

Elsewhere Freomund was thought to be a son of Offa and that he abandoned his life as a hermit to fight the Vikings, but was beheaded by an English traitor.<sup>12</sup> Saint Birinius, the bringer of Roman Christianity to the early proto-Saxon kingdom of the Gewissae, and who became its first bishop, establishing his See at Dorchester, is apparently included in one version of the tale, despite his having died much earlier in A.D. 650.

There is ample room for confusion at first sight. However, Mercia had initially been Christianised by Northumbrian missionaries of the Irish Celtic school. Irish Christianity had evolved separately from the Roman Church and was based on, amongst other things, a monasticism ruled over by an abbot, often in remote locations combining isolation, scholarship and frugality but also pilgrimage. Celtic monks around this time conducted remarkable missionary journeys into Europe, leading to the conversion of many pagans to the north of the Alps. The Roman and Celtic Churches had become notably divided on the method of calculating Easter and also the acceptance of the authority of bishops. Despite the decision made at the Synod of Whitby in A.D. 663 to accept the Roman Church's practice within the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, Irish priests were still very much in evidence in England. Later, Mercia had expanded greatly under Offa, to the point at which he felt able to challenge the ecclesiastical supremacy of Canterbury. Offa's power and prestige was such that he persuaded the Pope to allow a new archbishopric to be created at Lichfield in the heartland of Mercia. This brash ecclesiastical policy created great hostility, only extinguished and reversed later around the time of the Danish invasions, when Dorchester also became a See once more. The inclusion of Saint Birinius of Dorchester may have been an attempt to bring some unity to the church in a later retelling of this tale, in what might otherwise have been perceived as an Irish Celtic and Mercian setting.<sup>13</sup>

Dedications to better-known saints, with whom we ourselves might be more familiar, were becoming increasingly common as Anglo-Saxon kingdoms merged. Following Offa's death the power of Mercia began to wane, so much so that in the time of the Danish invasion a large part of

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<sup>12</sup> See *Anglo Saxon Oxfordshire*, by J. Blair, pp.75-76, concerning one version of the story of Freomund.

<sup>13</sup> See Blair, *Anglo Saxon Oxfordshire*, concerning Irish influence on the emerging Church in the South Midlands, p.59; *Christianity in England from Roman Times to the Reformation*, Vol 1, by K. Hylson-Smith, p.200, concerning the creation of an Archbishopric at Lichfield.