

Oriental Influences on the Religion of the Celtic Church.

FROM the first century onwards, till the Celtic period was merging into the Roman Catholic age, Scotland was subjected to influences which were Eastern in type. Even in the days when the Roman army garrisoned the Antonine and the Hadrian Walls, a considerable proportion of the troops came from the Orient. The Hamian archers from the Syrian Orontes, the cohorts from Commagene and other Asiatic provinces, the altars to the Tyrian Hercules, the Phœnician Astarte, the Phrygian Cybele, the Sol Invictus of Doliche, are all proofs of how many links bound Scotland to the East. Mithraism, with its tremendous challenge to Christianity, was an Oriental faith, which very nearly mastered the country. It is possible that traces of these Eastern cults may be found in the Bull slabs of Burghead,¹ and in the rites associated with the 'Burning of the Clavie' on Hogmanay² in that town. Similar Bull slabs have been found at Inverness,³ and in a fort at the top of the East Lomond Hill in Fife.⁴

In all probability Christianity entered Britain by the channels of trade and commerce and through Christian soldiers in the Roman army. Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, Sozomen and others all speak of the devotion and earnestness of the British Church, and their words imply that close communication was kept up between the lands round Palestine and the distant British Isles. It was the British Churches which most ardently upheld Athanasius of Alexandria in his stand for Nicene orthodoxy against Arianism. The Patriarch was most grateful for this support, and increasingly the links uniting Egypt with Britain were strengthened. From A.D. 386 to 400 quite a number of Oriental writers speak with warmth of British piety as a feature well known in Eastern Church circles. Chrysostom at Constantinople, Jerome at Beth-

¹ See Stuart, 'Sculptured Stones of Scotland,' i., pl. 38; Sir Arthur Mitchell, 'Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.,' x. (1874), 661.

² Dr James Macdonald, 'Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.,' iv. (1868), 359.

³ Dr Joseph Anderson, 'Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.,' xxiii. (1889), 349; T. Romilly Allen, 'Early Christian Monuments of Scotland,' iii., 103 f.

⁴ J. M. Corrie, 'Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.,' lx. (1925), 32.

lehem, Theodoret at Antioch, and others all speak of British Christians with an intimacy that betrays constant intercourse. This connection was intensified by the frequent pilgrimages of British Christians to the Holy Land and to Syria, referred to in many histories and 'Vitæ.'¹ Seven Egyptian monks, interred at Disert Ulidh, are invoked in the 'Felire of Oengus.'²

When the Roman legions withdrew from Britain the intercourse between Italy and the British Churches was interrupted. The Celtic Church increasingly looked to Egypt, and not to Rome, for her inspirations and models of Church life. In particular, the Church imported from Egypt the monastic system as the dominant framework of ecclesiastical society. It was Pachomius of the Thebaid in Egypt who, in the reign of Constantine the Great, built the first monasteries, and gathered 'regulars' around him instead of the previous eremitical form of devotion. Eustathius, bishop of Sebastia, introduced the system into Armenia, Paphlagonia, and Pontus.³ John Cassian, through his Eastern travels, became so enamoured of the *lauras* of the Thebaid that on his return to Marseilles he wrote the 'De Institutis Cœnobiorum,' and set up there a monastery on the Egyptian pattern. From there the practice spread over Gaul, and was transplanted into Ireland, Wales, and Scotland by men like S. Ninian, who saw with admiration S. Martin's monastery at Tours; and by S. Patrick, whose experience of monastic life at Lerins moved him to introduce the system into Erin. The cœnobitic life which multitudes of monks followed amid the burning sands of the Nile Valley was reproduced amid the damps and snows of Scotland. Before Rome had adopted the idea, the Celtic Church absorbed it, and soon Ireland was covered with monastic establishments, to which thousands repaired. The Celts found that the system could be fitted into their clan organisation, and thus the nation adopted it with enthusiasm.⁴

In these monasteries the government was quite different from that of the Roman Church. The abbot-presbyter was supreme, and to him even the bishops were subject.⁵ This excited the amazement of the Venerable Bede with

¹ Palladius, 'Hist. Lausiæ,' cxviii.; Theodoret, 'Philoth,' xxvi.

² Colgan, 'Acta Sanctorum Hiberniæ,' p. 539.

³ Sozomen, 'Hist.,' iii., 14.

⁴ See Sir E. Anwyl in Hastings' 'Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics,' ii., 71, art. "Asceticism (Celtic)."

⁵ Bede, 'Hist. Eccles.,' iii., 4.

his narrow views of Church life. Had he been a travelled man and not a recluse, he would have known that the Celtic Church based her system on that current on the Continent and in Egypt. Presbyter-abbots in Egypt and in Gaul had the power to ordain, and abbots sometimes presided at Synods where bishops assembled.¹ Still more divergent from Roman practices was the liberty accorded to Celtic monks to marry. Athanasius, in his Letter to Dracontius urging him to accept a bishopric, used this argument with force, stating that bishops and monks were free to marry if they chose.² Professor Sayce similarly states: "As in Egypt, so in the Celtic Church: the 'monasterium' or 'collegium' was an assemblage of huts in which the monks, both cleric and lay, lived with their wives and families."³ "The existence of married priests in the Celtic Church," says F. E. Warren,⁴ "was due to its independence of, not to toleration by, the Roman See." In the Scottish Highlands celibacy of the clergy was unknown till near the Reformation. Hence the frequency of reference to the sons of the clergy. 'Mackellar' means the 'son of Cealloor,' the superior of a monastery; 'Macpherson' is the 'son of the parson'; 'MacVicar' is the 'son of the Vicar'; 'MacNab' the 'son of the priest.'⁵

The great size of the Egyptian lauras was copied in Ireland, &c. If one of the monasteries in the Thebaid had its 5000 monks, Bangor-on-the-Dee had 2000; the Irish Bangor, 3000; Clonard, 3000. These monasteries had no cloistered court, no common sleeping-room: each monk had his separate cell. Thus the details were entirely different from the Roman Benedictine model, which did not come into use till later. The "Laus perennis," the perpetual song of praise kept up by relays of choristers day and night, was similarly an importation from the East.⁶ It came from Egypt into Wales, where Kentigern and Asaph developed it, and Comgall at Bangor made it a part of the regular routine in his missionary college in Ireland.

¹ Migne, 'Patrologia Cursus,' lxxviii., 392; Cassian, 'Collatio,' iv., 1; Reeves, 'Adamnan,' p. 178.

² 'Epist. ad Dracont.' (ed. 1698), p. 267; Bingham, 'Antiquities of the Christian Church,' ii. (1843), 321.

³ Sayce in 'Scott. Ecclesiolog. Soc. Trans.,' iii. (1912), 257.

⁴ Warren, 'Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church' (1881), p. 14.

⁵ Dr T. M'Lauchlan, 'Celtic Gleanings,' p. 71.

⁶ See Baronius ad an. 459 'ex Actis Marcelli.'

The Celtic monasteries also followed the Egyptian model in this, that it was not idle contemplation which occupied the inmates, but active work and hard manual labour. There were endless duties that had to be undertaken: gardening, agriculture, draining of marshes, carpentry, weaving, tanning, shoemaking, copying of manuscripts, and many other activities, thus establishing a great difference between the Celtic ideals of monastic life and those in monasteries that originated within the Roman Church.¹

In regard to the liturgical services of the Celtic Church there are resemblances to those in use in the East which cannot be accidental. The 'Rule' of S. Columbanus, which he introduced into Gaul from Ireland, employs many Eastern words not found in Latin countries. Warren has summarised the points of connection between the Celtic Church and the Orient as follows: ² (1) the Episcopal benediction immediately preceding the communion of the people, and sometimes bestowed in the Eastern fashion; (2) the veiling of women at the reception of the Eucharist; (3) the use of unleavened bread; (4) the custom of fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays; (5) several other points of ritual. It may be objected that it is not conclusive to affirm that these features point to an Eastern origin, inasmuch as very early Western authority can be found for most of these Orientalisms in representations in the catacombs, or in early Italian mosaics. Nevertheless it is undeniable that in the 'Book of Moling,' the 'Book of Diama,' and the 'Book of Deer,' there are fragments of liturgies preserved in the Celtic tongue which take us back to the fourth or fifth century, and which bear unmistakable evidence of their Eastern origin. "These fragments of Oriental liturgies," says Bishop Ewing,³ "coincide with what is known of the liturgy in the Churches of Phrygia and Ephesus over which S. John presided. The probability is, therefore, that they came from that quarter, and, if so, an explanation is afforded of the belief which assuredly prevailed among the Celtic Churches that they had their customs from the East, and followed the example of S. John." Hence their plea at the Synod of Whitby as against the later Roman style.

The chief features which distinguished the Celtic

¹ See Cassian, 'Instit.', x., 23; Sozomen, 'Hist.', vi., 28.

² F. E. Warren, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

³ Ewing, 'The Cathedral Church of Iona' (1866), p. 27.

Church from the Roman have been enumerated by Warren as follows: ¹ (1) the date for the celebration of Easter, the Celtic Church following that of the Orient; (2) the fact of single instead of trine immersion in baptism, the omission of unction, and the ceremonial washing of the feet after baptism; (3) the tonsure, which was different in the Celtic Church from that in the Roman; (4) the consecration of bishops by a single bishop instead of by three, as in the case of S. Kentigern; (5) the sections of Scriptures used at ordination which differ from those in the Latin Ordinals; (6) the anointing of the hands of deacons and priests at ordination, with differences in robing; (7) the peculiar mode of consecrating churches and monasteries, not by dedicating them to departed saints but by naming them after their living founders; (8) the Liturgy, which, as we have seen, diverged greatly from that in use in the Roman Church; (9) the Communion in both kinds, given to the laity as well as to the priests.

These differences are so great as to preclude the notion that the Celtic Church derived her order from Rome. For the first three hundred years after Christianity was born, Rome was not even Christian. It was a pagan city, while Christianity was a power elsewhere, especially in the East. It was not Roman but Celtic missionaries who converted the greater part of Germany, Switzerland, and even of Italy.

The same Eastern connections are observable in early Celtic architecture. Fergusson maintains that there is not a trace of any 'Roman' basilica church in Ireland before the Norman Conquest, and that everything in the way of church design confirms the belief of an intimate connection with the farther East.² The same smallness of size of the churches is observable in Ireland, Scotland, and in Egypt. The Roman practice was to erect a large structure after the pattern of an Italian law court where crowded audiences could attend; the Oriental was content with a small structure, where the priest could celebrate the divine mysteries with a few earnest worshippers. This was the habit in the Celtic churches.³

Similarly in the orientation of Celtic churches the

¹ Warren, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-82.

² Fergusson, 'Illustrated Handbook of Architecture,' ii., 915.

³ See on this, Dr Joseph Anderson, 'Scotland in Early Christian Times,' i., 126.

practice diverged from that of Rome. In the East all churches faced east, the congregation faced the east, and the dead were buried with their feet towards the east.¹ Tertullian states that from this cause Christians were suspected of being sun-worshippers.² This practice of precise orientation was carried over into the Celtic Church, which practically invariably insisted on the correct facing of any ecclesiastical structure. All Celtic churches were built east and west, the altar being at the east end, the people entering by a western door and facing towards the east. Not so the Roman practice. Many of the Roman churches were pagan basilicas adapted to Christian worship, and these might or might not be oriented. Of forty-five churches built in Rome, thirty-five have their sanctuaries in the west end, and nearly every point of the compass is represented.³ Thus it is seen that while the Celtic churches kept by the Oriental custom of orientation, Rome had little influence in determining the regulations for church architecture in Ireland and Scotland.

Many of the details of the structure of the Celtic churches are clearly a direct copy from the churches whose remains are still extant in Egypt. The church of S. Brigid at Kildare had the well-known three internal divisions which obtain in many of the Coptic churches, and similarly elsewhere. The characteristic Celtic 'cachel' or wall surrounding the various buildings of a monastery finds its counterpart in various Coptic churches.⁴ The 'wagon-vault roof' seen in Egypt was carried to Ireland, and reproduced there in many a sacred building.⁵ The interior ornamentation of Christian Celtic art is clearly derived from the East. The 'wheel cross' of the early Christian Wigtownshire stones is of Egyptian origin.⁶ The Ruthwell and Bewcastle crosses are deeply indebted to Egyptian conceptions, and the motifs worked out are distinctly Oriental,⁷ the interlacing of designs, the plait-work, the crosses, the foliaginous scrolls being all traceable to Egypt and Syria.

Nearly all the celebrated Celtic manuscripts by their

¹ See F. C. Eeles, 'Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.,' xlviii. (1914), 169.

² Tertullian, 'Apology,' 16.

³ J. P. W. Young, 'Trans. Scott. Ecclesiolog. Soc.,' viii. (1926), 111.

⁴ See Dr J. Cromarty Smith in 'Scott. Eccles. Soc. Trans.,' vi. (1920), 110.

⁵ Butler, 'Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt,' i. (1884), 14.

⁶ Prof. Sayce, 'Scott. Eccles. Soc. Trans.,' iii. (1912), 256.

⁷ Dr J. King Hewison, 'The Runic Roods of Ruthwell and Bewcastle' (1914), p. 30 f., 129 f.

design and caligraphy link us in thought with the East, not with Rome. The 'Gospels of Lindisfarne,' the Irish MSS. of the New Testament, the 'Book of Kells,' and other documents have all been shown to be essentially based on Oriental models, phraseology, and design.¹ Even the pigments used in the adorning of these MSS., which have so marvellously preserved their brilliant colours after many centuries, have been ascertained to be identical with those of ancient Egypt, of whose arts the Celtic monks possessed the secret.²

Most of the articles in ecclesiastical use in Egypt, both formerly and to-day, so closely resemble those in the Celtic Church that they might almost be thought to have been the product of the same workshop. The leather satchels for carrying sacred books,³ the Celtic *cumdachs* or metal cases for manuscripts, the '*flabellum*' or fan, the '*bachul*' or Celtic crozier, the bishop's crown (not a mitre), the white short-sleeved dalmatic, the Coptic armlets, the chasuble worn in Alexandria, and numerous other articles are practically identical as used in the Delta and in the Scoto-Irish Church.⁴

The field of inquiry might be much more thoroughly explored, but enough has been adduced to show how close was the contact between the Celtic Church and the Orient. It is evident, therefore, how far from the truth is the statement so often made by prejudiced and ignorant writers that the Church of Columba, of Moluag, and of Brendan was entirely one with the Roman Church. It was not so. The Celtic Church, while cherishing kindly feelings towards all Christian brethren, stood apart from all subservience to Rome, and the independent way in which S. Columbanus rebuked the Pope, and urged him to repent, bluntly stating that he was in error, is still another proof of how the Celtic Church did not take its instructions from Italy. It was to the gracious East, to Syria, to Palestine with its holy memories, and to Egypt with its splendid traditions, that the Celtic Church looked for its guidance and its inspiration in ritual, worship, architecture, and law.

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¹ Sayce, *op. cit.*, p. 256; F. E. Warren, *op. cit.*, p. 51 f.

² Prof. G. T. Stokes, 'Contemp. Rev.', xlviii. (1885), 906.

³ Curzon, 'Monasteries of the Levant,' p. 105.

⁴ See Butler, *op. cit.*, ii., 171, 197, 229.