The Seven Churches of Oxford.

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LEGEND and myth have been very busy with the early history of Oxford. Mr. Parker sifted these out in one of the earliest publications of the Oxford Historical Society, and dated the actual history of Oxford from the foundation of St. Frideswide's in 727. But even this foundation suggests some earlier beginnings for the history of Oxford.

Dida, the father of St. Frideswide, is called "Rex quidam Oxnafordiae" in the Cottonian MS. of the Life of St. Frideswide, and "subregulus quidam nomine Didanus" in the Laudian MS.* Oxford, as the centre of a sub-kingdom of the Mercians, must have been a place of some importance at the Mercian conquest. The policy of Penda had been one of alliance with the British kings or chieftains, and the evidence for the continuity of Celtic sites on the old Mercian borderland of Staffordshire and Warwickshire suggests a similar continuity in other parts of Mercia.

In the time of Dida, c. 725, the Oxford district had been under Mercian rule for a hundred years. The Thames had been recognised as the southern boundary of the Mercians in the treaty made between Penda and the Saxon Kings, Cynegils and Cuichelm, in 628. Before the year 628 there may have been some recognition of West Saxon rule on the part of the old British population, though the few notices imply that the authority of the West Saxons north of the Thames was very slight. In 614 Cynegils and Cuichelm were fighting with the Welsh at Beandune (? Bampton), and it is probable that this was not due so much to a raid from beyond the Severn as to a rising of the native British in the Oxford district. The Engles, under Pybba, the father of Penda, were slowly driving in their wedge between the Northumbrians and the West Saxons, who would be quick to make use of any unrest among the British tribes.

* Parker, Early History of Oxford, p. 95.

During the reign of Ceolwulf (597-611) the West Saxons were incessantly at war with the Engles and the Welsh, and only twenty-six years before the accession of Ceolwulf the British were still in undisturbed possession of the district. It was in 571 that Cuthwulf, of Wessex, fought against the Bretwelas at Bedcanford (Bedford), and took four towns, Lygeanbirg (Lemborough, near Buckingham, or Limbery, near Luton), Aegelesbirg (Aylesbury), Baenesington (Benson, near Wallingford), and Egonesham (Eynsham). This West Saxon raid has been regarded as the conquest of the district, though no mention has been made of the capture of any cities, as in the Severn raid of 577, nor were any kings killed. And the brief entry of the death of Cuthwulf in the same year, 571, is in contrast with the triumphant note of 577. Dorchester and Alchester were both within the so-called District of the Four Towns, but their overthrow is passed over in silence. Indeed, the question arises whether it was more than a raid, and whether or not the submission of the British was anything more than a nominal recognition of West Saxon rule.

The site of Oxford at the junction of the Cherwell and the Thames is almost as important as that of Dorchester at the junction of the Thame and the Thames. And though it lies off the system of the Roman roads, it may not have been of less importance in British times. Is it quite certain that the earthworks of Oxford Castle only date back to 912, when King Edward took possession of London and of Oxford? Even if, as is suggested, a "burh" was built at this period, the site may still have been of British origin. The entry in the Chronicle in 912 implies that Oxford at least ranked in importance with London. Again, in the year 1034, this importance is emphasised in a charter of Cnut: "In urbe quae famoso nomine Oxnaford nuncupatur." Whence this fame of Oxford in 1034? It could scarcely be due to St. Frideswide's, for such religious houses were not uncommon in the land. Whence its importance in 912? Why was it a royal city in 727? If history does not answer the question, may there not yet be some tradition behind the myths and legends which have grown up round the early history of Oxford?

There is something unique about the plan of the seven principal Churches of Oxford. They centre, as Mr. Parker pointed out, in St. Martin's, the old city Church at Carfax. But it has not been sufficiently noted that they centre round St. Martin's Church in the form of a cross with its head not to the east, but to the west. This

occidentation is a characteristic feature of some of the older basilicas of Rome, especially of St. Peter's and of St. John Lateran. The Church of St. Peter le Bailey lies immediately west of St. Martin's at the head of the cross. St. Peter's in the East, lies at the foot. The present Church of St. Michael is at the end of the north arm of the cross; at the end of the south arm was formerly the Church of St. Michael at the south gate. This grouping of the Churches of St. Peter and St. Michael round St. Martin's at Carfax is referred to in the old Latin and English rhymes :—*

"Invigilat portae australi boreasque Michael
Exortum solem Petrus regit atque cadentem."

"The North and South Gates St. Michael doth guard;
The East and West St. Peter's care doth ward."

Two other Churches in a line with St. Martin's and the two Churches of St. Peter seem to form part of the original plan, All Saints and St. Mary the Virgin. These seven make up a group of Seven Churches centring round St. Martin's in the form of a Latin Cross of an early type of occidentation. Is this a mere accident, or does this plan preserve the memory of a group of seven Churches of the fifth and sixth century?

The fame of St. Martin was specially dear to the western Church during these centuries. The Church built by St. Ninian at Whithern was dedicated to St. Martin at the very opening of the fifth century; and St. Martin's at Canterbury was a foundation of the British Church before the English Conquest. Venantius Fortunatus, writing of the fame of St. Martin to Childebert, says :—†

"Qui velut alta pharus lumen pertendit ad Indos,
Quem Hispanus, Maurus, Persa, Britannus amat."

This fame was not only due to the mission labours of St. Martin and his followers in the country districts of Gaul. It rested quite as much upon the theological school he had founded in his own monastery and the schools which were founded under his influence throughout the Western Church. It is known to have had a considerable influence on monastic life in Ireland.[1] Sulpitius Severus says that it was the younger members of the community of St. Martin who devoted themselves to scholarship: "ars ibi, exceptis scriptoribus, nulla habebatur: cui tamen operi minor aetas deputabatur: majores orationi vacabant."[2] It would be these younger

* Wood. City of Oxford, Oxf. Hist. Soc., vol. ii., p. 91.

† Ven. Fort. op. pt. i., Lib. x. c. 7.

1. Zimmer. Celtic Church in Britain and Ireland, p. 41.

2. Sup. Sev. Vit. S. Mart. c.x.

scholars who would spread the educational influence of the monastic life in the Church : "Quae enim esset civitas, aut ecclesia, quae non sibi de Martini monasterio cuperet Sacerdotem ?"[3] The dedication of St. Martin at Whithern at least suggests that many of the Martin Churches of England owe their origin to the work and the fame of the followers of St. Martin.[4]

The records of British Christianity are only too scanty, but it would seem probable that at least east of the Severn episcopal jurisdiction was established as in Gaul on the lines of tribal and municipal organization. The site of Oxford was within the territory of the Dobuni. The chief cities were Cirencester and Gloucester. Their clans extended northward along the line of the Cotswolds to the edge of the forest of Arden. On this northern border, only two miles off the Fosse Way near Shipton-on-Stour, is the Martin Church of Barcheston ; and further east, under Madmarston Camp, near Banbury, is the Church of St. Martin at Shutford. On the road from Cirencester over the southern edge of the Cotswolds to the passage at Aust, in the near neighbourhood of the stronghold of Illey Burg and the Roman villa of Woodchester, are the Martin Churches of North Nibley and Horsley. Another, East Leach St. Martin, is close to the Akeman Street east of Cirencester. If the Martin dedications in Gaul are evidence of the influence of St. Martin in the Gallican Church, may not these Churches point to the influence of St. Martin in the British Church in this district of the Dobuni ? And is there not some reason for the suggestion that the old Church of St. Martin at Oxford, now, alas, destroyed, was the centre of a mission of the monks of St. Martin, established at the east end of his diocese by some British Bishop of Gloucester or Cirencester ?

The mission and the schools would develop and prosper during the fifth and sixth centuries. And at some period before the raid of 571 there will have grown up around the Mother Church of St. Martin the Churches of St. Peter, St. Michael, St. Mary, and All Saints. There is no difficulty in the dedications to St. Peter and St. Mary at that period. St. Michael's Church at Rome was enlarged by Pope Symmachus (c. 500), and Justinian is said to have rebuilt the Michael Church at Constantinople, and to have founded a third. The dedication to All Saints has in the west been connected with

3. Ibid, c.x.

4. Bp. of Bristol. "The Ch. in these Islands bef. the coming of Augustine," p. 113.

the dedication of the Pantheon in 607 "in honorem S. Mariae semper virginis et omnium martyrum"; but the sermons of St. Augustine, St. Leo, Maximus of Turin, and Fulgentius "in Natali Martyrum," seem to imply that the dedication was not unknown before. Gildas speaks of the veneration for the martyr Saints in the British Church, and says that, the Dioeletian persecution past, Churches were built in their memory: "Basilicas sanctorum martyrum fundant, construunt, perficiunt, et velut victricia signa passim propalant; dies festos celebrant."[1] This statement, if not strictly historical evidence for the fourth century, is valuable witness to the prevalence of the custom in his own day, in the middle of the sixth century.

There are some other points in the Oxford evidence in support of this theory.

The Church of St. Aldate is referred to in the Abingdon Chronicle in the time of Abbot Ingulph, 1130-1158: "Est in civitate Oxenford monasterium quoddam S. Aldati episcopi venerationi consecratum."[2] It has been suggested that Aldate is a mistake for Aldgate, and that both at Oxford and at Gloucester the Church so dedicated took its name from the old gate of the city. But if credit may be given to Thomas of London, and Thadioc of York, on the authority of Geoffrey of Monmouth, why may not the name of Eldad of Gloucester rest also on genuine tradition? The only two churches dedicated to him are within the district of his jurisdiction. He is associated with the names of Vortigern, Hengist and Aurelias in the British History in the middle of the fifth century. It would be quite in the spirit of Celtic Christianity to commemorate his name in the British ecclesiastical settlement at Oxford.

There has been no attempt to confuse St. Budoc with the west gate of the city. The presence of a Church dedicated to St. Budoc in Oxford: "extra portam occidentalem in parochia Sancti Budoci" has been a greater riddle than that of St. Aldate. The Churches of St. Budoc, near Falmouth, and St. Budeaux, near Plymouth, are evidence of a Cornish Saint or Bishop of that name. Mr. Parker says: "No reason could be well assigned for a Church in Oxford being dedicated to a Cornish Saint."[3] But the fact remains that this Saint is commemorated.

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1. Historia Gildae, c. 8, Mon. Hist. Brit., p. 9.
2. Parker's Early History, p. 292.
3. Parker's Early History, p. 296.

On the other hand, the dedication presents no difficulties if, as is suggested, the foundation of the early churches of Oxford is to be traced back to British times. Is it altogether unreasonable to assign these two dedications of St. Aldate and St. Budoc to the devotion of the British monks and clergy who had set out with such great care their group of Seven Churches in the centre of Britain.

It is also noticeable that in the Abingdon record St. Aldate's is called "monasterium quoddam"; that is the Register of St. Frideswide's, St. Peter le Bailey is called "monasterium Sancti Petri in occidente," and that is a deed of Cnut's, the Church of St. Martin is referred to as "quoddamque monasteriolum in honore Sancti Martini praesulis consecratum." Ducange in his Lexicon says of this word: "Monasteriolum, Parvum monasterium, ab alio majori dependens," and refers to the frequent occurrence of the name of Monstreuil in France as an instance of its survival. The titles given to the Churches of St. Martin, St. Peter, and St. Aldate at least imply some kind of monastic origin of which history subsequent to the English Conquest has no record.

It is a matter of regret that the Church of St. Martin has been destroyed. It stood of old in the centre of the city as the one monument of the venerable antiquity of the Church and Schools of Oxford. The monastery of the British disciples of St. Martin was, if this suggestion be admitted, the first school for the clergy in the heart of Britain, the Alma Mater of the University of Oxford.

P.S.—The *Archæologia Oxoniensis* (1892-1895) has a plan facing p. 5 showing British and Roman-British finds in Oxford. The position of the Seven Churches is best shewn in the plan at the end of Mr. Parker's Early History of Oxford (Oxf. Hist. Society, vol. iii.)

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