Columbanus’s Ulster Education

ALEX WOOLF

Columbanus was born in Leinster and made his career on the Continent, but despite Jonas’s reticence on the topic, it is clear that his training as both a monastic leader and a theologian was the product of his sojourn in Ulster. While the chronology is inexact and somewhat confused, our subject’s monastic profession and training are clearly said to have taken place at the monastery of Bangor under the headship of its founder, Comgall (abbot c. 559–602). At the end of book I, chapter 4, of the Vita Columbani we are told that Columbanus left Bangor for the Continent at the age of twenty. This seems a very early age for leading his own mission and is almost certainly an error by either Jonas or an early copyist. It is highly unlikely that Comgall would have approved one so young as the leader of a band of pilgrims setting out overseas; it is much more likely that either Jonas’s method of calculation is awry, perhaps reflecting his belief that the saint had arrived in Gaul during the reign of Sigibert (c. 561–575), or that at some point a period of twenty years as a professed monk was confused with carnal age. One intriguing possibility that suggests itself is that this is a very early example of confusion between Columbanus and Columba, since the latter seems to have left Ireland in 563, the former’s twentieth year and the second year of King Sigibert’s reign. Jonas, of course, frequently refers to his subject simply as “Columba,” and the saint himself used this form in his correspondence. It is easy to see how such confusion might have arisen.

At the end of the previous chapter of the Vita, Jonas had introduced his readers to a venerable man and teacher, Sinisilis, with whom Columbanus studied before entering into monastic profession at Bangor. Sinisilis has been identified in the modern scholarship with a future Bangor abbot, Mo Sinimu moccu Min (d. 610).1 An alternative identification, however, may be the Sinell (d. 603)2 who became bishop of Moville in succession to Uinnianus in 579.3 In either case this phase of the saint’s training also took place in Ulster. The purpose of this chapter

1. Ó Cróinín 1982, following Charles-Edwards 1976, at 44. Obituary at AU 610.2. Bullough 1997: 4 preferred to identify Sinillis with the saint of Clóeninis–Cleenish Island in Lough Erne, but for whom we are reliant on much later sources. Cf. Ó Cróinín, chapter 3 in this volume.
2. AU 603.4.
3. AU 579.1.
is to look at the context of this Ulster education and to discuss why Columbanus might have been drawn to the region in the later sixth century.

The term “Ulster” is used here to denote *not* the modern province of Northern Ireland, but the late antique kingdom of the Ulaid. In the period under discussion this kingdom of Ulster stretched, roughly, from the mouth of the Boyne north to the southern shore of Belfast Lough, largely, though not precisely, corresponding to modern Counties Louth and Down. Bangor lies at the extreme northern end of this district, and it is perhaps not a coincidence that its founder, Comgall, was said to have been born among the Cruithni, whose collection of kingdoms stretched north and west beyond Belfast Lough, in the direction of Lough Foyle. Six or seven kilometers south of Bangor lay Moville, which seems to have been an episcopal see, or quite possibly the chief episcopal see, for the Ulaid during the period in question. The Irish annals record the obituaries of three bishops of Moville: Uinnianus in 579, Sinell in 603, and Sillan in 619. After the death of Sillan the local episcopal see seems to have moved to Nendrum, on an island in Strangford Loch, about ten kilometers farther south. Obituaries for three bishops based here are found for the period between 639 and 659.

The Ulstermen became famous in the literature of medieval Ireland, and claims were made for their early domination of the whole of the North, but it is worth noting that their seventh-century extent was broadly similar to the region attributed to the “Woluntioi,” from whom their name is derived, in Ptolemy’s second-century map. This part of Ireland also appears, on the basis of the current evidence, to have been one of the main areas into which E-ware, the distinctive pottery produced in what is now western France, was imported between the mid-sixth and the very early eighth centuries. The fortress at Scrabo Hill, about three kilometers southwest of Moville, has produced such finds. This site, which sits atop the 540-foot hill, is described “as oval in shape, 90m x 37m.

4. Though now somewhat dated, the most useful general discussion remains Byrne 1973: 106–29.
6. AU.579.1; 603.4; and for Sillan an obituary at AU 619.2 as abbot but as bishop at AFM 619.
7. Moville (modern Movilla in Co. Down), Nendrum, and Bangor are all located in the territory of the later cantred of Uí Blathmeic, which is said to have been named from an eighth-century Ulster dynasty. The territory was also known by the name Duibthrian. See MacCotter 2008: 332–3. If Moville and Nendrum were not the chief episcopal sees of the Ulaid as a whole in our period, then they must at least have dominated this area. Dendrochronology has recently dated the construction of the horizontal mill at Nendrum to the year 619, the precise year of our last episcopal obituary from Moville (McErlean and Crothers 2007: 80). This may simply be coincidence, but possibly the appropriation of episcopal tithes from Moville at this point increased the volume of grain being processed at the site.
8. AU 639.4, 643.2, 659. For Nendrum’s position as the principal see of the Ulaid, see Charles-Edwards 2000: 260.
It consists of a badly mutilated stone-cored earthen bank with a ditch on the inside which is now filled in.\textsuperscript{11} Ewan Campbell has speculated that it may have been the political center of the region, from which other items of E-ware were distributed to the surrounding area. Unlike Downpatrick, at the southern end of Strangford Loch, however, Scrabo has no recognized textual attestation.\textsuperscript{12} The provenance of E-ware is as yet uncertain, but the favored hypothesis seems to be that it originated in either the lower Loire basin or that of the Charente—which provides a pleasing parallel with Jonas’s evidence for the point of departure for ships to Ireland.\textsuperscript{13}

It is notable that the territory of the Ulaid, and certainly County Down, does not seem to have participated in the earlier phase of Mediterranean trade that saw late Roman amphorae, known as B-ware, being imported to parts of Britain and Ireland.\textsuperscript{14} The late sixth-century appearance of Ulster on the archaeological map coincides with the appearance in textual records of the episcopal see at Moville and with its first known incumbent, Uinnianus. Whether Uinnianus should be seen as a moving agent in the development of the Ulaid or merely as another manifestation of the development is unclear.

Uinnianus is likely to have established himself at Moville when the Ulaid were ruled by Demmán and Báetán, the sons of Cairell mac Muiredaig, who between them seem to have ruled from 557 to 581, and the younger of whom, Báetán, seems to have been a major player who extended his influence beyond the Ulaid heartland.\textsuperscript{15} Uinnianus is best known to us through the pages of Adomnán’s \textit{Vita Columbae}, in which he is presented as the saint’s last teacher and in which a number of forms of his name are used: Finnbar, Finnio, and Uinniau. The last form makes it clear that we are dealing here with a Briton, the forms with initial ‘F’ indicating a natural gaelicization of the pronunciation by the late seventh century.\textsuperscript{16} As “Uinnianus,” the bishop is also well-known

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\item \textsuperscript{11} http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archsearch/record.jsf?titleId=2601817.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Campbell 2007: 110.
\item \textsuperscript{13} See Campbell 2007; and now Loveluck and O’Sullivan 2016. Both build on Wooding 2002.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Campbell 2007: 14–26.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Byrne 1973: 109–11, much of which is recapitulated by Ó Cróinín in this volume. It is interesting to note that the late Old Irish tale \textit{Scél Tuáin meic Chairill} has our bishop meet on arrival in Ulster with a cleric, Tuán son of Cairell, who claims to have inherited from his father the lands between Mag ailte (Mag nÍtha) and the Benna Bairche—that is, the valley of the Foyle and the Mountains of Mourne (the extent of the combined kingship of the Cruithni and the Ulaid in the ninth and tenth centuries after most of Louth had been lost to the Uí Néill). Tuán is clearly intended to be a brother of Demmán and Báetan. The text is edited by Carey 1984.
\item \textsuperscript{16} For a full, though perhaps overly skeptical, discussion see Dumville 1984, Sharpe 1984: 198 and Charles-Edwards 2000: 290–3 take, in my view, a more balanced approach. The possible confusion between a Finnian of Moville (d. 579) and a Finnian of Clonard (d. 549) within some of our source material cannot be ignored, but the identification of the saint of Moville, but not Clonard, as a bishop and the proximity of Moville to Bangor, as well as the form “Uinnianus” used in his annalistic obituary, in my
from the correspondence of Columbanus. Bishop Uinnianus may well have been the main attraction for both Columba and Columbanus when they chose the land of the Ulaid for their higher education. Jonas does not mention Uinnianus as one of Columbanus’s educators, but since he died in 579, when, according to the standard chronology, Columbanus was in his mid-thirties, it seems likely that he had a part to play, if only as the line manager or teacher of Sinilis. That Columbanus cites Uinnianus’s correspondence is suggestive that he may have spent time in Moville, where the bishop’s archive would have been maintained. It lay only a short walk from Bangor, so we need not hypothesize a long period of residence there. This line of reasoning may strengthen the case for identifying Sinilis with Uinniau’s successor Sinell rather than with Mo Sinu moccu Min.

In *Epistula 1.7* Columbanus cites Uinnianus’s correspondence with Gildas, and it is generally agreed that the so-called *Fragmenta Gildae* were compiled in part, or as a whole, from Gildas’s reply. Uinnianus appears to have been asking about the procedure to follow when a monk wished to leave his monastery to seek a stricter discipline. Such a question would make most sense coming from a bishop, since he would most likely be the arbitrator in such a dispute. As bishop of Moville, Uinnianus would have had at least two major monasteries in his diocese, Nendrum and Bangor, and possibly others. It is tempting to imagine a specific incident that might have triggered such a question.

Adomnán, in the *Vita Columbae*, never identifies the monastery at which his subject took his vows, nor does he identify his monastic teacher; the three teachers named—Cruithnechán, Gemmán, and Uinnianus—are none of them said to be in monastic orders. Throughout the *Vita*, however, particular respect is paid to Comgall of Bangor, who is mentioned more than any abbot other than Columba himself, and the Iona chronicle appears to have noted the death of every single Bangor abbot. Bearing in mind the proximity of Moville, where Columba’s final teacher was based, we might speculate that when Columba left Ireland for Britain in 563, he and his companions may have been leaving Comgall’s Bangor and seeking out a more austere calling in the islands of the ocean. Part of Gildas’s response to Uinnianus appears to have been that “a laxer

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20. For a detailed discussion of this passage, see Sharpe 1984: 196–8.
abbot should not hold one of his monks back if he is inclined to stricter ways, for priests and bishops have a terrible judge; it is his task, not ours, to judge them in both worlds.”

It is interesting to note that Gildas’s alleged visit to Ireland took place just two years after Columba’s departure for Britain. It is probably a little fanciful to suggest that Uinnianus’s original letter to Gildas had specifically asked for advice on the question “How do you solve a problem like Columba?”, but this example has the potential to illustrate the kind of situation that might have prompted the bishop’s inquiry. Why he should write to Gildas in particular is another interesting point.

There was a strand of genealogical thinking in the Middle Ages that attributed to Gildas a son named Uinnianus or some variant of the name. While the “Finnio Gildae” of Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae, lacking the patronymic, is ambiguous, the Gwynnog ap Gildas of Bonedd y Sant and Achau’r Sant is not. This may simply be coincidence, but a biological relationship is not out of the question. Gildas was already in middle age but not yet in monastic orders when he penned De Excidio, so he may have fathered sons (a Naiton is also recorded). Alternatively, a father-son relationship may have been construed from an earlier tradition of a master-pupil relationship. Whatever the truth of the matter, as Sharpe and Herren have argued, Gildas was regarded as a leading figure in the development of the British and Irish churches and in particular with that of monasticism. This should hardly surprise us.

Although we tend to focus on the achievements of the Irish Church in the early Middle Ages, due to the nature of the surviving material, it should not be forgotten that this Church was itself an offshoot of the British Church. By the late eleventh century even the Britons seem to have forgotten this and often have their early saints sent to Ireland for training, but the reality was the reverse. Columba and Columbanus were part of the first generation of Irish churchmen to go abroad following a phase of monastic reform or foundation by British fathers. In later literature Uinnianus was renowned as a scholar who had brought the law of Moses or the gospels to Ireland in a number of texts dating from the ninth century or later. More securely Uinnianus is generally accepted.


23. Gildas’s voyage to Britain is noted in Annales Cambriae C, s.a. 565. This date fits with his meeting with Ainnere mac Sétnai in the Ruys Life; Williams 1899: § 12. I have suggested elsewhere (Woolf 2007: 6) that a Hiberno-Latin source may lie behind parts of this text. Gildas’s obituary s.a. 570 appears to have been part of the original Chronicle of Ireland, and I see no reason to doubt it; cf. Stancliffe 1997: 179–81.


25. See also chapter 6 in this volume for the prior influence of British monks on the Continent.


27. Such as Scél Tuáin, discussed above, Carey 1984; or Féilire Oengus under September 10.
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as the author of *Penitentialis Uinniani*. Since this appears to be the principal unacknowledged source for Columbanus’s own penitential, it seems likely that this should be attributed to our Uinnianus.\(^\text{28}\) This sixth-century text is very much in the tradition of British penitentials and stands at the beginning of the distinctly Irish tradition, thus supporting the contention that Uinnianus was himself a vector for bringing this British monasticism to Ireland. It develops the mode of thought first seen in the text known as the *Praefatio Gildae de Poenitentia*, also thought to be sixth century and British.\(^\text{29}\) Despite its ascription to Gildas, and Gildas’s evident influence upon Uinnianus, modern scholarship has been skeptical of the attribution.\(^\text{30}\) Herren argues that the author of the *Fragmenta* cannot be the same as the author of the *Praefatio* because *Fragmenta* 2 states that “[a]bstinence on bodily food is useless without charity. Those who do not fast unduly or abstain over much from God’s creation, while being careful in the sight of God to preserve within them a clean heart (on which, as they know, their life ultimately depends), are better than those who do not eat flesh or take pleasure in food of this world, or travel in [vehicles] or on horseback,\(^\text{31}\) and so regard themselves as superior to the rest of men: to these death has entered through the windows of their pride,”\(^\text{32}\) while the *Praefatio* extensively recommends putting monks on short rations as a form of penance. In Herren’s words: “It is difficult in the extreme to believe that the author of the *Fragmenta*, who regards fasts and vigils as largely the activity of the vainglorious and hypocritical, would then proceed to write a penitential work in which going without supper was the most common punishment for minor transgressions and vigils for more serious ones.”\(^\text{33}\) It could be argued, however, that Herren confuses form with substance. The vainglorious faster chooses abstinence to set himself above his fellows, whereas the penitent brother humbly submits to his abbot’s prescription of abstinence. Since the *Penitentialis Uinniani* also depends on fasts and vigils as penances, it seems not out of line with the school of thought represented by Gildas and Uinnianus and later by Columbanus.

What else might have been on the curriculum at Moville or Bangor? In a recent paper on Columbanus’s monastic inspiration,\(^\text{34}\) Clare Stancliffe draws our attention to the fact that not all of those works penned in Europe or Asia that influenced Columbanus need necessarily have been encountered by him after he

31. This calls to mind Aidan of Lindisfarne as described by Bede in HE III.5.
32. Winterbottom 1978: 80; text at 143.
34. Stancliffe 2011.
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left Ireland.\(^{35}\) Columbanus describes having encountered the works of Faustus of Riez while still a young monk,\(^{36}\) presumably in Ireland. Lapidge has argued that the hymn *Precamur patrem*, preserved in the Antiphonary of Bangor, was the product of Columbanus’s pen while he was still based in Ireland. The manuscript of the Antiphonary dates to around 700. *Precamur patrem* shows familiarity with Rufinus’s Latin translation of Gregory of Nazianus’s *Orations*, Virgil, the Gospel of Nicodemus, and Cassian’s *Institutes*,\(^{37}\) as well as Sulpicius Severus, Venantius Fortunatus, and Jerome.\(^{38}\) Stancliffe also draws attention to the evidence provided by *Amra Choluimb Chille*, an elegy to Columba of Iona that appears to have been composed almost immediately after his death.\(^{39}\) This poem claims that Columba applied the Rule of Basil and loved the books of Cassian. If the poem does date to 597–598, it strongly suggests that these works were available in the northern Gaelic world at the time Columbanus left for the Continent, and it is not stretching the evidence much further to suggest that they may have formed part of the curriculum that Uinnianus established in his diocese, which included Comgall’s Bangor.

A further issue is brought to mind by Stancliffe’s chapter in this volume (see chapter 7), which emphasizes “shunning” and the ideology based on Ezekiel 33, which saw the Godly as watchmen (*speculatores*) set by God to warn the sinful among the powerful, both lay and ecclesiastical. This is, of course, a major feature of Gildas’s *De Excidio* and is also evident, as Stancliffe discusses in depth, in Columbanus’s own work. Echoes of it can also be seen in Adomnán’s portrayal of Columba, in particular with his dealing with kings and his refusal to have polluted laymen on Iona. Was this part of Uinnianus’s curriculum, and might i, perhaps be connected more widely to the changes happening in the Church in Ireland in this period?

In this chapter I have focused perhaps more on Uinnianus than might have been expected, but the extreme proximity of the churches of Duibthrian, the episcopal see at Moville, and the monastic houses at Bangor and Nendrum, neither more than an hour’s journey by foot or boat from it, suggest to me that we should picture this area as a unified ecclesiastical province whose clerics interacted with one another on an almost daily basis. It is tempting as well to

\(^{35}\) Stancliffe 2011: 26–8.

\(^{36}\) Columbanus, *Instructiones* 2.1; for discussion see Stancliffe 1997.


\(^{38}\) Stancliffe 1996.

\(^{39}\) Stancliffe 2011: 27. For the *Amra*, text and translation are available in Clancy and Márkus 1995: 96–128. Doubts about the early date of the *Amra* have recently been raised by Bisagni 2009, but my reading of his work suggests that the evidence for late forms depends on a handful of readings in the latter part of the poem that might simply reflect problems of transmission.
suggest that the fact that Columba and Columbanus share a name in religion, the Latin word for “dove”, may reflect Uinnianus’s spiritual direction. The vernacular form of the name, Colmán, has been shown to derive from a British rather than an Irish coinage, despite the name being confined almost exclusively to Gaelic-speaking milieus. The name springs into being in the historical record in the later sixth century, and in moments of whimsy one might be tempted to imagine that Uinnianus may have called all his students, secular and clerical, by the same name. Certainly Jonas of Bobbio, in both his name, from the Hebrew for “dove”, and his writing, continued to pun on this idea of doves, and it is difficult to believe that Columba’s island was transformed from Í to Iona purely by a slip of the pen. Like some new Noah, Uinnianus repopulated the world with his spiritual sons. It may even be the case that this tradition has its origins with Gildas. In De Excidio Gildas describes Maglocunus’s monastic vocation, after a military career, as follows: “Where you had been a raven, you had become a dove [ex corvo Colombam]; as though you were stoutly cleaving the hollow air with your whirring glide and avoiding sinuous twists the savage talons of the swift hawk, you came swiftly and in safety to the caves and consolations of the saints that you can trust so well.”

**Bibliography**


41. The standard view is that the modern form “Iona” drives from a misreading or miscopying of “loua”—the genitive and ablative forms of “lo” used by Adomnán. See Anderson and Anderson 1961: 154–5.
42. *DEB* 34.15–9.
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