

# Conference Report

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CONFERENCE TITLE: MEETING THE *GENTES* – CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES:  
COLUMBANUS AND THE PEOPLES OF POST-ROMAN EUROPE

**DATE AND LOCATION:** 22-23 NOVEMBER 2013, SCHOTTENSTIFT, VIENNA, AUSTRIA

**SPONSORED BY:** INSTITUT FÜR MITTELALTERFORSCHUNG, AUSTRIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND ORGANIZED BY **DR ALEXANDER O'HARA** FOR THE 'COLNET – THE COLUMBANIAN NETWORK' PROJECT, WHICH RUNS FROM 2013 TO 2016 AND IS FUNDED BY THE AUSTRIAN SCIENCE FUND.

**PROGRAMME:**

[http://www.oeaw.ac.at/imafo/fileadmin/bilder/events/programme\\_colonet\\_web.pdf](http://www.oeaw.ac.at/imafo/fileadmin/bilder/events/programme_colonet_web.pdf)

There could not have been a better time and place for a conference entitled 'Meeting the *Gentes* – Crossing the Boundaries': 22-23 November – the anniversary of Columbanus's death – at the Benedictine Schottenstift in Vienna. Although not a Columbanian foundation, the monastery was founded by the Babenberg duke of Austria with Irish monks in the twelfth century. It was a fitting venue to discuss the role of the Irish monasteries as places of education and social interaction as the Irish ambassador **James Brennan** pointed out in his welcome remarks. This outlined from the start the aim of the conference: To investigate the role of Columbanus, his monasteries and their relationship with the social world around them in the period up to the eighth century, when the ethnic self-identification of *gentes* was consolidated. Columbanus crossed many boundaries (both literally and figuratively) during his time on the Continent and his travels through Merovingian Gaul, Alamannia, and Lombard Italy. These travels brought him into contact with both the elite political power players and the local communities of post-Roman Europe. What were the outcomes of this cultural contact? How did Christian discourse come to increasingly influence the social and

political frameworks of the post-Roman world and what was the role of outsiders such as Columbanus in shaping this?

The two-day conference covered a wide range of topics and approaches largely arranged chronologically by Columbanus's *itinerarium*. The first two papers dealt with Columbanus's Irish identity and the impact his native land had on his faith and actions on the Continent. Despite cultural and doctrinal differences, **Clare Stancliffe** argued that Columbanus shared much in common with Gregory the Great's monastic worldview. Columbanus also strongly identified himself as a *peregrinus* – an outsider and exile in this world. His self-perception as a *peregrinus* enabled Columbanus to act as a cultural broker. **Damian Bracken** argued along similar lines; the emergence of Christian barbarians brought into question the ancient model of pagan *gentes* and the Christian *populus Romanus*. However, as an outsider, Columbanus made use of the pre-existing language of concord that was often used in imperial Roman and early Christian polemic. He reinterpreted phrases like *pax et concordia* and *concordia fratrum* as concord among the *gentes* in a network of nations and stylised Rome as the head of the Christian body.

Based on the idea of the outsider, **Alexander O'Hara** raised the question of why the difference articulated by Columbanus was attractive for the Frankish elite. After the Edict of Paris in 614, regional identities became stronger and Columbanus's strategies of distinction could have become a means of asserting social boundaries for the Frankish elite, particularly for the Neustrians. Like the preceding speakers, O'Hara pointed out that Irish and Frankish actors worked together in creating a new Frankish identity. From a religious perspective, as **Andreas Fischer** remarked, the perception as an outsider could, however, cause serious difficulties. Not only was the fight against heresy and religious deviance a problem for his community in the confrontation with the Gallic bishops as Columbanus's teaching contradicted Gallic ecclesiastical norms, but it also led to tensions within the Columbanian communities as can be seen from the case of the rebel monk Agrestius.

In addition to the Irish background, **Ian Wood** remarked that Columbanus was clearly influenced by the writings of the Briton Gildas and he and the other Irish benefited from pre-existing Brittonic connections on the Continent. When Columbanus settled at Annegray in the Vosges he encountered a Brittonic monastic community in the neighbourhood and some of his monks also included Britons. Besides these important prerequisites, the success of Columbanus lay in winning the support of lay rulers, as **Herwig Wolfram** stated. Columbanus's initial success in Austrasia, Burgundy, and later Alamannia failed when he lost his political support – first through his conflict with Theuderic II and later when the death of Theudebert II made it untenable to remain in Alamannia. Although Columbanus considered going further east to preach to the Slavs, he abandoned the idea. The mission to the Bavarians was instead undertaken by his disciple Eustasius following Columbanus's death. Similarly, it was the Irish bishop, Virgil of Salzburg, who later in the eighth century could start the mission to the Slavs after the defeat of the Avars when the political power of the Franks was consolidated and the conversion from top-down was possible.

The next papers dealt with different aspects of Columbanus and his work in Alamannia. **Bernhard Maier** and **Francesco Borri** both discussed the interpretation of the pagan rites starting from the mention of Woden in the *Vita Columbani* – the first mention in the historical record to this Germanic god. Maier pointed out that Woden's identification with the Devil is the earliest instance of an *interpretatio Christiana* of the Germanic god. Yet, according to Borri, Jonas's mention of Woden and the disapproval of this practice is not exclusively a statement of belief, but it should rather be regarded as possibly a statement of identity and an expression of an existing tension between barbarian military elites and Christian norms on drinking and social relations. Woden's appeal for the barbarian elites would continue to increase during the course of the seventh century, but his appeal would decline in the Carolingian period as Christian models of representation increasingly took precedence. **Barbara Theune-Grosskopf**, who dealt with the pre-existing circumstances of the Christianisation in Alamannia, emphasised the dynamics of this process. While Christian centres already existed in the former Roman areas west of the River Rhine, Christianity did not start to spread until the second half of the sixth century in the East. The gradually changing funeral rites are proof that pagan and Christian rites existed side by side for a time and Christian models also influenced pagan rites (so that the reference to Wodan, for instance, could also be understood as a reference to Daniel in the Lions' Den). Both Theune-Grosskopf and **Yaniv Fox** stressed the political undertones of the Alamannian mission. Columbanus's mission was initiated by Theudebert II and coordinated with the Alamannian Duke Gunzo, as Fox convincingly argued. But the political environment changed quickly and Columbanus had to flee to Italy after Theudebert's death in 612. Gunzo, however, continued to support monastic actions and cooperation with Columbanus's Irish disciple Gallus, who established a hermitage in the Steinach valley, was still possible.

Following Columbanus's *itinerarium*, the next two papers concentrated on Lombard Italy. The paper given by **Roberta Conversi** and **Eleonora Destefanis** demonstrated Bobbio's key position as a central place in a fluid borderland. Bobbio was enmeshed in a complex network between the Lombard, the Frankish and the Byzantine polities, where it was responsible for the control and economic exploitation of the territory. **Gisella Cantino-Wataghin** made a similar case for Novalesa Abbey, founded in the eighth century near Susa, the birthplace of Columbanus's hagiographer, Jonas. This Frankish monastery that had properties in the Lombard kingdom was important for the economic coherence of the area and it was integrated in a multi-cultural system. Thus, the Columbanian monasteries and later cases such as Novalesa were important nodal points for the interaction between the *gentes* and the formation of new identities in border regions.

**Conor Newman** as well as **Sébastien Bully** and **Emmet Marron** presented the latest archaeological results of the sites at Cleenish and Annegray in Northern Ireland and Eastern France respectively. In Cleenish, reputedly the site of Columbanus's place of education, there are no visible traces of a former monastery. However, the geophysical survey of the area brought near certainty that the existing graveyard marks the site of the early medieval monastery and traces of enclosing features also appeared in the geophysics. The excavations at Annegray, situated on an important Roman

traffic node like the other Columbanian monasteries, have revealed traces of an apse from a Romanesque church, probably eleventh century in date. The site of the earliest late sixth-century monastery has not thus far been identified however.

The last session of the conference dealt with liturgy. **Dominique Barbet-Massin** showed the continued existence of Irish liturgy on the Continent into the Carolingian period from the example of the *Ratio de cursus*, a computistical text. She portrayed the text as the answer of an eighth-century Breton monk probably writing in a Columbanian foundation to the attempts of the Frankish bishops to unify the monastic codes of practice and to establish the Rule of Benedict. Finally, **Ann Buckley** presented the 'Historia Project'. As the amount of surviving medieval music notation in Ireland is rather small and there is more evidence from Continental libraries, the project aims to collect the body of chants and spoken prayers in medieval liturgical manuscripts – antiphons, hymns, sequences, and tropes – to record them and to make them available with full public access.

In his closing remarks, **Jean-Michel Picard** came back to two central themes: the notion of the boundary used by Columbanus to establish a privileged field of difference and the location of his monasteries near political boundaries that enabled them to negotiate and create new identities. A volume is in preparation based on the proceedings of the conference.