



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

The monster in the river Ness in Vita Sancti Columbae: A study of a miracle

Borsje, J.

Published in:
Peritia

DOI:
[10.1484/J.Peri.3.202](https://doi.org/10.1484/J.Peri.3.202)

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Borsje, J. (1994). The monster in the river Ness in Vita Sancti Columbae: A study of a miracle. *Peritia*, 8, 27-34.
<https://doi.org/10.1484/J.Peri.3.202>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

THE MONSTER IN THE RIVER NESS IN *VITA SANCTI COLUMBAE*: A STUDY OF A MIRACLE¹

JACQUELINE BORSJE

ABSTRACT. This paper gives an example of a historical-critical study of Adomnán's *Vita Sancti Columbae*, ii 27, which reconstructs the episode of the encounter with a monster as a natural, historical event. However, the episode is presented as a miracle—it therefore treats of the extraordinary and supernatural. Hence a literary approach is also offered, one which attempts to find the miracle's message by comparing it with its possible source.

KEYWORDS: *Vita Columbae*, Columba, Adomnán, Sulpicius Severus, Ness, Picts, hagiography, thaumaturgy, missions, monsters, literary criticism

*Jacqueline Borsje, Department of Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
De Boelelaan 1105, NL-1081 HV Amsterdam*

Peritia 8 (1994) 27–34

ISBN 2-503-50379-9

This paper will deal with two dimensions of a hagiographical text. First, hagiography could in a way be characterised as historiography: the life, words and deeds of a holy person who lived in a certain time and place are described. Second, hagiography has a dimension that 'transcends' historical reality: the saint is in touch with an Other Reality—different from empirically perceptible, historical reality—that enables him or her to perform extraordinary or supernatural acts.

The ways of studying texts are, of course, almost as multi-dimensional as the texts themselves. This paper is a plea for an approach to (hagiographical) texts that does justice to at least these two dimensions. In order to accomplish this it seems sensible to apply, side by side, two approaches that might elucidate these two dimensions. These two approaches are: first, a historical-critical method that concentrates upon the historical aspects of the text and reconstructs the historical event on which the story might be based. In this approach, it is sometimes necessary to interpret 'supernatural' elements from the story in such a way that these can be linked with the empirically perceptible, historical reality.

Second, one could apply a 'literary' approach. Here, the focus is on the text itself relating it to other texts or the literary tradition and concentrating on its 'message'. In this approach one can do justice to 'supernatural' aspects in the text as important elements of the story.

1. These investigations were supported (in part) by the Foundation for Research in the Field of Theology and the Science of Religions in the Netherlands, which is subsidised by the Netherlands Organisation for the Advancement of Research (NWO).

This paper will give examples of each approach in order to show how they might be used to complement each other. The text central to this paper is an episode from *Vita Sancti Columbae* (hereafter VC),² about an encounter between Columba and a monster in the river Ness. This episode is often referred to as the first literary witness of the Loch Ness monster.

The structure of this paper is as follows: first, the episode from VC will be rendered (I); an example of the 'historical-critical' approach follows (II); and then the story is studied from a 'literary' point of view (III).

I. THE WATER-MONSTER IN COLUMBA'S LIFE

The episode central to this paper is to be found in the hagiography which Adomnán, abbot of Iona, wrote about his predecessor, Columba. Adomnán completed his text between 697 and 704.³ The water-monster anecdote is placed by Adomnán in a cluster about beasts (*De bestiis*),⁴ preceded by a group of stories in which Columba takes revenge upon enemies.⁵ Therefore, Adomnán shows here Columba's power over dangerous adversaries, human and bestial.

The encounter with the water-monster is the second in the cluster of three. It takes place during a stay in the land of the Picts, where Columba has to cross the river Ness. When Columba arrives he sees a Pict being buried by other Picts on the bank. Columba is told that not long before this man, who had been swimming in the river, was grabbed and savagely bitten by a water-beast (*aquatilis bestia*). Some of the people present had tried to rescue him, but they were too late. In spite of this danger Columba wants one of the brothers to swim across in order to fetch a boat. At once, Lugne mocu Min volunteers and plunges into the water, dressed in his tunic.

Sed bilua, quae prius non tam satiata quam in praedam accensa, in profundo fluminis latitabat. Sentiens eo nante turbatam supra aquam, subito emergens natatilis ad hominem in medio natantem alueo cum ingenti fremitu aperto cucurrit ore. Vir tum beatus uidens, omnibus qui inerant tam barbaris quam etiam fratribus nimio terrore perculsís, cum salutare sancta eleuata manu in uacuo aere crucis pinxisset signum inuocato dei nomine feroci imperauit bestiae, dicens: 'Noles ultra progredi, nec hominem tangas. Retro citius reuertere.' Tum uero bestia hac sancti audita uoce retrorsum acsi funibus retraheretur uelociore recursu fugit tremefacta, quae prius Lugneo nanti eo usque appropinquauit ut hominem inter et bestiam non amplius esset quam unius contuli longitudo.

But the monster, whose appetite had earlier been not so much sated as whetted for prey, lurked in the depth of the river. Feeling the water above disturbed by Lugne's swimming, it suddenly swam up to the surface, and with gaping mouth

2. Edition and translation by A. O. and M. O. Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (Edinburgh 1961; 2nd ed. Oxford 1991). Page references are to the second edition.

3. J.-M. Picard, 'The purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*', *Peritia* 1 (1982) 160-77: 167-69.

4. VC ii 26-28 (Anderson, 130-35).

5. VC ii 22-25 (Anderson, 124-31).

and with great roaring rushed towards the man swimming in the middle of the stream. While all that were there, barbarians and even the brothers, were struck down with extreme terror, the blessed man, who was watching, raised his holy hand and drew the saving sign of the cross in the empty air; and then, invoking the name of God, he commanded the savage beast, and said: 'You will go no further. Do not touch the man; turn backward speedily'. Then, hearing this command of the saint, the beast, as if pulled back with ropes, fled terrified in swift retreat; although it had before approached so close to Lugne as he swam that there was no more than the length of one short pole between man and beast.⁶

The brothers glorify God in Columba and the 'pagan barbarians' (*gentiles barbari*) magnify the God of the Christians.

It is surprising that this text has become so popular as the first literary source for 'Nessie'. According to the tales the Loch Ness monster is a huge beast; they refer continually to the great depth of the Loch. The monster in VC surfaces in the river Ness which is not as deep as the Loch, and the beast is not described as large. Nonetheless, these two monsters have been identified as one and the same.

II. THE WATER-MONSTER AS A BEARDED SEAL OR WALRUS

Charles Thomas wrote an article⁷ to show that the identification of the river Ness monster as the Loch Ness monster is not correct. He characterises the episode from VC as 'one minor literary trope within a deliberate and overt piece of religious propaganda'⁸ whose historicity he wishes to establish.

Thomas assumes the story about the adventure of the monk Lugneus or Lugne, who was a historical person, may have reached Adomnán through not more than one intermediary.⁹ This travel incident, he says, did not take place in Loch Ness because elsewhere¹⁰ Adomnán refers to the lake as *lacus Nisae fluminis longus* 'the long lake of the river Ness' and *Nisae fluminis lacus* 'the lake of the river Ness'.¹¹ The water that harbours the dangerous monster is called *fluvius*, *flumen* and *alveus*—all words for 'river'.¹² Combining this with the fact that a boat on the opposite shore and boat-hooks are mentioned, Thomas concludes that the place of action was a 'well-known traditional river crossing'.¹³ Furthermore, he assumes that this journey by the saint and his monks represents one of Columba's visits to the Pictish king Brude,¹⁴ whose citadel Thomas situates in the hill-fort of Craig Phádraig.¹⁵ In this way he arrives at the conclusion that the incident took place 'near the mouth of the River Ness—where

6. VC ii 27 (Anderson, 132–35).

7. Charles Thomas, 'The "monster" episode in Adomnán's *Life of St. Columba*', *Cryptozoology: Interdisciplinary J Int Soc Cryptozoology* 7 (1988) 38–45. I am indebted to Richard Sharpe for this reference.

8. *ibid.* 40.

9. *ibid.* 41.

10. VC ii 34, iii 14.

11. Thomas, 41.

12. *ibid.* 41.

13. *ibid.* 42.

14. *ibid.* 42.

15. *ibid.* 39.

it flows into the Moray Firth and the North Sea'.¹⁶ Without giving any reasons he dates the event to about AD 580 and identifies the beast as 'an isolated bearded seal' or 'a walrus',¹⁷ referring to the fact that the Iona monks were familiar with seals¹⁸. Then he demythologises the whole incident by detaching the danger in which Lugne found himself from the fatal accident that happened to the Pict and, moreover, by minimising this danger: 'Whether or not one such specimen had actually caused the death of the hapless Pict, this postulated intruder probably threatened Lugne when he swam too close to it, and then vanished underwater when the saint shouted and gesticulated'.¹⁹

In this fascinating way, Thomas reconstructs a natural event by stripping the episode of all supernatural aspects. The mysterious beast has been identified and the saint is pictured as a man who was the only one to keep a cool head when everybody else—Picts and monks—panicked. He drives away a stray animal—as one would chase away birds from a field—as if nothing exceptional were happening.

This line of reasoning raises several questions: as the monks and the Picts were familiar with seals, would they have been so terrified of 'a larger animal of the same general configuration'?²⁰ If these were well-known beasts why is there no terminology such as *vitulus marinus mirae magnitudinis* 'a seal of marvellous size', as used by Adomnán in the preceding chapter dealing with the monstrous boar? He chose to use the words *bilua*²¹ 'beast (distinguished by size or ferocity), monster' and *aquatilis bestia* 'water-beast' without further specification.

Therefore, although this reconstruction deserves consideration, I am not totally convinced by it. It is necessary to return to the text itself in order to do justice to some of its aspects—for example, the terminology and the fact that the event is presented as a miracle.

III. THE WATER-MONSTER AND ITS LITERARY PREDECESSOR

The statement with which Thomas started his investigation is now important: the purpose of the Life is 'propaganda'—Adomnán had a message. One of the things he wanted to show was the saint's sanctity. In doing this he not only drew upon historical facts from Columba's life but also used literary sources in the composition of the Life.²² For this reason I will now look at the text without considering whether this episode took place or how it may have taken place but rather in relation to other texts that have similar motifs.

Thomas continues with a description of this incident as it is represented in later texts, but here the relationship with historical reality is still his main concern. He

16. *ibid.* 39.

17. *ibid.* 42.

18. Adomnán refers to *marini vituli* 'sea-calves' (VC i 41).

19. *ibid.* 42.

20. *ibid.* 42.

21. This is a variant spelling of *belua* (the first example in Picard's list of Hiberno-Latin cases of shifts from *e* to *i*: J.-M. Picard, 'The Schaffhausen Adomnán—a unique witness to Hiberno-Latin', *Peritia* 1 (1982) 216–49; 226 n 4).

22. G. Brüning, 'Adamnans Vita Columbae und ihre Ableitungen', *Z Celt Philol* 11 (1917) 213–304: 244–55.

mentions two texts explicitly: an Irish and a Latin Life. The latter²³ can be put aside here as it offers—from a ‘literary’ point of view—no interesting new aspects in this context. The former, however, deserves attention. The Irish Life to which he refers is *Betha Coluim Cille* (hereafter BCC)²⁴ the extant text of which is dated by Máire Herbert to not much later than 1169.²⁵ Thomas establishes that in this later text the monster has been replaced by a serpent (*nath(a)ir*).²⁶ He explains this insertion as follows: ‘By the 10th century, there were many “Lives” of saints in circulation in which snakes, or serpents, or dragons—terrestrial or aquatic, with or without wings, silent or bellowing—figured as stock properties in every variety of resuscitation or repulsion miracle (Cross 1954)’.²⁷ I am curious as to which tenth-century Lives he has in mind, for Cross does not give any dates in his work. My impression is that most of the fantastic serpents and dragons belong to later Hiberno-Latin and Irish texts.²⁸ That being so, the insertion has not been satisfactorily explained.

I would like to undertake another attempt. The episode in BCC (§55) runs as follows:

Dia mboi tra Colum Cille i n-aroli lathi ic procept dona slogaib, luid aroli duine uadib darsin abaind bóí i comfocus doib, na beth oc estec[h]t fri brethir nDé. Not-mbenand in nathir he isin usce co rus-marb fo cétoir. Tuccad a chorp i fhiadnaise Coluim Cille 7 dos-beirside croiss dia bachaill dar a bruinde cond-eracht fo cétoir.

‘On another day when Colum Cille was preaching to the crowds, a certain person went away across the nearby river to avoid listening to the word of God. The serpent struck him in the water and killed him instantly. His body was brought before Colum Cille, who made the sign of the cross with his staff over

23. This is the Life in Codex Salmanticensis (W. W. Heist (ed), *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi* (Brussels 1965) 366–78) which Thomas says is an eleventh-century collection (op. cit. 43). However, others date its compilation to the fourteenth century (see, for instance, J. F. Kenney, *The sources for the early history of Ireland: ecclesiastical* (Columbia 1929 304; Heist, op. cit. p. xxi; M. Lapidge and R. Sharpe, *A bibliography of Celtic-Latin literature 400–1200* (Dublin 1985) 110). The episode is in §8 (Heist, 368).

24. Edition and translation by Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry: the history and hagiography of the monastic familia of Columba* (Oxford 1988) 218–69.

25. *ibid.* 193. Thomas, however, gives a different date, saying that it ‘may have been put together in the 10th or even later 9th century’ (op. cit. 43). He refers to Kenney, but the latter actually says that there are four recensions of the text, the common exemplar of which should be dated to the eleventh century. This posited exemplar would be an abbreviated version of a Life from the ninth or tenth century (Kenney, *Sources*, 434).

26. Incidentally, this later text may have influenced William Reeves, who seems to equate VC’s *bestia* and other *beluae* and *bestiae* with ‘demoniacal and terrible’ water-serpents (W. Reeves, *The Life of St. Columba* (Dublin 1857) 140 n c).

27. op. cit. 43. The work referred to is T. P. Cross, *Motif index of early Irish literature* (Bloomington IN 1952).

28. I am aware that this is a vague statement, but giving a list of dated Hiberno-Latin and Irish texts in which serpents and dragons occur is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I hope to supply the evidence for this statement in a future publication.

the man's chest, and he immediately arose'.²⁹

This episode led me to another text, namely the *Dialogi* of Sulpicius Severus that date from c.AD 404.³⁰ Miracles by St Martin are here described and one of them has a narrative of an encounter between this holy man and a serpent in a river:

Serpens flumen secans in ripam, in qua constiteramus, adnabat: in nomine, inquit, Domini iubeo te redire. mox se mala bestia ad uerbum sancti retorsit et in ulteriorem ripam nobis inspectantibus transmeauit.

'A serpent swimming in the river was cutting his way toward the bank where we had stopped. "In God's name," said Martin, "I order you to go back." At this word from the saint, the evil serpent [literally: the evil beast, JB] at once reversed its course and, under our very eyes, swam across to the farther bank'.³¹

Those present perceive this in amazement. Saint Martin, however, sighs because serpents listen to him whereas people do not.

A comparison of these three versions of this similar event supplies the following result:

Dial. iii 9: (1) *bestia/belua* in river; (2) saint on bank; (3) halting; (4) beast approaches bank; (5) saint repels serpent; (6) command to return; (7) invocation of God's name; (8) beast immediately returns.

VC ii 27: (1) *serpens/bestia* in river; (2) saint on bank; (3) wants to cross; (4) serpent approaches monk; (5) saint repels beast; (6) command to return; (7) invocation of God's name; sign of the cross; (8) beast immediately returns.

BCC §55: (1) *nathir* in river; (2) saint on bank; (3) preaching; (4) serpent kills 'disobedient' man; (5) saint resurrects man; (6) no encounter.

Sulpicius Severus's *Dialogi* belonged among Adomnán's sources³² and it is not impossible that this episode served as a model for the one in VC. It is also conceivable that the author of BCC, if familiar with both texts, combined these two older texts to form a new version.³³

If it is true that Adomnán used this episode from the *Dialogi* as a model, examination of the differences between these two texts could shed some light on the 'message' of the author.³⁴ What strikes one immediately is that the episode in VC is much more

29. BCC §55; Herbert, *Iona*, 238 (text), 261 (translation).

30. C. W. Mönnich, *Martinus van Tours: naar de beschrijving van zijn leven door Sulpicius Severus* (Amsterdam 1962) 9.

31. *Dialogi*, iii 9 4; C. Halm, *Sulpicii Severi Libri qui supersunt*, CSEL 1 (Vienna 1866) 207 (text); B. M. Peebles, *Sulpicius Severus. The Fathers of the church: a new translation* vii (Washington DC 1949-70) 237 (translation).

32. Brüning, 'Adamnans Vita Columbae', 247-49.

33. VC was a source of BCC; for more about the relationship between VC and BCC, see Herbert, *Iona*, 182-84.

34. With reference to the embedding of the episode in historical reality, it should be noted that Sulpicius does not give any names (apart from Martin's) in his episode, whereas Adomnán mentions the river Ness,

extensive and dramatic. In the *Dialogi* the story is written in the first person plural and it is said that these 'insiders' are amazed. St Martin sighs and sounds somewhat disappointed whereas God is glorified in St Columba by the 'insiders' (the brothers). Adomnán adds a missionary aspect to the tale by his description of the reaction of the 'outsiders' (the Picts): they are 'impelled by the magnitude of this miracle (*eiusdem miraculi magnitudine*) that they themselves had seen'.³⁵ Therefore, if it is true that Adomnán followed Sulpicius Severus in his story about this river-monster, he emphasised the miracle by additions that made it even more miraculous and its result even more impressive. One of these is the mention of Picts, with whom the tale begins and ends. It follows a climactic line: the story starts with the burial of the dead Pict and ends with the magnification of the God of the Christians by the living Picts. The episode is, therefore, a unit, which is why the death of the Pict should not be detached from the rest of the story.³⁶

Another aspect that might have been used by Adomnán is mentioned above: the vague terminology with which he refers to the monster (*belua* and *bestia*). It should be noted that Adomnán is equally unspecific when writing about other dangerous water-beasts. He terms a huge water-monster *cetus*³⁷ 'any large sea-animal, a sea-monster', and small dangerous beasts *bestiolae*,³⁸ 'small beasts'. He is more specific when dealing with dangerous land-beasts: earlier than the monster in the river Ness, a boar (*aper*) of marvellous size is described³⁹ and, later, poisonous snakes (*viperæ*) are dealt with.⁴⁰

One can only speculate on Adomnán's reasons for using this vague terminology. Perhaps he wanted to point out the unknown dangers of the sea and water in general. Water may look peaceful and beautiful on the surface, but nobody knows what is hidden in its depths. Quite possibly, Adomnán is being deliberately vague in order to leave room for the imagination and even to evoke a sense of horror. The more frightening the beast, the more admiration is felt for Columba and for God who bestows the power of miracles upon the saint.

In sum, Charles Thomas may have reconstructed a historical event correctly, but Adomnán, as author, treated this event in a peculiar way because he had a message to convey. Even though his motives are sometimes open to speculation, one should follow his text as closely as possible.⁴¹

CONCLUSIONS

The 'historical' approach by Charles Thomas to the episode VC ii 27 led to the

the Picts and Lugne mocu Min.

35. Anderson, 134–35.

36. As Thomas more or less does in his article ('Monster episode', 42).

37. VC i 19 (Anderson, 44–45).

38. VC ii 42 (Anderson, 166–71).

39. VC ii 26 (Anderson 130–33).

40. VC ii 28 (Anderson 134–35).

41. There are of course some motifs in the river-monster episode of which parallels can be found in other Hiberno-Latin and Irish texts but these are beyond this paper's scope. I hope to deal with them elsewhere.

reconstruction of an alleged historical event in which St Columba chased away a stray bearded seal or walrus by shouting and gesticulating. This could have occurred at the mouth of the river Ness about AD 580. This 'historicisation' method involved stripping certain aspects of their supernatural character and detaching parts of the narrative. This 'historical-critical' approach is valid and legitimate in the case of hagiography because this genre presents itself as a kind of historiography. One could add that in this Life the author embedded the events around the protagonist in the historical reality by mentioning the names of people and places. But after one has reconstructed the possible, historical event it is necessary to return to the text itself, which does not describe an ordinary event but a miracle. Relating miracles to the historical reality is tricky. The whole point of a miracle-story is that something extraordinary or supernatural occurs. By reducing the miracle to an ordinary event, one removes the very basis of what was intended by the author: a sense of wonder.

Therefore, a literary approach is offered here in order to do justice to this aspect of the text. An older text (*Dialogi*) is proposed as a model for the episode in VC. These texts have been compared and it is suggested that the author of VC stressed the miraculous and missionary actions of the protagonist. He may have emphasised the miraculous by deliberately using vague terminology, and thus leaving room for the workings of the imagination. The missionary aspect is represented by having the Picts as witnesses both of a horrible death of one of them in the beginning of the tale, and of the miraculous victory over the monster by the saint, which made them glorify the God of the Christians at the end.