

The Chronology of Saint Colum Cille

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Please note that the passages written in italics are either captions which refer to the overheads, or they reproduce some content of the overheads. In either case the overhead in question is identified by a label OH 1-9, written in bold.

OH 1 – *Kells f. 2^v – A portrait of Colum Cille?*

Good afternoon Ladies and Gentleman,

You are all very welcome, and I wish to say that I regard it a great honour to address this meeting of an Tionól, especially as, if you will allow me to indulge my taste for chronological pedantry, this is the first meeting of the third millennium!

Now, as it is the chronology of Colum Cille that I am to discuss, you may well be wondering why I have chosen to commence with an enlargement of this curious figure, which is spread-eagled above the start of Canon Two in the *Book of Kells* - who is this man?

Well, the portrait does not reconcile with any of the three Synoptic Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke to whom this Canon Table refers, and portraits of whom are found elsewhere in *Kells*, so it is not one of them. The figure's golden plaited hair surely signifies his nobility, his three crosses and halo his sanctity and holiness, his plain white garment suggests a monastic simplicity and purity, his distinctive tonsure shows he was not a follower of Roman orthodoxy, his position above the Eusebian Canons suggests a numerate man, and finally, it appears that *Kells* was known in medieval times as 'Soiscela mor Coluim cille'. All of these details are appropriate to Colum Cille, and I suggest that this may indeed be a late eighth or early ninth century portrait of him, and hence an appropriate starting point for this paper.

Be that as it may, let me now turn to Colum Cille's chronology and note that the date of his death in modern times is virtually always cited as 'Sunday ninth of June 597', and indeed this is sometimes characterized as the only secure date in Irish history of the sixth century. This year is readily derivable from Bede's statement in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* that Colum Cille went to Britain in AD 565 and died, 'about thirty two years' later, the sum of these two numbers yielding 597, and, consequently, this year was often cited in medieval sources. However, modern citations of this year usually prefer to reference the argument presented by William Reeves in his 1857 edition of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*, which argument has been

apparently universally accepted. Here is the essence of Reeves' argument in his own words:

OH 2 – Reeves (1857) argument for Colum Cille's obit in AD 597:

"In calculating the year of St. Columba's death, it will be granted that he died on the ninth of June: ... In the Feilire of Ængus and the Roman Martyrology, as well as those of Bede and Notker, we have domestic and foreign testimony agreeing with the date ...

We learn, however, from Adamnan the following particulars, which, taken in conjunction with the date of the festival, determine the year with great precision:

- *Saturday was the last day of the saint's life.*
- *Shortly after midnight he rose for matins.*
- *That, therefore, he died on Sunday.*
- *That the ninth of June fell on Sunday.*

Now the Regular letter of the ninth of June is F; therefore F was the Sunday letter of the year. But 597 is the only year at this period to which F belongs ... thus giving 597 for his obit."

Now there are two aspects of Reeves' argument to which I would like to draw your attention. First, note Reeves' trust in the chronological details provided by Adomnán, here emphasized by my red under-scoring, notwithstanding the fact that Adomnán wrote about one hundred years after Colum Cille's death.

Second, note the complete absence of any reference to the Irish annals, and I assure you that I am not hiding any such reference behind the ellipses, notwithstanding the fact that, as we shall see, the annals all support the date of the ninth of June which is essential to Reeves' case, but which is not actually given by Adomnán. To be fair to Reeves I should mention that he does subsequently discuss the *Annals of Tigernach* and of *Ulster*, but only to discount their witness. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that Reeves' distrust of the annals as a source for early Irish chronology and history has been shared by many modern scholars; one has only to note the number of references which open with words such as, 'if the annals are to be trusted', or to read the accounts of the annals by Kathleen Hughes or John Kelleher.

However, in 1972 Alfred Smyth demonstrated that from about AD 550 forward the Irish annals contain entries describing contemporary events, and he concluded that 'the earliest body of annals take their origins from the time of the saint himself' [i.e. saint Colum Cille]. Smyth followed John Bannerman in referring to this body of annals, and their continuation up to the middle of the eighth century, as the *Iona Chronicle*, because they both considered

that these annals had been assembled and maintained in Iona. In 1998 I pointed out that a corollary of this location, and of their taking ‘their origins from the time of the saint himself’, was that they must have been at least prepared under Colum Cille’s supervision, and more likely it was he himself that wrote them.

In that 1998 paper I examined the chronology of the early annals, and showed that the chronology of the *Annals of Tigernach* and *Chronicon Scotorum* together best represents the original chronology of the *Iona Chronicle*. This chronology of *Tigernach/Scotorum*, as I shall refer to it, has been placed in the public domain on my Web pages at: www.cs.tcd.ie/Dan.McCarthy/chronology/synchronisms/annals-chron.htm.

On the other hand, regarding the *Annals of Ulster*, which are the annals that have been most widely cited, it has emerged that their chronology over the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries is the result of a conflation of two chronologically divergent recensions of the *Iona Chronicle*, and it is consequently seriously distorted. Thus the scholarly distrust in the early chronology of the *Annals of Ulster* was fully justified.

However, it seems to me that overall the scholarly view of annals has been most strongly influenced by textual considerations, such as Tomás Ó Máille’s demonstration in 1910 that the *Annals of Ulster* preserve some very old orthographic features, whereas textually *Tigernach/Scotorum* are known to be relatively late. This antiquity of *Ulsters’* orthography has encouraged the view that they best represent the archetypal annals. For example, in his impressive and influential work *The High Kingship of Ireland*, Francis John Byrne wrote: ‘On closer examination it can be seen that the earliest annals, represented most reliably by the conservative Annals of Ulster, are ...’; thus, for Francis John, *Ulster* provided the most reliable representative of the early annals. But what has not been appreciated is that in respect of their chronological apparatus these situations are reversed, so that it is *Tigernach/Scotorum* which preserve the oldest chronological features, while *Ulster’s* chronology is relatively recent, and quite unreliable from the fifth to the mid-seventh centuries. This discovery has some significant implications for our understanding of the chronology of Irish history over these particular centuries.

For example, in a recent paper published in *Peritia* 14, I showed that this *Tigernach/Scotorum* chronology placed the obit of saint Brigit of Kildare at AD 524 in her eighty-sixth year, and her *natus* appropriately eighty-five years earlier in 439, so that both numerically and positionally these entries were originally harmonized. Furthermore the

Tigernach/Scotorum chronology for Brigit and eleven other individuals who appear in her *Vita Prima*, is completely chronologically consistent. Since neither of these sources appear to have copied the other, this implies that these chronological details are older than either of them, that is, older than the mid-sixth century. Since writing that paper, I have discovered some independent evidence which confirms this conclusion, and I would like to present this to you.

Over the last twenty five years Professor Mike Baillie of the Paleo-ecological Centre at Queens University, Belfast, has assembled a dendro-chronology covering the last seven thousand years of Irish history. The basic idea in dendro-chronology is that the annual growth ring of a tree represents a summary of the weather for that year, and its thickness varies accordingly. By measuring and collating the thickness of the growth-rings of over two thousand cross-sections of Irish oaks, Mike Baillie has obtained a year-by-year overview of the Irish climate spanning the last seven millennia. When similar work from other parts of the world is examined it emerges that the global climate deteriorated very seriously in the middle of the sixth century. I show on my next overhead Baillie's summary of the European situation from AD 523 to 552.

OH 3 – This level line represents the average annual European tree-ring thickness, and hence represents typical annual weather conditions, so that points plotted above the line represent fair weather years, and points below, harsh weather years. While growth and hence weather varied about the average from AD 523 until 535, beginning in 536 conditions began to seriously deteriorate; the seven years 539-545 all showed severely retarded growth and hence harsh climate, while the brief recovery in 546-7 was followed by two more severe years in 548 and 551. The intensity of the cold of some of these years was profound, with 536 and 541 nearly the coldest years in the last two millennia.

In social terms the duration of this extreme cold extending continuously over at least the seven years 539-45 surely constituted a severe challenge to human society. For, while the wealthy sector of a society normally stores food reserves to carry them over a one to two year climatic crisis, a calamity of such extended duration as this one would be expected to completely exhaust all such food stores, leaving no resources available for recovery. The social consequences of such a catastrophe are immense.

And indeed it is well established that at this time extensive social distress occurred on a global scale; the graphic description by Procopius of Caesarea of the spread in two years of

the Justinian plague from Egypt to Byzantium, where Procopius observed it in 542, is one well-known record of this. What then do the Irish annals have to tell us about social distress in Ireland over these particular years?

OH 4 – Here I have focused on the years AD 534 to 552, and I have plotted in red Mike Baillie’s own data for the Irish oaks over these years, while the black line represents the European data, and from this it is clear that the deterioration in the Irish climate was both more severe and enduring than the European average. Note in particular that the initial deterioration at 536 lasted two years in Ireland, and, while the Irish climate in 538-40 was marginally better than the European average, its recovery from 542-47 was significantly slower and weaker, while the climatic deteriorations in 548 and in 551 were nearly as severe as that in 540-2. In the annals we find entries reflecting social distress in the years AD 538, 540, 550 and 553 by the chronology of Tigernach/Scotorum. These entries from Tigernach are as follows:

538 – Failure of bread, i.e. famine.

540 – A great mortality which is called Blefed in which Mobí Clairineach, whose name is Berchan, a ? and a poet, perished.

550 – A great mortality in which these holy men died, i.e. Finnian, Colum m. Crimthann, Colm of Inis Cealtra, Sineall m. Cenannain and Mac Tail.

553 – A plague which is called Samtrusc.

Now, at the risk of stating the obvious, I would point out that social stress arising from climatic deterioration must necessarily follow it, and indeed follow it relatively closely. Then I would draw your attention to the fact that the annalistic entries at 538, 550 and 553 all follow within two years of the climatic deteriorations at 536, 548 and 551, respectively, while the ‘Mortalitas magna’ at 540 marks the start of the most enduring phase of the climatic deterioration. I suggest therefore that this close synchronization between the dendro-chronological series and these annalistic entries must derive from a chronologically accurate, and hence contemporary, record of these events available to their compiler.

I say ‘compiler’ here because it seems clear that these four entries are not contemporary records of the events; their very sparseness and the bare ‘perditio panis’, ‘mortalitas’ ‘pestis’ are summarizing descriptions; if ‘Blefed’ and ‘Samtrusc’ are original, as I incline to believe, then these would be further indications of retrospectivity. Of the named victims of the

catastrophe just one is selected for special celebration, Mobí, for whom not only is an alternative name ‘Berchan’ given, but some of his qualifications are listed. I suggest that this emphasis is significant because in the *Irish Life of Colum Cille* Mobí is represented as Colum Cille’s teacher at Glasnevin, where Colum Cille survives an inundation when the river floods, whereupon Mobí then predicts the arrival of plague, tells his pupils to disperse and he dies shortly thereafter. These events are all consistent with this dendro-chronological record, and with Colum Cille having chosen to honour his former teacher’s death in his retrospective summary of the beginning of the worst phase of the catastrophe.

One important implication of this result is that, if the monastic milieu into which Colum Cille was born and educated was capable of maintaining a chronologically accurate account of events through a human catastrophe which extended over fifteen years, with widespread famine, plagues, mortality and sustained cold, then that monastic milieu was certainly capable of accurately recording in normal times the obits of senior ecclesiastical and political figures, battles, and regnal ascensions, which comprise the overwhelming majority of annalistic entries over these centuries. There are then very good grounds for believing that when, in the later sixth century, Colum Cille began to compile what we now call the *Iona Chronicle*, he worked from chronologically accurate records, and furthermore he maintained that accuracy.

There are more details of interest in the relationship between these two independent records, but not sufficient time for me to examine them here. However, to further emphasize just how unreliable is the chronology of the annals of *Ulster* at this time, I would point out that it duplicates the first of these entries, ‘Perditio panis’, at AD 535, which is the year before the climatic deterioration had commenced. On the other hand, I suggest that this independent dendro-chronological evidence shows us that there are compelling reasons to trust the chronology of *Tigernach/Scotorum* as accurate, even for events which are recorded in the first half of the sixth century.

Turning next to Colum Cille I would like to commence by examining the principal annalistic witnesses to his obit, which event is placed by the chronology of *Tigernach/Scotorum* in the year AD 593:

OH 5 – *List of the obits from the principal annals.*

Tigernach reads as follows, ‘Quies Coluim cille in nocte dominica pentecostes, quintídh Iuin, anno perigrinacionis sue .xxxu. etatis uero .lxx.uii.’

As you can see Chronicon Scotorum reads verbatim, but with a slightly better text – note its orthodox Latin representation of the fifth ides of June, and the ordinal forms of its numerals.

Of the remainder, Clonmacnoise, Roscrea, and Inisfallen, are all virtually identical; they all identify the day as the fifth ides of June, i.e. June ninth, here underlined in red, and all except Inisfallen state that he died in the seventy seventh year of his age, here underlined in blue, and in the thirty-fifth year of his peregrinatio, here underlined in green, and that he died on the night of Pentecost Sunday, here underlined in yellow.

Ulster however differs in that it omits the years of his *peregrinatio* and assigns him just seventy-six years - which of these two versions is the earlier? Well, examination of *Ulster's natus* shows that it has been moved back by two years in an attempt to correspond with these seventy six years, showing that it is *Ulster's* version of the entries which has been tampered with. Finally, regarding the orthography of Colum Cille's name note that only *Clonmacnoise*, *Roscrea* and *Inisfallen* preserve the 'b' of 'Columba', and of these only *Roscrea* preserves the final 'e' of the Latin genitive – orthographically, therefore, *Roscrea* preserves the most conservative version of his name, and it suggests that it was originally written in Latin.

Now these intervals of thirty-five and seventy-seven years imply the availability, to the author of this passage, of information regarding the year of Colum Cille's *natus* and of his *navigatio* to Iona, and indeed entries are found registering both these events in all of the principal annals, again except *Ulster* which lacks the *navigatio*. It is naturally of great relevance to see how the positions of these three entries in the chronology of *Tigernach/Scotorum* relate to these two stated intervals. Thus in my next overhead I present *Scotorum's* text of these events, preceded by their AD year:

OH 6 - *Colum Cille's natus – navigatio – quies.*

Here by the chronology of Tigernach/Scotorum we have:

AD 520 – Colum Cille is born.

AD 562 – The voyage of Colum Cille to the island of I in the forty second year of his age.

AD 593 – The quies of Colum Cille on the night of Pentecost Sunday, fifth ides of June, in the thirty fifth year of his peregrinatio, and the seventy seventh year of his age.

I do not propose to explain the origin of the Anno Domini years given here since they are fully documented at the web-site:

www.cs.tcd.ie/Dan.McCarthy/chronology/synchronisms/annals-chron.htm

Now in the annals it was the practice to reckon time intervals inclusively, that is both the initial and the final year were counted, as is suggested by the ordinal form of the numerals, for example the seventy seventh year of his age.

OH 6 – *Consequently the interval from AD 520 to 593 equals seventy-four years when counted inclusively, not seventy-three as we would obtain by subtraction of 520 from 593. Similarly the interval from AD 562 to 593 equals thirty-two years when counted inclusively, not thirty-one as we would obtain by subtraction of 562 from 593.*

Now by far the most common scribal numerical corruption found in *Tigernach/Scotorum* is the joining of two minims ‘ii’ to give the Roman numeral ‘u’, and so these intervals suggest that in the *Iona Chronicle* Colum Cille’s *quies* originally gave him a *peregrinatio* of ‘xxx.ii’ years and an age at death of ‘lxx.iiii’ years.

OH 6 – *Further, the interval from AD 520 to 562 equals forty-three years when counted inclusively, not forty-two as we would obtain by subtraction of 520 from 562.*

And since the second most common scribal numerical corruption found in *Tigernach/Scotorum* is the omission or interpolation of minims, this suggests that originally the *Iona Chronicle* placed his *navigatio* in year ‘xl.iii’ of Colum Cille’s life.

These simple scribal restorations therefore bring the numerical data and chronicle positions of these three related entries into a precise relationship with each other, and I suggest that this was indeed how they originally appeared in the *Iona Chronicle* about the time of Colum Cille’s death.

However, a further issue arises in that in AD 593 the ninth of June fell on a Tuesday, so that the element of the annalistic *quies* asserting that he died on Pentecost Sunday is clearly incongruent. But we recall from our examination of Reeves’ argument that the most prominent chronological detail found in Adomnán’s account of Colum Cille’s death is that he died on Sunday, so we must therefore examine Adomnán’s account to see if this is a plausible detail.

I would begin by repeating that Adomnán wrote about one hundred years after Colum Cille’s death, and also by observing that, as an active proponent of the Roman Paschal practice, Adomnán represented a significantly different, and indeed conflicting, ecclesiastical tradition to that of Colum Cille. I next observe that in his dramatic account of Colum Cille’s death, which appears in the last chapter of his *Vita*, Adomnán placed the very first assertion of the

day, and indeed the time, of the event in Colum Cille’s own mouth, in the form of a prophecy delivered in secret to his servant Diarmuid, reading as follows:

OH 7 – The day of Colum Cille’s death according to Adomnán, Vita Columbae, iii.23.

“Et hac sequenti media uenerabili dominica nocte, *secundum eloquia scripturarum, patrum gradiar uiam. Iam enim dominus meus Iesus Christus me inuitare dignatur; ad quem inquam hac mediante nocte ipso me inuitante emigrabo*”

However, as you can see, the words here in italic, which Adomnán attributed to Colum Cille, actually came from Evagrius’ *Vita Antonii*, who wrote, “Ego quidem, filioli, *secundum eloquia scripturarum, patrum gradior uiam; iam enim Dominus me inuitat* ”. In fact, as Gertrud Brüning showed in 1917, Adomnán drew repeatedly on Evagrius when composing his account of Colum Cille’s death. Consequently it is virtually certain that at this point Adomnán was inventing, not reporting. Furthermore, Adomnán here makes Colum Cille repeat the time of his death twice, namely ‘media uenerabili dominica nocte’, and then ‘hac mediante nocte’, and, in a work which explicitly eschews chronological order, the sudden presence of this detailed, precise and emphatic chronological data, so closely juxtaposed to Adomnán’s invention, raises severe doubts regarding the veracity of these details. If the whole of Adomnán’s account is examined it will be seen that the hour and the day of Colum Cille’s death play a major dramatic role in the narrative, while in conspicuous contrast to this prominence, the actual date of his death and feast on the ninth of June is never mentioned.

I next turn to examine Adomnán’s account of the chronology of Colum Cille’s *peregrinatio*, which account appears in the penultimate chapter of the *Vita*, where, just as in the case of the hour and day, Colum Cille is made to deliver the information as a secret prophecy to his disciples. The gist of the account is that God agrees to Colum Cille’s entreaty to be allowed to die after he has spent exactly thirty years in Britain, but then his churches pray for him and so God grants them a precise four year extension to Colum Cille’s life. The chronological essentials read as follows:

OH 8 – Adomnán’s chronology of Colum Cille’s peregrinatio.

Lib. iii. C. 22: ‘... the venerable man thus spoke to them saying:

“Thirty years have been completed of my pilgrimage in Britain, down to this present day.

Meanwhile, for many days past, I have earnestly requested my Lord that in the end of this present thirtieth year he ... would at once call me to the heavenly country.

... the Lord granted me when I asked it with my whole strength that I should pass to him from the world on this day, [but now] he has changed ... answering in preference the prayers of many churches for me.

And so it has been granted by the Lord to the prayers of those churches that ... four more years from this day shall be added to my sojourn in the flesh.

After the end of the four coming years in this life, by God’s favour I shall ... joyfully depart to the Lord.”

In accordance with these words ... he remained in the flesh for four years afterwards.’

Lib. iii. C. 23: ‘When the end was drawing near of the four years aforementioned, after the completion of which the foreteller of truth had long ago foreknown that his present life would come to a close, one day in the month of May [the account of Colum Cille’s last days and death follow.

Now there are four aspects of this account to which I would like to draw your attention. First, note the precision which Adomnán establishes for these intervals of thirty and four years by means of his emphasis on the ‘present day’ and ‘this day’ – ‘in præsentes diem’ and ‘in hac die’ in the Latin, here underlined in blue.

Second, since at the time that Adomnán wrote, the date of Colum Cille’s feast day was definitely celebrated on the ninth of June, all his references to ‘this day’ here are implicitly to the ninth of June, and this is indeed consistent with Adomnán’s reference to ‘one day in the month of May’ in the next chapter, a few weeks prior to Colum Cille’s death.

Third, Adomnán’s account gives Colum Cille a *peregrinatio* of exactly thirty-four elapsed years in total, which number is explicitly given by Adomnán in his second preface and here is made up as a sum of a period of thirty years underlined in green, plus the four years underlined in red. It is important to realize that, because it goes implicitly from June ninth to June ninth, this elapsed period of precisely thirty four years corresponds exactly with the inclusive interval of thirty five years found in all of the principal annals. However, note well

that it conflicts with the inclusive interval of thirty-two years given by the chronology of *Tigernach/Scotorum*, and also by Bede.

Fourth, in this account Adomnán introduces an ambiguity with respect to the year of Colum Cille's death. The first such year he identifies is that in which Colum Cille is granted by God to die, and the second such year is that in which, allegedly, as a result of the prayers of his churches, he actually does die, and Adomnán repeatedly emphasizes the precise four year interval between these two events. These are shown here underlined in red, and you see that twice Colum Cille is made to repeat it in prophecy, and twice Adomnán himself confirms it.

OH 8 – *Colum Cille allegedly said: ‘four more years from this day shall be added to my sojourn in the flesh’ and then, ‘After the end of the four coming years in this life, by God’s favour I shall ... joyfully depart to the Lord.’*

Then Adomnán said: ‘he remained in the flesh for four years afterwards’, and then, ‘When the end was drawing near of the four years aforementioned, after the completion of which ...’

Now four years is exactly the interval by which Colum Cille's death must be delayed from Tuesday ninth of June 593 in order to ensure that it will fall on a Sunday, as Adomnán has insisted in the following chapter. That is four elapsed years from Tuesday ninth of June 593 brings you to Sunday ninth of June 597.

I suggest that these repeated emphases on a delay of his death by precisely four years betray an awareness by Adomnán that, if Colum Cille were to die on a Sunday as his following chapter so emphatically asserts, then the supposed year of his death must be deferred by exactly four years from the real year. In these circumstances I conclude that we must reject both Adomnán's assertion that Colum Cille died on Sunday, and that his *peregrinatio* lasted exactly thirty-four years. This in turn implies that the inclusive interval of thirty-five years found in all the principal annals is most likely a deliberate amendment from thirty-two years in order to bring the entry into congruence with Adomnán's datum. It then seems probable that the corresponding amendment, changing his age at death from seventy-four to seventy-seven years, was done in order to maintain the original relative chronology of his *natus* and *navigatio*. Similarly the annalistic references to his death being on Sunday are also most likely to be interpolations inspired by Adomnán's *Vita*, while the addition of the qualification ‘pentecostes’ in the annals is simply a case of a later annalistic interpolator further gilding Adomnán's magnificent chronological lily.

This then brings me to my final summary:

OH 9 – Conclusions –

1. *Adomnán deliberately chose to place Colum Cille's death on Sunday, apparently for purposes of dramatic effect.*
2. *To achieve this Adomnán extended Colum Cille's peregrinatio by exactly four years.*
3. *In the annals the words, 'in nocte dominica pentecostes' and the numbers 'lxxvii' and 'xxxu', are corruptions deriving from Adomnán's Vita.*
4. *The original Iona Chronicle texts and chronology which emerge are:*

AD 520 - Columba natus est.

AD 562 - Navigatio Columbae ad insulam Iae .xliiii^o. anno aetatis suae.

AD 593 - Quies Columbae u. id. Iuin, anno perigrinationis suae .xxx^o.ii^o., aetatis uero lxx^o.iii^o.

The textual evidence shows that originally his name was written in Latin, 'Columba', as shown here, and now these entries are all both numerically and positionally congruent. Note too that Colum Cille's death at 593 is followed in the chronology of *Tigernach/Scotorum* by the death of his successor, abbot Baithéne, three years later at 596, and that of Áedán mac Gabráin at 604, which is where John Bannerman, in 1968, on completely different grounds, suggested that these obits should be located.

Thus, just as in the case of Brigit, we find that critical examination of the texts and chronology of *Tigernach/Scottorum* discloses an original precise numerical and positional congruency between Colum Cille's entries. I suggest, therefore, that given the dendro-chronological evidence which has been demonstrated confirming the accuracy of the chronology of *Tigernach/Scottorum* in the earlier part of the sixth century, there are very good grounds to accept this annalistic account as accurately representing the chronology of these key events of Saint Colum Cille's life.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for your attention.