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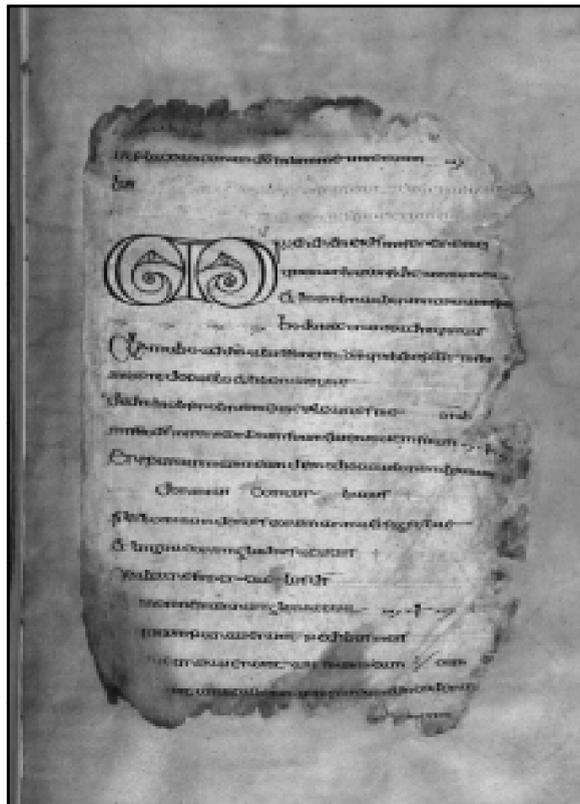
# Points of interest

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## The first case of copyright infringement, AD 560

Last year, on June 9th, 1997, Scotland celebrated the 1400th anniversary of the death of her best known saint, St. Columba who was abbot and founder of the monastic settlement on the island of Iona. He brought Christianity to Northern Britain, including the Picts in Scotland, and made Iona a place of sanctity and learning which became famous all over Western Europe. Many

celebrated his anniversary on the Island of Iona and elsewhere in Scotland last year but few would have known it was because of a conviction for copyright infringement that he first exiled to Iona. Today we know many of the details of the life of St. Columba because of a work celebrating his life that was written within a century of his death by Adomnan, a successor to Columba as



*Part of the original document, the subject of the first copyright infringement in AD 560  
(Copied with permission of the Royal Irish Academy)*

Abbott of Iona who died in AD 704, and by chapters on Columba in a book by the Venerable Bede in AD 731. There are also writings of many other later authors whose accounts add to our knowledge but are less reliable. More information on background and sources, and a translation of Adomnan's *Life of Columba* by Richard Sharpe<sup>1</sup>, were recently published as a Penguin Classic and make interesting reading. So are two recent popular books in the Historic Scotland series 'Picts, Gaels and Scots' by Sally M Foster<sup>2</sup> and 'Iona' by Anna Ritchie<sup>3</sup>. The original copied manuscript, that St. Columba is said to have copied in his own hand, still exists and is the prized possession of the library of the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin (a copy of one page is shown in the figure). Although the main facts about his life are not disputed, it is difficult even in Adomnan's work to separate historical fact from myth and from stories which have been embellished over the years. The following is therefore a record of what has traditionally been believed about the Saint, rather than an account that is necessarily factual in all historical detail.

St. Columba was born in Donegal in the North West corner of Ireland on December 9th, AD 521 of noble parentage: on his father's side; he belonged to the Royal family which ruled in that part of Ireland, one of the most prosperous areas of the island at that time (because of its easily tilled light soils). His mother is said to have been descended from the King of Leinster, the province around Dublin. Indeed if he had not entered the church, Columba might have become a King himself. This Royal and therefore politically influential background greatly influenced events which were to follow. Columba's birth came in the century following St. Patrick's missionary work in Ireland and a little over a hundred years after the fall of the Roman Empire. Some scholars are said to have fled in front of the Barbarians from the East as they overran the Roman provinces of the continent and Britain; and to have brought their learning with

them to Ireland, which had not been occupied by the Romans.

Some time after St. Patrick's mission a Christian monastic movement which had begun in Syria and Egypt had spread to Ireland and new monasteries in Ireland became the centres of religion and learning not only in Ireland, but also in Europe. It was in this exciting environment of the new Christian faith and new Latin learning and civilisation coming from Rome that the young Columba grew up. After some private tutelage appropriate for a Royal child, Columba was sent for further education to a monastery called Moville (the site was recently destroyed by a housing estate near Belfast) and then to a well known monastic school and seminary at Clonard in the centre of Ireland. There he was ordained a Priest and given his Irish name Colmcille (pronounced Colm-kill), the name by which he is still known in Ireland today. He became dedicated to the monastic movement and on returning to his native Donegal he began successfully to establish his own monasteries, helped by a growing reputation for piety; however his success was almost certainly made easier by his Royal background! One of these first monasteries was on an Island called Doire, meaning oak, now the site of the city of Londonderry. He was still only 24 years of age but he set out in the following decade to expand a network of monasteries outside Donegal throughout the large part of Northern and central Ireland now governed by his relatives. He went about this with enormous drive and energy and obviously with great political and managerial skills besides religious fervour and scholarship. His foundations included some major establishments which appear on the tourist maps in Ireland today such as Kells, Swords, Tory Island and Glencolmcille.

Life in these monasteries was not unlike life in a monastery today – time was spent at prayer, teaching and study, and household and farming duties as well as providing food and accommodation for travellers. But there was another

important activity: the copying of manuscripts, which took up a high percentage of the time of the monks because of the need for new copies of the bible and other manuscripts in the rapidly expanding monastic network. Although each monastery had its own abbot, Columba maintained overall control and appointed the abbots, travelling between monasteries and visiting these frequently. He also visited other monasteries besides his own and this gave rise to the copyright violation.

The illegal copy was of a new Latin biblical manuscript which St. Finian, Abbot of Clonard monastery where Columba had been a student, had received from Pope Pelagius and had just brought back from Rome. This would have incorporated the latest and most authoritative revisions of the text from Rome and would have been of great importance to the Irish monasteries. When he was shown it during a visit, Columba wanted a copy for his own network of monasteries. There must have been great rivalry between the monasteries as there is between Universities today and Columba began to make a secret copy without obtaining permission from St Finian. Unfortunately St. Finian is said to have grown suspicious and to have sent one of his young monks to spy on Columba; and his deceit was discovered.

There then followed a dispute over the ownership of the copy with the two abbots backed by their respective kings. This eventually led to a court case with the High King of Ireland as judge. His judgement, in AD 560, established for the first time the principal of copyright:

*'To every cow its calf, to every book its copy'.*

Unfortunately, Columba and his Royal family did not accept the judgement; the dispute turned to violence and to a battle between the supporters of the two sides in AD 561 in which it is said that 3000 died. The battle was probably fuelled by other disagreements between the families and the figure of 3000 dead

is probably an exaggeration, but it appears likely that Columba took an unsaintly part in the battle or at least gave his side support.

The shock of hearing of such activities on the part of an apparently saintly man who had done such good, must have been considerable. It led to a special Irish Synod of Bishops and Abbots who decided that Columba should be exiled from Ireland.

So, in AD 562, Columba is said to have set out with 12 followers from Derry to sail north to exile in the Scottish Isles. The banks of the river Foyle were lined with people sorrowing that they had lost their very popular and influential Abbott. Columba travelled just over the horizon and landed on an island from which it was just not possible to see Ireland, the Island of Iona and there set up a new monastery. Columba was by this time aged 42 and yet his main life's work was to come. He now extended his ecclesiastic influence to two other kingdoms, to Dalriada (which consisted largely of the Inner Hebrides and much of County Antrim in N.E. Ireland and whose King was a cousin of Columba) and to the kingdom of the Picts (which extended from the Forth to all of Northern Scotland). Iona was probably near the boundary of the two kingdoms, under the control of the Picts and therefore well situated to become the centre of Christianity for both kingdoms. Columba converted the king of the Picts and through him brought Christianity to all of his kingdom. He built several more monasteries across Scotland, particularly in the Hebrides, but some further south in England. Although most of his energies were now turned to Scotland in the latter part of his life, he continued to control and add to his network of monasteries in Ireland and to have great secular influence in Ireland as well as Scotland. It is known that he travelled to Ireland twice before his death, once to open a new large monastery, Durrow, in the Centre of Ireland and once to give advice to 'a meeting of kings' in AD 590.

His presence at this meeting of kings illustrated his great secular influence throughout much of Ireland and Scotland before his death. Indeed no king in Ireland or Scotland could be crowned without Columba's support. For example, in AD 574 when Conall, King of Dalriada died, Columba favoured a cousin, Aidan, rather than the King's eldest son, Owen, to succeed him; and Aidan became King. Aidan asked Columba to crown him king and for this purpose Columba brought a coronation stone from Tara in Ireland and devised a coronation ceremony similar to an ordination ceremony for the first time in history. This was subsequently copied in almost all European coronations. The Coronation stone used by Columba was the Stone of Scone and all subsequent kings and queens of Scotland have been crowned on it, including our present

Queen Elizabeth II. So the legendary influence of Columba extends even to the monarchy today – all because of a copyright conviction.

#### Reference

1. Richard Sharpe, *Adomnan of Iona, Life of St. Columba*, Penguin Books, Ltd., London, 1995.
2. Sally M. Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots*, Historic Scotland Series, B.T. Batsford Ltd., London, 1996.
3. Anna Ritchie, *Iona*, Historic Scotland Series, B.T. Batsford Ltd., London, 1997.

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