



CREaTE

Canterbury Research and Theses Environment

Canterbury Christ Church University's repository of research outputs

<http://create.canterbury.ac.uk>

Please cite this publication as follows:

Seaman, A. (2016) Religion in Britannia in the Fifth and Sixth centuries AD. *Desperta Ferro Ancient and Medieval History*, 36. ISSN 2171-9276.

Link to official URL (if available):

This version is made available in accordance with publishers' policies. All material made available by CReaTE is protected by intellectual property law, including copyright law. Any use made of the contents should comply with the relevant law.

Contact: create.library@canterbury.ac.uk



Religion in Britannia in the Fifth and Sixth centuries AD

Dr Andy Seaman, School of Humanities, Canterbury Christ Church University

The fifth and sixth centuries AD were a period of profound religious change. Christianity arrived in Britain during the late-Roman period, and had become firmly established amongst the 'Celtic' peoples of post-Roman Britain by the end of the sixth century. Nevertheless, Romano-Celtic paganism persisted throughout the period, and Christianity was not widely adopted by the Germanic Anglo-Saxon groups who migrated into southern and eastern England during the fifth century. Germanic paganism was central to Anglo-Saxon society, and although Christianity was re-introduced towards the end of the sixth century the conversion process continued into the second half of the seventh century. Few historical sources survive from fifth and sixth century Britain, but two important eighth century texts the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* by Bede and the *Vita Columbae* by Adomnán, and earlier writings attributed to Patrick, Gildas, and Prosper of Aquitaine provide key evidence. In addition place-names and an expanding corpus of archaeological evidence, including inscriptions on stone memorials and burials, provide important evidence.

The Romano-British Background

Christianity may have reached Britain during the third century, but it is not until after the Edict of Milan in AD 313 that we have firm evidence for Romano-British Christianity. There were bishops from Britain at the Council of Arles in 314, and although fourth century inscriptions are rare Christian symbols have been identified on a range of objects from Roman Britain, including the mosaics at Hinton St Mary and Frampton (both Dorset) and personal items such as finger rings. Fourth century churches are elusive, but a probable house-church has been identified at the villa at Lullingstone (Kent), and the impressive late-fourth century hoard from Water Newton (Cambridgeshire) has been interpreted as a set of liturgical plate used by an ecclesiastical community in the small town of *Durobrivae*. Christianity was one religion amongst many in late-Roman Britain however, and the evidence suggests that it was largely restricted to higher status social groups in the south of the province. Nevertheless, a curse tablet found in the sacred spring of the temple at Bath (Somerset) that attempts to identify a thief through the invocation 'someone, whether Christian or pagan' implies that Christians were numerous enough amongst the local in Bath population to have been suspected of petty theft. In the 'highland zone' of western and northern Britain, where the influence of Rome was muted, the evidence for Christianity is much thinner, and there is no evidence that Christianity was established amongst the groups north of Hadrian's Wall at this time. Whilst a lack of evidence does not necessarily mean that Christianity was absent area, it appears to have had limited impact outside of lowland southern Britain by the time that Roman control ended in the first decades of the fifth century.

The Pelagian Heresy

Pelagius was probably born in Britain in the late-fourth century, but he spent most of his life in Rome as a Christian ascetic. His ideas on God's grace and free will were condemned as heretical and his followers were exiled by the emperor Honorius in 418. Since Britain was no longer a part of the Empire at this time it is possible that Pelagianism was introduced by exiles seeking refuge in the country of Pelagius' birth. Prosper of Aquitaine attributed the growth of the heresy in Britain to an individual named Agricola and stated that in the year 429 '... 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'. An account of Germanus' visit to British is given in the *Life of St Germanus* written by Constantius of Lyon around 475-480. The *Life* recounts Germanus' confrontation with the heretics, a visit to the shrine of St Alban, and a battle against a pagan army. The historical basis of these events is dubious, but it is possible that Pelagianism would have been attractive to Christians in a declining province like early-fifth century which was only partially Christianized.

Christianity in Post-Roman 'Celtic' Britain

There has been considerable debate as to what happened to Christianity in Britain after the collapse of the Roman administration in the early-fifth century. Some scholars argue that it was too weakly established to have survived the upheavals that followed the end of Roman control and that there was a period of re-conversion by missionaries from Gaul and the Mediterranean in the later-fifth century. Others, however, favour direct continuity from the fourth century. Christianity was largely, although not completely, wiped out in the parts of southern and eastern England that was subject to Anglo-Saxon settlement in the fifth century. There is no evidence to doubt continuity further west however, where a glimpse of a functioning fifth century ecclesiastical organization can be seen in *Confessio* written Patrick who was a British Christian born in the first half of the fifth century near to the unlocated *vicus* of *Bannavem Taburniae*.

Whilst there were Christians in Britain in the fourth century it was during the fifth and sixth centuries that Christianity became firmly established, both within the parts of southern Britain that lay outside of Germanic influence and north Hadrian's Wall where Christianity had limited impact in the fourth century. Important evidence for southern Britain is provided by the *De Excidio Britanniae* composed by Gildas a British cleric around 530/540. The *De Excidio* was written within a firmly Christian milieu, and accusations of paganism are noticeably absent from Gildas' famous tirade against the contemporary rulers of his day. The picture from the *De Excidio* is support by archaeological evidence. Around 250 inscribed stones have been found across south-west England, south and north Wales, and southern Scotland. The stones date from the fifth to seventh centuries, and appear to have functioned primarily as funerary monuments, although they were also associated with the range of secondary functions including the marking of territorial boundaries. The stones carry inscriptions in Latin and/or the Irish ogham script. Many of the inscriptions are religiously ambiguous, but over a third include Christian formulae, such as *hic iacet* (here

lies) and *in pace* (in peace), and some are also associated with Chi-Rho symbols or crosses. Whilst many of the memorials are likely to have been set-up within isolated family cemeteries, some were associated with churches or monasteries. A stone from Aberdaron (Caernarvonshire), for example, commemorates a '*Senacus the priest with a multitude of the brethren*'. Monasteries, such as those at Whithorn (Galloway) and Llantwit Major (Glamorganshire), were the nodes around which Christianity came to be organized in Britain, and were central to the processes of conversion and Christianization during the fifth and sixth centuries. Few post-Roman monasteries have been subject to thorough archaeological excavation however.

Christianity started to spread beyond its heartland in southern Britain to Ireland and Scotland during the fifth century. The king Coroticus denounced in Patrick's *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus* was most probably a fifth century Christian king of Strathclyde in southern Scotland, and Prosper of Aquitaine records that there were a sufficient number of Christians in Ireland by 431 to warrant Pope Celestine sending them Palladius as their bishop. The Christian community that Palladius administered to was probably restricted to the east coast where archaeological evidence suggests there had been sustained contact with Britain during the Roman period. It was Patrick's mission a generation later that led to the conversion of the far west of Ireland. It is possible that Christianity was first introduced to the Irish and Pictish speaking groups in what is now Scotland by their northern British neighbours in the fifth century, but it was Christian monks from Ireland in the sixth century who played the leading role in the conversion of Dal Riata and Pictland. The Irish of Dal Riata appear to have been converted before 563, when the island monastery on Iona, from which Columba directed his mission to the Picts in the 560s and 70s, was established. Whilst it is clear that there were strong connections between Christian communities throughout western Britain and Ireland, the idea that there existed a 'Celtic Christianity' common to all Celtic speaking groups and distinct from a 'Roman' church cannot be supported.

Christianity in Early Anglo-Saxon England

In his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* Bede attributed the introduction of Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons kingdoms to Augustine's mission that arrived in Kent in 597. British Christians have not, therefore, been seen as contributing to the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons. There is now a growing awareness that Bede provided only a partial picture however. Anglo-Saxons must have come into contact with British Christians in lowland Britain, particularly as the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms expanded west in the later-sixth and seventh centuries. We also know that the Romano-British population was not exterminated in the south and east of England, and the survival of the cult of St Alban at St Albans, and that of an unknown martyr called Sixtus in either Kent or Essex attests to the existence of Christian enclaves in 'pagan' Anglo-Saxon England. Indeed, it has been suggested that place-names incorporating the element *Eccles* (from the Latin *ecclesia* meaning a church), of which there are examples in Kent and Norfolk, indicate places where British churches were incorporated by the Anglo-Saxons. Radiocarbon dates recently obtained from an Anglo-

Saxon 'princely burial' at Prettlewell (Essex) which contained two gold foil crosses also suggests that the Anglo-Saxon elite had come in contact with Christianity *before* the arrival of Augustine's mission. It appears, therefore, that not only did Christianity survive amongst the native British population in eastern England after the fourth century, but that some Anglo-Saxons adopted their religion during the succeeding centuries.

Paganism in fifth and sixth century Britain

It is important to remind ourselves that what we describe as 'paganism' and 'Christianity' were not strictly defined or comparable concepts during the post-Roman period, and the bipolar opposition that we perceive between them is a product of over a thousand years of hindsight. Whilst Christianity was an organised religion with a well-defined hierarchy and highly regulated codes of conduct and belief, the majority of Christians were not theologians and for many the division between paganism and Christianity was fuzzy. Thus we can expect that there to have been periods of overlap during conversion. Bede, for example, tells us that Rædwald, an early-seventh century of East Anglia, 'had in the same temple an altar for the holy Sacrifice of Christ side by side with a small altar for [offering sacrificial] victims to demons'. Whereas the late-seventh or eighth century *First Life of St Samson of Dol* describes how, whilst travelling through sixth century Cornwall, Samson came across a group of men 'worshipping a certain idol... by means of a play in honour of an image'. When Samson admonished the group 'not to forsake the one God who created all things' they defended themselves saying that 'it was not wrong to celebrate the mysteries of their ancestors in a play'. Clearly then they did not think that their actions were incompatible with Christianity.

Paganism and Christianity were not therefore impermeable to influences from one another. The Christian plaques from the Water Newton hoard, for example, have strong parallels with votive plaques with overt Romano-Celtic pagan imagery found elsewhere in Britain. Whereas the inscription on the curse tablet from Bath must imply that in the fourth century Christians could be found in pagan temples. The influence was not all one-sided however, and it has also been suggested that the appearance of structural shrines or temples in late-sixth century Anglo-Saxon England reflected influences from Christianity. Whilst the development of the Pictish symbol stones in north-east Scotland in the fifth and sixth centuries may have been a reaction *against* the emergence of Christianity and a reassertion of a pagan identity.

As we have seen we can be confident that there were Christians within the 'pagan' Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, but were there pagans in the 'Christian' kingdoms of the north and west? The evidence for this is less obvious, but there is no reason to assume that Romano-Celtic paganism did not persist throughout the period, as indeed it did in Gaul. Pagan activity at Romano-Celtic temples is generally assumed to have come to an end in the early-fifth century, but firm evidence is lacking and continuity beyond this date is possible. It has been argued that, since burial at temple sites appears to have been prohibited during the fourth century, cemeteries at temples such as Henley Wood and Lamyatt Beacon (both in Somerset) may reflect their Christianisation during the fifth and sixth centuries. Indeed,

small structures at these sites have been interpreted as possible churches. The dating evidence from the cemeteries does not preclude a gap of several centuries between the final use of the temples and the commencement of burial however. Moreover, burial was not unknown at pagan temples during the Romano-British period.

Romano-Celtic temples are not found throughout most of northern and western Britain however, and in these areas pagan religious practices remained largely un-monumentalised, non-epigraphic and aniconic throughout the Romano-British period. The absence of evidence for paganism in the fifth and sixth centuries does not therefore have to imply widespread Christianisation. Indeed, place-names which incorporate the element *neved* (meaning 'sacred place', 'sacred grove'), such as Lanivet, Carnevas, and Trewarnevas (all Cornwall) Nympsfield (Gloucestershire) and Gwernyfed (Powys), have been interpreted as evidence of post-Roman pagan cult sites. The process of conversion and Christianization was slow and drawn out, and whilst Christianity had been established in Britain since the fourth century there were still important pagan foci in the landscapes of the fifth and sixth centuries. It is possible, for example, that post-Roman power centres, such as the royal centres at Dunadd (Argyll and Bute) and Rhynie (Aberdeenshire), were associated with pagan kingship rituals.

Conclusions

We can be confident that both Christians and pagans could be found in most parts of Britain during the fifth and sixth centuries. Amongst the British, Irish and Picts Christianity was in the ascendancy by the middle of the sixth century and probably much earlier in the more Romanised areas. By the time that Gildas was writing kingship was closed off to all but Christians, and we can suggest that paganism persisted longest amongst lower status rural communities who did not enjoy regular contact with a church or monastery. In Anglo-Saxon areas, however, the socio-political elite were aligned with Germanic paganism, and it was only towards the end of the sixth century that the tide turned in favour of Christianity. Why the Anglo-Saxons did not widely adopt Christianity when they settled in Britain is a matter of debate, but it has been suggested that they may not have wanted to have associated themselves with the religion of their British enemies.

Bibliography

Blair, J. 2005: *The Church and Anglo-Saxon Society*, Oxford.

Dark, K. 2000: *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, Stroud.

Lambert, M. 2010: *Christians and Pagans: The Conversion of Britain from Alban to Bede*, Yale.

Petts, D. 2003: *Christianity in Roman Britain*, Stroud.

Seaman, A. P. 2014: *Tempora Christiana?* Conversion and Christianization in Western Britain AD 300-700, *Church Archaeology*, 16, 1-22.

Yorke, B. 2006: *The Conversion of Britain*, London.

Extended Bibliography

Brown, P. 2013: *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200-1000*, 3rd edition, Oxford.

Carver, M. (ed.) 2003: *The Cross Goes North - Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe A.D. 300-1300*, York.

Charles-Edwards, T. 2003: *After Rome*, Oxford.

Charles-Edwards, T. 2013: *Wales and the Britons, 350-1064*, Oxford.

Dumville, D. (ed.) 1993: *Saint Patrick: AD 493-1993*, Woodbridge.

Edwards, N. (ed.) 2009: *The Archaeology of the Early Medieval Celtic Churches*, London.

Edwards, N. 2001: Early-Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales: Context and Function, *Medieval Archaeology* 45, 15-39.

Edwards, N. and Lane, A. (eds.) 1992: *The Early Church in Wales and the West*, Oxford.

Fletcher, R. A. 1997: *The Conversion of Europe: From Paganism to Christianity, 371-1386 AD*, London.

Karkov, C. E. and Howe, N. (eds.) 2006: *Conversion and Colonization in Anglo-Saxon England*, Tempe.

Lapidge, M. and Dumville, D. (eds.) 1984: *Gildas: New Approaches*, Woodbridge.

Petts, D. 2011: *Pagan and Christian: Religious Change in Early Medieval Europe*, London.

Stancliffe, C. 2005: Christianity amongst the Britons, Dalriadan Irish and Picts, in (ed.), P Fouracre, *The New Cambridge Medieval History, volume I c500 - c700*, Cambridge, 426-461.

Thomas, C, 1981: *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*, London.