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Bede's *Civitas Domnoc* and Dunwich, Suffolk

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Bede's *civitas Domnoc*, where Felix of Burgundy established his see and converted the people of Suffolk, is a problem for both philologists and historians. Although many identify it as Dunwich (TM 4770), where the sea has washed away the medieval town, others prefer Walton Castle (TM 3235), a Saxon Shore fort (now also under water) near Felixstowe. If the location is uncertain, so is the form. Most read *civitas Dommoc*, but some argue for *Domnoc*. As for the meaning of *Domnoc* (or *Dommoc*), this is obscure as well. It must be Celtic, yet there is no agreement on whether it is from British or Irish, or on what it signifies. But no confidence is inspired by John Morris's astonishing suggestion of a link with St Dyfnog, son of Medraut, and hence perhaps grandnephew of King Arthur.¹

Location, form, and etymology are thus all unclear. Nevertheless, a vital breakthrough has been made by Professor Richard Coates of the University of Sussex, who backs up earlier archaeological arguments with his own linguistic ones.² What follows differs from his conclusions in one point only, though that a significant one. Let us look at what he says.

As regards early attestations the Moore Bede (Cambridge, University Library, MS Kk.v.16) has *ciuitas Domnoc*, the St Petersburg Bede has *ciuitas Dommoc*. Historians claim the second is the better reading, and most authorities (though not the Ordnance Survey) identify it with varying degrees of assurance as Dunwich, not Walton Castle.³ Yet Coates very reasonably rejects *Dommoc* on textual grounds, seeing *Domnoc* as the *lectio difficilior*. He also rightly doubts the traditional etymology 'deep (harbour)' from British **dumno-* (cf. Welsh *dwfn*, 'deep'), because *u* here should not appear as Old English *o*. He therefore argues for an Irish derivation, citing Old Irish *domnach* [church] from Late Latin *dominicum* [house of the Lord; church]. It is true that *domnach* is common in Irish

toponyms, as with Donaghmore [great church], near Newry in Northern Ireland, or Donaghpatrick [church of Patrick], near Navan in Meath. But there are grave objections to Coates's derivation of Bede's *-oc* from Old Irish *-ach*.

Even so, Coates is surely correct in seeing *Domnoc* as Irish. It would, however, surely not represent *domnach* [church], but the personal name *Domnoc*. This is well attested. It can be linked with Gaulish *Dumnacus* (the name of a Gaulish leader in Caesar's *Gallic War*), Welsh *Dyfnog* (already cited), and Middle Irish MAIL DOMNA[C] [servant of Domnac], the last on a tenth-century cross from Penally, Pembrokeshire.⁴ Still more to the point is St Domnoc (known too in early Irish as *Modomnoc* [my Domnoc], a hypocoristic form), a pupil of the great St David (d. 601), who taught him bee-keeping. St Mo-Dhomhnóg is associated with the monasteries of Tibberaghny (of which fragments survive) south of Kilkenny, and Bremore north of Dublin. He figures in the twelfth-century Latin life of David, but not the later Welsh one.⁵

Why should an Irish personal name occur on the coast of Suffolk, whether at Dunwich or Walton Castle? Bede himself provides the answer. He refers to Malmesbury in Wiltshire as *urbs Maildubi*. According to William of Malmesbury, Máeldub was an Irish monk who taught St Aldhelm.⁶ Bede likewise mentions Dícuill (otherwise unknown), an Irish monk who established a religious community at Bosham, Sussex. Fursa's monastery at Burgh Castle near Lowestoft is well known. Máeldub, Dícuill, and Fursa all founded monasteries, all had Irish names, and were not the only Irish monks in England whose names come down to us. St Aidan (<Irish *aéd* 'fire') is famous, but Bede mentions as well Foillán (who took over from Fursa at Burgh Castle), Gobán, another Dícuill, and Ultán (a second Ultán figures in the ninth-century Anglo-Latin poem *De Abbatibus*).⁷

Given these Irish forms and the career of St Domnoc, there is reason to take *civitas Domnoc* as 'Domnoc's stronghold'. It would be called after an Irishman of this name just as the unlocated monastery of *Tunnacaestir* (which Bede also locates in a *civitas*) was called after its abbot, Tunna. What Tunna did in Northumbria, Domnoc (of whom we have no other knowledge) did in Suffolk. He would have been an Irishman, presumably a monk, who occupied a Roman fort later handed over to Felix. If he was a monk within Roman walls, he would resemble Bass at Reculver in Kent, Cedd at Bradwell-on-Sea in Essex, and Ebba at Ebchester near Durham, all of whom established monasteries in Roman forts acquired as royal gifts.⁸

The above, then, appears to give a simple and cogent explanation of *civitas Domnoc*. Does it help decide whether this place was Dunwich or Walton Castle? It seems it does. There are three points. There is a strong circumstantial case for

Walton Castle, since Bede consistently uses *civitas* for Roman sites, whether cities or forts; Walton Castle was near a centre of royal power at Rendlesham; it had a chapel to St Felix (a rare dedication); and it is by modern Felixstowe. The case for Roman settlement at Dunwich is on the other hand weak, as is (despite Dorothy Whitelock's learning) that for linking it with Felix.⁹ There are also great philological difficulties in deriving the first element of *Dunwich* from *Domnoc*. Finally, Coates in his paper offers an entirely English etymology for *Dunwich*, proposing a meaning 'dune huts, sheds in sandhills'. That disposes of any need to link the toponym with *Domnoc*. Varied historical, linguistic, and archaeological evidence thus suggests we can say goodbye for ever to the association of *Domnoc* with Dunwich (hinted at in one twelfth-century manuscript of William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Pontificum*, and proposed by the Canterbury monk Thomas of Elmham in the early fifteenth century). Rigold's arguments for Walton Castle would hence be vindicated; so, too, would the Suffolk writer Bartholomew Cotton, whom Whitelock cites as identifying *civitas Domnoc* as Felixstowe in 1298.

If the above conclusions are correct, their implications are fourfold. First, writers on the Anglo-Saxons, editions of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, and dictionaries of English place-names should henceforth read *Domnoc* and not *Domnoc*, which has no meaning and should be dropped. Second, we can feel sure that Felix for seventeen years conducted his mission and taught at the lost Saxon Shore fort of Walton Castle. Like Burgh Castle, this was easy to reach by water, but had stout walls against intruders (though they were in the end powerless to halt destruction from the sea). It was there, too, that he died (his bones being translated to Soham and then Ramsey): a missionary exiled for the love of God, with a name still commemorated by the booming Europort of Felixstowe. Third, we can believe his monastery was occupied previously by an Irishman called *Domnoc*, perhaps a monk. Even though this paper disputes his etymology, Coates would here be right in seeing rare Irish influence in Bede's *civitas Domnoc*. Fourth, we can accept of Dunwich to the north that it was not a Roman settlement of importance, and that its name is English, not Celtic.

Henry James wrote of Dunwich that it was 'not even the ghost of its dead self; almost all you can say of it is that it consists of the mere letters of its old name'. That 'old name' has long intrigued or vexed linguists and historians; but it seems the questions regarding it can now be taken as solved.¹⁰

NOTES

¹ John Morris, *The Age of Arthur* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), pp. 140, 562-3.

² S. E. Rigold, 'The Supposed See of Dunwich', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 24 (1961), 55-9, and his 'Further Evidence About the Site of "Dommoc"', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 37 (1974), 97-102; Richard Coates and Andrew Breeze, *Celtic Voices, English Places* (Stamford: Shaun Tyas, 2000), pp. 234-40. *The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names*, ed. by V. E. Watts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 200, makes no reference to Coates's discussion.

³ *Map of Britain in the Dark Ages*, 2nd edn (Southampton: Ordnance Survey, 1966); Peter Hunter Blair, *The World of Bede* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1970), p. 108; F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 116; Dorothy Whitelock, 'The Pre-Viking Age Church in East Anglia', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 1 (1972), 1-22 (p. 4, n. 2); J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's 'Ecclesiastical History of the English People': A Historical Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 78, 224.

⁴ D. Ellis Evans, *Gaulish Personal Names* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 85, 196-7, 345.

⁵ Charles Plummer, *Miscellanea Hagiographica Hibernica* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1925), p. 217; *Rhigyfarch's Life of St David*, ed. by J. W. James (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1967), p. 18; Aubrey Gwynn and R. N. Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses: Ireland* (London: Longman, 1970), pp. 396, 407.

⁶ Aldhelm, *The Prose Works*, trans. by Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren (Cambridge: Brewer, 1979), pp. 6-7, 181-2.

⁷ Cf. Brian ó Cuív, *Aspects of Irish Personal Names* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1986).

⁸ *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 270 n. 2; Charles Thomas, *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 34.

⁹ Norman Scarfe, *Suffolk in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1986), pp. 7, 41.

¹⁰ I here thank Count Tolstoy for many gifts of books over the years, including some quoted above.