

A Holistic Study of Iona's Influence, AD 563–8th Century

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Abstract

At the edge of the known world, on the rugged side of the Hebrides Archipelago, a small group of Irish refugees, led by a disgraced and exiled prince, founded a monastery. Initially a small, ramshackle group of huts, this monastery emerged not only as a sanctuary of Christian devotion amidst a sea of paganism but as a powerful force shaping the social and economic landscapes of medieval Scotland, the British Isles, and beyond. There, on the island of Iona, faith intertwined with the rhythms of everyday life. Founded by St. Columba in AD563, Iona though one of the most influential monasteries in European history, has an understudied influence on the economic structures and social dynamics of the surrounding lay communities.

The vast majority of research on Iona Monastery tends to focus on its missions (e.g., the evangelization of Northumbria), its role as a religious center, and its abbots. Whilst there have been some excellent publications of the history of Iona, its wider context within Irish ecclesiastical history and useful studies of the hagiographical texts associated with St Columba's rule, there has been relatively little work connecting Iona's archaeology to its economy and specifically looking at its interaction with the surrounding society. Where such studies exist, they tend to isolate individual aspects.

While great men, missions, and miracles dominate the primary source literature, this thesis aims to build on previous studies and offer a holistic approach, arguing that understanding Iona's economic and societal structures offers valuable comparative insights into monasticism across the British Isles. Through primary sources such as Adomnán's *Life of St. Columba* this paper will explore how Iona constructed and projected its identity. As the ninth abbot, Adomnán not only commemorated Columba but actively shaped the monastery's perceived spiritual and cultural role. Contemporary writings, including *Cáin Adomnáin* ('The Law of Adomnán'), contribute further perspective, while Iona's extensive archaeological record adds complementary evidence: granaries, storage pits, farming implements, and metallurgic waste all illuminate agricultural practices, trade networks, and economic transitions that point to the community's relative wealth and influence.

The study focuses on the period from Iona's founding in 563 to the monastery's loss of ecclesiastical independence to Armagh in the late 8th century, a pivotal moment marking a shift in its regional authority and institutional identity. By integrating social, political, and economic analysis, the study presents Iona as a nexus of power and exchange, revealing how its monastic identity was woven into the broader fabric of early medieval Britain and Ireland.

Introduction

Although recent scholarship has deepened our understanding of Iona through archaeological, textual, and thematic studies, these topics are often addressed individually, so the transitions in Iona's political influence, economic role, and engagement with lay communities remain dispersed across a wide range of works or sections of a broader study such as T.M. Charles-Edwards combination of Iona with Lindisfarne in a single chapter in his seminal work, *Early Christian Ireland* or Ewan Campbells study entitled *Continental and Mediterranean Imports to Atlantic Britain and Ireland, AD 400-800*, which although having valuable information on Iona and the surrounding Kingdom of Dál Riata, the information is disseminated throughout the entire work. This has had the unfortunate effect of obscuring our understanding of Iona's development as one of the most influential institutions in the Early Medieval British Isles.

Sources and Methodology

Understanding Iona as a real, lived-in religious space requires a careful engagement with a range of primary and secondary sources. The textual evidence includes hagiography, ecclesiastical histories, and annalistic records, while archaeological investigations provide insights into the material culture of the island. The discussion begins with these primary sources and the archaeological record, then considers the most relevant secondary scholarship. Subsequent sections explore Iona's trade within the wider Atlantic West and, finally, assess Iona's broader political and societal influence. Brief historical overviews of Iona and its surrounding cultures will be provided as needed to establish the broader societal context.

One of the most important primary sources for Columba is *Amra Choluim Chille* (The Wonders of Columba). Written in Irish with borrowed Latin Vocab – the *Amra* is a fascinating document which discusses Columba's scholarship and missionary efforts.¹ Ascribed to poet Dallán Forgaill, 'The Little Blind Man of Superior Testimony,' no solid evidence for date but most likely from the early 7th century. It is the only text which offers direct evidence on the impression made by the saint on his contemporaries including his personality and character particularly in relation to his intellectual and missionary efforts.² Being an elegy written by a famous bard to honor St. Columba shortly after his death, its purpose was to praise rather than critically assess the man's career.³

Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (*Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*) is one of the most important sources of church history in the British Isles before the Norman Conquest, and 'is one of the very few works written in Latin before the Carolingian renaissance which have come down to us in copies virtually contemporary with their authors.

¹ T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 282-290. 290.

² Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 286.

³ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 286, 290

Bede was born around AD 672, and was fostered by Benedict Bishop, founder of Wearmouth monastery, and then by Ceolfrith, a friend of Abbot Adomnan of Iona.⁴ His own monastery, Wearmouth–Jarrow, was far less influenced by Celtic traditions, and one of its founding abbots was aligned with the Roman party during the Easter controversy⁵ a dispute examined later in this study. While Bede was firmly aligned with the Roman ecclesiastical tradition, his *Ecclesiastical History* reflects a more moderate stance toward the Irish and Insular traditions than some of his contemporaries. Thus, while Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* remains one of the most vital sources for the early medieval Church in Britain, its narrative must be read with careful attention to his theological perspective and institutional loyalties.

Another textual source that offers occasional insight into Iona is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Most of the useful information both about Iona, and her daughter houses (i.e. Lindisfarne) is derived from Michael Swanton’s translation of the Peterborough Manuscript. This copy of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, along with the Worcester the Canterbury Bi-Lingual Epitome, are based off the now lost northern edition of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and was possibly compiled at York or Ripon⁶ This lost manuscript drew from Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and a set of eighth century Northumbrian annals.⁷

Iona maintained a highly active scriptorium, as evidenced by Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae*, allusions in the Iona Chronicle, publications by abbots such as *De Locis Sanctis*, and the writings attributed to Columba himself, as well as by stylistic links in surviving Insular manuscripts and the island’s broader influence on monastic learning. In addition to external sources, the monks of Iona produced numerous documents through their highly active scriptorium. As was customary in major monastic centers, they recorded significant events year by year, preserving both spiritual and historical memory. One such example is the *Iona Chronicle*.⁸ *The Iona Chronicle*, although not surviving until this day, is one of the most important sources about the chronology of Iona. Fortunately, as proven by John Bannerman, significant portions of the Iona Chronicle survive in the Annals of Ulster.⁹ Entries give a good deal of information about the journeys between Iona and mainland Ireland and significant political events from Dál Riata, the Picts, Brittonic Kingdoms, and the Anglo Saxons.¹⁰ In addition to the *Annals of Ulster* is the *Annals of Tigernach* (referred to collectively as the Irish Annals), which, although not directly pulling from

⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 325-326; Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, V.24, ed. and trans. by Colgrave and Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 566.

⁵ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, II.15–18, ed. and trans. by Colgrave and Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 165–170.

⁶ Michael Swanton, ‘Introduction’ in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. and trans. by Michael Swanton (London: Phoenix Press, 2000) p. xxv-xxiix

⁷ Swanton, ‘Introduction’ in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, p. xxv.

⁸ Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995) p. 31, 133. Campbell, Ewan and Maldonado, Adrián, “A New Jerusalem ‘at the Ends of the Earth’: Interpreting Charles Thomas’s Excavations at Iona Abbey 1956–63,” *The Antiquaries Journal*, 100 (2020), p. 37.

⁹ Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 31.

¹⁰ Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 31.

the Iona Chronicle was compiled earlier in the 11th to 12th centuries. This makes it invaluable for cross-referencing events, filling gaps, and confirming early Insular chronology, making it useful alongside *AU* and the *ASC* to reconstruct Iona's interactions with Irish polities.

The *Vita Columbae* (Life of Columba) is one of the most important sources for understanding not only the founding and early years of Iona, offering a source wealth of descriptive detail, presenting a vision of a community of saints and founding monks bound by highly fraternal relations—though some of this may reflect Adomnán's own monastic ideal.¹¹ As a hagiographical text, it follows the conventions typical of a *vita*, highlighting Biblical references, devotion by followers, the founding of monasteries, and the saintly virtues expected of a medieval holy figure.¹² Hagiography can be a challenging source because it often served to assert ecclesiastical claims rather than simply record facts, reflecting what church leaders wished to be true, particularly in legal or territorial matters.¹³ The primary readership of Adomnán's *vita* was the monks of Iona, for whom he acted as a sort of patronus.¹⁴ In presenting Columba as a model abbot, the text offers direct insight into Adomnán's vision of the ideal life and leadership of Iona's monastic community.¹⁵

Adomnán's primary aim in composing the Life of Columba was to present St. Columba—and by extension Iona—as a figure worthy of veneration by both Roman and Irish audiences, thereby promoting unity between these groups. To achieve this, he downplayed Columba's scholarly pursuits noted in the *Amra*, which could have suggested contentious Celtic practices such as the Paschal (Easter) calculations and instead emphasized Columba's wisdom tempered by humility echoing Gregory the Great's portrayal of St. Benedict. In writing primarily for his own community and secondarily for the wider monastic network of the British Isles, Adomnán tailored the Life to reflect the needs and priorities of Iona. His monastery's reputation was under attack, and this was written in a direct response.

This, however, can make it an ideal source. Whatever Adomnán recorded would have seemed true to the monks living at Iona at the time, written only a couple of generations after the death of their founding saint. He cites specific places familiar to the community and depicts a way of life that underscores continuity of practice, linking the current inhabitants to their spiritual and monastic heritage. Therefore, even if it is not the most accurate portrayal of Columba himself, it reliably reflects the kinds of daily activities on Iona and illustrates the role that, in Adomnán's view, the Abbot of Iona ought to fulfill—not only within the monastery but across the wider Columban monastic network. Iona's scriptorium produced a wide range of manuscript works other than the *Vita Columbae*, including poetry, psalters, and lavishly illuminated Gospel books — the most famous being the *Book of Kells*. These sources will be referenced on an ad hoc basis where relevant to the discussion. Most of the shorter poetic sources

¹¹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 255; Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 10-11.

¹² Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 255.

¹³ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 255.

¹⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 283.

¹⁵ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 283.

cited are from *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* by Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Markus, a compendium of Poetry composed on Iona that contains the poems both in modern English or their original languages (i.e. Latin or Gaelic).

‘Despite its undoubted importance, Iona has been poorly treated by archaeology, with numerous *ad hoc* excavations of varying quality and degree of publication.’ The majority of the excavations were conducted by the late Dr. Charles Thomas who focused mainly on the monastic vallum (a broad earthwork bank with a ditch, sometimes topped with a wooden palisade), and much of what we know is based on his research.¹⁶ Unfortunately, the digs were made utilizing slit trenches with ‘no systematic planning or recording contexts, though finds lists were kept.’¹⁷ With over one hundred trenches quickly dug, most were backfilled within a couple days.¹⁸ To complicate matters further, the location of the Early Medieval monastery sits right underneath a 20th century restoration of the later Cistercian monastery that is currently being utilized by the Iona Community, a Christian ecumenical social justice organization.

Other than the excavation notes themselves, I rely on the work of Ewan Campbell and Adrián Maldonado which ‘integrate the main results of the excavations [at Iona] with new ideas on early Insular monasticism.’¹⁹ This is why this study relies on partial records and notes compiled and interpreted by sources such as “A New Jerusalem ‘At the Ends of the Earth:’ Interpreting Charles Thomas’s Excavations at Iona Abbey” by Ewan Campbell and Adrián Maldonado who tackle this viewpoint and the various partial documentation of the archeological site; previous to which, there was only partial/incorrect information regarding the position and location of the trenches.²⁰ Ewan Campbell wrote another text that combines archeology across Europe with history and topography to give a comprehensive analysis of trade within the Celtic regions in the Early Middle Ages; this work is entitled, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports to Atlantic Britain and Ireland, AD 400-800*.

The last—but certainly not least—of the secondary sources to be mentioned directly is T. M. Charles-Edwards’ *Early Christian Ireland*. Widely regarded as one of the most important studies for understanding the social and political world of sixth- and seventh-century Ireland, this magisterial work represents the culmination of a lifetime of scholarship. Although it devotes only a single chapter specifically to Iona and is addressed later in this thesis, its sweeping analysis of early medieval Irish society provides indispensable context for understanding the environment in which Iona emerged and flourished.

Location and Layout

¹⁶ Ewan Campbell and Adrián Maldonado, ‘A New Jerusalem,’ 43.

¹⁷ Campbell and Maldonado, ‘A New Jerusalem’ p45.

¹⁸ Campbell and Maldonado, ‘A New Jerusalem’ p45-7.

¹⁹ Campbell and Maldonado, ‘A New Jerusalem’ p24.

²⁰ Campbell and Maldonado, ‘A New Jerusalem’ p45.

Iona, though seemingly poised on the fringes of the known world, stood instead at the crossroads of a vibrant and multi-cultural northern Britain. The island lay within the lands of the Irish-speaking kingdom of Dál Riata, though the region had only recently been Pictish, and Iona itself lay close to routes leading into the centers of Pictish power. It was equally within reach of the British stronghold on the Clyde and not far from the rising influence of Northumbria. From this position, Iona projected an influence—both political and religious—that would, in time, extend across all these neighboring realms.

The island is directly west of the Isle of Mull in modern day Scotland. Originally known as Hy, Iona formed the northern boundary between the Scots and the Northern Picts.²¹ Iona enjoys comparatively fertile soil and receives less rainfall than regions lying to the east of Mull's mountainous terrain. Its proximity to the island of Tiree—home to Mag Luinge, a dependent monastery founded by Columba—provided access to the agricultural bounty of one of the most productive areas in the Hebrides.²² The Early Medieval monastery of Iona was situated on the eastern side of Iona, off the west coast of Mull, Inner Hebrides, and it was built on late Devensian raised beach deposits, ~20m above sea level.²³ Unusually, the site includes flat terraces and rocky outcrops (i.e. Tòrr an Aba and Reilig Odhráin) and a rocky upland area (Cnoc nan Càrnan) which within the monastic enclosure.²⁴ The underlying soil of the old monastery consists of orange sands and gravels with poor drainage due to iron-panning.²⁵ These rocks are the easternmost extent of the Lewisian basement gneisses that form most of the bedrock of the island. The natural deposits of the raised beach consist of orange sands and gravels, sometimes with decayed granite boulders, which in places are cemented with iron-panning causing poor drainage.²⁶ According to a civil engineer I consulted, the sandy soil and voids surrounding the rock outcrops would have significantly reduced the soil's natural cohesion. Sandy/silty soils already tend to lack cohesive strength compared to clay or loam, meaning they do not bind well and are prone to shifting or erosion. When these sandy soils are interrupted by gaps or voids around rock formations, their ability to hold together is further diminished. This makes the ground more unstable and susceptible to water infiltration. As a result, these conditions would have required effective drainage systems to maintain structural stability. This would have been especially important given the site's proximity to the ocean, where it would be exposed to frequent rainfall, high humidity, and possibly tidal or storm-related water movement, all of which could exacerbate erosion or instability in already loose soil.

Seamanship was a necessity for both Dál Riata and Iona due to the dangers of the Sea of the Hebrides, known for fierce storms, strong tides, and eddies. The monastic community at Iona likely included skilled seamen, and while romantic images depict lone monks sailing in tiny boats, this does not reflect the reality. In truth, Iona depended on professional sailors and large

²¹ Bellesheim, *St Columba and Iona*, p. 146.

²² Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 299.

²³ Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem' p 38.

²⁴ Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem' p38.

²⁵ Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem' p38, 40.

²⁶ Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem' p38-40.

ships to function and flourish. Adomnán's Life of Columba provides solid evidence of this maritime capability.²⁷

startling discoveries during the excavation of Iona was an elaborately constructed red granite paved road, marked by carefully arranged boulders. This road runs from Reilig Odhráin to the now ruined building called by Reeves 'the Old Guest House.'²⁸ It is paved with large red granite imported from Ross of Mull arranged to be about 2-3m wide, and it cannot be understated how labor-intensive and expensive this would have been.²⁹ 'The road was a very substantial construction, involving the procurement and transport of a large quantity of stone, at least 250 tons of material for the section within the monastic enclosure, representing a major investment of resources in its construction.'³⁰ This is such a unique feature to be found in the Early Medieval period, because paved roads in Britain ceased to be built after the fall of the Roman Empire, and for it to be found in such a remote location that was never even under Roman governance is intriguing, paved roads such as this would not be seen until after the Medieval Period; there are no known parallels to this type of construction.³¹ Campbell and Maldonado go so far as to say that it was 'such an impressively engineered paved roadway in this remote location has to be explained, especially as there seem to be no parallels in other contemporary Insular contexts.' The fact that Iona had the funds and expertise to construct such a marvel is a testament to the monastery's prestige and influence.

The Gift Economy: Systems of Exchange and Redistribution

The early medieval economy of Ireland, Scotland, and other areas of Britain were deeply embedded in networks of kinship, political authority, and religious obligation, and Individuals were bound together through a range of reciprocal relationships, expressed in agreements that governed the circulation of goods and services according to the relative social status of the parties involved. Iona was not isolated from broader European and Mediterranean trade networks. Archaeological evidence indicates that imported goods reached these regions through complex mechanisms of exchange, often mediated by high-status sites acting as hubs. From these sites, the imports were internally redistributed by a variety of processes, including gift and diplomatic exchange.

One of the starkest contrasts between the Ireland/Western Britain and Anglo-Saxon England is the complete absence of coinage. In fact, no coins were minted in Ireland, Wales, or Scotland during this period, and none have been found on any sites which produce imported pottery and glass.³² One of the few examples of Roman gold coins being used was found in an

²⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 298-299.

²⁸ Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem' p52.

²⁹ Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem' p53.

³⁰ Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem' p52.

³¹ Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem' p53-5.

³² Ewan Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports to Atlantic Britain and Ireland, AD 400–800* (Bootham, York: Council for British Archaeology, 2007) p. 74.

Anglo-Saxon grave where it was worn as a pendant.³³ The lack of coins in secure stratigraphic contexts alongside pottery and glass imports provides strong evidence that a monetary economy did not exist in the Atlantic west, with the absence of coinage instead suggesting an economy rooted in barter, tribute, and subsistence production.³⁴

This type of economy is known as the ‘gift giving’ economy. In modern society, gift-giving is largely symbolic, associated with special occasions and friendship; it creates no binding obligations, and while reciprocation is appreciated, it is not required, leaving gift-giving a peripheral aspect of social and economic life. The act of giving was more important than the gift itself, and the gift was expected to be reciprocated with something of equal or greater value. ‘By giving gifts, the king bound subject kingdoms to himself. The giving of the gift was an act of superiority, acceptance an act of submission. The return on this gift took the form of tribute but the real point was to create alliances.’³⁵ The tribute given by dependents would consist mainly of farming products such as cows, oxen, beeves, pigs, boars, sows, rams, sheep, and bacon with some clothing and metal ingots.³⁶ These are the products of a solid farming base. The stipends/wages given by kings in Ireland was varied. According to Doherty much of it was military equipment,³⁷ such as horses, swords, shields, ships, and corselets. Based on his list I would add the additional categories of clothing, servile tribute, animals, and luxury items, roughly in that order. Clothing would include items such as cloaks, suits, hoods, and mantles, while servile tribute would consist of servants, women, and slaves. The animal’s category would include the all-important cows, hounds, and stags. Lastly the luxury items would be items like cups and chess-sets. It has been suggested that one function of these exchanges was to equip local levies for the armies of these emergent kingdoms, and formed the foundations of the later feudal relationships like in Scandinavia.³⁸

High-status centers like Iona and Dunadd, the ecclesiastical and governmental hearts of Dál Riata respectively, could operate within a gift-based economy while still engaging in long-distance trade. Goods in this system were not assigned a specific value; rather Prestige, power, honor, and wealth were expressed and maintained through largess. A large part of Iona’s ‘trade’ would consist of gifts given by lordly patrons of the Island to receive divine favor. This is not to suggest that the Church ceased to preach the importance of giving offerings to God or to itself—such exhortations continued throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. What distinguishes the Late Medieval world, however, is that gifts were no longer embedded in a system of measured reciprocity; instead, treasure had been fully absorbed into a monetary economy where value was quantified, exchanged, and consumed rather than returned in kind. In a profit/market economy, nearly everything is assigned a monetary value, haggling, politeness, and fairness still play a

³³ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 75.

³⁴ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 75.

³⁵ Charles Doherty. ‘Exchange and Trade in Early Medieval Ireland.’ *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 110 (1980) p. 73.

³⁶ Doherty, ‘Exchange and Trade in Early Medieval Ireland.’ p. 74.

³⁷ Doherty, ‘Exchange and Trade in Early Medieval Ireland.’ p. 74.

³⁸ Doherty, ‘Exchange and Trade in Early Medieval Ireland.’ p. 75.

role, and this act of assigning precise values marks the shift from giving to profit-seeking.³⁹ Unlike modern markets, medieval exchanges cannot be assumed to rest on impersonal transactions; for in such dealings the parties shared no inherent social bond.⁴⁰

This type of economy began to shift during the reign of Charlemagne and effectively ended in Western Continental Europe by the 8th century, with the last known hoard burial occurring in the 11th century, marking the close of this economic system in the Latin West.⁴¹ This transformation of early medieval society unfolded unevenly across Europe: while central regions moved away from reciprocity, peripheral areas such as Ireland and Scandinavia retained it for longer. This persistence did not mean isolation, for external influences and innovations were present throughout, and—as anthropology shows—archaic and novel forces often coexisted within the same society.⁴² Throughout both classical antiquity and the Middle Ages, gift-giving, reciprocity, redistribution, and the market coexisted. The market emerged only gradually, and for a long time it remained secondary to older modes of integration rooted in reciprocity and redistribution.⁴³

As Doherty argues, Ireland's legal tradition provides a unique lens on early medieval society, since unlike elsewhere in Europe, social and political change cannot be traced through successive law codes and bureaucratic documents.⁴⁴

Joint slaving raids revealed the ease of quick profit, even as neither Irish nor Norse communities had yet developed coinage or urban centers.⁴⁵ From 900 to 1200, however, one can see the beginnings of trade, urban life, the use of coinage, stronger lordship, and the early machinery of the state—though no single factor was decisive on its own.⁴⁶

This puts this study of Iona into a startling period: one of social, religious, and economic change caused by centralization of institutions. These higher level institutions, i.e. the king and the Church, would amass tribute and redistribute it in which the object was to bind the people and the organizations together.⁴⁷ All of this to say, Iona was, from its monastic founding to its eventual submission to Armagh, still embedded within systems of tribute, patronage, and reciprocity rather than market exchange. Monetary gain or calculated exchange didn't really intersect with the island's economy; the circulation of goods was socially and politically structured, not monetarily transactional. This has many implications for understanding the world in which Iona lays which will be discussed in this section. Trade at Iona was mediated through gifts, tribute, or reciprocal obligations through oblations from clients, reciprocal gift exchange, and indirect transfer through intermediaries. In essence, trade on Iona was not facilitated through

³⁹ Little, Lester K., *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978) p. 45.

⁴⁰ Doherty, 'Exchange and Trade in Early Medieval Ireland.' p. 69.

⁴¹ Little, Lester K., *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy*, 6-7.

⁴² Doherty, 'Exchange and Trade in Early Medieval Ireland.' p. 67.

⁴³ Doherty, 'Exchange and Trade in Early Medieval Ireland.' p. 68.

⁴⁴ Doherty, 'Exchange and Trade in Early Medieval Ireland.' p. 70-71.

⁴⁵ Doherty, 'Exchange and Trade in Early Medieval Ireland.' p. 71.

⁴⁶ Doherty, 'Exchange and Trade in Early Medieval Ireland.' p. 71.

⁴⁷ Doherty, 'Exchange and Trade in Early Medieval Ireland.' p. 67-8.

monetary exchange, but a web of gifts, obligations, and prestige, reflecting the island's monastic and social hierarchies.

The Role of Dunadd

Dunadd, a 'nuclear' fort and probable royal center, likely served as the seat of the king of Dál Riata and functioned as a major hub for trade and the redistribution of goods. The site possessed more agricultural land than was necessary for its own sustenance, indicating that nearby clusters of settlements likely served as client communities contributing surplus resources.⁴⁸ 'Dunadd [as an archaeological site] has produced the largest quantity of E ware from any Atlantic site despite being one of the furthest from the suggested source.'⁴⁹ From this site have been found red dye from southeast Europe and/or France, mosaic tessera with inlaid gold leaf from Byzantium, and orpiment from Italy/Asia Minor.⁵⁰ 'The metal working area ... produced material showing the wide exchange contacts the site enjoyed. Material was present from the central valley and southern uplands of Scotland, Anglo-Saxon England, Ireland, south-west England, western France, and various Mediterranean sites.'⁵¹ Gold, silver, copper, tin, and other minerals were used to produce brooches, which functioned as status symbols and a mechanism of social differentiation; much of the Dál Riata kings' surplus wealth was invested in creating these items, which were then gifted to noble clients to reinforce ties of allegiance.⁵²

As noted by Campbell, Dunadd illustrates how an import center could mediate between Continental trade and the local economy. Local surplus, offered as tribute or renders, was exchanged for exotic goods from Continental merchants. Some luxury items reinforced the king's status by restricting access—such as red dye for nobles, pigments for the Church, or glassware for his retinue—while others were crafted into jewelry and redistributed to clients. This demonstrates the early fusion of economic, political, and ritual power in the hands of petty kings, a process that contributed to the formation of the medieval state.⁵³ However, it would not be surprising if Iona conducted similar trade/obligation relationships with their wider monastic network. They produced an enormous amount of smelting waste, and it would make sense for the founder of the monastic networks to produce metalworking goods for the rest of the monastic network. Items such as the sword that Columba gives a warrior as a gift.⁵⁴ This is not to imply that Iona was a hub for sword-making production, only that Iona was an active participant within this type of physical gifts, not just spiritual, within this economic context.

Dunadd is one of only nine archeological sites of the old kingdom of Dál Riata, with Iona being the only ecclesiastical site.⁵⁵ Therefore, since Iona, being the only ecclesiastical settlement

⁴⁸ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 80.

⁴⁹ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 116.

⁵⁰ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 78, 137.

⁵¹ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 116.

⁵² Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 116.

⁵³ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 123.

⁵⁴ Adomnán of Iona, *The Life of St Columba*, trans. Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 190.

⁵⁵ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 116.

of note, it is highly likely that Dunadd was the main trading partner with Iona, and that the monks got what they needed from Dunadd and brought it back to the monastery by boat. Evidence supporting this claim is the discovery of the aforementioned orpiment found at Dunadd. It is primarily used for manuscript illumination, such as the *Book of Darrow* and the *Book of Kells* (most likely produced at Iona) and was most likely an intended gift to the monks from their royal patron.⁵⁶

At Dunadd, a cross-marked quern (a hand-operated mill for grinding grain into flour) was found alongside a stone disc inscribed 'INOMINE,' suggesting not only connections with Iona but also that someone on-site was literate and able to read, and leather book satchel from Loch Glashan may indicate further links with a literate community.⁵⁷ It would not be surprising that one or more of the monks would regularly visit Dunadd to represent their interests regarding trade, diplomacy, missions, or even to assist the king of Dál Riata with records regarding trade. As the only ecclesiastical settlement within the kingdom, or at the very least, the spiritual care/protection of the kingdom was entrusted to them, and with their emphasis on *Anam Chara* relationships, it is highly likely that there would be a monk close to the king, especially considering their close political alliance that will be discussed in a later section. All this to say, that if Dunadd had access to a particular good, Iona had access to it as well.

Pottery

Understanding these successive phases of imported pottery provides a foundation for examining the trade networks, distribution methods, and high-status uses of such goods across sites like Iona and Dunadd. There were two successive phases of imported pottery in the Celtic regions of the British Isles: the earlier Mediterranean phase characterized by African slipware (c.AD475-550), including amphorae likely carrying wine, and the later Continental phase dominated by E ware (c. AD550-700), mass-produced vessels serving as containers for valuable goods or trader use.⁵⁸ Tintagel is the key site used by archeologists and historians used to understand the Mediterranean phase of imports, and Dunadd fulfils a similar function for the later Continental phase.⁵⁹ These exotic and high-value commodities—ranging from dyestuffs and beads to spices, nuts, and wine—underscore the diversity of goods that circulated through the Celtic West. Many of these items were likely transported in E-ware vessels, linking the physical containers directly to the commodities they carried. While some goods, like hides or iron, may have been locally sourced, others—including foreign nuts, honey, and rare dyes—point to the island's participation in long-distance exchange networks.⁶⁰ This section highlighted not only the variety of imported goods available to elite centers such as Iona and Dunadd but also the ways in

⁵⁶ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 117.

⁵⁷ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 117.

⁵⁸ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 26, 32, 46, 136-137.

⁵⁹ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 116.

⁶⁰ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 80.

which these items reflect the structured, gift- and tribute-based economy that governed their circulation.⁶¹

When the Roman Empire left Britain in the early fifth century AD, and collapsed in AD 476, their trade routes did not magically disappear. Although, in many ways, trade became more localized,⁶² trade with the Mediterranean world did not magically disappear. In fact, it continued well into the Early Medieval period. Wares from the Eastern Roman Empire were found as far north in Britain as Galloway, and especially in Tintagel, Cornwall which was a major trading hub⁶³ What is of particular interest is fragments of North African amphorae were found at Iona.⁶⁴ Although this could be chalked up to be a souvenir from a pilgrimage since Iona,⁶⁵ based on similar pottery being found in Trethurgy, Cornwall that has been stratified to the 6th century AD and onwards.⁶⁶ Although Ewan Campell is more hesitant is this view, this interpretation is consistent with the available evidence. According to his deductions, mediterranean imports can be divided into two phases with relatively conclusive dating: the earlier Aegean phase (c. 475–525) brought wares from the northeastern Mediterranean, while the later African phase (c. 525–550) from the region of Carthage.⁶⁷ Iona, being founded in AD563, was around during the tail end of the African phase. This would make Iona one of the last echoes of the former Mediterranean trade, and since this was when this trade was ‘drying up,’ the contents were most likely very expensive. During the time directly preceding Iona’s founding, were Justinian’s attempt at reasserting Roman hegemony over the western mediterranean through war and conquest, such as the Gothic Wars in Italy and the Vandalic wars, the latter especially since they ruled Carthage. These wars must have been a huge disruption in trade, or, more likely, may have been the cause for the shift from the Aegean to Carthage, due to the Roman reconquest of North Africa, it may have been more convenient to start production, since Carthage fell back into the hands of the Eastern Roman Empire in AD534 which fits neatly into Campbell’s beginning of the African phase. Regardless of interpretation, further excavation at Iona is needed to clarify the context and significance of the amphora, and whether this represents a singular occurrence or part of a broader pattern of imports.

The most plausible commodity shipped from Carthage to Iona was wine. While some scholars have previously assumed that African amphorae primarily carried olive oil, recent research suggests that not all imports were oil, and the evidence from Insular sites indicates a significant proportion may have contained wine, and amphorae were often recycled for multiple uses for different goods.⁶⁸ Carthage had been renowned for its wine exports since antiquity, and it is reasonable to suggest that Iona would have required regular imports of this product. As the

⁶¹ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 80.

⁶² Robin Fleming, *Britain After Rome: The Fall and Rise, 400 to 1070* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2010) p. 6-7.

⁶³ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 24-26.

⁶⁴ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 26.

⁶⁵ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 26.

⁶⁶ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 26.

⁶⁷ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 26.

⁶⁸ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 24-26.

center of a growing monastic network, the monastery was obliged to celebrate the Eucharist, which created a sustained need for wine. Moreover, the Insular church customarily consumed all the consecrated wine at each celebration of the eucharist, further increasing overall demand.⁶⁹ This demand would have been higher than that of olive oil because although it can be used liturgically (i.e. anointing of kings, baptism, chrism, etc.), it is not used for every mass. The presence of Bv amphorae at other Insular sites, such as Dalkey Island and Loughshinney,⁷⁰ demonstrates that Late Roman wine containers were circulating in the Atlantic trade network, providing additional support for the likelihood that Iona's amphorae also contained imported wine. Found so close to the monastery's founding, this may have been especially imported by or gifted to St. Columba for his use from someone like Áedán mac Gabráin of Dál Ríata. By the 8th century in Ireland, wine is mentioned in commentaries on the Sea Laws, the Muirbretha, as a cargo, and the Book of Armagh mentions wine used during festivities in AD807.⁷¹

Campbell has mentioned that wine could have been produced locally with a different fruit stating, '... it is not clear whether communion wine had to be made from grapes, nor how often it was necessary. Locally made wines could presumably have been produced throughout the Celtic West using native fruits.'⁷² Such a claim overlooks the theological significance of grape wine within the Christian tradition. From the time of Jesus of Nazareth, the Church Fathers—including Irenaeus, Cyprian, and Augustine—explicitly tied the Eucharistic cup to the fruit of the vine, echoing Jesus' own words at the Last Supper. Canon law, conciliar decrees, and medieval liturgical practice consistently affirmed that only grape wine could be valid matter for the sacrament. Adomnán himself says, "He [Columba] said to the ministers, 'You have the wine which the Lord Jesus provided for administering the mysteries.'"⁷³ To suggest that native fruit wines might have sufficed betrays a lack of engagement with Catholic sacramental theology and risks anachronistically imposing modern notions of substitution onto a context where the use of grape wine was understood as essential.

During the time of Iona, no pottery was produced in most of western Britain and Ireland at this time, so it all had to be imported.⁷⁴ Within the British Isles, the pottery from the 6th to 8th centuries is dominated by E ware; most of which is of a uniform technique and fabric; this is made especially strange considering the vast differential of pottery in Merovingian cemeteries of the same period.⁷⁵ This suggests mass production and transport from a single center.⁷⁶ 'The label 'E ware' was proposed by Thomas to supplement Radford's subdivision of the Tintagel imported pottery into classes A, B, C, and D wares.'⁷⁷ This type of pottery has a white and gritty with dimples on the surface and were typically unadorned; it was used to make of different jars,

⁶⁹ Ian Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way*, p. 61.

⁷⁰ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 26.

⁷¹ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 179.

⁷² Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 79.

⁷³ Adomnán of Iona, *The Life of St Columba*, trans. Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 154.

⁷⁴ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 50.

⁷⁵ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 36.

⁷⁶ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 136.

⁷⁷ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 136.

bowls, and jugs.⁷⁸ E ware was not typically imported by themselves as a good but as containers for high value contents or low-cost added value goods alongside bulk commodities like salt and wine.⁷⁹ E Ware is traditionally associated with cooking, Campbell argued convincingly that this is not the case due to the materials are unsuitable for that and only 1/3 of them show this kind of wear; additionally, some show staining from the use of carrying dyes and exotic materials implying that they were mainly used as storage for other materials.⁸⁰ The very limited number of E ware vessels, coupled with their presence primarily on elite sites, indicates that their use was likely confined to a small group of high-status individuals.⁸¹ As brought up by Campbell, ceramic objects were not seen as exotic technology within the British Isles, and they were quite capable of producing adequate cooking vessels. ‘The reasons they did not at an earlier period were presumably cultural and practical: cultural, because of a tradition of communal cooking; and practical, because the damp climate is poorly suited to making pottery while metal, wooden, and leather vessels were more practical and longer lasting.’⁸²

The most likely provenance (origin) of E ware is northern France, especially around the Lower Seine region. It’s tied to Frankish influence and trade connections. But archaeologists still haven’t located the exact kiln sites, so the evidence is circumstantial (based on distribution, mineral content, and historical context).⁸³ While there is abundant evidence for a merchant class in Frankish territories—including references in Gregory of Tours and charters concerning taxes and tolls—contemporary Irish legal records mention no organized trading class, though occasional voyages to the Continent may still have occurred.⁸⁴ Some of these merchants may have had connections with the mediterranean and acted as a sort of translator, intermediary, or pilot using their own knowledge of the British Isles to undertake their own trade missions when trade with the Mediterranean collapsed.⁸⁵

E ware vessels reveal more than just trade routes—they provide a window into what was considered valuable in early medieval Atlantic society. Focusing on high-status sites like Iona and Dunadd, the study of vessel contents helps trace the movement of commodities, illuminate patterns of exchange, and highlight the social and economic significance of these imports. The following sections will explore the materials that are both literarily.

Glass

Within the British Isles, five categories of glass have been identified: A , Late Roman; B, Anglo-Saxon/Germanic; C , Atlantic tradition; D, Undecorated Atlantic; E, lower quality copy of

⁷⁸ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 32.

⁷⁹ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 136.

⁸⁰ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 49.

⁸¹ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 51.

⁸² Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 51.

⁸³ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 48.

⁸⁴ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 136.

⁸⁵ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 136.

Atlantic glass.⁸⁶ In Scotland, the only other known example of window glass from this period other than Iona comes from the Northumbrian occupation at Whithorn, and no comparable finds are known in Ireland.⁸⁷ Particularly close in color and appearance is the seventh-century glass from Glastonbury Abbey, likely produced on site.⁸⁸ Since Iona lacks the high-purity silica needed for glass production and no evidence of local glassmaking facilities has been found, the material was almost certainly imported before being worked on the island. This is supported by the discovery of glass rods and studs during excavation.⁸⁹ These are known as reticella glass rods – they are slender glass rods, often twisted or with a pattern and were used in Scandinavia from the 8th to 10th centuries AD.⁹⁰ These rods could have been used for decoration or to make cable beads.⁹¹ Only three of these were found west of Scandinavia: one from Iona, the second from Moville abbey, the third on Dunnynail Island. Both those of Iona and Moville Abbey were found in a craft deposit with decorative molds and E ware, and those of Iona were dated from AD600-760, which is around the time of Adomnán.⁹²

Due to its high value, glass was more likely to be traded from merchant to merchant.⁹³ It is plausible that the reticella glass rods found at Iona were originally produced on the Continent or even Ireland⁹⁴ and then imported via intermediary hubs such as Dunadd or Whithorn before reaching the island. Whithorn is well known for being a hub for the glass trade with evidence covering two centuries of glass imports from c. AD500 to AD700.⁹⁵ Given the close relationship between the abbots of Wearmouth-Jarrow (Ceolfrith) and Iona (Adomnán), it is plausible that some of the more standard glass originated from Wearmouth-Jarrow.

Dyes

Although dyes have been mentioned, it is important to clarify which varieties were available to Iona through the trade and redistribution networks centered at Dunadd. Some imported dyes may have been kept for exclusive use by the royalty and nobility, such as the propensity for the sons of kings to wear purple and nobles to wear red.⁹⁶ This red dye, derived from the madder plant (*Rubia tinctorum*), is native to southeastern Europe and was not produced in Britain at the time, requiring its import through France.⁹⁷ It was not grown in Britain until the

⁸⁶ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 54.

⁸⁷ Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem' p70.

⁸⁸ Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem' p70.

⁸⁹ Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem' p71.

⁹⁰ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 81.

⁹¹ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 63, 81.

⁹² Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 81.

⁹³ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 136.

⁹⁴ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 81.

⁹⁵ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 56.

⁹⁶ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 116.

⁹⁷ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 80.

Late Saxon Period.⁹⁸ The preservation of dyes is exceptionally rare; it is largely a matter of chance that traces of madder have survived on certain E ware at Dunadd.⁹⁹

Arsenic sulfide, also known as orpiment, was used for yellow in illuminated manuscripts produced at Iona.¹⁰⁰ The only known sources for orpiment available to Iona were from Mt. Vesuvius in Italy or places in Asia Minor; this implies that a wide range of pigments/dyes were imported to Dunadd/Iona, for manuscript illustration and other uses.¹⁰¹

Since the *Book of Kells* is widely regarded to have at least been partially written on Iona, it is logical to think that the dyes that were used in its composition would have been available to the monks of Iona. Made of large calfskin-parchment bound in a codex, the *Book of Kells*, created around AD800, contains the four gospels featuring Christian symbols and portraits of the apostles and the life of Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁰²

According to a 2009 spectrographic analysis, a range of pigments was employed in the manuscript's composition. Three possible sources have been proposed for the blue hues: folium, extracted from *Chrozophora tinctoria*; indigo, from either the *Indigofera* species or woad (*Isatis tinctoria*); and ultramarine, derived from lapis lazuli.¹⁰³ The presence of pigments such as lapis lazuli or true indigo would suggest that Iona was, albeit indirectly, connected to trade routes reaching as far as Afghanistan and India. Green dye was known as vergaut, and it was made by combining the aforementioned indigo with orpiment.¹⁰⁴ The reds/oranges pigment was produced using lead oxide and could have been produced locally.¹⁰⁵ White, used to paint for faces and hands, was made using dehydrated gypsum (plaster).¹⁰⁶ The gypsum was almost certainly sourced from nearby local deposits within Dál Riata rather than imported from distant regions like England or the Continent. There are known deposits of gypsum within the territory of the former Kingdom of Dál Riata.¹⁰⁷ Within the Grampian Highlands of Scotland within the apply named Dalradian Supergroup, have been found deposits of gypsum, as well as within Dál Riata's

⁹⁸ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 80.

⁹⁹ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 80.

¹⁰⁰ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 117.

¹⁰¹ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 75.

¹⁰² S. Bioletti, R. Leahy, J. Fields, B. Meehan, and W. Blau, 'The Examination of the Book of Kells Using Micro-Raman Spectroscopy,' *J. Raman Spectrosc.*, 40 (2009), p. 1403.

¹⁰³ S. Bioletti, R. Leahy, J. Fields, B. Meehan, and W. Blau, 'The Examination of the Book of Kells Using Micro-Raman Spectroscopy,' p. 1044.

¹⁰⁴ S. Bioletti, R. Leahy, J. Fields, B. Meehan, and W. Blau, 'The Examination of the Book of Kells Using Micro-Raman Spectroscopy,' *J. Raman Spectrosc.*, 40 (2009), p. 1404.

¹⁰⁵ S. Bioletti, R. Leahy, J. Fields, B. Meehan, and W. Blau, 'The Examination of the Book of Kells Using Micro-Raman Spectroscopy,' *J. Raman Spectrosc.*, 40 (2009), p. 1405.

¹⁰⁶ S. Bioletti, R. Leahy, J. Fields, B. Meehan, and W. Blau, 'The Examination of the Book of Kells Using Micro-Raman Spectroscopy,' *J. Raman Spectrosc.*, 40 (2009), p. 1405-6.

¹⁰⁷ P. W. Geoff Tanner, Charles A. Bendall, Elizabeth A. Pickett, John L. Roberts, Jack E. Treagus and David Stephenson, 'The Dalradian Rocks of the South-West Grampian Highlands of Scotland', *Proceedings of the Geologists' Association*, 132.1 (2021), p. 1.

Irish possessions. In fact, ‘Gypsum and anhydrite are widely distributed in Northern Ireland as veins, stringers and nodules....’¹⁰⁸

Salt

Salt was a fundamental necessity for life in the early medieval period, used not only for seasoning but also for preserving food and sustaining livestock. Its importance meant that it could not be ignored in the networks of trade and tribute that linked monastic and secular centers across the British Isles. Because salt sources were unevenly distributed, it often had to be transported over long distances, making it a valuable commodity in both local and long-distance exchange. Salt was shipped in bulk in E-Ware alongside smaller materials filling in the space on the ship.¹⁰⁹ Although salt was not produced within Ireland before the Norman conquest, so it would have to have been imported.¹¹⁰ Campbell suggests that salt was shipped from Brittany—then a major producer near the Loire River along key Atlantic trade routes—and that E-ware vessels may have served as its containers.¹¹¹ It is possible that it was traded for from the Anglo-Saxons, specifically from Droitwich in Mercia – a center for salt production in Britain, but this is highly unlikely due to the minimal known direct connection with Iona and Mercia.¹¹²

Wine

As previously mentioned, for a monastic community, the possession of wine was of the utmost importance, especially when its complete consumption was mandatory. We know from archeology that some E-ware vessels were used to ship wine, but it is also possible that they were shipped in wooden casks; these were transported in bulk like salt.¹¹³

Influence

As archaeological and textual evidence reveal a wide spectrum of functions—monastic, episcopal, pastoral, economic—within a single site, the strict classification of early medieval ecclesiastical settlements as simply ‘monastic’ has increasingly been called into question.¹¹⁴ Iona in particular demonstrates how fluid and complex the category of ‘monastery’ can be, with extensive craft and manuscript production, both secular and ecclesiastical. Scholars such as O’Loughlin, Jenkins, and MacDonald have argued that under Adomnán’s leadership, Iona

¹⁰⁸ A. J. G. Notholt and D. E. Highley, Mineral Dossier No. 13: ‘Gypsum and Anhydrite, Mineral Resources Consultative Committee (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1973)’ p. 12.

¹⁰⁹ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 136.

¹¹⁰ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 80.

¹¹¹ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 80.

¹¹² Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 80; Fleming, *Britain After Rome*, p. 200.

¹¹³ Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports* p. 79, 136.

¹¹⁴ Campbell and Maldonado, ‘A New Jerusalem’ p25.

developed a conceptual identity as a ‘New Jerusalem,’ a spatial and spiritual analogue to the earthly and heavenly city.¹¹⁵ This Jerusalem model, with its concentric holiness and sacred geography, not only shaped Iona’s own organization and ritual life but also influenced how other Irish and Insular sites were imagined and structured.¹¹⁶ Tomás Ó Carragáin, the prominent Irish archaeologist and historian specializing in early medieval ecclesiastical archaeology, also sees Iona as the key site in developing and transmitting these ideas to Ireland.¹¹⁷

This chapter considers the ways in which Iona established and sustained its networks of influence, examining their operation within both the spiritual and secular realms of northern Britain. In doing so, it highlights how these ties positioned the island as a center of authority whose reach extended well beyond its immediate environment.

Missionary Efforts

Iona’s reputation was first and foremost rooted in its spiritual prestige. Through theological works, missionary activity, and the shaping of cultural memory, the monastery projected an influence that reached far beyond the island itself. During this period, the missionary activity associated with Columba and other abbots of Iona formed a crucial part of the community’s identity and enduring legacy. Far from being an isolated retreat, the monastery at Iona quickly became a base for outreach across northern Britain. According to Bede, the Monoth, the mountain range extending eastward just south of Aberdeen, separates the northern Picts from their southern counterparts.¹¹⁸ The southern Picts were originally converted by St. Ninian, while the northern Picts came under the mission of St. Columba. From its very foundation, Columba began evangelizing the local population, notably through his encounters with the Pictish king Bridei, where he came to be portrayed by Bede as the apostle to the northern Picts.¹¹⁹ Adomnán’s *Life of Columba* frames these missions not as mere diplomacy, but as demonstrations of divine power and prophetic authority, presenting Columba as both saint and apostle to new peoples. By emphasizing Iona’s role in extending Christianity into Pictish, Irish, and Anglo-Saxon territories, Adomnán underscored the monastery’s spiritual authority beyond the Irish world. These missionary efforts not only reinforced Columba’s sanctity and Iona’s claims to leadership but also opened the channels through which Insular art and script were diffused. The spread of Christianity and the spread of style were thus inseparable, with Iona positioned at the heart of both. After Columba’s death, Christianization continued Northward under his successors with the

¹¹⁵ Campbell and Maldonado, ‘A New Jerusalem’ p. 35.

¹¹⁶ Campbell and Maldonado, ‘A New Jerusalem’ p. 35.

¹¹⁷ Campbell and Maldonado, ‘A New Jerusalem’ p. 35.

¹¹⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 300; Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, IV.21, ed. and trans. by Colgrave and Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 223.

¹¹⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 300-308.

planting additional churches in Saxons and northern British Scottish and Pictish territory ordaining their own clergy such as Applecross and churches on the Island of Skye.¹²⁰

By far the greatest triumph of the monks of Iona was the evangelization of the Northumbrians which led to, ‘The effective conversion of the English kingdoms forms the borders of Lothian to the Thames.’¹²¹ They sheltered and tutored Oswald and Oswiu who both became kings of Northumbria and sent monks to slowly convert the local population, not just the royal family. As explored in chapter one, they built relationships and connections both concurrent with the royal family and on their own. Lindisfarne represented the fusion of monastic evangelization and political strategy. By anchoring the Northumbrian church, it allowed the monarchy to harness missionary work for political consolidation, while the monastery itself exercised influence over kingship and governance through its spiritual authority. Lindisfarne developed as a daughter-house of Iona, replicating its monastic ideals and extending its influence into Northumbria. For more than a generation, Lindisfarne was firmly in line with the Ideals of Iona¹²² until the council of Whitby, and even after, their abbots and monks were still held in high regard by monks like the Venerable Bede and Ceolfrith as exemplary monks and as people all clerics should strive to be like. Even after Whitby, many in Ireland and Scotland held onto the Insular calculation of easter for a generation longer leading to the Columbans being expelled from Pictland in AD717.¹²³ Lindisfarne and Iona evangelized to the north to regions such as Lothian and Galloway, and to the south of converting to Essex and Middle Anglia making great gains. Lindisfarne functioned as Iona’s northern outpost, maintaining its monastic discipline, missionary networks, and political influence for decades after Oswald’s grant.

The Ionan tradition, upheld at Lindisfarne, calculated the date of Easter using the older eighty-four-year cycle, which allowed Easter to fall on any day from the sixteenth to the twentieth of the first lunar month and could coincide with the Jewish Passover—something the Roman Church had long condemned. By contrast, the Roman method, followed by Bede and Ceolfrith and drawn from the Dionysiac or Alexandrian computation, fixed Easter on the first Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox of 21 March, with lunar limits from the fifteenth to the twenty-first day of the lunar month.¹²⁴

Art

Having established Iona’s central role in missionary activity and the diffusion of Christian authority across the British Isles, it is now possible to examine how the monastery influenced the development of Insular artistic and scribal traditions. As alluded to in previous

¹²⁰ Alphons Bellesheim, *St Columba and Iona: The Early History of the Christian Church in Scotland*, abridged from *History of the Catholic Church in Scotland from the Dawn of Christianity to the Present Day*, vol. I, trans. by David Oswald Hunter Blair (Surrey, BC: Eremitical Press, 1887), p. 97.

¹²¹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 310.

¹²² Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 102-108.

¹²³ Bellesheim, *St Columba and Iona*, p. 101.

¹²⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 392.

chapters, Iona was a key center of Insular manuscript production, and several significant works were either produced there or closely associated with it such as the *Cathach*, possibly the oldest surviving Insular manuscript and is traditionally believed to be written in Columba's own hand; the Book of Durrow, believed to be the oldest illuminated Insular manuscript; and the *Book of Kells*, widely considered to be one if not the most beautiful manuscripts of the Medieval period.¹²⁵ The age of these manuscripts alone is enough to indicate that Iona was at the heart of Insular Art and culture. Many of Iona's daughter houses managed to produce magnificent works of their own such as the *Lindisfarne Gospels*.

The development of scripts within the Columban monastic network, and particularly at Iona, reflects the dynamic interplay of insular creativity with inherited traditions from Late Antiquity. Around the time of Columba, Roman square capitals had fallen largely out of use and were replaced with informal cursive for day to day use and half-uncial for manuscripts and inscriptions.¹²⁶ By the seventh century, forms of Insular script—including half-uncial—were widely shared among Britons, Irish, Picts, and the English converted by missionaries from Iona, reflecting cultural diffusion rather than indigenous invention.¹²⁷

Iona's role in the dissemination of Insular scripts was pivotal. Situated at a crossroads of Atlantic trade routes and intellectual exchange, the monastery functioned as a hub of learning whose monks carried half-uncial and related Insular scripts across the Irish Sea and into Britain and continental Europe. The *Book of Durrow* and the *Cathach* were both written in this half-uncial. Through these early texts, the widespread adoption of these distinctive book-hands can be directly linked to the education and missionary activity emanating from Iona, making its influence on the cultural diffusion of Insular script both central and inescapable. We know that Iona had a direct influence on the dissemination not just because they were the main driver of conversion to Christianity in Northern Britain, but because of the manuscripts written in Iona's foundations were written in half-uncial script such as the *Lindisfarne Gospels*.

Adding further credence to Iona's importance in half-uncial's use and dissemination is that it was recognized during the period. During the Paschal debate between the 'Roman' and 'Celtic' parties, half-uncial script came into direct competition with the 'Roman' faction's uncial script.¹²⁸ In England, these differences became visible largely through the influence of Wilfrid of Northumbria, who consciously promoted Roman styles at the expense of perceived Ionan ones. He introduced uncial script into Northumbria and deliberately modeled his churches at Ripon and Hexham on Roman architectural forms, in contrast to the simpler timber church at Lindisfarne. Wilfrid's Roman emphasis drew on his experiences in Lyons and Rome, as well as Britain's own Roman remains, such as at Corbridge and the Roman Wall. His pupil Ceolfrith, at Jarrow, continued this Romanizing tendency, as seen in a foundation inscription of 685 written in square capitals. Thus, less than a century after the Britons abandoned square capitals, English

¹²⁵ Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem' p36.

¹²⁶ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 323.

¹²⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 323.

¹²⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 324.

churchmen deliberately revived them as part of a consciously Roman Christian identity.¹²⁹ In fact, all of Wilfrid's initiatives can be read as deliberate opposition to Iona and its influence. Whether features such as wooden churches and the half-uncial script truly originated at Iona is less important than the fact that, in the perception of the wider world, they were associated with it—a testimony to the prestige and influence that Iona had acquired.

While Wilfred sought to contrast Northumbria's ecclesiastical identity with that of Iona, other currents of exchange were weaving together the cultures of Britain and Ireland into something far more integrated. The careers of Ecgberht and Willibrord illustrate this interconnection, with their movements across Northumbria, Ireland, and the Continent carrying not only Christian teaching but also books and artistic traditions.¹³⁰ These networks helped forge the distinctive Insular synthesis, most visible in the hierarchy of scripts and in the lavish art of the Gospel books, where Irish, Pictish, Anglo-Saxon, and Late Antique influences converged in a uniquely powerful visual expression of the Christian faith as exemplified by the Lindisfarne Gospels which combine both Roman and Insular styles using the Latin uncial script for the titles of the Gospels and half-uncial for the main body of the text.¹³¹

Building on Iona's central role in missionary activity and the diffusion of Insular script, it is possible to trace the monastery's influence into the visual realm, particularly in Pictish art. Archaeologists distinguish two types of Pictish carvings Class I and Class II carvings. Class I consists of roughly dressed or undressed stones adorned with animal and other stereotyped symbols; these are carved by incision and deemed by most scholars to be from the pre-Christian era.¹³² By contrast, Class II carvings are cut in relief on carefully dressed stones, typically featuring a cross on one side accompanied by additional images, while the other side displays symbols and iconography similar to those found on Class I stones.¹³³ Most Class I stones are found among the lands of the Southern Picts, while Class II are almost exclusively found in the North.¹³⁴

According to Hughes, '...this disparity is because the Pictish aristocracy was not effectively Christian until the 8th Century, well after Northumbrian power over the southern Pictish provinces had come to an end.'¹³⁵ Charles-Edwards effectively critiques Hughes and Bede, showing that their interpretation of southern Pictish carvings is not fully reliable, but he does not offer a sound model, he does not provide a fully developed alternative explanation for the southern carvings. Charles-Edwards also states that Bredei was seen by Adomnan as being overlord of all the Picts.¹³⁶ He suggests '... the Britons of what is now southern Scotland did

¹²⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 324.

¹³⁰ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 328.

¹³¹ *The Lindisfarne Gospels* (Annotated): Complete Facsimile (Historical Bible Facsimiles, 5 vols.), annotated by Aleph Omega, illuminated by Eadfrith, translated by Aldred, hardcover edn (London: Historical Bible Facsimiles, 2022); Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 334-5.

¹³² Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 300.

¹³³ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 300.

¹³⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 302.

¹³⁵ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 302.

¹³⁶ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 305.

indeed play a role in the conversion of the Picts, but that this was as collaborators, not as competitors or predecessors, of Columba,' further suggests some involvement of the Britons working with Columba in the South'¹³⁷

This opens the door to a more nuanced view. In the south, Pictish communities came under Northumbrian control after the Battle of Nechtansmere in 685, at a time when Lindisfarne—not Iona—was the dominant ecclesiastical authority following the Council of Whitby in 664, and it would be the king, not Iona, who would be appointing bishops.¹³⁸ By contrast, the northern Picts remained more closely connected to Iona. The high crosses are evidence verifying that this is how the monks carved into stone. The Ionan high crosses, carved in relief and often considered among the earliest of their kind,¹³⁹ provide a plausible model for the Class II tradition. Even if Iona was not necessarily the birthplace of the high cross, its early adoption of the form suggests it exerted a formative influence on the shift from incision to relief carving within Pictish art.

Scholarship

Although Iona's role in developing Insular art within Britain and Ireland is well recognized by the academic community, Campbell and Madonado point out, 'its broader European artistic significance has often been dismissed as peripheral.'¹⁴⁰ According to Bede, regarding the English flocking to Ireland to study: 'The Irish received them all freely, and gave them food daily without payment, and books for reading, and took care to offer them instruction free of charge.'¹⁴¹

From its very foundation, Iona possessed a knack for scholarship. As discussed earlier, St. Columba himself was an avid astronomer and most likely calculated the Paschal computational tract attributed to Anatolius. Adomnán in the *Vita Columbae* frequently depicts Columba engaged in writing within his cell, with his final recorded activity being the composition of a psalter.¹⁴² The act of writing held such significance that manuscripts believed to be in Columba's own hand came to be regarded as possessing miraculous properties; they acquired the status of relics and were employed in rituals such as prayers for the cessation of drought or placed upon the altar while petitions were made for favorable winds.¹⁴³ The act of writing held such significance that manuscripts believed to be in Columba's own hand came to be regarded as possessing miraculous properties; they acquired the status of relics and were employed in rituals

¹³⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 308.

¹³⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 319.

¹³⁹ Stevenson, Robert B. K., 'The Chronology and Relationships of Some Irish and Scottish Crosses', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 86.1 (1956), 84–96.

¹⁴⁰ Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem' p37.

¹⁴¹ Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 8; Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, IV.5, ed. and trans. by Colgrave and Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 313.

¹⁴² Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 24.

¹⁴³ Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 24.

such as prayers for the cessation of drought or placed upon the altar while petitions were made for favorable winds.¹⁴⁴

Additionally other more artistic works had astronomy within them as well such as the ‘Altus Prosator,’ a Hiberno-Latin hymn. It states the following:

Orion wanders from his turning point at the hinge of heaven –
The Pleiades being left behind, most splendid of the stars –
Across the boundaries of the sea, of its unknown eastern rim.
Vesper, wheeling in its fixed circuits, returns by its former paths,
Rising after two years in the evening.¹⁴⁵

This hymn directly mentions many stars and constellations which, at minimum, suggests that there was at least some familiarity with celestial bodies and/or some kind of astronomical books within Iona’s library. It also reflects the Amra’s portrayal of Columba as an astronomer, giving further credence to the theory that he calculated the Paschal Computations. This section from the Amra adds further evidence:

Seasons and Calculations he set in motion... He separated the elements according to figures among the books of the Law... He could number the stars of heaven, the one who could tell all the rest, which we have heard from Colum Cille.¹⁴⁶

The *Iona Chronicle*, as discussed earlier, marks Iona as a pioneer in annalistic history, being among the earliest monastic foundations to maintain such a record.¹⁴⁷ Additionally, it has been proposed as the origin of the 8th century compilation of canon law, the *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*; this document was the first codified canon law collection to enjoy broad reception across northern Europe.¹⁴⁸

In particular, Adomnán’s scholarship was widely recognized, with his writings circulating and impacting intellectual life across Europe.¹⁴⁹ Although Adomnan is best remembered today for his *Life of Columba*, he was more well-known at the time for his more theological work such as *De Locis Sanctis* (Concerning Holy Places) which was influential throughout northern Europe and gained further reception through Bede’s condensed version.¹⁵⁰ Contrary to what the title suggests, this work was not just a geographical guide, but a sophisticated theological text on

¹⁴⁴ Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 24.

¹⁴⁵ Columba of Iona, ‘Altus Prosator,’ in Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 51.

¹⁴⁶ Dallán Forgaill, *Amra Colum Cille*, in Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 109.

¹⁴⁷ Campbell and Maldonado, ‘A New Jerusalem’ p. 37.

¹⁴⁸ Campbell and Maldonado, ‘A New Jerusalem’ p. 37.

¹⁴⁹ Campbell and Maldonado, ‘A New Jerusalem’ p. 37.

¹⁵⁰ Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 80.

scriptural exegesis such as reconciling variations in the Gospel narratives.¹⁵¹ Another work attributed to the famous Iona abbot are the *Canons of Adomnan*.

These strange laws, the *Canones Adomnani*, mostly permit or forbid the eating of certain foods (cattle that have fallen from a rock, chickens that have tasted the blood of a man, and so on.)¹⁵² Although scholars are skeptical about its attributed authorship,¹⁵³ it is fair to say that, at the very least, the author was attempting to invoke the authority of the famous abbot and Iona itself to give the work more gravitas. It is possible that Cu Chimne, one of Adomnan's monks who assisted in the compilation of the *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*, does discuss unclean meat.¹⁵⁴ Perhaps he is the author of the text or was influenced by Adomnan. Either way, it exemplifies the perceived influence and authority of Iona.

The influence of Iona extended beyond individual works of scholarship or manuscript production. The network of monastic foundations originating at Iona—including early foundations among the Picts, the 'Episcopacy of the Irish' in Northumbria, and further efforts reaching deep into Anglo-Saxon England—shaped the culture of the Early Medieval British Isles. As Charles-Edwards observes, this network created a coherent cultural province with Iona at its beating heart. This new Insular culture, encompassing Irish, Pictish, Briton, and Anglo-Saxon traditions, was an expression of shared religious values.¹⁵⁵ It was maintained through the movement of scholars, men, and books across the British Isles and into the continent, with many Insular scholars eventually serving in the Carolingian court and transmitting texts in Insular minuscule, helping ignite the Carolingian Renaissance.¹⁵⁶ Churchmen like Columbanus, though based in Ireland, were formed within this Insular cultural province and went on to found monastic foundations throughout Gaul while championing the Papacy during 'the infamous Three Chapters Controversy'.¹⁵⁷ Even indirectly, Iona's textual, artistic, and monastic practices shaped the environment that produced his missionary approach. Through its scholarship, art, and missionary activity, Iona established an Insular cultural tradition that resonated across generations, leaving an indelible mark on both the British Isles and continental Europe.

Direct Authority

In the highly stratified societies of early medieval Britain and Ireland, where kingship, kinship networks, and fosterage bonds structured almost every aspect of social and political life, it was virtually impossible for missionary activity to remain purely spiritual. Any attempt at conversion necessarily intersected with local power structures: to reach one influential figure was to gain access to their entire kindred, and acts of generosity, teaching, or counsel were

¹⁵¹ Campbell and Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem' p. 37.

¹⁵² Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 30.

¹⁵³ Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 30.

¹⁵⁴ Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 30.

¹⁵⁵ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 321.

¹⁵⁶ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 326-327.

¹⁵⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 375-377.

immediately read as assertions of authority or patronage. Thus, Iona's missionary outreach was not merely a matter of spreading faith; it inevitably functioned as a conduit for political influence, transforming religious persuasion into tangible leverage over land, loyalty, and alliances. In such a context, spiritual 'soft power' could not be separated from secular authority—every sermon, miracle story, or act of hospitality carried with it potential political ramifications, making the fusion of missionary work and political strategy an unavoidable feature of the Ionan mission. By the time of the council of Whitby, Iona maintained spiritual dominion from northern Scotland and Ireland to the midlands of England. We know Iona, like other monastic organizations, had their abbot visit their proverbial 'daughter houses' to ensure good order and observance. This can be deduced from Segene's visits to Lindisfarne, Iona's direct appointment of abbots to Lindisfarne, and, most compellingly, Columba's visit to other foundations in the *Vita Columbae*.¹⁵⁸ As stated previously, Adomnan's vita can be seen as an archetype for what an abbot of Iona should be, and his ideal abbot, the founder of Iona himself, is portrayed visiting other foundations as well as receiving gifts from them,¹⁵⁹ similar to a king on his royal tour of his base-clients.

This acknowledging of Iona's spiritual authority often led to some interesting situations. Bede portrays Columba as missionary and pastor while Adomnan, a pastor and monk.¹⁶⁰ There was an inherent tension with portrayal of Columba in the *Vita Columba* suggesting this tension was in his followers.¹⁶¹ According to both Bede and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, that Iona had a de facto episcopal authority, as depicted in the following quotations:

There must always be an abbot in Iona now and not a bishop; and all the bishops of the Scots must be subject to him because Columba was an abbot not a bishop.¹⁶²

The island has for its ruler always an abbot who is a priest, to whose direction all the province and even the bishops, contrary to the usual custom, are subject, according to the example of their first teacher, who was not a bishop but a priest and monk.¹⁶³

From these observations it becomes clear that Iona possessed some kind of authority over churches like a bishop, otherwise Bede and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle would not have felt the need to differentiate and compare the abbot of Iona to a bishop. Adding further credence is that Adomnan in his vita was particularly careful about how described Columba's missionary work

¹⁵⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 315-316; Kathleen Hughes and the Structure of the Early Irish Church; Adomnán of Iona, *The Life of St Columba*, trans. by Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin Books, 1995) p. 159, 210, 216, 219.

¹⁵⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 12; Adomnán of Iona, *The Life of St Columba*, translated by Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin Books, 1995) p. 193

¹⁶⁰ Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 23.

¹⁶¹ Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 23.

¹⁶² *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. and trans. by Michael Swanton (London: Phoenix Press, 2000) p. 18.

¹⁶³ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, III.4, ed. and trans. by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 223-4.

meaning that it is always described outside of Iona to try to downplay his pastoral role.¹⁶⁴ The limited pastoral interactions that the saint engages in with lay visitors on the island are comparable to those that any monastic community might maintain with its dependents: receiving gifts, offering counsel, admitting penitents, welcoming pilgrims, performing burials, and assisting the poor. These activities are not to be understood as missionary endeavors, but rather as the ordinary services a monastery would provide qua monastery to a population that was already Christian.¹⁶⁵ Clancy and Markus rightly noted that rather than serving primarily as pastoral missions, early monasteries were conceived as places of prayer and withdrawal.¹⁶⁶ As the sixth-century Penitential of Finnian makes clear, ‘Monks ought not to baptize, nor to receive alms’.¹⁶⁷ Yet despite such prescriptions, Irish monasteries nonetheless became hubs of missionary activity, not only in Columba’s Britain but across continental Europe.¹⁶⁸

This distinctive form of authority, which blurred the line between monastic and episcopal functions, provided Iona with a model of oversight that could just as easily be applied in the political realm. If abbots could command bishops and supervise dependent houses, they could also advise, legitimize, and even make kings. As said in the previously, Iona was from its very foundation interwoven with political authority. Columba was from the Cenél Conaill family, the most powerful tuath in Ireland at the time were the High Kings of Tara. Columba was fostered by leading churchmen and even a famous poet giving him education, authority, and gravitas that few men possessed at the time. This combined with connections with the royal line of Dál Riata and the connections to king Bredei of the Picts, made Columba one of the most influential people of the British Isles at the time, especially since this was before the Augustinian mission to the Anglo-Saxons at Kent.¹⁶⁹ Within the British Isles after Rome, it is important to remember the relationships and offerings between different ranking structures. According to T. M. Charles Edwards, every tuath was expected to have a king, a church, a poet, and an ecclesiastical scholar.¹⁷⁰ and the king of Dál Riata possessed the title of overking (ri ruirech) king of a province.¹⁷¹ As one might expect, being of an associate of one rank makes you the same rank in the relative structure, and since an overking is of higher rank than a king, therefore Iona has a rank at least higher than that of a petty king and a normal bishop. Primary sources such as Bede’s Ecclesiastical History and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle do not record a bishopric for Dál Riata. Iona itself had no bishop, only an abbot instead of a bishop.¹⁷² This adds further credence that

¹⁶⁴ Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 23.

¹⁶⁵ Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 23.

¹⁶⁶ Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 23.

¹⁶⁷ Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 23.

¹⁶⁸ Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 23.

¹⁶⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 308.

¹⁷⁰ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 12.

¹⁷¹ Keith Coleman, *Aedán of the Gaels: King of the Scots* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 2022) p. xi-xii.

¹⁷² Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) 223; The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, ed. and trans. by Michael Swanton (London: Phoenix Press, 2000) p. 18.

Iona had status equal to overkings other powerful bishoprics such as Armagh. There seem to be some other ties between Columba's family and that of Dál Riata. The king of Dál Riata at the time of Iona's founding was King Conail who, according to the *Annals of Ulster*, fought in a war with Colman Bec, the King of Tara and one of Columba's family, with Conail being the junior partner.¹⁷³ Perhaps Iona was seen as a way that both families could bind themselves closer together, or seen by Conail as keeping the Cenél Conaill placated by making one of their own the leading churchman for generations keeping that close relationship intact for generations to come. Although Colum Cille's ties with the rulers of Dál Riata strengthened, the monastery remained at the center of a wider network of daughter houses—primarily in Ireland at first—and Iona's interests were firmly integrated into the broader concerns of the Uí Néill, and 'after founding Derry and other monasteries, Colum Cille was the head of one of the most powerful ecclesiastic networks in the country.'¹⁷⁴

As discussed earlier, the *Vita Columbae* was written primarily for the Iona community, outlining how the monastery and its abbots should act, and it provides extensive evidence of Columba's interactions with kings across Ireland, Dál Riata, and Pictland—highlighting Iona's central role in regional politics. This is especially evident in Columba's interactions with Aedán mac Gabrain.

According to William W. Duncan, Aedán 'was a tough opportunist, enemy of all his neighbors and master of most of them.'¹⁷⁵ He was an accomplished general, with the annals recording multiple clashes with both Celtic and Anglo-Saxon powers, and Dál Riata's influence even extended to Orkney.¹⁷⁶ His rule may have been contested, as records indicate a battle immediately preceding his reign.¹⁷⁷ Aedán's father is traditionally associated with establishing a realm east of Dál Riata, and it has been suggested that Aedán had been part of a *fiann*, a warrior band with pagan overtones, in his youth.¹⁷⁸ This background helps to explain both the violence surrounding his early reign and Columba's initial hesitancy in supporting him.¹⁷⁹ Adomnan does mention that Columba did know his brother Eoganán better and would have liked him to become king. Columba not being as close to Áedán, could be explained Áedán having lands or warriors in the east.¹⁸⁰

Despite his initial reservations, Columba ultimately endorsed and confirmed Aedán mac Gabrain as king, lending his spiritual authority to legitimize the ruler's claim and solidify Iona's influence over Dál Riata.¹⁸¹ If this is indeed true, it would have been a remarkably novel intervention which broke all precedent among Gaelic speaking-peoples. It has been suggested

¹⁷³ Keith Coleman, *Áedán of the Gaels: King of the Scots*, p. 17.

¹⁷⁴ Keith Coleman, *Áedán of the Gaels: King of the Scots*, p. 18-19.

¹⁷⁵ Keith Coleman, *Áedán of the Gaels: King of the Scots*, p. xiii.

¹⁷⁶ Keith Coleman, *Áedán of the Gaels: King of the Scots*, p. xiii.

¹⁷⁷ Keith Coleman, *Áedán of the Gaels: King of the Scots*, p. 1.

¹⁷⁸ Keith Coleman, *Áedán of the Gaels: King of the Scots*, p. 8.

¹⁷⁹ Keith Coleman, *Áedán of the Gaels: King of the Scots*, p. 8-9.

¹⁸⁰ Keith Coleman, *Áedán of the Gaels: King of the Scots*, p. 9, 34.

¹⁸¹ Bellesheim, *St Columba and Iona*, p. 55.

that this ceremony and the role of Colum Cille with the ruling house of Dál Riata was to allude to the role of an Old Testament priest, God's intermediary on par with the highest secular rulers on earth, and it would make Áedán the first recorded king ever confirmed by a clergyman within the British Isles.¹⁸²

Adomnan asserts that King Áedán came to Iona to receive this blessing of St. Columba for his rule, and as Charles-Edwards says, '... meetings on the boundary suggest equality, those within one territory the superiority of the ruler of that territory.'¹⁸³ The fact that Aedán came to Iona for confirmation reveals that kings sought not only military success but also the spiritual legitimacy that only Columba and his successors could bestow. In Adomnán's telling, it is the monastery—not the court—that ultimately holds the decisive authority to ordain kingship as served as a precursor to the later to the later medieval idea that kingship required spiritual confirmation such as from the Pope.

Another famous incident involving St. Columba and King Áedán is the Convention of Druim Cett which along with St. Columba and King Áedán, was attended by King Aed of the Ui Neill, Columba's kinsman¹⁸⁴ and was described by Adomnan as *condictum regum*, 'a discussion among kings.'¹⁸⁵ This could make it a precursor to the famous *rigdal* a council between kings. The council focused on three central issues: the threatened expulsion of the poetic class from Ireland, the political status of Dál Riata and its obligations to the Irish high king, and the sensitive matter of a prince held prisoner by King Áed mac Ainmuirech.¹⁸⁶ Because Dál Riata was a cross-channel kingdom and Áedán was such a powerful ruler, other Gaelic kings could not ignore their influence—they had to factor them into the political balance of the north.¹⁸⁷ We do not know much regarding the specifics of what was discussed within this meeting, but this is, according to Adomnan according to Adomnán, Columba gave public support to Eochaid, son of Áedán, to succeed his father upon his death, not the eldest son.¹⁸⁸

The Council of Druim Cetta nearly disbanded the *filid*, but St Columba intervened to defend and regulate this influential class of poets, preserving their social and political role in early medieval Ireland. In Ireland, the *filid*, or bards, were a much venerated and respected caste, regarded as guardians of the oral tradition of folklore and heroic legend which sustained the community and provided its roots (FCW48). These men were often attached to the royal household and lived off public subsidy. The *filid* also followed a ranked learning structure, culminating in the *ollam filed* (chief poet), with ranks corresponding partly to noble and partly to commoner status (EMI131; FCW48). Poets claimed and exercised real political power,

¹⁸² Keith Coleman, *Áedán of the Gaels: King of the Scots*, p. x, 36.

¹⁸³ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 280.

¹⁸⁴ Keith Coleman, *Áedán of the Gaels: King of the Scots*, p. 61; *The Annals of Ulster*, AU 575, ed. and trans. by Bambury and Beechinor

¹⁸⁵ Adams, *The King in the North*, p. 143; Adomnán of Iona, *The Life of St Columba*, trans. Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 159.

¹⁸⁶ Keith Coleman, *Áedán of the Gaels: King of the Scots*, p. 61.

¹⁸⁷ Keith Coleman, *Áedán of the Gaels: King of the Scots*, p. 61.

¹⁸⁸ Adams, *The King in the North*, p. 143; Adomnán of Iona, *The Life of St Columba*, trans. Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 208.

particularly through satire, which could socially ‘disfigure’ a person, damaging a ruler’s prestige and potentially excluding him—and possibly his descendants—from kingship (EMI129, 25, 29). It was precisely this combination of privileges and influence that led the Council of Druim Cetta (Drumceatt) to almost disband the class. An accomplished poet himself, Columba defended the bardic class. Although their numbers may have been reduced, they were saved and Columba is accredited with creating regulations for them.¹⁸⁹ The bards, in deep gratitude to their great champion, dedicated to St Columba the renowned poem known as the *Amra Columcille*.¹⁹⁰

That Columba attended this council and that it is attested to by both the annals and the *Vita Columbae* is strong evidence that cannot be ignored: Columba was very much involved within the political sphere of Early Medieval Ireland. He was a prince with royal blood who rubbed shoulders with some of the most powerful people in the British Isles. The weight of his words was respected by him, and the bardic class was saved, and based on his close relationship with King Áedán, his vocal support at his confirmation would lead to the saint’s support at this council. This support for King Áedán went deeper than a political alliance, he was the kings *anam chara*, soul friend, and was not entered into lightly.¹⁹¹ It was essentially a personal mentor–disciple relationship. It provided an individual with a trusted guide for moral counsel, spiritual growth, and practical advice—someone to whom one could turn for guidance in matters of conscience and daily life alike. We even have evidence of Columba turning this down for certain people, such as a man who would eventually become a martyr.¹⁹²

In Pictland, Columba confronted Bridei mac Maelchon in his court and overcame the influence of pagan advisors, while in other instances he allied with southern Pictish rulers against factions within his own networks.¹⁹³ The *vita* further credits him with guiding succession within the Cenél nGabrain, demonstrating not only spiritual authority but also tangible influence over dynastic politics. Collectively, these accounts portray Iona not merely as a monastic center but as a hub of political power, where the abbot exercised *de facto* authority akin to that of a kingmaker—mediating disputes, sanctioning rulers, and shaping the political landscape of early medieval Britain and Ireland.

Through these narratives, it becomes clear how the monks of Iona—and Adomnán—envisioned the monastery’s role in political affairs, regardless of the semi-historical accuracy of specific episodes. By virtue of his noble lineage and personal authority, Columba is depicted as the equal of every ruler he encountered. Adomnán records his bold interventions with the Irish king Aed Dub, who sought refuge in Dál Riata, as well as his ability to reassure the British king of Dumbarton, Rhydderch Hael, regarding his safety—likely referencing Aedán mac Gabrain.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁹ Bellesheim, *St Columba and Iona*, p. 55-6.

¹⁹⁰ Bellesheim, *St Columba and Iona*, p. 56; Ian Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2018) p. 49.

¹⁹¹ Keith Coleman, *Áedán of the Gaels: King of the Scots*, p. 23; ; Ian Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way*, p. 96.

¹⁹² Keith Coleman, *Áedán of the Gaels: King of the Scots*, p. 23.

¹⁹³ Adams, *The King in the North*, p. 143; Adomnán of Iona, *The Life of St Columba*, trans. Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 184, 186, 269.

¹⁹⁴ Keith Coleman, *Áedán of the Gaels: King of the Scots*, p. 22.

The Life of Columba casts him—and, by extension, Iona's abbots—as king-makers, forging strong ties with secular rulers and providing a Christian framework for legitimizing kingship, and the sheer number of kings reportedly buried on Iona underscores the enduring influence of this model.¹⁹⁵

This political involvement was continued by Columba's successors illustrating the continuity of the monastery's influence in secular affairs. Oswald and his brother Oswine were trained on Iona from a young age, and he became friends with Iona's Abbot Ségéne whose tenure was from 623 to 652.¹⁹⁶ At Iona the princelings learned Irish as well as being brought up in the Christian faith.¹⁹⁷ Abbot Ségéne trained and sent out Oswald and Oswine of Northumbria directly effecting the Kingdoms succession securing a friendly dynasty to Iona and their own foundation at the new kingdom's heart.

In 697 an assembly was held at Birr, under the leadership of Adomnán, and was able to promulgate what became known as the *Cáin Adomnáin* (the Law of Adomnán).¹⁹⁸ This was a law that forbade the harming of clergy, women, children from violence.¹⁹⁹ In order to understand how important this was, one has to understand what the word *Cáin* means. The Irish culture at the time was very different than we imagine the modern state today and even with later kingdoms during the High to Late Middle Ages but no less complex. Society was structured by precedent, oaths, guarantees, and structured, hierarchal relationships. The king and others in authority (in this case Adomnán) had to navigate these systems; they did not create these systems but could use them to rally support around a specific goal. One way to do this was to promulgate *cánai*. The law would not have been effective without Loingsech mac Óengussa, the king of Tara, and the support of the other kings, lords, priests, kinships, etc. The strength of the law was that it benefited many rulers, so they had a reason to enforce it. In other words, society helped enforce the law on itself.²⁰⁰

Adomnan put these practices into motion negotiating on Dál Riata's behalf to have prisoners rescued and brought home. In fact, Cain were usually reserved for royalty to promulgate.²⁰¹ This law was even reaffirmed during the 8th century near the end of Iona's ecclesiastical independence highlighting its continued moral authority well into its decline. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to recount every instance of Iona's political involvement; but these vignettes demonstrates that Iona's role as kingmaker was not mere hagiographical idealization but a continuing reality that shaped the political landscape of early medieval Britain and Ireland.

The interconnectedness of Iona's role in art, script, missionary activity, and political authority demonstrates how impossible it is to separate cultural, spiritual, and institutional power

¹⁹⁵ Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 33; Adomnán of Iona, *The Life of St Columba*, trans. Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 123.

¹⁹⁶ Adams, *The King in the North*, p. 144-145; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 289.

¹⁹⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 312.

¹⁹⁸ Bellesheim, *St Columba and Iona*, p. 99.

¹⁹⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 524.

²⁰⁰ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 524.

²⁰¹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 281.

in the early medieval British Isles. This recognition has also shaped the ways in which modern scholarship has approached Iona, with debates centering on whether its influence was primarily religious, cultural, or political — or whether these dimensions can even be meaningfully distinguished.

The Question of Irish Primacy

I have already alluded to some of the motives underlying Adomnán's decision to compose the *Vita Columbae*. It is, however, necessary at this stage to examine the work more fully. Far from being a mere exercise in hagiography, the *Vita* was constructed with aims, shaped by the circumstances of Iona and by the wider ecclesiastical and political context of the late seventh century. Adomnan wrote his *vita* specifically to bolster St. Columba's authority to attacks from both the Romanizing party from Northumbria and from Armagh and Kildare's assertion of primacy over the Irish church and drive to secure metropolitan jurisdiction. In other words, Iona wished to keep its ecclesiastical independence.

This paper contends that Iona's prestige and reach effectively granted it authority comparable to that of a metropolitan, even absent formal recognition in canon law. This is not said to necessarily imply that Iona was never to acknowledge any other authority, only that it held a *de facto* status as a metropolitan. Armagh would not have made directed attacks on Iona if it did not see it as a threat to their claim of primacy. At the time, three different parties were claiming primacy over Ireland. The Roman party led by the fiery Wilfred. Armagh was also asserting claims of primacy using their aforementioned widespread assertion of Patrick being the founder of the church of Ireland, and Kildare as well since they were, for a brief time, the only metropolitan in Ireland that accepted the Roman dating of Easter.²⁰² When Wilfred, after visiting the Pope, came back after his exile, he carried with him a letter from Pope Vitalian. This letter, originally addressed to King Oswiu of Northumbria to commend his adoption of Roman orthodoxy after the Council of Whitby, later became pivotal in Wilfrid's career. Leveraging papal authority, Wilfrid secured letters reinstating him to York, which Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury then implemented it; thus, extending Wilfred's authority not only over Northumbria but also over the surrounding 'islands' of the northern British Isles. This was part of the broader power grab in which Wilfrid claimed metropolitan-like authority for York, aligning papal sanction with his own ambitions.

According to Charles-Edwards, before 664, Iona exercised authority over the Northumbrian Church, the Picts, and its dependent churches in the northern half of Ireland and enjoyed a large degree of autonomy. Once Wilfrid linked his metropolitan claims to his well-established defense of orthodoxy, his extension of authority beyond any single people could be framed as justified—not only over Picts and Britons but also over the northern Irish. In effect, he may have sought to make York the new, orthodox counterpart to Iona. This would replace King

²⁰² Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 427-8.

Oswald's old alliance with Iona with Oswiu's new one consisting of Canterbury and York. Oswiu used his military might to subjugate Dál Riata making them pay tribute and Wilfred's ambition to undermine and subjugate Iona based on Oswiu's ambition to 'subject the islands' possibly seeking papal confirmation that Iona, as a British rather than Irish foundation, was subject to York, in line with Gregory the Great's scheme. From this perspective, Wilfrid's claim to have established the orthodox faith across Northern Ireland, northern Britain, and the surrounding islands aligns with Oswiu's broader ambitions despite objections from the middle faction such as Bede. In effect, Wilfrid sought to bend Iona to York's authority, turning ecclesiastical influence into a tool of political control.²⁰³

It could be contended that this is the greatest evidence that Iona had the de facto authority of a metropolitan. If it was not such, why would Wilfred have seen it as such a threat or obstacle to his establishment of hegemony over Britain if it was under Canterbury? Why did Wilfred feel the need to travel all the way to Rome? Why was having this Islands section in his paper so important. Why would Tírechán in his *Life of Patrick*, he put him on his tour of Ireland does not have any mention of territory within the Columban *peruchia*?²⁰⁴

A closer reading of Charles-Edwards' criteria for metropolitan powers reveals that Iona exercised many of these functions, suggesting an internal tension within his account. What then is suitable criteria for defining a metropolitan in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland. According to Charles-Edwards, a metropolitan is not, at this time, equivalent to an archbishopric nor primacy.²⁰⁵ He gives the following criteria for a metropolitan based on their privileges which are the following

1. He [the metropolitan bishop] had the right to consecrate any new bishop of a see within his province, just as he himself was normally to be consecrated by the bishops of his province.
2. He had the right and the duty to summon periodic synods of the bishops of his province.
3. He was expected to exercise a general disciplinary jurisdiction over the whole province.²⁰⁶

Charles-Edwards is careful to note that not all these privileges were able to be exercised due to exigent circumstances, but that this is a good rule of thumb.²⁰⁷

It is well-supported by primary documentation that Iona held the power to ordain bishops, reflecting the monastery's far-reaching influence within the Insular church. Bede testifies that Iona supplied and trained bishops for the mission to Northumbria, effectively exercising

²⁰³ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 434-436.

²⁰⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 37, 51.

²⁰⁵ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 419.

²⁰⁶ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 418.

²⁰⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 418.

metropolitan authority in practice, though not in canon law clearly stating that the bishops of Lindisfarne came from Iona, and that Bishop Colmán (Aidan's successor) was also trained and sent from Iona, the same with Finan before him.²⁰⁸

There are also hints that Adomnán agreed with this assessment with his portrayal with his description of spiritual development and training in numerous places in his *vita*. 'The *Amra* celebrates the impact of Columban Christianity on the Picts ... where Iona had clergy at least until they were expelled ... according to the Ulster Annals – in 717.'²⁰⁹ From these it is self-evident that Iona meets the first criteria.

Regarding the second criteria: although it could be argued that the mentions of the authority of Columba in *Vita Columbae* regarding synods and meetings between kings, the Synod of Birr in 697 called for by Adomnán and resulting in the Promulgation of the Law of Innocents is clear and concise evidence that Iona had the authority to call for synods.

Pertaining to the 3rd criteria: while the *Vita Columbae* was clearly composed to enhance the prestige of Columba, it was written for an audience of Ionan monks who would have required events to be credible. The account of Iona initially sending an unnamed monk and then recalling him to dispatch Aedán can therefore be understood not as hagiographical embellishment, but as reflecting a practice that would have been familiar and recognizable to the monastery's own members, lending the narrative plausibility within the monastic context. Additionally, Columba is seen in the *vita* visiting other foundations in the Ionan *peruchia* Columba's interventions with Aedán mac Gabrain and other rulers can be interpreted as an extension of this disciplinary authority: sanctioning or advising leaders to maintain moral or ecclesiastical order within their territories clearly indicating and implying that Iona has supreme authority over their province including Dál Riata and the dominion of the Picts.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Iona, far from being only a center of mission and devotion, was a dynamic force whose economic and social influence shaped both its immediate community and the wider Insular world. By integrating archaeology, history, and hagiography, Iona emerges as a nexus of power, exchange, and identity in Britain and Ireland. Trade to Iona flowed from western France directed through powerful centers of royal authority and trade like Dunadd. Luxuries such as wine, salt, dyes, spices, and nuts being traded in exchange for surplus produce, perhaps leather or metal goods, and possibly slaves. Iona used these luxuries directly in their monasteries and redistributed some of the goods to their monastic familia and their neighbors. This process was used to bind kings and other monasteries by their provision of luxuries, and to bind the receivers of these gifts in ties of mutual obligation to the abbot of Iona. Occasionally, as

²⁰⁸ Adomnán of Iona, *The Life of St Columba*, trans. by Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin Books, 1995) p. 219-221, 229, 297, 307, 311.

²⁰⁹ Clancy and Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p. 24; *The Annals of Ulster*, AU 717.

in Scotland, these luxuries may have been sent as diplomatic gifts to rulers in areas far from the western seaways such as Pictland, to all their relationships to the Midlands of England.

Training and dispatching bishops and missionaries, authority in convening synods, and influence over kings and abbots across the Irish Sea – these demonstrate that Iona functioned as a *de facto* metropolitan center. In the absence of formal hierarchical structures in the Irish and northern British churches, the abbots of Iona exercised practical oversight, coordinated missionary activity, and shaped ecclesiastical policy, effectively occupying the power and authority of a metropolitan, compelling even ambitious figures like Wilfrid to reckon with its influence.

This thesis contributes to the study of Iona until its subordination to Armagh (563) by moving beyond the traditional focus on missions and hagiography to offer a fuller understanding of the monastery's place within the wider Insular world. By integrating hagiography, archaeology, annalistic history, and scientific analysis, it presents a holistic approach that situates Iona not only as a religious center but as a community embedded in broader social and economic networks. The evidence highlights how the monks of Iona engaged in trade, redistributed goods, and exercised authority over Columban foundations, positioning the monastery at the head of a wider ecclesiastical organization. More broadly, this approach demonstrates how monasteries could function as mediators between local subsistence economies and long-distance exchange networks, generating new forms of political and religious power. Looking forward, the methods employed in this study can be applied beyond the Columban network to examine monasteries and monastic influence across the wider Insular world. Above all, the study affirms Iona's role as both a spiritual powerhouse and a social institution of the highest order, standing alongside princes and kings and claiming a place among the great monasteries of medieval Europe.

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