The Latin word *peregrinatio* has come to be synonymous with the medieval Irish habit of voluntarily quitting Ireland to wander or settle in foreign parts to do the (usually missionary) will of God. For example, Peter Harbison, in his *Pilgrimage in Ireland: the Monuments and the People* (1992, 34), says that ‘the *peregrinatio*, the going on pilgrimage, that we have come to associate most with the early Irish Church was a purely voluntary exile. Perhaps the earliest saint whose name is linked with *peregrinatio* is Colmcille, or Columba, though in his case we cannot be sure that a certain amount of pressure may not have been exerted on him to leave Ireland because of his involvement in the battle of Culdreimhne in 561, two years before he left’. Likewise, Richard Sharpe, in his translation of Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae* (1995, 105), silently translates *peregrinus* as ‘pilgrim’, including where Adomnán describes Columba’s decision to sail from Ireland to Britain: ‘choosing to be a pilgrim for Christ’.

While it is clear that the English word ‘pilgrim’ is etymologically descended from the Latin *peregrinus*, it is by no means clear that the earlier term carried the specific meaning of the later one, as it is generally used in the present day. There can be no doubt that, during the medieval period, the large-scale export of Irish priests and monks to the continent came to be identified with the term *peregrinatio*. This article seeks to explore whether that sense of willing and voluntary self-exile for a religious purpose can properly be associated with the earliest Irish uses of the terms *peregrinus* and *peregrinatio*, and consequently whether it is appropriate to translate those terms as ‘pilgrim’ and ‘pilgrimage’ in the context of the earliest Gaelic writings.

The Latin noun *peregrinatio* in general usage meant simply a sojourn abroad or travel, usually in foreign parts (Lewis and Short: *peregrinatio*). In Roman law, the term *peregrinus* was applied specifically to a non-citizen, whether of local or foreign origin, and this person enjoyed lesser legal rights than those of a
citizen. One particular distinction was the subjection of *peregrini* to summary justice, while citizens had recourse to more formal legal procedures. Curiously, the term *peregrinus* has survived in the present-day law of the Republic of South Africa, where considerable jurisprudential attention has recently been paid to the means of establishing jurisdiction over *peregrini* (see eg Sibanda 2008): in this context, the term refers to a non-national; it certainly carries no meaning associated with pilgrimage. This suggests that it would be useful to investigate at what point and in what context the meaning of the word changed to involve some sense of religious purpose.

**Deorad Dé**

Thomas Charles-Edwards (1976, 53) suggests that *peregrinus* was used in the seventh century to parallel *deorad Dé*, an Old Irish term which he argues had a specific legal meaning in early Ireland. *Deorad Dé* is certainly a term which appears in legal texts, primarily those concerned with status. However, I suggest that it is not a direct parallel for *peregrinus*: that place belongs rather to the unadorned term *deorad*, to which *DIL* (Degra–dúus 28.80ff) attributes the following meanings: ‘stranger, outlander; foreign settler. opp. to *urrad* native freeman [...]. In general outlaw, exile, stranger, wanderer [...] Often with notion of indigence, need, defencelessness implied (cf. meaning pilgrim below) [...] With notion of hostility [...] Esp. alien, foreign mercenary [...] servant [...] A pilgrim, esp[ecially] in phr[ase] d[eorad] Dé’ (my emphasis). The addition of the qualifying ‘Dé’ is specifically to indicate that the *peregrinatio* or *deoraidecht* in question is associated with the church: there are few instances of *deorad* without the qualifier carrying this meaning of pilgrim.

Even in the phrase *deorad Dé*, there is some doubt about what precisely is implied by the term. For instance in the law tract *Cethairshlicht Athgabálae*, the *deorad Dé* is listed as one of those against whom the king’s testimony is not decisive (*CIH* 357:26–27). The *deorad Dé* is listed there alongside the *epscop* (bishop) and the *suí* (man of learning or schoolmaster). This is generally taken as implying that the *deorad Dé* had some sort of king-equivalent status, just as did the other two, and therefore that the *deorad Dé* was a highly respected member of society, as
a holy pilgrim might be (Kelly 1988, 41). However, the text, ‘
da comgrad d’inraicaib no sui no epscop no deorad de’, clearly
refers to ‘two of equal standing with him [the king] as to
credibility’. This causes some difficulty, as it is followed by a list
of three classes of person. I suggest that the logical way to
interpret this is that there were two classes of person who had
equal standing with the king as to credibility, and they were the
súí and the epscop. The deorad Dé was also beyond the power of
the king’s testimony, but for a reason other than being of equal
standing with him as to credibility. In my view, the deorad Dé
was beyond the power of the king’s testimony because he was
beyond the jurisdiction of the secular legal system: he was a
deorad Dé as a result of having submitted himself to the
ecclesiastical legal system, and could not be subject to ‘double
jeopardy’. I shall return to the question of legal jurisdiction
presently. For present purposes, it is sufficient to have cast some
doubt on the interpretation of deorad Dé as ‘pilgrim’.

I argue that the terms peregrinatio and peregrinus, in their
earliest Gaelic usages, were used to designate respectively time
spent away from the place to which one belongs and a person
who is away from the place to which he belongs. In order to
present this argument, I shall discuss various instances of the use
of the terms in early Christian Irish materials.

ST PATRICK

The writings attributed to St Patrick, if that attribution is correct,
must be amongst the earliest Latin writings in Ireland. The
Confessio of St Patrick uses the word peregrinatio once, in the
genitive form peregrinationis. The context is ‘ut audirem
obprobrium peregrinationis meae’ (Stokes 1887, 367). This
clearly carries a meaning like ‘that I might hear scandals of my
travels’. It is difficult to see how the meaning ‘pilgrimage’ could
be appropriate in this context. St Patrick’s letter to the soldiers of
Coroticus also uses the word peregrinatio. Here, the context is
‘peregrinatio mea in uacuum non fuit’ (Stokes 1887, 379),
meaning ‘my being away from home has not been for nothing’.
Here, too, the meaning ‘pilgrimage’ seems less appropriate:
Patrick refers directly to the time he has spent in Ireland, away
from his home in Britain. The meaning here might be compatible
with the sense of pilgrimage as applied to later Irish missionaries
to the continent, but it does not require that sense: it is perfectly
compatible with the simple meaning of absence from home.

Penitentials

A cross-section of relevant provisions in the Irish penitentials
reveals further difficulties with the translation of *peregrinatio* as
pilgrimage. The Irish penitentials were written primarily in Latin,
although some are in Old Irish. The earliest of them dates from
the sixth century, although they were still being rewritten and
circulated in the eighth and ninth centuries. Several, but not all,
of the penitentials are associated with the zealously ascetic Céli
Dé. Whatever the origin of each individual text, they ultimately
draw closely on each other and contain much of the same
material.

In cases where a sin aligns closely to a civil crime, such as
theft or murder, we generally find that the penitential authors
have a finger firmly on the pulse of the secular law, resulting in
the penitentials offering a blended solution composed of much of
the restorative justice outcome espoused by secular early Irish
law, together with a spiritual component, the true ‘penance’.

For example, *Penitentialis Vinniani* (Bieler 1963, 80–81)
prescribes the remedy for a cleric who commits murder. Being
concerned first and foremost with the state of the man’s soul,
penance is prescribed in the first instance. This is to be done
away from home, the motif which is of primary concern for this
paper. There are to be ten years of exile, seven of which are to be
spent in penance. When the exile returns home, he is to ‘make
satisfaction to the loved ones of him whom he killed, and he shall
give to the father and mother, if they are still in the flesh,
substitute filial piety and obedience’ (*satis faciat amicis eius quem
occiderat et uicem pietatis et oboedientie reddat patri et
matri eius si adhuc in corpore sunt*). This is a direct reference to
secular law, where, in the case of murder, the perpetrator or his
kin must pay an *eraic* as compensation to the victim’s kin. This
will be composed of a component for honour price, a component
as body price, and possibly other components depending on the
nature of the murder (Kelly 1988, 126). This is clearly reflected
in the words *satis faciat amicis*, ‘make satisfaction to the loved
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ones’. Further, since filial duty to elderly parents is central to the early Irish social system, the penitential dictates that a murderer must perform goire, or filial piety, for the victim’s parents, thus fulfilling the victim’s obligations under secular law. This requirement for substitute goire is not found in secular law texts, but nonetheless is clearly intended to fulfil a requirement for aged care that is established in secular law (Bieler 1963, 243; Kelly 1988, 43). This is reflected in the words uicem pietatis et oboedientie, ‘substitute piety and obedience’. Thus, the perpetrator ultimately satisfies the requirements of secular law, in addition to those of ecclesiastical law. What sets him apart from other perpetrators under secular law is the substantial delay before he is obliged to fulfil the secular law’s requirements. Presumably also, since the perpetrator is to be under conditions of penance, he will be under close ecclesiastical supervision and control, and therefore legally out of reach of the victim’s kin and other agents of secular law for the period of his penance.

The expression used here to delineate the perpetrator’s ten years in exile is ‘exterrem [...] de patria sua’ (‘outside his own land’). The seven years of penance are to be completed ‘in alia urbe’ (‘in another settlement’): this almost certainly directs that the penance be done under supervision in an ecclesiastical settlement which is not the one with which the perpetrator is himself associated and which is not in his own land. The same provision is found in the following paragraph where, if the murder is unpremeditated, the perpetrator is to complete three years of penance, once again ‘non in sua patria’ (‘not in his own land’).

In Sinodus Luci Victorie (Bieler 1963, 68), in relation to the sin of fornication, we find the provision ‘qui mechator matris est, iii annis cum peregrinatione perenni’ (‘He who commits adultery with his mother, three years with continual exile’). The three years refers to the duration of the penance. Precisely what is described by ‘peregrinatione perenni’ is not clear. Either it means that the penance is to be carried out in continual exile, or that the perpetrator is to observe exile continually for the rest of his life: in other words, that he is never to return to his own land. As in the case of the Patrician texts, to assert that peregrinatio must be interpreted as ‘pilgrimage’ is neither necessary nor particularly enlightening in this case.
Paenitentiale S Columbani (Bieler 1963, 98) contains the following provision: ‘si quis ruina maxima ceciderit et filium genuerit, septem annis peregrinus in pane et aqua paeniteat’ (‘if someone has fallen a great fall and produced a child, let him repent for seven years as a foreigner on bread and water’). Here, too, the word peregrinus appears to be best interpreted as meaning simply ‘away from home’: that is, the penance on bread and water is to be observed elsewhere than in the offender’s own land. To apply the meaning ‘pilgrim’ does not improve the sense of the provision.

In Paenitentiale quod dicitur Bigotianum (Bieler 1963, 228), we find the rather draconian provision: ‘si quis autem ex meditatione odii et post uota perfectionis alium occiderit, cum peregrinatione perenni mundo moriatur’ (‘however, if someone, out of contemplation of a grudge and after vows of perfection, strikes down another, with continual exile he shall die to the world’). This is a case of absolute and permanent exile. While peregrinatio might plausibly be translated as ‘pilgrimage’ here, such an interpretation is not necessary to the meaning of the clause. Arguably the translation ‘exile’ is more appropriate, since the primary concern is that the offender be permanently removed from the community.

Paenitentiale Cummeani (Bieler 1963, 114), in dealing with fornication, dictates that ‘si autem post peccatum uolerit monachus fieri, in districto proposito exalii anno et dimedio peniteat sic’ (‘if, however, after the sin he wishes to become a monk, let him repent a year and a half in the strict form of exile’). This passage suggests very strongly that an available punishment for sinning clerics was a strict form of penance that was closely regulated and involved compulsory removal from the offender’s own land.

This suggestion is strengthened by passages such as this one in Tres Canones Hibernici (Bieler 1963, 182), referring to one who steals from a church: ‘[…] septimeciter restituet et in dura penitentia in peregrinatione extranea per v annos permaneat. Et si laudabilis penitentia eius fuerit, postea ad solum patrium perueniat. Sin uero, in aexilio semper permaneat.’ (‘… he shall make restitution sevenfold and stay for five years in hard repentance in exile away from home. And if his repentance is praiseworthy, after that let him come to his home land. If not, however, let him stay always in exile.’) In this case, the word
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peregrinatio is directly aligned with aexilio. The purpose of the passage appears to be to send the offender away from his home to carry out his penance, and, if the penance seems inadequate, to keep him away from his home. In other words, peregrinatio and aexilio have here more-or-less identical meanings: to intrude the meaning ‘pilgrimage’ for peregrinatio would be to unnecessarily complicate a straightforward passage.

One further passage from the penitentials may allow a further glimpse of what is meant by peregrinatio. Penitentialis Vinniani (Bieler 1963, 86), in a section that is not really penitential in nature at all, decrees that: ‘basilicis sanctorum ministrandum est et ex facultatibus nostris omnibus qui sunt in necessitatibus constituti conpatiendum est nobis et in domibus nostris suscipiendi sunt nobis peregrini, sicut preceptum est a Domino’ (‘the churches of the saints are to be served and all who are in need are to be supported by us according to our ability; and exiles are to be received by us into our houses, as is commanded by the Lord’). Bieler silently translates peregrini as ‘pilgrims’ in this passage. I suggest that the intent of this passage is rather different from that envisaged by Bieler. In a catalogue of what might loosely be termed charitable duties, serving the churches of the saints (probably referring specifically to centres containing substantial relics as distinct from ‘ordinary’ churches) rubs shoulders with supporting the needy, visiting the infirm and ministering to captives. Receiving pilgrims would not be out of place in this list, certainly, but I suggest that a more important duty, and possibly one for which some ecclesiastical settlements may have been more reluctant, lay in providing a venue in which penance-in-exile could be performed. Any number of texts prescribe penance to be carried out in exile: it must have been done somewhere, and if we consistently translate peregrini as ‘pilgrims’, the texts are entirely silent about the places and conditions in which the penance was performed.

CÁIN ADOMNÁIN

The seventh-century decree-law, Cáin Adomnáin or the Law of Innocents, has a Latin passage interpolated into the otherwise Old Irish text (Ó Néill and Dumville 2003, 35, §33). It is possible that this passage is a later, legitimising interpolation, intended to
prove that the law is venerable and holy. It claims to be a
directive from an angel to Adomnán, obliging Adomnán, on
behalf of the Virgin Mary, to make a law that women not be
killed in Ireland and Britain. It is unlikely to be original, because
the law itself deals with much more than the killing of women. It
is significant that we know, from a list of the guarantors
preserved in the manuscript copy of the law, that it was
promulgated throughout Ireland and most, if not all, of Scotland
(Ní Dhonnchadha 1982). The directive goes on to stipulate the
various, mostly gory penalties to which offenders will be
subjected. If the offence is the work of a small army or mob, they
are to be divided into three and selected by lot. One third are to
suffer mutilation and death. The second third are to pay fourteen
cumala each. The final third are to be ‘iactatur in
peregrinationem trans mare sub regula regiminis duri’: ‘thrown
into exile across the sea under a rule of hard regimen’. This
passage parallels some of the provisions of the penitentials,
discussed above.

I have already stated my preference for peregrinatio to be
interpreted as time spent abroad, rather than as pilgrimage. The
penitentials present a series of cases, some employing the term
peregrinatio/peregrinus, and others using different terms, all
with the common motif of penance to be carried out away from
home. In the case of Cáin Adomnáin, the stipulation is even more
precise: the penance must be done ‘across the sea’. If
peregrinatio meant time spent away from home, what did this
mean for the early medieval Gaels? The society was kin-based. A
fine or kin-group to some extent acted together and shared
ownership of property and legal rights and responsibilities.
Several fine together made up a túath, ‘petty kingdom’. Fergus
Kelly (1988, 4) estimates that a túath probably contained around
3000 people. Although territory was undoubtedly constantly won
and lost, any particular túath at any particular time had
identifiable boundaries, and the law defined separate rights for
individuals depending on whether they were within or outside the
boundaries of their own túath. I would suggest, therefore, that
peregrinatio should be interpreted as time spent outside one’s
own túath.

This, then, makes Cáin Adomnáin’s descriptive phrase trans
mare important. It suggests that a sojourn outside one’s own
túath might be considered peregrinatio, but that the penalty
imposed by Cán Adomnáin required the further distinction of crossing the sea. I believe that in the present context, *trans mare* is a phrase employed to ensure that the penalty was carried out at some physical distance away from the *tíath*. I further suggest that it was intended to ensure that the penalty was carried out inside the *cenél* (‘kindred’). *Tíath*á were grouped together into these larger political units, and ecclesiastical settlements or monasteries were associated with particular *cenéla*.

The physical territory of a *cenél* was not always contiguous, and in general it comprised a number of disconnected regions, including some island settlements, and frequently including land in both Ireland and what is now Scotland. For example, the territory of the *Dál nAraide* covered a fairly extensive area around what is now Belfast and included the important ecclesiastical settlement of Bangor in that location, but it also included the ecclesiastical settlement of Applecross on the Scottish mainland opposite Skye, and the island monastery of Lismore in Scotland. Significantly, we know that some of the territory in between these last two belonged not to the *Dál nAraide* but to the *Úi Néill*, of whom St Columba was an important member. Ecclesiastical settlements in particular favoured island locations.

*Vita Columbae*

It seems likely that, at the peak of Irish penitential regulation, a potentially large number of clerics and others who had submitted to ecclesiastical, rather than secular, legal authority would have been performing penance as *peregrini*, many *trans mare*. This is an impression supported by a statement in Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae* (Anderson and Anderson 1991, I.21): ‘*alia in tempore sanctus ad Hinbinam insulam peruenit; eademque die ut etiam penitentibus aliquam praecepta cibi consuelatio indulgeretur*’ (‘another time the saint came to the island of Hinba; the same day he conceded the rules about food even for penitents’). The statement suggests that Hinba (an unidentified island in
Scotland) was home to a significant number of individuals performing penance. It is likely that many of these had come from Ireland, *trans mare*.

Other stories related in *Vita Columbae* suggest the presence of these *trans mare* penitents. For example (Anderson and Anderson 1991, III.7): ‘*alio in tempore, quidam Hiberniensis peregrinus ad sanctum perveniens, per aliquot apud eum menses in Ioua commanebat insula*’ (‘another time, a stranger from Ireland who came to the saint, was staying for some months in the island of Iona’). The word *peregrinus* is here used, and it is at least possible that it means ‘pilgrim’, but it seems far more likely that it refers to someone who has been sent *trans mare* to Columba’s supervision to perform penance as a *peregrinus*.

Perhaps the most enlightening (for the present purpose) story in *Vita Columbae* concerns Libran of the reed-beds (Anderson and Anderson 1991, II:39). This story is almost a perfect case study of the provisions of *Penitentialis Vinniani* concerning murderous clerics, discussed above. This story is generally translated as though Libran arrives at Iona as a voluntary penitent and the activities prescribed by Columba are of the saint’s own invention. I argue that Libran is sent to Iona pursuant to the provisions found in *Penitentialis Vinniani*, and that Columba’s response is to follow the remaining provisions faithfully. Thus, for instance, Sharpe (1995, 188) translates ‘*ad delenda in peregrinatione peccamina longo fatigatum itinere*’ as ‘that he had made the effort of the long journey in order to wipe out his sins on a pilgrimage’. I would argue that a more suitable translation might be ‘that he had taken the long and wearisome way to neutralise his sins in exile’. This would imply that a civil legal procedure might have been applicable to him, but he had chosen to place himself within the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical legal system, which involved ten long years in exile. In order to do this he had only recently assumed the clerical habit: ecclesiastical jurisdiction may not have extended to him had he remained a layman.

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1 I propose Canna as the most likely location for Hinba: see O’Neill 2008.
Libran then explains to Columba that he had been held captive, and redeemed by a rich man, to whom he had sworn servitude, only to break his oath and join the church. Here, there is a distinct reflection of the civil legal procedure whereby, if the *eraic* is not paid, the perpetrator can be held by the kin of the victim, and potentially put to death. The rich man has ransomed the captive, resulting in Libran obtaining the status of a *fuidir*, bound to a lord, but not a slave. Columba directs that, after the completion of seven years’ penance, Libran must return to the rich man and pay the price of his ransom (which is given to him by Columba). In other words, Columba obliges Libran to reimburse the cost of the *eraic*, which Libran is to pay, not to the victim’s kin but to the rich man who has paid it to them on his behalf. This aligns precisely with the penitential’s requirement to make satisfaction to the victim’s loved ones. Next, Libran is pressed by his brothers to render filial piety, first to the father and then to the mother. Although it is certainly his brothers (‘*tui fratres*’) who so press him, there is no possessive pronoun associated with the parents. Most translations assume that these are Libran’s parents, but there is no reason not to accept that they are the victim’s parents, bringing the story once more into line with the penitential.

**Supervised Penance in Exile**

There are, therefore, several accounts which, when examined closely, suggest not only that the word *peregrinatio* was used to describe the state of carrying out enforced penance away from home, but also that this was a fairly common occurrence. Having a significant number of men performing penance away from home would represent a net loss of labour and, when necessary, armed strength, within the *túath*. Importantly, this loss seems in general to have been temporary: the penitentials direct that most offenders be received back into their home communities at the conclusion of the penance. For this reason, perhaps more than any other, it would be important for offenders, while physically separated from home, not to form allegiances with other communities, and particularly not with communities which might be expected to appear in opposition to their home communities in any conflict.
A closely controlled system of sending offenders to carry out their ecclesiastical punishment, in the form of strict rule, fasting and the like, in ecclesiastical settlements that were beyond the bounds of the offender’s túath but within the broader confederation represented by the cenél, would have been a useful tool. One can easily envisage such ecclesiastical settlements as Hinba and Tiree equipped to accommodate industrial activity such as the processing of rural produce or the production of vellum or other goods, providing useful productive work for offenders to carry out as part of their strict penance. Such penance or ‘hard regimen’ might be expected to include the labour associated with supplying an ecclesiastical settlement with food and other materials: the bread which is a prominent feature of penitential diet, for instance, would have required considerable labour for its production. One might suggest that the many accomplishments of Columba included the capacity to govern an establishment not entirely unlike a prison farm, where penitents from across the sea might serve out their peregrinatio under firm government, and then return safely home to their own communities.

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