



Christianity and Cross-Channel Connectivity in Late and Sub-Roman Britain

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ABSTRACT

Christianity was a key channel for continued connections between sub-Roman Britain and the Continent. This paper explores the ways in which these contacts were articulated considering the documentary and archaeological evidence. It is suggested that although links via the Atlantic trading system have been most emphasised in the literature, in fact, there is also strong evidence for cross-Channel communication between the South of England and Northern France.

In the on-going debate about the end of Roman Britain and the fifth-century transition, there is general consensus that Christianity and the Church form one of the more conspicuous threads of continuity (Henig 2004; Petts 2003; Thomas 1981). Whilst in the past some scholars have argued that the late Roman Church made no significant contribution to the early medieval British Church (Frend 1955; 1968; 1979; Radford 1971; Watts 1991), the pendulum of academic opinion is increasingly swinging towards those who would argue that religion can be seen to provide an element of cultural continuity, as the Church becomes more firmly established in the rump successor kingdoms of Western Britain. These successor kingdoms themselves formed a staging-post for the further transmission of Christianity beyond the *limes* to Ireland and Scotland. In the words of Charles Thomas, 'If Continuity (of the British Romans, their life and languages, and of Britannia) is the horse ... the Church is the rider' (Thomas 1981, 351). The Church not only arguably provided an institutional and ideological infrastructure which enabled some British kingdoms to transcend the political chaos of the fifth century, but it also provided a channel for the maintenance of contacts with the Continent. It is these Continental links that I want to explore in this paper.

Traditionally, the early medieval Church in Western Britain is seen as having strong links (theological, artistic and institutional) with Southern and Western France, the Mediterranean, and ultimately the Byzantine world via the Atlantic seaways (Harris 2003; Knight 2007; Wooding 1996). The undoubted importance of this western sea route is affirmed through archaeological evidence, particularly the presence of imported ceramic types from the later fifth century: specifically the Eastern Mediterranean table wares and amphorae, so-called A and B wares; and the slightly later imported pottery from Western France, D/E wares (Campbell 2007). The amphorae would have brought in wine and oil (both needed for liturgical purposes) and there is even Christian imagery (a fragmentary chi-rho symbol) on a sherd of imported *Dérivées de Sigillées Paléochrétiennes* (D Ware) from Dinas Emrys (Gwynedd) (Savory 1960).

These ceramic types have a western distribution, although the overall quantity of imports is relatively low (see Campbell 2007 for a discussion of quantification of the imports). Their importance to the archaeological narrative has disguised their limited distribution, and they are often seen as indicative of diplomatic and trading links with the Roman East, acting as a 'barium meal' for the Byzantine body politic (Harris 2003). The occasional appearance in Western Britain of other Christian objects with an East Mediterranean provenance also attests to links with the Eastern Empire, such as the two St Menas flasks from Cheshire and the Byzantine censer from Glastonbury (Campbell 2007, 74; Griffiths *et al.* 2007, 58; Rahtz 1993, 99–100). The small, but real, distribution of early Byzantine coinage from Britain also seems to have a broadly western distribution (Moorhead 2009).

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FIG. 1. A representative selection of early medieval inscribed stones from Western Britain: (a) Llannor (Caernarvonshire); (b) Penmorfa (Caernarvonshire); (c) Hayle (Cornwall); (d) Penmachno (Caernarvonshire); (e) Llanerfyl (Montgomeryshire); (f) Bodafon (Caernarvonshire).

The other line of evidence that is used to argue for the centrality of the western sea routes is the sub-Roman/early medieval epigraphic tradition of Western Britain and beyond (Fig. 1). Simple Latin and Ogham inscriptions of the fifth to seventh centuries are known from across South-West England, Wales, Ireland and southern Scotland (Edwards 2001; Forsyth 2005; Okasha 1993; Swift 1997). Almost exclusively funerary in nature, it has long been recognised that the epigraphic formulae used on these stones have strong parallels in contemporary epigraphic traditions in the Western Empire (Redknap 1998; Handley 2001). Nash-Williams, compiler of a major corpus of Welsh material, argued that the parallels in terms of the formulae used were strongest with the gravestones of Southern Gaul, particularly from around Lyons, Vienne and the southern Rhône corridor — areas most accessible to Britain via the Atlantic seaways and the Mediterranean (Nash-Williams 1950, 8, 10).

This evidence, whilst inevitably patchy, does seem to suggest that the Church in late antique Britain was closely linked with the Atlantic and the Mediterranean world. I want, however, to suggest that there has been an over-emphasis on these long-distance links and to re-assert the importance of the cross-Channel links throughout the fifth century, emphasising the importance of the contact zone that ran along the English Channel, the area where Britain and Gaul both have long facing coastlines.

PERSONAL LINKS

The textual record for fifth- and sixth-century Britain is slight (Halsall 2013, 51–86), and the little that survives provides no evidence for any sustained or formally structured inter-church contact between the British and East Mediterranean Churches. One of the few texts that has

been adduced to attest to such connections is the *Vita* of St John the Almsgiver. John was a late sixth-century patriarch of Alexandria; his seventh-century *Vita* records the bishop's encounter with a merchant. After the usual series of trials and setbacks John provides the merchant with a boat filled with bushels of corn to trade with Britain, which he exchanges for tin (*VSJE* ch. 10). On his return to Alexandria, the tin has been miraculously converted into silver. However, it is clear that, despite the patriarch's involvement, this contact between Egypt and Britain is a commercial venture, and there is no mention of any contact between the Churches. When he reaches Britain, the merchant encounters 'a great man', not a priest or bishop (*VSJE* ch. 10). Whilst reflecting trade links between the East Mediterranean and Britain, there is no indicator of an ecclesiastical dimension to this relationship. As with all such unique anecdotal records, it is not easy to assess whether the connections are being recorded because they are exceptional or simply as a miraculous event tied to a more mundane interaction.

There is a little more evidence for contacts between Britain and the Church in the Western Empire. Not surprisingly, during the fourth century the British Church was seen as part of the wider Roman Church, and British bishops attended the Council of Arles in A.D. 314. Close links between the Romano-British and the North Gaulish Churches are also attested in the later fourth century. At the very end of the century (probably in A.D. 396), Victricius, Bishop of Rouen, was summoned to Britain to adjudicate in an ecclesiastical dispute of an unspecified nature (Myres 1960, 21–36; *DLS*). This shows that in times of institutional difficulty the Romano-British Church looked to Northern Gaul rather than elsewhere. This pattern is repeated 33 years later in A.D. 429 when Germanus, Bishop of Auxerre, and Lupus, Bishop of Troyes, arrived in Britain to combat the Pelagian heresy. The circumstances of their arrival are not clear. The *Vita Sancti Germani* states that the British summoned Germanus directly, whereas the chronicler Prosper states that the deacon Palladius encouraged the Pope to send Germanus to Britain (*VSG* 12; Barrett 2009; Mommsen 1892, 472, Item 1301). Both versions show that Germanus' sphere of influence was seen as extending into Britain. Both Lupus, who came from Toul (Meurthe-et-Moselle), and Germanus, who was born in Auxerre (Yonne), were natives of north-east/north-central France and, despite having important secular careers before assuming the episcopate, they returned to their native area for their ecclesiastical work (Griffe 1947, I, 240–3; Chadwick 1955, 275–85). According to his *Vita* Germanus' career included the post of *dux*, a significant military post (*VSG* 1). Although the precise location of his command is not further defined, it is hard to resist the possibility, given his geographical location, that this post was the *Dux tractus Armorici et Nervicani*, commander of the military defences along the Northern Gaulish coast (Martindale 1980, 504). Germanus' activities in Britain appear to have been connected with the growth of the cult of St Alban in Gaul. Alban's *passio* appears to have been written in Auxerre, possibly for placement on *tituli* within a church dedicated to the saint (Sharpe 2001; Wood 2009). According to Germanus' *Vita* there was a second visit to Britain in A.D. 440, although this has been contested (Barrett 2009, 206ff.). Whether his second visit is accepted or not, his continued interest in the wider Channel region is attested by his subsequent mission to Armorica, where he intervened against punitive raids by the Alans sanctioned by Aetius following a rebellion (*VSG* 28–42). This mission is one for which his previous possible service as the *Dux tractus Armorici* would have prepared him well.

Prosper recorded that Pope Celestine sent Germanus to Britain at the behest of Palladius. It has been argued that this Palladius was the same Palladius who was sent to Ireland in A.D. 431 by Pope Celestine (Ó Cróinín 2000). Ó Cróinín has also suggested, persuasively, that he is the same Palladius, son of Exuperantius, recorded in *De Reditu Suo*, a poetic record of a journey by the Roman aristocrat Claudius Rutilius Namatianus from Rome to his estate in Gaul in A.D. 416 (*DRS*). Rutilius mentions that at the docks he left his charge Palladius, a youth who had come from Gaul for legal training, and seemingly to the pagan Rutilius' disgust became a monk (Ó Cróinín 2000, 217). There are very few other individuals with the name Palladius known from this period who fit the bill; either their dates are wrong or we know the name of their father (*ibid.*, 213–16).

Rutilius also records that Palladius' father Exuperantius 'now teaches the inhabitants of the Armorican coastal regions to love the restoration of peace' (*DRS* 1.126). Exuperantius was a military officer (*praefectus praetorio Galliarum*) when killed in Arles in A.D. 424, so, like Germanus, he may well also have acted as *Dux tractus Armorici* (Ó Cróinín 2000, 217–18). They both had

connections in a political or military capacity with Armorica. This further emphasises the close links between the secular and ecclesiastical administration in Northern Gaul and its sphere of influence along the Channel coast, and Palladius' connection with them both (Mathisen 1979).

It is harder to identify the other individuals with British links to fifth-century Gaul. A Mansuetus, recorded as being British at the Council of Tours in A.D. 461, may be the same Mansuetus who was later Bishop of Toul (Thomas 1981, 51). We also have Faustus, a Briton who became abbot of the important monastery at Lérins (Île Saint-Honorat Cannes), and subsequently Bishop of Riez (Alpes-de-Haute Provence). We know that he was in correspondence with Sidonius Apollinaris, Bishop of Clermont Ferrand, who also mentions Riocatus, a colleague of Faustus calling him 'a truly venerable ... priest and monk' and noting his return 'to his Britons' with books obtained in Gaul (Sidonius, *Carm.* 16; *Ep.* 9.6.9). Sidonius Apollinaris also corresponded with Patiens, Bishop of Lyons, who was the patron of Constantius' *Life of Germanus*, and with Constantius himself (Sidonius, *Ep.* 5.1.), emphasising that the links between the Churches of Southern France and Britain need not be only via the western seaways but also via a circle of ecclesiastical correspondence that spanned central Gaul.

Significantly, such ecclesiastical communication provided a key channel via which the influence of the Lérins school of monasticism may have been felt in Britain. In this context we can recall that in the late fourth century, Martin of Tours was a colleague of Victricius of Rouen. The link between Victricius and Martin is confirmed by Sulpicius Severus, who says that Martin was asked, at Chartres, to help a mute twelve-year-old girl, and deferred to the bishops Valentinus and Victricius, 'who happened to be walking beside him' (*Dialogues* 3.2). This also shows how monastic ideals could reach Britain. More generally, when we map the evidence from the documentary sources in the fifth century, it can be seen that all our evidence links Britain to Northern Gaul and Burgundy and down the Rhône through Lyons (FIG. 2). There is no fundamental reason to assume that all ecclesiastical contacts were directed via the Atlantic coast.

EPIGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

Turning away from the written sources, what can archaeology tell us about lines of influence in the fifth century? As noted earlier, the corpus of early medieval epigraphy from Western Britain has provided evidence for links between the Insular Church and Southern France, particularly Lyons and Vienne. However, more recently, Handley has shown that the formulae used in Britain which were seen as being distinctively Gallic, such as *Hic Iacet*, are in fact found throughout the late Roman Empire (Handley 2001). Handley has also argued that the early medieval British epigraphic habit need not be described in terms of borrowing from Continental practices, but is one facet of a wider revival in epigraphy in the late antique world from the mid-fourth century onwards (*ibid.*, 195). However, whilst Handley is correct in arguing that we should not be looking at the British epigraphy in terms of 'borrowing' or 'influence', it is certainly possible to recognise broad stylistic zones in late antique epigraphy, and the Western British examples can be shown to have much in common with the epigraphy of Northern Gaul, particularly Normandy and eastern Brittany (the *tractus amoricani*). To do this, it is necessary to move beyond Handley's arguments, which are based primarily on the language of the formulae, to the physical appearance of these inscriptions. Even a quick review of the epigraphy from the Western Empire shows that the memorial stones regularly incorporate a very distinctive range of symbols. Common symbols include paired peacocks, often standing either side of a cantharus or chalice, and the chi-rho (Gauthier 1991). In some cases, the quality of carving is good, and in others, extremely poor; nonetheless there does seem to be a consistent iconographic repertoire. This contrasts strongly with the British corpus which is almost entirely aniconic. The few that do have symbols are scattered across north Wales and southern Scotland, such as the group of stones from the Whithorn area that have chi-rho symbols on them (Forsyth 2005).

The lack of the peacock imagery, so common on the Continent, is particularly striking. The use of peacocks is known in Insular sculpture only from a small number of stones in western Ireland, including Caherillan (Co. Kerry) and Reask (Co. Kerry) (Sheehan 2009). These have been taken to indicate stylistic influence on the sculptural tradition from the Mediterranean (*ibid.*,

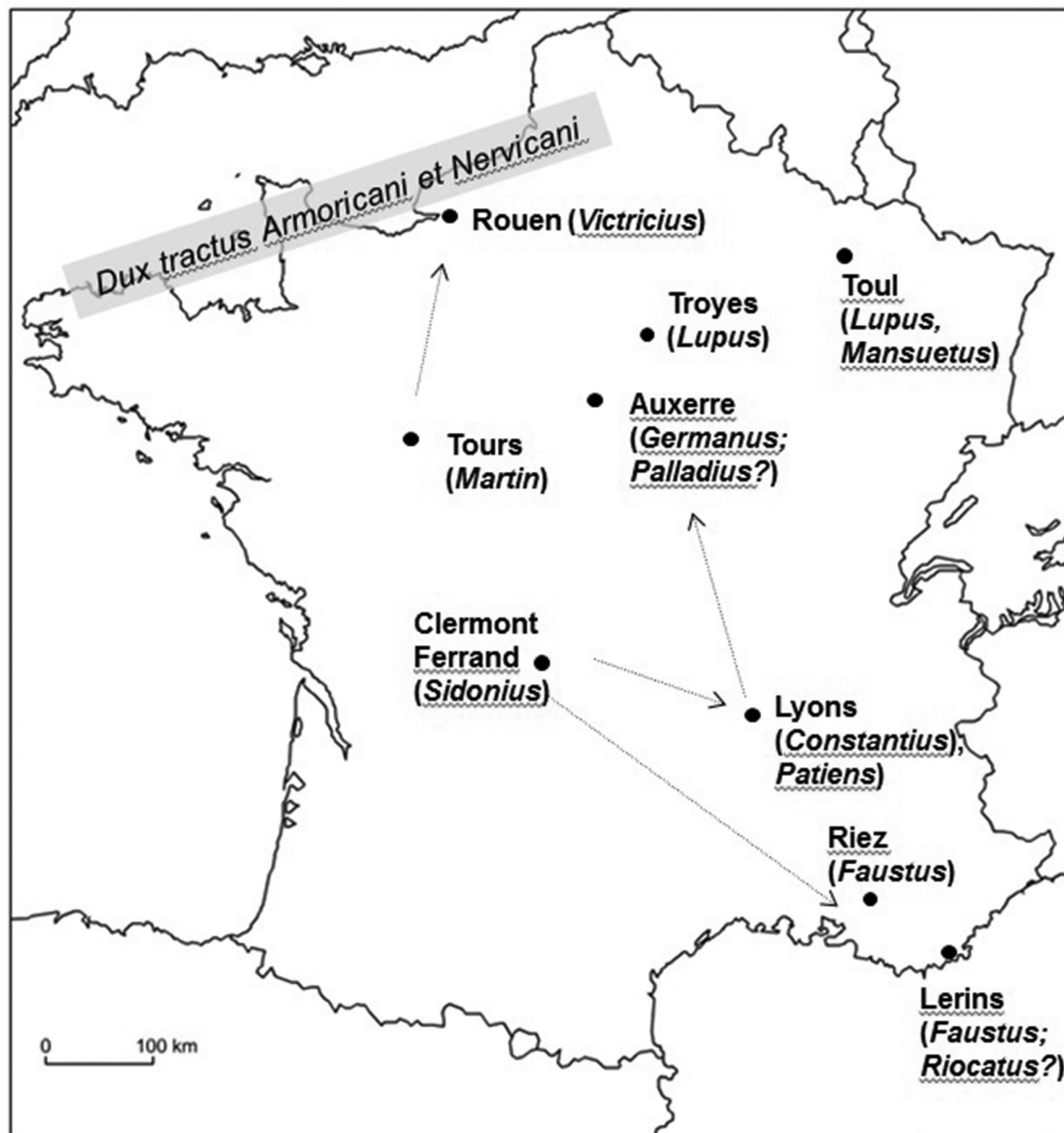


FIG. 2. Location and interrelationships of late fourth- and fifth-century Gaulish Christian figures with associations with Britain. This shows that these connections are centred on central and eastern France rather than the Atlantic coastline.

200–2). However, Knight has rightly pointed out the similarity of some Insular cross-carved stones with a group of sixth-century stelae from the Vexin to the south-east of Normandy (Knight 1996, 118–19; Fleches-Morgues 1995), and more generally, this iconography is, as noted above, widespread in the Western Empire (FIG. 3). It is also important to note the chronology of these Irish examples, as the evidence points to them being mid- or late sixth century in date, and even if the argument for Mediterranean stylistic influence is accepted, it certainly cannot be used as an indicator of fifth-century connections with this region.

So we have a problem. Insular Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries has an epigraphic tradition that draws on, or at least parallels, the inscriptions of the continental Western Empire in terms of the range of memorial formulae used, but, physically, the inscriptions look very different from decorated stones from the Continent. One explanation is that the lack of symbolism or artistic representation on the Insular inscribed stones is simply due to the early Church in Britain reproducing the inscriptions from Continental models without having seen the stones themselves — with perhaps the formulae being memorised by an individual, or even recorded

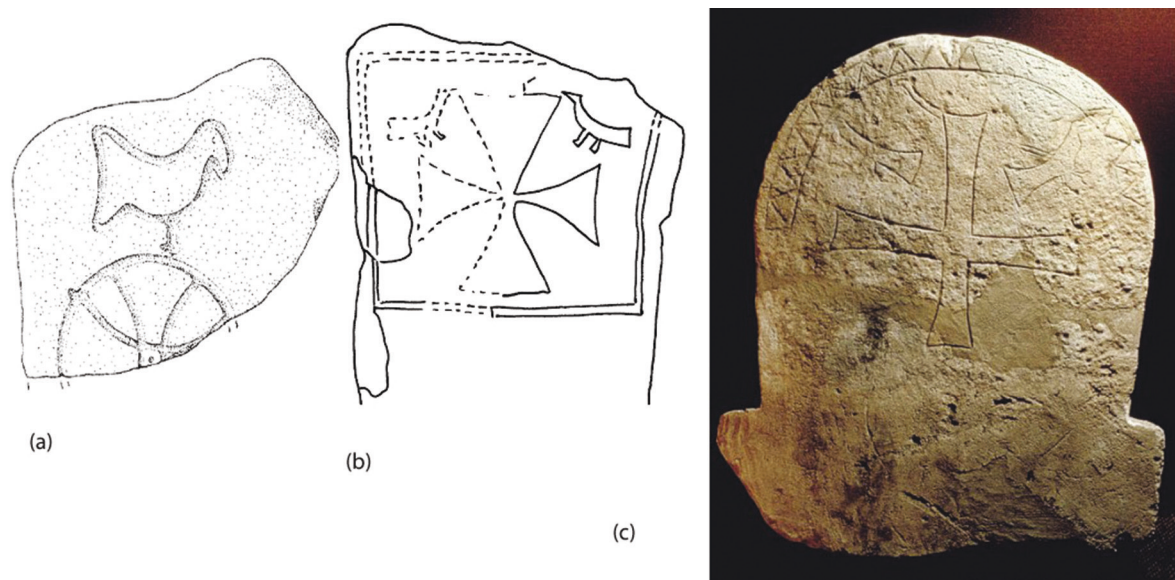


FIG. 3. Depiction of peacocks on early medieval sculpture: (a) Caherillan (County Kerry), Ireland; (b) Reask (County Kerry), Ireland; (c) Ableiges (Val-d'Oise), France.

on a wax tablet. However, the epigraphic hand used by the British carvers shows relatively little idiosyncrasy when compared with the Continental corpus (Tedeschi 2001). This suggests that they were at least familiar with the appearance of some of the Continental inscriptions, particularly as the script used is a version of capitals, a hand used specifically for monumental epigraphy, rather than the cursive hand used for handwriting, and thus unlikely to have been seen on small movable or portable objects. This would seem to indicate at least some sort of familiarity with the physical appearance of the Continental examples. An alternative explanation could be that the stones which were acting as a source or inspiration for the British memorials were themselves not decorated. So are there any other areas in the Empire which have late antique epigraphy which does not conform to the normal layout of late antique gravestones with an extensive use of Christian symbolism?

We can find just such a zone if we look at the region running along the north of France from Brittany through to the Pas-de-Calais — where the epigraphic tradition clearly has a strong resemblance to the early Insular tradition. Breton material has become increasingly familiar to those working on Insular epigraphy due to the recent publication of a comprehensive corpus of early medieval epigraphy (Davies *et al.* 2000). It has, however, perhaps not been appreciated how far the Breton material forms a continuum with other northern Gaulish material further east. For example, the slate plaques from Ille-et-Vilaine (Brittany), such as that found at Bais, have strong parallels in the schist plaque from Couville in the far north of the Cotentin peninsula of western Normandy (Davies *et al.* 2000, 258–78; Le Blant 1856, 180, pl. 13, 60). Whilst again we need to be cautious about regarding these similarities as borrowings and influence, we can at least see a common stylistic zone that spreads across both sides of the Channel in the fifth century. Further east, in Lower Normandy, the small corpus of late antique epigraphy also combines a widespread range of epigraphic formulae with a lack of decorative schemes (Vipard 2002) (FIG. 4).

The similarities between the British and the North Gaulish stones are striking. Whilst Handley was correct to emphasise that, in terms of the formulae alone, the Insular material is consistent with a wide range of potential sources across the Western Empire, in terms of their material appearance the closest parallels (both physically and geographically) are the stones from Northern Gaul.

CHRISTIAN MATERIAL CULTURE

If we look at small finds we can also find evidence for Gaulish, in addition to East Mediterranean, connections with Roman and sub-Roman Christian culture in Britain. In the fourth century,

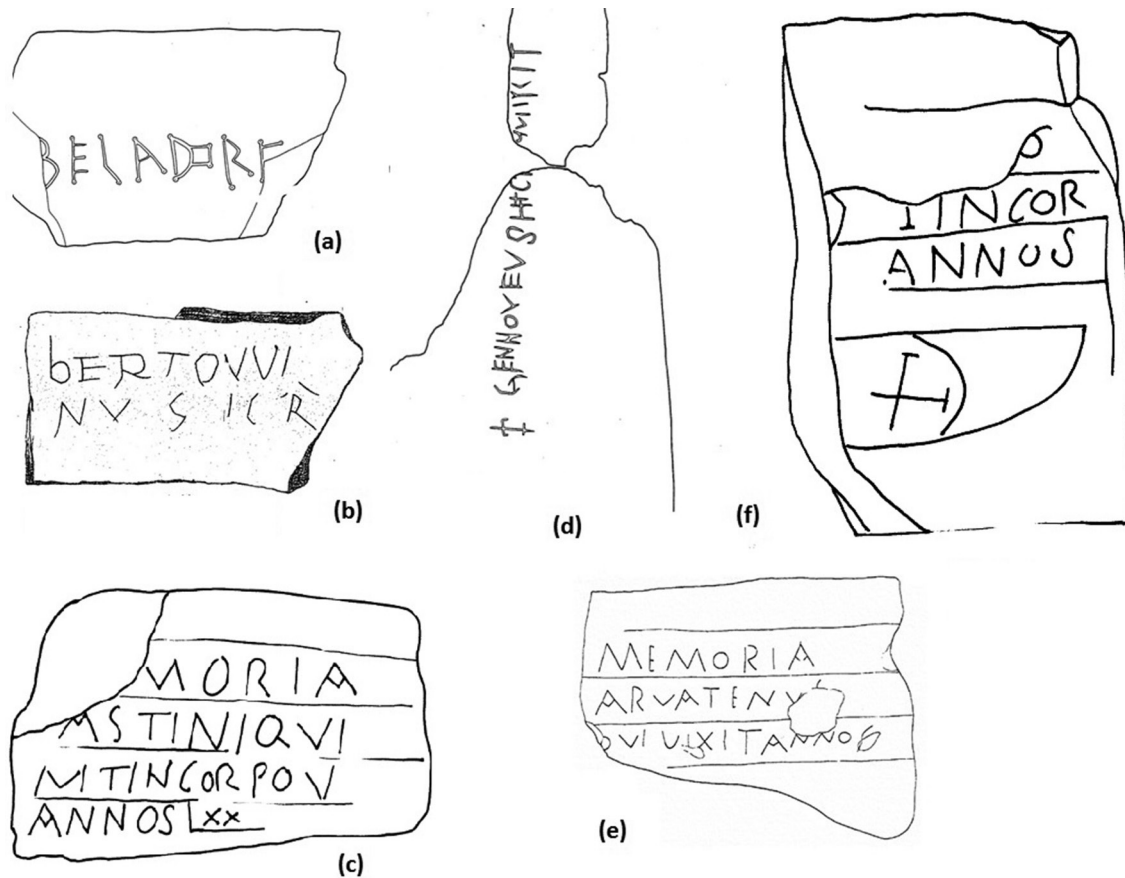


FIG. 4. Late antique epigraphy from Brittany and Normandy: (a) Bais, Ille-et-Vilaine, Brittany; (b) Couville, Manche, Normandy; (c) Vieux, Calvados, Normandy; (d) Visseiche, Ille-et-Vilaine, Brittany; (e) Vieux, Calvados, Normandy; (f) Vieux, Calvados, Normandy.

parallels have been drawn between some elements of the large and high-value hoards from Britain containing objects with Christian symbolism and material from the Near East. For example, similarities have been demonstrated between the silver hoards from Water Newton (Cams.) and hoards from the Eastern Empire (Frend 1984/5; Painter 1999, 7–13). However, this is partly because we have far better evidence for silver plate from these regions; and it is notable that often the parallels made are between fourth- or early fifth-century silverware from Britain and sixth-century or even later plate from the Near East. However, it is equally easy to find good parallels to the British material from Gaul (e.g. Baratte 1980).

Despite these exotic parallels, Christian material culture from fourth- and early fifth-century Britain sits comfortably within the range of Christian objects from the Western Empire, particularly Gaul and its immediate neighbours. For example, the so-called toothpick with a chi-rho symbol from Canterbury has strong parallels with one from Kaiseraugst in Switzerland (e.g. Johns and Potter 1985, 333; Cahn and Kaufmann-Heinimann 1984). Elsewhere, a silver spoon with a chi-rho engraved on it from Monbadon (Gironde) has strong parallels with the similarly decorated spoons from the Canterbury hoard (Baratte and Metzger 1991, 308; Johns and Potter 1985). The inscription of a chi-rho on a cup in a fourth-century hoard from Alesia in France would fit comfortably in a British context, as would a bronze dish with an engraved central chi-rho found in the Seine (Tassinari 1975, no. 104; Le Gall 1966).

As noted above, paired peacocks are not found on late antique inscriptions in Britain. But this motif does appear on a small group of belt-buckles from Britain, from Pen-y-Corrdyn (Clwyd), *Tripontium* (Warwicks.) and Stanwick (North Yorks.), which carry the image of paired peacocks opposed over a cantharus (Petts 2003, 108–13). Another interesting example of material culture links between sub-Roman Britain and Gaul can be seen in a small group of vessels with repoussé

copper-alloy plaques showing Christian scenes. We have one example from Britain, discovered in an Anglo-Saxon grave at Long Wittenham, near Dorchester-on-Thames (Akeman 1860–1, 350; Cook 2004, 82–3; Henig and Booth 2000, 186, fig. 7.4). This has usually been missed out of the inventory of Christian objects from Roman Britain and it does not appear in Charles Thomas's *Christianity in Roman Britain* or Frances Mawer's corpus of Christian objects from Roman Britain (Mawer 1995, 82–3; Thomas 1981). Henig has suggested that it may be of sub-Romano-British workmanship (Henig and Booth 2000, 186). However, it can be seen as one of a series of stylistically very similar vessels known from Northern France and the area around the mouth of the Rhine, from Lavoye (Meuse), Miannay (Somme) and Wiesoppenheim (Rhineland-Palatinate) (Neuman de Vegvar 2006, 37–40; Baratte and Metzger 1991; Chenet 1935) (FIGS 5–6). These items are also similar to a copper-alloy mount for a bucket or similar container from



FIG. 5. Distinctive fifth- and sixth-century copper-alloy Christian vessels from Northern France and England: (a) Long Wittenham (Oxon.), England; (b) Lavoye, Meuse, France; (c) Miannay, Somme, France; (d) Wiesoppenheim, Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany.

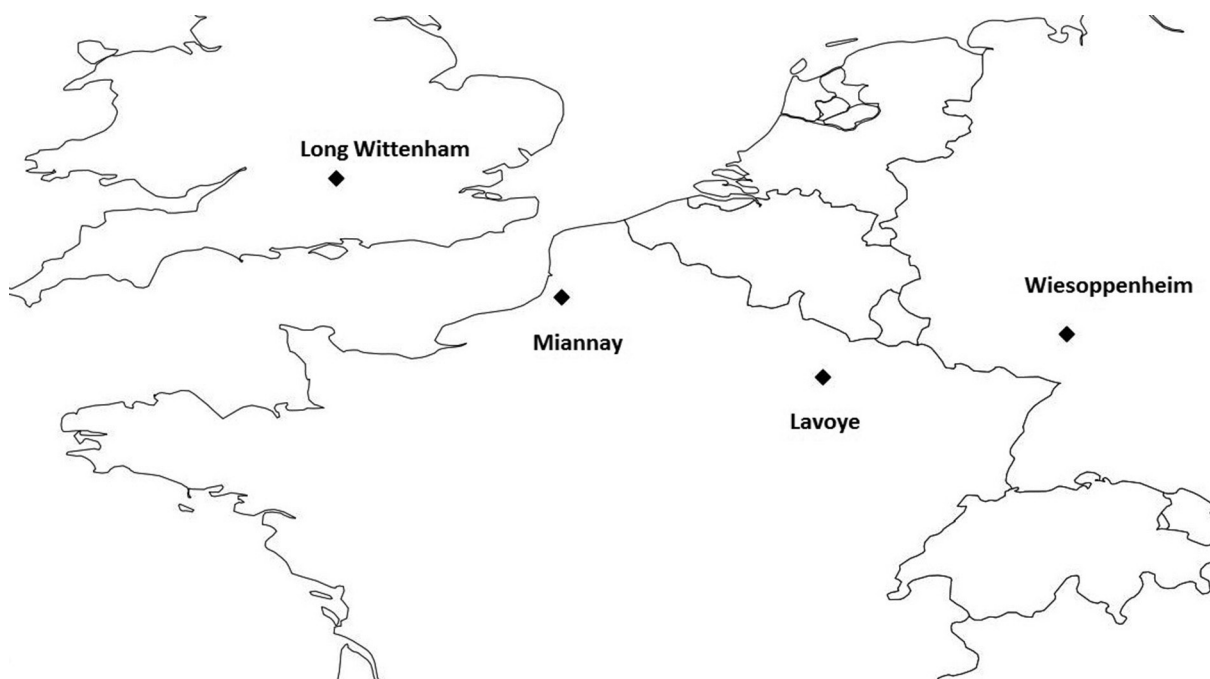


FIG. 6. Distribution of fifth- and sixth-century copper vessels of the Long Wittenham–Lavoye type.

an Anglo-Saxon burial at Strood in Kent, which has its closest parallels in the gilded copper overlay for a wooden bucket carrying biblical scenes from Vermand (Aisne) (Cook 2004, 69; Chenet 1935, 101–4, fig. 31). Although these example of late antique Frankish metalwork from England were found in Anglo-Saxon graves, there is no reason to assume that they were brought over the Channel by pagan Anglo-Saxons; they can equally be seen as a continuation of on-going patterns of exchange of religious items between Christian communities in Southern England and Northern Gaul. The location of the Long Wittenham grave suggests another, more likely, possibility. The site lies close to Dorchester-on-Thames (Oxon.), a small Roman town, and a site with increasing evidence for a continuing Roman identity into the fifth century (Henig and Booth 2000, 188–93). There is even circumstantial evidence that the town may have become the location of a sub-Roman see (Doggett 1986). The survival of the town as a sub-Roman enclave and a possible centre of Christian continuity provides an intriguing context for the Long Wittenham vessel.

THE ENGLISH CHANNEL AND FIFTH-CENTURY CONNECTIVITY

The examples presented above illustrate the fifth-century ecclesiastical contexts and exchange links between sub-Roman Britain and North Gaul. When we bring together these disparate threads, it is possible to see communication between the late antique Churches of Britain and Gaul expressed in a number of different ways: through personal links and connections, through the spread of stylistic influences in burial memorials, and through the physical movement of objects. Whilst none of these connections is necessarily on a substantial scale they can be set against the general lack of evidence for overseas connections in early and mid-fifth-century Britain.

Discussions of Christianity in Roman Britain often have the subtext that the material culture and architectural evidence of the Church is not as strong as it is on the Continent. But this view arises only if we do not compare like with like. The material from Britain does not, indeed, compare well in quality or quantity with the objects and church structures from Central and Southern Gaul of the fifth and sixth centuries. But it is more impressive than the evidence for fourth-century Christianity in Northern Gaul. For example, from Brittany, the artefactual evidence for fourth-century Christianity is only a chi-rho graffito on a sherd from Quimper and a tentatively Christian gold ring from Carhaix (Galliou 1976; Cabrol and Leclercq 1907).

The identification of many Northern Gaulish structures as churches is often predicated on a continuity of use into the fifth and sixth centuries. The actual remains of fourth-century date would not be diagnostic in the absence of the later features. Thus lack of continuity on church sites in Britain might be a strong argument for different trajectories of Christianity between Gaul and Britain in the later fifth century. It is not, though, an argument for contrasting the nature of the Church on either side of the English Channel in the fourth or early to mid-fifth centuries.

The connections that have been discussed between the British Church and the wider Empire via the Channel are important for a number of reasons. First, they allow us to place less emphasis on the Atlantic sea route as an axis of exchange and to recognise other important routes and connections. We can begin to refigure the fifth-century Church in Britain not as an exotic survival reliant on long-distance links with the Mediterranean world, but as an integral part of the Northern Gaulish ecclesiastical world. Rather than seeing the Church's main external outlet being the Atlantic seaboard, we can instead identify the main zone of contact in the fifth century further east in the English Channel, roughly between the Côtes d'Armor and the Pas-de-Calais. This need not perhaps be such a surprise. It is after all a significant stretch of coastline and is the coast physically closest to Britain with most areas of Northern France being accessible in relatively short crossings of only a day or two.

Unlike the Atlantic exchange network, which had been of limited extent in the late Roman period, the fifth-century Channel network is a continuation of a late Roman period exchange system. This can best be recognised through the trade in ceramics. For example, Black Burnished ware produced in Dorset was widely traded across the Channel into Northern France. Major assemblages have been found in Rouen, Bayeux, Cherbourg, Alet, Avranches and Coutances (Thierry and Dufournier 1983; De la Campagne and Dufournier 1993; Fulford and Allen 1996; Morris 2010, 135), with Black Burnished ware making up 15–20 per cent of an assemblage from Bayeux and up to 40 per cent of an assemblage from Lillebonne (Tuffreau-Libre *et al.* 1995, 133–8). Recent work has pushed the terminal date for the production of some forms of Black Burnished ware further into the fifth century (Gerrard 2004), and it would be intriguing to explore how far into the fifth century Black Burnished ware was traded to Northern France.

Exchange also went the other way. Ceramics produced in Northern Gaul have a distribution that suggests that both sides of the Channel were supplied via the same distribution network. The sponge-decorated ceramic, known by its French name *céramique à l'éponge*, probably produced in Bordeaux and around Poitiers, is common in Western France, between the Loire and Gironde with a scatter of findspots in Brittany and Normandy (as far as the Seine), the Channel Islands and Southern Britain. Although it was presumably shipped up the west coast of Gaul, its distribution in Britain suggests that it was then brought eastwards up the Channel rather than following the west coast route to any extent (Galliou *et al.* 1980). Argonne Ware, produced in North-East Gaul, has an almost identical distribution in Britain, but in this case it was distributed down the Channel in a westerly direction (Blaszkiewicz and Jigan 1991). Langouet has suggested that the distribution of *céramique à l'éponge*, which is primarily coastal in Brittany and England, represents trade by cabotage (Langouet 1996, 77). This contrasts with the more directed distribution of Argonne ware, where in Northern Gaul in particular there is a clearly more substantial and focused trade into north-east Brittany, essentially the hinterland of Alet, whilst in Britain there is a focus on London and Kent (Fulford 1977; 1978; Morris 2010, 131). The central English Channel zone can thus clearly be seen as a zone where the two ceramic distribution systems came together. The southern coast of England and northern coasts of Gaul were plugged into similar maritime networks of trade and communication, which included trade and exchange on a variety of scales.

Possible cross-Channel links can also be recognised in other forms of material culture. There is the intriguing distribution of the so-called Quoit Brooch style metalwork. This has been described as a continuation of a late Roman metalwork tradition, produced for mixed successor populations after the withdrawal of Roman rule, and indicative of sustained interaction between Germanic and Romano-British cultural groups (for a range of different perspectives, see Ager 1996; Hirst and Clark 2009, 666–8; Welch 2007). Although mostly found in Southern and Eastern England, from Wiltshire through to Kent, the origin of these objects appears to be firmly in Continental

and not Romano-British metalwork (Ager 2012, 241). Increasing numbers of Quoit Brooch style artefacts are known from Northern Gaul, including examples from Pont-de-Buis-les-Quimerch (Finistère), Reville (Manche), Benouville (Calvados), and Thennes (Somme) (Scuvee 1973, fig. 43: T. n 147-III, pl. 57; Lorren 2001, 1, pl. 14; Macgregor 1997, 125–6), although the Quoit Brooch style material recorded as coming from Herpes (Charentes) is of dubious provenance and more likely to come from Northern France (Ager 1997). Most spectacular has been the recent discovery of a late fourth- and early fifth-century inhumation cemetery at Saint-Marcel (Morbihan) in southern Brittany in which five graves contained objects consistent with Quoit Brooch style metalwork; several of these also contained weapons (Le Boulanger and Simon 2012). Whether one chooses to see these graves as representing the burials of formal *foederati* or something less structured, it is becoming probable that objects of this style were being produced on both sides of the Channel in the mid-fifth century and reflect some form of shared cultural identity.

This serves to emphasise the importance of the English Channel as a contact zone in this period. Traditionally, the tendency has been to see the Atlantic or western seaways as being the maritime province of the British, whilst the North Sea zone was a Germanic pond. However, neither approach has adequately dealt with the English Channel except for annexing the west and east ends into the Atlantic or North Sea zone respectively. Instead the evidence perhaps points to the Channel being a zone of both north–south and east–west contact, where cultural influences from the late antique and ‘Germanic’ worlds could coincide. For example, distinctively Anglo-Saxon metalwork (i.e. clearly derived from England rather than the Germanic homelands) is known from several places in Normandy, particularly around Caen; Gregory of Tours wrote about an Anglo-Saxon population in the Bessin to the west of Caen (Welch 2007; *HF* 5.26).

CONCLUSION

This paper has aimed to place the sub-Roman British Church in its geographical context. The written evidence indicates that links were predominantly with Northern Gaul, Burgundy and the Rhône corridor. This also appears to be reflected to some extent in the material culture. Fifth-century British inscriptions have their strongest parallels in Northern Gaul, in the zone approximating to the so-called Armorican shore. There are hints that this axis of communication may have started to shift westwards in the sixth century; though noticeably the evidence for the use of late antique symbolism on the inscribed stones is likely to have begun only in the sixth century at about the same time as E ware begins to be imported. Finally, I hope I have emphasised the importance of the Channel as a region of cultural exchange; it is important not to forget that in the sixth century, the Welsh saint Samson arrived in Gaul from Wales at Alet, near Saint Malo, in the very east of Brittany, and virtually in Normandy, having travelled via the Channel Islands. One of the few late antique baptisteries known from north of the Loire can be found at Portbail on the western coast of the Cotentin peninsula, crucially not a late Roman *civitas* capital, but a port site (De Bouïard 1957; 1967; Pilet-Lemière 1998; Petts forthcoming). It is at sites such as this, rather than Tintagel or Canterbury, that we might better be able to understand the nature of late antique cross-Channel contexts and their relationship with the early Church.

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