

Abbán

by Pádraig Ó Riain

Abbán (d. 520?), saint in the Irish tradition, although primarily associated with the churches of Mag Arnaide ('Moyarney'/Adamstown, near New Ross, Co. Wexford) and Cell Abbáin (Killabban, Co. Laois), is also linked to other parts of the country, most notably Ballyvourney, Muskerry, Co. Cork, where his grave is pointed out, and where he is held to have been the brother of St Gobnait (qv). His parents are named as Cormac and Mílla, and his pedigree, which attaches him to the Moccu/Uí Chormaic, appears to reflect the interests of his Laois church. The Latin and vernacular Lives produced for him are very probably based on a Latin original written about 1218 by Ailbe O'Mulloy (qv) (Ailbe Ua Maíl; d. 1223), bishop of Ferns, within whose diocese the saint's Wexford church lay. The original Life also took account of his Muskerry connections, attributing to him the foundation of the church in Ballyvourney, which he is said to have surrendered to Gobnait.

Abbán's biographer caused him to visit several other parts of the country, including the Fermoy area, the Glen of Aherlow, where a vivid description is given of Beccán's church, now St Peakaun's, and the Éile–Fíir Chell area on the marches of Munster and Leinster, where he is said to have effected the conversion of a local man of royal descent, whose son he baptised. Ailbe Ua Maíl Muad was a native of this latter area, and it is probably of himself that he spoke when, using the first person, he asserted at this point in the Life that 'I who gathered together and wrote the Life am a descendant [*nepos*] of that son' (Plummer, *Vitae SS Hib.*, §26). Elsewhere in the Life the saint's biographer attributed to him a connection with the church of Abingdon, near Oxford, England, deriving the name of the English church from *Abbaindun vel Dun Abbain*, 'Abbán's town' (ibid., §14), and asserting that the saint converted a king and his people there. The purpose of the spurious derivation may have been to counter the English allegation that their presence in Ireland resulted from the need 'to spread the faith'. Indeed, the fortuitous similarity of name between English church and Irish saint may have been one of the factors that led Ailbe Ua Maíl Muad to choose Abbán as the subject of a Life in the first place – Abbán's church of Mag Arnaide was otherwise unimportant within the diocese of Ferns, and was certainly not in a position to produce a Life in its own right. The name 'Abbán' (also written Eibbán, Moab(b)a) has been taken to mean 'little abbot', from *ab* (abbot). It is far more likely, however, to derive from a hypocoristic or pet form 'abba', with characteristic doubling of the medial consonant, probably based on Ailbe. Among the churches said to have been founded by the saint was Cell Ailbe in Co. Meath. Abbán has two feast-days, 16 March and 27 October.

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Plummer, *Vitae SS Hib.*; C. Plummer, *Bethada náem nÉrenn* (1922); *Cork Hist. Soc. Jn.*, lvii (1952), 18–61 (articles by M. J. O'Kelly and Diarmuid Ua hÉaluighthe); SC; Heist, *Vitae SS Hib.*; W. W. Heist, 'Over the writer's shoulder: Saint Abban', *Celtica*, xi (1976), 76–84; D. Ó Corráin and F. Maguire, *Gaelic personal names* (1981); Ó Riain, *Corpus geneal. SS Hib.* (1985); P. Ó Riain, 'St Abbán: the genesis of an Irish saint's Life', D. E. Evans et al. (ed.), *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Celtic Studies, Oxford, 1983* (1986), 159–70

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