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ST COLUMBA, SILNÁN, AND THE 'MALE BOVINE' (VC 2.17)

Abstract

At VC 2.17, Adomnán has severely misunderstood a written source which originally described how Columba ordered one party to a dispute, an alleged *maleficus* 'evil-doer' called Silnán, to milk a sick cow in order to settle the dispute by demonstrating that its contaminated milk was the real, hidden cause of the harm which had occasioned the dispute. Adomnán misread a description of a *bos maculosus* 'pock-marked bovine' to refer to a *bos masculus* 'male bovine', and proceeded to misunderstand the story as the description of some form of contest between Columba and a *maleficus* 'sorcerer'.

In his *Vita Columbae* [VC], Adomnán, ninth abbot of Iona (679-704), has left us a wonderful account of the life and achievements of Columba, the founder and first abbot of the monastery at Iona (563-97). Nevertheless, it is important to appreciate that he did not himself live through the events which he describes, and that, as he set about his task, in addition to any oral tradition, he necessarily relied a great deal upon existing documents, much more than he would seem to want to admit at times.

Unfortunately, the name of only one of these earlier works is known to us today, the *liber de virtutibus sancti Columbae* which his predecessor Cumméne Ailbe had composed, probably during the period c.623-40.¹ An effort has already been made to identify some passages in the *Vita Columbae* where difficulties in understanding what exactly Adomnán means to say may point to his misinterpretation of a written

¹ On Adomnán's sources, see R. Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St. Columba* (London, 1995), 55-60; M. Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and the Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Oxford, 1988), 23-26.

source.² The purpose of this note is to draw attention to another passage where one particular oddity in his language suggests that Adomnán has seriously misunderstood a written source.

At VC 2.17, Adomnán tells of an event alleged to have happened in the house of a man called Foirtgern at a mountain called Cainle. The modern identity of this site remains unknown, although the fact that both Foirtgern and Cainle are Irish names points to the location of this story either in Ireland or in Scottish Dalriada, probably the former.³ The account begins by reporting that while Columba was staying at the house of Foirtgern, he acted as a judge between two country people in dispute. Curiously, the account says nothing more about the nature of this dispute or how Columba settled it.⁴ Instead, it seems to change topic quite abruptly and proceeds to describe how Columba ordered one of the disputants, a ‘sorcerer’ (*maleficus*) called Silnán, to milk a bull by means of his diabolic skill (*arte diabulica*). On the face of it, this seems to have nothing whatsoever to do with the dispute. Nor is it clear why Silnán should have allowed Columba to order him about in this way. Nevertheless, he did as instructed. When he then showed his vessel full of milk to Columba, the latter blessed it so that milk changed colour from white to red, and revealed that it was not really milk at all, but blood. Finally, the bull, which had grown wasted until the point of death almost, was sprinkled with water which Columba had blessed, and almost immediately restored to health.

² D. Woods, ‘Four Notes on Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae*’, *Peritia* 16 (2002), pp. 40-67

³ Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, pp. 300-1.

⁴ Hence Sharpe’s conclusion in *Adomnán of Iona*, p. 325: ‘This sentence tantalizes by alluding to a potentially extremely interesting set of circumstances, in which the saint acts as mediator and judge, but the story is never told.’

At face value, this seems like one of the most absurd and far-fetched stories recorded by Adomnán concerning Columba, a prime candidate for identification as a story transmitted by an oral tradition which has transformed Columba from a Christian saint into a wonder-working folk-hero.⁵ After all, no-one could ever really have milked a bull, so the tale cannot have been built upon an historical incident, or so it seems. But was the bull really a bull ? While most modern translators have translated this account as if it did indeed describe the milking of a bull,⁶ it is noteworthy that Adomnán does not use the precise Latin term *taurus* ‘bull’ anywhere in this story.⁷ The heading to the chapter refers to a *bos masculus* ‘a male bovine’, and

⁵ J. Bruce, *Prophecy, Miracles, Angels, and Heavenly Light ? The Eschatology, Pneumatology, and Missiology of Adomnán’s Life of St. Columba* (Milton Keynes, 2004) concludes that Irish pagan myth and saga had little, if any, influence on the stories preserved by Adomnán concerning Columba. S. Thompson, *Motif Index of Folk Literature* (Bloomington, IN, 1955) includes a category B 531.2 ‘Unusual milking animal’, but does not mention any bulls.

⁶ See e.g. J.T. Fowler, *Prophecies, Miracles and Visions of St. Columba, First Abbot of Iona AD563-597, Written by St. Adamnan, Ninth Abbot AD679-704: A New Translation* (London, 1895), p. 70; *Adomnan’s Life of Columba*, ed. M. O. and A. O. Anderson (London, 1961), p. 363; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, p. 167. I will cite the Latin text from the above edition by the Andersons.

⁷ He only refers to bulls once elsewhere in his text (VC 2.29), where he does use the obvious term *taurus*: ‘*Pugionem*’, *ait*, ‘*ad iugulandos tauros vel boves benedixisti.*’ The opposition between *taurus* and *bos* here suggests that Columba did sometimes use it to mean cow, that is, a female bovine. Strictly speaking, the term *bos* could be used to refer to a bovine animal of either gender, male or female. See P. G. W. Glare,

the same expression is used once more within the text.⁸ When the animal is mentioned for the third and last time, it is described simply as a *bos*. The fact that Adomnán should avoid the obvious and commonplace term *taurus* ‘bull’ in favour of the rather clumsy and unusual phrase *bos masculus* ‘male bovine’ ought to have raised far more suspicion than it seems to have done. Something is not right here, and one possibility is that Adomnán has misunderstood his source. In this context, one is immediately struck by the similarity of the adjective *masculus* ‘male’ to the adjective *maculosus* ‘covered with stains or blotches, spotted, blotted’.⁹ If this term were used in description of an animal without any other indications of ill-health, then one would immediately translate it to mean ‘variegated, spotted, or striped’. In this case, however, the alleged ‘male bovine’ is clearly extremely sick so that it is on the point of dying before it is sprinkled by water which Columba has blessed. So what sort of disease would have left a bovine ‘covered with stains or blotches, spotted, blotted’, and is there any evidence that such a disease was prevalent in Ireland or Scottish Dalriada during Columba’s lifetime ?

Probably not coincidentally, Adomnán preserves a relatively detailed description of a cattle-epidemic which displayed this precise symptom. According to this account,

Oxford Latin Dictionary (Oxford, 1982), pp. 239-40. The more specific term for cow is *vacca*.

⁸ The heading reads: *De vasculo quod quidam maleficus nomine Silnanus lacte de masculo bove expreso repleverat*. It is clear that Adomnán wrote the chapter-headings himself. See M. Stansbury, ‘The Composition of Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae*’, *Peritia* 17-18 (2003-04), pp. 154-82, at 161-64.

⁹ See Glare, *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, p. 1059, s.v. *maculosus*.

Columba once prophesied that a certain rain-cloud would cause a terrible epidemic affecting both men and cows in the Leinster area of Ireland (VC 2.4):

‘This cloud will bring great harm to people and livestock. Today it will pass over here and tonight it will shed a deadly rain over that part of Ireland between the River Delvin and Dublin, a rain that will raise awful sores full of pus on the bodies of people and on the udders of cattle. All those afflicted with this poisonous infection will suffer a terrible sickness even unto death’.¹⁰

Columba then sent a monk, Silnán mac Nemaídon, in order to heal all those affected by this cloud, both man and beast, and he found everything to be exactly as Columba had predicted. While one may doubt whether Adomnán’s source has correctly identified the cause of this cattle-epidemic, there is no reason to doubt that it did in fact occur.¹¹ It is probably identifiable as the same epidemic which so ravaged Gaul and Italy in 570 according to bishop Marius of Avenches.¹² Again, both man and

¹⁰ ‘*Haec nubes*’, ait, ‘*valde nocua hominibus et pecoribus erit. Hacque die velocius transvolans super aliquantam Scotiae partem, hoc est, ab illo rivulo qui dicitur Ailbine usque ad Vadum Clied, pluviam vespere distillabit morbiferam, quae gravia et purulenta humanis in corporibus, et in pecorum uberibus, nasci faciet ulcera. Quibus homines morbidī et pecodes, illa veninosa gravitudine usque ad mortem molestati laborabunt.*’ Trans. Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, p. 157.

¹¹ The idea that disturbances of the air, including rain, caused disease, was commonplace. See e.g. Bede, *De natura rerum* 37.

¹² Mar. Avic., *Chron.* s.a. 571: *Hoc anno morbus validus cum profluvio ventris et variola Italiam Galliamque valde afflixit et animalia bubula per loca supra scripta maxime interierunt* (MGH AA 11, 238). For a catalogue of epidemics affecting both man and beast, see D. Stathakopoulos, *Famine and Pestilence in the Late Roman and*

beast were attacked, although by different diseases which happened to occur at the same time rather than by the same disease in each case. In so far as Marius also describes how an outbreak of bubonic plague struck the same regions in 571, and the common ancestor of the surviving Irish chronicles seems to have dated the arrival of that particular epidemic of bubonic plague in Ireland to 576, then one should probably date the arrival of the preceding cattle-epidemic in Ireland to c.575.¹³ As to the nature of the cattle-epidemic, it has normally been identified as cow-pox.¹⁴

It is my suggestion, therefore, that Adomnán's account of how Columba ordered the 'sorcerer' Silnán to milk a *bos masculus* sick to the point of death really refers to an occasion when he ordered Silnán to milk a *bos maculosus*, a cow suffering from a severe case of cow-pox much like that which had certainly struck Ireland by c.575.¹⁵ This still leaves the question as to why Columba should have ordered Silnán to milk the alleged bull or cow in the first place. One possibility is that he did so as part of his

Early Byzantine Empire: A Systematic Survey of Subsistence Crises and Epidemics, (Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Monographs, 9; Aldershot, 2004), pp. 110-54.

Strangely, this neglects the evidence of Irish sources, although it does include that of English authors such as Bede.

¹³ See D. Woods, 'Acorns, the Plague, and the "Iona Chronicle"', *Peritia* 17-18 (2003-04), pp. 495-502.

¹⁴ See e.g. Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, p. 319; J.T. Fowler, *Adamnani Vita S. Columbae. Edited from Dr. Reeve's Text with an Introduction on Early Irish Church History, Notes and a Glossary* (Oxford, 1894), p. 74.

¹⁵ One hesitates to date this incident precisely to the epidemic of c.575 due to the incomplete nature of the historical record. There may well have been several less serious epidemics of the same disease before the 570s.

cure of the beast, but his healing miracles never involve anything so complex. It is usually enough simply to bless the man or beast, or to get them to consume something which he has blessed. In fact, the milking of the animal seems to have been intended solely so that Columba could demonstrate that it did not really produce milk at all, but blood. The unstated implication here is that the apparent milk was not fit for human consumption, that it harmed those who drank it even though it appeared perfectly normal at first sight. This brings us back to the start of the anecdote when Columba had acted as a judge between two disputants, one of whom may be presumed to have been accusing the other of harming him in some way. My suggestion is that Columba ordered the milking of the alleged bull or cow so that he could demonstrate that its milk was the real hidden cause of whatever allegation of harm had brought the two disputants before him. In this way, he settled the dispute.

Here one needs to draw attention to the fact that the term *maleficus* does not necessarily have magical connotations. It may mean simply ‘evil-doing, criminal’.¹⁶ I suggest, therefore, that when the author of Adomnán’s source had originally used the term *maleficus* in reference to Silnán, he had meant no more than to convey that he had been regarded as the guilty party in the dispute until Columba had showed up. Of course, once he had seemed able to perform so unnatural a feat as to milk a bull, it was all too easy to interpret the term *maleficus* as if it meant ‘sorcerer’, and this is undoubtedly how Adomnán understands it here, as he reveals by his comment that

¹⁶ See Glare, *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, p. 1067, s.v. *maleficus*. It is not irrelevant that this is the only occasion that Adomnán uses the term *maleficus* to denote a ‘sorcerer’. Elsewhere, he always uses the far less ambiguous term *magus*. See VC 1.37; 2.11; 2.32-34.

Silnán was able to milk the bull by means of his diabolic skill (*arte diabolica*).¹⁷ It is arguable, therefore, that Adomnán has misinterpreted his source for the cure of the alleged bull. The mistake seems to have begun with his misidentification of the *bos maculosus* as a *bos masculus*, but then grew worse as he proceeded to misinterpret the rest of his source also in the light of this mistake, so transforming Silnán from the perceived guilty party in a dispute into a ‘sorcerer’.

It remains to explain Columba’s apparent conversion of this milk into blood. If this anecdote has an historical basis, how does one explain this ? The most plausible explanation is that it misrepresents and exaggerates Columba’s achievement in demonstrating that the milk produced by the sick cow was ‘bloodied’ (*sanguineus* or *sanguinolentus*), presumably stained by the blood which dripped into it as Silnán

¹⁷ This is not to claim that all hagiographers would necessarily have viewed the milking of a bull in the same way subsequently. W. Reeves, *The Life of St. Columba, Founder of Hy, Written by Adamnan* (Dublin, 1857), pp. 126-7, draws attention to a claim that the young St. Fechin inadvertently milked a bull. One cannot entirely exclude the possibility that Adomnán may have been influenced somewhat by his knowledge of an incident in the early passion of St. George of Diospolis where a magician called Athanasius demonstrates his ability to compete with the power of George by using his magic first to cause a bull to split into halves, then to restore him. See e.g. W. Arndt, ‘Passio Sancti Georgii’, *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der königlichen sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Leipzig* (Leipzig, 1874), pp. 43-71, at 52. Adomnán reveals a detailed knowledge of some of the miracles associated with St. George in his *De Locis Sanctis* 3.4. In general, see D. Woods, ‘Arculf’s Luggage: The Sources for Adomnán’s *De Locis Sanctis*’, *Ériu* 52 (2002), pp. 25-52.

pulled on the sore-covered udders and caused the sores to open and bleed. Columba did not really need a full bucket of blood to prove his point, that the milking of a sick cow in this manner produced bad milk unfit for human consumption. In reality, a few flecks of blood on the surface of the milk would probably have done the trick.

However, it is in the nature of hagiography to require more startling achievements of its subjects, and either Adomnán, or the author of his immediate source, were quite happy to believe that Columba could have converted a bucket of milk into blood if he had so wished. Hence a story which in its earliest form had merely demonstrated the wisdom of Columba in detecting the hidden cause behind a serious dispute has been quite unnecessarily transformed into a miraculous tale.

In summary, Adomnán has severely misunderstood a written source which originally described how Columba ordered a certain Silnán, the perceived guilty party in a dispute, to milk a sick cow in order to settle the dispute by demonstrating that its contaminated milk was the hidden cause of the harm which had occasioned this dispute. He misread a description of a *bos maculosus* ‘pock-marked bovine’, originally meant to be understood as a cow from the context, to refer to a *bos masculus* ‘male bovine’, an apparent reference to a bull, and proceeded to misunderstand the whole purpose of the story before him as the description of some form of contest between Columba and a sorcerer called Silnán. This suggests that his source was short to the point of obscurity, that it almost took the form of rough notes rather than of a finished literary product. While these notes may have been perfectly comprehensible to those who took them and who understood or even had some personal memory of the circumstances surrounding the event being described, Adomnán seems to have had nothing to assist him as he tried to understand them. One suspects that they constituted part of the testimony which the monk Silnán had

delivered to the Abbot Ségéne (623-52) and some elders (VC 2.4), even if Adomnán does not seem to have realised this, where the alleged ‘sorcerer’ Silnán is probably identifiable as the future monk Silnán at a point before he had decided to become a monk. Indeed, it may well have been Columba’s role in clearing Silnán of the allegation against him that decided him to become a monk.

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