NEW HEROES FOR A PAGAN LAND:

CELTIC AND SAXON TRADITION THROUGH
THE VITAE OF ST. COLUMBA AND ST. CUTHBERT

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I. Introduction

As Christianity spread, the incorporation of pagan elements has been both the result of practices which neophytes continued to observe and a valuable tool for making the faith more accessible. In Britain, Celtic and Germanic pagan-heroic ages met up with Christianity from within—the vestiges of the 400 year Roman occupation—and from without—renewed impetus from the Rome of St. Peter. Saints (here limited to western Christendom) often were endowed with popular heroic virtues from their more familiar pagan heritage as well as being uplifted as new heroes by the Church. The early written accounts of these individuals' lives many times display their syncretistic nature through the occurrence of heroic motifs or pagan folklore within the narratives. The pre-conquest lives of St. Columba and St. Cuthbert help illustrate this process as it developed in the Celtic culture of Ireland and the Germanic one of the Northumbrian Saxons.
II. Saints' Lives--Who, What, WHY?

Reading a saint's life these days is about as popular a pastime as playing ma--jong; it is perceived as a bit childish and definitely out of date. In literature, the saint's life is often discarded for its disjoint progression, clumsy syntax and annoying, forthright plagiarisms. Historians scream "anathema" at such fiction posing as some sort of reality. As with the rest of the Medieval period, the saint's life also is relegated to the mere interim activities which took place between the glories of ancient Greece and Rome and the energy of the European Renaissance. Scorned by academians and laymen alike, saints' lives nevertheless were respected and enjoyed for hundreds of years by both parties. What was the attraction?

Popularity is a nebulous quality to determine especially for a genre as broad as the saint's life. There are a few common denominators which can help draw borders, but these do not always apply to every instance. The saint's life tends to be a medieval specialty served in the common language of the church (Latin and Greek); thus the genre is also known as hagiography from the Greek for "holy writing", and the works are often referred to by the Latin *vita*, life. It also has an international aspect in that the veneration of a saint could take place in various locations not necessarily limited to his homeland, especially since many saints were quite mobile in the range of their ministries. The saint's hagiographer was often from yet a
different part of Christendom. Consequently saints came to be venerated in lands far from their native ones.

The documents which followed were meant to be biographies, but both more and less of what biography currently is expected to provide. Most biographers within modern tradition would have their readers form a certain opinion about the person in question, usually an opinion which the author himself has tried to communicate. Very rarely, though, do biographers seek to establish their subject's spirituality, at least not beyond some system of morals, and certainly not to the point of divine favor and miraculous deeds. Also in a society where the scientific method and reason are held to be the only respectable means of expressing non-fiction events, exaggeration and exploits which cannot be substantiated have no place in a biographical work. Gordon Hall Gerould further stretched the boundaries in order to encompass the genre more completely:

The saint's legend is a biographical narrative, of whatever origin circumstances may dictate, written in whatever medium may be convenient, concerned as to substance with the life, death, and miracles of some person accounted worthy to be considered a leader in the cause of righteousness; and, whether fictitious or historically true, calculated to glorify the memory of its subject.

(5)
Such "calculated" efforts clue one in to the extent of influence that the author's intent has on the stories. From its first appearance in the fourth century to Chaucer and beyond, the saint's life has been employed in various ways. Sermons often included material from vitae, particularly when the church calendar became filled out with the saints' feast days. Martyrologies arose from such calendars since an identifying description of the saint tended to accompany the designation of the feast day. Around the fifth century, it was not unusual for a feast day sermon to be nothing more than reading the saint's life to the congregation (Gerould 13-14). During the rest of the year, narrative excerpts from the vitae, called exempli, were used to teach moral lessons. The exemplum grew into a genre of its own during the Middle Ages. In these ways the laity officially received the stories; yet the saint's life always owed some of its form to the folk tradition that the laity had nurtured in honor of an especially noteworthy individual.

The prototype of these works has been attributed to St. Athanasius for his Life of St. Anthony in 357 A.D. Evagrius translated it into Latin for the churches of the West later in the same century. This is not to say that stories were not being circulated about other groups or individuals who had lived and died for the faith. Indeed, the written versions only came about after time had passed, allowing oral memories to be handed down and quite often to be "enhanced." As towns and monasteries grew fond of their
holy dignitaries (i.e. local saints), the body of traditions which inevitably grew up around the saints spread to other areas by word of mouth and then by the written word. In time, this reciprocity led to an accumulation of increasingly more fantastic elements which eventually were incorporated into the accounts. The saints' lives consequently were source of story-telling entertainment as well as instruments of edification. Monastic schools across Europe reinforced religion and morality through the texts of saints' lives. The students might not have been on familiar terms with the *Odyssey*, but could relate the travels of St. Brendan the Navigator; the *pietas* of Aeneas was overshadowed by the piety of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Catherine of Alexandria.

By the sixth century, conventions over episodes like death scenes had developed, resulting in less individualized and less true-to-life works (Gerould 29). Not uncommonly the mother-to-be of a saint received an annunciation or prophecy concerning the holiness and future of her unborn child. Under the category of miracles, a great deal of "enhancement" occurred; the saints walked on water, raised the dead, changed water into wine, and accomplished many deeds after the example and by the power of the Master. At his death bed, a saint would commonly instruct and comfort his friends, praise God, and request that God may be glorified in the completion of his earthly service.

Martyrdoms abounded in declarations of faith and in
executions which required several attempts before the saint actually succumbed. These narratives follow the work of Sabine Baring-Gould. At age twelve, St. Agnes chose to remain devoted to Christ rather than to marry a young Roman noble. An angel clothed and protected her when she was thrown into a brothel for her stubbornness. Thereupon execution by fire was commanded, but the flames subsided and died around her. Execution by sword followed, successfully, after all manacles dropped from St. Agnes' wrists and she herself bared her neck. St. Sebastian, a military commander under Diocletian until found to be a Christian, was left to die after receiving a barrage of arrows from Diocletian's archers. He was found by St. Irene and cared for until Diocletian passed through the area again. Despite Sebastian's weakness, he still greeted the emperor. His reward was to be clubbed to death and dropped into a sewer.

Stories about saints of the first through the fourth centuries centered on the Roman (pagan) vs. Christian (martyrs) confrontations. The men and women who died in this way were held up as martyrs in the original sense of "witness" and were to be emulated for this confession of faith. However, once Christianity became a legal religion in 312 under Constantine the Great, ascetics and missionaries tended to become the more prominent pool from which saints arose. Both missionary life and the practice of asceticism received impetus as the Roman world collapsed in the West. Intrepid men sought to bring back a semblance of order through one faith, replacing the broken fagres of
Rome with the cross of Christ.

Seemingly dauntless missionaries, particularly the Irish and then English, ranged throughout Europe from the sixth to the eighth centuries as *peregrini*, pilgrims for Christ. Papal advice often advised moderation in methods of proselytizing. On the first mission to the Saxons in Britain, Pope Gregory the Great advised St. Augustine of Canterbury, through an envoy, to make use of the pagan temples:

> In this way, we hope that the people, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may abandon their error and, flocking more readily to their accustomed resorts, may come to know and adore the true God.... for it is certainly impossible to eradicate all errors from the obstinate minds at one stroke, and whoever wishes to climb a mountain top climbs gradually step by step, and not in one leap. (Bede I.30)

After the failure of one project to Northumbria backed by the Irish Church, Aidan was chosen to try again "since he was particularly endowed with the grace of discretion" and because he believed that a missionary should follow the example of the apostles by "giving them the milk of simpler teaching, and gradually [nourishing] them with the Word of God until they [are] capable of greater perfection and able to follow the loftier precepts of Christ" (Bede III.5). Conciliatory practices won friends and brothers in the faith
but stopped short of deviating from doctrine. Britain played a leading part in this process where both at home and abroad paganism was evident. The combination of a folk memory and imagination concerning the prominent figures, and the increasing awareness of continental models found the body of saints' lives to be reflecting similar developments in society and in the Church. The people adapted, albeit somewhat nominally, to the Church, and the Church adapted to the people.

The authors of pre-conquest vitae in Britain had the Evagrian *Life of St. Anthony* in mind as well as Sulpicius Severus' *Life of St. Martin* and others, but more importantly they had their own tradition and culture to draw on. From time to time when this happened, somewhat questionable or unusual episodes were included. Slightly provoked curses are flung at certain sinners while others are given time to repent and receive sudden grace from the holy men. The image of the soldier of Christ found warm reception among converts of both heroic Celtic and Germanic societies.

These two cultures, having some common origin in the Indo-European past, played a sizable role in determining the form which Christianity took throughout the British Isles. For although *Britannia* had been a part of an officially Christian empire--the late Roman empire--Rome's religious practices more than the civic organization often proved to have attracted superficial adherents. Therefore, after the Germanic invasions later in the fifth century, Christianity from the Roman occupation may have survived only in areas of
Wales and Cornwall. From these vestiges, the Irish Church developed and became instrumental in bringing the Word to the Picts and the Northumbrians. This sequence of missionary activity allowed time for assimilation of native customs (with pagan overtones) and cultivation of a sense of identity among the Welsh-Cornish-Irish Christians to the Celtic Church.

III. Druids, Doom and Disillusion

Britain converted, almost completely by the eighth century; but from what had the Britons and Saxons turned? For the most part one must turn to neopagans—those who seek to revive non-Christian beliefs like Druidism—to get any idea of the spirit and context of Germanic and particularly Celtic religions. For written commentaries, there are a few observations made by Roman authors, sections of poems and whatever pieces of information which happened to fall from Christian sources as they recorded the triumph of Christianity over the "devil-inspired" heathens. Other information is drawn from archaeological finds, such as inscribed stones (not standing stones which antedate the Celts) and sculpted cult figures.

Pagan Britain evokes visions of hooded Druids milling about a grove of sacred oaks. Apparently this may have been but one aspect of a more involved vocation; however, opinions are split concerning the level of intellectual achievement within the Celtic religious community. One view
sees the Druids as the upper echelon of a frequent dichotomy between the religion of the priests and that of the common people. Among these learned priests, belief in life after death through reincarnation and in a type of monotheism is thought to have been widespread. According to Dudley Wright, "The Druids maintained that the Supreme [Being] had produced a number of intelligences which animated different parts of matter and conducted people to the destiny of the Eternal Will" (23). What the common people assumed to be separate divinities and lesser spirits, especially after contact with the Romans, the Druids understood to be simple extensions of the Supreme Being. These extensions were often given separate names out of convenience so that one could refer to a more specific function—fertility, war, health. Meanwhile the Supreme Being was held nameless. One collection of Welsh bardic tradition compiled in the sixteenth century by Llewellyn Sion of Llangewydd touches on this belief:

Q. Why is it not right that a man should commit the Name of God to vocalisation, and the sound of language and tongue?

A. Because it cannot be done without misnaming God, for no man ever heard the vocalisation of His Name, and no one knows how to pronounce it; but it is represented by letters, that it may be known what is meant, and for whom it stands. Formerly signs were employed.... However, to prevent
disrespect and dishonour to God, a Bard is forbidden to name him, except inwardly and in thought. (Wright 33)

A similar attitude influenced their practice of passing on the most important knowledge orally while lesser matters could be committed to writing.

Many scholars dispute this interpretation, saying that too much is built upon the work of authors who romanticized their reconstructions of Druidism. J. J. Tierney contends that the known practice of human sacrifice surely could not coexist with the level of philosophy attributed to the Druids (Ross 56, n.1). Even in classical times there was a tendency to portray barbarians as primitives with virtues untainted by the civilized--yet corrupted--world. Therefore, most sources are discounted to the point where very little can be ventured about the Druids. Anne Ross goes as far as to conclude:

The Celtic priests, far from being the sophisticated philosophers that the Romans, besotted with their current concept of the "Noble Savage" envisaged them to be, were little different from the priest/shamans of the entire barbarian and later pagan world, concerned with shape-shifting and primitive magic, controlling ritual and propitiating the treacherous gods with sacrifice. (60)

Yet one must counter with the concrete reality of ardent Irish scholarship which surely did not appear and flourish
as a result of spontaneous generation once Christianity arrived. Druidic "colleges" often were adopted as centers for Christianity even while still bearing pagan significance, such as the monastery at Durrow, Ireland which was widely referred to as the monastery on the "plain of the oakwood" (Adomnan 265).

It was commonly believed among the remaining people that spirits inhabited all things, regardless of whether they were extensions of a Supreme Being or not. The tribes probably considered all the gods, goddesses and subordinate spirits of nature to be separate divinities. Rome came and altered little for most of the Britons in relation to the substance of their beliefs. Yet by introducing an organized pantheon to the rather amorphous Celtic divinities, John Mann commented that Rome probably "[assisted] in the creation of deities as individual personalities" (Thomas 27).

Even with the arrival of Christianity, springs still received libations in honor of their local divinity and sometimes in honor of a new Christian saint. The practice of hanging objects on holy bushes for the spirits to absorb various ills continued in the instance of the hawthorne bush of St. Ciaran of Saigher where rags and ribbons are hung in honor of him (Marnell 15). Especially in the decades of transition, the best insurance against the uncertainty of life seemed to be to pay homage to any and all divinities, or, at least, to show respect by including part of the old beliefs in the literature of the new religion.
The religion of the people did include a range of deities all with localized personalities, attributes and names. Cernunnos, the horned one, has been noted as one of the primary war gods, while the threefold goddess Morrigan—lover, mother, death hag—represents not only a manifestation of the Celtic fascination with threes, but also the retention of a powerful female figure. Unfortunately the mythology remains rather garbled in comparison to the Norse one of the same period. Whether this was due to the influx of Roman and eastern religions or not, W. P. Ker wrote that "the Welsh and Irish more and more forgot their [gods'] divinity, and turned their gods into princes or heroes" (59).

Germanic religion is nearly as much a mystery to us, except for a greater number of observations recorded by the Romans, particularly Tacitus' *Germania*, the votive finds in peat bogs and some similarity between Norse and Germanic mythologies. Tacitus pointed out that the Germanic practice of worshipping among trees was based on the opinion that it is not "in keeping with the divine majesty to confine gods within walls or to portray them in the likeness of any human countenance"(109). These gods were part of a pantheon resembling that of the Norse, and their names have lent themselves to our current days of the week. Three of these—Tiwaz (Tiw, Tyr), Tuesday; Woden, Wednesday; Donar, Thursday—were war gods equated with the Roman gods Mars, Mercury and Jupiter or Hercules, respectively, according to their attributes (Todd 183-4). As war gods, they were the
first of the Germanic deities the Romans confronted during the continuing aggressions the two peoples had. Nerthus, or Mother Earth, was the predominant goddess of several tribes. Tacitus described how her priest would draw her veiled chariot through the countryside every spring. Afterwards, it was ceremonially cleansed by slaves who were subsequently drowned.

Despite Woden's responsibility as escort of the dead—thus his connection with Mercury—the afterlife does not figure much in the Germanic psyche, much less any references to transmutation of the soul. Bede recorded the view which one Saxon noble expressed to King Edwin:

When we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day with your thanes and counselors....This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another....Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing. (II.13)

A vestige of this is evident in the "Christian" Beowulf; his hope for existence after death lay in the "doom of the just" (line 2806) and his fame as a hero among the living. As life ebbed from his body following the battle with the dragon, Beowulf asks Wiglaf to take care of his funeral:
Order a bright mound/...after the pyre/ at the sea's edge;/...[it will be] a memorial to my people,/that ever after/ sailors will call it/ 'Beowulf's barrow'/....fate has swept/all my kinsmen/to their final doom,/undaunted nobles./I must follow them. (lines 2802-2805,2814b-2816)

Doom in Old English (dom=judgment) does not necessarily contain the connotation of modern day destruction and ruin, but neither does it imply the joyful Heaven of Christianity.

In practice the two cultures show several similarities, originating in their common heritage. Both the Celts and Germans had a Mercury-type god, Lugus and Woden, each of whom had ravens as companions and carried a spear (Gelling and Davidson 175). The thunder god Donar was worshipped in oak groves which were as sacred to the Germanic tribes as they were to the Celts. Those people who cared for the supernatural aspects of the tribes were held in respect. Veleda, a German priestess, was recognized by the Roman emperor Vespasian for abilities and was honored as a divinity (Tacitus 8). Arthurian scholars theorize that Merlin could have been a Druid acting in the accustomed position of counselor. In addition, the Germans revered springs and wells in much the same manner as the Celts, on the basis of the frequency of votive offerings found throughout Germanic territory.

Into this atmosphere, Christianity was introduced and reintroduced to the British Isles. Ireland received the Faith through St. Patrick, of course, in the fourth century
and through a few more shadowy figures--Ninnian, Palladius--in the fifth century. A century later Ireland, then England, abounded in monastic communities which were busily occupied inspiring *peregrini* (self-exiled pilgrims for Christ), sending missionaries imbued with their cultural heritage to Wales, England and Europe.

**IV. The *Vitae* Take Shape**

Amid the vigor of a missionary-monastic heritage, the earlier *peregrini* and monastic founders were extolled by their brothers for generations afterward. Thus when a *vita* began to be compiled, it was a work of devotion and admiration. And for the congregations, Christian saints provided a useful intercessory service which their pagan heroes could not equal. Writing the work in itself was an opportunity for the author to become intimately familiar with as many of the traditions as he could which touched on his sainted brother in the faith. In both the *vitae* of Columba and Cuthbert, the authors wished to further the memory of their saints and to encourage others to follow such examples. It was a blessing to for an author even to have received the commission, and each almost invariably considered himself unworthy of the task. In the prologue to bishop Eadfrith, the anonymous author of St. Cuthbert's *vita*—liberally borrowing from the *Epistola Victorii Aquitani ad Hilarum de cursu paschali*—asserts:

For this is a great task for me and my powers of
understanding are small.... And I beg you, if anything has turned out otherwise than you wished, that balancing fairly my weakness against the task imposed, you will judge the labor of my imperfect enterprise in terms of duty rather than of merit. (Two Lives 61)

A vita also served to increase the reputation of the monastery whence came the saint. Columba was recognized on the basis of his founding the monastery at Iona even though he was from Ireland and undertook the mission to the Picts in the sixth century. Iona was his base of operations and spiritual retreat. Lindisfarne grew famous through the administration and example of Aidan and Cuthbert. Cuthbert only served as bishop at Lindisfarne for two years before relinquishing that title due to the years of ascetic wear his body had maintained, yet his name is ever linked to that monastery. The brothers kept his incorrupted body for veneration and apparently composed the earliest known vita of Cuthbert. In the various vitae, the recollections of surviving brethren, clergy and lay were handed down until someone culled the material so it could be preserved in writing.

Adomnan related that he drew from "tradition passed on by our predecessors" (185) in both oral and written forms. In addition sections of the text bear close resemblance to earlier vitae from Europe. A comment on Columba's diligence in the second preface follows a section of Sulpicius Severus' description of Martin of Tours (Anderson 187, n11).
While Adomnan was writing the *vita* (ca 700), he was serving as the abbot of Iona where he must have been surrounded by reminders of Columba from his first arrival. The sheer number of accounts floating about at that time can be appreciated in light of Adomnan's admission "that for the sake of brevity, ...only few things out of very many have been written down" (179). Brevity notwithstanding, he still filled the equivalent of 150 pages, covering first, prophetic revelations; second, miracles; third, appearances of angels and heavenly light. M.O. and A.O. Anderson warn though that "his [Adomnan's] value is less for the history of Columba than for his own ideas, and for the circumstances of his own time" (23). The time was alive with the remembered works of the saint who had died a century earlier in 597.

The same year saw the arrival of the first missionaries sent to the Saxons, not by the Celtic Church, but by the Roman pope. Yet due to the Celtic missionaries emanating from the holy isle of Iona, the first Christian Golden Age was initiated among the Northumbrian Saxons instead of among the southern Saxon kingdoms. In 635, Aidan was called from Ireland to found the monastery of Lindisfarne in Northumbria at the request of King Oswald who had come to the faith during a period of exile among the Irish. Thus the Celtic practices gained ascendancy in the north over those of Rome which were being extended in the south. Lindisfarne thrived, but eventually its Celtic heritage was overruled by
the decisions reached at the Synod of Whitby in 664. [See Appendix i]

In the midst of the controversy, Cuthbert became a saint despite his Celtic background. The honor bestowed on him by diehard advocates of the Roman Church suggests the kind of man Cuthbert must have been. His life and ministry outshone any aberrations evident from his Celtic tonsure or the date of Easter that he had most probably practiced until the ultimatum of Whitby. Never at a loss for words against Celtic stubborness and practices, Bede fell under the spell of the gentle bishop and wrote two versions of Cuthbert's life in tribute to his hero.

In the preface to his Historia, Bede cites that his primary source for the vita was an anonymous work which he simply ascribed to "the brethren of the Church of Lindisfarne" (35). Despite the relatively contemporaneous composition (within 15-20 years of the saint's death) of the vita, the anonymous author also felt pressed by the pool of incidents illustrating Cuthbert's holiness which had already started circulating during the saint's lifetime. As noted earlier, the author offers a lengthy strand of apologies for his work and his unworthiness to attempt the work. Evagrius' Life of St. Anthony appears in the background, but the author did not seem to feel obligated to follow it to the letter if it did not suit the character of Cuthbert. He replaced Evagrius' phrase "never through an excess of hilarity burst into laughter" with "at all hours he was happy and joyful" (Two Lives 4). Yet Cuthbert's hagiographer
was Roman and may have felt compelled to protect his subject, himself and the monastery from any taint of unorthodox practices. Although Cuthbert first took vows under the Celtic monastery at Melrose, the *vita* has him receiving the "Petrine tonsure" (77) over a decade before the Synod of Whitby made its pronouncement that the English kingdoms would henceforth unite in worship and practice with the Roman Catholic Church.

For all the unrest among clergy over the Celtic-Roman practices, the differences were not in belief so much as in tradition. Most would have agreed that the Celts, as Bede had noted about Aidan, "believed, worshipped, and taught exactly what we do, namely the redemption of the human race through the Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension into heaven of the Man Jesus Christ, the Mediator between God and man" (III.17). God continued to be the common source of the virtues ascribed to both Columba and Cuthbert, while the time and cultures of each contributed less acknowledged distinctions.

**V. Columba, Soldier of Christ**

Columba emerged from a royal lineage which did no harm in helping establish him as a hero-saint of the new faith. His *vita* bears witness to act upon act of his rather assertive Christianity. Perhaps since he was already perceived around Ireland and Scotland as part of the political authority, he could readily assume an analogous
position on the spiritual level. When accounts of his
demonstrations of prowess and power, which often mirrored
the acts of age-old heroes, circulated, no one seemed to
demn it inconsistent at that time; indeed, it could be quite
useful. Did not St. Paul point out a pagan altar at Athens,
which had been dedicated "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD", as a clouded
recognition of the one true God? Continuing in that
passage, Columba and his brethren could also say to their
audiences, "What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I
proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23b).

Agreement in faith does not necessarily result in
drearly uniformity among individuals. Certainly Columba and
Cuthbert are represented with contrasting qualities within
their own eras and traditions, yet bearing the same faith.
Although Cuthbert was a soldier in his youth, it would not
be ungrounded to suggest that perhaps Cuthbert might have
better represented the name "Columba"--dove--than the saint
of Iona himself. Generally, a dove symbolizes peace;
however, Adomnan did not even mention that aspect in his
preface which examines the meanings of Columba's name.
Rather the dove represents the Holy Spirit, purity,
simplicity and innocence (Adomnan 183). These qualities
could be applied to both men, but Columba did not shrink
from employing force aggressively when it suited his
situation.

Granted, neither the Saxon nor the Irish societies at
the time could claim to be excessively peaceful; still
Adomnan seems to relish Columba's fiery actions more than might be expected for a man of God. One third of the Life of Columba is devoted to his divine miracles, many illustrating this phenomenon by means of his formidable power to curse. Once as he and his tutor were reading outside, a young girl fell dead at their feet, pierced by the spear of "a certain cruel man" (383). Gemman, the tutor, asks Columba, "For how long, holy boy, Columba, will God, the just judge, suffer this crime, and our dishonour, to go unavenged?" Without hesitation Columba proclaims, "In the same hour in which the soul of the girl whom he has slain ascends to heaven, let the soul of the slayer descend to hell" (383/385). The murderer fell dead as Columba finished speaking. Acts such as this one, whether hearsay or actual, circulated very quickly, adding to the saint's reputation.

Not only did Columba command respect for his power from the supernatural realm, but also for his standing among temporal powers. Had Columba desired it, he might easily have shared more in Irish politics; due to his hereditary position within the Ui Neill clan, many kings were his cousins. This clan dominated northern Ireland for several hundred years, originating from the semi-mythological Niall of the Nine Hostages who died ca. 427 A.D. (O'Rahilly 215). Columba moved confidently as an equal among the courts of kings in Ireland, Dalraida (an Irish colony in present day western Scotland) and Pictland (roughly the rest of Scotland).
Tucked in among attestations to the variety of Columba's powers is one section which displays the weight of his unabashed activity within temporal spheres:

And in the terrible crashing of battles, by virtue of prayer he obtained from God that some kings were conquered, and other rulers were conquerors. This special favour was bestowed by God,...as on a triumphant and powerful champion. (199)

Supernatural power tied in such a way to familiar temporal power gave Columba an useful advantage in the missionary field.

In wilderness fields as well, Columba wielded considerable clout. One instance seems to assert his supernatural and temporal powers through his encounter with a boar. Celtic culture regarded the boar as a royal hunt animal with additional martial overtones. In addition, the boar was "perhaps the most typical Celtic animal, symbolic of war and of the sacred ritual of hospitality...and the hunt animal par excellence of the Celtic World" (Ross 352). Celtic literature portrays boars as the most highly esteemed prey both as a divine food and a supernatural challenge. Ross notes that the appearance of other-worldly boars causes great destruction as they elude all, "despite the skill and heroism of their princely or divine hunters" (313). Columba's boar was "mirae magnitudinis" (384)--of astonishing greatness--not a normal boar. God is first invoked, but it is "by the power of his[Columba's] terrible word" (emphasis
added) that the boar falls beneath the mortal blow (385). It is a deed worthy of the Ui Neill and Celtic society, and even the intensity of the words echo (persona nante) with the force of the finest battle iron.

Plenty of battles hardened Columba as a soldier of God, for the servants who were devoted to the divinities of the oaks and springs were not easily vanquished by the servants of the alien Christ-god. After the manner of Elijah and the priests of Baal, Columba took on the challenge of Broichan the magician. Each had probably been well aware of the other's presence for some time, since Broichan was the foster father of the Pict king, Brude, from whom Columba had contrived permission to evangelize among the Picts. Broichan threatens that he will call up winds and fog to prevent Columba from setting sail. Before a curious throng, Broichan enjoyed an early victory, yet Columba maintained that "the omnipotence of God rules all things" (405) and sailed at great speed against the wind.

Other challenges were posed at the pagan court of King Brude. While Columba and a few brothers were singing vespers outside the fortress, the worried magi (priest-counselors) sought to keep the psalms from being heard by the townspeople. Columba discerned this and was given a miraculous voice which sounded "in the air like a terrible peal of thunder, [so] that both the king and the people were filled with intolerable dread" (289).

This followed Columba's initial show of force which won him the kingdom's respect as a holy man, even though it is
evident from the previous examples that this respect did not necessarily result in conversions. Brude shut out the saint at first because he was "uplifted with royal pride" (409). Columba responded by approaching the gate and after "first imprinting the sign of the Lord's cross upon the doors,...the doors opened of themselves" (409). Consequently Brude seemed to think it a wise policy to honor this man as a powerful representative of one of the gods.

Columba confounded the attempts of his opponents with the effect that they had to pay attention to him. Eventually the people moved from a position of fearful attention to one of respectful awe through Columba's continued efforts to demonstrate his God's superiority over their divinities. Not all the Celtic spirits were benevolent, and through one of these, some magi hoped to see Columba defeated. There existed a well whose water caused leprosy, blindness and other ailments. Columba determined to use this opportunity to assert Christ's authority. The conclusion is never in doubt as the saint and his men drink and wash in the water. Adomnan reminds the reader of the score between Columba and the magi: "he often repelled [magi] from himself in confusion and defeat" (349).

Thereafter the well became a blessing; the Christian "spirit" of Columba and his Christ had vanquished the evil spirit and had left healing waters.

Through such acts of power, Columba's prestige among the pagan was undeniable; however, among his Christian
brethren, Columba evoked adoration which was curiously reminiscent of that paid to an earthly potentate. Upon arriving for a visit at one monastery, Columba is met by the brothers who have run in from all parts of the fields and buildings,

as if he had been an angel of the Lord. On seeing him they bowed their faces to the earth, and he was kissed by them with all reverence, and...they led him with honour to the church. (215)

Within Adomnan's work, the saint also becomes a hero, as the holy Columba and as the soldier of God who wrought "terrible vengeance upon enemies" (385) and who was never defeated by any challenge.

VI. Our Most Holy Father and Bishop Cuthbert

In shifting from the sixth century Celtic heritage of the volatile Irishman to the seventh century Saxon heroic society of Cuthbert, the saint-as-hero sentiment generally found an eager following. Cuthbert's life and his hagiographers' renditions of it drew on the Celtic-Saxon traditions which slowly were beginning to be assimilated through the Church. The aggressive quality so evident in Columba's vita does not appear nearly as much. It could be that such an heroic personality in a man of God was not as effective or welcome when the Christian church and monastic organizations were fairly well established and the kingdom was enjoying relatively peaceful reigns. Yet the pagan

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threads still surface from time to time in stylistic devices, like Bede's use of heroic verse for a vita of Cuthbert, and in the use of certain allusions to mythic symbolism. Christianity also provided bards with new figures to extol. Gerould noted that for the Saxon, pagan and Christian works are unified by the singleness of aim that animated their authors: the desire to present a stirring picture of the triumphs of some great soul in contest with the forces of sin. If they can stimulate the imagination to grasp the meaning of the hero's life and can awaken a passion for the warfare of the spirit instead of the sword, they have accomplished their end. (62)

The distinctive heroic verse of the Saxons was applied freely to sacred material. Aelfric, a Saxon scholar of the tenth century, recounted the acts of a native saint--King Oswald of Northumbria. Oswald is depicted as an enlightened warrior carrying on an earthly form of the struggle against evil. Returning from a youth spent in exile among the Christian Irish, Oswald achieved his vengeance on Cadwalla, the British (Welsh) leader who had killed Oswald's Christian uncle, King Edwin in battle [see appendix ii]: "Oswald came to him [Cadwalla] and fought boldly against him/ with a little army, but his faith strengthened him,/ and Christ helped him to the slaughter of his enemies" (Aelfric 127). Oswald continued to exhibit heroic characteristics by falling in battle at the hand of a pagan ally of the late Cadwalla:
the heathen approached the holy Oswald. Then he [Oswald] saw approach his life's ending, and he prayed for his people who died falling, and commended their souls and himself to God, and thus cried in his fall, 'God have mercy on our souls'. (Aelfric 135/137)

The vita of Cuthbert, a soldier turned monk, exhibits a marked contrast to both those of Columba and Oswald by a comment made early in the work: "he [Cuthbert] desired that all his miracles should be hidden so far as this was in his power" (Two Lives 63). The differences extend further, for Cuthbert sought peace and diplomacy while Columba seemed to have traveled perpetually from one confrontation to another. Nobility does not figure in Cuthbert's life with any apparent consequences, nor was he dedicated to the fosterage of the church at an early age as Columba had been. Cuthbert worked as a shepherd and served in the army before he sought out monastic life. Whereas Columba instilled a sense of distance and awe by his more aggressive style, Cuthbert overwhelmed his contemporaries and succeeding generations by piety of the spirit, rigor of his asceticism and gentleness of life.

Through the eyes of an unknown monk of Lindisfarne in the eighth century, Cuthbert appears to be a saint whose behavior is closer to current perceptions of sainthood; and if the miracles offend any sensibilities, at least Cuthbert's qualities of compassion, sobriety and the desire
to conform to God's will are evident even when the wonders are taken lightly. This may well be a conscious effort to deemphasize warrior motifs on the part of Cuthbert's hagiographer and the church, while hints of less violent pagan motifs remain for familiarity's sake. There is a promising description of Cuthbert as a child of eight years:

He surpassed all of his age in agility and high spirits, so that often, after the others had gone to rest their weary limbs, he, standing triumphantly in the playground as though he were in the arena, would still wait for someone to play with him. (Two Lives 65)

Thus far the author seems to be following the conventional practice; however, in the next few lines, the nascent saint is called to task for his horseplay by a prophetic toddler who cries to Cuthbert, "Be steadfast and leave this foolish play.... O holy Bishop and priest Cuthbert, these unnatural tricks done to show off your agility are not befitting to you or your high office" (65). If Cuthbert is not a warrior-saint, then perhaps his cultural legacy is endowed through more subtle means than Columba's.

Curses are not to be found in the anonymous vita, nor kingmaking; there is no heading: "Summary of miracles of power" (Adomnan 189) as is found in Columba's vita. Instead Cuthbert appears in all the "steadfastness" for which the toddler could have hoped. The exorcism of demons and other miracles are portrayed as works of love, not conquest.

A certain man sought a priest at Lindisfarne monastery
who would perform last rites for his pious wife. Ashamed that her sickness was demon induced, he avoided mentioning it. Cuthbert, volunteering himself, had already discerned the woman's affliction and "began to console [the husband] with kindly words" (93). Upon arriving home, the woman met them. It took only the touch of the saint's reins to rid her of the demon, thereby restoring her health.

In another instance as a plague besieged a village, Cuthbert comforts a woman holding a dying child and "blessing the infant, kissed it, saying to the mother: 'Woman, do not weep; your son will be saved and no one of all your household, who is still alive, will perish by the plague" (121). Finally, a servant to one of King Ecfrith's companions was brought back from his deathbed when "the holy bishop had pity on him" (121). In such a manner, Cuthbert ministered compassionately among his flock within a pure Christian context.

Animals too loved and respected Cuthbert, and it is here that Germanic tradition, mixed with a fair portion of Celtic influence, divulges itself through stylistic details. Bertram Colgrave comments that Cuthbert's relationship with animals follows a line of hagiographic tradition from the Irish and even back to the Egyptian (Two Lives 320). St. Paul of Thebes (ca. 234-347) reportedly led such a solitary life that his only friends were animals, and that his burial was left to the labor of two mourning lions. The Celtic heritage also was not so divorced from the Catholicized
monasteries that such cultural endowments no longer had meaning.

During the night, Cuthbert often kept vigil by walking on the seashore. Once he was seen to walk into the sea and upon reaching the shore again two sea animals followed him "humbly prostrating themselves on the earth; and, licking his feet, they rolled upon them, wiping them with their skins and warming them with their breath" (81).

One other example involves two ravens who learned to have a care for the labor of others. While Cuthbert dwelled in the solitude of the barren Farne island, the birds had been extracting nest material from the thatched shelters. They ignored the saint's repeated prohibitions until he finally was moved to banish them. A couple of days later one returned, and "with outspread wings and drooping head, began to croak loudly, with humble cries asking his [Cuthbert's] pardon and indulgence" (103). Once forgiven, the ravens thankfully took up residence again, bringing with them a piece of lard that was used for a whole year to grease boots.

Colgrave pursues Bede's assumption that the "sea animals" are otters on account of the supernatural properties which the Irish believed otters had and the frequency with which friendly otters appear in Irish saints' lives (Two Lives 319n). Even more than the otter, ravens are found acting alone or accompanying Celtic and German divinities. Because of the birds' affinity for battlegrounds and the meals provided thereof, both peoples
often made ravens the companions of their warrior gods (see III., Lugus and Woden). Ross summarizes, "The role of the raven in the entire Celtic tradition at all stages [is] as a bird of omen, possessing outstanding intelligence" (251). By including images such as these Celtic/Germanic cult animals, the author could link Cuthbert to the sacred tradition of both worlds.

But what seems more important to the anonymous cleric is the way Cuthbert interacts with the animals which further reveals the saint's blessed position in creation. Like Adam before the fall, Cuthbert is allowed communion and communication with the dumb creatures. It also attests to his share in the company of Celtic saints. Eleanor Duckett notes that among this group:

A bird drops a feather to make a pen for St. Molaise of Devenish when he wants to write a book; a wild boar of the forest tears with its tusks twigs and grass to build a cell for St. Ciaran of Saigir; a stag holds wide open on its antlers the book of St. Cainnech of Aghaboe as he seeks to study in the forest. (15-16)

The bird, the boar, the stag—all were highly esteemed within the Celtic psyche as suitable companions for their heroes.

The Venerable Bede may have decided that this subtlety would not express the true excellence of Cuthbert's example. Bede's Life of St. Cuthbert tends to elaborate the simpler
narratives of the *Anonymous Life* with the intent of catering to a larger readership. In one episode, he clearly returns to military imagery. One of Cuthbert's practices which hearkens back to his Celtic background was his predilection for solitary ascetic life. After passing some time among the brothers of Lindisfarne island, he left for a neighboring island which the anonymous Lindisfarne cleric noted that "almost no one could remain alone for any length of time on account of the various illusions caused by devils. But he [Cuthbert] fearlessly put them to flight" (*Two Lives* 97).

In contrast, Bede quotes Ephesians 6, which describes the arming for a soldier of Christ, and explains that consequently:

> The wicked foe himself was driven far away together with the whole crowd of his satellites. This soldier of Christ [Cuthbert], as soon as he had become monarch of the land he had entered and had overcome the army of the usurpers, built a city fitted for his rule. (*Two Lives* 217)

Being the careful historian for which he is so well known, Bede may seem to be creating more of a fiction than is warranted; however, one should recall the way a *vita* was perceived at this period, as was covered earlier. The task then arises to determine his motivation. He might be improving the spare narratives of the anonymous author with the more striking and appealing heroic style. Then again it might go deeper.
There is a light-hearted tone in the anonymous *vita* which is generally followed in Bede's rendition but for such instances of enhancement. About twenty years transpired between the anonymous work and Bede's in which political and ecclesiastical affairs appear to have disturbed Bede. Peace exists, but he is wary of the calm surface which induces: Many of the Northumbrians, both noble and simple, together with their children, [to lay] aside their weapons, preferring to receive the tonsure and take monastic vows rather than study the arts of war. What the result of this will be the future will show. (Bede V.23)

The Lindisfarne brethren at the turn of the century could bask in the twilight of their great Christian kings Edwin, Oswald, Oswin and Oswy, and Aldfrith who reigned over a period of seventy years. However, between 704 and ca. 730 three kings died and one had been deposed and restored. If the warriors were abandoning their weapons and neglecting the operation of the nation which allowed them to prosper, then Bede would have every right in hagiographical tradition to promote the more aggressive temperments of the earlier Northumbrians in order to protect what had been England's first Golden Age. The anonymous author could indulge in the Christian atmosphere of his monastery and quietly allude to his pagan heritage and that of his fellow Northumbrians while presenting an adapted hero-saint.
VII. Summary

Too easily these accounts of a former age's role models can fall in among volumes of the Grimms' fairy tales and Mother Goose; yet within all of them are fragments which must be brought out of the nursery and given fair consideration for their contribution in reflecting aspirations and fears of an age which served as a vital bridge between our world and that of the ancients. Whether Christianity aided or hindered this process is not the question to be posing at this point. But where Christianity was most successful, it did not scorn all local traditions as Pope Gregory made clear in his instructions to St. Augustine of Canterbury.

At a time when scholarship depended upon the Church for life, those with an academic or artistic bent found refuge and work. And as Bede noted, many were young nobles who joined orders and brought their songs and heroic outlook with them. Their traditions did concern the church from time to time. In 747 the Anglo-Saxon Council made several "suggestions" that preachers not "declaim in the manner of secular poets" and that monasteries beware of becoming "resorts for poets and harpers and foolish tale-tellers" (Albertson 21). Although without these newly converted poets, musicians and artists making their contributions, it is doubtful that Northumbria could have enjoyed the cultural excellence which probably produced Beowulf (Two Lives 10).
In addition, the Celts maintained a vital spiritual and artistic presence among the Saxons which is still visible in the fantastic knot work and calligraphy of the Lindisfarne Gospels which were completed just after Cuthbert's death. Contorted animals wind themselves about the gospel texts in the same way that they had earlier adorned pagan altars and pre-Christian decorative wares. These were some of the most readily adaptable pagan motifs since, as creatures of the One True God, they could be used to reveal the Creator's works or to test men (e.g. Cuthbert and the sea creatures; Columba and the boar).

Columba's story also shows strands of earlier tendencies woven into the material of the new faith. For, as Ian Finlay states, "to the ancient Irish, not even God's appointed purpose for a man could be allowed to obscure the fact that he was kin to him who occupied the throne of Tara of the Kings" (51). Different generations look for heroes who can evoke fitting respect in that society and provide hope for that age. Columba fulfilled such requisites among those whose faith still lay in the unabashed wielding of power by prophet-counselors and hereditary nobles. In his own way, Cuthbert reflects a shift toward more restraint in the working of God's power so that it reveals His love rather than His vengeance. The constant friction that existed among the seven Saxon kingdoms continually taxed the practice of Christ's injunction to love one's enemies, "Christian" though they were.
Old habits do not have to die hard but can be assimilated into acceptable forms that live on and leave their mark in a way that ameliorates the perception of those outside the Church and allows some room for neophytes to relate to the transitions more easily.
APPENDIX i: CELTS AND CATHOLICS

It must be kept in mind that this dispute arose over custom and not over doctrine. Isolation from the continental developments began what later invasions solidified, namely that the Celts became fond of their independent, monastic organization and were wary when asked to shift loyalties, especially by newly converted invaders. The most serious points of contention were the date of Easter and the monastic tonsure.

In 457, Victorius of Aquitaine reformed the calculation for setting Easter which the Roman Church adopted, but the Celtic Church in general did not. When these two groups were practicing in close proximity, as they were in the Northumbrian royal family, there were unsettling situations. Bede recorded:

It is said the the confusion in those days was such that Easter was sometimes kept twice in one year, so that when the King had ended Lent and was keeping Easter, the Queen and her attendants were still fasting and keeping Palm Sunday. (III.25)

Parts of southern Ireland, who were able to keep in touch with continental activities because of their more frequented sea routes, conformed with the Roman Easter nearly thirty years before the Synod of Whitby in 664 (Chadwick 129).

Bede also presents the arguments regarding the canonical tonsure. The Celts are accused of wearing a
tonsure "characteristic of simoniacs and not of Christians" (Bede V.21). A Catholic monk shaved his crown leaving a ring of hair to symbolize Christ's crown of thorns, while the Celt shaved from his ears forward (Bede 344n). Ian Finlay seeks a deeper origin for the Celts' tenacity about this tonsure by noting that "it is a reversion to the druidical tonsure" (59). Thus the Celtic Church probably regarded the Roman unity movement as much a threat to her cultural identity as an attempt to join Christians in fellowship.
Interestingly enough, Cadwalla, according to Bede,"professed to call himself a Christian, [although] he was utterly barbarous in temperment and behavior" (II.20). Edwin had been converted by a Roman missionary from the south; however, Cadwalla had done such a thorough job of ravaging Northumbria after his victory that Christianity had to be reintroduced to the kingdom. When Oswald invited missionaries, they were from the Celtic Church with which he was more familiar. This account may contain double prejudice on the part of Bede. As a Welsh leader, Cadwalla's faith, nominal as it may have been, emanated from the Celtic Church tradition. Thus not only did Cadwalla disrupt a peaceful Christian--Roman Catholic--reign of seventeen years, but also he came from the erring Welsh/Celtic Church. Bede goes on to condemn the Welsh, saying,"Indeed even in our own days the Britons pay no respect to the faith and religion of the English and have no more dealings with them than with the heathen"(II.20). Apparently, the Britons (Welsh) never felt a divine calling to preach salvation to the people who had displaced them, often quite violently.
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ADDITIONAL SOURCES


