

ON THE SHAPE OF THE INSULAR TONSURE

Introduction

In the early decades of the eighth century at least three Northumbrian authors referred to the tonsure worn by clerics or monks in such a way as to show that it carried for them powerful connotations of Christian orthodoxy or unorthodoxy, depending upon its shape. As well as this all three correlated orthodoxy or unorthodoxy in tonsure with orthodoxy or unorthodoxy in Paschal observance. The earliest of these authors, Ceolfrid, abbot of Jarrow and later also Wearmouth, in a letter written to Nechtan, king of the Picts in *c.* 710, discussed both the Paschal and tonsorial issues at great length, whose details we shall examine below. In chronological order the next was Eddius Stephanus, who, in his *Life* of St Wilfrid written *c.* 720, explicitly stated that Wilfrid's tonsure was coronal, i.e. circular, and emphasised its association with St Peter and hence the Roman Church, writing:

Wilfrid, the servant of God, in accordance with his own desire, gladly received from the holy Archbishop Dalfinus the form of tonsure of the Apostle Peter in the shape of the crown of thorns which encircled the head of Christ.¹

On the other hand he stated that, following the synod of Whitby, Colmán, abbot of Lindisfarne, was told that:

... should he reject the [Roman] tonsure and the Easter rule for fear of his fellow-countrymen, namely, he must retire and leave his see to be taken by another and better man.²

Bede, the third of these authors, writing his *Historia Ecclesiastica* in *c.* 731 provided by far the most references, wherein he repeatedly identified the coronal tonsure with Roman orthodoxy, and he juxtaposed this with what he called the 'catholic rules' for Easter, i.e. the Dionysiac computation.³ On the other hand he twice clearly identified as in error those who rejected the coronal tonsure and the 'catholic' Easter, and

¹B. Colgrave (ed. and tr.), *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus* (Cambridge 1927, repr. 1985) 14–15.

²*Ibid.* 22–3.

³B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (ed. and tr.), *Bede's Ecclesiastical history of the English people* (Oxford 1969); *H.E.* iii.26x2, iv.1, v.21, v.22 (pp. 308–9, 330–331, 532–3, 554–5) for coronal tonsure, *H.E.* iii.25, iii.26, v.21, v.22, v.24 (pp. 296–7, 308–9, 532–3, 552–3, 566–7) for the catholic Easter.

represented that it was conflict about these which led to the synod of Whitby.⁴

These are not the only, nor the earliest, indications of conflict regarding the shape of the ecclesiastical tonsure in the Insular context. From further south, Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury, wrote a letter in 672 to Geraint, king of Cornwall and Devon, because he had heard:

... diverse rumours that your bishops are not at all in harmony with the rule of the Catholic Faith ... [and] that there are in your province certain bishops and clerics who obstinately refuse the tonsure of St Peter ... [and] in the most holy celebration of Easter they do not follow the rule of the three-hundred-eighteen Fathers [Dionysiac Easter].⁵

Apropos the Insular tonsure Aldhelm wrote that, 'we have learned that the author of (this mode of) tonsure, in the opinion of many, was Simon, the founder of the magical art', and he cited 'the Struggle of the Apostles [cf. *Acts* 8.14–24] and the ten books of Clement [i.e. *Ps.-Clement, Recognitiones*]' as evidence of Simon's necromancy. This seems to be the earliest, well-dated instance of this identification of Simon with the Insular tonsure, but there are good reasons to believe that such allegations had existed at least from the time of the synod of Whitby in 664.

All the remaining material has an Irish provenance, the first of which, the *Collectio canonum Hibernensis* has been dated to the early eighth century, and thus is approximately contemporaneous with Ceolfrid's letter.⁶ The fifty-second book is entitled *De tonsura*, and consists of seven *capitula* dealing in turn with: (1) the origin of the tonsure, (2) the primacy of Peter's tonsure, (3) the reasons for wearing it, (4–5) its spiritual, sacerdotal and regnal significance, (6) the British tonsure and (7) a canon asserting that clerics who did not wear the Roman tonsure ought to be excommunicated. Consequently the *Hibernensis* provides a substantial exposition of the whole subject, and its two *capitula* which refer to the appearance of the Insular tonsure are as follows:

⁴*Ibid.* H.E. iii.26, v.22 (pp. 308–9, 554–5) for the errors of unorthodoxy, and H.E. iii.25, pp. 298–9 for the issues which prompted the synod of Whitby, for the circumstances of which see also D. Mc Carthy and A. Breen, 'Astronomical Observations in the Irish Annals and their Motivation', *Peritia* 11 (1997) 1–43, at 24–30.

⁵M. Lapidge and M. Herren (tr.), *Aldhelm — the prose works* (Ipswich 1979) 156–7. For this letter, which is dated by the authors to 672, see *ibid.* 141–3; earlier it had been dated to 679 by H. Hahn, *Bonifaz und Lul* (Leipzig 1883) 39. Earlier again, A. W. Haddan and W. Stubbs (ed.), *Councils and ecclesiastical documents* (Oxford 1871) 268, dated it to 705.

⁶J. F. Kenney, *The sources for the early history of Ireland* (Columbia 1929) 250, 'the book [*Hibernensis*] was composed early in the eighth century'.

Cap. 3. *De quinque causis, quibus tonsus est Petrus Romani* dicunt, quod quinque causis Petris tonsuram accepit: prima, . . . quinta, ut a Simone mago christianorum discerneret tonsuram, in cuius capite cesaries ab aure ad aurem tonsa anteriore parte, cum ante magi in fronte cirrum habebant.

Of the five justifications for Peter's tonsure

The *Romani* say that there are five reasons Peter's tonsure ought to be accepted: first . . . fifth, that the tonsure of Christians may be distinguished from that of Simon Magus, wherein the head [hair] it is cut from ear to ear [and] the front part shorn, although earlier the *magi* had a fringe in the front.

Cap. 6. *De tonsura Brittonum et solemnitate et missa*

. . . *Romani* dicunt: Brittonum tonsura a Simone mago sumpsisse exordium tradunt, cuius tonsura de aure ad aurem tantum contingebat, pro excellentia ipsa magorum tonsurae, qua sola frons anterior tegi solebat, priorem autem auctorem hujus tonsurae in Hibernia subulcum regis Loigairi filii Neili extitisse Patricii sermo testatur, ex quo Hibernenses pene omnes hanc tonsuram sumpserunt.⁷

Of the tonsure of the Britons and solemnity and Mass

. . . *Romani* say: They say the tonsure of the Britons took its origin from Simon Magus, whose tonsure used to reach almost from ear to ear, but to surpass the tonsure of the *magi*, with it [*sc.* the tonsure of the Britons] the very front of the brow was accustomed to be covered; the learned discourse of Patrick indicates that the swineherd of King Laoghaire mac Néill provided the earlier origin of this tonsure in Ireland, from whom nearly all the Irish have acquired it.

A number of observations arise from these two passages. Firstly *cap.* 3 proposes that one of the five reasons for accepting Peter's tonsure is in order to distinguish the Christian tonsure from that of Simon Magus. Secondly it indicates that the tonsure of *magi* is cut behind from ear to ear but it is ambivalent regarding the appearance at front, asserting that earlier the *magi* had worn a fringe, but now the front part was shorn (*tonsa*) in some unspecified way. Whatever shape may be inferred from this latter statement it is important to realize that these remarks refer to the tonsure worn by *magi*.

⁷H. Wasserschleben, *Die irische Kanonensammlung* (Leipzig 1885) 211–13. Collation of *cap.* 3 with Aldhelm's text shows correspondences in matters of content and text which suggest they drew on a common source, cf. *ibid.* 211 n. 4. The author gratefully acknowledges the crucial assistance of Dr David Howlett, Bodleian Library, Oxford, with the translation of *Cap.* 6.

Turning to *cap.* 6, firstly it should be noted that this passage was published by Haddan and Stubbs as part of a collection of excerpts under the heading ‘Gild[as]. Epist. II A.D. 565 x 570’; however, it is clear from their preliminary discussion that they did not regard the text which referred to the tonsure as having been written by Gildas.⁸ Secondly we note that the Latin of the passage has caused difficulty, with both Ussher and Haddan and Stubbs proposing emendations.⁹ However, while some case endings may be corrupt, it is clear that, in contrast to *cap.* 3, the passage is referring to the tonsure worn by British Christians which it alleges originated with Simon Magus whose tonsure was cut from ear to ear. In the front, on the other hand, the passage explicitly states that in order to distinguish it from the tonsure of the *magi* this British Christian tonsure leaves the very front of the brow covered, i.e. unshorn. Thus whatever the shape at the front, it is not possible to propose that the whole front of the head was shaven bare. Finally, on Patrick’s authority it attributes the introduction of this British Christian tonsure to Ireland to the swineherd of King Laoghaire and makes the interesting assertion that nearly all of the Irish [Christian clerics] have adopted this tonsure.

Regarding the purpose and tone of these references it can be seen from both the structure of Lib. 52 and the content of these citations that they were directed towards those clerics already observing the Roman customs, and were intended to both reassure them of their own orthodoxy and to heighten their sectarian antagonism towards those of their contemporaries who insisted on wearing the ‘Brittonum tonsura’. Thus these references to it are deliberately tendentious, and their brief allusions to its appearance, like the allegation that Simon Magus was its originator, are intended to be derisory. The remaining evidence, the *Catalogus sanctorum Hiberniae*, dated by its most recent editor to the ninth or tenth centuries, effectively simply repeated the first part of the brief prescription of the *Collectio*, viz.:

Primus ordo Catholicorum sanctorum erat in tempore Patricii [c. fifth cent.] ... unam tonsuram ab aure usque ad aurem sufferebant.

Secundus ordo Catholicorum presbyterorum [c. sixth cent.] ... unam tonsuram ab aure ad aurem.

Tertius ordo sanctorum [c. seventh–eighth cent.] ...

⁸Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils* i, 108 n.* ‘... but the allusion to the tonsure in the last paragraph (which does not appear in the Corpus MS.) belongs to a later date than his [sc. Gildas]’. The paragraph in question appears on pp.112–13 where their apparatus shows that this text comes from the St Gall and Corbey MSS of the *Hibernensis*.

⁹J. Ussher, *Britannicarum Ecclesiarum Antiquitates* (Dublin 1639), reprinted in C. R. Elrington, *The whole works of the most Rev. James Ussher D.D.* vi (Dublin 1847–64) 491. Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils* i, 112–13. John Dowden, ‘An examination of original documents on the question of the form of the Celtic tonsure’, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (1895–96) 325–37, at 331: ‘The text, which is obviously corrupt, presents several difficulties’.

diversam tonsuram (alii enim habebant coronam, alii caesariem).¹⁰

This evidence was first rehearsed in print in 1639 by James Ussher, who cited all the above sources, followed by discussions from G. Chamillard in 1659, J. Mabillon in 1669 and 1703, E. Martène in 1690 and 1700, John Smith in 1722, Daniel Rock in 1849, J. Mayor and J. Lumby in 1879, Charles Plummer in 1896, P. Gobillot in 1925, Louis Gougaud in 1932, A. A. Luce in 1960 and Edward James in 1984.¹¹

Now it is the case that, of all the sources identified above, Ceolfrid's letter gives the most detailed account of the appearance of the tonsure which their authors considered to be unorthodox, and, moreover, it provides sufficient information to allow us to deduce its shape, and that is the purpose of this paper. If the question be asked — what need is there to establish this detail so many years after the tradition has disappeared?, I would reply that knowledge of this should help us to identify more precisely the relationships between the Christian varieties extant in the early stages of Christianisation in the British Isles, particularly with respect to their artistic and literary productions. Note that I will use the qualification 'Insular' to refer to the distinctive tonsorial and Paschal traditions referred to by these authors.¹²

¹⁰Cited from Ussher, *Antiquitates* vi, 477–9. The most recent edition of the *Catalogus*, which I have not seen, is P. Grosjean, 'Édition et commentaire du *Catalogus sanctorum Hiberniae secundum diversa tempora* ou *De tribus ordinibus sanctorum Hiberniae*', *Analecta Bollandiana* 73 (1955) 197–213 and 289–322. The Latin may be translated as: 'The first order of Catholic saints were in the time of Patrick ... they wore one tonsure from ear to ear. The second order of Catholic presbyters ... one tonsure from ear to ear. The third order of saints ... diverse tonsures (some had the circle, others the cut)'.

¹¹Ussher, *Antiquitates* vi, 477–9, 487–92; G. Chamillard, *De corona, tonsura et habitu clericorum etc.* (Paris 1659) 546; J. Mabillon, *Acta sanctorum ordinis S. Benedicti*, saec. ii (Paris 1669) 120, and J. Mabillon, *Annales ordinis S. Benedicti* i (Paris 1703) 472; E. Martène, *De antiquis monachorum ritibus* (Lyons 1690) 723–35; E. Martène, *De antiquis Ecclesiae ritibus* ii (Rouen 1700) 294–301; J. Smith, 'De tonsura clericorum', Appendix IXb to *Baedae H.E.* (Cambridge 1722), reprinted in J. P. Migne, *P.L.* xcvi (1861) c. 327–32; D. Rock, *The Church of our fathers* (London 1849), three vols., i 185–8; J. E. B. Mayor and J. R. Lumby (ed.), *Venerabilis Bedae historia Ecclesiasticae lib. III IV* (Cambridge 1879) 293–5 give a substantial bibliography of further eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources. C. Plummer, *Venerabilis Bedae opera historica* (Oxford 1896) ii, 353–4; P. Gobillot, 'Sur la tonsure chrétienne et ses prétendues origines païennes', *Rev. d'Hist. Eccl.* 21 (1925) 399–451; L. Gougaud, *Christianity in Celtic lands* (London 1932) 201–6; A. A. Luce et al., *Evangeliorum quattuor codex Durmachensis* ii (Olten 1960) 48–9; E. James, 'Bede and the tonsure question', *Peritia* 3 (1984) 85–98. I have not been able to consult Gobillot, which reference is taken from F. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, *The Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford 1983) s.v. 'Tonsure'.

¹²Since the identification by Dáibhí Ó Cróinín of the *latercus* in Padua MS I.27 f. 71v–75v, all essential details of the Insular Pasch have been identified and published in D. Mc Carthy and D. Ó Cróinín, 'The 'lost' Irish 84-year Easter table rediscovered', *Peritia* 6–7 (1987–88) 227–42; D. Mc Carthy, 'Easter principles and a fifth-century lunar cycle used in the British Isles', *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 24 (1993) 204–24; D. Mc Carthy, 'The origin of the *Latercus* paschal cycle of the Insular Celtic Churches', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 28 (1994) 25–49. Earlier, Charles Jones gave the best modern survey of the history of the Pasch in his 'Beda opera de temporibus' (MA thesis,

Ceolfrid's letter to Nechtan

The reason that Ceolfrid's letter supplies so much detail in respect of the Insular tonsure is made clear by Bede in his introduction to the letter, wherein he wrote:

The king [Nechtán] asked the abbot [Ceolfrid] to send him information by letter to enable him to confute more convincingly those who presumed to celebrate Easter at the wrong time; also about the shape and method of tonsure by which it was fitting that clerics should be distinguished: notwithstanding this request he himself had no small measure of knowledge of these matters.¹³

As can be seen from this, Nechtán was in close contact with clerics who were maintaining both the Insular Paschal and tonsorial traditions, and he was already well-informed with respect to them; consequently a substantial treatment was required of Ceolfrid. This he certainly delivers, firstly in respect of the Paschal issue, where, in a sustained and persuasive argument, he discusses theological, astronomical, computational and historical aspects of both his own and the Insular traditions. Next, turning to the matter of the tonsure he first acknowledges the existence of current diversity, writing:

... the catholic Church nowadays, though it agrees in one faith, one hope, and one charity towards God, does not agree in one and the same form of tonsure throughout the world.¹⁴

Moreover he acknowledges that, unlike the Pasch, so far as he knows, the tonsure has not been a matter for controversy heretofore, writing:

But though we freely admit that a difference in tonsure is not hurtful to those whose faith in God is untainted and their love for their neighbour sincere (and especially since we never read that there was any conflict amongst the catholic fathers about differences of tonsure such as there has been about diversity of faith or in the keeping of Easter) ...¹⁵

This is an important detail since it indicates that in Ceolfrid's view this tonsorial controversy was unprecedented, which view is in accordance with the results of Edward James' survey of European tonsorial

Cambridge, 1943) 3–104, however much of the detail of his survey of the British Isles has been superseded by the above-mentioned publications.

¹³Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede E.H.*, v.21, 532–3. Colgrave's translation of *de tonsurae modo uel ratione* as 'the shape and method of tonsure' seems slightly inappropriate; cf. L. Sherley-Price (tr.), *Bede — ecclesiastical history of the English people* (London 1990) 309: 'he also required information about the form and reason for the tonsure that clergy should wear'. Surely it was the reason, or rationalization, for the coronal tonsure which Nechtán sought.

¹⁴Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede E.H.*, v.21, 546–7.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

references, wherein he observed the rarity of references to Ceolfrid's preferred tonsure, the *corona*. James wrote:

The infrequency of references to the *corona* in the sixth and early seventh centuries is, however, noteworthy. Gregory of Tours uses the word only in that one place. Early discussions of the symbolism of tonsure make no reference to the *corona*.¹⁶

Next, having carefully indicated the significant detail that he is considering both Christian and non-Christian tonsorial traditions, Ceolfrid emphatically identified his own tonsure with St Peter and hence the Roman Church, writing:

... nevertheless among all the forms of tonsure which we find either in the Church or among the human race, I would say that none is more worthy to be imitated and adopted by us than the one which that man wore to whose confession the Lord replied, 'Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church ...'¹⁷

However there is a limit to Ceolfrid's forbearance, for he then continues:

Nor do I consider any tonsure to be rightly judged more abominable and detestable than that worn by the man who wished to buy the grace of the Holy Spirit, to whom Peter said, 'Thy money perish with thee because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in the matter.' [*Acts* 8.20–21]¹⁸

Now this is a potent accusation by Ceolfrid, for, although he does not explicitly identify the person concerned at this stage, his citation of Peter's rebuke to Simon Magus from *Acts* 8.20–21 makes his identification contentiously clear. However he skilfully suspends identification while he explains the reasons for the coronal shape of his own tonsure, identifying it both with Christ's Passion and his crown of thorns. Then, resuming his attack on the Insular tonsure, he wrote:

But as for the tonsure which Simon Magus is said to have worn, what believer, I ask you, will not, at the very sight of it, detest and reject it together with his magic? And rightly so. In the front of the forehead it does seem to bear the

¹⁶James, 'Bede and the Tonsure', 96. James's paper primarily undertakes 'to attempt to determine the significance of hair and its cutting in [medieval European] society as a whole' (p. 87). While he cites the 'ear to ear' allusion of the *Hibernensis*, he does not discuss the question of the shape of the Insular tonsure.

¹⁷Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede E.H.*, v.21, 546–9.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 548–9.

resemblance to a crown, but when you come to look at the neck, you find that the crown which you expected to see is cut short; so that you recognize this as a fitting fashion for simoniacs but not Christians.¹⁹

Here Ceolfrid makes explicit his identification of the Insular tonsure with Simon Magus, to which matter I will return, and follows this with the most substantial description of the appearance of this tonsure to have survived. Ceolfrid's description, 'in the front of the forehead it does seem to bear the resemblance to a crown', stands alongside the assertion in the *Hibernensis* that it was 'sola frons anterior tegi solebat', i.e. that the very front of the brow remained covered. These two statements can be reconciled together but I suggest that Ceolfrid, even though he too was strongly opposed to the tonsure, has given the more objective description of its appearance, even acknowledging its partial resemblance to his own corona, and clearly contrasting the front and rear views of it. Moreover, Ceolfrid was writing to an informed political leader who was dealing with clerics actually wearing the tonsure, and for Ceolfrid to offer a description which did not correspond with what Nechtan observed would both confuse and diminish the authority of his advice. The tendentious allusions in the *Hibernensis*, on the other hand, directed at the minds of conforming clerics, give very little information regarding shape, simply identifying the end-points of the cut as 'de aure ad aurem', and indicating that the hair was left on the very front of the brow. In these circumstances it seems to me that Ceolfrid, who, as we shall see, had observed the tonsure upon Adomnán's head, has given the more detailed account, an account which, furthermore, reconciles with the available graphic evidence.

I now turn to review the various conclusions that have been derived from the foregoing evidence. In 1639, Ussher, having cited 'ex vetere libro canonum' i.e. now *lib. 52, cap. 3* of the *Hibernensis*, which ends 'cum antea Magi in fronte cirrum habebant', wrote:

Diversum enim ab hoc [sc. tonsura Magi] Britonum, Pictorum et Hibernorum ritum, quo anteriore tantum capitis parte tondebantur clerici, rotunda quidem tonsura, sed imperfecto orbe ab aure ad aurem circumducto . . .

Different indeed from this [the tonsure of the magi] was the observance of the Britons, Picts and Irish, with whom only the anterior part of the heads of the clerics were tonsured, with a rounded tonsure indeed, but an incomplete circle being brought directly from ear to ear . . .²⁰

Here Ussher deduced a shape which was circular but incomplete, being truncated from ear to ear. This is not a particularly clear statement of

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰Ussher, *Antiquitates* vi, 490.

the shape from Ussher, but it must be borne in mind that his interest was Church history, not geometry, and neither does he make it explicit upon exactly which evidence he based this conclusion. Nevertheless it is apparent that he concluded that the front part was circular while behind, it was brought directly from ear to ear. This semicircular shape identified by Ussher indeed reconciles both with Ceolfrid's description and that of the *Hibernensis*, *cap.* 6, and it was the hypothesis adopted by most subsequent authors; since Ussher was the first to set it forth in print, I will use his name and 'semicircle' with which to designate it. In 1659, Chamillard, citing no evidence, wrote, 'in Simone Mago, primo inter haereticos diaboli candidato, semiplenum Simonianae Coronae orbiculum damnantem', and subsequently referred to 'dimidiata Simonis coronae forma', clearly showing he considered it to have the shape of a semicircle.²¹ In 1690 Martène clearly set forth the evidential basis for the semicircle hypothesis when he wrote:

Nimirum primo aspectu in frontis superficie videbatur praeferre speciem coronae, at ubi ad cervicem considerando pervenisses, decurtatam eam, quam te vidisse putabas, inveniebas ... Romanam tamen apud Scotos tonsuram primum invexerat S. Patricius, at hanc quae in semicirculam definebat, ad invenit Loitgari Regis filius, quae magnarum postea contentionum fomes & origo extitit ...²²

As can be seen, the first part of this was a paraphrase of Ceolfrid's description of the Insular tonsure followed by a loose paraphrase of *Hibernensis lib.* 52, *cap.* 6, wherein Martène explicitly described the shape as that of a semicircle in order to accommodate Ceolfrid's description that, from the front, the Insular tonsure bore, 'the resemblance to a crown'.

However, somewhat earlier, in 1669, Mabillon made the first of his two contributions to the discussion, when, in a footnote to a reference to tonsure in his account of the *Vita S. Eustasii*, he wrote:

Nempe discipuli S. Columbani tonsuram gerebant Hibernicam, quae dimidiatam coronam reddebat: scilicet ab aure ad aurem per frontem in coronam caesus erat capillus, ab

²¹Chamillard, *De corona*, 546, which may be translated as: 'with Simon Magus [you have] the principal candidate of the devil amongst the heretics, and the cursed half-round circle of the Crown of Simon ...' and 'the divided shape of the crown of Simon'.

²²Martène, *De antiquis Monachorum* ii, 727, which may be translated as: 'Doubtless at first sight the upper side seemed to resemble a sort of corona, but when one came to consider the neck, one found that which you expected to see was truncated ... St Patrick first brought the Roman tonsure to the Scots, but here it was bounded by a semi-circle; it reached the son of King Laoghaire, which later provided the kindling and origin of a great struggle ...'. Ten years later, in *De antiquis Ecclesiae* ii, 299, he effectively repeated the same statement: 'unde & praeterimus antiquam Scotorum tonsuram quae in semicirculum tantum definebat, quae multarum suo tempore dissensionum fuit seges ...'.

aure ad aurem per occipitium capillus intonsus dependebat. Certainly the disciples of S. Columbanus wore the Irish tonsure, which bestowed a half corona; that is, from ear to ear around the front the hair was cut in a circle, while from ear to ear through the occiput the unshorn hair was hanging down.²³

As can be seen this account of the tonsure worn by the Columban disciples simply repeated Ussher's semicircular hypothesis; however, Mabillon's assertion regarding the back — that 'the unshorn hair was hanging down' — introduced an element for which there was absolutely no evidential basis, but which nevertheless was to prove remarkably influential. Subsequently, in 1703, as part of his account of events leading to the synod of Whitby in 664, Mabillon published his second contribution and, apparently influenced by a portrait he found in a St Amand manuscript and which he reproduced, he wrote:

At vero Brittones & Scotti anteriorem caputis partem capillis omnino nudabant ab aure ad aurem, posteriori intonsa quod exemplo beati Johannis apostoli se facere gloriabantur. Hujusmodi tonsurae formam in libro XVI ubi de Sancto Amando, in sancti Mummolini episcopi effigie videre licet. However, the British and Scots were entirely denuding of hair the front part of the head, while the back was unshorn in order to follow the example of blessed John the apostle whom they honoured. This shape of tonsure may be seen in the portrait of the holy bishop Mummolinus in Book XVI at Saint Amand.²⁴

Here, citing no authority whatsoever, Mabillon simply asserted that the British/Scottish tonsure comprised completely stripping the forehead bare back to between the ears and leaving the back of the head untonsured, which tradition he said they attributed to the apostle John. Now not only was Mabillon's hypothesis completely unsupported by any known authoritative source, but it was also in irreconcilable conflict with the descriptions of both Ceolfrid and the *Hibernensis*, *cap.* 6, which both require hair on the front of the head. Furthermore, the portrait of an apparently bald man which he used to instance the supposed tonsure carried the caption 'S. MVMOLEN?', and his question mark certainly suggested that there was uncertainty in Mabillon's mind regarding its status. Finally, Mabillon's hypothesis here also stood in irreconcilable and unacknowledged conflict with his statement of 1669, and together they represent the most confusing contributions to the whole discussion. Notwithstanding all of these deficiencies, Mabillon's invention of

²³Mabillon, *Acta* ii, 120.

²⁴Mabillon, *Annales* i, 472. The reproduction is between pp. 528–9.

a totally-shaven forehead came to constitute the alternative and competing hypothesis to the semicircular hypothesis of Ussher. All subsequent discussions have simply offered minor variations of these two.

For example, in 1722 Smith concluded: ‘Nam coronae dimidiatae fuit, vel semicirculi forma, illa Scottica tonsura, hoc uno differens a Catholica, quod non totum circuitum capitis pervaderet . . .’, effectively repeating Ussher’s hypothesis.²⁵ In 1849 Rock wrote, ‘the Irish [tonsure] was made by cutting away the hair from the upper part of the forehead in the figure of a half-moon, with the convex side before’, which was repeated by Mayor and Lumby in 1879, all thus maintaining Ussher’s hypothesis.²⁶ On the other hand, in 1857 Reeves wrote that St Columba’s tonsure ‘was *ab aure ad aurem*, that is, the anterior half of the head was made bare, but the occiput was untouched’, and he simply cited Mabillon’s *Annales*, whose authority he clearly accepted.²⁷ Shortly after, in 1864, Todd wrote ‘The Irish tonsure consisted in shaving all the hair in front of a line drawn over the top of the head from ear to ear’, while Warren’s description in 1881 was virtually verbatim, ‘The Celtic tonsure consisted in shaving all the hair in front of a line drawn over the top of the head from hear to ear’.²⁸ All these authors had clearly accepted the authority of Mabillon’s shaven-forehead hypothesis. Then in 1896, in the notes to his important edition of Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* and referring to the Insular tonsure as the ‘Celtic tonsure’, Plummer wrote:

The Celtic; this consisted in shaving the whole front of the head from ear to ear, the hair being allowed to hang down behind . . . Some of the Celts claimed for this, as for their Easter practices, the authority of St John.²⁹

Thus, it can be seen that Plummer, although he did not cite Mabillon explicitly, nevertheless reproduced in translation his 1703 hypothesis of the shaven forehead virtually verbatim, into which he incorporated Mabillon’s 1669 element of untonsured hair at the back being allowed to hang down. It is remarkable that in the very same year two other scholars published hypotheses incorporating this very same element. Plummer’s Oxford colleague, William Bright, wrote: ‘The peculiarity of the Celtic tonsure consisted in leaving a small fringe of hair cross the forehead and letting the hair grow behind . . .’, thereby incorporating

²⁵Smith, *Baedae H.E.*, c. 330, which may be translated as: ‘For the tonsure of the Scots was a half-ring or semicircle, the one difference from the Catholic [tonsure] being that it did not complete a full circuit of the head.’

²⁶Rock, *Church* i, 188; Mayor and Lumby, *Venerabilis Bedae*, pp. 293–5.

²⁷W. Reeves, *The Life of St Columba, written by Adamnan*, (Dublin 1857) 350.

²⁸J. H. Todd, *St Patrick, Apostle of Ireland*, (Dublin 1864) 487; F. E. Warren, *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church*, (Oxford 1881) 67.

²⁹Plummer, *Venerabilis Baedae* ii, 354. As his authorities Plummer cites Bede *H.E.*, Ceolfrið’s letter to Nechtan, *Hibernensis*, cap. 6 from Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils* i, 113 and J. O’Donovan (ed.), *Annals of Ireland: three fragments* (Dublin 1860) 112, for John.

Mabillon's long back hair into Ussher's hypothesis.³⁰ Then in Scotland, John Dowden cited this passage from Bright, as well as both passages from Mabillon and reproduced the questionable portrait of St Mummolinus, and illustrated long back hair conspicuously in his reconstruction of the Insular tonsure. This tonsure, he wrote, 'took a crescentic or semilunar shape', while 'the whole back of the head was covered with its natural covering'.³¹ Thus the year 1896 saw both of Mabillon's inventions endorsed in authoritative British academic publications.

By 1939 Mabillon's shaven-forehead hypothesis represented a serious alternative to Ussher's hypothesis, and the long back hair had become a required element of both hypotheses as may be seen from Gougaud's survey:

Some hold that the forepart of the head, in front of a line drawn from one ear to the other, was completely shaved, whilst behind this line the hair was let grow in abundance. According to others the Celtic clergy did indeed wear their hair long behind, but the forepart of the head was not wholly denuded, for a semicircle of hair ran from ear to ear above the forehead'. This latter view appears to me the more likely ... [citing Ceolfrid's description] ... Evidently the Celtic tonsure, viewed in front had the appearance of a crown or circle, but it was only a semicircle.³²

Thus Gougaud himself opted for Ussher's hypothesis, with the addition of Mabillon's long hair behind, and in 1960 A. Luce, discussing the *Book of Durrow* f. 21v, endorsed Gougaud's view, writing, 'the context demands a positive, though incomplete crown, such as is described in Gougaud's words "a semicircle of hair ran from ear to ear above the forehead"'.³³ On the other hand in their 1969 edition of Bede's *E.H.*, Colgrave and Mynors effectively repeated Plummer's version of Mabillon's shaven-forehead hypothesis, writing, 'The Celtic tonsure seems to have left the hair long at the back while the front was shaved bare'; curiously they omitted the ear-to-ear detail, the only attested element of Mabillon's hypothesis, but retained his unattested long hair.³⁴ Thus it can be seen that down through the long sequence of discussions of the shape of the Insular tonsure, authors have proposed just minor variations upon either Ussher's semicircular hypothesis, or Mabillon's shaven-forehead hypothesis. Indeed it is the former of these which was employed in the effigy of St Columba placed

³⁰William Bright, *The Roman See and the early Church* (London 1896) 414 n. 1.

³¹Dowden, 'Examination', 337 n. 3 for his citation of Bright; 334–5 for Mabillon; 334 fi g. 3 for the portrait; and 332 fi g. 2 for Dowden's reconstruction.

³²Gougaud, *Christianity*, 202–3.

³³Luce et al., *Codex Durmachensis* ii, 48.

³⁴Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede E.H.* ii.2, 139 n. 3. The same note was repeated verbatim in their 1991 edition.

in the interpretive centre erected at Gartan, Co. Donegal, popularly considered his birth place.

However, I suggest that critical examination of Mabillon's formulation of the shaven-forehead hypothesis shows that it is without any basis whatsoever in any authoritative source, and furthermore it irrevocably contradicts the descriptions in both Ceolfrid's account and the *Hibernensis*, cap. 6. Consequently all those interpretations which have effectively repeated Mabillon's hypothesis must be rejected. Moreover, when considered carefully, neither can the hypothesis of a semicircular tonsure be accepted, for Ceolfrid explicitly stated that from the front it *superficially resembled* a crown, viz., 'Quae in frontis quidem superficie coronae uidetur speciam praeferre', but from the front the semicircular hypothesis would appear *identical* with a crown. Thus neither of these hypotheses is sustainable.

Ceolfrid's description requires that from the front the shape must approximate the appearance of a circle viewed obliquely, while the *Hibernensis*, cap. 6 description requires that some hair at least must cover the front of the brow. Viewed from behind, both accounts agree that it exhibits truncation between the ears. Consequently the shape must be symmetrical about the central axis of the head with a horizontal termination to the rear, and in the front it should project symmetrically towards the brow. The most plausible shape that can be fitted to this specification is an approximate equilateral triangle with one vertex facing forward, like a Greek 'Δ', as illustrated in figure 1 (a). The front vertex of this tonsure, when viewed from the front, face to face, will tend to be obscured by the forehead hair and, on the domed surface of the human head the two diverging front edges will appear to approximate a corona, cf. figure 1 (c). Moreover the very front of the brow is covered as *Hibernensis* cap. 6. asserts. However, when viewed from behind, the back edge will appear to follow virtually a straight line between the two conspicuous rear vertices placed between the ears, and this would indeed cut off the crown which Ceolfrid so wished to see there, and also reconcile with the *Hibernensis*, cap. 6 description, 'tonsure de aure ad aurem tantum contigebat', cf. figure 1 (b).

Following Ceolfrid's description and castigation of the Insular tonsure, he relents somewhat, and allows that some who wore it were:

... holy men and worthy in the sight of God. Among these is Adamnan, a renowned abbot and priest of the company of St Columba, who was sent on a mission from his people to King Aldfrith and wished to see our monastery. He showed wonderful prudence, humility, and devotion, in word and deed. Once when we were talking I said to him, amongst other things, 'Holy brother, you believe that you are going to win the crown of life which knows no end, so why do you wear on your head a form of crown which is incomplete and

therefore ill-suited to your belief; and if you are seeking the company of St Peter, why do you copy the form of tonsure which he cursed?³⁵

Note that Colgrave has infelicitously rendered *terminatam* — in the phrase *terminatam in capite* . . . — as ‘incomplete’, whereas *termino* carries the opposite connotation, viz. ‘to bound, limit, circumscribe, close, finish, end or terminate’.³⁶ I suggest that the translation should read ‘why do you wear on your head a terminated form of a crown . . .?’, which description then stands in antithesis to Ceolfrid’s usage of *termino* in the first part of the sentence, viz. ‘Obsecro, sancte frater, qui ad coronam te uitae, qua terminum nesciat, tendere credis’, meaning that Adomnán hopes to win a crown of life which is ‘unterminated’, i.e. never ending. The ‘Δ’ shape derived above, with its three terminations, then reconciles perfectly with Ceolfrid’s description here of Adomnán’s tonsure, where he draws the contrast between Adomnán’s ‘terminated’ tonsure and his hopes for ‘unterminated’ life. Thus examination of Ceolfrid’s remarks to Adomnán indeed supports the conclusion, based upon his description of its appearance, that the Insular tonsure was triangular in shape.

It is appropriate here to make some practical observations about this tonsure. Firstly, whilst I have characterized it as ‘triangular’, it is in fact impossible to project a plane triangle onto the dome of the human skull. Rather, the edges are all curves and are seen as such from most viewing points, cf. figure 1 (a)–(c).³⁷ Secondly, when this tonsure is viewed frontally, from slightly lower than eye-level, while the shaven skull is not visible a distinctive ‘V’ notch is still seen in the hair profile, cf. figure 1 (d), and this is a relevant detail to bear in mind when considering artistic representations of this tonsure. Thirdly, given that for a significant proportion of males their hairline recedes as they age, it is clear that when the recession reaches the front vertex these members of the community will no longer have a triangular tonsure, but rather a wedge-shaped ‘U’ tonsure. Here the coronal tonsure, placed back on the crown of the head, has the advantage that it will retain its integrity of shape for longer than the triangular tonsure.

³⁵Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede E.H.*, v.21, 550–551.

³⁶C. T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin dictionary* (Oxford 1975) s.v. *termino*. Compare also Sherley-Price, *Bede — ecclesiastical history*, 319: ‘Why then, I beseech you, do you wear on your head the image of a crown which, in a fashion that belies your faith, is terminated?’.

³⁷The author wishes to express his gratitude to Dr Steven Collins, now of www.havok.com and to Dr Gareth Bradshaw of the Image Synthesis Group, TCD, who so enthusiastically and constructively developed these images.

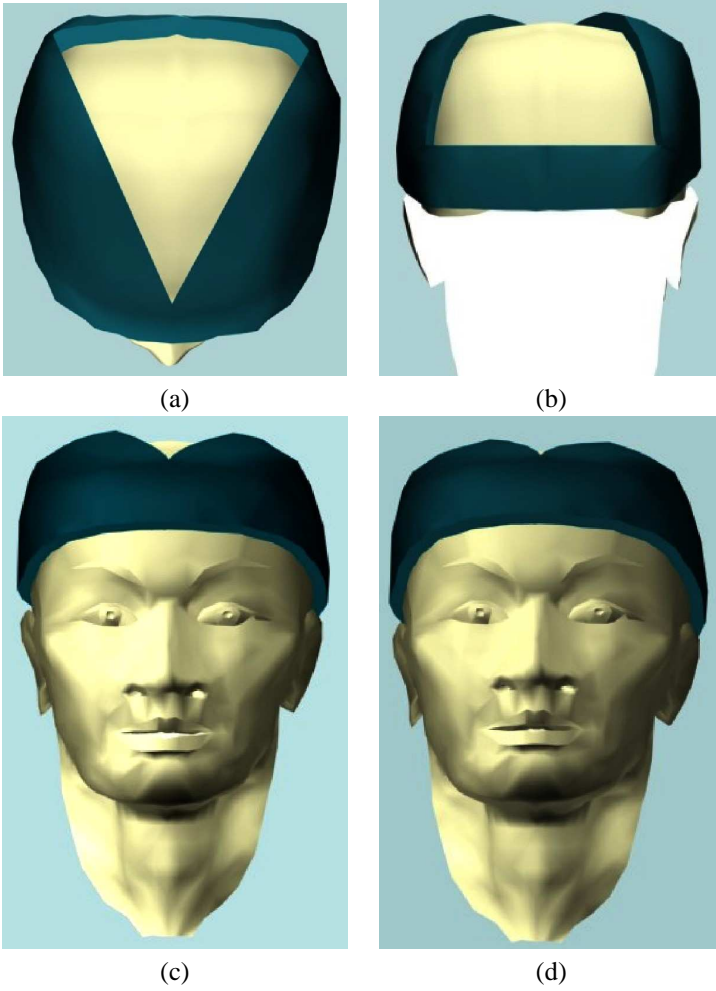


Figure 11.1: A computer-generated view of the triangular tonsure as seen from: (a) above; (b) the back at eye-level; (c) the front at eye-level; (d) the front slightly below eye-level, just at the point where the crown of the head is occluded by the forehead hair.

Graphic and Literary Corroboration

What affirmation may we seek beyond the descriptions by Ceolfrid and the *Hibernensis*, *cap.* 6 that this deduction of a triangular tonsure is indeed correct? Well, given the intimate character of a tonsure, and the conspicuous nature of its appearance, and the intensity of the controversy which we know occurred, an obvious and essential check is to see whether any corresponding references appear in significant locations in contemporary works of Insular Christian art and literature. The most substantial of these are the Insular Gospel texts, which constitute a group of high Christian art productions originating from the British Isles, and dating from the late seventh to mid-ninth centuries.³⁸ Consequently, they are contemporaneous with the tonsure controversy, which continued at least until the Insular tonsure was substantially eliminated. The *Annales Cambriae* indicate that the British Church in Wales conformed to the Roman Pasch in 768, while in Cornwall the British Church did not conform until the tenth century.³⁹

Since in England these works are closely associated with Northumbria, particularly Lindisfarne, and in Ireland with the Columban monasteries of Kells and Durrow, they relate to monasteries which were implicated to various degrees in the tonsorial controversy. As such we would expect contemporary art, particularly in any representation of the human head and its hair, to be sensitive to the shape of the controversial tonsure. Of course in the case of the Gospels there is no basis on which to propose that the four Evangelists concerned wore a tonsure at all, and indeed they are usually represented as un-tonsured. However one can imagine that, occasionally, in the heat of controversy, it became difficult for an artist engaged in illustrating an Evangelistic head to resist imposing his own preferred tonsure upon it.

That this in fact happened is readily demonstrated by an examination of J. J. G. Alexander's catalogue, *Insular manuscripts 6th to the 9th century*, where together with details of each manuscript, he reproduces its principal illustrations. Here we find, in all, eight portraits of Evangelists wearing the Roman coronal tonsure; viz. in the *Echternach Gospels*, Matthew f. 18v.; in the *Codex Aureus*, f. 9v. Matthew and his Symbol, and f. 150v. John; in the *Cutbercht Gospel Book*, Mark and John f. 18r., Mark f. 71v., John f. 165v.; in the *Book of Dimma*, Mark p. 30. These manuscripts date from the late seventh to the late eighth century.⁴⁰ For example, on f. 18v of the *Echternach Gospels*, a late seventh

³⁸Nearly all of the MSS catalogued by J. J. G. Alexander, *Insular manuscripts 6th to the 9th century* (London 1978), are Gospel texts.

³⁹J. Morris, *Nennius – British history and the Welsh annals* (London 1980) 47, 88, for the *Annales Cambriae*, and M. Dillon and N. Chadwick, *The Celtic realms* (London 1973) 230–231, for the Cornish date.

⁴⁰Alexander, *Insular manuscripts*, descriptions and illustrations as follows: *Echternach*, pp. 42–3, illustration 54 (Matt.); *Cod. Aureus*, pp. 56–7, illustration 147 (John), 153 (Matt.); *Cutbercht*, pp. 62–3, illustration 182 (Mark and John), 184 (Mark), 186 (John); *Dimma*, p. 69, illustration 223 (Mark).

or early eighth century work which is associated with the monastery founded by the Anglo-Saxon Willibrord in 698, the artist depicted the *Imago hominis* of Matthew wearing a Roman coronal tonsure, cf. figure 2 (a).⁴¹ This being so, an obvious step is to examine the representations of both Matthew and his Symbol in the other Insular texts associated with areas in which the Insular tonsure was known to be worn, in order to see whether this tonsorial imposition in *Echternach* was a response to earlier tonsorial impositions, or had stimulated a response from artists of subsequent manuscripts.

Thus I first turn to the *Book of Durrow*, which manuscript, up until the middle of the seventeenth century, so far as is known, had resided in the monastery of Durrow in County Offaly, founded by St Columba in the sixth century. This, one of the earliest Insular Gospels, is dated to the early middle seventh century.⁴² Here on f. 21v the artist has illustrated the Symbol of Matthew with a distinctly emphasized, deeply incised 'V' in the hairline at the middle of his brow, cf. figure 2 (b). This image corresponds to viewing the triangular tonsure from a point slightly below eye-level, where the crown of the head is not visible, cf. figure 1 (d). In 1960 A. A. Luce strongly argued that this image represented the Insular tonsure, and, excepting only his adoption of Mabillon's element of long hair behind and his difficulty rationalising the image based upon his assumption of the semicircular hypothesis, the remainder of his careful and cogent discussion remains persuasively valid.⁴³ Furthermore, exactly the same hairline detail is repeated in the Symbol of Matthew depicted on the 'Four Symbols' page in *Durrow* f. 2r.⁴⁴ Thus we find that *Durrow*'s artist has twice given graphic representations of Matthew tonsured in a style which reconciles precisely with the triangular shape we have deduced from the accounts of Ceolfrid and *Hibernensis*, cap. 6. Since *Durrow* is one of the earliest Insular Gospel texts, it is clear that these texts were being used to express tonsorial ideologies from the later part of the seventh century, so that *Echternach*'s Roman tonsure is simply maintaining an established mode of controversy.

⁴¹G. Henderson, *From Durrow to Kells* (London 1987) 48, identified this instance, and gave, pp. 48–51, a useful discussion of *Durrow*'s tonsure. However, it is compromised by the unacknowledged conflict between the shaven forehead and semicircular hypotheses, and the fact that neither reconcile with *Durrow*'s Matthew.

⁴²Luce et al., *Codex Durmachensis* ii, 45, for the date.

⁴³*Ibid.* 48–9.

⁴⁴Alexander, *Insular manuscripts*, illustration 13.



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)



(e)



(f)

Figure 11.2: Tonsure references in: (a) *Echternach* f. 18v, Symbol of Matthew; (b) *Durrow* f. 21v, Symbol of Matthew; (c) *Kells* f. 28v, Matthew; (d) *Kells* f. 2v, Atop Canon II; (e) *Lichfield*, p. 218, Luke; (f) *Dimma*, p. 2, Matthew.

Next I turn to the *Book of Kells*, which of all the Insular Gospel books is probably the best known and artistically the most spectacular. While both its date and its place of composition are subject to considerable dispute, it is known that it was in the monastery of Kells in County Meath in the early eleventh century, and it is usually dated to between the mid-eighth and early ninth centuries.⁴⁵ In 1007 it is from Kells that the annals report that it was stolen, and then subsequently recovered, twice referring to it as ‘an Soisgela mor Colum Cille’, i.e. the great Gospel of Colum Cille.⁴⁶ Thus, at this time, before the reform of the Columban monasteries, it was emphatically identified with St Columba, and therefore, wherever it was made, it must have satisfactorily represented his tradition from a Columban viewpoint. Here, while none of the Evangelistic portraits nor the *Imago hominis* Symbol of Matthew are shown tonsured, in two important cases, viz. f. 28v and 291v, we find triangles encircling and touching the hair of the Evangelists Matthew and John respectively, which in the former case alternate with, and in the latter case bear, triple discs. In figure 2 (c) I reproduce the portrait of the head of Matthew from f. 28v. In particular should be noted the position and the orientation of the three triangles supporting his halo and touching his hair, for their apices index the three positions on the head where we have deduced that the vertices of an Insular tonsure were placed. The fact that the artist of *Kells* was prepared to place such structures in such a significant and prominent location, at a time when the tonsorial controversy was still current, strongly suggests that, here, he too was making his statement regarding the controversy. It is a more complex and subtle statement than simply imposing the tonsure, but unmistakable in its intent. In particular his alternation of triangles and triple discs in both portraits suggests some affinity between the two motifs, which share an underlying ‘ Δ ’ geometry; the sheer proliferation of these delta-configured triple dots and discs in *Kells*, and their conspicuous locations on the garments of sacred figures (7v, 28v, 32v), angels’ wings (f. 27v), the vault of heaven (f. 4r, 5r) and as little bunches of triple grapes attached *passim* to the sacred text, suggest that this motif, and hence the underlying ‘ Δ ’ geometry, referred to sacred and cosmic ideals.

Next, in figure 2 (d), I reproduce a figure who surmounts the canon table given on *Kells* f. 2v; in his hands he holds the tongues of two cats whose faces are decorated with triple dots and whose ears are terminated in triple discs (not illustrated). Three golden crosses support his

⁴⁵Alexander, *Insular manuscripts*, 71–6, ‘(?)8th to 9th century’. B. Meehan, *The Book of Kells* (London 1994) 91, ‘c. 800 can be cited as a suitable compromise’.

⁴⁶Notification of the theft and recovery is found in both the *Chronicum Scotorum*, W. M. Hennessy (ed.) (London 1866, repr. 1964) 244–5, and *The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)*, S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill (ed.) (Dublin 1983) 438–9 s.a. 1007. However, the entry in the Annals of Ulster is an interpolation in the hand of its compiler, Cathal mac Maghnusa, which asserts that, ‘It was the most precious object of the western world on account of the human ornamentation’, and that it was recovered after ‘two months and twenty nights’, which details are not given by the *Chronicum Scotorum*.

halo in locations corresponding to the triangles about Matthew's head, while his richly-plaited golden hair shows a deep 'V' at the very centre of his forehead, in just the same way as already noted in the representations of Matthew in *Durrow*. Furthermore, at the base of the central cross, the apex of a tiny black triangle points down towards the crown of the man's head. Whilst the identity of this man is not made clear, his crosses and halo establish his Christianity and sanctity, his spectacular golden hair his nobility, his prominent tonsure his independence of Roman orthodoxy, and his plain white tunic his humility — could this be a portrait of Columba himself? Whether this identification is accepted or not, here we surely have unmistakable graphical verification of the delta shape of the Insular tonsure. This result, together with the remarkable level of the vine/Johannine imagery in *Kells*, carries the corollary that wherever the manuscript was manufactured it was a monastery which was still emphatically maintaining the Insular tonsure and Pasch.⁴⁷ This would seem to rule out Lindisfarne after the synod of Whitby, i.e. 664, Pictland after Nechtan's reform in c. 710, and Iona after the Paschal reform there in 716.

Next I turn to the *Lichfield Gospels*, dated by Stein to 730, and known to have been in the church of Llandeilo Fawr in south Wales by the early ninth century.⁴⁸ Here, when we examine p. 219, the Symbols of the four Evangelists, we again find Matthew's Symbol has a 'V' incision above the centre of his brow. It is not so deep as those in *Durrow* and *Kells*, but in the context of a tonsorial controversy wherein the contemporaneous artist of *Echternach* provided Matthew's Symbol with a coronal tonsure, *Lichfield's* artist cannot possibly be considered to be representing the same tradition. Moreover, when *Lichfield's* portrait of Luke on the opposite page 218, is examined, it is found that his richly plaited hair has been arranged so as to form a triangular shape, facing forward, at the very centre of his forehead, cf. figure 2 (e). Again, in the context of the tonsorial controversy, his placing of this shape in this orientation and position, appears to me to be an unmistakable statement of controversy by the artist. Finally, it is remarkable that in *Lichfield* one finds surrounding this portrait of Luke, and the portrait of Mark on p. 142, and on the last page of Matthew's Gospel on p. 141, a frame composed of a distinctive double rank of interlaced triangles. This repeated use of triangular geometry, in close proximity to such sacred figures, surely represents a controversial and taunting statement by the artist, suggesting that the portraits of Matthew and John, missing from

⁴⁷F. Henry, *The Book of Kells* (London 1974) 209, 'The use of plant ornament is one of the characteristic features of the Book of Kells ... This Kell's vine ...'. Cf. Mc Carthy, 'The Origin', 33–7 for John and the Insular Pasch.

⁴⁸Alexander, *Insular manuscripts*, 48–50, 'Lichfield ... second quarter of 8th century'. W. Stein, 'The Lichfield Gospels' (Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1980) 133.

Lichfield, may well have been removed as an act of censorship when the manuscript arrived in a milieu antagonistic to Insular customs.

A similar double rank of interlaced triangles provides part of the infilled frames which surround the portraits of Matthew and the Symbol of John in the *Book of Dimma*, which is dated to the second half of the eighth century and placed in Roscrea, Co. Tipperary.⁴⁹ On p. 2 is a portrait of Matthew, apparently closely related to that of *Echternach*, except that here the artist has illustrated a deep 'V' in the centre of his hairline, cf. figure 2 (f). Like the corresponding image in *Durrow*, the viewpoint is such that no crown is visible, and the representation is clearly that of the Insular tonsure, cf. figure 1 (d). Now it has been mentioned above that *Dimma*, p. 30, represents Mark wearing the Roman tonsure; however, any possibility that the artist was expressing a neutral position in the tonsorial controversy disappears when all four Evangelist portraits are compared. The portraits of Matthew and John's Eagle are both given elaborate frames partially filled with triangle interlace, and the portraits positioned gracefully therein; Mark and Luke (no tonsure), on the other hand, are given bare frames of two parallel lines against the upper of which, in both cases, their head is jammed. In this way the artist has made graphically clear how his feelings differ with regard to the two tonsures and, indeed, the two pairs of Evangelists. Finally, to complete this review of Gospel references to the Insular tonsure, f. 12v. of the *Book of Mulling*, dated to the second half of the eighth century, like *Durrow*, *Dimma* and *Lichfield*'s Symbol, portrays Matthew with a 'V' incision on his forehead hair.⁵⁰ Thus this examination of the Insular Gospel texts provides substantial graphic confirmation of the triangular shape of the Insular tonsure from the books of *Durrow*, *Lichfield*, *Kells*, *Dimma* and *Mulling*, all of which are associated with monasteries or areas where there is good reason to believe that the Insular tonsure was favoured.

Is there any literary evidence to support this conclusion? Muirchú's *Vita Patricii*, dated by its editor Ludwig Bieler to between 661 and 700, was also contemporaneous with the tonsorial controversy. In it Muirchú relates how two of King Láegaire's druids, Lochru and Ronal, prophesied Patrick's coming to Ireland as follows: 'Adueniet ascicaput cum suo ligno curuicapite'.⁵¹ This designation of Patrick as 'ascicaput', is literally *ascia+caput*= 'axe-head', and, since it combines the connotation of 'cutting' with that of the 'head', it seems most probable that it refers to Patrick's tonsure. Now axes, of course, were made in many different shapes according to their purpose, but of them all the battle-axe was by far the most widespread and, moreover, its basic profile scarcely

⁴⁹Alexander, *Insular manuscripts* (Book of Dimma), p. 69. illustration 222 (Matthew), 223 (Mark), 224 (Luke), 225 (John's eagle).

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, (Book of Mulling), pp. 67–8, illustration 210.

⁵¹L. Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin 1979) 76–7; Bieler translated this as 'There shall arrive Shaven-head, with his stick bent in the head'.

varied from the bronze age to late medieval times.⁵² The blade of the battle-axe presented a convex curve, whilst the other two sides presented a symmetrical pair of concave curves as shown in figure 3, so that as a whole the battle-axe provided a good graphic analogy to the shape of a 'Δ' when projected onto the dome of a human head. Thus Muirchú's reference to Patrick suggests that, in the late seventh century, he considered Patrick's tonsure had been triangular in shape; this view is in accordance with the assertion by the *Catalogus* that, in Patrick's time, the first order of saints wore 'unam tonsuram ab aure ad aurem' and with that of *Hibernensis*, cap. 6 that 'Hibernenses pene omnes hanc tonsuram sumpserunt'. This then concludes my review of evidence corroborating the hypothesis that the Insular tonsure was in the shape of a Greek 'Δ', which evidence I consider emphatically supports it.

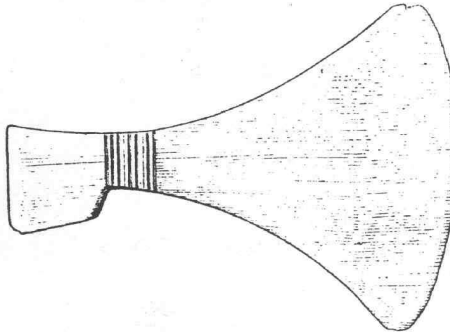


Figure 3. The profile of a medieval battle-axe, providing a good graphic analogue of a plane delta triangle projected onto the dome of the human skull. Based upon illustration no. 4 in figure 15, p. 643 of the *London Museum Catalogue*, No. 7, no author, (London 1940).

Magi and Tonsure

I now wish to briefly consider what possible basis there was for the allegation pressed by Aldhelm, Ceolfrid and the *Hibernensis*, that the Insular tonsure was the tonsure of Simon Magus. It is noticeable first of all that none of them had any documentary evidence to support it. For Aldhelm could only express his allegation as reported opinion, viz., 'we have learned that the author of this mode of tonsure, in the opinion of many, was Simon, the founder of the magical art'.⁵³ Aldhelm went on

⁵²For example, compare the bronze-age battle-axe profiles given by Peter Harbison, *The axes of the Early Bronze Age in Ireland* (Munich 1969), plates 19–39, with the late medieval battle-axes illustrated in the *London Museum Catalogue*, No. 7 (1940), plates 55 and 64.

⁵³'Nos autem, secundum plurimorum opinionem, Simonem, magicæ artis inventorem', Lapidge and Herren, *Aldhelm*, 156; Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils* iii, 270.

to refer to 'The struggle of the Apostles and the ten books of Clement', which Lapidge and Herren identify with *Acts* 8.14–24 and ps.-Clement *Recognitiones*, but these works, while certainly associating Simon with necromancy, provide no basis whatsoever for maintaining that he was either the author of the tonsure worn by the Insular Churches, or 'the founder of the magical art'.⁵⁴ Similarly Ceolfrid, in alleging that Simon wore this tonsure, could only cite hearsay: 'But as for the tonsure which Simon Magus is said to have worn . . .'.⁵⁵ Likewise the *Hibernensis lib.* 52, *cap.* 6 could only state vaguely, 'Brittonum tonsura a Simone mago sumpsisse exordium tradunt'.⁵⁶ Thus none of these proponents of the Roman tonsure were able to cite any ecclesiastical authority for their allegation. However the *Hibernensis*, *cap.* 3 and 6 also indicate that the tonsure worn by *magi*, whatever the detailed appearance of the front part, resembled that worn by Christians sufficiently for them both to be attributed to Simon Magus. Thus it appears that the Insular Christians and *magi* were wearing the same or similar tonsures. Unfortunately there appears to be no information available regarding the shape of the tonsure worn by *magi*, or their Irish representatives, druids.⁵⁷ Nevertheless it seems to me that for Ceolfrid to have been able to suggest to Adomnán that his tonsure was worn by Simon in Samaria, there must have been a plausible basis for his allegation. For had the tradition of the Insular tonsure stopped at Dover, then surely Ceolfrid and Adomnán, who were both intelligent, well-educated, travelled individuals, must have known it, and Ceolfrid's allegation would have been simply preposterous. This clearly was not the case, so that there must have been some tradition amongst *magi* of this triangular tonsure, stretching spatially at least towards Samaria, and temporally back towards the beginning of the Christian era, of which we now have no direct evidence. However, we can show that the triple disc/dot motif, which the artists of *Kells* juxtaposed to the triangles touching the heads of Matthew and John, and distributed repeatedly throughout the text, and which appears widely in many Insular texts decorating the garments of sacred persons and initial letters, does have a very long history and wide distribution. For this delta motif appears decorating the garments of a figure of a man on a fibula from Bohemia dated to *c.* 500 BC, and again decorating men's garments in an early Greek manuscript, and prominently on the cover of a book in the hands of Christ portrayed on a sixth century

⁵⁴For Pseudo-Clement see Rufi nus' Latin translation in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, (Paris 1857) c. 1205–1454. Books I–III, cc. 1214–1310, describe the contest between Peter and Simon.

⁵⁵'Ceterum tonsuram eam quam magum ferunt habuisse Simonem', Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede E.H.*, v.21, 548–9.

⁵⁶Wasserschleben, *Kanonensammlung*, 213.

⁵⁷Henderson, *From Durrow*, 50, 'I have not been able to trace any authentic description of a druidical tonsure'.

Byzantine icon from Constantinople.⁵⁸ This antiquity and distribution correspond to that deduced above for the ‘Δ’ tonsure amongst *magi*.

That, at least in seventh century Ireland, Christians and *magi* were considered to have worn a closely related tonsure is indicated by Tírechán’s description of Patrick’s conversion of Máel in his *Vita Patricii*, written in the latter part of the seventh century, wherein he wrote:

And Patrick preached the faith to him and converted him to the penance of God and the hair of his head was shorn off, that is, the (hair cut in) druidic fashion [*norma magica*] (which was) seen on his head, *airbacc giunnae*, as it is called.⁵⁹

The very fact that, at a time when the tonsorial controversy was current and both the Insular tonsure and druids were to be seen in Ireland, Tírechán chose to characterize the tonsure imposed by Patrick as *norma magica*, demonstrates that he considered there was a similarity between the Insular tonsure and that of *magi*. It appears, therefore, that the real basis for the Northumbrian accusation that the Insular tonsure was that of Simon, was simply that Simon was a *magus*, and *magi* did wear something which resembled a ‘Δ’ tonsure. This, and the fact that in both *Acts* 8.9–24 and *Recognitiones* Lib. I–III, Simon had come into direct conflict with Peter, the supposed ultimate authority for both the Roman Paschal tradition and tonsure, only to be reduced to abject submission, made Simon the ideal archetype, from the Northumbrian viewpoint, with which to denigrate both the Insular tonsure and Paschal customs. On the other hand, it is striking that in every case where an Evangelist or his Symbol was depicted actually wearing the Insular tonsure in the Gospel texts, it was Matthew, which surely suggests that he was regarded with special affection by these artists and their communities.

Distribution of the Insular Tonsure

Finally I consider the matter of the distribution of the Insular tonsure amongst Christians. In *H.E.* iii.3 Bede, referring to the time of Aidan’s arrival in Northumbria in *c.* 635, wrote of those nations which observed the Insular Pasch as follows:

The northern province of the Irish and the whole nation of the Picts were still celebrating Easter Sunday according to this rule [Insular Pasch] right up to that time [*c.* 635] . . .

⁵⁸J. Filip, *Celtic civilisation and its heritage* (Prague 1977), Plate XI for the fi bula; F. K. Smith and T. W. Melluish, *Keros-Greek in two years* (London 1951), illustration facing p. 160 for the Greek text; K. Weitzmann et al., *The icon* (London 1982) 9, for the book held by Christ. The author gratefully acknowledges receiving these references from an tAth. Ciarán Ó Sabhaois, Mount St Joseph, Roscrea; personal correspondence, 21 February 1991.

⁵⁹Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 144–5 for the citation and 41–3 for the date.

But the Irish peoples who lived in the southern part of Ireland had long before learned to observe Easter according to canonical custom, through the teaching of the pope'.⁶⁰

Since the Insular Pasch and tonsure appear to have been very closely associated, it seems reasonable to infer from this that at this time the Insular tonsure was still worn predominantly in monasteries located in the northern part of Ireland. Both the annals and Bede record the end of the Insular tonsure in Iona, the former in 718, the latter in *H.E.* v.24 in 716, but this can not, of course, be taken to imply that the *familia* of Iona all followed suit.⁶¹ Indeed the fact that the *Book of Kells*, dated to the later eighth or early ninth centuries, identifies with the Insular tonsure, shows that some at least did not. Regarding the southern part of Ireland, the tonsorial representations in *Dimma* and *Mulling* suggest it was at least worn in the south-east up until the end of the eighth century. Regarding Pictland, it appears from Bede's words that, in Aidan's time, it was worn by Pictish clerics and monks, and it is apparent from Ceolfrid's letter that it was still worn there *c.* 710, but it appears likely to have been suppressed by Nechtan by *c.* 718 when he expelled *familia Iae* from eastern Scotland. Regarding the British Church, from Bede's statement in *H.E.* v.22 that '... the Britons still persist in their errors and stumble in their ways, so that no [crown] is to be seen on their heads and they celebrate Christ's solemn festivals differently from the fellowship of the Church of Christ',⁶² we may infer that in 731 the British Church still maintained the Insular tonsure and Paschal tradition. For the remainder of Britain, as already mentioned, the British Church in Wales did not accept the Roman Pasch until 768, while in Cornwall it was not accepted until the tenth century. Consequently, these inferences above based upon Bede, whose earnest prayer was for the conversion of the followers of Insular customs to Roman customs, must be regarded with considerable caution. For example, as we have seen above, Bede asserted that 'the Irish peoples who lived in the southern part of Ireland had long before learned to observe Easter according to canonical custom, through the teaching of the pope', but this cannot easily be reconciled with both *Dimma* and *Mulling*'s manifest approval for the Insular tonsure deep in southern Ireland in the later eighth century. Given the tenacity of religious belief, and the propensity of sects to fragment and re-form, it

⁶⁰Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede E.H.*, iii.3, 218–19.

⁶¹See www.cs.tcd.ie/Dan.McCarthy/chronology/synchronisms/annals-chron.htm for D. Mc Carthy, 'Chronological synchronisation of the Irish annals' (which synchronises all the major annals) s.a. 718.

⁶²Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede E.H.*, v.22, 554–5. Colgrave's translation of this passage, where he rendered *capita sine corona praetenderunt* as 'no tonsure is to be seen on their heads', is not accurate, since clearly Bede's complaint was that the Britons did not wear the *coronal* tonsure, and hence my amendment. Sherley-Price, *Bede — ecclesiastical history*, 319–20 renders it freely but appropriately as, 'going about with their heads improperly tonsured'.

seems unlikely that the achievement of conformity in Bede's time was anywhere as complete as his words might suggest.⁶³

Outside of the British Isles, Paulinus of Nola in a letter written in the early fifth century to a correspondent in Gaul praised men whose hair was, 'cut close to the skin in chaste ugliness, half-shorn irregularly, shaved off in front, leaving the brow naked (*destitute fronte praerasi*)'.⁶⁴ This does not appear to be a description of a ritual tonsure, and it certainly does not correspond with the Insular custom. Gregory of Tours stated that, in the late sixth century on the northern borders of Brittany, Saxons fighting Britons imitated their tonsure and style of dress, which circumstances appear to be secular.⁶⁵ In 633, the fourth council of Toledo condemned a tonsure worn by lectors in parts of Galicia, who, 'in solo capitis apice modicum circulum tondent';⁶⁶ this has been identified with the Insular tonsure, but clearly is irreconcilable with its delta shape.⁶⁷ Likewise the hair-style illustrated by Mabillon and attributed by him to Mummolinus, bishop of Noyon c. 658, showing his forehead either bald or shaven, which was reproduced by Krusch and Levison, as a supposed example of the Insular tonsure, cannot be accepted as such.⁶⁸ However, the order issued in 817 by Louis the Pious to the Abbey of Landevenec to abandon their tonsure 'ab Scotis' and to conform to the Roman tonsure, appears genuine and shows that controversy regarding the Insular tonsure continued at least into the ninth century.⁶⁹

Finally, one noticeable development in respect of nomenclature is that, as time has gone by, it has become commonplace to assign a nationality to the Insular tonsure using variants of the epithets, 'Scotti', 'Irish', or 'Celtic', as examination of the references by Martène, Smith, Rock, Bright, Todd, Warren, Plummer, Dowden, Gougaud and Colgrave and Mynors cited above will reveal. Of these, 'Celtic' may be thought justifiable, since it includes Britons, Picts and Irish, some of whom favoured this tonsure, and which nations were all explicitly referred to by contemporary authors such as Ceolfrid and Bede and the author of the *Hibernensis*. However, the bare epithets 'Irish' or 'Scotti' are clearly inadequate and misleading, and indeed it may be seriously doubted whether the Insular tonsure was in any sense national in character.

⁶³For example, Abbot Maelrúain of the Celtic Orthodox Christian Church, based in Ohio, informs me that their tonsorial custom is that, 'Cele De who . . . are not working in the world shave it back to a line immediately above the ears so the front half of the head is hairless'; personal correspondence, 26 January 2001.

⁶⁴P. G. Walsh, *Letters of St Paulinus of Nola* ii (London 1967) *epist.* xxii, i, 198.

⁶⁵Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils* ii, 78.

⁶⁶This may be translated as: 'on the very top of the head they shear only a modest circle'.

⁶⁷Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils* ii, 100. Gougaud, *Christianity*, 204, believed this to be an instance of the Insular tonsure transported thence by British emigration.

⁶⁸Mabillon, *Annales* i, 528–9, and B. Krusch and W. Levison (ed.), *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum (Monumenta Germaniae historica)* (1885–1951; Hannover, repr. 1965–1984), v Pl. 20, for their reproduction and pp. 417 and 734 for their conclusions.

⁶⁹Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils* ii, 78–9.

Conclusions

This paper undertook first of all to review all of the evidence relating to the shape of the Insular tonsure, and this showed that Ceolfrid's description of Adomnán's tonsure and the *Hibernensis*, *cap.* 6 description of the 'Brittonum tonsura' reconcile properly together. Based on these, in 1639 Ussher deduced a semicircular shape for the tonsure, and his hypothesis was adopted by most subsequent authors. However, in 1703 Mabillon, with reference only to a supposed portrait of St Mummolinus in a St Amand manuscript, proposed the hypothesis that the forehead was shaven bare in irreconcilable conflict with the descriptions of both Ceolfrid and *Hibernensis*, *cap.* 6. Notwithstanding this conflict with the evidence, some subsequent scholars adopted Mabillon's hypothesis. Close consideration of the evidence shows however that the semicircular shape derived by Ussher and adopted by most subsequent scholars does not reconcile properly with Ceolfrid's description. Instead, I have shown that a shape corresponding to a Greek 'Δ' best corresponds to Ceolfrid's account, and I have tested this deduction by examination of the representations of Evangelists in the Insular Gospel texts, which are contemporaneous with the tonsorial controversy. This has shown that those texts do indeed reflect the tonsorial controversy in the form of the Roman tonsure applied to Matthew, Mark and John in some manuscripts, and a tonsure which reconciles with the front view of the Insular tonsure associated with Matthew in *Durrow*, *Lichfield*, *Dimma* and *Mulling*; *Kells* prominently exhibits the tonsure on a celebrated figure. This together with Muirchú's allusion to Patrick as 'ascicaput', or 'axe-head', has provided substantial confirmation that the deduction is correct.

Examination of the allegations that the Insular tonsure derived from Simon Magus has led to the conclusion that it arose because early Christian clerics and monks in Celtic Insular society wore a tonsure which closely resembled that worn by the *magi*, or druids, and that a tonsorial tradition was practised widely in Europe and extended back towards Christ's time. It consequently suited those proponents of Roman ecclesiastical customs to allege that, simply because Simon was a *magus*, the tonsure of these Insular Christians derived from the tradition of Simon, for which inference they had no documentary evidence. On the other hand, the repeated identification of the Insular tonsure with the evangelist Matthew in certain Gospel texts suggests that these artists and their communities regarded him with a special affection. Further, the identification of these artists with the Insular tonsure has implications for the provenances of their manuscripts. Finally, identification of the delta shape of the Insular tonsure has allowed a better determination of its distribution in space and time, so that in some cases we may now

reject descriptions, which, hitherto, in the prevailing uncertainty, were accepted as genuine examples.⁷⁰

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