

# Adomnán, plague and the Easter controversy

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## ABSTRACT

Adomnán's description (*Vita Columbae* II.46) of how the intercession of St. Columba preserved the Picts and the Irish in Britain alone among the peoples of western Europe against two great epidemics of bubonic plague is a coded defence of their use of the traditional Irish 84-year Easter table against the Dionysian Easter table as used throughout the rest of western Europe. His implication is that God sent the plagues to punish those who used the Dionysian table. Hence Adomnán still adhered to the 84-year table by the time that he composed the *Vita Columbae* c. 697. It probably took a third epidemic 700–c. 702 to persuade Adomnán that his interpretation of the earlier epidemics was incorrect, so that Bede (*HE* V.15) is correct to date his conversion to the Dionysian table to a third visit to Northumbria c. 702.

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to overlooked evidence indicating that Adomnán, ninth abbot of Iona (679–704), still adhered to the traditional Irish 84-year Easter table by the time that he composed his *Vita Columbae* [VC] c. 697, so that his conversion to the Dionysian Easter table as used at Rome is probably to be dated to a third visit to Northumbria c. 702, exactly as recorded by Bede.<sup>1</sup> This challenges the modern consensus that he had already converted to the Dionysian table c. 687, and all attempts to explain his subsequent career and writing on the basis of his alleged conversion then.<sup>2</sup> It is

<sup>1</sup> For a review of the different methods of calculating Easter into the seventh century, see A. A. Mosshammer, *The Easter Computus and the Origins of the Christian Era* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 59–316. The Dionysian Easter table was constructed by Dionysius Exiguus at Rome in the early sixth century, whereas the origin of the traditional Irish 84-year table remains unclear, although D. McCarthy, 'The Origin of the Latercus Paschal Cycle of the Insular Celtic Churches', *CMCS* 28 (1994), 25–49, suggests that it was constructed by Sulpicius Severus at the beginning of the fifth century.

<sup>2</sup> Supporters of his adoption of the Dionysian table c. 687 include M. Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: the History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 48–9, 142; R. Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St. Columba* (London, 1995), pp. 48–51; T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 410; C. Corning, *The Celtic and Roman Traditions: Conflict and Consensus in the Early Medieval Church* (Basingstoke, 2006), pp. 152–3; B. Yorke, *The Conversion of Britain: Religion, Politics and Society in Britain, 600–800* (Harlow, 2006), p. 17; C. Stancliffe, "'Charity and Peace": Adomnán and the Easter Question', *Adomnán of Iona: Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker*, ed. J. M. Wooding (Dublin, 2010), pp. 51–68.

necessary to begin, therefore, by highlighting the relative security of the dating of the composition of the *VC* to 697, and the weakness of the case that he had already converted to the Dionysian Easter table *c.* 687.

Three pieces of evidence, or factors, point towards Adomnán's composition of the *VC* about 697.<sup>3</sup> First, his language suggests that he was already abbot at the time of a miracle that he dates to a period seventeen years previous to his description of it (*VC* II.44). Since he became abbot in 679, he must have been writing in 696 at the earliest. Next, he dates another alleged weather-miracle after a meeting of an Irish synod (*VC* II.45) where his language and the assumption that his reader will immediately realize to which synod he refers has led to its identification as the synod of Birr in 697 at which he famously issued his *Lex innocentium*. Finally, the fact that the one hundredth anniversary of the death of Columba fell in 697 would have provided a good context for Adomnán's composition of the *VC* at the alleged request of his fellow monks (*Praefatio*). Hence if evidence within the *VC* indicates that Adomnán still adhered to the 84-year Easter table at the time of its composition, he must have adhered to it as late as 697.

Bede (*HE* V.15) is the only source to record when Adomnán decided to abandon the 84-year table in favour of the Dionysian table, and he alleges that he did so during a visit to the court of King Aldfrith (685–705) of Northumbria. Furthermore, while he does not date this visit exactly, he sets his account between other events explicitly dated to 696 (*HE* V.11, the ordination of Willibrord as archbishop of the Frisians) and 705 (*HE* V.17, the death of Aldfrith), and it ought to be clear that he intended to date Adomnán's visit to Aldfrith sometime late during the intervening period, say *c.* 702.<sup>4</sup> The modern consensus that Adomnán had converted to the Dionysian Easter table by *c.* 687 rests on the identification of his visit to Northumbria as described by Bede with one of the two visits that he paid there in 685 and 687 according to his own testimony (*VC* II.46) and the evidence of the Irish annals. However, one

<sup>3</sup> For what follows, see, e.g., J.-M. Picard, 'The Purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*', *Peritia* 1 (1982), 160–77, at 167–9; Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, p. 55.

<sup>4</sup> R. Sharpe, 'Armagh and Rome in the Seventh Century', *Irland und Europa: Die Kirche im Frühmittelalter*, ed. P. Ní Chatháin and M. Richter (Stuttgart, 1984), pp. 58–72, at 60, n. 13, points out that H. Zimmer had dated Adomnán's conversion to the Roman Easter to 701, as if from Bede, in 1884, but that he seems to have changed his mind by 1902. Ironically, while Sharpe reads Bede to signify a date just before 704 in this paper, he has changed his mind by the time of his *Adomnán of Iona* in 1995 where (p. 49) he now charges Bede with telescoping the period between Adomnán's second visit to Northumbria in 687 and his death in 704. T. O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings* (London, 2000), p. 76, seems to be the modern exception in accepting a third visit by Adomnán to Northumbria just before his death, although he does not discuss the matter in any detail.

may object to this identification on several grounds.<sup>5</sup> First, it contradicts the natural reading of Bede's text which suggests that the visit which he describes occurred relatively shortly before Adomnán's death in 704, say *c.* 702. Next, it assumes that the Irish annals are much more complete than they actually are, and places too much faith in the fact that none of them notes the occurrence of a third visit to Aldfrith's court *c.* 702.<sup>6</sup> Finally, it requires that Adomnán spent most of his period as abbot of Iona in disagreement with his fellow monks about a central feature of monastic life, the date of the commemoration of Easter and related feasts, without this having caused any major disturbance within the community and having affected the surviving records accordingly. Those who accept that Adomnán adopted the Dionysian Easter table *c.* 687 are forced to argue either that he spent most of his time in self-imposed exile away from Iona in order to minimize the controversy or that he was so conciliatory in his approach that he managed to avoid any serious controversy.<sup>7</sup> Neither argument is persuasive.

The chief difficulty in any debate concerning Adomnán's views on the Easter controversy is that he only addresses this subject directly once in either of his surviving works. At the conclusion to his description of how once, while Columba was staying at the monastery at Clonmacnoise in Ireland, he had prophesied the rise to fame of the young monk Ernéne mac Craséni, he adds almost as an afterthought:

<sup>5</sup> Corning, *The Celtic and Roman Traditions*, pp. 152–3, seeks to review the various arguments to conclude that Adomnán accepted the Dionysian Easter in the 680s. Unfortunately, she misrepresents the case for a date *c.* 702, such as in her claim that it requires that Adomnán was unaware of the problems with 84-year table until then.

<sup>6</sup> For example, none of the annals mention the synod of Teltown, despite the importance of this event in Columban hagiography as described by Adomnán (*VC* III.3).

<sup>7</sup> Those adopting the former approach include *Adomnan's Life of Columba*, ed. A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson (Edinburgh, 1961), p. 96; A. F. Byrne, *Warlords and Holy Men: Scotland AD 80–1000* (London, 1984), p. 133. Those adopting the latter approach include J.-M. Picard, 'Bede, Adomnán, and the Writing of History', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 50–70, at 69; Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, p. 49; Yorke, *The Conversion of Britain*, p. 17. Corning, *The Celtic and Roman Traditions*, p. 154, rightly argues that 'it does not seem possible that the Iona community itself or any individual community within the *familia* could have functioned using both tables'. Yet this is what her own conclusion requires, and she fails to square this circle. Stancliffe, "'Charity with Peace'", pp. 62–8, argues that a highly conciliatory Adomnán described the dying Columba bidding his monks to conduct themselves with charity and peace (*VC* III.23) in order to persuade his contemporaries to continue in communion with one another despite their differences on the Easter question. Nevertheless, the fact that, as she herself points out, Bede placed similar words in the mouth of a dying Cuthbert speaking to his monks (*Vita S. Cuthberti* 39) before he then bids them not to share communion with those who do not observe Easter in the Roman fashion, proves that charity and peace do not necessarily extend as far as she would wish.

Sed et multa alia hisdem diebus quibus in Clonoensi cenubio sanctus hospitabatur revelante profetavit sancto spiritu: hoc est de illa quae post dies multos ob diversitatem paschalis festi orta est inter Scotiae ecclesias discordia;<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, he does not reveal what exactly Columba was supposed to have said. Nor does he explicitly state his own thoughts on this most delicate issue. It is clear, therefore, that he remained conscious that he was writing a hagiography of Columba, not a treatise on the Easter question, and that he did not want to become sidetracked into dealing with this controversial topic. So why raise the matter at all? While it is tempting to interpret the apparently non-committal observation that Columba's power of prophecy had allowed him to foresee the rise of the Easter controversy within the Irish church as a neutral observation, it is anything but.<sup>9</sup> For if the prophetic Columba had foreseen the rise of this controversy, and yet had done nothing to avoid it, such as by rejecting the 84-year Easter table in favour of that used by Rome at the time, then the only possible explanation is that he took a conscious decision to retain it. Hence the simple observation that Columba had foreseen the Easter controversy is enough in itself to explode any efforts by opponents of the 84-year table to claim that he had not abandoned it because he had been unaware of how dangerously out of step he was with Rome and the rest of the world. Adomnán does not have to write a single extra word. His point would have been clear to those engaged in the details of the current debate, but not so explicit that it would have risked provoking the rejection of the *VC* by those within Ireland and Britain who were not quite so engaged, or by those on the Continent who knew even less about the debate.

Since Columba had died before the Easter controversy became a live issue within the Irish church, it should have been relatively easy for Adomnán to avoid the issue when adhering strictly to the events of Columba's own lifetime, even if there was always the temptation to have a slight dig at the other side, as just noted.<sup>10</sup> However, the temptation to say more about the subject must have been greater still when dealing with the events of more recent times, the

<sup>8</sup> *VC* I.3: 'During those days in which the saint was a guest in the monastery of Clóin, he prophesied also many other things, by revelation of the Holy Spirit: that is to say, concerning the great dispute that after many days arose among the churches of Ireland over the diversity in time of the Easter festival'. Text and translation from *Adomnan's Life of Columba*, ed. Anderson and Anderson, pp. 218–19. I will quote all text and translation from this text henceforth.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Picard, 'The Purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*', p. 165: 'Adomnán's attitude is more neutral'; Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, p. 132: 'Only once is the Easter controversy referred to, and Adomnán does not use it to his advantage.'

<sup>10</sup> For a summary of the main phases of the controversy, see Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 408–10. The first phase began on the Continent with clashes between the Irish monk Columbanus and the Gallic bishops c. 603.

posthumous miracles worked by Columba, and it is my argument that Adomnán succumbed to this temptation in his description of the effects of recent epidemics of plague upon Ireland and Britain. He concludes book two of the *VC*, that devoted to the miracles worked by Columba, with a description of how the saint had protected the Picts and the Irish in Britain alone in these islands against two great recent epidemics of plague:

Et hoc etiam ut estimo non inter minora virtutum miracula connumerandum videtur, de mortalitate quae nostris temporibus terrarum orbem bis ex parte vastaverat maiore. Nam ut de ceteris taceam latioribus Eoropae regionibus, hoc est Italia et ipsa romana civitate et cisalpinis Galliarum provinciis, hispanis, quoque Pirinei montis interjectu disternatis, ociani insulae per totum, videlicet Scotia et Britannia, binis vicibus vastatae sunt dira pestilentia, exceptis duobus populis, hoc est Pictorum plebe et Scotorum Britanniae inter quos utrosque dorsi montes brittannici disternant. Et quamvis utrorumque populorum non desint grandia peccata, quibus plerumque ad iracundiam aeternus provocatur iudex, utrisque tamen huc usque patienter ferens ipse pepercit. Cui alio itaque haec tribuitur gratia a deo conlata nisi sancto Columbae, cujus monasteria intra utrorumque populorum terminos fundata ab utrisque usque ad praesens tempus valde sunt honorificata?<sup>11</sup>

This passage raises several questions. First, to what two epidemics of plague does Adomnán refer here? The fact that he claims that the epidemics occurred during ‘our times’ suggests that he is referring to events that took place during his own lifetime and of which he retains a vivid memory still. There seem to have been two distinct waves of epidemic that hit both Ireland and Britain during the periods 664–c. 668 and c. 684–c. 687, and the most obvious interpretation of Adomnán’s language is that he refers to these two waves of epidemic rather than, as has occasionally been assumed, to the occurrence of the epidemic in two separate years of the same wave.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *VC* II.46: ‘This also I consider should not be reckoned among lesser miracles of power, in connexion with the plague that twice in our times ravaged the greater part of the surface of the earth. Not to speak of the other wider regions of Europe (that is to say, of Italy and the city of Rome itself, and the provinces of Gaul on this side of the Alps, and the Spanish provinces, separated by the barrier of the Pyrenean mountain), the islands of the Ocean, namely Ireland and Britain, were twice ravaged throughout by a terrible pestilence, excepting two peoples only, that is the population of Picts, and of Irish in Britain, between which peoples the mountains of the spine of Britain are the boundary. And although neither people is without great sins, by which the Eternal Judge is often provoked to anger, yet until now he has spared both of them, enduring patiently. To whom else can this favour conferred by God be attributed, but to Saint Columba, whose monasteries, placed within the boundaries of both peoples, are down to the present time held in great honour by them both?’

<sup>12</sup> In general, see J. Maddicott, ‘Plague in Seventh Century England’, and A. Dooley, ‘The Plague and Its Consequences in Ireland’, *Plague and the End of Antiquity: the Pandemic of 541–750*, ed. L. K. Little (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 171–214, and pp. 215–30. J. E. Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland: Scotland to 795*, The New Edinburgh Hist. of Scotland 1 (Edinburgh, 2009), p. 241,

Next, why did Columba not intercede with God on behalf of the other Christian inhabitants of these islands, and not just the Picts and the Irish in Britain? After all, Adomnán himself reveals that Columba had appeared to King Oswald of the Northumbrians in a vision immediately before his battle against the British king Cadwallon at Heavenfield in 634 and declared to him that God had granted to him that Cadwallon should be defeated.<sup>13</sup> So what had changed in Northumbria between 634 and 664 that Columba was no longer willing to intercede for its king? This issue becomes all the more urgent, and one that no reader could have failed to note, because Adomnán concludes his description of how the plague had spared the Picts and Irish in Britain with a vivid description of the devastation which he himself had seen it work in Northumbria. Furthermore, he emphasizes the fact that the Lord protected him and his companions while visiting there so that not one of them even became sick. So why had Columba failed to intercede on this occasion for a king of Northumbria, Aldfrith, whom Adomnán specifically entitles a friend, by which he presumably means not so much a personal friend as a friend of the whole Ionan community, and who had even belonged to the community on Iona once himself?<sup>14</sup> The statement that the monasteries of Columba situated within their territories are greatly honoured by the two peoples for whom Columba did intercede suggests that the reasons that he did not intercede for the other peoples was either that they did not possess Columban monasteries, or that they did not honour them. This raises questions as to what exactly Adomnán means by Columban monasteries, and what it means that they should be properly honoured by the peoples among whom they are situated. Is a Columban monastery a monastery that had been founded by monks from Iona and had once been a member of the monastic federation under the abbot of Iona, or a monastery that had remained a member of this federation into the present? If one assumes the latter, this would explain why both epidemics

seems to be alone in identifying the plagues to which Adomnán refers as two years of plague within the second wave *c.* 684–*c.* 687. Bubonic plague seems to have struck in recurrent waves. D. C. Stathakopoulos, *Famine and Pestilence in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine Empire: a Systematic Survey of Subsistence Crises and Epidemics*, Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Monographs 9 (Aldershot, 2004), pp. 113–23, identifies eighteen great waves of plague in the Mediterranean basin between its first emergence in 541 and its disappearance *c.* 750.

<sup>13</sup> *VCI.1*: 'Hac enim vice mihi dominus donavit ut hostes in fugam vertantur tui, et tuus Catlon inimicus in manus tradatur tuas, et post bellum victor revertaris et feliciter regnes' ('For the Lord has granted to me that at this time your enemies shall be turned to flight, and your adversary Catlon shall be delivered into your hands'). Bede, *HE* III.2, does not mention Columba, preferring to attribute Oswald's victory to his devotion to the cross.

<sup>14</sup> He was also of Irish descent. On his early life and descent, see C. A. Ireland, 'Aldfrith of Northumbria and the Irish Genealogies', *Celtica* 22 (1991), 64–78. Bede says only that Aldfrith had studied on the islands of the Irish (*Vita S. Cuthberti* 24), while the earlier, anonymous life reveals that he had studied on Iona in particular (*Vita S. Cuthberti* 3.6).

affected Northumbria so badly, because Iona had lost its control of the church within Northumbria as a result of the so-called synod of Whitby in 664.<sup>15</sup> It does not explain, however, why Columba should not have interceded on behalf of the monasteries subject to Iona within Ireland. In this case, the problem seems to be that the peoples of Ireland were not honouring these monasteries properly. As to what this means in practice, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that it refers to the fact that most of the church within southern Ireland, with the notable exception of the Columban monasteries, seem to have adopted the Dionysian Easter table by the mid-seventh century in accordance with the practice at Rome. The most obvious way, therefore, in which the peoples of Ireland dishonoured the Columban monasteries was in ignoring their advice and practice and accepting the new Easter table promulgated by those church authorities who wished to calculate their Easter in conformity with Roman practice.

The relevance of the Easter controversy to Adomnán's description of Columba's failure to intercede for any except the Picts and the Irish in Britain is supported by two coincidences of chronology and geography, and an unnecessary and unusually expansive reference to events throughout the rest of western Europe. The coincidence of chronology is that he should have decided to extend his description of Columba's protection of people from plague, or failure to protect them from the same, back to the wave of epidemic that struck Britain in 664. Why bother to hearken back to events about twenty years earlier and before he was abbot? Since this epidemic struck about the same time as the synod of Whitby, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that he did so deliberately in order to allude to the coincidence between its emergence and the decision at Whitby to impose the Dionysian Easter table upon the church in Northumbria.<sup>16</sup> The coincidence of geography is that the two regions whose escape from the plague he chooses to emphasize were those where the local church was dominated by Columban establishments and where the acceptance of the Dionysian Easter table had made little or no headway as far as one can now tell. They were in fact the last regions within Ireland or the Irish sphere of influence to convert to the Dionysian Easter table, since Iona itself adopted it in 716 as the result of the teaching of the English monk Egbert, while king Nechtan of the

<sup>15</sup> See Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, OMT (Oxford, 1969), pp. 308–9. This traumatic event did leave its mark in the common ancestor of the surviving Irish annals, the so-called Iona chronicle, although long unrecognized as such. See D. Woods, 'An "Earthquake" in Britain in 664', *Peritia* 19 (2005), 256–62.

<sup>16</sup> The precise relationship between the synod and the outbreak of plague is unknowable, since exact dates are not known for either. Bede (*HE* III.27) only records the year of the outbreak, although it seems to have killed both the archbishop of Canterbury and the king of Kent on 14 July (*HE* IV.1).

Picts had enforced it throughout his territory shortly beforehand.<sup>17</sup> There is no reason to doubt that their relative isolation and colder climate did contribute to keeping the territory of the Picts and of the Irish in Britain, by which Adomnán seems to refer to the Scottish (in the modern sense) portion of the kingdom of the Dál Riata, free from plague. My point here is not that Adomnán has exaggerated, or even invented, the extent of their escape from the two epidemics of plague, but that he chose to include it within the *VC* precisely because, in conjunction with their known commitment to the 84-year Easter table, the tale of their escape tends to suggest to those familiar with the recent history of the Easter controversy in Ireland and Britain that they may have been spared because of their commitment to this Easter table. Of course, the real situation was considerably more complex than this, since various independent British kingdoms continued with the 84-year table until *c.* 770 at least, and there is no reason to think that they escaped from the plague.<sup>18</sup> However, Adomnán's approach to this topic allows him to evade this objection. He does not say that God spared the Picts and the Irish in Britain because of their commitment as such to the 84-year table, but because Columba interceded with Him to spare them. It is arguable, therefore, that the reason why the British kingdoms suffered the plague, despite their equal commitment to the 84-year table, was that they lacked a similar intercessor.

The fact that Adomnán chooses to emphasize that plague had also affected Italy, including Rome itself, and the various territories of both Gaul and Spain deserves attention because he pays so little attention otherwise to these regions. It is noteworthy that he repeats the same list of regions at the conclusion to his work when describing how far the fame of Columba's name had spread (*VC* III.23). Otherwise, he mentions Gaul twice (*VC* I.28, II.34), Italy once (*VC* I.28), and Spain not at all. In light of his subsequent affirmation that the name of Columba was known throughout Italy, Gaul, and Spain, the fact that Columba did not intercede with God on behalf of the people of these regions also against the plague immediately raises the question why not. Here one must understand the importance that the principle of universality had played in the various efforts to persuade the adherents to the 84-year table to adopt the Roman practice instead.<sup>19</sup> According to Bede, Pope Honorius wrote to the Irish concerning the calculation of Easter warning them not to believe that they had a wisdom exceeding that of the churches throughout the rest of the world, probably *c.* 628, and Cumman wrote to his fellow Irishmen Ségéne, fifth abbot

<sup>17</sup> See Bede, *HE* V.21–2.

<sup>18</sup> On the continued use by the British of the 84-year table, see Corning, *The Celtic and Roman Traditions*, pp. 164–6.

<sup>19</sup> See D. Bracken, 'Rome and the Isles: Ireland, England and the Rhetoric of Orthodoxy', *PBA* 157 (2009), 75–97, esp. 87–97.



of Iona, and to the hermit Béccán in similar terms, probably *c.* 632.<sup>20</sup> According to Bede also, Wilfrid had argued similarly again at the synod of Whitby in 664, emphasizing his own personal experiences at Rome, and throughout Italy and Gaul.<sup>21</sup> It is arguable, therefore, that Adomnán's reference to the devastation that plague had wrought throughout the whole of western Europe, including Rome, represents his subtle reply to the traditional argument of the opponents of the 84-year table that its adherents were setting themselves against the universal church, especially Rome. He is reminding his readers that while the Picts and the Irish in Britain rejected the calculation of Easter as practised at Rome and throughout western Europe, as their opponents so often pointed out, it was these very regions that were being devastated by plague, not the territories of the Picts and Irish in Britain. One cannot know whether Adomnán was aware of the fact, but Wighard, the archbishop elect of Canterbury, had died of plague at Rome in 665, and this outbreak was probably part of the same wave of epidemic affecting Britain and Ireland at this time also.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Rome and Pavia suffered devastating plague again in 680, probably the start of the wave of epidemic that struck Britain and Ireland *c.* 684.<sup>23</sup> Hence his words had the force of truth, even if his readers did not necessarily know the full details.

A final point is necessary concerning the potential relevance of Adomnán's remarks concerning plague and the conversion of the see of Armagh to the Dionysian table. It is generally agreed that Armagh must have abandoned the 84-year table by the time that Áed of Sleaty subjected his church to its control, and this cannot have occurred after the death of Ségéne, the bishop of Armagh involved in the process, in 688.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the contents of the *Liber angeli* reveal that Armagh must have converted to Roman practice by the time of its composition, and while this cannot be dated precisely, it is generally agreed that it was composed during the 670s or 680s.<sup>25</sup> Finally, it has been suggested that the change in practice most likely occurred in a year where the 84-year and Dionysian tables produced the same date for Easter, as they did in 682,

<sup>20</sup> See Bede, *HE* II.19; Cumman, *De controversia paschali* 90–110, ed. M. Walsh and D. Ó Cróinín, *Cumman's Letter De Controversia Paschali and the De Ratione Computandi*, PIMS Texts and Stud. 86 (Toronto, 1988), pp. 70–2..

<sup>21</sup> See Bede, *HE* III.25.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* III.29, IV.1.

<sup>23</sup> See Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Langobardorum*, ed. L. Bethmann and G. Waitz, MGH: SS rer. Lang. (Hanover, 1878), p. 166; *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. L. Duchesne, *Le Liber Pontificalis: Texte, Introduction, et Commentaire*, 2nd ed., Tome I (Paris, 1955), p. 350.

<sup>24</sup> See K. Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (Ithaca, 1966), pp. 115–16; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 428.

<sup>25</sup> Since it reveals a knowledge of Cogitosus's *Vita S. Brigidae*, much depends on how one dates this life. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 427, dates it to *c.* 675; D. Howlett, 'The Structure of the *Liber Angeli*?' *Peritia* 12 (1998), 254–70, at 269, dates it to the early 680s.

685, 686, and 689, after a long period when they had not agreed at all.<sup>26</sup> Hence there is strong circumstantial evidence that Armagh may have changed to the Dionysian table just before the second wave of plague referred to by Adomnán struck Ireland c. 684. If this was the case, then it may have been the fact that the conversion of Armagh to the Dionysian table was followed by an epidemic of plague in the same way that the conversion of Northumbria to this table had been followed by an epidemic in 664, that provoked Adomnán to devote as much time to the subject of these plagues as he did.

Adomnán concludes his description of how Columba had interceded with God to protect the Picts and Irish in Britain from the two epidemics with a warning that both nations contained very many people who did not admit that they had been protected from plague by the prayers of saints and ungratefully abused God's patience: 'Sed hoc quod nunc dicturi sumus ut arbitramur non sine gemitu audiendum est, quia sunt plerique in utrisque populis valde stolidi qui se sanctorum orationibus a morbis defensos nescientes ingrati dei patientia male abutuntur.'<sup>27</sup> These people are hardly identifiable as pagans, or Adomnán would have been more forthright in his description of them as such, or as people who rejected God rather than the idea that they had been protected from plague by the prayer of saints. Furthermore, it seems improbable that any group of Christians at this period would really have rejected the idea that saints could intercede for them with God.<sup>28</sup> One suspects, therefore, that the real problem is not that these people rejected the possibility of such intercession, but that they rejected the particular example that Adomnán was trying to use to prove it. In other words, they rejected the possibility that Columba, or

<sup>26</sup> See Corning, *The Celtic and Roman Traditions*, p. 109.

<sup>27</sup> *VC* II.46: 'But what we are now going to tell is, as we judge, not to be heard without sorrow, that there are in both nations very many foolish people who, not knowing that they have been protected from disease by the prayers of saints, ungratefully abuse God's patience.' No significance is to be attached to the use of the term *morbus* here rather than *mortalitas* or *pestilentia* as used earlier in this chapter, or the switch from singular to plural. The use of synonyms is typical of Adomnán's style. See e.g. *VC* III.1 where he uses three different terms (*peplum*, *pallium*, *sagum*) to describe the same garment. Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 222–3, misrepresents Adomnán's words here as if they were directed against the Picts alone in order to suggest that Iona's influence among the Picts was far less by now than Adomnán would have liked. G. Márkus, 'Iona: Monks, Pastors and Missionaries', *Spes Scotorum: Hope of Scots*, ed. D. Broun and T. O. Clancy (Edinburgh, 1999), pp. 115–38, at 136, ignores the context to interpret these words as 'an appeal for recognition of his [Columba's], and therefore Adomnán's, authority'.

<sup>28</sup> There had been some debate on this subject towards the end of the sixth century, but it was of a limited nature, and there is no evidence that it had any impact on the churches in Ireland or Britain. In general, see M. Dal Santo, 'The God-Protected Empire? Scepticism towards the Cult of Saints in Early Byzantium', *An Age of Saints? Power, Conflict, and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity*, ed. M. Dal Santo, P. Sarris, P. Booth, Brill's Series on the Early Middle Ages 20 (Leiden, 2011), 129–49.

any other great Ionan of the past, had interceded with God to spare them from plague, not because they rejected the possibility of intercession by Columba or anyone else, but because they rejected Adomnán's explanation of why these saints had interceded for them, because they had honoured them by continuing to use the 84-year table which they themselves had once used. Hence Adomnán's warning in this respect reveals the presence among the Picts and the Irish in Britain of a growing minority that questioned the continued adherence to the 84-year table. It is noteworthy also that Adomnán locates these dissenters among the people more generally rather than among the monks. It has been argued that his story of how Columba blessed Iona shortly before his death and declared that no poison of any snake would be able to harm either men or cattle as long as they should observe the commandments of Christ (*VC* II.28) ought to be interpreted metaphorically as a statement that the poison of heresy, broadly defined, would never be allowed to take effect upon the island, and this is certainly consistent with Adomnán's location of the dissenters among the peoples outside rather than among the monks.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the influence of those in favour of the Dionysian table was growing within the wider society, and the stage was set for Adomnán's own adoption of this table several years later.

The above reading of Adomnán's text may appear over-subtle to some, but all it does is set his description of Columba's protection of the Picts and Irish in Britain from plague firmly within its historical and theological context. The Easter question was the great question of the day in Britain and Ireland, as great as the Monothelite question in the East, and it would have been more surprising if he had ignored it as much as is generally assumed than that he had alluded to it in the manner suggested above. It was all too easy during this period to interpret illness, whether of an individual or a wider group, as a sign of divine disfavour, and many elsewhere had done precisely this in response to the various waves of plague.<sup>30</sup> The biblical precedents were almost

<sup>29</sup> See J. O'Reilly, 'Reading the Scriptures in the Life of Columba', *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba*, ed. C. Bourke (Dublin, 1997), pp. 80–106, at 96–97. While this interpretation is possible, I am not sure that it is necessary. The story functions equally well as a pious aetiological account explaining why none of the snakes on the island were poisonous. Since Britain supports only one native poisonous snake, the adder, whatever small population may have existed on Iona could have been killed off at an early stage in its settlement, leaving only the harmless grass snake. Even less convincing, J. Bruce, *Prophecy, Miracles, and Heavenly Light: the Eschatology, Pneumatology and Missiology of Adomnán's Life of Columba* (Milton Keynes, 2004), p. 121, offers an alternative allegorical interpretation wherein the snakes represent druids.

<sup>30</sup> On plague as divine punishment in the eastern sources, see D. Stathakopoulos, 'Crime and Punishment: the Plague in the Byzantine Empire, 541–749', in Little, *Plague and the End of Antiquity*, pp. 99–118.

irresistible.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, it is clear from the *VC* itself that Adomnán viewed God very much as a vengeful God who would eventually inflict punishment here on earth upon all those who had outraged him in some way.<sup>32</sup> The only problem then was to determine what exactly an individual or people had done to incur divine disfavour when it seemed that they had done so. Sometimes the answer was obvious. Writing *c.* 660, the anonymous Burgundian chronicler conventionally known as Fredegar was happy to believe that the sword of God had struck the emperor Heraclius' troops with plague before the battle of Gabatha, and that the emperor himself died in agony, all because he had adopted heresy and committed incest.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Adomnán does not seem to have believed that he had to look far to discover why God had spared the Picts and Irish in Britain alone when he had struck Britain, Ireland and the rest of western Europe with two great epidemics of plague *c.* 664 and *c.* 684. The coincidences in timing and geography pointed firmly in one direction: he had done so in order to reward them for their continued use of the right Easter table while he punished all the other peoples for their use of the wrong Easter table.

There remains a final question: if Adomnán believed that God had struck western Europe with two great epidemics of plague in order to punish them for their use of the Dionysian table when composing the *VC* *c.* 697, why did he then agree to adopt this table himself *c.* 702? If one takes Bede at face value, he did this at the earnest advice of those more learned than himself who urged him not to act contrary to the universal customs of the church, that is, as a result of the argument from universality once more: 'sed et a pluribus qui erant eruditiores esset sollerter admonitus, ne contra universalem ecclesiae morem, vel in observantia paschali, vel in aliis quibusque decretis cum suis paucissimis, et in extremo mundi angulo positus vivere praesumeret, mutatus mente est.'<sup>34</sup> However, this was an old argument, and it is difficult to understand why Adomnán should have found it any more convincing in itself by 702 than he had earlier. The answer, perhaps, lies in an entry in the *Annals of Ulster* for 700 that

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Exodus IX:8–12; I Chronicles XX:11–30; I Samuel V:6.

<sup>32</sup> Several of Columba's acts of prophecy concern the punishment of wrongdoers (*VC* I.14, 22, 36, 39), and he specifically characterizes the alleged destruction of an entire town in Italy by a rain of sulphurous flame as an act of vengeance (*terrifica ultio*) (*VC* I.28).

<sup>33</sup> Fredegar, *Chronicle* IV.66, ed. J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar with its Continuations* (Edinburgh, 1960), pp. 54–5. See D. Woods, 'Jews, Rats, and the Battle of Yarmuk', *The Late Roman Army in the Near East from Diocletian to the Arab Conquest*, ed. A. S. Lewin and P. Pellegrini, BAR International ser. 1717 (Oxford, 2007), pp. 367–76.

<sup>34</sup> Bede, *HE* V.15: 'but had also been earnestly advised by many who were more learned, not to presume to live with his most few followers in the furthest corner of the world contrary to the universal custom of the church either in the observance of Easter or in any other decrees, [he] changed his mind'.

famine and pestilence struck Ireland that year and lasted for three years so that people were even reduced to cannibalism.<sup>35</sup> Two points need to be noted here. First, there was a twelfth epidemic wave of bubonic plague that erupted either in Constantinople in late 697 or in Syria in early 698, and it is probable that the outbreak in Ireland belongs to this same wave.<sup>36</sup> Second, the famine associated with the plague in Ireland in 700 was probably due to the effects of a cattle epidemic which the *Annals of Ulster* report to have struck Saxon England in 699 and Ireland in 700. Hence the famine probably affected those areas of Britain most dependent on cattle farming as much as it did Ireland, and this may have played an important role in weakening people against the plague. Indeed, the famine may well have forced an increased trade in foodstuffs, particularly grain, that could have contributed to the spread of plague into areas that had escaped relatively unscathed during previous epidemics. It is possible, therefore, that the plague epidemic of 700–c. 702 may have had some impact also upon the Picts and Irish in Britain, and that it was this new realization that God was not in fact protecting these peoples against such epidemics because of their adherence to the 84-year Easter table that finally caused Adomnán to relent in his opposition to the Dionysian table.

In summary, Adomnán always remained conscious that the *VC* was a hagiography of Columba, and that it was not the place to engage in detailed technical debate, whether mathematical or theological, concerning the correct method to use in the calculation of Easter. Hence he did not engage explicitly or at length with this issue in order not to distract from the virtues of his subject. However, it was enough at times simply to spell out certain facts and those engaged in the debate would themselves have known what conclusions to draw. By reassuring monks who knew that Columba had always used the 84-year Easter table that he had indeed foreseen the rise of the Easter controversy, Adomnán confirmed them in their belief that their founder had consciously decided to stick with this table, and that they should do so also. Similarly, by pointing out that only two of the peoples of western Europe had been spared by the recent plagues to monks who knew that a major factor separating these two peoples, and themselves, from the rest was their use of a different Easter table, he encouraged them to continue with their current table.

<sup>35</sup> *Annals of Ulster s.a. 700*, ed. S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster (to AD 1131): Text and Translation* (Dublin, 1983), pp. 158–9: ‘Fames et pestilentia .iii. annis in Hibernia facta est ut homo hominem comederet.’ One notes that this *pestilentia* is not to be confused with the cattle epidemic of the same period because the *AU* include a separate entry for it in the same year.

<sup>36</sup> On this wave, see Stathakopoulos, *Famine and Pestilence*, pp. 121–2, 363–5.