Christianity and the End of Roman Britain

by David Petts

Although an early fifth century date is accepted by most as the end of Roman political control of the diocese of Britannia, it is clear that there were continued links into the early medieval period, particularly in the West of the country. The study of Western or Celtic Britain is dominated by the study of early Christianity and its archaeology, yet in the Roman period it is often suggested that Britain was barely Christianised. In this paper I want to suggest some reasons why this contrast should exist, and explore the relationship between *Romanitas* and Christianity in Late Antiquity.

The end of Roman Britain has been a subject of much debate in recent years, though there is very little agreement to be found. Arguments for long-term continuity (Dark 1994a) compete with those for an end that was 'nasty, brutish and short' (Esmonde Cleary 1989:161). It seems that the end of Roman Britain can be as complicated or as simple as we want it to be. It is possible to take a minimalist approach, and place the end of Roman Britain in AD 410, with the Honorian Rescript. The exact events of this year are unclear, but it is seems that at this point official Roman political control of the diocese of Britain ceased (Salway 1981:443–4).

This simple model for the end of Roman Britain has the advantage of providing a clean divorce between Britain and the Western Empire, and all that follows are merely sub-Roman successor states. But we know things were not that simple, today we cannot interpret the end of Roman Britain in strictly political terms.

For the last twenty years another approach has been to look at the economic end of Roman Britain. An emphasis has been put on the importance of the cessation of the Roman coin supply, and the taxation cycle which this coinage enabled (e.g. Esmonde Cleary 1989:139; Millett 1992:224–7). Thus the end of Roman Britain has been placed in the mid-fifth century with the catastrophic collapse of the 'Roman Economy', reverberations echoing throughout British society, leaving a collapsed and enervated society which easily fell victim to the minimal number of Germanic immigrants who are now seen to be the orthodox interpretation of the *adventus saxonum*. Thus, in many ways, it could be argued that Britain underwent the same social processes as found in mainland Europe, following Chris Wickham's model of a move from 'taxation modes' to 'tributary modes', but in a period of 20–30 years rather than 200 (Wickham 1984).

However now with the advent of post-processual, structural and symbolic modes of thought in archaeology, we are encouraged to see the end of Roman Britain, as being a symbolic shift. The end of Roman Britain is now the end of a cultural construct: in the words of the historian Ian Woods 'Ultimately the end of Roman Britain is the history of fifth and sixth-century opinion' (Woods 1984:2). This leads to the obvious question: whose opinions?

We are faced with many players on the Late Roman scene, all with valid opinions about the end of Roman Britain. There will inevitably be a disjunction between the opinions of Roman bureaucrats in Cirencester or Trier, Scots and Irish raiders, settling Saxons, Romanized Britons living in Somerset, or Hibernicized Cornish in Dumnonia. Following AD 410, it can quite easily be seen that we could potentially have a series of 'imagined Roman Britains' dying out over a period of two hundred years. There is also the disjunction between what people say and what people mean: when Charlemagne had himself crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Leo III on Christmas Day AD 800 in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome he undoubtedly made a claim to be the heir of the Roman Empire, but did he really think he was a Roman? It seems highly unlikely that by this time there would be a conscious harking back to a former era of greatness. Any

consideration of the end of the Roman world from a symbolic stand point, should aim to outline this slow transition from Roman to Romanesque.

It is clear that even in the minds of the Romans themselves the nature of being Romanized was complex and multi-faceted. Around AD 477 in Sidonius Apollinaris' letter to Arbogast, Count of Trier, a descendant of the Frankish *magister militem* of the AD 390s, this ambiguity can be seen:

> You have drunk deep from the spring of Roman eloquence and dwelling by the Moselle, you speak the true Latin of the Tiber. The splendour of the Roman speech, if it exists anywhere, has survived in you, though it has long been wiped out from the Belgian and Rhenish lands: with you and your eloquence surviving, even though Roman law has perished at our border, the Roman speech does not falter.

Ep IV.17

So can we categorize Arbogast as a Roman? Linguistically, he is a Latin speaker, genetically he's of German origin; as for his own self-perception, we cannot know. So is Arbogast a Roman?: politically? no; linguistically? yes; genetically? no; in his own perception? maybe. This ambiguity can equally be seen in Olympiodorus' description of the wedding of Visigothic federate King Atauulf to Galla Placidia, the sister of the Emperor Honorius at Narbonne.

> There Placidia, dressed in royal raiment, sat in a hall decorated in the Roman manner, and by her side sat Atauulf, wearing a Roman generals cloak and other manner of Roman clothing.

Olympiodorus frg. 24

This description of Atauulf's Roman military garb appears to be very Roman, whereas this combination of military regalia with secular power is fundamentally non-Roman: the Romans tried to keep the upper military ranks clearly distinguished from the upper civic ranks (Barnish 1991:72).

Does the archaeology and history of the late Roman period, become impossible? Can we characterise these changes, and how do we recognise them in the archaeological record? If the Roman Empire only existed in the head, how do we recognise its end in the archaeological record? To start with, it is clear that it is crucial to incorporate historical documents into the picture. This is not to say that the documentary record must be privileged, but in the Roman Empire, and especially with the growth of Christianity, texts become an increasingly important means of social and cultural reproduction (Brown 1971). The use of the textual model for reading material culture is common in archaeology (Hodder 1986:122–4), but amongst archaeologists there often seems to be a reluctance to use the same critical approaches to reading the texts themselves. Whilst early medieval historians seem happy to engage with the theoretical issues associated with text based archaeology such approaches remain untheorized amongst those working in Roman Britain (Dark 1994b:1–5; Driscoll 1984, 1988; Rahtz 1984).

But we still face the problem of how we recognise in the archaeological record, something that cannot be effectively conceptualised on paper. It is clear that it is impossible to reach an 'essentialist' definition of what characterises Roman Britain, and it is equally clear that the concept of *Romanitas* is both contextually specific and dynamic.

We have to make choices, we can either become stuck in a relativistic mess with discussions of what marks the end of Roman Britain, and reach an impasse caused by conflicting definitions, or we must make clear and explicit which definitions we are using and argue with reference to these specific criteria. I suspect that many of the disagreements, which characterise the scholastic discussion of late and sub-Roman Britain, are partly due to this definitional misalignment.

Britain and Rome: AD 400–600

I hope to consider here just one aspect of sub-Roman Britain: what may be termed the 'poetics of power' (Geertz 1980:123). I am not so much interested in the mechanics and practical administrative elements of fifth century Britain, but the metaphors, models and terms of reference mobilised in the political life of the British regions of the Diocese.

First there are some practical issues to consider: namely the date at which Britain become independent from the Roman empire, to which we must turn to the documentary and historical evidence. The Honorian Rescript of AD 410 suggests that at this point the Roman Empire released the Diocese, though it is unclear whether this was intended to be a permanent decision or an act of temporary *realpolitik*. However, from Gildas' *De Excidio* we know of the 'Groans of Britain', a plea to the Roman *magister militem*, for help against the raiding Picts and Scots, written sometime between *c.* AD 428 and AD 454 (*DE* 20). This plea is typical of the type of the petition sent to Roman emperors by cities and *civitates* within the Empire (Barnish 1991:8) and suggests that until the mid-fifth century the British were prepared to accept some level of participation and integration with the Western Roman Empire. Beyond this point we have very little direct insular textual evidence.

The external textual evidence is far from clear. If we jump to the fifth century, it is clear that Byzantium's knowledge of Britain is poor (Cameron 1996:213–6). Although Procopius records Belisarius offering Britain to the Goths, it is clear that this was anything but a serious offer (*Gothic Wars* 2:6:28), Belisarius explicitly says that Britain is very shaky, and he seems to think that there are two islands, one name Brettia, and one named Britannia (*Gothic Wars* 4:20). He also recounts a hazy legend about the souls of the dead being ferried to the islands by locals. The one thing he is clear about, though, is that Roman rule of the island ended with the revolt of Constantine III, and it was henceforth ruled by tyrants (*Vandal Wars* 1:2:38). This contrasts with Byzantium's attitudes to other old parts of the Empire: it is clear from Justinian's reconquests of Africa and Italy that he was interested in reclaiming at least part of the old Western Empire, even though North Africa had been under Vandalic occupation for at least one hundred years (Cameron 1993:104–28). Rather than seeing the British as rebels it is clear that by the end of the fifth century, the Romans were actively courting British military help in Gaul against King Euric of the Goths. The Roman general Arvandus is condemned for treason for persuading Euric to attack the British, north of the Loire, instead of making peace with the 'Greek Emperor' (Sid. *Ep.* 1:7). This is the last external reference to British rather than Saxon leaders for a considerable period, and in a context that suggests an alliance between two independent powers, rather than any form of subordination. Whilst the Frankish King Theudebert writes to Justinian in the mid-sixth century claiming hegemony over the Jutes, probably in Kent, and, later, Angles who appear in Frankish embassies (*Gothic Wars* 5:20), British leaders seem to disappear from the continental scene. Meanwhile the Eastern Empire was busy courting the Franks and their Saxon allies, during the Byzantine reconquest of Italy (Wallace-Hadrill 1985:75–6). It is clear that by the end of the fifth century the British successor kingdoms had become politically isolated from the Continent. The Byzantine Empire made no claim to the Diocese, and were more interested in wooing the Frankish kingdoms in France, who in turn had political links with the Saxons, rather than the British. Britain was not seen as politically part of the Roman Empire, nor indeed within its immediate political ambit. It is clear from the British textual evidence that by the mid-fifth century when St Patrick was probably writing that he too believed that Britain to be politically distinct from the Roman Empire. In his *Letter to Coroticus*, a Scottish warlord, he wrote 'I do not say to my fellow citizens, nor to fellow citizens of the Roman Empire, but to fellow-citizens of the Demons, because of their evil actions' (*Epistola* 2). He distinguishes clearly between the British (his own citizens) and the Romans: though he utilises the language of civic belonging (*cives*) rather than of ethnic belonging (*gens*).

Attitudes to Rome in post-Roman Britain

I now want to turn to the archaeological record, and look for the continuation of objects, which may illustrate perceived affiliation. I first want to consider coinage. No one would doubt that coins have a value beyond the mere economic. The propaganda and ideological importance of coinage is well known (Howgego 1995:62–87). Most would accept that the end of the organised coin supply to Britain can be dated to the early fifth century, but what is surprising is there was no post-Roman imitative coinage. Unless there was a catastrophic economic collapse we can at least postulate that until the mid-fifth century there was still some form of centralized political organisation, under such figures as Vortigern, but there is no attempt to mint new post-succession coins.

This is completely different from the situation in Gaul. Here there is centralised and organised copying of Roman coinage from early to mid-fifth century, and the Visigoths were issuing pseudo-Imperial coinage, probably from Toulouse, by the early fifth century (King 1992). These coins were all imitative of Roman coinage and, despite being independent polities, the Barbarian kingdoms issued coins depicting the contemporary Roman emperor, until the end of the Western Roman Empire in AD 476. In these kingdoms the image of Empire and the Emperor continued to be an important source of power and legitimisation for the new successor kingdoms, to the extent that regal coinage was not issued until the sixth century. This practice simply does not seem to have occurred in Britain. There was no attempt to issue coinage, even for propaganda purposes, making references to the Empire or Emperors. The use of coins for political purposes seems to have ceased.

Another direct indicator of Roman political authority is the use of official brooches and metalwork. Objects such as crossbow brooches and belt-sets are well attested as indicators of civil and military rank: illustrations on late Roman coins represent emperors handing out crossbow brooches, and there is extensive literary attestation of their official importance (Janes 1996). On the mosaics in the church of San Vitale at Ravenna Justinian's generals are depicted wearing crossbow brooches, and the burial of the Frankish king Childeric contained a highl· ornamented crossbow brooch (James 1988:58–64). Belt-sets are also found widely across the Western Roman Empire, including much of Britain, and on the Continent were clearly part of a set of indicators of official rank, as late as the sixth century. If we look at these objects in the fifth century it is clear that crossbow brooches were not used in Britain much beyond the early fifth century, and there is no evidence of devolved brooch types based on these brooches such as found elsewhere in the Empire, such as Pietroasa in Romania (Harhiou 1977). The elaborate gold crossbow brooches from the Moray Firth and from Ericksbrae, in Scotland, are probably best understood in a fourth century context as diplomatic gifts (Johns 1996:166–70). There is some evidence that there was localised production of belt-sets in Britain, notably Hawkes and Dunning Types 1A and 1B, but again this production ceases by the late fourth century (Hawkes & Dunning 1961:41–50). It is clear that these belt-sets were never used in the dominant successor states in sub-Roman Britain, such as Gwynedd and Dumnonia, where there is the best evidence for contact with mainland Europe.

We also have a little epigraphic evidence that may help shed light on the political organisation of sub-Roman Britain. Two early Christian inscribed stones in particular are often brought up in this context. One stone from Penmachno (Nash-Williams 1950, no.103) in Carmarthenshire, includes the title *magistrati*, often translated as 'magistrate', whilst the so-called 'Vortipor' stone from Castell Dwryan also in Carmarthenshire includes the possible title *protector* (Nash-Williams 1950 no.138). It has been suggested that these may indicate some element of Roman administration in Wales in the fifth and sixth centuries. A brief examination of what these words actually mean makes this harder to defend. The word *magistrati* is very vague: in Roman provincial administration the word does not correspond to any specific rank, and can be used to refer to any office from *magister militem* to a member of a local *ordo*

(Curchin 1990:36). It can not be used by itself to indicate continuity in any element of Roman administration: are there any alternative meanings for the word? Yes there are, but that will come later. The second stone reads simply MEMORIA VORTIPORIGIS PROTICTORIS, with the Ogam inscription VOTECORIGAS, the phrase 'protictor' usually being understood as 'Protector', a word initially used to describe veterans and members of the imperial bodyguard, and by the later Empire, describing the later equivalent of the Praetorian. If Vortiporigis is equivalent to the Vortipor mentioned in Gildas (*DE* 31:1), it seems unlikely that he would be claiming to be an Imperial bodyguard, rather than a king or prince. It seems the term is being misunderstood. It has also been suggested the Protictor may merely be a translation of the name Vortipor, which may be understood as approximating to 'King of refuge', leaving the stone as a tri-lingual memorial to Vortepor (Hamp 1996).

The Role of Christianity

To sum up at this point, it is clear that after the mid-fifth century Britain did not see itself as politically Roman or part of the Roman empire, and equally what remained of the Roman empire saw Britain as independent and not as a province to be regained. Neither is there any continuation of traditionally Roman indicators of political prestige or power, such as the use of belt-sets and crossbow brooches or the issue of imitative Roman coinage, beyond the mid-fifth century. What little we know about the administrative organisation of sub-Roman Britain implies no continuation of the Roman system much beyond this date.

However despite this political isolation it is clear from the early fifth century that British groups had frequent contact with the Continent, especially Gaul. The significant aspect of this contact is that it was characterised by contacts between ecclesiastics rather than political leaders. These contacts ranged from the visits of priests to settle theological disputes, such as the visit of Germanus (Thompson 1984), to the dispatch of religious books to Britain (Sidonius Apollinaris *Epistolae* 9:9:6). Despite being politically isolated, Britain continued to be important in the religious life of what used to be the Western Empire, and the recent work of David Howlett on the Celtic Biblical Tradition suggests that Britain was on the cutting edge of contemporary Biblical scholarship (Howlett 1995; 1998). Whilst the Roman political authorities had no interest in intervening in the fifth century, it is clear that the church saw British religious affairs as being directly relevant.

So why did Britain forsake a political *Romanitas*, whilst maintaining religious contacts. If the British saw themselves as heirs of the Roman Empire it was in a religious rather than political sense. But how did this come about in a Diocese, which even allowing for the difficulty in recognising fourth century Christianity seems not to have been a major centre of Christianity. What motives led to the rapid conversion to Christianity in the fifth century, especially in areas that had never been particularly Romanized, no matter how the term is defined?

I would suggest that in the fifth century there was a general crisis of confidence in Roman governance. Elsewhere in the Western Empire, the new ideal for government seems to have been reconstituted in an elision of Roman and Germanic styles of rule, mediated in places by Christianity. Gaul in particular saw German invasions and settlement throughout the fourth century, and pottery styles, burial rites and metalwork shows a strong intermingling of Roman and Germanic styles, and as leaders of German origin rose to positions of political importance in the Empire, there was a mixing of Germanic and Roman symbols of authority (Lewit 1991:43–6, Alkemade 1997).

In Britain there was a lack of fourth century Germanic settlement, and I think that this lack of Germanic influence meant that this repertoire of German and Roman symbolism failed to develop in Britain. When German settlement occurred in Britain in the mid-fifth century it was in a mainly hostile context rather than through treaty agreements, and it was precisely at this period that outward symbols of political *Romanitas* disappeared in Britain. I suggest that the Romano-Germanic pattern of governance found on the Continent was not attractive to a group

of polities suffering from Germanic incursions themselves, and that in Britain attempted to find an appropriate reformulation of kingship in the mid-fifth century, rejecting German models. In this rejection of '*Germanitas*' there was a rejection of the political Romanitas that had become so closely entwined with it. In throwing out the Barbarian bathwater they also lost the Roman baby.

So where did the British turn? David Dumville has suggested in a recent article that they turned to the Bible, and the pattern of Biblical kingship (Dumville 1995). In *De Excidio* we see Gildas laying down the model for a Christian kingship, based on the model of David. This model of Davidic kingship did not develop on the Continent until the late sixth and seventh century. This can be seen if the issue of anointing kings is considered. In *De Excidio* there are references to British kings being anointed, a rite with explicit biblical parallels (*DE* 21:4). Assuming an early sixth century date for Gildas this places the practice of anointing kings in Britain some 150 years before any known Royal anointing on the European mainland: with the first certain such occurrence being the anointing of Wamba, king of the Visigoths in the late seventh century (Collins 1995:71). Another hint of the importance of Biblical models may be found if we return to the Penmachno stone: *magistrati* may have no direct administrative referent in Roman law; however, in the Bible it is a word frequently used to mean 'ruler', which makes more sense in the context: and suggests the use of Biblical terminology for describing some early medieval rulers in Britain. The use of biblical terms for administrative positions in early medieval Britain is also found in Gildas' *De Excidio*. Schaffer has shown that Gildas' use of the word *iudex* shares the same semantic range as its use in the Bible: 'The term *iudex* has a range of meaning in late Latin, and the width of meaning is matched by (and at times reflected in) the Vulgate translation of the Bible' (Schaffer 1984:156).

This emphasis on Christianity had several implications for the growth of post-Roman Western polities. Firstly, as Christianity became a means of self-definition for the British polities, as opposed to the Pagan Saxon, there was no impetus to convert them, and Bede indeed comments on the lack of British missionary activity amongst the Saxons. However, this attitude may also have isolated Britain politically on the Continent. Clovis was only baptised at the very end of the fifth century, but at this stage Christianity did not serve to define the Frankish elite as it did under Charlemagne and the Carolingians, and the common bond of a Germanic model of kingship as well as other linguistic and cultural ties served to overreach the dividing effects of religion, and it was ultimately through the Franks, not the British, that Christianity first reached the Saxons.

So to conclude, although the West of Britain is often seen as the successor of the Roman Empire in Britain, especially when compared with the Saxon areas of Britain, there is little evidence for the continuity of Roman symbols of power or means of government. This is due to Britain's failure to develop and sustain the new models of Romano-Germanic government found on the continent. In the mid-fifth century the advent of hostile Saxon incursions increased British ambiguity to Germanic imagery and symbols of power. Instead Britain looked to Christianity and the Bible as alternative models for kingship and power, this emphasis on Christianity ultimately serving to isolate Britain from the Arian and Pagan kingdoms of Western Europe.

Approaches to Christianity in Roman Britain

The evidence presented here suggests that there is a need to place the nature of Roman Christianity in Britain firmly under the spotlight if we wish to consider the end of Roman Britain. Traditionally this topic has been marginalized in the discussion of late Roman Britain. Whilst on the Continent the role of Christianity in Late Antiquity is pushed firmly to the fore, this has failed to happen in Britain. This is partly because of the difficulties in recognising Christian material culture and practices, and Britain has nothing to rival the upstanding architectural evidence of Spain, Italy and Gaul. Equally, attempts to consider the Christian

influence on burial have too often been dismissed without any alternative view put forward in its place (Millett 1995:454).

Such attitudes do no service to the study of late Roman Britain, and the transition to the early medieval period. The evidence for Christianity is more extensive than often supposed (Mawer 1995; Thomas 1981; Watts 1991), and interesting work is being carried out on earlier Roman paganism on far less evidence (e.g. Forcey 1998). Also the old archaeological adage that 'absence of evidence does not equal evidence of absence' is also too often ignored. There are no definite Roman churches in Britain, but considering the fact that there was no distinctively Christian architectural tradition until the fifth century (Krautheimer 1965:14–5) it would be very surprising if we could identify such buildings. Even on the Continent most fourth century ecclesiastical structures are identified as Christian on the basis of continuity of the use of the site, rather than definite contemporary evidence (Thomas 1981:157). The textual evidence is clear that Christianity was practised in the Diocese of Britain. British bishops attended synods in Italy and Gaul (Thomas 1981:197). One of the Theodosius' *vicarii* of the Diocese Chysanthius ended his days as a bishop in Constantinople (Salway 1981:447–8), and not only did the usurper Constantine III have a name with strong Christian affiliations, but his son was also believed to be a monk. Whilst in the early fifth century we have strong contact between the British and Gallic churches.

One of the problems with the study of Roman Christianity in Britain has been its relatively undertheorized approaches. Scholars working on Late Antique Christianity in Gaul have sophisticated models of social interaction, and are *au fait* with much recent work on social theory (e.g. Brown 1981,1988, Van Dam 1985). In Britain, however, whilst much work shows a magisterial command of the data, it is often fitted into a very traditional interpretative framework. To advance further there is a need for increasing use of contextual approaches to the study of Christianity. Currently maps of Christianity in Roman Britain either consist of simple distribution maps of specific artefact or site types, or alternatively broad trend maps demonstrating 'levels of 'Christianity' across the Diocese (Thomas 1981: figs. 14–6; Watts 1991: fig. 28). These fail to bring out the texture and variation in Christian practice in Britain. There is a need to place the evidence for Christianity both in its physical landscape and also in the social landscape of late Roman Britain. Too few attempts have been made to consider who made up the Christian community of Britain (though see Dark 1994:30–9; Frend 1982).

One of the reasons for the marginalization of Christianity in Britain may be partly due to its perceived relevance to only the elite of Roman Britain. The Christian mosaics from Hinton St. Mary and Frampton are undeniably part of an elite culture, as is the house-church at Lullingstone (Henig 1995:151–7). There is a tendency, perhaps, to dismiss this element of elite culture as not relevant to the majority of the population of the Diocese, and reflecting the effete and esoteric tastes of the aristocracy. It would be foolish to deny that Roman archaeology need to fight against the elitist 'Villas and Mosaics' approach to the archaeological record, but there are two important considerations to be borne in mind. First, it is perhaps axiomatic that elite material culture will be more obvious in the archaeological record: a lavish mosaic will obviously have a higher profile than a pot-sherd with an inscribed *Chi-Rho* symbol. Secondly, it is equally axiomatic that the Roman Empire was not a democracy. Modern theoretical approaches to archaeology emphasise the mundane and the everyday as mechanisms for change (e.g. Barrett 1995:9–39). However, it is clear that although change is in the hands of entire societies, elite social groups have a huge capacity to constrain and enable many alternative strategies for social reproduction. There will always be strategies of resistance, but these are themselves predicated on existing hegemonical discourses. Thus it is crucial to examine the social trajectory of new modes of thought such as Christianity, as its presence will affect even non-believers.

New world views such as those promoted by Christianity would have had a major impact. In the same way that early Roman concepts of empire and imperialism were as significant in the creation of the Empire, as simple economic motives, so the rhetoric of Christianity led to new avenues and approaches in the late Roman discourse of Empire. Christian doctrines of the universality of the church opened up alternative symbolic resources to draw on, beyond that of Empire (Cameron 1991). With the decline of the Imperial cult and the rise of Christianity there was no longer a simple equation between the state religion and state (Fowden 1993:80–100). Indeed Rome was not the first Christian kingdom, that honour goes to either Edessa or Armenia (Fowden 1993:76–9), and by the end of the fourth century there were other Christian kingdoms, outside the bounds of the Empire, such as Axum in Ethiopia (Phillipson 1997:111–8).

Whilst it is difficult to argue that the Eastern empire was 'caesaropapist', with the church being under the absolute control of the Emperor, he had the authority to appoint and dismiss patriarchs, legislate on church affairs and summon ecumenical councils, in a manner without parallel in the West, where both political and religious authority was much more dispersed (Cameron 1993:67–8). With lack of a centralized Roman authority in the West, there was no absolute measure of what it meant to be Roman; the only unifying ideology being Christianity. This is not to say that it was compulsory to be Christian to partake in the legacy of the Empire, as is attested by the use of Roman coin designs on pagan German bracteates (Magnus 1997), but it is clear that once kingdoms began to have designs on wider territorial power Christianity was quickly perceived to be a powerful ideological tool.

The period from AD 400–600 in the West of Europe is the story of the struggle between church and secular power, a struggle to find a new metaphor to describe their relationship. It is only in the late sixth and seventh century, with the rise of the papacy under Gregory the Great and, in Britain, the Synod of Whitby, that a new balance between church and state evolved. These two centuries of turmoil were ultimately the period when the issue of who were the true heirs of the Roman empire was fought out, in battles, books and material culture.

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