

P.p1 position that
shaped england's
foreign and domestic



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Apple-tab-span {white-space: pre}Before the seventh century, the Celtic church of the British Isles existed in relative independence from the Roman church, retaining autonomy in its composition. Although there are records of interactions between the two churches from AD 314 and the Council of Arles onwards, the distance, both geographical and cultural, between Rome and the Celtic lands had helped to form a 'natural division'. Eventually, however, the Roman bishops, spurred to create conformity and exert influence abroad, began sending bishops on missions to England to teach the believers there and cement Roman Catholic traditions as the common practice. As a result of the presence of these bishops and missionaries in the British Isles, disagreements occurred over various doctrines and traditions; these disagreements created century-long dialogues and bloodless power struggles - the eventual result of which was the victory of the Roman church in England. The Synod of Whitby served as a place of division marking the establishment of Roman practice as the norm in Northumbria, and the beginning of the eventual Romanisation of England. From a long-term perspective, the Synod of Whitby established the first instance of submission by Britons to the authority of Rome, a position that shaped England's foreign and domestic policy until the Reformation. In the mid seventh century, two Christian movements were at work in Britain. The Celtic monks in Ireland and Scotland, who belonged to the Irish Church, maintained an independent

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religious body, separate from the Roman missionaries, commissioned by Pope Gregory I, who initially established their mission in Kent and spread their message from there.

Celtic Christianity differed significantly from Roman Christianity, both in theory and in practice. According to Katherine Scherman, ' Irish Christianity was pure, spiritual, intensely personal, dedicated only to the absolute word of God. Rome's was materialistic, tightly organized, widely social in intent, intolerantly conformist'.

Fundamental doctrinal and social differences between the Celtic Christians and the Roman Church made cooperation and peaceful coexistence difficult, as each held the other to be at least somewhat heretical. As recorded by existing accounts created around the time of the Synod, the majority of the debate focused on the issue of the calculation of the dates for Easter celebration. According to the Irish Christians, their heritage could be traced to the apostle John and his churches, and thus Easter should be celebrated as demonstrated by John. The Romans, however, insisted that the churches as established by the apostles Peter and Paul practiced Easter in the pattern that all should follow. This meant that Easter was celebrated on different days for each church, according to the faith of adherence. The Synod, however, was not entirely focused on this one issue.

The styles of monks, particularly the type of tonsure worn and the values that hairstyle represented, were also debated at the Synod. While the origin of the tonsure worn by Celtic Christians was not certain, anecdotal evidence makes clear that the Roman model was significantly similar to the pattern

worn by slaves in the Roman Empire. To the Roman Church, this type of tonsure was symbolic as a picture of the crown of thorns which Christ wore. The difference in tonsure style served as physical evidence of the differences between the two faiths, but there were also differing doctrinal interpretations that led to significantly distinct ecclesiastical practices. The Celtic Church was independent, with abbots often taking precedence over bishops. Its clergy and organisation lacked the structure of the Roman Church. Cenobitic monasticism emphasised community life and separated the lifestyle of the Celtic monk from the Roman one. Customs of Celtic Christianity were integrated closely with structures of indigenous tribes and derived from native customs, particularly the tendency to support women in positions of authority.

By contrast, the Roman Church maintained a rigid hierarchy, with the position of the Bishop of Rome evolving into the ultimate figure of authority. Bishops worked under the direction of central authority to lead religion in diverse areas, maintaining a uniformity in belief and practice. Roman Christianity became associated with concepts of kingship and regal authority as distinct territories depended on religious support to establish and maintain governments. Unlike Celtic Christianity, women were forced into a position of complete subordination to men and prevented from holding positions of leadership within the Church. The mindset that all the churches and Christians in the civilised world should have the same doctrine and structure proved detrimental to the continued differences between the two churches. Bede, in his account of the proceedings, stressed that unity in the church, under the Roman tradition, was of the utmost spiritual importance.

This was especially true when concerning the celebration of Easter and other festivals. King Oswiu, ruler of Northumbria from 642-670 AD, declared this ideal to be valid when he called the synod in his opening address decried that ' it was fitting that those who served one God should observe one rule of life and not differ in the celebration of the heavenly sacraments, seeing that they all hoped for one kingdom in heaven'. As historians have observed, ' there seems to be no reasonable doubt but that the cleavage between Roman and Celtic Christians was very wide, and could not be bridged without one party's giving way to the other'. A dispute among Northumbrian royals dispute brought tensions to head and key religious leaders to Whitby Abbey to discuss the future of Christianity in Northumbria; King Oswiu, raised in the Celtic tradition, celebrated Easter on a different day than his queen, Eanfled, a devout Roman Christian. Additionally, Alchfrith, a son of Oswiu, also contributed to the religious conflict that led to the synod. In the early 660s, he expelled Ionian monks from a monastery and then reassigned control of that monastery to Wilfrid, a Northumbrian Roman Christian. These actions increased tensions within the royal house between followers of the Roman faith and Celtic Christians; he provided incentive for his father to call for the convocation of a synod to settle religious difference. These conflicts, both royal and stylistic provided the reason and setting for the Synod of Whitby.

In the seventh century, there were significant differences between the Celtic Christians and the church of Rome in many areas of doctrine and ecclesiastical polity. As earlier stated, the prevailing minder of the day meant that these differences could not continue unchecked. Since the differences between the two organisations precluded compromise, resolution

required that either the Celts or the Romans concede; the Synod of Whitby was called to settle these differences and establish order. Extant accounts of the Synod of Whitby focus mostly on the debate over the dating of Easter, though discussion over appropriate tonsure style was also recorded.

According to Bede's narrative, Bishop Colmán argued the Ionan calculation of Easter on the grounds that it was the practice of Columba, founder of their monastic network and a saint of unquestionable holiness, who himself had followed the tradition of St. John the apostle. Wilfrid argued the Roman position on the grounds that it was the practice in Rome, where the apostles Peter and Paul had taught; it was the universal practice of the Church throughout the continent; the customs of the apostle John were particular to the needs of his community; Columba had done the best he could considering his knowledge, but the Ionan monks at present did not have the excuse of ignorance. Ultimately, the argument that Peter holds the keys to heaven and is the rock upon which the Christian Church is built led King Oswiu to rule in favour of the Roman Church. With the conclusion of the Synod, a process of Romanisation began in the British Isles, a movement incomplete for centuries but immediate in its impact. As a result of this decision, Bishop Colman and the Celtic Christians left and returned to Lindisfarne, then withdrew to Ireland, where the followers of the Celtic Church could practice freely.

The English episcopate of Lindisfarne, which had been held by the Irish for thirty years, was transferred to the Romans as after the Synod. The episcopal seat of Northumbria was transferred from Lindisfarne to York;

Lindisfarne, which had previously been identified with Irish-Celtic spirituality,
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had lost appeal with the rejection of Bishop Colman. York, a spiritual centre with more previous Roman influence, became the heart of theological and ecclesiological thought and activity in the British Isles. The chief advocate for the Roman position during the Synod later became Bishop of Northumbria. Throughout Northumbria, and eventually the rest of Britain, Roman Christianity became the mainstream religion; the discipline of the Roman organisation influenced all.

Although the Church of Rome held sway over theological practice in Northumbria, contact between Roman and Celtic Christians following the Synod of Whitby was mostly peaceful, as a religious hierarchy had been formally established. Despite an improved relationship, however, the Celtic Christians continued to oppose Roman traditions until the eleventh century when they were finally assimilated into the Roman religion. The outcome of the Whitby synod was symptomatic of the growing influence of the European Church in Britain. More than simply a Northumbrian affair, the decision of Oswiu at Whitby Synod was symbolic of the subjugation of the British Church to Rome. Even from a medieval perspective, the adoption of Roman practice was considered to be a climax, or turning-point in the history of the English and Irish churches, as suggested by Bede's strategic placement of the Synod of Whitby in the Ecclesiastical History. Furthermore, Bede wanted to stress the harmony that existed between the "divine law" and the "human law" as a result of this synod, a concept that shaped the legislations of medieval and early modern Europe. This harmony could not exist without the adoption of a universal religion, and the Synod of Whitby allowed the Church of Rome, which already dominated religious thought on the Continent, to align itself

with the leaders of Northumbria and unite distinct peoples through the practice of a singular faith.

Though the Roman victory at the conclusion of the Synod of Whitby in 664 AD was incomplete, King Oswiu's decision had indeed signalled the beginning of the end for autonomous Celtic Christian spirituality. His decision made eventual domination for the Roman Church in Celtic lands a possibility, if not an inevitable outcome. Indeed, the Synod of Whitby confirmed the influence of the Roman Church on Britain and laid the foundation for the complete Romanisation of British Christianity throughout the Middle Ages.