



**Monastic  
Missionaries and  
the Expansion of  
Western  
Christendom  
(c.500-900 AD)**

# Recap: Hermits, the First Monasteries and Late Antique Society

## Some key points from the last lesson

- Monasticism finds its most influential point of origin in Egypt in the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century AD
- Men and women become *eremitic* recluses (i.e. hermits), separating themselves from society, and some even entering the barren desert of Egypt: they set themselves a harsh *ascetic* (i.e. training) life of self-denial and constant prayer to avoid temptation, repent for sins, and develop virtues. The ideal of a harsh life in the “desert” that develops in this period would exert a powerful long-term influence on monastic culture in the west
- *Coenobitic* (i.e. communal) monasticism also takes root as monks and nuns begin to congregate together for mutual support. These ascetics have a society in a sense, but one that defines itself differently to society in the world: they not only live together but increasingly aspire (as in Pachomian monasticism) to have everything – property, work, prayer, etc. - in common (“common life) to support a shared spiritual direction. This way of life was lived in enclosed spaces that are to some degree separated from outside society.
- Nevertheless, despite this desire to separate themselves, monks and nuns of all varieties frequently become well supported by outsiders, who offer them gifts and even estates to fund their efforts.
- Monasticism was very varied in this period. While monks looked back to the scriptural examples of Jesus in the wilderness and the community of the apostles, there were also complex socio-cultural roots, about which we cannot be entirely certain. Some potential influences had long traditions (e.g. Jewish semi-ascetic practices, Stoic philosophy, the influence of dualist religious culture in the Mediterranean).
- Other potential influences were more specific to place (e.g. the physical and social geography of Egypt) and also time: at a point where Christianity was becoming the dominant public religion in the Mediterranean heartlands of the Roman Empire, monasticism perhaps had a particular appeal as a sort of counter-culture: their voluntary harsh lives are an echo of the tough circumstances faced by the earliest Christians.
- While some outsiders could be concerned by the difference they presented, however, this culture was quickly found to be useful to Church leaders and society in the late Roman Empire, who did not seek to stop them. They were increasingly seen as a spiritual elite, serving society through prayer and example; they maintained the sacred prestige of Christianity within society at a time when it was becoming more commonplace.

# Christianity in the West at the dawn of the Middle Ages

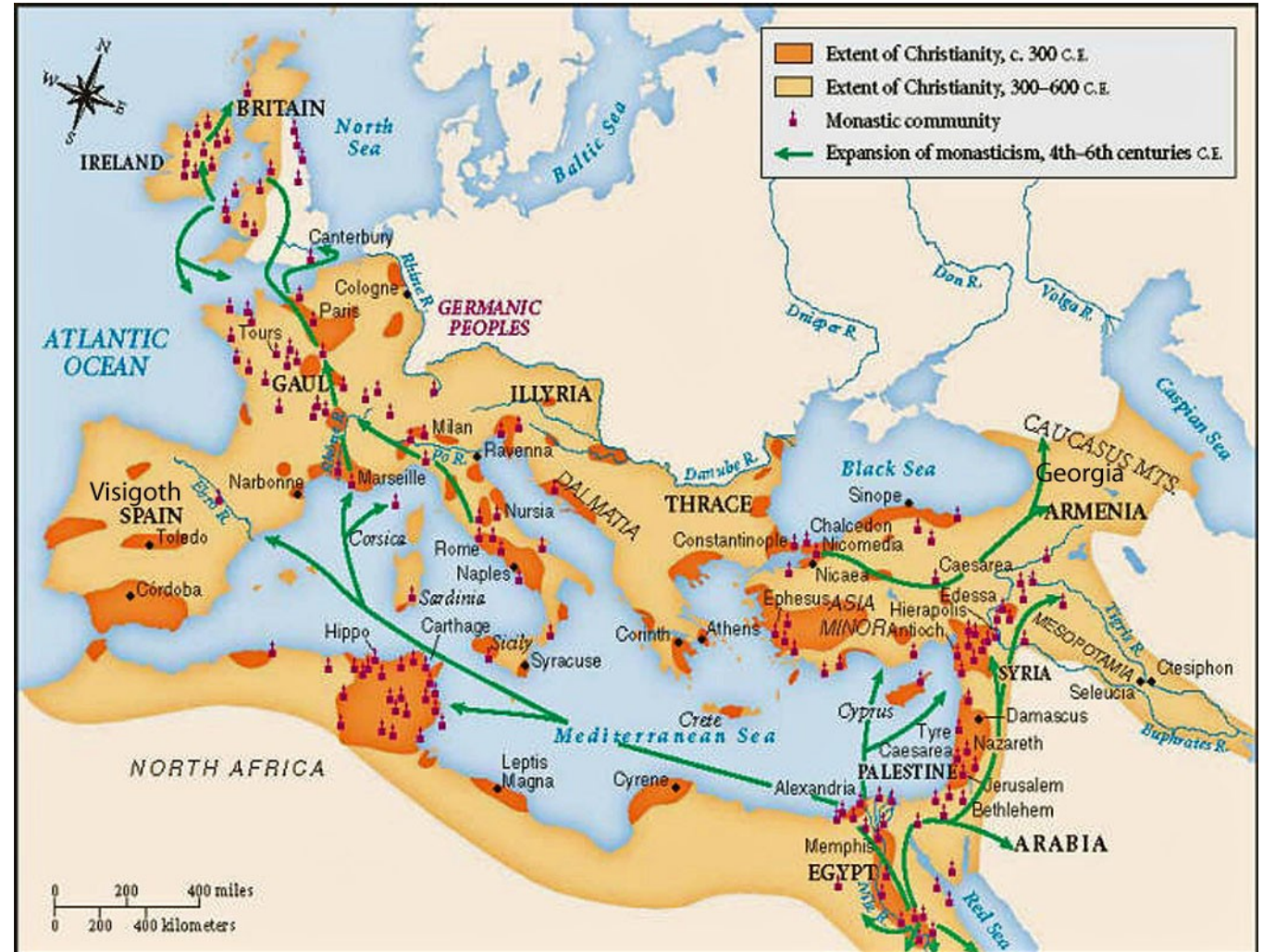
300-600 AD: While Christianity became the Roman imperial religion (from 324 onwards), Europe remains relatively weakly Christianized: **pagan cults were still widespread**.

In addition, there was little in the way of a united Church organisation.

- The authority of the bishops of Rome (i.e. the papacy) was not yet well-established.
- Bishops elsewhere most often chosen locally and with no standard procedure.

Doctrinal variations and differences added to the confusion.

- Imperial-sponsored Church councils (e.g. Nicaea, 325 AD) attempt to establish the doctrine of the Trinity and fix the nature of Christ's divinity
- Arian Christianity (non-trinitarian) nevertheless remained powerful. Among the Germanic tribes, who inherit so much of the Western Roman Empire (which collapses in 476 AD), it is the first form of Christianity to make inroads against their traditional pagan culture: e.g. Goths and Vandals

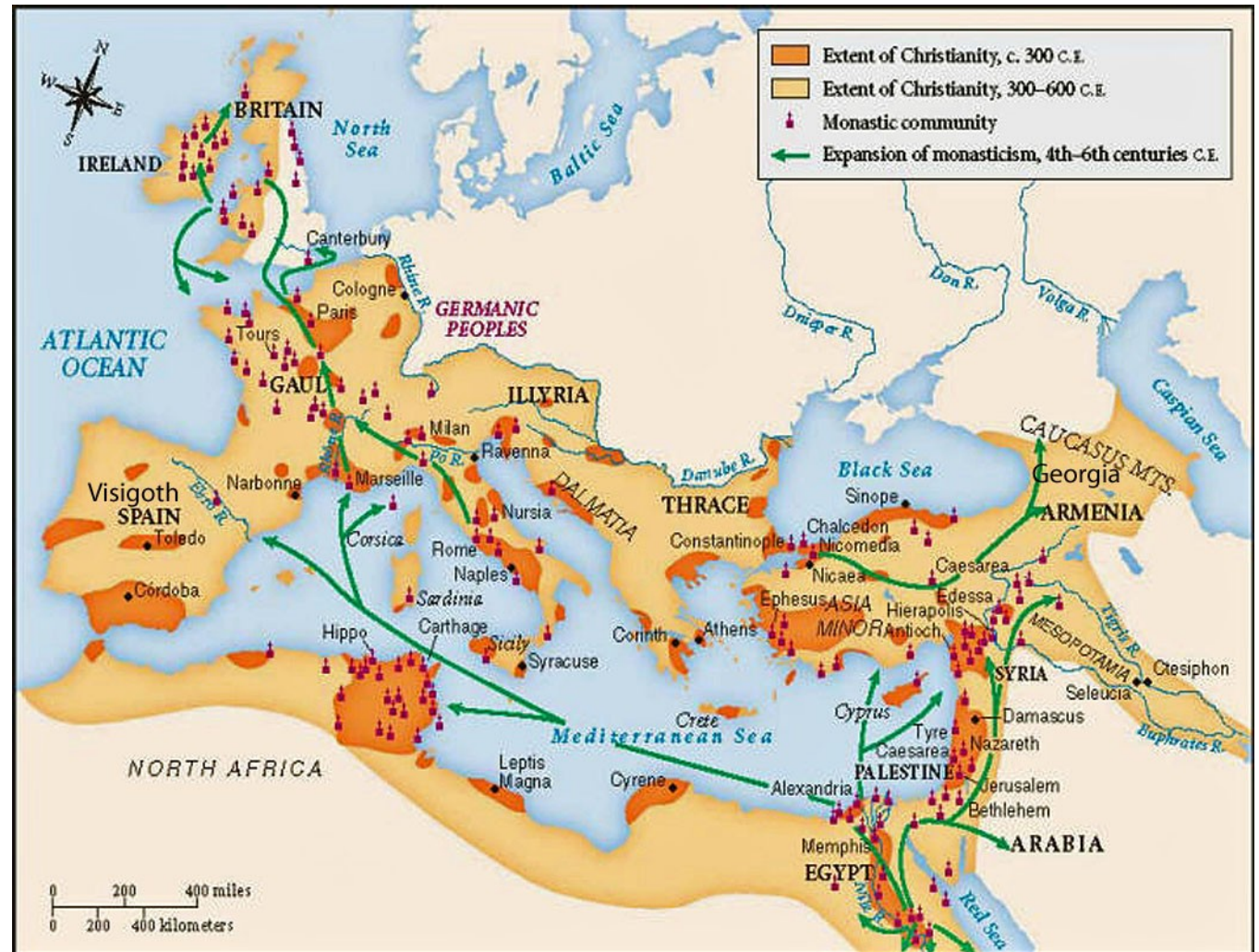


# The spread of monasticism in the West

Monasticism enters this European scene extremely rapidly from the mid-fourth century onwards

- Arrives from Egypt and North Africa through the Mediterranean
- Becomes most rapidly established in Italy, France, and – more surprisingly – Ireland (not part of the Roman Empire)

**Key point:** Monasticism may emphasise separation from society, but it is clearly also a social movement that occurs as part of – and effects – the rather chaotic Christianization of Europe





# Monasticism and the “Church Fathers”

In the most Christianized heartlands of the fading Western Roman Empire in the late fourth and fifth centuries AD, monastic life and values exercise a powerful influence over some of those who would become the most prominent Nicæan Christian thinkers and leaders

**Saint Augustine of Hippo** (354-430): arguably the most influential writer for Western Christianity (e.g. the *Confessions*, *City of God*), as well as an important bishop

- Born in Thagaste (in modern day Algeria). In his early life he is a Manichaean (a dualist faith). Becomes involved in the circle of Saint Ambrose in Italy, and converts to Christianity after hearing the life of Saint Anthony.
- On return to Africa, gives up his property and founds a monastery for himself and his friends – writes several monastic “Rules” for men and women. Becomes bishop of Hippo (North Africa) in 395 and is pro-active in Christianizing and educating the locals until his death in 430

**Saint Jerome** (c.347-420): an intellectual who defines scriptural orthodoxy

- Born in Dalmatia (modern day Croatia) as a pagan, converts to Christianity in his youth, as a student in Rome (c. 360-6).
- Journeys to the Middle East and lives as a hermit for two years
- Returns to Rome and establishes a monastic community for widows and virgins
- Most importantly, produces a new – and, for the rest of the Middle Ages, authoritative – **Latin Bible** (“*St Jerome’s Vulgate*”), setting canonical books and fixing their order

# Early Monasticism in Gaul

In Mediterranean Gaul (the south of modern day France) – in which Christianity was already very active c. 300 AD – monasticism takes root rapidly

- **Honoratus of Arles (d. 429 AD)** – from a Gallo-Roman consular family, he converts to Christianity and journeys to the Holy Land and Egypt. On his return to Gaul, he becomes a hermit on Lerins Islands (off the Mediterranean coast, near Cannes in modern day France): he gains followers and establishes a monastery there.
- **John Cassian (d. 435 AD)** – born in Eastern Europe, he journeys to the Holy Land and then to Egypt with his friend Germanus. He compiles a book of their conversations with hermits and monks (the *Conferences*). He goes to Rome, and then on to Marseilles, where he founds two monasteries.

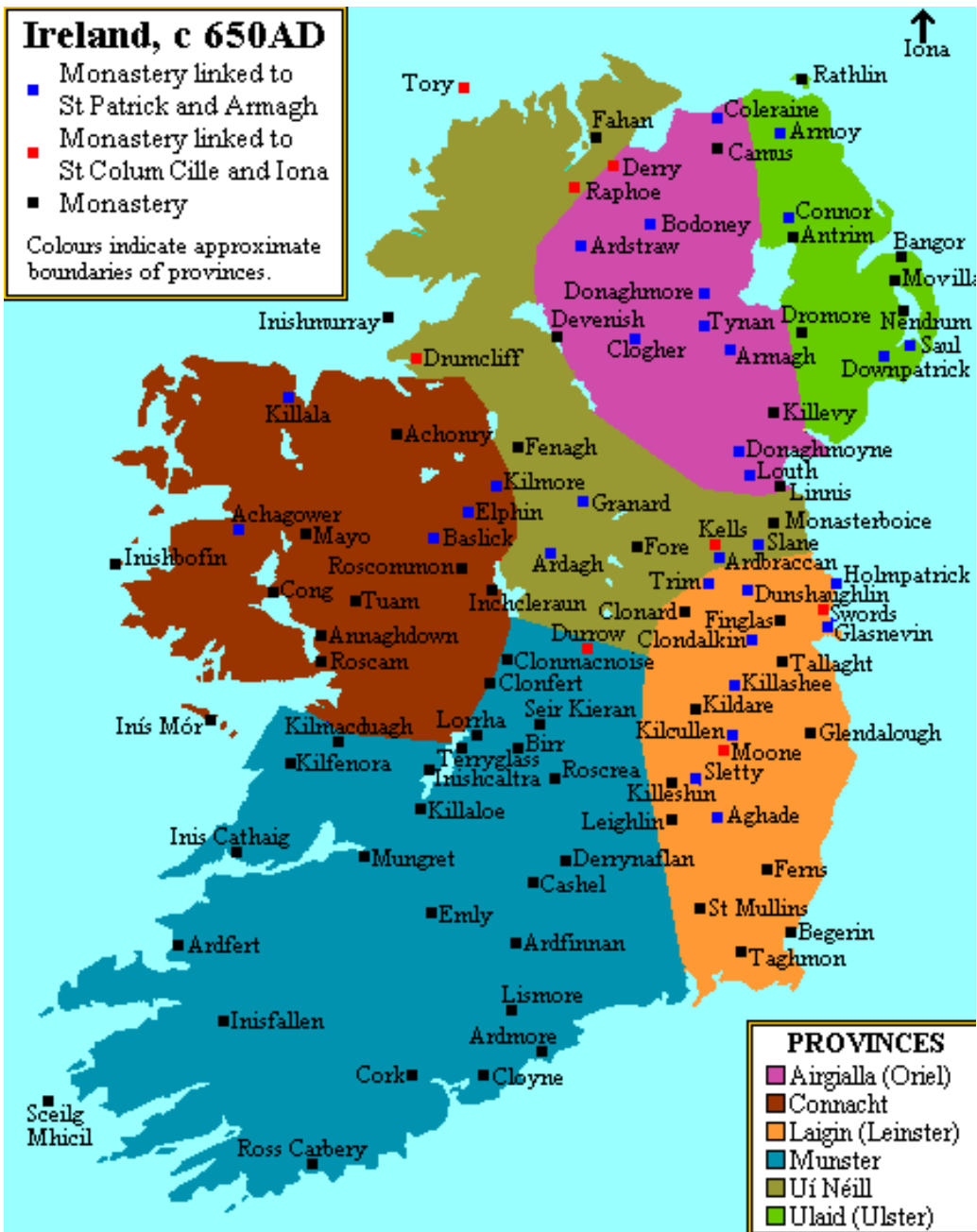
In Northern Gaul, where paganism and Arian Christianity (non-trinitarian) are more common, monasticism is a vector for conversion to Christianity (and more specifically, Nicæan Christianity).

- **Martin of Tours (397 AD)** – a Roman soldier from Pannonia (modern-day Hungary) who converts to Christianity in his youth. He comes to Gaul through military service. Later converts many and leads groups of ascetics in the forests near Poitiers, before being acclaimed bishop of nearby Tours due to his popularity in the city.

## Ireland, c 650AD

- Monastery linked to St Patrick and Armagh
- Monastery linked to St Colum Cille and Iona
- Monastery

Colours indicate approximate boundaries of provinces.



# Irish Monasticism

In Ireland, the rise of Christianity is closely intertwined with the spread of monasticism

- **Saint Patrick** (5<sup>th</sup> century AD) – a Celto-Roman Briton and somewhat mythic figure; widely thought to have brought Christianity to Ireland in the fifth century; said to have visited Marmoutier (the community of Saint Martin of Tours) and Lerins (monastery of Honoratus of Arles).

Patrick's converts found monasteries from c. 500 for both men and women. Celebrated monastic leaders begin to appear

- **Saint Brigid of Kildare** (late 5<sup>th</sup> to early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries) – said to have founded a monastery in Kildare, with two communities (one for women, one for men). Some debate as to whether she was a real person – she shares the name of a pagan goddess, and Kildare was founded at a former pagan site: it is possible that her memory represents a Christianisation of this cult.
- **Saint Finian of Movilla** (d. c. 589) – Irish, from the ruling clan of Ulaid; founds the monastery of Movilla after spending seven years in Rome
- **Saint Columba** (a.k.a Colum Cille, d. 597) – from an Irish noble family; a student of Saint Finian. Establishes the monastery of Iona, in the Outer Hebrides Islands (modern Scotland, but closely connected by sea to Northern Ireland)

## Some key points:

- Irish monasticism is particularly closely tied to local, rural powerholders from the very start. The abbot is often a member of a leading family that supports the monastery.
- In Ireland, monasteries (rather than existing towns) become the seats of bishops. These are often chosen from the monks by the abbot.

# Monastic Missionaries

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- Monasticism does not just effect Christianisation through slow diffusion: as seen, some monks become key proselytisers in this process, despite their apparent commitment to the “desert” (i.e. being outside of society).
- Some plucked from monasteries by bishops or popes to take up such roles due to their virtues.
- But other monks who become missionaries actively chose this path for themselves: this is a particularly common choice for those from the Irish monastic tradition





# The Gregorian Mission to England

- **Gregory the Great** (d. 604) - a Roman senator's son, who had been a monk his youth and never lost his respect for the life. He later became bishop of Rome in 590 – i.e. pope, heir to the seat of Saint Peter - and was pro-active in trying to expand the power of the papacy in Western Europe (where its authority over bishops and churches was little recognised)
- He is also interested in extending papal power through missionary work. Sends a Roman monk who became known as **Augustine of Canterbury** (d. 604) and some companions to England, where the pagan Anglo-Saxons had pushed back the Christian culture that was beginning to emerge among the Celto-Roman population in the fourth century.
- He and his followers have some initial successes in establishing Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England. Augustine converts King Aethelbert of Kent (who already had a Frankish, Christian wife); his follower **Paulinus** (d. 644) converts King Edwin of Northumbria. Augustine becomes first archbishop of Canterbury; Paulinus becomes bishop of York.
- There are setbacks however. Aethelbert's successor, Eadbald is pagan and does not convert for sometime, allowing paganism to return briefly to prestige in Kent. A similar situation in Northumbria, where there is a pagan reaction after Edwin's death.
- Augustine also fails to gain adherence of Celto-Roman Christians in Western England and Wales, having demanded their obedience as a representative of the pope.



# The Irish tradition in Britain and Europe

Although it was at the very periphery of the Christian world, Ireland in fact produced some of the most famous and successful monastic missionaries of this era. They are active in both the British Isles and deep into Continental Europe.

**Saint Columba** – who as mentioned, left Ireland to establish a monastery in the Scottish Isles (Iona) – begins the trend.

- Columba uses Iona as a base to preach to the Picts (an pagan, Celtic tribe) in Scotland.

**Saint Aidan** (d. 651 AD) – journeys to the kingdom of Northumbria in Northern England with support from King Oswald (d. 642, reign 634-642), a Christian who was exiled in his youth and studied at Iona.

- Aidan appears quite successful in converting both the Northumbrian aristocracy and the people of this rural region to Christianity, that had only a few years earlier seen a strong pagan reaction.
- He also establishes the important monastery of Lindisfarne (an island off the north-east coast of England), and receives the title of bishop of Lindisfarne.
- Monks of the Irish tradition – e.g. **Saint Cuthbert** (d. 687) – cement his success and play an active role in the fuller Christianisation of Anglo-Saxon England.
- The monasteries of Lindisfarne, Ripon, Wearmouth-Jarrow and Whitby become powerful centres of monastic life, learning, and Christian ministry.
- They provide a competing influence to the Roman mission – which has its Northern base at the bishop's seat of York – on the life of the early English Church

# Saint Willibrord and Saint Boniface

**Saint Willibrord** (c. 658-739 AD) – an English monk (from Northumbria), indebted to the Irish tradition

- Studied at Lindisfarne
- Journeys to Europe with companions from Lindisfarne to preach to the pagan Frisians (modern-day Netherlands), at the request of a Frankish aristocrat, Pepin of Herstal
- Goes to Rome and gains the approval of the pope for his mission in Frisia.
- Establishes himself and his followers at Utrecht: he effectively becomes a bishop there.

**Saint Boniface** (c. 675-754 AD) – another English monk (from Devon, South-West England) with ties to the Irish tradition

- Similarly, he journeys to Frisia, and follows up the work of Willibrord
- Also goes deeper into Germany, preaching throughout the countryside to convert pagans and deepen the roots of Christianity in the region
- Receives support from the Christian Franks, who have centres of power in the region, and also from Rome.
- While Boniface becomes a well-connected establishment figure within the Frankish realms, he returns to Frisia – where paganism remained remarkably resilient - later in his life. He is killed by pagans there.



# Saint Columbanus

**Saint Columbanus** (c. 540-615 AD) - travels from Bangor in Ireland to Gaul and then to Italy. He founds 12 monasteries in the Irish tradition. His form of monastic asceticism is particularly austere and physically demanding, even if he is frequently involved with laypeople and outside of his monasteries.

Most of the regions he travels to were relatively Christianised by this point (in comparison to England, for instance), and he has less opportunity to convert pagans.

- Nevertheless, he apparently confronts Alemanni pagans at Bregenz, according to his follower and biographer, Jonas of Bobbio.
- Beyond this he is certainly a proselytiser of lay people: plays a significant role in deepening the faith of Merovingian Frankish aristocrats – both becoming friends with them and challenging their values – and also in the countryside (his monasteries are primarily rural), where Christianisation was less complete than in the towns.
- He is also vocal in promoting Roman (i.e. Nicæan) orthodoxy and attacking Arianism in the region.

# Monasticism and the active life

Why would monks – people who “flee the world” to a contemplative life - be willing to take on such particularly active roles in ministry?

- Monastic hagiographers are certainly aware of the tension to some degree, particularly around taking roles of active leadership and authority
- While leading monks frequently became bishops, especially when they had become involved in missionary work, it becomes a common theme in saints’ biographies (“lives”, of *vitae* in Latin) from this period that monks had to be compelled to take up such roles (whether by other church authorities, lay rulers or popular acclaim.
  - e.g. in Bede’s *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, Cuthbert almost has to be dragged from Lindisfarne by the Northumbrian royalty and other supporters
- The desire to have a secluded retreat from their duties is often emphasised.
  - According to Bede (*Ecclesiastical History*) Aidan asks king Oswald of Northumbria to have his monastery and bishop’s seat in Lindisfarne which “as the tide flows and ebbs twice a day, is enclosed by the waves of the sea like an island and again, twice in the day, when the shore is left dry, becomes connected to the land”.
  - Columbanus seeks relatively isolated locations from his aristocratic supporters for his monasteries, despite his close ties to their courts, according to his biographer, Jonas of Bobbio.

# Monasticism and the active life

Nevertheless, it is clear that missionary work held an attraction to some of these men. Why?

There was doubtless a sense of Christian duty to convert those nearby, but other factors were more closely related to monastic ideals:

## **Another form of ascetic escape**

Leaving the security of a monastery – and perhaps a flourishing community and supporters - to take on difficulty missionary work, often far away and with little support, can be seen as a form of *ascesis* (training), and even as a different form of isolation (i.e. from one's existing support networks, from other Christians)

## **The renewed possibility of martyrdom**

Converting people, especially pagans, to Christianity could be a risky business.

- In some cases, the danger prompted monks to retreat back to their monasteries – Augustine of Canterbury apparently wanted to do this due to the danger (according to Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*), and his followers flee Kent to the continent at one point due to pagan reaction
- However, for other monks, this might have a positive reason to want to undertake missionary work. If they had become monks to be “dead to the world” and to live a life of mourning, then submitting oneself to the possibility of actual martyrdom was bound to attract the most fervent.



# Monasticism and the active life

## Irish socio-cultural factors in Ireland

Irish society and culture means that travel holds a particular appeal to monks there [see Johnson], a factor which helps to encourage their missionary work

- The very rural society of Ireland is understood by the Irish as a complex network of kingdoms, in which people were closely bound to local hierarchies and their district. Exile is a powerful social punishment in this context; but the ability to travel without restrictions over long distances is also a mark of social status (the “farming people” could not do this)
- These twin aspects of Irish society and culture meld with monastic tradition. Travel away from one’s home was a voluntary punishment and penance – a form of asceticism – travelling and wandering was their “desert”. But it also serves to elevate them and mark them out as worthy of reverence in their society.
- In addition, Irish monks inherited a classical intellectual culture that placed them at the wild edge of the world. This – combined with the very island nature of their land and the dangerous nature of sea travel – made undertaking overseas journeys a mark of one’s trust in God. It also gave them a sense of “Irish” identity – monks who went to the continent maintained strong links back to their homeland, encouraging others to come

Irish monks equate their wandering and overseas journeys with religious pilgrimage (*peregrinatio*). But unlike the more common understanding of pilgrimage elsewhere, it was the journey, not the destination that mattered.

# The appeal of monastic missionaries

## **The task of monastic missionaries could be very difficult**

- Older narratives of Western European history tended to regard Christianisation as more or less inevitable: Christianity represented “civilization”.
- In reality, pagan norms played their role in social and political structures on which people – and especially rulers – depended, and these were not easily erased.
- Rulers of looser Germanic polities ran even more of a risk in choosing conversion than the emperors of Rome had previously, since they were very dependent on their ability to draw together a social confederation from interpersonal ties.
- There are many setbacks that result from this – e.g. in Anglo-Saxon England converted kings are often replaced by pagan kings [Tyler] – and some ostensibly Christian rulers retained a warrior culture that suggested their new “faith” had not impacted them very deeply

And yet, monks ultimately enjoy particular successes in Germanic lands far away from the early Christian core of the former Western Roman Empire



# The appeal of monastic missionaries

Some ideas [see Little, in course syllabus, and Brown]

## **Tenacity**

If committed Christians of all types could be zealous in their faith, monks were the most extreme. Ascetic training prepared them well for the daunting task.

## **Otherworldliness**

If anyone from a different religious background can stand out, monks also take this to an extreme. The most successful monastic missionaries have an ascetic style that draws attention, while their apparent humility and simplicity could also allow them to appear less threatening, despite their zeal to convert others.

## **Learning**

The monasteries they established offered Latin education, and monks brought an advanced culture of reading and writing with them. Regardless of the religious aspects, this has an appeal, not least to the powerful.

# The appeal of monastic missionaries

## Independence and flexibility

While Augustine of Canterbury was sent to England by the Pope and sought to set up a relatively static ecclesiastical structure (bishops at Canterbury and York), most monastic missionaries – especially the Irish - arrived on their own initiative and followed no fixed plan.

- Able to work outside of towns and cities to convert the masses, e.g. Saint Aidan in Northumbria
- Able to establish their own institutions to match the needs of local society
  - A normal episcopal church was meant to serve a region, and perhaps more senior bishops. Monasteries (even if they might house bishops), meanwhile, were more independent institutions that could remain more closely associated with a founding family: part of the “household” in societies dominated by kinship networks.
  - As Christianisation progresses, aristocratic look to their monasteries not only for prayer, but prestige (i.e. your own religious / education centre). They can even be an agency of power (e.g. monastic missionaries under aristocratic patronage operating and converting in neighbouring territories).
  - Columbanus, working with Frankish elites, also establishes monasteries at former pagan ritual sites (usually associated with healing) [see O’Hara].

# Monasticism and the Church in the Early Middle Ages

Monasticism provides considerable strength to the growing Christian community

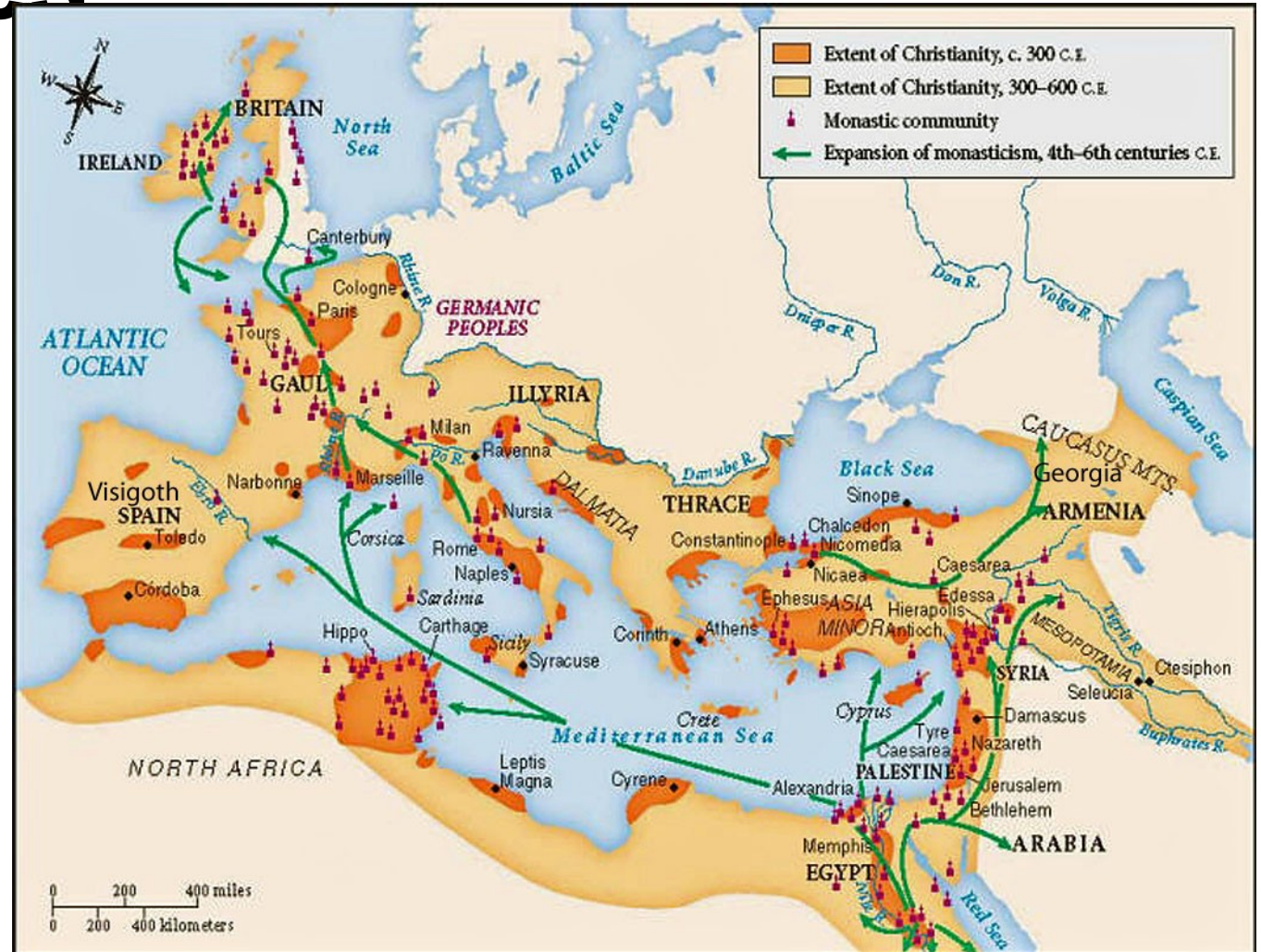
- Monastic communities and culture provide centres of learning, providing competent church leaders and indoctrinating other powerful figures in post-Roman Europe
- Many male monks become active proselytisers, deepening Christian faith in some areas, and being its vanguard in others

They also arguably help build greater uniformity in key aspects of the faith

- The majority of monks are Nicæan (rather than Arian) Christians, owing to their Egyptian/Eastern heritage

But in other ways, monasticism also adds to the chaos

- Monks and nuns show considerable variety in other beliefs and practice: the Irish use a dating for Easter that was not supported by the Roman Church – this leads to a significant argument in England in the 7<sup>th</sup> century
- Monasteries provide competing centres of religious authority and devotion – and for gifts! – that form their own spheres of influence.



# Sources – The Voyage of Saint Brendan

Brendan the Navigator (484-577 AD, according to Irish annals)

- Born in South-West Ireland
- Receives a good, monastic education, apparently under Saint Ida, a nun
- Founded a number of monasteries in Ireland, as well as one on the Aran Islands (off the West Coast of Ireland)
- Noted for travelling by Sea. Thought to have gone to Wales and Brittany (in Gaul/modern day France)

## *The Voyage of Saint Brendan*

- Unknown author, and probably written by the late 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. Earliest manuscripts c. 900 AD.
- Details a legendary voyage of Brendan, in which he journeys by sea to try to find “The Land of the Promise of the Saints”
- The story is clearly not strictly historical – Brendan and his companions rest on the back of a whale! – but this has not stopped wild speculation about where Brendan may have visited on such journey (Faroe Islands, Iceland, even America)
- Written in Ireland but in Latin: quite a popular text both there and in Europe (over 100 medieval manuscripts survive)

Reference: “The Voyage of Saint Brendan” in *The Age of Bede*, trans. J.F. Webb, ed. D.H. Farmer (London, 2004), 243-4

# Sources – The Voyage of Saint Brendan

“He sat down in the boat and one of the birds flew down from the tree towards him. The flapping of its wings sounded like a bell. It settled on the prow, spread out its wings as a sign of joy, and looked placidly at Brendan. He realized at once that God had paid heed to his prayer. ‘If you are God’s messenger,’ he said to the bird, ‘tell me where these birds come from and why they are gathered together.’

‘We are fallen angels,’ the bird replied, ‘part of the host which was banished from Heaven through the sin of man’s ancient foe. Our sin lay in approving the sin of Lucifer; when he and his band fell, we fell with them. Our God is faithful and just and, by His great justice, we were placed here. [...] On Sundays and holy days we take on this physical form and come here to sing the praises of our Creator. You and your companions have completed one year of your journey; six more years remain. Every year you will celebrate Easter in the same place as you are going to spend it today, and at the end of your travels you will achieve your heart’s desire you will find the Land of Promise of the Saints.’

[...]

After the octave day of the feast Brendan loaded the coracle with everything their steward had brought them, and had all the flasks filled with water running out from the spring. When all the gear had been carried down to the shore, the bird that had previously spoken to Brendan flew quickly towards them and perched on the prow. The man of God realized it had a message for them. It addressed them in a human voice: ‘Next year you will celebrate Easter Sunday and the rest of the time up to the octave of Pentecost here with us, and you will celebrate Maundy Thursday in exactly the same place as you did this year. Easter Eve, too, you will spend in the same spot as this year, on the back of Jasconius [a whale they had encountered]. In eight months’ time you will come across an island called the Island of the Community of St Ailbe. You will spend Christmas there.’ The bird left as soon as it had finished speaking. The monks hoisted the sails and put out to sea, with the birds singing ‘Hear us, O Lord, thou that art the hope of all the ends of the earth, and of them that remain in the broad sea...’”

# Sources – Bede, Ecclesiastical History (completed c. 731)

Bede (672-735 AD)

- An English monk, from the kingdom of Northumbria (Northern England); probably from a good, possibly noble, family
- Bede is given to the monastery of Monkwearmouth (in Northumbria) as a boy, and transfers to its nearby sister house at Jarrow. The monasteries of this region are heavily influenced by Irish tradition, who established monasticism there
- A noted intellectual who writes work biblical commentaries, saints lives (e.g. the *Life of Saint Cuthbert*), scientific treatises (on nature and time), geographic works, but also history

*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*

- Completed c. 731, this popular Latin work focuses on the history of Christianity in Great Britain, but above all on its history among the Anglo-Saxon tribes and kingdoms: he sees them as one people, the “English”
- Bede’s narrative is clearly carefully researched from earlier histories and many contacts; but it is also a Christian history, written to show the progress of Christianity in England through God’s will
- These two passages concern two critical figures in that progress – the Irish monk Aidan, and the Roman monk Augustine of Canterbury

Reference: Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, ed. V.D. Scudder (London/New York, 1910), [2.2, 3.3].  
[I have simplified the translations somewhat]

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/bede-book1.asp>

# Sources – Bede, Ecclesiastical History (on Saint Aidan and King Oswald in Northumbria)

King Oswald, as soon as he ascended the throne [of Northumbria], wanted that all his nation should receive the Christian faith [...] and sent word to the elders of the Scots [the monastery of Iona]: among them, he and his followers, while banished, had received the sacrament of baptism. He desired that they would send him a bishop, by whose instruction and ministry the English nation, which he governed, might be taught the advantages of the Christian faith, and receive its sacraments. Nor were they slow in granting his request; they sent him Bishop Aidan, a man of singular meekness, piety, and moderation [...]

From the aforesaid island, and college of monks, Aidan was sent to instruct the English nation in Christ, having received the dignity of a bishop at the time when Segenius, abbot and priest, presided over that monastery. Among other instructions for life, he left the clergy [of Northumbria] a most healthy example of abstinence or continence; it was the highest commendation of his doctrine, with all men, that he taught no differently than he and his followers had lived. For he neither sought nor loved any thing of this world, but delighted in distributing immediately among the poor whatever he was given by the kings or rich men of the world. He liked to traverse both town and country on foot, never on horseback, unless compelled by some urgent necessity. And wherever he saw any infidel along his way, he invited them, whether rich or poor, to embrace the mystery of the faith. If he met believers, he sought to strengthen them in the faith, and to stir them up by words and actions to giving alms [charitable gifts] and good works.

His manner of life was so different from the laziness of our times, that all those who were in his company, whether they were monks or laymen, occupied themselves with meditation, that is, either with reading the Scriptures, or with learning psalms. This was how he and all who were with him occupied themselves, wherever they went. And if it happened – and it only happened rarely - that he was invited to eat with the king, he went with just one or two clerics, and having taken a small meal, made haste to leave them, either to read or write.”

# Sources – Bede, Ecclesiastical History (on Saint Augustine of Canterbury and the Britons)

"[Those Britons] that were to go to the aforesaid council first took advice from a certain holy and discreet man, who lead an eremitic life among them. They wanted to know whether they ought, due to the preaching of Augustine, to forsake their traditions. He answered, "If he is a man of God, follow him." "How shall we know that?" they said. He replied, "Our Lord said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart." If therefore, Augustine is gentle and humble in heart, it should be believed that he has taken up the yoke of Christ [...] But if he is stern and arrogant, then it would appear that he is not of God, and that we should disregard his words [...] If at your approach he will stand up to greet you, hear him submissively, and be assured that he is the servant of Christ; but if he disrespects you, and does not stand up to greet you [...] you need show him no respect."

They did as he directed. It happened that when they came, Augustine was sitting in a chair. Observing this, they became enraged, and believing him to be proud, they tried to contradict everything he said. He [Augustine] said to them, "You act in many particulars contrary to our custom, or rather the custom of the universal church. But if you will comply with me on three points – that is, keep Easter at the correct time; administer baptism, by which we are again born to God, according to the custom of the holy Roman Apostolic Church; and jointly with us preach the word of God to the English nation, we will readily tolerate all the other things you do, even though they are contrary to our customs." They answered that they would do none of those things, nor receive him as their archbishop; for they alleged among themselves that "if he would not now stand up to greet us, how much more contempt will he should us – he will treat us as if we have no worth! - if we subject ourselves to him?" To whom the man of God, Augustine, is said, in a threatening manner, to have foretold that if they would not join in unity with their brethren, they would face war from their enemies; and, if they would not preach the way of life to the English nation, they would receive the vengeance of death at their hands. All of which happened exactly as he had predicted, delivered by Divine judgment."



# Sources – Willibald – Life of Saint Boniface (c. 760)

Willibald

- An obscure figure -English (i.e. Anglo-Saxon) monk who came to Mainz, in Germany, after the death of Boniface (754 AD)
- Clearly well-educated: his literary style appears indebted to Aldhelm (d. 709), an English monk and intellectual educated by the Irish in Wessex (Western England)

## *Life of Saint Boniface*

- Written in c. 760, detailing the the life and missionary work of Boniface in Germany and Frisia.
- While Willibald did not know him personally, he gained details from Boniface's companion Lull
- Perhaps the first Latin text composed in Germany
- Known in over 40 manuscripts – reasonably popular. Very influential for other hagiographers (those who wrote saints' lives) of the Anglo-Saxon missions to the continent.

Willibald, "Life of Saint Boniface", in *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany*, ed. and trans. C.H. Talbot (London/New York, 1954) [I have simplified the translation somewhat]

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/willibald-boniface.asp>

# Sources – Willibald – Life of Saint Boniface (c. 760)

“When [...] the faith had been planted strongly in Frisia and the glorious end of the saint's life drew near, he took with him a number of his personal followers and pitched a camp on the banks of the river Bordne [...] Here he fixed a day on which he would confirm by the laying-on of hands all the neophytes and those who had recently been baptized. [...] But events turned out otherwise than expected [...] A vast number of enemies armed with spears and shields rushed into the camp brandishing their weapons. In the twinkling of an eye, the attendants [of Boniface] came out from the camp to meet them and took up arms wherever they could find them to defend the holy band of martyrs (for that is what they were to be) against the senseless fury of the mob. But the man of God, hearing the shouts and the onrush of the rabble, straightaway called the clergy to his side, and, collecting together the relics of the saints, which he always carried with him, came out of his tent. At once he challenged the attendants and forbade them to continue the conflict, saying: "Sons, cease fighting. Lay down your arms, for we are told in Scripture not to render evil for good but to overcome evil by good. The hour to which we have long looked forward is near and the day of our release is at hand. Take comfort in the Lord and endure with gladness the suffering He has mercifully ordained. Put your trust in Him and He will grant deliverance to your souls." And addressing himself like a loving father to the priests, deacons, and other clerics, all trained in the service of God, who stood around him, he gave them courage, saying: "Brethren, be of stout heart, do not fear those who kill the body, for they cannot slay the soul, which continues to live for ever. Rejoice in the Lord; anchor your hope in God, for without delay He will render to you the reward of eternal bliss and grant you a home among the angels in His heaven above. Do not be slaves to the transitory pleasures of this world. Do not be seduced by the vain flattery of the pagans, but endure with steadfast mind the sudden onslaught of death, so that you can reign evermore with Christ." While encouraging his disciples to accept the crown of martyrdom with these words, the frenzied mob of pagans rushed suddenly upon them with swords and every kind of weapon of war, staining their bodies with the precious blood [of the martyrs].”

# Sources – Eligius, Foundation Charter of Solignac Abbey, 631 AD

Eligius (d. 660)

- From a Gallo-Roman aristocratic background, born in Aquitaine in Western Gaul (modern day France)
- Becomes “master of the mint” (i.e. coinmaking) under Clotaire II, king of the Neustrian (i.e. Western) Franks. Clotaire’s successor, Dagobert, appoints him chief counsellor
- Lived a religious life inspired by the Irish monastic rule of Columbanus with his friend Dado at the court. Also founds monasteries to live in this Irish style.

Foundation Charter of Solignac Abbey (631 AD)

- Issued in 631 AD by Eligius, giving a large estate at Solignac, near Limoges, in Aquitaine to a group of monks led by Remaculus, a monk of noble origin from Aquitaine
- The monks are to live under the “Rule of the most blessed fathers Benedict and Columbanus”. Thus, it recognised the increasingly popular Italian rule of Saint Benedict (from Monte Cassino), but also the Irish Rule of Columbanus.
- Despite the Gallic origins of the monastery, it is thus strongly indebted to the Irish monastic tradition that Eligius had become attached to in his own life

Reference: *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* 4, 746-9 [My own translation from the Latin]

[https://www.dmgh.de/mgh\\_ss\\_rer\\_merov\\_4/index.htm#page/746/mode/1up](https://www.dmgh.de/mgh_ss_rer_merov_4/index.htm#page/746/mode/1up)

# Sources – Eligius, Foundation Charter of Solignac Abbey, 631 AD

“Considering the great weight of my sins, and so that I might deserve to be set free from this and lifted up by God, I, your kneeling follower, grant to you [the monks of Solignac] small things in exchange for great things, earthly things in exchange for heavenly things, temporal things in exchange for eternal things. And I want to grant [...] the aforesaid field of Solignac, which came to me from the generosity of the most glorious and pious lord King Dagobert, along with the buildings which are known to be in this field [...]

The bishop or any other person should have no power within the aforesaid monastery, neither over its things nor its people – except the most glorious Prince [Dagobert]. Although I do not believe this will happen, if anyone, whether by their own will or by the command of any people should deceitfully attack the small gift I have granted - which I offer to omnipotent God for the good fortune of kings, for the remedy of my soul, for prayers for the peace of the people, and for peace for the servants of God – or in any way oppose it, [...] they should fall victim to the the anger of Omnipotent God.”

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