Gillebert of Limerick as an Irish Saint: a case of mistaken identity

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A bishop named Gilbertus has been listed as an Irish saint by some seventeenth-century writers and later commentators. As he is linked to St Malachy, it would appear to refer to the first Bishop of Limerick. However, an examination of the relevant historical material relating to the lives of saints failed to find any evidence for this. The conclusion reached is that Gillebert of Limerick (c.1070-1145) has been confused with Gilbert of Sempringham (c.1085-1189), by the hagiographer Henry Fitzsimon, and this error has been copied and thus compounded by others.

While much has been written about Gillebert1, first bishop of Limerick and papal legate to Ireland, very little is actually known of the man. He was all but ignored by the Irish chroniclers,2 with only one source briefly referring to his death. We do know that he was appointed bishop sometime in or before 1107, but by whom and where he was consecrated is not clear,3 and that he died in 1145.4 In his early life, possibly when a monk in France, he was acquainted with Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury, who died in 11095 and who was canonized in 1494. Although not mentioned in the extant Irish annals, Gillebert is known, from the now lost Book of Clonmacnois, cited by Geoffrey Keating, to have presided as papal legate over the Synod of Raith Breasail6 and the synodal enactments, in which the two archbishoprics Cashel and Armagh were created and the


2 All of the extant annals of Ireland omit him although the Synod of Raith Breasail, which he convened, is mentioned by their compilers. Similarly, Father John Colgan, writing also in the seventeenth century, fails to make any mention of him, except in a footnote although all the other principal players in that movement are included. For whatever reason a bias against Gillebert by Irish annalists and transcribers seems apparent.


4 W. M. Hennessy (ed.), Chronicum Scoto-Irish: 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.

5 It has been said that Gillebert had been a monk with Anselm at Rouen, e.g. Curtis ibid.; Brian Ó Cuív, ‘Ireland in the eleventh and twelfth centuries’, T.W. Moody and F.X. Martin (eds.), The Course of Irish History (Cork, 1989) pp 107-122:118.

diocesan boundaries delineated, are subscribed by him.7 He was among the leaders of the twelfth-century reform movement and had as his protégé and successor as apostolic legate St Malachy (Máel Máedoc Ua Morgair).8 Uniquely, he was also the only known theorist of reform in Ireland with his treatise De Statu Ecclesiae (Concerning Church Order).9

Although there are a limited number of officially canonized saints,10 there are very many that have been sanctified by tradition and appear in Irish or other calendars and martyrologies. In the most recent, and authoritative, study of Gillebert Dr John Fleming makes no mention of him as saint.11 However, he is included among the list of Irish saints by some earlier writers. Fr Stephen White (1575-1647), the Jesuit professor who provided Archbishop James Ussher with material on Irish ecclesiastical history, in his propagandist work Apologia pro Hibernia (1615), gives the following saints "S.S. Laurantius, Malachias, Celsus, Christianus, uterque Edanus [Aidan], Malchus, Neemias [Cocagienis], Gelasius, Gilleberius, Catholicus, et alii".12 Three other seventeenth-century Irish writers have given his feast or festival day as celebrated on 4 February. For example in the Catalogus praecipuorum sanctorum Hiberniae, attributed to Fr Henry Fitzsimon (1566-1643), the Index Sanctorum Hiberniae has the following entry: Gilbertus epus. Floruit cum S. Malachia, sed Anglus fuit. 4 Febru.13 Philip O'Sullivan Beare (c.1590-1660)14 in his Historia Catholicae Iberniae Compendium, printed at Lisbon in 1621, lists Gilbert along with Tarahata for 4 February15 and similarly Fr Francis Porter, who became professor of theology in the college of St Isidore at Rome, lists S. Gilbertus and S. Tarahata for 4 February in his Compendium Annalium Ecclesiasticorum Regni Hiberniae.16 O’Sullivan’s Catalogus aliquorum Sanctorum Iberniae, which he says was based on Fitzsimon’s list of 1611 printed in Rome,17 has the

7 Dinneen, ibid. The structural reform of the Irish Church, begun by Gillebert at the synod of Ráith Breasail, did not receive its seal of papal approval until a later synod held at Kells in 1152 (Martin Holland, 'The synod of Kells in MS BL., Add. 4783', Peritia, xix (2005) pp 164-7:164.
8 Máedoc O’Morgair who later took the name of Malachy (L. Malachias) was born at Armagh, in 1094 or 1095, and died at Clairvaux in 1148. He was canonized in 1190 by Pope Clement III thus becoming the first officially declared Irish saint, Robert T. Mayer (ed.), Bernard of Clairvaux: the life and death of Saint Malachy the Irishman (Kalamazoo, 1978) p. 5.
11 John Fleming, Gille of Limerick (c.1070-1145), Architect of a Medieval Church (Dublin, 2001).
12 Matthaeus Kelly (ed.), Apologia pro Hibernia adversus Cambri Calumniatas ... (Dublinii, 1849) p. 54.
14 Philip O’Sullivan Beare, after completing his studies at Compostella, wrote many compositions among the first of which was Compendious History of Catholic Ireland in Latin printed in four tomes at Lisbon in 1621, Patrick Lynch, Hibernia Sancta; or Lives of Irish Saints (Dublin, 1817) p. 25.
16 Francisco Portero, Compendium Annalium Ecclesiasticorum Regni Hiberniae (Rome 1690) p. 133.
17 Romae 9 Aprilis anno. 1611 Henricus Fitzsimon Societatis Jesu.
following: *Gilbertus Epis*, 4 Feb. floruit cum S. Malachia, Anglus Capgravius. This would indicate that the source of the information was Fr John Capgrave’s *Nova Legenda Angliae* the first collection of English saints’ lives published in the sixteenth century. Although he does not refer to his Gilbert as bishop of Limerick, it would seem, prima facie, that Fitzsimon confused our Gillebert with Gilbert of Sempringham and that O’Sullivan Beare copied this error. For in the *Nova Legenda Angliae* only one St. Gilbert, De sancto Gilberto confessore, is listed. In this work Capgrave outlines this Gilbert’s life and how on his journey to France he became familiar with Malachy archbishop of Ireland and Bernard abbot of Clairvaux:

Data est aui 7 inijecta bió gilbertó a papa eugenio custodia gregis fui 7 beatís malachie hiberniési archiepó et bernardo clareuallési abbatí in illo intinere adeo familiaris effect est vi ipo solo pître per ocóné eom cuidé egroto fert sanitas colla
ta.20

In the Middle English version, known as the *Kalendre of the New Legende of Englande*, also printed in 1516, the following clearly shows the entry to be the founder of the Gilbertines:

De sancto Gilberto confessore
Seynt Gyldert was born at Sempyngham.......And so he went into Frauncy, and there he toke degre of mayster. And when he came agayne into Englane he began the ordre of Sempyngham of men and women.......And in that journey he was made famylyer with Seynt Malachye, Bussshoppe of Irelande, and with Seynt Bernarde.......And in the year of our Lorde a thousand a hundred four score and ix., the day before the nonas of February...he went to our Lorde.21

Thus, this Gilbert who was born c.1085 and whose feast day is 4 February (the same date as that given by some for the ‘Irish’ Gilbert), died in 1189 when more than 100 years of age and was canonized in 1202: ‘*Translatio et canonization Sancti Gilberti de Sempringham*’. Yet both O’Sullivan Beare and Fitzsimon indicate that their Gilbert is a bishop, Ep’us and Epis respectively, whereas Gilbert of Sempringham was never elevated to the episcopate. That Capgrave mentions his being familiar with Malachy may have led to him being confused with Gillebert by Fitzsimon.24

18 Although Capgrave (1393-1464), an Augustinian friar, did write many original works, including the *Life of St. Gilbert of Sempringham*, as well as theological treatises he merely edited and rearranged the work known as *Nova Legenda Angliae* originally compiled, in Latin, by John of Tynehouse a Benedictine who was born c.1290, E.M.T., ‘Capgrave, John (1393-1464)’ Dictionary of National Biography, compact ed., vol. i (Oxford, 1975) p. 308.

19 [John Capgrave], *Nova Legenda Angliae* (Londonias 1516), ff clv-clviii. I am grateful to Muriel McCarthy, Keeper Marsh’s Library, for permission to consult this anonymous work consisting of the Sanctilogium Anglie of John of Tynehouse as rearranged by John Capgrave.

20 Note that in this sixteenth-century printing, the acute diacritic over some consonants signifies that an ‘s’ follows! It is also interesting to note that the same has been used over vowels to indicate that an ‘n’ follows, e.g. Henry Fitz Simon, *The Justification and Composition of the Divine Service of the Mass* (n.p. 1611) p. 366.


22 Yet his death is given by another source as occurring about the year 1150 (A Catholike Priest [I.W. Priest], *The English Martyrologe* (n.p. 1608) p. 33). The title page of this work has no publisher or place of publication but bears the words *Permissum Superiorum*.


In the *Martyrologium Romanum*, Gilbert of Sempringham’s citation is given, under 4 February, as follows: *Sempringhamia, in Anglia, sancti Gilberti, Presbyteri et Confessoris, qui Ordinis Sempringhamiensis fuit Instituto.* There is no mention of Gillebert who was a bishop in Ireland but his contemporary Malachy is listed, as Malachias, under 3 November. In fact only one saint is listed under Gilbert. Gilbert of Sempringham had become acquainted with St. Bernard and St. Malachy when he visited Clairvaux.26 Gillebert of Limerick is mentioned twice by St Bernard in his *Vita S. Malachiae*27 and this could have led to the confusion between the two men. It appears that Fitzsimon confounded that which had been written by St. Bernard with what Capgrave wrote when including Gilbert among the Irish saints and that this has been copied, and thus compounded, by some other later writers.

Gillebert is mentioned, as Gillibert, in passing in the *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae* under Sancto Malachia as a bishop but not as a saint.28 Neither is he listed in the *Officia Propria Sanctorum Hiberniae* although his contemporary bishops Malachie (+1148) and Celsi (+1129), with respective feast days of 3 November and 6 April, are included.29 Both of these as well as another of Gillebert’s contemporaries Giolla mac Liag, or Gelasius (+1174),30 with feast day of 27 March, feature in miscellaneous hagiographies of Irish saints.31 No Gilbert, or variants of the name, is listed in the comprehensive *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* which covered manuscript holdings in the Royal Brussels, Marsh's, Trinity College and Rawlinson libraries.32

As well as what Fitzsimon, O'Sullivan Beare, Porter and White wrote there appear to be no other early references to him as saint. For example, the Rev John Colgan, also writing in the seventeenth century, lists two saints, Cuanna and Modanus, for 4 February33 with no mention of Gillebert as an Irish saint.34 Gillebert is given as a saint by some later writers, however, who are probably copying what has gone before in the seventeenth century, e.g. O’Hanlon,35 Holweck36 and Ryan D’Arcy37 with the first named being cited as source by the other two writers. Rev John O’Hanlon, in his *Lives of the Irish Saints*, has this Irish bishop under what he calls the ‘Reputed Festival of St. Gille, or Gillibert’.38 After a persuasive lengthy piece he concludes that this feast of 4 February, in

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25 *The Martyrologium Romanum* first appeared at Rome in 1583. It was translated into English in 1627 wherein Gilbert of Sempringham’s citation for the fourth day of February is merely given as ‘The same day of S. Gilbert Confessor’, *The Roman Martyrologie: set forth by the command of Pope Gregory XIII, and reviewed by the authority of Urban VII; translated out of the Latin into English by G.K. of the Society of Jesus* (S. Omers, 1627) p. 39.


29 *Officia Propria Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1677) pp. 47, 103. Herein Celsus [Cellach] and Malachiae [Malachy] are both listed as Episcopi Armachani [Bishops of Armagh].

30 Gelasius succeeded Malachy to the see of Armagh in 1137, Ambrose Coleman (ed.), *Historical Memoirs of the City of Armagh by James Stuart* (Dublin, 1900) p. 71.

31 Carolus Plummer (ed.), *Miscellanea Hagiographica Hibernica* (Bruxelles, 1925).


34 Colgan, ibid., p. 563 only mentions Gillebert, as Gilla-Espuci, in passing in a footnote to St Beodach or Beocadus quoting Keating’s reference to his presiding at a synod in 1110.


our Irish Calendars, appears assignable to either Gillibert, Bishop of Limerick, or Giolla Aedha O’Muidhin, Bishop of Cork, who died in 1172. 39 What O’Hanlon wrote was summarized by the Right Rev Frederick Holweck, who assigns this date to only Gilbert (Gillibert, Gille) but follows the former in giving his death as occurring in 1140 and feast day on 4 Feb. 40 This earlier date for his death is cited by O’Hanlon on the authority of Sir James Ware, 41 but is in conflict with the later year of 1145 recorded for his obit in the Chronicon Scotorum. 42 Similarly, Ryan D’Arcy gives 4 February as his day and his death as 1140 but she styles him Gillebert. 43

We do find that a Gillebert is listed among the saints in the Martyrology of Donegal 44 and in the Martyrology of Gorman where the variant spelling of Gillibert is given. 45 However, this finding turns out to be a false dawn for present purposes! Both of these calendars can be attributed to the same author: Maolmuiré (or Marianus) O’Gormáin, abbot of Cnoc-na-napstol near Louth, who compiled the work, which commemorates the saints of Ireland and those of the universal church, in the times of Gelasius, archbishop of Armagh, or about 1167-1174 some twenty to thirty years after the death of our Gillebert. In the manuscript of the first mentioned work, the entry is merely ‘Gillebert’ under June 24. However, above the entry, in a more recent hand, is written ‘Mar Séd Agilbertus secundum Mart. Rom’ which as James Henthorn Todd, one of the modern joint editors points out signifies that the St Gillebert mentioned here by Marianus O’Gormáin is to be identified with Agilbert who is commemorated on this day in the Roman Martyrology. Obviously, the later annotation is post 1583 when the Martyrologium Romanum first appeared (See supra). In the other manuscript work, also under Iunius 24/June 24, the entry is ‘Gillebert co nglainne’, over which is written, in an Italian hand ‘Agilbert’, and which the editor Whitley Stokes has translated as ‘Agilbertus with purity’ but in the Corrigenda this is corrected to read Gilbertus. 46 Below this is ‘Agoard cen fuba’ which is translated as ‘Agoard without hewing’ while above is ‘John Baptists noble nativity’ also in Gaelic. The explanation of Agilbertus or Agilbertus is plausible as he is commemorated in the Martyrologium Romanum along with Agoardus on 24 June. 47 We find

39 Ibid. p. 327.
41 Walter Harris (ed.), The Whole Works of Sir James Ware Concerning Ireland (2 vols, Dublin, 1764) vol. i, p. 504.
42 Chronicon Scotorum, p. 342.
43 Ryan D’Arcy, Saints of Ireland, p. 173.
46 Ibid., p. 409.
47 Roman Martyrologe, p. 196. The year of the martyrdom of Agoard and Agilbert/Agilbert, in ‘the territory of Paris’, The Martiloge in Englysshe after the use of the Chartre of Salisbury (London, 1525) f. I.r, is given by Fr Laurence Suhr (1522-1578), in his collection of the lives of the saints in which ‘Gilibertis sea Agilbertis’ are the alternative name, gives it as occurring in the year 70, Laurentius Sturis, De Probatis Sanctorum Vitis, vol. iii (Coloxio, 1570-75, reprinted 1618) p. 326. See also Acta Sanctorum, pp 814-17 for an account of Agoard and Agilbert. There was an Agilbert (d. c.685), also a Frenchman, educated in Ireland and afterwards a bishop in Paris in the meanwhile having lived among the West Saxons in England where he was received by King Chenwald, Ralph Holinshed, The First Volume of the Chronicles of England, Scotlande and Irelande vol. ii. (London, 1577) p. 619.), whose feast day is commemorated on 11 October. Similarly, L. Tachet De Barneval, Histoire Légendaire De L’Irlande (Paris, 1856) p. 275) quoting the Venerable Bede says that the latter Agilbert, Bishop of Paris and one of France’s greatest prelates, was a pupil of the Irish and had spent many years among them in the study of the Holy Scriptures in the seventh century. There is no Agilbert listed in the ninth-century compilation known as The Martyrology of Tallaght under 24 June, Richard Irvine Best and Hugh Jackson Lawlor (eds), The Martyrology of Tallaght (London, 1931) p. 52, which only contains Irish saints.
in an earlier martyrology of the sixteenth century that these two martyrs are commemorated on 24 June as 'Saynt Gylibert' and 'Saynt Agobard'.

Henry Fitzsimon could not have had this St Gillebert/Gilbert, from the martyrologies of Donegal and Gorman, in mind as the feast day (24 June) is not the one given by him (4 February). Fitzsimon, or Fitz Simon, would appear not to have been au fait with Gillebert of Limerick for in his own discourse on the Mass he makes no mention of the latter’s liturgical work although he cites numerous other authorities. From a review of the different text notes of the manuscript entries for the Irish saint Gilbertus, attributed to Fitzsimon, it is apparent that the source of the information in his Catalogus was the work compiled by John Capgrave and known as Nova Legenda Angliae. An examination of the latter work identifies an Englishman as the only saint mentioned with the name Gilbert. The hagiographer Henry Fitzsimon thus appears to have in some way perceived this man to be synonymous with Gillebert an Irish bishop mentioned by St Bernard in his life of Malachy. That the feast day of 4 February for the two men should be the same would also seem to be a remarkable concurrence.

From the foregoing, it would appear that there is no evidence to suppose that any bishop with the name Gilbert, Gille, Gillebert, or Gilibert, who flourished with Malachy, was ever included among the Irish saints. Therefore, it must be concluded that Fitzsimon confused Gillebert of Limerick with Gilbert of Sempringham and that this error was followed by some later writers with regard to his sainthood. Clearly then a case of mistaken identity.

48 *Martiloge in Englyshe*. In the same work under 4 February ‘Gylibert a cőfessor’ is listed in reference to Gilbert of Sempringham.

49 Henry Fitz Simon, *The Justification and Exposition of the Devine Sacrifice of the Masse* (n.p., 1611). The title page of this work has neither publisher nor place of publication but bears the words *Permissu Superiorum*. 