



# *The Arrival of Christianity in the North East of Scotland.*

by

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The arrival of Christianity in what is now Scotland is usually associated with two early missionaries: St Ninian (c.360- c.432), and more particularly, St Columba, who landed in Hy (Iona) in 563. However, aside from a small number of early inscribed stones, apparently indicative of a Romano-British presence, there is no clear literary evidence of Christian activity in Scotland before the end of the seventh century. Prior to this one can only speculate that Scotland may have followed similar practices to those adopted in other areas of Britain.<sup>1</sup>

For reliable evidence of Christian activity on Scottish soil in the sub-Roman era, we have to turn to archaeological findings, although these must also be subject to careful criticism. In a period largely unchronicled by written evidence, it is not enough to find a moveable item such as a spoon with Christian emblems on it; such things may have been souvenirs from southern trips, or may have been obtained by means of trading. The only evidence we can countenance is that which is permanent, such as inscribed tombstones, and even these are subject to scholarly debate regarding their dates.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of Aberdeenshire in the history of the Early Church is that, after the Fife and Stirling areas, Aberdeenshire provided the advance base from which the Brythonic missionaries completed the Christianisation of the North Britons (Bede's *Southern Picts*). Seven successive and clearly defined missions were disposed over the area within the period from 400 to 600 A.D. Of course, 'Aberdeenshire' was neither a geographical nor a political unit in the time of the earlier missionaries, but for the purposes of this study it may be considered by itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Woods Preece, Isobel (2000) *Our Awin Scottis Use: Music in the Scottish Church up to 1603*, Glasgow: Aberdeen and Glasgow Universities, 35.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 37.

Each early Christian mission-centre was responsible for a group of churches or cells which were, to an extent, dependent on it, and often, had been founded from it. Some of these foundations were local, others much more distant. These groups do not represent differing types of ecclesiastical government and discipline; they were merely missionary activities separated in time, and directed by outstanding leaders, whose extensive work entitles them to consideration individually. All the centres, and the churches and cells based on them, were included in the 'British' part of the Celtic Church.

To understand the people and the country as the early missionaries found them, it is necessary to exercise a little historical imagination. "*Tak awa Aiberdeen an twa mile roon; an far are ye?*" It is doubtful if St Ninian and his workers found Aberdeen to be in existence on their arrival. In the second century, Ptolemy had credited one city, *Devana*, to the *Taizaloi* of the Aberdeenshire lowlands. The site of *Devana* has never been identified. It was certainly a fortified place, whereas Aberdeen probably arose, as the late Dr. Keith Leask used to say, from a collection of fishermen's huts at the mouth of the Don. The addition which gave civic importance to this early township was not a chief's fort, but the humble cell of an Early Christian missionary. What is now the County of Aberdeen was, along with an area that embraced Moray, one of the provinces in the federated kingdom of the Picts. There are substantial reasons for believing that the name of the province was *Ce* - a name that survives in Keith.

While the first missionaries were at work in this province, it was divided into *Buchan* and *Mar*, (with *Moray* extending in the background), from the *Deveron*, round the *Moray Firth*, to the limits of *Easter-Ross*. The chiefs of Moray continued to claim and to exercise control over the chiefs in Mar and Buchan, sometimes taking the proud title of *king* under the Sovereign

(*Ard Ri*) of the Pictish Federation. The people of Buchan were cultivators and arable farmers. The people of Mar cultivated the valleys, but they were a pastoral people rather than agriculturalists, and they engaged in hunting. The defence of the country depended on a judicious arrangement of forts and camps. Townships were, generally, supplied with a fort or tower. The people were organised in *families*, or divisions of related families (*tribes*). The chief was usually elected from a prominent family within the tribe. He was a military leader rather than a landlord since the land belonged to the tribe as a whole. The chief was the executive officer both of the local legal authority, and of the federal sovereign. Law rested on general Celtic custom, and was expounded by the *elders* and *druidhean*, whilst the *bards* cultivated the song and story of the tribe and race. Many of the people were skilled workers in metals and the professional smith occupied a high-status place socially. He was able to work in gold as well as in iron. Stock-rearing, the preparation of pelts, tanning, agriculture, and wood-craft were thoroughly understood by the men, and the women wove both wool and fibre and could dye their own fabrics. The women also made rough pottery, but the local clay in most districts was inferior and the means of firing it were defective. The potters among the southern Britons were better than those in the north.

The Church which the early missionaries introduced differed from the medieval Church, and from the modern Church, in its organisation. It was organised on St Martin's model, like the people themselves, in little religious families (*muinntirs*), led by an *Ab*, who taught and ruled in the midst of a central community of workers. A general, as well as a religious, education was given in all *muinntirs*. Laymen, presbyters, and bishops were theoretically equal under the *Ab*, even though he, himself, might only be a simple presbyter. Every member of a *muinntir*, ordained or un-ordained, was also under the discipline of his own *Ab*, no matter how far from the central *muinntir* he might be sent to labour. In sending out missions

every *Ab* appointed his own deputies, unless a deputy died at a distance from the central community, when the sub-community appointed its own leader. Wherever the members of one community came in touch with the workers of another community, they were bound, by the Christian obligation of *brotherhood in Christ*, to co-operate with them to the utmost in carrying out the Master's work. Each community or sub-community was settled near a populous centre, and within easy distance of the cell of the *Ab* or his deputy. Every member of the community had a hut of his own, often in an enclosed area close to the church. Outwith the hours of religious work, or maintenance work, each individual was master of his own leisure. With the permission of the *Ab* he could go away into retreat for a season so that he might better give himself to prayer, study, or restful meditation. Every community had its church, where the Psalms were sung regularly. Sometimes, in the large communities, continuous praise was sustained by relays of the brethren. The Sacraments were dispensed at the church, but preaching often took place in the open air, and many of the missionaries had regular preaching-places which are remembered in tradition, often being marked by a *Suidhe*. The books of Scripture favoured by the missionaries for working purposes were the Psalter and the Gospels.

Knowledge of the missionaries and their work in the North-east comes largely from place-names which give testimony of the sites which bear the missionaries' names. The early people did not dedicate cells or churches; rather they named them after the actual founders, even when the founder was the deputy of some more famous missionary. From an early site, the student can usually learn about the missionary that selected it, unless the name has been lost or replaced in later times. Documents, particularly documents relating to the early Church in Britain, have been subjected to great abuses, ranging from the physical frailty of a copyist to deliberate garbling and suppression at the hands of propagandists, excusing themselves with the plea of

"improvement." The testimony of sites and stones cannot easily be made to lie - in Scotland at least, where the conservatism of the people in local affairs is strong, and their fidelity to tradition pronounced. The churchyard has often preserved a founder's name when another has been forced upon the church standing within it. A good deal of history has been furnished by the nature of the site-names, and the place-names near the muinntir-sites. Secondly, documentary evidence is not wanting. It is still possible to separate the matter that belonged to the old native Lives (*Vitae*) of missionary saints from the garnishing found in many of the versions from the eleventh- and twelfth-centuries or resulting from the hands of other 'improvers'. Outside of the *Lives*, in old *Calendars*, in ancient *Offices*, in fragments of old manuscripts, in State-papers, bounding charters, and other odd sources, there are scraps of history that frequently give unexpected confirmation to ancient local traditions. However, the honest copyist and interpreter has sometimes failed to adhere to his original, or to read it in the light of the accepted geographical or political knowledge of the period of the original manuscript.

The Christian religion was carried to Aberdeenshire along an all-British route by missionaries who, in the early period, were mostly Britons; and, whether British or not, they all spoke the dialect of the local peoples, in one or other of its forms. Certain Gauls are known to have been sent to Ninian, among his first workers; but they would have little difficulty in making themselves understood by the natives of Pictland; because it is known that the Britons and Picts could communicate freely with the Gallic Celts in most of their dialects. After Candida Casa had been fully organised by Ninian, Irishmen - St Finbar is an example - joined the community and took part in missions into Pictland. And, somewhat later, other Irishmen - St Moluag is the outstanding example - also entered the Pictish mission-field. These men would not be reckoned "outsiders" by the British missionaries; because they came from the tribes on the

east of Ireland (the *Scotii*) that were descended from the Britons. In speech, culture, politics, and social customs they were kin with the people of Pictland. Throughout a long history, they had been frequently allied by social and political ties. When the British Christians invited the Hiberno-Pictish workers, like Finbar and Moluag, into the mission-field, no Briton, north or south, would find any outstanding difference between the one set of workers and the other. Although the men from Ulster had a different articulation for two vowels from the Britons, just as they have to-day (although not for the same vowels); they used the same consonants. In intercourse, although Finbar was responsible to the president of Candida Casa, and Moluag to the Ab of Bangor, the two missionaries would be as helpful to one another as if both had belonged to one Community.



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