Introduction

This volume presents a selection of papers given at the 'Columba and Iona: An Interdisciplinary Conference' held 9-10th December 2021 to commemorate and celebrate the 1500th anniversary of the date of the birth of St Columba (Gaelic: Calum Cille), founder of the monastery of Iona.[1] The conference was organised by researchers working on the project 'Iona's Namescape: Place-names and their dynamics in Iona and its environs', funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, based at the University of Glasgow. Bringing together multiple themes and disciplines with the common aim of discussing all things relating to St Columba and Iona, the conference allowed participants to explore a broad selection of topics, ranging from Iona's medieval maritime context (Dr Ewan Campbell, Dr Russell Ó Ríagáin and other contributions in this volume) to the present-day visitor experience on Iona (Dr Krittika Bhattacharjee, Peter Yeoman).

Organisers of conferences during the years of 2020-22 will undoubtedly remember the multitude of changes necessitated by the Pandemic. The decision was made to hold the conference online, which had implications for the format of the conference in various ways. As a relatively large, interdisciplinary conference with thirty-six papers, it seemed important to embrace the successes of previous comparable conferences held online over the previous year.

Launching the conference on Thursday (9th December), Prof Thomas Clancy, the principal investigator of the Iona's Namescape project, remarked that, given the coincidence of our project with the 1500th anniversary celebrations for the birth of Columba, it seemed appropriate for us to host a major conference, to showcase new research, some 25 years on from the last major conferences on Iona

[1] We extend our gratitude to our colleagues for all their help with the conference. Particular thanks to Gillebrìde Mac 'IlleMhaoil for giving us permission to play his music and to Eleanor Thomson and Gina Lyle for monitoring the chat and assisting with the running of the conference. The conference was held under the auspices of a research grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). We are grateful for their support of the conference and project. We are also grateful to Dr Nike Stam and the organisers of the Medieval Multilingual Manuscripts Conference (2021) for allowing us to tap into their knowledge and experiences.

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and Columba, in the centenary of Columba's death year, in 1997.[2] He then paid tribute to several recently deceased scholars whose 'work has been so influential on us, and whose presences will be very much missed both at this conference, and also at our elbows as we undertake future research.' Richard Sharpe, who was a supporter of this project in its application phase and would have been on its advisory board, died on 22 March 2020, before we heard about funding, and Ian Scott and Ian Fisher both have sadly passed away since the project got under way. All three made multiple contributions to our understanding of Iona and its remains; all who study Iona will be forever in their debt.

The traditional date of the saint's birth, 7th December 521, is of course not an entirely straightforward matter. Although this is the 'traditional' date of the saint's birth, it seems appropriate to briefly unpack the issue here. We do not know for historical fact what day, month or year Columba was born. This is not a great surprise—this is information we rarely know about anyone from the early Middle Ages; dates of death are much more reliably known.

Columba's birth is recorded as a bare fact in the early annals, and formed a part of the 'Chronicle of Ireland' which existed before 911, but the precise year it applied to is slightly uncertain, ranging between 519 and 523 in the records. According to Dan McCarthy,[3] who on this issue may be right, the best evidence is that in the 7th century people thought he had been born in 520. Despite this, a scholarly tradition, of uncertain origins, has long fixed on 521 as the year of his birth, and it is for that reason that in Ireland and Scotland, 2021 has been the year dedicated to celebrating Columba's birth. To stress then, 521 is a tradition of *scholarship* rather than anything else.

That Columba was born on 7th December is a tradition of considerably greater antiquity. The earliest annal entries link Columba's year of birth and the death of St Buite mac Bronaich,

[2] There was also an 'Adomnán of Iona' conference in 2004, held on Iona, since published: Jonathan Wooding, Rodney Aist, Thomas Owen Clancy and Thomas O'Loughlin (eds) *Adomnán of Iona. Theologian, lawmaker, peacemaker* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2010).

[3] Daniel McCarthy, 'The chronology of St Columba's life', in Pádraic Moran and Immo Warntjes (eds), *Early Medieval Ireland and Europe: Chronology, Contacts, Scholarship: A Festschrift for Dáibhí Ó Cróinín* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 3-32.

founder of Monasterboice in Ireland, and it may be that this led to his birth date being pegged to the feast of St Buite, 7th December.[4] This is made explicit in the Middle Gaelic Life of Columba, which Máire Herbert has cogently argued to have been produced in Derry in the middle of the 12th century.

> *Do rangir tra Boíte mac Brónaig i n-uair a etsechtai in tíi Colum Cille co n-epert fria a muintir: 'Ro genair isin oídchide anocht mac án oirmitnech fiad Dia 7 dáinib 7 do-raga sund i cind .xxx. bliadan onocht. Dá fher déc didiu bid he a lín 7 is e foillsigfides mo ligisea 7 tórindfess mo relicc 7 biaid ar n-oentu hi nim 7 i talmain.'*
>
> Buite son of Brónach at the hour of his death foretold Colum Cille, and said to his community: 'On this very night has been born a boy who is glorious and august in the sight of God and of men, and he will come here thirty years from tonight. Twelve men will be in his company, and it is he who will reveal my grave and mark out my cemetery, and the association between us will exist in heaven and on earth.'[5]

It is this Life that clarifies 7th December as the day Columba was born. But the Life is also very confident that he was born on a Thursday (spoiler—7th December was not a Thursday in 521).

> *Amal ro terchanad tra o sruthib Erenn 7 amal it-cess i fhísib ro genit Colum Cille amlaid. Gortán didiu ainm in luicc in ro genir. I septid Decimbir tra aria lathi mís frene ro genir. Dardaín didiu ar aí lathi sechtmaine. Amra tra in mac ro genir and, mac rig nime 7 talman .i. Colum Cille mac Fedlimid meic Fergusa meic Conaill Gulban meic Néill Noí-giallaig. A mathair tra do Chorprigiu Laigen .i. Eithne ólmár ingen Díma meic Noee.*
>
> As was prophesied by Ireland's elders, then, and as was seen in visions, so was Colum Cille born. Gortán is the name of the place where he was born. His birth was on the seventh of the ides of

[4] For instance, Annals of Ulster 519.1: *Natiuitas Coluim Cille eodem die quo Bute mc. Bronaigh dormiuit*, 'The birth of Colum Cille on the same day as Buite son of Bronach fell asleep'. Cf. AU 523.2, 523.3; Annals of Tigernach 520.2.

[5] Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic* Familia *of Columba* (Oxford, 1988; repr. Dublin, 1996), 224-25, 252.

> December as regards the day of the solar month, the day of the week being Thursday. Wonderful indeed was the lad who was born there, a son of the King of heaven and earth, Colum Cille son of Fedlimid, son of Fergus, son of Conall Gulban, son of Niall Noígiallach. Of the Corpraige of Lenster was his mother, Eithne, the outstanding daughter of Díma son of Noee.[6]

This idea that he was born on a Thursday became part of elaborated tradition represented by a poem preserved in the Bodleian manuscript Laud Misc. 615 and incorporated in Mánus Ó Domhnaill's Life. The poem confirms that he was born on a Thursday:

> *Dardaín breith Coluim Cille*
> *a nGartan uasal ainglidhe,*
> *dár indis Pádraig na fledh*
> *do Brighid re ndul ar nem.*
>
> On Thursday was born Columcille
> In lofty Gartan of Angels,
> As Padraic of Feasts had foretold
> To Brigid ere going to Heaven.[7]

However, it goes far beyond this, and claims that all the nodal points in his life happened on a Thursday: his christening, the battle of Cúl Dremne, his first steps, his death.

Despite the uncertainty regarding the historical date of St Columba's birth it seemed appropriate to mark the occasion in some way, and the Iona's Namescape Columba & Iona conference was organised.

Keynote lectures on diverse topics were delivered by Prof Thomas Charles-Edwards, Prof Heather Pulliam (both included in

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[6] *Ibid.*, 225-26, 253. Interestingly, the nearest year to the traditional one in which 7 December fell on a Thursday was apparently 523 (one of the years in his birth is given in the Annals of Ulster by one of the interpolators). Calculation via timeanddate using the Julian Calendar.

[7] A. O'Kelleher and G. Schoepperle (eds), *Betha Colaim Chille. Life of Columcille, compiled by Maghnas Ó Domhnaill in 1532* (Illinois: University of Illinois, 1918), 168-71; the poem is separately in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 615, p. 21, attributed there to Mura, whence it has not been fully published, to our knowledge.

this volume) and Dr Tomás Ó Carragáin who presented insightful comments on the monastic landscapes of Iona's contemporaries in the Irish midlands. The remaining thirty-three papers were pre-recorded by speakers and released to attendees for watching ahead of time. The bulk of the live portion of the conference consisted of virtual round-table discussions centred around twelve themes outlined in the programme. These sessions likewise provided diverse and stimulating discussions ranging from the women religious on Iona, to Columba in the 19th and 20th century. During the breaks attendees were able to enjoy music from Gillebrìde Mac 'IlleMhaoil's new album, 'Freumhan Falaichte' ('hidden roots'). The first day concluded with the screening of a short film on Calum Cille, place-names and shared Scottish-Irish cultural heritage by Co-Roinn Ghàidhlig Mhuile & Idhe | The Mull & Iona Gaelic Partnership. The second day closed the conference with the premiere of a cèilidh-film for the island of Ì | Iona, a project spearheaded by Alasdair Whyte, produced by Ross Wilson and featuring Logie Johnston, Riona Whyte and the pupils of Bunessan Primary School.[8]

A fortuitous outcome of having a conference online is the ability to reach a broad, global audience. Despite the study of St Columba and Iona being a relatively specialised subject, we attracted a geographically diverse selection of attendees. Some tuned in from expected places in Scotland and Ireland (Edinburgh, Glasgow, Kells, Belfast, Galloway to mention some). We were also delighted to see several participants tune in from Iona. Other attendees joined us from places which would have made an in-person event considerably more inaccessible, including Boston and New Delhi.

The volume contains a selection of the papers presented at the conference. To best represent the diversity of topics the contributions have been divided into four themes:

Iona: The monastery and its seascape
Artistic output: Sculpture and manuscripts
Hagiography: Columba and others
The wider world of Iona

As a way of connecting the contents of the volume to the interests of the Iona's Namescape project, four place-names from the project

[8] The cèilidh-film is available on the project Youtube channel.

corpus have been selected to represent each section, including a short discussion of the names below. The result is a metaphorical map representing the mental and physical landscape of Iona and its monastic history.

I
Iona: The monastery and its seascape
Tobar na Gaoithe Tuath, 'the well of the north wind'[9]

Figure 1: Tobar na Gaoithe Tuath. Image credit: Thomas Owen Clancy

In Section I: 'Iona: the island and its seascape', three chapters (Márkus, McAlary, Evemalm-Graham) engage with the activities of the monastic community on Iona during the early medieval period

[9] Note on spelling: place-names discussed here reflect the spelling used for the Iona place-names resource. These generally conform with current standard Gaelic spelling and grammar rules, but in some instances have been adjusted to reflect local dialectal variations. Where forms are firmly attested in both Gaelic and English, a dual-naming protocol is used, giving the name both in Gaelic and English, e.g. Crois Mhàrtainn | St Martin's Cross.

and later. Three chapters (Charles-Edwards, Macaulay, Petts) look oceanward to discuss the monastic seascapes of Iona and the British Isles more broadly. All chapters center around the realities of monastic island living, whether it be exposure to wind and weather, or a desire to maintain the sanctity of the island of St Columba.

With its connection to the ocean and wind, Tobar na Gaoithe Tuath 'the well of the north wind' has been selected to reflect the contributions in this section. Now a barely visible pool of water, especially during dry weather, this well features prominently in traditions associated with wind and weather on Iona; undoubtedly important matters for island-communities for whom a favourable wind is essential. The realities of navigating adverse weather are ever-present. According to Seton Gordon:[10]

> the people of Iona were wont, after the close of the harvest, to set out for Glasgow in their smacks, carrying with them the produce of the island. For this passage a steady northerly wind was all-important, so that before they set sail the voyagers made their way to a certain well on the island, stirred its waters—the while uttering mysterious sentences in the Gaelic, which have now unfortunately been lost—and asked the Spirit of the Well that the wind might be favourable to them. Afterwards they proceeded to another well, going through the same ceremonies here and asking for a steady and continuous south wind to bring them back to lona. The two wells are known as 'Tobar na gaoithe tuath' and 'Tobar na gaoithe deas,' that is, 'the well of the north wind' and 'the well of the south wind.'

Mairi MacArthur notes that Malcolm Ferguson who spent a week on Iona in 1893 was told of wells of the four winds, though not their locations, and that a family whose forefathers had come with St Columba 'had been blessed from generation to generation with the mysterious gift of changing the wind when circumstances rendered it desirable to do so.'[11] Attractive though this notion may be to some (that practices preserved on Iona reach back to the arrival of Columba or date even earlier and reflect ancient, pre-Christian beliefs), critical scrutiny of the relevant 18th and earlier 19th century

[10] Seton Gordon, *The Land of the Hills and the Glens: Wild Life in Iona and the Inner Hebrides* (London, 1920), 49.
[11] Malcolm Ferguson, *A Trip from Callander to Staffa and Iona* (Dundee, 1894), 119,

sources suggests, in fact, that the notion of a supernatural wind-raising well is a product of the late 19th century 'romantic' expectations that tourists brought to the island. The name is attested only from 1920 and the story appears to have been borrowed from an older tradition relating to one or more stones near the Abbey.[12] It is a salutary example of the dynamism of names.

II
Artistic output: Sculpture and manuscripts
Crois Mhàrtainn | St Martin's Cross

Figure 2: Crois Mhàrtainn | St Martin's Cross. Image credit: Gilbert Márkus.

Section II: 'Artistic output: sculpture and manuscripts' contains contributions with a focus on the tangible artefacts of Iona and other medieval monastic communities in the Gaelic world. These are artefacts which can still be directly experienced, whether it be high crosses like Crois Mhàrtainn | St Martin's Cross (Pulliam), manuscripts like the Book of Kells (Thompson Whitworth, MacGabhann) or the Book of Durrow (D' Alisera), or art produced during the Celtic revival (Macdonald). As demonstrated by Heather Pulliam in her contribution, Crois Mhàrtainn | St Martin's Cross is a significant part of the symbolic viewscape of Iona. The cross, along with other surviving sculpture produced on Iona, is undoubtedly one of the most tangible remains of the artistic skill and devotion of the Iona monks, and in light of this, it has been selected to reflect this section.

[12] Katherine Forsyth, 'Wells and winds, stones and ships: The evolution of an idea and the names it generated on Iona' (forthcoming).

One of Iona's best-preserved early crosses, it is first mentioned by name on a sketch created under Edward Lhuyd's auspices in 1699, there labelled 'St Martins Cross'.[13] Martin Martin described it as 'St. *Martin*'s Cross, an entire Stone of eight Foot high'.[14] Its Gaelic name is first recorded in 1771 as *Crois Mhartain*. Richard Reece was dismissive of this evidence asserting the names were likely of modern origin, a view which perhaps had undue influence on Historic Scotland, who in their old Official Guidebook emphasized the late attestation of the other High cross names.[15] On the contrary, however, the post-Reformation history of Argyll, especially the iconoclasm of the 1640s, makes it highly unlikely an association would be made afresh with a saint in the 16th or 17th century. [16] Although Ian Fisher was speaking specifically about Crois Mhàrtainn | St Martin's Cross when he noted, 'there is no reason to doubt that it is an authentic medieval designation', the same would apply to the crosses named after Sts John, Matthew, Adomnán and Brendán. Given the ample evidence from early Irish sources of saints' names being given to crosses as early as the 9th century,[17] and in view of the high reputation of St Martin of Tours in the early Irish church, attested by his commemoration in the liturgy at Iona in the time of Columba, his name may have been associated with the cross from the time of its erection.'[18]

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[13] J. L. Campbell and Derick Thomson (eds), *Edward Lhuyd in the Scottish Highlands, 1699-1700* (Oxford, 1963), plate XV.

[14] Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1703), 259.

[15] Richard Reece, *Excavations at the Monastic Site in Iona 1964-1974*, *UCL Institute of Archaeology Occasional Publication No. 5* (London, 1981); Dunbar, John G. and Ian Fisher, *Iona* (Edinburgh: HMSO, 1983), 15.

[16] Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven and London, 2002), esp. 221-26.

[17] Ann Hamlin, 'Crosses in Early Ireland: The evidence from written sources', in Michael Ryan (ed.), *Ireland and Insular Art AD 500-1200*, (Dublin,1987), 138-40; Katherine Forsyth, 'Naming, forgetting, remembering, imagining: The namescape of Iona's stone sculpture' (forthcoming).

[18] Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments and Constructions of Scotland, *Argyll: An Inventory of the Monuments,* vol. 4, *Iona* (Edinburgh, 1982), 204.

III
Hagiography: Columba and others
Tòrr an Aba 'mound of the abbot'

Figure 3: Tòrr an Aba. Image credit: Sofia Evemalm-Graham.

Section III: 'Hagiography: Columba and others' turns to the Lives of St Columba (Bellach, Carey, Krajewski, McNamara, Selvage) and other saints, including St Comgall and St Cainneach (McNamara), St Berach, St Farannán and St Náile (Selvage).

Although not given a name by Adomnán, when describing St Columba writing in a little hut, he is almost certainly referring to a structure located at Tòrr an Aba, 'mound of the abbot', a site thus closely connected to Columba himself and the activity of writing. It therefore seems an obvious choice to reflect this section.

The name refers to a natural raised mound which lies opposite the west entrance of the Cathedral. The name is not without its problems. In our first records of it, we find it in English as *Abbots Mount* (Douglas Estate map 1769), and it is possible that subsequent Gaelic forms to a greater or lesser extent are translations of a name which had originally taken shape in English amongst visitors and antiquaries.

It rises only a few metres, but abruptly, above what Adomnán in his seventh-century *Vita Columbae* calls the *platea* (the level green of the abbey precinct which in Adomnán's time would likely have been a paved or cobbled area) to its east. It creates the slight sense of a natural amphitheatre between the hillock and the abbey buildings, a sheltered and enclosed flat area which was probably the focal point for the outdoor rituals associated with the

church. This is where the largest early medieval crosses stood; it is the area bounded on the north and east by the shrine-chapel of Columba and the abbey church; it is the end-point of the early medieval roadway called Sràid nam Marbh | Street of the Dead. Parts of this ground between the shrine-chapel and Tòrr an Aba were covered in early medieval grave-slabs.

In Adomnán's Life there are several references to Columba sitting in a little hut or *tegoriolum*. Sometimes he is described as writing in a little hut (*VC* ii, 16; *VC* iii, 15; *VC* iii, 23), but at another time he is described, not writing, but having a vision of angels in a hut (*VC* iii, 22). This latter hut may not have been the same one which the saint used for his writing. It is specifically stated of this latter hut that it 'was built on a higher spot' (*in eminentiore loco erat fabricatum*). As Adomnán has already mentioned Columba writing in a hut more than once before this, we might ask why he only feels the need to state now that it is on higher ground. It may be that Adomnán is using this phrase to distinguish Columba's writing hut from this other one on a higher spot. Indeed, aspects of some of the anecdotes concerning his writing hut rather imply that it was not on raised ground, e.g., *VC* ii.16 where a monk coming back from the milking passes by the door of the writing hut—it is hard to see how this could fit into the layout of Tòrr an Aba. Whether it was his writing hut or a separate one, the most obvious reading of his description of a hut *in eminentiore loco* is that it was on Tòrr an Aba. However, one thing Adomnán's accounts do not give us is any sense of a name for the site in his time, certainly not one reflected in the modern Gaelic name for the site.

Excavations since 1956 have shown that the top of Tòrr an Aba was built on in various ways. A flat area of mortared stone, a damaged millstone reused as a cross-base, and traces of a building to the south of the cross-base have been found. Most excitingly, burned wattle discovered as part of the building on the site has been carbon-dated to the period around AD 600, clearly showing the possibility that this really was the site of Columba's hut 'on a higher spot' (Columba died in 597). The presence of a cross-base might also suggest that this little hillock was treated with some devotion by subsequent generations of monks, and perhaps the memory of its

saintly association was monumentalised in the eighth century by the erection of a cross.[19]

IV
The wider world of Iona
Port a' Churaich 'landing-place of the coracle'

Figure 4: Port a' Churaich. Image credit: Sofia Evemalm-Graham.

In the final Section, IIII: 'The wider world of Iona' the focus shifts to the wider world of Iona during the Middle Ages, with contributions predominantly discussing the role of Iona and St Columba in eastern Scotland. For reasons made clear in each chapter, particular emphasis is placed on Inchcolm in this section (Bull, Purser, Taylor), but Dunkeld also has a central role to play (McGuigan, Taylor, Clancy).

[19] HES ID 21650; Ewan Campbell and Adrián Maldonado, 'A new Jerusalem "at the ends of the earth": Interpreting Charles Thomas's excavations at Iona Abbey 1956-63', *The Antiquaries Journal*, vol. 100 (2020), 33-85.

Port a' Churaich 'landing-place of the coracle', located on the southern coastline of Iona, reflects this section. If Tòrr an Aba can be linked to the activities of St Columba once the monastery was established on the island, Port a' Churaich is the name most closely associated with the arrival of the saint on Iona.

In early modern Columban tradition, the landing-place becomes the point of connection between the Columban community on Iona and the outside world due to the traditional arrival of St Columba here in 563. The name is first mentioned by Mánus Ó Dómhnaill in his *Betha Coluim Chille* (1532) as 'Port an Curaigh', but he incorrectly locates it on the coastline near Rèilig Odhrain (*timcell reilge Odhráin*). It is next mentioned in a letter from 1701,[20] therein described as:

> a harbour, a mile distant, westward from the buildings of the place, where stons maybe found, as clear many of them, as some glasses; this harbour is called Port Achurnich, from the ship that Calimkill and his associats came upon from Ireland to that place. The length of this Curachan or ship is obvious to any who goes to the place, it being marked up att the head of the harbour upon the grass, between two litle pillars of ston set up to shew forth the samin, between which pillars there is three score of foots in lenth, which was the exact length of the Curachan or ship.

The Gaelic name presents several issues because of the considerable variability in its spelling. Several sources (including the Ordnance Survey maps) have rendered the name as Port na Curaich following the modern gender (feminine) of the word *curach* 'coracle'. The spelling Port a' Churaich seems to best reflect local usage, preserving the older masculine gender of the word. This has therefore been adopted as the standard spelling for the name in the Survey of Iona's place-names. Some sources use the element *curachan* 'little coracle' with the Gaelic suffix *-an* (used to denote small size) added, possibly influenced by the name for the mound located at the bay, An

[20] Wodrow Letters, in James Maidment (ed.), *Analecta Scotica: Collections Illustrative of the Civil, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1834), 115.

Curachan.[21] Although lacking any historical basis, the mound is traditionally known as the boat St Columba arrived in.

It is the hope of the editors that the contributions in this volume will inspire new thinking on the wide-ranging topics discussed herein.

Sofia Evemalm-Graham, with contributions from the Iona's Namescape team, Thomas Clancy, Katherine Forsyth, Gilbert Márkus, Alasdair Whyte and Mairi MacArthur.

[21] TAD track ID 17784; John MacCulloch, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1819), 21.