

A crux in the fourth letter of Columbanus



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A CRUX IN THE FOURTH LETTER OF COLUMBANUS

ABSTRACT

A note that proposes an explanation of *felmodo*, the name of an important member of Columbanus's followers that occurs in his Fourth Letter.

The fourth letter of Columbanus was written in 610 while he was waiting at Nantes for the ship to bring him back to Ireland.¹ Indeed, the ship was ready as he wrote (§8). He was being expelled because he became involved in the complicated family conflicts of Theuderic II, king of Burgundy (r. 595–613), and his formidable grandmother Brunhilda. He apparently refused to bless Theuderic's two extramarital sons, a remarkable indiscretion which, amongst other things, may have had implications for succession. His expulsion was a disaster for Columbanus' mission and he greatly feared for its future. The letter is written to his disciples in Luxeuil. He is deeply concerned for the survival of his community and painfully aware of its fragility. He is worried, too, about the divisions amongst the brethren. He attempts to make provision the future governance of the monastery. He enjoins that Attala shall rule the community; if, however, he wishes to follow Columbanus into exile, then Waldelenus shall be *praepositus*.

He writes:

Haec scripsi propter incertos exitus rerum. Mei voti fuit gentes visitare, et evangelium eis a nobis praedicari, sed Fedolio modo referente eorum teporem pene meum tulit inde animum.

'I have written this because of the uncertain outcome of events. It was my wish to visit the heathen and have the gospel preached to them by us, but when Fedolius just reported their coolness he quite took my mind from that.'²

As we shall see, there is a good deal doubtful about this rendering.

¹G. S. M. Walker (ed. and trans.), *Sancti Columbani Opera*, Scriptores Latini Hiberniae 2 (Dublin, 1957), 26–36; Inos Biffi and Costante Marabelli (eds), *San Colombano, Le opere*, introduzioni di Inos Biffi & Aldo Granata, analisi e commento dei singole opere di Aldo Granata, traduzione a cura delle Monache Benedettine dell'Abbazia Mater Ecclesiae di Isola San Giulio, cartografia di Costante Marabelli, indici di Antonio Tombolini, Biblioteca di Cultura Medievale (Milan, 2001), 54–73. *San Colombano, Le opere* has Walker's text with Italian translation and copious annotation.

²Walker, *Opera*, 30 (§5) (Walker's translation).

Fedolio modo is Walker's emendation. He comments: 'The manuscript corruptions conceal some proper name, and I have ventured to introduce that of Fedolius; the fact that Columban's poem to him exists in an eighth-century manuscript of German origin suggests that he may have lived or travelled across the Rhine, and he was in regular correspondence with Columban'.³ He then refers, for support for this interpretation, to some lines in the poem *Columbanus Fidolio fratri suo*.⁴ These read *sic tua nostras / missa frequenter / laetificabat / pagina mentes*, translated by Walker, 'so your note, so often sent, made glad our minds'. Few believe that this poem is a work of Columbanus and it lends little support to any argument.

J. W. Smit offers a cogent critique of Walker's understanding. The German manuscript, Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Sammelhandschrift Diez. B. Sant. 66, is not eighth-century; at earliest the relevant portion of the manuscript is ninth-century and may be later.⁵ This demolishes Walker's argument for a pre-eighth-century author. And with it, out goes the early contact of the so-called 'Fedolius' with Germany.⁶ The verses from *Columbanus Fedolio* can equally be translated: 'so the letter you have sent often made glad our minds' – there is, therefore no unequivocal support here for regular correspondence between Columbanus and the so-called Fedolius.⁷ Lastly, *gentes* may refer to the lightly christianised Franks. But, as we shall see, there may be more to this. Smit finds Walker's emendation grammatically weak: the ablative absolute *Fidolio modo referente eorum teporem* is the subject of *meum tulit inde animum*. However, Bieler's *Index grammaticus*⁸ has three syntactically similar cases of an irregular ablative absolute:⁹ letter IV, §7, p. 34, lines 14–15; letter V, §7, p. 44, lines 3–6; and *Instructiones* II, §3, p. 70, line 34. These all occur in Columbanus' genuine writings. Therefore, this loose use of the ablative absolute is a stylistic quirk of Columbanus and does not constitute, formally, an impediment to Walker's emendation. As we shall see, other considerations supply a diriment impediment.

Smit declares that 'the weakness of Walker's emendation is also apparent from the ease with which one can arrive at a more acceptable correction of the text' and he offers the following:

Mei voti fuit gentes visitare, et evangelium eis a nobis praedicari,
sed fel <s>inodo referente eorum teporem pene meum tulit inde
animum.¹⁰

³Ibid. cf. pp. xxxvii–iii, lviii–lx.

⁴Ibid. 192–7: 192, vv.14–17.

⁵J. W. Smit, *Studies in the Language and Style of Columba the Younger (Columbanus)* (Amsterdam, 1971), 242–3; Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *Clavis Litterarum Hibernensium* [hereafter *CLH*] (Turnhout, 2017), i, 431 (§334).

⁶Smit, *Studies*, 242–3.

⁷Smit, *Studies*, 243.

⁸Walker, *Opera*, 233a.

⁹I ignore the example in *Regula coenobialis* §9. This 'rule' is not the work of Columbanus.

¹⁰Smit, *Studies*, 244.

He does not give a translation of his emendation. It may run something like this: 'It was my wish to visit the *gentes* and have the gospel preached to them by us, but when the synod reported their coolness the venom quite took my mind off that.'¹¹ I am not sure whether 'their' should refer to the *gentes* or to the members of the proposed synod. Formally, Smit's emendation is a good try but he need not have worried overmuch about the ablative absolute.

In writing this letter, it is clear that Columbanus was in a highly emotional state, worried about his community, distressed about its divisions, deeply concerned about its future government, and depressed. And, as he himself says in §6 of the letter, he had wanted to write a tearful letter, but he tried to bottle up his grief and worry. It is not to be expected that his usual literary polish – which takes time he did not have – would be altogether in evidence here. In fact, he declares at the end (§9): *amor non tenet ordinem, inde missa confusa est. Totum dicere volui in brevi, totum non potui* 'Love does not keep order; hence my missive is confused. I wished to say everything in short, but could not manage everything.'¹²

A much more serious objection to Smit's proposal is that there is no reference whatever to any synod in Letter IV. In the circumstances of Columbanus' troubles, who would have called it and why? Why should a synod evaluate the attitude of supposed pagan or semi-pagan populations (*gentes*), and report its findings to Columbanus? This is not what synods usually do.

Besides, we are in no way obliged to translate *gentes* as pagans or, as Walker, 'the heathen'. Note Granata's translation: 'era mio desiderio visitare quelle popolazioni e predicare il Vangelo anche a loro'.¹³ It is worth recalling the meaning of *gens* in Classical Latin: 1. 'race', 'nation', 'people' (note the descending order: *gens*, *natio*, *civitas*, in the usage of Cicero, Tacitus, Caesar); 2. 'the nations (of the world)'; 3. 'the geographical region occupied by a nation'; 'land', 'canton', 'country'; 4. 'a Roman lineage', 'family', 'house'. Blaise does not give the meaning 'pagans',¹⁴ though of course the plural *gentes* can mean 'gentiles, pagans' (the first meaning in the *Lexicon manuale*). And of course, *gentes* may mean 'the barbarians' as opposed to the Romans. I think we had better stick to 'the peoples'. There is no evidence here for a proposed mission to the Germans on the right bank of the Rhine. All we can conclude is that Columbanus planned to preach the Gospel to certain unnamed populations (and preaching the gospel and evangelisation of pagans are not the same thing). When their lack of interest was reported to him, that quite put him off. And it is worth noting the context: Columbanus is a distressed man who has been removed from his community and its cure of souls, and he is recalling yet another failure.

¹¹*fel* 1. 'gall', 'bile'; 2. 'bitterness', 'venom', 'acrimony'.

¹²Walker, *Opera*, 34, lines 34–5 (translation by Walker).

¹³*San Colombano, Le opere*, 65.

¹⁴*Lexicon Latinitatis Medii Aevi* (Turnhout, 1975), s.v. *gens*.

If Walker's *Fedolio modo* will not do, what are we to make of the underlying textual corruption? The single manuscript and Fleming's Bobbio transcript read:

fee.modo, M (St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek Sang. 1346; s. xvii; transcribed by Jodoc Metzler, abbot of St Gall, 'ex manuscripto codice monasterii Bobbiensis litteris hibernicis confecto'; original now lost);

fel.modo, F (lost Bobbio manuscript, transcribed by Fr Patrick Fleming (1599–1631) in 1623 and published in his *Collectanea sacra seu Columbani ... acta et opuscula*, ed. Thomas Sheeran (Louvain, 1667).¹⁵

Behind these forms lies the name of a person so important that, in this time of crisis, Columbanus recalls his opinion on the unreadiness of certain peoples to accept preaching by the Columbanian community. I propose a minor change: to emend *fel.modo* to *Felmedo*, a Latinisation of the Irish name nom. **Felmed*, gen. **Felmedo*, *Felmeda*. The genitive form *Felmeda* is well and clearly attested, but only in one context:

Genelach Ua Felmeda: trí meic Muridaig meic Óengusa m.
Feidilmthe a quo Uí Felmeda m. Énnai Chenselaich.

'The genealogy of Uí Felmeda: three sons of Muredach son of Óengus son of Fedelmí, from whom descend Uí Felmeda, son of Énna Cennselach.'¹⁶

Uí Felmeda are a senior royal lineage of the Uí Chennselaig, the dynasty that ruled south Leinster, and whose king Brandub mac Echach (ob. 605), fourth in descent from Fedelmí al. **Felmed* was (it is claimed) king of Leinster.¹⁷ The layout of the genealogies makes it certain that Feidlmí is the eponym of Uí Felmeda and, in the understanding of the genealogists, the two names are identical. They place Fedelmí three generations previous to Columbanus' floruit. Early forms of the name occur in ogam: VEDDELLEMETTO, VEDELMET<TO>.¹⁸ Among the forms in Old Irish are: nom. *Feidlmí*, *Fedlmí*, *Fedlmith*; gen. *Fedelmedo*, *Fedeilmtheo*, *Fethelmtho*, *Fedlmtheo*, *Feidhilmtho*, *Feidelmeda*, *Feidlmthe*, *Feidelmthie*.¹⁹

¹⁵CLH i, 417 (§328).

¹⁶M. A. O'Brien, *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1962), 353, 354, 430 = LL, vi, 1365, 1478.

¹⁷According to the Annals of Ulster, he was ruling in 590, 597–8, and was slain in 605 (*AU*, 94, 96, 98, 102).

¹⁸Damian McManus, *A Guide to Ogam* (Maynooth, 1991), 6.13, 6.24; R. A. S. Macalister, *Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum* (Dublin, 1945), i, 201–2 (§206).

¹⁹Ludwig Bieler (ed. and trans.), *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 10 (Dublin, 1979), 166.40, 168.5, 7, 12, 16; 176.23; *AU* 578.3, 590.1, 701.4, 722.6, 761.2, 801.2, 814.1, 840.4, 820.5, 847.1, 822.7 (prima manus only).

A second example of *Felmeda* occurs in the early genealogies of the saints, in the place name *Tilach* (al. *Tulach*) *Meic Felmeda*, that is, the townland and parish of Tullowphelim al. Tullow, barony of Rathvilly, Co. Carlow, in the dynastic lands of Uí Felmeda.

Ingena Cormaic meic Aililla .i. Ethni & Dar Cairthend i Tulaig meic Felmeda.

‘The daughters of Cormac son of Ailill i.e. Eithne and Der Cáirthend in Tulach Meic Felmeda’.²⁰

Thus, **Felmed*, gen. *Felmeda*, which appears to be a dialectal syncopated form of *Fedelmid*, is well attested, and closely linked with Uí Felmeda, a branch of Uí Chennselaig, the rulers of south Leinster. Columbanus came from Leinster and it is possible that one of his followers was closely associated with the ruling south Leinster dynasty.

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Editors' note

The editors greatly regret that Professor Donnchadh Ó Corráin died while this volume was in press.

²⁰Dublin, TCD H. 2. 7 (1298), 77.17 = Lec. 91rb40 = BB 133a9 = P. Ó Riain (ed.), *Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1985), §247 = *ibid.* §656 ; cf. Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhisigh, *Great Book of Irish Genealogies*, ed. N. Ó Muraíle, ii, §726.11: *Eithne agus Dearchairthinn i tTulaigh meic Felmeadha da inghin Cormaic m. Oilealla.*