

Gillebert of Limerick: the Prelate's Present to the Primate of England

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The sending of a present of twenty-five pearls, in late 1106 or 1107, to the archbishop of Canterbury, afterwards St. Anselm, by Gillebert, the first bishop of Limerick is analysed. Why such a gift would be given is discussed and where these gems might have been sourced is examined. It is concluded that the pearls were native and were most likely to have come from Kerry and were sent as a token of loyalty and devotion as well as affection and friendship.

In the early years of the twelfth century, most probably late in 1106 or early in 1107, Gillebert¹ (Gillebertus or Gislebertus) the first bishop of Limerick,² wrote to Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury, congratulating him, apparently, on the successful outcome of his controversy with King Henry I of England and enclosing a gift of twenty-five pearls.

A copy of the letter is shown in Figure 1. Another copy, textually only slightly different from this one, which was also in the possession of Robert Cotton (1571-1631) the English antiquary and collector of literary relics, was reproduced as follows by James Ussher (1581-1656):

Anselmo Dei gratia Anglorum archi-præsuli, Gillebertus Dei quoque misericordia Lumnicensis episcopus fidele servitium et orationes.

Audiens, pater, certaminis vestri laborem et laboris victoriam; subditas esse videlicet indomitas Normannorum mentes regularibus sanctorum patrum decretis, ut legaliter fiat abbatum et præsulum electio et consecratio: immensas divinæ clementiæ refero gratias, et quas possum Deo preces effundo, ut perseverantiam vobis et tanti laboris præmium largiatur. Munusculum paupertatis meæ et devotionis transmittō, XXV. margaritulas inter optimas et viliores; et rogo ne sitis immemor mei in orationibus vestris, in quibus post divinam largitatem confido.³

¹ He also abbreviated his name to Gille at a later date, e.g. in *De Usu Ecclesiastico*, addressed to the bishops and priests of Ireland, he starts with 'Episcopis et presbyteris Hiberniæ, infimus præsulum Gille Lumnicensis in Christo salutem', Jacobus Usserius, *Veterum Epistolarum Hibernicarum Sylloge* (Dublinii, 1632) p. 77; J.P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiæ Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, vol. clix (Paris, 1854) p. 997. In the Gaelic language he has been called Giolla Easpuig, Gearóid MacSpealáin, *Cathair Luimnige, cuid i 432-1691* (Baile Áta Cliath, 1948) p. 20 and mistakenly Giolla Iosa, Brendan Connellan, *Light on the Past: Story of St. Mary's Parish, Limerick* (Limerick, 2001) p. 4.

² It has been said that St. Munchin was the first bishop of Limerick: Sancto Munchino primo Limericensi Episcopo, Francisco Portero, *Compendium Annalium Ecclesiasticorum Regni Hiberniæ* (Romæ, 1690) p. 192. The dates of his episcopacy have been given as the fifth century, e.g. John Fleming, *St John's Cathedral, Limerick* (Dublin, 1987) p. 93, sixth century, P. Fitzgerald & J.J. McGregor, *The History, Topography and Antiquities of the County and City of Limerick* (vol. ii, Dublin, 1827) p. 386 and seventh century, e.g. *The History of Ireland by the Abbot Mac-Geoghegan*, translated from the French by Patrick O'Kelly (Dublin, 1844) p. 171 but, according to James Ware, no evidence for this exists, Walter Harris (ed.), *The Whole Works of Sir James Ware Concerning Ireland* (vol. i, Dublin, 1764) p. 503. Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (vol. ii, London, 1837) p. 273 even claims that he was consecrated by St Patrick. It is most improbable, however, that there were earlier bishops of Limerick before Gillebert, Aubrey Gwynn, 'The diocese of Limerick in the twelfth century', *NMAJ*, v (1946-7) pp 35-48: 36.

³ Ussher, *Sylloge*, p. 88, the two texts correspond perfectly except that there is a final *vale* [farewell] in the MS shown in Figure 1.

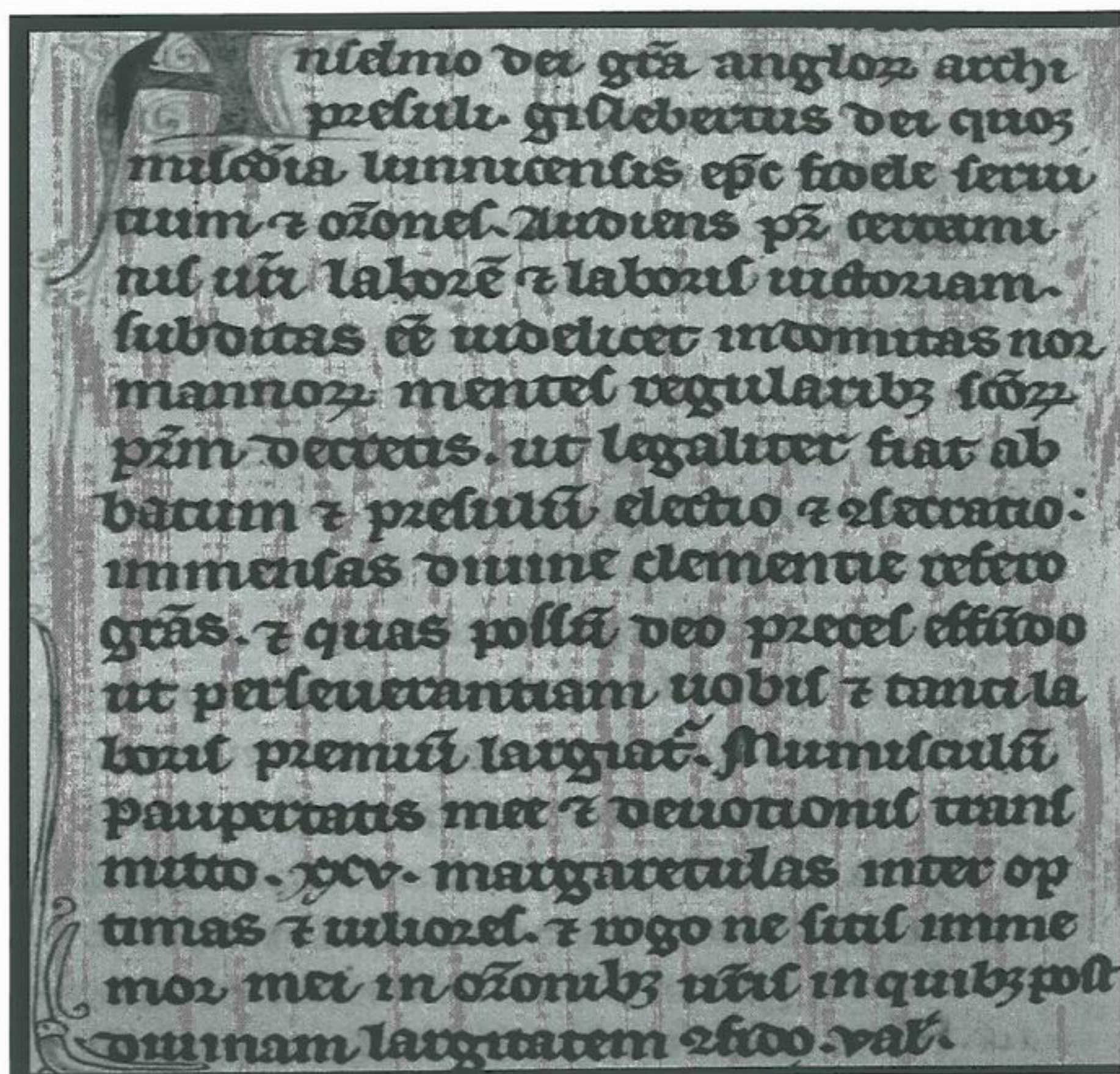


Fig. 1. Copy of early twelfth century letter from Gillebert, bishop of Limerick, to Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury. (British Library, Cotton MS Claudius A. xi., f. 153). Note that the Latinized name is Gislebertus.

A translation of the Latin text reads as follows:

Gillebert, by God's mercy bishop of Limerick, to Anselm, by the grace of God, primate of England, with pledge of faithful service and prayers.

Father, I have learned what a hard struggle you have had and how successful you have been in securing the obedience of the ungovernable Normans to the decrees of the holy fathers, regulating the lawful election of abbots and bishops. I give unbounded thanks to God for his mercy and spend myself in prayer to him that he may grant you perseverance and reward such great labour. From my small means and my devotion I send you a modest gift, 25 small pearls, some precious, some inferior; and beg remembrance in your prayers in which, after God's generosity, I place my trust.⁴

⁴ Hamell in litt., 20.vi.1991. I am grateful to the late Monsignor Patrick J. Hamell for this translation.

Why, as Dr John Fleming, now Bishop of Killala, in his recent biography of Gillebert, whom he calls Gille, one bishop should send pearls, some of which he acknowledged were of poor quality and some of reasonable value, to another is difficult to fathom.⁵ In the following pages it is intended to shed light on the reasons for sending such a gift and further to examine sources for pearls in Ireland, some 900 years ago, in an effort to establish where these were procured.

Background

Firstly, it is necessary to give some background to events of that time to place this enigmatic ecclesiastic, whom Aubrey Gwynn has called 'one of the most obscure of the bishops who worked for the cause of ecclesiastical reform in Ireland',⁶ in context.

Gillebert corresponded with Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury, whom he had known when the two were in Rouen⁷ and sent him the gift of twenty-five pearls in late 1106 or 1107. His original writings were apparently lost⁸ but there are some copies of the letter to Anselm extant: British Library, Cotton MS Claudius A. xi; Corpus Christi College Cambridge, MS 135; Lambeth Palace Library, MS 59; Bibliotheque Nationale Paris, MS 2478.⁹ Ussher, who had a loan of a copy from Robert Cotton, dates the letter to Anselm at 1094¹⁰ but he was in error. Ussher may have had in mind Anselm's earlier success in his struggle with King William II over money matters, rights, and privileges. However the letter should be dated to the last period of Anselm's reign as archbishop (1106-1109) when he returned to England from Rome where from 1103 he had sought papal support in his dispute with the new king, Henry I, over his interference in ecclesiastical appointments. This quarrel was settled by compromise in late 1106 or some time in 1107.¹¹

In the letter, Gillebert congratulates Anselm on his compromise with Henry I, and Brigid Pike interprets this as referring to the occasion of Anselm's return in 1106 thus dating it more closely to that particular year.¹² However, the letter does not mention any year and other sources have dated the letter post August 1107, when, they say compromise was reached over investiture.¹³ The quarrel between Anselm and William II had begun in 1094 and Anselm spent from 1097-1100 in exile at Rome and Cluny, with a second exile from 1103-1105.¹⁴ Some writers give the year of settlement on investitures as 1107, just after Henry had completed the conquest of Normandy¹⁵ as it is in *Flores Historiarum*, attributed to the thirteenth-century monk Matthew Paris.¹⁶ However Anselm and the king settled their differences in August 1106 after the king had gone to Normandy, where articles of agreement were drawn up in the Abbey

⁵ John Fleming, *Gille of Limerick (c.1070-1145), Architect of a Medieval Church* (Dublin, 2001) p. 42.

⁶ Aubrey Gwynn, *The Irish Church in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, ed. G. O'Brien (Dublin, 1992) p. 125.

⁷ It has been said that Gillebert had been a monk with Anselm at Rouen, Brian Ó Cuiv, 'Ireland in the eleventh and twelfth centuries' in T.W. Moody and F.X. Martin, (eds) *The Course of Irish History* (Cork, 1989) pp 107-122: 118.

⁸ Writing was a laborious business in the twelfth century: parchment was expensive and many writers neglected to keep copies of their letters. When no copies had been kept, a collection of letters might be formed either by recovering the originals at the time they were written and sent or by later gathering letters that had been kept by the recipients, Giles Constable (ed.), *The Letters of Peter the Venerable* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967) vol. ii, p. 9.

⁹ Ramsay in litt. 23. iv. 1991, I am most grateful to Nigel Ramsay, of the British Library, who provided information on the two Cotton MSS of the letters of Anselm.

¹⁰ Ussher, *Sylloge*, p. 88. Others, such as Sylvester Malone, *Church History of Ireland* (Dublin, 1880) p. 59, also give Gillebert as bishop of Limerick at about the close of the eleventh century. However, Gillebert specifically mentions the success Anselm has had in securing the obedience of the ungovernable Normans to the decrees of the holy fathers, i.e. the bishops, regulating the lawful election of abbots and bishops, i.e. lay investiture, thus dating it at the later period of 1106/07.

¹¹ Austin L. Poole, *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta 1087-1216* (Oxford, 1955) pp 173-9.

¹² Brigid Pike, 'Gilbert of Limerick and the Reform of the Church'. (Unpublished M. Phil. Thesis, University College Dublin, 1976), p. 89.

¹³ J. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, (New York, 1929) p. 761; S.H. Steinberg, *Historical Tables 58 BC - AD 1965* (London, 1966) pp 38-9.

¹⁴ Steinberg, *ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁵ David Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688* (vol. i, Dublin, 1775) p. 282.

¹⁶ Henry Richard Luard (ed.), *Flores Historiarum* (vol. ii, London, 1890) pp 37, 40.

of Le Bec and Anselm returned to England in the following month.¹⁷ Thus, Gillebert wrote to Anselm sometime after September 1106.¹⁸ Anselm, who died in 1109, was canonized in the fifteenth century.¹⁹

It is worth giving Anselm's reply to Gillebert's letter in full here, as well as a translation, to get an insight into the contents of their correspondence; particularly the inference to canonical abuses in the then Irish Church and the advice on correcting these:

Anselmo servus ecclesiae Cantuariensis, Gilleberto Lumnicensi episcopo salutem. Gratias ago reverentiae vestrae, quia laetari se significant in literis suis, quod Deus in Ecclesia sua ad profectum religionis per me dignatur aliquid operari. Quoniam autem olim nos apud Rothomagum invicem cognovimus, dilectione sociati sumus, et nunc cognosco vos ad episcopatus dignitatem gratia Dei profecisse: confidenter audio vos obsecrare, et secundum quod intelligo opus esse, vobis consulere. Sumlimavit Deus in Hibernia vestram prudentiam ad tantam dignitatem; et posuit vos, ut studeretis ad religionis vigorem et animarum utilitatem. Satagite ergo solliciti (sicut scriptum est; "Qui praeest, in sollicitudine,") in illa gente, quantum in vobis est, corrigere et extirpare, et bonos mores plantare et seminare. Ad hoc etiam (quantum in vobis est) regem vestrum, et alios episcopos, et quoscunque potestis suadendo, et gaudia quae parata sunt bonis, ac mala quae expectant malos, ostendendo attrahite. Et de vestris, et de aliorum bonis operibus praemium mereamini a Deo accipere. Grates refero pro munere vestro, quod mihi benigne misistis. Orate pro me.²⁰

The translation of which is as follows:

To Gillebert, bishop of Limerick, greetings from Anselm, servant of the church of Canterbury.

Your Reverence I thank you for your letter telling me that you rejoice that God has graciously deigned to use me as an instrument for the advancement of religion in His Church. We came to know one another in the old days in Rouen, we have continued since as loving friends, and you have now, as I know, advanced to the dignity of the episcopate. And so I confidently make bold to speak to you and, insofar as I consider it necessary, to offer you some words of counsel. God has raised you up, prudent man that you are, to that high dignity and appointed you in Ireland so that you would give yourself to the promotion of religion and the welfare of souls. Therefore, you must make it your earnest concern among the Irish people (Scripture tells us; "that the leader must be zealous") to do your utmost to correct and root out abuses and lay down and sow the seeds of good conduct. To achieve this you must (use every effort to) win over your king, your fellow bishops and everyone you can influence, using your powers of persuasion and putting before them the rewards prepared for the good and the punishments that await the wicked. May your good deeds and those of your fellow workers merit for us a reward from God. Thank you for the gift you kindly sent me. Pray for me.²¹

It could be deduced from Anselm's words, 'and appointed you in Ireland', that Gillebert was not Irish and the fact that Limerick was then, along with Dublin and Waterford, a strong Norse settlement would appear to strengthen that view. However, as with much of Gillebert's life we can only speculate as to his origins. Anselm had connections with Ireland as his friend

¹⁷ R.W. Southern (ed.), *The Life of St Anselm by Eadmer* (London, 1962) p. 135n.

¹⁸ Anselm spent two periods in exile when archbishop of Canterbury: 9 November 1097 to 23 September 1100 and 20 December 1103 to September 1106.

¹⁹ Not to be confused with St. Anselm of Lucca (c.1036-1086) of whom the Waterford-born Fr Luke Wadding (1588-1657) wrote an account of his life (Lucam Waddingum, *Vita S. Anselmi Episcopi Lucensis*, Romae, 1657). Anselm of Lucca became Pope Alexander II but the two Anselms were contemporaries and had studied together at the famous abbey of Bec, Aubrey Gwynn, 'Lanfranc and the Irish church', *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, lvii (1941) pp 481-500: 481.

²⁰ Ussher, *Sylloge*, p. 89.

²¹ Hamell, op. cit.

Arnulf of Montgomery married the daughter of the king of Munster Muirchertach O'Brien.²² Anselm corresponded with the Irish king in 1100 and asked him to amend abuses by clergy and laity, such as men taking more than one wife, but particularly relating to the election of bishops.²³ Muirchertach, who ruled from Limerick, held a synod at Cashel in 1101 which actively inaugurated the reformation of the church in Ireland. At the synod of Ráith Breassail ten years later, at which Gillebert as papal legate presided, Cashel was chosen as the second metropolitan See, next to Armagh. Sometime between these dates and prior to 1106 Gillebert had been consecrated first bishop of Limerick. Gillebert is likely to have been ordained bishop outside of Ireland - perhaps by the archbishop of York - and not, as has been assumed, in Ireland²⁴ sometime in the period 1103-1106 when Anselm was in exile and before he returned to England after the 'Compromise of Bec'.²⁵

Ecclesiastical Pearls

The pearl has been used to represent spiritual or religious concepts, such as Christian salvation, the chaste soul, or heaven as well as to signify more secular ideals, such as innocence, virginity and beauty.²⁶ In fact the pearl is used in a symbolic way in most religions. An indication of the status of pearls in Christendom is their use in iconography as symbols of regeneration²⁷ and Gillebert could have had the regeneration of the Church in mind when sending the pearls as a gift following Anselm securing the agreement of the Norman rulers in England to the lawful election of abbots and bishops.

Native pearls were used in Irish ecclesiastical objects for a long period. The shrine of O'Donnell, made in 1084, when Gillebert would have been in his teens or twenties, originally contained pearls.²⁸ The *Domnach Airgid* is apparently the most precious relic of its kind as it supposedly contained a considerable portion of the copy of the Gospels which was used by St. Patrick during his mission in Ireland.²⁹ The original box, made of hollow yew, was reputedly given by Patrick to St. MacCarthainn of Clogher, county Tyrone and is now in the National Museum in Dublin. It has tinned bronze plates ornamented with interleaved bands against a hatched background dating from the eighth to the ninth centuries. An outer cover is of silver plated with gold which was added in the mid-fourteenth century by the native Irish artist John O' Barrdan.³⁰ This external cover has a representation of the Holy Ghost, as a dove, enamelled in gold and the corners were enriched with pearls that were most probably native.³¹ Only one of the original four pearls remains in its setting today.

In medieval times many of the freshwater pearls were used in ecclesiastical decorations such as on bindings of missals and other manuscripts but apparently there are no surviving Irish examples. Unique tomes, such as the missal at the library of Rouen, took thirty years of labour to complete.³² These books were among the most valued possessions of the churches, and their bindings were enriched with gold, pearls and coloured stones. A fine example of such books is the Ashburnham manuscript of the Four Gospels, which probably dates from the

²² R.W. Southern, *Saint Anselm and his Biographer: A Study of Monastic Life and Thought 1059-c.1130* (Cambridge, 1966) p. 134.

²³ *Cur Deus Homo* by St Anselm to which is added a selection from his letters, (London, n.d.) pp 217-21, Anselm refers to Muirchertach as 'Muriardachus, King of Ireland'.

²⁴ J. Lanigan, *Ecclesiastical History of Ireland* (vol. iv, Dublin, 1822) p. 23; Gwynn, 'Diocese of Limerick' p. 37; Edmund Curtis, *A History of Ireland* (London, 1950) p. 39.

²⁵ C.R.L. Fletcher, *An Introductory History of England from the Earliest Times to the Close of the Middle Ages* (vol. ii, London, 1913) p. 118.

²⁶ K. Joyce and S. Addison, *Pearls: Ornament and Obsession* (London, 1992) p. 219.

²⁷ G. Clark, *Symbols of Excellence* (Cambridge, 1986) p. 81.

²⁸ G.F. Kunz and C.H. Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl* (New York, 1908) p. 425.

²⁹ W.F. Wakeman, *Handbook of Irish Antiquities* (Dublin, 1891) p. 312.

³⁰ M. Stokes, *Christian Inscriptions in the Irish Language* (Dublin, 1978) p. 98.

³¹ George Petrie, 'An account of an ancient Irish reliquary, called the *Domnach-Airgid*', *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy*, xviii (1838) pp 14-24: 16.

³² A.E. Farn, *Pearls: Natural, Cultured and Imitation* (London, 1986) p. 19.

late-ninth century, whose front cover is bedecked with pearls and other precious stones. The 98 pearls used on the cover appear to have come from fresh water, and probably all were obtained from the rivers of Europe.³³ In that century many of the churches in France were pillaged by the Norsemen when many treasures were destroyed or taken. The tenth and eleventh centuries were the Dark Ages with respect to the cultivation of the arts and yet the churches of Western Europe received many gems from penitent and fear-stricken subjects. It has been said that while pearls were well known and valued, they were apparently not much used in England prior to the twelfth century as the Anglo-Saxons were not an especially art-loving people.³⁴ A list of church ornaments belonging to Stephen de Fulbourn, archbishop of Tuam and justiciar of Ireland, that were sent to London after his death in the late thirteenth century, included a cross of pearls and an amice with pearls.³⁵

Pearls were often used in Irish religious ornaments in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries³⁶ including those of a later bishop of Limerick. The mitre of Conor O'Dea, bishop of Limerick (1400-26), has 'the front and back enriched with jewels of semi-precious stones and pastes, the triangular reserves decorated with flowers and leaves formed of pearls'. It is a fine 'example of medieval post-conquest art in Ireland ... made in 1418 and signed by the craftsman Thomas O'Carryd'.³⁷

It is likely that most of the pearls used in Ireland in the late Middle Ages were native but it is not improbable that merchants brought pearls from the East. We know, for example, that a Florentine jewel merchant travelled to Ireland in 1399 carrying jewels for sale.³⁸ However, in Gillebert's time, some 300 years earlier, the pearls were likely to have come from a local source and the fact that he says some were inferior specimens would strengthen that theory.

The Source of Gillebert's Pearls

Dr John Lanigan, writing in 1822, gets it right, albeit somewhat irresolutely, when he refers to Gillebert's pearls as 'of the sort, I suppose, found in Ireland'.³⁹ Similarly, Rev. Aubrey Gwynn refers to 'a gift of Irish pearls'.⁴⁰ Other writers, however, were unaware or skeptical that Ireland produced pearls. Rev. John O'Hanlon, for example, speculates incorrectly as follows on what these 'margaritulas' were 'these were probably of the sort, known as Irish diamonds, or some of the coloured and polished stones, used formerly for ornaments in Ireland'.⁴¹ There is no doubt that these were pearls and O'Hanlon was obviously unaware that Ireland produced such gems and seems to have confused them with what were known as 'Kerry diamonds'.⁴²

Some authors have speculated as to where the pearls had come from. For example, Jackson wrote that 'the pearl fishery at Omagh is evidently of some antiquity, as it is reported that pearls from there were sent by Gilbert, Bishop of Limerick, in 1094 A.D., to Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury'.⁴³ He gives his source as Lovell but as the following shows had misinterpreted what was actually said 'At Omagh, in the north of Ireland there was formerly a pearl-fishery, and Gilbert, Bishop of Limerick about 1094, sent a present of Irish pearls to Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury'.⁴⁴ This error, of linking the pearl fishery at Omagh with Gillebert's pearls, has

³³ Kunz and Stevenson, *Book of the Pearl*, p. 17.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ H.S. Sweetman (ed.), *Calendar of Documents, Relating to Ireland, 1293-1301* (Dublin, 1881) p. 45.

³⁶ W. Stokes, *The Life and Labours in Art and Archaeology of George Petrie* (London, 1868) p. 305.

³⁷ L. Walsh, *Historic Limerick: the City and its Treasures* (Dublin, 1984) p. 7.

³⁸ M.W. Labarge, *Medieval Travellers* (London, 1982) p. 13.

³⁹ Lanigan, *Ecclesiastical History*, p. 24.

⁴⁰ Aubrey Gwynn, *The Twelfth Century Reform* (Dublin, 1968) p. 25.

⁴¹ John O'Hanlon, *Lives of the Irish Saints* (vol. ii, Dublin, 1875) p. 323.

⁴² See P.W. Joyce, *A Social History of Ancient Ireland* (vol. ii, London, 1903) p. 226, where he says 'Kerry diamonds', amethysts, topazes, emeralds and sapphires were found in Kerry.

⁴³ J.W. Jackson, 'The distribution of *Margaritana margaritifera* in the British Isles', *Journal of Conchology*, xvii (1925) pp 195-211: 204.

⁴⁴ M.S. Lovell, *The Edible Mollusca of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1884) p. 71.

apparently been copied and thus compounded by others, e.g. Gibbings,⁴⁵ Went⁴⁶ and Ross.⁴⁷ Helena Chesney,⁴⁸ quoting the aforementioned Went, gives the following fanciful rendering 'amongst the earliest recorded Irish pearls was the exquisite pearl sent in 1094 by Gilbert, the bishop of Limerick, as a gift to Anselm, the archbishop of Canterbury.'

However, as we know from Gillebert's letter he, in fact, enclosed twenty-five pearls and not just one specimen. An anonymous author, using the initials A.M., writing in 1892, says that a pearl from the Shannon was given to Anselm for his mitre⁴⁹ 'Irish pearls have some antiquity; Gilbert, bishop of Limerick in 1094, presented a pearl found in the Shannon for his mitre to Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury'.⁵⁰ This writer is incorrect both in the number of pearls and from where they came. Additionally, he takes liberties in speculating that the pearl was for Anselm's mitre. Brigid Pike, in her thesis on Gillebert, thought the Shannon also the source of the pearls and says she saw one of 'three centimeters' in diameter which had been taken from Lough Ree, one of the lakes in its catchment, in the 1920s 'Gilbert's source of supply was most probably the Shannon, possibly L. Derg. I have seen a seed-pearl, a good three centimeters in diameter, which was found in a freshwater oyster in L. Ree in the 1920s'.⁵¹ As she refers to a seed-pearl it is likely that it was three millimetres and not centimetres as the latter would be an extraordinary size for a freshwater pearl. It is also likely that it was from the species *Anodonta cygnea*, which is found in the lakes of the Shannon system, rather than the usual pearl-producer *Margaritifera margaritifera*, which is largely absent from the catchment,⁵² that the pearl was taken. There is absolutely no evidence for this, nor for the assertions made by others, above, that the pearls came from Omagh in Tyrone. The date of 1094, for sending the present of pearls, in all cases evidently originated from Ussher.⁵³

So, where were Gillebert's pearls likely to have been sourced? One of the lakes and many of the rivers of Kerry were celebrated for their pearls. Nennius, writing in the ninth century (AD 831), says of Luch Lein [Lough Leane] in Killarney 'and in that lake are found many pearls which, kings wear in their ears' (et in eo stagno multae margaritae inveniuntur, quae ponunt reges in auribus suis).⁵⁴ Gillebert may have been familiar with the writings of Nennius some 275 years previously.⁵⁵ The monastery of Inisfallen was situated on the largest island in the lake. It had been in existence since the late sixth or early seventh century and the monks there in the

⁴⁵ R. Gibbings, *Lovely is the Lee* (London, 1945) p. 143.

⁴⁶ A.E.J. Went, 'Notes on Irish pearls', *Irish Naturalists' Journal*, ix (1947) pp 41-5: 41.

⁴⁷ H.C.G. Ross, 'The reproductive biology of the freshwater pearl mussel, *Margaritifera margaritifera* (L.) in Co Donegal', *Irish Naturalists' Journal*, xxiv (1992) pp 43-50: 43.

⁴⁸ Helena Chesney, 'Irish pearl mussels: going, going, gone?', in J.D. Reynolds (ed.), *The Conservation of Aquatic Systems* (Dublin, 1996) pp 142-50: 143.

⁴⁹ Mitres began to be generally worn by bishops during the eleventh century. Originally made of linen but as early as the thirteenth century of silk, in the later Middle Ages they were adorned with embroidery, rich golden bands, pearls, precious stones, and ornamented discs and even painting, James O'Boyle, *Life of St. Malachy*, (Belfast, 1951) p. 191.

⁵⁰ A.M., 'Natural History Notes. Irish Pearls', *Cork Historical and Archaeological Society Jn*, i (1892) pp 210-11: 210.

⁵¹ Pike, 'Gilbert of Limerick' p. 89.

⁵² T. von Hessling, *Die Perlmuscheln und ihre Perlen* (Leipzig, 1859) p.188 does give *Margaritifera margaritifera* as occurring in the Shannon in the middle of the nineteenth century but his informant could have mistaken *Anodonta cygnea* for the pearl-producing mussel.

⁵³ Ussher, *Sylloge*, p. 88.

⁵⁴ Nennius, *Historia Britonum*, British Library, Harleian MS 3859, f. 198.

⁵⁵ The *Historia Britonum*, of which there are many versions, including several different texts of *Lebor Bretnach*, the Irish version, is attributed to Nennius (fl.831). Nennius says that he had collected information from the Irish annals and that he was told by the most learned of the Irish of Irish events, 'Sic mihi peritissimi Scotorum nunciaverunt', M.F. Cusack, *The Illustrated History of Ireland* (Kenmare, 1868) p. 69. Some of the Latin versions, including the most extensive edition in the British Library (Harleian MS 3895) contain 'De mirabilibus Hiberniae' or the 'wonders of Ireland' (e.g., J. Stevenson (ed.), *Nennii Historia Britonum* (Londini, 1838) p. 61). It is believed that the work is a long compilation which was edited by Nennius and some MSS are dated 831, Kenney, *Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, p. 154. The 'wonders' are named by Nennius as pre-existing works that he transcribed which would place the reference to Irish kings wearing pearls in their ears to a more remote time, J. Morris (ed.), *Nennius: British History and Welsh Annals* (London, 1980) p. 6.. A later edition of the work (c. 910) came to Ireland and was worked on by Gilla Coemain (Kenney, *ibid*, p. 155) and it is believed that the earliest manuscript of the 'Irish Nennius' was of the twelfth century, J.H. Todd, *Leabhar Bretnach Annso Sis: the Irish Version of the Historia Britonum of Nennius* (Dublin, 1848) p. 21. The Irish versions, however, do not contain the reference to pearls in Lough Leane!

time of Nennius and later in Gillebert's era would have known of the pearls. Even down to the late seventeenth century pearls were being taken from Lough Leane, e.g. in 1687 Sir Richard Cox tells us that pearls were taken in great quantities from the lake.⁵⁶ Friar O'Sullivan, writing in the eighteenth century, gives the places in Kerry where pearls have been found.⁵⁷ These include the rivers Blackwater, Cumurah [Cummeragh], Ini [Inny], Behih [Behy] and Carrah [Caragh]. In an account of a survey of the revenues of the Earl of Desmond and others, carried out after his lands in Munster were forfeited in 1584, there is reference to a productive pearl fishery at Killorglin on the River Laune, in County Kerry, in which many pearls are taken and found with industry and labour.⁵⁸ This river flows from Lough Leane in Killarney to the sea, downstream of Killorglin, in Castlemaine Harbour.

There is no evidence to suggest that pearls were collected from rivers elsewhere in Ireland, e.g. in Donegal,⁵⁹ Tyrone,⁶⁰ Fermanagh⁶¹ and Down,⁶² during the early part of the twelfth century as they were from the seventeenth century onwards. However, pearls in the possession of the king of Scotland, Alexander I (d. 1124), were celebrated for their size and beauty,⁶³ and the rivers in the north of Ireland could conceivably also have been exploited at that time as they were in Scotland. We do know, from the testimony of Nennius, that pearls were taken from Lough Leane, in Kerry, in the ninth century or before and the fact that he included their occurrence among the 'wonders of Ireland' would suggest that there were no other known sources at the time of his writing.

Fishing rights were an important source of revenue for the Church in medieval Limerick⁶⁴ and would have included the fisheries of the lower Shannon, Maigue, Deel and Feale. Of these rivers and their tributaries, only the Feale now contains the pearl-producing mussel. In Britain and Ireland most of the bigger monasteries were sited on or near rivers.⁶⁵ As well as supplying large volumes of water for domestic purposes the rivers also supplied fish, chiefly salmon and eels, and many religious houses owned important fisheries. Sometimes the monks owned the whole fishery and either operated it themselves or leased it, or part of it, to some person outside the abbey for a rent. The rigid routine of many religious orders, with their strict rules as regards abstinence from meat, either entirely or on certain days, made fish a desirable and necessary item for those who entered the monastic life. The majority of the fishing weirs, used for trapping migrating salmon and eels, of medieval Ireland were in the hands of the monasteries, chiefly as a result of grants made by their founders.⁶⁶ The monks may have been aware of the pearls in some of the rivers near the monasteries. We know from the lost 'Book of Clonenagh' that at the Synod of Ráith Breasail, at which Gillebert presided, the diocese of Limerick is set at extending from the River Mulkear in the east to the River Feale in the west⁶⁷ embracing present-day north Kerry, Limerick, Clare and Tipperary.

⁵⁶ Pádraig de Brún, 'Sir Richard Cox's description of Kerry, 1687', *Journal of the Kerry Archaeological and Historical Society*, v (1972) pp 33-45: 44. As well as the lake he says pearls were also then got from the Kerry rivers, the Laune, Maine and Currane.

⁵⁷ F.J. Prendergast, (ed.), 'Ancient history of the kingdom of Kerry by Friar O'Sullivan, of Muckross Abbey', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, vi, (1900) pp 146-56: 148.

⁵⁸ M.J. de Dodd, 'The manor and fishery of Killorglin Co. Kerry', *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, xxi (1945) pp 140-73: 160.

⁵⁹ Common place book of papers relating to the natural history of Ireland: a short description of ye County of Donnegall, 1683, Trinity College Dublin, MS 883/1, f. 213.

⁶⁰ Sir Robert Redding's letter to Dr Lister concerning the Pearls found in the North of Ireland with some further queries relating to the same, 1688, Trinity College Dublin, MS 888/2, f. 141.

⁶¹ Ibid, f. 159.

⁶² C.J. Robb, 'Fishing for pearls in the Bann and Strule', *Irish News and Belfast Morning News* 12 May, 1939, p. 6.

⁶³ Anon., *A History of the Earth and Animated Nature by Oliver Goldsmith*, (vol. vi, 1876, London) p. 622n.

⁶⁴ James MacCaffrey (ed.), *The Black Book of Limerick* (Dublin, 1907) p. lxxi.

⁶⁵ Arthur E.J. Went, 'Irish monastic fisheries', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, lx, pp 47-56: 47.

⁶⁶ Timothy O'Neill, *Merchants and Mariners in Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 1987) pp 37-8.

⁶⁷ Geoffrey Keating, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, ed. D. Comyn and P.S. Dineen, (vol. iii, London, 1908) p. 305.

Why present of pearls was sent

Another Gillebert, perhaps abbot of Westminster, had sent gifts to Anselm during the latter's time at Bec (1063-1093) either as a monk, prior or abbot. For in his reply Anselm refers to the gifts as 'proofs of thy affection'.⁶⁸ Our Gillebert, in his letter, says he is sending the pearls as a token of his devotion. Devotion is synonymous with loyalty and the gift of Irish pearls accompanying the letter may have been meant as a message to the archbishop regarding fidelity to Canterbury. It has been assumed that, because of the creation of two archbishoprics at the Synod of Ráith Breasail, the Irish bishops at that time were independent of the church of Canterbury. However, Gillebert's presence, as a suffragan bishop, at the consecration of the first Norman bishop of St. David's in Wales, some eight years later, would suggest that Limerick was still then within the influence of Canterbury. We know that he assisted Archbishop Ralph of Canterbury (1114-22), Anselm's successor, at the ceremony on 19 September 1115 at Westminster Abbey and that the bishop in question was Bernard a chaplain to the queen 'Bernardus quidam capellanus reginæ.' Gillebert (Gislebertus Lumniensis de Hibernia), along with five British bishops, is listed as suffragan of the church of Canterbury:

Huic consecrationi interfuerunt et cooperatores extiterunt suffraganei ecclesiæ Cantuariensis, episcopo videlicet hi, Willelmus Wintoniensis, Robertus Lincolniensis, Rogerus Serberiensis, Johannes Bathoniensis, Urbanus Glamorgatensis, Gislebertus Lumniensis de Hibernia.⁶⁹

One can only wonder at how this loyalty and closeness to Canterbury and King Henry I of England would have been interpreted in Ireland at the time, in 1115, and later after the conquest of Ireland by the Anglo-Normans some fifty-five years later.⁷⁰ Gillebert, who had played a large part in the attempts at reforming the Irish Church in the twelfth century, has all but been excluded from the native annals and only his death, in 1145, has been recorded.⁷¹ Gillebert had presided at the Synod of Ráith Breasail,⁷² as papal legate when the two archbishoprics, Cashel and Armagh, were created. The date for the synod has been given as being held, during Lent, in the year 1111.⁷³ Yet four years later the bishop of Limerick, apparently, still looked to the archbishopric of Canterbury as his spiritual authority just as he had, during Anselm's time in 1106 or 1107, despite what was reportedly agreed at the synod in Ireland. According to Geoffrey Keating (c.1570-1649), quoting from the now lost 'Book of Clonenagh', he subscribed the Decrees of the Synod of Ráith Breasail with his name Giolla Easpuig.⁷⁴

The letter to Anselm, with the present of pearls, has to be viewed as not only a friendly gesture but also as a well-disposed act by a loyal and faithful servant. Gillebert, after all, addresses his letter 'to Anselm, by the grace of God, primate of England, with pledge of faithful service and prayers'.

Conclusions

We do not know if Gillebert was native, of Norse or perhaps even Norman stock. While it may not be known where Gillebert originated, we can be confident that the pearls, which he sent to

⁶⁸ *Cur Deus Homo* by St Anselm to which is added a selection from his letters, London, n.d., p. 128.

⁶⁹ Martin Rule (ed.), *Eadmeri Historia Novorum in Anglia* (London, 1884) p. 236.

⁷⁰ A.B. Scott and F.X. Martin (eds), *Expugnatio Hibernica: The Conquest of Ireland by Giraldus Cambrensis* (Dublin, 1978) p. 93.

⁷¹ W. M. Hennessy (ed.), *Chronicum Scotorum: A Chronicle of Irish Affairs from the earliest times to A.D. 1135; with a supplement containing the events from 1141 to 1150* (London, 1866) p. 342.

⁷² The contemporary Irish annalists, with singular unanimity, ignore his part in the great assembly, Aubrey Gwynn, 'Diocese of Limerick', p. 37.

⁷³ John Watt, *The Church in Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 1872) p. 10; Gwynn, 'Diocese of Limerick', p. 36.

⁷⁴ Keating, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, p. 306.

Anselm, were native and were likely to have come from Kerry. Of the known forty-six locations where pearls have been found in Ireland,⁷⁵ the nearest sources to where Gillebert was domiciled are Kerry (eight rivers and one lake), Cork (five rivers and one lake) and Clare (one river). Of these, however, only one source of pearls - the lake in Kerry - is mentioned in early writings.

It has been said that Gillebert's letter was sent as a courteous gesture designed to acquaint the archbishop of Canterbury that Irish prelates were now in a position to consecrate bishops, not merely in the traditional churches of the monastic age, but also in this Norse-Irish city which might otherwise have looked to Canterbury for consecration.⁷⁶ Yet Gillebert's successor, Patrick, made a profession of obedience to the archbishop of Canterbury and primate of Britain, Theobald, in 1140⁷⁷ at his consecration there illustrating that the episcopal See of Limerick was even at this later date within its ambit of jurisdiction.⁷⁸ Thus, it is more likely that Gillebert was informing Anselm that despite his being consecrated elsewhere, during the archbishop's exile, his allegiance was still to Canterbury.

In summary, we can safely conclude that Gillebert's letter was indeed written shortly after King Henry I had, in 1106, settled his dispute with Anselm the archbishop of Canterbury. That the pearls sent to his old friend were native there can be little doubt and further, it may reasonably be surmised, that these were most likely to have been sourced from Kerry. The reason for our prelate sending the present to the primate of England was, it appears, as a token of loyalty and devotion, as well as affection and friendship, and perhaps additionally to symbolize regeneration in the Church after a difficult period in its history.

⁷⁵ John Lucey, 'A History of Pearls in Ireland' (Unpublished M. Phil. Thesis, The Queen's University of Belfast, 1997, pp 15, 201.

⁷⁶ Gwynn, *Twelfth Century Reform*, p. 25. The first bishop of Dublin was consecrated at Canterbury by Lanfranc and the first bishop of Waterford, had been consecrated at Canterbury in 1098 by Anselm, John Begley, *The Diocese of Limerick Ancient and Medieval* (Dublin, 1906) p. 73.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 78.

⁷⁸ Patrick must have gone to Canterbury for his consecration on the advice of his predecessor, Gwynn, 'Diocese of Limerick in the twelfth century', p. 39.