The Churches of Roman Britain.

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IN discussing the early history of Repton at the Royal Archæological Institute's meeting, at Derby, July, 1914, Sir Henry Howorth dismissed the possible survival of any remains of the original mother-church of Mercian Christianity, by laying down the broad principle that "in the seventh century there was not a single stone ecclesiastical building throughout the north of England." His conclusion as regards Repton in particular is doubtless final. It had not been a Roman settlement [1] in which some relics of an earlier church might have been utilized, whilst there is every reason to believe that in the seventh century the handicraft of masonry was not practised by the Anglian invaders or by their British slaves. It must be assumed that any church built by the first Christians of Mercia was a rude fabric of timber or of wattle-and-daub, which has long since perished by fire or natural decay.[2]

But leaving aside the particular case of Repton, there is convincing evidence that the missionaries of the seventh century found the masonry of Roman churches still standing (though doubtless in every stage of ruin) in important Roman centres throughout Britain.[3]

It is on record that they were able to identify and to re-occupy the ruined structures, and many of our churches

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[1] *Victoria County History* I. p. 261.

[2] The A.S. verb for "to build" is "ge-timbrian" (from timber); the Welsh verb is "adeiladu" = to weave, indicating wattle.

[3] Bede describes a stone-built church as "juxta morem Romanorum ecclesia" (Plummer's Bede ii., 101).

stand on the same sites to-day. The survival of the substructures or materials of Roman church-builders cannot therefore be rejected as impossible in any place known to have been a Roman settlement. On the other hand the causes which have since tended to obliterate such survivals must not be overlooked.

The missionaries of the seventh century found a land strewn with the ruins of towns, villas, roads, bridges, dykes, fortifications, and public works. Much of the masonry which they saw is still intact after fifteen centuries of neglect, whilst they were separated from the downfall of Roman order and civilization by only 150 years, or 200 years at the most. Many buildings had been deliberately burnt, and in other cases despoiled of all timber. But the Pagans themselves made no use of stone buildings; they did not dwell in them; they did not (like their successors) treat ancient ruins as quarries and it is improbable that they wasted their energies in picking away Roman cement to pull down the walls for no practical use. In short, all substantial Roman masonry, however shaken by fire or neglect, would generally be found "in situ" in the seventh century. The obliteration was the work of later generations when the sites were re-occupied or the material re-used.

If we review the position of Christian worship in Roman Britain in the fourth and fifth centuries it is impossible to doubt that substantial churches (which would be dissimilar in plan from later conceptions of ecclesiastical structure) had been erected in all important centres, and that until they were slowly engulphed by the advance of Pagan conquest, they were protected by the deeply-rooted traditions of the Romano-British population. These in fact held their ground in the north, especially in the hill-country, much longer than in the south.

When the last Legions were withdrawn (A.D. 410), the emperors had ruled Britain for three-and-a-half centuries

—longer than the whole period of English rule in India or the Colonies—while Christianity had been for a century the favoured religion of the imperial court at York, and for three generations the official religion of the empire. The recall of the Legions was regarded as a temporary expedient to meet a military emergency, and did not imply the disappearance of the Roman population, the Roman Order, or the Roman Faith. That was the gradual result of a protracted period of social disintegration and barbarian encroachment. The imperial army left the defence and the administration of Britain in the hands of a numerous Colonial population both urban and rural, the latter being to a great extent the half-British descendants of discharged Legionaries, who had been settling upon the soil generation after generation.

For at least 300 years before the Pagan invaders effected their first permanent settlement (A.D. 449), Christianity had been spreading amongst these Roman-British people. The new faith reached the province through two distinct channels. At first it entered chiefly through the humbler strata of society—through soldiers, refugees and Christians exiled for conscience sake, amongst whom would doubtless be found many specifically condemned to labour in the imperial mines—a frequent sentence. In the third century Christianity began to permeate the educated classes of the Empire and the same movement extended to the provincial officials in Britain. At York, the western headquarters of the empire, Constantius (A.D. 296-306) had before his own accession, sheltered the new faith from the persecution of his predecessor, Diocletian. His wife (the future Empress St. Helena, and mother of the Emperor Constantine), and also his most able and trusted officials, were Christians. Under Constantine, Christianity became the state-religion of Roman Britain and of the empire. It remained so after the provincials were called upon to undertake their own

defence in the fifth century. It continued to hold its position among the people as they slowly fell back before the invaders. Chester remained a Christian city for 200 years, until its destruction in the seventh century (A.D. 617), whilst Wales, the Peak country and other inaccessible districts, were never submerged by the Pagan flood.

It is a matter of history that the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire expressed itself throughout the third and fourth centuries in the widespread erection of churches for public worship. Even before the power of the Faith had won the personal and official support of the emperors, the churches had been so numerous and so important as to kindle the jealousy of Paganism. This was one of the factors which excited the persecution under Diocletian (A.D. 303-305), and the Christian churches were demolished wholesale by his edict. But from his abdication (A.D. 305) onwards the work of church-building recommenced in every direction, and was specially supported by the Emperor Constantius, by St. Helena, and the Emperor Constantine. In Britain, as in Gaul, and Italy, the churches destroyed under Diocletian were restored,[1] and existing temples may have been consecrated for the service of the imperial faith. But whether the fabrics were old or new, we must assume that in the fourth and fifth centuries the public worship of the state was conducted at all important administrative stations in Roman Britain within edifices no less seemly and substantial than the old temples and other official buildings of the period. At that date the ground-plan and the design would possibly have no distinctive ecclesiastical characteristics. But it is impossible to conceive that the ruling classes, who had left behind in Britain enduring monuments of their constructive instincts in walls, forts, temples, villas, baths, &c., should have built no churches

[1] Gildas.

for the official public worship of the empire. If we recall the resources, the pomp, and the ceremonial which surrounded the imperial family and the high officials of Roman administration, if we realize the zeal of the Christians, the influence of the church, and the wealth and importance of Britain throughout the fourth century, we cannot doubt that in all official centres Christian worship was maintained with no less dignity and far deeper devotion than had been accorded to the discredited rites of the temples.

Doubtless in the latter part of the fifth and sixth centuries, the churches gradually sank into ruins or were deliberately burnt as social order perished, and the worshippers disappeared before the slow advance of the invaders. Yet it is not to be assumed that the ecclesiastical handiwork of the Roman-British builders was less permanent than their secular masonry which has survived for sixteen centuries. The buildings might be ruinous, but the walls would not be obliterated, and the substructures would survive until to-day unless purposely removed.

Even at Canterbury, which bore the first brunt of the barbarian invasion, Ethelbert's Christian queen, Bertha, coming from Paris (A.D. 570) after the heathen invaders had been in possession for over a century, found the little church of St. Martin's "built while the Romans were still in the island" [1] and it was repaired for her use. In the North of England, and especially in the hill-country, where the invaders arrived later, the Roman influence persisted far longer than in the south. There were districts in which the interval between the old order and the new—between the lingering tradition of Rome, and the missions of the seventh century—was not beyond the reach of living memory, and where the use of the ancient

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[1] Bede chap. xxvi. St. Martin died about 387-401, so it is improbable that this was the original dedication. St. Martin of Tours was especially venerated by Queen Bertha's family, and the church was probably re-dedicated by her.

fabrics was never forgotten. Chester did not succumb to the Northumbrians until A.D. 617, twenty years after the revival of Christianity in Kent, and the missionaries found in the Peak country Christians who had preserved their faith from generation to generation.[1] In fact "the faith survived the English Conquest to a greater extent than is commonly supposed, and many of our existing churches had a Roman origin"[2]

From this brief review it will be seen that there is the strongest reason to assume that the masonry—more or less dilapidated—or at least the substructures, of numerous Roman Churches still existed in ancient Roman centres throughout England during the seventh century. The hallowed sites were identified and adopted by the missionaries. Bede tells us that Ethelbert allowed the Christians "to build or *repair* Churches in all places." Doubtless the first restorations were rude and perishable, but the clergy were accustomed to the use of stone and brick, and in due course they brought over masons for such work.[3] Thus there can be no reason to reject on principle any reliable indications that throughout England (as in Southern Europe) Roman masonry and materials were incorporated in later structures built and rebuilt upon the primitive sites which are still consecrated to Christian worship.[4]

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[1] The tenacity of Christian tradition in this mining district may be associated with the fact that banishment to the Imperial Mines had been a usual sentence upon Christians in the third century. The half-Roman, half-British name of the "Ecclesburn" *i.e.*, the "Churchbrook" which leads up from the Derwent to the Roman mining settlement at Wirksworth, suggests the existence of a Roman church there. It is also noteworthy that the missionaries showed a special interest in this district and in the lead mines of Wirksworth, and induced the Mercian King to grant them to the Abbey of Repton, which retained them in its protection until the Danish invasion.

[2] Ward, *The Roman Era in Britain*, p. 113.

[3] The efforts of Paulinus undoubtedly led to the erection of Churches of stone at York and Lincoln between 630 and 644.

[4] There is no *prima facie* reason to discredit the tradition that the original Church of St. Helens-on-the-Walls at York was erected over the vault in which the ashes of the Emperor Constantius (who died at York) were deposited by Constantine, and the desecration of the Church at the Reformation may well have been instigated by antipathy to that cult of St. Helen which appears to persist in places with Roman traditions. I am indebted to the Editor for

The comparative rarity of vestiges of primitive Christianity in England has sometimes been adduced as evidence that it had no great hold upon the Roman-British, but this conclusion is not tenable. Tertullian as early as A.D. 198 recorded "In districts of Britain, inaccessible to the Romans but subdued to Christ, . . . the Kingdom & name of Christ are venerated," while the vigorous survival of the church in Wales amongst those who could find there a refuge from the Pagan invaders, exhibits the vitality of their faith. The general Christianity of the British population under the Empire can scarcely be doubted when we find the descendants of the survivors adhering to the ancient worship after a century of isolation and disintegration.

If vestiges of the churches of Roman Britain are faint and rare, it is because the places which they served became naturally the centres of an expanding population. Secular handiwork of the period has survived through neglect and indifference, but Christian structures, with the sepulchral monuments concentrated on the hallowed sites, have—it may be confidently assumed—been effaced by the pious energies of each succeeding generation. They have been obliterated by the accretion of debris and of interments, which have raised the ground-levels, by successive re-constructions and extensions, and by the Gothic transformations of the primitive ground-plans. Thus St. Martin's at Canterbury, though it incorporates the

another link in the chain of continuity. York Minster is the successor of several Churches which have been erected in increasing size and magnificence over the Chapel of wood in which King Edwin received instruction and eventually baptism from Paulinus (A.D. 627). The most ancient masonry in the Minster is the Roman brickwork upon which (according to a tradition which coincides with every probability), the original Chapel was constructed. This masonry is traditionally supposed to belong to a Temple of Bellona. If so, it is probable that the Temple had been dedicated to Christian Worship in Roman times, since York was the seat of a bishop under the Christian Emperors—(one attended the Council of Arles in the reign of Constantine A.D. 314)—and the Church was powerful. It would not have been in accordance with the ways of the Missionaries to found a Church upon a Pagan Temple, in a City in which presumably the sites of ancient Churches could be identified.

materials of the Roman Church, was rebuilt in the thirteenth century.

Moreover, after the Hildebrandine Revival and the Norman Conquest, there was a disposition to efface the earlier memorials and national traditions of the Church of England. Saints of the Roman calendar frequently displaced ancient dedications which kept alive the insular sentiment of the pre-Norman Church. Even the traditional British veneration for the Empress Helena inherited by the Anglo-Saxon church was discouraged, and the dedications to her were in many cases transferred to the Swedish St. Helen (d. 1161), a saint totally unconnected with the national tradition. To Norman ecclesiastics the vestiges of earlier Christianity seemed barbarous and were associated with the irregular customs which challenged Roman authority. Far from claiming reverence, they were doubtless removed when opportunity offered.[1]

The facts justify the following conclusions :—

1.—We must not assume with Sir Henry Howorth that no vestiges of Romano-British churches restored by the early missionaries could possibly be found in Derbyshire or elsewhere north of the Trent. On the contrary many existing churches have a continuous history since they were recorded in Domesday, and there is every reason to believe that those amongst them which stand in places known to have been Roman settlements cover the sites of primitive churches which were tenaciously reoccupied by the clergy as Christianity made its way amongst the

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[1] The infrequent occurrence of Christian sepulchral memorials, whether Roman or Anglo-Saxon, as compared with those of Pagans may be traced to the same causes ; Pagans, whether Roman, British or English were not buried or burnt amongst the haunts of the living, and thus their graves may remain undisturbed for centuries. Christians if possible were buried within consecrated ground which has been broken up again and again to make way for new constructions and new graves in succeeding generations.

English people.[1] Veneration for the consecrated ground and burial place would usually ensure that such sites would remain centres of Christian worship until Domesday, and thenceforward until modern times.

2.—On the other hand, if the vestiges of primitive Christianity are rare as compared with the secular and Pagan relics of the Roman period, it is probably due to the concentration of worship and burials upon the same hallowed sites generation after generation, and to the frequent structural changes and extensions in which, with rare exceptions, the handiwork and even the materials of earlier times have been broken up and obliterated. Nevertheless, whenever the characteristics of Roman or British handicraft appear in the masonry, stones, bricks, tiles, sepulchral relics, debris, or graveyards of churches recorded in Domesday, there is no historical improbability in the assumption that they are vestiges of the *Ecclesia* in which the Christians of the Empire worshipped and which the early missionaries identified and restored.

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[1] Domesday shows 41 churches in Derbyshire, in addition to two "half Churches" (Brailsford and Ednaston), and six in Derby. Of these Bakewell, Wirksworth, and Darley Dale are known to be Roman settlements, whilst in a few other cases discoveries of Roman coins and remains offer signs of Roman occupation. The ancient cult of St. Helen at Darley Dale and Wirksworth is significant.