WILLIBRORD

Apostel der Niederlande
Gründer der Abtei Echternach

Gedenkgabe zum 1250. Todestag
des angelsächsischen Missionars

Herausgegeben von Georges Kiesel
und Jean Schroeder
im Auftrag des Institut d’Echternach

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Vorwort

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THE YOUNG WILLIBRORD

BY MICHAEL RICHTER

_Iste pro amore Christi patrion contempsit, peregrinationem elegit._ (Alcuin)

The career of the young Willibrord, those years before the beginning of his missionary work in Frisia in 690, falls into two parts:

1. his first contact with the monastic life in his native Northumbria; and
2. the twelve years he spent in Ireland.

In these years, he received the training and Christian education which motivated him to go abroad and work on the continent, successfully, as far as we know, for almost half a century.

It has often been deplored how poorly we are informed about Willibrord whose undisputed success is barely visible in its details. We have hardly any documentation from Willibrord himself. The basic dates and some facts of his career are contained in the Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum by the Venerable Bede (HE III, 13; V, 10, 11), Willibrord's contemporary. A full Life of Willibrord, by Alcuin, was written about half a century after his death. It is of limited value and the author writes little about the young Willibrord.

Thus the most important informants about Willibrord were, like he himself, of Northumbrian origin. Unlike Willibrord, neither Bede nor Alcuin spent any time in Ireland. It can be argued that Willibrord received the foundation for his later achievements in Ireland, as well as his motivation to go to the continent. The Irish contemporary records which have been preserved contain no information whatever about Willibrord. It is thus all the more important to look closely at the sources which we have mentioned, and to evaluate them in their own historical and historiographical context. Only then can we make full use of them.

The Christian foundations of medieval Europe were laid by Anglo-saxon missionaries on the continent. Their activity began in the late seventh century and reached its climax under St. Boniface.

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1 Use is made here of the edition by B. COGRAVE and MYNORS, Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English people, Oxford 1969 (referred to henceforth as HE); still extremely valuable, especially in its sumptuous annotations, is the edition by Charles PLUMMER, Venerabilis Bædae Opera Historica, Oxford 1896, a truly stupendous work of scholarship.


3 Wilhelm LEVISON, Die Quellen zur Geschichte des hl. Willibrord, originally published in Willibrordus. Echternacher Festschrift zur XII. Jahrhundertfeier des Todes des hl. Willibrord, Luxemburg 1940, reprinted in LEVISON, Aus rheinischer und fränkischer Frühzeit, Düsseldorf 1948, p. 304-313 offers the best survey of the sources; however, he fails even to mention in this article Willibrord's stay in Ireland. This stay is mentioned, albeit briefly, in Levison's other article: St Willibrord and his place in history, The Durham University Journal 32, 1940, p. 23-41 which is reprinted in the same volume, p. 314-329, here 316 f.

in the first half of the eighth century.\(^5\) In learned assessments of this phase of European history, Wilibrd, the fellow-countryman of Boniface, has always received minor treatment only, although in several respects he seems to have prefigured the activity of Boniface. The paths of the two men seem to have crossed briefly in Frisia in 716 and again in 719, but why they parted company, why each thereafter went on his own way, is one of the many questions which are very difficult to answer, not least because Wilibrd's activity as a missionary and Church organizer is infinitely less well documented than that of his younger contemporary Boniface. It can be argued, however, that their different spiritual training may account for difference of work and attitude.\(^6\)

Wilibrd must be regarded, by any standards, as a personality of major importance in the evolution of early medieval continental Europe. The historian reports about the past on the basis of the sources available. The sources for Wilibrd's career have been available for the best part of this century and have been used before. While the formative years of Wilibrd have been known in outline for as long as the subject has been treated,\(^7\) recent research may have added enough nuances to add depth to the general picture. Thus, a fresh look at them might yield new insights.

According to Alcuin, the Northumbrian Wilibrd was offered to the monastery of Ripon under Abbot Wilfrid at a young age of about seven. He stayed there for about twelve years while Wilfrid advanced to the office of bishop. In the year 678 in which Wilfrid was compelled to leave England for Rome, trying to defend his claim to the bishopric in the north of England, and on his way stopping over in Frisia to act as a missionary and preacher for a few months, Wilibrd left Ripon as well, but he went to Ireland and ended up in a monastery directed by another Northumbrian, Ecgbert, at Rath Melsigi. (Bede, HE III, 27) There he received his inspiration for the mission on the continent. Wilibrd is thus one of the representatives of Irish spirituality which did so much to shape Christianity in England, especially in Northumbria,\(^8\) as well as on the continent. This Irish contribution has recently been re-assessed thoroughly, but it still remains to show repercussions in the scholarly world.\(^9\)

Leaving Ireland for the continent with eleven companions in 690, he never returned, as far as we know, either to Northumbria or to Ireland. In this he appears as a representative of the Irish ascetic practice of peregrinatio as it had evolved since the time of Columbanus.\(^10\) It is the context of this which is worth elaborating here.

The Northumbria in which Wilibrd was born in 658 and grew up was strongly influenced by Irish missionaries and teachers. Even the most traditional accounts of the period admit the overwhelming Irish presence in the northern parts of England in the generation after 635 when King Oswald first invited monks from Iona to work in his kingdom.\(^11\) According to these accounts, the Irish impact on nascent English Christianity came to a sudden end when, in 664, a synod was held at

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\(^5\) The standard work here is Wilhelm LEVISON, England and the continent in the eighth century, Oxford 1946 (and later unrevised reprints); for a more recent assessment see Timothy REUTER, ed., The greatest Englishman. Essays on St Boniface and the church et Credton, Exeter 1980.


\(^7\) See Albert HAUCK, Kirchengeschichte Deutschlands, Erster Teil, 1896. 3. Buch, 1. Kapitel, p. 415 ff.; also see Josef JUNG-DIEFFENBACH, Die Friedenbekehrung bis zum Martyrologe des hl. Bonifatius, Modling 1931. I do not intend to provide a full bibliography of works which do not add to this knowledge.

\(^8\) For the more traditional interpretation see Wilhelm LEVISON, England and the continent, p. 60: "Wilibrd was to England what Columbanus had been to Ireland. He inaugurated a century of English spiritual influence on the continent."


\(^11\) See, e.g., F.M. STENTON, Anglo-Saxon England, Oxford 1971, pp. 118-129; for a more recent summary, which is not to be called traditional, see James CAMPBELL (ed.) The Anglo-Saxons, Oxford 1982, chapters 4 and 5; see also James CAMPBELL, The debt of the early English Church to Ireland, in: Ireland and Christendom (see n 9) 332-346.
Streaneshale (later known as Whitby, a Scandinavian name) at which the famous dispute occurred over the various methods of calculating the date of Easter. In this dispute the 'Irish party' under Bishop Colman lost to the 'Roman party' the spokesman of which was a young priest named Wilfrid. Colman thereupon retired to Ireland and was replaced by Wilfrid as bishop. With the appointment of Archbishop Theodore of Tarsus to the see of Canterbury by the pope, the English church became once again (after the Gregorian mission) closely linked to Rome and shed the Irish connection.

This traditional account, which is found in most treatments of the subject, is shaped decisively by the writings of the Venerable Bede, especially his Historia Ecclesiastica, the strongly partisan nature of which is not always sufficiently taken into account. It is necessary to elaborate. For one thing, the work of Irish Christians in Northumbria for a generation before Lindisfarne did not mark the departure of Colman from Lindisfarne and would have recognized that, apart from the monastic tonsure and the way of calculating the date of Easter, the Irish monks taught sound Christianity. Also, a careful reading of Bede's Ecclesiastical History makes clear beyond doubt that the departure of Colman from Lindisfarne did not mark the departure of all Irish personnel from Northumbria.12

Thirdly, while the Irish presence in Northumbria prior to 664 is generally recognized, what is much less appreciated and has not yet been researched adequately (apart by art historians) is the fact that there was a considerable English presence in Ireland in those decades. Willibrord himself demonstrates that Ireland was attractive for seriously-minded Christians even after the alleged 'Irish defeat' at Streaneshale. It may be more than a coincidence that Willibrord and Wilfrid left Northumbria at the same time, in 678, the bishop to go to Rome, the monk to go to Ireland where he joined the English community at the monastery of Rath Melsigi. The location of this community has only recently been clarified when Dr. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín suggested Clonmelsh Co. Carlow as the modern equivalent of Bede's Rath Melsigi.13

The clearest statement about English Christian communities in Ireland is provided by Bede when he mentioned the arrival of the plague in the British Isles in the year 664:

*Haec autem plaga Hiberniam quoque insulam pari clade premebat. Erant ibidem eo tempore multa nobilium et mediocrum de gente Anglorum, qui tempore Finani et Colmani episcoporum, relicta insula patria, vel divinae lectionis, vel continentiors vitae gratia illo secesserant. Et quidam mox se monasticae conversationi fidelter mancipauerunt, alii magis circuendo per cellas magistorum, lectioni operam dare gaudebant; quos omnes Scotti libentissime suscipientes, victum eis cotidianum sine pretio, libros quoque ad legendum, et magisterium gratuitum praebere curabant.* (HE III, 27)

The attraction of Ireland to Englishmen, lay people and clerics, nobles and commoners alike, in the mid-seventh century, is here prominently displayed. Of course, there were political tensions as well as military encounters between Northumbria and Ireland at that time,14 but there was also learned exchange, and apparently the pull of Ireland was still strong enough to attract Willibrord in 678.

Without Bede's account we would know very little of the fascination of Irish Christian schools for English people in the seventh century. Due to his account, we can at least state the fact of this attraction while the details largely escape us. Apart from Rath Melsigi, we know something of only one other English community in Ireland, at Mag-eo (HE IV, 4). The story of this community is one of success and failure at the same time: failure because originally Colman, the founder of this community, had intended to set up a community of all the monks who had gone with him to Ireland after the synod of Streaneshale, Irish and English alike, at Inishbofin. However, it turned out very soon that the Irish and English monks did not get on together, hence the establishment of a separate

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English community in the West of Ireland. Success it had nevertheless because the English community at Mayo is known to have survived there for more than a century at least.¹⁵

Unlike Mayo, Rath Melsigi is not specifically called an English community.¹⁶ It is perhaps due to the dearth of information about this community in general that we know of only English inmates, but we have reason to believe that Englishmen who lived there were shaped by their environment. Surely they had not gone to Ireland in order to keep the Irish spiritual influence at bay. As has been mentioned before, the idea of *peregrinatio* which caught the imagination of Willibrord as well as of his predecessors who went to do missionary work on the continent, had a strongly Irish flavour.¹⁷ In this they showed the spiritual inspiration which the Irish Christians had conveyed to them.

Reference must be made here to another passage in Bede’s work. He writes, in the form of an exemplum, about the reverence shown to the Northumbrian martyr-king Oswald. His story was also known in Ireland, for an unnamed Irish cleric of more learning than devotion to God, on being attacked by the plague and believing to be on the brink of death, begged Willibrord for a powerful relic of Oswald which Willibrord supplied and which did work. Bede got this story from Willibrord via the bishops Willfrid and Acca (HE III, 13).¹⁸ Here we get a brief glimpse not only of an exchange between an Irish and a Northumbrian cleric in Ireland, but also of an encounter between former master and pupil when the pupil had risen to higher office than his master ever was to hold.

Furthermore, it is not enough to point to those English Christians who had gone to Ireland and then left to do missionary work on the continent. Irish Christian communities had much to offer in the field of Christian learning, and the second half of the seventh century is rightly regarded as the high point of Ireland’s radiation. It was the time of the first Latin hagiography, the Lives of Patrick, Brigit and Colum Cille. It was the time of the teaching of Latin as a foreign language, as evidenced in the various grammars. It was the time of the compilation of law, both secular and ecclesiastical. It was also the time of the reception of patristic works in Ireland, writings of the great authors down to and including Isidore of Seville.¹⁹ All this could unfold because living conditions in Ireland were relatively peaceful.

In the light of this the so-called dispute over the date of Easter in Ireland, important as it was for Bede, assumes its proper proportion. The south of Ireland had gone over to the Roman Easter as early as the 630s²⁰ and the north was soon to follow suit. In any case, the English Community of Rath Melsigi received spiritual impulses from their Irish fellow-Christians, impulses which can still be discerned.

The clearest evidence for that is contained in a manuscript which has very close connections with Willibrord, his Calendar (MS Paris BN lat. 10837).²¹ To judge by its contents, this calendar appears to have been written in the first or second decade of the eighth century, thus on the continent. The prima manu entries, however, are clearly in insular script by a scribe known as Laurentius. Daibhi Ó Cróinín has adduced good arguments recently for the assumption that behind MS Paris, BN, lat. 10837 there was an exemplar which was drawn up in Ireland, most likely in Rath Melsigi, and that

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¹³ See RICHTER, Medieval Ireland, p. 96.
¹⁴ This was pointed out by William O’SULLIVAN, Insular Calligraphy: current state and problems, Peritia 4 (1985) pp. 346-359, at 351.
¹⁶ This exemplum was surely included for didactic purposes. Its historicity is more difficult to establish. When the great Plague struck Ireland, according to the Annals of Ulster in 664, 665, 667 and 668, this was prior to Willibrord’s sojourn in Ireland. Those annals do not report outbreaks of the Plague during Willibrord’s years in Rath Melsigi, but they do, at least, mention other epidemics: 680: *lepra grauisima in Hibernia que vocatur bolgoch*; 683: *iniuim mortaliatis puerorum in Kl. Octimbris*; 684: *Mortalitas parumularum*. See Seán MAC AIRT, Gearóid MAC NIOCAILL (edd.), The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131), Dublin 1983, pp. 134-148. See further below at note 26 (Tallaght). Levison does mention this story, Sources, pp. 309-310, but fails to point out that the encounter between Willibrord and the Irish cleric occurred in Ireland.
this exemplar may be dated to ca. 684 when Willibrord had reached the half-way mark of his stay in Ireland. Here we would have, thus, a tangible piece of evidence of the Irish influence on the Rath Melsigi community in the time of Willibrord's stay there. One finds major Irish saints commemorated in the Calendar: St. Brigit (brigide virginitis, 1 Februarii; St. Patrick (sancit patrici episcopi in scotia, 17 March); Colum Cille (sancit columcellae, 9 June). But one also finds the commemoration of the two Ewalds who had gone to convert the Saxons following the example of Willibrord and who had died as martyrs there (Natale sanctorum martyrum heualdi et hevaldi, 4 Oct; cf. Bede HE V, 10). One finds reference to some English rulers who were important for the spread of Christianity: Ecfrith (Ecfridi regis, 20 May); Oswald (Osualdi regis, 4 August); Edwin (edvini regis, 13 Oct).24

In the original contents of Willibrord's Calendar, written up on the continent by a scribe whose work betrays Irish training, we thus see, next to each other, various influences of a general Christian nature as well as more regional characteristics. All of these are important, but for the regional characteristics the influences can be pin-pointed most clearly. The Northumbrian entries reflect Willibrord's country of origin and first monastic training, the country which owed so much in its Christianity to Irish missionaries. The Irish entries can be accounted for best by Willibrord’s stay at Rath Melsigi where the major Irish saints were obviously highly esteemed. But, as we have seen with regard to Oswald, English saints were revered by Irish Christians as well, and they found their ways into Irish martyrologies.25

Of particular importance is, finally, the reference in the Calendar to Pope Gregory the Great (sancti grigori rome, 12 March). The orthography of the name betrays clearly Irish influence still remarkably strong in Echternach.27 The prominence given to Gregory here is perfectly in line with what is known about the reverence shown to him in Ireland in the seventh century while he was still forgotten in Northumbria. It is possible to suggest that he came to be venerated in Ireland first, then in Northumbria, as evidenced in the biography of the Whitby Anonymous and later in Bede's work, through the mediation of Rath Melsigi.28

It may be suggested that the reverence shown for Pope Gregory the Great and, by implication, for Rome, in Ireland,29 a reverence taken over by Willibrord, passed on through him to Boniface,30 Willibrord sought Roman backing for his work at a very early stage of his missionary career: he went to Rome, was consecrated there and given the name Clement.31 It was after this event that Winfrid joined him in Frisia, left him and eventually went to Rome to secure support there.

Thus it appears that the young Church on the continent reformed by the Anglo-Saxon missionaries in the first half of the eighth century, owed its close link with Rome originally less to English and more to Irish inspiration. A prominent link in this chain appears to have been Willibrord who had received both spiritual guidance and impulse to work in Frisia in the community of Rath Melsigi in Ireland.

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22 Dáibhidh Ó CRÓININ, Rath Melsigi, pp. 29-30. His central arguments can already be found in KENNEY, loc. cit.
23 This entry is possibly not prima manus.
24 This entry is possibly not prima manus.
25 LEVISON, Sources, 305. fails to mention the Irish names in the Calendar.
26 This subject still awaits proper treatment. It is worth mentioning here that Oswald, besides other Englishmen, is listed in the Martyrology of Tallaght, ed. R.I. BEST and H.J. LAWLER, Henry Bradshaw Society vol. LXVIII, 1931, sub 5 Aug. The exemplar of this martyrology has been assigned by John HENNIG to ca. 700, see: The function of the martyrology of Tallaght, Medieval Studies 26 (1964) pp. 315-328.
27 In Latin texts from Ireland at the time ~i in the genitive case was usually written as (long) ~i. See also above: patrict. Likewise, the spelling of Colum Cille betrays knowledge of Irish.
29 John HENNIG, Ireland's contribution to the martyrological tradition of the popes, Archivum Historiae Pontificiae 10 (1972) pp. 9-23.
30 LEVISON, Willibrord and his place, p. 323, sees this differently, he assumes a mediation of Wilfrid. It is possible that his personal career, and his exile in England during the Nazi period, made him overrate the English dimension of Willibrord. Certainly, his fine book England and the continent is a token of gratitude to his host country during a difficult time of his distinguished scholarly career.
31 LEVISON, England and the continent, p. 59 f.
The achievements of great personalities are always, among other factors, a reflection upon the environment that produced and influenced them. It does not detract from the contribution of Anglo-Saxon missionaries on the continent to point out those inspirations which English Christians received from Ireland. The evidence for this is contained in the sources, even though it does not strike the observer immediately.
La procession dansante dans la 1er moitié du 20e siècle

Het Sint-Willibrordusmonument te Berchem-Antwerpen. Schone hulde aan de heilige patroon, boegbeeld van de vroege kerstening der Benelux-Landen

ZUR GESCHICHTE DER ABTEI ECHTERNACH IN SPÄTMITTELALTER UND FRÜHNEUZEIT

Arnoud-Jan Bijsterveld
„Sinte Willebrordus eygen“. Het bezit van de abdij Echternach in Texandrië (Nederland en België), circa 700-1300

Petrus Becker
Bemühungen um eine geistliche Erneuerung der Abtei Echternach. Eine Visitation im Jahre 1443

Wolfgang Seibrich
Die Abtei Echternach im Verband des Benediktinischen Provinzialkapitels Köln-Trier

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