

CULTURAL AND ECCLESIASTICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

(Summary of Basic Research)

INTERNATIONAL CANON LAW HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER

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Szabolcs Anzelm SZUROMI, *Three parchment leaves from the 7th century and the Greek literacy of Irish monks (Russian National Library, St. Petersburg)*

1 – The Greek Culture of the Irish Monasteries in the British Isles

Until as late as 2023, scholarly consensus attributed the influence of the Greek language on Irish monks and their disciplinary collections solely to Theodoros, Archbishop of Canterbury (668–690), as the sole source (Plöchl, *Geschichte des Kirchenrechts*, Vol. I, Wien–München, 1960, 393). The conclusion was obvious, since Theodoros was a native of Tarsus, spoke Greek fluently, and combined this tradition with the Latin ecclesiastical literature he had mastered in Rome. After his arrival to Canterbury, he not only engaged in ecclesiastical politics and conciliar activities (i.e. the Council of Hertford [672]), but also laid the foundation for the so-called Canterbury School, dedicated to the study of ecclesiastical and other sciences in both Greek and Latin (e.g., Stevenson, Cambridge 1995). His erudition demonstrably exerted a significant influence on the traditional collections of the so-called ‘golden age’ of Irish penitential books, which lasted from the 7th to the 9th centuries, particularly regarding Greek sources.

During the past more than four years (2023–2026), my research on manuscripts at the *National Library of St. Petersburg* (Russia), *Gonville and Caius College* (Cambridge, UK), and at the *British Library* (London, UK) have significantly refined my understanding of the influence of Eastern ecclesiastical culture and knowledge of the Greek language from the 6th century (that is, even before Theodoros) through the 9th century, on Western monastic and ecclesiastical discipline, suggesting that this influence was far broader and more extensive on both sides of the Channel than had been assumed based on the theory primarily linked to Archbishop Theodoros. This suggests that Eastern ecclesiastical discipline had a direct influence on the development of the characteristics of Irish—and, more generally, Western—sacramental discipline (Szuromi AfkKR [2024] 1–12).



2 – The Three Parchment Leaves of St. Petersburg

The Greek manuscript fragment belongs to the collection of the *National Library of St. Petersburg* that belongs to the collection of the German biblical scholar Lobegott Friedrich Constantin von Tischendorf (†1874). Although Tischendorf's name is most closely associated with the discovery of the *Codex Sinaiticus* and the critical edition of the Greek text of the New Testament, his book-collecting activities were far more diverse, contributing significantly to the exceptionally rich collection of codices and fragments currently held by the National Library of St. Petersburg. Between 1844 and 1860, with the financial support and patronage of the Russian government and Tsar Alexander II (1855–1881), Tischendorf acquired extensive collections of manuscripts of East and West, biblical, liturgical, theological, and secular subjects, particularly from Middle Eastern and Greek monastic as well as private libraries. The more than 1,200 manuscripts, dating from the 2nd to the 15th century, constitute a unique source for research on Eastern and church history; the most recent typewritten *inventarium* of the Greek material was completed in 1985 (ed. Салтыкова-Шедрина, М. Е.).

One small piece is particularly noteworthy, since, according to a note in the *inventarium*, its contents are 'illegible'. Between October 20th and 25th 2026, I was able to read and interpret this Greek fragment, which consists of three separate parchment leaves and was considered 'illegible', and which also contains two larger geometric figures. Based on this, the manuscript fragment was most likely written in Lindisfarne, copied onto parchment produced in Milan (size: 1. 184x134; 2. 196x140; 3. 175x147). Its date undoubtedly falls within the tenure of Lindisfarne's first abbot, Aidan (634–651) [i.e. Szuromi, Newsletter [2025] III/4, 3–5], so the manuscript must have been copied no later than 651.

Fol. 1r-v contains a liturgical calendar; the first two-thirds of fol. 2r is dominated by a geometric figure consisting of a circle and arcs, decorated with green, red, brown, and yellow colors, which most likely serve to highlight the individual delineated segments. A green Latin cross is visible in each of the four clearly distinguishable sections. The Greek text in the last third of the folio is almost completely illegible due to blue ink smudges. The first two-thirds of fol. 2v feature a geometric figure like that on fol. 2r, while the Greek text in the last third is so worn that it is nearly illegible. The Greek text on fol. 3r–v was written by only one hand and is divided into four sections highlighted with rubrum (red ink). The handwriting corresponds to the 7th-century Greek small-letter script used in Lindisfarne. It should be noted that fol. 1r and 1v are likely reversed, as I was able to identify the early numbering of fol. 1v, which thus may have been fol. 8r of the original manuscript.



3 – Significance of the Fragment

If we read the texts considered ‘illegible’, we can reconstruct the meaning of the explanations accompanying the geometric figures on fol. 2 based on the sentences found on fol. 3. The first half of fol. 3r contains twenty-one sentence sections, each beginning with a rubrum. The summary lists the rules of monastic life in the form of brief statements. The second half of fol. 3r contains regulations regarding the community life of presbyters (here: monks ordained as priests), organized into nine points. The first two-thirds of fol. 3v provide a summary of self-denial and its fruits. Finally—as the fourth section—the last third of fol. 3v lists the stages of spiritual guidance. If we then examine the two geometric figures on fol. 2 and the fragmentary explanatory words below them, it becomes clear that they symbolize and explain the theoretical structure of monastic life. In this—in accordance with the Irish monastic tradition—the four pillars represented the monk’s unity with God, with himself, with the specific community (monastery), and with the Church. The four Latin crosses serve to symbolize this.

4 – Conclusion

In light of the above, it can be said that the textual witness found among the fragments of the collection of Greek medieval manuscripts identified on October 20th–25th 2026, and preserved in St. Petersburg, is of special significance. It is not merely another example attesting to the Greek-language ecclesiastical and monastic culture that existed at Lindisfarne from the very beginning. The three identified parchment leaves make it clear that Greek-speaking monks must have been present at the Lindisfarne Abbey during its earliest period, as nothing else

could explain why the most fundamental principles regarding monastic status were recorded exclusively in Greek. Furthermore, the depiction of the four pillars of Irish monastic life lends the fragment additional unique value. Beyond all this, the three parchment leaves provide further clear evidence of the close connection between Irish monasteries working in the Anglo-Saxon region and the Italian scriptoria and parchment-producing centers.



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