An Analysis of Eddius Stephanus' Life of Wilfrid:
The Struggle for Authority Over the English Church
In the Late Seventh Century

In the year 664, a multitude of English bishops, abbots and priests -- as well as Oswiu and Alhfrith, the kings of Northumbria -- convened at the Abbey of Whitby. Their purpose, according to the monk Eddius Stephanus in his Life of Wilfrid, was to decide when Easter should be celebrated. At the time, there were two ways of calculating the date of this holiday. One method was sanctioned by the Apostolic See in Rome and used by clerics throughout Christendom. The churchmen of northern England, Ireland and Scotland, however, determined the date in a slightly different manner. Although the two methods produced dates that varied by no more than a day, this was enough to merit the gathering of this synod in Whitby. In Stephanus’ Life, King Oswiu asks the question that was at the heart of the matter for those assembled at the abbey: “which is greater in the Kingdom of Heaven, Columba or the apostle Peter?” The Irish saint Columba represented the Celtic tradition of Christianity and its rules, such as the unique way of calculating Easter, which had dominated the Church of northern England for several decades. Saint Peter, who was the first bishop of Rome, symbolized the distant Apostolic See and its laws and practices. Oswiu’s question, therefore, implies that the churchmen in Whitby had to make the following decision: would the English Church be subject to Rome and obey the tenets of the Pope, or would it remain relatively independent of the Holy See and follow the Celtic discipline?

The synod resolved to celebrate Easter according to the Roman method. Their decision was based largely on the belief that the Messiah had granted primacy over all of Christendom to the Apostolic See. “Thou art Peter,” Jesus had declared to the first bishop of Rome, “and upon this rock I will build my Church.” Since the successors of Peter were invested with divine spiritual authority, the churchmen implied, papal law had to be obeyed. It is commonly thought that the synod of Whitby decided definitively the fate of the Church in Britain; “From this time on,” Tierney states, “the English church
was united in doctrine and practice and closely allied to Rome.”13 The Life of Wilfrid makes clear, however, that this is a serious misconception. After the synod, the Church of England was neither unified nor “closely allied” to the Apostolic See. Roman authority over the Church in northern England, as we shall see, was not widely accepted or acknowledged by English authorities until many years later, in the late seventh and early eighth centuries. The synod of Whitby did succeed, however, in removing the staunchest supporters of Celtic Christianity from the English Church. According to Stephanus’ Life, many Celtic monks left their monasteries in Northumbria after the synod’s decision.14 And Bishop Colman was forced to resign his post because he did not accept the Roman method of calculating Easter.15 Nevertheless, this waning of Celtic influence did not guarantee that Rome’s power over the English Church would consequently increase. Instead, a new division appeared between those who supported Roman authority and those who advocated leaving control over the English Church within England. Stephanus’ Life of Wilfrid, written between the years 710 and 720,16 portrays this growing divide and shows that the acceptance of Roman rule in the north was far from certain upon the synod's resolution.

Wilfrid, a Northumbrian bishop of this period who was later declared a saint, promoted Roman supremacy in England throughout his career. During the synod of Whitby, for example, he spoke in defense of the Apostolic See.17 As a young man just entering into the service of God, he made a pilgrimage to Rome and was blessed by the pope.18 He also had an “ardent desire” to receive the Roman form of tonsure;19 like the calculation of Easter, the practice of cutting monks’ hair was performed differently in the Roman Church than in the Celtic one. After he was elected bishop, Wilfrid instituted the Rule of St. Benedict -- then associated with monasticism around Rome and elsewhere on the continent20 -- in local monasteries.21 Previously, each abbey in Northumbria had followed its own set of rules.22 A strong advocate of Roman primacy, the saint tried to bring the English Church under the discipline of the Apostolic See.

Wilfrid’s tumultuous career as bishop demonstrates how the supporters of Rome faced strong opposition in the late seventh century, after the synod of Whitby. Members of the clergy as well as a number of kings in northern England persecuted the bishop for more than twenty years of his life.23 While the saint was away from Northumbria, for
example, the king had Chad, a Celtic clergyman, ordained as bishop of Wilfrid’s diocese. Stephanus states that King Oswiu’s action was “highly irregular . . . and clean contrary to the mind of the Apostolic See.” Theodore, the Archbishop of Canterbury, later returned the bishopric to Wilfrid. But several years later, this same Archbishop and the new king of Northumbria, Ecgfrith, took Wilfrid’s territory, divided it into three parts, and consecrated new bishops over the partitioned land. When Wilfrid approached the king with a letter from the Pope demanding that his see be returned to him, Ecgfrith threw the bishop in jail. Wilfrid regained his freedom, but he remained a virtual exile from his own diocese for many years. During the synod of Austerfield, the saint was confronted by two new opponents, Archbishop Berhtwald and King Aldfrith, who attempted to rob him of all his possessions. Soon after this synod, Wilfrid’s enemies declared that he and his followers “were no longer part of the body of the faithful.” The bishop again appealed to Rome and obtained from the Pope a second letter, ordering the kings and clergymen to make peace with him and to give back his land. Nevertheless, many of the bishop’s opponents continued to abuse him, ignoring or rejecting outright the papal decrees. King Aldfrith stated that “no documents . . . emanating from the Holy See” would make him treat the saint differently. The king, like many other important figures in Britain at this time, refused to accept the authority of the Pope over the Church of England.

This account of Wilfrid’s troubles raises the question of why the saint was persecuted in the first place. What reasons did the Northumbrian kings and English prelates have for mistreating this bishop and rejecting papal authority over the Church of England? These questions become even more complex when one considers that Wilfrid was initially supported by secular and spiritual authorities in Britain. After Colman resigned following the synod of Whitby, for example, Kings Oswiu and Alhfrith nominated Wilfrid as his successor; according to Stephanus, they wanted a bishop who would “make the discipline of the Apostolic See his own and seek to spread it.” Upon Wilfrid’s election to the bishopric, the kings of northern England gave him, and consequently the Church he represented, large amounts of land “for their souls’ salvation.” When the saint dedicated a church in Ripon to St. Peter, the apostle of Rome, kings and many other powerful figures attended the ceremony to show their
support. Stephanus states that in the beginning of his career, Wilfrid won “universal affection” from the English people, receiving enough wealth to end “the poverty” of the Church and to give his diocese an air of “worldly pomp.” We can conclude, therefore, that the period immediately following the synod of Whitby was a time of widespread pro-Roman sentiment, in which Wilfrid was able to acquire a vast amount of land and power.

It is hard to say whether the synod of Whitby’s decision was directly responsible for the early success of the saint. The fact that this synod was called at all indicates that even before the year 664, there was a movement to acknowledge the primacy of Rome in England. King Oswiu revealed his reasons for favoring Wilfrid during the synod, when he swore to obey the successors of Saint Peter; to the king, Wilfrid was the representative of the Apostolic See in England. Like Oswiu, most of the bishop’s early patrons probably believed that the Popes in Rome, as suggested by Scripture, had God-given authority over all of Christendom. By aiding Wilfrid, they were acknowledging the primacy of the Holy See in England. We have seen, however, that support for Wilfrid and for Rome was short-lived. After initially assisting his rise to power, English kings and clergymen suddenly turned on Wilfrid and tried to steal away his lands.

There are several explanations for this dramatic shift in policy. The Life of Wilfrid suggests that the saint’s rapid acquisition of land in the early years of his career contributed to his fall from grace in Northumbria. During the dedication of the church at Ripon, for example, Wilfrid urged the kings who were present -- Ecgfrith and Aelwine, as well as several less powerful rulers -- to grant him land that had been abandoned by the Celtic clergy after the synod of Whitby. If they did so, the bishop declared, “God would indeed be pleased” with them. Wilfrid was thus taking a very active role in procuring possessions for the Church, encouraging donations and hinting at heavenly rewards for such gifts. The fact that Wilfrid brought up the issue of land during the church’s dedication, before a large gathering of important men from throughout the kingdom, suggests that he had a well-planned, shrewd method of acquisition; he may have realized that the kings, in order to outdo one another and prove their power to the abbots, sheriffs, and dignitaries who were present at the ceremony, would probably grant him more territory than they would in a less public setting. We can see from the list of lands provided by Stephanus that Wilfrid did indeed obtain a number of endowments
from the kings that day. In addition to these secular patrons, the saint also received land from “nearly all” the abbots and abbesses in his diocese. Stephanus tells us that Wilfrid was “second to none” in the amount of gifts he bestowed on both clergy and laity. These statements suggest that the bishop was rivaling, if not exceeding, secular rulers in wealth, land and power. Wilfrid’s aggressive policies of acquisition and his rapidly growing number of possessions must have worried the English kings. The rulers of Northumbria were probably not used to such assertive and powerful religious figures; the Celtic clergymen, who had previously dominated the English Church, were known for their love of meekness, obedience, and poverty. A man such as Wilfrid, who combined spirituality with an active secular life, was something radical and unfamiliar, and therefore vaguely threatening, to the people of northern England.

The appearance of the churches built under Wilfrid’s direction probably made the kings even more suspicious of the bishop’s ambitions. According to Stephanus, the church at Ripon had an altar covered in purple and gold; at Hexham, he built a church more magnificent than any other in Western Europe; and at York, he installed in a church glazed glass windows, which were very rare in this period. These churches, which resembled palaces more than they did the humble monasteries of the Celtic Church, displayed the vastness of the bishop’s fortune. According to Stephanus, when King Ecgfrith heard of Wilfrid’s “temporal glories,” he became envious and took the bishop’s see away from him. Ecgfrith and the kings before him may have helped Wilfrid attain this level of wealth; but as the bishop’s temporal power became increasingly visible, they began to regret having given to him so many generous gifts.

Was Ecgfrith’s persecution of Wilfrid an overreaction? Stephanus states that secular rulers grew envious of Wilfrid as he built monumental churches and founded a great number of monasteries; the bishop was, in their eyes, showing off his wealth. But the author also suggests that their abuse of Wilfrid was due to more than just envy. The kings of Northumbria attacked the saint primarily because they saw him as genuine threat to their own authority. As we will see, Wilfrid did more with his money than construct churches and look after the people of his diocese; he also involved himself in politics and influenced events in the secular realm. According to Stephanus, Wilfrid possessed some type of military unit or bodyguard, complete with uniforms and weaponry, in his diocese.
We hear later on that the bishop provided arms and “a troop of his companions” to Dagobert, king of the Franks, to help him resume power after his forced exile in Ireland. Wilfrid did a similar service for Ceadwalla, who was also in exile from his homeland. The saint aided the nobleman “in all kinds of ways” -- Stephanus does not go into detail -- and enabled him to gain control over the whole of West Saxony. It is not surprising, therefore, that the kings of Northumbria banished the bishop and tried to take away his land. Ecgfrith put Wilfrid in jail for demanding his diocese back; at the same time, he ordered that the bishop’s supporters “be scattered far and wide,” perhaps to prevent the saint’s troops from attacking him or from freeing their leader. The monarchs had good cause to be wary of a man who maintained an armed retinue and who had influenced the political situation in two distant lands. Since Wilfrid had put exiled noblemen on the throne elsewhere, the kings of northern England may have feared he would do it in their kingdom too. And what better way to rid themselves of this potentially dangerous individual than to force him out of Northumbria and deprive him of his territory?

Kings were not the only ones who felt threatened by Wilfrid. Many members of the clergy in England also opposed the bishop. According to Stephanus, Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury allied with King Ecgfrith and consecrated new bishops over Wilfrid’s see. The author writes that Ecgfrith bribed the archbishop to gain his support; J.F. Webb, however, states that such an accusation is hardly believable and is merely an indication of the author’s bias against Wilfrid’s opponents. It is quite possible that Theodore, like the king, felt threatened by the rapid expansion of the saint’s land and power; as Wilfrid’s ecclesiastical superior, he would not have wanted the wealth and authority of his territory rivaled by that of a mere bishop. During the synod of Austerfield, the new archbishop, Berhtwald, and the current king, Aldfrith, formed an alliance much like the one between Ecgrith and Theodore. According to Stephanus, they called the synod with the hidden purpose of stripping Wilfrid of all his possessions. Berhtwald probably had good reason to see the bishop as a threat to his authority: Theodore, before his death, had made peace with Wilfrid and appointed him as his heir. Berhtwald may have been worried, therefore, that the saint would challenge his election to the archbishopric and claim the post for himself.
The archbishops were not the only clergymen who opposed the saint. Though nearly four decades had passed since the synod of Whitby, the English churchmen were still far from being a unified group. During the synod of Austerfield, “tremendous disputes and altercations broke out” between those who wished to obey the papal decrees and give Wilfrid back his lands, and those who rejected the authority of Rome and accepted instead the old edicts of Theodore, which denied Wilfrid’s right to his diocese in York. Stephanus blames these arguments on the “avarice” of some of the bishops present at the synod; the author probably calls them avaricious for putting their own interests above the unity of the Christian world. Although they were not members of the Celtic Church, these bishops still refused to acknowledge the authority of Rome over the Church of northern England. Instead, they wanted the English Church to remain under local control, so that holy men such as themselves could make rules for it and remain independent of the Holy See. By appealing to the Pope as the supreme authority of the Church, Wilfrid was challenging the power of English prelates to make unquestionable and immutable decrees. These clergymen opposed the saint because he “despised and rejected” those statutes of the English Church that were not in accordance with the decrees of the Apostolic See. Roman supremacy over the Church also threatened the power of the Northumbrian kings. King Ecgfrith, for example, offered to free Wilfrid from jail if the bishop denied that the Roman statutes -- which ordered that the diocese be returned to him -- were genuine. The saint, however, replied that he would “rather lose his head” than disavow the supreme authority of the Pope. Wilfrid’s loyalty to the Apostolic See thus gave him a measure of independence from secular power as well as from local spiritual leaders in England.

Despite all of the opposition faced by the bishop, the Life of Wilfrid ends happily for the saint. At the synod of Nidd, which took place in 706, the clergymen decided to obey the papal decrees; they made an “unconditional peace pact” with Wilfrid and gave him back the lands and revenues he had lost. The new king of Northumbria, Osred, became the bishop’s adopted son. Wilfrid gained the additional support of the rulers of Mercia, Aethilred and Coenred, who swore to obey the laws of the Holy See. According to Stephanus, Wilfrid again had “the goodwill of the whole Northumbrian people;” for the saint and his followers, the time of “misery” was over. But how had
Wilfrid overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacles presented to him by the secular and spiritual leaders of England? Why was the primacy of the Apostolic See suddenly accepted after such a long period of anti-Roman sentiment? Part of the answer lies in the belief that the Pope had divine spiritual authority over all Christians. In the final letter obtained by Wilfrid from Rome for his defense, Pope John threatened to excommunicate anyone who did not make peace with the bishop. Those who disobeyed his commands, the Pope said, would be found “guilty by Heaven.”

Archbishop Berhtwald was “terrified” by this decree and promised to obey it. When the synod of Nidd was called, Berhtwald argued in defense of Wilfrid instead of against him.

This answer is not completely satisfactory, however. In an earlier letter from Rome, Pope Agatho had also warned that those who disregarded his commands would “be overthrown.” And yet his decree was not obeyed by the English authorities. The synod of Whitby, too, acknowledged that Christ had granted St. Peter and his successors supremacy. But we have seen that their decision in favor of Rome was far from effective. What had changed in England that allowed for the sudden acceptance of the primacy of the Holy See? Stephanus’ text contains numerous hints as to the social and political environment in Northumbria during the late seventh century. Bede’s Life of Cuthbert, which is set in the same time period, also provides some useful clues. According to Stephanus, Northumbria during the reign of King Ecgrith suffered greatly from invasions and pressure from external forces. When the “vicious tribes” of the Picts revolted from Saxon rule and gathered in the north, Ecgrith fought with them and reduced the tribes to slavery. This did not end the threat of invasion, however. The king, along with the “flower of his army,” died in a later battle with the Picts. Trouble was also brewing in the south: the king of Mercia, Wulfhere, wanted to make Northumbria a tributary state. The tables were turned, though, when Ecgrith defeated Wulfhere and put the kingdom of Mercia under tribute. Bede tells us that at this time, plague was also a major problem in Britain.

Besides the destabilizing factors of invasion and disease, there was also the threat of political instability. In his Life, Stephanus frequently calls Ecgrith the king of Bernicia and Deira instead of the king of Northumbria. The substitution of two names
for one suggests that there was a political conflict in the kingdom, which divided the realm into two opposing states. The *Life of Cuthbert* seems to support this theory. Aldfrith, Bede informs us, was the illegitimate son of King Ecgrith’s father. He had “willingly exiled” himself in Ireland during his half-brother’s reign. We may wonder, however, just how voluntary this exile was. The fact that there were two heirs to the throne -- one in Ireland and one in England -- at the time when Northumbria appeared to be divided, indicates that something akin to a civil war was taking place in the kingdom. Thus, Northumbria in this period was being torn apart by invasion, plague, and political uncertainty. This environment of turmoil and the weakening of central authority probably created a power vacuum in Northumbria. Wilfrid may have used this opportunity to reclaim his authority and assert the primacy of the Holy See in England.

Stephanus hints at how the saint was able to take advantage of this void of power and eventually to fill it. He states that after the death of King Aldfrith, Eadwulf -- who was very hostile to Saint Wilfrid -- took the throne. Only two months into his reign, however, Eadwulf was replaced by Osred, King Aldfrith’s son. Such a short period of rule suggests that the kingdom was still politically unstable. Stephanus confirms this by describing a battle between Osred’s army and another force, which almost certainly consisted of those loyal to Eadwulf. During the synod of Nidd, one of Osred’s noblemen stated that their side was victorious because they had vowed to “carry out the apostolic injunctions concerning Bishop Wilfrid.” This nobleman, Berhtfrith, implied that this vow had a supernatural effect, instantly bringing the war between the two factions to an end. As we have seen from the cases of Dagobert and Ceadwalla, however, Wilfrid did indeed have the ability to influence politics through his own wealth and power. The bishop’s relationship with Osred was probably one of mutual benefit: Osred would have received financial and perhaps military aid from Wilfrid, while the saint received the gratitude and support of Osred and his followers. The bishop even adopted the new king as his son, thus symbolizing his newfound influence over the royalty of Northumbria. The backing of Osred and his supporters during the synod may have pressured the clergymen to finally acknowledge Wilfrid’s rights and the Popes’ decrees. Indeed, Stephanus indicates that once Berhtfrith made his speech in the synod, praising Wilfrid’s
role in the battle and hinting at the saint’s close connection with the king, those present
were persuaded to rule in favor of the bishop. 98

How effective was the synod of Nidd, however? The convention at Whitby was
obviously unable to enforce its resolutions; we must not assume, therefore, that the
authority of Rome in England was secured by the decision of this later synod. Stephanus
indicates that the conflict within the English Church was ongoing even while he was
writing this Life. In the last chapter of the text, for example, he writes that the abbots and
monks, after the death of their bishop, worried that “their old enemies” might persecute
them again. 99 They no longer had Wilfrid’s “wisdom and sanctity” to guide them. 100
The saint’s followers comforted themselves by trusting that the saint was now guarding
them from heaven. 101 But they probably had little support from forces on earth.
Stephanus portrays Wilfrid as a passionate man who firmly believed in Roman authority,
fighting to strengthen its hold on the English Church and defying the opposition of
secular and spiritual powers. If we are to believe Stephanus’ account, the movement for
Roman primacy in Northumbria rested heavily on Wilfrid’s shoulders. Without his
energetic personality and determination, would this movement survive? The social and
political atmosphere of England also affected the situation, as we have seen. With Osred
in power, the authority of Rome in Northumbria was relatively safe. But it was
impossible to say what the next king’s policies would be, especially in a kingdom with so
much governmental instability. The Life of Wilfrid shows that establishing Roman
authority in England was a long, complicated process; and even at the end of the saint’s
life, there was no clear resolution.

3 Stephanus, 141.
5 Webb, 14.
6 Stephanus, 142.
7 Stephanus, 142.
9 Brian Tierney and Sidney Painter, Western Europe in the Middle Ages: 300-1475 (Boston: McGraw-Hill
College, 1999), 53-4.
10 Stephanus, 142-3.
11 Stephanus, 142.
12 Tierney, 53-4.
13 Tierney, 118.
14 Stephanus, 150.
15 Stephanus, 143.
16 Webb, 28.
17 Stephanus, 142.
18 Stephanus, 138.
19 Stephanus, 138.
20 Tierney, 58.
21 Stephanus, 181.
22 Webb, 16.
23 Stephanus, 179.
24 Stephanus, 147.
25 Stephanus, 147.
26 Stephanus, 147.
27 Stephanus, 156.
28 Stephanus, 167.
29 Stephanus, 172.
30 Stephanus, 178-80.
31 Stephanus, 182.
32 Stephanus, 190-1.
33 Stephanus, 195, 197.
34 Stephanus, 195.
35 Stephanus, 143.
36 Stephanus, 150.
37 Stephanus, 149.
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46 Stephanus, 154.
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51 Stephanus, 148.
52 Webb, 27.
53 Foley, 123-5.
54 Stephanus, 156.
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57 Stephanus, 159.
58 Stephanus, 174.
59 Stephanus, 178.
60 Stephanus, 156, 178, 180.
61 Stephanus, 167.
62 Stephanus, 156.
63 Webb, 28.
64 Stephanus, 180.
65 Stephanus, 175.
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70 Stephanus, 197.
71 Stephanus, 186.
72 Stephanus, 169.
73 Webb, 26.
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84 Stephanus, 152.
85 Stephanus, 177.
86 Stephanus, 153.
87 Stephanus, 153.
89 Stephanus, 147, 153.
90 Bede, 103.
91 Bede, 104.
92 Stephanus, 196.
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101 Stephanus, 206.