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Title	When were St Columba's corporeal relics enshrined?
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Publication date	1998-01-01
Original Citation	MacDonald, A. D. S. (1998) 'When were St Columba's corporeal relics enshrined?' Hallel, 23 (1), pp. 20-30.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
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Download date	2026-11-03 11:26:54
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/14383

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When were St Columba's corporeal relics enshrined?

Aidan MacDonald

The generally accepted view that, when Adomnán wrote his life of St Columba (VC), probably during the 690s, the saint's mortal remains had not been translated and enshrined, prompts one to ask whether there is evidence of any kind that might give some indication of the actual date or period of enshrinement. Since I cannot possibly claim to know all the various evidence that might bear upon the problem, what follows should be regarded rather as notes than as a definitive statement - observations or suggestions to stimulate more systematic enquiry, or to elicit qualification or correction from more informed sources.

I adhere to the generally accepted view that St Columba's "holy bones" reposed (see below) in their original grave rather than in a shrine when Adomnán wrote. In the first place, he refers to the saint's burial in expectation of his bodily resurrection: "the venerable body... was wrapped in clean fine cloths, and laid in the appointed burial-place that had been made ready, and was interred with fitting veneration, to rise again in bright and eternal light" (*...uenerabile corpus... in luminosa et aeternali resurrecturum claritudine* - iii 23, 133ab). This indicates to me that the body had not been disturbed subsequently: that it lay still, in other words, where it had been originally intended that it should rise again on the last day. Twice elsewhere in VC, furthermore, the burial of Columban monks in expectation of the bodily resurrection is mentioned, where there is presumably no question of enshrinement - by Adomnán's time at any rate. The first case is, admittedly, less explicit than the second. Columba prophesies of Librán (ii 39, 92ab), "You will die in one of my monasteries; and your part in the kingdom will be with my elect monks, and with them you will awake from the sleep of death into the resurrection of life". The prophecy is fulfilled at the end of the chapter: "And he was buried among the elect monks of Saint Columba (at Durrow)... to rise

Hallel (23) 1998
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again into eternal life." Of Ernéne mocu Fir róide, whom Adomnán knew as a young man, we are told (iii 23, 132a), "He (himself a holy monk) lies buried among the remains of other monks of Saint Columba, and awaits the resurrection with the saints *(cum sanctis resurrectionem exspectat)*, in the ridge of Tóimm" (Drumhome, Co. Donegal). The other relevant passages are less conclusive. There is the question of the posthumous function of Columba's pillow-stone (iii 23, 129a), though its description as "a kind of grave-pillar" *(quasi quidam... titulus... monumenti)* standing "beside his burial-place" *(iuxta sepulchrum eius)* recalls the setting up by Jacob of a titulus over Rachel's tomb *(sepulchrum)*, which *est titulus monumenti Rachel usque in praesentem diem.*[1] And there is reference to divine light about and angelic visits to "the place in which his holy bones repose" - *locum in quo ipsius sancta pausant ossa* (iii 23, 135ab). Arguments *ex silentio* are risky, particularly where Adomnán is concerned; but, if Columba's mortal remains *had* been enshrined by the time that he was writing, it is surprising to me that he does not at least mention the fact. There is, moreover, no explicit mention of pious recourse to the saint's tomb or shrine to solicit his intercession, especially for miraculous cures for physical or mental ailments (though it was visited, presumably for purposes of prayer: iii 23, 135ab). Actually, relics of Columba of any kind play a noticeably small part in VC: ii 44 (his white tunic and books in his own handwriting are deployed by Adomnán to help end a drought); ii 45 ("first occasion" - Adomnán lays garments and books of Columba on the altar, "with psalms and fasting, and invocation of his name", to obtain favourable winds through his intercession for bringing building timbers by sea to Iona); ii 8 (explicitly posthumous) and ii 9 (probably so also: leaves or books in Columba's handwriting seem to be well on the way to acquiring religious veneration).

Dr John Bannerman has, on the other hand, argued recently that Columba's relics had been translated and enshrined, probably before Adomnán's .ime:[2] "in light of the evidence... for the much earlier and remarkably rapid translation of saints' remains after death, especially perhaps within the Columban Church, it is difficult to believe that Columba's bones remained in the ground until some time after Adomnán had written his *Life*." The evidence he adduces is from Bede's Ecclesiastical History (HE) and, though it concerns Irish saints, or saints trained in the Irish tradition - Aidan, Cuthbert, Chad, Fursa, Aethelthryth (of Coldingham and Ely) - and Irish bishops - Finán and Colmán of Lindisfarne -

1. Gn 35:20: see Anderson 1991, 224-5 n.247, with Knox's translation and some additional discussion.
2. *"Comarba Coluim Chille and the Relics of Columba"*, *Innes Review* 44, No. 1 (Spring 1993), 14-47, esp. 18- 19, 22-4.

most of whom were connected directly or indirectly with Iona, it has to do mainly with events in the early life of the Northumbrian church. I think that Dr Bannerman's case would be more convincing if there were more evidence for earlier rather than later translation and enshrinement forthcoming from seventh century Ireland.[3] And I am doubtful, for the considerations discussed above, that Adomnán's reference to Columba's "holy bones" (iii 23, 135a) "might suggest that they were accessible".[4] Dr Bannerman also argues, with reference to the word *sepulchrum* as used by Adomnán in connection with the mention of Columba's pillow-stone (see above), that "Bede used *sepulchrum* to describe Cuthbert's permanent shrine within the church at Lindisfarne". Bede, however, uses the word in the context not alone of the translation of Cuthbert's body, but also of the burial of bishop Eadberht. His words are (HE iv 30): *Cuius (sc. Eadberct) corpus in sepulchro benedicti patris Cudbercti ponentes, adposuerunt desuper arcam, in qua incorrupta eiusdem patris membra locauerant* - "His (i.e. Eadberht's) body was placed in the sepulchre of the blessed Father Cuthbert and they put over it the coffin in which they had laid the incorrupt limbs of the father". I take this to mean that the recently deceased Eadberht was interred in Cuthbert's newly exhumed grave *(sepulchrum)*, while Cuthbert's body was enshrined immediately over it in the arca: in other words, Bede's *sepulchrum* is the original grave, not the new shrine. Compare, early in the same chapter - *aperientes sepulchrum inuenerunt corpus totum... integrum...* "opening the grave, they found the body (of Cuthbert) intact and whole..." *Sepulchrum* is used only once elsewhere in VC, in i 20. Here the context requires that the grave be in a cemetery that is accessible to lay people (and, in a crisis, their livestock); and there is no question but that Baitán's body is properly and safely buried. (*Sepulchrum* actually occurs twice here: 26a). While Adomnán himself is perhaps not explicit enough to allow of complete certainty in the matter, I think that the balance of probability must favour the conventional belief - that, when he wrote, Columba's remains were still buried, not yet enshrined.

Bede, speaking of Columba, his mission to the northern Picts and of the

3. I have found no notice of any translation and-or enshrinement in the two sets of annals probably of most importance for northern Irish, Scottish and Pictish affairs at this time - AU and AT - during the period 600 to 700.

4. Perhaps one might compare, in the "Notes Supplementary to Tírechán" [III 4] 54, iiii: "nobody knows where his (i.e. Patrick's) bones rest" - *Ubi sunt ossa eius nemo nouit*. (The author of this note, who may have been Tírechán himself - or the developing tradition he reflects - seems here to have turned adroitly in Patrick's favour what could have been a considerable embarrassment for his partisans: this is one of the four things in which Patrick resembles Moses.) *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, ed. L. Bieler, Dublin (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae*, X), 1979, 164-5, 44.

Columban church, says (HE, iii 4): "From both of these (i.e. Iona and Durrow) sprang very many monasteries which were established by his disciples in Britain and Ireland, over all of which the island monastery in which his body lies held pre-eminence" - *Ex quo utroque monasterio plurima exinde monasteria per discipulos eius et in Brittania et in Hibernia propagata sunt, in quibus omnibus idem monasterium insulanum, in quo ipse requiescit corpore, principatum teneret.* In itself, the phrase *in quo ipse requiescit corpore*, "in which he himself rests in the body", is open to more than one interpretation: it could refer to a grave or a shrine. Bede has, however, earlier in the same chapter, used almost identical words of St Ninian of Whithorn: "His episcopal see is celebrated for its church, dedicated to St Martin where his body rests, together with those of many other saints" - *cuius sedem episcopatus, sancti Martini episcopi nomine et ecclesia insignem, ubi ipse etiam corpore una cum pluribus sanctis requiescit.* And there is evidence from later in the eighth century that Ninian's corporeal relics were by that time enshrined within a church: it seems a reasonable supposition that they were already so in Bede's day and probably for long before. The evidence is mainly from the poem known as *Miracula Nynie Episcopi*, "The Miracles of Bishop Nynia", composed by a member of the Whithorn community towards the end of the eighth century. It is, admittedly, very difficult to be sure precisely what is envisaged in medieval literary descriptions of buildings (in whole or part) or groundplans, of which little or nothing now survives above or below ground - especially, perhaps, where a poetic form is in question. The references, moreover, are here (as so often) incidental, rather than explicit. Three passages seem, however, to yield some information, more or less:- 1. *sacrata busta sacelli* (X, 300), "the sacred tomb in the chapel" (or of the shrine?); 2. *(ad) tumulum, quo sanctus corpore praesul/Marmore sulcato fatali sorte quiescit* (XI, 326-7) - "(to) the tomb, in which the saintly bishop rests in the body in the furrowed marble, according to fate's decree" (a decorated stone shrine?); 3. *celsi culmina templi/Ingrediens precibus supplex consistit ad altar/Quo domino letus tumulato corpore pausat/Antistes Nyniau...* (XIII, 399-402) - "he entered the heights of the lofty temple and stood at the altar, a suppliant in prayer, where the bishop Nyniau rejoicing in the Lord rests in the body in the tomb..."[5] In a letter, furthermore, to the monks of Whithorn, written between 782 and 804, Alcuin writes, *Direxi ad sancti patris nostri Nyniga corpus suum olosericum ob memoriam nostri nominis, ut illius atque vestram piam merear intercessionem habere semper* - "I have directed to the body of our holy father Ninian a covering of pure silk for

5. Cf. also IV; XII, 347, 349-50, 369 (where *antrum* may be used figuratively); XIV, 450-2. I have used the edition (1923) of K. Strecker, *Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Poetarum Latinorum Medii Aevi* Vol. 4, fasc. 3, Munich 1978, 943-62; and the translation of W. MacQueen in J. MacQueen, *St Nynia*, Edinburgh 1990, 88-101.

remembrance of our name, that I may be worthy to have always his and your pious intercession".[6]

Caution needs, however, to be exercised here. In the first place, Bede is not a firsthand authority for Iona: he may, indeed, have *assumed* that Columba's mortal remains were enshrined, interpreting whatever he had heard on the basis of his own ecclesiastical background. In the second place, he is not making a formal statement about the contemporary resting places of either Columba or Ninian: these references are set in broader contexts. In the case of Columba, his posthumous presence there validates (or validated) the authority of Iona over the other houses of the Columban federation. In the case of Ninian and the many other saints at Whithorn, it may be that Bede wishes to emphasise the deep-rooted significance in the local landscape (ecclesiastical and secular) of an ancient episcopal church that has recently become a Northumbrian see. Bede's testimony cannot, I suggest, safely be adduced as reliable evidence that Columba's corporeal relics were enshrined when he wrote.

The earliest explicit reference that I know to a shrine of St Columba is in the context of the martyrdom of Blathmac at Iona in 825. The verse account of his martyrdom composed by Walahfrid Strabo of Reichenau (d.849) mentions a shrine there "wherein lie the holy bones of St Columba", apparently adorned with precious metalwork: *preciosa metalla... quis sancti sancta Columbae ossa iacent* (ll.142-4). The monks have lifted "the shrine from its pediments" - *suis de sedibus arcam* - on the approach of the raiders and buried it (ll.144-6). The shrine is indeed central to the narrative, since Blathmac's refusal to reveal its place of concealment to the marauding Danes (who seem to be represented as having prior knowledge of its existence) is the immediate cause of his murder at their hands. Walahfrid, on the other hand, was not an eye-witness of the

6. A.W. Haddan and W. Stubbs, eds., *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 2, part 1. Oxford 1873, 8. The translation is mine: for *suum* in the text reading *sagum* (see C. Plummer, ed., *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica*, 2 vols., Oxford 1896, 2.129 - note on HEiii4): Haddan and Stubbs suggested *velum*. For brief general comment, with further references, see, e.g., MacQueen, *St Nynia*, 3-4, 25, 33-5; C. Thomas, *Bede, Archaeology and the Cult of Relics* (Jarrow Lecture 1973), 3, 13; *Whithorn's Christian Beginnings*, Whithorn 1992, 19. At the time of writing, I do not have access to the Dumfries and Galloway Society's Transactions.

7. Walahfrid has introduced his account of Blathmac's martyrdom with a more general statement: "A certain island appears in the shores of the Picts, rising above the wave-driven sea: it is called Iona, and there the saint of the Lord, Columba, rests in the flesh" - *Insula Pictorum quaedam monstratur in oris/Fluctivago suspensa salo, cognominis Eo,/Qua sanctus domini requiescit carne Columba* (ll.95-7). The relevant section of the poem is translated, with reference to editions of the Latin text, by A.O. Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History*, A.D. 500 to 1286, 2 vols, (Edinburgh and London 1922), 1, 263-5. I have used the edition of E. Duemmler, *Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini* 2, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Poetarum Latinorum Medii Aevi* 2, Berlin 1884, 297-301. R. Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba* (Harmondsworth 1995), 80-1, discusses briefly the possibility of a flourishing school of metalwork in mid 8th century Iona that might have produced Walahfrid's shrine: see also his note 411 (374-5).

events he describes; and it is difficult to know how far his testimony may be relied on in any detail.[7]

The earliest relevant Irish annalistic notice appears to be at 829, when Diarmait, abbot of Iona, took relics of Columba from Ireland to Scotland, returning thence in 831 (AU, CS and A Clon.).[8] The Irish word used by AU at 829 and 831 for these relics of Columba is *minn* (829), *mind* (831- CS *miond* both times): `"halidom or venerated object", esp. something connected with a saint', as bells, gospel-books, pastoral staffs, etc.: it seems to be a term of broad application - perhaps including enshrined corporeal relics? See DIL, 1 *mind (minn)*, §b.

There are indications, however, that the original translation and enshrinement may have taken place about the middle of the preceding century. In 753, Columcille's law was enforced by Domnall of Mide (AU, AT and A Clon.).[9] It was enforced again by Sléibéne, abbot of Iona, in 757 (AU and AT);[10] and again in 778 by Donnchad, the Uí Néill overking, and by Bresal, abbot of Iona (AU).[11] The provisions of the Law of Colum Cille are not known;[12] and I am not aware of any previous mention of it. Its promulgation was, however, probably validated by relics of the saint of some kind: for example, in 727 Adomnán's relics were brought to Ireland and his law (i.e. Cáin Adomnáin, 697) renewed (AU and AT);[13] and in 734 Armagh brought on circuit the relics of Peter, Paul and Patrick "to fulfil the law" (Patrick's Law?).[14] It cannot be certain, of course, that these would have been corporeal relics: they may not have been in Adomnán's case; and they would not have been in the case of Peter and Paul (or, presumably, of Patrick). Nevertheless, this spate of enforcements of a (new?) law of Columba suggests the distinct possibility that something of more than ordinary significance had occurred shortly before 753.

8. CS 818 records that "Diarmaid, Abbot of Hi (Iona), went to Alba (Scotland) with the shrine of Colum Cille" - *Diarmaid Ab Ie co sgrin Colaim Cille do dul a nAlbain*. The word order suggests to me that *co sgrin Colaim Cille* was originally an interlinear or marginal gloss suggested by the entry of 829: *Diarmaid Ab Iae do dul a nAlban co miondib Colaim Cille*. The corresponding entry in FM 816 states only that Diarmaid went to Scotland: A.O. Anderson, *Early Sources*, I, 261, though Anderson appears to have overlooked these CS entries.

9. Anderson, *Early Sources*, I, 241. *Lex Coluim Cille la Domnall Mide* - AU 753.4.

10. Anderson, *Early Sources*, I, 242-3. *Lex Columbe Cille la Sleibene* - AU 757.9.

11. Anderson, *Early Sources*, I, 249. *Lex Coluim Cille la Donnchad ⁊ Bresal* - AU 778.4.

12. M. Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry* (Oxford, 1988), 64.

13. Anderson, *Early Sources*, I, 223. *Adomnani reliquiae transferuntur in Hiberniam ⁊ Lex renouatur* - AU 727.5.

14. *Commotatio martirum Petir ⁊ Phoil ⁊ Phatraicc ad legem perficiendam* - AU 734.3; and AT. For these ecclesiastical laws, see K. Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, London 1966, 149-53.

There are also archaeological indications that may point to a similar conclusion. It has been observed that "the position of three major crosses of 8th- or 9th- century date, St John's, St Martin's and St Matthew's... all apparently *in situ*, strongly suggests that the ecclesiastical focus of the early monastery was on the site of the medieval church, and immediately to the west of it". Here "there is a small chapel, now rebuilt and called `St Columba's Shrine'". While this little building "is unlikely to be earlier than the 9th or 10th century", it may perhaps have replaced an earlier timber oratory that might itself have been built over St Columba's exhumed grave. The modern name, furthermore, is derived from an older tradition, recorded in the late seventeenth century, that this was the site of St Columba's tomb or `monument'; and it has been urged that this tradition should be taken seriously.[15] St John's and St Martin's Crosses have been dated to about the middle or second half of the eighth century; while St Matthew's Cross has been dated to the ninth or early tenth century.[16] The possible significance of this physical evidence in the context of the present discussion seems sufficiently clear. (It has also been suggested, more tentatively, that the production of the Book of Kells might be referred to Iona and the occasion of the translation and enshrinement of St Columba's mortal remains c.750.)[17]

With these considerations in mind, the following tradition may take on the significance that has been claimed for it. A note supplementary to Tírechán seems to show that there was a "martyrial" connection between Columba and Patrick at an early date. 'Columb Cille, moved by the Holy Spirit, showed where Patrick's grave *(sepulturam)* was and confirms this, that is, in Saulpatrick, in the church near the sea, where there is the coming together of the martyrs (or "relics": *conductio martirum*), that is, of the bones of Columb Cille *(ossuum Coluimb Cillae)* from Britain and of all the saints of Ireland on the day of Judgement' *(et conductio omnium sanctorum Hiberniae in die iudicii)*.[18] Though the authorship of this note is in doubt (and Bieler seems to distance himself somewhat from an attribution to the later seventh century (?) Tírechán himself,[19] it must certainly have been in existence by or during the first decades

15. The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, *Argyll: an Inventory of the Monuments*, vol. 4, Iona, HMSO 1982, 41-2; cf.137-8.

16. *Ibid.*, 17-19, 197-204, 204-08, 208-11. The position of the chapel and the crosses in relation to each other and to the medieval abbey complex as a whole can be seen most readily on Ground Plan VI at the end of the volume.

17. *Ibid.*, 47.

18. [III,5] 55(2), in Bieler, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, 164-5.

19. *Ibid.*, 43-6, esp. 44-5.

of the ninth century, when Ferdomnach (who may or may not have been the actual author) transcribed it into the Book of Armagh.[20] Reeves argued that this note was evidence of the existence at the end of the eighth century of a belief "that the bones of Columkille had, before that period, been brought to Ireland from Britain, and deposited in Saul".[21] This interpretation of the passage quoted above is possible[22] and, if correct, might seem to provide additional evidence for the translation and enshrinement of Columba's corporeal relics well before c.800. But it would reflect, I think, a historically most improbable state of affairs. And I doubt that it is what the passage actually means to say. I had inclined to a belief that the mention of the Day of Judgement, implying the general resurrection of the dead, reflected rather a tradition that Columba was *buried* at Saul - however and whenever precisely such a tradition might have arisen. A tradition of this kind might, of course, further reflect the local presence of *some* corporeal relics - though I would be hesitant about accepting unreservedly even such evidence of Iona's prodigality in regard to her patron's bodily relics at what (it is argued here) was a very early stage in the history of their enshrinement. I now think a possible alternative interpretation of the passage in question is that it is to be read as a kind of prophecy (attributed to St Columba?[23]) that the bodily resurrection on the Day of Judgement of Columba and of all the (other) saints of Ireland would take place at the tomb of Patrick in Saul. In other words, this quasi-prophecy is essentially a claim to the preeminence in the Irish church of St Patrick - and so, presumably, of Armagh.[24] In this view, I do not suppose that it is strictly

20. *Ibid.*, 2-3, 35.

21. *The Life of St Columba... Written by Adamnan...*, ed. W. Reeves, Dublin 1857, 312-14.

22. *Conductio* 'the bringing (coming) together': Bieler, Patrician Texts, 234 (commentary). Reeves' interpretation is implicit in Anderson's translation of the passage: Early Sources, I, 20; cf. 265.

23. With this passage is probably to be compared an entry in AU 553, recording a tradition that Columba enshrined Patrick's relics sixty years after his death (reckoning from 493). In the process, three important relics were discovered in the burial-place *(isin adhnucal)* and were thus distributed for Columba by an angel: Patrick's goblet to Downpatrick, the Bell of the Testament to Armagh and the Gospel of the Angel to Columba himself. See Anderson, *Early Sources*, I, 19- 20; AU 553.3, after the Book of Cuanu; Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, 45 n.1, referring to Gwynn.

24. Compare, perhaps, Tírechán 38.(4): "... because to all the holy men of Ireland, past, present, and future, God said: 'Climb, o holy men, to the top of the mountain which towers above, and is higher than all the mountains to the west of the sun in order to bless the people of Ireland', so that Patrick might see the fruit of his labours, because the choir of all the holy men of the Irish came to him to visit their father..." - *quia corus sanctorum omnium Hibernensium ad eum uenit ad patrem eorum uissitandum:* Bieler, Patrician Texts, 152-3. In this view, the cooption of Columba as the prophet of Patrick's paramountcy could have been intended and seen as a subtle but shrewd thrust at Iona and the contemporary Columban community.

necessary that the bones of Columba leave Britain (i.e. Iona), or the bones of all the saints of Ireland their individual tombs and churches, until the last trumpet sounds. And it ceases to be an issue whether Columba is still buried or already enshrined.

It is natural to ask what specifically might have prompted so important a move on the part of the community of Iona at this time. There does not seem to be, however, anything potentially significant in the known history of the monastery, throughout the period between the death of Adomnán in 704 and the first promulgation of Columcille's Law in 753.[25] So it seems that we must look to external events and developments if we would find a likely reason or reasons. In Ireland, Máire Herbert has shown how, during the first half of the eighth century, the Cenél nEogain succeeded in ousting the Cenél Conaill, Columba's own kindred, from the hegemony of the northern Uí Néill kingdoms. In the process, the Cenél nEogain rulers aligned themselves, not with Iona and St Columba, but with Armagh and St Patrick. In the ecclesiastical sphere, Armagh was asserting or reasserting claims to paramount authority in the Irish church for herself and her patron and successfully extending her influence: the alliance was to the mutual advantage of both court and church. As a result, the Columban federation found itself allied increasingly with the powerful Clann Cholmáin kings of the southern Uí Néill: it was kings of this dynasty who promulgated or shared in promulgating Columcille's Law in 753 and 778. While such an alliance must have benefitted greatly Columba's churches in the midlands of Ireland especially, the active assertiveness of Armagh in and from the north must have been increasing cause of anxiety for Iona and (in particular) her Irish dependencies.[26] In Scotland, the annals record the death of Tuathalán, abbot of Cendrigmonaid, in 747.[27] This is St Andrews: Kinrimund (Kil-), etc., at a later date. This notice

25. The known events relating to Iona itself are documented conveniently, in translation and with notes, in Anderson, *Early Sources*, I, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215-16, 216-17, 217-18, 218, 219-20, 221, 222, 223, 225, 227, 238, 240-41; and in A.O. Anderson, *Scottish Annals from English Chroniclers, A.D. 500 to 1286*, London 1908, 47-9, 50-2. For the death of Cú Chuimne: AU 747.5; AT (248); FM 742; AI [747]. The history of the Columban federation generally during the 8th century is discussed by Herbert, Iona, Kells, and Derry, 57-67.

26. *Ibid.*, 61, 63-7. For the claims of Armagh from the second half of the 7th century, see Hughes, *Church in Early Irish Society*, 111-20. It is worth noting that in the same year - 734 - in which the relics of Peter, Paul and Patrick were brought on circuit `to fulfil the law', a Cenél nEogain succeeded a Cenél Conaill king in the overkingship of the Uí Néill: Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry*, 63.

27. Anderson, Early Sources, I, 238. *Mors Tuathalain abbatis Cinrigh Monai*, AU 747.10; *ab Cind-righ-monaidh*, AT (249); *abb Cinn Ríghmonaidh*, FM 742.

obviously reflects the existence here of a monastery by the late 740s: it may also reflect the local presence of relics of St Andrew by that time.[28] The monastery might, indeed, have been founded to house the relics. If this were so, then Iona could, c.750, have found herself flanked, as it were, by two important churches, the one in Ireland and the other in Scotland, both possessing what purported to be apostolic relics; and both, probably, seeking to exploit the advantages arising from such possession. Secular events may also have had their influence here too. Indeed, if David Dumville's recent contention can be sustained - that the kingdom of Scottish Dál Riata was conquered and incorporated into the Pictish overkingdom in and from 741 - that event and its possible consequences for Iona would have to be taken into consideration.[29] But at the end of the day we have to admit that we do not really know what precisely might have decided the community, directly or indirectly, to take the step under discussion, around the middle of the eighth century or at another time.

If, however, a mid-eighth century date is correct, it is worth noting further and finally that the abbot under whom the translation and enshrinement of Columba's corporeal relics may well have been effected - Cilléne Droichtech (726-52) - was also the abbot under whom the relics of Adomnán went on circuit in Ireland between 727 and 730. According to the genealogical tradition, moreover, Cilléne belonged to the southern Uí Néill.[30] On the other hand, while all this serves to emphasise the contemporary connection, doubtless to their mutual benefit, of the Columban federation and the Clann Cholmáin kings of the southern Uí Néill, it must not be forgotten that the translation and enshrinement took place at Iona: Scottish as well as Irish circumstances must have played a decisive part in the process.[31]

To conclude: I do not think that I have said anything here that is radically new or original. But such has not been my intention. All or most of what I have said will be found in other secondary sources discussing Iona and the Columban community in the seventh and eighth centuries. What I have tried to do is to provide a more explicit treatment of the problem than, so far as I am

28. Cf. Anderson, *Early Sources*, I, 266-7 (under the year 834). In other words, the relics of Andrew may have arrived in Pictland during the reign of Angus I, son of Fergus (i.e. between 729 and 747) rather than during that of Angus II, son of Fergus (820-834).

29. D.N. Dumville, *The Churches of North Britain in the First Viking-Age*, Whithorn 1997 (5th Whithorn Lecture), 34-6.

30. Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry*, 60-1, 62, 65.

31. Cilléne died in 752. His successor, Sléibéne, of the Cenél Conaill, came to Ireland in 754; and promulgated the Law of Columcille in 757. But if corporeal relics of Columba validated the promulgation of 753, it follows that such relics came to Ireland then or earlier: to Durrow? Anderson, *Early Sources*, I, 242, 242-3. Cf. Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry*, 64,66.

aware, exists elsewhere. As I indicated at the outset, there may be evidence, perhaps crucial evidence, of which I am ignorant. To the best of my knowledge and belief, however, the surviving evidence, the documentary record in particular, not only does not tell us when exactly Columba's corporeal relics were enshrined; but also does not allow us to define narrower limits than those described above. To that extent, therefore, the problem remains: it cannot, it seems, be resolved in terms of a neat and "mathematical" demonstration.

Notes and References. Abbreviations.

A Clon: Murphy, D., ed. *The Annals of Clonmacnoise.* Dublin 1896.

AI: MacAirt, S., ed. *The Annals of Inisfallen.* Dublin 1951.

AT: Stokes, W., ed. 'The Annals of Tigernach', *Revue Celtique* 16(1895) 374-419; 17(1896) 6-33, 116-263, 337-420; 18(1897) 9-59, 150-303, 374-91.

AU: Mac Airt, S. and Mac Niocaill, G., eds. *The Annals of Ulster* (to A.D. 1131). Dublin 1983.

CS: Hennessy, W.M., ed. *Chronicon Scotorum.* London 1866.

FM: O'Donovan, J., ed. *Annals of Ireland by the Four Masters,* 7 vols. Dublin 1856.

DIL: *Dictionary of the Irish Language.* (Based mainly on Old and Middle Irish Materials). Royal Irish Academy 1913-76.

All citations from and references to Adomnán's life of St Columba are from *Adomnán's Life of Columba,* ed. and transl. A.O. and M.O. Anderson, revised by M.O. Anderson, Oxford 1991. All citations from and references to Bede's Ecclesiastical History are from *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People,* ed. B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford 1991.

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