

Columban on the European Continent

Columban and his 12 companions sailed from Bangor to Brittany and landed on the beach of Gueschlin near St. Malo.

He headed eastward toward Rouen and then south into Austrasia and Burgundy – which then was controlled by the Franks. This Germanic tribe had helped bring down the Roman Empire. Columban arrived in Gaul in 591.

King Clovis (466-511) united the Frankish tribes and also was baptised some time between 496 and 500. The king at the time was Gunthram who was a good living person. He received Columban very cordially and urged him to set up a monastery in his kingdom.

Columban's first monastery was located at Annegray. Gradually the monastic community grew at Annegray so Columban decided to set up another monastery in Luxeuil. The date for this monastery is 592 AD. Because the monks worked constantly on the land to produce food, this was a boost to the local rural community. The monasteries provided stability in the countryside around which Christian life could be organised.

Life in Columban monasteries revolved around prayer (the canonical hours), manual labour and study. The regime was very strict – only one meal each day which was eaten in the afternoon. Obedience to the Abbot was seen as very, very important.

Within a few years a number of problems arose both with the ecclesiastical and secular authorities in the area.

Columban followed the Irish computation for fixing the date of Easter. This was not in line with the practice of either the Gallic Church or Rome itself. For example, in 600, ten years after his arrival in Gaul the Columban monasteries celebrated Easter on April 3rd 600, which was one week earlier than the rest of Gaul.

On the secular front Columban's period of involvement with the Franks from 591-612 AD was marked by almost constant political violence.¹

Before Columban had arrived in Gaul, Sigibert who was the king of Austrasia married Brunhild who was from Spain. Brunhild has a sister called Galswintha. Sigibert's half brother called Chilperic. Even though he was already married to Audovera he sought to marry Galswintha. The marriage took place. Within a year Galswintha was murdered by the Queen's maid servant, Fredegun who was having an affair with Chilperic. Chilperic then made Fredegun his queen. Naturally, Brunhild was outraged by what happened to her sister and these events led to a long period of warfare between Chilperic and Sigibert.

In 575 AD Sigibert was winning the war. However, Fredegun sent assassins who murdered Sigibert. This gave the upper hand to Chilperic who had Brunhild imprisoned in Rouen. Chilperic was murdered in 584 leaving Fredegund with a son called Clothar. Brunhild begged for mercy from King Bunthram. He both spared her life and recognised her son as the King of Neustria.

In 612 AD King Theudebert of Austrasia invaded Alsace. King Theuderic who was king of Alsace countered attacked and captured both King Theudebert and handed him over to Brunhild. She banished King Theudebert to a monastery. King Clothar of Neustria had remained neutral in the above conflict on the understanding that Theuderic hand over the Duchy of Dentelin to him. Theuderic died in 613 AD trying to regain his lost territory.

Theuderic left four sons. Clothar murdered two of them. Clothar also captured Sigibert II who had succeeded Theuderic. Clothar captured him and his great grandmother Bruhild and put them to death in a most cruel way.

Jonas who completed his Life of Columban in 543 AD reworks the history of this conflict in a way that legitimizes the *coup d'état* and also presents the events in such a way that Columban is seen to have foretold how things would turn out in the end. By the time Jonas's book appeared the monks at Luxeuil had made their peace with Chlothar II.

¹¹ Aidan Larkin, page 120.

In Jonas's account Queen Brunchild was primarily responsible for the expulsion of Columban from Luxeuil. He describes how Brunchild presented the extra-marital sons of King Theuderic to Columban and asked him to bless them. According to Jonas Columban's reply had a John the Baptist flavour: "No. These boys will never hold the royal sceptre, for they were conceived in sin."

Larkin and other see this presentation as part of the hagiography surrounding Columban. Jonas was saying that Columban had the ability to predict the future

Jonas fails to mention anything about the growing opposition of the Gallic bishops to Columban's challenging presence in their midst. Columban was expelled by King Theuderic at the insistence of both the Queen Brunchild and the bishops. In his letter to the Gallic Bishops meeting in the Synod of Chalon-Saône, Columban accuses some of the Gallic Bishops for being poor shepherds. He accuses some of the bishops of ordain people for financial gain. He accuses some of the bishops of spending more time hunting with hounds and horse than in shepherding their flock.

Columban was expelled twice. The first time he reached the city of Besancon where he released all the prisoners. His guards grew slack, so Columban was able to slip back to Luxeuil.

The second time the King meant business. Columban was expelled and told to "return to the place (from) whence he had come to this land." On his way he visited the tomb of Saint Martin at Tours where he prayed all night long. While at Tours Jonas says that Columban prophesized the fate of Theuderic and his children to a supporter of Theuderic.

Finally, Columban reaches the port city of Nantes where is expected to board a ship for Ireland. Before boarding the ship Columban wrote a very tender letter to his brother monks at Luxeuil in which he shows real concern for them. The letter begins with the words "to his most sweet sons and most dear disciples." The Oxford historian, T.M. Charles-Williams author of the classic work *Early Christian Ireland*, considers this "one of the most moving documents of the early medieval period."²

² Ibid page 88

Finally, Columban put his belongings into a boat but a freak wave hit the boat and for three days the boat was high and dry. The captain understood what was happening and ordered Columban off the boat.

Columban headed back inland but avoided Theurderic's territory. He headed for Paris where he healed a sick man. We see a much more sensitive Columban in behaviour in the house of Chagneric and his wife Leudegund. According to Macmanus "he shows a tenderness towards the youngest girl, Fare, which "makes his monumental sternness most human."³ Later she became the founder and abbess of a famous monastery in France Farae monasterium, Farmoutiers.

Neverthelss Columban felt the need to push on along the river Marne and made his way to Metz which was the capital of Austrasia which was ruled by king Theudebert. The king gave Columban lands in Bregenz near lake Constance.

Columban and his companions began to set up a new monastery near the ruins of a Church dedicated to St. Aurelia. They also began to evangelise the local population

In 612 AD, Theudebert and Brunchild went to war against Austrasia. They were defeated and later killed. With the removal of Theudebert's protection Columban decided to move on. His resolve was strengthened when two of his monks were murdered by local people.

Columban now decided that he would cross the Alps and go to the territory of Agiliuf the king of the Lombards.

Gall pleaded that because of ill health he be allowed to stay. Columban felt this was a breach of his vow of obedience to the Father Abbot and forbade him to say Mass while Columban lived.

Columban and his companions appeared at the court of King Agilulf and Queen Theulinda in Milan. In Milan he delivered 13 sermons which have survived.

While Columban was in Milan Jonas informs us that a person named Jocundus appeared before the king and said that he knew of a Church dedicated to St.

³ Francis Macmanus, 1963, *St. Columban*, Clonmore & Reynolds LTD, Dublin, page 99.

Peter in the Apennines. The King granted the Church at Bobbio and the surrounding lands to Columban. The monastery grew and expanded and over time became one of the most important ecclesiastical and culture centres of Europe.

In November 615 AD, Columban realised that he was dying. He commanded that his staff or cambutta should be sent to Gall as a token of absolution. Gall had a premonition that Columban had died and asked his servant to prepare for Mass. He offered Mass for his abbot who had died the previous day.

Columban died on November 23, 615 AD.

What others have said about Columban

The 19th century French Intellectual Count Montalembert wrote of Columban.

One of the most illustrious of those who have laboured under the impulse of Christianity for the fusion of the two great races of the West.

In 1923, Pope Pius XI wrote that, *the more light is shed on the darkness of the Middle Ages the clearer it becomes that the rebirth of Christian wisdom and civilization in various parts of France, Germany and Italy can be attributed to the labour and fervour of Columban.*

Robert Schumann one of the founders of European Union said of Columban in 1950 AD that “*St. Columban is the patron of all those who are attempting to build a united Europe.*”

Fr. Aidan Larkin:

Columbanus envisaged nothing less than the building of a truly Global Community of justice, peace, freedom and solidarity. His appeal is universal, it is directed to all men and women, it looks to all cultures and civilizations. As he wrote to the Gallic Bishops, “we are all together members of one body, whether Franks or Britons or Irish, or whatever race we belong to.” Page 176.

He is a human right advocate. In letter IV he wrote “*If you remove freedom, you take away dignity.*”