

**An evaluation of the Synod of Whitby (AD 664) with reference to the political and historical context of contemporary Northumbria.**

by

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It has long been traditional amongst historians of the period to represent the Synod of Whitby and its outcome as a momentous event in English history and a definitive turning point in the identity and allegiance of the English church. This interpretation of the Synod has endured over the centuries to the extent that, only recently, the historian Patrick Wormald expressed his frustration trenchantly in the following paragraph written in 2005,

‘From the days of George Buchanan, supplying the initial propaganda for the makers of the Scottish kirk, until a startlingly recent date, there was warrant for the anti-Roman, anti-episcopal and, in the nineteenth century, anti-establishment stance in the Columban or ‘Celtic’ church. ....The idea that there was a ‘Celtic Church’ in something of a post-Reformation sense, is still maddeningly ineradicable from the minds of students.’

This enduring interpretation may well be due to the limited scope and intent of the source material available and also to the desire of ecclesiastical historians over the centuries to give primacy to the overarching theme of the evolution of the church universal and its relentless expansion. Any detailed account of the Synod derives almost exclusively from that provided by the Venerable Bede in his *Historiam Ecclesiasticam Gentis Anglorum* completed in 731 supplemented by a hagiographical *Life of Wilfred* written by Eddius Stephanus (Stephen of Ripon) around 710. Both of these works were written at some distance although Bede did have access to the work by Eddius and is also said to have known surviving participants in the synod such as Acca of Hexham whom he described as the ‘dearest of all prelates upon earth’. It is also possible that Bede’s reputation and stature as an historian, to an extent the ‘father’ of history, has come to overshadow and repress informed scrutiny of the Synod. Bede’s insistence on the importance of accurate chronology wherever possible, his elegant and stylish deployment of the Latin language, his faithful attribution of sources and his ability to blend homiletic material seamlessly into the narrative all mark him out as a biblical scholar and historian of renown but his work was intended as an ‘ecclesiastical’ history and it would not be surprising if he had been minded to give additional prominence to those events which he considered important staging posts in the advancement of the church. The Paschal controversy was, indeed, an issue in which Bede, as a biblical scholar, especially interested himself and had addressed in his works, *De Temporibus* (703) and *De Temporum Ratione* (725).

A corrective to the assumption that Bede’s account of the Synod is accepted as being an accurate record of the proceedings may be found in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, prepared around 891 in the time of Alfred which, curiously, makes no mention of the Synod; instead, both the Parker Chronicle and the Laud Chronicle include the same

entry for the year 664, viz. ‘Colman with his companions went to his native land’ but provide no explanation for this happening although interestingly, the year 671 was noted as the year of ‘the great mortality of birds’! Given the quantity of material pertaining to Northumbrian history that is detailed in the Chronicle, this omission does appear odd if the Synod was contemporaneously regarded as a pivotal moment. In general, historical events involve a complex mixture of antecedents, motivation and personalities. The Synod of Whitby needs to be studied and understood against a background of political instability in Northumbria and parallel uncertainty in the sphere of shifting religious allegiance. The kingdom of Northumbria had come into being after the victory of Aethelfrith at the Battle of Degsastan. After his death, he was succeeded by Edwin of Deira (a Roman Christian) and the Bernician dynasty founded by Aethelfrith was forced to take refuge in Pictish and Scottish territory where many were baptised into the ‘Celtic’ Christian faith practised by their hosts. In 633, the Bernician prince Oswald regained the throne and turned to Iona for help with the conversion of his people. Aidan and a small band of monks responded and founded a monastery at Lindisfarne; later they were joined by many more Scottish monks and began to extend their missionary activity into Mercia (where the baptism of Peada in 653 was a signal success) and the East Saxon lands. Their work was zealous and effective and it is well nigh impossible to say how much of the conversion of the English was achieved by Roman or Celtic missions. The pure and ascetic life style of the Celtic missionaries was greatly admired and contrasted strongly with the organisation and panoply of the Roman church with its growing desire for universal authority. The Celtic church had been largely isolated from Rome for 150 years and was possibly offended by the assumptions and perceived arrogance of the papacy as indicated in the attitude of Augustine towards Celtic bishops whom Pope Gregory had described (probably out of ignorance) as ‘unlearned, weak and perverse’.

Nevertheless, by the mid-seventh century, the Roman church had come to realise the value of uniformity and of a universal church ruled from Rome and felt that the existence of a powerful group of Christians who did not acknowledge papal supremacy could no longer be tolerated. Already, too, some in the Celtic church were beginning to realise that they could not ignore indefinitely the benefits of closer linkage with Rome and an emergence from their isolation. In addition, Roman practices were steadily advancing northwards as a result of the activities of Augustine of Canterbury. In 633, the southern Irish had accepted the Roman method for calculating Easter while these practices were often introduced into the Celtic sphere of influence as a result of trade, travel and exile. A prime example of this was the wife of King Oswiu, Eanfled, who had been removed to Kent during the reign of Oswald but returned on her marriage to Oswiu with her Roman entourage and customs. This precipitated a crisis at court where it became necessary to celebrate Easter twice at different times. By this time, the saintly Aidan was dead and, without the constraint of his presence, it seemed appropriate to resolve this anomaly by means of a Synod at which advocates of both persuasions would argue the case before the king after which he would rule on the issue. The occasion was the Synod of Whitby in 664 (or 663 according to Stenton chronology).

Bede’s account of the proceedings at Whitby suggest a stylised and highly civilised debate which is not altogether convincing given the controversial nature of the

issues and the heat which such matters could generate. One has only to study the records of debates involving Martin Luther at the time of the Reformation to discern the passion and polemic that they could engender. At Whitby, the Celtic persuasion was represented by king Oswiu, bishop Cedd of the East Saxons, the Abbess Hild at whose monastery at Streanaeshalch the meeting was held and Colman, bishop of Lindisfarne who acted as their spokesman. The Roman party comprised Alchfrith son of Oswiu and sub-king of Deira, Agilberht, bishop of the West Saxons, James the Deacon and Wilfrid of Ripon who was then ruling a monastic community at Ripon. Alchfrith's motives in playing a prominent role in the summons of the synod are not touched upon but it is, perhaps, legitimate to speculate that he wished to enhance his power within the kingdom and considered that closer links with Rome and the patronage of the ambitious Wilfrid would forward his ambitions.

In the course of the debate as contained in Bede's historical narrative, the two principal advocates, Colman and Wilfrid, both argued forcefully that their method of calculating Easter was based upon worthy precedent. According to Colman, the Celtic practice could be traced back to the apostle John to which Wilfrid retorted that the Roman practice had been handed down by both Peter and Paul and had been followed from the outset by their churches. He also argued that, even if it were the case that John had used the Celtic practice, this would have been only a provisional dispensation to suit a particular congregation at a particular period in the evolution of the church. From the historical perspective, it is quite clear that both practices had co-existed for some centuries but that the tide was already turning in favour of the Roman method. The calculation of Easter involved a complicated system intended to reconcile the solar and lunar years by means of a cycle of years. At various times, cycles of 8, 11, 19 and 84 years had been used for this purpose and it seems probable that the tables based upon an 84-year cycle had been brought to Britain by Celtic bishops who had attended the Council of Arles in 314. In 455, Rome accepted and ordered the use of the 19 year cycle as advocated by Victorius of Aquitaine and this was implemented by those parts of England controlled by Canterbury and, after 633, by the southern Irish. Clearly, by the time of the Synod, there was absolutely no possibility that the Celtic tradition could supplant the Roman within the wider church and this was underlined by Wilfrid in the speech attributed to him when he stressed the folly of resisting the authority of St. Peter and refusing to follow the example of all the rest of Christendom. Although Bede states that the only point at issue in the Synod was date of celebrating Easter (and the tonsure issue), the fact that he records Wilfrid as emphasising this wider context and significance, suggests that he was fully aware of the implications of any decision on the Celtic branch of the church. Wilfrid's 'triumph' was based upon two main points: firstly, he referred to contemporary practice and pointed out that even the followers of the apostle John now celebrated Easter according to the Roman fashion and, secondly, he rebutted Colman's question as to how such holy men as Columba and Anatolius could have erred so greatly as claimed over the Easter dating by stating that Peter, as the rock on which the church is built and the keeper of the keys, must be a superior authority. Oswiu reportedly turned to Colman and asked whether he could say properly attribute any similar authority to Columba; Colman's 'nihil' was conclusive and Oswiu ruled in favour of the Roman practice saying that he would not risk a hostile reception from Peter himself at the gates of heaven. After a brief visit to Lindisfarne to bid farewell to his

community, Colman and his fellow monks returned to Ireland where they could still practice their religion according to their preference. The 'Roman' victory was complete.

The scale of this victory, however, is debatable as Oswiu's decision applied only to Northumbria and many decades were required for the complete implementation of the Roman ways. At the centre, York immediately supplanted Lindisfarne as the episcopal centre of Northumbria with Wilfrid as its bishop (664-78) but even within the kingdom and more so beyond the borders, the process of Romanisation was slow and painstaking. Britain was a complex patchwork of shifting kingdoms (twelve existed around 600 AD) with disputed boundaries and frequent changes of ruler. Strenuous efforts and reforming zeal were required to extend the Roman mandate throughout the lands and much of this work was carried out by Wilfrid, Theodore of Tarsus and Benedict Biscop. Their especial concern was the lack of effective leadership at a time (669) when only three men were known to have been in bishop's orders in the whole of England. The Synod of Hertford, summoned by Theodore in 672 issued a number of canons relating to the conduct of bishops, in particular enjoining them to remain within their sees and concentrate on their duties.

After 669, Theodore appointed a number of new bishops (initially to Winchester, Dunwich and Rochester and then proceeded to create new sees at North Elmham, Worcester, Hereford and Lindsey to supplement the existing ones. This work was the key to disseminating the messages of Whitby and Hertford and the broader thrust of the Roman establishment. Paradoxically, it was in Northumbria that the task was most difficult due to the stubborn stance of Wilfrid who opposed any diminution of his immense power as sole bishop of Northumbria. A love of pomp and panoply which would not have disgraced Cardinal Wolsey centuries later, did not endear him to his contemporaries and he was twice expelled from Northumbria (in 677 and 691) and only half-heartedly supported by the Pope to whom he appealed on both occasions. The work of Romanisation proceeded, apace despite the distraction posed by Wilfrid who was often his own worst enemy; his first expulsion, for example came about when he persuaded the king's beloved wife to retire to a convent, a triumph which, unsurprisingly was not pleasing to Ecgfrith ! Nevertheless, by the second decade of the eighth century, when Nechtan, king of the Picts enforced the recommended Easter tables on the Pictish Church after consultation with Ceolfrith, abbot of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow (Bede's home monastery), the authority of Rome was almost universally acknowledged, except for some areas of the north of Ireland. Iona, itself, had capitulated around 716 due to the efforts of Adamnan and Egbert.

The importance of Whitby, therefore, lies not so much in an immediate and widespread change of allegiance but in the clear message that it gave to the Celtic church that the tide was turning against it and that it faced a future of isolation and retreat accompanied by increasing pressure from the Roman church. Over the next fifty years, the Celtic church became more peripheral and, by its very nature, it was unable to organise itself with the same flair and zeal that was second nature to the Roman church. We cannot easily say what was the most important issue at the Synod of Whitby; to some, no doubt, it was the embarrassing schism at court, to others such as Alchfrith, it involved political manoeuvring, for many it did focus

upon the central issue of the celebration of Easter and, by extension, the universalist aspirations of the Roman pontiff.

Bede, himself, seems quite clear that the Easter controversy was the fons et origo of the Synod despite the fact that his own account alludes to the wider issue of a uniform doctrine and papal authority. Even his most distinguished editor,, Charles Plummer, in the introduction to his magisterial edition of 1896, professes himself puzzled by Bede's insistence on this point and a degree of unwonted asperity in his style. He writes,

‘And yet we cannot help feeling that the question occupies a place in Bede's mind out of all proportion to its real importance. It is sad that he should think it necessary to pause in the middle of his beautiful sketch of the sweet and saintly character of Aidan to say that ‘he much detests’ his mode of keeping Easter; it is strange that he should apply to this question the words which St. Paul used with reference to such infinitely more important matters, expressing the fear lest he ‘should run or have run in vain’ .....But the holiest men have their limitations, and questions even less important have divided Christians ere now.’

Bede is a wonderful literary and historical source and starting point for any study of the Synod of Whitby but, as ever, it underlines the need, wherever possible, for the widest possible array of sources in order to arrive at a balanced verdict. The spread of the early church in Britain followed by the imposition of the Roman dispensation is a long and complex story further complicated by the plethora of kingdoms, the paucity of source material and the fragmented nature of society at the time. Without Bede, however, we would lack an introduction to this event, couched in impeccable Latin and underpinned by an unwavering desire to write truthfully for the benefit of posterity. At the very least, his account of the Synod is exactly how we would wish the event to have proceeded, in the spirit of Christian humility and informed debate.

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