Extract from Professor Sarah Foot on *The Synod of Whitby*

**The Synod of Whitby**

**Introduction**

Missionaries who brought the Christian faith to the pagan Anglo-Saxon population from different places which followed distinctively separate church-traditions (such as Rome, Francia, Ireland or Iona (see *The Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons*)), mostly worked in harmony when they encountered representatives of other churches in the mission-field; the imperative to spread the good news of the gospel took priority over squabbles about liturgical practice. However, just as relations between the earliest Roman mission of Augustine and the British bishops proved particularly bad (see Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, II. 2), so increasing differences emerged in mid-seventh-century Northumbria between those Christians who followed the teachings of the Church of Rome (see *Rome*) and those who preferred Irish practices over the method for calculating the date of the moveable Easter feast and over the correct style of the tonsure (see *The Irish Church*).

According to Bede,

> In those days there arose a great and active controversy about the keeping of Easter. Those who had come from Kent or Gaul declared that the Irish observance of Easter Sunday was contrary to the custom of the universal church. *Bede, Ecclesiastical History*, III. 25

When these questions and other ecclesiastical matters had become matters of substantial disagreement, Bede reports that it was decided to hold a council to settle the dispute at a monastery called Streanæshalch (conventionally identified as Whitby, in north Yorkshire) where Hild was then abbess (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III. 25). Convened jointly by Oswiu, king of Northumbria and his son Alfrith (sub-king in the southern Northumbrian kingdom of Deira), the synod met in what had already been an eventful year, 664. A total eclipse of the sun had briefly darkened the Northumbrian sky on 1 May, the summer sky had seemed to be on fire lit up with aurorae (the northern lights) and plague was advancing rapidly across the kingdom. It was thus against a heightened atmosphere of fear and anxiety that the protagonists met to make decisions that would determine the future shape and direction of the Church in England.

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**Key:**

Interactive glossary terms
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