

# **The Eclipse of AD 664**



**By  
Duncan Steel**

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**O**NE COULD GO BACK FURTHER, BUT AD 664 IS A GOOD PLACE TO HALT, BECAUSE IT WAS AN ECLIPSE WITH SIGNIFICANT IMPLICATIONS.

This was the first total solar eclipse to be observed and recorded in England, the path crossing the northern parts of Ireland and then a band reaching from the present Scottish border down to York. But there is something about it which has been puzzling scholars since 1590, and has yet to be resolved. We know, from modern computations and records in monastic archives from Ireland and across continental Europe, that it happened on 1 May. The puzzle is that the English monasteries recorded it as occurring on 3 May, and we know this was no mere slip of the quill. The record was deliberately falsified, and this was not a trivial deceit.

## What Happened?

The year 664 is notable for two other events: an outbreak of the bubonic plague, and the Synod of Whitby, where the decision was taken by King Oswy of Northumberland to desert the Celtic Church and take up instead with the Roman Church.

The latter had made incursions into the British Isles from 597, when Saint Augustine and his missionaries arrived and established the first cathedral at Canterbury. Upon this religious conversion hinged the future of the entire British Isles, for it led to the unification of England and the end of paganism.

The king's conversion stemmed directly from his being persuaded that the Roman Church's knowledge of the movement of the Sun and Moon, and hence the calculation of the date of Easter, was superior to that of the Celtic Church. It seems that those on the Roman side pointed to the eclipse as being a sign of divine wrath, further demonstrated by God then

inflicting a pestilence upon the land, which was interpreted as a condemnation of the false doctrine of the rival Celtic Church.

The problem with the date of the eclipse arose because the lunar tables calculated in Rome were wrong. They showed the new moon on slightly the wrong date, in part because of the inexactitude of the metonic cycle.

After the event, the Roman party covered this up, falsifying the record and bluffing at the synod a couple of months later that the eclipse had occurred on 3 May, although it had actually been 2 days earlier. The future of Britain, and **the invention of the Anno Domini dating system, both stem from this subterfuge, which is only now being understood, over 1300 years later.**

Eclipses, then, have had an importance for the development of civilization far beyond what one might imagine. It is not only the ancients of Babylon and Greece who were affected by them, but also the antecedents of the English-speaking peoples.



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