

# Tempora Christiana? Conversion and Christianisation in Western Britain AD 300–700

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*It is argued that conversion and Christianisation in the late and post-Roman West were complex and variegated processes that involved the reception, internalisation and institutionalisation of Christianity within a variety of socio-political contexts. These processes were simplest where accommodations between Christian and secular ideologies, traditions, attitudes to power and authority could be achieved without causing significant upheaval. The Christianisation of the Roman aristocracy was facilitated by its framing within the traditional imperial and military idioms of the late-Roman West, but less Romanised areas, such as the west of Britain, were not so conducive to this form of Christianisation. Moreover, the collapse of the imperial system in Britain in the early 5th century deprived evangelists of this important ideological and institutional framework. Thus Christianity had comparatively little impact in western Britain throughout the 4th and into the 5th century, and evangelists were faced with a difficult task. It is suggested that it may have been the encroachment of the pagan Anglo-Saxons that instigated the widespread adoption of Christianity amongst the post-Roman British. Nevertheless, Christianisation was a slow and complex process, and it took several generations for Christianity to become firmly established throughout western Britain. The British aristocracy are likely to have been Christian by the time that Gildas was writing in the middle of the 6th century, but forms of paganism persisted throughout this century and beyond.*

*The study of early medieval conversion can be bewildering; a game played in swirling mist on a far from level playing field in which unseen hands are constantly shifting the dimly glimpsed goalposts.*  
(Fletcher 1997, 9)

Throughout much of the later 20th century interpretations of the origins and development of Christianity in western Britain<sup>1</sup> centred upon the collapse of Romano-British Christianity in the first half of the 5th century and the subsequent reintroduction of Christianity from southern Gaul and the Mediterranean during the later 5th and 6th centuries (Frend 1968; 1979; Nash-Williams 1950, 1, 4; Radford 1971, 8–10; but see Toynbee 1953). The conversion of the post-

Roman British kingdoms was attributed to wandering holy men of an ‘Age of the Saints’, out of which a common and distinctively monastic ‘Celtic Church’ emerged throughout western Britain and Ireland (Bowen 1956; 1969; Thomas 1971). Since the early 1980s, notions of a common ‘Celtic Christianity’ have been rejected (Hughes 1981; Davies 1992), and it is now acknowledged that Romano-British Christianity survived into the post-Roman centuries, and that it was from within these communities, albeit with contact and influence from the Continent, that the early medieval British Church developed (Edwards and Lane 1992; Lambert 2010; Petts 2003; Seaman 2006; Thomas 1981; contra Frend 2003).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, considerable ambiguity surrounds the nature of conversion and Christianisation in western Britain, and despite much

interest in recent years these processes are often treated as unproblematic and largely inevitable. Moreover, the tendency of British scholars to divide the conversion process between distinct 'Roman' and 'early medieval' periods, and to consider western Britain in isolation from other parts of early medieval Europe has removed vital context. Thus whilst reviews by historians and archaeologists have appeared in a wide range of different locations in recent years (Lambert 2010; Petts 2003; 2011; Turner 2006; Yorke 2006), this paper gives an opportunity to take stock of where we are with the data, its interpretation, and to identify a new narrative to understand the conversion and Christianisation of western Britain as a complex and variegated process which was enacted across the 4th to 7th centuries and beyond.

### *Theories of conversion and Christianisation in the late and post-Roman West*

What we describe as 'paganism' and 'Christianity' were not strictly defined or comparable concepts, and the bipolar opposition that we often perceive between them is a product of hindsight (Bowden 2008, 295; Pryce 2009, 144; Urbanczyk 2003, 16-22; Yorke 2006, 99). What we described as 'paganism' encompassed a great multitude of beliefs and practices which could and did overlap with Christian ones (Cameron 2012, 75). Early Christianity possessed concepts of 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy', but what defined these was contested and subject to redefinition. Moreover, whilst Christianity was an organised religion with a well-defined hierarchy, criteria for inclusion and exclusion, and highly regulated codes of conduct and belief, it was enacted on a day to day basis by local communities who chose which of its teachings to accept, which to reject, and which to adapt for their own needs (Klingshirn 1994, 1-2). Thus whether a group or individual was considered 'Christian' or 'pagan' depended on the circumstances and attitudes of the commentator (Pluskowski and Patrick 2003, 45; Yorke 2006, 99). The laity often fell short of the Church's expectations and the sources tell us frequently of relapse and confusion amongst converts, but this does not mean that those condemned of paganism did not consider themselves to be Christians. Indeed, it is useful to draw a distinction between the two kinds of 'pagan' encountered by early evangelists. On the one hand were members of laity who were accused of paganism by the clergy, but saw themselves as professed Christians. It

is these individuals that were frequently condemned in sermons and conciliar legislation. On the other we have individuals that did not see themselves as Christians, although this may not have precluded them from worshipping the Christian God (Klingshirn 1994, 213). Conversion was not therefore a linear event which began with a pagan and ended with a Christian (Halsall 2010, 269). It was a complex process of reception, adaptation and negotiation which could be punctuated by periods of relapse and error, but also transitions to a more intense or 'correct' form of Christian life.

Martin Carver has rightly noted that we must credit the communities to which Christianity was introduced with a '*wide and deep knowledge of their world and its philosophical and political concerns*' (Carver 2009, 341). The theory of conversion and Christianisation posited in this paper presupposes that this knowledge was created and maintained by a '*duality of structure*' which constituted both the rhythms and practices of day to day life and more overt structured experiences (Edwards 2005, 127-128; Petts 2011, 46-49). Converts did not merely absorb new sets of beliefs and practices, rather conversion involved the reception and reworking of Christian beliefs and attitudes within the context of the agent's own metaphysical framework (the process of internalisation). At the same time the articulation of these beliefs and attitudes was related dialectically to the ideological and institutional frameworks within which they operated, including socio-political and ecclesiastical structures (the process of institutionalisation). Thus conversion was complex and potentially confrontational. It was ultimately achievable, however, because Christianity was capable of successfully negotiating these entangled relationships. Three salient characteristics contributed to this: its small-scale forms of organisation, multiple social definitions, and doctrinal flexibility (Smith 2005, 223). The Late Antique Church was heterodox on both the micro and macro scale, and so it was flexible enough, in practice and structure, to accommodate itself to a range of social formations (Brown 2003, 14-15; Petts 2011, 26-28). Christianity was therefore well disposed to moving from one social context to another, repeatedly mutating and reconstructing itself in ways that still preserved its core features (Brown 2003, 14-15, 358-359; Smith 2005, 222-224). Nevertheless, the processes of assimilation and adaptation which were essential to conversion were complex and drawn-out. This could be particularly so amongst the lower and most conservative levels of society (Fletcher 1997, 64).

The forms which conversion and Christianisation took were greatly influenced by pre-existing socio-political, cultural and religious frameworks. They were most successful where a mutual accommodation between old and new could be established or where the bonds with old ways could be broken without causing significant upheaval. The conversion to Islam in the Sahel region of Africa, for example, was quickest amongst urban and nomad groups whose ties to traditional temporal, calendrical and ancestral networks were weakest (Insoll 2004, 133), whilst in 4th- and 5th-century Rome, Christianisation of the aristocracy had to take forms in 'which much of the Roman secular tradition was preserved' (Brown 1961, 2, 9). Raymond Van Dam has argued that Christianisation of the aristocracy in late Roman central and southern Gaul was facilitated by the mutual foundation of secular tradition and Christianity on the idioms of the Roman imperial state, and that the invocation of idioms of imperial authority helped evangelists make Christianity acceptable and attractive to late Roman aristocrats (Van Dam 1985). Martin of Tours' battle against rural paganism and the subsequent development of his cult, for example, were couched within imperial and military frameworks (see the depiction of Martin by Sulpicius Severus in *Vita Martini* and *Dialogues*). Fletcher even wonders whether Martin made use of soldiers from local garrisons when he destroyed temples, shrines, and cult sites (Fletcher 1997, 45). In this way Martin was able to remain antagonistic to paganism but through his appearance as an emperor, soldier, teacher or doctor non-Christian aristocrats were able to concede to his message without undermining their own authority (Van Dam 1985, 133). At the same time bishops were assuming roles that were increasingly being left by the imperial administration and the old landed aristocracy (Fletcher 1997, 50). Eventually Gallic aristocrats came to see Christianity as the final 'repository of Roman culture' (Van Dam 1985, 151–155; Sarris 2011, 209). Thus, as Christianity increasingly came to give cohesion and identity to Gallic society the inducement for conversion grew.

However, this model of Christianisation was restricted to those who were freed from the traditions and subcultures of rural life (Klingshirn 1994, 199). For the majority of the population the bonds with what the clergy saw as 'pagan' practices were much harder to break; Christianisation was therefore slower and, in the eyes of the clergy, less complete. This was because rural communities were tied much more closely to systems of social reproduction and habitual agricultural practices

that were mediated through intricate patterns of non-Christian festivals, rites, myths and customs (Klingshirn 1994, 209–213). Thus Martin of Tours, Germanus of Auxerre, and Caesarius of Arles frequently condemned the 'pagan customs' held by the countryfolk to whom they preached (Van Dam 1985, 121; Fletcher 1997, 64; Klingshirn 1994, 214). A sermon by Caesarius, bishop of Arles between c500–543, for example, noted how:

*We have heard that some of you make vows to trees, pray to fountains, and practice diabolic augury.... What is more there are some unfortunate and miserable people who are not only unwilling to destroy shrines of the pagans but even worse are not afraid or ashamed to build up those which have been destroyed.*  
(Caesarius of Arles, *Sermons* 53.1)

William Klingshirn has argued that vows to trees and prayers to fountains did not constitute a substitute for Christian rituals or indeed a challenge to them, rather they were a parallel system of belief and practice that came about when Christianity offered no credible alternative for dealing with the vagaries of agricultural life or maintaining the structures of rural society (Klingshirn 1994, 219).

We should not therefore expect to see a clear dichotomy between Christians and pagans in post-Roman western Britain. As Guy Halsall has noted, the extremes of non-Christian religious belief and the hard line Christianity represented by evangelists such as Caesarius of Arles were 'sparsely populated poles, between which lay many different combinations of Christian and non-Christian beliefs and practice' (Halsall 2010, 269). Neither should we expect conversion and Christianisation to have been unproblematic. With these points in mind I will now examine the evidence for Christians and pagans in late and post-Roman western Britain.

### ***Christians in western Britain c300–600: historical sources***

The earliest record of organised Christianity in Britain is contained within the *acta* of the ecclesiastical council of Arles which took place in 314. The text of the *acta* survives from the 6th or 7th century and is corrupt, but it appears to list five British delegates, including three bishops, a priest and a deacon:

*Eborius Episcopus de civitate Eboracensi provincial Britannia. Restitutus Episcopus de civitate Londinensi provincia supra scripta. Adelfius Episcopus de civitate Colonia Londinensium. Exinde Sacerdos presbyter; Arminius diaconus.*  
(Acts of the Council of Arles, 196)

*Eboracensi* can be identified as York, whilst *Londinensi* is London. The identity of *Colonia Londinensium* is debated, but Colchester and Lincoln have been suggested (Mann 1961, 316–320). If Lincoln is correct then three of the four provincial capitals of 4th-century Britain were represented at the council by bishops. John Mann suggested that *Eborius*, *Restitutus*, and *Adelfius* were archbishops based at metropolitan sees which mirrored the Romano-British civil administration (Mann 1961). A bishop from western Britain, *Britannia Prima*, which had its capital at Cirencester or Gloucester, was not listed, but Mann suggested that this province was represented by the remaining two delegates, *Sacerdos* the priest and *Arminius* the deacon (Mann 1961). This is thin evidence on which to base the ecclesiastical organisation of an entire diocese, however, particularly at such a short time after the division of Britain into four administrative provenances under the Emperor Diocletian and only a year after the Emperors Constantine I and Licinius had issued the Edict of Milan giving religious freedom to Christians. Indeed, Thomas Charles-Edwards interprets *Sacerdos* the priest and *Arminius* the deacon as companions of *Adelfius Episcopus de civitate Colonia Londinensium* (Charles-Edwards 2013, 583).

These three lines of text provide our only evidence for the organisation of Christianity in Roman Britain, but there are sufficient hints in other sources to suggest that British bishops were active throughout the 4th century. Athanasius, the patriarch of Alexandria, implied that there were British bishops at the councils of Nicaea in 325 and Serdica in 343, but the records of from the latter contradicts this (Stubbs, Haddan and Wilkins 1869; Sharpe 2001). Nevertheless, the Gallo-Roman chronicler Sulpicius Severus noted that British bishops were present at the council of Rimini in 359 (Sulpicius Severus, *Historia Sacra*, II, 41). Bishop Hilary of Poitiers also mentions British bishops in the latter half of the 4th century, and around 396 Bishop Victricius of Rouen visited Britain at the request of its bishops (Sharpe 2002, 77–79). Fourth-century Britain also produced theologians: Palagius was born in Britain but travelled to Rome as a young man in the 390s

where his ideas on divine grace were condemned as heretical, whilst Faustus of Riez was born in Britain around 400/410 and was active in Provence by the end of the 430s (Charles-Edwards 2013, 193, 199).

The presence of bishops presupposes a wider Christian community. These groups are almost invisible within the meagre documentary sources, but it is possible that there were Christians in western Britain even before the Edict of Milan. The British cleric Gildas, probably writing around 530/40, named three Romano-British martyrs: Alban of Verulamium, and Julius and Aaron ‘*citizens of the City of the Legions*’ (probably Caerleon, Gwent). Gildas also refers to unnamed ‘*others of both sexes who, in different places, displayed the highest spirit in the battle-line of Christ*’ (Gildas, *De Excidio* 10:2). Gildas conjectured (*ut conicimus*) that these martyrdoms had taken place during Diocletian’s Great Persecution of AD 303–311, but this appears to have been surmised from Eusebius’ general account of the Great Persecution which was known to Gildas through the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Rufinus (Sharpe 2002, 111). Gildas must therefore have overlooked the fact that the *Historia* also stated that Diocletian’s caesar in the Western Empire, Constantius I (the father of Constantine I), took little direct action against Christians (Sharpe 2002, 111). Thus Gildas may have had no reliable evidence for the dating of the British martyrdoms. The reigns of Decius (249–251) or Valerian (257–259) have been seen as more likely to have resulted in the persecution of British Christians (Petts 2003, 31; Stephens 1985, 327; Thomas 1981, 48), but persecution often occurred as a result of the enthusiasm of provincial governors rather than emperors and, with the exception of a few general outbreaks, normally occurred in different provinces at different dates (Sharpe 2002, 129). We cannot therefore attribute the British martyrdoms to the reign of a single emperor. Indeed, Ian Wood has recently suggested that the cult of St Alban was invented by Germanus of Auxerre, whose *Life* contains the earliest reference to Alban, around 429, as part of his campaign against British Pelagians (Wood 2009). If Wood is correct then an important piece of evidence for the continuity of Christianity in Britain from the 3rd to the 5th century is undermined. Although this does not preclude the possibility that the cult of Julius and Aaron was 3rd-century in origin, it must weaken the likelihood, since Gildas and a charter of the 9th century are the sole evidence for this cult (Seaman forthcoming a).

The presence of Pelagians in 5th-century Britain does, however, demonstrate the existence of a Christian



community at that time. The first firm evidence for Pelagian activity in Britain is provided by an entry for 429 in the *Epitoma Chronicon* of Prosper of Aquitaine. The *Chronicon* covers the period 379–455; it was composed in 433 and updated several times, being completed in 455 (Barrett 2009, 200). Prosper attributed the growth of the heresy in Britain to an individual named Agricola and stated that ‘... at the urging of Palladius, the deacon, Pope Celestine sends Germanus of Auxerre as his representative and overthrows the heretics and directs the British away from them towards to the Catholic faith’ (Prosper of Aquitaine, *Chronicon*, 1299–1301). An account of Germanus’ visit to Britain is also given in the *Life of St Germanus* written by Constantius of Lyon in c475–480 (Thompson 1984). Constantius’ and Prosper’s accounts of the context of Germanus’ mission differ, and Constantius also includes a series of events that took place during Germanus’ visit, including his confrontation with ‘well dressed’ heretics, a visit to the shrine of St Alban, and a battle against a pagan army in which a cry of ‘Hallelujah’ by Germanus’ newly baptised troops was sufficient to seal victory (Hoare 1995). The historical basis of these events is highly dubious (Barrett 2009), but the account of the battle suggests that late 5th-century continental churchmen expected many Britons to have been unbaptised pagans in the 420s (Thompson 1984).

It is not possible to gauge the extent of the heresy or the size of the British Christian community from the information given by Constantius (Barrett 2009), but we do know that there were Christians in Ireland by the time of Germanus’ visit. Ireland had not been part of the Roman Empire, but Prosper records that in 431 Pope Celestine, probably acting on information brought back by Germanus, sent Palladius to administer to the Christian communities in Ireland (Barrett 2009, 202). Palladius was not a missionary and there must have been a Christian community in Ireland prior to his arrival (Charles-Edwards 1993). Christianity is most likely to have reached Ireland via western Britain, where the presence of Christians around this time is attested in the *Confessio* of Patrick (Dumville 1993). In the *Confessio*, probably written between 430 and 490, Patrick tells us that he was raised as a Christian and that his father was a deacon and his grandfather was a priest, thus pushing his family’s Christian heritage back at least two generations (Patrick, *Confessio* 1). The *Banna Venta Berniae* in which Patrick was born cannot be reliably identified, but a location in a Romanised part of the western

seaboard would seem most appropriate. After escaping slavery Patrick returned to Britain where in a dream he received God’s call for him to convert the pagan Irish. But he faced accusations and misrepresentations about the conduct of his mission from the British Church, to which his *Confessio* seems to have been the reply (Fletcher 1997, 84). If the soldiers of Coroticus to which the *Epistola* was addressed were based on the lower Clyde, as seems most likely, then the content and context of Patrick’s writings point to a functioning and organised ecclesiastical hierarchy in western Britain and southern Scotland which may have stretched back into the late 4th or early 5th century (Fraser 2013; Sharpe 2002, 81).

After Patrick we hear very little of the British Christian community until the *De Excidio Britonum* of Gildas written in the mid-6th century (conventionally 530/540, but perhaps as early 470; Wood 1984; Lapidge 1984). The *De Excidio* provides vital evidence for 5th- and 6th-century Britain, but was not a work of history. It was an extended sermon targeted at the secular and ecclesiastical leaders of Gildas’ own day and must be used with great caution (Dumville 2007). The *De Excidio* appears to have been written within a firmly Christian milieu. Indeed, it is often noted that although Gildas was critical of his contemporaries and was aware of idol worship in the past he did not make accusations of practising pagans.<sup>3</sup> David Dumville, for example, has noted that ‘when Gildas was writing in the mid-6th century... we have no hint of any British religion other than Christianity’ (Dumville 1997, 90). It would have been very unlikely that Christian kings would have patronised pagans, and so we have reason to suggest that the British aristocracy was largely Christian by the time that Gildas was writing (Halsall 2010, 252–273). We should be careful with the extent to which we push this level of Christianisation however; the *De Excidio* was directed at the leading figures of the day and Gildas was not concerned with popular religious practice. In the sermons of Gildas’ southern Gallic contemporary, Caesarius of Arles, we encounter frequent references to practices which he considered pagan (such as *Sermons* 53.1), and indeed we also hear of individuals who were non-Christian pagans (Klingshirn 1994, 213). This situation appears to have been typical of Gaul throughout the 6th century and perhaps beyond (McNamara 1987, 21; Van Dam 1985, 121), and we should not expect Britain to have been any different. Indeed, the only other source to shed light on 6th-century western Britain, the *Life of*

*St Samson of Dol*, provides a rare glimpse of a more varied religious landscape.

The *First Life of St Samson of Dol* was written by an anonymous Breton in the late 7th or early 8th century (Florent 1997). The text is complex but the main themes and events are considered credible (Fletcher 1997, 61; Florent 1997; Thomas 1994, 224). Samson was born in south Wales around 500, but he ended his life as a bishop in Brittany (he appears in a list of bishops who attended a church council in Paris between 556–573; Hughes 1981, 4–5). He was educated at the house of Illtud, most likely Llantwit Major (Llanilltud Fawr, Glamorgan), but soon sought a more ascetic life and joined a monastic community on *Ynys Pyr*, most likely Caldey Island (Pembrokeshire) which was described as '*nuper fundata*' (lately established). After being ordained by Bishop Dyfrig, Samson became a hermit somewhere on the banks of the River Severn, before being instructed in a vision that he should cross the sea and live as a *peregrinus* (exile, pilgrim). He sailed first to Cornwall where he founded a monastery before reaching Brittany where he established a monastery at Dol (Taylor 1925). It was whilst Samson was in Cornwall, in a district referred to as *pagus Tricurium* (possibly the area later known as the hundred of Trigg), that the *Life* recounts a miracle story in which Samson confronts a group of men who were '*worshipping a certain idol after the custom of the Bacchantes, by means of a play in honour of an image*' (*The First Life of St Samson of Dol*, 49).

Samson admonished the group '*not to forsake the one God who created all things*', but they defended themselves saying that '*it was not wrong to celebrate the mysteries of their ancestors in a play*' (*The First Life of St Samson of Dol*, 49). At that point a boy who was driving horses nearby fell and died. Samson promised that if the group agreed to destroy the idol he would bring the dead boy back to life. After two hours of prayer he did so and the group's leader, Guediamus, obliged them to be baptised. Whilst we must treat this story as a piece of hagiography it is clear that the author considered Samson to be operating within British communities that were not fully Christianised.

### Summary of history Sources

The historical sources relating to Christianity in late and post-Roman Britain are sparse, but we can be certain that there were Christians within Britain from the early 4th century. Nevertheless, it is not until the 5th and 6th centuries that firm evidence for Christianity

starts to appear in the west. This is unlikely to represent a development of the 5th century however, and even communities in the far west may have come into contact with Christians through trade or the networks of cultural contact which underlay taxation and state administration. The image of a firmly Christian post-Roman society within western Britain drawn from the *De Excidio* of Gildas is misleading, however, and although the British sources are largely silent on the matter we should expect paganism, in both the forms identified above, to have persisted well into the early Middle Ages as they did in all other parts of the post-Roman world. To get a clearer impression of Christianity in late and post-Roman Britain we must now turn to the archaeological evidence.

### Romano-British Christian and pagan archaeology in western Britain

The religious significance of objects and structures is not immutable, and even objects bearing 'Christian motifs', (Mawer 1995, 1; Petts 2000, 31–21; 2003, 160; Dark 2006, 3–4) such as peacocks or fishes, need not have had any specifically Christian significance. Indeed, the most prominent early Christian symbol, the Chi-Rho,<sup>4</sup> was also used as a badge of secular imperial authority during the 4th century and, through its association with Constantine the Great's vision before the battle of Milvian Bridge, came to be seen as symbolic of the imperial house of Constantine (Pearce 2008, 197, 201, 207; Petts 2003, 107–110). Indeed, Christianity lacked a clearly defined artistic repertoire throughout the 4th and 5th centuries (Reece 1999, 52). We must also note that not all religious ceremonies are likely to have left any recognisable archaeological trace. Most 4th-century churches, for example, are likely to have been no more than rooms in normal buildings (Dark 2006, 3–4); it is only the uniquely preserved wall plaster that revealed the presence of a house-church at Lullingstone villa in Kent. We must also note that distribution maps of Christian material may have more to do with local cultural traditions than the actual prevalence of the faith (Petts 2003, 26–27; Stancliffe 2005b, 427). Indeed, the total quantity of 'Christian' material from Roman Britain is so small that the differential recovery of evidence has introduced major bias (Mawer 1995, 141–143). Thus we must be cautious about attempting to draw quantitative inferences from archaeological evidence (such as Thomas 1981, 39).

It was the urban elites of the western Empire who converted in the greatest numbers, and so it is with the

towns of western Britain with which we must begin. As we saw above, the *acta* of the Council of Arles may be interpreted as suggesting that Christianity was organised along the same lines as the civil administration. Thus Ilchester, Exeter, Bath, Worcester, Wroxeter, Caerwent, Cirencester, Dorchester, Wall, Leominster, and Gloucester have all been claimed to be 4th-century episcopal sees, and it is often argued that they would have persisted in this function into the 5th century and beyond (Bassett 1992; Dark 2000, 120; Pearce 2004, 132–133; Petts 2009, 160–161; Knight 2003, 122; Brooks 2006, 2–3). The evidence behind these claims is thin however. Possible Romano-British churches have been identified at Caerwent and Wroxeter (Nash-Williams 1930, 235–236; Boon 1992, 18–21; Pollock 2006, 59–61; Barker and White 1998, 107), but these buildings could just as easily be interpreted as domestic residences (Boon 1976, 175, N 28; Alcock 1987, 57, N 104; Arnold and Davies 2001, 132; White 2007, 81). Indeed, purpose-built churches were very rare outside of imperial capitals before the end of the 4th century, and it was only during the 5th and 6th centuries, and not the 4th century, that a ‘Christian topography’ typified by extramural cemetery churches, emerged on the Continent (Bowden 2008, 294; Esmonde Cleary 2013a, 174, 177). We should therefore be cautious of interpreting extramural medieval churches adjacent to former Roman settlements, such as St Peblig’s near Caernarfon (Gwynedd), as foundations established during the late Romano-British period (cf Davidson 2009: 42–44; Thomas 1981: 160–164, 170–180). Most importantly we must note that the towns of northern Gaul, an area that resembles Roman Britain closely, were not uniformly provisioned with bishops until the later 4th and 5th centuries (Esmonde Cleary 2013a, 175). We should not expect the situation to have been very different in Britain and, although post-Roman ecclesiastical foundations may have been established within several western British towns, unless we are to invoke a circular argument the evidence for the 4th century is unproven.

There has been much discussion as to whether late Roman extramural inhumation cemeteries can be attributed to a Christian milieu, but again little convincing evidence has been presented (for example Sparey-Green 2003; Thomas 1981; Watts 1991). Examples of extramural ‘managed cemeteries’ consisting of regular rows of unaccompanied east-west aligned inhumations have been excavated at Northover (Ilchester, Somerset), Shepton Mallet<sup>5</sup> and Poundbury

(Dorchester, Dorset). David Petts has argued that although there was no defined Christian theology of burial at this time, the Church was responsible for regulating the burial rite in these cemeteries, and suggests that this intervention arose out of tensions over the use of funerary rites as arenas for secular display (Petts 2003, 145–149). The presence of Christians within some extramural managed cemeteries seems likely; at Poundbury, for example, the plastered interior of a mausolea was decorated with a Chi-Rho symbol and scenes which may include the baptism of Adam and Eve and a cityscape (Sparey-Green 2004, 105–106). These cemeteries are part of a much wider burial tradition however, which developed throughout the Roman West independent of the widespread adoption of Christianity (Esmonde Cleary 2013b, 165). Moreover, we cannot assume that churches had been established within towns by this date. Thus although it is likely that some burials within extramural managed cemeteries were those of Christians, we cannot assume that they represent fully Christian communities.

A unique 4th-century curse tablet from the sacred spring in the temple of *Sulis Minerva* (Bath, Somerset) compliments the evidence from cemeteries such as Poundbury (see Fig 1). The curse was written for a man named Annianus and is interesting for way it attempts to identify a thief: ‘*Someone, whether Gentile or Christian, whether man or woman, whether boy or girl, whether slave or free, has stolen from me...*’ (Tomlin 1988, 232).

This is the first occurrence of the word ‘Christian’ (*Christianus*) in the epigraphy of Roman Britain. The word ‘gentile’ (*gentilis*) was a Christian term for ‘pagan’ that was not generally used by non-Christians to describe themselves, although within this context it appears to have been used as a formulaic

*Fig 1*  
Fourth century curse tablet found in the sacred spring at Bath (Somerset) in 1979 (Reproduced with the kind permission of Roger Tomlin)

alternative to Christian, perhaps by someone who was not a Christian, but was familiar with Christian nomenclature (Tomlin 1988, 232–234). The tablet was created and deposited within a non-Christian context, but it demonstrates that Christians were a significant enough group within 4th-century Bath to warrant their inclusion within this curse about a petty thief (Lambert 2010, 37; Pearce 2004, 81). The folded (perhaps ritually killed) fragment from a copper alloy casket depicting four Christian scenes deposited within the temple of Mercury at Uley (Gloucestershire) implies a similar awareness of Christianity amongst 4th-century pagans (Woodward and Leach 1993).

Slightly more ambiguous is a late 4th-century assemblage of vessels found buried within the floor of a town house at Caerwent (Gwent) which was interpreted as an *agape* set by the late George Boon (Boon 1962; 1992). The *agape* was an early Christian supper celebrated in the houses of high status members of the community after the Eucharist (Hall 2005, 23). The assemblage at Caerwent consisted of a calcite gritted jar, a black burnished ware cooking pot, three colour coated fine wares, traces of fine woollen twill, an iron knife blade, a double iron swivel-hook, and two pewter vessels, one of which had a small Chi-R symbol scratched on its base, all contained within a large early 4th-century grey urn and covered by a *mortarium* (Boon 1962; 1992). A silver spoon with a Chi-Rho flanked by an alpha and omega and an inscription that is provenanced only to ‘*Monmouthshire, near Roman remains*’ may have come from Caerwent and could also have been used within the liturgy, but this function and provenance are far from certain (Mawer 1995, 42–43, 48).

So much for the towns, but what about the countryside? Amongst the most famous evidence for rural Christianity in Britain are the impressive villa mosaics at Hinton St Mary and Frampton (Dorset). At Hinton St Mary a large pavement covering two rooms depicts a Chi-Rho symbol behind the portrait of a man, usually interpreted as Christ, juxtaposed with a range of traditional motifs, including hunting scenes, pomegranates, rosettes, and Bellerophon (Toynbee 1964). At Frampton, 20km south-west of Hinton, the mosaic had a Chi-Rho placed prominently within the centre of the pavement but, again, it was juxtaposed with traditional figures and hunting scenes (Huskinson 1974). The mosaics cannot be dated on archaeological grounds any more precisely than c270–400 but they are usually assigned to the mid-4th century (Cosh and Neal 2006, 156–157). Neither mosaic came from a house

church (both were from reception rooms), but they are often cited as evidence for Christianity amongst the villa-owning elite of 4th-century western Britain (Lambert 2010, 16; Perring 2002, 133–137; Petts 2003, 81–82). The juxtaposition of Christian and traditional pagan imagery on both mosaics has been variously interpreted as reflecting syncretism, Christian allegory, and even gnostic Christianity (Lambert 2010, 17; Henig 2006a; Perring 2002, 133–137). Its presence should not be too surprising, however, as the gulf between pagan and Christian imagery was ill-defined in the 4th century (Reece 1999, 52). Nevertheless, Susan Pearce has recently reinterpreted the Hinton St Mary figure as a representation of Constantine I, which she suggests may have had more to do with the expression of loyalty to the house of Constantine than an overt display of Christian belief (Pearce 2008, 202–203, 214). Indeed, villas and their mosaics were employed as stages for the display of a repertoire of Roman elite culture which, increasingly over the course of the 4th century, included Christian imagery (Bowden 2008, 293; Esmonde Cleary 2013a, 242–245; Huskinson 2002, 127–140). Thus the mosaics could be seen as displays of *Romanitas* that drew upon imagery and a body of myths, both old and new, and we need not attribute them with any specific religious affiliation or function (Casey 2002, 83; Pearce 2008, 213).

Other evidence for Christianity within the villa-owning classes is also slight and again restricted to the south-west of England. Two silver seal-rings, one inscribed with a Chi-Rho and the other with a Rho-Cross and dove and palm branch motif, were found as part of a silver hoard from the Fifehead Neville villa, only 5km south-west of Hinton St Mary (Mawr 1995, 72–73). At Chedworth Villa (Gloucestershire) inscribed Chi-Rho symbols were found on three paving slabs from the formal surround of a *nymphaeum* (Esmonde Cleary 2013b, 98). This has been interpreted as an act of Christianisation associated with the conversion of the *nymphaeum* into a baptistery (Thomas 1981, 106, 220). Octagonal pools have also been interpreted as baptisteries at Lufton (Somerset), Holcombe (Devon), Dewlish (Dorset), and possibly Bradford-on-Avon (Somerset) (Dark 2006, 17; Perring 2002, 175–177; Todd 2005, 307–311). These interpretations are problematic, however. Firstly, it is unlikely that small Christian communities centred on single villas would require their own baptisteries, especially where evidence for churches is lacking (Henig 2006b, 105). Secondly, baptism at this time was administered by bishops and known baptisteries on the Continent are associated



with urban episcopal churches (Esmonde Cleary 2013a, 185; 2013b, 99). Nevertheless, in the case of Chedworth it is likely that the *nymphaeum* had been Christianised and it is reasonable to suggest that the inhabitants of the villa had converted to Christianity (Esmonde Cleary 2013b, 99).

A small number of other objects with evidence of a Christian influence have been found in western Britain, but their significance is difficult to assess. An inscription reading VIVENTI [ JSCOPI on a lead salt-pan from Shavington (Cheshire), for example, has been translated as ‘Of Viventius, the bishop’ or ‘Of Viventius, in the charge of the bishop’ (Penney and Shotton 1996). Whilst a 4th-century date has been attributed to the salt-pan, a 5th- or 6th-century context is also possible, and as a stray find its significance is difficult to assess (Dark 2000, 120). Caution must also be expressed over the strap-end decorated with ‘tree of life’ and peacock symbols from Kenchester (Herefordshire), the belt buckle with similar decoration from Wortley villa (Gloucestershire), and the buckle from Pen-y-Corrdyn hillfort (Clwyd) with peacock, fish, and ‘tree of life’ decoration (Mawer 1995, 61–64). These objects carry symbols which were used within early Christian art, but they were a part of a wider series of official belt fittings, buckles and strap-ends used by members of the late Roman field army which need not have reflected the religious beliefs of the wearer (Mawer 1995, 60, 69; Laycock 2008, 113–116; Petts 2003, 110–113, fig 54).

The evidence for paganism in Roman Britain is almost entirely limited to the lowland civil/villa zone of central and southern England, and the Romano-Celtic religious practices of Cornwall, most of Wales and northern Britain remained unmonumentalised, non-epigraphic and aniconic throughout the Romano-British period (Mattingly 2006, 480, fig 17). The number of pagan temples in Britain peaked in the first half of the 4th century, and temple construction can be shown to have continued beyond the Peace of the Church in 314. The Romano-Celtic temples at Caerwent (Gwent), and Brean Down (Somerset), for example, were constructed as late as c330 and 340, and appear from their coin lists to have continued in use until the end of the 4th century (Brewer 1993, 45; ApSimon 1964–5, 109). The coin lists from other temples, including Maiden Castle and Joran Hill (Dorset), Lydney and Uley (Gloucestershire), and Henley Wood and Pagan’s Hill (Somerset) also suggest that they were in use up to the late 4th century (Mattingly 2006, Pearce 2004, 107–113; White 2007, 75). The evidence from western Britain is therefore in

keeping with that of the Continent where temples and sanctuaries established in the 1st and 2nd centuries continued in use throughout the 3rd and 4th centuries (Bowden 2008, 294; Cameron 2012, 73; Esmonde Cleary 2013a, 191–193). The deterioration of some British temples after the middle of the 4th century has been interpreted as reflecting the decline of paganism (Lambert 2010, 32–35; Pearce 2004, 108–109; Thomas 1981, 266). However, since this pattern matches a more general transformation taking place across towns and villas during the later 4th century, any relationship with the growth of Christianity is unproven (Esmonde Cleary 2004, 423). There is no convincing evidence that any of these temples were converted into churches, and this practice appears to have been rare until later on the Continent (Reece 1999, 93).

### *Summary of Archaeological Evidence*

The ‘Christian package’ which became typical of the early Middle Ages – east-west aligned churches, monastic settlements, cemeteries, and a clearly defined artistic repertoire – had not developed by the end of the 4th century. Thus it is difficult to quantify the numbers of Christians in 4th-century western Britain. Nevertheless, we can note that the small amount of archaeological evidence that we have is concentrated in Dorset, Somerset, Gloucestershire, with some more ambiguous evidence from Gwent and Cheshire (Fig 2). The evidence for Christianity in 4th-century western Britain is therefore slighter and more ambiguous than has often been acknowledged, and our tendency to concentrate on the evidence for Christianity has led us to neglect the bigger picture of religious life and practice in late Roman Britain which appears to have remained largely pagan (Esmonde Cleary 2013b, 98). Polytheism did not end with the Peace of the Church, and the Bath curse tablet suggests that Christians were just one group amongst the religious plurality of 4th-century Britain. Indeed, the public performance of pagan ritual was not outlawed until 391 under Theodosius I, and even then it continued in some parts of the Roman Empire for much longer (Bowden 2008, 295; Cameron 1993, 74–77; 2012, 72–73). The conversion of western Britain should not be seen as any earlier than that of northern Gaul, where the process of evangelising the countryside was only beginning in the late 4th and 5th centuries (cf Dumville 1997, 89–90), and it is very likely that many, perhaps most, Britons were still pagans in the 5th century (Ward-Perkins 2000, 515).

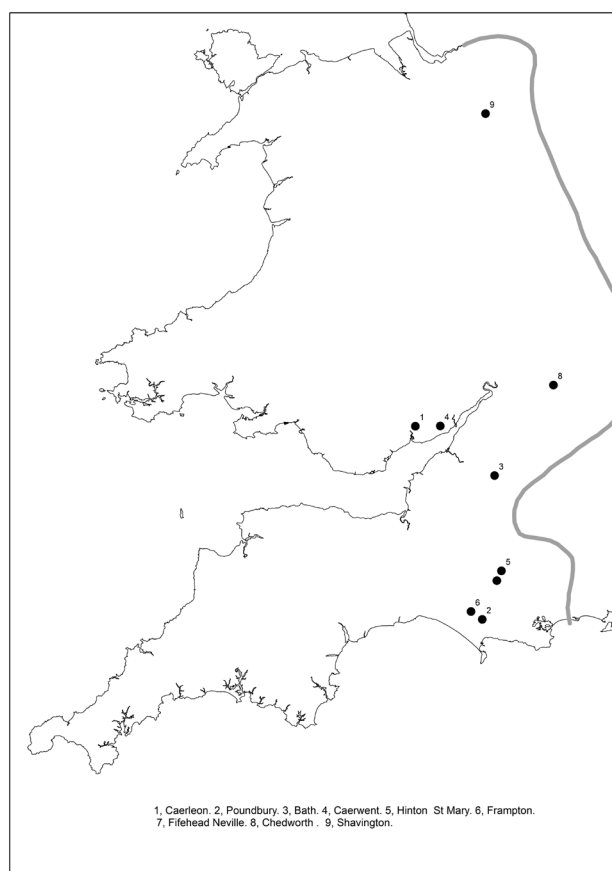


Fig 2  
Distribution of evidence for Romano-British  
Christianity in western Britain (author)

The Christianisation of what appears to have been quite a small section of Romano-British society during the 4th century is likely to have been driven by changes in the ways that status and identity were constructed and expressed in the late Roman empire. During the 4th century the civil culture of *Romanitas* and networks of imperial patronage that underpinned aristocratic power and identity became increasingly Christianised and closed off to professed pagans. This provided an incentive for aspirant aristocrats to convert (Cameron 1993, 77–78). This was a difficult process, however, as some groups, especially the senatorial aristocracy in Rome, viewed conversion as a rejection of their classical cultural heritage. It was therefore necessary that conversion take a form in which aristocratic traditions could be preserved and social upheaval minimised (Brown 1961, 2, 9). In Gaul and lowland Britain the framing of Christianity in ways which drew upon imperial idioms helped to ease these latent antagonisms (Van Dam 1985). There were three important checks on the efficacy of this mode however; firstly the collapse of imperial control in Britain during the first half of

the 5th century undermined the ‘vocabulary of power’ and attendant markers of status and identity which had been responsible for driving the Christianisation of the Romano-British aristocracy (Esmonde Cleary 1989, 138–141; Halsall 2007, 351; Wickham 2005, 306–309). Secondly, the lightly Romanised ‘upland zone’ of most of Wales and Devon and Cornwall was dominated by socio-political and ideological frameworks which were less predisposed to Christianisation. Thirdly, the horizons of religious life for the overwhelming majority of the Romano-British population would have been fixed at local levels, which were in large part insulated from the changes taking place within the aristocracy. The pre-Christian religions of this majority were also deeply interwoven with local systems of social reproduction and could not therefore have been abandoned or Christianised without causing significant upheaval (Klingshirn 1994, 208–209, 219–226).

Thus we are presented with a problem: whilst the Christianity of Patrick, Gildas and Samson lay beyond, temporally and geographically, the confines of *Romanitas*, there seems little doubt that their Christianity derived from that of late Roman Britain (Thomas 1981; Petts 2003). Before we consider how this apparently contradictory situation came about we must first consider the archaeological evidence for Christianity and paganism in the post-Roman centuries.

### *Pagans and Christians in post-Roman western Britain*

Pagan activity at Romano-Celtic temples is generally assumed to have come to an end around 400/410, but a firm chronology is lacking and continuity beyond this date is possible, but as yet unproven (see Rahtz and Watts 1979; Rahtz 1991, 17–19; Dark 2000, 121). It has been argued that, since burial at temple sites appears to have been prohibited during the 4th century, the post-temple cemeteries at Henley Wood (Somerset), Maiden Castle (Dorset), Lamyatt Beacon (Somerset), and Brean Down (Somerset) may reflect Christianisation during the 5th and 6th centuries (Leech and Leech 1982; Pearce 2004, 111). Indeed, small structures at Brean Down, Lamyatt Beacon and Maiden Castle have been interpreted as late or post-Roman churches (Petts 2003, 69, 71). The radiocarbon dates from these cemeteries do not preclude a gap of some centuries between the final use of the temples and the commencement of burial however. Moreover, burial was not unknown at temples during the Romano-British period; three cemeteries spanning

the 1st to 4th centuries were established on the edges of the temple precinct at Nettleton Shrub (Wiltshire) for example (Wedlake 1982, 77), whilst single and multiple burials are known from other temples (Aldhouse-Green 2004, 211).

As we have seen, Romano-British paganism outside of the lowland civil/villa zone of central and southern England appears to have remained largely unmonumentalised, non-epigraphic and aniconic throughout the Romano-British period (Mattingly 2006, 480). The absence of evidence for paganism in western Britain after 400 does not therefore have to imply widespread Christianisation. Indeed, place-names which incorporate the element *neved* ('sacred place', 'scared grove'), such as Lanivet, Carnevas, Trenovissick and Trewarnevas (all Cornwall), Nymet (Devon), Nymphsfield (Gloucestershire) and Gwernyfed (Powys), are suggestive of the existence of pre-Christian cult sites (Padel 1985, 172; Turner 2006, 132). With these points in mind we will now consider the 'early Christian archaeology' of post-Roman western Britain.

Inhumation burial in post-Roman western Britain is often taken as synonymous with early Christian burial and the associated development of the early Church (Longley 2009, 106). In an influential book published in 1971, Charles Thomas argued that inhumation cemeteries without churches, which he labelled 'undeveloped cemeteries', were 'the primary field monuments of insular Christianity' (Thomas 1971, 50). Following Thomas' lead other authors, the present one included, have suggested that the appearance of these cemeteries from the 5th century reflects the widespread adoption of Christianity in western Britain (Dark 2000, 117; 176; Seaman 2006). It is true that large inhumation cemeteries were rare in the less Romanised parts of western Britain, and the 5th century does mark a watershed in the development of burial practices, but whether these cemeteries should be considered Christian 'field monuments' is a matter of considerable debate, and must be considered at some length.

Burials in undeveloped cemeteries are usually unfurnished and aligned broadly east-west with the body in a supine position. The burial itself may be a simple dug grave, but cists and stone lined graves are common, and evidence for timber lining has also been identified (James 1992; Longley 2009). Some of these cemeteries acquired churches over the course of the 7th to 12th centuries (see Pearce 2012, fig 2 for models of development), and some may have been associated with monasteries from an early date (Seaman forthcoming b). There is nothing inherently Christian

about this form of burial practice, however, and it was not until the 7th century that the Church developed a theology of how burial was to be effected (Halsall 1995, 40–41; Longley 2009, 106; Rahtz 1977, 54; Paxton 1990, 62–63). Thus there is no *a priori* reason to assume that undeveloped cemeteries were Christian or that Christians and pagans were not buried side-by-side (Edwards 2013, 15; Longley 2009, 125). Indeed, we should expect there to have been some measure of resistance to the abandonment of traditional kin cemeteries (O'Brien 1992). The appearance of a set of distinctive funerary rites in the post-Roman centuries is interesting, but should not be placed within the context of a single transition, the conversion to Christianity, at the expense of wider changes in the relationships between the living and the dead which could extend to the construction of memories and identities, and the negotiation of claims to land and property (Maldonado 2013; Williams 2007).

The evidence for Christians within undeveloped cemeteries comes not from the burial practices, but funerary inscriptions,<sup>6</sup> but again there are ambiguities. The inscriptions are in Latin and/or occasionally the Irish Ogham script, and were inscribed upon predominantly unworked stones and boulders. Around 200 have been found across north-west and south-west Wales (with outliers in Breconshire and Glamorgan) and Cornwall (with outliers in Devon, Dorset and Somerset; Fig 3). Their dating and chronology is difficult to establish, but the earliest monuments are usually assigned to the 5th century and the latest to the early 7th century. Few of the monuments have been investigated *in situ* and whilst some, such as Pentrefoelas 1 (Denbighshire, D9) can be reliably associated with cemeteries, a proportion may have marked isolated burials (Edwards 2001). Some of the inscriptions give just the name of the deceased in either the nominative or genitive case, but commemorative formulae are frequently used. The most common are variations on the religiously neutral X *fili* Y (X son of Y), but formulae, including *hic iacet* (here lies) and *in pace* (in peace), that were used in Christian contexts on the Continent occur on 34% of the inscriptions (see Fig 4). A smaller number (17%) are also associated with Chi-Rho symbols or crosses (Edwards 2013, 48–53; 66–67).

The Christian memorial formulae suggest that some of the individuals commemorated were Christians, and in some cases the Christian identity of the deceased is explicit. Trawsfynydd 2 (Merioneth, MR23), for example, commemorates a '*homo [x]pianus*' (a Christian man), and Llandudno 1 (Caernarfonshire,

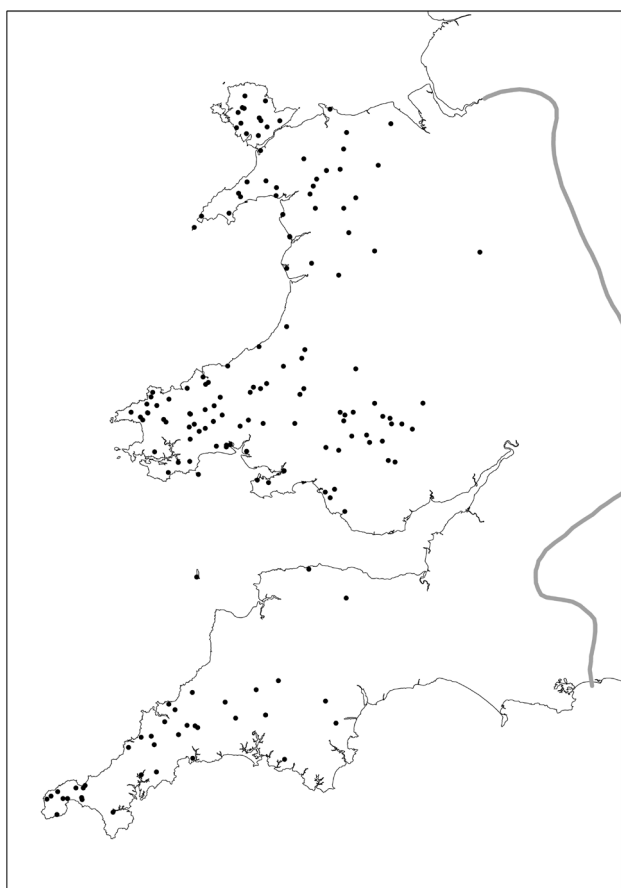


Fig 3  
Distribution of post-Roman inscribed stones, 5th to 7th centuries (author)

CN21), Llantrisant 1 (Anglesey, AN46), Aberdaron 1 and 2 (Caernarfonshire, CN2-3), and possibly Cardinham (Cornwall, 9) refer to priests or bishops. The personal name *Mailisi* on Llanfaelog 2 (Anglesey, AN13) is likely to derive from the Irish *Máel Ísu* meaning 'Bald one of Jesus', thereby referring to his clerical tonsure (Edwards 2013, 55). In terms of the total corpus, however, only 38% of the monuments display Christian formulae and/or symbolism, although it should be noted that some inscriptions are fragmentary or unreadable and it is not always possible to determine whether a cross or chi-rho symbol is contemporary or secondary to an inscription.

There are also regional and temporal patterns in the use of Christian formulae (Fig 5); whilst 59% of the inscriptions from north-west Wales include Christian formulae the figure from mid- and south-west Wales, Devon and Cornwall is only 26% (Edwards 2007, 41). The inscriptions are notoriously difficult to date (see Charles-Edwards 2013; Edwards 2007 and 2013; Tedeschi 2005), but whilst some Christian inscriptions, such as Llanerfyl 1 (Montgomeryshire, MT4), can

be assigned with confidence to the 5th century, the majority are likely to belong to 6th and 7th centuries. Thus whilst Christian formulae were used in certain contexts, we cannot assume that the inscriptions represent a Christian monumental tradition. The inscriptions without Christian formulae need not have commemorated Christians (Stancliffe 2005b, 431; Thomas 1994, 70), and indeed it is possible that the early ogham-only inscriptions were pagan (Edwards 2007, 48). Just under half of the inscribed stones are first recorded as being associated with medieval churches. Some of these may have been moved to churches for safe keeping at a later date, but a number are likely to have been located within early monastic cemeteries; Aberdaron 2 (Caernarfonshire, CN3), for example, commemorates '*Senacus the priest with a multitude of the brethren*'. Nevertheless, churchyard burial was not common amongst the laity until at least the 7th century and often much later, and the transformation from 'undeveloped cemeteries' to 'developed cemetery with church' was not instigated until after the end of the inscribed stone tradition (Edwards 2013, 81; Petts 2009, 122–126). There is no *a priori* reason, therefore, for assuming that all medieval churches with inscribed stones were established as Christian cemeteries during the 5th or 6th centuries.

It was only from the 7th century when burial at churches started to be extended to the laity that a widespread and distinctively Christian funerary tradition developed in western Britain. At this time the inscribed stone tradition was replaced by more anonymous and explicitly Christian cross-carved stones (Longley 2009, 106; Redknap and Lewis 2007, 89–111; Petts 2009, 29). In a small number of cases, such as Llanfynach 2 (P30, Pembrokeshire), and Llanwinio 1 (CM34, Carmarthenshire), crosses were carved onto earlier inscribed stones, perhaps as acts of Christianisation for monuments which were seen as pagan or not overtly Christian (Edwards 2007, 47; Longden 2003). This transformation has been linked to the increasing power and influence of the Church at this time (Edwards 2007, 114–115). Around 75% of the 150 carved crosses of this period from Wales are associated with medieval churches, and a few (16%) of these sites also have the earlier inscribed stones. The medieval parochial system seems therefore to have started to take shape at this time (Edwards 2007, 57; 2013, 81). There is documentary evidence to suggest that the 7th and 8th centuries mark a major upturn in the establishment and patronage of monasteries and/



Fig 4

*Fifth or early-6th century inscribed stone from Llanaelhaearn (Caernarvonshire). The vertical inscription reads Aliortus Emetiaco / hic iacet, 'Aliortus from Elmet lies here'. (Crown copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales)*

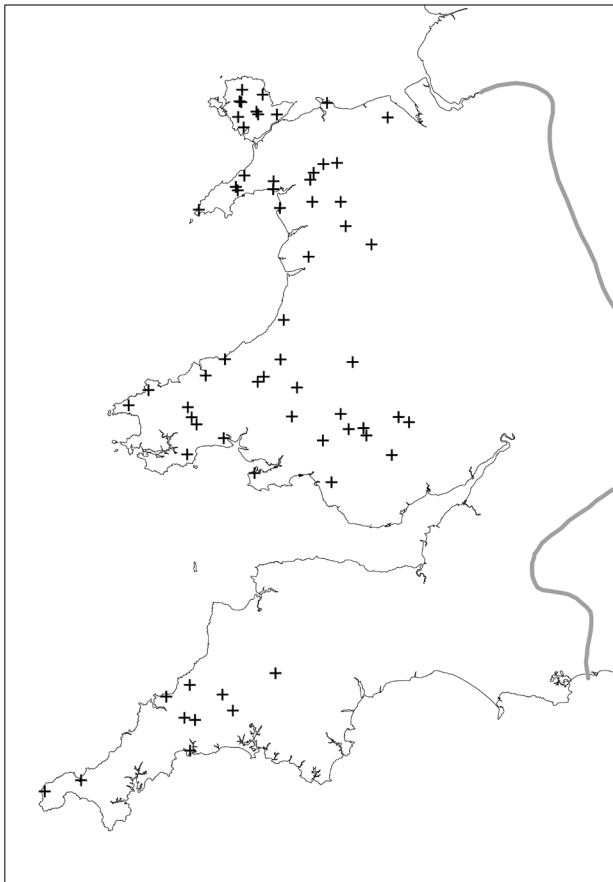


Fig 5

*Distribution of post-Roman inscribed stones with evidence for Christianity (author)*

or local churches by members of the lay aristocracy. Charters of the *Book of Llandaf*, for example, show that many of the parish churches of Gwent and Archenfield had been established by the mid- to late 8th century (Davies 1978, 121–122; Seaman 2010, 166–171). While this could be argued to be a product of biases in the evidence (the 8th century marks a major upturn in the granting of land to the Church) it is unlikely to be coincidence that the first evidence for ‘local churches’ follows the appearance of ‘developed cemeteries’ and the carved cross tradition.

The distribution of inscribed stones and carved crosses is concentrated in the far west of the region, but place-name evidence provides important evidence for post-Roman Christianity further east (Fig 6). The place-name element *eccles-* derives from the Brittonic *ecles* (a church) a loan-word from Latin *ecclesia* (Cameron 1968). There are four *eccles-* names in the West Midlands and some, such as Eccleshall (Staffordshire) survive as the names of settlements with parish churches. These names have been interpreted as indicating pre-7th-century British churches that were absorbed into the English ecclesiastical structure after the 7th century (Brooks 2006, 16; Sharpe 2002, 147; Stancliffe 2005b, 432). *Eccles-* names are absent from Wales and south-west England, but place-names incorporating *Merthyr* and *basilica* have been interpreted as deriving from post-Roman Christian nomenclature (Padel 1985; Pearce 2004, 139; Sharpe 2002, 141–143, 147). A note of caution is also required with the use of place-names; some

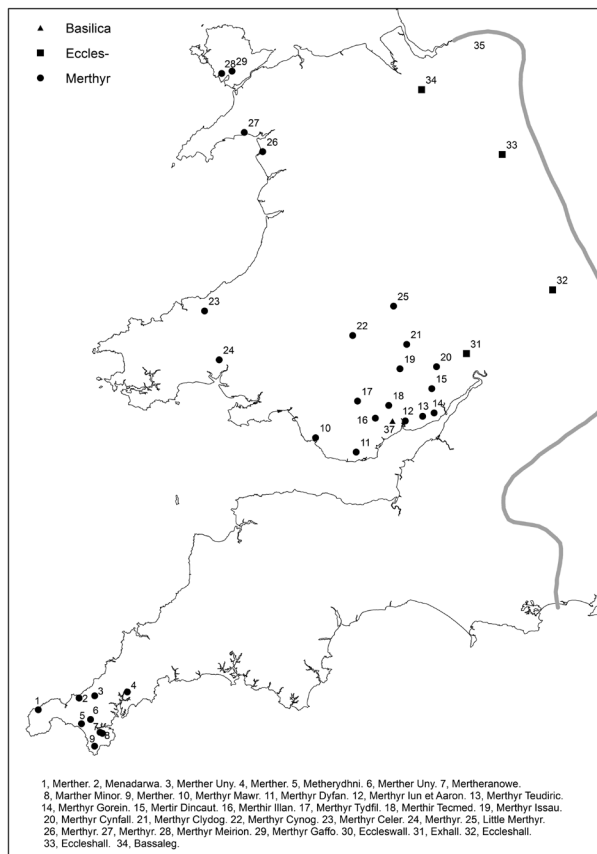


Fig 6  
Distribution of place-names in eccles, merthyr and basilica (author)

elements were productive for several centuries, and the names recorded for a church derive from a particular moment in time and churches could be known by different names (Pearce 2004, 147; 2012, 91). Indeed, excavations at Merther-Uny in Wendron (Cornwall) suggest that burial only commenced at this site in the late 9th century (Thomas 1994, 319). Thus the diagnostic value of a single place-name is unproven.

### *Summary of evidence for post-Roman western Britain*

There were Christians in 5th-century western Britain, and there is no reason to assume that this did represent the westward expansion of the small Christian community that was established in lowland Britain during the 4th century. The evidence for Christianity prior to the 7th century is less ubiquitous than is often assumed however, and there are large gaps in the distribution. The evidence is strongest for north Wales where the inscribed stones suggest that Christianity was an important marker of status and identity from

the later 5th century, but in other areas the evidence is more ambiguous. Whilst we cannot take the absence of evidence for Christianity as the evidence of its absence, the same must be true of paganism, and the '*chronological context of the period under review*' does not mean that we can ascribe a Christian milieu to it (cf Longley 2009, 106, 126). There is nothing that precludes the presence of pagans within western Britain throughout the 5th, 6th and potentially into the 7th centuries, and indeed the evidence from the Continent and Ireland suggests that this should be expected. Moreover, we should not expect there to have been a clear dichotomy between Christians and pagans at this time. Nevertheless, the *De Excidio* demonstrates that kings were assumed to have been Christian by the middle of the 6th century, and by the middle of the 7th century Christianity was firmly established amongst the wider populace. Thus Christianity appears to have won general acceptance in western Britain by the second half of the 6th century, at most only a generation before it did in Ireland (Stancliffe 2005a, 401). In the following section I will examine why Christianisation took so long, before considering the ideological and institutional contexts of the conversion process in western Britain.

### *A new model for Christianity and society in post-Roman western Britain*

The model of Christianisation proposed above for Gaul and lowland western Britain would have had little efficacy in the far west, and would have been greatly undermined, even in the east, following the collapse of Romano-British administration in the 5th century. The socio-political frameworks that developed in the post-Roman period provided a further barrier to Christianisation. This was because they were rural in their economy, and tribal and familial in their organisation. Urbanism, taxation and bureaucracy were non-existent; power and politics now revolved around leaders and their warbands who competed with their rivals for local dominance (Halsall 2007, 351, 366–368; Wickham 2005, 330–331). Christianity was therefore unable to graft itself on to the urban civil administrative framework of the late Roman state as it did in Gaul. Furthermore, the extrovert military culture of the emergent elite of the post-Roman kingdoms, with its emphasis on martial prowess, boastful and exuberant virility, sumptuous feasting and general excess was the antithesis of the idioms upon

which Christianity had developed under the Roman Empire (Sarris 2011, 225). The problems did not stop there however; how were evangelists to deal with the pagan past? The spiritual condition of a potential convert's ancestral kinfolk is known to have provided a barrier to conversion (Charles-Edwards 2000, 199), and Christianisation was difficult where it clashed with habitual systems of social reproduction which were deeply interwoven with pre-Christian religious practices (Klingshirn 1994, 208–209). The processes of assimilation and adaption that were required for conversion and Christianisation were therefore a great deal more complex to negotiate in post-Roman Britain than they had been in late Roman Gaul.

### *The ideological context*

How then did Christianity overcome these obstacles, and what drove the process of conversion and Christianisation forward? The 'missionary model' of evangelism with which we are familiar from St Augustine in England was not common in the early medieval West, and individuals seeking *peregrinatio* (voluntary exile or pilgrimage in the service of God) are more likely to have aided the westward expansion of Christianity during the 6th and 7th centuries (Brown 2003, 414–415; Fletcher 1997, 93–95). I will suggest here, however, that the Christianisation of western Britain may have been stimulated by the encroachment of pagan Anglo-Saxon groups into British territory. David Dumville has drawn attention to the coincidence of the emergence of British Christianity with the incursion of the Anglo-Saxons, but does not go so far as to propose a causal relationship between the two processes (Dumville 1997, 91). Some anthropological studies of conversion suggest that it was at moments of political and cultural change such as this that new religious loyalties, beliefs and behaviours could be introduced and confirmed (Klingshirn 1994, 202; Horton 1975; Peel 1977). It is not unreasonable to suggest that as the Romano-British civil administration faded away and pagan groups encroached upon British territory, so British communities increasingly looked to Christianity, which by this point may have become synonymous with *Romanitas*, to solidify their position and identity (Ward-Perkins 2000, 515). We can see something of this ethnic divide within our sources; Patrick in his *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus* draws a firm distinction between the British, who were Christian and Roman (*cives*, 'fellow citizens'), and the barbarians who were non-Roman and non-Christian

(*gentes*). In a similar vein Gildas draws a distinction between the British *cives* (although they were no longer Roman) and their pagan Anglo-Saxon enemies (*hostes*) (Charles-Edwards 2013, 227–228; Fraser 2013, 16–18). Thus we can suggest that Christianity became a repository of *Romanitas* that gave the British access to the ideological power and authority of the Roman Empire (Fletcher 1997, 24–25; Henig 2004; Seaman 2006). This opportunity was not grasped initially by the Anglo-Saxons, most likely because Christianity was too deeply associated with their British enemies (Ward-Perkins 2000). Nevertheless, it was through the adoption of Christianity that immigrant Irish communities in western Britain, who had previously had only very limited contact with Rome, came to display elements of *Romanitas* (Charles-Edwards 2013, 185).

Christianity's position in western Britain was consolidated by its adoption and patronage by the post-Roman elite. Once they converted the faith was drawn down through the networks of patronage which underpinned their authority and the status of their clients and dependents. Indeed, there would have come a point, probably before the time that Gildas was writing, when access to power and prestige would have blocked non-Christians (Halsall 2010, 272–273). Christianity armed the post-Roman elite with literate tools of governance, and offered an ideological justification to their kingships (Turner 2006, 65; Urbanczyk 2003, 15–16; Yorke 2006, 238). An added attraction was the status and power offered by positions within the Church; political leaders looked to plant members of their families in positions of authority in the monasteries they established, while nobles with limited inheritance prospects may have looked to the Church as an alternative route to power and authority.

Conversion was never solely a political decision however. Conversion offered the hope of salvation through Christ, and secular leaders who endowed and protected the Church were rewarded with '*a powerhouse of prayer and atonement in their midst*' (Brown 2003, 253). Patronage of the Church also gave access to the interceding power of the saints, '*persons with power and influence*' (Brown 1981; 2003, 19, 109) and, from the 6th-century, burial *ad sanctos* – close to saints – became increasingly sought after (Effros 2002). Theological developments across the 6th and 7th centuries helped to further consolidate Christianisation. New attitudes to private penance helped to define for the laity their obligations for receipt of salvation, whilst also serving to regulate

secular society and provide converts with opportunities for spiritual teaching (Brown 2003, 243–246; Fletcher 1997, 138–140). At the same time a body of theology surrounding death and burial, which included the concept of purgatory, was developing (Paxton 1990; Effros 2002). Thus, by the 8th century, the Church was encouraging lay burial within ecclesiastical cemeteries, a shift which was undoubtedly related to the appearance of ‘developed cemeteries’ in the previous century (O’Brien 2009, 149–150; Petts 2002, 44).

The Christianisation of the rural populace is the subject about which we know the least. We can speculate that some individuals converted following an act of charity or a miraculous cure; some may have followed the example of their leaders or kin; some may have been coerced, even violently (Klingshirn 1994, 227, 233); but we must not underestimate the numinous element of conversion (Insoll 2004, 134). The strength of the fear of the Final Judgement and the promise of eternal salvation must have played a very crucial role in the decisions made by individuals (Hall 2005, 14–15; Lambert 2010, 79). Whatever the motivation, we can be confident conversion was an antagonistic process which entailed breaking with long standing and deeply ingrained traditions. Evangelists could implement strategies to lessen the impact however. Concepts such as the ‘naturally good pagan’ and ‘gentile prophet’ placated the conflict between converts and the pagan past of their kin, whilst the pagan pantheon could be ‘euhemerised’ into mere humans, and assigned to a distant past prior to the arrival of the British in Britain (Charles-Edwards 2000, 200–202). Christianisation would also have been facilitated by the development of geographies of devotion that incorporated rather than obliterated the pre-Christian landscape. In late 4th-century Gaul, for example, Martin of Tours attempted to re-sacralise the landscape through the consecration of healing springs and associating trees with the graves of saints (Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini* XII). Over two hundred years later Gregory the Great in a letter to Abbot Mellitus also advocated the conversion of pagan temples (Gregory I, *Register* 11.56). We lack such early evidence from western Britain, but the trees, caves, standing stones, springs and prehistoric barrows that feature within later hagiography may represent the continuity of local traditions (Blair 2005, 226, 483; Petts 2009, 141). Christianisation of the landscape helped to dissolve antagonisms and served to reinforce the bonds between local communities and the new faith.

### *The institutional context*

In 1971 Charles Thomas argued that Christianity in 5th-century Britain was organised on diocesan episcopal lines, but during the 6th century the ‘*slow process of formal evangelisation was impatiently jolted by the advent of... organised monasticism*’ from the Mediterranean (Thomas 1971, 20). Thus Christianity in Wales and Cornwall came to be organised around monastic settlements headed by abbots (Thomas 1971, 20). Thomas’ model was heavily influenced by Kathleen Hughes’ (1966) work on Ireland, the validity of which has now been undermined (Sharpe 1984; Etchingham 1999). Direct evidence relating to the institutional context of the early British Church is limited, but a dichotomy between monastic and episcopal modes of organisation is difficult to sustain, even during the late 4th century (Etchingham 1999; Sharpe 2002, 105–106). The earliest body of reliable evidence from Ireland, which belongs to the 7th century, shows a system of ecclesiastical organisation in which episcopal, abbatial and ‘coarbial’ (a form of secularised ecclesiastical rule) authority coexisted as part of ‘*a single multifaceted organisational model*’ (Etchingham 1999, 457–458). I will, for want of better terms, describe this system as ‘monastic’ and call the earliest foundations ‘monasteries’ (Blair 2005, 3, 19). The modes of life practiced within these monasteries are not recorded in detail, but we can be fairly certain that a diversity of rules were practiced, and communities could include members of secular clergy, including bishops, as well as a lay element (Blair 2005, 3, 73; Davies 1992; Dumville 1997, 107; Etchingham 1999, 91, 457–458; Pryce 1992, 51–55; Yorke 2006, 159).

The heads of these foundations, some of whom were married, were men who were as much of ‘secular’ as of ‘religious’ power. They would have been able to persuade post-Roman rulers that the teachings of Christianity were compatible with their ‘secular’ concerns (Sarris 2011, 205). At the same time their monasteries came to reflect microcosms of local lay society that were not opposed to or closed off from the functioning of secular social systems. Indeed, systems of ecclesiastical authority operated along the same hereditary lines as secular society (Pryce 1992, 50) and Peter Brown has noted that monasteries could be as much local ‘*noblemen’s clubs*’ as they were centres of Christian prayer and learning (Brown 2003, 374–375). The early British Church was therefore able to adjust to the contours of post-Roman society and was well disposed to the challenges which evangelism posed (Sarris 2011, 331).



The arrival of monasticism in Britain is not documented, but should not be confined by chronologies that are dependent upon its arrival from southern Gaul in the late 5th century (cf Thomas 1971, 21–22; 1981, 348–349). Monasticism could have spread to Britain by the late 4th or early 5th century, and it was certainly well established by the middle decades of the 5th century when it formed a part of Patrick's evangelism of Ireland (Dark 2006, 7–8; Dumville 1997, 93–94). The archaeological evidence for post-Roman monasticism is far from unambiguous, and we must know that monasteries were just one element within a much wider Christian landscape that also encompassed cemeteries, inscribed stones, preaching crosses, private churches, hermitages, and 'natural' sites, such as holy springs and trees. Nevertheless, we have sufficient evidence to suggest that monasteries were established within western Britain from at least the later 5th century (Seaman forthcoming b). They must have initially been concentrated within the Romano-British Christian zone in the east, but the *Life of St Samson of Dol* demonstrates that they had been established in west Wales by c.500, and by 650 a network of local churches was being established throughout western Britain (Florent 1997; Thomas 1994).

Once established, monasteries became an 'evangelising vanguard' (NcNamara 1987, 25), places where new Christians were instructed and baptised, and where the Mass was celebrated (Fletcher 1997, 94; Klingshirn 1994, 227). They were also centres of ecclesiastical administration and the nodes from which pastoral support and guidance stemmed into the wider landscape; preachers could be sent from monasteries into the surrounding rural communities, perhaps initially preaching within undeveloped cemeteries, which eventually developed Christian monuments and churches of their own (Fletcher 1997, 61). Communities which were not situated close to a monastery would not have been as easily brought into contact with Christianity, however, and it would have been amongst these more peripheral communities that pagan practices, such as those encountered by St Samson in Cornwall, persisted longest. Over the course of the 6th and 7th centuries, however, monasteries were established in greater numbers and, in time, many became the nuclei of networks of dependent daughter houses (Pryce 1992, 55–56). Thus a tipping point appears to have been reached no later than 700 and most likely a generation or two earlier.

## Conclusions

Christianity had probably reached Britain by the end of the 3rd century, and during the 4th century Christians were common enough in Bath to be suspected of petty theft. Christianity was strongest amongst the Romano-British aristocracy, however, and it was in no way dominant by the end of the 4th century. Moreover, as Christianity had developed within the confines of the Roman Empire it was not well positioned to establishing itself within socio-political systems that were not founded upon *Romanitas*. Thus it had little impact within much of western Britain throughout the 4th and into the 5th century. The process of Christianisation hit an additional barrier in the early 5th century when the collapse of the Romano-British administration and the appurtenant reconfiguration of socio-political and economic systems undermined the ideological and institutional frameworks through which Christianisation had thus far taken place. Thereafter evangelists were faced with the difficult task of reconciling Christianity to socio-political and cultural systems which were in many ways the antithesis of those to which it was accustomed. It may have been the encroachment of pagan Anglo-Saxons into British territory from the middle of the 5th century which instigated the Christianisation of the post-Roman elite, and by the mid-6th century Christianity had become an important marker of status and identity amongst the British. Nevertheless, the processes of adaptation and reconciliation which lay behind conversion and Christianisation were complex and protracted, taking at least 150 years. Moreover, Christianity and paganism were at two ends of a spectrum with the vast majority of the population somewhere between. Paganism and practices considered 'pagan' by the Church would have lingered longest within communities which lay beyond the 'evangelising vanguard' of the earliest monasteries. The Christianisation of the British elite, which seems to have taken place by around 530/540, put Christianity in the ascendancy, and by the 7th century, as more churches were established and Christian theology and secular social systems became increasingly concordant, a tipping point was reached. I will finish by asking whether it is still sustainable to draw a contrast between 'Christian Britons' and 'Pagan Anglo-Saxons' in post-Roman Britain? I suggest that it is not, and would argue that differences in religion may be more profitably approached in terms of contrasting ideological and institutional frameworks. There were Christians and pagans in both the east and west but

in the west, Christianity and the early Church were in the ascendancy, whereas elites in the east were pagan and Christianity assumed a subordinate position which lacked a widespread and politically backed institutional framework until the 7th century.

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### Notes

- 1 Here defined as approximately Wales and England south of the River Mersey and west of the western limit of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in the 6th century (White 2007, fig 10).
- 2 It is now argued that Romano-British Christian communities may also have survived within the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (Brooks 2006; Sharpe 2002).
- 3 Gildas states that ‘*I shall not speak of the ancient errors, common to all races...*’. And that ‘*I shall not enumerate the devilish monstrosities of my land... some of which we can see today, stark as ever, inside or outside deserted city walls: outlines still ugly, faces still grim*’ (De Excidio 4:2).
- 4 A symbol constructed from the superimposed ancient Greek letters *chi* and *rho*; the first two letters of the ancient Greek word *Khrīstos* – ‘Christ’. The cross was not a common Christian motif until the 5th century (Thomas 1981, 91).
- 5 The ‘chi-rho pendant’ apparently found within the fill of a grave at Shepton Mallet (a replica of which was worn by George Carey when he was enthroned as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1991) has now been proven to be a fake (see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/somerset/7622395.stm>)

- 6 Monuments in Wales are referred to as they appear in Redknap and Lewis’ (2007) and Edwards’ (2007, 2013) corpora. Those from south-west are referred to as they appear in Okasha 1993.

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