

2004

Columba and Spiritual Proximity

Alexander Rolfe

George Fox University, arolfe@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/libraries_fac



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), and the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rolfe, Alexander, "Columba and Spiritual Proximity" (2004). *Faculty Publications - George Fox University Libraries*. Paper 18.
http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/libraries_fac/18

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the George Fox University Libraries at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - George Fox University Libraries by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

2004

Columba and Spiritual Proximity

Alexander Rolfe

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/libraries_fac

 Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Columba and Spiritual Proximity

Alexander Rolfe
George Fox University
Newberg, Oregon

Abstract

This essay argues that nearness to other monks is a dominant theme in Adomnan's *Life of St. Columba*. Spiritual proximity is of much greater concern in early Irish monasticism than in Benedictine or Pachomian monasticism, even though the Irish are noted for lonely *peregrinatio*.

The Irish saints of the sixth century are famous for leaving their familiar surroundings and pursuing a harsh exile in the wilderness. Voluntary exile is prominent in Adomnan's *Life of St. Columba*, which includes figures such as Cormac, who three times set sail in search of "a desert in the ocean," and Baitan, who similarly launched himself and some companions direction-less upon the sea (Adomnan 1.6 and 1.20). Columba himself "sailed away from Ireland to be a pilgrim," and "lived as an island soldier for thirty-four years" (Adomnan 1.7 and the second preface).

This propensity for exile has led scholars to compare them to their eremitic forerunners in Egypt. The Irish themselves consciously imitated St. Antony, particularly in seeking solitude. The focus on *peregrinatio* has overshadowed the fact that Columba was the abbot of a community, and therefore squarely in the tradition of cenobitic monasticism begun by Pachomius (d. 346) in Egypt, who established the first communal monastery. This tradition continued in Egypt under Shenoute (d. 466), as well as the direct successors of Pachomius. Perhaps the most important exponent of communal monasticism in the west was Benedict of Nursia, the author of the Benedictine Rule.

Studying Columba in the light of these dominant figures of cenobitic monasticism throws an unexpected and pervasive feature of Adomnan's *Life* into high relief. One of the most striking aspects of the *Life of St. Columba* is the degree to which Columba's prophecies, miracles, and visions re-establish the intimate connection between himself and other Christians, in spite of physical separation.[1]

Before examining the miraculous contact between Columba and other Christians, it is worth noting how widespread his connections were. Unlike abbots Benedict, Pachomius, and Shenoute, Columba was often on the move, judging from the varied locations of his miracles, and he also sent many of his monks travelling (Adomnan 1.18, 1.41; 2.19-21, etc.).[2] He was much more involved in the society beyond his monastery than were the early Pachomian and Benedictine abbots. Columba's high degree of involvement with kings is remarkable, even though kings were plentiful in Ireland. Bishop Conall entertained Columba and the "large crowd accompanying him" after they had attended a meeting of kings (Adomnan 1.9, 1.50). The saint foretold many kings' futures, appeared in a vision to King Oswald, and even anointed Aedan king (Adomnan 1.9, 1.1, 3.5). Columba prophesied to laymen of little status as well as to kings and noblemen, however (Adomnan 1.43, 1.46, 1.47). People of all rank came to him, whether to receive a blessing, obtain a prophecy, alleviate their poverty, or even to confess their sins and receive penance, as Fechna did (Adomnan 1.30). At one point Columba told a rich man to accept a noble exile into his retinue (Adomnan 2.23). It is clear that Columba was much more than the abbot of a monastery.

Columba usually knew when guests were coming to his monastery, according to his hagiographer. He miraculously predicted at least a dozen arrivals, whose fulfillment ranged from within the hour to not until after his death.[3] Often his prophecies included information about the arrival's condition, as when he asserted the safety of a storm-beset Colman (Adomnan 1.5). The arrival and safety of their fellow Christians was obviously of great interest to the monks of Columba's monastery, and there is no indication that he disapproved of their concern. "One day in his presence men who were conversing together suddenly made mention of Cormac, and spoke in this manner: 'How Cormac's voyage has fared, whether it is successful or not, is still unknown'" (Adomnan book 2.42). The reader familiar with Pachomius or Benedict winces, for this idle talk about affairs outside the monastery always merited punishment.[4] Not so with Columba, however: "Hearing them talk thus, the saint uttered these words, saying: 'You speak of Cormac; today quite soon you will see him arrive'" (Adomnan book 2.42). The frequency of prophecies about visitors points to the importance of visitors and contacts with the outside to Columba and his monks.

These outside contacts could even include family members. Columba was tied to his kin no less than to other Irish Christians. He told one monk, Libran, to "receive your aged father into your dutiful care" (Adomnan 2.39). This is in stark contrast to Pachomius and his successor, Theodore, who went to great lengths to insure that their monks forsook their families. In a more surprising episode, Columba knew that a poor woman in Ireland called on his name in the midst of a difficult childbirth, because she trusted "that relief from her

distress may be granted to her by the Lord through me, for the reason that she is related to me, and has a father born of my mother's kindred" (Adomnan 2.40). Even distant relations were important, and could be spiritually close.

Several of Columba's prophecies had to do with whether or not he would ever meet certain people again. "This friend of mine, now setting out, I do not expect that I shall see again, while he lives in this world," he said of Ernan (Adomnan 1.45). Similarly, after blessing a St. Colman who was embarking on a voyage, Columba prophesied that the holy man would "never in this world see my face again" (Adomnan 2.15). Although the prophecies are fulfilled in Ernan's and Columban's deaths, the phrasing suggests that it is not so much death, but the inability to meet again that is significant. At one point, Columba told his monks on the western part of Iona that "from this day forward you shall never more be able to see my face within this little plain," and he summoned the distant monk Caitan to him just in time to see him before he (Caitan) sickened and died (Adomnan 2.28; 1.31). There would be nothing worthy of comment if Columba prophesied death only when someone's sin occasioned it, or if he prophesied his own death in order to make final arrangements with the heads of houses, as the early Pachomian abbots did; his sole concern in the above examples, however, is simply that he will not see certain fellow monks again.

Columba's spiritual knowledge of people's distress enabled him to save many by prayer, according to Adomnan. No abbot from the earlier monastic traditions exercised the degree of protective power over those absent from the monastery that Columba did. He wept to see "that Laisran is now harassing my monks in the construction of a large building, although they are exhausted with heavy labour;" Columba's weeping proved to be enough to make Laisran, far away in Derry, suddenly feel compelled to refresh the monks and refrain from working them so hard in the future (Adomnan 1.29). Columba's supernatural knowledge that "one of the brothers who was falling from the highest point" of Laisran's great house enabled him to send an angel to catch the hapless monk before he hit the ground (Adomnan 3.15).

Columba's aid also extended to Christians not affiliated with his own monastery: he knew that "the holy virgin Maugin" had broken her leg and was calling on him, and he immediately sent a monk to Ireland with the means to heal her (Adomnan 2.5). Events such as his suddenly assembling the brethren in the oratory to pray (successfully) for Cormac and his fellow-voyagers seem to have been commonplace; the monks of Iona must have grown used to these unexpected stints of prayer on behalf of distant friends (Adomnan 2.42). Columba's own rescue from death at sea is an even more remarkable demonstration of the close ties he and others sought to maintain: once when his monks called on him to save them from the storm, Columba announced that "on this day it is not for me to pray for you in this danger that you are in; it is for the holy man, the Abbot Cainnech" (Adomnan 2.13). Cainnech had just broken bread at his monastery, but when Columba prayed from the boat, Cainnech "suddenly abandoned the small table, and with one shoe on his foot, and the other left behind through the excess of his haste, he went hurriedly to the church," urging his monks to pray. The image of Cainnech, wearing only one shoe, jumping up from

the table and racing to the church to pray for his brothers, is perhaps a more fitting image of Irish monasticism than the image of Columba and a handful of monks isolated on the storm-tossed sea.

Columba's spirit had a habit of roaming far from his body in order to succor monks too far away for him to help in person. A party of monks with heavy loads returning late to the monastery were suddenly refreshed and gladdened, and realized that because Columba couldn't meet them physically, "his spirit meets us as we walk, and in this fashion refreshes and gladdens us" (Adomnan 1.37). Libran, when faced with the hostility of people and weather, did as many of Columba's monks did, and "spoke to that venerable man, (who although far distant was yet present in spirit, as the event soon showed)" (Adomnan 2.39).

Columba transcended the limitations of distance in other ways as well. He saw angels carrying the souls of his fellow Christians to heaven on several occasions (Adomnan 3.6, 3.7, 3.9-14). He could also see the sins that people far from him hid within their hearts, as when he sent Colcu back to Ireland to question his (Colcu's) mother about "her very grave sin that she has hidden, and that she is not willing to confess to any man" (Adomnan 1.17). Perhaps the most astonishing affirmation of the nearness of physically distant friends is the transportation of Cainnech's staff, "divinely effected" (Adomnan 2.14). It is one thing for angels to fly unseen about the earth with marvelous speed, or even for Columba's ethereal spirit to come to the aid of drooping monks, but quite another for Columba to hand Cainnech his staff, just as if they were standing side by side, through prayer.

Even wrestling demons is not a solitary activity in the *Life of Columba*. The holy man held off a host of demons by himself for hours, but they were not after him alone; "They, as was revealed by the Spirit to the holy man, wished to assail his monastery, and with these same spikes to slaughter many of the brothers." Columba defended his monastery single-handedly for some time, but he was unable "to drive them from his island; until...angels of God came to his support" (Adomnan 3.8). But powerful as angels were, the aid of Christians fighting together in the unity of prayer was often important for victory, in secular battle as well spiritual battle. King Aedan defeated the Maethe with the help of the prayers of the far-distant Columba and his monks (Adomnan 1.8). Columba also called his monks to urgent prayer for the sake of Abbot Comgell's monks, who "are fighting in the air against hostile powers that are trying to carry off the soul of a guest who has been drowned along with them." Within a short while the angels came to the aid of "holy souls," and victory was achieved (Adomnan 3.13). Columba saw a woman who had preceded her husband in death, fighting the demons for his soul in the air, aided by angels and the virtuous character of the man himself (Adomnan 3.10). In Columba's world, men did not fight demons on their own, and even angels fought with the aid of Christian men and women.

Columba was sensitive to the pull of home and the ties of fellowship. His concern for an exhausted crane, "a guest...from the northern region of Ireland," whose arrival he foresaw, suggests he knew well what it was to be a stranger, away from the "sweet district" of one's homeland. "I commend it to you thus earnestly," he told one of his monks, "for this reason,

that it comes from the district of our fathers" (Adomnan 1.48). Although Columba, like many Irish monks, had dedicated himself to spending his life among strangers, his monks unconsciously commemorated an equally strong impulse of their former abbot in their cry for help as his feast day approached: detained by contrary winds, they cried, "Does it please you, holy one, that we should pass the day of your festivity tomorrow among laymen and not in your church?" (Adomnan 2.45). They knew what to say to move him.

The *Life of St. Columba* presents a remarkable contrast with the hagiography of earlier figures in cenobitic monasticism. It is astonishing that asceticism, a dominant theme in the *Lives* of Pachomius, Shenoute, and Benedict, and fiercely practiced by the Irish, receives hardly any emphasis in Adomnan's *Life*. It is also remarkable that there is so little emphasis placed on the conversion of local magicians and their followers.[5] What emerges as a new and important theme, in miracle and prophecy, is Columba's intimate connection with other Christians; one of the strongest messages emanating from the *Life of Columba* is that a monk (from the Greek *monachos*, meaning "alone") is never truly alone. Yet this by no means contradicts our understanding of Irish monks as seeking a harsh exile; rather it affirms it by revealing the importance their separation caused them to place on each precious manifestation of their proximity.

Notes

1. For more information on Antony, Shenoute, and Pachomius, see Athanasius of Alexandria's *Life of Antony* (Ellershaw 1957), Besa's *Life of Shenoute* (Bell 1983), and *The Life of Saint Pachomius and his Disciples* (Veilleux, 1980).
2. Monks were not to seek exile without their abbot's consent, however (Adomnan 1.6).
3. Adomnan 1.2, 1.4, 1.5, 1.22, 1.25-26, 1.30, 1.41, 1.48; book 2.33, 2.42
4. *The Rule of St. Benedict* instructs "No one should presume to relate to anyone else what he saw or heard outside the monastery, because that causes the greatest harm. If anyone does so presume, he shall be subjected to the punishment of the rule" (Fry 1982, 91-2). The so-called *Rule of Pachomius* had similar prohibitions, and Pachomius did not permit a monk to tell others of the sins he committed in Alexandria before entering the monastery (Veilleux 1980, 158).
5. Adomnan book 3.14, and perhaps book 2.11 and 2.27, are the only instances of conversion in the *Life*.

Abbreviations

Adomnan: Adomnan's *Life of Columba*, see Anderson & Anderson, 1991.

Besa: Besa's *Life of Shenoute*, see Bell, 1983.

Works Cited

Anderson, Alan Orr and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson, ed. and trans. *Adomnan's 'Life of Columba'*. 1991. Revised edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Bell, David N., trans. 1983. *The Life of Shenoute*. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications.

Ellershaw, H., trans. [1924] 1957. *Life of Antony, Select Writings of Athanasius*. Library of Nicene and post Nicene Fathers. Second Series, volume 4, 195-221. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Available on the World Wide Web at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/vita-antony.html>.

Fry, Timothy, ed. 1982. *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press.

Veilleux, Armand, ed. 1980. *Pachomian Koinonia, Volume One: The Life of Saint Pachomius and his Disciples*. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications.