement *Hic tertius liber orditur de angelicis uisionibus* (“Here begins the third book, of angelic visions.”). The Andersons' edition leaves half a page blank after the *finit*, and takes up the opening of Book III on a new page, which does not represent the actual layout of the page in Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1.

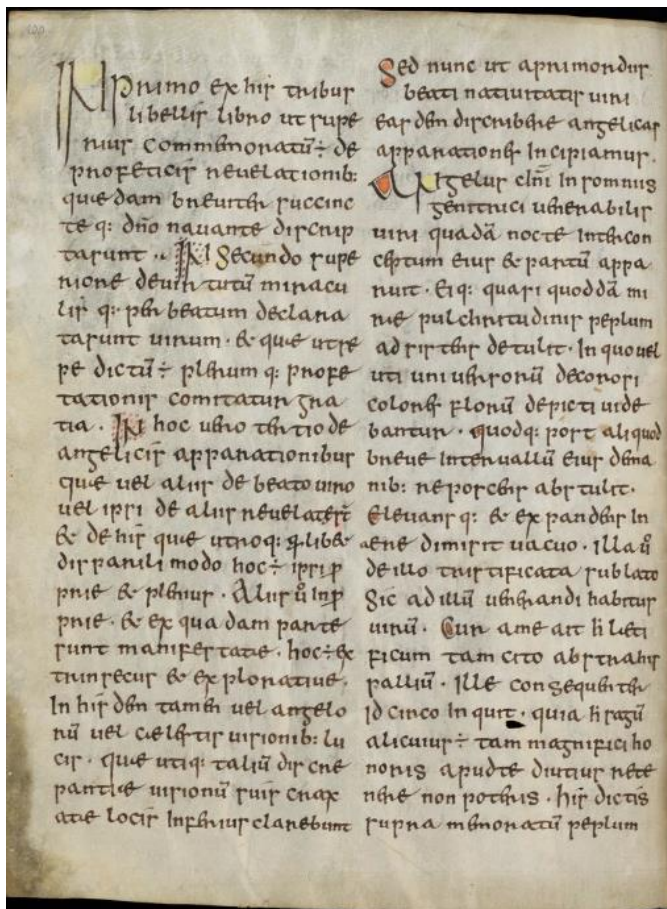
The sentence beginning *Hic secundus...* follows on from the end of II.46 with no line break between them, but the *H* of *Hic* is slightly larger than the usual size for the text on this page, and its loop is infilled in red, so there is a visual distinction. The final phrase, *Finitur secundus liber* is set visually apart from the preceding sentence and the following introduction to Book III by both spacing and the use of Greek script. This arrangement can be seen in Fig. 10:



(Fig. 10: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 103)

Before Book III actually begins, there is another outline the work's tripartite structure. As seen in Fig. 11, this takes up the left-hand column of the page. Dorbbéne again uses illumination to reinforce the sense of the words: as each of the three books is introduced, he marks the phrases out visually. For the first, he writes *In primo* in large letters, using the *diminuendo* technique, and decorates the first three letters of the phrase with yellow infilling. The second two books are not given this "title" style treatment, but are rather set within the main body of the paragraph. The word *In*, however (*In secundo* and *In hoc uero tertio*, respectively) is given in capitals, larger than the main body of the text, and decorated with red dotting. The effect of this is that the statements about the themes of the three books can easily be picked out from the text at the quickest glance at the page, which might be considered to function as a kind of index.

Book III then begins, with *Sed nunc ut a primordiis beati natiuitatis uiri easdem describere angelicas apparationes incipiamus* ("Now let us begin to describe these angelic apparitions from the time before the birth of the blessed man."). This sentence is not a heading but it does introduce a new chapter and section of the text, indicated by the red infilling of the *S* in *Sed*. The narrative proper begins with *Angelus domini* ("An angel of the Lord"): *Angelus* is written with a *diminuendo*, and the first two letters of the word are infilled with red and yellow respectively.



(Fig. 11: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 104)

In trying to set the navigational aids and visual elements of textual organisation that Dorbbéne uses into a wider context, we run up against a problem in finding useful comparanda. The other texts in the early group of Irish hagiographies in Latin (Cogitosus' *Vita Sanctae Brigidae*, the anonymous *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae*, Muirchú's *Vita Sancti Patricii* and Tírechán's *Collectanea*) are all preserved in manuscripts which post-date Dorbbéne's considerably, and many were produced in continental Europe. The most nearly contemporary are the Patrician materials in the Book of Armagh, which post-date Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1 by about a century. Conversely, if we look to earlier manuscripts, such as the *Cathach* (Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 12 R 33), the Book of Mulling (Dublin, Trinity College, MS 60), or the Book of Durrow (Dublin, Trinity College, MS 57), and seek to set Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1 in their context, we must be aware that they are psalm and gospel books rather than hagiographies, and the significant difference in genre means they are not directly comparable. Bearing these differences in mind, we can still see Dorbbéne's manuscript as part of the same broader scribal tradition. While even in this small sample there is much variation, the use of organisational tools such as columns, red chapter headings, large initials and illumination (to widely varying degrees) is quite common. Thus, while we cannot identify any particular models on which Dorbbéne was drawing, we can see that he worked in a context in which the kinds of navigational aids he used in his work were widely used and understood.

#### 2.4: Greek letters in Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1

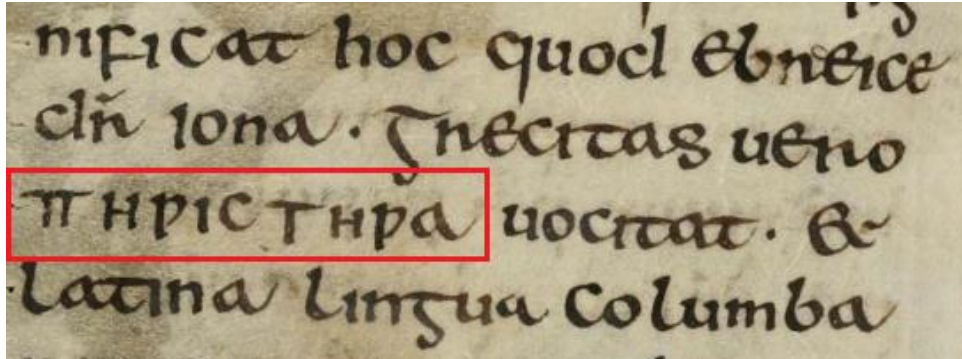
One of the most striking features of the visual construction of Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1 is the occasional use of Greek letters in what is otherwise an entirely Latin-alphabet text. As noted above, the significance of Greek in a linguistic sense will be more fully explored in Chapter 3, below. Here, the instances of the use of Greek characters will be seen, along with the page layout, illumination and letter sizes as part of the visual nature of the text, an element contributing to the visual complexity of the page.

##### 2.4.1: *Peristera*

During the discussion of Columba's name in the Second Preface, Adomnán gives the saint's name in each of the three sacred languages: Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Dorbbéne renders the Greek for "dove" in Greek capitals, ΠΗΡΙΣΤΗΡΑ (*peristera*), and as the two later manuscripts which preserve this portion of the text (British Library MS Royal 8D IX is unfortunately missing a few folios at the beginning) also do so, it would seem a safe assumption that this was



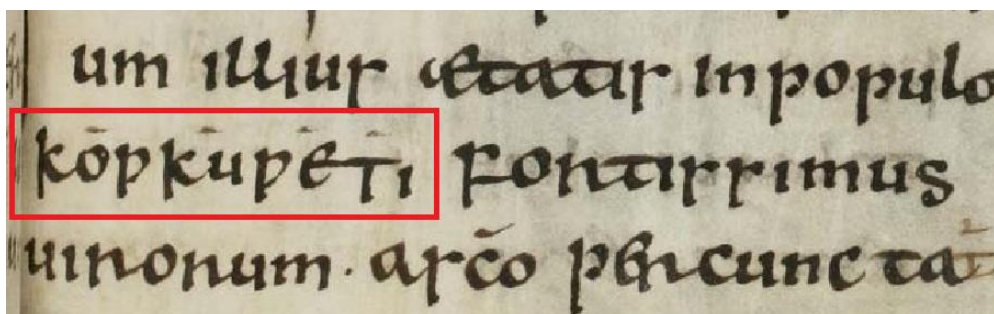
an original feature of Adomnán's text as well. There is no attempt to render the Hebrew form of the name, *Iona*, in Hebrew characters: it is only the Greek word that interrupts the otherwise Latin nature of the script of the page. That the letters are capitals, and spaced more widely than those of the other words on the page also makes this word stand out visually.



(Fig. 12: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 2)<sup>30</sup>

#### 2.4.2: Corcu Réti

The ethnonym Corcu Réti is also rendered in Greek letters on p. 47 though with a Latin *E* replacing the Greek *H*, *eta*.<sup>31</sup> As with *peristera*, this is a word set within the main text of the page, but its contribution to the visual complexity of the page is different in that *Corcu Réti*, unlike *peristera*, is of course not a Greek word. Its linguistic and literary significance in relation to the narrative context will be discussed in Chapter 3, here we note simply its presence as part of the Greek strand of the text in a visual sense. Again, this is present in two of the three later manuscripts (again, one of the B texts, this time British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III, is missing this section) suggesting that this was also a feature of Adomnán's original text.



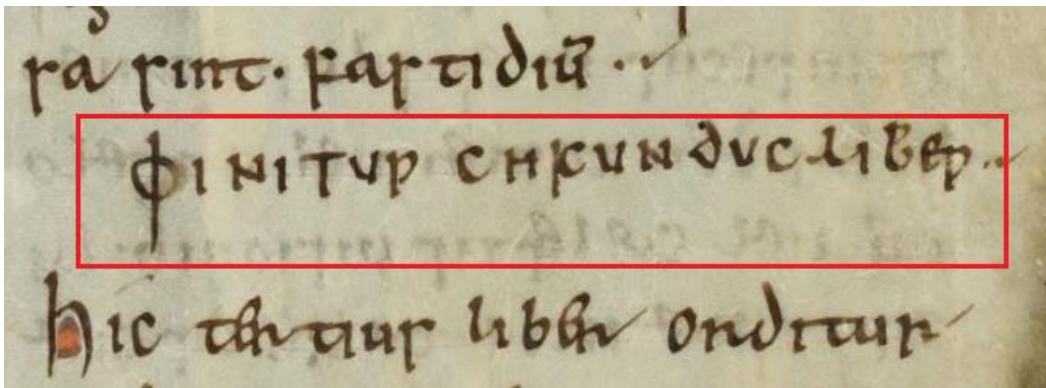
(Fig. 13: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 47. Note the Latin *E*, as opposed to the Greek *H*, *eta*, which was used in *peristera*.)

<sup>30</sup> Note that the *sigma* is in a cursive form that resembles Latin *C*.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of this name, see Fraser, "*Dux Reuda* and the Corcu Réti".

### 2.4.3: *Finitur secundus liber*

The conclusion of the second book of *VSC* is indicated by the statement ΦιΝιτυρ ςΗκυΝδυς λιβερ (*Finitur secundus liber*). The inclusion of such a statement is itself part of the overt textual organisation of the work, and similar framing devices are to be found at the conclusion of the first book and the third, to finish the work as a whole, as discussed above. It is only at the close of the second book, however, and only in this manuscript, that the notice is given in this way: a Latin phrase rendered in Greek letters (though note the use of the Latin letter *E* in λιβερ). Whether this was a feature of Adomnán's original version or was introduced by Dorbbéne himself cannot be determined. The Greek strand of the text thus has within itself a certain degree of complexity, since letters from that alphabet have now been used to render words in Latin and Old Irish as well as in Greek itself. That this strand intersects with a device for organising the text points to this manuscript being a sophisticated, tightly structured work in which the visual textual and meta-textual elements interact with each other.



(Fig. 14: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 103. Note the Latin *E*, in *liber*, as opposed to the Greek, *H*, *eta*, which is used in *secundus*)

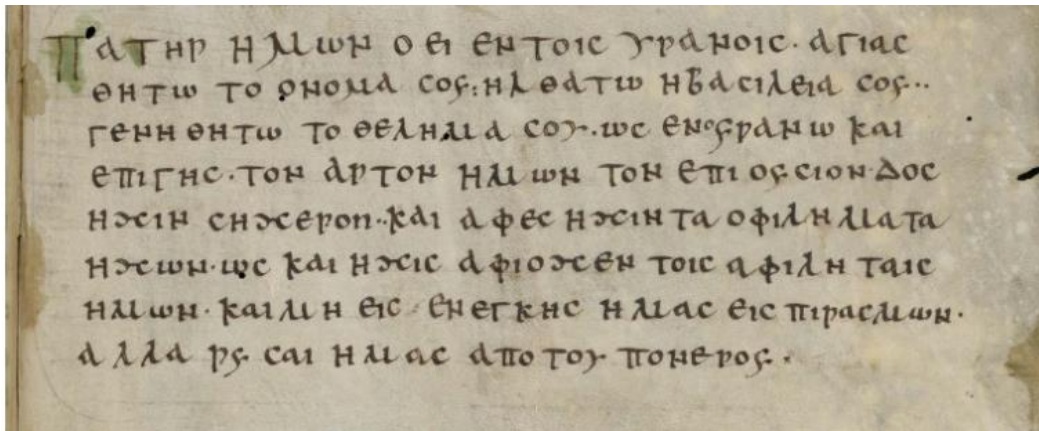
### 2.4.4: The Lord's Prayer

Finally, the last page of Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1 consists solely of a copy of the Lord's Prayer in Greek.<sup>32</sup> This is the longest text in a different language and alphabet from Latin in the manuscript, and clearly has a different function to the other instances discussed here. The inclusion of this prayer, given to his followers by Christ himself, seems to be an attempt to close the manuscript in a profoundly solemn, holy way. That the prayer is written in Greek demonstrates not only of the scribe's erudition, but also of the importance of his work:

<sup>32</sup> Carl Nordenfalk, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting: Book Illumination in the British Isles, 600 – 800* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1977), p. 32, wrongly says that the text is in Greek but written in Latin characters. This is incorrect – the characters are Greek.



the prestige of *VSC*, as the *vita* of the Ionan community's founder and patron, demanded a conclusion appropriate for the dignity and power of its subject. Closing the work with the Lord's Prayer in "the sacred splendour of Greek letters" was a fitting answer to such a demand.<sup>33</sup>



(Fig. 15: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 137)

The use of different alphabets in the visual construction of *VSC* in Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1 should be seen in the wider context of insular scribal practice, both in manuscript and in stone inscription, in which the use of different languages and alphabets in the same text had an accepted place. A parallel might be seen in the seventh-century Durham Gospel Fragment which features the Lord's Prayer in Greek, but transliterated into the Latin alphabet.<sup>34</sup> This was presumably in order to enable its use in a liturgical context; might this point to the function of the same text in Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1? A different approach is taken in the Book of Armagh, written about a hundred years after Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, in which the Lord's Prayer is written in Latin, but using Greek characters.<sup>35</sup> Ferdornach, one of the Book of Armagh's scribes, also wrote his colophon, including his name, in Greek letters, though writing in Latin.<sup>36</sup> We should remember also the

<sup>33</sup> Walter Berschin, "Greek elements in medieval Latin manuscripts", in Michael W. Herren and Shirley Ann Brown (eds.), *The Sacred Nectar of the Greeks: The Study of Greek in the West in the Early Middle Ages* (Exeter: Short Run Press for King's College London), pp. 85 – 103, at p. 86. Berschin discusses the transmission of the Greek letter forms in Dorbbéne's manuscript, at pp. 87 – 88.

<sup>34</sup> Durham, Durham Cathedral, AII 10, fol. 4r.

<sup>35</sup> Dublin, Trinity College, MS 52, fol. 36r. See discussion in David Howlett, *Insular Inscriptions* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), pp. 141 – 143.

<sup>36</sup> Ludwig Bieler (ed. and trans.), *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979), p. 2.

late eighth-century Stowe Missal, Dublin, Royal Irish Academy MS D. II. 3, in which the scribe, Sonid, signed his name in Ogham in the Latin colophon.<sup>37</sup>

Tilghman, discussing the use of the Greek character, *delta*, Δ in the *Book of Durrow*, writes:

The very fact that the letters are Greek was significant: as a little-known language revered for its beauty and sanctity, Greek, in any amount, would have added to the numinous quality of the sacred text while also demonstrating the erudition of the maker, or, for that matter, any viewer who recognized the letter for what it was.<sup>38</sup>

The same could well be said of the Greek characters in *VSC*, where the language is used to deal especially with the explicitly “numinous” matter of the connection between the saint's name and the Holy Spirit, and with the Lord’s Prayer. We might compare this to the use of a Greek-Latin mixture in one of the St Gall Charms, a collection of charms of Irish origin probably dating from the ninth century, of which Ilona Tuomi writes:

It is questionable whether the next line of the manuscript belongs to the charm against urinary disease or whether it is a charm on its own. It would seem, however, that it should be read as a part of the charm. The line is a mixture of Greek and Latin, the sacred languages of the Christian tradition. It reads: “PreCHNYTϕCAHωMNYBVC:~KNAATYONIBVS: ~Finit:~” (*Presinitphsan omnybus knaatyonibus*). This seems to be a Latin version of Matthew 28:19, incorporating one or two words of garbled Greek. The passage in question runs as follows: *Euntes ergo docete omnes gentes baptizantes eos in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti*.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, early medieval people did not encounter writing only in manuscripts, and it is worth considering the different alphabets used in sculpture as part of the broader context. While

<sup>37</sup> Dublin, Royal Irish Academy MS D. II. 3, f. 11 r.

[www.isos.dias.ie/libraries/RIA/RIA\\_MS\\_D\\_ii\\_3/tables/2.html#025](http://www.isos.dias.ie/libraries/RIA/RIA_MS_D_ii_3/tables/2.html#025) (accessed 14/11/2014). See also George F. Warner (ed.), *The Stowe Missal: MS. D. II. 3 in the Library of the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin* (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1906), 2 vols. For a discussion of this colophon as a poetic composition, see David Howlett, “Sonid's Ogam Signature”, in Georgia Henley and Paul Russell (eds.), *Rhetoric and Reality on Medieval Celtic Literature: Studies in Honour of Daniel F. Melia. CSANA Yearbook 11 – 12* (Hamilton, New York: Colgate University Press, 2014), pp. 94 – 97. Howlett's argument rests on a rather complex alphanumeric interpretation of the colophon which seems more ingenious than convincing.

<sup>38</sup> Tilghman, “The shape of the word”, p. 292.

<sup>39</sup> Ilona Tuomi, “Parchment, Praxis and Performance of Charms in Early Medieval Ireland”, *Incantatio*, 3 (2013), pp. 60 – 85, at p. 67.

inscriptions on stone and words on manuscript pages clearly have different functions, they were produced within the same milieu. Furthermore, since many of the stones are of early date (relative to some of the manuscripts mentioned above), they are more contemporary with Adomnán and Dorbbéne, giving a relevant insight into the world in which they operated.

So in this broader context we might include the cross slab at Fahan Mura in Donegal, of disputed but possible seventh-century date, which features an inscription now very difficult to read, but which may be a doxology in Greek.<sup>40</sup> There is also an eighth-century cross-shaft from Hackness in Yorkshire, which features no fewer than four alphabets: Latin, runic and at least two cryptic scripts, of which Higgitt says, “one of which is an example of hahal-runes, a system for encoding a runic text, while the other is vaguely ogham-like in appearance.”<sup>41</sup> We might also think of the bilingual or bi-alphabetic stones which have inscriptions in both the Latin and Ogham alphabets,<sup>42</sup> or of those stones which feature both Pictish symbols and alphabetic inscription.<sup>43</sup> These demonstrate clearly that the mixing of different alphabets and languages as part of the same display was an accepted, prestigious practice, demonstrating erudition and a connection to the wider Christian world.

Taking this wider view of the use of different alphabets in the early medieval Insular context, the literary and cultural context in which both Adomnán and Dorbbéne operated, we are better able to see the Schaffhausen manuscript of *VSC* as a literary production of its own time. Taken together with other aspects of the visual presentation of the manuscript studied here, we can see this text as a carefully structured one, in which the visual appearance of the manuscript is ordered so as to support the text’s literary and theological points. The visual and textual elements of the manuscript are intertwined, giving us a glimpse of the sophisticated nature of

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<sup>40</sup> John Higgitt, “Early Medieval Inscriptions in Britain and Ireland and Their Audiences”, in David Henry (ed.), *The Worm, the Germ and the Thorn: Pictish and related studies presented to Isabel Henderson* (Balgavies: The Pinkfoot Press, 1997), pp. 67 – 78, at p. 71. Higgitt writes: “The cross-slab at Fahan Mura in Donegal has a version of the doxology in Greek inscribed in a form of Greek uncials down one edge (apparently ΔΟΞΑ ΚΑΙ ΤΙΜΗ ΠΑΤΡΙ ΚΑΙ ΥΙΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΠΝΕΜΑΤΙ ΑΓΙΟΥ, that is 'Glory and honour to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit'). While there was some limited ecclesiastical knowledge of the Greek alphabet and of a few Greek liturgical forms, Greek was not a natural choice for a wide readership in early medieval Ireland. At one level this was a display of recondite knowledge but the text, which is a prayer, was clearly addressed primarily, and perhaps exclusively, to the Trinity.”

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>42</sup> For example, the seventh-century stone at Lochgoilhead Kirk in Argyll, (<https://canmore.org.uk/site/318854/lochgoilhead-church-of-the-three-holy-brethren>), and the Newton Stone in Aberdeenshire, (<https://canmore.org.uk/site/18084/newton-house-newton-stone>) (both accessed 13/08/2017).

<sup>43</sup> For example, the Latheron Stone, in Caithness, features both Pictish symbols and an Ogham inscription, <https://canmore.org.uk/site/8144/latheron>, and the Drosten Stone in St Vigean, Angus, has both Pictish symbols and a Latin inscription (<https://canmore.org.uk/site/35560/st-vigeans-drosten-stone>) (both accessed 13/08/2017).

literary production on Iona in the early eighth century. In this manuscript, the closest we can now come to the intellectual culture of Adomnán's monastery, we can see the practice of reading and writing as highly developed arts with a visual as well as a textual dimension.

Given Adomnán's keen interest in Greek, discussed in Chapter 3, below, and the fact that two of the four uses of Greek in this manuscript also appear in the B tradition, it seems probable that at least the renderings of ΠΗΡΙΣΤΗΡΑ and ΚΟΡΚΥΡΕΤΙ can be attributed to Adomnán. The Lord's Prayer is added at the end of the manuscript, after Adomnán's concluding exhortations, with no introductory formula that could be attributed to him. It thus seems likely, though not certain, that it was Dorbbéne's addition. Dorbbéne himself may also have chosen to render the Latin explicit to Book II in Greek characters as ΦιΝιτυρ ζΗκυνδουζ λιβερ, which is unattested in the B tradition. This strand of the text thus demonstrates a rich complexity: Greek is used by author and scribe, to render words in three different languages across the work, a testament to the keen interest in this alphabet in the late seventh and early eighth centuries.

### 2.5: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1: Adomnán, Cumméne, Dorbbéne

While of near-authorial date and probably produced at Iona, Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1 is Dorbbéne's manuscript and not Adomnán's. While we do not have Adomnán's autograph manuscript, we can identify points at which Dorbbéne has altered the text he received. One such is the addition of his colophon, as we have seen. A more substantial one is at III.5, in which Adomnán gives an account of the saint's prophecies about the offspring of Áidán mac Gabráin. Here, Dorbbéne inserts a passage from a now-lost book about Columba's miracles written by a previous abbot of Iona, Cumméne the White, which starts:

*Cummeneus albus in libro quem de uirtutibus sancti Columbae scripsit sic dixit, quod sanctus Columba de Aidano et de posteris eius et de regno suo profetare coepit, dicens...*

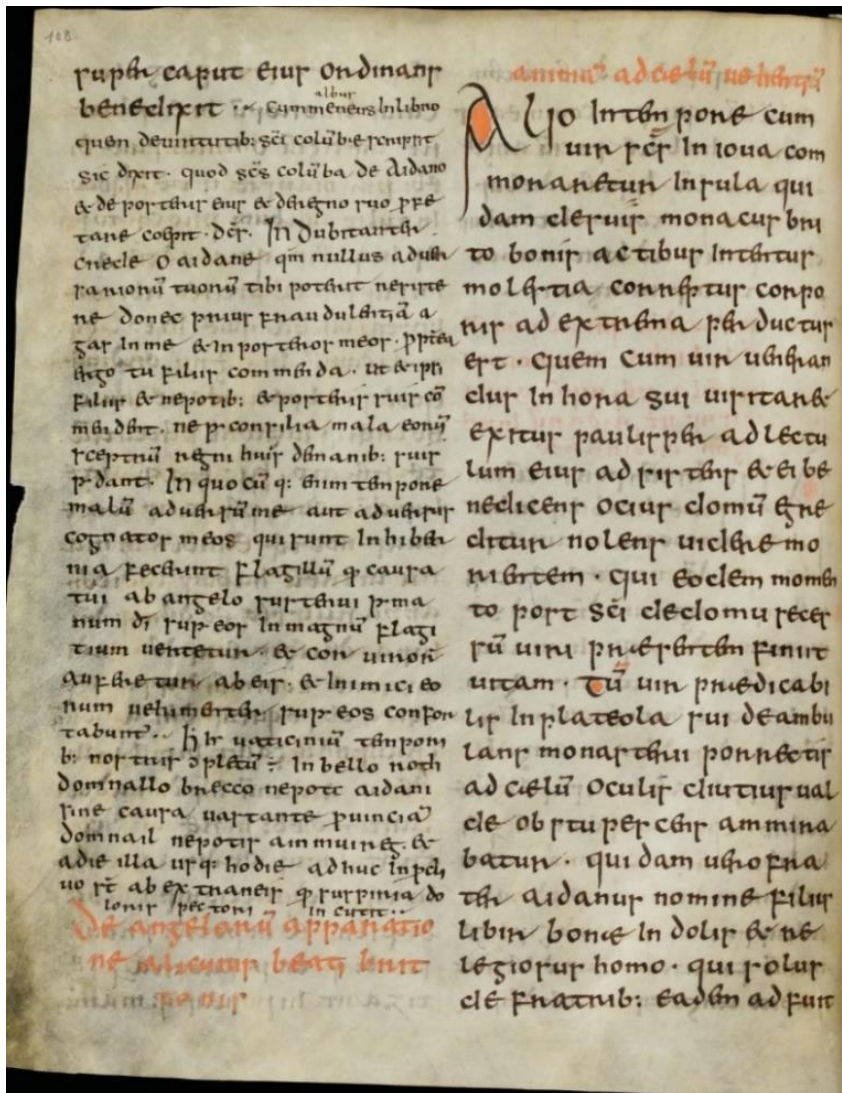
[Cumméne the White, in a book that he wrote on the miraculous powers of Saint Columba, spoke to this effect, that Saint Columba began to prophesy of Áidán, and of his descendants, and of their kingdom, saying...]<sup>44</sup>

Dorbbéne makes a clear visual distinction between Adomnán's text and his own interpolation from Cumméne's book by writing this section in smaller lettering (and it is clearly written in

<sup>44</sup> VSC III.5.



the same hand), giving a textual and a visual cue that demonstrates the active, rather than passive, role that scribes played in the transmission of documents in manuscripts.



(Fig. 16: Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek General 1, p. 108).

While this kind of scribal activity is usually considered “interpolation” (especially when the focus of study is the author’s original text, the *Urtext*), recent studies which focus on the text as we have it preserved in individual manuscripts prefer to distinguish between the “hypotext” (the original version) and subsequent “hypertexts”, which differ from it in various ways, an approach especially associated with the Paris school and the work of Martin Heinzelmann and Monique Goulet.<sup>45</sup> In Dorbbéne’s hypertext, and specifically in the choice he made to work this passage from Cumméne’s work into it, we can see, as Stansbury noted, three generations of Iona abbots (Cumméne, Adomnán and Dorbbéne) “writing and rewriting the story of the

<sup>45</sup> Monique Goulet, Martin Heinzelmann and Christiane Veyard-Cosme (eds.), *L’hagiographie mérovingienne à travers ses réécritures* (Paris: Beihefte der Francia, 2010). For a brief summary of their approach in English see Kreiner, *Social Life of Hagiography*, pp. 234 – 235.

monastery's founding abbot and patron.”<sup>46</sup> This allows us to see that Dorbbéne understood that while *VSC* was Adomnán’s work, a certain degree of flexibility was permitted in reproducing it, and materials from other documents in Columba’s dossier could legitimately be incorporated into it. The scribes of the later B manuscripts did this as well, adding more Columban material to their copies in the forms of genealogical information and the lists of Columba’s monks.

### 3: Metz, Bibliothèque diocésaine, 270.3 MS1 (folios 1 recto – 79 recto)

Metz, Bibliothèque diocésaine, 270.3 MS1 is the only surviving manuscript of the first recension to have been produced in continental Europe. It was produced in the mid-ninth century, probably in Reims, and contains, in addition to *VSC*, the *vitae* of Columbanus and his disciples by Jonas of Bobbio. As Picard has demonstrated, the mistakes which it has in common with Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1 suggest that it was copied either directly from Dorbbéne’s manuscript, or another, no longer extant, which was very closely related to it.<sup>47</sup>

Textually, Metz, Bibliothèque diocésaine, 270.3 MS1 adheres so closely to that in Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1 that, unlike the B manuscripts, it cannot be used to improve upon or add to the readings in Dorbbéne’s text.<sup>48</sup> The Andersons note three minor divergences from the text in Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1: the contents list for Book I has only thirty six entries, as against the Schaffhausen manuscript’s forty three (they do not state which entries are excluded); Metz omits the *finis* to Book I and the introductory sentence to Book II; and at the end of Book III, Metz omits the concluding paragraphs on Columba’s fame and virtues, the instructions to scribes to produce careful and accurate copies and Dorbbéne’s colophon (or indeed any scribal colophon).<sup>49</sup>

I have been unable either to study this manuscript personally, or to obtain images of it. As the small body of work which concerns this manuscript has focused entirely on textual matters and its relationship to the other manuscripts, it is not therefore possible to discuss its visual presentation here.

<sup>46</sup> Stansbury, “Composition”, p. 160.

<sup>47</sup> Jean-Michel Picard, “Schaffhausen, Stadtbibliothek, Generalia 1: the history of the manuscript”, in Bracken and Graff (eds.), *The Schaffhausen Adomnán, Part II: Commentary*, pp. 56 – 69, at pp. 66 – 67.

<sup>48</sup> Picard, personal communication, 07/10/2016.

<sup>49</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, p. 11, n. 10, p. 95, n. 124, p. 233, n. 261.

#### 4: The B manuscripts

The three later manuscripts of the first recension, now held in the British Library, London, constitute a variant textual tradition, and are designated by the Andersons as the B manuscripts (British Library MS Additional 35110, the Andersons' "B1"; British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III, or "B2"; and British Library MS Royal 8D IX, or "B3"). The "B" text is not derived from the "A" text: the B manuscripts do not include Dorbbéne's interpolation from Cumméne, or minor errors, while the spellings of Irish names in the B manuscripts sometimes follow more archaic norms those in A.<sup>50</sup> While the Latin orthography of the B tradition was revised away from Hiberno-Latin towards classical norms, the conservative spellings of Irish names in the B manuscripts suggest an early date for the origin of the B-text tradition. As such, we might look for archaic spellings diverging from Adomnán's practice in Dorbbéne's insertion from Cumméne Find's work, and then see if such spellings could be found elsewhere in the B manuscripts diverging from A, and so identify other possible passages of Cumméne's text in *VSC*. However, while the genitive form *Ainmuireg* in the inserted passage in III.5 does differ from Adomnán's spelling in I.49, *Ainmurech*, the B-text tradition also uses the *-ch* ending.<sup>51</sup> Thus, while the conservative spellings in the B manuscripts confirm an early date for the B text, they cannot be used as a guide to identify passages derived from Cumméne.

Aside from Dorbbéne's interpolation, there are also a few phrases in A which are absent in the B manuscripts, which the Andersons argue demonstrates that the B texts are based on an older copy than A is, with these minor additions and the interpolation from Cumméne being added when A, or its exemplar, was copied.<sup>52</sup> The B manuscripts also contain a short miracle narrative which is not included in A.<sup>53</sup> There are some other minor additions and alternations to chapter headings as well as differences in Latin spelling.<sup>54</sup> Other differences, such as the use of Greek and of contents lists, will be discussed more fully below.

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<sup>50</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, pp. lvi – lvii, lxxv – lxxix. "Adomnán's original text, perhaps dictated to an amanuensis, was separated from manuscript A by the work of at least one copyist. In the matter of spelling, A is an uncertain witness to Adomnán's own usage; but forms shared by A and B can be assumed to belong to his lifetime, if not to have come from his hand." (p. lxxv).

<sup>51</sup> *VSC*, III.5; I.49.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, [1<sup>st</sup> edn.], pp. 7 – 8.

<sup>53</sup> *VSC*, II.20. The Andersons, *Life*, p. 122, n. 150, believe that it was not in Adomnán's original text, but may be an insertion by him. Sharpe, *Life*, p. 327, n. 256, notes that the paragraph is in keeping with Adomnán's prose style.

<sup>54</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, [1<sup>st</sup> edn.], pp. 8 – 12.

Aside from their textual similarities, there are other features which the B texts have in common. None of them, unlike the copy of *VSC* in the Schaffhausen manuscript, is presented alone: all are in manuscripts along with other texts, giving *VSC* as one of a number of texts in a collection. The same is true of Metz, Bibliothèque diocésaine, 270.3 MS1, as discussed above. These manuscript contexts will be considered in the discussions of each individual copy, below. Secondly, they also contain other material which could be considered part of the saint's “dossier”.<sup>55</sup> These consist of lists of Columba's monks and relatives, while British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III also has a Latin poem of twenty-five lines detailing how Alexander I of Scotland (reigned 1107 – 1124) had ordered a copy of *VSC* to be made.<sup>56</sup> These extra materials will not be studied here, but they should be borne in mind as part of the “package” that confronted high and late-medieval users of these manuscripts, which were collections of cult materials showing a scholarly interest in Columba and in the history of his *vita*.

#### 4.1: British Library MS Additional 35110 (folios 96 verso - 143 recto)

British Library MS Additional 35110, the Andersons' B1, was probably copied at Durham in the late twelfth or the early thirteenth century, as suggested by a list of bishops of Durham which precedes *VSC*, ending with Hugh du Puiset (1154 – 1195). In addition to *VSC* and the list of Columba's monks and relatives, this manuscript also contains extracts about Columba from Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*.<sup>57</sup> The manuscript also contains a Life of Augustine of Hippo, several hagiographies by Bede (the *vitae* of Oswald, Aidan of Linsisdarne and Cuthbert), Ailred's *Vita Aedwardi Regis* and other miscellaneous material pertaining to Cuthbert. This collection, then has a particular focus on Northumbria, with Aidan providing a link between Northumbria and Iona. It is also clear that Columba is in prestigious company, which tells us about the regard in which this saint and his cult were held in Durham in this period.

The manuscript measures approximately 29 cm x 19 cm. The text is set into two columns, and ruled for thirty-two lines per page – the ruled lines can still be seen clearly on many of the folios. It is written in a clear, legible hand, with stress markers to aid reading aloud. The main

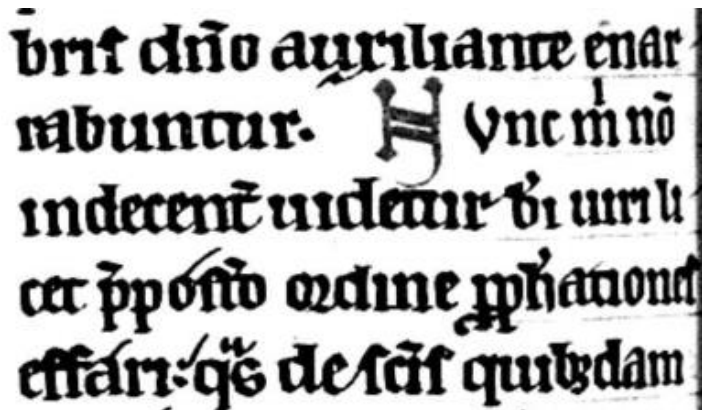
<sup>55</sup> Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints*, pp. 3 – 9. See also Delahaye, *Cinq Leçons sur la Méthode Hagiographique*, pp. 8 – 12.

<sup>56</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, pp. 237 - 329; Reeves, *Life*, pp. xxix – xxx.

<sup>57</sup> Brüning, “Adamnans *Vita Columbae* und ihre Ableitungen”, p. 219: “Fol. 143 folgen Auszüge aus Beda, Hist. eccl. gent. Angl. V.9 und III.4, 5.”



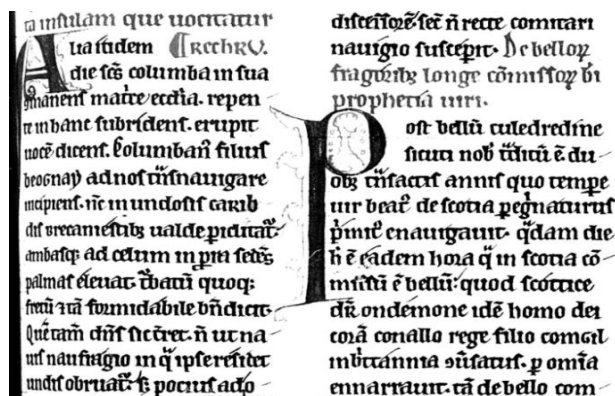
text is in black, with chapter headings in red. Occasionally, initial letters within the main text are written in red as well, as with the *N* in *Nunc mihi non indecenter uidetur* (Fig. 17):



(Fig. 17: British Library MS Additional 35110, fol. 99 r.)<sup>58</sup>

The initial letters of chapters are written alternately in green and red, a fairly common arrangement for English manuscripts from this period, with green letters given foliate decoration in red, and red letters given foliate decoration in green.<sup>59</sup> Initial *As*, *Ps* and *Qs* in chapter headings and the openings of chapters often have long tails down the left-hand side of the main text. The page layout, illuminations, chapter headings, stress markers and ink colours used in the copy of *VSC* conform to the usages of the rest of the manuscript. In a visual sense, the compilation of British Library MS Additional 35110 is presents a consistent stylistic unity.<sup>60</sup>

Fig. 18 illustrates the use of chapter headings (following on from the text of the previous chapter without line breaks, and visually distinguished by colour), illumination and stress markers.



(Fig. 18: British Library MS Additional 35110, fol. 102 r.)

<sup>58</sup> Unfortunately, colour images of this manuscript are not available.

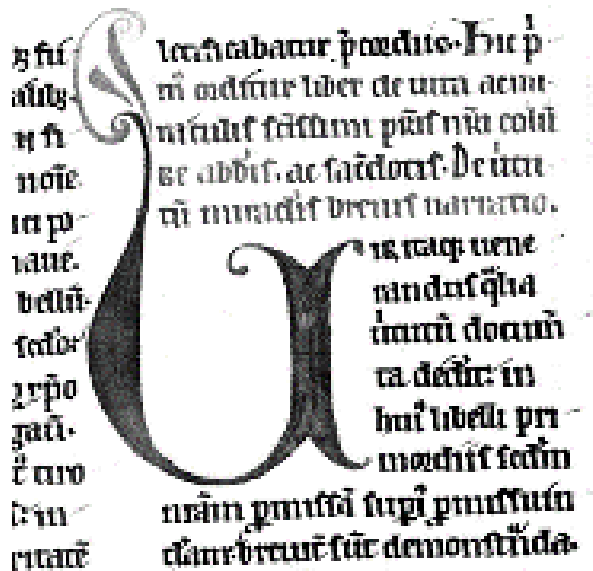
<sup>59</sup> Clemens and Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies*, p. 25.

<sup>60</sup> In the text of Bede's *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, at fol. 78 r, an initial *L* is topped with a drawing of the head of a bearded man. From a preliminary examination, this is the only representation of a human or animal form in the manuscript. There is no such illumination in the text of *VSC* in this manuscript.

Despite the long tails, the portion of the initial which breaks up the body of the main text is only two lines high, and this is consistent throughout the text, with the exception of initials which mark major divisions in the text, i.e. the prefaces and the three books.

#### 4.1.2: Major textual divisions in British Library MS Additional 35110

The initial letters of the two prefaces are four lines high, and neither is especially elaborately illuminated. They have long trailing stems from their serifs, but are otherwise undecorated. The initial *U* of *Uir itaque* in I.1, in contrast, is six lines high, with a decorated stem that rises up another five lines. The letter itself is green, while the decoration on the stem is executed in red.



(Fig. 19: British Library MS Additional 35110, fol. 98 r.)

The initial *A* of *Alio* in the first narrative of Book II is not remarkable for its illumination; it is written using one of a few variant forms of the letter *A* used as initials, with an extra stem being added on its left side, and trailing down the left-hand margin of the text. The only feature which sets it apart from other, similar, initial *As* is its size, in that it is three, rather than two, lines high, as seen in Fig. 20.

**G**lā in secula seculorū amen.  
 Hic pmo libro imponit tñm.  
 Incip scds lib de uirtutū nu  
 midis. que pterūq; ꝛ ꝓscientia  
 ꝓhānt comitat. De uno quod  
 de aqua fcm est.  
**A**lio in tempe cū uene  
 nndus uir in scotia  
 ap̄ sc̄m fēd̄ ar̄ ep̄m  
 adhuc utēnt sapentiā sacre  
 sc̄pturē addiscēt omanēret. q̄  
 dam solēpm die unū ad facti  
 ciale m̄stū casu aliq̄ minime  
 muenēbat. De cuius defectu ē  
 ministros altaris in se oque  
 renet audiret. ad fontē sup̄  
 usco ut ad sac̄ eucaristie mi  
 nistria aqm̄ q̄ diaconus fon  
 tanā hauriret. Ipse quippe il  
 lus in dieb; erat in diaconat̄  
 ḡtu amminutis. Vir itaq; be

(Fig. 20: British Library MS Additional 35110, fol. 114 r.)

Conversely, the initial *I* of *In primo ex his tribus libellis libro* (“In the first book of these three books”), for the paragraph which reinforces the structure of the work and introduces Book III, is rather more elaborate. Uniquely among the initials of *VSC* in this manuscript, the *I*, which is red, is decorated with a Greek key pattern.

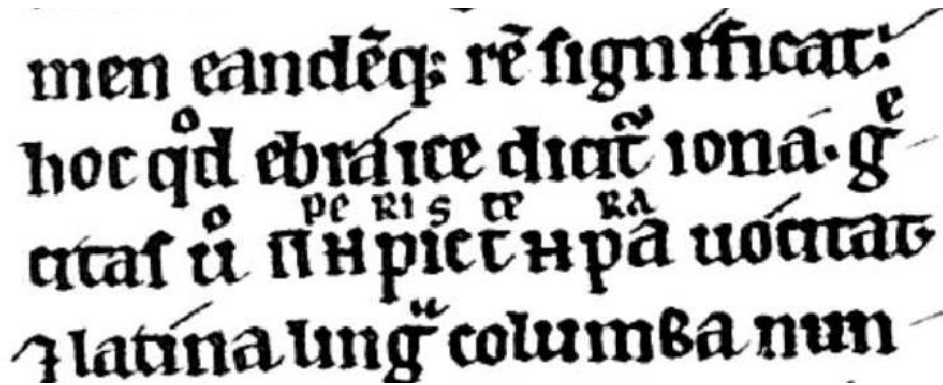
ro. uel eadem de aliis reuelate  
 sunt. De anglo dñi qui eius  
 generica in sōpnt post ipsi  
 m̄to conceptionē apparuit.  
**I**n pmo ex his trib; libellis lib  
 sup̄ omemoratū ē de ꝓhānt  
 reuelationib;. queclā breuit  
 succinetq; dño uiuante de  
 scripta sunt. In sc̄o sup̄  
 de inuū miracul; que ꝓ bea  
 tū declarata sunt. ut q̄  
 ut sepe dicit ē plerūq; ꝓhā  
 nom; comitat. ḡa. In hoc  
 uero t̄o de anglis appariti  
 onib;. que uel aliis de beato

(Fig. 21: British Library MS Additional 35110, fol. 132 v.)

The major textual divisions, then, which are so integral to the structure of *VSC* in a textual sense, are reinforced in the visual presentation of the manuscript.

#### 4.1.3: Greek letters in British Library MS Additional 35110

The use of Greek is less prominent in British Library MS Additional 35110 than it is in Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1. There is no copy of the Lord's Prayer and no Greek in the structural framing of the text. However, the use of Greek characters in spelling out the word *peristera* is retained. Uniquely among the manuscripts of VSC, the word is glossed with a transliteration in Latin letters above the Greek characters.



(Fig. 22: British Library MS Additional 35110, fol. 97 r.)

This is the only use of Greek characters in this copy of VSC. Comparison with the other uses of Greek in Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1 is interesting, for in British Library MS Additional 35110, the ethnonym Corcu Réti is given in Latin letters, but in the garbled form *Copeupeti*.<sup>61</sup> Plainly, at some stage in the text's transmission, the Greek *rho*, *P*, has been mistaken for Latin *P*, but we cannot now know if the error was made by the scribe of this manuscript, by the scribe of his exemplar, or at a still earlier point. That the name could be so rendered, of course, tells us that by the time this copy was made, the Corcu Réti were probably unknown to people in northern England.

#### 4.2: British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III (folios 192 recto - 217 recto)

The second B-text manuscript is British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III (the Andersons' B2). Like British Library MS Additional 35110, it dates from around the end of the twelfth century or the beginning of the thirteenth.<sup>62</sup> The manuscript itself is a collection of some seventy-seven texts, consisting of saints' lives and other cult material such as hymns, foundation

<sup>61</sup> British Library, MS Additional 35110, fol. 112 v.

<sup>62</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, p. lvi.

legends and accounts of relic translations, arranged under the feast days of the respective saints, mostly in April, May and June (Columba's feast day is the ninth of June). Sadly, the manuscript was very badly damaged in the fire of 1731 which devastated the Cotton collection, and parts of every page are now damaged or entirely lost, while other parts are quite legible, as demonstrated in Fig. 23, which shows the contents list to Book I, and the opening of I.1.<sup>63</sup>



(Fig. 23: British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III, fol. 193r.)<sup>64</sup>

Furthermore, prior to the fire, six folios of *VSC* were lost from one of the quires. As a result, some of the most important sections of the manuscript for the purposes of this study are now lost, though much of interest still remains. As noted above, this copy of *VSC* is accompanied by genealogical information, and a poem concerning the copying of the text during the reign of Alexander I.

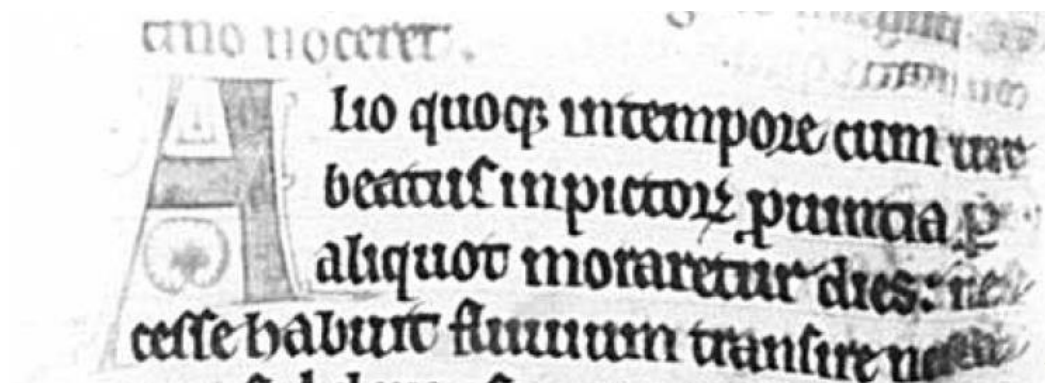
The manuscript itself is quite large, measuring approximately 38 cm x 28 cm. The text is written in two columns, with forty-three lines per page. Again, the main text is written in black

<sup>63</sup> For an account of the fire and restoration work on the Cotton collection, see Clemens and Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies*, pp. 99 – 100.

<sup>64</sup> Colour images of this manuscript are unfortunately not available.



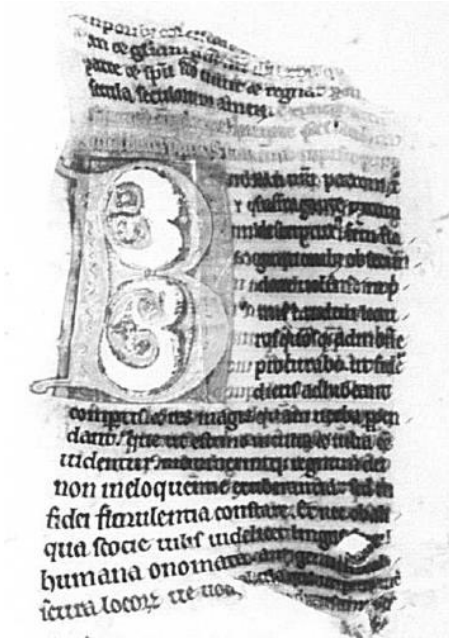
ink, with no use of stress markers, and the chapter headings in rubric. The illumination of initials is more elaborate than in the near-contemporary British Library MS Additional 35110, with three colours being used (red, green and blue) and more extensive use of such devices as scroll-work, zig-zags and foliate decoration. The initials of chapters are usually between two and four lines high, and are often set within a rectangle, which is then decorated, and often quite richly. The main body of the initial letter will be in one of red, blue or green, with foliate and other decoration given in the other two colours. A fairly typical example is given in Fig. 24.



(Fig. 24: British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III, fol. 201v.)

#### 4.2.1: Major textual divisions in British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III

The initials and the other apparatus which mark the major divisions in the text are again noteworthy. The first letter of *VSC*, the *B* of *Beati nostri* in the first preface (Fig. 25), is considerably larger and more striking than most initial capitals, as befits the opening of the text, and has the practical benefit of making it easier for the reader to locate the text among all the others in the manuscript. This is especially important since the text of *VSC* in this manuscript follows directly on from the end of the previous text, *Miraculi Sancti Niniani Episcopi*, and is not given a new page or column. The *B* is nine lines high, red and set on a blue rectangular background. Both of the loops of the *B* are decorated with foliate scrollwork, and there is a green zig-zag design down the main stem.



(Fig. 25: British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III, fol. 192r.)

The initial *S* of *Sanctus igitur* at the start of the Second Preface is more like the initials of chapters, rather than those of major textual divisions: it is only three lines high, and is red with green foliate decorations filling in the loops of the *S*.

The first initials of the three books of *VSC* are visually striking, reinforcing the fundamental literary importance of the text's structure. The *U* of *Uir itaque*, at the opening of Book I.1 (see Fig. 23, above) is eight lines high, and is green set on within a red rectangle. The left-hand stem of the *U* has a white line which picks out a series of five red dots, while the right-hand stem has a white zig-zag design, with red dots in its angles. The space in the middle of the *U* is filled with elaborate foliate decoration in red, blue and green (Fig. 26).



(Fig. 26: British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III, fol. 193r.)

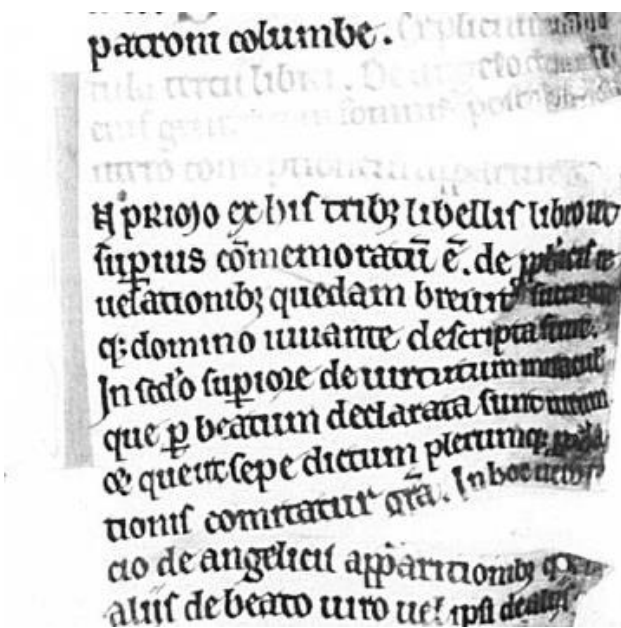


The opening initial *U* of *Uir uenerandus* at the start of Book II, following the contents list (discussed below) has been badly damaged by the fire. It is eight lines high, blue and set within a red rectangle (Fig. 27). It seems to have resembled the *U* in *Uir itaque* at the start of I.1.



(Fig. 27: British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III, fol. 198r.)

The *I* of *In primo* at the start of the third book is nine lines high, and unlike the other initials discussed here is set in the margin, not the main text. It is not decorated as elaborately as the other surviving initials which mark major textual divisions, but its size and position on the page certainly mark it out visually, and the importance of this point of the text as a structural division is further highlighted by the use of red ink for the explicit to Book II, for the explicit to the contents list for Book III and for the introduction to Book III proper (Fig. 28).



(Fig. 28: British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III, fol. 209 v.)

The overt organisation of the text also includes contents lists for all three books. In the first, each new narrative is given a new line, and the initial *D* of *De* (the first word of all of the titles) is given alternately in red and green (though *De lugidio* and *De enano* are both, presumably by mistake, capitalised in red).<sup>65</sup> The contents list for Book II is arranged as if it were a paragraph of text, rather than giving each new item a line. The first *D* for *De* is given in blue, and thereafter the initial *D*s are alternately in green and red, so the titles of the chapters can still be easily found, despite not being arranged with a new line for the start of each title.<sup>66</sup> The list for Book III is also arranged as a continuous piece of text, with the *D*s alternately in green and red. Unlike Book II, the first *D* appears to be red, though it has been almost wholly destroyed by the fire, so one cannot be certain.<sup>67</sup>

#### 4.2.2: Greek letters in British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III

Due to the extent of the fire damage which has been suffered by this manuscript, we are unable to make a full comparison with the other manuscripts for its use of Greek letters in the text. None of the surviving apparatus of textual organisation uses any Greek at all, and there are no additional texts or single words in Greek. The folios containing the story of Góre in I.47 are missing, so we cannot know whether the scribe (or his exemplar, at whatever stage of the text's transmission) retained the Greek letters of Corcu Réti or transliterated them, and if so, how well.

What does survive, however, is the word *peristera* in the discussion of Columba's name in the Second Preface. Or, rather, the word as far as ΠΗΠΙΣΤΗ survives, the final two letters having been lost to the fire damage.<sup>68</sup> Unlike the near-contemporary text in British Library MS Additional 35110, there is no interlinear gloss with a Latin transliteration.

<sup>65</sup> British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III, fol. 193 r.

<sup>66</sup> British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III, fols. 197 r – 197 v.

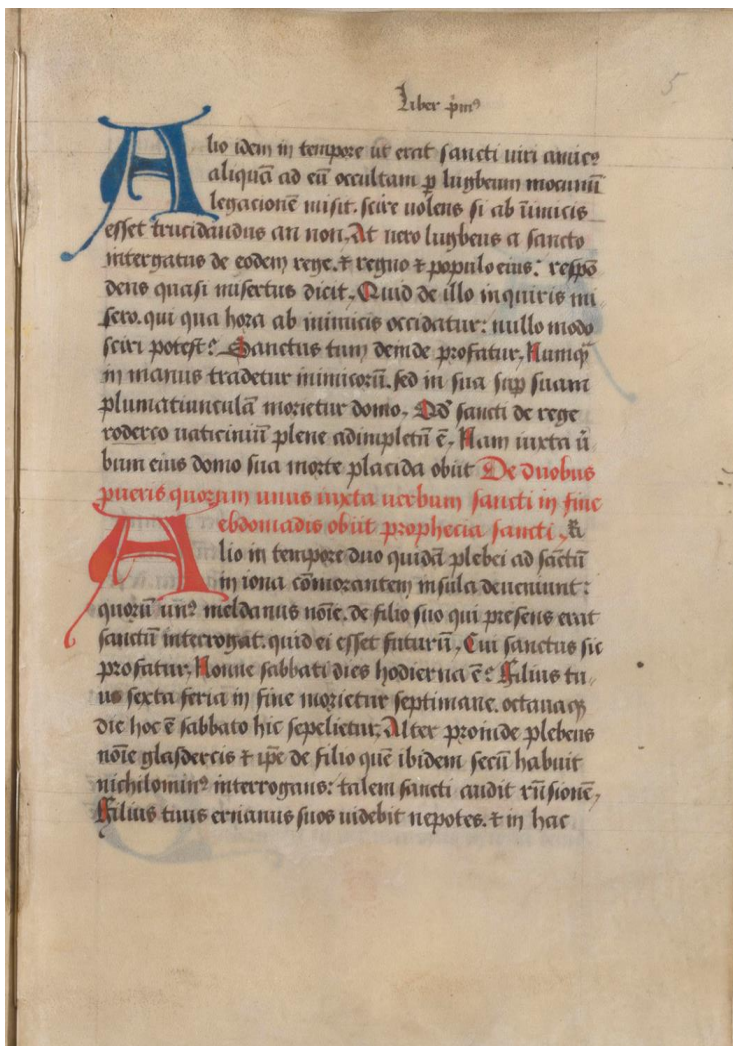
<sup>67</sup> British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III fol. 209 v.

<sup>68</sup> British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III, fol. 192 v.

#### 4.3: British Library MS Royal 8D IX (1 recto - 70 recto)

The latest manuscript of the first recension of VSC is in British Library MS Royal 8D IX (the Andersons' B3), written at an unknown location in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. The manuscript as it now is contains VSC, the list of Columba's monks and relatives in common with the other B texts, and a Rule of Augustine with commentaries, suggesting that it was produced for use in a monastic context. Unfortunately, the first eight or so folios of VSC are missing, and it may be that the text was originally preceded by others now lost.

The manuscript measures approximately 25 cm x 17 cm and is ruled for twenty-four lines per page. Unlike the other copies of VSC, it is written in long lines, not divided into columns. The main text is written in black using a clear, legible book hand. Initial capital letters within it often have vertical red lines through them, to mark new sentences. The chapter headings are in red and follow directly from the end of the previous chapter, with no line breaks. Initial capitals for chapters are three or sometimes two lines high, are not very highly decorated, and are alternately red and blue. These features of the text are all illustrated in Fig. 29.



(Fig. 29: British Library MS Royal 8 D IX, fol. 5 r.)

Another feature of the textual organisation of the manuscript can also be seen in the above image, in the heading *Liber primus*. This appears at the top of all of the recto folios of Book I, a useful tool for navigating the manuscript. Likewise, the contents list for Book II is headed *Tablua* (fol. 23 r.),<sup>69</sup> and the opening page of Book II is headed *Liber secundus*.<sup>70</sup> This, however, is the last such heading. No other folio in Book II is given this heading, and neither is the contents list to Book III, any folio in Book III, or the additional material about Columba's monks and relatives. The heading is written in the same hand as the main text, as can be seen from the decorated stems of the *Ls* in *Liber* (in the heading) and *Alio* (in the main text), in Fig. 30.



(Fig. 30: British Library MS Royal 8 D IX, fol. 24 r.)

Since the text is missing its beginning, we can make no comment on the illumination of the initials for the two prefaces or Book I, but as major textual divisions, it is likely that they would have been distinctive, as we have seen in the other manuscripts. The initials for Books II and III do survive, and they are not especially highly decorated, but are much larger than the initials for chapters within the books, as illustrated in Fig. 27. The *I* of *In primo* at the start of Book III is similarly tall, but not otherwise greatly different from the initials within the main text.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>69</sup> British Library MS Royal 8 D IX, fol. 23 r.

<sup>70</sup> British Library MS Royal 8 D IX, fol. 24 r.

<sup>71</sup> British Library MS Royal 8 D IX, fol. 53 r.



The manuscript being acephalous, there is no contents list extant for Book I, but Books II and III each have one. Again, the *D* in *De*, the first word of almost every chapter title is alternately red or blue, and the *E* is highlighted with a vertical red line through it.<sup>72</sup>

The statements that frame the books, that indicate that one book has ended and another is about to begin, are in red, differentiating them from the narrative text visually as well as in terms of content, and giving a visual reinforcement to the structure of the text.<sup>73</sup>

British Library MS Royal 8 D IX does not feature Greek letters at any point at all. Since the folios containing the prefaces are missing, we cannot check whether *peristera* was rendered in Greek letters or not, but the *Corcu Réti* of I.47 is given the garbled Latin-alphabet form *corforepti*, again indicating both a misreading of the Greek letters at some stage of the text's transmission, and ignorance of the group denoted by the name.<sup>74</sup> There is also no use of Greek, or indeed of any other alphabet other than Latin, to be found in the text's framing apparatus, either.

## 5: Conclusions

As can be seen, the manuscripts of the first recension of *VSC* use a variety of strategies to guide the reader through the text, such as illumination, different colours of ink and different sizes of initials. As the scribes are now the only readers of *VSC* whose interpretations of the text we can now access, the only readers whose responses to the text we can determine, it is imperative that we pay close attention to how they responded to it, how they decided to guide their readers through their version of Adomnán's texts.

While this study has focused primarily on Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, the only manuscript of the first recension of *VSC* to have been produced in a Columban milieu, it has also given consideration to the visual presentation of the text of the B manuscripts, the first time such work has been undertaken. The very early, near-authorial, date of the Schaffhausen manuscript, as well as its being produced at Iona, the centre of the Columban cult, mean that it is due special attention: it is the closest we can get to the intellectual and scholarly climate of

<sup>72</sup> British Library MS Royal 8 D IX, fol. 22 r – 23 v, and 51 v to 52 v. On 23 v, one of the chapter headings begins with *Miraculū*, the only one not to begin with *De*. The *M* is in red, and the *i* is highlighted with a vertical red line, maintaining the pattern of the rest of the contents list.

<sup>73</sup> Note that the contents list for Book III is followed by the statement *Expliciunt capitulae tercii libri* (fol. 52 v), which is not noted in the Andersons' edition. .

<sup>74</sup> British Library MS Royal 8 D IX, fol. 19 r.

Adomnán's abbacy. It may have been produced during Adomnán's lifetime, and even if it was not, it was produced when many of the members of the community who had known him and lived there during his abbacy were still alive. This manuscript therefore gives us a unique insight into how Adomnán's immediate circle encountered the *vita* of their monastery's founder and patron, how they were guided through it, how it was visually presented to them.

The B manuscripts, in contrast, were produced outside of a Columban milieu, and not for the use of foundations with particular connections to the Columban cult. As such, *VSC* is not presented alone in those manuscripts, but is bound together with other texts. In British Library MS Additional 35110 and British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III, it is neither the first text, nor accorded any special prominence. It is the first text encountered in British Library MS Royal 8 D IX, but as that manuscript is acephalous, this may not have originally been the case. While the B manuscripts do include material about Columba's monks and relatives which is not preserved in the Schaffhausen manuscript, they are fundamentally not Columban productions, and do not have a special, particular focus on the Columban cult. As such, they are worthy of attention for a different reason: they allow us to see the reception and transmission of this central text of the Columban cult outside of its cult centres. We can see the esteem in which Columba was held by those who produced these manuscripts from the exalted company Columba keeps in them. This demonstrates that even outside of the Gaelic culture zone, and even long after the political changes monastic reforms which ended the power of the Columban church, Columba was seen as a saint of considerable importance. His *vita* was still worth copying, and worth including in lavish, major productions alongside some of the major saints of the Christian church.

Studying the presentation of the same text across an eight-century manuscript tradition also allows us to see changes in manuscript culture (styles of script, forms of illumination) and textual organisation (contents lists for Books II and III in the B manuscripts, the navigational aids at the page headings in British Library MS Royal 8 D IX) through the medieval period.

In all cases, the visual presentation of the text is related to its literary structure: the various kinds of visual cues and navigational aids point out the different major (books) and minor (chapters) divisions in the work. The significance(s) of these textual divisions will be discussed in the study of the literary structure of *VSC* in Chapter 2, below.





## Chapter 2

### Structure and Narrative Sequencing in *Vita Sancti Columbae*

Integral to the understanding of any literary composition is the understanding of its structure. The way in which a text is arranged can tell us much about the aims and interests of its author, the way the text is intended to be used, the influences exerted upon the author, and other such aspects of literary composition. With respect to writings intended to tell the story of the life of an individual, the sorts of narratives selected to illustrate their character, the episodes in their life deemed significant enough for inclusion and the order in which they are arranged are all of literary interest. Since no biography or hagiography can be an objective, comprehensive record of an individual's entire life, authors must instead select a mixture of episodes from their subject's life to cover the representative and the unique; the dramatic turning points contextualised in the wider story of the subject's life. The way that these are arranged, the "plot" of the story, depends on the aims of the author, the whole will be structured so as to emphasise certain elements of the life.

This chapter considers the structure of *VSC* at what we will call both the macro and micro levels: that is to say, we will look at how the text is framed (the prefaces and books) and also the sequencing of narratives within the books. This chapter will be primarily based on the text preserved in Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, but the later three first recension manuscripts will also be discussed, and will include a consideration of how the physical construction of the manuscripts relates to the literary structure of the *Vita*.

#### 1: Review of existing scholarship

*VSC*'s unusual structure has attracted comment, it has occasioned little detailed study until fairly recently. While many have commented on the non-chronological organisation of the text and the thematic division of its three books, this has usually taken the form of quite general statements with little in the way of analysis of narrative sequencing, structural anomalies or of the theological and literary aspects of how Adomnán structured his work.<sup>1</sup> A few scholars have

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the Andersons, *Life*, p. lvii, write simply "Adomnán's division of the Life into three books is traceable to a convention of hagiography. It has been shown that the idea of providing two prefaces was borrowed from the Life of Martin written by Sulpicius Severus; so there is no reason to doubt that both prefaces belonged to Adomnán's original work." They are likely correct with respect to the prefaces, but I cannot think of any other

commented on how stories with similar themes are sometimes grouped together, but have not gone on to investigate the relative degrees of simplicity or complexity of these groups, how they relate to one another, or what their significance might be.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, most considerations of the structure of *VSC* are set within the context of either comparative studies of several texts, or studies of other things in which structure is more or less incidental.<sup>3</sup> These are very useful, but necessarily limited in the degree of detail they can devote to the structure of *VSC*. Notable recent exceptions are articles by Mark Stansbury, Clare Stancliffe, Michael J. Enright and Thomas Charles-Ewards.

Stansbury's article is a work of textual archaeology which traces the development of Adomnán's work and argues convincingly for the compilatory nature of *VSC*, which "... did not come fully formed into the world like Athena, but was built up over time like a pearl."<sup>4</sup> His approach focuses on the development and reworking of the text over time, with the non-chronological, episodic nature of *VSC* meaning that episodes could be slotted in to the structure easily as the text grew, something that continued after Adomnán's death with Dorbbéne's insertion of material from Cumméne Find's work at III.5 and in the insertions made in  $\beta$ , the exemplar for the B manuscripts. Stansbury also argues that Adomnán's work was an "open text" which he did not live to fix into a final form, that the text as we have it is in an unfinished stage of revision. As such, when we consider the structure of the text, and particularly the sequencing of narratives, we should bear in mind that we may be doing so with a version of the text that does not represent the author's completed work. Perhaps some of the structural anomalies discussed below would have been "ironed out" had Adomnán lived to complete his revisions; therefore, while we can only assess the structure of the text as we actually have it, we should be cautious about our interpretations of the structure and sequencing of a work whose

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early hagiography divided into three books on the same basis that Adomnán uses, far less enough that his doing so could be considered in any way conventional. The introduction to Sharpe's translation, Sharpe, *Life*, is 99 pages long, of which barely two full pages are concerned with structure, and then mostly concerned with identifying other *vitae* that influenced Adomnán, see pp. 57 – 59.

<sup>2</sup> Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints Lives*, p. 11. Jean-Michel Picard states that "[a] dozen instances of such *diuisiones* occur throughout the *Life*": "Structural Patterns in Early Hiberno-Latin Hagiography", *Peritia* 4 (1985), pp. 67 – 82, at p. 77. As will be seen below, I have identified twenty one, almost twice as many, in Books I and II alone. For reasons explained below, Book III is given separate consideration.

<sup>3</sup> Picard, "Structural patterns" is an example of the former. For examples of the latter, see Stancliffe, "The Miracle Stories in seventh-century Irish Saint' Lives", pp. 110 – 112; and Borsje's useful discussion in Jacqueline Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy: encounters with monsters in early Irish texts. An investigation related to the process of Christianization and the concept of evil* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996), pp. 95 – 96.

<sup>4</sup> Stansbury, "The Composition of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*", p. 173.

structure and sequencing may not have been fully worked out into a final form before the author died.

Stancliffe's article, though very short, makes a strong case for Adomnán's structural choices being developments from the works of Gregory the Great and Cogitosus. She also argues that Adomnán's arrangement of his material has a theological basis, reflecting his reading of Cassian and the greater importance of the inner, private spiritual life of the Christian over their more visible, outward, public virtues.

Thus, while Columba certainly had no lack of visible signs of his sanctity, his inner purity and his freedom from sin are prioritised, and thus presented as the culmination of VSC's case for him as a major, and perfectly orthodox, saint.<sup>5</sup> Stancliffe argues that "...Book I portrays Columba as a prophet; and Book II portays him as performing the sorts of miracles that Jesus and the apostles wrought... Adomnán's tripartite presentation begins with the more public face of Columba as prophet and miracle worker, and then turns to the innermost quality of his life...".<sup>6</sup> Such an argument requires some important qualifications. Firstly, not all of the prophecies and miracles are particularly public, many having only a very small public to witness them (for instance the prophecy of Lugbe mocu Min dropping the book in I.24, or the miracle and prophecy to Ligu Cen calad's parents in II.10). Secondly, Adomnán directly states that doubtless many more things were revealed prophetically to Columba than he ever made known to others, clearly indicating that his prophetic gift was quite as interior as it was public.<sup>7</sup>

Another important qualification is the public, prophetic aspect to Columba's character in Book III. Enright's analysis of III.1 – 5 sees this sequence of narratives as a demonstration of Columba's parity with several of the major Old Testament prophets, as these chapters, from the prophecies of Columba's greatness when is still in the womb to his excommunication, parallel passages in the Biblical accounts of the prophets.<sup>8</sup> Enright's argument about the public, prophetic dimension to these chapters is convincing, and this should caution us from accepting too readily a generalised interpretation of Book III as a whole as being concerned with Columba's inner holiness.

<sup>5</sup> Clare Stancliffe, "Adomnán of Iona and his Prose Writings" in Clancy and Pittock (eds.), *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature I*, pp. 110 – 114.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>7</sup> VSC, I.50.

<sup>8</sup> Michael J. Enright, "Prophets and Princes on Isles of Ocean", *Peritia* 21 (2010), pp. 56 – 135.

Like Stancliffe, Charles-Edwards looks at Gregory's *Dialogi* as a structural model for Adomnán, who built on this model to develop a work of great sophistication and complexity. He also looks at the interrelatedness of the three books of *VSC*, and at how Adomnán incorporated material from Cumméne's lost work.<sup>9</sup>

Clancy briefly considered narrative sequencing in his article on Adomnan's motivations for composing *VSC*. While his discussion of sequencing takes only a couple of pages, he does argue that there is a clear logic to the arrangement of I.2 – 19, and II.26 – 33. Far from being “a random selection of anecdotes”, the former maintains “a shifting and balancing of *foci*” in a skillful manner, while the latter demonstrates “how themes radiate and intersect, and importantly how the context of particular stories can be revealing.”<sup>10</sup> While Clancy is focused here on the political dimension of the text, and does not discuss the sequences in great detail, it is salutary that he gives attention to the sequencing of narratives as something considered and deliberate, and not random, an approach which is followed here.

John Miles-Watson published a short examination of narrative structures, looking at the structures of the individual narratives in Book II, rather than the sequencing of the narratives or the overall structure of the work.<sup>11</sup> Dividing the majority of the miracle narratives into two types, which he termed *miracles of sustenance* and *miracles of reintegration*, he argues that in the miracle narratives we can see Adomnán's portrayal of the church as a force for social cohesion, a *unitas* binding together and healing society. While certain aspects of Miles-Watson's schema seem somewhat arbitrary (perhaps due to the short length of the paper, he does not expand on his definitions, or explain how certain miracle narratives fit into his two categories. The slaying of the wild boar at II.26, and his subset of miracles about the violation of *fir flathemon* in particular seem to fit awkwardly into this categorisation), it is certainly a useful and substantial discussion, not least for its emphasis on *VSC*'s Columba as a narratively-constructed character of the late seventh century, rather than a direct representation of the historical man of the sixth.

What none of these works have undertaken is a study of both the overarching structure of *VSC*, and of all of the clusters or sequences of related narratives. The larger-scale investigation undertaken in this chapter enables us to see in more detail the arrangements of narratives in

<sup>9</sup> T.M. Charles-Edwards, “The Structure and Purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*”, in Wooding, Aist, Clancy and O'Loughlin (eds.), *Adomnán of Iona*, pp. 205 – 218.

<sup>10</sup> Clancy, “Personal, Political, Pastoral”, pp. 47 – 49.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Miles-Watson, “Adomnán - Vanquisher of Binary Opposition: A Structural Analysis of the Miracles in the Second Book of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*”, *Northern Studies*, 38 (2004), pp. 123 – 133.

relation both to sequences of chapters and to the overall structure of the work, including the anomalies or inconsistencies within Adomnán's tripartite schema.

## 2: Adjacent literature and the wider literary context

I know of no other hagiography from the early period, insular or continental, which shares the same general structure and organising principle as *VSC*. While others do have certain structural aspects in common with *VSC*, it seems that Adomnán, while drawing on some previously established models (such as the double preface, possibly ultimately inherited from Evagrius of Antioch's Latin translation of Athanasius of Alexandria's *Vita Sancti Antonii*) was highly original in how he arranged his materials.<sup>12</sup> Before considering in detail how Adomnán structured *VSC*, we will look very briefly at the main structural features and organising principles of the Gospels, Classical biography and hagiography (including the other three hagiographies that constitute the early group of Irish *vitae*, and a representative sample of late antique and early medieval lives).

### 2.1: Adjacent Literature: The Gospels<sup>13</sup>

The canonical Gospels are clearly central to all Christian thought and literature, since the narratives of which they consist form the bedrock of what Christians believe about Jesus Christ, his teachings, divinity and soteriological mission. Adomnán was of course intimately familiar with them, and it is not surprising that he refers to Gospel narratives several times in *VSC*.<sup>14</sup> The Gospels are presented as accounts of Christ's life, and while they could only in the very loosest sense be considered biographical in modern terms (for instance, only two of them (Matthew and Luke) give an account of Christ's birth, or any information about his childhood),

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<sup>12</sup> It is likely that the double preface is derived from the *Vita Sancti Martini* of Sulpicius Severus, and ultimately from *Vita Sancti Antonii* by Athanasius, both of which were central to the development of hagiography. Anthony's *vita* acquired a Second Preface when it was translated into Latin by Evagrius of Antioch, and it was this Latin version which became influential in western Christendom. Adomnán's familiarity with both of these texts was established by Brüning in 1917. Sharpe, *Life*, p. 242, n.6; Picard, "Structural Patterns", p. 75.

<sup>13</sup> There is also much biographical material in the Old Testament, of course, but these materials have not been considered here in order to maintain workable parameters.

<sup>14</sup> For an example with a particularly clear role in the structure of *VSC*, see the discussion of Columba turning water into wine in II.1, below.



they do fit well into ancient conceptions of biographical writing.<sup>15</sup> All four are arranged chronologically, with Christ's mission, teachings and miracles and confrontations with the religious authorities building up to his betrayal, crucifixion, resurrection and post-resurrection appearances. Despite sharing the same overall chronological organising principle, however, much of the matter of the Gospels is made up of originally independent narratives and teachings which are arranged in different ways by the different authors in order to emphasise different theological priorities. To take just one example, Jesus' cleansing of the Temple is placed near the end of his ministry in the Synoptic Gospels, at the climax of his confrontations with the Jewish authorities, but in John's Gospel it takes place at the start of his ministry, his first confrontation with the authorities after the commencement of his mission at the wedding at Cana.<sup>16</sup> Adomnán was a careful reader, and was closely attentive to the differences between the Gospels, as can be seen from his exegetical work.<sup>17</sup> As such he would have found in the Gospels an impeccable precedent for arranging narratives according to theological and literary imperatives and not merely chronological ones, even though the Evangelists' works, unlike his, have an overall chronological structure.

## 2.2: Adjacent Literature: Classical Biography

Christian hagiography emerged in a literary context in which writing about the lives of prominent individuals was common. In addition to the Gospels, there were traditions of biographical writing in both Latin and Greek, which memorialised political, military, literary and philosophical figures. Graeco-Roman biographies, like Christian hagiographies, had two

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<sup>15</sup> Richard A. Burridge, "Reading the Gospels as Biography", in Brian McGing and Judith Mossman (eds.), *The Limits of Ancient Biography* (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2006), pp. 31 – 49.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 21: 12 – 17; Mark 11: 12 – 19; Luke 19: 45 – 48; John 2: 12 – 17. For a discussion of the theological basis for the structuring of the Gospels, see John Marsh, *The Gospel of St John* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), pp. 48 – 56. "There was a time when it was held critically respectable to believe that the synoptic gospels, particularly Mark as the allegedly first of them, provided something approaching a chronological framework for a 'life of Jesus'. That was possible in the days before source criticism. But with the advent of form criticism and the analysis of the synoptic narrative into individual elements of different kinds such a view was no longer tenable. Instead of chronology being, as it were, the thread upon which the pearls of the gospel stories were strung in narrative sequence, it became clear that each pearl was a theological counter, and that chronology had much less to do with selection or place than than source criticism could have imagined. But if even Mark is not constructed chronologically but theologically (i.e. is not concerned simply to report what took place but always to make plain what was going on), than any correction of Mark made by John could not, in the nature of things, be simply chronological. Any 'correction' would primarily be concerned with theology, with meaning, with *what was going on* and only secondarily by implication, as it were, with chronology, with *what took place*." (p. 49. Italics in original).

<sup>17</sup> Thomas O'Loughlin, "Res, tempus, locus, persona: Adomnán's exegetical method", in Dauvit Broun and Thomas Owen Clancy (eds.), *Spes Scotorum: Hope of Scots: Saint Columba, Iona and Scotland* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), pp. 139 – 158.

basic modes of organisation: chronological and thematic.<sup>18</sup> Burrige has found that the biographies of generals and political figures are more likely to be structured chronologically, while those of writers and philosophers are more likely to have a thematic organising principle.<sup>19</sup> Regarding the elements such biographies would include, Jenkinson notes:

The Peripatetic biography, which we see in its classic form in the *Parallel Lives* of Plutarch in a later age, followed a fixed formula: the subject's birth, youth and character, achievements and death were narrated, all to an *obligato* accompaniment of ethical reflection, and diversified by anecdotes whose purpose was solely to entertain.<sup>20</sup>

While there is no direct evidence that Adomnán knew any Classical biographies, or that any were present in the library at Iona, it is worth bearing them in mind for the influence which they exerted on the emerging genre of Christian hagiography. Even if Adomnán had no direct access to the writings of such authors as Cornelius Nepos, Plutarch or Suetonius, they are part of his literary world at one remove due to being part of the literary world of Christian authors whose works he most certainly did know, such as Athanasius and Jerome.<sup>21</sup>

### 2.3: Adjacent Literature: Hagiography

#### 2.3.1: Continental hagiographies

Hagiography developed from the tradition of classical biography, and as such inherited its literary forms.<sup>22</sup> The *vitae* of the Late Antique period, as the genre and its conventions started to emerge, can be very diverse in many respects, as Stancliffe notes, yet they do share a basic chronological orientation.<sup>23</sup> This is true of texts as different as *Vita Sancti Antonii* by

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<sup>18</sup> Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 55 – 56. Cox gives Plutarch as an example of a writer employing the chronological mode, and Aristoxenus and Suetonius for the topical mode.

<sup>19</sup> Burrige, “Reading the Gospels as Biography”, p. 33.

<sup>20</sup> Edna Jenkinson, “Nepos – An Introduction to Latin Biography”, in T.A. Dorey (ed.), *Latin Biography* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 1 – 15, at pp. 6 – 7.

<sup>21</sup> Carolinne White (trans.), *Early Christian Lives* (Hardmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), pp. xxx – xxxv.

<sup>22</sup> David Bates, Julia Crick and Sarah Hamilton, “Introduction”, in David Bates, Julia Crick and Sarah Hamilton (eds.), *Writing Medieval Biography* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), pp. 1 – 13.

<sup>23</sup> Clare Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer: History and Miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 102.

Athanasius, which has a fairly straightforward chronological biographical form, and Gregory the Great's *Vita Sancti Benedicti*, which is cast as part of a dialogue between Gregory and his deacon Peter.<sup>24</sup> This form allows the saints to develop as characters, and they are often depicted as demonstrating certain holy traits as children, and overcoming sexual temptation in early adulthood.<sup>25</sup>

Gregory's work itself represented a structural innovation, moving away from the three-fold pattern of deeds, characteristics and way of life which marked Classical biography and early hagiography. Charles-Edwards argues persuasively that Book II of the *Dialogi*, which due to direct quotations we know Adomnán used, provided a structural model for *VSC*. This section of Gregory's work is arranged as series of prophecy narratives, a series of miracle narratives and a short section about visions of souls ascending to heaven. Charles-Edwards posits that this basic form was used as the organisational basis for *VSC*, but on a much larger scale, with each sequence in Gregory corresponding to a book in Adomnán.<sup>26</sup>

Some *vitae* begin with the saint's birth and youth and end with their death, but have the intervening sections arranged with regard to logics other than the solely chronological. For instance, the *Vita Sancti Germani*, the hagiography of Germanus of Auxerre by Constantius of Lyon, is framed by the saint's birth and death, but also has a section devoted to his attributes, and many stories which are not arranged with any linear chronological relationship to each other – as well as a section about the saint's travels, which is chronologically arranged.<sup>27</sup> The *Vita Sancti Germani* is introduced by a dedication and a double preface. The *Vita Sancti Augustini* by Possidius of Calama is likewise basically chronological in its structure, but with its latter

<sup>24</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Vie d'Antonie* (ed. and French trans.), G.J.M Bartelink (Paris: Imprimerie Paillart, 1994); Gregory the Great, *Vie de Saint Benoît, Dialogues, livre second* ed., Adalbert de Vogüé, French trans., P. Antin (Bégrolles en Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1982). English translations of both of these *vitae* are in White, *Early Christian Lives*; Régis Boyer, "An attempt to define the typology of medieval hagiography", in Hans Bekker-Nielsen, Peter Foote, Jørgen Højgaard Jørgensen, Tore Nyberg (eds.), *Hagiography and Medieval Literature: A Symposium* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), pp. 27 – 36, at pp. 31 – 35 (§ 3).

<sup>25</sup> Jerome, *Vita Sancti Hilarionis*, Pierre Leclerc, Edgardo M. Morales and Adalbert de Vogüé (ed. and French trans.), *Trois vies de moines: Paul, Malchus, Hilarion*, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2007), pp. 212-99; Sulpicius Severus; Jacques Fontaine (ed. and French trans.), *Vie de Saint Martin* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1967 - 1969). Three vols. English translations of both of these *vitae* are in White, *Early Christian Lives*.

<sup>26</sup> Charles-Edwards, "Structure and Purpose", p. 215.

<sup>27</sup> Constantius of Lyon, *Vie de Saint Germain d' Auxerre*, René Boruis (ed. and French trans.), (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1965). An English translation is found in F.R. Hoare, "The Life of Saint Germanus of Auxerre", in Noble and Head (eds.), *Soldiers of Christ*, pp. 75 – 106. That Adomnán knew this *vita* is clear from *VSC*, II.34, pp. 144 – 145.

parts focusing mainly on Augustine's personal attributes and virtues.<sup>28</sup> These two examples demonstrate that although the chronological mode was the dominant organising principle for Late Antique hagiography, there was a certain degree of flexibility as well.

### 2.3.2: Insular hagiographies

Conversely, of the four early Latin hagiographies from the Gaelic world, only one, Muirchú's *Vita Sancti Patricii* has a linear chronological structure.<sup>29</sup>

Cogitosus' *Vita Sanctae Brigitae* starts with a brief section on Brigit's youth, and concludes with some posthumous miracles and details about her tomb (her actual death is nowhere recounted).<sup>30</sup> Stancliffe suggests that this arrangement may have influenced Adomnán, as *VSC* includes similar information in the Second Preface, and concludes with Columba's death at III.23. She notes that this contrasts with the usual practice of continental hagiographers, who often devoted several chapters at the start of their works detailing the early lives of their subjects.<sup>31</sup> Between these two, chronologically fixed points is a collection of narratives which are often grouped by theme. For instance, chapters 11 and 12 deal with the healing of a man blind from birth and a girl dumb from birth, respectively; chapters 13 and 14 concern portions of meat; chapters 15 – 21 all involve animals of various kinds, and so on. Krajewski has argued that the narratives are arranged in such a way as to form a chiasmic structure, thus emphasising the construction of Kildare as a type of the New Jerusalem.<sup>32</sup> Thus Ludwig Bieler missed that mark in writing that, "... in one respect Cogitosus disappoints us: he has not succeeded in

<sup>28</sup> Possidius of Calama, *Sancti Augustini vita scripta a Possidio episcopo*, Herbert T. Weiskotten (ed. and trans.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1919). Another English translation is in Hoare, "The Life of Saint Augustine", in Noble and Head (eds.), *Soldiers of Christ*, pp. 31 – 73.

<sup>29</sup> The common use of Latin and their origin within the second half of the seventh century means that the *vitae* written by Cogitosus, Muirchú, Tírechán and Adomnán are often considered as part of a discrete group. "Na beathaí is sine atá againn, sa Laidin a scríobhadh iad, agus áirítear go mbaineann siad leis an dara leath den seachtú céad. Pádraig, Bríd agus Colm Cille na naoimh atá i gceist." ["The oldest lives that we have are written in Latin, and it is considered that they belong to the second half of the seventh century. Patrick, Brigit and Columba are the saints in question."] Herbert, "Gnéith den Naomhsheanchas in Éirinn sa Tréimhse Réamh-Lochlannach", p. 65. Translation mine.

<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, there is presently no modern edition. There are two seventeenth-century editions, in *Acta Sanctorum* (February 1st) and in John Colgan, *Trias Thaumaturga* (Dublin: Edmund Burke, 1997 [Louvain: 1647]). An English translation, which as Ritari notes diverges from the *Trias Thaumaturga* version, is in S. Connolly and J-M. Picard (trans.), "Cogitosus' Life of St Brigit", *JRSAI*, 117 (1987), pp. 11 – 27. See also Katja Ritari, *Saints and Sinners in Early Christian Ireland*, p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> Stancliffe, "Prose writings", p. 112.

<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth M.G. Krajewski, "Archetypal Narratives: Toward a Theological Interpretation of Early Celtic Hagiography", PhD Thesis, University of Wales, Trinity Saint David (2015), pp. 185 – 210.

welding his material into a continuous narrative.”<sup>33</sup> It is perverse to speak of Cogitosus not succeeding at something which he plainly never attempted to do, and doing so misses the theological depths to be found in the text when taken on its own terms. In eschewing a unilinear chronological structure for something more ambitious, Cogitosus produced a work far from disappointing. While Adomnán’s work does not adopt a chiasmic structure, the formation of sequences of thematically linked narratives without regard to chronology is a very important part of the organisation of his work, and it may be that he was influenced in this by how Cogitosus arranged his materials.

Tírechán’s *Collectanea* of Patrician material takes as its basis for textual organisation Patrick’s itinerary around Ireland, being concerned to demonstrate which churches owe their foundation to Patrick and thus which places owe allegiance to Armagh.<sup>34</sup>

Of these three other early Latin *vitae*, Muirchú’s alone employs a double preface. Cogitosus and Muirchú both follow their preface(s) with contents lists, as does Adomnán. Cogitosus and Muirchú both employ chapter headings, Tírechán does not. Cogitosus does not divide his work into books, Tírechán divides his into two and Muirchú, like Adomnán, arranges his into three.<sup>35</sup> Continental *vitae* from the Late Antique and Early Medieval periods are generally not divided up into books at all, and Stancliffe notes that when they are, it is generally into two books, and not three.<sup>36</sup> In this, as in the degree to which linear, chronological structures are set aside, the Gaelic hagiographical milieu can be seen as a locus of literary innovation, though we must be wary of making too firm pronouncements on this on the basis of such a small surviving corpus.<sup>37</sup> *VSC* is by far the longest of these *vitae*.

Still in an insular, though not a Gaelic, context, both the anonymous *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* (*AVSC*), composed at about the same time as *VSC* and Bede’s *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* (*BVSC*), which draws on the former, share a basically unilinear chronological structure.<sup>38</sup> Like *VSC*, *AVSC* is divided into books, though there are four of these rather than three, and the divisions

<sup>33</sup> Ludwig Bieler, “The Celtic Hagiographer”, *Studia Patristica*, 5 (1962), pp. 243 – 265, at p. 247.

<sup>34</sup> Both Muirchú’s and Tírechán’s works are in Bieler (ed. and trans.), *Patrician Texts*.

<sup>35</sup> The different manuscripts of Muirchú’s text complicate matters slightly with respect to both this division and the use of chapter headings: Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, pp. 7 – 18.

<sup>36</sup> Stancliffe, “The Miracle Stories”, pp. 111 – 112.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Bertram Colgrave (ed. and trans.), *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede’s Prose Life* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1939).

are made on the basis of different periods in Cuthbert's life. The books are then divided into short chapters, each with a chapter heading, as in *VSC*. In some manuscripts, each book is preceded by a contents list. *VSC* and *AVSC* also share the device of the double preface, probably borrowed from the Latin version of Athanasius' *Life of Saint Martin*.<sup>39</sup> *BVSC* is not divided into books, and has but a single preface, but follows this with a contents list, as in *VSC*.

Finally, both of the later vernacular Lives of Columba, both of which draw upon material from *VSC*, employ a basically unilinear structure.<sup>40</sup> Ó Domhnaill's *Betha* has a chronological structure, though within larger blocks (Columba's time in Derry, for instance), narratives are not necessarily ordered by time, and narratives often open with *Fechtus* or *Fechtus eli* (much like Adomnán's *Alio in tempore*). Some of the sections derived from Adomnán retain his ordering, such as the pair of milk bucket stories.<sup>41</sup>

### 3: The structuring of *VSC*: macro

#### 3.1: Prefaces

*VSC* opens with two prefaces, both introduced with headings, reading respectively, *In nomine Iesu Christi Orditur praefatio* and *In nomine Iesu Christi Secunda Praefatio*. In Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, the headings are in red, and the first words of these prefaces are written with large, decorated capitals and a *diminuendo* effect.<sup>42</sup> The paragraph beginning *Sanctus igitur Columba* in the Second Preface is also given a large capital and *diminuendo*, but no heading.<sup>43</sup> The Second Preface is about three times as long as the first.

In the First Preface, Adomnán explains that he has written the *Vita* having been entreated to do so by the brethren, and repeatedly (here and in the Second Preface) stresses both the truth of his

<sup>39</sup> Colgrave, "Vita Sancti Cuthberti Auctore Anonymo", pp. 60 – 65.

<sup>40</sup> Anon., "Betha Coluim Cille", ed. and trans., in Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 218 – 286. This Life is sometimes confusingly called "the Old Irish Life of Columba", though it is in fact in Middle Irish, and not Old Irish at all. Herbert dates it to the eleventh century, at pp. 184 – 193. Maghnas Ó Domhnall, *Betha Colaim Chille/ Life of Columcille*, ed. and trans. A. O'Kelleher and G. Schoepperle (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1918). This is a great compendium of Columban material in Early Modern Irish, dated to 1532, and incorporating much from Adomnán and almost all of the earlier vernacular Life.

<sup>41</sup> Ó Domhnaill, *Betha*, § 284 – 285, pp. 300 – 303; *VSC*, II.16 – 17.

<sup>42</sup> *VSC*, First Preface. Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, pp. 1 – 2. See Chapter 1, Fig. 5 and Fig. 6.

<sup>43</sup> *VSC*, Second Preface. Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p.4. Note that the Andersons' edition does not in any way indicate the textual break implied in the manuscript.



writing, and the holy and beneficial nature of Columba's works. This should be borne in mind when considering Adomnán's aims and motivations. As Justin Lake points out, prologues and prefaces are among the few places in ancient and medieval literature in which authors explicitly discuss their motivations for writing.<sup>44</sup> While much can certainly be discerned in *VSC* that relates to Adomnán's secular and ecclesiastical political concerns, it would be unwise for us to lose sight of this as a fundamentally religious work, motivated by genuine and sincere devotion to Adomnán's saintly patron.

He goes on to give a rather conventional apology for his poor literary style and also, as discussed in Chapter 3, below, for his occasional use of Irish words.<sup>45</sup> Despite his protestations, we see in this very first section Adomnán using his polished literary style as he uses a double alliteration, saying:

*Meminerintque regnum dei non in eloquentiae exuberentia sed in fidei florulentia constare.*

[Let them remember that the kingdom of God is founded not on the exuberance of eloquence, but in the flourishing of faith.]<sup>46</sup>

Following this, Adomnán goes on to claim that his book will of necessity omit a great many things about Columba which deserve to be remembered. This trope can be traced back to John 21: 25, in which at the very end of his Gospel, the Evangelist speculates that the whole world would not contain enough room to hold all the books that could be written about Christ's deeds.

The First Preface closes with a linking sentence, leading us onto the Second Preface thus:

*Hinc post hanc primam praefatiunculam de nostri uocamine praesulis in exordio secunde deo auxiliante intimare exordiar.*

[After this first slight preface I pass on, with God's help, to tell of our superior's

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<sup>44</sup> Justin Lake (ed.), *Prologues to Ancient and Medieval History: A Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), pp. xi – xviii.

<sup>45</sup> *VSC*, First Preface. For this “topos of incapacity” in ancient and medieval prologues, see Lake, *Prologues to Ancient and Medieval History*, pp. xv – xvi.

<sup>46</sup> *VSC*, First Preface. The translation here is my own. Strangely, with the exception of Wentworth Huyshe “...not in exuberance of eloquence, but in the abundant blossoming forth of faith...” (p. 3), *VSC*'s translators have not opted to render this double alliteration in English. Sharpe notes that Adomnán's declaration of the priority of faith over eloquence, and his earlier plea that his readers put faith in what he has written are both derived from the *Vita Sancti Martini* by Sulpicius Severus, and that the point regarding eloquence it itself ultimately derived from I Corinthians 4: 20.

name, in the beginning of the second.][<sup>47</sup>

The use of link sentences of this sort is very common in *VSC*. It is one of the ways in which Adomnán explicitly draws attention to the structuring and sequencing of his text, and also one of the ways in which readers are directly presented with *VSC* as a consciously constructed literary production.

The Second Preface does indeed open with a discussion of Columba's name (this is treated in more detail in Chapter 3, below), followed by an account of a prophecy before his birth that he would become a great monastic leader. Following this, we are given, for the first time, an overview of the structure of the *vita* as a whole.

*Huius igitur nostri Columbae uitam et mores describens in primis breui sermonis textu in quantum ualero strictam conpraehendam et ante lectoris oculos sanctam eius conuersionem pariter exponam; sed et de miraculis eius succincte quaedam quasi legentibus auide praegustanda ponam, quae tamen inferius per tris diuisa libros plenius explicabuntur; quorum primus profeticas reuelationes, secundus uero diuinas per ipsam uirtutes effectas, tertius angelicas apparitiones contenebit et quasdam super hominem dei caelestis claritudinis manifestationis.*

[In describing the life and character of this our Columba, I shall first in brief language condense in as small space as I can, and at the time bring before the eyes of the reader, his holy way of life; and shall also set before those that read, as morsels to be eagerly savoured, some instances of his miracles. These things will be more fully disclosed below, divided into three books, of which the first will contain prophetic revelations; the second, divine miracles effected through him; the third, appearances of angels, and certain manifestations of heavenly brightness above the man of God.][<sup>48</sup>

Adomnán does not justify, here or anywhere else, his decision to structure his book as he did, either in terms of its tripartite division, or in terms of the three major themes chosen. We might note, however, that the obvious significance of the number three for Christians, and even more so the idea of three distinct but interlinked units making up a single whole would have had a

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<sup>47</sup> *VSC*, First Preface.

<sup>48</sup> *VSC*, Second Preface.

certain appeal to Adomnán, the triune nature of the Godhead giving, as it were, a holy reflection the tripartite structure of a holy work of literature. Adomnán, of course, was not the first writer to arrange a work in three sections. Borsje writes of the way in which Classical biography often concerned itself with three main themes, and how this was adopted into Christian hagiography:

Hellenistic biography shows a traditional pattern of: 1. deeds (πράξεις); 2. virtues (ἀρεταί); 3. way of life (ἐπιτηδεύματα or πολιτεία). The tripartite structure can also be found in hagiography: Sulpicius Severus (†647) adapted this pattern for his *Life of Martin* (of Tours): 1. Early deeds (*acta*); 2. manifestations of supernatural power (*virtutes*); 3. holy way of life (*conversatio*).<sup>49</sup>

Adomnán's innovation was to take this tripartite structure, and apply it in a new way, looking at three different, though often connected, manifestations of the power of God in the saint.

Following an assertion of the trustworthy nature of his sources (which he claims to have been both written and oral in nature), there is a short description of Columba's virtues – his rigorous asceticism, hard work, wisdom, constant prayer and reading and so on. This concludes the Second Preface, though unlike the First, there is no explicit notice of this.

The Second Preface also includes a small amount of basic biographical information. It tells us that Columba founded monasteries (*Vir erat uitae uenerabilis et beatae memoriae monastorium pater et fundator*), but gives no indication of how many such monasteries he established, and neither here nor anywhere else in *VSC* is there a foundation narrative for any of them, including Iona. We are also told the names of his parents, that his father was Fedelmith son of Fergus, and his mother Ethne daughter of Mac Naue, that he left Ireland for Iona in his forty-second year, and that he laboured as an “island soldier” (*insulanus miles*) there for thirty-four years.

The use of the double preface, as noted above, is probably derived from the *Vita Sancti Martini* of Sulpicius Severus, and ultimately from *Vita Sancti Antoni* by Athanasius of Alexandria, both of them being very influential on the development of hagiography as a literary genre. The latter *vita* acquired a second preface when it was translated from Greek into Latin by Evagrius of Antioch, and it was this Latin version, of course, which became influential in western Christendom.<sup>50</sup> Adomnán's familiarity with both of these *vitae* was demonstrated by Brüning

<sup>49</sup> Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy*, p. 95.

<sup>50</sup> Head, “Introduction”, in Head (ed.) *Medieval Hagiography*, p. xvi.

in her classic study of 1917.<sup>51</sup> Adomnán's use of the double-preface device seems to be an attempt to place VSC in the first rank of European hagiographies, as Columba belonged among the first rank of saints.

### 3.2: Contents lists

As noted in Chapter 1, above, Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1 has a contents list for the first book only, introduced with *Nunc primi libri kapitulationes ordiuntur*.<sup>52</sup> The contents list is written continuously, in red, and the chapters are not numbered. The chapter headings given in the contents list do not always match those given at their respective chapters in Book I. Table 1 provides a comparison:

#### Chapter 2, Table 1: a comparison between the titles given in contents list to Book I, and in Book I itself, in Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1.

Note that editorial insertions given in the Andersons' edition have been omitted here where they have been derived from the later manuscripts. Note also that the book: chapter references are taken from the Andersons' edition for ease of reference. The chapters are not numbered in the manuscript itself.

<b>Ref.</b>	<b>Chapter heading given in contents list</b>	<b>Chapter heading in Book I</b>
I.1	<i>De uirtutum miraculis breuis narratio</i>	De uirtutum miraculis breuis narratio (p. 12)
I.2	<i>De sancto Finteno abbate Tailchani filio, quomodo de ipso sanctus Columba profetauit</i>	De sancto Finteno abbate filio Tailchani (p. 18)
I.3	<i>De Erneneo filio Craseni profetia eius</i>	De Erneneo filio Craseni sancti Columbae profetia (p. 24)
I.4	<i>De aduentu Cainnichi quomodo praenuntiauit</i>	De aduentu sancti Cainnichi abbatis de quo sanctus Columba profetaliter prenuntiauit (p. 26)
I.5	<i>De periculo sancti Colmani gente mocu Sailni sancto Columbae reuelato</i>	De periculo sancti Colmani episcopi mocu Sailni in mari iuxta insulum quae uocitatur Rechru (p. 28)
I.6	<i>De Cormaco nepote Letha</i>	De Cormaco (p. 28)
I.7	<i>Profetationes eius de bellis</i>	De bellorum fragoribus longe comisorum beati profetia uiri (p.

<sup>51</sup> Brüning, "Adamnans Vita Columbae und ihre Ableitungen", § 5, "Adamnan und seine Vorbilder", pp. 244 – 252. See also Sharpe, *Life*, p. 58.

<sup>52</sup> VSC, pp. 8 – 11.

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I.8		De bello Miathorum (p. 30)
I.9	<i>De regibus</i>	De filiis Aidani regis sancti Columbae profetia (p. 32)
I.10		De Domnallo filio Aido (p. 32)
I.11		De Scandlano filio Colmani (p. 34)
I.12		De duobus aliis regnatoribus qui duo nepotes Muiredachi uocitabantur Baitanus filius maic Erce et Echodius filius Domnail beati profetatio uiri (p. 36)
I.13		De Oingusio filio Aido Commani sancti profetia uiri (p. 36)
I.14		Profetia beati uiri de filio Dermiti regis qui Aidus Slane lingua nominatus est scotica (p. 38)
I.15		De rege Roderco filio Tothail qui in petra Cloithe regnauit beati uiri profetia (p. 38)
I.16	<i>De duobus pueris secundum uerbum eius in fine septimanae unus mortuus est</i>	De duobus pueris, quorum iuxta uerbum sancti in fine ebdomadis obiit, profetia sancti (p. 40)
I.17	<i>De Colcio filio Aido Draigniche, et de quodam occulto matris ipsius peccato</i>	De Colcio, Aido Draigniche filio, a nepotibus Fechureg orto, et de quodam occulto matris eius peccato, profetia sancti (p. 40)
I.17 <sup>53</sup>	<i>De signo mortis eiusdem uiri</i>	
I.18	<i>Profetia sancti Columbae de Laisrano hortulano</i>	De Laisrano hortulano homine sancto (p. 42)
I.19	<i>De ceto magno quomodo profetauit</i>	De ceto magno quomodo sanctus praesciens dixerat (p. 44)
I.20	<i>De quodam Baitano qui cum ceteris ad maritimum remigauit desertum</i>	De quodam Baitano, qui cum ceteris desertum marinum appetens enauigauerat, sancti profetia uiri (p. 46)
I.21	<i>De quodam Nemano ficto penetente qui postea secundum uerbum sancti carnem equae furtiuae comedit</i>	De Nemano quodam ficto penetente sancti profetatio uiri (p. 46)
I.22	<i>De illo infelici uiro qui cum sua genitrice pecauit</i>	De infelici quodam quo cum sua dormiuit genitrice (p. 48)
I.23	<i>De .I. uocali littera quae una in salterio defuit</i>	De .I. uocali littera (p. 50)

<sup>53</sup> This is presented as two chapters in the contents list, but is given as one chapter in Book I itself.

I.24	<i>De libro in ydriam cadente</i>	De libro in aquarium uas sanctus sicuti praedixerat cadente (p. 50)
I.25	<i>De corniculo atramenti inclinator</i>	De corniculo atramenti inaniter defusso (p. 52)
I.26	<i>De aduentu alicuius Aidani qui ieiunium soluit</i>	De alicuius aduentu hospitis quem sanctus praenuntiauit (p.52)
I.27	<i>De aliquo misero uiro ad fretum clamitabat mox morituro</i>	De aliquo miserabili uiri qui ultra supradictum clamitabat fretum (p 52)
I.28	<i>De ciuitate Romaniae partis super quam ignis de celo cecidit</i>	De romani iuris ciuitate igni sulfureo celitus prolapso combusta sancti uiri profetia (p. 54)
I.29	<i>De Laisrano filio Feradaig quomodo manacos probauit in labore</i>	De Laisrano filio Feradachi beati uisio uiri (p. 56)
I.30	<i>De Fechno Binc</i>	De Fechno sapiente quomodo penitens ad sanctum Columbam, ab eodem praenuntiatus, uenit (p. 56)
I.31	<i>De Cailtano Monaco</i>	De Cailtano eius monaco sancti profetatio uiri (p. 58)
I.32	<i>De duobis perigrinis</i>	De duobus perigrinis fratribus sancti prouida profetatio uiri (p. 60)
I.33	<i>De Artbranano sene quem in Scia insula babtizauit</i>	De quodam Artbranano sancto profetia uiri (p. 62)
I.34	<i>De nauiculae transmotatione iuxta stagnum Lochdae</i>	De nauicula noctu transmotata sancto praecipiente (p. 62)
I.35	<i>De Gallano filio Fachtni quem daemones rapuere</i>	De Gallano filio Fachtni qui erat in diocisi Colgion filii Cellaig (p. 64)
I.36		Beati profetatio uiri de Findchano prespitero illius monasterii fundatore quod scotice Artchain nuncupatur in Ethica terra (p. 64)
I.37		De quodam sancti solamine spiritus monacis in uia labroiosis miso (p. 66)
I.38	<i>De Lugidio claudio</i>	De quodam diuite qui Lugidius Clodus uocitabatur (p. 70)
I.39	<i>De Enano filio Gruthriche</i>	De Nemanio filio Gruthriche sancti profetia (p. 72) <sup>54</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Note the difference in the forms of the name given in the contents list and in Book I itself.



I.40	<i>De prespitero qui erat in Triota</i>	De quodam prespitero sancti uiri profetatio (p. 72)
I.41	<i>De Erco furunculo</i>	De Erco fure mocu Druidi qui in Coloso insula commanebat sancti profetizatio uiri (p. 74)
I.42	<i>De Cronano poeta</i>	De Cronano poeta sancti profetia uiri (p. 76)
I.43	<i>De Ronano filio Aido filii Colcen, et Colmano cane filio Aileni, profetia sancti</i>	De duobis tigernís sancti uaticinatio uiri, qui ambo motuís uulneribus disperierant (p. 76)
I.44		De Cronano episcipo (p. 80)
I.45		De Ernano prespitero sancti profetia uiri (p. 82)
I.46		De alicuius plebei familiola sancti profetia uiri (p. 82)
I.47		De quodam plebeo Goreo nomine filio Aidani sancti profetia uiri (p. 84)
I.48		De alia etiam ré quamlibet minore puto non esse tacenda sancti iucunda praescientia et profetizatio uiri (p. 86)
I.49		De bello quod in munitione Cethirni post multa commisum est tempora, et de quodam fonticulo eiusdem terrulae proximo, beati praescientia uiri (p. 88)
I.50		De diuersorum discretionem xeniorum sancto reuelata uiro diali gratia

As can be seen, there is only one instance (that of Book I.1) in which there is exact correspondence between the title as given in the contents list, and as given in Book I itself. The differences between the titles can be fairly minor rewordings or use of synonyms, but there are also some which give substantially more or different information in one version (typically the title in the contents list is more laconic than that given in Book I itself). More significantly, we have such instances as the story of Colcu: this is presented as two chapters in the contents list, which are combined to produce one chapter in Book I itself, I.17. Similarly, some of the chapters are not present at all in the contents list, as for instance the final seven chapters – an

important part of Stansbury's argument for the compilatory nature of *VSC*, in which different stages of its composition can be discerned.<sup>55</sup>

#### 4.1: Book I: Prophecy

##### 4.1.1: Book I: macro

The contents list is followed directly by a brief introduction to the Book I, which reads, *Incipit primi libri textus de profeticis reuelationibus* ("The text of the first book begins: Of prophetic revelations").<sup>56</sup> However, the following chapter, the first chapter of the book set aside for narratives about prophecies, is not about prophecy at all. Rather, it gives brief accounts of some major miracles ("properly" the matter of Book II), and visions (the subject of Book III). Adomnán concludes the chapter with his justification for placing these stories here, followed by another link sentence leading into I.2:

*Haec de sancti uiri híc ideo enarrata sunt uirtutibus ut auidor lector breuiter perscripta quasi dulciores quasdam praegustet dapes; quae tamen plenius in tribus inferius libris domino auxiliante enarrabuntur.*

[These things have here been related concerning the powers of the holy man, so that the more avid reader may savour, as a foretaste of a sweeter feast, what has been written in brief and, with the Lord's help, will be more fully related below, in three books.]<sup>57</sup>

This fronting of material with subject matter belonging to Books II and III to the start of Book I is not done only to whet the reader's appetite for more, as Adomnán himself writes, but also to bind the work together as a conceptual whole.<sup>58</sup> *VSC* lacks the conceptual unity that would be provided by a straightforward biographical arc (the structure employed by most early

<sup>55</sup> Stansbury, "Composition", pp. 161 – 164.

<sup>56</sup> *VSC*, pp. 12 – 13.

<sup>57</sup> *VSC*, pp. 18 – 19. The linking sentence is discussed below in the section on micro-structure.

<sup>58</sup> Sharpe, *Life*, pp. 249 – 250, nn. 25 - 36, provides references for the full versions later in the text that are "advertised" in I.1. The only story which is not told elsewhere in *VSC* is that about Oswald. The Andersons, *Life*, p. lvii, believe that this story, being told at some length, is "almost certainly" an afterthought; Sharpe, p. 250, n. 38 argues more plausibly that it is deliberately placed where it is "for special prominence."

hagiographies), and the connections that Adomnán draws between his three different books help to keep them focused on his central concern: the power and sanctity of Columba.

That this is a carefully-placed, integral part of the *Vita's* literary construction is confirmed in the Second Preface, as Adomnán follows the structure he laid out in the passage beginning *Huius igitur nostri Columbae* quoted above.

The final aspect of the structure of Book I at the “macro” level worth noting comes at the end of it. Adomnán gives a brief paragraph to round off the book about prophecies, which Dorbbéne in his manuscript sets apart visually with red infilling of the loop in the *H* of the first word, *Haec*.<sup>59</sup> Here, Adomnán claims that this book presents only a few of the very many examples of Columba's gift of prophecy, *de plurimís pauca*, a claim which again reinforces the overarching unity of *VSC*, since it echoes the claim about the plenitude of Columba's miracles made in the First Preface. He goes on to note that holy men, out of their great humility, will often try to conceal the things revealed to them by God, but that God allows some of these things to become known nevertheless, *uidelicet glorificare uolens glorificantes sé sanctos* (“inasmuch as he wishes to glorify the saints that glorify him”).<sup>60</sup> Book I concludes with the notice, *Huic primo libro híc inponitur terminus*.

One of the aspects of *VSC* which has received relatively little scholarly attention is narrative sequencing, or what might be called the “micro” level of the text's structure.<sup>61</sup> As we shall see in the discussions of narrative sequencing within each of *VSC's* books, the arrangement of the chapters within the books is by no means random, and this also applies to the link between Books I and II. In this concluding paragraph to Book I, Adomnán likens the relatively small number of Columba's prophecies which became known to other men to little drops of newly fermented wine dripping through the cracks of a vessel.<sup>62</sup> The first chapter following this, the first chapter of Book II is one of the most important in the whole of *VSC*, in which the saint, like Christ, turns water into wine. We shall discuss the importance of this miracle and its place within the structure of Book II below: here we should note that wine, and the holy significance thereof, is used to connect Books I and II, once more reinforcing the overarching unity of the

<sup>59</sup> *VSC*, I.50. Note that the Andersons' edition sets this paragraph apart from the text of I.50, which Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 52 does not.

<sup>60</sup> *VSC*, pp. 92 – 93.

<sup>61</sup> The grouping of narratives into sequences seldom occasions more than passing comment, as in Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints*, p. 11.

<sup>62</sup> An adaptation of Christ's image of the new wine in old wine skins, found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 9: 14 – 17; Mark 2: 21 – 22; Luke 5: 33 – 39), though meaning something quite different.

work. We should recall that this water-into-wine miracle was one of those included in the “foretaste” given in Book I.1; and note also that in the introductory sentence to Book II, Adomnán notes that miracles (the subject of Book II) are often accompanied by prophecies (the subject of Book I). This is indeed the case, and he comments upon it several times in Book II, as we shall see below.

#### 4.1.2: Book I: Narrative sequencing

Within the broad, overarching theme of a book (i.e. prophecy, for Book I), we sometimes find groups of stories connected by more specific concerns. These sequences are sometimes quite short, consisting of only two or three chapters. Here we shall look at all of the sequences to be found in Book I, in the order in which they appear.

##### 4.1.2.1: Narrative sequence I.2 – 6 (Holy and eminent men)

This sequence is introduced by Adomnán at the end of I.1. Following the forecasting of stories which will be related more fully in Books II and III, he moves on to the “proper” matter of Book I, prophecy. He concludes I.1 thus:

*Nunc mihi non indecenter uidetur beati uiri licet praepostero ordine profetationes effari quas de sanctis quibusdam et inlustribus uiris prolocutus est temporibus.*

[It seems to me not improper to tell now, though in inverted order, of the prophecies of the blessed man, which at various times he uttered concerning certain holy and eminent men.]<sup>63</sup>

The “inverted order” demonstrates immediately that VSC does not follow a chronological principle of organisation. The first story in the sequence, I.2, takes place in the immediate aftermath of Columba’s death, and concerns a prophecy he made that after his death a certain man would come to visit Iona. This is followed by another prophecy story set during Columba’s time in Durrow, in Ireland (I.3), and then three more from Columba’s time at Iona. The latter three are discussed in more detail below, since their common theme of sailing creates its own sequence, but the overriding unity of this first sequence, signposted by Adomnán, should not

<sup>63</sup> VSC, I.1.

be forgotten. Here, at the very start of Book I proper, we have a series of stories which clearly place Columba in the company of prominent holy men. As with the Kings sequence (discussed below), which shows Columba as a figure held in respect by, and interacting with, important secular political figures, this first sequence has the effect of emphasising Columba's status. Right from the start of *VSC*, we are shown the high status of Iona's founder by the prominence of the company he keeps.

In I.3, Columba visits Clonmacnoise, and proceeds through the crowd there surrounded by a sort of frame (*de lignis piramidem*), a term which as Clancy notes Adomnán uses in *DLS* II.4,7 to refer to the guard-rail around a saint's shrine. Clancy suggests that this may refer to the procession of Columba's relics, even though this is presented as an occasion in the saint's lifetime. This chapter thus forms a balanced pair with I.2: in the one Columba is dead, but is alive in his successors; in the other he is alive, but "is already treated with the reverence due the holy dead."<sup>64</sup>

#### 4.1.2.2: Narrative sequence I.4 – 6 (Sailing)

This represents a subsection of the first sequence, but deserves separate consideration because each of the chapters features characters sailing, and it thus forms a sequence of its own, running from I.4 – 6. In I.4, Columba prophesies that abbot Cainnech will sail to Iona, despite dangerous stormy conditions (sailing, danger); in I.5, he prophetically knows that Colmán is sailing to Iona through the whirlpool of Corryvreckan (sailing, danger); in I.6, he knows that Cormac, one of his own monks, is setting sail to find a more secluded retreat, but will fail to find it because one of his companions (through no fault of Cormac's) is there without permission from his own abbot (sailing).<sup>65</sup> A further commonality binds these three chapters together, since they are all set in the context of Iona's relationship with the wider ecclesiastical world: Cainnech was the abbot of Aghaboe; Colmán had a foundation at Lynally, near Durrow; and the unidentified abbot whose monk had joined Cormac without permission.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Clancy, "Personal, Political, Pastoral", p. 47.

<sup>65</sup> The final item in the penitential text *Synodus I S. Patricii*, ch. 34, states, *Et monachus inconsultu abbate uagulus decet uindicari*. ("Also a monk who goes wandering without consulting his abbot is to be punished."): Ludwig Bieler (ed. and trans.), *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1975), pp. 54 – 59, at pp. 58 – 59.

<sup>66</sup> For Cainnech of Aghaboe, see Pádraig Ó Riain, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), pp. 139 – 140. For Colmán, including his associations with Columba, see Ó Riain, pp. 203 – 205 (under Colmán Eala). As the Andersons note, *Life*, p. 28, n. 28) the only reference to his being a bishop is in this chapter title

#### 4.1.2.3: Narrative sequences I.7 – 16 (Battles, Kings, Prophecies of Death)

The second and most elaborate sequence is really a cluster of three related sequences. The central sequence runs from I.9 – 15, designated *De regibus* in the contents list, and is linked to two preceding chapters involving kings and battles. The two battle chapters make an obvious pair, while the narrative in I.9 refers back to the battle in I.8 twice, once to place the prophecy as having preceded the battle, and once to state that two of Áidán's sons died in it. The sequence is also extended at the end of the *De regibus* section proper, as there is a thematic link (prophecies of death) connecting the final chapters in the Kings sequence with the two following chapters.

Chapter 2, Table 2: Connected narrative sequences I.7 - 17

Ref.	Themes/ motifs	Characters (excluding Columba)	Other links
I.7	Kings, battle	Ainmure, Domnall son of mac Erce, Forcus, Echoid Láib	
I.8	Kings, battle	Diormit, Áidán	
I.9	Kings, succession, prophecy of reign	Áidán, Artuir, Echoid Find, Domingart	Refers to battle in I, 8
I.10	Kings, succession, prophecy of reign	Domnall son of Áid, his foster parents	
I.11	Kings, prophecy of reign, prophecy of death	Scandlán, Áid	
I.12	Kings, prophecy of death	Son of Laisrán Feradach, Diormit, Báitán son of Mac Erce, Echoid son of Domnall	
I.13	Kings, prophecy of reign, prophecy of death	Óingus Bronbachal	
I.14	Kings, prophecy of reign	Áid Sláne, Suibhne son of Colmán	
I.15	Kings, prophecy of reign, prophecy of death	Roderc son of Tóthal, Lugbe mocu Mí	
I.16	Prophecies of death	Meldán, his unnamed son, Glasderc, his son Ernán	
I.17	Prophecies of death	Colcu, his unnamed mother	

chapter, and is probably a slip, arising from confusion between him and Colmán mocu Loigse, who actually was a bishop.



As can be seen, far from a random assemblage of stories, what we have is rather a carefully and intricately structured work in which different clusters of stories are connected to one another, in much the same way that the simile of wine and the miracle of wine connected Books I and II, as discussed above.

#### 4.1.2.4: Narrative sequence I.18 – 20 (Sailing)

Following on from this elaborate sequence, we have another short, fairly simple sequence of narratives concerning sailing, again consisting of three chapters.

In I.18, Columba sends Trenán, one of his monks, on a mission to Ireland. The ship's crew for the journey is a man short, but the saint prophesies that they will be joined in Ireland by a companion, who after accompanying them on their journey in Ireland, will come back with the monks and live as a member of the monastery on Iona.

I.19 is structured around two separate voyages from Iona to Tiree, undertaken on the same day by Berach and Baithéne, and how both monks react firstly to Columba's prophecies about a great whale, and secondly to the appearance of the whale itself. Berach ignores the prophecy, and is terrified by the whale, he and his crew barely escaping with their lives. Baithéne acknowledges the prophecy, but trusting that both he and the whale are subject to God's authority, sails anyway. When the whale appears, he blesses it, and it dives to the depths, leaving the boat in peace to continue its journey.

In I.20, Báitán, seeks Columba's blessing as he sails in search of a more secluded refuge. Columba prophesies that he will fail to find one, and that a woman will one day drive sheep over his grave. And, indeed, Báitán, despite a long search, fails to find a suitable refuge, and instead settles as the *cellulae dominus* (“head of a small church”) in his native Derry. Shortly after his death, local laypeople fleeing from an enemy raid take refuge in the church, and in the course of doing so a woman drives her flock over Báitán's grave.

The presence of the second sequence prompts a question: why have two sailing sequences, rather than combining them to form one longer sequence? Indeed, the stories at I.6 and I.20 are rather similar, could they not have been combined to form one chapter with two incidents, much as two battles and the similar prophecies concerning them are combined in I.7? It may be that the similar structure of these two sequences contains the answers. As Table 3 demonstrates, there is a striking similarity between the two:

Chapter 2, Table 3. The structures of the Sailing sequences

Motif	Sailing sequence I	Sailing sequence II
1: Obstacle overcome	I.4 Cainnech's boat unaffected by storm	I.18 Trenán sails despite being a crewman short, finds companion
2: Danger at sea	I.5 Colmán and the whirlpool	I.19 Whale between Iona and Tiree
3: Would-be hermits	I.6 Cormac fails to find a secluded refuge	I.20 Báitán fails to find a secluded refuge.

This similarity is surely not coincidental. The two sequences have been arranged and placed as they are in order to give a balanced frame to the elaborate cluster of sequences discussed above: the Kings sequence and its extensions at its beginning and end being bookended by the two Sailing sequences. The deliberate structural balance here is strengthened by the direction of travel in the stories themselves: in Sailing sequence I, two of the three journeys are to Iona; in Sailing sequence II, all three are from Iona.

4.1.2.5: Narrative sequence I.21 – 22 (False penitents)

The Sailing sequence is followed by a pair of narratives concerning false penitents, which are significantly different, and cannot in any way be considered a doublet made up of two differing accounts of the same incident.

In the first, the saint travels to Hinba, an unidentified island with an Ionan daughter foundation.<sup>67</sup> There, he orders a relaxation in the dietary regime, including for the penitents. When Néman son of Cather (whose sin requiring penance in the first place is never revealed) refuses the offered indulgence, Columba addresses him thus:

*Ó Neman, a me et Baitheneo indultam non recipis aliquam refectiois indulgentiam. Erit tempus quo cum furacibus furituae carnem in silua manducabis equae.*

[Néman, you do not accept the indulgence in diet that I and Baithéne have granted. The time will come when in a wood, with thieves, you will chew the

<sup>67</sup> For a detailed discussion of some of the proposed locations for Hinba, see Sharpe, *Life*, pp. 306 – 308, n. 194. Sharpe argues, albeit tentatively, for Oronsay.

flesh of a stolen mare.]<sup>68</sup>

And, of course, this comes to pass.

It should be noted that Columba's reference to Baithéne in the passage quoted above is the latter's only appearance in the story. That he is presented as granting the indulgence jointly with the saint is an indication of his importance, and part of a thread running through VSC in which Baithéne is shown as a close companion of Columba.

The second story in this pair, I.22, is dealt with more fully in Chapter 4, below, so will be only briefly recounted here. In this story, Columba prophesies one day that a man guilty of a terrible sin will arrive at Iona in a few months, accompanied by Lugaid, an Ionan monk who knows nothing of the man's sin. When Lugaid and the unnamed sinner duly arrive, Columba sends Diormit to the shore to prevent the sinner from setting foot on the island. On hearing that the sinner intends to refuse food until he has met with Columba, the saint goes down to the harbour to speak with him. On the way, Baithéne (once more shown as Columba's close companion) quotes Scripture in support of accepting the man's penance, at which Columba reveals that the *miser* is guilty of both fratricide and incest with his mother. The sinner vows that he is willing to undertake any penance imposed upon him, and Columba tells him that God might forgive him his sins if he endures penance among the Britons for twelve years and never returns to Ireland, though he declares to all present that the man is a son of perdition (*Hic homo filius est perditionis*), and prophesies that not only will he fail to perform the promised penance, he will also shortly return to Ireland, where his enemies will kill him. This all comes to pass.

This sequence is too short to contain much in the way of intricate narrative patterning, but with respect to their ordering, it may be relevant that in respect to the length of the stories, the nature of the sins and the severity of the consequences, there is an escalation from I.21 to I.22. Baithéne is present as a character in both stories. This, in conjunction with I.22 being set on Iona, provides a link to the first story of the following sequence in terms of character and setting.

#### 4.1.2.6: Narrative sequence I.23 – 25 (Books and writing)

Books were central to the liturgical and intellectual life of monasteries, and the production of books was an important part of a monastery's activities, particularly those of a major monastic centre such as Iona. Columba himself has a traditional reputation as a scribe: most famously,

<sup>68</sup> VSC, I.21.

the *Cathach* is traditionally attributed to him, and Adomnán himself lists writing as among the labours which Columba could barely go an hour without performing, along with praying and reading.<sup>69</sup> There is a sequence concerning books copied out by Columba in Book II.8 – 9, some other manuscripts copied out by him are used as associative relics to effect a miracle in II.44, and in the final chapter of *VSC*, the saint is shown copying out a psalter almost right up until the moment of his death.<sup>70</sup>

As such, it is not surprising to find that stories centred on books and writing are used to propagate Columba's power and sanctity in *VSC*, both here and in the second Books sequence mentioned above. As we might expect for stories so closely connected to monastic activity, all three stories in this sequence are set at Iona. In this, and the presence of Baithéne in the first of them, the sequence is connected to the second story of the preceding pair. It also connects to the following story, as we shall see below.

In I.23, which is a very short chapter, Baithéne comes to the saint with a psalter he has copied out, and requests that one of the other monks be assigned to go through it and emend any mistakes (itself a useful insight into the processes of early medieval book production). Columba, however tells him that this will not be necessary, since the psalter has been copied perfectly, with the exception of one instance of the vowel *I* being omitted. And indeed, when the psalter has been read through, this is found to be the case.

Here Baithéne is shown to be a near-perfect scribe, but still dependent on Columba's guidance and leadership: a good candidate for Columba's eventual successor.

In I.24, while sitting at the monastery hearth, Columba warns the young Lugbe moccu Min, who is reading nearby, to be careful, for the saint believes that Lugbe will drop the book he is reading into a water jug. And this is indeed what happens: Lugbe stands up to attend to some work, and the book, which he had tucked under his arm, falls into a water jug.

I.25 is similar in some respects. Columba is in his hut, when he hears a man shouting across the strait. Columba remarks that the man, whose name and business in Iona are never revealed, is clumsy, and will spill the saint's ink-horn. Hearing this, Diormit, Columba's *ministrator*, stands at the door of the hut to await the guest's arrival and protect the ink-horn; however, he is

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<sup>69</sup> Timothy O'Neill, "Columba the Scribe", in Cormac Bourke (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), pp. 69 – 79; *VSC*, Second Preface, pp. 6 – 7.

<sup>70</sup> *VSC*, III.23. Columba breaks off at the end of Psalm 34 (Vulgate 33): 10, instructing his successor Baithéne to carry on where he has left off. The use of the manuscripts as associative relics in II.44 is discussed in Chapter 6, below.

soon called away on other business, and in his absence the guest arrives, and knocks over the ink-horn with the edge of his garment as he comes forward to kiss the saint.

I.26 is not part of the Books and Writing sequence, but it is connected to it by centring on the saint's prophecy of the arrival of a guest. Here, Columba says on a Tuesday that their customary Wednesday fast will be relaxed the following day, as a guest will arrive. This indeed happens the following morning, as a guest, Áidán son of Fergno, arrives, and the fast is relaxed. That this story is linked to the previous one in Adomnán's mind is clear not only from the structural similarities, but from the way in which Áidán is introduced: *Nam mane eadem iii. feria alius ultra fretum clamitabat proselytus Adianus nominue filius Fergnoi...* [emphasis added].

The relaxation of the fast recalls the dietary indulgence allowed to the monks and penitents at Hinba in Book I.21. These two short sequences and the final related story therefore constitute another cluster: bookended by stories featuring dietary permissiveness, which may perhaps hint at some reservations on Adomnán's part about more extreme ascetic practices, and linked together as discussed above.<sup>71</sup> We can thus see Adomnán deftly balancing quite disparate material in the construction of coherent, and not at all random, narrative sequences.

#### 4.1.2.7: Narrative sequences I.31 – 34 (Deaths of good men, Picts)

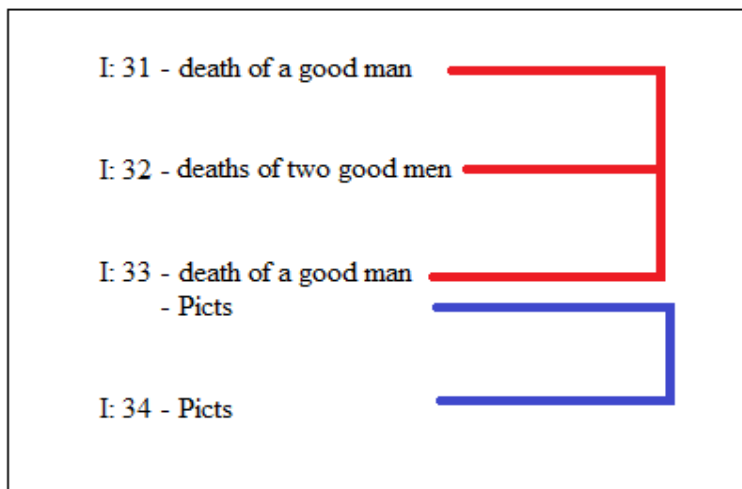
In I.31, we are told of how Columba summoned one of his monks, Caitán, who was at Loch Awe, to come to him at Iona. When he obeys, Columba reveals that he knows that Caitán is shortly to die, and has been summoned so that he will be able to end his life in Columba's presence.<sup>72</sup> Following this, in I.32, two brothers arrive at Iona with the intention of being pilgrims there for a year, but decide, upon being pressed by the saint, to become monks. Thereupon, Columba reveals that they will die within the month, having in that short space of time completed exemplary Christian service worth many years of labour. And, indeed, this comes to pass, the two brothers dying happily within the month.<sup>73</sup> This is followed by two stories centred on contact with Picts: the baptism of the aged and naturally good pagan warrior Artbranán in Skye (the advance of the Christian faith), which ends with an onomastic note about the burn in which the Pict was baptised; and the story of Columba having prophetic

<sup>71</sup> Cormac's repeated failures to find a suitable "desert in the ocean" (I. 6, II.42), the relief granted to weary monks (I.29, I.37) and the story of Lugne and his wife in Rathlin (II.41) are other stories which may also indicate this.

<sup>72</sup> VSC, I.31.

<sup>73</sup> VSC, I.32.

foreknowledge of an attempted attack on his party when in Pictland (hostility to the saint, and implicitly, to the Christian faith), and prudently removing their boat to another hamlet at night before the attack comes to pass.<sup>74</sup> The Pictish stories make a good narrative pair, linked not only by the interaction between Columba and Pictish people (one positive and receptive, one hostile and violent), but also by the use of boats: Artbranán arrives in one, and Columba has his own one moved – both are designated *naiculae*. So these two make a short sequence, but I.33 also links back into the previous sequence in being about the death of a good man. The sequence can be represented visually thus:



(Fig. 1. Narrative sequence I.31 - 34)

#### 4.1.2.8: Narrative sequence I.38 – 40 (Sinful priests and death *cum meritrice*)

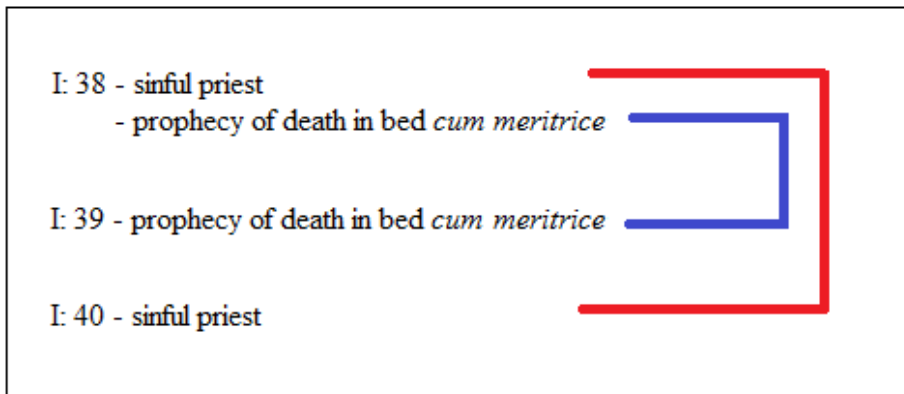
I.38 and I.39 are very similar stories, both featuring wicked men whom Columba prophesies will die in bed *cum meritrice*.<sup>75</sup> There are sufficient differences between the stories, however, to suggest that this is not simply a doublet, rooted in one original story that has diverged to form two. For one thing, the wicked men are both named (respectively a rich cleric named Lugaid the Lamé and Nemán, seemingly a layman); for another, the causes of their deaths are also different (choking and beheading, respectively). However, there seems to be more to the sequence than simply the placing together of two structurally similar stories with verbal echoes of each other. I.40, following on from the death of Nemán, finds Columba once more in Ireland,

<sup>74</sup> VSC, I.33 – 34.

<sup>75</sup> VSC, I.38 – 39. See Chapter 4, § 2.1.2, below, for a discussion on these stories and the phrase *cum meritrice*.



while a priest with a reputation as a holy man performs the mass. Columba, however, knows that the priest is hiding a great sin, and challenges him on this, prompting him to confess and repent.<sup>76</sup> Thus, we can expand the sequence from two chapters to three, with two stories about sinful clerics bracketing one about a sinful layman, to which the first sinful cleric story is thematically linked. For the sake of clarity, the sequence can again be visually represented thus, with the coloured lines indicating the themes connecting the stories in the sequence:



(Fig. 2. Narrative sequence I.38 - 40)

## 4.2: Book II: Miracles of Power<sup>77</sup>

### 4.2.1: Book II: macro

Book I one closes with the phrase *Huic primo libro hic inponitur terminus* (“Here an end is put to the first book”),<sup>78</sup> followed immediately by *Nunc sequens orditur liber de uirtutum miraculís*

<sup>76</sup> VSC, I.40.

<sup>77</sup> This term calls for some discussion. Adomnán describes his second book as, “*liber de uirtutum miraculís*”, which the Andersons translate as “book concerning miracles of power” (pp. 94 – 95) (Reeves: “wonderful miracles”). Likewise, in the Second Preface, he says of the second book that it is about “*diuinus per ipsum uirtutes effetas*”, which the Andersons render “divine miracles effected through him” (pp. 6 – 7). In II.19, we have the phrase “*miraculi... uirtus*” (Andersons, “power of miracle”), pp. 120 – 121. Sharpe, *Life*, renders these as “miracles of power” (p. 154), “divine miracles worked through him” (p. 105) and “power of a miracle” (p. 169), respectively. While it could be argued that it could equally be translated “miracles of virtue”, stressing the moral qualities of the man through whom they were performed, I do not think this is necessary, and will follow the Andersons’ usage. Note that *OLD* gives sense 5c for *uirtūs* as “potency, efficacy or sim[ilar]”; *DMLBS* has the following for *virtus*: “4 power to produce some effect, potency”, “7 manifested divine power, miracle”; *MLLM*, for *virtus* “1. Pouvoir de faire des miracles – power to perform miracles – Macht, Wunder zul vollbringen”, “2. prodige, miracle – miracle – Wunder”, “6. force, viguer – strength, force, vigour – Kraft, Stärke”.

<sup>78</sup> VSC, pp. 92 – 93.

*quae plerumque etiam profetalis praescientia comitatur* (“Now begins the next book, concerning miracles of power, which are often accompanied by prophetic foreknowledge”).<sup>79</sup>

As discussed in Chapter 1, Book II is not given a contents list in Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, but it does have one in the B manuscripts.

As discussed above, wine provides a thematic link between the explicit to Book I and the first miracle in Book II. While in the explicit to Book I, it was used to provide a simile for the plenitude and fame of Columba's prophecies, however much his humility prevented him from propagating them himself, the wine in the opening chapter to Book II is real wine. Here, the young Columba, while still in Ireland, miraculously turned water into wine when there was none available for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

The placement of this story at the very beginning of Book II is no accident. Not only is it a major, Christ-like, miracle, putting Columba into very exalted company indeed, it is also one of the miracles featured in the “foretaste of a sweeter feast” in I.1. Furthermore, this is presented as Columba's first miracle, as it had been Christ's at the wedding feast at Cana of Galilee (John 2: 1 – 12):

*Hoc itaque protum uirtutis documentum Christus dominus per suum declarauit discipulum, quod in eadem ré initium ponens signorum in Cana Galileae operatus est per semet ipsum.*

[And so Christ the Lord manifested through his disciple, as a first evidence of power, this that he had performed through himself in Cana of Galilee, when he made the same thing the beginning of his signs.]<sup>80</sup>

That this story is very much an introduction to Book II, and not merely the first chapter in it, is signified by its closing sentence:

*Huius inquam libelli quasi quaedam lucerna inlustret exordium, quod per nostrum Columbam diale manifestatum est miraculum, ut deinceps transeamus ad caetera quae per ipsum ostensa sunt uirtutum miracula.*

[Let this miracle of God that was shown through our Columba illumine like a lantern the opening of this book, so that we may pass forward to the other

<sup>79</sup> VSC, pp. 94 – 95.

<sup>80</sup> VSC, II.1.

miracles of power that were shown through him.]]<sup>81</sup>

Thereafter there is little requiring comment about the macro structure of Book II, until the end of the Book, with the exception of several comments by Adomnán about stories which combine prophecy and miracle, and which problematise the tripartite structure of *VSC* as a whole. However, since these will be dealt with in greater detail below, we will pass over them for now, and conclude this section on the macro structure of Book II by looking at the book's end.

Following the final miracle, in chapter II.46, there is a brief notice announcing the end of the book, and restating that much which could have been recorded has been omitted:

*Hic secundus de uirtutum miraculís finiendus est liber, in quo animaduertere lector debet quod etiam de conperitís in eo multa propter legentium euitandum praetermissa sint fastidium.*

*Finitur secundus liber.*

[Here must end the second book, of miracles of power; in which the reader should observe that even of the known instances many have been omitted in it, in order to avoid cloying the appetite of those that read.

The second book ends.]]<sup>82</sup>

This closing statement to Book II can be compared to a similar one in the First Preface:

*Sed et hoc lectorem ammonendum putauimus quod de beatae memoriae uiro plura studio breuitatis etiam memoria digna a nobís sint praetermissa, et quasi pauca de plurimís ob euitandum fastidium lectorum sint craxta.*

[We have thought that the reader should be warned of this also, that for the sake of brevity, we have left out many things concerning the man of blessed memory, even things that were worthy of remembrance; and that to avoid cloying the appetite of those who shall read, only a few things out of very many have been written down.]]<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> *VSC*, II.1.

<sup>82</sup> *VSC*, pp. 180 – 181. As discussed in Chapter 1, above, this final sentence is written in Greek characters in the Schaffhausen manuscript, a distinctive way of visually marking the literary structure of the work.

<sup>83</sup> *VSC*, First Preface.

Again, the use of repeated comments on the nature and form of the work at key divisions, clear divisions in the structure of the work, reinforce that this is a carefully composed and deliberately structured literary production, something which the scribe emphasised with his choices about presenting the text in his manuscript.

#### 4.2.2: Book II: Narrative sequencing

##### 4.2.2.1: Narrative sequence II.2 – 3 (Crops)

The first sequence in Book II is a fairly simple one, consisting of two stories, both of which concern crops, and are used to illustrate Columba's concerns for the physical wellbeing of people. In the first, II.2, there is a tree near the monastery at Durrow which produces a crop of fruit (*fructus* – it is not specified what kind of fruit), which is abundant, but extremely bitter. Prompted by the complaints of the inhabitants, Columba goes to the tree, raises his hand (a gesture often mentioned in the miracle stories) and blesses the tree, turning its fruit very sweet (*dulcissima*). The story is open to a fairly straightforward allegorical interpretation: a person may perform abundant works, but without God's blessing (mediated, of course, by the church), they will not be properly fruitful, and useful.

In II.3, Columba's blessing ensures that a man is able to grow a miraculous crop of barley, sown in the middle of summer and harvested at the beginning of August, after the monastery had taken his previous crop of wattles. This story is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, below, but here it is worth considering as teaching a lesson about the mutually beneficial relationship between the monastery on the one hand, and the local community on the other. As well as being a miracle story which demonstrates Columba's sanctity through his power, it depicts a society in which the monastic community feels entitled to help itself to a farmer's crops, but is also obliged to give due compensation, and extends its work of spiritual care to the lay community.<sup>84</sup>

These stories make a simple pair, two miracles involving crops, the physical sustenance of people, to show not only Columba's sanctity, but his care for people, and the role of his church in the lay community: providing care, and owed respect.

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<sup>84</sup> There may also be an echo of Christ's Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13, in which the gospel is represented as seed which produces an excellent crop when it falls on good soil (i.e. is given to those who hear and understand it).

#### 4.2.2.2: Narrative sequence II.4 - 7 (Healing objects)

Healing miracles are relatively uncommon in *VSC* (as well as the *vitae* of Patrick and Brigit) compared to Continental hagiographies, but following the pair of chapters about crops, we have a sequence of four healing narratives.<sup>85</sup> Like the stories about crops, these show Columba performing miracles that not only confirm his own sanctity, but also bring direct benefit to others. Columba is not himself present at any of the healings, all of the cures are effected through some object he has blessed. Rather than give a synopsis of each of the four chapters, the main points of comparable information will be laid out in Table 4.

Chapter 2, Table 4: Narrative sequence II.4 – 7

Ref.	Recipient of miracle	Type of illness/ injury	Object and operation
II.4	Many people and animals in Ireland	Pest borne by a cloud	Bread blessed by the saint to be dipped in water, the water to be sprinkled on the pest's victims
II.5	Maugin, a holy virgin, daughter of Daimén	Broken hip sustained in a fall	Box blessed by the saint to be dipped in water, the water to be sprinkled on her hip
II.6	Many sick people at Druim Cete	Illnesses of many (unspecified) kinds	Touching the hem of his cloak; anything ( <i>aut alicuius rei</i> ) such as salt or bread, blessed by the saint, dipped in water <sup>86</sup>
II.7	Sister and foster-mother of Colcu son of Cellach	Severe inflammation of the eyes	<i>Petra salis</i> . <sup>87</sup> No indication as to how it was used.

<sup>85</sup> Bruce, *Prophecy, Miracles, Angels and Heavenly Light?*, p. 32.

<sup>86</sup> Though not using an object as such, this chapter also says that others were healed by him extending his hand, or by being sprinkled with water blessed by him. Many of the miracle stories in Book II feature Columba raising his hand.

<sup>87</sup> The Andersons translate this “rock-salt”, as indeed do most editors and translators (though Reeves prefers “lump of salt”. Sharpe, however, contends that rock-salt was probably not mined in Ireland until the nineteenth century, and favours sea-salt moulded into lumps or blocks. See Sharpe, *Life*, pp. 321 – 322, n. 228.

As can be seen, many of the objects were to be used in conjunction with water, a fact to which we shall return when we look at the following sequence. These miracles, and the use of blessed objects in them, will be considered in more detail in Chapter 6, below.

#### 4.2.2.3: Narrative sequence II.7 – 11 (Fire and water)

This sequence not only follows the previous one, but also overlaps with it. In II.7, the village in which the two healed women lives is destroyed by fire, and their house is wholly burnt up, aside from the portion of the wall and pegs from which the *petra salis* was hung. This narrative, then, which rounds off a sequence of four stories concerned with healing objects, also opens a sequence concerning objects connected with the saint being miraculously preserved from damage.

Following the story with fire, we have two short narratives in II.8 - 9, in which manuscripts written out by Columba fall into rivers (the Boyne and an unnamed river in Leinster, respectively), but after some time are recovered, dry and totally unharmed. More wondrous still, on both occasions other volumes, not copied by the saint, fell into the water as well, and were soaked and rotted by the water. We are given an insight into Adomnán's compilatory and editorial methods here: for he tells us that similar miracles are reliably said to have taken place on several occasions, but that he has included the second of his stories (that set in Leinster) because it is especially well evidenced. He claims that he has heard the story from several reliable, honest men who have seen the book themselves, and he also names the manuscript's owner as a Pictish priest called Iógenón.

The care Adomnán has taken in structuring his work can be seen in the placing of these stories. Introducing II.8 he writes:

*Aliud miraculum estimo non tacendum quod aliquando factum est per contrarium elimentum.*

[I think that another miracle should not be omitted, that was once performed in connection with the contrary element.]<sup>88</sup>

This refers back to the previous story, the contrary element of the water that did not damage the manuscript(s) being the fire that did not damage the *petra salis*. In the same way, after asserting

<sup>88</sup> VSC, I.8.



the truth of the story about Iógenán's manuscript, he closes II.9 by once more pointing out the fire-water dynamic:

*Haec duo quamlibet in rebus paruós peracta et per contraria ostensa elimenta, ignem scilicet et aquam, beati testantur honorem uiri et quanti et qualis meriti apud habeatur deum.*

[These two things, although performed in small matters, and shown in contrary elements, namely fire and water, bear witness to the honour of the blessed man, and prove how greatly and how highly he is esteemed by God.]<sup>89</sup>

Fire and water make a rather obvious contrasting pair for miracles, and it may be that no model need be sought for setting them together. However, Adomnán may have had in mind a passage from the Gospel of Luke, in which Christ cites two narratives from the Old Testament to illustrate the sudden nature of the advent of the Kingdom of God, using the flood (water) and destruction of Sodom (fire) as his examples:

*Et sicut factum est in diebus Noe ita erit et in diebus Filii hominus edebant et bibebant uxores deucebant et dabantur ad nuptias usque in diem qua intravit Noe in arcam et venit diluuium et perdidit omnes.*

*Similiter sicut factum est in diebus Loth edebant et bibebant emebant et vendebant plantabant aedificabant qua die autem exiit Loth a Sodomis pluit ignem et sulphur de caelo et omnes perdidit.*

[And as it happened in the days of Noah, so also shall it happen in the days of the Son of Man. They ate and they drank, they married wives and were given in marriage, until the day on which Noah went into the ark and the flood came and all were destroyed.

It happened in the same manner in the days of Lot. They ate and they drank, they bought and they sold, they planted and they built. And in the day on which Lot went forth from Sodom, fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and all were destroyed.]<sup>90</sup>

<sup>89</sup> VSC, I.9.

<sup>90</sup> Luke 17: 26 – 29. Translation mine.

Adomnán continues with water miracles in II.10, and explicitly comments upon doing so:

*Et quia paulo superius aquati facta est mentio elimenti silere non debemus etiam alia miracula quae per sanctum dominus eiusdem in re licet diuersis temporibus et locis creaturae peregit.*

[And because just above reference has been made to the element of water, we ought to mention also other miracles, which the Lord performed through the saint in connection with the same substance, although in different times and places.]<sup>91</sup>

This comment, together with those cited above show very clearly that Adomnán was very consciously constructing a sequence of connected narratives in this section of Book II.

In this chapter, he recounts how Columba was in Ardnamurchan when two parents took their infant son to him to be baptised. Since there was no convenient water source, Columba knelt and prayed at a nearby rock, which soon brought forth a gush of water. This has obvious echoes of Moses bringing forth water from a rock in the desert (Exodus 17: 5 - 6; Numbers 20: 10 - 11. Adomnán finishes the chapter by saying that the spring is still there, and is still known by Columba's name.

Following on from this, in II.11, Adomnán tells how Columba was in an unspecified part of Pictland (*in Pictorum provincia*) when he heard of a local well which the pagan Picts venerated. The waters of this well would bring some sort of affliction to whoever drank or washed in it - leprosy, blindness or some such misfortune.<sup>92</sup> Columba, despite the expectations of the local pagan *magi* (making their first appearance as the saint's stock pagan antagonists) is unharmed by the water after he raises his hand over it, and then with his companions washes in and drinks from it. The demons in the well depart from it, and it thereafter becomes a healing well, an example of the well-known phenomenon of pagan holy wells becoming Christianised.<sup>93</sup>

The final water miracle thus brings us back to healing, and so allows us to see II.4 - 10 as a cluster of short, interrelated sequences. The structure of this cluster is represented in Table 5:

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<sup>91</sup> VSC, II.10.

<sup>92</sup> This does prompt the question of why the pagans would continue to use the waters of the well at all. If Adomnán (or his source) is not simply confused on this point, it may be that the waters were deliberately used with malignant intent, as a kind of supernatural poison. It may also be that Adomnán wishes to draw an even starker contrast between the previously demonic well and the current, sanctified one. Either way, the story as it stands paints a rather puzzling and probably quite distorted picture of Pictish pre-Christian cult practice.

<sup>93</sup> There is no mention here of the spring becoming a Columban cult well, but there a few wells named after him in the former Pictland, <http://www.saintsplaces.gla.ac.uk/saint.php?id=64> (accessed 02/08/2016).

Chapter 2, Table 5 – Narrative sequence II.4 - 11

Ref.	Miracle type	Featured “element”	Holy object(s) present?	Adomnán's notes
II.4	Healing	Water	Present	
II.5	Healing	Water	Present	
II.6	Healing	Water	Present	
II.7	Healing	Fire	Present	
II.8	Manuscript preserved	Water	Present	Comment links to previous chapter
II.9	Manuscript preserved	Water	Present	Comment links to previous two chapters
II.10	Miraculous flow of water	Water	Not present	Comment on previous references to water; refers forward to next chapter
II.11	Exorcism, healing	Water	Not present	

4.2.2.4: Narrative sequence II.12– 14 (Storms, Cainnech)

If the previous cluster of narratives is rather complex, this one is much more simple on the surface, but gives an important insight into Adomnán's method of composition. It consists of three chapters with two themes, overlapping in the second chapter of the sequence.

In II.12, Columba is in a ship that gets caught in a fierce storm. Initially, he tries to help the sailors bailing water from the ship, but they tell him that they would benefit more from his prayers. On hearing this, the saint stands in the prow of the ship with his arms outstretched, and prays to God for deliverance. Upon his doing so, the storm is immediately stilled, prompting all present to glorify God in the saint (*glorificauerunt deum in sancto et praedicabili uiro*).

The title (*De alio eius in mari simili periculo*, “Of another similar danger to him on the sea”) and opening phrase (*Alio quoque in tempore*, “Also at another time”) of the following chapter, II.13, clearly link it to II.12, showing again that Adomnán's arrangement of his narratives is conscious and deliberate. Here, Columba is once more caught in a storm at sea, and his companions once more implore him to pray for them. He answers that it is not he, but rather

Abbot Cainnech, who is to pray for them that day.<sup>94</sup> Cainnech, many miles away in his own monastery, prophetically knows about this, and interrupts the dinner he is about to start eating, rushing to the oratory to intercede for Columba and his companions – and does so in such haste that he has only one shoe on. When the sea is duly calmed, Columba addresses the distant Cainnech thus:

*Nunc cognoui Ó Cainneche quod deus tuam exaudierit precem. Nunc valde nobis proficit tuus ad ecclesiam uelox cum uno calciamento cursus.*

[Now, Cainnech, I know that God has heard your prayer. Now your swift running to the church, wearing one shoe, greatly helps us].<sup>95</sup>

Finally, in II.14, we have another story about Cainnech. Cainnech had visited Iona, and is now returning to Ireland, not realising that he has left his staff behind on the island (again leaving something behind, as he had previously done with his shoe). The staff is found and given to Columba, who takes it with him to the oratory (as Cainnech had gone to his own oratory in the previous chapter), where he remains in prayer for a long time. Cainnech, meanwhile has realised that he has forgotten his staff, and when the ship arrives at Oídech he kneels on the shore in prayer.<sup>96</sup> There, to his great surprise, he finds the staff, which has been divinely transported to him.

What immediately strikes the reader is that II.13 does not seem to belong in Book II at all. This book is supposed to be about Columba's miracles, but the stilling of the storm is effected through Cainnech's prayers, not Columba's. Adomnán closes the chapter with:

*In hoc itaque tali miraculo amborum ut credimus oratio cooperata est sanctorum.*

[In this so great miracle, the prayers of both the saints worked, we believe, together.]<sup>97</sup>

<sup>94</sup> For more information on Cainnech, see his entry under, “Cainneach of Aghaboe” in Ó Riain, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints*, pp. 138 – 140.

<sup>95</sup> VSC, II.13.

<sup>96</sup> Probably in southern Islay. See Sharpe, *Life*, pp. 324 – 325, n. 242.

<sup>97</sup> VSC, II.13.

This is the only indication that Columba played any active role in the miracle at all. Taking the story on its own, without Adomnán's editorial aside, it seems that Columba's role is restricted entirely to prophetic knowledge of Cainnech's actions, and thus the story “should” (if we follow Adomnán's tripartite schema more strictly than he does himself) be placed not in Book II at all, but in Book I. However, while the story may seem misplaced according to the macro-structure of VSC, it is very well placed indeed according to the micro-structure of Book II. It is the hinge of a three-chapter sequence, as it refers thematically back to II.12 (danger at sea) and forward to II.14 (Cainnech and Columba helping each other in a long-distance miracle). Here, then, we have an example of the importance of constructing narrative sequences and clusters to Adomnán's method of composition, as the construction of the sequence overrides the rigid imposition of the tripartite structure.

#### 4.2.2.5: Narrative sequence II.16 – 18 (Demons, milk, blood)

The three chapters from II.16 – 18 form another sequence of three stories, with the central one linking to the first and second. In this sequence, however, unlike the previous one, all of the stories are miracle narratives proper.

In II.16, a young monk called Colmán walks by Columba's writing hut carrying a bucket of milk, and asks the saint to bless it. When Columba does so, the bucket shakes violently, casting off its lid and spilling most of the milk. Columba tells Colmán that he had forgotten to bless the bucket before the milk was poured into it, and so had failed to drive out a devil (*daemon*) that was lurking in it. The demon having been driven out by Columba's blessing, and the milk spilt in the process, the saint bids Colmán bring him the bucket, that he may bless it. When he does so, the bucket is miraculously refilled with milk.

II.17 likewise features a milk bucket and demons. In this chapter, Columba arbitrates in a dispute between two peasants while staying at the house of a prominent layman called Foirtgern. The nature of the dispute is not revealed, neither does Adomnán tell us who Columba judged to be in the right. One of the disputants, named in the chapter heading as Silnán, is known to be a *maleficus*, which seems to be a rather less powerful kind of magical practitioner than the *magi* whom Columba encounters when in Pictland. Knowing of Silnán's abilities, Columba commands that he draw milk from a nearby bull, using his diabolical arts (*arte diabolica*). In an explanatory aside, Adomnán writes that this was done not to confirm Silnán's sorceries (*maleficia*), but to confound them in the presence of the crowd. When the bucket, seemingly filled with milk, is brought to Columba, he blesses it, and reveals that the liquid it

contains is not milk at all, but blood, which the deceit of demons (*daemonum fraude*) has made to resemble milk. The blood then immediately changes to its proper colour. Thereupon the bull, which was wasting away and sickly, is sprinkled with water blessed by the saint, and recovers its health.<sup>98</sup>

Finally, in II.18, we have the story of Lugne mocu Min being healed by Columba. Lugne, who appears as a character several times in *VSC*, comes to Columba complaining of frequent nosebleeds. The saint presses Lugne's nostrils together with his right hand, and in so doing heals the young man so that he never again suffers from nosebleeds.

This miracle, rather low-key in comparison to many others in Book II, rounds off the sequence, which we can see progresses from a miracle story involving demons and a milk bucket, to one involving both of those elements and blood, to one involving blood: another neatly constructed triptych.

#### 4.2.2.6: Narrative sequence II.19 – 21 (Animals)

This short sequence recalls the healing miracles at the start of Book II, in that the miracles presented here could be broadly described as “social miracles”, benefiting laypeople in a material way.

In II.19, there are two short stories, both featuring catches of fish. In the first, Columba is in Meath, in the company of some fishermen who between them have caught only five fish. The saint tells them to cast their nets once more, for the Lord had provided a great fish. They do so, and are rewarded with a great salmon. Similarly, in the second, Columba is beside Lough Key, and dissuades his companions from going fishing, telling them that there will be no fish to be found for the next two days. Instead, he says, they should go on the third day and cast their net in the River Boyle, where they will find two great salmon.

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<sup>98</sup> David Woods argues that Adomnán misunderstood a written source which featured a *bos masculosus* (“pock-marked bovine”) and not a *bos masculus* (“male bovine”), and therefore introduced the whole issue of demons and sorcery both to make sense of this and to provide the saint with a victory in a contest against Silnán. As with some of Woods' other work which also postulates that Adomnán misread or misunderstood his source material, this seems to me to be plausible, but it has little bearing on this study, which is more concerned with what Adomnán wanted to convey. While Woods may be right in identifying earlier forms of the materials which Adomnán presents to us, my interest is in Adomnán's own text. In order to understand Adomnán's aims and motivations, it is necessary to accept his text in good faith, to engage with Adomnán on his own terms and to work from the assumption that the text means what Adomnán thought it meant. See David Woods, “St Columba, Silnán, and the 'male bovine' (VC 2.17)”, in *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 59.2 (2008), pp. 696 – 702.



A few things are worth commenting upon here. Firstly, there is the obvious resemblance to the (also two) miraculous catches of fish recorded in the Gospels (Luke 5: 1 – 11 and John 21: 1 – 14), again elevating Columba by attributing to him Christ-like miracles. Secondly, we can once more see a structure of escalation within the two-story sequence: the second story has both a more elaborate setup, and a larger catch. Thirdly, it is interesting that in both of these stories, as well as later, in II.37, the fish caught are always salmon of extraordinary size.

Finally, we again see an apparent overriding of the tripartite structure of *VSC*. Adomnán concludes II.19, by stating:

*In his duabus memoratis piscationibus miraculi apparet uirtus et profetica simul praescientia comitata. Pro quibus sanctus et socii deo grates eximias reddiderunt.*

[In these two above-mentioned catches of fish there appears the power of miracle, which prophetic knowledge also accompanying it. And for them the saint and his companions rendered very great thanks to God.]<sup>99</sup>

As the Andersons note, despite appearing like this in all of the manuscripts, the final sentence seems to be misplaced, and would more naturally follow from the ending of the second miracle, where the companions have drawn the salmon to land.<sup>100</sup> They do not explain this further, but the simplest explanation for the present placing of the sentence would be that Adomnán's comment on the combination of prophecy and miracle in these stories was added in redrafting (though likely also by Adomnán, since it appears in the earliest manuscript, and similar comments are often found throughout *VSC*). The interesting thing about this comment is that these two stories do not seem to combine miracle and prophecy at all, they are solely prophecy narratives. Again, if we follow the tripartite schema of *VSC* more strictly than Adomnán does, they would fit far better in Book I. If, however, Adomnán is willing to prioritise the micro-over the macro-structure (as suggested above), then the placement makes good sense. It means that he is able to open a sequence of narratives with animal-based “social miracles” with a pair of Christ-like stories, in the same way as Book II as a whole opens with a miracle clearly modelled on one of Christ's.

In II.20, Columba is hospitably received by a certain layman, called Nesán. This Nesán was very poor (*ualde inops*), owning only five cows. In return for his generous hospitality, Columba

<sup>99</sup> *VSC*, II.19.

<sup>100</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, p. 120, n. b.

asks Nesán how many cows he has. In hearing that he has only five, the saint tells Nesán that his herd will increase to a hundred and five cows, and that his sons and grandsons will be blessed. This ensures that his family will assume noble status since a sufficient increase in wealth had to be maintained for three generations for noble status to take effect.<sup>101</sup> These things, of course, all come to pass.

In the B manuscripts, but not in Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, this is followed by a contrary story, in which the saint is refused hospitality by a miserly rich man named Vigenus. Angered, the saint calls down a terrible prophecy on Vigenus, foretelling that his wealth will waste away, that he and his sons will become wandering beggars and that he will be killed by an enemy. Though not present in the earliest manuscript, the Andersons believe it “very possible” this story is of Adomnán's own composition.<sup>102</sup> Again, there is no miraculous element to this story at all. As a prophecy of doom, it is of a piece with I.38 – 39, and the miserly rich man might be compared with those singled out in I.50. However, the balance with the previous story in the same chapter, the composition of sequences at the micro-structural level, again can be seen to override the tripartite schema of the work as a whole.

I.21 is very similar to the Nesán story in I.20 – so similar indeed that Adomnán refers directly to it twice in the course of the chapter. Again, Columba is given hospitality by a poor man, this time called Colmán. Again, the saint asks him how many cows he has, and finds that he has five, though Colmán tells Columba that if he blesses them, the herd will increase. Again, Columba tells him that the herd will increase to a hundred and five cows, and that the blessing will continue for three generations. Adomnán concludes by writing that the herds of both Nesán and Colman always maintained their numbers at a hundred and five, never more or less.

Finally, he again notes the combination of miracle and prophecy – in the increase of the herds, and of Columba's knowledge of the endurance of his blessings.

#### 4.2.2.7: Narrative sequence II.22 – 25 (Persecutors of the innocent)

This sequence is one of the most important in *VSC*, as it focuses on an issue the punishment of those who sinfully persecute the weak. This links it very directly to one of Adomnán's major political projects, *Cáin Adomnáin* which sought to protect women, children and clerics from

<sup>101</sup> D.A. Binchy (ed.) *Críth Gablach*, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1941), ch. 24, pp. 14 – 15. See also Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), p. 12.

<sup>102</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, p. 122, n. 150. See also Sharpe, *Life*, p. 327, n. 256.

violence.<sup>103</sup> That these four chapters are to be considered as a unit is clear not only from the obviously common theme, but from Adomnán's use of overt strategies of textual organisation: the title to II.22, and the concluding comment at the end of II.25, which also refers explicitly to narrative sequencing. The title for II.22 is not so much a chapter heading as a heading for the sequence as a whole, reading, *De malefactorum interitu qui sanctum dispexerant* ("Concerning the destruction of evil-doers who scorned the saint), while the sequence ends with the explicit comment:

*Hucusque de aduersariorum terrificis ultionibus dixisse susficiat. Nunc de bestiis aliqua narrabimus pauca.*

[Let it suffice to have told so much of terrible vengeance upon enemies. Now we shall tell some few things about animals.]<sup>104</sup>

The first story, II.22 links back to the previous story because it features Colmán, the second of the two poor men whose herds Columba had miraculously increased. This connection ties the two sequences together: the saint is shown to have special care for the innocent victims of others' power as well as those in material need. Here, Colmán, who is presented as a special friend of Columba, is the victim of repeated depredations by Ioan, a member of the royal Cenél nGabráin, who on three occasions sacks Colmán's house and carries off all he can find there. On the third occasion, he is returning to his ship with his booty, when Columba appears and rebukes him, commanding him to return Colmán's goods. Ioan refuses, and, mocking the saint, continues to his ship and sails off. Columba follows him to the harbour, walks into the water until he is standing knee-deep in it, raises his hands to heaven and prays. After some time, he returns to his companions on the shore, telling them that they will soon see a storm arise in the north, the otherwise calm seas notwithstanding, which will sink the ship, drowning all of the men on board. And indeed, this soon comes to pass, and all of the raiders are killed.

In II.23, a Pictish nobleman called Tarain is driven into exile, where he is received by Columba, who arranges for him to be taken into the retinue of a certain rich Islayman called Feradach. Within a few days, however, Feradach betrays Tarain to his enemies, leading to the latter's death. When Columba hears of this, he announces that Feradach's name will be removed from the book of life, and that he will die and be consigned to hell before he tastes any of the pork

<sup>103</sup> Gilbert Márkus (trans.), *Adomnán's 'Law of the Innocents'/ Cáin Adomnáin: A seventh century law for the protection of non-combatants* (Kilmartin: Kilmartin House Trust, 2008).

<sup>104</sup> VSC, II.25.

from a pig slaughtered that autumn (the prophecy being made in the summer). When Feradach hears of this, he mocks the saint, and in early autumn orders one of his pigs to be slaughtered early and cooked quickly, so that he can confound Columba's prophecy. Despite this, he dies even as he reaches out his hand to take the first morsel of the pork, and the prophecy is fulfilled.

Again, this story might arguably be more naturally placed in Book I. Unlike the previous chapter, in which the saint seems to take a fairly active role in Ioan's downfall, here Columba's role is restricted to prophesying Feradach's. Once more, it seems that the construction of a coherent sequence of narratives is accorded higher importance than rigidly following the tripartite schema of VSC.<sup>105</sup>

The same is partially true of II.24. In this story, Columba is at Hinba, excommunicating certain persecutors of the church (including the Ioan whose death was recounted in II.22) when one of them, a certain Lám Dess rushes at the saint with a spear. Seeing this, one of Columba's monks, Findlugán, quickly gets in Lám Dess' way, and takes the spear-thrust himself. Unknown to Lám Dess, Findlugán is wearing Columba's cowl, which protects him as if it were armour. The attacker withdraws, mistakenly believing that he has killed Columba. A year later, Columba is at Iona, and says (to whom is not specified) that on this day, a year to the day since the attack at Hinba, that Lám Dess has been killed.

*Quod iuxta sancti reuelationem eodem momento in illa insula factum est quae latine longa uocitari potest, ubi ipse solus Lam Des in aliqua uirorum utrimque acta belligeratione Cronani filii Baitani iaculo transfixus, in nomine ut fertur sancti Columbae emiso, interierat; et post eius interitum belligerare uiri cessarunt.*

[And in accordance with this revelation of the saint, at the same moment this happened in the island that in Latin may be called 'long'. In a fight that took place there this Lám Dess alone of the men on either side perished, pierced by the javelin Crónán, Báitán's son (thrown, it is said, in the name of Saint Columba). And after his death, the men stopped fighting.]<sup>106</sup>

Though Adomnán does not here say so, this is another example of prophecy and miracle being combined. The story is also well balanced internally: the evil man who tried to kill Columba

<sup>105</sup> Fraser uses this story to illustrate Adomnán's technique of historicising the present. See Fraser, *Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 5 – 6.

<sup>106</sup> VSC, II.24.

with a spear is himself killed by a spear cast in the name of Columba. As with the death of Feradach, Columba has no active role in the death of Lám Dess, he merely reports it, having prophetic knowledge of it. The miracle in the story is the preservation of Findlugán, and as a miracle does not really belong in a series about the “destruction of evil-doers”: the chapter only fits into the sequence when taken as a whole, being extended beyond the miraculous part of the story.

Though this story has attracted less scholarly attention in relation to Adomnán's Law than the following chapter, I believe that it should be considered in the same context. While most of the Law is concerned with protecting women, it also covers clergy and children:

*For-tá forus inna Cána-sæ Adomnáin bithcáin for clérchu ocus banscála ocus maccu...*

[The enactment of this Law of Adomnán enjoins a perpetual law on clerics and on women, and on innocent youths...]<sup>107</sup>

That links it well to the following story, one of the best-known in VSC, which closes the Persecutors of the Innocent sequence. It should also be noted that the reason Columba was at Hinba in the first place in this chapter was to deal with evil-doers who had been persecuting churches. The work of the saint in tackling such persecution, the miraculous protection afforded to the monk by Columba's garment, and the death of Lám Dess by a spear cast in Columba's name all suggest very strongly a connection between this chapter and Adomnán's political efforts to use the power of the Columban church to protect clerics from violence.

Similarly, in II.25, the young Columba is in Leinster with his master Gemmán, when they see a young girl running towards them, being pursued by a wicked man with a spear. The girl takes refuge behind the two clerics, who try to protect her and ward off her pursuer. Showing them no reverence, however, the man stabs the girl through their robes with his spear, killing her. As he turns to leave, Gemmán cries out in distress:

*'Quanto,' ait, 'sancte puer Columba hoc scelus cum nostra dehonoratione temporis spatio inultum fieri iudex iustus patietur deus?' Sanctus consequenter hanc in ipsum sceleratorem protulit sententiam, dicens: 'Eadem hora qua in interfectae ab eo filiae anima ascendit ad caelos, anima ipsius interfectoris*

<sup>107</sup> *Cáin Adomnáin*, §34, pp. 36 - 37. For the fines due for wounding or killing clerics, see § 35, § 40, § 43, §44.

*discendat ad inferos.*'

[‘For how long, holy boy, Columba, will God, the just judge, suffer this crime, and our dishonour, to go unavenged?’ Thereupon the young saint pronounced this sentence upon the miscreant: ‘In the same hour in which the soul of the girl whom he has slain ascends to heaven, let the soul of her slayer descend to hell.’]<sup>108</sup>

Immediately, the butcher of innocents (*iugulator innocentium* – note the plural, cf. the Latin name of *Cáin Adomnáin*, *Lex Innocentium*), falls dead, just like Ananias before Peter,<sup>109</sup> and the fame of this sudden punishment spreads throughout Ireland. This is followed by the comment on sequencing quoted above.

This narrative is usually interpreted straightforwardly as propaganda for *Cáin Adomnáin*.<sup>110</sup> To Fraser, Gemmán, “...represents the distress and powerlessness of the whole Church prior to the introduction of Adomnán’s Law. But Columba... speaks with a different voice: that of the Church newly armed with that Law.”<sup>111</sup> For Smyth, assessing the value of *VSC* as evidence for Columba’s rather than Adomnán’s life and times, the story was “... too close to Adomnán’s own preoccupation with the protection of women from violence to carry weight in an historical debate on Columba. It may tell us much more about Adomnán’s personal interests at a time in the author’s life when he was preparing to introduce his famous *Law* for the protection of women and children all over Scotland and Ireland.”<sup>112</sup> While the connection between this story and Adomnán’s Law is very real, scholars have tended to see this in isolation from the story’s context as part of a larger sequence of narratives. Seen as the culmination of a sequence, which Adomnán plainly intended it be, it gains in importance, however. Each of the four narratives in the sequence have featured a different kind of person vulnerable to the violence of the powerful: a poor peasant, a political exile, a clergyman (whether Columba himself or

<sup>108</sup> *VSC*, II.25.

<sup>109</sup> Acts of the Apostles 5: 1 – 10. Columba is again accorded the prestige of a Biblically-modelled miracle.

<sup>110</sup> Fraser writes, “Columba’s teacher in this parable, ‘in great distress of mind’ over the killing, represents the distress and sense of powerlessness of the whole Church prior to the introduction of Adomnán’s Law. But Columba... speaks with a different voice: that of the Church newly armed with that Law”: Fraser, *Caledonia to Pictland*, p. 4. Smyth, “The story is too close to Adomnán’s own preoccupation with the protection of women from violence to carry any weight in an historical debate on Columba. It may tell us much more about Adomnán’s personal interests at a time in the author’s life when he was preparing to introduce his famous *Law* for the protection of women and children all over Scotland and Ireland”: Smyth, *Warriors and Holy Men*, p. 92.

<sup>111</sup> Fraser, *Caledonia to Pictland*, p. 4.

<sup>112</sup> Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, p. 92.



Findlugán) and a child. While only the last two of these are categories of people explicitly protected in *Cáin Adomnáin* (note also the use of spears in both of them, and only in them), the sequence as a whole presents a powerful image of Columba (and thus, the Columban church) as protectors of the powerless.

#### 4.2.2.8: Narrative sequence II.26 – 29 (Animals)

As noted above, Adomnán explicitly introduces this sequence at the end of II.25. The Persecutors of the Innocent sequence is therefore bookended by two sequences about animals, much as the Kings sequence (again, political in nature) is bookended by the two Sailing sequences in Book I.

The first chapter in this sequence will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, below, so will be only briefly summarised here. In it, Columba is in Skye when he encounters a very large boar, which charges towards him, pursued by hunting hounds. Columba raises his hand and commands the boar to die, which it does. This story provides a good transition from the Persecutors sequence, for two reasons. Firstly, it is the only story in the Animals sequence in which the animal is killed (as the evil-doers in the Persecutors sequence invariably were). Secondly, it is the only story in which Columba himself is directly threatened by an animal, and thus finds a partial parallel in the attack by Lám Dess in II.24.

II.27 is likewise discussed in greater depth in Chapter 5, below. This is the famous story in which Columba drives away a deadly, but frustratingly vaguely-described *bestia* (also, *bilua*) which he encounters in the River Ness when travelling in Pictland. As with the previous story, Columba is shown overcoming a dangerous beast, though in this case it does not threaten him directly and he does not need to kill it.

After two stories set outwith Iona, II.28 is set on the island. Reminding us that the structure of VSC is decidedly non-chronological, this chapter is set in the summer of Columba's death. In it Columba, speaks to some labouring monks, and tells them that he will never again return to that part of the island. The monks are saddened by this as it portends Columba's death, so in order to comfort them he raises his hands and proclaims that from that moment hence, the venom of the snakes of Iona will no longer harm the men or cattle of the island, as long as the inhabitants honour the commandments of Christ.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>113</sup> This story is retold in III.23, with a reference back to this earlier telling.

The final story of the sequence is also set at Iona. In II.29, Columba is busy writing when one of the monks, named Mo Lua, brings him a knife to be blessed. Columba absentmindedly does so, making the sign of the cross with his pen, while not looking up from his book. Only when Mo Lua has left does Columba ask Diormit what it was that he blessed. When Diormit tells him that it is a knife for slaughtering cattle, the saint replies that he trusts in the Lord that the knife he has blessed will do no harm to men or cattle.<sup>114</sup> When Mo Lua finds that the knife will not cut the throat of the cow he is trying to slaughter, skilled monks melt the knife and overlay its metal onto all the monastery's iron tools as a safety precaution to prevent injuries to those working with them.

The Animals sequence, then, can be seen to be well balanced. It opens with two stories in which Columba, outwith Iona, directly and dramatically deals with the threats posed by fierce animals, and closes with two stories set on the island, in which Columba effects the protection of the men and cattle of the island. The third story could be seen as a transitional story in this sequence, since Columba is protecting the monks and cattle from dangerous animals (the snakes), while also showing strong affinities with the final story as well.

#### 4.2.2.9: Narrative sequence II.30 – 31 (Healing)

There is then a short, two-chapter sequence of healing miracles. The first of which, the healing of a mortally-sick Diormit, and the prophecy of his long life afterwards links the sequence to the previous one, as it had concluded with a narrative featuring Diormit. The second story is similar, though it takes place when Columba is traveling across Druim Alban. On the journey, one of the monks, a young man called Fintén, falls seriously ill. Columba prays for and blesses Fintén, and prophesies that he will live to a good old age. And Fintén is indeed healed, and lives for many years afterwards. The location of this narrative links this sequence to the following one (which is composed of stories set in Pictland), as the person of Diormit linked it back to the previous one.

<sup>114</sup> Márkus sets out a threefold model for understanding the animal narratives in *VSC*, convincingly arguing that the different kinds of animal-related prophecies and miracles in Iona, Dál Riata and Pictland reflect the different roles of the Columban *familia* as monks, pastors and missionaries, respectively. Gilbert Márkus OP, "Iona: monks, pastors and missionaries", in Broun and Clancy (eds.), *Spes Scotorum*, pp. 115 – 138.

#### 4.2.2.10: Narrative sequence II.32 – 35 (Overcoming Pictish opposition)

This sequence contains some of Columba's most impressive miracles, some of which have distinctly Christ-like echoes. In the first, Columba preaches to and baptises the household of a Pictish layman. Shortly after, the man's son takes seriously ill, and is brought to the point of death. As in II.11, the hostile pagan *magi* make an appearance, taunting the boy's parents, praising their own gods and belittling the Christian God. Hearing of this, Columba returns to the house, to find the funeral rites in progress, as the child had already died.<sup>115</sup> Having the father take him to the body, Columba then raises the boy from the dead, to the great joy of the household. No more is heard of the *magi* in this chapter. The chapter concludes by making a great claim for Columba's status, putting him in the company of Biblical figures who raised the dead, Elijah, Elisha, Peter, Paul and John as well as Christ. Placing Columba among this great roll-call of heroes of the Christian faith makes sense here as this narrative starts a sequence in which Columba uses his powers to advance Christianity in the face of hostile opposition.

II.33 is set at the same time (*Eodem in tempore*), and sets Columba in opposition to the pagan *magus* Broichan. Columba demands that Broichan release a Gaelic slave-girl, which the *magus* refuses to do. The saint tells him that if he does not release her, his death will come to him soon. Leaving him, and going on his way, Columba takes a white stone from the River Ness, which he tells his companions will be used by God to work cures among the pagan Picts. He also knows prophetically that Broichan has been struck by a sudden deadly illness, which is shortly confirmed by messengers from the Pictish king. Columba sends two of his companions back with the messengers, telling them that if Broichan is willing to release the girl, they should dip the stone in water, and give the water to Broichan, healing him. This all comes to pass, and the girl is handed over to Columba's companions. True to Columba's prophecy, the stone indeed works many cures among the Picts for many years afterwards.<sup>116</sup>

The following chapter again sees Columba in conflict with Broichan. Adomnán writes that this story takes place after the one related in II.33, but gives no indication as how much time has passed. Here, Broichan asks Columba when he intends to leave. When the saint replies that he plans to leave the following day, Broichan says that he will summon up mists and adverse winds to hinder him, to which Columba replies (much like Baithéne in I.19, also before setting sail) that all things are under God's control. The next day, Columba sets sail along Loch Ness, and

<sup>115</sup> Cf. Mark 5: 21 – 43; Luke 8: 40 – 56.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. Acts 13: 4 – 12, in which Paul (still called Saul at this point) afflicts an antagonistic sorcerer (*magus*) with a temporary blindness.

the promised adverse weather conditions duly arise, at which the watching *magi* rejoice. Adomnán then pauses the story briefly, and recounts a similar story involving Germanus of Auxerre, which he has apparently derived from the fifth-century *Vita Germani* by Constantius of Lyon.<sup>117</sup> In same way, Adomnán says, Columba called upon Christ for aid and instructed the sailors to raise the sail against the contrary wind. When they do so, the ship initially makes miraculous headway against the wind, which soon changes to a favourable one for the rest of the day.

The final story in the sequence, II.35, is set during Columba's first journey to see the Pictish king Brude. Filled with pride, the king refuses to have the gates of his fortress opened for the saint and his retinue. Seeing this, Columba makes the sign of the cross on the gates, and lays his hand on them. Immediately, the bars locking the gate spring back, and the door is miraculously opened.

The king and his council (*rex cum senatu*) are alarmed by this, and go to meet the saint and show him due respect, the king honouring him for the rest of his life (though there is no direct mention of a conversion to Christianity). No *magi* as such are mentioned here, but they may well have been part of the *senatus*.<sup>118</sup>

All of the stories in this sequence feature high-profile, highly visible miracles worked by the saint. They show Columba taking on and defeating the representatives of Pictish paganism with the superior powers the Christian God makes manifest in him. With the exception of the first story in this sequence, which still features *magi*, all of the stories share a similar setting and revolve around the same set of characters: Columba, his companions, King Brude, his foster-father Broichan *magus* and other, unnamed *magi*.<sup>119</sup> In this highly public setting, and interacting with the highest social and political powers in Pictland, we see spiritual battle-lines being repeatedly drawn, with Columba and his Christian faith triumphing in each instance.

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<sup>117</sup> Sharpe, *Life*, p. 336, n. 298. See Constantius of Lyon, "The Life of Saint Germanus of Auxerre", ch. 13, trans. F.R. Hoare, in Noble and Head (eds.), *Soldiers of Christ*, pp. 75 – 106, pp. 86 – 87.

<sup>118</sup> A story with a similar theme, though clearly not part of the same sequence, is found in I.37, wherein Columba's mighty singing voice when singing the 44<sup>th</sup> Psalm outside the fortress with his monks fills Brude and his people with dread. Interestingly, the *magi* tried to prevent the Christians from singing, lest their own people hear it. This story is included along with another story about the power of Columba's voice, and how it could be heard from far away. Plainly, neither story has anything to do with prophecy, but the main story in that chapter concerns relief brought to the monks by the saint, though he is not present. Again, we can see the construction of a sequence that overrides the imperatives of the overall structural logic of VSC.

<sup>119</sup> Broichan is identified as Brude's *nutricius* in II.33. This illustrates the prominent social and political role help by this representative of the Picts' pagan religion – heightening the stakes considerably in Columba's confrontations with him.

#### 4.2.2.11: Narrative sequence II.35 - 36 (Gates)

This sequence is very short, consisting only of the story described above that takes place at Brude's fortress, and the following chapter. They are clearly linked, not only by the obvious similarity of the stories, but by the title of II.36, which reads, *De ecclesiae duorum agri riuorum simili reclusionione* ("Concerning a similar opening of the church of the land of the two streams" [i.e. Terryglass in Co. Tipperary, Ireland]). In II.36, Columba has been invited to visit the monks at Terryglass (a clear contrast to the inhospitable welcome he initially received from Brude), but when he arrives at the monastery, the monks inside cannot find the keys to let him in. Once more the doors are miraculously opened, as Columba declares that the Lord is able to open his house to his servants, missing keys notwithstanding.

#### 4.2.2.12: Narrative sequence II.37 – 38 (Small things)

This short sequence concerns two stories quite different in their subject matter. The first is the story of the poor layman to whom Columba gives a stake, which he blesses in order that it will attract game animals to impale themselves on it (this story is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, below). The second is about a monk named Lugaid Laitir, and Columba's prophecies about a milk-skin Lugaid had intended to take with him to Ireland.

Adomnán's conclusion to II.38 shows that he clearly thought of these two chapters as being related to one another:

*In his ut sepe dictum est binis narrationibus superius discriptis, quamlibet in paruis rebus, sude uidelicet et utre, profetia simul et uirtutis miraculam comitari cernuntur. Nunc ad alia tendamus.*

[In these two stories told above (although they concern small things, namely a spike and a skin), prophecy, and at the same time a miracle of power, as often remarked, are seen to go together. Now let us turn to other things.]<sup>120</sup>

In fact, the second story does not involve any obvious miracle at all. Columba's actions in this chapter extend only to knowing, prophetically, the whereabouts of the milk-skin. He does not miraculously recover it when it is lost, he only knows that it will be lost, and where to find it. As such it would again, if Adomnán were to stick rigidly to the macro-structure of VSC,

<sup>120</sup> VSC, II.38. Translation slightly altered ("small things") – the Andersons have "small matters".

properly belong in Book I. Once more, however, we see that the macro-structure is overridden by the micro-structure, in this case to construct a short sequence about small things, tied together, ostensibly, with the combination of prophecy and miracle.

#### 4.2.2.13: Narrative sequence II.44 – 46 (Posthumous miracles)

The final sequence in Book II comprises its final three chapters, and is once again signposted by Adomnán. Following the miracle of the chariot linch-pins in II.43, Adomnán writes:

*Huc usque de uirtutum miraculis quae per praedicabilem uirum in praesenti conuersantem uita diuina operata est omnipotentia scripsisse suficiat. Nunc etiam quaedam de his quae post eius de carne transitum ei a domino donata conprohantur pauca sunt commemoranda.*

[Let it suffice to have written thus far about the miracles of power which the divine omnipotence performed through the memorable man, while he continued in the present life. Now a few must also be recorded of those that are proved to have been granted by the Lord to him, after his passing from the flesh.]<sup>121</sup>

The following three chapters are indeed all about posthumous miracles attributed to Columba's patronage. The first concerns relief from a drought after the use of Columban associative relics (discussed in detail in Chapter 6, below). The second contains three narratives of Columba being successfully invoked to bring about favourable sailing winds, and concludes with the assertion that a hundred or more witnesses could be called to testify to the truth of Adomnán's accounts, far in excess of the two or three demanded by the Old Testament law (Deuteronomy 19: 15).<sup>122</sup> Finally, Adomnán tells of two occasions on which Britain was ravaged by plague (*mortalitate, pestilentia*). Columba's protection saved both the Picts and the Gaels in Britain during the first outbreak, on account of the presence of Columban monasteries among both peoples, and the honour in which they are held. During both outbreaks, Adomnán had cause to be in Northumbria, and reports that despite the devastation the pestilence was causing all around, he and his entourage were preserved in good health. Thus, as Book II had opened with

<sup>121</sup> VSC II.43. In the Schaffhausen manuscript, there is no line break separating this introduction to the Posthumous Miracles sequence from the preceding chapter, however the initial *H* of *Huc* has its loop infilled in red, thus clearly marking it off visually as the introduction to what comes next, Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 98.

<sup>122</sup> The same assertion was made in I.1 in the account of the brigands who saved themselves from their enemies by singing vernacular hymns in Columba's honour.



an impressive, Christ-like miracle in having Columba turn water into wine, so it ends with another impressive miracle in preserving his followers from the ravages of a deadly pestilence which had devastated most of western Europe. And as that Christ-like miracle had enabled the celebration of the Eucharist and thus Christian worship, so also at the end of Book II the saint's patronage works to uphold the church in preserving the monasteries of his *familia*, and his kinsman who had inherited the leadership of that *familia* (not to mention the man who was to write a hagiography in his honour).

In introducing the sequence, Adomnán writes that these were all posthumous miracles, and in each of the stories, he also claims either to have been an eyewitness to the miracles, or that they had happened in his own time. There is thus a second element binding this sequence together: the presence of the author as a character in his own text. This sets this sequence apart from other posthumous miracles reported in *VSC* (e.g. several in I.1, II.8 – 9), which do not directly feature Adomnán. Thus, although a certain element of chronological organisation is present (with a collection of posthumous miracles being placed at the end of Book II), Adomnán rejects a more fully chronological approach (by not placing all such posthumous miracles here) and reserves this section for only those posthumous miracles which took place in his own time and within the Columban *familia*.

#### 4.3: Book III: Visions and Heavenly Light

##### 4.3.1: Book III: macro

Book III is the last and the shortest of the three books in *VSC*. It opens with an introductory paragraph which is worth quoting in full, as it again restates the overall structural logic of *VSC*, while also reiterating that prophecy and miracle often accompany one another in Book II:

*Hic tertius liber orditur de angelicis uisionibus.*

*In primo ex his tribus libellis libro, ut superius commemoratum est, de profectis reuelationibus quaedam breuiter succinctque domino nauante descripta sunt. In secundo superiore, de uirtutum miraculis quae per beatum declarata sunt uirum, et quae ut sepe dictum est plerumque profetationis comitatur gratia. In hoc uero tertio, de angelicis apparationibus quae uel aliis de beato uiro, uel ipsi de aliis, reuelatae sunt; et de his quae utroque quamlibet disparili modo, hoc est ipsi proprie et plenius, aliis uero inproprie et ex quadam parte, sunt manifestate, hoc*

*est extrinsecus et exploratiue, in hisdem tamen uel angelorum uel caelestis uisionibus lucis. Quae utique talium discrepantiae uisionum suis craxatae locis inferius clarebunt.*

[Here begins the third book, of angelic visions.

In the first of these three books, as has been indicated above, some things have with the Lord's assistance been described briefly and in few words concerning prophetic revelations; in the second book above, concerning miracles of power, which have been manifested through the blessed man, and which, as has been said many times, the grace of prophecy often accompanies; and in this third book, concerning angelic apparitions, that were revealed to others in relation to the blessed man, or to him in relation to others, and concerning those that were made visible to both, though in unequal measure (that is, to him directly and fully, and to others indirectly and only in part, that is to say from without and by stealth), but in the same visions, either of angels, or of heavenly light. These disparities of the visions will appear clearly below, written in their places.]<sup>123</sup>

In terms of the overall structure of Book III, it is remarkable that parts of it follow a chronological structure. In III.1, Columba's pregnant mother is visited by an angel, who tells her of the glory of her unborn son; in III.2, his foster-father (*nutritor*) sees a glorious light over the sleeping child Columba, and understands that the Holy Spirit's grace is being poured out onto the young boy; III.3 is set at the time of Columba's departure from Ireland to Iona. From there on, Book III follows the usual pattern of *VSC* of arranging stories by theme or some other logic, rather than chronologically, with the exception of the final chapter, III.23, which recounts Columba's final days and death. The final chapter of *VSC* thus recalls the first chapter of Book I proper (i.e. II.2, after the first chapter of that book had been used as a “foretaste”, as discussed above), in which Columba's death is first reported to clerics from outwith Iona, and Baithéne is installed as his successor. In Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, *VSC* ends with three concluding addresses to the reader. In the first of these, Adomnán again reiterates the tripartite structure of the work, though more obliquely than previously:

*Post horum trinalium lectionem libellorum quisque diligens annotet lector quanti et qualis meriti sanctus sepe supra memoratus praesul uenerandus, quantae et qualis apud deum honorificentiae, fuerit estimatus; quantae et quales*

<sup>123</sup> *VSC*, pp. 182 – 183.

*angelicae ad ipsum et luminum frequentationes fuerint; quanta in eo profetalis gratia; quanta diuini efficientia uirtutem; quanta et quam frequens eum diuini luminis claritudo in carne mortali adhuc commorantem circumfulserit. Quae etiam post egressum animae de tabernaculo corporis almissimae, sicuti quibusdam electis ostensum habetur conpertum, locum in quo ipsius sancta pausant ossa usque hodie eadeam caelestis claritas frequentare non cessat, et sanctorum frequens uisitatio angelorum.*

[After the reading of these three books, let every attentive reader observe of how great and of high merit, how greatly and highly deserving of honour, our venerable holy superior so often named above was esteemed in the sight of God; how much and in what manner he was visited by shining angels; how great in him was the grace of prophecy, how great the power of divine miracles; how great and how frequent was the brightness of divine light that shone about him, while he still lived in mortal flesh. And even after the departure of his most gentle soul from the tabernacle of the body, this same heavenly brightness, as well as the frequent visits of holy angels, does not cease, down to the present day, to appear at the place in which his holy bones repose; as is established through being revealed to certain elect persons.]<sup>124</sup>

He goes on to tell of the extent of Columba's fame across Western Europe, and of how God honours those who honour him.

This is followed by a brief note to scribes, adjuring them to take care when making their copies, and to compare their finished work to their exemplar and make emendations from it very carefully (*cum omni diligentia*).

As discussed in Chapter 1, Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, then has the coda by the scribe Dorbbéne imploring the reader to pray for his soul, followed on a fresh page by the Lord's Prayer written out in Greek.

The B manuscripts, again as described in more detail in Chapter 1, do not have the text of the Lord's Prayer, but include instead some miscellaneous extra material pertaining to Columba.

<sup>124</sup> VSC, pp. 232 – 233.

#### 4.3.2: Book III: Narrative sequencing

Book III has a much narrower range of stories than the other two books in *VSC*. As such, while some sequences are certainly present, the organisation of narratives is more obviously a matter of dividing them according to the two themes of this book: visions of angels and visions of heavenly light. As such, it seems best to represent the structure of Book III in table form.

Chapter 2, Table 6: the micro-structure of Book III

Ref.	Type of vision	Description	Sequence
III.1	Visions of angels	Columba's mother sees a vision of an angel, who tells her of her unborn son's greatness.	Visions concerning Columba (unborn)
III.2	Heavenly light	Columba's foster-father sees a light over the sleeping boy saint.	Visions concerning Columba (young boy)
III.3	Visions of angels	Saint Brénden sees a vision of angels accompanying Columba	Visions concerning Columba (at his excommunication)
III.4	Visions of angels	Saint Finnio sees a vision of an angel accompanying Columba.	Visions concerning Columba (young man)
III.5	Visions of angels	An angel bids Columba ordain Áidán as king.	-
III.6	Visions of angels	Columba sees angels defeat demons in battle for the soul of one of his monks, a Briton.	Souls of the dead (ecclesiastic)
III.7	Visions of angels	Columba sees angels lead the soul of a man called Diormit to heaven	Souls of the dead (ecclesiastic)
III.8	Visions of angels	Columba engages in spiritual battle with a host of demons, is aided by angels and the demons are defeated.	-
III.9	Visions of angels	Columba sees angels leading the soul of a blacksmith called Columb to heaven.	Souls of the dead (lay)
III.10	Visions of angels	Columba sees angels lead the soul of a woman to heaven. A year later, he sees angels defeat demons in a struggle for the soul of her husband.	Souls of the dead (lay)
III.11	Visions of angels	Columba sees angels coming to meet the soul of Saint	Souls of the dead (ecclesiastical)

		Bréndan of Birr.	
III.12	Visions of angels	Columba sees angels leading the soul of bishop Colmán mocu Loigse to heaven.	Souls of the dead (ecclesiastical)
III.13	Visions of angels	Columba sees angels defeat demons in a struggle for the souls of Saint Comgell's drowned monks.	Souls of the dead (ecclesiastical)
III.14	Visions of angels	Columba sees angels awaiting the death of a Pictish layman, goes to baptise him and his family.	Souls of the dead (lay)
III.15	Visions of angels	Columba (in Iona) prophetically sees a monk falling from the roof at Durrow, calls for an angel to rescue him. <sup>125</sup>	
III.16	Visions of angels	One of the monks secretly observes Columba conversing with a multitude of angels.	Observations of Columba by others. Ends: <i>Hoc idem similiter et de quibusdam luminosis manifestationibus annotandum, quae a paucis exploratae inferius craxabuntur.</i>
III.17	Heavenly light	During mass, Saint Brénden mocu Alti sees a column of light rise from Columba.	Observations of Columba by others
III.18	Heavenly light	Columba is visited by the Holy Spirit. Spends three days in a barred house, from which bright light is seen and spiritual songs are heard by others.	Observations of Columba by others
III.19	Heavenly light	Virgno, one of the monks, prays in the abbey church at night, sees Columba enter to pray and the church being filled with heavenly light.	Observations of Columba by others
III.20	Heavenly light	Colcu, one of the monks, sees the church filled with light when Columba is praying there at night.	Observations of Columba by others
III.21	Heavenly light	Berchán, Columba's <i>alumnus</i> ,	Observations of

<sup>125</sup> Psalm 90: 11 – 12 (by the Vulgate's numbering); Matthew 4: 6; Luke 4: 11.

		disobeys Columba and observes him praying at night – cannot bear the bright light.	Columba by others
III.22	Visions of angels	Columba is pleased to see a vision of angels coming to bring his soul to heaven, but is saddened to learn that he must live another four years first.	Columba's death
III.23	Visions of angels, heavenly light	Extended description of Columba's final days.	Columba's death

As can be seen, there are some runs of chapters which are connected by the type of vision (angels, heavenly light), or by theme (the souls of the dead, for instance). There is also one theme (observations of Columba by others), which can be represented by either visions of angels or manifestations of heavenly light, and indeed this one sequence contains within it the transition from the first half of Book III, dominated by angelic visions, and the second, dominated by heavenly light. The two come together only once, fittingly in the final story.

### 5: Structural anomalies? Narrative sequencing and the overall schema of VSC

Although Adomnán chose to arrange his work thematically, the themes that he picked are by no means mutually exclusive. His tripartite schema is rather stretched, or even undermined, by stories which include within them more than one of the three thematic elements on which he bases his structure. Table 7 gives all the instances of anomalies in the structure of VSC, whether because of the presence of two or more of the organising themes in one story (a miracle tale with an accompanying prophecy, for instance), or because it seems to be in the “wrong” book. Where Adomnán comments on thematic overlap, his comments are given in italics. Otherwise, the content of the chapter is briefly summarised in normal type.

#### Chapter 2, Table 7: Structural “anomalies” in VSC

Ref.	Thematic elements present	Sequence	Notes
I.1	Miracles, prophecy	-	See discussion above, § 4.1.1.
I.29	Prophecy, miracle	-	Columba knows that Laisrán is overworking his monks; at

			the same moment, Laisrán is impelled to give his monks rest (which Columba also prophetically knows about)
I.37	Miracles	-	No apparent prophecy. Columba sends miraculous relief to weary monks. This is followed by descriptions of (and one miracle involving) the miraculous power of Columba's voice.
II. introduction	Miracles, prophecy	-	<i>Nunc sequens orditur liber de uirtutum miraculis quae plerumque etiam profetalis praescientia comitatur.</i> [Now begins the second book, concerning miracles of power, which are often accompanied by prophetic foreknowledge.]
II.4	Miracle, prophecy	II.4 – 7 (Healing objects)	<i>In hac itaque suprascripta narratione ut estimo duo haec manifestae pariter comitantur, hoc est gratia profetationis de nube, et uirtutis miraculum in egrotantium sanitate.</i> [In the story written above, these two things are, as I think, clearly associated together: that is to say, the grace of prophecy concerning the cloud, and the miracle of power in the curing of the sick.]
II.5	Miracle, prophecy	II.4 – 7 (Healing objects)	Columba prophetically knows that Maguin has been injured, sends Lugaid to her with a miraculous cure.
II.15	Miracle, prophecy		After a miracle narrative involving Colmán, Columba prophesies that they will not meet again in this life –



			fulfilled with Columba's death.
II.19	Miracles, prophecy	II.19 – 21 (Animals)	<i>In hīs duabus memoratīs piscationibus miraculi apparet uirtus et profetica simul praescientia comitata.</i> [In these two above-mentioned catches of fish there appears the power of miracle, with prophetic knowledge also accompanying.]
II.21	Miracle, prophecy	II.19 – 21 (Animals)	<i>In hac itaque natatione, ut in ceteris, uirtutis miraculum et profetia simul aperte ostenditur. Man in magna uaccarum ampliacione benedictionis pariter et orationis uirtus apparet, et in praefitione numeri profetalis praescientia.</i> [In this story, as in the others, a miracle of power, together with prophecy, is clearly shown. For in the great increase of cows, the power of blessing appears equally with that of prayer; and in the predetermination of the number, prophetic foreknowledge.]
II.22	Miracle, prophecy	II.22 – 25 (Persecutors of the innocent)	Columba prophesies the death of Ioan, seemingly (though not explicitly) having prayed for it.
II.23	Prophecy	II.22 – 25 (Persecutors of the innocent)	Columba prophesies the death of Feradach, no apparent miracle.
II.24	Miracle, Prophecy	II.22 – 25 (Persecutors of the innocent)	Columba's robe saves monk, saint prophetically knows of the death of Lám Dess.
II.31	Miracle, prophecy	II.30 – 31 (Healing)	Columba heals Fintén, prophesies his long life.

II.37	Miracle, prophecy	II.37 – 38 (Small things)	Columba blesses a stake for catching game, prophesies it will not harm people or cattle, and that the recipient will be well-provided as long as he keeps the stake.
II.38	Miracle, prophecy	II.37 – 38 (Small things)	Columba prophesies the loss and recovery of a milk-skin. No apparent miracle, but Adomnán comments that miracle and prophecy found together in this and the previous chapter.
II.39	Miracle, prophecy	-	Columba prophesies how things will go for Librán in Ireland, and of his later life. A weather miracle.
II.40	Miracle, prophecy	-	Columba knows that a kinswoman is in childbirth, prays for and obtains her safety.
II.41	No apparent miraculous or prophetic content	-	After fasting and praying, Lugne's wife is reconciled to him, but there is no obvious miraculous or prophetic element at all.
II.42	Miracle, prophecy	-	Columba prophetically knows of the dangerous creatures facing Cormac, and leads the monks in intercessory prayer.
III. introduction	Reference to prophecies accompanying miracles.	-	<i>In secundo superiore, de uirtutum miraculis quae per beatum declarata sunt uirum, et quae ut sepe dictum est plerumque profetationis comitatur gratia.</i>
III.5	Vision, prophecy	-	Columba has a vision concerning the ordination of Áidán as king, and prophesies concerning Áidán and his descendants. [Dorbbéne's interpolation from Cumméne's book,

			expands of the prophecies Adomnán only mentions, and provides some commentary.]
III.8	Vision, prophecy	-	Columba, supported by angels, engages demons in spiritual battle. After driving the demons away, Columba prophesies that they will attack and devastate Tiree.
III.21	Vision, prophecy	-	Berchán spies on Columba while the saint is experiencing visions. Columba prophesies Berchán's fall into sin and final redemption.
III.23	Vision, prophecy	-	Columba prophesies that the kings of the Irish and other nations will honour Iona. Angelic light seen filling the church as Columba dies, he sees angels coming to meet him. Retrospective story told of how Columba once prophesied that only his own <i>familia</i> would be present at his burial – fulfilled as storms prevent anyone else joining them.

These structural anomalies highlight that Adomnán's categories are not mutually exclusive, and that there is considerable scope for overlap as narratives can contain more than one of the three major thematic elements that form the basis of the overall division of the work. As can be seen, by far the most "inconsistent" of the books is Book II. Thomas-Charles Edwards suggests that its "more miscellaneous character" might be due to Adomnán drawing more material from from Cumméne's *liber der uirtutibus sancti Columbae* in Book II may have drawn more material than in Books I and III, which were more properly his, and thus adhered more closely to his schema. Cumméne's work may not have shared Adomnán's division between prophecy narratives and miracle narratives, and thus the material Adomnán inherited from him and

worked into Book II would not fit neatly into his tripartite schema.<sup>126</sup> However, while the description of Cumméne's work which Dorbbéne gives would suggest that its contents would generally align with the concerns of Book II, the fact that the only surviving fragment of it (III.5) is a prophecy narrative should caution us from accepting this too readily. Only one of these anomalous narratives is given provenance by Adomnán: the prophecy and miracle in II.4 were testified (*testatus*) by the monk Silnán to the later abbot Ségéne. Whether or not Cumméne made use of materials collected by Ségéne in his own book cannot be determined.

What is noteworthy is that of the fifteen narratives in Book II which either "should" be in Book I, or which contain both miracle and prophecy, ten are set within identifiable narrative sequences. This demonstrates again that Adomnán's approach to structure was not a rigid application of his tripartite division, but a flexible approach, in which the construction of narrative sequences could override the basic schema.

## 6: Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that *VSC* is a structurally complex text, a highly accomplished work which combines aspects of established hagiographical tradition and innovation to produce a work often considered among the best and most distinctive of the early medieval *vitae*.<sup>127</sup> A close study of the macro- and micro-structures of *VSC*, of how Adomnán put together this vast quantity of material, reveals evidence of a very keen literary mind at work, with a sophisticated sense of balance, of escalation and of thematic connections between stories. It becomes like a literary version of the complex patterns of knotwork used in early insular manuscript illumination – the weaving, balancing lines producing not a tangled, confused mess, but a disciplined, controlled whole.

Adomnán's text is most certainly not a mess. While it may at times appear that Adomnán is inconsistent in following his own structural schema, or that he has struggled to integrate materials from his sources, this study has demonstrated that there is a structural logic to many of these apparent anomalies, a logic based on the creation of, at times quite intricate, narrative sequences. This was possible because the fundamental units of *VSC* are short, episodic narratives, which are abstracted from any chronological context and arranged by theme, and then often linked to each other in the various ways discussed above. This organisational

<sup>126</sup> Charles-Edwards, "Structure and Purpose", pp. 213 – 214.

<sup>127</sup> As argued by Richard Sharpe in "Discussion", appended to Stancliffe, "The Miracle Stories", p. 114.

principle is very flexible, creating an “open text” in which the text could be revised, with narratives added or removed quite easily. As Stansbury argues, Adomnán himself probably continued to revise the text in this manner, slotting in new episodes in places that seemed appropriate to him, right up to his death, with no final version having been reached. Dorbbéne’s addition of material from Cumméne’s *Liber* indicates that he, too, felt that the text as he received it was not a fixed, final thing, but something to which he could add. Another example of this open nature of text is at II.20. The B manuscripts preserve an additional episode here not found in the Schaffhausen text, producing a balanced pair of stories: a generous poor man is blessed for his hospitality, and a rich miser is punished for his parsimony. The Andersons argue that the additional episode was not in Adomnán’s original version, though it may have been added by him in revision.<sup>128</sup> Whether it was inserted by Adomnán himself, or by the scribe of the exemplar of the B textual tradition, it demonstrates the flexibility of the structure, and the deliberate creation of narrative sequences within it.<sup>129</sup> That structure was Adomnán’s creation, an innovation building upon previously established traditions of hagiography in a highly sophisticated manner.

Relating this to the wider argument of this thesis, we can say that Adomnán wanted to produce a top-quality, highly elaborate hagiography of his patron. Of course, all hagiographers aimed to confer prestige on their subjects, and there is nothing unusual about Adomnán doing so. It is a fundamental feature of all hagiography. Adomnán, however, had particular motivations for doing so, which are closely bound to his motivations for writing *VSC*. As Clancy has observed, there were personal motivations, Adomnán was not simply Columba’s hagiographer, he was his kinsman and successor.<sup>130</sup> Anything which advanced the prestige of Columba would not only advance the prestige of his cult in a general sense, something that was needed after the setback at Whitby, but would also bolster Adomnán’s own position as the head of that cult, and would recruit Columba’s reputation in support of his own political work, too.

We should not underestimate, however, that among his motivations were a genuine sense of piety and of devotion to his patron. To produce such a text, he had to call upon all of the formidable intellectual resources at his disposal as he approached the stories and traditions of a man he considered truly holy. As we have seen here, these included his wide reading and his

<sup>128</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, pp. 122 – 123, n. 150.

<sup>129</sup> The redactor who abridged the text to produce the second recension also took advantage of this, as they were able to remove episodes without doing violence to a biographical narrative.

<sup>130</sup> Clancy, “Personal, Political, Pastoral”, p. 43.

ambitious approach to literary structure. We shall now consider how he turned his erudition and linguistic skill to this aim.





## Chapter 3

### Language and *Vita Sancti Columbae*

This chapter will focus on issues of language in *Vita Sancti Columbae*, considered from a number of different angles, but falling into two main sections. In the first section, we will consider the language of *VSC*, looking in turn at Adomnán's Latin writing style and at the incorporation of other languages (Greek, Hebrew and Old Irish) into the text. This will involve investigation into stylistics and etymologies, as well as Adomnán's comments on and translations of place and personal names, as well as into the importance of the *tres linguae sacrae*, the three sacred languages of western Christendom. These will all be set, as far as possible, in the context of the Christian and insular literary traditions, in order to set Adomnán's work in relation to his literary world and background. Secondly, attitudes towards vernacular languages, or the ways in which language issues are presented within *VSC* will be investigated – primarily Adomnán's comments on Irish, and his presentation of Columba's use of an interpreter when in Pictland. Between them, these two strands of investigation will advance our understanding of *VSC* itself, and help us to place it within the wider educational and intellectual milieu in which Adomnán operated.

Language was an important concern in the early Irish literary world. From the production of glossaries to the pointed code-switching of the colophon to *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in the Book of Leinster and the erudite eccentricities of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus and *Hisperica Famina*, linguistic exploration, play and displays of erudition were common elements in the Irish literary tradition.<sup>1</sup> Hagiography is an important part of Irish literature, and the concern with language is present there as well. This should not surprise us. Irish hagiographers after all were men who spoke one language, but whose religion was transmitted through another, and founded upon translations from two other languages. The Christian scriptures contain many direct

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<sup>1</sup> Cecile O' Rahilly (ed. and trans.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), pp. 136, 272; Virgilius Maro Grammaticus; (ed.) Bengt Löfstedt, *Virgilius Maro Grammaticus: Opera Omnia* (Munich and Leipzig: K.G. Saur, 2003); Francis John Henry Jenkinson (ed.), *The Hisperica Famina* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908). See also introductory comments in Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter (eds.), *Medieval Grammar & Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300 – 1475* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 248 – 249.

comments on language use<sup>2</sup> and etymological explanations of place<sup>3</sup> and personal names<sup>4</sup> of the sort that abound in Irish religious and secular literature. For Irish speakers in contact with communities which spoke other vernaculars, such as Pictish, there were also the practical issues of mediating linguistic barriers to consider, and this also finds reflection in hagiographies.<sup>5</sup>

### 1: Review of existing scholarship

The language of *VSC* has been studied extensively, from several different angles. Much of the fundamental work is summarised in the introduction to the Andersons' first edition, which deals extensively with matters of spelling, Adomnán's assimilation of Irish place and personal names and also makes some short comments about Adomnán's Latin composition.<sup>6</sup> The early and fairly secure date of the Schaffhausen manuscript of *VSC* has made it useful as evidence for the development of Hiberno-Latin, while scholars of place and personal names have also found it a valuable source – especially as many of the names Adomnán records, particularly Pictish ones, are otherwise unattested.<sup>7</sup>

Adomnán's use of Latin has attracted comment, not all of it favourable. His editors, the Andersons, considered his style “intricate” and “scholarly”, and Ó Riain described it as “sophisticated”; conversely, Picard thought it “somewhat pompous” and Meehan compared it

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, the *shibboleths* of Judges 12: 5 - 6, and the equally revealing nature of Peter's Galilean dialect in Matthew 26: 73.

<sup>3</sup> *Jehovah-jireh* in Genesis 22: 14; the changing of the name *Luz* to *Bethel* in Genesis 28: 19; the “field of blood” in Acts 1: 18 – 19.

<sup>4</sup> The explanation of Jacob's new name, Israel, as “Wrestles with God”, in Genesis 32: 28, followed by Israel renaming the place where the fight took place to commemorate the occasion; “Peter” in Matthew 16: 18.

<sup>5</sup> The nature of the languages spoken in early medieval northern Britain, their relationships to one another, and how the barriers between them were mediated is a set of controversial issues, complicated by the relative lack of evidence about Pictish. See, for instance, the very different views of William F. Skene, *Celtic Scotland: A History of Ancient Alban, Volume I: History and Ethnology* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1876), pp. 192 – 225; Kenneth Jackson, “The Pictish Language”, in F.T. Wainwright (ed.), *The Problem of the Picts* (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1955), pp. 129 – 166; Katherine Forsyth, *Language in Pictland: the case against non-Indo-European Pictish* (Utrecht: De Keltische Draak, 1997). See also Alex Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba: 789 – 1070* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 322 – 340.

<sup>6</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, [1<sup>st</sup> edn.], pp. 124 – 171. The discussion is much abridged in the second edition.

<sup>7</sup> J.M. Picard, “The Schaffhausen Adomnán – a unique witness to Hiberno-Latin”, *Peritia*, 1 (1982), pp. 216 – 249; J.M.P. Calise, *Pictish Sourcebook: Documents of Medieval Legend and Dark Age History* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2002), pp. 171 – 295; Jake King, “‘Lochy’ Names and Adomnán's *Nigra Dea*”, *Nomina*, 28 (2005), pp. 69 – 91.

unfavourably with contemporary Hiberno-Latin writing and with Bede.<sup>8</sup> The present study attempts to give a description, with examples, of the main stylistic features of Adomnán's writing in *VSC*, and also to consider why Adomnán used them. I argue that complaints about Adomnán's pomposity or obscurity are misplaced, as the elevated style of Adomnán's prose needs to be related to the prestige and importance of his subject matter.

The most detailed study of any aspect of Adomnán's prose style is Picard's article, "The metrical prose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*: an unusual system", in which he argues that Adomnán followed the teaching of the grammarians, while not being as rigid a stylist as some of his models (such as Jerome or Cassiodorus). He concludes that although *VSC* dates from the time of a general shift from metrical *clausulae* to the rhythms of accented prose, it shows signs of a good grounding in the traditions of metric and prosody, which are handled well and flexibly.<sup>9</sup>

## 2: Adomnán's language

### 2.1: Latin Style

*VSC* belongs to the earliest group of Irish hagiographical works, along with Cogitosus' *Vita Sanctae Brigitae*, Muirchú's *Vita Sancti Patricii* and Tírechán's compilation of Patrician traditions. All of these early texts are written in Latin, the common language of Western Christendom, but the native language of none of these writers. Hiberno-Latin, as an acquired language developed outwith the Empire, has a number of peculiarities, and indeed the Schaffhausen text of *VSC* is itself a good witness to some of these, being such an early manuscript.<sup>10</sup>

One peculiar development in Latin writing in Ireland was the emergence of the so-called Hisperic Latin style, named after *Hisperica Famina*. This poem, which probably dates from the sixth or seventh century, has certain stylistic and linguistic affinities with *Altus Prosator*, attributed to Columba, but is also abounds in obscure neologisms, Hebraisms and Hellenisms and other

<sup>8</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, [1<sup>st</sup> edn.], p. 161; Ó Riain, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints*, p. 53; Jean-Michel Picard, "Eloquentiae exuberantia: Words and Forms in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*", *Peritia*, 6-7 (1987-88), pp. 141 – 157, at p. 152; Meehan, *DLS*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Michel Picard, "The metrical prose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*: an unusual system", in Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (eds.), *Irland und Europa: Die Kirche im Frühmittelalter/ Ireland and Europe: The Early Church* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984), pp. 258 – 271.

<sup>10</sup> Picard, "The Schaffhausen Adomnán".

such “strange eccentric speech.”<sup>11</sup> Meehan was rather scathing in his assessment of Hisperic Latin:

The *Hisperica Famina* are evidence of the bizarre contortions of which the rhetorical groups, in isolation, were capable. Obscurity is mingled with flamboyance and turgidity: one gets the impression that glossaries of rare words were being used by someone of extremely immature taste and judgement.<sup>12</sup>

It should be stressed that while Adomnán's style can be complex and perhaps somewhat eccentric, it never reaches the heights (or depths) of obscurity that we see in Hisperic texts. While it should be borne in mind that *VSC* was produced in a literary milieu in which the famed difficulty of *Hisperica Famina* was appreciated and imitated, and while Iona itself may have been one of the centres from which Hisperic Latin emanated, Adomnán is not himself a Hisperic writer.<sup>13</sup>

### 2.1.1: Syntax

One of the most distinctive features of Adomnán's prose style is his unusual syntax, with intricate sentence constructions relying on grammatical suffixes to link words, and not on word order – a technique known as hyperbaton.<sup>14</sup> An example can be found in the famous story of the beast in the River Ness (with the words that “should” go together indicated by colour):

*Quo sancti audito praedicabilis uiri praecepto, Lugneus mocu-Min nihil moratus obsecundans, depositis excepta uestimentis tunica, inmittit sé in aquas.*

[Hearing this order of the holy and memorable man, Lugne mocu Min obeyed without delay, and putting off his clothes, excepting his tunic, plunged into the

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<sup>11</sup> F.J. Raby, *A History of Christian-Latin Poetry from the Beginnings to the close of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927), pp. 131 – 134.

<sup>12</sup> Meehan, *DLS*, p. 5, n. 3.

<sup>13</sup> For Hisperic Latin, and the possible role of Iona in its development, see Paul Grosjean, “*Confusa Caligo: remarques sur les Hisperica famina*”, *Celtica*, 3 (1956), pp. 35 – 85.

<sup>14</sup> The Andersons say, “He creates difficulty for his readers or hearers by his trick of showing the grammatical connexion between words through their endings, or grammatical forms, somewhat in the manner of Latin verse, instead of through the natural order of the words in prose. His sentences are often rather intricate, but never unintelligible; and with familiarity the intricacy becomes less disconcerting.” *VSC* [1<sup>st</sup> edn.], p. 161.

water.]<sup>15</sup>

Another good example can be found in II.38:

*Quo sancti audito uerbo quidam alacer iuuenis ad oram cucurrit maris.*

[Hearing these words of the saint, one active lad ran to the sea-shore.]<sup>16</sup>

Not all of the examples of Adomnán's use of this technique are quite so elaborate, however. We also find much simpler constructions, such as the following example, which is the chapter heading for I.17:

*De Colcio, Aido Draigniche filio, a nepotibus Fechureg orto, et de quodam occulto matris eius peccato, profetia sancti.*

[Prophecy of the saint concerning Colcu, Áid Draigniche's son, one of the descendants of Féchre; and concerning a hidden sin of his mother.]<sup>17</sup>

Deployed as a stylistic device, this certainly makes for a more complex text than if the sentences were written with a more standard word order, adding to the impression that this was an intricately constructed composition, carefully produced to the highest literary standard in a manner appropriate for the *vita* of Iona's founder and patron.<sup>18</sup>

Hyperbaton was a well-established rhetorical turn in Latin writing, though rather more common in poetry than in prose.<sup>19</sup> It is common enough in the Irish context, including in texts we might not typically think of as being literary, such as annals.<sup>20</sup> Meehan, who is not enamoured of

<sup>15</sup> VSC, II.27.

<sup>16</sup> VSC, II.38.

<sup>17</sup> VSC, I.17.

<sup>18</sup> Kempshall, *Rhetoric and the Writing of History*, writes about the use of techniques and thinking about rhetoric in medieval historiography, but much of what he writes applies well to hagiography as well. The concept of *elocutio*, the choice of language and vocabulary appropriate for the argument being made, is relevant here (p. 265, p. 491). The chapter, "Invention and Narrative", pp. 265 – 349, has much that is illuminating for reading VSC, although much of the focus is on the construction of works with a linear, chronological structure, which VSC does not have.

<sup>19</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, (trans.) Willard R. Trask (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948), pp. 274 – 275.

<sup>20</sup> Francis John Byrne, "Chiasmus and hyperbaton in the Annals of Ulster", in Michael Richter and Jean-Michel Picard (eds.), *Ogma: Essays in Celtic Studies in honour of Próinséas Ní Chatháin* (Dublin: Four Courts Press: 2002), pp. 54 – 64.

Adomnán's style, considers that his use of hyperbaton "...derive[s] from some sort of localized rhetorical trend, in which doubtless Adamnan was trained."<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Bullough considers Adomnán an innovator among the early group of Irish hagiographers in the extent to which he uses this form of decoration, as well as alliteration and *variatio*.<sup>22</sup>

### 2.1.2: Alliteration

Adomnán displays a marked fondness for alliteration – a feature of writing that would be especially prominent when *VSC* was read aloud. This is especially striking in the First Preface, in which Adomnán uses no fewer than eight alliterative phrases in the course of two paragraphs:

*f*ratrum *f*lagitationibus *o*bscundare *u*olens

[Wishing to respond to the importunity of the brothers]

*M*eminerintque regnum dei non in *e*loquentiae *e*xuberantia sed in *f*idei *f*lorulentia constare

[Let them remember that the kingdom of God inheres not in exuberance of rhetoric, but in the blossoming of faith.]<sup>23</sup>

*e*t quasi *p*auca de *p*lurimis

[only a few things out of very many]

*m*inima de *m*aximis *p*er *p*opulos fama de eodem beato uiro *d*eulgata *d*isperserit

[rumour has spread widely among the peoples only very little of the great matters concerning this blessed man]

<sup>21</sup> Meehan, *DLS*, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Bullough, "Columba, Adomnan and the Achievement of Iona, Part II", pp. 17 – 33, at p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> In Dorbbéne's manuscript the importance of this sentence to the preface is highlighted visually: the first loop of the initial *M* in *Meminerintque* is infilled in red, and the loops of the *S* in *sed* are infilled in yellow. Additionally, the concluding half of the sentence, *sed in fidei florulentia constare*, appears to be written slightly larger, and with slightly wider line-spacing than is used in the rest of the page, giving special emphasis to this dictum. Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 1.

*Hinc post hanc primam praefatiunculam*

[Here after this first slight preface]<sup>24</sup>

As discussed below, the remarks about the exuberance of eloquence are quite conventional, and there is certainly a tension between the form and the content in this case. Moreover, the effect of this opening salvo of alliteration, right here at the beginning of the work, could be seen as a kind of stylistic statement of intent. As with the use of illumination and of Greek letters, the intensive use of alliteration here, at the outset, is an indication of the status and prestige of the work, and therefore of its subject as well. Columba is a major saint, deserving a *vita* of the highest literary quality, and Adomnán is determined to provide him with one.

Alliteration is used in many other places in *VSC*, as well. For instance, we have two alliterative phrases in the short chapter concerning Nemán, son of Gruthrech:

*Hunc enim cum sanctus de malis suis corripere paruipendens sanctum subsannabat.*

[This man, when the saint rebuked him for his bad deeds, mocked him, with disdain.]

*Inimici tui repperient te in eodem cum meretrice cubantem cubiculo*

[Your enemies will discover you, lying in the same bedchamber with your harlot.]<sup>25</sup>

Less commonly, we sometimes encounter longer runs of three or four alliterating words, as in this example from I.48:

*Alio namque in tempore cum sanctus in Ioua inhabitaret insula...*

[At one time, while the saint was living in the island of [Iona]...]<sup>26</sup>

As noted above, Adomnán is hardly unique in using alliteration as a stylistic device, but

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<sup>24</sup> *VSC*, First Preface.

<sup>25</sup> *VSC*, I.39.

<sup>26</sup> *VSC*, I.48.



Bullough notes he does use it to a greater degree than the other early Irish hagiographers.<sup>27</sup>

### 2.1.3: Variatio

*Variatio*, or the use of synonyms as a stylistic device, is one of Adomnán's favourite literary technique. To return to the story of the beast in the River Ness, for instance, we find the animal is called both a *bestia* and a *bilua*, while a certain boat is both a *caupallus* and a *naviculus* (in addition to the *alnus* which the dead man's companions had used).<sup>28</sup> Whitley Stokes counted no fewer than nine words for boats used in *VSC*: *barca*, *curuca* (Old Irish *curach*), *navis longa*, *navis oneraria*, and *scapha* in addition to the three already mentioned.<sup>29</sup> Since at least two of these plainly refer to the very same boat, this should serve as a warning against placing too much weight on the exact meanings of individual words, and as a reminder that Adomnán was very fond of synonyms.<sup>30</sup> When we encounter variations in terminology, then, we may be as likely to be seeing Adomnán displaying his wide vocabulary for literary effect as actually different things. The breadth of his diction was held up by the Andersons as evidence of Adomnán's scholarly command of Latin;<sup>31</sup> Bullough took the opposite line, and argued that the abbot had a rather limited natural Latin diction, based mostly on the Vulgate, which he padded out by drawing from eclectic sources in a fairly haphazard manner.<sup>32</sup> Picard sets Adomnán's technique in context, considering that he goes beyond the usual stylistic requirements of the technique as practiced in the Isidorian tradition, and was quite prepared to sacrifice clarity of sense in order to connect words of different origins, which he does effectively.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Bullough, "Columba, Adomnan and the Achievement of Iona, Part II", pp. 17 – 33, at p. 21.

<sup>28</sup> *VSC*, II.27.

<sup>29</sup> Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), *The Tripartite Life of Patrick, with other documents relating to that saint* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1887) p. cxlix.

<sup>30</sup> The Andersons say, "Adomnan has also a habit of avoiding the repetition of a word by substituting for it a word of similar meaning, and in some cases a diminutive. This creates real ambiguity, since a word used a synonym may not retain its own proper meaning." Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, [1<sup>st</sup> edn.], p. 161.

<sup>31</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, [1<sup>st</sup> edn.], p. 161.

<sup>32</sup> Bullough, "Columba, Adomnan and the Achievement of Iona, Part II", p. 21. In "Part I" of this article, *SHR*, Vol. XLIV, No. 136 (1964), pp. 111 – 130, Bullough had said that "Adomnan can doubtless be given credit for his determination to get away from his models and for his efforts at originality, but hardly for his sense of style or his Latinity." (p. 128).

<sup>33</sup> Picard, "Eloquentiae exuberantia", p. 144.

#### 2.1.4: Diminutives

A not unrelated peculiarity of Adomnán's style is his habit of using diminutives, often apparently to indicate wretchedness - the dead man of the River Ness story, for instance, is a *homunculus* (he uses the synonym *homuncio* in several places as well, e.g. in I.38).<sup>34</sup> Once more, this introduces problems of precision at times, but allows Adomnán to vary his language and demonstrate the elasticity of Latinity, even if he overstretches it at times.<sup>35</sup>

This paints a rather different picture of Adomnán's style than the one he himself claims on the very first page of his work, in which he calls his words *inculta* ("rough, uncouth"), and reminds his readers that the kingdom of God is not to be found *in eloquentiae exuberantia sed in fidei florulentia* ("not in the exuberance of eloquence, but in the flourishing of faith").<sup>36</sup> This declaration, which itself displays alliteration in these contrasting pairs, is not so disingenuous as it might seem: Picard points out that it was a common enough protestation for Christian writers who were not opposed to artful writing as such, but wanted to set themselves apart from "the excessive refinement of the pagan rhetors of their time."<sup>37</sup> Kempshall gives a useful summary of the views of the twelfth-century writer Otto of Friesing, which, though late, is a good expression of the ideal:

His style may be uncultivated (*incultus*), but this is not to be scorned because, as the apostolic simplicity (*apostolica simplicitas*) of some of his sources demonstrates, sharp subtlety (*arguta subtilitas*) will sometimes (*non-numquam*) kindle error, whereas holy rusticity (*sancta rusticitas*) is always the friend of truth.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps the best-known use of this trope in an insular context is from Patrick's *Confessio*,<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See also Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, p. 121, n. 129, "perhaps no more is implied than a kindly patronage towards their lowly condition."

<sup>35</sup> Adomnán's tendency to use diminutives is so marked that Clancy and Márkus refer to it as supporting evidence for his authorship of some verses in Old Irish. See "Colum Cille do Día domm eráil", in Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 164 – 176, esp. p. 167 for comments on the use of diminutive forms.

<sup>36</sup> VSC, First Preface. Translation mine.

<sup>37</sup> Picard, "Eloquentiae exuberantia", pp. 152 – 153.

<sup>38</sup> Kempshall, *Rhetoric and the Writing of the History*, p. 116.

<sup>39</sup> The *Confessio* opens with "Ego Patricius peccator rusticissimus..." ([http://confessio.ie/etexts/confessio\\_Latin#01](http://confessio.ie/etexts/confessio_Latin#01) accessed 22/03/2017).

while Adomnán may be modelling this on Sulpicius' *Life of Saint Martin*.<sup>40</sup> A variant is also found in *The Life of Anthony* by Athanasius,<sup>41</sup> and in Christian thought the idea can be traced back to Christ's teachings concerning prayer in the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, according to Augustine, Christians could in good conscience write in a sophisticated manner, provided they were doing so for the right reasons – persuasion, teaching the truth and inspiring good deeds – and not merely out of vanity.<sup>43</sup>

## 2.2: Tres linguae sacrae

In early medieval Christendom, Hebrew (the language of the Old Testament), Greek (the language of the New Testament) and Latin (the language of the Western Church) were collectively considered as the *tres linguae sacrae*, the three holy languages. The three had been brought together in the inscription on Christ's cross, which had inadvertently proclaimed his Messiahship (John 19: 19 - 20), and since all three were the medium for the transmission of God's word in the Scriptures, the languages themselves assumed a sacred significance.<sup>44</sup> While interest in these languages as a holy linguistic triad certainly did not originate in and was not confined to Ireland, Hiberno-Latin writers do show a particular interest in etymologies, derivations and providing equivalents in these three languages.<sup>45</sup> Latin, of course, was the common language of Western Christendom, but Greek and especially Hebrew were far less widely known. Indeed, despite the interest shown in the latter two by Hiberno-Latin writers, McNally demonstrates that actual knowledge and understanding of them, especially of Hebrew,

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<sup>40</sup> Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini*, {ch?}: "...quia, ut sum natura infirmissimus, iudicia humana uitabam, ne, quod fore arbitror, sermo incultior legentibus displiceret, omniumque reprehensionis dignissimus iudicaret, qui materiem disertis merito scriptoribus reseruandam inprudens occupassem..."["... for being of a very diffident nature, I wanted to avoid people's criticisms. I feared that my unpolished style might offend my readers – as I am sure will happen – and I should be deemed deserving of general censure for having had the temerity to appropriate a subject better left to more competent writers." ] trans. White , *Early Christian Lives*, p. 134.

<sup>41</sup> Athanasius: ed. and French trans. G.J.M Bartelink , *Vie d'Antonie* (Paris: Imprimerie Paillart, 1994); "The Life of Anthony", trans. White , *Early Christian Lives*, pp. 3 – 70, pp. 53 - 59.

<sup>42</sup> Matthew 6:7, "*Orantes autem nolite multum loqui sicut ethnici putant enim quia in multiloquio suo exaudiantur.*"

<sup>43</sup> Kempshall, *Rhetoric and the Writing of History*, p. 371.

<sup>44</sup> Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> McNally, "The "Tres Linguae Sacrae", pp. 395 – 396.

was minimal, and that texts that use them often include quite basic errors, misunderstandings and (again, especially with regard to Hebrew) ghost words.<sup>46</sup>

Hebrew and Greek appear in *VSC* in a sort of holy supporting role, worked into the Latin to text to lend the prestige of the *tres linguae sacrae* to the work. What did it mean for Adomnán (and Dorbbéne) to write words in Hebrew and Greek set in an otherwise Latin text? Was this a display of erudition, an intellectual act of Christian devotion, a desire to provide their patron with a hagiography of the highest quality and status – or some combination of all of these? The discussion above about Adomnán's literary style and techniques should be borne in mind when considering his use of the *tres linguae sacrae*.

### 2.2.1: Hebrew

Hebrew was little known and used in Christendom, and until the thirteenth century there was no established tradition of learning that language in Europe aside from linguistic immersion in Jewish communities.<sup>47</sup> Since there were no such communities in Ireland or “Scottish” Dál Riata, Irish writers such as Adomnán acquired their knowledge of Hebrew from glossaries, used as didactic tools and interpretive aids, and from such explanations of Hebrew terms as are found in the Bible and Christian scholars such as Isidore and Jerome. This knowledge would fall far short of any reading fluency in the language, but it would give access to the meanings of Biblical place and personal names, and to allow some comparisons to be made with Greek and Latin terms. *DLS* gives us more evidence about Adomnán's knowledge of Hebrew than does *VSC*, and Meehan infers from it that Jerome's *Onomasticon* was one source that fed Adomnán's interest in Hebrew.<sup>48</sup> Most of the surviving glossaries postdate Adomnán considerably, but the so-called “O'Mulconry's Glossary” may have a core dating back as far the second half of the seventh century or the first half of the eighth, and thus could plausibly have been available to Adomnán.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 397 – 400.

<sup>47</sup> Pádraic Moran, “Hebrew in Early Irish Glossaries”, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 60 (2010), pp. 1 – 22, at p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> *DLS*, p. 14.

<sup>49</sup> Whitley Stokes, “O'Mulconry's glossary”, *Archiv für celtische Lexikographie* 1 (1900), pp. 232–324, 473–481. For dating, see Eoin Mac Neill, “De origine Scoticae linguae”, *Ériu* 11 (1932), pp. 112–129.

In *VSC*, Hebrew makes only one appearance, where Adomnán gives Columba's name in the *tres linguae sacrae*:

*Vir erat vitae venerabilis et beatae memoriae monasterium pater et fundator, cum Jona profeta omonimon sortitus nomen. Nam licet diverso trium diversarium sono linguarum unam tamen eandemque rem significat hoc quod ebreice dicitur jona, grecitas vero peristera vocitat et latina lingua columba nuncupatur.*

[There was a man of venerable life and blessed memory, the father and founder of monasteries, who received the same name as the prophet Jonah. For although sounding differently in the three different languages, yet what is pronounced *iona* in Hebrew, and what Greek calls *peristera*, and what in the Latin tongue is named *columba*, means one and the same thing [i.e. dove].]<sup>50</sup>

Note that neither here nor anywhere else in *VSC* does Adomnán use Columba's Irish name. This is the only instance of Hebrew in the entire text of *VSC*, and it is significant in terms of Adomnán's conception of language, and of the sacred nature of Hebrew, that it should be explicitly associated with Greek and Latin, as these languages are used to give equivalents for one term. For a Christian of the Western Church, like Adomnán, Hebrew was the most inaccessible of the *tres linguae sacrae*, but as one of those three, and indeed as the “mother of all languages and writing” according to Isidore,<sup>51</sup> it was important that it be present at this crucial point of the text. Here, where Adomnán writes of Iona's patron as being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, which of course descended upon Christ in the form of a dove at his baptism (Matthew 3: 13 – 17; Mark 1: 9 – 11; Luke 3: 21 – 22; John 1: 32 – 33), he brings as witness to Columba's sanctity no less than the three sacred languages of Scripture themselves.

Adomnán may have gotten his information about this Hebrew word from several sources. If O'Mulconry's Glossary was indeed available to him, he could have found the interpretation there.<sup>52</sup> Isidore is another likely source, as he uses the word in two of his etymologies, once for the Old Testament prophet Jonah, and once for the apostle Peter (Simon Bah-Jonah):

*Jonas interpretatur columba, sive dolens. Columba pro gemitu, quando in ventre*

<sup>50</sup> *VSC*, Second Preface.

<sup>51</sup> Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, p. 152.

<sup>52</sup> Stokes, “O'Mulconry's glossary”, p. 254, § 396.

*ceti triduo fuit...*

[Jonas means “dove”, or “the mournful”. “Dove” for his sighing when he was for three days in the belly of the whale...]

*Simon Bar-iona in lingua nostra sonat filius columbae, et est nomen Syrum pariter et Hebraeum. Bar quippe Syra lingua filius, Iona Hebraice columba; utroque sermone dicitur Bariona.*

[Simon *Bar-iona* in our language means “son of a dove”, and is equally a Syrian and a Hebrew name. For *bar* in the Syrian language is “son,” *Iona* in Hebrew is “dove”; both languages say *Bar-iona*.]<sup>53</sup>

While these would certainly have provided Adomnán with the Hebrew word corresponding to “Columba”, if we look not only at the word itself but its context in the sentence in which it appears, then the closest parallel to Adomnán’s passage comes from a letter by Columba’s namesake, Columbanus, who wrote of his own name in terms strikingly similar to those used by Adomnán:

*mihi Ionae hebraice, Peristerae graece, Columbae latine, potius tantum uestrae idiomate linguae nanto, licet prisco utor hebraeo nomine.*

[I am called Jonah in Hebrew, Peristera in Greek, Columba in Latin, yet so much is my birth-right in the idiom of your language, though I use the ancient Hebrew name of Jonah.]<sup>54</sup>

The letter’s use of all of the three sacred languages in this manner, giving the forms of the same name as that which Adomnán was writing about, make this the most likely immediate source. Wherever he first encountered the interpretation of the Hebrew name *Iona*, it seems

<sup>53</sup> Isidore, *Etymologiae*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911), VII.8.18 and VII.9.4 (translations mine). Moran, “Hebrew in Early Irish Glossaries”, pp. 4 – 5, demonstrates that Jerome’s *Liber de nominibus Hebraicis* was known in Ireland in the seventh century and that Adomnán used it in *DLS*, but this work contains no entry for “Jonah”.

<sup>54</sup> Columbanus, *Epistula V*, § 16, ed. and trans. G.S.M. Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1957), pp. 36 – 57, at pp. 54 – 55.

likely that he borrowed this triple-naming of Iona, Peristera, Columba from Columbanus.

### 2.2.2: Greek

Greek has a somewhat more prominent presence in *VSC* than does Hebrew. While, like Hebrew, it is only explicitly referred to here, the Greek alphabet is used in different ways in the manuscripts, as discussed in Chapter 1, above. In this very passage, the Greek word for dove, *peristera* is rendered in Greek capitals, ΠΗΡΙΣΤΗΡΑ. Similarly, in the Schaffhausen manuscript, the ethnonym Corcu Réti, though Irish, is given with Greek capital consonants in I.47. This can have no such theological significance as *peristera* does, and it is the only Irish name thus rendered. Picard, who saw in this narrative a reflection of a mostly forgotten mythological tale, and noting the fears of witchcraft (*maleficio*) which Góire expresses, suggested that the use of Greek letters is part of the story's “para-natural” setting.<sup>55</sup> If this is not simply a random display of erudition on the part of Dorbéne (or Adomnán), he may well be right, and the use of a foreign alphabet is a kind of textual “othering”, and indeed Martin Irvine points out that the medieval scholars who compiled grammatical tracts were often deeply interested in the occult associations of foreign alphabets.<sup>56</sup> However, since Greek letters are also used in the decidedly non-magical and non-theological *finit* to Book II in Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1 we should perhaps be wary of leaning too heavily on Greek letters as evidence for an archaic mythological presence. Finally, Greek is used in an explicitly Christian manner on the last page of Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, when it is used for a copy of the Lord's Prayer.

These four instances show interesting variations in the use of Greek letters: once for a solitary Greek word, once as letters for an Irish word, once as letters for a Latin phrase, once as a complete, self-contained Greek text. While we can easily imagine the writing of the Lord's Prayer in Greek as a devotional exercise, and the use of Greek to render a Greek word in the Preface as simply a linguistically or even theologically appropriate display of erudition, the other two uses are not so straightforward. One may be an example of “para-natural” othering, and the other simply a form of educated textual play. Together, they point to a sophisticated appreciation for the Greek alphabet and language and to its application within a non-Greek text

<sup>55</sup> Jean-Michel Picard, “The Strange Death of Guaire Mac Áedáin”, in Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach and Kim McCone (eds.), *Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1989) pp. 367 – 375, at p. 372.

<sup>56</sup> Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, p. 103.



produced in a non-Greek speaking environment among men who had probably never heard Greek spoken. These uses of Greek (and, once, Hebrew) are indications of the intellectual and educational milieu of Iona, suggesting a place that was curious about languages and keen to pursue their study. Further evidence for this, and for Adomnán's interest in Greek, can be found in Adomnán's other major work, *DLS*. At the conclusion of his description of Mount Thabor, he writes:

*Sed inter haec et hoc etiam notandum quod illus famosi montis nomen Grecis litteris sic oporteat scribi, per Θ et Ω longam ΘABΩP, Latinis uero litterulis cum aspiratione Thabor; producta o littera. Huius orthografia uocabuli in libris Grecitatis est reperta.*

[At this juncture it should be noted that the name of that famous mountain ought to be written in Greek letters with Θ and long Ω thus, ΘABΩP. Whereas in Latin letters it ought to be written with aspiration and long o – Thabor. The orthography of this word was found in Greek books.]<sup>57</sup>

Unfortunately, Adomnán does not tell us which Greek books he drew upon for this information, but the comment is sufficient to indicate a careful engagement with Greek orthography, an erudition which Adomnán would later use to raise the intellectual and literary level of *VSC*. Although, in common with other Hiberno-Latin writers, his abilities in Greek were probably quite limited (there is no indication that he attempted to write so much as a full sentence in the language), his interest at the level of individual words (and their theological significance) and letters was lively. Whatever the precise nature of the sources at his disposal – the unidentified “Greek books” must have consisted at the very least of alphabetic guidance, and glossaries or word lists of unknown extent and depth of detail – he used them carefully, raising the dignity and numinous quality of the text, demonstrating his own erudition and demanding the same from his readers.

### 2.2.3: Irish: People and places

Finally, Adomnán's choice of language in the names of people and places is interesting. This is not a study of Adomnán's assimilation of Irish and Pictish names to Latin orthography,<sup>58</sup> or

<sup>57</sup> *DLS*, II.27, pp. 96 – 97.

<sup>58</sup> For which, see Anthony Harvey, “Some Observations on Celtic-Latin Name Formation”, in John Carey, John T. Koch and Pierre-Yves Lambert (eds.), *Ildánach, Ildírech: A Festschrift for Proinsias Mac Cana* (Andover and

the integration of words from these languages into the Latin grammatical structure, but rather a catalogue to illustrate how Adomnán handles the presentation of cognomens and place names from Irish in a Latin text. As can be seen from the tables below, he does not adopt a consistent approach of translation or retaining the original form: sometimes he does one, sometimes the other, very occasionally both.

Table 1 presents all of the personal names and one ethnonym in *VSC* which either contain a nickname (Latinised or not), or for which Adomnán provides explanations or draws attention to the Irish origin of the names (as he apologises for in the First Preface). The list is inclusive rather than exclusive in order to illustrate the variety of approaches Adomnán takes to the meanings and origins of personal names – something which his treatment of Jonah/ ΠΗΠΙΣΤΗΡΑ/ Columba in his Second Preface tells us was of interest to him. Of course, since these are the names of other, less important, characters than the saint, their names are not treated in such great detail as Columba's is.

Chapter 3, Table 1: Personal names, and one ethnonym

Name	Reference	Language	Comment
Aidus Niger	I.36	Latin	<i>Aidum cognomento Nigrum</i> (acc.)
Aidus Slane	I.14	Irish	<i>Aidus Slane lingua nominatus est scotica</i>
Colman Canis	I.48	Latin	[Andersons: “This renders the Irish <i>cú</i> 'dog'”]
Columbus Coilrigin	III.9	Irish	<i>Columbi ... Coilrigin cognomento</i>
Colum Craig	I.2	Irish	<i>qui scotice uocitabatur Colum Craig</i>
Echodius Find and Eochodius Buide	I.9	Irish	
Ernene	III.23	Latin and Irish	<i>... cuius nomen etiam potest dici 'ferreolus' scotice uero Ernene...</i>
Lam Des	II.24	Latin and Irish	<i>... nomen latine manus dextera dicitur...</i> <i>... ex qua die Lam Des...</i> <i>... ubi ipse solus Lam Des...</i>
Libranus harundineti	II.19	Latin	<i>Tu Libranus uocaberis eo quod sis liber...</i> <i>Qui uidelicet Libranus ideo harudineti est uocatis quia in harudineto multis annis</i>

Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 1999), pp. 53 – 62, and Byrne, “Chiasmus and hyperbaton in the Annals of Ulster”, pp. 62 – 64.

			<i>harudines colegendo laborauerat.</i>
Lugidus Clodos	I.39	Latin	
Lugaid Lathir	II.5	Irish	<i>...aduocans fratrem Lugaidum nomine, cuius cognomentum scotice Lathir dicitur.</i> <sup>59</sup>
Lugneo Tidicula	II.41	Latin	<i>Lugneo guberneta, cognomento Tidicula</i>
Mac Naue	Second Preface,	Latin and Irish	<i>... latine filius nauis dici potest, scotia uero lingua mac naue</i>
Nessano curvo	II.20	Latin	
Oingussus Bronbachal	I.13	Irish	<i>Hic est Oingussius cuius congnoimentum Bronbachal...</i>
Ind Aithir	III.7	Irish	<i>prouincia... anteriorum, qui scotice ind Airthir nuncupantus</i>

In contrast to personal names, Adomnán's handling of place names is rather more straightforward. Usually, he simply uses the name of the place where a narrative is set with no comment or translation at all. The exceptions are listed in Table 2. Mostly, they consist of Adomnán drawing attention to the fact that the narrative happens in a place known by the Irish name X, on four occasions he offers Latin versions and not the Irish originals, and on two he gives both.

### Chapter 3, Table 2: Place names

Place name	Reference	Comment
Ached-bou	II.13	<i>...in suo conuersans monasterio, quod latine campulus bouis dicitur, scotice uero Ached-bou</i>
Aithchambas Art-muircho	II.22	<i>...in loco quid scotice uocitatur Aithchambas Art-muirchol</i>
Aithrago	II.45	<i>...insulam quae scotice uocitatur Aithrago</i>
Artchain	I.36	<i>...monasterii fundatore quod scotice Artchain nuncupatur in Ethica terra.</i>
Birra	II.3 III.11	<i>...illius monasterii fundator quod scotice Birra nuncupatur...</i> <i>...illius monasterii fundatoris quod scotice Birra nuncupatur...</i>
Boend	II.8	<i>...in flumine quod scotice Boend uocitatur...</i>
Bos	I.42	<i>...prope hostium fluminis quod latine Bos dicitur...</i>

<sup>59</sup> The Andersons note: “*Lathir* here, and *laitirus* [II.38] are equally well attested as Adomnan's spellings. They are epithets of the same man, and should express the same attribute. But they are inconsistent forms. *Láitir*, 'strong' would make sense, but it is difficult to decide that *laithir* is wrong”, Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, [1<sup>st</sup> edn.], p. 336, n. 8. The note in the 1991 edition is, “*laithir*, apparently the same epithet as the latinized *laitirus* in 86a.” Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, p. 101, n. 13.

Cambas	I.49	<i>...ad monasterium sancti Comgil quod scotice dicitur Cambas.</i>
Colini finchoil	III.23	<i>In illo namque monasterio quod scotica nominatur lingua Cloni finchoil...</i>
Cnoc-angel	III.16	<i>Unde hodieque et locus illius angelici conducti rem in eo gestam suo proprio protestatur uocabulo, qui latine potest dici colloculus angelorum, scotice uero Cnoc-angel.</i>
Coire-salcháin	I.46	<i>...in loco... qui scotice uocitatur Coire-salcháin</i>
Cuul Eilne	I.37	<i>...locum quie scotice nuncupatur Cuul Eilne</i>
Daire Calcig	II.39	<i>...ad locum qui scotice uocitatur Daire Calcig peruenit.</i>
Lathreg inden	I.20	<i>...cuiusdam cellulae dominus permansit quae scotice Lathreg inden dicitur.</i>
Longa	II.24	<i>...in illa insula factum est quae latine longa uocitari potest.</i>
Munitio magna	II.4	<i>...sedens in monticulo qui latine munitio magna dicitur...</i>
Nigra Dea	II.37	<i>...in fluio quie latine dici potest nigra dea.<sup>60</sup></i>
Ondemmone	I.7	<i>...bellum quod scotice dicitur Ondemmone...</i>
Snám luthir	II.43	<i>...illius monasterii fundator quod scotica uocitatur lingua Snám luthir...</i>
Trioit	I.40	<i>...monasteriolum quod scotice Trioit uocitatur...</i>

The fact that Adomnán offers translations for certain place or personal names, or at least indicates where a difficult name may be of Irish origin, points to an intended readership that was wider than the Columban *familia* in Ireland, or even the Irish Church more broadly. It also points to a curiosity about, and interest in, names and languages, which we can also see demonstrated clearly in *DLS*, as for instance when he writes of the well of Samaria:

*Arculfus sacerdos sanctus regionem Samariae peragrans ad eiusdem prouinciae peruenit ciuitatem quae Ebraicae dicitur Sichem, Graeca uero et Latina consuetudine Sicima nominatur; quae quamlibet uitiose Sichar uocitari solet.*

[The holy priest Arculf, traversing the region of Samaria, came to the city of that province called in Hebrew Sichem, by Greek and Latin usage Sicima. It is wont to be called Sichar too, though wrongly.]<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> The River Lochy, in Lochaber. Jake King argues on linguistic grounds that this was already a false etymology in Adomnán's day and that the name should more properly mean "the dark river" or "the shining river": King, "Lochy' Names and Adomnán's *Nigra Dea*". No such "black goddess" is otherwise attested.

<sup>61</sup> *DLS*, II.21, pp. 90 – 91.

In this work, he also draws attention to the Hebrew field name Acheldemach (*De illo agellulo qui Ebraice Acheldemach uocitatur*), points out that the Hebrew and Syriac languages call Tyre, “Soar”, that Alexandria used to be called “No” in Hebrew but is now named after Alexander and that Constantinople takes its name of its founder added to the Greek word for city.<sup>62</sup>

So far, this study has considered Adomnán's use of language within *VSC*, looking at aspects of his Latin style, and his use of Hebrew, Greek and Old Irish within the Latin text. While more detailed research is needed to investigate such things as his models and his educational background, it is clear that Adomnán was not only skilled in languages and language use, not only curious about the forms and function of languages and foreign words, he not only had an eye for relationships between words and how to match them across linguistic boundaries, but was also keenly aware of the theological significance of language as well. He deployed his erudition in such a way that the glory of both God and his patron would be magnified. This required the use to varying degrees of all three of the sacred languages of the Church (none of which he spoke natively) and also communication between his (and Columba's) Irish-speaking world and the wider Christian community across Europe and beyond. To do so needed a skilful handling of different languages with different functions within a Latin framework, resulting in complex relationships between four languages in the text of *Vita Sancti Columbae*.

### 3: Vernacular languages

In addition to his use of different languages within *VSC*, Adomnán also makes a few direct comments on language use which can help us to understand something of his language ideology, as well as of the linguistic landscape of early medieval northern Britain. Here, we will first consider Adomnán's treatment of Irish, before going on to discuss his treatment of Pictish.

#### 3.1: Irish

Adomnán makes few direct comments on Irish, if we set aside those about place and personal names noted above. In the First Preface, however, he implores his readers not to condemn the deeds he records on account of the obscurity of the occasional Irish words he uses in the text:

<sup>62</sup> *DLS*, I.19, pp. 62 – 63; II.29, pp. 98 – 99; II.30, pp. 98 – 99; III.2, pp. 108 – 109.

*Et nec ob aliqua scoticae vilis videlicet linguae aut humana onomata aut gentium obscura locorumve vocabula, quae ut puto inter alias exterarum gentium diversas vilescunt linguas, utilium et non sine divina opitulatione gestarum dispiciant rerum pronuntiationem.*

[Let them not despise the publication of deeds that are profitable, and that have not been accomplished without the help of God, on account of some unfamiliar words of the Irish tongue, a poor language, designations of men, or names of tribes and places; words that, I suppose, are held to be of no value, among other different tongues of foreign peoples.]<sup>63</sup>

This is an interesting statement, for two reasons. Firstly, it makes clear that *VSC* was intended for a wider audience than simply the “home consumption” of the Columban *familia* or the Irish church more generally, as befitted a work produced by so important a political figure as Adomnán. Secondly, it is at odds with the generally high prestige which early Irish tradition accorded to the vernacular. We should bear in mind the account in *Auraicept na n-Éces*, which is of an uncertain but probable seventh-century date, which makes the claim that Irish was constructed from the best elements of the other languages of the world following the confusion of tongues at Babel.<sup>64</sup> This confidence and pride in Irish matches well with the impressive body of vernacular literature which was being produced – some of it, quite possibly, written by Adomnán himself.<sup>65</sup>

Clearly, Adomnán recognises a hierarchy of language, in which Latin outranks Irish, at least for the purposes of writing a hagiography aimed at a wide audience including non-speakers of Irish; but this would not necessitate remarks which undermine the value of Irish. One suspects that these lines were not especially well received when read and heard in the Irish-speaking monasteries of the Columban *familia*, especially given that they were written by an abbot who had been influential in convincing many Irish churches to adopt the “Roman” method of calculating the date of Easter.<sup>66</sup> Even so, Adomnán does not seem to put this language ideology into practice: he uses Irish words fairly often in *VSC*. We have seen his use of Irish in the place

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<sup>63</sup> *VSC*, First Preface.

<sup>64</sup> George Calder (ed. and trans.), *Auraicept na n-Éces: The Scholars' Primer* (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1917), pp. 8 – 17.

<sup>65</sup> See the text and notes to “Colum Cille do Día domm eráil”, in Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 164 – 176.

<sup>66</sup> Bede, *HE*, V.15.

and personal names tabulated above (to say nothing of the many such names which were not included in the tables because he allows them to pass without comment), but his use of Irish goes further than this. For instance, the chapter heading to I.43 reads:

*De duobus tigernís sancti uaticinatio uiri, qui ambo motuís uulneribus disperierant*

[The holy man's words concerning two lords who had both perished by mutually inflicted wounds]<sup>67</sup>

*Tigernís* is a Latin form of the Old Irish *tigern*, a masculine o-stem noun which the *DIL* glosses as “lord”. While the two men in question are later referred to as *regii generis uiri* (“men of royal birth”) and *nobiles uiri* (“noble men”), *VSC*'s non-Gaelic audiences may have found this word rather perplexing. It is not glossed in Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1 (p. 43). As to the B manuscripts which are much later in date and were not produced in Irish-speaking areas, the word is neither glossed nor replaced with a synonym in either British Library MS Additional 35110 (fol. 112 r) or in British Library MS Royal 8 D IX (fol. 17 r). The relevant folio has unfortunately been lost from British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III, so its handling of this word cannot now be checked. The scribes and audiences of these later manuscripts must have been able to infer from the rest of the chapter what this alien word meant, but no apparatus is provided in those manuscripts to make sense of it in the chapter heading itself, when it is encountered. What makes Adomnán's word choice here interesting is that *tigern* is not an especially technical term in Old Irish: it is not used to denote any of the grades of lordship in the status tract *Críth Gablach*, which was probably compiled in the early eighth century.<sup>68</sup> It has not been used to carry a special sense that would not survive translation. Why use it, then? Why not *dominus*, or another such common Latin word? There seems to be no obvious answer, and no obvious reason why Adomnán should have chosen to use this word, but it suggests that he was perhaps not so dismissive of Irish as he appears to be in the First Preface.<sup>69</sup>

There is a similar occurrence in II.12, though this is harder to interpret. Columba's ship is caught in a storm, and the saint joins the sailors in trying to bail water out of the ship.

<sup>67</sup> *VSC*, I.43.

<sup>68</sup> Binchy (ed.), *Críth Gablach*, p. xiv. See also Nerys Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen: The Social Structure of Early Medieval Ireland* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp. 196 – 205. Sharpe, *Life*, p. 145, translates this as “rulers”.

<sup>69</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Bill Aird for the plausible suggestion that Adomnán may have used the term as an ethnic signifier, to indicate that these two lords were Irish.



*Nautae tum forte sancto sentinam cum illis exaurire conanti aiunt: 'Quod nun agis non magnopere nobis proficit periclitantibus; exorare potius debes pro pereuntibus.' Quo audito aquam cessat amaram ex inani ré hi nin glas, dulcem uero et intentam precem coepit ad dominum fundere.*

[Then it happened that the sailors said to him, as he tried with them to bail the water out of the ship: 'What you are doing now does not very greatly profit us in our danger. You should rather pray for us who are perishing.' Hearing this, he ceased vainly to pour bitter water into the green wave, and began to pour out sweet and fervent prayer to the Lord.]<sup>70</sup>

In Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, p. 62, the Irish phrase is rendered *hīnīn glās*. The B manuscripts bring the phrase together as one word, *hininglas*.<sup>71</sup> In none of the manuscripts is this phrase glossed or marked out as unusual in any way. *Nin*, as the Andersons note, is in *DIL* as a poetic term for a wave. The Andersons seem to suggest that this was a proverbial expression: "To pour water into the green wave, i.e. the deep sea, would typify futile action; cf. Ovid's *in mare fundat aquas*."<sup>72</sup> There is a close Irish parallel to Ovid's phrase, for in the version of *Lebor Bretnach* preserved in *Lebor na hUidre*, we find the following comment:

*... ferta tra Pátraic do innisin dúibsi, a fíru Hérend, is usce do loch insin.*

[... to tell of Patrick's miracles to you, men of Ireland, that is [like carrying] water to a loch.]<sup>73</sup>

We might also compare this to Amos 6: 11, in which the prophet compares the foolishness of Israel's moral perversions to that of ploughing the ocean with cattle. Sharpe is sceptical of this interpretation, noting that it cannot be proven to be correct, and depends only on the interpretation of this one example.<sup>74</sup> It is likely that this phrase would have been even more confusing to audiences without any Irish than the *tigernis* would have been. There, it would have been clear at least that two of whatever a *tigernis* was had killed each other, and the text

<sup>70</sup> VSC, II.12.

<sup>71</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, pp. 110 – 111, n. g.

<sup>72</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, p. 111, n. 139.

<sup>73</sup> R.I. Best and O. Bergin (eds.), *Lebor na hUidre: Book of the Dun Cow* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1929), p. 10, lines 273 – 274. Translation mine.

<sup>74</sup> Sharpe, *Life*, p. 323, n. 236.

in the chapter itself would have cleared up any confusion about what had happened, if not about why Adomnán had used this word. There is no such obvious context that would have helped audiences to interpret *hi nin glas*. Once more, we must suspect that the central and late medieval scribes and audiences of the B manuscripts found this phrase rather perplexing.

We should remember, however, that Adomnán was working to develop a cult which had a strong Irish-language element to it. Adomnán himself tells us of vernacular hymns to Columba, which were current at a popular level, among people who do not seem to have been especially pious devotees of the saint:

*Sed et hoc etiam non praetereundum uidetur, quod eiusdem beati uiri per quaedam scoticae lingae laudum ipsius carmina et nominis commemorationem quamlibet scelerati laicae conversationis homines et sanguinarii, ea nocte qua eadem decantauerant cantica, de manibus inimicorum qui eandem eorumdem cantorum domum circumsteterant sint liberati; qui flammam inter et gladios et lanceas incolomes euassere. Mirumque in modum pauci ex ipsis, qui easdem sancti uiri commemorationis quasi paruipendentes canere noluerant decantationes, in illo emulorum impetu soli disperierant.*

[This also seems to be a thing that should not be passed unnoticed: that certain lay people of the same blessed man, though they were guilty men and blood-stained, were through certain songs of his praises in the Irish tongue, and the commemoration of his name, delivered, on the night in which they had chanted those songs, from the hands of their enemies who had surrounded the house of the singers; and they escaped unhurt, through flames, and swords, and spears. A few of them had refused to sing, as if valuing little the chantings of the holy man's commemoration, and miraculously those few alone had perished in the enemies' assault.]<sup>75</sup>

Adomnán goes on to say that similar miracles have been reported in *diuersis locis et temporibus in Scotia et Britannia*, suggesting that these hymns were widely known. Unfortunately, we have no further information on the hymns, and Adomnán does not quote from them, even in Latin translation. We can only speculate as to whether Dallán Forgaill's poem, “Amra Choluimb Chille”, composed shortly after the saint's death, might have been one of them – certainly in a later period it was recited, but we cannot know how many vernacular hymns in

<sup>75</sup> VSC, I.1.

his honour there may once have been which are no longer extant.<sup>76</sup> Whether or not Adomnán was including “Amra Choluimb Chille” in this miracle narrative, it seems unlikely that he did not know it. The vernacular strand to Columba's cult in Adomnán's time should serve as a reminder that it is problematic to draw hard-and-fast lines between the vernacular-native culture of early medieval Ireland and its Latin-European-ecclesiastical culture. This is not the place to rehearse the often rather heated debates between the “nativist” and “anti-nativist” schools which contest the origins and interpretations of many aspects of early Irish history, culture, literature and law; it should suffice here to note that Columba's cult was developed, mediated and propagated bilingually.<sup>77</sup> Adomnán experienced it as a bilingual cult, with such elements as Cumméne's *Liber de Virtutibus Sancti Columbae*,<sup>78</sup> (an important source for Adomnán's work) and possibly Columba's own poetry in Latin,<sup>79</sup> and poems like “Amra Choluimb Chille” and the now-lost hymns he mentions in Irish. It is therefore not entirely unexpected that Irish-language elements should appear in *VSC*, and perhaps indicates that Adomnán's remarks about Irish are a rhetorical device, and not to be taken at face value.

The Irish language may also make an oblique appearance in the story about Columba's prophecy of the death of the poet Cronan.<sup>80</sup> There is no indication at all that Cronan was a cleric, or that he composed religious poems, but also no indication of a fundamental division between the world of the poets and the world of the monks – indeed, the saint's companions are surprised that he did not ask Cronan to perform one of his compositions, *ex more* (“according to custom”). The saint's reluctance to do so stems not from a rejection of Irish vernacular culture, or suspicion of a poetic tradition that stands outside of clerical control, but simply because he knows prophetically the poet is soon to be killed by his enemies, and therefore feels that something as joyous as song would be inappropriate. This episode, seemingly the first manifestation of the long-standing association of Columba with the *fili*, does not make any direct reference to the Irish language or to ideas about its worth, but clearly places Columba within the cultural milieu of the native aristocracy appropriate to his birth, a milieu in which

<sup>76</sup> Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, p. 96. See also Jan Erik Rekdal, “A monstrance for an absent poem: the reciting of *Amra Coluim Cille*”, in Richter and Picard (eds.), *Ogma*, pp. 224 – 229.

<sup>77</sup> For a brief overview, especially as it relates to issues of Latin – Irish bilingualism and the “two Irelands”, see Johnston, *Literacy and Identity*, pp. 27 – 42.

<sup>78</sup> For which, see Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry*, pp. 134 – 136.

<sup>79</sup> “Altus prosator”, “Adiutor laborantium” and “Noli Pater”, in Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, pp. 39 – 68, 69 – 82, and 82 – 95, respectively.

<sup>80</sup> *VSC*, I.42.

poets composing in the vernacular, and therefore by extension the use of the vernacular itself, had an important social role and high prestige.

### 3.2 Pictish

The notoriously poor documentary evidence that survives from early medieval Scotland has meant that the nature of the Pictish language remains somewhat obscure to modern scholarship. Even so, *VSC* provides some evidence, and as with so many other aspects of early Scottish history, has been used in discussions on Pictish language matters. While this thesis is not concerned with issues of historical linguistics *per se*, it seems appropriate at this juncture to review what Adomnán has to tell us about Pictish.

Firstly, he seems to confirm what Bede tells us: there was such a thing as a Pictish language.<sup>81</sup> This is inferred from two episodes in *VSC* in which Columba, when talking with Picts, is said to have spoken through an interpreter:

*Qui statim uerbo dei a sancto per interpretaem recepto credens ab eodem babtizatus est.*

[And as soon as he [Artbranán] had, through an interpreter, received the word of God from the saint, he believed and was baptized by him.]<sup>82</sup>

*Illo in tempore quo sanctus Columba in Pictorum prouincia per aliquot demorabatur dies, quidam cum tota plebeus familia uerbum uitae per interpretatorem sancto predicante uiro audiens credidit, credensque babtizatus est maritus cum marita libeisque et familiaribus.*

[At the same time when Saint Columba passed some days in the province of the Picts, a certain layman and his whole household heard and believed the word of life, through an interpreter, at the preaching of the holy man; and, believing, was

<sup>81</sup> Bede, *HE*, I.1, pp. 16 – 17. *Haec in praesenti iuxta numerum librorum quibus lex diuina scripta est, quinque gentium linguis unam eademque summae ueritatis et uerae sublimatatis scientiam scrutatut et confitetur, Anglorum uidelicet Brettonum Scottorum Pictorum et Latinorum, quae meditatione scripturarum ceteris omnibus est facta communis.* [“At the present time, there are five languages in Britain, just as the divine law is written in five books, all devoted to seeking out and setting forth one and the same kind of wisdom, namely the knowledge of sublime truth and of true sublimity. These are the English, British, Irish, Pictish, as well as the Latin languages; through the study of the scriptures, Latin is in general use among them all.”]

<sup>82</sup> *VSC*, I.33.

baptized, the husband, with his wife and children, and his servants.]<sup>83</sup>

These episodes have generally been understood as evidence that Pictish and Irish were not mutually intelligible languages. The fact that no interpreter is mentioned in any of the other interactions Columba has with Picts, however, may problematise this somewhat. Skene, who believed “that the difference between Pictish and Irish may not have been greater than that between Breton or Cornish and Welsh”,<sup>84</sup> argued that the upper-class Picts with whom Columba spoke (Bruide, Broichan, Emchath and Virolec) needed no interpreter because they, like the saint, possessed the necessary level of education to be able to accommodate slight but consistent linguistic differences, while Artbranán and the unnamed Pictish man and his family did not. While not without its merits, this argument has two flaws. Firstly, the absence of evidence should not be used as evidence of absence: we cannot assume that interpreters were not present on the other occasions simply because they are not explicitly referred to. It may be that the narratives that do not mention interpreters come from a source different from those which do; or that Adomnán only records the presence of Columba's own interpreter, and not that of, say, Bruide's own court interpreter, or the use of Broichan's Irish slave-girl in this role.<sup>85</sup> It may also be that the interpreter's presence is taken as read in some of these narratives: note that the encounters with Broichan and the one with Bruide's closed gates take place immediately after that of the baptism of the Pictish family. Other episodes may also originally have had a similar chronological arrangement which has been lost in Adomnán's thematic arrangement of his material. Equally, we might simply re-frame Skene's point about education, and postulate that the more educated, upper-class members of Pictish society had learnt Irish to some degree. All of this is speculative, but it demonstrates that the existence of Pictish as a distinct language from Irish, already known from Bede, cannot be dismissed on the basis of Adomnán, or argued down to a difference of dialect that educated people could negotiate.

With respect to the value of *VSC* as a source for studying Pictish, it should also be noted that Adomnán preserves a handful of personal names that are otherwise unattested. These are

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<sup>83</sup> *VSC*, II.32.

<sup>84</sup> Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, Vol. I, pp. 200 – 201.

<sup>85</sup> *VSC*, II.33.

Artbranán,<sup>86</sup> Broichan,<sup>87</sup> Emchath and his son Virolec.<sup>88</sup> Many of the Pictish names that survive in other documentary sources are the names of kings, and these generally fall within a fairly narrow onomastic range, so it is useful to have Adomnán adding to the corpus of attested Pictish names in this way.

Finally, we should note Adomnán's use of the term *barbari*. He does this twice, the first when Columba prophetically knows of the progress of a battle being fought many miles away, and declares:

*Nunc barbari in fugam veruntur; Aidanoque quamlibet infelix tamen concessa victoria est.*

[Now the barbarians are turned to flight; and the victory is yielded to Aidan, unhappy though it is.]<sup>89</sup>

The Andersons note:

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<sup>86</sup> VSC, I.33. For a brief summary of scholarship on this name, see Calise, *Pictish Sourcebook*, p. 179: “A.O. and M.O. Anderson state that “Artbrananus” is a Latin version of an Irish or North-British name possibly meaning “small raven-bear” or “small bear-raven”. William Reeves thinks that “Genoa” was a Pictish military unit named after its district, which is uncertain but may have been an island. Richard Sharpe believes that Artbranán’s identity as a Pict is indicated by Artbranán’s use of an interpreter when listening to Columba. Sharpe also seems to agree with David Dumville that “Geonus” is an adjectival form of “Cé”, a place-name of a Pictish province in Banffshire and Aberdeenshire according to W.J. Watson.”

<sup>87</sup> He first appears in VSC, II.33. For different interpretations of this name, and the question of whether it is a Latinised Irish name, or P-Celtic, see Calise, *Pictish Sourcebook*, p. 189: “T.F. O’Rahilly claims that “Broichanus” used by Adomnán is a Latinized Irish name. It would have been “\*Vroichan” in the sixth century and “Fróichan/Fróechan” in Old Irish, deriving from “froích/ froéich” (“heather”). Kenneth Jackson thinks that it is not a Latinization but a Gaelicized P-Celtic cognate of “\*Uroican”. A.O. and M.O. Anderson believe that Broichan may be Fráechán of the Annals. They state that because Adomnán does not say that Columba needed an interpreter to speak with Broichan, Broichan must have known Irish. They also cite the intercession of Columba against Diarmait as further proof that Fráechán is Broichan. Richard Sharpe disagrees with the speculation that Fráechán is the same person as Broichan, and declares that the accounts in the Annals are traditions about the battle that developed independently of *Vita Columbae*. Although there is a linguistic basis for the equation of Broichan with Fráechán, the historical evidence is inconclusive.” To Sharpe’s objections, we may add the following. I) Broichan’s ability to speak Irish does not mean that he was a native speaker. As a prominent figure at Bruide’s court, he could well have learnt it precisely in order to be able to interact with Irish-speakers like Columba. II) The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. We do not know that Columba did not use an interpreter to speak with Broichan. We might speculate that interpreting between Irish and Pictish may have been one of the slave-girl’s duties.

<sup>88</sup> VSC, III.14. For different interpretations of Emchath, see Calise, *Pictish Sourcebook*, p. 220: “A.O. and M.O. Anderson suggest that “Emchatus” is a “partly-Irish” version of the British “Ambicatus”. Kenneth Jackson remarks that “Emcat or Emcath” has been associated with the Gaelic “Imchath” and used to show the Goidelic nature of the Picts but points out that it is related to Gaulish “Ambicatus” and British “Ammecatus” which would have become “\*Amcat” in Columba’s time and Gaelicized in *Vita Columbae*.” Calise has no entry for Virolec, but the Andersons [1<sup>st</sup> edn.], p. 128, say that he “was certainly a North Briton.”

<sup>89</sup> VSC, I.8.

“Adomnán’s use of this word implies that the Miathi were not speakers of Irish, and at the same time seems to show that they were not the southern people of the Picti who had accepted Ninian’s teaching of Christianity.”<sup>90</sup>

Adomnán uses the word, then, in order to set up a distance between his own *familia* and Aidan on the one hand, the Miathi on the other. A problem arises in identifying the Miathi, and little about them can be said for certain.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, it seems that a difference in language, presumably Irish:British or Irish:Pictish contributes to this distance and to their otherness. The term has shifted in meaning, away from “non-Greek”, or “non-Roman”, to encompass “non-us”, if “us” is understood as Irish-speaking Christians.

Secondly, and even more obscurely, we have the episode of the saint’s prophecy about a raid on a layman’s home:

*‘Illam quam dicis prouinciolam’ ait sanctus, ‘nunc barbari populantur uastatores.’*

[‘The district that you speak of,’ said the saint, ‘is now being plundered by barbarian marauders.’]<sup>92</sup>

The layman lived at an unidentified place called Coire-salcháin.<sup>93</sup> Since its location is not known, it is problematic to speculate as to the ethnic, linguistic or religious identities of the *uastatores* in question. It may be that they were non-Christian Picts, in which case the term would again carry connotations of ethno-linguistic othering, but this may also simply be a Classical trope (marauding is the sort of thing barbarians do, so marauders can aptly be called barbarians), combined with typically clerical disapproval of brigandage and violence. It is not possible to conclude one way or the other from the slender evidence at our disposal.

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<sup>90</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, [1<sup>st</sup> edn.], pp. 226 – 227. Note that the model of Christianisation which attributed the conversion of the “southern Picts” to the work of Ninian was still dominant at the time the Andersons were writing.

<sup>91</sup> See Sharpe, *Life*, pp. 268 – 269, n. 81.

<sup>92</sup> *VSC*, I.46, pp. 82 – 83.

<sup>93</sup> For some suggestions as to its location, see Sharpe, *Life*, p. 310, n. 197.



#### 4: Conclusions

It can be seen that Adomnán's use of and ideas about language in *VSC*, are complex, and demonstrate a sophisticated writing style and skill at bringing together different languages in order to raise the literary standard of the text to a level appropriate for the *vita* of Iona's founder and patron. Adomnán drew on different literary techniques to enrich his text, using alliteration, *variatio* and hyperbaton to produce a highly elaborate prose style suited to the dignity of telling of the holiness of a man blessed with God's favour, and whose sanctity still blessed those who honoured him. Similarly, in bringing in elements of Greek and Hebrew into a Latin text, Adomnán was quite consciously drawing upon the prestige of the *tres linguae sacrae*, and attempting to confer some of that prestige on his subject.

Conferring such prestige on the text, and thus on the saint and his cult, was, as we have already seen, central to Adomnán's aims. The Columban church had suffered a serious setback at Whitby, and a complete, updated hagiography of its founder in elaborate and erudite Latin would surely help to regain some of the prestige it had lost. In the context of Wilfrid's disparaging remarks at Whitby about Iona's remoteness and Columba's relative inferiority as a saint, the desirability of a sophisticated text, imbued with the sanctity of the three holy languages and an impressive display of stylistic skill, can readily be appreciated.<sup>94</sup> Adomnán himself, as both the text's author and its subject's successor, would also have enhanced his own prestige in producing such a work, thus strengthening both his leadership of the *familia* and his influence as a political actor.

By setting this study of the language of *VSC* in the context of *DLS* and of the contexts of early medieval Irish and wider Christian literary and intellectual culture, we have also been able to understand more about Adomnán as a writer. Clearly, in order to achieve his ambitious of producing a high-quality, prestigious *vita* for his community's founder, he would need to have a considerable degree of literary skill at his disposal. As regards Latin style and his approach to different languages, the study in this chapter demonstrates that he did indeed possess such skill. His ability to make use of a range of different stylistic techniques to raise the literary level of his work has been demonstrated, as has his intellectual curiosity about and interest in language. Adomnán was not, as some have taken him to be, a pedantic and inflexible writer, he was a sophisticated and ambitious writer, who crafted elaborate sentences with words carefully chosen to demonstrate both his own erudition and the greatness of his community's patron.

<sup>94</sup> *HE*, III.25, pp. 306 – 307.

To appreciate this, we must appreciate the literary and intellectual context in which Adomnán was working. Within the early medieval Christian world, and seemingly especially in the early medieval Gaelic Christian world, there was a great deal of theological interest in the three sacred languages (even where two of them were little understood), in the forms and roots of words, in the meanings of personal and place names. For people who believed that *In principio erat verbum*, that the earth and heavens were created by the speaking of words, that Christ himself was The Word incarnate, that he was the Alpha and the Omega, these could not simply be matters of idle intellectual speculation and play. They were fundamental parts of the order created by God, and in understanding them one could approach a better understanding of the nature of God's work of creation and salvation. Columba and Adomanán were servants of the Word, and it was therefore highly appropriate that Adomnán should give words and language such attention in *VSC*.

The first three chapters of this thesis, while looking at aspects of *VSC* in detail, have done so in the context of considering the text as a whole. The following three chapters focus on particular themes or aspects of the text which are found in certain chapters, which will be examined individually and then set in relation to each other and to adjacent literatures, beginning with a discussion of sex, women and violence in *VSC*.



## Chapter 4

### Sex, Women and Violence in *Vita Sancti Columbae*

The potential that hagiographical texts have as sources for the study of social history, including past attitudes to sex and gender, has long been recognised.<sup>1</sup> Many such texts are rich in the anecdotes, incidental detail and situations that social historians use to reconstruct the relationships between people in past societies, and *VSC* is one of many *vitae* to have been quarried for just such information. While this approach can yield apparently true-to-life illustrations of points being made, there are dangers in abstracting episodes from their compositional contexts. For evidence taken from texts, especially literary compositions like hagiographies, to be reliable, it must surely be understood in its own context.<sup>2</sup> With respect to *VSC*, we must understand Adomnán's own constructions of gender and his interpretations of Christian sexual behaviour as they are presented within *VSC*, before we can use his text as evidence in wider arguments.

Following on from three chapters that have studied aspects of *VSC* by looking at the text as a whole (the text's visual presentation in the manuscripts, its structure, and language), this chapter represents a slight shift in approach, looking rather at a group of episodes, connected to each other by the related issues of sex, women and gendered violence.<sup>3</sup> The approach taken here is a series of focused close readings of these episodes, and relating them to each other as well as to the wider context of adjacent literatures.

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<sup>1</sup> Instrumental in this was the work of Evelyne Patlagean, see Patleagan, *Structure sociale, famille, chrétienté à Byzance: IVe-XIe siècle* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1981); and also J.T. Schulenberg, "Saints and Sex ca. 500 – 1100: Striding down the Nettled Path of Life" in J.E. Salisbury (ed.), *Sex in the Middle Ages* (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. 203 – 232. A good recent example is Kreiner, *Social Life of Hagiography*.

<sup>2</sup> Provenance is also key here, and should not be divorced from the overt ideological content of the text. It should be remembered that *VSC* is a text about a celibate man, written by another celibate man, both of whom lived in communities of celibate men. The scribes who produced the subsequent manuscript copies were likewise celibate men living in monastic communities.

<sup>3</sup> Gender and sexual behaviour are both potentially very broad categories, encompassing as they do very important elements of human behaviour, socially normative attitudes and religious ideology. A more comprehensive study of gender would need to include a discussion of Adomnán's constructions of masculinity as well. While this chapter does investigate male sexual behaviour, there is considerable scope for future research into the nature and ideals of masculinity in *VSC*.

## 1: Review of existing scholarship

Certain aspects of sex and gender in *VSC* have already received attention from scholars, though to my knowledge the only dedicated study is Jacqueline Borsje's article in Anne-Marie Korte's volume *Women and Miracle Stories*, which gives short but very useful analyses of all of the stories in *VSC* which feature women.<sup>4</sup> She notes that women play a quite marginal role in the text. By far the vast majority of stories in it do not feature women at all, only two women (Columba's mother Eithne and the nun Mogain) are named and even some of the stories which do mention women do so only in passing. *VSC* is a very male text, being concerned with the life of a holy man whose earthly interactions are mostly with other men.

In the wider context of Adomnán's work, scholars looking at *Cáin Adomnáin* have noted the relationship between the aims of that law, and one of the stories in *VSC* (see § 4.1, below), though as will be argued below, there are other stories in *VSC* which should be considered in connection with *Cáin Adomnáin*, and which seem to have gone unnoticed.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, *VSC* has been used as a source by historians working on aspects of gender in early medieval history, and as supporting evidence for those working with gendered aspects of early Irish law.<sup>6</sup>

Outside of *VSC*, there has been much work on sex and gender in early Gaelic history and literature. Some of this has focused on the legal status and capacity of women, which, despite prevalent popular notions of an egalitarian pre-Christian Ireland, can be shown to have been thoroughly patriarchal.<sup>7</sup> Christina Harrington has also produced a full-length study of the roles played by women in the church in Ireland, looking at how nuns, abbesses, holy virgins and other female religious fitted into the ecclesiastical structures of the period before the monastic reforms.<sup>8</sup> The seemingly prominent roles played by female characters in literary texts, such as

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<sup>4</sup> Jacqueline Borsje, "Women in Columba's Life, as seen through the eyes of his biographer Adomnán", in Anne-Marie Korte (ed.), *Women and Miracle Stories: A Multidisciplinary Exploration* (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2001), pp. 87 – 122.

<sup>5</sup> Sharpe, *Life*, p. 356, n. 266; Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 4 – 5.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, see Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, pp. 132 – 133.

<sup>7</sup> Donncha O Corrain, "Women in early Irish society", in Margaret MacCurtain and Donncha O Corrain (eds) *Women in Irish Society: the historical dimension* (Dublin: The Women's Press, 1978); Wendy Davies, "Celtic Women in the Early Middle Ages", in Averil Cameron and Amélie Kuhrt (eds.), *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), pp. 145 – 166; Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, pp. 68 – 79; Bart Jaski, "Marriage Laws in Ireland and on the Continent in the Early Middle Ages", in Christine Meek and Katherine Simms (eds.), *The Fragility of her Sex? Medieval Irishwomen in Their European Context* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), pp. 16 – 42.

<sup>8</sup> Christina Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church: Ireland, 450 – 1150* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Harrington gives a good discussion of how and why popular modern fantasies of a "feminist" early medieval Irish past developed, at pp. 6 – 16.

Medb in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, have been studied extensively, but Gilbert Márkus has cautioned against applying the status enjoyed by such literary characters to the actual situations of real, historical women.<sup>9</sup>

The gendered dimension to wisdom in *VSC*, and the degree to which women can be considered wise, is one of the areas investigated in this chapter, and it has not, to my knowledge, been studied before. There have, however, been studies of similar aspects in Irish secular literature, and they have been drawn upon here. Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin's article "Irish Jezebels: women talking – gendered discourse in early Irish literature", is a short but excellent overview of gendered aspects of discourse in several genres of early Irish literature, while Joanne Findon's *A Woman's Words* looks at the speech of Emer and other female characters in the Ulster Cycle group of prose tales.<sup>10</sup> Neither Ní Bhrolcháin nor Findon include any hagiographical texts in their respective studies.

Outside of the Gaelic context, issues of sex and gender in medieval Europe have been studied extensively. Vern L. Bullough gives a very useful summary of the development of Christian ideas about sex, monogamy, celibacy, ideas which were grounded in the Jewish laws of the Old Testament, but modified by the teachings of Christ and Paul, and also influenced by the philosophical and ascetic ideals of Hellenic and Roman culture.<sup>11</sup> Peter Brown's *The Body and Society* investigates the theory and practice of sexual renunciation in early Christian societies, and the contexts in which ideas about religious celibacy emerged, and though it is mainly focused on the Late Antique period, it provides much useful context for understanding Christian attitudes to sex in the early medieval period.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ann Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Sarah Sheehan, "Loving Medb", in Sarah Sheehan, Joanne Findon and Westley Follett (eds.), *Gablánach in scélaigeacht: Celtic studies in honour of Ann Dooley* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), pp. 171 – 186. Sheehan makes the important point that the study of women in early Irish literature has had a disproportionate focus on the relationship between female characters and issues of kinship and sovereignty, and other issues have consequently been understudied. See also G. Márkus, "Early Irish 'feminism'", *New Blackfriars*, 73 (1992), pp. 375 – 388.

<sup>10</sup> Joanne Findon, *A Woman's Words: Emer and Female Speech in the Ulster Cycle* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, "Irish Jezebels: women talking – gendered discourse in early Irish literature", in Dónall Ó Baill, Donncha Ó hAodha and Nollaig Ó Muraíle (eds.) *Saltair Saíochta, Sanasaíochta agus Seanchais: A Festschrift for Gearóid Mac Eoin* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), pp. 199 – 210.

<sup>11</sup> Vern L. Bullough, "Introduction: The Christian Inheritance", in Vern L. Bullough and J.A. Brundage (eds.) *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1982), pp. 1 – 12, and in the same volume, Bullough, "Formation of Medieval Ideals: Christian Theory and Christian Practice", pp. 14 – 21. Bullough notes (p. 21) that hagiography "... proved particularly important in conveying certain concepts."

<sup>12</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). See also John Kitchen, *Saints' Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender: Male and Female in Merovingian Hagiography* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

## 2: Sexual behaviour in *Vita Sancti Columbae*

### 2.1: Narratives concerning sexual behaviour

#### Chapter 4, Table 1: Narratives concerning sexual behaviour

Ref.	Summary	Columba's role	Outcome
I.22	Unnamed man of Uí Thuirtri comes to do penance, having committed incest with his mother, and killed his brother.	Prophetically knows of his sins, assigns penance.	Columba correctly foretells that he will not perform the assigned penance, and will be killed by his enemies.
I.38	Lugaid the Lame, a rich cleric, will die in bed with a harlot ( <i>cum meritrice</i> ). <sup>13</sup>	Prophesies Lugaid's downfall and death.	Lugaid dies a poor man, in bed <i>cum meritrice</i> .
I.39	Neman mac Gruthriche will be killed by his enemies while in bed with a harlot ( <i>cum meritrice</i> )	Prophesies Neman's death.	Neman is beheaded by his enemies, who caught him while in bed <i>cum meritrice</i> .
II.10	Ligu Cenncalad will submit to sexual sin in his youth.	Prophesies while baptising the infant Ligu that he will sin sexually in his youth, but will later become a good Christian and live a long life.	It comes to pass to as Columba prophesies.
II.41	Woman in Rathlin refuses to sleep with her husband on account of his ugliness.	Prays and fasts with the couple, attempting to reconcile them.	They are reconciled, and she no longer refuses to sleep with her husband.
III.21	Berchán, a young monk, to live a life of sexual sin in Ireland.	Prophesies Berchán's life of sin, but assures him that he will do penance and be forgiven before his death, since he is Columba's <i>alumnus</i> .	It comes to pass as Columba prophesies.

Table 1 above outlines all of the narratives in *VSC* which are connected with sexual behaviour in some way.

In addition to these, there are several narratives which refer to unspecified sins which may or may not be sexual in nature (the secret sin, *occulto... peccato*, of Colcu's mother in I.17, for instance), but these will not be discussed here.

<sup>13</sup> See §2.1.2 below for a discussion of this term.



Three of the six narratives concerning sexual behaviour are to be found in Book I, two in Book II and one in Book III. However, since the tripartite structure of prophecies, miracles and visions is not watertight (as discussed in Chapter 2, above), it is not the case that Columba's miraculous powers or angelic visitations are brought to bear on matters of sexual propriety: all but one of the stories (II.41) are prophecy narratives.<sup>14</sup>

As we can see, most of the narratives in *VSC* which concern sexual behaviour focus on the sexual sins of men. While women are either explicitly mentioned or implicitly involved (or, at least, there is no direct mention of homosexual acts), it is generally the men in question who are the subject of either judgment or forgiveness.<sup>15</sup> If the women involved are sinning, that is not Adomnán's focus. As Karras argues, late antique and early medieval societies thought of sex as something fundamentally "transitive", that is, something which one person did to another, rather than something that people did together. Today, we might think of sexual partners as being engaged in the same act together, but this was not how an early medieval ecclesiastic like Adomnán would have seen it: the sexual partners in Adomnán's narratives were thus not merely playing different roles in the sexual act, they were doing quite different things.<sup>16</sup>

We will now discuss all six of these narratives in more detail. The two pairs of similar stories, namely I.38 and I.39 and II.10 and III.21, will be considered together.

### 2.1.1: *De infelici quodam qui cum sua dormivit genitrice* (I.22)

In this story, Columba wakes the monks in the middle of the night, and has them pray, because an appalling sin has been committed:

*'Nam hac in hora aliquod inauditum in mundo peccatum perpetratum est, pro quo ualde timenda iudicialis uindicta.'*

[‘Because in this hour a sin unheard-of in the world has been committed, for

<sup>14</sup> The prophecies in II.10 and III.21 are preceded by a miracle and a story of an apparition of divine light, respectively. They are two of many examples of narratives in Books II and III in which miracles and visions are accompanied by prophecies. See Chapter 2, § 5.

<sup>15</sup> The phrase *Findchanus Aidum carnaliter amans*, in I.36, might be interpreted as referring to either a homosexual relationship between Findchán and Aid, or at least for homosexual desire on the part of Findchán. Meckler, however, quite convincingly argues that it refers to familial love: Michael Meckler, “Carnal love and priestly ordination on sixth-century Tiree”, *Innes Review*, 51:2 (2000), pp. 15 – 108, at pp. 101 – 103.

<sup>16</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 3 – 5.

which the judicial penalty must be very terrible.’]<sup>17</sup>

The following day, Columba refuses to expand on this in response to questions from some of the monks, telling them that the wretch who committed the sin would arrive in a few months, along with the unwitting Lugaid, one of the monks of the *familia*. When this duly happens, Columba initially sends word to Lugaid with Diormit, another monk, telling him not to let the sinner set foot upon the island. At this point, the man declares that he will not eat until he has spoken with Columba – an example of the Irish practice of *troscad*, in which a complainant fasts against somebody as a way of obliging them to give them justice, or, as here, an audience.<sup>18</sup> Columba relents, and heads to the harbour. Baithéne, presumably walking with him, argues from Scripture that the man's penance be accepted. Columba does not contradict him, but tells him the nature of the man's monstrous sin:

*‘Ó Baithenee, hic homo fratricidium in modum perpetravit Caín, et cum sua matre mechatus est.’*

[‘Baithéne, this man has perpetrated fratricide, in the manner of Cain, and incest with his mother.’]<sup>19</sup>

This is the first that anyone else in the story knows of the nature of his sin, though the magnitude of it had been known months before. Even for the audience, who know about the incest from the title, the additional crime of fratricide is new information. Here, after Adomnán's building up of the mounting horror at the man's unknown crime (waking the brothers, telling them the next day they will know of it in some months, the command not to let the man come ashore), the horrid truth is revealed in a private conversation between the saint and his close confidant and successor. When they reach the harbour, they find the man kneeling on the shore and vowing to undertake any penance which Columba assigns to him. The saint tells him that God might have mercy on him if he does penance among the Britons for twelve years and never returns to Ireland. Columba already having given three true prophecies in this chapter, we might expect that to be the end of it, but the saint goes on:

*Haec dicens sanctus ad suos conuersus dicit: 'Hic homo filius est perditionis, qui*

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<sup>17</sup> VSC, I.22.

<sup>18</sup> Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland: 400 – 1200* (Harlow: Longman, 1995), p. 79; Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, pp. 25 – 26.

<sup>19</sup> VSC, I.22.

*quam promisit penitentiam non explebit sed mox ad Scotiam reuertetur, ibique in breui ab inimicis interficiendus perbit.'*

[Saying this, the saint turned to his people and said: 'This man is a son of perdition; he will not fulfil the penance that he has promised, but in a little while will return to Ireland, and will there shortly perish, killed by his enemies.']<sup>20</sup>

It seems that he utters this prophecy in the hearing of the wretch in question, who does indeed fail to perform the penance and dies at the hands of his enemies in Ireland. It is only here, in the final words of the chapter, that we are given any clue to the man's identity, being told that he is of the Uí Thuirtri kindred. His own name is never used, he is throughout referred to as *infelix* and *miser*, and once as a *homuncio*.<sup>21</sup>

Leaving aside the question of fratricide, incest on its own would have been considered a serious enough matter. For Christians, nothing good could come of it: the incest of Lot and his daughters had been the origin of the Moabites and the Ammonites, both bitter enemies of the Israelites.<sup>22</sup> Biblical laws concerning incest can be found in Leviticus 18: 6 – 18 (sexual intercourse between *ego* and *ego's* mother being the first listed in the prohibition), with the corresponding penalties at Leviticus 20: 11 – 21. Incest likewise features in the penitentials, where it is treated as a serious sin.<sup>23</sup> In the penitentials, as in this story, incest is really the sin of the son: there is no word of any guilt, penance or punishment on the part of his mother.<sup>24</sup> Might this indicate that the son had raped her, and had killed his brother in the aftermath to prevent it being known? There is no conclusive evidence of this in the text, but it would certainly fit with Columba's horrified reaction.

<sup>20</sup> VSC, I.22.

<sup>21</sup> For Adomnán's use of diminutives to indicate wretchedness, see Chapter 3, § 2.1.4.

<sup>22</sup> Genesis 19: 30 – 38.

<sup>23</sup> The following citations are for penitentials which deal with incest, and are from Bieler (ed. and trans.), *The Irish Penitentials*: "The Synod of the Grove of Victory", pp. 68 – 69, para. 6 – a man who sleeps with his mother shall do three years' penance with perpetual pilgrimage; "The Penitential of Cummean", pp. 108 – 135, II.7 – a man who sleeps with his mother shall do three years' penance with perpetual exile; "The Bigotian Penitential", pp. 198 – 239, II.3 – mandates periods of four, seven or fifteen years for a man sleeping with his mother, depending on circumstances. See also Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, pp. 128 – 129.

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, this is of a piece with the treatment of many sexual sins in the penitentials (and, as we have seen, in VSC). See Christine A. McCann, "Transgressing the Boundaries of Holiness: Sexual Deviance in the Early Medieval Penitential Handbooks of Ireland, England and France 500 – 1000", PhD Thesis, Seton Hall University (2010), p. 43.

That Columba knows that the man will not fulfil the penance that he promised, and that this disobedience will lead to his violent death at the hands of his enemies is significant. The previous chapter also concerned a disobedient penitent, who returned to secular life and was found to have become a horse thief. These two stories highlight the dangers of disobeying abbatial authority, which in *VSC* always leads to misfortune for monks, penitents and laypeople alike.

### 2.1.2: Lugaid the Lame and Neman mac Gruthriche (I.38 and I.39)

These two, quite short, stories are very similar, and share a similar structure. In the first, entitled, *De quodam diuute qui Lugudius Clodus uocitabatur* (“Concerning a certain rich man, who was called Lugaid the Lame”), Columba is in Ireland, when he sees a cleric, *qui gaudenter peragrabat campum Breg* (“gaily driving over the plain of Brega”).<sup>25</sup> Presumably the use of the chariot is on account of his lameness.<sup>26</sup> Columba asks who the cleric is, and some of his friends tell him that it is Lugaid the Lame, who is very wealthy and widely respected. The saint replies that this is not how he sees him, and prophesies that he will die *homuncio miser et pauper* (“a poor and wretched man”), having only three stray cows which properly belong to his neighbours.<sup>27</sup> Having one of the cows killed and cooked, he will choke to death on it, as he reclines in bed *cum meritrice* (“with a harlot”).

*Meretrix* in Latin typically means “prostitute”, and it is one of the terms used in the Vulgate for the woman in the Book of Revelation.<sup>28</sup> The Andersons render it “harlot”, and I follow their translation here for the sake of consistency, but the term deserves some discussion. Reeves, in the English translation that accompanied his 1874 edition, rendered it as “prostitute”; Huyshe avoided a direct translation, having Lugaid die “lying the while in a couch of shame and sin”, and in the following chapter uses “harlot” and “in a couch of shame”; Sharpe translates it as

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<sup>25</sup> *VSC*, I.38.

<sup>26</sup> Pace Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, p. 87, who has Adomnán seeing it as part of his luxurious, sinful lifestyle. Note that Columba himself travels by chariot in II.43.

<sup>27</sup> Note, again, Adomnán's use of the diminutive to indicate wretchedness.

<sup>28</sup> *LS*, “a prostitute, harlot, courtesan”; *OLD*, “A courtesan, a kept woman”; *DMLBS*, “1 courtesan, court mistress, kept woman; 2 prostitute, whore”; *NGML*, “(1) prostituée; 2) femme adultère.” *NCLCL* has at the time of writing published only as far as the letter *H*. Rev. 17: 1 and Rev. 17: 15.

“whore”.<sup>29</sup> As Sharpe notes, we should probably not understand the woman in this story to be a commercial prostitute, but rather think in terms of “loose liaisons in a polygamous (and sometimes promiscuous) society...”<sup>30</sup>

While churchmen like Adomnán would of course have approved of polygamy no more than they would of prostitution, the idea that polygamy was actually practiced at all in early medieval Gaelic society, which as been assumed rather than demonstrated for a long time, has recently been forcefully challenged by Liam Breatnach. His analysis of the of the term *cétmuintir*, which has often been interpreted as meaning “chief wife (of several)”, but which he demonstrates convincingly actually simply means “spouse (of either sex)”, seriously challenges the notion of early medieval Gaelic polygamy.<sup>31</sup> As such, while Adomnán may well have included the *meretrix* in order to convey the utter moral, as well as the financial, ruin of Lugaid before his death, we should probably be thinking in terms of promiscuity, rather than of either polygamy or prostitution in this case. Quite what brings about Lugaid’s moral ruin is not made clear. It may be that Adomnán, through Columba, is expressing a disapproval of clerics who enjoy wealth and high secular standing, failing to renounce these worldly things as they ought; or it may be a rather less pointed story, a more straightforward one of the *sic transit gloria mundi* type, in which apparent wealth and status are seen to be less stable and enduring than they had seemed, in which case the lesson would be not to put much trust in them.

The following story, entitled, *De Neman filio Gruthriche sancti profetia* (“The saint’s prophecy concerning Neman, Gruthrech’s son”), is very similar, and though it differs in some important particulars, the stories are very closely linked thematically, so it makes sense for Adomnán to have placed them together.<sup>32</sup> Here, the saint chastises Neman for unspecified bad deeds, and is met with mockery in return. Columba then tells Neman that his enemies will find

<sup>29</sup> Reeves, *Life*, p. 28 (note that Reeves uses a different division of chapters, and has this as I.30); Huyshe (trans.), *Life*, I.38 – 39, pp. 69 – 71; Sharpe (trans.), *Life*, I.38, p. 142. The women themselves are not subject to judgement here. However much Adomnán may disapprove of supposedly polygamous practices, the narratives are not constructed to attack them, control female sexuality or any such purpose. As Borsje puts it, “Columba appears to be neutral towards these two women: the two prostitutes just happen to be present at the deaths of men. The mention of these women is purely incidental; their presence in the anecdotes is not pivotal”: Borsje, “Women in Columba’s Life”, p. 93.

<sup>30</sup> Sharpe, *Life*, p. 300, n. 172. Organised commercial prostitution of the kind discussed in Vern L. Bullough, “The Prostitute in the Early Middle Ages”, in Bullough and Brundage (eds.), *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church*, pp. 34 – 42, does not seem to be what Adomnán has in mind.

<sup>31</sup> Liam Breatnach, “An Old Irish collective and abstract nouns, the meaning of *cétmuintir*, and marriage in early mediaeval Ireland”, *Ériu*, 66 (2016), pp. 1 – 29.

<sup>32</sup> VSC, I.39.

him in bed *cum meritrice*, and kill him, and that demons will drag his soul to hell. Sure enough, this comes to pass some years later in the unidentified district of Cainle, as Neman is found in bed *cum meritrice* and beheaded by his enemies. There is no word at all about the fate of the *meritrix*: once more the focus is entirely on the sinful man. Neman is plainly a rather bad sort, as the fate of his soul makes clear, and his failure to observe Christian norms of sexual behaviour is seen to be of a piece with his contempt for Columba, and the unspecified bad deeds which prompted the saint's rebuke in the first place. While this story, like the one preceding it, is not mainly focused on sexual sin as such, its close association of Neman's sexual debauchery and his gory end within a larger context of sin and failure to repent is surely not accidental. Sexual sin is one of a number of serious failings on Neman's part, and his violent death and damnation match that. It may be that this chapter carries a message for those who face the censure of the Columban church, that a haughty refusal to reform their behaviour is unlikely to end well.

### 2.1.3: Ligu Cenncalad and Berchán Mes-loen (II.10 and III.21)

These two stories, again a similar pair, though not placed together, also contain prophecies of falling into sexual sin, though the endings are much happier for the two men concerned.

In II.10, which comes after a series of miracles involving water, and is the first in a short sequence of two concerning springs, Columba is traveling through Ardnamurchan when an infant boy is brought to him by his parents for baptism. Having miraculously brought forth a stream of water from a rock, Columba baptises the child, and then prophesies concerning him:

*'Hic puerulus usque in extremam longeus uiuet aetatem. In annis iuuenilibus carnalibus desideriis satis seruiturus, et deinceps cristianae usque in exitum militiae mancipandus, in bona senectute ad dominum emigrabit.'*

[‘This little boy will live long, to extreme old age. In the years of his youth he will sufficiently obey the desires of the flesh, and afterwards, devoted until his death to service as a soldier of Christ, will depart to the Lord in good old age.’]<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> VSC, II.10.

We are then told that the infant was Ligu Cenncalad (who is now otherwise unknown), and that the spring still existed in Adomnán's day, and was a “powerful” well bearing Columba's name, perhaps a healing well, though this is not stated explicitly.

In contrast to the three previous chapters concerning sexual sin, this one offers a story of redemption, in which Ligu not only changes his ways, but goes on to live a long life in faithful service to God, and presumably being well known to Adomnán's intended audience as a holy man. We are told nothing of the specific nature of his sexual sins, of how long he remains in sin, or of how he comes to repent and change his ways. Neither is there any information concerning how or for how long he did penance. This chapter, in short, gives us little detail about Ligu, and would be of little use in a pastoral context as a reference for a priest looking to discipline a wayward young man, or to guide him back into proper Christian living, for instance – penitentials would serve that function. What we have here is simply the principle that even young men who have fallen into sexual sin and failed to live in accordance with Christian norms could find forgiveness and go on to live a life of faith and Christian service, using an esteemed example.

The story of Berchán Mes-loen, told in a chapter entitled, *De alia parili diuinae lucis apparitione* (“Concerning another like apparition of divine light”), is in some respects quite similar, but also has significant differences.<sup>34</sup> The two stories are more different from one another than those at I.38 and I.39, but are still similar enough that they bear being studied together.

The story concerns Berchán, a young man studying wisdom at the monastery and an *alumnus* of Columba's. There is some disagreement as to what exactly Berchán was, and what sort of relationship he had with the saint. The word *alumnus* appears twice in this story: Reeves renders it “pupil” the first time, and “disciple” the second; Huyshe “pupil” the first time and “foster-child” the second; the Andersons translate it as “pupil” both times, but indicate in a note that it could also be “foster-son”; Sharpe uses “foster-son” both times, arguing that Berchán was a lay youth being educated at Iona, but with no intentions of entering the religious life, though he admits that the boy's disobedience may have stymied plans for a monastic career.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> VSC, III.21.

<sup>35</sup> Reeves, *Life*, III.22 [note different chapter numbering] pp. 92 – 93; Huyshe, III.21, pp. 221 – 222; Andersons, *Life*, III.21, p. 213, 215; Sharpe, *Life*, III.21, pp. 222 – 223, and p. 371, n. 393. For comparison, the word appears on two other occasions in VSC, and is translated as follows: VSC, I.2 (referring to Baithéne) is translated as “disciple” by Reeves (p. 7), Huyshe (p. 17), and Sharpe (p. 113), and as “foster-son” by the Andersons (p. 21); VSC, III.2 (referring to Columba) is translated as “young charge” by Reeves (p. 79), “foster-child” by Huyshe (p. 189), “foster-son” or “pupil” by the Andersons (p. 185, n. 27); and “foster-son” by Sharpe (p. 206).



One day, Columba warns Berchán not to come near his hut that night, but he disobeys, peering through the keyholes of the door, correctly supposing that some heavenly vision is being made manifest. The brilliant light that fills the hut, however, is too much for Berchán to bear, and he flees. The next day, Columba tells Berchán that he knows he was there, and that had he not at that moment immediately prayed for his safety, the young man would have been violently blinded, or even killed, and tells him:

*'Sed tibi hac uice propter me dominus pepercit.'*

[‘But this time the Lord has spared you for my sake.’]<sup>36</sup>

He goes on to prophesy that Berchán will live a life of debauchery in Ireland, and that for the length of his life he will be in disgrace. However, once more on account of Columba's intercession, and because Berchán is the saint's *alumnus*, he will do penance before his death, and receive God's mercy for his sins. And, of course, it all comes to pass as Columba has foretold.<sup>37</sup>

This story has significant similarities with that at II.10. In both cases, there is some demonstration of Columba's sanctity (performing a miracle/ seeing a vision), followed by prophecies that the infant Ligu and the young Berchán (how young, we do not know) will fall into sexual sin before finally obtaining forgiveness. There are also important differences, however. Berchán's life of disgrace and possibly his failure to live a monastic life seem to be punishments for disobeying the saint and trying to gain access to holy mysteries which were not his right to know, whereas Ligu is only an infant when Columba makes his prophecy: his falling into sexual sin is not a consequence of other sins he has already committed. And, of course, Ligu sins in his youth before going on to live a long and holy Christian life, while Berchán's life is marred by sin and disgrace, apparently only obtaining mercy shortly before his death. Still, Berchán is fortunate in having such a powerful intercessor, who is willing and able to save him from serious injury or death, and also lobbies God for mercy on his behalf.

<sup>36</sup> VSC, III.21.

<sup>37</sup> There is a similar story recorded in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, in which Abba Lot obtains forgiveness for a brother who had fallen into sexual sin: “Lot”, trans. Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Trappist, Kentucky: Cistercian Publications, 1975), p. 122, §2. The sixteenth-century vernacular life of Columba has a story in which a young man, drawn by a miraculous light, spies on the saint while he secretly transcribes a book he has borrowed from St Finnen. Angered, Columba sends his pet crane to peck the youth's eye out. The young man is later healed by Finnen. *BCC*, XIV, pp. 176 – 179, §§ 167 – 168.

Lacking any other information about Berchán than that found in this chapter, we are left with four lessons to take from it. Firstly, and most obviously, Columba's sanctity is demonstrated by the manifestation of holy light, one of many such manifestations in Book III.

Secondly, the importance of obedience to the abbot is stressed: Berchán's failure to do so nearly ends in disaster for him. This recalls the story in I.6, in which the first of Cormac Ua Liatháin's three attempts to find a more secluded retreat is frustrated because (unknown to him), one of his companions has come with him without first getting permission to do so from his own abbot – Adomnán, the abbot of Iona, may here again be using the story to stress abbatial authority. The importance of obedience to abbatial authority is clearer if, with Ritari, we read *VSC* as at least in part a guide to monastic life. Ritari argues that Adomnán presents Columba as an ideal type of abbot, and Iona as an ideal type of monastic space, with a supporting cast of monks (and to a lesser extent laypeople) striving for holiness.<sup>38</sup> O'Reilly, studying the teaching of *alumni* in *VSC*, also points out the importance Adomnán places on obedience to abbatial authority.<sup>39</sup>

Thirdly, the seriousness of sexual sin is highlighted. Unlike the case of Ligu, who we could say was guilty of some youthful indiscretions but grew out of them, Berchán's debaucheries, vaguely as they are described, were either so inappropriate or so continuous (or both) that they disgraced him almost as long as he lived. Arguing from the penitentials and other sources, McCann believes that a certain amount of adolescent straying from Christian sexual norms (including such sins as homosexual acts and bestiality) was anticipated in early medieval society, with the expectation that young men would grow out of such sins as they grew older and got married, thus finding a more appropriate outlet for their sexuality.<sup>40</sup> Ligu may have become a monk and not gotten married, but was at any rate able to exercise a greater degree of sexual self-control once he had passed his youth.

Fourthly and finally, the effectiveness of Columba's two intercessions on Berchán's behalf may be seen as a message that the Columban church, of which Adomnán himself was of course the temporal head, was a very useful ally to have in dealings with the Almighty. Perhaps this story is partially targeted at those who, aware of their sinfulness and perhaps of their mortality, might be mustering all the spiritual help they could get, with gifts, political support, donations to

<sup>38</sup> Katja Ritari, "Holy Souls and a Holy Community: The Meaning of Monastic Life in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*", *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, 37, No. 2 (2011), pp. 129-146, at pp. 132 – 136, p. 140 for stress on obedience to abbatial authority.

<sup>39</sup> Jennifer O'Reilly, "Adomnán and the art of teaching spiritual sons", in Wooding, Aist, Clancy and O'Loughlin (eds.), *Adomnán of Iona*, pp. 69 – 94, at p. 76.

<sup>40</sup> McCann, "Transgressing the Boundaries of Holiness", pp. 45, 48 – 49, 53 - 54.

Columban foundations or the dedications of sons among the potential reciprocations expected for such support.

#### 2.1.4: Lugne Tudicla and his wife (II.41)

Compared to the other stories which concern sexual behaviour, this one is something of an outlier. It contains no prophecies, is not concerned with the sexual sins of men and is one of relatively few stories in the *VSC* in which the saint is shown teaching some matter of Christian doctrine.

The story is entitled *De quodam Lugneo guberneta cognomento Tudicla, quem sua coiuux odio habuerat ualde deformem, qui in Rechrea commorabatur insula* (“Concerning a certain Lugne, a pilot, surnamed Tudicla, who lived in the island of Rechru [Rathlin], and whom his wife held in aversion because he was very ugly”).<sup>41</sup> In it, Columba is at Rathlin when Lugne, a layman on the island, approaches him, complaining that his wife refuses to sleep with him. The reason for this is given only in the title, and seems to be taken as read in the story. The saint chides the (unnamed) woman, citing the scriptural dictum that at marriage two become one flesh.<sup>42</sup> While not disputing this, she implores Columba not to oblige her to sleep with Lugne, saying that she is willing to do anything else, from undertaking the whole management of the household to going overseas and becoming a nun. Nevertheless, Columba insists that since Lugne is still alive, she is bound to her married duties, and that God's law forbids them from being separated. He goes on to propose that the three of them join in prayer and fasting, to which the wife (not, interestingly, Lugne himself) replies:

*‘Scio’ ait, ‘quia tibi impossibile non erit, ut ea quae uel difficilia uel etiam impossibilia uidentur a deo inpetrata donentur.’*

[Then she said, ‘I know it will not be impossible that things appearing difficult or even impossible may be granted by God to you, when you ask for them.’]

<sup>41</sup> *VSC*, II.41. Reeves and, following him, Huyshe, have Lugne being “deformed”, while the Andersons and Sharpe consider that he was simply ugly. It is not possible to determine from the text whether Lugne was merely an ugly man or had some kind of deformity. He was, however, clearly physically capable of both work as a pilot, and of sexual intercourse.

<sup>42</sup> Matthew 19: 5 and Mark 10: 8, both of which are based on Genesis 2: 24.

So, the three pray and fast, and that night Columba prays while the couple sleep. The following day, in Lugne's presence, Columba asks the wife if she still feels ready to leave for a monastery of nuns.

*Illa: 'Nunc' inquit, 'cognovi quia tua a deo de me est audita oratio. Nam quem heri oderam hodie amo. Cór enim meum hac nocte praeterita quomodo ignoro in me innotatum est de odio in amorem.'*

*Quid moramur? Ab eadem die usque ad diem obitus anima eiusdem maritae indesociabiliter in amore conglutinata est mariti, ut illa maritalis concubitus debita quae prius reddere rennuebat nullo modo deinceps recussaret.*

[She said: 'I know now that your prayer concerning me has been heard by God. For him whom I loathed yesterday I love today. In this past night, (how, I do not know) my heart has been changed in me from hate to love.'

Let us pass on. From that day until the day of her death, that wife's affections were indissolubly set in love of her husband; so that the dues of the marriage-bed, which she had formerly refused to grant, she never again denied.]

Columba's intervention is much less spectacular here than it is in many other stories. He acts here as a kind of saintly marriage counsellor, and his prayer for the couple, though effective, seems more of a prayer of intercession than a miracle as such.

The responses that Adomnán has Columba give to the woman indicate a sound knowledge of canon law, which would not permit divorce in these circumstances.<sup>43</sup> Irish law did permit divorce in some cases of sexual incompatibility – for instance if the husband was impotent, homosexual or grossly obese – but not on the grounds of ugliness.<sup>44</sup> What is also clear is that Adomnán presents sexual intercourse within marriage as a natural and good thing: there is no attempt here to take advantage of this unhappy situation to press for chastity as a good in and of itself.<sup>45</sup> While chaste marriages were certainly known, and often recommended in the early

<sup>43</sup> Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, p. 133; Sharpe, *Life*, p. 341, nn. 321 - 322. See also I Corinthians 7: 1 - 7.

<sup>44</sup> Bert Jaski, "Marriage Laws in Ireland and on the Continent in the Early Middle Ages", in Meek and Simms (eds.), *The Fragility of Her Sex?*, pp. 16 - 42, at p. 31. For valid grounds for divorce, see Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, pp. 73 - 75.

<sup>45</sup> Pace Davies, "Celtic Women in the Early Middle Ages," p. 156. Borsje argues that "Columba and Adomnán apparently see celibacy and *perigrinatio* as an ideal fit for men; the place of a woman is, according to them, next to her husband. This reinforces Ní Dhonnchadha's conclusion... about Adomnán's view of women that they are

medieval church, this was a way of life to be adopted by the consent of both man and wife, which clearly is not the case here.<sup>46</sup> It could be argued that this is one of several narratives in *VSC* in which Adomnán implies certain reservations about excessive asceticism. There are two chapters in which Columba orders a regular fast to be relaxed (I.21, in which a penitent who refuses to relax the fast later falls back into sin, and I.26),<sup>47</sup> and two in which the monk Cormac Ua Liatháin tries and fails to find a remote “desert” away from the monastery (I.6 and II.42).<sup>48</sup> While this is certainly plausible, these stories should also be seen in the context of Adomnán’s concerns about submission to abbatial authority and oversight. Ascetic practices could be beneficial, but they needed to be properly directed and under the oversight of the head of the Columban community, not embarked upon and pursued unilaterally.

## 2.2: The asexual presentation of the saint

Finally, it is worth considering something that the text does not mention at all: the sexual behaviour of the saint himself. This is in interesting contrast to the early hagiographies of continental Europe, North Africa and the Holy Land, which very often feature (especially male) saints resisting sexual temptation.<sup>49</sup> In the case of Hilarion, this came in early manhood when his success in resisting the sexual temptation of visions of naked women is shown by Jerome to be a marker of sanctity, an early triumph in a long life of ascetic rigour, along with resisting the temptations of rich foods and the excitement of gladiatorial entertainments.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Gregory the Great writes of Benedict, as a young man, fighting off sexual temptation when a

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primarily wives and mothers”: Borsje, “Women in Columba’s Life”, (p. 110). Set against this, *VSC* also features a highly-regarded nun, Mogain, at II.4.

<sup>46</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, “Chaste Marriage and Clerical Celibacy”, in Bullough and Brundage (eds.), *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church*, pp. 22 – 33, at p. 29.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. “Isidore the Priest”, trans. Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (pp. 106 – 107, § 4): “He also said: ‘If you fast regularly, do not be inflated with pride, but if you think highly of yourself because of it, then you had better eat meat. It is better for a man to eat meat than to be inflated with pride and glorify himself.’”

<sup>48</sup> Cf. “Longinus”, trans. Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 122, § 1: “One day Abba Longinus questioned Abba Lucius about three thoughts saying first, ‘I want to go into exile.’ The old man said to him, ‘If you cannot control your tongue, you will not be an exile anywhere. Therefore control your tongue here, and you will be an exile.’... He said to him the third time, ‘I wish to flee from men.’ The old man replied, ‘If you have not first of all lived rightly with men, you will not be able to live rightly in solitude.’”

<sup>49</sup> Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, p. 39.

<sup>50</sup> Jerome, *Vita Sancti Hilarionis*, in Leclerc, Morales and de Vogüé, *Trois vies de moines*, pp. 213 – 302, at pp. 224 – 225, translated in White, *Early Christian Lives*, pp. 85 – 115, at pp. 91 – 92. Cf. Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 34: “Upright Jews and early Christians alike expected sexual temptation to bulk large in the life of young males.”

demon brought to his mind's eye the image of a woman he had seen some time earlier. Benedict initially drove the demon away by making the sign of the cross, but when it persisted in its efforts to entice him to sin, he stripped himself naked and flung himself into a dense patch of thorns and nettles in order to use physical pain to overcome his lust. This worked very well, and Benedict was thereafter so able to control the temptation of sexual pleasure that he never again experienced it.<sup>51</sup> Evagrius of Pontus was likewise subjected to sexual temptation by the demon of fornication, which appeared to him in the form a naked woman.<sup>52</sup> Germanus of Auxerre, whose *Vita* was certainly known to Adomnán, is not said to have experienced sexual temptations, but he made such total changes to his life when he became a priest that, along with giving away his riches and adopting a humble way of life, he ceased to have a sexual relationship with his wife.<sup>53</sup> Although temptation is not mentioned as such, Germanus renounces sexual intercourse at a major turning point in his life and career, and this is clearly of a piece with embracing poverty and humility in his progression towards holiness. There is nothing of this sort in *VSC*.

In this respect, Adomnán also differs from Dallán Forgaill, whose Old Irish elegy for Columba, “Amra Choluimb Chille” is the oldest surviving element of the Columban dossier, predating *VSC* by about a century.<sup>54</sup> The poem contains two direct references to chastity:

*Lassais tír túath,*  
*Lais túath occidens,*  
*cot-ro-lass oriens*  
*ó chlérchib crí-dochtaib.*

(The northern land shone,  
 the western people blazed,  
 he lit up the east

<sup>51</sup> Gregory, *Dialogues: Tome II (Livres I – III)*, II.2, 1 - 3, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé, and French trans. Paul Antin, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1979), pp. 136 – 139. English translation in White, *Early Christian Lives*, pp. 161 – 204, at pp. 168 – 169.

<sup>52</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 374.

<sup>53</sup> Adomnán refers directly to *Vita Sancti Germani* in *VSC*, II.34, pp. 144 – 145. Constantius, *Vie de Saint Germain D’Auxerre*, I.2, ed. and French trans. René Borius (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1965), pp. 124 – 125. English translation by F.R. Hoare, “The Life of Saint Germanus of Auxerre”, in Noble and Head (eds.), *Soldiers of Christ*, pp. 75 – 106, at pp. 79 – 80.

<sup>54</sup> Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: the Earliest Poetry*, pp. 96 – 128.

with chaste clerics).<sup>55</sup>

*Boí cath, boí cast,  
boí cartóit, cloth-ond oc búaid.*

(He was holy, he was chaste,  
he was charitable, a famous stone in victory).<sup>56</sup>

There are also references to struggles with the flesh, which could be interpreted as referring to lust, though since the poem also shows Columba overcoming the temptations of food and drink, it may be wiser to see them as more general references to an all-encompassing asceticism. Dallán presents a rather different model of sanctity from Adomnán's, focused not on miracles but on Columba's scholarship and ascetic prowess. This difference in focus, and the absence of narratives dealing with the sexual temptation of the saint, makes *VSC* fit in with the other early Irish hagiographies.<sup>57</sup> Simply put, stories about saints resisting sexual temptation are not part of the rhetoric of sanctity in this group of texts as they are in Late Antique ones. Consequently, the motif of real or demonically-conjured women as temptresses to be resisted, so common in the influential Late Antique *vitae*, including those read by Irish hagiographers, does not seem to find its way into Irish hagiographies.

This is not to suggest that Adomnán was not concerned to establish the fact of Columba's holy virginity. The summaries of Columba's virtues at the beginning of *VSC*, in the Second Preface, and at the end, in III.23, both refer to it. In the Second Preface, Adomnán tells of Columba, *integritatem corporis et animae puritatem deo donante custodiens* ("preserving by God's favour integrity of body and purity of soul").<sup>58</sup> The Andersons, citing Brüning and Colgrave, attribute this and other phrases in this section to Adomnán borrowing from the anonymous *Actus Silvestri*.<sup>59</sup> *Integritatem corporis* is most likely a reference to virginity: it is used in this sense in other Latin texts, including in the account of the chaste marriage of saints Julian and

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., "Amra Choluimb Chille", II.7-10 (pp. 106 – 107).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., VI.13-14, pp. 108 – 109.

<sup>57</sup> As Harrington notes, the *topos* of male saints seeking to avoid female company of any sort, which is very common in Late Antique *vitae*, is almost entirely absent from Irish *vitae* before the tenth century: *Women in a Celtic Church*, p. 6.

<sup>58</sup> *VSC*, Second Preface, pp. 6 – 7.

<sup>59</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, p. 6, n. 2. Brüning, "Adamnans Vita Columbae", p. 253; Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, p. 316.



Basillissa.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Columba is described in III.23 as *uirgo immaculatus, ab omni intiger labe* (“a virgin unstained, free from every flaw”).<sup>61</sup> For the kind of sanctity Adomnán was portraying in *VSC*, Columba’s sexual standing as a virgin was important, as indicated by being stressed at the beginning and at the end of his work, but it did not need to be established by describing him overcoming sexual temptation as such. We should note that Adomnán, who does not use chronology as the organising principle of his work, is not greatly concerned with what we might call “character development”. His saint, even in the stories set in his youth, is effectively a fully-formed holy man, with no room for the spiritual improvement implied by a struggle with sexual temptation, even a successful one.<sup>62</sup>

What we have, therefore, is the saint presented effectively asexually, but still as a figure of authority in a world in which others struggle to maintain Christian sexual norms. Even where the text’s audience may not have been able to emulate Columba’s freedom from sexual temptation, their submission to abbatial authority and discipline on such matters would allow them to aspire to the kind of life that Adomnán describes within the idealised monastic space he constructs in *VSC*.

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<sup>60</sup> BHL 4259 II.6 (pp. 576-7): *ipse est amator castitatis, qui integritatem corporis custodiētibus vitam promittit æternam.*

<sup>61</sup> *VSC*, III.23.

<sup>62</sup> The sixteenth-century vernacular life, in contrast, has two stories of the saint as a young man resisting sexual temptation. In the first, he resists the advances of three beautiful young women who, it transpires are the three sisters Virginity, Wisdom and Prophecy (‘*An óghacht 7 an eagna 7 an fháidhedhóracht ar n-anmomnda, ar siad.*’), whom their father, Jesus, has given in wedlock to Columba. In resisting the apparent sexual temptation of the women, the young Columba gains these important gifts for his life in Christ’s service, *BCC*, IV, pp. 48 – 53, §§ 64 – 67. In the second, the saint resists the advances of a woman whom Satan has impelled to tempt him sexually, similarly to the case of Hilarion noted above, *BCC*, XVII, pp. 224 – 225, § 224.

There is a similar story in the Old Church Slavonic “Life of Constantine”, which dates from the second half of the ninth century:

When he was seven the boy had a dream which he recounted to his father and mother, saying: “After the strategos had assembled all the girls of our city, he said to me: ‘Choose her whom you wish as your wife and helpmate from among them.’ Gazing upon all of them and taking note of each one, I discerned the most beautiful of all, with a radiant face, richly adorned in gold necklaces and pearls, and all manner of finery. Her name was Sophia, that is, Wisdom. I chose her.” Anon., *Life of Constantine*, in Marvin Kantor (ed. and trans.), *Medieval Slavic Lives of Saints and Princes* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, The University of Michigan, 1983), pp. 25 – 96, at p. 27.

### 3: Women as givers of advice

#### 3.1: Women as givers of advice in *Vita Sancti Columbae*

All three of these stories are to be found in Book II, the book dealing with Columba's miracles, and all feature women giving advice to their husbands – probably because a married couple make a natural pair for these kinds of conversations. Two of them portray wives giving good advice, and one – the only one to refer directly to the Bible, or indeed any text at all – portrays the wife giving disastrously poor advice. In all three cases, the advice is seen to be good or bad depending on how it relates to the actions or instructions of the saint: good advice, perhaps unsurprisingly, is advice to trust in Columba. It may be significant that the three wives in question are from three different social strata: the wife of an ordinary layman, the wife of a beggar and the wife of a very wealthy man, respectively.

##### 3.1.1 Findchán's wife and the miraculous harvest (II.3)

Firstly, in II.3, Columba sends his monks to collect withies from the land of a layman called Findchán, so that they can be used to build a guesthouse.<sup>63</sup> They do so, but report to the saint that the layman, who it seems had not been consulted about this beforehand, was distressed at this loss. Columba immediately sends the monks back to Findchán with six measures of barley as compensation, with instructions to sow it. Though Findchán is grateful for the barley, he expresses doubts about the use of sowing it so late in the year, with midsummer having already passed. His wife, however, speaks:

*Marita econtra: 'Fac' ait, 'secundum sancti mandatum, cui dominus donabit quod cumque ab eo postulauerit.'*

[His wife, on the contrary, said: 'Do according to the bidding of the saint, to whom the Lord will grant whatever he may ask of him.']<sup>64</sup>

The monks likewise insist that despite being sown halfway through June, the crop will be harvested in August. Findchán proceeds to sow the barley, and to his neighbours' wonder, it is duly harvested, fully ripe, in August. While there seems to be no direct allusion to the good wife of Proverbs 31 (see § 3.2.4, below), the unnamed woman's actions would certainly fit into

<sup>63</sup> VSC, II.3.

<sup>64</sup> VSC, II.3.

that model of spousal virtue. In a sense, her role in the story is not entirely necessary: it could have been left to the monks alone to insist that Findchán plant the barley and the essentials of the story would not be changed. Nevertheless, Adomnán has the woman articulate the central truth of the chapter in the form of advice to her husband: trust in Columba, for he has special access to the power and favour of God.

### 3.1.2: The beggar's wife (II.37)

In II.37, an unnamed beggar from Lochaber approaches Columba for help, being unable to provide for his family.<sup>65</sup> Taking pity on the man, Columba instructs him to fetch a stick from the forest. When the man brings him the stick, the saint sharpens it to a point, blesses it and gives it to the poor man, telling him that it will not harm humans or cattle, but that it will kill wild animals and fish. As long as the man has this stick, his family will be well fed. Delighted, the man sets the stake up in a remote place, and in the morning finds that a large stag has impaled itself on it. Before long, so many animals have been caught on the stake-trap that he is able to sell surplus game. At this point, his wife (also unnamed) intervenes:

*Sed tam diabuli inuidia per sociam ut Adam et hunc etiam miserum inuenit, quae non quasi prudens sed fatua taliter ad maritum locuta est: 'Tolle de terra ueru. Nam si in eo homines aut etiam pecora perierint, tu ipse et ego cum nostris liberis aut occidemur aut captiui ducemur.' Ad haec maritus inquit: 'Non ita fiet, nam sanctus uir mihi benedicens sudem dixit quod numquam hominibus aut etiam pecoribus nocebit.'*

*Post haec uerba mendicus uxori consentiens pergat, et tollens de terra ueru intra domum quasi amans illud secus parietum possuit; in quo mox domesticus eius incedens canis disperit. Quo pereunte rursum marita: 'Unus' ait, 'filiorum tuorum incedet in sudem et peribit.'*

[But the malice of the devil reached this wretched man, as it did Adam, through his wife. She, not like a wise woman but as a fool, spoke to her husband thus: 'Take up the spike from the ground. For if people, or if cattle, should perish upon it, you yourself and I, with our children, will either be put to death, or be led into slavery.' To this the husband replied: 'That will not happen; for the holy

<sup>65</sup> VSC, II.37.

man said, when he blessed the stake for me, that it will never hurt people, or cattle.’

After these words the beggar, yielding to his wife, went, and lifting the spike from the ground placed it, as if he loved the thing, inside the house, beside the wall. And before long his house-dog fell on it and was killed. When the dog died, his wife said again: ‘One of your children will fall upon the stake, and be killed.’]<sup>66</sup>

The story then becomes almost comical, as the man keeps putting the stake in different places (in brambles, in a river, on his roof) and animals (a goat, a salmon so big he can barely carry it, a raven) continue to impale themselves on it. Finally, he destroys it, with Adomnán again commenting on the wife's foolishness:

*Quo facto miser fatuae coiugis consilio deprauatus ueru tollens de tecto adsumpta securi in plures concidens particulas in ignem proicit.*

[After that, the wretched man, led astray by the advice of his foolish wife, lifted the spike down from the roof, took an axe, chopped the spike into many small pieces, and threw them into a fire.]]<sup>67</sup>

As might be expected, he then returns to poverty, spending the rest of his life begging and regretting throwing away the wondrous prosperity which the saint had gifted to him.

This story again stresses the importance of trusting the saint and following his instructions, and, by extension, the instructions of the Columban church. It also makes a comparison between the wife and Eve, a common device used by medieval theologians when seeking to impugn a woman (or women in general).<sup>68</sup> The comparison, which makes the woman the conduit for the ruin of the man, indicates a Christian distrust of women's advice, articulating the same attitudes and fears to be found in *Tecosca Cormaic* (see § 3.2.1 below). Here, then, the folly of the man in eventually rejecting Columba's instructions is compounded by his listening to somebody giving untrustworthy advice. From the legal and literary traditions of early medieval Ireland, it is perhaps not surprising that that person should be a woman, as we shall see in the discussion

<sup>66</sup> VSC, II.37.

<sup>67</sup> VSC, II.37.

<sup>68</sup> Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, p. 106.

of adjacent literatures (§ 3.2, below), though as we have seen *VSC* does not simply reproduce cultural or Biblical stereotypes in this regard.

### 3.1.3: The lord's wife (II.39)

The final example of a woman giving advice in *VSC* is found in II.39, the story of Reed-plot Librán.<sup>69</sup> This is one of the longest narratives in the whole work, and it is not necessary to recount its entire plot here. The story centres on Librán, a penitent who has come to Columba to seek expiation for his sins. Back in Ireland, he had killed a man, and being unable to pay compensation for his crime looked set to be killed until he was ransomed by a very wealthy kinsman of his. In return for this, he swore an oath to his (unnamed) kinsman that he would serve him for the rest of his life.<sup>70</sup> Only a few days into his servitude, however, he absconded, choosing instead to serve God. Librán, having thus added oathbreaking to killing, is in desperate need of Columba's help, and the saint assures him that if he performs penance for seven years, he will be forgiven. This done, Columba sets to helping him clear up his obligations. He prepares to send him back to his former lord, with a prestigious gift to pay for the service he was supposed to render him:

*Et inter haec uerba macheram beluinis ornatam dolatis protulit dentibus, dicens:  
'Hoc accipe tecum portandum munus quod domino pro tua redemptione offeres;  
sed tamen nullo modo accipiet. Habet enim bene moratam coiugem, cuius  
salubri obtemperans consilio té eadem die gratis sine pretio libertate donabit,  
cingulum ex more captiui de tuís resoluens lumbís.'*

[With these words, he held out a sword decorated with shaped pieces of ivory, saying: 'Take this, to carry with you as a gift that you will offer to your lord for your redemption; but yet he will by no means accept it. For he has a virtuous wife, and yielding to her sound advice he will on that day grant you liberty, freely and without recompense, unloosing according to custom the captive's belt from your loins.']<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *VSC*, II.39.

<sup>70</sup> See Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, pp. 97 – 98, for the legal process in question.

<sup>71</sup> *VSC*, II.39.

It indeed comes to pass as Columba foretold. When Librán arrives in Ireland, he goes to his former lord:

*Nam statim ut pretiam suae offerens libertatis ostendit domino accipere uolente, refregans uxor: 'Vt quid nobis,' ait, 'hoc accipere quod sanctus pretium misit Columba? Hoc non sumus digni. Liberetur ei pius hic gratis ministrator. Magis nobis sancti uiri benedictio proficiet quam hoc quod offertur pretium.'* Audiens itaque maritus hoc maritae salubre consilium continuo gratis liberauit servum.

[As soon as he showed the price of his liberty, offering it to his master, who was willing to receive it, the master's wife refused, saying: 'How can we take this price that Saint Columba has sent? We are not worthy of this. Let this pious servant be released for him without payment. The holy man's blessing will profit us more than this price which is offered.' When the husband heard this salutary counsel of his wife, he immediately released his slave without payment.]<sup>72</sup>

Here, the (once more, unnamed) wife's advice is shown to be good. Realising that the blessing of the saint is worth more even than the value and prestige of a good sword, and perhaps reminding VSC's lordly audience of the worth of the Columban church as an ally, she convinces her husband to turn down the gift. Continuing with the idea of a message to a lordly audience, and bearing in mind Adomnán's major political project, the *Cáin Adomnáin* (discussed below), could this also be a message about the greater worth of piety and obedience to the Columban church over that of military might?

It can be seen, then, that Adomnán does not present a single, monolithic image of female wisdom or foolishness in VSC. As we shall see below, there were competing discourses about women's wisdom, current within his cultural and religious milieu, so this is perhaps not surprising. What it means is that there is no artificially maintained line concerning women's counsel as such, except obliquely in its relation to the consistent line that it is wise to trust in Columba, and foolish not to. The role of the women in these three stories is to articulate responses to that line.

<sup>72</sup> VSC, II.39.

### 3.2 Women as givers of advice in adjacent literature

It should be noted that wisdom is not generally among the virtues for which women are praised in insular or continental hagiographies, or other genres of Christian writing. There certainly were highly-educated women in the early church, mostly from upper class Roman families, but while some were praised for their knowledge of the Bible and theological writings, this was rare, and (predominately male) writers generally show little interest in their intellectual abilities and contributions.<sup>73</sup> Late Antique hagiographies from Roman and Near Eastern Christian communities tend to identify different virtues as proper to Christian women, typical among them are fortitude in the face of persecution, generosity to the poor, asceticism and virginity.<sup>74</sup> The gendered division of virtues can be seen clearly in the writings of the influential fourth-century theologian Evagrius Ponticus, many of whose writings were known in western Christendom after being translated from Greek into Latin in the fifth century. Two of these writings, *Institutio ad monachus* and *Ad virginem* were didactic texts for monastic men and women, respectively. The former, modelled on the Biblical Book of Proverbs, depicts the life of the monk as a determined effort to obtain *sapientia*, *scientia*, and *prudencia*; the latter in contrast barely mentions these virtues, and instead emphasises the important of moderation, separation from the world and following precepts.<sup>75</sup>

The boundaries between male and female sanctity were not absolute, however, and could be blurred. Julia M.H. Smith notes that there was a sharp decline in the proportion of writings about holy women in the western church from the late fourth century onwards, as hagiography shifted from being largely concerned with martyr passions to being largely concerned with the holy lives of the saints, and thus when Carolingian hagiographers started to produce *vitae* of female saints they had few obvious models to draw upon. As such, they often ascribed virtues gendered as male to female saints, showing how holy women had overcome the supposedly

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<sup>73</sup> Albrecht Diem, "The Gender of the Religious: Wo/men and the invention of monasticism", in Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 432 – 446, at p. 434.

<sup>74</sup> Carolinne White (trans.), *Lives of Roman Christian Women* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2010), pp. x – xiv. In the Old English version of the *Life of Saint Margaret of Antioch*, the sole justification for Margaret's sainthood was that she, a slave, rejected the sexual advances of her violent master: see David Wyatt, *Slaves and Warriors in Medieval Britain and Ireland, 800 – 1200* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), p. 260. An exception is the anonymous Syriac "Life of Febronia of Nisibis", from the late sixth or early seventh century: "[Febronia] had a great love of learning, so that many people, including the abess, were astonished at the extent of her knowledge.": trans. Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 150 – 176, at p. 155, § 5.

<sup>75</sup> Diem, "The Gender of the Religious", pp. 437 – 438.



innate weaknesses of their sex to approach a masculine form of sanctity.<sup>76</sup> Even so, wisdom as such is not stressed as a virtue that they thus obtained, and there does not appear to a particular tradition of female saints (with or without masculine-coded virtues) as givers of advice.

Female sanctity, in short, was not demonstrated by wisdom. Of course, it is Columba's sanctity which *VSC* sets out to establish and propagate, not anybody else's, male or female. Even so, many other characters have their virtues outlined and lauded in *VSC*, so while women's faults and virtues as such are not Adomnán's primary concern, they are certainly present – and, as regards wisdom, present in a way that has few if any models in hagiographical literature that would have been accessible to Adomnán.

Despite popular modern fantasies of a prevalent “Celtic” feminism in early medieval Ireland, it is abundantly clear that early Gaelic society was thoroughly patriarchal. One aspect of this was a general distrust of women, which had different manifestations. For instance, except in a few special circumstances, women were generally not able to give evidence in legal trials.<sup>77</sup>

### 3.2.1: *Tecosca Cormaic*

There are several early literary texts which also cast aspersions on women's capacity for reason and wisdom, prominent among them the wisdom text, *Tecosca Cormaic* (“The Teachings of Cormac”), dated by Kuno Meyer to no later than the first half of the ninth century.<sup>78</sup> This text features a substantial section, running to some 122 lines in Meyer's edition, attacking women for all sorts of negative attributes, ranging from stubbornness and jealousy to quarrelsomeness

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<sup>76</sup> Julia M.H. Smith, “The problem of female sanctity in Carolingian Europe c. 780-920”, *Past & Present*, 146.1 (1995), pp. 3 – 37, at pp. 11, 18 – 37.

<sup>77</sup> Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, pp. 207 – 208. Irish canon law gives a rather surprising justification for this, namely that the disciples did not believe the women who told them of the resurrection of Christ. That the Christian religion insists that the women were entirely correct about this seems to be neither here nor there. I am grateful to Dr Alex Woolf for the suggestion that this was a pragmatic admission of misogyny: men were simply unlikely to believe women, even though they might well be right, as in this Biblical instance. It may not have been a case of the legal experts thinking women's testimony was unreliable, but rather a recognition that they were unlikely to be listened to regardless.

<sup>78</sup> Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), “The Instructions of King Cormac Mac Airt”, *Royal Irish Academy: Todd Lecture Series*, 15 (1909). For dating, see. p. xi.

and an undue fondness for fancy head-dresses.<sup>79</sup> Among the barrage of misogynistic abuse, the following barbs, which are most relevant for our purposes, declare that women are:

*báetha comarile* [silly counsellors] (16.6)  
*écundla airechta* [dishonest in an assembly] (16.19)  
*tórachtcha báise* [on the pursuit of folly] (16.25)  
*eitche trebair* [rejecting of wisdom] (16.54)  
*cétludcha báise* [ever in the company of folly] (16.61)

Not only are women seen to be foolish, they are dangerous:

*...fó cách náchasríaraig,  
 a n-úaman amail tenid,  
 a n-ecla mar fiadmíla,  
 elca míla mná...*

[...happy he who does not yield to them,  
 they should be dreaded like fire,  
 they should be feared like wild beasts,  
 women are capricious beasts...] (16.100 – 103)

The section concludes:

*'... ní bí enech anim ná cloth ac neoch contúasi fri drochmná', ol Cormac fro Carpre.*

*'At tonna notbáidet,  
 at tene notloisc,  
 at airm defáebracha notchloidmet,  
 at legaim ar lenamain,  
 at nathracha ar túaichli,  
 at dorcha i soillsi,  
 at olca etir maithi,  
 at messa etir olcu.'*

['... he will have neither honour nor life nor fame who listens to bad women,'  
 said Cormac to Carbre.]

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., ch. 16, pp. 28 – 35.

‘They are waves that drown you,  
 they are fire that burns you,  
 they are two-edged weapons that cut you,  
 they are moths for sticking to one,  
 they are serpents for cunning,  
 they are darkness in light,  
 they are bad among the good,  
 they are worse among the bad.’] (16.113 – 122)

Note that it is only here that bad women are specified; aside from the prefix *droch-* (“bad”) in line 113, it seems that this catalogue of abuse is supposed to apply to women in general. There is no hint here of “Celtic” feminism or matriarchal wisdom; we have instead a very clear depiction of women as foolish and untrustworthy, the more striking since *Tecosca Cormaic* is a wisdom text.

### 3.2.2: *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*

A similar attitude is expressed in *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* (“The Tale of Mac Dathó's Pig”), composed c. 800.<sup>80</sup> In this saga, which has a strong comical element, and seems at least in part to be a parody of the heroic sagas, the king of Leinster, Mac Dathó is faced with a quandary when both Conchobar of Ulster and Ailill and Medb of Connacht request the gift of his wondrous hound Ailbe. Unwilling to offend either party and thus incur their wrath, he takes to his bed:

*Ro'lá didiu i socht innī Mac Dathó co'rrabe tri tráth cen dig cen biad, acht 'co  
 immorchor ón taib co araile. Is and dixit a ben: 'Is fota in troscud i'taí. Atá  
 biad lat cenco'n-essara. Cid no'taí?' Nicos'n-ārlastar. Is and dixit in ben:*

*Tucad turbaid chotulta do Mac Dathó co-a thech,*

*boíthi nī no'chomairled cenco'labradar fri nech.*

<sup>80</sup> Rudolf Thurneysen (ed.), *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1935). For dating, see p. iv.

*As·soí, do·soí ūaim do fraig in ferg fēne co londgail;*

*a ben trebar, dos·beir mod bith dia cēiliu cen chotlud.*

*[In fer:] As·bert Cremthann Nia Nāir: ní tardda do rúin do mnāib.*

*rūn mnā ní maith con·celar, maīn ar mug ní·aithenar.*

*[In ben:] Cid fri mnaī at·bertha seo manid·epled ní airi,*

*ní nad·tét do menmna-so, tēti menma neich aili.*

[Then Mac Dathó fell into silence, and thus went a full day without drink, without food, but tossed from side to side [in bed]. Then his wife said: “You are a long time fasting. You have food, but you do not eat it. What is the matter?” He did not answer her. Then the woman said:

Sleeplessness has come to Mac Dathó, to his house,

He lacks for counsel, he speaks to nobody.

He turns away from me, the fierce warrior turns to the wall;

his clever wife, she notices that her spouse is without sleep.

[The man:] Cremthann Nia Nāir says: ‘do not give your secret to women. A woman's secret is not well hidden, treasure is not given to a slave.’

[The woman:] Yet you may say this to a woman if nothing be destroyed on account of it. A thing which your mind does not attain will be attained by the mind of another.]<sup>81</sup>

The wife, who herself is not named in the text, goes on to advise Mac Dathó to promise the hound to both parties in secret, and to let them fight it out between them. He does so, and in due course a violent brawl breaks out, resulting in losses on both sides and the death of the hound to boot. The woman’s role as a giver of advice in this saga is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, what she predicts does come to pass, and Mac Dathó is spared the wrath of the other kings. On the other, he loses the hound which had protected his people, and the hostel in

<sup>81</sup> Thurneysen (ed.), *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*, para. 3 (pp. 3 – 4). Translation mine.

which he is supposed to provide hospitality to guests becomes the scene of an undignified and far from heroic brawl. Even if the audience are to see the wife's advice as sound in the circumstances, it is significant that Mac Dathó himself is initially reluctant to do so. Citing what was presumably a well-known aphorism, he initially refuses to confide in his wife, not because she has shown herself to be an untrustworthy counsellor, but because women in general are believed to be so. It is notable that she does not challenge this: in this regard, both characters seem to inhabit the same textual world as, and share the assumptions of, *Tecosca Cormaic*.

### 3.2.3: Táin Bó Cúailnge

Further examples can be found in the secular saga literature of the Old Irish period. In *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ("The Cattle-raid of Cooley"), the forces of Connacht embark on an ultimately disastrous invasion of Ulster, led by Medb, the queen of Connacht, her husband Ailill and Fergus, an exiled Ulsterman in the Connacht host. The three have the following conversation when Medb becomes concerned about the superiority of a group of their allies over their own warriors:

*Tic Medb iar ndéscin in tslóig 7 asbert ba n-espá do chách dul in tslógaid dían téset in trícha cét Galión.*

*'Ced ara tánsi na firu?' or Ailill.*

*'Ní dá tánsem dam,' ol Medb. 'It ána ind óic. In tan ro mboí cách oc gním a sosta, ro scáig dóib-seom tuga a sosta 7 fune a mbíd. In tan ro mboí cách oc praind, ro scáig praind dóib-seom hi suidiu, 7 ro bátar a cruti ocaó n-airfituid. Is espá didiu,' ol Medb, 'a techt. Is foráib bíaid búaid in tslóig.'*

*'Is airiund arbáget dano,' or Ailill.*

*'Ní regat lend,' ol Medb.*

*'Anat didiu,' ol Ailill.*

*'Nach ainfet dano,' ol Medb. 'Ficfit fornd iar tiachtain dúin,' ol sí, '7 gébtait ar tír frind.'*

*'Ceist, cid dogéntar friu,' or Ailill, 'innách maith a n-anad nách a techt?'*

*'A nguin!' ol Medb.*

*'Ní chélam as banchomairle,' or Ailill.*

*'Ní maith a n-asbir; a sanais ón,' ol Fergus. 'Ní maricfe, úair is áes comhchotaig dúinni 'nar nUltaib, acht má nan gontar uli'*

[After she had surveyed the host, Medb came back and said that it would be vain for the rest to go on that expedition if the division of the Gailiúin went also. 'Why do you belittle the men?' asked Ailill.

'I am not belittling them,' said Medb. 'They are splendid warriors. When the others were making their shelters, the Gailiúin were already finished thatching their shelters and cooking their food. When the rest were eating, they had already finished their meal and their harpers were playing to them. So it is useless for them to go on this expedition,' said Medb, 'for they will take credit for the victory of the army.'

'Yet it is for us they fight,' said Ailill.

'They shall not go with us,' said Medb.

'Let them stay here, then,' said Ailill.

'Indeed they shall not,' said Medb. 'They will overpower us when we have come back and seize our land.'

'Well then, what shall be done with them,' asked Ailill, 'since neither their staying nor their going pleases you?'

'Kill them!' said Medb.

'I shall not deny that is a woman's counsel,' said Ailill.

'You speak foolishly,' said Fergus in a low voice. 'It shall not happen unless we are all killed, for they are allies of us Ulstermen.']<sup>82</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Cecile O'Rahilly (ed. and trans.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976), lines 147 – 165, pp. 5 – 6, trans. on p. 129.

Medb often behaves impulsively and, arguably, quite unwisely in the course of the *Táin*, though she is clearly a very powerful and authoritative character. While this passage helps to define these aspects of Medb as a character (and we should be wary of ascribing the traits of an individual character to entire groups. Medb is a woman, but she is not all women), it is more important for our purposes for Ailill's exasperated reference to *banchomairle* (“a woman's counsel”). While Medb is not all women, Ailill's response, which may be a comical misogynist joke for the audience, indicates that Medb's ludicrous idea is typically womanish in its foolishness, something with which the author of *Tecosca Cormaic* would no doubt agree.

Similarly, Medb later urges Ailill to abandon his caution and attack Cú Chulainn:

*Co cloth ní Medb:*

*‘Coméirig, a Ailill, co fiannaib fótrind ar duth buaib sceó genat mc melchib  
athaib i ngrenchaib móraib i llinnib dubaib forbrisset comlund sceó Fergus  
dánae co loingis Ulad biaith and iartach i ndáid in chatha memais cauma co  
filedaib Féne.’*

*Co cloth ní Fergus:*

*‘Banairle baetha nach auchide nach cluinte co teintib bláthaib sceó cholet  
muinte sceó chenel olca anaphai rosrí a chialla consuidet na tádet.’*

[Then Medb was heard:

‘O Ailill, arise with war-bands... (Your) sons will kill in passes (?) and on fords,  
in great sandy places and in dark pools. And Fergus the brave and the exiled  
warriors will be victorious. After the battle there will be restitution...’

Then Fergus spoke:

‘Do not listen to the foolish counsels of a woman. Hear them not...’<sup>83</sup>

Once more, Medb's femininity is closely linked to the unreliability of her counsel, and the impression that the advice of women is not to be trusted is reinforced. After the Connacht host is finally routed, Fergus observes to Medb that they have come to the disaster one expects when

<sup>83</sup> *TBC: Recension I*, lines 2,432 – 2,440, p. 74, trans. on p. 192.



a herd of horses follows a mare. This relates more directly to female leadership than counsel as such, but it is worth bearing in mind in the larger context of the perceived disparities between male and female capabilities.<sup>84</sup>

Did Adomnán share the kinds of assumptions we have seen in these secular sagas? Does Columba, as Adomnán presents him in *VSC*, inhabit a textual world in which women as such are seen as untrustworthy, as givers of bad advice? How far would Adomnán, or his Columba, be prepared to trust *banchomairle*? All of the texts discussed above post-date *VSC*, at least in the forms in which we now have them, and we should be wary of assuming that they, or earlier but essentially similar versions of them, were known as early as the late seventh century, with their particulars concerning gender intact at this point in their textual prehistory. We should therefore proceed with caution, and state simply that Adomnán lived in a cultural environment which, from at least a century following his death and possibly much earlier, evinced a widespread distrust and suspicion of women and their counsel.

### 3.2.4: The Bible

Conversely, although he does not quote from or allude to it, Adomnán would certainly have been familiar with passages in the Old Testament Book of Proverbs in which the abstract virtue of wisdom is personified as a female character, *Sapientia* in the Vulgate. She warns passers-by against rejecting wisdom in 1: 20 – 33, and is given another set-piece in chapter 8, in which the value and effects of wisdom are again cast as attributes of a female character. While Folly (*Stulta*) is also characterised as a woman, she is given only six verses (9: 13 – 18), compared to the twelve (9: 1 – 12) given to Wisdom in the section in which the natures of the two are contrasted. And it is not only the abstract notion of wisdom which is given a feminine form: the book's epilogue is a description of the ideal wife, and among the virtues of generosity to the poor, hard work, piety and domestic prudence is that of wisdom:

*os suum aperuit sapientiae et lex clementiae in lingua eius*

[she has opened her mouth to wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of

<sup>84</sup> *TBC: Recension I*, lines 4,121 – 4,124, pp. 123 – 124, trans. on pp. 236 – 23. Though too late to be included in this discussion fully, it is interesting that the late Old Irish saga *Aided Óenfir Aífe* features Cú Chulainn expressing a similar sentiment when he rebukes his wife Emer: '*Coisc, a ben! Ní cosc mná admoiniur mórgnúmaib asa coscur glé. Ní gníther do banchobrae.*' ['Silence, woman! I do not seek a woman's instruction concerning great deeds of brilliant splendour. They are not performed with a woman's assistance.'] Emer's advice is rejected out of hand precisely because she is a woman: A.G. Van Hamel (ed.), "*Aided Óenfir Aífe*", in *Compert Con Culainn and other stories* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1956), pp. 9 – 15, at p. 14, § 9. Translation mine.

clemency]<sup>85</sup>

Furthermore, Proverbs 31: 1 – 9 actually consists of wise counsel given by a woman, as these verses are attributed to the mother of king Lemuel. The final two verses of this section, immediately preceding the section on the virtues of a good wife, are ones that would have had a particular resonance for Adomnán:

*aperi os tuum muto es causis omnium filiorum qui pertranseunt*

*aperi os tuum decerne quod iustu est et iudica inopem et pauperem*

[Open your mouth for the mute ones, and for all of the causes of the children that pass by. Open your mouth, decree that which is just, and do justice to the destitute and the poor.]<sup>86</sup>

*Cáin Adomnáin* contains provisions to protect children from violence, and could be said to speak for the “mute ones” more generally, especially since, as we have seen, early medieval Gaelic women were often without a voice in a legal sense, in that their testimony was usually not valid.<sup>87</sup> As we shall see in the discussion on gendered violence, below, this concern is also very much present in *VSC*. The cause of the poor is also a concern in *VSC*, as Columba can be seen miraculously providing material aid to poor people on a number of occasions, for instance increasing the meagre herd of cattle owned by the poor (*inops*) man Nesán, who showed him hospitality; likewise the hospitable but poor Colmán; the vengeance on Ioan, son of Conall, who plundered Colmán’s household; and the beggar to whom Columba gave the blessed stake.<sup>88</sup> While the Biblical imperatives to care for and defend the poor are hardly limited to this passage in Proverbs, these are certainly verses with which Adomnán would have been familiar, and which formed part of his intellectual and moral worldview. In integrating the force of the teachings of Lemuel’s mother into *Cáin Adomnáin* and *VSC*, Adomnán himself could be said to be taking good counsel from a woman, albeit indirectly.

<sup>85</sup> Proverbs 31: 26, translation mine.

<sup>86</sup> Proverbs 31: 8 – 9, translation mine.

<sup>87</sup> *Cáin Adomnáin*, § 34 – 35, pp. 36 – 37; § 40, pp. 40 – 41; § 44, pp. 44 – 45. Interestingly, the Inchcolm Antiphoner, dating from the middle of the fourteenth century, contains a chant which addresses Columba as *Os mutorum* (“the mouth of the mute ones”): University of Edinburgh Library, MS 211, IV, folio 1v.

<sup>88</sup> Nesán, II.20; Colmán, II.21; Ioan, II.22; stake, II.37.

It is clear, in sum, that Adomnán had access to Christian texts which allowed for positive views of the wisdom of women, while also living in a culture which viewed women as unwise and untrustworthy. This duality should be borne in mind when examining the three episodes in *VSC* in which women are shown giving advice.

#### 4: Gendered violence

Secular literature, legal texts, the annals and many of the narratives in *VSC* itself present a picture of a society in which violence was endemic. Between murders, wars and raids, it seems that violence was deeply embedded into the fabric of early Gaelic society. Laws, social codes and ecclesiastical authorities sought to regulate the use of violence, or to contain it within acceptable limits. Adomnán himself made significant efforts to limit the use of violence, most notably in his *Cáin Adomnáin*, promulgated in 696 or 697, which aimed to protect non-combatants (women, children and clerics) in war.<sup>89</sup> Adomnán also used *VSC* to further this aim, using several stories to illustrate and condemn such violence, one of which concerns violence against a girl.<sup>90</sup> Three other stories are less directly related to this aim, but merit consideration here for their gendered aspect.

##### 4.1: The murder of a young girl (II.25)

In II.25, one of the most well-known stories in *VSC*, Columba, while still a young deacon, and his old master Gemman are reading outside on a plain in Leinster, when they see a young girl running towards them, being pursued by a man with a spear. She takes cover under Gemman's robe, but the spearman kills her nonetheless. As the killer turns and walks away, Gemman cries out:

*Senex tum ualde tristificatus conuersus ad Columbam: 'Quanto,' ait, 'sancte puer Columba, hoc scelus cum nostra dehonoratione temporis spatio inultum fieri iudex iustus patietur deus?' Sanctus consequenter hanc in ipsum sceleratorem protulit sententiam, dicens: 'Eadem hora qua interfectae ab eo*

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<sup>89</sup> Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), *Cáin Adomnáin: An Old-Irish Treatise on the Law of Adamnan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1905); Márkus (trans.), *Adomnán's 'Law of the Innocents'/ Cáin Adomnáin*; Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, "Birr and the Law of the Innocents", in Thomas O'Loughlin (ed.), *Adomnán at Birr, AD 697: Essays in Commemoration of the Law of the Innocents* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), pp. 13 – 32.

<sup>90</sup> For an example of violence against clerics, see *VSC*, II.24.

*filiae anima ascendit ad caelos, anima ipsius interfectoris descendat ad infernos.’ Et dicto citius, cum uerbo, sicut Annanias coram Petro, sic et ille innocentium iugulator coram oculis sancti iuuenis in eadem mortuus cecidit terrula. Cuius rumor subitae ae formidabilis uindictae continuo per multas Scotiae prouincias cum mira sancti diaconi fama deuulgatus est.*

[Then the old man in great distress of mind turned to Columba, and said: ‘For how long, holy boy, Columba, will God, the just judge, suffer this crime, and our dishonour, to go unavenged?’ Thereupon the saint pronounced this sentence upon the miscreant: ‘In the same hour in which the soul of the girl whom he has slain ascends to heaven, let the soul of the slayer descend to hell.’ And more quickly than speech, with that word, like Ananias before Peter, so also before the eyes of the holy youth that killer of innocents fell dead on the spot. The fame of this sudden and dreadful vengeance was immediately spread abroad throughout many provinces of Ireland, with wonderful renown of the holy deacon.]<sup>91</sup>

This story seems to be clearly related to *Cáin Adomnáin*, depicting terrible and righteous vengeance on those who use violence against those unable to defend themselves.<sup>92</sup> The use of the term “innocent” three times in this story (in the title, *De alio itedem innocentium persecutore*; in the first sentence, *quadam accedit die ut homo quidam innocuorum inimitis persecutor crudilis* [sic]; and again in the passage quoted above) is probably a deliberate attempt to link this story with the law, an impression strengthened by the fact that the preceding story deals in a similar manner with an attempt on Columba's own life.

Note that there is no apparent motive for the attack. There is no allusion to robbery or rape or anything of that sort: the man is evil, the girl is innocent, and that is all there is to it. Significantly, this chapter comes at the end of a sequence of four stories concerning the depredations of the wicked against the innocent (the poor, the exiled, clerics, the girl), each of which ends with the death of the evildoer. Here, the intersection of youth and female gender make the girl doubly vulnerable to the wicked man, rounding off a section in which Columba is shown to have a special concern for the vulnerable.

<sup>91</sup> VSC, II.25.

<sup>92</sup> Sharpe, *Life*, p. 356, n. 266; Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 4 – 5.

#### 4.2: Broichan's Irish slavegirl (II.33)

Worth considering in this context is II.33, the first story to feature Columba's antagonist, the Pictish *magus* Broichan.<sup>93</sup> In this story, Columba is in the house of king Bruide of Pictland when he asks or demands (*postulauit*) that Broichan release an Irish slavegirl (i.e. a Gael, whether from Ireland itself or Dál Riata). Despite Adomnán mentioning that the slavegirl was a Gael, Columba's intervention is in the spirit of mercy, there being no mention of ethnic solidarity:

*Eodem in tempore uir uenerandus quandam a Broichano mago scoticam postulauit seruam humanitatis miseratione liberandam.*

[At the same time, the venerable man asked of the magician Broichan that a certain slave, an Irish woman, should be released as an act of human kindness.]<sup>94</sup>

Broichan refuses to release her, and Columba warns him that if he continues to refuse, he will die before the saint leaves the province. Leaving the king's house, Columba takes a white stone from the river Ness, telling his companions that through it God will heal many Picts. He also tells them that Broichan has just then been stricken by an angel, is close to death and is now willing to free the slavegirl. While he is still speaking, two horsemen arrive, messengers from the king, who confirm that Broichan is indeed near death and willing to release the girl. Columba sends them back with the stone, with instructions on how to use it to heal Broichan if he swears to release the slavegirl. When they return to Broichan and the king, the girl is handed over to the saint's envoys, and Broichan is cured with the stone, which is kept and, in accordance with Columba's prophecy, works many cures among the Picts.

While not explicitly concerned with violence, and while Adomnán's law makes no mention of slavery (the sole reference to it comes in the prologue, which is a tenth- or eleventh-century addition to the text), this story clearly puts Columba once more on the side of a vulnerable female individual against a wicked man. Adomnán was not the first insular ecclesiastic to have

<sup>93</sup> VSC, II.33.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. Contrast Columba's care for the storm-blown crane that arrived on Iona, I.48. There, he instructs one of his monks to look after it, *Quam ideo tibi sic deligenter commendo, quia de nostrae paternitatis regione est oriunda* ["I commend it to you thus earnestly, for this reason, that it comes from the district of our fathers"]. For slavery in Irish law, see Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, pp. 95 – 97; see also Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 68 – 71, 80. As Charles-Edwards notes, slaves from overseas were especially valuable, since it was hard for them to escape home (so it may be marginally more likely that the slavegirl was from Ireland than from Dál Riada) and also that female slaves were valued highly partially because they could be sexually exploited. We lack comparable evidence for the function and operation of slavery in Pictish society, but it is unlikely to have been greatly different.

a concern for slaves, as can be seen in Patrick's famous letter to the soldiers of Coroticus, and this story is illustrative of a broader effort on the part of the Church to end the practice of slavery.<sup>95</sup>

#### 4.3: The raid at Crog-reth (I.46)

This very short story is a more marginal example, in which violence is not actually inflicted, but which it seems relevant to include for the sake of completeness.<sup>96</sup> In it, Columba is a guest in an unidentified place called Coire-salcháin, when he speaks to an unnamed layman. On hearing that the layman is from the district around an also unidentified loch called Crog-reth, the saint prophetically informs him that his home is being plundered by raiders. Distressed by this, the man fears for his wife and children, until Columba tells him that they have managed to escape the marauders, though all of his cattle and goods have been taken. When the layman returns to his home, he finds that all has been as the saint foretold.

While this story does not feature violence actually being inflicted on the woman and her children, it is illustrative of the vulnerability of women to violence in this period. Raiding and violence were integrated into the economic structure of early medieval Gaelic society, and Adomnán here draws attention to those who suffer from its effects. He shows a special concern for the vulnerable, although the story cannot otherwise be directly tied to his law.

#### 4.4: Gendered non-violence: the *femme fatale* who wasn't (I.47)

Finally, there is the story of Góre at I.47.<sup>97</sup> We have already considered this story in the chapter on language use in *VSC*, above, on account of the use of Greek characters to render the ethnonym Corcu Réti, and it has also attracted attention due to possible mythological or

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<sup>95</sup> Text and translation in David R. Howlett, (ed. and trans.), *Liber epistolarum Sancti Patricii Episcopi: The book of letters of Saint Patrick the Bishop* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994), pp. 26–39. Christian opposition to slavery can be traced as far back as the New Testament – note that in I Timothy 1: 9 – 10, Paul groups slave traders together with murders, adulterers and liars among the sinners who are in need of God's law. Even so, there was a certain degree of ambiguity about slavery in early Christian thought and practice, with many seeing it as a natural part of the social order. For others, and this is relevant here, it was the (mostly masculine) violence and sexual exploitation of slavery that made it sinful. See Wyatt, *Slaves and Warriors*, pp. 260 – 261.

<sup>96</sup> *VSC*, I.46.

<sup>97</sup> *VSC*, I.47.

folkloric elements lying behind it.<sup>98</sup> What is relevant for our purposes here is Góre's fear about his wife, revealed after he asks Columba to tell him about how he will die:

*Cui sanctus: 'Nec in bello' ait, 'nec in mari, morieris. Comes tui itineris a quo non suspiciaris causa erit tuae mortis.' 'Fortassis' inquit Goreus, 'aliquis de meis comitantibus amicis me trucidare cogitet; aut marita ob alicuius iunioris uiri amorem me malefico mortificare.'* Sanctus: 'Non ita' ait, 'contigent.'

[The saint said to him: 'You will die neither in battle, nor in the sea. A companion of your journey, from whom you suspect nothing, will be the cause of your death.' 'Perhaps,' said Góre, 'one of the friends that accompany me may have it in mind to kill me; or my wife, to contrive my death by magic art, for love of a younger man.' The saint said: 'It will not happen so.']<sup>99</sup>

Columba refuses to tell Góre more, lest he become too preoccupied with the matter, and it eventually transpires that he dies when he accidentally wounds himself with his own knife when trying to separate two men fighting.

Here, there is no actual violence committed by Góre's wife, but his fear of it is revealing. Coupled with anxiety, perhaps, about his own fading sexual prowess (indicated by his fear that his wife would be attracted to a younger man, specifically), is his fear that she would use *maleficium* to kill him.<sup>100</sup> Despite his own physical power (he is described as *omnium illius aetatis in populo Korkureti fortissimus uirorum*, "the strongest of all the men of that time among the people of the Corcu Réti"), he is nevertheless vulnerable, and fears that vulnerability. His baseless fear of his wife is also of a piece with the distrust in and fear of women discussed above. One could well imagine that the author of *Tecosca Cormaic* or of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* would share his suspicion, and would also be likely to suspect the underhand,

<sup>98</sup> Picard, "The Strange Death of Guaire Mac Áedáin"

<sup>99</sup> VSC I.47.

<sup>100</sup> There is some ambiguity as to what *maleficium* means here. The Andersons use "magic art" in their translation, and add a note: "*maleficio*, 'sorcery' or possibly 'poison'." (Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, p. 310, n. 5); Sharpe translates it "witchcraft" (*Life*, I.47). Earlier translators avoided suspicions of witchcraft: Reeves has "may treacherously kill me" (*Life*, I.35); and Huyshe has "may do me to death by foul play" (Huyshe, *Life*, I.47). While there is room for differing interpretations without materially affecting the story, it may be relevant that *maleficus* and *maleficium* in II.17 plainly refer to witchcraft. *Maleficium* is discussed in Valerie I.J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). In addition to the senses discussed above, it can include prognostication (p. 17), and magical poison (p. 302). It certainly has sinful connotations, and in the early medieval period carried "a very heavy freight of condemnation" (p. 21). Augustine considered that *Veneficia*, *maleficia* and *malefici* all "diminish, defraud, give pain. In league with the demons, they conceal the true good from humankind" (p. 33, Flint's summary).



and possibly magical, actions of a sexually voracious woman in a predicted murder: Columba (or, rather, Adomnán) refuses to give such an idea credit.

## 5: Conclusions

Columba's power and holiness are, of course, ever-present in *VSC*. The narratives of prophecies, miracles and visions all work to establish, confirm and propagate the saint's the standing as one of the pre-eminent holy men in Christendom. As this chapter has demonstrated, however, these narratives also overlap with other messages as well, so that the prestige and sanctity of Columba lend extra force to messages about the sexual conduct Christian people (monastic and lay), Adomnán's political work and the importance of abbatial authority.

Adomnán's presentations of issues of sex and gender are nuanced. There is room in them for judgement, redemption and reconciliation. In the stories of sexual sin and the troubled marriage of Lugne and his wife, the saint is shown to possess authority, keen judgement, compassion and a sound knowledge of the laws of Christian sexual conduct, all attributes which were necessary for a leader in a Christian community. He himself is not presented as struggling with sexual matters, but it is in the nature of his role that he must deal with those who do, and he is seen to do so well.

In the matter of women's counsel, Adomnán does not conform to the idea, very prevalent in early medieval Gaelic society, that women were inherently untrustworthy or foolish, but rather assesses the wisdom or foolishness of women by their responses to the saint. Their gender is secondary to their receptiveness to the authority of Columba.

As regards violence, Adomnán shows in both *VSC* and *Cáin Adomnáin* a strong concern for those who are vulnerable to violence, including women. Using the attitudes of *Cáin Adomnáin* as the key to interpreting several narratives in *VSC*, it becomes clear that this is not merely a general concern for victims of violence, but one that is tied to a political plan of action. The stories in *VSC* exemplify and propagate the ideals of the law.

All three of these strands also demonstrate very clearly the authority of Columba, over both his monastic *familia* and over the laypeople with whom he interacts. They confess their sins to him, they seek penance from him, they look to him for justice, for protection, for resolution of their marital problems. Those who are wise, who are truly repentant, who are on the path of holiness all follow his direction. They submit to his authority and they follow his advice. Conversely, those who mock the saint, disobey him and refuse to follow his counsel face

disgrace, death and damnation. Adomnán was not merely describing events in Columba's life when he wrote these narratives, he was framing the ideal relationship between an abbot and his monks and the local lay community. In matters concerning sexual sin, discipline and gendered violence, *VSC* stakes a claim, based on Columba's manifest holiness and authority, for the authority of his abbatial successors, naturally including Adomnán himself. Abbatial authority is given holy sanction by the example of Iona's first abbot.



## Chapter 5

### Dangerous Beasts in *Vita Sancti Columbae*

This chapter is the second of two to look, not at an aspect of *VSC* as a whole, such as language or structure, but at a recurring motif or theme which helps to illuminate our understanding of Adomnán as a writer, and the intellectual context in which he operated. Here, we will consider the four chapters of *VSC* which feature dangerous and threatening creatures. These are, in order, the *cetus* in I.19, the boar in II.26, the *bestia* or *bilua* in II.27, and the *bestiolae* in II.42. Of these four, three have been the subject of varying degrees of debate as to their identification, the only exception being the boar (*aper*). This chapter will not include a discussion of the snakes in II.28, as these are merely referred to in the text, and not actually encountered by any of the characters. While it is tempting to group all of these creatures under the general heading of “monsters”, as does Jacqueline Borsje, such a general designation will be avoided here.<sup>1</sup> Adomnán himself describes only the *cetus* and the *bestiolae* as monstrous, and it may potentially be misleading to interpret the other creatures through the lens of “the monstrous”.

This chapter, as with Chapter 5, above, is a demonstration of the approach of studying a group of thematically related stories by undertaking focused close readings, and setting them in the wider context of adjacent literatures. For each of the four cases, the episode will be described, and the identification of the beast will be discussed, where applicable. After this, the episode will be studied for its messages, looking to see what Adomnán aimed to achieve with these stories of dangerous beasts. This will include, where possible, bringing in comparanda from adjacent literatures to provide a wider context for interpreting the stories. In looking at these stories of dangerous creatures, we are not merely studying some interesting stories about monsters and animals. These stories give clear examples of Adomnán’s ideas about Columba, about his awesome power and his place among the major saints Christendom. Some of them also share with some the narratives studied in Chapter 5, above, a concern with submission to abbatial authority.

<sup>1</sup> Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy*, pp. 93 – 175.

## 1: The Monsters and the Critics

Studies of monstrous creatures and dangerous animals in the literature and imagination of the Late Antique period and the Middle Ages tend broadly to focus on two main areas of investigation. The first is on the use of animals and monsters (some real, some fictional but sometimes believed at the time to have been real) as well as plants and stones, as allegorical devices in didactic discourses about virtue and the Christian life, the most famous of which was *Physiologus*, originally written in Greek.<sup>2</sup> Though a Latin version of *Physiologus* was in circulation from at least the late fourth century, there is no evidence that Adomnán had access to it, and neither does he provide allegorical interpretations of the creatures in *VSC*, in the manner of *Physiologus* or the later bestiaries.<sup>3</sup> Even so, he would have been familiar with the many Biblical examples of using animals to illustrate moral precepts.<sup>4</sup> A crucial difference, however, is this: Adomnán is not interested in the animals themselves, and he does not draw lessons directly from them. What is important in his stories in *VSC* is the power of the saint being revealed in relation to the creatures, and the ways in which people acknowledge and respond to that power.

The other, more recent, common approach is to look at monsters which represent some form of animal-human hybrid (such as dog-headed men), and to investigate them with respect to anxieties about the sometimes unstable, or permeable categories of the human body in its physical and social contexts, often looking into questions of race, sexuality and gender roles.<sup>5</sup> Again, this approach is hard to apply directly to Adomnán's work, since there is no human or quasi-human element to the monstrous creatures in *VSC*, but it should be borne in mind that he would have been familiar with such hybrid humans from Isidore's *Etymologiae*, XI.3: 7 – 39, some of which are given allegorical interpretations.

The stories of dangerous animals in *VSC* have received varying degrees of attention, and the responses that scholars have had to these narratives will be included in the discussion of each

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<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Bianciotto (trans.), *Bestiaires du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Stock Plus, 1980), pp. 8 – 9.

<sup>3</sup> Florence McCulloch, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962), p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> There are many of these in the book of Proverbs, such as the industrious ants of Proverbs 6: 6 – 11 and 30: 25.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)", in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (ed), *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3 – 25; Stefan Donecker, "The Werewolves of Livonia: Lycanthropy and Shape-Changing in Scholarly Texts, 1550–1720", *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural*, 1 (2012), 289–322; John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1981).

chapter, below. The work that should be singled out as most significant here is Borsje's *From Chaos to Enemy*, which uses *VSC* as the example of the genre of hagiography in a wider discussion of monsters in medieval Irish literature. The basic argument of her book is that the development of the concept of evil can be traced in early Irish literature, moving from a chaotic, non-moral evil to a morally antagonistic, Satanic evil, with the shift becoming more pronounced the more deeply Christianity took root in Ireland.<sup>6</sup> While I depart from Borsje's interpretations in some places, as seen below, I believe that her overall approach is a very valuable one, and my study of the beasts in *VSC* is influenced by, and indebted to, hers. The present study has a different focus from hers, however. As she was investigating the theological development of the concept of evil in early medieval Ireland, the particular situation and operation of the Columban cult and *familia* is not given much attention. The present reading of the same set of narratives highlights how Adomnán used them to demonstrate Columba's status as a major saint, and also to stress the importance of obedience to abbatial authority.

2: *De ceto magno* ("Concerning a great whale") (I.19)

In I.19, which is the second of a short series of three narratives featuring monks sailing, a monk called Berach seeks Columba's blessing before sailing from Iona to Tiree (*ad Ethicam*). The saint warns him not to sail there directly, but rather to take a more roundabout route because of the danger which he will otherwise encounter *en route*:

*Ó filii, hodie intentius praecaueto ne Ethicam cursu ad terram directo per latius coneris transmeare pilagus, sed potius circumiens minores secus nauiges insulas, ne uidelicet aliquo monstruoso perterritus prodigo uix inde possis euadere.*

[My son, be very careful not to attempt to take the direct route across the open sea to the land of Eth [Tiree] this day, but instead to sail round about, by the small islands [i.e. the Treshnish Isles]; lest you be terrified by a monstrous prodigy, and be scarcely able to escape.]<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy*, pp. 10 – 14.

<sup>7</sup> *VSC*, I.19. I have altered the translation slightly, the Andersons have "lest you be terrified by a prodigious monster", apparently either treating *monstruoso* as a noun, or considering a prodigious monster to be effectively equivalent to a monstrous prodigy. I am grateful to Cameron Wachowich for the suggestion that both *monstruoso* and *prodigo* could be describing the indefinite pronoun *aliquo*, i.e., "lest you be terrified by something monstrous (and) prodigious." I am also grateful to Daniel Watson for advice on this matter.

Berach ignores the saint's advice, and he and the other sailors are terrified when a *cetus* of enormous size duly rises up out of the sea, and they only just escape destruction by the wash caused by the creature's movement. The same morning Baithéne, another of the monks, is also planning to sail to Tiree. Columba tells him of the great whale, but Baithéne is not frightened, remarking that both the creature and he himself are subject to God's power. Columba dismisses him in peace, telling him that his faith will keep him safe. And, indeed, when the whale makes its reappearance, Baithéne alone of his crew remains unafraid. He raises his hands and blesses both the sea and the beast, and it dives to the depths, never to be seen again.

### 2.1: Identifying the *cetus*

In her discussion of this episode, Borsje, consistently describes the *cetus* as a “sea monster”, which is a well-attested meaning for the term.<sup>8</sup> In their respective translations, the Andersons and Sharpe render the term as “whale”.<sup>9</sup> Considering the marine wildlife around Iona, this seems to be the better interpretation. Some kinds of whales are still frequently seen around Iona today, and Lee Raye has argued that whales were a much more common sight in the British Isles in the early middle ages than they are now. It should be borne in mind that the catastrophic collapse in whale populations due to climate change, increased sea-traffic and hunting by humans is a fairly recent phenomenon: the right whale and the grey whale, which are now extinct in the East Atlantic, were once reasonably common there.<sup>10</sup> Going back to the medieval period, there is also a poem, attributed to Columba, though in fact dating from the twelfth century, which mentions whales around Iona:

<sup>8</sup> Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy*, p. 100. The term is thus defined in different dictionaries: *LS*, “any large sea-animal, a sea-monster; particularly a species of whale, a shark, dog-fish, seal, dolphin, etc.”; *OLD*, “a) a large sea animal (whale, porpoise, or dolphin) or its flesh, b) (mythol.) the sea monster to which Andromeda was exposed”; *DMLBS*, “whale or sim[ilar]”; *NCLCL*, for *cetia*, “whales or other sea monsters”.

<sup>9</sup> Sharpe, *Life*, pp. 125 – 126. In the Andersons' edition, a footnote to the word *cetus* reads, “This ‘whale’ is assimilated to the traditional idea of Jonah's sea-monster” (Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, p. 44, n. 50). While the message about obedience present in this story is also central to the Book of Jonah, it should be noted that the creature in Jonah is nowhere called a *cetus*. It is invariably referred to as a *piscis*. The term *cetus* is used, however, in Christ's allusion to Jonah in Matthew 12: 40, *sicut enim fuit Ionas in ventre ceti tribus diebus et tribus noctibus*. As Borsje notes, the Andersons do not elaborate on this somewhat opaque statement: Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy*, pp. 100 – 101, n. 262. O'Loughlin considers that the *cetus magnus* is “a clear allusion to the great sea monsters (*cete grandia*)” of Genesis 1: 21: O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places*, p. 166. While this episode does make the point that all of creation is under God's control, and an allusion to the creation narrative would certainly be appropriate in making that point, the fact that a different adjective is used suggests that the similarity may be coincidental rather than deliberate.

<sup>10</sup> Lee Raye, “The Forgotten Beasts in Medieval Britain” (PhD thesis, Cardiff University, 2016). I am grateful to Lee Raye for discussing this with me, and allowing me to read from his unpublished PhD thesis.



*Go bhfaicinn a healta ána  
 ós lear lionnmhar;  
 go bhfaicinn a míola mára,  
 mó gach n-iongnadh.*

[[O, that I] might see [Iona's] splendid birdflocks  
 over the teeming sea;  
 might see its whales, greatest  
 of all marvels.<sup>11</sup>

The Columban *familia*, and others like it, would certainly have been familiar enough with whales. It seems very likely, then, that when Adomnán wrote of a *cetus*, he meant no more and no less than a whale; and when contemporary audiences encountered it in his work, they would have imagined one. A large and frightening whale, to be sure, but a normal and recognisable part of their lived experience in a maritime community nonetheless.

## 2.2: Interpreting the *cetus*

How the *cetus* is to be interpreted is to a large extent dependent on how it is identified. For instance, Borsje considers the beast to be a “sea monster” of an unspecified type, and includes this as evidence in arguing that Adomnán uses deliberately vague terminology about water-dwelling animals, in doing so highlighting the strange, unknown nature of the depths, and thus increasing the glory of Columba's (or, in this case, possibly, Baithéne's) miracles.<sup>12</sup> This, of course, is difficult to apply if, as argued above, *cetus* is to be understood as a whale, something with which the Columban *familia* would have been familiar. Even so, Borsje's model of two kinds of evil (non-moral and chaotic on the one hand and moral and wilfully harmful on the other) is useful here. The whale here seems to be in the first category: threatening, dangerous: but a part of the natural world, not given any Satanic connotations, and in the end is not killed

<sup>11</sup> Thomas F. O'Rahilly (ed.), *Measgra Dánta: Miscellaneous Irish Poems, Part II* (Cork: Cló Ollscoil Chorcaí, 1977), Poem 42, lines 17 – 20; trans. Thomas Owen Clancy, “Columba's Island Paradise”, in Thomas Owen Clancy (ed.), *The Triumph Tree: Scotland's Earliest Poetry, 550 – 1350* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1998), pp. 188 – 189 (p. 188).

<sup>12</sup> Borsje, “The monster in the River Ness in Vita Sancti Columbae: a study of a miracle”, *Peritia*, 8 (1994), pp. 17 – 34, at p. 33. It should be noted that Borsje's, *From Chaos to Enemy*, published two years later, does not make this argument.

by Baithéne, nor merely driven away by him, but blessed. It is sent on its way, and the monks can continue on theirs.

Even if we decide not to consider the *cetus* to be a sea monster, however, Adomnán still tells us that it is *monstruoso* (“monstrous”). While on one level this could be understood as referring simply to the beast’s great size and terrifying nature, with its mere presence threatening to destroy both boats, a deeper meaning can be found by looking to the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville:

*Monstra vero a monitu dicta, quod aliquid significando demonstrent, sive quod statim monstrent quid appareat.*

[But monsters derive their name from admonition, for in giving a sign they demonstrate something, or otherwise because they immediately show what might appear.]<sup>13</sup>

It is the first sense that is the most applicable in this instance, and here we should remember that the term *monstruoso* is used not when the *cetus* makes either of its two appearances, but when Columba is warning Berach about it beforehand. It is an admonition that Berach ignores, with near fatal consequences for himself and his crew.

If we are to understand the whale, however, we must also look at the functions that it plays within the story. It seems to have two functions. First, and most obviously, it serves to demonstrate Columba’s prophetic powers. Second, it acts as a catalyst for a story about obedience. We might ponder why Baithéne and Berach did not travel together to Tiree, especially as the distance between the two islands is some 35 km (22 miles) – using the direct route which Columba warned against. Having the two men make separate voyages, however, allows for a direct comparison of their attitudes: the one disobedient and dismissive of Columba’s advice, and the other mindful of it, but trusting fully in the power and protection of the Lord. The use of Baithéne to articulate correct behaviour is well executed by Adomnán, and eventually it is Baithéne – not Columba – who holds his nerve and dismisses the whale. Baithéne, of course, was Columba’s successor as abbot of Iona, and this is one of a number of episodes in the *Vita* which demonstrate his fitness for that role.<sup>14</sup> The importance of obeying

<sup>13</sup> Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XI.3.3 . Translation my own.

For Adomnán’s knowledge of the *Etymologiae*, see Thomas O’Loughlin, “The Library of Iona in the Late Seventh Century: The Evidence from Adomnán’s “*de Locis Sanctis*””, *Ériu*, 45 (1994), pp. 33 – 52 (pp. 47 – 48).

<sup>14</sup> See also I.2; III.23.

the instructions of the abbot is also a common theme in *VSC*, which is perhaps not surprising, since it was after all written by an abbot.<sup>15</sup>

### 3: The great boar (II.26)

Secondly, in the context of a series of episodes about animals, we have the very short story of Columba's encounter with an enormous wild boar on the Isle of Skye. The chapter is short enough that it can be quoted in full:

*Alio in tempore uir beatus cum in Scia insula aliquantís demoraretur diebus, paulo longius solus orationis intuitu separatus a fratribus siluam ingressus densam, mirae magnitudinis aprum quem forte uenatici canes persequabantur obuium habuit. Quo uiso eminus sanctus aspiciens eum restitit. Tum deinde inuocato dei nomine sancta eleuata manu cum intenta dicit ad eum oratione: 'Vterius huc procedre noles; in loco ad quem nunc deuenisti morire.' Quo sancto in siluis personante uerbo non solum ultra accedere non ualuit, sed ante faciem ipsius terribilis ferus uerbi eius uirtute mortificatus cito conruit.*

[At another time, when the blessed man was for some days in the island of Sci [Skye], being alone for the sake of prayer, and separated from the brothers by a considerable distance, he entered a dense wood, and encountered a boar of remarkable size, which was being pursued by hunting-dogs. The saint saw it a little way off, and stood still, regarding it. Then he raised his holy hand, with invocation of the name of God, and praying intently said to the boar: 'You will approach no further; in the place to which you have now come, die.' When these words of the saint rang out in the wood, not only was the wild beast unable to advance further, but before Columba's face it immediately fell, slain by the power of his terrible word.]<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> For instance, see I.61; I.21.

<sup>16</sup> *VSC*, II.26.

### 3.1: Interpreting the boar

For medieval people the primary characteristic of boars was their ferocity. Bestiaries do not tend to attach any moral lesson to their descriptions of boars, but they do comment on their wild and dangerous nature.<sup>17</sup> Irish secular literature features many examples of heroes demonstrating their prowess by hunting and killing boars. The most famous of these is that of Diarmaid, in *Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*, a prose tale in Early Modern Irish, which may have existed in some form in the Middle or Old Irish periods.<sup>18</sup> Other examples are listed in Cross' *Motif-Index*.<sup>19</sup> A key point of difference between the story in VSC and accounts of boar hunts in secular literature, however, is that Columba does not hunt the boar, or set out with the intention of killing it – he does not in any way seek out an encounter with this ferocious creature. The presence of the hounds certainly indicates that a hunt is taking place, but Columba himself is not taking part in it.<sup>20</sup>

This episode has attracted relatively little attention from scholars, though Márkus points out that both it and the following chapter, both stories of dangerous beasts, are both set in Pictish areas, which he relates to the role of Iona monks as missionaries in a hostile land.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps it has been overshadowed somewhat by the more famous story about the beast in the River Ness which immediately follows it – and it is certainly worth noting the similarities between the two. Both feature a fierce, threatening creature, both of which are dealt with by Columba raising his hand, invoking God and commanding the beast to go no further. The story of the boar differs from that of the River Ness beast, and the other “monstrous creature” stories, in two important

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<sup>17</sup> Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XII.1.27 posits that *aper* (boar) is derived from *feritate* (fierceness), with the initial *f* substituted for *p*. Willene B. Clark (ed. and trans.), *A Medieval Book of Beasts: The Second-Family Bestiary* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), p. 152.

<sup>18</sup> Nessa Ní Shéaghda (ed.), *Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1962); for dating, see p. xi. The story is also known as a folktale in modern Scottish Gaelic, “Diarmaid and Grainne”, in J.F. Campbell (ed. and trans.), *Popular Tales of the West Highlands: Volume 2* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1994), pp. 247 – 251), and also as a heroic ballad, “Laoidh Dhiarmaid”, in J.F. Campbell (ed.), *Leabhar na Fèinne* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1872), pp. 157 – 164. The oldest of these ballad texts is from the sixteenth-century Book of the Dean of Lismore. Another hero, Caoilte, also kills a boar in another ballad, pp. 52 – 54.

<sup>19</sup> See Tom Peete Cross, *Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1952), B16.4, “Giant devastating boar”; B871.2, “Giant Boar”; B871.2.1, “Giant Hog”, p. 82. For similar stories in Irish hagiographies, see Bray, *A List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saint*, p. 89, “Saint slays animal by word”. For some non-Irish examples, see the following entries in Inger M. Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature* (Copenhagen: Den Arnamagnæanske Kommission, 1966): B16.1.4. “Devastating swine” (p. 40); B16.1.4.1. “Giant (hero) devastating boar” (p. 40); H1161. “Task: killing ferocious beast” (p. 156).

<sup>20</sup> Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2000) discussing hunting in general at pp. 272 – 285, and the hunting of wild pigs in particular at pp. 281 – 282.

<sup>21</sup> Márkus, “Iona: monks, pastors and missionaries”, pp. 116, 132 – 138.

and, as Borsje notes, related respects.<sup>22</sup> Firstly, the boar – and the boar alone – appears to represent a direct threat to Columba himself; and secondly, the boar – and the boar alone – is killed.<sup>23</sup> We may here compare the fate of the wicked man Lám Dess, just two chapters earlier in Book II.24, who attempts to kill Columba with a spear thrust. Another monk jumps in to take the blow in the saint's place and is miraculously preserved. One year later, on the very anniversary of the attempted murder, Lám Dess himself was killed, transfixing by a spear thrown in the name of Saint Columba. It is not entirely clear whether this means that the saint's aid was invoked by whoever threw the spear, or if the throw was in some way dedicated to him, but either way Columba is in some way shown to be involved with the vengeance visited upon Lám Dess.<sup>24</sup>

Both of these two stories, that of the boar and Lám Dess – as well as the intervening story of the swift vengeance on the man who killed a girl trying to seek Columba's protection – send a very clear message: Columba, and by extension his church, is not to be threatened. II.24 and II.26, therefore, may be deliberate allusions to the prohibitions on attacking clerics in *Cáin Adomnáin*.<sup>25</sup> While the patterns of narrative sequencing in *VSC* are given detailed examination in Chapter 2 of this thesis, above, which need not be repeated here, the sequence here is noteworthy: a series of chapters concerning wicked men and their persecutions of the innocent, and their inevitable fates, followed by another series about animals – and the transitional story, the first one in the Animals series, continues the motif of threats to Columba being met with swift and terrible vengeance.<sup>26</sup>

With regard to the relation between the church and secular authorities, it would also be worth considering the relationship in this story between the saint and the unseen hunter (or hunters) whose hounds pursue the boar. In the first place, we can see that Columba demonstrates a measure of superiority over the hunter, as he achieves what the hunter does not: he kills the boar, and does so before the hunter arrives at the scene in person. This may plausibly be

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<sup>22</sup> Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy*, p. 170.

<sup>23</sup> Note that there is no indication that the boar was intentionally charging at the saint – it was being pursued by the dogs and ran in Columba's direction while trying to escape them. Columba would still be in a dangerous situation, of course, if he happened to be in the way of a fleeing boar. The text also does not say how near to Columba the boar was when it died. However, there seems little obvious motivation for Columba to strike the boar dead or invoke the power of God's name against it if he was not in danger. Columba's being threatened by the boar is therefore an inference rather than something the text makes explicitly clear, but it seems a reasonable inference.

<sup>24</sup> *VSC*, II.24.

<sup>25</sup> *Cáin Adomnáin*, § 34 – 35 (pp. 36 – 37); §40 (pp. 40 – 41); § 44 (pp. 44 – 45).

<sup>26</sup> Persecutors sequence, *VSC*, II.22 – 25; Animals sequence, *VSC*, II.26 – 29.

interpreted as a coded statement about the superiority of the Columban church over secular authorities. Going beyond this general message, the circumstances in which Columba kills the boar may make this claim stronger, and perhaps more provocative.<sup>27</sup> Even if Columba is being threatened by the boar, his killing of somebody else's quarry is a rather bold thing to do, as in slaying the animal he has spoiled the sport of the hunters. It is not clear whether an individual hunting on somebody else's land was legal in early Irish law, though later evidence suggests it was not.<sup>28</sup> Literary evidence suggests that such interventions were not appreciated, as we can see in the Old Irish Triad 236, in which the first of the three wonders of Glenn Dallan is:

*Torcc Dromma Leithe, is ass rochin 7 is dó-side forfhéimid Finn ní, co torchair  
imMaig Lii la aithech búí hic tírad, ut dixit Finn:*

*“Ní mad biadsam ar cono,  
Ní mad ríadsam ar n-echa,  
Tan is aithechán átha  
Romarb torcc Dromma Letha.”*

[The boar of Druim Leithe. It was born there, and Finn was unable to do aught against it, until it fell in Mag Li by a peasant who was kiln-drying. Whence Finn said:

*“Not well have we fed our hounds,  
Not well have we driven our horses,  
Since a little boor from a kiln  
Has killed the boar of Druim Leithe.”]*<sup>29</sup>

A similar example can be found in a more distant text, *Pwyll Pendeuic Dyuet*, the First Branch of the Mabinogi. In it, Pwyll is first drawn into the affairs of Annwfn when he must make restitution for feeding his own hounds on a stag he did not know was properly the quarry of Arawn. Arawn makes clear the depth of the Pwyll's unwitting insult:

<sup>27</sup> I am grateful to Abigail Burnyeat for suggesting this interpretation to me.

<sup>28</sup> Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, pp. 106 - 107. Whether something similar to the Irish legal framework was in place on Skye is unknowable, but Irish legal norms are integral to several stories in *VSC*, for example in II.37, the poor man's wife fears being sold into slavery if people or cattle are killed or injured on the stake, and the laws dealing with murder, filial obligations and service are integral to the story of Librán in II.39.

<sup>29</sup> Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), *The Triads of Ireland* (Dublin: The Royal Irish Academy, 1906), pp. 30 – 31.

*“A unben,” heb ef, “mi a wnn pwy wyt ti, ac ny chyuarachaf i well it.”*

*“Ie,” heb ef, “ac atuyd y mae arnat o anryded ual nas dylyei.”*

*“Dioer,” heb ef, “nyt teilygdawt uy anryded a'm etteil am hynny.”*

*“A unben,” heb ynteu, “beth amgen?”*

*“Y rof i a Duw,” hep ynteu, “dy anwybot dy hun a'th ansyberwyt.”*

*“Pa ansyberwyt, unben, a weleist ti arnaf i?”*

*“Ny weleis ansyberwyt uwy ar wr,” heb ef, “no gyrru yr erchwys a ladsysei y carw e ymdeith, a llithiau dy erchwys dy hun arnaw. Hynny,” hep ef, “ansyberwyt oed, a chyn nyt ymdialwyf a thi, y rof i a Duw,” hep ef, “mi a wnafo anglot itt guerth can carw.”*

[“Sir,” he said, “I know who you are, but I will not greet you.”

“Well,” said Pwyll, “perhaps your rank is such that you are not obliged to.”

“God knows,” he said, “it’s not the level of my rank that prevents me.”

“What else, sir?” said Pwyll.

“Between me and God,” he said, “your own lack of manners and discourtesy.”

“What discourtesy, sir, have you seen in me?”

“I have seen no greater discourtesy in a man,” he said, than to drive away the pack that killed the stag, and feed your own pack on it; that,” he said, “was discourtesy: and although I will not take revenge upon you, between me and God,” he said, “I will bring shame upon you to the value of a hundred stags.”]<sup>30</sup>

There are several significant differences. Arawn’s hounds have killed the stag, so Pwyll has not intervened in the same way that Columba does in *VSC*, moreover Pwyll’s hounds drive away Arawn’s, and start eating the stag themselves, while there is no indication that Columba’s

<sup>30</sup> R.L. Thomson (ed.), *Pwyll Pendewic Dyuet* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1957), p. 2, lines 29 – 38; Sioned Davies (trans.), *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 3 – 4.



actions deprive the hunter of the boar's carcass. Also, there is no confrontation between Columba and the hunter, who does not make a personal appearance in the story at all.

While the value of *Pwyll Pendewic Dyuet* for interpreting this episode in *VSC* should therefore not be overstressed, it helps to illustrate that interrupting another person's hunt was contrary to the norms of accepted behaviour in insular medieval society. That Columba does so with impunity, even in probable self-defence, may be a demonstration of not only his saintly power, but also of the power of ecclesiastical as opposed to secular authority.

#### 4: The *bestia* in the River Ness (II.27)

The most famous dangerous creature in *VSC* is the water beast encountered in the River Ness.<sup>31</sup> This, somewhat inevitably, is often cited in tourist brochures and cryptozoology and creationist websites as the first appearance on record of the legendary Loch Ness Monster, though the story is actually set not in Loch Ness itself, but in the River Ness, which flows north-east from the loch out to the Beaully Firth.<sup>32</sup>

Here, Columba and his monks come to the river, intending to cross it, when they come across a group of Pictish pagans burying a man. This man had been swimming in the river when a terrible beast – variously called a *bestia* and a *bilua* in the story, an example of Adomnán's fondness for synonyms – rushed to the surface of the water and bit him. Despite the efforts of his friends to rescue him, the poor fellow (*homunculus*) died.<sup>33</sup> Unperturbed by this, the saint sends one of his monks, called Lugne, to swim across the river to bring back a small boat tied up on the opposite bank. He dives in, and while swimming so disturbs the water as to alert the beast, lurking on the river-bed, to his presence. The creature, its appetite having been whetted by its Pictish aperitif, comes back to the surface in hope of a main course. As it closes in on the intrepid Lugne, however, Columba once more raises his hand – and, making the sign of the cross in the air, he invokes the name of God and commands the beast to go no further, not to

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<sup>31</sup> *VSC*, II.27. For similar stories in other Irish hagiographies, see Bray, *A List of Motifs*, p. 88: "Saint defeats monster".

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, the page on "Nessie" on the creationist website *True Authority*: <http://www.trueauthority.com/cryptozoology/nessie.htm> (accessed 10/12/2015). Among many other surprising pieces of information to be found on this website is the revelation that *VSC* dates from AD 400.

<sup>33</sup> This is how the Andersons render *homunculus* here. It literally means a little man, or a dwarf, and perhaps that is how it should be regarded here, but this seems to be an example of Adomnán's use of the diminutive to indicate wretchedness.

touch Lugne, to go back at once. And this it indeed does, rapidly retreating, leading the Christians and pagans present to praise alike the Christian God.

#### 4.1: Identifying the *bestia*

Attempts have been made to identify this creature. If we leave aside a loch-dwelling plesiosaur as a possibility, we do have some other attempts. One is that of Charles Thomas, who sought to give a naturalistic interpretation, positing that our *bestia* was some kind of bearded seal or walrus, and that it was frightened off by Columba shouting and waving his arms about.<sup>34</sup> David Woods seconded this, stating, “the description of this beast resembles that of a bearded-seal or walrus.”<sup>35</sup> However, the account in *VSC* does not give us enough information about this animal to come to such a conclusion. The creature is called only *bestia* and *bilua*, and there is no mention of any feature that we would specifically associate with walruses or seals, aside from the beast's living in the water. Surely if it had been a walrus, some mention of the beast's fearsome tusks would be expected? Oisín Plumb notes that seals appear elsewhere in the *Vita* in Book I.41, and that if the creature here had been an unusually fierce seal, Adomnán would likely have said something like “a ferocious seal of extraordinary size”, much as he did with the boar in the previous chapter.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4.2: Interpreting the *bestia*

Borsje quite rightly argues that this naturalistic method, seeking to make banal something which Adomnán intended to be miraculous, risks missing the point of the story.<sup>37</sup> While it can in many cases be interesting and useful to try and read between Adomnán's lines to discover what actually happened (as Woods does), I believe that we miss out on more interesting and useful things if we opt not to engage with Adomnán on his own terms. Readers today are free to believe or disbelieve in monsters and miracles as they please: but these were very real parts of

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<sup>34</sup> Charles Thomas, "The "monster" episode in Adomnan's Life of St. Columba", *Cryptozoology*, 7 (1988), pp. 38 – 45.

<sup>35</sup> David Woods, "Four Notes on Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*", *Peritia*, 16 (2002), pp. 40 – 67, at p. 53.

<sup>36</sup> Oisín Plumb, “An analysis of how Adomnán and the wider Iona community engaged with the physical world and unusual natural phenomena” (MSc thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2011), p. 23. I am grateful to Dr. Plumb for discussing this with me, and for allowing me to read his unpublished thesis.

<sup>37</sup> Borsje, “The monster in the river Ness”, pp. 29 - 30.

Adomnán's world, and that of his audience. For them, this could not be the simple chasing away of an ordinary if rather aggressive animal; it was instead a miraculous manifestation of the power of God in the person of the saint; one which made clear to the heathen Picts that the Christian God was mighty indeed, and that his holy man had access to his favour and some of his power.

James Carney sought to find in this episode one of the sources of the secular saga *Táin Bó Fraoich*, a thesis which has not won widespread approval.<sup>38</sup> He also suggests a root for Adomnán's story in the *Vita Sancti Samsonis* (VSS), in which Samson of Dol overcomes a number of fearsome serpents in Brittany, sometimes sending them away, sometimes (as Columba does with the boar) commanding them to die.<sup>39</sup> This seems more plausible, and certainly the fact that the local pagan population were very impressed by the Christian saint defeating the serpent in VSS I.50 is strikingly similar to the reaction of their Pictish counterparts in Adomnán's episode. For a clear line of influence to be posited, however, it would need to be demonstrated that VSS predates VSC, which is by no means certain. Olson's dating of VSS to the middle or later seventh century would make plausible Adomnán's reuse of the text's serpents; Sowerby places its composition at *c.* 700, about contemporary with VSC, which makes it less likely; Flobert's mid-eighth-century date for VSS would of course make Adomnán's reading it impossible.<sup>40</sup>

Aside from questions over the relative dating of VSS and VSC, there is another problem with Carney's suggestion. He posits that Adomnán wanted to give his own subject some similar set pieces, but opted for a water beast on account of the lack of appropriate venomous snakes in

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<sup>38</sup> James Carney, "Composition and Structure of TBF", in *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979), pp. 1 – 65, at pp. 40 – 53. For a critique of Carney's thesis, see Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy*, p. 144. We might note that there are other fearsome water monsters in early Irish literature, such as the *muidris* in *Echtra Fergusa Maic Léti*, ed. and trans. D.A Binchy, "The saga of Fergus mac Léti", in *Ériu*, 16 (1952), pp. 33 – 48. I do not think that it is necessary to posit direct connections and borrowings between surviving texts, especially when so many of the vernacular ones likely had an oral existence of an unknown length of time, across an unknown geographical extent of the Gaelic-speaking world, before they were written down. It seems to me better to think of these texts sharing a literary context in which such creatures could be called upon and deployed if needed, that such monsters were part of a common cultural understanding, rather than looking for direct literary borrowings. For more such monsters, see Cross, *Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature*, B11.3.1.1, "Dragon lives in lake"; B11.7.2, "Dragon guards lake"; B16.9, "Devastating man-eating sea-monster (serpent)"; B91.5, "Sea-serpent"; B91.5.2, "Lake-serpent (monster)".

<sup>39</sup> *Vita Sancti Samsonis*, Pierre Flobert (ed. and French trans.), *La vie ancienne de saint Samson de Dol* (Paris: CNRS, 1997), I.32; I.50; I.58; I.60.

<sup>40</sup> These are discussed in Lynette Olson, "The Date of the First Life of St Samson of Dol", in Pamela O'Neill (ed.), *The Land Beneath the Sea: Essays in Honour of Anders Ahlqvist's Contribution to Celtic Studies in Australia* (Sydney: The University of Sydney, 2013), pp. 171 – 182. At pp. 181 – 182, she notes that Flobert's late dating has won little support from other scholars.

Ireland.<sup>41</sup> This is a rather curious argument, not least because the River Ness is not in Ireland – and in any case, in the very next chapter we see Columba giving his protection to men and cattle on Iona against the venom of snakes as long as they follow God's commandments.<sup>42</sup> A direct influence from VSS on VSC seems therefore unlikely.

A closer parallel has been identified by Borsje in Sulpicius Severus' *Dialogi* of Saint Martin of Tours. The *Dialogi* were identified as being among Adomnán's sources by Gertrud Brüning in her great work on the VSC in 1917<sup>43</sup> – and Borsje cites the following episode from them as relevant to Adomnán's story:

*Serpens flumen secans in ripam, in qua constiteramus, adnabat: in nomine, inquit, Domine iubeo te redire mox se mala bestia ad verbum sancti retorsit et in ulteriorem ripam nobis inspectantibus transmeauit.*

[A serpent swimming in the river was cutting his way toward the bank where we had stopped. "In God's name," said Martin, "I order you to go back." At this word from the saint, the evil beast, at once reversed its course and, under our very eyes, swam across to the further bank.]<sup>44</sup>

The parallel is not exact – Sulpicius' serpent has not killed anyone – but it is close enough to suggest that Borsje's identification of this as Adomnán's source is probably correct. In using this, Adomnán was deliberately placing Columba in exalted company: as he also does when he attributes to Columba miracle stories derived from those of Saint Germanus and even Christ. In doing so, Adomnán is staking a claim for Columba as a saint of the very first rank, part of the elite company of holy men venerated across Christendom.

<sup>41</sup> Carney, "Composition and Structure of TBF", p. 50, n. 1.

<sup>42</sup> VSC, II.28. He expands on this point in, Carney, "The Irish Elements in Beowulf", in *Studies in Irish Literature and History*, pp. 77 – 128, writing: "An Irish hagiographer could not convincingly represent his hero as overcoming a serpent or a dragon on Irish territory. Since classical antiquity it was well known that Ireland harboured no venomous creatures of the serpent, hence of the dragon, type. The only kind of monster for the hero to overcome is therefore the water-beast. A general rule may be stated: *where continental saints or heroes overcome serpents or dragons Irish heroes overcome water-monsters.*" (p. 123. Italics in original). Again, it must be pointed out that despite Carney's consistent use of "Irish" when discussing VSC, this episode in it is not set in Ireland at all, so we should not assume that the text's audience would dismiss the presence of serpents in such a story.

<sup>43</sup> Brüning, "Adamnans Vita Columbae und ihre Ableitungen", pp. 247 – 252.

<sup>44</sup> C. Halm (ed.), *Sulpicii Severi Libri qui supersunt* (Vienna, 1866), p. 207, English translation in B.M. Peebles (trans.), *Sulpicius Severus. The Fathers of the church: a new translation VII* (Washington DC, 1949 - 1970), p. 237.

5: The *bestiolae* (II.42)

Finally, we have the curious little creatures encountered by Cormac.<sup>45</sup> Here, Cormac undertakes a voyage - his third of three attempts to find an appropriately secluded refuge. The relevant passage is quite long, so it will be split up into several shorter sections, with a brief commentary on each.

*Cum idem Cormacus teria in ociano mari fatigaretur uice, prope isque ad mortem periclitari coepit. Nam cum eius nauis a terris per xiiii. aestati temporis dies totidemque nocte plenís uelis austro flante uento ad septemtrionalis plagam caeli directo excurreret cursu, eiusmodi nauagatio ultra humani excursus modum et inremeabilis uidebatur.*

[While Cormac was labouring for the third time in the sea of Ocean, he came into dangers that nearly caused his death. When his ship, blown by the south wind, had driven with full sails in a straight course from land towards the region of the northern sky, for fourteen summer days and as many nights, such a voyage appeared to be beyond the range of human exploration, and one from which there could be no return.]<sup>46</sup>

Cormac's first voyage is recounted in I.6, in which his first effort to find a more secluded refuge is said to have been unsuccessful since one of his companions from another monastery had joined him without his abbot's permission (unknown to Cormac). His second attempt is reported in the first part of II.42, in which Columba exhorts the Pictish king Brude to ensure that his subject-king (*regulus*) of Orkney will ensure that Cormac and his companions are protected when in Orkney.

Where exactly Cormac had sailed to is of course impossible to say with any certainty, but it was certainly considerably beyond the seas with which he was familiar.<sup>47</sup> If he was not quite beyond the range of human exploration, he was certainly beyond the world known by the Ionan community. The significance of "the north" will be discussed in more detail below, here it is

<sup>45</sup> VSC, II.42.

<sup>46</sup> VSC, II.42.

<sup>47</sup> It would be tempting to try to estimate how far fourteen days' worth of sailing might have taken him, but without knowing Cormac's starting point, the strength of the wind, and if it blew at a consistent speed for fourteen days, such an effort would be little more than guesswork.

sufficient to note that Cormac had travelled a great distance, and was so far away that his safe return was improbable.

*Vnde contigit ut post decimam eiusdem quarti et decimi horam diei, quidam pene insustenabiles undique et ualde formidabiles consurgerent terrores. Quoddam quippe usque in id temporis inuisae mare obtegentes occurrerant tetrae et infestae nimis bestiolae, quae horribili impetu carinam et latera pupimque et proram ita forti feriebant percusura, ut pellicium tectum nauis penetrales putarentur penetrare posse. Quae, ut hí qui inerant ibidem postea narrarunt, prope magnitudine ranarum aculeis permolestae non tamen uolatiles sed natatiles erant; sed et remorum infestabant palmulas. Quibus uisís inter cetera monstra, quae non huius est temporis enarrare, Cormaccus cum nauítis comitibus, ualde turbati et pertimescentes, deum qui est in angustís pius et oportunus auxiliator inlacrimati precantur.*

[And so it happened, after the tenth hour of the fourteenth day, that there arose all around them almost overwhelming and very dreadful objects of terror; for they were met by loathsome and exceedingly dangerous small creatures [*bestiolae*] covering the sea, such as had never been seen before that time; and these struck with terrible impact the bottom and sides, the stern and prow, with so strong a thrust that they were thought able to pierce and penetrate the skin-covering of the ship. As those that were present there related afterwards, these creatures were about the size of frogs, very injurious by reason of their stings [*aculeis*], but they did not fly, they swam. And moreover they damaged the blades of the oars. Seeing these among the other monsters,<sup>48</sup> which this is not the time to recount, Cormac and his fellow-sailors were in great alarm and terror, and with tears prayed to God, who is a true and ready helper in times of need.]<sup>49</sup>

Here we are given a description of the appearance and the behaviour of these creatures. As will be discussed below, attempts to reconcile known species with all of these characteristics have proven to be extremely difficult. Again, the danger which Cormac and his crew believe themselves to be in must be stressed. Lost in the seas of the far north, they are in peril for their lives, and must call on divine aid. It is most unfortunate that Adomnán does not feel that this

<sup>48</sup> I have here altered the translation slightly. The Andersons give “with the other prodigies” for Adomnán’s *inter cetera monstra*.

<sup>49</sup> VSC, II.42.

is an appropriate place to expand on the *cetera monstra*, but even that brief mention adds to the impression that Cormac and his companions are in a strange, hostile, threatening place which they cannot understand, navigate or, on their own, escape.

*Eadem hora et sanctus noster Columba quamlibet longe absens corpore spiritu tamen praesens in nauis cum Coraco erat. Vnde eodem momento personante signo fratres ad oratorium conuocans et ecclesiam intrans astantibus sic more sibi consueto profetizans profatur, dicens: 'Fratres, tota intentione pro Cormaco orate, qui nunc humanae discursionis limitem inmoderate nauigando excessit. Nunc quasdem monstruosas ante non uisas et pene indicibiles patitur horrificas perturbationes. Itaque nostris commembribus in periculo intollerabili constitutis mente conpati debemus fratribus, et dominum exorare cum eis. Ecce enim nunc Cormacus cum suis nauis faciem lacrimis ubertim inrigans Christum intentius precatur, et nos ipsum orando adiuuemus, ut austrum flantem uentem usque hodie per xiiii. dies nostri miseratus in aquilonem conuertat. Qui uidelicet aquiloneus uentus nauem Cormaci de periculis retrahat.'*

[At that same hour, our Saint Columba also, though far distant in body, was nevertheless in spirit present with Cormac in the ship. So in that moment, calling the brothers together to the oratory with the sound of the bell, and entering the church, he spoke thus prophetically according to his custom to those that were standing by, and said: 'Brothers, pray with your whole might for Cormac, who now in his voyage has far exceeded the bounds of human travel. Now he endures the terrors of certain horrible and monstrous things never before seen, and almost indescribable. In our minds, therefore, we must share the sufferings of our brothers, our fellow-members, who are placed in unendurable danger; and we must pray to the Lord with them. For now behold Cormac, copiously watering his face with tears, prays earnestly with his sailors to Christ, and let us help him in praying, that Christ may take pity upon us, and may turn into a north wind the south wind that has blown for fourteen days, until today; so that this northerly wind may bring Cormac's ship out of its dangers.']<sup>50</sup>

Deliverance is of course granted to Cormac and his crew, as the Lord sends a north wind to bring the ship to safety. Unlike the other dangerous creatures in *VSC*, there is no word of the

<sup>50</sup> *VSC*, II.42.



little creatures being killed or driven away, far less blessed. Columba here reinforces that the creatures are monstrous, previously unknown and very dangerous, and that Cormac has travelled far beyond the bounds of human exploration.

### 5.1: Identifying the *bestiolae*

As might be expected, this story has attracted a few attempts to identify the little creatures in question. T.C. Lethbridge suggested that they were mosquitos – which seems rather a stretch even without Adomnán's statement that the creatures swam and did not fly.<sup>51</sup> Fowler, somewhat more plausibly, argued for a kind of jellyfish, but this also does not seem to fit the description very well - the hard butting against the boat, in particular, would be hard to account for in jellyfish.<sup>52</sup> Woods, in another attempt at a naturalistic explanation, posits a complex chain of exaggeration and misunderstanding of source materials on Adomnán's part, and emends the text to give a description which could square with that of a pod of dolphins.<sup>53</sup> His reasoning is good as far as it goes, but it is hard to credit that sailors and inhabitants of the Inner Hebrides (where dolphins and porpoises are still quite common) could have given such a bewildered and confusing description of these very common animals, without it being made clear at any point of the narrative's transmission what they actually were. Even unusually aggressive dolphins could be called just that without the story losing any of its miraculous force - plenty of stories in *VSC* feature miracles involving ordinary animals, two of which have already been discussed above. So, I regard the dolphin theory as, again, plausible, but not entirely convincing. Bill Aird has suggested to me that the creatures could have been a shoal of squid and that they butted against the boat with their beaks.<sup>54</sup> This certainly seems more plausible than some other suggestions that have been made; but again, squid are common enough in the Irish Sea zone, and would not need such a roundabout description.

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<sup>51</sup> Sharpe, *Life*, p. 343, n. 326.

<sup>52</sup> He quotes a letter from Rev. A. M. Norman, who suggested, “the common stinging jelly-fish, *Cyanea capillata*.” Norman pointed out the tendency for such creatures to get entangled on the blades of oars: Fowler, *Vita*, pp. 220 – 221, n. 20.

<sup>53</sup> Woods, “Four notes”, pp. 52 – 62. Plumb, “An analysis”, has a detailed critique of Woods' argument, pp. 28 – 30.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. the Andersons' note, Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, p. 168, n. 191, “*aculei* usually means ‘stings’, but here they seem to be in front, like birds' beaks.”

Borsje's theory of Adomnán's deliberately vague descriptions of water creatures is also difficult to apply here. While it is certainly true that he uses the rather generic and unhelpful diminutive *bestiolae*; his detailed, if puzzled, description is surely anything but vague. Rather than using a vague term for literary effect or to make a theological point, Adomnán seems to be using a generic term because he himself has no clear idea of what these creatures were. It is probably now not possible to give these creatures a positive identification, but, as with the river creature, I consider what actually did or did not take place to be secondary to what Adomnán is trying to do with his material. Unlike the river beast, however, there seem to be no obviously literary models that Adomnán was drawing upon.

There is a partial parallel in *Beowulf*:

‖*Fēƿa eal gesæt;*

*gesāwon ǣfter wætere ‖ wyrm-cynnes fela,*

*sellīce sǣ-dračan ‖ sund cunnian,*

*swylce on næs-hleoðum ‖ nicras licgean,*

*ǣ on undern-mǣ ‖ oft bewitigað*

*sohr-fulne sīð ‖ on segl-rāde,*

*wyrmas ond wil-dēor.*

[There sat them down the ranks of men. Now they saw about the water many of the serpent-kind, strange demons of the sea, ranging the flood, and demons of the deep lying upon the jutting slopes, even such as in the middle hours watch for those journeying anxious upon the sailing paths, serpents and beasts untamed.]<sup>55</sup>

Carney suggests that *Beowulf*'s early adventures with sea monsters may have been inspired by this episode in *VSC*, but it seems to me that the passage quoted provides a better point of contact, if one must be sought.<sup>56</sup> While a direct line of influence from *VSC* to *Beowulf* is unconvincing,

<sup>55</sup> *Beowulf*, lines 1424–1430, ed. C.L Wrenn, rev. W.F. Bolton, *Beowulf, With the Finnesburg Fragment* (London: Harrap, 1953), pp. 152 – 153, lines 1424 – 1430; J.R.R. Tolkien (trans.), *Beowulf: A translation and commentary, together with Sellic Spell*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014) p. 54.

<sup>56</sup> Carney, "The Irish Elements in *Beowulf*", p. 87.

Charles D. Wright has argued persuasively that the *Beowulf* poet was drawing on imagery of Hell from an Insular, and probably Irish, redaction of the *Visio Sancti Pauli*, a redaction that must have existed from at least as far back as the late eighth century, and possibly earlier.<sup>57</sup> It cannot be securely dated far back enough for it to have been available to Adomnán, and the presence of monsters in northern waters is too slight a basis on which to build a case for the *Visio*'s redactor having read *VSC*. While a direct connection between *VSC* and the redaction of *Visio* cannot therefore be demonstrated, they certainly seem to inhabit a shared tradition in Hiberno-Latin writing which utilises the danger of monster-infested northern seas.

### 5.2: Interpreting the *bestiolae*

Whatever these creatures were, the more important matter for the purposes of this study is the function they and their location have in the story. Adomnán sets this episode in the far north - further than anyone had ever been before. It was a commonplace of medieval thought that the far reaches of the world, beyond the edge of what was familiar, were where one was bound to encounter all sorts of strange things – and here Adomnán's tantalising comment about the *cetera monstra* he does not have the time to record should be borne in mind.<sup>58</sup> In part, this was inherited from Classical notions, already present in the early Greek tragedians, about the threatening and bewildering nature of the rather vaguely defined “north”. This “north” could be shifted to north of wherever a given writer happened to be, so that it was also used by writers (such as Adomnán) whom other writers would certainly have considered to be in “the North” themselves.<sup>59</sup> Strabo considered that Ireland was a wretched place to live on account of the cold, and that nowhere north of it was inhabitable, while Procopius, in the sixth century, thought that Britain benorth Hadrian's wall was inhabited only by serpents, wild beasts and ghosts, and that nobody passing from the south of the island to the north of it would be able to survive there for longer than half an hour.<sup>60</sup> If Adomnán had access to these writings, or ones similar to them, he would of course have known that such beliefs were nonsense, but the north as a concept could simply be moved relative to himself.

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<sup>57</sup> Charles D. Wright, *The Irish Tradition in Old English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 110 – 133.

<sup>58</sup> Friedman, *The Monstrous Races*, pp. 37 – 58. Similar ideas about a similarly amorphous “East” were also common: Robert Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 101.

<sup>59</sup> Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), pp. 25 – 26.

<sup>60</sup> Davidson, *The Idea of North*, pp. 26 – 31.

He would certainly have been familiar with several Biblical references to the north as a place where evil was to be found. For instance, the prophet Isaiah has Lucifer setting up his throne in the north:

*Quomodo cecidisti de caelo lucifer qui mane oriebaris corruisti in terram qui vulnerabas gentes qui dicebas in corde tuo in caelum conscendam super astra Dei exaltabo solium meum sedebo in monte testamenti in lateribus aquilonis.*

[How you have fallen from heaven, Morning Star [Lucifer], son of the dawn! You are struck down to the earth – you, who used to wound the nations. You, who said in your heart, “I will ascend to heaven. Above the stars of God I will raise my throne. I will sit in the mountain of the covenant, in the regions of the north.”]<sup>61</sup>

Another prophet, Jeremiah, twice mentions the north as a place from which threatening things will come:

*et dixit Dominus ad me aquilone pandetur malum super omnes habitatoes terrae*

[And the Lord said to me, “Evil will spread out from the north over all the inhabitants of the earth.”]<sup>62</sup>

*Levate signum in Sion confortamini nolite stare quia malum ego adduco ab aquilone et contritionem magnam*

[Raise the banner in Zion, strengthen yourselves, do not stay! For I will bring evil from the north, and much grief.]<sup>63</sup>

In Biblical as well as Classical texts, therefore, we can find the idea that “the north” was a place of evil and fear. The extreme north as the location of Hell is also found in some vernacular Irish and later Icelandic texts, as Wright demonstrates.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Isaiah 14: 12 – 13. Translation mine.

<sup>62</sup> Jeremiah 1: 14. Translation mine.

<sup>63</sup> Jeremiah 4: 6. Translation mine.

<sup>64</sup> Wright cites Dublin, National Library of Ireland, G. 1, 51r: *Cia bhail dorus iffrin? Nī ansa: isin tuaiscert; 7 is aire-sin is ón tuaiscert tigid na huile olc 7 doraigh* (“Where is the door of hell? Not difficult: in the north; and that is why all evils and hardships come from the north”) and the *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturlusons, *niðr ok norðr liggr helvegr* [“the way to hell lies down and northwards”, my translation]. See Wright, *The Irish Tradition*, p. 129 n. 89.

In this light, the aspersions cast on Columban orthodoxy at the Synod of Whitby may have stung all the more for their emphasis on how physically as well as theologically isolated Iona was from Christendom as a whole. Bede, in his account of the dispute about the dating of Easter, has Wilfrid say:

*Etsi enim patres tui sancti fuerunt, numquid uniuersali, quae per orbem est, ecclesiae Christi eorum est paucitas uno de angulo extremae insulae praeferenda?*

[For though your fathers were holy men, do you think that a handful of people in one corner of the remotest of islands is to be preferred to the universal Church of Christ which is spread throughout the world?]<sup>65</sup>

While Adomnán certainly considered that Iona, along with Ireland and Britain, was on the far western rim of the world, as O'Loughlin details, he would probably not have seen it as being especially remote.<sup>66</sup> After all, not only does *VSC* depict visitors arriving with some regularity, but in *VSC* II.42, as in I.6, Cormac is said to be leaving Iona precisely because it is not remote enough. He seeks a more appropriate place of contemplative solitude elsewhere, and heads into the dangerous, *bestiolae*-infested waters of *Oceanus* in order to find it. The monk Báitán makes a similar attempt in I.20. The waters around Iona had their share of terrors, such as the whale of I.19 and the whirlpool of Corryvreckan in I.5, but they were known entities. For unknown terrors, one had to venture north.

Whether strange part-human, part-beast inhabitants, or other kinds of monsters, the far, distant regions of the world are a place where one might reasonably expect to encounter strange and dangerous creatures. The point is that Columba had been granted prophetic knowledge of what happens beyond the limits of human experience, and the ability to intervene and influence events in the weird, dangerous, realms beyond ordinary human ken and power.

Wooding has demonstrated that this episode in *VSC* can be seen as part of an emerging tradition of monastic voyaging narratives, a literary genre developing out of the established practice of actual eremites.<sup>67</sup> In the context of this genre, this story is unusual in that Cormac's voyage

<sup>65</sup> *HE*, III.25, pp. 306 – 307.

<sup>66</sup> O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places*, pp. 143 – 176.

<sup>67</sup> Jonathan M. Wooding, "Monastic Voyaging and the *Nauigatio*", in Johnathan M. Wooding (ed.), *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), pp. 226 – 245, at p. 234.

ends in failure, and not in the discovery of the sought-for secluded refuge, or of strange and wonderful new lands. In explanation of Cormac's failure, Westley Follett has offered an allegorical interpretation of some of the voyage narratives in *VSC*, arguing that Adomnán uses them to critique hermitude.<sup>68</sup> This more strict asceticism carried within it not only the dangers of pride, as Isidore and Cassian had warned, but also removed the hermits from abbatial control and oversight, clearly a matter of concern for an abbot such as Adomnán.<sup>69</sup> The repeated failures and near disasters of those monks in *VSC* who tried to find more secluded retreats are thus held up as warnings against hermitude. Anchorites, in contrast, remained not only physically closer to their monasteries, but under the oversight of their abbots, and here are indeed two such anchorites in *VSC*, Virgno (III.23) and Finan (I.49), both of whom are presented in a praiseworthy manner.<sup>70</sup> Such a reading certainly accords with the concern for obedience to abbatial authority clearly present in several of the narratives about sex, women and violence discussed in Chapter 5, above, as well as the story of the penitent Nemán in I.21, whose refusal to accept the relaxation of the fast ordered by Columba prompts the prophecy of his return to sin.

## 6: Conclusions

Adomnán used very different types of narratives involving different types of dangerous creatures to illustrate the sanctity of Columba, and the fact of divine power manifested in him. By looking at the roles these beasts play in the stories in which they appear, and the reactions of the different characters to them, and to Columba's interactions with them, we can gain a deeper understanding of how Adomnán thought about Columba, and how he wanted to present the saint to his audience. We have already seen that some of the miracles Adomnán attributes to Columba are intended to establish his place among the very greatest and holiest of saints, with miracles modelled on those of major Christian saints, Old Testament figure and even Christ himself. Adomnán highlights the greatness of the saint explicitly at the end of *VSC*, as he declares that Columba is renowned not only in Ireland and Britain, but also Spain, Gaul, Italy and even the holy city of Rome.<sup>71</sup> Columba, in *VSC*, is a major saint, and we can see this

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<sup>68</sup> Westley Follett, "An Allegorical Interpretation of the Monastic Voyage Narratives in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*", *Eolas*, 2 (2007), pp. 4 – 27.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 20 – 21.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14 – 16.

<sup>71</sup> *VSC*, pp. 232 – 233.

in the examples of his prowess in these stories of dangerous beasts, most especially in the account of the beast in the River Ness in II.23, which appears to be modelled on a miracle performed by Martin of Tours.

As we have seen, the serpents, boars, *bestiae* and other such creatures – real and imagined – of secular, religious and scholarly literature provided audiences with a network of allusions and associations that could be brought to bear when they encountered the beasts of *VSC*. By evoking the creatures and settings of other texts with which his audience were familiar, Adomnán was able to demonstrate Columba's gifts of power and prophecy in ways that enhanced the prestige of his cult, setting him alongside the major heroes of Christendom. The function of these stories, therefore, was mostly to propagate Columba's greatness as a saint.

As we have seen previously in this study, however, Adomnán was concerned not simply to proclaim Columba's greatness and holiness, but also to lend the saint's prestige to support his own particular concerns, including his political work to protect *innocentes* from violence, to emphasise the importance of abbatial authority. Both of these concerns, as has been demonstrated, are present in some of the narratives of the dangerous beasts in *VSC*. The sequence of narratives detailing the downfall of those who persecute various classes of *innocentes* at II.22 – 25 is followed immediately by the episode in which Columba miraculously slays the wild boar, illustrating, perhaps, the power of Columba's church to resist any who would violate its protection or seek to harm it. Similarly, in the story of Berach, Baithéne and the great whale, and in the story of Cormac in the far northern waters, we can see the importance of obedience to abbatial authority, which was also a major theme in the narratives about sex, women and violence discussed in Chapter 5, above. The narratives of dangerous beasts in *VSC*, therefore, both establish and propagate Columba's saintly stature, and reinforce the authority of his successors, including Adomnán himself, at the head of his *familia*.





## Chapter 6

### *Vita Sancti Columbae* and Cult Practice

Thus far, this thesis has considered the roles or functions of different aspects of the text within the literary construction of *VSC*. In this final chapter, we will now consider the role or function of *VSC* within the Columban *familia*, and suggest some of the ways in which it might have been used by communities with a particular devotion to Saint Columba. It is hoped that this may open up new ways of thinking about the text and the role it played within the life of the Columban community. *VSC* is ultimately a work of religious literature, and it is worth considering how it was used in the life of the religious communities dedicated to its subject.

To my knowledge, there have been no detailed studies of the function of *VSC* in Columban cult practice. There have, of course, been studies of the role of the text in the development of the cult as a political and ecclesiastical entity, and of the relationships between the different Columban hagiographies as part of the literary expression of that cult, of which Máire Herbert's *Iona, Kells and Derry* is the most comprehensive.<sup>1</sup> There have also been studies of the Columban cult that focus on relics, "cult accessories", as Ó Floinn calls them, such as bells and croziers, and which have used *VSC* only for references to the use of cult objects.<sup>2</sup> With regard to liturgy, Clancy and Márkus have used *VSC* as evidence for the liturgical life of the monastery at Iona, and have suggested, quite plausibly, that some of the poems in their anthology may have been used as hymns in the monastery.<sup>3</sup> Márkus has also used *VSC* as evidence to argue for the presence of a hand relic within the Columban *familia*.<sup>4</sup> Building on these previous studies, this chapter will be the first to provide a detailed study of the role played by *VSC* in Columban cult practice, in a more comprehensive sense than looking at isolated examples of particular relics.

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*.

<sup>2</sup> Ragnhalla Ó Floinn, "Insignia Columbae I", and Cormac Bourke, "insignia Columbae II": in Bourke (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba*, pp. 136 – 161 and 162 – 183.

<sup>3</sup> Clancy and Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Márkus, "Diormit: Columba's right-hand man", *Innes Review*, 60.2 (2009), pp. 164-169.

This will require a comparative approach, drawing on research into other cults with better documentation, including that by Raymond Van Dam on saints' cults in Gaul, by Clare Stancliffe on Martin and by Papavarnavas Christoduolos on Byzantine martyr passions.<sup>5</sup>

### 1: Manuscripts and manuscript culture

Before we consider the relationship of the text to cult practice, it is worth considering the production and use of the manuscripts which transmitted the text.

It need hardly be pointed out that the experience of reading a manuscript differs in significant ways from that of reading a printed book. Manuscripts come with their own particular forms of presentation and organisation, and these cannot always be preserved when they are reduced and conflated to produce the critical editions of modern scholarship. These forms include such aspects as the colours of ink used, the layout of the page, the relative sizes of different portions of the text, glosses and illuminations; all are integral to the "performance" of the text as a unique visual production, comparable in some respects to an oral performance.<sup>6</sup> Over the last generation, there has been an increased awareness among medievalists, including Celticists, of the importance of the visual nature of the text to understanding medieval writing and reading: as such, a consideration of this aspect of the manuscripts should be central to an analysis of VSC as a literary production.<sup>7</sup>

There were several different ways in which early medieval people interacted with manuscripts, which must be borne in mind when studying the texts contained within them. In the first place, of course, the manuscript must be written out. A laborious process, this was invested with religious significance, as the shapes of letters carried messages resonant of Christian doctrines such as that of the Trinity (in the three lines that make up the Latin letter A, or the Greek letter *delta*, Δ), the unity of the Old and New testaments (in the two loops that are joined to make the

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<sup>5</sup> Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer*, pp. 1 – 27; Van Dam, "Images of Saint Martin"; Van Dam, *Saints and their miracles*; Christodoulos Papavarnavas, "Die Rolle des Publikums in den vormetaphrastischen Gruppen- und Einzelmartyrien" (MA thesis, University of Vienna, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> John Dagenais, *The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture: Glossing the Liber de Buen Amor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Dagenais, *Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture*; Martin Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: 'Grammatica' and Literary Theory, 350 – 1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Patrick K. Ford, "Medieval Irish Manuscript Culture", in Marjorie Garber, Paul B. Franklin and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (eds.) *Field Work: Sites in Literary and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 164 – 168; Burnyeat, "Córugud and Complilatio"; Richard Sharpe, "Irish Manuscripts and the Complex Page", presentation given at "The Book: History and Practice Workshop", 12/03/2012 at the Humanities Institute of Ireland, University College Dublin: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKE5wrlsbVA> (accessed 04/10/2014).

single letter *B*), the name of Christ suggested by the letter *X*, and so on.<sup>8</sup> While this understanding that the forms of letters had a Christian significance, “join[ing] theology and grammar together in a mystical relationship” was common across Christendom, McNally argued that it was especially marked in early medieval Ireland, which of course was the milieu in which Adomnán and Dorbbéne were trained and in which they operated.<sup>9</sup> Letters, of course, make up words, and the religious significance of producing words cannot have been lost on monks familiar with the prologue to the Gospel of John.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, *VSC* depicts Columba at work copying manuscripts (e.g. I.25; II.29, and, famously, just before his death in III.23), and scribes transcribing these narratives when they made copies, must have felt that they were echoing the actions of the saint even as they copied the text which propagated his cult. The act of writing the manuscripts, then, can be seen as a devotional act, with respect both to Christ and to the saint.

Secondly, the manuscripts were read, and in ways which were closely bound to the monastic (or other ecclesiastical) context in which they were produced. The surviving manuscripts give little direct evidence for their use in liturgical contexts, there being no marginal notes or similar indicators that point to specific occasions for reading certain passages. However, the text preserved in British Library MS Additional 35110 does mark the stresses of the words, which would certainly be a useful aid when reading the text aloud. Likewise, the interlinear gloss in that manuscript which transliterates the Greek ΠΗΠΙΣΤΗΠΑ into Latin letters (*peristera*) may have been intended to assist a *lector* in reading the text aloud.<sup>11</sup>

The manuscript context of the text preserved in British Library MS Cotton Tiberius D III may also point to a liturgical function. The manuscript itself is a compendium of *vitae* and other cult material, arranged under the feast days of the respective saints, mostly in April, May and June (Columba's feast day is the ninth of June), but with some saints from outside this range as

<sup>8</sup> Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, p. 103: “The discourse about letters and writing in other early medieval texts proceeds from the foundational grammatical doctrine. Treatises and poems on the symbolism or meaning of the letters of the alphabet were written. For example, the letter “A”, written with three strokes, is an image of the Trinity; it is the first letter, after the name of the first man, Adam, and *anima* and *angelus*, which were before time began. “B” is written with two strokes, and signifies the Old and New Testaments. “T” with its long and short strokes is a figure of the body and soul or the extended arms of Christ. “X” is a sign of the Cross and the name of Christ (from the Greek XP abbreviation), and so on. The very activity of writing and copying for scribes could become reflective and meditative, letters taken as signs in themselves.” Jesus identifying himself as Alpha and Omega in Rev. 23: 13 gives a Biblical warrant to seeking theological significance in letters.

<sup>9</sup> Robert E. McNally, “The “Tres Linguae Sacrae” in Early Irish Bible Exegesis”, *Theological Studies*, 19:3 (1958), pp. 395 – 403, at pp. 402 – 403.

<sup>10</sup> “*In principio erat Verbum, et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum ...*” (John 1: 1).

<sup>11</sup> British Library MS Additional 35110, fol. 97 r.

well (such as the apostle Andrew, thirtieth of November). It is likely that this manuscript was part of a set that covered the liturgical year, the other volumes of which have since been lost.

Further, many medieval texts were not read from start to finish, but rather “discursively”, so that a reader would read a few chapters in one part of a book, and then a few in another and so on, and these might be related thematically in some way.<sup>12</sup> This should be borne in mind when considering such aspects of the visual construction of the manuscript as the ink colours used in chapter headings, in contents lists and in the large initials used to indicate major divisions in the text, as discussed in Chapter 2, above.

Thirdly, some books were treated as objects of veneration, especially those which had a particular connection with a saint.<sup>13</sup> The most famous example in a Columban context is of course the *Cathach*, Royal Irish Academy MS 12 R 33,<sup>14</sup> but there also examples within *VSC* of books written by Columba being accorded remarkable properties (*VSC*, II.8 – 9. Two manuscripts copied out by the saint were miraculously undamaged after prolonged submersion in water. Adomnán tells us that he has heard many other such reports).<sup>15</sup> Were our surviving copies of *VSC* themselves objects of veneration? Were they used in order to effect miracles, as were books copied by Columba in *VSC* II.44? We have no direct evidence that they were, but this form of interaction with manuscripts should be borne in mind as part of the cultural practices associated with books. Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, being by far the oldest copy, may have acquired such a function in later years because of its great age, and having itself (probably) been transcribed by an abbot of Iona. The prestige of the text – the life of a saint and abbot of Iona written by another saint and one of his successors at the monastery – would make it natural if the texts were so venerated, certainly within communities with Columban connections. As such, we can quite plausibly posit that the manuscripts of *VSC*, and most likely our oldest copy, were not only read, but possibly also carried in processions, displayed in the church on certain days (such as Columba's feast day on the ninth of June), touched or held during prayers, used in the swearing of oaths, and so on.

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<sup>12</sup> Raymond Clemens and Timothy Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 47.

<sup>13</sup> See Rekdal's study, focusing on the sixteenth-century *Betha Coluimb Chille* as an example: Rekdal, “*Betha Coluimb Chille*: the Life as a shrine”, pp. 407 – 414.

<sup>14</sup> For the use of the *Cathach* as a relic, see Herity and Breen, *The Cathach of Colum Cille*, pp. 8 – 14.

<sup>15</sup> Examples of this motif in other Irish hagiographies are listed in Dorothy Ann Bray, *A List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia/ Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1992), p. 127, under the heading “Saint's book unharmed”.

## 2: Blessed objects and associative relics in *Vita Sancti Columbae*

Saints' cults very often involve the veneration or use of corporeal relics such as the bones and hair of the holy dead, a practice which has an Old Testament precedent in the miraculous properties of Elisha's bones, contact with which revived a dead man in II Kings 13: 20 - 21.<sup>16</sup> As noted above, Márkus has argued, very plausibly, that the use of corporeal relics of Columba (in the form of hand bones), can be traced in VSC III.23.<sup>17</sup> But many saints' cults also involved associative relics, the veneration or use of things which a saint had used or touched, or which had been in contact with his or her tomb. Such associative relics included items of clothing, bells and staffs which the saint in question had used during their life on earth.<sup>18</sup> This, too, had a Biblical precedent, in the aprons and handkerchiefs touched by Paul which cured the sick and drove evil spirits away from them in Acts 19: 11 – 12, as well as in the account in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke of the sick woman who was cured after, in faith, touching the hem of Christ's robe (Matthew 9: 20 – 22; Luke 8: 42b – 48).<sup>19</sup>

Detailed accounts of how relics were actually used in cult practice usually come from much later sources, and we should be wary of reading such practices back into the early medieval period. Even so, we may get a useful insight into how Columban relics might have been used by reading Simon Yarrow's description of the hand relic of St James in twelfth-century Reading

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<sup>16</sup> *Mortus est ergo Heliseus et sepelierunt eum latrunculi quoque de Moab venerunt in terra in ipso anno quidam autem sepelientes hominem viderunt latrunculos et proiecerunt cadaver in sepulchro Heliesi quod ambulavit et tetigit ossa Helisei et revixit homo et stetit super pedes suos.* [Elisha died, and they buried him. And bandits from Moab came to the land in that same year, and some that were burying a man saw the bandits, and threw the corpse into Elisha's tomb. When it touched Elisha's bones, the man revived and stood on his feet]. II Kings 12: 20 – 21 (IV Kings/ Liber Malachim in the Vulgate). Translation mine.

<sup>17</sup> VSC, III.23, pp. 224–7: *Et ut ab aliquibus qui praesentes inerant didicimus, sanctus necdem egrediente anima apertis susum oculis ad utrumque latus cum mira uultus hilaritate et laetitia circumspiciebat, sanctos scilicet obuios intuens angelos. Diormitius tum sanctam subleuat ad benedicendum sancti monachorum chorum dexteram manum. Sed et ipse uenerabilis pater in quantum poterat simul suam mouebat manum; ut uidelicet quod uoce in egressu non ualebat animae etiam motu manus fratres uideretur benedicere.* [And as we have learned from some men who were present there, the saint, whose soul had not yet departed, opened his eyes, and looked around on either side, with wonderful joy and gladness of countenance; for he was gazing upon the holy angels that had come to meet him. Then Diormit raised the holy right hand, to bless the saint's company of monks. And the venerable father himself at the same time moved his hand, as much as he was able, in order that he might be seen to bless the brothers even by the movement of his hand, a thing that in the departure of his soul he could not do by voice.] This may very well be modelled on Exodus 17: 8 – 13, in which the Israelite army prevails against the Amalekites so long as Moses holds his staff aloft. In order to keep the staff aloft during the whole battle, and thus ensure victory, Aaron and Hur remain on hand to hold up Moses' arms when he grows tired. Adomnán often mentions Columba making the sign of the cross with his hand, or stretching out his hand(s), or doing something else with his hand(s) when performing miracles, as discussed in Márkus, "Diormit: Columba's right-hand man".

<sup>18</sup> For examples of different kinds of associative and contact relics, see Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things*, pp. 244 – 250; Carmen Garcia Rodriguez, *El Culto De Los Santos En La España Romana Y Visigoda* (Madrid: Consejo Superior De Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto Enrique Florez, 1966), p. 366.

<sup>19</sup> More general statements of healings effected by sick people touching Christ's robe are also found in Matthew 14: 34 – 36 and Mark 6: 53 – 56.

in the context of the possible hand relic of Columba mentioned in VSC III.23, and of the repeated use of water in Adomnán's healing narratives, as shall be seen below:

The withered arm of Alice, daughter of a clerk from Essex, was cured when William the sub-prior, 'brought the reliquary in which the hand of St James was kept', placed it over her arm, and had water poured over both. The second recipient of a cure effected by the 'personal touch' of St James was Thomas, a monk of Reading whose tumorous head was 'signed with the apostle's hand'. Again, William the sub-prior granted this special privilege. Normally, the monks used water in which the hand had been placed, as the chief medium for bestowing the saint's favours on pilgrims. In numerous other narratives, as in the case of Roger Hosatus, canon of Merton priory, it was the 'health-giving water of St James' that was 'sought and obtained'.<sup>20</sup>

VSC contains accounts of several kinds of associative relics, which will be discussed here.

### 2.1: The *petra salis* and manuscripts copied by Columba (II.7 – 9)

In II.7, Columba blesses a *petra salis* and gives it to a certain Colcu, son of Cellach.<sup>21</sup> First it is used to effect cures for severe inflammations of the eyes, and later it and the pegs and the section of wall from which it was suspended are miraculously preserved from a devastating fire which destroyed the rest of the village.

*Alio itidem in tempore Colgu filius Cellachi postulata a sancto petram salis benedictam accipit soror et suae nutrici profuturam; quae ophthalmiae laborabat ualde graui langore. Talem euloogiam eadem soror et nutricia de manu fratris accipiens in pariete super lectum suspendit; cassuque post aliquantos contegit dies ut idem uiculus cum supradictae domucula feminae flamma uastante totus concremaretur. Mirum dictu illius parietis particula, ne beati uiri in ea deperiret suspensa benedictio, post totam ambustam domum stans inlessa permansit, nec ignis ausus es attingere binales in quibus talis*

<sup>20</sup> Simon Yarrow, *Saints and their Communities: Miracle Stories in Twelfth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 199.

<sup>21</sup> VSC, II.7, pp. 104 – 105. The Andersons translate *petra salis* as "rock-salt". Sharpe prefers "a block of salt", arguing that "it is unlikely that rock-salt was mined in Ireland before the 19th century", and suggests rather the production of salt from sea water (Sharpe, *Life*, II.7, pp. 159 – 160, pp. 321 – 322, n. 228). While it should be noted that nothing in the story identifies its setting (or the provenance of the *petra salis*) as Irish, his translation seems to me to be more likely to be correct.



*pendebat salis petra sudes.*

[So at another time, Colcu, Cellach's son, requested and received from the saint a piece of rock-salt, blessed for the benefit of his sister and foster-mother, who was suffering from a very severe inflammation of the eyes. That sister and foster-mother also received this blessing from her brother's hand, and hung it on the wall above her bed. It happened by a mischance, after some days, that the village was entirely burned down with devastating flame, including that woman's cottage. Strange to say, a small part of that wall remained, standing undamaged, after the whole house had been burned about it, so that the blessed man's blessing, hung up on it, should not perish. And the fire did not dare to touch the two pegs on which this rock-salt hung.]<sup>22</sup>

In a similar manner, the following two chapters, II.8 – 9, concern books copied out by Columba which are invulnerable to damage by water, even after being submerged in rivers for extended periods of time. At the end of II.9, Adomnán writes that he has heard many similar stories about other manuscripts copied out by Columba. He then concludes:

*Haec duo quamlibet in rebus paruis peracta et per contraria ostensa elimenta, ignem scilicet et aquam, beati testantur honorem uiri et quanti et qualis meriti apud habeatur deum.*

[These two things, although performed in small matters, and shown in contrary elements, namely fire and water, bear witness to the honour of the blessed man, and prove how greatly and how highly he is esteemed by God.]<sup>23</sup>

The existence of these associative relics, then, and Adomnán's documenting them, demonstrate Columba's sanctity. What Adomnán does not tell us is whether or not these relics had any continuing role in Columban cult practice. Was the *petra salis* kept after the fire, and did it continue to be used to effect cures? Was it venerated in any way, as an object which bore "witness to the honour of the blessed man"? He does not say. Likewise, of the manuscripts which proved invulnerable to water damage – what, if anything, the churches that held them did with them is not told.

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<sup>22</sup> VSC, II.7.

<sup>23</sup> VSC, II.9.

In II.8, the text copied out by the saint is not identified. All we know is that it was a single page. In II.9, the text is described as *ymnorum liber septimaniorum* (“a book of hymns for the week”), and so had an obvious practical function in the liturgical routine of the church which held it, but there is no way of knowing if its use was in any way connected with specifically Columban devotion.

Beyond their miraculous preservation demonstrating Columba’s sanctity, did these objects have a role in the religious life of Columban communities? There are other uses for relics which are well attested in other cults, such as their being carried in procession on the saint’s feast day, or used in the swearing of oaths.<sup>24</sup> None of these are mentioned in connection with the objects Adomnán writes about in II.7 – 9, but a detailed description of the use of Columban associative relics in II.44 might help us to understand more about the use of such objects in the Columban church.

## 2.2: Columban relics and the end of a drought (II.44)

Valerie Flint notes that, “...supplications for rain or against damaging storms throughout [the early medieval] period quite often involve the clothing of the saintly supplicants.” She cites the examples of the tunics of Deodatus of Nevers and his friend Hildulph, used in times of drought, flood and plague, and more closely to the narrative in *VSC*, an account in Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues*, in which the tunic of the dead Abbot Eutichius was carried around fields after a long drought, after which the rains returned.<sup>25</sup> These suggest the actions of the *familia* in *VSC* II.44 were in line with fairly widely-spread ideas about how to deal with drought, with the added use of books written by Columba, as well as his clothing.

<sup>24</sup> Bartlett gives examples of relic processions in *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, pp. 296 – 297; Garcia Rodriguez, *El Culto De Los Santos*, pp. 368 – 369. Adomnán’s own relics were taken to Ireland when his law was renewed in 727, and they were returned to Iona in 730: *AU*, *sub anno* 727.5; *sub anno* 730.3. For the use of relics in the swearing of oaths, see Julia M.H. Smith, “Rulers and Relics, c. 750 – c. 950: Treasure on Earth, Treasure in Heaven”, *Past & Present*, Supplement 5 (2010), pp. 73 – 96, at pp. 79, 95. I am grateful to Dr. Rick Sowerby for the observation that it is seldom clear in contemporary sources whether the relics used in the swearing of oaths were corporeal or associative relics, as accounts usually say simply that oaths were sworn on the relics of a certain saint, without elaboration on the nature of the relics themselves. However, since there were probably more associative than corporeal relics, it is likely that associative relics were used for this purpose. (Personal communication, 07/09/2016). Overbey notes that in early medieval Ireland veneration of associative relics was apparently more common than veneration of corporeal relics: Karen Eileen Overbey, *Sacral Geographies: Saints, Shrines and Territory in Medieval Ireland* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, p. 187. Yarrow, *Saints and their Communities*, p. 24, notes that a procession of the relics of Edmund the Martyr at his cult centre of Bury on 29th April 1095 was followed by rains that ended a drought and brought a good harvest later that year.

The miracle in II.44, which opens the sequence of three posthumous miracles which concludes Book II, and of which Adomnán claims to have been an eyewitness, is set during a severe drought which afflicted Iona and a wide area around it. The situation was so severe that that the monastic community was reminded of the curse of the drought in Leviticus 26: 19 – 20, and decided to take action:

*Nos itaque haec legentes, et imminentem plagam pertimescentes, hoc inito consilio fieri consiliati sumus, ut aliqui ex nostris senioribus nuper aratum et seminatum campum cum sancti Columbae candida circumirent tunica, et librís stilo ipsius discriptís, leuarentque in aere et excuterent eandem per ter tunicam qua etiam hora exitus eius de carne indutus erat, et eius aperirent libros et legerent in colliculo angelorum, ubi aliquando caelestis patriae ciues ad beati uiri conductum uisi sunt descendere.*

[Reading this, and in dread of the impending stroke, we formed a plan, and decided upon this course: that some of our elders should go round the plain that had lately been ploughed and sown, taking with them the white tunic of Saint Columba, and books in his own handwriting; and should three times raise and shake in the air that tunic, which he wore in the hour of his departure from the flesh; and should open his books and read from them, on the hill of the angels, where at one time the citizens of the heavenly country were seen descending to confer with the holy man.]<sup>26</sup>

And the rains indeed return later on that same day. Adomnán concludes:

*Vnius itaque beati commemoratio nominis uiri, in tunica et librís commemorata, multis regionibus eadem uice et populís salubri subuenit oportunitate.*

[Thus the commemoration of the name of one blessed man, made with his tunic and books, on that occasion brought saving and timely help to many districts and peoples.]<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> VSC, II.44.

<sup>27</sup> VSC, II.44. Bartlett uses this miracle as his primary example of the use of clothing as an associative relic, and also cites examples from the cults of Martin of Tours and the Virgin Mary. He also notes that the veneration of books as associative relics was particularly prominent in Ireland: Bartlett, *How Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, pp. 245 – 246, and 248.

Unfortunately, Adomnán does not tell us what the books were. There is no reason to believe that they were the books Columba is said to have copied out in II.8 – 9. Adomnán nowhere claims to have seen those books himself, and both of those miracles are said to have taken place in Ireland (the River Boyne and in Leinster, respectively). The book in II.9 is said to be in the possession of a certain Iógenán, a Pictish priest living in Leinster.<sup>28</sup> While none of these observations rule out those books being the ones used by the monastic community here, there is no evidence in *VSC* to support the identification. There are, however, several other instances in *VSC* in which the saint is depicted engaged in scribal activity while at Iona itself.<sup>29</sup>

Neither does Adomnán tell us what parts of them were read out, but the more important thing is that he gives a rare and fairly detailed account of how associative relics were actually used within the Columban *familia*. Whether or not the miraculous manuscripts described in II.8 – 9 were used in similar ways cannot now be known, but it would be surprising indeed if books which were written out by a major saint, and which were believed to have already demonstrated that they were invested with his sanctity were not revered as relics in some way.

Regarding the tunic (*tunica*), we should note that another garment of Columba's is accorded miraculous properties in II.24, in which another of his monks, Findlugán, is protected from a spear thrust when wearing Columba's cowl:

*Alio in tempore uir beatus cum alios ecclesiarum persecutores in Hinba commoratus insula excommunicare coepisset, filios uidelicet Conallis filii, quorum unus erat Ioan de quo supra retulimus, quidam ex eorundem malefactoribus sociis diabuli instinctu cum hasta inruit, ut sanctum interficeret. Quod praecauens unus ex fratribus, Findluganus nomine, mori paratus pro sancto uiro cucula eius indutus intercessit. Sed mirum in modum, beati uiri tale*

<sup>28</sup> *VSC*, II.8 – 9.

<sup>29</sup> *VSC*, I.25; II.29; III.23. Only in the third of these is the text which Columba is writing identified: Psalm 34 (33 in the Vulgate). Adomnán says: *Post haec uerba de illo descendens monticellulo et ad monasterium reuertens sedebat in tegorio psalterium scribens. Et ad illum xxx. tertii psalmi uersiculum perueniens ubi scribitur, 'Inquirentes autem dominum non deficient omni bono': 'Hic', ait, 'in fine cessandum est paginae. Quae uero sequuntur Baitheneus scribat.' Sancto conuenienter congruit decessori nouissimus uersiculus quem scripserat, cui numquam bona deficient aeterna. Successiri uero sequens patri spiritalium doctori filiorum, 'Venite filii audite me; timorem domini docebo uos', congruenter conuenit, qui sicut decessor commendauit non solum ei docendo sed etiam scribendo successit. Post talem superius memoratum terminatae uersum perscriptum paginae, sanctus ad uespertinalem dominicae noctis misam. [After these words, he descended from that little hill, returned to the monastery, and sat in the hut, writing a psalter. And when he came to that verse of the thirty-third Psalm where it is written, 'But they that seek the Lord shall not want for anything that is good', he said: 'Here, at the end of the page, I must stop. Let Baithéne write what follows. The last verse that he aptly wrote befits the holy predecessor, who will never lack eternal good things. And the first verse that follows, 'Come, my sons, hear me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord', is fittingly adapted to the successor, the father of spiritual sons, a teacher, who, as his predecessor enjoyed, succeeded him not in teaching only, but in writing."]*

*uestimentum quasi quaedam munitissima et impenetrabilis lurica, quamlibet fortis uiri impulsione acutioris hastae, transfigi non potuit, sed inlessum permansit. Et qui eo indutus erat intactus et incolomis tali protectus est munimento.*

[At another time, when the blessed man was in the island of Hinba, and had begun to excommunicate other persecutors of churches, namely the sons of Conall Domnall's son (of whom one was Ioan, whose story we told above), one of their company of evil-doers, prompted by the devil, rushed in with a spear, intending to kill the saint. In order to prevent this, one of the monks, by name Findlugán, wearing the holy man's cowl, came between, ready to die for him. But miraculously that garment of the blessed man, like a coat of well-fortified and impenetrable armour, could not be pierced even by a strong man's powerful thrust of a very sharp spear, but remained uninjured; and the man that was glad in it was shielded by that covering from hurt or harm.]<sup>30</sup>

There is no indication that the cowl was later venerated or used as a relic, but the idea is clearly established that items of Columba's clothing are invested with something of his power.

### 2.3: Maugin and the *benedictio* (II.5)

Several healing miracles in VSC involve physical objects being blessed by the saint, and then taken to afflicted individuals and used to heal them. We have already encountered one such object in the form of the *petra salis* of II.7. Others include the consecrated bread that the saint instructs Silnán to take to Ireland, telling him to dip it in water, and to sprinkle the water on people and animals afflicted by a plague.<sup>31</sup> There is also the story of Maugin, a holy woman living in Ireland, whom Columba knows has broken her hip in a fall. The way in which she is cured is again rather involved. Columba instructs another monk, this time Lugaid Lathir to journey to see her:

*Quid plura? Lugaido obsecundanti et consequenter emigranti sanctus pineam tradit cum benedictione capsellam, dicens: 'Benedictio quae in hac capsellula conteneretur quando ad Mauginam peruenies uisitandam in aquae uasculum intinguatur; eademquae benedictionis aqua super eius infundatur coxam. Et*

<sup>30</sup> VSC, II.24.

<sup>31</sup> VSC, II.4.

*statim inuocato dei nomine coxale coniungetur os et densebitur; et sancta uirgo plenam recuperabit salutem.’ Et hoc sanctus addit: ‘En ego coram in huius capsae operculo numerum xxiii. annorum describo, quibus sacra uirgo in hac presenti post eandem salutem uictura est uita.’*

[Why say more? Lugaid obeyed, and was presently setting out, when the saint handed to him a little box of pine-wood with a blessing, saying: ‘When you arrive to visit Maugin, let the blessing that is contained in this little box be dipped into a vessel of water, and let the same water of the blessing be poured over her hip; and as soon as the name of God has been invoked, the hip-bone will join and be knit together, and the virgin will regain complete health.’ And the saint added this: ‘See, in your presence I write on the lid of this box the number of the years, twenty-three, that the holy virgin will live in this present life, after this cure.’]<sup>32</sup>

Again, the use of an object blessed by the saint, in conjunction with water, is used to work a cure. And once again, we might wish that Adomnán had provided us with more detail, in that he does not give us a clear description of the *benedictio* that was put in the box and to be dipped in water. The Andersons suggest in a footnote that the object in question may have been a written prayer, but while this is entirely plausible, it could equally have been just about any kind of small object.<sup>33</sup> After all, in the course of Book II, bread and a stone (discussed below) are similarly used in conjunction with water, and in II.7 cures are effected with the *petra salis* (though not using water). We also do not know whether the box, the *benedictio* or both were still extant in Adomnán’s time. If so, might Adomnán’s description of the healing process reflect contemporary cult practice? Again, we cannot know for certain, but another chapter, II.33, provides a more detailed example.

<sup>32</sup> VSC, II.5. Note once again the combination of a miracle of power with a prophecy.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Life*, p. 103, n. 134: “*benedictio*: an object that has been blessed; but here possibly a written prayer. Cf. II.7.” Written blessings were sometimes worn as amulets, though there is no indication of that being the case here: Jacqueline Borsje, “Celtic Spells and Counterspells”, in Katja Ritari and Alexandra Bergholm (eds.) *Understanding Celtic Religion: Revisiting the Pagan Past* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015), pp. 9 – 50, at pp. 20 – 21. Note that there is no mention in II.5 of Maugin or anybody else ever wearing the *benedictio*. However, Tuomi notes that, “[i]t is clear from studies done on textual amulets that they were not just worn physically without ever being read, seen, or otherwise used.” Tuomi, “Parchment, Praxis and Performance of Charms in Early Medieval Ireland”, p. 74. Done C. Skemer, albeit focusing on the later medieval period, writes, “textual amulets could also be read, performed, displayed, visualized, and used interactively”: *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), p. 127. If we consider this *benedictio* to be an amulet, then the cure recorded here would certainly be an example of an amulet being “used interactively”.

#### 2.4: Broichan and the white stone (II.33)

II.33, which is entitled *De Broichano mago ab ancillae retentionem infirmato, et pro eius liberatione sanata* (“Concerning the magician Broichan, who was smitten with illness because he retained a female slave; and was cured, when he released her”) is a relatively complex chapter.<sup>34</sup> The saint demands that Broichan, a Pictish *magus* and the *nutricius* (“foster-father”) of the king, Brude, release a Gaelic slave-woman as an act of *miseratione humanitatis*. When Broichan refuses to do so, Columba tells him that if he does not relent, he will die before Columba leaves the province. Leaving the king’s household, he then comes to the River Ness:

*De quo uidelicet fluio lapidem attollens candidum, ad comites: ‘Signate’, ait, ‘hunc candidum lapidem, per quem dominus in hoc gentili populo multas egrotorum perficiet sanitates.’*

[From that river he took a white stone, and said to his companions: ‘Mark this white stone. Through it the Lord will work many cures of the sick among this heathen people.’]<sup>35</sup>

He then tells his companions that Broichan has been struck by an angel and is near death, struggling to breathe. He also tells them to await the arrival of two emissaries, sent to obtain healing for Broichan, who is now willing to release the girl. The emissaries duly arrive and relay the king’s message to Columba.

*Quibus auditis legatorum uerbis sanctus binos de comitum numero ad regem cum lapide a se benedicto mittit, dicens: ‘Si in primis promiserit se Broichanus famulam liberaturam, tum deinde hic lapillus intinguatur in aqua et sic eo bibat, et continuo salutem recuperabit. Si uero renuerit refragans absolui seruam, statim morietur.’*

*Duo misi uerbo sancti obsequentes ad aulam deueniunt regiam, uerba uiri uenerabilis regi enarrantes. Quibus intimatis regi et nutricio eius Broichano ualde expauerunt. Eademque hora liberata famula santi legatis uiri adsignatur; lapis in aqua intingitur, mirumque in modum contra naturam lithus in aquis supernat quasi pomum uel nux, nec potuit sancti benedictio uiri submergi. De quo Broichanus natante bibens lapide statim a uicina rediit morte, intigramque*

<sup>34</sup> VSC, II.33.

<sup>35</sup> VSC, II.33.



*carnis recuperavit salutem.*

[When he heard these words of the envoys, the saint sent two out of the number of his companions to the king, with the stone he had blessed, and said: 'If first Broichan promises that he will release the slave-girl, then let this small stone be dipped in water, and let him drink thereof, and he will at once recover health. But if he refuses, and opposes the slave-girl's release, he will immediately die.'

The two emissaries went to the royal dwelling, in obedience to the saint's instructions, and repeated to the king the words of the venerable man. When these things had been made known to the king and to Broichan his foster-father, they were very much afraid. And in the same hour the slave-girl, set free, was handed over to the envoys of the holy man. The stone was dipped in water; and, in a marvellous manner, contrary to nature the stone floated in the water, as though it had been an apple or a nut. And the blessing of the holy man could not be submerged. After he had drunk of the floating stone, Broichan immediately returned from the brink of death, and recovered full bodily health.]<sup>36</sup>

Again, we can see the use of a blessed object in conjunction with water to effect a cure. This time, the blessed object is described as having the additional miraculous property of floating in water, despite being a stone.<sup>37</sup> Also, this is the only healing object in *VSC* which has a proviso attached: Broichan must release the woman or there will be no cure, no matter that Columba has somehow imbued the stone with miraculous power. The more significant difference, however, between this stone and the other blessed objects which effect cures, is that we are told that it continued to be used to work more cures than the one for which it was originally sent. None of the other healing objects are explicitly said to be used for cures after their initial, immediate, purpose is served.

*Talis uero lapis postea in thesauris regis reconditus multas in populo egritudinum sanitates, similiter in aqua natans intinctus, domino miserante efficit. Mirum dictu, ab his egrotis quorum uitae terminus superuenerat requisitus idem lapis nullo modo reperiri poterat. Sic et in die obitus Brudei regis quaerebatur, nec tamen in eodem loco ubi fuerat prius reconditus*

<sup>36</sup> *VSC*, II.33.

<sup>37</sup> Aside from its being white, we have no further information available to identify what kind of stone it was. While we could posit a naturalistic interpretation and suggest that it was some kind of pumice, this does not seem likely as its floating would then not be at all miraculous.

*inueniebatur.*

[This stone was afterwards kept among the king's treasures. When it was dipped thus in water, and floated, it effected by the Lord's mercy many cures of diseases among the people. Strange to say, when it was sought by sick people whose time had come, the stone could by no means be found. So also it was looked for on the day of king Brude's death, and it was not found in the place where it had formerly been kept.]<sup>38</sup>

Here, we see a blessed healing object being kept and used in a context that was not only secular, but pagan as well, with God in his mercy allowing the pagan people to use the stone to cure their diseases, and thus showing his own power and manifested through his holy man. Again, this raises a number of questions. Did the stone finally go missing permanently with Brude's death? If not, was it still used in Adomnán's day, a Columban relic among the Picts, who were Christians by then? Neither of these questions can be answered with any certainty. However, the fact that Adomnán does not claim to have seen the stone himself, when his high political position and diplomatic journeys would have given him the opportunity to do so if it was still extant, may suggest that it was no longer kept and used.

We can see, then, that different kinds of associative relics are used in *VSC*, for different ends and in different ways. The use of water in several of the healing miracles is notable, and though it is by no means unique to *VSC*, it is uncommonly prominent. By comparison, of the other three texts in the early group of Irish hagiographies (*Vita Sanctae Brigitae* by Cogitosus and the Patrician *vitae* by Muirchú and Tírechán), only the *Vita Sancti Patricii* by Muirchú has anything analogous, featuring a miracle in which Patrick blesses some water to be sprinkled on a horse in order to cure its illness.<sup>39</sup> There is also an account of a proposed test of the Christian faith, with Patrick being told to throw his books into water, and that king Loíguire would adopt the Christian faith if the books were unharmed. The trial does not actually take place, however, as his druid objects, on the basis that water was one of Patrick's gods, and that the saint would thus have an unfair advantage in a water-based contest (Muirchú suggests that confusion arose because the druid had heard of Patrick baptising with water).<sup>40</sup> Similarly, the Anonymous *Vita*

<sup>38</sup> *VSC*, II.33.

<sup>39</sup> Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii*, I.24, pp. 108 – 111.

<sup>40</sup> Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii*, I.20, pp. 94 – 95.

*Sancti Cuthberti*, which is roughly contemporaneous with *VSC*, recounts a healing miracle in which Cuthbert provides blessed water for sick nobleman, who is healed upon drinking it.<sup>41</sup> Bartlett mentions several saints who blessed or touched water which was believed to have healing properties, but gives no instances at all of other objects being used in conjunction with water.<sup>42</sup> Flint notes that dust from a saint's tomb was sometimes mixed into water and drunk in order to effect cures, but of course this can only take place after the saint has died, and does not involve objects the saint himself has blessed or used when alive.<sup>43</sup> Since Adomnán can hardly be said to have been drawing on a hagiographical commonplace with his accounts of blessed objects being used in conjunction with water, then, it seems highly likely that these stories represent genuine cult practice.

I suggest therefore that in these detailed descriptions of the use of associative relics, Adomnán was providing a sort of instruction manual for how to use relics to effect certain intended outcomes. It may be that he was recording not only the wonders worked by the saint, or through his intercession, in the past, but also suggesting how those who held Columban relics could use them in the future. What, for instance, would the monks at Iona do in the event of any drought in the future? They would still have had Columba's books and robe, and they also now had an account of how their predecessors, in the time of Adomnán the Illustrious, had used them when they needed their patron's aid. Would they not use the text in *VSC* as the basis for doing the same thing?

With regard to the use of water in combination with associative relics, might Adomnán have been reflecting contemporary cult practice, or even guidance on how to use such relics as were held in ecclesiastical and (as in the case of Brude's household and that of Colcu) secular settlements which owned Columba as their patron?

### 3: *Vita Sancti Columbae*: Readings and contexts

Much scholarship about early medieval readings of *VSC*, certainly by historians, has tended to focus on the communication of ecclesiastical and political messages.<sup>44</sup> While it is often stated

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<sup>41</sup> *AVSC*, IV.8, pp. 120 – 123.

<sup>42</sup> Bartlett, *How Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p. 248.

<sup>43</sup> Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, p. 308.

<sup>44</sup> The murder of the girl and the vengeance on her killer in II.25 being used as propaganda for *Cáin Adomnáin* is discussed above in Chapter 2, § 4.2.2.7. The story of the murder of the exiled Pictish nobleman Tarain, in II.23

that the audience of *VSC* was primarily though not exclusively monastic, and specifically Columban, the implications of this for our understanding of the text have seldom been pursued beyond Adomnán's motivation to honour Columba and to call for unity in the Columban *familia* after the bitterness and division of the Easter controversy.<sup>45</sup> Relatively little attention has been paid to the function played by the text in the day-to-day life of the Columban *familia*. In this section, we will look at how certain stories in *VSC* may have been used in the liturgical life of the *familia*, drawing on parallels in other, better-evidenced cults where they are available. We will look firstly at four chapters for which I posit a potential liturgical use, and then at a series of chapters in which I believe that the reactions of characters present in the text to something done by Columba are intended to provoke a similar reaction in the audience hearing the story read in a liturgical context.

### 3.1.1: Relaxing the fast (I.26)

Book I.26 is entitled *De alicuius aduentu hospitis quem sanctus praenuntiauit* ("Concerning a guest's arrival that the saint foretold").<sup>46</sup> It is the second in a sequence of three stories in which Columba prophesies the visit of a stranger to the monastery. It is very short, and will be quoted here in full:

*Alio itidem tempore sanctus die iii. feriae fratribus sic profatus est: 'Crastina quarta feria ieiunare proponimus, sed tamen superuiente quodam molesto hospite consuetudinarium soluetur ieiunium.'*

*Quod ita ut sancto praeostensum est accedit. Nam mane eadem iiii. feria alius ultra fretum clamitabat proselytus Aidanus nomine, filius Fergnoi; qui ut fertur xii. annis Bréndeno ministrauit mocu Alti: uir ualde relegiosus, qui ut aduenit eiusdem diei iuxta uerbum sancti ieiunationem soluit.*

[Similarly at another time, on a third day of the week, the saint thus addressed the brothers: 'On the fourth day of the week, tomorrow, we propose to fast; but

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has similarly been read as an attempt to influence contemporary political action: Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, p. 248.

<sup>45</sup> Máire Herbert, "The world of Adomnán", in O'Loughlin (ed.), *Adomnán at Birr*, pp. 33 – 39, at pp. 38 - 39; Herbert, "Latin and Vernacular Hagiography of Ireland from the Origins to the Sixteenth Century", in Guy Philippart (ed.), *Hagiographies, Vol. III* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), pp. 327 – 360, at p. 334; O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places*, p. 7.

<sup>46</sup> *VSC*, I.26.

nevertheless a disturbing guest will arrive, and the customary fast will be relaxed.’

This befell as it had been revealed to the saint beforehand. For on the same fourth day of the week, in the morning, another stranger shouted across the strait: a very religious man, by name Áidán, Fergno’s son, who (it is said) for twelve years attended upon Brénden mocu Alti. He, when he arrived, relaxed that day’s fast, as the saint had said.]

This is the second of two chapters in which Columba orders the relaxation of a fast, the other being the story of the false penitent Nemán in I.21.<sup>47</sup> This chapter may have been used as one of the *lectiones* in the monastic refectory during meals when a guest was present.

There is plenty of evidence for the use of hagiographical texts as refectory *lectiones*, though most of it dates from the eleventh century or later, considerably post-dating *VSC*.<sup>48</sup> As has been seen, however, ecclesiastical centres were still producing manuscript copies of *VSC* as late as the fifteenth century (when British Library MS Royal 8D IX was produced), so even if using hagiographical texts as *lectiones* during meal times was not customary when Adomnán wrote *VSC*, it certainly was when the bulk of our extant manuscripts were produced.<sup>49</sup>

This story, short as it is, would make a most suitable reading for meals in which a Columban monastery, or any monastery which had a copy of *VSC*, was offering hospitality to a guest. Hospitality is a sacred Christian duty according to Hebrews 13: 2, and using this chapter as a reading would demonstrate that it was being fulfilled, following the example of the saint. It

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<sup>47</sup> This relaxation of the fast for the brethren as a whole contrasts with the Rule of Benedict, which mandates that after the scriptures are read to them, the *Prior* sits with the guest, and eats with him, while the brothers observe their fast as normal. Principal fast days, however, must not be broken, and must be observed by the *Prior* as well as the brothers. D. Oswald Hunter-Blair (ed. and trans.), *The Rule of St. Benedict* (Fort Augustus: The Abbey Press, 1934), §53, pp. 140 – 141. The issue of guests’ visits coinciding with fasts is not addressed in Columbanus’ rules: Walker (ed. and trans.), *Sancti Columbani Opera*, pp. 122 – 169.

<sup>48</sup> Bartlett, *How Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, p. 507; Head, *Hagiography and the Cult of Saints*, pp. 124 – 127; Teresa Webber, “Reading in the Refectory: Monastic practice in England, c. 1000 – c. 1300”, London University Annual John Coffin Memorial Palaeography Lecture, 2010 ([https://www.academia.edu/9489001/Reading\\_in\\_the\\_Refectory\\_Monastic\\_Practice\\_in\\_England\\_c.\\_1000-c.1300](https://www.academia.edu/9489001/Reading_in_the_Refectory_Monastic_Practice_in_England_c._1000-c.1300), accessed 07/09/2016); Webber, “Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* as a Source of Lections in Pre- and Post-Conquest England”, in Martin Brett and David A. Woodman, (eds.), *The Long Twelfth-Century View of the Anglo-Saxon Past* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 47 – 74, at pp. 67 – 68.

<sup>49</sup> Anna A. Grotans, *Reading in Medieval St. Gall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 30 – 32, describes the practice of refectory readings, noting that some manuscripts from St. Gall are marked with the marginal note, *pro mensa* (“for the table/ meal”), indicating that they were deemed appropriate for reading at meal times. There is a copy of *VSC* from St. Gall, produced in around the third quarter of the ninth century, St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 555, but it is of the abridged second recension, and unfortunately does not include this chapter. (<http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/csg/0555>, accessed 07/09/2016)

would make the meal not only a shared fellowship at the table, but an echo of this story in which a holy man and his community once shared fellowship with a holy guest.

### 3.1.2: Baptisms (I.33 and II.10)

There are several chapters in *VSC* in which the saint baptises people. Two of them demonstrate the interrelation of act (in Columba baptising the individuals), text (in Adomnán recounting this) and the Christian reshaping of the landscape (in the creation and naming of landscape features). These may have been brought together in the ritual use of the landscape – in later baptisms at the same sites.

In I.33, Columba and his companions are in Skye, when he foretells that an old warrior, a pagan, though a good man, will shortly arrive seeking baptism, after which he will die.<sup>50</sup> Shortly thereafter, a ship arrives, bearing Artbranán, the old warrior of the prophecy. He is brought ashore by some young companions, and through an interpreter receives the Christian faith and is baptised.

*Et post expleta babtizationis ministeria sicuti sanctus profetizavit eodem in loco consequenter obiit, ibidemque socii congesto lapidum aceruo sepeliunt. Qui hodie in ora cernitur maritima. Fluiusque eiusdem loci in quo idem baptisma acciperat ex nomine eius dobur Artbranani usque in hodiernum nominatus est diem ab acculis uocitatur.*

[And after the rites of baptism had been performed, he presently died in that place, as the saint had prophesied, and there his companions buried him, building a cairn of stones. It can still be seen today upon the sea-coast. And the stream of that place, in which he received baptism, down to the present day named after his name, is called by the people of the district ‘dobur of Artbranán.’]<sup>51</sup>

Though evidently still known in Adomnán’s time, the cairn and *dobur* are now unknown.

Secondly, there is a story in II.10, entitled, *De aqua qaue sancto orante ex dura producta est petra* (“Of water that, at the prayer of the saint, was produced from hard rock”).<sup>52</sup> Here, the

<sup>50</sup> *VSC*, I.33.

<sup>51</sup> *VSC*, I.33. As per *DIL*, *Dobur* is an Old Irish word for ‘water’ (cf. modern Scottish Gaelic *tobar*, ‘well, spring’, which is a very common toponymic element).

<sup>52</sup> *VSC*, II.10.

saint is in Ardnamurchan when the parents of an infant boy approach him, seeking baptism for their child. Since there is no water source to hand, Columba kneels at a nearby rock and prays. Rising to his feet, he blesses the rock, whereupon water flows from it, and he is able to baptise the child.<sup>53</sup> Columba then prophesies that the child will live to a very old age, and despite going astray in his youth, he will repent and serve Christ for many years. Adomnán concludes the chapter thus:

*Quae omnia eidem uiro iuxta sancti contigerunt uaticinium. Hic erat Ligu Cen calad, cuius parentes fuerant in Artdaib muirchol, ubi hodieque fonticulus sancti nomine Columbae pollens cernitur.*

[All these things happened to that man according to the saint's prophecy. This was Ligu Cen calad, whose parents were in Artda muirchol [Ardnamurchan]. And there even today a little spring<sup>54</sup> is seen, that is potent in the name of Saint Columba.]<sup>55</sup>

I believe that this spring can be tentatively identified with St Columba's Well (Tobar Chaluum Chille) at Ardslnish, near the Ardnamurchan Distillery, water from which was being used for local baptisms as late as the 1920s.<sup>56</sup> While, according to the Canmore database, the earliest attestation for the name is no earlier than the 1870s, it is the only well with a Columban name, and indeed the only known well with a connection to any saint at all, on the Ardnamurchan peninsula.<sup>57</sup> In the absence of earlier known attestations, certainty is impossible, but it seems likely that the *fonticulus* in the text and the spring at Ardslnish are one and the same.

Both of these stories depict the physical reshaping of the landscape (in the building of a new cairn and the bringing forth of a new spring), and also its religious reshaping (the spring in I.33 being renamed for a Christian convert of high social standing, and that in II.10 after a Christian saint). The progressive Christianisation of the landscape in the naming and use of landscape features (springs, here) marks these places as sites of the triumph of the Christian faith and of

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Moses bringing water forth from rocks in Exodus 17: 5 – 6 and Numbers 20: 10 – 11.

<sup>54</sup> Translation amended. The Andersons have simply "spring", and do not indicate the diminutive form used in the Latin.

<sup>55</sup> VSC, II.10.

<sup>56</sup> Saints in Scottish Place-names, <http://saintsplaces.gla.ac.uk/place.php?id=1321890849> (accessed 15/09/2016). There is no evidence for how far back the use of the water from this spring for baptisms goes.

<sup>57</sup> Canmore, <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22351/ardnamurchan-ardslnish-st-columbas-well> (accessed 29/07/2017).



the Columban cult. Certainly the spring in II.10 continued to have a cult significance, for Adomnán tells us that it is “powerful in the name of Saint Columba”. What this means is not entirely certain. Is the power seen in the fact that it still flows, and did not dry up once the immediate need had passed, thus witnessing to the enduring power of the saint? Was it believed to have healing properties, as was the spring in the following chapter, II.11, from which Columba drove evil spirits, so that it became a wholesome and healing water?<sup>58</sup>

What use might the Columban *familia* have made of these sites, and these stories about them, in their pastoral work? The stories were evidently held to be significant enough to make an imprint on the toponymy of Skye and Ardnamurchan, respectively. It is possible that the two springs continued to be used for baptisms by Columban clergy, and that the reading of these stories may have been a part of the rite, bringing together text, cult practice and landscape.

### 3.1.3: The death of Saint Columba (II.23)

From early in the history of Christianity, Christians had gathered at the graves of martyrs on the anniversaries of their deaths, to commemorate and celebrate their passing from the earthly life to the heavenly. In many cases, part of this nascent cult devotion involved the reading of martyr passions, the accounts of the often very violent deaths of these martyrs.<sup>59</sup> From this practice developed the custom of reading from a saint’s *vita* on their feast day, whether or not they were a martyr, as part of the celebrations and devotions performed in honour of the saint.<sup>60</sup> Many of the early martyr passions are quite short, and could easily be read in their entirety and, no less importantly, digested by their audiences in a single reading. As hagiographies grew longer and more complex, this became less practical, and so it became more common for sections of them to be used for the *lectiones* on the saint’s feast day, with the focus on the saint’s earthly death being retained.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> VSC, II.11.

<sup>59</sup> B. de Gaiffier, “La Lecture des Actes des Martyrs dans la Prière Liturgique en Occident”, in *Analecta Bollandiana*, 72 (1954), pp. 134 – 166.; J.N.D Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 1958), pp. 490 – 491; Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, p. 81;

<sup>60</sup> Thomas Head, *Hagiography and the Cult of Saints: The Diocese of Orleans, 800 – 1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 131; Katrien Heene, “Audire, legere, vulgo: an attempt to define public use and comprehensibility of Carolingian hagiography”, in Roger Wright (ed.) *Latin and the Romance Languages in the Early Middle Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 146 – 163, at pp. 147 – 148

<sup>61</sup> Head, *Hagiography and the Cult of Saints*, p. 102.

VSC itself certainly gives a special prominence to the account of the saint's death. III.23, in which Columba dies, is the final chapter in the work, and is by far the longest.<sup>62</sup> In fact, only the first two thirds or so of the chapter are directly about Columba's last days alive, the rest is largely a catalogue of various signs seen by people in different places that informed them of the saint's death. It is interesting that a number of locations on Iona are mentioned in this chapter, a mapping of Columba's final journeys which may have been used as the routes for processions on his feast day.<sup>63</sup> Processions on saints' feast days were certainly common, not surprisingly this was most common for cults with celebrations during the summer months (such as Columba's, on the ninth of June), when the more clement weather made this more practical than it would be in winter.<sup>64</sup> Helen Gittos, whose study focuses on "stational" processions between churches, but which also notes that such processions took place within monastic precincts as well, writes that on such occasions, "gospel books, crosses, banners, and relics [were] carried in procession".<sup>65</sup>

First, the saint is taken in a wagon to visit the monks working in the western part of the island (*Ad quos in occidua insulae Iouae laborantes parte*), and after telling them that he will soon die, he is taken back to the monastery (*Post eiusdem benedictionis uerba sanctus ad suum reuehitur monasterium*).<sup>66</sup>

On what he knows is the final day of his life, the saint goes to bless a barn, and after some more prophecies and attempts to comfort his followers, again returns to the monastery, this time with more detail given to the description of the journey:

*Post haec sanctus horreum egreditur, et ad monasterium reuertens media resedet uia. In quo loco postea crux molari infixi lapidi hodieque stans in margine cernitur uiae.*

[After this, the saint left the barn, and returning towards the monastery sat down midway. In that place a cross that was later fixed in a mill-stone is seen, standing

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<sup>62</sup> VSC, III.23.

<sup>63</sup> As suggested in Clancy, "Personal, Political, Pastoral", p. 57.

<sup>64</sup> Helen Gittos, *Liturgy, Architecture, and Sacred Places in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 140. Columba's feast day is on the ninth of June.

<sup>65</sup> Gittos, *Liturgy, Architecture, and Sacred Places*, pp. 105 and 144 – 145.

<sup>66</sup> VSC, III.23.

by the roadside, even today.]<sup>67</sup>

And this introduces the famous scene of the white workhorse which comes to weep for Columba's imminent passing. Leaving the horse, the saint climbs a small hill (*monticellus*), where he raises his hands to bless the monastery, before returning to it, and sitting down for a final session of scribal work, copying out a psalter.

The route walked by Columba on his final day on earth would have been easily recognisable to the monastic community in Adomnán's time. The journey from the monastery to the barn, from the barn to the cross by the road, from the cross to the little hill, and from the hill back to the monastery could thus be easily recreated as a procession on Columba's feast day, with stops for lessons, prayer or hymns built in at the locations of each of Columba's stops and short speeches, much in the same way that the processions of the Stations of the Cross are based on the Gospel narratives of Jesus Christ's walk to Calvary. This cannot be demonstrated conclusively, but the erection of the cross beside the road certainly indicates that the spot was believed to be significant to the community at Iona.

### 3.2: Audience responses?

While Saint Columba himself is unsurprisingly at the centre of most of the stories in *VSC*, he is seldom alone. His prophecies and miracles are witnessed by others, sometimes many others, testifying to their veracity. On some fifteen occasions, these other characters are reported as responding to these wonders in various ways, generally expressing amazement or giving thanks to or glorifying God. These instances are listed in Table 1 below.

Chapter 6, Table 1: *Textualle Publikum* responses in *VSC*

Ref.	Quotation	Translation	Notes
I.2	<i>Fintenus consequenter percunctatur dicens: 'Quem post sé successorem relinquit?' 'Baitheneum', aiunt, 'suum alumnum.' Omnibusque clamitantibus, 'dignum et</i>	Thereupon Fintén inquired, saying: 'Whom has he left as his successor?' 'Baithéne, his foster-son,' they said. And while all exclaimed, 'A worthy and fitting	Fintén is informed of Columba's death, and Baithéne's succession to the abbacy of Iona. Note the alliteration of <i>dignum et</i>

<sup>67</sup> *VSC*, III.23.

	<i>debetum', Columb ad Fintendum inquit...</i>	successor,' Columb said to Fintén...	<i>debetum.</i> Cf. the popular acclaim of the new king Conaire in <i>Togail Bruidne Da Derga</i> . <sup>68</sup>
I.40	<i>Christique commiltiones qui in ecclesia sanctum circumstantes occulta cordis audierant manifestantem diuinam in eo scientiam cum magna ammiratione glorificarunt.</i>	And the fellow-soldiers of Christ who, standing about the saint in the church, had heard him expose the secrets of the heart, marvelling greatly glorified the divine knowledge that was in him.	
I.42	<i>Omnes tum qui in praesentes inerant ualde mirati sé inuicem intuentes obstipuerunt.</i>	All who were then present greatly marvelled, and looked at one another in amazement.	
I.44	<i>Quo audito sancti uerbo humilis perigrinus ualde stupefactus Christum in sancto ueneratus est. Et qui inerant praesentes nimis ammirati glorificant deum.</i>	Hearing the saint say this, the humble pilgrim was much astonished, and revered Christ in the saint. And those that were present there, greatly marvelling, glorified God.	
I.12	<i>Quo uero nauis inerant obstupefacti cum magna ammiratione referentes gratias glorificauerunt deum in sancto et praedicabili uiro.</i>	Those who were in the ship were amazed, and returning thanks, with great wonder glorified God in the holy and memorable man.	

<sup>68</sup> “Ní méti an nísín, ol seiseam. Ní hainim rí óc eslobar. Ní mise didiu éiside. Is cert n-athar 7 seanathar damsa fonaidm ngíall Temrach. Amrae n-amrae, ol in slúag.” [“That is no matter,” he said. “A young, generous king is no reproach. I am not corrupt. My father and grandfather had the right to take hostages at Tara.” “Wonder of wonders,” said the host.] Eleanor Knott (ed.), *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1936), p. 5, lines 162 – 165. Translation mine.

II.14	<i>De cuius etiam effecta diuinitus euectione ualde est miratus cum gratiarum in deo actione.</i>	And he marvelled greatly, with thanksgiving to God, because of its transference divinely effected.	The episode of Cainnech's staff. Note that only Cainnech himself, not a group of people, are present and reacting to the miracle.
II.19	<i>Pro quibus sanctus et socii deo grates eximias reddiderunt.</i>	And for them the saint and his companions rendered very great thanks to God.	
II.23	<i>Et qui uiderant et qui auiderant ualde tremefacti ammirantes Christum in sancto profeta honorificantes glorificarunt.</i>	And those that saw, and those that heard, trembled greatly, marvelled, and glorified Christ, honouring him in his holy prophet.	
II.27	<i>Fratres tum recesise uidentes bestiam, Lugneumque commilitonem ad eos intactum et incolomem in nauicula reuersaum, cum ingenti ammiratione glorificauerunt deum in beato uiro. Sed et gentiles barbari qui ad praesens inerant eiusdem miraculi magnitudine quod et ipsi uiderant compulsi deum magnificarunt christianorum.</i>	Then, seeing that the beast had withdrawn and that their fellow-soldier Lugne had returned to them unharmed and safe, in the boat, the brothers with great amazement glorified God in the blessed man. And also the pagan barbarians who were there at the time, impelled by the magnitude of the miracle that they themselves had seen, magnified the God of the Christians.	
II.32	<i>Clamor tum populi attollitur, plangor in laetationem conuertitur,</i>	Then a shout of the people arose, mourning was turned	Cf. Psalm 30: 11 and Jeremiah 31: 13, both of which concern

	<i>deus christianorum glorificatur.</i>	into rejoicing, the God of the Christians was glorified.	mourning being turned to joy by God.
II.34	<i>Et post haut grande interuallum uenti contrarii ad itineris ministeria cum omnium ammiratione reuertuntur.</i>	And after but a short space of time, to the astonishment of all, the adverse winds were turned about, to serve the voyage.	
II.38	<i>Quo sancti audito uerbo quidam alacer iuuenis ad oram cucurrit maris ; repertumque utrem gauisus coram sancto cum omnium qui ibidem inerant ammiratione adsignauit.</i>	Hearing these words of the saint, one active lad ran to the sea-shore, and raced back carrying the skin, which he had found as the saint had foretold; and joyfully handed it over in the presence of the saint, while all who were there marvelled.	
II.42a	<i>Et post quasi unius horae interuentum, mirum dictu et ecce inopinato Cormacus superueniens oratorium cum omnium ammiratione et gratiarum ingreditur actione.</i>	And after the interval of about one hour, strange to tell, behold, Cormac appearing unexpectedly entered the oratory; and all were amazed and rendered thanks.	
II.42b	<i>... et nauis Cormaci ad terras reducta est, et peruenit Cormac ad sanctum Columbam, et sé donante deo facie ad faciem cum ingenti omnium ammiratione uiderant et non mediocri laetatione.</i>	Cormac's ship was brought back to land, and Cormac came to Saint Columba; and God granting it they saw each other face to face, to the great wonder of all, and with uncommon rejoicing.	

III.23	<i>Tota interim personabat mestis plangoribus ecclesia.</i>	Meanwhile the whole church resounded with sorrowful lamentations.	The death of Columba
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These stories have two audiences: the audiences within the stories who react to Columba's actions, and the audiences who read or hear the stories. Christodoulos Papavarnavas, in his study of Byzantine martyr passions, employs the useful terms *textualle Publikum* and *außertextualle Publikum* to designate these two audiences, which I will adopt here.<sup>69</sup> Papavarnavas argues that the actions attributed to the *textualle Publikum* in the martyr passions – jeering, lamenting, praising God, etc. – were intended not only to reflect the actual, historical actions of the crowds of pagans who witnessed the martyrdoms themselves, but also to provoke similar reactions on the part of the *außertextualle Publikum* in a liturgical context. When the passions were being read to commemorate the earthly deaths of the martyrs, the assembled worshippers took an active role in the reading by “playing” the part of the crowds of pagans.<sup>70</sup> The worshippers, the *außertextualle Publikum*, thus become more fully immersed in the text, and have the *textualle Publikum* to provide them with cues for the appropriate emotional responses to the stories. From Western Christendom, we also know that readings of Sulpicius Severus' *Vita Sancti Martini* during Martin's festal celebrations at Tours, were accompanied by the audience trembling or exulting at the appropriate parts of the reading, again taking on a dual role as audience and as re-enactors of the stories they were hearing, playing the role of crowds in the *vita*.<sup>71</sup>

The stories in *VSC* listed in Table 1 above may have had a similar function. With the sole exception of II.14, the *textualle Publikum* is always a group of people, and could thus easily be replicated by a gathered *außertextualle Publikum*. The majority of these stories feature the *textualle Publikum* giving thanks to God, and notably this almost always happens at the end of the chapter in question. The descriptions of characters expressing amazement and glorifying God would make effective cues for the assembled congregation to call out *alleluia*, *gloria* or something similar, and especially as this marks the end of a reading, this would form the climax

<sup>69</sup> Papavarnavas, “Die Rolle des Publikums in den vormetaphrastischen Gruppen- und Einzelmartyrien”, pp. 70 – 77.

<sup>70</sup> Papavarnavas, “Die Rolle des Publikums”, pp. 70 – 77. Papavarnavas uses the passion of Sergius as a case study.

<sup>71</sup> Raymond Van Dam, “Images of Saint Martin”, p. 20.



of a shared experience of reading and hearing, a communal act of thanks to God for his work through the saint whom they sought to honour. Reading the text in this way thus opens *VSC* up for interpretation as a text that could be used in a manner that invited active, shared participation for the Columban *familia*, allowing us to think about the role the text may have played in that community.

#### 4: Conclusions

In this chapter, some of the potential functions of *VSC* within the Columban *familia* have been explored. While there is a lack of direct evidence about the workings of many aspects of cult practice, I believe that it is useful to try to look at the text in this way, to try to identify how certain narratives within the text relate to such cult practices as the use of Columban relics, lections and processions. In this chapter, therefore, the investigation moves from looking at the influences and motivations that fed into the text, towards how the text fed into the life of the Columban community.

As detailed evidence about many aspect of the practices of the Columban cult is lacking, parallels have been sought in other cults, which in conjunction with close readings of *VSC* provides a basis for a new reading of the text: one which had a central role in the cult practices (and not merely the identity, prestige and politics) of the Columban *familia*. By looking at how other cults approached the use of relics, or practices such as processions on saints' feast days, or the place of refectory and other readings within monastic culture, we can build up a plausible picture of how such things were approached in the Columban cult, and can identify which elements of Adomnán's text might relate to them. Some of these, such as the repeated references to the use of water in conjunction with blessed objects to effect cures, are likely to have been intended by Adomnán himself as guides to cult practice, a kind of users' manual for Columban relics within the saint's *vita*. Similarly, the processional route-map in the account of Columba's final day in III.23 is very probably there by Adomnán's design, and was intended to be followed by the community in commemoration of the saint's death on his feast day on the ninth of June, bringing together text, cult and landscape.

It may be that other applications of *VSC* to aspects of cult practice were not intended by Adomnán himself, but arose later, as users of the text in subsequent generations found different elements of the text usable in different contexts. For instance, the potential use of certain passages of *VSC* as lectionary readings as discussed above might have been realised at any time.

A text which was so central to the Columban community, the *vita* of their founder and patron,

would be well known and often read across the large number of Columban foundations across Ireland and Northern Britain, and this would surely give rise to new uses and applications over time.

The possible uses of the text within the Columban community explored in this chapter cannot be demonstrated conclusively, but the detail in the narratives studied here and the practices of other cults suggest that this approach is a fruitful one. This approach opens up possibilities for thinking about what it was the *familia* actually did with this text, and what roles it had within the life of the community in which and for which it was produced.



## Conclusion

*VSC* is a highly skilled, highly sophisticated work. It is also a work of deep reverence, in which the skill and intellectual prowess of its author are deployed to reflect the sanctity and enhance the status of its subject.

This thesis has been a detailed study of several important aspects of *VSC* which have been examined with respect to their function in a literary text, to their relation to a wider context of adjacent literatures and to their function within the operation of the Columban cult. Having approached *VSC* through a series of detailed close readings, interpreting a large number of episodes and other aspects of the text, such as its visual presentation, in relation both to each other and to *VSC*'s wider literary context, I believe that this thesis helps us to understand *VSC* better as a literary production. While *VSC* is and will remain one of the most important primary sources at our disposal for studying early medieval Scotland and Ireland, this thesis has shown that it is not, and should not be approached as, a collection of historical data and anecdotes. Neither is it a generic example of hagiography, to be considered as equivalent to other *vitae*, or representative of saints' lives as such, with an assumed set of literary characteristics and affinities. It is rather, as this thesis has sought to demonstrate, a highly accomplished, carefully-structured and sophisticated literary composition, which develops, borrows from and diverges from the inheritance of the hagiographical tradition, which displays an erudite curiosity about language. Adomnán composed with particular aims in mind, using the narratives demonstrating the sanctity of his subject to defend and advance the Columban cult, to strengthen his authority as abbot, and to support his great political project, *Cáin Adomnáin*.

All of these factors, as well as the text's relationship to the conventions of other adjacent literatures should be borne in mind whenever evidence from *VSC* is brought to bear on historical problems. Adomnán's arrangement of his episodes, the kind of language he uses to tell them, the ways in which they relate to one another and to other texts, all of these must be considered carefully if we want to understand what Adomnán was trying to convey in any one chapter of his work. This does not mean that we should stop using *VSC* as a historical source, but we must always try to understand Adomnán's aims, and how what he writes relates to literary conventions, when we use his work as evidence.

In Chapter 1, “The Manuscripts of *Vita Sancti Columbae*: the visual construction of the text”, the visual presentation of *VSC* was examined, looking at how the scribes of the extant manuscripts used a variety of strategies such as illumination, different colours of ink and different sizes of initials to guide the reader through their versions of Adomnan’s text. The ways in which the visual construction of *VSC* related to such matters as language (and the theologically significant use of the Greek alphabet) and to the work’s literary structure were also examined. The scribes can be seen to have taken care to present the text visually in a manner appropriate to the importance and sanctity of its subject. In particular, the illumination of the manuscripts, and the inclusion of Greek raised the prestige of the manuscripts of *VSC*, demonstrating to those who encountered them that Columba was a truly holy man, worthy of the care and erudition required to produce, to reproduce and read his *vita*.

While the investigation of the manuscripts in Chapter 1 focused primarily on Schaffhausen Stadtbibliothek Generalia 1, which is not only of a very early date but is also the only first-recension manuscript produced in a Columban milieu, it also discussed the visual presentation of the text of the B manuscripts, the first time such work has been undertaken. The early, indeed near-authorial, date of the Schaffhausen manuscript, and its Ionan provenance mean that it is due special attention as it provides nearest access we now have to the intellectual and scholarly climate of Adomnán’s Iona, giving a unique insight into how Adomnán’s immediate circle encountered the *vita* of their community’s founder and patron, how they were guided through it, how it was visually presented to them.

The B manuscripts are worthy of attention for a different reason, but it is attention they have not hitherto received: they allow us to see the reception and transmission of this central text of the Columban cult outside of its cult centres, including additional material from Columba’s dossier not preserved in the Schaffhausen manuscript. In including these manuscripts, this study enables us to take a longer view of the development and transmission of the Columban cult temporally beyond the early medieval period, and geographically beyond the Gaelic world.

The examination of the manuscripts included a consideration of how their visual presentation related to the work’s structure. That structure was the focus of Chapter 2, “Structure and Narrative Sequencing in *Vita Sancti Columbae*”, the first detailed study of the structure of *VSC*. This chapter demonstrated that *VSC* is a compositionally complex work, bringing together elements of established hagiographical tradition and innovation to produce a *vita* that is highly structurally distinctive. A close examination of the ways in which Adomnán arranged his

materials, of the macro- and micro-structures of *VSC*, reveals evidence of a very keen literary mind at work, with a sophisticated sense of balance, of escalation and of the thematic connections between stories. In arranging his narratives as he did, Adomnán produced a high quality, ambitious, elaborate *vita* for his kinsman and his community's patron, calling upon all of his formidable intellectual resources to present the stories and traditions of a man he considered truly holy. It was argued in this chapter that the structure of Adomnán's text, even where his placement of certain narratives works against his overall scheme, is flexible, careful and deliberate, and is not a result of a failed attempt to integrate his source materials into *VSC*. Again, the production of a text of such high literary quality was seen to be a means of . prestige and honour upon Columba, through which his cult was defended and advanced, as was Adomnán's own position in the leadership of the Columban *familia*.

Chapter 3, "Language and *Vita Sancti Columbae*", built upon this idea of the complexity of *VSC* being seen in relation to the prestige of the text and its subject. This chapter demonstrated that Adomnán's use of and ideas about language in *VSC* are complex, and that he used both a sophisticated writing style and skill at bringing together different languages to raise the literary standard of his work to a level appropriate for the *vita* of his community's founder. Drawing on various literary techniques to enrich his text, Adomnán integrated alliteration, *variatio* and hyperbaton into an elaborate prose style suited to the dignity of proclaiming the holiness of a saint blessed by God, whose sanctity still blessed those who honoured him. In the same way, in bringing in elements of Greek and Hebrew into a Latin text, Adomnán quite consciously invoked the status of the *tres linguae sacrae*, attempting to confer that prestige on Columba.

Conferring such prestige on the saint and his cult through the production of a highly sophisticated hagiography, was, as we have already seen, central to Adomnán's aims. The synod of Whitby had dealt a serious blow to the status of Columba's *familia*, and a complete, updated *vita* of its founder in elaborate and erudite Latin would surely help to restore some of the prestige it had lost. Adomnán, as both the author of the *vita* and its subject's kinsman and successor, would also have enhanced his own prestige in producing such a work, in doing so strengthening both his leadership of the *familia* and his influence as a political actor.

The study of language in this chapter was set in the contexts of early medieval Gaelic and wider Christian literary and intellectual culture (including Adomnán's own *DLS*), which enables us to understand more about Adomnán as a writer. Clearly, in order to achieve his ambitious of producing a high-quality, prestigious *vita* for Columba, he would need to have a considerable degree of literary skill at his disposal. The investigation of his Latin style and his approach to different languages, in this chapter demonstrates that he did indeed possess such skill. His

ability to use a range of techniques to raise the literary level of his work has been demonstrated, as has his intellectual curiosity about and interest in language as such. The picture of Adomna'n that emerges from this study is of a sophisticated and ambitious writer, crafting elaborate sentences with words carefully chosen to demonstrate both his own erudition and the greatness of his community's patron.

While the first three chapters had explored aspects of *VSC* when looking at the text as a whole, the final three focused on certain themes or aspects of the text found in individual episodes. These thematic studies entailed detailed close readings of those episodes, again set in the context of adjacent literatures. This allowed the study to both focus on the messages conveyed in those episodes, and to build up a picture of Adomnán's treatment of these themes by comparing them to each other.

Chapter 4, "Sex, Women and Violence in *Vita Sancti Columbae*" explored Adomnán's multi-faceted approaches to issues of sex and gender, and the ways in which these intersect with the problem of violence, and demonstrated once more the importance Adomnán places on submission to abbatial authority, which as we have seen is a key concern in *VSC*.

The saint is shown to have the authority to know of God's judgements and forgiveness on sexual matters. Columba is shown to possess not only authority, but also keen judgement, compassion and a sound knowledge of the laws of Christian sexual conduct, all necessary attributes for a leader in a Christian community. He is not shown as struggling with sexual temptation himself, but it is in the nature of his role that he must deal with those who do, and he is seen to do so effectively. As this chapter demonstrated, these episodes concerning issues of sexual behaviour with other messages as well, with the prestige and sanctity of Columba lend extra force to messages about the sexual conduct Christian people (both lay and monastic), Adomnán's political work and the importance of submission to abbatial authority.

In the matter of women as givers of advice, this chapter demonstrated Adomnán does not conform straightforwardly to the idea, present in early medieval Gaelic culture, that women are inherently untrustworthy or foolish, but rather assesses the wisdom or foolishness of women according to their responses to Columba's authority. The fact of their being women is seen to be secondary to their receptiveness to Columba's authority.

Regarding violence, Adomnán shows in both *VSC* and *Cáin Adomnáin* a strong concern for those who are vulnerable to violence, including women. Using the aims of *Cáin Adomnáin* as the key to interpreting several narratives in *VSC*, it becomes clear that this is not merely a general concern for victims of violence, but one that is tied to a political plan of action. The



stories in *VSC* exemplify and propagate the ideals of the law, and the two texts can therefore be seen to complement each other.

In Chapter 5, “Dangerous Beasts in *Vita Sancti Columbae*”, we saw that Adomnán used very different types of narratives involving different dangerous beasts to demonstrate the holiness of Columba, and the fact of God’s power dwelling within him. Through examining the roles these creatures play, and the reactions of different characters to those creatures, and to Columba’s interactions with them, we can better understand how Adomnán thought about the saint, and how he wanted to present him to his audience. Once more, analysis of these narratives shows Adomnán using them to demonstrate Columba’s greatness and thereby the prestige of his cult, while using that greatness and prestige to give extra force to messages about abbatial authority and his political work. Columba is portrayed as having the gift of prophecy, and the terrible power to drive away fearsome, man-eating beasts, and even to slay a charging wild boar. He is allowed prophetic knowledge of events taking place in the seas to the far, unknown north, and even at such a great distance calls upon divine power to change the winds and deliver his monk Cormac to safety. By examining these stories in the wider interpretative context of adjacent literatures – Biblical, scholarly and narrative – we can gain a better understanding of what these dangerous creatures might have meant to Adomnán and his audiences. They are not merely interesting tales of strange or impressive animals, they are illustrations of the holiness of Columba, and proof of his standing among the major saints of Christendom. The importance of submission to abbatial authority again is a prominent concern in two of the stories studied in this chapter, demonstrating again the importance of this matter to Adomnán’s aims, and of the monastic audience community as an audience for the work.

The approach of combining close readings of these episodes with readings in adjacent literature allows us to see how late antique and early medieval ideas about whales, serpents, boars, and *bestiae* provided the audiences of *VSC* with a network of allusions and associations that could be brought to bear when they encountered the beasts of Columba’s *vita*. By evoking the threatening creatures and unsettling geographical locations of other texts with which his audience were familiar, Adomnán was able to demonstrate Columba’s gifts of power and prophecy in ways that enhanced the prestige of his cult, setting him alongside the major heroes of Christendom.

In the final chapter of this thesis, Chapter 6, “*Vita Sancti Columbae* and Cult Practice”, some potential functions of *VSC* within the Columban *familia* were explored. The approach taken

was to undertake detailed close readings of individual episodes, and to set them in the context of attested practices in other cults concerning the use of relics, processions and readings. While the suggestions made in this chapter were necessarily speculative to some degree, they open up ways of thinking about the text as a part of a living community, integrated into the ritual practices of the Columban *familia*. Despite a lack of direct evidence about the workings of many aspects of cult practice, I believe that it is useful to approach *VSC* in this way, to try to identify how certain episodes might relate to such cult practices as the use of relics, lections and processions. This chapter therefore shifted focus from looking at the influences and motivations that fed into the text, towards how the text fed into the life of the Columban *familia*. Doing so provides a basis for a new reading of the *VSC*, as a text with a central role in the cult practices (and not merely the identity, prestige and politics) of the Columban *familia*.

*VSC* is a text that has been studied extensively from different angles, as would be expected of a substantial text of secure date and authorship, especially in the context of the paltry documentation extant from early medieval Scotland. While this thesis has built on existing scholarship, it has also opened up some new angles of investigation. This is true of certain subsections of the thesis – for instance, the visual presentation of the B manuscripts had not been given due attention before, and giving it that attention has enabled us to appreciate the contexts of the transmission and reproduction of the text more fully. Likewise, while certain short sequences of narratives had been studied before, the work carried out in Chapter 2 of this thesis is the first detailed study of the microstructure of *VSC* as a whole, giving us a much more comprehensive understanding of how and why Adomnán put his text together the way he did.

While this thesis has demonstrated that *VSC* is in many respects a highly singular work, I believe that certain approaches taken in this study could be fruitfully applied to other texts as well. While it has never been my aim to formulate a general methodology for approaching hagiography, I believe that in particular the detailed study of narrative sequencing undertaken in Chapter 2, and the approaches to cult practice in Chapter 6, could provide a basis for approaches to those aspects in other *vitae* opening up the possibility for more detailed comparative studies, understanding more thoroughly the literary workings of hagiographies in their cult contexts. Similarly, the close readings of groups of related episodes set in the wider context of adjacent literatures, as undertaken in Chapters 4 and 5 could be applied to more aspects of *VSC* that have been unexamined or underexamined so far, such as Adomnán's

approach to masculinity, for instance, among other topics that were excluded from this thesis because of a lack of space.

Having undertaken an intensive, in-depth study of *VSC* as a literary production, analysing Adomnán's literary techniques and approaches to arranging and presenting his material, one cannot but come away with a deep appreciation for the skill and care he put into his work. *VSC* is a highly sophisticated, highly intellectual production, crafted and shaped by a writer deeply concerned to honour his God and his kinsman, the founder of the monastic *familia* which he himself led. It is a work of great skill and deep reverence, a masterpiece of early medieval Christian literature.



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