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Aspects of the Monastic Landscape in Adomnán's *Life of Columba*

Aidan MacDonald

I believe a case can be made that Adomnán provides evidence for a triple boundary system delimiting and defining the monastic settlement and its adjacent farmland, and for the view that the entire area thus enclosed was regarded as, in some sense at least, sacred space. The broad validity of this contention will be argued, and some of its possible implications briefly explored. The bulk of the material I shall examine concerns, as one might expect, Iona.

1 THE OUTERMOST BOUNDARY

The foreshore of the island seems to me to function as more than a merely natural outer boundary. In *Vita Columbae* (hereafter VC) I.22, Columba orders to be put ashore on Mull a man of lurid sins, 'so that he may not set foot upon the sod of this island' (*ne huius insulae cispitem calcet*): the man must not be allowed to profane holy ground. Then he and Baithéne go to the harbour to confront the man. Columba knows in his heart that he is fundamentally impenitent and, in effect, persists in refusing to receive him on Iona. I interpret this direct exchange as a formal, almost ceremonial, refusal of admittance: the reverse of a ceremonial, or at least formal, reception. The harbour (singular) can be seen as the outer gateway. In VC I.4 Cainnech of Aghaboe, whose imminent arrival, despite bad weather, Columba has foretold, is formally received by the saint and the community of Iona – at the harbour, by clear implication. In VC I.30 the saint meets at the harbour a true penitent, Féchna, whose arrival he has foreseen. Féchna publicly confesses his sins there and then, and Columba pronounces him forgiven. 'And Féchna rising was joyfully received by the saint' (*Qui surgens gaudenter a sancto susceptus*...). He remains with Columba on Iona for a few days, before being sent to Baithéne at the monastery of *Campus Lunge* on Tiree. There is clearly a formal, perhaps almost ceremonial, aspect to this exchange: Féchna kneels and confesses, Columba bids him rise and so receives him. The formality of the occasion is, I suggest, enhanced by its setting at the harbour, though otherwise there is apparent an element of spontaneity that might seem to border on informality. Féchna, moreover, is forgiven, not absolved: he is

presumably sent to *Campus Lunge* for a more or less protracted period of penance, during which, like Librán in VC II.39, he was not permitted to receive communion.[1] In VC I.45 Columba goes to meet his dying uncle Ernán, arriving from *Hinba*, at the harbour. The case here is rather different, since Ernán has clearly left the harbour when he collapses and dies, and Columba has not yet reached it. In order that 'the saint's word should not be rendered vain in any way' (he has predicted, on sending Ernán as prior to Hinba, that he will not see him again alive in this world), it is necessary that Ernán die before they meet; and the two men are some twenty-four paces (*pas(s)us*) apart and, the Andersons suggest, apparently out of sight of each other, when death overtakes Ernán.[2] Clearly, no formal reception was contemplated here, and the outer boundary and its gateway are in the event ignored. Perhaps Adomnán wishes to emphasise, in this seeming breach of proper procedure, the vanity of Ernán's attempt in his extremity to evade the divine dispensation that Columba has already announced. The contrast with the order and dignity of Ernán's commission and departure for *Hinba* is marked. For Adomnán, the two crosses surviving in his own day are commemorative: one marks the spot where Ernán died, the other the spot where Columba stood at that moment. It is equally clear, however, that they do not stand at the harbour itself and fulfil, perhaps *inter alia*, an apotropaic function. Rather, they are probably on the way from the harbour to the monastery – perhaps beside the path linking the harbour with the (main?) entrance through the *uallum monasterii* (discussed below). In VC III.23 Adomnán mentions a cross, likewise commemorative and surviving, that is also situated beside a path, that linking the monastery with farm buildings, half way between the monastery and the nearest barn.[3] In VC II.14 Columba has bidden farewell to Cainnech at the harbour. He is not alone, since Cainnech's forgotten staff is given to him there when found. It seems quite likely that a formal communal valediction here balances the formal reception of VC I.4 – in terms of literary composition, if not of actual fact.

In Adomnán's text, those who come to Iona by sea under their own sail, who steer themselves into the harbour, are generally more favoured than those who

1 There does not seem to be much detailed circumstantial information on confession, as distinct from penance, in the early Irish church: see the *Canones Hibernenses* II.3 (P and B) and II.4 (P and B) (Bieler, *Irish Penitentials*, pp. 164–5); *Paenitentiale S. Columbani* B 23 and B 30 (ibid., pp. 104–7); and the 'Old Irish Penitential' III.19 (ibid., p. 268). Both monastic and non-monastic situations seem to be envisaged here. Discussion of the dating of these texts in Bieler's introduction, ibid., pp. 8–9, 47–51. In a strictly monastic context, Columbanus ordains that confession be made 'before meat or before entering our beds or whenever it is opportune' (Walker, *Sancti Columbani opera*, pp. 144–5). Cf. Warren, *Liturgy and Ritual*, pp. 147–52; Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, pp. 353–7. Penitents were apparently not housed on Iona, but were sent to *Campus Lunge* or *Hinba*: MacDonald, 'Adomnán's Monastery', p. 44. 2 Anderson and Anderson, *Life of Columba*, p. 82 n. 106. 3 For discussion of the functions of crosses, as evidenced by literary sources, see A. Hamlin, 'Crosses in Early Ireland'. In VC II.16, a demon has been inadvertently carried within the monastic enclosure at the bottom of a milk-pail: it is expelled by the *sign* of the cross.

have to ask for passage across the Sound of Iona from the Mull shore. In addition to Cainnech (VC I.4) and Féchna (VC I.30), there is Colmán (VC I.5); and also, though their circumstances are special in either case, there are Finten moccu Moic (VC I.2) and Librán (VC II.39). This group has a decidedly clerical hue. In comparison, those who have to be ferried across the Sound form a more mixed group, with a strong lay element. These people are represented as shouting across the strait to announce their arrival and to request a passage. There is no question in any of these cases of a formal reception at the harbour. A clumsy guest arrives thus in VC I.25. The arrival of a religious guest in VC I.26 – Aidán, Fergno's son, the attendant for twelve years of Brendan – causes the relaxation of the customary Wednesday fast and thus his presence may be regarded as in some sense intrusive. Also notable are a wretched man in VC I.27, more concerned with his material needs than with his spiritual welfare, whose death is imminent; two brothers – laymen – on pilgrimage in VC I.32, who enter the community at Columba's bidding and die shortly afterwards; and a traveller from Ireland in VC I.43, who confirms a prophecy of the saint.

The Sound of Iona, the strait, certainly seems to function here as a means of protecting the community by regulating access to the island, symbolically as well as physically. In VC III.22, Columba sees angels, who have come to conduct his soul to heaven, held back and 'standing on a rock beyond the strait of our island; they wish to approach, in order to summon me from the body, but they are not allowed to come nearer, and will presently return to the highest heavens'. During the three days and nights of the saint's funeral (VC III.23), 'a great storm of wind blew without rain, and forbade anyone in a small ship to cross the strait in either direction. And after the burial of the blessed man had been completed, straightway the storm was stilled, the wind ceased, and the whole sea was calmed'. The community was thus effectively immured and the world – *promiscuum populi uulgus* – excluded for the crucial period, fulfilling Columba's prophecy that only his monastic family – *mei soli familiares monaci* – would solemnise the rites of his funeral.

For Adomnán the Sound is, I suggest, a reinforcement of the outer boundary system facing the only nearby coast. The choice of the practice of shouting across it, however, to obtain a passage, frankly puzzles me. I should have thought the channel generally too wide for so uncertain a means of communication. Dr Richard Sharpe, on the other hand, who knows the locality far better than I do, accepts it as possible under the right conditions: 'The distance is nearly a mile; on still days, especially in the early morning or the evening, the voice would carry easily, but there must have been many days when the noise of wind and waves would have defeated the ears of the most attentive boatman'.[4] The practical

4 Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, p. 285 n. 126. In a letter to me dated 2 September 1992, Patrick Cashman, Area Officer for Scottish Natural Heritage in Mull, Coll and Tiree, writes: 'The

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effectiveness of the method, it seems to me, is likely to have been so haphazard under most circumstances that I wonder if Adomnán chose 'shouting' (*clamor*) to denote symbolically any petition, by whatever means, for access to the monastery, for whatever purpose.[5] It probably did not escape his notice, furthermore, as it certainly did not escape that of Isidore of Seville, that the root of Latin *fretum* (n.), *-us* (m.), 'strait, sound, channel', was said to be that also seen in the verb *feruео*, 'boil, ferment, glow, foam, rage, etc.': hence it can also mean by extension, 'a raging, swelling, heat, violence'.[6] The appositeness, in that case, of the symbolism of a cry across the fretful waters of worldly concerns and dangers to be brought into the safe shelter of a monastic haven would surely not have been lost on a learned but also religious author.[7]

II THE MIDDLE BOUNDARY

The middle boundary is, I propose, the monastic enclosure itself, the *ual(l)um monasterii*: perhaps a single rather than a multiple line of enceinte in Adomnán's scheme of things, but its detailed physical character (which may, after all, have varied from one settlement to another) does not really affect my argument. It is mentioned explicitly only in relation to Clonmacnoise (VC I.3) and Iona (VC II.29). In the case of Clonmacnoise, Adomnán may or may not have known the place personally. If he did not, then one must assume either that he knew of the existence of a *uallum* there by reliable report, or that he assumed its existence from his own knowledge of Iona and of other Columban houses. In the case of Iona, the fact that a monk goes outside the *uallum* to kill a cow (VC II.29) may reflect a religiously motivated prohibition against the taking of life even for purposes of food within the enclosure, an area of presumably greater sanctity in the eyes of the community. (It is perhaps unlikely, on the other hand, that cows or other livestock were kept within the *uallum* anyway). Since lay people are apparently allowed, at least under supervision, onto the *platea monasterii* (VC I.50) – the courtyard of the monastery which, as I would argue, was centrally situated within the enclosure among the main public buildings[8] – then

Sound of Iona is unlikely to have been much different in the fifth and sixth centuries than it is today. If anything, the channel may have been a little deeper and thus the Sound a little wider with the raised sea level.' 5 Cf. perhaps the opening verses of the *De profundis* (Ps 129.1–2 in the Vulgate): *De profundis clamaui, ad te Domine; Domine, exaudi vocem meam.* 6 Isidore, *Etymologiae* XIII.xviii.2; cf. Varro, *De lingua latina* VII.22 (Kent, i.290–1). I am most grateful to Dr P.A.J. Cronin, Department of Ancient Classics, U.C.C., for discussion and help with regard to the passages here quoted. On Adomnán's knowledge and use of the works of Isidore see O'Loughlin, 'Living in the Ocean', p. 15, and reference there cited. 7 Cf. Meister Eckhart, beginning of Sermon 54 and note 1 thereto, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart*, ii.69–74. 8 MacDonald, 'Adomnán's Monastery', p. 40.

this area was probably integral to the space specifically delimited by the middle boundary (see further below).

As with the outer boundary, Adomnán does not seem to envisage here an enclosure defended by standing crosses, whether of wood or stone, having an apotropaic function. In VC II.16, a demon that has been lurking in the bottom of a milk-vessel is inadvertently carried by a young brother within the enclosure. There Columba expels it with the sign of the cross; and rebukes the brother for not taking this precaution himself at the outset.[9]

III THE INNERMOST BOUNDARY

This, I believe, is an enclosure around the church, probably also containing the monastic cemetery. Lay people are not said to enter the church save as prospective monks (VC I.32), or as penitents like Librán, who subsequently takes monastic vows (VC II.39).[10] The attempted assassination of Columba (VC II.24) may have involved violation of the church on *Hinba*; but in any case the would-be assassin subsequently meets an exemplary end. Towards the end of his work, Adomnán mentions that certain privileged individuals witnessed Columba's grave surrounded by heavenly light and frequented by angels (VC III.23). Sharpe notes that 'the continuance of such manifestations at the grave of the saint is something not mentioned of other Irish saints'.[11] I have argued elsewhere that, in view of Adomnán's clearcut attitude to monastic burial, he would certainly not have tolerated, in fact or in theory, a mixed cemetery for monks and laity.[12]

IV THE BOUNDARY SYSTEM IN PRACTICE

This tripartite arrangement can be seen in action. At Clonmacnoise (VC I.3), Columba's reception, described as 'a ceremonial *adventus* recalling Christ's entry into Jerusalem',[13] moves with 'hymns and praises' from the fields (*agelluli*) adjacent to the monastery, through the *uallum*, to the church (*ec(c)lesia*). The saint is protected, moreover, from the enthusiastic throng as he walks. When

9 In VC III.8 Columba, praying alone in a remote part of Iona, has a vision of a host of demons making war on him with iron spits; they wish to attack his monastery 'and with these same spikes to slaughter many of the brothers' – by the infliction of diseases as it transpires. After a contest lasting nearly all day between the saint and his adversaries, the demons are driven off by the arrival of angelic help. The demons are attempting to invade Columba's island – *sua insula*: they are repulsed by his prayer and heavenly aid – at the shore? (But cf. Anderson and Anderson, *Life of Columba*, p. 193 n. 219). 10 Cf. n. 1 above. 11 *Life of St Columba*, pp. 377–8 n. 421. 12 MacDonald, 'Adomnán's Monastery', pp. 32–3. 13 O'Reilly, 'Reading the Scriptures', p. 103.

Adomnán and his companions, who have been delayed by contrary winds on their return from Ireland, eventually reach the harbour of Iona after the third hour on 9 June, having finished their voyage in the early morning and in miraculous time with Columba's help, they wash their hands and feet, presumably within the monastery, and at the sixth hour mass is celebrated in the church – for the festival of Columba and Baithéne (VC II.45). The aged Columba, sitting in a wagon on or near the western coast of Iona, turns east to bless the island and its inhabitants (VC III.23). As in the earlier version of the same episode in VC II.28, where the blessing is performed 'on higher ground', the saint's blessing renders men and beasts there safe from snakebite (see further below). Then, from a small hill overlooking his monastery,[14] he blesses it and prophesies its future greatness; finally, the saint blesses his community as he lies dying before the altar in the church. Cumulatively, this is the solemn blessing of a patriarch about to die, just as Jacob blessed his twelve sons (Gn 49) and Moses the twelve tribes of Israel (Dt 33).

Right of sanctuary for the local lay population seems to be involved in the episode (VC I.20) in which Columba prophesies of a certain Baitán, who has sought his blessing before setting out to seek 'a desert place in the sea' (*in mari herimum*) that he will not be buried in any such hermitage, but 'in that place (*illo in loco*) in which a woman will drive sheep across his grave'. Baitán's quest ends in failure and, returning to his own district, he is for many years head of a small church there. Then he dies and is buried at Derry. Shortly thereafter, the neighbouring lay people take refuge there during a raid and Columba's prophecy is duly fulfilled. Baitán has not been a member of the community of Derry, but he may have been a Columban monk.[15] If so, he may have been buried in the monastic cemetery, as Librán, from *Campus Lunge*, was buried at Durrow (VC II.39). Has a lay person – and a woman at that – breached the innermost boundary, sheep and all, during the dislocation caused by the crisis? Does Adomnán, then, wish to emphasise the contrast between Baitán's earthly expectation and the actual treatment of his grave by drawing attention to a serious violation of due order? Even if he was buried elsewhere, within or outside the main enclosure, such a contrast seems implicit: concentration is on his burial-place alone, to the exclusion of all others. I think, however, that

14 Both the Andersons (*Life of Columba*, pp. xlvi and 222 n. 243) and Sharpe (*Life of St Columba*, p. 374 n. 409) think that this *monticellus* was Cnoc nan Carnan, the rocky hillock immediately overlooking the main monastic area from the west. Both point out that Cnoc nan Carnan (or at least part of it) lay within the *uallum*; and this was certainly true at some stage. If, however, its steep eastern face originally bounded the west side of the monastic enclosure, then Columba stands on my middle boundary. If so, was one of the reasons for its eventual inclusion within the *uallum* the fact that it was the traditional site of this penultimate general blessing of the saint? 15 Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, p. 281 n. 111. For the church of Derry at this time, see ibid., pp. 28–9 and 255–6 n. 54.

solitary burial, especially in an ecclesiastical context, is unlikely. Adomnán seems distinctly reserved about Baitán. Perhaps he was regarded, because of spiritual pride or some other fault, as unsuited for the eremitical life. We are not actually told that Columba did bless him, and the saint's farewell prophecy seems to distance Columba somewhat from the seeker and his enterprise. The background details are opaque. An innermost enclosure may be implied, as far as Baitán's place of burial is concerned, and the use of the term *ecclesia* for the place of refuge may convey the existence of a *uallum* at least, possibly an outermost boundary also.[16] Further than that, however, it does not seem possible to go.

To be respected, all three boundaries would have to be visible, though not necessarily formidable or defensible in any military sense (a practical impossibility in any case). In the Second Preface to VC, the farmlands – *agelluli* – of a monastery of Mochta of Louth and a monastery of Columba (*monasteriola*) share a 'small hedge' (*sepiscula*) as a common boundary. The use of these diminutives here may have no material significance. Adomnán's boundary system, however, is apparent only in the context of somewhat formal movement inward, from the outside world to the church at the centre. When the direction is reversed, these boundaries make no appearance. Twice, indeed, an outward movement is depicted by Adomnán as threefold. Firstly, as the moment of Columba's death approaches, his attendant Diormit and a few other brothers, as they draw near, see the whole church filled with angelic light about the dying saint. In the hour of Columba's death, a monk in a monastery in Ireland has a vision of the whole island of Iona illuminated by the light of the angels descending from heaven to receive Columba's soul. At the same time, Columban monks and others fishing in the River Finn in Donegal see the whole sky lit up by a great column of light rising in the direction of sunrise and seeming to light the whole world 'like the summer sun at midday' (VC III.23). These three manifestations of heavenly light are, moreover, explicitly linked by Adomnán. The limits are, however, different: first the church, then Iona, finally the world. I am inclined to see in this a scheme in some sense complementary to that outlined by O'Loughlin, wherein the preaching of the gospel is also envisaged as a threefold movement: first in Jerusalem, then to all Israel, finally to the ends of the earth.[17] Iona, at those ends, has received the gospel message and now she makes in return her own contribution: 'You received without charge, give without charge' (Mt 10.8). Secondly and similarly, at the end of the work, Adomnán describes how Columba's fame has reached out from Iona to embrace not only Ireland and Britain; but also Spain, Gaul and Italy; and finally Rome itself, 'which is the chief of all cities' – and, of course, the centre of Latin Christendom (VC III.23).

16 Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, p. 281 n. 112; MacDonald, 'Adomnán's Monastery', p. 32.
17 O'Loughlin, 'Living in the Ocean', p. 19, writing in the context of Adomnán's *De locis sanctis*.

V ADOMNÁN AND THE LAITY

Adomnán's scheme of things, whether it reflects the reality of his own or Columba's day, or both, or an ideal only, pretty clearly envisages no resident lay population on Iona. The significance of the timely windstorm, which effectively closes the island to outsiders for the duration of the saint's funeral ceremonies and allows his family of monks only to be present at them (VC III.23), would apparently be nullified if there had in fact been laity living on the island at the time. If this impression is right, then though the *plebeus* Findchán is implicitly a tenant of the monastery (VC II.3), his home place, *Delcros*, must have been elsewhere, probably on Mull. This conclusion is supported to some extent by the fact that the wattles for building, taken from his land, are brought to the monastery by ship. It appears that only monks work on the land (VC I.18, 37; II.28 ,39; III.23), in the steading (VC II.16, 29), in the workshop (VC II.29), on building (VC I.29; II.3, 45; III.15), or at general tasks (VC III.12).[18]

The attitude of VC to the laity generally seems ambivalent. Adomnán shows, on the one hand, a lively interest in secular, especially royal and aristocratic affairs. His attitude to women in particular, mostly laywomen, is not unsympathetic as a rule (VC I.17; II.3, 5, 7, 39, 40, 41; III.10; but contrast I.47; II.37; cf. II, 7); and can be actively compassionate (VC II.25 and 33). Laymen are received in Columban monasteries in various circumstances and capacities: as guests (VC I.13, 25, 27; cf. I.2); as penitents (VC I.21, 30; II.39; cf. I.22); as pilgrims (VC I.32); as students (VC III.21); to be buried (VC I.16). On the other hand, Adomnán seems to show concern over unrestricted access to Iona on the part of the laity – a concern reflected, not only by the reference to the funeral windstorm (VC III.23), but also, I suggest, by the end of VC III.7. And, as I have already observed, most of those requiring passage across the Sound seem to be lay people.

It is in the context of a public cult of relics, however, that this concern appears most noticeable. Recourse to or veneration of relics (in particular relics of Columba himself) are not conspicuous features of the Life as a whole.[19] Such instances as are noted, moreover, are clearly not intended to attract or encourage the devotion of the laity at large. Most conspicuous, however, by its absence is any reference to pious recourse to Columba's grave,especially reference to posthumous miracles effected there. The reports of heavenly light about his grave and angelic visits to it (VC III.23) do not appear to be intended to stimulate lay interest generally in any way. Posthumous cures effected at the saint's grave, or more widely by means of his relics, simply do not occur. And the protective patronage afforded by St Columba (VC II.46) is, in the first instance, too vague (the Picts and Scots) and, in the second, too restricted (the Columban

18 Sharpe too concludes that Iona did not support a resident lay population in Columba's time (*Life of St Columba*, pp. 19–20). 19 See VC II.44–5; and cf. II.8–9.

community in Scotland and Adomnán and his companions on the two Northumbrian journeys) to be considered in this context. It does not, in any case, direct attention to Iona itself (or to a named dependent church for that matter), a surprising omission if the intention had been to foster pilgrimage. I have, in fact, the definite impression that Adomnán was concerned positively to discourage such developments. I think that he would have found much with which to agree in the words attributed by Bede to the dying St Cuthbert: '... I ... think that it will be more expedient for you (i.e. the community of Lindisfarne) that I should remain here (i.e. at his hermitage on Farne), on account of the influx of fugitives and guilty men of every sort, who will perhaps flee to my body because, unworthy as I am, reports about me as a servant of God have nevertheless gone forth; and you will be compelled very frequently to intercede with the powers of this world on behalf of such men, and so will be put to much trouble on account of the presence of my body'. And even when he has finally consented to be buried on Lindisfarne, Cuthbert recommends that he be buried in the church there, so that, while having ready access to his tomb themselves, the brothers may also control access to it by visitors.[20] If I have interpreted Adomnán's system of boundaries correctly in broad outline, Columba's mortal remains lay within the innermost enclosure, where lay people may have been excluded, or only allowed entry under strict supervision. The accommodation, then, of public access to them could have involved more or less fundamental changes for the community, and would probably have presented the monastery of Iona with problems – indeed dangers – that, I believe, Adomnán wished at all costs to avoid.

VI IONA AS A SACRED LANDSCAPE

Adomnán affords evidence which may reasonably be interpreted as indicating that the island was regarded as substantially more than just the home farm.

It frequently happens that the island and monastery of Iona are so closely identified as to be, at least by implication, one and the same. This practical identification probably occurs most frequently in formulaic phrases employed to establish Columba's situation at a given time. Thus: *cum esset uir sanctus in Ioua insula* (VC I.8); *cum uir sanctus in Ioua conuersaretur insula* (VC II.39); *cum (uir) sanctus in Ioua commoraretur insula* (VC II.42; III.6); *sanctus (Columba) in Ioua commanens insula* (VC II.40; III.9); *dum uir beatus in Ioua commaneret insula* (VC III.22; cf. III.7: an Irish pilgrim *in Ioua commanebat insula* with Columba for some months); *uir sanctus/beatus in Ioua conuersans insula* (VC III.10, 16); *dum uir uenerandus in Ioua conuersaretur insula* (VC III.11; in the closely similar

20 Bede, *Vita S. Cudbercti*, cap. 37 (Colgrave, *Two Lives*, pp. 279–81).

episode of VC III.12, Columba and his monks are in the *monasterium*: presumably Iona is meant); *uir uenerandus cum in Ioua conuersaretur insula* (VC III.13). In all these instances and in VC I.31 (*ad eum* [i.e. Columba] *in Ioua insula commorantem*), though the island is named, the setting is actually the monastery: in fact the monastery is meant. This also appears to be the case when Librán crosses from Ireland to Columba's island monastery, *insulanum monasterium* (VC II.39); and when a British monk 'first among us has died in this island' (*primus apud nos in hac insula mortuus est*, VC III.6). Demons wishing to inflict diseases on Columba's community of monks, *super eius cenubialem coetum*, are repelled 'from this our principal island' (*hac nostra de insula… primaria*, VC I.1). In the full version of the same episode Columba is described as living in the island of Io (*uir sanctus in Ioua conuersans insula*), and the demons as wishing to attack his monastery (*monasterium*), and to kill many of the brothers (*fratres*): he defends 'his island' (*sua insula*) against them (VC III.8).[21] Finten moccu Moie sails to the island of Io, *transnauigans Iouam deuenit insulam*; and is received there as a guest (VC I.2). Monastic hospitality is extended to an exhausted bird on the western shore of Io (*cum sanctus in Ioua inhabitaret insula/in occidentali huius insulae parte*): the crane is described as being 'in pilgrimage with us' (*apud nos perigrinari*), and as a 'pilgrim guest' (*perigrina hospita*, VC I.48). In VC II.45, the monastery is the destination, but is described usually as the island of Io (*Ioua insula*), or 'our island' (*nostra insula*).

As might be expected, however, the identification is not total: in VC I.30, 37, 48; and III.8, 16 and 23 (six times [thrice in 128a alone]), the monastery is quite clearly also *within* the island. The *uallum monasterii* is, after all, a significant boundary.

There are other considerations, however, that, I think, reflect much more explicitly the sacred character of the island as a whole for Adomnán and the Columban community. In the first place, there is Columba's pillow-stone. The saint is said to have used the bare rock for his bed, 'and for pillow, a stone which even today stands beside his burial-place as a kind of grave-pillar' (*et pro puluillo lapidem qui hodieque quasi quidam iuxta sepulchrum eius titulus stat monumenti*, VC III.23). The Andersons briefly discuss the use of *titulus* in Gn 28.18, where Jacob sets up his stone pillow *in titulum*; and in Gn 35.20, where a *titulus* is set up by Jacob over Rachel's tomb (*sepulchrum*): *est titulus monumenti Rachel usque in praesentem diem.*[22] I am not concerned here so much with the stone as grave-marker, as with the stone as pillow; and with its implications for Iona in the context of Gn 28.

21 There is, of course, only one monastery on Iona. Compare the situation on Tiree, which supported several *fratrum monasteria*, and where Baithéne successfully defends the *eclesiae … collectio* or *congregatio* of *Campus Lunge* against the same demons (VC III.8). 22 Anderson and Anderson, *Life of Columba*, pp. 224–5 n. 247. Sharpe too draws attention to Gn 35.20 in this connection: *Life of St Columba*, pp. 374–5 n. 411.

In Gn 28.10–19, Jacob stopped for the night at a certain place and, 'taking one of the stones of that place, he made it his pillow and lay down where he was'. In the ensuing dream, he saw a ladder stretching from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending; and God appeared to him and promised him that '"The ground on which you are lying I shall give to you and your descendants … Be sure, I am with you; I shall keep you safe wherever you go, and bring you back to this country, for I shall never desert you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Truly, Yahweh is in this place and I did not know!" He was afraid and said, "How awe-inspiring this place is! This is nothing less than the abode of God, and this is the gate of heaven!" Early next morning, Jacob took the stone he had used for his pillow, and set it up as a pillar, pouring oil over the top of it. He named the place Bethel …'.[23] The common use of *titulus* in the two Genesis passages and in Adomnán makes it a reasonable inference that Columba's pillow-stone symbolised for his spiritual descendants Jacob's pillow before it served finally as a grave-marker. Iona is then, like Bethel, nothing less than the abode of God and the gate of heaven. The island is, in other words, an especially holy place, where the divine may choose to reveal itself more clearly to 'elect persons'.[24]

In the second place, the monastery and its locality can be sensed as being or representing, for Adomnán, the earthly paradise restored, or at least returning. Here a passage from the Life of St Gall by Walahfrid Strabo (died 849) may serve as a link, since it both quotes Gn 28.16 and introduces snakes in the context of a sacred place. So it is both retrospective and prospective for purposes of the present discussion:

> … these two faithful lovers of the wilderness continued their way through the valley and espied at last between two streams a spot [i.e. the future site of St Gall] which they judged well fitted for a settlement, for it offered much that they desired, a fine wood and mountains around enclosing a small plain. Then the Saint, recalling the words of Jacob after he had beheld the vision of the ladder and the angels ascending and descending thereon, said, 'Truly the Lord is in this place!' (Gn 28.16). Up to that time there had been a great many serpents in that valley, but from that day forth they vanished so completely that not one was ever after seen there.[25]

23 The translation is cited from the *New Jerusalem Bible*. Cf. the Vulgate of Gn 28.18: *Surgens ergo Iacob mane, tulit lapidem quem supposuerat capiti suo, et erexit in titulum, fundens oleum desuper* ('Rising then in the morning, Jacob took the stone which he had put under his head, and set it up as a pillar, pouring oil from above'); and references in n. 22 above. 24 '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 (*quibusdam electis*)' (VC III.23). 25 *Vita Galli* I.13 (Joynt, *Life of St Gall*, p. 82).

In VC II.28, Columba, shortly before his death, visited the brothers working in the western plain of Iona. Standing on higher ground and prophesying that they will not see him again in that vicinity, 'raising both his holy hands he blessed all this island of ours, and said: "From this moment of this hour, all poisons of snakes shall be powerless to harm men or cattle in the lands of this island, so long as the inhabitants of that dwelling-place shall observe the commandments of Christ".' The chapter-heading makes it clear that this is the focal point of the chapter. The episode must have been important to Adomnán, since he repeats it at the beginning of VC III.23 as a kind of first prelude to his account of Columba's death. In this second version the saint, 'still sitting in the wagon ... turned his face to the east, and blessed the island, with the islanders its inhabitants. And from then to the present day, as has been written in the above-mentioned book, the poison of three-forked tongues of vipers has not been able to do any injury to either man or beast.' Here the prophecy of his impending death is more explicit. The primary version is clearly that of VC II.28; but in VC III.23, too, the formality of the moment is marked when Columba turns his face to the east, over the island to his monastery, to give his blessing (see above). There are actually no adders on Iona and there probably never have been any.[26] It is unlikely, however, that Adomnán wrote the story just to explain why there were no snakes on the island: that is not his purpose and he does not, in any case, say that Columba *expelled* an insular population of snakes.[27] His message must, therefore, be sought elsewhere than in the material or natural order. O'Reilly has discussed more generally the Biblical, Patristic and early monastic exegetical tradition in which the snake represents the devil and all his works (including schism and heresy); and in particular the passages under review as depicting, *inter alia*, the earthly (here monastic) paradise as a foreshadowing of the heavenly paradise and realisable now as long as the community perseveres in the monastic life and in the quest for Christian perfection.[28] I am concerned here only with the implications of this metaphor for a sacred landscape. So I would observe that, while there is no question that the snake symbolises the diabolic at important levels of early and medieval Christian thinking, it is also and equally incontrovertibly a creature in the natural realm. It has to be dealt with, therefore, under both aspects. At one and

26 In his letter to me of 2 September 1992 (see n. 4 above), Patrick Cashman writes: 'I have found no biological record of the adder on Iona, and I have confirmed this with local islanders.' Cf. Reeves, *Life of St Columba*, pp. 142–3 n. d. 27 Lérins was 'uninhabited because of its utter desolation and unvisited for fear of its venomous snakes'. But St Honoratus is not said to expel the snakes: 'The terrors of the solitude were put to flight; the army of serpents fell back ... not once was he ever in danger or even startled by an encounter with a snake, although encounters are so frequent in those arid wastes (as I can bear witness), especially when provoked by heavy seas.' So says Hilary of Arles, quoting just beforehand Ps 90(91).13 and Lc 10.19 (*De uita S. Honorati Arelatensis episcopi*, cap. 15, in Hoare, *Western Fathers*, pp. 259–60). 28 'Reading the Scriptures', pp. 94–7.

the same time, the devil must be overcome if even an earthly paradise is to be restored, let alone heaven attained; but the snake is also an integral part of that fallen creation whose redemption as a direct consequence of the final salvation of humanity St Paul confidently expects (Rm 8.18–25). If the state of paradise before the fall was to be realised, as far as possible, in the monastic settlement – or, to put it another way, if the monastic community and its place of habitation were to be an incarnation (therefore physical as well as spiritual) of that paradise – then it might have been thought desirable or appropriate at one level that the site and its surroundings be free of snakes. It was not necessary, however, that, if naturally present, they should actually be expelled. Snakes, like other wild animals, could indeed be a danger or a nuisance. Like other wild animals, though, they could be assumed into the renewed order of a cosmos becoming whole again (as in Is 11.6–9). The reintegration of the cosmic order does not, of course, raise brute creation to the destiny of rational humanity: the animal kingdom serves and will continue to serve mankind. Columba's blessing, nevertheless, protects beasts as well as men: beasts, too, participate in the reconciliation of heaven and earth. God, moreover, gave the created order to humanity for its right use in integrity and holiness (Gn 1.26–8; compare, e.g., Ps 8, Sap 9.1–4): the true relationship of *all* creatures is one of mutual dependence (and respect on the part of human beings) under the eye of divine providence.

Adomnán's attitude to animals in general is not sentimental: they were, often enough in practice, for work or food only. So the compassionate hospitality bestowed upon the exhausted crane in VC I.48, where the bird is tended in the way that a sick or weary human visitor to a monastic guest-house might reasonably anticipate; and the sorrow of the white workhorse at the impending death of its master, which has been in some way divinely revealed to it (VC III.23), should also be seen in all probability as reflecting the ideal reintegration of the animal kingdom, wild and domestic, into a redeemed order of creation.

Angels, too, frequent the earthly paradise and, in the new dispensation, the sword is withdrawn (Gn 3.24), save, of course, to keep evil at bay. Columba reveals that certain places within the enclosure at Clonmacnoise were frequented by angels at the time of his visit there (VC I.3). The saint is eventually given help by angels in his fight against the disease-bearing demons in VC III.8. His conversation with angels on *Cnoc Angel* – the *colliculus angelorum* – on the western plain is observed (VC III.16).[29] The frequent visits of angels to Columba's grave are mentioned (VC III.23). Indeed, angels often visited the saint, according to Adomnán (VC III.16; cf. III.23).[30]

29 In VC II.44, Adomnán, some seventeen years before the time of writing, has to take action to try to end a severe spring drought on Iona. Part of his plan involves elders of the community in opening and reading from books in Columba's handwriting 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'. This is immediately successful: heavy rain falls and, eventually, a very good harvest ensues. 30 The idea that the monastic life was the angelic life, that the

VII COLUMBA ON THE MOUNTAIN

Iona and its community are also the Promised Land and the Children of Israel,in which and for whom Columba moves and acts as a patriarchal and prophetic figure.[31] In this context it is surely significant that on a number of occasions the saint receives prophetic knowledge on, or gives his patriarchal blessing from, a hill or at least higher ground. In VC I.30 Columba, sitting 'on the top of the hill that at a little distance overlooks this monastery of ours',[32] foresees the imminent arrival by sea of the penitent Féchna; but it is his attendant Diormit who actually sees the ship's sail a short while later. In VC II.4 the saint sits 'on the little hill (*in monticulo*) that is in Latin called "great fortress" (*munitio magna*),'[33] from which he sees 'a heavy rain-cloud that had risen from the sea in the north, on a clear day'. Foretelling that the cloud will bring disease to both men and beasts in a certain part of Ireland, he sends one of his monks thither with bread that he has blessed as a cure. In VC III.16 he has the conference with angels, standing 'on a certain knoll of that [i.e. the western] plain' (*in quodam illius campuli colliculo*) – the *Cnoc angel* referred to earlier. In VC III.23 he blesses his monastery and prophesies its future renown from the summit of the small hill (*monticell(ul)us*) overlooking the monastery that both the Andersons and Sharpe have suggested was Cnoc nan Carnan.[34]

Adomnán's exemplars were doubtless Scriptural and drawn mainly from the Old Testament accounts of patriarchs and prophets. I see nothing to indicate that we need look further afield than the Biblical tradition. Abraham encounters God in the supreme test of his faith – the sacrifice of Isaac – on the mountain of Moriah (Gn 22.1–18), traditionally identified with the hill on which the

monks lived the life of paradise restored, in a reintegrated relationship with the created order, especially the animal world, is already found in the desert: see Benedicta Ward's introduction to Russell, *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, pp. 36–7, 43–4. A hermit of the Thebaid called Amoun, much troubled by thieves, employs two large serpents to guard the door of his cell – to good effect. But the same hermit destroys a monstrous serpent that has been ravaging the countryside around: ibid., pp. 80–1 (IX) and notes, p. 132. 31 O'Reilly draws attention to the identification of the monastery of Iona with Jerusalem: 'Reading the Scriptures', p. 97. 32 Cnoc Mór? See Anderson and Anderson, *Life of Columba*, pp. 56–7 n. 62; Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, p. 292 n. 140. 33 Anderson and Anderson (*Life of Columba*, p. 98 n. 126) and Sharpe (*Life of St Columba*, p. 319 n. 215) identify this hill with Dún Í. 34 Cf. note 14 above. In VC II.22 Columba predicts the impending doom of Ioan and his associates from 'higher ground' (*eminentiore loco*) in Ardnamurchan. The setting seems entirely secular. It might be argued that the saint and his companions needed to be elevated in order to witness the destruction of the thieves and their ship out at sea between Mull and Coll. The circumstances of the patriarchal blessing of VC II.28 and III.23 differ from one another in some details: in the former the saint stands 'on higher ground' (*in eminentiore loco*) for the prophecy and presumably for the blessing also; but in the latter he refers to his own impending death and then, 'still sitting in the wagon' (*ut erat in uechiculo sedens*), he gives his blessing.

temple of Jerusalem was later built.[35] Moses meets God in the burning bush at Sinai; there also he is given his mission; and the divine name is revealed to him (Ex 3.1–4.17). On the mountain also he sees what is allowed him of the glory of Yahweh (Ex 33.18–23). At Sinai Moses receives the Law from God (Ex 19–40, especially 19.3–25, 24.12–18, 31.18, 34.1–9, 28; Nm 1–10). In III Rg 19.1–18, Elijah, recalling Moses, journeys to Horeb-Sinai to find God and be confirmed in his own mission. On the mountain of the Transfiguration (traditionally Tabor), it is Moses and Elijah who appear to Peter, James and John, talking with Jesus (Mt 17.1–8; Mc 9.2–8; Lc 9.28–36).

CONCLUSION

Adomnán's triple boundary scheme, if acceptable, frames this sacred landscape. The outer boundary, the foreshore, delimited the island at large: an area access to which may have been closely supervised rather than actively restricted, and one where mundane agricultural and no doubt other domestic activities were carried on. The island was, nevertheless, I have argued here, formally a *locus sanctus*. The intermediate boundary, then, the *uallum monasterii*, defined the immediate area of the monastic settlement, access to which may have been restricted (certain categories of persons perhaps being excluded), or at least more tightly controlled – a *locus sanctior* in fact. Finally, I have postulated an innermost zone, the church and any enclosure around it, access to which may have been highly privileged – the *locus sanctissimus*. More work in detail is certainly necessary, but it is pertinent to notice here that the scheme I have adumbrated is at least reminiscent of that advocated in the *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*. This work is of early eighth-century date and one of its editors, Cú Chuimne, was himself a monk of Iona.[36] In it is found legislation for a system of ecclesiastical *termini*, varying in number between two and four, but in which three actually seems to be the implied norm, enclosing zones that are progressively *sanctus*, *sanctior* and *sanctissimus*.[37] One of the two main recensions of this collection actually names Adomnán as its latest authority. I would not argue, however, that he was necessarily the author of the scheme; or that it originated within the Columban federation – though the latter is a possibility. On the other hand, the fact that Adomnán envisages the same or something very similar as operating at Clonmacnoise leads me to suppose that he took it for granted that a system of progressively more sacred enclosures was usual around seventh-

35 'Solomon then began to build the house of Yahweh in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah where David his father had a vision' (II Par 3.1). 36 Kenney, *Sources*, p. 249. 37 I have discussed this matter briefly, in the context of a discussion of Adomnán's *plate(ol)a monasterii*, in 'Aspects', pp. 293–7, esp. 295–6, with reference to Wasserschleben, *Irische Kanonensammlung*, pp. 174–5. See also Kenney, *Sources*, pp. 247–50 (nr 82).

century monastic – perhaps more broadly ecclesiastical – sites. The concept of sacred space, enclosed or unenclosed, is probably universal. The ultimate exemplar behind the particular scheme or schemes outlined here, however, is, I suggest, Ezekiel's ideal temple in his restored Jerusalem of the (post-exilic) future (Ez 40–8). Here the sanctuary area as a whole has three divisions: an outer court (40.5–27), to which the people are confined (42.14, 44.17–19, 46.19–24 – save on solemn festivals, 46.9?); an inner court (40.28–47, 44.17–19);[38] and the Temple (40.48–41.26), itself having three parts – the *Ulam* (the Vestibule, 40.48–9), the *Hekal* (the Hall, the 'Holy', 41.1–2) and the *Debir* (the Sanctuary, the 'Holy of Holies', 41.3–4). Admittance to the Temple and Sanctuary is strictly circumscribed (44.4–9).[39] For the present, however, these final observations must be regarded as very tentative.[40]

38 Possibly also Ez 42.15–20, unless these are the outer dimensions of the whole sanctuary area, including the outer court: cf. 45.2. 39 Cf. the account of Solomon's temple in III Reg. Other threefold divisions *possibly* discernible in Ezekiel's scheme are:– (i) the Holy Land (Ez 45.1), Jerusalem (48.15–16, 30–5), the Sanctuary (45.2); (ii) Jerusalem – the Sanctuary – the Temple proper. 40 The text of the *Collectio* in particular requires examination in detail, so that the complex evidence of VC can be more fully illuminated.