Penance in the early medieval north.

by

Dr W Graham Watson

AMA FMA FSAScot

Penance in the early medieval north

Abstract

Amongst the many articles on this website is one on Celtic Liturgy.[1] In it there is a short section on *confession*. This article looks at our current understanding of early medieval *penance* and offers some thoughts on how it might have been practised in the north of Scotland in the long eighth century. It begins by looking at the integration of the church in the west and north with that in the rest of Europe, using the Easter question as an example. It then looks at the geographical and historical background to the area including the sources of various external influences. Having set the scene, it outlines the development of penance as a practice before finally discussing how this may have looked in the early medieval north.

Background: Micro-Christendom's and the 'Celtic Church' - the example of the Easter question

It has long been argued by scholars that the term 'Celtic Church' is unhelpful.[2] It overemphasises a perceived lack of contact between the churches in Britain and Ireland and those in Gaul and Rome in the centuries following the establishment of ecclesiastical organisation in these islands. More helpful is Michael Brown's term 'micro-Christendoms'. This concept allows for those relatively minor variations in practice that might develop in churches that existed at a time and place when communication was not easy. The best known of these minor variations is the calculation of the date of Easter. How this was calculated and practiced changed in different places at different times. This was reflected in Ireland, where churches in the south adopted different practices from those in the north. Across Europe, the various 'micro-Christendoms' and Church power structures adopted the system

[1] Firth's Celtic Church http://cushnieent.com/earlychurch/nature_liturgy.htm (accessed 14/9/19)
[2] For one example amongst many: Kathleen Hughes, 'The Celtic Church: Is this a Valid Concept', Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies 1 (1981), pp. 1-20

approved of by Rome at different times and took time to change. The south of Ireland adopted the latest nineteen-year cycle calculation in the mid sixth century. It took the church in Wales, for example, until 777 to follow suit.[3]

The debate started as an academic disagreement, and we can follow this through a letter sent by Cummian to several other scholars arguing the need for change.[4] However, it remained at the level of a theological argument until church politics intervened. In the 660s Wilfrid of Hexham was trying to extend his role to become the Archbishop of Ireland and Northern Britain - a northern equal to the Archbishop at Canterbury. It was he who seems to have introduced the idea that those who did not conform to the way things were done in Rome were heretics and schismatics. The problem was that many Irish scholars simply thought that the way the calculations were done was wrong and didn't, at the start, see it as a matter of orthopraxy or 'right practice'. However, division escalated, and real splits existed until the dissenters adopted what by now was 'common practice'.

The point is that, in this key issue, and in others, there was no 'Celtic Church' position, simply a difficult theological dispute where academic argument got mixed up with church and secular 'politics'.

The long eighth century and change over time

In understanding any historical movement, change over time is a critical factor. We should avoid thinking and talking about a single belief at a single time. Views on the date of Easter changed, place by place, time by time. It is a mistake to point to a single place at a single time and suggest that what was happening there, then, is necessarily what was happening elsewhere or at a given date in the early medieval period, that itself covers any range between 400 and 600 years.

---

[3] Teresa Hall, 'The Reformation of the British Church in the West Country in the 7th Century' in M. Ecclestone, K. Gardner, N. Holbrook and A. Smith, (eds), The Land of the Dobunni (Oxford, 2003), pp. 49-55, pg. 50

[4] Maura Walsh and Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, (eds.), Cummian's Letter *De Controversia Paschali* and the *De Ratione Conputandi* (Toronto, 1988).

There is a lot that we still don't understand about this period, which is partly why the term 'dark ages' is still used. Its origins as a term, to describe that period that supposedly suffered from not being part of the greatness of Rome or benefitting from the Enlightenment, has been long forgotten. Some context around what we think we know and don't know is required before scoping out a hypothesis on penance.

The understanding of the geography of the Picts took a huge leap forward with Alex Woolf's article on the location of Fortriu.[5] Woolf argued that it was based around what would become Moray, rather than, as was previously thought, in southern Pictland. The full historical implications have yet to be worked through, but the role of places such as Tarbat and Rosemarkie and bishops such as Curetán, must reflect what can be located in this key Pictish kingdom. In 687, Curetán and the king, Bruide mac Derilae, both attest the 'Law of the Innocents' at Birr.[6] His brother Nechtan, who succeeded Bruide, wrote to Ceolfrith, abbot of Bede's monastery at Monkwearmoth/Jarrow seeking advice on implementing correct, i.e. Roman, practice in the church in the north. Curetán is likely to have been the chief bishop of the kingdom, and of those other areas under subjugation. In short, the most powerful Pictish kingdom had very important links to the church in Ireland and Northumbria.

We know from all this that we have functioning ecclesiastical sites and personnel in the north. How exactly they functioned is less clear. Another article on this website suggests the use of the term *muinntir* in place of monastery because words come loaded with meanings that may not reflect exactly how things worked in different periods.[7] It would be wrong to think about the church at the time functioning as it did later, with a network of priests each with a geographical parish. It might also be wrong to assume that everyone was served in the same way, and those who lived

[5] Woolf, A. (2006). 'Dún Nechtain, Fortriu and the Geography of the Picts', *The Scottish Historical Review* 182 (2006)
[6] Thomas O'Laughlin, (ed.), Adomnán at Birr, AD 607: Essays in Commemoration of the Law of the Innocents (Dublin, 2001)
[7] http://cushnieent.com/articles/muinntir.pdf (accessed 14/9/19)

and farmed on monastic estates might have a different set of roles and expectations from others. But this is to get ahead of ourselves.

The church in the north was influenced by the church in Ireland. It is not necessary here to expand on the role of Iona, and we have seen that Curetán was involved in the Synod of Birr and attested, along with King Bruide, the Law of the Innocents. A number of the churchmen active in the north are likely to have been Irish or trained in Ireland or Iona. But there is another source of possible influence. In 669 AD Theodore arrived in Canterbury to take up the role of Archbishop, accompanied by Hadrian, who was to be abbot there. Both were senior figures in the church in Rome. It is probably church politics and the *monothelete controversy* that was behind the decision to send them. It is likely that part of their role was to ensure that the church in Britain and possibly Ireland conformed to the developing doctrine on the nature of Christ's humanity and divinity. Following their arrival, a major school was established at Canterbury where these scholars taught all of the subjects and ideas that were current, and at the cutting edge, in Rome. This allowed those attending the school, from Ireland and the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and possibly elsewhere, access to this knowledge and these links. Thus, instead of a picture of a 'Celtic' church locked in an esoteric past and different from the rest of Christendom, we should see the churches of the north eagerly disseminating the very latest thinking and practice from the heart of Rome and Byzantium.[8]

We can access some of Theodore's teaching by what has become known as *The Penitential of Theodore*. This is actually put together from student notes taken from Theodore's responses to questions and put into penitential form by someone calling himself *discipulus Umbrensium*. The work is actually third hand, with this Northumbrian scholar getting the information from a priest called Eoda, who had presumably personally witnessed Theodore's teaching.

[8] Michael Lapidge, (ed.), *Archbishop Theodore* (Cambridge, 1995)

Back in the north, Bruide's successor as king was his brother, Nechtan. Again well-known because of its inclusion in Bede's *Historia* is Nechtan's call on Northumbrian assistance to reform the church in the north to better conform to the practices of Rome.[9] Although Nechtan is said to have expelled Irish churchmen, this may be part of the Easter controversy and if so, he is only expelling those not currently conforming, and this did not include the churches of the south of Ireland. It is as likely to have been a political decision as a theological one. The problem is that our evidence comes from a work purporting to detail the hand of God in converting nations and ensuring orthodox practice across the British Isles. It is not a history of the English-speaking peoples as we would understand it today. What we know is that the church in the north receives guidance from Northumbria at a time when knowledge there is as up to date as possible with developments in Rome and the Mediterranean. That same knowledge is available to the churches in Ireland.

Public and Private penance

Looking at the long period from the formation of the church to the medieval period, there is a change from public to private penance. Again, care must be taken with meanings, because what 'public penance' means at various times during that millennium is not always clear. At the extremes, public penance is taken to mean the exclusion from communion, and other solemn acts of worship, of those who had committed particular sins, with the way back to full acceptance being a period of exclusion from some of the aspects of public ceremony. Private penance is taken to be the confession both of sin and the intention to sin, which is then followed with a series of private devotional acts that expiate these. It has long been accepted that the various churches in Britain and Ireland (the micro-Christendoms referred to above) had a role in developing both the theology and practice of penance and spreading it throughout the western church. This development is the sense of sin being a form of illness that can be cured; hence a number of the penitential guides 'prescribe' actions

[9] HE.v.21: Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, (ed. and trans.), Bede: Ecclesiastical History of the English People (Oxford, 1969), pg. 533

that are opposites to the sin itself - patience for anger and so on.[10] The *penitentials* themselves have been published and translated.[11]

The study of these penitentials has moved through a number of phases, from dismissal as a subject worthy of study, because of prurience regarding the sexual nature of some of the activities; to being part of the debate on pre-Christian survivals in Irish society; to being seen as an innovation in both how to live a holy life both in and outside a monastic situation versus being a rigid theocratic approach; to being seen more recently as a way of the Church influencing wider society through providing a form of conflict resolution. The problem is gaps in the evidence. Is the lack of evidence of new penitential literature in England in the tenth century, for example, a result of private penance not being in use, or is it the result of lack of survival of the evidence? Rob Means, for example, argues that in the rest of Europe, there is little evidence for new penitential writings, but much evidence of the copying and use of older material.[12]

This lack of evidence is fundamental to the place and time under study here. The key to the discussion is a sense of how widespread in society the use of private penance was at any given time, remembering that it is not a one-way flow of more and more use. What the picture is for one place in one time is not the same either for other places at the same time or the same place at a different time. So, given the lack of evidence, its fragmented nature, and the likelihood that any picture we can paint only holds good for a fraction of time, what can we say about penance in the early medieval north?

The Practice of Penance in the North

It can certainly be proposed with some confidence that undertaking private penance was not practiced across all of society, in all places, in the early medieval north. The

[10] John T. McNeill and Helen M. Gamer, (ed and trans), Medieval Handbooks of Penance (New York, 1938 and 1990), pg. 44

[11] Ibid and Ludwig Bieler, (ed.), The Irish Penitentials, (Dublin, 1963)

[12] Rob Means, 'Penitentials and the Practice of Penance in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries', Early Medieval Europe 14 (2006), 7-21

key question is whether it was practiced at all outside of the special relationship of churchman and teacher. Is it entirely limited to the *muinntir*? There is some evidence that studying in a church environment didn't always lead to a monastic or priestly vocation. Aldfrith of Northumbria, for example, was said to be a *sapiens*, that is, a learned church scholar, whilst at the same time being king of Northumbria. Aldfrith, and others like him, may have practiced private penance, carrying on from their experience in a church environment. The other group of people who may have practiced penance are those who live on church land. The Church required estates with farmers and workers to maintain any sort of large-scale structures. These people may be those referred to as *manaig* in the early literature and may have been expected to participate more regularly in church practice than those in secular communities. There is evidence in Bede's *Life of Cuthbert*, of Cuthbert travelling 'far and wide' to villages where he heard confessions and the villagers 'cleansed themselves' by 'fruits worthy of repentance'.[13] This can be read as Cuthbert and the villagers practicing confession and penance. What is not certain is whether these villages were part of the monastic estate of Melrose, and therefore '*manaig*', or lived further afield.

Bringing this together, a minimalist picture is that those living on the estates of a church such as that at Portmahomack,

would have been supported by a priest or priests to relatively regularly confess their sins and undertake private penance. It may also be that other communities were also supported, presumably in decreasing frequency the further way they were from ecclesiastical centres. Certainly, the church in the north was interested in the 'cure of souls' from the 'sickness of sin'. Important in this was the role of the church in wider society. What we are unable to determine at this stage is how successful the church was. We can only point to the growing wealth of the church in terms of landed estates and the ability to produce the highest quality sculpture.

[13] Bede, *Vita Cuthberti*, 9; Bertram Colgrave (ed. and trans.), *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1940), 187

Conclusion

It is not possible to detail how widespread private confession and penance was at any given moment in time in the early medieval church in the north. We can suggest that it was practiced, and that this extended beyond the confines of the *miunntir*/monastery and into the lay community. We can also begin to paint a picture of a church with links across Europe and beyond, perhaps a micro-Christendom varying in some of its details, but with access to theological developments and liturgical practices underway in the wider world. Its confessional practices don't make it 'Celtic'; they make it an integral part of western Christendom with, at times, an influential role on church practice. To progress further we need to better understand the working of ecclesiastical estates and the possible role of *manaig* in the north. We also need to look for evidence of confessional and penitential elements from our surviving evidence, in the form of Pictish sculpture. Lastly, an understanding of the theological nature of the debates in the Church at the time, including those over the calculation of Easter and why they were important, and also the great theological debate over the divine and human natures of Christ, might assist archaeologists and historians in their search for the past.

W. G. W.

Inverness, 2019